



THE OFFICIAL PREQUEL
TO THE HIT
VIDEO GAME FROM
BiOWARE™

MASS EFFECT™ ANDROMEDA INITIATION

N. K. JEMISIN | MAC WALTERS



INITIAL AIRDATE JANUARY 1ST, 2184

**Andromeda Initiative recruitment ad title:
"COME WITH US"**

**Notes of the Central Nairobi Advertising
Agency**

SFX: Stills of ark *Hyperion* superimposed with shots of the Andromeda Galaxy. (*Nnamdi, do we have permission for close-up? You know what these private-funding types are like.*)

SOUNDTRACK: Something inspiring. Adjust style for local market tastes per extranet IP address.

EDIT TEAM 1: *Can we use Vaenia's music?*

EDIT TEAM 2: *No, are you high? We want "inspired," not "let's go fuck an alien."*

EDIT TEAM 1: *Hey, inspiration's what you make of it!*

VOICE-OVER: We are travelers, constantly moving forward—and looking back. Alone and

MASS EFFECT

as one, we have no choice but to try. For our insatiable curiosity. For our fear of what should happen if we don't. *You* can be that explorer. We will say goodbye, and you will look back one last time—and know that wherever you go, we will be with you. *(This is good. Woman's voice, alto for maximum appeal, tough-sounding.)*

BLACK SCREEN WITH INITIATIVE LOGO:

Select to learn more and sign up!



CHAPTER ONE



“There is always a moment when the familiar becomes the strange,” Cora recited, as she stood looking around at the bustling open docking area of Tamayo Point. “Look at your own hand and you will eventually notice the variation of textures, the growth of nails and the fade of scars, the peculiarity of having five fingers instead of three.”

If there had ever been a time when the words of Sarissa Theris resonated more, Cora couldn’t remember it. This was a moment that should have felt familiar, after all; she’d disembarked hundreds of times during station runs with her old Alliance unit, and before that cargo pickups on her family’s ship. She’d even previously visited Tamayo Point, Sol’s gateway to the galaxy for the no-frills travel set, though she didn’t remember it well. Too many ports over the years. Too many crowds shuffling and murmuring and jostling in exactly the same way... and yet, somehow, everything about *this* crowd felt a little off-kilter. Familiar, but strange.

From the shadowed loading area near her shuttle’s docking tube—out of the other passengers’ way but with a good elevated view of the busy promenade—Cora found herself watching with growing fascination the first human crowd she’d seen in four years. There was just something inherently *alien* about the way humans acted in large groups, wasn’t there? Well, the crowd wasn’t completely human; her huntress-trained

eyes immediately picked from the churn of movement the slower, dancing glide of two hanar, and over there was a salarian standing stock-still as he checked something on his omni-tool. But mostly she just saw hundreds of humans: running to catch the next shuttle, arguing with the cargo staff, yelling some kind of slogan and hefting a placard along with a small gaggle of other protestors, calling out to partners or siblings or grandparents to say that hey, the cafe had real shrimp and not that protein-vat crap.

Asari, Cora knew, would all be moving at about the same pace and maintaining a noticeable distance from one another. She'd read somewhere that their version of politeness meant a slightly wider zone of personal space, just beyond easy melding distance. The adults in a turian crowd tended to move in lockstep, probably out of leftover habit from their years of compulsory military service. By the same token, krogan deliberately resisted the formation habit, since when they slipped into lockstep, they instinctively started looking for a warlord or battlemaster to lead them in a charge. Took forever to get through a big group of krogan because so many of them would just stop suddenly and stand still for no reason—but it was either let them do that, or risk a station-wide, days-long brawl between impromptu armies.

At least there was a *reason* for the behavior, unlike with humans.

That was what Cora found herself noticing, as her gaze picked out a hundred little vignettes of behavior. Humans stopped mid-walk while reacting to messages on their omni-tools; humans paced back and forth, bounced on their toes, leaned against walls; humans got annoyed when someone slower moved in front

of them, and speeded up to pull ahead, even though the crowd meant they wouldn't get very far. She kept pinging on them because in any other crowd, these small oddities of behavior looked suspicious. Potential threats. But she was pinging everywhere, because they weren't threats.

They were just humans—a complete chaotic mess.

And she was just going to have to get used to it again. Finally proceeding down the steps, Cora shouldered her satchel with a sigh, and braced herself to push and weave through the crowd.

“Lieutenant Harper? Cora Harper?”

The voice made Cora jump, nearby and unexpected as it was, though she sharply controlled the reflex to snap up a biotic barrier around herself. Turning, she saw a tall, slim, brown-skinned woman watching her with a polite, open smile. No—Cora frowned, reassessing at once. It hadn't been for nothing that Nisira T'Kosh, her old commander on Thessia, had drilled her in rapid threat assessment and response. Cora might be pinging false positives all over the place, but she felt sure that her instincts were right in this case. There was something *off* about the woman's smile.

“Yes?” Cora replied, trying and failing not to sound wary.

