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## Chapter 1: Prologue 1: Arcturus

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### A/N and Intro:

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Welcome to ***Of Sheep and Battle Chicken***.

Yes, the name is ridiculous - I guarantee you will remember it.

Before you read any further, two things need to be kept in mind.

First, this is an very heavily AU (Alternative Universe) fic. I have taken a shotgun to canon in every possible way. Things you will not see include a stupid Council, moronically evil Cerberus, weak-ass turians, or pretty much anything that Bioware half-assed. Things you **WILL** see are salarians that operate in bullet-time, asari who have biotic lightsabers, a severely dark and evil SA, and pretty much an entire universe that makes War40k look like My Little Pony.

It's so AU that if you go to my profile, I've written up supporting documentation, such as the **Cerberus Files, the Systems Alliance Order of Battle, and the Encyclopedia Biotica**. These are not required to understand the story but will help. There is already a sequel, a link between ME 1 and ME 2 called **OSABC: And Then There Were None**.

This story has some strange pairings. There's FShep/Liara, but also Joker/Tali, Garrus/OC, and Ash/Kai. Also, Saren/Benezia.

Second, this is rated **M** for strong language and heavily violence. While there are a number of sexual innuendos, there are no explicit sex scenes in this work. There is a good amount of focus on BDSM (although not explicit) and well, given my version of Shepard's proclivities, it is probably for the best that I don't get too detailed.

The story is told in five arcs.

Arc I covers what I call the Prologues : introductions to all the key players, and of course the Opening Scene.

Arc II covers from just before Eden Prime to the establishment of Shepard as a Spectre.

Arc III covers Therum, Feros, and the hunt for Cerberus.

Arc IV covers Noveria and Virmire.

Arc V is the finale, covering Ilos, the Citadel, and the Aftermath.

The story would not be possible without the kind assistance of **WordKrush, Bebus, Michael110, and Prozman**.

As of October 2014 I am overhauling the story thanks to kind assistance from **thebluninja**, who has

*been proofreading each chapter so that it sucks less, as well as **liethr**.*

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### **THE FIRST ARC : You suggested me for *what*?**

*'I have to say, when I first heard the news about being made Spectre? I seriously wondered if Anderson was drunk.'* – Major-Commander Sara Shepard, '*Lay it on me*'

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Arcturus Station.

A bastion of humanity's will to power, floating almost arrogantly in the depths of the void. Some viewed it as a weak copy of the far more mighty Citadel, others saw it as merely a prudent defensive station that had grown over time.

What no one debated is that it had become a place where the government of the Systems Alliance did a great deal of backroom politicking, away from the cameras and publicity of Vancouver. Many dark secrets were embedded in computers within its walls, tucked away in filing cabinets among racks of OSD's and data-pads gathering dust. Still more secrets were whispered into the air of the many conference rooms surrounding the Congressional Hall at the heart of Arcturus.

One of these rooms, proclaimed by its heavy wooden portals and the richly detailed brass plate to one side reading 'SA Joint Defense Board', was perhaps the penultimate place where certain decisions were made by a handful of powerful figures. Here, humanity had come to a deal involving the Treaty of Farixen. Here, they'd hashed out a formal cessation of hostilities with the Turian Hierarchy, some eight years after the end of the First Contact War.

And here was where humanity took its first steps towards what its leaders hoped would be a more open acceptance by the Council.

The room was not large, given its importance, but was richly decorated. The walls were wood-paneled, the floor carpeted in thick, rich piles. A bar ran along one wall, a huge view port along another, displaying a dazzling view of the beyond, stars burning in the eternal night. The long meeting table was real mahogany, imported all the way from Earth, inlaid with the Alliance symbol in gold. Marring its pristine surface were a collection of file folders and data pads, the very oldest and newest in documentation.

The air was tainted by cigar smoke, rising in lazy whorls before being snatched away by the air filters, the expensive Terra Novan tobacco bringing a teasing, sweet scent to the otherwise dry air. Five men and one woman sat in the room, but one of the men was unimportant, merely a recorder of events, faded blond hair shorn in buzz cut, framing a square, empty face. His uniform was crisp as he began transcribing the latest words into a new pad.

One of other four men in the room sat almost indolently, the woman at his side poised and elegant, while the other three men had far stiffer postures, each glancing over various reports, dispatches, and data-pads. They perched in overstuffed chairs bespeaking their influence, their expressions fixed in grim visages more akin to a funeral than a calm discussion. The table was a war-zone of political detritus, a light lunch, data-pads limned in the red-and-white of secure documents, and old, bitter secrets. A heavy sheaf of papers was neatly stacked at the end of the table, the top page embossed with a raised set of pale white stylized wings inside a white circle on a black background.

A puff of cigar smoke threaded into the air, followed by a mellifluous voice. "And that is what has transpired thus far. In return for our kind cooperation with our damned alien overlords, the best that Udina and Doyle were able to dicker from them was the Spectre, the treaty changes, and the economic

allowances. I trust you gentlemen understand the requirement for discretion in what we've discussed so far? There are, and always will be, elements back home who won't quite understand the idea of trading away our discovery to the spikes and blues for a Spectre and a few more ships."

The man who spoke puffed on his cigar briefly. He was not fat, but large, muscles once taut and powerful having faded over time. His expensive suit was unruffled from the trip from Earth, silk and demiweave a muted gray-silver that gleamed faintly in the dim light of the holo-projection on the table. His eyes were dark, cold gray, the same as his perfectly trimmed hair. Every line in his face was cold, elegant and calm. A tap of the large hand, festooned with gold rings, dumped a crumbling ash in a pile into the nearby ashtray.

The man that faced him across the table was like but unlike. Like the man, his frame was large, fading from muscle with age. Old, harsh red scars marred the craggy strength of his profile, the lantern jaw, the hard blue eyes, the firm, almost dour set to his mouth. His uniform was ablaze across the chest with ribbons, each one a testament to courage, valor, and skill. Four stripes of pure gold perched on either shoulder, symbols of both power and duty. His voice was a grating, slate drawl, like the crunch of gravel. "Senator Adkins, I think if Fleet Master Dragunov were here, he would say the same thing I will : this is more than merely a few ships and a Spectre. A modification of the Treaty of Farixen would allow us to lay another two, maybe three dreadnaught keels."

The man placed his fingertips together pensively. "That might make all the difference, should there ever be war again. Given the tense situation with the batarians, we can't afford to throw this away on political posturing."

The woman sitting next to the Senator nodded. Her face was classically beautiful even with age, with liquid dark eyes, an aquiline nose, and thin but shapely lips now curving into a small grin. Long cascades of auburn hair, only faintly touched with silver, were coiled tightly into a long braid, setting off the black and brown pattern of expensive dress. Her voice, a warm contralto cooled by a hard German accent, rang out with confidence.

"Very true, Admiral Hackett. Not to mention the concessions on trade and tariffs. The High Lords of Sol will not let you back down from this, Adkins. You might as well simply bite the bullet and pick someone to represent humanity in a good light."

Senator Adkins nodded his head. "Admiral Hackett, Lady Manswell. That's why we're here. That's why Captain Anderson and Major Kyle are here. Both the President and the Ministers agreed that having some damned committee with no experience pick our candidate would be a stupid idea. I merely want everyone to understand we will have to move ... quickly on this. The Beacon won't be a secret forever, and if everything is already a done deal by the time the press, not to mention Earth First and Terra Firma, find out, we'll have fewer problems down the line."

Lady Manswell sniffed dismissively. "I hardly care of the thoughts of the masses, Senator. That is the role of the Commissariat, to keep them well inline. Let us see these candidates you have."

Adkins turned to Hackett, who nodded. "We've tried to pick candidates that can fulfill the requested role, milady. As a general rule, a Spectre would spend most of their time on the ground, so space-side only soldiers were not included in our selection. We've narrowed it down to five suggested choices...and one outside possibility."

Five digitized faces flickered into existence in cold blue lighting above the center of the table, each surmounting a scrolling list of achievements, commendations, and facts. A soft VI voice spoke each of their names.

"John Rodgers Young. Captain, SAMC. N6. Info-war specialist. Current assignment: 2nd *Solguard*."

Adkins looked across at Hackett, and then the two officers next to him. "Never heard of him. Assessment?"

The larger of the two officers, directly to the left of Hackett, gave a tired shrug. This man was barrel chested, his frame thick with muscle, but his appearance was almost downcast, distracted. His medals blazed on his chest thickly, along with three red bold ribbons on his collar, but his posture was that of a defeated man, not a proud one, and his voice was very slightly unsteady.

"I honestly do not believe that we can expect him to perform the high level tasks we need. Captain Young is more of a leader than a fighter. And there are other issues that make him unfit to interact with some aliens. Captain Young has had some troubling interactions with asari in the past."

Lady Manswell arched an eyebrow. "When you say 'troubling'..."

The other officer, to Hackett's right, frowned before speaking, his dark face set in severe lines. It was a face that spoke of great strength and great sorrow, and his voice, refined with a touch of London, belied his trim, muscular appearance. "I would have to agree with Major Kyle, milady. The incident involved an issue involving Mr. Young's ex-wife and an asari lady why he was on duty. When he returned from service..." He trailed off delicately, and the lady made a moue of distaste.

Then she laughed.

"How droll, Captain Anderson. Still, scandals of that nature are something we can do without. Next?"

The VI's voice was calm. "Jason Delacor. Captain, SAMC. N7. Current Assignment: CO, 5th Regiment, Mindoir Army Group."

Adkins frowned this time, glancing up at Hackett. "You *cannot* be serious. The man is *literally* walking bad luck and death."

Hackett coughed into his hands. "That is an unfair assessment. Captain Delacor has endured a great deal of tribulation in his life but has never failed to do his duty."

Lady Manswell smiled slowly. "His colony of Mindoir was raided in the most savage attack in history, making him very nearly the sole survivor in his town. His boot camp class suffered from malfunction in the survival simulator, with only him walking away alive. His entire unit was eaten by thresher worms ... maws, whatever they are called ... on Akuze, again leaving him the sole survivor. He's tried to get married twice and both fiances have died in a matter of days. To me, it appears as if he's the unluckiest bastard in the entire galaxy."

Anderson nodded slowly. "Also, keep in mind he's in command of the Fifth. If we made him a Spectre, that means Commander Shepard would be in charge of the 5th."

Adkins winced. "Ouch. Probably not wise. Next?"

The VI's voice spoke again. "Countess Melissa von Ituria. Lieutenant Commander, SAIS. P7. Current assignment: Citadel discovery ops."

Lady Manswell immediately shook her head, her voice dripping with amusement. "No. Even above the fact that her Family is a pack of Terra Firma lunatics, I happen to know the lady in question personally. She has ... emotional baggage. She *hates* turians. Next?"

The VI spoke again, almost apologetically. "Julio Espinoza, Major of Marines, SAMC. KoUE. N7. Current assignment: CO, Beta Reaction Force."

Hackett folded his arms, glancing at Anderson and Kyle. "I have no reservations with Major Espinoza, except for the fact that he's married and recently had his first child."

Anderson frowned. "He has never worked with aliens, in any capacity. Nor does he have any space-side experience outside of his A-level training. And he's been sitting behind a desk for the past two years, not in the field. He certainly has more seniority than any of the other candidates. Outranks me, which could be tricky in command situations."

Adkins carefully reviewed the data. "I'm not totally satisfied. He's good, but bland, and he's never been in a life-or-death fight. And that's a lot of caveats you just listed out. We'll list him as a 'maybe'. Next?"

The VI sounded off again. "Sir James Branson. Captain, SANF. Star of Sol. KoUE. N7. Current position: CO, First N Combat Brigade."

A long sigh sounded in the room, and the stern voice of Adkins sounded weary. "Gentlemen, we have now been through your first tier of candidates, and there isn't a single one I'd feel totally comfortable with. And this one is no exception. The Hero of Elysium is an outstanding warrior. A very ideal, heroic figure. But we all know that the public face is mostly Commissariat PR. Elysium was a sham, and the aliens will figure that out if we give them reason to look. On top of that he's racist, foolhardy, and worst of all a glory hound."

Hackett sighed, then turned - almost reluctantly - to face Anderson and Kyle. "Senator, my subordinates have one more recommendation to review with you. I'd like to go on the record and say this is their idea, not put forth by Alliance Command."

Anderson gave a tight smile, facing the Senator and Lady Manswell. Hackett - and the Fleet Master - didn't like his idea, but that wouldn't matter. He knew that the senator had the Senate wrapped up, and that anything a Manswell wanted, they got. If he could convince the two of them that his idea would work, the SA would have no choice but to go along with it.

He took a deep breath. "Senator, I think we can all agree that whoever we submit must be a symbol that represents the best of what humanity has to offer, but I would like to know what else you think we should be looking for."

The senator puffed his cigar again. "Symbolism is certainly important. But if we're going to do this, it has to be someone who can get the job done, *whatever* the job may be. Whatever the cost. I look at these fine men and women you have proposed and I see great soldiers. Heroes. Symbols, as you said. But I *don't* see someone who can make the hard calls a Spectre might have to undertake. They called Branson a hero because instead of falling back he showboated. I don't like that. Delacor is a survivor, but that's all he is, for all his achievements. Ituria is a complete novice at ground warfare, and this Espinoza has never been tested. Young doesn't sound like he has the chops to get it done. What I need is someone who will never, ever fail us."

The senator glanced over at the other two men at the table. "Someone like the Lion of Mindoir. Of course, I know someone of that nature is hard to find. But I need more than merely 'good'. I need goddamned excellent."

Lady Manswell nodded. "If there are personal problems, those can be ameliorated, but I tend to agree. We are all familiar with your own attempt at being a Spectre, that the Council and that filthy turian derailed. We have made a great deal of effort to make sure this time the selection will be successful - but whoever is chosen must be the equal of any of the aliens."

Kyle glanced at Anderson, then sighed and nodded. Anderson gave a slight smile. "Then there is one other possibility, Senator Adkins. One we hesitated to submit given the delicacy of the position, and the various reactions putting her name forward might entail. But if you really don't approve of the other candidates, we have no choice."

He keyed his omnitool, speaking aloud. "Open file 53-9 Alpha, authorization Anderson, David". A

pause. "Major?"

The other figure at the table merely nodded. "Confirm, open file 53-9 Alpha, authorization Kyle, Preston".

The VI spoke again, in neutral female tones. "Accessing secure Alliance databases." A single holographic image replaced the five faces at the center of the table, and the Senator leaned forward.

"...well, that's not what I expected, for sure." Adkins voice was almost amused.

The hologram was that of a human woman, her face a profile in stillness. Black hair framed features that would be lovely if not set in such a cold expression. Eyes the color of an angry storm front stared out unseeing, the nose, thin; the planes of the face set and almost unfeeling; the mouth, an angry slash marred by black lipstick. The eyes, though, drew one in, promising nothing but oblivion.

The VI announced in solemn tones. "Sara Shepard. Commander, SAMC, Star of Terra. N7. Current Assignment: XO, 5th Regiment, Mindoir Army Group."

Senator Adkins exhaled, smoke curling from his mouth. "The Butcher of Torfan."

Anderson coughed before speaking, trying to keep his voice even and calm. "Yes, Senator. A top N7 graduate, ranked first in every exercise. She's completed the entire workup for a space command as well. Cross-trained in both biotic and info-war combat. She's had tactical command at the battle of Dirth and again against pirate incursions at Terra Nova, and Horizon. Blocked the so-called revenge strike on Mindoir. And of course...Torfan."

Hackett spoke up. "Her background is ... problematic. She had a horrific childhood, and was heavily involved with gangs and worse on Earth. She was force-drafted to avoid a capital sentence, which she served through the Penal Legions. There are some who will say she's not fit for a role of this nature."

Anderson gave the admiral an angry look, and Hackett sighed. "But ... I must admit, she's surpassed anyone's wildest expectations. Pushed herself to the top, from the very bottom. Deadly, never failed a single mission over the course of a hundred missions. Wounded eighteen times, never out of commission. Completely fearless. Not exactly a ... people person, but that's not really what the job requires."

Major Kyle spoke, his voice quiet. "She was my best soldier. Her team was the best of the best, and she was the only reason Torfan didn't end up worse than it did. She doesn't just fight." The other three men turned to look at the major, who was looking at his hands as if they were stained. "She destroys. She overwhelms. You can't imagine it. But Anderson and Hackett are both right. If you give her this, she will never fail, never surrender. But she will need someone to keep an eye on her. Someone she can't intimidate."

He gave an almost helpless look at Anderson. "Just be aware of what you're playing with. It's plasma fire."

Adkins nodded. "Is she stable? There's quite a bit of this record that's been redacted and she came from... very hard times, it looks like."

Anderson nodded. "I have worked with her a great deal, sir. She is often emotionless. She is utterly, completely professional. She has no bias – she had to work with turians once, fought alongside a krogan on Torfan, and participated in a months long training exercise with asari commandos as well. No friction with aliens. No serious private life to speak of. Never gets into trouble outside of the things she gets up to in combat. No drugs, no messy divorces, not even civil disturbance tickets. Obeys every order, regardless of ... "

Anderson hesitated, and then firmed his voice "...anything in the way. She won't embarrass us, won't try

to show off, and I can't imagine her doing anything to betray the Systems Alliance. "

At this, Kyle gave a very thin, sardonic smile. "Tell them the rest, David."

Adkins looked over at Anderson, who sighed. "I will be the first to admit she is not the perfect candidate. Torfan, sir. That was ... not our best moment, in many ways. She murdered prisoners, she used her marines like expendable assets, and she – "

Adkins shrugged, and waved him to silence. "She got the job done, Captain. That's what matters. We all know Torfan was not her fault, and the results were what the SA wanted." He exchanged glances with Lady Manswell.

She sniffed. "If we must send someone to show the aliens we are not to be pushed about, I cannot think of anyone better than the Butcher. I give my approval, and the High Lords of Sol will agree."

Adkins nodded. "As do I." He glanced at the glowing comm-link set into the table, one connected to the Citadel. "I trust you have no insight or opinion on this, Ambassador Udina?"

A new voice sounded from the comm-link, slightly distorted by the mechanics of FTL data buoys. "Aside from questioning the obvious? I have to ask if that is really the kind of person we want as a Spectre, Senator?" The voice was almost nasal, but cold, with a touch of accent.

Senator Adkins, the most powerful of the members of the Alliance Senate Subcommittee on Galactic Affairs, scrubbed out his cigar. "Ambassador Udina, that is the only kind of person who can be such a thing. Forward the recommendation to the Council with our gratitude, and let them know Captain Anderson will be arriving at Eden Prime as soon as possible. "

A pause, and then Udina spoke. "I'll...make the call."

Anderson nodded. "And I'll get the ball moving, sir, in regards to the Normandy. Thank you, for giving me this chance."

Adkins snorted. "You should have been the first human Spectre, Captain. The whole reason we're giving you this project - being put in command of our Spectre candidate, given our most advanced warship, dealing with the Spectre assessor - is to rub it in the face of the Council that we still have complete faith in you." He stood, pulling out a fresh cigar, and extended his hand towards Lady Manswell.

She took it gracefully, cool eyes raking over Anderson and Kyle. "I agree. Major Kyle, are you alright? You look fatigued."

The major gave a smile, shrugging his massive shoulders. "I'll be fine, milady. Just a long trip here. Thank you both for your time and consideration."

The room emptied, leaving behind the single lieutenant to finish up recording the notes and clean the documents and materials from the table.

O-OSaBC-O

Kyle and Anderson walked out of the room, and then down the adjacent hallway, ignoring the plain old steel paneling and Alliance logo stencils. Dress boots clicked with a metronome's precision as the two men rounded another corner, before Kyle stopped. "David, you know what she's like. How far she has gone. Is this really a good idea?"

Captain David Anderson paused for several seconds, his dark face taut with a mix of emotions. "I don't know, Preston. That's not a question I can answer. I can say that, from what I've seen of the Spectres, they all seem pretty dark to me." He glanced up. "What I can't do is ignore Delacor's reports. The man is an idiot, and he's making her more unstable. If we don't do something she'll end up out of control and

in a court martial."

Kyle sighed. "I know. I should have done things differently at Torfan, but -"

Anderson closed his eyes, and grimaced. "Preston, now isn't the time to beat yourself up over that. You made mistakes, General von Grath made mistakes, and Shepard made mistakes. What is important is we have a chance not just to prove our worth to the Council, but help Sara out of the hole she's dug for herself. Can you reach out to Delacor?"

Kyle only nodded. "I'll see if I can't get Delacor on the horn and explain this to him. After that ... I think, perhaps, it's time for me to find another path. I've recently found a few things that have disturbed me, and I need time to reflect. I will be retiring."

Anderson fixed him with a somewhat shocked gaze. "I was hoping you'd come along with me to explain this mess to her. She looks up to you. Admires you."

Kyle gave a gentle, sad smile. "She idolizes you, David. She'll follow your lead, no matter what. Make them include you in whatever mission they plan to assess her in, not just commanding the Normandy. Guide her. Show her the way. She'll listen to you, you're like her damned father."

Anderson nodded. "I'll try. For what ever that is worth. I owe her that much. As for being her father...I only wish. She's had a hard life, and if I can get her through it to something better... I have to try." He clenched a fist in frustration, and Kyle just nodded.

Anderson looked back up. "Preston. Are you sure you are okay? There's a lot of talk about some of the things you've been saying in recent months. Off the record reprimands. Official censure. That kind of thing. Does that have anything to do with you deciding to retire?"

Kyle's eyes flickered, once before subsuming. "Anderson. Do you remember when you made naval captain, and some Commissar sat you down to explain what the SA did in the dark, to 'protect humanity from harm' and keep us safe?"

Anderson's face tightened in disgust. "Of course I do."

Kyle's eyes were sad. "What you were told wasn't the *worst* thing we were up to, Anderson. My sons were L2's, did you know that?"

With that cryptic statement, Kyle turned and departed, leaving a bewildered Anderson by himself for several seconds.

He sighed, then tapped his omni-tool to bring up his comm-link. "Commander Vonn, I'm done here. Have my launch ready for me, then prep the Tokyo for immediate departure for Almor. When Captain Asis shows up, send him to my ready room so I can begin the hand-off."

He clicked off, turning to stare out a nearby window at the expanse of the Arcturus docks. "God, I hope this works."

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## Chapter 2: Prologue 2 : Shepard

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*A/N: Abbreviations and unclear terms will appear at the bottom. Generally speaking, I will attempt to use American Naval military nomenclature.*

*Original readers of this chapter will note quite a few changes. Some of what happened here simply made no sense given Shepard's history, and some of it was just pointless.*

*Thanks to liethr for followups.*

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"Suppressive fire, now! Jackson, Carls, left flank, maintain pressure."

The voice was like ice, loud and yet somehow precise, a smoky contralto that spoke of nothing but absolute control.

The sky was riven by the slashes of GARDIAN lasers as two more pirate ships crashed to the ground in vast, earthshaking plumes of fire and dust. The sky was a broken red, streaked through with wispy grey clouds. The ground was burnt, blackened, the hulls of broken colony modules offering up thick black plumes of smoke to the uncaring sky. Marines, clad in heavy blue and white armor, moved in tight squads, the ground broken up in layers, three-tiered platforms of concrete like a giant stairway. At the edges, pirate forces fired back. The bark of sniper rifles competed with the low-pitched chattering of sub-machine guns and the occasional angry booming cough of a shotgun.

A single black-armored figure stood among a tide of blue-armored soldiers, directing their assault. She leapt down from the broken edge of a landing pad, lithe energy untrammelled as she half-crouched next to a prefabricated wall still stenciled with assembly numbers. The ugly bark of Avenger assault rifles pierced the air, along with the scent of burning flesh, and the shrieks of the wounded and dying.

Behind the hardened faceplate of her helmet, she smiled coldly.

Almor was not a first or even second-tier colony world. Barely a collection of ship modules and mining gear, it had less than a thousand souls, all Ashland-Eldfell employees mining heavy pockets of titanium and palladium. Without defense towers or even a militia, the planet's only defenders - a handful of private security mercenaries and a reinforced group of cheap security mechs - was no match for a full pirate raid. The workers valued their independence, and Ashland-Eldfell liked not having to pay heavy SA taxes, but as the danger of a pirate raid mounted, the businessmen who ran Almor became worried.

The local pirate lord in the region, a cruel slaver and drug running asari known as Thalia Renas, operated in this area with impunity. From her base at Alsages, too deep within the Traverse for the SA to strike at, she was a danger to human and volus colonies, both who had appealed to the Citadel Council for protection. With no assistance forthcoming, the small human colony had desperately asked for help from the Systems Alliance, reluctantly going so far as to sign onto the SA Charter, making them a protectorate rather than independent.

The SA had agreed, and drew up plans to make sure the area was secure. They carefully sent in their forces to fortify the world, improving its defenses and bringing in the 5th Regiment of the First Mindoir, the famous *Lion's Roar* force of Marines that were well known for their hatred of pirates. Then the AIS had cunningly spread rumors that the SA had pulled out of the area, unwilling to meet Almor's requirements.

Sure enough, a battlecruiser and nine pirate frigates had erupted from the mass relay, so secure in their collective might they had not even deployed a scout first, rushing to be the first to strike the undefended colony. Except it was bait, with the miners and all other civilians flown out a week earlier. Now the "helpless civilians" were actually hardened Marines from the Fifth Regiment, the "private security forces" all N5+ special forces, the "cheap mechs" a force of JOTUN heavy assault mechs.

The battle had initially gone well. Six pirate ships had been shot out of the sky by the heavy cruisers *Calais* and *Bonn*, after they had been savaged by the long range shots of the dreadnaught *Saint Helens* just after jumping into the system. The pirate battlecruiser had taken a lucky glancing hit from a torpedo and lost weapons power, making a hard landing on the surface to attempt repairs.

Still, the pirates had landed in force, and the fight was on, the scum unaware just how badly they had been played. The casualties were heavy, the pirates bolstered by a thick scrum of Blood Pack vorcha,

but the plan had seemed to be working.

Shepard's original orders had simply to been to corral the heavier pirate force that had come from the crashed pirate cruiser, while the regimental CO, Captain Delacor, lead the rest of the regiment against pirate armored flanking forces and the vorcha swarm threatening the Ashland-Eldfell mining equipment. Unfortunately, Delacor had been taken by surprise when a second pirate force entered the fray, severely damaging the *Bonn* and forcing the *Calais* to fall back. The pirate frigates had managed to harry and delay the dreadnaught and the heavy armor units it carried, and now Delacor was pinned in place by armor units with little capacity to take them out.

Worse, she'd discovered the pirate battlecruiser was making repairs much faster than expected. If that cruiser got repaired enough to get back in space, the already damaged heavy cruisers in orbit would be no match without backup from the dreadnaught, and they'd either be destroyed or driven off.

And if that happened, the cruiser could simply bombard her forces on the ground to paste, or get away entirely.

With Delacor out of comms and pinned down, Shepard had to redefine the assault on the fly. Relieving Delacor was suicide, she had no anti-tank weapons. Storming the cruiser itself was also not an option, as it's own GARDIAN defenses would make short work of her Marines.

Her only plan, and one she was attempting to implement now, was to draw the main force of the pirates away from the cruiser, and then flush the cruiser out from it's hiding place with missiles and nerve gas. If the small battery of mobile GARDIAN trucks near the colony proper could draw a bead on the cruiser at close range, it could be shot out of the sky.

That meant using half her force or more as bait, to draw the pirate defenders away far enough to let her strike force get close enough to threaten the cruiser. She was shaken from her thoughts by the loud and slightly panicked voice next to her.

"Commander Shepard! Incoming gunships, orders?" The young face of the lieutenant next to her was taut with exhilarated fear, his armor dented and scorched from the building to building fighting that had occupied them most of the morning. His brown eyes were bright, even if his mouth was set in a grim line.

Shepard paused. Her features set in an emotionless mask, she turned. "Ignore them. Let them get in firing range, then have Squad Seven hit them with crossfire from their M-77's. We can't afford to let them know about the mobile GARDIAN trucks until that cruiser was found, Higgs."

Lieutenant Higgs grimaced, but complied. "Yes, ma'am. That means Sixth Company will be left without flanking cover when the pirates are drawn their way, however."

Her voice was cold. "They should dig in, then. Give the orders."

Shepard popped up, one hand grabbing on to the ledge above her, hauling her weight up to the next level. Movement caught her eye and with her free hand she unclipped her pistol and fired three shots, rapid fire. Higgs started as there was a spray of blood and two broken figures slipped from rubble to land bonelessly on the ground. Orange and blue ichor mingled, a turian and a batarian, each with a bloody crater between the eyes, their weapons in their hands cold.

"Pathetic."

Shepard pulled herself up, gazing around. The pirate flank was getting closer to her own strike force, directly away from where it was supposed to go. She snarled and tapped her omni-tool. "Jackson, where is my damned suppressive fire!"

A laconic voice answered, syllables slurred slightly in an undercurrent of fatigue. "Sorry, ma'am.

Jackson and Carls are both dead, trying to reorganize a firing line now. This is Moharmi."

Shepard grunted. "Acknowledged, Chief Moharmi. Move up the forward operating area to my current position and set up the GARDIAN trucks at the remote site." She clipped off the communicator.

"Higgs, have 4th and 5th squads dig in here. Have 8th squad hold position on the ridge. I'm going to flush that cruiser out. When you see fire, pull your men back immediately to avoid the gas."

The lieutenant nodded. "Yes ma'am...good luck." He turned away, moving towards the comm specialist tucked into cover, and Shepard headed out herself, towards the left flank of the battlefield. She cursed, mentally adjusting the map of the battlefield in her head. Most likely without flanking suppressive fire, the squads drawing the pirates to the right would be overrun when she completed her task. And fourth and fifth would get savaged by the need to keep the pirates from closing on the trucks.

*Gonna die either way, but at least this time we'll at least stop the fucking pirates. If I had another choice, I'd take it.*

The thought flicked across her consciousness, and she moved.

With a leap, Shepard crossed the broken concrete edge of the upper level platforms and flew through the air below. With a grunt of effort, she flexed her arm, and blue fire wreathed her form, the mass effect field channeled by her amp reducing her weight to almost nothing. She fell three stories to the underway below, landing with barely a scrape of armored boots on cracked, filthy pavement.

"What th-" A voice exploded from behind her and she was moving, ducking into a half crouch even as her hand unshipped the shotgun at her back, firing twice. A batarian was flung backwards, two huge craters torn into the cheap battle-plast armor he wore. A second later Shepard was there, fist covered in coruscating blue energy as she smashed his skull to flinders, a vivid splat of blood marking his final moment.

Shepard paused to look around, pulling up the partial map on her omni tool. "All commands, be ready for primary action. Eighth Squad, hold position on the ridge once you are there."

She gathered herself and raced down the narrow underway, the shortcut slicing between slapdash mining equipment and the detritus of the battle above. A shattered salarian body here, fragments of armor and an arm there...

Ahead she saw it, the secondary mining facility, the pirate cruiser downed with huge cross-crossing lines of charred ablative armor on its flank. Above it, the ugly overhang of the cliff the mining village was built around was scored with more black marks, but the orbiting ships were not able to get a clean hit on the grounded vessel.

Even as she watched, the GARDIAN laser array of the pirate cruiser flared, fifteen bright beams searing across the upper platforms in the distance, vaporizing more marines from the flanking squads. The main force of the pirate infantry, a mix of vorcha, krogan, and mostly batarians, had already moved out from their hastily fortified barricades to chase the Marines. A few remaining pirates milled around the ship, helping to make repairs to the damage caused by the heavy cruisers in orbit. More pirates worked on the engines, weapons laid on the ground so they could crawl along the hull.

Shepard sighed. There was still a chance she wouldn't have to pull the trigger. She bit her lip and tapped her comm. "*Saint Helens*, status."

The voice that answered was distorted by the screech of stellar radiation. "Time to position still three five minutes away. The last frigate pulled a suicide run on us, main propulsion was still down. We are out of range for fire support, ground control."

Shepard nodded and closed her eyes for a moment, before shaking her head. Thirty five minutes would

see this battlecruiser in the air and her entire force dead.

She knelt, and unshipped the weapon she had brought along with her.

She glanced around, wondering if she'd finally get court-martialed for using this thing, but there were not any cameras around to watch what was about to happen. She'd lugged the weapons to several ugly fights, waiting for a chance to use it on pirates, to let them get a taste of what it was like to suffer, and this was the best use she could think of.

It was a customized ML-77 missile launcher, but the warheads were black-nano binary munitions. One part nerve agent, one part blood chemical warfare, and all of it lethal to every Citadel species, capable of eating through protective clothing in seconds and even strong filters in a few minutes.

When she'd found them in pirate loot three months ago, she couldn't resist the irony of taking them along to use on more pirates.

When she hit the cruiser with these, they would either bolt and get chopped by the GARDIAN trucks still carefully hidden, or die slowly from the gas. She rather hoped they chose the latter. The heavy green canisters were technically illegal in Citadel space, but Shepard cared more for the spirit than the letter of the law, especially when it came to those who hurt the defenseless.

Carefully programming her payload with her omni-tool, Shepard loaded the missile launcher. Tapping her omni, she spoke. "Eighth Squad, report."

The voice of Lieutenant Cammis sounded on the line, her French accent breathy as usual. "We are in position. The pirates are overrunning the flanking squads, but cannot get back here to stop us in time. We are waiting for your fire."

Shepard nodded. "Good. Go ahead and set up your shots. Make sure you pop your pills, this shit will kill you right through your armor if it gets on you." With that, she clicked off, turning to consider her next actions.

First, she had to make sure none of the pirates could trace back the missile fire to her or her team and snipe them. A distraction was needed.

Pausing to gather herself, she reached out with her biotics, focusing on a heavy beam of scrap suspended above the main semi-wreckage of the cruiser. With a grunt she pulled it down, releasing it almost immediately, and watched as the 800-pound hunk of metal crashed into the cruiser's hull. A rain of sparks flew high into the air as a huge, hollow boom sounded from the impact.

One pirate screamed as the projectile slid down the curved hull of the ship to smash into him, rendering him into a splash of red paste and segments of unidentifiable flesh. Shepard gave a grim little smile, as all the eyes turned to the source of disturbance, and fired her missile.

It flashed across the battlefield in a heartbeat, slamming directly into the cruiser's side, not doing much damage as it exploded. Vile, heavy black gasses erupted in all directions as the chemical compounds inside interacted, producing thick, choking clouds of poisonous black gunk. A pirate screamed as he fell to the ground, twitching and then going stiff, blood pouring from eyes and nose, and a turian next to him gagged helplessly as blue blood seeped from between his plates and he was unable to move.

An instant later nineteen other missiles from squad eight slammed into the engines, hot omnigel incendiary paste burning away merrily at the engines and the external heat sinks for the GARDIAN lasers of the battlecruiser.

Shepard reloaded and fired again, this time at the front of the craft, the black filth spattering across the clean white steel before erupting into more choking clouds of black gasses. She popped a silver pill into her mouth, the deactivation agent for the gas, just in case a wind blew it her way.

Now all she had to do was wait.

O-OSaBC-O

Aboard the battlecruiser, the pirate commander went stiff at the sight of the black gas explosions, her features tightening into an almost pain filled mask. She recognized a lethal chemical warfare nano-agent when she saw one. When more missiles began slamming into the ship's exposed engines, blowing out a power conduit, she knew it was time to leave. Without weapons power restored yet, she was a sitting duck. Sooner or later that blood-nerve gas would eat its way into the ship, and even if it didn't, the other missiles would wreck her engines and overheat her heatsinks, making their GARDIAN lasers useless.

This raid had gone all wrong from the start, her beloved battlecruiser a near wreck, most of her fleet gone...and no slaves. She watched bitterly as more missiles slammed into her ship. Her own forces were out of position to reinforce the cruiser and drive the missile-launchers off. The armor pinning most of the main force wouldn't last forever, and once they failed...

Thalia Renas would not tolerate jail. She sighed, sealing the airlocks to the ship, locking out all external venting and hitting the button that sealed the systems from the outside. She turned to the haptic panel next to her, and tapped the comm.

"Bn'nga, get us in the air." Examining the haptic interface in front of her, she grimaced at the damage reports. "Weapons, ECM and kinetic barriers still down, I see."

Her batarian pilot grunted over the intercom. "Yes, ma'am. Been nice knowing you, Thalia. No way we can deal with those two cruisers until the repairs are done."

The pirate asari snarled. "Well we can't goddess-damned stay here, either. Engage the lowest level of the core, and keep us just above the ground, hugging it. We'll circle sun-side and get lost in the solar radiation. The humans have moved their entire force to the south, to deal with the armor, and drawn off my men. The way north open, right past the main upper colony, with no one to even see us."

His voice was dubious in tone. "It's possible, I suppose. If we stick around here, we could at least fix up the shields..."

She sighed. "If we stay on the ground anymore, we'll get holed by those stupid humans."

The batarian, barely visible in the front of the ship, nodded, beginning his maneuver.

O-OSaBC-O

The heavy, unwieldy battlecruiser, an old turian design, slid forward, mass effect core barely lifting it clear of the ground. The engines lit up, as the last of the pirates still outside the ship gave a blood-strangled curse and died.

Shepard made sure her rifle was steadied and in place, and tapped her comm. "Spear, be ready. No target ladar, fire on my target designator."

"Acknowledged, ma'am." The voice over her omni-tool was tight and nervous.

The pirate cruiser wheeled, the pilot skillfully keeping the ship low to the ground. Her own people fired a few final missiles, most of them missing entirely, and the cruiser picked up speed.

Shepard tracked the ship with her rifle, the laser target unit on it's side sending out a beam of green light, and when the pirate ship angled up ever so slightly, she pressed the button on the side of the rifle.

"Designated. Fire when ready, Spear."

O-OSaBC-O

Thalia Renas, pirate queen of Alsages, gave a smile as the cruiser accelerated.

A few more minutes and they'd make a clean getaway.

She had lost hundreds of men and almost her entire fleet, but she had hurt the Alliance force badly, and she would live to fight another day. She turned to head to the back of the ship when suddenly the entire ship lurched.

Eight huge beams of death carved instantly into the engines from the until now concealed GARDIAN laser GTS trucks at the edges of the colony.

The cruiser dipped, sliding from the sky in a blaze of burning armor and uncontrolled fires, as the trucks unleashed a torrent of heavy laser fire on it again and again. Thalia couldn't believe it, even as haptic interfaces flashed red all around her.

"The bitch sacrificed her own men to ...."

Another flash of lasers, and Thalia Renas knew her pirate empire - and possibly her life - was no more.

### O-OSaBC-O

In the aftermath of battle, the ugly truth of warfare becomes evident.

The ground was carpeted in corpses, rivulets of blue, red, orange and purple all commingling on the torn and shattered landscape. Corpses stared unblinkingly at the angry red sky, the wind carrying the charnel scent of burning flesh everywhere.

Here and there medical corpsmen triaged wounded marines, applying medigel infused bandages and speaking in soft tones. Smoke wafted gently skywards, as Alliance fighter units began to descend, harrying any remaining enemy forces with lances of purifying fire.

On the highest tier of the colony, the concrete under-works were a bit more high quality, the colony shells larger, cleaner.

Offices for the Ashland-Eldfell executives who normally oversaw everything, Shepard supposed.

As she watched, at UT-47 drop shuttle came to a shuddering landing, fore and aft burners firing to stabilize the craft as two figures dropped from its inner bay. One she was all too familiar with, in recent days, the other ... she had not seen in a very long time.

"Shepard. Status report." The man facing her was large, angry looking and almost weary. His face was craggy and marred with a heavy, irregular scar on one side, occluding his eye and part of his scalp, the cybernetic eye replacement making a tiny whirring noise as he focused on Shepard. His battered armor had the name DELACOR printed across his left chest, and the bars of a captain were painted on the shoulder of his armor.

"Sir. Operation complete. Second Company Group has suffered moderate casualties. One hundred thirty eight marines dead, ninety four wounded. I regret to report that Sixth Company was destroyed by the main pirate force, which drew away from the cruiser. The battlecruiser attempted escape. With five squads from Ninth Company, I was able to draw off defenders and use inciindary missile fire and biowarfar nano-gas to flush it from cover."

Delacor grunted. "You finally got a chance to use those things on pirates, I see. Figures you wouldn't kill them clean." He ran his fingers through his hair. "Second company got splattered by the goddamned tanks and Lieutenant Commander Vitan is dead. I'd normally have you ride herd on First Company Group, but that won't be necessary." His eyes flicked to Anderson, then back to Shepard.

"I haven't gotten a report from upstairs yet, what is the fleet status?"

She remained at attention. "We have affirmative reports from the *Saint Helens* - they have destroyed all pirate vessels in the operation still in space. The dreadnaught is damaged from a kamikaze attack. The *Bonn* is heavily damaged and reports Captain Bishop died from shrapnel and internal explosions when the forward missile battery went. I went ahead and dispatched 10th Company's medical teams to assist."

Delacor nodded again, his expression easing slightly. "...good thinking. Enemy casualties? And I'm a fucking idiot for even asking this, but do we have any prisoners for interrogation?"

Shepard gave a thin, cold smile. "Initial casualties of pirate forces indicate over 1,700 dead. No prisoners. Thalia Renas was discovered on the cruiser, and refused to surrender. I was forced to kill her, sir. A dead batarian - the pilot, probably - and a handful of other dead pirates were also found in the wreckage. There was also single civilian on the cruiser, her daughter I believe. Also dead."

Delacor sighed. "Shepard, did you kill a fucking *kid* this time?"

She immediately shook her head. "Captain Delacor, the child was dying from untreatable injuries at the time of discovery. It was a mercy killing."

Shepard thought back to the wreckage of the pirate cruiser.

#### O-OSaBC-O

*Thalia Renas had actually survived, both legs broken. The cruiser was broken in half along its keel, dead bodies spilling from the ruptured flanks and shattered engine room, but the main deck was mostly in one piece, if completely wrecked. Shepard had found Renas crawling towards rear of the ship, where another asari form lay, this one far younger and clearly badly injured, in what must have been some kind of private quarters.*

*Shepard had stepped over the burning wreckage of what was once a bulkhead and unshipped her shotgun. "Freeze."*

*Thalia only looked at Shepard, then back at the young asari. "I surrender. Or kill me. Whatever. But...not my daughter. She had no part in this. She did not know. Please."*

*The pirate's voice was broken with pain and shaky with emotion, and Shepard gave a tiny smile as she knelt down next to the child.*

*"And how many slaves begged for mercy from your men? How many families have you wrecked with your evil?"*

*Thalia's blue eyes widened, and she clenched her fists, the blood and shattered bones of her legs forgotten. "You... you are supposed to be better than people like me. I know what I did. Fine. Kill me. But she didn't do a thing. Have mercy. Not for me. But for her. She..."*

*Shepard paused, looking over the asari girl and her wounds. From the jagged foot-long gaping hole torn into the tiny abdomen that was spilling forth all-too-human looking intestine, the torn throat only weakly spurting purplish blood, and the fourth-degree horrible burns that seared the child's face, arms, and upper chest down to bone, Shepard knew the child was going to die no matter what.*

*There wasn't enough medigel in the world to stop the bleeding and broken internal organs, and it was only going to be a few more minutes until the asari child's heart stopped.*

*She'd never intended to kill a child with her actions, but it wouldn't be the first time she'd inadvertently ended an innocent life. The child was probably in pain, and the least Shepard could do was put the girl out of her misery.*

*The fact that Thalia clearly thought she was still alive and could be saved, though, lead Shepard to*

*decide not to let the asari pirate think it was mercy guiding her actions.*

*After all, Shepard owed Thalia a very large amount of pain and suffering. She smiled, and then leveled her shotgun, placing a blast right into the head of the asari girl. "Oops. Finger slipped."*

*Thalia screamed in horror and anger, biotics flaring as she attempted to rise to her feet despite the compound fractures, and the shotgun spoke again, in finality.*

O-OSaBC-O

Shepard straightened, facing her commanding officer. "She had suffered internal injuries and fourth-degree burns, as well as abdominal perforation. It was frankly hard for me to pull the trigger."

Delacor looked at Shepard with weary, disgusted features. "Imagine that, you hesitating to pull a trigger. As for the pirate leader, we both know she didn't goddamned attack you, but I'm tired of trying and failing to rein you in. Thankfully, Shepard, you are not my problem any more."

He grunted, jerking a thumb over his shoulder at the figure of Captain David Anderson. "Your request for transfer has been noted and approved."

Shepard raised a dark eyebrow, her posture still ramrod straight, and glanced over at the other man.

Anderson only shrugged. "I need an XO for a new command I've just picked up. And another mission I could use your help on. Mindoir Command has already signed off on the transfer, and your level four and five qualifications in navops and engineering qualify you as an XO aboard a frigate."

He smiled. "If you are still interested in seeing space, that is."

Shepard only looked at the man for a long moment, a sparkle in her eye, before nodding.

"Yes, sir."

A pause, as if searching for words. "I would like to accept, sir."

The face was unmoving, not a single twitch of muscle, but Shepard's eyes had gone from hard and flint to dark, almost quiet, and thoughtful.

Delacor nodded amiably. "I'll get the paperwork out of the way. This sounds like a speed transfer, based on the orders from Command. If you'll follow me, Captain, we can get this wrapped up inside the offices up there."

He paused and turned to Shepard. "As for you, Shepard, your final task in the Fifth is to police up this disaster area you've made and detail off recovery and burial squads. Make goddamned sure whatever nanochemical agent you deployed is neutralized as well. I don't know how the hell you got a hold of that stuff, but make sure the rest is destroyed before you ship out."

Shepard saluted, eyes hard once more. "Sir, yes sir."

Pivoting on a heel, she stalked off, something almost animistic in her walk.

Delacor shuddered and gestured to the office behind him. "After you, Captain."

Anderson stepped into the office, which had been converted hastily into a command center. A rack of Avenger rifles was clipped neatly to one wall, the other two pasted over with rough terrain maps and a top down display of the under-tunnels and mining tunnels. Comm radios for various units were neatly clipped on the windowsill in easy reach, next to the captain's own weapon, a heavy Vindicator rifle.

The desk was flimsy and covered in data-pads, pieces of a Vigilance sniper rifle, and leftover lunch, which was dumped into the trash by Delacor as he sat down behind the desk. "So, Captain Anderson. Not that I am anything but *delighted* that you are taking that crazy bitch off my hands, but is there

anything else you can tell me about this transfer? Am I going to be getting a replacement XO, preferably not someone like her?"

Anderson sat as well, taking in the man across from him. He'd never served with Delacor, but in his own way the man was as much a legend as Shepard or Branson. Nicknamed the Iron Man, he'd survived everything thrown at him - crashing transports, erupting volcanoes, thresher maws, even an assault from a krogan warlord. But Delacor was also held to be unlucky.

Certainly, given how willing Shepard was to sacrifice Marine lives to get the job done, the Fifth Regiment must have felt their luck had run out when she'd been named XO. The two had not gotten along well at all, with Shepard pushing for more attacks on pirates and going after slavers, while Delacor wanted to perform defensive operations. The Fifth had actually been tasked to this raid by a change of orders from General Rachel Florez, and was unusual for the Fifth, which had been doing mostly garrison duty for the past three months.

Given the fact that Anderson knew Shepard and this Ranas asari had past history - the pirate had been responsible for much of the suffering Shepard had gone through in her youth - he was pretty sure General Florez had set the raid up as a way to give her prized student a bit more closure. Maybe that last killing would allow Shepard to focus now.

He hoped so. He considered telling Delacor the truth, but the man would probably be upset he himself had been passed over to be a Spectre.

"To your second question, yes. You'll be getting an N6 commander and two more lieutenant commanders who were just approved for N training. As far as her next duty station, I'm afraid it's classified, actually. I can tell you generalities. It isn't just to take Shepard off your hands. She'll be working with me on an experimental frigate, and we're doing shakedown runs."

Delacor nodded. "Huh. Space command? Limits the damage she can do, smart. You are comfortable with her as an XO? She's very efficient with the tasks an XO must perform, I will grant that."

Anderson nodded. "I've known Shepard a long time. I know she was very difficult to work with, but there's no one better."

Delacor snorted. "Difficult? She used black-nano nerve and blood agents to flush out the battlecruiser the pirates had crashed here, after getting almost a fifth of my men killed to bait their main force into getting flanked, and more to pull the survivors of that fracas away so she could get close enough." He sighed. "And yet again I have to explain to Alliance Command why I have zero prisoners. They are starting to have issues believing me when I say every enemy we encounter fights to the death."

Taking a sip of water from a cup on his desk he shook his head tiredly. "The fact she mercy killed a child is so fucking unlike her that now I don't know if it was a mercy killing, or if she straight up shot the kid just to fuck with this Ranas' head. I shouldn't have to wonder that kind of thing about my own XO, Captain."

Delacor exhaled. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to rant. But she's not doing better since Torfan."

Anderson only nodded, pulling out his datapad. "Which was why we are making this transfer. We have a task for Shepard that will allow her to focus all her energy on something new, and yet will hopefully keep her more in line." He presented the transfer chit to Delacor, who nearly snatched out of his hand and approved it without even reading it .

Delacor handed it back, eyes dark and mouth twisted into a bitter smile. "I wish you luck with her. It's been years since Torfan, and you wouldn't be doing this if you had any idea of what kind of monster she's become, Captain. "

Anderson shook his head. "I know her. There's still a good person in there, somewhere. It's hard for her to show it because she doesn't know how."

Delacor smiled coldly, eyes suddenly narrow, and his voice was a whisper. "Is that so? I've seen her shoot surrendering soldiers in the head and laugh, kicking dying men to death while ignoring every rule of surrender, and throw away the lives of a dozen marines to bring down one batarian, only to torture the man to death. She's sick, Anderson."

Anderson's brows furrowed. "And how often has she been given the proper support to carry out the orders she is tasked with? We all know that she had half the men you did and managed to bring down a battlecruiser with a handful of missile launchers and two GTS trucks. She's damned effective, and if the SA would give her a chance to prove herself, she could show that instead of having to act this way. Of course she's bitter."

Delacor grimaced. "I simply dislike her tactics, and their costs. I feel as if I have been tainted, compromised by what she does. And I don't understand why the SA would keep deploying her."

Anderson gave a weary sigh at that. "Because, Captain, when the news says the Butcher was deployed to a region, what happens to piracy?" His own eyes darken. "When we send her into a terrorist negotiation, what happens? When people see her coming, they know they either surrender – at once – or die. She's become a tool for them. You're just the handler. Or you were. Now I am. I was able to keep her in order once. And it's been a long time, but maybe I can rein her in again."

Delacor slumped and rubbed his eyes, laughing. "Good luck, then, Captain. I'll see if she's done with her final tasks yet."

He sat up straight and tapped his omni-tool. "Shepard, status."

Her voice was cool but more animated than earlier. "Just finishing up setting funeral and hazmat detail, sir. And we found a survivor among the pirates... I didn't kill him, just to make you feel happy. Sir."

Delacor glared at his omnitool, then sighed. "I suppose I should be fucking thankful you have enough decency to do that much, instead I'm just thankful we are going our separate ways. Finish up what you're doing and report to the colony landing pad, at the shuttle Captain Anderson and I came in on. You ship out *immediately*. I'll have Lieutenant Higgs get your ship-bag and put it on the shuttle for you."

The line was silent for a moment, then she spoke. "Yes sir. At once".

Delacor killed the link and smiled sadly up at Anderson. "The bitch is all yours. Don't bring her back."

Anderson stood, pocketing the approved transfer order. "I won't, Captain. She needs someone who believes in her to find her way back." He left the pre-fab unit, and Delacor stared at the ceiling for a few seconds before tapping his omnitool and engaging an encrypted commlink.

"General Florez, Anderson is picking up Shepard now, as you said he would. I'll give your offer careful thought."

He clicked off, and smiled, wondering if his luck was finally turning around.

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*GARDIAN: General ARea Defense Integration Anti-spacecraft Network - basically laser anti-air, anti-missile and anti-ship weapons.*

*XO: Executive Officer - second in command of a military unit*

*CO: Commanding officer - first in command of a military unit*

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## Chapter 3: Prologue 3 : Wrex

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*A/N: Remastered on 10-21-14.*

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Urdrnot Wrex was not happy. His last task for the Broker had ended messily, with the turian target dying in front of his family.

Then the family attacked him. He hated turians, they tasted bad, if you ate too much you'd throw up, and they were all crazy in his opinion.

Now they had gone from crazy to dead, and he'd had to waste hours cleaning his armor, making him late for his meeting with the Broker representative for his next job. All because a turian was dumb enough to double-cross the Broker.

*It's amazing how stupid people always think they can escape consequences,* he thought, checking the loads on his shotgun before shipping it in the lack at the small of his back. The huge krogan then came to his full 7'8" height, his scarred face looking around him with jaded, ancient disinterest.

The Citadel was much the same as it always had been on previous visits, a patina of blind fools prating away among five cities worth of people who pretended they had made it big, while the sludge of society lapped away at their very feet, snickering in amusement even as they feigned obedience. C-Sec was, as usual, efficiently cocksure and arrogantly lording it over the commingling races in the docking bay, their blue armor setting the apart from the drab coveralls and tired hex-pack travel wear of the many people thronging about.

Not they got anywhere near Wrex, of course.

No, the crowd parted before him, throwing him worried and frightened glances and making hasty motions to clear his path, as if a mass effect field had parted some sea for him to walk through. The battle-master began to walk to the far end of the bay, eyes barely taking in the outstretched arms of the Citadel, festooned with a parade of light and motion. His heavy armored feet thudded like the boom of distant thunder on the metal decking below him, as a group of salarions clucked in alarm at his menacing approach and scattered.

*Worthless pack of pyjak dung. I hate docking bays. Always full of people on the go to someplace else, yet always managing to get in my damned way.*

The air was stale, still, rank with the body scents of things that clanked, flapped, and glowed. The din of faintly said words beyond the range of the translator was a dull, irritating roar in the background, the staid and ugly arches of the under-supports of the bay littered with the occasional graffiti. An insectoid keeper crossed in front of him, softly chattering as it began to unscrew a panel on the wall, eyes fixed in an idiot's focus.

Wrex did not like the Citadel.

Too soft, too full of fools, too much security that never stopped the strong but merely enabled the weak to be preyed upon multiple times. Wrex had no time for the wide eyed humans, snobby asari, or the uppity turians. It was sterile and dead, a mockery of a real world, hidden away from the truth of the rest of the galaxy.

He was here to see one person about one job and then he could get off this stupid tin can and back to the free, clean wilderness of the Terminus systems. He needed the money to keep up his hunt for the

Ganar who had killed his son, but the rage had begun to fade even as his pain increased. Taking jobs from the Broker would let him get back into the chase, and clear his head.

All too often, though, the Broker's jobs broke his number one rule: don't take any job involving anything else but himself, his shotgun, and a dead body. He'd rather work for someone else.

*Of course, not many can afford me. Only places to go other than the Broker are all on Omega. Maybe I can go get some work there, and Aria and I can pretend we don't recognize each other again, or if Sederis isn't too crazy or trampy.*

He paused, actually stopping for a moment to imagine a non-trampy, sane Sederis, then laughed. His mood lifting slightly at the ridiculous image, he turned the corner from the main corridor to a long, empty access hallway that lead only to empty docking bays.

In a pool of light at the far end of the hallway stood a slender, menacing figure, all in black, cloth falling from cocked hips, ungloved talons gleaming in the faint light. One hand clasped a thick black cane, the other was hooked into a wide black leather belt weighted down with weapons. The turian's face was a black space within the all-concealing hood, the tip of mandibles barely visible, and one angry glowing red eye.

Wrex sighed. *Goddamned turian melodrama.* He then strode up, gait easy and slow, hands empty. "Tetrimus."

The turian's voice was a cold rasp, as if damaged. "Wrex. You are late."

Wrex sighed. "Delays from the last job. I'm here now."

Tetrimus flicked a mandible in irritation. "You're out of sorts. Even more so than usual."

The krogan made no movement. Tetrimus was a scary bastard, and while Wrex feared nothing, he did respect the turian's strength and quiet lethality. He had been one of those who spoke "with the voice of the Shadow Broker" for almost 30 years now. The Broker only tolerated the turian and a crazed salarian assassin, Tazzik, as his representatives.

Every one else who had sought a personal audience with the Broker died, usually in horrifying ways.

That, in and of itself, was enough make Wrex's plates itch with caution. He knew Tetrimus fairly well, of course, having worked for and with him for decades, but he didn't get to be as old as he was by assuming anything. And anyone crazy enough to kill both sons of the old turian Primarch - the one before Fedorian - was no one to take for granted.

Wrex grunted, folding his arms, finally speaking. "I hate coming here and I haven't had my friendly chat with C-Sec or my first cup of jaaki yet, so let's get this over with, Tetrimus."

The black-clothed figure pulled his hand free from his belt and extended a datapad. "To work, then. Three solar cycles ago, we received a low level contact from an interested party. A salarian, Mano Ergdai, had a confirmed lead on activity regarding certain bio-engineering activities in the Perseus Veil. Details are not important. The contact was to be made, here, yesterday. "

A pause.

Wrex grunted, hating turian melodrama. "And? Who was the contact supposed to be?"

"Fist, the fourth level entry contact at Chora's Den, Lower Bachrjet Wards. You know, the human."

Wrex snorted. "Gristle headed two bit thug. What happened?"

Tetrimus exhaled. "Due to the importance of the data, and the likelihood of hostile interest, a security and liquidation team was sent."

Wrex snorted. Translation, the data was hot and expensive enough the Broker was willing to kill to get it.

The turian continued. "There was an altercation. Two members of the wet team were taken down. The contact was liquidated, the data lost. We are *almost* certain this is an internal security breach. Meeting times and places were known only to myself, the Broker, the security team – both dead – and Fist. There is a possibility that Fist is not involved but merely compromised."

Wrex tilted his reptilian head, red eyes fixing on the artificial one of the turian. "You want me to kill Fist?"

The turian shook his head, the minimal movement exposing an expanse of scarred, blackened plating and red facial markings. "Not yet. The Broker has decided the chance that this was not a betrayal by Fist is still non-zero. Thus a test is called for. The next official contact event we have will be routed to Fist. We have isolated and identified all other potential leaks. Your job will be to ensure there is no leak with Fist. If he betrays us, secure the asset and kill Fist. If he is secure, inform him – respectfully but firmly – that someone in his organization is compromised, and that a level 2 liquidation and a Severance from the Feed will be conducted."

Wrex nodded, familiar with the Broker's rather extreme methods. Even if Fist wasn't a traitor, he had let someone pierce his security. For that, Fist would be ejected as a Broker dealer and contact, cut off from the Feed, and excluded from any further contact for at least a year. Anyone working for him would be killed.

Wrex was rather surprised the order wasn't just to kill him anyway, the Broker did not usually display such mercy. It was curious enough, actually, that Wrex decided he needed to know more. "Why not just kill him anyway? He's just a human thug."

Tetrimus gave a harsh bark of bitter laughter, mandibles flickering. "The Broker believes humans are about to be awarded rights to submit a candidate for the Spectres, in preparation for them to assume a Council seat. Councilor Tevos is impressed with certain actions humanity has taken recently. Some human raid killed an old enemy of hers."

The turian folded his own arms. "The Broker has contacts in human space, of course, but Fist is uniquely placed – he is the brother to a recently placed acolyte with the Consort, his bar is frequented by those members of C-Sec who are open to influence and bribes, and he has very good ties with the Blue Suns and the Underrunners. Fist could be developed and mentored to a second level contact with time and effort."

Wrex nodded, thinking, settling back on his legs.

Humans had moved so fast. In less than half a century they went from first contact backwater rubes to boasting a navy clearly deserving of respect and fear, and in some ways superior to that of the asari or salarian navies, regardless of dreadnaught numbers. Their soldiers were as fierce and relentless as batarians but better disciplined, and their tight alliance with the asari meant they were destined to pass the volus and elcor in short order. Their creativity and original ideas were sending shockwaves in military circles that Wrex still bothered to listen to.

Having good contacts was how the Broker stayed in power, and having contacts with contacts of their own, in such a fast moving situation, would be something the Broker wouldn't throw away at the first sign of a problem.

"Alright. So I keep an eye on this guy. He double crosses us, kill him, otherwise give him a warning, kill his people, and put a bullet through his link to the Feed. Pay?"

Tetrimus nodded. "Full expenses, hotel of your choice, bond fees, docking fees, transport within 4 jumps, and your usual fees for live combat wetwork. We've done this before. We're still running down your requested information on Ganar Clan sightings, most of them seem to be working for Saren nowadays. Take that as you will."

Wrex grinned, suddenly in a much better mood. Unlike the last job, this job wouldn't cost him a credit and he'd get to move out almost immediately. Plus, if the Broker could pin down any Ganar clan groupings, he could strike them before they knew he was coming.

*I'd need backup, but Jona would probably help. Maybe time to pay Omega a visit. Wonder if Aria still has that beat up old krogan as a trophy or not.*

He shrugged. "Done. Who's my contact?"

Tetrimus shrugged. "I will serve, we're trying to keep a low profile until this is sorted out. I'll be at Flux if you need me, assuming Doran doesn't die of fright when I show up and cause C-SEC to come looking. I'll be there after mid-light to just before low-light every day until the mission is complete."

Tetrimus dug into his cloak, searching for something. "As usual, payment in volus banking system credits and docking passes will be given once completed. If you need additional support, I can provide that. Here."

Tetrimus handed over a C-Sec weapons authorization (identifying him as a bodyguard for a turian CEO), a 10,000 credit chit, and the datapad with the mission information on it. "Pad code is WREAV. As usual, it wipes in 96 hours."

Wrex frowned. "Broker has a stupid sense of humor" He sighed, rubbing his crest at the name of his worthless brother. "No matter. I'll be keeping an eye on Fist. " Without another word, Wrex stomped away, tucking his new possessions into the outer pocket of his battered red armor, and began thinking tactically.

*Fist is not going to be public, he'll have dug himself in somewhere. If he betrays the Broker openly, he has to know he's a dead man...unless whoever he betrays the Broker for has resources enough to keep him alive. That means a Spectre, or deep STG, or a Councilor. None of which make sense.*

Wrex grumbled, walking slowly back out into the open bay-area, and over to the shuttle call station.

*Humans are never tactical thinkers, always too busy going after the quick profit. Salarians aren't known for being trusting, and who ever whacked the guy with the info not only took him out, but took out two of the Broker's bully boys to do it. Pile of varren shit, more than a damned "leak".*

The krogan sighed as the taxi pulled even to the curb, and stepped in as its top split open. Leaning his large bulk back into the squishy plastic seats that vainly tried to shape themselves around him, he barked out commands. "Brakas Hotel, Lower Bachrjet Wards."

The taxi swooped away, entering the tube-ways linking the five wards together that passed along the outside of the Presidium ring. Wrex snorted at the sight, rolling his eyes at the thought of simpering paper-pushers within the flimsy looking ring.

*Soft ass aliens...not worth my time.*

Leaning back further, the old krogan closed his eyes.

*Seems like nothing is, these days, except credits I can't spend on much beyond weapons and ryncol that doesn't keep the memories away long enough.*

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## Chapter 4: Prologue 4 : Liara

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*A/N: remastered 10-22-14.*

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The bone-white corridor seemed to shimmer for a moment, the faintly curved lines on every surface still polished and gleaming despite the millennia that had past since this outpost of the Protheans was laid low. Liara T'soni trailed delicate blue fingers over the surface of the wall, feeling how the not-quite ceramic/metal hybrid actually flexed gently at a touch, yet was resistant to almost all forms of damage.

The dig site she was in was one of several on Therum, a human colony world on the edge of the Traverse. All of them centered around the strange facility the Protheans had built literally into the side of a semi-active volcano. There were signs they used the thermal energy to power several devices that were now nothing more than miles of twisted, faded wreckage on the hot surface.

Liara had been here for almost three months now, and found this to be one of most frustrating expeditions she'd ever been on. The original expedition had been over thirty people, including the lead researchers Doctor Sanaris Te'Vurth'a and Doctor Balno Maleas from the University of Althara, an esteemed salarian institute.

Getting into the ranks of the original expedition had been a very narrow thing for Liara. Too many people at the University of Serrice saw her as nothing more than a spoiled crackpot. Her name alone inspired fear and submission from commoners and the Clans, but most of the University staff were themselves of the Thirty, the noble houses of Thessia. Many were from Houses far greater than the dimmed glory of T'Soni, and some were even political foes.

She'd spent the past thirty years pursuing her beliefs and goals - her study of the Prothean extinction, and what it actually was. Most Prothean research was more pragmatic, seeking weapons technology, energy sources, or something the research teams could sell to the Council or to corporations. The pure study of the vanished culture of the Protheans was seen as a waste of time, and trying to find out why they vanished an even more foolish endeavor.

Her stubborn pursuit of it had only sent her career into a tailspin. Five books, which sold poorly and mostly only to aliens. Twenty seven papers that were all ignored or mocked by the more experienced researchers at the University of Serrice.

She'd been on eight major expeditions and recovered well over four hundred artifacts, but she was unable to secure a solid extension of a teaching position or even a good research job. She was lucky to have been retained as long as she had on the expedition planning staff as a technical assistant. When Dr. Sanaris reached out to her, bringing her onto the team to work the dig at Therum, she had been excited.

The excitement had faded. Aside from the personal catastrophe she'd suffered - something she didn't want to think about - the expedition itself had turned rather sour. The first three months had been grueling grunt labor, mostly by her and the other technical assistants, while the expedition leaders did research from their comfortable cruiser in orbit. Liara had seen some rough sites but this was possibly the worst, and the conditions at the dig site were all too basic - cots, camping gear, and the like. Her position among the Thirty isolated her from her asari co-workers, and her relationships with her fellow researchers were strained.

With the unfamiliar salarians she was a hesitant, stuttering mess, too quick to avoid conflict and thus ignored as unneeded by them.

The dig had just started to become interesting when the Council had sent an urgent message to Sanaris and Maleas, instructing them to report to the Citadel - a Prothean artifact of staggering importance had been discovered by the humans, and Sanaris and Maleas were called upon to oversee the research. The University of Serrice didn't have another team ready to go to Therum in the short term, and the university instead sold the research rights to the digsite to the human company Exogeni.

The rest of the team had gratefully pulled out - they hadn't found anything here worthwhile, and the conditions were terrible - but Dr. Maleas had been kind enough to listen to Liara's request to stay behind and do follow up work. She said she didn't really need the pay, and that she could at least find anything of use and see off any looters until Exogeni arrived.

She was alone here now, Maleas having set up the situation with Exogeni, allowing Liara to research this find on her own - and at her leisure, instead of looking over her shoulder for competing researchers.

Not that she'd found anything. Everything about the site was baffling. It was extremely late-period design, and like many other late period structures lacked the living spaces and other features of most Prothean architecture.

