

# MASS EFFECT: AGE OF DECADENCE

*By Zaftig Industries*

*CW: Overeating, mild weight gain, corruption, burps, burp kink, fat Asari in seductively tight clothing.*

## PART 1: THE SECRET



Shiza W'Lode was on the trail of something big. She felt it in her bones--that tingling feeling, the almost prescient feeling that a major discovery was just beyond the horizon, just around the next corner.

Patience had never been Shiza's strong suit. Still enjoying the Maiden stage of her long lifespan, she was a mere hundred and fifty-one years old, but she had crammed a lot of living into that time. She'd worked as a research assistant on Thessia, a bartender on Earth, and even a diplomatic intern on the Citadel. Beneath her flighty nature and short attention span, however, there was a brilliant intellect at work. She'd accumulated several degrees in her brief career, and was already working on a doctorate thesis: "Cultural Impacts of Discovering the Citadel." Like most things in life, it was a work in progress.

Her doctorate research had taken her from the gleaming halls of Hyetania, to the slums of Omega, and beyond. And now, she'd come to Illium, following a trail of information that seemed to have a mysterious hole at its center.

Something was off, in the asari's historical records, right around the discovery of the Citadel--the enormous space station built by Protheans, near the center of the Milky Way galaxy. Shiza had expected the research to be easy, cut-and-dry, but she was running into problems: Dates and decades didn't line up. Prominent figures of the pre-Citadel age suddenly vanished, in the post-Citadel records.

At first, Shiza had thought this was due to the confusion of the time--after all, that era of asari history was fraught with confusion and chaos. Between frantically negotiating with Salarians and struggling to puzzle out the mystery of the Citadel, maybe Thessia's historians had let a few details slip. But as the inconsistencies mounted, Shiza began to suspect something stranger was at work here--something that went beyond mere sloppy record-keeping.

She'd begun to suspect a conspiracy.

After two thousand years of history, few Asari survived from the original period of the Citadel discovery, so there was no one for Shiza to interview--at least, no one who had been there. But, Asari had long memories, and a few Matriarch historians remained who were specialists on that era. Oddly, most of these had disappeared or retired to obscurity over the years... a fact Shiza found suspicious.

One of the Citadel Age historians was a Matriarch named Aethyta, who had worked briefly as an archivist for the Council, way back during the Rachni Wars. After a brief but promising career in politics, Aethyta had dropped off the map--there was nothing in the Citadel records about her past that point, just a few scraps of her old college theses. So Shiza began to dig.

Her findings led her to Illium, a corporate-owned asari planet. Across the galaxy, it was renowned as a famous den of backdoor dealings. Nearly anything could be bought and sold on Illium--including, to Shiza's disgust, other asari.

Recent records indicated Aethyta lived near the spaceport--or at least, someone matching her description did. Truth be told, this was a threadbare lead. Shyza had briefly considered not going, maybe writing her research article on something else. But her curiosity could not be suppressed: she needed answers. Why were there so few records about the Citadel's discovery, and the asari cultural response to that discovery?

It made no sense. The Citadel had been a massive find, a paradigm shift for the asari as a species. With a discovery *that* big, there should have been countless cultural artifacts surrounding it--books, documentaries, Holonet records. The arrival of Asari on the Citadel should have been commemorated with monuments and festivals, maybe even revered as part of the religious rites of Justicars.

And yet... there was nothing.

A gaping hole in the paper trail, as if a deep-space singularity had gobbled up all the information. She was compelled to fill that gap, solve that puzzle... because if she did, she might find out why it existed in the first place. Why the biggest event in asari history was a cultural dead-zone.

All she had to do was navigate the biggest hive of deception and cruelty in all of the Asari Republic.

Steeling herself as she got off the shuttle, Shiza inhaled the strange new sights, smells and sounds of Ilium's heavily populated surface. Skyscrapers towered over the landscape, cast in gold by the rays of Ilium's oversized sun. Like many asari settlements, Ilium seemed a bastion of sophistication and technology... but appearances could be deceiving.

Putting her reservations aside, Shiza hailed a taxi for the Eternity Lounge. The Lounge was a place of ill repute, an open-air bar where shady stock-traders and pharmaceutical executives talked shop and sipped expensive drinks. In other words, it was just the right place to meet an informant. Passing through the crowd, she coozied up to the bar, repeatedly checking her omni-tool. Yes, this was the place... but how could she draw her mysterious .

