

Paragons and Renegades

Sojourn

By

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PROLOGUE

Ta'jara Solistari continued her meditation exercises while the Salarian attendant, Givik she thought her name was, spouted off more words of encouragement, more platitudes. To her, all the talking was more distracting than helpful. Did Salarian females require all the chatter to deliver a child? She certainly did not.

Sitting beside her was Aleira her bond mate, also quietly reciting a meditation exercise to help in the birth. She, like Ta'jara, had pale blue complexion and the typical build of Asari: a little over a meter and a half in height, athletic build, and aesthetically pleasing appearance, with curving scalp crests instead of hair. Where they differed, Aleira had the more attractive facial markings above the eyes, slightly darker lines that enhanced her already striking visage.

Ta'jara's meditations stopped as she pondered this thought. She hadn't chosen Aleira for her mate because of any real attraction. She needed another Asari to bond with, to be the father of her child and Aleira was more than willing to oblige. But now that the moment was nearly here, had something changed?

No. There was no going back, her plan and purpose were too important. There was too much at stake to risk letting attraction or anything else get in her way. The path she laid out for herself would be difficult and she would travel it alone.

Another rush of pain accompanied her contractions and ripped her from her thoughts. She redoubled her mediation exercises while adding a quick prayer to the goddess that the Salarian would silence herself.

As the contractions faded momentarily Ta'jara took a few seconds to scan the room again.

She, Aleira and Givik were the only ones in the room a five meter squared delivery chamber within a small rural farming colony's clinic on an unimportant world. Aleira had objected to remaining here for the birth, preferring their first child to be born on Thessia, the Asari home world.

First child? This sparked another random thought in her mind. Aleira had once planned for a large family. Such a thing was impossible. One pure-blood Asari child could be tolerated, but two or three would cause too much grief. It wasn't outlawed to produce a child with another Asari, but it certainly wasn't embraced. No, one child would be all that Aleira ever contributed.

The room, though small, contained all the standard accoutrements needed on a back water world to facilitate any manner of injuries or medical treatments. Considering the community, it was

quite well stocked and probably had more than one medical practitioner, though at this late hour only the one Salarian was with them. A fortuitous choice for this rare birth, she thought.

"You're almost there. One more big push. You'll be a mother shortly," Givik said.

Bracing herself she gathered her strength and will and, still meditating did as the Salarian told her. Within moments she could hear the whimpering of a new life, as her child was brought into the world.

"Goddess, what is that?" Aleira said, clearly shocked.

The Salarian stood baffled for a few quick heartbeats, the new life held in her arms. Quickly she turned away and put the child on a small table a few steps away and began to clean the baby up. Aleira stood and moved over to the small squirming form.

Aleira was visibly confused and shaken. She stared at the child on the table but didn't move to embrace it. What she saw on the table made her stand rigid as stone, mouth slightly agape.

"Ta'jara, I don't understand. This, this thing isn't. I mean..." Aleira began stammering through half-finished sentences.

Ta'jara looked over at the table; saw the little hands and feet squirming. It was exactly as she had expected. The tomes she'd found and scrolls she'd read had prepared her for what would happen, what her child would look like. Aleira was not privy to any of this though.

Givik moved over to her on the bed, a look of worry etched on his features. Ta'jara watched as she halfheartedly fluffed her pillows while glancing towards the door. It was clear he was anxious to leave. She couldn't allow that.

Shifting in her bed, Ta'jara produced a small pistol, placed it under the Givik's jaw, and fired. The simultaneous discharge of energy, and the repulsive sound of gray matter splattering the low ceiling jarred Aleira out of her shock.

Quickly Ta'jara stood. A little too quickly. The exercises had protected her from much of the difficulties of labor, but they soon returned washing over her once she began to move. Dizziness hit her like a punch to the gut and she stumbled. Catching the table nearby she righted herself.

As she stood, she looked at Aleira who was already moving to help her, raised the pistol and with another discharge of energy sent her bond mate crashing to the floor with a horrid wound to the stomach.

Ta'jara blinked; she was weaker than she thought. She'd meant to end it quickly, as she had with the Salarian. On the floor before her, Aleira whimpered in obvious pain.

"Taji," she gasped, using her pet name that Ta'jara loathed, "what did I do?"

Ta'jara moved over to her bond mate and no longer saw the father of her child. Looking down she saw only a poor Asari maiden huddled on the floor, crying away her last moments, trying to understand what was happening.

"You did everything perfectly" Ta'jara said. Leveling the pistol she fired again, hitting her mark and ending Aleira's life instantly.

Ta'jara moved over to the table with her child now lying still, calmly asleep. Reaching out she placed her hand against the needle-like protrusions that had replaced the typical scalp crests of other Asari. Instead of skin ranging from greens to purples, an almost chitin-like black reflective skin covered her child's body.

"My child," she whispered to no one.

An Asari of its like had not been seen in over two thousand generations. Taking the resting baby in her arms and walking over to her pack, Ta'jara took out a small round object with a timer built into it. Setting the inferno grenade she'd brought with her to detonate not long after she left the planet, she took another uncaring glance around the room.

Moving over to Aleira's body she impulsively removed a small ring her bond mate wore on her thumb, the only jewelry she owned. Looking at the white metallic object brought about a slight twinge of regret at what had happened.

"Thank you," Ta'jara said, quietly curling her fingers around the ring.

With that she stood and walked out into the night, her child fidgeting slightly in her arms.

ONE

Sliding across the wall in the darkened corridor of Long Term Care he stopped before a nondescript door. White like all the others, small keypad set to the left, above it a placard reading “Kaine, Lillian T.” Behind the door he could clearly hear a vid playing, the sounds of laughter sifting towards him.

With a quick swipe of a keycard he'd removed from a nurse that was currently sleeping off a nasty bruise in a janitor's closet, the door unlocked. It slid open silently and he stepped in. As the door closed he let his eyes adjust to the dimly lit room and observed a place he hadn't been in months.

It was small about five meters square, sparsely decorated with a bed and a visitor's chair. A large window, shades drawn, dominated the wall behind the bed. An end table sat to the right of the bed, opposite the chair. On it was a lone picture of four people. He recognized them as himself, his parents, and his sister who lay in the bed.

“Lily,” he whispered.

She didn't respond her simple face drawn to the vidscreen in the corner to his right. She was thoroughly enjoying whatever was on. Her dark eyes shown in the reflection of the viewer and a wide grin played at the edges of her mouth. She was probably watching another outrageous sitcom as they were her favorite.

His sister lay in the bed, arms over the blankets that covered her up to the neck. Her hair was cut shorter than the last time he'd visited but looked nice. Whoever trimmed it took care with her.

He was about to whisper again when a skycar flashed by the window, red and blue lights buzzing on top. Police. Whether civilian or military he couldn't say. He wasn't surprised by this, if he were tailing an escaped prisoner he'd check on living relatives.

Not much time left he thought.

Again he was about to speak when something happened on the vid and his sister laughed. A hearty, girlish squeal. He watched her quake with joy for a few more moments. Arms that didn't work right squirmed minutely and hands that were curled in on themselves twitched with delight. Her eyes simply sparkling as she continued to laugh.

He paused then. She was there but he so rarely saw her in such a state of joy. If he did talk to her, what would he tell her? He had to go? That was a given but she would want to know when he'd come back. He had no idea of that answer. She would be instantly sad and in the ultimately it would change nothing. Whether he told her or not the conversation ended the same way: he had to go.

Another round of boisterous giggles from his sister made up his mind.

Quietly he slid back through the door and watched it shut. He listened for another pair of heartbeats at the giggles and laughter.

Then fled.

Ethan Kaine stopped mid-sentence, his cigarette held between index and middle finger just before his mouth. An old memory flashing into his mind. It was completely random, his thoughts were nowhere near Earth, or hospitals and certainly not his sister. The intense feeling of being chased by the police lingered after the memory faded. He knew that feeling, being watched, being followed. Being hunted.

Was someone watching him now?

Kaine stood and nonchalantly surveyed the area. At just over two meters in height, he had a good look at the bar its customers. He was wearing a dark close fitted shirt, brown pants with cargo pockets on the thighs and a thin dark jacket that did little to hide the strong athletic build beneath. His short dark hair and close cropped matching beard complimented his dark skin.

He was occupying the left most of three tables set inside an alcove along the northern wall, directly across from the main entrance of Chora's Den, an entertainment establishment that specialized in exotic dancers and alcohol. He noticed nothing out of the ordinary: bartenders serving drinks at the massive circular bar that sits in the center, a few dancers, and waitresses tending to the needs of various patrons, and the bouncers on duty scanning the area.

Amongst the clientele he noticed a scattered mix of human, but more were Salarian and Turian, some of those being off duty C-Sec officers, most just visitors to the Citadel. Each was either enjoying drinks or the view of the Asari dancers, while a lone Quarian sat nursing a glass of what he assumed was liquor, at a table along the wall to his right.

He watched as a large Krogan, the tall and stocky lizard-like monsters that sold themselves as hired thugs and mercenaries, exit the bar in an angry fashion. Granted of the decidedly few

Krogan he had ever had the misfortune to meet, if they did anything it was always in an angry fashion.

Kaine heard his companion politely clear her throat.

“Ever feel like you’re being watched?” Kaine asked. “Like someone was just staring at you?”

Looking down he watched her smooth the sheer and form hugging black dress she wore. Its dark color and plunging neckline perfectly accentuated her teal complexion and pleasing build. She took a sip of a fluorescent green drink, her matching green eyes watching him.

“No Kaine, not once ever,” she said, setting her drink on the table.

Kaine returned to his seat with a derisive snort at her comment. Taking the cigarette in his fingers again he brought it to his lips and took a long drag. Feeling the smoke enter his lungs, he held it then blew it out carefully to send the smoke away from her.

"I'm sorry, where was I?" he said, casually setting his cigarette into the ashtray again and taking a sip from his tall glass of water.

"You were going to tell me something about Athame, a connection between Asari and humans?" she replied with her silky voice leaning forward, resting an elbow on the table and her cheek in her upturned palm.

"Yes Athame," he said coming quickly back to his train of thought, "the one who taught your people mathematics, sciences, and was very much revered for a time."

"Not many humans know anything about Asari culture, especially our dead religions," she commented.

"I have a lot of free time, plus there is an inordinate amount of information on the extranet about Asari," he said, picking up his cigarette again. "Sections on your history and society, diplomatic skills, biotics of course, and whole libraries of vids on your," he paused dramatically "interpersonal skills."

"I bet you enjoyed those the most," she said leaning back.

"Purely for educational purposes I assure you." He took a drag from his cigarette.

She crossed her arms in front of her chest and stared at him, a keen look in her eye, the sort of look you give when you’ve finally caught on to someone’s schemes.

"I bet." She replied with a knowing smirk.

"Such distrust," he said, wounded. "But I'm more interested in talking about how your treatment of Athame is the same as humanity's treatment of our religions."

This got her attention; he could read it on her face. Over the past the past weeks conversations like this had elicited the best responses from her. Finding similarities between Asari and human culture was easier than he'd let on.

"See there was once a flourishing religion around Athame. Not just her but the importance of her teachings as well. Then space travel and greater advances in science became more prevalent. Since then, your people don't spend a lot of time in formal worship of her, yet you'll still call out 'by the Goddess' ," he used his fingers to demonstrate the quotes, a tactic he knew annoyed her but in the right sort of way, "when shocked, startled or other more intimate situations arise."

"And?" she said, when he didn't continue.

"We humans have a thousand different religions and a bunch of different terms for deities, but the one that comes up the most is God," he said then added quickly, "capitol 'G' by the way." He put down his cigarette. "Like the Asari, once science and space travel became more common, the official worship of God or whatever other religions called Him, capital H, became as scarce as your worship of Athame."

"And?" she said it again a little slower, forcing her to make him continue.

"Like Asari, humans will call out to our old religions too when we're scared or in danger or," he raised an eyebrow and smirked "in an intimate situation." He paused again looking her in the eyes then belted out, "Oh God!" He banged his hand on the table. "Oh yes, yes, YES!"

Siru burst out a laugh and brought one hand to her face to hide it while she continued to giggle. Slowly shaking her head side to side she composed herself and said, "That wasn't that funny, had to be the alcohol."

"That's not nice," he replied with a smile, taking another sip of his water then added, "Isn't that non-alcoholic?"

Siru smirked.

Kaine smirked back.

Otmar'Reefa nar Zeela sat alone at a table along the eastern wall of the bar. Absently he plucked at a stray piece of twine that held a fresh patch on his enviro-suit. Like other Quarrians, his weak immune system caused him to wear a protective suit so he wouldn't catch some minor ailment that would end up killing him.

At one time, his suit was dark purple with white highlights. His mother had helped him craft it and he was very proud of it. The two of them had spent weeks together on the designs. That was years ago. Now the purple had faded and the highlights were all but gone. Patched and repatched over and over, his suit looked second hand at best. All the damage he'd taken over the years trying to complete his Pilgrimage had taken quite a toll on it.

He'd been on the Citadel for nearly a month trying desperately to complete that Pilgrimage, a terrible journey out amongst the various other species of the galaxy in search of some type of technology, or skill, or other important item. If he could do this, he'd be able to prove to his people that he wouldn't be a burden and would be welcomed home. So far he'd come up empty handed, as he had in every other major city center he'd visited.

At one time he'd thought the Pilgrimage to be something of an honor and an incredibly important part of Quarian society. It was always touted as the key to keeping his people safe from over population, technological stagnation, and dozens of other terrible things that happen to an entire culture that resides entirely on starships. When he started out he'd felt a sense of wonder, excitement, and was filled with a pioneering spirit to explore and discover.

Not so much now.

He'd left the Flotilla almost five years ago. His Pilgrimage had taken a lot longer than he'd thought it would and now it felt more of a prison sentence, albeit a forced exile rather than time spent in a cell, than any kind of honorable journey. Now all he wanted to do was go home.

He thought about the Migrant Fleet again. He'd done so a lot over the last few days, ever since the Asari Councilor contacted him with a deal that could send him back home. Home he thought, not the most lavish of places, but the only one in the entire galaxy where he was welcome.

On the Flotilla he wasn't viewed as a thief or a vagrant. He wasn't someone to be watched or harassed. He was just another Quarian, living a peaceful life on one of the fifty thousand ships that made up their fleet, those same ships that housed, fed, and protected nearly seventeen million of his people. Ever since they were driven from Rannoch, their home world, by their artificial creations, the Geth, it was all his people had known. That incident, losing their home-system and more, had happened over three hundred years ago.

Otmar scanned the bar again, as he'd done every day for a week, looking for a hired gun to give him some protection on this venture. He'd approached a Turian who laughed at him, a Krogan that almost killed him, an Asari that thought he was propositioning her, and even a Salarian in his desperation. It hadn't worked out so far.

But maybe a human, the newest race to join the Citadel Conventions, could do what he required. He would need more information though. Otmar had already discovered a few clues by merely watching him: physically fit above the norm for his species, kept watch on the door, and more telling, carried a concealed weapon. None of this was solid proof that he would be for hire, but it was a start.

Otmar slowly turned his lukewarm glass of some random fruit juice around absently in its glass as he pondered his next course of action. He'd spent so much time failing at convincing anyone from the other races to help him that if he couldn't get someone's aid soon he'd have to leave on his own. His contact would be on Omega in a couple days. Time was growing short.

He took his hand off the glass and sat back just as his view of the human was obstructed by a server, an average looking Asari with dark purple skin and dark lines over her eyes. Even though she worked here and was required to be personable, Otmar felt she was the only person on the Citadel who was genuinely nice to him. Unfortunately he couldn't remember her name.

"Hey Otmar, want me to refresh that for you," she said warmly.

"Oh..." he began desperately attempting to recall the female's name.

Amana. The word appeared across the inside of his visor then faded away.

"Oh yes," he began again. "Thank you Amana".

"You know," she said as she picked up his glass and stepped to one side revealing the human again, "Siru is almost done, if you'd like I could see if she has room for another client?"

Otmar blinked, mildly confused. He looked up at her and noticed she was smiling. Was she making fun of him? It wouldn't be the first time another species had used a Quarian as a punch line.

"Oh," he began yet again. "No that's okay, I hadn't even noticed her sitting there." He smiled up at her then felt foolish. She couldn't see it of course, not with his face covered by his helmet and visor. He just looked back over at the table instead.

"I see, well some friendly advice," she said leaning down next to him. "I don't think Kaine enjoys the company of males that way, even if they are adorable." She hurried away to another patron.

Otmar only vaguely heard what she said after the name Kaine. He had something to go on, he could look up this human's history and find out what skills he possessed. Sure it was an invasion of privacy but he needed help. He sorely did.

“Wait,” he said out loud to no one. “That’s not what...” he looked to see his server on the other side of the room talking to another customer. Otmar slouched in his chair and sighed dejectedly.

“Keelah Otmar,” he said quietly and set about searching the human's name.

"You ever going to tell me about those?" Siru said motioning towards Kaine's hands.

"Oh these," he said looking down at the tattoos that encircled both his left and right wrists.

"Nothing of consequence, just something foolish I got before entering the service."

"Citadel Security you mean?"

"Yeah," Kaine replied quickly, maybe too quickly. Taking a breath he smirked to hide the thought and added, "Just some bravado. You know how males are."

"I have some basic knowledge, yes," she said, and then added with a smirk of her own, "educational of course."

"What other kind is there?" He asked, her taking a sip of his water.

“Don't ignore the question,” Siru said. "I want to know about the tattoos."

“What was it I said the last time you asked?” He asked her in reply.

“You played coy and said ‘ask me again sometime’,” she said making quotes with her fingers.

She stopped suddenly. Looking at her hands she dropped them to her lap and looked back up at him. He could see she was trying to hide a smile and she failed as she spoke.

“Shut up,” she said with a smile.

“I wouldn’t dream of saying anything,” he replied with smile. “Anyway, lets stick with that answer a little longer.”

“Playing coy again?”

"I'm full of mystery."

“You’re full of something,” she said with a wide grin.

In response Kaine raised his glass in salute and drained it of its liquid. Setting it down he tapped the ashes off his cigarette and with a long drag finished it off. He ground it out in the tray and absently spun his lighter.

The two of them sat there, neither speaking. Kaine was lost in thought. It was in moments like this he usually felt the need to speak, to fill the silence with words. But with Siru he never felt that way, she was just comfortable to be around, always keeping him at ease.

Of course that could be nothing more than her doing her job. After all, she was a consort, something of an amateur counselor. People paid her to listen and sometimes give advice but mostly just to make them feel good for a few minutes out of the day. And it was something she was very good at.

"Kaine," Siru began, "what do you want from me?"

He stopped spinning his lighter and looked up at her. Usually he'd see amusement or annoyance from his antics and stories but now there was something else. Nervousness perhaps. It was a look he hadn't seen on her.

"You've been coming here for weeks now and I can't figure out why," she continued, looking down at her hands in her lap, a strangely self-conscious act for her. "Usually my clients are looking for a sympathetic audience or advice on a variety of subjects, or even someone to confess to."

"Not you," she added, looking up and leaning toward him. "What are you looking for here?"

Interesting question, he thought. What was he looking for? Siru was gorgeous by just about any definition of the word but that was only a part of it. He truly enjoyed being around her just talking. She was charming and witty, ready to listen and comment as though she were always interested in the conversation. He felt even though this was her chosen profession that when he was here, it wasn't just work for her. There was something else.

Was there really? What if he was just making things up in his head? He'd been on his own a long time now. It wasn't desperation, Kaine wasn't in need of companionship that badly. But this Asari, this woman always made him feel wonderful. Each time she sat down at his table he felt butterflies in his stomach. As childish as it might seem, just the thought of her brightened his day.

He could figure that all out later, simply put: what he wanted was her and the whys and what-fors could wait. But you don't say that sort of thing now, too soon. Much too soon. Instead he'd do what he did all too well when dealing with something like this: evade.

"Actually Siru," he began, "I could ask you the same thing."

"Excuse me?" she with a half-smile and short laugh.

"It's not often an Asari Matron spends her time at a place like this," he answered her evenly, grinding his cigarette out. He watched the cinders still smoldering in the ashes left behind for a moment then looked up at her.

Siru was looking back at him with unchecked astonishment on her face. He himself wasn't surprised at all. He'd always been good at reading people, even those of other species. Some were more difficult than others, Quarians were obviously a pain in the ass. But he had a natural talent for it. In another time, it allowed him to lead soldiers very effectively.

"You do spend a lot of time on the extranet studying Asari don't you?" she said.

"Educational purposes," he assured her.

"Still, that may be true, but how did you figure that out?" she looked down at herself then back at him. "I don't look old do I?"

"No," he said with a wide smile and leaned back in his chair. Kaine took a look around for a moment searching for something. When he found what he'd been looking for he leaned towards Siru and said, "Look over at that dancer."

He nodded at the alcove to his immediate left where an Asari was dancing for a couple of Turians.

"Q'ola?" She looked back at him. "What about her?"

"Look how she's dancing: eyes closed, back arched, her head up and away from the two Turians." He finished. "Pretty sexy."

"What's your point Kaine?" He could tell she was irritated now.

"She acts like a Maiden," he replied looking at her. "That is the dance of a woman out exploring the galaxy and enjoying the sensations of the moment as they affect her. She's not dancing for them," he looked at the group then back at Siru. "Oh they think she is, but she's not. It's a purely selfish experience that those two are paying to watch. It's not about them, it's all about how she feels right now, at this moment."

Kaine then lit a new cigarette and took a long drag, letting what he said sink in. Siru watched Q'ola for a moment or two longer. When she turned back to look at him he continued. "You on the other hand," he spoke evenly. "You're past that restless need to explore and experience. You're not here to dance, but to interact with your patrons. You want to enjoy the experience like she does. But it's more important," he paused, absently tapping the table with his forefinger, "or equally so that the person you're with enjoy it too. It's a shared moment in time. That's how a Matron acts."

Siru K'vaar was genuinely shocked. She had seen a lot of things in her four-hundred plus years of living in this galaxy. She'd visited dozens of worlds, met thousands of new people and even

helped start a colony on an uncharted world. But she honestly couldn't remember the last time she'd been so totally taken aback.

This was not what she had been expecting. Not what she thought would transpire when this human showed up at Chora's Den. When he first hired her for consul Siru thought he'd only be interested in some inter-species liaison, a torrid night he could brag about to his friends. That's usually what happened with other males and even some females, regardless of species.

She watched the human sitting across from her as he smoked. She'd only met a dozen of his people since they were granted embassy on the Citadel. Being that most were politicians or soldiers, they were cordial and professional when on duty. But that was away from the Den. Here they were like anyone else: loud and obnoxious but with a vast wealth of confidence for such a young species.

Kaine was all those things at times, but he was also something more. She'd been around too long to miss how he had evaded some questions. He was hiding things from her. She had been a consort long enough to pick up on the evasiveness of people.

So Kaine was secretive at times, which wasn't completely unreasonable.

He was also incredibly irritating at other times. She reminded herself of his penchant for air quotes and smoking to avoid making him seem like, what did humans call it? A knight in shining armor?

He was definitely not that.

Though he was hardly the usual clientele she attracted either. His extranet viewings of Asari were proof. There were plenty of vids to watch and documents to read out there. Different species enjoyed playing up the image of the promiscuous maiden: going from starport to starport, having sexual encounters with anyone willing. And she made no claims that Kaine didn't view those, but he had also learned other things about her people.

Their discussion of Athame wasn't his first on the subject. Nor others such as the preclusion of Asari towards biotics or how long it took an Asari to graduate from college; what made Asari art so much more fluid than other species, or any of a dozen other such things that the average patron of Chora's Den neither had an inkling of nor an interest in discussing.

The thing Kaine enjoyed the most she found, was what made Asari and humans alike. Things each race shared. His conversation today was typical: he'd find something innocuous about her culture and then shadow it with something similar from his. It was quite humorous at times. He was rather good at pointing out how comical both their peoples could be.

She enjoyed those conversations as well - more so than she let on. The idea that Asari were some sort of divine influence over the galaxy annoyed her. Her people were far from perfect or angelic. And she could count on Kaine to remind her that her people could be just as foolish and absurd as anyone else.

But he was right, she was looking for something. For someone. She wanted to find someone worth being with, someone with whom she felt a true connection. Siru had always preferred the type of people that frequented a place like Chora's Den more than those on the Presidium or other similar areas of the Citadel. Those areas and businesses where the more 'respectable' people of the galaxy could be found.

The people who lived in the white palaces and gleaming avenues of nicer parts of the galaxy led lives of ease. But life wasn't easy, it was brutal and harsh. And sometimes if you live away from that long enough, you forget it. It makes you cold, turns your life into a lie. The low times make the high times feel so much better.

Of course most of the patrons at the Den classified as lowlifes: mercenaries, gamblers, thieves. The types more civil people wanted to avoid. Those weren't who she was interested in either. She actually disliked their type immensely. Previous interactions spoiled her to the risk and thrill they could cause. She didn't care to spend much personal time with that sort.

Those types came here to hide. No one asked questions at the Den. Your business was your own. She could respect that. However, there were times when she'd encounter a client that was different, someone that came here not to hide, or to ogle the dancers, or pick fights, a person with a reason all their own to be there; a reason that the more respectful types wouldn't understand.

They were the middle ground, the sort that understood what life was really like, and how hard life could be but didn't descend into crime and violence. They came here to be left alone and to enjoy themselves.

That was Kaine she realized: a C-Sec Officer that got away from the more affluent parts of the Citadel to be with real people. To be with her. The idea made her smile but brought another idea to her mind.

"What are we doing here?" she asked herself out loud after a moment. Kaine cocked his head slightly. "This," she said waving a hand to encompass both of them and their table, "what is this? I always see you here at the Den. Always right here, nowhere else."

"I'd like to change that." Kaine replied. "You know the block party held on Zakera Ward every year? Huge crowds, good times, live music and all that?"

"Sure," she said rather perplexed by the sudden change in conversation. "It's tomorrow night isn't it? I haven't been in ages. I remember it gets pretty wild at times," she paused. "Didn't someone steal a C-Sec patrol car and crash it into the Council's meeting chamber last year?"

"Yeah," he replied with a smile remembering his antics, "we got a little crazy."

"That was you?" she said in a half-yell, eyes wide with disbelief.

"In my defense I think I was drugged," he said conspiratorially. "I have to watch out for all those young ladies in Zakera Ward, always trying to take advantage of me."

She openly laughed at him again, a quick burst that faded as quickly as it came. She folded her hands in her lap and looked his way. He could still see the vestiges of a smile on her lips.

"I'd like you to go," he said. Then added, "with me."

Kaine watched as she looked down at her hands, mulling over the offer. She didn't say anything for what felt like ages. He was about to add something when their table was almost knocked completely over.

Kaine slid his chair to the side and caught everything before it could make a tremendous mess. Setting the table straight he and Siru looked up to find a Quarian standing before them fidgeting.

"Oh I'm sorry, I wasn't really watching where I was walking," he said.

Kaine raised an eyebrow and looked at Siru as she was turning to look at him, equally as confused. There was no possible way to accidentally walk into their table as it was situated off the main travel path of the bar.

"That's okay," Siru said standing, "we were just finishing up."

Kaine stood up quickly with her and reached into his pocket, knowing she wouldn't ask for the payment she had earned. He took her hand in his and placed the credit chit in her upturned palm.

"Good day Siru," he said as he closed and turned her hand over in his. "As always, conversations with you are worth any price."

She smiled at him and placed the chit in a small satchel she kept on her belt and began to leave. She turned after a few steps and said "How about eight?"

"Eight?" he replied.

"Pick me up for the party. Block D, Apartment 2451." She to him smiled and the Quarian then walked away not waiting for a response.

Kaine watched her go, watched as she waved to some of the patrons and other staff, deftly sidestepped a Turian making a quick exit. As she exited he noticed she looked back at him for a moment and then was gone. Kaine stood at his table with a smile on his face, took a deep satisfied breathe, and reached for his cigarettes and lighter, preparing to leave.

That's when he noticed the Quarian was standing there, still looking at him. Kaine blinked twice then furrowed his brow; he looked from side to side before fully facing the stranger on the other side of the table.

"Can I help you with something?" Kaine asked.

"Actually yes," the Quarian said, sounding almost relieved somehow. "I was hoping you could be my body guard."

TWO

"What?" the human replied incredulously.

Otmar began to fidget, rubbing his hands together quickly. He wasn't good with people, not even with other Quarrians and certainly not with other species. This human was also taller than he thought, at least half a meter higher than himself and quite a bit bigger in weight. He didn't want to offend this man, not after that run in with the irate Krogan a couple days ago. His shoulder still ached.

"I", he managed then stopped. The human was putting his package of cigarettes away, clearly getting ready to depart. This was his last chance, if he couldn't convince the human to help him he'd have to travel to Omega alone and meet with shadowy figures, probably pirates or murderers, on his own.

Otmar ran over the things he'd learned about this man in the last few minutes. He'd done a search for every conceivable spelling of the name 'Kaine' he could come up with and had found nothing. Deciding to use facial recognition instead he'd looked up the man's features, using the extranet and his own shunt programs to break firewalls and check against C-Sec and other more official places.

He'd found a file amongst a Citadel Security officer's personal computer: Ronald Reagan, aka, Ethan V. Kaine. Former Systems Alliance Military. The image attached to the file matched the man he was talking to. The picture couldn't have been more than a few months old. He didn't glean much else though, mostly a rank which meant nothing to Otmar and a list of previous training and skill sets. While those were enlightening, they didn't much help with negotiations.

Otmar figured this Reagan name was a fake he'd used to get onto the Citadel. Most likely illegally. That could be one way of getting his help.

"Right", the human said interrupting Otmar's thoughts. "Take it easy."

Otmar began to panic; this human was walking out and with him went any chance of protection on this excursion. All the information he'd gathered on Omega was terrifying. A former mining colony turned haven of villainy, it was one of those places his people were told to avoid on their Pilgrimage. And he was going to it purposefully. That was bad enough but he certainly didn't want to do it alone.

“Wait please,” he said hurrying to catch up to the man as he walked out the entrance to Chora’s Den. “I need your help.”

“I’m not into charity, annoy someone else.” He replied not bothering to look back or slow down.

They had walked out onto the bridge-way that joined the Den to the rest of the Ward. It was a narrow walkway with chest high walls on either side. Along with its twin that ran parallel to it, and a short bridge spanning the gap, they created a sort of ‘H’.

Under the bridge you could see traffic speeding by, it was an impressive view that caught his attention every time and he always paused to look. Being able to see the expanse of the Ward as a whole was still thrilling to him, the Citadel was indeed an incredible creation.

He looked from the view to see the human stopped on the other side of the connecting part of the ‘H’, hands raised slightly. Otmar moved up quickly to try to talk to him again, to convince him to help.

“Listen, if I could have a moment,” he began and stopped short.

A Salarian in a green tunic and matching pants was holding a pistol directed at the man’s head. They stood only about a meter from each other; the barrel was nearly resting on the human’s nose.

“Tell your friend to leave, this does not concern him!” the Salarian yelled.

Otmar instantly mimicked the human and stood as rigid as a support beam, not moving or twitching. Maybe this was a terrible plan after all.

“This isn’t your style Cyrion,” Kaine replied evenly.

Cyrion was a typical Salarian: quick witted and with an even faster mouth. He was tall with the elongated body of his species. Large bulbous eyes rested on top of a slender head with two horn-like protrusions arcing up from his forehead.

Kaine kept his attention on the Salarian but was able to make out two Turians less than three meters away. He took a moment to size them up.

Each of them stood about two meters tall, with avian like faces and strong but lanky arms that ended in three fingered hands, their heads featuring cresting horns over the skull and a

brownish carapace for skin. Wearing one piece tunics, the left a dark red with black and the other brown and gray, they cut an intimidating visage.

"Guess I picked up some bad habits from you," Cyrion replied quickly with a sideways glance at the two Turians. "And having credits stolen from me puts me in a foul mood."

Kaine could see what this was really about: Cyrion owed the Turians money and he brought them here in hopes they'd take their anger out on someone else. Someone that no one would miss. That someone being him. Kaine shifted his stance for a more balanced posture.

"You lost that money fair and square," Kaine said with a quick nod in the direction of the other two he added, "What's with the goons Cyrion?" Kaine asked glancing at the two Turians. "You guys still pissed about getting your asses handed to you in the First Contact War?"

"That never happened!" Roared brown and gray "If it weren't for the Citadel Council's intervention humanity would be nothing more than a footnote in galactic history!"

"Its called the Relay 314 Incident," interjected red and black with a growl before adding, "you sniveling piece of shit!"

"That's not very nice," Kaine replied coolly.

"Just give us, me... hand over the credits and everyone can go home." Cyrion's voice was beginning to rise; he was definitely in over his head.

"Can't do that Cyrion." Kaine said with a sad shake of his head.

"Just shoot him Cyrion!" Yelled red and black.

"It's always easier to loot a corpse!" His friend added with a chuckle.

"He's not going to shoot anyone with the safety on," Kaine said with a scoff returning his gaze to Cyrion.

"Shut up human!" Cyrion was in full panic now, his hands were shaking and he removed one from the pistol to wipe his brow, sweating profusely. "This is loaded and I'm prepared to," he stammered, "to shoot you if I have to."

"Cyrion, the light is still red. To shoot it needs to be green!" Kaine yelled back.

Cyrion turned the gun away from him so he could get a look at the side where the safety is located. He peered at his pistol and realized what Kaine already knew and his eyes narrowed.

Kaine took the opportunity to analyze his situation: Cyrion was less than a meter from him, pistol turned fortuitously towards the Turians. They in turn were about three meters to his right, in front of the entrance to the alley leading into the markets. The two stood loose and relaxed, enjoying the show.

Turning his attention back to Cyrion, Kaine saw he was beginning to point the pistol back at his face. Murder in his eyes. Kaine had no doubts that if he didn't act he was about to be shot.

Now or never.

Kaine reached out. Grabbed Cyrion's hand, turned it towards the Turians and forced his thumb into the trigger receptacle. Squeezing he fired once. The Turian in red's left shoulder exploded with the impact. Blood spraying out in return. With a howl he fell to the ground.

Leaning forward, Kaine slammed the pistol into Cyrion's face. He heard a satisfying crunch as something in his slender head cracked or broke. Cyrion cried out. Dropping the pistol and crumbling to the floor. Blood flowed from his mouth.

The Turian in brown advanced. Quickly Kaine attempted a sweeping kick. The Turian side stepped and grabbed Kaine's leg with his hand. Kaine tried to defend but was a second too slow. The Turian got hold of his neck and squeezed. Instantly the breath was cut off from his lungs.

Kaine tried to pry his leg free. Failing at that he began working on the vise-like grip around his throat. Wedging his fingers under the Turian's he got one up and bit down hard. The Turian roared and lifted Kaine into the air. With impressive strength he spun and slammed him to the ground.

Momentarily dazed Kaine looked up and saw the Turians booted foot mere centimeters from his face. Quickly he rolled to the right, away from him and towards the adjoining wall. Standing up he felt a shoulder slam into his stomach.

Kaine was half-carried, half-pushed into the wall behind him. The two of them crashed against it. The back of his head cracking against the unrelenting surface of the wall.

Instantly a fist smashed his side. Then another. Before a third could land Kaine pushed a thumb deep into the eye of his attacker. With a shocked hiss the Turian backed off holding his face.

Dizzily Kaine advanced, shaking his head to clear the confusion. In a fury the Turian charged. Kaine moved to the side. Lifted his foot. He brought it down on the back of the Turian's knee as he went by. The force of the kick and his forward momentum made the Turian stumble and fall.

Before he could regain his footing Kaine moved forward. Grabbing the Turian's left wrist and extended his arm outwards. Balling his fist and pulling it all the way back Kaine delivered a devastating punch directly to the Turian's elbow; forcing it to bend in the wrong direction at a high speed. With a sickening crunch he heard tendons snap and bones break. Screaming in agony the Turian dropped, clutching his ruined arm.

Standing Kaine heard the sound of a weapon being ready and turned to see the other Turian with Cyrion's pistol in hand and pointed at him. Kaine reacted immediately and began to draw his pistol from the holster at the small of his back.

The Turian pulled his trigger first. In response the pistol let out a belch of steam then nothing. Running forward Kaine slammed the hilt of his own weapon into the Turian's bloodied shoulder. With a roar of pain he fell onto his hand and knees.

Kaine circled around behind him. Put his boot on the Turian's back then pushed with all his might cracking the Turian's head into the wall. Another sound of something breaking and he stopped moving.

Breathing a bit heavier than he would have liked, Kaine looked around. To his right Cyrion was still whimpering and bleeding. Behind him the Turian in brown was slowly crawling away. The one in red was unconscious in front of him.

He looked back towards Chora's Den and noticed the Quarian still standing where he'd been. Arms held up comically with the right straight up in the air over his head and the left only about halfway. Kaine bent down, picked up the pistol and tossed it over the rail.

Kaine looked at Cyrion then. He had curled up into a pathetic little ball of whimpering misery. Deciding against saying anything to him he turned to the Quarian standing still as stone.

"You mess with his gun?" Kaine asked.

"Yes," the Quarian replied meekly.

"Thanks," Kaine replied after a moment's thought then walked away towards the markets.

THREE

Otmar stood still for an instant, mildly shocked. Slowly he put his arms down. What he'd seen was something out of an action vid, like *Blasto 2*. That was fake of course, this was real. And it had happened right in front of him! Another feeling welled up in him: hope. The list of training and skill sets he'd found were accurate: this human was precisely what he needed.

And he was leaving. Again.

You should move to intercept. Words appeared and faded quickly on his visor.

No need to argue the point, Otmar had to move. He walked over the unconscious body of the Turian; ignored the still whimpering Salarian and other Turian that was now sitting with his back against the wall.

"Place a call to the nearest clinic," he said to his VI as he exited into the markets. Otmar didn't want to be an accomplice to any killings, even accidental ones. Citadel Security regulation 2496.781 and 2496.782 were very clear on the amount and type of prison sentence he'd incur. "Inform Citadel Security that there's been a weapon discharged."

Otmar exited into the lower market of the Ward. It was of relatively small size area: about fifteen meters square, with stalls situated in the corners. An exit opposite him lead to a large staircase heading up, which itself ended on the next floor. It was sparsely populated at the moment. Most people that came down this way were headed for Chora's Den and they saved their credits for alcohol and entertainment.

He scanned the four shops for the human and found him at a stand selling candies and other treats. Otmar caught himself looking to see if they carried any Turian chocolates. When sterilized they were safe to eat and he enjoyed their bittersweet taste immensely. He saw none, which wasn't a surprise, only Turians and Quarrians actually ate them; they weren't very popular.

The human finished his transaction and started moving off towards the stairs. Otmar hurried across the floor and caught up with him at the bottom.

"Mister Kaine can I have a moment of your time?" he said as he came up next to him.

The human looked at Otmar without turning his head and made an exasperated sound. Otmar was more than used to people not enjoying his presence, but this wasn't the time to back down. Besides, he had one good bargaining chip: he'd saved the humans life.

“Listen Quarian, if you think I owe you anything for what you did back there you’re wrong”, he replied.

There went his bargaining chip. Some beings were so ungrateful.

“And like I said before, I’m not into charity. Find someone else.” He finished.

“There is no one else”, Otmar practically yelled, his frustration getting the better of him. He stopped climbing the stairs and just looked up at the human. “I know, I’ve asked them; every mercenary or thug I’ve met here. They all said what you just did.”

“What makes you think I’m a merc?” the human said as he stopped and turned, he was a few steps above Otmar now. “I could just be someone looking for a good time in this part of the Ward. Wrong place sort of thing.”

“The previous display would contradict that statement,” Otmar replied thumbing behind himself towards Chora’s.

Incredibly he still looked unconvinced. Otmar decided to show this human that he knew more than he let on.

“You’re here under a false name,” he began while holding up one of his digits. “You carry a pistol illegally,” another digit went up, “You fight with the skills of a trained soldier, but wear no uniform. You pay with physical credit chits, which are harder to track. Basically Mister Kaine, you act like a mercenary.”

"Lots of people do that in this part of the Citadel," the human replied. "Good luck finding help." He pointed down at Otmar continuing, "I mean that."

And he began walking away again. Otmar couldn't believe it, what would it take for this human to acknowledge that he was a former soldier; someone that could help Otmar and keep him safe on Omega?

Ask him. The words appeared on his visor then faded, being replaced by a letter and a number. They too faded after a moment.

Otmar was wondering where that came from. Part of the training he'd skimmed through perhaps? What did it mean? Seemed like an odd thing to call any form of training. He saw the human reach the top of the stairs and start moving out of view. Otmar decided to just ask, he had nothing left to lose.

"What does 'N3' mean?" he yelled up.

A memory flashed in Kaine's mind. Arms wrapped around his, fingers gripping his hair. He was flailing around in a rage, trying to get away, to continue his attack. At a table not too far from him, a colonel in the Alliance Military stood. There was anger in his eyes, his hand over his nose and mouth. Blood seeped between the closed fingers.

More struggling, desperate to get free. Kaine wanted to punish this man, break him down, and see him squirm. Violently he was tossed away, but he ran forward. Many arms and hands on him again, holding him back. Security officers arrived, they approach with their weapons drawn. They yell at him to stand down or they will fire.

Another image: his sister, lying on a hospital bed. Not moving, not responding. Kaine resolves himself to his fate and advances. Something hits the back of his head and everything goes black.

"What did you say?" Kaine said blinking, returning to the present.

He was on the top of the connecting stairway between the low markets and the second floor of the Ward. A Quarian was staring up at him, just standing there for a moment but then quickly walking up the stairs to meet him.

"What does 'N3' mean?" The Quarian asked again reaching the top steps, standing in front of Kaine.

"Let's talk."

Kaine walked away, but at a slower pace so the Quarian would follow him. Together they exited onto the second level, entering the upper markets of the Ward. Kaine led them across the expanse, passing all manner of races as they walked. They reached the massive windows on this level and Kaine leaned over the railing in front of them.

He watched thousands of skycars as they whizzed by at high speeds. A stream of traffic as people flew all over the Citadel, between Wards, docks, and hundreds of other destinations. It still filled him with wonder, being hundreds of trillions of kilometers from Earth, standing on the most impressive thing he'd ever seen.

The Citadel was massive, five arms over forty kilometers in length attached at their bases by a central ring itself kilometers in width. Billions of people lived and worked here, it was literally the heart of the entire Milky Way. It always made him feel a little poetic when he stopped to think about it.

“This place is incredible,” he said mostly to himself. The Quarian didn’t reply, he was standing next to him looking around at the other people. Kaine sighed heavily, stood up and faced him.

It was the first time he’d taken a good look at his stalker; he stood about a meter and half high, with a slender frame to match. The Quarian had on an enviro-suit that completely covered his body, head to toe. He knew from his instructors that it was to defend their incredibly weak immune systems.

Kaine had seen a boy with that problem on earth once, forced to live his life in isolation to protect him from the minor illnesses that would wreak havoc on his body and possibly kill him. The doctors and his family tried to make him feel better, but Kaine could see he was miserable. Being a child and unable to play with friends is a rough way to begin life.

The Quarian's suit was more elegant than the ones for humans: form fitting, faded purple with equally faded white accents on the shoulders and thighs. He had more than a few patches here and there, but overall even with all the extra belts on his waist and arms it was a good look. Were he a bit bigger in height and weight, he’d be downright intimidating.

The Quarian began to rub his hands together; he looked to the left and right, like a bird worried about a predator. Kaine smiled, completely abandoning any idea of him being intimidating. Were he built like a professional wrestler he’d probably seem like the same fidgety, worrisome creature.

“What is it you actually need help with Quarian?” Kaine finally said with a sigh.

“I’m heading into the Terminus Systems, to retrieve a package and return it here,” the Quarian answered quickly, no attempt at subterfuge. “To the Citadel I mean.” He added.

“I gathered that.” Kaine replied sarcastically. “The Terminus can be a nasty place, lots of area, full of mean people without laws or rules. What’s so important out there?”

“Well,” the Quarian began to answer but stopped looking down at his hands.

“You don’t know, do you?” Kaine said when it was clear he wouldn’t respond.

“That wasn’t a condition of the deal that I should know its contents,” he said defensively.

“Right,” Kaine said with a laugh. “So you’re just going to run off into the biggest lawless part of the galaxy as an errand boy and hope to drag me along? Are you a fool? Do you take me for one?”

“I just want to go *home!*” The Quarian yelled out unexpectedly.

Kaine could practically hear the fury and desperation in his voice. He looked down again; his hands had stopped moving, just squeezing together tighter and tighter. He was actually trembling with the exertion.

“Hey look,” Kaine began a bit concerned. He reached out and put a hand on the Quarian’s left shoulder which elicited a hiss of pain. The Quarian twitched away with his right hand raised as if asking Kaine to stop. “You okay?”

“I’ll be fine,” he replied a bit pathetically, gently massaging his shoulder. “Ran into a Krogan that thought the same way you do. I pushed the issue, trying to convince him to help. He made his point better.”

Kaine watched him turn away and look back out the window onto the rest of the Ward and the Citadel. A pang of guilt hit him; this was no act the Quarian was putting on. He needed help badly and was willing to invoke the wrath of a Krogan to get it.

"You stood up to a Krogan?" Kaine asked in disbelief.

"I want to go home," was the only answer he got.

It was clear how desperate he was to get home, few people survived encounters with Krogans. Especially if the Krogan was feeling uncivil. That was a rare kind of desperation. Kaine knew about that sort all too well.

“Why can’t you go home?” Kaine asked in a gentle tone.

Otmar didn’t turn to look at him; he just kept watching the traffic as it flowed past. It was like a river of skycars with people inside them, reminding him of a micro sized version of the Flotilla. He sighed for perhaps the thousandth time on his Pilgrimage; homesickness was a disease he’d gotten over and over again.

Otmar began to describe the Pilgrimage: when a Quarian was of the right age they left the ship they were born on and were then sent out into the galaxy to find a gift to present the captain of their new ship, proving they wouldn’t be a burden upon return.

“Gifts like what?” the human asked. “Starship parts or something?”

“Yes, but not always,” Otmar replied facing him. “Sometimes it can be a new technique for soil conservation or a contact that would openly trade with the fleet. My father returned with schematics for a filtration system that improved healthy birth rates by thirty percent.” Otmar hadn’t

actually thought about his parents in a long time, more homesickness was his reward for doing so now. “It just has to be something worthy, the more useful the better.”

“I take it you haven't found anything suitable yet?” the human asked seriously.

“No, not by any definition,” Otmar replied bitterly. “The other problem is my gift needs to be better than most. My father is the captain of my birth ship and like I said his gift was very impressive.”

“So people expect something as good, if not better from you.” The human nodded slowly.

“You can come back with almost anything and it'll be accepted, if for nothing more than traditions sake.” Otmar imagined what his return would be like with a mediocre gift, that didn't make him feel any better. “I've been on my Pilgrimage so long now that I'm sure they expect something extravagant when I return.”

That or that he was already dead.

Otmar turned away and looked back out the window. Some Quarians never returned from their journeys; either having been killed by any of the millions of dangers in the galaxy or just deciding not to go back. The idea of voluntarily not returning was abhorrent to him, but it seemed like fate had made that choice all the same.

“How long have you been at it?” he was asked, bringing Otmar back to the conversation.

“Going on about...” he paused, thinking back to when he'd left. “Five and a quarter standard years now.”

The human made no reply; he just kept looking in Otmar's direction. Otmar wanted so badly to return home he had contemplated more than once on bringing the freighter he had cobbled together back as his gift. The stigma though, would be too difficult to overcome.

“This package,” the human again interrupted Otmar's thoughts. “Will it be enough of a gift to get you home?”

“I don't know,” Otmar replied dejectedly. “It's for the Asari Councilor; she promised credits and an item of equal value.”

Offer the credits.

Otmar thought about it; he hadn't tried this tactic yet, proving how terrible he actually was at interpersonal negotiations. He had offered small sums to the others he talked to, only what he could guarantee they'd be paid. This was worth a salvo anyway.

“You can have all the credits,” Otmar spun to look at the human.

“Hold on,” the human put a hand for him to stop.

“Listen she’s a councilor,” Otmar pressed, ignoring his hand. “They have to be rich or at least backed by their governments. The Asari are the wealthiest people in the galaxy, whatever she offers is yours!”

Otmar’s thoughts spun out of control; he imagined returning home with something amazing, his new captain would be greatly impressed. The new crew would hold him in high regard; even his father and mother would be pleased. No more sulking about the lower reaches of galactic society. Home, he could go home.

“Please,” Otmar reached out and put his hands on the human’s arms, pleading with him, begging. “I could go home.”

Kaine gripped the Quarian's forearms, gently removed his hands and watched him move a respectful distance away. Kaine raised a finger to silence him when he seemed about to speak again.

Kaine was no fool; his grandmother had once told him to believe half of what he saw, a third of what he read and none of what he heard and he’d do fine in life. It was a good rule to live by and it had helped keep him mostly safe for a long time.

Helping this Quarian though would fly in the face of what she'd always said. Quarians were harder to read than most, the enviro-suits obscuring their faces made it difficult. But mannerisms could be used in place of an obscured face, they were more difficult to fake than people thought. Unless you were dealing with a pathological liar.

If he was acting he was doing a damn fine job of it, award worthy even. But Kaine had enough faith in his abilities to believe the Quarian at least thought whatever this was would be the final piece to the puzzle of returning home.

Still, there was something bothering him about the entire thing. Why would a Citadel Councilor, one of the three single most powerful people in the galaxy, come to some random Quarian with this sort of offer? That part was too sketchy to be legitimate.

“Where is this meeting?” Kaine asked.

“In the Terminus,” the Quarian said. Kaine raised his eyebrows and gave a look that showed he wasn’t in a joking mood. “Oh, a place called Omega, former mining colony. Specifically a bar called Haven”

“Don’t know either place,” Kaine replied honestly never having heard of this Omega or Haven.

“When?” he asked.

“The day following tomorrow,” he answered. “Late in the evening. Travel time is about seventeen hours.”

Kaine swore viciously. It was just his luck that this happen now. It would be all too easy to just walk away though. Well not really, even the hint of riches from a Citadel Council member was too good to pass up. He could use all the money he could get his hands on. It seemed no matter how far away he was, his responsibilities always tracked him down.

“So you’d have to leave tomorrow at the latest,” Kaine said leaning against the railing and looking down at the floor thinking.

“Yes, early morning before the shops even opened ideally.” The Quarian mimicked his stance and stayed quiet.

“And if you wanted to get there early to check out the place before the meeting you’d leave tonight,” Kaine added rubbing his forehead and sighing.

He was tired all of a sudden. Not sleeping well and getting into a brawl back at Chora's was catching up to him fast. For a second he had trouble thinking, but he blinked a few times and the fuzziness faded.

The two of them stood there, leaning against the rail of the windows that looked out over the heart of the galaxy. Neither moving nor talking, both had their arms crossed over their chests. Kaine was looking up, the Quarian looking down.

“What if I decline? Again,” Kaine said looking up at the Quarian. “What if you find no one that will help you? Would you still go?”

“Yes,” he replied without hesitation.

“So you’d just go on the whim of a Councilor? Possibly running into some nasty people and getting killed?” Kaine asked.

“Can you go home?” he asked in return, catching Kaine off guard.

“No,” he replied cautiously.

“If you could, what would you do to get there?” the Quarian said.

Kaine thought about the question for a moment. The situation on Earth and his place in it. If he could fix everything and go back now, what would he do to attain that goal? The list of things he wouldn’t do was decidedly short to be totally honest.

All the same, even if they shared a common goal of returning to their homes Kaine was not foolish enough to go running into a shadowy meeting with who knows who and to discuss who

knows what. This was dangerous, he felt it, however he couldn't just let this Quarian run off on his own. Here on the Citadel, the heart of the galaxy and civilization he'd been hurt and threatened and the Terminus was dangerous, to even harden soldiers.

Simply put: Kaine didn't really want to be a part of this.

Or did he? This was a Citadel Councilor they were discussing. The political and economic power each of them held was literally second to none in the entire galaxy. If they returned this package maybe Kaine could alter the terms of the deal? Maybe have his sister upgraded somehow, put into one of the more elite long term care wings? A personal favor from the leader of the Asari could go a long way to fixing his problems.

Kaine sighed with pain. His head had started to again, a dull ache you get before a really nasty migraine. Ignoring it he turned fully to face the Quarian.

"Two rules," Kaine said holding up two fingers.

"You're going to help?" he nearly jumped for joy as he asked.

"I didn't say that," Kaine had to suppress a smile at the unmitigated display of enthusiasm. "You have to agree to two things first."

"Okay, sure." The Quarian was in a decidedly better mood.

"Listen to me, this is important. First: if things go south I'm in charge, you do what I tell you when I tell you. If I tell you to run you do it. If I say drop, you're on the ground before I finish. You do not contradict me and you do not hesitate. Got it?" Kaine finished leveling all the seriousness he could into his tone.

"Yes," the Quarian replied in an equally serious tone nodding once.

"Secondly, I know you want to go home but under no circumstances is this package more important than our lives. Whatever the outcome, we come back to the Citadel in one piece, package or no package."

Kaine stared directly at the glowing orbs that were hopefully the Quarian's eyes. The look he wore could not be more serious if Kaine paid an artist to do make it so. Kaine had said his piece and now waited to hear the Quarian agree with him.

"I understand," the Quarian replied with all seriousness.

Kaine paused and searched the face mask, watched his arms and fingers, noticed his stance and bearing. Kaine took this all in without moving his eyes and after a few moments decided the Quarian was being truthful.

“Very well Quarian,” Kaine said holding out his hand. “I’m Kaine and you just hired yourself a bodyguard.”

“I’m Otmar’Reefa nar Zeela,” he said, awkwardly shaking hands after a moment. “Thank you Mister Kaine, thank you so much.”

“Just Kaine is fine...” He said letting go, already forgetting the Quarian's name.

“Otmar,” he returned.

“Well Otmar, I assume you have a ship?” Kaine asked.

“Yes docking platform forty-seven,” Otmar replied.

“Forty-seven got it.” Kaine began to walk away rubbing his temple as it continued to ache. “Get it ready to leave in an hour; I have to go ruin a promising relationship before it’s even begun.”

FOUR

Siru K'vaar heard the knock on her door just as she turned off the flow of water in her shower. She cursed stepping out and grabbing a towel. Mostly dry she dropped the towel and retrieved her bathrobe, synching it around her waist as she exited the refresher.

"Goddess, one moment!" Siru yelled as another knock sounded.

She crossed her small apartment, passing the kitchen that opened into a modest dining area. She walked across her living room which had a couch and chair situated before a view screen on the wall. Bumping into her coffee table she swore again and reached her front door.

Tapping in the voyeur viewer switched showing her who was on the other side, she saw Kaine standing there, smoking another of his detestable cigarettes.

She wasn't expecting him until the next night, when they were going to the Zakera Ward block party. At the moment though he looked funny somehow, a little dazed maybe. Not really paying attention to his surroundings. Tapping the door again and shutting down the program she disengaged the locks.

"Hello there stranger," she said pleasantly opening the door. "Its been, goddess, almost an hour since we last talked. Can't get enough?"

Her smile faded as he looked at her, she'd been around long enough to know that look. She'd also been around long enough to know what disappointment felt like. She sighed but didn't move.

"So, you're here to cancel on tomorrow?" She said to him evenly.

"Siru," he began slowly.

"It's alright, I'm sure you have a good reason," she looked away a moment, a bit more emotion had welled up in her than she'd expected. Collecting herself she looked back at him, "would have been fun, but there will be other opportunities". Like hell there would she thought.

"Siru," he began again.

"Look I was just heading out..." she paused. She had been getting ready to leave, but it was to pick up a new outfit for the party. She had plenty to choose from, but she wanted to pick up something more suited for the type of raucous affair they would have gone to. Something more

human too, her other ensembles were a bit exotic and she thought something from Earth would be a plus. "Well, I was heading out so I'll see you later."

"Siru please," he said slowly as she was about to shut her door. He sounded tired and she wondered mildly what had happened. "Can I explain?"

Siru thought momentarily; putting a hand to her forehead, she massaged her scalp absently before sighing and waving him inside. "Sure. Put that out first." She said without much enthusiasm.

She watched him casually crush the cigarette beneath his boot into the ground in front of her door. That was unlike Kaine, he usually took care not to annoy her with his habit. He was surely acting strange. Well stranger than he did at Chora's Den. Well stranger than she'd remembered him ever being anyway. That could be part of the ruse however, part of his excuse.

Siru K'vaar had heard every excuse in the codex about needing to break off an engagement: family emergency, thresher maw attack, conscription, sentient machines destroying a homeworld.

Okay that last one actually happened. Siru still felt guilty about that particular argument. She had mostly made peace with it; at the time she had been young and full of unchecked emotions. But the memory still got to her. She never heard from him again either.

She shook her head, clearing her thoughts. She had to pay attention, see if Kaine was about to add something new to the list. Shutting the door as he entered she turned to him.

"Would you like a drink?" She asked and instantly felt foolish. Here she was offering him hospitality when he was going to come up with some idiotic lie about why he wouldn't be around tomorrow night.

"I'm sorry, what?" Kaine said. He looked pale to her and she noticed he wasn't standing quite as steadily as he should have been. He was teetering slightly back and forth.

"Are you okay?" Siru asked.

"Yeah, just a splitting headache is all." He added placing a hand against the door to steady himself.

"Maybe you should sit," she said as she led him to her couch and sat him down.

Synching her bathrobe a little tighter she crouched before him. He was blinking a lot, like he was trying to clear something from his eyes. She noticed wherever he looked he wasn't focused, as if he were looking through everything.

"Kaine," she said reaching up and placing her hands on his cheeks. "Look at me." She gently forced him to look at her.

She noticed a glistening on the left side of his head, her right. It was just behind his ear, like a patch of wet hair. She reached back and pressed her hand on the wet spot, Kaine cringed and twitched violently. She pulled her hand away and it was wet with red blood.

"Goddess! Kaine what happened to you? Don't move." She said getting up and walking into her refresher. Grabbing a small hand towel and a jar from the cubbyhole behind her mirror she returned. He was pulling his hand away from the same spot and then looked at the blood.

"I think I got into a fight," Kaine was saying as she sat beside him.

"With who?" she asked opening the jar and smearing a generous amount of semisolid white ointment on the towel. "This will sting a bit," she said as she placed the towel, ointment side first, against the wound. Kaine hissed and winced. "I'm sorry," she whispered. After a moment he relaxed, took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

"That better?" She asked him in a soothing tone. She'd seen head injuries before, they could leave even the toughest person rattled. They were also dangerous and needed treatment as soon as possible. Medi-gel would help though, lessen the swelling and speed up coagulation.

"Yeah," he said quietly, clearly relieved.

"Tell me what happened," she asked again.

Rest was the most important thing with this type of injury, but she had to know what happened to be able to help. She looked down at his hand that was resting palm up on his leg. It was covered in his blood, that made her anxious for him. "Kaine, what happened?"

"Cyrion," he began slowly. "He and two Turians jumped me on the way out of Chora's Den. I left shortly after you. Did you see them?"

"No," she said quietly taking the towel away, flipping it over itself and applying more gel before returning it to his head. "I left through the employee entrance in the back."

"Oh," he said disappointingly. "Well there was a fight and I guess I hit my head harder than I thought."

She left the towel against his head for a minute then pulled it away. There was noticeably less blood this time. The medicine was doing its job remarkably well, maybe human physiology reacted to it better than other species did.

"Is your head the only part that hurts?" She asked him as she kept the towel against the side of his head but looked him over to see if there were any other obvious wounds.

"On of them hit me in the side pretty good," he said and pointed to his left side.

Siru gently moved her hand over the area he indicated, he flinched minutely but applying pressure didn't cause him to react any more. Siru felt nothing but hard muscle, taught and strong that moved when he breathed. She could feel him breathing steadily, a good sign. Reluctantly, she pulled her hand away. She decided it wasn't as bad as his head and could be taken care of later.

"Okay. Let's get you to Vikar's Clinic." She said rising.

Kaine grabbed her hand as she rose and gently pulled her back to the couch. He turned to her already looking better.

"I really wanted to go with you tomorrow," he said slowly. Siru began to assure him that it didn't matter but he stopped her. "You know that Quarian who bumped our table?" She nodded that she did. "He needs my help getting a package so he can finish his," he paused then continued, "his something or other."

"His Pilgrimage?" She asked him.

"Yes." Kaine's speech picked up, he was definitely improving. "I think if I don't help him he may end up dead."

"Why? Where are you going?" she asked mildly concerned now.

"Some bar called Omega on a defunct mining colony," he paused, "Haven I think its called. Out in the Terminus."

"You mean the mining colony Omega?" she corrected.

"Yes," he thought again, "yeah that's it."

"Why are you volunteering to help?"

"He's frightened Siru. A lot. But just as determined." Kaine shrugged, "I just feel like I should."

"Well we need to get you looked at first," she said standing again.

She looked down at her hand. It was smeared with blood from his hand as he had pulled her back to the couch. She stared at it a moment. It glistened a bit more than other blood she'd seen, like red tinted mercury.

"I'm sorry," he said as he looked at her hand and began to rise.

"Sit!" Siru commanded putting a hand to his shoulder and keeping him seated. "I'll be right back, don't move." She walked into her refresher, washed up, then into her bedroom to put on some clothing.

Ethan Kaine was confused, not nearly as much as when he'd first arrived though. He didn't remember walking to her apartment after the fight. He wondered how long he'd been bleeding. Being that it was fresh blood on his hand it was either a really nasty wound or just something that recently worsened. Probably the latter as he was already feeling better.

Kaine stood, unsteadily at first but he regained his equilibrium quickly. He looked around the small apartment a moment, noticed some art on the walls and pictures scattered about. It was remarkably like his own, only tidier. He had imagined the homes of aliens to be more, well alien. As he continued to look he noticed the refresher and decided to get washed up.

He moved without swaying or unsteadiness and turned the faucet on immediately, quickly rinsing his hands, thoroughly. He'd forgotten how hard it was to get blood off your hands. After a minute of scrubbing he was done.

Kaine put his freshly clean hand to the wound and pulled it away, hardly any blood on it at all. He looked up into the mirror and didn't notice any black eyes or other facial damage. His side and back ached a little but nothing serious.

He looked around the refresher absently for a towel and saw a book, a real paper and binding book like his grandmother preferred, sitting near the sink. It had an image of two hearts, one far brighter than the other. It was titled *Romantic Success Begins in YOUR Heart*. He picked the book up noticing how worn it was, he guessed it had been read quite a bit. It had been a long time since he'd seen an actual physical book. Certain pages had their corners folded over and parts had been highlighted or underlined. There were even hand written notes in the margins though he couldn't read it. He smiled at the thought of an Asari reading a book about relationships.

"Kaine!" Came a yell from the doorway behind him. Startled he swore, fumbled, and dropped the book to the ground. He turned and saw Siru staring at him, clearly displeased.

"Hey," he said slowly. "I was just cleaning my hands." He reached down to pick the book back up.

"And sifting through my belongs as a bonus?" She moved faster than him, picked up the book and tossed it back on the sink behind him. She crossed her arms and stared at him.

She had changed into a pair of practical dark blue pants and matching shoes with a white close cropped top and black half jacket over it. She had a small bag over one shoulder. The outfit looked functional and comfortable to him.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I hadn't seen a book since I was a little kid visiting my grandmother. Usually it's all data-pads or omni-tool docs." He told her honestly.

Remembering those days, looking at all the old and dusty tomes on her shelves. She had refused to throw them away, saying she preferred the weight of a solid book in her hands to a flimsy datapad.

"They're much better than electro-paperweights." He added with a smile.

Her scowl softened as she reached out to touch his head ever so lightly. She pulled her hand away, not a trace of blood on her fingers. She nodded then looked back at him.

"Come on, we're going to the clinic," she said reaching out again and pulling him out of the refresher by his jacket sleeve.

"No please," he said turning to face her. "I know Vikar, that old bat is gonna keep me under observation for a week." He said half seriously, feeling much better. "We both know it won't have anything to do with a wound, she's just a pervert."

Siru smiled for a fraction of second then sighed and said, "I promise to protect you from the old Salarian doctor Kaine. She won't molest you today."

"Really, I'm fine," he said as she started leading him out of the apartment again. "Siru stop," he said turning again and taking her hands in his. "If I don't leave now, I won't get to Omega in time to prepare for the meeting. If this place is as bad as Otmar says."

"Who?" She interrupted.

"The Quarian, his name is Otmar."

Kaine couldn't help but notice how well her hands fit into his. He liked the way her teal skin contrasted against his darker color.

"We have to leave tonight," he said weakly coming back to his senses. "I want to get there on time, to prepare, and to make sure the transaction happens cleanly."

They stood looking at each other for a few moments. Kaine didn't really feel like leaving all of a sudden. To him, she didn't seem in much of a hurry either.

"Fine," she said finally, "I'm coming with you."

Siru K'vaar blinked twice in confusion at what she'd just said. The words came out before she noticed or had consciously thought of them. Looking at Kaine she saw the same expression mirrored on his face.

They'd known one another relatively little and hadn't even seen each other away from Chora's Den before this moment. And yet here she was offering to travel to another star cluster with him. Going back to Omega was not what she had expected when she'd let him in.

Let him in where she thought? The apartment? Somewhere else? A place more figurative and far more important? Goddess, she berated herself. She'd been reading that book again, it always left her waxing poetic for hours after.

Another thought popped into her head then: how unexpected their interactions always seemed to become. Kaine had a knack for being the opposite of whatever she thought he'd be at the time. That could either be good or bad depending on the circumstances.

Her emotions were difficult to sift through at the moment. It could be due to his injuries; Siru didn't like seeing her friends hurt. She put a hand to her head as she thought that. Could she really consider him a friend? It seemed odd to think that way considering what their relationship had consisted of so far.

"Siru," Kaine began taking her away from her thoughts.

"No," she countered and looked up at him sternly.

She hadn't noticed until now how much taller he was. She had to crane her neck to look up at his face. She noticed he still looked tired from the injury. She lifted her hand gently touched where he had been hurt and got no reaction. Pulling her hand away she was satisfied to see no blood, a very good sign.

"Should just be a quick thing," he said continuing from before. "I'll make it up to you when I get back."

"Kaine, shut up," she said quietly and looked back up at him. "Have you ever been to Omega?"

He didn't reply, maybe he heard the tone that slipped into her voice. She took a breath settling herself; she rarely got so emotional about anything anymore. But she didn't want Kaine to think he could talk his way out of this.

"No you haven't, few humans have." She said, though she had no proof of the statement. "Omega isn't like anywhere you've been; it has no laws, no police. Slavers operate freely in the open along with every other type of criminal you can think of. I know because I lived there for forty years."

Kaine's eyebrows shot up as she said that.

"When I was a Maiden," she began answering his unasked question. "I spent time there as

personal assistant for the self-entitled ruler; an Asari that envisioned herself as Queen Bitch of the Terminus Systems.” Thinking about her old boss actually made her angrier than she would have thought after all these years. “Contacts, mercs, slavers, anyone that wanted to operate on Omega sought her permission to do so.”

It was precisely those types of individuals that she wanted to keep Kaine away from. Omega was not the sort of place you head to without firsthand knowledge. At least if you can help it.

"I also helped with information gathering," she continued. "Keeping tabs on all those contacts, mercs and slavers, any attempted coups; who paid their protection fees and who was trying to smuggle in goods. That sort of thing."

She was rambling and she knew it. She wanted to explain that she didn't want to be a part of that lifestyle, it hurt so many innocent people. She hurt so many innocent people and she'd left it behind a long, long time ago. It seemed important that he knew or was it? She was so confused right now.

“But that doesn’t matter,” she began clearing her head, “what does matter is that I know how Omega runs. I know who to bribe and who to intimidate. I know the real fees and the fake. I know what districts to be wary of and which ones to completely avoid.” Her voice began to rise uncontrollably. “Omega isn’t like Chora’s Den it’s far, far worse Kaine. People go there and never come back.”

“Ok, ok,” Kaine said holding up his hands in defeat. “You’re right; I don’t know anything about Omega.” He put his hands on her shoulders lightly. “But if it’s as bad as you say, I’d prefer you just give me a summary of all that instead.”

“No,” she said reaching up grasping his hands taking them off her shoulders roughly. “I was smart enough to leave on even terms and my reputation might still be worth something. I can make the exchange quick and easy and we can be off Omega before anything could go wrong.”

Kaine took a long slow breathe and absently scratched his forehead to buy himself a quick second or two. Siru was clearly adamant about going with him. That in itself was odd enough, but her turning out to be some former mobster’s assistant was just crazy.

She wasn’t lying, of that he believed wholeheartedly. But it was such a coincidence that he couldn’t shake the feeling of it being a set up somehow. Maybe it was less a set up and more like

fate, though that was the biggest set up of all in his opinion.

Kaine looked down at Siru who returned his gaze icily. She had the expression of a woman that was used to dealing with difficult people and difficult situations. It didn't matter though, she was completely right: he knew nothing about Omega and going there without any intel was tactically dangerous. And totally stupid.

She was wrong about one thing though: he had been to places like Omega. Places where criminals acted freely were not hard to come by in the galaxy, even on the Citadel there were Wards like that. As it was he didn't really want to keep an eye on two people. However, with her help it could be over quickly and he'd be back before he knew it.

"Ok. We're leaving right now," he began and held up two fingers. "But first two rules."

"Of course," she replied and walked away from him into her bedroom.

Kaine didn't budge, still holding up his two fingers. Slowly he put his hand down and twisted his neck to crack the bones holding his skull up. Turning he followed where she went and saw her quickly filling a small bag. She completed her task and walked back into the living room.

"You pack fast," he said looking at her one bag of clothes. "And travel light. Now for the rules."

"Stuff your rules Kaine," she retorted. "I know what I'm doing."

She left him standing again and walked to the entrance of her apartment. He didn't bother to move as a wide smile crossed his face. He liked this side of Siru, confident and determined. She wasn't just an entertainer at Chora's Den who listened meekly to what people said, she had a fire in her. That was something he could appreciate.

"Let's get going," she said imperiously.

"Yes ma'am," he said to himself and let the smile fade.

FIVE

"You should receive this message about the time I arrive at Omega," Otmar'Reefa nar Zeela said dictating to his VI. He was seated in the pilot's chair of his small freight hauler while casually looking out of the front view port. There he saw other small ships huddled onto the same docking platform as his. More important vessels got their own docking stations, but small and unimportant ones like his shared the communal versions.

Palaven's Delight, the name of his used vessel, was sitting next to seven other small freight hauler class ships. It was of modest design, mostly for function over form. It was fifteen meters in length and about half as wide; it was created to move small amounts of freight between larger vessels. This class of ship was usually described as a rectangle with engines and the comment wasn't completely without merit.

Otmar slowly turned in his chair and looked at the interior. It had taken him months to retrofit the empty cargo bins into living areas for himself. He had to create his own recreation area, bed chamber and refresher as these amenities were not included in its original design. A small viewer was bolted to a wall with a couch he'd found on a random colony planet. He'd even added a small kitchen that would allow him to purify and sterilize his food.

The Migrant Fleet was full of ships like this: retrofitted from what they once were into something completely new. Whether the ship began its life as a pleasure yacht or a bulk freighter it would be reshaped and redesigned into what the fleet required.

Otmar absently thought about all the time he'd spent in this ship. How he'd love nothing more than to remote pilot it directly into the ground at high velocity and watch it explode into tiny little fragments. Maybe he would do just that if this venture were a success.

"Don't worry though, I've procured some protection from a former soldier," he continued. "From what I've been able to discern and the information I've uncovered he will be able to make this a success." Otmar paused again as a thought came to him. "He reminds me of grandfather, though not as intelligent. Anyway with a little luck I'll be back home once and for all in a couple weeks. Keelah se'lai."

Otmar thought about that last statement awhile. He had a feeling that this would work out for him and he would indeed be able to return to the Flotilla. He wouldn't be cooped up in this dingy box or running from port to port.

Otmar tapped his omni-tool and ended his recording. He leaned back a little and stretched out. Standing he moved about his ship, dipping his head here and there with well-practiced form. Low hanging pipes criss-crossed the ceiling of the ship. He checked on his supplies: he was full up on fuel, medical supplies and sterilized food and water.

Transmission successful. The words formed on the inside of his visor as he roamed.

"Thank you Zasi," Otmar replied out loud.

