

# MASS EFFECT™

## RETRIBUTION

DREW KARPYSHYN



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# **MASS EFFECT™ RETRIBUTION**

**DREW KARPYSHYN**



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To my wife, Jennifer.

Thank you for always being there for me.



Because of you, I can follow my dreams ...

and have someone to share them with.

#### **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

Once again I want to express my gratitude to the entire Mass Effect team at BioWare for all their hard work. Without your tireless effort and limitless dedication, Mass Effect would not exist.

I also want to thank all the fans who've shown such passion for what we've created. Without your support, none of this would be possible.

## PROLOGUE

The Illusive Man sat in his chair, staring out the viewing window that formed the entire outer wall of his inner sanctum.

The unnamed space station he used as his base was orbiting a red giant-class M star. The semispherical edge of the burning sun filled the entire lower half of the viewing window, its brightness dominating but not completely obscuring the field of stars behind it.

The star was in the last stages of its six-billion-year life span. As the grand final act culminating its existence, it would collapse in upon itself, creating a black hole to swallow the entire system. The planets and moons it had spawned in its birth would be devoured in the inescapable gravitational pull of the dark, gaping maw left behind by its death.

The scene encapsulated everything the Illusive Man believed about the galaxy: it was beautiful, glorious and deadly. Life could spring up in the least likely of places in the most unimaginable of forms, only to be snuffed out in a blink of the cosmic eye.

He wasn't about to let that happen to humanity.

"Viewing window off," he said, and the wall became opaque, leaving him alone in a large, dimly lit room.

"Lights on," he said, and illumination spilled from the ceiling.

He spun his chair around so it was facing away from the viewing window, looking out over the circular holographic pad in the center of the room he used to receive incoming calls. When activated, it would project a three-dimensional representation of whomever he was speaking to, almost making it seem as if they were standing in the room with him.

They could also see him, of course, which was why the holo-pad was located so that it looked out over the chair by the viewing window. When the window was active, the Illusive Man would be framed by whatever astronomical wonder the station happened to be orbiting at the time: a bold and powerful visual to reinforce the image he had carefully fostered over the years.

He needed a drink. Not the synthetic, alien-produced swill that bartenders across the galaxy hawked to unsuspecting humans. He wanted something real; something pure.

"Bourbon," the Illusive Man said out loud. "Neat."

A few seconds later a door on the far end of the room slid open and one of his assistants—a tall, gorgeous brunette—appeared, an empty glass in one hand and a bottle in the other. Her heels clacked sharply as she crossed the room's marble floor, her long legs making short work of the distance between them despite her tight black skirt.

She didn't smile or speak as she handed him the glass, her demeanor strictly professional. Then she held the bottle out for his approval.

*Jim Beam Black*, the label proclaimed, *Distilled to Perfection in Kentucky*.

"Three fingers," the Illusive Man told her by way of approval.

The assistant filled the glass to just past the halfway point, then waited expectantly.

As it always did, the first taste brought him back to the simpler time of his youth. In those days he had been an ordinary man, a typical citizen of Earth's upper class—wealthy, comfortable, naïve.

He savored the flavor, feeling a twinge of longing for those lost halcyon days: before he had founded Cerberus; before he had become the Illusive Man, the self-appointed protector of humanity; before the Alliance and their alien allies on the Citadel Council had branded him and his followers terrorists.

Before the Reapers.

Of all the enemies in the known galaxy and beyond, of all the dangers that might one day wipe humanity from existence, none could compare with the threat that lurked in the void of dark space at the galaxy's edge. Massive, sentient starships, the Reapers were ruthless machines completely devoid of compassion and emotion. For tens of thousands of years—perhaps longer—they had watched as alien and human civilizations evolved and advanced, waiting for the perfect moment to come in and wipe out

all organic life in the galaxy.

Yet despite the apocalyptic threat they posed, most people knew nothing of the Reapers. The Council had sealed all official records of the Reaper attack on the Citadel space station, covering up the evidence and denying the truth to prevent widespread panic across the galaxy. And, of course, the Alliance, lapdogs of their new alien masters, had followed along without protest.

The lie ran so deep that even those who'd helped bury the truth had convinced themselves the Reapers were nothing but a myth. They continued on with their mundane existence, too weak and too stupid to acknowledge the horrific destiny awaiting them.

But the Illusive Man had devoted his life to facing unpleasant truths.

When the Alliance turned their back on the disappearing human colonies in the Terminus Systems, Cerberus had taken up their standard. They had even managed to recruit Commander Shepard—the Alliance's greatest hero—to aid them in investigating the mystery. And what Shepard discovered had shaken the Illusive Man to his core.

The Illusive Man dismissed his assistant with a slight nod; the woman spun expertly on her heel and left him alone with his thoughts.

Taking another sip of his drink, the Illusive Man set it down on the arm of his chair. Then he reached into the inside breast pocket of his tailored jacket and removed a long, slim silver case.

With an unconscious grace gained from years of practice, he flipped open the top, slipped out a cigarette, and closed it again in one seemingly continuous motion. The case disappeared into his jacket once more, replaced in his hand by a heavy black lighter. A flick of the thumb and a quick puff on the cigarette and the lighter also vanished.

The Illusive Man took a long, slow drag, letting the nicotine fill his lungs. Tobacco had been part of Terran culture for centuries, the act of smoking a common ritual in nearly every developed nation on the globe. Small wonder, then, that this ubiquitous habit had followed humanity into space. Various strains of tobacco had become popular exports for a number of colonies, human and otherwise.

There were those who even had the audacity to claim that several of the salarian brands of genetically engineered leaf were superior to anything humanity had produced. The Illusive Man, however, preferred his tobacco like his whiskey—homegrown. This particular cigarette was made from crop cultivated in the vast fields sprawling across the landscape of the South American heartland, one of Earth's few remaining agriculturally viable regions.

The traditional health risks associated with smoking were no longer a concern in the twenty-second century; advances in the fields of chemistry and medical science had eradicated diseases like emphysema and cancer. Yet there were still those who harbored a deep, fundamental hatred of this simple act. Ancient legislation passed in the mid-twenty-first century banning tobacco was still in effect within the borders of several of Earth's nation-states. Many viewed cigarettes as morally abhorrent: a symbol of the callous and exploitive corporate indifference that caused millions of deaths in the pursuit of shareholder profit.

For the Illusive Man, however, smoking represented something else entirely. The taste curling across his tongue and down his throat, the tickle of smoke spreading through his lungs, and the warm rush of nicotine spreading through his system brought both the comfort of familiar routine and the satisfaction of physical craving: two essential elements of the human condition. Smoking was a ritual to be celebrated ... especially now that humanity's continued existence was at risk.

*Smoke 'em if you got 'em*, he thought, conjuring up an old line from a long-forgotten source. *Because none of us is going to see tomorrow.*

The Illusive Man took a few more puffs on his cigarette before stubbing it out in the ashtray built into the arm of the chair, then took another sip of his drink.

As grim as things might seem, he wasn't about to give in to melancholy despair. He was a man who tackled problems head-on, and this one was no different.

Commander Shepard had discovered that human colonists were being abducted by the Collectors, a reclusive alien species that served the will of the Reapers without question. Though trapped in dark space, the massive starships were somehow able to exert control over their hapless minions even across

millions of light-years.

Acting on the orders of their machine masters, the Collectors had been gathering humans and taking them to their homeworld in the galactic core. There the abductees were repurposed: transformed, mutated, and finally rendered down into organic sludge as part of a horrific experiment to fuel the creation of a new Reaper.

Shepard—with Cerberus's help—had destroyed the Collector operations. But the Illusive Man knew the Reapers wouldn't simply give up. Humanity needed to learn more about this relentless and remorseless foe in preparation for the Reapers' inevitable return. They had to study their strengths and weaknesses, expose and exploit their vulnerabilities.

Cerberus had salvaged key pieces of technology from the remains of the Collector operation. They were already beginning to set up a facility to undertake the first carefully controlled tests of the strange alien technology. Ultimately, however, there was only one way to gain the knowledge they sought: they would have to resume the Collector experiments on real human subjects.

The Illusive Man knew full well the abhorrence of his plan. But ethics and morality had to be cast aside for the survival of the species. Instead of millions being abducted, a few carefully chosen subjects would be chosen. A handful of victims had to suffer to protect and preserve the entire human race.

The plan to replicate the Collector experiments would progress in secret, without Shepard's knowledge or involvement. The alliance between Cerberus and humanity's most famous hero had been uneasy at best; neither side had fully trusted the other. It was possible they might work together again in the future, but for now the Illusive Man was only willing to rely on his own top agents.

A soft overhead chime indicated an incoming message from one of those operatives.

"Viewing window on," he said, sitting up straight in his seat and focusing his attention on the holo-pad.

The lights dimmed automatically as the wall behind him became transparent. The dying sun to his back cast an orange-red glow over the room.

"Accept," the Illusive Man muttered, and the image of Kai Leng materialized above the holo-pad.

Like most of humanity, he was a child of a truly global culture. His Chinese heritage was clearly predominant in his dark hair and eyes, but around the jaw and nose were subtle clues pointing to some Slavic or Russian ancestry as well.

"We found him," Kai Leng reported.

The Illusive Man had no need to ask who he was talking about. A top Cerberus assassin, Kai Leng had for nearly three years been on a mission to track down a single target.

"Where?" the Illusive Man wanted to know.

"Omega."

The corded muscles of Kai Leng's neck momentarily tightened with revulsion as he spoke the name—a completely involuntary, but understandable, reaction. The space station represented everything Cerberus despised about alien culture: it was lawless, savage, and brutal. The reflex caused Kai Leng to turn his head, offering a glimpse of the tattoo on the back of his neck: a snake swallowing its tail.

The ouroboros was often used to symbolize eternity, but the Illusive Man knew it had a darker meaning as well: annihilation. Which was, in its own way, also eternal.

Cerberus had discovered Kai Leng a decade ago, liberating him from an Alliance prison camp. The Illusive Man had looked carefully into his past before recruiting him: a marine with N7 special forces training, he had been arrested after killing a krogan in a bar fight on the Citadel while on temporary leave.

The Alliance had come down hard on the former lieutenant, making an example of him. He was stripped of his rank and sentenced to twenty years in military prison. Kai Leng's long list of documented confrontational and even violent behavior toward aliens had no doubt contributed to the harshness of his sentence. For the Illusive Man, however, his anti-alien leanings were proof of character. That, combined with the fact that he had managed to kill a krogan while armed with nothing more than a standard-issue service blade, had made him a perfect recruit.

In the decade since Cerberus had arranged his escape, Kai Leng had become one of the organization's top wet-work operatives. But he was more than just a ruthless killer. He understood the need to be discreet; he knew how to plan and implement complex and delicate operations.

Now that he had found his target, the Illusive Man's first impulse was to give the exterminate order. But then an idea came to him. He still needed subjects for the upcoming experiments; why not kill two birds with one stone?

"Bring him in," he said. "Alive. Be sure to cover your tracks."

"I always do," Kai Leng replied.

Satisfied, the Illusive Man muttered, "Off," and the holographic image of the assassin flickered once, then disappeared.

He leaned back in his chair, casually swirling the contents of the glass in his hand before downing the last of his drink in a long, satisfying gulp.

*It's been a long time coming, Grayson,* he thought, his mood much more cheerful than it had been only minutes ago. *But I'll make sure the wait was worth it.*

## ONE

Paul Grayson knew the Illusive Man was still looking for him. It had been almost three years since he had betrayed Cerberus for the sake of his daughter, but even if *thirty* years had passed he knew they wouldn't give up the hunt.

He had changed his name, of course: Paul Grayson was gone; he went by Paul Johnson now. But creating a new identity for himself was only the first line of defense; it wouldn't hold up should any of the Illusive Man's agents come across his credentials. And his agents were everywhere.

Since its inception, Cerberus had seeded operatives throughout nearly every branch of the Alliance government. There was almost no place in Council space he could run where they wouldn't eventually track him down. So he had fled to Omega.

The Illusive Man had never managed to secure a foothold on the enormous space station that served as the de facto capital of the Terminus Systems. Cerberus was well known for its radical pro-human agenda, making its agents extremely unpopular among the various alien warlords, gang leaders, and despots who held sway on Omega. Even if they suspected that Grayson was hiding here, it wouldn't be easy for them to get to him.

It was something of an irony to Grayson that the skills he had learned while working for Cerberus—espionage and assassination—were proving so useful in carving out a new life for himself as a mercenary on Omega. He had been trained to kill aliens; now he was working for one.

"We're wasting time," Sanak grumbled, setting his sniper rifle to the side. He tugged at his combat suit as he shifted to find a more comfortable position behind the stacked crates that were concealing Grayson and him from view.

Grayson kept his own weapon trained on the ship on the far side of the loading bay. He was acutely aware of how careful his batarian partner was to not make any physical contact with him as he rummaged around.

"We wait for Liselle's report," he said flatly.

The batarian had turned his head to glare with all four eyes at the man crouched beside him. He blinked the uppermost pair, but the lower set remained still as stone.

"You always want to wait, human," Sanak snarled. "It's a sign of weakness."

"It's a sign of intelligence," Grayson snapped back. "That's why I'm in charge."

Sanak knew only one way to deal with problems: charge into them headfirst. It made working with him difficult at times. His general dislike of humans—and Grayson's deeply ingrained mistrust of batarians—didn't help matters.

The two species had a checkered history. Humanity had expanded quickly after bursting onto the galactic scene, pushing the batarians out of the Skyllian Verge. The batarians had retaliated with violence, triggering a war between the two cultures—a war the batarians had lost. Now they were outcasts and pariahs in the civilized worlds of Council space—hardly ever seen, regarded with suspicion and mistrust.

On the streets of Omega, however, they seemed to be on every other corner. Since leaving Cerberus, Grayson had worked hard to overcome the xenophobia that had been drilled into him by the Illusive Man. But old habits died hard, and he was in no hurry to embrace the "four-eyed menace."

Fortunately, he and Sanak didn't have to like each other to work together. Aria had made that clear to both of them on several occasions.

"Seven targets in total," Liselle's soft voice chimed in his earpiece. "All members in position and awaiting orders."

Grayson felt the familiar rush of adrenaline coursing through his body in anticipation of the kill. Beside him he sensed Sanak training his weapon onto the ship, mirroring Grayson's pose.

"Go," Grayson whispered, the single word triggering a barrage of gunfire from the far side of the warehouse as Liselle and her team went into action.

A second later four turians stumbled into view from around the far side of the vessel. Their backs were



to Grayson and Sanak, their attention and their weapons focused on Liselle's ambush.

Grayson released the air in his lungs in a long, slow breath as he squeezed the trigger. One of the turians dropped, the kinetic barriers of his combat suit too drained by Liselle's opening salvo to stop the sniper round that took him in the back of his bony skull.

An instant later two more went down, courtesy of a pair of perfectly placed shots from Sanak.

*I may not like the bastard,* Grayson thought as he took aim at the final adversary, *but he gets the job done.*

The last turian had just enough time to take two steps toward the cover of a nearby crate before Grayson took him between the shoulder blades.

There were several seconds of absolute silence before Grayson spoke into his mouthpiece. "Four targets neutralized on our side."

"Three more over here," Liselle responded. "That's all of them."

"Let's move," Grayson said to Sanak, leaping out from behind the cover of the crate and racing toward the fallen aliens.

The turians were members of the Talon gang, and the warehouse was a building deep inside Talon territory. Given the time of night and the remote location, it was unlikely anyone had heard the shots. But there was always a chance, and the longer they stayed the more likely they'd have to deal with reinforcements.

By the time he and Sanak reached the bodies, Liselle and the two batarians that made up the rest of her team were already rifling through their victims' clothes.

"Five kilos so far," the blue-skinned asari informed Grayson, holding up several plastic bags tightly packed with a fine, rosy powder. "Ninety, maybe ninety-five percent pure."

From personal experience, Grayson knew it took only a small pinch of refined red sand to get a human high. Five kilos was enough to keep an entire apartment complex floating for the better part of a year. A stash this size could easily fetch six figures back in Council space. Which was precisely why Aria had ordered this hit.

There were no actual laws on Omega, no police force. Order was maintained solely by the gangs that ran the space station. But though there were no laws, there were rules. Rule number one: don't cross Aria T'Loak.

"Two more kilos on this one," Sanak said, pulling another tightly wrapped brick from inside the vest of the corpse he was searching.

"This one got caught in the cross fire," one of the other batarians said, holding up a bag so Grayson could see the grains of sand streaming out of the tiny hole in the side.

"Patch it up!" Grayson snapped angrily, taking a quick step back.

Red sand had no effect on batarians or asari, but one good whiff and he'd be dusted for the rest of the night.

"Aria wants it all," he reminded them. "The whole shipment. She's sending a message."

Known as the Pirate Queen, Aria had been the de facto ruler of Omega for over two centuries. Every other gang paid tribute to her in some form or another for the privilege of doing business on the station. Those that tried to cut Aria out—say by refusing to give her a piece of their red sand trafficking business—suffered the consequences.

"That's it," Liselle declared, standing up as she finished her examination of the last body.

Even though his mind was focused on the mission, Grayson couldn't help but be struck once again by the ethereal beauty of the woman before him. The asari as a whole were gorgeous by human standards: the mono-gendered species closely resembled human females, though their pigmentation was typically blue. Instead of hair they had sculpted, flowing folds of skin covering their scalp, but that did little to take away from their sexual appeal.

Liselle was considered extremely attractive, even among her own kind, and her form-fitted combat suit accentuated every curve. The part of Grayson's mind that still harbored the Cerberus-bred mistrust of aliens couldn't help but wonder if it was merely her physical appearance that was so stunning, or if it was something more.

In addition to being a species of biotics, the asari were known to have subtle yet powerful empathic—almost telepathic—abilities. Some believed they used these talents to influence the perceptions of others, making themselves appear more attractive than they actually were. If that was in fact the case, then Liselle was exceptionally skilled at the art.

“Secure the sand and move out,” Grayson ordered, snapping his mind back to the task at hand. “Stay tight, stay alert. Remember—we’re still in enemy territory.”

Following his instructions, Liselle, Sanak, and the other batarians stuffed the packets into their gear before falling in behind him.

With Grayson in the lead and Sanak taking up the rear, the small troop filed out of the warehouse and onto the district’s shadowed streets. Moving quickly, they made their way down the twisting labyrinth of alleys and back lanes, eager to reach friendly—or at least neutral—territory.

It was late, well into the middle of the space station’s night cycle. There were only a handful of people out on the streets. Most would be civilians, ordinary men and women from various species who—for whatever reason—lived or worked in the Talon-controlled neighborhood. These were easy to spot: seeing the heavily armed squad, they would turn away or slip into the blackness of a doorway, eager to avoid confrontation.

Grayson noted and dismissed these people with a single glance. He was on the lookout for Talon patrols. Any response to the attack on the warehouse would be random and disorganized; the Talons couldn’t have expected Aria to strike at them here, in the heart of their own turf. But the turian gang was one of the few that regularly sent armed cadres out to walk the streets of their territory, as a way to remind people who was in charge. Armed and outfitted as his people were, Grayson knew that if they came across one of these patrols, the turians would immediately open fire on principle alone.

In the end, they were lucky. They crossed over from Talon territory into one of the central districts of Omega without incident. Just to be safe, Grayson kept them in formation for several more blocks, wary of signs of pursuit.

It was only when Liselle put a hand on his shoulder and said, “I think we’re clear,” that he let his guard down.

“Aria’s waiting for us at Afterlife,” Sanak pointedly reminded him.

Grayson knew full well where their boss was. And that was the problem—everyone knew.

Afterlife was the social epicenter of Omega, a club where the wealthy and powerful mingled with the station’s common folk, all in the pursuit of pure hedonistic satisfaction. Patrons came in search of music, sex, drugs, and even violence, and few left without finding at least some of what they sought.

Aria T’Loak was a fixture at the club, presiding over the pulsating chaos of the crowd from her private booth nearly every night. Her presence was part of what made the club what it was: Afterlife epitomized Omega, as did Aria herself.

“We’re not strolling into the club loaded down with twenty pounds of red sand,” Grayson replied. “We need to stash it someplace safe.”

It wasn’t likely the Talons would be able to mount a retaliatory strike so quickly; even if they did, he doubted they’d have the balls to take a run at Aria in her own club. But the Talons weren’t the only ones he was worried about.

Security kept a tight rein inside the club, but shootings, stabbings, and random acts of violence were common in the streets and alleys surrounding it. Junkies desperate to score or street thugs too stupid to consider the long-term consequences wouldn’t hesitate to go after Grayson’s crew if they thought the payoff was big enough. It was a small risk, to be sure, but Grayson was all about minimizing risk at every opportunity.

“We hide the sand at my place,” he declared. “Then we report to Aria and arrange a pickup for tomorrow.”

Sanak’s lip curled in disapproval, but he didn’t say anything. Liselle, on the other hand, nodded her agreement.

“Lead the way, Paul,” she cooed. “The sooner we drop this off, the sooner we can hit the dance floor.”

It took them about fifteen minutes to reach Grayson's apartment. Several times he checked to make sure they weren't being followed; each time he did so, he couldn't help but notice Sanak rolling all four of his eyes.

*That's why Aria put me in charge, he thought. I worry about the details.*

It was just one of the many valuable lessons he had picked up from the Illusive Man.

His apartment was located in one of Omega's safest, and most expensive, districts. The guards at the district gate—a pair of heavily armed turians—recognized him and stepped aside so he and his squad could enter.

Reaching his building, he punched in the access code at the main door, instinctively shielding the keypad from Sanak and the other batarians as he did so. The position of his body gave Liselle a clear view, but he'd already given the asari his building code several months ago.

The door slid open, revealing a small hallway leading to a set of stairs and a single elevator.

"Third floor," Grayson said. "Take the stairs. The elevator's a little slow."

He led the way, with Liselle, Sanak, and the others following behind single file. At the top of the steps was another hall, with a single door on either side. There were only two apartments on each of the building's five floors; that was one of the things Grayson liked best about this building—only a handful of neighbors, and they all respected one another's privacy.

He went up to the door and placed his hand on the pad in the center. He felt a faint warmth as the biometric scan read his palm; then there was a soft click and the door slid open.

The well-furnished apartment beyond wasn't large, but Grayson didn't need a lot of room. A small entry-way where visitors could take off their boots and coats led into a sitting room with a single couch and a vid screen. A small window looked out over the street below. Beyond the sitting room was a half-wall separating it from the functionally simple kitchen. Through the kitchen was another small hallway leading to the bathroom and then to the bedroom in the rear. The bathroom was small, but the bedroom was large enough not only for Grayson's bed, but also for the chair, desk, and terminal he used whenever he wanted to patch into the extranet.

"Just put the bags inside the front door," Grayson instructed, eager to keep the batarians from traipsing through his home. "I'll figure out someplace to hide them."

"What's the matter, human?" Sanak growled. "Don't you trust us?"

Grayson didn't bother to answer.

"Aria's waiting for our report," he said. "Why don't you and your friends go fill her in."

Liselle waited until the batarians were gone, then came over and draped her arms around his neck, pressing herself close against him. He could feel the heat emanating off her, and the faint perfume wafting up from her neck made his head spin.

"You're not coming to the club?" she whispered in his ear, disappointed.

Grayson could imagine the sultry pout playing across her lips, and he felt a flush rising up his neck and into his cheeks. Liselle always made him feel like a cradle robber, despite the fact she was at least a full century older than him.

*It's different with asari, the churlish part of his mind admonished. They mature slowly. She's still a babe in the woods, and you're a weathered geezer pushing middle age. She's probably got more in common with your daughter than with you.*

"I'll be there," Grayson promised, giving her a quick kiss even as he unraveled her arms from his neck and gently pushed her away. "I just have to take care of a few things first."

She turned away from him, letting her fingers trail along the length of his arm as she did so.

"Don't take too long," she called out over her shoulder as she headed for the door. "You might find me dancing with a krogan if I get bored."

When the door closed, he took a long, slow breath to clear his head. The lingering scent of perfume filled his nostrils, but without Liselle pressed up against him it didn't have the same overpowering effect.

*Back to business, lover-boy.*

He had to find somewhere to hide the red sand. It wasn't likely anyone would break into his apartment, but there was no sense leaving it out in plain sight.

First, however, he had to make a call.

## TWO

Kahlee Sanders knocked lightly at the door of Nick's room.

"Come in," he called from the other side, his adolescent voice cracking on the second word.

She passed her hand over the access panel and the door whooshed open to reveal Nick and Yando, one of the newest students at the Grissom Academy, sitting side by side at the desk in the corner of the room.

"It's past curfew," Kahlee said. "Yando should have been in his own room thirty minutes ago."

"We're studying," Nick said, pointing at the haptic interface screens projecting up from the terminal on his desk.

Kahlee glanced at the assignment floating before her, then at the two boys. Nick stared back at her, his expression one of total innocence.

Nick had just turned fifteen. Always small for his age, he looked at least a year or two younger. His shoulder-length black hair and the wispy, curling bangs that fell down across his forehead did little to offset the impression of youth. But she knew he was mature beyond his years; if any of the students could look her straight in the eye and lie to her without giving anything away, it was Nick.

Yando, however, was another story. Eleven years old, he had had his amplifiers surgically implanted only a few months ago. Everything here was still new to him, strange. The instructors of the Ascension Project still filled him with a sense of awe, towering figures of authority looming over this unfamiliar world. Kahlee wasn't above using that to get to the truth.

"Yando," she said, keeping her voice low but firm, "what were you really doing?"

The young boy looked from Kahlee to Nick and then back to Kahlee, his eyes wide and white against his dark face.

"We were playing Conquest," Nick admitted with an exasperated sigh, letting his young companion off the hook. "But only for, like, ten minutes. Before that we studied for two hours at least!"

"You know the rules, Nick," she replied. "No extranet after curfew."

"It was just ten minutes!"

"I can check the logs," she reminded him. "See if you're telling the truth."

"I am!" he snapped back defiantly, before adding in a lower voice, "Well, maybe more like twenty minutes."

"Am I in trouble?" Yando asked, his lower lip trembling slightly.

Kahlee shook her head. "No. You're not in trouble. But it's time to get into bed, okay?"

The younger boy nodded, and she took him by the hand and led him to the door. Then she turned to Nick.

"We'll talk about this when I come back to take your readings."

"Yeah, right," he said, his voice dripping with teenage sarcasm. "Hate to go one whole week without someone jabbing a needle in my neck."

Kahlee led Yando to his room and tucked him in, but her mind was on Nick the entire time.

She wasn't sure if she should punish him or not. In his first two years at the Grissom Academy, Nick had been a holy terror. Always ahead of most of his classmates in the biotic Ascension Project, he had been arrogant, selfish, and prone to bullying the other children. In the last year, however, something had changed. Nick had gone from a problem child to a model student, the perfect example of everything the Ascension Project was trying to achieve.

Among humans, biotics—the ability of some individuals to use their mind to affect the physical world through small bursts of dark energy—was a commonly known, but still misunderstood, phenomenon.

Many erroneously believed that biotics were mutants blessed with superhuman telekinetic powers. Urban legends told of out-of-control biotics upending vehicles with a mere thought, or using their abilities to cause earthquakes while unleashing rampages of destruction that decimated entire city blocks.

The truth was much less terrifying. For one thing, contrary to what popular action vids portrayed,

generating biotic fields took time and focus; it wasn't something that happened instantly. And without the surgically implanted amplifiers wired into their brains and nervous systems, most biotics could barely tip over a cup of coffee.

With the amplifiers and years of intense training, talented individuals could learn to generate dark energy fields strong enough to lift a full-grown man from the floor and toss him roughly against a nearby wall, but doing so required intense amounts of physical and mental energy. Two or three such displays were all that typical biotics could manage before total exhaustion would set in, leaving them as helpless and vulnerable as any other man or woman.

Making the general public aware of these limitations was one way the Ascension Project tried to bridge the gap between rumor and fact. The hope was that understanding would lead to acceptance, allowing biotics to integrate into normal human society without suffering the irrational mistrust and persecution they currently faced. Indeed, outside of the military, most human biotics preferred to keep their talents hidden whenever possible.

Kahlee didn't want children like Nick to grow up ashamed of their gift. But there was always the fear the pendulum could shift too far the other way, leading to an arrogant sense of entitlement or superiority among biotics. They could come to look down on others as inferior, making it even more difficult for nonbiotics to welcome them into society.

When Nick first came to the program, Kahlee had feared this was the direction he was heading. But the Ascension Project focused on more than just maximizing biotic potential; the curriculum also concentrated on building moral character, and in Nick's case it seemed to have made a difference.

As he'd matured, the bully had transformed into a protector of the other students. He'd gone from sullen and selfish to helpful and cooperative. Now he regularly volunteered to tutor other students at the Grissom Academy—even the nonbiotics who weren't part of the Ascension Program.

In light of all the progress he'd made, Kahlee decided she wasn't going to come down too hard on him for his latest minor transgression.

When she got back to his room Nick was lying facedown on his bed, the nape of his neck exposed in preparation for the familiar procedure he was about to endure.

"I never meant for Yando to get in trouble," he mumbled into his pillow as he heard Kahlee come in.

She sat down on the bed beside him, then reached over and carefully pinched the nape of his neck between her thumb and forefinger, wincing at the inevitable—but still slightly painful—static spark as she made contact with his skin. The Ascension Project had tried to find a way to regulate the excess electrical charge that built up naturally in a biotic's body, but so far had experienced little success in coming up with a practical solution. For now, it was still a minor inconvenience the students and teachers simply learned to live with.

"Yando's still recovering from his surgery," Kahlee explained as she inserted a long, slim needle between the young man's vertebrae and into the tiny subcutaneous transmitter. "He needs his sleep."

The small ball on the top of the needle blinked green, indicating the data was successfully uploaded.

"He doesn't like being alone in his room," Nick answered, muscles tense and teeth gritted against his discomfort. "I think he misses his mom."

He let out a long sigh when Kahlee extracted the needle, and his body relaxed.

"I thought maybe if we played some Conquest he wouldn't be so scared."

Kahlee smiled to herself and gently rubbed Nick's shoulder.

"You're a good kid."

Still facedown, he didn't answer, but she could see his ears turning red with embarrassment. He shifted slightly, and she realized he was trying to get more comfortable while being careful not to roll over, desperate to hide his body's involuntary reaction to her touch.

*He's not a little kid anymore, she reminded herself, quickly pulling her hand away as what was happening to Nick dawned on her. He's a teenager practically drowning in hormones.*

Kahlee was aware enough to know that several of the older students had developed crushes on her. It was understandable: she offered them comfort and compassion, and though she dressed conservatively while at the Academy, with her shoulder-length blond hair and trim figure she was still an undeniably

attractive woman.

“I better go,” she said, standing up quickly.

Uncontrollable erections were perfectly normal for someone Nick’s age, but the last thing she wanted to do was make an awkward situation worse by drawing attention to what was happening. Better to just make a quick exit.

“Yeah, okay,” Nick answered, his voice noticeably strained.

She flicked off the light and shut the door behind her, giving him some necessary privacy.

Once she got back to her own private quarters, she downloaded Nick’s data into her private terminal, where it would automatically be relayed to the central database inside the Ascension Project’s main laboratory.

The numbers were encouraging. Initial testing had indicated there was an upper limit to what each individual biotic could achieve. However, recent results from students like Nick seemed to imply that with hard work these so-called upper limits were hardly set in stone.

As she charted the latest results from her other students, she couldn’t help but wonder what would have happened with Gillian Grayson if she had stayed in the program.

Although she was autistic, Gillian’s potential had dwarfed the other children’s in the Ascension Project. Kahlee suspected her remarkable talent and her autism were somehow linked, though it was also possible her abilities were the result of the drugs her father and Cerberus had been secretly pumping into her system.

In the end, Grayson had chosen his daughter over his loyalty to Cerberus, and with his help Kahlee had managed to get Gillian onto the crew of a quarian deep-space exploration vessel ... one of the few safe places in the galaxy beyond the Illusive Man’s reach.

Kahlee understood how hard it had been for Grayson to send his daughter away; it had been hard for *her* to. But Gillian wasn’t alone: Hendel Mitra—the former security chief of the Grissom Academy—was with her, and he cared for her as much as her own father did.

Kahlee’s train of thought was derailed by the soft beeping of an incoming call over the extranet. The point of origin was blocked, but she had a pretty good idea of who was on the other end of the line.

She tapped the bottom right corner of the hovering interface screen to accept the call, activating the video feed on a separate screen. Staring back at her was Grayson himself, as if Kahlee’s thoughts about his daughter had somehow conjured him up.

“Kahlee,” he said, his face brightening as he spoke her name.

For the past three years, Grayson had called her every two or three weeks. Though he would never openly admit it, she knew he was checking up on her. She suspected that after Gillian was gone, he’d struck some kind of bargain with the Illusive Man to guarantee her safety ... though what that bargain was, or what it had cost him, she’d never been able to find out.

From the image on her screen, it looked as if he was calling from a computer station set up inside a small bedroom. She couldn’t make out any other significant details, however; Grayson was always careful to give her no clue as to where he was calling from. So she studied his physical appearance instead.

He seemed to be wearing some type of body armor or combat suit, though it was hard to be sure with only his head and shoulders visible. She was relieved to see that his pupils and teeth were white, with no trace of the rosy pink hue that would indicate he had started using red sand again. Yet his face looked lean and haggard, as if he was under a great deal of stress.

“You look good, Grayson,” she said, letting a smile slip across her lips to sell the white lie.

“I’m keeping busy,” he responded, as vague and evasive as ever. “How have you been? Everything going well on the Ascension Project? Nothing unusual?”

“Unusual? You mean other than teaching children how to move objects with their mind?”

Grayson forced a polite laugh. Kahlee could see he was on edge.

“Is something wrong?”

“No,” he answered quickly, shaking his head. “Everything’s fine. Just got back from a job. Always leaves me feeling a little off.”

“What kind of job?”

“The kind that pays my bills.”

There was an awkward moment of silence as Kahlee debated whether to keep pushing for more information. In the end, she decided to let it go.

“I was thinking of Gillian when you called.”

A wave of conflicting emotions flickered across Grayson’s face at the mention of his daughter: longing, regret, and happiness ran in rapid succession across his features.

“I’m always thinking of her,” he said softly. “Have you heard anything? From the quarrians? Or Hendel?”

“I’m sorry. No.”

After a pause, Grayson gruffly insisted, “It’s better this way.”

Kahlee couldn’t help but feel like he was trying to convince himself, not her.

“You’re welcome to come visit the Academy,” she reminded him. “I’ve put you on my precleared-visitors list.”

Grayson’s association with Cerberus had never become known to anyone at the Academy other than Hendel and Kahlee, and she knew those days were behind him. As far as the rest of the staff knew, he was just the father of a former student ... and a major donor to the program.

“I know how much you miss Gillian,” she pressed. “Maybe coming here and meeting some of the other students and seeing the advances we’ve made would make things easier somehow.”

“It’s too dangerous,” Grayson replied, refusing to even consider her offer. “For me and for you.”

“I wish you’d let me help you,” she said. “You don’t have to do this alone, you know.”

“I wish that were true. Goodbye, Kahlee. It was good seeing you.”

And with that, the call abruptly ended.

Kahlee flicked off her screen and tried to turn her attention back to the files she’d been studying, knowing it was a lost cause.

Grayson wasn’t exactly a friend. He had a dark history, and she was certain he’d done things that would horrify her. But they had a strong connection through their feelings for Gillian, and through the traumatic experiences they’d shared while on the run from Cerberus.

She knew he was trying to turn his life around; she truly believed that in his own way he was seeking redemption. Unfortunately, there was nothing she could do other than hope he someday found it.



## THREE

Grayson sat for several minutes in front of the terminal after disconnecting his call to Kahlee, his mind filled with thoughts of his daughter.

She was in a better place now, and that gave him some comfort. But he couldn't help remembering all the terrible things that Cerberus had done to her. All the things he'd helped them do to her.

The familiar guilt washed over him, followed quickly by the inevitable self-contempt. There was nothing he could do to change the past; feeling bad about it was a waste of time. He considered himself a practical man, and he needed to stay focused in the here and now if he wanted to stay alive.

Unfortunately, rational arguments held little sway over matters of the heart, and—as he so often did after speaking with Kahlee—he felt hot tears streaming down his cheeks.

He had sworn he'd become a better person for Gillian's sake. And while it was true he'd turned his back on Cerberus, was what he was doing now really so different? He was a paid mercenary for a ruthless crime lord on the most dangerous, deadly space station in the galaxy. Did killing someone for credits become less amoral if the target had probably done something to deserve it?

In some part of his mind, the answer must have been yes. The nightmares that had plagued him during his time under the Illusive Man were gone; on some level he must have been more accepting of his new position. On the other hand, there were times when he felt fractured, as if he were two people. He knew the kind of man he wanted to be, but part of him—the little voice in the back of his head—wouldn't let him forget what he once was.

*You can't change what you are, the little voice chimed in, as if on cue. You're a killer. A violent man. And one day you'll die a bloody, violent death and the galaxy will be a better place because you're gone.*

The acceptance of his own incorrigible nature was strangely reassuring. It confirmed his decision to let Gillian go with Hendel and the quarians; better to put her as far away from her monster of a father as possible. It made it easier for him to distance himself from his past; made it easier to do what had to be done to survive in the present.

He wiped away the tears and got up from his chair. Liselle was waiting for him at Afterlife, but he wasn't quite ready to face the club scene yet. And he still had to hide the packets of red sand lying just inside the door of his apartment.

*Maybe a quick dusting is what you need to pick up your spirits.*

Grayson did his best to ignore the voice. He'd been clean for three years now. His body no longer craved the chemical-induced euphoria of the red sand.

*But it was never really about the physical cravings, was it? Dusting takes away the pain. Makes things bearable.*

He'd cleaned himself up for Gillian's sake. She didn't deserve a junkie for a father.

*Gillian's gone now. So who are you staying clean for? Liselle? Aria? They won't care if you dust up, just as long as you don't let it get in the way of a job.*

During his last nine years with Cerberus, Grayson had been using regularly. Over that time, he'd never once let his addiction interfere with an assignment. But things were different now. He wasn't an undercover operative using his daughter to infiltrate an exclusive biotic training program. He was a man on the run; he had to stay sharp. Any given second of any given day could be his last.

*Cerberus will find you. It's inevitable. So why not enjoy life until then. Ten kilos of red sand. Just one little hit. No one's going to miss it. No one will even know.*

Grayson pushed the chair away from the extranet terminal and stood up slowly. He made his way from the bedroom down the hall, through the kitchen and sitting room, and over to the packets of red sand still piled just inside the door. He picked up all five bags, cradling them awkwardly in his arms, then took them back into the bedroom. Kneeling down, he slid them under the bed one by one. It wasn't much of a hiding place, but it was better than leaving them out in the open.

When he was done, he stood up and went into the bathroom. Looking at himself in the mirror, he noticed a small patch of pink residue on the front of his combat vest. He remembered that one of the bags had been punctured in the attack.

*Damn batarians couldn't even seal it properly.*

Brushing it away, he felt the fine granules rubbing coarsely against his palm. Most of them fell into the sink, but some adhered to his skin.

He held his palm up to his face, close enough so that he could make out each tiny, individual grain of sand clinging to his flesh. He stared at them for a long second, then shook his head and slipped his hands into the sink. The action triggered the faucet's motion sensor, and a stream of warm water washed the temptation down the drain.

Five minutes later he was changed into his civilian clothes and headed out the door. Walking at a smooth, easy pace, he reached the club in nearly twenty minutes.

As always, there was a throng of people outside waiting to get in. Human, asari, turian, krogan, batarian, volus, elcor: Afterlife catered to individuals from every species. But Aria had strict rules about crowd control, and those outside clamoring to get in would have to wait for some of the revelers inside to leave—or be carried out—before the guards at the door would grant them access.

The line stretched the entire length of the massive building, then disappeared around the corner at the end of the block. It would be hours before those at the tail end found their way inside. Fortunately for Grayson, friends of Aria didn't have to wait in line.

The krogan bouncer at the entrance recognized him, and let him in with a nod. Grayson passed through the short hall that led from the entrance into the ground-floor foyer, where a pair of scantily clad asari stood preening behind the coat check counter.

The asari weren't alone in the room, however. Two large, heavily armed and armored krogan flanked the sealed double doors leading to the hedonistic pleasures on the other side.

Outside, the music from the club was so muted and faint it could barely be heard above the noises of the street. Here, however, only a single insulated wall separated patrons from the waves of sound. Grayson could feel the beat from inside the club thrumming in his teeth—low, heavy, and fast.

"Anything to check?" one of the krogan growled, speaking loud enough to make sure he could be heard over the music.

Grayson shook his head. Many of the club-goers preferred to leave their valuables with the asari behind the counter, especially if they intended to end the evening too drunk or stoned to keep track of their belongings. Grayson, however, had no such intention.

The krogan stepped aside as the asari pushed open the doors. Taking a deep breath, Grayson walked inside.

The club consisted of four levels, each one made up of a large outer ring surrounding a square dance floor suspended by wires and walkways in the center. Each of the various levels appealed to its own particular crowd, with its own dance floor, unique musical style, and custom drinks and chemical recreations.

The common theme, as befitted the club's name, was the afterlife. The commingling of myths and legends from across the galaxy, including humanity, were represented in the club. On each level individuals could seek out the pleasures—or hedonistic debauchery—associated with Paradise, Heaven, Hell, the Halls of Athame, the Hollows, or any of a thousand other names for the promised realm allegedly waiting beyond mortal existence.

Grayson never gave much thought to what waited for him after death, but it was impossible to deny the primal appeal of the club. He had been here too many times to count, yet he still felt it each time he walked across the floor. There was something surreal and otherworldly about stepping inside Afterlife. The music, the lights, and the crowd created a palpable energy that seemed to free you from yourself, unleashing inhibitions and wild, dangerous desires . . . most of which could be satisfied on the lower levels of the club.

Adding to the exhilaration was the common knowledge that most of the patrons inside Afterlife were armed. Violence could—and often did—erupt without warning. Security forces were on hand to clamp

down on riots and to prevent widespread chaos, but individuals were expected to look out for themselves. As a result, it was rare that a month went by without at least one death inside the club.

Grayson knew how to look after himself should trouble arise, but he couldn't deny that the savage undercurrent in the club enhanced the mood.

The entrance itself was on the third level. A stifling heat rose up from the bodies gyrating on the dance floors below. Well over a hundred patrons occupied this level, but the club was large enough to accommodate the numbers without making it feel overly crowded.

The strobing lights made it difficult to pick any one individual out from the crowd, but Grayson still made a quick search for Liselle as he crossed the floor. By the time he reached the spiraling ramp leading up to the VIP level above, he still hadn't seen her. He wasn't worried, however. Eventually she'd find him.

Climbing the ramp, he could feel the insistence of Afterlife fading slightly. On the topmost level of the club the music was less intense, the lights more subdued. It was less crowded, though Grayson still estimated the number of patrons at close to fifty.

Sitting behind the table of a large private booth on an elevated platform near the back was Aria T'Loak herself. From this vantage point Omega's infamous Pirate Queen could look out across the entire club, taking it all in like a god looking down from above.

Like all asari, she was beautiful by human standards. Unlike Liselle, however, Aria's complexion was more violet than blue. Grayson had often wondered if this had something to do with her age. He didn't know how old she was exactly—he doubted anyone did—but he wouldn't have been surprised to learn she was over a thousand years old. Despite this, she retained the youthful appearance and raw sexuality that was a hallmark of her species.

A familiar entourage surrounded her: a pair of asari handmaidens, a krogan bodyguard, and several batarians, including Sanak. However, the three turians standing at the table opposite Aria caught Grayson by surprise.

He had known the Talons would come to see her about the attack eventually; he just hadn't expected them to arrive so soon. He hadn't noticed an inordinately high percentage of turians in the crowd gathered outside the club, but if these three were in here to parley with Aria, it was a safe bet a dozen more were lurking in the streets and alleys outside.

His decision not to bring the red sand directly to the club was looking a lot less paranoid. He resisted the urge to say "I told you so" as he climbed the platform and took a spot beside Sanak next to the booth, close enough so his translator could pick up the conversation between Aria and her rivals.

Nobody paid any real attention to him; he was known to Aria and her associates, and the turians were focused only on her. There were private rooms on the VIP level, but Aria preferred to conduct most of her business in the booth, where others could see ... especially when she was asserting her dominance over a potential challenger to her throne.

"I'm not denying what happened," Aria answered calmly in reply to part of the conversation Grayson had just missed.

The turians waited for her to continue, but she was content to let her words hang in the air as she took a sip from the tall glass elegantly cradled in her left hand.

Eventually overcome by the pressing silence, one of the turians—probably the leader—took up the dialogue.

"We're not looking to start a war—"

"Good," Aria cut him off. "Because you'd lose."

Momentarily thrown by the interruption, the turian was forced to start again.

"We're not looking to start a war. We came to parley in good faith. We want to come to an agreement."

"We already had an agreement," Aria reminded him. "Two percent off the top. Then you started moving product without giving me my cut."

"That was a mistake," one of the other turians admitted. "We came to apologize. You'll get your cut from now on."

“No apology necessary,” Aria said, flashing a dangerous smile. “But you violated the terms of the contract. Now we need to renegotiate.”

The turians exchanged a few quick glances, and Grayson could see them weighing their next words carefully. The Talons were an up-and-coming gang on Omega, but they weren’t on par with the Blue Suns or Bloodpack yet. And they had no illusions about where they stood in the grand scheme. If Aria truly wanted to, she could wipe them out.

“A reasonable request, given what happened,” the first turian conceded. “We’ll increase your cut to three percent.”

“Five,” Aria stated, her voice making it clear the number wasn’t open for negotiation.

“Nobody pays five percent!” the third turian objected, taking an angry step forward as his hand dropped to the pistol clipped to his hip.

In a flash the krogan was beside him, his mammoth eight-foot frame looming over the smaller man. Slowly, the turian’s hand fell away from his weapon. Everybody else remained frozen until Aria gave a slight nod. The turian took a careful step back. A second later the krogan grunted, then did the same.

“You crossed me,” Aria said coolly. “There are consequences.”

“Five percent,” the leader agreed.

He hesitated before continuing, choosing his words carefully to avoid further provocation.

“There is still the matter of the attack itself. Several of our people were killed. A large sum of product was stolen.”

“Consider it the cost of doing business,” Aria said, calmly taking another sip of her drink.

The turians collectively bristled. Grayson knew they weren’t stupid enough to attack Aria here in the club; in addition to the highly visible bodyguards and biotics surrounding her, there were dozens of less obvious security personnel scattered around the VIP level. They’d be dead before they even got a shot off.

He did expect them to turn and storm out, however. Their friends had been gunned down, and the value of the sand was far more than what they had cheated Aria out of. She was adding insult to injury, making a point about who was in charge. She had backed them into a corner, and there was a chance they’d retaliate out of sheer desperation. The Talons couldn’t win a war against Aria, but they could make it hurt before she broke them.

But Aria had a knack for knowing exactly how far she could push her rivals before they pushed back. For hundreds of years, she’d played various factions off against one another while keeping them under her thumb; no one was better at ensuring that the anarchy of Omega never got out of control.

In the end the turian leader nodded, accepting her terms.

“I’ll inform our people,” he said.

“I knew you’d see reason,” she replied, dismissing them with a wave of her hand.

The turians turned and left without another word, the eyes of Aria’s krogan bodyguard following them until they descended the ramp to the level below and disappeared from view.

“It didn’t take them long to figure out what happened,” Grayson commented once they were gone.

“The Talons are smart,” Aria replied. “They’re growing fast. A little too fast. They needed to be knocked down a notch.”

“Glad we could do our part,” Sanak chimed in.

*You four-eyed ass-kisser*, Grayson couldn’t help but think.

“Sanak informs me the sand is secured at your place,” Aria continued. “I’ll send a crew over to pick it up in the morning.”

Grayson nodded.

“I won’t send them too early,” Aria added with a sly smile. “I’d hate for you and Liselle to have to cut your evening short. You’ve earned the right to celebrate. Everything at the club is on me tonight.”

“Thanks,” he said, taking the compliment in stride.

Aria was hard on those who failed her, but she was generous with those who came through.

“Liselle mentioned she’d be on level two,” Aria added, giving Grayson his cue to leave. He was smart enough to take the hint.

He went and got himself a drink at the VIP bar before making his way down to the second floor. He took his time, letting the atmosphere of Afterlife wash over him. In the end, it took him nearly twenty minutes to find Liselle. As he'd expected, she was on the dance floor, surrounded by a crowd of fawning young men and women.

Grayson had come to terms with Liselle's penchant for humans: she liked them, and they liked her. He knew the asari preferred to partner with those outside their own species; their unique biology allowed them to take genetic traits from alien partners and incorporate them into the DNA of their offspring. But Liselle was still young; it would be decades—or maybe even centuries—before she passed from the maiden stage of the asari life cycle into the childbearing years of matronhood. Whether she would still be attracted to humans, or if this was just an experimental phase of her youth, he couldn't say. And in the end, it didn't matter. All Grayson knew was that she was interested in him right now, and he planned to enjoy the relationship as long as it lasted.