“Hey. You. What're you having?”

The gravelly voice of the bartender shook Shiza out of her reverie. Glancing up from her omni-tool's research notes, Shiza looked up to see a stern-faced Matriarch nodding at her from the end of the bar. The Asari's form-fitting, dark clothing was scuffed with the wear and tear of a hard day's work.

“Uh... Actually, I was wondering if you'd seen someone... Do you know a Matriarch named Aethyta?”

“Who's asking?”

The Matriarch's eyes danced up and down Shiza's slim form, and the young Asari shivered as she felt like a piece of meat being dangled in front of an alpha Varren. She'd been checked out by other Asari, of course--but never so *openly*. It was unnerving.

“I... I'm Shiza W'Lode. I wanted to interview Aethyta for... um, for a research article I'm working on.”

The Matriarch sighed, and glanced around--Shiza was her only customer at the moment, it seemed--and leaned against the bar, her body language relaxing.

“Well, aren't you just a curious little thing. I could charge you for the intel, but it doesn't look like you've got many credits to spare... I'm Aethyta. What d'you want?”

Shiza perked up immediately, and scrambled for her omni-tool, preparing to take notes. She hadn't expected to find her mystery scholar so quickly!

“Uh... You worked in the Archives of Thessia for a while, right? And as an assistant professor of history, on Hyetiana?”

Aethyta raised an eyebrow, her expression hardening.

“You’ve certainly done your homework. I haven’t stepped foot on those worlds for centuries. How’d you find that out?”

Shiza swallowed, fumbling with her tool--she couldn’t seem to open the notes app. Goddess, this was going *terribly!* If she alienated her only source of information on the “Dark Years,” her whole research project would fall apart.

“Like you said. I do my homework. Your name shows up in a few records--a few research papers. But... Then you quit academia for good, and joined up with the Commandos, fighting the Krogan Rebellions. Right?”

Aethyta crossed her arms, impressed.

“Sounds like you could recite my entire life story for me. If you know so much about me already, what’s left to know? Why come all the way out here?”

Shiza took a deep breath.

*Here goes nothing...*

“I want to know why there’s a gap in Thessia’s records, around the discovery of the Citadel. Somebody’s hiding something--and I think *you* know why. Your research centered around cults and religions, heretics who worshipped the Protheans and the Citadel--but after a few papers on them, you stopped. And you ran off to fight in the Rebellions. What were you running from? What spooked you bad enough to send you to the front-lines?”

Aethyta’s mouth opened... and then she leaned in, glancing around to make sure those lingering outside the bar couldn’t hear.

“Kid. You’re messing with things you don’t understand. Are you sure you wanna go down this road? Because... Trust me, you won’t like what you find.”

Shiza steeled herself, looking the Matriarch in the eye.

“My mother was a journalist working for the Thessian Chronicle, and she was drummed out of a job, because she tried to expose inside trading by members of the Council. I had to pay for my tuition, using stripper credits... I supported Mom and my sister for years. We were ostracized because my mother wanted to be truthful with the public. Because she believed the truth *matters*.”

Shiza’s jaw tightened as she recalled the painful memories.

“Whether I like the truth or not, that part doesn’t matter. People have a right to know.”

Aethyta rubbed her temples.

“Kid, you’ve got guts--I’ll give you that. But this isn’t something we can discuss here. Meet me at the warehouse, behind the stock exchange, tonight. I’ll tell you what you want to know. And... Shiza, was it?”

“Yes?”

“Don’t be late.”



Shiza shivered in the cold of the storage facility, flinching every time she heard a robotic arm shift a package somewhere in the building. The place was staffed entirely by ‘bots--it wasn’t exactly made to be comfortable, for living beings. There was frost on the windows, and the whole warehouse was dark and gloomy, shadows filling every corner.

Aethyta arrived on time, just like she’d said--and she brought company.

An Asari diplomat in a Consort’s dress followed Aethyta out of the darkness. The woman was short, a full head shorter than Shiza... but she more than made up for that, in *width*.