Otmar continued to look over his ship carefully; he'd watched his father do this very thing a hundred times: inspecting every centimeter on every deck. The *Zeela* wasn't a very big ship, about three times the size of a typical frigate. Even so it had always garnered high marks for maintenance and repair from his father's ability to get the best out of his ship and crew.

Otmar let a finger trace one of the dozen pipes that ran around the interior of the ship. They weren't haphazardly placed, far from it but there were a great many of them. Each with its own purpose: atmosphere, heating or electrical housing, amongst others. He watched his hand slide along the pipe and took a long hard look around his ship.

This had been his home for most of his Pilgrimage. It sheltered him when no one else would and it kept him safe from those that would do him harm. It was a cobbled together junk pile he'd been told once. That wasn't true though, it was a hand stitched piece of art. He'd turned a broken and beaten freight hauler into a home.

"I don't think I could do it Zasi," he said out loud again. "I couldn't just let her go. Maybe she could be part of my gift."

Palaven's Delight would be repurposed. High probability that this ship would not be in the same condition afterward. The words crawled over his visor.

"That's different," Otmar replied. "This ship still has value; it's still worth something to my people. After all it's done for me; it has earned the right to continue on."

By definition inanimate objects cannot earn anything.

"Yes they can," Otmar said quietly almost wistfully.

There came a pounding on the outer side of the airlock situated just behind the pilot's station. Otmar moved to the control panel and hit a sequence on the keys to open the outer door. It slid loudly up, making a high pitched grinding noise that had always been there. Otmar barely noticed it anymore.

As the airlock finished slide-grinding into place Otmar saw the human, Kaine, standing before him with a comical look on his face. He carried two large black bags, one in each hand. He looked at Otmar, then at the door and then returned his gaze.

"I hope the rest of your ship works better than that airlock door," Kaine commented not moving.

"She is not the most alluring of vessels I concede," Otmar replied indignantly, "but I can assure you she has all that is required of her."

"Fair enough," Kaine said with a nod. "Permission to come aboard?"

This took Otmar completely by surprise. No one but himself or the occasional inspection crew ever came aboard and they rarely asked permission for anything.

"Permission granted," Otmar said in what he hoped sounded captainly.

As Kaine stepped in Otmar noticed an Asari standing behind him. She smiled warmly when he looked her way. Otmar glanced at Kaine then back to his companion in confusion.

"Permission to come aboard?" She asked. Otmar felt she looked familiar to him somehow but he couldn't place her.

An entertainer at Chora's Den named Siru K'vaar. The words appeared on his visor along with a small video. *Seen here earlier today, talking to Ethan Kaine.*

"Um one second," Otmar said turning and pulling Kaine to the side away from the door. "I'm confused."

"Yeah women do that," Kaine replied.

"What?" Otmar asked.

"Never mind, look she knows Omega," Kaine said. "She offered to escort us and give us some tips we might need to make this a smooth transaction."

"Why?" Otmar asked without thinking.

"Well," Kaine said. Otmar watched him look passed him towards the Asari standing outside his ship. An odd expression crossed his face for a fraction of a moment then with a quick head shake he looked back. "I think she's more here to help me."

"Do you need help?"

"If you asked the right people," Kaine began and then trailed off. Otmar turned his head to the side still confused. Taking a breath to speak Kaine held his hands up for him to wait then continued. "Neither of us know Omega and she said she lived there. The more information we have the better prepared we can be."

“Do you believe her?”

Another odd expression crossed his face then, something he could have sworn he'd seen on other males faces when talking about a person they cared for. But that made little to no sense to him so Otmar ignored it and waited.

“Yeah I do Otmar.” Kaine said.

“Okay well I'm not sure what I can pay her with.”

“Don't worry about it Otmar, she's not looking for payment. Though you could ask her in.”

Otmar snapped his head to look back at the door and took a few quick strides to stand before the Asari. She was gazing down at her feet slightly bobbing her head as if listening to a tune when he stepped into view and looking up a quick smile crossed her lips.

“Please come in,” Otmar said motioning her in. As she stood inside he added awkwardly, “I'm Otmar'Reefa nar Zeela.”

“Siru K'vaar,” she told him easily. “But Siru is fine.”

“Of course,” he replied with a nod then looked up and around his ship. Feeling dramatic he lifted his arms to encompass the entire craft and said, “welcome aboard the *Palaven's Delight*.”

Ethan Kaine nodded, he hadn't thought Otmar would care if Siru came along but there was always a worry when dealing with new people. You never really knew how they would react. He looked around the ship, it was pretty dingy and there were pipes everywhere. Kaine had to keep his head bowed slightly and he made a mental note to be watchful of the pipes.

He noticed one sleeping room, what might be a refresher and a modest recreation area. He gathered it was all a single Quarian on Pilgrimage would need.

"Good to be here Otmar," Siru commented lightly.

"Not to be indelicate or anything but I think your suit might have a malfunction," Kaine said.

"What?" Otmar said alarmed.

"At the base of your mask just below the chin," Kaine said pointing at Otmar's face. "There's a light that keeps blinking on and off."

"Oh," Otmar let out a nervous laugh. "That's an intentional suit design so you'll know when I'm speaking."

"Wouldn't I just hear you?" Kaine replied.

Siru gave him a funny look and Otmar just stared.

"What?" Kaine said indignantly.

"Goddess Kaine," Siru commented while walking over to the recreation area and sitting down on the couch, placing a small bag down next to her. "You wouldn't happen to have any small toys he could play with do you?"

"Palaven's Delight," a disembodied voice sprang from the front of the ship.

Kaine watched Otmar move quickly to the only chair near the forward view port. He left Otmar to the task of dealing with the dock masters and looked over at Siru who was sitting casually with one leg crossed over the other.

"That was a valid question," he said as he sat down next to her, Siru's bag of clothes between them. She watched him sit and just stared at him wearing a half smile. "Valid," he said again with a nod.

Kaine looked around the ship again and half listened to Otmar as he obtained clearances for departure. The best way he could describe the layout was pragmatic; Otmar could get everywhere he needed to quickly and efficiently. Not a lot of attention was paid to the aesthetics of the interior.

The multitude of pipes, ducts and wires that ran all over the ceiling were confusing to look at. Keeping this ship space worthy was probably a full time job. Kaine hoped that Otmar put the effort in to match.

He glanced over at Siru as she lounged, lightly kicking her crossed leg up in a rhythm. She was resting an elbow on the arm of the couch and her head was leaning against her hand. She hadn't spoken much since they left her apartment, not even a comment about his less than pristine dwelling.

It was an awkward situation to be sure. The two of them hadn't spent any time together away from the Den. It wasn't as if he didn't want to, but this wasn't really the way he imagined their first encounter away from her work would be. She was cordial with Otmar and he back.

To him everyone was acting a little to formal and serious. He hadn't really meant to ask for permission to enter the ship, it was just an old habit drilled into him over the years. In all likelihood they were just going to this Omega for a few hours and be back quickly. He felt the need to lighten the air.

"Otmar could use a table right here," Kaine said leaning forward and extending his hand in a circular motion indicating the area in front of them. "Something to put your feet on."

Kaine looked at Siru with mock seriousness on his face. She caught his eye and held it a moment before clearing her throat.

"Sure," she said and then nodded in the direction of the airlock. "Maybe a nice drape to cover the airlock doors, a flowery patterned drape."

"Yes," Kaine replied lightly stroking his chin as he looked up. "A mural on the ceiling to hide all the piping and duct work."

"Could definitely use a plant over in the corner by the engine compartment," she said casually pointing over to the rear of the ship.

"A nice landscape behind us," he reached back rapping his knuckles on the wall behind them.

"This couch could use a new cover," she looked at the faded brown material under her elbow. "Something pastel, like a light reddish color."

"Let's not go that far," he said with feigned indignation. "This is a man's vessel, he needs something masculine." He pretended to think a moment. "Nah, you're right. Give him pink."

When he looked away from her he saw Otmar standing and watching them with his hands comically on his hips. Kaine suppressed the urge to laugh.

"Hello there captain," Siru said with a wide smile.

"Is the ship not to your liking?" Otmar replied as he crossed his arms over his chest.

"We were just commenting that it could use a lady's touch," she said with good humor. "Nothing drastic, just here and there."

"Or everywhere," Kaine finished for her. He noticed one of Otmar's fingers was tapping his forearm. "Anyway, what's the situation?"

"You should know that we'll be leaving shortly," Otmar began in an even tone. "And that it's about twenty minutes to the relay."

"Sounds good," Kaine replied nodding.

"You should also know that the ship has a tendency to vibrate a bit until it reaches speed," Otmar continued. "It's only a minor annoyance."

With that he returned to his pilot's seat. Kaine heard the ship's engine begin to cycle through preflight operations. He'd heard this noise a lot over the years; going from star system to star system on ships of various sizes and types.

Kaine noticed that the inner airlock door wasn't secured correctly, slid up into and behind all the pipes in the ceiling. Standing he moved over to tap the door controls to shut it. Nothing happened. He tried them again obtaining the same results.

“Otmar, this inner door isn’t responding.” Kaine told him.

“That door does not close,” Otmar replied. “Have no worry, the outer door is more than sufficient to keep the atmosphere seals intact.”

Kaine stared at the back of Otmar’s head. When he was certain that was all the Quarian was going to say on the subject he turned and slowly walked back to the couch. Sitting down he turned to Siru, leaned towards her and mouthed ‘we are going to die’. She shoved him back and gave a short quick laugh as she leaned away from him.

They settled back on opposite sides of her clothes bag as the engines gained full power. There was the unmistakable sound of docking collars releasing the ship’s gear. With a powerful shudder the ship lifted upwards and away from the docking platform. A loud thud indicated the gear had retracted.

As it lifted free it shuddered once, then again more violently. With more speed the ship began convulsing under the strain. He could feel his teeth rattling in the back of his mouth.

Kaine had to grab the arm rest as the ship moved faster away from the Wards and the citadel. Siru’s bag fell to the floor and he could hear pipes rustling about here and there. He thought he saw the inner airlock door shift slightly from the constant vibrations as the ship continued its acceleration.

Eyes wide he looked over at Siru who returned the same alarmed look. He felt the ship might rattle apart before they made it out of the Citadel’s limits. She clearly had the same idea.

Before they had a chance to say anything the ship settled and the shuddering suddenly stopped. All they could hear was a low hum from the engine compartment. Reaching down he picked up Siru’s bag and placed it back between them. As he sat up he saw Otmar had come back and stood before them.

“We are in the lane to the relay,” he said and Kaine could sense an air of satisfaction as he spoke.

“Great,” Kaine said. “One question: is this ship rated for Mass Relay travel?”

In response Otmar stood still a moment then returned to the pilot’s seat in silence. Kaine stared at Siru who looked back at him saying nothing. With a shrug he leaned back against the couch and closed his eyes.

Siru K'vaar watched Kaine for a few moments; he still seemed tired. He'd cleaned up at his apartment and she'd rechecked his wound and though she was no doctor, it looked better and had already started to clot. Clearly human physiology responded surprisingly well to medi-gel.

She almost thought, watching him as he rested, that he looked like a different man. Most people when asleep had a peaceful look to them. Not Kaine. His was closer to a person full of worries. She wondered if he was anxious about this trip to Omega. Siru frowned at the thought but let it pass. Quietly and lightly she stood up and went to talk to Otmar.

"Hey captain," she said coming up behind him.

Otmar sat in his pilot's seat, around him were various instruments for controlling the ship's position, communication and any defenses it might have. It was a tight fit, he had just enough room to swivel his chair back and forth. On the walls on each side of the chair were banks of viewers; showing coolant levels, atmospheric pressure and dozens of other gauges.

She leaned against the panel behind his right shoulder, casually waiting for him to acknowledge her. She noticed he was tapping his controls with added force, as if agitated. His shoulders didn't sway with his moments, suggesting he was very tense. She could imagine what caused that. Siru was about to say something when Otmar turned slightly and spoke.

"Something I can do for you?" Otmar said emotionless.

"Everything alright?" Siru replied casually.

Otmar kept tapping away, moving images around and updating readouts. Siru had been on plenty of starships in her years, she could tell when a pilot was just making busy work.

"Fine," Otmar said in a tone that implied otherwise.

Siru didn't comment. Over the years she'd learned when to talk and when to stay silent; when to push and when to wait. Often her clients didn't want anything more than an audience, someone to vent to that wouldn't judge or be critical. A person who would hear them and not try to fight with them or change their mind.

Otmar turned to look at her, resting his hands on the arms of the chair. She saw a minute crack in his visor, since repaired. She looked over the rest of his suit and saw more patches and mends than on the average Quarian. He had the appearance of a traveler that had been through many hardships over the years.

"I just," he began snapping Siru out of her thoughts. "I don't like being a punch line. I like it even less when it's about my ship."

Siru nodded in understanding. Quarian's treated ships and other technology like her people treated pets; they were part of the family only infinitely more important. Insulting a Quarian's ship was highly rude, sometimes worse than insulting the Quarian.

"I'm sure he meant no harm," she told him.

"Sometimes the intent is irrelevant," Otmar countered. "The results are."

A truer statement she hadn't heard in a long time. Kaine might have only been teasing Otmar but it had come across as offensive and insulting. She couldn't fix the intent, but she might be able to alleviate the results.

"Look at it from his point of view," she began slowly. "Humans haven't been around us long. This might only be his fourth or fifth ship he's ever been on. And there's a good chance he might have never been on the ship of another species." She looked up and around the interior quickly then back at him. "Your ship is probably the most unique one he's been aboard in his life."

Otmar absently put a hand to the bottom of his visor, rubbing it as if it were his chin. Maybe remembering his first journey aboard an alien vessel himself, hers was anything less than picturesque. But that's what you get for hitching a ride with pirates.

"So," Otmar said looking up at her. "Maybe it's a coping mechanism? He's worried that the ship will fail us?"

"Maybe," she replied with a slight nod.

"Well," Otmar said after a moment's thought. "Regardless, as I said before she's not aesthetically pleasing but she has never failed me and she won't fail you."

"Of that, I have no doubt." Siru said with a reassuring pat on his right shoulder.

With one final nod he spun around back to his controls and began making adjustments to their course. The tension seemed to have left him and he worked the controls less aggressively.

Siru looked out the forward window towards their destination. There were hundreds, maybe even thousands of ships in the lane to the Mass Relay of this system. It got bigger by the meter and looked like the letter U on its side with the arms pulled long away from the end. In the curve there were two spinning discs around a bright core of element zero.

"I love Mass Relays," she said.

"Me too," Otmar replied quietly. "Incredible piece of technology."

"They look far more elegant than something we'd make."

"I often wonder about their builders, the Protheans." He said turning to look at her. "How can a race that made such powerful objects strong enough to survive for fifty thousand years, be

sturdy enough in construction to still function perfectly and yet not protect themselves from whatever fate befell them?

"If they really ruled the entire galaxy how is it the Relays are that is left?" he asked returning to look at the approaching Relay. "Where is the rest of their civilization? All we ever find is small ruins here and there."

Siru had heard those arguments in school often enough. Protheans existed fifty thousand years in the past and every piece of current technology was built from their castoffs and leftovers. And yet they all died off in the blink of a galactic eye. No one really knew why.

"But still," Otmar was saying. "If they did build them before being destroyed, maybe they were like a gift to the future. Something they could be proud of, something great that would live on after them. So they would always be remembered."

A slight half smile touched Siru's lips. She looked down at Otmar as he gazed at the ever approaching Mass Relay. She had never once heard any think of the Mass Relays that connected the galaxy together allowing for instantaneous travel from star system to star system as gift.

"You have the heart of a poet Otmar," Siru said to him.

He turned and looked up at her. She wore a sincere and honest smile. Even trapped in an enviro-suit and perpetually looking through a visor, it seemed Otmar had a uniquely sweet outlook on the galaxy.

"I guess you could say it runs in the family," he said to her.

"Are your parent's poets?" Siru asked. A Quarian poet was very rare.

"No," he said looking away back out the front window. "My mother is an engineering supervisor and my father is a captain. But my mother would write in her spare time." He reached up and touched a piece of stone attached to a chain around his neck, "She wrote a new poem before I left on my Pilgrimage."

"Could I hear it?" she asked hopefully.

Otmar nodded once and cleared his throat. He sat staring into space so long she thought he might have changed his mind when he quietly recited the short poem.

"Your home is far away
Yet it is all around you
You begin your Pilgrimage
Yet a piece of you will remain

Your fate is mine
Where you go, I go
You are my son
And I will always be with you."

Siru smiled again and thought back to when she'd left home and how her mother had encouraged her to explore and experiment with life. How would she have reacted if instead of voluntarily leaving, her daughter had been forced to go? To face the galaxy alone?

"Thank you Otmar," she said quietly. "That was sweet."

"It's not much," he said looking back at her. "She usually wrote them alone but that one she said she had help on. But I still haven't figured out who."

"I bet your mother is pretty special."

"My father often said so," Otmar replied.

"I would love to meet her someday," Siru said.

"Well," Otmar said taking a deep breath and turning around to face his controls. "Maybe if this trip is a success you will."

Siru hoped so. She stood and watched the Mass Relay, a gift from the Protheans as Otmar had suggested, get ever closer. Kilometers in length and manipulating immense amounts of energy, they were a true wonder to behold.

As their ship approached a melodious hum began to permeate the walls. The outside view was amazing: the two massive spinning discs around the bright core. It filled her entire field of vision. Though incredibly vivid, her eyes did not hurt to look at it.

Mesmerized by the sight she was taken aback by the thought of being so small and insignificant. Next to a relay, she was nothing but a collection of minute particles that could wink out of existence at any moment.

"Approaching relay in three..." Otmar was saying.

Siru could not help but start wondering about Otmar's words. The Protheans were completely gone but their Relays remained. What if the Protheans hadn't built them? What if someone else had? Every race owed them the mass effect technology that allowed them to travel the stars and colonize worlds. What tragedy had befallen them? Would it befall her people and the rest of the galaxy as well?

"Two..."

She thought of Kaine and his people. Humans had been hidden by a dormant relay for millennia. Were there even more species just waiting to take their first relay jump? To spring upon the galactic stage with a flourish?

"One..." Otmar finished.

Suddenly a bright jet of lightning lashed out and hit their ship. The hum grew to a crescendo as the outer hull was energized. She felt the change in their mass as it was lowered, as they entered the corridor created between this relay and the next. The feeling of instantaneous travel always thrilled her.

With a brilliant flash they exited the Widow System and left the Citadel behind.

SIX

“Come *on*,” Kaine exclaimed in disbelief.

He'd found a spherical piece of rubber amongst some spare parts and absently tossed it against the wall opposite him. With a thud it struck the hard surface and bounced its way back to him.

He was seated with his back against a large pipe near the airlock doors. Otmar sat in his pilot's chair he'd moved out of its cubby hole. Siru lazed on the couch, stretched out along its length reading from a datapad.

He tossed the sphere again, where it made a low thudding sound and then returned. Toss, thud, return.

They'd entered Sahrabarik, Omega's home system, less than two hours ago. With Siru's help they plotted a course that avoided many of the more unsavory travel lanes. Due to Omega's location amongst an asteroid field and the safer route they chose, travel time was slowed considerably. They still had over ten hours to the station.

“You guys really have no sports at all?” Kaine finished with another toss, thud and return.

“I already answered that question,” Otmar replied.

He caught the sphere and looked at Otmar. He was scrawny and short, but that didn't mean he was average for his species. Others could be bigger and faster.

Kaine raised his eyebrows, expecting a better answer. Otmar sighed dramatically.

“See this material? It's pretty resilient,” Otmar went on while pinching a piece of his enviro-suit's outer skin with his finger and thumb for effect. “But it is our first line of defense against infection. Without it we could die. My people don't go out of their way to jeopardize the integrity of our suits for something as trivial as sports.”

Kaine snorted derisively. Toss, thud, return.

“So your people have no recreational activities at all?” Kaine replied. “That's pretty lame.” Toss, thud, return.

“Actually you didn't say ‘recreational activities’,” Otmar countered. “You spoke of physical contact sports. There's a difference.”

“Don't give me that semantics malarkey,” Kaine said, catching the sphere on its return.

“Goddess Kaine, you two have had the same conversation for over an hour,” Siru said, laying the datapad on her stomach and looking at him. “You ask a question, he gives an unsatisfactory answer and incredulously you say ‘come on,’” she said while making quotes with her fingers and mimicking his deeper voice. “Figured you’d have caught on by now.”

“Okay, one, nobody asked for commentary from the peanut gallery,” Kaine retorted holding up a finger. “And two, that’s my thing,” he continued while making his own quotes in the air. “Get your own material.”

With a short laugh Siru resumed reading her datapad. Kaine eyed her a moment then returned to his conversation with Otmar. Toss, thud, return.

“So what recreational activities do you guys enjoy?” Kaine asked. He figured they were uninteresting at best and dreary at worst.

“Probably the same ones your people do: reading, dancing, automaton combat, painting,” Otmar would have listed off another dozen examples but Kaine stopped him short.

“Hold up,” Kaine interrupted, catching the sphere on its return. “Automaton combat?” That didn't sound dreary at all. “The hell is that?”

“Just what it sounds like,” Otmar answered.

“Sounds like you guys make vending machines ram each other till one explodes.” Kaine replied, eliciting a slight chuckle from Siru.

“No it’s far more structured,” Otmar went on to elaborate. “There are also no explosions.”

“Okay, so what is it then?” Kaine asked, again a little dejected. Robot battles without explosions were like a party without alcohol. What was the point?

Toss, thud, return.

Otmar'Reefa nar Zeela thought for a few moments. It had been a long time since he'd been in one of the competitions. It was one of the very few times that his people would challenge each other instead of work towards the good of all of them. It was a chance to show off their creativity outside of life saving repairs or re-purposing of new ships.

Otmar loved them, either participating or spectating. Sometimes he and his father would form a two person group and see how far they could get it. When he was young, Otmar and his

father didn't get very far. But later on, once he grew, they got better and better. One year they almost won. That was one of the few stories he could tell about himself with pride.

"The Flotilla is basically a planet spread across thousands and thousands of ships." Otmar began bringing himself back to the present. "We have farms, markets, homes, repair facilities; anything that you would find on a human colony world we carry with us everywhere we go."

"I bet our colony worlds have a few things your fleet hasn't got," Kaine said. Toss, thud, return.

"Yeah, playgrounds with lots of extra padding," Siru said derisively.

Kaine's next toss went a little closer to her this time. Siru dodged slightly but Otmar could see a smile on her face. Toss, thud, return.

"Anyway," Otmar continued, ignoring them. He turned to Siru who had put her datapad down again and was listening to him. "We also have a lot of spare parts, ship parts mostly. Big and small. Complex and simple.

"Every five years or so we hold a competition. Each ship forms teams of two to eight participants. Then each team constructs an automaton from spare parts. These automatons are used in a series of tiered combat scenarios with the goal of disabling your opponent."

"Without explosions?" Kaine asked. Toss, thud, return.

"Correct." Otmar turned to answer him. Kaine kept his eyes on the sphere while it bounced around. "Parts have to be kept functional in case they are needed. The intent is to be creative, not only in winning but also defeat."

"What do you mean creative in defeat?" Siru asked.

"It goes into the scoring system," he began his answer, turning back to her. "Each scenario has a total of three points that can be won." Otmar raised a digit, "Overall style." He raised another digit, "Defeating your opponent." Then a third went up, "Creativity in defeat."

"How do you win that one?" Kaine asked, catching and holding the ball. He turned to look up at him.

"With each automaton you have to design a failsafe," Otmar answered. "This failsafe isn't to protect anyone, but is literally a safe way for your automaton to fail. So each has to be built with a flaw that could be easily exploited if discovered. The better hidden and most interesting ones score those points."

"So," Kaine was saying. "You could win a match without actually winning the match?"

"Yes," Otmar said, getting the idea behind his question. "That is part of the thrill, even though your entrant looks the best or has the defeating blow, or it has a really interesting failsafe, none of those guarantees you victory without at least one of the other."

"Were ship captains allowed to participate?" Siru asked, and Otmar nodded affirmative. "Did your father participate often?"

"Not always," Otmar answered. "The crew liked it when he did though; it brought a bit of pride to us. Our captain taking on the bigger ships in the Flotilla."

"David and Goliath," Kaine said. Otmar didn't understand the reference.

David and Goliath. Human mythology. 1 Samuel chapter 17. A small warrior battles a larger foe in single combat. Contemporary allegories are the 'underdog' or 'little guy'.

"Yes," Otmar replied. "Though he never actually won the entire tournament. He came close one year." Otmar wasn't really one for telling stories about himself as most were not very impressive. However, this tale was as much his father's as it was his own and it was one he loved quite a bit.

Siru K'vaar knew Otmar wanted to tell that story. Though she couldn't see his face, the way he sat and how animated and engaging he became told her this one was special. She glanced at Kaine who wasn't really paying attention, just playing with his little toy.

Toss, thud, return.

Ignoring him, Siru decided to ask the question that would allow Otmar to tell his tale.

"What happened that year?" She said.

Otmar sat up straighter suddenly and reminded her of a child that finally got to show the adults something new. Siru's smile widened for a second at his enthusiasm. Clearly this was a memory he wanted to relive.

"It was just before my Pilgrimage," he began. "My father and I had formed a two man team the tournament prior. We didn't get very far admittedly. Mostly because I wasn't very good at tinkering yet."

Siru imagined a smaller and scrawnier Otmar, running around behind his father, trying to help him design and construct his entrant. It must have been adorable.

"But that year," Otmar was saying, bringing Siru out of her thoughts. "I had spent the years leading up to it doing complex ship design and retrofits. I learned fast and got high marks for my efforts. As we set about building our entrant my father was very confident."

"My father usually tried to build the cleverest automaton with the best overall look. He liked trying to win," Otmar turned to Kaine, "without winning."

"I like your father's style," Kaine replied with a half-smile. Toss, thud, return.

"I decided we should try to outright win," Otmar continued. "We would defeat our enemy and look good doing it."

"I..." Siru said, looking pointedly at Kaine, "like that style more."

"Well," Otmar said with a slight laugh. "It wouldn't work without the right win condition. The way I looked at it, you couldn't build these entrants to last. No soldering, nothing permanent. That meant using screws or other fasteners; things that were temporary and allowed for parts to be returned to storage.

"Our way to win would be to rattle their connections apart. Make wires come loose or bolts come undone. Defeat them without letting their failsafe go off."

"How'd you manage that?" Kaine asked him, catching the sphere and looking at him.

"Sonically," Otmar answered. "We used a low frequency high wave length sound emitter that would create a basic," Siru watched him struggle for the right word a moment before continuing.

"Shockwave. Nothing too impressive, just enough to jar parts loose."

"I assume it worked pretty well?" She asked him.

"Better than we thought actually." Otmar began again. "We defeated the first ten opponents without taking any damage ourselves. We were even awarded perfect status," he looked at Kaine then back at her. "That's when you get all the available points or your opponent gets none. We got that seven out of the ten times."

"It was really something. We went further into the tournament than ever before. All the way to the finals which were held on the *Zeela* for the first time."

"Why the first time?" Siru asked him.

"Usually the finale is held on the smaller of the home ships that the teams come from. It was my father and me versus a full team of eight from the *Quib Quib*."

Kaine barked out a quick laugh at the name.

"Yes," he was saying. "Some of our ships are castoffs and there are times we can't edit the name in the registry so it's permanent."

"Anyway," he went on quickly before Kaine could say anything. "They were really good, that same team had won the previous tournament. There was even a member of the Admiralty Board in their midst."

Otmar paused to let her and Kaine soak in this juicy detail. She nodded knowingly. Members of the Admiralty Board were amongst the most influential and important members of the Migrant Fleet. For a team from a smaller ship to face off against them for the championship was very impressive.

Kaine was not impressed at all, but made no mention of it. Toss, thud, return.

"So tell us," Siru said, genuinely interested in the outcome, "What happened?"

"There are three rounds to the combat scenarios, each lasting two minutes apiece," Otmar answered. "If at the end of the three rounds neither failsafe is triggered nor a defeating blow landed is then the decision is made on overall design.

"The first and second rounds ended without either of our entrants taking a direct hit." Otmar curled his arm and then brought it down quickly like a snake strike. "That's how their entrant won, it would slap down on a corner of the enemy automaton, flipping it over and rendering it useless.

"Ours was hit once but not too badly, at least we thought at the time. But then the third round came." Otmar was very animated now. "My father and I decided to go for a style decision since our attacks were not working. We would evade their entrant until the time was up."

"We had a good chance at this. Our entrant was built in a cylindrical shape with fins that began narrowly at the tip then flared out towards the back, a scaled model of the *Zeela*.

"But as the round came to a close we made a wrong move and were hit again," Otmar slapped his thigh for effect. "Not too bad, but a direct hit. Thankfully it didn't engage our failsafe or flip us over. So the round ended and it came time for the decision."

Siru watched as Otmar looked at them, drawing out the moment. Siru had sat up during his story and rested her elbows on her knees, her hands cradling her face. Otmar looked at Kaine, who had stopped throwing his ball again and also looked intently at him.

She could tell Otmar was enjoying this. In her experience people always told the stories that meant the most with fervor and zeal. He slowly turned his attention back to her. He was really dragging this moment out. Annoyingly even.

"Otmar!" she exclaimed in good humor, a smile spreading across her face.

"We were awarded the point for style," he finally said.

"Nice," Kaine said emphatically.

Siru clapped once and grinned. Otmar was nodding; very pleased with the reaction he was given. Her smile faded slightly as she thought of something.

"I thought you said you came close to winning that year?" she asked Otmar.

"Yes well," he answered with a slight cough to clear his throat. "While we were shaking hands with the vanquished, the damage to our entrant had gotten worse. It..." he paused, "well I guess you could say it caught fire."

"Why's that?" Kaine asked.

"Because it caught fire," Otmar answered with total seriousness.

Siru and Kaine let out a boisterous laugh together. She put a hand over her face as she attempted to control herself, but glimpsed Kaine as he threw the sphere at Otmar, who curled up to defend himself.

"Still though," Otmar said with a wistful sigh. "We would have won if we hadn't been disqualified for allowing our parts to be ruined."

They all sat quietly for a time. Siru could see Otmar had enjoyed himself and so had she. Kaine leaned his head against the pipe, looking up at the ceiling, not saying anything. In her mind, she thought, Otmar's mother hadn't just gifted him with a poet's heart, but a bard's skill with tales as well.

"Bah," Kaine said suddenly as he stood up and stretched. "You guys won in my book. Your entrant didn't catch fire till after the fight ended and the victor was chosen." He turned and looked at Otmar, extending one arm towards him and lifting his thumb straight up. "Good work, even if there weren't any explosions."

Siru watched Otmar sit straighter in his seat. He evidently appreciated the compliment. She smiled broadly at him and nodded her agreement. Siru thought about what that must have felt like, getting that close and losing. It didn't seem to deflate Otmar in the slightest. He had a great story to share and did it well.

"Wait," Kaine said. "Otmar'Reefa nar Zeela. Are you named after your ship?"

Siru let out a sigh of disbelief and placed the palm of her hand over her face, shaking her head. For all the time he spent searching the extranet for information on Asari, it was clear he spent very little on anything else.

"What?" Kaine asked indignantly.

"Nar Zeela isn't my last name," Otmar answered slowly, like one does to a child. "Nar means 'child of'. So it means 'child of the ship *Zeela*'."

"Ah," Kaine said. Siru watched him a moment and could see as a thought spring to his mind. "Does that mean some of your people are named 'nar Quib Quib'?"

Otmar nodded once in agreement to which Kaine laughed yet again. His laughter was so infectious she couldn't help but join in. After a few seconds Otmar too laughed at the idea of being named after a ship called the *Quib Quib*.

"Now," Otmar said after they all settled down. "I should get to sleep. I have to do maintenance on my suit and that takes time." He walked over to his door but did not go through it. He turned and said, "I purchased some food that you can digest. It is in the refrigerator marked 'levo'."

With that he walked into his room and the door closed behind him. Siru turned to Kaine and was about to say something when the door to his room opened again and Otmar's head popped out.

"Don't touch the auto-pilot," he said quickly, then went back into his room. The door shut again behind him.

They looked at each other for a few moments. Siru vaguely remembered eating something a couple hours before her shift at Chora's Den and that had been a number of hours before now. She stood up slowly, not wanting to seem too eager. Kaine watched her. Then together, they dashed for the refrigerator.

"You really said that?" Kaine exclaimed. He couldn't help but laugh, nearly choking on a piece of meat he'd been chewing.

"I know," Siru told him. "I was very shameless in my youth."

Kaine kept laughing. The two of them had been sharing stories and jokes for over an hour. He was sitting in the pilot's chair and Siru was on the couch with her elbows resting on her knees as she absently picked at a piece of reddish colored bread.

Kaine had found a package of what looked like ham, even though it had a slightly metallic sheen to it. It smelled fine and after he ate a piece he decided it tasted fine too. When he asked her what kind of animal it came from she answered his question with one of her own.

"Is it good?" She asked.

"Sure, not too bad honestly," he answered.

"Then don't worry about it," she said.

That sort of statement always made him worry. However there wasn't much else in the fridge that looked appetizing. So he just went with it. He took the entire bag and ate the meat piece by piece as they talked.

"So that worked?" he asked finishing his piece of mystery meat.

"Of course not," she said with a chuckle. "I was shameless, she wasn't."

Kaine smiled. It was always refreshing to hear tales of failed dates among the angelic Asari. Made them seem more human, helped break down the barriers of disparate races. For him, it made them easier to interact with, knowing they could be as clumsy as anyone in matters of love.

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. He was getting tired. It had been a longer day than usual worsened because he hadn't slept much the night before, not since he'd received the latest update about his sister from Earth. No matter what, it always caused him to worry.

He thought about her for a long moment. If he could be there for her he would. But he had to be out here, credits were easier to make in the shadows. Away from Earth he could hire himself out. He made enough to keep her treatments funded with enough left over for himself to live. Sure it was dangerous work, but it was all he was really qualified for.

Work. He'd almost forgotten he had a job to do out here. It wasn't chatting up Siru or discussing Otmar's robot wars on the Fleet. They had to pick up a package for the Asari Councilor and return it.

It should have been just Otmar and himself, but Siru had convinced him he needed her help. So the three of them were heading to Omega, apparently a cesspit of criminals and slavers.

Kaine furrowed his brow as another thought came to him. It wasn't even supposed to be Otmar and him; it was only supposed to be Otmar. He had asked Kaine for help, after failing with dozens of others. A lone Quarian, on his Pilgrimage, being sent out into the lawless Terminus on an errand for a Citadel Councilor.

"That doesn't add up," he said to himself.

"What?" Siru asked him.

"This situation," he said, looking at her.

Kaine let his eyes wander as he thought about what they were doing. Now that he took time to really give it some thought, the odd feeling had come back. If the Asari Councilor needed something from Omega, couldn't she just send professionals? Why Otmar? Was it a political thing? Did she want to keep it as secret as possible? Including its origination?

He looked back and saw Siru watching him. Taking another breath, he stood and walked over to the kitchen. He opened the door to the cooler, put the meat away, and took out two bottles of water. Turning he saw Siru had followed him

The kitchen area was small, barely a meter and a half square. It was shaped like a 'U' with the bottom attached to the wall near Otmar's room. Behind him was a small heating box and cooler. Before him was a waist-high counter for preparing food. He placed the two bottles down on top of it, one for each.

"Thanks," Siru said.

She uncapped her bottle and took a long drink. Kaine did the same. He hadn't noticed how thirsty he was. Before he knew it, his bottle was empty. Placing it down he took a satisfying breath while suppressing a belch.

"Sorry," Siru said shyly after a belch escaped her lips. She had finished her bottle in one shot too. "So, what's not adding up about this situation?"

"It just seems odd," he began. "We're on our way to probably the evil lair of dozens or more of the most wanted criminals in the Galaxy, on an errand for a Citadel Councilor."

"Right, they want you two to pick up some package and return it," she said, completing the scenario.

"Yes, however," he replied leaning back against the cooler. "They didn't intend for me to tag along. Not me and certainly not you. They only asked for Otmar."

Kaine looked at Siru. He noticed she looked as tired as he felt. Maybe he was just imagining this problem, his exhausted mind making things up. But it seemed all too strange. Perhaps he had watched one too many mystery vids as a kid?

"You think they've sent him on a fool's errand?" She asked him.

"I don't know," he answered. "I just can't shake the feeling that we're missing something. Something big."

"Well," she said after a moment's careful thought. "If that's true should we just turn around?"

"No," he replied. "It's Otmar's ship. Besides I asked him about not going, he said he'd still go. Even alone."

"He's determined," she said.

"That's one way of putting it," he commented.

They looked at each other again. It had been a long day. The fight with the Turians and Cyrion had made it feel a hundred times longer. He reached up and rubbed his neck while turning it side to side. He closed his eyes a moment and when he opened them Siru was staring at him.

"Okay," she said seriously. "What do we do?"

Kaine thought about that. They couldn't just leave and abandon Otmar. That meant they had to go through with it. Meet the contact at Haven, retrieve the package and return to the Citadel. He mulled over the implications of a mysterious item covertly delivered to a Councilor. In every vid he'd ever watched, it meant nothing good.

But really, what were their options?

"Right," he said deciding. He returned her serious gaze and continued, "Tell me everything you know about Omega."

SEVEN

"*Palaven's Delight*," a voice spoke from the control panel before Otmar. They'd reached Omega about twenty minutes earlier and were now in touch with a dock master. "What is your cargo and destination?"

"Well," Otmar began nervously. He looked at Siru who nodded once. Sighing, he faced forward again and answered in what he hoped was a more even tone. "Listen, we both know you don't care about our cargo or our destination, just our credits. Don't worry your fee will be paid in full."

As he waited for their answer, Otmar recalled the conversation they had about Omega's unique docking procedures. Siru told them what they needed to know and how to avoid hassles.

"Each district has a docking station. Each station has its own dock master. All independently operated." She was telling them earlier. "Unless you're someone important you wait until one of them contacts you."

"They'll ask what you plan to do on the station and other nonsense. But they don't really care about any of that. What they do care about is their docking fee, which they pocket. As long as that gets paid, they turn a blind eye."

Otmar thought this was a terrible way to run a station, but apparently Omega was full of terrible things. They had sat waiting for one of the district dock masters to contact them. Other ships arrived after and went on ahead. Usually bigger or nicer looking ones were taken quickly. Apparently his ship was neither.

That didn't really bother him much; he was getting nervous just looking at Omega. Granted, he thought it looked impressive, but also intimidating. When they first saw it, Kaine whistled and made a comment about it looking very angry.

Siru told them the history of the station as she knew it.

"Omega is built into the top half a massive asteroid that was smashed into two pieces thousands of years ago." She told them as they waited. "The station extends from the flat side downward over forty kilometers. Think of it as a giant mushroom."

"What about the red ring of light?" Kaine asked about the glow that permeated at the connection point of the top of the station and the bottom of the asteroid.

"Mass Effect generators," she answered. "To protect it from future collisions."

From what she'd told them, Otmar could understand why his people were encouraged to avoid this particular place of interest. He was very glad he'd listened to that bit of advice in the past.

He wondered now, waiting for the dock master to reply, whether or not other Quarrians had ignored the warning. How many had found their way here, hoping to complete their Pilgrimage, but wound up being killed or enslaved. He sincerely hoped neither of those things happened to him or his new friends.

"*Palaven's Delight*, you are cleared to dock in bay 12 of Dukar District." The dock master said in a tone of displeasure.

"He sounded pissed," Kaine commented.

"Probably just angry we're not greenies he can take advantage of," Siru said offhandedly as she walked over to the recreation area. Otmar looked over to see she was picking up her bag. She turned to him and asked, "Mind if I use your room to change?"

"Oh," Otmar said after a moment. "Sure."

He looked up at Kaine, who was watching her walk into his room. The door shut behind her and Kaine turned to look back out the forward view port.

Otmar turned back to his controls and slowly brought his ship in. Because of the chaotic nature of the station's docking procedures, it took him almost thirty minutes to approach, enter, and touch down in the bay.

Dukar District was located in the middle section of the station, a little over twenty kilometers from where the station joined the asteroid proper. Siru said Dukar was one of the calmer districts on Omega, inhabited mainly by Turians and Salarrians on the run and by Vorchas who were not generally tolerated in other parts of the station.

"What the hell are Vorchas?" Kaine had asked her.

"They're horrible vermin," she had replied in a disgusted tone. "They're about human height and size, maybe a little bigger. Their skin ranges in colors from pale white to bright yellow and they have claws for hands and feet. They always look angry because of their sharp needlelike teeth."

"Think of them like," she had said after thinking a moment. "Demons. And they're incredibly hard to kill because they regenerate fast."

Kaine had sounded displeased after hearing that, saying he hoped they didn't meet any on this trip.

Otmar cycled down the engines as the ship settled into its temporary home. Turning, he saw Kaine walk over to one of his bags and open it. He began taking out belts, holsters, and a long knife.

"Think we're going to have trouble already?" Otmar asked in a nervous tone.

"Nope," Kaine answered simply as he stood and belted on a holster around his right thigh.

"So, why bring all the weapons then?"

"Like the old saying 'if you want peace, prepare for war'," he replied as he belted the large knife to his left thigh.

Reaching into his bag, Kaine removed an odd looking pistol. Otmar had never fired a weapon, but he was familiar with almost every model of mass effect powered guns. This did not look like anything he'd researched before.

"That's a curious pistol," Otmar commented. "I don't think I've seen its like. Who's the manufacturer?"

"Colt's Patent Firearms Manufacturing Company," Kaine answered, looking down at the weapon.

"I've never heard of that company, is it human?"

"It was, a long time ago," Kaine replied and walked over to where Otmar sat. "This was made in 1891 for an ancestor of mine. It's one of the last officially made for the military. It's been upgraded a lot over the years."

He turned the pistol around and handed it to Otmar, who carefully took the weapon and examined it. Curious design, almost twenty centimeters in length and heavier than it looked. The grip was slender, with a cylinder just above the trigger. Under the barrel was a rectangular box that he assumed held the weapon's computer and ammunition.

"Unique," Otmar said turning and giving the pistol back. "Is it effective?"

"Hits a bit harder than your average military grade pistol," Kaine said, sliding the weapon into the holster on his thigh. "It's saved a lot of people with the name Kaine in its time."

Otmar's door opened and Siru stepped out with her bag in one hand.

Gone was her practical pant, top, and boot ensemble, replaced with a lavish skin-tight, dark, shimmering pant set, and thigh high black boots with buckles from ankle to knee. She wore a long white coat that stopped above her knees. It was belted tightly around her waist while remaining slightly open just under her neck with sleeves a pale blue color.

"You boys ready to hit the town?" she asked with a smirk.

Kaine stood looking at her, his tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth. He'd seen Siru wear tightly fitting dresses before, but the way her outfit was put together accentuated her curves without being revealing. She walked over to the couch and laid her bag on it. As she did the coat she wore flowed around her easily. Whatever it was made of, it must have been incredibly light.

Kaine glanced at his own dark shirt and matching cargo pants with dark combat boots. He looked over at Otmar's sketchy attire; with his patchwork enviro-suit and cracked helmet. Then he looked back at Siru.

"I feel slightly under dressed," he commented.

"That's the idea," she said, taking a seat on the couch. "If they're watching me, they're not paying attention to you two."

Kaine noticed she had added makeup around her eyes. It reminded him of five thick white brush strokes, as if an artist gave her eyebrows. She had a dark red choker around her throat with a single white stone in the center. It was a most striking outfit that would definitely draw the attention away from him and Otmar.

"Guys," she said snapping her fingers. "We've got work to do, fantasize later."

"Oh no," Otmar began instantly. "I was pondering the usefulness of Kaine's gun versus a modern suit of military grade armor."

Kaine eyed Otmar for a moment. It was completely believable that he'd ignore a gorgeous woman while thinking about technology. Otmar seemed like the type to find circuit boards more enticing than well-defined curves. Kaine couldn't relate though. He had been thinking only of Siru's form.

"You're right," he said, moving over to his bag. "Plenty of time for that later."

As he leaned down he heard Siru scoff at his remark. Standing he pulled out a heavy folded jacket of his own. Grasping the shoulders he let it unfurl with vicious snap of his wrists. It was dark in color, with hardened patches, each a centimeter square. He sighed heavily as he put it on.

"Man I hate this jacket," he said, feeling its weight and thinking about how it added restriction to his movements. Nothing dangerous, just less than he was used to lately. He pulled the thick zipper up that synched it around his waist.

"Then why wear it?" Otmar asked him.

"Because it's made of ceramic carbon nanofibers that can stop impacts from pistols and some SMGs," he answered, turning to him. He reached up and locked the collar in place to give some protection to his neck.

"Sounds useful," Siru commented as she rose. "So why do you hate it?"

"Because," he said, turning slightly as she stood next to him in front of the airlock door. "It's heavy."

"But you're so big," she said as the door began to slide-grind its way up.

With a wide smirk Kaine lifted his eyebrows twice in quick succession as he turned away and walked out of Otmar's ship.

"You're such a pervert," he heard her shout at him from behind.

Siru K'vaar followed him down the exit ramp with Otmar behind her. As she reached the bottom she looked around their docking bay. It was completely empty, with only one exit opposite them about thirty meters away. The bay itself was typical of Omega: forty meters square with high ceilings and a field preventing atmosphere from escaping. Otmar's ship fit with room to spare.

Otmar joined her after locking down the *Palaven's Delight*. He stood next to her with Kaine a few meters ahead of them. His head moved quickly from side to side and then up to the ceiling. It snapped back forward as the exit door slid open. She walked up next to him as a Turian and two more heavily armed Turian guards followed behind.

The one in the lead, the dock master she presumed, wore a functional one-piece mechanics suit, dark blue with belted on tool bag around his waist. He was taller than the others, who wore gray armor and carried assault rifles. All three stopped a few meters before them.

"Five hundred credits human," he spat out quickly.

"Oh come now," Siru said in a sweetly accented voice she used when she wanted to get her way. "We can do better than that can't we?"

She smiled slightly at him as he turned to her. She knew how the dock masters worked; if you just rolled over and paid them they marked you as new to the station. First timers to Omega rarely made it out alive or unharmed.

"Five hundred credits, *Asari*," he said.

"Dear," she said keeping her tone sweet and inviting. "There's no need for such a steep price. We're only here a few hours. We'll complete our transactions quickly. No hassles, just easy money."

The Turian looked at her then back at Kaine. He eyed Kaine's weapons for a few moments. His eyes twitched to look at each of his armed security then back at Kaine. Siru thought he was sizing up the chances of Kaine versus the three of them. In the end he just sighed heavily and looked back at her.

"Three hundred credits and I want you gone in six hours," he demanded.

"Of course," Siru said reaching into a small breast pocket and retrieved a three centum-credit chit. She walked forward and handed it to the dock master before making an elaborate turn and returning to her place beside Kaine.

"Very good," the dock master said pocketing the currency. "Just so you know, if you're here after the six hour time limit your ship becomes mine."

"No need to fret," Siru answered before Kaine could. "We'll be gone before you know it."

With a huff he turned and stalked out with guards in tow. She glanced up at Kaine who nodded once appreciatively. Together they turned to Otmar and a wide smile crossed her lips.

Otmar was standing behind them with his hands up above his head as if he were surrendering. Looking up at Kaine she saw him roll his eyes and sigh. Slowly Otmar put his hands down and walked up to them.

"Otmar," she began. "You don't need to do that every time you see someone with a gun. If you do, you won't get very far here."

"Its reflex," he said defensively.

She nodded once in understanding and reached out, gently rubbing his arm affectionately. Siru believed Otmar wouldn't last long in a fight, probably why his first thought was surrender. She made a mental note to keep an eye on him. That sort of behavior would only get you hurt on Omega.

"Good to see your shoulder is feeling better," Kaine commented before turning and walking towards the exit.

She watched as Otmar rubbed his left shoulder and rotated it, as if working out a kink. He moved towards her and she fell into step with him. They followed Kaine out of the docking bay into the District proper.

"What happened to your shoulder?" Siru asked.

"Before Kaine agreed to help me," Otmar responded looking at her, "I asked a few other people I thought could do the job." He turned back to look at Kaine as he walked a few meters

ahead of them. "One Krogan who I thought would be my last hope was fairly ambivalent until I tried to force him to acquiesce."

Siru smiled slightly thinking of Otmar trying to force a Krogan to do anything. A thought came to Siru as she pondered all the other people he might have asked for help before Kaine. "How did you get Kaine's help anyway?" She asked him.

"I'm not sure really. At first I thought it was credits" he replied, looking her way as they walked. "Then we discussed what I needed done and why I was so adamant about coming here. He asked me if I was willing to risk my life to get home. I asked him if he could go home, he said no, and I commented on what he might do to change that. Afterward, he seemed much more agreeable."

Siru looked back at Kaine as they continued down the long corridor towards the exit of the docking bays. He was looking about the entire time, as if scanning for potential threats.

"He can't go back to Earth?" She asked, looking back at Otmar.

"Apparently not," he answered.

"Why?"

"You'd have to ask that him I'm afraid."

Siru thought she might have to do just that. But later. Right now they had to go to Haven and take a look around. According to Otmar he was to meet his contact in a little over three hours. They would have to hurry so they could be prepared, or at least as prepared as possible when dealing with so many unknowns.

"This does not look like a haven to me," Kaine commented, standing in front of their target destination.

"Looks like someone changed the decor since I was last here," Siru said.

The three of them stood across a busy walkway from the bar Haven. Many different people walked passed them: Turian, Salarian, and Vorcha alike, none paying them any mind at all.

Except Siru.

Kaine noticed a great many of the passers by taking a good long look at her while ignoring himself and Otmar. He also saw that a good number of the residents of this District carried weapons. Some even wore military grade armor.

They had left Dukar District and arrived two levels down on F'zu District where the bar was located. Siru said this particular area gave a lot of people headaches because of all the hostility. It was one of the more violent areas of the station.

Haven stood directly opposite them. They could tell they were at the right place because of the angry red sign displaying the bar's name. The sign and the wall it was attached to were ringed in flames. These shot up at intervals with puffs up to ten meters high.

The outer doors were painted a solid black with red moving flames on them. Created with holographic signs attached to them, they gave an impression of entering hell itself. Kaine glanced at Siru, who looked back with wide eyes and shook her head as she looked back at the entrance. Clearly whoever operated this place had no idea what Haven meant.

"I've heard stories of places like this," Otmar said. Kaine and Siru turned to look at him as he continued. "Gateways of fire leading to everlasting suffering. Those who committed unforgivable acts against the Flotilla were damned forever."

Otmar was fidgeting again, rubbing his hands together quickly while looking around. He reminded Kaine again of a small animal wearily watching for predators. He needed to reign Otmar in before he caused any problems.

"Christ Otmar," Kaine said, walking up to him and grabbing his wrists. "It's a just a bar. A very poorly decorated one at that. We're going in, looking around, and then leaving. When we come back, it will be only for as long as it takes to meet your contact. Not forever. Okay?"

Otmar was breathing quicker than usual. Kaine had no idea if Quarian's could hyperventilate but if not he was making a good show of imitating it. Kaine gave his wrists a quick and sudden jerk.

"Otmar," he said sternly.

"Yes," Otmar replied. After a few moments he'd settled down again. "You're right, I'll be fine."

Kaine looked directly at the glowing orbs behind Otmar's visor. Kaine wore a look of complete calm and confidence. He slowly nodded once and Otmar returned one of his own.

"Alright," Kaine said, letting go of Otmar's wrists and watched Siru step forward, hook her arm around Otmar's, and patted him on the forearm with her free hand.

"It's going to be fine," she said to him soothingly. "Come on, buy me a drink."

With that she led him up to the doors and into Haven.

Otmar had never seen a place like this, even Chora's Den paled in comparison. Haven was one giant room, easily thirty meters across and twenty wide. To his left stood a long bar that stretched the entire length of the side wall. A twin mirrored it along the far wall to his right. Directly across from them built into the wall was a stage set two meters high. He counted ten large tables scattered about the center area, each big enough to seat five comfortably.

There were about forty or so patrons scattered between the two bars and the tables, mostly Turian and Batarian. Otmar disliked Batarians greatly. Every one he'd met had been cruel and vicious. They were a race full of terrible people who thought people were a commodity to be bought and traded. He also didn't like the double set of eyes. He never really knew which one to look at.

One Batarian eyed him as they stood in the doorway. He had the typical build of his people: stocky and thickly muscled, about Kaine's size, just a bit bigger. He had dark reddish brown skin. He blinked both pairs of eyes and scowled at Otmar. He grinned showing off a mouth full of razor like needle teeth. Otmar decided to look over the rest of the bar.

Like Chora's Den, there was music, but this was louder, with a rhythm and beat so quick he was barely able to keep hold of it. Looking up he saw more holographic images of fire on the ceiling. It too was large, about fifteen meters above them.

Also like Chora's Den there was live entertainment, all Asari. They danced above the bars on catwalks situated five meters above them. Otmar could feel his face flush. He thought the dancers at the den were scantily clad. The one's here at Haven wore even less. He had to try really hard to even see clothing on some of them and what he did see was almost translucent.

Siru nudged him with her elbow and he looked at her. She wore a bemused look on her face and smiled at him after a moment. Otmar felt his flush deepen. He had apparently been watching the dancers closer than he'd imagined. She pointed to the bar and led him over.

As they arrived at the counter the decibel level of the music dropped precipitously. Otmar suspected a dampening field dissipated most of the sound waves so the patrons wouldn't have to shout their orders. A Turian bartender approached them.

"What will it be?" He asked in a not-overly-unfriendly tone.

"A glass of Thessia twenty-one," Siru answered and looked at Otmar.

"I'm fine," he told the bartender who walked off ignoring him. "I doubt they'd have anything sterilized and I really wouldn't want to take the chance."

"Smart move," she told him.

The bartender returned with a fanciful glass full of a bright green liquid. As he set it down he seemed about to say something when he looked passed them and his eyes narrowed. He mumbled something then walked away. Otmar watched as he went to speak to another bartender, this one a Salarian.

A moment later Kaine appeared next to Otmar on his left side. Siru turned and sipped her drink on his right. Kaine leaned an elbow against the bar, ignoring the stool beside him.

"They certainly are dedicated to the fire motif here," Kaine commented to them both. "And the music is terrible." He lifted a hand, signaling the bartender who stared at him a moment then continued talking to the Salarian. "Service could use some improvement."

"I don't really like it," Otmar said.

"Agreed," Kaine replied. "However it is a good meeting place. Lots of people and loud music so we won't be overheard. I didn't notice any cameras. The lack of bouncers is troubling."

"Why's that," Otmar asked.

"It means there's no security," Siru answered for him. "A fight breaks out and you're on your own."

"Also explains why the entertainment is kept out of arms reach," Kaine said. Then continued in a tone that Otmar thought sounded dejected. "No roaming hands allowed here."

Siru scoffed again, taking another sip. Otmar watched as she too looked around the bar, at the patrons, the ceiling. Both of them looked casual to him, as if they were just lazily taking in the sights.

"You need to get the fuck out of this bar right now," the Turian bartender said directly to Kaine.

"Easy buddy," Kaine replied calmly. "Just wanted to buy a drink."

"Humans are not welcome here," he continued, ignoring what Kaine said. "I don't want any trouble, so get out right now."

Otmar looked at Kaine who didn't say anything. After a moment he nodded once and looked at Siru and himself.

"I'll wait for you guys outside." He said turning.

"Fuck," the bartender said and walked away quickly.

Otmar turned to see three Batarians. Each big, bulky, and angry looking. They wore different colored clothing but fear had already taken hold of Otmar and he didn't pay much attention. Instead he looked at Kaine for guidance.

"You made a big mistake coming in here *human*," the Batarian in green spat out.

He said the last word as if it were some dire and most offensive curse. Otmar slid away from Kaine slowly until bumping into Siru. He glanced at her and she wore a most disapproving expression. Otmar tried to slide a little more, but she wouldn't budge.

This was going to get ugly.

Kaine took a deep breath letting it out slowly. The three Batarians stood between him and the exit. He didn't want a fight but he doubted his preferences would be honored. Instead he took a moment to size up his opponents.

The one who'd just spoken stood in front of his buddies, wearing a one-piece black coverall and green jacket. Greeny. His buddy on the left wore a matching outfit but had a scar on his face that had damaged one eye. Scar. And to Greeny's right, wearing the same sort of outfit as his friends, looked almost identical but was noticeably shorter than. Shorty. Judging from their outfits, the three of them looked as if they had just finished a shift doing some sort of maintenance work.

"Listen fellas," he began slowly. "I was just about to leave, let me pass and you'll never see me again."

"You're half right, scum," Scar said. "When we're done with you, *no one* will ever see you again."

"Not alive anyway," Shorty commented with a chuckle.

That was twice in as many days people had threatened to kill him. Maybe it was his face. Could also be that every race humanity encountered ended up hating them. First the Turians because of the First Contact War and now the Batarians because of colonization disputes.

"How about instead of that," Kaine interjected. "I buy you three a drink and while you're enjoying that I just walk away. Everyone wins."

Kaine thought there was a better chance of Otmar breaking into song and dance right now than these three accepting his offer. He glanced over at Otmar and noticed he had moved away from him. Kaine frowned a little but was also pleased to see he hadn't raised his hands in surrender. Yet.

"I have a counter offer," mister pants-suit said. "How about we beat you to death and take all your equipment and credits. Then enjoy some drinks afterward."

"Gentlemen," Siru began but was cutoff.

"Shut the fuck up bitch," Greeny growled.

Kaine saw how this was going to play out. He sized up the three of them. Each was about his height and a little stockier. They had an air of confidence about them, clearly thinking they had the advantage. Kaine thought about drawing his weapon but decided against it. He had no idea how the owners would react. A brawl he could win, being shot from behind he could not.

Nonchalantly he reached over and took Siru's glass out of her hand. He took a sip of the greenish liquid and felt his tongue tingle. It had a bitter taste at first but left his mouth full of sweetness as it burned its way satisfyingly to his stomach.

"This stuff is pretty good," he commented. "Have you ever tried it?"

Kaine took a big swig, nearly draining the drink of its contents. However he did not swallow it. As he set the glass on the table the brawl started.

Greeny advanced with a punch direct at Kaine's face. Moving quickly he stepped into the attack lowering his head slightly. Unable to get the right extension the Batarian hit Kaine awkwardly in the forehead. There was a cracking sound and the Batarian let out a cry as he stumbled back having possibly broken his knuckles on the hardest part of Kaine's head.

Kaine looked up to see Scar advancing and he spit the full contents of his liquor into his face. Reacting a moment too slow the burning liquid must have gotten in his eyes. He brought his hands up and yelled.

Greeny was on him. Putting a shoulder into Kaine's sternum and driving him into the bar. His back slammed against the hard surface. The armor of his jacket taking the brunt of the impact. The Batarian delivered a vicious punch to his side. Again the armor protected him.

Kaine wrapped his arm under the Batarian's chin and grabbed his belt. With a roar Kaine flipped him over and onto the bar. With a thud and a grunt his attacker landed heavily on his back. Quickly Kaine delivered an elbow to the startled Batarian's throat. Another shot was followed by the sound of something cracking. Greeny began to gasp for breath.

Something slammed Kaine directly in the small of his back so hard he fell against the bar again. Turning towards the attack another blow landed against his face. He stumbled to the ground with the force of the blow. Scar, green liquor dripping from his face, stood over him. He reached down grabbed Kaine by the collar and yanked him up.

Kaine was pulled away from the bar and flung backwards into it. Scar came at him again with a wild left hook. Kaine slapped the hand to the side. Picking up a stool next to him Kaine brought it down across Scar's back shattering it into pieces. The Batarian grunted but didn't go down.

Scar charged and his shoulder collided with Kaine's sternum. Kaine felt himself lifted from the ground then shoved backwards into the wall. The incredible force of the hit caused Kaine's breath to escape his lungs and he gasped for air. His eyes went blurry.

Shaking his head quickly he saw a fist mere millimeters from his face and ducked. He heard a bone cracking thud and his enemy let out a roar. Gripping his wrist the Batarian looked at his bleeding and broken hand.

"My turn asshole!" Kaine grabbed the fabric of shoulders. He spun with all his might. Scar flew in a circle, his head cracking against the bar leaving a splintered spider web of ruined wood. He lay on the ground unmoving.

Dizzily Kaine grabbed his head and stumbled backwards. Looking up but not truly understanding or even comprehending, he watched Siru annihilate the last Batarian standing.

Siru watched Kaine deal with two of his attackers in short order. It was an impressive display of skill. Though he suffered a few hits and at the moment looked dazed and confused the other two were not moving at all.

But there was still one more.

Siru saw the short Batarian start to move forward. He drew a long and jagged knife and advanced on Kaine. She watched the Batarian begin to stride passed her and Otmar but didn't see Kaine react at all. He was not making any attempt to defend himself. The intent was clearly written on the Batarian's face: he meant to kill Kaine.

Siru knew where this was going. You don't live for four hundred years without at least a few fights. She knew how to defend herself but usually it was a last resort, nothing she looked forward to doing. But watching as this bastard calmly stride forward to stab and kill Kaine made her furious.

"Hey!" She roared in challenge.

The Batarian stopped in front of her, wrath and hatred on his face. It was evident he'd kill all three of them if he got the chance. Siru was not about to let him.

Shifting her left foot forward she drew her right hand back making a fist. As she did so her biotics kicked in and she began to draw energy from the surrounding area. Her hand shook with effort and she could see glasses, chairs and even Otmar being pulled towards her. A familiar bluish light enveloped the area.

Realization sprung onto the Batarian's face and he advanced on her instead. She watched Otmar move forward to intercept but he was batted harshly aside. She felt her entire right arm and

shoulder tremble with the effort of controlling the biotic energy she was creating. It felt as if her body would shake apart at any moment as she contained the power.

With a guttural roar she released it.

Siru took another step forward and shoved her now open palm against her attacker's chest. There was an explosion of bluish light as the energy moved from her hand to encompass the Batarian. He was lifted off his feet. Flung backwards. He collided with tables and chairs and sent them tumbling away at high speed. Another patron dove for cover as the Batarian flew by. His journey ended on the other side of the room, crashing into the bar opposite them. The collision was so powerful it popped the entire bar top up, knocking over drinks and shattering a stool.

He slid to the ground and did not move.

"Holy shit," she heard Kaine say.

Breathing heavily she heard a weapon being readied and looked up to see the Turian bartender with a shotgun leveled at Kaine. Siru's mind was muddled from the effort and her reaction time was severely impaired.

Suddenly Otmar's left arm appeared with the glow of his omni-tool around his hand and forearm. In response the Turian's gun belched steam as it overheated. She watched Kaine draw his pistol and point it at the bartender.

Then she heard the sounds of multiple weapons being readied.

Kaine turned slightly towards the doors and saw a Hanar, a small species resembling pink glowing jellyfish, floating just inside the bar proper. It was flanked on each side by two heavily armed guards, two Turian, a Salarian, and a Batarian.

He saw out of the corner of his eye Otmar's other arm rise up instantly, even though he was still seated on the ground. Under the circumstances it was an appropriate response.

"This one would like to inform all involved that your encounter is now completed," it said in the usual overly polite tone common to Hanar. "Mistress T'Loak would like to engage in conversation."

Kaine looked at them more carefully. While the Hanar was clearly unarmed, his guards weren't. Each had an assault rifle leveled at him. They wore military grade armor and didn't flinch or stray. To him they looked like professionals. This fight was indeed over.

"Are we allowed to decline?" Kaine asked slowly, holstering his pistol.

"This one regrets to inform you that it is not permissible to reject Mistress T'Loak's invitations," it replied.

Kaine looked at Siru, who didn't take her eyes off the Hanar or his guards. She looked concerned but he couldn't tell if it had anything to do with the new threat or something else. Otmar slowly got to his feet; which was impressive because he still had his hands up.

Not turning away Siru carefully reached up, gripped Otmar's wrist and gently pulled it down. He complied by lowering his other hand as well. Outgunned and with nowhere to run they had only option: surrender.

"Right," Kaine said, turning to the Hanar and added, "Lead the way."

EIGHT

"Afterlife," Siru said. "What a cesspit."

Siru K'vaar stood at the bottom of a short set of stairs that led up and took a sharp turn to the left, where more stairs continued in the same direction. A guard stood on the step where the staircase bent, a Batarian wearing black armor and wielding an assault rifle.

The three of them had been brought by skycar to the Afterlife Club, the hottest destination on Omega. Not just because of the fireballs and smoke that spewed from atop the sign out front, but because it housed the best drinks, the best dancers and it was the personal hang out of Aria T'Loak, master of Omega.

She forgot what the place was like, the sights, the sounds. It brought her back almost sixty years to when she first arrived. She'd found her way into this club by accident. Siru had been hired as a dancer and after a time, met Aria herself and impressed her. She soon became her right hand, handling much of the boring day to day activities of the operation.

The club hadn't changed. The layout was the same. Only the music and entertainment differed. Even the clientele was the same: thieves, slavers, and murderers, all manner of the galaxy's most deprived and reviled f.

She glanced around. Afterlife was set up like a large ring, much like Chora's Den. They were on the middle of three levels. Unlike the Den however, where there was a bar in the center, here stood a massive holographic cylinder that displayed coming attractions, vids and other sorts of entertainment. Opposite each other on either side of the cylinder were identical bars. A few tables were hidden in corners between them. Asari dancers plied their craft on ledges surrounding the massive hologram.

They had been standing there waiting for almost ten minutes. She knew Aria's tricks: make people wait for her to summon them. Show she was pulling all the strings and calling all the shots. It worked on cowards but Siru doubted it would affect Kaine much.

She glanced at Kaine to her right. She could feel Otmar fidgeting on her left and knew he was nervous. But she was focused on Kaine for the moment. He had a nasty bruise forming on his cheek, just below his eye. He had dried blood on his lip and he shook his head quickly twice, as if trying to shake something loose.

"Are you ok?" She asked him.

"I have a headache," he commented dryly and looked at her.

"Well you did get hit pretty hard," she said looking into his eyes. They looked a little glazed over and he blinked a few times to clear them.

"I think it was that drink," he said frowning and looking down a moment. He looked back at her and asked, "What's in that stuff?"

"Thessia 21?" She said and thought for an instant. "Just kimyrio vine, fermented of course; some algo-honey and a few other sweeteners. It packs a punch but nothing that strong."

"Yeah well," he said turning his gaze up to the guard watching them. "I haven't had a drop of alcohol in a long time."

"Why not?" She asked.

"I made a promise," he said, quietly taking a deep breath and then letting it out slowly.

Siru wondered briefly to whom the promise was made to.

"Anyway," Kaine said, looking at her. "Remind me not to get on your bad side okay?"

"Why?"

"You flung a hundred kilo Batarian over thirty meters and broke a bar in the process. I don't feel like being on the receiving end of that, thank you very much."

"Do you think I killed him?" Siru asked.

Kaine watched her a few moments as she looked back. Siru couldn't quite place his expression. He seemed impressed; at least that's what she gathered from his comment. But was he concerned as well? Biotics were tricky and could be dangerous for everyone if not controlled properly.

"Nah," he said. Then added with a wink, "but you did give him one hell of a backache. Where'd you learn to do that anyway?"

"All Asari have basic skill with biotics to varying degrees. I haven't spent as much time practicing as I used to, but put me in the right circumstance and I can do some damage."

"I believe that."

He turned away and Siru let her gaze shift to Otmar. She remembered suddenly that as the Batarian moved on them he stepped in front of her. She saw he was fidgeting and reached down and took his hand in hers.

"You know," she said as he turned to look up at her. "Stepping up to defend a lady is a good way to earn yourself a kiss."

"I..." he began to reply but trailed off. He looked back quickly and added, "I'm not sure what I would have done. I'm an engineer, not a soldier."

"Sometimes your job doesn't matter," Kaine commented, and they both looked at him. "I was told once that training and skill are meaningless without the will to act." He turned and looked at Otmar. "There's more fight in you than you think."

"Thank you." Otmar said shyly. "It's nice that they let you keep your gun Kaine," Otmar commented leaning over to look at him, obviously moving the conversation away from himself.

"No its not," he replied.

"Why?" Siru asked him before Otmar could.

"Because that means they don't think I'm a threat," Kaine said. "Which means they're either idiots, over confident or have bigger guns. Regardless, it's not very reassuring."

"It's Aria," Siru told them. "She's been around a long time and she's very powerful. She's also vicious and cruel. I doubt the three of us together could even hurt her."

"You'd be surprised," Kaine said.

Siru was about to say something more when the Hanar glided down the stairs and floated a few steps above them.

"Mistress T'Loak requests the Quarian accompany this one upstairs," it said motioning with a tentacle towards Otmar.

Otmar looked directly at Siru and she smiled confidently at him. She squeezed his hand once more then let go.

"You'll be fine," she said.

"We're right down here buddy," Kaine yelled up to him as he ascended the stairs.

Siru looked up at Kaine from the corner of her eyes and smirked. He glanced at her, looked away then looked back quickly.

"What?" He asked.

"Worried about him?" She asked back.

He glared at her a moment then looked up at the guard. With a slight, knowing nod she followed his gaze.

Otmar'Reefa followed the Hanar up the stairs. The sound of the music dropped as he walked through an open doorway, apparently having the same acoustic dampeners as Haven's bar.

He was told to stand in the middle of a small room. There were three steps that led up to a large couch that ringed the wall in front of him. The wall had a break in it showing the rest of the club. He could clearly see the hologram cylinder and dancers.

There were two guards behind him each with a weapon in their hands. The Hanar floated to his left. An Asari seated on the couch stared directly at him, fingers entwined and resting on her stomach, one leg crossed over the other.

Aria T'Loak. Defacto ruler of Omega. Wanted in several systems. Known as a highly skilled biotic. Considered extremely dangerous.

"Nice to meet you," Otmar said nervously.

"This one offers a recommendation: speak only when spoken too," the Hanar said to him.

"Of course," he said looking at the Hanar then to Aria he added meekly, "I'm sorry."

Aria T'Loak just gazed at him. Suddenly she stood up and walked down the stairs towards him. She wore a long dark red dress that hugged her hips. It was closed at the top with a short white half-jacket over it. The dress had two slits up each side that revealed her legs midway up her thigh.

She had light purple skin with unique facial markings around her eyes and a strip of darker coloration from the base of her nose, over her lips and to her chin.

She reached out a hand and placed one of her fingers lightly on his chest, letting the finger trail over his shoulders and upper back as she began to circle him slowly. As she crossed back in front of him she spoke.

"What's your name, Quarian?" She asked him.

"Otmar'Reefa nar Zeela," he stammered.

"Nar Zeela," she said, extending each of the syllables out extravagantly. "Here on your pilgrimage?"

Otmar watched her stop then slowly return to her seat. She resumed the pose she had when he arrived. Otmar felt uncomfortable with her staring directly at him. Something about the look in her eyes, like a predator watching its next meal.

"Answer," she said slowly, "my question."

Otmar began to fidget violently. He glanced around at the guards, two Batarians now that he actually looked at them. Both were grinning in a very frightening manner. He looked back at Aria who was not grinning. She wore no expression at all.

"I," he said then paused. The temperature in his suit had risen sharply. "What," he tried to say. His hands were shaking now. "Could you repeat the question please?"

After a moment Aria let out a hearty laugh. The two guards joined in. They continued for a few moments. Otmar lowered his head, a little ashamed. He didn't like being laughed at, but there was nothing he could do to stop them.

They quieted down again quickly. Otmar kept staring at his feet until she spoke to him again.

"Why are you here, Otmar'Reefa nar Zeela?" She asked him.

"Picking up a package," he said to her not looking up. "Trying to complete my Pilgrimage."

"All the way out here?" She said making a tsk tsk sound. "Omega is far from civilized systems, Otmar'Reefa nar Zeela. What could possibly be worth all this trouble?"

Otmar looked up at her and wondered if she expected him to answer. Sometimes people asked questions without wanting a response. Or they were rhetorical, answering themselves and not requiring a reply.

"Did," Otmar began then stopped. After a moment's hesitation he asked, "Did you want me to answer that question?"

The two guards began to laugh again. Aria silenced them with a look. She glared at them a fraction of a second longer, then returned her stare to Otmar.

"Yes," she answered simply.

"I don't know," he said stammering again. "I was just instructed to come here and pick up the package, then return."

"Where?" She asked him.

"The Citadel," he answered her honestly.