He pushed his way through the others on the dance floor, drawing irritated looks that quickly changed to envy when Liselle saw him and draped her arms around his neck to pull him in close.

"Aria seemed pleased with your work tonight," she shouted, leaning in close to his ear to make her words heard above the music.

They were pressed tight against each other, Liselle's body gyrating to the music while Grayson did his awkward best to try and match the rapidly pulsating rhythm.

"I couldn't have done it without you," he reminded her.

As he leaned in close to her ear, the familiar alluring scent of her perfume rose up and engulfed him. For some reason, however, it didn't rouse the normal lust-filled urges.

Liselle was quick to notice his lack of reaction. Grabbing him by the wrist, she quickly dragged him across the dance floor and into a corner where the music was only a dull roar.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

From her expression it was clear she was concerned, rather than upset. As it always did, her concern made Grayson feel guilty and somewhat ashamed.

He preferred to see their relationship as primarily physical. For the most part, Liselle seemed to have a similar perspective. To think it was anything more was ridiculous; even if they stayed together for the rest of Grayson's life, she would live on for hundreds and hundreds of years after he was gone. Her developing any serious emotional attachment to him wouldn't just be unlikely . . . it would be tragic.

"I'm fine," he said with a shrug.

"Maybe we should go somewhere quiet."

Normally he would have jumped at her suggestion. Tonight, however, it felt wrong for some reason. Like he would be taking advantage of her somehow.

"I think I'm just tired," he said apologetically, looking for a way to let her down easy. "Maybe I should go home and get some rest."

"You were talking to her again, weren't you?" Liselle said with a wan smile. "Your mystery woman. You always get like this after you talk to her."

Grayson had never told Liselle anything about his past. She didn't know about Kahlee, or Gillian, or his time with Cerberus. But there had been occasions when he'd mentioned the need to make a private call, and obviously Liselle had pieced some things together.

*She's a lot more perceptive than you give her credit for.*

Again, it was clear Liselle wasn't angry. She seemed a little disappointed, but she also seemed to understand and accept his reaction. Which only made Grayson feel even worse.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled, not sure what else he could say.

Liselle leaned in and gave him a quick kiss.

"If you change your mind tonight, give me a call."

And with that she was gone, disappearing back into the crowd of dancers, where she was quickly consumed by a wave of eager admirers.

No longer in the mood for the club, Grayson returned to the entrance on level three. One of the asari at the check counter winked at him. He nodded politely in response, then headed back out into the

street, still wondering if turning Liselle down had been self-sacrificing or simply selfish.

## FOUR

Kai Leng waited patiently in the line of patrons waiting to enter Afterlife. Though it was unlikely he'd run into anyone who'd recognize him on Omega—even Grayson had never met him—he'd still taken steps to hide his identity. He'd dyed his black hair blond and darkened the pigmentation of his skin. The signature ouroboros tattoo on the back of his neck—a snake devouring its tail—was covered with a temporary design of a Celtic knot.

Based on the length of the line, it would be several more hours before he reached the door and was allowed to enter Afterlife, and that was fine by him. He was here to wait, watching patiently for Grayson to reemerge.

Since tracking the former Cerberus member down on Omega nearly two weeks ago, Kai Leng had studied his routine from afar. He was learning Grayson's patterns, familiarizing himself with his routine.

He had been surprised to discover that Grayson was working for Aria T'Loak; he had risen quickly through the ranks until he'd become a valuable minion of Omega's most powerful crime lord. That complicated the extraction. Cerberus couldn't just grab him from a public place and make a break for one of the spaceports. Aria's influence spread too far on the station; someone would report the abduction. They'd end up having to fight their way through the Pirate Queen's people to try and escape, and Kai Leng didn't like those odds.

Secrecy was the key. Capture Grayson alone, where nobody would notice him missing. Get him off the station before anyone even knew he was gone. And make sure nobody could trace it back to Cerberus.

This had proved to be much harder than it sounded. Grayson was careful; he rarely went out in public unless he was on a mission for Aria. The club, a busy grocery store, and the apartment of his asari whore were the only places he ever seemed to visit.

Taking him at his own apartment was the preferred option, of course, but he lived in a secure district. Any attack on Grayson would have to involve some plan to first get past the guards protecting his neighborhood.

It would have been so much easier if the Illusive Man had simply wanted Grayson dead. Kai Leng could have completed that job within hours of locating him: a slow-acting poison slipped into his drink at the club; a sniper shot between the eyes from a hidden vantage point as Grayson walked down the street. But extraction was always more difficult than simple assassination.

Kai Leng wasn't acting alone, of course. He had six of his own people—loyal Cerberus operatives—on standby in an apartment in a neighboring, human-controlled district, just waiting for him to give the signal. With a little luck, it could happen in the next few hours.

Everything had been in place a few days ago, when Grayson had suddenly dropped off the radar. At first Kai Leng feared he'd been made, but some careful inquiries revealed that Grayson had gone on a special mission for Aria. He hadn't been able to learn all the details, but he'd gathered enough secondhand information to know it had something to do with drugs and one of the rival gangs.

Kai Leng had staked out the club, knowing Grayson's eventual return to his alien master was inevitable. For three nights he had waited for a glimpse of his target in vain. But tonight his perseverance had been rewarded.

Grayson had entered the club less than an hour ago. If he went home alone tonight, instead of accompanied by the young asari he was sleeping with, they'd strike. If he wasn't alone, they'd wait for another chance. Kai Leng was nothing if not patient.

Still, he was eager to get off the station. There were too many aliens on Omega, and too few of his own kind. He was an outsider here, subject to the whims of strange beings with cultures and values he had no interest in adapting to. The high crime rate, brutal dictatorship of the gangs, and relative powerlessness of humanity were a grim example of the Illusive Man's vision of an alien-dominated future. Kai Leng was convinced that anyone who had doubts about Cerberus had only to visit Omega to truly

grasp the fundamental necessity of a pro-human organization willing to do whatever was necessary to defend the species.

The VIP door to the club opened and everyone in line craned their necks eagerly to see who was coming out. They hoped to see a large group: six, seven, or eight individuals leaving the club meant the same number waiting in line would be allowed in to take their place. On seeing only a single human exiting, a palpable murmur of disappointment rippled through the crowd.

Kai Leng felt the opposite emotion as he watched Grayson emerge and wander off in the direction of his apartment alone.

Several patrons near the back of the line gave up in disgust, stepping out of the queue in search of other entertainment. Kai Leng blended in with this crowd to avoid drawing attention, heading off in the opposite direction Grayson went. He continued around a corner until he was safely out of sight; he didn't want to risk Grayson noticing him if he happened to glance back for any reason.

Reaching up, he activated the two-way transmitter looped over his ear with a light touch.

"Target has left the club alone," he whispered, knowing the receivers worn by the rest of his team would automatically amplify his words so they could be heard clearly. "The plan is go."

Grayson made his way back to his apartment, his pace quickening with every step. He didn't feel right. Tense. Restless. Frustrated.

Leaving the club had been the right decision; the scene at Afterlife held no appeal for him tonight. But he still felt bad about brushing Liselle off.

*She's right about Kahlee, you know. You always get moody after you talk to her.*

He nodded to the guards at the district's gate as he passed, but didn't bother to speak as he blew by, his mind too caught up in his own thoughts.

Kahlee was a link to his old life; speaking to her was a way to keep the connection with his daughter alive. Their conversations were a reminder of what he'd once had ... and what he had lost.

*Those days are gone. Quit torturing yourself.*

He reached his building, punched in the code, then quickly ran up the stairs. By the time he reached the door of his apartment he was breathing heavily. But while his physical exertion had raised his heart rate, it had done nothing to quell his inner turmoil.

Inside the apartment he locked the door, pulled the shade down in the sitting room, then stripped off his boots, shirt, and slacks. A few beads of perspiration had broken out on his skin; standing in his underwear in the middle of the room, he shivered in the cool air wafting down from the climate-control vents in the ceiling.

Part of him wanted to call Kahlee again.

*Great idea. What are you going to say? You think she cares about your emotional bullshit?*

She was probably asleep by now. There was no point in waking her up. And calling her might not make him feel any better; it might actually make things worse.

*You're so messed up you don't even know what you want. Pathetic.*

He began to pace back and forth in front of the couch, trying to burn off the restless energy.

*Just leftover adrenaline from the job. You need to relax.*

This feeling wasn't completely new to him. On edge. Wired. During his days with Cerberus, he'd felt this way most of the time. It wasn't hard to guess the cause: psychological stress.

Working for Aria was a little too close to what he used to do for the Illusive Man. He was falling back into old patterns.

*What are you going to do? Tell Aria you quit? You really think she'll just let you walk away?*

Leaving Omega wasn't a realistic option. He'd just have to find ways to cope. Like he did while working for Cerberus.

*One quick hit of red sand and it's all good.*

He couldn't deny the truth—he was an addict. He'd never last the entire night. Not with the drugs right here in the apartment. But there was a solution: replace one addiction with another.

Making his way into the bedroom, he activated the extranet terminal and tapped the screen to send out



a quick call. Liselle answered on the second ring.

“I knew you’d call back.”

Her voice was distorted slightly, the two-way transmitter in the bracelet she wore on her wrist struggling to filter her words out from the background noise of the club’s dance floor.

“I’m sorry I was acting so weird,” he said. “I just felt a little . . . off.”

“Feeling better now?” she asked, her voice dripping with insinuation. “Want me to come over?”

“As fast as you can” was his earnest reply.

“I’ll be there in twenty minutes.”

The call disconnected, and Grayson pushed himself back from the terminal. Twenty minutes. He could last twenty minutes.

Kai Leng and his team—four men and two women—stopped at the gate leading into the district where Grayson lived. The turian guards studied them with something between boredom and contempt, not even bothering to raise their weapons.

It would have been an easy matter to take them out, but unfortunately, eliminating the guards wasn’t an option. They were part of Omega First Security, an independent company hired by wealthy residents to provide protection in a handful of neighborhoods on the station. Each guard post had to check in with the main dispatch every twenty minutes; failure to do so would trigger an emergency response of two dozen reinforcements descending on the district.

“Name,” one of the guards demanded.

“Manning,” Kai Leng replied. “Here to see Paul Johnson.”

The turian glanced down at the screen on his omni-tool. “He didn’t put you on the list. I’ll have to call him to get clearance.”

“Wait,” Kai Leng said quickly. “Don’t call him. This is supposed to be a surprise. It’s his birthday next week.”

The turian hesitated, then gave the seven humans standing before him a closer look.

Kai Leng had dressed his people to fit their cover story. Nobody wore body armor; instead they were attired in colorful clothing befitting current Omega fashion. Instead of a weapon, each member of the team carried a gift wrapped in brightly colored paper.

They were armed, however; each team member had a small tranquilizer pistol carefully hidden somewhere on his or her person. Stunners were smaller and would have been easier to hide, but the tranqs had better range and weren’t limited to two or three shots before needing to be recharged.

“This is a breach of protocol,” the other turian said, though his tone wasn’t one of flat refusal. “We could get fired.”

“We’re not looking to get you in any trouble,” Kai Leng replied, holding up a pair of hundred-credit chips. “Just do us a favor and pretend we were never here.”

Omega Security paid its people well, but that didn’t mean they were immune to bribes under the right circumstances. The group before them looked harmless, and the offer was just enough to tempt them, but not so much it would arouse suspicion.

“Let me look in those gifts first,” the turian said, snatching the chips from the human’s outstretched hand.

Kai Leng had briefly considered having his team hide their weapons inside the gift boxes. Fortunately, his understanding of alien nature had made him reconsider. He knew the turian guards wouldn’t be able to resist asserting their authority over a group of wealthy humans.

For the next few minutes, the turians pawed through the gift boxes. They tore off the wrappers and rummaged around inside, thoroughly—and roughly—inspecting the contents. Their search revealed several bottles of expensive wine, a watch, a pair of cuff links, and a box of premium cigars. When they were finished, the gift boxes had been reduced to shreds of brightly colored paper and a pile of crumpled cardboard strewn about the feet of the guards.

“Clean up this mess and you can go,” the second turian said.

Kai Leng bit his lip and nodded to his crew. One further humiliation: picking up garbage off the street

while the guards literally looked down on them. To their credit, his people took the insult without comment, knowing the mission was more important than their burning desire to punish the turians for their alien arrogance.

Just as they were leaving, one of the turians warned, "Mr. Johnson might not be that happy to see you. His asari friend came through here about ten minutes before you showed up."

"She's probably giving him her gift right now," the other added with a crude chuckle.

Kai Leng swore silently. Seeing that Grayson had left the club alone, he'd dropped surveillance and gone to meet up with his team. He hadn't considered the possibility that the asari might join him at the apartment later.

Keeping his anger in check, he smiled and said, "We'll be sure to knock."

He led his team past the checkpoint and around the corner leading to Grayson's building. As soon as they were out of sight of the guards he held up a hand, ordering everyone to stop.

He never would have given the go-ahead for the mission if he knew the asari would be there, but it was too late to abort. The guards were sure to ask Grayson about his surprise party in the next few days. He was smart enough to put the pieces together; he'd know Cerberus had found him. He'd either disappear or get a special security detail from Aria to shadow him. Tonight was their only chance.

"You heard the guard," he told his team. "Grayson isn't alone. The asari is with him. We have to take him alive," he reminded them, stressing the mission's primary directive. "However, the alien whore is expendable. If you get a chance, kill her."

He could see from the others' faces that they all understood this was easier said than done. They expected Grayson to have at least one weapon somewhere in his apartment; the asari could be similarly armed. Even if she wasn't, she was a biotic. Wearing nothing but party clothes and armed only with tranquilizer pistols, they were at a significant disadvantage.

"Stick to the original plan," he reassured them. "Strike fast; catch them unprepared. If we're lucky, it will be over before they even know what's happening."

Grayson was panting like a dog. He lay atop the covers of his bed, staring at the ceiling, trying to catch his breath. Liselle was pressed up against him, their naked bodies still intertwined.

"I'm glad you changed your mind," she murmured in his ear, running her fingers lightly down the center of his bare chest.

Still recovering from their session, he barely managed to croak out, "Me too."

Sex with Liselle went beyond mere physical pleasure. Like all asari, she established a profound and powerful mental connection with her partner during climax; for a brief instant two minds became one. Their identities crashed together, splintered, reformed, then tore apart with an overwhelming intensity that left Grayson literally gasping for air.

*How are you ever going to go back to humans?*

"I need a drink," he said, gently unraveling himself from Liselle's long, slender limbs.

He staggered down the hall into the kitchen. He pulled a bottled water from the fridge and drank it all in a single series of long, desperate gulps. He felt light-headed, but the restlessness and anxiety were gone, washed away by Liselle's incredible skills in the bedroom.

Just as he was about to call out to Liselle to see if she wanted anything, the door to his apartment slid open.

His head snapped around in response to the sound, revealing a small group of people in the hall just outside his door. One was crouched at the edge of the door frame, where she had just finished overriding the security codes. The others were standing in a tight knot, making it hard to accurately gauge their numbers. But two things stood out to Grayson immediately: they all appeared to be human, and they were all armed.

His instincts kicked in and he dropped to the floor, the half-wall shielding him from a round fired by one of the intruders.

*Professional. He got that shot off fast.*

"Ambush!" he called out to Liselle. "Bedside table!" he added, giving her the location of his weapon.

*Told you Cerberus would find you.*

He knew there was no way he could win this battle. Naked, unarmed, outnumbered—the odds were impossible. But he didn't care about survival. All he cared about was getting back to the extranet terminal in the bedroom long enough to send a warning out to Kahlee.

*Assuming they haven't already gotten to her.*

Knowing it was a huge risk, he popped his head up over the wall to sneak a peek at the enemy. Three of them fired as soon as his head came into view, but he was able to duck back down and avoid the shots.

Fortunately, they had no way of knowing he was unarmed. Instead of charging in to finish him off, they were still lurking in the hall, taking cover by the edges of the doorway to guard against any return fire.

Grayson made a break for the hall leading to the bedroom, crouching low to the ground. Behind him he heard heavy footsteps as several of the assassins burst into the apartment.

There was a series of sharp *twangs* as enemy bullets peppered the wall just above him. He heard the hiss as one whizzed past his ear. And then he was around the corner and out of the line of fire.

*Odd. Bullets don't twang.*

The stray thought was pushed from his head by the sight of Liselle rushing from the bedroom and down the hall toward him. She was still naked, her right arm extended, her hand clasped firmly around the butt of Grayson's pistol.

They were both moving fast, and in the split second it took them to realize what was happening it was too late. They plowed into each other, the collision knocking them both to the ground.

Grayson sprang back to his feet, yanking on Liselle's left arm in a desperate attempt to pull her up. He was already heading toward the bedroom door again, moving backward as he half-dragged the asari with him. Amazingly, she'd managed to hold on to the pistol despite being bowled over and having her arm nearly wrenched from its socket.

A Cerberus agent skidded around the corner from the kitchen, bearing down on them. Grayson's grip instinctively tightened on Liselle's arm as he braced himself to receive a slug in the chest. From her half-prone position, Liselle waved the hand holding the gun vaguely in their enemy's direction as he took aim, the physical action triggering the synapses in her brain to unleash a quick burst of dark side energy.

The asari didn't have enough time to gather her power for a truly devastating attack. The biotic push didn't do any real harm, but it knocked their opponent off balance, sending his shot harmlessly into the ceiling as he staggered back around the corner and out of sight.

They were less than a meter away from the bedroom when the attacker ducked around the corner a second time, already firing. From point-blank range he unloaded a single shot, catching Liselle in the chest. She gasped and, with Grayson still dragging her down the hall, threw up her free hand to return fire.

The high-powered pistol unleashed a wild spray of bullets, the automated targeting computer compensating as best it could for Liselle's erratic aim. At least one round found its mark—a burst of red splashed across the wall and the Cerberus agent slumped to the ground.

Grayson kept his legs churning as Liselle's body went limp, the pistol sliding from her nerveless fingers as they crossed the bedroom's threshold. Releasing his grip on his lover, Grayson punched the panel on the wall and the door slammed shut, buying him a few moments of precious time.

He hoisted Liselle up and tossed her on the bed, frantically searching her naked body for the wound. He expected to see a hole torn through her sternum; instead he found only a small pinprick perfectly centered between her breasts.

The pieces finally fell into place when he realized that Liselle, though unresponsive, was still breathing.

*The almost invisible wound. The strange twang of their ammo. They're using tranquilizer rounds. They want to take you alive.*

He didn't know if that was better or worse. In either case, the realization did little to change the equation. He still had to warn Kahlee.

He could hear the intruders in the hall, just outside the bedroom door. It had no lock, but they were still being cautious—they knew their target wasn't using tranq rounds. But he didn't have long.

Leaving Liselle's unconscious body on the bed, he raced over to the extranet terminal on the far side of the room. Tapping frantically at the haptic interface screens, he logged on to the extranet and sent Kahlee the files he'd assembled over the past two years.

The second the message was away he activated the purge, deleting every file on his system, including all records of his incoming and outgoing messages.

An instant later the door slid open. Grayson turned and charged his attackers.

He had taken but one step when he felt the sting of two tranq rounds in his chest. By the third step he was already out.

Kai Leng stood motionless for several seconds after Grayson's body slumped to the floor, the tranq pistol still pointed at the target in case he needed to fire another round. When it became clear that his adversary was unconscious, he lowered the weapon and began barking out orders.

"He was sending a message. Check the terminal—see if he was calling for backup."

Shella, their tech expert, ran over to inspect the computer in the corner.

"The rest of you search the room. Grab any weapons you can find. We'll need something more than these pop guns to take out those turians at the guard post."

"What about her?" Shella asked, nodding in the direction of the unconscious asari on the bed even as her fingers tapped away at the terminal's interface.

"Leave her to me."

He went back out into the hall. Darrin's body lay on the floor in a dark pool of his own blood. Jens was still crouched over him, injecting him with medi-gel, checking his vitals and hoping for a miracle. One glance at the body was enough for Kai Leng to know the medic was wasting his time.

Making his way into the kitchen, he began a quick but thorough search; opening cupboards and pulling out drawers, he found a very large, very sharp carving knife. Picking it up, he hefted the weight. Satisfied, he went back into the bedroom.

"The terminal's clean," Shella informed him as he came in. "Must have wiped it before we came in."

Kai Leng frowned. He had no idea what kind of info had been on Grayson's system, but it had been important enough for him to spend time getting rid of it even while his apartment was under attack.

"Found this under the bed," one of the others chimed in, holding up a cellophane-wrapped package about the size of a brick. "Four more here, too. Looks like red sand."

They'd finally caught a break. He knew Aria was involved in a drug war with a rival gang; with any luck, she'd think they were behind Grayson's disappearance.

"Take the sand with us. Any weapons?"

"Just the one they used to shoot Darrin."

"How bad is he ...?" Shella asked, her voice trailing off.

Kai Leng simply shook his head as he crossed the room toward the bed. A shadow passed over Shella's face, but she didn't show any other emotion.

Standing over the naked asari's body, he drew the knife quickly across her throat. The cut was clean and deep. A river of blood ran down her neck and soaked into the sheets, the same dark color as the human blood pooling in the hall.

"Two of you grab Grayson, two more grab Darrin," he said, reaching around to slide the knife into the back of his pants, then untucking his shirt to hide the protruding handle. "Let's go."

The attack and search had taken less than ten minutes in total. Kai Leng was impressed with his team's efficiency, though in this case it wasn't really necessary.

Residents of the other apartments inside the building had probably heard the sounds of gunfire. But none of them were likely to get involved; people on Omega tended to mind their own business. Even if someone did want to report the incident, there was no one to contact. Omega had no police force, and the guards at the entrance gate a few blocks away wouldn't leave their post; they were paid to keep unauthorized people out of the district, not maintain order inside. News of the battle would reach Aria's ears eventually, probably even before morning. He hoped to be long gone by then.

Only one problem remained: getting Grayson's unconscious form, Darrin's still warm body, and eight

kilos of red sand past the Omega First Security guards at the district gate.

He led the team through the winding streets, back the way they had come. They were fortunate enough not to run into anyone else. As they reached the last corner before the guard station, Kai Leng brought his crew to a halt. He extended his hand and Shella slipped Grayson's pistol into his palm. He registered with some disgust the fact that it was a turian-designed Elanus model before tucking it away under his shirt beside the knife. He could feel the two handles—blade and gun—pressing against the small of his back.

“Wait here, but be ready to move.”

Taking a moment to focus his mind and body, he rounded the corner alone, moving with an easy but determined pace.

The turians noticed him as he drew near, but they didn't draw their weapons or seem alarmed in any way.

“What's the matter?” one of them taunted. “Get kicked out of the party?”

“Forgot something,” he muttered, still moving toward them.

He was ten meters away—easily close enough to deliver an accurate kill shot. But the guards were wearing combat suits; their kinetic barriers would easily deflect a round from this far. He had to get up close and personal for either of his weapons to be effective.

“If you leave the district, it'll cost you to get back in,” the other warned.

He didn't bother to answer. Five meters. Just a few more steps and it would all be over. He was close enough to read the expressions on their avian features; he recognized the exact moment they realized he was a threat.

Had either of them taken a few quick steps back while he reached for his weapon, he wouldn't have stood a chance. Fortunately, they both held their ground.

Moving with blinding speed, Kai Leng lunged toward them, his left hand reaching back to grasp the knife in his belt as he closed the gap. He whipped the blade out and drove the tip into the throat of the nearest guard. Twisting his wrist as it penetrated the leathery skin, he severed both the trachea and the turian equivalent of the carotid artery.

The second turian had his gun drawn, but as he extended his arm to shoot, Kai Leng slapped it down with his free hand, causing the weapon to discharge into the floor at their feet. He let go of the knife and went for his own pistol. In a blur of motion he yanked the gun from his belt, brought his hand back in front of his body, jammed the nozzle against the turian's temple, and squeezed the trigger.

There was a wet pop as the back of the turian's head exploded, spewing bits of skull and gray matter out the opposite side. Kai Leng was staring into his enemy's eyes at the moment of death; he saw the pupils dilate as the synapses from what was left of the brain ceased firing and the turian slumped to the floor.

Kai Leng turned his attention back to the first guard. He was down but still twitching, his hands feebly pawing at the knife jutting out from his larynx. Kai Leng stepped forward and finished him off in the same way as he had his partner: one close-range shot through the head.

Looking back, he saw his team was already moving, doing their best to run while carrying Grayson and Darrin. He didn't see anyone else; if there had been any witnesses, they were smart enough to make themselves scarce.

Moving at a quick jog and switching off the burden of the bodies every few blocks, the six of them made it to the spaceport in under ten minutes. Five minutes after that, they were aboard the ship and safely off the station.

Only then did Kai Leng allow a satisfied smile to cross his face.

“Call the Illusive Man,” he said to Shella. “Tell him Grayson's coming home.”

## FIVE

Kahlee tossed and turned all night, constantly glancing over at the glowing clock by the bed. Each time she was surprised to see that only a few minutes had passed since she'd last checked; it seemed as if morning would never come.

She never slept well after one of Grayson's calls. She couldn't help but think about where he was, and what he was doing. And thinking of Grayson inevitably made her think of Gillian and Hendel.

She cared about each and every one of the students she'd treated, but Gillian had always held a special place in her heart. She knew Hendel was watching over the girl, but it didn't make her miss Gillian—or Hendel—any less.

The stoic security chief had been one of her closest friends on the station ... one of the few close friends she'd had in her life. Despite her outgoing personality, she tended to keep others at a distance, a trait she'd probably inherited from her misanthropic father.

It was strange to think how much influence Jon Grissom had had over her life. She'd taken great pains to conceal the fact that the man the Academy was named after was in fact her biological father. After her parents' divorce he'd vanished from her life, so she'd taken her mother's name. As she grew older, she tried her best to keep her relationship to one of Earth's most honored—and misunderstood—heroes secret.

Despite these efforts, her father had been thrust back into her life some twenty-odd years ago, when she had been on the run after being framed for the massacre of her fellow scientists at the Sion research facility. He'd hidden her at his home on Elysium, then later helped her and David Anderson—an Alliance soldier and the only other person who had believed Kahlee was innocent—escape off world.

Nearly two decades later Anderson had helped Commander Shepard expose Saren, the rogue turian Spectre, as a traitor to the Council. Kahlee had become a leading researcher in the field of biotics and the head of the Ascension Project. Her father, on the other hand, had stayed on Elysium. He had lived a lonely, isolated existence, refusing all interviews and doing his best to hide from a legendary reputation he never learned to bear.

She'd kept in regular, if infrequent, contact with her father up until the day he died. He had passed away from natural causes six months ago, at seventy-five: shockingly young by modern standards. But then her father had always been a relic from a bygone era.

There were hundreds of dignitaries at the funeral, all coming to pay their respects to a man they idolized, but never really knew. Kahlee had attended not as Grissom's daughter, but rather as a member of the Academy faculty: obviously she valued her privacy as much as he had.

The death of her mother when she was a teenager had shattered her world. Grissom's passing had had a much smaller impact. She never did feel close to her father: the two or three clandestine visits each year to his estate on Elysium had always resulted in uncomfortable conversations filled with long stretches of bitter silence. And yet, now that the surly old bastard was gone, she actually missed him. She still felt a small lump in her throat whenever she passed the memorial plaque in the mess hall that bore his name and likeness.

In an effort to turn her churning thoughts away from the people from her past, she tried to think of a way to smooth things over with Nick. She didn't want him to feel ashamed or embarrassed about what had happened, but talking to him directly might only make things worse.

If Hendel had still been here, she'd have asked him to handle it. But he was gone. Just like her father. And Grayson. And Anderson.

*Why do all the men in my life tend to disappear?*

That wasn't a question she wanted to mull over in the middle of a long, sleepless night. Fortunately, at that moment her terminal chimed to indicate an incoming message, giving her an excuse to jump out of bed and check it out.

She couldn't help but feel a twinge of apprehension as she flicked on the screen. At night the terminal

was set to receive messages silently and store them until morning; it alerted her only when something tagged as *Urgent* came in. Seeing it was from Grayson made her even more anxious.

Unlike his call earlier in the day, this wasn't a live feed. She could see from the formatting that it was a prerecorded message and an encrypted data file. Her throat was too dry to swallow as she tapped the screen and watched it play.

The instant Grayson's image appeared she knew the message had been recorded months or even years ago. His face wasn't as lean; the bags under his eyes weren't as pronounced.

"If you're watching this, that means Cerberus has found me."

He spoke the words with cool, almost clinical detachment, but that didn't keep Kahlee's heart from jumping into her throat.

"I don't know if they'll come for you, too. They might not; the Illusive Man is practical enough that he might decide you are inconsequential to his plans. But he can also be vindictive and petty. It's a chance you can't afford to take."

She tried to focus on what Grayson was saying, but her mind was having trouble processing the words. She couldn't disconnect the recording from the man behind it. Was Grayson dead? Had they taken him prisoner?

"There's a file attached to this message," the recording continued in the same calm voice. "Everything I know about Cerberus is in there."

Grayson's monotone delivery was a sharp contrast to the chaos crashing down on Kahlee. Her head was spinning, her stomach churning. The whole thing seemed surreal, a nightmare from which she couldn't wake up.

"The Illusive Man is smart. He's careful. He only tells his operatives what they need to know. But I know far more than he suspects.

"Over the last several years working for Cerberus, I was gathering intel. Maybe some part of me knew even back then that I would turn on the Illusive Man. Or that he'd turn on me. Maybe I was just smart enough to want an insurance policy.

"Names of agents inside the Alliance. Locations of key facilities and safe houses. Shell companies owned by the Illusive Man. Whatever information I could gather, no matter how small, is there.

"Some of the information might be out of date—locations move; new operatives are brought in. But in the right hands what I know could do real damage to Cerberus."

A spark of hope flickered inside Kahlee. If Grayson was still alive, she might be able to use the files he'd sent her to figure out where Cerberus had taken him.

"Don't try to rescue me," the message continued, as if the recording could read her thoughts. "If you're seeing this, then I'm as good as dead."

Kahlee shook her head in an instinctive, unconscious refusal.

"You have to protect yourself. Get this information to someone in authority. Someone with the power to go after Cerberus. You have to destroy the Illusive Man; it's the only way you'll ever be safe."

The message went silent for several seconds, and Grayson's brow furrowed on the screen. Then he barked out a grim laugh.

"I don't know who you can go to," he admitted. "I wish I did. Cerberus has people at nearly every level inside the Alliance. Anyone in a position of power could be working for the Illusive Man.

"But you're smart. I know you'll figure something out. Just be careful who you trust."

The message ended abruptly, catching Kahlee off guard. There were no last words; no sentimental goodbyes. Grayson had told her what she needed to know, then simply ended the recording.

For several minutes she just sat in her chair, staring at the frozen image of Grayson's face on the last frame of the recording as she tried to absorb the horrific news.

Once she felt more in control, she muttered, "Replay," and watched the recording a second time to make sure she hadn't missed anything important during her first emotional viewing.

When it was done, she loaded an optical scan disk into her terminal and copied the information from the attached file. Then she got up, went to her closet, and began to pack. She wasn't panicking, but there was a definite sense of urgency in everything she did.

Despite the emotional shock, she was already thinking about a plan of action. She couldn't stay at the Academy; it might put the children and other staff at risk.

There were a number of people she could go to. She was recognized as one of humanity's most brilliant scientists; over her career she'd come in contact with any number of politicians and military liaisons who would listen to—and believe—her story.

But could she trust any of them? These weren't friends; they were acquaintances at best. Any one of them could be working for Cerberus.

If her father had still been alive she would have gone to him. If Hendel had still been here she would have asked him for help. But they were gone, just like Grayson.

There was only one person she could turn to. Someone she hadn't seen since her father's funeral, and only a handful of times in the decade before that. But Kahlee trusted him absolutely. And she knew she had to get Grayson's information to him as soon as possible.

Aria T'Loak stood motionless beside the bed, staring down at Liselle's naked, blood-soaked body. Two salarian technicians crawled around on the bedroom carpet, collecting samples of blood, hair, and fibers. Another was processing the room's extranet terminal while four more scoured the rest of the apartment, looking for any shred of evidence that might help reveal what had happened.

The signs of a struggle were obvious, though how many had been involved in the battle—and who they were—was impossible to tell. All they knew for sure was that the man known to them as Paul Johnson was gone, and so were the drugs.

That wasn't his real name, of course. As the enterprising human had worked his way up the ranks of her organization, Aria had had him checked out. It hadn't taken long to discover that Paul Johnson was an assumed name, but that hadn't alarmed her. He was hardly the only person in her organization using a forged identity.

A few months of careful surveillance assured her that he wasn't working for a rival gang or some law enforcement agency looking to move in on Omega, but she never had figured out who he really was. She'd had her people take biometric samples: fingerprints left on glasses at the club; retinal, facial, and morphology scans from the station's various security cameras; skin, hair, and even blood samples gathered by Liselle while Paul lay sleeping beside her. None of it came back as a match to any known database.

Aria didn't like uncertainty. Her first instinct had been to have Paul eliminated, just to be safe. She'd even ordered Liselle to do it. But the younger asari had pleaded for Paul's life. He had skills Aria could use, she'd insisted; he was valuable to the organization. Whatever his past was, he had left it behind when he'd come to Omega. He was loyal to Aria now, Liselle swore ... as loyal as anyone who worked on Omega could be, at least.

In the end, Aria had let herself be persuaded. And now Liselle was dead.

Over the centuries, Omega's Pirate Queen had seen thousands, if not millions, of bodies: both those of her enemies and her allies. She'd stood over more asari corpses than she could remember, many of them slain by her own hand. But it was rare she had to face the death of one of her own offspring.

At her mother's insistence, Liselle had kept their relationship hidden. Aria didn't want her enemies to use the knowledge against her, and she didn't want Liselle to go through life with a target on her back. Yet in the end, it hadn't mattered.

Despite the seething rage she felt over the death of her daughter, Aria wasn't about to jump to any conclusions. There were too many possibilities in play. This could have been a retaliatory attack by the Talons, though that didn't seem likely. Why come to make peace with her, only to start the war up again? They were smarter than that.

Plus, the Talons had no reason to take Paul with them. If they were responsible, his body should have been lying beside Liselle's. In fact, she couldn't think of anyone who would want to take Paul prisoner ... which meant there was a good chance he was in on it.

She turned and strode quickly from the bedroom, her face an emotionless stone mask as she left her daughter's body behind.



Sanak was somewhere in the hall outside trying to find out if the neighbors had seen or heard anything useful. She'd sent a pair of krogans to accompany him—a not too subtle message that when Sanak asked a question, he expected a very thorough answer.

Unfortunately, there wasn't much chance of his learning anything new. Omega First Security had already offered a five-thousand-credit reward for any information that could lead to the apprehension—or elimination—of those responsible for killing their district guards. So far they had no significant leads. Aria's reputation was known to everyone on Omega, but if five thousand credits couldn't make someone come forward, neither could the legendary wrath of the Pirate Queen.

She crossed the kitchen and entered the living room just in time to see Sanak returning. From the batarian's expression she could tell his report wouldn't please her.

"We spoke to everyone in the building," he said, tilting his head to the left in an unconscious gesture of respect peculiar to his species. "A few shots fired; a group of six or seven seen running from the apartment. All of them human. Nothing new."

Aria could have lashed out at him for his failure, but there was no point. She would use violence and intimidation to get what she wanted; they were valuable tools in negotiation and in motivating those working for her. But she knew Sanak was doing everything he could.

Although not her most intelligent employee, he was loyal and relentless in the pursuit of her goals. Getting angry at him served no purpose. She didn't berate her underlings without cause; it only led to resentment and eventual betrayal.

"So we still don't even know if Johnson is a victim or a traitor," she mused.

"My money's on traitor," Sanak offered. "You can't trust humans."

Rather than respond, Aria fixed him with a penetrating stare.

"Look at the evidence," he continued quickly, realizing she needed more than just his personal hatred of a species to be convinced. "Liselle's throat was slashed; she trusted her killer to let him get in close. And what about the drugs? I wanted to take them to you at the club. Johnson insisted we leave them here with him. Seemed kind of strange."

"Bringing the sand to the club would have been a foolish risk."

"It wasn't what he said," the batarian insisted. "It was how he said it. Seeing all that sand affected him. He kept staring at it. His lip was twitching. He used to dust up. It was obvious."

"And he left the club alone," Sanak added. "I saw Liselle there by herself."

"Obviously you think that's relevant," she noted, impressed by how much thought he'd given this. "You have a theory?"

Sanak blinked his uppermost eyes, collecting his thoughts before he spoke.

"Johnson couldn't resist the sand. Felt that old craving deep inside. So he called some old friends on the station. Invited them over for a party. Liselle showed up to surprise him. He knew he was caught. Had his friends hide in the bedroom. Invited her inside. Cut her throat. Grabbed the drugs and took off with his friends."

Aria considered the explanation briefly before discarding it. "It doesn't make sense. Why was Liselle naked?"

"Humans are sick, twisted animals. Probably raped her before they killed her. Or maybe after."

"You said the neighbors heard gunfire," Aria countered quickly, eager to push away the mental images of her daughter being violated. "Explain that."

The batarian blinked all four eyes this time, struggling to come up with a plausible answer. Before he could, one of the salarians emerged from the bedroom hall.

"Extranet terminal. Wiped clean," he reported in the staccato manner of his kind.

Sanak pounced on the new information. "Bastard was covering his tracks. He had to be in on it."

"Get a trace from the network. I want copies of every message going in or out of this apartment for the past month."

The salarian shook his head vigorously from side to side. "Human was smart. Scramblers. Encryption. Impossible to rebuild messages."

"We have nothing?" Aria exclaimed, her anger and frustration seeping into her tone for the first time.

“N-no m-messages,” the suddenly anxious technician stammered. “Identify callers, maybe. Find where messages sent. Best we can hope for.”

“Do it,” Aria snapped. “Find out who he’s been talking to. Understood?”

The salarian swallowed with an audible gulp. Unable to speak, he gave a quick nod.

“Clean up this mess,” Aria added as she turned to go. “And for the sake of the Goddess, somebody cover up Liselle.”

## SIX

Consciousness came back grudgingly to Grayson. For a long while he floated in the half-world between wakefulness and sleep, until physical sensations began to intrude on the drug-induced blackness.

His mouth was dry. He tried to swallow, resulting in a painful, hacking cough as his parched throat nearly choked on his bloated tongue. His eyes fluttered open, then snapped shut as a searing light burned his pupils.

Even with his eyes closed, he could still see the brightness pressing insistently down on him. He tried to roll over to shield himself against it, only to find he was immobilized.

A jolt of adrenaline washed away the last remnants of the tranquilizer, and awareness came crashing in on him. He was naked and lying on his back atop a cold, hard surface. His arms were held down at his sides by thick straps on the wrists and elbows. His legs were similarly restrained at the knees and ankles. Three more straps—across his thighs, waist, and chest—completed his bondage.

He opened his eyes again, squinting to block out most of the light. He tried to turn his head from side to side to get a sense of his surroundings, but it, too, was anchored in place. A strap under his chin kept his jaw clamped tightly shut; he couldn't even open his mouth to cry out for help. Not that he expected any help to come.

*There's no escape this time. Cerberus will do whatever they want to you.*

A wave of panic swept over him, and he struggled madly against his bonds, straining and twisting in a futile effort to gain even an inch of play in the straps.

"You'll only injure yourself," a voice said, speaking from close by his side.

The brightness dimmed substantially and Grayson opened his eyes fully to see the Illusive Man leaning over him. He was dressed in his typical attire: an expensive black jacket over a white designer shirt unbuttoned at the collar.

"Liselle?" Grayson tried to ask, but with his jaw restrained all that came out was an unintelligible grunt.

"You'll have answers soon enough," the Illusive Man assured him as he leaned back, though it wasn't clear whether he'd actually understood his victim.

With the Illusive Man no longer dominating his field of vision, Grayson could see a large lamp hanging down from the ceiling directly above him, like the kind found in an operating theater. It was off now, but it explained the unbearable brightness from before.

They weren't alone. He could hear the sounds of other people moving about the room, along with the low electrical hum of machinery.

He cast his eyes from side to side, trying to take in as much as he could before they turned the light on again. At the edges of his peripheral vision he could make out just enough detail to realize he was in some kind of hospital or lab. A man in a long white coat passed by on his right, heading toward a bank of monitors.

The Illusive Man was standing just to his left, blocking out most of his view in that direction. But he did manage to catch a glimpse of what appeared to be several strange and terrifying pieces of medical equipment over his shoulder. And then the blinding light came on again, forcing him to once more close his eyes.

"It's been a long time," the Illusive Man said.

With his eyes closed, Grayson had no choice but to focus on his enemy's voice. The tone was calm, almost nonchalant. But Grayson knew the Illusive Man well enough not to be fooled.

"You're probably wondering what happened to the asari," the Illusive Man continued. "She's dead, of course. Quick and painless, if that makes any difference."

*It doesn't, you sick son of a bitch!*

Grayson concentrated on his breathing, struggling to keep it slow and even. Whatever was going to happen to him, he didn't want to give the Illusive Man the satisfaction of showing his fear, grief, or impotent rage.

“You might be worried about Kahlee Sanders, too,” the Illusive Man added after a lengthy pause.

*The bastard's watching you. Tying with you. Just stay still. Don't move. Don't give him anything to work with.*

He could hear the others in the room—doctors or scientists, most likely. He heard footsteps, the flick of switches, and soft beeps emanating from computer consoles. Occasionally he would pick up a snatch of a low, whispered conversation, but the voices were too soft for him to make anything out.

“We haven't done anything to Kahlee,” the Illusive Man finally admitted, once he realized Grayson wasn't going to entertain him with a reaction. “And we won't. She's irrelevant to our plans, and I won't kill a fellow human being without a good reason.”

*You're a real prince.*

“That's why we brought you here. Why I wanted you kept alive. It wasn't so we could torture you. It wasn't to satisfy my lust for vengeance ... though I don't deny I have those feelings. I'm only human, after all.”

The Illusive Man laughed, and his hand patted Grayson on the shoulder like a father bestowing a lesson on his son.

“Humanity needs a hero—probably a martyr in the end. Not the kind of thing people are eager to volunteer for. But this is something that has to be done.”

The overhead light dimmed again, and Grayson opened his eyes to see one of the scientists looming over him. Her face was utterly neutral; she showed neither pleasure nor remorse as she leaned in and affixed a pair of electrodes to Grayson's temples.

She stepped back and the Illusive Man leaned forward once more. His face was hovering mere inches above Grayson's own.

“The survival of our race depends on this. And I chose you for this ... honor.”

The hint of a smile, cruel and knowing, crept across the Illusive Man's features. Grayson peeled back his lips and tried to spit through his teeth into his tormentor's face. But his mouth was too dry, and all that came out was a hiss of air.

The Illusive Man leaned back and the overhead light snapped on again, forcing Grayson to shut his eyes once more.

*Stop playing his games. If the light goes off again, keep your damn eyes closed.*

He heard the sharp click of a metal case snapping shut, then the unmistakable flick of a lighter followed by a long inhalation of breath as the Illusive Man lit a cigarette.

“I know you hate me, Grayson,” the Illusive Man continued, somehow managing to sound hurt. “But I don't hate you. That's why I'm going to explain what we're doing. At least you'll be able to appreciate your contribution to the salvation of our species.”

“Have you ever heard of the Reapers?”

The question hung in the air. Cigarette smoke curled into Grayson's nostrils and crept down his throat, causing him to cough once.

The overhead light went off, but Grayson didn't fall for the bait this time. He braced himself, expecting to feel a hard slap across the face for his defiance, or maybe the tip of the Illusive Man's cigarette burning into his flesh.

When no punishment came, Grayson realized his enemy had no need of such crude methods. The Illusive Man had absolute power over him, and they both knew it. Petty tortures would only trivialize the situation, lowering the Illusive Man from the position of omnipotent god to pathetic despot.

“No, of course you haven't heard of them,” the Illusive Man continued. “Knowledge of the Reapers has been buried for fear of causing a panic. But I know you're familiar with the Collectors, at least by reputation.”

Grayson had never actually seen a Collector, but he'd heard plenty of stories. A reclusive race of insectlike humanoids, they were said to come from a world somewhere beyond the Terminus Systems' Omega 4 relay. Spoken of with fear and even reverence by the residents of the Omega space station, the tales told of the Collectors offering extravagant payments in exchange for very specific, and often bizarre, requests.

Their demands always involved the trafficking of live victims, but they were more than just common slavers. They wanted only individuals that matched very precise characteristics: a salarian clan mother with different-colored eyes, or a pureblood asari matron between the ages of two and three hundred.

The residents of Omega had regarded the prospect of striking a deal with the Collectors as akin to winning the lottery: a rare occurrence that would result in untold riches for anyone fortunate enough to cash in. Few of them ever bothered to imagine what it was like for the victims taken away.

Most believed the Collectors used them as subjects for genetic experimentation. But nobody really knew for sure; any non-Collector vessel passing through the Omega 4 relay vanished forever.

A few years ago, or so the rumors claimed, the Collectors had taken a particular interest in humans. Grayson himself had nearly been sold to them after being betrayed by Pel, his ex-partner. Fortunately, he'd managed to escape before the Collectors arrived, eliminating Pel in the process.

*This time you won't be so lucky. The Illusive Man's made a deal with the Collectors. They're giving him some kind of advanced technology in exchange for you.*

On the surface it seemed a logical conclusion, but Grayson quickly realized it didn't make sense. The Illusive Man would never agree to give a mysterious alien species human test subjects so they could learn the vulnerabilities of the entire race. It violated everything Cerberus stood for and believed in.

"The Collectors were agents of the Reapers," the Illusive Man explained. "A slave species under the total control of their masters. Everything they did, every strange request they made, was to satisfy the orders of the Reapers.

"They are the true enemy. A race of synthetic organisms—machines—that want to destroy or subjugate all organic life. And now they're targeting humans."

He paused as if he expected some kind of reaction from Grayson. It was almost as if he'd forgotten this was a one-sided conversation with a bound and silenced listener.

"We need to study the Reapers. Learn more about their strengths and weaknesses so we can strike back at them. You're going to give us that opportunity."

"We're ready to begin."

The female voice emanated from somewhere off to Grayson's right. With his eyes still closed he had no way to be sure, but he assumed it was the woman he had seen earlier.

There was a high-pitched whine of a powerful machine revving up, and a few seconds later Grayson's world exploded as his body was racked with a powerful electrical current. His muscles went into spasm, causing his back to arch and his limbs to strain against his bonds with such force the straps bit into his skin and drew blood.

The current cut off suddenly and Grayson went limp. Every nerve in his body was still on fire; it felt like his skin was peeling away to reveal the muscle and tendons beneath. But despite the agonizing pain his body remained absolutely still; he wasn't even able to scream—completely paralyzed, yet fully conscious and aware.

"We have to replicate the procedures of the Collectors as closely as possible," the Illusive Man explained. "I'm afraid this is going to be ... unpleasant."

He felt thumbs on his eyelids, lifting them open. With Grayson unable to control his muscles, they stayed that way, staring up into the excruciating brightness of the operating lamp. The silhouette of the female scientist momentarily blocked it out as she leaned over him to remove the strap from his chin. She opened his jaw and forced a long, flexible tube deep down his throat before stepping away, leaving him to be blinded by the light again.

"The Collectors implanted their victims with cybernetic Reaper technology. This allows the Reapers to communicate with and eventually dominate the organic host, even from across the galaxy."

The tube in Grayson's throat began to pulse as some type of viscous fluid was siphoned down into his stomach.

"Their technology is incredible," the Illusive Man continued. "Are you familiar with quantum entanglement? No, probably not. It's a complex field of study.

"Basically, there are particles in the universe that share certain complementary properties. If one has a positive charge, the other has a negative charge. Reverse the charge on one particle, and the other also

reverses instantly, even if the particles are thousands of light-years apart.

“Humanity explored the phenomenon throughout the twenty-first century, but the cost of identifying and creating the particles was astronomical. In the end, the field was abandoned as impractical.

“But the Reaper technology we recovered from the Collectors is far more advanced. They’ve combined entangled particles with self-replicating nanotechnology, allowing them to infect, transform, and dominate organic hosts even while they’re trapped in dark space.”

Someone peeled the electrodes back from Grayson’s skull; he felt them pulling at the skin as they were removed. Then he felt the sharp prick of a heavy-bore needle against each temple. There was an unbearable pressure as the needles burrowed into the soft tissue, penetrated beneath the skull, and finally buried themselves deep inside his brain.

“You’re being implanted with self-replicating nanides. Their numbers will increase exponentially as they graft themselves onto your neurons and synapses. Eventually they will spread throughout your body, transforming you into a tool of the Reapers. You will be repurposed into a synthetic-organic hybrid unlike anything any of the Council races could possibly create.