“I thought that might be you!” The woman brightened, extending a hand to shake, which Cora did automatically—her body remembered local custom even if her mind was still somewhere back in asari space. “I've been waiting here all afternoon to speak with you. Your shuttle was late.”

“Traffic going into the Parnitha Relay,” Cora said, even as she wondered *Who are you, lady?* The politeness came automatically, too, after four years of thinking of

herself as an ambassador for humanity. “Sorry to keep you waiting. What was it that you wanted to speak to me about, Miss...?”

“Khalisah bint Sinan al-Jilani.” The woman’s smile widened to show teeth, and—what? A camera drone floated up from where it had been hidden behind her, suddenly focusing a blindingly bright spotlight on Cora’s face. She squinted into it while al-Jilani continued. “Westerlund News. Do you mind answering a few questions for me, Lieutenant Harper? It won’t take long.”

“I, uh—” It had been years since Cora had received any media training, before shipping off to Thessia, and she hadn’t used it since. Asari simply didn’t think that members of other races coming to learn from them was particularly newsworthy. “I guess?”

“Great. I can see you’re a little off-balance; sorry about that. Why don’t we start with a few softballs?” Al-Jilani glanced at the drone, which flashed a red light to indicate that it had begun recording, and nodded in satisfaction. “You’re returning to the Sol system, Lieutenant Harper, after—was it *four years* that you spent on Thessia as part of the Alliance’s Valkyrie Program?” She glanced at a small datapad. “Quote, ‘To strengthen diplomatic relations between humanity and the asari, improve the quality of human biotics training—’”

“Yes,” Cora said. Then she winced inwardly; she hadn’t meant to interrupt. That wouldn’t play well with women and non-binaries. It was just that she’d heard the précis of the Valkyrie Program before, more times than she could count, and she wanted this interview over with, and it was hard not to let these things show. “Uh, I mean, not quite. I was stationed with a commando unit based on Thessia, but we took

missions all over asari space.”

“Talein’s Daughters, right, under the command of Nisira T’Kosh—seventy-four combat veteran, survivor of the Ailanthus campaign and the Siege of Arta. What was it like, working under such a distinguished asari matron?”

Cora relaxed fractionally, thinking, *It was exhilarating... and terrifying.* Nisira had never fought alongside humans before, and all she’d really known of humans came from a few data files and a quarter-century of extranet articles. Her philosophy for training Cora had basically boiled down to “*Well, you look like an asari, so I’m going to treat you like an asari*”—and Cora had had little choice but to measure up.

That had meant hours of additional physical training as well as, after dismissal, studying ancient texts on biotics and philosophy, and even learning how to cook with Thessian ingredients so she wouldn’t starve between the asari’s twice-daily meals. It had been the most demanding, most dangerous training Cora had ever heard of... and she’d loved every minute of it. But how to boil all of that down to a sound bite?

“It was great,” she muttered. And then inwardly she slapped herself.

Not that al-Jilani seemed to notice her utter failure of eloquence. “Mmm-hmm, mmm-hmm. And what do you say about rumors that you failed to meet even the most minimal standards of performance for an asari commando? That they created a new, looser set of standards for you which are roughly equivalent to the training given to asari children?”

What? Cora stared at her. “Those are... none of that is true.” Some of the minimum standards had taken her a few tries, sure, but she’d made all of them eventually.

"It's not? And what about the rumors that you 'went native?' Eating only Thessian food, wearing only asari-made clothing, using a biotic amp custom made for you by a high-end Armali bespoke manufacturer?"

Al-Jilani's face still bore the same open, friendly smile as before, but it was becoming increasingly obvious that her friendly demeanor was horseshit. It made Cora's teeth start to itch—a sure sign that she was starting to lose control of her temper. For whatever reason, her biotic biofeedback tended to start with dental roots.

"I ate and dressed with my comrades," she snapped. "I ate and dressed *like* them, because that's what people in any military unit tend to do. Food's food and clothes are clothes; asari clothes fit me fine, so why would I pay through the nose to have stuff shipped from human space if I didn't have to? Call that going native if you want, but the whole point of the program was to provide an immersion experience." She opened her mouth to add, "*And that was an unfair question,*" but while she drew a breath al-Jilani slid her next comment smoothly into the silence.

"Immersion in an alien society, of course," al-Jilani said, nodding in what Cora assumed was supposed to be a thoughtful manner. "But then you quit the Alliance military after completing the Valkyrie Program, which means humanity's investment in your training has seen no returns. I understand you've moved on to bigger and better things—the Andromeda Initiative, yes?"

Cora ground her teeth. She'd quit the Alliance military because her enlistment was up, nothing more. She'd reupped once because Nisira had asked her to continue serving with Talein's Daughters for an additional two years after her first tour, and Cora

had happily agreed to stay. But she hadn't made the same request of Cora at the end of that one, insisting that it was time Cora tried something new, and Cora had taken her advice. Like *most* marines did, if they respected their COs—but it was clear now that al-Jilani had some sort of specific narrative she was trying to spin. Cora was going to have to figure out what it was, and quickly, before she got blindsided again.