Purple-skinned and rosy-cheeked, she wore a close-fitting dress made of alternating white and black nano-fabrics. The dress was stretched to its limit by an enormous, bulging belly, broad hefty hips, and an impressive bust, which threatened to draw Shiza’s eye every time it jiggled and quivered.

The woman looked Matriarch age. But unlike Aethyta, she wore her years with grace. Her round, freckled cheeks and soft double chin gave her an ethereal, cherubic look. Her eyes were watchful, full of quiet wisdom.

Aethyta cleared her throat, introducing the newcomer.

“Shiza, this is Consort Ma’kima L’fete. I met her when I was digging into the old Citadel records. She showed me... well, the truth. To be honest, she saved my life--if I’d kept digging, I might not be standing here today.”

Shiza bowed to Ma’kima, who returned the gesture... with difficulty, as her massive belly stopped her from bending over very far.

Shiza was trying not to judge the Asari by her size, but it did beg certain questions--how had she gotten a Consort position, looking like that? For that matter, how had she gotten so *huge* in the first place? Obesity was mostly a thing of the past, in Asari society--her people were generally an active, fitness-loving species, not inclined to sit on the couch and eat, like humans or Volus might do in their spare time.

Shiza sighed, trying to figure out where to begin.

“Consort. Why all this secrecy? What’s so dangerous that we have to meet like this? If I’m honest, it’s getting a little ridiculous. What’s at stake here--military secrets, maybe espionage? Why the cloak-and-dagger routine?”

Ma’kima and Aethyta shared a significant glance.

“It is... difficult to explain,” said Ma’kima, fidgeting.

“When she told me,” said Aethyta, “I didn’t believe her. I asked for proof. So she showed me... through a Meld. Ma’kima, could you do that? For Shiza?”

Shiza blushed, suddenly feeling put on the spot.

“Woah, hold on. I’ve never actually... I haven’t Melded with anyone. At least not since I left the homeworld...”

Ma’kima approached her, the edge of her massive gut nearly pressing against Shiza’s waist as she reached out, cupping Shiza’s cheeks. The woman’s hands were soft and plump, but she had a surprisingly firm grip.

“It’s okay... As a Consort, I’m an expert at melding. We don’t need to merge completely--I can simply show you what you need to know. Alright?”

Still nervous, Shiza nodded. She was so close to *real* answers, she felt she couldn’t turn back now.

“Okay. Let’s do it.”

Ma’kima nodded, and her eyes went dark, body thrumming with biotic energy.

***“Embrace eternity...”***

Shiza felt their senses merging, a tingling passing between them... and suddenly she was looking at *herself*, through Ma’kima’s eyes.

And then she was falling, falling through a dark void crackling with biotic sparks... an entire life flashed in front of her, moments that were not her own... She’d heard of this technique. Ma’kima was taking her to some point in the past, a memory buried deep within her psyche, beneath a long, long lifetime of experience.

As she fell, moments of Ma’kima’s life flickering past her at the speed of thought, Shiza couldn’t help but be afraid. There was something dark, at the bottom of this rabbit-hole... Something dangerous.

She only hoped she was ready for it.



“By the Goddess... We’ve done it. Project Beacon is complete! The Citadel is powering up!”

Across the bridge of the Asari research vesse *Benevolent Intent*, there were cheers of exultation. Dozens of asari scientists--all exhausted from weeks of work--rejoiced as the Citadel came to life below them, its empty buildings and streets lighting up.

Atmosphere condensers churned and ancient engines hummed to life. Once dusty and abandoned, the Citadel was now active... and fit for Asari habitation. Even now, the particle shields of the station's inner "shell" were collecting oxygen and nitrogen from the atmosphere generators, making the interior almost a planet in its own right.

Ma'kima was just as joyful as the rest of her peers--she had been working within the Keeper Initiative, the group within Project Stellar Lift responsible for studying the Citadel's odd, insect-like inhabitants. Getting the Keepers to awaken from dormancy and return to their duties had been difficult, but now that it was complete, the Citadel no longer needed constant influxes of power and Asari workers to function. It was self-sustaining once again, just as it had been designed, hundreds of thousands of years ago.

Someone threw an arm over her shoulder, offering her a bottle of Thessian champagne. It was Supervisor Tevura--her friend and superior, and head of the Keeper project.