“We need to study this transformation. Learn from it so we can defend ourselves against this alien technology. It’s the only way we can hope to stand against the Reapers.”

Grayson heard the words, but he could no longer understand them. His mind was being ripped apart. He could feel the nanides spreading through his head: alien tendrils wrapping themselves around his very thoughts and identity, strangling them out of existence until everything went black.

“He’s catatonic,” Dr. Nuri barked out. “Stop the procedure!”

The Illusive Man sat impassively as the scientists scurried to shut the equipment down. He waited silently as Dr. Nuri checked the screens monitoring Grayson’s vitals.

“It’s okay,” she assured him after a few tense minutes. “No permanent damage.”

“What happened?”

“It was too much for him to handle. It overwhelmed his system; he shut down.”

“You pushed him too far.”

“We knew the initial implantation would be traumatic,” she reminded her boss.

“I told you to be conservative with your estimates,” he reminded her. “We can’t afford any mistakes. The Reaper technology is too powerful.”

“We have no baselines,” she answered defensively. “No data to extrapolate from. It’s all theoretical. Nobody’s ever tried anything even remotely close to this kind of procedure before!”

“That’s why we must err on the side of caution.”

Chastised, Dr. Nuri replied, “Of course. I’m sorry. It won’t happen again.”

“You said there was no permanent damage?” the Illusive Man asked, satisfied he’d made his point.

“He should rest for a few days. After that we can continue.”

The Illusive Man nodded.

“Seal the room, but keep him hooked up to the monitors. I want him under observation at all times.”

He stood up to leave.

“We’ve reached phase two of this project,” he reminded the doctor. “The subject isn’t human anymore. He’s something alien now. Something dangerous.

“If you see anything unusual or unexpected—if you have any doubt or uncertainty at all—exterminate him immediately. I’d rather see the entire project fail than risk having this thing we’ve created break free. Do I make myself clear?”

Kai Leng stepped out from the shadows where he had been silently observing the experiment.

“I understand,” he assured the Illusive Man. “Grayson will never leave this facility alive.”

## SEVEN

Admiral David Anderson was, above all else, a soldier. He understood the true meaning of words like honor, duty, and sacrifice. For twenty-five years he had served the Alliance without question or regret, giving up the chance for love and a family in order to protect humanity as it struggled to find its place in the galactic community. He'd served multiple tours of duty on godforsaken worlds. Fought in more battles than he could remember. Put his life on the line countless times without any hesitation.

Whatever his mission, whatever his assignment, he'd followed orders to the best of his ability and without complaint. But if he had to spend one more meal in the diplomats' lounge listening to the elcor ambassador drone on about his volus counterpart, he was going to go snap.

"With true sincerity," Calyn said in the ponderous style of his species as he sidled up to Anderson's table, "it is good to see you here."

The elcor were a large, heavysset species from the high-gravity world of Dekunna. Standing nearly eight feet at the shoulder, they used their long forelimbs to help their short back legs support their massive girth, giving them the appearance of gray-skinned gorillas walking about on all fours. They had no neck; Calyn's large, flat head seemed to be pushed back into his shoulders.

Though he was still technically an admiral in the military, Anderson hadn't seen active duty in several years. With the restructuring of the Citadel Council, he'd become one of humanity's key political representatives—a "reward" for all his years of dedicated service.

Over the past few months Anderson and Calyn had both been involved in a series of ongoing trade negotiations between the Alliance, elcor, volus, and turians. Anderson was little more than a figurehead at the talks; the Alliance had plenty of real politicians to handle the delicate negotiations. But that hadn't stopped Calyn from striking up a conversation whenever they met outside the conference room.

Every day, when Anderson would leave his Presidium office and come to the lounge for lunch, the elcor ambassador would invariably show up and plot a slow but relentless course over to his table to join him. Upon arrival, he would immediately begin grumbling about the volus ambassador.

"Without exaggeration," the elcor said, jumping right into it as he settled in across the table from Anderson, "Din Korlak is the rudest individual I have ever dealt with."

"I know," Anderson said through gritted teeth as he shoveled a forkful of food into his mouth. "You've told me. Many times."

As a result of evolving in such a high-gravity environment, the elcor moved—and spoke—with a painful deliberateness that Anderson found maddening. Listening to Calyn vent his frustrations was like hearing a recording played back at one-quarter speed.

His frustration was compounded by the fact that the elcor had no concept of how to use inflection or tone in their speech. Among their own kind they relied on subtle body gestures and subvocal sounds below the threshold of human hearing to convey meaning and subtext. Unfortunately, these nuances weren't relayed through the universal translators that allowed the various species of the Citadel to communicate with each other. As a result, anything the elcor said invariably came across as a flat monotone devoid of any and all feeling.

To make matters worse, their faces were almost featureless. Their small, wide-set eyes and the vertical skin flaps where their mouths should have been revealed no discernible emotion, making it nearly impossible to read their mood.

"Genuine apologies," Calyn droned in reply to Anderson's objection. "It is not my intention to irritate you."

Anderson bit his lip and considered his next words carefully. Even without any contextual clues, it was clear he'd offended his dining companion. And even though he couldn't understand all the complexities of the negotiations, he knew enough to realize that they needed the elcor on their side.

The volus and the turians had a long history of cooperation; centuries ago Din Korlak's people had petitioned for military protection from the turians in exchange for preferential economic status. If the

Alliance was going to make any headway in the negotiations, they needed the full support of Calyn's people.

"It's not you," Anderson lied. "The negotiations are just wearing me down."

"Understandable," the elcor replied. "Our jobs can be very stressful."

*That's the understatement of the century,* Anderson thought.

He was a man of action, not words. He liked to have a plan and implement it. But in the world of politics nothing was ever that simple. Among the ambassadors and Council members he was out of his element, drowning in a sea of bureaucratic red tape.

Calyn had accepted Anderson's apology, but it was impossible to tell if he was still feeling slighted. In an effort to smooth things over, the admiral decided to offer his own feelings on the volus ambassador.

"I probably shouldn't say this," he said, "but I share your opinion of Din Korlak. He's an arrogant, self-entitled whiner."

"With humorous intent," the elcor replied, "just be glad you do not share an office with him."

It was a classic military ploy: strengthen an alliance by focusing on a common enemy. Anderson was relieved to see that at least some of what he'd learned as a soldier could be applied to his new role.

"Next time that little butterball interrupts one of us at the talks," he told Calyn with a grin, "I should smack him hard enough to send him rolling out into the hall."

"Shock and horror," the elcor responded, his monotone words explicitly stating the emotional state completely absent from his appearance and demeanor. "Violence is not the answer."

"I wasn't serious," Anderson explained quickly. "It was a joke."

He'd managed to go twenty-five years as a soldier without stepping on a mine, but as a politician he couldn't even manage one meal without blowing himself up.

"Humans have a disturbing sense of humor," the elcor replied.

They continued the rest of the meal in silence.

By the time Anderson got back to his office after lunch, he was seriously thinking about retirement. He was only forty-nine; thanks to advances in science and medicine he had at least another twenty years before age began to take any significant physical toll. Mentally, however, he was exhausted.

It wasn't hard to explain. As a soldier he had always understood the value in what he did. As a politician, he was always frustrated by his inability to get anything done. In fact, the only time he ever felt like he made any difference whatsoever was when something went wrong . . . like with Calyn.

"How was your lunch, Admiral?" Cerise, the receptionist at the human embassy, asked as he entered the building.

"Should have stayed in the office," he grumbled.

"Be glad you didn't," she corrected him. "Din Korlak and Orinia came by looking for you."

Anderson wasn't sorry he'd missed the volus ambassador, but he wouldn't have minded speaking with Orinia. Anderson's turian counterpart during the ongoing trade negotiations was a former general. And even though they had seen action on opposite sides during the First Contact war, they shared a common set of military values: discipline, honor, duty, and a barely hidden contempt for the political bullshit they now endured on a daily basis.

"Do you know what they wanted?"

"I think Din wanted to file a formal complaint about something one of your aides said during the last session of negotiations."

"You think?"

"When they found out you weren't here, Orinia managed to talk him out of it."

Anderson nodded, certain he'd still get an earful from Din about it at the next round of negotiations.

"That reminds me," he said, trying to appear nonchalant. "Might be a good idea to extend a formal invitation to the elcor delegation to join us here at the embassy after today's talks."

"Why?" Cerise asked, suddenly suspicious. "What did you do?"

*She's a sharp one. Can't sneak anything past her.*

"I think I offended Calyn with a joke."

"I didn't know the elcor had a sense of humor."



“Apparently they don’t.”

“Don’t worry,” the young woman assured him. “I’ll take care of it.”

Grateful, Anderson took the elevator to his office. He had thirty minutes before the scheduled meeting with his advisers to prepare for the afternoon’s talks. He planned to spend the entire time alone, just savoring some much-needed peace and quiet.

When he saw the blinking light on his extranet terminal indicating a message waiting for him, he nearly picked it up and threw it out the window. He thought briefly about ignoring it; he had a list of ten people he could imagine it being from, and he didn’t want to hear from any of them. But in the end his soldier’s training wouldn’t let him be derelict in his duty. He logged on to the terminal, hanging his head in resignation.

“David: I need to see you right away.”

His head snapped back up in surprise as he recognized the voice of Kahlee Sanders.

“It’s important. An emergency.”

He hadn’t spoken to her since Grissom’s funeral. Even then, they had exchanged only a few pleasantries, carefully avoiding any mention of their time together on the run twenty years ago.

“I’m on the Citadel. I can’t say where. Please—contact me as soon as you get this.”

Before the message had even ended he was sending a reply. Kahlee wasn’t the type to overreact or blow things out of proportion; if she claimed it was an emergency, it had to be something very serious.

She answered immediately, her face appearing on the view screen.

“David? Thank God.”

He was relieved to see she wasn’t hurt, though it was easy to tell from her expression that she was upset.

“I just got back to the office,” he said by way of apology for keeping her waiting.

“Is this a secure line?”

Anderson shook his head. “Not really. Standard diplomatic protocols. Easy to hack.”

“We need to meet in person.”

There was a long pause, and Anderson realized she didn’t want to openly suggest a location in case someone else was listening in.

“Remember where we said goodbye after Saren filed his mission report from Camala?”

“Good idea. I can be there in twenty minutes.”

“Give me thirty,” he replied. “I need to make sure I’m not followed.”

She nodded.

“David? Thank you. I didn’t know where else to turn.”

“It’s going to be okay,” he said, trying to reassure her ... though of what, he couldn’t even begin to guess.

The call disconnected. Anderson rose from his chair, locked up his office, and headed back downstairs.

“I have to go, Cerise,” he said to the receptionist on his way out. Remembering the concern etched on Kahlee’s features, he added, “Don’t expect me back for a few days.”

“What about the trade negotiations?” she asked, taken aback by his sudden departure.

“Udina will have to take my place.”

“This isn’t going to make him happy,” Cerise warned.

“Nothing ever does.”

Anderson took three monorails and two cabs, transferring between four different levels of the Citadel space station to make sure he wasn’t followed. He didn’t know what Kahlee was afraid of, but the last thing he wanted to do was get careless and lead whoever she was hiding from right to her.

Once he was confident nobody was tailing him, he made his way back up to the Presidium. In addition to the embassies for all the species residing in Council space, the Citadel’s inner ring also housed a spectacular park. Grass, trees, flowers, birds, and insects from dozens of different worlds had been chosen and carefully reengineered to coexist in a verdant paradise where diplomats, ambassadors, and

other functionaries could go to escape the stresses and pressures of government work.

In the center of the park was a shimmering lake. Twenty years ago he had met Kahlee there on the shore only minutes after learning his application to become the first human Spectre had been rejected because of a report filed by Saren Arterius.

Anderson didn't consider himself a vindictive man, but he couldn't help but feel a smug satisfaction knowing the turian who had derailed his candidacy had eventually been revealed as a traitor.

He made his way across the grass to the edge of the lake. He didn't see Kahlee. Knowing she was probably lurking nearby in an inconspicuous hiding place, he sat down, removed his shoes and socks, then dangled his feet off the bank. The temperature-controlled water was just cool enough to be refreshing.

A few minutes later Kahlee sat down beside him.

"Had to make sure you were alone," she explained.

"You told me not to tell anybody."

"I know. I'm sorry. I'm getting a little paranoid."

"It's not paranoia if someone's really out to get you."

In person she looked even more nervous than she had over the vid screen. She sat with her knees pulled close up against her chest, her head low as she cast furtive glances from side to side.

"You're going to draw attention," he warned her. "Relax. Try to act casual."

She nodded and methodically removed her footwear, moving in tight beside him as she dipped her feet in the water. Anderson knew she was just getting close so they could speak in confidential whispers, but it still stirred up all his old feelings for her.

*The one that got away. Only now she's come back.*

He waited for her to speak, but after several minutes of silence he realized he would have to be the one to break the ice.

"Kahlee? Tell me why you're here."

He listened carefully as she told him about Gillian, Grayson, and Cerberus. He tried not to show any reaction, keeping his face and manner calm both for her sake and to avoid drawing the notice of the other park patrons. When she was finished, he took a deep breath and let it out in a long, easy sigh as he thought about everything she'd said.

"You said Grayson was part of Cerberus. Are you sure he's not still working for them?"

"He's not," she replied with absolute confidence. "He's been on the run for two years."

"And you're sure they're the ones who found him?"

"I'm sure."

"And now you're afraid they're coming after you?"

"Maybe. But that's not why I came to you. Grayson's a friend. He needs my help."

Anderson didn't say anything at first. He had more experience dealing with Cerberus than Kahlee realized. For example, he knew that Cerberus had recently joined forces with Commander Shepard to stop the Collector abductions in the human colonies of the Terminus Systems. But he also knew that had been a temporary alliance of convenience; the Illusive Man was just using Shepard like he used everyone else. And when Cerberus had no further use for someone, they tended to show up dead.

"You realize it might be too late for your friend," he said carefully.

"I know," she conceded, her voice a barely audible whisper.

"But even if he's dead, I still want to take those bastards down," she added more loudly. "I owe him that much."

"The Alliance has been trying to bring down Cerberus for thirty years," he reminded her. "So far we haven't had much success."

"He sent me a file," she said, casting a quick glance over her shoulder as if she expected to see the Illusive Man standing right behind her. "Names of agents. Secret bases and meeting locations. Bank accounts and corporate financial records. Everything you need."

"I want to help you, Kahlee. I really do. But it's not that simple. Even if the information is good, we can't act on it without tipping Cerberus off."

“They’ve got people in our government. Our military. Grayson may have given you a list of Cerberus agents he knew of, but what about all the people under the Illusive Man’s thumb he doesn’t know about?”

“The Illusive Man is smart. He’s got a contingency plan in place for something like this. We start arresting people, or gearing up for a raid on these locations, and he’ll know about it almost before we do.

“If we’re lucky we come up with a handful of low-level operatives. But we’ll never get close to anybody important. And if Grayson is still alive, we might just spook them into killing him.”

“You’re telling me you can’t do *anything*?” Her voice rose sharply at the end of the question, her anger and frustration spilling out.

“If you stay here on the Citadel, I can keep you safe,” he assured her. “I’ll handpick a team of four or five soldiers I trust to watch over you.”

“It’s not enough,” she said, shaking her head in a stubborn defiance he remembered even after twenty years. “I’m not going to spend the rest of my life hiding from Cerberus. And I’m not going to give up on Grayson. There has to be a way to get to the Illusive Man.”

“Maybe there is,” Anderson exclaimed as a sudden flash of inspiration hit.

The ideal solution would be to call on Shepard for help, but that wasn’t an option. The commander was off the grid, doing God knows what, God knows where. But there was another option.

He jumped to his feet and extended a hand to help Kahlee up.

“Do you have somewhere safe we can stay for a few hours?”

“I’ve got a place in the Wards,” she replied, her eyes suddenly alight with eager expectation. “Why? What’s your plan?”

“The Alliance can’t help us. But I know someone else who can.”

“We need to see Ambassador Orinia,” Anderson told the turian receptionist. “It’s urgent.”

He recognized the young male behind the desk, though he couldn’t remember his name. Fortunately, the turian recognized him as well.

“I’ll tell her you’re here, Admiral,” he said, sending a message through his terminal.

It was well past supper time; most of the embassy offices were empty. But Anderson knew the turian ambassador would be working late.

“Go right in,” the receptionist said, though he did give Kahlee what Anderson assumed was the turian equivalent of a suspicious glance.

Orinia’s office was smaller than Anderson’s—not surprising, given the fact he held a much higher position than her in the Citadel hierarchy. Like his own, it was functionally Spartan in décor. A desk and three chairs—one for the ambassador, two for guests—were the only pieces of furniture. Three flags hung on the walls. The largest was the emblem of the Turian Hierarchy. The second represented the colony where Orinia was born; its colors matched the markings on the hard carapace of her bony skull. The third was the flag of the legion she served in during her military career. A solitary, bedraggled plant stood out on the balcony, sorely neglected. If Anderson had to guess, he would have said someone had given it to her as a gift.

Orinia was already standing to greet them. Warned by her assistant’s message, she showed no surprise at Kahlee’s unexplained presence.

“I’m sorry you missed today’s negotiations,” she said, extending her hand. “Has Din Korlak become too much for you to handle?”

Anderson ignored the joke as he clasped the ambassador’s hand. As always, the exchange was both awkward and clumsy. Orinia had readily adapted the familiar gesture of greeting in her dealings with humans, but she had yet to truly master the art of the handshake.

“This is Kahlee Sanders,” he said by way of introduction.

“Welcome,” the ambassador said, though she didn’t extend her hand.

Anderson didn’t know if Orinia had sensed his reaction to her handshake and decided not to repeat the effort, or if turian culture somehow viewed Kahlee as unworthy of the gesture.

*You’d know all this if you were any good at your job.*

“I’m guessing this isn’t a social visit,” the ambassador said, getting right to the point. “Sit down and tell

me why you're here."

As they'd agreed on earlier, both he and Kahlee remained standing as a way to convey the urgency of this meeting. Taking her cue from them, Orinia did the same.

"I have a favor to ask," Anderson said. "One soldier to another."

"We're not soldiers anymore," the turian replied carefully. "We're diplomats."

"I hope that's not true. I can't go through official diplomatic channels for this. Nobody in the Alliance can know I'm here."

"This is highly unusual," she replied.

He could sense the suspicion and hesitation in her voice. But she hadn't given him a flat-out refusal.

"Are you familiar with Cerberus?"

"A pro-human terrorist group," she shot back sharply. "They want to wipe us out, along with every other species in the galaxy except your own."

"Cerberus is the main reason we opposed humanity's addition to the Council," she added, a hard edge to her voice.

"Don't define us by the actions of a criminal few," Anderson warned her. "You wouldn't want all turians to be held accountable for what Saren did."

"Why are you here?"

Her voice was curt; obviously, bringing up Saren was not the way to try and win her over.

*The one time in your life you actually want to be diplomatic and you make a goddamned mess of it.*

"We have information that can destroy Cerberus," Kahlee said, jumping into the conversation. "But we need your help."

The ambassador tilted her head to the side, fixing the humans with one piercing avian eye.

"I'm listening...."

## EIGHT

From the comfort of her private booth and flanked by her krogan bodyguards, Aria T'Loak watched Sanak make his way through the crowd at Afterlife.

She was a master at reading batarian body language, just as she could read nearly every sapient species in the known galaxy. Over the many centuries of her life she had learned to pick out the subtle cues that could tell her when someone was lying, or happy, or sad, or—as was often the case when one stood before the Pirate Queen—scared. Watching Sanak approach, she already knew that the news he was bringing her was not good.

For the past three days she'd had her people following up on Paul's disappearance. Inquiries with the typical Omega sources, ranging from simple chats to brutal interrogations, had turned up nothing. Nobody knew anything about the abduction, or even about the man himself. He was a loner; apart from Liselle he didn't spend time with anyone if it wasn't related to work.

Her last hope was his extranet terminal. It had been wiped clean, but her technical experts were attempting to salvage scraps of data from the optical drive. Another team was trying to track any messages sent or received through the terminal by scouring the data bursts transmitted through the relay buoys that linked Omega to the galactic communication network.

The cost of the investigation was astronomical, but Aria could easily afford it. And while part of her was doing this to avenge her murdered offspring, a more calculating part of her knew that sparing no expense to track down someone who might have betrayed her would send a powerful message to everyone else inside her organization.

Unfortunately, it looked as if all her efforts had been in vain.

"The technicians couldn't find anything," she guessed as Sanak reached her booth.

"They found plenty," he grimly replied.

Aria frowned. That was the problem with reading body language: it was imprecise. She knew Sanak was unhappy; she just didn't know why.

"What did you learn?"

"His real name is Paul Grayson. He used to work for Cerberus."

"Cerberus is making inroads on Omega?" she guessed.

The batarian shook his head, and Aria scowled in frustration.

"Just tell me what you know," she snapped.

Aria always liked to give the appearance that she was in complete control. By reputation, she was always two steps ahead of her rivals because she knew what they were going to say or do even before they did it. Nothing surprised her; nothing caught her off guard. It didn't look good for her to keep throwing out guesses that proved to be wrong; it weakened her image.

"Grayson used to work for Cerberus. Then he turned on them. It had something to do with his daughter and a woman named Kahlee Sanders.

"We couldn't locate his daughter. She vanished two years ago. But we found Sanders.

"The technicians said Grayson called her every few weeks. And he sent her a message the night he disappeared."

"Where is she?" Aria asked, suspecting she wouldn't like what she heard.

"She was working at a school for biotic human children. But she left the day after Grayson vanished. We tracked her to the Citadel; she's under the protection of Admiral David Anderson."

Aria's knowledge of politics and power extended far beyond the gangs of Omega. She recognized Anderson's name: he was an adviser to Councilor Donnel Udina, and one of the highest-ranking diplomatic officials in the Alliance.

The Pirate Queen ruled Omega with an iron fist. Her influence extended in various ways throughout the Terminus Systems. She even had agents operating in Council space. But the Citadel was another matter entirely.

In many ways the massive circular space station was a mirror image of Omega: it served as the economic, cultural, and political hub of Council space. And Aria was well aware that if the powers-that-be ever discovered she was taking an active role in events on the Citadel, there would be retribution.

Officially Omega was outside the Council's jurisdiction. But if they felt Aria had crossed a line—if they decided she posed a threat to the stability of Council space—they could always unleash a Spectre against her.

The Spectres weren't bound by the treaties and laws that shaped intergalactic policy. It wasn't inconceivable that one would come to Omega to try and assassinate Aria. The chances of such a mission actually succeeding were slim, but Aria hadn't survived over a thousand years by exposing herself to risk. She was careful and patient, and even the death of her daughter wouldn't change that.

"Don't do anything yet. But keep an eye on the situation," she ordered Sanak. "Let me know if anything changes. And keep trying to find out where Grayson went."

Grayson woke to find himself in a dimly lit cell. He was lying on a small cot in the corner. There were no blankets, but he didn't need any—despite still being naked, he wasn't cold. There was a toilet against one wall; against another was a built-in shelf stocked with enough military rations and bottled water to last several months. Apart from these few necessities, the room was completely empty. No sink. No shower. Not even a chair.

He had no idea how long he'd been unconscious. His limbs were heavy; his mind was groggy. As he sat up, a shooting pain laced its way from the top of his skull down through his teeth. Instinctively, he reached up to rub his head, then pulled his hand back in surprise when it touched bare scalp.

*Must have shaved you while they had you strapped to that table,* the familiar voice inside his head reasoned. *Probably so they could plant that Reaper technology inside your brain.*

The horror of what Cerberus had done to him in the lab was still fresh in his mind. He could remember the sensation of an invasive alien presence burrowing into his brain. For some reason, however, he no longer felt it.

*Is it gone? Or just dormant?*

He should have been afraid, terrified even. Instead, he just felt tired. Drained. Even thinking was a struggle; his thoughts were enveloped in a thick fog, and concentrating brought on more flashes of pain in his skull. But he needed to try and piece together what had happened.

Why had Cerberus put him in a cell? It was possible this was still part of the experiment. It was also possible something had gone wrong and the project had been aborted. In either case, he was still a prisoner of the Illusive Man.

His stomach growled, and he glanced over at the ration packs.

*Careful. They could be drugged. Or poisoned. Or maybe they just need you to eat so whatever they implanted in your brain can start growing.*

The last reason was enough to make him ignore his hunger, though he did open a bottle of water and take a long drink. He could go a long time without food, but he needed water to survive. And Grayson wasn't about to give up on life just yet.

He spent a few minutes examining the rest of the cell, only to find there was nothing else of interest to discover. Then utter exhaustion set in and he had to lie down again. Before he knew it, he was in a deep sleep.

Grayson had no idea how long he'd been imprisoned in the tiny cell. He'd fallen asleep and woken up again five or six times, but that had little bearing on how many days had actually passed. He had no energy. No initiative. Just trying to stay awake required a monumental effort.

Nobody had come to see him. But he knew they were out there. Watching him. Studying him.

The bastards had planted probes inside him so they could monitor what was happening inside his head. He'd felt the tiny, hard lumps beneath the skin while running his fingers over the stubble growing back on his shaved scalp. Two on the top of his skull. Another pair centered at the top of his forehead.

One behind each ear and a larger one at the base of his neck.

A while ago he'd tried to dig them out with his fingernails, clawing at the skin of his forehead until he drew blood. But he couldn't dig deep enough to dislodge the probes.

*Or maybe you just don't want to. They're screwing with your brain, remember?*

The rumbling of his stomach drowned out the rest of what the voice in his head was saying, hunger tearing at his gut like some kind of creature trying to rip its way to freedom.

Ignoring the risks, he grabbed one of the rations from the shelf and tore open the vacuum-sealed packaging. He wolfed it down, gorging himself on the bland, nutrient-rich paste. He was reaching for another when his stomach cramped up violently. He barely made it to the toilet in time to disgorge everything he'd just eaten.

Flushing the toilet, he wiped his chin in a halfhearted attempt to clean himself up without benefit of a sink or mirror. Opening one of the bottles of water, he rinsed and spit into the toilet until the foul taste of acidic vomit was gone.

The second meal he ate more slowly. This time his stomach managed to keep it down.

His best guess was that a week had passed. Maybe two. Probably not three. The passage of time was impossible to track in the cell. There was nothing to do but eat and sleep. But when he slept he had dreams—nightmares he could never quite recall on waking, but that left him shivering nonetheless.

He still had had no contact with anyone from Cerberus. But he couldn't really say he was alone anymore.

They were inside his head, speaking to him in whispers too faint to understand. These weren't like the critical, sarcastic voice he used to hear in his thoughts. That voice was gone. The others had silenced it forever.

He tried to ignore them, but it was impossible to block out their constant, insidious murmur. There was something simultaneously repulsive yet seductive about them. Their presence in his mind was both a violation and an invitation: the Reapers calling to him across the great void of space.

Somehow he knew that if he concentrated on them, he would be able to understand what they said. But he didn't want to understand. He was trying very hard *not* to understand because he knew understanding the voices was the beginning of the end.

With each passing hour Grayson could feel the whispers growing stronger. More insistent. Yet even though Cerberus had implanted him with this horrific alien technology, his will was still his own. For now, he was still able to resist them. And he intended to hold them at bay for as long as was humanly possible.

"I thought you said the transformation would only take a week," the Illusive Man said to Dr. Nuri.

They were staring down at Grayson through the one-way window in the ceiling of his cell. Kai Leng was lurking in the shadows over by the wall, standing so still he almost seemed to disappear in the darkness.

At the back of the room, the other members of Dr. Nuri's team were monitoring the readings on the hovering holographic screens projecting up from the individual computer stations. They were tracking and recording everything that happened inside the cell: Grayson's breathing, heart rate, and brain activity; changes in body and air temperature; even minute fluctuations in electrical, gravitational, magnetic, and dark energy readings emanating from the room.

"You told me to proceed with caution after we nearly lost him during the implantation," she reminded him.

"I just want to make sure nothing's gone wrong."

"The time line was only an estimate. Our research strongly suggests indoctrination and repurposing varies greatly depending on the strength of the subject."

"He's resisting," the Illusive Man said appreciatively. "Fighting the Reapers."

"I'm amazed he's held out this long," Dr. Nuri admitted. "His focus and determination are far beyond anything I expected. I underestimated him in my initial calculations."

"People always underestimated him," the Illusive Man replied. "That's what made him such a good

agent.”

“We could try to artificially accelerate the process,” Nuri offered. “But it would skew the results. And it might send his body into shock again.”

“It’s too much of a risk.”

“Dust him up,” Kai Leng suggested, stepping forward to join the conversation. “We still have the red sand we grabbed on Omega.”

“It could work,” Dr. Nuri said after a few moments of consideration. “Our testing shows narcotics have no impact on the Reaper biotechnology. And it could weaken his focus. Make him more susceptible to the indoctrination.”

“Do it,” the Illusive Man ordered.

Grayson didn’t move when he heard the cell door open. He was lying on his side in the cot, facing the wall. He heard footsteps crossing the floor and he tried to tell how many people there were. It sounded like a lone individual, but even if there had been a dozen armed guards it wouldn’t have made a difference; he knew this was probably his only chance to escape.

The footsteps stopped. He could sense someone standing beside the bed, looking down on him. He waited another half-second—just long enough to let them lean in to check on his motionless form. Then he sprang into action.

Whirling around, he kicked out with his feet, intending to send his target sprawling backward. His blow never connected.

Instead the person beside his bed—Chinese features, medium but muscular build—moved nimbly to the side and brought an elbow crashing down, dislocating Grayson’s kneecap.

Under normal circumstances the agonizing injury would have ended the fight. But Grayson was driven by desperation and a primal survival instinct. Even as he screamed in pain, he curled his right thumb across a rigid palm, extended his fingers, and jabbed at his enemy’s throat.

Yet again his attack was thwarted with ease. His adversary grabbed his wrist and twisted the arm up and back, yanking Grayson from the bed so that he landed hard on the floor, knocking the wind out of him. Momentarily stunned, he was unable to resist as the man plunged a needle into his arm and injected him with some unknown substance.

The man let go and Grayson tried to struggle to his feet. His attacker delivered a single punch to the liver, and Grayson collapsed back to the floor in a quivering ball.

The man calmly turned and walked away, never looking back. Helpless, Grayson could only watch him go. His eyes fixated on his assailant’s ouroboros tattoo until the cell door slammed shut behind him.

A few seconds later he recognized a familiar warmth spreading through him. His face felt flushed and his skin began to tingle as the soft blanket of red sand wrapped itself around him.

Grayson had been a duster; he had always snorted the fine powder to get his high. But there were shooters, too. Red sand could be dissolved in a solution and injected directly into the bloodstream for those who wanted—or needed—a more powerful fix.

He curled up into a ball and closed his eyes, desperately trying to shut out what was happening. He’d been clean for two years. He’d put his body through the agonizing symptoms of withdrawal and battled against the powerful psychological urges of his addiction by clinging to the memory of his daughter. He had changed for Gillian’s sake; staying clean was a symbol of the new man he’d become.

And now, with a single needle, everything he’d worked for was gone. He opened his mouth to scream at the unforgivable violation. Instead, he giggled softly as waves of euphoria washed over him.

He shivered with pleasure as the red sand coursed through his veins, the effects a hundred times more intense than anything he’d experienced while dusting. The first few minutes were a rush of pure ecstasy; yet already he was craving more. Every cell in his body savored the exhilaration of the concentrated drug even as he yearned for another hit.

Eyes glazed and a simpleton’s grin plastered on his face, he managed to stand up. His dislocated kneecap sent signals of pain up to his brain, but the sand kept him from caring. Still giggling, he collapsed back onto the cot and closed his eyes in rapturous contentment.



Then, through the pink haze, he heard the whispers once more. And this time, he could understand them perfectly.

## NINE

This wasn't the first time Kahlee had been taken in by an alien species while on the run from Cerberus. In contrast to her stay on the Quarian Flotilla, however, she didn't have to wear a full enviro-suit at all times inside the turian embassy.

At Anderson's request, Orinia had agreed to let Kahlee stay in the turian embassy for protection while they prepared to move against Cerberus. If Kahlee had known that would mean being shadowed by a pair of turian bodyguards day and night and not being allowed to leave the building for nearly two straight weeks, she might have objected.

Fortunately, she had plenty to keep her occupied. The files Grayson had sent on Cerberus were thorough, but far from complete and somewhat out of date. Understandably, Orinia had no intention of taking action until every piece of information that Grayson had provided was verified, updated, and cross-referenced against her own people's files.

Kahlee was initially surprised to discover that the turians were keeping tabs on Cerberus. In retrospect, however, it wasn't that shocking. Cerberus was intent on destroying, or at least dominating, every nonhuman species in the galaxy, making them a threat to the Turian Hierarchy. The turians weren't about to take that threat lightly.

The intel they had gathered on their enemy so far was impressive. It had taken a lot of convincing before Orinia had allowed Kahlee to look at the classified files; even though the First Contact war had happened thirty years ago, the ex-general still held a lingering mistrust of humans. Ultimately, however, the sheer overwhelming volume of information had forced the ambassador's hand.

Kahlee was one of the galaxy's foremost experts in complex data analysis. She'd used her skills to help Dr. Qian twenty years ago with his radical AI research. She'd used it to help the Ascension Project design and iterate new biotic implants to maximize the potential of the students at the Academy. Now she was using her talents to try and save Grayson.

With an organization as fluid and secretive as Cerberus, information was in a constant state of flux. Individual agents and cells were given virtually full autonomy to achieve their mission objectives, allowing them to operate across a broad spectrum of parameters. That made tracking their operations very difficult, with a high probability of error.

Grayson had even admitted in his own files that there had been numerous false leads and dead ends. There were only a few individuals inside the Alliance with whom he had worked personally; these were the ones he could confirm as agents of the Illusive Man. The other two dozen names on his list were only suspected Cerberus operatives; it was possible some of them were actually innocent.

He'd also provided the location of several key research labs, but had warned that Cerberus would periodically abandon certain facilities and relocate operations just to make it harder to shut them down. And the companies that helped finance the Illusive Man's illegal activities were all public corporations employing thousands of workers, most of whom had no idea that their efforts were helping to fund a terrorist organization.

The turians needed accurate information if they were going to go after Cerberus. They couldn't just start detaining and interrogating suspected operatives; in addition to the legal and political ramifications, it would alert Cerberus that something was coming, giving them time to relocate and evacuate.

Similarly, they couldn't just send soldiers to raid every suspected Cerberus location. If the information turned out to be inaccurate, they might end up attacking a civilian facility, which could be considered an act of war against the Alliance. Plus, Orinia had a limited amount of troops under her command for this mission; they had to choose their targets carefully. They were going to get only one chance to strike at the Illusive Man; wasting resources on abandoned locations could undermine all their efforts.

The only viable strategy was a blitz approach: simultaneously arrest all known Cerberus operatives on the Citadel while at the same time hitting key installations with military strike teams. By cross-referencing Grayson's files with the turian intel, and incorporating follow-up research of her own, Kahlee was

creating a list of confirmed high-value targets.

It would have been easier if they had been able to draw on Alliance resources for assistance, but that risked someone's reporting their activities back to the Illusive Man. Orinia had decided to keep this in-house: she and Anderson were the only nonturians who knew what was coming.

At least they had Citadel Security on their side. Technically C-Sec was a multispecies police force, but the top officials—and over half of the active force—were turian. Executor Pallin, the head of C-Sec, had served under General Oriana during his stint in the military, so he had readily agreed to create a special C-Sec turian-exclusive task force to aid in their efforts.

It all would have been so much easier if they could have simply arrested the Illusive Man himself. He was the mind, heart, and soul of Cerberus: eliminate him, and the organization would collapse into disorganized cells incapable of working together.

She had hoped that Grayson would reveal the Illusive Man's true identity, but in his file he had explained that was impossible. The Illusive Man wasn't living a double life, posing as a respected and powerful civilian as most suspected. He was the full-time head of Cerberus; he had no other identity. If he needed a public face for legitimate business, he'd call on representatives of the pro-human Terra Firma political party, or use clandestine agents in positions of authority to manipulate and influence events to get the results he wanted.

That was why it was so crucial to compile an accurate and effective list of targets. If the Illusive Man slipped through their fingers, it was inevitable that Cerberus would rise again. They had to either capture him, kill him, or deal Cerberus such a crushing blow that it would take decades for them to recover.

Kahlee understood all this; that was why she was willing to accept Orinia's careful and cautious approach. But she also knew that every day that passed made it less and less likely Grayson would still be alive.

It was possible he was already dead, but she wouldn't let herself believe that. The Illusive Man was cunning and cruel; he wouldn't simply execute someone who had betrayed him in the way Grayson had. He'd have some elaborate plan to exact his revenge.

As grim as this thought was, it gave her some small glimmer of hope to cling to as she analyzed all the disparate data in a desperate race to save him.

When Grayson woke up, he was horrified to discover he was a prisoner in his own body. He could see and hear everything around him, but it seemed surreal, almost as if he was watching a projection on a vid screen with the volume and brightness set way too high.

He rolled over in the cot, spun to put his feet on the floor, stood up, and began to pace restlessly about the cell—but none of these actions came from his own volition. His body refused to respond to his commands; he was powerless to control his own actions. He had become a meat puppet, an instrument of Reaper will.

He briefly registered the fact that his crippled knee had somehow repaired itself overnight. Then his eyes flickered downward, giving him a glimpse of his body, and his mind recoiled in disgust.

He was being transformed. Repurposed. The implants in his brain had spread throughout his body. The self-replicating Reaper nanotechnology had woven itself into his muscles, sinews, and nerves, transforming him into a monstrous hybrid of synthetic and organic life. His flesh had become stretched and semitranslucent. Beneath it he could see thin flexible tubes winding along the length of his limbs. Flickers of red and blue light pulsed along the tubes, the illumination bright enough to be visible through his opaque skin.

Even though he was no longer in control of his body, he could feel that the cybernetics had made him both faster and stronger. He was more aware of his surroundings; his senses were heightened to a supernatural level. The melding of man and machine had created a being that was physically superior to any evolutionary design.

But that wasn't the only change. He was also developing rudimentary biotic abilities beyond those temporarily granted by dosing up with red sand. He could sense his Reaper masters pushing and probing, eager to test the limits of his weak but ever-growing power.

The Reapers turned his body to face the shelf of provisions. Inside he felt a buildup of energy, like a static charge increased a thousandfold. His hand rose, palm extended toward the ration kits. There was a sudden jolt along the length of his arm, strong enough to send a flare of pain shooting up to Grayson's helpless consciousness.

The neat pile of carefully stacked rations was blown apart by the impact of a biotic push. Boxes shot up into the air, bouncing off the shelves and wall before clattering onto the floor.

It was hardly an impressive display. Grayson had seen his own daughter lift a thousand-kilogram piece of machinery and use it to crush a pair of Cerberus agents. The scattered ration packs weighed less than a kilogram each, and the impact hadn't even been powerful enough to burst the seals keeping the food inside fresh. But he knew his power would continue to grow, and he sensed the Reapers were pleased.

Grayson lowered his arm, and it took him a full second before the significance of the action struck him. *He* had lowered his arm; not the Reapers—him!

The biotic display must have temporarily weakened their control of his body. Recognizing that their domination of his will was not yet absolute was all the encouragement he needed to fight back.

The whispers in his head grew to an angry roar as Grayson struggled to regain control of his physical form. He shut them out, ignoring them as he focused all his energy on the simple act of taking a single step.

His left foot rose in response, moving forward half a foot before coming back down to the floor. Then his right foot followed suit, setting off a chain reaction in Grayson's body. He could literally feel each individual muscle tighten, then relax, as his mind reasserted its dominion over what was rightfully his.

As he came back to himself, his body began to tremble. His mouth felt dry, his skin itchy. He recognized the classic symptoms of withdrawal. The hit of red sand was wearing off, allowing him to regain his focus and concentration, his most valuable weapons against the aliens inside his head.

The Reapers were mounting a counterassault: pushing in on his thoughts, trying to twist and bend them to their control. But Grayson refused to surrender what he had fought so hard to regain. It was a battle to save his very identity, and he was winning!

He felt a rush of elation and adrenaline ... and something else. He barely had time to realize what it was before the warmth of another dose of red sand swept over him.

His head began to swim in an ocean of narcotic bliss, and the Reapers seized the opportunity to wrest control of his body away from him.

Helpless, he could only watch from within as his body walked over to the cot and lay back down on the bed. Lying there in a dust storm fugue, he struggled to understand what had just happened. There was only one explanation that made any sense.

Cerberus was still watching him. Studying him. They knew he was resisting the Reapers; they had dosed him with concentrated red sand to weaken his resolve. Sometime during his previous high they must have surgically implanted a device to allow them to remotely administer doses of the drug to keep him in a perpetual state of intoxication.

It wouldn't have been hard; a small radio-controlled dispenser under the skin that released the sand directly into his bloodstream would do the trick. At a soluble mixture of near one hundred percent concentration, it would take only a few drops to send him flying each time. Eventually the supply in the dispenser would run out, but that didn't give him hope: he knew Cerberus would just refill it.

His eyes closed, shutting out the world. The Reapers needed him to rest; the transformation was still in progress. They needed him to sleep, and so he did.

The Illusive Man and Dr. Nuri had watched the entire episode through the one-way glass. The physical changes to Grayson's body were gruesome, but any guilt the Illusive Man had over what they had done was offset by the knowledge that the data they were collecting could prove invaluable at preventing or reversing the process in future victims. More important, they were learning the limits of what the Reapers were truly capable of.

At first the results seemed to mirror those collected from experiments on the so-called husks: human victims transformed into mindless automatons by the geth during Saren's campaign to seize control of the

Citadel. But the Illusive Man knew the truth about that war: Saren and his geth army had all been servants under the control of a Reaper called Sovereign. And the technology to turn humans into husks hadn't come from the geth.

But Grayson's metamorphosis was something more subtle and complex. He was not becoming a mindless slave. He was becoming a vessel, an avatar of the Reapers—like Saren himself. And before his death at the hands of Commander Shepard, Saren had been very, very powerful.

"His strength is growing quickly," Illusive Man noted to Dr. Nuri. "We won't be able to hold him prisoner for much longer."

"We're tracking his evolution carefully," the scientist assured him. "It will be at least a week before he poses any real threat of escape."

"You're certain of your data?"

"I'd stake my life on it."

"You already have," the Illusive Man reminded her. "And mine, too."

There was an awkward silence before he added, "I'll give you three more days to study him. That's all I'm willing to risk. Do I make myself clear?"

"Three days," Dr. Nuri promised with a nod. "After that we'll terminate the subject."

"Leave that to Kai Leng," the Illusive Man told her. "That's why he's here."

## TEN

“Based on my analysis, we have to strike at the six locations highlighted on the first page of the report.”

Kahlee had given plenty of presentations over the years, often to powerful and important people. But at her core she was a researcher, not a public speaker, and she couldn't quite ignore the cold, heavy knot in the pit of her stomach as she spoke.

“The names listed beneath each location are confirmed Cerberus operatives believed to have specific knowledge of the layout or defenses of the target in question.”

This particular presentation wasn't made any easier by the fact that, apart from Anderson, everyone she was addressing was a turian military officer. They stared at her with the intensity of hawks tracking a mouse on the ground—eight pairs of cold, unblinking eyes.

“In order to use their intel without giving Cerberus advance warning, the strike teams will have to be en route before C-Sec arrests the operatives.

“Even if someone does send off a warning, these bases are in remote clusters that haven't been directly linked into the galactic comm network yet. It'll take time for any messages to get through to them.”

“What kind of window will we have between the arrests and hard contact?” one of the turians asked.

His uniform sagged under the weight of all the medals pinned to his chest.

Upon entering the briefing room she'd been introduced to the assemblage, their names and ranks thrown at her in rapid-fire succession as they went around the table. She hadn't even made an attempt to try and remember them.

“Four hours,” Anderson chimed in. “Plenty of time for C-Sec to interrogate the prisoners and transmit the info to you.”

“Using the info, each strike team leader will have the authority to change the strategic plan for their target,” Orinia added.

“This information is reliable?” another turian, this one female, asked.

A thin white scar ran along her jaw, its color making it stand out from the dark red facial tattoos that signified the colony of her birth. She was the only female turian other than Orinia in the room, meaning she stood out enough that Kahlee could actually recall her name: Dinara.

Kahlee could have gone into a lengthy explanation about statistical analysis, margins of error, and probability matrixes extrapolated from incomplete, estimated, and assumed data. However, doing so could have created doubt in the turians' minds.

“It's reliable,” she assured them.

“Most of these targets are within the borders of Alliance territory,” Medals, the first turian, objected.

“Just before Orinia gives the go to the strike teams, I'm going to authorize a joint-species military action inside Alliance space,” Anderson explained. “Everything you do will be completely in accordance with existing Council laws and treaties.”

“That's the kind of thing that could get you dismissed from your post,” a third turian noted.

“Almost certainly,” Anderson agreed.

“Two of the locations are inside the Terminus Systems,” Dinara pointed out. “You can't grant us the authority to strike there.”

“Those are the most important installations,” Kahlee insisted. “The whole reason Cerberus has facilities outside Council jurisdiction is to allow them to engage in illegal or unethical research without fear of repercussions.”

“Attacking a facility in the Terminus Systems means a Council review,” Medals countered. “It could be grounds for a military discharge.”

There were murmurs of agreement around the table, and Kahlee feared the turians were turning against them.

“That could happen,” Anderson said, speaking loudly to be heard over the general grumbling. “But Cerberus doesn’t play by the rules. Neither can we if we want to take them out.

“If that’s a problem for any of you,” he added sternly, “you can leave now.”

There was a long moment of silence, but every turian remained seated at the table.

“The Terminus facilities are orbital space stations in uninhabited systems,” Oriana said, picking up where Anderson had left off. “If the strike teams complete their mission, there won’t be any witnesses to file a report against you.”

“Understood,” Medals replied with a curt nod. “No survivors.”

“Except for any prisoners you find,” Kahlee hastily added. “If Cerberus is holding someone against their will, they need to be rescued.”

“This is a rescue mission?” Dinara asked, looking for clarification.

Anderson and Orinia exchanged glances before the turian ambassador answered the question.

“We can’t confirm the presence of prisoners at any location. If you find any, help them if you can. But do not put the mission—or turian lives—at risk unnecessarily.”

Kahlee bit her lip to keep from objecting. Anderson had warned her that getting the turians to cooperate wasn’t going to be easy. They had to offer something the turians wanted: the elimination of Cerberus. If she pushed the prisoner angle, Orinia might pull her people out.

“What about the Illusive Man?” Medals wanted to know.

“Capturing him would be an ideal outcome,” Orinia admitted. “But we have no pictures of what he looks like. All we have is a basic physical description. If you see anyone matching the profile, try to bring them back alive.”

Kahlee wasn’t sure what would happen next. She thought there might be a vote or some spirited debate regarding the mission. At the very least she expected others to voice their objections or raise concerns. True, the turians were a military culture, and they were used to accepting and acting on orders from their superiors; but this was an unusual situation, and technically Orinia was no longer part of the chain of command.

However, whatever window there had been to question the mission had apparently been closed.

“Strike teams leave in four hours,” the ambassador declared as she rose from her seat.

Following her lead, the other turians stood and filed out, leaving Orinia alone with the two humans.

“I wish we could go with them,” Kahlee muttered.

“Each commander has crafted his or her team into a finely tuned military instrument through thousands of hours of training,” Orinia reminded her. “You’d only get in the way.”

“They’ll do their best to help Grayson if they find him,” Anderson assured Kahlee, reading her thoughts.

“I know,” she said, though secretly she had her doubts.

Kai Leng’s muscles strained as he pulled his chin up over the bar one last time. Then he dropped to the floor and knocked out a final set of fifty push-ups.

When he was done he threw a towel over his shoulder, strode to the fitness room’s gravity control, and dialed it back down from two hundred percent to one standard G.

He wiped the sweat from his bare torso and slung the towel back over his shoulder. He turned toward the locker room, then changed direction instantly when alarms began to wail.

Rushing over to the console by the wall, he punched in his security code to get a status update. The screen might as well have said: *ALL HELL IS BREAKING LOOSE*.

Three unidentified vessels were bearing down on the orbital space station. They were small enough to have slipped past the long-range sensors; that meant they didn’t have the firepower to pierce the station’s kinetic barriers and reinforced hull. Instead, they were coming in fast in an effort to get close enough to begin boarding procedures before the GARDIAN defenses could burn away their ablative armoring.

The database matched the energy signatures to turian light frigates, each capable of holding up to a dozen crew. The station had approximately forty hands, but the majority were scientists and support staff; only a handful had real military experience. It wasn’t hard to do the math: the turians would win this

battle.

Kai Leng raced to his locker, but didn't bother to grab his clothes. Instead, he grabbed his knife and pistol—a custom-modified Kassa Fabrications Razer. Gripping the Razer in his left hand and the twelve-inch blade in his right, he raced from the fitness center.