She wiped her forehead clear of sweat, shaking her head at the heat. The volcano under the site was inactive but still threw off copious amounts of heat, enough to make her feel physically ill and ruining more than one of her uniforms with sweat. The only place to find good air-conditioning - and showers - was in the tiny outpost "capital" of Nova Yekaterinburg.

The mining town was her first real exposure to humanity. She'd gone a week ago to have her uniforms laundered and to get a shower and more food, and she wished now she had skipped the place. The ubiquitous heat made everyone cranky and short tempered, and her trip had been filled with rudeness.

Nova Yekaterinburg was a very rough place, all boxy colony modules, ramshackle bars, and poorly concealed brothels. The miners who worked the surface for the heavy metals were almost exclusively brutish looking males, most of whom shot her looks of unwelcome intent and desire. Hulking and huge, most of them topped out over half a meter taller than the frail asari girl, all of them with heavy slabs of tattooed muscle, hair, and grime their distinguishing features.

The human females, on the other hand, looked almost just like asari except for the lack of crests, and from the skin itself, which aside from color was also bizarrely delicate looking, not even finely scaled like that of asari. Their hair was unusual, but not jarringly so.

The atmosphere was far from the quiet, refined environs she was used to, and the miners used to a far different class and type of asari than Liara was. It was bad enough being leered at so openly by men (and some women), but when the prostitutes had picked up on her nervousness and offer her some "freebies", it had become embarrassing. Asari were *very* casual about sexuality in general, but it was something Liara had never done, and until recently not something she'd felt an urge to experiment with.

Given the way things had been going the past few weeks, though, she was almost certain if she went back and was asked again, she would say yes. Her head was still not right from the mess she'd gone through with Amania...

She flinched from the name, sighing, and continued her walk down the ancient Prothean hallway, her sensor unit humming away as it analyzed a scrap of broken ceramic.

The young asari maiden wandered nearly aimlessly through the darkened, pale hallways while her omni-tool gathered readings. Her mind tried to piece together what this place was. There were many reinforced rooms and what seemed to be gathering points, but much of the facility seemed hardened. Every entry was covered with regenerative force fields that could be brought up to repel invaders or

even trap intruders.

Powered by the magma flow exchanger far below, the facility would not even have shown up on scans if a recent earthquake hadn't revealed part of the complex after a rock-slide. There were computer systems here, wiped clean like every other Prothean system she had encountered, as well as broken Prothean Beacons, shattered green stumps standing mute guard in the dusty topside wind near the entrance to the dig site.

Moving around a protrusion in the ground, Liara paused at a waist high wall in the middle of the corridor. Something clicked in her mind at the sight, and she recalled the entrances to the Family Hold on Thessia. The high walls flanking the gates were set around a central courtyard with walls just like this one.

"Goddess, this is not a hallway, this is a defensive choke point."

Stepping back from the waist high wall, Liara imagined the layout of the facility in her mind, concentric rings linked only by easily defended elevator shafts, protecting a chamber near the center that linked the power source below to whatever the ruins were topside. Whatever it was, the Protheans had designed this place to hold out against superior numbers of infantry.

*Yet more evidence that the disappearance of the Prothean people was not a peaceful transition.*

Liara frowned, and slowly exited the corridor, her feet taking her back to the small campsite she had set up at the base of the human elevator system.

Passing the heavy mining laser they had used to gain access to the entry portal in the first place, Liara wearily sat down on her cot, wiping a thin layer of sweat and grime from her face and glanced around at her meager possessions, before snorting at the two cases full of expensive dresses sitting next to the far end of the tent.

She sighed, before pulling open the bag on her cot. From it, she tore open one of the cleaning towels Dr. Brakas had politely left behind, wiping her face clean and digging the edge of a fingernail against her crest, wiping sand out. Flinging the towel into the trash, she considered her options.

She did not want to head back into Nova Yekaterinburg, and not just because she wasn't sure she could control her hormones. She was also worried at the sensation she'd experienced while there, one of being followed, or stalked. That there were eyes watching her every move. Fifty years of roughing in the wild and on all manner of research sites had not left Liara soft or unaware of her surroundings. . . and something was *off* in that little human town.

At the same time, she needed fresh hygienic supplies, food, a shower, or more likely several showers. With her most recent revelation, she also needed to connect to the extranet on a highspeed link. Her access this far from any uplink meant she could still get communications, but not dense blocks of research data. She would need to look for notes and researches on Prothean military designs.

The Protheans were almost stultifyingly uniform. Every single building they had constructed met the same layout specs even when they were on worlds across the galaxy from each other. If she could link this site to others, maybe a pattern in their placement could be found, indicating at least where the threat they were defending against came from.

The scientist laid back on the cot, thinking, mind racing. Her features smoothed out, her thin lips grimacing as she yet again tried to find a way to avoid heading back into the human town for resupply. She groaned, and her hand went to her hip, pulling free a flask of drinking water, which she drained completely before letting it fall to the ground.

She was beyond tired, dehydrated really, from the never-ending heat, the cramped, dark hallways, the

need to gather all this data and process it herself. The work on organizing the data and making sense of it had to be done in bursts of activity, since she could only draw upon simplistic modeling on her personal computer.

And the argument that still rang in her head, the icy coldness of her mother during their last communication. The bizarre way she spoke, held herself, even moved. Liara worried about her mother, but was worried more that maybe nothing was wrong with *Benezia* at all, and that it was *herself* that was addled and lost after all these years in dig sites.

*How I wish I could just be like others instead of me.*

A single tear trickled down her cheek, to be lost in the damp sweat she wiped from her forehead with an angry motion.

She was frustrated, lonely, and miserable.

Never able to even think about a relationship, with most asari of her own rank shunning her as a pureblood piece of trash, and dallying with a clanless or a Clan member... again, she thought of Amalia before cursing to herself weakly. As far as aliens went, it would just be a sexual release, not finding someone to take joy in or end her crushing isolation with. She understood nothing of their cultures or even perspectives, too busy studying dead Protheans to think much of live turians, salarians, or humans.

She was unable to connect to her mother any more, which hurt. *Benezia* was too busy to deal with her silly daughter, who had thrown away a chance to serve her people to go dig in the ground. The rest of the family shunned her, except for the youngest - who had been a child when she left Thessia last - and the lesser Family, who were kind but unwilling to really reach out to her.

Liara was simply too shy, clinical, and polite to make her way in a society where boldness, promiscuity, clever misdirection and flirtation with other, alien beings measured success.

*And of course, I am making things so much better by laying on a filthy cot in my own sweat, crying and feeling sorry for myself.*

Liara's lips twitched into a sad, self pitying sort of smile as she closed her eyes, needing rest, reflection, or just oblivion. Before she could obtain any of those things, the comm unit on the far side of the tent lit up with an apologetic tone.

"Incoming message, University of Serrice, Dr. T'soni." The VI chimed softly as Liara grunted.

"Realtime communication requested."

Liara sighed, staggering to her feet and walking over to the unit. She triggered the commlink, hoping she didn't look like a wreck but too tired to truly care.

The static-glitched image of a stern, older asari filled the screen.

Liara's only facial markings were those of human eyebrows above each eye, something she did to show her solidarity with *Benezia* when she'd gone of to be the first asari ambassador to humanity. Doctor Sanaris, on the other hand, had the marks of a commando etched deeply into her cerulean skin. Eyes narrow and more black than blue regarded the tired, frail form of Dr. T'soni, before the cruel mouth smirked. "Ah, Dr. T'soni. You look well rested. I presume everything is going well with your, ah, excursion?"

Liara grit her teeth but managed to reply politely. "Yes, Dr. Sanaris, it is. I believe this facility to be a military installation, after review of the floor plan and the power systems. It's possible the surface ruins that once linked her were some sort of maintenance facility, or some form of defensive grid."

The older asari 's smirk did not waver. "Yes, well, I'm sure that with a more extended research period, not to mention more professional assessment, we can conclude what the facility was *actually* used for. That is beside the point. I've just been notified that, unfortunately, ExoGeni has stepped up their acquisition schedule. We're not sure why, but they've made the decision to actually move resources from another site to Therum to begin work there. We'll be sending a freighter your way in a week, ExoGeni teams will be onsite shortly thereafter."

Liara's face crumbled in defeat. "But... Dr. Maleas..."

The smirk turned into a cruel grin. "Dr. Maleas of course did what he could. But he of course must also think of the larger picture, don't you think? As we travel to the Citadel, and prepare to move on this human Prothean find, we were able to have a very nice conversation and discuss many matters where the combined Serrice/Althara team could benefit from a closer relationship. With ExoGeni and in ... other ways."

Liara did not even look up at the screen. "I see. And you have, no doubt, already picked out what team members would participate in such an effort."

Dr. Sanaris only smiled wider. "Yes, well, as you know such things are done by seniority. I'm sure you can find something to occupy your time for a few more days until the freighter arrives. Exogeni made it *quite* clear they will attend to the site themselves, no need for you to clutter the place up. "

Sanaris drew away from the comm-link unit, and Liara glimpsed what must be her quarters aboard whatever ship they were on, and a slender form laying on some kind of bed just barely visible over her shoulder, the distinct shape of a salarian male. The double-bent horn on the right side was clearly that of Dr. Maleas.

Liara swallowed, a flush creeping into her cheeks even as a chill went down her spine.

She had known Sanaris hated her, of course. Sanaris had brought Liara along hoping to form a relationship with the younger asari. Sanaris herself had been adopted from the clanless into a Lesser House, but her advancement had stalled. Like most clanless she hated purebloods, but she'd clearly hoped Liara would simply be so thankful for her intervention that she'd link with her. A relationship with a member of the Thirty would boost Sanaris' cachet immensely.

Liara, of course, had not done so. She didn't even realize that was what Sanaris wanted until Amalia had clued her in, and in the aftermath of what had gone wrong with Amalia she'd withdrawn from everyone. Sanaris had taken this as a snub, and her anger and frustration overrode the usual deference of the clanless towards the Thirty.

It really didn't help that Liara had innocently, unintentionally found an error in Sanaris's research, showing her up in front of several of her peers. But she didn't think the woman would go to the lengths of seducing the salarian project lead to sabotage her in this fashion.

Clearly, she was wrong.

Liara trembled for a moment, before her frustration got the best of her. She smiled, her voice turning patronizing, like she had heard her mother's voice do many times.

"I should not be surprised, Dr. Sanaris. I am very glad that you were able to manage to sell yourself for the appropriate price. I figure that the head of Prothean studies feeling threatened by a little girl to the point she has to whore herself out to a second-rate salarian researcher merely to get off one final, bitchy little jab is something of a complement, actually."

Liara's voice dropped lower, to a vicious pitch. "I will make sure I am gone by the time ExoGeni arrives, doctor. No worries. I just wonder how Maleas will react once he realizes he has made an enemy

of the daughter of one of the most powerful of the Thirty, merely to sleep with jumped up street trash."

Liara cut the connection even as she heard the other woman's enraged shriek.

Why commoners who had managed to climb the ranks of status in the asari culture felt so put out whenever reminded of their actual origins always left Liara confused, but no matter.

*Putting that bitch in her place felt good.*

Still, that left her a week to pack up her studies and equipment and prepare to move out again, and with no backing and no grants she was back to square one again for the fifth time in her life. She would have to limp home to Thessia once more, hoping against hope someone else would seek out for a project, and try to endure the cruel neglect of her relatives.

*Oh, it would be so much simpler if the heroic and dashing Justicar could ride in and save me from...from...*

Liara looked down at her hands, the delicate looking fingers calloused, stained with dirt, and capped with broken fingernails. "Save me from myself, I suppose."

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## Chapter 5: Prologue 5 : Benezia

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*A/N: Remastered 10-22-14.*

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"Ethics. A stupid framework set upon us like hungry vakars, as if issues like 'right' and 'wrong' have any meaning when the lives of billions are at stake. A pile of arrogant idiocy parading as a necessity, when instead it is a chain, a leash, a wall between what makes us great and what makes us gods."

Saren Arterius sat up from the bed they shared, the silvery-white plating of his skin shining dimly, his cybernetic arm sunk like some feasting leech upon his left side. Only wounds, scars, and marks littered his form, the visible weight of years of selfless service to the betterment of all.

She smiled faintly as she got up herself, wincing a little from where their lovemaking had grown too aggressive. It would heal. Her mind was more concerned with the darkening turn of her lover's mind in the aftermath of their bonding.

She loved listening to him talk, his voice was grating and harsh, yet somehow soothing to her ears, and her soul. But recently he had become erratic.

She rose, naked, and walked over to where he stood, trailing her fingers against his back. "A curious statement to utter just after joining, beloved. Why do you speak of ethics?"

Benezia gave a tiny thrill of pleasure as Saren turned to her and trailed a single talon against her cheek. The contact was one of tenderness, yet also reminder of the sheer power he possessed. The unnatural lines of the ship – *the god machine, the gate to immortality*, her mind whimpered – all of these seemed to focus on him, and every action he took had a magnified effect. A kiss became overwhelming, a caress erotic, a frown reason for sorrow.

The talon reversed direction, tracing a fine line down her neck. "All things worth fighting for must be taken, never just expected. This should be evident to a being of your wise years and power, Benezia." Saren's voice gentled, ever so slightly. "It came to me as I realized that you suffer simply to keep me sane. You endure pain and uncertainty to follow in my path ... even when you are uncertain. But your uncertainty - your worry - the concern I felt in our bond...this comes from the unethical actions we

take."

He exhaled, slowly touching his forehead to hers. "I cannot do this without you. And you cannot afford to wonder of the cost of what we are attempting."

Benezia swallowed, not moving. She'd not realized her bond had become so sloppy that her background worries would seep across. She should have been focusing on making sure his pleasure - or at least her own - was the focal point of the bond, not her increasingly disjointed thoughts.

But she had to ask, given that he had spoken. "And when one grows uncertain, beloved? When one asks if there could not be some other path to reach the same goals, one that does not require the slaughter of hundreds of thousands?"

Saren dropped his hand, his mandibles clicking against his jaw. "One remembers the price of doing nothing. All things have a cost." He turned away, and she sighed.

Benezia's eyes followed the turian as he strode towards the door leading from the room they used as a place of sleep and rest, to the bizarre and vast cathedral-like space that served as the bridge.

After a moment, she followed, still naked. No one else was aboard mighty Nazara, after all, and the god-being would hardly care if they were clothed or not.

She glanced around the bridge as she entered, finding Saren already at his seat, the odd chair at the center of the bridge of Sovereign, gazing at the incredible sensor displays of the mighty god-ship. As usual, the jarring shapes and slightly wrong angles left him looking distorted, but his vitality, his *force*, was undimmed, even in the dark nightmare of this room.

Naked, his body seemed a war-torn shrine to duty, to sacrifice, and to unwilling pain. Benezia had always wondered where he had been so grievously wounded, but the Spectre never spoke of this, only a quiver of mandibles showing his rage at the question.

She shook herself free of her own self-deliberation and stepped forward, each motion rich with elegance and grace. A thousand years of leadership and drawing the eyes made her motion natural, not feigned, but it seemed harder now. As if her mind was a splintered thing, scrabbling around, appropriating any logic, no matter how twisted, to justify her actions. Her hand touched his shoulder, gently, not forcefully but inquisitively. Saren glanced at it, and only nodded, the silent question between them unasked.

"I know what you are feeling, Benezia. Do not berate yourself. It is no lapse. Doubt is a natural reaction, but one we must simply put behind us. As you are always telling me, waves already upon the shore are no more, yes?"

She smiled, always touched when he would recall her wisdom from happier times. "It is the nature of our bond, beloved. For my mind to have wandered is not something I should have done. It is natural for it to have upset you."

The turian shrugged, but was careful not to dislodge her hand. "There is little natural about me any longer. I do not need comfort, merely knowing that I am not alone in this." He shook his head. "Enough of this. We must focus. What have we heard from Eden Prime?"

The matriarch swallowed again, throat tight as if not wanting to say the words. "Cerberus agents have sent word to Ylana through Eylana. The humans on the world have not just found ruins, but a *working* beacon. It may have the information we need. It seems to be intact, but the humans are still extracting it. Given the unfamiliarity humans have with safely accessing a Beacon, it will be weeks before they are ready to operate it themselves."

Saren smiled. "Then we have time."

She sighed. "No. Cerberus also told us that the Alliance has already notified the Council. Not only are they putting together asari-lead science teams, but they have decided to send in a Spectre to oversee the operation."

She closed her eyes. "They are sending Nihlus."

Saren's eyes closed in agony, fist clenched, and he was silent for long moments before whispering. "...all things have a cost."

Benezia could only shake her head, but even that motion was stilled, the voices in her skull freezing the muscles. She knew that once Saren's cabal bondmate had died, the only other turian he really connected with was Nihlus, his protege and student. Saren had trained the younger turian in every method of combat and investigation he knew, resulting in Nihlus being the youngest turian Spectre in history.

If he was on Eden Prime, he would die with the rest. She opened her mouth to try and speak, but the voices silenced her.

Saren did not notice her action. "Little Nihlus, all grown up and a Spectre." The voice was almost gentle, flanging tones of happier times filling the small room for a moment. "The fools told me he was only a hatchling, too weak to be Blackwatch, much less Deathwatch. And look how far he has come."

She finally found her voice. "He is your friend, Saren."

Saren nodded. "The only one I have, I suppose, aside from you. We turians are not meant to operate alone. Without Cereta, or the others of my old cabal..."

His voice trailed off, speculative, almost pleading. It hurt her to even hear that note in his voice.

Benezia shuddered again at the tearing emotion she felt across the bond, pressing herself against him. "You are not alone, Saren, not while I draw breath."

Saren only gave her a smile, the gleam of needle sharp fangs drawing away from the look in his eyes.

"We are utterly alone, Benezia. "

He turned to her, tracing his hand down her flank, sighing at the the single seeping clawmark and the faint bruising, testament to their violent sexual release not twenty minutes ago. "We can cling together in the darkness, but we both know the truth. We are a breath away from not being the people we are."

Benezia's voice was softer. "I think if we were crazy, or mere thralls, such organic urges would be suppressed." She turned away, and walked over to the side of the bridge area, opening a small backpack of supplies. She picked up a medigel infused bandage, which she applied to her bleeding hip, and then turned back to face him, her chin lifted, her body still proud and supple.

Saren admired her for a long moment, then shook his head. "I should feel something more. I am going to murder my best friend. The loss of monkey lives, an annoyance - but I am going to have to *kill* Nihlus if he gets in my way. There is something wrong with me. With us."

Benezia shook her head, as she finished her field dressing. She stepped back into the living area, swiftly reached for a black silk robe, and returned, slipping it over her limbs to ward off the sudden chill in the air.

Her voice remained soft. "It is hard to feel anything, anymore. And we have no time to reflect. We must survive, and if that costs us friends and loved ones... then we will have time to mourn later. Better that a million die than billions, or billions rather than *everything*."

Saren exhaled, and with a growl sunk his face into his hands. "And if one day I must sacrifice you, or you me? I cannot ..."

She watched him struggle, knowing the baleful force of Nazara was strongest here, warping their very minds. She placed her hand against his tortured fringe, willing her love for him across their bond. "I will never sacrifice you willingly, my beloved. And if the time comes when you must sacrifice me, I will love you still. We are not doing this for power. Or for our own good. But to safeguard our species."

She sighed, and her words must have pleased Nazara, as the awful pounding against her mind lessened. "There is nothing saying that Nihlus will die at your hand. Perhaps he will be killed by the geth soldiers, or in the wrong part of the area. I have faith in you." She gently wrapped her hands around his wrists - even they were scarred.

There were times she was glad so many would die, for what Saren had suffered for the sake of the galaxy already. She shook that thought off and smiled. "Come back to our bed. There is nothing you can complete in this ugly chair but brooding until we get to Eden Prime."

Saren looked up at her, mandibles flickering with subdued but clear amusement. "Are you serious? I think you've gotten clawed up enough for one night, beloved. Besides, not all of me is cybernetic. Your entertainments will have to wait for me to recover."

She burst out laughing, something she had not done in a very long time, and then shook her head. "I actually merely meant to sleep, Saren. And the cut is nothing." She paused. "And if joining with you keeps you able to function and with me, a thousand cuts and bruises are of no moment. I am not here to prove anything to anyone. I am here because you *need* me here. "

Saren grimaced, gently taking her hand in his. "And the cost? Not just to your body, but your mind, your spirit?"

Benezia only looked at him. "We have both paid that already. There is no stopping now. We have to finish together what we began together."

Saren smiled, rising from the chair, and headed back into their shared room. She followed, watching in silence, in companionship, in slightly empty and awkward spacing, as he dressed himself in his armor.

A part of Benezia wanted to curl up and cry at the thought of him having to kill the young turian he looked on like a son, just to accomplish their goals.

A part wanted to sooth Saren, to take the pain away, to join with him until they were lost in each others souls and the pain a mere memory.

A part of her just wanted to complete the task, to feel the approval of the god-machine, the ship. To know it found her worthy.

She placed a hand to her head, feeling her thoughts crawling in her skull, slithering about like fattened sha-snakes in Thessia's oceans, feasting on the corpses of the drowned and the doomed.

Saren, across the room, just sighed as he attached his last pieces of armor, stopping at the gauntlet, one inscribed with turian marks of honor.

"Nihlus gave me this, when he was inducted into the Deathwatch. I shouldn't wear it if I am forced to kill him."

Benezia said nothing, only watching, and suddenly Saren raged, angry, defiant. "No. I will convince him. Make him see. Let him see what we have to do to defend the galaxy. A few dead humans are not even a cost, they should be honored to sacrifice themselves for the greater good. Nihlus will see. He will understand."

Benezia only nodded, even as Saren's omni-tool flared orange with an incoming message. He tapped at it, frowning. "Finally. The geth, for all their vaunted skill at hacking, are remarkably slow when it

comes to locating someone."

Benezia frowned slightly. "Who have they located?"

Saren grunted, looking up at her with a flat expression in his eyes. "Liara. They finally found her, some human world with a Prothean dig site called Therum. How convenient. We can examine the site and pick her up at the same time. After we deal with the Beacon I'll send a team to recover her. "

Benezia's frown became a scowl. "Your geth? Those krogan thugs? They'll kill her!"

Saren shook his head, albeit slowly. "They will obey my orders. We can't go ourselves, after all. The frigate has to be docked at Noveria the entire time for our ruse to work, and we ourselves must go to Noveria as soon as the capture of the Beacon is complete, to establish a firm alibi. Tying up loose ends must wait."

Benezia sighed. "Liara is not merely a loose end. For all her foolishness about her chosen discipline, she is exactly the expert we need to find this fabled location of the Conduit."

Saren raised his hands. "I've given them very clear and careful instructions. I'm not using the Ganar clan for this, but an independent krogan mercenary. He's dependable and always follows orders. They'll capture and secure her, and once any blow-back from Eden Prime has been handled, we'll pick up Liara and make our next move. "

Benezia wanted to scream, but instead only nodded.

For some reason what seemed dangerous a moment ago now seemed like a calm, well rationalized plan. After all, with what would no doubt be unleashed very soon, death could be racing at them all. What if the ruse to keep their involvement a secret failed, if the assault failed? What if Cerberus double crossed them - or if the Council somehow figured it all out?

Even the might of Nazara could not win against the united galaxy. Better, perhaps, to let Liara stay put on this Therum place, and to let Saren's forces take her and keep her safe. If all was good, she could always explain things to Liara, who would be overjoyed that her passion would be of use to her mother, no doubt.

And if things went horribly wrong, then Liara would not be dragged down with Benezia. With a sigh she nodded again, even though she worried.

Saren, for his part, touched her shoulder carefully. "Do not worry, Benezia. Eden Prime will not take long. I look forward to meeting Liara, and if - when - I convince Nihlus to join us, the boy could use companionship of his own."

Benezia laughed again.

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## Chapter 6: Chapter 1: Mikhailovich

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*A/n: Remastered 10-22-14.*

*This begins the actual start of ME 1.*

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### **THE SECOND ARC : This is an *outrage!***

*I'd just like to point out that while I doubted Shepard at first, I at least had enough sense to change my mind when I saw her do what no one else could. A lesson few seem to be able to comprehend, but one*

*that has saved me, I suspect, from a broken jaw at her hands.'*  
- Councilor Donnel Udina, *"Maybe Later" is Never the Right Answer'*

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"AT-TEN-SHUN!"

Forty-five sets of black combat boots crashed together. Forty-five backs went ramrod straight.

Arcturus Station was quiet, the view of the great beyond marred by the glittering silver crescent hanging motionless outside the docking arms. A complicated crane and gantry system nestled against the hull, poised, waiting. The ship was devoid of a name, waiting for its first crew to come aboard and take her into space, danger, and destiny.

Forty-five men and women stood in silent even ranks on the dockside, stoic and prepared. Silent. Motionless.

"Present arms!"

The ten-man marine squad crashed to a new stance, shipping the Avenger battle rifles in salute as the ship's officers approached, then neatly pivoted to face the crew.

Rear Admiral Chan Mikhailovich was not particularly happy right now. Christening a new ship for his flotilla was usually a happy moment, another battle won with those money-grubbing corp-kissers that passed for an appropriations board in the Alliance, or the idiots at BuShips.

But the amount spent on this staggeringly useless trinket that passed as a frigate was so mind boggling that it made him almost want to scream in frustration.

And he wasn't even going to get to command it. Intolerable.

*And yet, appearances must be maintained. It isn't the crew's fault their superiors have their heads in their asses.*

The crew and their officers stood, sharp and ready looking. Twelve engineers, every one of them both battle tested and college graduates, commanded by Lieutenant Greg Adams. Sharp and skilled, he'd been the assistant engineer on the Tokyo. Four years past when he could have made Lieutenant Commander, simply because he had pissed off the wrong Senator by eloping with the man's daughter. A shame. His features were even, almost bland, with flat brown hair and a dour, no-nonsense face.

Operations and Navigation, lead by Lieutenant Commander Charles Pressly. A staid, quiet, dependable figure. Career Navy man, but had done a few years groundside. Brilliant navigator, good with battle ops. His eighteen man department was outstanding, all trained operators and most of them with fire control experience. His tired features and balding hairline were countered by his ramrod straight posture and broad shoulders. The brown eyes were alert, ready, almost excited. A man still passionate about his job.

*Good.*

The pilot, Flight Lieutenant Jeff Moreau. Complete and total asshole. Best damned pilot in the fleet, maybe in history. Test and simulator scores so high they were beyond theoretical. Piloted his way out of a class six solar storm without even scratching the paint on the *Calais*. Egomaniacal asshat, but tough little bastard. Even though the agony must be killing him, the kid was standing at attention without his crutches. The rear admiral gave the man a nod of respect, and the kid stood tall even more.

*Crew like this given over to the fucking Council for who knows how long, for a goddamned joyride to pickup an interactive lollipop, just to hand it over to more aliens. I am going to skin Udina alive for*

*this. Make a fucking rug out of his stupid, hanar kissing ass.*

The marine crew shipped their arms as Captain Anderson approached, uniform perfect, his dark face set in a gentle smile.

There was a hero in and of himself. One of the first N7 commanders ever, right up there with names like Ahern and Kyle. Brilliant career, service with the turians, even saving the life of the Primarch's son. A long and storied history of excellence. The fact that he was in charge of this mission must have been a bitter pill for the man to swallow.

Mikhailovich knew the rumors, that Anderson had been a Spectre candidate and failed. Mikhailovich also knew David hadn't ever failed at a single thing he put his mind to. He smelled politics, the rancid scent of scurrying slime-molds in good suits sucking up to things with three fingers and no sense of smell.

He hated politics.

Anderson at least looked good, sharp, ready to lead. Behind him were the rest of the command staff. The ship's doctor, Major Karin Chakwas, was unknown to him but highly recommended. The marine staff lieutenant, Kaiden Alenko. Biotic sentinel, good leadership skills, quiet, but dedicated. The kid looked a little nervous, but his eyes were still bright with excitement.

And finally the centerpiece. The Butcher herself, all lithe power and arrogance as she sauntered along behind Anderson like a chained panther, or a contained wildfire. Icy eyes flickering over the crew, looking for weakness, sloppy postures, anything out of place, and finding nothing, a tiny cold little smile appearing.

The officers came to attention, saluting, and Mikhailovich returned it. "Captain Anderson, I present to ships company this twenty-second day in the year of our Lord, 2183...the Systems Alliance Space Vessel ... Normandy."

As he said the name, an auto-launcher smashed a capsule of champagne out of the station, to shatter into a spray of vapor against the hull. At the same moment the paint gantry moved, the arms spraying out the nano-agent laced hull agents, and the name scrolled along the silvery hull in bold, black letters."

Anderson saluted, and turned to the ship's station engineer, a commander who was now done with the ship. "Sir, I relieve you."

The station commander returned the salute. "Sir, I stand relieved. The Normandy is ashore. By order of the Systems Alliance Admiralty, command is transferred to Fifth Fleet Command, Sixty-Third Scout Flotilla. Captain David Anderson has the deck and the conn. VI, log the time."

A bosun's whistle rang out, and the master at arms fell into parade rest. "Puhrade...REST".

The crew matched his motion with machine like quality, and Mikhailovich sighed before speaking.

"Sailors, marines, ... brothers and sisters. You were originally slated to join my flotilla, the 63rd scout, and perform anti-pirate operations in the Skyllian Verge. These orders have been superseded, however. Arcturus Command has recently installed prototype stealth technology into the Normandy, making her one of the most effective, lethal insertion vessels we have. This technology is a human invention, but the Normandy is a joint turian-human effort."

No one made a noise, but some of the faces tightened in discomfort.

*Good, he thought. Ship is a piece of tin but the crew is solid.*

"In order to facilitate your mission, you will conduct shakedown operations beginning immediately. Captain Anderson is your new commanding officer. Commander Shepard is your new executive officer.

Further orders will be transmitted once on station. This is not a normal shakedown cruise, but I have faith that you will accomplish your tasks with utmost proficiency, and demonstrate the honor, commitment, and courage the Alliance Navy is known for."

"Make me proud, Normandy." The admiral saluted, and the crew came to attention.

"FALL OUT and board by unit and division!"

The crew broke up, heading into the ship in segments, officers leading. Anderson and Shepard traded a single glance and Anderson raised an eyebrow, before nodding towards the direction of the ship. Shepard nodded and headed in, her stride cool and almost leisurely.

Mikhailovich frowned. It was clear Shepard and Anderson knew each other well, if just by a few motions they could understand each other. "Captain. A moment, if you will."

"Of course, sir." Captain Anderson's expression was neutral as he walked beside the rear admiral, as the last of the crew faded into the ship. "You seem familiar with Commander Shepard. I can only presume you are equally familiar with her record?"

Anderson nodded. "I worked with her a number of times, sir, and gave her the nod and recommendation for N7 training. "

Mikhailovich didn't know that. "I find that hard to understand. David, you've always prided yourself doing it by the book, doing what's right, figuring out a way to play the peacemaker as well as the soldier. I don't like aliens and I don't want anything to do with 'em, and yet you manage to work with them without compromising humanity. I've always admired that about you."

"Thank you, sir."

Mikhailovich held up a thick finger, absently noting as he did so that he needed to clean his fingernails. "But that woman is nothing like you, and nothing like what you train your people to be."

Anderson was silent for long seconds before speaking. "She has gone through things that would leave most people broken or dead. Mentally and physically. She will always do the actions that are best for the greater good, sir. She will always achieve her objective. She has no pity, no mercy, no weakness, that is true. "

Anderson exhaled. "And she has never shied away from casualties, either. But she has always taken ownership of every one of her actions. "

Memories flashed across Anderson's mind...

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*"Hit me."*

*The sobbing mother and widow looked up at the glacial features of the marine, and then at Anderson in confusion. "Hit you?! I want to KILL YOU! You got John killed, you got his unit killed, for what? To get revenge on some slavers? To make yourself fucking look good?! So you could get a medal!"*

*Shepard stood there, unblinking, then unclipped her pistol. Ignoring Anderson's indrawn breath, she took off the safety and handed it to the wife of her former XO, dead with so many others on Torfan.*

*"Then kill me, Mrs. Sanders. Make this a relief for both of us."*

*The woman stared at the pistol in her hand, then back up at Shepard. "...what the hell is wrong with you?"*

*Shepard said nothing for a moment.*

*"I'm broken somehow. I don't know how. Or why. I can't even be sorry about what happened to your husband, or say I wouldn't do it again. We completed the mission. A lot of people died so that more could live."*

*A pause. Muscles in her jaw flexing. "But some part of me knows what I do is evil. That I'm evil."*

*Those cold, blue eyes swiveled down to stare at Sanders' widow, who flinched, even though she had the gun now. "And they keep sending me out. They keep giving me men. Boys. Fools. They keep giving me tasks to complete that can't be done and saying to do them. And I do. And people die. And I can't even feel it."*

*Jessica Sanders had trembled, and Anderson didn't think she knew why. Shepard ignored it.*

*"So please. Take the pistol, and kill me. End it. End it for me, for you. End it before they make me do something worse."*

*There was no fear in the eyes, no weariness. Just blank emptiness.*

*Sanders swallowed. "They said you tried to save them." She takes in the woman, the heavy bandages, the cast, the bruises. "That you killed them all, all the batarians, even the ones who surrendered."*

*Shepard nods. "I did. I expect I'll be court-martialed, dishonorably discharged. Broken and thrown out. That would also be good."*

*And suddenly Sanders snapped, flinging the pistol aside and stepping closer. "So that John died for NOTHING? So he drew those slavers off for nothing!"*

*Shepard blinked, and the woman spat. "I can't feel fucking sorry for you, you're a goddamned monster. I feel sorry for everyone you have gotten killed in your career. I feel sorry for those you are in command of. But I'll never feel sorry for you."*

*Sanders stepped back. "I hope it hurts to keep on living. I hope they DO give you a fucking medal and make you wear it the rest of your life. I hope it never, ever ends, because it won't for us. "*

*Shepard said nothing, eyes still. Then she slowly bent over and picked up the pistol, slipping it at her waist. "I'm sorry for your loss, Mrs. Sanders. I'll leave you to your grief."*

*She pivoted smoothly on one heel despite her injuries, walking without hesitancy or seeming pain. Anderson knew that, in her head, she still heard the widow shrieking, one of thousands now, all hating her, all despising her. All he could do was follow.*

---

Anderson shook his head. "Chan, you can't understand that woman. But she's a good person inside. It just doesn't get much chance to show. Trust me on this."

Mikhailovich looked across at the ship, exhaling.

"No choice *but* to trust you. The people who pushed this along are way beyond my range of influence, and technically she's out of my chain of command now, son. If you need me to back you and her up, though, just let me know."

The rear admiral handed the captain a datapad. "Prior to transit to Eden Prime you are to report to Sesatven III and pick up a turian Spectre, one Nihlus Kryik. You will pick him up from his shuttle, he's been aboard the Alliance repair docks there for the past six hours. He will be observing and qualifying Commander Shepard during this process. The ship is fitted with a turian-sized sleeper pod, dextro rations, and some turian blood-plasma and medical crap in the medbay. Try not to get him killed."

Anderson nodded. "I have some good history with Nihlus, we worked together in REACHBACK. We

should get along just fine, and he's likely to be a lot more open minded than Saren was." He grimaced at the name, then squared his shoulder. "I'll keep you in the loop, sir."

Mikhailovich snorted. "Be the first time I was in the loop on some shit like this, so don't stress over it too much. Get that overpriced tin heap outta my docks."

The rear admiral watched as the ship sealed, and undocked. He watched as it transited out from Arcturus, and continued to watch until it vanished into that distant night sky, before sighing and turning away, back towards his office, and paperwork, and mediocrity, and struggling against bureaucratic fucks.

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*TERMS:*

*BuShips: Alliance Bureau of Ship Standards - SA organization that develops all ship plans and designs*

*Deck and Conn: who is in command of the deck and the conning system, or the CO.*

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## **Chapter 7: Chapter 2 : Departure**

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*A/N: Remastered 10-23-14. Changes include tenses, Shepard and Anderson's conversation, and background references.*

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"Hitting the relay in 3...2...1..."

The *Normandy* was alive with rivulets of static discharge as it stormed out of the mass corridor generated by the awesome relay next to it, arriving in a blue-shifted burst of light and heat, outlined against the stark energies of the ancient FTL device. Immediately, the ship's very shape began to reconfigure, the outboard engines sliding down and back along hydraulic pylons, heat sink exchanges venting to space.

The ship skimmed a bit across the endless expanse of space, approaching the distant bulk of the station to the starboard side, as inside the cockpit Flight Lieutenant Jeff Moreau finished his checklist.

"1900k drift, sir."

Anderson nodded. "Good, Joker. There should be an incoming turian shuttle, go ahead and open the hangar bay door once the bay is depressurized."

Joker tapped a few controls on the gold-gleaming haptic interface, the holographic keyboard shunting aside with a few touches to reveal the egress control panel.

Anderson pulled down the IMC mike and spoke quietly. "Now hear this. Now hear this. All hands, stand clear the hangar bay for decompression and entry. I repeat, all hands stand clear the hanger bay for decompression and entry."

Joker waited until the cargo bay showed sealed and empty of life before triggering another set of controls. "Opening doors, sir."

Anderson nodded again, eyes on the harsh lines of the triangular shuttle now visible on the forward bow, then glancing back. "Shepard?"

She stood behind him, having just come up from the CIC and answered quietly, voice pitched low and

calm. "Yes, captain?"

Anderson inclined his head towards the back of the ship. "Meet our guest with a few marines, if you don't mind, and escort him to the communications room. He should be alone. Ensure that."

Shepard saluted and walked down the comm/ops corridor towards the CIC. Around her, the four fire control officers each watched over a panel comprised of one part dirty electronic tricks, one part anti-missile defense, one part active scanning, and one part gunnery station for GARDIAN lasers. Taking three steps down into the CIC, she observed Pressly taking nav readings and a handful of electronics techs monitoring the heat bleed from the hull.

She stepped past the marine CIC sentry, who saluted, and down the shallow stairwell, eyes narrowed, deep in thought.

She had worked with turians three times before in her past, mostly on combined service patrols. From what she knew and remembered, they were not complicated people. Honor and duty were their primary concerns, with a focus on communal benefit and duty to the Turian Hierarchy before personal needs. All in all, good fighters and tactical planners but sometimes arrogant.

The ugly wounds of the First Contact War would, of course, make things more difficult for some older humans, but Nihlus had taken no role in that conflict. Anderson had, and from what she knew he actually knew the turian and had spoken of him in a complimentary tone. That's how she had also learned Nihlus was a Spectre.

A turian Spectre would be either what turians believed in taken to extremes and amplified, or completely different than anything expected. That didn't really help her figure out why he was on board.

She entered the elevator shaft, slapping the controls for the hangar deck, and brushed a piece of lint from her uniform.

*Either way, he's likely to be looking for something. I really wish Anderson would tell me what's going on, this isn't a damned shakedown run, and the crew is going to freak when they realize we're loading on a damned Spectre.*

She never liked the idea of Spectres, flashy Council super-agents who were above the law. It was one thing to assign trash to get the job done. After all, if you have to use someone on a throwaway job, it might as well be someone you want to *throw away*. It was another to assign a bona fide hero to a position guaranteed to put him or her in a bad place.

Shepard figured whatever it was about, it was nothing good. The Council did not send out Spectre agents unless the situation was dire and needed the personal attention of someone who could violate Citadel Law if needed. The combination of that and being headed to a quiet colony like Eden Prime was downright disturbing.

So far, the only *good* thing about this shakedown run was the lack of Commissars on board.

The elevator doors opened as the hanger re-pressurized, and six marines marched sharply out of engineering.

In sotto voice, she murmured, "Good timing, gentlemen", and one of the marines grinned as they all snapped to perfect attention directly behind her, just as the shuttle door opened.

For a turian, Nihlus Kryik was a big guy.

Compared to humans, he was gigantic.

Standing well over seven feet tall, his already barrel chest amplified by his Spectre battle armor in

silver and black, the turian stepped down from the shuttle alone, and with a motion of joints that seemed subtly wrong, came to his full height, the half-cloak hanging from his right side embroidered with the winged shield of the Spectre agency.

He was armed to the teeth and beyond – a modified Revenant light machine gun hung across his back, while two Tornado-class shotguns, each one with a shortened, widened mass chamber, hung from oversized holsters on a wide armored belt festooned with grenades. Most worryingly of all, a massive block of metal with a sniper scope peeked over one shoulder, a Widow anti-material rifle, the much bigger cousin to the Thunderbolt rifle she herself used.

*That isn't a gun. That's a fucking anti-aircraft cannon.*

Shepard only minutely shook her head and stepped forward. "Spectre Nihlus? Commander Shepard, XO, SSV Normandy. Captain Anderson is waiting to brief you in our communication room."

The turian eyed her curiously. His eyes were a shade of green, she noted absently, His skin was brown, but his plating was almost black, highlighted with bright metallic white tattoos. His stance was calm, casual, and almost predatory. It looked familiar somehow, to Shepard, but she couldn't place from where.

His voice was a soft growl, harmonic undertones giving it an almost dirge-like cast. "Of course, Commander. Lead the way."

Human and turian left the shuttle bay as the marine escort filed out, the bay preparing to vent to allow the shuttle to leave.

The elevator moved up, slowly, the two warriors saying nothing as it finally slid open on the crew deck.

"This is our main crew deck, the comm room is on the CIC level." Shepard's voice was even, but the turian barely glanced around before refocusing his gaze on Shepard, green eyes intense.

They walked up the stairs, the doors to the CIC sliding open as the sentry crashed to attention. Saluting, Shepard walked past the galaxy map towards the short corridor leading the comms room. The ship shuddered as the hanger bay disgorged the turian fighter/shuttle Nihlus had arrived on.

"Right this way, sir."

The turian entered, the comms room the usual dull, grey shade. Captain Anderson stood in the middle of the circular room, talking to a hologram on the vidscreen.

"Of course, Admiral. En route now, Normandy out."

The link disconnected and Anderson turned around to face the two. "Nihlus, welcome aboard the Normandy. It's good to see you again. Your trip went well?"

Nihlus paused, then nodded, a very human gesture. "Of course, Anderson. It is also good to see you, it has been many years since you worked with the Deathwatch. My trip into human space was boring, but agreeable. Your facilities on the base here were quite impressive, they even got me a meal of surprising quality."

Anderson nodded, gesturing to seats, but no one sat. Shepard only folded her arms, assuming she'd be dismissed while the captain and the Spectre talked. Instead, Anderson merely continued.

"Very good. We made sure to prepare for your arrival and stay. The Arcturus mess decks loaded up dextro supplies for us, and the Hierarchy sent us a menu, now we'll see if we can cook it. One of our sleeper pods has been reconfigured for turian physiology and size as well. And feel free to use the terminal here, in the comm room, for any secure connections that might be needed. Our doctor was trained in turian physiology and medicine, if you have any medical issues that may arise."

The Spectre nodded again. "Very good. I presume Commander Shepard will be staying for the inbriefing, given the purpose of this entire trip?"

Shepard turned from Nihlus to Anderson. "Sir?"

Anderson sighed and sat, gesturing for the other two to do so as well.

This time they took the hint, sitting down, facing each other.

"Shepard, your unit - well, part of your unit, lead by you - conducted a raid on Tor Shan about two months ago, ending with you personally killing a pirate named Grathias, a turian extremist. This person was responsible for the deaths of several very important figures to Citadel governance, including the asari Councilor Tevos' mother. Even the Spectre Corps had not been able to track him down very well, and the one who did wasn't able to kill him. Given the nature of this person's crimes against the asari and the Council in general, they were very grateful."

Shepard paused. "I am glad the Alliance was of service to the Council, of course, but that doesn't explain why a Spectre is on board, sir."

Anderson's smile grew almost bitter. "I'm getting there."

He sighed. "Humanity has been arguing for a while now that we need a bigger role in the Council, in determining the path humanity takes. We've been colonizing like mad in the Verge and the Traverse, but the ugly truth was that we don't have the military power to protect all these colonies. Without a voice on the Council, the Alliance spends too much time catering to mega-corps and their interests, and the High Lords of Sol feel that if we continue down this road, we'll be facing trouble in the next ten years. The first step to proving to the galaxy that the Alliance can handle itself was to let them see our best and brightest."

Shepard grimaced. "So, where is Captain Branson?"

She felt her voice go a little bitter. The so-called "Hero of Elysium" was a glory-seeking jackass, arrogant and smug, but he was also the golden boy of humanity, peering out from every recruiting poster and holo vid. She'd met him once, and it was only by the greatest of efforts at self-control that she had stopped herself from punching him in the mouth.

Anderson didn't answer that, instead continuing. "The Alliance, and the Citadel Council, have agreed that it's time Humanity had a Spectre. As such, names were put forward for consideration. At the same time, a mission of critical importance that needed this of oversight is just now coming up, very time-sensitive and somewhat dangerous. The Normandy will be responding to this mission while Nihlus evaluates our Spectre candidate."

Shepard nodded. "Ah. We'll be backing Branson up while the turian here evaluates him, then?"

Nihlus shook his head, an odd note in his flanged voice. "Commander, the sole recommendation of your High Lords of Sol, Alliance Military Command, and Ambassador Udina was you."

Shepard felt herself go very, very still, and she slowly turned to face Anderson.

"Sir, I am not ... sure that was a very wise idea." *Was he fucking drunk to agree with this, or is this some kind of sick joke?*

The turian spoke again. "And after reviewing the other candidates, I have to agree with their recommendation. You are the only one of those recommended who can understand what it is like to be one of us. It is not a job for *heroes*." He spat the word out as if it disgusted him. "Or, for that matter, those concerned with anything but galactic peace. Whatever the price. Whatever the *cost*." He gave a look at Anderson, who grimaced but nodded.

Sara Shepard smoothed the front of her uniform and merely nodded. That sort of thinking did indeed seem right up her alley. She could figure out how she'd been dragged into this shit later, for now there was a mission. "And the mission we are assigned to?"

Anderson looked away. "Secure high priority pickup. A dig team on Eden Prime uncovered several Prothean ruins, including an *intact* Prothean beacon. Supposedly, it's still active. The Alliance brought the Council in on this, as we couldn't handle it alone. This could be the biggest scientific development in over fifty years, Shepard. The last time we uncovered unspoiled ruins like this-"

Shepard nodded. "Yeah, I can see that. And a Spectre on the shakedown run makes sense now. Something like this would turn into a mess if word got out. It would attract not just pirates but special interests, info-war teams, God knows what kind of interest from nutjobs like Cerberus and the Shadow Broker..."

Shepard exhaled, then refocused. This wasn't a combat mission yet, and if she did her job right maybe there wouldn't *be* any combat. "Mission parameters?"

Anderson straightened in his seat. "We're already on course for the relay to Eden Prime. Once in-system, we'll establish comms with the ground team. Nihlus will be observing you but you will be in overall command. Take a team, secure the site, and a Council archeology team lead by Dr. Sanaris of the University of Serrice and Dr. Maleas of the University of Althara will arrive to analyze it and oversee it for transport to the Citadel. En route, we'll provide security."

Anderson stood. "After that, I believe this will be the first of several missions conducted by the Normandy with Nihlus on board to assess your skillset. I'm just tagging along to provide a little bit of support, and some advice here and there. Assuming all goes well, you would be inducted into the ranks and given training within a month, heading out to Pinnacle Station for some command training and then to the Citadel."

Nihlus nodded. "From what I've read of your record and achievements, this will not be a difficult series of tasks. You have already been tested and proven, after all."

Anderson nodded back, and folded his arms. "If that's all, I believe that Nihlus here has to prepare a mission report for the Council. Shepard, my quarters, please."

He walked out, and with a glance back at the turian, Shepard followed, almost stiffly.

The trip down the stairs to Anderson's tiny stateroom was made in silence, but as soon as both were inside, Anderson gave an exhale of breath and sat down on the sectional couch in the corner of the room. His lips quirked into a smile.

"Alright, Sara, I could feel you seething just walking here. Go ahead and lay it on me."

Her eyes narrowed. "Lay it on you? How about are you out of your *ever-fucking MIND*? A Spectre, me? Really? Who the fuck thought THAT was a good idea? 'Hey, wouldn't it be funny if we made the crazy suicidal bitch with zero tact into James Bond?'"

She folded her arms. "Who put this fucking concept together?"

Anderson sighed, and leaned over to flip open a panel in the wall, withdrawing a single bottle of scotch and two plastic tumblers. He set them both down, carefully, as the ship shuddered with the thrust of FTL acceleration. "Major Kyle did, actually."

If anything Sara's gaze got even colder. "Because the guy suffering from PTSD was a good judge of character. David, you can't do this to me. This is not going to work. When I asked for a transfer to front-line space units, I wanted to work with you, not - "

Anderson cut her off, his own voice raising. "Dammit, Sara, you don't have any choices!" He sighed. "You know full well that there are lots of people in Alliance Command who don't like you. The shit you were doing under Delacor was raising a lot of questions about your stability. They said, after the little rampage on Tor Shan, that you were out of control. Delacor was furious at you taking off without permission. He was going to try to get you cat-sixed out."

She paled. Cat-six was slang for a category six discharge, which given her background would end in her execution. She gritted her teeth. "I ... what the fuck? So it's okay if Delacor has the Fifth sit on it's ass while pirates are raping and killing their way through the fucking Traverse, but I take three companies to stop a murdering turian bastard from butchering one of our colonies and I'm out of control?"

Anderson sighed. "It's more complicated than that, Sara. You used to be Rapid Reaction force. You used to lead an NCT. You were used to acting independently, smashing pirates. That kind of thing won't work with the *Lion's Roar*. The units at Mindoir are already seen as ... too bloodthirsty, and you simply up and going after pirates could have made things worse. The Commissariat wasn't happy."

He rubbed his temples. "Delacor has his supporters. You used to have von Grath and Florez on your side, and Kyle. Now the only person sticking up for you is me, and the only way to get you out of the mess was to put your name forward as a Spectre."

She folded her arms. "So I'm too reckless for the Marines, but it's okay to make me an above the law agent of mass destruction?"

Anderson poured the scotch, three fingers for each glass, then capped it, before taking one and swallowing. "No, not quite. They chose you because none of the others could do the job without messing it up. I know full well why you wanted to work with me, Sara. And I feel the same way. I don't give a shit what Command thinks, you did the right thing by going out on Tor Shan instead of waiting. The main reason the Alliance hasn't *done* anything is you made us look like heroes."

He sipped again. "But you also put in for a transfer to the RIU's. Dammit, that's nothing but suicide, Shepard, and I won't have it. Not now, not ever. You're a good soldier, the best damned soldier I ever had the pleasure to train.

She finally sat, slumping. "I'm just so fucking tired, David. Tired of everything."

He nodded. "I know it was not easy to live with Torfan. What they made you into. What happened. I know you never really got over your past." He paused. "But at the same time, Shepard, I didn't just put your name forward to get you out of trouble. *We need* you on this. It's a chance for Humanity to move forward, and we can't do it with half-measures."

He clenched his jaw. "Twenty years ago, they tapped me for this program. To be a Spectre. "

He looked up, seeing the surprise in her face, and gave a grim smile.

"Oh yes. Partnered me with a Spectre, sent me out to prove myself. But I wasn't ruthless enough. I wasn't hard enough. Paranoid enough. I trusted, and I was betrayed, and very nearly killed. And even today it haunts me."

He gazed at her firmly. "The psych profile says you hate yourself. That you want to die, but that you're just too good to do so."

Another swallow of his drink, and his voice turned sad.

"Maybe you think if you martyr yourself for a big enough reason, that all that you've done in the past will be forgiven – that if you die it will somehow make up for it. "

He looked up, eyes calm and quiet, and shook his slowly. "But it doesn't work that way, Shepard. Rather than throw your life away on dying, in some attempt to atone for being born the way you were, you can actually improve the lives, the futures, of all humanity. "

Shepard only looked at the floor. "I am not a hero. Kyle must have told you. Delacor must have told you."

Anderson pushed the glass across the table, in Shepard's direction. "I knew all I needed to know about you that day a gang banging kid threw herself into bullets to save my life. You've done bad things. But you had no one raising you, no one caring about you, and nothing good to compare to. You beat yourself up over what you did, without bothering to look at all you have accomplished since then."

She shrugged, sipping the drink, letting it burn down her throat. "Yeah, I know what I've accomplished. I've gotten a lot of good fucking Marines killed."

Anderson sighed. "No, you have always done what was needed, given what you had to work with. Torfan..."

"Don't talk about Torfan. Please." Her voice was pained.

Anderson shrugged, then shook his head. "Am I your friend, Sara?"

A small, uncomfortable silence. "I don't deserve the right to call you that after I stormed out on you after Torfan, sir."

Anderson gave a tiny smile. "Didn't ask that. And that never bothered me. Am I your friend?"

Sara looked up. "Yes. The only one I have."

She didn't tell him she saw him more like a father, or that her worse nightmare was disappointing him, having him yell at her and tell her she was worthless.

She didn't move as he stood up and put a firm hand on her shoulder.

"Then trust me, this one time. You spent your whole childhood and teenage years doing evil, because that's all you had. Parents who sold you into prostitution for drugs. A drug-addicted gang life because you were trying to survive. Murders and crimes in the name of just living one more day."

"Then I pull you out of that shit, get you clean, get you a uniform. You survive the Penal Legions, the brutality, the endless risks. You push yourself to be the best. To be so good they took you out, made you a real Marine."

He smiled faintly. "You lived up to every expectation that anyone could have had. To never fail, never quit, never give up. Perfect scores. Perfect reviews. Never drunk, never late, always leading your troops."

His hand tightened on her shoulder. "And when the brass put you in a spot where you had to survive, you did so. And you hated it. You felt like you had gone back to being that monster you were, willing to do anything to just live one more day, except now you threw yourself into every crazy assault trying to die."

Sara said nothing, but drank. Anderson let go of her shoulder, straightening.

"But I know you, Shepard. The reports say you lead your men at Torfan into a grinder, killing all the surrendering batarians. That you used your men as bait in many situations. What they never fucking mention was you were always in the front. You were always the one shot up, bloody, nearly dead. The bait in that trap always included you. That you killed those batarians clean, rather than let your men torture them to death. And we both know you were distracted in that fight."

He trailed off, and Shepard winced against old painful memories.

He continued a moment later, eyes and voice intense. "Every time you've killed those who surrendered after a fight, the fear of you grew. But you never killed anyone who surrendered without a fight. You made very sure people knew the cost of fighting you, of fighting the Alliance. You can tell yourself you are a monster, or listen to those who didn't have the nerve to do what had to be done. But if you hadn't done what you did at Tor Shan, how many thousands more civilians would be dead, captured, raped, enslaved? If you didn't push the way you did at Dirth and Terra Nova, how many pirate captains would still be ravaging our colonies?"

She shook her head, but didn't speak. Anderson grimaced. "I won't let my best soldier destroy herself. Not without a fight. I need *you* on this, Shepard. I don't trust any other human with the kind of power a Spectre has. Too many would fall in love with their own judgment. Their own arrogance that they are always right. And then they would fail."

A pause. "But you won't. I trust you with that. And so does the Alliance. So does Kyle. So do the High Lords."

The woman's eyes came up slowly, filled with pain for a moment, before clearing, and going to icy blue calmness. "Then I won't fail, David."

Anderson smiled. "That's my girl. I'll be here, at your back, the entire way. You aren't in this alone."

He shook his head, sighing. "For now, get up to the cockpit and make sure Joker brings us up clean, I have to get a report off to the Admiralty and brief the University of Service team of what's happening."

Shepard saluted, and turned to leave, but paused before exiting. "Sir...I still have concerns. About my suitability. On the last mission, I did something I maybe shouldn't have. There was a girl. Civilian, daughter of Thalia Renas. She was dying, almost dead. I'm almost sure she couldn't be saved. I mercy killed her, and I did it in front of Thalia...to hurt her. But now I wonder if she might have made it if I'd just ... tried. And if I *didn't* try because she was Thalia's daughter."

She looked away. The twisted look of pain on the child's face bothered her, and she felt as if she'd befouled herself for not even trying to save the girl.

Anderson only nodded. "I know, Shepard. I know what Thalia was responsible for, also. She was the one who dealt in red sand to Jackson, the one you blamed all these years for ending up the way you were. And you wanted her to hurt and pay before she died."

He sighed. "It's not for me to say if it was right or not right. The fact that you're torn up about it should answer your own question, Sara. I'm not going to sit here and condemn you for something like that - I wasn't even there. I will say that you have always known the difference between right and wrong. Even on that day in the Arcology. And I have faith that you never will violate the trust I have in you, because you are your own harshest critic."

He shrugged. "In this case? As much as I hate to say it ... what you did was probably a bad judgement call, but one that a Spectre would have made. One more reason why I picked you for the job. Now, get moving."

Sara nodded. "Yes, sir."

Straightening her back, she stepped out, the door closing behind her with a weighty thud.

Anderson regarded the two empty glasses of scotch on the table, and poured himself another, grimacing, Delacor's words echoing in his mind.

*"It's been years since Torfan, and you wouldn't be doing this if you had any idea of what kind of*

*monster she's become, Captain."*

He drained the glass, and turned to his terminal. "God, I hope this works."

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## **Chapter 8: Chapter 3 : Eden Prime , Arrival**

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*A/N : Remastered 10 - 24 -14*

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"Get down!"

Screaming blasts of plasma fire streamed overhead, as Gunnery Chief Ashley Williams skidded across the smooth concrete of the dig site into a position of cover. Lethal blue darts smashed into the rubble next to her, splinters of white-hot concrete splashing at impact to patter impotently against her shields.

Another blast caught Corporal Brin in the face, obliterating her entire upper torso in a flash of heat and wave of smoke, the smell of cooking flesh and melting plas-steel almost making Williams gag in her helmet. The ruined shell of the woman's body slid backwards, Avenger rifle tumbling from nervous hands as the corpse crumpled into a messy, leaking pile.

Next to her, Private Jackson had only a second to stare in horror before he was nearly torn in half by another plasma blast, his shriek of pain trailing off as his upper body literally melted into the waist high low wall that defined the edge of the dig.

Cursing and blinking back hot tears of frustration and rage – and fear – Williams popped up, firing at will. Her Avenger chattered hotly, the heat-sink glowing with the results of her fire, her shots stitching across the obscenely organic looking front of a geth sniper, tearing gaping wounds into it's silvery surface. The machine gave a chattering, mechanical cry as white fluid burst forth, but Williams was already firing again, this time finding the glowing orb of the geth unit next to the first, shattering it into darkness and sending the machine spinning to collapse on the ground.

On her right, Lieutenant Parker calmly fired his sniper rifle, picking off three geth with three carefully placed shots. "Keep it steady, chief. We're gonna get through this."

"Y-yes sir." Williams swallowed. Sweat ran into her eyes, blurring her vision, and she blinked them clear, her grip tightening on her Avenger. "Ready."

"Move. Left, then up. " The lieutenant fired one more time, shipping his now overheated sniper rifle and pulling out a pistol. The Carnifex barked three more times, loud hammer blows through the thick, sultry air of Eden Prime, and then the two of them ran for it.

"This is Lieutenant James Parker, executive officer of the 212 Colony Defense Regiment. Anyone, respond. We are overrun by geth, I repeat, the dig site is overrun by ... " he trailed off, slamming into cover, as an explosion tore through the air, so powerful that a blast of wind sailed past. He looked up in awe, seeing the clouds in the sky pushed away, and then trained his gaze to the left.

A gigantic black thing - a leaf - a squid - a torn body... he couldn't make it out what it was, but it had just sheared one of the arcology towers in half with a single blast. It fell, tumbling to pieces, and tiny struggling figures fell with it, distant shrieks ending with sickening finality as the top of the tower detonated violently.

Williams vomited, next to him, and he felt himself nearly faint. The noise in the air was a buzzsaw, cutting through his mind.. The sky was blazing with fires, the forests to the south nothing but burning

embers and choking black smoke billowing into the sky. Parker shook himself out of his own daze, eyes dark with determination and fear both.

"...we have to keep moving, Williams. Move that ass, soldier."

She nodded, pulling her helmet off and wiping her mouth. "Shit!" Her rifle whipped up, firing, and shriek of digital pain told Parker she had just dropped another geth. He grabbed her wrist and ran on, between two pre-fab units that were used to store some of the finds of the dig site. He crouched, pausing, as two more geth came into view, and with a flick of his wrist hurled his last contact grenade, the flat disk skidding to a stop between them.

The two geth units looked down stupidly, a second before it detonated, blowing them both to scrap and a wash of milky fluids.

He pushed on, face grim, Williams covering his six. "Just a bit farther to the transmit tower, kiddo." The two marines ran full out, stumbling over bodies here and there, even as more geth poured down into the dig area. Parker heard desperate firing, the uncoordinated staccato rhythm of panic.

Above it all he heard the hard, bass voice of Master Chief Cole. "Come on, you tin can motherfuckers. I got *lots* more love for you bastards. Bhatia, one o'clock. Jones, suppressive fire. Ha! Looks like your freaky little flashlight head just bit off more than it could chew!" Another long string of fire erupted as they rounded the corner, smoke and plasma mist occluding his view.

Cole stood there, firing his heavy Revenant LMG one handed, while his other had lifted a geth trooper into the air, the machine thrashing helplessly in his giant grip even as its head was slowly crushed under the power of his synthetic arm. Cole's armor was rent with smoking holes, his right eye missing, his dark skin scorched in places. Six dead geth were scattered at his feet, and with a grunt his hand closed fully, the geth in his hand crumbling under the straining hydraulics of his grip, and falling to a limp silence.

He tossed it aside, firing again with the LMG in his left hand, the heavy accelerated shells ripping the last two geth almost completely in two. "Good to see you, sir. Bhatia, Jones, Morris, fall in." The three marines behind him stood from cover, blood soaked and wounded, and Bhatia was limping, her right arm a melted mess tied off with a rag and a pack of medigel. Roberts was mostly intact, but his knee had been wrenched when he barely dodged a burst of geth plasma darts, making him immobile.

"Good work, Master Chief." Parker nodded to the small transmission tower. "Something is jamming our comms with Central Command, but I think we can punch through it with this, it's designed to link to the HE3 station even during a solar storm. The 280 is gone, and from all indications so is the 234. And this is all that's left of the 212. We are beyond fucked if we can't get the 410 here fast. What's our status?"

The master chief sighed, glancing around the battered defensive position. "Not good, sir. We don't have much more ammo, that's how hot the fight's been. Few more minutes and we'll be down to big poppas and pop guns". Cole used marine slang for heavy pistols and light pistols, his dark face covered in sweat. "No medigel either. Roberts can't fucking walk. And Jones has on a k-suit, not even full armor. We need extraction quick or we're toasted."

Parker sighed. "We have to broadcast first, or there's not much chance of any extraction. I'll need cover-"

Cole just grunted, interrupting him. "Williams, cover the LT while he broadcasts." He paused, pulling up a map on his omni-tool. "Sir, we got more incoming, from the archeologists camp and down from the valley. There's no way out of this canyon, unless we're gonna rappel down to the lower valley floor. What are your orders after you finish the broadcast?"

Parker closed his eyes, then opened them, gazing at the obscene black ship that squatted almost arrogantly over the spaceport. "Get the signal out to the Alliance. Let them know we're under attack, the Beacon taken. Then hold here as long as we can. We have to keep it going and hope the repeater drones at the system's edge pick it up, or help will never arrive in time. If the geth take this place, they'll kill the signal."

Cole was silent a long second, dark eyes flickering up to meet the lieutenant's. He then saluted, and extended his hand. "Die like a bastard, sir."

Parker swallowed and gripped the artificial hand tightly. "Shoot it like you stole it, Chief."

He turned away, and Williams followed, unlimbering her sniper rifle.

Cole turned back to the other three soldiers. "We know a lot of people have already died today, marines. If we don't hold this damned position, the rest of colony dies. The people we swore to protect die. Our families, die."

The black master chief pulled out a cigar and lit it, puffing calmly. "I'm proud of all of you. We stood where no other motherfucker could have stood. Less than ten of us dropped over two hundred fucking geth. But now it's time to shine. Here's where we show those flashlight-head mechanical sons of bitches that they could not have picked a worse enemy than the human race. We are going to blow the hell out of those dumb tin cans until we don't have anything left to shoot 'em with! And then, we are going to strangle them with their own fucking wires! Am I right, Marines?"

The four marines hooted, and he nodded. "Now get it done. Bhatia, position yourself left, use your M-77 launcher to keep their heavies off of us. Jones, shotgun, keep them from closing. Morris, you suppress them while I hit 'em with the Rev Daddy here. Roberts, go for headshots on the right, and keep yourself tucked into cover since you can't move. Williams will be covering the LT with her sniper, but don't let them rush past us.

Bhatia nodded shakily, her dark features set in determination, pushing glossy black hair out of her face. "I... we are going to die, are we not?"

Cole just looked at her, his remaining eye black and unflinching. "We're gonna die, Nirali. We can't change that. But if we have to die, we're going to make the geth remember us. We're gonna fuck them up so **bad** that a thousand years from now those bastards will flinch just *hearing* the name Eden Prime." He ejected the ammo block from his Revenant, and slotted in a fresh one, racking the slide. "Are you with me, Private?"

Bhatia blinked away tears, but saluted, and her mouth set in a firm line. "Semper fi, Master Chief."

"Damn straight. Get to your positions." He jutted his chin out, feeling the shot he had taken to his side keenly. Medigel wouldn't stop him from going septic with his damn liver blown open.

Inside the pre-fab transmission unit, Parker was dumping everything from his omni-tool. "Any units, this is Lieutenant James Parker, XO of the 212nd infantry on Eden Prime. We are overrun by geth, they have destroyed two arcology towers and are assaulting the spaceport. We need immediate assistance, I repeat, immediate assistance. ANYONE, please respond."

The line was dead and static filled. Outside he heard the malicious chatter of the geth as they began to surround their position, the whump-thud of Bhatia firing her missile launcher. Williams was at the small window in the pre-fab, her sniper rifle speaking death to synthetics, but he could hear her mumbling under her breath.

"...cannon to the left of them...cannon to the right of them..."

"This is Lieutenant Parker, is anyone out there!" He closed his eyes, biting his lip. He was pretty sure

his wife was dead, but his kids were still at Tower 15. He had to live through this.

Static. Only static on all comm bands.

A blast assaulted his ears, rocking the whole side of the prefab, and he heard the clanging noises of geth storming forward. He heard Cole's angry below, the ripping chainsaw sound of his LMG spitting 1.2 cm death in all directions, the boom of Jones' beloved shotgun as he took down a geth trooper trying to close in. He heard Roberts yell and Nirali snarl a curse.

They were all going to die.