"Have a drink, Ma'kima! You've earned it. All of you have."

Ma'kima adjusted her research goggles, laughing as Tevura swigged straight from the bottle. Tevura was usually so uptight--it was surprising to see her let loose, like this.

"I, um. I don't really drink much..."

"Oh, come on now--the mission is complete, we can finally *relax!* Have a glass."

Tevura grabbed a champagne flute from a passing researcher who was handing them out, pouring Ma'kima an overflowing cup.

"If we work hard, we should play hard, right? Besides, the new project starts tomorrow--we've been assigned to Life Support. We're going to be *plenty* busy, once the Citadel's streets start filling up with asari!"

Ma'kima shrugged, tossing her lab coat over a nearby chair and sipping from the glass.

Maybe she *should* have a few drinks... Just to be polite. They deserved to have a little fun--after all, they were going to be in the history books. The asari team responsible for ushering in a new era of galactic politics, science, exploration... More than just a simple space station or port, the Prothean stronghold would become a place for science, learning, the advancement of culture. And Makima had helped to make it happen.



After a few glasses of Thessian booze, she was feeling “the blessing of the Goddess,” as the saying went. A spritely young Maiden asari, she felt her passions stir as music pulsed around them... and Tevura got up to dance on a nearby table, to the approving hoots and whoops of the more drunken researchers.

Someone had put on a recent Omega album--”Meld My Body,” by the Azurians. The lighting was low, the mood relaxed... even a little romantic.

Ma'kima saw several of her peers kissing in dark corners, slender hands exploring each others' bodies. The sight made her blush... But then again, was it really so unexpected? They'd all been cooped up on this ship for *months*... She couldn't blame people for letting off a little steam.

And Makima wasn't immune to such urges--she could feel the call of long-buried lusts burning inside her, rising to the surface.

When Tevura clambered off the table, drunkenly staggering towards the impromptu bar they'd constructed, Ma'kima rose and joined her, “accidentally” letting her hand fall on Tevura's rear end as she fumbled for a bottle.

“Oh, excuse me,” purred Ma'kima, leaning on her superior--her curvaceous, shapely, well-toned superior--and laying a hand on her shoulder. “I may have had a few too... Too many glasses. How I wish I had a big, strong Asari to carry me home...”

Tevura's eyes flashed, picking up immediately on Ma'kima's clumsy flirting. She slipped an arm around Ma'kima, dark-blue lips parting as she leaned in to whisper in Ma'kima's ear.

“If by ‘home’ you mean my chambers, that can be arranged...”

A short time later they were in bed together, a tangle of clothes hurled into the far corners of the room, caught in a passionate embrace together. Ma'kima liked to think of herself as a competent lover, but Tevura showed her the true meaning of pleasure that night--teasing and enticing her in strange, exotic new ways. Melding with her at the moments of greatest ecstasy, so that they could drink deeply of each other's thoughts and sensations.

The next morning brought a hangover, but the fun wasn't over--Ma'kima found a message waiting on her omni-tool, when she got back to her bunk.

*I had a wonderful time, last night... Maybe drinks next weekend?*

-- *Tevura.*

Flattered by her superior's attention, Ma'kima found herself enthusiastically agreeing.



Project Lifeblood was the next task on Ma'kima's list, now that the Citadel had been brought online. She'd been assigned to work with Tevura on the life-support systems of the Citadel, making sure everything was clean and properly functioning. This job took them into the darkest, most secluded depths of the Citadel... and gave them ample time alone together, something the pair took *frequent* advantage of.

This was how Ma'kima found herself pinned against a wall by her lover, in the tunnels below the streets of the Citadel, their equipment scattered all around, forgotten.

"Mmm... Tevura, s-stop, we've got to get back to *work*..."

"Oh yeah? Why the hurry, little one? I think I can find plenty of work to do, right here..."

Tevura was a full half-head taller than Ma'kima, and had taken on the more dominant role in their relationship almost immediately, teasing and tormenting Ma'kima and ravishing her at every opportunity. Ma'kima certainly enjoyed the attention--back on the homeworld, she'd been a lonely bookworm, but out here she'd found a lover who *clearly* couldn't get enough of her. It was flattering... if a little distracting.