What's she after? Smearing the asari? Smearing the brass behind the Valkyrie Program?

"Yes," Cora replied, just managing to keep her tone civil. "I was recommended to the Initiative by Matron T'Kosh, in fact."

"Oh, of course!" Al-Jilani's face lit up, and with a sinking feeling Cora belatedly remembered her media training: *Never volunteer unasked information*. Al-Jilani continued, "It makes perfect sense for an alien to recommend a soldier like you to something like the Andromeda Initiative." And as Cora stood there floored—*A soldier like me?*—al-Jilani went on. "Were you aware of allegations that the Initiative's principal backer, entrepreneur Jien Garson, has misused investor funds, underreported earning statements, and sponsored illegal research?"

"Oh, for—" Cora caught herself. Was that who this was really about? Garson? The Initiative? Then why was al-Jilani ambushing Cora? "No, Ms. al-Jilani, I wasn't aware, and if they're allegations, then I don't think you are, either."

"There's no need to get defensive, Lieutenant. I'm just asking questions."

And I'm a shifty space cow, Cora thought. "Is that all, Ms. al-Jilani? I've got another ship to catch."

"Just one more question." Al-Jilani glanced at her

datapad again, though Cora was sure this was part of the act; al-Jilani already knew full well what she wanted to ask. “The Andromeda Initiative plays itself off as a quaint throwback to the past, when humanity thought itself alone in the universe and bravely ventured into the unknown purely for the sake of exploration itself.” She glanced back at the drone and murmured, “Pause here, search file footage for twentieth-century Apollo mission launches, pre-first contact shipflight images, Initiative press release shots of ark *Hyperion*. Splice together with a music track from... I don’t know. Pick something old-fashioned and obscure. Canadian electronic rock, maybe, whatever.”

The drone flashed a light twice in acknowledgement, and Cora blinked away afterimages as al-Jilani resumed. “But given that the project now stands poised to place more alien than human colonies in the Andromeda galaxy—specifically *asari*, *salarian*, and our former enemies the *turians*—and given the project’s tendency to hire personnel like you, with questionable loyalty to humanity’s interests—”

That did it. The fury blazed white in Cora’s head, pounding behind her eyes, and then it was all around her, sheening the world in a glimmering blue haze of dark energy. Al-Jilani’s eyes widened in alarm, which was probably the first honest emotion Cora had seen in her, and which made perfect sense considering that the power to crush every bone in al-Jilani’s body now crawled unfettered over Cora’s skin.

But flashing biotics was something *asari* did to show anger—their version of *krogan* headbutting, or *turian* mandible-clacking, or human and *batarian* fist clenching. Four years of *asari* immersion had left Cora with the habit. Thing was, although humans had

placards at the moment. Angry people had to eat too, didn't they? So she stopped paying attention.

Later, when Cora got a chance to tot up her sins for the day, she would vaguely recall hearing the protestors suddenly grow quiet and whisper to each other. Right around the time that she started to suspect the "shrimp" were actually a variety of Horizonian insects that tasted great but had a mild laxative effect—she'd eaten as many dodgy proteins growing up as any Traverse kid, but the worst of them stuck in memory—a shadow fell over Cora's table.

"You were in that commercial for Westerlund News just now," said a man. "The feature report they're going to air later this week. Some kind of exposé about the Andromeda Initiative."

Oh, *of course* they were advertising it already. Cora suppressed a groan and glanced up at him. The man was in his early twenties, tall but skinny, his skin an orangey tan that spoke of the supplements many planet-born took to avoid becoming unfashionably spacer-pale. He was dressed in a tourist-quality environment suit. As if that would save him if Tamayo Point's mass effect fields ever failed!

More significantly, the man was standing too close, trying to loom over her. Deliberately, Cora took another bite of her sandwich. Then, still chewing—he didn't deserve her manners—she said, "Maybe that was me in the commercial. I didn't see it, I don't know. What about it?"

"You work for the Andromeda Initiative. Humans working with *aliens*."

Not at the rate she was going, but that was nobody's business but hers.

"I repeat: What about it?"

The guy didn't like her nonchalance. He bent suddenly and slammed his hands on Cora's table, jostling the top layer of bread off the uneaten half of her sandwich. "You're a traitor to the Earth!"

With exaggerated care, Cora replaced the bread and moved her plate away from the man in case he was a spitter. "Don't you mean a traitor to humanity?"

"What?"

"Well, I've never called Earth *home*. And the Alliance has a few dozen colonies at this point, plus hundreds of space stations, trade interests along a thousand shipping lanes, and diplomatic outposts on most non-human planets. That's not counting all the private ventures like Noveria, or the non-species-aligned places where we've got a foothold, like Omega and the Citadel. So if you really want to call me a traitor, you might want to remember that humanity hasn't equalled 'Earth' for, what? Fifty years?" The man was staring at her in confusion and rising fury. "Of course, if you do that, you'd also have to remember that collaborative exploration *helps* humanity—"

She hadn't been expecting the man to shove her. He'd seemed obnoxious, bigoted, provincial, but not quite stupid enough to try taking on a woman who was wearing full body armor. If she'd expected violence, she could've been mentally prepared for it, and physically braced herself to withstand the shove.