The station lurched as the first attack vessel's boarding ramp latched onto the exterior, nearly throwing Kai Leng to the floor. The ship shuddered twice more as the next two frigates made contact a few seconds later.

The invaders would use high-powered lasers to carve a seam in the station's hull, then apply concentrated explosives to blow open a hole so they could board. Given the turians' reputation for military efficiency, he figured they had less than a minute until the halls of the facility were crawling with enemy soldiers.

The station's main hangar housed several shuttles, but it was on the far side of the station. Going there was a fool's errand: if the turians were smart, they'd hit it first to cut off a primary evacuation route. Fortunately, there were several small escape pods located throughout the facility ... though not nearly enough for all personnel to make it out alive.

Kai Leng had taken the time to memorize the location of every one of the pods; he knew the closest was easily in reach. But he couldn't leave yet—there was something too important he had to do.

The Illusive Man was asleep in his bed when the alarms rang out. Waking to the unexpected din, it took him a moment to orient himself. As soon as he had his bearings, he fired up the terminal at the desk in his private quarters.

He analyzed the information on the readout, evaluating their chances of victory. Seeing they were under assault by a trio of turian frigates, he immediately realized there was no hope in staying to fight. But if he was lucky—and quick—there might be enough time to terminate Grayson and still make it to one of the escape pods.

It had been over thirty years since he'd seen any active military service; he knew his skills were not what they once were. His best hope was to avoid enemy contact, but he wasn't about to go out unprepared. Moving quickly, he pulled a Liberator combat suit from his closet and slipped it on. From the drawer in his bedside table he grabbed a Harpy pistol before unlocking the door to his room and stepping out into the hall.

He was immediately assailed by a wall of sound: shrieking alarms, shouts of fear and panic, the pounding of booted feet as the station's crew ran up and down the hall. A scientist ran past him, his hands wrapped tightly around a Gorgon assault rifle, the heaviest armament on the station. The fact that someone had opened the armory was good; the fact that an untrained scientist was carrying one of its most powerful weapons was not.

The station was primarily a research facility; it wasn't properly equipped or staffed to defend against a direct assault. Orbiting an insignificant planet circling an irrelevant orange dwarf star in the Terminus Systems, they relied on the secrecy of their remote location to protect them.

The deck trembled beneath his feet and he heard the faint echo of a distant explosion, and he knew the turians had breached the hull. A few seconds later he reached a t-intersection in the hall. From the left-hand corridor, he heard screams and the sounds of gunfire. He turned in the opposite direction, realizing he'd have to take a longer route if he hoped to get to Grayson's cell while avoiding the turian patrols.

As he ran down the hall, his mind was already trying to piece together what had gone wrong. He liked to encourage the impression that Cerberus was all-knowing and all-powerful, but the truth was somewhat different. By galactic standards, they were a small organization, with limited people and finite resources.

Though the Illusive Man was a master of deploying those resources with maximum results, and had a knack for anticipating the actions of both his friends and allies, there were holes in his organization that left them vulnerable. Somehow the turians had found one. None of his agents on the Citadel had warned him of a potential attack, which meant the turians were acting alone. But how had they discovered the location of the base?



He saw Dr. Nuri coming toward him, flanked on either side by security personnel wearing heavy combat suits and armed with Gorgons.

“Come with me,” he ordered. “To the lab.”

Nuri shook her head. “We’ll never make it. The turians overran the entire wing. We have to get to the escape pods.”

Nuri was a valuable asset to Cerberus, but she had only the most basic level of combat training. Considering she wasn’t even wearing body armor, he didn’t see any point in forcing her to accompany them.

“Get to the escape pod,” he told her. “Hold it until we get there.”

To the guards he said, “You two stay with me.”

There was no objection from the guards; they were trained soldiers, and knew better than to defy a direct order. Nuri responded with a nod before dashing off in the opposite direction.

Leading his small team, the Illusive Man was still trying to figure out how the turians had found them. He knew Grayson had information on Cerberus. The Illusive Man had assumed that Grayson didn’t know about this facility, but it was possible he could have learned of it during the two years he was on the run. Still, even if Grayson was the source of the intel, how did it end up in the hands of the turians?

His musings were cut short as they rounded the next corner and came face-to-face with a six-member turian patrol standing less than five meters away. Both sides opened fire immediately, the turians dropping into crouches to present smaller targets while the Illusive Man and his guards retreated back around the corner for cover.

The brief initial exchange hadn’t lasted long enough for the weapons to penetrate the kinetic barriers of either side. But the turians were better equipped and trained, and had them outnumbered two to one; further engagement was almost suicidal.

“Fall back,” the Illusive Man shouted.

Keeping their weapons pointed at the corner should the turians emerge, the guards crab-walked backward in a shuffling retreat.

They’d gone roughly ten meters when two turians poked their heads around the corner and let loose a quick burst of gunfire. The Illusive Man pressed himself close against the wall, taking shelter behind one of the exposed steel ribs that ran vertically along the wall’s surface every five meters to reinforce the station’s hull. On the other side of the hall the guards did the same, the two of them cramming themselves tightly behind a single protruding girder.

The first two turians continued to lay down a wave of suppressing fire to keep their opponents pinned against the wall so they couldn’t shoot back. At the same time the other four rounded the corner and took cover behind the beams in the same manner as their opponents.

The Illusive Man peeked out and squeezed off a few token shots with his pistol, but a barrage of return fire forced him to duck back into cover. The guards huddled together on the opposite side of the corridor had a similar idea, and they were better armed. Working in concert, they leaned out—one high, one low—and unleashed a storm of bullets.

One of the turians wasn’t pressed tightly enough against the wall; his left side was partially exposed. By design, both guards aimed at this single target, their concentrated fire ripping through his kinetic barriers and shredding his combat suit in less than a second.

The turian screamed as the high-velocity rounds tore his arm and shoulder to pieces, nearly severing the limb. His compatriots returned fire as he slumped to the ground, blood gushing from his wounds. The Cerberus guards flattened themselves against the wall as rounds peppered their position, relying on the protruding edge of the vertical beam they were hiding behind to shield them from the assault.

With all the turian fire focused on the guards, the Illusive Man took the opportunity to lean out and let loose with his pistol, aiming at the injured turian lying on the floor before his kinetic barriers could recharge. The turian’s body jumped and spasmed as the Harpy buried a half-dozen rounds into the helpless alien’s torso, then went still. Before the turians could retaliate, the Illusive Man ducked back behind cover.

From the corner of his eye he caught a glimpse of something flying past his position. His gaze drawn by

the movement, he turned his head to see a small, fist-sized black disk adhering itself to the wall beside the Cerberus guards.

The Illusive Man dropped to the floor and curled up into a ball, covering his head with his hands just as the grenade exploded. The concussive blast tossed the guards like rag dolls, bouncing them off the wall and sending them ricocheting out into the center of the hall. Any chance of their surviving was immediately snuffed out as their twisted bodies were riddled with turian bullets.

The Illusive Man knew his pistol didn't have the firepower to keep the turians at bay. But he was damned if he was going to let them take him alive. Rolling out from behind the covering beam, he grabbed for the nearest guard's assault rifle.

Wrapping his fingers around the weapon, he mentally braced to feel the impact of the enemy rounds as they overwhelmed his kinetic barriers. He came up on one knee and raised the weapon, but never fired.

The scene before him was a masterpiece of brutally efficient mayhem.

In addition to the turian shot by the guards, two more were already on the floor. One's throat had been slashed from behind, the cut so deep it nearly severed the head. The back of the other's head had been blown off, the result of someone's firing a pistol jammed against the back of his skull so the kinetic barriers couldn't protect him.

The remaining three were engaged in close-quarters fighting with Kai Leng. Despite not wearing a combat suit—he wasn't even wearing a shirt—Cerberus's top wet-work operative made short work of the heavily armored turians.

At melee range the heavy turian assault rifles proved to be a disadvantage; they were too slow and cumbersome to be brought to bear on a target as lithe and mobile as the human butcher attacking them. Kai Leng's weapons presented no such problems.

He stabbed his knife in an upward thrust toward the head of his nearest opponent. The sharply ascending angle brought it in beneath the turian's protective visor, impaling him through the underside of his chin. The blade penetrated up through tissue and bone and into the brain, resulting in instantaneous death.

The weapon was stuck fast in its victim, but Kai Leng had already released his grip on the hilt. One of the turians had thrown down his own ineffectual weapon and grabbed Kai Leng's wrist with both hands in an attempt to break his arm, or at least wrench the pistol from his grasp. But his combat suit made his movements clumsy and awkward, and the thick gloves prevented him from getting a proper grip.

Kai Leng slipped free and dropped to the ground, his leg sweeping out to knock the turian off his feet even as his partner fired a round from his assault rifle at the space where his human target had been standing upright an instant before.

Crouched low to the floor, Kai Leng shoved the nose of the pistol against the back of the still standing turian's knee. The joints of the combat suits were less protected to maintain flexibility; the thin mesh material did nothing to absorb the projectile when he squeezed the trigger. With a scream the turian fell to the floor, the assault rifle slipping from his grasp.

It had all taken less than a second. By the time the Illusive Man processed what was happening and dropped the Gorgon to reclaim his pistol, Kai Leng had grabbed the injured turian's helmet. One hand slipped beneath the chin, the other braced itself against the crown. The corded muscles of the tattooed human's bare chest flexed and he let out a grunt as he wrenched the turian's head at an impossible angle, breaking his neck and severing the spinal cord.

As the last turian was scrambling back to his feet, the Illusive Man shot him in the back. The first five rounds from the auto-repeating Harpy were deflected by the kinetic barriers. The next five were absorbed by the heavily padded layers of the combat suit. The final five pierced the flesh, damaging several vital internal organs.

The turian dropped to his knees, then slumped forward onto his face. Kai Leng added a final round to the back of the head from point-blank range for good measure before standing up.

"Is it clear the way you came?" the Illusive Man asked as he, too, stood up.

Kai Leng shook his head. "Our only hope is to get to the escape pod back in sector three."

The Illusive Man nodded. "Dr. Nuri's already there."

The two of them ran down the corridors of the doomed space station, knowing they could come across another turian patrol around any corner. The only reason they'd survived the last engagement was because Kai Leng had been able to sneak up on the turians from behind while they were focused on the Illusive Man and his guards. If they ran into another patrol, the ending would be much different.

Fortunately they didn't come across any enemy troops, though less than fifty meters from the escape pod they found grisly evidence that the turians had passed by earlier. Dr. Nuri's body was sprawled across the floor, her lifeless eyes staring up at the ceiling, a gaping shotgun wound in her chest.

Neither man made any comment as they stepped over her and continued on their way. A few seconds later they were in the escape pod. The vessel was capable of holding four passengers, but they weren't about to wait around and see if anyone else showed up.

Kai Leng sealed the door; the instant he was done the Illusive Man slammed his fist down on the button that jettisoned them to safety. As they shot clear of the station, the older man slumped across the padded seat, panting heavily in an effort to catch his breath.

It had been a long time since he'd seen any action; his body wasn't used to the intense physical exertions of combat. As he gasped for air, he was acutely aware that Kai Leng wasn't even breathing hard.

After a few minutes he had recovered enough to speak.

"You eliminated Grayson, I assume," he said.

Kai Leng shook his head. "There wasn't time. It was kill him or save you. I chose you."

The Illusive Man almost replied, "You made the wrong choice." Instead, he bit his tongue as he realized he could just as easily have asked Kai Leng the same question back on the station, while there was still a chance to do something about it.

The encounter with the turians had rattled him. He had thought he was going to die. Faced with a glimpse of his own mortality, he had decided not to ask Kai Leng about Grayson because he didn't want to know the answer. Not if it could cost him his life. He was a patriot, but deep down he wasn't ready to be a martyr.

He also had to accept the fact that this was all his own fault. There had been no need for him to come to the facility to oversee the experiments in person. He could have stayed on his secure station and received regular updates. But he'd wanted to watch Grayson suffer. He'd let his desire for vengeance override his common sense, and it had almost gotten him killed.

The truth wasn't pleasant, but the Illusive Man had made a career out of facing unpleasant truths. He wouldn't make the same mistake again. And he wasn't about to chastise one of his best agents for doing something he had tacitly approved of.

"That operation was too well planned to be a one-off mission," he informed Kai Leng. "Get on the secure channels. Find out who else was hit."

Damage control had to be his first priority. He needed to evaluate the situation, take stock of his resources. After that, he could turn his attention back to Grayson.

He couldn't be allowed to live. It wasn't about revenge anymore. They'd turned him into a monster, an abomination. Grayson had become an avatar of the Reapers, and now he was on the loose. Finding him and destroying him was the only way to protect humanity.

## ELEVEN

Grayson woke when he heard the alarms. More precisely, when his cybernetically enhanced senses detected the distant sound of sirens echoing from somewhere outside his cell, the Reapers in control of his body caused him to sit up and open his eyes.

He was once again trapped inside himself. He could see and hear everything acutely, his senses relaying information along the network of synthetic synapses coursing through the gray matter of his brain. He could feel the temperature of the air, cool against his skin. The stench of his own flesh—unwashed in weeks—filled his nostrils. Even his sense of taste was heightened to preternatural levels: the spicy sauce from the rations he had devoured last night still lingered on his tongue.

But though he was fully aware of his surroundings, it was all somehow distant, as if it was filtered before being processed. This wasn't the pleasant fog of a red sand high, though he could feel that the effects from the last dose of drugs Cerberus had given him had yet to clear his system. This was something else. It was almost as if his consciousness had been removed from the equation, the inexplicable link between the physical and mental self severed.

The Reapers were growing stronger: it was the only explanation. The thought caused his heart to pound as adrenaline released itself into his system. The instinctive fight-or-flight response gave Grayson hope. His fear had triggered the reaction; if his emotional state could still exert any kind of influence over his body, then perhaps all was not lost.

He tried to reassert control, his battle against the enemy within temporarily making him ignore the distant sounds of battle coming from somewhere far away. As he pushed against the Reapers, he felt them push back. They were aware of him and his efforts, just as he was aware of them on a far deeper, more intimate level than before.

Horried, Grayson tried to sever the link by flooding his mind with raw emotions: fear, hate, desperation. He hoped the primitive, animalistic thoughts would somehow disrupt or disgust the machines controlling him from beyond the edges of the galaxy, but it was immediately apparent that was not the case. He realized he was powerless; in this fight, he had no effective weapon to use against them.

The same could not be said of the Reapers. The sensation of a thousand red-hot needles piercing his skull made his mind scream in anguish, the suffering so brutally intense he instantly broke off his efforts to try and regain control of his body.

His enemy's victory was not absolute, however. In his torment, Grayson's physical shell had responded with a barely audible moan ... further proof he was not yet entirely under their control. The memory of the searing pain was too fresh for him to try and resist them again, at least for now. Instead, he let his consciousness retreat, falling back into itself and leaving the machines unopposed for the time being.

Relegated to the role of observer, he was witness as the Reapers moved him over to the cell door until his ear was pressed up against it. He felt the alien technology focusing its energies on his ears, and amazingly his hearing became so acute he was able to discern sounds beyond the constant whooping of the alarms. He could pick out gunfire and even yelling coming from both near and far, punctuated with the occasional explosion or scream. The Reapers took it all in, desperate for information, using the auditory clues to try and construct a probable scenario of what was happening outside.

Grayson didn't know what was happening, either. He had a few theories, but he was afraid to consider them in detail. He didn't think the Reapers could actually read his thoughts—not yet—but he didn't want to chance it.

They held the position for several minutes, ignoring or not caring about the cramp forming in Grayson's neck and shoulders from the awkward angle necessary to keep his ear plastered tightly to the door. Eventually he felt the muscles seize and spasm, bitterly cursing the twisted irony that even though he couldn't control his body, he still suffered when it was harmed.

A few minutes later the gunfire tapered off, then ceased altogether. Soon after, he heard multiple

footsteps as a small group approached the door. A second later they were fumbling with the electronic locking mechanism on the other side.

He thought the Reapers might brace for a desperate lunge for freedom the instant the door opened. The muscles in his legs trembled slightly as the option was considered, then quickly discarded. Instead, his body took several steps back so as to present less of a threat to whoever was about to come through.

Grayson was intently focused on everything his enemies did, on everything they had him do. Carefully studying his foe was his only hope of discovering any weakness they might have. The simple act of stepping away from the door told him the machines were rarely impulsive. They applied cold, unassailable logic to each situation, analyzing it for the most likely successful outcome. More often than not, he realized, they would choose to proceed with patience and caution.

The door slid open a few moments later to reveal three heavily armed turians. Discovering him inside the cell, they all took a step back and raised their weapons at Grayson's wild appearance.

His hair had grown back to cover his scalp, just as the scraggly, unkempt beard now covered his face. But he knew that wasn't what startled them. Completely naked as he was, the cybernetics weaving their way beneath his skin would be plainly visible; he suspected he barely looked human anymore.

"Who are you?" one of the turians demanded.

From the voice, it was obvious she was female. A long white scar ran across her chin, visible through the visor of her combat helmet along with the dark red markings painted on the bony carapace covering her face and skull.

"I'm a prisoner," the Reapers replied. "They tortured me. Experimented on me."

Grayson's voice rang hollow in his ears, like listening to a recording of himself.

"What's your name?" the turian demanded, keeping the gun leveled at his chest.

On some level Grayson was hoping she would shoot. She was obviously repulsed by the synthetic hybrid he'd become. Maybe she could sense the alien presence inside him. Maybe some finely honed self-preservation instinct would compel her to simply pull the trigger and end it.

The Reapers shook his head. "I ... I don't know my name. They drugged me."

"Look at his eyes, Dinara," one of the other turians noted. "Totally dusted."

"Please help me," the Reapers begged.

*No, don't!* Grayson silently screamed.

At a signal from their scarred leader, the turians lowered their weapons. Grayson was deflated the ruse had worked, but the fact the Reapers didn't know his name verified his suspicion that his thoughts were still private ... though for how much longer he couldn't say.

"Come with us," Dinara said.

The turians led him out of his cell, giving him his first glimpse of the facility where he'd been held prisoner. Beyond the door of the cell was a small hall; at the far end was a staircase leading up. At the top of the stairs was an observation room, made easily identifiable by the large, one-way mirrored window looking out over the cell below.

Beyond the observation room was what appeared to be a lab. A large console consisting of several computer stations filled the center of the room. The chairs were empty now, but Grayson had no trouble imaging his Cerberus tormentors sitting in the seats at the various terminals, monitoring the changes as his body was transformed into something hideous.

"See if you can find him something to wear in one of the sleeping cabins," Dinara ordered.

One of her followers disappeared out the door on the far side of the room, heading farther into the station in search of something for Grayson to wear. He returned a few minutes later clutching several pieces of clothing.

He handed them to Grayson, and the Reapers slowly made him get dressed. The pants were too large, as was the shirt. The boots were a size too small and pinched his feet. The Reapers didn't bother to complain.

Dinara reached up and placed a hand lightly on the side of her helmet, activating the built in receiver-transmitter.

“Status report,” she demanded.

With his heightened sense, Grayson was clearly able to hear both sides of the conversation.

“Facility is secure,” the voice on the other end replied. “Thirty-six enemy combatants confirmed dead. No prisoners.”

“Shut down the alarms,” the commander ordered, and a few seconds later the sirens abruptly stopped.

“We lost eleven of our own,” the voice on the other end of her comm-link continued in a more somber tone. “Seven from second team, two each from first and third teams. Two escape pods are missing.”

“Any sign of someone fitting the Illusive Man’s description?”

“Negative. If he was here, we let him slip through our fingers.”

“First and third teams stay here to hold the facility,” she said. “Second team rendezvous back at my shuttle. We’ve got a liberated Cerberus prisoner for transport.”

“Copy that.”

She lowered her hand and the transmitter clicked off.

“Come with us,” she said to Grayson. “We’ll get you somewhere safe.”

The three turians led him through the halls of what Grayson quickly realized was a space station. He didn’t recognize it, though it had the distinctive utilitarian look of a Cerberus base.

He realized the Reapers were making his head and eyes turn and gawk constantly as they walked, trying to take in as much of their surroundings as possible. The machines were capturing data, storing it inside their infinite memory banks in case they ever needed it.

The turians didn’t comment on his somewhat unusual behavior. Either they didn’t know enough about humans to realize he was acting strangely, or they chalked it up to the effects of the red sand.

Grayson expected the turians to lead him to the docking bay. Instead, they rounded a corner to reveal a massive hole in the side of the station’s hull. A chunk of metal two meters square lay on the floor, the edges scorched from where they had been partially sliced open by a powerful cutting beam, the metal itself twisted by the blast of the explosion that had finished the job.

The turian shuttle was visible through the hole, connected to the station by a fully enclosed platform extending directly into the shuttle’s airlock. Three more turians—the surviving members of team 2—emerged from the airlock to greet them and salute the commander.

“Tell me what happened to the others,” she ordered.

“Ledius, Erastian, and I split off from the others to cover more ground,” one of them replied. “They engaged an armed enemy force. By the time we arrived, the battle was over and they were dead.”

“All six of them?” their leader asked, her voice rising in disbelief.

“Most were killed at close quarters. It looks like they were ambushed from behind by three or maybe four assailants.”

“Their bodies will be returned to Palaven,” Dinara assured them, “and their spirits commended to that of the legion.”

All six turians bowed their heads and shared a moment of silence. Then Dinara activated the transmitter in her helmet.

“We’re ready to leave. Seal off this sector.”

“Affirmative, Commander.”

After a brief delay a warning siren let out three long blasts, followed by the heavy thud of bulkheads slamming shut from either direction of the corridor to seal off the damaged area so that the entire station wouldn’t decompress when the turian shuttle detached itself.

Satisfied, the turians boarded their ship. The Reapers had Grayson follow close behind. The shuttle wasn’t large, but it had room for ten, not including chairs for the pilot and copilot. Five seats lined the wall on either side, facing each other.

Two of the turians went up front to fly the vessel. Three took seats on one wall, while Grayson and the commander took the other.

“We can’t offer you anything to eat or drink,” Dinara apologized as she helped Grayson into his seat. The chair was far from comfortable; it had been designed for turian morphology. “Our only supplies are turian; they could be poisonous for your species.”

The Reapers nodded on Grayson's behalf.

"Take us back to the Citadel," the commander called out to the turians up front. "And send a message telling them we rescued a prisoner. Looks like he needs medical attention.

"Better transmit a retinal scan," she added. "He's too dusted to remember his name."

The engines fired up and the mass effect drive engaged. The pilot punched in coordinates, and then Grayson felt the familiar surge as the ship accelerated to faster than light speed, heading toward the nearest mass relay.

Until the shuttle dropped back to sublight speeds, they were completely isolated, undetectable by any scanners or tracking equipment and incapable of transmitting or receiving messages—the perfect time for the enemy within to strike.

Grayson could feel the Reapers gathering their power, and he fought to resist in any way he could. He had no great love for turians, but he didn't want to see any harm come to his liberators ... especially if he was going to be the one to take the blame.

Everyone on board the shuttle was armed and armored except for him. It might be possible to eliminate two or even three of the turians, but the others would make short work of him. In the close confines of the shuttle, firing weapons was dangerous; they might resort to knives or simply bludgeon him to death with the butts of their assault rifles. It would be ugly, violent, and messy. He didn't want to go out like that.

The Reapers were too focused on the turians to lash out at Grayson with another debilitating bust of mental agony, but his efforts to stop whatever it was they were planning succeeded only in causing his face to twist into a grotesque mask.

Glancing over at him, the turian commander's eyes went wide with alarm.

"Are you all right? What's wrong?"

In response, Grayson's fist slammed into her face, shattering the visor of her combat helmet and caving in the hard carapace protecting her features, killing her instantly. Grayson's mind let loose a silent howl of agony as the bones of his hand shattered from the force of the blow.

Oblivious to his suffering, the Reapers unleashed a powerful biotic wave at the three turians sitting across from them before they could react to the gruesome murder of their leader. The impact lifted them out of their seats and slammed them into the wall of the ship behind them, knocking the wind from their lungs and leaving them curled up on the floor gasping for breath.

Using Grayson's undamaged hand, the Reapers ripped the pistol from the belt of the commander's corpse, stood up, and delivered three kill shots execution style to the helpless turians on the ground.

Caught completely off guard by the unprovoked assault, the two turians up front were just now getting out of their seats to try and help their brethren. Grayson dropped the pistol and closed the distance between them, moving so quickly that everything around him became a blur.

His good hand wrapped itself around the wrist of the nearest turian and yanked him off his feet, tossing him to the back of the shuttle, where he landed with a heavy thud atop the bodies of the others.

This provided just enough time for the second turian to bring his assault rifle up. But as he squeezed the trigger Grayson slapped the nose of the weapon down. A stream of bullets deflected off the floor of the shuttle and ricocheted wildly around the reinforced walls of the cabin.

Several rounds ripped through Grayson's flesh: one through the shoulder of his damaged hand, another through the knee of the opposite leg, two through the thigh. There was a cry of pain as the stunned turian lying in the back of the shuttle was hit as well.

Grayson yanked the rifle from his opponent's grasp with his one good hand, taking it away as easily as an enraged parent might snatch a toy from a petulant child. Then he swung the rifle like a club, slamming it into the side of the turian's helmet. There was a muffled grunt and the unconscious body went limp.

Ignoring the pain from the rounds in Grayson's knee and thigh, the Reapers spun him around and sent him leaping through the air to land on the turian at the rear of the vessel as he tried to get up, knocking him back to the floor. Then the Reapers had Grayson lift up one of the heavy boots and bring it smashing down on his back again and again and again, cracking vertebrae, severing the spine, and causing him to spew frothy indigo spittle across the floor as the internal injuries caused his dark blue blood to seep into

his lungs.

When the turian beneath Grayson's boot had been reduced to a lifeless, pulpy mass, the Reapers stopped. Moving with purpose but without hurry, they piled all the bodies—including the still unconscious turian who had been bashed on the side of the head—into the airlock.

Had Grayson been in control of his body, he probably would have thrown up in reaction to the brutal assault. As it was, however, the Reapers kept him from having any physical reaction at all.

The most horrifying part was the cold, efficient way the savage attack had been planned and carried out. Grayson had sensed no anger or rage on the part of the Reapers as they had used him as an instrument of wanton slaughter. The massacre wasn't motivated by hate or even a sadistic desire to destroy organic life. The Reapers had analyzed the situation, determined a course of action, and followed it without any emotion whatsoever.

This, more than anything else, terrified their human host. It seemed to symbolize an inevitability about the Reapers, as if nothing could stop their relentless, passionless pursuit of their goal.

Once all the bodies were secured in the airlock, the Reapers had Grayson take a seat in the pilot's chair. Using his good hand, they punched in a series of commands that first disabled the vessel's transponder, then brought them out of FTL travel.

Grayson was an experienced pilot, but he had never been trained on a turian vessel. Alone, he probably could have fumbled through the process, but the Reapers moved with precision and certainty. They had an intimate knowledge of turian technology, and he could think of only one reasonable explanation.

The Reapers were gathering knowledge about him and his environment, recording everything they came into contact with. He didn't know how many of the aliens were in his head; sometimes it felt like a single entity, other times it felt like billions of individuals. In either case, however, it wasn't unreasonable to assume they shared whatever information they collected with others of their kind. Following this train of thought, if the Reapers had ever possessed a turian in the past for a long period of time, they could have learned virtually everything there was to know about that species. And now they were using Grayson to learn all they could about humanity.

The Reapers hit the eject button on the airlock, jettisoning the bodies into the cold vacuum of space. Then they plotted a new course—too quickly for Grayson to catch the final destination—and made the jump to light speed again. Finally, despite his heroic struggle to oppose their will, the Reapers closed his eyes and made him fall asleep.



## TWELVE

As she ran on the treadmill, Kahlee remained intently focused on her technique. She didn't believe in simply putting one foot in front of the other until she was out of breath and dripping with perspiration. There was an art to running; function followed form. She maintained an optimal stride length, kept her breathing under control, and focused on pumping her arms with each stride. Her pace never varied, and the kilometers—and minutes—rolled past.

The turian strike teams had left roughly twelve standard hours ago. Four hours after that, C-Sec had swooped in and arrested key Cerberus operatives for interrogation, including many high-ranking Alliance officials. As soon as the arrests were complete, Orinia had gone to oversee the interrogations. She had yet to return.

Anderson was gone as well, swallowed up by a maelstrom of meetings with representatives of the Alliance and the Turian Hierarchy in an effort to avert a political catastrophe. That left Kahlee alone in the turian embassy with nothing to do but wait for them to return. She didn't like to wait.

Patience had never been her strong suit. She was used to tackling multiple tasks at once. Whenever she felt bored or restless, whenever she felt the world dragging itself too slowly for her liking, she would throw herself into her work and occupy her mind with difficult, complex problems.

In that vein, she had tried reviewing the Cerberus data one last time, but there really wasn't any point. Not with the turian strike teams already deployed. She had employed a number of other methods to distract herself—surfing the extranet, reviewing data collected from the children of the Ascension Project, even watching a romantic comedy vid—but nothing helped. Knowing the plan to destroy Cerberus had been set in motion made it virtually impossible to concentrate on anything else.

In the end she'd resorted to a crude but effective therapy to vent her frustration: physical exertion. The turians had been gracious enough to offer her access to the fitness facilities of their embassy, and for the last three hours she had engrossed herself in a punishing cardio workout while waiting for an update on the strike teams.

She noticed a small ache building in her left knee, and she reluctantly reduced the speed of the treadmill to a walking pace. As a classic type A personality, she had a habit of overdoing things. After suffering many painful repetitive-stress injuries in her youth, she'd finally learned to pay attention to the warning signs her body gave her.

With the slower tempo, however, her mind began to wander back to the very things she was struggling to avoid. Could the turians really bring down Cerberus? Was it possible they might actually capture the Illusive Man? Would they ever find Grayson? And if they did, would he still be alive?

The questions gnawed at her, forcing her to pick up the pace again. But now that the ideas were firmly entrenched in her thoughts, even her run couldn't drive them back into her subconscious. After another twenty minutes she shut the treadmill down.

She'd promised to stay out of the way until the missions were over, but she'd reached a breaking point. It was time to march into the turian ambassador's office and demand answers!

Now that her mind had been made up, even taking the time to shower seemed like an unbearable delay. Wiping her neck and brow down with a towel, she marched over to the door, flung it open, and stepped right into Anderson and Orinia as they were coming in from the other side.

"Whoa, Kahlee," Anderson exclaimed. His hands instinctively reached up to wrap themselves around the biceps of her bare arms as he tried to catch her and absorb her momentum to keep them from crashing into each other.

His grip was firm, but not rough. Suddenly aware of the layer of perspiration covering her skin, Kahlee took a quick step back, breaking free of his grasp.

"We were just coming to find you," Orinia explained. "The strike teams have all reported back."

Unable to decipher the expression on the turian's unfamiliar features, she glanced over at Anderson to see if she could get a quick read on how things had turned out. She caught him rubbing his hands on his

hips, trying to subtly wipe away the sweat that had transferred to his palms when he'd grabbed Kahlee's arms. She flushed with embarrassment, and hoped he would think her color was simply a result of her recent physical exertions.

"Udina was pissed," Anderson explained, and she could tell he was just as embarrassed as she was. "Says I created a political shit-storm that's going to take months to clean up."

He was avoiding the details of the mission, and she could tell by the expression on his face that things hadn't gone exactly as planned.

"Tell me what happened."

"All Cerberus bases were neutralized," Orinia informed her. "Unfortunately, turian casualties were almost twenty percent—nearly double what we anticipated. And we failed to apprehend the Illusive Man."

"What about Grayson?" Kahlee asked, fearing she already knew the answer.

"Dinara's team found him on a space station in the Terminus Systems," Orinia said.

"He was still alive," Anderson interjected quickly. "They sent us a retinal scan to confirm his identity."

She should have felt relief at hearing his news, but something about the way he said it gave her pause.

"Why a retinal scan? Why couldn't he just tell them who he was? Something went wrong, didn't it?"

"Dinara and her team took Grayson aboard their shuttle and transmitted a message they were returning to the Citadel. That was three hours ago. We haven't heard anything since."

"They'd need at least three mass relays to make it back to the Citadel," Kahlee offered, refusing to give up on Grayson. "That could take longer than three hours."

"Each time they pass through a relay they'd need to drop to sub-FTL travel," Orinia explained. "Standard turian military procedure would require them to transmit an updated ETA and flight plan each time. We've had no contact since the initial message."

"What do you think happened?" she asked, her mind struggling with the implications of what she was being told.

"We don't know," Anderson admitted. "It's possible they could simply be having comm issues."

Kahlee knew spaceships were designed with too many redundant backups for something like that to happen. Any mechanical failure that kept them from at least sending out a distress call would have to be catastrophic. If it was a technical issue, the chance of their still being alive was almost zero.

"There are other possibilities," Orinia reminded them. "The Terminus Systems are a haven for slavers and pirates."

"Would any of them be stupid enough to attack a turian military shuttle?" Kahlee wanted to know.

"Probably not," Anderson conceded. "We have to consider the option that their disappearance has something to do with Cerberus. Maybe some type of retaliation for the attacks."

"We found no indication they had the ships or resources to strike back so quickly," Kahlee objected. "Even if the Illusive Man is still out there."

"Unless they had an asset on the shuttle itself," Orinia said darkly.

It took Kahlee a second to realize what she meant, then she shook her head vehemently.

"No! That's not possible. Grayson isn't a traitor."

"It's a scenario we have to consider," Orinia insisted. "None of the other explanations make any sense."

"Grayson's the whole reason we got this information!" Kahlee protested. "Why would he help us bring down Cerberus if he was working for them?"

"Maybe he's trying to overthrow the Illusive Man," Orinia suggested. "Using the turians to do the dirty work for him would be a masterful ploy."

"I know Grayson," Kahlee vowed. "I trust him. He wouldn't do this."

She turned to Anderson, looking for support.

"You believe me, don't you?"

"Kahlee," he asked, his tone grave, "is Grayson a drug addict?"

The relevance of the question was completely lost on her. "Why?"

"The retinal scan Dinara sent to confirm his identity was discolored. Pink. Like he'd been mainlining

red sand.”

“Those bastards!” Kahlee hissed, her face twisting up with rage. “He was clean for two years. Two years!”

“They must have drugged him while he was their prisoner to try and gain some kind of leverage over him. Sadistic sons of bitches!”

“How can you be sure that’s what happened?” Anderson pressed. “Addicts aren’t always the most loyal people. Maybe he was using again. All Cerberus would have to do was wait until he went into withdrawal and then offer him a fix in exchange for information.”

“He’s not like that anymore!” Kahlee shot back. “He turned his life around.”

Anderson didn’t say anything, but she could tell he had his doubts.

“There’s no doubt in my mind,” she assured him. “So why is this so hard for you to accept?”

“You’re not always the best judge of character,” he replied, choosing his words carefully. “It took a long time before you convinced yourself Dr. Qian’s work was dangerous enough to report him to the Alliance.”

“That was twenty years ago. I was young and naïve then,” she explained.

“What about Jiro Toshiwa?”

Kahlee didn’t realize Anderson knew about her former coworker at the Ascension Project, though it wasn’t surprising the reports had crossed his desk. In addition to being Kahlee’s lover, Jiro had also turned out to be a Cerberus mole inside the program.

“This is different,” she muttered, fixing Anderson with a dark scowl. “Grayson isn’t with Cerberus anymore. He turned against them for his daughter’s sake. He would never start working for them again.”

“Maybe not willingly,” Orinia said. “But we found evidence of medical experiments at the facility where he was being held prisoner. The data is encrypted and very advanced, but we think Cerberus was investigating some form of mental domination or mind control.”

“This is crazy!” Kahlee shouted. “Grayson is a victim, not the enemy!”

“Orinia’s just worried about her people,” Anderson said, trying to calm her down. “She doesn’t want to lose any more soldiers, and we have too many questions without any answers.”

“Then let me help find the answers,” Kahlee said, jumping on the opportunity. “Send me to the Cerberus facility. Let me look at their test results, and I’ll find out what they did to Grayson.”

“We’ll send our own experts to the station,” Orinia said, dismissing her offer.

Kahlee bit her lip to keep from shooting back a reply that would do more harm than good. She wanted to say that she had twenty years’ experience analyzing advanced scientific experiments in everything ranging from artificial intelligence to zoology. She wanted to remind Orinia that she was widely recognized as the most brilliant and accomplished complex statistical analyst in the Alliance. She wanted to mention that for the past decade she had been directly studying the effects of synthetic biotic implants on the human brain and nervous system. She wanted to point out that the odds of finding another individual in Council space with her combination of knowledge, experience, and talent was almost nil. And she wanted to scream that she could do more to help them in one hour than the entire team of turian so-called experts could achieve in a week.

But blowing up at the ambassador wouldn’t help her cause. Instead, she tried to present a rational and reasonable argument.

“I have some experience in this field—.”

“So do we,” Orinia replied, cutting her off.

Kahlee took a deep breath to calm herself, then continued.

“The Cerberus scientists are human. They’re going to think like humans, use methodology and processes common to my culture, but likely very different from what your scientists are familiar with.

“Biology and society combine to create familiar, recognizable patterns in the minds of every individual within a particular species. The way the data is encrypted—even the way it’s organized and categorized—will be more accessible to me than it will be to a turian, no matter how brilliant.”

Orinia didn’t answer right away, no doubt balancing the advantages of sending Kahlee to analyze the data against the risks of letting a human become an integral part of what was still technically a turian

mission.

“If there’s any hope of finding Dinara and her team alive, we have to move fast,” Anderson pointed out, playing on the ambassador’s sense of loyalty to her fellow soldiers. “Your people might figure this out eventually, but we’ll see results a hell of a lot faster if Kahlee’s there.”

Orinia nodded, and Kahlee could almost forgive Anderson for doubting her about Grayson.

“My shuttle’s leaving in an hour. How fast can you be ready to go?”

“Just tell me where to meet them, and I’ll be there,” Kahlee assured her.

“So will I,” Anderson added.

“I thought you’d have to stay here to help smooth things over with the Alliance,” Kahlee said, mildly surprised.

“Actually, I resigned my post,” Anderson said. “Udina was threatening to launch some massive investigation into what he called my ‘inappropriate diplomatic relations’ with the turians.

“The Alliance brass was going to put me on administrative leave until it was all sorted out, so I told Udina to cram his investigation up his ass and I quit.”

“David,” Kahlee said, reaching up to put a hand on his shoulder. “I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be,” he said with a shrug. “I’m sick of being a politician. I used to be proud of what I did; I felt like I was making a real difference in the galaxy. Then I became a desk jockey and everything I tried to accomplish got buried in a mountain of political bullshit.

“Maybe this is my chance to do something that matters one last time before I pack it all in.”

“I’ll tell the shuttle commander to expect you both,” Orinia said.

“Don’t be late,” she warned as they headed out the door. “We turians are nothing if not punctual.”

## THIRTEEN

The Illusive Man sat in the chair of his private office surrounded by darkness, staring out at the dying red sun that dominated the viewing window. He was letting his mind settle, his sense of confidence and control returning now that he was back in the familiar—and secure—surroundings. The turians may have hit Cerberus from all angles, but thankfully they had failed to strike at the true heart of the organization.

As cautious as the Illusive Man was with his operatives and operations, he was downright paranoid when it came to protecting this one location. Including Kai Leng, who was on board right now, only six Cerberus field operatives had ever set foot on this space station. Each time one of them visited he had the crew relocate the vessel to another system as soon as the guest departed.

The mobility preserved the secrecy, as did the harsh personnel screening practices used to recruit the onboard crew. The two dozen Cerberus agents who manned the unnamed space station that served as his inner sanctum were the most loyal and devoted of his followers. These were the fanatics, the zealots.

They were identified through a battery of psychological tests from among the Cerberus rank and file, and part of their training was a subtle yet effective program of propaganda that stoked the fires of their fervent belief in the cause and its leader. The individuals assigned to work here didn't just respect him; they revered him. Worshipped him. Each would have given his or her life without any question or hesitation if he commanded it.

There had been times when the Illusive Man had wondered if he was crossing a line. Was building himself up as a virtual god a necessary security measure, or merely a way to feed his own ego?

The events of the past twenty-four hours had irrefutably answered that question. The turians had dealt Cerberus a savage blow. Many of his key operatives inside the Alliance were now in turian custody. Some would refuse to talk, even when threatened with a capital sentence for treason against the Council. Others, however, would readily spill their guts to save their hides. A number of the undercover operatives not yet exposed would either turn themselves in to avoid the harshest penalties, or abandon their assumed identities and go on the run as the dominoes began to fall.

The vast financial network of companies and corporations that helped fund Cerberus—some knowingly, others unwittingly—was about to be exposed and dismantled. The Illusive Man would still have more personal wealth than he would ever need, but the cost of running an organization like Cerberus was astronomical, and until he rebuilt his financial support network it would be a considerable drain on his resources.

More troubling than the loss of his fortune and his inside sources in the Alliance, however, was the destruction of so many strategically vital operational facilities. The turians had captured two primary military training bases and four major research labs. From what he had been able to gather, few if any of the personnel had been taken alive, meaning that in addition to trillions of dollars of equipment, weapons, and resources, several of the most brilliant minds recruited to their cause had been lost as well.

However, despite the damage done, Cerberus still survived. The Illusive Man's network of followers was far larger than the Alliance could even imagine. There were other research bases and other training facilities located in systems both inside and outside of Council space. The network of scattered agent cells operating independently across the galaxy was still intact.

Through this unassailable space station known only to the most trusted few, the Illusive Man could still control and direct his followers while remaining hidden from both his enemies and his own people. Slowly he would regain what had been taken. He would gather resources and rebuild the political and economic shadow empire that had supported him. He would recruit new followers, and construct new facilities to replace those that had been destroyed. He had already put contingency plans in place to get new operatives assigned to key Alliance positions.

It would take time to recover completely, but humanity still needed Cerberus to protect and defend it. Despite what he had suffered, he wasn't about to turn his back on the people of Earth and its colonies.

But all that was for the future. In the present, he still had to deal with the problem of Grayson being at

large. He knew Kai Leng was eager to go after the traitor, but he'd need help and support to hunt down and destroy the monster they had created.

Yet Cerberus couldn't do it alone. His organization was vulnerable right now. He had to be careful. His enemies wouldn't be satisfied with simply setting Cerberus back; they wouldn't rest until the Illusive Man was dead or in prison. They'd anticipate his efforts to rebuild, would be watching and waiting for him to reemerge, keeping a close eye on anyone who could possibly be sympathetic to his cause. Approaching potential allies right now was too dangerous; the solution lay elsewhere.

To bring Grayson down, he would have to look outside the human race, and even outside Council space. For the sake of humanity's future, he would have to swallow his pride and beg for help from those who represented everything Cerberus despised about alien cultures.

This all began on Omega. And if he wanted to end it, he would have to send Kai Leng back.

Kahlee and Anderson exited from the shuttle via the boarding ramp, falling into step behind the turian soldier who had been sent to greet them and take them to the lab. The half-dozen scientists Orinia had sent with them on the shuttle disembarked and followed close behind.

The docking bay of the Cerberus station was large enough to accommodate not only their own vessel, but also those of the turian assault teams that had originally secured the station. Yet even with all the ships, there was still plenty of room for the bodies.

The turians still hadn't finished cleaning up from the assault. A handful of their people were laid out respectfully in one corner of the bay, their arms folded across their breasts, their weapons lying beside them.

In stark contrast, the human casualties had been dumped haphazardly in the middle of the docking bay's cargo floor. They were being systematically stripped of anything of value by a team of turians. As they finished with each body, two of them would pick it up—one at the wrists, the other at the ankles—then carry it over and toss it onto the growing pile against the far wall.

Cerberus was the enemy, but Kahlee still felt a natural revulsion watching the aliens loot the bodies of her own kind. She glanced over at Anderson and noticed he was pointedly looking the other way.

"Thought they'd have more respect for the dead," she whispered, speaking softly so the turian guide a few steps in front of them wouldn't overhear.

"The turians show no quarter for an enemy," Anderson reminded her in a similarly low voice. "Look what they did to the krogan."

Kahlee nodded, remembering how the turians had released the genophage on the krogan homeworld—a biological weapon that effectively sterilized 99.9 percent of the population. Cerberus had brought this on themselves by openly declaring their intention to see humans eliminate or dominate every other species in the galaxy. As far as the turians were concerned, they were in a war for their very survival.

And it wasn't like they were going to jettison the bodies into space; all the dead would be sent back to the Alliance for identification. That was what bothered Kahlee the most—she couldn't help thinking about those who would be tasked with notifying the families of the dead. Breaking the news to a parent or spouse was hard enough; it would be even more difficult having to tell the bereaved that the person they loved had been a traitor to the Alliance.

Fortunately their guide was setting a brisk pace, and they soon left the horrors of the docking bay behind. He wove his way down the corridors and halls of the Cerberus space station. The signs of battle—bloodstains on the walls and floor, scorch marks and scoring from the ammo—were still clearly visible.

Passing by an open door, Kahlee caught sight of something out of the corner of her eye.

"Wait," she called. "Hold on a second. What's that room back there?"

Their guide stopped and turned around slowly. It was clear he didn't like taking orders from a human. But Orinia had promised Anderson the turians on the station would cooperate with them, and he wasn't about to disobey his superior.

"It's some kind of operating theater," he answered.

"I want to see it."

The guide nodded, and Kahlee and Anderson went into the room. The turian scientists followed them,

their own curiosity piqued as well.

The room was stark and utilitarian. A bright lamp hung down from the ceiling in the center. Beneath it was a gurney fitted with leather restraints. The straps and the gurney were stained with dried blood, as was the floor around it.

“They didn’t use an anesthetic,” Kahlee muttered, feeling sick to her stomach.

Medical equipment on wheels had been pushed up against the far wall. Some of it Kahlee recognized from her work with the Ascension program: an EEG monitor; an endoscope; a cranial drill. Other, more sinister-looking machines she could only guess the purpose of.

She gave each piece a quick examination, trying to get a feel for what it might have been used for. At the same time she struggled not to picture Grayson screaming as he was subjected to the bizarre medical tortures.

Once she was done, she and the rest of the group went back out into the hall, where the guide was waiting.

“I need to see where Grayson was being held,” she said.

“We have to go through the lab,” he told her. “Follow me.”

They continued through the station until they reached what was obviously the station’s primary research lab. There was a large bank of computer terminals in the center of the room. Several of the terminals had turians sitting at them, doing their best to hack through the layers of security on the system.

The process of analyzing what Cerberus had been up to was threefold. First the encrypted data had to be carefully extracted from the databases. Then it had to be decrypted. Finally, it would be analyzed by Kahlee and the other scientists.

One of the techs was walking around the room from terminal to terminal, coordinating the work of the data extraction team.

“You must be Dr. Sanders,” he said, extending his hand. “My name is Sato Davaria.”

Kahlee shook his hand, as did Anderson.

“Admiral David Anderson,” he said by way of introduction.

“An honor to meet you, sir,” the turian replied with genuine sincerity.

The turians were a military society; it wasn’t surprising that someone with as distinguished a service career as Anderson would be known by reputation.

“I need to see where Grayson was held,” Kahlee said.

Sato looked over at their guide, who nodded to indicate he should comply with her request.

“This way,” he said, taking them through a small door at the rear of the lab. The other scientists promptly fell in line behind them; at some point they had obviously decided to defer to Kahlee, at least for now.

The door led into an observation room. There was a large window in the far wall—probably one-way glass—overlooking a sparsely furnished prison cell below. The only other exit from the observation room was a small spiraling staircase leading down.

Sato led them down the stairs and into a small hall that terminated at the door to the cell. Kahlee pushed it open and stepped inside.

An unpleasant smell lingered in the stale air—a mixture of sweat, urine, and excrement. There was a small cot in one corner and a toilet in another. A shelf of bottled water and rations had been built into one of the walls. Several of the ration kits were scattered about the floor.

“No sink. No mirror. No shower,” Kahlee noted. “They were treating him like an animal. Trying to dehumanize him.”

“He was naked when he was discovered,” Sato confirmed.

“Let’s go back upstairs,” Kahlee said. “I want to see what you’ve pulled from the data banks so far.”

“We’re making progress,” Sato explained as they climbed the stairs, “but it’s slow going.”

“So far it looks like there was only one test subject in the whole facility. We’ve decrypted what could be preliminary results from the experiment. But our job is just to pull it out. You’re the ones who have to determine what it all means.”

When they reached the lab again, Sato took a seat at one of the open terminals. He started flipping

through screens until he found the files he was looking for. Reaching out, he tapped the haptic interface, causing the data to balloon up so that all the hovering screens were suddenly filled with an assortment of charts, graphs, and raw numerical data.

He got up from the chair so Kahlee could sit down, then stood over her shoulder as she began to flip through the data. Anderson came over to stand by her other shoulder, showing his support.