Ma'kima bit back a moan as Tevura's lips traced up the inside of her neck, the older Asari's kisses drawing a line from her clavicle to the bottom of her chin. The maiden Asari squirmed with delight as Tevura's hands explored her, delving under her form-fitting environment suit...

In their fumbling passion, the two of them fell sideways onto an unsteady part of the tunnel wall--and it promptly collapsed, dumping the pair into an eerie, green-lit room full of strange tubes and machinery.

"*Oof!*"

"Ow! Shit, sorry--I didn't mean to--"

“It’s okay, I’m fine. Just a little dusty.”

Ma’kima stood, helping her partner up, and dusted herself off. Glancing around, she noticed she couldn’t even see the far walls of the chamber they were in--this place was enormous. Its features simply stretched away into shadow on all sides, a vast emptiness that should not have been here at all. On the Citadel’s records, this area was supposed to be a mass of conduits, not hollow and filled with... weird containers.

“What is this place? This isn’t on the maps...”

“Maybe some kind of storage facility?”

Tevura frowned, examining the strange canisters, wiping the dust off one of them.

“Prothean runes... I can’t quite make them out. Something about sustenance... Here, you take a look. You’re better at deciphering syntax.”

Ma’kima leaned over the strange metal object, peering at the glyphs etched in its surface.

“Something about... ‘Food, sufficient to sustain... Many worlds.’ And then there’s a set of instructions.”

Always curious, she began pressing the runes according to the instructions, each rune lighting up as she did so. Tevura stepped back as the whole room began to hum and churn around them.

“Woah, maybe don’t do that! It’s thousands of years old, we have no idea what that machine will do.”

“Don’t worry. I’ve got this--I’ve been working with systems like these for years.”

The young engineer crouched beside the cylinder, watching in fascination as it hummed, rattled and pulsed with strange lights. Finally, a slot opened at the bottom... and a small plate with strange gelatin on it popped out, the gelatin wobbling as Ma’kima picked it up.

“This is... a Prothean dish. Some kind of protein substitute, for their worker castes--I’ve read about it. And this machine... this is something they refer to as a ‘Cibus drive’ in the old tablets. A machine that can generate food on command, by converting local anti-matter into matter. I never thought I’d see one in person...”

Tevura took the dish, examining it.

“Anti-matter? But... If they could generate food anywhere, doesn't that mean...”

Ma'kima nodded slowly, staring around in wonder at the countless cylinders around them.

“They were a post-scarcity society. The Protheans were a Type Two civilization, maybe even Type Three! This is revolutionary--we have to tell the research team!”

“Hold on.” Tevura held up a hand. “If they can make *any* food on command... do you think they could make Asari foods?”

Ma'kima pulled up some research logs on her omni-tool, delving into old texts and translations.

“Theoretically, it's possible, yes...”

Tevura put a hand on Ma'kima's shoulder.

“Ma'kima, these things could erase food scarcity across the galaxy. This isn't just an archeological find--with these drives, our people would be free from want, from need, *forever!* No more dependence on supply lines, to colonize our planets... The applications are infinite!”

Ma'kima felt the weight of history settling on her shoulders.

“Well then, we've got a lot of work to do. Go grab my equipment--let's get these things up and running.”



Shiza, riding in Ma'kima's consciousness, watched the days and weeks slide by in a blur, Ma'kima and Tevura tinkering with the machines, testing them... Then she heard Ma'kima's voice in her mind: quiet, tinged with sadness.

**“We thought the Drives would be our salvation. The harbingers of a new age for the Asari, a tool to erase inequality, bring peace to the stars. How wrong we were...”**

Shiza saw the pair, sweaty and disheveled from hard work, sitting in front of a modified Cibus Drive. The machine buzzed and hummed... and dispensed a humble Asari wheat-cake, a meal known as “Janiri cake” in reference to the Asari deity of harvests.

**“I was so young, back then. So innocent. I believed in Tevura... I loved her. I believed in our mission. I had no idea the kind of greed, selfishness, and excess we were both capable of...”**

In the hazy memory, Shiza saw Tevura take a bite of the steaming cake... and nod, swallowing. By the look on her face, the food wasn't just good--it was *delicious*. Tevura gobbled down half the cake before finally sharing with her partner, and Ma'kima seemed just as delighted, shoveling handfuls of it into her mouth in an uncharacteristically greedy fashion. After discussing the molecular build of the food, the two turned back to the machine... and keyed in the sequence to generate another cake.