Instead, because of his height advantage, his shove pushed her chair back far enough to lift her feet off the floor and nearly knock the chair over. And instead of taking the shove, Cora's mind flipped over from *not combat* to *combat*—because that was what Nisira had drilled her to do in situations of unexpected violence. That was what Cora and the other Daughters

had done for the past four years, on fields of battle this backwater fool would never see, and through a hundred life-and-death conflicts. Survival meant reacting instantaneously. Taking time to think could get you killed.

That was the asari huntress way.

So Cora was afire with dark energy before her feet landed back on the floor, the barrier snapping into place so fiercely that the sound of it made the air crackle. The man snatched his hand back with a yelp, though the field wouldn't have hurt him. He wasn't a projectile, after all. As it was, however, the static electricity of his skin sparked against the shifting, shimmering aura of her field, sending minute ripple effects over the sheath of energy. She felt her hair waft a little in the electromagnetic breeze as she got to her feet. And she knew, as the man stumbled back from her with eyes wide, exactly why he was afraid.

We are living weapons, we huntresses. Nisira's deep, night-soft voice came into her head again. *Your race is only beginning to understand what eezo can do, what the mass effect truly is, the potential of dark energy, but you came to Thessia to learn as we asari learn, so I'll tell you. We are gravity bound by will. You, Cora, are organic and synthetic power fused and honed to their pinnacle. Fight only when you must—but when you must, give your enemies warning of the nightmare they've awakened. That's only polite... before you rip them apart.*

Not that Cora would have done so. That was the point of all her years of training, after all; her control was iron. If she happened to smear the man over the cafe's far wall, it would be the result of a deliberate choice, not mere reflex on her part. But before Cora could speak to the man about the virtues of courtesy

toward heavily armed strangers, a hand moved into the range of her vision, gliding with enough grace to jerk her out of pre-battle tension. Another biotic field impinged gently on her own, a polite warrior-to-warrior greeting.

"Hey there, little sister," rasped a voice so familiar and comforting that Cora instantly blinked, dissipated her barrier, and turned to stare into an open, amused, turquoise face. "This a private party, or do we all get to dance?"

Cora could've hugged the big asari.

"Ygara!" Ygara Menoris, to be specific: Nisira T'Kosh's former subcaptain, also lately of Talein's Daughters and one of the few asari that Cora had ever truly called friend. "Oh my God. What the hell are you doing here?"

"Keeping you out of trouble, what else?" Ygara let Cora go now that she'd calmed down, flashing a toothy grin. Then she glanced over her shoulder at the man who'd shoved her, and who had already backed up a step or two. It was a mild look, but the man flinched and took another few steps back. Two of his comrades came to join him, Cora noted, but they both seemed more concerned with pulling him away from danger than backing him up.

Cora didn't blame them. Ygara was bigger than the average asari—beautiful of course, but taller, more muscular, and with a "matronly rack" that she wore like a warning even though she was still within the tail end of her maiden years. It *was* a warning; Ygara had been a commando for most of her life, and Cora had seen her outdo a few matriarchs at combat biotics.

But that didn't matter. The man who'd shoved her didn't matter. Khalisah bint Sinan al-Jilani didn't

matter. Cora was just glad to see someone civilized again. "Let's get out of here," she said in immense relief, and Ygara hummed in easygoing assent. They exited the cafe, leaving the belligerent man and his friends scared silent in their wake.

They walked through the crowd, Cora leading them toward the shuttle she would take to the Andromeda Initiative's headquarters, Ygara apparently just along for the stroll. She was passing through the Sol system on her way to Illium, she explained, where she'd decided to try starting up her own mercenary band now that she'd quit Nisira's. It wasn't a surprise that she'd done so; everyone had been expecting Ygara to strike out on her own eventually, as maidens tended to do once they'd learned their trade. Nisira had given Ygara's new venture her blessing and backing.

Then it was Cora's turn to speak, and to her own surprise she found herself babbling out everything that had happened since she'd left asari space. The shuttle passenger who'd repeatedly found a reason to brush up against her ass until she'd found a reason to threaten his future reproductive capability. The customs agent who'd actually asked—and been overly interested in—whether Cora had slept with any asari during her years on Thessia. "*That's none of your business,*" Cora had replied to the woman with a sharp-edged smile. The disastrous interview. And worst of all, the difficulty Cora was having with simply being around her own species again.

"We're a mess," she blurted. "I never thought of us as primitive before now, but we really are just..." She sighed and rubbed her eyes, then clenched her teeth as a random fellow traveler bumped into her shoulder and muttered an apology before bumping

into someone else. Finally Cora took a deep breath. "God. Listen to me. I'm whining."