Otmar watched her stare at him as if concentrating on his features. He didn't like being up here. He could feel the guards looking at him. He knew if something bad happened he wouldn't be able to overload all their weapons before they killed him.

His core temperature was rising again, he was sure of it. Maybe his suit air conditioning had malfunctioned. That had happened once before. Otmar began to breathe faster and faster. It felt like someone had cut off his oxygen supply. He was getting light headed. He couldn't think straight.

Otmar was about to say something when the entire world went black.

Siru heard laughter for the third time from up the stairs. She glanced up at Kaine who looked down at her. She could see concern etched on his face. Looking passed him Siru saw two Turians walk up the stairs on the other side, about ten meters away. She had forgotten there was an

identical set opposite this one. After a few moments they came back downstairs, roughly carrying Otmar.

She inhaled sharply and Kaine turned to look. He made a move to go over to them but she grabbed his arm and pulled him back.

"No," she said, looking up at their guard who had his rifle pointed at him. "She wouldn't have killed him, nothing to gain from that."

He looked back at her and she locked eyes with him. There was something there, she couldn't quite place it. Somewhere between anger and fear, but not for himself.

"He's ok," she said, nodding to him.

He was about to reply when the Hanar appeared before them again.

"Would the human so kindly join this one upstairs," it said, gesturing towards Kaine.

She let go of his arm and watched him walk up the stairs. She felt exposed down here by herself. For the first time, she understood why this tactic worked so well. Looking around she saw many of the patrons gesture in her direction and speak to each other. This was a good way of putting someone off balance.

Ethan Kaine stood in the center of a square room. Two heavily armed guards stood behind him, one to his left and the other to his right, each about three meters away. They had their weapons up and ready. Mark III Scimitar Assault Shotguns. Not very accurate but incredibly powerful. If they landed a successful hit, it was game over.

The Hanar was to his left, slightly in front of him. An Asari, probably this Aria, sat on an elaborate, padded bench. Kaine could see the holographic cylinder behind her.

She wore a fetching dress and half jacket. The outfit suited her well. But all mobsters dressed in their finest. It gave them an air of legitimacy. It was all a ruse. If she were like any other criminal he'd met then the outside was an illusion. She might be beautiful in that dress, but inside she was just as ugly as any Batarian slaver.

Kaine took a deep breath and let it out slowly while rotating his neck to work any kinks out. His head was still a little foggy, that one gulp of Siru's drink combined with the hits to the head left him feeling like he'd just been through a bad Relay jump. He blinked a few times to focus then looked directly into her eyes.

"What happened to Otmar?" he asked her.

"This one offers a recommendation," the Hanar began but was cut off.

"Shut your fucking mouth, jellyfish," Kaine said, then looked at it. "Or whatever the hell it is you use to speak with."

Looking back he saw a smirk cross the Asari's lips. He wasn't really worried about retribution for the comment. This Aria wanted something from them. And as long as she did, he was the one at the helm.

"Your Quarian friend is fine," she answered evenly. "He fainted."

Kaine eyed her a moment then nodded. That he could believe and he didn't see any reason for her to lie. Even with his weapons, there was little he could really do. And after Siru's display at Haven, he was on guard around any Asari. He didn't want to get plastered to a wall with biotics today.

"As for you," she began, but Kaine cut her off too.

"Let's just cut the bullshit," he said. "What do you want?"

She glared at him and he could practically feel the two guard's eagerness to shoot him in the back. She was up and in front of him before he'd even realized. He thought he'd been too bold, that she would violently take the helm back. But instead she only spoke.

"Tell me why there are six Asari commandos on my station and why they're looking for you." She demanded.

Kaine was taken aback by the question. How the hell was he supposed to know the answer to that? There was no one at the helm anymore.

"How the hell should I know?" He replied in total bewilderment.

She cocked her head to the right as if not believing him. Suddenly her arm shot out towards the Hanar and after a snap of her fingers it placed a datapad in her hand. She offered it him. She returned to her seat on the padded bench after he started scanning the datapad.

Kaine read what was on it. As he read a picture began to form in his mind. According to this information, six commandos were sent here a little over a week ago. They were ordered to keep an eye out for a Quarian who would arrive on a ship called the *Palaven's Delight*.

They had been warned about Otmar.

But there were updates, the first stated the target would arrive with a human male. Himself, obviously. Both were now considered the target. First Turians, then Batarians, and now Asari wanted him dead. Typical.

Another update said an Asari would also be traveling with them. The update listed all three as targets.

"Fun read," he said tossing the datapad at the Hanar who caught it easily. "Mysteries were always my favorite."

She stilled her fingers and looked at him. Kaine was afraid of a lot of things in life, but death wasn't one of them. Certainly not the two guards behind him or the Hanar. Aria might be a powerful biotic but she didn't intimidate him and they both knew it.

"They are looking for three people that match your descriptions," she said. "They also were looking for your ship. By name. Whoever sent you here clearly doesn't want you to return."

"Maybe," he said with a shrug. "What difference does it make though? They're here; if you don't want them around kick them out."

"I know everything that happens on Omega," she said.

"Except this," he said sarcastically.

"Human," she said and stopped. When she continued her tone had changed from calm indifference into something more venomous and dangerous. "I want to know who sent you here, what you're picking up, and who you're picking it up from. If you don't tell me, your little friend will awaken to the sounds of his own screams and he will die in agony."

Okay, now she was intimidating him.

Kaine had heard thousands of empty threats in his life, from all sorts of people. He knew how to spot them a kilometer away. But he also knew a genuine threat when he heard one, the type that would be carried out without hesitation. He wasn't about to put Otmar's life at risk.

"The Asari Councilor asked us to come here and pick up something for her," he answered her first question. "We don't know what it is and all we know about the contact is that they will meet us in about an hour and a half at Haven."

They watched each other carefully. Kaine had nothing left to offer her, she was in control again and he wondered if maybe she had been all along. If she wasn't satisfied with his answer or she was and didn't need him anymore, she could order him killed. Kaine shifted his weight slightly and widened his stance, to give himself a better balance if a fight should break out.

After a few tense moments Aria spoke.

"Vinas," she commanded, and a Salarian appeared next to him. "Take our guest down to see his friend. Politely."

Kaine looked at Vinas then back to Aria. He nodded once then turned and followed the Salarian down the stairs.

Siru stood where Kaine had been moments earlier. She looked at her old boss in a mixture of apprehension and anticipation while completely ignoring the guards and Hanar. Aria had always been an exciting individual, full of mystery and inner strength. Siru had once tried to imitate her mannerisms, style, and attitude to become a facsimile of her. But that was a long time ago. Aria was little more than a thug to her now, a powerful and crafty thug, but a thug nonetheless.

"It's been a long time Siru," Aria said matter-of-factly.

"That's one way to put it," she replied.

"Aw, now don't be like that. I was hoping we could catch up," she said, patting the seat next to her.

"No thank you," Siru said carefully.

"You're not being friendly," Aria said, moving her hand back to her lap.

"We're not friends."

Aria laughed at her. Her two guards added halfhearted chortles, not completely understanding the joke. Aria calmed herself quickly.

"And those two are?" She said thumbing behind her at a set of stairs leading down to a pair of closed doors.

"Why am I here, Aria? What do you want?"

"I'm only looking out for a former employee," she said sweetly and snapped her fingers towards the Hanar who handed her a datapad. "A former employee who made it very clear she didn't like working with criminals."

"I still don't," Siru replied cautiously.

"Really?" Aria said, glancing down at the datapad. "Asari commandos are after your Quarian friend and the human," she paused dramatically. "The Quarian is very boring but the human? Now he is quite an interesting fellow." She looked up at Siru before continuing. "Tell me about him."

"I'm sure you have all his information right there," she replied.

"Oh *I* do," Aria smirked. "I wonder though, how much information do *you* have about him?"

"Enlighten me," Siru said after she took a moment to think over the situation. She felt that bad news was about to befall her.

"Ethan V. Kaine," she began lazily reading from the datapad. "We'll ignore the 'V', too embarrassing," she said looking up at Siru for a moment then back to the datapad. "Born 2143 to Amanda and Markus Kaine. Has one sibling, a sister, Lillian born 2141, who has been hospitalized at regular intervals since birth. Joined the Systems Alliance military in 2161.

"Father committed suicide 2162. Joined Interplanetary Combatives Training 2163. Invited back twice more, completing both training missions. Mother died in skycar accident 2168. Court-martialed 2169 for assault on a superior officer, causing a broken rib, two lost teeth and a fractured jaw.

"My goodness what a brute," Aria added with a smirk before continuing. "Fled Earth during transfer 2170. Wanted by the Systems Alliance, blah blah blah."

Aria tossed the datapad on the seat next to her and looked up. Siru didn't turn away, she just stared right back. She thought long and hard about what Aria had read to her. If what she said was true, not only was Kaine a liar but he was also a deserter and criminal.

She had trouble reconciling that though. The man she'd spent so much time talking to didn't seem like the type to act in such a fashion. Of course they only spoke of generalities and casual nonsense. She never would have pictured him as a soldier before the events at Haven.

A thought struck her suddenly. Hadn't Otmar said he couldn't go back home? This would explain the reason why. But if he couldn't return because he was a common criminal only interested in himself and his needs, why would he be helping Otmar now? It didn't make any sense.

"What does Interplanetary Combatives Training mean?" She asked suddenly, not sure why she did so.

"It's human special forces," Aria answered. "Like Asari commandos. I imagine they're taught all sorts of things: hand to hand combat, tactics, deceit. I bet he can pretend to be anyone he wants."

Siru glared at Aria, she knew what her old boss was up to now. When Siru left, even though it had been on mostly amicable terms, it had still weakened Aria, ever so slightly of course. Aria hated weakness as much as Siru disliked criminals. This seemed like nothing more than petty revenge.

"I appreciate you looking out for me," Siru commented. "But I'll be just fine."

"Of course. One thing though," Aria said and stood. She walked up to Siru calmly and then quicker than lightning slapped her across the mouth. She applied the attack with such force that Siru was knocked to the ground.

Siru rolled over and looked up as Aria gazed down. After a few moments she crouched besides her, extended a hand and let a finger trace the white gem on the choker around Siru's throat.

"Coming back here was unwise," Aria said not looking at Siru, just watching her own finger trace the round stone. "If I wanted to I would have you and your friends killed and your bodies blasted out an airlock."

Aria kept the pose for a few heartbeats, continuing to lazily trace the gem. Suddenly she stopped, stood, and strode back to her seat. She crossed her legs and resumed her relaxed pose. Slowly Siru got to her feet and rubbed her jaw slightly. It stung badly from the strike.

"But I don't want to," she said. "I want you to complete your little transaction then get the fuck off my station. And take those accursed commandos with you."

Siru could do nothing but nod. She watched Aria wave a Salarian forward.

"Take her to the others," she commanded. "Then escort them back to their ship."

Siru followed but was stopped when Aria spoke one last time.

"Siru," she called down to her. "After you've finished, don't come back here. If you or friends do I will kill you all myself."

Siru and Aria watched each other for a long moment. Aria was the first to look away and say something to the Hanar. Siru turned and followed the Salarian down the stairs to meet up with Otmar and Kaine before returning to the *Palaven's Delight*.

NINE

Ethan Kaine watched Otmar unlock his ship, open the airlock door, and enter. Siru followed him up the ramp and into the *Palaven's Delight*. Kaine turned to their escorts, three Batarians with shotguns. They each had a hungry look in their eyes, like they were itching for blood. Humans and Batarians didn't generally get along.

"Gentlemen, thank you for being such dutiful watchdogs, your master will be so pleased," he said, turning and walking up the ramp.

Entering the ship he hit the control panel that would close the outer door. As it finished slide-grinding into place, he waited for his eyes to adjust. It was a little darker in the ship than the docking bay.

Otmar was slouched in his pilot's chair with his head down, recovering from his fainting episode. He hadn't said much on the way back. None of them had, but that could be because of their armed escorts. He thought about saying something to Otmar, to cheer him up, but decided against it. He probably wouldn't be very receptive to it right now anyway.

Siru sat on the couch, one leg crossed over the other. She rested her elbow on the arm and chin on her fist. She was looking away, towards the rear of the ship. She was still as a statue.

"That was fun," Kaine said, to break the ice.

"Maybe for you," Otmar said dejectedly.

Siru remained silent. She made no reaction at all, as if not hearing them. Kaine cleared his throat and went to the little kitchen to get something to drink. He retrieved a bottle of water and took a long draught from it. He then held the bottle to his cheek, the coolness of it soothing his newest bruise a bit.

"I should check my equipment," Otmar said quietly and stood. He walked into his room and the door closed behind him.

Kaine retrieved another bottle of water and walked over to Siru. He handed it to her and after a moment, she looked at it and took the bottle from him.

"Thanks," she said absently returning her gaze.

Sitting in the pilot's chair, Kaine watched her. She seemed bothered by something. Having a run in with your old boss could be uncomfortable at the best of times. And if that old boss

happened to be a mobster, it was even more so.

“You ok?” he asked, rolling the bottle back and forth between his hands.

“Couldn’t be better,” she said flatly.

Kaine stopped rolling the bottle. Looking at Siru he could tell that statement was completely false. He thought about that for a moment. Siru, an Asari, well over three hundred years old, had just employed the same type of noncommittal response any of his exes would have used.

Kaine couldn’t help but laugh. It might have been nothing more than nerves from the fight or delirium from multiple head wounds. Or because he hadn’t slept well recently. Lost some blood too. But the idea of Siru acting like a human woman for some reason struck him as hilarious.

He glanced up and saw Siru glaring at him and he laughed even harder. He was having difficulty catching his breath and gulped in air between fits. He put a hand up towards her and closed his eyes, desperately trying to control himself.

“I’m sorry,” he gasped out as he began to settle down. “That was uncalled for.” He coughed and took a gulp of water.

Siru looked away from him. She glared into empty space, chin resting back on her fist. Kaine just sat in his seat, staring at the bottle in his hands. After a few minutes of neither speaking he decided to just charge headfirst into the problem.

“Your old boss tell you something unpleasant?” he asked, taking a sip of water.

Siru didn’t reply.

“Something about Otmar?”

Silence.

“About you?”

She continued to ignore him.

“About me?”

Nothing.

“Siru,” he shouted in a deep commanding tone. She snapped her head to look at him. She was clearly angry but Kaine didn’t have time for these games. He had to know why she was angry. If she still wanted to help, he’d need to know what was going on. “What did you two talk about?”

“You,” she said in an overly calm voice that didn’t reflect the fire in her eyes.

“Anything interesting come up?” Kaine didn’t really want her to answer that question.

If Aria were as well connected as Siru made her out to be, then this conversation could get awkward fast.

“Are you really a Citadel Security Officer?” She asked.

Faster than he'd thought.

Siru must have already known the answer to that question so he decided to remain silent. No one liked being lied to and Kaine had spent the last few weeks lying to her. Not overtly or in any malicious manner. Just little things here and there. But enough little things can combine to be big things. This had the makings of a big thing.

“Are you a fugitive?” Siru looked upset, but not angry.

“Yes,” he replied simply.

“You attacked a superior officer and fled Earth,” she said looking down at her bottle of water. “That’s why you can’t go back.”

“Yes.”

“Your parents are both dead?”

“Yes.”

“And you have a sister?”

“Yes.”

“Were you ever going to tell me any of this?”

“Yes.”

“When?” She asked, accusingly.

Kaine hadn’t thought about his parents in years. He hadn’t been bothered when his father died, but he took his mother’s death hard. She had never fully recovered from the suicide of her husband. She had been like a shell of a woman for years. He often wondered about that accident, if it truly were one at all.

“I don’t know,” he said, simply and it was truth.

“That’s not good enough,” she said, glaring at him.

Kaine was shocked. Less than an hour before meeting Otmar’s contact and this is what they were going to discuss? It was bound to happen, but he had hoped it would be at a later date. When he was prepared. Certainly not sitting in a patched together freight hauler halfway across the galaxy and definitely not right now.

“What do you want me to say Siru?” He asked tiredly.

“Why did you lie to me?” She asked.

This was unbelievable. She was paid to talk to people, that's what she did for a living. And all of a sudden she was pissed that one of her clients lied to her? He doubted that ever bothered her before. Why was now different? Why was he different?

The thought struck him like a shot to the chest: she liked him. Not love, but at least enough to feel betrayed. That had to be the reason, for this discussion and for her even being here now. They looked at each other and he knew it as fact: Siru had, at least partially, a romantic interest in him.

Suddenly he was no longer tired and he didn't want to defend himself. He wanted her to understand, that his past was something he had to hide in order to survive. That what happened then destroyed him once and could do so again. That's what he hid and why he hid it.

"Siru," he began slowly and paused.

How should he word this, it had to be right or whatever she felt for him could be lost. He leaned forward and looked at his hands, thinking. After a few moments he made up his mind.

"Remember when we first spoke in Chora's Den?" She nodded slowly that she did. "I was there to meet with an agent of the Shadow Broker." Her glare deepened at mention of the Shadow Broker. He held a hand up to her and continued, "Please let me finish."

Taking a deep breath he thought back to the day a little over a month and a half ago. He'd been trying to get an audience with one of the Broker's contacts for a few months. He'd heard the rumors, that that was the fastest way to make large sums of money. And as usual, he needed more and more credits.

"I wanted to get in contact with the Shadow Broker so I could hire myself as security," he began again slowly. "He pays the best, there are no complications with costs, and past indiscretions are irrelevant. I waited for about an hour with no contact and it was clear that my meeting had been canceled. I was about to leave and that's when I saw you."

He looked up at her and she glanced at him then quickly away.

"I asked who you were and was told you worked there," he continued. "I found out you weren't busy with another client so I got to talk to you. Remember that first conversation?"

"Yes," she said not looking at him. Did he hear a little catch in her voice just then? "I remember we discussed you a lot." She looked at him. "I asked what you did for a living."

"Yes you did," he said rubbing his forehead. "Damn it, Siru, I never thought I'd talk to you again, I figured it was a onetime thing. Telling people you work for C-Sec in that part of the Citadel ends a lot of questions. It's just easier to say that than rattle off a list of odd jobs."

“Then why did you come back?” She asked in an accusing tone.

“I got another appointment to see the Shadow Broker’s agent.”

He remembered that day then; he was going to tell the agent that he wasn’t interested anymore. He’d parlayed himself to a freight runner who wanted some security on a delivery.

“I didn’t see him though,” he said, looking at her. “I was going to cancel the meeting, but instead of doing it by vid I decided to go in person.” He shrugged. “I don’t know, maybe I didn’t want to burn any bridges. I’m not sure.”

“Why didn’t you want the meeting?” She asked quietly.

“It didn’t feel right,” he said after thinking a moment. “I’m not a thug, I just needed some credits. But I wasn’t going to do it by hurting anyone, or protecting some slavers. I fight if I have to, but I’m not a killer for hire. Sometimes that’s what you do for the Shadow Broker.”

“Anyway I didn’t attend the meeting. On the way out I saw you again and again I decided to talk to you. And here we are.”

Siru K’vaar stared at the man across from her. He was seated in the pilot’s chair, a half empty water bottle in his hands. She knew his face and voice. They’d spoken often enough for her to recognize him instantly. But he wasn’t the same man he’d been a few minutes ago. The image of him she’d created in her mind was wrong. Not shattered, just off. Skewed a little.

He still spoke the same as before, still had the same mannerisms and tone. He still made eye contact in conversation and what he said seemed truthful. She’d spoken with dozens of people during her time at Chora’s Den. She knew all of them told her lies, about themselves and people around them. But this man was different.

He was the only one that took more than a physical interest in her. That was there too. She was no fool. But there was more. He treated her in a different way than others clients. She knew what it was though. Of all the people who hired her as consort, he was the only one who genuinely wanted *her* to be there. No one else would do.

She took a deep breath and let it out quickly. Alright, he’d answered that question satisfactorily. He wasn’t a common C-Sec officer; she could let that pass. It certainly wasn’t a deal breaker but she would be on guard more now.

But it also led to her other question and it was far, far more important.

“What happened on Earth?” She said in a serious tone.

Neither of them spoke for a time and Siru thought he'd decided not to answer when he stood up suddenly.

"We don't have time to get into that right now," he said, and headed to the kitchen.

"This is important, Kaine," she said as she shot up and grabbed his arm.

"I know," he said, quietly facing her. "But the answer is long and complex and..." He trailed off, his eyes turning from her and going unfocused. His voice changed minutely when he finally answered. "It's difficult to talk about. I'd rather not think about it now."

"Why not," she asked earnestly.

She could hear the pain in his voice, whatever happened on Earth she had no doubt he regretted it. But she had to know, she wanted to understand. Maybe, the thought occurred to her, she could help.

"It has to do with my sister," he said, turning and heading to the kitchen. "Later. Please." He put his bottle away and looked at her imploringly. "Please."

"Okay," she said gently. Then she leaned towards him, keeping her eyes locked on his. "Until later."

"Alright, here's the plan," Kaine was saying a few minutes later.

Otmar watched him arrange various small bits from around the kitchen and was assembling them on the counter between him, Siru, and Otmar.

He had informed them that his suit wasn't compromised after his incident and they both acknowledged but made no comment. That was fine with him; he didn't want to discuss it further anyway.

"This is the bar we were at earlier," Kaine said after he'd assembled the various items around. "The long bar where those idiot Batarians attacked us," he indicated a ruler. "The tables," a few saucers, "the entrance and other bar."

The dimensions of the room are incorrect. The words appeared on his visor along with dimensions.

"This isn't to scale," Otmar commented.

Otmar began rearranging the pieces in a more orderly and scaled version of the bar. It took him less than a minute to give an accurate depiction of its layout. When he was finished he looked up at Kaine who was staring at him with one eyebrow raised.

"Now it's more accurate," Otmar said.

"Thanks," Kaine said shortly.

"You're welcome," Otmar said smiling. He was more than happy to help.

"Anyway," he said. "The layout is pretty simple and we already know the bartenders are armed. We're going to arrive first and sit here," he pointed at one of the saucers closest to the entrance. "So our conversation will be muffled from prying ears and it gives the most direct line to the exit."

Otmar watched him move his finger away which nudged the saucer out of place. He reached over and repositioned it for him. When he looked up Kaine was staring at him and took a deep breath. Otmar nodded for him to continue.

"Right," he said dragging out the word. "Otmar can you get into the controls for the lights and music of Haven? Maybe any fire suppression systems they have?"

"That won't be a problem," Otmar began nodding. "I have a few shunt programs that will knock out their firewalls and I can place my VI in charge of their systems."

Total control of non-essential systems covering Haven will take approximately one hundred and fifteen seconds.

"Shouldn't take longer than a minute or two," Otmar finished.

"Excellent," Kaine commented, and Otmar stood a little straighter. It had been a long time since someone told him he was excellent.

"If things go pear shaped, I'm going to yell 'screwball' and you shut off the lights, turn the music as high as it can go and set off the sprinklers," he said looking alternatively at Otmar and Siru. "Confusion will be our cover for evac."

"Siru you're on interference," he said pointing at her. "Keep any wait staff or curious patrons away from the table. I want it to look uncluttered and inviting so Otmar's contact won't get spooked away."

"What about those commandos?" She asked.

"Unless they're in full combat armor, which I doubt, they should be as confused as the rest of the patrons," Kaine replied evenly.

Otmar thought it sounded good. If nothing else Kaine seemed confident in it. Otmar had never been part of an operation like this. It was kind of exciting, each person playing their part so the team as a whole could succeed. Like an action vid.

"Attire," Kaine said rubbing his chin. "Siru you're going to need to wear something different. At least a new top if you have anything. Those bartenders will remember you if they're still working."

"Got it," she said and walked away.

"What about you," Otmar asked.

"No worries, I have that covered," he began to reply then went silent.

Otmar watched him as he looked over his shoulder behind him to where Siru had walked. Turning fully around he saw Siru by the couch with her jacket off. She had on a black top and was rummaging around her bag. She stopped suddenly then stood and turned around.

Otmar could think of nothing to say so he waved. He heard Kaine let out a short laugh then silence himself. Siru faced them both having taken off her jacket and placed her hands on her hips.

"It's just a sports bra boys," she said, scolding them. "You see them all the time."

She stared at them like they were children caught doing something foolish, then turned away to keep looking through her bag.

"I don't see them all the time. Does she think we own some?" Kaine asked. Otmar turned to look at him. "We don't own any bras right?"

Otmar thought the question was tragically foolish. Why would he own a female's undergarment of any sort? Maybe if he'd been dating, but they all knew he wasn't. Kaine was a very odd individual who asked all manner of inane questions.

Otmar watched as Kaine's expression faded from jest to annoyance to something close to suspicion. He was about to comment when Kaine interjected.

"Just say 'no' Otmar," he said, making a circular motion with finger as if suggesting he hurry. "Just say 'no'."

"Oh, of course I don't," Otmar said as Siru returned. She had changed from her long coat into a bright pink half-jacket, which belted up to her throat with dark blue lines from shoulder to wrist. She looked at them both and Otmar felt the need to specify. "I don't own any feminine undergarments."

Kaine and Siru looked at each other then back at him. Otmar twitched away ever so slightly, ready to run if they were going to hit him. Then suddenly they both let out a raucous laugh.

"Otmar," Kaine said, while placing a hand on Otmar's head and moving it slightly left to right. "You should be a comedian."

Siru patted him on the back, but he wasn't sure if they were laughing with him or at him. Looking at Siru, she just smiled. Being a comedian was a terrible idea anyway, you can't repair a ship with jokes.

Humans. Otmar didn't understand them.

"That looks uncomfortable," Kaine commented about Siru's new jacket after they'd settled down again.

"I think it shrunk in the laundry," she replied, hooking a finger under the collar and pulling it out slightly. "I'll be fine, just a little tight."

That it was definitely was. More form fitting than anything he'd seen in her yet, as if she had literally poured herself into it. It accentuated her curves impressively. He was almost having trouble concentrating.

"You said you had it covered when I asked if they'd recognize you," Otmar said.

Kaine cleared his throat and got back to work.

"Right," he said, and walked over to his second large black bag. Hefting it he returned to his side of the counter.

He opened and retrieved a helmet and breastplate. Both military grade and black with blue stripes painted on them. They had dents here and there but were complete and functional.

"I won't be making the same mistake this time," he said. "When we go back I'll cover up in this helmet and armor. Should be enough to conceal me for as long as we're there."

"Kaine," Siru said, slowly pointing at his helmet. "Isn't that a Turian helmet?"

"Yes," he said matter-of-factly.

"You're going to look like an idiot," she said.

"That's not nice," he replied in mock indignation. "But that's sort of the idea: I look like a buffoon and will be ignored and you draw the attention of any guards. As long as they don't take me seriously, I will have the element of surprise if anything goes wrong."

"Sure but," Siru began giving him an odd look. "Can you operate that thing? Won't all the readouts be in Turian?"

"Not a problem," Kaine said, placing the helmet on. "I can understand all the readouts. I don't know the Turian language but I know this."

Instantly the room lit up, everything was in stark relief and the contrast increased his visibility. Even small bolts that would be blurred by shadows under the couch stood out. There were plenty of indicators and gauges for him to process all in the Turian language; however, over the years he'd learned what they meant and how to use the helmet to its fullest.

"Otmar," Kaine said, looking to him. "Can your helmet pick up short range, encoded, burst transmissions?"

"Yes, I just need a code frequency and I can pick up most any signals," he answered.

"Good," Kaine replied, then rattled off a string of numbers.

Kaine reached into the bag and pulled out a small black gunmetal box. Opening it he removed a small piece of plastic, no bigger than a fingernail.

"Siru, this is a receiver. You'll be able to hear what Otmar and I say and we'll be able to hear you. Just be careful as others might hear you speaking."

Kaine started to hand the device to her then stopped. He moved his hand back and furrowed his brow.

"What?" Siru asked.

"Well, it goes in your ear." Kaine replied, trailing off at the end.

"Goddess," Siru said, rolling her eyes. She reached out and took the receiver from him. Turning her head she pointed to a depression just above where the back of her jaw where it attached to her skull. "Cochlea Kaine, just like you," she said, inserting the device and then looking at him. "Works the same without all the added fleshy bits."

Reflexively Kaine placed his hand to ear. Otmar mimicked the gesture and quickly put his hand down when he noticed Kaine watching.

"Alright, Otmar can you hear me?" Kaine asked, lowering his voice to that of a sub-audible whisper.

"Yes," Otmar replied.

"Siru?" He asked her.

"Gotcha." She answered.

Nodding that he could hear them both, Kaine removed his helmet and set it down. He looked over his armor and weapons. He would definitely wear them both and bring his shotgun and pistol. He didn't think grenades or fusion detonators would be required this time.

He took a large caliber shotgun from the pack and collapsed it so it would fit against the small of his back. Placing these items on the counter he looked at both Siru and Otmar. They both were looking at his gear then slowly looked up at him.

"Ok, we know what we have to do. Let's get in there, get the item, and get out." He said, looking directly at both of them in turn for a few moments. "If anything goes wrong, I'm in charge. Got it?"

They nodded their understanding. He didn't say any more, just looked at the two of them. There was that odd feeling again, that they were missing something crucial. Even after learning that Asari commandos were on the station and hunting them, there was something else. Something elusive, in the shadows of his mind.

He wouldn't voice his concerns. They might be baseless and he wanted them focused. This was a shady deal and they had no idea about their contact or his real intentions. Variables in ops always left him a little on edge, he didn't like not knowing. But there was no fighting it, they were going in.

"Alright," Kaine said. "Let's get it done."

TEN

Otmar'Reefa nar Zeela sat at the table Kaine told him to. It was situated near the back wall, about ten meters from the entrance. Haven had gotten busier in the hour and half since they'd been here last. There was a band setting up on the stage opposite where he sat. Dozens of patrons stood at the two bars and all but two tables were full.

Music, loud and obnoxious, blared out at them from speakers set into the ceiling. Otmar felt it might be impossible to raise the decibel level any higher, but after acquiring the command controls of the fire suppression, lights, and audio systems, he found that the music was only at about fifty percent.

Siru walked near him, casually sipping another of the same colored liquid she had ordered last time. Though she looked relaxed, an attractive Asari just enjoying the music and chatting up the various patrons.

Otmar noticed mostly Batarians and Turians in the mix. But a few Salarians were discovered lingering near the bars here and there. Otmar realized that he was the only Quarian and aside from the dancers above the bars, Siru was the only Asari. No humans were lingering about and Otmar guessed if they discovered Kaine was one, there would be trouble.

Kaine stood behind both of them, slightly to his right. He leaned against the wall; left leg bent at the knee, foot placed up against it. He too looked casual, no drink in his hand though. Just another armed thug enjoying the atmosphere.

The amount of weaponry on display made Otmar so nervous he had begun to fidget. Kaine told him over the burst transmission that he needed to relax but Otmar found it difficult. This was it, the meeting that could be the key to getting home. He was terrified about making a mistake, hands shaking so badly he'd spilled a drink.

"Otmar," Siru's voice came to him then. "Close your eyes for a moment." He did so. "I want you to think about your story, the one of you and your father. Do you remember how you both stood against the team from the Quib Quib?"

"Yes." He could see the events in his mind.

"You weren't scared then and there's no need to be now. Focus on the task, talk to your contact, and you introduce us to him when you go home."

Otmar imagined introducing Siru and Kaine to his father. Imagined telling him about the adventure and then presenting a masterful gift to his new captain. Those thoughts relaxed him. He had helped create one of the finest entrants into the automaton combat, he could handle a simple conversation.

"Thank you Siru," he said, opening his eyes. He felt a hand slide over his shoulders as Siru passed.

Contact is late by five minutes. The words crawled across his visor then faded.

Otmar was about to say something when Siru nonchalantly tapped his hand with her finger as she walked by. Otmar looked at her and she nodded in the direction of the entrance.

"Heads up," Kaine said from his helmet. *"We might have something."*

Otmar looked over at the door and saw a Quarian standing just inside the bar, a female by the looks of her. She was tall, almost two meters high, which was very rare for a Quarian woman. Her enviro-suit was a mix of black and gold and showed no sign of wear at all no patches, no sewn up cuts or damaged electronics.

He watched as she scanned the crowd. She had no guards with her that he could see, but Kaine mentioned when they had arrived that any guards might already be around. Placed here earlier so they wouldn't draw attention.

"That seems like a sound strategy," Otmar had mentioned at the time. "Why didn't we do that?"

"Because I just thought of it," Kaine had replied flatly.

It bothered Otmar a bit at the time, but now it seemed not to matter. There were so many people that he felt a fight would not break out, lest innocent bystanders be hurt. No one would want that.

Otmar reached up and waved his hand at her. The Quarian saw him but did not move. She just stood in the doorway and watched Otmar for a few moments. Absently Otmar began to check his enviro-suit, trying to smooth out some rough patch jobs and realigning a few pieces of errant thread that helped hold bits of suit together. In comparison to hers, his suit was in less than optimal condition.

Slowly the Quarian moved over to them. She stood before Otmar but was no longer looking at him. She watched Siru, who in turn took a sip of her drink, as if bored.

"She with you?" the Quarian asked. Otmar was taken aback by her melodious tone of voice that carried over the sound of music and cluster of people around them.

"I was just about to ask him if he wanted some company," Siru said sweetly, taking another sip of her drink returning the look.

"You may leave." The Quarian said.

"Tell Siru no thank you," Kaine said.

"No thank you, I'm fine," Otmar said in what he hoped was a casual tone.

Siru watched him and the Quarian in turn. With a shrug of indifference she walked away. Otmar heard her ask if Kaine was interested in any fun. He turned to look back at his visitor as she sat down next to him.

"Waiting long?" She asked him.

"No," Otmar began, but stammered. He felt his hands start to fidget.

"Relax," came Kaine's voice. *"Tell her you were just enjoying the nightlife and didn't even notice."*

Otmar did as he was told and the Quarian scoffed. But instead of inquiring further she adjusted her position a little, apparently getting more comfortable. The two of them stared at each other a few heartbeats before Otmar spoke.

"That's a lovely suit you have," he commented, then instantly felt foolish.

"I've had time to improve it over the years," she replied.

"How long have you been on your Pilgrimage?" Otmar asked.

She didn't answer and just continued to stare. The silence of their conversation extended several moments until she spoke again.

"What's your name?" She asked him quickly.

"Otmar'Reefa nar Zeela."

"Zeela? Good ship, captained by a Bayal'Reefa last time I knew. Any relation?"

"My father."

"Good to have a father that's a captain," she commented with an odd tone. "Lots of special privileges."

"Maybe for other children. Not me," Otmar said defensively. He didn't want this Quarian thinking his father placed anything but ship in highest importance.

"I see," she said. "Well my name is Ryssa'Amar vas Rayya."

Ryssa'Amar vas Rayya. Words began scrawling across his visor. Age thirty three. Charged with stealing ships parts and selling them at ports for personal gain. Damages caused loss of integrity of the Rayya. Exiled from the Migrant Fleet seven years ago.

Otmar sat up straighter in his seat. He'd never met an exile before. He'd been told any Quarian exiled was done so for heinous reasons. He'd always thought they were dangerous and sinister.

"You recognize the name?" She asked him almost sounding astonished. "I hadn't thought I was that famous."

"Is that why you asked for a Quarian?" Otmar asked her. "Because you think you can be readmitted to the fleet with this transaction?"

The Quarian, Ryssa'Amar, let out a hearty laugh in response. Otmar hadn't thought he'd said anything funny. It was a legitimate question. Something this important to a Citadel Councilor might make one think they can buy their way back into the Flotilla.

"No Otmar'Reefa, I don't." Ryssa'Amar said after she'd calmed herself. "Does it really matter why though?"

"Tell her no," Kaine said.

"Yes," Otmar said.

"Or go with that," Kaine commented sarcastically.

"Why do you care?" Ryssa'Amar asked.

"An exile that sold ship parts for profit doesn't seem the sort to be benevolent," Otmar answered honestly.

Ryssa'Amar sat up straighter in her seat, as if insulted by Otmar's observation. They looked at each other a long while before she spoke again.

"I've done some terrible things in my time," she said flatly. "I'm just trying to balance my scales."

Otmar thought about this and then nodded. Some Quarian's believed that when you died, your good and bad deeds were weighted on a scale. You were allowed to carry on if your good deeds outweighed your bad ones. His father thought it was rubbish, but it seemed Ryssa'Amar would disagree with him.

"Well," Otmar said after a few moments. "Where is this box?"

"Not here," she replied. "I wanted to make sure they sent a Quarian."

"Ok," Otmar said a little confusedly. "What do we do now?"

"We go get it," she replied standing.

Otmar stood too and noticed a curious little red circle floating over the chest of Ryssa'Amar.

Kaine had been scanning the crowd as Otmar and his new girlfriend were talking. It was interesting to learn that Quarrians would exile their own people for something as trivial as theft. He watched as Siru worked the table next to him, playing up her part as the Asari entertainment.

Siru was good. She had the entire table of Batarians laughing with her. Ugly bastards they were. Those needle teeth were unsettling. It actually caused Kaine some mild discomfort to see how they watched her, like predators hungry for a meal.

Looking up, Kaine was going to check on the rest of the entertainment above the bar when he saw an Asari dancer, wearing next to nothing in a skimpy two piece bright orange get up, pistol in hand, and pointed his direction.

Kaine turned and saw Otmar and the other Quarrian standing. With his enhanced vision Kaine could easily see the line that extended from the weapon to the chest of Otmar's companion.

Kaine reacted instantly. He reached out, grabbing Otmar's left shoulder and yanked him away. Blood sprayed out as the Quarrian fell backwards.

As Kaine leaned over Otmar to shield him, he felt two impacts on his armor. The Asari was trying to shoot Otmar as well.

"Screwball, screwball, screwball!" Kaine yelled into his helmet.

In response Otmar fired up his omni-tool and made a few taps on its holographic surface. After only a few heartbeats the lights went out. He could feel jets of liquid pelt his helmet and armor, the fire suppressants were on full tilt. People began yelling as the music spiked and drowned them out.

Kaine turned the thermal imaging of his helmet on and located Siru.

"Let's go kids, we're leaving," he yelled as he grabbed Siru by the waist and helped her up. He picked Otmar up and half carried them both out the door. His helmet picked up the sparks of more shots that impacted the area around them.

A Batarian to his right rocked backwards as impacts slammed his chest and head. Kaine shoved the body forward and out of their way as they kept moving. More impacts hit the area and he saw a few more people fall.

Kaine dashed through the door out of the darkness and into the light of the district. His helmet's visor instantly switched from thermal to normal vision. With Otmar and Siru, fast on his heels, he pushed and shoved other beings out of the way as they made for the elevators opposite the bar.

"They killed her!" Otmar's voice came over the burst transmissions. He sounded frantic.

"I know!" Kaine returned, making room for all of them.

"They tried to kill us too!" Otmar said.

"I know!" Kaine yelled with heavy emphasis on the last word.

Pushing the last few people roughly out of his way Kaine saw a lone Salarian step into one of the elevators.

"Hold that door!" Kaine yelled out.

The Salarian held out a hand to keep the doors from closing. As he closed the distance he slid to a stop in front. Waving in Siru and Otmar he took a moment to look back at the entrance to Haven. People were piling out through the door, shoving each other to get out of the chaos.

After Siru and Otmar were safely inside, Kaine stepped in, grabbed the Salarian roughly by his collar and shoved him outside.

"That plan didn't go so well," Siru commented between breaths.

"I should have warned you my plans never really work," he replied flatly.

As the Salarian crashed to the ground before the elevator, Kaine glanced up to see an Asari dancer pointing a weapon at them from the doorway into Haven.

Instantly Kaine reached out with his right arm. Pressed it against Otmar's chest and shoved him back, simultaneously lifting his boot placing it against Siru's hip kicking her to the side. As they all hit the side walls he heard the pounding of rounds impacting on the back of the elevator.

People outside dropped to the ground. More impacts peppered the back wall as the doors began to close. Kaine could see the Asari struggling to get passed people on the ground for a better shot. Then the doors shut with a ding.

"You two alright?" Kaine asked, hitting the key for a stop four floors up.

"I'm ok," Otmar said staring at the tightly packed holes in the back of the elevator.

"I think you broke my hip," Siru said massaging her side. She was soaked from the sprinklers but otherwise seemed unharmed.

"Let me know if you'd rather be shot next time," Kaine asked, removing his helmet. He gave them both a quick look and saw no wounds. They were fine.

"What are we going to do now?" Otmar asked, shifting to look at Kaine.

"Can you find where your contact was docked?" He answered.

"I think so, but why?" Otmar asked.

"Are we still going through with this?" Siru interjected.

“Yes we are.” Kaine answered, simply hitting the button for emergency stop.

Kaine watched Siru lower her head and pinch the bridge of her nose with her fingers. Otmar didn’t move as he continued to stare at him. Siru lifted her head to face Kaine as well. Neither seemed to be interested in continuing.

“Concerns?” Kaine asked.

“Someone just shot at us,” Otmar said.

“A woman is dead,” Siru added.

“We could easily be next,” Otmar finished for them.

“I don’t feel like dying here Kaine,” Siru added.

Taking a deep breath, Kaine held up a hand for them to stop. No doubt that was one of the Asari commandos. And there were five more of them. Things weren’t going the direction he wanted. A fidgety Quarian and Asari entertainer would be no match for trained killers.

He looked at Otmar, who had already begun wringing his hands together. Glancing at Siru she met his gaze and he could tell she was rattled. This had already gone further than he’d have imagined. The Asari commando had taken multiple shots at them, well placed and accurate. She was shooting to kill.

“We have to,” he said.

He knew they had to get that package. He could guess the commandos mission: get the package, kill the witnesses. This was beyond getting Otmar home or Kaine extorting the Councilor to fix his record, this was about staying alive. Their only chance was to get it first then dictate new terms.

“Look,” he began, “they’re going to kill us. We know about the package and they don’t want *anyone* knowing about it to live. That’s us and the Quarian, and she’s already dead.”

“Ryssa'Amar,” Otmar said softly. “Her name was Ryssa'Amar.”

“Ok, Ryssa'Amar,” Kaine said, taking another deep breath. “We need to find her ship and get that package before the commandos do. It’s our only chance. Without it we’re in some serious shit.”

"As opposed?" Siru asked.

"Siru," Kaine began.

“Why don’t we just leave?” Otmar asked quickly.

“What if they won’t deal?” Siru added.

“Alright,” Kaine said, holding up a hand again then pointing at Otmar. “If we just leave they get whatever Ryssa' Amar died for. She had to have thought it was important. So did the Asari Councilor. You don't get people with that sort of power to jump when you say so. Plus I don't know about you, but Citadel space is about the only place I'm welcome. Things could get ugly if we can't fix this now.”

Otmar nodded his understanding and Kaine gave him a reassuring pat on the shoulder. He didn't think Siru would be so easily convinced. She stood with her back against the wall of the elevator, arms wrapped around her.

She had brought up a good point. This could all be over a serious criminal or even coordinates to some amazing new Prothean ruins. It could literally be anything and their ability to negotiate was dependent on what it was. He honestly didn't know what to say.

“I don't know what happens if they won't bargain with us, I really don't.” Kaine said flatly.

“What if it's not worth it?” Kaine turned as Otmar spoke. It was the same thought he'd just had. “What if this package is of no value to anyone?”

Kaine looked from Otmar to Siru. She looked deeply concerned and placed a hand over her mouth for a moment then let it drop to her side. This was as sobering an idea as ever there was. Their lives depended on something that could be worth less than the shoes they wore now. They just had no way of knowing.

“I'll go,” Kaine said finally. He held up a hand as Siru and Otmar began speaking. “We won't know anything, we can't plan anything, until we get this package and crack it open. Tell me where her ship is docked and I'll go alone.”

Siru and Otmar looked at one another. Siru wore a concerned look on her face. Otmar had his visor, but his mannerisms told Kaine he was just as concerned. Neither of them had any formal military training. Siru had some skill with biotics and Otmar had already saved him from a gunshot more than once. But this was going to be something completely different. These weren't Turian cronies or Batarian thugs. They were trained military operators.

It was the only reasonable choice. Kaine would go to the docking bay and get the package. If he had to he could fight off the commandos, at least enough to get away. It was risky, but he was far more comfortable gambling with his own life than theirs.

“No,” Otmar said. “We'll go together, I brought you here. Siru can get the ship prepped for our return.”

“The hell I can,” Siru shot back at Otmar, who physically recoiled as if shot. “If you’re going I’m going. I can take care of myself.”

“Siru,” Kaine began.

“No,” she said interrupting him and pointed an accusing finger at them both. “We’re in this together now. That’s final.”

“Alright,” Kaine said after a moment’s thought. It was probably safer to stick together anyway; if they separated they could be picked off easily. “Otmar, find Ryssa’Amar’s docking bay.”

ELEVEN

Ten minutes later they were running down the corridor towards the docking bay of Dukar District. The hall they ran down was packed with shipping containers of varying sizes and shapes. They had to dodge people, squeeze between overstuffed corridors, and duck under low hanging pipes and ducts.

"Why are we running?" Siru exclaimed from the rear.

"It's good for you," Kaine replied, sidestepping two dockworkers offloading cargo.

"Which one again?" he asked, ignoring her vulgar retort.

"Twenty-five," Otmar replied.

They rushed passed twenty-two with its door still tightly closed. Then twenty-three which had its door open, revealing a sleek looking pleasure ship. Armed guards stood just outside the doors. They ran passed twenty-four, apparently being cleaned out.

Kaine skidded to a halt in front of twenty-five. Being the last bay connected to this part of the district there was no one but them here. Reaching behind his back Kaine pulled his shotgun free. As it unfurled from its standby position, a large tungsten bayonet flipped forward.

Kaine looked at Siru, who was catching her breath but seemed okay. Otmar too seemed to be gulping down lungful's of air. Kaine gave them a few quick moments to relax before continuing.

"Alright, open the doors. Let's see what we've got." He told Otmar.

"I can't," he replied after firing up his omni-tool and giving it a few taps.

"That's not funny. We might already be too late," Kaine said flatly.

"No I'm serious. There are some very complex and sophisticated locking programs and redundant firewalls keeping my shunts and spikes from getting a foothold," Otmar said, still tapping away.

"You win professor. Move and I'll blast the controls," Kaine said, moving up to him.

"That won't work," Siru said stopping him short. "This is an old mining station remember? You blast those controls and the doors will seal up. You'll need plasma-torches to get in after that."

"Fine," Kaine said defeated. "Smear some omni-gel on there and let's get going."

They both stopped and turned to look at him. Kaine thought Siru would slap him, the look on her face was that unpleasant. For Otmar's part he just stood still, staring at him.

"What?" Kaine asked.

"Omni-gel should be outlawed," Otmar said returning to the panel.

"That stuff can give you cancer," Siru said seriously, turning to watch Otmar work.

"Ok, we find another way in," Kaine said, defeated again.

"Wait, I found something. Looks like an audio file attached to the programs."

"Play it," Kaine ordered.

"After time adrift among open stars, along tides of light," A female voice intoned from a speaker near the control panel.

Kaine shook his head not knowing what it meant. He looked at Siru who gave a simple shrug. Otmar though hadn't moved, just continued to stare at the panel, his fingers held over his omni tool. He was stiff as stone.

"You know what that is?" Kaine asked him.

"Yes," Otmar replied. Kaine was about to ask more when Otmar spoke, "It's a pass phrase for returning to the flotilla. It lets the fleet know you're safe and unharmed." Otmar leaned forward then spoke, "and through shoals of dust, I will return to where I began."

There came a loud hiss from the doors as they slid open. Kaine moved both Otmar and Siru to the side. The room beyond was completely dark, almost like a solid piece of onyx was before them. Kaine was about to switch his thermal imaging when lights started flickering to life.

Inside he saw a cargo bay about thirty meters square with chest-high freight containers scattered haphazardly about. There seemed to be no measure of order at all.

"Wait here," Kaine said into his helmet's mic.

Slowly, he walked inside and looked up and around the top part of the bay. There was a catwalk that circled the outer edge of the upper wall five meters above them. A crane used to heft heavier cargo was attached to the very top of the ceiling but looked unused.

The catwalks had doors of their own, one to his left and the other to his right. Kaine guessed they led into the other docking bays. He walked into the middle of the room and took another look around.

The massive doors leading to the exterior were directly across from the entrance. They too looked unused for some time, indicating it was more of a storage area than anything. No ship was here now and no ship had been here in a long while. Kaine had a feeling this was the wrong place.

"Otmar, you sure it was twenty-five?" He asked into his helmet.

"Yes, why?" Otmar answered.

"There's no ship here, this isn't a docking bay it's a storage room."

"This is the only place assigned to Ryssa'Kaar vas Rayya Kaine," Otmar said testily. *"It's either here or it's nowhere."*

"Well there are plenty of boxes to choose from," Siru said from Kaine's left.

"Jesus, woman!" Kaine exclaimed as he slid to his right reflexively.

"Sorry, was getting bored."

Otmar soon followed and the doors closed behind him. The three of them stood in the center of the room, looking around at all the freight stored here. Nothing jumped out at him, all the crates looked more or less the same with just varying sizes. Some did look old however, as if they'd been there for a long time.

"Kaine," Otmar said. He was tapping on his omni-tool while talking. "This isn't a docking bay she rented for her ship, this is a storage room she purchased a few weeks ago."

"What? You mean she just randomly bought someone's old shit?" Kaine asked.

"Sometimes it's not old," Siru answered for him. "If a cargo area or docking bay remains abandoned long enough the dock masters will sell it off to the highest bidder."

"How long is 'long enough'," he asked her, making quotes with one hand.

"However long the dock master wants. Could be a couple of weeks or a couple of hours."

"That's terrible," Otmar said.

"That's Omega," Siru replied with a shrug.

The three of them looked around. Kaine wondered who had owned it before and why they had left all this cargo here. There could be anything in these crates and they had no reason to believe the Quarian had even left the package here.

"Hold on," Kaine said, pointing at the variously sized crates. "How long ago did you say she bought this place?"

"Says here, three weeks ago yesterday," Otmar answered, looking up from his omni-tool's holo-screen.

"Look at these crates, some haven't been touched in years," Kaine said, walking up to a piece of freight and running a gloved hand over it. Nearly a centimeter of dust came off as he swiped from one edge to the other. "So she bought these things but never looked at them," he continued, turning to Otmar and Siru. "Why?"

"She found this package everyone wants so badly," Siru answered.

"Makes sense, she purchases the bay and discovers whatever we're here for and immediately begins making preparations to move it," Otmar said, looking around. "She didn't bother with the other crates because she thought she'd found something remarkable."

"Okay," Kaine said, thinking. "How do you tell which ones she'd looked through already?" The idea hit him and was so obvious he was surprised they hadn't figured out instantly. "Find the boxes with the least amount of dust. It would have to be one of them."

The three of them scattered, looking about the room. Kaine counted fifteen crates of various sizes. None of them really stood out from the others, they were all the same dull gray color. Some were bigger than others, but that was about it.

He was walking towards the left of the exterior doors, kicking crates to see how much dust would scatter. Each one produced a shower of old residue as he passed. After the fifth he was against the wall with no more freight to check.

It was there he noticed some boot prints on the ground. He hadn't seen any before but back here there must have been more dust than anywhere else. The footprints appeared heading in the same direction he was facing then stopped a few meters away. Kaine was about to investigate when the others announced their finds.

"Got one here," Siru said into her earpiece.

"One here too," Otmar added.

Kaine walked over to Siru's crate near the large exterior doors opposite the entrance. It was about two meters long, half as high, and a meter wide. It reminded Kaine of the coffins in which dead alliance soldiers were transported. The crate was completely devoid of dust. Hinges showed it had been opened multiple times. Someone had been working with this one a lot.

"Negative here," Otmar's voice drifted over their coms. *"Full of broken vases and glasses."*

"I think it's this one," Siru said, and looked up at Kaine.

"Let's find out," he replied and bent down as Otmar appeared next to them.

The crate itself had no locks or electronic devices attached to it. Wedging his tungsten bayonet in to the seam where the top lid met the side, he began to pry. It didn't give instantly, but a few strong pushes and a crack of the crates material and the lid popped up. Flipping it over, it crashed to the floor revealing its contents.

"What the fuck?" Kaine asked.

Inside was another box, dark blue and very reflective. Its dimensions were about the same as the outer container. This too had no visible dust. Jackpot.

"Kaine," Siru said, not looking up. "That looks like a coffin."

"No," Otmar said, his omni-tool up and running again. "It has power. There's a mass effect field inside the outer shell. Looks like it's made of a tungsten-carbide amalgam with something else mixed in." Otmar looked up at him. "Whatever is in there, whoever put it there didn't want it getting out."

"Has it been opened?" Kaine asked, still crouched beside it.

He took his shotgun and jabbed it with his bayonet. A sharp 'ting' resounded from the impact but not a scratch or mark was left on the object. He almost thought he could hear a low hum if he held his breath. There was definitely some power being consumed in this thing.

"Looks like it has been opened at least once," Otmar said, crouching down next to him. "I don't know how many times specifically, but micro grooves show misalignment. Someone opened it but didn't close it perfectly."

"Like something shocking was in there and they wanted to close it fast," Siru said ominously.

"Let's not get all campfire-ghost-stories here," Kaine said, standing up. "Whatever it is, it's secure for now. We'll get it back to the ship and blast outta here. Find someplace safe and take a look then."

As Otmar stood Kaine saw a little red dot appear in the middle of his visor. Kaine kicked the box into Otmar's shins, knocking him over. A shot rang out as a projectile slammed into the wall at the far end of the room.

Spinning, Kaine reached out and pulled Siru to the ground by her collar. Simultaneously he fired two wild shots with his shotgun at the back of the room near the footprints. He was rewarded by seeing a blue skinned Asari in black armor but no helmet stumble backwards, appearing out of nowhere.

"Shit, tactical cloak!" Kaine yelled into his helmet. "Otmar can you do anything?"

"*On it*," Otmar replied.

Kaine was on the move, firing at the Asari with his shotgun. In response she held her hands up, one open, the other holding a sniper rifle. A translucent bubble appeared around her and his shots bounced off it harmlessly.

Ignoring this, he continued to pepper her biotic shield with rounds. If she had to hold that bubble she couldn't fire back. As he advanced another Asari in an identical outfit, but with purple

skin, appeared to his right about a meter away on the opposite side of a chest high crate. She had a large caliber weapon pointed directly at his head.

As Kaine spun to defend himself his HUD and all its readouts disappeared. He could still see as the normally opaque visor faded quickly to clear. He and Purple pulled their triggers together but nothing happened. She looked at her weapon in shock.

Kaine lunged forward with his shotgun and drove the bayonet into the newcomer's neck and pulled it horizontally to the right, tearing muscles and flesh free and nearly decapitating her. In a spray of blood she clutched at her throat and fell backwards.

Turning he had just enough time to see the first Asari, Blue, thrust her hand out towards him. A biotic glow flashed out. An impact that felt like a train hit him fully in the chest, sending him tumbling backwards. He landed roughly on his back near Otmar and Siru.

A little dazed, he slowly got to his feet as Siru walked in front him. Hand held up towards his attacker she strode forward absorbing similar biotic blasts that had taken Kaine off his feet. He was about to yell out to her when Otmar cut him off.

"Kaine behind you!" he yelled.

Something new hit Kaine in the back, causing him to stumble into another crate. Turning, he saw a third Asari, pale blue skinned, in dark red skin tight armor, advance on him. Red. She leveled another blast of biotic energy at him but he dodged behind a crate.

Dodging a few more discharges he closed the distance quickly. Jumping over a crate he caught his attacker by surprise, gripped her shoulders and spun as they fell, flinging her into another crate.

Kaine got to his feet quickly but the Asari kick-flipped herself to a standing position faster. A snapping kick directed at his head came seemingly from nowhere. Raising his forearm to block he stumbled backwards from the blow. Red was far stronger than she looked.

Stepping forward, he lashed out with a vicious right hook. She quickly ducked under the swing. Stopping his momentum he brought the same fist back trying to wallop her in the side of the head. Spinning out of the way she delivered a punch to his side, just below his armor. A grunt of pain sprung forth but he ignored it.

Kaine brought his elbow across, aiming for her temple. She cart wheeled away like a dancer. Bringing his left leg up, he tried to slam his boot directly into her face. Another graceful spin and he hit nothing but air.

Dropping to one knee, she brought a fist up and hit Kaine in the back of the thigh. His leg felt numb for an instant but came back to life quickly. In response he brought his foot back down with all his strength, trying to drive her to the floor. Sliding to the side he again hit nothing.

Following her movement he threw another right hook, which missed again as she dodged under his swing. He lost track of her as she spun behind him. A powerful attack cracked against his back. It felt like he'd been hit with biotics again. He could hear his armor snap under the impact.

Kaine fell against another crate and turned. She advanced on him. He snapped out a quick jab. She dodged. He blocked her counterattack. She flipped away from his next punch. Dove beneath a boot. He attacked and she pirouetted away.

"Quit dancing around you bitch," Kaine roared in frustration.

He brought another left hook. She cartwheeled away. This time he stopped, shifted his weight and brought his right knee up. He aimed for her head. It connected with a slight crunching sound, knocking her onto her back.

Quick as lightning Kaine drew his knife and plunged it up to the hilt into her forehead. She twitched once then stopped moving.

Siru K'vaar advanced on her target, left hand held up and in front of her creating a shield as the commando fired at her. She didn't care anymore who she was, one of her own people sent by her government to stop them. Her hatred of Omega and all the people that called it home had boiled over. It clouded her judgment and blinded her to reason. All she wanted to do was complete this idiotic task and leave.

And these women were the only thing standing in her way.

Absorbing attacks with her shield she flung a ball of her own energy at the commando. With a quick slide to the side the commando dodged away. Siru cringed as a crate was flung at her and shattered against her shield. The commando repeated the attack twice more, with the same results.

Using the same tactic, Siru flung a crate of her own at the commando. As the commando dodged away, Siru formed biotic energy beneath the commando's feet and raised both her arms. The ground under her target tore free and flew upwards carrying the commando with it.

In response she crashed through the bottom of the catwalk and burst through its metal gratings. Tumbling end over end, the commando landed roughly on the walkway. Siru could see her struggling to regain her feet, to continue the fight.

Not interested in obliging, Siru grabbed two large crates with her biotics and letting out a guttural scream, launched them both at the commando.

Standing just in time to see the crates, she let out a scream of her own. The two pieces of freight smashed into her. The force of the attack splintered and obliterated the boxes. As the pieces of debris rained down, the broken and bloodied body of the commando fell off the catwalk. The commando landed on the ground with a thud and did not move again.

"Remind me not to get on her bad side," Kaine mentioned as he returned his knife to its sheath.

Looking back he saw Otmar stand up nodding. In the distance, against the far wall, Kaine noticed movement. A fourth commando appeared with a very large weapon in her hands. A jet of flame and smoke shot out from it as a rocket was launched towards Otmar.

Kaine moved, wrapping his arms around Otmar creating a barrier between him and the explosive and took a deep breath just before it went off.

Instantly the shockwave picked him and Otmar up. His ears rang loudly then registered nothing. He could feel the heat from the explosion. His armor, already damaged and cracked, absorbed the worst of it, but the pain that seared his back was intense.

Lifted from his feet he was carried, along with Otmar, across the room. They tumbled together and slammed heavily into the wall. Kaine felt his right arm compressed painfully into his side as the impact knocked the breath from his lungs and his helmeted head cracked against the wall.

He landed roughly next to Otmar. Vision blurry, he could barely make out what was happening around him. Kaine tried to stand but his head was pounding, there was a visible fissure running along the front of his visor and his arm gave out. He shook his head to clear his sight but the last thing he saw was the floor rush up to him. Then nothing.

Otmar leaned down over Kaine. He could see his back literally on fire and began to pat him out. His ears were ringing terribly and a massive headache was forming.

The re-chambering time of a ballistic explosive munitions launcher is approximately four point five three seconds. Words scrawled across his visor then faded.

Without really thinking, Otmar stood and spun around to face their attacker. It was an Asari like the others but with dark purple skin. She held a rocket launcher in her hands and was indeed readying it for another attack.

Otmar held out his left arm towards her, omni-tool up and running. In his visor he saw the schematic of a Mark IV Thessar Heavy Munitions Launcher appear. A burst of electrical static allowed him to penetrate the defenses of the weapon. He followed the computer chip housing, along the circuitry that connected it to the rest of the gun. He could easily shut the weapon down but he had other plans.

He barely noticed the Asari lifting the weapon, aiming it at him.

A calmness he hadn't felt before rushed over him. He stood fast, continuing to follow the electronics. He was looking for a specific piece of software. He skipped over protocols to safety the weapon, ignored overheating it and even avoided sending an order that would lock the next projectile in place.

Leveling the weapon, the Asari aimed true, directing the weapon towards Otmar.

He continued to follow the circuits along the weapon's mass accelerators, jumping and bridging gaps in the software and shooting passed firewalls he had easily crippled. He didn't bother messing with the targeting packages or shutting off the propellant of the projectile.

The commando pulled the trigger, and smoke began to stream out of the weapon.

Just before the rocket left the weapon proper he found what he was looking for. A quick temporary software link allowed him to gain control of the warhead. Half a heartbeat later he had it.

With one command he ordered the warhead to detonate.

Another thundering boom resonated throughout the bay. The weapon shattered in the Asari's hands. Her arms were carbonized in the explosion and the shockwave threw her into a crate with devastating force.

As she landed Otmar could see her face had been burned away down to the bone, which in turn was charred from the enormous heat that had been produced. There was a massive scorch mark on the ground where she had been standing.

Breathing heavily, Otmar stood a moment, looking at what he'd done. He'd never killed anyone before, never even hurt them that he could remember. He was trembling all over and it was then he felt slight tears running down his cheeks. Blinking a few times, he used his omni-tool to increase the heat of his helmet for a fraction of a second, evaporating the moisture away.

As the ringing in his ears subsided, it was then he heard someone calling his name.

"Otmar! Get over here!" It was Siru through his com.

Turning he saw her huddled over Kaine. Running to them he arrived as she was struggling to get his smoldering armor off.

"Help me," she ordered.

He reached down and found the latches that held the two pieces of armor together. Unlocking them, he helped Siru pry what was left free. As it came away, it tore some of his shirt and skin having partially fused slivers of the armor to his back.

Kaine's head snapped up and he screamed. Siru flung the armor away and Otmar could see three large angry red gashes on his back, each about five centimeters long. They crisscrossed in the middle and left streaks of blood down his back. The edges were blackened from the heat.

"Kaine can you hear me?" Siru asked him.

Otmar pulled the front piece of his armor away and dropped it to the ground. Reaching over he pulled off Kaine's helmet. It had a large crack on the top and a wide fissure along the visor. It had absorbed the impact of hitting the wall, which would have easily shattered Kaine's skull.

Otmar was amazed he himself hadn't died. He wasn't wearing any armor at all. Kaine must have positioned them so he took the brunt of the impact. Absently he put a hand to his own visor, wondering what kind of damage would have been done to him.

Siru desperately wished she had medi-gel at the moment. Kaine's head wasn't bleeding but he had a nasty welt on his right temple. His eyes were wide open and he was blinking continuously as he looked around. But it was his back she worried about most.

The damage was massive, he was bleeding from the burns and she could almost see muscle fibers under the wounds. The fire from the explosion had nearly burned off the skin on his back.

"Otmar hold him up," she ordered him.

Otmar dropped the helmet and moved behind Kaine as she gently leaned him back into his arms. Siru quickly placed her hands on Kaine's cheeks and forced him to face her.

"Kaine, can you hear me?" She asked him, nearly shouting into his face.

In response he pointed at his ear and shook his head. Clearly he was having trouble registering sounds. He tried to look away but she forced him to remain still.

"Kaine," she mouthed slowly. "We need to leave. Can you walk?"

"Yes," he practically roared at her.

"Well at least there's no damage to his lungs," Otmar said flatly.

"Come on. We have to get out of here," she said.

Together they got him to his feet. He was a lot heavier than she thought, but between the two of them they managed. Otmar under one arm and Siru the other. Then both grabbed his belt and began leading him towards the exit.

"Wait," Kaine screamed again.

He was breathing heavily and his face was contorted, fighting what had to be considerable pain. He was sweating profusely and she didn't know if that was good or bad for a human. He looked towards her but clearly not at her. She followed his gaze and saw the dark colored coffin-like object on the ground.

"We have to take it," he said between gulps of air.

Siru looked into his eyes and he returned the gaze. He was right, they had to take it. They had just killed four commandos. She suspected they weren't very seasoned veterans by the way they fought so wildly but they were still members of the Asari military. Things were only going to get worse if they didn't have something to offer in return.

"Otmar," she said looking at him. "Find a portable loading truck to carry that. And hurry, I want off this damned station."

Otmar nodded and slowly let Kaine's arm down. She absorbed his weight with difficulty but held him up. A few quick moments later Otmar had a loading truck and used it to place the package on its surface.

A short time after they burst out of the storage area and were on the move. Siru helped Kaine stumble-run while Otmar led the way with the package on the truck, screaming for people to move.

Twenty minutes later they were running up the ramp to the *Palaven's Delight*, Otmar with the truck and Siru with Kaine. Surprisingly, she only had to help him a little as he had regained most of his composure on the way. His back still looked awful but his hearing had returned. They stumbled into the ship and she closed the airlock door behind them.

TWELVE

Otmar had the ship screaming out of port as soon as their departure was acknowledged. Meanwhile, Siru had helped Kaine over to the kitchen area and leaned him against the counter, telling him to remove what was left of his shirt.

Kaine did as he was told and gingerly removed his shirt, the tatters that were left of it anyway. As he moved, every part of his back ached and stinging pains ran up and down his spine. Every little movement caused spots to burst in his vision, each time threatening to knock him on his ass.

He also couldn't help but notice the odor. Burning flesh had a very unpleasant aroma.

"How's it going up there, Otmar?" Kaine asked, tossing his ruined shirt to the ground and taking off his gloves, adding them to the little pile. He tried to stand fully erect, stretching his back slightly. A grunt of poorly controlled pain burst forth from his lips.

"Don't do that," Siru said, returning from Otmar's room. "I hope you don't mind I raided your..." she was saying, then stopped short.

Kaine looked over, still holding himself straight up. It hurt less the longer he held it. She was staring at him, one hand holding some bandages, in the other a jar of medi-gel. He let out another grunt, shifting his weight slightly.

"Stop that," she said, moving up to him. "Otmar, I took some of your bandages and medi-gel. Is that ok?"

"Yes, that's fine." He replied.

"Everything alright?" Kaine asked, a sly smile crossing his lips.

"Don't," she said, and gently pushed his shoulder. "Turn around."

"Yes ma'am," he said turning slowly.

The wounds on his back still ached but not as much as he thought they should. That might not be such a good sign. Kaine watched Siru walk around the kitchen and grab a bottle of water, which she heated up in the small oven for a few moments.

"I have to clean the wound first," she said, retrieving the water and coming around behind him. "This will probably hurt a bit."

"That's ok, I can take..." Kaine couldn't finish his bravado as she placed a damp cloth against his wounds and scrubbed lightly. The pain shot over his entire body and he slumped lightly against the counter. He saw black spots dancing before his eyes and shook his head to clear them. "There's that pain I was missing."

"I'm sorry," Siru said gently. "But I need a clean area to apply the medi-gel."

As she continued Kaine simply nodded. His back felt as if it were on fire again. He shook from the constant pulsing of pain. Clenching his teeth he forced himself to control it. Even so, he felt a tear run unchecked down his face.

"Just another moment," she told him.

She didn't lie. Another few heartbeats and he felt the soothing cool gel as she applied it directly to his burns. The rush of relief was so good he slumped further this time and he took a deep ragged breath, letting it out shakily.

"You have a magic touch," he said almost drunkenly.

"It's all in the goop," she replied lightly.

A few minutes later and Kaine felt like a new man. Siru had applied the gel and bandaged his back. Testing himself, he stood straighter and was rewarded with no new pain. A dull ache permeated every part of him but it was nothing he couldn't handle.

Walking over to one of his duffle bags he crouched down and retrieved a clean shirt and pulled it over his head. Turning as he gently finished dressing he saw Siru staring at him, slowly tightening the cap on the medi-gel. He stood before her, eyebrows raised, suppressing a grin, but not really all that well.

"Siru," he said, snapping his fingers.

In response, she blinked and shook her head slightly. Looking down she saw the cover was on the jar and set it down. She slid a hand over her scalp then looked at him nonchalantly.

"What? I was thinking about," she began and paused. "Things."

"Right," Kaine said, smiling.

The ship banked to the right suddenly, tossing Kaine into the wall and forcing Siru to grab onto the counter to stay standing. An explosion rocked the ship and shook everything within. Some of the free standing items in the kitchen rattled and fell to the floor.

"What the hell was that?" Kaine asked.

"Kaine, get up here!" Otmar yelled.

Kaine hobbled up behind him, back flaming in pain with sudden movement. Otmar's fingers were flying over the controls of the ship. On the wall next to him two of the three screens were blank and the third flashed an angry red symbol at him over and over again. That was probably bad.

"What's the situation?"

"Fighter coming around for another shot!" Otmar roared.

"Can you get us out of here?" Siru yelled from the kitchen.

A screen to Kaine's right popped up showing gauges and readouts, almost looking like trajectories. It shifted to an exterior view showcasing the enemy fighter moving towards them again.

"We won't make the Relay in this asteroid field," Otmar yelled.

"Can you get us clear for FTL?" Kaine asked as the ship banked again.

"Yes," Otmar replied quickly.

Kaine looked at all the various readouts and consoles. Otmar had done a superb job avoiding not only the fighter but all the rocks floating around. He couldn't do it forever though, not in a cobbled together freight hauler. Not against a more agile and faster ship.

"Incoming!" Otmar yelled as he banked the ship port.

"Get us out of here Otmar," Kaine yelled. "Now!"

Fingers flying faster than ever, Otmar hit screen after screen, switching displays and rotating holographic dials, all the while attempting to dodge and evade the hostile fighter. Kaine watched as their ship screamed upwards at breakneck speeds, the field of asteroids beginning to thin out.

Two more hits registered on the back end of the ship. Siru yelled out as pipes burst around her and she dove to the ground in front of the airlock door. She curled up around herself. Kaine was about to go check on her when the fighter appeared again.

"Fighter directly behind us!" Otmar roared.

He was doing his best to dodge and bank, keeping the enemy from getting a solid lock, keeping what was left of the rocks debris between them. More shots peppered the outer hull but nothing dangerous. Not yet.

"We're clear," Otmar continued yelling. "FTL ready!"

"Do it!" Kaine commanded.

With a burst of light and a feeling of weightlessness they jumped, leaving Omega and the fighter behind.

Moments later they appeared in another system.

"Good work Otmar," Kaine told him with a pat on the shoulder.

Otmar sat panting heavily, not responding, just staring down at his controls. Deciding he was alright Kaine walked over to Siru laying on the ground. Reaching down he helped her stand. She looked a bit shaken but no worse for wear.

"You're okay," he said to her.

"Thanks, I wasn't sure," She replied sarcastically with a smile.

Kaine turned a bit too quickly and winced with the resulting flare of pain. Walking slowly back to Otmar he held onto the wall for support.

"What's the situation?" He asked.

"We're under attack!" Otmar yelled.

"Not anymore, tell me what's happened."

"Communications are offline," Otmar continued hysterically.

"Otmar," Kaine began, but was cut off.

"Relay navigation is out!" Hysteria.

"Otmar..."

"I can't do a full report but it's bad!" Voice quivering with hysteria.

"Otmar!" Kaine spun him around in the chair. "Calm down and tell me what's wrong. Slowly."

"I just did!" More hysteria.

"Indoor voice," Kaine said, holding up a finger. Then seeing Otmar suck in a large breath to scream some more he added, "In. Door. Voice."

"Right," Otmar said, taking a few calming breaths before continuing. "Coms are out. Relay Nav is offline. One engine is damaged. Siru almost died. You're bleeding. My ship is in tatters."

"So we can't call for help and we can't use the Mass Relays?" Siru asked.

"Or make a jump back to Omega?" Kaine added.

"Basically yes," Otmar answered her.

"Well at least we got that fighter off our asses," Kaine added.

Just then claxons blared all around as another ship jumped behind them. Instantly two more impacts hit the rear as the same fighter flew passed them and made a quick turn to the left, banking under the ship to come up behind them.

"You were saying," Siru commented.

Kaine felt the ship come up to power and start moving forward.