And another. And another...

Shiza heard Ma'kima sigh woefully, the ancient Asari's mind filling with a sense of grief.

**“We had no idea what kind of evil we'd unleashed...”**



The next memory Shiza saw was a resplendent gala aboard the *Benevolent Intent*. Asari diplomats, politicians, and senior officials mingled with the *Intent's* research team, all of them looked excited and full of pride. A buzz of excitement passed through the crowd, as Tevura stepped up to a large, white podium.

Camera drones buzzed around her, snapping photos and broadcasting her image onto countless screens throughout the ship.

Shiza saw Makima in the back of the crowd, looking nervous. The young Asari was gazing worshipfully up at her lover--this was clearly a big night for both of them.

But... Something was off, about both of them. Up on the stage, Tevura looked *different*, after weeks of “testing” the Cibus Drives. To put it bluntly, she’d gained weight.

The tall, stately Asari woman had grown wider in the hips, and her sleek, toned midsection had softened considerably. Her shoulders, arms and cheeks were softer, well-fed. She wasn’t *fat*, not quite, but she was noticeably plump--especially compared to all the Asari around her.

Ma’kima glanced at her own reflection, in a nearby chrome bulkhead--and Shiza felt her surprise as the young Asari realized she, too, had grown soft and plump. But unlike the wide-hipped, hourglass-shaped Tevura, Ma’kima had put on weight in the middle, a tubby potbelly sagging off her midsection.

Memories of “testing” the Drives flooded through her--bite after bite, meal after meal. Tevura had insisted they try everything... test every possible recipe... and the inevitable results had come home to roost, in the end.

Up on the podium, Tevura began her speech, spreading a pair of plump arms beneath the spotlights.

“My fellow scientists... Council affiliates... Planetary governors... Thank you all for coming. Our team has some big news to share with you. We’ve made a huge discovery on the Citadel, something that will change the foundation of our society, lead us into a new age of prosperity...”

And Ma’kima listened with mounting concern, as her boss and lover described the Cibus Drives in detail--emphasizing their usefulness in commerce, colonization efforts, and trade with the Salaris, a recently discovered sentient species on the galaxy’s outer rim.

As murmurs passed through the room, Tevura had a Cibus Drive brought onstage... and used it to generate a bottle of fine Thessian wine, pouring herself a glass and sipping from it to the astonishment of the onlookers.

After fielding questions from the press, Tevura retired to her quarters. Fighting off questions from curious reporters and Asari scientists alike, Ma’kima hurried off the ship’s bridge and followed her lover there, knocking on the door.

If she was honest with herself... Ma’kima was worried about Tevura. The older Asari had been distant in the past few days, secretive... and like Ma’kima, she’d been indulging constantly in Cibus Drive food, claiming it was all “for the good of science.”

Possibilities raced through Ma’kima’s mind. What if Tevura had been withdrawn and quiet because of an illness, or some kind of reaction to the food? They hadn’t fully analyzed the structure of the antimatter drives--what if the material had reacted badly with Tevura’s cells?

But when she entered the program director’s quarters, she found Tevura happy and healthy... although her cabin’s cleanliness left a little to be desired.

Nearly every open surface in Tevura’s room was covered by empty or half-empty plates and glasses, bottles of Thessian wine crowding for space with freshly “printed” delicacies gifted to her by the Drives. Tevura herself lay on the bed--the same humble crewman’s cot she and Ma’kima had cuddled on, dozens of times. But now it was covered with empty plates, Asari Republic credit chits, and empty champagne bottles.

Tevura lounged against the pillows, watching footage of her own speech on a screen over the bed as she fished pieces of candy from a silver bowl, popping it into her mouth.

“Oh, hey Ma’kima.” She belched softly, wiping her mouth. “Good to see you. That was pretty stressful, huh? I think it went well, though.”

“Tevura... What is all this?”

The curvaceous Asari looked up from her slovenly nest, raising an eyebrow.

“Just testing the Drive’s production limits. Want some snacks?”