Ygara laughed. "A little. Look, so you're having some culture shock." She shrugged her broad shoulders. "I mean, I'm not sure scaring the piss out of some xenophobe is the best way to handle it, but what you're feeling is pretty normal. I spent twenty years on Palaven once." She blushed a little. "Thought I'd found 'the one.' Anyway, after I came home, took me weeks to stop wondering why all the faces I saw were blue and not silver, and why nobody wanted to talk about tactics or public service. I kept feeling like Thessia was *wrong*. You'll get over it."

Cora knew it was true, but it was nice to have the external validation. She stopped as they reached the docking tube that led to her shuttle. Still twenty minutes before boarding, but maybe they'd let her on early so she could catch some shut-eye.

"Thanks," she said, finally. Because it had been nice, and much-needed, to have someone who she could talk to about these things. "I know they say it's a small galaxy, but I could start to believe in all those gods of yours after this kind of coincidence. You came along at just the right time."

Ygara let out an amused snort, jabbed her companionably in the shoulder, then turned to saunter off. "Just try not to cause any interspecies incidents," she called back over her shoulder. "Remember, we taught you better than that!"



Theia Station was old. Cora's dossier had said that it was an ancient quarian low-orbit station, damaged and left derelict hundreds of years ago after their war

against the geth. The Initiative had purchased it from a group of volus “station-flippers” some years back.

The quarians’ construction was, as always, phenomenal. The hull was unblemished despite the years it must have spent unprotected by a mass effect envelope. There was also no sign that it was a secondhand station. In its clean, airy corridors and its Citadel-standard infrastructure everything gleamed like new. Still, there was something just slightly off about the place. A peculiarity of proportion—as if its aesthetics had been chosen by minds that did not think the same way. Math was math, engineering was engineering, but it wasn’t a human thing to *tilt* everything slightly, or to decoratively filigree stylized plants and water motifs alongside every pipe and conduit.

As Cora gazed through one of the station’s viewports, she could not help noticing that the clear carbon-fiber “glass” was slightly convex, with an off-center focal point that subtly drew the gaze back to the station rather than out toward the spray of suns and galaxies. Humans would want to look at the stars. The ancient quarians had wanted to remind themselves that life amid the stars depended on sound hardware and competent people.

Cora turned from the view, studying again the man who was to be her new commander. Well, supervisor, since the Initiative wasn’t military; this was another thought that felt strange. At the center of the vaulted room in which they stood, he’d built a bizarre configuration of platforms and terminals and server nodes, arranged around a floor-to-ceiling frame that made Cora think of a natural beehive: efficient in its use of space, but a little disturbing to look at. He was on its uppermost platform now, tapping on an interface with one hand while he gazed through a

stationary pair of powered goggles at... something.

Cora had been standing in the room since she'd called out to him—he'd said, "Just a moment," ten minutes ago. She was beginning to suspect that he'd forgotten she was there.

Alec Ryder, she knew from the dossier. Former Alliance marine—N7-ranked, no less. Enlisted just after the Prothean ruins were found on Mars, like so many young people of the time, eagerly wanting to be on the front lines of humankind's next quantum leap. And he'd succeeded in that; Ryder had actually shipped out with Grissom, on that famous first flight through a mass relay! Less-than-honorably discharged, though, and the records were conspicuously quiet on why.

Somewhere along the way he'd spent a few years retooling himself, earning a handful of experiential masteries in xenocybernetics, artificial linguistics, and other training in subjects Cora could barely pronounce. Two children, both adults; a recent widower. Well-preserved for a man in his fifties: graying hair, not too skinny, no noticeable gut. Still dressed like off-duty military: khakis with lots of pockets, commando sweater with the sleeves rolled up.

No visible hint of mad scientist... but it was there. Cora could almost smell it.

"Thanks for your patience," Ryder said suddenly, surprising her. So he hadn't forgotten her. Still hadn't looked away from the goggles, though. "Tweaking a dynamic intuition processing matrix while it's still running. Tricky."

"It's intuition," Cora said, looking around and trying to push aside a vague feeling that she might not have made the right decision regarding her post-military occupation. "Shouldn't it be?"

It was an attempt at small talk. She didn't really expect Ryder to answer. Indeed, he was silent for another moment, continuing to tap on the interface and stare into the goggles. Then he stopped, sat back, and rolled his shoulders until his neck popped loudly enough that Cora could hear it from where she stood twenty feet below.

"Well, that depends. Should a virtual intelligence have good intuition or bad intuition? Bad intuition's easy. Case in point: The complete lack of a warning instinct that tells you when you're being railroaded by a reporter."

Damn. Cora sighed and drew herself to a sketchy sort of attention. Best to get this over with. "Sorry, sir," she said. "I was caught off guard. Won't happen again."

"I know it won't," Ryder said. He rubbed the back of his neck, then got up and started walking down the steps from one platform to the next. "The Initiative can't afford that kind of press. If you can't talk to a reporter without making yourself and anyone affiliated with you sound like the Benedict Arnold of the post-relay age, then just pull a 'no comment' and leave, next time."

Cora set her jaw, but she supposed she deserved that.