“See this chart here,” she said, touching one of the screens so that it expanded and moved to the forefront of the display. “This is the kind of thing we track on kids recently fitted with biotic amplifiers.”

“What does that mean?” Anderson asked.

“It confirms the theory that Cerberus implanted Grayson with something. Possibly some kind of experimental cybernetics.”

She continued to glance over the data, then stopped when she recognized something else, the cold chill of an old memory creeping down her spine.

“I’ve seen this before, too,” she said softly. “Advanced AI research. The same kind of thing Dr. Qian was working on back at Sidon.”

“Are you sure?” Anderson wanted to know.

“I’m sure.”

“This must have something to do with the Reapers,” Anderson said.

Unfamiliar with the name, Kahlee asked, “Who are the Reapers?”

Anderson hesitated, as if he was gathering his thoughts. Or maybe wondering how much he could say.

“They’re a species of massive, hyperintelligent starships trapped in the void of dark space. They wiped out the Protheans fifty thousand years ago. Now they’re looking for a way to return so they can wipe out all intelligent organic life again.”

Kahlee blinked in surprise. “I’ve never heard anything remotely like that before in my life.”

“I know how crazy it sounds,” Anderson admitted. “But it’s true. When Saren led the geth army against the Citadel, they weren’t following him. They were answering to the Reapers. Saren was just an agent under his control.”

“Saren Arterius was a traitor,” Sato interjected, his voice sharp and bitter. “Don’t try to excuse his actions with some crazy story.”

Kahlee knew Saren was a sore point for the turians. Though he was once revered as a hero of his people, his betrayal had made him a source of shame for the species. But Anderson had no love for him, either. He had no reason to mention this unless he believed it.

“If this is true,” she said, still trying to wrap her head around the idea, “then why haven’t I ever heard of it before? It should have been all over the vids.”

“The Council suppressed the story. They said there was no real evidence, and they didn’t want to cause mass panic. But I worked with Commander Shepard. I saw the uncensored reports. The Reapers are real.”

“It’s still a hell of a leap to trace this all back to Qian,” Kahlee noted.

“You told me Qian had become obsessed with some kind of ancient, hyperadvanced AI technology. I think he found something connected to the Reapers. Saren must have gotten his hands on it during our mission to Camala.”

“Okay. But I still don’t see the connection with Cerberus.”

“A few months ago, Cerberus learned the Collectors were abducting humans from remote colonies in the Terminus Systems so they could conduct horrific experiments on them.

“Cerberus stopped the Collectors, and they discovered they were working for the Reapers ... just like Saren!”

“How do you know all this?” Sato demanded.

“I’ve seen the mission reports,” Anderson assured them. “I’ve talked to people who were there. I’m not making this up.

“Cerberus must have recovered some of the Reaper technology from the Collectors. That’s what they were doing here—experimenting on Grayson the same way the Collectors were experimenting on the colonists!”



“This is ridiculous!” the tech declared, and the general murmur from the turian scientists in the room seemed to support him.

“Look at the files,” Anderson insisted. “You’ll see I’m right.”

Everyone turned to Kahlee, waiting for her opinion on the matter. She wasn’t going to condemn Anderson’s theory, but she wasn’t ready to support it yet. Not without further evidence either way.

“The files will tell us the truth,” she reminded them. “But whatever Cerberus was up to here, we need to figure it out.”

## FOURTEEN

Kai Leng wasn't worried about being recognized as he made his way through the twisting thoroughfares of Omega. The last time he had been here his appearance had been carefully altered. This time, as per the Illusive Man's instructions, he wasn't wearing a disguise.

Still, he was wary. Though he appeared calm on the surface, his senses had entered a state of hyperawareness. It was always a good idea to be on the lookout for trouble when visiting Omega. The lawless station was overrun with mercenaries and criminals; every encounter had the potential to suddenly erupt into violence.

Kai Leng glared at a pair of batarians approaching him, his eyes burning into them, sizing them up as potential threats. The four-eyed freaks noticed him staring. He could see a moment of indecision in their eyes: was this a threat worth confronting, or one they should just walk away from? In the end they made the right choice and crossed over to the other side of the street.

When the Illusive Man had first told him of his latest assignment, Kai Leng had expressed his skepticism.

"I don't think Aria T'Loak is a fan of Cerberus."

"She's a businesswoman," the Illusive Man had assured him. "At the very least she'll listen to our offer."

"And if she refuses?"

"We're not looking for a fight," the Illusive Man had reminded him. "We're trying to form a partnership."

"I need someone I can trust for this mission," he'd continued. "Just say and do everything exactly like I told you and it will all work out."

Kai Leng rounded the corner and came in sight of Afterlife. As was typical, the line to get in stretched down the block before disappearing around the corner. He had no intention of waiting in the queue, however.

Marching up to the krogan bouncer at the entrance, he declared, "I need to see Aria T'Loak."

"Name?" the krogan asked, ready to relay it to someone inside for confirmation that he was expected.

"I'm not on the list," Kai Leng admitted.

"Then you don't get in."

A pair of thousand-credit chips suddenly appeared in the assassin's hand. He reached over and pressed them into the krogan's massive palm.

"You can't bribe your way into Afterlife," the krogan declared with a deep laugh, extending his hand to return the credits to Kai Leng.

"Tell her I have information about a man named Paul Grayson," Kai Leng insisted, refusing to take the money back. "She might know him as Paul Johnson," he added.

The krogan's eyes narrowed to thin slits, but he did reach up to activate the transmitter built into the collar of his suit.

"Relay a message to Aria," he said to someone inside the club. "Some human here to see her about Paul Grayson. Or maybe it's Paul Johnson. He's not on the list."

There was about thirty seconds of silence as they waited for a response. Then the krogan's eyes went wide as he heard the orders coming from the other end.

"Yeah. Right. I'll send him right in."

He turned back to the waiting human. "Aria's sending someone to meet you. Head inside to the claim check."

Once again he offered the credits back to Kai Leng.

"Keep them," he told the bouncer, following the Illusive Man's orders to try and make a favorable impression.

The krogan shook his massive head. "Aria says you're to be comped for everything tonight. Including

door fees.”

Kai Leng took the credits back and slipped them into his pocket, then made his way down a short hall to the claim check. In addition to the two armed krogan and the pair of whorish asari behind the counter whom he’d seen here on a previous visit, a batarian was waiting at the checkpoint to greet him.

“Put all weapons on the counter,” he insisted.

“I thought patrons were allowed to be armed inside the club,” Kai Leng protested.

“Not if you want a personal meeting with Aria,” the batarian replied.

Kai Leng hesitated, reluctant to leave himself vulnerable while walking into a veritable lion’s den.

“You could always put your name on the list and come back after we run some background checks on you,” the batarian mocked. “Should only take a week or two.”

Kai Leng placed his pistol and knife on the counter. One of the asari took his weapons away and disappeared into the back. The other handed him a claim ticket and flashed him a lurid wink. Kai Leng ignored her.

“Stand still for the body scan,” one of the krogan grumbled.

Once he was cleared, the batarian led him into the club. He pushed his way through the crowd, parting the way before them. Kai Leng was glad he didn’t have to squeeze through the stinking, sweating bodies of the alien patrons himself.

The club was much as Kai Leng remembered: a den of disgusting filth, with drunk and stoned individuals from every species gyrating against each other on overcrowded dance floors to the relentless beat of uninspired techno music.

They climbed the staircase to the upper level, where the music’s volume was at least bearable and the crowds were somewhat tolerable. The batarian led him across the club to where Aria T’Loak was sitting at a table in an elevated booth.

An asari handmaiden was seated on either side of her. Standing close by was the largest krogan Kai Leng had ever seen. Well over eight feet tall, he had to weigh at least five hundred pounds.

In addition to the weapons Aria’s menagerie carried, Kai Leng knew the three asari were all powerful biotics. It was possible the krogan was, as well; biotics were rare among the reptilian species, but not unheard of. Even if he wasn’t, however, he was clearly capable of physically overpowering anyone else in the club.

The batarian led him up the small staircase into the private booth, then stepped off to the side. Aria didn’t ask him to sit; even if she had, Kai Leng would have declined. Perhaps she knew that, which was why she hadn’t made the offer.

Kai Leng suddenly understood why the Illusive Man had insisted on planning out everything he was going to do and say in such detail. They hadn’t even made their introductions, and the negotiations had already begun.

“You have information on Grayson?” Aria said, breaking the silence.

“You want to find him,” Kai Leng replied, following the script he’d memorized. “So do we. I think we can help each other.”

Kai Leng noticed that the batarian and the krogan had subtly shifted their positions to stand behind him. Aria’s people now had him surrounded.

“I don’t get involved with people I don’t know,” the Pirate Queen informed him. “So let’s start with you telling me your name.”

“You know I wouldn’t give you my real name,” Kai Leng replied. “I can make something up if you want, but it seems like a waste of time.”

“Are you willing to tell me who you’re working for, at least?”

As instructed, he answered truthfully. “I work for Cerberus. Grayson used to be one of our people.”

Every alien in the booth tensed, except for Aria herself.

“Why is Cerberus in my club?” she demanded coolly.

“My boss wants to make you an offer,” Kai Leng replied.

“Why would I help an organization sworn to eliminate me and my kind?” Aria asked. “Maybe I should just kill you right here instead.”

"I'd take at least three of your people with me," Kai Leng warned, forgetting his promise to stay on script. "Maybe even you, if I get lucky."

Behind him the batarian laughed. "You're not even armed. What are you going to do?"

Aria tilted her head to the side, a contemplative smile crossing her lips.

"Don't be a fool, Sanak," she said. "It's obvious our friend doesn't need a weapon to kill."

"This can end in violence," Kai Leng noted, his voice as calm as if he were discussing the weather. "Or it can end with you making a very tidy profit."

"You have my attention," Aria admitted.

Aria had studied the human as he'd crossed the floor of the club and approached her booth. The lean, tattooed man was obviously a highly skilled assassin. He showed neither fear nor bravado, moving through the crowd with the easy grace of a predator on the prowl.

Yet she was still able to pick up the revulsion in his body language. He was disgusted by the other patrons; they were lesser life-forms in his eyes. If pressed, he wouldn't hesitate to kill any one of them, and she was certain he would feel no remorse over his actions.

"The Illusive Man wants to speak to you himself," the assassin told her. "Somewhere more private."

"I prefer to do my business in the club," she informed him. "He can come meet me here if he wants to negotiate."

"He's not foolish enough to set foot on Omega. You can contact him through a secure comm channel. He's waiting for your call, if you're interested."

Aria had to admit she was intrigued. She was eager to find out more about the man she'd known as Paul Johnson and his possible role in Liselle's death. Plus, Cerberus's anti-alien bias was well known; she was curious to know why they had come to her so openly. And the chance to speak to the Illusive Man was an opportunity she wasn't about to pass up; it was amazing how much one could learn about an adversary through a single conversation.

"Come with me," she said by way of agreement.

Her handmaidens slid out from behind the table, allowing Aria to do the same. She led the human through the club to the private rooms in the back. Most of these could be rented out on an hourly, daily, or even weekly basis by patrons of the club. But there was one chamber Aria always kept reserved for herself and those rare occasions when she wanted to conduct business away from the eyes of Omega's curious public.

They entered the room and Aria took a seat at the comm terminal. The human stood off to one side while her own people took up positions scattered about the room.

"Do you have holographic relay technology?" the human asked.

Aria didn't rise to the obvious bait, but from off in the corner Sanak snorted, "We're not savages."

"Give me the comm channel," Aria said, ignoring the batarian as she activated the holo projector.

The human complied, and a few seconds later the image of a well-dressed older human with silver hair and bright blue eyes materialized in the center of the room. He was seated in a chair on what was obviously a space station. A swirling but unidentifiable nebula could be seen through an observation window behind him. In his right hand he held a lit cigarette.

"Aria T'Loak," he said with a slight nod. "I'm the Illusive Man."

"I'm disappointed you lacked the courage to meet me in person," she said, gently needling him in the hopes of goading some type of reaction.

"Are we here to play games, or talk business?" he asked, his demeanor unchanged.

Aria didn't reply right away. She wanted to make him sweat.

The three-dimensional holographic image was lifelike enough for her to easily make out the subtle clues and body language projected by the man on the other end of the call. She studied him during the long silence as he took a slow drag on his cigarette, analyzing the unconscious mannerisms and expressions of his every movement.

To her disappointment, she quickly realized she wasn't picking up anything useful. His actions were a confusing mélange of false signals and intentional misinformation carefully orchestrated to hide his true

feelings.

“I was told you wanted to speak to me,” she finally said, opening the negotiations.

“Grayson betrayed our organization,” the Illusive Man told her, putting his offer on the table. “We’ve been hunting him for over two years. Now I’m willing to pay you to kill him.”

“Somebody went after Grayson while he was working for me,” Aria said. “They killed one of my people. I think it was Cerberus.”

“Nobody came after Grayson,” the man corrected her. “He fled because his cover was blown, then staged the scene to make it look like he was abducted in order to buy time for his escape.”

“His cover? Are you claiming he was spying on me?”

“Grayson infiltrated your organization. Climbed the ranks. Made himself invaluable. But the whole time he was working for you, he was gathering intel for his new employers.”

Aria focused all her attention on the man as he spoke, carefully noting the inflection of his voice, his posture as he sat in his chair, his facial expressions and the involuntary movements of his eyes. But she was still unable to get any kind of read on him.

Only a handful of individuals in the galaxy could successfully lie to Arai T’Loak; with some dismay she realized the Illusive Man was one of them. But the fact that he *could* lie to her didn’t necessarily mean he was lying to her.

She considered what he had told her so far. Grayson had worked for Cerberus, then betrayed them. Now they wanted revenge. That much she could believe; why else would the Illusive Man have sent his representative to Omega to bargain with her?

Given that he’d betrayed his previous employer, it wasn’t hard to believe he had done the same thing to her. However, there were still too many pieces missing for her to accept the story without further investigation.

“Who was Grayson working for?” she wanted to know.

“A turian loyalist group. They’re bitter over humanity’s growing influence on the Council. They want to expand turian interests. They’re planning to make inroads into the Terminus Systems.”

The scenario was plausible enough. Though they were technically allies, everyone knew there was still lingering resentment between turians and humanity. If a group of nationalists did want to spread turian interests, the Terminus Systems would be the logical place to begin. And anyone who wanted to make inroads in the Terminus Systems would have to deal with Aria sooner or later.

Maybe Liselle had discovered Grayson’s secret. He could have killed her to keep her quiet. But Grayson was smart enough to know he couldn’t get away with her murder. Everyone knew they were sleeping together; if she turned up dead—or even disappeared—he would have been the prime suspect. So he fled Omega, leaving behind a staged abduction scene to throw Aria and her people off his track.

The more she thought about it, the more plausible it all seemed.

“One thing I don’t get,” Sanak said, stepping forward as he barged his way into the conversation in his typical heavy-handed style. “Why would Grayson work for a pro-human group like Cerberus, then suddenly switch his alliance to a bunch of turian nationalists?”

The holographic image in the Illusive Man’s chamber showed Aria T’Loak seated in what appeared to be a well-furnished suite. The projected image was centered on her, but at the edges it was possible to make out several aliens who were also in the room. Kai Leng wasn’t visible, but the Illusive Man assumed he was there as well.

When the batarian stepped forward and interposed himself into the picture to ask his question, the Illusive Man didn’t offer an explanation right away. He was building an elaborate lie, and if he wanted Aria to fall for it he had to let her do some of the work herself.

“Don’t be dull,” the asari said to her lieutenant, as if on cue. “Grayson’s a mercenary. He has no loyalty to any cause. He works for the highest bidder.”

The Illusive Man was well aware of an interesting phenomenon. The smarter someone was, the easier it was to make them believe a complex lie. The simple-minded focused on the holes in the story; they needed an explanation for every loose end. The intelligent filled in the holes themselves, using logic,

reason, and creative thinking to weave the threads together into a perfect tapestry of deception.

However, it was also important to weave in bits of the truth to reinforce and support the layers of the story that were false. He knew Aria would have investigated Grayson's disappearance. If she had managed to track any of his communications, it was inevitable she would have come across one name popping up time and time again.

"Grayson doesn't work alone," the Illusive Man declared. "He has a partner. A woman named Kahlee Sanders."

He was hoping the name would elicit some type of reaction from Aria, but her expression remained unchanged. Grudgingly, he had to admit she was almost as good at concealing her true emotions as he was.

"Sanders is the key to finding Grayson," he continued. "She doesn't know the truth about him; she thinks he left Cerberus because he realized the error of his ways. She also thinks the turians they're working with serve the Council.

"She's nothing but a pawn in his games. He's using her. But we can use her, too.

"Sanders is the only person Grayson cares about other than himself," the Illusive Man explained, weaving in more bits of truth into his extravagant lie. "He will try to contact her sooner or later. Force her to send a reply asking for his help, and he'll come."

The Illusive Man paused, knowing a monologue was the least effective way to sell a fabrication. It was always more effective if there was some kind of give-and-take. He needed Aria or her people to engage in order to be truly persuasive.

Fortunately the batarian at her side was happy to oblige.

"Sanders is untouchable," he objected, confirming the Illusive Man's suspicions that Aria already knew about her. "She's hiding out at one of the embassies on the Citadel."

Kai Leng had filed extensive reports on Aria and her people during his preparations to grab Grayson. Based on the batarian's appearance and demeanor, the Illusive Man concluded he had to be Sanak, one of the Pirate Queen's longest-serving lieutenants.

"Sanders isn't at the embassy anymore," the Illusive Man explained. "The turians took her to a secret research station. Heavily protected, but a well-armed force with the element of surprise would be able to overwhelm the defenders and take Sanders hostage."

"Your information on this is solid?" Aria asked.

"My sources are always reliable," the Illusive Man assured her.

"So just go get her yourself," Sanak objected.

"The turian nationalists know we're their enemy. They try to keep tabs on all Cerberus movements. We'd never be able to pull off an operation like this without them knowing about it beforehand.

"But," he added, nodding in Aria's direction, "they will never see you coming."

"How much is this worth to you?" Aria wanted to know.

"Four million credits," the Illusive Man stated. "One million up front. The other three when Grayson's death is confirmed."

"Grayson's worth four million?" the batarian exclaimed in disbelief.

"What he knows about Cerberus is," Aria replied. "He has secrets they want to keep buried. Maybe I should try to take him alive."

The Illusive Man was impressed. Even though his offer was ridiculously high, he'd expected the Pirate Queen to haggle over the amount simply on principle. But she was smart enough to realize the key to the deal wasn't the amount of credits on the table, but rather Grayson himself.

"You might be able to sell his information, but you'll never find a buyer who can even come close to matching our offer," he told her. "He's worth more to both of us dead than alive."

Aria thought about it before nodding her assent.

"I accept your offer. Your representative can stay here as my guest until the deal is done."

"No," the Illusive Man replied, flatly declining her offer. "Cerberus will contact you with Sanders's location only after he is safely off Omega."

"Are you trying to offend me?" Aria asked. "Everyone knows my word is my bond."

“Nothing changes hands until we report back,” the Illusive Man insisted. “When we contact you about Sanders, you can provide instructions to transfer the credits into your account and we’ll send the down payment.”

She considered the offer for several minutes before nodding her agreement.

“We have a deal.”

The holographic image suddenly vanished as Aria immediately disconnected the call, determined to get in the last word.

The Illusive Man let the hint of a satisfied smile cross his lips as he spun in his chair to better enjoy the magnificent view while finishing his cigarette.

Kai Leng bit his tongue to keep from commenting on Aria’s abrupt end to her call with the Illusive Man. He suspected she had done it to try and get a rise out of him, and he wasn’t about to give her the satisfaction.

“One of our operatives will contact you through the extranet once I’m off the station,” he said, reiterating the Illusive Man’s terms. “She’ll make arrangements to transfer the funds.”

“Why are you so eager to leave?” she asked. “We should celebrate this partnership. At least stay and enjoy a drink in the club. On me.”

“Our business is done. I’m ready to leave,” Kai Leng insisted.

He had no desire to stay any longer in her presence than was absolutely necessary, and he wasn’t worried about offending her with his honest answer. Aria had made the logical decision to accept the deal; she wasn’t about to change her mind because of a little rudeness on his part. She was far too smart to let emotions get in the way of business.

The asari shrugged indifferently, confirming his theory.

“As you wish. Sanak, escort our anonymous guest out.”

The batarian led him from the private room, through the club, and back to the entrance. Kai Leng was only too happy to retrieve his weapons and leave the pounding music of Afterlife behind for the crowded Omega streets.

He made his way down the street for several blocks in the direction of the nearest spaceport, keeping an eye out to see if he was being followed. Once he was satisfied Aria hadn’t put a tail on him, he changed course.

Despite what he’d told Aria, the Illusive Man had given Kai Leng specific instructions to remain on Omega after the meeting.

“Keep an eye on Aria and her people,” he’d said. “Make sure they keep their end of the bargain.

“If they don’t,” he’d added, “take matters into your own hands. Do whatever it takes. Grayson cannot be allowed to live.”

## FIFTEEN

When Grayson came to he was sitting slumped forward in the pilot's seat of the turian shuttle, his chin resting on his chest.

He raised his head slowly, the muscles in his neck stiff and sore. His mouth was dry, he had a pounding headache, and he was sweating profusely: the familiar first stages of red sand withdrawal. With Cerberus no longer refilling the dispenser pumping the drugs into his system, his body was on its way to becoming clean again.

Lifting himself carefully from the seat, he reached his hands up to the ceiling to try and stretch out his aching back. Only then did he recall the injuries he'd sustained during the attack: the broken hand; the rounds in his shoulder and legs ... injuries that had miraculously healed themselves while he had slept.

It took a few seconds before the full implications struck him. The Reapers had repaired his body while he was unconscious, but now he was the one standing and stretching! He was in control again!

The Reapers were still there. He could feel them deep inside his mind, slumbering like some great beast. The outburst of biotic and physical energy had forced them to withdraw into the dark recesses of his subconscious to rest and recharge.

This proved their power was not infinite, but he knew that when they attempted to seize control of him again they would come back stronger than ever. The cybernetics in his body were spreading ... growing. Soon the Reapers would dominate him absolutely; he wouldn't have many more windows of opportunity left.

Sudden spasms in his stomach and bowels caused him to double over: another side effect of the red sand withdrawal. Moving quickly but carefully, he made his way to the head at the back of the shuttle. Turian and human physiology was similar enough for him to use the toilet, something he was grateful for as his body tried to purge itself through both ends.

It was nearly ten minutes before his stomach settled enough for him to feel safe leaving the bathroom. Even though the Reapers were dormant, he could sense their instinctive revulsion at the graphic display of organic weakness. Grayson didn't enjoy it, either, but his withdrawal gave him hope. Without the red sand clouding his thoughts, he'd have a better chance of holding the Reapers at bay when they tried to seize control of him once more.

He didn't know what the Reapers wanted. Their persistent presence in his mind gave him no insight into their ultimate goal. But whatever it was, he was determined to stop it.

Suicide was the quickest solution, of course. End his life now, and the threat would be eliminated. The easiest way would be to end it with a single shot to the head, but the Reapers had jettisoned the turians' weapons along with their bodies. He wondered if this was just coincidence, or if they had done this in anticipation of his reaction.

There were other options available to him, though. He got up and made his way over to the emergency kit in the back of the shuttle.

*Something is wrong.*

The Reapers sensed the changes in the brain waves of their host through the synthetic network monitoring his mental activity. They recognized the pattern flashing through his synapses: hopelessness; self-destruction. They had lost a vessel once before like this. This time they were prepared.

Grayson opened the metal emergency kit and examined the contents. There was medi-gel; a massive overdose could put him into a coma from which he might never wake. But would that even stop the Reapers? Or would they simply animate his flesh and send him stumbling around like some kind of zombie?

Dismissing the drugs, Grayson let his eyes fall on the next available option: the emergency kit's long, jagged utility knife. But it couldn't be a simple slit on the wrist; the incredible healing properties of his own flesh would betray him. He would have to slash his throat, making a cut so deep he bled out before the Reapers even realized what was happening.



*The avatar cannot be allowed to harm itself.*

The Reapers understood that Grayson had grown more resistant to their overt attempts to control him; his mind was adapting, developing new ways to protect itself from their domination. But there were other forms of control.

Tapping into his body's unconscious systems, the Reapers increased the levels of hormones being released into Grayson's system even as they subtly manipulated the electrical impulses in the brain to alter his emotional state.

Grayson's heart began to pound. He tried not to think about what he was going to do in case he lost his nerve. As he picked up the knife, his hands were shaking. He raised the trembling blade to his throat and closed his eyes.

A bizarre mix of emotions flooded through him. He'd expected to feel fear, and there was plenty of that. But he also felt an odd sense of hope and elation. He felt inexplicably energized. Defiant. Triumphant!

He tossed the blade back into the kit and opened his eyes. He refused to end it like this. Suicide was the coward's way out. He was better than that.

Marching back up to the pilot's chair, he sat down in the seat and took a look at the nav systems to get a sense of where he was. If he could figure out where the Reapers were heading, maybe he could figure out what they were up to.

To his surprise, he was deep inside Council space, orbiting a mass relay only one jump away from the Citadel ... and from Kahlee.

He knew she was on the great station that served as the heart of the civilized galaxy. It was the only way to explain how the turians had found him. She must have passed the Cerberus files he'd sent her on to someone she trusted; that person had recruited the turians to help them.

He quickly plotted a new course for the shuttle—one that would take it in the opposite direction. Away from the Citadel. Away from Kahlee. He didn't have a destination in mind. Instead, he planned to send the shuttle out into the most remote, sparsely populated region of the galaxy. With any luck it would be a one-way journey; he would run out of fuel and be trapped floating on the edges of space, never to return.

It was another form of suicide, but now he was driven by the urgent need to put as much distance between himself and Kahlee as he could. He had to protect her.

As a further precaution, he decided to send her a message. He didn't activate the shuttle's video feature; he didn't want her to see what kind of monster he'd become. Instead, he'd send an audio file to her extranet account.

He had to warn her to stay away from him, no matter what. He had to tell her not to look for him; not to try and help him.

*He has feelings for her.*

The Reapers made another slight alteration to Grayson's thought pattern. Instead of his rational, conscious mind doing what was morally right, he momentarily succumbed to his primal, subconscious yearnings and desires.

"Kahlee, this is Grayson. Listen closely—I need to see you. Right away. Send me a reply as soon as you get this."

Grayson ended the recording and sent the message off, completely unaware of what the Reapers had done.

"Listen up!" Sanak shouted at the crew assembled in the cargo hold of the frigate. "ETA is five minutes. Expect resistance to be armed and organized."

Cerberus estimated they'd have about twenty soldiers to contend with. Just to be safe, Aria had sent forty of her best people on the mission—a mix of batarian, krogan, and asari mercenaries.

"Turians don't believe in surrender," Sanak warned them. "So expect this to get messy."

There was some knowing laughter from his team; they were eagerly looking forward to the carnage. Between the element of surprise and their superior numbers, they wouldn't have any trouble winning the

battle. That wasn't what Sanak was worried about.

"Remember the primary goal—capture the human alive! Is that clear? Capture the human alive!"

A chorus of assent rumbled back to him, but he wasn't satisfied yet. He knew how easily things could get out of hand, particularly when krogan were involved.

"This isn't a suggestion. It's not even me giving you an order. This comes down from Aria herself. The human ends up dead, and so do we."

He could see from the expressions on their faces that the importance of what he was saying was sinking in. Just to be safe, however, he repeated it one last time.

"Capture the human alive!"

The bunk in the room Anderson had chosen for his quarters was comfortable enough, but he wasn't able to sleep.

It wasn't just the strangeness of the situation, though being on a Cerberus station manned by turians was more than enough to shake him. And there was something disconcerting about claiming the sleeping cabin of someone whose corpse was likely piled against the wall in the station's docking bay.

The issue keeping him awake was much more personal, however. He was worried about Kahlee.

She was obsessed with scouring the research files, trying to fully grasp everything that Cerberus had done to Grayson. The turian scientists and techs were doing their best to help her, working in alternating ten-hour shifts. But Kahlee hadn't taken more than a handful of ten- and twenty-minute breaks since their arrival. She was pushing herself too hard, and if she didn't take a break soon she was going to collapse from exhaustion.

Anderson had urged her to slow down, arguing that with each passing hour she was becoming less productive and more inclined to make a mistake. He pointed out that the turians could continue to pull files while she rested, giving her a completely fresh batch of data to analyze when she came back. As expected, she listened politely to his concerns, then brushed them aside with the reassurance that she knew her limits and a promise to stop whenever she reached them.

Knowing he had no chance of convincing her to take a break, Anderson had retired to try to get some much-needed shut-eye. Instead, he lay on his back, staring up at the ceiling in the dim light of the cabin.

It wouldn't have been so bad if he didn't feel so useless. His skills weren't suited to research and analysis; he was a soldier. He didn't like feeling helpless; he wished there was something he could do.

A second later he regretted that thought as alarms began to ring out through the station.

He sprang from the bunk and ran out into the hall, still in his undershirt and boxers. Several turians were emerging from the surrounding cabins, roused from their slumber by the emergency sirens.

With no clear idea of what was happening, Anderson raced down the halls until he reached the lab. Kahlee was there along with several armed turian soldiers, though the techs and scientists were gone.

"What happened to Sato and the others?" he asked, yelling to make his voice heard above the alarms.

"They went to grab their gear," one of the turian soldiers explained. "We're under attack!"

It wasn't surprising that the techs and scientists would have brought their combat gear with them: military service was mandatory for every turian. Given the nature of the mission, it was likely everyone on board except for Kahlee and Anderson was still in active service.

"What do we know?" Anderson asked, looking for a situation report.

"Single ship closing in. Medium-sized frigate. Not responding to hailing frequencies. Looks like they're going to try and board us."

The irony of the turians being on the other side of the equation this time was not lost on Anderson. He just hoped that this time the station's defenders would emerge victorious.

"You think it's Cerberus?" Kahlee asked.

Anderson shook his head. "I don't see how they could have mounted a counterattack so soon. Not after the kind of damage we dealt them."

"Whoever it is, they'll be here any minute," the turian warned. "The captain wants us to rally here by the lab. Keep our forces together and face the enemy as a single unit."

"Understood," Anderson said. "Where do you want us to set up?"

The turian shook his head. "You stay in here with the door locked until the battle's over."

"We both have combat training," Kahlee protested. "We can help!"

"You don't have body armor or combat suits," the turian reminded her. "You don't know our tactics. You'll just get in the way."

"He's right," Anderson said, cutting Kahlee off before she could object further.

He didn't necessarily agree with the turian, but he knew that nothing was more disruptive to a fighting unit than individuals questioning orders.

"Can you at least spare some weapons just in case?" he asked.

The turian handed Anderson his assault rifle and pistol, then disappeared out the door. Anderson handed the pistol to Kahlee, hit the wall panel, and punched in the code to seal them inside.

He took a second to familiarize himself with the weapon: standard turian military issue. It was a good weapon, efficient and reliable ... though if it got to the point where he had to use it, he suspected it would mean the battle had already been lost.

"Now what?" Kahlee asked him.

"Wait and hope that the next time someone comes through that door, they're on our side."

Except for the whooping of the alarms, everything was silent for the next few minutes. Then the sound of gunfire erupted from the hall, deafening even through the closed door. It continued without pause for several minutes, punctuated by the faint shouts of soldiers barking out orders and the periodic explosion of a grenade.

When it finally ended, it didn't taper off. Rather, it came to an abrupt and sudden halt. A few seconds later the alarms stopped, too—either shut off at the control room or disabled by someone hacking into the system remotely.

"Take cover," Anderson whispered.

He crouched behind one corner of the massive computer console in the middle of the room, resting his assault rifle on the edge and training it on the door. Kahlee took up a similar position with her pistol on the other side of the console.

They heard heavy footsteps in the hall beyond, then the unmistakable sound of someone hacking the door's access panel from the other side. When it slid open to reveal a krogan in heavy armor, both Anderson and Kahlee opened fire.

Instead of falling back, the beast charged their position. He managed to take three loping strides toward them before their combined fire penetrated his kinetic barriers. His momentum carried him two more steps forward, then they finally brought him down less than a meter away from the console.

Anderson vented the heat clip to keep his weapon from overheating, waiting for the next attack. A pair of batarians, one on either side of the door frame, peeked around the corner and lay down suppressing fire, keeping the two humans pinned behind their cover long enough for an asari to step into the room and unleash a biotic wave.

The console rocked backward from the impact, and Anderson and Kahlee were spent sprawling toward the rear of the lab. Anderson managed to scramble back to one knee to take aim again. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Kahlee roll over onto her stomach and wrap both hands around the butt of the pistol so she could fire from a prone position.

Neither of them managed to get off a single shot before they were enveloped in a biotic stasis field launched by a second asari waiting in the wings. The powerful opposing gravitational and magnetic forces inside the stasis field held them completely immobilized for several seconds, allowing plenty of time for the batarians to rush in and disarm them.

One charged up to Anderson and slammed him in the face with the butt of his shotgun just as the stasis field dissipated, sending the admiral toppling backward to the floor, barely conscious. Beside him he heard Kahlee scream as the other batarian brought his foot slamming down on the pistol clasped in her hands, crushing her fingers beneath his heavy combat boot.

Anderson, his head spinning from the blow, tried to get up to fight. But before he could, the batarian landed on top of him, his knee driving into Anderson's chest and pinning him in place. Turning his head, Anderson saw Kahlee in a fetal position, writhing in pain, her mangled fingers clutched tight against her

abdomen.

To his surprise, the attackers didn't kill them. Instead, they hauled them to their feet, forced their hands behind their backs, and slapped cuffs on their wrists.

"Sanak's waiting by the ship," one of the asari said.

Anderson could feel blood pouring down his face; the rifle butt had broken his nose and split his top lip. But he was more worried about Kahlee—her skin was pale and her eyes were glazed. The trauma of having all ten fingers simultaneously broken in multiple places had combined with her physical and mental exhaustion to send her into shock. Unfortunately, there was nothing he could do help her.

Their captors dragged them out into the hall. Bodies were strewn along the entire length of the corridor; most were turians, but there were several batarians, a few krogan, and even the odd asari among the dead.

They were hustled through the station until they reached a large breach in the hull. A wide, fully enclosed gangway extended out from the breach, no doubt leading to the assault vessel the attackers had used to board the station.

Several enemy troops of various species were milling about the area, all following the shouted orders of a batarian who seemed to be in charge.

He was standing with his back to them, but turned as they approached. Seeing the prisoners, he blinked all four eyes in surprise.

"What are you doing with him?" he said, pointing his weapon in Anderson's direction.

"You said take the humans alive," one of the asari replied.

"I meant her, not him!" the batarian exclaimed.

"Are you sure that's what Aria wanted?" the asari asked, looking for clarification.

At least Anderson knew now who they were working for, though he had no idea why the legendary Pirate Queen of Omega had launched an attack on the station.

"Fine. Put them both on the ship."

Anderson decided to take a chance and speak up.

"She's going into shock," he said, nodding in Kahlee's direction.

His voice sounded strange to his own ears, distorted by the damage to his face.

"If Aria wants us alive, you better see to her injuries."

"Get them on board and give them each a shot of medi-gel," the batarian ordered. "Then load up those data banks from the lab and set the explosives. I want to be out of here before reinforcements arrive."

The batarians dragged them up the gangway and into the hold of what appeared to be some type of frigate. They were forced roughly down into two of the seats lining the wall. Anderson winced as his weight fell on the hands cuffed behind his back, causing a sharp pain to shoot through his shoulders. Kahlee cried out in agony, and he could only imagine what it felt like to have her broken fingers pinned between the seat and the weight of her body.

"You better get those cuffs off her," he said.

"You should worry about yourself," one of the asari suggested as she jabbed a long needle into his shoulder.

A few seconds later, everything went dark.

## SIXTEEN

When Anderson came to, he was surprised to find himself lying on a large, comfortable couch in what appeared to be a well-furnished living room.

Shaking off the lingering effects of the medi-gel, he rolled over to put his feet on the floor and stood up. He realized he was naked, and then he noticed his undershirt and boxers folded and sitting on a chair nearby. They had obviously been laundered; there were no traces of the bloodstains from his broken nose. Next to his underclothes were pants, a shirt, socks, and even a pair of shoes.

Puzzled, he slowly got dressed as he took a quick survey of his surroundings. There was an archaic set of hinged double doors at one end of the room, open just a crack. Through it he could see a large, luxurious bed. At the other end of the room was a more contemporary sliding door, closed and—judging by the red light on the wall panel—locked.

Though they weren't his, the clothes fit him well enough. Doing his best to move silently, he approached the locked door and pressed the wall panel just to be sure. It beeped but didn't open. Despite the expensive surroundings, he was still a prisoner.

*But where's Kahlee?*

Moving quickly but quietly, he crossed to the double doors and gently pushed them open. To his relief, Kahlee was lying on a bed, under several covers. She appeared to be naked as well; someone had piled her clothes on a chair beside the bed. Unlike the unfamiliar garments Anderson wore, however, he recognized her outfit as the same one she had been wearing when they'd been taken prisoner.

She was snoring softly, her body still recovering from her recent lack of sleep and the medi-gel she'd been given on the frigate.

Coming closer, he was relieved to see her fingers had been splinted. It would probably be close to a week before the bones properly mended and she regained full use of them, but at least she had been tended to.

Curious, he made his way over to the bedroom's en suite to check his reflection in the mirror. Like Kahlee, his injuries had been tended to. His nose had been reset and his split lip was healed; apart from some minor bruising and swelling it was hard to tell anything had happened to him at all.

He considered waking Kahlee up, then decided to let her sleep. They couldn't do anything to escape their gilded cage at the moment, and she still needed to rest. He returned to the couch, where he lay down and closed his eyes, just for a moment.

"Hey, soldier," a voice whispered in his ear, "on your feet."

Anderson's eyes snapped open to discover Kahlee standing over him, dressed and fully awake.

"Must have dozed off," he mumbled, sitting up.

"You snore like an elcor with asthma," she told him.

"Not my fault," he objected. "Bastards broke my nose."

Kahlee held up her splinted digits. "I'd say you got off easy."

"How'd you manage to get dressed?" Anderson asked.

"It wasn't easy," she admitted. Coyly she added, "You could have helped me if you'd been awake."

The situation was too grim for Anderson to generate much of a smile, but he did his best.

"You look like you could use a drink," Kahlee said. "I know I could. I found a bar over in the corner, but I need someone else to pour."

Anderson got up and headed in the direction she pointed.

"Right there. Open the cupboard."

Doing as she said, he found an assortment of high-quality alcohol to suit a wide variety of species' palates, from krogan ryncol to asari elassa.

Not in the mood for anything too exotic, he poured two glasses from a bottle of brandy.

"On the rocks?" he asked.

"Neat," Kahlee replied.

Anderson brought the glasses over to the couch, where Kahlee sat waiting for him. She took one from him, cradling it awkwardly in her palms because of her splinted fingers.

“Any idea why we’re here?” she asked after taking a sip.

“I figure Aria wants to meet with us,” he said, still standing. “Can’t say how long we’ll have to wait, though.”

“Might as well get comfortable, then,” Kahlee said, patting the cushion beside her.

Anderson took a seat beside her and kicked back his drink in one quick gulp.

“Is this related to Grayson?” Kahlee asked as he leaned over to set his glass on the nearby end table.

“Pretty big coincidence if it’s not.”

Kahlee continued to sip her drink. Anderson realized they were sitting much closer together than was necessary—there was plenty of room on the couch to spread out. But when he shifted his position he ended up moving closer to her, not farther away.

He knew there were things Kahlee might not like to talk about right now, but in the end he finally decided he had to ask.

“How much did you manage to find out at the lab?”

“You were right,” she admitted. “Cerberus implanted Grayson with some kind of Reaper technology. Similar to cybernetics, but much more invasive. And far more advanced.

“Their results were still very preliminary, but they were *changing* him somehow. Turning him into ... well, I don’t even think they knew.”

“Can it be stopped?” Anderson asked. “Reversed?”

“I don’t know,” Kahlee said softly.

“I’m sorry I got you involved in all this,” she said after a few more sips of brandy. “You wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for me.”

“I’ve stayed in worse hotel rooms than this,” Anderson replied, trying to make light of the situation.

“But at least they let you check out,” she glumly replied.

Anderson reached an arm around Kahlee’s shoulder and pulled her close. As he did so, she turned so she could snuggle into the crook of his arm, resting her head on his shoulder.

“We’re going to get through this,” he promised her. “Somehow. Someway. *We will* get through this.”

He looked down into her eyes, and she tilted her head back so she could look up at him. Slowly, he tilted his head downward, bringing his lips to hers.

The room’s sliding door opened with a sharp *whoosh*, causing them both to sit up suddenly.

“Christ!” Kahlee swore as the glass slipped from her grasp in her haste to disentangle herself, spilling what was left of her drink onto her lap.

From the door there came a chorus of crude laughter, emanating from the entourage that had just barged in on them: three asari, a krogan, and two batarians. As the door slid shut behind them, Anderson caught a glimpse of two more krogan standing guard out in the hall.

The batarians and krogan were all grinning; he guessed they were the source of the laughter. He recognized one of the batarians as Sanak, the leader of the attack on the station.

Two of the asari looked nearly identical, though whether they were actually twins or if he—as a human—was simply unable to discern the differences between them he couldn’t say. The third asari, standing in the middle of the group, had to be none other than Aria T’Loak herself.

“Are we interrupting?” she asked, the corners of her mouth turning up in mild amusement.

Both Anderson and Kahlee got to their feet, but neither bothered to reply. Anderson could feel himself blushing with embarrassment, but Kahlee didn’t seem to be suffering the same reaction. She glared at the intruders with nothing but hate in her eyes.

“You know who I am?” Aria asked.

“We know,” Kahlee answered, her voice cold and hard. “What do you want?”

“I want Grayson, of course.”

“Why?” Kahlee demanded.

“That’s my business.”

“We don’t even know where Grayson is,” Anderson objected, joining the conversation.

“No, but you can help me find him.”

“What are you talking about?” Kahlee wanted to know.

“We hacked into your extranet account. There’s a message from Grayson. He wants to see you. So you’re going to send him a reply telling him to meet you here.”

“What makes you think he’ll come?” Kahlee asked.

“My sources tell me you and Grayson have a special relationship.”

“Maybe not as special as we thought,” Sanak chimed in with a snicker. “Or do you just stick your tongue down the throat of whoever you’re with at the time?”

He was obviously hoping for some kind of reaction. Anderson was pleased to see that Kahlee was smart enough to stay silent and disappoint him.

“Your sources might be playing you,” Anderson warned, his mind piecing things together. “That’s what Cerberus does.”

Aria didn’t bother denying her relationship with the Illusive Man.

“Cerberus was right about where to find you,” she said to Kahlee. “They were right about Grayson trying to contact you. Why shouldn’t I believe them when they say he’ll come if you reply to his message?”

“Why are you even working with a pro-human group?” Kahlee wanted to know.

“We share an interest in Grayson,” Aria admitted. “He betrayed both our organizations.”

“You’re going to kill him!” Kahlee exclaimed.

“That’s the plan,” Sanak replied with a grin.

“You’re crazy if you think I’ll help you!”

“You’d really sacrifice your life—both your lives—to protect Grayson?”

Anderson jumped in before Kahlee had a chance to answer.

“How do we know you won’t just kill us in the end anyway?”

“That’s a chance you’ll have to take,” Aria said with a sly smile.

“I’ll help you on one condition,” Kahlee offered. “I’ll try to bring Grayson in if you promise not to kill him.”

“You don’t get to make conditions,” Aria pointed out.

“Grayson’s smart. You need my cooperation if you want this to work.”

“You’ll cooperate eventually,” Sanak said, and the other batarians laughed knowingly.

“I don’t know what Cerberus told you,” Kahlee continued, ignoring Sanak and speaking directly to Aria. “But I know they didn’t tell you the whole story. Whatever deal they offered, you’re getting the wrong end of it.”

“Maybe so. But I doubt you can match their offer.”

“You’re right about that,” Kahlee admitted, though Anderson could tell she wasn’t backing down. “And I don’t know what happened between you and Grayson.”

“But all I’m asking is for you to let Grayson tell his side of the story before you make up your mind. You might be very surprised by what you find out.”

“I’ll think on what you said,” Aria promised. “I suggest you do the same. I’ll send someone for you in one hour to record your message for Grayson.”

“Regardless of my decision, it would be in your best interest to cooperate,” she added, her voice so cold it actually sent a shiver down Anderson’s spine.

The Pirate Queen turned on her heel and left the room, her followers trailing along in her wake. The door to the hall slid shut and the familiar red *Locked* display lit up on the wall panel.

Once they were alone in the room, Kahlee turned to Anderson.

“Just so you know,” she told him, “that was all a bluff. I’m not going to let them hurt you. When Aria comes back, I’m going to do whatever she wants.”

“Don’t worry about me,” Anderson assured her.

“The batarian was right,” Kahlee said with a shake of her head. “In the end I’ll do whatever they want. I might as well cooperate up front and save us both a lot of pain and suffering.”

Anderson knew what kind of person she was. If she was alone, she would have resisted to the bitter

end. The fact that he was with her—that he could suffer for her decision—forced her to compromise. But he also knew she wasn't the type to give up on someone. She was still holding out hope for Grayson.

"You're still hoping she'll agree not to kill him," he said. "You hope Aria will see what Cerberus did and then let you try to help him."

"I know it sounds crazy. But if you've got a better plan, I'm all ears."

"Why didn't you tell her everything?" Anderson wondered. "About how Cerberus implanted Grayson with Reaper technology?"

"Do you really think she'd believe me? I saw the research files and I barely believe it myself.

"Besides," she added. "I figured I better keep a couple of our cards hidden."

Anderson knew that Kahlee needed him to stay positive. But he couldn't shake the feeling this wouldn't end well.

"Even if she says she won't hurt him," he warned, "there's no way to know if she's telling the truth."

"I know. But it's better than nothing. At least I planted the seed. Now I just have to wait and see if it grows."

There wasn't much else to say, so they simply sat down on the couch and waited in silence for Aria's people to return.

As promised, they arrived promptly one hour later to get Kahlee. Anderson had thought Aria might send Sanak; the batarian was obviously one of the alpha dogs in her pack. Instead, she sent the massive krogan and one of the asari twins.

"What did Aria say about Grayson?" Kahlee asked as they came in. "Is she going to take him alive?"

"She's still considering the offer," the asari replied. "Have you considered hers? Are you ready to cooperate?"

Kahlee nodded.

"Smart girl," the krogan growled as he led her out the door.

The half hour it took for them to return were the longest thirty minutes of Anderson's life. In his head he knew Kahlee was in the same amount of danger whether he was with her or not, but emotionally he felt like he could keep her safe just by staying near her.

When the door finally opened and Kahlee stepped through, she was alone. He jumped up from the couch and rushed over to her.

"What happened? Did they hurt you?"

Physically she seemed unharmed, but he could tell by her face that she was upset.

"I did what they wanted," she said quietly. "I sent Grayson a message."

"You had no choice," Anderson whispered, wrapping his arms around her in a reassuring hug. "You did the right thing."

"For us," she whispered. "But what about for him?"



## SEVENTEEN

Grayson kept slipping in and out of consciousness as the shuttle drifted aimlessly through space. Every few hours he would suddenly become very tired and the world would slip away. When he awoke, he could never tell how long he had been out. He wasn't sure, but he suspected the Reapers were behind the blackouts.

Each time his senses returned he quickly checked the shuttle's navigational equipment to make sure the Reapers hadn't programmed a new destination into the ship while he was out. Each time he found the vessel's course unaltered.

It was almost as if they were waiting for something, harboring their strength until the moment was right. What that moment might be, however, he couldn't even begin to guess.

The sixth or seventh time he woke up, he saw a blinking light on the shuttle communications console, indicating an incoming message waiting to be heard. But that was impossible. He'd disabled all hailing frequencies; there was no way for someone to contact the shuttle directly. The only way there could be a waiting message was if he had logged in to the comm network ... or someone had done it for him.

Suddenly the blackouts made sense—the Reapers were temporarily putting him out so they could use the communications equipment. He briefly wondered why they didn't simply keep him unconscious. Based on all the other times they had used him, he suspected they needed him to be awake and alert to function properly. By taking control of his body, they became bound by the limitations of his physical form. If his mind was pushed into an unconscious state, Grayson suspected, his reactions would be slow and clumsy, like a sleepwalker stumbling around in a stupor.

It could also be more taxing on the Reapers themselves. Taking control of his body while he slept could have drained their reserves, which might explain why recently he hadn't felt them try and reestablish their dominance while he was awake.

If his speculations were true, then he'd learned something new about the alien parasites feeding off him. It might not amount to anything, but the more he understood what was happening to him, the better his chances of fighting it.

The message light was still blinking. His first instinct was to delete it unheard, perhaps thwarting the Reapers' plans in the process.