Ma’kima opened her mouth to say ‘no’... and then her stomach, always the traitor, audibly growled under her dress. She clutched at it, embarrassed--she’d just eaten twenty minutes ago. How was she hungry again?

“Uh, sure, I could have... maybe a bite or two...”

Before long, she was lounging on Tevura’s couch, shoveling candy into her mouth by the handful. She wanted to stop, but she was nervous, and being nervous apparently made her hungry. It wasn’t until she’d emptied the entire bowl that she asked Tevura the big question.

“Where have you been the past few days? I was worried sick about you...”

Tevura waved a hand dismissively, her eyes never leaving the screen.

“Preparing for the unveiling, of course--testing the merchandise. And I think the results are hard to argue with. What did you think?”

Ma’kima fumbled for words... and the Drive next to her dispensed another bowl of candy. Without thinking, she took it and started eating again, fingers stained with sugary residue.

“The results... *mmlph, glph*... are exactly what I’m worried about. Don’t you think this food has been making us a little... out of shapet? People keep staring at me in the hallways...”

Tevura snorted, reaching for a fresh bottle of champagne... and drinking right from the bottle, the alcohol dribbling down her softened chin and into her cleavage.

“Oh, they’re just jealous of our new figures. Pay no attention to them--we look great.”

She chuckled, eyeing Ma’kima’s bulging midsection.

“At least, *you* certainly do. Prosperity looks good on you, Ma’kima... Come over here, share some of that ‘prosperity’ with me. I’ve missed you lately...”

Ma’kima hesitated. With her stomach gorged on candy and her mind dizzy from the events of the past few weeks, she couldn’t articulate what she was feeling. A low, buzzing anxiety lurked underneath her exterior--there was something *wrong* about the way Tevura was acting. So slovenly, so lazy. So unlike the hard-working technician that Ma’kima had fallen in love with.

But what authority did *she* have to lecture Tevura about laziness? She herself was feeling swollen, heavy... overfed. If Tevura was being a little lazy, so was Ma’kima--and she’d arguably gained more weight than her partner.

Still nervous, but caving to the promise of intimacy, Ma’kima pulled off her dress, and crawled into bed with Tevura.

The taller Asari purred with satisfaction, pulling her in for a wine-drenched kiss. Ma’kima’s back arched under Tevura’s questing fingers, as she felt the pull of their mutual passion for the first time in weeks...

Then, out of the corner of her eye, she noticed something odd. Piled into the storage lockers in the corner were a series of luxurious items--a collection of history books, a personal service android in “dormant” mode, a V.I. research assist module. All of them bore floating holographic tags, marking who had sent them. Admiral Hassia, Councilwoman He’fayre ...



*Those are some of the richest Asari in the galaxy. What's been going on in here?*

“Tevura... What is all that stuff?”

“Hmm?”

Breaking off the make-out session, the purple Asari glanced over at her collection of luxuries.

“Oh yes, those were personal favors from some new... Friends of mine.”

“Friends? What friends?”

Then it clicked for her.

“Tevura, did you... did you exchange some of our Prothean artifacts... for *bribes*?”

Tevura sat up straight, her stomach bunching into several plump, sweat-slicked purple rolls of fat. She scowled at Ma'kima, setting aside her bottle of champagne.

“Bribes? Don't be childish. The rich and powerful among our society were always going to get their hands on this Protean tech--but right now, I control the distribution. I can roll out the technology slowly, prevent it from disrupting the economy... And if I get a few perks on the side from doing that, what's the harm?”

Makima pulled away from her lover, horrified.

“You just gave away ancient Prothean technology--for *this*? Those Drives were priceless--and maybe dangerous! We still don't know what they're capable of, at full power!”

The older Asari crossed her arms, as if Ma'kima's concerns were the whinings of a petulant child.

“I don't see why this is such a big deal. We've done all the hard work of repairing this station--why shouldn't we reap the fruits of our labors? The plan was always to distribute the Drives, right? I thought we agreed on that....”

“Not like this! Not for cheap thrills and... are those exotic cigars?! What the hell, Tevura?”

Ma'kima climbed out of bed. Her plump, dangling stomach wobbled as she began obsessively cleaning up Tevura's quarters--grabbing piles of dishes and tossing them into the miniature mess-hall, on one end of the room.