"Sir. Yes, sir."

He stopped on a middle platform, frowning directly at her for the first time. "Neither of us are marines anymore, Ms. Harper, and I never stood on rank when I was. Also, 'sir' makes me feel old."

The "Ms. Harper" made her twitch, inadvertently. "And I prefer 'Lieutenant.' I worked hard to earn that, even if it doesn't quite apply anymore. Or you could just use my family name." She paused, meaningfully. "And

respect isn't the sole province of the military... sir."

He let out a soft, unamused snort at this. "Maybe not. Still, I'd rather have the reality of respect and not just its outward trappings. I notice you didn't salute, for example, although I outrank you."

Cora fought the urge to frown a little. She didn't know what to think of this man. He kept challenging her, then backing off, then attacking from another angle. Yet it didn't feel quite hostile. More like... assessing.

"It's mostly a human convention," Cora said. "I fell out of the habit."

Ryder frowned at that. "What else did you forget while you were away?"

He was definitely pushing her. Trying to draw her into a confrontation, maybe? "I *forgot* how frustrating it can be to have a conversation with a species that has little to no ability to intuit anything. Always dancing around topics that any asari would know just by looking at you, and all the while thinking we're so clever as we do it."

Ryder's expression didn't change, but she saw him stiffen ever so slightly.

"And..." She gathered herself and pressed on. "I forgot how sensitive people can be to the truth. How averse they are to being direct and straightforward. And that sometimes, saying nothing is better than being right." She hadn't handled the situation with the reporter well, and she had no problem admitting that. "But, I *didn't* forget that I was a marine once. And that a superior deserves respect, even if they haven't earned it yet, *sir*."

Ryder shook his head, and to her surprise he looked bemused. Then he leaned against the platform railing, his voice softening.

"You would've had trouble with al-Jilani on a good

day, Lieutenant. I've seen her roll five-star generals, and that's without ambushing them on their first day back in human space."

"Maybe so, sir—maybe so." Cora resisted the urge to set her jaw. "Nevertheless, I apologize for making the Andromeda Initiative look bad."

"It would take more than one obviously biased news report to do that. Unfortunately, what you encountered at Tamayo Point *is* just the vanguard of a more sustained campaign." Ryder sighed. "How much do you know about what we do here, Harper?"

"What's in the dossier and on the extranet. The usual."

"Tell me."

Was it a test? To see if she'd done her homework? Again Cora fought the urge to tighten her jaw. There should've been no need for tests at this point, but fine.

"Well, the idea is to get to the Andromeda Galaxy—the closest galaxy to our own. Find some garden worlds, set up shop, maybe make contact with the local species, or if nothing else set up trade between the colonies." She shrugged. "Originally it was championed by a human-only team, but as the project gained momentum, the other Council species got on board. So now we're all going. Launch date's scheduled for six months from now."

"Okay. That's good." Ryder turned to head down the steps, finally descending to her level. "But I think that's not really what I want to know. Tell me why you've signed on to a project that will take you six centuries and two-and-a-half million light years away from everything you know and everyone you love? And don't tell me 'the human love of exploration.'" He rolled his eyes. "That sounds great in the marketing,

and maybe it's even true for the young ones who have more gonads than sense. It's a wonderful ideal. But the explorers of old generally meant to come *back* from wherever they were going, hopefully covered in glory or riches.

"Even Jon Grissom was just following orders, when he became the first human to lead a team through a mass relay. I know, I was there. Everybody thinks he was so brave, and he was, but at the end of the day he just wanted to go home to his daughter." Ryder shook his head. "So what's your reason for jumping into the unknown, without a return ticket?"

Cora took a deep breath. She'd been afraid of this. "I don't have one."

He blinked, frowning. "Then why are you here?"

"Because Nisira T'Kosh told me to come."

Ryder folded his arms and rocked back on one heel. "And whatever your old commander says, goes?" He shook his head, looking incredulous. "I got T'Kosh's recommendation, and invited you here because your record was impressive... but I'm no longer impressed, Harper. Why should I hire you, instead of someone who actually has a motivation of her own?"

"With all due respect, why does that matter?" Cora asked, trying hard not to sound defensive. "I don't see how that's relevant to the work I'll be doing. I give my best regardless."

Standing face-to-face with Cora at last, Ryder was less impressive himself. He tended to slouch—or maybe that was exhaustion, she amended, now that she had a good look at him. His hair was a little messy, as if he had a habit of running his hands through it when frustrated or tired.

He began to pace in front of her, arms folded.

"We've got competitors, Harper. Other ventures that want our technology, our investors, even though they aren't willing to take our risks. You got ambushed on Tamayo because you obviously didn't know that—something you *should* have known about a project that you're effectively dedicating the rest of your life to. I can't hold your hand to tell you these things; you need to anticipate problems yourself. And you clearly aren't doing that."