Then the comm unit illuminated. "...shrkss...this is Commander Shepard of the SSV Normandy, incoming. ETA 11 minutes. Hold your position."

Parker's head snapped up, eyes wide. "A..acknowledged. We are almost overrun. Transmitting signal data. "

He punched up what he could on his omni-tool...he knew it was a mess , having no time to clean it up and organize it, but he sent what he could, images, logs, maps of the colony. "Be advised, geth are on the ground in battalion strength or greater."

"Understood, Parker. You will hold that position. We ARE coming." The voice was cold, like iron, but it lifted his spirits just the same.

"Yes, ma'am." He turned, lifting his chin, and slammed next to Williams. "Marines, we got reinforcements. We just gotta hold out until they get here."

Cole barked laughter, his right shoulder shattered by geth fire, using the low edge of the ramp in front of the prefab as cover and support for his LMG. "Fuckers had better hurry. I think I finally got them good and pissed off now."

He paused to direct fire into the chest of a geth with a rocket launcher, the slugs shearing the machine apart like a knife through butter, making the geth shriek digitally. "Sorry, I can't hear you with my bullets in your mouth!"

Parker nodded, unslinging his sniper rifle. "Let's kick ass, marines."

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"Hitting the relay in ... 3...2...1...prepare for transition."

The Normandy erupted into blue-shifted fire, silver hull gleaming hotly in the light of the star Utopia. Immediately downshifting into battle mode, the Normandy angled towards the planet, a dagger screaming towards it's mark.

On the cargo deck, marines scrambled into battle armor, and rifles clattered to the deck for a final inspection. Doctor Chakwas was injecting each marine with a field booster, in case of any bio-warfare weapons on the ground. The ship shuddered, sending people staggering. A heavy crate of ordinance intended for the Mako , the armored tank in the hangar bay , broke free, sliding down and out towards Corporal Jenkins, who could only watch as it slammed towards him -

-only to feel himself wrenched away at the last second by a aura of blue, bending him almost double and slamming him very hard into the side of the Mako, the container missing him by mere inches. Lieutenant Alenko let his hand drop, trembling with the effort, and Chakwas rushed over to Jenkins. "You saved his life , Alenko...but let's hope you didn't break his back..."

With a grunt, though, Jenkins popped up from where he had crumpled to the deck, a wild smile on his face. "Holy SHIT, LT, I was flying! That was AWESOME!"

Alenko gave an amused snort, trying to hide how relieved he was that Jenkins was okay. "Sorry about the rough ride, but I couldn't be sure I could handle that crate." He turned and tapped the comm relay on the door. "Christ, Joker, what the hell just happened, we almost got crushed by an ammo crate after that little dodge."

The voice on the comm unit was not Joker. "Lieutenant Moreau evaded incoming fire from a geth destroyer and took it out." Commander Shepard's voice was like frozen silk. "Readiness of the ground team?"

Alenko exhaled. "We are prepped, locked and loaded, ma'am."

"Good work. Bridge out. Be ready in five."

Alenko turned back to the marines. "You heard the lady, jump to. If we just got shot at by geth, I don't think this is a simple shakedown run anymore, boys and girls. Get disruptor ammo from the armory and make it fast, we need to be ready in 3 minutes. Move it!"

---

"Reverse and hold at 38.5". Anderson's voice was tense, strained, as he, Shepard and Nihlus reviewed the mess of video images the lieutenant on Eden Prime had sent.

Now frozen on the screen was a black ship, almost a mile long, piercing the smoke-stained sky of Eden Prime, its lower section like a grasping, vile hand reaching out to crush all beneath it. It was wreathed in red lightning, like a nightmare out of some bad 21st century sci-fi movie.

"What the hell is that?" Shepard voiced what was in Anderson's head. "Scale indicates it's almost ... no, much larger than a dreadnaught. What is that thing?"

Nihlus's mandible moved in an unsure gesture of nervousness, but he said nothing. Anderson turned away. "The mission just got a lot more complicated. Joker, take us in, fast and hot, weapons loose."

Turning to Shepard, he spoke. "Three objectives. Secure the team at that transmission tower, recover the beacon, and find out what the hell is going on. I can't think of any enemy worse than the Geth to get their hands on a Prothean Beacon. You are to destroy it if you can't secure it, if needed."

Shepard nodded. "I'll take a small team, Alenko and one of the marines, to secure the dig site. The rest of the team can secure the survivors in the Mako." She turned to Nihlus, raising an eyebrow. "Will you be accompanying me?"

The turian shook his head. "Not the time to play games with assessments. I'll go in by the spaceport, see if I can't find out what's going on and get data on that ship. We'll meet up at the spaceport for extraction, if possible. I move faster on my own." With that, he left the comms room, leaving Shepard and Anderson alone.

"I'll go suit up, sir. We doing a hot drop?"

Anderson nodded, and grimaced. "I'll get 4th fleet on the line..we have to recover what we can and get out quick. Stay out of trouble, we cannot survive a slugging match with that monster of a ship, our kinetic barriers can't repel firepower of that magnitude."

Anderson turned to Shepard. "Get your team ready, you move in five."

Shepard nodded, and departed, mind full of the things she'd need to get done.

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## Chapter 9: Chapter 4 : Eden Prime, Rescue

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*A/N: Remastered 10-24-14. No major changes.*

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"You are go for insertion."

The Normandy screamed out of the sky, GARDIAN lasers blazing in every direction, swatting down geth drop-ships like the hand of an angry god. Roaring from its open hangar bay was twenty tons of promised death, double coaxial mass accelerator spitting 2000 rounds of 3 cm death every minute, the main gun firing even as its eezo-core thrusters eased its slam into the battered concrete near the transmission tower.

Master Chief Cole lit another cigar, smirking as he inhaled and then shot a geth with his free hand, the barrel of his Carnifex pistol smoking. "Marines! We - are - leaving!" His features were tired and sweat-streaked, his bald head gleaming in the sun.

Lieutenant Parker and Gunnery Chief Williams stormed out of cover, rapid firing bursts from their assault rifles, catching two gun drones in their crossfire and blowing them out of the sky to waver and crash into a stand of pines down the road leading up to the tower. The Mako slammed to a stop, its back hatch splitting open into three sections, and the Normandy marines spilled out, already forming a firing line.

Cole turned towards the one in charge, a staff sergeant. "Master Chief Cole. We got one dead, two seriously wounded. Can we extract?"

Staff Sergeant Masterson nodded. His black hair cut close to his scalp, the big marine hoisted his heavy rifle and spoke, voice low and grim. "We can, but it won't be easy. If that ..." he gestured towards the spaceport and the giant ship squatted there "...monster gets into the air, the Normandy is going to have to skedaddle."

Suddenly Commander Shepard's voice broke through the comm. "Nihlus is on the ground, but we've got too much ground fire here. Masterson, we'll be at your location in three, secure for drop. "

The marine nodded. "Yes'm." He glanced past Cole to the figure of the Lieutenant walking up. "Sir, Commander Shepard is incoming. Our orders are to evac your squad and secure the Beacon. Holding here until she arrives, sir."

Parker frowned, glancing out past the edge of the ruined ring of buildings that once surrounded the transmission tower. The firefight to hold the place had been ugly and intense, the geth had poured in so much incoming fire that, with the exception of Williams, every remaining member of his squad was a wreck with multiple wounds, and poor Bhatia had been nearly cooked alive, hit by some geth version of a plasma flamethrower. "Understood, sergeant, but none of our soldiers except Williams are still combat effective. All my guns are melted through, heat sinks shot."

The sergeant nodded. "Understood sir, let's get your squad inside the Mako while we set up a perimeter. We can get some basic first aid going, at least."

He paused, then snapped orders. "Muse, Haln, support the LT's squad. Everyone else, active perimeter. Ownby, keep that turret hot."

The next few minutes were eerily quiet, the last of the 212 herded into the Mako to rest. The LT sat wearily in the back of the armored vehicle, exhausted mind racing even as one of the Normandy marines stripped his armor and began patching his most serious wounds with medigel. "Something doesn't make sense, Cole. Why aren't they rushing us any more?"

The master chief had gone very pale for his complexion, his one good eye barely open. A bloody

medigel soaked bandage covered half his face, as he laid flat on one of the benches, a portable medicomp beeping dire messages in binary as it read his vitals. "Regrouping, maybe. More likely, waiting for a heavy unit, to try and crack our defensive setup. That's what I figure, sir. But I ain't worried, no geth can match our big blue style!"

Cole patted the Mako affectionately, and Parker smirked.

The Mako buffeted in a heavy wind, and the LT looked outside the back hatch to see an Alliance frigate hover over the field, and three figures drop out of the front hatch. The flanking pair were clearly more marines, nondescript in plain blue armor. But the third...

Parker couldn't help but smile coldly. The geth were *fucked*.

She walked with an almost arrogant roll, chin lifted, an Avenger held loosely in one hand like a part of her body. Yet somehow he knew this was no arrogant fool, or someone too caught up in her own skill to be cautious. The coveted red-and-white stripe and N7 device picked out in silver instead of brass spoke of only one thing.

Lethality beyond the measure of any other human special forces member alive.

Commander Shepard walked over to the Mako, putting one black-armored foot against the sill of the hatch, and locked gazes with Lieutenant Parker. "Good job holding, LT. I need a sit rep."

Parker nodded. "It's a bit of a mess, ma'am. We were perimeter security for the excavation site. We really didn't expect them to find anything worth much. They'd been digging for years and only finding bits and pieces, but suddenly they hit the jackpot."

He closed his eyes, voice becoming bitter. "When it became obvious what we had, I wanted to reinforce the site with every unit on the fucking planet, but Major Dorston felt that would be 'reckless'. He only put the 212 and 280 on active duty here. Both light infantry regiments. We had, between us, maybe 200 effectives all together. The 235, light armor, was put on perimeter patrol at the 132 highway between Tower Attican and Tower Montana, the nearest civilian access. But the 410, the heavy infantry battalion with all our support, was kept at Tower Central, five hundred miles away. "

Shepard shook her head, a look of disgust on her face. "And then what?"

Parker shrugged, wincing as his bandages shifted. "First few hours, just watched the archeology guys. First and second burst transmissions went out without a hitch. We sent our initial data packet off to the University of Serrice, and then three hours ago all hell broke loose. Six geth frigates came out of nowhere and blew the shit out of the defense sats, and two more went to town on our GARDIAN lasers. Last we heard from the 235 was that the geth were coming down in fucking battalion strength or greater."

He sighed. "Major Dorston couldn't be raised on the comm. Lieutenant Commander Garcia, my CO, had the 212 and 280 form a defensive perimeter around the dig site and the archeologists living area. We locked the scientists in and barricaded ourselves up, set prox mines, dug in as best we could. We figured it would only be a while until Dorston got on the comm and the 410 came in to kick ass. But that never happened."

His eyes took on a haunted look. "Geth came out of everywhere. Kill one, six more show up. Guns that go right through your shields, drones popping out of nowhere to rain rockets on you. I lost half my men in three minutes, and the CO bought it trying to fall back to the Beacon."

He swallowed. "Pretty much everyone broke at that point, except the platoons with Cole and Williams, they kept fighting back and held the line long enough for us to ... get to cover." He shook his head. "Not long after that, the geth came up from behind us...I figure they shot their way through the marines

who broke and ran. Then it was just us, sir, falling back to here. That's all I know."

Shepard nodded, the look on her face emotionless and calm. "We'll handle it from here-" she broke off as an explosion sounded behind her.

"Geth incoming!"

She rolled to her left, coming up behind a low wall, and her eyes widened as she saw the hulking red figure of a Geth Prime striding along the middle of the road, multifunction weapon arm spitting mini-rockets at the line of marines to her right. "Evasive, fire for effect!"

Her men fired back immediately, as Corporal Jenkins and Lieutenant Alenko slid into cover next to her. "What's the plan, Commander?" Jenkins asked, his once eager features now distorted with rage at what had been done to his birth world.

Shepard exhaled. "First, drop the damned Prime. Evac the wounded and find the Beacon. It's either still at the dig site, or at the spaceport. And we need to link up with Nihlus at some point."

Shepard tapped her omni-tool, and smiled. "Mizia fire pattern, full auto!"

The marines with her all opened up on the Prime in irregular, staccato bursts, designed to frustrate the compensation computers in the geth's shielding units. Shepard broke cover, firing at the two geth flanking the Prime who carried flamethrowers. Her shots were true, two head shots to the one on the left, blasting the eye-light to pieces and leaving nothing but a shattered wreck for white fluid to sluice out of as it collapsed.

The other one fired, but her third and fourth shots shattered its hip-joint. It staggered, playing the hot flames over the Prime unit, who recoiled as the plasma jet seared past the shielding to its armor, blinding its sensors.

Alenko popped up, his biotics picking up a long spar of construction material and flinging it with all his strength towards the prime. Blue flames raced down the length of the piece of metal as it accelerated through the air to strike the Prime in the chest, staggering the monster again, before two Marines opened up with ML-77 missile launchers, blasting the 12-foot war machine to pieces and sending other geth scurrying back to cover.

But the geth were not content to cower, and snipers fired. Six shots rang out, most striking and sparking on shields. But three were targeted at Jenkins, still holding his missile launcher. Two flared his shields, and the last once lanced through his helmet, blasting out the back of his head in a wash of blood, bone and grey matter to splatter messily over the marine next to him.

Shepard gritted her teeth, and clenched her fist, biotic energy racing over her body. With a lunge she was over the wall and then she *flashed*, a blue streak of biotic rage slamming into the sniper with the force of a freight train, reappearing in a storm of mass energies. The sniper staggered back, half broken in two by the blow, and Shepard's shotgun came up. One shot, blasting through its head, sent it crashing to the ground.

The shotgun swept left, firing again, once, twice. Two more geth collapsed, one with a smoking hole the size of a dinner plate in its chest, the other one sporting a broken collar of metal and white-spewing tubes where its head once was. Another boom as she half-turned, crushing the half-dead geth pyro she had winged, its entire upper torso gone with the blast, liquid accelerant catching fire as it slumped.

She pivoted on her heel, snapping the shotgun out for the fourth shot, catching the geth to her left in the knee. It staggered, stumbling forward, and her fist lashed out, wreathed in biotic energy as it literally crumpled its armor plated chest, pounding the unit into the concrete with a thud and a crack of electronic data units. The thing gave a squeal of static, trailing off suddenly as the biotic field in her

hand expanded into shock waves of force, scattering parts in all directions.

Not even pausing, she dropped the shotgun and rolled to her side, a second before plasma darts slammed into the ground where she had been. Her free hand, still trailing biotic energy, lifted her pistol. Five shots erupted from its cavernous barrel as it moved through a smooth arc, each one striking a geth unit directly in the lighted orb that formed its face and sensor unit. The last actually spun in midair from the force of the shot, tumbling off the edge of the raised platform to fall 10 feet down in a wrecked pile of now white-smearred ruin.

Parker simply stared in unblinking awe. *Nine dead geth in less than three seconds, unholy shit!*

He glanced over to Cole and Williams, both who watched Shepard slowly come to her feet with an almost predatory ease. She didn't even look as if she had been fighting. She could have been cleaning her weapon or talking about the weather.

Shepard leapt down lightly, landing next to Alenko, who was crouched over the prone, still form of Jenkins. Alenko sighed, and closed the young man's wide, staring eyes. "Goddamn it. I told him to keep his head down..."

Shepard placed a hand on Alenko's shoulder. "Mission first. We can mourn later."

Alenko nodded. "Yes commander. But Jenkins was the only marine we have who knew Eden Prime well. How will we locate the dig site quickly?"

Shepard turned back to Parker, still sitting slack-jawed in the Mako. "Lieutenant, you said one of your men was still combat effective?" Parker did not answer, rather, a firm voice behind her did. Shepard half turned, to face who spoke.

"Gunnery Sergeant Ashley Williams, ma'am, of the 212. Cocked, locked and ready to rock."

Williams was strongly built and tall, her eyes smoldering with enough anger to set her jaw to trembling. Alenko could only stare at her, as if she was some kind of Valkyrie. Shepard, on the other hand, just sighed.

"You are of course familiar with the area. I need to secure that Beacon. Can you lead the way, soldier?"

Williams nodded. "Yes, ma'am. I damn sure can."

Shepard continued to look at the young soldier, her own stance utterly still, her eyes cold, her voice emotionless. "I don't need a hot-head out for revenge. I need a team player, Chief. Can you do that as well?"

"They just massacred almost my entire unit! All my friends!"

Shepard's voice grew colder. "And unless you get control of yourself, marine, and stay frosty, they'll finish the job. Can you do the job?"

Ashley shuddered, giving a long exhale. "I...I can, ma'am."

Shepard nodded. "Lieutenant Parker, I'm taking one of your soldiers to replace Jenkins, since I have no experience with this planet. Evacuate as soon as possible, this position will be overrun."

Parker only nodded. "The Normandy just radioed, the pilot says they are headed back this way. Be very careful commander. There are a LOT of geth out there and we still don't know what drew them here."

Shepard clipped her shotgun back to her weapons pack and drew forth her sniper rifle. "Leave the geth to me, sir." She turned to Alenko and Williams. "Move out, recon pattern. Radio silence. We are to find the beacon, and avoid hostile contact where possible."

Williams gestured with her rifle. "The dig site is down this road...past the mouth of the valley below. Then there is a path up to the cargo tram storage site where they stored all of their findings, and the camp of the archeologists. A tram line from there runs straight to the spaceport,ma'am."

Shepard nodded, eyes cold. "Let's get it done, then."

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TERMS:

LT: Lieutenant

Mizia Pattern: fire pattern than attempts to utilize the quirks of kinetic barriers to good effect. Instead of requiring a crushing amount of damage to crack shields entirely, small "chunks" of damage are inflicted

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## **Chapter 10: Chapter 5 : Eden Prime, Ambush**

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*A/N: Remastered 10-24-14 . Minor changes, clearing up Saren-Cerberus interaction.*

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*Spirits that shield us, this is not good.*

Nihlus had been in many bad, bad spots in his career as a Spectre for the Council. He'd been trapped behind enemy lines in batarian space. He had nearly gotten killed on Tuchanka by Clan Weyrloc while he was investigating reports of ground-to-space weapons smuggled in past the CDEM. He had been chased for three days by an enraged asari justicar and barely escaped with his life.

He had even been pinned by down by heavy artillery fire and surrounded by Blue Suns with only a pistol.

But this was beyond any of that.

Nihlus' powerful legs pumped, untiring, as he vaulted over a broken cargo crate, a shotgun in each hand. He fired one as he landed, blasting a geth backwards with enough force to send it bouncing off the wall, barely missing him as he sped past. A geth with a heavy plasma thrower popped up from cover, along with two more of his brethren with pulse rifles, and the other shotgun in his hand barked, blasting the containment tank, spraying all three with white-hot plasma that melted them into the already blackened ground.

*Surrounded by an army of geth, with my only backup a human that even scares the shit out of other humans, and my only way off planet a frigate that wouldn't even scratch the paint on that nightmare of a dreadnaught.*

"Shepard, this is Nihlus, report." He stormed up a metallic staircase, shoulder-ramming another geth. Dropping one gun, he lashed out with his talons, the omni-tool on his arm sheathing each one with a thin layer of electro-plasma the instance before impact. His talons slid through polymer armor with ease, literally slicing the geth's head off bulky shoulders even as it staggered from being rammed. As it fell he rolled past it, picking up his shotgun and then holstering both on his wide belt.

All around him, the colony burned. At least one arcology tower was a half-melted ruin, the ground around it carpeted with hundreds of horribly burned and broken bodies. Rows of once neatly parked ground cars burned in silent vigil, while others had been hurled in all directions, as if a giant child had thrown a temper tantrum.

The corpses of human soldiers were everywhere, many having taken such savage wounds that they were barely recognizable. It looked like most of a company had died trying to defend the tramway leading from the spaceport, but they had been overrun. They didn't die alone, though, as hundreds of geth also lay dead, white conductive fluids pooling into small ponds here and there, smeared with the red viscera of the human defenders.

"Nihlus, this is Shepard. On the ground, transmission tower and surviving elements of 212 secure. Moving towards dig site." The human's voice crackled with some sort of electrical interference, but was clear enough to make out.

He crouched next to some sort of electrical generator housing, the bulk of the concrete base giving good cover.

"Copy. I am approaching other side of landing area, near tramway access. Be advised, geth are still incoming." Nihlus paused as another one came around the corner. Not even bothering to pull a gun, the turians arm snapped out in a lightning fast arc. A slender shard of metal shot from the Spectre's arm gauntlet, sparkling with electrical charge, and slammed into the throat of the geth machine, exploding into an electrical cascade that overloaded the machine. It stumbled forward in a ragged circle before collapsing with several internal explosions.

"Understood. We will see if we can't find the Beacon and recover some of the scientists on site. You plan to secure the tramway? Should we not try to link up?" Shepard sounded cautious and worried.

*Well, good. If I had the sense the spirits gave to a hatchling my answer would be yes, but I can't play games keeping you alive right now, human.*

Nihlus paused, thinking, mandibles waving in agitation. It was clear geth were being funneled by the tramway, from the battlefield and the patterns of the corpses, but now it looked as if the geth were falling back towards the spaceport. "Negative. I'm going to try to reach the spaceport, see if I can't get detailed scans of that black dreadnaught."

Shepard's voice sounded almost tight, or perhaps disapproving. "Understood. Be advised that the Normandy is engaging additional incoming geth ships. Captain Anderson will be forced to leave the battle space if that dreadnaught goes space-side. "

Nihlus grimaced, his fringe contracting at the thought of being trapped on a planet overrun by geth.

*Ah, it just officially got worse. Great spirits of Palaven, what I wouldn't give for a few Final Line soldiers right now.*

Out loud, he kept his voice cool. "Understood. Nihlus out." He rose from his crouch, pulling out the modified Widow sniper rifle he favored, and brought it up to his eye, scanning ahead.

In the distance, he saw what looked like a turian, executing two humans with a large caliber pistol. The turian's back was to him, his armor black and silver and somehow familiar, but he couldn't place it exactly, although it looked too much like Spectre armor for Nihlus' taste.

Without facing him, the turian strode off after gunning down a third human, descending down a set of stairs and out of sight. Nihlus felt his gizzard contract, bile pumping through his system.

*What sort of traitor to the Hierarchy works with geth? An outcast? Facinus separatist?*

He moved to his left, spotting a ladderway leading down, and shipped his rifle to climb down. The human ladders were so small, so cramped, it hurt his spurs to use them, but he got to the bottom, pulling out his Revenant LMG and flicking it over to full auto fire.

The wind carried a charnel scent, burning plastic, burning flesh, burning innocence on the wind. This

colony was perhaps humanity's proudest achievement, with soaring clean arcology towers, clean energy and rich natural resources, but it was now ruined. Nihlus shook his head as he carefully but quickly proceeded down what looked like an access road of some kind, ducking from cover to cover in the shade of air-cars and the occasional cargo lifter.

It took him an agonizing ten minutes to reach the cargo terminal, which was littered with dead bodies. These humans had not been overwhelmed, they had been massacred. Six of them had literally been torn limb to limb, with savage strength that would normally be the hallmark of a krogan. But he saw claw marks on the faces, the arms.

Turian talons made those marks.

He grimaced, when he heard a sound, and ducked back behind some crates to the side of him. As he crouched down, he noticed a human corpse next to him, a shocked expression on his face, a huge bloody hole blown in his chest. Next to him was a pistol of some sort, barrel warped by heat. Nihlus carefully cautiously looked around the edge of the crate, seeking the source of the noise.

Clanking, heavy footfalls sounded at the stairwell the strange turian had descended. Nihlus clamped his mandibles together and waited as the steps reached the top of the platform, and then his eyes widened at the voice he heard. He hastily killed his omni-tool, lest it show up on a scan or make a noise if a call from Shepard came in.

"I was about to head to the terminal, but I can't get a comm signal there with all the interference from ... my ship. I'm on a timeline, this had better be good, human."

*It can't be him. It can't be Saren. Spirits...why?*

Nihlus felt as if he was about to fall over, or if his scales would burst into fire. He edged around the crate a bit more, taking in the silver and black armor he recognized now, the oversized custom Sunfire pistol he had been given by the Primarch himself for stopping the Red Star assault. The cybernetic arm, the plated face that was due to the radiation exposure he had gotten fighting during the Relay 314 incident...

Nihlus closed his eyes as if in pain, gently easing back on the balls of his feet, as a deep, calm voice spoke through the other turian's omni-tool.

"Oh, it is, *turian*. The Systems Alliance sent in a stealth frigate to pick up the Beacon, and they've just sent out a distress beacon call. Ships from the 4th Fleet are already spinning up their drives, and the Council is alerting the Eighth Fleet of the turians as well. You don't have much time to finish up."

Saren snarled. "As long as you do what you were supposed to do, we will be just fine. Did you at least accomplish that much?"

The voice was cool and modulated. "Yes. As we agreed, we've made the appropriate entries to the registry at Peak 15 and Port Hanshan. We even had a turian mocked up to look like you. Everything is in place. All you need to do is destroy the colony as you leave."

Saren gave a quiet snarl of disgust. "You people are willing to blow up your own civilians just for more power. And you have the gall to suggest turians are brutal."

The voice on the omni-tool was calm, not responding to Saren's tone. "Humanity is more than one colony, Arterius. You, of all people, should agree with the concept that hard times call for hard actions. As long as you get away cleanly, the bomb will deal with the Alliance forces on the world, and any who might have seen you, so it is in your best interests as well. We'll have our proof of batarian terrorism, you will have your Beacon."

Saren hissed, mandibles snapping. "Clever. As long as you keep the Council distracted, we will all

benefit from this. The geth are almost done with reworking the power supply to the Beacon. I'll access it and then wipe the colony. Be ready with those false batarian ships."

The voice gave a cultured chuckle. "But of course. Anything for a Spectre."

Saren clicked the omni-tool off as two geth approached behind him. "Saren-Prophet, we have suppressed all organized resistance, but we still have geth units in no-carrier status. Two groups of hostiles that do not match local forces found in databases approach. One is located by the recovery area of the Beacon. The other is nearby."

Saren nodded, grimly pulling out his pistol. "According to Cerberus, at least one ship responded to the distress call. No matter. Pull back to Nazara and prepare for departure. The bomb will clean up all the evidence, and the EMP will wipe any recording devices that remain. Go."

The two geth turned away in a jerky manner, stepping away with alacrity. Saren looked off into the distance, in the direction that Shepard's group would be coming from. He put away his pistol and instead pulled out the long, silvery sniper rifle on his back.

Nihlus exhaled as slowly as he could, spent air dribbling past his fangs as he very carefully eased out one of his shotguns, turning off the auto-extender and quietly moving it's various pieces into firing shape to avoid noise.

He only had one shot at this – if he couldn't take Saren out instantly, his chances of winning a fight were slim to none. Saren was possibly the most lethal Spectre in history, both a powerful biotic and a talented info-war specialist. There would be no second chances.

He couldn't call out, couldn't risk even turning on his omni-tool for a text message without certainty that Saren would not take him out, and if they were talking about a bomb he didn't have much time.

Saren half turned away, looking for a place to snipe from, and Nihlus made his move, vaulting the crates in one smooth move and firing as he leapt, triggering the over-fire mod marketed as 'Carnage' by the humans. The blast staggered Saren, ripping through his shields into his back, sniper rifle flying away, and Nihlus landed, drawing his other shotgun to finish him off...

And instead catching a violent backhand to his face, sending him flying back, his shotguns knocked out of his stunned hands. A biotic blast of light crushed his shields a split-second later, even as warfire washed over his pistol, ruining it.

Nihlus crashed to the ground in a heap, grimacing as he felt something break, feeling the awkward, shattered grinding of his left mandible. He was too stunned to do much more than try to blink his head clear and focus his vision as Saren straightened.

A huge hole was blown in the other turian's armor and underneath it was blue-gleaming cybernetics, writhing like worms as it slowly meshed itself whole once more. Saren looked over his shoulder, even as the blue-glowing substance in his back began regrowing his armor.

"Nihlus."

His mandibles lowered in a sardonic, evil grin, and he turned fully around, his hand now holding his pistol, firing as he did so, the blast sounding like an explosion to Nihlus. An instant later his world vanished in fire and red-hot pain and the feel of the wind on and *inside* his torso. He sagged, blue blood spurting from his mouth.

"...S...Saren...what ha...have you ...done!" He fell over, on his hands and knees, struggling to rise. Saren stepped forward, kicking Nihlus in the midsection, and Nihlus retched, bile and blood spilling over the edge of his jaw as he collapsed on the ground.

*Hard ..to breathe...bastard shot out one of my lungs, and ruptured my sac...*

Saren plucked Nihlus' sniper rifle and LMG off of his back, tossing the former away but holding on to the latter in his free hand, holstering his pistol. "You can't possibly understand what is at stake, old friend. I had hoped it would not come to this. That I would have a chance to talk to you, to convince you. I could use you on my side. "

Nihlus spat weakly, a splotch of his lifeblood marring Saren's gleaming armored foot. "Your ... side? You are working with geth! And Cerberus! You are a -

Said foot kicked him in the face, splintering his facial plates, sending rivulets of blood into his left eye, and cutting off his speech.

Saren's voice was sad, but cool. "Yes, well, I expected that. I suppose it's a shame, really. Your idiot human allies will be fried in the nuclear explosion due to happen in a few minutes time. I'll make sure to comfort your parents when I get back to Palaven, tell them some heroic tale of your final sacrifice for the cause."

Nihlus' own custom LMG lowered to the top of his skull, the barrel a cool, small circle against the edge of his fringe.

"Farewell, Nihlus."

---

Shepard, Alenko and Williams halted just prior to the descent to the dig site, as the roar of a LMG tore through the air somewhere ahead and to the right. Shepard frowned. "That sounds like a Revenant, but Nihlus still isn't answering his damned comms."

Alenko only shrugged. "You think he is in trouble, sir?"

Shepard pressed her back up against the edge of the walls surrounding the dig site, and bit her lip. "Unknown. Williams. How far to the tram access?"

The woman glanced around, measuring. "About ten minutes, if we rush it. Twenty if we're taking cover and fighting our way through. There's a sort of platform, cargo holding area really, at one end. Then just a sort of long breakwater over the river, and tramlines runs over that towards the spaceport."

Shepard unslung her Avenger and set her amp to full power. "Let's hit the dig site fast, and then move on the tram access. I don't like this. "

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### ***TERMS:***

*Final Line Soldier: turian cybernetic elite infantry*

*LMG: Light machine gun*

*no-carrier status: geth for 'dead'*

*Facinus: a group of turian rebels, once a famous turian clan*

*CDEM : Council Demilitarization Enforcement Mission : military force blockading and guarding the krogan home-world of Tuchanka*

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## **Chapter 11: INTERMISSION: Alliance Service Record**

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A/N : remastered on 11-27-14. Some very significant changes.

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## **ALLIANCE SERVICE RECORD – TANTALUS CLEARANCE, EYES ONLY**

**Complete ASR Summary pullback ... complete**

**Commissariat Assessment ... complete**

**Removing Restrictions ... error. Some restrictions not removed.**

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### **Demographic summary:**

*Name:* Sara Ying Shepard

*Known Alias:* Sara Bonaventure, Sinthia Yong Li

*Known Titles:* Shepard of the Dancing Kanquess

*Date of Birth:* 11.4.2154

*Height:* 5'11

*Hair:* black

*Eyes:* blue (dark)

*Identifying marks:* tattoo, gang related (right shoulder, two dice showing ten pips, done in black and red ink), scar, right chest (5.4 inches long, knife wound), scar, right thigh (14.3 inches long, scar, knife wound), 17 parallel scars (lower and upper back, electrowhip), 4 scars, parallel line along spine (cattle prod), broken tibia, broken femur (both), broken pelvis (right side, pins inserted 7.2 inches below waistline).

*Ethnicity:* mixed northern African, French, Chinese. Based on genetic markers, at least one biological ancestor (beyond parents) was fully ethnic Chinese.

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### **Biographical summary:**

*Parents:* unknown non-citizens, Earth, New York mega complex. Possible transients. Recruiting officer note: gang rumor at time of sentencing indicated parents were red sand addicts and dealers for the asari pirate and drug runner Thalia Renas. Confirmed that parents sold her at age of eight to local prostitution ring.

*[SECTION RESTRICTED - Authorization, Donnel Udina, Systems Alliance Authority under Article 9 , Section 3 of the Systems Alliance Military Justice Charter] AIS investigation after Incident 9420-C as reported by NYARC CenPol shows birth parents were Michael and Yishan Shepard. Michael Shepard was a Systems Alliance Marine lieutenant prior to dishonorable discharge for conduct unbecoming. (Subfile is missing.) Yishan Shepard was non-citizen civilian transient, no birth records, hospitalization showing red sand addictions and psychological trauma, source unknown. Parents found murdered by NYARC CenPol in 2175. [RESTRICTION ENDS]*

*[SECTION RESTRICTED - Authorization, AIS Special Internal Investigations] fragmentary evidence of Lt. Shepard's involvement with Cerberus, including payment from known accounts associated with IRON. [RESTRICTION ENDS]*

*Relatives / NOK:* none. Legal will entrusts all material assets to David Anderson, captain, Systems

Alliance. Genetic testing indicates familial relation (third cousin or greater) to New York Authority Precinct Captain Jason Yong Li, deceased shortly after induction to the military. *UPDATE: As of 01.24.2184, Shepard has added Liara T'Soni, Garrus Vakarian, Urdnot Wrex, Ashley Williams and Tali'Zorah nar Kazan to her will.*

*Native language:* English (northern Atlantic dialect)

*Languages known:* Chinese (minor), Spanish (American Hispanic, fluent), Turian (minor, low dialect only), asari (Serrician accent, minor).

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### **Medical and psychological summary:**

*Medical:* Meets all N7 baseline physical requirements.

Last PTR testing indicates all seven point standards met or exceeded. (2.5 mile swim, 2.5 mile run in 15 minutes, 250 pushups, 400 situps, obstacle course completed in 8.3 minutes, weight support at 1.7 times body mass, endurance run with 97% O<sub>2</sub> suffusion after 13 minutes). Subject appears to be in fantastic physical shape.

Eezo exposure both pre and post uteral, eezo nodes identified through 44% of body. Stable, benign masses, no sign of eezo stage toxicity. Standard L3 implant provided, no physiological side-effects aside from excessive biotic flaring in all maneuvers.

Addendum: higher biotic baseline than normal. Rating factor currently high class V biotic.

Due to radiological damage and a combination of factors during youth including suboptimal medical treatment, sterility drugs, chemical damage to uteral lining and possible cervical damage during intercourse, subject is sterile.

Toxicology at time of sentencing/admittance indicated light red sand and heavy heroin usage. Criminal record indicates possession of personal amounts of red sand, cocaine and livoticane-6. All drug tests since enlistment have come back as negative.

*[SECTION RESTRICTION – Authorization, Jason von Grath, General, SAMC] Subject shows sexual modifications – increased nerve sensitivity, pain tolerance, black-market modification of nervous system to enhance receptivity to pain-gate overloads resulting in pleasure center stimulation. [RESTRICTION ENDS]*

Vision perfect. Hearing perfect, slightly above norms for human female of age bracket with noise exposure.

*Psychological:*

Subject was raised in very abusive environment and in broken home. *[SECTION RESTRICTED - Authorization, Donnel Udina, Systems Alliance Authority under Article 9, Section 3 of the Systems Alliance Military Justice Charter] AIS investigation after Incident 9420-C as reported by NYARC CenPol that high possibility exists that severe domestic violence and probable child abuse occurred. Social services in NYARC were at the time over 850% of capacity and no action was taken. At least one other child of Michael and Yishan Shepard was born after Sara Shepard sold into slavery. Second child also sold. Subject is NOT aware of this and is not to be made aware of this. [RESTRICTION ENDS]*

At some period between 7 and 8 years of age, subject sold to local prostitution ring by parental figures for undisclosed amount of drugs and cash. Abandonment issues and feelings of self-hate, worthlessness stem from this event. Based on fragmentary criminal evidence as well as captured recordings made by prosecuted pedophilic offenders, subject was used both as subject of repeated rapes as well as staged

haptic entertainment. [REDACTED – SYSTEMS ALLIANCE COMMISSARIAT CODE OMEGA : Recent investigation has shown every single dealer, operative, movie operator and producer of these entertainments was murdered, as were more than half of the people who abused her sexually. Based on the evidence, it appears General Rachel Florez was involved in assisting Shepard in executing her tormentors. This action was not authorized by the Commissariat. However, upon review, the Commissariat finds nothing wrong with actions taken. REDACTION ENDS]

Repeated abuse by clients lead to psychotic break at age 14, arrest records indicate subject stabbed client and three other observers with handmade implement ("shank"). Admitted to Preston Memorial 9.16.2169, released due to paperwork mix up two days later.

Initial psychological workup conducted at the time of hospitalization indicated suicidal and self-destructive tendencies, self-harm tendencies, corruption of sexual and social understanding. Comments on workup indicate subject was sociopathic in the extreme even at such a young age.

[SECTION RESTRICTION – Authorization, Jason von Grath, General, SAMC] Additional documentation shows sexual addiction, obsessive compulsive disorders in regards to electrical shock, and repressed sadomasochist tendencies. [RESTRICTION ENDS]

Complete psychological profile conducted at time of enlistment. Functional paranoid with suppressed, if sharp, sense of right and wrong. High levels of Stockholm Syndrome towards Tenth Street Red gang members. Sexual trauma, nonfunctional social framework. Complete profile available in separate enclosure, runs to 13 pages. (Release officer, David Anderson)

[SECTION RESTRICTION – Authorization, Jason von Grath, General, SAMC] Secondary psychological interviews conducted at later dates show slow evolution of initial mental pathologies from pure sociopath to limited social functioning within a self-destructive, passive-aggressive set of personal rules. Subject is extremely dangerous, willing to terminate anything that violates her personal ruleset, notably any figure involved in criminal activity that preys upon the weak, helpless, or young children. [RESTRICTION ENDS]

[SECTION RESTRICTION – Authorization, Commissar-Captain Alfred Jiong, SACC] Tertiary psychological interviews conducted after Benezia Incident show marked improvement in social function, but increased self-destructive tendencies, extremely strong obsessive-compulsive sexual disorders, and high levels of emotional instability. Subject retains willingness to execute anything violating her personal rules, tempered only by a strong dislike of breaking the law unless absolutely necessary. [RESTRICTION ENDS]

Notable deviations from norm include pathological hatred of New York Arcology authority, dismissal of personal emotions, and difficulty establishing personal relationships with humans. According to all reports, subject has not had any romantic or sexual relationships during her entire enlistment.

ADDENDUM: Subject is not authorized for deployment to or release to New York Arcology for any reason.

*Commissariat Political Assessment:*

Subject is disinterested in politics, but very well connected. Mentors include Captain David Anderson, General Jason von Grath, and General Rachel Florez. Figures of note connected to her at least peripherally include General Igor Petrovsky (retired) and Major Preston Kyle. Given that the von Grath and Kyle Families are highly placed and that David Anderson is distantly related to the Andersons, the Commissariat is hamstrung in restraining the subject.

UPDATE: Due to classified operations (Subfile CC-AIS Joint Mission 34, subfile s44943) subject's relationship with Florez terminated.

Subject's individual fame as the Butcher of Torfan also gives her enough notability and popularity among some segments of the population that media access at high levels would be easy for her to obtain. While subject is not fully aware of such notability, and is incapable of utilizing such on her own, she could be manipulated by others with great ease. Subject's emotional vulnerability leaves her at a disadvantage with experienced psychological operators, and as such, subject should be treated as extremely politically dangerous.

Subject displays strong conservative views regarding the role of government, conservative views regarding social justice, liberal views regarding social welfare, and hostile views regarding human dominance.

Subject is comfortable with aliens, shows a fascination with asari, and is able to work closely with krogan even under stress.

Subject displayed admirable devotion to the Systems Alliance until the Battle of Torfan. While still obedient, subject is rated as only 'reliable' in terms of reliability, due to repeated statements regarding dissatisfaction with certain controversial SA actions.

Subject has no close friendships. Relationships with her RRU squad deteriorated in the aftermath of Torfan. Her connections to General von Grath and General Florez have not been utilized since Torfan, and her connection to other mentioned figures besides Captain Anderson appear tenuous.

ADDENDUM: Interviews with both Captain Anderson and Commander Shepard indicate a strained, strange relationship. Not exactly father/daughter, not exactly friendship. This is believed to stem from the events just prior to the Tenth Street Massacre.

UPDATE: As of 1.19.2183, other formative relationships with various mentors and squad-mates appear to be terminated in the aftermath of the Battle of Torfan.

UPDATE: As of 09.24.2183, relationships with David Anderson and Jason von Grath reestablished. Former warnings apply.

UPDATE: As of 11.14.2183, Shepard has developed formative relationships with a small number of people of seemingly normal focus.

*[SECTION RESTRICTION – Authorization, Commissar-Captain Alfred Jiong, SACC] Subject has also entered into romantic relationship with Dr. Liara T'Soni, asari noble. This has decreased PRIDE rating from 4.5 to 4.2 and will drop to 3.5 if this becomes public knowledge. [RESTRICTION ENDS]*

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#### **Known Records (Criminal, civilian record):**

*19 charges, distribution of controlled narcotics (dropped charges, court load)*

*31 charges, possession of controlled narcotics with intent to distribute (unable to prosecute)*

*33 charges, theft (all dismissed, court load)*

*21 charges, grand theft (convicted on 13, adjudicated sentencing, see military enlistment)*

*9 charges, arson (lack of evidence, dismissed)*

*4 charges, assault and battery (associated with rape charges, dismissed)*

*4 charges, rape (dismissed)*

*2 charges, attempted rape (dismissed)*

*119 charges, murder class 1 (convicted on 119 charges, adjudicated sentencing, see military*

*enlistment)*

*44 charges, murder class 2 (convicted on all charges, adjudicated sentencing, see military enlistment)*

*19 charges, murder class 3 (mandatory capital punishment waived, adjudicated sentencing, see military enlistment)*

*17 charges, assault with deadly weapon, biotic (convicted on 3 charges, adjudicated sentencing, see military enlistment)*

**Suspected:**

*Between 22 and 25 instances of grand theft, grand theft auto, and grand theft military.*

*Between 25 and 30 charges of distribution or intent to distribute controlled narcotics.*

*2 rape charges (brought by females)*

*Between 4 and 11 charges of arson*

*Estimated (conservatively) in tenure as Tenth Street Reds assassin to have killed over 100 gang members between the ages of 15 and 18. This does not include confirmed charges .*

*Multiple misdemeanors and class 3 felonies.*

**Notable incidents:**

Note that only important arrests will be listed. As indicate above, subject was arrested numerous times. Neither the bounty services nor the NYARC ever properly referred the case to the local Commissariat.

9.11.2169 - arrest at Volthan Apartments, arresting authority Civil Patrol Services, disturbance of peace call. Subject, aged 14, found covered in blood with severe stab wounds and clear signs of forced sexual activity. DNA from dead male human matched against rape kit test at site. 3 others found dead, stabbed from behind in jugular. Arresting officer notes subject "scared the shit out of him" with visual glare. Refused to surrender, tasered to submission and taken to psychological counseling. Released in error.

*[AIS SECURITY RESTRICTION: Additional investigation found several other dead bodies on the scene, notable for having been killed at close range with a military sidearm. Additionally, the police were unable to explain how the subject got free of restraints noted on site. Apartment was clearly set up as some form of trideo recording studio for the production of child pornography. AIS is still investigating. RESTRICTION ENDS]*

11.15.2169 - arrest with known members of Tenth Street Reds. Arresting authority, Calthium Bounty services. Released after bond paid in full by Tenth Street Red lieutenant, charges dropped due to court load. Charged with distribution of controlled narcotics. First actual criminal record.

3.12.2170 - arrest with known members of Tenth Street Reds. Multiple charges, arson, grand theft (auto and military), distribution of controlled substances. Arresting authority, Civil Patrol Services.

Dismissed with prejudice by Precinct Captain Yong Li. Notable due to the first time Yong Li interfered with court proceedings, claiming charges were fabricated, or failing to locate witness or evidence for trial.

12.1.2171 - arrest for distribution of controlled narcotics, red sand. Arresting authority, NYPD. Dismissed after review by Precinct Captain Yong Li, due to court load. Notable due to size of sized shipment (83 kilos) and that shipment went missing one month later.

1.19.2173 - arrest for assault with a deadly weapon, biotic. Arresting authority, NYPD. Dismissed after review by Precinct Captain Yong Li. Notable due to the bizarre malfunction of over twenty security cameras that should have captured the incident and six eyewitnesses who vanished in the course of the

week. Notable also for the fact that this was the first use of biotics by the subject, involving a hacked L1 implant.

2.04.2174 - detainment and arrest for attempted rape. Arresting authority, Dorasn Intersystems Bounty Services. Dismissed after review by Precinct Captain Yong Li. ADDENDUM: Charges brought forth by civilian female. Claims she was drinking in bar and admitted to making a pass at subject, claims she was pinned to table and induced at knife-point to commit acts of sadomasochistic nature. No injuries aside from bruising (genital, breasts, stomach) were found on plaintiff, nor eyewitnesses that would come forward. In weeks following this, several more incidents of the same kind were brought to court and dismissed.

2.11.2175 - arrest for assault with a deadly weapon, biotic. Arresting authority, Calthium Bounty Services. Dismissed after review by Precinct Captain Yong Li. Notable as the last arrest incident prior to the Massacre.

### **Tenth Street Massacre Addendum:**

4.30.2175 - event known as the Tenth Street Massacre. While records of this event are speculative (mostly due to the extreme lethality of the subject), a few pertinent facts can be gleaned from the police record, emergency responders, and SWAT Unit. As detailed in additional information, Precinct Captain Jason Yong Li was utilizing the Reds as a method of combating crime in the area of his precinct, feeding them information, recovered weapons, even drugs that had been seized from other gangs, and using the Reds to obliterate the Four-Nines and the Path of Lho, the larger and more dominant gangs in the area.

On the morning of the 30th, subject was assaulted by members of the Path of Lho while transitioning to the northern area of the arcology to sell red sand. Subject was saved by the presence of off-duty 1st Lieutenant David Anderson, who engaged the gang members. Anderson was able to kill nine and disable three more attackers before being critically wounded, and the subject attempted to protect him. Subject also took a severe wound to the chest during the fight in the process of protecting David Anderson, and drove off the attackers. According to eyewitnesses, subject wept at the sight of Anderson lying seemingly dead in the street, and was notably relieved when he proved to be only wounded.

Despite outstanding warrants and her own injuries, subject personally got Lieutenant Anderson to a local hospital for his injuries. In doing so, she was identified by a local police officer as being a gang member. A partial police report implies that police officers attempted to get a statement from Anderson implicating subject in criminal activity. Anderson declined to do so. Hospital monitoring systems recorded a brief conversation between Anderson and Shepard, in which she inquires why he didn't sell her out and he replies that if she had been evil she wouldn't not have gotten shot saving his life, and that she deserves another chance.

Subject vanished at some point that morning after having her wounds treated with medigel. Anderson was kept at the hospital, still severely wounded. Eyewitness reports are sketchy, but it appears that at some point that afternoon Tenth Street Red gang leaders decided that a war hero would make a good hostage to hold for ransom. The gangs had done this before, with a mixed success rate (they captured Rear Admiral Jackson in 2159 and released him for random of over 1 million credits). The Systems Alliance would never pay ransom for its officers, but Anderson's family was distantly related to the Viscount Andersons of Britain, and the gang seemed to think they would ransom him.

Given her success rate and the fact she knew the target, it is likely that the Tenth Street Reds expected Shepard to conduct this act. What happened next is conjectural in its reasons but absolute in results - Shepard proceeded to single-handedly execute every single Tenth Street Reds leader, and began slaughtering the other gang members with heavy weapons from their own stockpile.

*[REDACTED – SYSTEMS ALLIANCE COMMISSARIAT CODE OMEGA : Investigations after the Massacre indicated Tenth Street Reds may have been in contact with off-world gang elements and planned to sell him to aliens interested in his knowledge. Shepard was not aware of this at the time of the Massacre. REDACTION ENDS]*

Only one survivor, Jared Finch, is known to have escaped, and according to arrest records prior to execution by the Commissariat he stated that Shepard "lost her shit when we told her to kidnap her fucking hero Anderson. She screamed that he was a good person and we only went after shit, and we all laughed at her and said she could fuck him after we got paid and put a cap in his ass." According to the report, Shepard tore the throat out of the speaker with her bare hands and proceeded to execute the leader of the Reds, a Jethro Taylor, by coring out one of his eyes with her thumb and shoving the exposed socket onto an exposed spar of metal.

Local police units attempted to intervene and were forced to withdraw as the other gangs piled onto the chaotic battle, with several hundred gang members from various gangs attempted to crush the Tenth Street Reds. Subject apparently took this as somehow offensive and began sniping opposing gang members as well. 119 people were killed or wounded that could be directly traced back to Shepard, and at least 9 ground vehicles destroyed. At least two minor gangs were completely obliterated in the fighting. Multiple nearby buildings were on fire and news services attempting to get in close enough to use remote drone cameras were placed under fire as well.

It is worth noting that the destructiveness of Shepard's actions was due to three things. First, her biotic barrier gave her protection, while most gang members had no kinetic shielding, nor weapons that could pierce her barrier. Second, Shepard had appropriated heavy weapons from the gang armory, leaving most of them unable to reply in kind to her firepower. Finally, she was very well dug into the gang headquarters and capable of firing on gang members indiscriminately, while the gangs were fighting each other almost as much as they were trying to get at Shepard.

At 6:43 PM, one of Shepard's shots apparently detonated a fuel cell of a gang vehicle, the ensuing blast accidentally killing two police officers. At this point heavy SWAT units responded in full kinetic armor. The SWAT team stormed the building and discovered an abattoir, with over one hundred gang members butchered and executed, many with incendiary weapons or heavy weapons intended for anti-material and not anti-personnel use. Two SWAT members actually withdrew from the building due to nausea.

SWAT units engaged Shepard on the top floor of the Tenth Street Reds HQ building shortly afterwards, with orders to subdue. Eleven officers were wounded, three severely, before Shepard was shot multiple times and backed into a corner threatening to detonate the building. Observed holding some form of old omni-tool based haptic interface, SWAT formed a cordon and called for a negotiator. Police unit psychologist was called up, but under Systems Alliance authority, a still badly wounded Lieutenant David Anderson demanded to be allowed to speak to Shepard. This was allowed, but a call was sent the Commissariat for a Expurgation Team should he fail.

*[REDACTED : LOG OF CONVERSATION BETWEEN SUBJECT AND ANDERSON, DAVID – deleted. Authorization – [refError 9ss94-alpha]. Please contact the AIS. REDACTION ENDS]*

Despite expectations, Anderson was able to talk Shepard down and take her into custody. Anderson is believed to have come to some sort of deal with the Precinct Captain, Yong Li. As a result, Shepard was remanded shortly thereafter to Alliance medical custody. Investigation of records and recordings in the Reds HQ lead to the discovery of Yong Li's role in the success of the Reds, and his suppression of evidence that could have led to the arrest of Shepard years earlier.

*Notable information:* Precinct Captain Jason Yong Li was very likely a distant relative of the subject. 85% of all dismissed charges and records were done so at his behest. Based on existing evidence, it

appears Captain Li was using the subject (and the Reds) as a form of "cleanup" of other gangs in the lower levels of the arcology. After the Tenth Street Massacre, of course, there was no way to continue utilizing the subject, and the very hasty agreement to allow Shepard to enlist in the military was done mere days before the Captain was hauled before the Authority Board, stripped of his rank, charged with state treason and executed.

ADDENDUM: Violence of this nature should have drawn Commissariat attention long before the Massacre. The assigned commissar for the region was found dead six days after the Massacre, and had been dead for almost a full year. Cause of death was indeterminate due to decay. Whoever murdered the commissar in question took his omnitool and continued to make reports that did not include any mention of Shepard or the Tenth Street Reds.

The Judgment Cadre is still investigating this incident. However, based on the failed attempt to locate the omnitool and perpetrator, which lead to a shoot out with criminal elements who had ties to Cerberus, it is believed that Cerberus may have been blocking this event from us.

*[REDACTED – SYSTEMS ALLIANCE COMMISSARIAT CODE OMEGA : Given further understanding of exactly who was in charge of Cerberus in the aftermath of the raid on Edolus, their intervention and the assignment of Shepard to the Penal Legions under Florez takes on a much more sinister light. Additional investigation is required. There is a possibility Anderson had Cerberus connections and utilized these on behalf of Shepard. REDACTION ENDS]*

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### **Duty Summary:**

*Rank:* Commander, SSV Normandy

*Rating :* A6 Marine Infantry. C7 Biotic Infantry. N7 Special Forces. Level IV / V space command package (ops/nav/eng).

Initial Deployment, Corporal, 3rd Military Penal Legion Unit, gunner.

Promotion with honors: Authorization, Major Rachel Florez, 3rd MPL, Brevet to Sergeant.

Promotion with honors: Authorization, Major of Marines Rachel Florez, 3rd MPL, Brevet to Gunnery Sergeant.

Promotion: Authorization, General Jason von Grath, 2nd Fleet Marine Command, to "A" qualification ranking.

Promotion with honors: Authorization, General Jason von Grath, 2nd Fleet Marine Command, lateral transfer to A enlisted rank status : Petty Officer First. Brevet promotion to Chief Petty Officer.

Promotion: Authorization, General Jason von Grath, 2nd Fleet Marine Command, lateral transfer to C biotic specialist.

Promotion: Authorization, General Jason von Grath, 2nd Fleet Marine Command , to Senior Chief Petty Officer.

Promotion with Honors: Authorization, Systems Alliance Officer Training Command, Sir Raphael von Grath, commanding , to 1st Lieutenant.

Promotion with Honors: General Jason von Grath, 2nd Fleet Marine Command brevet promotion to Lieutenant Commander.

Formalization, Systems Alliance Command, of Lieutenant Commander Rank.

Promotion with Valor: President, Systems Alliance, as recipient of the Star of Terra, brevet promotion

to Commander (Staff)

Promotion: Authorization, Systems Alliance Officer Training Command, Sir Raphael von Grath, commanding , to Commander (Line)

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**Awards:**

Star of Terra, for actions conducted on Torfan.

Medal of Valor, 3 repeats, actions beyond the call of duty

Distinguished Service Medal , 3 repeats

Legion of Honor , 2 repeats.

Purple Heart, 9 repeats

Navy Cross, Marine, 3 repeats

Marksmanship Wartime award, 12 repeats

**Training Awards:**

C7 Silver Flash (retired 2181)

N4 Silver Flash: current holder

N7 Silver Flash: current holder

Qualifications:

Zero-G Special Warfare badge

C7 Augmented Biotics Warfare badge

Biotic Instructor badge

Marksmanship badges

master, pistol course

master, rifle course, assault

master, rifle course, sniper

master, rifle course, anti-material

infantryman, sub-machinegun and machine pistol course

infantryman, coaxial mount armor course

Pass on go/nogo shotgun and heavy weapons courses

Certified journeyman class electronic warfare course

Certified journeyman class electronic countermeasures course

"Miathra" master ranking, asari biotic commune training / cross-training course with asari commandos.

Joint SA / TH sniper class ranking 1st of 32 turian and human participants.

**N7 Participation:**

N1 Electronics and Countermeasures badge, N1 Hostile Terrain survival badge, N1 Weapons course badge

N2 Survival and Rescue / Escape badge, N2 Zero-G combat badge

N3 Hostile systems survival badge (additional qualification on Adept-class biotic survival badge, but no badge awarded due to regulations)

N4 Sniper Qualifications badge, N4 Infiltrator-class sniper badge (awarded despite regulations due to score, record range and time)

N5 Stealth Operations Conduct badge, N5 Command Operations badge

N6 Combined Arms/Biotics badge (additional qualification on Infiltrator-class sniper course, but no badge awarded due to regulations)

N7 Graduate with honors, highest current final qualification score.

### **Space-Side Qualifications / Training:**

Arcturus system ship command qualification, ranks 4 and 5 (Engineer, Navigation, Executive).  
Qualified Systems Alliance Marine line officer and Naval Line Officer.

**Discomendations and demerits:** none in training. 4 letters of discommendation from various operating theater CO's or XO's. All denied. 2 charges of conduct unbecoming an officer, dismissed. 1 charge of disobeying direct order, dismissed. 1 charge of utilization of a banned military device, dismissed.

*ADDENDUM:* Subject has had zero legal violations when off duty since enlistment that have been sustained.

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### **Operational Overview: (Eyes Only – AIS Classification Tantalus)**

Commander Shepard is a biotic assault infantry soldier with extreme cross training in electronic info-war, biotic CQB, biotic crowd control, and sniping. Her personal background means she is very comfortable with either direct assault or infiltration and assassination. She holds qualifications at the very highest level of proficiency in every known method of combat the SA offers with the exception of engineering-specific info-war classes and adept-biotic training, and she has participated in those and placed well above the 90% percentile.

*[REDACTED – SYSTEMS ALLIANCE COMMISSARIAT CODE OMEGA : Additionally, Shepard has received specialized training involving the asari biotic charge known as the kanquess. Shepard's proficiency with this maneuver matched or exceeds that of most asari and all current and past Vanguard-class biotics. Her variant of the kanquess is very rare among modern day asari who find it less useful. This 'dancing kanquess' is extremely low-cycle but has reduced power. REDACTION ENDS]*

Shepard's has no single battle style outside of directly leading from the front. Tactically she prefers the use of misdirection, combined ground arms, and heavy suppressive fire prior to flanking whenever employable.

*[SECTION RESTRICTION – Authorization, Jason von Grath, General, SAMC] Her personal command style with larger units is mixed, but in most cases results in high casualties among non-special forces personnel, which she will use as force multipliers, distractions or even as bait. This has resulted in very low success rates when she is given forces to command above company strength [RESTRICTION ENDS], however, she is qualified to command up to battalion level forces (she has not had or shown an interested in regimental level command training) and is most formidable in small, special forces style squads of 3 to 5 specialists.*

Shepard is willing to endure heavy casualties in all non-special forces operations, which has resulted in corresponding morale drop when she is given strategic command. Conversely, Shepard has an *[SECTION RESTRICTION – Authorization, Jason von Grath, General, SAMC] almost perfect operational record when her command or team members are limited to [RESTRICTION ENDS]* special forces personnel, with expected morale gains. There is a marked variable between the survival rates of soldiers she knows personally, on any level, and those she does not.

*[SECTION RESTRICTED - Authorization, Donnel Udina, Systems Alliance Authority under Article 9 , Section 3 of the Systems Alliance Military Justice Charter] Shepard's public image is currently one of terror to most alien forces. Unfortunately, she also has a low reputation among many rank-and-file soldiers who have connected her exploits with the high casualty rates in the battles she participates in, particular after the Battle of Torfan. While special forces units are not affected by this, Shepard's presence in any military line unit will result in a corresponding morale reduction. She has survived multiple attempts at 'fragging' by disaffected soldiers, all of which ended in the termination of said soldiers. [RESTRICTION ENDS]*

Her image and reputation, however, are a force multiplier in any conflict. Surveillance shows that even krogan display agitation and neurological/physiological bodily changes associated with fear during combat with Shepard. This trend accelerated markedly after the battle at Dirth where independent video operators managed to record footage of her laughing while biotically ripping the spines out of krogan mercenaries and killing six heavily armed turians in nine seconds in close quarters battle.

Shepard's current preferred armory authorizations are as follows: customized Carnifex Model S personal defense pistol, fluidic-shock mounted Avenger assault rifle modified for increased rate of fire and double-core tungsten rounds, M-29 ODIN class shotgun, illegal in Citadel and System Alliance space, permits obtained from Citadel Security and SA Office of Special Authorizations for use in combat only, M-919 Thunderbolt Anti-personnel long-range rifle.

*UPDATE: As of 01.12.2184, Shepard's current preferred armory authorizations are as follows: highly customized M-903 turian Sunfire plasma compression pistol, taken from Saren Arterius. Full-auto remounted-rail Valkyrie assault rifle using jackhammer rounds. M-29 ODIN class shotgun,utilizing polonium rounds. Salarian Manur sniper rifle modified for human usage.*

*ADDENDUM:* Personal records can usually give some insight into a person, but the very long list of Shepard's accomplishments contrasted with a criminal record of extreme violence often is missed. From the time she exited the Penal Legion to the present day, Shepard has exhibited nothing but complete 100% adherence to the letter of the law. She has not even had a speeding ticket or civil disturbance violation fine. Such a complete 100% turnaround in character is usually indicative of someone changing their way of life, but from all evidence Shepard was the most talented and skilled Tenth Street Red gang member as well. Excellence appears to be her goal, either in criminal or military affairs. Once she is devoted to a course of action she does not stop until incapacitated or completely successful.

*ADDENDUM:* Criminal , arrest and sentencing records can only describe the horror of subject's childhood and early life in clinical terms. The shift from being a sex object and "owned" to a cold, emotionless killing machine that executed anything or anyone in her way can be traced back to the earliest arrest record, but we don't know what set it off or what happened to turn her from what seemed to be a traumatized helpless figure to a sociopath.

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## **SERVICE HISTORY:**

**All sections marked in italics are restricted viewing,: Authorization, Donnel Udina, Systems**

## **Alliance Authority under Article 9 , Section 3 of the Systems Alliance Military Justice Charter.**

5.3.2175 : Adjudicated enlistment, 3rd Marine Penal Legion (3MPL). Liaison officer with Alliance standard military is Lieutenant David Anderson.

5.4.2175 : Commencement of Adjusted Service Boot Camp

8.22.2175: Completion of Adjusted Service Boot Camp. Graduation with honors. Promotion to Corporal.

*8.26.2175: Held in suspicion related to the murders of several persons involved in the sex-slave trade network responsible for publishing trideo in which she was a subject as a child. Charges reviewed and dismissed by Major Rachel Florez.*

9.01.2175: Returns from leave granted after ASBC. During leave period, studied in base library, spent 6 hours daily in rifle and pistol ranges.

9.02.2175: Assignment to 4th Platoon, 2nd Regiment, 1st Battalion, 3MPL as assistant gunner.

*10.11.2175: Disciplinary punishment for repeatedly striking a Commissar in the line of duty. Reports indicate subject did so to defend squad-mate from what she perceived as unfair punishment. Punishment deferred per orders, Rachel Florez.*

10.30.2175: Completes "B" Rate package. Advanced to B4.

11.12.2175: First deployment, anti-pirate operations against Terminus pirates on Kalthus. Subject kills 19 batarians, managing to save the lives of 2 of her squad mates despite multiple wounds.

11.14.2175: Award package submitted for Navy cross by Lieutenant Commander David Anderson, who commanded the N7 element in the operations on Kalthus.

11.19.2175: Operations on Kalthus complete.

11.21.2175: Awarded Purple Heart, Navy Cross, Marksmanship Award. Promoted to Sergeant

11.24.2175: Made squad leader.

12.11.2175 : Operation in New Edo system, hostile pirate boarding operations. Took shots for squad mate Beatrice Shields, personally kills 15 batarians and a krogan. Field brevet to Gunnery Sergeant.

### Miracle at Vansha

01.04.2176: 3MPL deployed to Vansha in response to pirate raid. Subject's dropship shot out of the sky, but subject survives. Links up with elements of the 2MPL, and directs 3 squads to form a flanking assault line as she storms the command group of the pirates. Using nothing but biotics, grenades and CQB subject kills all pirate officers at their comm center, allowing main elements of 3MPL and 2MPL to hold position and for the 34th Marine to crush the pirates. However, the squads she used as cover are killed nearly to a man.

Subject's remaining forces were able to dig into the ruined comm center and hold against repeated assaults. Comm center becomes a choke-point as additional reinforcements are put into battle.

*During the assault, elements of the 15th RIU onsite were overrun by pirate forces and retreated in poor order. RIU survivors reach comm center and demand admittance. Subject allows them to enter, but engages in an argument with the executive officer of the RIU, Captain Thelma Songs, when the latter demands subject stand down and to breach defense lines to let them pass. Subject refuses, despite threats of Commissariat punishment from Captain Songs.*

*When Captain Songs attempts to order subject arrested, subject's team opens fire, badly wounding her*

*and several other officers. Shepard orders remaining RIU units to hold and they manage to repel two more assaults until reinforcements arrive.*

01.10.2176 : Upon cessation of hostilities, Commissariat forces review subject's actions. They recommend an inquiry, but also immediately execute Captain Songs and all 15th RIU officers involved in the battle for cowardice.

01.11.2176: Inquiry into actions finds subject performed her duty. Field breveted to Chief Petty Officer. Removed from 3MPL and sent to Earth for C-class biotic infantry training.

01.14.2176: Awarded Distinguished Service Medal for actions on Vansha.

01.21.2176: Begins C-class biotic training.

4.13.2176: Completes C-Class biotic training, awarded C7 classification with honors.

4.14.2176: Awarded C7 Silver Flash, for having highest ranking qualification test score ever.

*4.16.2176: Letter of discommendation from CO, 15th RIU. Letter dismissed by General von Grath, per review and recommendation by Lieutenant Commander David Anderson and Colonel Rachel Florez.*

5.01.2176: Authorization by General von Grath for exculpation of Class Z restriction on 114 members of the 3rd MPL , including Shepard and her squad. Shepard is sworn in as a member of the Systems Alliance Marine Corps on this date.

5.03.2176: Assigned to 5th Battalion, 2nd Marine Rapid Response Unit. Subject begins A rate qualification.

7.01.2176 : Completes A rate qualification. Advanced to A2.

7.02.2176 : Successful anti-pirate operation, planet Kilgore, under General von Grath.

7.15.2176 : Successful anti-pirate operation, planet Eden Prime under General von Grath. Subject's squad wounded. Notable in that subject did not land at any time on the planet, instead being involved in orbital boarding operations of pirate ships.

7.29.2176 : Successful anti-pirate operation, planet Sensan II, under General von Grath. Advanced to A5.

### Battle Of Horizon (1st)

8.09.2176: 2nd RRU deployed to Horizon in response to batarian/turian pirate raid. Raid turns out to be major invasion, complicit figures in colony administration sabotage GARDIAN defense system to allow pirates to land. 42 minutes into RRU deployment, 5th Battalion's entire command cadre, aboard the cruiser Fort Worth, is knocked out of the battle by direct kinetic orbital strike. CPO Shepard takes command, executing three Marines who attempt to surrender to pirates and eighteen more who attempt to flee the battle. Without waiting for chain of command, half of 5th Battalion dispersed guerrilla style among colony population to tie up and delay invaders, while the other half storms pirate landing site under cover of darkness.