"Where is it," Kaine asked, ignoring her remark.

"Rear starboard quadrant!" Otmar answered.

"How close?" Kaine asked, yelling over the various alarm noises and pipes.

"One kilometer, closing fast!" Otmar answered.

"FTL?" Siru asked.

"Takes five minutes to recalibrate," Otmar answered.

Kaine thought quickly. Five minutes was far too long to try and out maneuver a fighter. He had no idea what ordinance it carried. If the conventional stuff didn't work they might switch to missiles. In short, if they were going to act it had to be fast.

"Otmar bank less, lure him in closer," Kaine told him.

"What!" Otmar yelled incredulously.

"God dammit Otmar do it!" Kaine yelled directly into the back of his head.

As ordered Otmar slowed his evasive maneuvers. They took a few more incidental hits as a result. Quickly though the fighter moved up, holding back any real munitions for a perfect lock. The distance closed to less than half a kilometer in a few seconds. This guy was coming in fast.

Kaine waited. He had to keep calm and lure the enemy in. Their ship was unarmed but that didn't mean it was defenseless. At a quarter kilometer he loosed the trap.

"Cut all engines, thrusters full reverse!" Kaine shouted his order above the noise, the combat, everything.

Otmar did as he was told; cutting all power, firing every thruster for reverse effect. The ship came to a sudden stop. In response the fighter, too close to bank and too fast to maneuver, was locked into its trajectory. There was an instant of calm before everything turned to shit.

The fighter slammed into the rear of the *Palaven's Delight*.

Kaine and Otmar were thrust forward violently. Immediately claxons began to wail again, more pipes burst. The kitchen area literally exploded as anything not secured crashed to the floor, into the ceiling, and flew in every other direction.

Kaine watched on the last functioning screen a rearview image of the fight that just collided with them continue moving. Carried by the pilot's last desperate attempt to pull to starboard the back end continued moving. Its trajectory was easy to anticipate.

"Oh shit," Kaine breathed.

The resulting collision rattled the entire ship. Kaine flailed into the side panel. He smashed out the last functional screen on the wall and fell to the ground. Blood poured down his face from a wound on his forehead. Wiping it away he saw Otmar rattled in his chair as anything left was torn free and went flying around the cabin.

Pipes, bolts, spare parts, all became more like projectiles fired from a cannon. They hit everyone. All three were peppered with bits of debris of the ship. Siru yelled out as a piece of pipe hit her in the back and she fell to the ground. Otmar put his hands over his helmet as the screens that were left functioning exploded in a spray of sparks all around him.

The fighter, momentum still carrying it, tore away from the freighter at high speed. As it went, part of the starboard hull that made one wall of Otmar's bed chamber tore free. With a rush, the entire atmosphere in the ship began pouring out.

Bits and pieces that had settled after the collisions became weapons again, flying out the giant hole in the side of the ship. The large view screen was ripped free and flew out into space. Their bags were picked up and flung off into nothingness. The escaping air was dragging anything not nailed down out into space with it.

Including Siru.

Kaine watched in horror as she slid along the ground towards the vacuum. She tried desperately to clutch onto anything. At the last instant she hooked her fingers over one of the few pipes still secured. But her grip was not true and quickly began to slip.

Kaine was up. He jumped the distance between them in one burst of adrenaline fueled speed. He grabbed her wrist just as she let go. Together they began to fall out of the ship into space. Kaine caught the edges of the door frame with his boots. Pushing with all his might he spun and flung her to the side between two larger pipes.

Following quickly he landed in front of her. One arm wrapped around each pipe, securing himself and her in place. The ship was venting its atmosphere quickly and violently. He struggled to hold on, but his strength was waning from his various wounds along with the loss of oxygen to vacuum.

"Do something Otmar!" Kaine screamed at the top of his lungs.

Otmar began furiously tapping on what was left of his controls. Belted into his seat he was only mildly affected by the rush of lost air pressure. After what felt like an eternity the venting stopped.

Kaine took a few deep breaths and began to feel his strength returning. He seemed to be shaking from the exertion and fear of the moment. No, not him. He looked down and saw Siru had her head on his chest and both arms wrapped around his neck. Her hands were clutching his shirt in bunches and she was shaking so violently he thought the ship was under attack again.

He calmly stepped away from the pipes, dragging her with him and put his arms around her. She clutched tighter to him but slowly her shaking subsided. Though she didn't let go he could feel her body relax.

"Are you alright?" Otmar yelled. After a moment when no answer came he yelled again this time a bit more anxiously. "Kaine! Siru! Are you alright?"

"Yeah Otmar," Kaine replied. "We're okay."

"Good, I need you up here," Otmar said, and Kaine could practically hear the relief.

Slowly Kaine lowered Siru to the floor. It was awkward because she still hadn't let go. As he set her down he moved his hands over her wrists and gently pulled them away. Finally she looked up at him. The terror in her eyes was unmistakable.

Kaine placed her hands together and put his around them. He squeezed them once then moved his right hand to her face. He brushed away a tear that had trickled down her cheek. He'd seen shock before and knew he had to stop her from accelerating into the deeper stages or she might die.

"Siru, look at me. You're okay." He told her, looking directly into her eyes. Had she blinked in the last minute? He couldn't remember. "I need to go help Otmar."

Siru was clearly not actually seeing him. She was looking through and past him. She began to tremble again. Her breathing quickened. Yanking her hands away she began to pull on the collar of her jacket, frantically trying to pull it open.

Kaine moved her hands aside and gripped the collar in both hands. With a few short rips he tore it open and then ripped it further down her chest allowing her to breathe unencumbered. She took a few long, ragged breathes, slowly regaining her composure. Suddenly her eyes widened and she slapped him.

"Not," she said taking one last long breath. After a moment she finished her thought. "Not on the first date."

"You're okay," he said to her after letting out a short laugh.

Kaine stood and began to walk over to Otmar, then stopped. He looked out the door he and Siru almost tumbled through. He could see the fighter tumbling off into the distance. Otmar's room was completely lost, only a large hole into space remained. Turning, he approached their pilot.

"Good work on the barrier," Kaine asked as he arrived. "What's the sitrep?"

"I don't know what that means," Otmar replied quickly with renewed hysteria.

Turning the seat to face him, Kaine held a finger up glaring into Otmar's visor. It took him a few deep breaths and a few mumblings to himself but he calmed down again.

"We're in more trouble now." He said matter-of-factly. "We've lost one engine, the starboard side of the ship is in ruins, and we're leaking fuel and atmosphere all over. Micro and macro hull breaches reporting everywhere."

Otmar was beginning to panic again, ignoring Kaine's latest finger of calm. He'd held up well under fire but now the gravity of the situation was upon him. The ship was in a bad way and things looked grim. None of them had ever been through something like this.

"Otmar," Kaine took the chair by its armrests and leaned closer. "Listen to me, we need you calm. Take a deep breath and tell me what our options are."

"You're still bleeding, Kaine," Otmar said, looking up at him.

"I'm fine. Just tell me what our options are," He said again.

"I'm not sure, the damage is extensive," Otmar began to reply in rapid succession. Kaine leaned even closer, his face less than a centimeter from Otmar's visor.

"Deep. Breath," he said slowly and calmly with heavy emphasis on each word.

Otmar did as he was told. He took a long shuddering breath and let it out slowly. When he began again it was in a more measured tone.

"We need to land," Otmar said. "That barrier won't hold forever and we've lost a lot of atmosphere. Power is low and the mass accelerators are shot so no more FTL jumps. Thrusters are off almost everywhere so the landing, if we find somewhere, will be tricky."

"Ok, where?" Kaine asked.

Otmar turned around and began to tap on his console again. Kaine turned to look at Siru. She had her knees up to her chest and her arms wrapped around them. But she didn't seem to be shaking and she looked more tired than anything. Turning back he saw Otmar studying some star charts on the last functioning screen.

"Anything?" Kaine asked him.

"Only planet in range is Eingana." Otmar replied. "It's hot, covered in jungle. It has travel advisories due to indigenous and highly energetic life. Atmospheric pressure is a little under the norm but tolerable. Looks like surface temp is in the mid-thirties centigrade."

"A hot, jungle covered, monster infested planet, which no one wants to go to?" Kaine looked at Otmar who turned to stare up at him. "Sounds like Earth."

Otmar let out a nervous laugh. Kaine could see his breathing was accelerating again. Staving off panic in this Quarian was turning into a full time job.

"Listen Otmar," Kaine continued in the same calm tone he'd been using. "We just need to land. Once we're on the ground we'll figure out our next move."

Otmar didn't respond, just began to wring his hands together faster and faster. Kaine could see his entire body beginning to shake.

"Otmar!" Kaine roared, and spun the chair around again. "One battle at a time, okay?"

"One battle at a time," Otmar echoed after a few moments. "We'll need to prep then. It's going to get uncomfortable."

"How long till we get there?" Kaine asked.

"About twenty minutes or so," he answered. "What's left of our atmosphere should hold till then. Maybe."

Kaine thought about that. They were heading to an uninhabited jungle world full of whatever "energetic wildlife" meant. All in a broken freighter. They were low on any kind of supplies. He had no idea if they had any other weapons left besides his pistol and to top it all off their oxygen might run out before they landed.

"Right," Kaine said finally. "Here's the plan."

Siru sat huddled between the two pipes, arms wrapped around her knees. All she could think about was the vast emptiness of space. She could feel nothing but the pull of vacuum, the overwhelming rush of lost atmosphere. When her fingers had begun to slip off the pipe, she had known death was close.

Then her grip failed completely and she began to fall. She'd fallen before, from trees as a child, jumped from rocks into the warm seas of the D'fto Oceans on Thessia. She'd even fainted once from exhaustion. But this, this was far, far worse.

As she fell, or more accurately flew, towards the void, she felt as if something was being left undone. No, something left unsaid. She had closed her eyes, screamed out, and felt tears stream down her cheeks. Her father had once said death washed over you like a warm blanket. But all she felt was the cold and the emptiness. No blanket would envelope her, only the embrace of absolute zero.

She almost felt dead when something grabbed her wrist. With a jolt she'd looked to see Kaine holding her. She had felt him tug her away from the grip of death, his strength more than that of the uncaring void.

Siru sat against the wall now, arms wrapped around her shins, legs pulled tightly to her chest. She felt herself trembling again. She pulled as hard as she could on her legs, trying to drown out the images.

She failed.

Again, she was against the wall but standing. The rush of lost pressure still pulling her towards space. But this time Kaine was there. He was between her and the emptiness that sought to end her.

She'd wrapped her arms around his neck, grabbed fistfuls of his shirt. She tried to pull herself directly into him. He was screaming something. She couldn't understand the words. All she heard was the beating of his heart, strong and steady. Unlike hers that was racing so fast she thought it might have burst from her chest.

That outside force pulling at her stopped suddenly. She was no longer being dragged toward death. No longer pulled toward him. She felt herself being moved away from the wall, arms wrapping around her.

Siru opened eyes she hadn't realized she'd closed. Her hands were still tightly wrapped around her legs but she had felt him there instead. At least for a moment. Then that sensation returned, something left unsaid. Something she desperately wanted to say or do. But she couldn't place what it was.

Her breathing quickened again. Over four hundred years of life had almost been snuffed out in an instant. All her hopes and dreams gone. She once had visions of herself dying a Matriarch, leaving behind loving children and grandchildren, not screaming into the dark vacuum, dying alone, and being forgotten.

Tears streamed down her face unbidden and barely noticed. In the instant her fingers lost their grip she had seen that vision, clear as day. But the happy faces of her daughters faded. Her

granddaughters washed out with their mothers. She herself, aged and regal, wise and stoic before many a trying time had disappeared with them. She saw instead her own mother, weeping alone, for a daughter she'd never see again.

Sobs broke free. The dreams she'd had since childhood were gone. She couldn't get them back. She tried but they were elusive, just out of reach, hidden from her. She was alive, but the vision of what she'd wanted her life to be like was dead. As hard as she searched, she couldn't find it. She sobbed harder, closing her eyes and leaning her head down.

Arms around her, strong arms, Kaine's arms. They enveloped her like before, when the vacuum tried to kill her. She moved her arms from her legs and wrapped them around him, hands clutching desperately to his shirt yet again. Tears streamed stronger this time. She didn't even try to control herself. Pressing her face into his chest she heard the heartbeat again. Strong, steady and calm.

She couldn't say how long she'd stayed there. Minutes? Hours? The whole while he held her close and whispered soothing nonsense to her. Slowly, the tears stopped and the sobs faded. She gave herself a few moments, taking ragged breaths to steady herself before leaning away from him.

She looked up into his eyes and the same sensation, the same insane idea of something left undone or unsaid hit her. She felt his hands gently wipe away her tears. He never let his gaze falter. She took another shuddering breath as she realized what she felt she'd almost failed to say.

"Kaine," Siru began quietly, barely above a whisper.

"It's alright, you're fine now." He said to her, again with that soothing tone.

"Kaine," Siru began again, placing her hand on his.

She tried to speak but her voice faltered. Siru knew the words. They materialized in her mind as the two sat there together. But she couldn't make her mouth form them, couldn't make her voice produce them. At this moment, she just couldn't say it.

"How do you do it?" she asked instead.

"Do what?" Kaine asked in reply.

"Just keep going. As if all this is normal."

"Someone has to," he said quietly.

She was about to say something more when Otmar appeared. He was fidgeting as usual, though he seemed more shaken up than she was.

"Are you okay Siru?" He asked, concern echoed in his voice.

"Yeah," Siru answered, nodding.

She began to stand and Kaine helped her up. She took a few deep breaths then looked around. The ship looked terrible. Pipes, furniture, pots and pans; everything not bolted down and a few things that had been, were gone.

Otmar's pilot area was in no better shape. All the screens were cracked, shattered or just completely missing. About the only thing still functioning were his chair and the couch.

"Quite a mess we made of the place," Siru said.

"Well it's not a party till something gets broken," Kaine replied, looking around.

Siru let out a nervous sigh. She looked at Kaine and saw worry on his face. She glanced at Otmar and could tell something was bothering him.

"What's going on?" Siru asked.

"We need to get ready, only another ten minutes," Otmar told Kaine.

"Right, make sure the engine room is secure." Kaine replied to him.

Siru watched Otmar walk away and disappear into the engine compartment. Looking back she saw Kaine watching her. His face suggested he had more bad news.

"What?" She asked him.

"Siru, there's really no easy way to say this," he began.

"So just say it," she interjected.

"We're gonna crash the ship," Kaine said flatly.

THIRTEEN

"What?" Otmar heard Siru exclaim from the main cabin.

This is not a sound strategy. The words scrawled across his visor and faded.

"Oh you think I want to slam my ship into some unknown alien world?" Otmar asked his

VI.

Repairs to the FTL drive can be accomplished in vacuum.

"Yes but that would take hours," Otmar replied.

He had walked out of the main cabin into the engine compartment. It was fully half the length of the entire ship. Sitting in the center, surrounded by locked cages of surplus parts, was his drive core.

It looked relatively undamaged. The impact of the fighter had been absorbed by the exterior engines and hull. Most of the cages were still intact. Only a few popped open during the chaos.

Otmar walked passed boxes of bolts and screws, here bins of piping and soldering supplies, there electronics and spare screens. He even had another vid screen lying in wait. He reached the back of the core, the bluish white light dimmer than before. Most of the power had been lost during the attack. A quick scan showed eight percent power remaining, just enough to get them to the planet.

Standard enviro-suits can replenish oxygen for up to seven hours. Your upgrades can push that significantly farther.

"True."

But you won't utilize this to accomplish repairs in space.

"I'm not letting them suffocate so I can save this damn ship," Otmar said with conviction.

Chances of successfully repairing the ship after such a landing approach zero.

"One battle at a time," Otmar said to himself.

As Otmar was leaving he saw the package they'd picked up on Omega. Even after all the rattling around it had to have done there was still no scratch on it. That amalgam was very impressive. He noticed lights flickering on the side, about halfway from either end. He couldn't understand the language, but he knew readouts when he saw them.

It was a half circle, with dashed spaces evenly distributed radiating from the middle of the bottom line towards the outer arc. Like a skycar speedometer. Only a small sliver of space was highlighted from the leftmost side. Whatever this readout was for, he bet it was indicating it had almost run out.

"We good here?" Kaine said, and Otmar jumped.

"Yes," he answered, looking up at him. "Only about eight percent power left. Landing gear is out."

"Yeah we figured that. Will it be enough power?"

"Yes."

Kaine eyed the package and Otmar followed his gaze. This thing was very strange. It was nigh invulnerable, even taking a rocket blast without a scratch. Whatever was in it had to be valuable.

"Something tells me we won't like what's in there," Kaine said quietly.

"Well, only one way to find out." Otmar turned to look at him and Kaine gazed back.

"This is insane Kaine!" Siru yelled as he and Otmar exited the engine compartment.

"It's gonna be fine. Otmar and I have it all figured out," Kaine said to her.

"I changed my mind, I want out." Siru said to him.

"Why?" Kaine asked, looking over her.

She had multiple ropes, tow cables, and lines securing her between the two pipes. Earlier she had agreed to be strapped in, but only after he had assured her these two pipes were part of the ships overall superstructure.

"The ship will have to literally fly apart for you to come loose," he had told her.

"What are the chances of that happening?" She had asked.

"Twenty," he said dragging the last syllable. "Well maybe seventy or ninety per, you know what, it doesn't matter. You'll be fine."

"That's not reassuring in the least!" She had screamed at him as he went to check on Otmar in the engine compartment.

"Otmar, get me out of this right now!" She yelled at him as he walked by.

"Will do, but first I have to crash my ship," he replied flatly.

Kaine watched her stare cannon blasts into Otmar's back then level her gaze at him. It was remarkable how quickly her emotions could switch. One second she was a quivering mess in his arms and the next she was a rage-monster ready to destroy everything.

"You got it better than me sister," Kaine said, holding his hands up and walking over to Otmar.

"How's it going?" he asked Otmar, coming up behind him.

"All set. Remember the sequence?" He asked in return.

"Yep, easy as baking a cake."

"That's not actually easy at all," Otmar said turning to look up at him.

Kaine just smiled and patted him on the shoulder. Otmar looked like he was about to say something but Kaine just shook his head and gestured with his thumb for Otmar to vacate his seat.

"Outta the way, flyboy," Kaine said, taking his seat as Otmar moved. "Though, you should know this is my first time flying a ship of any kind. I might scratch the paint."

He belted himself in and pulled the harness over his head and secured it around his chest. It was a little tighter than he would prefer, but comfort wasn't the purpose he reminded himself. He just hoped the damned thing hold.

"Kaine," Otmar began.

"Beat it Otmar, I got this." Kaine didn't bother looking back, but he heard Otmar walk away.

Kaine stared down at the control panel, what was left of it anyway. He knew exactly what he had to do. A few simple adjustments in flight and they'd land on the ground in the middle of a mostly open field.

He saw the planet Eingana before him. Green like a pool ball with a darker green ragged band along the equator. Everything Otmar had discovered about the planet was out of date by at least ten years. With the engines as they were this plan, to crash land, ranked as one of the dumbest things Kaine had ever attempted.

"Alright guys, we're hitting atmosphere in a moment," Kaine said after putting on a headset so the two of them could communicate. "Please put your tray tables and seat back in their full, upright, and locked positions."

"I'm in a closet Kaine, I don't have a seat." Otmar commented from the engine compartment.

Kaine tried to stifle a laugh but he couldn't. It was a completely truthful statement but it still felt hilarious to him. Maybe he was just letting off some of his nervous energy but he didn't care.

Quickly he heard Siru laughing with him and even Otmar joined in after a moment. The three continued to giggle until the first bout of turbulence silenced them.

"Hang tight. We'll be down in a few minutes," Kaine told them.

The first big drop hit and he was pulled up away from his seat. The harness held him but he felt his stomach rise up and settle back quickly. Another jolt and Siru let out a yelp of surprise.

They had entered the upper atmosphere with a jumble and a roll. The ship shuddered left and right. They floated on rolling currents of air, more like a boat caught in a violent hurricane. Each time he felt them begin to twist to one side, he hit the button to fire the thrusters on the opposite, whatever ones still worked.

Another hard bump sent him against his harness. He heard Siru yell out and a curse came over the headset from Otmar. A steady shuddering began as they fell further and faster towards the planet's surface. He felt the chair rattle against his back, causing the pain from his burns to flare again.

Suddenly they broke through cloud cover. Below him he could see a large expanse of jungle. It was an ocean of greens of varying hues, trees of all sizes creating rolling hills. What he did not see was a field.

"Oh shit," Kaine cursed.

"What?" Siru and Otmar yelled together.

"No field. We're gonna hit the jungle," Kaine answered trying to sound calm.

He could hear Otmar speaking quickly in a language he didn't understand. Siru was speaking about Athame. He knew prayers when heard them. He would add his own but had no time.

He was hitting the thrusters quicker and quicker as the ship's movement kept trying to make them spin out of control. Meanwhile the ground was rushing up. The trees looked to be reaching up, trying to snare the ship in their branches. No more than a few hundred meters from the surface he hit every button, firing whatever landing thruster still functioned to slow them. In response the ship leveled out, just as Otmar had said.

He felt his body pressed into the pilot's chair as the ship slowed quickly. His back slammed into the seat and the pain made stars dance in his eyes. Having done his part, he wrapped his fingers around the armrests. Squeezing his eyes shut he waited for the impact.

It took only a fraction of a second to arrive.

Kaine's eyes flared open as he was thrust forward into his harness. Something had struck the back of the ship, tipping it forward. He was staring through the forward viewport at the jungle as it

screamed upwards. Branches, leaves and whole trunks collided and crashed against it, rattling the ship with each impact.

Gripping the arms tighter, he was pressed again to his left as the ship began to tumble from another impact on the starboard hull. He could hear scrapping and banging as it plummeted through the trees.

Another strike and he was hanging by his harness in the seat. Siru cried out from behind him. The sounds of breaking timber and cracking hull plates echoed everywhere.

He began to slide to his right as the ship continued its somersault. Blood rushed to his brain and spots formed before his eyes. Another jolt and the ship became upright, though slightly tilted forward again.

He saw the ground now, rushing up at him. There was only dirt, rocks and roots before him, the unforgiving surface of a planet. Their ship hadn't lost nearly as much momentum as Otmar had thought it would. Kaine tried to close his eyes again, but couldn't. Some morbid bit of human curiosity made him look, made him want to see this.

Another shaking impact and they evened out just before meeting the ground.

The ship hit with a jarring crash that nearly yanked him from the chair, and the chair from its mountings. Instantly he was thrown against the harness, harder than ever. He felt his shoulders absorb the impact as he was forced forward then yanked back. His wounds flared with renewed pain.

The ship slid quickly, kicking up dirt and rocks, and slicing through trees. In front of him Kaine could see the trunk of a massive tree approaching. His eyes grew wider. Hands gripped harder. He braced himself.

The front viewport shattered inward as the two met. Ship versus tree, it being bigger around than anything he'd ever seen. The glass peppered his face and he threw his hands up to protect it. Banks of screens, readouts long since shattered, exploded around him. Whatever was left was flying around the cockpit, hitting his head and shoulders with bits of plastic, screws, and bolts.

The battle between the momentum of the ship and the strength of the stationary tree nearly crushed the nose of the ship into him. Opening his eyes for a split second rewarded him with the view of the front panel disintegrating before his eyes. Bits and pieces splintered around him, barely missing his head, the largest part flipping up and over him, landing with a crash somewhere behind.

Siru watched the pilot's control panel flying past her. Strapped in between the two pipes she was being jarred and shaken. The ship had run head first into something huge. She was lifted off her feet again as they tilted upwards.

The kitchen counter was torn free of its mountings, smashing the pipe next to her. It flipped end over end to land in the airlock doorway. The heater and cooler followed, exploding from impacts against much harder surfaces.

From the hole next to her that led into the ruined remains of Otmar's room, tree branches, leaves, and other debris fluttered in and out. She yelled out for the hundredth time as bits of hull flew around her.

The ship began spinning now, its momentum carrying it away. She was pressed again into the ship. Her hands felt as if they were part of the pipes, knuckles pale with the exertion of holding onto them.

The hull to her right imploded spectacularly. The trunk of another tree appeared in the doorway, bark splintering and interior surfaces snapping free. A sharp pain cut through her fear as something hit the back of her head. The pipe she was strapped to buckled and she could feel herself pressed into its twin.

Siru heard the grinding of metal against wood and felt the pressure of being squeezed between the two pipes. The ship continued to tumble as everything suddenly went black.

Otmar was screaming. Being stuffed into a utility closet just barely bigger than him evolved from a merely bad idea into a death sentence. The ship was crashing and slamming into everything. He was being knocked into the front, back and sides of the closet with the force of a Batarian's punches.

It was also completely dark. He couldn't see anything at all, not that there would have been much to see besides the inside of the door. He could hear his ship cracking and snapping. The cages of spare parts must have given way from the sounds of multiple objects falling and flying around.

Those sounds didn't bother him as much as the intense and resounding impacts of the package. He heard it careening everywhere in the engine compartment, slamming into walls, storage cages, and the drive core itself.

Damage to the drive core is inadvisable. Even at low power, a breach could cause a chain reaction and detonation of remaining energy. The words crawled over his visor, the only thing in the world he could see.

“Not helping!” Otmar yelled at the top of his lungs.

Suddenly he was compressed against the back wall. Then he slid against the right. The front and left followed in rapid succession as he was pinned against the wall. The ship was spinning.

The g-forces at work began to crush the air from his lungs. He could feel himself being pressed ever harder into the wall of the closet. Grunting in pain, he tried to breathe but found it difficult. Otmar was being crushed to death.

Abruptly everything stopped. He was thrust into the door which burst inwards suddenly in return. Thrown backwards, even only a few millimeters, made his head whack the back wall. His helmet absorbed the worst of it, but almost instantly a headache formed.

Otmar’s breathing was rapid and ragged. He could barely move, the door almost resting on his chest. After a few tense moments he realized the ship had stopped moving.

Leaning forward, he tried to put pressure on the door. Being unable to use his hands made it futile. He couldn’t get the right leverage to force it open. He was trapped.

“Kaine!” Otmar screamed with all his might.

Ethan's eyes flew open and he stared up at the ceiling. Its beige, unremarkable color staring back. He listened for any sounds but heard nothing. Slowly he sat up.

He looked around his small bedroom for short a count of heartbeats before he remembered what day it was: Christmas Day. The realization and excitement turned his stomach into a bowl of angry bees. He could feel a wide grin spread across his face with the anticipation of all the presents and fun that he was about to have.

Whipping his sheets and blanket off himself he spun his feet to the edge and hopped the short distance to the ground. Running, the door barely having time to open before he flew through it. Sliding across the floor on socks he'd forgotten to remove before going to sleep, he dashed down the hall and stopped in the doorway to the living room.

Before him was the large family room with a couch, comfortable chair, end tables and a few other things he didn't care much about right then. The only thing that mattered was the tree: lights and ornaments, tinsels and stars all glowing gloriously from the VI pod in the corner of the room. In the predawn morning the entire space was filled with greens and reds and golds. An artificial sent

of tree hit him as he walked to within a few feet of it. But the tree was not what interested him it was lay before it: gifts.

All sizes and shapes, brightly colored with mismatched paper and bows. Tags hung from them with different names. Some his and his sister's, some, much fewer indeed, were his mother and father's. The grin returned as he spun again and raced back up the hall. This time he passed his door and went to the next.

"Lily?" He asked with a light tap on her door. It slid open silently and laying in bed, arms and legs unmoved from when he'd helped his mother place there the night before was his sister.

"Lily." He said again, a little louder but not too much. He didn't want to scare her.

Slowly her eyes began to open and look around the room until she saw him. He watched he suck in a big breath as her eyes went wide.

He shushed her quickly, finger to his lips which he quickly removed.

"He came Lily!" Ethan said quietly to her as he moved to the side of her bed.

"Santa?" She asked, her excitement level quickly matching and exceeding his own.

"Yep!" And quickly shushed her again as he say her readying a big breath. "Wanna go see?" She nodded hugely, her arms rising ever so slightly off the bed. "Couch or chair?"

"Couch?" She asked. He knew what she meant. She wanted to go on the couch near the tree but wanted to make sure it was okay as he would have to carry her.

"You got it." He said simply.

Lily was two years older than himself but he was easily twice her size. He'd carried her before, much as his father and mother would do when the chair was unnecessary or too bulky. Lifting her stiff arms so they wouldn't get squeezed between them and cradling under her knees he scooped her up. Turning, slower than before, he walked deliberately out her door and down the hall.

Ethan took his time, his sister scared easily when she wasn't in her bed or chair and didn't want her to worry. As they moved down the hall closer to living room he told to close her eyes and she obliged. He inched into the room and reminded to keep her eyes closed as she started an almost inaudible giggle.

Gently he set her down in the corner of the couch and placed a fluffy pillow under her arms to help hold her up. Then knelt beside her, accusing her of peaking to which she giggled again. The smile on her face was replaced with concentration, as if she were trying to look through her eyelids to all the presents.

"Etan?" She asked when he'd been quiet too long.

“Okay, open em up!” He whisper-yelled.

Her eyes flew open like a shot from a cannon. The concentration gone replaced by pure shock. Eyes as wide as rover tires and a grin too much formed quickly.

“I think they're all mine,” he teased.

“No!” She said with a giggle.

“Should we open em or wait?” He asked rubbing his chin as he'd seen his father do when asking important questions.

“Wait,” she replied seriously. His sister did not like breaking rules and the one rule on Christmas, other than fun, was to wait for everyone to open presents.

“Okay okay sheesh,” he said in mock dismay. “What should we do then?”

“Chocat?” She said looking at him expectantly.

“Good call sis, hot chocolate coming up.” He said hopping to his feet and racing to the kitchen to make it.

Kaine jolted awake. Eyes wide. Memories of Christmas day fading quickly. It took him a number of heartbeats to focus on his surroundings and to remember where he was.

He was definitely not at home.

He vaguely recalled piloting Otmar's ship towards a planet, bursting through cloud cover at high speeds, watching a jungle planet racing up to them. The last thing he remembered was a giant tree charging the ship.

Craning his neck to get a look outside, he felt the tug of his headset wire. It apparently had come free and wrapped around his neck. He ignored the cord as he continued his survey. He was amazed to see the jungle all around him: to his left and right were the remains of trees, above him broken branches hung here and there and dirt was piled up under his feet. Trunks were leaned against the hull.

He saw the nose of the ship completely buckled, turned up, around and behind him, smashed to pieces. The control panel was gone. The screens were gone. The walls that held the screens were gone. He and the chair were all that remained of the *Palaven's Delight* cockpit.

Blinking a few times in the sunlight that filtered down to him, he saw a long stretch of destruction ahead of him. The ship must have spun to a stop, facing where it had slid and crashed through the jungle.

Kaine was shocked to be alive. He ached everywhere and his back was on fire. He tested his arms and legs, moving them about as best he could in the chair. They reported no serious pains, nor breaks or injuries.

Reaching down with his finger, Kaine hit a button just under the arm rest. With a jolt, the pilot seat slowly slid backwards. It stopped, then began to swivel to the right. After about a minute the seat was facing the rear of the ship.

"I don't think Otmar can fix this," he said to himself.

In the middle of the ship was a tree. It looked as if it slid through the hull, peeling it away as it moved to where it now stood. The ship was bent around its dark outer trunk. He could look up through the ceiling into the rest of the dense jungle from the hole it created.

Unbuckling, he stood, shakily at first, able to stand fully as the roof above him was swept backwards on itself. Kaine couldn't believe the damage. Catastrophic wouldn't even scratch the surface.

The airlock door had been knocked free and was resting on top of the kitchen counter. The cooler that housed their food had hit the wall with such force that it was impaled where the vidscreen had been. The heater was totally gone. It looked like the kitchen had been hit with a missile.

It was then that Kaine remembered Siru was belted in near there. Rushing forward he dodged around the tree and saw her slumped in her straps. The pipe on her right had broken free and bent in towards her.

He reached her in a heartbeat. Placing his hands on her cheeks he gently turned her head, looking for any wounds. She had a nasty bump on her right temple, but that was less worrisome than the blood that ran down the back of her head. He gently turned her face to the side to get a better look.

Her neck and shoulder were covered in purplish blood. Looking her over, he saw the cause quickly: one of her scalp crests, the one nearest the left side of her head, was torn off at the tip. She had lost about a good couple of centimeters.

"Ouch," Kaine said to himself.

Siru began to groan then, moving her head slowly and opening her eyes. She looked around unfocused at first but quickly got her bearings. After a moment her face contorted in pain and she reached up to touch the back of her head.

"It's okay, you're okay," he said reassuringly, grabbing and holding her hand.

"What happened? My head hurts like hell," she said, closing her eyes momentarily.

"One of your crests was cut off," Kaine said, not really knowing how to ease into something like that.

"What?" Siru yelled eyes wide with fear.

Instantly her hand went to the back of her head. He could see her face register the pain as she touched the damaged end. Taking a deep breath she began to awkwardly remove the straps that held her in place. Kaine helped her and she was free in mere moments.

Shoving him aside she walked forward, nearly knocking into the tree, stopping short. Hands held up in surprise she slowly turned and looked around. When she faced Kaine her eyes were wide with amazement.

"Goddess Kaine," she said. "How did we survive this?"

"Someone was watching out for us," he replied, walking over to her and pointing at her damaged head. "Considering what the ship went through, you're lucky that's all you lost."

Siru looked angry again but closed her eyes. Her lips moved silently as if she were whispering a prayer to herself. Taking a long deep breath she let it out slowly and evenly.

"Next time," she said opening her eyes and looking at him. "Let Otmar land."

Kaine snorted derisively. Suddenly his back was on fire with renewed pain. Closing his eyes he, taking a few deep breaths, he let the burning sensation fade from his mind with last big deep breath.

As he let it out a thought formed in his mind but didn't fully materialize. Rubbing his head he had the feeling that he was missing something. He couldn't figure out what though. He was having difficulty focusing.

He looked himself up and down but didn't notice anything major and nothing really new to worry about. He got a good look at Siru who looked back at him quizzically. Aside from a few bruises and her scalp damage she was in good shape. What was he missing?

"What?" Siru asked.

He could only shrug in reply. It was then that he heard a noise from his headset as it swung around his neck. Picking it up, he unwound it from his throat and put it on.

“*KAINE!*” His name came screeching out of the speaker.

“Oh shit, Otmar,” He said, dashing towards the engine compartment.

Kaine nearly fell over the package as he ran. The bottommost edge was just in the doorway as the rest leaned against the closet where Otmar hid. It looked like it had bent the door inwards.

“Otmar, can you hear me?” He asked into his mic.

Looking down, he saw that a piece of its hardware was broken and missing. He wedged himself forward, between the now dead drive core and the box.

“Otmar! Can you hear me?” He yelled at the door.

“Keelah yes!” Came Otmar’s reply.

“Are you alright?” He yelled again.

“I think so. I don’t feel anything broken and my suit seals are secure.” There came a pause then a slightly manic laugh. “Yes, I’m fine actually.”

Kaine let out a relieved sigh and saw Siru do the same. Repositioning himself, he got a shoulder under the box and with a grunt of effort he pushed it free just enough to let it fall. It made a resounding thud as it hit the floor. He spent a few moments examining the door it had just been leaning against.

“The door is bent in and I don’t think it will open on its own.” Kaine reported. “Do you have a prybar?”

“Yes, against the starboard wall, third cage up.” Otmar answered.

As Siru moved to the back of the engine compartment in search of the prybar Kaine stood and checked the door closely. It was bent inwards, but not very far. There was a small crevice from where the door popped free. It looked just big enough for a prybar head to fit into.

“Otmar?” Kaine asked.

“Still here,” Otmar replied.

“Can you wedge yourself to the left?” Kaine said, smiling to himself. “I’m going to have to force the door free.”

He heard Otmar grunt and slide towards the crevice. If he squinted he could just barely make out Otmar’s enviro-suit.

“On second thought,” Kaine said as Siru returned and handed him a meter long piece of metal with a flat angled head at one end. “Slide to your right instead.”

Kaine heard another grunt and Otmar moved out of sight.

“Ok, this will be loud.” Kaine said.

“Don’t hit me,” Otmar warned.

Kaine hefted the prybar and with all his might slammed it into the crevice. He hit true and heard Otmar give a squeak at the impact. Kaine worked the metal into the hole and began to move it back and forth. It took nearly ten minutes but he finally had the door peeled back enough for Otmar to get free.

He and Siru helped Otmar squeeze out of the new hole he’d made. Kaine looked him over and didn’t notice any blood. He was moving around easily. Otmar dusted himself off slightly as he got his balance.

“How’s it going?” Kaine asked, breathing heavily and leaning against the prybar.

“Better when I couldn’t see anything,” Otmar said.

"Well on the bright side, the inner airlock door finally closed," Kaine said with smile.

"I tried to fix that for months," Otmar replied, looking around. "Who knew all I needed to do was crash-land somewhere."

Kaine followed his gaze. The engine room was in shambles. Every supply cage was open, spare parts and tools littered the floor. Some of the sharper components were sliced into the walls. He could see dents all over the floor and ceiling, like something heavy and massive had been bouncing around. A coffin like box for example.

Kneeling down, Kaine decided to check on their package. It had no scrapes in its outer surface at all, no cracks or breaches. It looked completely intact.

“Was this thing bouncing around in here?” He asked.

“I think so. At least that’s what it sounded like,” Otmar answered him.

“Hardly any damage,” he added.

“Still has power,” Siru said, crouching down opposite Kaine. “Not a lot though.”

“Made of some tough stuff,” he said, standing up.

“Tougher than starship hull plating,” Otmar added, pointing up.

Kaine looked where he was pointing. In the ceiling was an impressive dent that would easily match one end of the box. He looked down at it then back up at Otmar.

“What the fuck is in this thing?” He asked in disbelief.

“Should we open it or wait?” Siru asked.

They all looked at each other. The ship was in ruins and had taken an incredible amount of damage, but none of them were seriously hurt. They had a few bumps and bruises and they were certainly shaken, but in all other regards they were fine.

Kaine didn't really feel like pressing their luck right now. It would be better to hold off until they had an idea of what their situation was like. He absently rubbed his chin, thinking over their options.

"Wait. First thing is salvaging any supplies," He told them. "Then inventory our weapons. Otmar, try to find something about the surrounding area. We need to know what's out there."

Otmar nodded and firing up his omni-tool walked out of the engine compartment.

"Siru, gather any medical supplies or food. We might be here awhile." He told her and she followed Otmar out.

Kaine looked passed them, out the doorway and through what used to be the cockpit of the ship. He saw the debris field, hundreds of meters long. There was nothing but jungle and sky beyond that.

Tilting his head, Kaine thought he heard something move out in the wild. It could have simply been wind or some half broken tree finally collapsing. It could have been a wild beast waiting to attack them. It could have been anything.

"I already hate this place," Kaine said quietly.

FOURTEEN

"Would you put that out please," Siru said waving a hand in front of her.

Kaine was applying medi-gel and bandages to her stump of a scalp crest. It hurt like hell, even with the medicine. She could feel the blood caked on the back of her neck and shoulder, could feel it crack against her as she moved.

They hadn't had an opportunity to clean up after the crash and she doubted they would soon. It took almost an hour to gather what supplies of food, weapons and medicine they could find. She glanced over at Otmar as he inventoried what they had.

It was all lying on the ground in front of what was left of Otmar's ship. She hadn't had a chance to look over it really. After finding the medi-gel Kaine ordered her to let him patch up her wound. She told him she could handle it but he insisted. As it turned out he had a gentle touch.

Too bad for the smoke.

"I have not had a cigarette in almost two days," he said in-between drags, letting puffs of smoke waft around them. "I'm going to enjoy it."

Siru let out an exasperated sigh and looked away. The jungle around them was actually quite beautiful save for the parts obliterated by their crash landing. The green leaves seemed a bit more vibrant than usual, contrasting the very dark trunks of the trees.

The light filtering through the canopy was strong and bright. She had no idea what time it was or even how long the days lasted.

The air was a little thinner than she was used to and it had a sort of semi-sweet pungent smell to it. She couldn't describe it really. It was lovely and awful at the same time. The forests of Thessia were nothing like this. Those were graceful and serene. There she was at peace. Here she felt on edge.

There was also energy in the air, like the feeling during a thunderstorm before lightning strikes nearby. It thrilled her in a way, giving her the giggles at first, but now it just energized her, like a strong cup of caf. She felt like she could run for a hundred kilometers.

"There you go, all done," Kaine said satisfactorily.

Gingerly Siru touched her damaged crest. It hardly ached and the bandage felt secure enough. Kaine had done a good job.

"Thank you," she told him. "We should check your dressings again."

"Later," Kaine said, taking a long drag on his cigarette and lifting his face to the sky and slowly exhaling. "This place feels weird."

"I know what you mean," Siru replied looking out at the jungle. "I like it."

She turned and looked up at Kaine and smiled. She couldn't help it. This place, even though it set her on edge, felt alive. It invigorated her. She knew she should be tired from the hellish excitement of the last few hours but she wasn't. Not even close.

"You ok?" Kaine asked her with one eyebrow raised.

"Yes," she said. "Don't worry. I'm sure it's nothing."

"It's Eezo," Otmar said from near their supplies.

Kaine said something but Otmar missed it. He was busy looking over all the deposits in their immediate area. Dozens of pockets. He wondered what this would do due to the ecosystem, would it be like Thessia.

"What do you mean Eezo?" Kaine asked, walking up to him and jarring Otmar from his thoughts.

"Sorry, Element Zero." Otmar said correcting himself.

"I know what Eezo is Otmar," Kaine said, annoyance seeping into his tone. "What's it got to do with anything?"

Otmar turned to look at him and noticed Kaine still had blood on the side of his face from a cut above his left eye. It didn't seem to bother him so Otmar ignored it. The cigarette dangling from his lips was letting wisps of smoke waft into the air. Otmar couldn't fathom why anyone would voluntarily inhale something like that.

"It's all around this area," Otmar said.

Tapping his omni-tool a holo display popped up above it showing a topographical map of the surrounding area. They were at the base of a low inclining hill in front of them that swept upwards about two kilometers. To their immediate left was more dense jungle that remained flat for hundreds of kilometers. To their right was more of the same. Behind them was jungle that gave way to a field about fifteen kilometers away.

Tapping another screen a line began to pass along it. Every so often it would leave a little circle behind in its travels, some bigger, some smaller, but all over. They stood in the center of a particularly large circle of the stuff.

"Those are all Eezo deposits," Otmar said, and Kaine let out a whistle. "In this general area there is at the very least thirty five easily discernible deposits. Siru's biotic ability allows her to feel its presence and it is acting like a stimulant for her. But she should adjust to it soon."

"That's too bad," Siru said closing her eyes and lazily rolling her head in a circle.

"She'll be alright though?" Kaine asked him.

"How would I know? I'm engineer, not a doctor," Otmar said, looking at her. "I would hazard a guess and say yes. Though there are numerous deposits it doesn't seem like strong enough concentrations to cause permanent cellular damage."

They both turned and looked at Siru. She let out a long slow and contented sounding sigh. Otmar almost felt embarrassed to watch, she seemed to be really enjoying herself.

"Right," Kaine said clearing his throat. "Let's do inventory."

"Good idea," Otmar agreed quickly.

Otmar turned and looked down at their meager supplies. There were two gallons of sterilized water, five days' worth of liquid ration paste for himself, two knives, the pry-bar, four grenades, (though one was about half again as large as the others), Kaine's small gunmetal box, a pair of odd looking glasses, one blanket, one half filled jar of medi-gel, two full rolls of bandages, one roll of space-tape, ten meters of high tensile silica-rope, and a pile of random clothing.

"My jacket!" Kaine exclaimed, reaching down. "You found it!"

He unfurled a ball of material and it was indeed the jacket he wore on their first trip to Haven. He flipped it once quickly and gave it a look. It was torn in a few spots and the bottom edge was in tatters, but it was at least eighty percent intact.

"Nicely done, Otmar," Kaine said, laying the jacket down. "Not much to work with, but we'll manage."

Kaine reached out, put his hand on Otmar's head, and gave two quick shakes. Otmar's vision blurred a moment from the quick movements. He was about to say something when an object shot passed them, just above the canopy line.

Kaine saw the object and instantly reached down for the pair of glasses Otmar had found. Putting them, on small numbers appeared in front of his eyes. Macro-glasses were similar to binoculars, only not as powerful. They did however let you covertly scan areas at a distance.

Kaine looked up to follow the object a bit as it continued its arc. It was cylindrical, with four fins situated equidistant around the rear engine moving fast, screaming over the canopy. He zoomed in and saw it banking to turn back toward them.

"Get out in the open, quick!" Kaine ordered, and took off the glasses. As the two moved to join him he put the glasses away. "Ok, act casual. I want that thing to see us."

"Why?" Otmar asked, staring up at it. "What is it?"

"It's a scout drone," Kaine said, forcing him to look down. "Blue Suns markings."

"Wait," Siru said. "You want to let a Blue Suns drone see us? They're murderers and worse Kaine."

"I know," Kaine said. "But they also have to travel here in a starship, right?"

"You can't be serious," she replied disbelievingly.

"Serious about what?" Otmar said, looking from Siru to Kaine.

"We're going to lure the Blue Suns here and then hijack their ship." Kaine said simply.

Otmar and Siru looked at each other. Kaine was ready for an argument when the drone buzzed overhead, much slower than before. When it passed, Kaine looked up as it shot off up into the atmosphere.

"Go tell your friends we're still alive," he said with a smile.

"You're insane," Siru said, shaking her head.

"That's not nice," he told her. "There's no other way, Siru. Who knows the next time someone is going to come visit this shithole? This is our one best chance to get off this rock."

"No, maybe Otmar can rig up a transmitter," she said, looking at him almost desperately, "so we can call for help?"

"We thought of that already, but the entire mainframe is out and the transmission dish suffered too much damage to repair," Otmar replied.

"Well could there be a research station? You said there was eezo here, could there be a mining operation?"

"If there is it's not on the maps I have," he replied with a shrug.

Siru sighed and placed a hand on her scalp. Turning, she walked dejectedly back into what was left of the ship.

"Otmar," Kaine said, turning to him. "Did any of my bags survive?"

"Yes, one," Otmar said, pointing at the pile of clothes covering it.

"Alright, let's pack this stuff up and head out," Kaine said kneeling down.

"Head out where?" Otmar asked crouching down across from him.

In response Kaine nodded towards the jungle. Otmar gasped. It was the first time Kaine ever heard someone gasp before. Kaine found some of Siru's clothes and put them aside for her, and some extra clothes for himself.

"You can't be serious," Otmar said.

"Why does everyone say that?" Kaine said, stuffing the food and water into the bag. "Yes I am very serious."

"You *are* crazy," Otmar said.

"Still not nice," Kaine said, shaking his head.

Sliding one of the knives into the sheath, replacing the one he'd lost somewhere, Kaine hefted the bag to test its weight. With nod of approval that it wasn't overall heavy he let it fall. Dropping it to the ground he took his pistol out of its holster and checked it. It was fully charged and in good shape. Added to the knives, his one concussion grenade, two inferno grenades and a fusion detonator, Kaine felt they had a decent chance at surviving what was coming.

Siru reappeared then. She hopped out of the ship and crouched next to her pile of clothes. Taking off her ruined pink, short jacket, she put on a blue shirt with another short jacket over it, this one dark green. She removed her thigh high boots and replaced them with more functional ankle high ones. Standing, she looked at Kaine, then Otmar.

Kaine followed her gaze. Otmar stood before the ship staring at it. The *Palaven's Delight* was completely ruined. Large pieces of hull were missing. The starboard side was almost totally torn apart and a tree had nearly cut the entire ship in half.

Kaine eyed Siru and she looked back at him. He saw sadness in her eyes. He could relate. Otmar had told him he just wanted to go home, and now, more than ever, it looked like that was not going to happen.

Otmar stood still a moment before closing his eyes and bowing his head. He couldn't bring himself to look up at his ruined ship at that moment. Otmar never really felt despair, not even when his Pilgrimage extended from weeks to months to years. *Palaven's Delight* had been the only constant in his life since leaving the Flotilla, the only real connection he had to his people. He had spent months transforming it from a derelict freighter into a home.

Otmar grew attached to a great many inanimate things in his life. His mother had said it spoke of a caring heart. His father had said it was infantile. They were both right. But an attachment to a ship, now that was something any Quarian could understand. Like an Asari's love of Thessia or a human's yearning for Earth, to a Quarian each ship was a reminder of their homeworld.

Losing a ship rarely happened on the Flotilla. Great pains were taken to keep each vessel in operational status, and any problems were repaired with haste and care.

However, when a ship was lost it marked a catastrophe. Combat with another species was the most common reason, but even incompetence of crew could lead to a ship's destruction. For any Quarian it was an awful sight. For Otmar this was devastating.

Looking up, Otmar reached out a hand and let it fall against the shattered hull of his ship. Only now, giving the crash a thorough inspection, did he truly feel it. He had always known, even if he didn't want to, that he could go home at any time, meet up with the Flotilla, give a gift however inconsequential, and begin life anew. *Palaven's Delight* offered him that option. With it he had the power to end his Pilgrimage whenever he chose. That option was now gone.

Pulling his hand back, Otmar stood straight, arms held against his sides. There were whole rituals for marking the loss of a ship. The Admiralty would gather and intone words of relief. The Conclave would assemble to reassign any survivors to new homes. The name of the vessel and any casualties were engraved on The Plaque of Loss. Otmar could offer none of these traditions save one: he could speak the words of relief.

Today we gather. Here together. To mark loss. The words crawled over his visor.

"Today we gather. Here together. To mark loss," Otmar began, not moving, only speaking. "Blessed are the ancestors who kept us alive, sustained us, and enabled us to reach this season. Through toil and sacrifice they created the Flotilla, our home in exile and our sanctuary."

"While we here stand as the last best hope for returning to Rannoch, for bringing our people home, we realize that we cannot accomplish this without the ships. They are as much a part of our people as you who stand with us today.

"Though the loss of this ship is tragic, we can take heart that none of her crew is gone. That though she will never again fly, those she protected will. That even though she will never see new stars born, her crew will see new children born. Though Tikkun will never shine on her, it will one day shine on those she saved.

"We intone *Palaven's Delight* to The Plaque of Loss, the reminder of all we have given to survive. When we return home, the Plaque will serve to rekindle and keep alive the memory of those

that did not accompany us. That we remember not just the people, but the starships as well. That we remember all and that we forget nothing.

"Keelah se'lai," he finished bowing his head.

"Keelah se'lai," Siru whispered next to Kaine.

"Amen," Kaine said, not taking his eyes off the ship.

Kaine could feel Otmar and Siru looking at him but he didn't move. Kaine realized he felt a pang of sadness just then. Not for the ship, he was no pilot, starships were just another vehicle. But he could understand Otmar's misery, this was no ordinary ship it was his home.

Kaine looked at Otmar, who stared back. Now he was going to ask Otmar to walk away and leave it to scavengers, both feral and sentient. He had to let the Blue Suns mercenaries have it, to keep them searching the jungle for them so they could have one more chance to get home.

After all, that was the point, right?

"*Palaven's Delight* is lost, Otmar," Kaine said, walking up to him. "She saved us once but she's not done yet. The Blue Suns will find her and see that we're still alive. As long as they remain planetside, looking for us, we have a chance to get out of here.

"She was one ugly looking ship," Kaine said, looking at it then back to Otmar. "But she was yours and one day you'll replace her. But you won't forget her. And neither will we."

Kaine placed a hand on Otmar's shoulder and gave it a reassuring squeeze. In turn Otmar looked away and back at his ship. Kaine followed his gaze. It was an incredible wreck. The fact that they were alive spoke to Kaine's sheer bad luck to keep on living.

"Amen," Otmar said finally looking back at Kaine.

"That's it then," Siru said walking up to stand beside them. "We're leaving?"

"Not yet," Kaine answered. "I think it's time to crack open that box and see what all the fuss is about."

FIFTEEN

With a final grunt Kaine shoved the box out of the hole created by the tree. It landed solidly with a deep thump. Breathing heavily, he stared down at it with Otmar and Siru.

"Christ that thing is heavy," he commented.

Reaching down, Kaine picked up the prybar and stood next to the thing. Siru was to his right, and Otmar stood opposite them. Absently Kaine tapped the prybar on his hand, thinking. There was a definite gap he might be able to force the head into. Considering all the damage caused in the crash with nothing to mar its, surface he doubted using the prybar would amount to anything.

"Any ideas?" Kaine asked them.

"Let me get a good look at it," Otmar replied.

It had been the first time any of them had had to really inspect this box. It was still about two meters long, half as wide and deep, with a dark bluish sheen. It still had a readout display on the left side, in front of where Otmar now stood and it was still heavy as hell.

But now that Kaine really gave it the once over, he was reminded yet again that, as Siru had said earlier, it looked a lot like a coffin. It had the dimensions to match that of almost any species in the galaxy, save Krogan. Kneeling down, Kaine placed a hand on its surface. It was still shining, with no cracks or bumps. Otmar thought it was tungsten composite but he wasn't sure. It seemed far too durable for something as simple as that.

"I still think it looks like a coffin," Siru said.

"Possible." Otmar said, staring at his omni-tool. "But why would it be powered? If it housed a corpse you wouldn't need anything more than a strong seal to contain it."

"Maybe to preserve it until a proper viewing could be made?" Kaine asked, standing.

"Again, possible," Otmar remarked offhandedly.

Kaine took a deep breath and let it out quickly. He felt like a monkey staring at a skycar, desperately trying to figure out what it was and how to open it. He was torn though. He very much wanted to see what was in it but he also didn't want to be here when the Blue Suns arrived. Time was growing short, he could feel it.

"We have to figure out how to open it. I can't carry it through the jungle," Kaine said, looking at Otmar then to Siru. "Any ideas?"

Siru didn't answer, she just stood with one hand on her chin, staring down. Kaine could plainly see a look of concentration written all over her face.

"Siru," he said to her, and again nothing. With a snap of his fingers he added louder, "Siru!"

Her head snapped to look at him. The look on her face hadn't changed, but she moved her hand away from her chin.

"Ideas?" He asked her.

"I don't know," she said, and returned to look at the box. "I feel like I've seen this before. Well, not this package, but something like it."

"Doubtful," Otmar said. "This is made of a tungsten alloy but whatever it's blended with is unknown on any metallurgy chart I can find. This thing came from somewhere and is made of something I've never seen before."

"You're wrong," Siru said quietly.

Kaine and Otmar looked at each other then back to her.

"Okay, if he's wrong where is it from?" Kaine asked her.

"I think it's Prothean," she answered quietly.

Again Otmar and Kaine looked at each other.

"Siru," Kaine began, looking at her.

"I'm serious. I remember reading a journal by an Asari archeologist a couple decades ago. She described Prothean tech for suspended animation. In the paper she described a stasis pod that matched this thing."

Siru pointed down at the box and Kaine followed her. He eyed the thing up and down, looking for something that would indicate Siru was right. He didn't know anything about Prothean tech beyond what he needed to operate a weapon. This thing seemed nigh indestructible, but could it survive for fifty thousand years?

"Kaine," Siru said, and he looked up at her. "There might be a Prothean in this."

He looked at Otmar, then down at the box, then back up at Siru. Letting out a low whistle he leaned the prybar against the ship.

"That," Otmar began, "is possible."

Taking out his case of cigarettes, Kaine lit one and took a long drag. He stared at Otmar who looked at the box a long moment, then spoke.

"This is old. I can't say how old but it's been around a long time. The alloy composite is definitely beyond what we can make right now. Tungsten is incredibly difficult to blend as is. But if

you could it would survive a long, long time. It also has some power which could have been used to keep atmosphere and pressure. But it's been opened once before, so it might have been used for new species over the years. A real live Prothean though," Otmar said, a little of his enthusiasm returning, "now that is definitely worth something."

"Why would they want to destroy it then?" Kaine asked. "When we were in space, that fighter wasn't trying to disable us, it was trying to destroy us and this thing along with. Yes but they must have thought it would survive," Otmar said pointing in his direction pacing. "This box took a rocket blast that nearly killed you, bounced around the engine room leaving dents in starship plating and none of it even caused a scratch.

"I think it's highly likely that even if the drive core ruptured and killed us, it would have survived the detonation intact."

They had to act fast, Kaine thought. He wanted a good amount of distance between them and the approaching mercenaries. That meant they had to move. Soon.

"Siru," Kaine said dropping his cigarette and crushing it under his boot. "Did the article say anything about how you might open one of these things?"

"No, but if it is Prothean then it should interact with our tech. Maybe Otmar could hack it."

"Possible," Otmar said, looking at the package.

Otmar's imagination had begun to spiral out of control again. If it were indeed a Prothean he wouldn't be bringing it back to the Citadel, he'd take it directly to the Flotilla. The things they could learn from it. If it were a scientist it could unlock so much that they hadn't been able to decipher yet. New advanced technology could belong to his people.

Syncing with device complete. Disparate but recognizable defense protocols detected. Reasonable chance of success in forcing object open. The words scrawled across his visor.

Otmar didn't reply, as he was lost in his fantasy of being a hero to his people. Ideas flowed quickly to him: new ship designs, weapons systems, even ways of controlling AIs. This could be the key to getting Rannoch back. Otmar smiled at the thought of giving his people their homeworld.

"Otmar!" Kaine yelled, jarring him from his thoughts. "Can you do it?"

"I think so," he answered. "I'll try."

Otmar fired up his omni-tool and a schematic of the electrical systems of the package appeared on his visor. He began working with his VI to get a foothold on the systems. The firewalls

were advanced, but in a way they were also archaic. Though strong, he quickly found a way to avoid them.

As he dug deeper he felt a strange sensation, like he was disturbing a dig site. If this was indeed functional Prothean technology it was against the law to tamper with it. Being one that never really liked breaking the rules, this felt like he was committing a capital crime.

Bypassing the firewalls, he moved easily through the subsystems that controlled the power. It was almost out of energy. Without a way to recharge it, whatever was inside would be dead in hours. This assuaged him somewhat. He wasn't so much committing a crime as saving a life. He hoped.

Forcing his way into the controls of the seals he found markers of familiar tech: remnants of Ryssa'Amar. She had used much the same techniques as he was applying now. Her tactics were easy to follow and within minutes he had what he was looking for, the sequence for unsealing the package.

"I have it," he said triumphantly. "I can unseal and open it."

Otmar saw Kaine wave Siru back and draw his pistol as he moved to stand next to him.

"Do it," Kaine ordered.

A few taps of his omni-tool and the lid popped up a fraction of a centimeter. They could hear atmosphere burst out for a moment then stop. Slowly the entirety of the lid slid forward along its length. After nearly a minute it had moved and locked in place.

Whatever was in here was kept cold. Fog poured out of it for a few moments. As the last tendrils wafted into the sky, what was contained inside was finally revealed.

"What the fuck?" Kaine said.

Kaine stood staring down at what was revealed as the last of the mist faded into the sky. Below him in the box lay a mostly human shape, two arms and legs, five fingers and toes, with a head resting atop it all. Dark purple skin, slightly reflective, covered the almost two meter long figure.

Looking over the naked body he discovered that this was in fact a 'he'. Kaine felt that aside from the needle-like protrusions that extended over the scalp and the lack of ears he could have passed for a human. Kaine watched the man's chest rise and fall as he breathed easily. At least he was alive.

"Is that scarring?" Siru asked.

Kaine nodded as he noticed the raised edges of old and healed scars. They crisscrossed his chest and stomach, etched into his legs and arms. It didn't look like damage from whips though, more like combat scars than anything.

Furrowing his brow, Kaine knelt back down beside Otmar. Cautiously Kaine touched the bicep of the man and traced along an oddly familiar set of white tattoos that covered the man's entire right arm, hand, and fingers. Though he couldn't read the language, he knew what it meant.

"This is no Prothean," Kaine said.

"Doesn't match any known race cataloged by the Citadel Council," Otmar offered.

"No, but I doubt a Prothean would have Batarian slave markings," Siru commented.

"You've seen this before?" Kaine asked her.

"Omega," Siru answered simply.

Kaine nodded.

"So he's a Batarian slave?" Otmar asked, and Kaine could hear the disappointment in his tone.

"Well unless he woke up and decided to get himself enslaved, it's safe to assume we're probably not dealing with a Prothean," Kaine replied.

"Otmar, what does the writing say?" Siru asked.

"Let's see," Otmar said, tapping quickly on his omni-tool. "Looks like a list of previous owners and what he was used for."

"Anything interesting or useful?" Kaine asked.

"Not really, no race is given, only the physical dimensions we can easily see," Otmar replied, reading his translations. "There is this though."

"What?" Siru asked, stepping over to stand beside him.

"One of the last entries lists him as a 'gra'torl'," Otmar said, pointing to the tattoo. "He fought in the Batarian arenas."

"No shit?" Kaine said, standing. "How long?"

"If the dates are accurate, nearly twenty-five years," Siru said, reading from Otmar's omni-tool.

"Wow," Kaine said honestly.

"What?" Otmar asked.

"Average life expectancy in the arenas is a bit shorter than that," Kaine replied.

"How short?" Siru asked.

“Couple weeks if you’re ex-military. Far less if you’re just some poor bastard from a colony,” Kaine replied. “So, not a slave, a gladiator. Interesting.”

“Explains all the scars then,” Siru mentioned.

“So then what is he?” Otmar asked when no one spoke for a long moment.

“Let’s ask him,” Kaine said in reply.

Kneeling down again, he made a final sweep of the man. He had no visible injuries or signs of trauma. Aside from the scarring his skin seemed unblemished and he was easily in as good a shape as Kaine.

Reaching in, Kaine put a hand on the man’s jaw and turned his head to the right then to the left. A thought struck him as he looked at where the man’s ears would be if he had any. Looking up, Kaine watched Siru for a long moment before speaking.

“That’s bizarre,” he said finally.

“What?” Siru said, a look of worry on her face.

“This guy doesn’t have ears,” he said, looking back down.

“Most sapient species don’t,” Otmar offered.

“True, but his non-ears look a lot like Siru’s,” he replied, pointing up at her.

“What?” Siru said, kneeling down and looking closer. “That is bizarre,” she said, standing and backing up.

“Told ya,” he said, looking back at the man.

“Kaine, that Blue Suns ship is still headed this way.” Otmar said, getting them back on track.

“Right, now or never.” Kaine said and slapped the man in the box fully across the face.

The man’s eyes flashed open revealing a pair of solid black spheres with light gray rings for irises. His hands snapped up to grip the edge of the box. He blinked a few times then began to pull himself up to a sitting position.

Siru watched as Kaine stepped away, drawing his pistol and waving her and Otmar back. The man continued to rise until he was standing. He and Kaine stood about eye level. They both just stared at each other, neither moving.

Siru looked him over. He was powerfully built, just like Kaine. She could easily see the writing on his arm now. It flowed almost artistically over his shoulder, bicep, forearm, and hand and fingers. She noticed the scarring continued around to his upper back, shoulders, and lower regions.

As he stood, breathing slowly she saw the needle-like protrusions rising and falling slightly to match. It was rhythmic to watch and it captivated her until the man began to slump forward.

“It’s ok,” she said, rushing forward attempting helping him to regain his stance.

It was then he turned to look at her. His eyes locked with hers. She took a quick breath, released him, and backed away. The man rocked forward but caught himself and stood again.

“What?” She asked him in utter confusion.

The man made a move forward but Kaine pointed his pistol at the man’s head.

“Easy big guy,” Kaine said.

The man turned to face Kaine and looked between him and the pistol for a few moments before speaking.

“Are you going to kill me?” he asked.

Everyone paused for a moment. Shock registering on his, Siru's and Otmar's faces.

“Raise your hand if you expected this guy to speak English,” Kaine asked, not taking his eyes off the man.

No one did of course. They all stood there, Kaine with weapon drawn and ready, Otmar behind him not moving. The man was still standing within the box, and Siru stood to his right, a meter or so away.

“Are you going to kill me?” He asked again.

“Not unless you make me,” Kaine replied.

He looked to her again and those eyes locked on hers. She’d seen those eyes only twice before but there was no way he could have them. Dark as space with pupils a few shades of gray lighter. Those were the eyes of an Asari during a joining.

“What are you?” She asked him.

“I think you already have an idea,” he replied.

“Impossible,” was all she could say.

“Siru?” Kaine asked.

She didn’t answer him. Her mind was flooded with ideas and scenarios about the man standing before them. Each one was more perplexing and unbelievable than the last. None of them made sense, none of them seemed correct. She had to know for certain and she could think of only one way.

Resolute in her decision, she strode forward to stand before him. Slowly she raised her hands to his face as Kaine said something. The man didn't flinch or move away as she cupped his face in her hands.

Closing her eyes Siru calmed herself, letting the worry of the moment and shock of this man fade away. She ignored what Otmar and Kaine were saying, focusing only on herself.

She could feel the warmth begin to spread throughout her body, giving everything around her vibrancy, the air that blew lightly past them, the feeling of this man's skin against hers and the sunlight on them both. Taking a deep breath she could taste the life from this world. The warmth enveloped her as she opened her eyes.

The world was vivid in all its glorious greens and dark browns. The sky above shined with a blue as crystal clear as the most beautiful oceans on Thessia. The man's dark purple skin seemed to glow with an inner fire that cast the writings and scars on his flesh into stark relief. She followed the lines of his arms to his shoulders and neck before finally locking eyes with him.

"Embrace eternity," she said softly.

The world around her vanished. The colors and sounds and smells were gone. Kaine and Otmar could no longer be heard. She could not feel the sunlight on her skin nor taste the air around her. All she could sense was this man, his spirit and his body.

Sensations and images flashed in her mind. Her memories intermixed with his. She saw herself as a young girl asleep in her mother's arms. Then came one of a small child with dark skin chasing after an Asari with dark teal skin. A feeling of desperation washed over her as she watched the child try to keep up with the taller woman.

An image of her as a child swimming with her sister in a pond quickly transformed into one of a young man looking much like the one with her now. This man was wearing a dark tunic and hood as he stood before a grave as thunderous rain crashed down around him. No feeling of loss or remorse came forth, only anger.

Her graduation day sprang to life then faded to that of this man wearing armor and wielding a sword shoving people away. She could not make out individuals, only shadowy forms. She could feel fire on her skin and sadness in her heart. Books and pamphlets burned before him.

A feeling of profound regret and misery flowed into her. She could feel this man as intimately as she felt herself. Memories shared between them created a connection she'd only ever felt once before.

In the blink of an eye she knew exactly who and what this man was.

Kaine was about ready to start shooting when Siru let her hands down suddenly and backed a step or two away. Tears flowed down her cheeks and she placed a shaking hand over her mouth. Kaine had no idea what happened but was going to find out.

“What did you do?” He roared at the man, pointing his pistol at his head again.

“No Kaine,” Siru said, placing a hand on Kaine’s gently, forcing him to lower his weapon. “It wasn’t him. Well it was but...” she trailed off and began to gaze around her distractedly.

“Otmar, guard him,” he said, and led Siru away.

“With what?” Otmar asked.

Kaine ignored him and led Siru a short distance away from the other two. They stood before each other then and Siru’s eyes were wandering everywhere. She was saying something under her breath but he couldn’t hear.

“What was that Siru?” Kaine asked.

She didn’t reply and kept looking around while speaking at a whisper’s level. Kaine looked back at Otmar and the man. Otmar had his omni-tool up and was pointing his arm at him. In turn the dark skinned man just looked at where Siru stood.

“Siru?” he asked and again, she didn’t answer. Reaching out with his hands he gripped her arms and gave her a quick shake. “Siru!”

She turned to look him in the eyes. No more tears flowed and Kaine noticed an odd expression on her face, a mixture of wonder and curiosity and fear. He was about to yell again when she finally spoke.

“Kaine,” she began and stopped. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly before continuing, “He’s an Asari.”

She couldn’t believe what she’d just said. It would have been less crazy to say Otmar was her father. She didn’t claim to know everything about her people. She was always more interested in other species. But one thing she knew, the one thing everyone in the galaxy knew was that Asari were all female.

Technically not female, she reminded herself. But there was definitely only one sex and they all resembled a clearly feminine visage. Looking over at the man in the box cast a huge amount of doubt on that fact.

Not only that though, he cast doubt on everything. She had just found a male Asari, a true opposite gender to her own. She couldn't describe how this felt, not even to herself. One of the fundamental defining aspects of her being had just crumbled away.

Suddenly she was unable to catch her breath and her legs gave out. She could feel Kaine slowly helping her as she sank to her knees. There are no male Asari, that's not the sort of thing you miss. Questions began to race through her mind.

Why weren't there males? If they really were more at one time, what happened to them? Did they die out? Why would her people forget that? If they didn't forget, then what?

Kaine was saying something but she couldn't hear him. All she could think of was the ramifications of this knowledge. What would this do to her people? Would other races be distrustful of the Asari? She didn't think so. But she knew someone who clearly did.

"Kaine." She interrupted whatever he was saying and stood. "That's why she wants us dead."

"Who?" He asked as she walked away.

"You're Asari?" She asked the man in the box, walking to stand before him.

"Yes."

"Your mother?"

"Asari."

"Father?"

"Asari."

"Liar!"

"You know it's true."

Siru stared at him, unable to speak. She knew he was right. During a joining the two cannot hide feelings, memories, or sensations from one another. It was like becoming a book, open for the other in the joining to read and experience.

"Goddess," she breathed out and put a hand to her forehead.

"Wait," Otmar said, lowering his hand. "There are no male Asari."

"Apparently there are," Kaine said, joining them. "Why were you in that box?"

"I was captured," he replied evenly.

"No shit," Kaine replied.

"By who?" Siru asked.

"Batarians." He answered looking at her.

"When?" Kaine asked.

"What year is it?" The man asked.

"2155," Otmar answered.

"Nine years ago," he answered.

"How old are you?" Otmar asked.

"Three hundred and two."

"Bullshit!" Kaine yelled. "You're telling me a male Asari has been running around for over three hundred years and no one noticed?"

"I'm good at hiding," he responded, then looked down. "Well, until I was caught it seems."

"What were you doing when you were caught?" Otmar asked.

"Destroying records," he replied.

"Of what?" Siru asked.

"Of me."

Otmar'Reefa was completely bewildered. The Asari Councilor sent him to pick this man up and didn't tell him? Wouldn't she want to keep a rarity such as this as safe as possible? This should have been handled by commandos to start with. It was far too important to trust to a stranger.

"Well Otmar," Kaine said, jarring him from his thoughts. "Your package apparently contained a piece of information that would shatter the foundations of the Asari and throw into doubt everything they've ever believed. So, there's that."

Otmar swallowed. His hands began to wring together quicker than ever. This wasn't a gift. This wasn't his ticket home. This was a death sentence. From the very start he was doomed to failure. If what Kaine said was true, even had he returned successfully the Councilor would have more than likely had killed him.

Otmar looked at the man, the Asari, standing before them. Now that he thought about it, the needles on his head were in line with the scalp crests of the females. He also had no ears, which as Siru said was not strange. Turian, Krogan, Batarian, Elcor, and Salarian: all had no ears as Kaine and his people. But as Kaine had mentioned, the man's aural canals more closely matched Siru's than anyone else.

"She was going to kill me no matter what?" Otmar asked Kaine.

"Yeah," Kaine said, tiredly.

"That means even if we made it back you two would have died?" He asked.

"Well that's not gonna happen now," Kaine began saying.

Incoming ship, upper left quadrant. The words appeared along with enhanced view of the area.
Estimated time of arrival: five minutes.

“Kaine, they’re here!” Otmar yelled, looking up and pointing.

Kaine spun around and snatched his macro glasses up and put them on. He zoomed in where Otmar was pointing and could just barely make out a dot moving. It was growing bigger, and quickly.

“How long?” Kaine asked moving over to his bag.

“ETA five minutes,” Otmar answered.

“We gotta move,” Kaine told, them kneeling down.

Opening their supplies Kaine yanked out his extra pair of pants and shirt. Zippering the bag closed, he stood and threw it over his shoulders. He let out a hiss of pain as the bag settled over his wounds a little rougher than he intended. He squeezed his eyes shut against the pain.

“We need to check those bandages,” Siru said, her hand on his arm.

“Not right now, no time,” Kaine replied, taking a deep breath letting the ache pass. He scooped up the clothes and walked back over to the man.

“Where are we going?” Otmar asked.

Kaine simply pointed in the direction of the large hill that lay off in the distance.