That was a reasonable expectation, Cora reminded herself, though her teeth had begun to itch with tension again. It was clear that Alec Ryder was going to be the kind of boss who preferred honesty to bullshit. It was also clear that he was an egghead, N7 background or no; liked to think out loud, but still valued brevity over a litany of details. All that suited Cora just fine. It was time to see if she really wanted to spend the next few years—give or take six hundred—working for this guy.

"I wasn't expecting what happened on Tamayo because I'm coming at this from a different perspective," she said. "I was born on a cargo freighter, not a planet. I grew up like any other Traverse kid. We risk the unknown every day just trying to survive, so none of that is new, or glamorous, to me. And I've spent four years among the asari, where the Initiative is seen as..." She tried to think of a good way to say it, then gave up. "A vanity project. A way for a baby spacefaring species to score a few popularity points, in a galaxy that isn't easily impressed. A few asari are going along because it's interesting, and you can always find matriarchs looking for a fulfilling way to end their lives—or maidens in the 'young and idealistic' category. But really, most of the galaxy has better things to do than pay attention to the Initiative. What's newsworthy

here... *isn't*, out there. So a reporter was the last thing I expected."

Ryder's pacing had slowed. He seemed to be digesting this. "Okay. That's... huh. That's fair. And there's value in a different perspective. But that still doesn't tell me why I should bring on someone without any sort of vision. How do I know you won't just get bored and abandon the project? I need a fellow leader, not a follower." He shook his head. "What did Nisira tell you, at least, when she decided to send you here?"

Cora pursed her lips, considering, and then let out a heavy breath. *Honesty, then.* "She said... that this sounded like the kind of venture that could *give* me a purpose," she admitted. "That I was wasted on Thessia, and even in the Alliance. I won't live long enough to become a true asari huntress, after all—and humanity is still too afraid of biotics to know what to do with the average one, let alone one who spikes as high as I do." She shrugged. Ryder's eyes narrowed—in judgment? Skepticism? It stung that he might think so little of her.

Defensively, she clasped her hands behind her back, at ease, and lifted her chin. "She thought the Initiative might actually be different enough, flexible enough, to know what to do with someone like me. So, since you obviously think this trip to Andromeda will actually happen... Why do *you* think I should be here, sir?"

Ryder stopped pacing and faced her, an expression of honest surprise on his face for the first time since she'd met him. Then, grudgingly, he smiled. "Turn my own question back on me, hmm? Well, then." He looked away, thinking for a moment, then said, "We're definitely going. We're... committed, at this point. Barring the catastrophic failure of every ark

at launch—a statistical improbability—at this point there’s virtually nothing that can stop us from going. We *have* to go.”

Cora blinked, unable to hide her skepticism. “I’m not sure I understand why we have to send a quadrillion-credit mission to another galaxy.”

He looked fleetingly amused. “Quintillion... and we don’t have a choice, Harper. Any of us, really, but humanity especially.” He took a deep breath. “It’s been a few short decades since we discovered we weren’t alone in the universe. Since then, our knowledge and understanding of almost everything has exploded. But in this galaxy... it’s all been figured out. We have no need to explore. To discover. To grow. What little we do need, we can likely borrow or learn from another species who’s been doing this since before we were apes.” He lowered his voice. Slowed his delivery.

“Humanity thrives when it’s challenged. We grow when we have something for which we struggle. How can we grow in a galaxy where everything’s already been decided for us?” He frowned to himself a little, then chuckled ruefully and started pacing again. “Getting there isn’t going to be easy, Harper. Staying there, and thriving—only then will we realize our full potential.” Cora watched him pace, unsure what to think. This was beginning to sound like a petty grudge against the Council. Or maybe a dislike for humanity’s place in the order of things?

“If you’re looking for growth, the Council and the other species have plenty of opportunities to offer us,” she countered. “I should know.”

“Of course they do.” He waved her off. “And we’ll all still work together in Andromeda, but the playing field will be level. And the opportunities...

no, the *necessity* for discovery and adaptation will be immediate and ongoing. We'll have no choice but to advance, and to succeed. It'll be survival of the fittest, with each species looking to its own needs."

Cora wasn't sure she liked where this was going. "That doesn't exactly sound like 'working together.' It sounds more like open competition—like a race to see who will come out on top."

Ryder stopped pacing, and he seemed to chew on that a bit.

"Yes and no," he said. "The Council is doing a fine job here in the Milky Way, and the other species are civil enough. But this peace... the entire galactic society we live in... it's based on centuries of lessons learned, mistakes made and wars fought, long before you and I were born. We didn't earn it—it was *given* to us. Some people might call that utopia; all of the enlightenment without any of the struggle. *But humans need to struggle.* We're at our best when our greatest accomplishments—and challenges—lie ahead of us."

"I don't disagree," Cora ventured. Maybe she was beginning to understand what he was getting at. Still... something didn't quite add up. "But if all we need is *struggle*, why not just start a colony in the remotest part of the Milky Way, far from Council control, entirely dependent on no one but ourselves?"

Ryder paused, and... smiled?

Was it wistful? Or sad? She couldn't read him well.