*It could be important. A tool to use against the enemy.*

As he was reaching up to delete it, a new thought popped into his head. Knowledge was his only weapon against the Reapers. If he listened to the message, it might reveal something useful. If he knew what the Reapers were after, they might be easier to stop.

He hit the playback, and to his surprise Kahlee's face appeared on the comm panel's screen.

"Paul. I need your help. Meet me on Omega. I'm sending you the location. Please hurry. It's urgent."

There was something odd about the way she spoke. Her voice was flat, almost monotone. It didn't have its normal energy or spark. It made him suspicious.

*Maybe she's scared. Or hurt.*

He was being paranoid. There were any number of reasons she might not sound like her normal self. There was even the possibility that she hadn't changed at all, and that the physical changes the Reapers had wrought on his body were affecting his senses and perceptions.

Her message left him torn. He wanted to see Kahlee, and if she was in some kind of trouble he wanted to do everything possible to help her. But he couldn't risk exposing her to what he had become. He couldn't risk letting her come into contact with the Reapers.

*She has nowhere else to turn. She's desperate. Don't abandon her.*

He played the message again, focusing on the last four words: "Please hurry. It's urgent."

Kahlee wasn't prone to dramatics. If she said it was urgent, it had to be something serious. And there was a look of desperation in her eyes, as if he was her last hope. She needed him; he couldn't turn his back on her.

His mind made up, Grayson sent off a reply to the message.

"I'm on my way, Kahlee" was all he said.

*Omega is dangerous. You'll need all your strength when you get there.*

He plotted a course for Omega into the nav computer, then settled back in his chair and closed his eyes. He'd need to rest up so he'd be ready to face whatever might be waiting for him on the lawless space station.

"One at a time," Anderson said encouragingly. "Flex those fingers."

"You'd make a great nurse," Kahlee replied.

They were sitting side by side on the couch of the room they still had not been allowed to leave. They had turned so they could be face-to-face. Kahlee was holding her hands out in front of her, palms up. Anderson's hands were beneath, supporting her wrists. He had helped remove her finger splints so she could begin her physical therapy; when they were finished he would carefully help her put them back on.

They were sitting slightly closer than they needed to be, but not so close it could be considered intimate. Kahlee knew they were both wary of another sudden intrusion from Aria and her underlings; neither she nor David felt any need to endure that type of awkward embarrassment again.

She had noticed, however, that in the aftermath of any discussions of Grayson—like the one they had had with Aria yesterday—he always became a little more reserved and distant. She didn't think it was jealousy; not exactly. It was almost like he was waiting for her to work out her feelings for Paul before he let himself get too close.

"You're not concentrating," Anderson chided her, breaking her train of thought. "Focus."

Kahlee nodded, and turned her attention to her injured digits. One by one she curled them into her palm and extended them out again. The tendons felt stiff and brittle; she half-imagined she could hear them crackling as she went through the exercises.

They were only half finished when the door to the room slid open and Aria swept in. Her asari, krogan, and batarian escorts followed in her wake. Instinctively Kahlee snatched her hands out of Anderson's grasp, then cursed herself for caring so much what a bunch of criminals and thugs thought about her and her relationships.

"Grayson replied to your message," Aria informed her.

"I want to see it," Kahlee said, rising to her feet.

The asari shook her head. "There's nothing to see. He agreed to the meeting. You can see him then."

Kahlee felt like Aria was hiding something. She flashed back to some of what she had uncovered in the Cerberus research files: physical abnormalities; widespread mutations; repurposing of the host.

*How bad is it? How far has his condition progressed?*

"What happens now?" Anderson asked.

"I'll be alerted when he arrives on the station. At that time, my people will come to take Kahlee to the meeting."

"I want to go too," Anderson told her, getting up and moving over to stand beside Kahlee in a show of support.

"What you want is of no consequence," Aria reminded him.

"Where am I meeting him?" Kahlee asked.

"I wanted to keep this private. One of my warehouses near the loading docks."

Kahlee didn't like the sound of that. She would have preferred somewhere more public.

"Why not in Afterlife?"

"Too many people," Anderson answered grimly. "She thinks it's going to get violent."

"You promised you wouldn't hurt him!" Kahlee shouted, taking a half-step toward their captor.

In a flash her krogan bodyguard interposed himself between them. Anderson did the same, leaping in front of Kahlee. The two stared at each other, the krogan's massive reptilian form towering over Anderson. He didn't back down, however.

The krogan finally stepped aside when Aria reached up to put a hand on his shoulder, indicating she wasn't worried about the threat either of the humans posed. Satisfied, Anderson took a step back so he

was once again standing beside Kahlee, rather than in front of her.

“I didn’t promise you anything,” Aria pointedly reminded her. “I said I would take what you told me about Cerberus into consideration.

“Grayson may already have killed one of my people,” she added darkly. “I’m not going to take any chances with him.”

“I want an assurance that Kahlee and I will be allowed to go free after this meeting,” Anderson insisted.

“Everyone wants things they cannot get.”

“Are you going to keep us here as prisoners forever?” Kahlee wanted to know. “Or are you just going to kill us when this is over?”

“I haven’t decided your fate yet,” Aria said with a smile. “But if you cooperate, your chances of leaving Omega will increase dramatically.”

“How long until the meeting?” Kahlee finally said, realizing there was truth in Aria’s last statement.

“I’ll send an escort to accompany you in a few hours. I suggest you be ready when they arrive.”

Kahlee and Anderson both remained standing until Aria and the others were gone and the door had closed behind them.

Neither of them spoke as they turned to look at each other. Kahlee wondered if the concern she saw in Anderson’s face was reflected in her own.

He reached up and gently took her wrists, then drew her back down to a sitting position on the couch.

“You risk losing mobility if we don’t finish the therapy,” he told her.

With a nod, Kahlee resumed the exercises, eager to find something that could take her mind off the imminent meeting with Grayson ... and the fear of what she might find waiting for her.

Aria still hadn’t decided what she was going to do with her prisoners. She didn’t want to kill them if she didn’t have to; there was little long-term gain to be had from dead bodies. But she was also leery of letting them go. Anderson in particular looked like the type to carry a grudge, and she already had plenty of enemies. Ultimately, she knew, her decision would depend on the outcome of the meeting with Grayson.

He represented another decision she hadn’t made yet. It was unlike her; she very rarely went ahead with a plan if she wasn’t reasonably certain of the outcome. But she still didn’t like the idea of getting into bed with Cerberus, no matter how lucrative the payoff might be.

“What’s the plan for when Grayson arrives?” Sanak asked, causing her to turn her head in mild surprise.

She had never thought of the batarian as particularly perceptive; was it possible she had underestimated him? Or was it simply coincidence that had made him bring up the subject?

“We’ll have plenty of people at the warehouse,” she assured him. “More than enough to handle whatever happens.”

“Why go to all this trouble? Why not just have someone take him out the second he sets foot on the station?”

“I haven’t even decided for sure whether I want him dead or not,” she cautioned.

“If you let him live you’re throwing away three million credits!” Sanak protested. “And for what?”

“For what, indeed,” she answered, causing him to shake his head in bewilderment.

She didn’t bother trying to explain her thought process to him. The Cerberus offer was generous ... a little too generous. What secrets did Grayson have that were so valuable to them? And was there any chance they could prove as valuable to her?

“It’s a lot of money,” Sanak muttered. “That’s all I’m saying. With those kind of credits on the table, no way I’d let him live.”

Suddenly Aria knew what she was going to do, at least as far as Grayson was concerned. Sanak had many fine qualities. He was loyal, skilled, ruthless, and relentless in pursuit of his goals. But one thing he lacked was vision; he had a sense only of the now. The fact that he would take the Cerberus offer meant she should reject it.

“I want to try and take Grayson alive if possible,” she declared. “But if he resists in any way, kill him.”

Sanak’s lip curled up in a snarl of disgust, but he had the common sense not to question her.

“I’m going to put Orgun in charge of the warehouse team,” she added, deciding the bad blood between her lieutenant and Grayson only increased the chances of the meeting turning violent.

“What about me?”

“I’m putting you in charge of Kahlee. Make sure she’s there to meet him.”

## EIGHTEEN

Grayson's fingers moved deftly over the controls of the turian vessel, bringing it in to dock with one of Omega's many landing ports. He was surprised by how easily he had picked up the feel of the alien vessel; it almost felt like he had piloted turian shuttles thousands of times before.

The meeting with Kahlee was at a warehouse in a district firmly under Aria T'Loak's thumb. Grayson didn't know if that was good or bad, however. Had Kahlee somehow become involved with Aria, or was it just random chance? The odds of any given location on Omega somehow being connected with the Pirate Queen were fairly high. She had direct control of at least a third of the station, and another third was held by various factions loyal to or affiliated with her organization in some way.

*Aria is powerful. A threat. Avoid if possible.*

Still, it didn't hurt to be cautious. He didn't know how Aria would react to his disappearance and Liselle's death. Rather than take a chance he chose to touch down at one of the rare Omega ports that didn't pay her tribute.

From there it was a long walk to the rendezvous, but he covered the distance quickly. Though he wasn't running, Omega's landmarks rolled by quickly as he made his way through the labyrinthine streets. After several minutes he noted with surprise that, despite the brisk pace, he wasn't even breathing hard.

He would have made even better time if he wasn't constantly slowing down to study various structural and architectural features of the station. He had seen it all before, of course, but he almost felt like he was looking at it through fresh eyes: taking every detail and comparing it against some half-remembered blueprint he didn't actually ever remember seeing.

*The cycle continues. Each civilization brings change, yet the works of our kind are eternal.*

Omega was known for the haphazard, piecemeal way it had been constructed. Most believed that it had been carved from the heart of an ancient asteroid by the Protheans eons ago, but over the centuries any number of species had left their mark on it. Its discordant style gave it an almost random feel. And though it had never bothered him before, for some reason he now found the chaos offensive on a deep philosophical level.

But while the overall effect filled him with revulsion, each individual element he examined during his trek caused him to react with amusement. It reminded him of the ant farm he had as a child. The insects had worked with slavish dedication to build their network of tunnels, shaping and altering the tiny glass case that encompassed the entirety of their existence. He had observed them through the glass as they worked, industrious and relentless, completely oblivious of their own insignificance in the grand design of the universe.

He was nearing the warehouse district. Soon he would see Kahlee again. Just thinking of her caused his pulse, and his pace, to quicken. The walk felt effortless, as if he were being carried along by some invisible force. It felt different than when the Reapers had taken control of his body, however. Then he had been distanced from himself, a passive observer. Now he felt fully engaged in the process of putting one foot in front of the other to propel himself along. It just didn't seem to require any effort. It was almost as if someone was helping him.

*A symbiotic relationship.*

Grayson pulled up short, his calm, relaxed demeanor swallowed up by a dark cloud of suspicion. He tried to turn around and head back the way he came, but his legs suddenly felt heavy and awkward. He managed only ten steps before he was doubled over and gasping for breath. His own body was fighting him; resisting him.

The horrifying truth slowly dawned on him. The alien technology had become so deeply embedded into his body and mind that the Reapers were now an inextricable part of him. When he had been heading toward Kahlee they had been working in unison, parasite and host united in a common goal. Their insidious influence had burrowed so deep into the fiber of his being that he had not only been unable to resist their will, he had actively been helping them achieve their end.

“No,” he shouted out, harsh and defiant. “I won’t take you to her!”

He braced himself for the inevitable surge of pain as the aliens fought to bend him to their will. Instead, he felt nothing. The lack of opposition confused him. He knew they were still present; the wires and tubes protruding from his joints and crisscrossing beneath his flesh confirmed that beyond any doubt. But they had become invisible. He no longer processed them as *other*; they were part of him now, inseparable and indistinguishable from his own identity.

*That’s a good thing. Influence can work both ways.*

A crazy idea began to form in his mind. If the Reaper technology was part of him now, maybe that meant he would be able to influence and control it the same way the Reapers had controlled his body earlier. Maybe he could draw on the cybernetic enhancements and his newfound biotic abilities whenever he wanted to. Maybe he could use them as tools to achieve his own goals.

*You are superior to the pathetic beings of flesh that surround you.*

The implications were staggering. Liberating. He had transcended the slow, laborious process of natural selection. He had broken free of the cycle of passing randomly mutated genes down from one generation to the next with the slim hope of gaining some minuscule natural advantage. He himself was changing, quickly and with purpose. He was evolving toward a perfect being.

*Do not hide what you have become. Reveal your glory.*

He had been afraid to see Kahlee because of what she might think of him. He looked strange. Different. But she was a scientist; she would understand and appreciate what was happening to him. She would see how he had been improved. Repurposed. She would admire him. Adore him.

Spinning on his heel, he set off once more toward the warehouse district, eagerly anticipating the meeting he had been defiantly refusing to go to only minutes before.

Kai Leng sat on the couch of the small room he had rented two nights before, staring intently at the image on his monitor as he absentmindedly spooned his dinner into his mouth. The monitor was linked to a surveillance camera pointed at the back wall of Afterlife.

His accommodations were less than a block away from the club; a run-down, ramshackle building converted into a pay-by-the-hour motel by an enterprising volus. It was primarily used by patrons of the club looking for a quick hookup who couldn’t afford to rent one of Afterlife’s private suites.

The room was poorly lit, and it reeked of what Kai Leng assumed was a mixture of alien sweat and vomit. But it was close enough to the club that he could maintain his vigil yet still have time to react if he saw anything.

The image on the monitor hadn’t changed. He knew that what appeared to be a solid wall was, in fact, a well-disguised secret door leading to the private rooms in the back of the club. The wide-angle lens on the surveillance camera showed that the narrow alley was completely deserted; unlike the crowded doors out front, this hidden entrance was apparently known only to those who served in Aria’s inner circle.

The Illusive Man had instructed him to keep an eye on Aria’s people to verify they actually delivered on their promise to eliminate Grayson. With no other resources, it was impossible for Kai Leng to keep track of everyone in the organization. So he had initially decided to focus on Sanak, Aria’s batarian lieutenant.

A less experienced agent might have tried to tail Aria herself. But the risk of being noticed was too great, and Kai Leng knew she wasn’t going to put herself at risk by meeting Grayson face-to-face. Besides, she almost never left the club.

Sanak seemed the next logical choice, given what the Illusive Man had ascertained about his role in Aria’s organization through a few discreet inquiries. The batarian was her attack dog, a blunt instrument. Whenever a situation called for violence or brute force, he would be her first choice.

Kai Leng’s instincts had served him well. Three days ago Sanak had left the club through the VIP entrance out front. Kai Leng had tailed him as he gathered a squad of heavily armed mercenaries and boarded a ship. When the ship returned the next day, Sanak and the mercenaries weren’t alone: Kahlee Sanders and Admiral David Anderson, one of the Alliance’s most decorated soldiers, were with them.

It was immediately obvious the humans were prisoners and not guests. He could see the handcuffs on

their unconscious bodies as they were carried by Aria's massive krogan bodyguard, one tossed over each shoulder.

Kai Leng had followed at a distance as Sanak's crew had taken the hostages back to Afterlife. They stuck to the unused back alleys to avoid drawing unnecessary attention. Upon reaching the club they had used the secret back entrance instead of going in the front, inadvertently revealing its existence to the inconspicuous shadow that had been following them the entire time.

So far everything was going according to the Illusive Man's plan—they had captured Sanders, and now they were using her as bait to lure Grayson in. Kai Leng estimated he had at least a day before the meeting would take place; wherever Grayson was, it would take time to contact him and set up the location. That gave him time to purchase the surveillance equipment, set up the camera on the back entrance, rent the repulsive room just down the street, and stock up on food and water in preparation for his vigil.

The wireless monitor was portable; when Kai Leng needed to use the bathroom, he brought it with him so he wouldn't miss anything. It was also set up to beep if the camera detected motion, allowing Kai Leng to grab a few sporadic hours of sleep as he waited. He never slept well or for very long, however. He didn't fully trust the merchant who'd sold him the equipment, and in the back of his mind he was worried it might simply short out while he was dozing.

He wasn't about to let that happen. Not when things seemed to be drawing to their conclusion.

Aria's people had brought Kahlee in through the back entrance; he had no doubt they would bring her out the same way when the meeting with Grayson drew near. All he had to do now was watch and wait.

\* \* \*

Anderson knew the time was drawing near.

"Are you ready for this?" he asked Kahlee.

"Ready as I'll ever be."

"We'll be fine," he assured her. "Just stick to the plan."

They'd talked it over after Aria left them alone, and had agreed they had to stick together if they wanted to get out of this alive. Besides, there was no way in hell he was going to let them take Kahlee away to meet Grayson alone.

He took a deep breath to center himself, forcing his pounding heart to throttle itself back through sheer force of will.

A few minutes later the door whisked open and Sanak came marching in. Anderson hadn't been expecting him to be the one sent to retrieve Kahlee, but it didn't change anything. In fact, it might actually work in their favor.

A pair of krogan stepped into the room right behind him, weapons drawn in case the prisoners tried anything.

"Time to go," Sanak snapped. "Move."

Kahlee crossed her arms defiantly, careful not to bend her splinted fingers. Anderson did the same.

"We go together or I don't go," she said.

Sanak whipped out his pistol and stepped forward, jamming the barrel into Kahlee's forehead.

"He stays here. You come with me now, or you die."

"You won't kill me," she said, her voice calm and certain. "You need me for this meeting."

The batarian tilted his head to the right, an instinctive display of his contempt and frustration. Then he turned and pointed his gun at Anderson.

"We don't need him for the meeting," he warned her. "Come with me or I splatter his brains all over the floor."

"No you won't," Anderson declared. "Grayson's going to be suspicious. He's going to scout the location out; he won't reveal himself until he sees Kahlee. And if he senses something's wrong, he'll bolt."

"You need my cooperation to pull this off," Kahlee insisted. "Harm Anderson in any way, and you won't get it."

Anderson could see Sanak's mind churning. Aria would no doubt have emphasized the importance of

getting Kahlee to the meeting; the batarian was trying to figure out a way to follow his orders without letting the prisoners dictate any terms.

“You have two options,” Kahlee explained slowly. “One, David comes with me and we all go to meet Grayson. Two, you try to stop him from coming and the meeting doesn’t happen.”

“Then you get to explain to Aria how you blew this mission,” Anderson added.

He suspected the lieutenant was good at following orders. He hoped he wasn’t as good at improvising. Their gamble hinged on it.

Sanak let his pistol drop. He glared at them, then snapped it back into the clip on his thigh.

“If either of you try anything on the way, I’ll kill you both,” he warned.



## NINETEEN

Kai Leng's monitor beeped its warning to indicate the camera had detected movement, but the alert wasn't necessary. He was already watching the screen intently as Sanders, Anderson, Sanak, and a pair of krogan guards emerged from Afterlife.

Grabbing his pistol and knife, he rushed out the door of the tiny rented room. He didn't bother to pack up the surveillance equipment. He didn't care if the next guest stumbled across it; he would have no further use for it after this meeting.

Ignoring the elevator, he took the stairs two at a time. He reached ground level and burst through the door out onto the street. Racing around the corner, he managed to catch his quarry just as they reached the intersection where the alley behind Afterlife joined up with the main thoroughfare.

To the casual eye they would have appeared to be nothing more than a group walking a little too closely together, but Kai Leng knew different. Sanak led the way, an assault rifle strapped to his back and a pistol on his hip. Anderson and Sanders followed, both unarmed. The two krogan brought up the rear, also carrying assault rifles. Unlike Sanak, however, the krogan had their weapons out, casually cradling them in their arms as they marched.

Keeping a safe distance behind, Kai Leng followed them as they wound their way through the business and residential sections of Omega's central district. Eventually the shops and homes gave way to warehouses as they reached a dimly lit industrial area.

They passed several nondescript two- and three-story buildings before disappearing inside the warehouse at the end of the block. Even through the gloom of the street, Kai Leng could see that the windows had been shuttered or painted over to hide whatever activities were going on inside.

He found a spot just inside the arch of a doorway in one of the nearby buildings that hid him from view, yet gave him a clean line of sight down both directions of the street. He settled in to wait for Grayson. An hour later, he arrived.

His appearance hadn't changed much from when Kai Leng had last seen him. The stubble on his head was a little longer; his beard a little more ragged; his synthetic upgrades slightly more noticeable. Despite the ill-fitting clothes covering up most of his exposed flesh, the tubes winding from his neck up into his skull were hard to miss. And it was possible to see the glowing, pulsating wires and circuits beneath the taut, almost translucent skin of his cheeks and hands.

The Illusive Man had warned him not to confront Grayson unless absolutely necessary. He was no longer the man Kai Leng had so easily beaten and then drugged in his prison cell; he had become something far more powerful. The plan was to let Aria's people do the dirty work; he was just here to report back in case something went wrong.

Even without the warning, Kai Leng would have sensed something different about him. Grayson moved with a fluid grace he hadn't possessed before. He had the sharp bearing of a predator now, a hunter on the prowl.

He passed less than five meters away from where Kai Leng was hiding. Though it was dark, the assassin instinctively pressed himself deeper into the shadows to avoid being noticed. Grayson passed by without seeing him and continued on to the warehouse at the end of the street.

He stopped a few meters before the door and paused, his head moving from side to side as if he was studying the building. He seemed suspicious, as if he sensed it was a trap.

Kai Leng held his breath, praying he would step inside.

Grayson made his way quickly down the dark row of buildings. Despite the low light, his augmented vision allowed him to see clearly. He noticed a lone figure lurking inside the doorway of a building as he passed, but dismissed him as irrelevant. He was here to meet Kahlee; nothing else mattered.

When he reached the entrance of the building bearing the address she had given him, however, Grayson hesitated, suddenly wary. Why had Kahlee chosen this remote location for their rendezvous?

Why hadn't she wanted to meet him somewhere more public? Her message said she was in trouble; maybe she was too scared to show up anywhere else.

*It could be a trap. Is Sanders loyal? Can she be trusted?*

He shook his head, dispelling the ridiculous notion that Kahlee might betray him. She had risked so much to help him and Gillian escape Cerberus. She'd put her career and her life on the line for them, risking everything to help Grayson save his daughter.

*Gillian.*

Gillian was safe now; not even the Illusive Man could find her aboard the quarian deep-space exploration vessel. Memories of the daughter he hadn't seen in over two years came flooding back to him: the way she smiled; the ways she spoke. Gillian was special—she had an autistic condition that had made it difficult for her to communicate. Despite her incredible potential, she had lagged behind the other children of the Ascension Project.

*Ascension Project.*

The goal of the Ascension Project was to help biotic human children control and even master their latent abilities. Kahlee had made a special effort to help Gillian, giving her personal instruction above and beyond what the other students had received.

*Biotic children.*

He didn't know much about the other students. During Gillian's time in the program he had visited her only once or twice a year, as per the Illusive Man's orders. But he was certain Kahlee would have taken a personal interest in every student at the Grissom Academy. Knowing her, she would have memorized every—

Grayson forced his mind to a sudden, screeching halt as the truth dawned on him. The Reapers had grown stronger. The connection between them and him had deepened. His very thoughts had become exposed. They were sifting through his memories, picking through his knowledge piece by piece. And they suddenly seemed very interested in Kahlee and her role in the Ascension Project.

Terrified, he tried to turn and run. He had to get as far away from Kahlee as possible. In response, the will of his enemy came crashing down on him. He struggled to resist, but the Reapers would not be denied.

They forced him to march forward. Step by step he drew ever nearer to the door, until he was close enough to reach out his hand and tap the access panel.

Grayson fought against them, drawing on the mental tricks he had used to resist them in the past. But it was all in vain. The Reapers had grown far stronger than he'd realized. They'd been lying in wait, manipulating him instead of dominating him to hide their true power.

The door slid open and Grayson stepped into the dimly lit warehouse. He saw Kahlee standing in the middle of the room, her expression a mix of revulsion and pity when she saw his appearance.

"Oh, Grayson," she said, nearly breaking into tears.

But while his attention was focused completely on her, the Reapers were acutely aware of everything around them. Kahlee was not alone—at least a dozen armed individuals were scattered around the perimeter.

Adrenaline surged through him as his puppet-masters recognized they had been lured into a trap, and Grayson knew hell was about to be unleashed.

Aria's people were already in position when Anderson and Kahlee had arrived at the warehouse: a dozen on the floor, eight more perched on the catwalk running along the warehouse's rear wall. Shipping crates and forklifts had been strategically placed to provide cover for Aria's troops on the ground. The obstacles had also been arranged in a loose semicircle, effectively forming a corral in the center of the room.

It had been easy enough for Anderson to figure out the plan. When Grayson came far enough into the room, some of Aria's people would slip in behind him to block his retreat, leaving him surrounded on all sides. It was a good plan except for one thing: to lure Grayson into the right position, Kahlee herself would have to be inside the semicircle . . . and right in the line of fire if things turned violent.

He'd voiced his objections, only to have them fall on deaf ears. Orgun, the massive krogan in charge of the operation, had ordered Kahlee to take up her position and wait for Grayson. He'd confined Anderson to a dark corner in the rear of the building, and ordered Sanak to keep an eye on him. The batarian was standing a few steps off to the side, his assault rifle drawn and ready to dissuade Anderson from doing anything that might interfere with the meeting.

From their location, Anderson couldn't see Kahlee, though he had a line of sight to the warehouse's front door. He was staring right at it when Grayson came through.

Anderson was shocked by his appearance. Kahlee had mentioned he had been altered by the Reaper technology, but Anderson had never imagined anything like this. He could clearly no longer be called human; he had become some kind of nameless abomination.

His skin was stretched and discolored. Beneath it Anderson could see that the cybernetics had merged with his body, as if he was being devoured from the inside by machines.

It reminded him of the colonists who had been repurposed into husks on Eden Prime. There had been no way to reverse the effects of their transformation. He feared the same could be said of Grayson.

He heard Kahlee say his name, and then Orgun stepped into view behind Grayson, blocking his retreat.

"Surrender," the big krogan growled, raising his assault rifle so it was pointed directly at Grayson's back, "or we'll kill you where you stand."

Grayson responded by dropping into a crouch, spinning around, and charging the krogan, doubled over so low he almost seemed to be crawling on all fours. It happened in the blink of an eye; Orgun was moving so fast he seemed to be nothing but a blur.

Orgun fired a burst from his assault rifle, but the unexpected speed and uniqueness of Grayson's reaction caught him off guard. Trained to aim for the chest and upper torso, his shots sailed too high as Grayson scuttled toward him.

Some of his troops around the warehouse—the ones with quick reflexes—squeezed off a few quick shots of their own, but in their haste they aimed wildly and the rounds deflected harmlessly off the spot on the floor where Grayson had been standing an instant before.

He slammed into Orgun, a 160-pound man versus a nearly 500-pound krogan. Amazingly, it was Orgun who was sent flying by the impact, his assault rifle spinning free of his hands.

The warehouse erupted with the thunder of gunfire as Orgun's troops got over the initial shock of the unexpected attack. Grayson responded by throwing up a biotic barrier, the air around him shimmering with the sudden release of energy. The bullets were devoured by the powerful gravitational field, losing their momentum instantly and dropping harmlessly to the ground.

Anderson glanced over at Sanak from the corner of his eye. The batarian had been as surprised as anyone by Grayson's outburst; he was only just now recovering. His attention was focused entirely on the carnage before him, the prisoner beside him utterly forgotten.

As the batarian took his first running step toward the battle, Anderson delivered a back round-kick to the side of the head. It sent Sanak reeling, the assault rifle falling from his grasp to skitter across the floor as he pinwheeled his arms.

Anderson followed up his initial attack with a flying tackle, knocking them both to the ground. They wrestled briefly, trying to get possession of the gun clipped to Sanak's thigh.

They grappled at close quarters, grunting and cursing as they each fought to gain leverage. But Anderson was on top, giving him the advantage. He wrapped his hand around the butt end of the pistol, but the batarian managed to get him in an elbow lock, pinning his arm in place so he couldn't raise the weapon.

Anderson squeezed the trigger anyway. The round ripped a hole in the batarian's thigh, causing him to scream in pain and release his grip. Anderson quickly brought the pistol up and shoved the muzzle into the batarian's gut, then fired three more times.

All four of Sanak's eyes went wide in disbelief as his body went limp. Anderson rolled off him and stood up, still clasping the pistol. The batarian opened his mouth to speak, but all that came out was a wet gurgle. He coughed, and a dark trickle of blood seeped from between his lips.

Anderson fired one more time, aiming for the heart. Sanak shuddered once. Then his head lolled to the side, his eyes glazed and unfocused as his life ebbed away.

The entire encounter had taken less than thirty seconds, but in that time the shooting at the other end of the warehouse had stopped. Looking up, Anderson noticed several of Aria's troops—including Orgun—lying dead on the floor. Some were bent and twisted, limbs protruding at awkward angles in the unmistakable pose of those killed by powerful biotic attacks. Others appeared to have been beaten to death, their heads staved in as if someone had smashed them with a sledgehammer.

But he couldn't see Grayson anywhere in the carnage . . . or Kahlee.

Running toward the center of the room to get a better view, he realized he was the only one still alive inside the building. He had no idea what had happened to Kahlee, but a thousand scenarios were playing through his head, none of them reassuring.

Fearing the worst, he raced across the room and out the door, only to find her standing in the dimly lit street, alone and unharmed. She was staring off into the distance, her back to him.

"Are you okay?" he asked, panting slightly from his recent exertion as he ran up to her.

She turned in response to his voice.

"I'm all right," she assured him. "When the shooting started I just tried to stay low. Luckily nobody was aiming for me."

"What about Grayson?"

"He's gone," she said. "He broke through the circle of Aria's people and escaped out the door. They all ran off after him."

Anderson realized this was their chance. For the next little while it would be chaos as Aria's people tried to stop Grayson from escaping Omega. With everyone focused on him, they might be able to slip away unnoticed.

"Come on," he said to Kahlee. "We're getting off this station."

"How?" she asked.

"We just have to find someone with a ship who doesn't answer to Aria," he explained, knowing it wouldn't be nearly as easy as he'd made it sound.

A man he didn't recognize stepped out from the shadow of a nearby building.

"Maybe I can help with that," he said by way of introduction.

## TWENTY

Kai Leng heard the sound of gunfire from inside the warehouse; the trap had been sprung. A few moments later, however, he realized Aria's people had failed as Grayson emerged from the building still alive. As before, Kai Leng pressed himself into the shadows rather than confront him. As loyal as he was to Cerberus, he wasn't suicidal.

Grayson broke into a run, and seconds later three armed krogan burst from the warehouse in pursuit. Despite their massive bulk they could run much faster than humans, their muscular legs powering them along. Grayson, however, was no longer human. The cybernetic enhancements of the Reapers gave him incredible speed, and he had already opened up a gap of at least thirty meters before the krogan even appeared on the scene.

They opened fire with their assault rifles as they chased after him, their accuracy compromised by the poor illumination of the street and their desperate efforts to keep up with their target. Grayson moved in an erratic, zigzagging pattern to make it even harder for them to line up a clear shot. But it was impossible to dodge the hail of gunfire completely, and a few stray rounds found their mark.

The impacts caused Grayson to stumble, momentarily knocking him off stride. In response he wheeled around and thrust his palm out toward his pursuers. The air seemed to ripple and distort with the power of his biotic push.

Kai Leng had no doubt that if the krogan had been closer the energy wave would have pulverized them, breaking bones and liquefying even their redundant internal organs. As it was, Grayson's flight had already left them so far behind that the force of the attack had dissipated considerably by the time it reached them. Instead of crushing them, it had only enough strength to knock them off their feet.

Before his enemies could pick themselves up, Grayson was off and running again. He was limping noticeably, but the awkward gait did little to slow him down.

Behind him reinforcements came pouring out of the building: half a dozen batarians and two more krogan. While the original pursuers picked themselves up, those newly arrived joined the chase. Like the others, they fired their assault rifles as they ran, but by this time Grayson was well beyond the effective range of their weapons.

As he raced past Kai Leng's hiding place, he passed under one of the few lights on the street, giving the assassin a brief but clear look at his wounds. Blood was streaming from several places in his right thigh. His left arm dangled awkwardly at his side; Kai Leng suspected a round had shattered his shoulder. His injuries were severe, but none appeared lethal—miraculously, he didn't appear to have been hit in the torso or head.

And then Grayson was gone, fleeing down the street before vanishing around a corner. Kai Leng remained perfectly still as Aria's troops rumbled past several seconds later, knowing any movement might draw their attention to his hiding spot. He doubted they would bother to stop; they seemed intent on chasing Grayson down. But he wasn't taking any chances.

Several of them were shouting instructions into the transmitters of their helmets as they went by, no doubt calling in further reinforcements to help them bring Grayson to his knees. Kai Leng had a hunch they wouldn't be successful.

It was almost a certainty that Grayson was going to escape the station; the Illusive Man would not be pleased. But witnessing the failed ambush had still given Kai Leng hope. Grayson's wounds were proof that, as powerful as the Reapers were, they were not invulnerable. If any of Aria's people had managed a clean headshot, the threat might have been eliminated.

He was still concealed in his hiding place, wondering what to do next, when Kahlee Sanders stepped out onto the street. An idea began to form in Kai Leng's head.

Once Grayson left Omega, Cerberus would need to track him down again. The Illusive Man had told Aria T'Loak that Sanders was the key. That might no longer be the case, given her role in setting him up at the warehouse. But there was a chance she could still be used as bait to lure him out of hiding a second

time.

As Kai Leng was contemplating his next move, David Anderson came out of the warehouse to join Sanders. He was armed with a pistol, though Kai Leng wasn't worried. If it came down to a physical confrontation, he was certain he was more than a match for Anderson and Sanders. But he wasn't sure that was the right way to proceed.

He stepped out of his hiding spot and began to move quickly but silently toward them. He stayed close to the edges of the buildings along the street, trying to make himself less conspicuous by sticking to the shadows. His efforts were helped by the fact that Sanders and Anderson were completely focused on each other.

"We just have to find someone with a ship who doesn't answer to Aria," he heard Anderson say once he was within earshot.

Acting on a sudden impulse, he stepped out into the open and declared, "Maybe I can help with that."

Kahlee took a quick step back, and Anderson raised his pistol.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

Kai Leng was close enough to easily disarm the admiral before he could fire a single shot. But he knew Cerberus would need Sanders's cooperation if they wanted to find Grayson. So instead of violence, he resorted to something even more radical: the truth.

"My name is Kai Leng. I have a ship docked at one of the ports outside Aria's sphere of influence."

"And you just happened to wander into this district?" Anderson said, making no effort to hide his skepticism. His pistol was still pointed directly at Kai Leng's chest.

"He's with Cerberus," Kahlee said, putting the pieces together. "The Illusive Man sent him to spy on Aria. He wanted to make sure she finished Grayson off."

"We have common goals," Kai Leng assured them, not bothering to deny her accusation. "We all want to get off the station, and we all want to find Grayson. We should work together."

"Or I could just shoot you where you stand," Anderson said, waving the pistol menacingly.

"You could try," Kai Leng answered. "But how will that help you escape Omega?"

"Not everyone here is in Aria's pocket," Kahlee replied. "We'll find someone willing to give us a ride."

"How long will that take? You don't have much time. Right now her focus is on stopping Grayson, but once he escapes—and he will—she'll turn her attention back to you."

"We'll take that chance," Anderson said, squeezing the trigger.

Kai Leng was already in motion, spinning out of the way. Before Anderson could bring the pistol to bear again, he seized the admiral's wrist, forcing it down and twisting it at a painful angle.

Anderson tried to fight back as the gun slipped from his suddenly nerveless fingers by bringing his knee up toward Kai Leng's groin. But he blocked the move by turning his hips so the blow only struck him in the meat of his thigh.

Kahlee jumped in to join the fray, driving her foot into the center of Kai Leng's back. He absorbed the impact by tumbling forward in a somersault, still keeping his grip on Anderson's wrist. His momentum yanked Anderson off balance, dragging him down to the ground.

From his prone position, Kai Leng scissored his legs and swept Kahlee's feet out from under her, bringing her crashing down to the ground on top of the two men. He momentarily stunned Anderson with an elbow to the solar plexus, rolled free of the tangled mass of bodies, grabbed the pistol where it had fallen, and sprang to his feet.

He pointed the weapon at his two opponents, both of whom were still on the ground. He'd left them unharmed, though the blow he'd delivered to Anderson had him gasping for air.

He kept the pistol trained on them long enough to make it clear they would have been dead had he wished it, then slipped the weapon into the back of his belt.

"Cerberus is not your enemy," he told them. "We are defenders of the human race. We have no quarrel with you."

Kahlee cautiously got to her feet. Anderson was still having trouble catching his breath. She reached down and offered him a hand. He shook his head and waved her off, coughing and wheezing as he

struggled up on his own.

“Don’t pitch your propaganda to me,” Kahlee spat, refusing to back down even after Kai Leng’s display of physical superiority. “I know what you really are. I saw what you did to Grayson’s daughter. I saw what you did to him.”

“Sometimes individual sacrifices are necessary for the greater good.”

“Bullshit,” Anderson chimed in. “Justify your actions however you want. You’re nothing but a bunch of terrorists.”

“The Reapers are a threat unlike anything humanity has ever faced,” Kai Leng reminded them. “You may think the Illusive Man went too far, but it was necessary to learn about our enemy. The survival of our species depends on it.”

“You created a monster and set him loose on the galaxy!” Anderson shot back.

“That was as much your fault as ours. But blame gets us nowhere. We need to work together to bring Grayson back in.”

“I’m not going to help you kill him,” Kahlee declared. “So either shoot us, or leave us the hell alone.”

“You saw what Grayson has become,” Kai Leng pressed. “You can imagine what he’s capable of. He has to be stopped.”

“Clean up your own damn mess,” Anderson answered, siding with his companion.

“We can help him,” Kai Leng said, knowing there was still a way to get Kahlee to listen to him.

“We have the knowledge and resources to reverse the transformation,” he lied. “But soon it will be too late. Everything Grayson is will be consumed by the Reapers.”

Kahlee didn’t say anything right away, causing Anderson to glance over at her.

“Is that true?” he asked her. “Can they reverse this?”

“Maybe,” she said. “I don’t know. But if there’s even a chance to save him . . .”

She left the words hanging in the air.

“Even if it means working with Cerberus?” Anderson asked softly.

Kahlee nodded.

“Take us to your damn ship,” Anderson grumbled.

“This way,” Kai Leng said, pointing back down the street. “You’ll understand if I prefer you didn’t walk behind me.”

Aria was at her usual spot in Afterlife when one of her asari underlings rushed in with news of the failed attempt to capture Grayson alive.

“Orgun and Sanak are both dead,” she said. “Grayson is on the run, and Keedo is leading the pursuit.”

The Pirate Queen kept her features calm, concealing her extreme displeasure.

“What about Sanders and Anderson?”

The attendant who had brought her the news shook her head. “I don’t know. Keedo didn’t say.”

“Then why are you here?” Aria asked coolly.

“Keedo is requesting reinforcements. He says Grayson is . . . changed.”

“Changed? In what way?”

“Cybernetic enhancements of some kind. He didn’t go into details.”

Aria silently cursed herself for trusting Cerberus. There was no doubt in her mind they knew about Grayson’s upgrades; they might even have been responsible for them. Yet they had failed to warn her. If she had known, she might have sent more people to the meeting . . . and she might have reconsidered the idea of taking him alive.

But she was also angry at herself. Eager to avenge Liselle’s death, she’d accepted Cerberus’s proposal despite her misgivings. She had let her feelings for her daughter interfere with her judgment. She had let emotion get in the way of good business. She wouldn’t make the same mistake again.

“Give Keedo whatever he needs,” she answered. “And send an alert out to everyone we have: Grayson is to be shot on sight. Civilian casualties should be minimized if possible, but I won’t hold anyone responsible for collateral damage.”

The attendant nodded and rushed off to relay the orders.

Aria watched her go, sipping her drink while she thought about how she would have her revenge against Cerberus and the Illusive Man.

Grayson could do nothing but watch in fascinated horror as the Reapers sent him on a rampage through Omega. They had buried him so deep inside his own mind he had lost nearly all connection with his physical self. He could still see and hear, but he could no longer feel his own body. He knew in some academic way that he had been shot, but the pain was so distanced from his awareness that it had no meaning.

The escape from the warehouse had been only the beginning. As he raced down Omega's streets, it seemed as if everyone on the station was trying to kill him. Every time he rounded a corner he seemed to run into an armed patrol or a blockade. Aria was sending everything she had at him; Grayson wondered if it would be enough.

The Reapers had turned him into a devastating weapon, but their power wasn't infinite. The constant pressure kept them from replenishing the stored energy in his body; each time they drew on it they became fractionally weaker and more vulnerable. He was already seeing the effects of their exertions as each encounter became more difficult and more dangerous.

The first group to get in his way had been easily dispatched with a biotic singularity. With a mere flick of his wrist, the Reapers had caused a single point of near-infinite mass to be created right in the center of the four asari lying in wait for him around a corner. The gravitational field swallowed them up instantly, collapsing them into nothingness before they could summon their own biotic powers to strike back.

The next group of enemies—a mixed squad of humans and batarians—fell to a brutal physical onslaught. Grayson simply barreled into them before they had a chance to fire their weapons, his hands and feet becoming lethal weapons that bludgeoned, bashed, and tore his enemies to shreds. At the end of the encounter, the Reapers paused long enough to scoop up the weapons of his fallen foes, then sent Grayson racing off once more with an assault rifle in each hand.

The rifles allowed the Reapers to switch tactics. Instead of having to overwhelm enemies with bionics or melee combat, they were able to fight a running battle through the Omega streets. Unlike Aria's people, Grayson wasn't wearing a combat suit, so the Reapers never went toe-to-toe with any of the patrols they came across. Instead, they would fire off a quick burst, then retreat, ducking around a corner into one of Omega's countless side streets or alleys. Using speed and maneuverability to offset the enemies' kinetic barriers and greater numbers, they would pick off the enemy squad one by one until the path was clear again.

The strategy would have been impossible under normal circumstances. Technological advances had helped reduce the kickback, but the sheer volume of rounds being discharged still required the use of both hands to stabilize the weapon. Even a krogan wasn't strong enough to use one in each hand effectively, but Grayson managed them as easily as if they were pistols.

Assault rifles also weren't known for accuracy. Even with the automated targeting systems built into the guns, the odds of repeatedly hitting a single target while on the move were low. But Grayson's synthetic enhancements gave the Reapers incredible accuracy, allowing them to focus both guns precisely on a single target. Kinetic barriers couldn't hold up under such a concentrated barrage, and as soon as the target became vulnerable the Reapers would finish the job with a perfectly placed head shot.

Aria's people fought back as best they could, but no organic foe could match the ruthless efficiency of a near-perfect killing machine. However, even aiming the weapons with laserlike precision was taxing his energy reserves. No matter how superior he was to his opponents, their numbers would eventually overwhelm him. He'd lost track of how many victims the Reapers had claimed somewhere around twenty, but he knew Aria had plenty more fodder to throw at them.

Recognizing the futility of trying to defeat an entire army, the Reapers began to search for a way to escape the station. The layout of Omega was a confusing labyrinth of haphazard, unplanned construction. It was littered with dead ends and routes to nowhere. But in the two years he had worked for Aria, Grayson had become as familiar with the layout as anyone.

Now the Reapers were drawing on his knowledge, accessing it directly from his mind. There was



nothing he could do to stop them; he'd been reduced to a reference library they could call on whenever they wanted.

Still battling swarms of Aria's soldiers, they plotted a course through the twisting, turning streets, heading for the closest of Omega's countless docking bays. None of the ports Aria controlled were heavily guarded—most people knew better than to steal a ship from Omega's Pirate Queen. This one was no different; only a handful of defenders were there to try to stop him. They quickly met the fate of so many of their comrades, though one managed to set off the alarms before she fell.

Grayson knew the blaring claxon meant that reinforcements would arrive in under two minutes, and even as the thought crossed his mind he realized the Reapers would now know it, too.

They had him race over to a small, single-pilot shuttle stationed in one of the bays. The boarding ramp was up, the hatch locked. The Reapers had Grayson reach out his hand and place it on the security panel. Blue sparks arced out from his fingers as he made contact. A sequence of codes flickered through Grayson's consciousness as the Reapers interfaced with the security system's programming, and a second later the hatch opened with a soft click.

The Reapers didn't even wait for the boarding ramp to descend. Dropping the assault rifles, they had Grayson grab hold of the underside of the hatch and haul himself up and in. Once inside, he resealed the hatch and took a seat in the pilot's chair.

A batarian squad arrived just as the engines were roaring to life. They opened fire on the shuttle, but their weapons were useless against the vessel's hull.

The ship rose up from the docking bay, passing smoothly through the shimmering, microns-thin energy barrier that kept the temperature-controlled atmosphere inside the docking bay from leaking out into the frozen vacuum of space.

Unlike the Citadel, Omega had no exterior defenses. There were no patrolling fleets, no GARDIAN turrets or mass accelerator cannons. No longer assailable by patrols and soldiers on the ground, the Reapers were about to complete their escape from Omega.

As the shuttle pulled away from the station, the Reapers once again began to pick through Grayson's mind and memories. He quickly realized they were digging for anything and everything he knew about the Ascension Project: names, locations, security procedures.

He didn't even try to fight them anymore; there was no point. The Reapers had broken his will to resist. His only solace was that even with full access to his thoughts, the Reapers would never be able to find Gillian. His daughter was safe . . . though the same could not be said of her former classmates.

The Reapers didn't immediately plot a course for the Grissom Academy. First, they opened the ship's comm channel and connected to the extranet. With access to trillions of terabytes of information from virtually anywhere in the galaxy, it didn't take them long to find what they were searching for.

Armed with the information they needed, the Reapers began to script lines of code. While with Cerberus, Grayson had been trained in basic computer hacking. He'd seen this type of thing before; it was clear the Reapers were compiling some kind of virus.

Driven by the AI intelligence of his masters, his fingers flew over the ship's digital interface. Grayson tried to follow what was happening, but the complexity and volume of the data was too much for his organic mind to process.

It took nearly fifteen minutes of effort for them to be satisfied with the program. Then they logged back on to the extranet and transmitted a message to the Grissom Academy. The Academy had firewalls and multiple levels of virus protection in place, but Grayson knew their security protocols would be no match for whatever malicious program the Reapers had created.

As the Reapers plotted a course for the Academy into the shuttle's nav systems, Grayson could sense they were almost spent. The desperate escape from Omega had pushed their avatar to its limits. They needed to recharge, but Grayson held out no hope he would have any opportunity to try and regain control of his body.

The shuttle accelerated to FTL speeds, heading for the nearest mass relay to begin the series of jumps that would take the Reapers to their destination. As it did so, they shut Grayson down, pushing him into a deep, dreamless sleep.

## TWENTY-ONE

Kahlee and Anderson walked a few steps in front of Kai Leng as they made their way from the warehouse district back to one of the residential areas of Omega. He guided them by issuing directions when needed in a firm, businesslike voice.

“Left at the corner. Continue three blocks. Right here. Take another left.”

They weren’t running, but they were walking quickly, propelled by their mutual desire to get off the station as soon as possible. And as they wound their way through the crooked streets, Kahlee’s mind was working in overdrive.

She was thinking about Grayson, and about Kai Leng’s promise that Cerberus could save him. She wanted to believe him, but she knew that someone who worked for the Illusive Man wouldn’t be above lying to coerce her cooperation.

Working solely from memory, she tried to reconstruct everything she had learned about the experiment on Grayson during her short time studying the lab reports. Much of it was theoretical and speculative; even the scientists in charge of the operation hadn’t known exactly what to expect.

Try as she might, there was no way for Kahlee to confirm or deny Kai Leng’s claim. She hadn’t been given enough time with the data; Aria’s people had attacked the facility before she’d had a chance to fully process everything.

She did manage to get a sense of the overall direction of their work, however. Their research had focused primarily on measurable and quantifiable data: physical changes and alterations to brain wave patterns. They hadn’t bothered to do any kind of psychological testing; they hadn’t bothered to try and figure out the purpose behind the horrific transformation. Why had the Reapers developed this technology? Why had the Collectors been abducting humans and repurposing them? What were the Reapers after? What did they really want?

Kahlee knew if she could figure out the answers to those questions, she’d be able to figure out where Grayson was going next. Whether she would actually share that information with Kai Leng remained to be seen.

Anderson could tell that Kahlee was deep in thought as she marched beside him. And he could guess what she was thinking about: she wasn’t ready to give up on Grayson.

He wasn’t ready to give up yet, either. The Cerberus operative had kicked his ass seven ways from Sunday, but he had no intention of simply following the orders of someone who answered to the Illusive Man.

Kai Leng was muscular, but he wasn’t a big man. Anderson outweighed him by at least twenty pounds; if they were in close quarters—like the pilot’s cabin of a shuttle—he might be able to use that to his advantage. Whether it would be enough to offset Kai Leng’s speed and superior training, however, remained to be seen.

“Right at this corner,” Kai Leng told them.