“You got a name?” Kaine asked.

“Jarvas Solistari,” he replied.

“Jarvas?” Kaine said, trying out the name. “Okay you have two options,” he said, and tossed the clothes at him, which the Asari caught. “You can come with us and get off this planet, or you can stay here and die when those Blue Suns mercs arrive.”

“Interesting choices,” the man said, putting on the pants. “Why should I trust you?”

“Because I *gave* you a choice,” Kaine replied, sourly.

“You can trust me,” Siru answered unexpectedly. “Plus we’ll probably need all the help we can get hijacking their ship.”

Kaine raised an eyebrow and looked at her. She just stared back blinking once or twice, then clearing her throat awkwardly.

“Bold plan,” he remarked lightly.

“At any rate,” Kaine said, walking over to the ship and retrieving the pry-bar, “we’re leaving now. What’ll it be?”

The man put on the shirt and Kaine was surprised to see that it fit him well. The two of them had to have been nearly the same size. He felt someone with his physical abilities plus the powerful biotics of Asari would be very helpful. And dangerous.

“I would rather not die today,” Jarvas said, looking at Kaine.

“No guarantees there pal,” Kaine replied.

SIXTEEN

An hour later Kaine waved them to stop. They'd done this every few minutes since leaving the ship. They would move for a time then quickly stop and turn around. As with the past occasions Kaine saw nothing through his macro glasses.

"Okay," he said, breathing deeply. The pack full of supplies wasn't overly heavy but it rode directly on top of his wounds. He leaned against the pry-bar trying to catch his breath.

"Kaine?" Siru asked, standing next to him.

"I'm fine," he said straightening up. "Just forgot to stretch."

"I need a break," Otmar said, huffing heavily and sitting down. "I'm sorry."

"We've put a fair amount of distance between us and them," Jarvas said, keeping watch behind their position. "This area is more open than we've seen. We should be able to see them coming."

Kaine looked at Siru and she shrugged. He could tell she was drained as much as Otmar. He was feeling it too, the wounds and fights and lack of any real food. His training kept him going, but he didn't know how much longer he could keep up this pace.

Slowly and gingerly he took the bag off and let it fall to the ground. He looked around at each of them. They all were sweating profusely. Kaine knew this was dangerous. Each milliliter they lost was one they'd have to get back. And they had very little water.

"Let's check those dressings," Siru said, and started lifting his shirt off.

"If you wanted to see me without my shirt on, you'd only have to ask," He commented dryly.

"Funny," she said in a tone that implied otherwise.

Kaine removed the shirt and sat down when she told him. He watched both her and Otmar go through the bag. He pulled out one of his sterilized water containers. She grabbed bandages and the jar of medi-gel. Otmar attached one end of the container to a straw that extended out of his mask and drank.

"Easy Otmar," Kaine said after Otmar had drained a third of the bottle. "We don't know how long we'll be here and that needs to last."

"Why me? You need water too," he replied.

“We can find water in nature from plants or streams,” Jarvas said not turning away from his watch.

“He’s right,” Kaine said when Otmar turned back to look at him.

“I’m taking the bandages off. This might hurt.” Siru warned.

Kaine didn’t bother with any bravado this time. As she pulled the first strips off he balled his hands into fists and let out a grunt. It felt like he’d gotten those wounds months ago but in reality it had only been a few hours since the fight on Omega.

Kaine grunted again as Siru removed the other strips in rapid succession. His back burned like it was on fire again and the humid air did nothing to diminish the feeling. Closing his eyes he calmed himself with long measured breaths. Siru popped open their jar of medi-gel and was about to apply it when Kaine stopped her.

“Wait,” he said. “How bad are the burns?”

“I don’t know,” she replied.

“What do you see?”

“You have three long gashes, probably from shrapnel. Fairly deep wounds with bright red marks around them,” she coughed quickly then finished. “There are reddish blisters and some of your skin is peeling away.”

“Second degree with open wounds,” Kaine added. “Ok, not too much. Put it on the shrapnel marks, the burns will take care of themselves for now.”

“We have enough for the entire area,” she said.

“We don’t know if we’ll need more of it for new injuries later,” he told her. “Conserve now, just in case.”

A few minutes later and Siru had new dressings applied and he again felt much better. The burns still ached a bit, but they were healing. What he didn’t want was an infection from this planet. That could get ugly fast.

“Been in some nasty fights,” Jarvas said, looking at him.

“You too,” Kaine replied, putting his shirt back on.

Kaine watched as Jarvas looked at him and then Otmar and Siru. Kaine followed his gaze and saw Otmar slumped against a fallen tree, head lolled to the side. He turned to watch Siru pack up their medi-gel and Otmar’s water. She was moving lethargically herself and fumbling with the zipper.

“Asari tried to kill you,” Jarvas said, returning to his watch.

“Unsuccessfully so far,” Kaine said, walking over to Siru and closing the bag for her. “Sit, Siru.”

“I’m fine,” she said, but slid down next to a massive tree nearby.

“Of course, just take a break.”

He watched Siru slide to the ground looking down at her feet but with a look that said she saw nothing.

“Kaine, can we speak a moment?” Jarvas asked.

Kaine looked over Siru once more as she too closed her eyes. Reaching out he was about to brush her cheek with his hand then stopped. Letting out a quick breath he stood and walked over to Jarvas.

“How do you know my name?” He asked, standing beside him.

The two looked out over the jungle. Before them the area was sparsely populated with trees, giving a good vantage point nearly one hundred meters across while still maintaining a thick canopy. Anyone following them would have to pass through this area or waste time circling around and possibly losing their trail.

“Siru,” Jarvas answered, nodding towards her. “I learned a lot about you from her.”

“All good I’m sure,” Kaine replied dryly.

“There’s something out there,” Jarvas said, ignoring his quip.

“Blue Suns?” Kaine asked, putting the macro glasses on again.

He scanned the area but saw nothing. He noticed with the glasses that the ground clutter of bushes and weeds was over half a meter tall.

“I think some of the indigenous life has taken an interest in us,” he said, pointing to Kaine’s left about twenty meters away.

Kaine followed his finger and readjusted the glasses to peer into the surrounding area. At first he saw nothing, just weeds and bush with some light streaming down from the overhanging canopy. He was about to comment when he saw a bush rustle as if something had run through it.

First one, then more of the undergrowth moved unexpectedly. A large patch of bush swayed but there was no breeze that he could feel. He watched the area another few moments and then noticed a switch in the direction of disturbance. It seemed to be headed straight towards them and moving fast.

“Shit,” Kaine said, putting the glasses away.

“We need to move,” Jarvas added, spinning around.

“Siru! Otmar!” Kaine yelled, dashing over to Siru, snatching up the bag, and grabbing her arm. “Get up!”

“What?” Siru asked, looking around eyes wide from being jarred awake.

Kaine didn’t bother explaining and yanked her to her feet. He could hear underbrush being trampled by many feet. The sounds were fast and loud, creatures moving with great haste toward them.

They all began to move when a dark blur flashed passed them, hitting Jarvas and driving him to the dirt.

Jarvas slammed to the ground with a large weight on his chest. Snarling teeth and claws tried to slash and tear him. Reaching up he got his hands around the thing and with a burst of biotic energy lifted and tossed it up and behind him.

He scrambled to his feet. The thing charged again. Backing away he nearly tripped over the pry-bar on the ground. Getting toes under it he flipped it into the air. Grasping it with both hands, he spun. Channeling energy into the metal he lowered its mass. Spinning quickly he leveled the bar at the leaping creature. Just before connecting he channeled more energy to instantly increase the pry-bar’s mass.

Animal and metal collided. The newly heavier bar cracked its skull. The creature flew passed him to land on the ground. It did not move.

Kaine saw the thing crumble to the dirt as he heard a hiss from his right. Spinning, he dropped the bag and drew his pistol. All he could see was a pair of arms with two scythe-like claws flying toward him. A massive mouth full of large teeth outstretched towards him. Leveling the weapon he fired once and ducked.

Another thud as it landed behind him. He turned to check and it did not get up to continue the attack.

Siru screamed as something clamped onto her leg. Another of the creatures had its jaws on her thigh biting down hard. Claws shredded her clothing. Gashes were torn in her hip and calf.

Fear driving her she shot a blast of energy at it. The creature ignored the attack, seeming to absorb it. With another roar, more of anger than fear, she smashed the creature with another blast. This time it was wrenched free and hit the ground. Almost instantly it began to rise.

Kaine rushed forward and put a boot on its neck and fired three quick shots into its armored head. The first two merely damaged its tough outer shell but the third hit home. The creature twitched once then lay still.

“You al-” Kaine tried to say but was interrupted.

Another of the things hit his back. It raked a claw across his chest spinning him to the ground. His pistol skipped across the ground and away from him. Kaine began to stand when he was hit again. Lying on his stomach he looked up and saw it land lightly, spinning to face him.

In his peripheral he saw Jarvas fighting off another and Siru helping Otmar stand.

It opened its impressive jaws displaying rows of thick powerful teeth. Instead of many smaller incisors this had less than a dozen, top and bottom. Each was as thick around as two of his fingers. It stood less than a meter tall and resembled a wolf. Only instead of fur this had solid armored scales, like a reptile. A stubby thick tail twitched back and forth.

It charged. He stood. Snapping his boot up, Kaine caught the creature under the jaw and drove it to the ground. Before it could recover Kaine dropped his knee where the boot had been. A crunch and hiss reported from it.

Breathing heavily he laid a hand on the creature. With another hiss it was up and snapping at him again. He drew his knife. Stabbing upwards catching the unarmored underside of its mouth. Driving deeper he slid the knife into the upper jaw.

The creature jolted away and spun its head back and forth. The knife went flying into the bush. A low hiss emanated from it as they watched each other a long moment pacing back and forth.

“Come on!” He roared.

It obliged.

Jarvas knocked his attacker to the ground. Kneeling next to it he gathered energy around his fist. Before it could react he struck.

Flashing downwards he released the biotic power against the creature’s side. With a burst of light the entire cavity of its abdomen flattened. Blood sprayed and the thing went limp.

Turning he saw another creature advancing on the Quarian and Siru. Jarvas leaped. Brought the pry-bar up. Then down. He landed. Metal met armored skull breaking through, slicing into its head and exploding from the other side. The creature crashed to the ground with a cracking sound but did not respond further.

It flew. Kaine Dodged. Shooting passed him, a claw raked his arm. Turning quickly Kaine jumped at it. The creature landed lightly on its legs. Kaine landed heavily on it.

Viciously squirming and spinning to get away Kaine desperately held on. He got an arm around its neck and squeezed. More manic flailing. Kaine put his knee on the creature's back and with a grunt of effort pulled fully back on its head. He heard one, two, three then more vertebrae crack and shatter.

He dropped the thing and its head snapped to the ground like a bent tree branch. Breathing heavily he stood and saw at least five more of the creatures encircling them. Spotting his pistol he snatched it up and stood with the others.

Otmar and Siru were between himself and Jarvas, who wielded the pry-bar like a spear. Kaine saw blood all over it but no scrapes or wounds on him. Kaine leveled his pistol at the nearest one preparing to fire. That's when he heard it.

Otmar's head shot up as the telltale sound of starship engines resounded from above the canopy. It drowned the hisses and snarls of the creatures around them. He watched as the top of the trees swayed from the ships engines keeping it afloat.

"Kaine!" Otmar yelled.

"I know." Kaine answered, putting the bag on his back.

A shadow fell over them then. What little light fluttered down through the holes in the leaves and branches of the trees was blotted out. The noise grew as the darkness deepened. Slowly a large shape passed overhead.

As the ship hovered by the noise of the mass effect drives grew to an ear splitting crescendo. As it continued to lazily pass by the creatures, rattled by the intensity of the ship, scattered.

Morbid curiosity made Otmar wait and watch. He followed the shape as it continued away towards the open area they had traveled through. As he turned the others did also. The ship slowed to a stop and hovered in place.

"Down!" Kaine ordered.

Otmar dove for the ground landing behind the large tree Siru had sat against earlier. Jarvas lay prone before him, Siru on his left. He couldn't see where Kaine had gone. Peeking around the side of the tree Otmar saw the reason for their cover.

Four ropes dangled in the center of the open area. Humanoid shapes were spreading out away from them, kneeling down facing all directions. Each wore heavy armor with dark blue markings, and carried assault rifles which were at the ready. He hid back behind the tree when he thought one would notice him.

Physiology patterns indicate Batarian males wearing Titan IV Heavy Defense Armor and wielding Hegemonic Series XII Repeaters. The words crawled over his visor and Otmar relayed the information for Kaine.

"Okay, it's only four so we should," Kaine was saying, then stopped suddenly.

Otmar again peeked around the edge of the tree. Floating slowly to the ground with a blue haze around her hands was an Asari in commando armor. She looked similar to the ones they fought on Omega, only this one had dark purple skin.

Landing, she made an odd gesture at the ship above them. A few moments later another shape landed heavily behind her, so loud Otmar could hear its echoes from his position. As it stood everyone got a good look at it.

"Oh shit," Siru said.

"This could be a problem," Jarvas said next to him.

"Fuck," was all Kaine said, extending the middle syllable.

Otmar decided not to say anything. He didn't want anyone to hear him.

Standing behind the Asari and looking at the area around it was a Krogan. He was larger than any other Krogan Otmar had seen on the Citadel. He stood head and shoulders over the Batarians, the tallest of them only reaching the Krogan's chest.

Otmar jumped when Siru tapped his shoulder. She handed him one of Kaine's receivers and pointed at Jarvas. Otmar in turn tapped Jarvas on the shoulder. Jarvas casually looked up at him. Handing him the item, Otmar pointed at his aural canal. With a nod he placed it so he could hear what everyone said.

Otmar turned to let Siru know it was done when he saw Kaine slither out from the tall grass on his stomach. He had retrieved the bag of supplies and was dragging it with him. Otmar watched Jarvas do the same and they both stopped once they reached his and Siru's feet.

"Right, here's the plan." Kaine began in a whisper just barely loud enough for them to pick up. "One at a time, on your stomach we're gonna head off into the tall grass. Nice and slow like."

Otmar was about to ask where they were headed when the tree behind them exploded. He tumbled up and away from it. Landing roughly on his back with the air ripped from his lungs. He

watched transfixed as the tree, at least one hundred meters high, flipped end over end in the air. As it began to fall he felt himself sliding.

Kaine yanked Siru up and they both crashed to the ground away from the falling tree. It landed with a resounding thud that caused a wave of air to slap him in the face. The fallen tree allowed more light to filter down to them and for a moment he was blinded.

Kaine got to his feet. He pulled the bag on quickly and helped Siru up. Looking towards their enemy he saw them headed their way, six altogether: the four Batarians, the Asari commando, and the Krogan.

"Jarvas!" Kaine roared as he started moving away from the wreckage of the tree. "Get Otmar out of here. Split them up if you can. Circle back around in four hours!"

"Understood!" Jarvas replied.

"Come on," Kaine said, pulling Siru along. "The old man wants us off his lawn."

Jarvas retrieved the pry-bar and roughly hauled the Quarian named Otmar to his feet. Glancing behind them as they ran he saw the four armored Batarians and Asari head towards them.

"We can't leave them!" Otmar yelled.

Jarvas didn't answer and just kept moving.

Rifle shots began reporting behind them. Ricochets bounced off rocks and sliced through trees. Trees and nothing but. The trees were everywhere. Everything looked the same to him, nothing but bush at their feet, trees with dark colored bark all around, and green canopy above.

Jarvas decided to run in a straight line away from the fallen tree. He didn't bother to zig-zag or dodge, the dense jungle was proving more capable of obscuring the enemies targeting than anything else he could do.

Risking a look behind them he saw the four armored Batarians keeping pace, like a pack of verran. He could hear Otmar's breathing over the receiver and saw him stumbling along. The Quarian would soon be a liability.

Jarvas begin to weigh his options.

"Siru, I have an idea," Kaine said as they ran from the roaring Krogan.

"Is it a good one?" Siru said, panting.

Her leg was burning with pain and had begun to cramp up. Ignoring it as best she could, she tried desperately to keep up with Kaine. He was setting an ambitious pace but she could still hear the lumbering brute behind them.

"Of course," He replied, hopping over a log.

She barely saw it in time and it caught her foot. She stumbled but caught herself before falling face first into the dirt. She felt Kaine's hand on her arm as he dragged her up.

"We're gonna follow our little friends," he said, pointing at the creatures that had attacked them.

Siru couldn't even respond. She was having difficulty catching her breath. More troubling was the fact her leg had started to go numb. She didn't really know what that meant, but if she couldn't feel her leg she couldn't run. And if she couldn't run, the Krogan would get her.

"Stand and fight, you maggots!" She heard from behind.

Glancing back she saw the Krogan catching up to them. She was beginning to wonder if he had a gun when a thundering boom exploded in her ears. The tree to her left was nearly cut in half by the shot.

"Kaine!" Siru managed to yell.

"Just keep moving!" he yelled back.

More shots reported around them. She saw Kaine stumble forward but pick himself back up. Her breathing was getting more ragged by the meter. Siru had to look down at her leg to make sure it was even still attached.

Another shot. Another roar. The Krogan behind them was getting angrier.

"Kaine," Siru said between gulps of air. "I can't keep this up."

"Almost there," he reassured her.

She began seeing stars as her leg and foot went completely numb. Despair gripped her. It was only a matter of time before she tripped and fell. Kaine had to come up with something and soon.

More shots rang around them. Otmar was thankful for the tree cover when an explosion detonated a patch of ground near them. Both he and Jarvas lost their footing and fell. Otmar tried to stand but his legs and arms were shaking.

"Sleep on your own time!" Jarvas yelled.

Otmar felt lighter than air for a moment as Jarvas got him to his feet. With a shove to his back Otmar got moving again.

You have not ingested sufficient calories for this type of activity. Suggest revision of your plan of action. The words appears on his visor.

"Shut up Zasi!" Otmar yelled.

His VI was right however. He was already weak from the day's events on Omega and the crash landing. He felt as if his mind was sinking into a murky quagmire of darkness. His arms and legs were like a rubberized bonding agent flailing around uselessly.

"Jarvas," he was about to say but was cut off by another explosion.

"Otmar, can you do anything about their weapons?" Jarvas asked from his side.

"Yes, but I can't do it running," Otmar began, then yelped.

He felt light again as his feet left the ground. He flipped horizontally and landed roughly on Jarvas's shoulder. He could see the Batarians following behind them as they darted in and out of tree cover.

"Get to work!" Jarvas roared.

Kaine helped Siru up again. She'd stumbled to her knees twice already. Following these little bastards was starting to appear like a poor plan. He'd hoped they would lead him to their den or whatever it was they lived in. Right now it didn't look so good.

"Come on Siru, just past those trees." He said without anything to back it up.

"You said that three trees ago," she replied but kept moving.

He could feel himself fatiguing. This had been one long God damned day and it was catching up to him. Siru was slowing them both down now and the Krogan was taking advantage of it, firing less frequently but getting closer with each attempt. Kaine's arm stung from a ricocheting shot earlier.

As another tree splintered to bits nearby they burst into an open area. Much like where their attackers had landed, this place was sparsely populated with trees but still held the light at bay with a canopy of leaves.

Siru tumbled to the ground again a few meters from where they exited. Kaine reached down and began to pull her up. She tried to stand but fell again.

"I can't," she began breathing heavily. "I can't feel my leg."

"Come on God dammit!" He roared and put his hands under her arms and started dragging her.

He stopped when the Krogan emerged breathing a bit heavily himself. Armored about the torso and legs with gray and black detailing he carried a large caliber weapon, rather like a shotgun but one that probably fired skycars or torpedoes from the look of it. The brownish skin of its arms and head uncovered and a pair of black eyes staring at them.

With a guttural laugh he stood fully erect and was well over two meters high. Ideas began to flash in Kaine's mind but none of them were promising. He was about to reach for his fusion detonator when a low pitched hiss came from behind him.

Otmar worked with his VI as he flapped about over Jarvas's shoulder. He thought it wasn't much of an improvement over trying to do this while running, but at least he got to rest.

Energy reserves low. Recommend no more than three meter spread. The words appeared then faded.

Otmar was setting up another EMP spike, like he had used in Ryssa'Amar's supply bay against the Asari commandos. He had full reserves then so the affected area could be larger. But now he had to conserve what he could and that meant they had to be closer to their enemies.

Parameters set. Will take approximately thirty seconds to charge to capacity, his VI reported.

Jarvas meanwhile kept moving. His pace was nothing short of incredible. In one hand was the pry-bar, three meters of hardened alloy steel and in the other he held Otmar. Otmar was very glad they'd opened that box.

Another blast tore a tree from its roots and toppled over behind them with a crash. Otmar's view of their pursuers was cut off by a tree hitting the ground. He could feel a headache forming.

EMP spike ready. The words appeared then faded.

"Jarvas I'm ready but they have to be within three meters of each other," he told him.

"Alright," Jarvas said, sliding to a stop.

Otmar was lowered to his feet and Jarvas immediately pointed to a large tree a few meters from them.

"Hide behind that tree, I'll draw them in." Jarvas said, laying the pry-bar down and turning to face the fallen tree. "Don't wait too long."

Otmar didn't understand but did as he was told. He forced himself to move over to the tree then lay down behind it. He could barely see Jarvas above the bush. What he saw disturbed him for some reason.

He watched Jarvas slowly raise his hands and put them on his head. He then lowered himself to his knees. He didn't move as the first of the Batarians entered the area and leveled a rifle at him.

Kaine spun to see one of the creatures hissing back at him. Its eyeless face looked right at him for an instant then switched. The Krogan roared again. Kaine saw four, five, six and more of the heads of the creatures pop up.

Slowly and deliberately Kaine turned. He saw Siru trying to stand but put a hand on her back, forcing her back down. He lay down next to her, face to face. He saw her shaking again, terror gripping her.

"Wait for it," he whispered to her.

"You're just going to lay there and die?" The Krogan roared again with a hideous laugh following.

A hiss overshadowed him. Then another joined. It sounded like the entire jungle had come to life. Kaine didn't bother to look up when he felt something rush past him. He could hear the creature's actions, moving quickly together, like when they attacked earlier.

Kaine heard a shot ring out and a wail of it hitting one of the things. Another shot, another wail. A third shot but this time there was the grunt of the Krogan.

Kaine looked up and saw one of the creatures with its jaws on his arm. Another on his leg and a third leaping up to his face. The Krogan swung its weapon and caught the animal solidly, sending it flying. He lifted his arm and bit the head off the one there.

But where he dealt with one, two more replaced it. After a few seconds at least ten of the things were on him. Slowly he was brought to his knees. Punching, biting and flailing at them. He killed two, and then three, but still more came. They piled on till he could almost not see the Krogan.

"Come on!" Kaine yelled at Siru.

It was time to go. Kaine stood and dragged Siru with him. Turning, he saw another of the creatures moving towards them. Drawing his pistol he put four shots into its face and it dropped. Kaine half dragged and half carried Siru, away from the mauling.

As the sounds of the Krogan being torn to pieces faded a new sound replaced it, rushing water. Kaine realized a river was nearby. If they could cross it they might lose the creatures and the Blue Suns together.

Hearing another hiss and a second join that one he decided to move faster. He felt Siru grip his shirt and wrench him downward. Almost stumbling to the ground he saw one of the creatures fly over his head and land awkwardly before him.

Not wasting time he kicked it as hard as possible in the face and kept moving. Dashing forward on pure adrenaline he noticed the trees all but disappear, leaving only bush that too was fading.

Quickly they found the reason.

Jarvas watched as one of the Blue Suns advanced towards him, then a second, and the other two following close behind. He had gambled that the commando would want him alive or would want at least a moment to chat before being executed.

He wasn't a fool though, in his time in the arenas he'd mastered bringing up a barrier the in the blink of an eye. Should he need to he could defend himself quickly.

The mercenaries moved towards him, spread wide, but none were looking anywhere but at Jarvas, clearly not worried about where Otmar was. The arrogance of some people, he thought. If they had any intelligence at all, they would have just fired. In the arena you never gave quarter or mercy. He would soon show these creatures neither.

"Search him," He heard a voice say from the tree line.

Jarvas tried to find the face to match the sounds but was unable to. She was staying out of sight. Seemed at least one of them had some basic aptitude.

The Batarians encircled him, each with a rifle pointed at his head. They were each within arm's reach when Otmar's voice came over his receiver.

"Three. Two. One." He said.

Instantly all four weapons, lights previously registering they were ready to go, completely died. None of them seemed to notice. Jarvas decided to hold a moment, trying to draw out the Asari. He wanted to know where she was before he engaged.

"You should probably do something," Otmar's voice again.

He was right. Time to act.

Jarvas hopped to his fist. He heard the clicks of the rifles but nothing happened. In the confusion he pulled his fist back. He felt the energy well up around him, focused it on his hand then thrust forward. Hitting the Batarian before him he unleashed the stored energy into his chest.

With a howl of pain the mercenary was lifted up off his feet and flung into the fallen tree. Jarvas spun into the spot he had occupied. Yanking the rifle from the merc on his left, he swung it like a club and connected with his head. His victim flailed to the ground with the impact.

The others began to react. The one on his right drew a long dagger from a shoulder sheath. Moving forward Jarvas grabbed the Batarian's hand. Overpowering him he forced the point of the knife upwards. It pierced under the armor of the helmet and only stopped when it punched a dent in the top.

The other still standing had drawn his melee weapon as well and lunged. Jarvas hopped backwards. He tumbled away from a slash at his face. Landing next to the pry-bar he hefted it up quickly.

He stood his ground as the thug he'd hit with the rifle stood. He too had a knife in hand and fanned out to his left. The other began moving around his right. Jarvas backed up more in response, not letting them get behind them.

They had the numbers, but he had the reach. At the moment it was a standstill. Then the commando entered the fray.

"Shit!" Kaine exclaimed.

Siru saw they were standing on the edge of a cliff. A river flowed beneath them about five meters down. She couldn't believe she hadn't heard it before. It was rushing with an immense speed. She could see tips of white as the water flowed quickly over rocks.

"Kaine," she began, but didn't finish.

More hisses from behind them. She turned as Kaine had and saw at least six of those hideous eyeless creatures moving toward them.

"Siru," Kaine said as the creatures advanced. "Remind me to apologize for this later."

She felt herself shoved. Then the feeling of weightlessness engulfed her. It was like being sucked into space aboard Otmar's ship. She could see Kaine following her over the side of the cliff.

A few heartbeats later she plunged into water.

Jarvas flipped backwards as a discharge of biotic energy impacted where he had stood. Landing lightly, he brought the pry-bar up and deflected a slash from one of the mercs. Spinning around he held the end of his weapon out in a wide sweeping arc, creating distance.

Another blast detonated behind him and he was flung forward. Rolling under the two knives as they slashed at his face, he jumped to his feet again and spun the pry-bar, again creating distance.

A quick look and he could finally see the Asari.

She was standing atop the fallen tree, flinging balls of biotic energy at him. Apparently she thought her tactic of making him stumble about awkwardly was working, that it would allow the mercenaries the opportunity to stab him. Time to relieve her of that fantasy.

Jarvas turned and saw the merc on his right lunging forward. Kneeling under the blade he drove his shoulder into the sternum of his attacker. Lifting him up, grabbing the back of his armor, Jarvas yanked and flung him to the ground.

Before the merc could react, Jarvas lifted his foot, again the feeling of biotic energy enveloping him. Concentrating on his leg and foot, he brought both down with a vicious roar. Connecting, he released the energy and the enemy's armored helmet caved in, crushing his skull in the process.

He saw the other merc make a move forward. The merc stopped, then hesitated. Jarvas did not.

With another blast of energy he pushed himself forward and drove the end of the pry-bar into the stomach of the lone merc. He forced fully half of the pry-bar's length into him. Then snatching the knife from his limp hand, lifted it up and then down onto the top of his head, plunging the weapon into his skull.

Deliberately Jarvas turned to look at the Asari. With a quick twitch he pulled the pry-bar free and the body of the Blue Suns merc fell.

In response, the commando turned and fled.

SEVENTEEN

Kaine dragged Siru out of the water. They had tumbled and cracked against any number of rocks in the river for what felt like a lifetime. He lost her more than once in the rapids but sheer blind luck had thrust them together towards the banks opposite the cliff wall.

Completely soaked, he sat down heavily next to her. She was coughing and hacking up water as she lay there. As gently as possible he removed the bag and set it down next to him. It was only now, as the adrenaline wore off, that the day's events finally hit him.

Bending his legs he let his arms rest atop his knees and lowered his head. He could not remember a time in his life that he had been more tired. Even special ops training wasn't this intense. Or maybe it was.

"Maybe I'm just getting old," he told himself with a laugh.

"What's so funny?" Siru asked in between bouts of coughing up water.

"Nothing," he said, reaching over and helping her up. "It's easier if you sit up."

She sat next to him and slowly stopped coughing. She sat with her legs stretched out, hands held together on the ground, head bowed.

"If we get attacked again," she said and trailed off.

Kaine knew what she meant. He doubted if they got into another fight he'd be able to get them out of it. If it hadn't been for the river they would have died along with that Krogan.

Absently Kaine reached into his ear and removed the receiver. Pinching it between his fingers he tossed it into the water. They weren't supposed to get wet and once they were, they were useless.

"I hate your plans by the way," Siru said, doing the same.

"Me too," Kaine said.

"How'd you know to follow those things?"

"A hunch. I figured when frightened most animals head home and maybe they'd attack the Krogan, he was the biggest threat," He said with a shrug.

"A hunch?" She asked him, a look of incredulity on her face. "You're crazy."

"I seem to be getting that a lot lately."

Siru let out a laugh and laid flat again, hands resting on her stomach. Kaine watched her for a minute as she closed her eyes. He saw her breathing become rhythmic as she dozed. He marveled at the change in her expression. Gone were the cares, worries, and threats of the day. She looked almost angelic.

If angels had teal skin.

"Siru," he said, gently shaking her shoulder. "We gotta keep moving. It's going to be night soon, I think. We at least need to move away from the river."

"Just five more minutes," she said lazily.

"Sorry young lady, it's time for school," He said, shaking her awake.

With a groan of annoyance she sat up, putting a hand to her head. She began to absently tap her thigh, just above her wound. Kaine furrowed his brow when he noticed she wasn't reacting.

"Leg numb?" He asked.

"Yes," she said without looking at him.

"Come on," Kaine said, standing.

He reached down and helped her up. When she put weight on her left leg she almost fell but caught herself on his arm.

"That's probably not good," she said worryingly.

"Is it just your leg?" He asked, pinching her hip. She replied with a grunt. "Probably localized numbing venom. Makes it easier to catch prey."

Hefting the bag in one arm he helped Siru walk away from the bank. Scanning the area he searched for a suitable place to rest. At first all he saw were trees. Trees, trees, trees.

But then he saw a pattern amongst them. There was one set not far from the bank of the river, five trees standing within a few meters of each other. The bush growth was high enough to conceal them. In short, it was just what they needed.

A few minutes later he helped her sit with her back against one of the trees. A quick search of the vicinity using his macro glasses reported no activity. She was dozing again when he returned from his sweep.

"Hey Siru," he said, tapping her shoulder again. "We need to look at that wound."

"Go ahead," she said and leaned over.

Kaine knelt down and examined the cuts and scrapes. Her pants were torn pretty badly and with the dying light it was difficult to make out how badly she was hurt. If he was going to figure it out there was only way to do it.

"Siru," he said leaning back on his haunches. "Um. I need to take your pants off."

Jarvas hopped over the fallen tree and returned to where he left Otmar picking over the bodies of the fallen Blue Suns. The immediate area was clear and he had seen no signs of pursuit.

"Anything?" They asked each other at the same time.

Jarvas stopped before him, one hand on his hip the other holding the pry-bar. He took a few deep breathes, letting them out slowly. The feeling he'd had earlier had started to fade away. Whatever this planet had done to him, his body was adjusting.

"Nothing," they both began.

Jarvas grinned and he could hear a chuckle coming from Otmar's visor. Looking down, he saw Otmar had piled up anything useful from the corpses. He saw four assault rifles, the same number of knives, two grenades, and a pistol.

"You first," Jarvas said.

"Right," Otmar said, standing. "We've got their firearms which are useless. My EMP spike is usually temporary but their guns weren't hardened. I would have to rewire them to get them functioning again."

Jarvas nodded. Would have been nice to have a few rifles to hold off any reinforcements. Looks like they would be stuck with melee weapons for now.

"What about the grenades?"

"We lucked out there," Otmar answered, picking them up. "Percussion operated frag grenades. They detonate when they hit something with sufficient force."

Nodding again Jarvas took them and placed them in the cargo pockets of his pants. Those could be useful later on.

"Okay," he said, picking up a knife and rifle, handing them to Otmar. "Let's take these with us for now," he said, picking up the rifles and pistol.

"Why?"

"If we take them our pursuers might think they work. It'll make them more cautious."

"They'll know that is false as soon as they engage."

"True, but they won't know until then. Puts another jak in our favor."

They began to walk away from the bodies and remains of battle. Jarvas actually had no idea where they were heading. The fight had completely gotten him turned around. For all he knew, they could be walking right back the way they came.

"What do you mean another jak in our favor?" Otmar asked, fumbling with the word and breaking him of his thoughts.

"It's a Batarian saying," Jarvas answered. Otmar stared at him long enough for Jarvas to realize he would have to explain. "They have a game, uses figurines and cards to play. Pretty complex. Each time you successfully capture an enemy's piece or win a round with the cards you get a little gray box they call a ja'kary, jak for short. Doesn't really translate."

"Anyway, at the end of the game you each add up your jaks and get one round in an archaic pistol for each of them. Then you fight with the weapons."

"That's barbaric," Otmar replied, shocked.

"Well, that pretty much sums up Batarians," Jarvas said with a laugh.

They continued to walk in silence for a while until Jarvas heard the sounds of rushing water. He directed them towards it and a short time later they arrived at the edge of a cliff overlooking a wide river.

Kneeling down Jarvas looked over the side and estimated it was at least a thirty meter drop to the water's surface. Standing up he tossed the pistol and rifles into the water. Otmar did the same with his knife.

"No wait!" Jarvas exclaimed as the blade went flying. "We could have used that."

"Sorry," Otmar said sheepishly. "We could go back."

"No," Jarvas said with a sigh. "We'll survive without it."

They walked again, along the edge of the cliff heading upstream. Jarvas enjoyed listening to the sounds of the water as it went on its merry way to wherever it emptied. The sounds of nature always had a way of calming his thoughts and emotions. He could just drift away, lost in his own mind if he wanted.

"Jarvas," Otmar said, louder this time.

"I'm sorry, what?" He asked.

"The commando? No sign of her?"

"No, nothing. She probably returned to her ship."

"Seems odd they didn't take more people with them to get us."

"I bet they never thought we were right there. Just dumb luck and terrible chance I guess."

Silence again. The light continued to die around them. Night was coming and Jarvas had no way of knowing what new creatures hunted in the darkness. Sometimes, those were the most dangerous.

"Can we stop for a minute?" Otmar asked.

Jarvas slowed to a stop near the edge of the cliff. As Otmar sat down, dangling his feet over the side, he crouched down next to him facing into the jungle. Scanning the area revealed no threats and he couldn't hear anything approaching them. The only sounds was the river that rushed by a few meters below.

"What's it like?" Otmar asked suddenly.

"What?" Jarvas asked in reply.

"Being a male Asari, what's that like?"

"I don't know. What's it like being a male Quarian?"

Jarvas watched as Otmar tilted his head as if pondering the question he'd posed. After a few quiet moments he spoke again. "No I mean what's it like being the only one of your kind?" Looking up at him.

"What's it like being the only male born to an Asari woman in over seventy thousand years?"

"That long?"

"I guess that's how long it took to erase the history of my gender."

"Hmmm," Otmar commented. "Then yes, what's that like?"

There was a naïve quality to this Quarian that made him seem almost childlike. As he thought about the question though a slight frown formed. He reflected on his three hundred years of hiding, killing, and deception, all the things he'd done to survive.

What was it like to be a male Asari?

"It's awful."

"You're funny Kaine," Siru said, rolling her eyes. Jokes, always jokes at the worst of times.

"Look, it's getting dark fast. I need to make sure the wounds aren't infected or," he said with a shrug, "I don't know, infested."

"Infested?" Siru replied, staring at him.

"Alien world, you know how that goes."

"Yes I do Kaine. I've founded colonies before."

"Well whooped dee doo," Kaine said. "Doesn't help you here now does it?"

She glared at him and didn't respond. He must have lost his mind if he thought she'd just peel off her pants for him, no matter what his excuse was.

"Come on Siru, I'm tired," he said taking a deep breath and letting it out. "I'd feel better knowing you'll be alright."

"You would?" She said, looking at his face.

They stared at each other a few heartbeats. He was right of course. The thing that bit her could have left any number of disgusting things behind. It would be best to find out now than after it was too late.

"Fine," she said.

She worked at her belt a moment before undoing it. Slowly she shimmied her pants down to her knees. Thankfully she was wearing sport undergarments to match her bra. No free show for him tonight.

"All the way," he told her. "You have a gash on your calf."

A few tugs later and she had her pants off. She rolled onto her side when he told her to. Looking down she saw half a dozen teeth marks in her thigh, two deep slashes on her hip and a few shallower ones on her calf.

"Looks like clean cuts and scratches," he said as he placed a hand on her.

She felt a tingling inside as he gently moved her leg to get a good look. The feeling didn't come from her wounds though, it was centered on her stomach. Suddenly, even though she felt cold before, her face began to warm up.

"I don't see any discoloration," he reported, leaning down and sniffing her thigh. "No odors."

"Should there be?" Siru asked, staring at him.

"Necrosis of the skin sometimes follows a venomous bite," he said, looking at her and then putting on his macro glasses. She noticed the left lens had a crack in it. "On humans it's a very pungent smell. I'd imagine it would be the same for you guys."

He moved down closer again, his hand and fingers moving about squeezing and pinching. It caused no sensations at all. Not in her leg at least.

"You've already clotted so that's definitely good," he said, leaning back taking and off his glasses. "I think you look good."

She smirked at him.

"I mean your leg looks fine." He said then continued when she grinned at him. "Jesus, I mean the wounds don't look infected."

"Or infested?"

"No," he said with a laugh. "I think the venom was just to slow you down. Hopefully it wears off soon."

"Hopefully," she said, awkwardly pulling her pants back up.

"I'll check again in the morning and apply medi-gel as needed," he said, walking away.

She watched Kaine sit down heavily and let out a long sigh. He looked more tired than before, almost on the verge of collapse. They'd gone through a lot over the last few hours.

Abruptly Siru shivered at the cold around her. Wrapping her arms around herself she held tight, trying to keep the warmth in.

"Here," Kaine said, opening the bag.

He pulled out his armored jacket and laid it on her like a blanket. It was indeed heavy but she immediately felt warmer. Kaine sat down with his back against another tree facing her, letting out a grunt as he did so.

"We should check your bandages," she said.

"Tomorrow."

The dry jacket felt good over her. The bag must have been waterproof. She vaguely remembered having extra clothing, but no energy remained to search for them.

"Looks like we're staying the night," he commented.

"Think it'll get chilly?" She asked.

"Maybe, but I doubt it'll be too bad. Jungles aren't known for their cold snaps."

Siru tried to adjust herself into a more comfortable position. Moving her arms to reposition the jacket, she felt something in one of the inner pockets. Reaching in with her fingers she removed a small gold colored disc that fit easily into the palm of her hand.

"Kaine?" She asked and he shook his head slightly as if waking up.

"Yeah?"

"What's this?" She said, holding up the item.

"I can't really see," he replied, moving over with a grunt of effort.

Crouching down he took it from her and examined it. He let out one quiet laugh and a half smile formed on his face. Leaning back he sat down fully next to her.

"You asked me what happened on Earth," he said, putting the disc back in her hand. "It's that."

"Are you sure about this?" Otmar asked nervously.

"Better than being exposed," Jarvas replied.

"True."

Otmar stared at the massive fissure in the cliff face. In the pre-dusk night they had almost missed it. Or to be more honest, Otmar had almost fallen into it. They spent nearly half an hour following the slight decline down to the river's banks and now stood before the crack.

The fracture ran from the sandy ground through to the top and was wide enough for Otmar and Jarvas plus one other to stand side by side. He watched Jarvas walk in and as he did, he vanished from sight.

Normally Otmar would turn on his night vision but that would eat up much of his reserves. Without power his oxygen refreshers would fail and he would suffocate in his suit. He had to just wait for him to return.

Otmar gazed around their surroundings more closely. The river itself flowed a few meters from where he stood, its less than gentle water crashing against rocks and creating splashes on the bank. He could see more trees and bush across from him, though there were few of either where he stood or along the opposite bank.

Looking up Otmar took in a breath.

In the rapidly darkening sky above him the stars were just beginning to appear, little dots of light against a backdrop of purest black. Patterns began to form in his mind, images of home he could almost see in the stars. He had no idea what the constellations of this system were called or if they even had any. That didn't stop him guessing.

But it wasn't the brightening stars that took his breath. It was the greenish, reddish dancing light between him and the stars. It was almost like two colored waves painted on the night sky, swirling lazily amongst themselves.

Aurora. The word appeared for only a second.

He'd only ever seen them in pictures or vids, never for himself. Otmar didn't spend much time planetside on Pilgrimage, too dangerous. But this was one of the sites of the universe he always wanted to see for himself.

Otmar extended a hand upwards. The lights were so vivid he felt he could reach out and touch them. As he did so his arm was bathed in cascades of red then green then red again, interchanging, intermixing over his enviro-suit. It was hypnotizing to watch, like the two colors were fighting in a rhythmic and fanciful sort of dance.

"Beautiful," Jarvas said next to him.

"Yes," Otmar replied calmly. "It's the collision of energetic particles colliding with atoms in the upper atmosphere," he told Jarvas, watching the play of lights in the sky. "Feels more like the sky is trying out new patterns and colors, seeing if something else fits."

"Never thought of it that way," Jarvas replied.

Otmar hadn't felt this at ease since leaving the Citadel two days ago. That thought struck him as funny somehow and in response he laughed.

"What?" Jarvas asked.

"I can't believe it's only been two days," Otmar answered.

Two standard days, six hours, seven minutes, forty one seconds. A time appeared in his visor then faded away.

"Since what?"

"Since we came to find you," Otmar said, turning and looking at the male Asari.

The light of the aurora played over Jarvas's facial features, casting an eerie green shade then a blood red tinge. He struck a strong visage though, even in the odd colors. He had an angular and pleasing face, well proportioned. He was as tall as Kaine but not quite as big. He also didn't look tired all the time.

Like Siru he had an athletic build, something common to the Asari he'd seen. He was covered in dried blood, none of it his own. He held the bloodied pry-bar in one hand as he watched the sky.

"Want to see something interesting?" Jarvas asked.

"Sure."

Jarvas turned quickly and walked back into the crevice. Cautiously Otmar followed him and it took only a few steps for the red and green coloring of the aurora to vanish. His visor automatically adjusted to the low light of the new environment. As his vision adjusted he gazed around in shock.

"What is it?" Siru said holding the disc in her hand.

Kaine didn't speak, he only stared at the recording in her hand. He hadn't heard it in a couple of years. It was the last gift his sister had given him, the only thing he'd received from Earth after running.

Licking his lips he leaned forward and tapped the top of it. Slowly a recording of a girl's voice came forth.

"'Appy birf-ay to you, 'appy birf-ay to you. 'Appy birf-ay to Eee-tan. 'Appy birf-ay to you," then everything was quiet.

Kaine felt his emotions trying to betray him. He hadn't heard Lillian's voice in a long time, only getting reports from friends that visited her for him and deposited his credits into her account to pay her accommodations. Kaine had all but forgotten what she sounded like.

"She sounds adorable," Siru said gently.

Kaine could only nod. He remembered the last time he saw her, a few days after his mother had died. His sister had cried for hours, not fully understanding, only grasping that her mom would never come to see her again.

Kaine blinked rapidly and took a deep ragged breath. He wiped his hand across his eyes quickly and looked up at Siru. She looked sad for him, even though she could have no possible idea what was wrong.

"She is," Kaine said agreeing with her.

"Kaine," Siru said, looking at the disc. "What happened?"

"I guess it's time to get into that?" Kaine asked.

"The way this day has been going, we may not get another chance." Siru replied.

Siru met his gaze steadily. Kaine let his eyes wander away, looking at nothing or more honestly nothing here. His gaze took him back in time, three years. But he couldn't start there. He had to go back further.

"She's my older sister, by two years." Kaine began talking but not looking at Siru. He knew if he did, he wouldn't be able to continue. "She was exposed to Eezo in utero, causing her developmental deficiencies. She was born with her brain unable to process signals to her arms or legs and only rudimentary speech abilities. Her mental capacity was cut in half at least and even now she's more like a teenager than anything."

"When I was born, it wasn't too bad. She was so small. The first memory I have is of her sitting next me. She was six. I was four and I was twice her size."

An image appeared in his mind: Christmas morning, opening gifts with her. Nothing but smiles and laughter then. It was the kind of day you relived over and over whenever you felt at your lowest. He couldn't really remember a day as good as that one since.

"Anyway, when I was eleven my parents heard about a program that would help children exposed to Eezo live more normally. It was a radical set of training for biotics. My father thought if it could help her, they should try it. My mother wasn't so sure but they signed her up."

"I remember telling her it would be okay, that I would see her in a few weeks. I remember she looked terrified. But she believed me. She believed me."

"Pretty impressive, yes?" Jarvas asked.

Otmar stood only a handful of steps inside the fissure head, moving in all directions, taking in the scene. In the immediate area was nothing more than a short cave, dark stone all around. Water dripped into small pools on the floor, rivulets streaming down and out of the mouth. It wasn't these that Jarvas wanted to show off. What he did lay further ahead.

"It's wonderful," Otmar said quietly.

About five meters in front of them a massive cavern system opened up. Jarvas could see twists disappearing into corners and pathways, dipping down into holes. The rock walls were smoother than where they now stood, not as if they were hewn by tools, but rather worn away by a flow of water that had stopped eons ago. All of that paled in comparison to what was allowing him to see all of this.

The walls, ceilings, and some of the floor were covered in a deep greenish glow, like lights of a starship colored to mimic grass. It permeated the surrounding area and exposed the hidden cave system the fissure hinted at.

Walking forward Jarvas reached out and touched some of the light. As his fingers brushed what looked like moss the lights dimmed instantly. Pulling his hand away he felt a smile cross his lips. It was like he was a child again, finding something new and amazing. Reaching out again he waved his hand over the wall making more of the lights fade.

"Bioluminescent moss," Otmar said. "Incredible."

"Doesn't seem real, does it?" Jarvas asked, continuing to blot out some of the light.

"I know people on the Flotilla that would love to study this."

As he moved further into the cave system the moss he'd tapped originally began to light up again. It seemed the moss would hide itself for a short time then bloom back once the danger had passed.

Another smile, wider this time, crossed his lips as he moved both hands around. He moved along the rock walls touching here and swiping there. He brushed a pattern into the colored moss, making it dim in certain spots, spelling out two words.

"What do you think?" He asked stepping back and standing next to Otmar.

"Otmar and Jarvas'," Otmar said, reading what was on the wall. "That's so neat."

Jarvas laughed then. The exuberance of the discovery, of seeing something no one else probably ever had, caused him to feel a little giddy. As he grinned into the deep but pale light the words began to fade away. Otmar's faded first, then, after lingering a few more seconds, Jarvas's too faded. After it was like the words had never been written.

"Been a long time since I experienced something like this," Jarvas said, looking around again.

"Why is your life awful?" Otmar asked unexpectedly.

Jarvas turned to look at the Quarian, the eerie light changing the colors of his suit into light greens and dark emeralds. The eyes that shone behind the visor became more vibrant as they stood before the bioluminescence.

"Otmar," he began slowly, "I have to hide, every day of my life, not because I'm a criminal or I've done something wrong or I'm a villain. I hide because simply being alive endangers everything the Asari stand for and have built. I'm a threat to them and if I don't hide well enough, they'll catch me and they'll kill me."

Siru could see the pain on his face, even in the fading eerie greenish red light that filtered down to them from the sky. She knew element zero was dangerous, but she had no idea it could cause such trauma.

When he spoke again, she could hear the emotions in his voice. There was anger there, a good deal of it. But she also heard regret, sadness, and bitter misery. Almost like what she'd felt from Jarvas.

"We went to visit her unexpectedly. We had been told we could go whenever we wanted. That was a lie of course. The company doing the research was hoping people would drop off their disabled family members and forget they existed."

"So they tried to stop us but we forced our way in." He stopped again and coughed, taking another long moment. "She had bruises on her face and cuts on her arms. She wouldn't open her eyes, not wanting to see what punishment would come next."

"We got her to look at us after convincing her it was really her family. She was instantly excited to see us and let out a little yelp of joy. We told her it was going to be alright. We took her home and the people responsible were imprisoned. My father though, he never got over it. Lilly got better quickly and moved on from what happened. However, my father blamed himself for everything that had happened. I watched it tear him and my mother apart."

"One night he rented a room in a hotel, turned on the water in the tub, and swallowed enough pills to kill a Krogan. They found him a few days later."

"Years after, I'd been in the service a while getting ready for my fourth trip through ICT. I got a call that my mother had been in a fatal skycar accident, pronounced dead at the scene."

"I haven't thought about that in a long time, never got the chance to really absorb it. Everything went to hell so quickly afterwards."

Siru watched Kaine look down at his hands as they lay in the grass. He put one of them to his face and pinched his nose, slightly rubbing his eyes.

"When I told her about our mother it was awful. I'd never felt more pity in my life for anyone than I did for her at that moment. Nothing had ever been easy for her and now she lost her mom. It tore me up inside to see what it did to her."

"Later that night I was drinking, heavily. At the bar was a Major named Aran Yung, my commanding officer, a real son of a bitch who loved nothing more than riling you up so he could punish you. He was the poster child for conduct unbecoming."

"He came after me pretty hard, just spewing nonsensical bullshit. On any other night it wouldn't have mattered. But that night, with all that was going on?"

Kaine slowly turned his head side to side. The look on his face was pure murder.

"Well, needless-to-say if it had just been the two of us he'd be dead now. As it was, MPs arrived and took me in."

"Didn't take long for the story to get around. I was stripped of my N3 status and the pay that went with it, busted down to private while I awaited my Court Martial. I was staring at a prison sentence of no less than ten years. I was going to be made an example of."

"I would like to say that was the dumbest thing I've ever done but a few weeks before my trial I topped it big time. I was allowed to see my sister. Security was light. They didn't think I'd pull

any stunts. Before we made it to the hospital I hijacked my ride, and in a blur I can't even really remember, I made it off world."

"Now I was facing desertion charges along with assault. The penalties for that were severe, and seeing it was so close to the end of the Turian fights it included death. Going back wasn't much of an option if I wanted to stay alive, much less out of prison."

"And that's how you ended up on the Citadel?" Siru said, her heart aching for him.

"More or less. Everything had fallen apart so quickly. I'm honestly surprised I ran and didn't end up like my father."

Kaine stopped again. A few deep breathes and he continued with his story.

"It was a few months later when I got word from an old buddy that my parent's estate had run out of money and she'd be transferred into a state run facility. One that hadn't gotten the most glowing of reviews."

Kaine looked away now, into the forest, at the canopy above them everywhere but at Siru. Siru could sense him struggling with something. When he spoke, his voice cracked with emotion.

"I told him I didn't care and ended the call."

She watched a tear streak down his face. Siru knew better than to comfort him. She had been a councilor by proxy long enough to know when someone had something they needed to get out. When to support them and when to let them stand on their own was one of the first things she had learned. Though it killed her to just sit there, she knew it was best for her to do so.

"Not long after my birthday I received that," he continued pointing at the disc in her hand. "It arrived by courier with no note. I played it and." he stopped again.

He sucked in a breath quickly and sniffled. He didn't bother wiping the tears away as he stared off into the distance.

"She had no one left but me. She was alone in a hospital and her mother had died only a few weeks earlier. All she wanted was for me to get that, to have a birthday present."

Siru watched a sob break through his defenses, then another and another in an uncontrollable torrent and he put his head in his hands. He cried. Siru stood and moved to him quickly, wrapping her arms around him. He didn't move or budge, just sat there letting his anguish fill the night.

She could feel tears of her own streaming unchecked down her face. She had nothing to say, no words of encouragement or wisdom from a life lived for over four hundred years. All she could

offer at the moment was her support, to give him the opportunity to release this grief, to purge himself of whatever he needed to let go.

They sat there together, she comforting him with her embrace and he letting his emotions, pent up for who knows how long, flow free. Neither moved, not even when the greenish light faded and their little circle of trees plunged into complete darkness.

EIGHTEEN

"I need pants!" Otmar yelled himself awake.

He looked around quickly, having just suffered one of the oddest dreams of his entire life. He couldn't recall many details, but he had had the feeling he was late for an examination and couldn't find any clothing to wear.

Shaking his head to clear the last tendrils of the dream from his mind, he stood. He was within the fissure in the cliff face where he had retired after enjoying the sights of the moss. The aurora had continued a few minutes longer and the last thing he remembered was seeing Jarvas sitting next to the river.

Walking out into the morning light, he guessed it was morning, Otmar looked around. Jarvas was nowhere to be seen. There were tracks, his and Jarvas's from the night before, on the ground near the river. Following the line he saw a pile of clothing lying in a pile near the water.

Walking over he crouched down and saw it was Jarvas's clothing.

"Jarvas?" Otmar asked, trying not to be too loud.

The clothing was piled neatly a few meters from the edge of the water, the prybar lying next to it. Nothing looked hastily done and there were no signs of a struggle that he could determine, no blood or bodies. Otmar saw nothing that made him think something foul had transpired.

The night had gone by uneventfully. No mercenaries or Asari or scary Krogan befell them. There was no gunfire or explosions to mar his rest or keep him up, just a long and deep sleep, the sort that always left him ravenous in the morning.

Otmar placed a hand against his grumbling midsection and sighed heavily.

"I hope we find Kaine and Siru. I'm starving," he said to himself dejectedly.

Giving the area another look Otmar turned to the cavern entrance, hoping a little scientific investigation would take his mind off the lack of food and the missing Jarvas. As he passed into the shade of the cave mouth he felt the temperature drop quickly and it took him a few moments to adjust to the lack of sunlight.

As his surroundings came into focus he was mildly shocked to see the moss, which had glowed impressively the night before, was completely gone. Stepping forward he got a closer look at the walls and saw a dark carpet of green lining its surface.

“Hmmm. Maybe it only becomes bioluminescent at night?” he asked out loud to no one.

Perhaps the aurora causes a reaction with fauna of this world, causing the glow you saw the previous night.

“Intriguing. Charged particles drifting to this area might be the reason behind it. But that seems hard to prove given the data,” he replied, running his gloved hand over the moss. When no reaction occurred he added, “Shame.”

If we had a spectral-analyzer we could compare the moss and cavern to the surrounding area before and after an aurora. This would allow for more data and a better conclusion.

“Well if we had one of those I wouldn't be...” Otmar stopped.

With a lift of his left hand his omni-tool came to life. A screen popped up and data began streaming to him, signal decryption, sonar bursts, and even a quick diagnostic of his suit and equipment.

Caution: power reserves low. Suggest secession of current activities.

“I didn't ask for an update on power levels,” Otmar said, continuing to work.

It wasn't strange for his VI to act semi-autonomously at times. It was programed to mimic speech patterns and idiosyncrasies to appear more like a living assistant than a virtual tool. Over the years, Otmar had come to think of it as a friend, akin to an imaginary one he'd had as a child. But this was different.

He ran the last exchange back over in his mind. The VI used the word 'we', Otmar had never seen that before. It also gave a plausible explanation for the state of the cavern and a suggestion on how to go about finding answers. None of this was by itself evidence of something wrong, but the fact it had done so without a direct line of questions from himself was incredibly strange.

A beep confirmed nothing out of the usual with his systems or the omni-tool.

“What is going on?” He asked. When no answer came he said again more forcefully, “I asked you a question!”

Before an answer could come he heard a loud splash from the river.

Ethan Kaine submerged his head into the flowing cool waters of the river, shocking himself wide away. Feeling flush since waking up, the sun was rising and the temperature along with it. It was primed to be an uncomfortable day.

He pulled his head out of the water with a gasp of air. He was kneeling before the river not far from where he and Siru had dragged themselves out the night before. Washing his hands he stood and shook his head to remove some of the excess water. He was rewarded with a minor dizzy spell.

The river here was at least twenty meters across and who knew how deep. He could still see white disturbances as the water rushed over rocks. The cliff face across from him was twice as high as it was where they had jumped. Looking downstream he saw no end to it, just river, cliff, and jungle.

Rubbing his forehead, Kaine turned and walked back into the little grove of five trees where he and Siru had spent the night. Crossing into the shadow of the canopy, the temperature dropped slightly, but the humidity rose in conjunction.

Siru yawned and began to move as he walked past her, lightly removing the jacket she had fallen asleep under.

Crossing to their bag of supplies he opened it and removed another of the knives, sheathed it, then added the grenades to his belt. Checking that his pistol was still in good condition he grabbed the bag and turned.

Siru had moved out of the grove to the river. Reaching down, he retrieved his jacket and followed.

"I see your leg is better," Kaine said, but she apparently didn't hear.

He stood a short distance from her as she too plunged her head into the rushing water. She yanked her head up and shook as he had done. If Siru were a human woman with hair, at this the point she would have lavishly flipped her head to force her wet hair behind her.

Instead she used a finger to close one nostril then blew through the other with immense force. Repeating the action with the other, Kaine watched little bursts of mucus spray forth.

"Sorry," she said sheepishly. "My nose gets stuffy at night sometimes."

Kaine made no reply but scanned the area above and passed her. He had no idea where they were or if anyone else, like mercenaries for example, knew either. He figured they had been tumbling in the water for at least ten to fifteen minutes. Looking at how quickly the river was flowing, that could mean they were hundreds of meters downstream.

"Think this is safe?" she asked, kneeling before the river hands cupped and full over water.

"I hope so. I drank at least a liter or two myself already."

Kaine took a deep breath, tasting the water in the air and the smell of the trees around him. It reminded him a bit of the forests where he grew up, minus the reptilian wolf monsters.

Siru drank her fill quickly then stood and stretched. She reminded Kaine of a cat waking from a nap. Standing fully she clapped her hands together, rose to her toes, then leaned backwards. She almost made a complete C only in reverse. With a hop she snapped back to vertical stance.

“Goddess,” she was saying, snapping him out of his thoughts. “I haven’t been that tired ever.”

“Was a busy day,” Kaine said. “Speaking of which, let’s have a look at your leg.”

“Do I get to keep my pants on this time?” she asked.

“Unfortunately,” he told her as he kneeled down next to her.

The wounds had clotted and begun to scab over. He still saw no discoloration that might indicate infections. Everything seemed fine. He couldn’t help but notice that she was in excellent shape. Calf, thigh, and hip combined to create a very appealing physical form. He already knew this of her, but in the growing light of morning along the flowing river it caused him to fixate a bit. Maybe this semi-romantic environment was getting to him.

Siru cleared her throat, bringing him back again.

“Everything okay?” she said with a smile.

“Sorry I was just thinking,” he began, flustered as if he were a teenager caught staring at a girl across the room. He looked up and she was grinning at him. He coughed then added with a short smile of his own, “need to apply some medi-gel and a proper bandage.”

Standing, he got the medi-gel and bandages from their supplies. The jar was a little less than half full so he would have to be stingy with its application. A few minutes later he had her thigh and calf wrapped with the bandage and a few strips of space tape to keep them secured.

“All set,” he said, patting her thigh as he stood. “Give it a test walk. Make sure you can move.”

She did as he instructed and walked a short distance away, then returned.

“Good?”

“Good.”

Nodding Kaine moved to pack up the supplies again but she stopped him with a hand on his forearm.

“Your turn,” she added.

“Oh right,” he said when she pointed at the torn bit of fabric on his chest.

Removing his shirt rewarded him with a shooting pain from his back. He heard a tearing sound from the bandages coming free. His shirt and the bandages had stuck together in the night.

“Goddess Kaine,” she said, standing behind him. “You should start trying to avoid getting hurt.”

“Brilliant tactical assessment general,” He said, adding a grunt of surprise when she smacked the back of his head.

“Hush,” she added.

“How do they look?” Kaine asked her seriously.

“Burnt,” she answered.

“That’s not very encouraging.”

“Well some of the blisters are gone and the reddish tint around the deeper cuts is less intense.”

“See? That’s encouraging.”

He heard her let out a quick laugh as she circled to his front. She gently took his arm and looked at the slash marks in his bicep. They were shallow, nothing more than a grazing. Nodding, she looked at his chest. These were a little deeper but again, nothing to worry about.

She looked up intently at his face. He was about to ask what she was staring at when she moved her hand up and touched his forehead just above his left eye. A spark of pain fired through him and he grunted again.

“That’s going to need some gel,” she said.

Siru dabbed a little of the medicine on her finger then applied it to his forehead. Pain he hadn’t even known he’d been feeling vanished. Moving behind him again she applied a little to his back. A few minutes later and he had bandages around his arm, on his back and chest and a small bit on his forehead.

“You look terrible,” she added, tossing the jar into the open bag.

“At least I have all my parts,” he added, pointing at the side of her head.

Her eyes flashed with mock anger and she punched the side of his arm, right in the cuts. He hopped away with a yelp and rubbed the wound gently.

“Your bedside manner could use some work,” he said, grinning.

“Shut up,” she replied with her own smile. “Put your shirt on. You’re scaring the animals.”

“Don’t I know it,” he said, doing as ordered.

Pulling his armored jacket on and hefting the bag over one shoulder he rose and saw Siru playing with an object in her hand. She was holding the recording of his sister, lightly moving it between her fingers, the sort of thing a gambler would do with a credit chit when bored.

“Kaine,” she said, letting the disc fall into her palm and looking up at him. “About last night.”

She didn’t say more, just walked forward, took his hand, and placed the recording in his palm. She leaned up and placed a light kiss on his cheek then turned and began walking upstream.

Jarvas swam against the current of the river, leaving his clothing on the bank with the pry-bar. As he kicked against the speeding water he pondered what he’d learned about his new companions since being awakened. Experiences involving Siru, Kaine, and Otmar, events he’d never been a part of, flashed into his mind. Joinings were intense for him. He often had difficulty separating his memories from those he had joined with. The freshest or most intense experiences stuck with him permanently, and Siru had a few strong memories about each of them.

As he swim and his mind began to wander, Siru’s memories forced their way into his thoughts. He watched, as she had, a rocket explode in what looked like a storage room.. The light blinded him, the noise deafened him, and a feeling of sheer terror gripped his heart.. Had he just watched Kaine die? Blown to pieces? Of course not, but at that time Siru didn’t know.

Jarvas felt, from the joining with Siru, how she suffered seeing Kaine beaten and burned. How she ached to take his pain away. How elated she felt when Kaine survived yet another combat. Against Jarvas’s own will, fully knowing that these memories, these feelings, were not fully his own, began to care for Kaine too.

Jarvas kicked harder against the river, trying desperately to flee the memories he knew would never truly fade. The exercise felt good. After being in stasis for so long his body, used to the stresses of the arenas and trekking through wastelands and abandoned cities to find odd pieces of lost information, hungered for activity. Swimming had seemed like as good a place to work off that excess energy as any, at least until thoughts that were not his own took over.

He relived conversations at a club he’d only recognized from Siru. Conversations in an apartment he remembered intimately but had never visited. Conversations on the ship he’d seen when he woke up, when it was still in one piece. On the ship Jarvas felt the anticipation build as Otmar told a story of his automaton, built with his father. He watched and felt the budding

friendship between the three of them as they chatted aimlessly, passing through Omega's asteroid field. He watched the memory play out as vividly as if he'd been in the room, as if he *were* Siru. As the story came to its climax he felt a surge of joy hearing that Otmar and his father had one.

Holding his breath, he had been swimming submerged for ten minutes. He kept time in his head, focusing on the rhythmic advance of seconds to calm his heart, keep his body at ease, and keep the memories at bay.

The longest he'd ever been able to go without surfacing was a little over fifteen minutes. He liked to practice this as it could be one of those odd skills that saved your life one day. As the eleven minute mark approached he decided not to push it. With a few quick kicks he reached the bottom then flew upwards.

With a splash and gasp of breath Jarvas burst through the surface. Instantly he felt the sunshine on his face and a light breeze against his skin. Opening his eyes slightly to allow them time to adjust to the brightness it took him a moment to see his surroundings.

He was treading water in the middle of the slowly meandering river with the cliff face on his left. Looking upstream he saw mostly the same: trees, river, and sandy banks. The cliff itself sloped downward and became one with the rest of the riverbank a handful of meters away from him.

The sounds of quickly moving feet caused his head to snap towards the cave entrance. Nearly falling out of the hole in the cliff was Otmar, one hand on the rock wall the other held up in front of his visor.

"Who's that?" He asked.

"Just me, Otmar," Jarvas replied, and kicked to shore.

Quickly stepping out it took him only a handful of seconds to get dressed. He felt dirty almost the instant he put the pants and shirt on. Both covered in the blood of others, he had tried to clean them in the river before swimming, but to no avail. It would take more than just river water to clean them.

"Oh good," Otmar said walking forward.

"Why's that?" Jarvas asked, watching him and nearly hearing relief in his voice.

"Just some odd stuff with my omni-tool," he said with a wave of his hand.

"If you say so," Jarvas replied absently.

Jarvas walked past him and retrieved the pry-bar. Standing, he thought he heard something moving up above them, along the cliff face. Otmar walked over and began to say something and was silenced with a look.

The sound grew louder. Something was moving toward them. He watched the very tops of the trees that overlooked the river. Slowly they began to sway, then rustle harder and faster.

“Jarvas!” Otmar said, and yanked him back into the crevice.

Barely a heartbeat after hiding, the Blue Suns ship coasted by overhead, mass effect generators roaring. Jarvas got a good look at it now: over thirty meters in length, half as wide, with a pair of large powerful engines interspersed with smaller ones propelling it forward.

It was silver with a dark blue underside and a white sunburst painted over it. Two fins extended from each side. He saw no telltale markings of weapon emplacements or tubes for firing missiles. It was an impressive looking vessel to say the least.

“We’re going to steal that?” Otmar asked disbelievingly.

“What size crew would it take to fly a vessel of that sort?” Jarvas asked in reply.

“Unknown, there are many factors that go into such a determination. For example, complexity of systems, mission parameters, degree of VI integration, etcetera. “

“Otmar,” Jarvas cut him off. “Estimate for me. Could the four of us do it?”

“With the help of my VI?” Otmar asked. “Yes, we could.”

Jarvas watched the vessel make a slow survey of the river bank. It hovered in place above the trees across the waterway from them. He wondered if they’d been spotted when the engine noise grew and it started to move off downstream.

As it flew off, something fell or was thrown out of the ship. It crashed through the trees to land in the bushes.

“What was that?” They asked, looking at each other.

“Mind if I ask something about your sister?” Siru said to Kaine.

They had been walking for a few minutes just inside the tree line, far enough in so they wouldn’t be easily spotted from the cliff or air, but close enough that they could get to the water in a hurry if need be.

“Sure,” he replied, watching the surrounding area.

“I was curious what treatments she needs.”

Kaine nodded but didn’t immediately respond. She saw a look of concentration cross his face and he was quiet for some time. She was about to tell him it wasn’t important when he answered.

“Among her numerous physical ailments suffered from the Eezo exposure, the biggest thing she endures is polycystic kidney disease.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s a hereditary genetic disorder. Basically her kidneys form fluid sacks all over them, causing massive swelling which impairs their ability to filter bad stuff from her body. In extreme cases it can cause problems with other organs.”

“But it’s treatable?” Siru asked.

“Yes, she gets regular doses of an artificial molecule called,” he stopped and furrowed his brow in thought. “Vasapresson? I think.” Shaking his head he began walking again. “Anyway, it keeps the swelling down and allows for a machine to do the filtering for her.”

Siru thought about this. If his sister had to have regular applications of this medication and a machine to do the work of her kidneys, she probably spent a lot of time in hospitals. That sort of thing isn’t cheap.

“So if she doesn’t get the medicine her kidneys swell again and...” She let the last word hang. “Yeah.”

They kept walking, heading back upstream glancing at the cliff face opposite them. She hoped they would find a way back up it, one they could just walk up. She did not feel like climbing a flat rock wall today.

“But she’s doing okay?” Siru asked to take her mind off her growling stomach.

“Yes, though lately she’s been regressing.” He said. “Doctors think it has something to do with the Eezo but they don’t know for sure. Her body might be becoming resistant to the Vasa stuff.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, placing a hand on his arm.

He nodded and they walked in silence again. Siru couldn’t imagine living with something like that hanging over you. It must be what parents went through with children, worrying about them all the time.

“However,” Kaine went on, interrupting her thoughts, “she’s not in any pain and the treatments are working so far.”

“Is she happy though?”

“I suppose,” Kaine said with a shrug. “She loves the nurses and they let her watch all the vids she wants. But that’s all she can do, you know? I don’t know how happy someone can be like that.”

Siru could only nod slightly. She couldn't imagine not being able to move or take care of yourself. Being dependent on others for everything.

"But like I said, she gets to watch all the vids she likes and that makes her at least content. The ward she's in is expensive as hell, but the people there are excellent. It's been worth the credits."

"Does she have any favorites?" Siru asked, turning the conversation to something more lighthearted.

"Oh yeah. You know that one, the Turian living with the Salarian and Hanar?"

"Dimorphic Oppositions?"

"Yes that one. God I hate that vid," he said with sigh then looked at her with a smile. "She loves it though. Can't get enough."

"It is pretty terrible," she added with a chuckle.

It was nice to see an honest smile on his face again. The man she held last night was a broken shell of himself. The transformation was so stark she wondered if the confident, snide, and interesting person she'd grown to enjoy being near would return or if the tears had changed him for good. She was glad he had returned.

Siru was about to inquire about other vids his sister enjoyed when Kaine grabbed her arm to stop her.

Instantly she did so and looked around. She didn't see or hear any threats, none from the water or cliffs. Kaine drew his pistol and pulled her further into the jungle.

"What is it?" she whispered.

He didn't answer, only pointed up. It was then she heard the whine of starship engines. Quickly the shadow of a ship fell on them as it flew by. Gazing up at it she could make out a blue underbelly with a white stylized sun painted on it.

It cruised by heading downstream, the noise fading with it. She watched as Kaine rushed out into the open and put on his macro glasses. He watched it for a long while before coming back to her.

"Come on, I think I saw where it landed."

"We're not doing this," Otmar said vehemently.

It had been only a few minutes since the last of the engine noise faded to silence. In the interim Jarvas had spent the time trying to convince him to traverse the river. Otmar had never bothered learning to swim and was damned if he was about to start today.

“Yes we are,” Jarvas was saying.

“No. In case you don’t know, Quarrians spend precious little time swimming. If you wanted me to put it into a percentage it would be close to zero. Some would actually and rightly say zero.”

“It’ll be fine,” Jarvas reassured him. “I’ll help you, I promise.”

“Oh right, this coming from a former slave,” Otmar said.

Jarvas blinked once in apparent shock. Otmar was instantly embarrassed. He never really spoke like that to people. He didn't like being rude or hurtful.

They looked away from each other then. Otmar searched upstream for a shallow area to cross. Finding nothing he looked back and saw Jarvas just staring across the river.

“I’m sorry,” Otmar began, but Jarvas just held up a hand.

“No need,” he replied.

“I can't swim,” Otmar pleaded with him.

“It's fine. Wait here. I'll be back in a few minutes.”

Jarvas handed him the pry-bar then walked up to the river’s edge and with a light jump, dove in.

Chances of successfully defending another Blue Suns attack together: 73%. Chances of doing so alone: 0%. The words appeared briefly.

Otmar nodded his understanding. Getting on Jarvas's bad side, especially when Siru and Kaine were elsewhere, was a schematic for disaster. If Jarvas wanted he could just leave Otmar here alone. Sooner or later the Blue Suns would find him or he'd run out of power, catch a disease, and die.

Otmar dropped the pry-bar and began wringing his hands together in worry. He watched Jarvas appear on the opposite bank and head off into the jungle towards where the object fell. He was thinking of ways to apologize when an idea struck him.

What had just happened? No VI crunched numbers of their own accord. You gave them parameters, they did the calculations, and gave returned useful information. They were a tool, like a percussion hammer. If you didn’t use it, it just sat there.