"Ma'kima, come back. Let's talk this over..."

"We don't even know the long-term effects of eating Prothean food--and you just *gave away* the ability to create more of it! If anyone gets hurt, as a result of eating this stuff..."

"We've been eating it for weeks with no negative effects," said Tevura, exasperated. "Except for the high calorie content. Which looks pretty good on you, by the way..."

Ma'kima rounded on Tevura, shaking a furious finger at her.

"Don't you try and flatter your way out of this. That food *isn't* harmless--we confirmed it's got a high amount of Element Zero in it, which could overcharge biotic powers!"

Tevura shrugged.

"So the food enhances our natural abilities... Why is that a problem? If anything, that just makes the Drives even *more* valuable."

"*Tevura!*"

"Okay, okay, I'm sorry. Alright? Maybe I wasn't... thinking clearly. It's been a long few weeks."

Tevura climbed out of bed, reaching for Ma'kima's hand and squeezing it.

"But I promise, it wasn't out of self-interest. I did this for *us*, Ma'kima--for you. No more scraping for official recognition, no more tinkering with Prothean plumbing while our superiors take all the credit for our work. We're now the number-one experts in post-scarcity technology! We're going to have book deals, speaking tours--we can finally put down our greasy tools and live in *luxury* for a change! Don't you realize this is good for us?"

Ma'kima pulled her hand away. In Tevura's eyes, she saw love... but she also saw a frightening, raw ambition. A hunger for glory and riches, that she'd never seen before. Was this new? Or had that same, blithe arrogance been under the surface all along, just waiting for a moment to emerge?

“Well, it doesn’t *feel* good. I think... I need some time. Away from the ship--away from us. And all of... this.”

She gestured at the mess around her.

Tevura pulled away, her jaw clenched.

“I *need* you along for this, Ma’kima. You know I can’t read Prothean like you--we have to do this together.”

Makima sighed, pulling on her dress and picking her omni-tool up off the couch.

“Just... Let me think about it, okay? I need some air. And I need to run more tests. Make sure the food is safe--that we haven’t made a mistake. Just give me a few weeks, and for the Goddess’ sake, don’t touch the rest of the drives, okay? We only have a limited amount, and if we lose them...”

Tevura nodded.

“Of course. I promise--no more back-room deals. Just... Stay in touch, okay?”

Ma’kima’s heart fluttered at the sight of her crush looking so defeated. She pulled Tevura’s head down for one last kiss, running her hand along the older Asari’s ample hips.

“I will. And don’t *you* go anywhere. Once my tests are done, you and I have some ‘catching up’ to do.”

Tevura’s hips pressed against hers, Ma’kima’s belly oozing up against the taller Asari’s broad thighs.

“I like the sound of that...”

“See you in a week--I’ll be down in the life-support decks of the Citadel, if you need me.”

The two kissed again, and Ma’kima departed, satisfied with her lover’s apology.

But as soon as the door closed, Tevura flopped back on the bed, activating her personal Drive. The machine vibrated as it generated a fine Thessian steak, slathered in sauce. Tevura

used her omni-tool to cut it and then grabbed the chunks of rich meat with her bare hands, gobbling them down.

“Mmm yes, come to Mama... *Mmf, chmp, gulp. BLLLCH.*”

With easy access to such formerly expensive luxuries, Tevura felt like a queen... a queen set on expanding her empire. Dialling a number on her omni-tool, she wiped sauce off her lips, droplets of it landing on her plump belly.

“Hey, Brax? Yeah, this is Tevura. The next shipment of Drives will be on schedule... Just make sure that Red Sand shows up on time.”

Outside in the hallway, Ma’kima closed her omnitool, her face grim. While “cleaning up,” she’d left a tiny listening device under the sink--a form of insurance, to make sure Tevura could be trusted with the responsibility of the Drives.

Apparently, she could not.

There was only one path left: Ma’kima had to report her lover to the authorities. But corruption and graft cases like this were hard to prove--she would need to gather evidence. And meanwhile, those Drives were still out there, spreading potentially tainted food. Tainted with *what*, she didn’t know... but judging by Tevura’s behavior, the food might be addictive. Even mind-altering.

She had to act fast... or this technology might rip Asari society to pieces.

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END OF PART 1