The Horizon 3rd Battallion, under General Jack Adams, SAMC, begins to break. Horizon 1st Battalion, under General Oleg Petrovsky, fights through heavy batarian reinforcements to stiffen their lines. After reinforcements, batarians retreat. Petrovsky advises pursuit and decimation of fleeing units, but General Adams overrules him. Less than thirty minutes later, the half of 5th RRU Battalion dispersed to aid colony population comes under heavy assault.

*Subject moves to reinforce her men, and is given an order to stand her ground by General Adams, as she is protecting his flank. General von Grath is out of communications due to being trapped in his*

*downed cruiser, but General Petrovsky countermands the order. Ignoring the bickering between the generals, subject manages to relieve her beleaguered force and evacuate the colonists to safer locations.*

*During the time 5th Battalion is out of place, more batarian forces arrive, and begin shelling General Adams position. 1st Battalion attempts to respond, but batarians (thought to be routed earlier) hit them from the flank and break their lines. Rather than fall back to secure position, Shepard leads a small force of men towards the landing area the batarian forces have their gunships at.*

3rd Battalion under heavy kinetic fire, and 1st Battalion is being overrun, General Adams in CQB with pirates, when Shepard's strike manages to kill ground force holding landing area. Capturing several gunships and shuttles, Shepard strikes pirate force from behind. Pirates break and escape, Shepard orders all units to fire and destroy retreating and surrendering forces. Order countermanded by General Adams.

*General Petrovsky agrees with Shepard, and General Adams relieves him of command. Petrovsky angrily refuses to do so and begins withdrawing 1st Regiment out of the battle, covering civilian retreat.*

Shepard orders her supporting units to pursue batarians, and as a result, defensive lines north of Adams position weaken. Panicked batarians push through, killing everything in their path, including General Adams. Shepard reiterates kill order and this time is obeyed.

8.10.2176: Shepard personally executes pirate leader Hantha Jones, human, rather than arresting him. Official reports indicates he was executed in escape attempt. Autopsy shows lividity on wrists, legs, indicating he was and had been securely tied up prior and after death.

Alliance reinforcements arrive and secure Horizon spaceport.

Follow up pursuit of retreating batarians by Shepard drives them away from the wreck of the SCV Fort Worth, where both General von Grath and Colonel Rachel Florez were trapped in the wreckage, pinned down and injured. Subject extracts them successfully after an intense CQB fight with several batarian biotics, including one Glorious-level biotic commando.

[AIS SECURITY RESTRICTION: Additional investigation shows that Hantha Jones was involved in piracy operations as well as slave transactions on Earth. Jones was tied to the slavery rings employed by the same child pornography distributors believed to be responsible for Shepard's sterility. RESTRICTION ENDS]

8.11.2176: Horizon secured.

8.12.2176: Shepard called before board of inquiry, charged with conduct unbecoming an officer and disobedience of direct orders.

8.13.2176: Recently promoted Commander David Anderson acts as Shepard's council. Inquiry board finds Shepard saved the lives of the colonists, managed to preserve the bulk of 3rd Battalion, destroyed the pirates, and her lapse in judgment that MAY have caused the death of General Adams is forgivable given she is not trained for battalion level leadership.

8.14.2176: Commendation award recommendation from General Jason von Grath. (Addendum: von Grath and Adams has significant friction, politically and personally). Seconded by newly promoted General Rachel Florez, General Adams replacement (Addendum; Florez had filed sexual harassment charges against Adams repeatedly but these were dismissed.)

8.20.2176 : General Petrovsky resigns from the SAMC. He gives a statement exonerating Shepard from any wrongdoing and implies that several officers testifying against her are committing perjury.

8.22.2176: All charges dropped against Shepard. She is brevetted immediately to Senior Chief Petty Officer, with a recommendation for Alliance Officer Training Academy.

8.23.2176: Awarded Medal of Valor, Purple Heart (2 repeats, for serious injuries), Legion of Honor (for saving Lieutenant General Florez in CQB against superior forces, armed only with a pistol and her biotics), Navy Cross.

9.01.2176: Released from medical.

8.15.2176 : Successful anti-pirate operation, planet Horizon, under General von Grath.

9.29.2176 : Successful anti-pirate operation, planet New Edo, under General von Grath. Advanced to A7.

10.03.2176: Enters Alliance Officer Training Command, Annapolis

5.12.2178: Graduation with honors, Alliance Officer Training command. Awarded Purple Heart for injuries sustained in final graduation exam, risked life and sustained life threatening injury to save fellow student from malfunctioning shuttle.

5.13.2178: Promoted to 1st Lieutenant. Upon recommendation of General von Grath, brevetted to Lieutenant Commander.

5.19.2178: Second RRU promoted to full brigade status. Major Preston Kyle attached to the 2 RRU as the CO. General von Grath becomes responsible for brigade level command.

6.11.2178: Selected for N7 program, along with her squad. Begins N1 qualifications.

6.19.2178: Completes N1 and continues through N2 program.

8.02.2178: Completes Special Warfare courses (Zero-G, Biotic Instructor, electronic warfare)

### Massacre at Dirth

8.19.2178: Emergency deployment to Dirth with 1st and 2nd Regiments, Second RRU, due to pirate invasion. En route, General von Grath's command ship is holed by mines on final approach and goes down in foothills outside of landing zone. Broken communications suggest they are surrounded by hostiles and the ship's drive core is unstable. Command staff all on board the ship for final briefing. Command staff includes Commander David Anderson and Major Preston Kyle.

Infantry dropships establish new chain of command. Brevet Lieutenant Commander Shepard outranks both 1st Lieutenants in charge of the other companies, even though she has only been an officer for a few months. Disagreement over command settled when Shepard accuses 1st Lieutenant Jack Parson of cowardice and pistol whips him unconscious. Throwing him in the brig, Shepard lands all infantry dropships in unorthodox patterns, using the dropships to project cover fire and dropping platoons in a broad firing line rather than massed infantry.

Pirates react with makeshift artillery using converted GARDIAN laser arrays. Shepard leaves 1st Regiment under command of it's XO , ordering them to flank down the foothills and flush out pirates. 2nd Regiment is instructed to split in half, one half digging in outside the colony to protect civilians, the other to proceed under cover of 1st Regiment to extract 2 RRU command staff from wreck.

Shepard wires up one of the drop ships for single pilot control and kamikazes it into the pirate base camp, ejecting in an escape pod jury rigged for mass displacement effects four seconds before impact. The explosion incinerates 55% of the pirate ground force and obliterates their hardened cover, but kills dozens of marines too close to the blast who were flanking the site per orders. Inquiry notes that if not for the 1st Regiment's flanking maneuver drawing the attention of the pirates and the GARDIAN artillery, said artillery would have shot the dropship out of the sky in short order.

Shepard exits pod, video footage shows her cutting a path through pirates on foot to link up with 2nd Regiment, nineteen confirmed sniper kills and two CQB kills including a krogan with his own shotgun and an elcor by way of biotic 'piledriver'. 2nd regiment, lead by Shepard, links up with command staff, extracting Anderson, von Grath, Kyle and a dozen other badly wounded officers. Extraction slowed by heavily wounded lower ranking officers. Sending senior officers on ahead with heavy escort, Shepard makes a stand to cover retreat. Since ground cars cannot transport everyone, junior officers with most severe wounds are held back, along with five platoons of 2nd Regiment.

Pirate units do not pursue, instead breaking off to strike the colony proper. Shepard pursues.

Shepard's units reach the main colony, where the pirates have attacked heavily and in massive numbers. Rather than abandon the colonists, however, Shepard splits her forces. The majority are sent to protect the colonists, while the rest head to reinforce the force already covering the retreat of the wounded officer and command cadre.

The battle for the colony is fierce, and by all accounts the subject was the primary reason for its successful conclusion. Shepard, despite being shot and wounded multiple times, managed to evacuate the entirety of the colony before pirate forces became too numerous to hold back. Some members of the command cadre (Major Kyle in particular) attempted to help in this endeavor.

Eventually the fourth and fifth squads escorting the command cadre reported incoming skirmish fire, and Shepard had to retreat. Boldly splitting her force yet again, she drew the main pirate body away herself, with a handful of her men, while the rest evacuated the civilians and rejoined the command cadre.

Shepard then fought a fighting retreat, holding off pursuit long enough for von Grath to establish command radio links to the sabotaged GARDIAN and orbital defense network. *Using network, von Grath takes out pirate support ships and conducts three unauthorized kinetic strikes on the planet itself.*

*AIS Addendum: Official records indicated that a Lieutenant Commander Henry Vore did the strikes. However, Lieutenant Commander Vore did not have the authorization codes to perform such strikes. AIS believes that Shepard either hacked the launch authenticator, or was given the authentication by General von Grath. While subject is skilled in many info-war techniques, the AIS is fairly sure von Grath pulled the trigger himself.*

Bombardment decimates the pirates, allowing time to further move the civilians out of the way, but the majority of the military force is still pinned down, unable to fall back due to having to protect the civilians.

Rather than lose everyone, Shepard orders the heavily wounded junior officer cadre, along with any volunteers, to hold the line while the bulk of the rest of the forces fall back. One officer, Lieutenant Commander Henry Vore, accuses her of cowardice. According to eyewitness reports (suppressed by General von Grath) Shepard executed LC Vore for treason, then withdrew the enlisted infantry, leaving the officers to be overrun.

(ADDENDUM: Most details of the battle were sealed until inquiry of 2183. Even after that, we do not know what is truth and what is fabrication by officers who hate Shepard. An execution of such a nature seems very close to a criminal act, which flies in the face of Shepard's behavior since enlistment. More likely, Shepard would have stayed behind, and LC Vore attempted to remove any support making her sacrifice capable of slowing the advance, leading to her taking drastic action.)

The officers and volunteers are overrun, but the delay is enough for the civilians and the remaining military forces to reach the fortified spaceport. The ensuing siege is short lived as the 3rd, 5th, and 11th

RRU all hit the planet the next day, routing the pirate forces.

8.25.2178: Aftermath of Dirth offensive completed. Major Kyle stands down unit for rest, organizes Shepard as commander of the Second RRU's lead NCT, code-named 'Neutron'.

9.07.2178: NCT Special Operations under Major Kyle, location classified. Notable as first deployment of Team Neutron.

10.22.2178: NCT Special Operations under Major Kyle, at Ferris Fields, anti-pirate operation. All pirates executed or killed in battle.

10.31.2178: NCT Special Operations under Major Kyle, deep space boarding action of pirate ships, station, and anti-pirate operation. All pirates executed or killed in battle.

11.17.2178: NCT Special Operations under Major Kyle, location classified, anti-slaver operations. Squad mate Beatrice Shields injured severely protecting Shepard.

11.19.2178: Letter of reprimand from reliving forces for brutality and conduct unbecoming, with complaints of batarian slavers executed after surrender. Dismissed with prejudice by General von Grath.

12.21.2178: NCT Special Operations under Major Kyle, location classified, anti-slaver operations.

12.30.2178: NCT Special Operations under Major Kyle, location classified, anti-slaver operations. Squad mate Jason Dunn severely injured, requires cybernetic arm replacements.

01.11.2179: NCT Special Operations under Major Kyle, location classified, anti-slaver operations. Squad mate Beatrice Shields injured a third time.

01.23.2178: NCT Special Operations under Major Kyle, boarding action against pirates.

01.27.2179: 2 RRU stand-down for refit of strike force. Neutron given leave to work on N2 training.

02.10.2179: 2 RRU's command transport sent in for overhaul. Shepard and Neutron deployed TDY to finish N7 qualifications.

04.11.2179: Shepard completes N7 program, awarded Silver Flash N4, N7 badges.

04.15.2179: Selected by Commando Mistress Seinna, for cross-platform training. Travels to Thessia.

07.11.2179: Completes training with asari commandos. Formally given the title "Shepard of the Dancing Kanquess". Asari command indicates this is a military epithet, so is entered into her file.

08.13.2179: 2 RRU deployed. NCT strike mission on Sivlas III, batarian slave camp. No batarian survivors.

08.25.2179: 2 RRU deployed. NCT strike mission on Tarok II, batarian slave camp. No batarian survivors.

09.12.2179: 2 RRU deployed. NCT Special Operations under Major Kyle, location classified, anti-slaver operations.

***10.19.2179 : BATTLE OF TORFAN. REDACTED : SECTION 334 – 392. Authorization – [refError 9ss94-alpha]. Please contact the AIS. REDACTION ENDS]***

11.14.2179 : Court martial ended.

11.17.2179: Major Kyle takes indefinite personal leave. 2 RRU decommissioned. Team Neutron decommissioned.

11.19.2179: Award package submitted for Star of Terra, Navy Cross by General Rachel Florez.

11.22.2179: Shepard released from Alliance Psychological Ward, Mindoir.

11.24.2179 : Shepard promoted to Commander (Staff), awarded Systems Alliance Star of Terra, Medal of Valor, Navy Cross, Purple Heart.

12.15.2179: Shepard adjudicated back to Alliance Training Command, Arcturus for commander level training.

01.14.2180: Shepard enters Alliance Officer Training Command, Arcturus.

03.11.2180: Shepard files for and receives permission to undergo commander-level training for space (level IV, V).

09.22.2180: Completed OTC course. Promoted to Commander (Line). Requests space command with Captain David Anderson or service with RIU's.

10.14.2180: BuPers declines to assign her to ship status. Instead she is attached to 8th RIU.

11.14.2180: 8th RIU engages in defensive actions, Telmore IV. No invading survivors.

12.22.2180: 8th RIU engages in defensive actions, Therum System. No invading survivors.

01.16.2181: CO of 8th RIU requests Shepard's transfer out of the unit. Shepard protests.

01.28.2181: Transferred to First Mindoir Army Group, Fifth Regiment, as company commander, Sixth Infantry.

02.11.2181: Performs combined operation with Blue Suns Military Services in anti-slaver capacity.

03.20.2181: Blue Suns Commander Kuril sends recommendation of valor for Shepard.

07.18.2181: End of Blue Suns cooperation. Return to Mindoir.

08.01.2181: Begin garrison duty, New Edo.

12.12.2181: Puts in for request to RIU. 5th Regiment CO Delacor immediately approves and sends to BuPers.

01.05.2182: End garrison duty, New Edo.

01.08.2182: RIU transfer approved. Transferred to 15th RIU in area, working with 5th Regiment.

01.12.2182: 15th RIU engages in defensive actions, New Edo. No invading survivors.

01.27.2182: 15th RIU engages in defensive actions, Ferris Fields. All 47 pirates surrendered when asked by Shepard and were spared. This is the first time she spared those who surrendered.

02.21.2182: 15th RIU engages in defensive actions, New Hoskins. 4 surrender prior to engagement and are spared. The rest of the invaders are executed.

03.17.2182: 15th RIU engages in defensive actions, New Edo. No invading survivors.

03.22.2182: 15th RIU engages in defensive actions, Mindoir. No invading survivors.

03.25.2182: CO, 15th RIU replaced. New CO requests Shepard be transferred back to the 5th Mindoir.

03.28.2182: Transferred back to First Mindoir Army Group, Fifth Regiment, as XO to Captain Delacor.

03.29.2182: Delacor protests, but BuPers denies his request to have her sent to another RIU.

04.02.2182: Begin garrison duty, New Edo.

07.22.2182: End garrison duty, New Edo.

07.28.2182: Performs second combined operation with Blue Suns Military Services in anti-slaver

capacity.

10.10.2182: End of Blue Suns cooperation. Return to Mindoir.

10.12.2182: Shepard requests transfer to RIU. 5th Regiment CO Delacor immediately approves and sends to BuPers.

10.15.2182. RIU transfer denied by BuPers.

10.18.2182: Begin garrison duty, Mindoir.

11.14.2182: Shepard informed by surrendering pirates in course of garrison due that strike on Miris IV is planned. Shepard attempts to get CO Delacor to act.

11.18.2182: Delacor denies request.

11.19.2182: Shepard attempts to alert Mindoir command of intelligence. Command acknowledges but does not react, as Miris V is a wildcat colony.

11.20.2182: Shepard requests RIU transfer. Denied the same day by BePers.

11.22.2182: Shepard, in violation of orders, takes three companies detached from 5th Mindoir to perform defensive ops and strike on pirate operations on Miris V, using order codes apparently obtained from General Rachel Florez. Attack drives off pirates and kills famed pirate lord Grathias. Strike was not authorized by SA Command.

11.24.2182: Shepard formally reprimanded by CO Delacor, Mindoir Command. Letter of discommendation approved by Mindoir Command, but then denied and removed by Lord General Kirsten Dularis after appeal by General Rachel Florez.

12.14.2182: Shepard again applies for RIU transfer, or space duty with David Anderson. RIU request rejected, space transfer request reviewed.

12.16.2182: Citadel Council allows humanity to select one military officer for SPECTRE training. Planning process for the search begins.

12.22.2182: Shepard given psychological eval for space-side duty. Cleared by Alliance Medical.

01.03.2183: Selected for SPECTRE Status, Systems Alliance. Assigned to the SSV Normandy as Executive Officer under Captain Anderson.

01.05.2183 : Termination of service with 5th Mindoir in aftermath of Almor anti-pirate operation.

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## **ADDITIONAL DOCUMENTS OF NOTE:**

### **Psych Profile I: Summation (RESTRICTED VIEWING)**

*Behaviorally, subject is an ISTJ with minor ESTJ tendencies, in the Briggs Model. In the Six Point Scale model, she is in the Aggressive-Suppressed quadrant of combative personalities.*

*The following observations can be made.*

*\* Their desire to execute known systems against concrete facts, and their dismissal of emotions, makes them immune to frustration with military systems, but leads to difficulty understanding the importance of considering people's feelings, and trying to meet their emotional needs.*

*\* They believe strongly in doing their duty, and perform out of a sense of honor and duty, rather than an expectation of getting something in return, but their respect for rules and order make them intolerant of failures in others.*

*\* They are loyal to family and friends, but will be unable to place value on individual life unless said life is important to them personally.*

*\* They will put forth a great deal of effort towards any identified goal, but will expect that out of everyone around them and will be highly controlling towards others to 'shape' them.*

*\* They will use their determination and skills for the benefit of an institution rather than personal needs, but will have a lack of interest in other people, or in relating to them.*

*\* They will be able to usually suppress emotional issues, but when overwhelmed will have an intense and quick temper, and occasional inappropriate emotional displays*

Subject appears to be responsible, punctual, and thorough. She is temperamentally well-suited for long-term planning and execution. Steady and purposeful, focusing on common sense and attention to detail. Prefers facts to feelings, does not like people who neglect the importance of committing properly to a goal. Once committed, will always stay the course, even in the face of distractions that would make others change directions.

Will project as emotionless and serious, tinged with anger or dismissal. Fears emotional closeness due to past trauma. However, with those who have connected will show sentimentality and dry humor.

Does not handle total changes in life algorithms well.

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## **Psych Profile II: interview**

*Interview with Doctor Jacen Mathew, Sociolinguistic and Aberrant Behavior, University of Pittsburgh, on detached sabbatical and volunteer military service as Director, N7 Mental Health since 2180.*

*Interview conducted 12.22.2182 at behest of Captain Anderson, with file release to Dr. Mathew by Major Kyle, as part of clearance for space assignment and SPECTRE selection.*

P: Tell me about yourself, Commander.

S: Sir, that is a very large request.

P: Well, yes, but everyone usually has some aspect of their personality they like to expound upon. Some are "people persons", and like to explain themselves in terms of their relations. Others use religion, or political beliefs, or hobbies. What makes you a little different from everyone else, is what I'm asking, as a place to start to help you figure yourself out.

S: I'm not sure I can address that.

P: Commander...may I call you Shepard?

S: As you wish, sir.

P: Great. I'm Dr. Mathew. Shepard, is this interview and counseling something you want to do?

S: (3.4 second pause) I don't know. I've been told it will help me understand myself. Or deal with my inability to get past my early life. Or my anger. But I do not know. I am attempting to be as cooperative as I can.

P: I see. Let's take this a different direction. What is your ... um...yes. What is the target of this operation?

S: Identification and destruction of any psychological issues that hinder my ability to perform, sir.

P: Very good. Forget the psychology. Forget the stupid papers on the wall. Forget I'm a doctor. Tell me,

however you can, in whatever terms you can, why you aren't like everyone else.

S: (Silence for 8.3 seconds) I don't understand how to be like ... others. I can't bring myself to trust. I can't bring myself to really care, to feel about what happens to others. I can't imagine what it is like to be in love, or to cry at someone's death. I can feel anger, disgust, and hate. I can be ... amused, by someone's pretension. I can feel... gratitude, when someone helps or does a good job.

P: But do you know WHY you feel grateful?

S: No.

P: Do you have nightmares?

S: Yes. I always have. They let me know I'm still me.

P: Ah. You think the pain is ...

S: (interrupting) The pain is the reminder of what you are. Of what I am. Every time I sight down on a mercenary or pirate in my sights, I'm aiming at me. Every time I break up a drug runner, I'm arresting myself. Every time I stop some slaver from hurting civilians, I'm blowing myself away. Someone should have stopped me, and they didn't. They let me go, and kept letting me go, until I killed so many people that even the corrupt police officers the Reds had bought couldn't cover it up.

P: I see.

S: And then...then...the only family I have gets himself killed ... to get me sent to a penal legion with someone I barely know...and he tells me I have to be the perfect soldier, or I go back to the gas chamber. So I do. Then he tells me I have to protect civilians, and kill pirates, and keep doing until I can forgive myself.

P: And will you ever forgive yourself?

S: No. Because it's easier to keep being the monster and just turn the fear against the pirates rather than the marks. No one cares what it does to me, or to the men I command, as long as we win. They'll cover it up. It will all be a heroic act.

P: But you have done a great deal of good, Shepard. No one is making that up, it's not an "act".

S: It's not a good act if you're doing it because you don't know what else to do. It's not a good act when you want to die and just rest and you are told to keep going. It's not life if you turn down everyone who wants to be closer because you don't know how to be closer. Or even close.

P: Understandable. But the Alliance needs you to be mentally healthy.

S: Sir, the Alliance demanded I do better than anyone else and I did. They demanded I outperform everyone else, and I did. They pushed me to all kinds of bloody battles no one could win without going insane, but I won them and I'm still sane. That doesn't mean it doesn't hurt. And I will always remember the people I sacrificed. Didn't do it for promotions, or valor, but because they told me I had to. When do I get just to let it all go?

P: (2.2 second pause.) And you are angry with Alliance for that?

S: No, sir. I am angry with myself.

P: Why?

S: Because the very reason we are having this interview shows me that no matter how hard I try to do what I am told, or how far I push myself, it will never be enough. And I won't ever get to let it all go. I will be moved around like this until I snap, and I am killed, or I am killed in battle. It's punishment for

the person I am.

P: Shepard, the Alliance values you immensely. You have achieved things no one thought possible. The most hardened pirate scum in the Terminus systems fall on their knees babbling and surrendering when you show up. But the Alliance does not want to punish you. Yes, you did very bad things in your past, but very bad things were done to you.

S: That's never a valid excuse, sir. All that matters is the success of the mission. (2.1 second pause.) Do you feel my problems are affecting my ability to perform, sir?

P: (5.3 second pause) I don't know, soldier. There are people who hate you because of some of the things you have done. And yet, if you had not done those things, the outcomes would have been worse, every time. Your recent actions, however, have people worried. (3.2 second pause). Let me change this up again. What do you do with your free time?

S: I practice at the range, sir. Or physical training, or correspondence courses for qualification in more electronics classes. Or biotic practice. (2.1 second pause.) It was very calming to practice with the asari commandos. They did not seem to judge me.

P: And you think the average soldier you serve with does?

S: I don't really know what they think. They go silent when I walk past. They never bring issues to my attention. It makes it easier to do my job.

P: You mean, to give orders that could get them killed. I see. But no hobbies? No favorite movies?  
No ...

S: They get in the way of the mission, sir. (1.4 second pause) Although I do like Star Wars. Sir.

P: (laugh) Well, I didn't expect that! Good. I think you need to take some leave, Shepard. Unfortunately, it's not up to me to decide that. Failing that, you need to figure out something to do with your off-duty time that isn't military related. Have you ever done that?

S: (23.2 second pause) ... I .. I used to collect model ships. When I was younger. I would...wish I was ...somewhere else. Flying out there.

P: Have you ever had a space-side assignment, then?

S: No, ground command only,sir. I have applied more than once, but I was denied.

P: (5.3 second pause) Well...a space-side command would be good for you , I think. Get to see Council space. More downtime, more time to figure out who you are. I've been asked to clear you for this anyway, but it's good to know that it will be actually good for you.

S: I see. Thank you.

P: Shepard. Captain Anderson thought this would be something you would ... ahem, that this would be a good task for you. I don't know any of the details aside from the fact that a space assignment may be in the cards sometimes soon. Do you think you'd like it?

S: (3 second pause) ... D...Captain Anderson is the only friend I have, sir. If he says this is what I need to do, then this is what I need to do. Thank you for your time, Dr. Mathew. I need to start figuring out what to study for wherever I am assigned next.

S: (1.3 second pause) And maybe buy some ship models. Sir.

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## Chapter 12: Chapter 6 : Eden Prime, Revelation

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*A/N: Remastered 10-30-14. Minor changes only, mostly some extra dialogue.*

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Alenko hurried along behind the Commander, sweeping his pistol around in a slow arc as they moved down the side of the dig site. High walls of tough fabric, supported by hastily erected posts, surrounded the massive holes carved out of the ground, the dig site looking less like an orderly venue of science and more like a giant bomb crater liberally sprinkled with corpses.

*Well, so far this has been a complete disaster,* he thought sourly, eyes half looking at the area around him and half trying not to focus on the curvy form of Williams' battered armor. His head hurt, not a full on migraine, but the nagging, back of the neck throbbing of nervous anticipation and fear.

The dig site itself was fairly nondescript. A circular ramp of earth, pierced in places by heavy granite spurs that the archeology team had dug around rather than through, looped down somewhat irregularly around a grid of smashed bone-white towers that jutted from the earth like the teeth of some ancient giant. In the middle of these was a wide, circular plinth of some gray stone that had an eerie, slick texture. Not a single mark or chip on it's surface could be found, despite the mangled corpses of human infantry and geth troopers that were flung, crumpled and otherwise left behind.

Shepard moved with utter silence and focus, Avenger moving back and forth as she swiftly took point. The eyes under her helmet were nothing more than angry grim slits as she stepped past an erected light pole and took in the carnage. The ground was muck here, liberally covered in random bits of gear, trash, and the occasional odd metallic cylinders geth weapons seemed to use.

Three dead human infantry had been dumped in a pile at the entrance, with two more slumped over a concrete barricade, drying blood staining the area a sick scarlet color, as flies angrily buzzed around the ugly wounds in their corpses. Against the far wall, a path led towards the plinth, a geth trooper smashed into several segments propped up against the hastily carved wall.

"Stay sharp. Geth may still be here." Shepard's voice was utterly calm and even, setting Kaiden's teeth on edge. He felt as if his hand would bruise from his death-grip on his pistol as the three stepped past the geth body into the central area. More human bodies, some shot, some torn open from explosions, all tossed around carelessly. Digging equipment bulked off to one side, with several more geth troopers and the still smoldering bulk of a Prime unit around the largest of the bulldozers. Fires flickered in the small hab units along the far side of the dig, along with piles of broken crates and a severed, blackened arm.

The plinth itself was empty, and Williams frowned. "The Beacon was right here, ma'am. I.. I remember falling back from here." She pointed to a corpse on the ground near the center of the plinth, the figure's blackened armor melted from heavy fire. "That was LC Garcia, ma'am. My CO. "Her head fell, her features twisting in sorrow.

Alenko hesitantly placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder, and she angrily wiped her eyes. "He just found out his wife was going to have their first kid...shit..."

Kaiden nodded. "It's okay, Chief. We'll get them."

Shepard, for her part, was scanning the battlefield, eyes cold. "Stupid defensive setup. They let the fucking Geth flank them on both sides."

Her mouth was a grim line as she moved to the edge of the plinth. "Track marks. Looks like they used a power sled or something to move something heavy up this road towards the tram-line."

Alenko pulled his hand from Williams' shoulder, giving her an awkward pat on the back, and glanced over at Shepard.

*Not one for personal emotions, I see.*

Out loud, he spoke mildly. "We haven't run into any geth, it is likely they are falling back to their ship if they already have the Beacon, ma'am."

Shepard nodded. "Let's move. Up this road, hit the tram access, and find the thing before they get away." She tapped her omni-tool. "Normandy, this is ground team. We've lost contact with Nihlus and the Beacon is not at the dig site. Recommend defensive posture."

Anderson's voice crackled over the comm, the weird jamming signal blocking communications strong enough to warp even short range comms. "Understood, Commander. We've recovered the Mako...and Jenkins' body. Be advised we are picking up ground movement near the spaceport. We're going stealth, moving to the far side of the moon...let us know if that dreadnaught gets into the air."

"Copy sir. Shepard out." She put away her assault rifle and withdrew her sniper rifle instead, and gestured. "Williams, take point, and set fire suppression tactics. Alenko, you cover our rear, hit anything that moves with your strongest throw. Double time."

The three marines ran up the far side of the dig site, weaving past bodies and shattered equipment. The Prothean towers at the edge were blackened with scorch marks, and occasionally Williams uttered a name under her breath, recognizing the corpses they passed on the ground.

*Goddamn, how do you get over watching your entire unit get slaughtered in a matter of minutes and keep it together?* Alenko shook his head as they began the ascent, the low slope of the ramp providing good traction.

Coming out into the top of the escarpment, the three had a good view of the terrain below for the first time. In the distance, the heavy black dreadnaught still towered over the landscape, suspended over what looked like a lake of fire. Sloping down gently from the ridge they were on, a meandering dirt path lead right towards a collection of pre-fab units, with low barricades and stacked pallets of supplies and cargo crates out front.

Two of the pre-fabs were shattered shells, pouring smoke into the already blackened skies, bodies hanging out of shattered windows or slumped in doorways that opened into raging fires. Two more of the pre-fabs were open to the air, and one looked sealed.

Beyond that, the dirt road turned into a concrete path, angling down past a series of metallic loading platforms to a long and cluttered dock area, a heavy crane and stacks of crates and building materials in long piles and rows lining it's edges. Stands of trees framed the edge of the platform, and cliffs rose in sheer progression to the left, running all the way to a broken hillside. A placid stream ran alongside the path, turning off before the platforms to meander across the plain, and over this a heavy, reinforced walkway lead to what looked like the tram station itself.

Set along the right edge of the cliffs were four tall, ugly spikes made of black metal, each standing twelve feet high. Impaled on these spikes were human corpses. Alenko hissed in dismay.

Williams merely frowned. "Those weren't there before, ma'am. What the hell are they?"

Shepard motioned them forward, eyes sweeping back and forth over the terrain, and then halted. The spikes made a grinding sound, and then slowly retracted in sections, lowering the bodies to the ground. As this happened, Shepard focused on the closest of the corpses, and realized something was horribly wrong with them.

Each one wore armor, or at least bits and pieces of it, but their skin was blackish blue, as if completely bruised, and .. withered, drawn tight against sinew and bone. Their faces and flesh were shot through with faintly blue glowing machinery of some kind, tracing along the limbs, to meet in two heavy lines

of radiance below the eyes, which were just pits in the face, glowing an angry blue-white as they fell to the earth. Hair sluiced away from semi-liquifying skin, revealing bone, as the four figures slowly stumbled to their feet, motions jerky and uncoordinated.

Alenko's voice was wild with horror. "What the hell..."

The four figures stumbled closer, their motions smoothing, arms lifting as they went from a zombie like stagger to a shambling run, mouths opening to reveal shattered black teeth and eyes wide. Shepard fired, her sniper rifle taking one directly in the head, venting a quarter of the skull to the air as the tungsten round tore into the thing, jerking it back and to the ground with a wail. The other three rushed closer, electrical discharge radiating over their twisted forms.

Shepard snarled. "Fire at will!"

Williams opened up with her Avenger, stitching rounds across the remaining three. The lead husk of a human being took half a burst in the chest and legs, abruptly coming apart and tumbling to the ground. The other two took several shots but simply staggered on. Shepard fired again, this time a hot load, the inferno round spearing the leftmost creature in the face, detonating in a bright blaze of white phosphorus, sending it spinning around, clawing at its face as it burned.

Alenko concentrated, willing, pushing the tingling in the back of his neck down his outstretched arm, blue energy radiating down his form. A pulse of dark energy lashed out, catching the last creature in mid-stride and smashing it violently against the cliffs with enough force to send limbs flying. The thing fell dead to the ground with a sharp crack as it landed head first, shattering the neck and spine.

Shepard walked to the one she had shot first and turned it over with a booted toe, taking in what had been done to it. The skin looked as if it had been sucked dry, taut against the underlying bones, and the blue cybernetics were slowly losing their glow. Lines of black tubing riddled the body, each one ending at points along its neck, which were heavily bruised. The battered chest-plate it wore bore the Alliance stencil '212 – B6 GC Yallen'.

"Williams, you know a gunny chief called Yallen?" Shepard's voice was even, calm.

"Yes ma'am. She was one of the NCOs the LT put in charge of protecting the scientists we left at the camp, ma'am. Is ... is that her?"

Shepard tilted her head, and then shook it with disgust. "Impossible to say, chief."

Prodding her omni-tool, she raised her comm link. "Nihlus, you copy?"

Only static answered her, and she shook her head again and sighed. "Normandy, this is ground team. Copy?"

The transmission was even worse this time, thin and static-laced. "Copy ground team."

"Sir, we've found some kind of geth machinery, and it looks like they've done *something* to some of the corpses, sir. Turned them into some kind of ... husk. Full of cybernetics and drained of fluids. Not sure why, advise any recovery teams to be wary of large, tripod spoked platforms with bodies on them, corpses are not recoverable."

"The hell? Husks?" Anderson's voice sounded bewildered, before dropping in tone. "Copy, ground team. This is not looking good."

Shepard snorted as she killed the comm.

"No shit, sir" she muttered under her breath, and then glanced towards the intact prefab unit. "Let's check for survivors then head to the tram station."

They jogged over to the prefab, finding the door securely locked. Shepard pulled up an infiltration program on her omni-tool and set several hundred runtimes at the door software, which shuddered under the assault and disengaged with a loud clank. A whimper shot out from within the pre-fab.

"Commander Shepard, Alliance Marines. Come out now."

"Oh thank god." A trembling voice called out, and the door rattled. A moment later it opened.

Revealed were two figures in the unisex one piece field overall commonly used by research teams in the field. One was a man with drawn, pained features, sallow skin and haunted green eyes set off by graying hair in a widow's peak, his spare frame hunched over as his hands twisted together.

The other was a woman of oriental heritage, her face set in weary stressed lines, black eyes full of horror and her hair set back in a severe bun. "I'm Dr. Sarah Warden, from the University of Arcturus, and this is Manuel Cayce, comms decryption tech. My assistant. Where...where is Lieutenant Commander Garcia.?"

Her voice, a weak contralto, wavered in the silence of the pre-fab.

Shepard shook her head. "Dead. I need to know what happened here."

Manuel spoke, his voice disjointed, broken. "Here? Here is where the end of life begins, the circle closes."

Warren sighed, troubled lines appearing on her face. "Ignore him, he's not well. When we unearthed the Beacon it interacted - or tried to, at least - with him in some manner, and he hasn't recovered yet. All we know is that we were prepping the Beacon to move when that huge black ship landed and geth appeared everywhere. Garcia tossed the team's study computer into my hands and locked us in here and slapped some kind of lock on the door, and all we've heard since is heavy fighting."

Shepard nodded. "Did he say anything about the Geth?"

Manuel looked at Shepard, eyes wide, pleading. "Agents of the destroyers. Bringers of darkness. Heralds of our extinction, or blind fools?"

Warden gently pushed Manuel back. "Manuel, please. As I said, Commander, we don't know anything. I remember hearing screaming about 'geth dropships' and 'spikes' but that is it."

Shepard considered this. "And the Beacon? Did we extract anything from it? Do we know if it is still functional?"

"It appears to be some kind of communications device, maybe a router or a storage unit. As I said, it interacted with Manuel here, but only briefly, as if he wasn't what it was looking for. It didn't bother activating for anyone else, and there was no interface unit of any kind. It seemed as if it was drained of power, perhaps on standby."

She stepped back, pulling something from a computer on the shelf behind her, and held it out. It was a standard OSD. "This is all the notes and research we had, at least, what was on the main field computer."

Shepard took it, sealing it in her belt. "You said Manuel interacted with the Beacon?"

Manuel only shuddered. "We have unearthed the heart of evil. Awakened the beast. Unleashed the darkness. You can't stop it. Nobody can stop it. Night is falling. The darkness of eternity!"

Warren gave a lopsided smile. "Manuel was not very stable before this event, commander, and he saw his entire comms team get shot to bits immediately after interacting with alien technology. I'm not sure what he says can be taken as anything but, well...madness at this point."

Manuel's eyes widened, and he grabbed Warren's arm, shaking her. "Is it madness to see the future? To see the destruction rushing towards us? To understand that there is no escape? No hope?"

Shepard tilted her head, then lashed out with her fist, striking Manuel cleanly in the jaw. He slumped to the floor with a thud, and Shepard shook her head.

"Goodnight, Manuel."

Warren looked outraged. "You can't just-"

Shepard cut her off with an icy glare. "He's unhinged, exposed to unknown factors in alien tech and probably in shock. Have you ever seen what happens when people snap completely? I *have*. Lay him out on that cot over there and make sure he doesn't get up again, I'll send someone to police this area up and get you some help."

Warren stepped back, shaken. Williams, frowning, unclipped her pistol. "Here, ma'am. Just in case."

She handed it over to the scientist, who took it with ill ease and held it awkwardly at her side.

Shepard merely nodded, then tapped her commlink. "Normandy, this is ground team. Mark this location. We've located two survivors of the science team. One has mental trauma...and a concussion, probably."

"Copy, ground team."

Shepard jerked her head, and the three marines backed out, heading down to the concrete path to the tram access platform. Shepard paused, taking in the shattered remains of a geth slumped against the wall. She then examined the wall behind it more closely, eyes narrowing. "This shotgun blast. It's from a sawed off weapon."

Williams frowned, not getting the point, but Alenko nodded. "Like the ones Nihlus had."

Shepard nodded, and the three proceeded down the path, coming to a platform overlooking the cargo area. Shepard paused again to examine three downed geth nearly melted into the ground, but Williams pointed.

"Ma'am...there's a body on the platform."

Shepard glanced over and cursed. "Move."

The three got to the platform's edge, descending the ladder that terminated on an access road running next to the platform. Running flat out, Shepard leapt over a cargo hauler's low deck and scrambled up onto the platform proper, weapons ready.

Nihlus lay slumped against some crates stacked near the far wall, the entire top of his head blown apart, his face smashed in and covered in drying blue blood. His chest armor was compacted and splintered by a dent the size of a soccer ball, and a crater of a hole was blown into his left chest, going clean through the other side of the armor. His LMG was loose in his hands, and his shotguns were tossed carelessly to the side. He sat in a pool of his own blood, sticky and starting to dry. One eye was missing, torn apart by whatever blew his head open, but the other was staring blankly up at the sky, still as vividly green as when Shepard had met him on the ship.

Alenko grimaced. "Damn, he looks like he went out hard."

Shepard glanced around, looking for clues. A patch of blue blood, speckles here and there, nothing that gave any hint of what was going on. Geth footprints. A pile of corpses, burning, most only bones and ash now. Bloody drag marks indicating the pile had been created sometime after Nihlus was dead, as some of the bodies had smeared the blood pool at the turian's feet.

Nihlus' omni-tool was missing. Shepard cursed.

"Normandy, this is ground team. More bad news, sir. Nihlus is dead. I repeat, Nihlus is dead. Looks like he went down hard, sir."

"...copy ground team. Goddamn this mission. Any sign of who did it?"

"No, sir. Pile of bodies looks like they got policed up after the fact, more signs of geth but no geth on the platform. And the Spectre's omni-tool is missing. Anything he recorded is gone."

Anderson's voice was tired sounding and wavery. "Understood, ground team. See if you can't -"

The transmission was interrupted by what sounded like an explosion. Shepard turned, and watched as the huge black ship rose into the air on a plume of white-hot exhaust. "Sir! Dreadnaught is going space-side!"

"Copy Shepard. Going silent and landing on the moon. As soon as that thing is gone we'll pick you up. Try to find out if they took the Beacon."

Shepard nodded grimly. "Come on, let's move."

O-SaBC-O

**"We are exiting this system. You will be in Noveria in less than two hours. Be ready to move once we arrive, or else your ploy will fall through."**

Saren shuddered as the Voice moved within his skull. He sat in the Chair, mind alive with emotions and rage.

"Spirits curse you, fool boy. Why, why did you have to be *there*, of all places!"

Saren examined his taloned hands, as if expecting them to be drenched in blood. He remembered the final look of the turian he had trained himself, the expression of disgust.

"Nihlus didn't understand what was at stake. There is a cost to all things, as you told me not so long ago, beloved." Benezia's voice was cool, but carried an undercurrent of sorrow.

Saren stared at her a long moment before snarling. "Would you say the same if you had to blow your daughter's head off?"

Benezia closed her eyes, shuddering, before nodding.

Saren's mandibles twitched, then sagged in disgust with himself. He rubbed his hand across his face, as if trying to rub away from mark, and within him burned emotions he could not even hope to handle.

After a long moment, he gently extended a hand in a gesture of apology. "That was uncalled for, from me, Benezia. I had just hoped he would have given me some chance to make him see reason, to explain what we are doing. The first hint I had of him being there, he'd already shot me and was about to kill me, if not for the 'improvements' Nazara has already gifted me with."

He grimaced. "When it said they would save my life, I did not believe him." He glanced away, into the dark, twisted shadows of the ship, and closed his eyes.

Benezia slowly glided to his side, her features unreadable. "I am sorry, Saren. I know he was your friend, as you said. But he would have killed you without remorse, and I cannot do this on my own."

Saren nodded, and gently touched her chin with his fingers. "I am upset, but I know you feel my grief. And ... you are right. We must focus on what we are doing this for, not the losses and pains we suffer. It is just hard to remember that when it seems all around me is black confusion, headaches, and doubt."

She smiled and placed her hand against his, closing her eyes. "There is nobility in suffering, in

enduring what those of lesser strength cannot. Nihlus died, so that in the end many others would have a chance at something other than annihilation. If he understood, Saren, he would have happily sacrificed himself for that ideal."

Of course, the geth would choose this moment to report. The clanking form of a geth trooper entered the command area, the fell gray light giving its mechanical shape a mottled, almost organic appearance.

"Saren-Prophet, Prime Unit 302 reports detonation device for the primary explosive unit has failed. It is making repairs. ETA until completion is just under two kiloseconds. Prime Unit 2209 reports devices in secondary positions are in place."

Saren nodded. "And the beacon?"

The geth's eye-flaps adjusted, as if perplexed. "The Beacon continues to deactivate any synthetic brought within ten feet. We have no methods to move it. We have prepared explosive charges to ensure it is completely destroyed upon primary detonation."

Saren sighed. "After all the damned thing has cost me, I feel cheated that we cannot even take it with us. The others were not so well protected, this one still has secrets unrevealed." He placed his head in his hands, his voice turning bitter. "Nothing to even show for our effort."

Benezia shrugged. "The vision from this one seems both fragmented and dangerous. Merely handling the shock almost killed you, and stabilizing your mind against the assault it put you through when it detected indoctrination exhausted even me. Nazara warned us they were dangerous. Perhaps, much as one cannot hold onto a wave when it meets the shore, we should leave it behind and search for safer options."

Saren looked up between his talons, and for a moment just looked at Benezia. "Very well. At least the damnable humans will pay alongside Nihlus." The image of his friend flashed across his mind's eye again, bringing fresh pain.

*What happened to the times where I was just fighting evil, and you were just helping me make it through one more night? When did we lose ourselves to the point where the sacrifice of our closest friends is seen as necessary?*

Icy, iron thoughts lanced through his head. "**Weakness is a sign of those unwilling to ascend.**"

Saren shuddered, clearing his mind. "You...never mind. We must leave this system before reinforcements arrive."

The geth made some form of motion similar to a bow, which drew an amused snort from Benezia. "We will ensure the runtimes on the planet remain until detonation. One ship to receive transmitted archival copies thirty seconds prior to detonation, and all forces remaining will return to Virmire-Base."

Saren waved the machine away, not caring if the geth on the planet lived or died. His thoughts turned to the huge gaps in his knowledge, the inability they had of making sense of what he had seen so far.

There was, of course, Liara, but he was less sanguine about how well a young and innocent asari maiden would take to this. Benezia might end up having to subdue or even kill her own daughter. If they could find a different path to find what they needed, perhaps the girl - and Benezia - could be spared such pain. He turned to her, voice low and soothing.

"Benezia, I need your Triune commandos to probe ExoGeni, to find more Beacons. This is not enough. We've struck more than a few volus supply ships, seeking the manifests for archeological expeditions. Those only provided us with four sites, none of which had a Beacon. There must be a better way to search."

Benezia nodded. "I will try, although the Triune is already under scrutiny. Why the change of plans?"

Saren shrugged. "The geth are not being as useful as they could, and their searches have turned up nothing. I do not think they are putting everything they have into the search, hoping that we fail so they can serve Nazara directly. So far, every operation until now has been a failure."

He paused. "Still, Eden Prime was a major victory, and the Beacon has brought us one step closer to finding the Conduit."

Benezia nodded. "And one step closer to the return of the Reapers. And with no one the wiser, if Cerberus does it's job correctly."

Saren snorted. "I would not count on that at all, which is why I have already prepared contingency plans."

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## Chapter 13: Chapter 7 : Eden Prime, Escalation

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*A/N: Somehow I managed to blow this chapter up - fixed 12-13-12*

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**January 23rd , 2183**

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Anderson's large hand was curled around the headrest of Joker's chair, fingers digging into the cloth as if hanging on for dear life. "Emissions levels, Joker?"

The pilot grunted, hands flying over the golden glow of information that shifted almost too fast for Anderson to even follow. "We managed to bulk-vent the waste heat when Adams shunted the freshwater tanks across the radiator vanes on the anterior array. Right now we have all non-essential systems shut down except temperature control, life support, and the drive core, which is idling at almost dialed in g's to the moon."

Anderson nodded. The CIC behind him was as silent as a tomb, as if "running silent" meant people had to be quiet. The view-screen displayed four views of the giant black vessel, 3 from dropped remote probes, the fourth from the camera in the ventral sail assembly. "This had better work."

Joker nodded mutely. The sheer size of the thing, the obvious power of it's eezo core, the speed at which it broke orbit - all of these things were horrifying. A ship that size shouldn't even be able to land, much less boost to space in 41 seconds and pull a turn that would have snapped even the Normandy in half with G forces. They had dropped observation beacons as soon as the thing had launched, and vented as much waste heat as possible and engaged stealth, hastily setting down on the dark side of the moon facing away from Eden Prime proper. Slunk into the far wall of an old impact crater, they had to hope the message Anderson had hastily programmed into the beacons would be taken at face value.

"This is Captain Anderson of the SSV Normandy. Eden Prime is under geth attack. Any ship entering this system should fall back. We have departed the system to get help, all comms are jammed. There is no one in this system to defend you, perform an emergency jump back immediately."

Joker watched the huge black ship soar through space. It's lower end, the part that looked nothing more like a vile, grasping hand, began to open, and ruby red light shone from some sort of aperture at it's base. With almost titanic force, a torrent of red light tore through space, lancing through the first beacon, then the second. A pause, and then a final red spear erupted, blasting the third into a cloud of

superheated metal particles.

Joker cursed. "Some kind of wide angle LADAR ping just clipped the hull." Tense seconds trickled by, Anderson's hand beginning to cramp, droplets of sweat sliding down the small of his back, tickling.

*God, Kahlee...I wish I had told you how I felt, rather than dying like this...*

The alarm on the ECM panel stopped suddenly. Joker's hand was shaking slightly as he paged through a menu, then he pumped his fist. "Fucking YES. Big bastard is lighting out, sir, full on towards the relay!"

Anderson suppressed a shudder of relief and exhaled. Focusing a moment to calm himself, he gave a wry smile. "Well, Joker, he probably didn't think he could survive a dogfight with you."

Joker half twisted around in his seat to stare at Anderson. "...who are you, and what did you do with my hard-ass of a captain?"

Anderson snorted, the broad planes of his face breaking into a gentle smile. "Good work on the dump and setting us down. Let me know when that thing relays out so we can pick up our team."

"Roger that, sir. . . jumping jalapenos, that sonofabitch can move. It's going at mark 118, sir. Three times as fast as that Salerian tricked out frigate in the last Citadel Relay Event."

Anderson watched the sensor screen, the mirth on his face drawing back down into hard lines. "118? That's ... how much eezo does that thing have?" Shaking his head, he turned to head down the ops alley to CIC. "Pressly, report!"

The NavOps officer nodded, hands moving over the system displays for heat management. "Dumping that water on the vanes cooled us down, but the remote sensor units are shorted out. Once we drop out of stealth , going back in will be tricky. Kinetic barriers at 100%. I show the orbital space around Eden Prime as clear."

Anderson nodded, arriving at the turian-designed status console and slapping a heavy hand on the comm panel. "Adams, status."

The dour, dry voice of the chief engineer sounded through the CIC. "Mass core is stable and holding at within 1% of the planet's G force, to avoid distortion effects. Ships power at 94% sir. Serviceman Rhanna is angry that the showers and toilets don't work now that we have no water. I can get the recycling still going on the greywater, wastewater and coolant tanks, but we are going to have to resupply ASAP. We need some of that freshwater for atmosphere electrolytic heat regulation."

Anderson ran a hand over his scalp. "Understood. Prepare to bring us up to full power on the core." Shutting down the comms, the captain turned back to Pressly. "I need a heavy energy pulse for maximum transmission power as soon as that damned .. thing.. goes superluminal. I need to punch straight out to Arcturus for backup and to the Citadel Council ASAP. Make it happen."

Pressly rushed off, and Anderson grimaced and strode to stand at his place overlooking the CIC. "Joker, ground team status?"

"All hard-suits in the green, sir."

"Good. Keep me informed, Joker, and prep the ship for lift. Is that thing gone yet?"

Joker's voice was all business. "Yeah, but we...have a problem. It just relayed out, but 3 other ships are incoming. Blue-shift projection says they are batarian, sir. Cruiser class."

Anderson clenched his fist. "Joker, we can't take down three cruisers." He paused. "Get me the ground team, and prep for transmission."

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Shepard's team moved over towards the tramway, weapons ready. Shepard had taken scans of Nihlus's death scene and appropriated the dead turian's LMG, the heavy weapon comfortable in her hands. Behind her, Alenko's face was in a grimace of concentration as he kept up a barrier field in front of them to protect against snipers, while Williams brought up the rear, tracking with her Avenger back and forth.

The tram-line hung over the river, extending off into the distance. Some 65 feet below, the river splashed into tumbling rapids, heavy boulders and jutting cliff sides sending a glitter of spray high into the air, momentarily dispelling the ever-present scent of death, burned flesh and metal. A rainbow glimmered briefly in the reflected droplets, some of them cascading down to mist gently across the team.

The cool wind and spray flickered over Williams, making her jaw tremble. *Fucking geth killed my team! They killed them, and I couldn't stop them.* The human woman's grip on her weapon was tight enough that her knuckles stood out whitely, strained. Her eyes were bloodshot and darting around, and anger burned through her like some kind of bubbling, hot tar, scalding and unbearable. "Where the fuck are the fucking geth!"

Shepard glanced back over her shoulder, hazy blue-grey eyes narrowing behind her visor. "Keep it sharp, Chief. Emotion just gets you laid out on a slab like your unit if you let it get in the way of the mission."

Williams gritted her teeth. "Yes, ma'am."

Shepard moved ahead. There were several minutes of silence as they moved towards the tram, finally coming across the final segment. A heavy cargo tram was here, strips of packing wire and spools of slack cable indicative that it had once held something heavy and oblong in place.

Williams cursed. "Shit, they've moved it to the space port. You think they made off with it?"

Shepard nodded, then frowned, kneeling down. Muddy footprints were on the flat metallic walkway, both geth and human. "I can't tell if the geth ambushed them when they were moving it, or if they had already moved it and the geth came after." She glanced around, frowning deeper. "No bodies, no mass accelerator holes, not a single plasma burn or ejected geth clip."

Alenko had moved behind the sled to the control panel. "I've recalled one of the trams, ma'am. Should be here in a few minutes."

Shepard nodded absently, then stood. "Williams, sniper position, behind that console. Alenko, oversight with biotics. If anything is on that tram that's not human, I'll throw a warp field and you detonate it. If that doesn't work, I'll use a charge and try to knock them off."

Williams nodded coldly. "Be happy to, sir." Unslinging her mud-spattered rifle, she flipped up the scope and loaded up a spool of heavy impact ammo.

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The network was ice, a broken web of data that trickled along arbitrage/negation lines. Runtimes skittered along the dark lanes of non-connect/no carrier, illuminated only by the static-edged dim light of the occasional FTP ping response.

Prime 302 Downlink to Prime Alpha-Prophet was focused on the bomb. The physical non-software world was unoptimized. 332 runtimes struggled to constantly map physical surfaces with low-scale ladar pings, and 82 had to slave all cognitive processing to interpret it. 191 runtimes maintained the

battle readiness of the servitor-construct that the collective inhabited. But almost the rest of the 2,290 runtimes on board focused on the bomb.

Eden Prime was a nonoptimal, it's FTL wideband connections still in shreds from the damage done to the planet's comm array by Nazara-Giver-of-Future, but even without that, the download of the technical documentation should have been completed by now on any mainline colony world. But facts could not be altered. The required documentation was incomplete. Even if it had been, repairs to the device, which had been damaged by a wild shot during transport, would require a machine lab with sub-scalar scanning capabilities, and at least three parts they didn't have access to. A jury-rig was possible, but required too much time.

Runtime 4X/V-Command started a consensus thread.

*4X/V-C : dis-optimal solution. Estimated time to repair of detonation device: 29 minutes.*

*B-211-A: non-computing fail error. Saren-Prophet requires detonation in 10 minutes, 54 seconds. Long range comms arrays detect Cerberus/Alliance Soulwatch false-flag batarian cruisers in approach lane.*

*67-T: unable to comply. Bomb is not operable. Secondary nuclear implosion will not function.*

*45-A: Suggestion: documentation suggests blast radius upgrade unnecessary. Replace with long-decay delay radio-nucleotides. The over-net washes out with blue light of data analysis.*

The digital sky tears open, runtimes rappelling down shifting waterfalls of data, maps, blast pattern charts, chemical formula. An inventory of the spaceport manifest is downloaded by 5 runtimes, with one time escalated to top-tier runtime analysis.

*B-211-A: Spaceport inventory: 54 single-photon emission computed tomography systems. Manifest details: planned utilization for x-ray imagery of Prothean/Failstate ruins. Systems each contain 1.2 kilograms of Gadolinium-153. Isotope is unstable, half-life of  $240.4\text{Å}\pm 10$  days, emits gamma radiation with strong peaks at 41 and 102 keV. Boosted by detonation, fallout emission will edge into the MeV range.*

A pause. Calculations.

*67-T: Irradiation sufficient to blanket area of 1,717,854 square Creator-Thousandfoot spans. Estimated time to removed needed material, 3 minutes, 44 seconds. Estimated workforce time to repair and implement detonation, 4 minutes, nines seconds. Estimated time to transmit all runtimes to orbital shuttle-oversight, 44 seconds. Total time, under 10 minutes, 54 seconds.*

*4X/V-C: Authorization required. Begin assembly of material. Consensus poll.*

The consensus forms, washes like a tide...and crystalizes. 2,011 runtimes vote for the plan.

In the real world, a subtransmission signal goes out the geth units standing nearby. 16 proceed to the heavy cargo crates at the far end of the spaceport and begin opening them.

Prime 302 uplinks to orbital shuttle-oversight. "Adjudicated plan change. Technical document corrupted. Onsite repair facilities lacking within required time constraints. Detonation force of bomb insufficient. Will explosively salt device with locally obtained active radioisotopes."

A long, static filled delay before Saren's voice rasps across. "... ahh. You are indeed vicious, machine. The radiation will deny the area to investigators for many days, correct?"

"Affirmative. Emissions estimated to be of sufficient gamma intensity to sterilize all life within area roughly 19.3 times total area mass, Palaven City. Within one solar cycle all higher bond DNA chains will decay, obliterating trace evidence. Site will be denied for approximately 240 to 280 days." The machine did not bother to mention that with the quantity of fallout debris that would be thrown into the

air, not only the local area but most likely the entire planet would be contaminated. 65 kilos of Ga-153 was almost ninety times what would be needed to irradiate the entire colony. The planet would die, utterly and completely.

"...well within our time line. By the time they sort everything out, we'll have found the Conduit. Do it." A pause. "Make sure you offload your mind, or whatever you things do. You are the first geth who thinks in a way both I and Nazara approve of."

The comm line goes dead. The collective pulses a pale, satisfied green. The signals go out. Unit 44-Perpetuity Guard fails to notice the #3 tram accelerating back towards the cargo terminal as it too is caught up in the wave of reverence for Nazara-Giver-of-Future.

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## Chapter 14: Chapter 8 : Eden Prime, Conclusion

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*A/N: Updated December 12*

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January 23nd , 2183

"Ma'am , the tram car." Ashley gestured with her sniper rifle, pointing out the rapidly approaching rectangular platform. The car had low walls on all sides, but no roof, and appeared to be free of battle wreckage. "Looks clear."

Shepard sighed. "That means there's no one on the other side most likely, or they would have shut it down or sent a welcome party."

Alenko smirked. "Or they're just dug in waiting for us, ma'am." He stood, easing off his amp and folding arms across his chest.

Shepard glanced at him for a long moment before giving the trace of a smile. "Smartass."

Alenko coughed, and nervously glanced away. "I, uh, aim to please. Ma'am."

Shepard only nodded, turning away, eying the tram. *They're only treating you nice because they don't know you well. Don't put anything into it. Focus on the mission, not the eye candy.* Glancing away from Kaiden, she turned to look at Williams and then sighed internally. *No, not that eye candy either. Dammit.*

The tram car slammed to a screeching halt, it's rails a bit scuffed , signs of poor maintenance or excessive use under loads it was not designed for. *Like hundreds of geth soldiers, most likely. Fuck it all, this is gonna end badly.* Shepard stepped forward, tapping the interface on the tram's control panel. "All aboard."

Williams gave a tiny , tired laugh as she and Alenko hopped on. "Next stop, Geth station, ma'am?"

"Yeah well..." Shepard reached out to steady herself as the tram lurched. Williams was thrown back, crashing into Kaiden, who instinctively wrapped an arm around her waist to keep her from falling off. "T-thanks , LT."

"No problem, Chief." His eyes were sad. "We've lost enough of the 212 for one day to let you die in a silly accident. Speaking of that...are you okay?"

Williams blinked hard several times, then gave a grimace. "I will be. I just need to kill some fucking geth."

Shepard gave her a sardonic smile. "You'll never be able to kill enough to get it out of your head, Williams. Trust me, I've tried and tried."

Williams said nothing, unsure of how to respond to that. The sheer deadness of the woman's voice, the tiredness in her eyes, threw a chill over her own hot-blooded anger. But then she remembered Bhatia, blasted into agonizing death on the ground right next to her barely 20 seconds prior to pickup. "With all due respect, ma'am, have you ever lost your entire fucking unit?"

Alenko winced, as Shepard's expression shifted from a blank stare to a grim, ugly smile. "Three times, Chief. You can either cry about it, or use the anger to get the job done. Either way, if you can't deal..."

Williams gritted her teeth. "I'm fine, ma'am."

Shepard's eyes met Williams, and the younger marine shivered under the sheer malevolent .. emptiness of that look. "Just pull that trigger when I tell you, Chief, and you'll be fine." A bitter note crept into her voice as she turned away to look at the approaching spaceport. "If you're lucky, Alliance brass will pat you on the head for not dying, and give you a piece of tin and ship you off to another place to get killed."

Alenko placed a hand on the gunnery chief's shoulder, cautiously. She snapped her head around to glare at him, but he only shook his head softly. His eyes were sympathetic, but carried a warning in their gaze, and Williams shrugged his hand off. "I am fine, ma'am...but I apologize if I was out of line."

Shepard gave an almost lazy wave of her hand. "Don't worry about it, Chief. Your unit just got fucked over and out. You're allowed to be upset, if that's your thing. I could care less if you call me a frigid bitch and hope I die in a fire...as long as you kill the goddamned fucks that did this, you're in line."

Williams bit her tongue but spoke anyway. "How did you get over it? Losing your... unit? More than once? All your friends, all the memories.."

Shepard slowly glanced her over shoulder at the marine. "Never had friends, and the memories were nine parts boredom, and 45 minutes of terror." She turned away, hands unshipping and opening her Avenger rifle. "Movement, at the space port."

Williams exhaled and lifted her sniper rifle, the scope auto-flexing to bring the distant end of the tramline in order. "Geth, ma'am."

Shepard nodded. "How many?"

Williams swallowed, suddenly pale. "Ah...um...a lot."

Alenko narrowed his eyes. He felt for the younger woman, but they needed her to be sharp right now. "How many is "a lot", Chief? 10? 20?"

Williams lowered the scope in horror. "No, sir. I'd say company strength, sir. At least 75 of them."

Alenko gave a sharp inhalation, but before he could speak, the silence was pierced by low, almost breathy laughter. Both Williams and Alenko turned to Shepard, who was .. smiling.

"It's about damned time someone gave me a fight on this stupid hick backwater of a world." Her smile faded. "Listen carefully. There's no damned reason for the Geth to still be here with the ship gone unless they're doing something. Maybe to do with the Beacon, maybe concealing evidence. Whatever it is, we need to –

Her omni-tool chirped. "Warning. Radiological alert. Unauthorized isotopes in excess of Alliance authorized dispensation detected. Please notify local law enforcem-" the VI voice went dead as Shepard silenced the alarm. The three of them just looked ahead silently, until Williams summed it up nicely.

"Well, *fuck*."

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The sub-network flashed an alarmed white-red. Non-geth data streams interrupted, ladar pings picking up movement of the third tram car. It was within visual confirmation distance.

No units were near the car controls panel. Active sensors painted the incoming hostiles. Local net archives were breached searching for data.

*No data found/Williams-OrganizerOfWeaponscombatant-within parameters.* The breached local Alliance military network spilled forth human measures of threat, all meaningless without context. *No data found/Alenko-SubDecisionNode Ground Warrior Prime unit.* Images of Alenko using biotics, reports from the local net. *Within parameters.*

*Primary threat identification complete. Data found. Shepard-Predator-Commander. 1.2 TB combat data. Classification: TotalDeath/NoCarrier threat level.*

*Retargeting parameters.*

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"Holy SHIT!"

The three marines ducked as every geth unit on the spaceport platform opened up at once, hundreds of rounds pouring in. The tram shuddered under repeated hits, the controls shattering under the blast of a rocket that sent Alenko skidding to the deck, barely holding on to the edge of the car. Shepard cursed and ducked down, almost prone to the floor.

Williams lay on the floor of the car, gripping her carbine. "Shit! They're gonna blow this thing off the tracks! What do we do?"

Shepard smiled. "Alenko, find whatever caused that radiological alarm and disarm or destroy it. Williams, cover Alenko."

Williams eyes bugged out. "Are you fucking nuts? How the hell do I do that? What about the Geth ARMY over there?"

Shepard smirked. "Relax, I got this." She rolled out of her crouch and stood in a rapid motion, lifting up on the balls of her feet, and vanished in a blue flash. A streak of blue light slammed into the ranks of the geth lined up at the edge of the platform's edge. There was a blast of energy and several loud booms as she impacted a Prime, shedding dark energy in shockwaves that sent geth platforms flying like bowling pins.

"STRIKE, BITCHES!" Shepard gave a howl like an enraged hyena, snarling as her right hand flared with blue radiance, spilling out in a wave of energy, slamming across the ranks of the geth. She stood, extending both hands, bursts of dark energy rushing out like a tidal wave to crush the serried ranks of geth. Legs bent backwards and snapped, arms wrenched out of joints and flew off in all directions. 11 geth were already wrecked by her charge, some tumbling 80 feet to the ground far below, others smashed against the wall with bone crushing force. 19 more stumbled around the platform, still recovering from the system-loss of the Prime unit Shepard had slammed into, which had been bent double at the waist, its entire upper torso bowed outwards by the force of the impact.

She ducked under the scything fire of two geth on the upper level and retaliated, her free hand pulling out her pistol and placing a single shot in each geth head, both troopers pinwheeling off of the overhead catwalk with digitized screeches. The group she had stunned were recovering, bringing weapons to the ready, but Shepard twisted her hand, inverting the dark energy she had summoned. Her amp hummed in

her skull as she strained, exerting all her might not on the geth themselves, but on the structural support rods keeping the heavy crates on the high walls of the platform from collapsing.

With a shriek of tortured metal, the truss tore free from the wall, and a broad shelf of metal, used to store dozens of crates of building supplies originally intended for the dig site, collapsed in a slow wave. Crates weighing hundreds of kilos plunged down, some crushing the geth into splinters of metal and splashes of white ruin, others crunching completely through the thin decking and carrying geth to watery doom 80 feet below, the synthetics spinning in the rapidly dimming sunlight as they slammed into the shallow riverbed below.

In less than a dozen seconds, seventy eight geth had become nine. Their communal network shattered, the remaining units fell back to auto-programmed responses, firing blind suppressive patterns at the primary threat. These were ineffective as Shepard athletically leapt aside behind a low crate, a moment later her hand flicking up and outwards. Three disk grenades tumbled through the air for a few moments before detonating in mid-air, collapsing the rest of the cargo shelving. With a slam and a hollow series of booms, the rest of the right side of the platform collapsed, the geth skidding across the suddenly slanted decking as it fell, tumbling end over end before smashing into the already mangled remains of their fellows below.

The tram slammed into place, Alenko and Williams stepping off and looking at Shepard, jaws hanging open. Shepard's hands trembled slightly, the after-rush of biotic exertion shivering through her like ice sliding along her skin. She took in a large breath – and choked it off as Williams was slammed back to the wall nearest the tram by a blast of plasma, her gun flying from suddenly nerveless fingers, collapsing to the ground in wash of blood.

Alenko yelled, pulling his pistol with one hand and snap firing at the Geth Prime that just stepped into the platform from a tunnel leading to the spaceport proper. His shots pinged off harmlessly as the massive 12-foot tall war machine stepped down, its giant plasma cannon barking again, tearing a basketball sized hole in the wall inches from Alenko's face, pattering him with burning metal. He shrieked, pistol hurled away as he spun in agony.