They turned down a long, narrow alley. At the far end was a large door built into the bulkhead, separating the district they were in from the one on the other side. In front of it was a reinforced, waist-high barricade extending out from the bulkhead, across the alley, then back to the bulkhead again to form a small bunker. Behind the barrier were five armed turians.

At first glance they seemed to be almost bored, leaning casually against their protective wall or sitting on top of it, idly passing the time. On seeing the humans, however, they quickly took up defensive positions behind the barricade.

“Who are they?” Kahlee asked.

“Talons,” Kai Leng answered. “They control the district beyond the barricade.”

During his time as a diplomat, Anderson had received regular reports from Alliance intelligence from across the galaxy. The majority of these came from inside Council space, but some were focused on key

locations in the Terminus Systems like Omega.

From these reports, Anderson knew that the Talons were the largest independent gang on Omega. Like most gangs, the Talons were into drug running, weapons smuggling, extortion, killing for hire, and slave trading. For a substantial fee, they also allowed ships and shuttles looking to avoid dealing with Aria's organization to dock at Talon-controlled ports scattered around the station.

Their business model had proved profitable, and they'd slowly been extending their influence on the station by swallowing up smaller gangs. However, Anderson knew that much of the Talons' success had come from their willingness to maintain a mostly peaceful coexistence with the Pirate Queen, rather than opposing her directly.

"Aria might have sent our descriptions out to every gang on the station," Anderson warned. "If she's offering a reward, the Talons might just decide to turn us over to her to cash in."

"There's bad blood between Aria and the Talons right now," Kai Leng assured them. "Even if they knew she was after us, they wouldn't want to help."

The turian guards studied them as they approached. Two raised their weapons while a third climbed over the barricade and stepped forward to confront them. Anderson was surprised to see that in addition to his pistol he also had a short-range stunner clipped to his belt. He'd assumed the Talons were thugs determined to shoot first and ask questions later. Obviously, however, there were times when they preferred to disable an adversary instead of killing him.

In retrospect, it made sense. The clientele who hired out their docking bays weren't the most upstanding citizens; disputes over payments were inevitable, and shooting customers was bad for business. Blasting them with an electrical current strong enough to render them unconscious wasn't an ideal solution, but it beat the alternative.

"Halt," the turian ordered. "State your business."

"I rented bay 6358," Kai Leng stated.

"Step up to confirm identity," the guard replied.

Kai Leng came forward, holding out his palm so the turian could scan it with his omni-tool.

"Identity confirmed," the guard acknowledged. "Paid in advance until the end of the week."

"I'm leaving a little early," Kai Leng said.

"That's your business," the turian told him. "But we don't give refunds."

To emphasize his point, his hand hovered over the stunner on his belt.

"I'm not looking for one," Kai Leng assured him, and the guard relaxed and gave a nod to his companions.

Convinced the humans had a legitimate reason to be there and weren't looking for any trouble, the others lowered their weapons. The guard who'd greeted them climbed back over the barricade and hit a panel on the wall. The door behind them slid open, revealing nothing more dramatic than another long, narrow alleyway.

"You two first," Kai Leng said with a nod.

Anderson placed one hand on top of the barricade and vaulted over the top. He turned to look back at Kahlee. As his eyes fell on her splinted fingers, a hastily formed plan suddenly took shape.

"She's going to need some help," he said, tilting his head to indicate her injured hands.

He looked at Kai Leng, who, wary of some kind of trick, shook his head in response—just the reaction Anderson was hoping for.

"What about you?" Anderson said, turning to the guard with the stunner on his belt.

After a brief moment of hesitation, the guard stepped forward.

"Hurry up," he grumbled.

Kahlee approached the barricade and raised her knee high enough to set her right foot on top of the wall. With her other leg fully extended and her left foot still on the ground, she didn't have the leverage to propel herself over. Instead, she leaned forward awkwardly so Anderson and the turian guard could each grab hold of one arm, clasping her firmly by the wrist and elbows.

"On three," Anderson said. "One ... two ... three!"

Anderson felt Kahlee flexing her knee and shifting her weight with each count to try and help build

enough momentum so they could haul her up and over. But as they pulled her toward them, Anderson twisted his hips and shoulders, throwing Kahlee off balance so she crashed into the turian guard as she came over the barricade. Anderson kept his grip on her arm throughout, letting her weight drag him down so that all three of them fell clumsily to the ground.

Kai Leng reacted almost instantly, springing over the wall without even touching it. The other turian guards responded to the situation just as Anderson had predicted, reaching for their weapons to defend themselves against what appeared to be an aggressive and hostile action.

With Kai Leng forced to engage the guards, Anderson had the few precious seconds he needed. He ripped the stunner from the fallen turian's belt, rolled onto his back, and fired at his target.

The stunner blast took Kai Leng right between the shoulder blades, causing him to drop to the ground unconscious. Two of the turians were already down, injured but not dead. The other two were still fumbling for their weapons, though whether they intended to use them on Kai Leng or Anderson wasn't clear.

"It's okay! It's okay!" Anderson shouted, tossing the stunner aside and raising his hands in a gesture of surrender.

The turians still standing rushed over and hauled him and Kahlee to their feet as their fallen captain angrily picked himself up. They slammed the humans back against the bulkhead, pinning them there by jamming their assault rifles into their chests.

Anderson didn't say anything as the nose of the weapon pressed painfully into his sternum. He knew he needed to let everyone calm down before speaking. He saw Kahlee wincing in pain, though he couldn't tell if it was from being roughly pinned against the wall or from banging her tender fingers during the scuffle.

The captain glared at the humans, then went over to check the two turians on the ground. They were both groaning in pain, but with the captain's help they managed to clamber to their feet, much to Anderson's relief. Convincing the guards to let them go would have been much harder if Kai Leng had actually killed anyone.

"I can explain all this," Anderson said, judging that emotions had cooled enough for him to make his case. "That guy on the ground was holding us prisoner."

"He paid for the docking bay," the captain snarled. "He's our customer. You're not."

"You're still going to get your money," Anderson reminded them. "Even if you let us go."

"Maybe we should hold on to you and wait for him to wake up," the captain countered. "He'll probably throw in a nice bonus for keeping you from escaping."

"He's with Cerberus," Kahlee said, jumping into the negotiations.

"Is this true?" the captain asked Anderson, stepping forward and leaning in until only a few inches separated their faces.

"It's true," Anderson declared, staring right into the turian's eyes.

The captain took a step back, but didn't speak right away. The guards cast quick glances in his direction, waiting to see what he would say. Anderson held his breath.

The anti-alien agenda of Cerberus was well known throughout the galaxy, even on Omega. It was only natural that most nonhumans would feel a similar bias against the Illusive Man and his agents. The only question was whether it would be enough to overcome the Talons' mercenary greed.

"You can go," the captain said at last. "Take his ship if you want."

In response, the guards lowered their weapons.

"What about him?" Kahlee asked, nodding in the direction of Kai Leng's still unconscious body.

"We'll think of something special," the captain replied, and the other turians all squawked out evil laughs.

"Things will go worse for Cerberus if you let us take him," Kahlee insisted. "We're with an Alliance task force. We're trying to take the organization down. He has information we can use."

"You don't want to get mixed up in a war against the Illusive Man," Anderson added. "You already got paid. Just take the money and walk away."

The captain considered for a moment, then shrugged.

“Sure. Take him. Get the hell out of here. What do we care?”

Anderson didn't need to be told twice. He bent down and scooped up Kai Leng's unconscious body. With a grunt he tossed him over his shoulder in a fireman's carry.

“How far to the docking bay?” he asked.

“Not far. Take a right at the end of the alley. Bays are marked on the side. 6358's the one you want.”

With Kahlee leading the way, they left the turians behind, Anderson struggling under the weight of his burden.

“I'm sorry I didn't warn you,” he said once they were beyond earshot of the guards. “Are you hurt?”

“I'm fine,” she assured him. “That was quick thinking back there.”

“Why did you want to bring him along?” Anderson asked, indicating the unconscious man draped over his shoulder.

“Figured we'd hand him over to the Alliance for interrogation,” she explained.

Her answer made Anderson feel better; he'd been afraid Kahlee was still clinging to the notion that Kai Leng and Cerberus could somehow reverse Grayson's transformation.

Kahlee didn't say anything else, and Anderson decided it was more important to save his breath than continue the conversation. Five minutes later they reached the spaceport. Anderson was relieved to discover that bay 6358 was the second closest one to where they had come in.

“We better hurry,” he warned Kahlee as they reached Kai Leng's shuttle. “I don't know how much longer he's going to be out.”

It took her a few minutes to hack the security system so they could get inside. Anderson hauled Kai Leng into the vessel, then began searching for something to restrain him.

He found a standard emergency supply kit, complete with rations, bottled water, an electric lamp and heater, extra batteries, a small folding tent, fifty feet of nylon rope, and a military-style field knife.

Working quickly, he cut the rope into eight-foot lengths and used them to lash the still unconscious body of Kai Leng to the copilot's chair.

“Can you fly this thing?” Kahlee asked.

“Basic Alliance design,” he assured her, firing up the engines.

After a routine safety check to confirm all the systems were working, he took the shuttle up and out of the docking bay, leaving Omega behind.

He hoped he'd never have to set foot on the godforsaken station again.

## TWENTY-TWO

They had just completed the first mass relay jump on their way back to the Citadel when Kahlee got up from her seat in the back of the shuttle and came up front to check on Anderson.

She glanced down at their prisoner; he was still strapped into the copilot seat, unconscious. With nowhere in the forward cabin for her to sit, she crouched down beside Anderson as he worked the controls.

“I realized I never thanked you for getting me off Omega,” she said.

“I figured I was leaving, so I might as well take you with me,” he joked.

Kahlee smiled, and reached to carefully place her injured hand on his arm.

“What happened in Aria’s . . .,” she began.

Anderson shook his head. “Not with our friend listening.”

Kahlee turned her head to look at Kai Leng. At first glance his eyes appeared to be closed, but as she studied him carefully, she realized his lids were open just a crack, allowing him to see what was going on.

“He’s been awake for at least twenty minutes,” Anderson said.

Realizing his ruse had failed, Kai Leng opened his eyes wide.

“Where are you taking me?” he asked.

“The Citadel,” Anderson answered. “I’ve got some friends in the Alliance who are going to want to speak to you.”

“That’s a mistake,” he warned them. “You should be going after Grayson. He’s just going to keep getting stronger. He has to be stopped.”

“You’re probably right,” Anderson agreed. “But unless you know where we can find him, we’ll stick with the original plan.”

“I don’t know where he is,” Kai Leng admitted. “I just assumed you did.”

Kahlee sensed genuine surprise in his voice.

“Why would we know where he’s headed?” she wondered aloud.

“The Illusive Man told me you were the key to finding Grayson,” he told her. “He thinks you two have some sort of special connection.”

“He’s not the Grayson I knew,” she said coldly. “Your people made sure of that.”

“But you saw the files,” Kai Leng continued. “You know what’s happening to him. I thought you would be able to piece it all together to anticipate his next move.”

“Don’t listen to him,” Anderson warned. “He’s trying to get inside your head.”

“No,” Kahlee said softly, “he’s right. I was thinking about this earlier. I feel like there’s something I’m missing.”

“You saw what he did to Aria’s guards,” Anderson reminded her. “Even if we knew where to find him, what could we do?”

“That’s a coward’s excuse,” Kai Leng insisted.

Anderson didn’t bother to reply.

Sensing that continuing the discussion would only make the tension worse, Kahlee retired to the rear of the shuttle again.

Taking a seat, she continued to mull over the problem. The thing she’d seen in the warehouse wasn’t Grayson. It was his body—at least partially—but the Reapers were manipulating and controlling him.

If she could just figure out what the Reapers wanted, and how Grayson fit into their plans, she told herself, she could find the answer.

She thought back on the data from the experiments, trying to piece together everything she knew about the Reapers. They were interested in humans; that much was clear. They had even gone so far as to have the Collectors abduct humans so they could perform their own versions of the Cerberus experiments.

But if all they’d wanted was for Grayson to start abducting people, they’d have simply sent him out to

the remote colonies in the Terminus Systems. The chances of finding him would have been almost zero.

She slammed her fist against the padded arm of her seat in frustration, sending sharp jolts of pain up through her splinted fingers. But she was too focused on trying to solve her problem to give it more than cursory notice.

Kai Leng had claimed she was the key. The Illusive Man felt there was some special connection between her and Grayson. Was he referring to Gillian? Was it possible the Reapers were going to go after Grayson's daughter because of her unique biotic abilities?

She felt like the solution was close, but she knew she wasn't quite there. The Cerberus data speculated that the Reapers would eventually be able to pull knowledge directly from Grayson's mind. But even if they found out about Gillian, there was no possible way they could find her. The best they could do would be to inspect her files from the Ascension Project—

The answer hit her with such force she almost cried out. Leaping to her feet, she raced into the forward cabin.

"Send a message to the Grissom Academy," she ordered, speaking so quickly her words nearly tripped over themselves. "Warn them Grayson is on his way."

To his credit, Anderson didn't argue or question her. Acting on her instructions, he dropped the ship out of FTL and sent out a signal to connect to the closest communications buoy.

"I've got a signal," he said a few seconds later, "but something's wrong. I can't connect to the Academy."

"Try emergency frequencies," Kahlee suggested.

"I'm trying them all," he said. "I'm getting no response. It's like they shut down all their comm systems."

"The Reapers," Kai Leng declared. "They found some way to block transmissions so nobody can warn them."

"How close are we to the Academy?" Kahlee wanted to know.

"Two relay jumps," Anderson informed her. "I can have us there inside of three hours if I push the engines."

"Push them," Kahlee told him.

Grayson's shuttle decelerated from FTL speed only a few thousand kilometers from the Grissom Academy. At this range it wasn't necessary to use the comm buoy network to send a message; he was able to hail them directly.

Grayson knew Kahlee hadn't told anyone else at the Academy the truth about him. Convinced he had truly rejected Cerberus and was trying to turn his life around, she hadn't seen any purpose in poisoning his reputation. She'd also left him an open invitation to come visit her, though he'd never followed up on it.

The Reapers had discovered all this back on Omega while probing Grayson's mind for information about Kahlee. Now they were going to use what they had learned to gain access to the files of the Ascension Project.

"Grissom Academy, this is Paul Grayson. Do you copy?"

"Copy, Grayson," a voice came back over the intercom. "Long time no see."

Grayson didn't recognize the guard's voice, which meant the Reapers didn't either. But it wasn't unusual to have the guards remember him, even though two years had passed since Gillian had been part of the Ascension Project. While working for Cerberus, Grayson had played the role of a wealthy parent and frequent benefactor to the Academy, and Gillian had been one of the more unique students at the facility. Any visit from her father was likely to stand out in the minds of the staff.

"I tried to let you know I was coming, but the message wouldn't go through," the Reapers lied.

"All our network connections are snafued," came the reply. "Haven't been able to link in for the last four hours. We're in a grade-two lockdown until the techs get it fixed."

The Reapers picked through Grayson's memories, reaching back to the days when Gillian was still attending the Academy. A grade-two lockdown was a relatively minor security precaution. Normally

parents could visit their children at the Academy at any time, but in a grade-two lockdown they needed to get clearance from someone on staff.

“Kahlee Sanders told me to meet her here,” the Reapers explained, spinning a story out of the bits and pieces they had drawn from their host. “She’s supposed to arrive in the next hour or so. I’m guessing you didn’t get the message.”

“Affirmative. Like I said, nothing from the comm network for the last four hours.”

“I know it’s against protocol,” the Reapers said, “but is there any chance you’d let me dock my shuttle and wait for her on board the station? I’d like to get out and stretch my legs. It’s getting a little cramped in here.”

There was a brief hesitation before the reply, probably the guard checking with one of his superiors. Grayson prayed they would deny the request.

“Sure thing,” the guard’s voice chimed a few seconds later, and Grayson knew the unsuspecting young man had just signed his own death warrant. “Bring it around to bay three. But you’ll have to wait in the security clearance area until Miss Sanders arrives.”

“Roger that. Much appreciated.”

Grayson’s fingers flew effortlessly over the pilot’s interface as the Reapers brought the shuttle around to align with one of the landing pads of the exterior docking bay. It touched down with only the faintest bump. Unlike the docks of Omega, here there was no mass effect field separating the Grissom Academy from space. Arrivals had to wait for one of the covered docking platforms to connect to the vessel’s airlock in order to enter the station.

While waiting for the docking platform to get into position, the Reapers had Grayson rise from the pilot’s seat and dig out the emergency kit stashed beneath his chair. He noticed that despite the fact that all his recent injuries were completely healed, he was moving much slower now. It had been several hours since the Reapers’ frantic rush to escape Omega; obviously that hadn’t been enough time to fully recover.

Inside the emergency kit was a knife with a long, heavy blade. The Reapers tucked this into the front of his belt before making their way toward the back of the vessel.

He could sense them picking through his mind for details about the security of the station. Technically, the Grissom Academy was a school, not a military base. But there were still enough security staff on-site—not to mention the biotic instructors of the Ascension Program—to pose a legitimate threat to the Reapers in their weakened and vulnerable state. Unable to simply overpower their enemies with irresistible biotic displays or incredible physical prowess and martial skill, they would need to rely on subterfuge and stealth to achieve their goals.

He couldn’t say for sure whether the Reapers had selected this particular vessel during their escape from Omega in anticipation of this eventuality, though he knew it was possible. But by design or chance, they had ended up taking a standard passenger shuttle. Given their familiarity with the turian vessel they’d hijacked at the Cerberus lab, Grayson wondered if the Reapers simply had an affinity for that particular species.

In the back of the vessel was a sleeping cabin, with an assortment of clothes hanging in a small closet. The Reapers rummaged through the collection, looking for anything that could effectively cover Grayson’s unnatural appearance and conceal the knife from the guards.

From the cut and style of the garments, it was clear the owner of the shuttle had been turian—unsurprising given the make of the ship itself. None of the pieces would fit Grayson in a way that could hide what he had become.

There was a soft chime from the overhead intercom, indicating the docking platform had connected with the shuttle’s airlock.

Realizing the disguise had to last only long enough for them to get through the docking bay’s security doors, the Reapers whisked the cover off the bed. As if it were a shawl, they draped the blanket over the back of Grayson’s head, neck, and shoulders like a cape. Pulling the open sides at the front together and tucking the material beneath his chin left only his eyes and face exposed, peering out from a small opening in the formless tent of material.

As the Reapers passed through the shuttle’s airlock and made their way slowly along the covered



docking platform, Grayson speculated on what might happen to his new form if it was exposed to the unforgiving environment of space. Did the Reapers even need his organic systems to continue functioning anymore? He had seen ample evidence they were capable of repairing damaged organic tissue at an incredible rate, but at this point the cybernetics were so deeply ingrained in his body he felt as if he was more machine than man. As their avatar, could he somehow survive without oxygen in the freezing temperatures outside the docking platform?

He knew he was far from indestructible. But if his lungs and heart shut down while the synthetic network woven into the synapses of his brain remained undamaged, could the Reapers continue to animate his body? Or might there be a point where massive damage to the life-giving systems of the physical shell would cause them to finally abandon their host?

If the Reapers were aware of his speculations, they gave no sign. Perhaps they simply didn't care. They had absolute control of his physical form, and they had no intention of doing anything but plodding slowly along the ramp, swaddled in their bedspread cowl.

The docking ramp led him through another airlock and into a small hallway that sloped upward for several meters before turning around a corner and emerging inside the security screening area.

It was a large, open room. Behind him was a wall with a window built halfway up, overlooking the docking bay. Before him was a reinforced glass wall. In the center of the wall was an open doorway equipped with a security scanner. All arrivals had to pass through the door in order to clear security.

Beyond that was another room with a small security booth built off to one side and another open doorway leading into the main section of the Academy. The security booth was on a raised platform, giving anyone inside a clear view of the docking bay through the glass wall and massive exterior window.

One of the guards—probably the young man he'd been talking to over the radio—had come down to meet him. He was standing on the other side of the glass wall, just beyond the security scanner. Grayson could see the head and shoulders of a second guard, this one a young woman, watching from the security booth.

The Reapers made a quick evaluation of their closest opponent. He seemed fit, and possessed the confident stance of someone who had received some basic training. At his side was a pistol, but instead of a combat suit he was wearing a Grissom Academy staff uniform: dark pants and a blue shirt emblazoned with the school's insignia.

Moving even more slowly than before, the Reapers approached the security scanner. They stopped a few steps before it, as if waiting for the guard's instructions before passing through.

"Uh ... you okay, Mr. Grayson?" the guard asked from the other side of the scanner, taken aback by their guest's strange attire.

"Caught some kind of flu," the Reapers replied from beneath the blanket. "Can't stop shivering."

Obviously satisfied with the explanation, the guard noted, "That's an interesting shuttle you're flying. It's turian, right?"

Grayson's cover while working for Cerberus had been that of a high-ranking employee for Cord-Hislop Aerospace, a shuttle manufacturer that served as one of the Illusive Man's many front companies. Knowing this, the Reapers were able to come up with another plausible explanation.

"We're considering a merger with one of our turian competitors," they informed the guard. "Testing out their product before the deal becomes final."

The guard nodded, once again buying the story—a little too conveniently, Grayson thought. He wondered if the Reapers were somehow manipulating the young man, exerting a subliminal influence on his thoughts and emotions that made him more predisposed to believe their lies.

"I don't feel so good," the Reapers said, causing Grayson to sway unsteadily on his feet.

He stumbled forward and braced himself against the wall. Concerned, the guard took a step halfway through the security scanner to see if he was okay. The Reapers slowly toppled backward. The guard leapt forward and caught Grayson, supporting his weight with a grunt.

"Hey," he called out to his partner up in the security both. "I think he's really sick. Bring me the med-kit."

The young woman sprang into action, grabbing the med-kit and rushing down to help.

The Reapers kept the blanket clutched tightly around Grayson's body as the young man carefully lowered him to the floor. The woman ran up and crouched on the other side of him, setting the med-kit down beside her.

She turned her head to open it, and the knife now in Grayson's hand thrust up through the blanket, impaling the young man in the chest as he leaned forward to examine the patient more closely. He grunted in surprise, then let out a long, low gasp as the blade was withdrawn.

The young woman's head snapped around in surprise, and her eyes flew open in horror as she realized what had happened. The Reapers shoved the dying man aside and sat up, slashing out with the knife in an attempt to disembowel the female guard.

But the supernatural speed the Reapers had possessed on Omega was lacking, and she managed to scamper back out of range. The blade left a long gash in the belly of her uniform, but failed to make contact with the flesh beneath.

Scrambling to her feet, she ran toward the emergency alarm built into the wall right beside the security scanner. The Reapers brought Grayson to his feet, then snapped his arm forward. The knife flew from his grasp, end over end, before burying itself between the guard's shoulder blades.

She sagged to the floor, her hand desperately stretching out toward the alarm she would never reach before falling limp to the floor.

Ignoring the corpses of the two dead guards, the Reapers passed through the scanner and moved quickly up into the security booth. It took them less than two minutes to log in to the primary systems and disable the intercom and alarm systems across the entire station.

Next, they brought up a schematic of the Academy and committed it to memory. Returning to the security clearance area, they retrieved the knife sticking out of the dead girl's back as well as each guard's pistol.

Finally, they picked the blanket up from the floor and wrapped it around Grayson once more, reversing it to hide the bloodstains. On close inspection the large tear left by the knife was still visible, but Grayson suspected that anyone who got close enough to notice would already be as good as dead.

Moving with long, easy strides, the Reapers left the security clearance area behind, passing through the door into the main Academy as they headed for the wing of the Ascension Project.

## TWENTY-THREE

“Grissom Academy, this is Admiral David Anderson of the Alliance. Do you copy?”

Anderson knew that the fact they were getting no response was a bad sign. They were close enough to the Grissom Academy to attempt to make contact through direct radio transmission, bypassing whatever technical glitch had isolated the school from the comm network. The silence on the other end meant something had gone wrong on the station itself.

“Try it again,” Kahlee said, stubbornly refusing to accept the truth.

Knowing it was futile, Anderson closed the comm channel. They’d been trying to get a response for the past five minutes, ever since they had dropped out of FTL.

“There’s no point,” he said, hoping some hard truth might help to prepare Kahlee for whatever scene awaited them on the station. “We’ll be there in two minutes anyway,” he added to soften the blow.

“You won’t be able to stop Grayson alone,” Kai Leng warned them. “Untie me and let me help.”

Neither Anderson nor Kahlee bothered to respond.

The ship’s sensors projected an image of the exterior docking bay onto the vid screen. Three of the bays were empty; the fourth was occupied by a small passenger shuttle.

“Turian,” Anderson muttered, though everyone on board knew who the pilot had been.

He brought the shuttle in slowly. Without a signal coming in from the Academy, he had to land the shuttle freehand, relying on instrument readings and dozens of tiny manual adjustments to their course. A delicate operation at the best of times, it was made even more difficult by the fact that Kahlee was standing behind his chair, leaning over his shoulder and staring intently at the screen. She didn’t say anything, but he could sense her urgency, as well as her frustration at how long it was taking. Despite all his care, when he finally touched down, the shuttle landed with a heavy thump.

They waited a few seconds to see if the docking ramps would connect to the shuttle’s airlock, but sensors picked up no movement.

“Nobody manning the docks,” Anderson muttered. “Going to need an enviro-suit.”

“There’s one in the back,” Kai Leng offered. “A shotgun, too.”

Kahlee glanced down at him in surprise.

“I want to stop Grayson as much as you do,” he assured them. “Even if you leave me bound to this chair, I’ll do whatever I can to help.”

“Keep an eye on him” was all Anderson said as he got up from his seat and headed to the rear of the shuttle.

The enviro-suit was right where Kai Leng had promised. The resilient, insulated fabric easily stretched to fit over Anderson’s clothes, and when he slipped the helmet over his head and flicked it on, it formed an airtight seal with the rest of the suit.

He touched the side of the helmet to activate the transmitter. “Kahlee, do you copy?”

“Copy,” she replied from up in the cockpit. “Maintain radio contact at all times.”

“Roger that.”

He picked up the shotgun, the weight of the Sokolov noticeably heavier than the old Hahne-Kedar model he’d used during his tours in the First Contact war. Then he made his way over to the shuttle’s airlock and stepped inside, closing the interior door behind him. There was a loud rush as the atmosphere whooshed out. Even through the insulation of his suit he felt the temperature drop, though it wasn’t enough to make him uncomfortable.

He opened the airlock’s exterior hatch and stepped down carefully onto the floor of the docking bay. The enviro-suit had magnetized boots for space walks, but they weren’t necessary here—the artificial gravity generated by the station’s mass effect fields was still active.

Scanning the dock for targets, he made his way over to the nearest airlock leading into the station. Fortunately it wasn’t locked, and within a minute he was inside a small hall filled with heated, breathable air.

"I'm inside," he said to Kahlee, lifting the visor of his helmet.

He proceeded up the gently sloping passage, emerging in what served as the Academy's security clearance area for all passenger arrivals. The two bodies lying on the floor only confirmed what they had all suspected.

"We've got casualties," Anderson said softly, knowing the transmitter would amplify his voice enough for Kahlee to hear every word clearly. "Two. Look like security guards."

Keeping his shotgun at the ready, he crept toward the security booth, crouching low to the ground. He pressed up close to the wall beside the open door, then poked his head around the corner for a quick peek.

"Area is clear," he reported, some of the adrenaline-fueled tension fading from his muscles.

Making his way over to the control panel, he found the manual overrides and activated one of the docking ramps. Through the glass wall he watched as it slid into position, clicking tight on the shuttle's airlock.

"Docking ramp is in place," he told Kahlee. "Might as well come aboard."

"What about Kai Leng?" Kahlee asked. "You think it's safe to just leave him?"

"Don't see any other choice," Anderson replied. "Just in case, bring that knife from the first-aid kit with you."

"Copy that. I'm on my way."

Anderson debated stripping off the enviro-suit, then decided not to bother. He was already sweating under the airtight fabric, but the suit was equipped with standard kinetic barrier technology. If he ended up getting into a firefight, he'd need the protection.

He hustled down the steps from the guard station back to where Kahlee would emerge in the security clearance room. She probably knew the murdered guards; he wanted to be there for support when she came across the bodies.

He arrived just a few seconds before Kahlee. He didn't say anything as her eyes came to rest on the fallen guards, letting her mourn their deaths in silence.

She walked slowly over to the first body—a young man stabbed through the chest—and got down on one knee. Despite his glassy, unblinking eyes she pressed her fingers against his throat to check for a pulse. Finding nothing, she reached up and gently closed his eyes, then let her head drop.

Getting to her feet, she made a similar examination of the second body before coming over to stand by Anderson.

"Erin and Jorgen," she told him. "Good kids."

"Grayson did this to them," Anderson said, knowing it was something she didn't want to hear. "If we don't stop him, others will die."

Kahlee nodded her head in agreement.

"You don't have to worry about me," she assured him. "If we have to take him out, I won't hesitate."

Anderson didn't like the sound of that "if," but he knew it was the best he'd get from her. She still couldn't bring herself to admit Grayson was beyond salvation.

"The bodies are still warm," she noted. "And the blood is just starting to congeal. My guess is that Grayson came through here less than ten minutes ago."

"Do we set off the alarms?" Anderson asked.

Kahlee shook her head. "It's night—most of the students and staff will be in their rooms. That's probably the safest place for them. We set off the alarm and they'll all come pouring out into the hall to see what's going on."

"What about security personnel?"

"We should be able to alert them from the guard station," Kahlee said.

They quickly made their way into the small control room overlooking the dock. Kahlee flipped a few switches, then slammed her hand down on the console in frustration.

"The whole system's fried."

"Any other security stations close by?"

She shook her head. "They're spread out everywhere. It'd take forever to gather them all."

“Do you have any idea where Grayson is going?” Anderson asked.

Kahlee thought about it for a moment before answering.

“If the Reapers are just looking for information, he’ll head to the data archives. If they’re after more victims, he’ll head for the dorms. Either way he’s heading for the Ascension wing.

“Come on,” she added, turning to rush off.

Anderson grabbed her forearm, stopping her in her tracks.

“Grayson took the guards’ pistols. We know he’s armed. You can’t go after him without a weapon.”

“I have a knife,” she reminded him, showing him where she’d slid it into her boot.

“You need a gun.”

“This is a school, not a military base,” she explained. “The only guns on-site are carried by the guards.

“Besides,” she added, holding up her splinted fingers, “I couldn’t fire one anyway.”

“Where’s the nearest guard station?” Anderson asked.

“Down the hall and to the right,” she replied. “But the Ascension wing is in the opposite direction.”

“Then we split up,” Anderson declared, falling into the familiar role of an officer barking out orders.

“You go alert the guards. Get them to help you search the dorms. If you don’t run into Grayson, round up all the kids and take them somewhere safe,” he added, knowing Kahlee’s primary concern would be for the safety of the children.

To his relief, she nodded in agreement.

“Take a left when you go out into the main hall,” she told him. “If you just keep following it you’ll end up at the main entrance to the Ascension wing.

“When you get there, look for the map painted on the wall. The data archive is off the main research lab. Look for the large room near the center of the map marked *Restricted Area*.”

There was an awkward moment of silence. Anderson didn’t know whether he should kiss her, hug her, or simply say “Good luck.” Kahlee resolved the issue by leaning forward and giving him a quick peck on the lips, then turning and dashing out the door and down the hall.

Grasping the shotgun firmly in his hands, Anderson lowered the visor of his helmet and set off at a run in the other direction.

\* \* \*

Back on the ship, Kai Leng was working to free himself from his bonds. His wrists and forearms were tied to the arms of the copilot seat; his ankles and calves were lashed firmly to the supports underneath. He wasn’t completely immobilized, however.

By straining against his bonds he was able to gain just enough play in the rope to allow him to wiggle from side to side in the seat. Each time he did so the rope pulled taut, digging painfully into his flesh ... but it also rubbed against the rough metal on the underside of the padded armrests of the chair.

He started slowly, rocking himself and twisting his torso, applying as much tension to the rope as possible, testing the limits of his movement. Then he began to pick up speed, side to side and back and forth, increasing the friction. In less than a minute the ropes had scraped his skin raw. After another they began to draw blood.

The blood mingled with the sweat of his exertion, making a warm, sticky mess that quickly covered his arms and dripped onto the seat and the floor around it. Kai Leng was oblivious, however; all his attention was focused on working the rope against the metal fittings of the chair, fraying it one woven nylon strand at a time.

It took nearly five minutes, but in the end the wear and tear caused one of the loops securing his left arm to snap. The others quickly went slack as he wriggled his arm, until they were loose enough for him to slide his crimson-soaked limb loose.

He attacked the knots holding his right arm in place, the fingers of his left hand slick with blood and sweat. It was frustrating work, but after another minute he managed to free his dominant hand. Then he set to work on the ropes around his legs and ankles.

The angle was awkward; he had to lean forward and down to reach under his seat. Unable to see what he was doing, he had to stop every twenty or thirty seconds to keep the blood rushing to his head

from causing him to black out. In the end it took him longer to free his legs than it had his arms, but ultimately he was free.

Breathing heavily from the exertion, he stood up slowly. His legs had fallen asleep from being held in the same position for so long. Gritting his teeth and clutching the bloody copilot's chair for support, he gingerly walked it off, doing everything he could to get the blood circulating again.

When the pins and needles finally faded, Kai Leng headed for the first-aid kit in the back of the shuttle. He wiped away the blood with a sanitized towel, then smeared a layer of soothing medi-gel on the gashed and torn flesh of his burning forearms.

Then he paused to consider his next course of action. One option was to simply close the airlock and fly away, leaving Anderson and Sanders to try and deal with Grayson. This seemed to be the most sensible thing to do; he had no weapon and it was likely everyone on the station would be as much against him as they were against Grayson.

But he knew that would displease the Illusive Man. There was a good chance Grayson would escape. Once he left the Academy, he would be virtually impossible to find ... especially if he killed Sanders before fleeing.

The more Kai Leng thought about it, the more he realized this might be the last chance Cerberus would have to stop the Reapers. And even if it meant confronting Grayson unarmed, he couldn't let the opportunity slip from his fingers.

With his mind made up, he didn't waste any more time. Moving quickly, he passed through the docking ramp and airlocks and into what was obviously a security clearance room.

Two bodies lay on the floor: one male, one female. A quick inspection revealed they had been killed with a knife. The fact that Grayson hadn't simply crushed them with some type of biotic power gave Kai Leng hope; it could mean his enemy was exhausted and possibly even vulnerable.

He felt the familiar spark of excitement flickering deep inside him. At heart he was a killer, a predator. He lived for the chase. And the hunt was about to begin.

## TWENTY-FOUR

The Reapers were being cautious. Methodical. There was no need to hurry, so they didn't.

Eager to avoid unnecessary confrontations, they set Grayson off on a winding, circuitous route through the halls of the Academy, using the schematics they had downloaded from the guard station. It was night on the station, so they chose a route that passed by empty offices rather than dorm rooms where students would be sleeping.

With the blanket still wrapped tightly around his body, Grayson was nothing more than a passenger along for the ride. He was grateful their route kept them from running into anyone else, however. He didn't want to imagine what would happen if one of the students happened to stumble across them.

Eventually they reached the door of the Ascension Project's primary research laboratory. The door was closed, but the Reapers knew that the data archives for the entire project were stored in the room beyond.

They had Grayson lean forward and press his ear against the portal. Through the door and the blanket, his hypersensitive hearing picked up voices coming from the other side. Scientists working late, most likely.

They let the bloodstained blanket fall to the floor, then hit the panel to open the door. It slid back to reveal what was quite clearly a research lab. A bank of computer stations lined one wall. The opposite wall contained shelves of biological samples taken from the students to monitor their health and progress. In the back corner were various pieces of expensive equipment used to analyze the samples, as well as the electronic data collected weekly from the implants of every child in the program.

Two men and a woman occupied the room. One of the men was seated at a computer station, his chair turned away from the screens as he conversed with the other man and the woman. She was smiling knowingly, as if she'd just made a joke; the two men were laughing out loud.

All three turned in Grayson's direction as he came in. Their expressions transformed from laughter to fear, though it was impossible to say whether the cause was Grayson's mutated appearance or the twin pistols he carried.

The Reapers fired three shots in rapid succession. Each bullet was perfectly placed in the exact center of the forehead, causing instantaneous death. The three researchers fell to the floor, their lives forfeit simply because they had chosen this particular night to put in a few hours of overtime.

Standing perfectly still, the Reapers listened for the sound of any response to the three pistol shots that had echoed in the room. There were no cries of alarm from down the hall; there were no sounds of running footsteps. Satisfied that the obstacles had been eliminated without alerting anyone else on the station, the Reapers turned and casually hit the panel to close the door.

In the back of the lab was another door; beyond it were the data archives. The archives consisted of an OSD library and server array that contained every reading and every result from every test on every student who had ever participated in the Ascension Project.

Not surprisingly, the door to the data archives was locked. Access to the information was restricted to only a handful of senior staff on the project, and required a keycard, access code, and biological identification confirmed via voice and retinal scans. It took the Reapers less than two minutes to hack the door open.

Once inside, the Reapers began to access the data using the lone terminal in the room. As the information flickered on the screen, Grayson scanned it, processed it, and transmitted it instantaneously back to his Reaper overlords in dark space.

The sensation was unlike anything Grayson had ever experienced. It was exhilarating. Intoxicating. Euphoric. Even a red sand high couldn't compare with the rush of being a conduit for pure data transmission.

But it was also taxing. Draining. Exhausting. Transmitting trillions of terabytes of data required a tremendous output of energy, and the Reapers knew their avatar was already weak. So they went

slowly, taking their time, careful not to destroy their precious vessel.

\* \* \*

“We’ve got an emergency,” Kahlee said as she burst into the guard station closest to the security clearance room, slightly out of breath from running the entire way.

“Three of you come with me. The other two go alert the other guard stations and put the whole Academy on stage-four lockdown.”

Hendel Mitra, the former security chief at the Grissom Academy, had been a close personal friend of Kahlee’s. His successor, Captain Ellen Jimenez, was a capable replacement, but Kahlee and she had never formed the same close, personal bond. Fortunately, she still respected Kahlee enough not to question her when she burst into the guard station and started barking out orders to the staff.

“Jackson and M’gabi,” the new security chief said, nodding at two of her people, “go warn the others. Seal off this wing—nobody gets in or out.”

Turning to Kahlee she said, “Lead the way.”

The fact that Jimenez had been on duty was pure coincidence. Racing down the hall toward the Ascension wing, Kahlee couldn’t help but wonder if the other security personnel would have been as quick to listen to her if they hadn’t seen their supervisor so easily falling into step.

*We’re going to need a few more lucky breaks if we want to get out of this alive,* Kahlee thought.

“What’s going on?” Jimenez asked as she ran beside her.

Not wanting to go into the whole story, Kahlee decided to stick to the details that mattered. “Someone infiltrated the station. We have to evacuate the Ascension Project dorms. Get the children somewhere safe.”

“The cafeteria,” Jimenez suggested. “Get everyone inside, and reinforce the room with as many security personnel as we can spare.”

“Good idea,” Kahlee replied.

When they reached the dorms, they had to split up. There were three separate student halls, plus a fourth for the faculty. Jimenez dispatched her people with the calm, cool efficiency of a true leader.

“Giller, take the far hall. Malkin, the one next to it.”

“Don’t let anyone out of your sight,” Kahlee warned them. “Not even the staff. We’ve already had two casualties.”

She didn’t offer the names, uncertain what effect it might have. To the credit of Jimenez and her staff, they didn’t ask.

“Rendezvous back at the cafeteria,” Jimenez called after the others as they ran off. “The same goes for you,” she said, turning to Kahlee. “Are you armed?”

“Got a knife in my boot.”

Jimenez glanced down at the splints on her fingers.

“Can you fire a pistol with those things?” she asked.

“I doubt it,” Kahlee replied.

Jimenez unclipped the gun from her side and offered it to Kahlee anyway.

“Just in case,” she said before rushing off to start rousing the children from their beds.

Kahlee awkwardly tucked the pistol into her belt, then hurried over to the closest room. She opened the door and flicked on the light to find Nick asleep in his bed. The teenager rolled over and looked at her with the confusion of someone still half asleep.

“Get up, Nick,” she said. “Right now. Hurry.”

“What’s going on?” he mumbled.

“Please, Nick. Just get up and meet me in the hall right away.”

Not waiting for a response, she went to the next door and repeated the process.

Within five minutes she had all sixteen students following her to the cafeteria.

“Miss Sanders,” Nick said, falling into step beside her. “What’s going on?”

He’d pulled on a pair of pants and a shirt after she’d woken him up, but his dark hair was still a tangled, uncombed mess.



“Not in front of the children,” she replied, knowing he’d be less likely to argue if he felt like she was treating him like an adult.

“Gotcha,” he replied, his chest puffing out just a little.

Even in these dire circumstances, Kahlee couldn’t help but let a quick smile slip at his reaction.

They were the third group to arrive in the cafeteria. Jimenez showed up with the fourth a few seconds later.

Everyone was milling about, confused and a little alarmed. Being roused from slumber by armed guards—even guards meant to protect you—was more than a little frightening.

“What do we tell them?” Jimenez wanted to know.

“Listen up!” Kahlee called out, projecting her voice so everyone could hear. “Nobody is allowed to leave this room without permission from me or Captain Jimenez.”

She paused, and there was an instant onslaught of questions, mostly from the other members of the staff. “What’s going on?” ... “How long do we have to stay here?” ... “Are we in danger?”

Kahlee wasn’t about to tell them the whole story. It would take too long, and they probably wouldn’t believe her anyway. And if they did believe her, it might cause panic.

“It’s possible we have an abduction scenario in progress,” she continued, shouting to be heard above everyone else. “We haven’t confirmed that yet, but we’re not taking any chances.”

The threat of a student being kidnapped was something everyone in the room could easily accept and understand. Every child at the Grissom Academy was special in some way. In addition to the biotics of the Ascension Project, the school had a high proportion of academic geniuses and artistic prodigies, as well as a large number of children with parents rich and influential enough to get their offspring onto the enrollment list of the best school in Alliance space.

“We have security forces clearing this wing, but until they’re done you all have to stay here where it’s safe,” Kahlee continued. “You might be here all night, so try to get comfortable.”

As she spoke, Jimenez glanced over at her with a curious look. The security captain wasn’t buying the story, not completely. She knew her people weren’t scouring the halls looking for an unauthorized intruder.

Kahlee considered pulling her aside and asking for her help in tracking down Grayson. But more armed guards in the cafeteria meant a better chance of keeping the children safe. And she was still clinging to the hope there might be some way to end this without further bloodshed. She was convinced some part of Grayson was still alive inside him; if she could get through to him, she could get him to surrender so they could try to help him. If Jimenez joined the hunt for Grayson, however, it would almost certainly end with either Jimenez’s death or his.

“I have to go,” Kahlee told her. “Make sure nobody leaves until I give you the all-clear.”

It was obvious Jimenez wanted to say something, but she just bit her lip and nodded in acknowledgment.

“I better go with you,” a voice behind her said, the manly timbre cracking on the last word.

Kahlee turned to find Nick standing there.

“I’m the strongest biotic at the school,” he reminded her. “I can help you stop these kidnappers.”

“I need you to stay here with Captain Jimenez,” Kahlee told him. “Keeping the children safe is the most important thing.”

“I’m not stupid,” Nick told her. “You’re just saying that so I won’t feel bad you’re leaving me behind.”

“She’s leaving me behind, too,” Jimenez reminded him.

“Whatever,” Nick replied, turning away from them and trudging off to disappear into the crowd.

“He has a point,” Jimenez noted once he was gone. “Whatever’s going on, you shouldn’t be heading out there without backup.”

“I’ll manage,” Kahlee assured her, slipping out the cafeteria door to avoid further argument.

A second later she heard Jimenez barking out orders.

“Come on, everyone. Don’t all crowd around the doors. Find somewhere to sit and we’ll bring drinks around to the tables.”

Satisfied the cafeteria was in good hands, Kahlee set off at a brisk jog, heading in the direction of the

data archives.

The station was on an Earth-standard day/night cycle, meaning the offices that Anderson passed were all dark. The overhead illumination in the halls had been dimmed to conserve energy while most of the people on board were sleeping.

On reaching the entrance to the Ascension wing, he'd studied the map long enough to commit it to memory. Then he began to make a slow, cautious trek toward the data archives.

Time was of the essence, but he knew carelessness and impatience had killed more soldiers than any other enemy. Even though his enviro-suit was equipped with kinetic barriers, he had no intention of walking into an ambush. He hugged the walls as he went, hiding in the shadows. He poked his head around every corner, warily scanning the halls for signs of the man he was hunting.

At one point he heard the sound of distant gunfire—three quick shots from a pistol—and he froze. It was impossible to tell exactly, but the sound seemed to have come from the direction he was heading. There were no further shots, so Anderson continued his methodical progress. Whatever encounter had triggered the shots was obviously over; there was no sense recklessly charging in now and possibly getting himself killed.

After several minutes he finally reached the hall leading to the main research lab where the data archives were stored. As he peeked around the corner, he saw something lying on the floor right in front of the lab's sealed door.

He ducked back quickly on instinct, then paused while his mind processed the memory of the image. It looked like a bundle of clothes, or maybe a blanket. He couldn't imagine how it had come to be there, but it didn't seem to pose any threat.

Creeping into the hall, he approached the lab's door with his shotgun at the ready. As he drew nearer he was able to confirm it was a blanket on the floor; he could see that it was stained with blood. An image of a child getting up in the night to wander the halls and stumbling across Grayson forced its way into his consciousness, and he struggled to push it aside.

He hit the panel on the wall and the door slid open with a soft *whoosh*. Anderson wheeled into the doorway, ready to fire. But what he saw in the lab didn't prompt him to pull the trigger. Three bodies lay on the floor, each shot once between the eyes—a clear explanation for the pistol fire he'd heard earlier.

The adrenaline was pumping through his system; his senses were hyperalert, and he could hear the sound of his own breath inside his helmet. Grayson had to be close. If he wasn't in the lab, there was only one other place he could be.

With the shotgun pressed tight against his shoulder, Anderson carefully approached the door at the back of the lab. It was closed, but the green light glowing on the nearby wall panel indicated it was unlocked. He pressed himself against the wall just beside the door, took a deep breath to steel himself, then hit the panel.

Grayson was standing inside the room only a few meters away from Anderson, intently focused on the display screens of the room's lone terminal. He was so absorbed in whatever he was looking at that he didn't even seem to notice the man now standing in the doorway with a shotgun aimed directly at him.

Up close, Anderson was shocked to see how invasive the Reaper cybernetics had become. Even through his visor it was clear the thing before him could no longer be considered a fellow human being. Despite this, Kahlee probably would have given him a chance to surrender. Anderson felt no such compulsion.

All this flashed through his head in the fraction of a second that it took for him to squeeze the trigger. He aimed at his target's center of mass to inflict maximum damage. At point-blank range the projectiles mushrooming out from the shotgun's barrel maintained a tight dispersal pattern; the blast took Grayson square in the side of his torso. The impact spun him around and sent him sprawling face-first onto the floor.

Without a combat suit or kinetic barriers to protect him, the damage to Grayson's internal organs was almost sure to be instantly lethal, but Anderson wasn't taking any chances. He stepped forward as he prepared to fire again, only to be suddenly lifted off his feet and tossed back through the open door to

crash against the computer terminals in the lab. He fell in a crumpled heap to the floor, stunned but not seriously injured.

It took him a second to recover from the biotic attack, enough time for Grayson to rise to his feet. His right side had been reduced to hamburger; blood was oozing from a hundred tiny holes in his torn flesh. But somehow he was still going.

From his prone position Anderson fired again, taking aim at his enemy's head. Grayson dodged out of the way by throwing himself awkwardly to the floor. Then he scrambled back to his feet, yanking a pair of pistols from his belt.

He was still quick, but he didn't have the unfathomable speed Anderson had witnessed during the ambush at the warehouse on Omega. In the time it took him to get up and draw his weapons, Anderson was able to roll into cover behind the edge of the lab's massive computer console.

Grayson fired the pistols several times, keeping Anderson pinned down. And then Anderson was rocked again by another biotic attack. This time instead of a simple push to send him reeling, his enemy created a series of microscopic, rapidly shifting mass effect fields that completely surrounded him. They flickered in and out of existence, subtly warping the very fabric of the space-time continuum. The powerful push and pull of the opposing forces tore at his flesh, causing him to scream in pain.

It felt like he was being ripped apart at the subatomic level. Anderson knew if he didn't get out of the shifting fields, they'd cause all the cells in his body to hemorrhage and rupture.

Ignoring the pain, he popped up from behind cover and fired off several rounds with the shotgun. Grayson fired back with the pistols as he dove for cover. The kinetic barriers in Anderson's enviro-suit shielded him from the opposing fire, allowing him to fall back into the hall.

He backpedaled quickly, putting some space between himself and the door, then dropped to one knee and took aim at the opening, waiting for the enemy to emerge once more.