"Trust me, I've thought about it," he said, "and if the Initiative hadn't found me, I might've done just that." He turned and walked back over to one of the consoles. "But they did find me, and here we both are. About to embark on a journey that will once again put humanity at the forefront of innovation and invention."

He lapsed into silence, and Cora shifted a little, unsure if he would continue. After a second, Ryder flicked a switch and the image of a planet materialized in the air between them.

"Take a look at this." He reached out and "spun" the holo with his hand. "This is our designated golden world. Everything we know tells us this planet possesses the essential building blocks needed to support human life. Yet we don't *know*, not for certain, and we won't know until we set foot on it.

"Even if it does, and everything goes to plan... we'll spend the next several decades making it our home. Every day will bring an opportunity for us to grow. Expand. Evolve. But also... an opportunity to stumble. To fail." He straightened up a bit. "Every decision we make, for decades to come, will determine if we live or die."

Cora watched the rotating globe. "And you think..." She weighed her words before continuing. "You *believe* that at the end of that, humanity will be... better. That *we* will be better for that?"

Ryder switched off the display and turned to face her. "Yes. And I'm guessing T'Kosh sent you here because she sees the same thing. Asari tend to think long-term, understandably. If she thinks this is something you can help with, and something that will give you a chance to grow..." He spread his hands. "I guess we *both* ought to listen to her."

"I've pretty much found that to be the case on every occasion, sir."

"Understood. So..." He folded his arms. "You don't have a reason to be here? Let's see if we can't change that."

Cora nodded, slowly, digesting what he'd said.

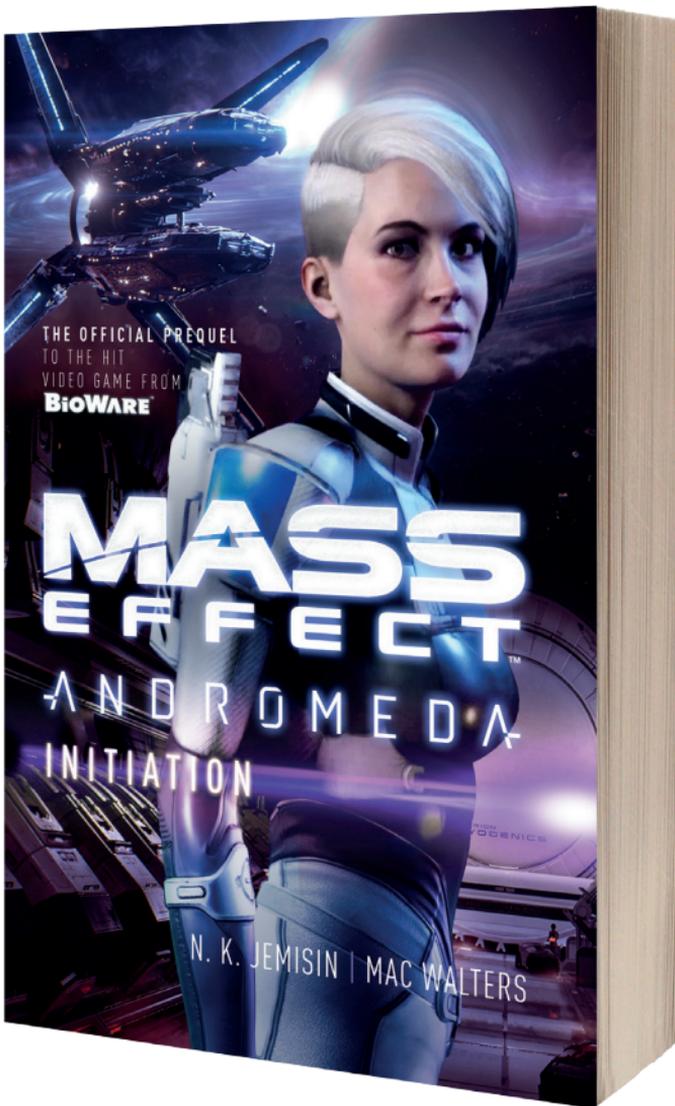
Expand, explore, adapt—or die. The thought of it made her belly clench, just a little, in something that might have been excitement. Yet this was *his* motivation.

Interesting as it was, she wasn't convinced it was hers.

"I'm in—for now, at least," she said. "For the same reason I just spent four years of my life on Thessia: because high-minded reasons don't matter, at the end of the day. *Somebody's* got to do the hard work of making the future happen." That was what her mother had always said, through the shit jobs and the shit food and the long years of flying around in a junkheap held together with duct tape and wishes. Cora shrugged. "Might as well be me."

Ryder gazed at her for a long, thoughtful moment. "I guess that will have to do," he said with a hint of wryness in his voice. "We'll see if it's enough. If you're serious about making the future happen, Harper... I've got a job for you."

YOU HAVE JUST READ
THE FIRST CHAPTER OF



GET YOUR COPY [HERE](#)

© 2017 Electronic Arts Inc. Mass Effect, Mass Effect: Andromeda, BioWare, the BioWare logo, EA and the EA logo are trademarks of Electronic Arts Inc.