Shepard's mind flashed through old memories for a split second – *LT Capp, falling dead as he blocked a shot from that turian sniper, Major Kyle, bloodied and broken as he watched both his sons bodies carried off the field, glancing back at Shepard with tears in his eyes. . . "why didn't you protect my boys, Shepard? I trusted you despite everything..."*

Shepard roared, a crazed sound, and let loose with the Revenant. The heavy machine gun spun up in a cyclic roar like twelve chainsaws inside a firing jet engine, the stream of heavy tungsten spikes cutting into the shields of the Prime, sending cascading storms of dissipated energy down its huge frame.

Prime 302 turned the cannon on Shepard but she was already moving. The first plasma blast missed, searing past her head close enough to glaze the material of her visor. She slid along the smooth metallic floor, dropping the gun and triggering her biotics. A disc of dark energy skidded along underneath her sliding form even as she focused on lightening herself.

A second shot, blasting the decking in front of her, pitting it with white-hot plasma. She slammed down a heel, her entire body pivoting like a see-saw to an upright position as she made her disk angle upwards like a launch ramp. With a grunt of effort she leapt, high in the air, drawing back a fist as she skinned her teeth in a snarl.

Prime 302 stepped back, adjusted the choke on his cannon, and fired directly at Shepard as she slammed down towards him, the blast meeting her in midair in a flash of glaring, blinding plasma energies.

Energies that were rent aside as her barrier parted them, her fist glowing with biotic power as she now focused all her weight, her rage, her anger, her fury into one strike. She slammed into the Prime with every bit of power in her soul, eyes blazing in rage.

"You won't kill my fucking CREW!"

Alenko flinched as the entire spaceport seemed to shake, his head ringing from the blast of a biotic explosion. Wind rushed past him, scattering bits of old paper and a couple of leaves across his face before it died down. To his left, Williams groaned, her armor baked and cracked, blood leaking from her mouth.

Swallowing in sharp pain, Alenko stood. He now saw a large cylindrical device in the mouth of the tunnel the Prime had come from, along with the shells of what looked like dozens of rectangular beige boxes hurled willy-nilly around them. Chunks of a pale yellow-grey pasty substance were scattered about, his omni-tool blaring visual alarms about radiation.

He coughed, peering off to his right. Picking up his pistol, he advanced slowly to the smoking hole in the decking where the Prime had stood. A geth arm, red painted and heavily armored, lay next to it, the forearm warped into a bizarre curve by the sheer force of what ever severed it. He waved a hand, smoke clearing from the glowing mess in front of him.

The Prime unit lay prone, smashed almost two full feet into a circular indentation that must have radiated out 11 or 12 feet. The metal was compressed, almost bruised looking – cracked, warped, discolored in many places, glowing red in others. Much of the bulk of the Prime above its chest was simply gone. Hundreds of splinters of red metal studded the area of the indentation, the crates next to it...

And the figure that knelt at the Prime's feet. Shepard's fist was a bloody mangled ruin, skin stripped off in flayed, jagged segments to reveal torn, seeping muscle and white bone. Her armor on her left arm was warped and broken, with bits of geth armor shoved through it in places. Her helmet was cracked, a huge split in the visor spearing back towards the aural sensor pads covering the ear, the other side blackened and smoking. Her chest was heaving, but the armor covering it was deformed, blood trickling in rivulets from cracks along the side. She looked up, and her eyes were alive with hot fires for just a single, aching moment.

"..C...commander?"

She blinked, and the fire died. "Fuck, Alenko, do I look like a Geth?"

"n-no...that was ... Christ, that was *insane*."

Shepard stood, very unsteady on her feet, her right leg trembling. She staggered, and he caught her by the left arm, feeling muscle spasms as she fought to stay upright. A long piece of metal had pierced her thigh, transfixed from front to back. "I'm .. fine."

A weary cough made Alenko turn his head. "Bullshit...ma'am." He hastily reached into his belt pack, cracking open a canister of medigel and slathering her entire forearm and hand with it wincing, at the grisly mess that was her right hand. Williams slowly sat up, cradling her head, touching her temple where a wash of blood and burned scalp made her flinch away from the pain. "You look like...shit, ma'am. But that...that was fucking *awesome*."

Shepard swallowed. "I don't like...geth...or anybody else...fucking with my crew."

Alenko exhaled, feeling a strange sort of warmth at being called 'her crew'. He pushed it down, focusing on the mission. "I see some sort of device over there, ma'am. Can you walk?"

Shepard nodded, wearily. "Yes, lieu... Alenko. Go. I'll help the Chief up." She limped over to the

gunnery chief, who was angling herself up using a loose piece of metallic wreckage like a cane. The two women slowly hobbled over to Alenko, who was carefully stepping through a series of haptic interface menus.

"This bomb is a mess. Salarian detonator, but the casing and first stage scale up is human. They ... they salted the bomb, commander. Some kind of isotope from .. what are these?" He picked up one of the beige boxes, and grunted. "Huh. Something to do with X-ray machines." Tossing the empty casing aside, he tapped three commands, and the interface went from red to green. "Sloppy work, ma'am. I honestly expected some kind of genius device here."

Shepard looked around, frowning. "They must have been in a hurry." Her head rotated, stopped. "Through this tunnel. There." She pointed, a green radiance washing along the edges of the far end of the tunnel. "What is that?"

Alenko shrugged. "Let's find out."

Shepard nodded, pausing to trigger her omni-tool. "Normandy, this ground team, come in."

Joker's voice was tense. "Thank god. Commander, we lost telemetry on your suit and ship's sensors detected some kind of explosion. Is everyone alright?"

Shepard sighed. "Stupid geth did *not* know who it was fucking with. All team members alive, but we are pretty banged up. Alert Chakwas. We're going to need a rad-safe team down here, too."

Anderson's voice broke in. "For what?"

Shepard shuddered. "Some kind of amplified bomb, sir. There's enough goddamned high-powered shit here to kill krogan, much less humans. Geth were really, really anxious that no one find out what happened here."

Anderson's voice was grim. "We'll get it figured out. Status of the Beacon?"

Shepard hesitated. "We're about to the end of the spaceport now, sir. We'll update you momentarily."

"Well hurry it up. Three batarian cruisers jumped in just after that big battleship left. They haven't moved, but we don't know their intent. If we break stealth, we're going to have a hard time going back to it, so we have one chance to scoop you up and get out of here. I'll notify the main tower about the attack and cleanup."

"Yes sir." Shepard deactivated the comm. "Alright, let's clear the spaceport and get out of here." She sighed, Nihlus's powerful gun had been ruined by her reckless nova-charge, and her ODIN shotgun was damaged as well, the cowl bent and buckled. She pulled out her sniper rifle and gestured. "Move out."

The three marines staggered ahead again, the short tunnel evidently a customs checkpoint. On the far side, weapons scanners and a reinforced security station sat in an elevated corner, overlooking a broad open transit area, probably for air-car docking. Cargo crates and cranes cluttered both sides of the open space, the left pierced by doors leading into the spaceport proper.

Two things competed for their attention. To their right, a vast lake of smoldering lava sat, heat pouring off of it. The melted, twisted wreckage of buildings at its fringe only helped put context to its size, nearly 800 feet wide, the planet had been very literally cooked by the landing and departure of the huge ship.

Williams's whisper was hoarse. "It's like a bomb went off. Or an orbital strike. My god..." In the distance, they could see two more arcology towers, both shorn in half and on fire. Williams closed her eyes, knowing that each tower held thousands of colonists...and these had been gutted with the vile ease of a man plucking the wings from a fly.

Shepard, on the other hand, fixed her gaze on the tall, silvery-green pillar that stood somehow proudly from the top of a cargo tram. In front of the tram, six dead humans had been piled, each one carefully head shot. A neat pile of geth lay to the left of that. Oddly enough, none of the geth had a single mark or wound on them to indicate why they were inactive. Alenko moved closer, scanning.

"..what the hell happened?" Alenko's voice was quiet, almost reverent, but Shepard had no answer. She only eyed the alien device closely, noting the green, shimmering energy that radiated from it, rising like smoke into the sky.

Shepard shrugged, then froze. "Quiet." Half turning, she moved with as much silence as her tortured body could muster, slowly converging on a set of high crates in the corner. She lifted her sniper rifle, leveling it. "Come out. Now."

There was a whimper, and a sad faced human man stood up. His features were almost comical – watery huge brown eyes, a limp face with drooping jowls and a sour, lined mouth. Mousy brown hair fell in messy tangles from a head mostly covered with a ratty green and yellow knit cap, while his coveralls were discolored with grease and other less identifiable fluids. "D-don't shoot! Please! I'm human!"

Shepard lowered her weapon. "Who are you, what happened here, and how the fuck did you survive?"

The man trembled, his voice weak. "I.. I am Delan. Please don't .. kill me."

Shepard nodded, and faced the man fully. "I need to know what happened here." She spoke each word carefully but quietly, a dangerous look in her eye.

Delan slumped. "I..I'm just a dockworker. You know, manual cargo management. I just.. move crates around. I don't know everything. I was moving cargo when that .. ship came out of the sky, with this...noise, like a jackhammer in your mind. It..it was...the worst sound I have ever heard. And I wish I hadn't."

He paused. "I remember the spaceport security stacking up, getting weapons. One told us to hide behind something, stay out of site. So I did that, and a moment later there was a blast. I guess.. I guess I hit my head." He gingerly rubbed the back of his skull."

Shepard nodded. "What next?"

"I came to...sort of, groggy I guess. I remember almost standing when I heard the machine soldiers making that creepy clicking sound, talking to each other. Then I hear this humming sound. A grav plate is carrying that beacon thing over to the platform edge, and it's humans operating the grav plate. Six of them. Behind them are these geth things, but at a distance. I saw one get about 10 feet from the beacon and just drop dead, boom. They get it in place, and then this...turian walks out. Big guy. Black armor, scary looking, big pistol. He starts giving the Geth orders, and he .. he shot the people who had been working the grav platform." With a shaky hand, he indicates the pile of corpses next to the Beacon.

Shepard raised an eyebrow. *Some kind of anti-geth weapon? But the Protheans were dead along time before the damned Geth showed up.* The man was still speaking. "He said something about a guy, some guy named Nighlus or something like that. He was upset he had to kill him, cursing, throwing a fit, and one of the geth guys says he has to calm down and he just punches it. It collapsed, and another, bigger geth calls the turian Saren-prophet."

Delan wipes his eyes. "The turian left, but I could see the geth things building working on some kind of machine, doing that..chittering. They were talking to someone over their comms, had some kind of argument, something about big bomb and repairs."

Shepard frowns. "They did not see you? Did they search the dock area, anything?"

Delan casts his gaze to the ground, as if looking for something. "I was still behind the crates...they only

searched during the initial invasion I guess, must have thought I was dead. All I know is they're working on this thing, and then this Saren guy walks right up to thing and touches it. It sort of opens, and this green light comes out, and he is floating him in midair. After a few minutes, it lets him down, and he starts trying to get the geth to move the thing. "

A long pause. "They can't, it just ... shuts them off whenever they get close, and he's already shot the humans that were moving grav platform. He ... gets really angry, shoots a couple of the geth, shoots the Beacon about a dozen times, then .. then he just...walks off. Been shining like that ever since."

Shepard glances speculatively at the device. Williams and Alenko are examining it closely, and neither seem to be lifted up or anything odd. She shrugs, but the man continues. "Anyway, almost all the geth get on the big ship and it takes off, but a bunch are still hanging around. They aren't as coordinated before, dropping things, making a mess. I figure if I hide out, someone will come along. Just .. trying to survive. Maybe... I should have fought them, but I would ..die."

Shepard snorted. "You don't even have a weapon. We've shut down their bomb. Stay put, an Alliance team will be here to debrief you."

She turned away, moving towards the Beacon. "Normandy, this is ground team. Beacon is secure, I repeat, Beacon is secure. Looks like there was someone else behind this attack than just Geth, sir, someone called Saren."

Anderson's voice is tight, almost pained. "Copy , ground team. You did say Saren, correct?"

Shepard doesn't like the tone in Anderson's voice. She's never heard it before. It's almost ugly. "Affirmative, Normandy. We have another survivor, at this position, and a big pile of geth bodies with no battle damage."

"Understood, Shepard. ETA 15 minutes until we're ground side for recovery. Hold your position. Normandy out."

Shepard slowly walked over to Alekno and Williams. "Anything interesting?"

Alenko had been scanning the Beacon with his omni-tool. "Not really, ma'am. Readings don't make a lot of sense. It seems –" he breaks off as the Beacon flares, the light intensifying as Shepard steps within 10 feet.

Shepard is lifted into the air, back arched, as if crucified, eyes glowing the same green as that of the Beacon, and drawn closer to it...

*I am Tyth Kashan Avatar of Understanding*

### **burst of pain**

towers flash by on the horizon, the ground cover sweet and wet with the purple moss of home, Bithra glittering in the dark of night as the shapes of Reapers fall from the sky like a rainfall of doom, lances of bright fire

### **Burn free of mortality, child of chaos**

*We have to evacuate the Symphonies of Defense, the Taken ones have come! The city is burning!*

Broken, shattered skylines. Screaming children, inner and outer eyes wide in senseless pain, mouths open as spikes shatter their tiny frames. Endless armies of the Taken, bodies twisted into nightmare forms , each worse than the last, obscenely hopping forwards..

### **You MUST understand**

*I am the Avatar of Understanding, there comes a darkness which devours all*

red-tinged fires, burning flesh in a wave of pain. The machines come, they pierce, they rape and tear, the swarms cover the sky, the water turns to blazing poison, the air itself is lead in our lungs

*Praetor, we cannot delay! The Citadel has fallen, the Penumbra Apex has broken, the broadcast must go out!*

**You WILL understand, child of our making.**

Agony

the screaming, the stars burning with the single, feared shaped, the curling leaf opening it's dark arms to embrace all in death

Agony

chittering monsters with glowing eyes feasting on our flesh, implants buried in our minds, the burst of the black mist, as we melt into impurity

AGONY

*You must do ... what we could not .. they are COMING ...*

AGONY

*Oh, fallen glory, sun – spun might of a thousand, thousand suns burnt down in the face of the machines...the Zha'til were our warning , but we did not heed*

**This one must understand**

**Complete**

**Incomplete**

"SHEPARD!"

She falls, unaware of anything but bright bursts of pain in her mind, her body, wondering why her vision feels so flat and the air so dry a moment before all senses leave her, the darkness engulfing her not stopping the bursts of pain that echo throughout her form until nothing else is left.

The voices are so dim now... "Normandy come in, we have a fucking medical emergency, the Beacon attacked Shepard..."

"Omigod, her eyes are bleeding..."

Ah... silence at last.

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## **Chapter 15: Chapter 9 : Tali**

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*A/N: Long chapter. I'll try to keep them a bit shorter, but there was a lot of stuff to go over in this one. I could really use some feedback on this one, I feel as if I'm cluttering the story with too many OC's, however minor. And I'm never sure if my Tali feels right, AU or no AU , Tali is always Tali.*

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January 24th, 2183

"Breaking news! Geth attack on Eden Prime kills tens of thousands! Alliance not commenting!"

Tali'Zorah nar Rayya wrung her hands helplessly as she glanced around the Caleston spaceport, her feet

shuffling in a nervous little dance of anticipation, exhilaration, and fear. Her environmental suit gleamed in the dim light of the transit lounge, hexagonal reinforcement shapes giving sharp relief to otherwise subtle curves set off by twists and wraps of the soft purple Rayya *reik* she wore. Her gaze never strayed from the gigantic human in front of her, glacially calm and still.

"H-how much longer, Mr. Dost?" She cursed the stutter in her voice, but she was still very shaken. The lounge was crowded, full of dark corners and ... aliens ... glowing, floating things, hulking krogan, sharp-featured turians. Even the lowering, grumbling mass that was an elcor. She felt exposed, nervous, and more than a little overwhelmed.

The man turned, eyes dark under the gleaming brim of his cap. His Alliance uniform was all dark blue leather and soft panels of deeper blue cloth, slashed with ribbons, encrusted with the emblems of rank humans seemed to attached to. He stood almost 7 feet tall, and to Tali looked like he could pick up a cruiser, his forearms the size of her legs.

His face was very pale, set in hard lines crossed by ugly, welted scars, and it spoke of hard, vicious battles against odds that no sane man would endure. One hand was gleaming metal and plastic, whirring ever so faintly as he opened it in a casual gesture.

"Miss Zorah, I don't know. Right now, with what is going on at Eden Prime, the Alliance fleet is in a very confused situation. We've had reports of geth attacks in several other locations as well. I understand you are still in the process of decrypting that information you recovered from the geth you killed?"

Tali gave a nod, standing a bit straighter. "Yes. My omni-tool is reassembling the data in the correct matrix format for me to try to interpret it. It's not compressed enough to be video, so it has to be audio, but I have no idea what geth would be doing with audio transmissions. I.. I just worry we'll run into... more of those men who were shooting at me."

Lieutenant Dost shrugged., but also pats his heavy pistol. "Don't you worry about that. I can handle any more trash that can't mind their manners. My .. orders are pretty clear – get you to the Citadel so Alliance and Council techs can take a look at this material. Our method is a little sketch, but just have faith." His face eased into a grin. "Besides, you're pretty hot with that shotgun if you ask me, snatching data from a geth after you take out two of them. Always thought quarians were, ah, kinda frail."

Tali blinked, happy that her faceplate kept her emotions unseen. "Um...thanks? I-I mean, honestly, even krogan probably seem frail to you. You're so... big."

Dost laughed, a booming noise of mirth that got him an irritated look from a turian ahead in the line. He met the turians gaze with an ugly glare, and the alien turned away, mandibles moving in deprecation. "Stupid plated chicken...anyway, ma'am. I wasn't trying to insult you, I'm sure your people have to be tough to survive as long as they did. I'm sure the Alliance will be happy to get this data."

Tali looked down. "Everyone is usually so... dismissive of us."

Dost snorted. "None of that, Miss Zorah. Us underdog species got to stick together. I can guarantee you after the way the Council treats humans, we're not likely to take their damned word for it that your people aren't worth much, especially after a couple of kids from your fleet saved Admiral Nechanir from that pack of geth bastards on Lastrudo and you bringing in actual geth intelligence."

He sighed. "That being said, the Alliance isn't going to just accept whatever you find on that thing without a lot of good reasons. That's why we're doing this a different way. I just need to make contact with a guy who should be here any moment and we – or rather, you – can get this into the hands of people who can use it."

Tali nodded, but still worried. "What if it's just...junk?"

The big human snorted. "You said it yourself, miss? Why would geth have audio logs? Ain't like they decided to catch the latest episode of Fleet and Flotilla. I'm sure what ever it is will be useful, assuming my contact shows up before we expire of old age..." He pauses, squinting, and then smiles. Lifting his head, he gestures bluntly at a slender figure in gray and black, moving with a calm elegance, who came walking down the very long transport line. "And here's my contact now."

Tali looked up. The figure approaching was a drell, a reptilian alien normally found only in hanar space. His face was almost humanoid, but comprised of thumb-sized scales that overlapped smoothly, framing a wide mouth with almost sensual, grooved lips, a short nose, and huge, gleaming eyes that seemed to take in everything. His head was topped by a fringe of the scales set in an irregular pattern, all dark blues and blacks. His tailored open coat was gray, and he wore a loose silk shirt under it, leaving his heavily muscled chest bare. Soft white and gray slacks that clung almost indecently tight to heavily muscled legs tapered down to the most curious pair of foot coverings Tali had seen yet, leathery and almost to his knees, richly embroidered with tracings and stitching, coming to metal capped points at the end and elevated on heels. Tiny spinning stars on each heel clinked musically as he sauntered to a stop, his features twisting into an easy grin.

"Goddamn, Troyce, you still wearing those stupid cowboy kicks you got on Earth?" Dost held out a meaty hand the size of Tali's head, and the drell shook it, smiling. His voice was a grave, grating rattle that sounded like rocks across a metal screen. "They are comfortable, Jason, and give an easy introduction of the exotic and devastatingly handsome alien to anyone human."

"That they do, you silly lizard. Ma'am, this is Captain Troyce Nihar, Hanar Ascended Primacy, retired. Private captain now, does recon and courier work for the Alliance. Troyce, this is Lady Tali'Zorah rar Rayya, daughter of Admiral Rael of the Migrant Fleet."

The drell's lips quirked in a grin. He took her hand in his own, gently and lifted it to his lips. "Charmed, Miss Zorah. I admit to have only met one your people, a rather gentle soul named Shala'Raan."

Tali swallowed at his gesture, and then started at the name. "She...ah, she is my aunt. You know her?"

Troyce shrugged. "I aided her in locating one of her wayward students, or something of the sort. She did not give many details, something to do with a trip that is taken as a rite of passage?"

"Y-yes, the Pilgrimage. You helped one of us?"

His eyes darkened. "In a way. I returned a quarian's body to her, he was robbed and killed by ... criminals. They paid the only such price the hanar have for murderers, violence unto violence."

Dost cleared his throat. "Sorry to interrupt, but I called you because this is important. Now, I got a lead from a junk dealer on this planet that Miss Zorah found something big while wandering on her...Pilgrimage, was it? Anyway, little lady got jumped by geth who didn't think she had a shotgun on her. Two dead geth later, she managed to salvage some kind of audio file from them."

The drell's scales flexed. "Impressive. I did not believe geth could be salvaged."

Tali nodded, having learned the gesture over the past few months from both humans and turians. "Yes. You have to be...very careful and quick but you can often salvage the secondary storage banks they use to transfer information for archival to other hubs. It's sometimes useless stuff – 8 hours of sensor logs, for example – but it can also be useful. But THIS data is audio .. and geth don't use audio to talk to each other, they have the network." She realized she was babbling, something she did too often when nervous, and tried to clamp down on it by twisting her hands together again.

The drell paused, then glanced at the blaring news on the holonet. "You think this is related?" He

gestured with his chin, images of burning towers amid a blackened landscape displayed, Alliance fighters crossing the sky like enraged bees.

Dost shrugged. "There was one Alliance ship on sight. Early reports say they found a dreadnaught, and then later batarian cruisers showed up. There's no way the geth could have found out about whatever kind of op was going on down there. I heard from ... other sources .. that a Spectre was killed on the ground at Eden Prime. A lot of questions are being asked. And I think the geth have to have contacts in Council space, organic contacts, for them to be on Eden Prime during...whatever the hell went down. This could be they key."

Troyce fingered his chin. "Huh. Well, if they did, pirates and smugglers would be the best bet. So, why aren't you putting this in a pouch and giving it to the Alliance brass? Alliance loves killing pirates almost much as they do wearing fancy uniforms."

Dost rolled his eyes. "Don't be stupid, cowboy lizard. Look, I trust quarians because I've been living with one for almost 8 years. I get a lot of shit from other humans about it, but she has no where else to go due to being exiled. But just because I am willing to listen to Miss Zorah here does not mean the Alliance will. I send this off in a packet saying it came from some quarian teenager, and the local command will laugh themselves silly before tossing it in the trash." He paused. "No offense, ma'am. But some of my superiors are nothing but a bag of anthropocentric dicks, and in human culture you would be a child."

Dost looks around carefully. "No, I got a better idea. I have a ... contact. You probably remember him. Fist."

Troyce nods. "You ... are sure of this? I have no doubt the .. person he answers to will be interested, but that is a risky proposition."

Dost shrugged. "He can get it into the hands of people who will take it a hell of a lot more seriously than if we deliver it ourselves. And ... well. I'm not 100% sure about this, but twice we've been trailed, and once – just a few hours ago, actually – someone took a shot at her. I think someone knows she got this data, she was a bit ... too open about letting people know what she found at first."

Tali slumps a little, wringing her hands together again. "I'm sorry. I was just...scared, and not sure what to do or where to go."

Dost drops to one knee, putting a hand on the tiny quarian's shoulder. "Hey, kiddo. You did okay. I know Kiana'Shaal is a bit of a bitch, but she was right to tell you that skeddaddling back to the Migrant Fleet with this wasn't the best idea. We'll get this to someone who will pay you a great deal of money for it, money you can use in your Pilgrimage." He stands, smiling.

Troyce is still for several moments, before nodding and keying his omni-tool. "Miss Zorah, my ship, the HAV *Sullen Cloud*, is at private dock TR-44. I've transferred an entry code to you. If you're intent on this, I can get you to the Citadel and to a meeting with an .. agent .. who can get this information to the correct people."

Tali nods. "I... I guess I am ready to go , then. We...travel light on our Pilgrimage, it's all in my haversack." She nervously hefts the small pack of her belongings, and the drell smiles. "Go ahead, then, Miss Zorah...I need to get clearance to depart this overcrowded place, and finish up a couple of things, I'll be there in a few minutes."

Tali turns to Dost. "Thank you...and ... thank Kiana'Shaal as well. Tell her I will speak to my father about her exile, she has so many skills the Migrant Fleet needs."

Dost chuckled. "I'd .... actually rather you didn't, Tali. I sort of like having her around, we've been

bonded for about 7 years now. "

Tali flushed, again very glad for the mask, having utterly misunderstood why the two were living in the same apartment, and nothing but a confused stutter issued from her voder. Dost turned to Troyce. "I have that effect on all the quarian girls, apparently."

"...bosh'tet!" Tali is blushing, not just because of her mind thinking about what it would be like to be skin to skin with .. her mind blanked and she just wrung her hands more.

Dost grins. "Just teasing. Anyway, you should head on up to the ship, Tali. I'm pretty sure I can get him cleared pretty quick."

"O..okay. Thank you gain, Mr. Dost." Tali begins walking, following the directions from her omni-tool, trying to stay to the walls in the cavernous transit lounge before turning a corner out of sight. Dost exhales, and looks hard at Troyce. "The Broker was very clear – make sure she gets to Fist. There's 50,000 credits on delivery. I don't know why , but it was made VERY clear that no other contacts are to be used for any reason. When you're done, find a krogan named Urdnot Wrex and give him the details."

Troyce frowns. "That's...a rather large sum for a simple trip to the Citadel and a walk around the wards, old friend. Do you know anything?"

The large Alliance lieutenant shrugged. "Bits and pieces I heard yesterday. They found a Prothean Beacon on Eden Prime and sent in a Spectre along with the Butcher of Torfan to recover it. The geth got there first. Lots of speculation about grainy video of a dreadnaught five fucking times the size of the Ascension."

The drell's eyes widened, mouth hanging open. "Arushu, protect us all." He shook his head , and folded his hands behind his back. "Sending a Spectre along with a human whose name is a byword for 'psychotic killer' is an indication they knew something was up, perhaps?"

Dost shrugged, yet again. "Like it said, this shit is all very ... sketch. TOO sketch for my taste. I'mma just do my job and keep my lil' quarian honey happy."

Troyce gave a trilling snort. "It's Kiana. She's never happy. I bet she just *loved* the idea of helping out a quarian admiral's daughter."

Dost shook his head. "Yeah, I'm in the doghouse, as we humans put it, for a while. It's okay. I can catch up on my Fleet and Flotilla, that always works. For all her bitterness sometimes, she's still a sap."

Troyce placed a hand on the big human's shoulder. "I'll get Miss Zorah to the Citadel. Don't worry. You... take care of yourself, you big *jahan*. I'm getting too old to bail you out of trouble."

Dost smiled, his pale skin glinting in the lounge dim lighting. "You too, old lizard. At least TRY not to seduce the poor girl, she's not even 20 yet." He handed the drell a data card. "Fist is at Chora's Den nowadays, moving up in the world. But be careful. I heard someone say the Broker is watching him closely. Could be good...or bad."

Troyce smiled. "I am always careful, my friend. As the hanar say, this one did not achieve age through foolishness."

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An hour later, Troyce finished the initial jump from Caleston, smiling as the little quarian next to him nearly bounced in her seat. "I still can't believe the hanar just gave you a light frigate as a retirement gift. It's amazing." The interior of the small ship was light and clean, faint yellows and dark reds the primary colors. It was crewed only by the drell and four mechs, it's drive core room entirely automated.

The drell leaned back in the pilot's seat. His haptic interface was dark green, with overlays of

ultraviolet that his modified eyes could see but any passengers could not. "Yes, well, I was a *very* successful captain for almost 25 years, Miss Zorah. I fought pirates, batarians, rogue turians, krogan, more batarians, the occasional mercenary band, crazy biotic cults, this one pack of really pissed off asari ex-commandos... did I mention batarians?"

Tali laughed, the glowing eyes behind her faceplate crinkling. "You did. Still..."

Troyce placed his gloved hands behind his head, lean body relaxed. "You are right though...the gift was mainly due to me rescuing an entire Prothean pyramid from looting pirates, saving several high ranking hanar priests who had gone to visit the site for religious reasons. My brother died in that fight...the Hanar felt the least they could do was ensure my retirement was well paid and I lack for nothing."

Tali nodded. "I'm sorry to hear about your brother, Troyce. I .. I haven't done a lot of fighting, just a couple of close calls with some very rude turians and those geth. My father made me practice with the Migrant Fleet Marines, though, almost every week."

"Ah, the MFM. Tough little bastards. Not exactly spit and polish, perhaps, but they are brave and pack some nasty info-war tricks in those suits. I worked with a Dan'Reegar on a mission almost 20 years ago to recover a quarian on his .. Pilgrimage, was it? Damned mess, but everyone got out alive. Except a pile of dead batarians, which brightens everyone's day. "

Tali gave a small chuckle, wondering at the way no one seemed to like batarians much more than they did quarians. "Troyce...I've had a lot of people give me ugly looks, accusing me of being a thief or worse... I knew people didn't particularly care for quarians, but I didn't expect to be spat on or refused service. Why are you...and Dost...so ... nice?"

The drell rubbed the side of his face , his other hand adjusting course as the ship angled towards the next relay. "Dost didn't explain this, but he actually saved Kee – sorry, Kiana'Shaal – from a very nasty run in with some bigoted turians who were about to puncture her suit for sadistic amusement value. He's .. well. He's very protective of her, and as a result, I've noticed he tends to be pretty nice to the few quarians that run through Caleston. Maybe he feels like your people get a bad rap for nothing. I don't know. Most of the Citadel races don't care about anything that isn't in Citadel space, as if 17 million people suffering on rickety ships because of a single mistake entitles them to feel superior."

She nods at that. "Have you known him long?"

Troyce laughed. "Yeah. I knew him from my last years as a captain, but after that, well...I helped him get the decon chamber off an old hanar cruiser, actually. Took a few months, but we got it rigged up and active, so that Kee has a safe place she can be without that suit on."

Tali's eyes widened. "A.. a private clean room? For just her? Keelah...that's ... he must really...care for her." She tried to imagine the sheer luxury of being able to have a truly clean room whenever, then flushed when she realized what it was most likely used for. *I wish I could have something like that. No, I wish . . I could have someone like that.*

The drell nodded. "Yeah, he is. People joke about it, but she is fiercely devoted to him – like, stalker level obsessive – and he is the same for her. Anyway. . . long story short, he's got a really good understanding of your people that almost no other human has. Don't count on other humans being so nice. They can be nice...or downright Arashu-shunned evil."

Tali considered this. "And you?"

Troyce shrugged. "Me? My religion says... " He pauses, searching for words, and then smiles almost bitterly "...it says that everyone is flawed and we all need forgiveness for the sins our bodies commit. Judging people beforehand is .. bad. It pollutes the soul with thoughts that are neither true nor healthy,

and it puts your active judgment to sleep in the name of looking down your ridge at someone. I don't have time for that, I judge people on their actions."

Tali nodded, hesitantly. "But why do people think we are thieves? You can't take anything back that is stolen from your Pilgrimage, and the Fleet..."

Troyce sighed. "People are short sighted. And your people live in all concealing suits. The Fleet never has forgotten that the Council did nothing when your people were chased from your planet, and the stress the Fleet can put on a system means a lot of people lose jobs to cheaper, more efficient quarian labor. I don't agree with it, mind you. But it exists for a reason."

The drell's lips tightened for a long moment, and he stared blankly off into space. Tali said nothing for several seconds, before carefully touching his arm. "T-Troyce?"

The drell shook himself, shoulders hunched. "Sorry. Lost in memory. Doesn't matter. If you take no other wisdom from an old fool of a drell, remember this, young lady. The Citadel is the worst place in the galaxy for anyone who is not confident in themselves. Everyone there is looking for something, and most of them are looking to imprint someone else's eggs for free."

Tali considered his words, the strange metaphor at the end notwithstanding. "Not everyone. You are helping me. So is this person I am going to see."

Troyce shrugged. "If your information is good, he and I both get paid by the Shadow Broker. I ... do want to help...but don't think Dost or I are doing this totally out of the goodness of our own hearts." He pauses, a worried expression crossing his face. "But the stuff in the news may be related to this, and the Broker will pay very, very well for something he can sell to the big boys, like the Council or the Alliance High Command. The very last damned thing we need is geth running around with those stupid flashlight heads, killing people."

Tali leaned forward, eyes bright with curiosity. "I have heard rumors but I know nothing about this Shadow Broker. Can you tell me something about him?"

Troyce smiled wider. His teeth, she noticed, were actually a solid curved plate of sharp bone, "The Shadow Broker is a complete enigma. No one knows where he – or she – operates. His agents are everywhere, such as myself – " he pauses, giving her a grandiose bow from the waste that sent her into giggling "- and his motivations are unknown. NO one crosses him unless they want to die a short, messy death. He has done some very good things at times, and a lot of very bad things, but he has one firm rule that hasn't been violated in decades or longer – anyone who is bringing him intelligence is safe. Sacrosanct. I do know that Fist – the man we are going to see – is a dedicated agent, so at least you will be safe."

The ship slipped through yet another mass relay, booming into the next system with a flash of light. The VI chimed. "Venting heat. Citadel Landing is on approach communications."

The drell carefully entered in the comms frequency on the data card he got from Dost, and the comm unit flickered. "HAV Vessel, this is Citadel Landing. You are cleared to dock in bay J-33. Your landing fee has been paid."

Troyce grunted. "That's..weird. I knew the Broker wanted this intel, but .. wow. He must have people on hand waiting for us." He smiled. "You about ready to get off my little ship and see the Citadel for the first time, young lady?"

Tali bounced in happiness. "Yes!"

The old drell chuckled. "Well, you should be safe enough here. But just in case..." the Drell leans under his seat, and pulls out a heavy pistol, which he clips to his belt, and a shield generator. "Better safe than

sorry, rule always kept me alive."

The drell eases the ship into the long dock with the elegance of long decades of experience, his scaled hands drifting over the ship controls in a dance of small motions. With a light set of thumping sounds, the small frigate is clamped to the docking bay, magnetic clamps swinging down and out on heavy hydraulic arms to secure the vessel.

Tali looked out the bridge window, eyes bright as she saw the Wards of the Citadel for the first time, five massive islands of blazing light, giant skyscrapers arched in alien shapes, a billion blazing lights making a web of gold and white as traffic surged through airways and ground paths like the bloodstream of some massive, exotic starfish. The diffuse purple light of the Widow Nebula framed everything in hazy spirals of smoke-like galactic dust. "So...beautiful."

Troyce grins. "You ain't seen nothing yet. Wait until you walk around on the Presidium, that really will blow your mind." He turns to the ship's main computer, punching in the code for airlock release, and checks his pistol again.

The drell hears the hiss-clank of the airlock door as they traipse out of the bridge and onto the main deck. Triggering the airlock, they step through, and down the short row of steps that arise smoothly from the floor. The docking bay connects to his ship via two long, wide walkways, narrow rails along either side, the open space of the ring below them, trailing off thousands of feet to terminate only in the eerie silent and unmoving half-light of the nebula.

Approaching down the ramps is the welcoming party, but ominously enough it is neither C-sec officer and scanning crew or shady turian mercs in the Broker's black armor...but two krogan, clad in thick ugly plates of dark gray and with the blunt shapes of several heavy weapons hanging from their over muscled frames. The drell stops, hesitantly, as Tali stands beside him. She turned her silver-eyed gaze up at him. "Troyce..."

The drell placed a hand on her shoulder. "No matter what, young one...if I tell you to run, you run. The place you need to get to is down the hall, and then down stairs to your right, Bechjtet Wards. Ask for Fist."

The krogan march forward, thudding footfalls sounding like the boom of the surf he still misses hearing after all these years. Troyce takes a step forward, pitching his voice strongly as he did in his days in command, eyes fierce and his stance aggressive, confident. "Where's C-Sec? And if you work for the Broker, where's your card?"

The rightmost krogan sneers, revealing square-set, sharp teeth under its gray plates. "Heh, the Broker. That's a good one. Listen up, lizard. Give us the girl, and you can get back on your little ship, with your life." Both of the warriors pull out shotguns, their muzzles seemingly the size of Tali's wrist. Her eyes widen –

"GO, TALI!" Troyce leaps forward gracefully, clearing almost a dozen feet with a biotic leap, his right foot catching one krogan across the face as he lands and spins, pistol firing. Tali sprints, remembering his words, but terrified. She angles down the right-side ramp, curved legs pumping with all the speed she can muster, toes splayed for better traction. A shriek of pain echoes through the landing bay, but she dares not look back. Her heart feels like it's in her throat, her breath fogging her faceplate as she gasps.

A snarl sounds, and guns blast. There is a twanging sound as the railing next to her shatters, bits of railing spraying across her suit, and she staggers as something hard and heavy smashes into her hip. Alarms blare in her head, the clamping feel of internal sealing snapping around her left thigh and waist. Pan fans out in all directions as she staggers to her suddenly weak knees, shields gone entirely. Medigel pools against her hip, cold and sticky.

She half turns as she tries to get back to her feet. The drell captain fires again, pistol spitting white fire as rounds stitch into the heavier of the two krogan, which staggers back, pieces of armor splintering off and gore flying as it is slammed into the edge of the docking ramp. It gives an ugly, trailing cry as it's vast bulk is slammed by a wave of blue light, the biotic throw overbalancing the huge form, sending it spiraling into the depths below.

But that act gives the other krogan enough time to charge, shoulder slamming into the drell's lightly built form. Troyce is smashed against the hull of his own vessel, grimacing as his pistol slips from now numb fingers. The krogan headbutts him viciously, bony crest crushing thin scales with a sickening squelch.

"TROYCE!" Her voice is shrill, warbling in terror and pain. *Fight back! Get up, you stupid girl, help him, run, something...*

The krogan rears back, shoving its heavy weapon into the drell's now bloody face with enough force to shatter his jaw, a moment before the gun fires, a blast of gore splashing in a gory star-burst over the delicate pale yellow of the ship's surface where the drell's head used to be. Tali whimpers in horror, tears overspilling her eyes as she gasps for breath and scoots back, still too hurt to walk or even think.

*Oh... Troyce...* The headless corpse slumps to the cold metal of the ramp, leaving a smear of blood and bits of scaled skin as it does so.

The krogan turns, smoke trailing from the now blood-smearred barrel of his gun, baleful red gaze fixed on the quarian. "Stop running, little bitch. I'll make it quick and painless. Try to run and I'll shove this between your whore quarian legs and see if I can blow your head off that way." His vile mouth splits in a grin, blackened teeth a zipper holding back vile threats.

Tali scrambles to her feet, triggering her omni-tool in white-hot rage. *He was so nice to me...keelah...*

Her fingers tap a hasty set of commands, and the krogan's automatic shotgun detects a purge command. Still glowing with heat, it attempts to discharge as if empty, but the swollen size of the heat sink is too wide for the shaft of the ejection port. The now shattered heatsink instead discharges all that heat into the integral mass accelerator in the barrel, even as the krogan lifts it to fire.

The barrel detonates in splinters of glowing hot metal, some driving directly into the mercenary's eyes, others shearing through his unarmored wrist, severing an artery. Howling with pain and half blind, the beast drops the gun, hands going to his now ruined face. Blood seeps between thick fingers as he screams.

Tali limps away, hurrying, biting her lip as she feels blood running down her leg inside her suit. A breach. A death sentence, if she can't find help, on a station she has never seen with no one to guide her and everyone to hate and mistrust her. And she remembers that krogan regenerate...before long he will be hounding her again, and if he catches her...

*Father, I don't want to die...*

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## Chapter 16: Chapter 10 : Garrus

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**A/N: GARRUS!**

January 24th, 2183

The mercenaries ran, three sets of feet pounding frantically as they fled down the narrow access corridor, red utility lighting casting their features in warped, muted caricature. High, arched towers

loomed all around them, casting fuzzy-edged shadows in menacing stripes over the uneven ground, the ever-present Widow-light from the nebula casting everything into a purple-tinted gloom.

A hollow boom sounded, and the batarian mercenary on the left spun around even as she was lifted from the ground, the back of her head simply gone, her face an ugly rose of exploded flesh as she tumbled to the ground. Her black armor blended well with the shadows, as a puddle of blood pooled around her now still form. The other batarian and the salarian ran on, not stopping.

The C-Sec cruiser flashed overhead, lights flaring in the semi-darkness of the upper ward alleyways. A flanged voice spoke from its integral speaker, cold and mocking. "Throw down your weapons and surrender immediately. This is your final warning. You cannot escape."

The batarian suddenly jinked to the left, trying to split from the Salarian. Garrus Vakarian sighed, the expression angling his blue facial markings into a new configuration, He then slid the door up on the air-car, hitting a control on the dash in front of him. A restraining harness lashed onto his armor, even as he hung his bulk from one side of the car, pulling the 3-foot long compressed form of his pride and joy, his beloved sniper rifle. As it unsnapped and lengthened, Garrus inhaled, the roaring notes of *Die For the Cause* ringing in his head. He put the scope to his eye, his ocular visor throwing a targeting ring over the back of the batarian thug's misshapen head. Micro-adjustments were automatically uploaded to the Model 19 anti-material rifle in Garrus's hands, and he pulled the trigger smoothly, calmly.

The gun cycled a spool of heavy wire into the firing chamber, shearing it into a shaped, wedge like flake weighing almost 3 grams, a microsecond before the mass accelerator field hurled it down the barrel, magnetic focus fields keeping it straight and true as it exited in a blue flash of flame-like dark energy. The dart entered the batarian's skull .4 nanoseconds later, striking with a force of 60 G's. The dart, with microscopic fractures ensuring it would shatter upon impact, exploded, turning into a cloud of 32 tumbling sharp-edged bits of metal that tore through the bone and brain of the target. The sudden kinetic energy coming to a sudden halt resulted in the remaining 700 newtons of force to flash into heat energy.

The batarian's head literally detonated, spattering scalding hot blood , bits of bone, and smears of pale gray matter all over the floor and walls. The body was hurled to the ground, bouncing in a ragged fashion , arms flopping bonelessly. The smoking muzzle of the weapon in Garrus's hands rotated smoothly, and a second shot was fired at the Salarian. This one caught the fleeing criminal in the lower back just as he was about to round a corner in the maze of buildings below, blowing a 5 inch hole almost completely through the narrow build of the alien before detonating as well. The blast sheared the salerian in half, a rush of organs and sizzling blood tumbling to the ground along with his upper body. The merc had enough time to feel himself slam hard against the floor , his pistol skittering away, before shock sent him into blackness.

Garrus's visor pinged softly. "Kill count: 7"

He shipped his sniper rifle, the harness holding his somewhat narrow waist perpendicular to the aircar digging into his side as he did so. His partner toggled a switch on the galaxy of haptic buttons on the dash of the car, and Garrus ducked back inside even as the harness unsnapped itself and retracted. The turian shut the door, sealing away the howling wind and metallic smell of the boundary atmosphere near the ward's upper boundary, and exhaled. "Clean kills."

The salarian driving the vehicle blinked large, black eyes rapidly in succession, his spare features showing no other reaction. "The executor will be displeased, of course." Slim hands angled the car down, the salarian's excellent reflexes avoiding an oncoming truck easily. "Warned you about the uncertainty of the evidence. Distressing to see sentient beings tortured, but...they could have just been

hired hands, not involved parties."

Garrus snorted, his mandibles flaring in annoyance. "The only 'evidence' I needed was those two-bit thugs shooting at me when we caught them with the sprits-be-cursed slaves, Forlan. Not much you can say to excuse shooting at C-Sec agents. And who gives a shit if they were fucking involved or not, if you work for a monster who mutates people into *organ farms*, you get a bullet in the skull. End of story."

"Executor likely to not appreciate that kind of dismissive response, Garrus. Just saying. It's like you enjoy getting him pissed. And I get saddled with the paperwork."

Garrus gave a turian grin, shrugging his massive shoulders. "If you could shoot worth a damn, I'd be happy to do the paperwork. Besides...Pallin wouldn't appreciate anything I do, up to and including having Shai'ra ride his rod until she fainted."

The salarian gave a tiny little snort of amusement. The dark, leathery skin of his face glistened in the dim light, it's smooth planes broken only by the bisecting pink scar across his muzzle. His blue-and-black C-Sec armor gleamed, the marks of 10 years carefully and lovingly buffed out each night. The air-car slid across the wards, finally coming to a hovering stop on a broad platform boldly marked "CSEC AIRCAR ONLY". Haptic-illuminated hazard lines blared into the endless night as the air clomped down on it's rubberized landing pads, the eezo-core engine powering down with a whine of heat exchangers.

Garrus swung out, his long arms pushing the hinged door up and out of the way, massive frame unfolding from the cramped, gummy seats that always tried to conform to the shape of his ass. "Spirit-damned asari deathtraps", he muttered. He stretched, lanky legs tamping down, his spurs flexing inside the battle armor he wore almost all day long. Blinking away grit in his eyes, he pulled up a report interface in the visor over his left eye, triggering a comm call with his eye motions.

"Pallin here. That had better be you, Vakarian."

Garrus sighed, a long suffering sound that spoke of frustration. "Yes, sir. The mercenaries were at the drop site, just like the informer said. When we moved in, they bolted, and opened fire on us. Tratham's team secured the ... cargo ... and Forlan and I pursued."

The voice of the head of C-Sec was clipped and cold, but irritation seeped through the digitized transmission. "I told you repeatedly you were to follow and NOT engage. Now we have no chance to find out who the hell they were taking orders from. Your continued lack of discipline –"

Garrus snarled. "Don't start with me, you stone-polishing ass. You know full fucking well who they 'answered' to. All those slaves had the same marks on them as Saleon's last victims. He's shipping the poor bastards all over Citadel space now, thanks to your soft-taloned 'justice'. And the victims pay the price."

Pallin's voice had gone even colder. "You are a fool, Vakarien. I wasn't about to allow you to blow up a fucking transport full of eezo and spirts know what else directly over the wards to satisfy your stupid vigilante fantasies! And this! Your stupid act may save this handful of victims, but what about the rest of the people in the doctors hands, IF he is the culprit. We'll never know, you just blew away the only possible witnesses."

Garrus stalked towards the station doorway, talons flexing inside his gloves. "Listen to me, you barefaced son of a chieftain, we all know how you operate. Your precious paperwork is far more important than stopping the gods-damned criminal. The rules are more important than protecting the innocent from the vile thugs kicking them in the face."

Pallin roared over the commlink. "INNOCENTS? You are going to lecture ME about protecting the innocent? You've shot through fucking hostages to down the perp, put an entire FLOOR of innocent bystanders at risk to get at a gunman, and you have the unmitigated gall to even use that word? Get in my office in five minutes, Vakarian, or I'll have you issue plumbing citations for the rest of your career in the ass-end of Zakera. The volus section."

Garrus pushed his way inside the station, mandibles twitching in fury. He could feel his overheated blood racing, his stance had gone from calmly walking to each step being planted in preparation for a leap-and-spring. He felt his fringe tighten and made a concerted effort to calm down, cold blue eyes taking in everything around him.

C-Sec was a huge tube of connected offices, computer workrooms, forensic evidence rooms, and tactical armories, on top of a labyrinth of holding cells and storage rooms with enough weapons and armor to start a war. 200,000 strong, it boasted its own armored division, its own cruisers and frigates for interdiction and customs, its own food preparation squad (with dextro and levo cuisine and even special eating areas for the sixty volus officers in C-Sec's Financial Crimes division).

It was an army. An army of impotent, castrated justice; an army of paper pushing clerks; an army of tired and jaded cops sitting around with their talons up their chutes, waiting for someone to fuck up so they could arrest some two-bit thug and claim they were stopping crime, while the truly guilty bought their way free and the clever used the system to hurt others.

Garrus loved it and hated it all at once. He strode ahead, past the huge central elevator that connected all levels together and linked to the council-access docks at level alpha, and headed down a set of stairs to his right. Blue-tinted haptic news-feeds scrolled reports, while the "sitrep" wall dominated the far side of the executive office area, 118 news-feeds from every known race blaring, monitored by a group of twitchy, obsessive compulsive salerians and memory-perfect drell.

Garrus slammed armored, heavy feet across the delicate tiles of the executor's entry suite, walking right past Pallin's secretary, a pretty young Palaven born girl called Trethia who he usually loved to flirt with. He pushed open the over-decorated doors of solid steel, stamped so melodramatically with C-Sec's seal. The words seemed to bite at him as he bisected the seal by pushing the doors out of his way.

*Duty to the People. Sacrifice for the Public Trust. Uphold the Law.*

Pallin's office was large, but sparse. A window overlooked the Presidium commons, the view marred by an ugly earth plant of some kind having been installed right in the middle of the view. The walls were bare, except for two metallic bookshelves bearing the complete legal system code. A small eating or meeting area, off to one side. And in the center of the room, on a raised plinth a few inches tall, was Pallin's desk, its top usually empty of anything but a haptic keyboard and a display panel.

Executor Pallin sat at said desk, looking even more unhappy than usual. The undoubted source of said unhappiness was the amber-glowing hologram that hovered, like a ghost, over the holopad in the corner, its feet distorted by the certifying image of the continents of Palaven in a circle, nestled against the curve of the Council Tower. Garrus stopped dead in his tracks.

Councilor Sparatus was the only person Garrus knew that was more hidebound and rules oriented than Pallin. Except when it served him not to be, and then he was just a sarcastic asshole with a love of the human gesture of air quotes. *Soft, pedantic plate-licking son of a six-credit asari whore...*

"Executor, perhaps you did not hear me clearly, or perhaps you feel that your position has overtaxed your endurance and wish to retire to Palaven's shores. I require an investigator who can get the job done on this issue. It's a mess. Saren is implicated and Tevos is **all** up in my fringe demanding "action".

Pallin sighed, clearly attempting to retain his temper in the face of his boss. "I understand your position

and how ... difficult this must be. But I only have 19 detectives capable of operating at that level of oversight, and they are all either tasked to beyond capacity or have operational .. issues that do not lend themselves to this task."

The turian councilor's eyes narrowed. "There seems to be a lot of tork-shit on this line, Pallin. You should probably rephrase that or pick out a good estate on the coast."

Pallin growled, his voice harmonics coming unmeshed as he got angrier. "You want it in plain Unification Cant? Fine. 11 of the detectives are in deep cover and pulling them out would get them killed. 2 more aren't even on the spirits-be-raped Citadel. 4 are not even in Citadel SPACE, tracking that pack of Eclipse hauling tainted eezo in from the Terminus. That leaves me with a special ops sniper who specializes in assault and a propensity for killing above solving crimes, a financial crime detective who happen to be fucking VOLUS and thus useless in any fight not involving food and is tripolar to boot, and a Salarian who is about a week from retirement and who , by the way, had his life saved by Saren – twice – and who specialized in data analysis...for catching air-car illegal racers, not galactic heroes."

Pallin gave a shuddering exhale, his talons tapping a staccato beat on the desk. "I want to help. Spirits above, I *hate* the entire concept of the Spectre program, and Saren is a rogue who makes my worse agent look like an Academy pledge model." Garrus could not restrain a smirk at that, but said nothing. "But the bottom line, Councilor, is that we don't have anyone available and won't for at least two weeks."

"Unacceptable. Flat out utterly unacceptable. How the hell did a person like you manage to crawl this far up the meritocracy continues to astound me, Pallin. Never mind. The sniper, put him on the case with the Salarian you spoke of. I don't give a pile of rantha dung if they find absolutely nothing, and I don't really expect this to be anything but more smoke up my chute from those stupid humans, but I cannot sit on my talons and expected to be acting impartially!"

Pallin shuddered, and then shook his head. "When it blows up in your face, Councilor, let it be known I think this is a bad idea. I will make the assignments. Pallin out."

Garrus folded his arms and leaned back on one leg, tilting his head a little. "Well, for what it's worth, I think he needs to listen to what you are saying. Not that you are ever right, of course, but ..."

"Shut up." Pallin massaged his forehead with his hands, talons trembling. "We'll talk about this catastrophe with the refugees, slaves, whatever, later. Have Forlan write it up. Sit down."

Garrus did so, his jaw set. Pallin looked even more pissed than usual, which was pretty impressive given that he already looked like his plates were going to fly right off his skull from blood pressure alone on an average day. "... alright, sir. I'm a pretty bad turian, I know, but I can see when shit is serious. What is the investigation?"

Pallin just looked at Garrus for a moment, then shook his head. His pale green eyes were tired, almost sunken, his plates dull and glossless. "A few days ago, we got a notification from the humans that they had uncovered a Prothean Beacon on some colony of theirs. A working beacon, mind you. They invited the Council to access it along with them, in return for some... political leverage."

"Damned humans. Not surprising, though. What kind of leverage?"

Pallin shrugged, his dark features almost crumbling as his mandibles clamped against his jaw. "Spirits, what didn't we give them? Concessions on tariffs, inspections. The chance for them to pick a candidate for Spectre status and have them evaluated, and a promise of a review of the Treaty of Fairaxen to allow them to add two more dreadnaughts to their fleet."

Garrus's blue eyes widened. His visor scrolled down a search window, coming up with news hits on "Spectre candidate human" and displayed only one hit. "Their so-called hero of Elysium, I presume? Egomaniacal human-centric jackass."

Pallin gave a weak laugh. "Still bitter about that busted arrest? Pity. And no, surprisingly enough, they did not pick him." Pallin shoved a datapad across his smooth obsidian desk. Garrus caught it, his plates arching in shock. "The Butcher of Torfan? Holy spirits be calm." He took in the image of the woman on the pad, a snapshot from Westerlund news of her breaking the back of an augmented elcor mercenary with nothing more than a biotic piledriver, her face set in a grimace of pure predatory hate. "I think I'm in love."

Pallin looked at him sharply, and then give an actual laugh of amusement. "Figures you would be, she's right up your tram line. Crazier than a hanar bodybuilder, but she is definitely effective. Don't see that kind of cold dedication in most of those monkeys, too busy selling themselves out for a few credits or trying to pretend they actually are anything more than jumped up batarians with two less eyes and better oral hygiene.. no matter."

Pallin paused, then continued. "This human apparently investigated the colony, with Nihlus Krylik as her supervisor, and they ran into an army of geth, apparently there for the Beacon as well."

Garrus smiled, his fangs gleaming faintly in the dim lighting of the office. "Geth? Really?"

Pallin nodded and Garrus paged through the rest of the pad. Images of a ruined, shattered spaceport. Burned out colony towers. Piles and piles of bodies, human and geth. Close ups of one of the geth, it's body torn open, white fluids splashed everywhere. Vague hazy shots of human military forces engaging silvery hordes of geth.

"...shit."

Pallin nodded. "Yeah. It gets worse. Krylik died down there, murdered with his own weapon according to the autopsy report. They found some burned human remains with marks on the upper arms. Defensive wounds, from turian talons. And a human cargo worker that survived claims to have seen Saren Arcturius leading the geth and planting a dirty bomb on the surface."

Garrus's head whirled. "Saren? Impossible."

Pallin shrugged. "Who knows? We pulled his comm records, nothing there worth noting, random chitchat with that matriarch he's coring, Benatria, Benzaria, whatever it fuck it is. According to him – and the port master and six witnesses – he's been on Noveria the past week, dealing with some kind of bullshit in his own investigation of human cloning."

Garrus nodded. "Hm. So the human must be wrong. Saren may be ... aggressive, but he wouldn't do this. Working with geth? Maybe the humans did this to try to get him off the investigation he is working on?"

Pallin gave another shrug. "Three problems with this theory. First, the cargo worker had his head blown off this morning. Professional hit, drell mercenary...who six years ago did contract work for Saren. Not much of a link but the humans are up in arms. Not that the Council is going to accept the word of one drunken, admittedly traumatized dock worker, but still."

The Executor ticked a talon out, as if enumerating points. "Second, the autopsy of Nihlus showed the cause of death was definitely the LMG he took to the head – " Garrus winced, imagining "- but he also had been shot in the lung and kicked. From the pattern of facial plate breakage, we're 86% certain that whoever kicked him in the face was a turian. Two breakage impact points to either side of the bridge of his nose."

Another talon elevated, slowly. "And there's no ballistics on the pistol – the slug was explosive – the size and impact of the damage to the poor bastards armor is indicative of a M-903 Sunfire pistol."

Garrus nodded. The Sunfire was a fantastically rare gun, utilizing a fragmenting, explosive mass accelerated slug that was closer to a shotgun round than a pistol round. The ammo blocks tended to overheat when used rapidly, making it a very ugly, precision weapon used at short range to instantly incapacitate dangerous opponents. As such, it was ruinously expensive, with no less than nine major parts under fabrication rights management contracts tighter than the Consort's chute. Garrus was no Spectre fanboy, but even he had heard multiple stories of how Saren barely managed to save the day by use of his Sunfire pistol. "That looks bad, then".

Pallin nodded. "Gets worse. This morning, one of our informants calls us with a tip. The Shadow Broker apparently obtained some hot intel relating to the Eden Prime incident. It was supposed to be coming into dock on a drell ship, the HAV Sullen Cloud. Someone hacked C-Sec docks control and had the ship redirected to a private dock. By the time we got it all sorted and got units to the scene, the drell was dead, head blown off against his own ship. We found a dead krogan in the underway assembly ... just luck, he was six feet from sailing right off into deep space. We ran his vitals and came back with a name. Raik Bole."

Garrus frowned. "That name sounds familiar."

Pallin smirked. "It should. Bole was the krogan arrested for illegal mod smuggling last year... mods he claimed were authorized by Saren. Saren bailed him out. We have one clear lead that looks very bad, a transfer of 85,000 credits to Bole a day before Bole is found dead near the corpse of a drell who had information on Eden Prime."

The Executor stands. "I will be .. blunt, Vakarian. I don't like you. You are a loose cannon, and you don't show the attention to the chain of command, to obedience, to duty as you should. You're an incredible shot, a skilled investigator, and a damned good cop – at times. But your disregard for what you see as useless red tape is going to end up with you getting an innocent person killed sooner or later, and you aren't going to like how that feels." He holds up a hand as Garrus opens his mouth to speak. "Just listen."

The Executor folds his arms behind his back. "This job is brutal. Every mistake, ever missed bust, every charge of brutality, racism, and favoritism ends up on my desk. My charge. Now I have the Council telling me point blank I have to assign detective to investigate someone who is explicitly and implicitly outside the law, with the damned crime having occurred light years away on a planet on the borders of our authority. . ."

Pallin sighed, shuddering. "If you find evidence proving Saren is behind this, the humans will go berserk. One of their most senior military figures has been accusing Saren of things for the past 15 years, and the very first time humanity actually plays ball with the Council and doesn't keep something to themselves in return for a chance to sit at the big table, a Turian destroys it. They'll say the entire Turian Hierarchy aided and abetted him. The council will split. Tevos has been looking for a way to reduce our influence for the past decade and this will play right into that bitch's blue hands."

"Worse, if he's guilty, our greatest hero is a traitor worse than any in history."

Garrus nodded. "And if he's not guilty?"

Pallin snorted. "That's even worse, believe it or not. It means we have a foe in alliance with the geth, who is attempting to frame Saren to distract humanity from the real culprit, whoever that might be. If we can't prove it is him, even if it is the truth, the humans might pull a Khar'shan and withdraw entirely from Council space. They don't even bother trying to enlist most of their race or use their

resource towards full military production. If they did, it would be a fuck-all mess." Pallin turned back to face Garrus.

Garrus only looked at him for a long moment, then turned his head to one side. "Alright, Executor, I get what you are saying. If I do this, it has to be by the damned book. No exceptions."

Pallin only nodded, and Garrus huffed. "I.. I don't know if I have the skill-set for this. Chasing murdering thugs, yeah. Going after crazed doctors, drug-pushing piles of walking feces, and busting down krogan bullies, yeah. Taking down Saren?"

Pallin shrugged. "The humans will also be running an investigation, and in fact have already started. They are hindered by the fact that the commander of their ground team on Eden Prime, the Butcher of Torfan, was .. somehow incapacitated by the Prothean Beacon they found, which destroyed itself for some reason immediately after."

Garrus groaned. "It's like a bad science-fantasy holovid. A *cheesy* bad holovid at that. What next, you're going to tell me I need to work with some human cop to track down a threat to all life? We'll bond, maybe he'll be retiring soon, and his aged wisdom will bring my exuberance in place? With all due respect, it sounds like a damned Blasto the Spectre novel."

Pallin gazed at Garrus a long second, then began to grin, an immensely pleased expression crossing his features. "Oh, no, Detective Vakarian. That would be an imposition. No, you will work with this Butcher of theirs whenever she recovers. You'll be assisting her. Let's see how you like it, eh?"

Garrus's jaw hung open and Pallin gave crossed the office to give the other turian a mocking, jovial pat. "Cheer up. I'm sure she will have no problem with you shooting everything and anything that her monkey brain can't grasp. Dismissed, Detective. And remind Forlan to get me that paperwork by first light, tomorrow."

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## Chapter 17: Chapter 11 : Chakwas and Joker

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*A/N: Sorry for the minor delay. I had a chapter already written, two actually, but the chronology is off so I scrapped them. As far as some of my minor OC's, Dace and Kee will definitely make an appearance , a minor one, later on.*

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January 24, 2183

The voices wouldn't stop.

*Parker, where is Parker! Batarians are overrunning the FOP!*

The smell of burning flesh, the taste of ashes on the tongue...

*Where is our goddamned fire support!*

The harsh consonants of khar'shai , the gleaming needle teeth bared in a thousand hungry grins...

*Stupid monkey filth, did you think you could defy the Fist of Khar'Shan? Behold your death, at the hands of your betters!*

The feel of torn muscle, the warmth of leaking blood...

*What happened to my boys, Shepard? What...why didn't you protect my boys? I trusted you, despite everything...they were supposed to be SAFE with you...*

Ah, there is was, the empty agony that never stops... it feeds , it nourishes, red rage like a tide towering over a tiny , broken shape of a girl, all huge eyes and a dirty mop of black hair clinging to the head of a battered teddy bear...

*You must do ... what we could not .. they are COMING ...*

Shepard opened her eyes, the whole world a white blur shot through with streaks of green and black. Bursts of pain radiated down her arms, her stomach, her thighs. She took a deep , shuddering breath.

*So long, death. One of these days, we're gonna have a good chat about what a lousy date you are. Goddamn tease.*

"I think she's waking up ,doctor." The voice was female, bleary and exhausted, and unfamiliar for a moment. Shepard began to set up, her motion checked by a hand on her shoulder, and she blinked hard.

"Easy, Commander. You took a lot of fire down there even before you decided to punch out a geth." The woman in front of Shepard was tall, with the lithe slender form of a born spacer. Intelligent, calm green eyes crinkled in kindness as she placed a pillow behind Shepard's back , but her mouth was in a grim line, giving her otherwise classically beautiful features a weary cast. Silvery-gray hair hung to either side, her uniform the white and green of Alliance Medical, but slashed with the four gray bars of a major."

Shepard shook her head to clear it, and winced as the motion sent off explosions in her skull. "Ow. I'm sorry, doc, a little .. woozy still. Fill me in? Guessing you are the ship's doctor. Never had time to do my medical in-brief." Shepard leaned back, taking in the room.

The med-bay was dimly lit, a flat metal desk at the far end lined with medical journals and a computer unit, it's haptic keyboard lining the shape of a few picture frames otherwise cast into darkness. A medigel dispenser hung by the door. Medical scanning beds lined the near wall, the ceiling crowded with lockers emblazoned with bizarre words – 'BioStat', 'RefStat' – and heavy locks. Near the door sat Williams, now in a standard marine BDU fatigue uniform, sleeves rolled up to reveal medigel bandages on her forearm. One eye and part of her face was occluded by more bandages, as well as thick ones wrapped around her torso. The woman's remaining eye was fixed on Shepard.

The doctor sighed. "Indeed. I'm Karin Chakwas, major, Alliance Medical. Ships Medical Officer. And you are suffering a long list of injuries, young lady. We'll ignore the stress fractures in the legs from whatever mission you were on before you got on the Normandy, but we have at least two gunshots, a chipped vertebrae, first and second degree burns over most of the right side of your face, a piece of metal in one thigh, 132 metal splinters and bits embedded in your body, 3rd degree plasma burns to the chest, and of course 7 broken bones in the hand, not to mention half your hand ripped off. And flash burns around your biotic amp from overuse."

Shepard locked gazes with the doctor, her eyes cold and clear, then glanced down at her body. Her right arm was set in a light cast, and she could now feel bandages around the side of her, her shoulder, stomach..."Noted, doctor. I presume I'll make a full recovery?"

Chakwas sighed. "You have another hour or two with that hand in the cell regenerator. And you're not going to be up for full duty for at least a week. But then again I doubt you'll listen to me when I tell you that you need to take it easy, you special forces types seem to think you're invincible."

Williams in the corner gave a small, wan chuckle. "Doc, she punched out a geth and then talked shit about it. That's pretty close to invincible."

Chakwas arched an eyebrow. "You should be resting as well, Chief Williams. You don't have much more sense than she does, walking around with a hole in your tummy."

Williams shrugged. "I . . . I just wanted to make sure the Commander was okay, ma'am."

Shepard sighed. "The last clear image I have is approaching the Beacon. Then..." She frowned, eyes lowering to the rough standard issue medical blanket.

The doors swished open, revealing the dark form of Captain Anderson. "Doctor? She's up?"

Chakwas nodded, stepping back. "Yes , she is. She is recovering normally, although I noticed a great deal of REM activity while she was out."

Shepard glanced at the doc. "And how long was I out for, anyway?"

Anderson sighed. "I need to speak to Shepard . . . privately. " Both Chakwas and Williams nodded, the latter getting to her feet somewhat unsteadily. "I'll be in the mess , then, sir." She hobbled out, followed by Chakwas, and the door shut behind them with a final thud.

The captain folded his arms over his barrel chest, sighing. "Well, I see you managed to tear yourself up again, Sara."

The response popped out of her mouth before she could even think. "It fucked with my crew."