Grayson could feel his heart fluttering erratically. His lungs were drowning in blood from his wounds. He knew the only things keeping him alive were the cybernetic implants and the irresistible will of the Reapers.

He thought the wounds might cause their hold on him to slip, but if anything they were holding on even tighter. Try as he might, he could find no purchase in his efforts to wrest back control of his body. It was like grasping at thin air; there was nothing left for him to seize onto.

The Reapers knew their enemy was lurking just outside the door. Another well-placed hit from the shotgun and even the synthetic elements of their avatar might begin to fail. So rather than step out into the hall, they waited, gathering their strength for one last attack.

## TWENTY-FIVE

Nick couldn't get comfortable in his seat. He kept casting glances over at the cafeteria door, where Captain Jimenez stood watch.

He'd seen the gun in Miss Sanders's belt, but her fingers were all bandaged up. There was no way she'd be able to use it. What was she going to do if she ran into the kidnappers? She wasn't even biotic.

Focusing on the glass on the table in front of him, Nick briefly gathered his strength, then caused the glass to slide across the surface toward him. He caught it with his hand just as it was about to topple off the table's edge.

*I could yank the guns right out of the kidnapper's hands. Send them flying back to smash against the wall. But they want me to sit here like I'm some kind of kid!*

He glanced over at Yando, who was sitting beside him. The younger boy was staring at him with wide eyes.

"You're not supposed to do that," he whispered.

Nick knew he was referring to the trick with the glass. The instructors would have called it a "gratuitous display" of biotic ability, something that was frowned on in the Ascension Project. They didn't want kids to push themselves too far by experimenting on their own. But for Nick, moving a glass was easy. He'd been using biotics for years. He knew what he was capable of, even if nobody else believed in him.

"Hey, Yando," he said, getting a sudden flash of inspiration. "I need your help."

"With what?" The younger boy was suspicious. He was always worried about getting in trouble, but in the end Nick knew Yando would do whatever he told him to.

"I need you to go up to Captain Jimenez and tell her you've gotta use the bathroom."

"The bathroom's right over there," Yando said, pointing to the rear of the cafeteria.

"I know. Just tell her you gotta go, but you're scared. Tell her she has to come with you."

"She's a girl! She can't come into the boys' washroom!"

Nick gave an exasperated sigh.

"She's a security guard. She can go wherever she wants. Let me finish."

"Sorry," Yando muttered.

"Go inside the bathroom and count to ten. Then start crying and screaming like you're freaking out."

"What? No way! Everyone will make fun of me for being a baby!"

"I won't let them," Nick assured him. "You know I've got your back."

It was true; Nick had been watching out for Yando ever since he got here. But the younger boy still wasn't entirely convinced.

"Come on, buddy. I need you to do this. It's important."

"Why? What are you going to do?"

"I can't tell you," Nick said. "That way, if I get caught you won't get in trouble."

Yando thought about it, shaking his head slowly back and forth. But when he spoke, he didn't say no.

"Okay. I'll go tell her."

"Attaboy," Nick told him. "I knew I could count on you."

Nick turned in his seat to watch the action as Yando got up and crossed the cafeteria to speak with Captain Jimenez.

He was too far away to hear them talking, but he could see Yando shifting uncomfortably from foot to foot, just like he had to pee and was fighting to hold it in.

For a minute he thought Captain Jimenez was going to refuse or maybe send him with someone else. Then she took a quick glance around and took Yando's hand, leading him off to the restroom.

Careful not to move too quickly, Nick got up and made his way over to the door. Nobody paid him any attention. The younger kids were half asleep in their seats. The older ones were sitting in tight little groups, excitedly discussing the evening's strange events. The instructors and security guards were

distributing food and drinks to the kids and trying to act like they knew what was going on.

He stood off to one side, trying to appear inconspicuous. And then he heard a high-pitched wailing coming from the rear of the cafeteria as Yando delivered on his promise.

As everyone turned to see what was happening, Nick opened the cafeteria door and slipped out into the hall, quietly closing the door behind him. He knew Yando wouldn't rat him out, and with so many kids to worry about he didn't think anyone would even notice he was gone.

Impressed with himself for carrying out such a brilliant plan, he realized there was one fatal flaw: now that he was free to go after Kahlee, he had no idea where she'd gone.

He hesitated, trying to figure out what to do next. Going back to the cafeteria wasn't an option, not after he'd worked so hard to get out. So he headed down the hall back toward the dorms, hoping he'd figure something out or simply get lucky and stumble across either Miss Sanders or the kidnappers.

Kai Leng had never been to the Grissom Academy. Fortunately, the school was designed to accommodate unaccompanied visits from parents of the students. The walls were marked with maps showing the general layout to help visitors unfamiliar with the station find their way around.

It was easy enough to guess that Grayson had gone to the Ascension wing, given the history of his daughter. Using the maps, Kai Leng was able to find his way there without any real difficulties.

The halls were completely deserted; not even a security patrol crossed his path. Kai Leng considered that a stroke of bad luck—if he had run into some guards he would have been able to arm himself with some kind of weapon. As it was, he had nothing to go on at the moment but his training.

When he reached the Grissom Academy's entrance, he briefly studied the map on the wall. There was no way to be certain, but his instincts told him Grayson would be heading for the large area marked *Restricted Area*.

He wound his way through the halls, but before he reached his destination he heard a young man's voice coming from behind him.

"Don't move unless you want to find yourself thrown through a wall."

Kai Leng stopped and turned to face the unexpected threat. A young teenager with dark, messy hair was standing in the hall.

"I'm a biotic," the kid warned. "I can bounce you around like a basketball!"

His words were defiant, but it was clear to see he was terrified.

Kai Leng had no doubt he could close the distance between them before his opponent could gather himself and unleash a biotic power. But violence wasn't always the best solution.

"You're one of Kahlee's students," he said.

"You know Miss Sanders?" the boy replied, a look of uncertainty coming over his face.

"I came here with her. We're working together."

The kid let out a deep breath and relaxed. "Sorry. I thought you were one of the kidnappers."

Kai Leng wasn't exactly sure what he was talking about, but it was easy enough to play along.

"If I was a kidnapper, wouldn't I have some kind of weapon on me?"

The kid shrugged. "Maybe you don't need one. You look like sort of a badass."

"This badass is on your side," he assured the young man. "I need to find Kahlee. Do you know where she went?"

The kid shook his head. "She had security take us all into the cafeteria, then she ran off. But I snuck out to help. I'm the strongest biotic in the school."

"I don't doubt it," Kai Leng said with a nod. "What's your name?"

"Nick. Nick Donahue."

"My name is Steve. Maybe you can help me."

"Sure," Nick eagerly agreed. "What do you need?"

"The maps on the wall have a section marked off as a restricted area. You know what's there?"

"If I tell you," the kid replied, "you have to take me with you."

"Deal," Kai Leng answered, knowing it couldn't hurt to have a powerful biotic around—even one as young as Nick—if he ran into Grayson. Plus, he could always use him as a hostage if he got into a tight

situation.

“That’s the lab and data archives,” Nick explained. “You figure that’s where Miss Sanders went?”

“There’s a good chance. Care to show me the way?”

“Sure thing. Follow me.”

Kahlee rounded the corner and stopped when she saw Anderson crouched in the middle of the hall. He was facing away from her, his shotgun pointed at the door of the lab.

She was about to call out to him when Grayson suddenly came barreling through the door. Anderson fired with the shotgun, but the bullets were repelled by a shimmering biotic barrier. Grayson thrust his fist out and a rippling biotic wave rolled down the hall.

Her brain had just enough time to register Anderson hurtling backward in her direction as if he had been fired from a cannon before the wave struck her, too. Fortunately, she was far enough away to be spared the brunt of the concussive impact; much of the energy had dissipated, and she was only knocked off her feet. But Anderson had been much closer to Grayson when the power was unleashed, and had been hurtled a good twenty meters before landing in a crumpled heap beside her.

Kahlee grunted in pain as she had to use her fingers to struggle back up. At her feet, Anderson didn’t move or make a sound. Before she could check on him, however, Grayson was standing in front of her, pointing a pair of pistols in her face.

Grayson knew the Reapers were going to kill Kahlee, and there was nothing he could do about it. They had locked him inside his own body, helpless to affect the physical world.

In desperation, he tried one last time to exert his influence over the alien machines controlling him, in what he realized might quite possibly be the final act of free will before they devoured him completely. But instead of struggling for physical control, he threw all his energy into projecting a single thought: *Kahlee is too useful to kill.*

He didn’t know if his gambit worked, but he suddenly felt the Reapers pawing through his mind, digging up everything he knew about Kahlee Sanders. Not even knowing if it was possible, he tried to direct and influence their search.

*She knows more about the Ascension Project than anyone else. She’s studied the children for years. She’s analyzed the data from every conceivable angle. She’s one of the most brilliant scientific minds in the galaxy. She’s worth far more alive than dead.*

Instead of squeezing the trigger, the Reapers tucked one pistol into Grayson’s belt. With their free hand they grabbed Kahlee by the forearm in a viselike grip, causing her to gasp in pain.

“Come with me,” they said, dragging her away.

Kahlee didn’t argue as Grayson seized her by the arm and led her off down the hall. He seemed to have forgotten all about Anderson, as if he had suddenly become entirely focused on her and her alone.

She had no way to know if Anderson was still alive as they left his motionless body behind and marched back up the hall, but she wasn’t about to draw attention to the possibility that he might be.

Once they had rounded the corner and Anderson was out of sight, she dared to speak.

“Grayson, please—I know what’s happening to you. I want to help you.”

“Grayson is gone,” the man pulling her along replied.

They were moving so fast he was practically carrying her, her feet scuffling along the floor in a desperate attempt to keep up and take pressure off her arm.

“Slow down! You’re hurting me.”

To her surprise, they did slow down. Just a fraction, but enough so that she was able to keep pace. In her mind, there was only one possible explanation: somewhere, deep inside the abomination manhandling her down the Grissom Academy halls, a tiny part of Grayson still lived.

## TWENTY-SIX

David Anderson's return to consciousness was not pleasant.

It began with a sharp, stabbing pain in his left side that flared up intensely with every breath. His mind wasn't thinking clearly yet; it couldn't quite remember where he was or how he'd got here. But his soldier's training allowed him to focus on the pain and try to make a self-diagnosis.

*Broken ribs. Collapsed lung.*

Neither condition was fatal, but either would definitely slow him down. He rolled gingerly onto his back and tried to assess the extent of the damage by reaching up to feel around with his right hand. The simple motion nearly caused him to black out.

*Fractured collarbone. Possible dislocated shoulder.*

He felt like he'd been hit by a high-speed monorail.

*Or one hell of a biotic push.*

Everything came back to him in a flash. He didn't know how long he'd been out or why Grayson hadn't finished him off, but he was still alive. And that counted for something.

*Come on, soldier. On your feet.*

Trying not to twist, which would aggravate his ribs, and careful not to jar his arm, which would set off his collarbone, he tried to get to his feet ... only to fall back hard to the floor as the torn ligaments in his left ankle collapsed under his weight.

As he hit the ground, he was swallowed up in waves of pain so intense they made him vomit inside his helmet. The reflexive spasm of his stomach caused his broken ribs to scream out, which started a coughing fit that squeezed his collapsed lung even tighter, making it feel like he was being strangled by someone inside his chest.

Knowing that the only way to stop the chain of injuries from setting each other off like toppling dominoes was to lie still, Anderson somehow forced his body to quit writhing despite the throbbing pain in his ankle, chest, and shoulder.

He opened his lips and took several slow, shallow breaths, ignoring the foul taste of his last meal that coated his mouth. As bad as the taste was, however, the stench inside his helmet was worse.

When the excruciating pain finally subsided to a dull agony, he very slowly took his one good arm and unbuckled his helmet, letting it fall to the floor beside him. Fighting the urge to take deep, greedy gasps of the clean air, he very carefully maneuvered himself up into a sitting position.

Using the nearby wall for support, he managed to stand up, keeping all his weight on his right leg. He spotted his shotgun on the floor a few meters away.

The enviro-suit was releasing a steady trickle of medi-gel into his system. It was regulated to keep the doses small; too much of the wonder drug and he'd slip into unconsciousness. The limited doses weren't enough to heal his injuries, but did make it easier for him to cope with the pain.

With slow, careful steps, he made his way over to pick up the shotgun, wincing each time he put weight on his injured foot. He was able to hold it with his injured arm. The weight of the weapon pulling down in his grasp caused jolts of pain to shoot through his broken collarbone, but he had no other way to carry it. Not when he needed his good hand to help support his weight against the wall.

Gritting his teeth, he hobbled down the hall in the direction of the landing port, hoping to catch up to Grayson before he escaped. The collapsed lung limited him to short, shallow breaths, making his creeping pace as exhausting as an all-out sprint.

It wasn't long before the painkillers coursing through his body were going into overdrive, staving off shock and giving him a nice little buzz as well.

*Stay focused, soldier. No R and R until the mission is done.*

Kahlee was trying to think of a way to reach Grayson. When she'd tried to appeal to him directly, the Reapers had shut him down. But when she'd asked the Reapers to go slower, Grayson had been able to

exert some kind of subtle influence over them. It almost seemed as if making the Reapers focus on something external loosened their hold on Grayson, allowing him some limited type of freedom.

“Why are you here?” Kahlee asked. “What do you want from us?”

She wasn’t sure if the Reapers would even reply. All she was hoping for was that she might be able to engage the Reapers enough to give Grayson a fighting chance. A fighting chance to do what, however, she couldn’t say.

“We seek salvation,” Grayson said, much to her surprise. “Ours and yours.”

“Salvation? Is that what the Collectors were doing? Saving those human colonists? Is that what you did to Grayson?”

“He has been repurposed. He has evolved into something greater than a random assortment of cells and organic refuse.”

“That randomness is what made him unique,” Kahlee countered. “It made him special.”

She noticed that their pace had become more measured and deliberate. If Grayson was still inside there, if he had any influence at all, he was using it to slow the Reapers down. He was trying to buy her time to escape. The best thing she could do was try to keep them talking.

“Why can’t you just leave us alone? Why can’t you just let us live our lives in peace?”

“We are the keepers of the cycle. The creators and the destroyers. Your existence is a flicker, a spark. We can extinguish it—or we can preserve it. Submit to us and we can make you immortal.”

“I don’t want to be immortal,” she said. “I just want to be me.”

They were barely moving at all now. Grayson had managed to bring their hurried escape from the Academy down to a crawl.

“Organic life lives, dies, and is forgotten. You cannot fully comprehend anything beyond this. Yet there is a realm of existence beyond your understanding.”

There was something odd about the things Grayson was saying. She knew he was speaking on behalf of the Reapers, but it seemed like he—or they—actually wanted her to understand their position. It was like they were trying to persuade her to agree with them, but they didn’t know how to frame their arguments in a way she could relate to. Or maybe there simply was no way for organic beings to relate to hyperintelligent machines.

“We are the pinnacle of evolution,” they continued. “Yet we see potential in your species. You can be elevated. The weakness of organic flesh can be cast aside. You can transcend yourselves.”

The words didn’t really make any kind of compelling argument, but she felt as if there was some deeper meaning to them.

“Your understanding is limited by genetics. You cannot see beyond the brief instant of your own existence. Yet our knowledge is infinite, as are we.”

The more Grayson spoke, the more his words seemed to make sense on a deep, almost subconscious level.

“The laws of this universe are inviolate. Immutable. Your resistance will only lead to your extinction. What are—what we do—is inevitable.”

Kahlee was so far under the Reapers’s spell, she wasn’t even aware she was nodding along in agreement.

Kai Leng heard the voices coming from down the hall. They were faint, still too distant to decipher what was being said, but he recognized the tone of Grayson’s voice.

He reached out and put a hand on Nick’s shoulder, signaling him to stop. The boy hadn’t noticed the voices, and he turned and looked back up at Kai Leng with an inquiring stare. To his credit, he knew enough to keep quiet.

The assassin continued to listen, focusing on the distant voices until he was certain they were drawing closer. Then he pointed in the direction of a nearby dark office with an open door. The two went inside, and Kai Leng promptly closed the door and flicked on the light.

In a careful whisper he said, “I heard something down the hall. The kidnappers are coming this way.”



“What are we going to do?” Nick asked, his adolescent voice cracking with a mixture of fear and excitement.

“I think they’re heading back to the docking bays. They’re going to go right past us.”

Nick nodded to show he was following along so far.

“I don’t have a weapon, but you do,” Kai Leng continued. “If we wait here for them to pass by, will that let you build up enough energy to hit them with a blast powerful enough to take them out?”

“You mean kill them?” Nick asked in wonder.

“These are dangerous men,” Kai Leng warned him. “If we don’t kill them, they’ll kill us.”

“I’ve . . . I’ve never killed anybody before.”

Kai Leng nodded sympathetically. “That’s okay. I understand. It’s a lot to ask from someone your age. Maybe we should just hide and let them go by.”

“No,” Nick answered hastily. “I don’t want to hide. I can do this.”

“Are you sure you’re up to it? It’s not going to be easy.”

“I can do it,” Nick swore.

“Good. Here’s the plan. We wait in here with the door closed and the lights off until they pass by. Then I hit the panel and you jump out into the hall and hit them with everything you’ve got before they can turn around.”

“Isn’t that like stabbing them in the back or something?”

“This isn’t a game, Nick. There’s no such thing as playing fair.”

“Yeah. Okay. Right.”

“I’m going to turn out the light now. You ready for this?”

Nick nodded, and Kai Leng cast the room into darkness. At first it seemed there was no light at all, but after a few seconds their eyes began to pick up on the subtle illuminations from various sources around the room: the blinking message light on the office’s extranet terminal; illuminated power buttons on the computer console and video display screen; the ghostly green glow of the wall panel that indicated the door was unlocked. It wasn’t much, but it gave them just enough light to make out their own silhouettes in the gloom.

Kai Leng pressed his ear to the door and listened carefully. He could hear Grayson speaking; occasionally Kahlee’s voice would interject. He wouldn’t tell Nick about Kahlee—it might make him reluctant to launch his attack, and Kai Leng was more than willing to sacrifice her if it meant they had a chance to eliminate Grayson.

He looked over at Nick, and was surprised to see a tiny spark run the length of the young man’s neck. As he watched the teenager gather his power, the sparks became more plentiful as his body began to discharge the dark energy in tiny bursts.

It took them a long time to finally reach the door; they were moving far slower than Kai Leng would have imagined. Once they were past, he waited a few more seconds to let them get a few meters down the hall, then he hit the panel and jumped back out of the way.

Nick sprang into action, rushing out into the hall with a shrill scream of youthful rage.

The buildup of stored biotic charge was causing Nick actual physical discomfort. His teeth felt like they were chewing on tinfoil, his eyes itched, and he could hear a high-pitched hum in his ears. But it was worth it if it meant he had a chance to help stop the kidnappers and impress Miss Sanders.

When the door to the office opened, he charged through, unleashing all his pent-up energy against his enemies. Too late he realized that Kahlee was one of the two people he was about to crush with the most powerful biotic display of his young life.

The barely contained power was already pouring out of him in an uncontrollable flood, and he didn’t have the mental discipline or control to simply shut it off. The best he could manage was to try to refocus it. Instead of a concentrated beam of deadly force, he pushed out with his mind, distorting it into a swooping wave so the impact would be dispersed across a much wider area.

His yell had caused both Kahlee and the man beside her to turn in his direction. He saw their faces clearly, their eyes going wide in surprise as they were lifted from their feet and thrown sideways against

opposite walls before falling hard to the floor.

“Hit them again!” the tattooed man who called himself Steve shouted from inside the office door. “Finish them!”

Confused and overwhelmed, Nick could only stand there, staring in horror at the bizarre-looking half-man/half-machine rising to its feet and turning toward him.

Nick’s scream had given Kahlee just enough time to realize what was happening and brace herself for the impact. Nevertheless, the biotic wave hit her so hard, the pistol in her belt was jarred loose and sent skittering across the floor.

Fortunately, she hit the wall with her shoulder rather than her head, and she managed to keep her senses about her. She didn’t know how Nick had found them; she knew only that by attacking Grayson he had marked himself as a threat in the Reapers’s eyes.

Reacting rather than thinking, she got off the floor and threw herself across the hall toward Grayson, slamming into him as he raised his pistol and fired at his young assailant. She was able to knock him off balance, but as the pair tumbled to the ground, she heard the explosion of the gun and the sharp grunt of surprise from Nick.

Grayson sprang to his feet and grasped the back of her belt with his free hand. He hauled her up by the belt, holding her suspended horizontally like a sack of flour before heaving her aside.

The throw sent her helicoptering through the air, her arms and legs flailing wildly. Caught off guard by the sudden move, she didn’t have time to brace herself for impact this time, and slammed face-first into the floor.

The blow left her seeing stars. Dazed and stunned, she couldn’t even roll over to see what was happening behind her.

From inside the office Kai Leng saw Nick get shot, the bullet catching him in the stomach. As the young man gasped in pain and fell to his knees, Kai Leng was already in motion.

He’d seen the pistol fall from Kahlee’s belt; he knew he had to get to it if he had any hope of surviving the confrontation. Grayson tossed Sanders aside, his distraction buying Kai Leng a few precious fractions of a second. He slid across the floor and wrapped his hand around the pistol, rolling over onto his back so he could fire at Grayson.

But the Reapers were too quick. In the time it had taken him to secure the weapon, they’d crossed the hall to where he was lying on the floor. Grayson’s foot kicked the gun from his hand, striking with such force it shattered Kai Leng’s wrist.

The assassin knew it was over. He stared up at the monster looming over him, prepared to meet his end. He flinched at the thunderous echo of a shotgun, his mind taking a second to realize he had not been shot.

Grayson staggered away from him, revealing the source of the blast. Anderson stood halfway down the hall, the stock of his weapon wedged firmly into his stomach as he held it with one hand. His right arm hung limp and useless at his side.

He fired a second time, and Grayson’s body shuddered and collapsed to the floor.

As Grayson lay on his back, staring up at the ceiling and gasping for air, he felt the Reapers abandoning his body. Their vessel broken, they directed their consciousness back into the void of dark space, leaving Grayson alone as the last sparks of life flickered away.

Finally free of their control, he turned his head as the world began to grow dim. He saw Kahlee gamely hauling herself back to her feet, and he smiled.

His head lolled back to its original position, leaving him staring up at the ceiling once again. The head and shoulders of a dark-haired man of Asian descent appeared in his field of view; it took Grayson a moment to recognize him as the one who had attacked him in the Cerberus holding cell.

Life seemed to slow down, and he heard the familiar *pop-pop* of a pistol, the standard double-tap taught to all Cerberus assassins. As the pair of bullets entered his skull, everything went dark for the last

time.

## TWENTY-SEVEN

To aim the shotgun, Anderson had to brace the butt against his stomach. When he fired, he had to hold his breath and keep his abs tight to try and absorb the kickback so he wouldn't pass out from the pain. Despite these precautions, it took him a few moments to recover each time he pulled the trigger.

He managed to score a hit on Grayson with his first attempt; fortunately, with shotguns it wasn't necessary to be particularly accurate at short range. Grayson was staggered by the first shot, but didn't go down. Between this blast and the one Anderson had delivered when he caught him in the data archives, however, he had sustained such grievous injuries that it was all the Reapers could do to keep him on his feet.

That gave Anderson time to gather himself and fire again, finally dropping Grayson to the floor. In the time it took Anderson to recover from the kickback of the second blast, Kai Leng had scooped up a pistol from the ground and finished Grayson off with two point-blank shots to the head.

Before the assassin could turn his attention toward another target, Anderson said, "Drop the gun and don't move!"

He didn't shout or yell; despite his being dosed with medi-gel, his collapsed lung and broken ribs were too painful for him to take a deep breath. But he knew that Kai Leng had heard him clearly.

The assassin stood frozen, his weapon still pointed at Grayson's corpse on the floor. Anderson knew what was running through his mind. Could he bring his pistol up and get off a shot before Anderson could squeeze the shotgun's trigger? He was quick, but was he quick enough?

"Don't do it," Anderson warned. "I've got you dead in my sights. At this range even *I* can't miss."

To his relief, Kai Leng let the gun slip from his hands.

Anderson had seen the unconscious teenager lying on the floor bleeding from his gut when he'd arrived on the scene, and in his peripheral vision he could see Kahlee trying to shake off the cobwebs and regain her senses after being thrown by the Reapers. But he couldn't offer help to either one. Not yet. Kai Leng was too dangerous to take any chances with; until he was neutralized Anderson had to push everything else aside and focus on this true threat.

"I want you to take it slow and easy," Anderson told him. "Gently—very gently—use your foot to slide that pistol over to me."

He kept his trigger finger ready as Kai Leng complied, ready to fire at any sudden movement; God help the man if Anderson sneezed. The gun skittered across the floor and stopped a few inches from Anderson's feet.

"Now put your hands behind your head, turn around to face the wall, and get down on your knees."

The assassin complied, and Anderson finally felt like he had the situation under control. From that position even Kai Leng wouldn't be able to react fast enough to avoid a shotgun at point-blank range.

"What do we do now?" the assassin asked.

"All this gunfire is sure to attract someone's attention. I figure the security patrols will be showing up in a couple of minutes. We'll just wait for them to arrive."

He glanced over at Kahlee and saw she was on her feet, bracing herself against the wall and trying to get her bearings. She glanced down at Grayson's body lying just across from her, and then her eyes fell on the boy farther up the hall.

"Nick!" she shouted, racing over to him and crouching down to inspect his wounds.

Anderson kept his shotgun trained on Kai Leng, wary in case he used the distraction to try to escape. He didn't move, but he did speak.

"I could have killed you, you know," Kai Leng said, keeping his eyes fixed firmly on the wall. "But I didn't. I have no reason to harm you."

"David," Kahlee said, looking up from the body of the unconscious boy. "He's losing too much blood. I need a med-kit."

"All I wanted was to stop Grayson," Kai Leng continued on as if he hadn't heard her. "My job is

done. Just let me go.”

“You’re not going anywhere,” Anderson snapped at him. “This is all your fault. Grayson. This kid. Their blood is on your hands!”

“David!” Kahlee barked out. “I can still save him. But I need that med-kit!”

“Go,” Anderson told her, not taking his eyes off Kai Leng. “I don’t know where they are. Grab one and bring it back.”

“We need to keep pressure on the wound,” Kahlee protested. “He’ll bleed out before I get back.”

“I can’t take my eyes off this guy,” Anderson told her with a shake of his head. “We’ll just have to wait for security to show up. Shouldn’t be long now.”

“There isn’t time,” Kahlee insisted.

“You,” Anderson said to Kai Leng, coming to a decision. “On your feet. Nice and slow. Come over and put pressure on this kid’s wound. Hold it until Kahlee gets back.”

“No,” Kai Leng replied without moving, his voice completely devoid of emotion.

“No?” Anderson repeated incredulously.

“You have a choice,” the assassin calmly told him. “You stanch the flow of blood while Kahlee retrieves the med-kit, and I disappear. Or you keep that gun pointed at me until security shows up and we all watch as the boy dies.”

“You son of a bitch!” Kahlee screamed. “He’s just a boy!”

“It’s Anderson’s choice,” Kai Leng told them. “All he has to do is let me go.”

Kai Leng was still facing the wall. Anderson took the opportunity to set the shotgun down and gingerly pick up the pistol. Moving carefully, never taking his eyes off Kai Leng, he made his way over to where Kahlee was sitting beside Nick. She had her injured hands stuffed up inside the wound in the boy’s stomach, her arms trembling from exertion as she pressed with all her might.

“I’ve only got one hand,” Anderson warned her.

“You’ve got more good fingers than I do,” Kahlee reminded him. “Reach inside and press as hard as you can.”

“I assume this means I’m free to go,” Kai Leng said confidently.

He was still facing the wall, but he became bold enough to get to his feet. Anderson took careful aim with the pistol and fired. The bullet lodged itself in the thick muscles at the back of the assassin’s right thigh, causing him to cry out and drop back down to the floor.

Writhing on the ground, he reached his hands down to awkwardly try to clutch at the wound. Anderson fired the trigger again, this time catching him in the calf of his other leg.

Kai Leng roared in pain and anger, then rolled onto his stomach and looked up at Anderson with death in his eyes.

“Security’s on its way,” Anderson noted. “If you want to get out of here you better hurry.”

Kai Leng flashed him a hateful grin, then turned and started crawling on his belly in the opposite direction in a desperate attempt to escape before reinforcements arrived.

Finally able to turn his full attention to Kahlee and her patient, Anderson let the pistol fall to the floor.

“Show me what to do,” he said.

“Reach into the wound and follow along my fingers,” Kahlee told him.

Anderson followed her instructions, carefully pressing his hand up and into the warm, sticky hole in Nick’s abdomen.

“Feel that tube my fingers are pressing against?”

“Yeah. I think so.”

“When I pull my hands out, you press down on it as hard as you can. Whatever you do, don’t let go.”

“Got it.”

“On three. Ready? One ... two ... three!”

Kahlee slipped her hands out of the way, and blood began to seep from the wound as Anderson fumbled to get his own hand in position to clamp down on the bleeding.

“He’s still bleeding!” Anderson said, his voice frantic.

“Press harder!” Kahlee shouted. “As hard as you can!”

Anderson leaned the entire weight of his body into it, and the oozing blood slowed to one thin trickle.

“Good,” Kahlee said, standing up and patting him on the shoulder. “Can you hold it?”

“For a bit,” he answered. “But hurry.”

She didn’t need to be told twice. He heard her footsteps disappearing down the hall, and then he was alone with Grayson’s corpse and the dying boy.

Nick’s breathing had become rapid and shallow. His skin was so pale it looked like he’d been rolled in chalk, and beads of sweat covered his forehead.

“Don’t die on her, kid,” he whispered. “She’s lost too much today already.”

Kahlee was back inside of two minutes.

“How is he?” she asked as she set the med-kit on the floor beside him.

“Still with us,” Anderson replied.

She pulled out a hypodermic, grasping it clumsily in her palm because of her injured fingers, and injected it right through Nick’s pants and into his thigh.

Unlike the small amounts of medi-gel Anderson had been receiving from his suit, a concentrated dose could have immediate, almost miraculous, effects. The clotting agents would stop the bleeding and the biological nanides would begin to repair damaged tissue and cells. At the same time, the powerful sedative properties would send the patient into a state of virtual hibernation, the medically induced coma maintaining vital systems and preserving internal organs. Surgery would still be required for serious wounds, but except in the most extreme cases medi-gel could stabilize patients long enough to get them proper medical attention.

Within seconds Nick’s color returned and his breathing became slow and regular.

Kahlee leaned in and scanned his vitals with the omni-tool from the med-kit, claspng it awkwardly with both hands.

“It’s working,” she said. “You can let go.”

Anderson carefully slid his hand from the wound and rolled gingerly out of the way, giving Kahlee room to work.

From the med-kit she retrieved bandages and a thick tube of ointment. Unlike the liquid medi-gel she’d injected into Nick, this batch had been processed into a thick, gooey salve. She struggled to open the cap, her splinted fingers unable to find any purchase.

“Hold the tube,” Anderson said, reaching over with his one good hand to grasp the cap.

He twisted and the cap came loose. Kahlee spread the salve directly on and into the wound, then covered everything with a bandage. Using the omni-tool, she scanned him one final time, just to make sure nothing had been missed.

“I think he’s going to be okay,” she announced, wiping the back of her hand across her sweat-drenched brow.

“We make a good team,” Anderson remarked. “Maybe we should open a med-clinic.”

“You are looking for a job,” she reminded him. “It’s either that or—”

Anderson held up his hand, cutting her off mid-sentence. “Hear that?”

She tilted her head to the side. “Footsteps!”

Kahlee scrambled to her feet and began to yell at the top of her voice. “Over here! By the admin offices!”

Soon four security guards—two men and two women—came around the corner.

“We heard gunfire, so I figured we better send some reinforcements,” the woman in charge said. “I left the others to keep an eye on the children.”

She glanced down at the bloody carnage and Grayson’s mutated corpse, and her face became grim. When she saw Nick, her expression changed to one of shock.

“I’m sorry,” she blurted out to Kahlee. “I don’t know how he got out of the cafeteria. I didn’t even notice he was gone!”

Kahlee shook her head. “It’s not your fault, Captain. And he’s going to be okay ... though we should still get him to the hospital.”

The security chief nodded at one of the men in her detail, and he carefully picked Nick up off the floor.

“Hate to be the one to interrupt,” Anderson chimed in from where he was still sitting on the floor. “But maybe the rest of you should go after Kai Leng.”

“Right,” Kahlee agreed. “Asian male. Tattoo on the back of his neck. Not armed, but still dangerous.”

“Wounded in both legs,” Anderson added, pointing at the trail of blood drops leading off down the hall. “Shouldn’t be hard to find.”

While the guard carrying Nick set off at an easy pace so he wouldn’t unnecessarily jar the young man, the other guards sprinted off at a full run, leaving Kahlee and Anderson alone.

Kahlee crouched down beside him. “You look like you’re in pretty rough shape,” she said, holding up the omni-tool. “Better let me check you out, too.”

“In a minute,” Anderson told her. “After you say your goodbye.”

She glanced over at Grayson, then let her eyes fall to the floor. She got up, went slowly over to the body, and knelt down beside it.

Anderson turned away, giving her some privacy. He could hear her whispering, but he made no effort to listen in on what she was saying. When he heard the faint sound of Kahlee’s sobs, he couldn’t help but glance back to see if she was okay.

She was clasping Grayson’s hand in her lap, a few tears trickling down her cheeks. She brought his hand up to her lips and gave it a single soft kiss before letting it slide gently back to the floor. Then she wiped her eyes, took a deep breath, and got back on her feet.

Anderson didn’t comment as she sat down beside him. He wondered what she had whispered, but he had no right to ask. The moment hadn’t been his; it was between her and Grayson.

“Let’s see if we can get you patched up,” Kahlee said, holding up the omni-tool and giving him a tired smile.

## TWENTY-EIGHT

A number of things flashed through Kai Leng's mind after Anderson rendered both of his legs effectively useless.

He knew right away the wounds weren't life-threatening. Both shots had struck muscle; no major arteries had been hit. His legs were bleeding, but not profusely—it would take at least twenty minutes before he lost enough blood to put his life in danger.

Knowing he wasn't going to die, Kai Leng's first instinct was to get even. As he crawled along the floor, he glanced back and saw Anderson and Kahlee focusing on the injured boy. Kai Leng figured he had a better than even chance at getting to Grayson's body—and the pistol beside it—before they noticed him.

But once he had the pistol, what could he do with it? Anderson had chosen not to execute Kai Leng; he had too much of the noble hero in him to kill a helpless opponent. But if Kai Leng got his hands on a weapon and started shooting, he was pretty sure Anderson wouldn't hesitate to finish him off.

Normally Kai Leng would have taken his chances anyway. But Anderson was wearing an enviro-suit equipped with kinetic barriers. He'd survive the first few shots, giving him a chance to grab either the pistol or shotgun and start firing back. Given Kai Leng's current state, it didn't seem like a battle he could win.

He could use the pistol to kill Sanders, but that wouldn't accomplish anything except pushing Anderson into enough of a rage to kill him. He could use the pistol to threaten Sanders, putting them all into a hostage situation, but that would only give the security guards more time to arrive. Against such overwhelming odds, there could be only one realistic outcome.

Kai Leng realized he wasn't ready to die just yet, so he decided to ignore the pistol and focus on escape. He continued to crawl on his belly until he disappeared around the corner, moving at a snail's pace. It wasn't the pain that slowed him down; mentally, he was strong enough to ignore it. But Anderson was a crafty old bastard—he'd placed his shots carefully, knowing the damage to the muscle tissue would make it impossible for Kai Leng's legs to bear any weight at all.

The smooth floor of the Academy's halls offered little purchase for his hands and fingers; escape would be impossible if he had to drag himself along like a slug. But the Academy was a space station—gravitational fields inside the halls were maintained by the facility's mass effect field generators. In the event of an emergency, it was possible the artificial gravity could fail.

On his way in, Kai Leng had noticed a series of metal rungs running the entire length of the ceiling. Their purpose was to allow people to move around should the environment suddenly become weightless. He'd also noticed a small maintenance ladder built into the wall farther up the hall to provide access to an overhead electrical duct. If he remembered correctly, the ladder was on the same side of the corridor as the rungs in the ceiling.

The ladder was less than fifty meters away. Moving as fast as he could, it still took Kai Leng well over a minute to reach it. Then he grabbed the first step and hauled himself up the ladder one rung at a time, his injured legs dragging behind him.

When he reached the ceiling, he wrapped his left arm around the ladder's topmost rung and reached out to grasp the handhold in the ceiling with his right hand. But he couldn't quite reach; his fingertips just brushed against the rough, rounded metal.

Refusing to be defeated when possible salvation was only inches away, he lunged toward the handhold, simultaneously pushing off from the ladder with his other arm. His fingers locked around the rung, leaving him dangling by one hand from the ceiling.

He rocked his body back and forth several times to build momentum, then pulled himself up as he swung forward so that he was able to grab the next hold with his left hand. At the same time he let go of the rung in his right and swung his arm forward to grab the next hold in the line. Keeping the rhythm going, he was able to go from rung to rung, his legs dangling below him as he propelled himself along like



one of his simian ancestors swinging through the branches of Earth's long-forgotten jungles.

It didn't take long for his arms and shoulders to start aching from the strain of supporting the entire weight of his body, but as with the pain from the bullet wounds he simply blocked the sensation out. By the time he reached the security clearance room outside the docking bay, his arms were trembling with fatigue, and his grip finally faltered.

As his fingers slid off the rung, he barely had time to brace himself before his body fell back down to the floor with a heavy thud. The impact sent a fresh wave of pain through his wounded legs. He saw stars, and for several seconds he had to fight to keep from blacking out.

It took him close to a minute before he had recovered enough to press on. His heart was pounding and he was gasping for air, but salvation was in sight. There was no way he could get back up to the rungs in the ceiling; even if he could, his exhausted shoulders and arms would probably refuse to support his weight. With no other options available, he once again began to crawl toward the passage that would take him to the docking ramp.

He passed by the bodies of the two dead guards, inching his way along. He was halfway up the docking ramp—less than ten meters from the shuttle's airlock—when he heard voices coming from the hall behind him.

"Got another spot of blood here!" someone shouted. "Looks like he's headed out to the shuttles!"

Kai Leng redoubled his efforts, crawling across the hard metal floor of the docking ramp as fast as he could. Behind him he heard the heavy clunk of boots coming for him.

He reached the shuttle's airlock just as the first two security guards stepped onto the docking ramp.

"Freeze!" one of them shouted.

Ignoring the order, Kai Leng rolled through the airlock's door and lunged up to slam his palm against the button halfway up the wall.

Kai Leng wrapped himself into a ball, covering his head with his hands as the guards opened fire. A few stray rounds snuck into the airlock and ricocheted around before the heavy panel slammed shut, but none made contact with their target.

Kai Leng knew he didn't have much time. The guards' guns wouldn't be able to penetrate the hull, and the airlock door was locked. But they could still try to hack it open and get on board before he could take off.

He crawled through the shuttle and up to the forward cabin. Hauling himself into the chair, he punched the controls and fired up the engines.

Fortunately, the Academy had been designed with an exterior docking bay—far less expensive to maintain than a fully enclosed landing port. That meant there were no doors or ceiling that could be closed to prevent his escape.

A few seconds later the vessel lifted off and pulled away from the station. Kai Leng punched in a course for the nearest mass relay, but he knew he was already free and clear, so he didn't accelerate to FTL speed yet.

Instead, he slid down from the chair and crawled back to the rear of the cabin, where the first-aid kit was still lying on the floor. Anderson had raided it for the rope to tie him up, but there were still basic medical supplies.

He found a tube of medi-gel and smeared it onto his wounds to dull the pain and prevent infection, careful not to overdose and black out. Then he crawled back to the front, hauled himself up into the pilot's seat, and opened a comm channel.

The display flickered, and then the face of the Illusive Man came into focus.

"Is it over?" he asked.

"Grayson is dead," Kai Leng assured him. "But I couldn't recover the body."

"It's still on Omega?" the Illusive Man wanted to know.

"No. The Grissom Academy."

The Illusive Man's face showed no reaction to the unexpected news.

"What about Sanders and Anderson?"

"Also at the Academy. Both still alive."

“I think you’d better come deliver your mission report in person,” he said.

Just as Kai Leng was wondering if he would leave that meeting alive, the Illusive Man said, “I knew I could count on you to complete this mission.

“You’re a valuable asset to the organization,” he added, almost as if he had read Kai Leng’s thoughts. “Cerberus is lucky to have you.”

“It’s my honor to serve the cause,” Kai Leng replied.

“The station has been moved,” the Illusive Man told him. “I’m sending the coordinates.”

The comm channel beeped to confirm the receipt of the incoming data. Then the view screen went dark as the Illusive Man killed the connection.

Kai Leng leaned back in his chair and let out a long breath he hadn’t even realized he’d been holding.

He had the autopilot plot a course for the station and fired up the drive core, sending the ship into FTL. Glancing at the flight plan, he saw he had close to an hour before he’d have to manually coordinate the first mass relay jump of the trip.

“Lights off,” he said, closing his eyes as the shuttle’s illumination dimmed. “Wake in forty minutes.”

For the first time since this whole thing had begun, his body was able to truly relax, slipping easily into a deep and dreamless sleep.

Three days had passed since Kai Leng had escaped the station. Anderson’s injuries had been tended to; his ribs were still a little tender and it would be another week or so before the ligaments in his knee were completely mended. Still, he was well enough to return to the Citadel. But first he needed to speak to Kahlee.

He found her where he’d expected: sitting beside Nick’s hospital bed to keep him company as he recovered from his wounds. Over the past three days her time had been split between this room, Anderson’s room, and twice-daily physio sessions to help her regain full use of her fingers.

“How you doing, champ?” Anderson asked as he entered the room.

“Fine” was all Nick said.

He didn’t talk much when Anderson was in the room. That was to be expected. It was obvious he had a crush on Kahlee. When it was just the two of them, all her attention was focused on the boy.

“You’re looking well,” Kahlee said, flashing Anderson a warm smile.

From the corner of his eye he caught a momentary scowl cross Nick’s face, and he had to fight to keep from laughing at the young man’s reaction.

*Get over it, kid*, he thought. *Go find someone your own age.*

“How are the digits?” Anderson asked.

“Good as new,” Kahlee said, holding her fingers up and twiddling them in the air. “I can start taking piano lessons tomorrow, if I want.”

“I’ve got another proposal you might want to consider.”

She raised a curious eyebrow. “What are you talking about?”

“Can we talk in private?”

“Back in a minute, Nick,” Kahlee said, patting the young man’s hand as she got up.

“Whatever,” he grumbled, though she didn’t seem to notice his suddenly surly attitude.

Anderson led her out into the hall, then into a nearby patient room that was currently empty.

“Shut the door,” he said once Kahlee was inside.

“Sounds serious,” she said, complying.

“I checked with some old friends inside Alliance Intel,” he told her. “No sign of Kai Leng or Cerberus.”

“Like cockroaches when the lights come on,” Kahlee noted. “You think they’ll come after us?”

“I doubt it. There’s nothing for them to gain. Besides, we’re too high-profile. Cockroaches like to stay in the dark corners.”

“So what are your plans now?” she asked.

“I’m heading back to the Citadel in a few hours,” he told her. “I need to take Grayson’s body with me.”

“Do you think this will finally convince the Council the Reapers are real?”

“You saw the research. You tell me.”

“Doubtful,” she admitted. “The technology inside him may have been based on Reaper designs, but it’s got Cerberus’s fingerprints all over it. And there’s no way to know who or what was controlling him. Not anymore. They’ll probably just put all the blame on the Illusive Man.”

“I may not be able to get the Council to listen to me, but there are people I can turn to ... both in and outside the Alliance. We can’t ignore this anymore; something has to be done to try and stop the Reapers.”

“You want my permission to study him,” she said softly as the realization of what he was asking dawned on her. “You want to conduct autopsies. Take him apart and see what you can learn about their technology.”

“This isn’t the same as what Cerberus was doing,” he insisted. “I don’t condone what they did to him in any way. But they were right about one thing: the Reapers are coming, and we have to find a way to fight them.

“I promise he’ll be treated with respect and dignity,” he assured her. “But there are things we have to know.”

“I understand,” she said softly.

“There’s more,” Anderson continued. “I want you to come with me. You’re the most brilliant scientist in Alliance space. If we have any hope of figuring this out, we need you.”

He paused to give weight to his words before continuing. “I need you.”

“You’re asking me to leave the Ascension Project?”

“I know you love these kids. And you’re doing good work here. But nothing is more important than this.”

She mulled it over in silence for a few moments, then nodded her acceptance.

“It’s what Grayson would have wanted.”

“It has to be what you want, too,” Anderson insisted. “Don’t do this out of guilt.”

“It’s not guilt,” she said. “I spoke to them through Grayson. The Reapers, I mean. They kept talking about a cycle. They said our extinction was inevitable. I’m not going to sit on the sidelines and let that happen.”

“I’m glad,” he said, reaching out to take her wrist, then pulling her close. “I didn’t want to lose you again.”

He held her head in his hands, then leaned in and gave her a long, deep kiss on the lips.

“Better not let Nick catch you doing that,” Kahlee said with a soft laugh when he was done. “He’ll bounce you off every wall in the station.”

## EPILOGUE

The Illusive Man sat in his chair, staring out the window at the brilliant blue sun the station was orbiting. It was a suitably stunning, and perfectly nondescript, background for the call he was expecting.

Occasionally he would take a sip from the whiskey rocks in his right hand, or pull a long, slow drag on the cigarette in his left. He was thinking about everything Kai Leng had told him, and what the implications were both for humanity and for Cerberus.

He knew enough about Admiral David Anderson to know he wasn't going to ignore this. Finally someone other than Cerberus was going to start doing something about the Reapers. That didn't mean the Illusive Man was simply going to step aside, however.

Working with Anderson probably wasn't an option. Not in the immediate future, anyway, though he wasn't willing to rule it out entirely. But for the time being he needed to make sure his own work continued, even as he tried to rebuild his fallen empire.

And that meant smoothing things over with Aria T'Loak. He couldn't afford a war with her, and she had something he needed.

He had just finished his cigarette and started another when he heard the soft *beep* indicating an incoming message. He spun his chair to face the holo-pad.

"Accept call," he said.

A flickering, three-dimensional image of Omega's Pirate Queen materialized in the center of the room. She was alone, seated in the same room she had called him from the last time they had spoken.

"I'm not very happy with Cerberus right now," she declared, skipping the formalities and getting right down to business. "You didn't warn me what Grayson had become."

"It wouldn't have been a problem if you hadn't tried to take him alive," the Illusive Man countered. "You're the one who reneged on the deal."

"I've heard Cerberus has suffered some rather serious setbacks of late," she said, changing topics in a blatant effort to rattle him.

"The stories of our demise are greatly exaggerated," he assured her, borrowing a quote from one of his favorite literary figures.

"I lost a lot of good people because of you," Aria told him. "I don't forget something like that."

"A war doesn't help either one of us," he countered. "I thought you were smart enough to know that."

"Is that why you called me? To sue for peace?"

"I have a business deal."

She laughed.

"What makes you think I'll say yes after the way the last one turned out?"

"This one won't cost you anything. No risk. Only reward. It's a deal you can't pass up."

"I'm listening."

"I want the research files from the station where you attacked the turians."

"That was your lab originally, wasn't it? You used me to get revenge on them."

"I think we used each other. What about those files?"

"Why should I turn them over to you? Maybe I'll just keep them for myself."

"So keep the originals for yourself. Just send me a copy."

"Were these experiments really what I think they were?" she asked.

"I don't know what you think they were," the Illusive Man replied evasively.

"What's your offer?"

"Send me the files and I'll give you three million. One up front, two on final delivery."

"Three million, and I can keep the originals?"

"All I want is the data," he assured her. "But I'll know if you hold anything back. If you want to get paid, you send everything."

"You really believe in this, don't you," she said. "The Reapers. Galactic extinction. You don't think it's

some crazy story.”

“Let’s just say I’m not willing to take that chance.”

“I’ll send you the files,” Aria agreed. “You’ll have them by tomorrow.”

“I’ll put the down payment into your account tonight. Same as last time?”

“The same,” she said with a coy smile. “Unlike you, I don’t care if people know what I’m up to.”

Before he could reply, she disconnected the call. He laughed in spite of himself, amused at how important to her it was to get the last word.

He spun his chair to face the viewing port and pulled out a cigarette. He’d half-finished it when one of his assistants arrived to slip a glass into his hand before quickly removing herself from the room.

As he sipped his drink and smoked his cigarette, the Illusive Man’s gaze shifted from the glowing blue star to the cold black curtain behind it. One thought kept running through his head, over and over.

*The Reapers are out there somewhere. And they’re coming.*

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