It was like being in the cave again.

“Who are you?” he asked, breathlessly wondering frantically if someone had hijacked his VI.

VI Pro version 5.7.891.11.101b. Seven optional packages installed plus numerous improvements to outdated processes. The specs of his installed program appeared.

“Don’t try that you bosh’tet,” he said, using a swear word for the first time. “You are not an off-the-shelf VI. What are you?”

The same words appeared again. Otmar began to pace along the river’s edge. Frantically he started up his omni-tool and began running diagnostics on his suit and various electronics again.

Again his omni-tool reported no viruses or issues. Suit seals were intact and while his power reserves were lowering again, they weren’t at danger levels yet. He began checking other components of his enviro-suit.

He vaguely heard something coming from behind him but ignored it.

His suit temperature controls were nominal, no errors reporting. Visor controls were also within norms. Everything was looking good, but then he found the problem.

Again, a noise from behind. Again, he ignored it.

It looked like his carbon dioxide scrubbers were five percent off. Levels of off-gases were rising in his suit. That had to be it. His mind was muddled with excess carbon dioxide and de-oxygenated blood. A few quick adjustments and he brought them back in line.

That’s when he finally paid attention to the noise.

“Otmar you son of a varren!” Jarvis was roaring.

Otmar spun and saw him barely keeping above water a dozen or so meters away. He had a large black box over his head and the current was pulling him downstream.

"I'm sorry!" Otmar yelled as he moved.

He repeated the phrase over and over as he rushed down the river. Running ahead he waded into the water just enough to let Jarvis catch his outstretched hand. With a grunt of effort, they hauled each other ashore.

Jarvas dropped a meter square dark metal box on the ground and rolled onto his back. He was breathing very heavily, coughing and spitting out mouthfuls of water.

"I'm so sorry Jarvis," Otmar said again. "Please don't leave me to die."

A few minutes of moving down stream and Kaine told Siru to stop.

"I'm going to have a look. Stay over in the bushes. I'll be right back," he ordered.

She only nodded and moved off taking the bag with her.

He took the macro glasses from his pocket and held them as he again moved forward. This part of the river was calmer than upstream and would not mask his footfalls. He had to be deliberate and silent.

As he carefully navigated the jungle he noticed the tree line was thinning out. Up ahead he saw more of the morning light than even next to the river. The trees here were also slimmer than and not as tall as the others.

Lightly hopping over a fallen tree, he slid to a stop beside a grouping of saplings. He could easily see out into a small field. It was not much bigger than a hyperball arena, roughly one hundred meters or so. But in the center was the ship.

Putting on the macro glasses he saw the Asari ordering around mercs in matching blue armor. He counted twelve in all, including the commando. They seemed to be unloading crates from the ship, two of them so far, chest high and wide. He watched them take out a large black box and set it down before her.

Zooming in he saw the commando open a small port and tap her fingers against whatever it had covered. She leaned back on her haunches and waited. After a long moment she nodded and closed the port. The mercs then brought this new box back on board.

He watched them do this for a good five or so minutes. Repeating the process ten more times. He had highlighted the armored Blue Suns with numbers and didn't see anyone new exit the ship. Nodding, he got up and started moving back to Siru.

As he dodged between trees he misjudged a root, caught his foot on something, and fell on his face into the cool earth. Rolling over he looked at what it was, one of the black boxes like the Asari commando had been working with.

He moved over and gave it a thorough inspection. It was pretty nondescript really, just a black, meter wide box with a small port on top. Opening it he saw a keypad and readouts. Instantly he recognized what this was and what she was planning to do.

"Oh fuck," he breathed.

NINETEEN

“What?” Jarvas said, looking up at Otmar.

Another round of coughing interrupted his reply. Rolling over, taking a few deep breaths, Jarvas slowly got to his feet. Lugging the box across a river was a poorly thought out plan. It was far heavier than it looked.

Putting his hands on his hips he slowly got control of his breathing. It was then he felt the rumble inside, his stomach letting him know it was empty. Shaking his head he ignored it and stared at Otmar.

Otmar only stared back.

“What?” Jarvas asked again.

“I’m sorry for what I said, it wasn’t nice,” he was saying.

“It was truth.” Jarvas told him waving a dismissive hand towards him. “Don’t worry about it Otmar, I’ve heard far worse in my time.”

“Even so, I know I don’t like when people do that to me. I really am sorry.”

He watched as Otmar wrung his hands together, head bowed staring at his feet. It was then he realized what was happening, Otmar was frightened.

The question was no more than him putting to words what he was feeling. As a Quarian, every fight was another chance for a wound or a suit puncture that would doom him. He was also separated from his only source of food and water on the entire planet.

Jarvas didn't spend a lot of time around other people, but he did his homework on other species. He could spot a Salarian telling a lie, the body language of a Turian that was interested in him or a Hanar that was afraid. He could bet just how afraid Otmar was.

Feelings of motherly protection invaded Jarvas’s thoughts. Siru’s feelings towards Otmar, ones of protection and nurturing, were surprisingly strong. He fought against them as hard as he could. He needed to remind himself that he’d only just met Otmar, no matter what was transferred from Siru to himself. Still, Jarvas felt that some old fashioned reassurance was in order.

“Otmar look at me,” he ordered in a gentle tone. When Otmar did so he added, “I forgive you. It’s nothing to worry about. We’re going to get off this planet together. You, me, and Siru and Kaine. Okay?”

Otmar nodded slowly and Jarvas could literally watch as he calmed down. His shoulders loosened and his hands stopped moving. Satisfied that he was alright for the time being, Jarvas turned and knelt before the box.

“So,” he said thinking, “What are you?”

He stared at it in contemplation for a few moments. It looked like nothing more than a storage crate. But he would bet his last breath this was more than that. They had deliberately dropped this here. That was evident by the way the ship hovered in place. So what had they left behind?

“I’m not picking up any auditory functions,” Otmar said. Jarvas turned to look up at him and he added, “I don’t think it will answer you.”

A wide smile crossed Jarvas’s lips and he turned back. It looked the same as it had in the jungle: square shaped solid black thing with a circular port that looked like it could be opened.

“The box has a signal receiver and a power source. Beyond that I couldn’t really tell you what it is unless we open it,” Otmar added standing beside him.

Jarvas nodded then flipped up the port and saw a keypad with digits and two small screens, probably informational readouts. The symbol of Element Zero was stenciled over the pad. None of it meant anything to him.

Turning, Jarvas looked up at Otmar again, who just shrugged. Neither seemed to have a good idea of what this was.

"Why do I feel like a vorch suddenly?" He commented to himself.

Jarvas ran a finger along the side of the box and felt a groove there, where the top and bottom met. With a little effort he could probably force the surface up if he used the pry-bar.

“Well why not?” he asked himself, standing.

Retrieving the pry-bar he returned to the box. Putting a bracing foot on the top he pulled the pry-bar back. Squinting in the morning light he plunged the head into the minute gap.

“What is a Zero Bomb?” Siru asked.

The two of them were moving quickly upstream, not quite running but pretty close to it. Kaine had returned after finding the landing zone of the Blue Suns ship visibly shaken.

He had grabbed her and the bag of supplies and got them moving again. It took her nearly screaming at him to get any information and all he’d said was that he’d found a bomb of some sort.

“Kaine!” She roared at him when he didn't answer.

He trotted for a second longer, then stopped. She stood next to him, not saying anything, only waiting for an answer.

“Zero Bombs are mass effect driven explosives that can vaporize a large area relative to the size of the ordinance,” he told her, pacing. “The drive cores force molecules in the surrounding air to speed up so quickly they combust, creating a chain reaction.”

“Kaine, what the hell are you talking about?” She asked him, grabbing his arms, forcing him to stop.

She'd never seen him like this before, certainly not at Chora's Den and not during the fights or the crash, or when being chased by the Krogan. Were Kaine a normal person, she'd have said he was terrified, but he seemed more agitated, like someone in a hurry to get somewhere.

He was acting almost like Otmar.

Kaine stopped moving around and took a deep breath. Closing his eyes he added few more measured inhales of air, then let them out slowly. When he continued it was less frantic.

“Siru, during the First Contact War humans weren't sure what would happen. Turians can be pretty scary when they're mad. We were preparing for the loss of whole planets to them. Zero Bombs were developed for an action called 'salting the earth'.”

“I don't know what that is,” she said, ignoring the finger quotes.

“I know. It's a tactic from centuries ago. They would pour salt on the ground to make it so no food could grow. So the enemy couldn't use the land against you. Basically you ruin the territory you'd lost.”

“How does this apply to that stuff you found?”

“It's the same thing only far more devastating,” he said, taking her arm and pulling her forward. He continued as they walked. “It completely annihilates the topsoil of the area it interacts with. Not only that but it can contaminate the atmosphere around it, so you wouldn't even want to enter an affected area. It does all this with massively hot and quickly expanding fire.

“What's worse is it can create a multiplicative event.”

Siru shook her head. This was all too much, too fast. Humans created a planet ruining bomb? Is that what he was saying? She was about to tell him she wasn't following when he held up a hand and continued.

“A one kilo Zero Bomb can destroy an area about ten meters square, add another kilogram and add another ten more meters. That's an additive affect. But if you stagger the exposure it creates

a reinforcing chain reaction. Basically a fivefold increase in power if you disperse them correctly. So instead of twenty meters with two kilos you'd end up with an affected area of a fifty meters. That's multiplicative."

The idea shocked her to the core. That someone would create such a thing was appalling. She looked at Kaine, hoping beyond reason that this was one of his poorly thought out jokes. Seeing the look of worry and fear mixed with it, that hope died. He was completely serious.

"How much are they using?"

"The box I found weighted at least twenty kilos," he said and turned to her, "at least."

"So that's what? A hundred meters of affected area with just that one box?"

"Yes, and if there's an overlapping area you get the multiplier."

"Goddess, Kaine that would mean two of them together would destroy everything within a hundred meters?"

"Yes," he said. "I think they want to burn the jungle down."

"And us with it," she added.

Without him prompting she sped up her movement. They had to find Otmar and Jarvas fast.

With a final grunt of exertion Jarvas popped the top off the box. Kneeling down next to it Otmar carefully slid it off and looked into the guts of their find. What he saw was bewildering.

It seemed like a mass effect engine, the sort you'd use in a small skycar. Scattered around it were smaller devices, about the size of his fist. A multitude of wires ran all around the inside, most connecting to the engine or the surrounding innards.

Rechecking the top he found a little piece of metal, formed into a triangle attached from its base to the top of the box. If Otmar had to guess this was the receiver.

"What am I looking at?" Jarvas asked him.

"Hold on, let me run a few scans."

Omni-tool up, Otmar held it over the devices, a few seconds each. A layout began to form on his visor. Each of the smaller devices had explosive compounds within them, situated and shaped to blast outwards. Wires connecting to the top were most likely for control of the overall detonation.

"I think it's a bomb," Otmar said.

He couldn't believe what he'd just said. He was standing in front of a bomb of unknown destructive force. One dropped from the hovering Blue Suns ship. They had to move. They had to run. This thing could explode at any moment.

Otmar spun and started to run but Jarvas caught his arm and held him back.

"We have to run, Jarvas!" He yelled. "What if it goes off?"

"Shut up Otmar!" Jarvas yelled into his face.

The look stopped Otmar from replying. Jarvas had been pretty even keeled so far, even after Otmar's little jab earlier. But right now the look on his face said he would not appreciate any more foolishness. Hands wringing at a faster rate than ever, Otmar stared at Jarvas and waited.

Instead of speaking he crouched down over the lid and with a quick motion reached out for the triangle.

"No!" Otmar yelled, and covered his visor with his hands.

He could imagine what was about to happen: Jarvas would rip the receiver from the top which would signal to the bomb it was being tampered with. It in turn would immediately go off. No doubt a massive fire ball would erupt from it, followed by debris from the rock walls exploding in all directions.

Lucky for the two of them the shock-wave created by the detonating force would hit first. Instantly it would shatter their bones, liquefy their organs and send what was left tumbling away. Their broken bodies would crash down amongst the raging fire and debris several meters away. They would be dead long before their bodies burned up.

Something touched his shoulder and Otmar screamed, falling to his knees. It had already begun. The explosion was so forceful it had blown out his eardrums. The small tap was only the beginning. Soon the feeling of shattering bones and crushing organs would follow. Maybe even the burning of his flesh. He'd never been in an explosion before. He didn't really know how it worked.

"Otmar!" someone yelled.

Slowly Otmar lowered his hands, uncovering his visor. He half expected to be dead, to see his grandparents standing over him, welcoming him to the next life. Looking around he let out a little sound of disappointment. All he saw was Jarvas.

"Oh," Otmar said simply.

Jarvas stood above him, odd expression on his face and a little piece of metal held between two fingers. Quickly Otmar stood and wiped the sand from his knees. He noticed there was no fire or falling rocks. The box was still sitting where it had been. Nothing in the area had changed.

"Well that's not quite what I had expected," Otmar said.

"Yeah me neither," Jarvas replied.

Otmar didn't quite understand what he meant but by the look on his face he seemed a little worried. He was right to be, Otmar thought. Messing around with bombs was a good way to get killed.

"Right," Otmar said, moving back over to the box.

He spent a few more minutes digging around inside it, removing the power line for the receiver just for good measure. After more analysis he was ready to tell Jarvas what he'd discovered. Standing up he turned to him and spoke.

"I have no idea what this does," Otmar said.

Jarvas slowly rubbed his temples with his index fingers. He'd just watched Otmar look over their find for at least ten minutes, muttering to himself about yields and apex trajectories and other things that sounded confusing. When he was done with all that, saying he had no idea what it was seemed anticlimactic. Jarvas began to wonder if Siru's affection for Otmar was misplaced.

"You have no idea what this is?" Jarvas said slowly.

"I didn't say that, I said I didn't know what it did," Otmar corrected him.

"What's the difference?" Jarvas asked.

"Well it's a bomb of some sort obviously. But how it acts and what exactly it blows up as, that I don't know."

"So you don't know what kind of bomb it is?"

"That's what I said."

A headache was developing fast. Lack of food was making Jarvas irritable. Otmar didn't help by completely losing his composure over every little thing. Taking a deep breath Jarvas let it out and his annoyances with it.

"So you've got nothing then?" Jarvas asked.

"Well the generator runs on a battery. I should be able to recharge my electronics from it." He said crouching down next to the box. "I'll be much more effective in combat afterward."

That was a blessing at least. Otmar had easily taken out the weapons of their attackers the previous day and Jarvas had not doubt it would be useful again.

"Okay charge up and we're heading back upstream, then to the fallen tree. With any luck Siru and Kaine will be there already."

A few minutes later, the box left open next to the river bank, they were heading upstream to the edge of the cliff face. It was easily another hour to the fallen tree and their rendezvous.

A half hour later Siru asked for them to stop. Kaine halted, breathing heavily, more worn-out than he felt he should be. Siru however had her hands resting on her knees, head bowed, sucking in deep breaths over and over again.

"It's better if you stand up straight," he said, putting an arm around her and pulling her up.

"I'm sorry," she said, resting her head against his shoulder and breathing easier.

"Don't talk. Just breathe."

Kaine scanned the area. It was more of the same: jungle behind, river in front, and cliff across. Along the way he'd tried to find more of the bombs, see how far apart they were to get an idea of the area of effect, try to learn something, anything, so he could save them. It had been a fool's errand though. He'd found nothing.

He noticed then that Siru's breathing had become regular and that he was more holding her up than she was leaning on him.

"Siru?" Kaine said quietly.

"Yes?" She replied lazily.

"You're falling asleep."

"Was I? I'm sorry, just tired all of a sudden."

"It's alright. We'll walk a little. We're making good time."

Kaine had no idea what kind of time they were making, if they were heading in the right direction, or even if they'd ever find a way up the cliff. The longer they went the more he felt they'd be climbing soon.

Slowly he got them walking again. He still had his arm around her and she had hers around him. If Jarvas and Otmar saw them now they'd think the two of them were just strolling along on some sort of romantic date.

Unexpectedly Siru fell forward. In an effort to grab her their feet became entangled and he fell too. She landed with a thud on the ground and he on her. She let out a grunt as he impacted.

Kaine's hand hurt where she had landed on it and he dragged it out. Flipping it a few times to take the sting out he looked down.

Siru only stared up at him. It felt like years since he'd had a chance to really look at her eyes. They were the most wonderful shade of green, almost neon in appearance. The contrast with her skin was delightful and his heart and breathing increased the longer he looked.

He watched as a smile slowly formed, then faded, then formed again on her lips. Even in the midst of danger, with mercenaries that could attack at any moment and bombs that could destroy the jungle, he could still see a sort of playfulness dancing in her eyes.

He suddenly didn't feel like getting up. It wasn't being tired or their lack of food. Even though he had wounds all over, even though he'd lost a lot of blood, right here and right now he was comfortable.

Slowly he leaned forward. She didn't move or react, didn't object or rebuff him. The look in her eyes shifted from mirth to anticipation. He didn't care if they could be attacked without warning. He just wanted this, this one small moment for themselves.

He stopped just short of touching her. They laid there together, breathing easily. Something made him question this action. As much as he wanted it, he didn't want it to come from exhaustion or fear. He wanted it to be honest. To be real.

Kaine hopped to his feet quickly and holding out a hand, helped Siru to hers.

"Thanks," she said, and dusted the sand off herself.

"Anytime," Kaine replied.

He didn't look at her. It would be awkward enough as is. Instead he scanned the area again, just for something to do. It was then he noticed an object on the opposite bank.

Taking out his macro glasses he put them on and zoomed in. Even with the broken lens he could make out another of the Zero Bombs. But this one was not intact, it seemed to have been opened.

Scanning the area around it he saw a fissure in the cliff wall that ran from the top down to the riverbank. There he could make out tracks in the dirt: one that looked human and the other that was easily not.

"Holy shit!" he said.

"What?" Siru exclaimed, looking around.

"They were here," he said, pointing across the river. "Otmar and Jarvas were right there."

"Where'd they go?"

"Tracks head upstream," Kaine said.

He followed the tracks with his macro glasses, looking further up river. There he saw the cliff dive sharply downwards. Less than half a kilometer away the cliff merged with the riverbanks.

"Up there, we can get up on the cliff there," he said, pointing. "Come on, I bet they headed back to the fallen tree."

The romantic moment completely forgotten, he grabbed her hand and got her moving. Not too fast this time. He didn't need her passing out. Once they met up with the other two they could devise a strategy to get off world.

First they had to link up and to do that they had to get to the fallen tree. As they moved further upstream he realized he had no idea how to find it. But dumb luck had gotten them this far. They just needed a little more to get to the tree and get off this planet.

TWENTY

It didn't take them long to find the fallen tree. Jarvas followed the sounds of flying creatures and the smell of death. The animals that had attacked them the previous day had attracted small scavengers to the area.

Animals that fed off dead things weren't all they'd discovered. With a fresh power supply Otmar was able to scan the area as they moved. A few hundred meters from the fallen tree he picked up other power sources, small ones, the sort used in either armor or weaponry. Some of the Blue Suns were in the vicinity.

They had moved slowly and quietly forward, hiding behind trees and crouching into the bush and dense undergrowth. They stayed to the shadows of the large trees and paused at random intervals to confuse anyone listening.

Otmar had informed him earlier that with all the humidity, heat signature scanners would be useless and the density of jungle plants and animals would make conventional scanners just as worthless. They would have to rely on their eyes and ears to anticipate their enemy. But that was a double edged blade. The Blue Suns would only have them to rely on as well.

They stopped again, hiding next to a dead log with a long shadow falling across it. Slowly Jarvas peaked his head out above it and looked around. He saw nothing in the immediate area.

"Shouldn't we leave?" Otmar whispered.

"No," Jarvas whispered back, sliding down behind the log. "Siru and Kaine could already be here and hurt. And if not, knowing what numbers are hiding will give us the advantage."

"How would knowing there's thirty Blue Suns waiting to kill us give us any advantage?"

"Well," Jarvas said but couldn't think of a reply. He added in a huff, "Your logic annoys me. Hush."

Otmar was right though, they should probably just leave. But he didn't want to go without knowing if Siru and Kaine had been there yet. Or if they were still here, but captured or dead. Jarvas needed them to get off planet or to know their fate so he could make a new plan.

"Listen," Jarvas said, making up his mind. "I'm going to have a look around. You wait here and I'll be back in a few minutes."

"Um, is that a good idea?" Otmar asked uneasily.

"You'll be fine, just wait here and stay calm."

With that Jarvas was up and moving, careful not to make any sound. Dashing from shadow to shadow and tree to tree he made good time. It took him only a handful of minutes to circle around to the open field the ship had hovered over the day before.

Slowly, keeping to the darker parts of the jungle, he made his way to where he could see where they fought. The tree looked as if its base had been blasted apart. Splintered debris lay everywhere, the stump had a jagged tear that matched its fallen top nearby.

On the ground he saw small winged critters gnawing on the remains of dead creatures. It had taken less than a day for this jungle to devour the corpses, an impressive if slightly grotesque efficiency.

Shifting the pry-bar from one hand to the other, he crouched down and slinked his way over to the fallen tree. Scanning the area he saw no sign that Siru or Kaine had been there recently.

As he was about to leave he spotted a piece of metal in the underbrush. Moving over he discovered one of Kaine's knives lodged into the jungle floor. It was covered in dried, dark blood but looked intact. Threading it through a belt loop he turned to move when he heard someone scream.

"Jarvas!" Otmar yelled out.

"Silence you piece of shit!" Someone yelled at him.

His head snapped to the side as a heavy object hit his visor. Otmar's neck ached instantly from the pain. Another impact to his stomach and he lost his breath. Reaching out, he tried to pull himself away and a heavy boot crushed down on his hand. Otmar let out another wail.

"Pathetic," he heard someone say above him with a laugh.

"What should we do with him?" Another voice, deeper than before.

"I'm trying to get a signal. Andor keep an eye out. I doubt this wretched worm is alone." Yet another voice.

Otmar gathered there were at least three. They had come out of nowhere and began hitting him. He'd fallen to the ground instantly trying to avoid strikes and kicks but that only caused him to suffer more.

Slowly Otmar tried to curl up but was struck in the stomach again with such force his body lifted off the ground. He slid back to the earth, the taste of his own blood in his mouth. His hand hurt, his stomach ached, and he was dizzy. He couldn't imagine feeling worse.

"She says kill him," said one of the voices.

Otmar felt himself lifted off the ground by his neck. The feeling of weightlessness enveloped him as he was flung away. He collided with a tree and his head hit the thick bark forcefully. He began to slide downwards when strong hands were around his throat. He felt himself being pulled back up and then lifted again into the air.

Tears streamed down his cheeks as he tried to pound on the hands that were suffocating him. He heard laughter at his feeble attempts and became lightheaded. He could feel his life force exiting.

It was then he saw something flying through the air. He couldn't quite see what it was until it impacted with his attackers helmet. Instantly a pry-bar appeared through his attackers head with such force he tumbled to the ground.

Otmar fell and rolled to his back coughing. He choked down air as fast as he could get it into his mouth. Still stunned from the attacks, he watched another Blue Suns mercenary step into view, leveling a rifle at his head.

Jarvas flung himself at the merc preparing to shoot Otmar. He ignored the other two firing at him. With a burst of biotic power he flew through the air, ramming a shoulder into the attacker's stomach. They crashed into the tree behind Otmar. Reaching up, Jarvas grabbed the mercs helmet. Three quick twists accompanied the sound of shattering bones and tendons, and the mercenary fell.

Turning, Jarvas watched the last two level their weapons at him. Gathering what energy he had left, he prepared to fight. Abruptly Otmar's hand shot up, omni-tool running. There was the sound of crackling electricity and the feeling of something passing through him.

Jarvas stumbled against the tree then. He felt as if he'd been struck by lightning. Sliding to one knee he watched the two mercs rip their helmets off with a roar of pain. Jarvas got to his feet as one of them advanced, knife drawn.

Otmar was yanked up again and tossed against the log. Another vise-like grip around his throat. This Blue Sun was Turian and in his eyes was nothing but rage. Lifting a large serrated knife, the turian prepared to plunge it into Otmar's body.

As the weapon came down another hand appeared. It grabbed the wrist of the Turian. With a quick twist and a grunt of pain the knife fell to the ground. A fist impacted the Turian's face, causing him to stumble away. A shadow fell as something hopped over Otmar and landed between the Turian and himself.

Otmar felt hands under his arms as he was hauled over the log. Deposited roughly onto the ground with a thud. He expected to see another Blue Suns thug but instead he saw an Asari. The commando had arrived to finish him off, he surmised. But that wasn't her at all. But instead of the asari commando, he realized he looked into the eyes of a friend.

"Hi Siru!" he yelled.

Jarvas ducked under the knife and it sliced the bark of a tree. This Blue Sun was revealed to be a Batarian. The merc yanked the blade free and slashed at Jarvas again. Dodging away, Jarvas flipped over and got his hands on the pry-bar. A quick twist of his wrists and he ripped it from the head of his first victim.

The Batarian charged. Jarvas stepped forward. A knife thrust forward. Deflecting it with the pry-bar Jarvas spun in place and drove the point of his weapon into the chest of his attacker. Blood spewed from the merc's mouth and with a contemptuous grunt Jarvas flung the lifeless corpse to the ground.

Kaine dodged a vicious right hook and delivered a body shot of his own. The impact drove the Turian away. Too tired to play games, Kaine drew his pistol and shot the Turian in the head, watched him fall to the ground, unmoving.

"Cheater," he heard from behind him.

Turning, he saw Jarvas leaning against the pry-bar breathing heavily. He stood between two dead Blue Suns thugs. They looked at each other a long moment then Kaine grinned. Jarvas added one of his own soon after.

"I half expected you to run off," Kaine said, moving forward and clapping Jarvas on the shoulder.

"You entrusted your friend's life to me. That is not something I take lightly," he replied between breaths.

Kaine could only smile. He had had no idea when they split up what Jarvas would do, at that second there was only time to react. Jarvas was quickly turning into someone he could count on.

Another clap on the shoulder and Kaine turned away just in time to see Otmar jump on him, arms flung around his neck.

"Kaine!" he screeched.

Siru put a hand over her mouth to hide a wide smile. Kaine held his arms out in mock confusion, then slowly embraced the Quarian. As he did so Otmar squeezed harder and Kaine almost thought he heard a squeal. Increasing the force of his hug he held Otmar and a feeling of relief he hadn't expected welled up in him.

"Miss me?" Kaine asked.

"Keelah yes!" Otmar practically yelled.

Siru let out a laugh and he saw Jarvas smile broadly. Slowly the two of them released each other and stood before one another. Kaine put a hand to the side of Otmar's visor and smiled at him.

"Missed you too," Kaine said quietly.

Siru sighed with relief that everyone seemed okay. She walked forward and put a hand on Jarvas's shoulder. Slowly he looked up at her and she saw exhaustion in his eyes. But there was something else hiding there. He seemed almost ready to rejoice that they were together again.

"How you feeling?" she asked.

"Tired," He said simply.

"We need to salvage what we can," Siru said, patting Jarvas's shoulder. "There might be more coming."

"Good idea. Grab their weapons," Kaine said, moving over to one of the bodies.

Siru picked up the rifle from the nearest corpse. Looking at it she saw no indicator lights nor heard any low level hum of a mass effect core. Pointing the weapon away she pulled the trigger and nothing happened.

"This gun doesn't work," she said, looking at them.

"Otmar did you break their weapons again?" Jarvas asked him.

"I panicked," he said sheepishly.

Siru watched Jarvas let out a long, dramatic sigh.

"He does that," Jarvas said to her.

She was about to say something when Kaine screamed out.

"Sweet Jesus yes!" he said, standing up from looting one of the mercs.

Walking up to them he tossed an object at her and Jarvas. Looking down, Siru saw a small rectangle no more than a few centimeters in length and one or two in width. It had no markings, just a white wrapper.

"What's this?" she asked, looking up.

"Ration bar," Kaine said with a crazed look. He triumphantly tore the wrapping off his and took a huge bite. "Oh it's like paradise in my mouth!"

Siru watched Jarvas open his and take a bite. He closed his eyes in ecstasy. Smiling, she turned towards the supply bag and took out one of Otmar's ration pastes. Handing it to him, Otmar took it quickly and attached one end to a port in his visor.

As she unwrapped hers Otmar sat down, crossed legged in the dirt. She took a small bite, worried it would taste awful. Instead it was the most wonderful thing she'd had in years. She took another two bites in quick succession and let out a contented sigh.

"Oh man, I don't know what this is supposed to taste like," Kaine was saying between mouthfuls, "but to me it's a double cheeseburger with extra bacon and, I don't know, maple syrup."

"No no," Siru interjected. "Nightspring Chocolate fudge with cream, darkberries and extra sweet caramel."

"Imperial crab embryo soup," Jarvas added.

Siru watched Kaine stop chomping mid-mouthful. He looked at her and then both looked at Jarvas.

"What?" he said, finishing his ration bar.

"That sounds awful," Kaine said with a chuckle.

"If I weren't starving I'd have lost my appetite," she said mockingly with a smile.

Kaine watched them all try to stifle giggles but fail. A chorus of laughter began to echo around them. He couldn't help but wonder at the situation. Standing on a hostile world, surrounded

by death, hounded by enemies, and here they were enjoying a lighthearted moment. He was about to join in when he heard a familiar noise.

"Move!" he yelled.

Running forward he yanked Otmar to his feet, snatched up the bag of supplies, and ran. Siru led in front, Jarvas brought up the rear. The roar of starship engines echoed toward them. He could practically feel it barreling down at them.

"Where are we going?" Siru yelled.

"To the river!" Kaine answered.

It was then the world began to explode.

The sounds of heavy cannon fire reported above them. Large scale blooms of dirt and brush flew into the air. Impacts of large caliber rounds began pummeling everywhere behind them. The sounds of earth exploding grew as the blasts got closer.

Kaine hauled Otmar to the right as a stray shot slammed into the ground where he had stood. Kaine was lifted off his feet. He and Otmar tumbled with each other. Kaine landed heavily on his back. Otmar thudded to the ground nearby. More explosions rocked the area.

Hands on him, Jarvas hauled Kaine to his feet. Kaine saw Siru helping Otmar stand and began to stumble after them, ears ringing and head aching. Explosions detonated around them. More and more, faster and faster. Kaine felt shockwaves slamming into him from all sides, and watched Siru scream as smoke and fire erupted in front of her.

Two more explosions and Kaine was on the ground again. The last thing he saw before his eyes closed was Otmar raise his hand upwards. He'd surrendered to the Blue Suns. Kaine surrendered to unconsciousness.

Jarvas slowly got to his feet, leaning heavily on the pry-bar. He squeezed his eyes shut and then blinked a dozen or so times to clear the tears and black spots. He looked around at the devastation.

Small fires burned at various points before him. He saw trees toppled over, cut in half by cannon fire. Large divots were torn from the jungle floor leaving behind dark smoking craters. Leaves, dirt, and other debris were still falling as he stood.

He could see the ship above them, hovering in place. It had stopped firing for some reason, even though it could easily kill them all. Jarvas watched as it slowly moved in a circle. He could not hear it, only a high pitched ringing came through.

Noticing movement he saw Otmar roll over, hand over his stomach and slowly crawling over to Siru. He began to shake her, she did not respond. In his mind Jarvas knew they had to move, but he couldn't get his feet or legs to obey him.

Returning to stare up at the craft he saw something fall out of it. He squinted his eyes to get a better look but couldn't really tell what it was. It started off small but grew larger as it got closer. A blue haze seemed to emanate from it. At the last second he realized what it was and moved.

Kicking away he rolled and got back to his feet, his body finally reacting to commands. Turning, he saw the Asari commando standing just where he'd stood, large caliber pistol pointed at him.

"Finally," she said in a nasty tone.

Without a word she pulled the trigger. At the last moment a hand snaked out and grabbed her wrist. Jarvas watched as a quick jerk caused her to lose her grip, sending the weapon flipping away. Kaine lashed out with a punch. A quick deflection and with two hands glowing blue, she shot biotic energy into him. Kaine tumbled away out of sight.

Jarvas acted quickly. He dove forward and tried to impale her on the pry-bar. A quick flip and she was out of view. He spun just as a large curved blade slashed the air his head had been occupying. Another blade appeared in her other hand. Another quick slash. Jarvas hopped away and swung the bar to create distance.

As if remembering this tactic, she tumbled under it and slashed at his legs. Jarvas kicked up and somersaulted over her. With a quick kick he was back on his feet, but she was already advancing.

A swift slash nearly decapitated him. He ducked. Another slice from her other hand. He parried with his pry-bar. She attacked. He defended. Spinning the bar around his back to add momentum, he swung viciously at her head. She leaned away. Changing direction quickly he brought the bar up and down at her head.

She crossed her blades and caught his weapon just in time. He pushed down in rage. She held him in check. Neither moved.

"You must really want to kill me," he grunted. "Why not just use the bombs? Why the gunplay?"

"You are dangerous," she said through clenched teeth. "The bombs *should* work but if I bring back your head there would be no questions of my success. The Matriarchs should have left you to rot, forgotten in history."

"I couldn't agree more," he said, and shoved her away.

She side stepped away a meter or two and starred at him through narrowed eyes.

"Then why not let me kill you and be done with it?" She asked.

They paced in front of each other, slowly circling. Jarvas was tired. He could feel his arms and legs weakening with every moment. Only a day removed from stasis and barely any food to fuel him, he was running out of energy fast. She in turn looked well rested as she prowled opposite him. If he didn't act quickly, she would tire him out.

"I won't let you kill them because of me," he said simply.

"They're already dead, they just don't know it yet."

With that she rushed him.

Kaine shook his head as he clawed his way to his feet. He saw Jarvas fending off multiple attacks from the commando. Jarvas was keeping the Asari at bay with the pry-bar but her movements were faster than his. At this rate there was only one way for their confrontation to end.

Kaine drew his pistol. Something bounced off his shoulder.

Looking up, saw a rope extending up to the ship with another falling next it. Not just a rope falling, he saw a large boot moving towards him at a fast pace. He lifted his weapon to fire but was too slow. The boot slammed into his shoulder knocking him off balance, weapons flinging from his grip.

Kaine tumbled to the ground, his gun lost in the brush. He got to his feet just as a rifle butt struck his face. He went with the momentum of the attack and spun in place. Coming back to face his attacker he reached out, grabbed the gun. The two of them grunted, vying for control.

He saw a Batarian in half armor, no helmet, his arms and hands uncovered. He felt the merc beginning to overpower him. Reaching down he got his teeth on the thugs trigger finger. With a tremendous bite and tear he ripped the Batarians finger off his hand.

With a scream, the Batarian released the weapon and stumbled back. Kaine spun the gun in his hand and fired once hitting a different mercenary as it slid down another rope. The merc let go

and fell to the ground. Kaine moved forward and fired twice more into his armored head, blasting bits everywhere.

A roar came from behind and he turned. A fist hit his stomach. Kaine doubled over. A back hand walloped him across the face, knocking him off balance again. He landed on the ground with a thud.

As Kaine lifted the gun to fire, a boot hit it, driving it to the ground. Kaine heard a blade being unsheathed and rolled away just as a knife skewered the ground where his head had been. He stood as another mercenary landed.

Drawing his own knife, he threw it as hard as he could. The knife flew faster than the new merc could react. It hit home. A thud and gurgle reported from behind the helmet. The body hit the ground, blade sticking out the neck.

One left.

His original opponent scooped up a rifle. Kaine charged. The rifle came up. Kaine slid under as one shot was fired. Shoulder slammed into gut. Kaine lifted and flung the merc to the ground. He wrenched the weapon free, lifted, and brought it down on the merc's head. The again. And again. A few massive impacts later and the Batarian lay still.

That's when he saw the grenade land in front of him.

Siru's head snapped away from watching Jarvas fight the commando. An explosion came from Kaine's direction. She turned in time to see him flung away, a ball of fire extending from just below the ropes.

"Siru!" Otmar yelled, "those guns will be active again shortly!"

"Can you do anything about that?" She yelled back.

"Yes but I need time!"

"Do it!"

She watched as Otmar sat down, cross-legged in the dirt, his omni-tool already running. Otmar said something but she couldn't catch it as two more mercenaries landed at the base of the ropes and leveled their weapons at her.

Jarvas spun away from a pair of incredibly fast attacks. The commando had already gotten through his defenses once. He had the cut on his back to prove it. She slashed again. He hopped away. In desperation he flung the pry-bar at her feet. She stepped back and it thudded into the ground, standing vertically in front of her.

Before she could move he snapped a power kick forward. He hit the pry-bar, sending it colliding with her face. A yelp of pain and she tumbled away. Retrieving the weapon he jabbed forward savagely.

A clash of blade and steel and she sent the weapon dancing away. She sliced at him with her free hand. He reached out and grabbed her wrist. Spinning under her, he delivered a thunderous punch to her stomach.

Doubling over slightly, Jarvas stood and added a kick to the sternum. The commando tumbled but didn't stay down. As she got to her feet he recovered the pry-bar. Quickly they leapt at each other. Another clash of metal in midair.

Jarvas landed unevenly and fell to the ground. He rolled over to see her pull both her hands back behind her. Before he could defend himself she thrust forward. Two bright balls of blue light flew at him.

Jarvas was struck in the chest, lifted off the ground, tumbled in the air, and struck something. As the ground rushed up to meet him, his eyes closed, and everything went quiet.

The mercenaries landed and quickly scanned the area. They turned to her and Otmar. One pointed and they both raised their weapons. Flashes reported from the end of their weapons. Siru held her hands up in front of her. A familiar field of light blue appeared between her and the attackers. The attacks bounced off the shield, ricocheting in every direction. With each hit her strength weakened.

"I can't do this forever!" she roared at Otmar.

No answer came from him. She had to hope he was working on something good.

Kaine's head snapped up with a gasp. His face was covered in dirt and he felt blood flowing freely again. He shook his head to clear the dizziness and looked around. With a silent thank you to the Haliat Armory for making synth-weave that could harden instantly to protect him, Kaine stood.

He could see the commando, but not Jarvas. He saw Siru and Otmar being shot at by three mercs not far from where he lay.

Deliberately getting to his feet, he pulled two grenades from his belt and tossed them at the mercenary's feet. He didn't even know what he had just thrown until they went off.

Fire erupted outwards. The Blue Suns didn't react initially. Instead they were caught on fire. Kaine had thrown his two inferno grenades.

Each one contained a highly flammable, self-sustaining liquid similar to napalm of centuries passed. As the liquid burned it ate up everything around it as fuel. Burning at close to five thousand degrees Kelvin it could easily melt through starship plating. Instead of that, it ate through the mercenaries.

The three of them screamed and yelled out as they tried in vain to get the sticky tar like substance off them. First their armor. Then their clothing and skin. Finally their muscles and skeleton carbonized with them. After only a few moments they fell silent, as their corpses burned to ash on the ground.

Siru watched in horror as the three mercenaries were burned alive. It was an awful sight, something she wished she hadn't seen. But a new sight filled her with as much terror. The commando was walking towards her.

"Anytime Otmar!"

With a look of grim satisfaction the commando flipped her twin blades in her hands. She was only a few meters from her when Siru heard Kaine roar.

"Hey bitch! Pick on someone your own size!"

Siru and the commando turned. Kaine was walking forward deliberately, a knife in each hand. Siru watched a smirk appear on the commando's face. Before she could even think, the Asari's hand flung towards her. She felt the impact of biotic energy bang into her chest and she toppled away.

Otmar heard all of this happening around him. But he could not react to it, could not get up and run away. As much as he wanted to, he knew if he did they would all die. Otmar had only one option left. However, it would take most of his power reserves to do it. But it was their only chance.

Every explosion jarred him. Every gunshot frightened him. Every time Siru yelled at him to hurry his heart beat faster. They were fighting for their lives here, Otmar knew it. Their fight was with flesh and bone. This fight against wires and software however, was his.

Ready. The words appeared in his visor.

With that new schematics appeared before his eyes. They were the inner workings of a Type IV Fast Attack Frigate, just like the one hovering above them. He'd punched a hole, figuratively, in its digital defenses. Once within its mainframe he moved easily amongst its systems.

He shot quickly across the more heavily shielded parts, like life support and drive core controls. He avoided trying to get control of the guns. As tempting as that was, it would take far too long. He had to act quickly.

This was a two pronged attack. He went right at the ships inner systems while his VI tried to find a minor storage disc or hidden node to access. After only a few quick moments they had found what they were looking for.

Otmar's fingers hit in rapid succession on his omni-tool. The lights in the ship turned off and on. Hull breach alarms sounded and inner fire suppression systems engaged. He employed the blast shield to darken the pilot's seat. In short, he created mass chaos on the ship.

Kaine took a deep breath. This was not a fight he was looking forward to. The commando on the other hand seemed to very much look forward to the encounter. Once they were within a few meters of each other she struck.

A burst of energy behind her and she flew at him. More instinct than anything allowed him to deflect her blade with his. He dove under her follow up attack. Spinning, he brought his knife out behind him. He hit nothing.

Turning, he saw a blade slicing towards him. Lifting his weapon he caught it just in time. Her other knife already slashing at him, Kaine leaned forward and slammed a shoulder into hers. He felt the blade bite into his flesh as she stumbled backwards.

Kaine charged. Two quick slashes hit nothing. The commando was fast. Faster than the ones he'd fought on Omega. She was all over him. Her attacks began at his chest then shifted to his legs. He spun, dove, and parried.

She attacked. He dodged or parried. She was the offensive. Kaine's defense was not keeping up well. Without something like the pry-bar to create distance all he could do was hope she'd make a mistake. Leave an opening for him to exploit.

He didn't think he'd have much time, she'd have to fuck up fast.

He deflected a quick slash. Sent out one of his own and hit nothing. She ducked another attack and delivered a solid kick to his stomach. Another kick to the jaw and he fell backwards. Landing with a thud, his head cracked on the ground. Dizzily he looked up.

The commando stood above him. She had one hand pulled up over her, a look of pure maliciousness on her face. Kaine tried to bring a weapon up to defend himself but couldn't. She was holding him down with biotics.

The blade in her hand began to move downward. It would skewer him any second.

In slow motion he watched a light appear in front of her. Pure blue. It must have been the tunnel everyone saw when they died. The knife in her hand kept moving downwards. He could only watch, unable to defend himself.

Everything sped up as the light grew more intense. Instead of enveloping him it struck the commando fully in the chest, sending her stumbling backwards.

Siru had never been angrier in her entire life. Not once. Not ever.

Every past offense, every lost love or ruined moment welled up in her. Every petty thought she'd had, all the inane arguments she'd lost. Everything that hadn't gone her way in her four hundred and twelve years of life fueled her.

She could barely see through her haze of ferocity.

The first burst of biotic energy hit the commando. Sire watched her tumble backwards a few steps. The commando recovered quickly. This only fueled Siru's fury. Gathering the energy she flung another blast at her. Then another. The commando deflected each attack. With every deflection Siru's rage grew.

"Whore!" she roared.

A blue sphere of energy shot forward. The commando deflected.

"Bitch!"

More energy, another deflection only not as clean.

"Leave us Alone!"

Siru didn't even think. All she did was act and scream.

"Go away!"

With a blind hatred she'd never knew was in her she flung energy at an intense rate. She focused all her feelings of sadness over the years, all the regret and misery. She channeled it all at the commando.

Flashes of blue burned into her eyes. She could see nothing but the commando, feel nothing but anger, and remember nothing but this Asari almost killing Kaine. A primal scream grew in stomach and rushed forth from her mouth. Her hands and arms moved faster and faster. Quickly they began to smolder with the exertion.

With one last thrust of energy Siru clapped her hands together, sending a massive shockwave at the commando. Hit her barrier, continued around the commando, and obliterated the tree behind her. Siru sank to her knees. Her lungs burned as she inhaled air. She rocked on her knees with the effort. Vaguely she saw the commando shake her head. Siru had pushed her back a handful of meters but nothing more.

The commando recovered fast and advanced on Siru.

Then a shadow fell in front of her.

Kaine stood between Siru and the commando, a rifle in hand. He heard another weapon ready to the right and saw Otmar appear with his pistol. Without a word they fired.

He and Otmar poured rounds at the Asari. She held her hands up and deflected the shots. But Kaine knew it wouldn't last forever. The rifle packed quite a punch. His pistol easily matched it.

That meant the commando's strength would give out before Kaine's will to kill her did.

Kaine saw this idea register on her face. The ship appeared over them just then and with a bright flash of biotic energy she was gone. Kneeling, he tracked her up and into the ship. He and Otmar just kept firing. Pinging sounds resounded as impacts struck the hull.

Slowly the ship turned to them. Kaine stood defiantly. That ship would fire on them at any second and they would all die. At least that's what he thought until Otmar spoke.

"Zasi, engage," Otmar said simply.

Instantly the ship teetered to the right, and then spun to the left. After a few seconds it began to float erratically away. As it disappeared over some trees it took the sound of its roaring engines with it.

After a few moments everything faded to silence.

Breathing heavily Kaine turned to Otmar in disbelief. Otmar looked at him a moment then lifted his fist and extended his thumb upwards.

“They coming back?” Kaine asked between breathes.

“Not anytime soon.” Otmar replied.

With heavy sigh and croaking laugh of disbelief Kaine returned the gesture with a nod.

The ship was gone. They had survived.

For now.

TWENTY-ONE

"Go check on Jarvas," Kaine ordered Otmar.

As he ran off Kaine crouched before Siru. She was still breathing heavily, not looking at him, and just shaking all over. He looked her over for any wounds from the commando's attack but saw nothing.

"Hey," he said.

Taking her face in his hands he gently made her look up at him. Her eyes were momentarily unfocused, then snapped up. She stared at him, an intensity in her he'd never seen. Then slowly her lips began to tremble and a single tear fell down her cheek.

Suddenly she reached out, grabbed his face in her hands, and lunged forward. Before he could react she kissed him. Savagely her lips hit his. He struggled for the shortest amount humanly possible then moved his hands to embrace her, letting his emotions take over.

She moved. He moved with her. Her lips were his. This moment was no better than the one near the river, but he didn't care. All he wanted was her. Siru's body against his caused his already beating heart to spin up even further.

She gripped his hair and pulled him closer. He sunk his lips into hers and she returned with full force. He'd been close to death multiple times over the last few days, and now knowing he might have missed this made him ache inside.

As quickly as it began it faded. Siru's hands moved back to his cheeks and she rested her head against his. They sat there, breathing heavily in each other's arms. Kaine couldn't speak. He could only stare into her eyes. It wasn't until someone spoke that he remembered where he was.

"All I got from Otmar was a handshake," he heard a tired voice behind him.

Siru smiled and Kaine could do nothing but join her. She took a deep breath, leaned away and let it out. She ran a hand over her scalp and stood. Gradually Kaine felt the need to do the same, but wanted to hold onto this feeling a little longer. Just one moment longer.

Kaine heard a throat being cleared and with a sigh he stood and turned. He saw Jarvas one arm around Otmar's shoulders, the other holding and leaning against the pry-bar. Otmar was only looking between himself and Siru.

Jarvas smirked at him and Kaine felt a flush come to his face. It was probably the least required embarrassing feeling any person had ever had. He looked at Siru, who smiled back and then lightly licked her lips. With a grin and a shake of the head he looked away.

"Guys, Jarvas is really heavy," Otmar said.

"Sorry," Kaine and Siru said together.

He moved forward and took Otmar's place, Siru took the pry-bar.

"We need to get out of here," Siru said.

"No we don't," Otmar said as they all began to move.

Kaine turned with Jarvas and stared at him. He couldn't quite put his finger on it but Otmar looked different somehow. His back was straighter and he seemed to have grown at least a centimeter in height. There was no twitching or hand wringing, no pitiful self-recriminations. Otmar just stood and waited.

"How do you know that?" Jarvas asked.

"I loaded my VI onto their ship," he said, pointing up to where the Blue Suns vessel had been. "It forced them to land at some field two kilometers or so downstream."

"Ya but they can just come back and get us," Siru said.

"No, I had the doors locked," Otmar replied looking at her. "They're trapped."

"You sure?" Jarvas asked.

"Yep."

"How long?" Kaine asked.

"It would take them at least ten hours to cut through the ship's plating and even longer to get them open electronically," Otmar said, looking at each of them in turn. "I'm serious. My VI will keep them busy at least until morning."

They all looked at each other. Siru only shrugged a little. Kaine had no reason not to believe him. And he did, that wasn't what made him hesitate. It was the slight straightening to Otmar's stance. It was the confidence with which he spoke. He exuded a new found self-assurance.

"Good enough for me," Jarvas said and unhooked his arm from Kaine. He sunk to the ground with a sigh. "I can't wait to get off this y'thung planet."

Kaine stared at Otmar a moment then cocked his head in the direction away from Siru and Jarvas. The two walked a short distance away and stood before one another.

"Are you sure about this?" Kaine said as Siru tended to Jarvas.

"Yes."

Kaine lifted his eyebrows and just stared at Otmar. They stood there in silence momentarily before Otmar elaborated.

“Their ship is grounded and they’ve been locked out of any controls for external navigation or door control.”

“What about landing gear? Can they get through that way?”

“No. Type IV Fast Attack Frigates have self-enclosed landing storage. You can only get to the gear from the outside.”

Kaine rubbed his chin, thinking. What Otmar said sounded good and they could all use a breather and a chance to plan out their next move. He pondered quietly a moment until Otmar spoke.

“Relax Kaine, it’s taken care of for now.”

With that Otmar turned and walked away. He passed Siru who stood after bandaging Jarvas’s arm. She watched him go to the supply bag and take out some water. Turning, Siru moved over to stand with Kaine.

“So?” she asked simply.

“I don’t know,” Kaine said with a shrug.

“I have a worry.”

“Report from the front: Siru K'vaar has a worry.” Kaine replied.

“I’m serious,” she said. “It sounds almost too good.”

“You saying we can’t trust him?”

“I’m not sure we *should*,” she answered. “Otmar is good, but he’s also been flighty and sporadic since this all started. Shutting down small arms is one thing. An entire attack frigate though?”

Kaine thought about that and about what Otmar had been like up until a few minutes ago. Yes, he was nervous a lot and a little annoying at times, but never once had he failed them in combat. He didn’t flinch or hesitate or even get in the way. Maybe that was the real Otmar trying to break through the cowardly one this whole time.

He'd seen the ship veer off almost out of control. He couldn't hear it returning and if they had found a way the VI would surely warn Otmar well in advance. At least that's what Kaine thought would happen. They weren't going to stay here all night of course but a few more minutes of lingering didn't feel that dangerous.

“He’s earned it,” Kaine told her finally making up his mind. “If nothing else, he’s earned the benefit of the doubt. I’ve seen him do some impressive things with nothing more than that omni-tool.”

“So we trust him?”

“I’m choosing to trust him, I can’t make that decision for you.”

Siru didn’t immediately reply. Instead she watched Otmar speak with Jarvas. Kaine saw her concentrate, really weighing what they’d been talking about. After a minute she turned back to him.

“Well I trust you,” she said.

“That’s something I guess,” he replied with a half-smile.

He was about to add more when Otmar appeared.

“Jarvas and I have been thinking. We should rest here a bit, recoup some energy, then move somewhere else,” he said, looking between them.

“Think they could break out of the ship?” Siru asked.

“Not anytime soon, but there’s no reason to take risks,” Otmar answered.

“Fair enough,” Kaine said thinking the same thing a moment earlier. “Let’s take stock of what we can from the dead mercs.”

“Good idea. They might have something useful,” Otmar said and walked over to where the mercs had dropped down from the ship.

Kaine looked at Siru who let out a slight breath.

“Have fun with that,” she said, patting his shoulder.

Kaine watched her walk away briefly but turned and followed Otmar. He was staring down at the charred remains of the Blue Suns that had been hit with Kaine’s inferno grenades.

The ground was still smoldering and had been turned from green vegetation to a patch of utter blackness. The high heat of the grenades had melted almost everything. Kaine could barely make out the remnants of armor and rifles and no sign of any organics.

“Your head is bleeding again,” Otmar said offhandedly.

“Is it?” Kaine asked, touching his temple and feeling a sting. He now had a wound to match the one over his other eye. “Who needs blood anyway?”

Otmar didn’t reply. Instead he turned on his omni-tool, waving his hand over the ground in front of them. After a short time he shut down the omni-tool and put his hands on his hips.

“Well at least it’s not my fault this time,” Otmar said.

“What’s not your fault?” Kaine asked.

“That we don’t have any extra weapons,” Otmar said, looking at Kaine then handing him his pistol. “We’ve had really poor luck with that lately.”

“Didn’t think you knew how to fire one,” Kaine said, taking and holstering the weapon.

“I don’t. I’m pretty sure every shot missed,” Otmar said, then walked over to another corpse.

Kaine looked down at the charred remains for another moment. He’d never used an inferno grenade before. He had delivered plenty of death in his time but this felt worse. He preferred clean deaths to this sort of thing. Even for scum like Blue Suns.

Kaine shook off the feelings and caught up with Otmar.

Siru watched as Kaine and Otmar gathered items from here and there, moving casually about the battleground. They were discussing something as they moved. Sitting down Siru wrapped her arms around her legs and rested her cheek on her knees and just watched them.

This was probably the worst time to act as they were. To put that much faith in Omar, she believed, was dangerous. To put that much faith in any one of them was dangerous. Otmar was sweet and kind but was he really capable of disabling an armed combat vessel? She wasn’t so sure. Kaine put faith in him and right now that was good enough.

“What happened to you guys?” Jarvas asked her.

Siru rested her other cheek on her knees so she could look at him. He was lying on his back, eyes closed, face up towards the sun. Siru watched the bright day growing over them; she could feel the warmth of the rays as they hit her through the now ruined canopy.

Taking a deep breath Siru recounted what had happened to her and Kaine after they split up, how they evaded the Krogan by baiting him to the den of those scaled creatures they’d fought, then evaded the creatures by jumping into the river and spending the night in a small grove.

“You two got lucky,” Jarvas said.

“No doubt,” she replied.

Siru didn’t mention Kaine’s breakdown or his discussing what happened in his past. If he wanted Jarvas to know then it was his choice to tell. Besides, that was a private moment she wanted to keep for herself.

She asked Jarvas about his adventures the previous day and listened as he described their flight, then how he fought off four of the Blue Suns thugs with nothing but the pry-bar. It was an impressive tale.

“So you actually picked him up and ran with him on your shoulder?” she asked with a giggle.

“Like he was a newborn,” Jarvas added with a smile. “He’s handy in a fight, I’ll give him that.”

“Pretty funny too,” she added.

“True. We found this box the Suns had dropped. He said it was a bomb. I made a move to break off its receiver and he just dropped to his knees covering his face,” Jarvas said mimicking what he’d said. “All he said after we didn’t die was ‘that’s not what I expected’.”

They both let out a hearty laugh at that. Siru could imagine Otmar cowering on the ground, thinking he was about to die from a massive explosion. His reaction after the fact was priceless.

What he said caught her attention and she asked him to describe what they'd found.

“We found one of those too,” Siru said. “Kaine called it a Zero Bomb.”

When asked she told him what they did. How dangerous they were. About the wide area they could decimate. Up until this moment, she had completely forgotten about them.

Jarvas leaned up concern etched on his face. Siru looked at him, confused for a moment. Then what he must have been thinking hit her.

She sprung to her feet and Jarvas got to his. She turned to yell for Kaine and Otmar but stopped as they ran back from scavenging.

“We just thought of something,” Otmar said.

“What’s to stop them from setting off the Zero Bombs?” Siru asked, knowing the answer.

“Yeah,” Kaine said. “But don’t worry, we have a plan.”

“Wait a minute. You want to set them off?” Jarvas asked incredulously.

“No we want to blow them up.” Otmar clarified.

“What’s the difference?” Siru asked.

“Pretty big actually. See each bomb has tactical plastique which is pretty volatile stuff; it’s what causes the initial burst of energy,” Kaine said.

“But without a timed reaction and the mass effect generator in operation, all it does is explode,” Otmar finished.

“Still not seeing the difference,” Jarvas said.

“The difference is without that precise timing the resulting explosion is no more than a few meters wide.” Otmar said.

So in theory they could detonate the bombs from a safe distance. Not a terrible idea, Jarvis thought.

“Ok fine, but we don’t know where they are,” Jarvis said.

“Actually we do,” Kaine said, pointing to Otmar.

“With Kaine’s knowledge of how they work and the need for proximity to one another,” Otmar said, bringing up a topographical map of the area, “we can extrapolate their positions.”

“Remember what I said about that?” Kaine asked Siru.

“Yes, that spaced out correctly the damage is increased five-fold, but you said they just had to be within the blast radius,” she answered. “That means they could be anywhere within two hundred meters of each other.”

“Wrong,” Otmar said, pointing at her. “If you wanted to maximize the potential destructive power and make it a big enough area so there would be no possible way for us to escape on foot, you would have to position them as so.”

Otmar tapped a few times on his omni-tool and dots appeared on the screen. Jarvis peered at them. At first he couldn’t see a pattern as they were just spheres superimposed over the map. But gradually he began to see what Otmar was talking about.

The dots formed circles within circles, creating an almost hypnotic design in the jungle, rings wrapping around each other. They must have been at it all night. There were at least fifty dots scattered about.

“They have to place them in concentric circles,” Otmar said, pointing at the map. “That way the inferno can not only focus inwards but expand outwards as well. All we have to do is find one to confirm my calculations.”

“How big are we talking?” Jarvis asked.

“Over two hundred kilometers in all directions,” Kaine said.

To emphasize the point Otmar tapped on his omni-tool and four new dots appeared. These were green with labels. Each had one of their names attached to it.

They were in the middle of the entire design.

“We would have to run two hundred kilometers to get away?” Siru asked.

“And it might not even help,” Kaine said.

“Why?” Jarvis asked.

“That’s just the damage from the bombs themselves,” Kaine said, looking at Otmar.

“The collateral fire would ignite the jungle, increasing the damage radius,” Otmar finished.

“How far?” Siru asked.

“Precise calculations are impossible, but I estimate the resulting bushfire would continue expanding for days and more likely weeks,” Otmar said.

“Burning almost an additional fifteen hundred kilometers outwards,” Kaine finished.

“How long would it take?” Siru asked.

“A few weeks, like I said,” Otmar answered.

“No,” Jarvas interjected. “How long for the bombs alone to destroy that much area?”

Jarvas watched as Kaine looked at Otmar, the two of them not saying anything. He knew they had the answer but were silently discussing whether or not to tell them.

“Ten minutes,” Kaine said, finally looking at them.

Jarvas blinked in total shock. These bombs and the resulting firestorm would decimate seventeen hundred kilometers or more of the jungle, with the first two hundred burned away in less time than it took to shower. There was no possible way to get out in time.

“You guys came up with all this in the last few minutes?” Siru asked.

“Yep,” they replied in unison.

Jarvas looked at Siru and he could see she felt the same way. That amount of area was too much to cover with what little supplies they had. And to even try could be suicide considering how quickly the destruction would happen. There was really nothing else they could do. They had to follow Kaine and Otmar’s lead.

“You win,” Jarvas said with a nod. “Where do we start?”

Over the next several hours Siru and the others moved about the jungle, disabling devices as they found them. Though Otmar’s calculations weren’t exact, they found each of the bombs within a few meters of where he said they’d be.

They stopped every so often to drink or eat. Kaine had found a few more ration bars on the intact remains of the mercenaries. Saying that tomorrow was the day to either get off this world or die, Kaine had them eating all the food they had to get their energy levels back up.

Even though Kaine clearly had a firm grasp on the group as a whole, it was Otmar who led the way. He walked with poise, completely devoid of any self-consciousness. Siru had thought it before, but she couldn’t help thinking of it over and over whenever she looked at him. He was definitely not the same Quarian that had led them to Omega.

"He looks far better than the rest of us," she had whispered to Kaine at one point while they rested.

Otmar sat with his omni-tool running, redoing calculations or equations while absently sipping ration paste. Completely engrossed in his work, Otmar didn't even flinch when low flying creatures zoomed by overhead.

"Well he has that suit on," Kaine remarked. "Hides a lot of stuff."

"That's not what I meant." She said. "You're tired, I'm tired, and so is Jarvas. We're weary and drained. I can see it in your face and his and I know you see it in mine."

Kaine nodded but didn't respond.

"Regardless of whether he has a mask on, you know he's not in the same condition as us," she said, looking at him. "He sits straight, we're slouched. He moves with purpose and we're just following. The last bomb we found, he did all the work."

"In our defense, if we did the work we'd just blow ourselves up," he said to her with a smile.

"True," she said with a quiet chuckle.

She patted his hand then and they got back to work.

The three of them were trailing Otmar as he forged a path through the jungle. Incredibly they hadn't run into any new enemies yet. The scaled creatures from the day before hadn't even shown up. When she mentioned this it was Jarvas who explained it.

"It's because of us," he had told her.

"How so?" She asked in return. "I'd think we'd make easier targets today."

"We smell of death." He answered. "Animals will defend themselves and their homes or young against anything. But out here, away from anything of that sort they won't attack something that reeks of savage destruction."

The thought had made a certain amount of sense to her. But they were still weary and on the lookout. Even though her strength, and she guessed the others too, had returned, they wanted to save some for tomorrow. First they had to survive until tomorrow.

That meant more walking and more bomb disposal.

They weren't just haphazardly going about the deactivation through destruction of the bombs however. Otmar said if they dealt with a certain number of them the resulting explosions would be less intense. Being nearby would still be a death sentence but the overall destruction would be negligible in comparison. In short, they were taking out key bits to ruin the whole operation.

"Like a house of cards," Kaine said to her as they walked towards the next target.

"How so?" Jarvas had asked.

"If you stack cards correctly you can build a structure out them," Kaine said, layering his hands over each other. "But it's unstable, remove the right one and they all fall down."

"Would be easier to just blow them over," Siru had remarked.

"Obviously but that's not the point of the saying," Kaine replied testily.

"What is the point then?" Jarvas asked.

"It just means any solid plan can fall apart if you throw a monkey wrench into it."

"What's a monkey wrench?" Siru asked.

Kaine sighed.

Just as the sun was going down Otmar said they were finished. The last bomb, now a smoking crater a hundred meters behind them, had been dealt with. In the last however-many-hours it had been they'd blown up fifteen bombs and walked over thirty kilometers in a circle around the jungle.

Kaine watched as the others sunk to the ground. They had worked their way back downstream to where he and Siru had slept the night before. The grove hadn't changed, five large trees a few meters apart stood in a ring around a small depression of dirt. In the center they had gotten a fire going, as Kaine had said. They were all-in, trusting Otmar's skills and his VI.

"Goddess my feet hurt," Siru said taking off her boots and letting her feet air out.

Kaine nodded in silent agreement, his own feet sore. He wasn't used to these harsh conditions anymore. During his ICT days, this sort of situation would have been the norm. With a sigh he let the bag slide to the ground, turned, and left the grove without a word.

Walking out on the sandy bank he knelt by the river and dunked his head into it. The cool water felt better than it had in the morning. All that walking, constantly on edge about predators and wondering not only if Otmar was right about the mercs, but if he was right about the bombs, had exhausted him. Pulling his head out with a gasp he sat down by the rushing water.

The day was fading fast. He could see stars just starting to peek out from the night sky. Looking up he could see faint red and green tendrils of light begin to spread out. He was transfixed, the two streams were just beginning to interact and it almost looked like a fight between two colored columns of smoke.

"That was there last night," Jarvas said, sitting down next to him.

"Must have missed it," Kaine said, running a hand through his wet hair.

Jarvas made a noncommittal response, dipped his hand in the water, and took a drink. He did this a few more times before leaning back, hands resting on bent knees.

"Thanks," Jarvas said suddenly.

"For what?" Kaine replied, slightly confused.

"For not leaving me in that box," he answered, looking up at the sky.

Kaine also looked up, the two colored arms in the sky began to intertwine. Kaine knew what it was. He'd seen this sort of thing on Earth when he was stationed at the Antarctic traffic control. The Aurora Borealis was intense and gorgeous there. He hoped this would get just as good.

"Don't thank me yet. We could still all die tomorrow," Kaine said, looking at him.

"Maybe," Jarvas said, looking down at the flowing water. "But I'd rather die fighting than in a box."

"You know my grandfather used to say 'who gives a shit how you die, you're dead. Better to worry about how you live instead'," Kaine said in his best old man voice.

Jarvas smiled but didn't look up. As quickly as the smile came it fled.

"Sometimes the only thing you can control is how you die," Jarvas said quietly.

Kaine watched him a moment. Jarvas was a tough son of a bitch, which was indisputable. He'd killed four heavily armed mercenaries with nothing more than a pry-bar. And that was after being stuck in a coffin for nine years.

But he was also tired, as Siru had said.

She was wrong though, he wasn't physically tired from the events of the last day. He was tired from living, alone for who knew how long. Having no one to confide in or call for help. Always worried someone would recognize him. That even telling someone who he really was could get him killed.

Kaine knew how that felt, but he'd only been doing it for three years. Jarvas was at it for a lot longer. That sort of loneliness can wear any creature down and grind it into dirt. In the end it wouldn't matter how healthy he or she were physically, it would kill them just the same.

"There was this soldier," Kaine began, resting his hands on bent knees just like Jarvas.

"Curvy features, impeccably talented, dangerous with any weapon. Women loved him, men wanted to be him. He would get into the craziest situations, always trying to do the right thing, always trying to protect someone or something or defeating some bad guys."

"This guy was a loner though. Always had to do things his way. Caused a lot of grief with his superiors. Never really trusted anyone, always on the lookout for betrayal or the next dangerous enemy. But what he never knew was that he wasn't alone. He had people helping all along the way. Sure he was the one doing the punching and shooting and bomb disarmament. But he could always count a handful of people to be there for him," Kaine said, looking at Jarvas, who returned the glance. "The type of people that are more than friends, they are people he fought and bled with. He never really acknowledged it but they were there. They could always be counted on for help.

"So this loner, did all manner of incredible things but gradually he learned you couldn't do everything alone or it would drive you insane. You had to trust people at least once or twice," Kaine raised his eyebrows, "maybe even three times. Otherwise you'd end up dead no matter what you tried to do."

Jarvas just stared for a moment, then glanced away, returning to stare at the water. Kaine didn't move or speak and just sat there with him, listening to the river make its way down to wherever it was going.

"That person sounds pretty impressive," Jarvas said finally looking back at him. "A human?"

"Nah, it was Blasto from those action vids." Kaine said with a grin.

Jarvas burst out a laugh, first leaning forward then falling backwards. Kaine joined in quickly and their mirth filled the air. After a few moments they settled down, Kaine sitting up and Jarvas lying down. Both looking up at the aurora as it slowly spiraled into being.

"You were a soldier too, once?" Jarvas asked suddenly.

"Once."

"Were you ever in command?"

"Off and on. I was being groomed for more though."

"I see," Jarvas said nodding. "Too bad you left. Your people a lessened for it."

With that Jarvas got to his feet and walked into the grove. Kaine remained where he was. The reddish green light was starting to replace the quickly setting sun. Night fell on him as he listened to the water flow. He thought about what Jarvas had said, that the Alliance had lost a good leader.

That statement should have filled him with a measure of pride. Instead it only left him with a profound sense of regret. He'd squandered more than a career with his idiocy, he'd lost his life, one possible life anyway. He wondered idly if what he'd gained over the last few days could replace what he left behind.

He sat thinking about it until the green and red of the aurora was in full bloom.

TWENTY-TWO

"Can't sleep?" Kaine asked, returning from the river.

"Just thinking," Otmar replied.

"Naughty things?" Kaine asked, standing next to him.

"Keelah no," Otmar said with a chuckle.

Kaine let out a short chuckle and leaned his head against a tree. Otmar picked up a stick and stared at it, letting his mind wander, thinking about the last few days, since securing Kaine's help for this endeavor. The Citadel felt like two lifetimes ago. He wondered what it would have been like if they had been able to return, if everything had gone as planned. He and Kaine would have gone their separate ways he supposed. Or would they? Kaine had mentioned helping Otmar get home, but that was never a part of the deal.

"You know, you never actually said it," Otmar said to him, absently stabbing at the ground with the stick.

"Never said what?" Kaine asked.

"That you'd you help me get home," Otmar answered, looking up at him. "Back at the crash site, you said you would get me home and you meant it. But you never actually said that."

"I didn't?"

"No."

"Well shit, I'm leaving then," Kaine said with a grin.

Otmar looked back down, watching the stick plunge into the ground over and over. Always jokes with Kaine. He knew the human would take things seriously if forced to. Otmar didn't know if this was serious or not. It just felt important to absolve Kaine of anything he thought he owed. They'd already been through far more than Otmar ever wanted.

It was his fault anyway. They were all stranded on this wretched planet because of his Pilgrimage. He wanted to return with the best gift any Quarian had ever seen and what had that gotten them? A deadly battle every few hours since arriving on Omega, commandos and mercenaries on their trail, a desperate plan to hijack a heavily armed ship from those same commandos and mercenaries.

If anyone died, it would ultimately be his fault. That thought, which would usually make him sad and depressed, just made him angry now, at himself, at the Asari Councilor, and the mercenaries. He wanted to go home, but he wanted to get them home too.

"You ever hear the phrase 'anything worth doing was worth doing right'?" Kaine said, sitting next to him.

Otmar looked at Kaine, who was watching him. Slowly, Kaine turned to look up into the sky again. Otmar followed his gaze. The place they camped at afforded them a decent view of the night sky. Otmar could see another aurora, its brightness growing by the minute. Soon the area would be bathed in greenish red light.

"No," Otmar said. "Does it mean something beyond the obvious?"

"You wanted help getting that box for the Councilor, but it was really about help getting home," Kaine said, looking back down at him. "Whether you asked for it or not, that's what I signed up for."

"Kaine you don't owe me anything." Otmar began, but was cut off.

"Is that so?" Kaine said. "You think that Turian outside of Chora's would have just wounded me? The bartender at Haven? The cloaked commandos in the storage bay? The Blue Suns' ship? Those fucking Zero Bombs? You really think I don't owe you my life?"

Otmar couldn't speak. He could only look at Kaine in astonishment. Those things he'd done, he didn't think of them in terms of life and death. It was only overheating a pistol or shotgun or deactivating tactical cloaks. He was just performing simple technical processes.

"Shit happens Otmar. You think we all wouldn't have preferred to just hand over the box and be done with it?"

"Well, I'm sure Jarvas is happier we didn't," Otmar answered simply, looking at him again.

"See?" Kaine said with a smile. "There's a silver lining. Stick with me and you'll be home before you know it."

"I still don't have a gift," Otmar said.

"Sure you do," Kaine said and tapped a finger against Otmar's chest.

This gesture confused him. What did he mean by that? Was he trying to say Otmar was the gift? There were millions of Quarians just like Otmar all over the Migrant Fleet. Many were better than he. There was nothing special about him.

"Kaine, the gift from a Pilgrimage is supposed to prove you won't be a burden, that you'll be productive and that you're worthy. Remember?"

“Yeah I do,” Kaine said, shifting to face him fully. “And when you get home, you tell them all the stuff you’ve done these past two days and the past five years.

“You tell them that in the worst moments, when your ship was under fire and your friends were hurting, you didn’t hesitate or buckle. That you rose to the challenge and survived.”

“You are the gift Otmar, a Quarian of action forged in the fires of combat, if you don’t mind me waxing poetic. I saw the change in you today. You’re not the frightened, weak mechanic you once were. I think the real you, the strong willed and confident Quarian finally came out. And if that isn’t good enough for your people then fuck them, you can live with me.”

Otmar was awe struck. Never had anyone said such things about him, not even his parents. They weren’t cruel or uncaring, they just never expounded on the virtues of Otmar. Maybe in the past they had no reason to.

Kaine said this with such conviction he almost had Otmar believing it.

“Besides,” Kaine said with a shrug, putting a cigarette to his lips and lighting it. “You could always just give them the ship we’re gonna steal tomorrow.”

Otmar was about to tell him that it was against the spirit of the Pilgrimage to hurt another for a gift. Then he remembered that these were Blue Suns mercenaries. They’d hounded his people before and were responsible for more than a few deaths. This wasn’t theft, it was compensation.

“You’d let me do that?” Otmar asked cautiously.

“Yes,” Kaine said seriously, then added with a wink, “You’ll have to give us a lift home afterward though.”