Anderson gave a soft smile. "It probably regrets it now, soldier." The smile faded. "Shepard, I'm not going to lie to you. The situation...is bad. Over 30,000 people were killed on Eden Prime, including over 400 Alliance soldiers. The Beacon is...well, destroyed. After doing whatever it did to you, the jury-rigged power supply it was hooked to detonated. You've been out for over 14 hours. Nihlus is dead, and while you were unconscious, an assassin got into the hospital where that dockworker was recovering and blew his head clean off."

Shepard laid her head back against the pillow. "So now what? We go after this Saren guy?"

Anderson shook his head. "Saren is... a Spectre of the Council. Their most trusted agent. I've crossed paths with him several times. And he's not good news, trust me. He gets the job done regardless of the cost, but I think he enjoys the violence, the suffering, the thrill. He's not a friend of humanity, either, his brother was killed in the First Contact War. As a Spectre, everything he does is off the record , in most cases untraceable. He's been a Spectre for years, probably has contacts and resources all over Council and Terminus space, and he's one of the most adept warriors in known space. All in all, a terrifying foe."

Shepard frowned. "I'm not following, sir. We have the testimony of that dock worker. The Council strips him of his status, we find him and put a bullet in his plated chicken skull."

"Not that simple. The Council is in an uproar, and our ambassador, Udina, isn't helping. Rumors are flying everywhere. Some of the top brass in the Alliance are saying this whole event was staged, that we were set up to fail, that Saren was working for the Council and stole the Beacon data from us, using some kind of "hack" to control the geth. Others say he's gone rogue, still others say humanity is trying to frame him to stop him investigating human research companies on Novaria."

Anderson paced. "But I know Saren. I know his politics. His . . . hate. If he is doing this, it's to attack humanity. To annihilate us. He's never forgiven the loss of his brother and . . ." The captain folded his hands together. "Taken all together, it looks..bad. We lost the Beacon, the Spectre we had supporting you is dead, our only actual witness to what went down is dead, the only suspect is immune to being prosecuted or even questioned...and to top it all off, the Council wants a report. They're pretty much blaming everything on you."

Shepard rolled her eyes. "The council can kill my ass, sir. I'm an Alliance Marine, I could care less what they say."

Anderson nodded, "Unfortunately , the order – from top Alliance brass – is for us to go before them and testify. To try to salvage something from this mess. There isn't much chance they'll make you a Spectre now...unless you learned something from the Beacon."

Shepard shook her head again. "No sir. It was...painful and chaotic. Images and words that implicated a much higher level of technology. Lots of synthetics...lots of ships like that one we saw on Eden Prime. Dozens of them. I saw machines dissolving people. Killing them. Butchering them." She trailed off, shuddering, feeling herself shrink with the sheer pain and agony of the memories. She paused. "I .. I think it was a warning. Of what , I don't know."

Anderson's eyes narrowed. "We have to tell this council this."

Shepard looked up, and gave a bitter little laugh. "Tell them what? That the blood-thirsty human nutjob they got foisted onto them as a Spectre candidate had a bad dream? Sir, they'll laugh us out of the room. I can't ... ignore what I've seen, not saying that. Something is coming, and it's .. bad. But we seriously can't expect them to listen to us without real, solid proof."

Anderson leaned one muscled shoulder against a locker and frowned. "Sara, I've known you a long time, ever since this scary slip of a street thug was jumped by gang-bangers as she helped a little girl. I caught two slugs for that. And when the criminals you had run with your whole life tried to take advantage of you to hurt me, your reaction was to destroy them utterly."

He gave a ghost of a smile. "I won't pretend I understand you, that I understand the pain you go through every day. I won't lie and say that I grasp how you do what you do, or why you can manage to tear apart entire armies and make krogan piss themselves in fear but can't even manage to talk to the people who try to break through to reach you." Shepard looks down, frowning, but Anderson continues.

"But in the 8 years I've known you, I've only seen you cry twice. Once, when I saved your life." A hand reaches out, gently, the fingers tracing Shepard's cheek to wipe away a tear. "And now, when you spoke about whatever it is you saw in the vision. That means it's important , damn what anyone else things. You aren't crazy."

"I.."

Anderson shook his head. "And I know one more thing. I don't give a damn what the Council , Alliance brass, or anyone else says. You didn't fail your mission in my eyes. You did good, child. Anyone else would have just died down there. Against an army of geth, you not only saved half a million people from a grisly death, but recovered the Beacon and saved the remains of the 212 and those scientists. So if they call you a nutjob, I'll be right there next to you, ready to take the hit and call them out on it."

Shepard gave a little exhalation. "I...sorry. I just don't know how to ... process all of this. Things are supposed to make sense. Go here, flash the biotics, kill the bad guy. Get sent into suicide mission, turn it around, make the final run myself to take out the leaders. Write the letters about the people that got killed because some REMF on Arcturus can't be bothered to read the intel, or because some general ground-side thinks women should be barefoot and pregnant and won't give me the resources to get the job done the right way. I can do that."

"I don't want to ... feel. I just .. want to get the job done."

She looked up. "I don't know how to deal with .. *this*. Go in front of the Council and convince them of something I don't even know if I believe? Anderson, I can't even figure out how to talk to other humans half the time." Her good hand clenches into a fist on the blanket. "I'm tired. I'm tired of being sent off to die and only managing to get everyone around me killed. I'm tired of wading through emotions and trying to pretend they aren't there. I'm tired of waking up every night wanting to empty out my skull. I'm tired of having the only peace in my life when I'm on the battlefield, killing something. I've been

told to be the perfect soldier, the perfect killing machine. Every op, every training class, every goddamned qualifica-

She breaks off as Anderson places a hand on her shoulder and squeezes. "Sara, am I your friend?"

*That goddamned word again. That goddamned question again.*

"I..."

The eyes that bore into hers are such a soft, open shade of brown. They are the only eyes she's known that don't judge, that have never judged, that have always seen something in her that even she can't, even when she's gone too far in hate and rage and fear. "I don't even know how to have a friend, David. But you are all I have."

Anderson nods. "Then if you won't trust yourself, trust me. You can do this. You have to learn to live, now, child. You've punished yourself enough. It was never you who was at fault. It's been the people pushing you. Using you. Now you have to take one more step, Sara. Trust that you can be more. You've gone from being used, to making your own path. From being a criminal who hurts people, to being a hero to humanity who protects them. Now you have to be more."

"What if I **fail!**"

Anderson lets her shoulder go, standing to his full height. His uniform is perfect in the dim light, his stance speaking of nothing but confidence. It almost *hurts*. "Sara, you've never failed at anything you put your will and mind to in your entire life. You aren't about to start now."

Anderson turned away. "We're still a ways out from the Citadel. Finish up with Chakwas and have her get you ready to move out when we dock. I have to prepare a report to Admiral Hackett."

"Yes, sir."

The door opens, and Anderson steps out, replaced by Chakwas, who immediately walks over and begins consulting the haptic interface at the foot of the bed. "Lieutenant Alenko informed me that you'll have to be up and around soon. You really do need a week of recuperative time, Commander."

Shepard leans back against the pillow. Her mind is still whirling. "I heal fast, doctor."

Chakwas scowls. "No you don't. You just push yourself on, before you're healed, as if you don't matter. Your body is a patch work of badly healed injuries that should have killed you." She walks around the bed, her hands deft as she slips open the cast around Shepard's shattered hand, and places the boxy form of the cellular regenerator over it. "And your psych profile and medical records ...."

Shepard sighed. "I have this conversation with every medical officer I deal with. No, I am not psychotic. No, I do not have anger management issues. No, I -"

"Commander. I was not going to state any of that. I'm just sorry you had to .. endure...what you've had to go through."

Shepard snorted. "You'd be the first." She flexes her hand inside the regenerator, feeling pain ripple through it, then turns to look at Chakwas, noting the stricken look on her face. "What?"

For her part, Dr. Chakwas was torn between fury and wanting to cry. "Are you serious? That all this time, your doctors have been dismissive of your past and what you've went through?"

Shepard shrugs, wincing as muscles pull in her back. "Doc, most of my ground commands get pretty torn up in the course of repeated anti-pirate ops. The doctors end up having to patch together the people that pay the price for me getting the job done. Whoever works with me always ends up judging me on the fact that I used to be a gang-banging, drug slinging murderer. The first Alliance docs, the ones in

boot camp and with the Marine Penal Legions, saw me as a liability. They were looking for any reason to category 6 me."

Chakwas sighed, being dismissed for mental issues when you were in a Penal Legion was grounds for an immediate bullet in the head. "They were supposed to be helping you."

Shepard's face was calm, emotionless, as if discussing someone else. "No, they were supposed to be helping people who needed help. You lose the right to that when you turn into a monster."

Chakwas gave a great snort, brushing hair out of her eyes, fixing her gaze on the woman in front of her. "I have never heard such a . . . hurtful, dismissive thing. A woman, traumatized, betrayed by her own parents, forced to survive in an environment where any weakness means death or worse, and when you show you aren't just a monster, they treat you as one anyway? Horrific. Unethical. Inexcusable."

Shepard tilted her head. "Doc, you are reading the same reports everyone else is? Flipped my shit, shot up 119 people, blah blah blah? That's what most people call crazy."

Chakwas crosses the room to pick up a datapad, and flicks it on, paging through something. "Ah, yes. I quote: '*Despite outstanding warrants and her own injuries, subject personally got Lieutenant Anderson to a local hospital for his injuries. In doing so, she was identified by a local police officer as being a gang member. A partial police report implies that police officers attempted to get a statement from Anderson implicating subject in criminal activity. Anderson declined to do so. Hospital monitoring systems recorded a brief conversation between Anderson and Shepard, in which she inquires why he didn't sell her out and he replies that if she had been evil she wouldn't not have gotten shot saving his life, and that she deserves another chance.*'" Chakwas put down the pad, and folded her arms. "Yes, very monstrous. You destroyed a sick infestation of evil men who had twisted you into a weapon for their use. But you didn't do that in the end. You turned on the evil. And since then you have done nothing but try to follow orders and get the job done."

Chakwas came back over to Shepard, gently undoing the bandage on her head, and clucked critically. "No noticeable scarring, good. Shepard, I know you only through the piles of documents I get on crew members and from what Anderson has told me. But I can see with my own eyes you are no monster. A monster would have let Chief Williams and Lieutenant Alenko distract that Geth Prime so they could drop it, not attract it's attention and dive through a plasma blast to punch it to death. "

She pauses, fussing with the bandage on her shoulder, frowning a bit, her voice even and calm and . . . kind. "A monster would not put themselves in harms way again and again every time they had to sacrifice soldiers, as if hoping to die alongside the men and women you had to let die to get the job done. I'm not as hard as you. I don't think I could do what you did. That doesn't mean it makes you evil, or wrong, or worth anything but as much consideration and care, if not more, than any other soldier in this ship."

Chakwas turned away, her cultured voice filled with disgust. "The fact that you have not had that treatment from other doctors is the only sickening thing about this. And anyone who make an oath to do no harm and then ignores your pain . . . those are the only monsters I see here."

Shepard paused. "Just before I transferred here, there was one psychologist who . . . was different. Told me that I had to let things go." She shook her head. "I .. I don't know what is wrong with me. Maybe it's that Beacon. I need to focus on the mission."

Chakwas gave a small, worried smile. "Commander. You aren't used to anyone being concerned for your well being? Well I am. You are part of this ship's crew now, and that means I hold myself responsible for your health. Mental and physical. If Captain Anderson, a man I respect immensely, says you are good people, then who am I to question him?"

Shepard looks away. Chakwas gives a little sigh, and pulls down the blanket, examining the bandaging around Shepard's thigh. "Everything except the hand is healing well, Commander. While usually I'd want you to stay in bed another 24 hours, the regenerator is done with the thigh wound, and you need to walk it to prevent muscle scarring that could limit motion. You're not cleared for any sort of combat, but I think you could finish resting in your own stateroom."

Shepard nods. "What about my hand?"

Chakwas smiled. "Well, you have at least another hour on that. Perhaps you could tell me about your military history? I need it for your medical in-brief anyway. And these documents are full of redactions."

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Two hours later, Shepard limped towards the main battery, dressed in her blues. Her head was still spinning, from the aftereffects of the Beacon, battle medicine, and some of the strangest conversation she'd ever had. Chakwas was so infuriatingly stubborn. Never judging. Never assuming. *As if I was some kind of real person instead of a cardboard cutout that shot things.*

She was pacing down the length of the crew deck, feeling the stress in her injured leg begin to smooth out. She never had a chance to do a real tour of the ship when she got on , the rush to Eden Prime all consuming, and as a result she had no idea where things were. But she loved weapon systems, and before she went and tried to interact with any of the crew, she needed a moment to gather herself mentally.

The battery was deserted, racks of Spearfish missiles neatly stacked in auto-loading racks, the launchers themselves retracted into the hull. Bigger than the ground assault missiles from mobile artillery trucks, the Spearfish missiles were almost 18 feet long, and tipped with a fleck of antimatter suspended in a charge neutral vacuum state supported by mass effect fields. Ruinously expensive, they gave the Normandy the punch of a much larger ship without a heavy power draw.

As she walked forward, she could hear voices, sounding from above her. *Whoever is on the bridge, I suppose.*

The first voice was clearly that of Lieutenant Alenko, his quiet tones muffled. "I'm just saying that she isn't quite what I expected, Joker. I figured that she would be less cold."

The other voice she recognized vaguely as that of the pilot. She remembered him being called "Joker" by Anderson , apparently it was a nickname of some kind. His voice sounded bitter. "Geez, Alenko, you really don't get it , do you? She's not cold. She's just trying to keep everything in."

Alenko's voice was almost mocking. "And when did you become an expert on icy killing machines, Joker? Trust me. I've seen her in person, remember? She went through those geth like they were irritants, and she wasn't even breathing hard until the very end. She snapped at Williams for being upset at seeing her own damned unit butchered and said she never had a problem with it because she never had friends."

Joker said nothing for a moment, then almost snarled. "Funny thing, LT. People don't understand pain. See, I live with pain every day. Everyone thinks, "oh, he had bad bones, he has to be careful." Being careful doesn't help. Everytime I move, the bones break a little. Walking to get a cup of joe and go to the head? Sledgehammers up and down the legs, every step. Having to slide out of my rack in the morning? Feels like someone is kicking me in the spine and hips. I can't even fucking walk down to the mess decks to eat without pain so bad I want to cry sometimes."

Alenko is quiet, and then speaks. "I.. didn't know.."

"Shut up, Kaiden. Not my point. I don't need people's pity. I am sitting here because I busted my ass in flight school. I stayed in the sims until I couldn't keep myself awake anymore with coffee and cigarettes. I pushed myself to study 20 hours a day. I aced *every* test, I pushed *every* limit, and I didn't give myself time to heal. It hurt all the time, and the more pain I was in, the more I pushed."

His voice softens. "I thought...if I did good enough, if I was the best, maybe it would make the pain mean something. Maybe people would be impressed enough to see through the awkward kid with the broken bones, do more than feel sorry for me and avoid me at the bars. But of course, it did nothing but alienate everyone."

"That's not true, Joker. At least I hope not, I've .. I mean, hell, we've gone drinking together."

Joker gave a laugh. "That was because you were all over that asari girl and needed a wingman. But no, LT, you are right. Some people here have done that. Not many. And not what I'm saying. Spending all these years on the sidelines of life, watching everyone else go through the motions, the loving, the living, the little things I can't have, you get really good at measuring people, at seeing things other people miss."

Joker's voice goes quiet. "And our new Commander is the same was I was. In pain. Pushing to be the best to make it go away, but drawing on the pain to push herself further. Unable to reach out to anyone because if someone feels sorry for you then you don't know what to do. They called me Joker in flight school because I was so serious, I pushed everyone away. I didn't have a single friend until 5 years after that."

Kaiden made a thoughtful sound. "I.. hadn't thought of it like that."

Joker's voice is bitter. "Most people don't. Easier to avoid and pity the kid with busted bones. Easier to avoid and fear the crazy lady with a bad history. Except it's not. It's cruel, and it's hateful, and it makes you hate yourself more, blame yourself more, for shit that isn't even yours to claim. And then you go all emo and people move on without you."

Kaiden laughed. "Can't see you as ever being... emo, Joker. Maybe tossing out irreverent comments on William's ass to my private commlink."

Joker made a scoffing sound. "Well yeah. I mean, I'm crippled, not dead. And while the Commander is also a beautiful woman, the chances of me saying anything about her ass ending with me having even more broken bones is far too high for me to risk saying anything over the commlink."

Kaiden laughed. "True. I guess I just...Hell, I don't know, Joker. I thought I was dead. I thought for sure she'd let us distract that Geth Prime and take it out from behind. Dirth, Mindoir, Torfan, isn't that what she's known for? Big casualties, victory at any price?"

Joker said nothing. Kaiden's voice rambled on. "But she didn't. She flung herself into over 70 geth, and then nearly killed herself saving us. Maybe you're right and I'm being unfair. I don't know. But she still seems cold."

Joker finally spoke again. "You get that way when you can't figure out how to say things. Now, I do it with humor and sarcasm, but ... I just... I feel like I know where she is coming from. Our pain isn't the same. I can't do all the incredible things she can do, or say that my background is as bad as hers." Joker pauses, then his voice goes sarcastic. "Then again, she can't make the Normandy do a 720 in less than 10 km at top mark and still manage to hit a drift of under 1500k from across the galaxy."

Alenko laughed. "So modest, Joker."

Shepard looked hard at the missiles, old voices playing in her head. Then she thought of Anderson.

*"Shepard, the only person who can give you absolution is you. But don't imagine you're in this alone."*

*You just have to reach out."*

---

Joker was in the cockpit solo 10 minutes later, when irregular footsteps sounded behind him. He half turned, catching the sight of Commander Shepard now standing behind him. "Commander. All systems nominal. We're currently one hour fifty two minutes from the Citadel."

"Acknowledged, flight lieutenant." Her voice was icy and flat. He waited for her to turn away, but instead she slowly, carefully lowered herself into one of the seats next to him, manning the gunnery station. "I need to check some power fluctuations I noticed while reviewing the battery."

"Of course, ma'am."

There was a few seconds of silence. Shepard paged through menus. Her motions were not fast, but she didn't have to go back and forth. She clearly knew what she was doing, but it was as if it was memorized, not learned. "If you don't mind me asking, ma'am...I thought you were a ground-side marine."

She nodded. "I was. Before I was assigned here, though, a few years back, I went ahead and did the qual package for executive officer, nav, engineer and general systems."

"Huh. What ship did you serve on, then?"

Shepard glanced over to him, face neutral, and then back to the panel. "None, Flight Lieutenant. I studied the material and took all the courses up to level 4 and 5." She identified a system and brought it up with a minimal movement of her hand over the haptic interface, examining something.

"But those classes are designed for officers who've had two years of watch standing experience to prepare!" Joker couldn't even imagine passing them without having the actual knowledge...

Shepard gave a cold smile. "As usual, people don't understand how things can work out if you just push yourself hard enough. "

Joker was silent for a moment. "Yes ma'am." He fell silent. The last thing he wanted to do was pop off in front of the commander. He might berate Alenko for dismissing her, and he knew his ego about his piloting skills was why he often bragged on himself, but up close she was... terrifying. Beautiful, icy, calm, and probably saw him as a ship function rather than a person.

Shepard finished her scan and shut down the link. But she didn't move from her seat. After several minutes of increasingly worrying silence, Joker glanced over at her, watching her stare outside into the onrushing stars. "Commander?"

She didn't look his way, but spoke. Her voice had an odd note in it, almost tentative. "Ships are often full of little quirks. Engines that don't balance right. Panels that don't operate correctly. A medigel dispenser that squirts it in your face. Missile links that never got adjusted from the factory." A pause.

"Or the fact that due to acoustics and venting, someone in the forward battery can hear every word of a conversation between two lieutenant's about their commander's ass."

Joker felt as if the entire universe constricted around his heart. He didn't dare glance over, just kept his now trembling hands on the haptic controls. "M..ma'am?" His throat felt as if it was about an inch wide.

Shepard didn't say anything for a long time, maybe five seconds. "I don't have any friends, Mr. Moreau. While I'm not sure I know how to make any, there is a certain .. comfort in knowing that I am at least not ... entirely misunderstood by all people."

Joker could not believe his ears. Carefully exhaling, he glanced over to where Shepard was sitting. Her

eyes were fixed on some point ahead in space.

*She is going to kill me. I can see the head line now. 'Pilot with Vroliks Syndrome broken into bits by enraged Commander Shepard for being nice.'*

He reached his free hand out anyway, to place it over right hand, gently. "Ma'am, you aren't alone in... uh, being alone. I can't understand what you've gone through, and anyone who does is a lying asshat ... but I know *more* than enough about living in pain every second of every day. If I can get past that so can anyone."

Shepard stared at the pilots lightly boned, elegant hand on top of hers for a long moment, before Joker lost his nerve and withdrew it. She felt as if pieces of her mind were spinning around in drunken patterns.

"Feeling...hurts, Fl... Joker." She stood, abruptly, and began to walk out.

Joker couldn't let that go. "So does everything else, ma'am. But at least feeling can do something beside hurt."

Shepard paused, and said nothing for long seconds, her hand braced on the doorway to support her weight. Finally she straightened. "Flight Lieutenant, if you comment on my ass to any member of my ground team I will personally put both your femurs into your lungs."

She exhaled, as Joker internally cursed himself for saying anything. "As long as you don't do that, Joker, I would.. appreciate any additional insight you have to give. I'll be heading to Engineering if the Captain needs me."

And then she was gone. He knew she was grimacing, forcing herself to walk quietly and normally so she would never look weak. He could understand that.

His face split in a grin after a moment of reflection. She had called him Joker.

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## **Chapter 18: Chapter 12 : Doran**

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*A/N: Mess of a chapter to write. Never understood how the hell Bioware expected me to believe a wounded quarian girl would survive for a couple of DAYS on the incredibly hostile Citadel with Saren's thugs looking out for her and no one inclined to help. I actually almost distrusted her evidence because it was so .. convenient.*

January 24, 2183

Tali sat in the huge, open area of the Upper Wards, and realized she was completely lost.

The area was like nothing she had ever seen on the Migrant Fleet or the handful of worlds she had visited. Giant arcs of gleaming metal held up huge, jutting shelves of offices, stores, cafes, and businesses. Aircars ran riot overhead, complex patterns twining in the shallow airzone between the ground and the envelope inclosing the Upper Wards.

The buildings were all towering, angular shapes, slashed with myriad lights of .. people doing things. What they did was all rather hazy to Tali. She had wandered the upper wards for half a day now, her leg increasingly sore and tender. Biting her lip behind her mask, she rubbed her hip absently, feeling the heavy bruising from when she had fallen.

She had patched the suit breach, but without a clean area to examine the wound to her leg she was just praying any infection wouldn't be too bad. She had doused herself with immuno-boosters, but her

supplies were almost empty, and she had no cash to buy even basic medical care.

*Troyce...*

The flash of the gun and the ugly, sickening image of the kindly old drell's head coming apart wouldn't get out of her mind. She remembered the little stars on his curious shoes – spurs, he called them – jangling in discord as he crashed to the ground. The vile bared teeth of the monster who had brutally murdered him.

Troyce had been right about the Citadel people and how they would act, though. Most completely ignored her, or crossed the narrow walkpaths to avoid her, as if she smelled. Turians gave her hard-eyed glares, asari merely looked over the top of her head, and salarians rudely brushed by, as if she wasn't even there.

Twice she had tried approaching someone for directions only to be told to get lost. Now her leg hurt fiercely, and she was feeling light-headed, depressed, and wrung out from crying. She didn't think the krogan would shoot her dead in the middle of a crowd, but she had to leave this area sooner or later, and the chances of him surprising her increased every moment.

*Two tubes of paste left, half a liter of filtered water, and only a dozen air filters left. No antibiotics, and I dropped my shotgun running away. I have a pistol, 19 credits, a boot knife, 3 OSD's, a data disk full of geth audio I can't even understand, two books, a picture of my mother and father, another reik, and a silly model of a quarian ship. What do I do?*

Lost in thought, she barely noticed the C-Sec officer walking over to her. "Move along, quarian. We've had two complaints of vagrancy and loitering."

"W-what? I was j-just sitting here thinking, I'm l-lost.."

The C-sec agent was a turian, his armor harsh angles in blue and black trim gleaming with polish. His hands held a heavy rifle, its ammo indicator glowing a sullen red. His face was a dark, cold gray, slashed with heavy white marks around his eyes. "Sure you are. Waiting for someone to lift their credit chit from?" He jerks his chin, where two more C-Sec officers are dragging another quarian away, this one a male with the pale red reik of House Shava. The young man is limp, his faceplate showing a single, long crack down one side.

The turian sneered, mandibles dipping in scorn. "We found three stolen chits and a security card registered to another thieving quarian. But I'm an open-minded sort. Get the hell out of the Upper Wards before I have you arrested."

Tali stood uncertainly, limping. "I was.. told to look for someone named . Fist?"

The C-sec agent's eyes narrowed instantly, and he tensed. "So you are a criminal. Fist is really branching out if he's using quarians as drug mules. Well, that's all I needed to hear, you're going to have to come with me."

"W..what? I don't even know Fist, I was just t-told by my friend to meet hi-" She nearly screamed as the turian roughly pushed her to her knees, the agony in her wounded leg flaring. "Sure, and I'm Blasto the Spectre, too. God you people are so .. "

A huge, blocky shadow towered over both the quarian girl and the C-sec officer. Tali gasped at the sight of the krogan in front of her. This one was even more gigantic than the one that had been chasing her, angled and heavy red armor dented and blasted with years of battle. A sallow face, crossed with ugly scars, boasted little more than angry red eyes and a snarling grim line of a mouth, while the krogan's fire red crest was even more scarred. The most gigantic shotgun Tali had ever seen in her life was clipped to his back, nearly half as long as he was, with a barrel she could have cleanly put her fist into.

"...fuck, Wrex. What do you want now?"

Wrex gestured. "Little quarian bitch is one of Fist's new hires. She's already paid for and we already paid off Donatix, I ain't paying twice. She got clever, got away from the workers and old Bintho said she was running up this way." With a casual gesture, Wrex flicked a thousand credit chit to the C-sec cop, who deftly caught it with two talons and tucked it in his armor in one smooth, well-practiced motion.

The C-sec officer looked around. "Tell Fist to keep his shit clean, goddamn it." He shoved Tali towards Wrex, who caught her by the waist in one giant hand. "And get her the fuck out of here, you know anyone who does quarians isn't in the Upper Wards." The turian turned away with an irritated grunt.

"Don't. Say. A. Word. Just move and you'll get through this alive, girl." Wrex's voice was low, rough, and completely terrifying. Tali was half paralyzed with pain and fear, her heart beating so fast she thought it would explode. He shifted his massive grip from her waist to her shoulder and guided her – gently, which was odd – over to a somewhat darkened alleyway. Turning the corner, he took Tali down several sets of broad, flat stairs.

After four flights, the stairs opened out onto an underground, empty plaza, abandoned buildings giving way grudgingly to smears of light and motion off in the distance. He gestured to the shattered side of a building up against the walls of the ward, and Tali obeyed, limping more after all the stairs. Wrex glanced in both directions for long seconds before kneeling down in front of the tiny quarian.

"Are you Tali'Zorah?"

Tali started. "Y-yes.."

Wrex nodded. "Good. The Broker sent me, originally to meet Troyce. I just came up from C-sec, he's dead. I need to know what happened."

Tali squeezed her eyes shut, half in relief and half in agony of memory. "He...he got me here, from Caleston. On his ship. W-we were told to land in a docking bay...and when we got out two k-krogan attacked us. He killed one. ... I think...but the other shot me then shot him. He told me to run...to find Fist in someplace called the Lower Wards."

Wrex cursed. "This krogan – describe him. Black head crest, where mine is red? Grey armor? Dark skin?"

Tali nodded, hesitantly. "Y-yes...T-troyce asked if they were from the Broker and he laughed."

Wrex grunted. "He's a stupid thug. ... " He lifted his head, and sniffed, before whirling around and standing, his hand already going to his gun-

And was thrown back with a roar of pain, smoke coming from his chest, as a shotgun boomed. The huge krogan collapsed, blood leaking from his mouth. Tali whirled, her pistol in her hands.

The krogan who had shot Troyce stood there, his face unscathed, a new looking shotgun smoking in his massive hands, a human cigar in his teeth. "Idiot old fool, did the smell of the human leaf throw you?" Ignoring Tali, he fired another shot, this time at Wrex's knee, which erupted in red-orange blood. "I'll deal with you in a minute, doddering wreck.." The barrel lifted towards Tali –

Who, with a grimace, rolled aside, and fired her pistol three times in rapid succession. The shots did nothing to the heavy armor the krogan mercenary wore, and he gave a belly laugh. "You really are a stupid little -"

With a tap of her omni-tool, Tali generated an over-current, and grounded it in the bits of metal she had shot into the krogan's armor. There was a great, arcing blast of white energy, and the krogan fell

shrieking to the ground. Tali pounced, screaming in hate, sweeping up her boot knife and cramming it down with all her strength into the krogan's eye.

The blade punched through with an ugly squelch, and the krogan roared, so loud Tali's ears rung. With a snarl it slammed its heavy fist into her stomach, literally folding her in half over his massive arm. He flung her back, to land in a heap on the ground, and plucked her blade from his eye. "Bitch, you've got a quad, I'll give you that, but now I'm really going to hurt you before I kill. You should have finished me back at the ship, krogan regenerate."

"Regenerate this, pup". Wrex's voice was pained gravel on steel as he pulled the trigger of his shotgun, point blank at the other krogan's head. The explosion that slammed through the air was muted due to the gore flung in a liquified cone that sprayed all over the graffiti covered walls. The headless merc slumped to his knees, arms twitching as his secondary nervous system tried to figure out what had happened. Wrex nudged the soon-to-die body over with his foot, viciously putting two more shots into the chest area, and then, limping, moved to check on Tali.

Tali managed to roll over and took in the ruin of the krogan. "You...you killed him, even after he shot you?"

Wrex shrugged. "I'm embarrassed he even got the drop on me. You look hurt."

Tali winced, trying to put on a brave front. Her father told her the krogan respect strength and will over anything else, and she exhaled to even her voice before speaking. "I.. got shot in the leg, and bruises on the hip from falling. My suit is punctured...and I .. don't have any money."

Tali trailed off hopelessly. She doubted a krogan would bother with charity.

Wrex flexed his massive physique, feeling the knitting sensation around his knee grow tight and hard with pain. *I could just put a bullet in her skull and take the info directly to Fist...and see if he tries and crosses me. Easy, simple.*

The krogan gave a grim little grin as he put away his weapons, remembering how the tiny quarian girl stabbed the other krogan right in the eye. "Typical quarians, always broke. C'mon, let's get to a doctor before you start crying or bleed out from a broken toe nail or something."

The krogan stomped away, Tali scurrying to follow. "B-but I don't have any credits!"

Wrex gave her a sidelong look. "If what you're offering the Broker is any good, you'll be able to pay me back for this. And if you don't, I'll kick your spine out of that suit. Now, hush up and follow, the Lower Wards aren't the safest place for a kid."

For almost 10 minutes, Tali limped silently after Wrex. In comparison to the gleaming metal and light of the wards above ground, the lower wards were...grim. Trash and rust were everywhere, so were homeless people and the occasional wandering pack of C-Sec agents, all hard eyes and hands on their guns. They gave Wrex unfriendly looks, which he just gave great, roaring laughs at, but every time he increased the pace a bit. Clearing another set of stairs, Wrex spat as yet another C-Sec agent gave him a dirty look and turned away. "Spineless pyjaks..." he muttered at last. Then he came to a stop.

"Quarian."

Tali stiffened. The pain of her leg had only increased with his punishing pace, and she was now shaking slightly, a cold sweat covering her body. Her vision was blurry, and she was hungry and tired and wanted to just curl up somewhere safe and clean and have Auntie Raan stroke her back and make tucharial tea. "My NAME is Tali, krogan!" Her silvery eyes narrowed to dagger throwing slits for a few seconds before she realized she was shouting at a giant, angry lizard with far too many teeth, in armor that weighed more than her entire family and who was armed with a gun that looked like it had been

looted from a spaceship's main battery.

But Wrex roared with laughter. "Ah, you have a quad on you, little girl. Tali it is. I'm about to drop you off at a clinic in the upper wards." He gestures to a stairway, gleaming clean steel and brightly light, with a haptic sign over it reading "Upper Wards Access: South Bechjet Ward"

The krogan frowned, spoke, his voice low and careful. "The doctor in there is called Michele. Human female, too touchy feely for my taste, but she specializes in patching up volus and quarians and the like, so she can help you. Tell her **Wrex** sent you, and that this makes us even. When she gets done patching you up, go to Chora's Den. She'll tell you how to get there. Ask for a man named Fist, and you'll get directions on where to meet an agent of the Broker."

Tali frowned. "What about the Broker himself?"

Wrex shook his head. "NO ONE has seen the broker directly for over 50 years except one man, a turian, and that's who you're going to meet. They call him the Voice of the Broker, and it's as close as you can get to meeting the Broker himself. Hell, I've been shooting up shit for the Broker for 250 years and I've only meet the various Voices 4 or 5 times. Be glad you're getting this close." He paused. "If your info is good, the guy you meet will pay you off. Once that's done, come find me. If I'm lucky I'll be in Flux, if not, I'll be a guest of C-Sec. Either way, if your intel is pretty good, we can get you out of here. And I can get paid, at last."

Tali nods, as they slowly take the steps. "I.. I know you are being paid, to help, but...thanks. I'm sorry you got shot."

Wrex snorted. "As the idiot said, we regenerate. An hour from now and I won't feel a thing. And killing that fool was it's own payment. Only two kinds of people oppose the Shadow Broker - fools and those on the payroll of very evil men. Killing the second? I get paid well for that. Killing the first? That's doing a favor to the whole galaxy." Wrex closed his eyes.

"But you killed your own people for .. me?"

The krogan reached the top of the stairs and gave an amused grunt. "My people are dying slowly anyway, little girl. Everyone will be happier when we're all dead, anyway. Including us." The krogan looked around, this part of the wards nestled deep in the Morche Tower complex. Tali cocked her head at the bitterness in his voice, wondering why he would say such a statement, but the big krogan just turned his head to stare directly at her, red eyes narrowed, mouth a firm, hard line.

"Alright, listen up. Clinic is over there." He pointed at a nondescript set of doors, set off by a series of universal medical symbols – the asari circle, the salarian hash-marks, the turian shield, the human cross, and the krogan hand. He snorted at the last, such a flimsy looking building wouldn't contain a badly wounded krogan blood-raging in his death throes for very long. "Down this big hallway is a sign leading to Flux. That's where I'll be waiting. Come see me after you talk to Fist."

Tali nodded, mustering her courage. "Thank you, Wrex."

The krogan stomped off, half watching the quarian enter the medical office out of the corner of his eye, then grunting in suppressed irritation as he made his way through the crowds towards Flux. His mind was not on asari girls or quasar machines, but information.

Ten minutes later, he was ensconced in the only booth large enough for his vast bulk, a bowl of heavy tjark nuts on his table, and a slug of ice-cold ryncol in his meaty fist. "Varren dung, Doran. Your suit scrubbers must be full of it. I'd believe I fought at Gatatog, given how stupid he was, but not Weyrloc."

Flux was a nightclub that catered mainly to the up-and-coming set in the upper wards – haptic programmers, simsense interface controllers, C-sec investigators, financial analysts and the like. The

bouncers were a set of krogan twins, incredibly rare, who were over half a century old and could read each other's movements like a book. Both were armed with light coaxial mass accelerators off of old turian light fighters, and heavy stunsticks used on Tuchanka to corral varren. No one, no matter how drunk, started trouble in Flux.

The club was triangular, a huge dance floor dominating the ground floor, reluctantly giving way to the bar and small eating area, while the balcony above was awash in the sounds of high stakes gambling and quasar machines. No tasteless asari in ass-revealing outfits here, only a salarian in white robes, playing a zith-kaan acoustic, plucking notes of elegant sorrow for the dining elite.

The krogan's booth was in the very back of the dining area, right next to the bar, and it was only rarely used. Wrex still wondered why Doran had gone to the trouble to put one in, given that the number of krogan with the cash to meet the cover fee when you could get a drink for far less was probably limited to a handful.

*It's just that the damned music is so catchy. Not that I can let that fat bastard know, I'd never hear the end of it from the silly pyjak.*

The figure across from him was a volus, the rotund creatures from Irune who were so savvy with money and entertainment venues. The volus's suit was a clean, stark black, with gleaming white trim. He was more slender than other volus, the chops of his mask coming to neat points tipped in gold, his eye-globes a soft, cunning green. His voice was a smooth baritone, interrupted periodically with the rasping sound of his respirator unit. "I assure you, Tuchanka-clan, that my information is valid and timely. Raik Bole was definitely the corpse found in the docks near the *Sullen Cloud* – I heard C-Sec gossiping about it at the machines – and Raik Bole only partnered with one other of his kind. Weryloc Shan."

Wrex sighed. "I always thought better of Weyrloc. To think one of their pups was such a weakling offends the heart. Bah." Wrex downs more ryncol. "You haven't seen Tetricus at all, then?"

The volus gave a rasp and then a long suffering sigh. "Oddly enough, a giant menacing Palaven-clan who has been burned to a crisp, is full of cybernetics, and is a biotic lunatic dressed all in melodramatic black is rather hard to miss. No, he's either not shown up at all, or is capable of being invisible."

*"No wonder volus are a prey species on Irune, Doran."* The voice is icy, cold, and comes out of nowhere. The volus gives a jumpy start, only to nearly fall over when a cascade of electricity erupts in the darkened corner near the back of the booth. A black-hooded figure stands there, leaning against the wall, heavy cane in hand. The sneering tip of a mandible quivers in amusement. "All the awareness of an elcor hallex addict, but only half the response time."

Wrex snorts, drinking another sip of ryncol. "Tetricus. New toy?"

"Whole body cloaking. The humans actually came up with it first, but they can't figure out the power supply so the blasted thing only works for a few seconds. The Broker hooked up one of those Inusannon power stars. Now, I am seen at my leisure only." The turian glanced around, then sat with his back to the wall, next to Wrex, a blot of darkness. "And despite your complaints, volus, I have been in and out several times. I see no reason to walk in openly, thus announcing for any fool with eyes that the Shadow Broker is watching this place."

Doran gave the volus version of a shrug, sausage-plump arms twitching. "I am but a humble barkeep and cook. Nothing to see here." His voice was completely deadpan.

There was a pause, and all three men snorted in amusement. Tetricus placed a datapad on the table. "Well, barkeep, we'll need your *help* with this one. The entire operation has gone to pieces." His talons ticked over the pad, bringing up images of three dead, mauled bodies on a steel floor, blood spattered in

crazy , looping shapes on a wall nearby. "All three of our Eden Prime operatives are deader than Septimus's chances with Sha'ira. Someone pierced our security at Caleston, almost killing the quarian, and then managed to ambush them right at the damned docks here. They killed Captain Troyce and almost got the quarian girl."

Wrex picked up a handful of nuts and dropped them into his maw, blocky teeth turning them to fine, gritty paste. "I sent her to that doc down the way , since that doc has a clean room. But before that...someone sent C-Sec into doing a sweep on quarian kids in the Upper Wards. They had at least 15 officers out, and the only reason I got her away is I lucked out with a greedy turian and dropped Fist's name."

Doran spluttered. "If they're into C-Sec, they could be ... by Plenix. That's horrifying." A pause. "Is she safe there, alone? What if the Rannoch-clan is still being followed? My own people haven't found much, but like I was telling Wrex, a LOT of Tuchanka-clan mercs suddenly seem to be answering to Saren."

Wrex snorts. "It's fine. Soon as she leaves, we'll follow her to Chora's Den. Fist tries anything, I'll eat him. If he's clean, we toss the place until we find the leak. Delan can keep the girl here, in one of his rooms, until we figure out how to ship her off station, and give us an alibi if we need one."

Tetrimus coughed dryly. "And if the leak isn't Fist, when everything else is handled, you eat **them**, I suppose?"

Wrex only grabs another handful of nuts. "Only if they aren't turian. You guys taste horrible."

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## Chapter 19: Chapter 13 : al Jilani , Westerlund News

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*A/N: Irrissa is the asari who replaces Tevos if you don't save the Council. And of course we can't have nice things without our buddy Gavin Archer. This is kind of a filler chapter, I'll have a large update tomorrow.*

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January 24th, 2183

*DOWNLOADING: Data feed, prime broadcast segment 54, terminal date 2183.24.1*

*Manifest dump 40303-core alpha, unclassified*

*This is an official Systems Alliance data capture dump , replication or rebroadcast is restricted.*

*Transcript begins, identifiers J: al-Jilani G. Gavin Archer I: Irrissa Te'Shora*

*Keywords: geth, Eden Prime, Butcher*

BEGIN:

"Westerlund news! All the news , fit or unfit to print, 24/7!"

J: "Good afternoon. I'm **Khalisah Bint Sinan al-Jilani**, Westerlund News Network. Today we're covering the top story on all the comm-links : the geth assault on Eden Prime, crown jewel in the Systems Alliance network of colonies. Is this random attack a precursor to a larger geth offensive, or were the geth somehow made aware of the stunning fact that Systems Alliance researchers had found a working **Prothean** beacon?"

J: "Joining us today are two very special guests: Dr. Gavin Archer, AI specialist for Synthetic Insights,

and Irrissa Te'Shora, sub-adjunct to Asari Councilor Tevos. Welcome."

G: "Thank you."

I: {inclination of head}

J: "Let's begin. I'm sure you are both very aware of the horrific attacks conducted less than 24 hours ago on the pristine fields of Eden Prime. Details about the attack, other than the wide-burst transmission from the SSV Normandy calling for aid, have been both vague and conflicting. Do we have a clear idea of what exactly happened, Matriarch Irrissa?"

I: "Khalisah, we have a fairly clear understanding now. Please understand that some elements of the investigation are still under security seal, since it's ongoing, and the Council has not determined it's response yet. However, due to the... well, to be honest, unabashed rumor mongering and frankly delusional conspiracy theories being floated around Citadel space, I have been authorized to participate in this interview to clarify things."

I: {hands folded}

I: "First, the Systems Alliance did find a working Prothean Beacon on the surface of Eden Prime. At this time, we have no clear understanding of the Beacon's contents. Much like beacons found on other worlds, it appears to only interact with certain people, and almost always inflicts catastrophic mental damage in doing so."

J: "Fascinating. I can only suppose such a large find was carefully kept a secret?"

I: "It was attempted to be kept secret, but the Systems Alliance did contact the Council immediately to notify them of the find, and that the Systems Alliance was willing to share any discoveries, and the research of the Beacon itself, with the Council. As such, the Council prepared to send a team of Prothean experts under the wise guidance of one of our most dedicated researchers to the site in short order, once security was established. However I'd like to note here that dozens, possibly hundreds, of people on Eden Prime knew about the Beacon, and in the aftermath of the destruction of the planet's comm network, there is no evidence to let us know if someone from the planet communicated the Beacon's presence offworld."

J: "But it could be that someone who knew about it on the Citadel could have revealed the information?"

I: "Possible but very unlikely. Our comm records are intact..and C-Sec *is* investigating. However, based on what we know, it's more likely that whoever compromised security was on Eden Prime itself."

J: "You think humans would sabotage their own colony in this fashion?"

I: "No, not at all. It may have been as simple as a soldier or civilian calling a family member off planet to let them know about the find. There was a four hour gap between the discovery and when planetary officials finally put transmissions filters on the local net connections to the extranet and FTL comm buoys. Once it is out there, we don't know who may have accessed this information and who forwarded it to a target, but we do have investigators following that set of leads as well. "

J: "I see. What of the attack itself?"

I: "At this time, Systems Alliance military officials are handling the investigation of the attack, while C-Sec is focusing on the alibi's and communications records of anyone implicated in the attacks. I'm afraid for obvious reasons I cannot release names at this time."

J: "Of course, Matriarch...can you tell me why a Systems Alliance frigate, christened barely a day before the incident, was on site? There are multiple extranet postings on VidShare of the SSV

*Normandy* in orbit or operating in atmosphere, and rumors suggesting that Commander Shepard, best known for her assault on Torfan, was in operational command."

I: "As I said, parts of the investigation are still sealed. However, I can say that the *Normandy* was tasked with transport of the Beacon to the Citadel, and was the first responder onto the scene, providing immediate relief to the colony. The Systems Alliance will be hosting a press conference in a few days to cover all material they choose to release at that time, which I am sure will put to rest any further questions."

I: {makes a gesture of siari, indicating she has said all that she can on the topic.}

J: {nods solemnly} "Our thoughts and prayers are with the colonists in this time of trouble, and our listeners are encouraged to donate to the Eden Prime Relief Fund. Keyword on the extranet: **AidEdenPrime.**"

J: {pauses, turns to Archer} Dr. Archer, you are a senior researcher at Synthetic Insights, one of only four companies licensed and authorized by the Council to conduct limited AI research. Given that much of your company's efforts have been to research the geth, does anything strike you as strange about this attack?"

G: "Many things do, actually. One popular misconception is that geth are separate robot like beings. They are not, instead, they are collectively networked together in one mass intelligence. That means that there are no 'separatist groups' or minorities in the geth, any geth taking an action means that all geth have decided to take the action."

J: {nods, a bit uncertainly} .. I see. The significance being...?

G: "The significance being that this is not an isolated raid. It is a declaration of war. The geth must have organic ties, most likely pirates or other independents, who are operating in Citadel space. The more paranoid members of AIThreatsGroup on the extranet are, of course, pandering to the quarian rabble who created the geth, saying that the geth could monitor traffic and done this on their own. But Eden Prime is halfway across the galaxy from geth space. No, I'm afraid the only way the geth could have gotten there in time is if someone very close to the actual dig notified them immediately after it's discovery."

J: "That certainly is disturbing, Gavin. How likely is it, though, that the geth, who have refused all communications with the outside since their uprising 300 years ago, would communicate with organics? Or suddenly declare war, unprovoked."

G: "It does seem extremely far-fetched on the surface. But a review of some of the medical data coming off Eden Prime shows the savagery of this attack. Three towers full of colonists were destroyed, and the ground infantry defending the site were massacred. The fact that all reports state elements of a high powered nuclear bomb were recovered seems to indicate they were planning to blow up the colony to cover their tracks. It seems unlikely the geth would bother to do so, except to conceal their involvement altogether."

J: "How is that strange? Wouldn't most criminals do that?"

G: "Yes, but the geth do not care about such things in most cases. Other geth attacks in recent weeks have not had such extreme reactions. They don't hide who they are or that they attacked. The only reason to do so here must be to protect whoever is feeding them intelligence. That worries me, quite a bit. It implies their intelligence is adapting."

J: "There are, as Matriarch Irrissa stated, many wild theories being discussed about this attack. You've just stated that you think organics are aiding the geth. What is your take on why the geth would go after

a Prothean Beacon?"

G: "You raise a very good point. From what little we know of the geth's motivations, they don't seem to be very interested at all in interacting with beings outside the Perseus Veil. Aside from their intelligence adapting and growing, the fact that they have done so indicates something major has changed in the geth outlook. Humanity has stated for years that it's irresponsible to not have any sort of intelligence assets working on the issue of the geth. But worries me the most is that – no offense, Matriarch – the Citadel Council does not seem to be taking this attack, and other geth incidents very seriously. The geth are not organics. They will not preface an all out attack with a declaration of war. They don't need supply lines or food supplies. They don't have morale, or fear, and they can't be conquered conventionally because what spotty intelligence we do have indicates they don't even use the planets they have access to."

{Archer frowns, staring directly at the camera.} "If the geth have decided to attack us, the next incident may be a geth armada, led by one or more of those titanic black dreadnaughts that we can't match, blasting their way into Citadel space. It's not rumor mongering to admit the truth."

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The signal clicked off, the three men sitting in chairs around a steel table each with a different expression on their face.

"It appears things are moving at a pace we did not . . . anticipate." The first figure knocks the ash from his cigarette calmly, his other hand cradling his drink. "Saren failed to cover his tracks, and now we have to worry about our own exposure, and that of our projects."

"Project Invictus is going well. The rachni and thorian plant creatures .. not so well. Our only concern is Kohoku interfering with our programs. That's why I believe this mishap may actually turn to our benefit." The second man swallows his own scotch, grimacing.

The final man taps long, slender fingers together. "I think it's time we prepared contingency plans. If Saren is no longer viable as a partner..there is always value in moving him into the category of "recoverable asset". A little prodding never hurt anyone."

The first man narrows glowing blue eyes at the other two. "Cerberus cannot afford exposure at this time. The financial aspects are still vulnerable.'

The other two men shrug, and the response is predictable. "Well, Jack, I suggest you come up with something, Quick. " The two other figures in the room vanish into holographic static, and the Illusive Man, one third of the slouching beast of Cerberus, ponders his next move.

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## **Chapter 20: Chapter 14 : Citadel, Arrival**

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*A/N: More stage setting. It's about to get seriously AU up in here, so don't worry.*

January 24, 2183

Shepard spent the brief time prior to docking with the Citadel taking a quick look around the ship. Although certainly not a people person, she felt it was her duty as executive officer to make her presence known. Dr. Chakwas was not entirely enthused about her staggering about, but acquiesced without much of a fight when Shepard pointed out that she might as well walk around, as she definitely would have walking to do on the Citadel, and any problems , loose bandages or torn stitches would be dealt with better sooner rather than later.

The Normandy wasn't a large frigate. It had 3 decks and, which included the cargo bay. The upper deck, the CIC, had the ops alley, the bridge, and the comms room. On either side of the comms room were two tiny staterooms, basically a private sleeper pod, a locker, a shelf, and a desk and chair. She got the port side one, Pressley the starboard side one.

The next deck down was the crew deck. It consisted of the captains quarters, and just forward of that a tiny galley tucked behind a slide-away panel. On the other side, the med bay and the research lab, which doubled as a storeroom. Between the two, a narrow pathway connected the battery pod to the mess area, the path lined with sleeper pods. There were 20 of the narrow, coffin like devices, which were held on gamboled arms. Closed pods in use retracted beneath the floor to a horizontal position, while the inactive pods were vertical, displayed to the world. Two pods at the end were much larger, designed to fit turians, krogan, or other exotic species and special equipment.

The mess area was a few tables and chairs, an integral soda/coffee unit, and a large haptic display array showing a selection of news and entertainment feeds. Behind the wall hosting this, the two stairways that lead up to the CIC came together in the ships systems panel and the elevator.

Two doors on either side of the stairs led to what passed for ships heads – a single shower and a waste recycling unit. A single door to the right of the ships systems panel lead to "officer country" – 3 sleeper pods, a couple of shelves, and a desk – the home of the Marine Command Element, the Chief Engineer, and the Flight Lieutenant. Alenko was in his pod asleep when she took a peek in side, but the others were about their duties.

Shepard took the elevator down to the final deck, the operations deck. Bisected by sealed pressure doors, the forward half of the ops deck was given over to the hanger. This hosted an M35 Mako tank, the armory pod, storage lockers, and the ships gym equipment. The quartermaster had a tiny office here, built into the corner of the bay, carefully sealed against vacuum in case of active deployments while he was on duty. The man doubled as the ships yeoman, his office having a small micro-frame computer built into the wall.

Shepard stepped inside the cubby, frowning. "Quartermaster?"

The man was young, almost fragile looking, his standard BDU blues looking loose on him, but he came to a sharp attention. "Commander, ma'am. How may I help you?"

Shepard glanced around, then met his gaze. "Inventory report." She listened carefully to his explanation of how the Alliance requisition system worked – ships drew standard stocks, food, fuel, spare parts, ammo blocks, hard-suits and weapons – based on an allotment system. Any desired purchases above and beyond that had to come out of the ships discretionary funds. Taking down pirates with a bounty, turning in (or just selling) confiscated arms, armor, equipment, logging mineral or archeological sites – the Alliance cheerfully paid for all of these, and the Captain disbursed them as he or she saw fit. At the end of a patrol run, when the ship was put in drydock for months, the fund was split between officers and crew.

"Interesting", she said. *And about two steps above that Corsair program they keep talking about kicking off.* "I wasn't aware the Navy had as much of a hard-on for anti-pirate ops as the Corps did."

The quartermaster gave a small smile, his mousy brown hair mostly covered by his regulation ball cap, which he pulled off to scratch his head before replacing it. "Well, after Elysium, Commander Branson really convinced the Admiralty Board to put more funds towards anti-pirate ops. And, uh, after Torfan, well..." He trailed off, shrugging .. "they finally saw that you couldn't just stick marines on the ground everywhere and expect 100 guys to stop a thousand batarians."

Shepard narrowed her eyes, but only nodded. "Very well, ensign. Things actually look squared away

down here, which is about the first pleasant surprise since I set foot on board. Carry on."

The man looked shocked but saluted sharply again, and Shepard walked out and down the shallow hallway to engineering. The heavy pressure doors opened, and the air filled with the solemn hum of a mass drive core.

The Tantalus Core, she had read, was the single most advanced drive system in the fleet. Massive for a frigate, it allowed the Normandy to handle more nimbly than almost any other ship, and provided enough motive power to enable the heat-diffusion system of the stealth systems to work at top efficiency. The theory on it bored Shepard, but the basic idea – if all you can see in space is heat, then store the heat and you are invisible – made enough sense.

Engineering was dark, most of the lighting coming from the mass effect corona generated by the core. Ranks of panels formed a barrier around the core pit, staffed with engineers monitoring all aspects of power, heating, and propulsion. The engineer's office stood to one side, tucked against the wall behind a single bulkhead, a plexan window almost half the height of the wall piercing it. Haptic displays shone dully through it as Engineer Adams reviewed something. "Commander, ma'am, welcome to Engineering." His voice was a quiet drawl, and he looked almost ... sleepy. But his hands moved with a brisk energy over the keyboard as he updated some kind of information in his system.

"Just taking a walk around to loosen up my legs and a quick in-brief. Anything I need to know, Chief?"

Adams leaned back in his seat, thoughtful. "Not off the top of my head, ma'am. Despite how heated it got down on the ground, our only issue up here was waste heat. Presley got a bit creative in alleviating it, and we have some minor repairs to make to the radiator vanes, but that's already pre-ordered and repair crews on the station waiting."

She nodded. "Any crew issues?"

Adams shook his head. "No, ma'am. I mean, everyone was kind of put together on the spot, most just transferred in a day or two before you did, but everyone on my team has at least 5 years experience in frigate engineering ops, and half of them are cross-trained as operations people. And everyone on board has at least one marine combat op. It's good"

"Very good. We'll almost certainly be stuck on the Citadel for some time, the ever-fucking Council is gonna *love* our report, so your staff should use this opportunity to stock up on parts and make sure everything is working correctly. With any luck, once circus is over, we can get back to actual scouting and patrol duty."

"Yes, ma'am, we'll be ready". Adams voice was confident, and Shepard nodded, walking back to the elevator.

*Everything is working smoothly. Mm.* Shepard felt her leg loosen a bit more, and stretched as the elevator dropped her back on the crew deck. Slowly walking to her stateroom, Shepard considered what she knew about the mission thus far.

*First, they weren't really expecting problems with the Beacon pickup. If they were, someone would have given orders to heavily fortify the dig site. So the whole point of having Nihlus on board probably was to evaluate me, just like he said.*

*Second, this was all put together very quickly. Adams sounded a bit surprised that everyone on board is so ... experienced. Hmm.*

Shepard reached her room, and activated her personal terminal, pulling up personnel records. *Alenko...huh. Biotic instructor 3 years. 3 years anti-pirate ops. 2 years as junior ops officer on a frigate. Kind of a waste for a 10 man security detail on a tiny frigate.*

*Pressley. Lieutenant Commander 3 years prior to this, he should be looking at getting his own command soon, not Navigator. 10 years anti-pirate ops...and he was one of the guys on over-watch at Torfan. Well well well. Small arms instructor? Psychology degree? Wrote books on deployed artillery? No way you'd stick a guy this flexible on a fucking frigate on a shakedown.*

*Adams. Lieutenant...ah. Right. Pissed off Senator Jackson by eloping with his daughter. No wonder his career is dead...but still pulled assistant engineer on a pretty big ship. Has a doctorate in mass energy transfer, whatever the hell that is. And was a marine for 4 years before going spacer. Again, waste of talent.*

She rubbed her eyes. *And of course, putting me and Anderson on the ship is overkill as well. From what Joker was saying, he's some kind of piloting bad-ass, and Chakwas put me together twice as fast as any doctor I've had before.*

*So they didn't tell us, or the guys on the ground, to expect shit to go wrong, but if it did...they made sure we had the best people. And the only ship that could possibly have survived. No dice.*

She exited the stateroom, marching directly to Anderson's quarters, and tapped the entry request panel. "Enter!"

Anderson was adjusting his dress uniform in the mirror that looked like it swiveled down from the ceiling. "Shepard. About 10 minutes until we dock. "

She nodded. "Yes sir. I have... a question about the mission, sir."

Anderson waved a hand as he finished smoothing out his dress jacket. "Ask, and drop the sir garbage."

She gave a small smile and nodded. "I.. I don't like patterns I'm seeing. I was told this trip was the first of several missions designed for Nihlus to assess my skills before making a recommendation on my suitability for being a Spectre."

Anderson nodded. "That is correct."

Shepard exhaled. "I know I'm not college educated, the only schooling I had was the Academy and what I've picked up on my own. I didn't even know how to read or write until I was almost 14. But I'm not stupid. Every single member of the crew is top-tier. Alenko has the chops to be an XO in his own right, Pressley should be commanding a destroyer by now. Chakwas has the skills I'd expect from a CMO of a dreadnaught. I can understand assigning you, since you're the person who has had the most impact on my career...but the rest does not fit."

Anderson slid away the mirror by touching a control on the wall, and gestured to the chair in front of his desk. Shepard hesitated, then sat, and Anderson wearily sat on the bed, rubbing his jaw.

"Sara . . . the committee that decided on a Spectre candidate originally was focused around a couple of figures. Commander Branson, the hero of Elysium, obviously was a candidate. So was Captain Delacor, your old CO. They even considered tapping Commander Linson, the biotic who broke your old C7 record. All of these choices were shot down as either being too . . . mm. Human-centric . . . "

She coughed. "Translation, racist asshats."

Anderson gave a lopsided smile. ". . .or they were simply not politically acceptable. You were, believe it or not, the only candidate Hackett and Adkins agreed on. Both Kyle and I pushed your name in the running, because you can get the job done."

"Kyle"... she sighed, glancing away. "Is he okay?"

Anderson shook his head. "Not really. He's never recovered from .. his sons dying. But he doesn't blame you for that."

Her voice was bitter. "He should. I let my crew get killed." She exhaled. "What does that have to do with this?"

Anderson nodded. "The main reason we chose this whole mess – this trip as a test of your skills, a stealth frigate, all of it – is we had .. a very vague warning that something bad was going to go down at Eden Prime. No specifics. Just a warning with no source. 'Go in loaded for bear at Eden Prime, only send your best'. The ... method the message was received was disturbing, it was bounced through the highest encryption protocols , but there was no record of the message being sent or received. And it was distributed to the Admiralty Board as if digitally signed, but the signature was that of a dead man. Admiral Janar, who's access codes weren't properly terminated in the system. Janar died on Valthsi trying to pierce the Perseus Veil, until the recent troubles started, he was the last Systems Alliance casualty we had to the geth."

Shepard sat back. "That's a .. pretty heavy warning, sir. I can see why you didn't know what to expect..."

Anderson nodded. "So yeah, I had Hackett pull together the best people we could get on short notice. None of this has been released. It's need-to-know stuff, not even code-word. But the Admiralty thinks we have high level spies ... or worse ... in positions of power."

"Worse? What the hell could be worse than spies, sir?" Her voice was puzzled.

Anderson stood, tapping the subcutaneous comm link in his jaw.. "Joker, status report."

"Two minutes out, sir. Citadel has granted docking authorization at bay D-24."

Anderson nodded, then turned to Shepard. "After the First Contact War ended, a lot of people felt threatened by the existence of the Council races, their power and technology. There were a pair of very deep cover black ops projects to fix that. One was called Janus, it was to present an amiable face to the Council. I was a part of Janus, so was Commander Branson. Janus tried to ensure that every other race's contact with our military was pleasant, but firm , and that we showed our strength. We tapped comm-links to find where pirates would hit alien colonies in range of our ships and 'happen along' in time to save them. We'd share intel on pirate groups and basically...well, participated in Council space."

"But the other program was the opposite. It was called Cerberus, and it was designed to .. well, do dirty tricks. Assassinate alien politicians opposed to us. Steal technology. Experiment with new and sometimes dangerous experiment tech to keep humanity's edge. As Janus ended up being staffed with people who liked aliens, Cerberus became , well, bigoted."

Anderson looked at Shepard. "Most of the people in Janus ... are no longer active. We had a setback.. one involving Saren, actually, and the program was ... let to go to seed. But when Alliance brass tried to shut down Cerberus, the three program heads went dark, and most of their people with them. No one knew what they were up to, except they were rogue."

Shepard nodded. "And..."

Anderson exhaled. "Cerberus and Janus shared the same base encryption keys for their messages. No one else was familiar with it, but I remember it because I was there when the programmers developed it. Whoever sent that message to us was Cerberus. And if someone in Cerberus can access that high of clearance, to warn us, it means someone else could access that high of clearance to ... betray us."

Shepard frowned. "This .. is not really holding together, sir. I thought you said Saren hated humanity, wanted to destroy us. I don't follow how Cerberus has anything to do with Eden Prime at all. "

Anderson shook his head. "They don't, surely. But I was tapping the best people I knew because I was expecting Cerberus involvement at Eden Prime. I was expecting a human attack, and quite frankly I

was almost certain they were involved until you got on the ground. But that still means Cerberus knew an attack was coming days before we did. We need to find out how, and why."

She nodded. Anderson strode to the door, just as Joker came over the intercom. "All hands, the Normandy is moored. Shore security, stand to. Captain, we have a transmission from the Council, you're to report to Ambassador Udina's office ASAP."

Anderson only grunted, waving Shepard to follow. He crossed the mess, stopping to open the door to medbay. "Chakwas. How are our guests?"

The gray-haired doctor was adjusting something on a medical bed. "Captain. Lieutenant Parker is still in a coma, I'm afraid. He needs to be transferred to a hospital. Master Sergeant Cole is still in critical condition, the loss of an eye, several pints of blood, and most of his liver almost killed him. Chief Williams is ambulatory, but wounded. Much like the Commander here."

Anderson nodded, and tapped the comm link by the door. "Gunnery Chief Williams, report to the airlock for shore duty, BDU's only."

Shepard frowned. "Sir?"

"She's an eyewitness, Shepard. Come on."

Twenty minutes later, the three humans sat in Ambassador Udina's spacious office. The beautiful vista of the Presidium ring was visible through the un-glassed window, the graceful shadow of cherry blossoms providing an elegant frame of the awesome view.

Seated at a handsome silver and steel desk, Ambassador Donnel Udina surveyed the three people before him. His features were craggy and heavy, lips thin, nose almost hooked. Sharp, black eyes assessed, measured, questioned everything around him. He ran a hand over his thinning salt-and-pepper hair and sighed. "This is a political **shit-storm** waiting to happen."

Anderson said nothing, his broad face placid. Shepard was completely expressionless, her dark features unreadable and seemingly calm. Williams sat stiffly, her arm still bandaged, BDU's creased so sharply they looked as if new.

Udina placed both hands on his desk and scowled, leaning forward. "I've managed to obtain an interview with the Council, but I'm not 100% sure what they plan to ask about. Right now, the situation is grim. Nihlus dead, the beacon destroyed pointlessly, the colony ravaged." His scowl turned into a sneer. "I thought you said the Butcher could get the job done, Anderson."

Shepard's face didn't change expression, merely gazing at Udina coolly, but even meeting that gaze mad the politician swallow nervously. Anderson merely frowned. "Ambassador, please. We can hardly be faulted for not being prepared for an army of geth, or a giant dreadnaught, or a rogue Spectre."

Udina shook his head. "We have no proof of that, Anderson. I'm only going to tell you this once, your history with Saren is bitter enough that the Council is not going to believe anything you say without solid proof."

Anderson's frown grew angry. "Saren is a danger! He shot his own friend and we have eyewitness testimony--"

Udina slammed his fist on the desk. "NO, Captain, what you have is a 15-year old vendetta! I'm FULLY aware of that. You have a dead dockworker with a criminal record and whose autopsy reports show he was on red sand. Police reports show he was a smuggler, stealing military equipment and selling it to various parties, and he probably got shot so he couldn't squeal. We are not going in there to make intergalactic fools of humanity. I don't want to hear it."

Shepard tilted her head. "I was under the impression that an investigation would be done on this issue, both by our teams at Eden Prime and by C-Sec."

Udina snorted. "As if. The Eden Prime teams haven't found anything much more than you did. All of the geth have internal self-destructs, so we can't learn anything from their logs or data chips or whatever they use. We have video of the giant ship, but it's outline looks vaguely geth to me. Squid-like. It could be they developed it, or it could be something they salvaged and modeled their own ships after."

Udina sighed. "We supposedly had evidence that the Shadow Broker had obtained, but that person was killed, and what kind of evidence he was bringing we were never told. The C-Sec investigator here is a blasted turian, so I doubt we'll get much traction there against Saren. No, the best we can hope for is that they'll recognize this geth attack as dangerous, and provide us with Council fleets to stop further attacks. IF it is Saren, he'll make a mistake and the Council can deal with him as they see fit."

Anderson seethed. "And what about Shepard's vision from the beacon?"

Udina rolled his eyes. "Have you ever dealt with the fine councilors, captain? I assure you, half-assed dreams aren't going to be taken as anything but an admittance that Shepard is crazy. I can just see Sparatus now." Udina mimed air quotes as he spoke in a high, mincing voice. "Ah, yes. Dream evidence. We'll have to dismiss that."

There was a long moment of silence, then Williams snickered. Udina threw her a glare, but she only straightened. "I was just agreeing with you, sir. The turians are gonna stand up for their own, not listen to us."

Udina nodded, and smiled. "Yes, I agree Chief... Williams was it? No matter." He turned to Anderson. "They want to debrief you and Shepard in the Council tower in ten minutes. Take a shuttle there, and meet me there." Udina strode out of his office, scowling, and then the doors shut behind him.

Williams spoke up. "Well, he's a little ray of fucking sunshine, isn't he?"