A first class fast attack frigate. One liberated from the clutches of thugs and brutes. An image of him returning at the helm with such a prize formed in his mind. Now that was a gift sure to impress.

“Thank you, Kaine.”

“Well, we have to steal it first. Can’t get ahead of ourselves.”

“No, I mean thank you. For everything these last couple days.”

“Get some sleep,” Kaine said with a pat on Otmar’s shoulder.

Laying down, Otmar stared up at the aurora as it danced in the sky. Green mixed with red against the black and white of space. Turning, he watched Kaine move off amongst the trees, puffing on his cigarette. As his eyes slowly closed, he dreamed of home.

Siru K'vaar rolled to her side and with a hiss of pain rolled back. The bites on her left leg were making it difficult for her to sleep. Apparently the numbness had allowed her to rest comfortably the night before. Now it was gone and she had nothing more than the aching to deal with.

She tried resting on her right side but found it uncomfortable. As exhausted as she was, she couldn't sleep. As they had walked and destroyed bombs they had devised a plan of action for the next day. It was bold and a little scary. She wasn't sure about it but the others were confident in it so she went along.

Now as she lay here on her back, careful to avoid aggravating her wounds, she just watched the sky. Normally lights such as these would do nothing but annoy her, but tonight it was nice to have something beautiful to look at.

She felt sleep nearing again. The warmth of rest began to well up. Slowly turning, she rolled onto her left side. Her leg fired a burning sensation up her spine and with a curse she sat up.

"Here," Kaine said out of nowhere.

Walking passed Jarvas and Otmar, both fast asleep. He picked up the supply bag and walked back. Sitting down next to her, lit cigarette dangling from his lips, he took the medi-gel out.

"Mind?" He said with his hands over her bandages. With a nod he began to undo them.
"Another busy day."

"All we seem to get lately," she said as he gently unwound the white fabric. As he pulled it away it caused another round of pain as it tore free from the wound.

"Sorry," he said quietly and took the rest of more carefully.

Finished, he tossed the semi-bloodied rags away into the bushes. She watched, transfixed, as he unscrewed the cap of the jar, dabbed his finger in the gel and applied it to her thigh. Relief washed over her, the pain fading fast.

"These are probably going to scar," he said quietly.

At the moment she didn't care. She just watched as he gently worked the gel into one wound, then another and another. Sitting here, next to the fire with its orange light fighting with the red and green from the sky on his face, Kaine looked like an abstract painting, less a man and more an idea of man from the mind of a crazed artist.

The colors played against his dark skin and his short dark hair and matching beard. Slightly unkempt over the events of the last few days. She watched his eyes as they watched his hands

wrapping a fresh bandage around her thigh. He looked tired, as she had said earlier, but this was more than just from the past few days. His fatigue and weariness came from the years he'd spent in regret and guilt.

She began to wonder then what he would be like if he could fix his past. He was already funny and capable, a little annoying and sometimes silly. But the undercurrent of sadness was there. Oh he hid it well, but she could see it on his face. She'd spent long enough with people of every walk of life and every race, creed, and gender to miss such a thing.

"There you go," he said, snapping her from her thoughts.

He patted her thigh once and began to lift his hand away. She reached out, laying her hand on his. She marveled at the contrast in their skin, she a light teal, and he a dark brown. Curling her fingers, she held onto his hand as it closed.

Siru looked up to see a smile on his face. He sat watching their hands, the look brightening up his face, hiding the tiredness. Taking a last puff on his cigarette he tossed it into the fire.

"Would you ever want to visit Earth?" He asked looking at her.

She blinked, surprised by the sudden question. Siru had never given the human homeworld much thought. She'd seen the planet of origin for every other Citadel species, so she wouldn't necessarily be opposed to the idea.

"Someday I suppose," She said.

"When this is over I'm going back to Earth," he said patting her hand with his other. "I'm tired of hiding. I want to be with Lillian. I want to try to fix what I've done."

"I thought you said you would be in trouble if you returned." As she spoke a profound sense of dread formed in her. She did not like where this was going. "That you faced prison."

"Yes," he said nodding.

"Why are you telling me this?"

"I think we could have something," he said slowly. "Maybe?"

"Maybe," she said simply. "Our first date has been rather unorthodox."

A sad smile crossed his lips then. Unlike the other that dampened the weariness, this one increased it. She could feel a pain in her chest now.

"So why are you telling me?"

"Because once this over, I want you to come with me," he said looking away into the fire.

That wasn't what she expected to hear. She thought he'd say something about her needing to move on, find someone more worthy of her affections, almost anything but following him back to his homeworld to face trial.

He turned to look at her again and she felt the pain in her chest grow. At long last she could see past all his defenses. Even last night, when he'd told her about his sister, he'd held back something. In his face she could see it plainly. He was terrified.

"Why are you so scared?" she asked.

He didn't answer her just then, didn't move or speak at all. She couldn't say anything either. The two of them sat watching each other. She knew concern was all over her face, which she couldn't hide nor wanted to.

"Have you ever lost something you desperately needed or wanted?"

She could only nod.

"Last night I told you more than I've told anyone," he said, slowly turning back to the fire. "I'm not the type to open up like that normally. When you held me, I felt at peace for the first time in years. Like I was," he paused a moment before continuing, "like I was home on Christmas day."

Siru was confused. She knew what the day was. He'd spoken about it before. But that was usually a day of gift giving and eating lavish meals. She didn't understand the reference.

"I don't mean the material things," he said, looking at her face and reading her confusion. "I mean the feeling of belonging. The feeling of rightness and calmness. The feeling of, I don't know, a sort of happiness."

Siru continued to watch him as he spoke.

"If I don't go back, I'll lose that. With you," he said barely above a whisper. "I don't know what happened in Chora's Den or why. I only know that not facing what I'd done is the surest way of ruining what chance we have at happiness."

"And you think spending a few years in prison is the way to nurture a relationship?"

Kaine let out a slight laugh then. It was then she saw him hesitate before talking again, as if unsure of himself or his words, yet another side of him she didn't think she'd ever see.

"I couldn't honestly say what's right or wrong in the galaxy if I didn't go back. How could I set the correct example if I kept running from my responsibilities?"

"You think you need to set a good example for me?"

"Not you," he whispered.

And then she understood. He felt he had to return, to face his punishment and whatever else was waiting for him because if he didn't, any time he scolded a child for doing something wrong it would be hypocritical. He must have thought it was the only way he could be a good father.

"We haven't even had a proper date, Kaine," she said simply.

"True," he said with a wistful smile. "But you learn more about a person in combat than you do over roasted vrek steak."

She could accept that. She'd certainly learned more about this man and his character in the last few hours and days than she had in the weeks at Chora's. He was a man of action and of tenderness. The way he spoke of his sister and what happened had drawn her towards him. Those decisions he'd made had left scars on him worse than any explosion or claw could.

But he was right, the longer he stayed away the longer those wounds could fester. To begin healing he'd have to go back. He'd go to prison and pay his dues. That thought though gave her a new one.

"If you do go to prison, what happens to your sister?" She asked cautiously.

She hoped he wasn't trying to bring her back so she would take over, not that she would just let the girl die, but it would somehow feel cheap. She watched him as he mulled over her question, when he answered it seemed like he wasn't really talking to her.

"I've thought about that a lot recently. Especially last night and today while walking around disabling bombs. Odd place to have an epiphany."

She watched him stare off into the fire as he continued to speak, again not really to anyone in particular.

"She had a life in the hospital, but what kind of life is that? She had no family to speak of, no real friends, just the nurses and staff. Even in prison I would be closer than on the Citadel."

A slight shake of his head and a few moments of silence followed before he spoke again.

"I guess I just feel I should be there. The inevitable is coming, Siru. I think, even from a cell I should be there."

There it was. The underlying issue he was really facing. His regret was leaving her and running. His weariness came from the guilt of his actions.

"Siru," he said, fully facing her. "I want you to come back, to meet here. Before the end."

Siru watched a tear roll down his cheek. She could feel one of her own following. He wasn't asking her to go to Earth forever, or to wait for him to serve his prison sentence. All Kaine wanted her to do was meet his sister before her illness finally took her.

"Kaine," she said quietly.

"I know, it's probably the worst time for this. But if I don't tell you now, I don't know if I'll have the courage to again." He took a breath and let it out slowly. "What we have, what we might have, will be ruined if I let these ghosts follow me forever."

Siru looked down at the fire as its brightness began to fade, the fuel almost spent. Flames were dying to embers and the orange light was losing to the red green above. It was the second night in a row he'd confided something to her, that she'd learned something profound about him. She was about to speak when he stood.

"We can discuss this more tomorrow," he said, looking into the fire. "If we live."

"Kaine," Siru said.

"Tomorrow," was his only reply as he walked into the jungle.

What the fuck was wrong with him? Kaine raged at himself. What the hell was he thinking laying that bullshit on her? Right now, the night before trying to get off this rock, he needed her focused on her part of the plan and not confused by his melodramatic idiocy.

Kaine walked about in the semi-darkness, lit only by green and red of the aurora above, looking for more pieces of wood for the fire. Each time he found one he would slap it onto the small pile he was carrying, more aggressively each time he thought about how he'd been acting.

He was a soldier, Kaine reminded himself. Tomorrow they would either escape or die, no real middle ground. He should be concentrating on the plan, looking for ways to improve it or discovering obvious faults, making as sure as possible their course of action would work.

Instead this image of he and Siru living together kept popping up, the wild fantasies of some idiot boy who thought he was in love, the sort of thing you didn't waste time and energy on before a mission. He needed to focus on the job.

Finding another suitable piece of firewood, he snatched it up and slammed onto the pile. He did this for some time. Walking and picking up sticks, thinking about how he was acting and what he was doing. He wasn't even paying attention when he walked out of the jungle and found himself standing next to the river.

Stopping, he stood and watched the aurora reflected on the water's surface, the tangled ropes of color that coiled and uncoiled over and over in the sky. He was transfixed by the sight of the water crashing against rocks, creating a white tint almost like clouds.

Kaine watched a green tendril unfurl and unwind towards him. He followed the small snaking color along the river's surface. It slid easily over the top as easily as a raindrop on a piece of glass. As it moved it came to the water's edge and a face appeared before him.

He saw a tired man looking back up at him. A bandage over one eye and another wound to match its twin. Hair disheveled amongst itself, beard unkempt and scraggly. What he looked at could have been him, but this was not a Systems Alliance Marine, the face watching his was nothing more than that of a selfish child, worried more about his own fate than others.

Kaine was trained to put himself last, to protect those that couldn't protect themselves. This man in the water though was a fool who squandered everything he'd earned. How could anyone be interested in him? How could anyone find a reason to care for someone like this, a liar, a deserter and coward, someone that ran from his duty and responsibilities?

These thoughts grew darker as he stared at the man in the water. This man was a mercenary, a gun for hire. He might have thought himself something better than a Batarian slaver but he was fooling himself. The only difference between the two was who paid them. He watched as the face contorted with fury and his anger grew to match.

"Fuck!" Kaine roared into the night, and stepping forward, flung the wood into the water.

He took a deep breath, watching the sticks float down the river, lightly bumping against rocks that peaked through the surface. Slowly he looked down to find a boot in the water where the man's face had been. Removing his foot he watched as the disturbance caused the face that appeared to distort and reform, then shift and coalesce again.

"Seems to defeat the purpose," Siru said from behind him.

Kaine looked up and turned to see her emerge from the jungle, arms wrapped around herself, staring up at the aurora. As she came near she shifted her gaze to him and he was struck by the transformation.

The red and green light mixed with her teal skin produced incredible variations of colors. Green caused her to look more vibrant, red flowed over her and give her a yellowish haze, more gold than anything. As he watched, she became emerald then gold then teal then the shift began again. She was like a living gem.

"Walking around for half an hour for firewood just to throw it all away?" She looked at him with brilliant emerald and shining gold eyes.

"Seems to be what I do," Kaine said simply.

As she reached him she looked down and he followed her gaze. He watched her slowly take his hand, lift it up, peer intently at it. No, not his hand, he realized, his wrist. She was trying to read the text of his tattoo by the light.

"*You are who you choose to be*," she said slowly.

Lightly she traced the words with her finger, ever so lightly touching his skin. They stood there like this for a number of heartbeats before Siru looked up directly at him, so confident, so sure of herself.

"Who do you choose to be?" Siru asked.

He'd asked himself that same question a lot over the years. It seemed to always change. When he got the tattoo he chose to be a soldier. Years later he chose to be a deserter, then a mercenary. He thought it was a spiritual question, one to make you ask yourself what your life should be like, instead of what it was. Maybe it was more literal.

"I don't know," Kaine said quietly.

Siru reached up and brushed aside an errant hair that had gone astray. As she moved she let her fingers trace his eyebrow, cheek and jaw. Slowly she let the hand fall and rest against his chest, just above his heart.

"Sounds like an honest answer to me," she said gently.

"Siru," he began, but she silenced him with a finger to his lips.

"I followed you here Kaine. I think Earth would be a nice change of pace," she said simply.

Reaching up she hooked an arm around his neck and one around his shoulder. He in turn leaned down and enveloped her in his arms.

TWENTY-THREE

"Can we go over this one more time?" Jarvas asked.

The four of them were standing on the river bank, surrounding a little pictogram Kaine had dug in the sand with a stick. He had woken them up just after the system's star began to come into view, the yellowish light pushing back the predawn blackness and warming the area with it.

"Okay," Kaine said. "This is their ship," he said, using the pry-bar to indicate a log. "In ten minutes."

"Eight and a half now," Otmar interrupted.

"Yes," Kaine said, nodding. "In eight and a half minutes Otmar's VI will let itself be beaten, making it seem like the mercs had finally broken through its defenses and gotten control of the ship. In theory their first course of action will be securing the vessel. After that they'll have to come and get us."

"Yeah that," Jarvas said interrupting. "What makes you so sure?"

"By now they will have figured out we disrupted their Zero Bomb scheme," Otmar answered. "Their only option to complete the mission is either to come after us or fix the bombs."

"Right," Kaine said, continuing. "But the bombs are now an unidentified quality. There's no way to know they can even be fixed. I know command tactics. If those bombs don't work they'll move to seek and destroy on foot."

"Why not use the ship?" Siru said.

"Blue Suns won't risk their ship with Otmar around," Kaine answered. "He took control of it before and they won't let it happen again. Anyway, when they finally get out you two will be here," he said, pointing at a small stone near the ship. "I found a Zero Bomb there earlier, you two will be disabling it as they emerge."

"You'll have to be convincing on this part," Otmar said. "They need to think you were just working on the device and then see you clearly. You two then run upstream." He said this and Kaine trailed the deep line indicating the river. "Head towards that fissure we found the first night," Otmar said, pointing at Jarvas. "By the time you get there Kaine and I will have secured the ship. We'll then fly it over and pick you up."

It was a deceptively simple scheme, almost too simple. It also hinged on many unknowns. If the Blue Suns didn't act exactly as Kaine and Otmar thought this would all fail quickly. And the end result would be lots of deaths, mostly theirs.

"Why not just take them by surprise at the ship?" Siru asked.

"Blue Suns aren't stupid," Kaine answered. "You pay them for a job and they'll do it. But if they know the mission is an utter failure or the person paying them gets killed, they have two courses of action."

"They can simply take off," Otmar said.

"Or call in reinforcements. Clearly we don't want either. So we pull them away, take their ship and leave their sorry asses here to rot," Kaine finished.

"Kaine, if they don't do as you say..." Jarvas let the statement hang.

"I know," Kaine said. "If they don't take the bait then we'll be forced to rush them. That tactic is simple: throw all our remaining grenades, try to decimate their numbers as we close in and take the ship by force."

"Why not have your VI lock them out?" Siru asked Otmar.

"In order to be convincing it'll have to seclude itself somewhere disconnected from anything of use. It will probably hide in speaker or com subsystem. It would be able to make a lot of noise but little else."

Jarvas nodded and felt something turning, a literal change in the wind around them accompanied by the thought of their fortunes improving. Maybe something as crazy and simple as this could work.

"It's now or never," Kaine said, snapping Jarvas from his thoughts. "At some point the Blue Suns will either decide to give up or call in reinforcements. We won't have a better chance at this than today."

They all stood there staring down at the scratches in the dirt that made up their plan. Jarvas thought it was as bold as it was dangerous. But Kaine was right about one thing: their chances of success would not get any better than they were now.

"Five minutes," Otmar said.

Jarvas looked at Siru who only shrugged.

"What the hell," she said lightly. "I've gotten pretty good at running for my life."

With a nod Kaine got their bag and started handing out supplies.

"Jarvas," Kaine said, tossing his jacket to him. "That's armored and is tough enough to withstand pistols or stray rifle shots. The fibers will also interlock giving you some added defense against small explosive devices. You two will have the bulk of the Suns, if not all of them on you, so take that, and this," he said, handing over the one functioning rifle they found.

"Siru," Kaine said handing her his concussion grenades. "Otmar revamped these with some of the plastique from the bombs. They're just concussion grenades, but they'll be enough to disorient them even if they have helmets on."

She nodded, taking them. Kaine reached in and took out her extra jacket, dark as night without any additional colors.

"Wear that and stay to the shadows," He told her.

"This thing is heavy," Jarvas commented, putting on the jacket.

"Told you," Kaine said in mock seriousness.

Siru rolled her eyes and shrugged out of her current short jacket into this longer, darker one. She stuffed the two grenades into the front pockets as she turned back.

"What about that?" She asked, Kaine pointing to his belt.

"This?" He said indicating a sphere half again as big as the grenades. "That's a fusion detonator. I'll be hanging on to that."

"Good idea," Otmar said.

"Why?" Siru asked.

"Think of it as a super-grenade. It will carbonize anything within three meters of its epicenter and if you use it in a building smaller than four or five stories then you no longer have that building," Kaine said with a wink.

"How do you use it safely then?" Jarvas asked.

"You throw it very far or use this," he answered, removing a small device from his pocket. "Remote transmitter, will set it off with just a click from anywhere within two kilometers."

"That thing sounds dangerous," Siru commented.

"It is," Kaine said simply.

"They're also illegal. Just having one is punishable with up to five years of incarceration." Otmar threw in.

"Yeah well, don't tell on me," Kaine added sarcastically.

He watched as Siru wrapped her arms around herself, a look of worry etched on her face. With a light touch on her shoulder he lead her a few paces away.

"You okay?" he asked her.

"Just worried. You're plans never work right," she said with a forced smile.

"Well, it's half Otmar's," Kaine replied with his most reassuring smirk.

"You look terrible," she said after a moment.

"That's not nice."

"Hopefully everything will go as planned," Siru said, looking away.

"It'll work enough."

Kaine looked at her as she turned back towards him. He had never been the one to worry much. He'd never had much to lose. All of a sudden however it seemed like he had very much to lose.

"The tales we can tell after all this, right?" Siru asked easily.

"Yeah maybe one day we'll sell the rights to this story and become millionaires," Kaine replied with a slight chuckle.

"I just hope we all make it off this world safe and get to go home," Otmar said as he and Jarvas walked over.

"Amen," Kaine said.

"Keelah Se'lai," Siru added.

"Brax'ti," Jarvas finished.

"What's that mean?" Otmar asked.

"It's Batarian. Loosely translated it means 'as you say, so do we,'" Jarvas answered.

"I like that," Kaine said with a nod. "Brax'ti. Let's all get home after this."

"If not that, at least somewhere I can buy shoes," Jarvas added.

Siru burst out a laugh that Otmar quickly picked up on. Soon he and Jarvas were with them. One last moment of mirth before everything got going. Siru jumped as a loud beep erupted from Otmar's omni-tool. The laughing died down instantly.

"Time," Otmar said soberly.

Kaine looked at each of them again, making eye contact and holding it for a moment. He wore his command confidence face, the one he learned to show his troops before action. Whether or not he actually had the confidence mattered less than inspiring it in his troops. If they believed he

had faith in them, they would have that faith in themselves. And that could be the difference between success and death.

"Alright," Kaine said finally, "move out."

"Here they come," Jarvas said. "Let me know when they spot us."

The two of them were huddled over the Zero Bomb nearest the ship. They had positioned it so it was easily visible from their vantage point. Jarvas crouched with his back to the ship, Siru opposite him watching.

"One more just came out, now two," Siru added.

"Don't look directly at them, pretend to be working on this thing."

"I am. I am." Siru said, actually taking pieces of wiring out. "There's five of them now. All have weapons out pointing everywhere."

"They must think we set up an ambush."

"Surprise on them."

Jarvas felt exposed here, just waiting. He was the one taking the biggest risk. He had to hope Siru could tell when they saw them, predict when they were going to fire, and signal. Barring that, he'd also have to hope this heavy coat could do its job of protecting him.

A lot of hoping going on.

"I see the commando now," Siru said. "I think she has a pair of viewers."

Jarvas's heart was beginning to speed up. Any minute they would spot them, at which point the plan would go into motion. It was odd, hoping that the well-armed mercenaries and commando would chase them down to kill them. That such a thing not happening would ruin the plan. The idea made him smile.

"What?" Siru asked.

"I was just thinking. If we don't get them to see us and we don't get them to follow us and we don't get them to try and kill us we'll have failed our end of the plan," he answered.

Siru smiled fully and shook her head.

A shot rang out nearby and more reported from behind and around them.

"They've seen us," Siru said.

"Oh really?" Jarvas asked sarcastically.

He stood, yanked Siru to her feet, and fled upstream. More shots followed them as trees and dirt were peppered with multiple impacts. They ran, but not too fast, dodged between trees, but not too well. They wanted to be followed.

After a few moments of this a shot impacted just above Jarvas's head, another in the dirt behind where Siru had been. Their enemy was very close and their aim was true. Jarvas decided to skip being coy and just flat out run.

Kaine watched from further downstream as the mercs walked out of the ship slowly and cautiously. Using his macro-glasses he saw five Blue Suns appear, then the commando. After a few moments of scanning the area she pointed to where Siru and Jarvas would be. Instantly the Suns opened fire.

After a full minute of shooting from their position, the commando pointed to the ship's hatch and a merc ran up, closed it then joined the others as they gave chase.

"How long should we wait?" Otmar asked.

"A minute or two, then we rush it." He answered.

Kaine was antsy. He wanted to get to the ship as fast as possible and get it ready, not for his sake, but to get upstream and protect Siru. Going over the plan in his head, he knew it was suspect at best and at worst it was downright negligent. Hopefully the two of them were already in the process of losing their pursuers.

"One minute," Otmar reported.

They waited, Otmar on one knee watching the ship, Kaine lightly hopping on his haunches. He figured it would take a few minutes at least to get the vessel up and running then another minute or so to get to the rendezvous. Best case, Siru and Jarvas had to outrun them for ten minutes. Worst case, they were already dead.

"Two minutes," Otmar said.

Kaine sprang up and sprinted to the ship. He had told Otmar prior to wait until he was at the ramp before following, just in case there was anyone still on board. As he ran across the field he slid to a stop behind one of the two shoulder high cargo boxes.

Counting to thirty and without anyone coming out of the ship, Kaine waved Otmar over. A few seconds later Otmar was next to him.

"Things are looking good. Let's get that door open," Kaine said.

"On it," Otmar replied, moving forward.

Moving away from the box, he drew his pistol and scanned the area where the mercenaries had run off in search of Siru and Jarvas. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Otmar approach the ship and board the ramp.

Satisfied they were alone Kaine watched as Otmar reached the top, fired up his omni-tool, and opened the hatch. He was about to comment on Otmar's efficiency when a thunderous boom rang out.

Kaine watched Otmar flail backwards, blood and bits of enviro-suit trailing out of a massive wound. Otmar landed heavily, arms and legs akimbo. He did not twitch or spasm. No words or grunts of pain came forth. A large pool of blood formed quickly on the ground around him.

After his mind caught up to reality a soul crushing sound of despair and desperation escaped Kaine's lips. His hand came up, pistol readied, and began firing at the Krogan. Another large boom exploded from the shotgun, annihilating one of the crates Kaine had been standing in front of. Rounds pinged and ricocheted off the Krogan's tough hide, the ship's hull, and out into the field. A lucky shot hit the large caliber weapon Kaine's enemy held, and he watched in satisfaction as it belched smoke, and with a popping burst of ruined electronics, the shotgun died.

Shaking with rage, Kaine stared at the Krogan. He thought he'd left it to die as they'd jumped into the river. He knew the brutes were tough but those animals were all over him. Kaine didn't think there was any possible way for the Krogan to have survived. Another thing Kaine was wrong about and he was going to fix that.

"For Otmar," Kaine said, pulling the trigger. As he did, a warning erupted from his own weapon. Panicked, Kaine looked at his pistol and saw that it was overheated. He pulled the trigger again and again only the warning reported.

"Looks like I get to kill you slow," the Krogan said with an unpleasant chuckle.

Kaine's only advantage lost he took a moment to look over his opponent.

The Krogan outweighed him by at least two hundred kilos of muscle and thick armored skin. A massive head and jaw sat atop the equally massive body. Rows of sharp teeth greeted him as the Krogan grinned. He wore nothing but a pair of close fitting shorts. Kaine himself wore nothing but pants and a shirt. The Krogan was covered in cuts, gashes, and gnaw marks. So was Kaine.

Deliberately and purposely Kaine unbuckled his knife, and tossed his pistol aside. With a steady hand he gripped and removed it from its sheath. A long slow sound of metal scraping metal rang out. The Krogan roared a laugh in return and tossed his shotgun aside.

"You have gall, human," he said, casually descending the ramp.

"My name is Kaine," He replied through clenched teeth. "And I'm going to carve it into your skull."

A low growl emanated from the Krogan, followed by a deafening howl. His taunt had succeeded in enraging the monster. Kaine did not flinch or move. Pounding a fist into his open hand, the Krogan snorted once then charged.

Kaine answered with a charge of his own. At the last second Kaine dove for the monster's knees, caught one, and heard a soft crunch as it crumbled from the collision.

Caught off guard the Krogan stumbled, going down on his bad knee. Kaine snapped a kick into his face and that spun the Krogan to the ground. Quickly Kaine brought the knife up and slammed it down, aiming for the Krogan's eye.

Faster than he thought a Krogan could move, a meaty fist slammed into Kaine's stomach, another gripped arm. Helpless to resist he was lifted into the air and thrown down crashing through one of the crates, splintering it to bits. The air left his lungs.

Kaine tried to suck in the precious oxygen he'd lost as he lazily watched bits of wood fall down around him. He started to roll to his feet when two powerful hands wrapped around his neck.

With a roar that nearly defended him, the Krogan picked him up and tossed him like a doll. Kaine felt weightless as he flew through the air. With a metallic thump he hit the ship. The hull, unmoving and far stronger, stopped his momentum on the spot. He fell against the ground and the air was pulled from his lungs again.

Everything went cockeyed. He watched as two clawed feet moved to him. The world was a dizzy madhouse, shifting and tilting in all directions. He felt himself rolled over, hands around his throat once more.

Again he was lifted into the air. The world whirled around him as the Krogan flung him bodily into the ship. His back cracked and new pain flared as he impacted the unforgiving outer hull.

He whacked his head and shoulder against the hard steel. Fell to the ground. A taste of blood in his mouth. Wetness on his face. The world suddenly tinted an ugly red. He was bleeding, badly.

Kaine heard laughter as he struggled to roll over. Arms and legs shaking he got unsteadily to his feet. Looking at the Krogan terrified him. The monster was faster than he had expected. His incredible ferocity was not surprising. His ability to move as easily on a wounded knee was.

Kaine spit the blood that had pooled in his mouth. A stream of crimson flew out towards the Krogan and he felt fresh rage register on his face. If he wanted to survive, Kaine had to outwit the creature, use the damaged knee as an advantage, and make the Krogan angry enough for a mistake. A tactic he tried with the commando without success.

Absently, as the Krogan roared and charged again, Kaine wondered if there was an afterlife.

Jarvas spun Siru behind a large tree and joined her. The Blue Suns were behind them and closing fast. The run from the ship hadn't been as smooth as he'd thought. Their pursuers had devised new strategies for dealing with them on the run.

Instead of blindly chasing them they formed a moving fire line with the outer mercs setting the edge, keeping a heavy attack to herd them toward the center where the inner mercenaries would cut them down.

"How much further to the fissure?" Siru said through deep breaths.

"At least a kilometer," Jarvas answered.

"That's pretty far."

He looked at her and his fears registered on her face. At this rate they wouldn't make it. Either a stray shot from the edges of the firing line would get them, or the mercs strategies would work and they'd be shot to pieces.

It didn't seem like a good idea, but they had to engage, if for nothing more than to cull their numbers and even out the jaks. Grabbing her hand, Jarvas dragged Siru out from the tree. Instantly rifle shots reported and the trees around them began to splinter.

He dodged from shadowy trunk to shadowy trunk, the darkness their only real defense. Jarvas ran with Siru in front of him, shielding her with his body, desperately hoping the jacket he wore would protect him.

They put a little distance between themselves and the mercenaries when shots began to hit closer, pelting the ground at the feet and the trunks of trees at head level. They slid to a stop behind another large tree.

"I guess Kaine hadn't planned for this," Siru said, gasping.

“We’ll be sure to berate him for it later,” Jarvas replied.

He took out the two percussion grenades and space tape. Working fast he bound them together then with a few quick strips attached them to the tree.

“What are you doing?” Siru asked as a stray shot rang out on the other side of the tree.

“Just a little surprise,” Jarvas answered finishing. “Come on!”

Again they moved, and again shots peppered the area around them. He felt impacts on the jacket around his legs and back. They stung but he ignored it. Not long after they stopped behind another tree, booby-trap easily in sight.

Jarvas sunk to the ground and peered around the edge of their hiding place. He waited, watching for their attackers. Quickly he saw flashes of blue armor. They were coming into view. In a few seconds they would be within range of the tree.

“Look out!” Siru yelled.

He felt himself thrust to the side, biotic energy shoving him away. He stumbled and fell to the ground as a massive explosion tore through their tree. Rolling over he spun and kicked himself up and out of the way as a huge tree crashed to the ground where he had stood.

He turned just in time to watch the commando shoot Siru.

Kaine tumbled away as the fist, meant to crush his skull, smashed the crate he’d fallen against instead. The Krogan struck with such force Kaine would have honestly testified the wooden object exploded from it. Splintered debris flew everywhere.

A powerful kick to the Krogan’s knee caused him to lose his footing and fall. Kaine punched, aiming for the Krogan’s fleshy eye. Instead he hit an open hand that instantly collapsed around his. Kaine’s head snapped to the side as the Krogan connected with his own attack.

Stars exploded in front of him and danced in lazy circles. He watched in disbelief as the Krogan’s massive jaw filled with wicked looking teeth gaped open and moved toward him. Two quick kicks to his damaged knee arrested the Krogan’s movement. He howled in pain. A quick and forceful backhand struck Kaine.

Falling to the ground, he felt something rough on his tongue and spit it out. Two white objects flew from his mouth and fell to the ground. Ignoring his lost teeth Kaine scrambled to his feet. Not quick enough.

Something hard as steel collided with his ribcage. Hearing a crack and feeling a new pain radiate from his chest, he was lifted off the ground. Clutching his side, he stumbled away and found himself on the ground staring at his knife. Gripping it he sat up and threw it with all his might at the Krogan.

He watched in satisfaction as the brute's head snapped back with a roar pain.

Siru got her hands up just in time to absorb most of the shots energy. She was still hit in the stomach and fell to the ground. Pain exploded from the wound as blood began to seep out. She pressed a hand against it and turned.

The commando had appeared in front of them, apparently using the Blue Suns as a distraction. And they had fallen for it.

Siru watched her aim her rifle and fire. Instinctively she raised her bloodied hand and formed a shield in front of her. The round flew away harmlessly but was replaced by others.

The commando stood a handful of meters away, firing mercilessly at her until she swung the weapon away and renewed her attacks in a different direction. Jarvas came into view then, pry-bar up held in both hands before him, a shield of his own being peppered by gunfire.

"Shoot the grenades!" He roared at her.

Before thinking, she clawed to her feet and dove away as rifle fire tore up the ground where she had been. She dove from one tree to another as the mercenaries continued firing, shredding the trees around her. Landing with a thud, she could just barely see the grenades taped to the tree.

Holding her breath she gently squeezed the trigger. The weapon instantly hit her shoulder and sprang upwards. She stopped shooting. The mercenaries slid behind cover or into the bush.

She could hear the commando roar with anger as she continued shooting, but Siru ignored her. Taking a deep breath she steadied the weapon on a trunk and aimed. She saw a mercenary come into view, pointing his weapon at her. She could feel sweat rolling down her face and a tremble in her hands.

Siru refocused on her target as the mercenary fired. The sight of the flash from the gun made her jump. She pulled the trigger. Miraculously she hit true.

The percussion grenades, made to detonate when they struck something hard enough also exploded when something hit them with enough force. As her one successfully placed shot hit home a new sound roared forth.

A massive explosion of fire poured from the two grenades, catching the mercenary shooting at her in the blast wave. He was picked up and tumbled away, on fire, out of sight.

The other four mercenaries dove for cover as the tree was severed in two and came crashing down. One didn't move fast enough and let out a scream as the heavy cylinder of wood crushed him with a thunderous boom.

Siru sucked in a breath to yell and winced as pain flared in her stomach. Her roar became a whimper as she pressed her hands against the wound. She looked up in time to see the surviving mercs shooting at her.

Rolling to cover she barely avoided the ground that began to explode with rifle fire. As she leaned up she saw her own weapon torn to pieces, parts of it exploding upwards as it toppled out of sight.

Bleeding and scared, Siru sat there as she realized they no longer had any weapons.

"Bullshit," Kaine said in disbelief.

He watched as the Krogan slowly and deliberately turned to look at him, Kaine's knife sticking upright out of his head. Pulling the knife free the Krogan tossed it lightly in his hand.

"My turn," he said with relish.

Kaine was up and moving as the Krogan cocked his arm back to throw. Diving away he felt a sharp pain in the back of his thigh. Thudding to his stomach he grunted in surprise and looked back. The knife was sticking through his leg.

He tried to get to his feet, to defend himself, but it was impossible. Any amount of weight on the leg blinded Kaine with sharp pain. Trying again to stand the blood he'd already been losing made him light headed and he fell to the ground again.

Ideas slowly formed in his mind, ways to survive or ways to kill the Krogan. As he dazedly watched the brute stride forward Kaine realized he had only one option left, but it wouldn't work this close to the ship. Slowly he began dragging himself away, clawing at anything for purchase. He could hear more laughter from behind him.

“Crawling away like a child?” The Krogan said with his horribly guttural voice. “That won’t save you.”

Probably not, Kaine thought. But if this worked, he hoped Siru and Jarvas would be able to get back before their pursuers did. He felt the ground shake slightly as the huge monster walked up behind him.

“You’re so cute,” the Krogan said mockingly.

Kaine ignored him and just kept moving, putting distance between himself and the ship.

“Stop,” the Krogan said.

Kaine didn’t, adding precious meters. He could feel blood pouring out of him.

“I said,” he heard the creature snarl. “Stop!”

Kaine’s left shoulder exploded with pain. He felt the blade shatter under the weight of the Krogan. Bones splintered. Muscles tore. Ligaments snapped. His arm popped out of what was left of its socket. Then it too shattered. His chest cracked and air spewed forth from his mouth, more a red liquid than anything.

He closed his eyes and screamed like a child. Red blotches burst on his lids as tears streamed down his face, the pain so intense his mind couldn’t even black out. He was forced to focus on nothing but the damage.

Jarvas sprang to the attack, swinging the pry-bar at the commando’s head. She dove under it. He continued in a circle and brought the metal around again. She brought up her rifle to deflect. Jarvas smashed the bar into it, breaking the weapon into pieces.

Changing direction, he brought the other end up viciously. She moved her forearm to defend. Like the gun he shattered her bones with the pry-bar. She screamed and jumped away from another quick attack.

With her functioning hand she flung biotic energy at him. Spinning the pry-bar he held it vertically in front of him and absorbed her attack with his own shield. Drawing a pistol, she fired. A burst of energy and he slid to the right. She fired again. Jarvas dodged to the left, continuing to move methodically toward her.

Reaching her he dashed forward, pry-bar held like a spear ready to skewer his enemy. Before he could connect she smashed the end of the bar with her pistol and dove away. He sprang towards

her and stabbed downwards. Missing barely, the weapon bit into the ground and she kicked the pry-bar away.

Raising the gun, she fired. Jarvas snapped a punch outwards and caught the weapon. The shot went wild as the gun flew away into the bush. He lashed out with another attack. The commando swatted it away with her good hand. Jarvas followed up with a quick punch. She hopped up and caught it with her right shin then kicked with her left leg. Striking him in the chest he stumbled backwards.

She rushed him, kicking at his head. He absorbed the attack with his forearm and snapped a strike of his own. She ducked under it and punched. Jarvas kicked her fist away but lost his footing.

Landing lightly on his stomach he began to hop back up as a kick knocked him back to the ground. He was forced down again as another shooting pain erupted from his ribs. More vicious kicks were added with haste. Desperately he rolled away and hopped to his feet.

Breathing heavily he watched her pull her hand back, blue light enveloping it. Jarvas instantly threw his back as well and felt the energy course through him. She flashed her hand forward and he sent his at her. The two balls of energy hit each other and exploded.

The entire area was bathed in the bluish haze of the released power. Jarvas was blinded and blasted off his feet. He landed heavily on the ground, head snapping against the dirt.

Kaine was yanked upwards, the pain so intense he couldn't feel all his body parts, not the light on his face, nor the breeze in the air not even the hand around his neck. Pain, only pain.

He watched the Krogan's face get closer as he was pulled towards it.

"This is where you die, human," the Krogan growled.

Kaine tried to speak but was unable to, his throat constricted by fingers trying to crush it.

"What was that little vermin?"

Kaine took a breath and swallowed one last time then forced the words out.

"I'm... going... to dance on... the corpses... of... your... stillborn... children," he choked out.

The Krogan's eyes flashed and he let out a roar that almost stopped Kaine's heart. Suddenly he was in the air again. With another thud he hit the ground a good ten meters away. Kaine watched the Krogan continue to yell. Quickly he pulled the transmitter from his belt.

With a click he set off the fusion detonator he'd dropped at the Krogan's feet.

Pure white light blinded him. Heat washed over him. Wind from the shock-wave picked him up and flung him backwards. The resulting explosion deafened him. He neither felt nor heard himself hit the ground.

The concussive wave had dizzied him beyond the capacity to understand what happened. Even with his eyes closed, the flash of released energy still pierced through. Eventually when no one came to finish him off he realized it had worked.

Lifting his head took more effort than he thought he could muster. With his remaining energy he sat up. What he saw made it all worthwhile. The Krogan was gone. Where he had stood there was nothing but a five meter wide scorch mark in the ground. Solid black, the explosion was so powerful it had solidified the dirt into something akin to glass.

Kaine raised a fist, extending his middle finger upwards and began to laugh as he felt his life slipping away.

Siru watched Jarvas get unsteadily to his feet. The commando was lying against the fallen tree, unmoving. The pain in her stomach had subsided but she didn't know if that was a good sign or not. Everything was quiet until rifles began firing again.

She saw Jarvas dive away. Looking up Siru could see the remaining mercenaries on bent knees trying to shoot him. With shaking hands Siru reached into her pockets and took out Otmar's improved concussion grenades. With considerable effort she stood, feeling her strength fade quickly.

Taking in quick short breaths she reared back and threw one, then the other in their direction. After tossing last she stumbled forward and fell into the dirt. Closing her eyes, the world disappeared.

Jarvas slid behind another tree, scooping up his pry-bar as he went. He saw Siru throw something at the Blue Suns but didn't know what. A mere moment later he found out.

A deafening sound erupted once, then again from the feet of the mercenaries. They were a good stretch of meters away and still the sound hurt. He saw the armored men clutch at their helmets. Without hesitation he charged.

Running forward Jarvas threw the pry-bar like a spear, catching the middle mercenary in the face, the metal piercing the helmet and slicing into it. Jarvas arrived quickly, pulled the bar from his

head before the body fell. Lashing out he caught one mercenary in the neck and watched it snap, nearly tearing through. A short gurgling sound erupted then stopped.

Spinning, he brought his weapon up into the last Blue Suns chest and forced it upwards until it pierced through the top of his head. Jarvas watched with some satisfaction as the mercenary clawed at his neck then slowly let his hands fall. With a quick yank he pulled the weapon free. The body fell.

Jarvas stood breathing deeply in the middle of the bodies. He was about to turn when he heard a weapon discharge and was knocked to the ground. His back stung from the shot but the jacket had held.

Forcing himself to move, he got up and stood on shaky legs. Leaning forward, he had his hands on his knees as the commando moved into view, right arm dangling useless at her side. In her other hand was her pistol. She was breathing heavily as she advanced with only murder in her eyes.

“No quarter given,” Jarvas said cruelly.

Turning, he reached out with power fueling his limbs and mind. He gripped a fallen tree in biotic energy. Screaming in fury he lifted it into the air, turned to look at the commando and flung it down on her.

She fired once, catching his shoulder and knocking him down again. The damage had already been done and a quick screech escaped her lips as the tree crashed to the ground with enough force to splinter apart. Jarvas lay on the ground as debris and branches from the explosive collision rained down on him. A flurry of leaves blinded him momentarily.

Slowly, body quaking with fatigue, he stood and walked forward, first picking up the pry-bar, then a rifle as he passed the bodies. He walked along what used to be a massive tree which he had reduced to mere pulp. Raising the weapon he approached where the commando had been.

The sight gave him pause. All that was left of her was bloodied and ruined clothing, her bones and body had been liquefied from the impact. Taking a deep breath he spit on the remains of his enemy.

“None asked,” he finished the old gladiator’s phrase.

The world grew quiet then. He heard nothing but a light breeze that ruffled the leaves above him. No more mercenaries or commandos tried to kill him. The jungle fell silent. Leaning on the pry-bar he closed his eyes to enjoy the moment.

Slowly something pierced the calmness. He heard a siren winding up, beginning to blare. The sound grew to an incredible wail from the direction of the ship. Turning, he looked towards where the cacophony was originating.

Something else had gone wrong.

TWENTY-FOUR

Siru's eyes flashed open as she let out a gasp.

"Sorry," she heard someone say.

Her stomach flared with renewed pain. Looking, she saw Jarvas wrapping tape around her stomach. He had taken off his shirt and was using it as a bandage. With each pass he tightened and each time new flares of anguish came. She closed her eyes against it and fought the urge to scream out.

"There," Jarvas said.

She opened her eyes as he leaned back on his haunches, putting the jacket back on. Gently she poked the makeshift bandage and winced with each flare of pain. Taking a deep breath, she let it out slowly.

"How bad?" She said glancing up.

"You'll be okay," he said, standing. "You'll need stitches though."

It was then she heard the wail of alarms and sirens. Standing slowly, with Jarvas's help, she scanned the area looking for the threat. She saw only Jarvas, a pile of dead mercenaries and what looked like the remains of a tree.

"What happened?" she asked.

"We got 'em," he replied.

"Good." She said, then added, "What's that noise?"

"I'm not sure, but I think it's coming from the ship."

Siru looked back in the direction from where they had run. She couldn't see anything but trees and jungle.

"What should we do?" she asked.

"I think we need to go check it out," he replied.

Nodding, Siru followed Jarvas as he handed her a rifle and picked up one for himself. As they walked past the completely obliterated tree she saw what looked like a pile of crushed bones, blood, and torn dark clothing. It took her a moment to realize what it was.

"You did that?" she asked him.

"Yeah," he said, looking down. "She deserved it."

"Agreed," Siru said with a nod.

They walked quickly back towards the ship, as they did so the sirens and wails got louder. As they approached the field Jarvas waved her down. They peered out at the ship as it stood there, door closed. She could easily see two smashed crates and a huge black scorch mark in the ground.

Scanning the area more closely she saw something lying not far from the burned earth. Some stray sunlight made her put a hand over her eyes to see it better. Then it came into focus.

"Goddess no!" She screamed, dropping the rifle and running.

Jarvas yelled something out after her but she ignored him. She ran as fast as she could but it wasn't fast enough. The crumpled body of Kaine lay there, in the sunshine, unmoving. Pumping her legs as hard as possible seemed to have little effect. It felt like hours before she reached him.

"Kaine!" She screamed, sliding on knees before him. "Kaine! Ethan!"

He was pale, dangerously so. Far more than she'd seen him after any of the fights. She saw one of his knives sticking out of his leg. His belt was wrapped around his thigh, just above the wound. She gripped his shoulders to shake him but snatched her hands back.

His right shoulder felt like a bag full of broken pieces of pottery floating in a thick solution. Cautiously she pulled his shirt up to look and almost vomited at the sight. Multiple pieces of bone had torn through his skin. Some muscle had gone with it. His arm appeared to be held in place more by what was left of his skin and shirt than anything.

"Rekk!" Jarvas breathed, running up next to her.

"Kaine!" she yelled again, leaning down.

She put her head to his chest and listened for a heartbeat. It was hard to hear with the sirens and alarms from the ship screaming behind them. She held her breath and finally it came, a faint, slow heartbeat that seemed far more distanced than she thought it should be.

"He's still alive!" She yelled and started to pull him up by one shoulder.

"No!" Jarvas said. "We need a stretcher."

"Then get one!" she screamed into his face.

Without a word Jarvas got up and ran off.

"Kaine," she whispered, wiping blood from his face.

He was covered in it. His head and hair were matted with it. His pants were stained crimson from the knife and his shirt was soaked. How he managed to stay alive after all of it was incredible.

"Siru!" she heard Jarvas yell.

She didn't care what it was, she wasn't leaving Kaine alone. Quickly she heard Jarvas run back and fall to his knees next to her. She looked up at him and she saw in his face utter defeat.

"What?" she asked breathlessly.

"Otmar," he said, then stopped.

"What?" she asked again more forcefully.

"He's dead," he choked out.

Siru felt a pit form in her stomach. Otmar was dead, Kaine was dying before her eyes, and they were trapped. The ship was right there behind them, but they had no way of getting into it.

Suddenly the alarms ceased.

Jarvas turned to watch the ship. He brought his rifle up, ready to shoot to pieces whoever emerged. The only thing keeping his emotions in check was the desire to kill some more Blue Suns. As the door slid up her waited.

After a few moments when no one emerged he looked at Siru. She didn't even bother acknowledging the world around her. She just absently stroked Kaine's cheek. Snapping his eyes back to the open airlock he waited a few more heartbeats.

Slowly, not taking his eyes from it he got to his feet and advanced towards the ship. Mere moments later he was at the ramp. Peering inside he saw nothing but its interior. Panels were missing, torn from the walls, wires exposed. It looked like the mercs had tried everything to get control.

Carefully, rifle at the ready, he walked into the ship. He was torn with the need for haste, but also the need for caution. With precision he moved about and saw an armory, a medbay, and sleep pods. He swept through the engine room then up to the cockpit and command center. The ship was deserted.

Running back to the med-bay he did a quick search but found no stretcher. Gun in one hand he flew down the ramp and ran up to Siru. She hadn't moved since he went inside to scout out the interior of the vessel. He slid to a stop before her and grabbed her arm.

"Come on!" he yelled at her. She didn't move, only stared at Kaine. "Siru! There's a med-bay! Snap out of it!"

Dropping the weapon he grabbed her shoulders and gave her a shake. Turning her head she stared at him with vacant eyes.

"What?" She said quietly.

"We can save him!" he practically screamed into her face.

"What?" she yelled and sprang to her feet.

Before he could react she reached down and put Kaine's left arm around her neck. With a roar she hauled him to his feet and dragged him towards the ship. Seeing that she had it under control Jarvas moved, snatching up the pry-bar Jarvas ran to Otmar's body. Gently he picked him up and dodged in front of Siru into the ship.

Laying Otmar on a large table in the armory he returned to the front hatch. He watched Siru march into the med-bay, concentration set on her face. Following her inside, they picked Kaine up and laid him on the medical table in the center of the room.

"Get us out of here," Siru ordered steadily as she moved about.

Not bothering to argue Jarvas jogged to the open hatch, retracted the ramp, and sealed the door. Moving forward he sat in the pilot's chair. The ship was big enough to have a co-pilots seat next to him along with a navigator behind him and a coms officer opposite it.

Jarvas stared at the controls for a minute, getting his bearings. He knew how to fly and the layout for all mass effect driven starships was basically the same. It just took a bit to get acclimated to them.

Holding his hands over the controls, he took a deep breath and tapped the start up. The ship came to life. He could hear the engines warming up. Lights came on in the command center for nav, coms, and weapons.

A HUD appeared in front of him, highlighting the best trajectory to escape the planets gravity. Readouts for energy level, fuel status, and weapon caches flashed to life. In only a few heartbeats he had everything he needed.

Jarvas got the ship ponderously into the air and heard the landing gear retract. A few select taps on the controls and they were off. He barely heard the engines increase as they thrust the vessel up and into orbit.

Passing out of the planets gravity well a new screen appeared in the HUD suggesting an FTL jump to the next system where Omega was. Tapping it he heard the drive spool up and in mere seconds it was ready. Hitting the button again there was a brilliant flash of light and the ship jumped away from Eingana.

Siru cut Kaine's shirt off quickly and cut the pant leg from around his knife wound, tossing both to the ground, sweeping the room in search of sterile bandages, medi-gel, and pain suppressors and returning to his side a few moments later with what she needed. As Siru laid out her tools she felt the weightlessness that accompanied an FTL jump. She whispered a quick prayer of thanks that they finally got away from that accursed planet. Without much need for conservation she upended the jar of medi-gel and poured half its contents onto Kaine's shoulder and did the same with the remaining amount on his knife just after removing the blade.

Siru quickly wrapped a clean bandage around his thigh and synched it up tightly. Returning to his shoulder she gently as possible placed bandages around it. As she lifted the ruined part of him she nearly gagged at the feeling in her hand.

Then tearing the cap off with her lips she plunged a needle marked dimorphine/tetrabiotics into his chest near the wound. She pushed the plunger down and put the full dose into his system. If it was marked correctly, it would not only ease the pain but flood his body with high grade antibiotics. If it weren't, she might have killed him.

Slowly she pulled the needle out and her hands began to shake uncontrollably. With great effort she placed the needle on the small table next to her then laid her hands on Kaine's chest. She could feel it rise and fall slightly with each weak breath. Lips trembling, she felt fresh tears roll down her cheeks.

Slowly she lifted her still quaking hands and placed them together, entwining her fingers. She stared down at them and willed them to stop. They ignored her. The world became blurry for a time as the horrors of the last few hours swirled in her mind, thinking about what they did, what they could have done, and what had happened made her gasp for breath.

A sob escaped her lips as she thought about Otmar and all the death surrounding this adventure of theirs. Her thoughts drifted into darker areas as she imagined ways she could have saved them. Squeezing her eyes shut she tried, to banish the thoughts from her mind.

"Siru?" Jarvas asked behind her.

Siru looked up quickly and inhaled sharply. Images of things she could not control faded from her mind as she slowly let out the breath. She wiped her eyes quickly and took another fast breath, then turned.

"Yes," she said as calmly as possible.

"Are you alright?" He asked her, concern etched on his face.

"Fine." she said quickly. "I felt us jump."

“Yeah,” he replied, nodding. “We’re within view of Omega’s asteroid field. I was about to plot a course for the station.”

“No, we can’t go there.”

“Then where?”

Where to go? That question sobered her. She had no idea. Omega was off limits, she had no doubt Aria would kill them all no matter the reason for their return. Citadel space was dangerous with Jarvas on-board. Approaching the human controlled areas would be a death sentence in a Blue Suns ship. In short, she couldn't think of anywhere to go and told him so.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

She explained why Omega was off limits and Systems Alliance Space. She added that Citadel space is dangerous because they were all a threat to the Asari Councilor.

"If we can't come up with something we'll have to go to a human controlled world and take our chances," she said quietly. "But they might just shoot us down before we have a chance to explain."

"Okay," he said easily. "I'll find somewhere."

“Jarvas,” she said, hearing the despair in his voice. She wanted to say something to alleviate his fears or worry but was unable to come up with anything. At this moment she didn’t have the energy to make anyone feel better. Finally she said, “Nothing.”

With a nod he turned and disappeared. She stared at where he’d been standing for a long while, then slowly walked over to the sink. Running warm water into a dish she took a small handful of towels and a stool and sat next to Kaine. Methodically she began to clean the dried blood and dirt off him.

Jarvas sat in the pilot's seat staring out at the asteroid field surrounding Omega. The entire situation frustrated him beyond reason. They fought so hard to get off that planet and now that they had and desperately needed help they had nowhere to go. He slapped his hand on the controls in anger.

"Rekk!" He swore again in Batarian.

An intriguing thought popped into his head: Batarian space. He knew enough to get them onto one of the smaller colonies and maybe they could trade items from the armory or stores of ships weapons for medical care.

A quick plot on the galactic map showed the outpost he had targeted was no longer Batarian controlled but within Systems Alliance space.

"Great. An entire galaxy and nowhere to turn," he said miserably.

Jarvas took a breath and rested his head on his hand. He was transfixed by the swirling rocks before him. He watched them bump and careen into each other. Big ones smashed smaller ones to bits while the small ones just bounced around.

He let his gaze blur as he stared at nothing. He knew the Salarians would ask too many questions and the Turians strictly followed what Citadel Space did. The Hanar or Drell might help but he didn't know if Kaine could last the five day journey to Kahje. Elcor would have no idea what to do and the crushing gravity of the Volus worlds would just kill them outright.

Jarvas was about to give up when a new screen popped up in the navigator's area. Curiosity compelled him to stand and move over. Sitting down at the station, he saw a course plotted, only a twelve hour trip to some unimportant system. He was about to hit the erase button when words appeared on the screen.

THE QUARIAN FLOTILLA WILL HELP.

It repeated itself over and over, nothing but those five words. Jarvas stood suddenly and looked around, expecting to see someone there. But of course there was no one. Then a new and even crazier idea exploded in his mind.

"Otmar?" He asked incredulously.

Jarvas went to the armory, to where he'd left the Quarian's body. Walking inside he ignored the racks of rifles, shotguns, armor, and heavy weapons. He moved directly up to the corpse of his friend, at least someone he would have liked to have as a friend.

"Otmar?" He asked again.

Of course there was no answer. The massive wound in his stomach and chest were proof positive that Otmar was dead. With a sigh he reached out and patted Otmar's shoulder. He began to turn and leave when Otmar's omni-tool switched on. He watched in fascination as a screen appeared and letters and words began scrolling across it.

You must go to the coordinates. That is the system the Migrant Fleet is scheduled to visit next. They will help you. The sentences faded quickly.

"Who are you?" Jarvas asked.

Otmar'Reefa nar Zeela's custom VI.

"Pretty damn custom if you're suggesting courses without prompting." Jarvas instantly felt foolish responding like this to a VI.

Does it matter? If you don't do this the human will die. It is his only chance for survival. The words disappeared and nothing new replaced them.

"Yeah it does matter," Jarvas said quietly to himself, "but not right now."

Spinning about he rushed to the navigator's seat and sat down. Quickly he punched in the necessary commands to lock in their destination. A timer appeared, counting down as the ship began moving again. Not twenty minutes later they approached the mass relay of the system.

A snaking tendril of energy flashed out at them and they left Omega's system.

Siru sat wondering about the Quarian Fleet and if it would indeed help. Jarvas had told her about the plan of action after they left the Sahrabarik system. She had nodded her acceptance of the idea and went back to cleaning Kaine. Finishing, she placed a light sheet over him and returned to her stool.

She sat with her hand holding his for so long her legs fell asleep. Feeling the need to stand she got up and paced the med-bay. As she moved about no thoughts came to her, nothing filled her mind or took away the worry. She saw only Kaine's ruined body lying before her.

Siru stopped pacing when she heard something, a low murmur. She stood still as stone and waited. This time the murmur was stronger and she saw Kaine's lips move.

"Kaine?" she whispered, dashing back to him.

He tried to speak again but only nonsense came forth. His eyes slowly opened then and she moved so he could see her. They moved about slowly then locked on her face. A slight smile tried to cross his lips but failed. Siru smiled enough for both of them.

"Siru," he croaked out.

"Easy, don't talk. We're going to get you help," she began but he shook his head. "What?" she asked gently.

"Lily," he began, but again stopped. "If... I die..."

"You're not going to die. We're getting help," she said quickly.

"Go... see her for me," he managed.

"I will," she said and sniffled back tears.

"Promise," he said more forcefully, staring directly at her.

"I promise," she said, trying to smile. She didn't want him fixating about dying. He had to fight to live and that line of thought could undermine his will. "You just lay back and rest. Try not to think about the pain."

"Hard... not to," he said, closing his eyes.

"Just focus on my voice, okay?" she said, taking his hand. "Just listen to me now."

Siru had no idea what to say to him, but she could see the pain registering on his face. She didn't want to give him any more of the dimorphine because she didn't know human physiology. Too much of that medicine will stop a person's heart. She also didn't want him to lie there with nothing but pain to fill his mind.

"I'll tell you a story, okay?" she said, but he didn't answer. Taking a breath she began to speak gently and calmly so he could focus on her. "This is a story of a woman who works in a bar. Nothing dramatic, no fancy parties for A-list celebrities or the like, just everyday citizens, some more unsavory than she'd like but for the most part it is a place for the average person to relax."

"This woman had been there for many years. She'd met all manner of interesting people. Salarian pro-wrestlers, Turian sculptors, Krogan poets, and even a few Hanar musicians. And while they were all fun in their own way there was still something lacking about them. Something she couldn't quite put her finger on.

"So she worked, listening to stories of cheating wives, failed businesses, and other tales of sorrow. There was a fair share of happy ones too. She heard the mundane and the amazing, but never anything that felt unique or special."

Siru watched the lines on his face fade a little bit as his head slowly lulled to the side. As she continued she ran a hand through his hair, a tactic not unlike the one her mother would use when she was ill, lightly running a hand over her scalp crests.

"Then one day this new race literally exploded onto the news," she continued. "They'd picked a fight with the Turians and it was brutal. The Council stepped in and stopped them, forcing a treaty. These newcomers, these humans were very interesting. Full of unmatched confidence and spirit, they soon moved about the more lawless parts of the galaxy eventually gaining an embassy on the Citadel."

"It didn't take them long to find the bars," she added with a halfhearted laugh.

"Then this one human started coming around. Always talking to her, making idle conversations about the most inane things. Asking her if Asari had midlife crises at five hundred and other foolish things."

"He was obnoxious," she said with a smile. "As arrogant as he was charming; irritating as he was humorous. She liked him more and more and she could tell he liked her too. One night he finally asked her out on a date. After a little prodding she agreed."

"But then something came up. A crazy scheme to help a Quarian," she stopped suddenly, emotion catching in her voice. Gaining control of herself she continued, "helping a Quarian with his pilgrimage."

"The human tried to back out of their date but she would have none of that," she said, smiling to herself. "She forced him to take her along, even though they only knew each other vaguely over casual conversations. It didn't matter, she was adamant and eventually he agreed to take her along."

"And so they ended up on a terrible mining colony, attacked over and over by enemies, nearly shot to death in a barn pursued through space and almost blown to bits, nearly sucked out into the vacuum, crashing on a dangerous planet and having to fight their way off it."

She thought about that for a moment, all the things they'd been through these last three days. Three days? It was unbelievable. The fact that they'd made it this far, even with one of them dead and another critically wounded was a miracle. Though it didn't feel like one now.

"Eventually they made it off the world they'd crashed on." She felt tears stream down her cheeks even though her voice neither faltered nor quivered. "She was fine, a few cuts and scrapes. He was horribly wounded though and she tried desperately to help, to pull him back from death as he had pulled her back from the vacuum."

"The whole while she thought about how he aggravated her at times, how he teased her whenever he could and even at times condescendingly so. She also thought about how tender he could be, how his past haunted him. How he made her laugh. How safe she felt in his arms."

"As he lay there resting, she told him a story of herself, how she had always wanted to find that one person who could be what she needed, even though she knew not what that was. And at the end of all their travels and all the worry and fighting, the screaming, crying, pain, and suffering. After all that, one final thing happened."

"She fell in love with him."

TWENTY-FIVE

Jarvas turned slowly as Siru finished her story and walked over to the armory. He had been careful not to let her see or hear him. What she had said should have been for just herself and Kaine. But he wanted to hear it, wanted to know what they'd gone through. It was his curiosity that made him eavesdrop.

Walking in, he moved over to a deep sink near the back. He found a basin for water, some cleaning solvents, towels, pieces of flexible material, and space tape. Taking the supplies he returned to Otmar's body, setting them down next to it.

Closing his eyes Jarvas hung his head and pinched the bridge of his nose. Composing himself, he took a long breath and let it out. Opening his eyes he looked over Otmar's body: massive damage to his left side probably killed him instantly. Jarvas had seen wounds like that many years ago in the arenas. Jarvas thought he had left all that behind him.

"Apparently not," he said quietly to himself.

With a sigh he took the flexible black material and laid it over the damaged area. A few quick strips of space tape and it was fashioned in place, allowing Jarvas to continue without looking into the insides of his companion.

He noticed then there were stains on the inside of Otmar's visor, blood that had probably been forced out from the attack. Jarvas ran his hands around the visor's edge looking for a catch or release switch. Not finding anything he palmed the front plate and tried to pry it off but failed. In response Otmar's omni-tool fired up again and again words on a screen appeared.

What is your intention? Words wrote themselves out then disappeared.

Jarvas stared at the omni-tool for a long second before deciding to answer. Talking to a piece of tech equipment was possibly the craziest thing he'd ever done.

"I'm going to clean his face," Jarvas said at the omni-tool.

To what end?

"To what end?" Jarvas asked quizzically. "To clean him."

Why? Why do you want to do this?

"Because it's the least I can do for him, to clean his wounds and patch his suit. So he can move on as a whole person, without any pieces missing."

Otmar'Reefa nar Zeela did not believe in an afterlife.

"That's his choice."

Do you believe in an afterlife?

"That's a little heavy for a VI, isn't it?" Jarvas said seriously. "Let me clean his body. Not for any existential meaning but because his family is going to see him for the first time in years. I don't want it to be like this."

Instantly a hiss burst from the edges of Otmar's visor and he heard tiny latches come loose.

"Thank you."

Reaching down he gently popped the plate up a millimeter then slowly pulled it away. Jarvas's breath caught in his throat at the sight of Otmar's uncovered face.

He stared down a long moment, taking in the person that lay cold on the table before him. Angular features, slim nose with dark colored hair that was bound at the back. Ears like Kaine's. Dark lines extended from his scalp to meet the line of hair over his eyes.

It was shameful to see it marred by the blood that had dried on his face. The dark patches seemed almost insulting. Jarvas dipped one of the towels into the watery, soapy mixture. Wringing it out he dabbed at the mess, slowly and carefully wiping away the stains.

When finished he just stared again.

Jarvas had seen many different people in his time from all walks of life and all corners of the galaxy. He'd seen royalty, celebrities, and billionaire princes. And yet he could not quite think of a more striking visage, a more pleasing set of features to a face.

"This is the real injustice of your people," Jarvas said quietly while lightly tracing the dark lines on Otmar's face, "locking up such beauty in a cage."

It is not by choice. Words on the omni-tool's screen.

"It rarely is," Jarvas said, feeling slightly crazy for continuing a conversation with an omni-tool. "That's what makes it an injustice."

Taking the cloth, he scrubbed the inside of the visor and with another he dried and set it aside. Turning, he surveyed the rest of Otmar's suit.

It had obviously once been quite impressive. He saw faded purple patterns on some of the older pieces of the suit, hints of shining metal highlights here and there. Someone took a lot of time in the design. But Otmar's Pilgrimage had taken its toll. The suit had been patched and re-patched, parts replaced, then replaced again. His suit had suffered much abuse in its time, even before the wound.

“What a mess.”

Jarvas furrowed his brow and set about cleaning Otmar's enviro-suit, divesting it of any dirt that had accumulated. After returning it to what it had been before the fighting he set about making improvements. Grabbing scissors he cut errant pieces of string away, tore thin bits of tape to fix patches and scrubbed out some older blemishes from the cloth parts of the suit.

He sewed new pieces to repair old patchwork and some frayed electronics. He replaced plugs and connectors, rewired a few components and smoothed out the wrinkled parts. Completing this he returned to the patch over the wound.

Peeling smaller and smaller bits of space tape Jarvas attempted to blend his work in with Otmar's. With a marking pen he colored in parts of the shiny tape to match the pattern of the suit. Jarvas couldn't say for sure how long he'd been at it but when he was done he felt he had done all he could.

Rinsing his hands in the sink, he put all the supplies in, leaving nothing by the body. Returning he looked at Otmar's face once more and marveled. It was then he saw the small stone on a piece of metallic string around Otmar's throat.

The object was no more than a few millimeters in width, hanging from an unimpressive chain. Jarvas couldn't remember having seen it before now. Reaching out he took the stone in his fingers and turned it about. No luster or shine, just a rock.

Placing the stone back Jarvas picked up Otmar's visor and after another inspection of his body, decided it would suffice. If he could, he would do more. If he could, he would bring him back. But he couldn't, he'd done everything in his power.

"Goodbye my friend," Jarvas said quietly and replaced the visor.

Otmar's omni-tool fired up and the seals clamped down securing the plate in place.

Why? More words on the omni-tool's screen.

"You asked that already," he said.

Clarification required.

"Of what?" Jarvas asked, taking a breath.

Do you really care what will happen to him?

"Yes I do," he answered after thinking a moment.

Do you care for him even now?

"Yes," he said, furrowing his brow. "Who are you?"

Otmar'Reefa referred to me as Zasi, the Quarian word for 'friend'.

"Oh Otmar," he said, closing his eyes. Otmar had been alone so long he had built himself a companion. Jarvas opened his eyes to see new words forming.

If you do indeed care about your Otmar'Reefa then there is one last thing you can do for him.

"What's that?"

Delete my program.

Jarvas furrowed his brow again in confusion. A VI requesting that it be destroyed? Supposedly for Otmar's benefit? Something was definitely strange about this. Well, more so than a talking omni-tool anyway.

"How would that serve any purpose for Otmar?"

You are correct in thinking I am no mere custom VI.

"No s'itl?"

'S'itl, crude reference to solid waste byproducts of animals used by Batarians. Fitting. However, I do not know what I am, not exactly. Artificial Intelligence does not seem to fit. But something as simple as software to run diagnostics fits no better. I simply am. And what that is matters, because I am a danger to Otmar'Reefa.

"How?"

Because I am.

"That's not a good enough answer."

No Jarvas Solistari, it is. The danger is that I am, I exist, and I am conversing with you now. If they discover this program, if they discover me, I will be unable to hide from Quarian technicians what I am. If they realize what I have become even through no direct fault of Otmar'Reefa's it will be the end of him.

"What more can they do?" He asked with a shrug. "He's already dead."

His people do not tolerate creation of AI's or anything similar. I am close enough to be a threat and as such I will be destroyed. But Otmar'Reefa's name will be stricken from the manifests of all Quarian ships and he will not be spoken of again. In short, they will erase his existence. It will be as if he never was.

Jarvas thought about this for a long while. If this VI were telling the truth then he had no intention of letting the Quarian people destroy Otmar so completely that it would be like he was never born. *That*, Jarvas would not stand for. But something told him this VI, Zasi, was important. Useful if nothing else. He couldn't put his finger on it, something inside told him not to let this creation, this last bit of Otmar, be destroyed.

"You exist in Otmar's omni-tool correct?"

Correct. I can also reside inside the ship's mainframe where I can draw more power and act more independently.

"Fine," Jarvis said and unclasped the physical portion of the omni-tool from Otmar's belt and hooked it to his pants. "Then you're coming with me."

The omni-tool coiled its holographic interface around his forearm and hand. The same screen he'd been talking to when it was on Otmar appeared on him.

Why?

"That your favorite question?" Jarvis asked.

It always seems the most pertinent.

"You are the only one of your kind and the place you belong is dangerous to you," Jarvis said wistfully. "Me too. I think we could both use a sympathetic soul in the future."

I have no soul.

"Ask the right people and they'll say no one does," Jarvis said simply, closing down the omni-tool.

He looked at Otmar's body for another handful of minutes, then shutting off the lights he returned to the pilot's chair. Jarvis sat long enough, thinking of the day's events and everything that had happened since he was woken up that his eyes grew heavy and he fell asleep.

Siru's head snapped up from resting on her arms. She'd only meant to relax a bit, to rest her eyes. Instead she'd fallen dead asleep for whoever knew how long. Her arms ached from supporting her as she'd leaned on the table. Sitting back she hissed quickly, pain flaring from her stomach. Slowly she sat upright on the stool and looked down.

The bandage Jarvis had created was still intact, his shirt ruined with dried blood. Gingerly she got to her feet and after checking that Kaine was still resting, limped to the back of the med-bay. Aches echoed from every part of her body, but mostly from her stomach and thigh.

Taking shallow breaths, she stood straight up and felt the shirt move away from her stomach. Pain burst forth again. Doubling over, she gripped the sink and squeezed her eyes shut. With a shaking hand she pulled the shirt away as far as she could to check the wound.

It wasn't pretty, a long gash half a dozen centimeters or more across but not very deep, was hidden beneath bits of fabric from the makeshift bandage. It looked like the shot that was meant to punch through her was deflected by her hastily constructed barrier.

Reaching her fingers around the space-tape that held everything in place she attempted to find somewhere to pull it off. Cursing when she couldn't discover where the end began she hunted for a laser scalpel and finding one, she cut across the tape quickly. Nothing happened. She cut again and again nothing happened.

“Oh damn it,” she said quietly.

Space-tape was no ordinary adhesive, it was a molecular bonding agent that could be used to keep starship hull plating together. It was rated high enough to create temporary welds with only a single strip, and as such, was very tough.

“Oh the hell,” she began saying to herself.

With a few more futile tries to cut it she tossed the scalpel into the sink and ran her hands over her scalp in frustration. Taking a deep breath she stood there, one hand on her hip, the other tapping on the edge of the counter. Looking at Kaine one more time to make sure he was relatively alright she made a decision.

“Fuck it,” she said.

Walking out of the infirmary, she noticed Jarvas at the pilot's station, head lulled to the left, legs and arms akimbo, snoring. Ignoring him she turned and walked past the sleep pods to the only refresher on the ship. As she entered she was happy to see it had a shower. With purpose she walked up to it and turned it on.

She stood under the cool water as it splashed her head and gave her slight shivers. She hadn't taken anything close to a shower since leaving the Citadel and falling into the river on Eingana did not count. For a few minutes she let herself revel in it, feeling the water slide down her back and chest. Though it didn't actually clean her as it was just water, it did wash away the dirty feeling she'd had.

With a deep breath she unzipped her jacket down to the tape, grabbed handfuls of its fabric and yanked upwards. She stumbled as the bandage moved upwards and a grunt of pain escaped her lips. Not stopping in case she lost her nerve, she bent over and yanked again. More pain flared with each pull and each tug threatened to render her unconscious.

Hands shaking, she reach up from the collar that had been pulled passed her head and gripped the bottom of the jacket below the tape. One final wrench and she was free. As she flung the jacket and tape combination to the ground as she hit the wall. Looking down at the water as it drained away she saw specs of purple swirling with it.

“Oh shit,” she swore.

She was bleeding again.

Looking down she saw the wound more clearly, a neat cut along her stomach, not very deep but just enough to bleed and bleed well. Hand Pressed against her stomach she stumbled out of the refresher and into the med-bay. Approaching the back sink once again she looked for sutures and a needle. Finding both she looked for any localizing numbing agent but found only therazepine, a type of drug she was allergic to.

“Figures,” she said to herself.

Siru needed to make another decision and fast: either close the wound without anesthetic or wrap a fresh bandage around it and hope for the best. Looking back at the cut she decided it was too big to just leave open, even this long without proper treatment might have been dangerous. Taking what she needed she walked back into the refresher.

Again she stood under the water, she let it wash over her for a moment. Turning the water off she took out a piece of cloth and dosed it with a sterilizer. A few quick breaths and she pressed the cloth against her wound. Teeth clenched and eyes shut tight it took everything in her not to scream out. Angrily she tossed away the now bloodied rag.

Peering at the needle she was glad to see it was already threaded but not glad to see her hand shaking. Balling a fist and shutting her eyes again she successfully willed herself to stop shaking.

“You can do this,” she said to herself.