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## Chapter 21: Chapter 15 : Citadel , Trial

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*A/N: I apologize for the length of this chapter. But breaking it up would have just been .. artificial. The real divergences begin here.*

*It's good to know at least one person has picked up on Udina's reluctance to bring all the pieces to the table in front of the Council. Why is made clear in this chapter.*

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January 24, 2183

The chambers of the Citadel Council spoke of many things. The high, arching ceiling and elegant steel buttresses that flowed into wide open spaces for the public to gawp spoke of arrogant, conceited pride. The overblown gardening and ridiculously expensive cherry trees spoke of waste, extravagance, and a touch of hypocrisy, given that humans were not on the council but their trees decorated their chambers.

The heavily armed guards, in stupendously thick armor with double shield generators and cold, predatory gazes, spoke of people who clearly did not rule through the generous appreciation of their subjects. The wide gap between the Council's throne-like platform and the pitifully thin span where people plead their cases spoke of immense, overweening self-ego, as if to demonstrate there was no way anyone on this side could ever cross over to that side.

All in all, Shepard's immediate and ongoing urge was to take a flamethrower to the place.

She, Williams and Captain Anderson had arrived punctually, spending on a few minutes walking through the park-like environs of the Ring to get to an aircar. The gaudy, grandiose vision of the future style atmosphere was such a hard contrast to the slums of Earth and the broken battlefields of the colonies that Shepard wanted to spit. For the first time, she began to grasp just why the Council species never seemed to pay much attention to pirates, slave gangs, pissed off petty dictators, plagues, and the thousand other pitfalls in the dark that everyone else had to deal with. Sealed in this fake paradise, they didn't even need to put up with anything but the best.

Standing in front of the Citadel Council, her suspicions were mostly confirmed.

Udina stood at the end of the petitioners pier, his white silk suit gleaming faintly in the dim, filtered light of the chamber. His fists were clenched, his lips drawn into a grim line, his entire being radiated fury. Shepard wondered if he would actually catch fire or just have a heart attack on the spot.

"This is an *OUTRAGE!* You would not respond this way if a *turian* colony were attacked!"

Councilor Sparatus smugly folded his arms. "Unlike humans, we do not found poorly defended worlds on the edge of Council space. You were warned about that dangers of the Traverse and you chose to inhabit the place anyway." His elegant clothing hung in complex layers from his lanky frame, his dark plating only making his white facial markings stand out more.

Udina looked at the councilor as if he had lost his mind. "Have you taken complete leave of your senses? We were not attacked by pirates, or slavers, or batarian radicals! If the attack on Eden Prime had been something of that nature I would take your words as bitter but accurate truth."

Udina half turned away, hands jabbing into the air, pointing at the holographic video visible above the Council's head. "But to expect geth to invade our world with the intention of destroying it? No, ten thousand times no. They killed 30,000 people! They stole a priceless beacon and MURDERED your own damned Spectre! The Council MUST respond to this and move fleets to protect our colonies from further aggression."

Without even looking at his colleagues, Sparatus shook his head. "Human, you do not dictate to the council."

Udina folded his arms, face set in a near snarl. "If the Council sees no value or reason to aid the Alliance when it is under attack by external forces..." He paused, mastering his anger, and then gave a cold, grim smile "...then the Alliance sees no reason to bother participating in this farce. Orders have already been given to the Alliance fleet. We will evacuate our border colonies that overlap Council Space and withdraw." He glared at all three Councilors. "We are not going to allow ourselves to be attacked while our fleet is crippled by a treaty we were forced into after being unreasonably attacked in the first place!"

The turian snarled. "Your species rushing in to unlock mass relays is why your kind was -"

Udina exploded. "Your idiot commanders opened fire on the ships doing so without even explaining why. Your ham-handed assault on us was justified by laws supposedly defending the so-called galactic community that we did not even know existed! And now , 3 decades later, we are a 'part' of your precious Council, your farce of a galactic community ,except we have no voice, no representation in the Spectres, no officers in C-Sec, no chartered banks, nothing but a pitiful pile of excuses and 30,000 dead victims because you are too cowardly to defend your own space! Where are you laws defending US in this situation? Where are your trigger happy fleets?"

Udina exhaled, eyes narrowed almost slits, and his voice was bitter. "Sitting on your hands is not going

to convince humanity that you are acting in our best interests, *turian*."

The room was filled with shocked murmuring from the balconies, as the hard words echoed through the broad arena. Shepard concealed a smirk. *He's an asshole, but he is very good at being an asshole.*

Councilor Tevos gave the turian next to her a hard glare, and then cleared her throat to speak, her crests visible as she bowed her head. Her robe was almost demure compared to the expensive finery her other two Councilor's wore, but they clung to her form rather revealingly. Her features were almost nondescript for an asari, fairly plain aside from her complicated facial markings. "Ambassador, we are not unsympathetic to your cause, and we freely admit that this is an unprecedented situation. We are prepared to provide medical assistance packages, transport ships, and monetary relief for the refugees on Eden Prime."

She paused, then smiled, gesturing to the salarian next to her as she continued. "And stand assured that we are not just sitting on our hands, as you put it. The Salarians have five entire STG teams investigating the logistics of the attack. Our own C-Sec has put a special investigator onto your claims of Saren's involvement, even without the slightest bit of solid evidence on your part. The volus have already gifted almost 50 million credits worth of medical supplies and emergency housing to the Alliance to help with the aftermath."

She paused again, waiting, and Udina unfolded his arms. Her voice softened as she continued. "But the ugly reality is that your own argument defeats you. The geth didn't attack Eden Prime because it was a human colony, but due to the Beacon you found. The other geth incidents did not happen on solely human worlds. Placing a large contingent of warships around your colony worlds in the Traverse would be seen as an incitement by Aria and other warlords, and would not guarantee that an attack didn't fall elsewhere. The Council cannot endanger turian, or asari, or hanar worlds to safeguard your far-flung colonies against the possibility of an attack. We understand your frustration, and your words about the Relay 314 incident are taken to heart, but we cannot simply scatter our fleets to the four winds as you suggest."

The sallow features of the Salarian Councilor peered out from the richly decorated hooded robes he wore, his armored forearms the only mark of his past as an STG specialist. "Finally, Councilor...we haven't even had a chance to understand exactly what occurred at Eden Prime, or touch on this ... allegation... of involvement by our top agent. All we know is one of our best agents is dead and that your own Commander Shepard accessed the Beacon prior to it's suspicious detonation. And so far, the only response to our questions is the claim – by a figure with a long and well-known antagonistic background with Saren – that Saren is behind this geth attack and is out to destroy humanity."

Udina sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose with his left hand, his right opening in a vague gesture. "It is . . . frustrating to approach this matter in such a clinical light, Councilors. I had a niece on Eden Prime, who is mourning three of her sons, now dead in the attacks." Udina straightens. "But the statements I made still stand."

Sparatus gave a theatrical sigh. "And what are we supposed to do that we have not already done?"

Udina folds his arms once more, then grimaces. "I .. will make the recommendation that we await the outcome of further investigations. We will consider the attack reactions a tabled issue for now. But that still does not cover the agreement we came to regarding the Beacon."

Tevos shakes her head. "According to your reports, the Beacon is destroyed. Unless your Commander Shepard can give us any insight into it's contents, we can hardly reward you for a technological bounty we do not have. We will be, of course, happy to recognize the intent that the Alliance showed in contacting us at all. The concessions on tariff and inspection will be honored, and we will review the Treaty of Farixen."

Next to her, Valern speaks up. "But any thing else, such as Spectre candidacy, has to be placed on hold. We don't even have a good concept of what happened on Eden Prime yet, after all." Valern gestures to Captain Anderson, who steps forward with Shepard and Williams. "We will now table the issue of Eden Prime reinforcement and move on to the actual attack inquiry. The team has arrived to answer our questions. Perhaps after we get clarification on this issue, we can move forward with whatever next steps may or may not be ... taken."

Shepard sighed. *Oh , here we go down the fucking rabbit hole.*

Udina sighs. "Councilors, I regret that we do not have .. sufficient evidence to prove anything at this time. Our own investigation is still ongoing, of course, as I understand yours is. But – "

Sparatus shook his head. "Oh, no, Ambassador. Your Alliance was very vocal in shouting Saren's name out as the perpetrator of this horrific act. You demanded *action*, if I recall correctly. You cannot stroll through the halls of the Council and smear Saren's name and demand we place him on inactive status, then claim you have no evidence and need more time. Executor Pallin has already given us his report, which mostly consists of him admitting that there isn't anything solid linking Saren to the attacks. We have eyewitnesses placing Saren on Noveria during the attacks. He has a witness in Lady Benezia, an asari matriarch, corroborating that. We have only a pair of dead mercenaries who were apparently caught up in some form of criminal activity, and a purported agent of the Shadow Broker who was killed, and a very sketchy financial transaction from Saren's accounts that was authorized remotely and may have been a hack. The mercs worked for Saren in the past, but that means nothing, given that Saren has employed hundreds of mercs in his many years of flawless service. One of the mercs also worked for your Admiral Hackett, should we now assume he had some part in this vile attack?" The sarcastic tone of the turian broke off abruptly as Tevos touched his arm, and he stepped back, clearly irritated.

Tevos sighed, and shook her head. "We cannot simply ignore the allegations made , Ambassador. We must hear your evidence, such as it is, and determine Saren's innocence or involvement."

Udina turns to Captain Anderson, then back to the Council. "I'll leave that to Captain Anderson, then. I wish it noted , however, that our investigation is still ongoing and could turn up additional evidence or point to other involved parties at a later time."

Anderson steps up next to Udina, back straight. "Councilors."

Tevos and Valern, the salarian councilor, nodded, while Sparatus just sighed again. "Captain Anderson. It has been some time since you were last before this council...with wild allegations against Saren which proved untrue, after a seemingly simple mission turned into a massacre. This seems very familiar, right down to the Spectre assessment."

Anderson only nodded. "I was in overall command of the mission, but I wasn't running it ground side. I have here with me Commander Shepard, who was in charge of the ground team, and Chief Williams, who is a survivor of the infantry unit that was assigned to defend the dig site. As to the *wildness* of our allegation, our claims are clear: an eyewitness saw Saren interacting with Geth, and he heard Saren admit to killing Nihlus. Evidence on the scene indicates a turian did kill several humans, with turian claw-marks on the bones of burned bodies. You have already been appraised of our ... setbacks ... in our investigation on Eden Prime, but our assertion stands."

The turian nodded. "C-Sec has agreed to investigate the finances of the drell assassin your men killed, who murdered the ... witness. However, we need to make a few things clear, Captain. Your only eye-witness was a habitual red-sand user with a long history of mental illness and a lengthy criminal record. He was actively engaged in smuggling, and we know for a fact that Saren was widely known and reviled among smugglers due to him targeting them. It pains me to admit that , based on forensic

evidence, a turian must have been present on the site – but that does not mean there is any solid evidence indicating Saren's guilt."

There was a commotion to the rear, and Shepard half turned. Walking forward was a tall, broad turian in gleaming silver and black armor. A cloth half-cloak of purest black was tossed over his shoulders, embossed with the Spectre winged seal, and sort of loincloth obscured his hips and upper legs, draped over his battle armor. His voice flanged out, as hard as his face, with its plated angles and pointed mandibles. "Yes...Captain Anderson always seems to be at the forefront of any line when humanity has made up charges against me."

Anderson turned. "Saren!"

The turian Spectre stopped at the top of the stairs. "I am rather disturbed that I have to find out from old friends in C-Sec that the Council distrusts me. I am almost amused that, once again, this failed excuse of a human commander sees fit to attempt to besmirch my name with no evidence. And I am infuriated that no one is explaining to me what kind of fool let my friend go off by himself into a war zone!"

Tevos arched her brow, but held her hand up. "There is a question of your involvement in this, Agent. There are ... discrepancies in some communications entries. Several people have died recently, and the murderers are all known to have had past history with you. While there is no solid proof, the reality is that your influence and power mean that if you are involved in anyway, we have to investigate."

Saren merely shrugged. "I have read the Eden Prime reports. The commander here seems to have done a commendable job, the loss of the Beacon notwithstanding. However, allowing such a priceless device to blow up after going through so much to secure it seems...anomalous."

Shepard arched an eyebrow. "I would have figured you'd be more upset about Nihlus's death, than the Beacon blowing up."

Cold gray eyes met steely blue ones. For a single moment the entire gallery was silent. Then Saren gave a small, jerky motion with his head. "Nihlus...was too damned impulsive for his own good. The moment he was .. careless enough to head out on his own instead of sticking to the team, especially in a hostile warzone, he was already dead. I lay that on you, since you had ground command. Did you even TRY to suggest splitting up was a bad idea? No. According to reports you let him go on his own while you redeployed to save humans."

Shepard leaned forward, her form still and yet taut with anger. "Nihlus made it very clear he was *observing* me, not under my command. He was armed to the teeth and had 20 years of training on me. And it wasn't geth who killed him, someone met him in open battle and beat him. How many people could do that... besides you? I'm a badass but I'm not **that** badass." She folds her arms, stepping back.

Anderson gazed at Saren with loathing. "And how is it you know any of this? I made very sure you were not copied on any of the findings from Eden Prime!"

Saren rolled his eyes. "Of course you were. But Nihlus's files passed to me on his death. Really, this is ... tiresome. I was on Noveria, shutting down a corrupt human facility investigating illegal AI research...again." Saren's eyes narrowed. "An investigated interrupted by this ridiculous spirit hunt."

Turning back to Shepard, he snarled, mandibles flaring. "And as for your statement...no, you are not that 'bad-ass'. Nihlus would have split you in two. But no one is invincible. Someone went to a lot of trouble to make it look like I was involved, but look at it from my point, human. How would you feel if someone framed you for killing Anderson over there?"

Shepard jerked back, as if kicked, and the turian Spectre only nodded. "That's what I thought."

Tevos glanced uncertainly at Valern, who stepped forward. "Order, please. We have questions and need

them answered., not some kind of contest of who has the bigger egg clutch." Turning to Shepard, the salarian spoke. "Commander, did you see , at any time, Saren on Eden Prime?"

Shepard shook her head. "No. Just geth."

"You spoke with the witness. Did they seem to be speaking with veracity?"

Shepard hesitated, remembering. "They were somewhat disoriented. Some of the things he described did not seem to make a lot of sense. But they did describe Saren's armor correctly. And they mentioned Nihlus's name." Shepard gave a cold smile. "I find it difficult to explain how the smuggler would have known about Nihlus being on planet."

Saren seemed unconcerned. "And I find it difficult to explain that, according to your report, this dockworker was the only survivor. Literally everyone else had been butchered , hidden away or not, but one man miraculously survives, someone who not only manages to catch my name but directly link me to the murder of Nihlus. This same eyewitness conveniently is assassinated in Alliance custody, on an Alliance world, surrounded by more security than Arcturus Station. And we are told that a mercenary drell, who has done work for me in the past, is the perp. Because a drell would fit *right* in on a human colony world." Saren gave a low laugh.

"You will forgive me if this has the feel of a set up, Commander." Saren turned to the Council. "I request you review secured notes on investigative report 65-Theta-7. Specifically, end of said report." Saren waits, while Udina scowls.

The three councilors review something on their haptic interface screens, and the turian councilor puts his hand to his face, shaking his head. Tevos speaks softly. "...Ambassador Udina, according to an after-action report filed by your own Alliance marines, the drell assassin was already wanted in Alliance space prior to the assassination, and arrived on planet after the attack. But your security officials waved him through because he had this." Tevos taps a control, and the holoimage of an Alliance Local Authority pass is shown, the drell's picture cleanly incorporated.

Udina shook his head. "What? Impossible."

Saren snorted. "Hardly. After I found out my friend got killed, and the only witness murdered, I did my own looking around. A tip lead me to contact a Lieutenant Commander David Barnes – Eden Prime's military Council liaison set up after the attacks – and he was kind enough to be honest with me and pull this data for review. Not only did he mention he had given this data to your investigative team, which shut him down, he said something else." Saren tapped his omni-tool, and the voice of a young man spoke, while a thin red haptic integrity logo showed the data had not been altered in any way.

"Yes sir. On arrival, the drell indicated he was here on a personal favor from General Rachel Florez. He showed us this pass, and said he had to conduct some private business involving a relative of the General who passed away in the attacks. When his criminal record flashed, he said he had that cleared months ago. One of the MP's was skeptical but the drell just asked why he would come here if he had a murder charge on him and encouraged us to contact Florez if we needed authorization. We ran the pass and it came up legit, and with comms so messed up we just let it go."

Saren tapped another control , while Udina shot Anderson a look, who stepped away to use his commlink. A moment later, the voice of Lieutenant Commander Barnes spoke again. "No sir, I mentioned this to the investigator. They just didn't seem to care, they said they had the information they needed to 'make this all fit'. One of them told me to keep my mouth shut and focus on getting the defenses back up. They wiped my omni-tool , but my tool auto-archives everything into the microframe in my suit to avoid hackers and the like. So I had a copy of ... the drells authorization."

Saren cut off the recording. Anderson was speaking quietly into his comm, and then stepped forward.

"Councilors...Admiral Florez committed suicide this morning, about 2 hours after the drell assassin struck. We are..still investigating."

Saren gave a shake of his head. "Do I even need to point out that this General Florez is a known supporter and backer of Commander Shepard, and was instrumental in her rise to power in the human Systems Alliance? " Saren stepped forward, arms spread, and then half turned to eye the council.

"This is what I see. A Beacon is promised to us, but magically blows up for no reason and the only people who get to see what is on it is a hardline Alliance Commander , who works for a human who despises me. My student is killed under disturbing , mysterious circumstances. Every bit of evidence that links me to the case can't be examined, the eyewitness is killed by an assassin given access to the planet by human admirals who want to see Shepard succeed, and who then conveniently kills herself to avoid further questions. Even this so-called evidence purportedly from the Shadow Broker vanishes into thin air."

Saren folds his arms, the cybernetic left limb gleaming dully. "There is nothing to investigate in this debacle, except of course the real issue , how did the geth find out about the Beacon and get here so quickly, and where did the giant black ship reported come from. Questions not being answered while we waste time on this spirits-be-damned farce of an investigation!"

Tevos spoke up, her voice soft. "Commander...during your assault on the geth forces, did you notice any other aberrations aside from the .. spikes... in your report? Anything else that could support your assertions of Saren's guilt?"

Shepard shook her head. "No, Councilor. Although the spikes were bad enough."

Saren interjected. "Dragon's teeth. We've seen them before, the geth use them for some sort of sick psychological purposes. No one has ever figured out how to make them work...more evidence that this geth attack was about more than the Beacon and needs further investigation." Shepard looked at him again, curiously, before turning back to the council.

Sparatus glared at Shepard. "Given that you have no solid evidence of any kind to implicate our agent, and given that your eyewitness report has zero actual veracity, that his death appears to be orchestrated by elements within your own government, and that, quite frankly, your own investigators appear to be suppressing evidence that points to the truth rather than the story your people have concocted, we cannot in good faith find any reason to hold Saren responsible. C-Sec's investigation found that there were several mercenaries involved in an attack on Shadow Broker elements that had worked for Saren in the past, but these men had worked for many other Spectres in the past as well."

Tevos sighed."Ambassador Udina, we will need to have a private interview with Commander Shepard regarding the Beacon itself. Until then, our findings are final. Saren is cleared of all charges regarding the Eden Prime incident. Until such time as the Alliance can account for irregularities in it's own investigation, we see no reason to prolong these proceedings."

Udina frowned. "But our own investigation is still ongoing! Yours barely lasted a day! What kind of whitewash is this!"

Sparatus gave the ambassador a glare. "Udina, we are not going to allow your people to attempt to make up more false statements and suppress evidence contrary to the facts! It's ridiculous that we even bothered to have this conversation, but we are *attempting* to be open-minded despite your claims that we have no interest in seeing humanity succeed. None of us wanted Eden Prime to turn out like this. But just because one of your senior officers has a vendetta against our agent does not require us to accept he is somehow guilty!"

Valern nodded to Udina. "This session of the Council is *adjourned*. Have Commander Shepard report

to Council Debriefing Room 1 tomorrow morning. We...appreciate she is still wounded and needs time to rest."

Saren smirked, and clapped a hand on Anderson's broad shoulder, who glared hatefully back at the turian. "Try again later, human. Maybe you can try blowing up some more factories and blame it on me, eh?"

Anderson almost lunged, his eyes wide, but Shepard tightly caught his arm. "It's not worth it, sir." Anderson subsided, jaw tight. Shepard turned her gaze to Saren. "I know a criminal when I see one. I don't need evidence, I *know* what you did. And the next time I meet you, you will die."

The big turian merely walked off, mandibles flaring in amusement. "Your pitiful species will never be ready for the Spectres. Find someone else to annoy." He paused to link arms with a dark-robed asari woman at the bottom of the stairs and strutted off, pausing only to sneer at a passing turian in C-Sec colors.

Udina slumped at the end of the pier, before turning to face Captain Anderson and Shepard. "This ... did not go well. It was a mistake bringing you here, Anderson... my mistake, not yours. Your intransigence did not help, of course...but the Council only saw your history with Saren and now actually believes we are trying to frame him." He signed. "I **told** you this would happen. I told you that what we had wasn't enough."

Anderson continued to watch Saren walk away. "Dammit, we had to do something. I know Saren. I know his agenda, I've seen him work. Every colony we have is in danger, every world could be the next target. I don't care what the Council thinks, Saren is a danger to humanity."

Udina whirled on him. "And you fail to see why the Council won't take us seriously? *Listen to yourself*, Captain. You have **nothing**. We have just had that hurled at us. This isn't some group of pirates you can have your pet maniac stare down." Shepard actually gave a sardonic grin at this, and Udina shuddered. "We clearly have serious internal issue going on with the investigation at Eden Prime. I have to get in touch with Hackett and figure out what in the blue hell is going on there before the Council outright accuses us of trying to frame Saren!"

Anderson tensed, then his broad shoulders sagged, and he nodded. "I... I just don't want what happened 15 years ago to repeat itself. Maybe you're right, Udina. It's hard to let this go."

Shepard glanced at Udina before placing her hand on Anderson's shoulder. "We're not letting it go, sir. We just have to be smart, keep our heads down, and find the evidence we need – solid evidence the Council can't ignore. We can't afford any more .. half-measures."

Udina gave Shepard an appraising look. "Every time I believe I have you pegged, you surprise me, Commander. I must admit, I hardly expected prudent caution from you."

The woman's eyes flickered. "I'll go back to eating babies and head-butting krogan warlords tomorrow, sir."

Udina rolled his eyes, exasperated, and turned to Anderson. "I have things to attend to, Anderson. You heard the Council. Make sure Shepard is here in the morning, and try not to stir up any more trouble until then." He paused. "Officially, the issue is closed. If you can find hard, and I mean **HARD**, evidence of Saren's guilt, we can use it ... otherwise bringing this up again is political suicide. I've already got most of the Senate pushing us to withdraw from Council space altogether, I don't want it to come to that. Find that evidence, Commander." With a last dark look at Anderson, he strode off.

Anderson huffed, and Williams looked confused and angry. "Dammit. Now what do we do?"

Shepard shrugged. "The only thing we can do. Find evidence. They mentioned a C-Sec investi.." She

trailed off, eyes narrowing, as raised turian voices flanged across the way. "Who is that?"

Anderson squinted. "Executor Pallin is the dark one...not sure who the other one is." He glanced at Shepard and Williams for a moment, then shrugged. . "Let's see what they're arguing about, then. It may have to do with Saren." They walked down the stairs leading to the lower level of the Council Chambers, as Udina headed off in a different direction, his face set in a scowl.

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On the balcony above, eyes watched Captain Anderson and his team walk down the steps. The room they were in was a private meeting room for high-ranking dignitaries, sealed against ladar-beams, and a jammer hummed away merrily on the table in the middle of the room. The man watching the Captain was dressed to the nines, richly cut jacket opened to reveal a long, patterned silk shirt, crisp dress slacks breaking without cuffs over expensive dress shoes. He was slender, dark, and short, every motion precise, economical.

The other figure was graying and handsome, his features even, a trail of smoke writhing over his head from his cigarette. His eyes glowed a faint, digital blue in a curious pattern across his iris, and his free hand toyed with a glass of brandy. His own suit was understated, dark green and pale cream, the ever-present tie barely two fingers wide, and loose around the neck.

The room they were in was unadorned, except for the table, a handful of comfortable chairs, the etched symbol of the Citadel Council on the wall. . . and the holopad generating the image of the man with a cigarette.

The leftmost figure smiled, and examined his nails, as if seeking dirt or imperfection. "That was ... quite an interesting show. How did you link it to Florez?" The hard, gravelly voice is almost tired. "Not that I miss the bitch. She was always interfering in naval operations."

The other man merely leaned back in his chair, lit cigarette dangling from his free hand for a moment before he took a puff. "Florez is one of ours, of course. The corpse we left in her office is a flash clone...she's been moved to oversee the results of Project Phoenix. It was fairly simply to ensure the drell hit his target. . . being able to throw the investigation into chaos was a bonus." The glowing eyes were confident, cold. He lifted a glass to drink from, and smiled. "Pity I wasn't there to see it in person."

The first man snorted. "The drell killing that fool , or watching the farce below?" He sighed, running manicured hands through his razor-cut hair. "I'm still not sure of the wisdom of this course of action, Jack. A nudge here, a dropped data packet there, and we could expose Saren right now. Wouldn't that help humanity's cause more than protecting Saren?"

A smile crosses the other man's features, who merely takes another drag from his cigarette. "You misunderstand our course, Charles. I fully expect Shepard to find the evidence needed. Our agents report the quarian escaped with one of the Broker's enforcers, and is recovering in a medical facility in the Upper Wards. I'm not protecting Saren, I'm making sure that when this blows up, the resulting witch hunt will be looking for external infiltration, rather than trying to find out the internal issues."

A pause, and he continued. "Just handing over the evidence won't do much, I'm afraid. The bottom line is that the Council can't afford to make Saren a rogue agent without overwhelming evidence. The kind the Shadow Broker has. Building a circumstantial case based on financial records, vague eyewitness reports, shadowy assassins and the like might make them question him, but not fully. The Council's natural reaction to THAT kind of evidence will be to investigate it. And we can't risk them stumbling across Cerberus involvement if it comes to that."

The other man nodded slowly. "I see. You worry that if we use a thousand bits and pieces, it will look

like we're framing him. Or that someone is framing him."

The Illusive Man's image nodded. "And that is how we spring the trap. We've cast the entire Alliance investigation into doubt. We've made the Council sure this is only a smear campaign, a frame job, as you put it. And when concrete evidence suddenly arrives, just after the Council was so sure this was just bitter humans trying to get Saren in trouble, they will be mortified. Udina will go on the attack, there, I assure you. And at that time we'll introduce the few remaining bits and pieces. "

The man named Charles nodded again, listening. The hologram smiled, sipping from his drink again. "And then everything else falls by the wayside. Confusion on Eden Prime? Well meaning Alliance officers, trying to cover up the fact that our investigation was a disaster. The drell having a pass? Generate some evidence that Florez was beholden to Saren somehow, maybe blackmail, and the suicide was guilt at what she did. Assassins on the Citadel? A timely payment to the Broker will almost certainly illuminate just how many mercenaries worked for Saren that are still roaming free...every one a potential danger to Citadel security. In their arrogance, the Council will want to control the investigation themselves going forward."

The politician grunted. "In short, make everything such a mess that that the Council assumes Saren his hands..claws...whatever...in everything. Make them put all their eggs in one basket. Send a Spectre to clean up after a Spectre."

The Illusive Man nodded. "Exactly, Charles. "

Charles Saracino scowled, turning away from the balcony to face the hologram. "I just hope this works. So far, nothing else has gone to plan. First you told me we had a chance to control the geth. Then to make a fool of the turians, and in the process, get a council seat and a Spectre of our own. Now I have a destroyed colony, a pissed off Senate, a lot of dead colonists, a suspicious Council, and Alliance investigators running all over the place. Even if this pans out, how does any of this lead to progress for humanity?"

The Illusive Man did not move in his seat, but his chin lifted. "Charles, in this sort of game, patience and misdirection is the key. Right now, we hold all the cards. Giving them to the Council won't win humanity any points. And the goal stands. Once we know how Saren is controlling the geth, and where he got that ship from, our agents will move in and take that knowledge for humanity. Imagine it. Control of an army of battle machines, doing our bidding. Destroying competing alien forces. Clearing out pirates and ensuring human dominance in the Traverse. And the technology of that dreadnaught is beyond anything we've seen before, even in Prothean ruins."

The blue-eyed figure turned, his cigarette almost out. "But in order to maximize our gain, we have to be holding the whip hand. Udina will play along. We've already primed how this will all go down, Charles. When it's done, the Council will have to choose between sending a fleet after Saren, or sending a Spectre. And that Spectre *will* be Shepard."

Saracino shrugged. "And? What makes you so sure that instead of sending one of their trusted Spectres, they would make Shepard one?"

"Because that will be the price of Alliance silence. Shepard gets the nod, we back down on demanding action and even the treaty adjustments. After that, Shepard will clean up any loose ends for us, leaving us to move in behind and pick up the spoils. She's not a strategic thinker. We can drop hints in her path and lead her by the nose. But as both a symbol and a tool, she's invaluable."

Saracino gives a sigh. "How do you even keep this tangled shit *straight* in your head? I get where you're going with this, but... "

The Illusive Man extinguished his cigarette, and tilted his head. "Charles, our methods differ, but our

goals are in alignment. Right now, doing things in a blunt fashion will only leave Cerberus exposed. And that can't be allowed to happen. If we can cover our own tracks and at the same time have even the slightest chance of humanity getting it's own Spectre, we have to take it. And in that, we have a chance at reshaping the galaxy around humanity's proper place. You just need to have a little faith."

Saracino exhaled sharply. "Alright, alright. What do you need from me?"

The Illusive Man smiled, and drained his drink. "Just for you to give an anonymous tip to a frustrated C-Sec investigator about a quarian he may want to interview. I'll send you the details over HadesNet, and leave it to you to determine when to reveal the information. But only do so after Shepard's meeting with the Council. So far, we have no information on what she got from the Beacon, and we'd like to know."

The hologram nodded it's head, and the room was cast into darkness as it faded. Saracino picked up the jammer disk on the table and put it in his pocket, sighing.

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## Chapter 22: Chapter 16 : Saren

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*A/N: I got a few messages about tense and spelling – I'll probably need to pause in the updates to clean a lot of that up.*

*The next chapter is one I deleted before because I couldn't get it right. I hope this is a better effort.*

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January 24, 2183

Saren's forced himself to walk calmly, pacing himself, keeping his mandibles in an amused, relaxed position. He nodded his head at the occasional turian , noncommittal, pausing only to adjust the Spectre flash on the shoulder of his hood drape. His walk was arrogant, confident, sheer rolling power and yet the unearthly killing grace in his form some how showed , in the tilt of his head, the cool gaze of his eyes.

Benezia strolled along side him, still linked arm in arm, her face set in a serene, otherworldly expression that somehow went with the wry smile she had on her face. The smile faintly grew with every asari youngster that glared daggers at her as she swished by, her long blue legs flashing in and out of visibility with the slit dress she wore. If he was power, she was elegance and mystery, a black flame flickering to his bonfire.

"I'm trying to keep a straight face, Benezia, and you smirking like a teenaged krogan in an asari harem isn't helping." Saren's voice was both light and strained.

"That was one of the more entertaining scenes I've had the pleasure to witness. Humans burn so brightly, but they don't even see the truth hanging above their heads. They made complete idiots of themselves. . . and for what?"

Saren shrugged. "Anderson hates me because I showed him that galactic politics is the process of relabeling atrocity and calling it justice, and redefining sacrificing the innocent as serving the greater good. He's a shallow and clear drinking pond, upset because people keep splashing mud through it. Fools like him are why the galaxy needs people like me."

He half turned his head, mandibles set in a smirk of his own as yet another asari, clad in leather so tight he could not imagine how she was able to breathe, shot angry looks at the Matriarch on his arm. "But we were talking about that vicious little smile on your face."

Benezia gave a small chuckle. "To be honest, I can't seem to help myself. So many young fools, so sure of their place in the universe, blind to everything around them. . . the suffering, the poor, the dying. . . and yet so angry at the sight of an old woman on your arm. Is there nothing more they can do besides throw themselves at any strong mate that appears?"

He actually laughed, then, a real, clean laugh, the first she had heard from him in what seemed like decades. "Spirits forbid anyone showing up the ever-so-prim and proper matriarch with actual sex appeal." He paused, and then his eyes grew harder. "Not that any of them could deal with the reality that we deal with."

Benezia's smirk faded slightly. "There was a time I was hardly prim or proper. Liara's father was . . . hardly a cultured influence." Her hand wrapped around his wrist a bit more tightly, as if fearing he would pull away... or that she would fall. "But you are right. I have so little given over to myself in all of .. what we are doing. They don't know what they are jealous of."

The couple walked slowly past the salarian vinthark trees that lined the approach to their private docking bay. Several krogan in blue and silver armor stood guard, long rifles slung, wedge shaped helms in faintly glowing blue trim giving them a look more of statuary than living being. The sealed , heavy outer doors opened, and the two walked into the bay, Saren's gaze going automatically to the small turian frigate he had piloted here from Noveria.

The doors slammed shut behind them, giving them privacy from stares and eavesdroppers. Saren glanced at his omni-tool. "Another hour until refueling is complete." His gaze moved over the fuel lines, the supply crates being on loaded by mechs, checking for dangers, hidden signals, anything that was a threat.

His omni-tool beeped and displayed a green light – nothing lived in the docking bay but Saren and Benezia.

Benezia, on the other hand , seemed lost in thought. "The more I see the people around us, the less I grasp how they can be of any use to those who are coming. My philosophies have always focused on acceptance of every element of all species , just as we do in taking mates. To find the strength and the determination of the turians, the brilliance and moral relativism of the salarians, the dignity and ruthlessness of the hanar..." She trailed off, smiling. "Even the brilliance of the volus with matters financial."

Saren made a slight rumbling noise, his eyes taking on a thoughtful cast. "I'm not sold on that yet. I fail to see humans, vorka, batarians or the other cockroaches of the galaxy 'contributing' much of anything besides more mouths to feed."

The asari matriarch paused, bringing Saren to a halt. "And that is why it is up to us to *correct* the imbalance. It was not easy to divert my path to meld with yours, Saren. My teachings were developed over 6 centuries of life, pain, joy, loss...hope...and despair." Her blazing blue eyes darken, as she lifts her face to look at him. "Just as yours has, over a shorter scope. How many have had their plating burned down to where it has to be replaced with hard, cold metal? How many have lost an arm, a lung, skin, blood the way you have?"

Saren exhaled. "I am no longer the handsome young talon I once was when we first met all those years ago, no. I paid for what I am with every scar, every implant. It isn't easy."

Benezia nodded, softly, tracing her fingers along his tortured, artificial mandible. "Pain is never easy to bear, or to wear. We nurture it, using it to drive us or to keep us from challenging ourselves. Some cling to it like mother's milk, others flee from anything that causes it, as if Death is some predator that one can outrun." She shook her head. "If we were doing this out of .. some profit motive, out of some

misguided attempt to control others, then we would be wrong. But we're destroying ourselves to try to save.. everything. Or as much as we can."

Saren shuddered, and lowered his forehead to brush the top of her headdress, gently. "There are times the silence is .. too much to bear. The coldness. The ... force of the Voice in my mind. I almost lost it in the Council Chambers, with that jumped up criminal thug trying to stare me down. I wanted to plant my talons in her throat, to feel her flense apart and splash the gore over the blind, stupid Council."

Benezia passed her hands over his face, gently. "I , too, sometimes fear the price we are paying is too much. I cannot ... feel myself anymore. I am breaking to pieces , sometimes I give orders or direct actions and I don't even feel like it's me doing it."

Saren nodded. "Thanoptis thinks the effect is due to some kind of ultra-low frequency harmonics, combined with the positronic energy field that surrounds the ship itself. It's worse inside than out, the angles of the ship trigger visual .. effects, for lack of a better word, that force organics to put more processing power into sensory interpretation, making the signal work faster."

Benezia frowned. "And thus we are lost."

Saren growled. "No! It needs us intact. Everything we've seen shows the more control it has , the less effective the being controlled becomes. I've explained it to Sovereign. We'll use the frigate as much as we can, now. We have to ... be careful."

Benezia nodded, her eyes glancing around the floor as if searching for an anchor. "What now? We have the Beacon, but it's message is garbled garbage. And we know the target is a hidden Prothean world, but we have no clue which, or where. The Conduit is useless without knowing the other end."

Saren sighed, and finally let go of her hand, flexing his talons. "I don't know. I raided over 20 volus merchant ships, looking for the manifests, but every dig site they delivered to is already known to us. We know from the signals the geth intercepted that Exogeni found a massive ruin, and in the ruin they found a being who was sentient from the remains of Protheans it had consumed."

Benezia nodded. "A being like that must be ancient. And powerful."

Saren paced, running a hand along his fringe. "And it would know! Maybe not only how to .. interpret this stupid thing in my head, but how to make the pieces fit. We know only what Sovereign has told us. The rebels sabotaged the Citadel. We need to allow Sovereign to make a direct connection to the tower to override that. And there's no way to ensure he can get in before the Citadel closes besides the Conduit, to take the Citadel by storm, to capture the controls."

His talons flexed. "I just feel as if we're losing our minds , and yet are mired in mud, running in place...no closer to salvation than before. How long before Sovereign decides we aren't making progress ..."

Benezia gently placed a hand on his shoulder, slowing his movement. "Saren. We have made progress. We have the base researching what is happening to us. We have your forces moving to recover my daughter. We at least have some leads to where to look." Her hand shifted to his jaw, turning his face to look at her. "We are not going to fail. We're in this together, no matter what the cost."

He looked at her a long moment, then shook his head. "Maybe we have already failed. Maybe this is .. the wrong way." A shudder passed through him. "No time to talk about it. It's ... best , perhaps, given your concerns about the indoctrination, if we split up. You can go back to Noveria..."

Saren pulled back, glancing away. Benezia's hand hung in the air, empty for a moment, before she clenched her fist. Saren's voice was cold. "...I will continue the hunt for the creature."

Benezia's knuckles popped with the tension in her fists as she leaned forward, her voice loud. "Damn

you, let me in! You can't just keep *hiding* from it!"

Saren roared, eyes wide as he spun on his heel to put his face an inch from hers, the metallic scent of his skin flowing over her. "Let you in so you can go crazy like me? Spirits, I have done all I could!"

Benezia's voice shattered, the calm matriarch gone, eyes streaming with sudden, hot tears. "You think I don't see? I see you thrashing in your sleep, slashing your own body with your claws as if you are fighting yourself! I see you trail off in conversation, eyes dead and filled with pain. I saw you have to murder the only other friend you ever HAD, a boy you nearly had to raise. Nihlus was closer to you than Liara is to me! Don't LIE to me, Saren! I know you want to do everything yourself but you CAN'T."

Saren screamed back, his fringe flared. "And I'm expected to drag you with me? What do you want me to say, Bee? Am I supposed to trot out some fucking romantic lines about how much you mean to me? You should already know."

He leaned closer, until they were nearly nose to nose, the heat radiating off of him. "I remember *every* single time we've unioned, all 193 of them. They are ALL that keeps me from turning into a slavering animal, a feral tajak on two feet. You are all that stops me from going into a red rage like I did on Eden Prime, killing humans with my talons like some kind of lunatic."

Benezia grabbed his arm. "Then why won't you just let the fear go! You try to pretend you are alright, but every time join it's like battering my way past walls! You only have me to share this with, and the more you try to pretend you are okay, the more tortured you become! It's wrecking you! This is all we HAVE, Saren. There isn't any other way."

Saren shook his head. "And what if I'm wrong!"

Benezia only met his gaze, tears down her cheeks. "Then we'll die together, at least, and I can know you actually care, and I'm not just some mental bandage for you. " She wiped away tears, the moisture not adhering to the patterned blackness of her dress sleeve. "I am just as scared as you are, but I trust in you more than anything."

Saren's voice had dropped to a whisper. "We could end up as slaves. We could be betraying all life."

Benezia's teeth ground together. "No. We've seen the truth these fools never would. Even if by some miracle we killed Sovereign ... " Her face contorted in pain at the thought, but she clenched her jaw savagely and continued "...we know the others in dark space would still come, be it 5 years or 50. We have seen the Collectors, we know the Protheans were spared. Sovereign says the keepers were sentient until the Prothean rebels sabotaged them with their retrovirus, stripping them of their minds to stop them from fixing the damage to the Citadel."

She placed on finger on his cheek, tracing the pointed, artificial attachment point for his cybernetic mandible. "We know it can be done. We have to try, Saren. If we don't, if they kill everything, there is no second chance. But if we survive...even if we are slaves...it might not be our children, or their children...but where there is life, there is a way. It might take a thousand, thousand years, but we can learn from their technology and learn their weaknesses and eventually overcome. But we'll all be dead if we can't prove our worth now."

Saren gave a long, shuddering breath. "I just ... hold out .. I feel the Voice in my mind and I wonder if it's changing how I think. How we think. I *assaulted* you, dammit."

Benezia's voice snapped like iron, unyielding. "And I *enjoyed* it. I am here. I don't care if I have to murder or torture. I don't care if you flay my body. I've risked everything for you. My life. My reputation. My followers. All my wealth and influence. My body. My mind. My own daughter. I've

given you everything I am. All I ask is you don't ... do this alone. Don't ... make me give up my soul just to break it so you don't have to worry about me."

"I..." The flanged voice fell silent, unable to speak for a long moment. "I .. could never break you. I don't have a soul any more, just you to take it's place."

A long, silent moment passed, Benezia looking up to him, her face tired and weary, once clear blue eyes reddened with pain and fear. Saren traced her jaw with a single shaking talon, then nodded.

Her head rested against his chest, the cool metal of his armor stanching the fear in her chest, and the two forms in black stood a long time under the dim lights of the docking bay as the mechs blindly serviced their vessel, unmoving in their shared pain.

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## Chapter 23: Chapter 17 : Garrus , Recruited

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*A/N: Aaaand this is the other deleted chapter. Unlike the last one, I rewrote this one almost entirely from scratch.*

*I really should time stamp these. This bit begins just prior to the scene with the Council and Anderson, continues through it, and picks up where it left off. Confusing enough?*

*Also, Garrus!*

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January 24, 2183

Garrus slammed the C-Sec aircar to an abrupt stop in the reserved parking area of the Citadel Tower access pad. He was running late, and he could only hope that for once the good spirits would deign to listen to his pleas and convince Pallin to listen to him.

The Citadel Tower jutted out of the Presidium Ring like some obscene phallic device, all smooth arches and angles suddenly becoming nothing but a half-mile pillar of solid armored steel. Mass effect bubbles and implanted turrets with barrels inches wide studded it's gleaming white surface, while the thousands of tiny flags that trailed limply down it's front were from every nation, city state, clan, tribe and division in Council space. *God only knows how many thousands more the humans will add if they ever get a seat.*

Garrus hustled past security using the C-Sec entrance, and caught the elevator just before it closed. A pair of asari were in the car with him, slender frames not very concealed by skin tight, shoulder-less dresses. Garrus gave an inner sigh, and immediately pulled up his omni-tool. He had **zero** problems with nice young asari cooing over his angular features in the bar, but he had to keep a clear head for the meeting and the last thing he needed was giggling blue seduction messing his mind up right now.

Thankfully, the two asari were gossiping instead about some human female that had just gone into the Citadel tower, their breathy little squees of excitement making his mandibles twitch in amusement. *Sorry, girls, but most human females only go for human males. Just because they look like you doesn't mean they'll sleep with anything like you.*

Garrus finished pulling up the financial records Forlan had pulled up. Saren had to be dirty, but his tracks were so convoluted that there was no way to prove it without the Council giving him authority to have the banks freeze transactions. Right now, while the money trail was .. jumbled and somewhat suspicious, it alone wouldn't convict a vorcha of being stupid, much less Saren of attacking Eden Prime.

The turian sighed, covering the pertinent facts in his head, as if presenting his case to the Council.

First, the mercenaries hired to go after the drell, Captain Troyas, had both worked for Saren. Not once, but dozens of times, repeatedly for the past 15 or so years. They always worked as a team and they did nothing but wetwork. While he couldn't prove the payment to the Weryloc krogan wasn't hacked, he did find one eyewitness who said the two krogan had met with a regal looking asari woman matching the description of Lady Benezia the week prior. Granted, his testimony was more about the size of the matriarch's chest than anything else, the fact that she had met with the krogan at all was too suspicious to pass up. Saren might have been able to play off a relationship with such crude thugs, but Lady Benezia was an asari philosopher and businesswoman. Notwithstanding her long relationship with the Spectre, she simply had no business talking to a pair of murderers.

Second, the docking manifests as transmitted by the Novarian Port Authority. They certainly seemed to be inline, and an independent news report did place Saren on the planet. Synthetic Insights stock dropped on the fact that their Noverian lab facility was under "investigative lock down". There were even witnesses who spoke of seeing Saren, and of course, Benezia's own testimony. But like all badly packaged meat, a single touch of the talon separated truth from third-rate packaging. While several eyewitnesses claimed to have seen Saren, none could say they spoke with him. Given the fact that Saren's armor was pretty unusual, that didn't seem too suspicious at first. But all of the eyewitnesses were recent layoffs from Noverian businesses, slowly losing ground on their overpriced apartments while they looked for work. In the hours after their testimony, all six of them had found work. And that work had all been with one company.

Binary Helix.

Which was pretty much dominated by Saren and Benezia, with a 42% ownership stake by Saren and 39% by Benezia. Oh, he could hear Pallin now, damning him for leaping to conclusions, but Garrus knew something was rotten. Despite Benezia stating she had been with Saren on Noveria and thus he couldn't have been elsewhere, and despite eyewitnesses seeing Saren, no one at all reported seeing the statuesque matriarch until almost a day after the attack. Given that she stood out in a crowd, was usually found on Saren's arm or in his wake, and that she tended to be flanked with high-powered asari commandos as bodyguards, the idea that she was conspicuously absent was preposterous.

Garrus exited the elevator in a rush, ignoring the two asari who had stopped gossiping to whisper behind slender hands, eyes boldly going over his own form. He twitched a mandible in suppressed amusement, but continued his rapid review of data, pulling up a report here, adjusting a statement there.

*Such a damned burden looking as good as I do.*

His final and most damning evidence, however, he still had to follow up on. Several workers in the Bechjet Lower Wards reported a firefight near the Upper Wards entrance that led to the space-side docking ring. The very same docking ring that the Sullen Cloud, the drell's ship, had docked to. The few bystanders who had reported weapons fire in the docking ring had reported a young quarian female fleeing the area, wounded. Fragmentary C-Sec reports spoke of a cull of migrant and transitory quarians earlier that day in the same area, with a girl meeting the description "let go" to one of "Fist's thugs". And almost half an hour later, a witness working salvage on Keeper repair sites near the old metalling plant placed a known Broker agent, one Urdnot Wrex, at the lower wards with a female quarian, headed to the Upper Wards, both wounded.

The dots were not in a line, but they connected. Somehow, this unnamed quarian had escaped the battle between Raik Bole and Captain Troyce. She had something that convinced a Broker merc, not known for their charity, to rescue her from pursuit, in the process killing Weryloc Shan. Who then ... apparently delivered her to Fist, a known Broker associate. At least, that is what he had thought.

Garrus had just come from Chora's Den, though, and found nothing. Not a witness that had seen or heard of any quarians. And Fist himself had been singularly ... confusing. The human thug had seemed very interested in any information about the quarian the C-Sec officer had, and even offered to pay him for her whereabouts, an offer that was put forth as 'appreciation' and not a bribe. Garrus sneered at the memory. As dirty as Fist was – his naked asari girls stank of red sand and worse – he wasn't about to beat up or arrest a Shadow Broker operative.

*There's not following rules, and then there is begging for a bullet in the fringe.*

Garrus knew if he found the quarian, he could finally begin to have a solid, unbreakable piece of evidence against Saren. The very concept that one of his own kind, gifted with the highest trust not just of the Hierarchy but of every race in Council space, could murder another turian, collude with the geth... it made Garrus's eyes burn in hate.

Garrus burst into the lower plaza of the Council chambers, almost running directly into Sparatus and Pallin. "Ah, Detective. How kind of you to join us. The humans will be here in about ten minutes, and we need to be able to refute their claims firmly."

Garrus's eyes flicked in confusion from Pallin to the smooth-talking Councilor. "I have..not finished my investigation, Councilor. I came to make my findings thus far known, and ask for more time to finish the investigation. The financial aspects are very convoluted and my partner Forlan feels that we need to get authority for an asset freeze and audit."

Pallin was uncharacteristically quiet, his mandibles so tight against his jaw Garrus thought they would snap. His stance was pure Hierarchy military, back straight, cowl a perfect 45 degrees to the floor, spurs lined up against each other. He wore heavy gloves, concealing any twitching of his talons.

*This is not good.*

Sparatus put a hand on his hip, scowling, his jaw loose. "I see. And what strong evidence to you have to present to take such a prejudicial course of action."

Garrus was speechless. "Councilor, we have quite a bit of evidence that, while not a solid indicator of guilt, is very indicative that something is wrong."

Pallin finally spoke. "The Council has come to the conclusion, based on ... various evidence discovered by STG teams...that the humans are framing Saren. Saren forwarded a report showing human officers told to ignore evidence that showed Saren's non involvement. Councilor Sparatus plans to have Saren arrive mid-testimony to drop this bombshell and see if the Alliance Military Command is completely corrupt or if this was localized sloppiness."

Sparatus nods. "In any event, it's clear to me that if Saren was involved, there should be at least something solid on him."

Garrus shook his head. "Councilor...please. What I have is .. well, the Executor would say it's conjecture at best. We have disturbing coincidences and lack of facts that can be simply explained away. And I'm fairly certain that the Broker obtained vital evidence we have yet to see."

Sparatus placed a hand on Garrus shoulder. "Detective. I ... appreciate your fire and honesty in this endeavor. Executor Pallin didn't want to give you this case, but I'm glad to see his worries about you taking it seriously or having the skills to pursue it were wrong. You can forward me your findings, and I promise you , on the spirits of my clan, I'll research them. But right now, can you look me in the eye and say you're 100% sure Saren is behind this?"

Garrus clicked his mandibles in frustration. "I just need more time! I know the proof is there!"

Sparatus shook his head. "We're dealing with the possibility that human intelligence assets have been

planting or altering evidence, Detective. This time tomorrow, they'll have reacted to everything we've shot holes in today to make it all more plausible." His voiced gentled. "Saren likes to play loose and fast with rules, and I don't doubt you found some things that are probably not 100% on the mark. My own guess is that he was doing something he shouldn't have been – not at Eden Prime, mind you, but somewhere else, in the course of his investigation into human AI. I think he probably did something shady with his supposed alibi at Noveria, and I plan to confront him on it. Privately."

The councilor straightened. "But I've been doing my job for over 20 years now, and I've known Saren longer than that. The anguish and pain in his eyes when I told him about Nihlus's death was real. He almost came unhinged. If he is playing fast and loose with the rules, it's only a reaction to this frame-up the humans are putting on him."

Garrus shook his head. "Sir...Lady Benezia met with the krogan assassins a week before the murder of Captain Troyce. I have a very solid eye-witness to that. Whatever evidence the Broker procured must be very damaging..."

Pallin shook his head. "I called up Fist this afternoon...apparently, just after you had a little chat with him. He is under the impression that the information he was expecting to receive had something to do with Saren's finances being...irregular in regards to his investments in Binary Helix. He may be abusing his position to acquire a controlling interest for his own financial gain. It is possible Benezia is wrapped up in this as well. And it's ... more than likely, really, that the human government, which is dominated by corporate interests, is simply taking hasty advantage of this Eden Prime attack to try to smear Saren's name."

Garrus looked at the two turians in bewilderment. "That doesn't even make any sense! Something that large would have taken time to set up-"

Sparatus glanced at Pallin. "And the humans spearheading this effort have been enemies of Saren for 15 years. I don't have time to brief you on everything, you can watch for yourself." Sparatus brushed lint from his robe, and gazed at Garrus coolly. "Your request for an extension to this investigation is denied, Detective. This case is closed. If you will excuse me, the humans will be arriving shortly."

Sparatus stalked off, robe flowing around him, and Pallin just gave Garrus a pitying look. "Follow me, kid."

Garrus didn't even argue, following his superior to an overlook of the main council floor. He watched as the human councilor, a rough-edged figure with an apparent love of screaming histrionics, berated the Council and demanded action.

He watched the three humans enter the upper foyer, taking in their shapes and sizes. Pallin gestured to the female in the middle. "That's Commander Shepard. Before this afternoon, the idea was for you to aid her in the investigation. With this recent ... discovery, however... we've been ordered off the case. Officially. STG is handling any followup."

Garrus snapped his head to one side, glaring. "And you just let them walk over you like that? Where is your damned angry demands that we do it by the book? Damn the spirits, I did everything right, and all I asked for is another day!"

Pallin shrugged, seemingly ... exhausted. Or broken. "I already had this fight with the Councilor, Garrus. It was made clear to me that if I continued, they would dismiss me, you, and anyone else who failed to fall in line. This is no longer about justice. It's about politics. It's about stopping the humans from getting a seat, about putting them in their place and making fools of them. They could have done this in a private session..." he trails off as Saren enters, cocksure and bold, draped in melodramatic black with his badge of office high on one shoulder. Pallin's talons clench the railing in front of him in

suppressed rage, then he exhales. "Expediency wins...the truth loses."

Garrus could only watch as Saren twisted the human concerns into a farce, as if he was the aggrieved party. Down on the lower balcony, Garrus recognized the cloaked form of Lady Benezia, leaning serenely against one of the bizarre pink-furred human plants, her face smirking in obvious amusement as the humans floundered and the crowds watching murmured and gestured.

Garrus felt sick, as if his gizzard was full of wet stones. The burning energy he had felt all day long drained away in a single, pained sigh. Pallin looked over, and shook his head. "I never like the way you do things, Vakarian. Too rash. Too quick. Too sloppy. But I admit there are times where just shoving a pistol in someone's fringe and pulling the trigger would be more just than this... debacle."

Garrus nodded, a tiny spark of outraged satisfaction burning in his chest. He watched the obviously dejected humans leave the platform, the ambassador clearly broken and running, the dark human male with the stripes on his uniform seemingly defeated, and the large, heavier human female looking angry.

Only Shepard walked away calmly. Every movement measured, cold but somehow full of restrained energy. He scratched a talon over his fringe as Pallin turned to go, heading down the narrow stairwell to the elevators. "Executor...wait."

Pallin stopped, and turned. "Let it go, Garrus. They've closed the case. I have no wish to enact pitiful scenes from Blasto, bemoaning the fact that stupid politics is the winner of the field of battle."

Garrus glared, stepping into his superior's face, deliberately trying to get an instinctual rise out of him. "Is that it? All these years of wise posturing and angry yelling at me to do it right. All those spirit-damned speeches about the fucking purity of justice. All the people who died because you weren't willing to break the rules and get it done. Now you're just going to let that barefaced bastard walk out of here with his whore of an asari, when you KNOW full well he's dirty? When you know he might very well be behind it!"

Pallin finally snapped, his talons shearing right through his gloves, teeth bared. "What am I do then, you idiot child? I don't have a famous father to cover for me. If you're wrong, I lose my job. C-Sec is my LIFE. I follow ORDERS. I am a TURIAN! I have been given a task and I do it! I don't question! I don't break the law to stop crime! And if you are right, what then? I end up with a bullet in my head? I wake up tomorrow to find they've killed you? No, Garrus." He jabbed his talons into the younger turian's armor, hard enough to chip the glossy black paint. "Some of us are not willing to destroy everything on a wild hunch from a spoiled kid who thinks justice is shooting bad guys with over-powered guns. It's patience. It's doing things right, regardless of your personal opinion. And above all else, it's not assuming someone's guilty until it's proven to be the case."

Pallin spun on a heel, and stormed off, not looking to see if he was followed. Garrus just stood there, eyes closed, head down, wondering what to do next.

"Detective?"

The voice was .. cold. Even. No harmonics to give him a clue of anger or friendship. It was almost soothing in a way. Garrus turned, eyes opening, and faced the speaker.

Up close, Shepard was almost soft looking at first glance. Her skin was dark, almost brown, and set in firm, hard angles. Like all humans she had features almost identical to asari, but her eyes were a cold blue that, strangely enough, reminded him of his father. Hard, unyielding, icy, yet somewhere behind them lurked madness and anger. "Yes. I am, that is. Detective Garrus Vakarian, C-Sec Special Investigative Unit."

"Commander Shepard, Alliance Navy. I ... overheard some of that argument you had with your

superior. You were investigating Saren?"

Garrus nodded, exhaling. "Was being the operative term. I have bits of evidence that don't look good, but the ugly truth is I need another day or two and the Council has shut the case down and given it to the STG. If there's anything to find, it will be so classified and locked down that we'll never hear about it, and that bastard will walk free."

The light-skinned human female to the left spoke, her voice rougher but higher pitched. "Isn't it kinda .. odd .. for a turian to want to nail Saren? Isn't he like, a hero for turians?"

Garrus eyed the woman coldly, his jaw set. "Imagine how you would feel if you discovered evidence, no matter how ... patchy ... that your Hero of Elysium was actually selling children to batarian slavers, but that no one wanted to expose it for political reasons. Would YOU be happy? I'm not. I feel defiled. He's a disgrace, both to the Hierarchy and to the Council."

Shepard arched an eyebrow. "That's nice. But what are you going to do about it."

Garrus shook his head. "I can't touch him, he's a Spectre, he's got immunity to everything, and everything he touches is classified. The case has been .. closed."

She shook her head, the weird floppy fringe thing all humans had moving with the motion, the faint light of the Council chamber catching on edges in the mass. "Fuck that. I didn't ask what C-Sec was going to do. I asked what YOU were going to do. Run away clucking like the chicken you look like?"

Her voice hardened. "He's going to get away. He's going to do *something* even worse, people are going to *die*, and unless someone stops him, it's going to be on your conscious. He's a fucking criminal."

Garrus looked away, conflicted. "Yeah, I know."

She spoke again, voice even harder. "I *hate* criminals." And Garrus realized, belatedly and suddenly, that here was someone much like him. Someone for whom rules were a boundary and not a guideline, someone who had been hurt to the point where it mattered more about vengeance than justice, for whom the only judge, jury and executioner needed was common sense.

Garrus squared himself upright, jaw clacking with amusement, and cocked his head to look at her. "Assuming I was some kind of paramilitary badass with a grudge rather than a respectable C-sec officer... then what I would do is try to find a quarian that went missing yesterday. A quarian that I'm sure had something to do with the Shadow Broker and some evidence linking Saren to Eden Prime." He folded his arms, mandibles cocked to one side in a smirk, and fixed his eyes on hers. "But alas, I don't seem to have any terrifying Special Forces soldiers to back me up when I go looking for my first lead."

Shepard actually gave a tiny little smile. "And *are* you a paramilitary badass with a grudge, or do you just like to look good?"

*Goddamn, Vakarian, even the crazy bitches can't get enough of you.* Mandibles flaring in amusement, Garrus raised his plates above his eyes. "I *always* look good."

Shepard said nothing, but Williams gave an astoundingly juvenile giggle before stifling it. "Um...sorry ma'am."

Shepard tilted her head to match the tilt of Garrus. "Can you follow orders, Vakarian? And don't hand me that 'me-turian-me-good-soldier' zombie bullshit."

Garrus laughed, for the first time all day. "No, I'm a really, really bad turian. I find, to the distress of my father and superiors, that I can only follow orders that aren't completely full of shit."

Shepard nodded. "That will do. Where's this lead of yours, Detective?" They began walking to the

elevator bank at the end of the plaza, Shepard leading.

"Right now, I suspect he's head-butting some poor C-Sec officer in receiving. His name is Urdnot Wrex." Shepard opened her mouth to speak, shut it, then opened it again. "Wait. Large, old, angry krogan, scars on the face, red armor, likes to threaten to eat things?"

Garrus nodded, as Anderson and Williams glanced at Shepard in confusion. "Yeah, that's him. You know him?"

Shepard grimaced. "Yeah, fought him on Torfan, actually. This should be interesting. Lead on, Detective."

Garrus felt oddly .. better, knowing he was at least doing something and not just giving up like Pallin did. "No problem, Commander. New to the Citadel? You'll *love* the Lower Wards."

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## Chapter 24: Chapter 18 : Doctor Michele

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January 24, 2183

If the Presidium was a glorious testament to just how well aliens could mimic mankind's ability to use wealth and privilege to blind themselves to the suffering of their fellow man, then the Lower Wards were the alien take on a mix of the ghetto, third world countries, and post-industrialism.

Garrus drove a patrol aircar to C-Sec headquarters, Alenko and Shepard in the back. She looked out the angular window down upon the gleaming light of the Upper Wards, slowly growing dimmer and darker towards the end of the Ward, where it hooked into the ring itself. At it's terminus, the aircar angled up sharply, and the battered, grimy buildings of the Lower Ward could be seen. *That could be the arcology, full of lives fucked over and out.*

Part of her wished Anderson was still here. But Anderson had to make reports to Alliance Command, and felt that the Council would look at evidence with a more even view if he wasn't involved in the process at all. Williams was, in Shepard's mind, a good soldier, but far too emotional, and in any event was still badly wounded, and not exactly in any shape to be doing an investigation. Shepard had thus decided to drop her off as well, so she could recuperate in the medbay.

She had expected the fiery soldier to object, but Williams, surprisingly enough, had acquiesced, leaving Shepard, Alenko, and the turian to head onwards. But the conversation stuck with her, replaying in her mind as she gazed at the detritus of the Lower Wards.

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*"Not that I'm not wanting to guard your six, skipper, but I'm still pretty shot up." The turian was outside the Normandy, going through some kind of reports, and Williams had followed Shepard back to the medbay.*

*Shepard had raised an eyebrow. "Skipper?" Williams actually looked embarrassed, studying her dress BDU boots. "Um, got in the habit of calling the CO that in the 212. Ended up calling the LT that a lot, since he did more work than the CO did, ma'am." At mentioning the 212, the younger woman's open, simple features had crumpled.*

*Shepard had paused, and finally frowned. She felt absolutely useless at dealing with these kind of issues, but this wasn't a 2000+ unit where she could brusquely suggest someone hurting go talk to the psych officer. This was a crew of 50, and she was expected to be the open, accessible face of command, the one you talked to because you couldn't talk to the CO.*

*Shepard tried to think about all the times Anderson, or Delacor, had to comfort people, and finally tossed all that aside. "Williams, look at me." The younger woman looked up. "I'm not any good at comforting people in their loss. I don't feel it. If there is anything like that in me somewhere inside, it's buried under so much crap that just reaching for it means I have to relieve all the pain it's under. I've never been able to do that. I told you that day you had to get past it because it's all I've known."*

*Shepard paused. "But you aren't me, and the 212 isn't the 2 RRU. What happened on Eden Prime was stupid, and you just told me your LT was really pulling the weight rather than the CO, XO, or BDO. They got sloppy. That BC of the 410 got sloppy and lazy. And a lot of good soldiers died due to that."*

*Shepard remembered how Joker touched her hand, and did the same to Williams. Her own memories bubbled up, a thousand widows and broken mothers glaring at her hatefully from the amphitheater of memory, but this was a mission, for her crew, and she wasn't going to fucking fail it. "But that has nothing to do with you. You're one of the best soldiers I've seen, and you should know I don't bullshit or patronize people."*

*William's eyes had gone wide with shock but Shepard continued. "If I was harsh it's because I don't want you ending up a ... thing... like me, so filled up with hate and anger that you can't do anything but lash out. The pain will **not** make you better. Let it go now, clinging to it won't bring them back. They died. They died hard, Williams, they died fighting and for their families, and above all else they died fucking Marines. You can't cry on the battlefield, but this isn't the battlefield. They died, and you lived, and you lived not because you ran away, or weren't good enough, or whatever bullshit you're telling yourself right now. They died and you lived because of sheer, dumb, stupid luck, and because you fought your ass off."*

*Williams was trembling, shaking, jaw almost quivering "But I.. I couldn't even save Nirali...I just let her ... fry in front o-of m-meee..."*

*Shepard grabbed the chief's shoulder. "Is that why you have burns all over your armor down one side, why both your arms and half your face is burned? You tried to shield her with your own body. Your friend, Nirali – she died because of the geth. Hate them. Use that hate when we fight them. But don't hate yourself." Shepard remembered words from Anderson, words that seemed to fit here. "Nirali would be happy you lived. She wouldn't want you hating yourself. She would want you to remember her as your friend, to remember all the good things you did together, not to remember her as a failure and a reason to despise...yourself.."*

*The woman across from her had just come to pieces then, sobbing, and nearly falling to her knees. Shepard had caught her, holding her, not knowing what to do. Sobs wracked Williams' body, shaking her muscled arms like tidal waves slamming into a fragile ship.*

*"You're my crew, Williams. I don't let anyone hurt the people who have my six. And I promise you, we'll get the motherfucker that did this, and kick his stupid, pointy fucking face until it shatters, just the way he did Nihlus."*

*Williams managed to nod, still hanging on as if her whole body had given out. Shepard looked around, as if for what to do. Outside the med-bay window she saw Chakwas, watching them both with a look of both sympathy and bafflement in her eyes. Shepard raised an eyebrow, and Chakwas nodded.*

*A moment later she entered, and Williams made an effort to pull herself together. "None of that, Chief Williams." Chakwas placed a gentle, almost hesitant hand on the younger woman's shoulder, and her voice was ... motherly, almost. "Every soldier needs to just let it all out, sometimes."*

*Shepard swallowed. "Williams needs some more time to .. .recover. We're going into what might be combat."*

*Chakwas nodded, moving the chief to a med-bay bed. "Understood, commander. You should not stress the leg or the hand, either, especially the latter. The regenerator and medigel and skinspray has everything covered up, but the bones and tendons are still weak."*

*Shepard nodded, coming to her feet, and walked towards the door, but stopped. "Williams?"*

*The voice that responded was quieter now, calmer. "Yes, ma'am?"*

*"...when I .. get back, I'll come up and talk. If you need that. Even if I'm no good at it."*

*Williams gave a wan smile, and then made an effort to straighten. "You told me what I needed to hear, ma'am."*

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"Commander?"

Shepard started, glancing around the aircar. "Sorry, going over some things in my mind, Lieutenant."

Alenko just nodded, his even, clean features showing only understanding. "I think we all do that sometimes, Commander. Didn't mean to break into your ruminations, but..."

He gestured out the window, as the shuttle touched down, Garrus's deft piloting bringing it down in a rumble of air and pads. "This is C-Sec? It looks like a damned fortress!" The building was an ugly, armored cylinder, connecting the hinge that the wards all sat on to the inner ring of the Presidium. It was supported by thousands of trusses and what looked like an entire armored division of armed aircars and gunships were perched on vast airfields next to the building proper.