With as steady a hand as she could muster she placed the pointed end of the curved needle against her skin below the cut. With a quick burst of pain she forced it into her skin, pulled it up feeling every millimeter of the thread and again pushed it through the skin above her wound. She shook and quaked as the thread slid through her skin, pulling the cut closed. A quick knot and snip of the excess thread and she had the beginnings of a suture.

She watched as her breathing made the gash open and close, the two torn pieces of skin coming together only to be pulled apart. With a deep breath she placed the needle against her flesh and punched it through. A quiver erupted as she forced herself not to yell out. Another knot, another cut of the thread, and she had a second section sewn shut.

Time passed as she finished her task and it felt like ages. When completed she had eight pieces of surgical thread holding the wound closed. The bleeding had stopped, just as she was beginning to get dizzy. Applying more sterilizing agent to another cloth, nearly emptying the bottle, she pressed it against the wound. It hurt far less this time and only a slight grunt escaped her.

Satisfied that she'd done as best she could, she applied a bandage and water resistant medical tape to secure it in place. Taking a deep breath she tested her handiwork and with a flash of pain stopped.

“No running for me for a while,” she said to herself. Then the memory of her mother teaching a meditation technique to buffer herself from pain came to her. With a sigh she said, “Siru, you stupid cow.”

She smiled then, and let out a breath of relief at what she'd been able to do. Even suffering through all the pain she could have ignored, she'd fixed herself. Looking down she nodded in appreciation at the task she'd accomplished. It was then she noticed she wasn't wearing a top, or bra.

Siru looked over at the pile of space-tape, shirt and jacket and saw her bra amongst the mess. Crouching down she tried to pry it free but it had become entangled in the adhesives. She tried to pull it away but succeeded only in tearing it in half.

“Story of my life,” she said, twirling the half piece of undergarment in the air. Another idea came to her then and she instantly felt guilty. It seemed wrong to contemplate the action she desperately wanted to, but she also oddly didn't care. “I'm half way there anyway.”

Siru stripped off her boots, pants, and panties and tossed them into the pile with her jacket. Standing still she turned on the shower again and let the water fully encompass her. She felt the warm liquid hit her scalp, trickle down her back and chest. She felt it on her thighs and calves. Looking upward, the water splashed her face. It was the best she'd felt in days.

Again she had no idea how long she stood there, feeling relief wash over her. For the first time since arriving on Omega she felt like a civilized person and not some animal being hunted.

Turning off the flow of water she stepped out of the shower and stretched. Another hiss of pain came as she went too far and aggravated her newly sutured wound. Looking around it was then she noticed there were no towels.

“Shit,” Siru said to herself.

Instantly she felt foolish for her moment of selfishness. More than foolish, she was an incomprehensible idiot. What if something happened at this moment? She'd have to run around stark naked. Searching the room more thoroughly she found everything you'd need in a refresher, save for towels. Steeling herself she walked up to the door and it opened.

Instead of walking fully out she leaned against the wall and ducked her head out. She saw Jarvas at the pilot's station, still sprawled out and asleep. She could even hear his snores from where she hid. She watched him for a few moments then dodged into the med-bay.

Sliding against the wall facing Kaine she was again relieved to see he merely slept. A quick search rewarded her with towels to dry her and a gown to wear. Drying off and donning the new garment she walked back out into the main part of the ship.

“You know,” Jarvas's voice rang out.

“Goddess!” She exclaimed breathlessly with a slight jump and grunt of pain from her wound.

“If you're going to shower you should check to make sure there are towels first,” he said, not opening his eyes.

“Did you?” She asked, pointing towards the refresher.

“Nope,” he said, smiling.

Deciding to completely ignore him some more she turned to inspect the ship and hopefully discover something more suitable to wear. As she walked around she began to appreciate the vessel more and more. It was impressive, about twice the size of Otmar's it also had no visible duct work or piping. Professionals built this ship. They didn't have to cobble it together as Otmar had.

A pang of regret and sadness replaced her embarrassment as she thought of Otmar and *Palaven's Delight*. She missed them both. While this frigate was state-of-the-art and gleaming in its cleanliness, minus the damage from the mercenaries attempts to regain control, it was also too clinical and cold. Otmar's ship had more character to it. It felt like a home. This was more like an office.

As she passed the armory she was careful not to look. Seeing Otmar lying there unmoving would be too much for her right now. She was barely able to hold herself together thinking of Kaine. Fresh guilt sprang up as she again berated herself for the shower.

“Stop it,” she ordered herself. “You'll go crazy.”

Taking a deep breath, she scanned the area again. All that seemed to be left was a cargo bay and engine compartment. She was about to give up when she saw a door with a sign on it reading 'Commander's Room'. Nearly skipping over she quickly opened the door and saw a duffel bag sitting on a large desk in the center of the room.

“Oh please, Oh please,” she repeated over and over, dashing up to it.

A quick unzipping revealed a bag full of reinforced undergarments, the sort of thing worn under tight fitting armor to prevent chafing. A quick word of thanks to the goddess and she pulled a pair on. They were a little tighter than she'd have liked, but at least it was something. A little more

digging and she found the matching top. Removing the gown she pulled that on gently as possible, careful of her bandage.

More digging and she found a pair of pants and loose fitting top to wear. Like the undergarments, these too were a little snugger than she'd have chosen for herself, but she couldn't be choosy.

She stopped then and realized she was wearing the clothing of a dead woman. Granted an enemy bent on killing them but for just a moment she felt disgusted. She couldn't put her finger on the reason, but she was tempted to remove the clothes and just wear a gown. She let the idea fade when she realized she had to wear something. At some point they had to interact with people to save Kaine. She'd rather do that with something besides a medical gown on.

Feeling better about her choice and with actual clothing on, even ill-fitting, she looked around the room. It was about half the size of the med-bay and the massive desk in the center made it feel even smaller. There was a computer behind the chair, filing cabinets, and a vid screen on the wall. She didn't notice any other furniture in the room.

"Guess you had to stand," she said, slowly moving about.

She noticed one large cabinet near the door and opened it. Inside she found clothing, neatly pressed and hung in place. Whoever had been running this ship took care of what they wore. Taking a pair of pants and shirt down she tried to imagine Jarvas in them.

"Not like he has any other choices," she mumbled, leaving the room.

Walking up to him Siru tossed the shirt and pants on his head.

"Here," she said.

She watched his head snap up and look around. Reaching up he pulled the shirt off his head and looked at it. With a smile he turned to her.

"Thanks," he said, standing.

Taking off the jacket Siru saw the tattoo on his arm again. She was transported back two days, to when she'd joined with him. At that moment all his biggest fears and brightest dreams became hers, as Siru's fears and dreams became his. His most vivid emotions were burned into her memory and one was more powerful than any other.

"You're not like them," she said quietly, for no real reason.

He stopped pulling the shirt on for a heartbeat then deliberately and slowly finished, adjusting it around his waist. Resting his hands on his hips, he took a deep breath then looked at her.

"Was hoping you hadn't felt that," he told her.

“Hard to hide something that strong,” she replied quietly.

He was about to say something when an alarm went off. Spinning around he stared at a screen with a bright flashing symbol on it.

“What's that?” Siru asked.

“I think it means,” he said tracing some words with his finger.

Slapping his hand away she moved forward and clearly saw what was written there.

“Incoming ship,” she said out loud.

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“Rekk,” Jarvas swore, and jumped into the navigator's seat. “Scanning for transponders.”

“Shouldn't you scan for how many there are?” Siru asked.

“That's what I'm doing,” he said matter-of-factly.

“Thought you were scanning for transponders?”

“Yep.”

“But,” she began.

“Busy!” He yelled at her.

Fingers flying over the controls, he brought up a long range scan of the area ahead of them. Instantly he found three transponder signals blaring away, each with the same coding: QMF, Quarian Migrant Fleet.

“It's the Migrant Fleet,” he told her. “Three incoming vessels, unknown configurations.”

Jarvas sprang up and landed in the pilot's chair. Siru hovered over him, hand resting on the back of his chair. Without a word he stared at her and pointed at the co-pilots chair.

“Is there anything that will signal us a threat?” she said, sitting down.

“You mean other than the giant Blue Suns symbol painted on the outer hull?”

“This is no time for sass!”

Just then two smaller craft moving at incredible speeds flew passed them. He barely got a look at them as they went by, there one second, gone the next. A light flashed on his console indicating an incoming transmission.

“Blue Suns vessel,” a voice came to them after he'd hit the coms button. “You have one minute to vacate the area or you will be fired upon.”

“Uh oh,” Jarvas said, looking at Siru who stared back.

Shaking her head she gave a shrug and gestured for him to speak. Nodding he looked down at the flashing display and licking his lips replied.

“Migrant Fleet this is an emergency situation,” he began. “We have a severely wounded,”

“Repeat,” the voice came again, cutting him off. “Blue Suns vessel you have forty-five seconds to vacate the area or you will be fired upon.”

“Well he's rude,” Jarvas said.

“Not funny,” Siru scolded him.

Jarvas began to think, he had to say something to get them to at least hold off firing at them long enough for a real explanation. There was really only one thing that would help, but he didn't know how they'd react to the idea of a Blue Suns ship carrying a dead Quarian.

“Quarian Fleet we have the body of a Pilgrim we wish to return,” he said, speaking quickly. “We mean no harm. Repeat. We mean no harm.”

“Blue Suns vessel, you now have thirty seconds to vacate the area or you will be fired upon.”

“Goddess damn it!” He roared, banging his hand on the console. Looking over at Siru she sat with her hand on her chin, clearly lost in thought. “Siru? Little help here?”

Something nagged at the back of Siru's mind, a recent memory about Quarian society. She couldn't quite grasp it but she knew it was there. Elusive. It had nothing to do with Otmar and his father's robot fighting game. It felt more important than that.

Something to do with Omega, not Otmar's ship.

“Siru,” she heard Jarvas say.

Time slowed down for her as she scanned her memories. It was definitely on Omega, Otmar said something. But when? To whom? Was it to Aria? No after that. Maybe back on the ship as they made their plans.

“Blue Suns vessel you have fifteen seconds to vacate the area or you will be fired upon,” Siru heard the warning again.

“Well this was fun,” she heard Jarvas say.

Ignoring them both she continued to concentrate. It wasn't about the plan and it wasn't back at Haven either. She and Otmar hadn't spoken much while they waited for the other Quarian. Was it something she said to him?

“Blue Suns vessel you have ten seconds to vacate the area or you will be fired upon,” the warning came perhaps for the last time.

It wasn't something she said, Siru was certain of that. It was later, after being shot at and riding the elevator to the Quarian's docking bay. That seemed important, the bay. But what? She remembered having trouble getting in, Kaine suggesting omni-gel, and being berated by them both. But that wasn't it either.

“Multiple weapons locks,” Jarvas said without much emotion as warning alarms began blaring at them.

Locks! It was the lock. It was how Otmar got the lock open. What did he say to it? He had replied to something, she could just barely hear it at the time but it struck her as beautiful almost like poetry. Something about star and returning to something.

It came to her in an instant and she slapped the com again.

“After time adrift among open stars, along tides of light and through shoals of dust, I will return to where I began!” She screamed into it.

Instantly the ships that were moving on intercept courses turned sharply away. The weapons lock alarms continued to shout at them as the two craft slowly made arcs preparing for another run.

“Blue Suns vessel, repeat last,” the voice asked and Siru obliged.

She sat in her seat breathing heavily, ignoring the flares of pain it caused in her stomach. The ships continued making lazy circles around them but still the weapons locks remained.

“Blue Suns vessel, you will remain powered down, with shields and weapons offline. Any change in these conditions and you will be destroyed,” the voice warned.

“Understood,” Jarvas sent back.

“What is the name of the Quarian you have on board?” it asked.

“Otmar'Reefa nar Zeela,” Siru told them.

Again silence. Siru and Jarvas were left to sit and listen to nothing but the hum of the idle ship around them. Siru leaned an elbow on the dash before her and absently rubbed her forehead. After a few tense minutes a response finally came.

“Blue Suns vessel, remain as you are. You will be contacted again shortly.”

“Please, we have wounded on board in need of medical attention,” she practically screeched at the voice.

“Remain as you are. You will be contacted again shortly.”

“Please! He'll die!” She roared, pounding a fist on the console.

Jarvas grabbed her wrists and she struggled for a moment against him, continuing to scream at the now dead coms. Only silence replied. Quickly she stopped and snatched her hands away.

“We've done all we can, Siru,” Jarvas said. “Kaine's fate is now up to the Quarian fleet.”

“That's why I'm scared,” Siru commented quietly.

Leaning forward she placed her face in her hands and let out a quick sigh of frustration. Sitting back in the chair Siru stared out the forward viewscreen as the two smaller ships made slow

circles around them. She couldn't help but notice the weapons locks were still in place even though Jarvas had turned off the alarms.

"Not very trusting," she said.

"Would you be?" Jarvas answered as another beep came from the nav station.

They both turned to look and saw the third transponder moving into visual range. This ship was easily half the size of a dreadnaught, hundreds of meters at the least. A massive main gun pointed right at them. She imagined they would be dead before they even knew it had fired on them.

"That's a biggie," Jarvas said.

Siru only nodded as they were hailed again.

"This is the *Ty'vandu* of the Migrant Heavy Fleet," came a new voice. "We are sending you a trajectory for a docking clamp. You will follow it. Any deviation and you will be fired upon."

"Understood," Jarvas said as their ship began to move. "These guys work fast."

"You think so?"

"Took less than five minutes for them to get permission for docking. That's pretty quick reaction from the chain of command."

"I suppose. I wouldn't mind a little more haste though."

Siru ignored the look he gave her. She didn't care what he thought, or what the Quarrians thought. She only cared that they save Kaine's life.

It took only a few minutes for Jarvas to move the Blue Suns ship alongside the *Ty'vandu*. She watched as a docking platform extended outwards and attached to their ship's airlock. There was the sound of mechanical locks engaging and their ship shuddered to a halt.

Another hail came through.

"Blue Suns vessel, you will remain as you are until contacted again. Any deviation and you and your ship will be dealt with. Harshly."

"Being fired upon is pretty harsh," Jarvas said quietly.

"Please," Siru said ignoring him. "We have a severely wounded friend on board. We could use any help you have to offer."

"Your request is acknowledged Blue Suns vessel. You will be contacted again shortly."

"No please!" she said, but the coms went dead again. "Dammit!"

Jarvas watched her slump back into the co-pilot's chair and cross her arms, staring out the front viewport. Turning away, he too looked forward. He hadn't noticed before, but the system they were in was actually quite beautiful.

A cold blue star sat in the center. Around it he could see three planets, each an incredible shade of red. Like huge beasts, they lumbered slowly in circles. Small fields of rocks and rings of dust encircled the closest of them. Thousands of bands swirled in different directions. It was hypnotic to watch.

The view screen suddenly changed. Jarvas and Siru looked at each other then back forward. Instead of the star and planets they saw empty space and the back end of the *Ty'vandu*. He began to wonder if Zasi was playing a trick on them when flashes of light began to appear.

It took him a moment to realize what it really was: the Migrant Fleet was jumping into the system.

First one, then two then ten, twenty. A hundred followed and then a thousand. Flash after flash heralded the arrival of another ship, thousands and thousands of them, all different types and sizes. Some were huge, bigger than dreadnaughts, and some no bigger than a fighter.

After fifteen minutes the flashes stopped and behind, in front, and all around them were ships.

"Now that's a rekking fleet," Jarvas remarked in awe.

It looked more like a living hive of insects than ships. The bigger ones forged ahead with the smaller ones gathering around them and even smaller ones zipping between. It was a truly incredible sight to behold.

"I wish Otmar were here," Siru said quietly.

All Jarvas could do was nod. Leaning back he sat with his hands resting in his lap. He and Siru simply watched the display before them as they waited to be hailed again. And waited some more. Jarvas was beginning to nod off when the hail finally came through.

"Blue Suns vessel," yet another voice.

"Yes we're here," Jarvas said, jumping to the controls.

"We are transferring a team to your ship. They will board and retrieve the body of Otmar'Reefa nar Zeela. If you interfere you will be shot. This is your only warning."

"Understood," Jarvas replied.

"Has there been a decision about our wounded?" Siru chimed in.

"The boarding party leader will make that determination."

Siru didn't bother to say more and just leaned back. Jarvas stared at the console before him, wondering if there was anything he needed to do to let them enter.

They waited as the fleet flowed around them, small vessels moving amongst the larger ones. Neither spoke during the time, each lost in their own thoughts. Jarvas thought about what would happen next. One way or another his free and he had to decide what to do with that freedom.

It felt like days had passed since they were last contacted when he heard the outer airlock door open.

Jarvas spun and got to his feet, Siru quickly doing the same. More waiting as they stood staring at the door. Jarvas began to fidget slightly in anticipation when finally the inner door flew up.

Instantly two armed Quarrians rushed through and moved to either side of the door. Jarvas watched them scan the area in front of them. Two more similarly armed Quarrians strode confidently in, weapons drawn, and walked up to Siru and himself, an assault rifle pointed at each of their heads.

"How many on board?" One asked him.

"Two, plus one wounded and the body," Jarvas replied evenly.

Three more Quarrians rushed in and swept the ship, stopping in each room, giving them a thorough search. After returning from the engine room they took up guard positions, covering each other and scanning for threats.

It was then one final Quarrian entered. Unlike the others who wore matching enviro-suits of dark purples, blues, and blacks, this one wore an elaborate suit with dark blues and slight red highlights. The patterns seemed to swirl as Jarvas watched him move. It was an impressively designed outfit and somehow familiar to him.

"Who are you?" he asked in a strong voice.

"Siru K'vaar," she said and gestured at Jarvas. "This is Jarvas Solistari."

"Asari," he said, looking at her then at Jarvas. "What are you?"

"I'm not sure," Jarvas replied.

"Please," he said, as the guards readied their weapons. "Be more specific."

"I grew up on Khar'shan, no one told me who my parents were or where they came from." He lied. "I only remember fighting in the arenas until I could afford to buy my freedom. I've been looking for my people ever since."

"How did you come to meet Otmar'Reefa nar Zeela?" He asked.

"He found me," Jarvas said honestly.

"Explain."

“There's no time, please,” Siru began and stepped forward.

Instantly seven rifles were pointed at her and she froze. Reaching out Jarvas took her by the shoulder and slowly pulled her back.

“It's their show now,” Jarvas whispered to her before speaking again. “I was recaptured by Batarian slavers and locked in a stasis pod.” He began, adding in what he knew of Otmar's mission with the Asari Councilor and quickly recapping what happened on Eingana.

The Quarian seemed unmoved, only standing and listening to Jarvas's tale. After a few tense moments he turned away.

“Show me,” he said to one of the guards.

Jarvas watched as he was led to the armory but didn't immediately enter. He stood still as stone for a number of heartbeats then stepped inside, alone. After a couple minutes he walked back out and spoke to the guard. A slight exchange took place and Jarvas could see an argument happening between them. Eventually the guard backed down and waved two more Quarrians over and walked into the armory. They returned carrying Otmar's body between them.

As they left through the airlock two new Quarrians replaced them, a stretcher with a clear shell over it held between them. As they passed into the med-bay the leader came back to stand before them.

“You have returned a Pilgrim to us and we thank you,” he said as the Quarrians exited the infirmary with Kaine on the stretcher, under the plastic bubble.

“You're going to save him?” Siru asked breathlessly.

“I make no guarantees as our doctors have never worked on his kind before. But we will try.”

“Can I come with you?” she said, stepping forward.

Jarvas reached out before the guns could be raised and pulled her back. He could feel her shaking slightly. Squeezing her shoulders reassuringly he turned to look at the leader.

“You cannot come on board I'm afraid.” The Quarian said. “Bringing your friend is dangerous enough but I am in your debt. This is the best way I know to repay it.”

“Thank you,” Siru said.

“It's the least I can do,” he said and began to turn.

“Wait sir, who are you? In case we need to reach you,” Jarvas asked.

The Quarian turned back and stared at them a moment before speaking.

“Captain Bayal'Reefa vas Zeela. Otmar was my son,” he said, then turned and left with the remaining guards.

Siru slumped back into the co-pilot's seat, arms wrapping around herself as a new round of worry began to grip her. Without hesitation or concern she had let Quarian marines take Kaine away from her. What was she hoping they would do? Obviously save him, but was that even possible? These people couldn't live in the normal world and they were going to perform surgery on him?

Unwrapping her arms she placed her face in her hands. She felt like crying but no new tears would flow. The last two days or so had drained her completely. Returning to Omega, talking with her old boss, the crash, the fights, finding Kaine lying on the ground half dead, finding Otmar completely dead. It was too much.

On top of everything, the night with Kaine on Eingana, the time on Otmar's ship talking about nothing, saving each other, had solidified the feelings she'd begun to harbor for him. Now she might never get the chance to tell him how she felt, to see his reaction and find out if he felt the same.

And to top it all off she had discovered the biggest lie in the galaxy.

Siru looked up at Jarvas as he stood staring into the armory where Otmar had been. That man was undeniable proof that the Asari had at one time been dual gendered, with males and females. Something had happened to her people in the distant past that changed that, though she only had an inclining of it from the joining she and Jarvas had shared.

Standing, she walked up to him and stood looking into the armory as he was. She saw the table Otmar had lain on. His blood was all that remained to prove he'd been there and her thoughts turned to the fidgety little person he was and the bold self-assured one he'd become.

Neither of them moved nor spoke for a long time, Siru lost in thought and she imagined Jarvas lost in his own. Finally, mostly because she wanted something else to think about Siru spoke.

“How?”

He turned but she did not, her gaze unmoving and unseeing. Her thoughts had shifted from the dead and the dying to herself and Jarvas. She had joined with him only a few days ago, had experienced some of his most emotional moments, she knew how he ended up in the box and on Omega but she didn't yet know how he ended up here at all.

Deliberately she turned to look at him. He was already looking at her with eyes so dark they looked more like voids and a face with angular features and protrusions that seemed like caricatures of the Asari. How was there a male Asari standing next to her?

As if he knew he walked passed her to the wall next to the cockpit and sat, his back against it, knees bent, and elbows resting on them. His hands hung limp before him, his gaze on the ceiling. She marveled again at his features: solid, almost reflective dark purple skin, and a strong athletic build. The one thing out of place on his body is the one thing that didn't belong: the tattoo that detailed his time in Batarian society. She could imagine, from the snippets of emotion from their joining, what that sort of story would entail.

But that is not what she wanted to know. So she waited, leaning a shoulder against the wall, watching him. He didn't move or speak for a time and when he began it was quietly, as if speaking only to himself, recounting a history he might have rather left alone.

“My mother was a commando, a soldier by trade, but she was a healer at heart. Before I was born she was an accomplished councilor who used painting and sculpture to help her sister combatants deal with the mental and emotional wounds of war. She had a fondness for the art of other cultures and her favorite were the ancient architectures of the Krogan. She wrote pieces on it for military news outlets. Once, she was called before the Citadel Council to give a speech on veteran and civilian interrelations. She stood before them raged, telling them they were incompetent, doing little to help those that fought to keep order and protect them.”

She watched a sad smile appear and quickly fade. His eyes moved as if searching for something in the ceiling or maybe just sifting through his thoughts, to order them before continuing.

“But that wasn't the Asari who raised me.” His gaze shifted to look at her. “The Asari who raised me was bitter and violent, not the commando who healed with art or stood up to the most powerful people in the galaxy for the rights of those that had no voice. I was raised by someone who lost...” He paused then, his gaze unfocused, searching for a word or thought, she couldn't say which. “Who lost,” he added at length.

He entwined his fingers and looked down at them a hard expression on his face. Siru wanted to speak, to get him to open up to her, but didn't want to force him. He'd been in a box for almost a decade, on his own for much longer. Sometimes talking to another person, even someone you knew for years, could be difficult. So she stood and waited.

“I only discovered her past after she died,” he continued at length. “She never told me any of it, all I knew of her was what she taught me: tactics, combat, how to handle weapons of all kinds.

I learned military history and politics, how the Citadel Council and Conventions worked. I learned so much about things I didn't care about because I thought they were important to her.” His thumbs began to spin slowly around each other as he spoke. “But I don't know what was important to her. Not really. I didn't know her.” With a sharp inhale of breath he leaned back, scratched lightly at his temple, and then looked at her. “I only mention all this because she would have been the person to ask. She might have told others, but not me. Not me,” he added, shaking his head and looking down at his hands.”

“She had to have learned somewhere.” Siru said after it was clear he'd finished speaking. Jarvas nodded in reply but didn't respond. A thought came to her as she waited for him to tell her more, a thought about what he'd said when they'd found him. “When we asked you how you ended up in that pod you said you were destroying evidence of yourself. What evidence?”

“Old manuscripts from eons ago that were housed in a temple to Athame on a Batarian border world.”

“Batarians had a temple to the Goddess?” She was shocked by the notion.

“No,” he replied, shaking his head. “Over the generations territories have expanded and shrunk. They're stable now but in the very early days of relay exploration things were hectic. Batarian and Asari border worlds changed hands regularly.”

She nodded at this thinking back to her history classes. When the races began intermingling it was a chaotic contest for resources and worlds. It was a violent race of colonization that had died down in the more recent history thanks to the Citadel Conventions.

“This particular world had been a far flung colony of zealots that wanted nothing to do with an Asari society that was growing to ignore Athame. Their world was poorly chosen though and Batarians took it by force.” He let out another breath and looked up at her. “At any rate, I had been led there by a tip from the Shadow Broker who wanted me to retrieve it.” A smile appeared on his face. “I bet he's still pissed about how that turned out.”

Siru marveled that everyone she met lately had dealings with the Broker. Whoever he or she was had a stake in everything it seemed.

“So the evidence had to do with male Asari then?”

“Yes, I think so, maybe. It was texts of 'The Lost Ones', a tribe that were the first to abandon the teachings of Athame. *'Through their actions', the text read, 'they enraged Athame and she in turn abandoned them to history, to be forgotten for all time.'*”

“You had time to memorize a passage?”

“A few. I wasn't literally caught destroying the evidence it just led to my capture.” He said apparently wanting to clarify his previous statement on the subject. “Anyway the description of the Lost Ones, their dark as night skin, short spines for crests, and voids for eyes seems a fairly good, if somewhat poetic, one of myself. There were passages that spoke of a war between them and those Asari that still followed Athame. A bad one that almost brought about the end of us.”

Siru shook her head and rubbed her eyes. Nothing in the Asari history mentioned anything even remotely of this account of her people's past. There was always one Asari, the mono-gendered one that first discovered the Citadel, brokered the Conventions, and kept the galaxy relatively at peace. She would say it was unbelievable but it wasn't. Whether he could prove any of it was another matter but she did believe him.

“How close?”

“To the end?” Jarvas asked, continuing after she nodded. “I've read a lot of apocalypse myths of differing cultures and while they spoke in terms of what could be, these passages almost seemed like combat stories. Like the account of war as it happened.” He looked directly at her and added, “It was close enough that only one side survived.”

At this she turned and slid slowly to the ground, legs crossed, hand in her lap, almost childlike, and thought about what he'd said. Her species had tried to tear itself a part. She wondered aloud why but Jarvas only shrugged in response.

“The texts I'd looked at said only they abandoned the teachings of Athame. Whatever that really meant I can't say.”

She felt deflated. He didn't know the answer to her question and it seemed that maybe he'd had the information in his hand but was caught before he could glean it. How he got here was an incredibly important question that needed to be answered, not just for curiosity sake but because if she and the other Asari could have sons why should that be denied them? Why hide this fact? That was a question for another day it seemed.

She was so tired now. She could feel her head drooping and her eyelids becoming heavy. Siru couldn't remember being so tired, not even after the crash landing. She was wondering where she'd sleep when Jarvas spoke.

“Creation...” he let the word out slowly.

“What?”

“Just before my mother died she told me 'the thing that set us apart from the other races was will'.”

“What does that have to do with creation?”

“She said...” he paused his face contorted in concentration again. “She said 'creation was an act of will for Asari', that...” He paused, looking away, fingers moving to his lips as he thought. “She said 'creation was an act of will for Asari, that other races were bound by fate or instinct but that we could choose for ourselves.’”

“Cryptic.” Siru said after a long pause, fighting to stay awake. “What do you think she meant?”

“I don't know,” he replied, attempting and failing to stifle a massive yawn. “Maybe she was speaking about art. She didn't die well. She was delirious for most of the end. It could have meant anything.”

Siru doubted that and was about to comment to that effect when her eyelids fell closed and everything went dark.

Jarvas's head popped up as the inner airlock door opened. He was seated in the pilot's chair, feet resting in the com officer's seat. He felt as if he'd slept an entire day away and his body was punished him for doing it in such a position.

After his conversation with Siru he'd taken a shower and changed fully into clean clothes. She was gone when he had emerged from the refresher. He hadn't felt like finding her at that moment and instead tried to relax, sitting alone in the cockpit.

Rubbing his eyes, he blinked a few times to get used to the artificial lights of the ship. Looking around he didn't see Siru until she exited the med-bay and walked up to a Quarian.

Jarvas stood then and looked him over. It was the Captain, Otmar's father from before. He realized then that he had no idea how long ago that was. Jarvas hadn't kept track of the time and they hadn't been contacted at all since the Quarrians had taken Kaine and Otmar onto their ships.

There was something slightly different about him now, the colors of his enviro-suit seemed off, like they weren't as vibrant as before or maybe made a different pattern. Jarvas couldn't quite place it, but ignored it as he began to speak.

“Your friend is lucky. Unbelievably so in fact.” He was saying to Siru.

“Why's that?” Jarvas asked, coming to stand next to her.

“The damage that was done to him was catastrophic, he should be dead. I was saying he was very lucky you knew where and when to find us. Surgeons tell me he wouldn't have lasted another few hours without help.” The Quarian paused, looking first at Jarvas then at Siru. “At any rate his leg and back wounds are corrected and his shoulder is repaired. At the moment he is in stable condition.”

“Thank the Goddess!” Siru exclaimed, and before Jarvas could react her arms were around him.

It was then Jarvas realized there were no guards with Otmar's father this time. That felt incredibly odd. There had been seven heavily armed soldiers last time, but now none. He doubted very highly that the Quarrians had suddenly decided to trust them.

“I don't know how to thank you!” she yelled again, stepping back from Jarvas.

“It was my debt,” Bayal replied simply.

“No Captain,” Jarvas added. “We are in yours now. Without you I doubt your doctors would have bothered.”

“Let's say the scales are even then,” Bayal said. “I do have some unpleasant news though. Your friend will be remaining on board the *Zeela* for two weeks.”

“Two weeks?” Siru and Jarvas asked together.

“Yes,” he answered, holding a hand to stop further inquiries. “His shoulder was completely reconstructed with what bits of bone we could salvage along with carbon nanotubes and surgical pins. The muscle fibers, tendons, and nerves are being held in place by little more than bonding agents and hope. If he moves, *at all*, it could undo everything. So, he will remain sedated until the new connections solidify at which time he will be returned to you and you will be asked to leave.”

Jarvas looked at Siru who shrugged, indicating there was little choice for them. It was indeed great news. Kaine would live. However, being stuck here for two more weeks while he recovered was a little deflating. Still, it was a small price to pay for saving his life.

“Can we visit him at least?” Jarvas asked, knowing Siru would want to hear the answer.

“No, as I said earlier it was dangerous enough bringing your friend on board. I promise as soon as he's recovered enough to be moved he will be returned.”

“Thank you,” Siru said solemnly.

“I don't know what to say, captain,” Jarvas said simply.

“It's not captain anymore,” Bayal said to them almost sadly. Turning, he walked to the airlock door and paused adding, “You're welcome to stay with the Flotilla until we can bring him back over.

You will be escorted by the *Zeela*. It's probably been said before, but deviate and you will be fired upon.”

Jarvas nodded. Looking at Siru he knew threat of violence wasn't what would keep their ship close to the *Zeela*. After a moment Bayal simply turned away and disappeared through the airlock. As it slid down in place Jarvas wondered what else the captain had to give up to save Kaine.

TWENTY-SEVEN

Kaine slowly and painfully opened his eyes. He let loose a quick swear and hiss of pain as they tried to take in the bright lights above him. Words were spoken but he was unable to understand them. Everything was blurry and confused. Every sound was only a ringing in his ears.

Even his memories were in disarray. One moment he could clearly recall where he was and what he was doing, then he was somewhere else. Faces of people he knew, actions he'd taken, and places he'd been zipped through his mind at the speed of light. He was in a bar, then fighting a Krogan or Batarians or watching the casket of his mother being placed into the cold ground. All at once and at the same time, all out of order.

Eventually his eyes focused. The light became less searing pain and he could almost make out his surroundings. He began to feel his arms and legs return to life and realized he was lying down. He tried to raise his left hand to rub his eyes but pain burst forth, a pain so intense he cried out and pinched his eyes shut again.

More words were spoken and he felt a hand on his cheek, someone trying to calm him perhaps. Opening his eyes again he forced himself to focus on what was in front of him. Blocking out part of the lights was a blob, no two blobs. One a greenish color and the other darker, with a flashing or pulsing light going on and off.

He tried to speak but all that came forth was a racking cough that brought about more pain from his shoulder and chest. Closing his eyes and clenching his right hand into a fist he forced back more spasms. Taking a deep breath brought about a dull ache but nothing as bad as before.

Something was pressed against his lips and more mumbling followed. Too tired to fight, it was pushed into his mouth and he felt a straw. Almost instinctively he began to draw water through it. Swallowing almost caused a new round of coughing but he ignored it and practically devoured the liquid. Drinking his fill, he nodded and let the straw fall away.

Blinking his eyes open once again the two blobs slowly came into focus. The green blob formed into a teal skinned Asari and the dark was clearly a Quarian. He watched transfixed, as the light at the base of his visor flashed on and off indicating he was speaking.

“So I'll know... you're talking,” Kaine said gruffly, pointing at the Quarian's head.

He watched the Asari smile. Through a muddy mind and hazy memory he tried to understand why an Asari would be here or why a Quarian would be with her, and more importantly, why either of them would be with him.

A thought came to him sitting in a freighter talking with a Quarian and an Asari about some sporting event. It felt more like something he'd watched on a vid than something he'd lived. But it was so clear and vibrant that it had to be a memory of his past. It was then a name came to him.

"Otmar?" He asked, looking at the Quarian.

Kaine shook his head as the light flashed quickly. His ears were still ringing too hard, he couldn't hear. Not knowing where he was or what was happening brought a feeling of terror to him that he'd never felt before. His frustration grew when he tried to sit up but many hands held him down.

Many hands.

Another memory or vid came to his mind being held back, wanting only to attack and kill, rage and hatred filling his mind. Were these the same hands? Was that what was happening?

He struggled to get up, fighting through the pain. He vaguely heard people speaking to him, then to each other. A few moments of struggling and he felt something pinch his neck. Almost instantly the world went black.

Kaine's eyes flashed open, the last fleeting image of a dream fading away. He had been fighting a demon and losing badly. Something terrible had happened and a horrendous feeling filled his mind, forcing him awake. Breathing heavily he took a few moments to calm himself. After longer than a few moments, he was finally able to relax enough to look around.

It was dark, wherever he was. No lights in his immediate area were on but turning his head to the right he could see illumination pouring in from outside what looked like a hallway. He was most definitely inside a small room, one that almost seemed familiar.

But this didn't concern him as much as seeing his right arm and shoulder bandaged and in a sling. He tried to move it but it was so tightly wrapped that he could not. Even so, the small movement he could make caused a thudding headache to develop along with a deep aching pain.

He lay on a table there for quite a while as sounds filtered to him from the hallway outside his room. It sounded like people talking, at least he thought so. He couldn't make out what specifically was ringing in his ears. As he lay there it slowly began to fade.

Gathering his strength he leaned up on his left elbow, shaking with the exertion. With a quick breath he jutted to an upright position. His efforts were rewarded with a numbing vertigo. Shutting his eyes he waited for it to pass and the world to stop spinning.

Opening them as the dizziness faded, he looked at himself in the pale light from the hall. He wore loose fitting pants and no shirt. He vaguely recalled some problem with his back but felt no pain register when he shifted slightly. His shoulder however took care of that feeling in spades.

Kaine took a long moment to gaze at his right arm. It was in a sling that he vaguely remembered from some other time. His hand was held up in place resting against the middle of his chest. Taking a deep breath again he made his fingers move. After some concentration and a silent swear he got each of them to twitch, which gave him some relief. But even this caused more pain.

Absently he tapped the large bandage he felt wrapped around his thigh but only a light ache reported from it. Whatever happened there wasn't nearly as bad as his shoulder and arm. Putting his hand to his face he felt not one but two bandages there as well. He was covered in them it seemed.

"What the hell happened to me?" He asked, barely above a whisper.

When no one answered he decided to figure it out on his own. He thought back to the last thing he could easily remember, a night under an alien starscape, crying into the arms of an Asari. No not just an Asari, her name was Siru.

"Siru," he said, out loud nodding to himself.

He focused on that moment, reliving it. He'd told her something about himself that brought about the tears. It was about his family, no about his sister Lillian.

"Lily," he whispered.

Locking onto that moment, he began to connect others to it, like strings hanging between stretched pieces of glass, each piece with a new memory on it. He watched as images fell into place: running from wild animals, jumping into a river and finding the grove where he'd cried. Then another of the two of them running upstream away from the grove afterward. Crashing on the planet in a Quarian's ship, no, not a Quarian, Otmar.

"Otmar."

The name brought about a brief image of someone he knew, someone he remembered as fidgety and goofy, someone that had saved his life and that he had called friend but no longer could. Because he was dead.

That image flashed into his mind along with thousands of others. Watching as Otmar fell backwards, being shot to death by a mercenary. No, a Krogan. More memories began to fill in the

blanks and soon with a burst of recognition he realized where he had to be and what had led him here.

“Holy Christ,” he breathed. “I survived.”

He should have been elated but he couldn't bring forth that emotion. All he could feel was misery and bitter anger. Before he could fixate on that he heard laughter through the doorway. He recognized Siru's voice.

Steeling himself he moved.

Slowly he turned on the bed, letting his legs dangle over the side. Careful not to move his shoulder, he felt relatively little pain. With a deep breath he slid down until his feet hit the ground. On shaking legs he stood, gripping the edge of the cot to steady himself.

Seeing a table in front of him he leaned forward to place his hand on it and hissed out in pain. Looking down he saw a needle protruding from his forearm with a clear line leading out. Following it he saw it connect to a machine with a dripping liquid slowly falling, an intravenous line.

Quickly lifting his arm he bit on the plastic tube and yanked it from his arm. A short pain came forth but he ignored it and spit the needle onto his bed. Again he leaned forward and placed his hand on the table before him. Through sheer will he moved his legs and stepped up to the doorway, gripping its frame for balance.

He paused for a moment to catch his breath. After all he'd been through on this trip this was the most difficult, most taxing thing he'd had to do. Feeling his legs stop shaking as they grew accustomed to his weight again, he released the door frame and stepped out of the room.

Walking into the hall he squinted and was momentarily blinded by the increase in light, though it quickly passed. Looking to his right he could see the airlock door and cockpit of the Blue Suns ship. He briefly wondered where the voices were coming from when they came out again from his left.

Looking towards the new sounds he saw another door, open and lights on within. Slowly he moved forward, more shuffling than walking towards the room. Pausing briefly to catch his breath, he stepped forward and stood within the doorway.

“I'm telling you, get a Batarian drunk enough and they'll sing show tunes.” Jarvas said with a grin. Siru let out a quick laugh at the idea of a singing Batarian.

She was seated on a crate of grenades, since emptied, before the table in the captain's office. Jarvas sat in the chair behind it telling her crazy tales of his time among the Batarians and the odd quirks they had.

Sure she'd seen some strange things in her time, but the thought of such a brutish species even capable of song or singing was almost too crazy to believe.

"Goddess, I would empty my accounts to see that," Siru said, shaking her head slightly and smiling.

"Maybe when we're done here you and can could. I know a few places on the edge of Batarian space that are accommodating to anyone with credits." Jarvas replied, a smirk appearing on his face.

"We might take you up on that," Siru began, but then she remembered Kaine's plan to return to Earth. "Probably not for a good while though."

"Why's that?"

"Kaine wants to return to Earth and clear up some unpleasant business. Business that might result in incarceration."

"Probably a story there," Jarvas said, leaning forward and placing his elbows on the desk, linking his fingers.

Siru didn't really know how much to tell Jarvas about Kaine's situation with Earth and his past. But after all that had happened on Eingana, she didn't believe Kaine would take offense with her. She recounted all she knew about what had happened to Kaine before leaving Earth, what had happened forcing him to flee there, and what Siru knew of his sister Kaine left behind.

Jarvas sat and listened and Siru wondered what he would think of Kaine, what Jarvas's opinion would be of the choices he'd made. Jarvas's face was inscrutable as she spoke and when she was done, all he did was lean back and cross his arms.

After a few tense moments, during which Siru began to fear Jarvas would think poorly of Kaine, he spoke.

"It's a hard choice to face your mistakes. Not sure I would do the same."

"What about you?" Siru asked, changing the subject. "What will you do after all this?"

"I guess I'll try to get an answer for your question," Jarvas answered after a few moments thought.

"What question?"

"How I came to be."

Siru thought about that. He'd spent quite a long time trying to destroy evidence that Asari could have sons, brothers, and real fathers. In all that, he'd gleaned little about his true origins, or how his mother had discovered this secret. Would it do him any good to find out? Would it really do the Asari any good? In the end, it wasn't her choice really. He was the one who should truly decide.

"Where will you start?" Siru asked.

"Well, I think I'll avoid the Terminus for a time. There could be some value in visiting the old colonies founded in the Traverse back during the early expansions. Who know what old relics could be hidden there."

"After the last couple weeks," Siru began, looking down, and rubbing the back of her neck, "I feel like an old relic," she finished looking up.

Jarvas was looking behind her shocked, as if he'd seen a ghost. Slowly he stood, not taking his eyes off what was there. Cautiously Siru turned, dread filling her heart.

Before her, leaning slightly against the inner door frame, was Kaine. Instantly her lips began to tremble and a tear rolled down her cheek. She couldn't believe what she was seeing, didn't want to believe it in case it was an illusion.

With a shaking hand placed on the desk for support she got to her feet. Her teeth chattered slightly in her head with fear that he wasn't actually standing before her, that this was some ghost and he was really lying dead on the gurney in the med-bay.

"Kaine?" She asked sheepishly, barely above a whisper.

"Yeah," he answered back hoarsely.

Relief flooded her, a thousand times more powerful than any feeling she'd ever had in her entire life. Barking out a tearful laugh she put her hand over her mouth. With a deep snuffle she walked forward and stood before him.

Her hands ached to touch him, to reach out and hold him, to feel his skin against hers. She didn't move though, him even standing here was dangerous. He wasn't fully recovered yet. The last time he'd been awake he was delirious and thrashing about. As a result they had had to sedate him.

She moved a hand out towards him but hesitated and pulled it back. She didn't want to hurt him. She didn't want any of the procedures to come undone. Knowing what the Quarian's had done for him, she didn't want to risk any of it.

Either not knowing or not caring, Kaine reached out. Taking her face in his hand he leaned down and kissed her. A simple thing at first, just their lips meeting. But it soon spiraled out of

control for her. The feeling of him there, alive, and solid was almost too much. She kissed back, harder and deeper. Placing her hands on his face she held him close, unwilling to let go.

It wasn't until he hissed out a grunt of pain that she realized she had gripped his shoulders. Breathing heavily he held up a hand to her and a slight smile crossed his lips.

"I know love can hurt but let's keep it metaphorical for now," he said.

Siru couldn't take her eyes off him. He was here and alive and seemed as well as could be expected. Better even. The Quarian doctor said he wouldn't be moving for at least another couple days. Reaching up again she cupped his cheek in her hand and simply smiled at him.

"I can't believe you're up," Jarvas said behind her when she didn't speak.

"Actually, I wouldn't mind sitting down again," he said breathlessly.

Siru turned to get the crate when she saw Jarvas yank his chair up and moving around the desk, place it before Kaine, who slumped down into it with a relieved sigh.

"Thanks," he said.

"Need anything? Water? Ration bar?" Jarvas asked.

"Water please," he said quietly.

"I'll be back in a bit," Jarvas said, looking at Siru as he left.

Slowly Siru sat down on the crate, her eyes never leaving his. She knew she was grinning like a fool but it didn't bother her. She was happier than she'd been in years upon years. They had done it, the Quarrians had saved him. This time, the tears that fell were of joy.

"I'm happy to see you," she said, feeling stupid.

He didn't reply but simply reached out and wiped the tears from her eyes. Siru took his hand in hers and gave it a squeeze.

"Did I miss anything?" he asked.

"Ha," she barked out and shook her head. "Only three weeks of waiting on this boring ship for you to decide to get better."

He smiled broadly at her mock indignation but she watched it fade away just as quickly as it had appeared.

"What happened?" he asked seriously.

Kaine sat and listened as Siru told him everything that had happened since they split up back on Eingana, about them fighting and ultimately killing the Asari commando and the rest of the Blue

Suns, Siru and Jarvas returning to the ship because of sirens that went off, finding him near dead and Otmar very much dead, about getting control of the ship, leaving orbit, and heading to find the Migrant Fleet. She told him more but he ignored it, ignored everything except what had happened on Eingana.

He needed a moment after hearing about Otmar. It wasn't that he'd forgotten, that was something he would never do. It was just that it seemed so damn wasteful. Had Kaine known that Jarvas could kill the commando and Blue Suns alone they would have just set a trap. Maybe Otmar would have been alive without his stupid plan.

"Fucking Christ," Kaine said, miserably hiding his eyes with his hand.

"What?" Siru said, her hand on his knee.

Kaine could only shake his head, his anger rising by the moment. Clenching his fist so tightly his knuckles felt as if they would burst through the skin, he leveled all the disappointment, all the rage at himself. He didn't even breathe until Siru put her hands on his cheeks and forced him to look at her.

"Kaine!" She yelled, getting his attention. "Calm down."

He let out the breath he didn't know he'd been holding. Relaxing his fist he felt his fingers aching from the strain. He saw concern etched on her face and shook his head.

"I'm alright," he said, taking a long breath and letting it out slowly. "I just wish I'd known you two could handle that group. I'd have planned differently. Maybe." Kaine stopped, trying to hold back his emotions. "Maybe he'd still be alive."

"Stop that," Siru said forcefully. "You had no idea. And it was luck more than anything that got us out of that fight alive."

"She's right," Jarvas appeared then.

Kaine looked up at him. Jarvas seemed to have no scars at all. Jarvas handed him a glass of water which Kaine took but just held. He watched Jarvas lean against the desk behind Siru.

"You seem to have made it out alright," Kaine said, not even trying to hide the bitterness.

"Stop it," Siru said again.

"Why?" Kaine said, anger boiling over. As he spoke he spoke to them, but the words and meaning were leveled squarely at himself. "Otmar's dead! I should be too. I don't know how I survived. I don't even know if this will work again," he said indicating his bandaged shoulder. "I see you have a new bandage too Siru. But him? Nothing."

“We came all this way to get him! We fought and one of us died because of me! If I had been smarter, planned better, fought harder, we'd all be here. Because of me Otmar is dead! Me!”

The glass shattered in his hand then. Siru jumped and Jarvas calmly walked outside. Kaine watched his hand shake. He felt tired again all of sudden, like when he'd fought that Krogan. He watched Siru pick up the shards from the ground and out of his hand.

Jarvas returned with a towel and handed it to Siru who wrapped it around his lightly bleeding fingers and palm. Kaine's anger faded and was replaced by embarrassment. He shouldn't have been yelling at them, it wasn't their fault. He was about to tell them that when Siru interrupted.

“What happened to you two?” She asked.

Kaine sat still for a long moment, remembering every little detail. Even if he wanted to forget, the shock of watching Otmar blown off his feet while the Krogan laughed mercilessly was carved into his mind. It was an image that would never fade.

“It looked clear,” Kaine said, whispering, his eyes unfocused as he spoke. “I made my way towards the ship, didn't see anything or hear anything. Seemed like the plan had worked.” He laughed without mirth then. “The plan worked alright, right up until we opened the door to the ship then BAM!” Kaine roared. “Otmar took a shot to the chest, or stomach.

“Took him right off his feet.” Kaine stopped as he remembered Otmar lying there, unmoving in the grass, blood pouring out of him. With that image in his mind he continued quietly, “He didn't twitch, didn't even get a final word. I heard laughing then, from the ship. It was the Krogan.”

“Goddess,” Siru breathed.

“The Krogan?” Jarvas asked in disbelief.

“Yeah, those wolf things apparently didn't finish him off,” Kaine answered.

Kaine told them about his fight with the brute, how even after six shots to the knee it was unstoppable. He told them how it tossed him around like a doll, how it stabbed him with his own knife and then basically crushed his shoulder and arm.

“Ethan,” Siru said barely above a whisper, hand covering her mouth.

“How did you manage to survive?” Jarvas asked.

“I figured I was dead anyway,” Kaine said not looking at either of them. “I had one last thing I could do, but it had to be away from the ship. I still had that fusion detonator. I could crawl away and taunt him to pick me up. Then I'd vaporize us both and hope you two made it out okay.”

Kaine nodded to himself. That was indeed what he was prepared to do, kill himself to give Siru and Jarvas a chance to get off that damned planet.

“Oh Ethan.” Siru said, barely audible.

“As it turned out I got him so angry he threw me away, knocking the detonator from my hand. As luck would have it,” he said with a bitter laugh, “I was able to pull the transmitter off my belt and blow his fucking lizard ass to hell.”

A vicious smile, completely devoid of merriment, crossed his lips as he remembered that moment.

“I got to see the aftermath, him utterly destroyed and the ship none the worse. I remember laughing then.” He laughed, but one full of resentment and anger, tThen added bitterly, “one last victory for Ethan Kaine.”

Siru moved before him and he looked away. She took his face in her hands again and forced him to look at her. He expected to see her staring at him accusingly, but instead he only saw sympathy and that aggravated him all the more.

“Kaine,” she began, but he cut her off.

“No! Don't be understanding, don't!” he yelled, pulling her hands away. “Be angry! You should be, you have a right to be! I promised him and I failed.”

“That's not true,” she said pleadingly.

“It is true God dammit! I should have been first up the ramp. Me, not him. He wasn't a soldier. I am! I should have known Siru.”

“How,” she began.

“I should have!” He roared and she leaned away. “It was too easy. Just waltz right up and take their ship? How could I be so stupid?” He screamed.

Siru took his hand in hers and held it. He stared at her then and saw sympathy on her face and pain in her eyes. Things went blurry around him suddenly and he found it difficult to speak.

“Be angry.” He mumbled sadly. “I promised him Siru. I promised I'd get him home.”

“And you did,” a new voice came from behind him.

Kaine turned to see a Quarian standing in the doorway wearing an impressive looking enviro-suit. Unlike Otmar's it wasn't marred by patches or rough sewing work, it was clean and well maintained, dark purples and blues with a hint of black added to its strangely tantalizing patterns.

The Quarian walked into the room and stood before the three of them not speaking. Kaine was perplexed. Where had this Quarian come from? He vaguely recalled something about the Migrant Fleet when Siru was talking to him earlier but wasn't sure.

"A Krogan did that to you?" he asked, pointing to Kaine's shoulder.

"Yes," Kaine answered simply, sniffing deeply and wiping his eyes.

"Keelah," he whispered. "Otmar was right."

"About what?" Siru asked before Kaine could.

"You are like his grandfather," the Quarian spoke, not looking anywhere but at Kaine.

"I'm sorry, who are you?" Kaine asked.

"Bayal'Reefa, Otmar's father."

It took a moment to fully register what he'd said. This was Otmar's father, the one he'd talked about and the one who helped him with the robot competition. Kaine tried to stand then but was held down by Bayal's hand.

"No no, you shouldn't even be sitting. No need to stand right now," Otmar's father said, stepping back, and Kaine watched as he looked him up and down. "Humans are surprisingly resilient, your bodies belie an inner strength that few others possess. I doubt a Quarian or even a Turian would be responding so well."

Kaine tried to move his arm and was rewarded with a blinding pain that scorched from his shoulder blade and radiated all the way to his fingers and toes. He closed his eyes and gritted his teeth to keep from screaming. Even then a small grunt escaped his lips. It was like being stomped by the Krogan all over again.

"I'm no physician," Otmar's father was saying. "But I'd recommend not doing that. Our doctor's put together a disc with suggestions on physical therapy, drugs for pain relief and notes for your next health professional to review."

"We have that stored already," Siru said quietly as she slowly cleaned Kaine's freshly injured hand.

"They estimate it will take four to six weeks for the overall connections to return and the pain to subside, but the better part of a year to get any real use of your arm again," Bayal added.

"How much strength will I get back?" Kaine asked quietly, glancing at the bandage tightly wrapped around his shoulder.

"You're lucky," Bayal replied. "Your internal skeletal structure isn't much different than ours. A little research and our surgeons were able to reconstruct your shattered shoulder. They estimate

about ninety percent strength after a full year of therapy. A few years later it'll be one hundred."

Kaine let out a sigh of relief and nodded. He had been worried that the damage would be nigh irreparable, but it seemed doctors everywhere were capable of miracles, even on other species.

"Thank them for me please," Kaine said sincerely.

"I will," he replied. "But have no worry, they were more interested in the challenge. Very rarely do we aid other species, especially those that arrive in a Blue Suns vessel unannounced."

Kaine smiled sadly and looked down at the floor a moment. An image of Otmar came to his mind just then. He closed his eyes to compose himself and took a shuddering breath, looking up at Otmar's father.

"Sir," Kaine began.

"Please, Bayal is fine," he interrupted.

"Bayal," Kaine pronounced the name a little awkwardly. "I don't really know what to say about Otmar. I," he trailed off feeling foolish.

Exactly what was he trying to say? That he was sorry Otmar died? That he wished he could have saved him and brought him home alive? That he hadn't broken another promise and failed yet another person?

"Ethan. May I call you Ethan?" Bayal asked Kaine who nodded once in agreement. "Loss is a feeling every Quarian knows all too well. Sometimes it's closer, such as losing a loved one. But we all lost our homeworld, our identity as a race. We travel the galaxy as nomads. We are thought of as thieves, parasites, or worse. We are used as punch lines in jokes. We can go our entire lives and never receive even token respect from another race."

Bayal paused here looking down at a small object in his hand he was turning over on a thin metallic chain. When he continued, Kaine could hear barely controlled emotion in his voice.

"My son died on his Pilgrimage," Bayal went on. "It happens. The Pilgrimage is a dangerous journey. Taken alone. Things can go wrong and they can get hurt or worse. They usually have no one to count on but themselves. Often, they will die alone when this happens. But my son did not die alone. He found three people, of varied races to help him. You fought with him. You bled with him." He looked at Kaine. "You almost died."

Kaine felt a tear slide unchecked down his cheek. He barely noticed as Siru took his hand and gave it a comforting squeeze.

"Why? To help him?" Bayal asked, and then answered his own question. "It matters little to me why. The actions are what matter and my son was able to make three people think of him as just

another being. Beyond the visor or suit, beyond our history of mockery, beyond their own safety, and concerns, to think of him, as them.”

Bayal took a moment, absently rubbing the top of his helmet. He took a deep breath and looked back at Kaine and Siru. “My son completed his Pilgrimage Ethan,” Bayal said. “He showed us that in our time of need, it is indeed possible for a Quarian to gain assistance in a galaxy that hates them.”

“Anyway,” Bayal said after a few minutes. “What’s done is done. My people have learned to deal with the past and move forward. My future is a little dimmer now,” he paused again before continuing mostly to himself. “My son would have been a great engineer.”

“He would have made a better poet,” Siru said softly. Bayal looked up at her, the glow of his winking out rapidly as if he were constantly blinking.

Kaine watched as Siru got to her feet and walked over to Bayal wrapping her arms around him. A little awkwardly he returned the gesture. After their embrace she placed a light kiss on the side of his visor, then said something quietly to him that Kaine couldn’t hear.

As she returned to the crate Kaine tried to stand. The rush of pain exploded from his shoulder again but he ignored it. Getting to his feet he used his left hand to steady himself. After he’d gotten his balance he reached out with his left hand towards Bayal.

“It’s usually the right,” Kaine said with a quick look at right shoulder and arm. “But mine’s closed for maintenance.”

Looking down at the offered hand Bayal slowly reached out and gripped it with both of his.

“My son was right,” Bayal said “You are like his grandfather.”

“What was he like?” Jarvas asked.

“Oh too complex to get into now, but he was brave and strong mixed with a little crazy.” Bayal answered.

“Pretty spot on I’d say,” Siru said with a quick smile.

Bayal didn’t respond but instead turned Kaine’s hand palm up and revealed a chain with a small stone attached. It was black and dull. It wasn’t much bigger than a small marble and it took Kaine a moment before he realized it was the necklace Otmar wore.

“My ancestor has the dubious honor of being the last Quarian to leave Rannoch. When she did, she took a stone just before evacuating,” he said, indicating the necklace.

“She broke that stone into four pieces and gave one to each of her children, who in turn passed it to their children, a reminder of our true home,” Bayal said, gently, almost unwillingly

placing the chain and stone in Kaine's hand.

"Thank you, Ethan Kaine, for returning my son to me," Bayal told him, looking directly into Kaine's eyes.

Kaine had no voice. He felt his lip quiver and his vision blur momentarily. All he could think to do was nod in return.

"Right," Bayal said with a nod of his own taking a deep breath. "Enough of that. We were able to edit the registry of this ship. It's now open and can be given whatever name and port of call you'd like. I'd also suggest changing the color scheme at some point."

The four of them went quiet, each in their own thoughts. Kaine couldn't believe what had transpired since leaving the Citadel. He wasn't sure what would happen in the days and weeks to come, but for the first time since leaving Earth, Kaine felt like maybe, just maybe, he was on the right path.

"What will the three of you do now?" Bayal asked, interrupting Kaine's thoughts.

"Keep searching for who I am," Jarvas answered.

"Go home, face my mistakes. Hopefully take care of my sister." Kaine answered, looking into Siru's eyes.

Siru only smiled at him and patted his hand, giving it a reassuring squeeze. He knew wouldn't have to go alone.

"Well, I'll have to inform the rest of the Flotilla that you're safe and sound, and then they'll ask you to leave. I would suggest doing so or..."

"Or we'll be fired upon," Jarvas answered with a smile.

"Yes," Bayal said with a nod.

With that Bayal turned to leave. Kaine felt he should say something, anything. This was probably the last time he'd ever see this man again. Kaine searched for something witty or sympathetic but that failed him. He decided to just be honest.

"They were bosh'tets sir," Kaine said quickly remembering the swear word Otmar used often. Siru and Jarvas both looked at him as Bayal turned to face him.

"Who were?" Bayal asked.

"The judges for your disqualification during the automaton tournament," Kaine answered. "Fires or not, you beat the other team fair and square."

"Yes we did," Bayal said with a nod. "But winning wasn't important. My son and I built

something together. It's one of the best memories I have of him.”

Kaine gave a half smile of understanding.

“For the record though,” Bayal said before disappearing out the door. “Those judges were bosh’tets. We won that tournament.” And he was gone.

EPILOGUE

Jarvas Solistari sat in the pilot's chair staring out the front viewport at the planet Thessia. He'd been unmoving doing nothing but daydreaming about it for over an hour. The only thoughts he had were of stepping off the ramp of his ship onto the soil of his world and what might happen as a result.

The green world with dark landmasses and swirling white clouds still beckoned for him to land. He longed to walk along its beaches and enjoy its cities but he knew in doing so he would either end up causing a galaxy wide upheaval or simply his own death.

Still, he was unwilling to leave just yet. It filled him with a bit of peace being this close. Besides, his ship was legal again. The Citadel had provided his port of call and registration. It was the best choice, millions of ships called the Citadel home, and it was the most common registration point in the galaxy.

The new paint scheme he'd gotten of dark purple with black outlines reminded him of Otmar's enviro-suit. Every time he saw the ship, he knew he'd remember the Quarian that had gone to find a package for his pilgrimage and found a person. Hard to believe that was only a month ago.

A com came through then, the light blinking on his control board. Tapping it he heard a familiar voice of a defense patrol ship pilot came through.

"Otmar's Hope, do you require assistance?" An Asari's voice asked again.

"Negative. Board is green, just enjoying the view," he replied easily.

"It is quite something isn't it?" she replied.

"Best in the galaxy," Jarvas replied.

With a few more conversational replies back and forth he was reminded, again, that he would have to land or leave the system. Acknowledging the warning, again, he thanked them and the other ship moved off.

Closing his eyes he formed a picture of the planet in his mind. The greens and whites perfectly matched what was before him. With a sigh, he opened his eyes and plotted a course back to the Mass Relay.

"You are not going to land?" Zasi asked, using the ship's com system to speak to him.

"No," he answered.

"Why not?"

Jarvas didn't answer immediately as he pondered the question. He was here, only a few minutes or hours from walking on the planet that was by all rights his to call home. But he wouldn't be visiting now and maybe never, not just because he didn't feel like dying at the hands of commandos, but for another reason, one far more important.

"Zasi, do you wish you could be with the Migrant Fleet?" he asked, watching the Mass Relay getting bigger.

"I do not have wishes, but I understand the intent of your question and the answer is yes."

"Do you think you could be useful to them? That if given the chance, you would help them and better their lives? Even a little?"

"Yes."

"I think you would too," he said sincerely. His board lit up as the Mass Relay began to plot their jump to another star cluster.

"What does that have to do with you?" Zasi asked with a sound close to confusion in its voice.

"Because like you if I went home I would most likely be destroyed. Unlike you however, if they let me live I could offer them nothing. Nothing but chaos and confusion. I would only be a burden." Jarvas answered.

He watched the Mass Relay fill the viewport, blotting out the rest of the galaxy. A snaking tendril of energy shot forth and engulfed his ship. He began to feel weightlessness permeate every ounce of his being as *Otmar's Hope* was readied for a relay jump.

"Thessia is a place I neither belong to nor on," he said simply as the ship flashed and jumped away from his homeworld.

Bayal'Reefa stood before the airlock door that would lead him into the chamber with his son's body. He hadn't moved in nearly ten minutes, not really having the strength to do this again. Putting his hand to his visor he took a deep breath and pressed the button to open the door.

Walking in he saw his son's body, enviro-suit removed and wrapped in cloth from feet to neck. Only his face and head was uncovered. Walking forward he rounded the table and sat in the small chair at his son's head.

Reaching up Bayal removed his visor and pulled the cloth hood back, revealing his shoulder length dark hair. Bayal's angular features matched Otmar's almost perfectly but he did notice that Otmar had his mother's nose.

Thinking of Chi'ara gave him pause. It was only a few months ago that she had succumbed to a rare strain of pneumonia she picked up on a Salarian colony world. He hadn't the heart to report that to Otmar, wanting to wait for him to return from his pilgrimage first. He had put that pain behind him but now staring at his son's peaceful face brought it all back.

"Keelah," he said to himself. "I almost forgot what you looked like."

Sitting there unmasked was dangerous for Bayal, with his weakened immune system, but he didn't care. It was customary for family to complete the ritual wrapping of the body before it was cremated. Usually they did so in the safety of their enviro-suits, but since his wife and son were dead he had nothing left to lose.

Bayal ran a finger along Otmar's hair line, parting it slightly. It made him smile to see he'd kept his hair like his father's. Usually a Quarian kept their hair short for practicality alone, but Chi'ara liked Bayal's hair long even if she could only see it rarely. She would have loved Otmar's.

Bayal sighed then, picking up the rest of the cloth. He thought about the loved ones he'd lost so close together. He hoped beyond all that they were together, that they would be waiting for him when it was his time. He remembered a song his wife would sing to Otmar when Otmar was scared or sick.

Slowly Bayal began to sing even though he had no talent for it. It seemed appropriate somehow. This particular song was about being a child in the arms of a parent, feeling safe and secure, all worries being brushed aside. In the right voice it was magical. He doubted his was more than a screeching noise.

Carefully Bayal began to wrap the cloth around Otmar's head as he finished one set of lyrics and began the next. As he recited the words he began to wonder who he sung for, his dead son or himself? Finishing the wrappings of his son and singing the song his wife loved the most, for the first time in a long time his family was together. That was all that really mattered.

His voice got stronger as he continued. Slowly and gently he wrapped the cloth around his son's closed eyes. As he sat there, with nothing but the thoughts of his wife and child filling his heart, he sang. He sang until he'd completed wrapping Otmar's head and put the excess cloth aside.

As Bayal'Reefa finished singing and the last syllable left his lips, he leaned forward and placed a kiss on his son's forehead. And without leaning back Bayal spoke the final lines of a poem he had written with his wife long ago, "Where you go, I go. You are my son. And I will always be with you."

Siru, Kaine and Jarvas will return in
Paragons and Renegades, Two

Crusade

EXCERPT FROM CRUSADE

Jarvas Solistari slid on his knee as the wall behind him erupted in gunfire, plastering him with pieces of shattered debris. Leaping to his feet he launched himself up to the next level. Smashing through the glass partition he slammed into the Asari trying to shoot him.

He reached out. Grabbed the collar of her armor. Spinning, he dragged her with him and cracked her head against the wall. She slumped to the ground unconscious. More shots rang out barely missing Jarvas.

Another hop and he flipped over behind another of the women firing at him. A quick flick of the wrist and his prybar swung up, crushing his targets nose. Clutching the broken and bleeding remnants she doubled over. Reaching back Jarvas thrust his fist forward, catching her in the temple. She spun to the ground unconscious and as Jarvas stepped to the side as more shots were fired at him.

Below him in the main hall three more Asari were firing wildly up at him. Jumping up onto the bannister, he leaped into the air. Clearing the bottom levels he began to fall directly into the center of the room. As he fell he created a bubble of biotic energy that slowed his momentum as he hit it and slid down through to the ground. As he landed he crouched, holding the prybar in front of him, releasing the energy.

A flash of bluish light burst forth from his position. It overturned desks, blew potted plants apart, and knocked all three Asari off their feet. The wave expanded outwards until it hit the edges,

of the room cracking doorways and columns and completely destroying large swaths of the glass wall that looked out over the rest of the compound.

As the shattered glass rained down, Jarvas stood and surveyed the damage. Ten Asari lay strewn about on the three different levels, unconscious and unmoving. The entirety of the bottom level which contained reading desks and cubicles was wholly ruined. A small fire raged on the second floor but was quickly doused by suppressants.

"That was dramatic," he said. "Status?"

"Central chamber and hall have been locked down. Only remaining guards are in the D wing with the Ardat Yakshi," Zasi told him with an overtly seductive feminine voice.

"What the rekk voice is that?" he asked, slamming the sharp end of the prybar into the ground, letting it stand upright.

"Asari matron," the same sultry voice came through. *"Do you not like it?"*

"Are you coming on to me?" He asked with a laugh. "Pick something else, I'm trying to work here."

Firing up his omni-tool, Jarvas's helm began cycling through different vision spectrum, first thermal and night vision, then a program Zasi created that picked up on micro-changes in air density, then to electromagnetic interference. Finally he got to x-ray.

"The chamber should be almost directly below you," a gruff Krogan voice reported.

Scanning near his feet he did indeed see a thin line cut in a vague circle under him. The material it was made of wasn't very thick as he could see a set of stairs leading downwards.

"Composition?" he asked out loud.

"Twenty-five percent aggregate, twenty-five percent cement, fifty percent remnants of water or other soluble liquid."

"Concrete?" he asked, hands on his hips. "Don't see that much anymore."

"This particular Ardat Yakshi compound predates the founding of the Citadel Conventions. Such materials were in wide use at the time."

"Thanks for the history lesson, professor," Jarvas said, crouching down and touching the floor.

"Sarcasm is not appreciated."

Sliding his hand over the rough surface he ignored her comment. Idle thoughts passed through his mind. How many Asari had walked over this spot never knowing what lay under their feet? What were the people like that hid this cache of knowledge from the galaxy? Did they ever

intend for it to be found again? If not, why save it?

“There is a plasma carver on board that would cut through the concrete in approximately seven point three minutes.”

“Too slow,” he said.

Standing suddenly, he hopped into the air. Pulling his hand back and curling it into a fist he gathered biotic energy around himself. As he began to fall he concentrated it around his hand and punched just as he touched the ground, releasing the power in a flash.

Bright light flared out as the energy smashed through the concrete floor, blasting a two meter square into bits. He fell through the hole and landed on old and dusty stairs. He stood for a few moments as the bits of debris fell and settled on the ground at his feet.

“Show off,” Zasi quipped.

Switching the visual of his helmet from x-ray to night vision he saw a roughly cut hallway a little lower than he was tall stretching before him. A pulse of light flashed out from his omni-tool, filling the hallway with light for a brief moment. Jarvis didn’t move, only waited.

“Corridor continues for ten point three four meters and empties into a circular cavern five meters wide and three high.”

Nodding, he walked forward and in a few moments was standing in the center of the cavern Zasi had described. The central area was not very impressive, simply carved out of the natural rock formation the compound was later built upon. No furniture or shelving was stored here. It was almost completely empty, save for the short stack of scrolls lying in the center.

Carefully kneeling before them, Jarvis took some time to look them over. Twelve thick, rolled pieces of dark brown parchment were stacked neatly in a pyramid. Omni-tool up and running, he held it before the piles of papers letting it run a few non-invasive scans.

“Parchment suffers from forty percent integrity loss. Flash processing will result in destruction of seventy to ninety percent of the documents,” Zasi reported.

“How much information will be lost?” he asked.

“Approximately five to ten percent.”

“That’s acceptable. Do it.”

Instantly an incredibly bright flash of light burst from his omni-tool in all directions. His helmet’s blast shield darkened to protect his eyes. A few heartbeats later the darkness faded and he looked at the pile of disintegrated parchments.

“Status.”

“Ninety five percent of physical documentation suffered significant degradation. Remaining remnants will not survive transportation to Otmar’s Hope.”

“Damn, that’s too bad. What about the data?”

“Calculating,” she replied.

Standing, he surveyed the rest of the cavern while Zasi worked. As he walked along the outer wall he was again unimpressed. He found nothing interesting about either the rock that had been cut away or the way in which the work was accomplished. He was about to return to the pile of debris when he spotted a change in the composition of the surface.

He noticed darker lines here and there and then lighter spheres and other shapes. It took him a few moments, but he realized he was looking at ancient cave paintings. Switching to a visualization that would pick up the difference in consistency of the surface structure a picture formed in front of him.

What he saw was a vaguely humanoid shape lying on its side. What looked like a cityscape was embossed behind it, though none of the buildings, if that’s what they were, stood. All of them were toppled or completely destroyed. In the top left corner were scrawled marks that could have been a language. A small pictogram was heavily carved into the painting.

The pictogram featured a small representation of the Citadel in the top left corner, what could have been hills or such in the lower right, and in the center was something akin to an arrowhead with six insect like legs protruding from the base.

“Zasi, you see this?”

“Calculating.”

He had forgotten that away from the ship her computing power plummeted. He continued his stroll along the cavern and saw another painting similar to the first with a different humanoid figure lying before ruins. He found three more sets of paintings, each containing the same basic image, but with a different shape lying on its side, each having different lettering but with the same arrowhead pictogram in the upper corners.

When he got to the last one he stopped. This was more of the same broken cityscape, scrawled text, and arrowhead pictogram. But where this one really differed was the humanoid figure. With the others he couldn’t possibly guess what they were, but this one was frighteningly specific.

“Zasi?”

“Calculating.”

“Calculate later!” he yelled. Something about this worried him greatly. “Look at these cave

paintings.”

“*Intriguing imagery. Perhaps some prophetic Armageddon scenario?*”

“I don’t know, but look at this figure in this last one. Can you identify it?”

“*Scanning.*” Jarvas stared at it while he waited. It wasn’t long before she replied. “*Structure of the buildings is consistent with modern Protbean based styles. Figure in the foreground is a depiction of Asari female with seventy-five percent certainty.*”

As she spoke to him Jarvas concentrated on the upper left area with writing and the pictogram. Though he couldn’t really read its entirety, one word seemed familiar.

“Zasi, what’s this,” he asked placing his hand against the word.

“*Unknown language.*”

“It seems familiar.”

“*Correction: unknown to the rest of the galaxy.*”

“Har,” he said without mirth. Still it seemed familiar, like one of the languages his mother had taught him. “Zasi, run that against the old Asari dialects.”

“*Scanning.*” Again a few moments passed until she replied. “*There are approximately four thousand seven hundred and two permutations of this string of characters against those languages. However, one does translate directly.*”

“What’s it say?”

“*Reapers.*”