Garrus chuckled, the sound a harmonic rumbling mixed with more normal laughing noises. "In the original setup of the Citadel, back when the asari and salarians were the only ones here, this was the only access to the Citadel Towers that ran directly, and to the inner secure docks, like the ones they put your ship in. When my people showed up, the place was used as a welcoming facility for newcomers. We turned it into a defensive location to protect the Tower, and later on, it was the natural place for C-Sec to operate from."

The three stepped out of the car, Garrus leading. "We'll have to be quick about this. Technically, the case is closed, and if Pallin catches wind of what I'm doing, he'll have to stop me. He didn't seem...happy...about what was going down, but I don't know that I blame him for not taking a stand."

Alenko nodded. "The law has to be obeyed, the rules are there for a reason." Garrus frowned, about to respond, when Shepard laughed. "Really, LT? Let me tell you about laws. Criminals don't respect the law, and they don't respect the idea that hurting others to get what they want is bad. That goes for a white-collar bank executive screwing his shareholders all the way down to some two-bit batarian filth who sells kids. It's the same mindset, screw the rules, I have power. But clinging to the rules won't stop some people."

Alenko frowned. "Without rules, without order, you have anarchy. Being a vigilante isn't promoting justice and ignoring governments means you are second guessing those with a wider viewpoint and information you don't always have."

Shepard nodded, but her expression was cold. "Sure, in theory. In reality? You have anarchy in the Verge, in the Expanse, in the Terminus anyway. The precious order we have in Council space can be shattered at will by pirates, plagues, corporate fuckery...and clinging to laws often won't catch these people until their harm is done. What good does it do to arrest a slaver after he's captured 10,000 people and sold them when you could just blow his head off before hand and save them? I don't ever break laws, Alenko. I think you know that. But that is a choice I made. If I had to break the law to save

the innocent, I'd do so. If I had to break it to save one of my crew, I'd do it in a heartbeat."

Alenko was still frowning. "I understand what you're saying, Commander...I'm just the kind of person who follows rules... I guess instinctively."

Garrus gave a wry smile. "Lieutenant, I think you would make a very good turian."

Alenko scratched his head. "Thank you. Uh, I think."

Garrus laughed. "But you should listen to your commander on this. I've been working C-Sec cases for over a decade now. I've seen .. monsters let go due to red tape and regulations and rules that are supposed to protect the public and end up being abused to protect the criminals and politicians."

Garrus exhales, pushing open the main doors to C-Sec, and the two humans follow him in, taking in the huge lobby area. "That being said , I follow the rules right up to the point where they get in the way of me taking the shot, then I throw them out. It hasn't won me a lot of friends...but I suspect I sleep better at night than my boss does."

Garrus turned down a narrow, blue lit corridor, nodding at two blue-clothed salarions who stood with folded arms listening to a third salarian explaining why he was doing something to the Keepers. They swept past a long line of glass fronted offices, including one that read "Vakarian, G, Special Operations" in white frosted letters and three languages , into a second foyer area, this one having large, heavy staircases that led into the Lower Wards proper.

At the head of the staircase were six C-Sec officers, 3 of them with drawn weapons, two more with hands on omni-tools. In the center of the semi-circle they formed was a single , huge form, red armor streaked with battle damage, dribbles of orange blood seeping through craters the size of a baseball. The globular red eyes, slitted with black, were narrowed, and the scarred muzzle was twisted into a mocking, menacing grin, displaying far too many teeth the size of a human thumb.

"This is your last damn warning , Wrex. Firefights are not acceptable in the Upper Wards."

The krogan leaned forward slightly, his jutting jaw in the turian's face. "I don't take orders from pyjak droppings like you. If you're gonna warn someone, warn two bit mercs not to mess with me."

The turian C-sec officer stood his ground, although his mandibles flared in alarm. Glancing around at the officers at his back, he stepped forward. "Are we going to have to arrest you, Wrex?"

Wrex jerked his head forward in a series of movement, backing the officer up, looming over him, his voice a low , menacing rumble. "I want you to *try*."

Garrus gave a small chuckle of amusement. "Dantrian, I'll take it from here."

The turian officer glanced over at Vakarian and the humans behind him with a mix of relief, embarrassment, and confusion, but his voice was clear. "Understood, sir. Wrex was seen engaging in a firefight not far from the south end of Bechjet Upper, and we brought him in after he killed – admittedly in self-defense – another krogan merc."

Garrus nodded, but waved a hand. "I'll handle it, Sergeant. That will be all."

Slowly, the knot of C-Sec officers moved away. Alenko nudged Garrus's arm. "Um...Detective?" He pointed to Wrex...and Shepard, who had stalked forward to get right up in the giant krogan's face, glaring.

The krogan growled, hand dropping to his side, near the handle of the massive shotgun C-Sec had not quite built up the nerve to try to confiscate. Shepard's hand already rested on the butt of her Predator, fingers tapping the base. The two stared at each other for long seconds.

"Um...Commander?"

Shepard tilted her head, ignoring Garrus, and finally exhaled.

"Wrex."

The krogan stepped back one small pace, eyes finally taking in Garrus and Alenko, before snapping back to the woman in front of him.

"Shepard."

Alenko goggled. "Wait, you know each other?"

The krogan grumbled. "Crazy bitch dropped a building on me on Torfan."

Shepard folded her arms, leaning back on her good leg, which resulted in her cocking her hip out in an almost arrogant stance, smirking. "If you don't want buildings to drop on you, don't go trying to drop artillery strikes on my position. Besides, you look just fine."

The krogan leaned down further. "You shot up my squad, dropped a building on me, and then shot them to pieces right in front of me."

Shepard shrugged. "Well, shit, I guess you using them as bait to draw out my own squad and then dropping artillery on us both was just bad aim on your part?"

The two stared at each other for another long moment, then the krogan gave a great, roaring laugh, shaking his entire frame. "Why is it all you squishy races have women with bigger quads than the men?"

Shepard unfolded her arms. "I would never though to say it's good to see you, but it actually is."

The krogan nodded. "First human I ever met who could fight me to a standstill. I don't apologize for that contract, but ... I drew the line at what they did to civilians. That's why I ended up turning on my own men. There isn't very much I won't do for money, but killing kids... is a sore spot with krogan."

Shepard nodded, looking grim and suddenly almost .. tired. "Yeah, well. You saw how that shit ended. Fucking Star of Terra."

Alenko glanced at Garrus, then cleared his throat."Commander?"

Shepard waved a vague hand at Garrus and Alenko. "This is Detective Vakarian, and the human next to him is Lieutenant Alenko, a member of my crew." She faintly emphasized the last word, and the krogan nodded. He only glanced at the detective, but stepped forward to inspect Alenko closer. "Huh. Doesn't look like much, but she only calls people crew if they're hard as nails."

Alenko blinked, not sure whether to feel complemented or .. confused.

Shepard continued. "I didn't come by to see you make C-Sec officers piss themselves. Or whatever it is turians do..."

Garrus gave her a look, then just shook his head. Shepard gave a very slight smile. "...but to ask for your help." She exhaled. "You up on what happened on Eden Prime?"

The krogan nodded. "Saw the video and interviews in Flux. Hard to believe geth would strike this far from the Veil, but who can understand things that go around with spotlights for heads?"

Shepard actually chuckled. Alenko remembered the last time Shepard had laughed was when facing down 70 plus geth with an Avenger assault rifle. She seemed less..stiff around aliens, as if they were easier to deal with than people. *And for someone as damaged as her, maybe they are. Maybe Joker is right .. but it's hard enough to figure out what sets her off and what makes her approve.*

Shepard jerked her head to Garrus, who explained his findings, the linkages, and mentioned the quarian that his investigation had turned up. The krogan nodded.

"Whole reason I'm here. I work for the Shadow Broker. This was . . . well, supposedly a simple job. We thought we had a leak in our network, so the Broker made sure the next incoming piece of intel was routed here. I was to keep an eye on things, monitor the transfer, and if our contact here was dirty, put him down. Even if he was clean, I'm to . . . make sure he understands the penalty for sloppiness, and take him out of the network for a while."

The krogan gestured to the stairs, and the group followed. "Except it wasn't like that. The ship carrying the quarian with the evidence was misdirected and ambushed at the docks, the guy who brought her here got his head blown off. The quarian managed to outfox a krogan tracker for half a day before he caught up to her. Lucky for her, I had also caught up to her by then, and I repaid Troyce's death in the best possible way, by blowing the merc's head off."

Alenko frowned. "You're just admitting this in front of a C-Sec detective?"

Wrex laughed. "Most of the Citadel knows by now that Vakarian doesn't give a shit about rules, as long as he gets to nail druggies, slavers and mercs with that cannon of his." The turian shrugged, and irritably gestured with his talons. "You were talking about the quarian."

Wrex nodded, his feet making clumping booms as they descended the stairs. "Yeah, yeah. Anyway, the quarian is hurt, bad. Tough little varren. I get her to an Upper Wards clinic, and the doctor there is patching her up. She should still be there. I was watching the place when another krogan merc that worked for Saren in the past jumped me." He gestures to the holes in his armor, though his bleeding has stopped. "Dumb bastard brought a shotgun to a fist fight."

Shepard gave another grin. "You mean a biotic fist fight?"

The krogan nodded. "Not many of us have the soulgrip any more. Other krogan forget why we're battlemasters and not battle leaders or warlords."

Garrus's mandibles twitched with impatience. "The clinic? "

Wrex reached the bottom of the stairs and started walking. "Doctor Michele's. Where else is there a clean room in the Wards?"

15 minutes walk brought them to the clinic. Shepard sighed, and turned to Wrex and Alenko. "Stay outside and make sure everything is clear. No point extracting the quarian to get her shot by some sniper. Vakarian and I will go in, retrieve her, and if necessary get the information we need right there."

Alenko saluted. "Aye, ma'am. Hopefully it won't come to a fight, since we're not in armor and have only pistols."

The krogan grunted, leaning against the wall. "Speak for yourself, human." He patted his thick armor with a meaty hand, grinning.

Alenko just shrugged. "What? I'll just hide behind you."

Shepard rolled her eyes and entered the clinic. The door slid shut behind them. There were chairs set out, a waiting area, calming music playing in the background, a shelf of magazines hanging from one wall...and a dead receptionist slumped against the wall, a bloody hole blown in her chest. Instantly Shepard had her pistol out, and Garrus had drawn his own sidearm. She moved as close to him as she could, whispering.

"We'll roll through the door, you take left, I'll cover right."

Garrus nodded, nose twitching at her scent, a mix of medigel and something more . . . alien. He gripped

his pistol tightly, and they rolled through the door just after his massive foot kicked it open. "C-Sec! Freeze!"

Shepard rolled right, behind a counter covered with medical documents, and Garrus had fetched up behind a support pillar. The office beyond was an open bay, 5 set of beds separated by curtains attached to the ceiling, all currently empty and pulled open. Hard, artificial illumination from cheap overhead lights cast dark shadows into the corners. At the far end of the room was some kind of medical equipment, and doors leading to restrooms and an airlock looking door that read "Decontamination - Clean Room. No Exit".

A desk sat at the other end of the room, in front of a narrow metal bookcase of books and a few pictures, and in front of that was a slender, curvy human woman with pale skin and glossy chestnut hair. She was held tightly around the waist by a muscular, human man with a shaved, tattooed skull and wearing the chest armor of an old Onyx battlesuit. A pistol in his grimy hand was pressed against the woman's head,. Two more thugs in cheap armor holding pistols next to the doctor's computer, one attempting to look something up, the other one covering the door with a shaky aim.

The man with the gun to the doctor's head sneered. "I don't think so, C-Sec."

Shepard took in the scene. The thug holding the doctor was not even shielding himself properly with her body, the other two were poorly placed to take a shot. She lifted her pistol and fired, realizing as she did so Garrus had done the same thing.

The thug flew back, the doctor moaning in fright as the mercenaries' jaw and then the top of his head were blown off, splattering her with speckles of blood. The other two fired, the first thug cowering behind the desk as cover, the second yelling as he blasted away. Garrus spun on his heel, putting two shots in the chest of the human behind the desk, the heavy slugs tearing into flesh and spinning the man to the floor in a bloody heap. Shepard only fired once, planting a pullet in her opponents eye, sending him tumbling to the ground a half second later.

Shepard only nodded at Garrus. "Stole my kill."

Garrus gave a turian grin. "Not my fault you're slow. Sometimes, you just get lucky." Coming around the corner, he gently helped the human woman to her feet. "Doctor Michele, are you alright? Did those thugs hurt you?"

She shuddered..."n-nno.. wait...there's -"

As she spoke, the clean room door opened, in it's hatchway stood a salarian in silver and blue armor, hube, black eyes wild with fright, mouth set in a grimace that distorted it's narrow face. It's hands were clenched around a gigantic black Judgment heavy pistol with a bore the size of one of Shepard's thumbs.

Shepard had already holstered her pistol, standing next to Garrus with no cover. Garrus's own weapon was holdstered as well, both caught flatfooted by the unexpected entry. The salarian screamed, saliva flying from his mouth as pulled the trigger frantically, firing rapidly. "DIE YOU EGGSMASHING FUCKS,DIE! DIE!"

8 shots rang out. Shepard waited for the flare of pain, the feeling of her body smashing to the floor, but felt nothing.

Shepard glanced down at herself, then at Garrus who was doing the same thing. She hadn't been hit. Neither had he. Neither had the doctor, for that matter. At a range of barely 10 feet, with a hand cannon that would have blown her in half, she hadn't been hit. She traded a single, dark look with Garrus, and their pistols came up in unison, firing.

The salarian flew back, two craters in his chest, to slam against the hatch edge with a thud before collapsing to the ground, dead. The gun flew from his hand to land on the counter-top next to him with a heavy bang, spinning a few moments in a lazy circle before coming to a stop, its smoking barrel pointed at the wall.

Shepard turned to the doctor, eyes narrowed. "Be quicker next time you try to warn us about a gunman, instead of sobbing. Did it slip your fucking mind there was another goon in there with a goddamned hand-cannon in the clean room?" Her voice was soft, but icy. Michele only gave a trembling nod, then shook her head, hair flying. "I .. I am sorry, I was.. frightened..." Her voice was rolling consonants and liquid vowels behind her fear, the clear accent of France permeating her words.

Garrus, on the other hand was still, his mandibles loosened in delayed shock. "Did you see the size of that gun he fired at us, Shepard? It was bigger than him. Spirits on a stick." He turned, eyeing the huge blackened holes in the wall behind where they had stood. He placed his finger in one, the talon sliding in cleanly to a depth of 3 inches. "We should be fucking dead, bleeding out on the floor.

Shepard sighed, and pulled the doctor all the way to her feet. "I know. Like you said, sometimes you get lucky." She checked the doctor for wounds, finding nothing except the spatter of gore from the merc who got shot right next to her, forming a gory decoration on her otherwise pristine white lab coat.

Garrus shook his head. "No..no no. That can't be luck. This...this is the intervention of the spirits."

Shepard tilted her head. "...you're implying that divine forces came down from Heaven and stopped the bullets?"

Garrus nodded. "Exactly. The spirits came from the beyond and stopped these sirefucking bullets. It's destiny. They saved us to stop Saren."

Shepard coughed. "We can discuss the theological ramifications later, Detective. We need to find the quarian." She turned her cold gaze back to the doctor. "Where is she?"

Michele stammered in barely concealed terror. "I..I .. she left! She was healed, and she got a message f-from someone who said F-fist was ready for her...t-then she took off, without w-waiting!"

Shepard leaned forward. "Where, doctor, is this message?" Michele pointed mutely to her computer, then scrambled away, hastening to bring it up.

Shepard and Garrus stepped behind her, as the holoscreen displayed a human with blocky, cruel features and a marine's buzz cut. "Miss Zoruh. I'm Fist. We have some bizness ta attend to, no? Meet me down in Chora's Den. We'll get this all worked through and you on your way. I'm afraid your buddy Wrex died, but we'll get ya back safe and this ... information to the proper place. Don't bother with the cops, I'm sure you're already familiar with how they treat your kind, and they might be in Saren's payroll."

Shepard scowled. "Sounds like an asshole. You know where Chora's Den is at?"

Garrus nodded, still lost in thought. "Lower wards. I'll call in a C-Sec team and ... get this mess policed up. Calm the good doctor here down. I'll meet up with you once you have the girl."

Shepard nodded, heading back to the front of the clinic and outside. Wrex stood over a crumpled form, nudging it with his boot. "More of Saren's trash." Alenko was in cover next to him, gun drawn.

"Wrex, the quarian isn't here. She got a message telling her to go to Chora's Den and meet someone named Fist."

Wrex's eyes widened. "Shepard, Fist is the person that the Shadow Broker thinks is our leak. She's

walking into a trap."

Shepard cursed. "Which way?" The krogan nodded to a nearby aircar terminal. "Faster by aircar. Other end of the ward."

"Alenko, Wrex, in the car." She moved at a run, tapping her comm-link. "Detective, Wrex says Fist is working for Saren. We're moving into recover her, get to Chora's Den pronto."

"Acknowledged. Be careful, you don't have any armor and Fist's people aren't pushovers."

She smirked. "I don't need armor, Detective. I got three biotics."

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## Chapter 25: Chapter 19 : Liara , Interrupted

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*A/N: This is more infodump than anything else, but I could not figure out how to get it all out in any other fashion.*

*If my Shepard is psychotic and unable to process emotions, and if my Garrus is darker, crueller and more like Archangel than the original Garrus, then my Liara is an emotional, social cripple, not merely shy. I don't know how to convey that without conveying how pointless Liara felt at the time she was rescued. A normal person with a rewarding career might not have turned into what Liara did.*

*But as with everything in the PremiseVerse , anybody well adjusted and sane dies a horrible death, and anyone who survives will have more issues than a complete back catalog of National Geographic. :D*

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January 24, 2183

Liara sat in the darkness of the dig site, her face buried in her hands. Her comm unit lay shattered at her feet, and a bottle of Serrice brandy was the only other thing on the small table next to her, an empty glass still fouled with a few drops of the drink lying broken on the floor.

*Why does everything go wrong...why...*

For an asari, Liara knew she was far more sheltered than most women her age. The first 50 years of her life had been entirely spent upon the T'soni estates on Thessia, overlooking the sea, snuggled up against the awesome peaks of the Skypillar Mountains. Except for the occasional off-world trip - Palaven, Sur'Kesh, once even to Earth – her whole life had been the classes and training she was put through by her mother, Benezia. Her years at the University of Serrice were hardly more exposed. Every argument with her mother about her chosen path made her withdraw more into her studies, and the more she dug into the Protheans, the more enraptured she became. What few acquaintances she had at the University , who managed to persevere through her shyness, spent their nights in very wild debauchery she had heard or imagined, and many that she had not.

Liara, on the other hand, had fallen into a slippery pit of books, research, and quiet hopeless despair. Though she graduated with honors, and her masters thesis was hailed as a brilliant deconstruction of the Expert Pan-Empiric Collapse theory of the Prothean extinction, the completion of her doctorate opened her eyes for the first time to the real world. Museums were the corporate faces of research for profit. They attracted crowds and allowed the ignorant to ooh and ahh over bits of Prothean architecture about as important to the Protheans as a datapad or pair of shoes. But the real research was digging into Prothean energy fields, the wreckage of colony sites searching for weapons and defensive technologies, and the ever-present race to discover more Prothean Caches and Beacons. The Caches were stockpiles of useful technology, from blueprints that had lead the Asari to develop the first dualpulse FTL drives

to full out technologies, like the ultra-light fighter squadrons that made human carriers so deadly.

But it was the Beacons that were the real prize. Each one of the slender green monoliths was an adaptive supercomputer, intergalactic comms relay, and VI-driven monitoring system. Only 19 beacons had been discovered, and 11 of them were classified as "Dark". These beacons, corrupted by some sort of data overlay that had been uploaded to them in the last days of the Prothean Empire, only transmitted mind-blasting images of death. No one, not the strongest asari matriarch or the most stubborn krogan, had ever survived connecting to such a Beacon. The other Beacons though, were full of useful knowledge that they implanted on a memory-driven level. The Salarian Urtha Beacon, for example, had given the Salarian who used it the impetus for the development of modern two-stage kinetic barriers. The asari had made contact with no less than five Beacons, 3 of which dealt with the advanced biotic techniques of the Commandos and the Justicars, such as Reave and Domination. The only known human Beacon on Mars had shattered the minds of its researchers but had led the humans to master mass effect travel and FTL centuries before they would have discovered such concepts on their own.

For all her love of things Prothean, it had been a bitter drink to Liara to discover that the only people employing Prothean experts were corporations looking to loot the sites for Caches, Beacons, and useable tech. No one seemed to really care why they were gone, or why their technology had such strange disconnects. They could build the Citadel and the Mass Relays, but none of their other architecture resembled these structures in any way. They could master biotics on a level even unmatched by the Asari, yet their computer systems were almost antiquated when it came to processing power. They clearly were master biotechs, capable of altering genetic structure almost as if they could interpret the DNA like a book, yet there wasn't a single educational document, ruin, or even data disk about such things.

Most frustratingly of all, Protheans burned their dead, and there was astonishingly little evidence of what the Protheans even looked like. There were bits of skulls that had four eyes, with a humanoid build, mixed in with heavily built tripod-like beings with oversized fists, strange creatures like elongated salarians comprised of neuroactive cartilage and no brain area to be found, and of course, the bizarre, semi-humanoid figures of great regal bearing with tentacle-covered faces and claws on their four fingered hands that would not look out of place on a Thessian novatiger. Were the Protheans much like today's Council races, a unified force? Prothean documents only spoke of the Prothean people, as if they were all the same species. But the businesses did not care. The academics only wanted more grants for more digs, to find more artifacts to sell for more money. The technical researchers cared nothing for Prothean culture or history, destroying priceless cultural sites by the acre merely to retrieve power systems or technical schematics.

Liara had given in almost a decade ago, after the final, heart-breaking separation from her mother, and had spent the time attaching herself to whatever science teams would take her. She still published her papers and books, but mainline researchers had no time for her, and most academics believed the question of how or why the Protheans vanished of zero import. The only people who seemed to pay Liara's theories any attention were conspiracy theorists and the occasional disaster-preparation figure, who would query her on how to avoid galactic wide collapses. For a life of one hundred and six years, it summed up by a few bursts of discovery and joy, mired in the soul-consuming mire of despair. She didn't have her mother's endless resources to draw upon anymore, only her slender salary from the University of Serrice. She was an "associate research technician", a glorified digger of holes in the ground, until someone more properly focused could come along and reap the rewards. She had spent her meager earnings on what little equipment she called her own, and on paying her way through various digs and researches. She had never really expected her whole life to spiral down to this, months spent filthy and harried, moving from dig site to dig site, trying to find something to support her own

theories. She found tantalizing hints, at the cost of months of backbreaking labor and ever-escalating sniping from other researchers. She found the occasional useful find, which brought her much needed credits, tempered by the fact that she knew such devices were being torn apart to figure out how they worked instead of curated and valued. And the whole time, she was so utterly alone. Never able to find a way to just be a part of the group. Always stumbling through her words, her emotions misfiring like badly tuned guns.

Her hand curled into a fist on her thigh, clenching. Tears leaked past the fingers of her other hand, still cradling her head. She had thought herself clever, even righteous, snapping back at Dr. Sanaris via vidlink. And yet, once again, what she had thought a proper response, a sign that she had grown emotionally enough to hold her own, had turned into a disaster. Yesterday morning, she had opened her comm tool to find 2 communications from the University of Serrice. The first was from the Office of Prothean Studies, thanking her for the years of work she had put in. However, due to budget cuts, not only was her request to move to teaching or full participant in dig sites denied, but she was one of 11 technicians being terminated from employment. Her final 2 solar tencycle's worth of pay would be credited to her account, minus the cost of her transport off Therum. The second email had been from Dr. Sanaris, only a few, cruel lines. *"Spoke with your mother via videolink. Amusing that she seemed to feel you were not following her chosen path for you. Agreed, per her request, that you had better things to do with your time than blunder around our digs. Your papers and database logs have been purged from our system, we have better uses for the space than childish fantasy."*

Liara had wept angrily, and sent messages to the netbox of her mother, demanding why she had just destroyed her career, but got no answer that day. She had spent the rest of yesterday focused solely on the extranet coverage of the Eden Prime attack, particularly anything she could find about the Beacon the humans had found. She learned some soldier, a Commander Shepard, had accessed it and actually survived. But more astounding, the Beacon had been destroyed, meaning this Shepard person was the only one who knew it's contents.

Infuriatingly, the extranet was full of useless theories and rumors instead of hard details. The geth had attacked the planet, or batarians, or perhaps Collectors. The humans tried to frame Saren for the attack, or it was the Shadow Broker doing it. The Council had sabotaged the humans from the get go and had stolen the Beacon somehow. One particular lunatic had claimed he, too, survived Eden Prime and touched the monolith and that it showed him datapads and VI's eating all living beings alive.

That had been yesterday. Two hours ago, she had been disturbed from her final assessments of a Prothean statue by her comm link vibrating.

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*"Incoming call: Noveria, Benezia T'soni"*

*Liara had hesitated, then hit the connection button. Rather than text, an FTL commlink connected her to a recorded, non-interactive evocation of her mother.*

*Benezia was wearing a white suit, cut tightly around her waist and breasts, with a high, shimmery faint gray skirt. Her head and shoulders were concealed under layered draping of gauzy silver cloth, which formed a sort of shawl over her. Her eyes were narrowed and hard, her lips set in a firm blue line.*

*"Liara, by now you should have heard from the University of Serrice. I can only presume you are upset, given the fact that you sent several disrespectful emails to me. I will not tolerate your intransigence any further. I have been tolerant, forgiving of your silly infatuation with the corpse of a failed civilization, much as I was tolerant with you digging holes in the garden. Because you were a child then and you are still a child now."*

*The image of Benezia flickered, and she lifted her chin, continuing. "But the time for silly pastimes is gone. I have need of your service to me, as is my right as your mother and the Matriarch of our House. I will not longer allow you to waste the time, money and energy spent on training you on foolish stubbornness. It would have been more useful if you had whored yourself in some Terminus hellhole, for at least then you'd know how to use your body to achieve your goals. But you have failed even at that which comes naturally to us."*

*Benezia had sneered. "I do not have the time to waste picking you up myself, and you are simply not worth the time of any of my acolytes or commandos to retrieve. I have sent krogan mercenaries under the employment of my friend Saren to pick you up, with orders carry you away by force like a tantrum-throwing child if you resist. I have already informed every asari university of any acclaim that taking any application of employment from you will be held as a personal insult to House T'soni."*

*"I am ashamed to call you my daughter, and perhaps I was wrong to ever think you would amount to anything at all. You will board the ship with the krogan mercenaries when they arrive, or when the Exogeni teams arrive to your location they will have orders for your arrest and incarceration., and I will disown you and take from you the name of your proud ancestors, who must weep at your foolish actions. Do not disappoint me again, Liara."*

*The message had cut out, leaving her in the dark.*

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She had spent the night drinking the two bottles of brandy she had bought back on Thessia, back when the expedition was just gearing up and she was still trying to be as friendly as she could with Amania. The young asari was the first person Liara had been able to relate to, her own history of poverty and want a sharp contrast to Liara's background. But Amania had not been intimidated, or awed, and didn't care of the disapproval of others. It was only later, when Amania's intentions became clear, when Liara realized she wanted to be more than friends, that Liara had backed away. Unsure of herself, unsure of how to even react or respond, she had stupidly panicked, over-reacting to Amania's own loneliness, and ending up driving the closest thing she had ever developed to a friend away. Dr. Sanaris had actually been pleased, saying that Liara at least had the taste not to dip her crest in the gutter classes, and Liara had fled in tears, trying to find a way to explain to Amania what she had meant, what she was scared of.

Of not being able to understand how to handle someone else caring about her. She had searched the entire site, hoping to just .. try to get the words out. To fix at least one thing that had backfired on her. Amania had already left the site, and never answered a single email. The two bottles of brandy Liara had planned to share with her friend at the completion of the dig had sat in her pack, untouched, unnoticed, until that message had come through.

*What have I done to make my entire life a painful, pointless wreck?*

Liara felt sick, heavy, and above all else empty. The fiery liquor had burned through her slender body and left her listless and with a spinning head on the cot in her tent. All of her supplies were gone, only a jug of water and a single tube of long-endurance rations left. Her belongings were neatly packed in two heavy cases, stacked by the landing pad outside of the dig, except for her journals, her personal positions, and her omni-tool, all in her satchel. The minutes passed, empty and wasted. Liara examined her hands, wondering what she was to do in her mother's service, but her thoughts were just rote, pointless fragments, ricocheting around in her head. Just as she was about to try to sleep again, she felt the ground shake, and sighed, feeling her stomach roiling with the liquor. She hoisted her satchel in one hand and staggered to her feet, unsteady, and slowly moved her body ahead.

The Prothean elevator leading to the upper dig level was it's usual, unyielding self, gleaming pure white

and undamaged, as if 50,000 years was nothing more than an afterthought to it. She passed the bizarre control panel set into the wall, intending to ride the Prothean elevator to the surface, when she heard the rickety dig-site elevator installed during the first excavation activating. *Of course, they don't know about the Prothean entrance, they're just hired thugs. Mother didn't even bother to tell them how to enter.* She let her satchel fall to the floor, spending a last few minutes examining the control panel, for the stubbornness of doing it rather than any other reason.

She heard a curious sound... a digital clicking and chittering. *Why does that sound so ... familiar.* Then a rough, angry voice, like rocks having a fist fight. "Don't chatter at me, geth. Shut up and stay out of sight until I pick up the stupid blue bitch. Saren wants her alive if possible." Liara's mouth seemed to go completely dry, her nerveless hands shaking. She heard another voice, now, hard, digitized speech. "Understood, Weryloc-Strikeleader. We will switch to non/nocarrier fire patterns."

The growling voice – it had to be a krogan – spoke again. "You can shoot the stupid bitch to pieces for all I care, Saren just pays more if she's able to speak. Now, silence. I have to act .. nice."

Liara's breath came in great, heaving gasps of panic. *They are going to take me... maybe kill me, or worse. Why are there geth here? Why are they .. what ...*

Liara's pistol was foolishly packed away in her cases topside. She bit her lip, and then prepared to call upon her biotics. She knew it would not end well. She was tired, drunk, exhausted, and hadn't slept properly in days. She didn't even have her Serrice-made neural focus to amplify her natural biotics. The elevator shuddered to a halt, its doors sliding open in a spray of sparks. "Spread out. She's biotic, if she starts glowing, put a round through her leg". The krogan was huge, broad and heavy looking, with a glowing set of tubes lining his angular black armor in a menacing red color. He had a shotgun of some kind flung over one shoulder, the plate over the shoulder wider than her chest. Thankfully, his back was to her, he was looking towards the camp site. Behind him trailed 5 silvery, elegant figures, all organic curves in steel and strange, gray bundles of what looked like muscles. Curved heads spread illumination around the cave, seeking a target. The krogan whispered harshly, "cut the stupid lights off", and the geth – they had to be geth – went dark, clutching menacing, flowing weapons in three-fingered hands.

There was no way she could take out a krogan and five geth with her biotics, even if she had been in the best of health. She bit her lip, wondering if she was quiet, if she could maybe sneak out and trigger the elevator. It was noisy, but if she was quick, she could get to the surface far before the service elevator could. Her flutter was still there, she could take off for Nova Yekaterinburg ...someone in the human city would help her.

She carefully took a step back. The krogan called out, his voice pitched to an almost calm mien. "Doctor T'soni? I'm Weyrloc Gulm, your mother sent us to retrieve you. We're here to help you move your belongings to our ship, miss."

Silence. She took another step back, drawing even with the control panel to the barrier field she had discovered.

"Doctor T'soni?"

One of the geth half turned, and gave an electronic trill. "Weryloc-strikeleader, she is behind us." "What?" The krogan spun, staring down the long ramp leading to the ruins entrance proper. "Doctor T'soni, don't do anything ...stupid." Liara's voice wouldn't work as the krogan advanced slowly, red eyes gleaming faintly in the dim light. "I'm sure you are confused, doctor, but these geth are .. docile. It's a project your mother is working on with Saren." Liara shook, shivers overcoming her. She tried to remember how far it was to the controls of the elevator, if she could run that fast. The krogan's mouth twisted from a grim line to a menacing smile. "T'soni, I'm only going to ask one more time politely.

Come with us to the ship. Your mother demands that. You will not be harmed."

"N-no!" Her voice was almost a squeal, shaking and pained. "S-she would never-" Her fear and stress made her biotics flare, as she panicked.

The krogan sighed. "Shoot the bitches kneecaps out, boys." The geth lifted their rifles with mechanical precision. Liara just...reacted. She threw up a barrier, her feeble strength barely enough to form it, as the guns erupted in a spat of high-pitched whines. 5 shots tore across the barrier at knee height, and it shimmered faintly, almost collapsing. She knew it wouldn't hold long enough for her to get to the elevator, but she had one more trick. Her lips twisted in a smile. *Finally, some use for my knowledge.* She slammed her fist down on the control panel, intending to trigger the defensive screen that would seal the entry way.

A voice in Prothean spoke, the words barely understandable to her. "Warning...misfunction. Unfirst detection failed. Enacting ward."

She had expected a barrier curtain to seal the entry way. Instead, the entire entryway filled with blue light, and she found herself jerked up, off her feet, her arms and legs spreadeagled by a force like a thousand grasping hands. She couldn't move, she could barely breath or turn her head. The krogan stopped, jaw open, then shut it. "For the love of rutting Shiagur, what the hell is this?" Liara said nothing, but the geth next to the krogan spoke, it's mechanical voice carrying an undercurrent of concern. "It appears to be some form of energy curtain, combined with a low-grade stasis field. Surmise: probable use in detaining unauthorized visitors." The krogan grunted. "Shut it off."

The Geth examined the field for several seconds, building consensus. "Not possible. Design conforms to Rebel-Prothean field defenses. Nazara identifies this as a military communications array. It is powered by geothermal reactions and can only be deactivated from the inside."

The krogan threw his hands up. "Stupid machine! That is not an answer that is acceptable!"

"Suggestion: inform Saren-Prophet of events. Likely to have organic contacts capable of disrupting energy field, retrieving T'soni-target." The krogan half turned to look at the geth as if the machine had grown three heads. "Admit failure to Saren? He'd use my hide as a cape. Blast this stupid field down." The krogan lifted his weapon, firing three shots that blazed with the fire of disruptor mods. Liara flinched...but nothing happened. The geth's voice sounded almost apologetic. "Inadvisable action. Field strength estimated in excess of 4000 Newtons."

The krogan cursed. "Dig through the wall!"

"Rebel-Prothean metal is plasma forged composite carbon nanoplating. Estimated time to completion of bypassing tunnel: 8 days, 4 hours, 52 minutes." "Saren will be furious at the delay. No. What else?" The geth paused. "Reassembly of Colossus-mobile platform primary defense cannon to large scale multi-tiered EMP phased energy array. Theoretically would disrupt barrier energy." The krogan nodded. "I'm going to pretend that babble made sense. How long?"

The geth calculated. "3 days, 11 hours. Assuming no external disruptions."

The krogan laughed. "There's some kind of human research team incoming in four days. Cutting it close, but that should work. Get it going." The krogan turned away from the machine to face Liara. "You hear that, you little bitch? 3 days. Then we're going to break all your arms and legs and haul your little blue ass back to Saren." The krogan leaned forward. "But before that, I think I'll have a little fun. Saren doesn't let us go out and have any ... relaxation time, after all, and you look like you could use a good hard fuck." Liara's eyes widened in horror, and the krogan laughed and walked off. "Three of you stay here, keep an eye on the bitch. If she's faking and gets free, you know what to do." The krogan and the rest of the geth moved to get back in the elevator, and it ascended with a shriek of tortured metal.

The remaining geth stood there, stock still, illuminated only by the glow of the energy fields.

Liana's head couldn't bow in defeat, held stiffly aloft by forces she didn't even understand, but her eyes closed, as she shook with sobs. Either the monsters would get her out of this field, to torture and probably kill her, or she would slowly and painfully die of dehydration and starvation. No one would come to get her. No one cared what happened to her. The University wouldn't even notice her absence, now that she's been terminated.

The geth watched the young woman cry, unmoving, uncaring.

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## Chapter 26: Chapter 20 : Fist

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*A/N: A couple of people have asked me about my pace of updates, wondering how I crank out chapters so rapidly. I have most of the chapters for the first book already outlined, the major points laid out, the key parts or tones of the discussions mapped. All that really remains is writing the bulk of the text and checking it against other chapters to make sure I don't contradict myself.*

*My Fist is not a spineless coward. Imagine a Southerner mixed with a touch of mobster. I never understood why he'd send Tali into some open, public space to off her, when he could have done it in the privacy of his club.*

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January 24, 2183

Tali entered the bar, eyes wide behind her mask, taking in the entire scene in front of her.

Most quarians tended to treat their Pilgrimage as very serious, and Tali was no exception. She had spent a few hours once in a quiet restaurant, and once in a tiny little bar on Bikesh, to have a drink of turian brandy. But other than that she never really thought about 'entertainment' venues such as the pit she had stepped into.

The Lower Wards were .. terrifying, really, full of long, dark corridors, gaping pits with no bottom spanned only by narrow bridges, and rusted edifices cut into the walls, windows dark and empty like the eye sockets of long-forgotten skulls. Vague figures slunk from shadow to shadow, and the C-Sec patrols were clearly ready to shoot anyone who even looked aggressive.

But taking Troyce's words to heart, she had kept her head up, walking cleanly thanks to Doctor Michele's excellent treatment of the shallow wound on her leg. She kept one hand on her pistol, and the other on her knife, now sheathed on her belt. Twice male turians had eyed her speculatively, and once a thuggish looking human had given her a dark glare, but no one else bothered her.

But stepping into the chaos of Chora's Den had shook her hard-won false confidence. The main area was a huge dome, with crazed fractal patterns projected on the curved ceiling, interlaced with graphic images of asari women arched in the throes of passion, blue forms unworried with clothing. The center of the Den was a huge circular bar, staffed with a pair of gruff looking turians with dark plates and a total lack of facial markings. The bar surrounded a pillar of what looked to be a thousand, thousand bottles, containers, vials, phials, and small barrels of every sort of alcoholic drink in the known galaxy. Some glowed softly with their own light, some bubbled and fizzed even inside their sealed bottle, and one had haptic flashing lights on it reading "radioactive".

The top of the bar was a flat platform, atop which two asari contorted their bodies around into suggestive shapes, completely naked. The leftmost asari was rubbing two fingers between her legs,

leaning forward over the edge of the bar so that her breasts hung down pendulously, shapely legs crossed and eyes bright. The other asari gripped a pole in the center of the platform, her back arched as she supported her weight with only one hand and the grip of muscled legs, her free hand pouring some kind of oil over her chest and laughing.

Tables lined the outer walls, most filled with hard looking krogan, surly turians, bitter humans with smirks on their flat faces, and a couple of salarians. More naked or near naked asari tantalized the clients by writhing on top of tables or grinding against the males by sitting directly in their laps.

The air was thick with smoke, her suit alarms reporting a mix of nicotine, carotene, hallex and several dozen unidentified particulates. She'd have to ditch this air filter for sure once she left. She carefully picked her way through the tables, avoiding the dance floor off to the right, and winced as a krogan smashed his forehead into a turian's face. The turian flew backwards, collapsed in a blue-spattered pile, and the krogan reached out to pull an asari dancer into his lap. "My pole is bigger than his, blue."

Tali shuddered as she gingerly maneuvered past a hulking elcor, trying very hard not to think of what it was doing here and failing miserably. *Keelah, this is vile, I feel like I should bathe my poor environment suit in bleach.* Finally reaching the bar, she raised her head at the bartender. The turian looked up. "Well, lookie here. You really must be a wild one to want to ride the pretty blue ponies at Chora. What's your poison, girly?"

"I'm not here to ... partake of your disgusting products. I need to speak with Fist. He is expecting me."

The turian glared at her a long moment before tapping a comm-link set into the wall. "Boss, there's some uppity quarian bitch here, says she's here to see you. Throw her out?"

The voice that responded had that same casual, sleepy drawl as the message. "Goodness no, Thrax. Send her in. And you should respect a lady, I'm sure she's not happy with our .. clientele, after all."

The turian just grunted, jerking a talon to the right. "Past the krogan bouncer. Get lost."

She walked off, not bothering to respond, and immediately saw the bouncer. Not nearly as big as Wrex had been, his head plate was a deep blue, and he wore only a breastplate instead of full armor. Ropy lines of muscle and cartridge connected his upper arms to his chest, and the upper and lower segments of his legs, which were bare. A black loincloth of some kind hung from his hips between his legs to nearly touch the floor, and heavy black boots covered his feet.

The krogan was armed with, of all things, a freaking sword, a heavy blade wider than her arm, shoved point first into the decking, as he leaned arrogantly against the wall. "You here for Fist?"

She just nodded, eyeing the serrated edge of the sword. "...do you actually use that?"

The krogan laughed, almost good-naturedly. "Only on drunks. I have a gun nearby for real idiots. Fist is waiting for you."

Tali entered the back rooms of Chora's Den, the door shutting behind her. The room was a short corridor, with two doors, one leading to some kind of stockroom, piles of crates heaped high. Figures in black armor sat on some of them or checked weapons, and one glared at her as she moved on. The other door was heavily sealed, flanked by a pair of humans in heavy black armor and carrying shotguns. "Miss Zorah, this way. Fist is in here. You'll have to leave that piece and your knife outside."

She hesitated, but the guard just looked at her. "We don't know you from any other quarian with that damned mask on, and Saren's tried to off Fist once already. The weapons go, or you can get the hell out."

"F-fine." She withdrew the pistol and the knife, and laid them both on the table. One guard ran a scanner over her, grunting. "She's clean, 'cept for the omni, which probably is kinda important."

"Send her in." A voice spoke from the wall, and the guard unlocked the door, letting it slide open.

Tali walked past them, noting the weapons racks on the walls, and into the office of Fist. The room was surprisingly large, dominated on the far wall by a vidscreen of the club. A heavy wooden desk bisected the room, two heavy automated turrets tucked into armored niches to either side. An earth plant sat in a wide oversized pot heaped with dirt, and in the massive, overstuffed chair behind the desk sat Fist.

For a human he was large. He wore a black sports coat of the latest style over a light armor breastplate, his black slacks loose as he crossed his legs, leaning back. His face was blunt, blocky, nearly square, his gleaming scalp visible through the buzz cut off his dirty blond hair. The armor breastplate came up to a few inches below his throat, a white shirt open underneath it, the tip of an Alliance "A" tattoo visible.

Fist smoked a heavy, fat cigar, the smoke forming a layer of gray haze near the top of the office. "Miss Zoruh, have a sit down." His drawling voice was quiet as he smiled a cold smile, gesturing to the chair behind her. She sat, nervously, forcing herself not to clutch her hands together. The door slammed shut, locking with a series of heavy thuds. She jumped a little, but then turned back to face the human in front of her.

Fist flicked an ash into a shallow dish on his desk, black eyes empty and cool. "Miss Zoruh, I'm truly sorry about your whole trip here. Nearly being shot by thugs on Caleston, seeing poor ol' Troyce get killed, even that big bastard Wrex buying it...must be hard."

She swallowed. "How did they... get to Wrex? I was in surgery, I didn't .. hear ..."

Fist nodded, mouth wrapping around his cigar as he took a puff. "Working for the Broker is dirty bizness, Miss Zoruh. Things can and do go downhill at a moment's notice. And while the Broker has a long reach, he's not the only one who is a big wheel. Wrex forgot that Saren had a lot of power and muscle and paid for it."

He flicked the ashes from his cigar again and smiled. "As it happens, actually, that's kind of the moral of the story."

Tali blinked, confused. "I.. I don't understand."

He made a gesture with his hand, one intersecting the other at an angle, cigar held carelessly. "You see...I'm ambitious. I see things changin', places opening up where before there was nothin' but scorn. People like the Broker think you can control events by keeping an ear to the ground, a threat here, a bit of blackmail there. That sort of shit only works as long as people are not willing to call you on your bluff, though."

He took a puff from his cigar, blowing blue-tinted smoke in a cloud in front of him, and Tali was very thankful her filters were still working. "But this information you have, well..it could disturb a very tricky balance between two powerful men. You .. do have the information, yes?"She nodded, a bit nervous at his words or what they might mean. "Y-yes. It took a while to put it together..but it's all here, intact. I didn't tamper with it."

Fist nodded. "Before we start talking numbers...I'd like to hear it."

Tali nodded, and triggered the recording. There was a burst of static, then a bland mechanical voice. "Prime 302 to Prime-CoordinatorOfTactics-5. Aural band transmission of requested data is ready. Utilization of aural bands to avoid monitoring from Saren-Prophet as requested."

A second mechanical voice cut in, deeper, slower, as if less used to talking. "Acknowledgment of primary mission complete. Consensus has been achieved. Saren-Prophet is not direct representative of Nazara-Giver-of-Future. The Old Machines have not chosen their avatar-prime connection.

Discrediting Saren-Prophet and Benezia-Secondary would allow geth to achieve Avatar-prime connection status."

The first voice was silent for a moment. "Understood. Compromising vocal recordings enclosed. If Saren-Prophet violates restrictions, transmission to Nazara-Giver-of-Future can be conducted."

"Transmit vocal recordings."

There was another pause, then the dual-tone voice of a turian spoke. "Still...Eden Prime was a major victory, the beacon has brought us one step closer to finding the Conduit."

A second voice, exotic, sensual, spoke. "And one step closer to the return of the Reapers. And with no one the wiser, if Cerberus does it's job correctly."

The first voice sounded again. "I'm more worried about the Geth., Benezia. As long as Cerberus's ruse works, well and good. But using the geth for this assault was a bad idea, just as I told Sovereign. I wouldn't have had to kill Nihlus if I could have used some finesse. It's as if he's trying to make sure I don't go my own way."

The second voice spoke, more quietly. "And the geth watch us constantly. We must be careful, Saren."

The first voice begins to speak an unidentified word before the transmission dissolved to static. Tali cut it off. "That's...that's all I was able to get."

Fist nodded, eyes bright. "Heh. That's more than enough. Far more than enough. In fact, sorry to say, it's... too much, really. Stupid to fucking use names. Stupider to admit to a murder. But stupidest to talk around machines that routinely share everything they do and think with others like them everywhere."

Tali was surprised. She hardly expected a thuggish looking bar owner to know about distributed geth networking. "You know about how the geth function?"

Fist took another drag off his cigar, the cherry casting his face in a sinister red glow for a moment. "Oh yeah. I've got...all the details. And that's where we have ... well, a problem, Miss Zoruh. The broker offered me 150,000 credits for the recovery of this data, so he could sell it to the Council for untold millions, probably."

Fist extinguished the cigar, and then his hand picked up a heavy caliber pistol from his lap that she had not seen, given the darkness of the office. "Unfortunately, Saren has offered me 5 million credits for the data, and for me to make sure it goes away, forever.. Sorry to have it come to this, ma'am. You seem like an awfully good kid."

Tali froze, thinking of how to escape, and Fist shook his head. "Don't bother. You get up from that chair, the turrets fill you with holes even if I miss. And I'm ex-military, I won't miss at this range, Miss Zoruh. Even if you **did** drop me and the turrets with some fancy engineering trick, the door is locked mechanically, and there's nothing to hack. You ain't fighting your way through 20 of my men with an omni-tool."

Fist leaned back, his free hand picking up a glass of wine, his weapon hand holding the gun steady, it's dark barrel pointed at her face. "So, in a few minutes, Saren's men'll be here. We'll try to be civilized. Once we're sure there ain't no copies, no backups, we'll wipe your omni-tool and melt it down. What happens then is up to you. If you cooperate, if you don't raise a fuss, I'll suggest disposing of a quarian corpse is a waste of time, and ask that they let me handle it. I have no need to kill a young woman. Play nice and we'll give you access to Troyce's little ship. I'm sure he'd want you to have it anyway. Nice present for the folks back home. You go your merry way and maybe owe us a favor down the line."

His voice hardened. "Or you cause problems, get smart, or try to lie to us, and we can peel you out of

that suit. After you've had a few bones broken, you'll be singing whatever we want to hear. And I've got a few clients on my list that have always wondered what it would be like to fuck a quarian. Your people don't last so long out of dem suits, but you should live long enough to entertain, hell, three, four, maybe five of my clients? We'll be polite enough burn your body when we're done rather than have C-Sec find you and send what is left back to your fleet of gypsy ships."

Tali was shaking in fear, anger, horror, and despair. She couldn't even find her voice, or do anything. It felt as if a thousand pounds of stone pressed on her shoulders, her hands gripping the arms of the chair so tight the tension made her arms ache. She didn't want to die. She didn't want to ... *keelah, why is this happening...*

Fist slowly nodded. "You're smart, I can see that. Way you're trying not to shake and burst into crying means you're a tough lil' cookie, but you are playing in the big leagues now, and I'm not fucking around. Like I said. Your choice. Life, or a miserable fucking pain filled existence soon to end in some pile of ashes on the Lower Wards. "

He smirked, when his comm unit flared. Not taking his eyes from Tali, he tapped it with his free hand. "Bjora, you'd better be telling me that Saren's men are here."

"Ah...n-no sir. The lookouts just spotted an aircar touch down at the upper landing. The krogan we thought we killed is headed to the club, along with .." The voice trailed off.

Fist snarled. "With what? The ever-fucking pope? Sha'ira in a g-string?"

"..n-no, sir...it's the Butcher." Fist paled, eyes boring in to Tali. "Do you know about this?" Tali shook her head. "I-I don't know anything! I just ... don't .." Fist exhaled, gritting his teeth. "Shut up." He tapped the comm unit again. "Break out everything, I mean every fucking thing. Get everyone armored up. And send a call to Saren's men, dammit, they need to get here. Don't let Wrex get inside, and if he and that bitch do, I want them fucking dead."

"Yes boss."

Fist exhaled again, and his mouth settled in a grimace. "You are already costing me more than you are worth. Now, transfer the data to me, nice and slowly. Try anything stupid, and I swear to the Virgin Mary I will blow your goddamned head right off." Tali swallowed and nodded, transferring the data to Fist's own omnitool. "Good girl. Now, take that omni off and toss it on the desk."

Tali hesitated. "It helps regulate my suit..."

Fist tilted his head and fired, the bullet speeding so close to her head it tore the edge of her reik. She shrieked, nearly bolting, but managed not to move. "I will *not* ask again. Take it off."

She bit her lip as she removed the sleeved padd from her arm, hearing a few minor alarms in her suit as the microprocessor in the omni-tool disconnected. She placed it on his desk, her hand trembling, then sat back. Fist nodded. "Now, slide your chair back and into the corner next to the plant there." He watched as she did so, and nodded again. "Computer, lock port side turret to target in grid 1 dash 1. Fire on significant movement out of grid 1 dash 1."

One of the turrets popped fully up, the 3-barreled length of the gun spinning up and aiming right at Tali. Fist lowered his own pistol, and stood. "As long as you don't move, it doesn't fire. Leave that chair, or move more than a foot from that spot, and it will cut you in half."Fist loaded his pistol with some sort of mod, and clipped a battle visor over his eyes. "If you will excuse me, I have uninvited guests to deal with." He took out a slotted metal card from his pocket and slid it into a slot by the door, which unlocked and opened with a thud.

A moment later it slammed shut behind him, re-locking, leaving Tali alone, with nothing but a

dissipating cloud of cigarette smoke and the quiet hum of the turret for company.

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## Chapter 27: Chapter 21 : Tetricus

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*A/N: I love quiet Monday nights. I can get a ton of writing done.*

*It's almost a shame for Bioware to waste the potential of a two-bit thug done good like Fist. I don't intend to do the same. And be honest, who hasn't ever wished they could see Shepard going biotically WWF on a mofo? Anyway, I apologize for how scattered this chapter is, but it has to incorporate a bis fight AND wrap up a lot of loose ends.*

*Oddly enough, the music for this chapter? I got my mind set on you by George Harrison.*

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January 24, 2183

Shepard stormed forward as the aircar doors opened, with Alenko trailing in her wake and Wrex stomping alongside her, loading inferno shells into his oversized shotgun. She glanced at it, out of the corner of her eye. "Jesus, Wrex, did you loot that from a main battle tank?" The big krogan just chuckled. "Elcor merc, actually. Dumb bastard made a mess when he landed after I used my biotics to push him off a six story building. He didn't need it anymore."

Alenko noted the easy banter between the Commander and the krogan, again, wondering at how much more at ease Shepard seemed with a ton of alien killing machine than with her own kind. *But then again, maybe it makes sense. The krogan are simple, they focus on fighting, strength, and power, they don't put a lot of stock in emotions...*

Alenko swallowed, his thoughts trailing off, as he eyed the flashing lights of the bar at the end of the broad avenue. Chora's Den was set into a corner of the Wards, not far from the market area. The only approach was through a narrow set of corridors or down an open, wide avenue, flanked by ledges and pillars surrounding a deep pit that lead to the sector's power transfer conduit. Shadows clung to corners and the entire front of the club was set back into the walls of the Wards.

"Ma'am, what's our approach strategy?"

Shepard nodded. "Wrex will storm in and lead, opening up with throws, and take down any heavy armored targets with that artillery piece of his. I'll flank left, you right. Don't bother with the pistol, unless you're confident of a head shot, at least some of these thugs are likely to wear light ballistic vests or full hard suits. Go for biotic close quarter battle. You know how to augment your punches and kicks, right?"

Alenko nodded. "Yes ma'am, I had to take the C5 classes on that." He remembered how hard it was to maintain a biotic field without concentration, having to keep the energies tamped down and yet let them explode out when kicking or punching. Asari were masters at it, and krogan were good. Humans, being artificial biotics at best, were usually not so hot, and those who were, like Shepard, were put into the CQB Vanguard training program. Alenko had passed the training, but only barely. He decided not to try and pretend otherwise. "But to be honest, ma'am, I'd feel better if I could use my omni-tool to disrupt weapons and act as crowd control, ma'am. I mean, I can do a biotic punch, but I'm no vanguard."

Shepard didn't slow her pace, but nodded. "That's probably a better idea, but stay under cover and don't forget to check your six. Wrex, sniper, 4 o'clock, 40 feet up." She didn't even pause, even as Wrex almost casually flicked a hand in that direction. The blue fire of biotic energy pulsed down his arm and

outwards, slamming into the fragile salarian perched on the high ledge. With a ululating scream, the half-pulverized sniper fell past them into the power transfer core, a white light illuminating the deep pit for a moment later as his body was no doubt flashed into subatomic mist.

The three approached the main entrance, slowing. Too late, Shepard noticed the slim cameras above the door, and her jaw tightened as about a dozen men stormed out of the main door, all of them in black hard-suits and with submachine guns or machine pistols. "Open fire", one barked, a human with a wide scar occluding one eye, his face covered in stubble but his blond hair neatly trimmed and cut.

Wrex growled and didn't even stop moving forward, firing as he went. He jerked back as rounds impacted against his shields, but then surged ahead, his first shot blew the leader's right leg into paste, sending the man backwards with a stumble that turned into a splatter as blood jetted from the gory stump to the ground in front of him. His second shot, half a second later, crushed the armor of the rightmost figure, a turian, sending the idiot staggering backwards as well. The turian gave a desperate cry as the force of the shot knocked him over the guardrail into the power conversion pit.

Shepard, on the other hand, reacted to the merc's appearance with biotics. Her form flashed into blue light, a flicker faster than the eye could follow making a streaking azure blaze across the distance, and erupting into a storm of mass energy as she crashed into the two thugs on the left. One man was launched backwards, slamming into the wall with enough force that his skull cracked. Thick red blood seeped from his nose for a moment, before Shepard's undamaged hand found his throat, stiffened fingers augmented with biotic force. The knife-hand blow crushed his windpipe, sending him to the ground in a rapidly fading explosion of pain. Shepard then turned to the man she had charged into, and shifted her mass from fist to foot. Bringing her right leg out in a snap kick, her booted toe crashed into the second human's temple. Bone snapped and the man's head gave a sickening lurch-pop sound as vertebrae tore completely free and the man's head ended up at a 90 degree angle from it's original place.

Alenko tapped a program with his omni-tool, ducking behind a column for partial cover. He focused his energy, and then extended his free arm at the group of thugs nearest to the door. Three men lifted from the ground helplessly, his biotic fields reducing their weight to less than zero, while his omni-tool beeped ominously and then ran the requested program. The on-board generator flashed a volume of high-energy particles in a cone in front of him, the very air igniting as it was forced into a white-hot plasma state. The flames roared out, flowing over the three figures in mid air, turning them into floating, jiggling pillars of screaming, melting flesh for a few moments before they crashed to the ground, the smell of cooked meat wafting across the avenue.

Wrex grinned. "Ha! I like this human!" He put a round through another merc, the blast so powerful it actually blew a gore-trimmed hole through the human to blast the salarian behind him apart as well. A few seconds later, all the thugs lay dead. Shepard picked up a machine pistol and handed it to Kaiden, after picking up a battered but serviceable Mattock long rifle from another guard. "In we go , let's try not to shoot anyone unless they work for Saren. Or Fist."

Wrex muttered. "Easier to just shoot them all. Quicker , too."

Alenko gave a shocked look , and to his immediate relief, Shepard shook her head. "We're going to have enough problems convincing the Council to listen to us without having dozens of civilian casualties. Evidence won't do us any good if we're in jail." The three of them reached the front of the club, the music within muted by the closed doors. "Let's hope this doesn't go completely to shit immediately."

Wrex stormed through the doors, roaring, shotgun out. He stopped , suddenly, and Shepard and Alenko moved behind him, weapons ready.

The club was dimly lit, lights flashing their perverted graphics onto the ceiling as normal. Almost all of

the patrons of the club , as well as the dancers, had been gathered onto the dance floor, forced to their knees, hands behind their backs. 15 or so guards in light black armor stood behind them, weapons drawn. A krogan stood in a doorway off on the other side of the large room, slapping the wide blade of a sword into his palm. Next to him were 3 or 4 more black-armored goons, each holding heavy assault rifles.

Sitting on a bar stool in the middle of the club was Fist, a drink in one hand and a heavy pistol in the other. "Welcome to Chora's Den, Wrex. Why, you look absolutely pure-dee pissed. " The human mobster gave a cocky grin, his black eyes narrowed.

Wrex growled. "Give me the quarian and maybe I'll kill you clean."

Fist shook his head, draining his drink. "Don't think so, Wrex. She's in the back, with a heavy turret pointed at her head, and if anything happens to me, well... my men will get to the trigger panel first, and quarians don't hold up so well to tungsten rounds. Not to mention these fine, fine guests of mine will also eat a bullet."

Wrex sneered. "You think the Broker gives a shit about hostages, human?"

Fist smiled. "Naw. And you sure as fuck don't, and I'm pretty sure the Butcher there don't either. But see, that's not the thing I'm countin' on. The thing is that I'm gonna walk out of here unharmed, get in my shuttle, and leave. And then you can get your data, and these people don't have to die. OR you can try to kill me, my guards use the hostages as human shields, you have to kill a lot of innocent people on live recorded cameras that will get sent to C-Sec, and the data will get erased and you'll do a lot of hard, hard time. Which is more important...stoppin' me, or stoppin' Saren?"

Shepard scowled. "And how the fuck do we know you aren't lying about the data?"

Fist pressed a button on his omni-tool, and Saren's voice rang out. "I wouldn't have had to kill Nihlus if I could have used some finesse. It's as if he's trying to make sure I don't go my own way." Fist cut the recording off, and pulled a cigar from the front pocket of his suit jacket. He lit it with a tiny flame from the omni-tool and puffed out smoke. "Good enough for you, honey?"

Shepard's finger tightened around the trigger of the Mattock. "Take the omni tool and leave it on the bar."

Fist shook his head. "Nah. Miss Zoruh , in the back, still has it on hers. Didn't have time to wipe it with what all you have going on here. Mine, I'm afraid, I'll need to call my shuttle and make sure you all don't pull nothing. Just cooperate, and we all walk outta here winners. Face it, you're dealing with a superior criminal mind here, girlie. I go, you get the data, no one dies. You can't win them all, despite –"

A cold, irritated voice sounded behind and above Fist, interrupting him. "I *hate* monologues, human." Fist spun, looking up, as the black-garbed form of Tetrimus uncloaked atop the dancer's platform. The turian cabalist was already in motion, however, his hands limned in blue fire as he hurled two shockwaves of biotic force into the guards threatening the hostages. The goons went flying in all directions, some hurled against the walls hard enough snap spines or crack skulls, others skidding across the dance floor to crash into the far wall with sickening splatters. The turian followed it up by pulling out his pistol, calmly placing shots at will into eyes and foreheads.

Wrex moved, immediately firing at Fist, the heavy shotgun booming out a belch of flame as the inferno round ignited. Fist was hurled head over heels, over the bar, to crash into the liquor collection at the bars center. Bottles shattered and Fist screamed as the still burning inferno rounds in his armor ignited the spirits drenching him, sending runnels of burning fluid inside his armor, down his arms and legs, into his eyes. With a choking, gurgling scream Fist collapsed into a blackened mess on the floor. The

pool of burning alcohol left runners of fire racing up the pillar of various libations, and his fancy suit burst into flames as well. There was a screaming series of sobs, mixed with a bubbling noise, and Tetrimus, with an amused flicker of his one good mandible, placed a shot into the burning mass of flesh, silencing it forever.

Shepard and Alenko had moved the moment the black-cloaked turian had appeared. Alenko immediately threw up a barrier between the hostages and the remaining guards, straining with the effort to curve its edges around them, spraying suppressive fire with the machine pistol he had. Shepard ran forward, Mattock leveled, and fired four snap shots, each one drilling a merc in his weapon arm. Two of the mercs dropped to the floor, the shots having struck something vital as well, the other two cursing and grabbing their injuries. A third merc winged her shoulder with a shot, but she didn't even slow down, grimacing with pain but flaring biotically.

Smoke was beginning to billow from behind the bar, and from the bodies of two more dead merc Wrex shot down, one hit in the chest with enough force that a seared, slightly burned arm went spinning off into a corner, the other taking a direct hit in the crotch, howling in agony and collapsing to the ground, writhing until Wrex's heavy boot stomped on his skull. The gory crunch and spray of blood that erupted from under Wrex's foot did nothing for Alenko's stomach, nor did the stench of burning body parts.

Shepard, unable to hold the rifle aloft properly with a wounded arm, flung the Mattock in front of her and with a pulse of biotic energy used a push field to send it accelerating into the wrist of the merc who had shot her, the only one not taken out by Tetrimus's shockwave, knocking his weapon out of his hands and sending him to the ground. Leaping over a table, she landed on light feet, her right leg snapping out to connect with the head of a merc still recovering from the shockwave, dropping him. "Move people, to the door, go go go!"

The crowd, a mix of turians, humans, barely clothed or naked asari, and an elcor, stampeded for the doorway in a panic, trampling several of the mercs still on the floor. One human merc attempted to get to his feet, and Shepard cruelly drove a biotically reinforced kick into his face, snapping his jaw like a dry twig and sending a sheet of blood cascading down over his now ruined features. Two more rushed her, one a green-tinged salarian in bits of old armor, concave chest crossed by a bandoleer of heavy splinter shells, hands filled with a heavy, dark red shotgun. The other opponent was an emaciated human, dark brown skin criss-crossed with old slash marks, long black hair swaying in long locks across his face, drawing a long, curved knife from a sheath on his chest.

She threw herself into a skid across the floor, catching the shotgun wielder with a scissoring movement of her legs, twisting her body and throwing the lighter salarian to the ground. Rolling free she snatched the shotgun from his stunned hands, stepping away and parrying a swing of the other man's blade with its barrel, and then brought the heavy weapon across the mercenary's face. It slammed into him with a visceral crunch, and Shepard paused long enough to grab his long hair with her free hand and jerk his face to the business end of the shotgun, which she fired. His head literally disintegrated with the blast, leaving her holding a hank of hair and bloody dripping flesh. The salarian thug she had tripped got to his feet, only for Shepard to hurl the gory mess in her hand into his face. He gave a revolted shout, pawing at his face to wipe bits of hair and scalp out of his eyes. Shepard put the remaining two shots into his chest, the impacts heavy enough to send him crashing through a flimsy glass table, jagged pieces of tabletop scything through his body and sending out gouts of greenish ichor as he collapsed.

Taking advantage of her turned back, another human merc, one of the ones she had shot but not put down, lunged at her, his heavy frame thick with muscle, the wound in his forearm bleeding profusely. He managed to land a solid blow to her back, and then tried to grab her, but she snapped her head back, slamming the top of her skull into his face, breaking his nose. He staggered back, roaring, and she turned to face him, tossing the empty shotgun aside and grinning. "Ooh, a big boy." The merc screamed

an incoherent battle cry and swung a hay-maker at her, his fist tattooed with the word "PAIN" in blurry letters.

She ducked under his wild punch, and her biotics flared as she rammed his torso with her shoulder. Staggering back, the merc attempted to grapple with her, but she backhanded him, sending his head flying to one side, teeth spraying from his mouth. With a roar she wrapped her arms around the thug and pulled, throwing herself back and down, pile-driving the human into the ground. His head met the floor and bent to the side with an audible, grisly snapping sound, and Shepard flung his corpse away, wiping her hands with a cruel grin.

Alenko let go of his barrier now that the hostages were mostly clear, ducking just in time to avoid being shot by the mercs in the far doorway. He triggered a lift field, the four humans suddenly lifting into the air, tumbling helplessly. Alenko's hands shook as he wrenched the forces around the men from merely negating gravity to warping the energy into another form, and there was a shearing, ugly blast of blue light as he detonated the lift field. Bits and pieces of black armor, arms, legs, and chunks of steaming flesh splattered in a crude sphere, to land on the walls, floor, even the ceiling. A single, dying merc remained, and Alenko shot him in the head with a burst, the rapid-fire pulse rounds juddering into the man's face in a burst of blood.

Wrex was already charging, running forward with thudding steps to meet the counter charge of the sword wielding krogan, who had run forward to challenge the battlemaster. The two were roaring phrases that Shepard's translator wasn't even trying to convert to English, and they crashed together with a sound more akin to an aircar collision than melee combat. The bouncer swung the sword at Wrex, but blue energy surrounded the krogan battle master's hand as he caught it, barehanded, laughing harshly before snapping the blade in half with a wrench of his arm. "Ha, who are you supposed to be, pup, Moro the Ice-Blood?" Wrex plunged his head forward, his plates impacting the other, smaller krogan's face, and the bouncer staggered back, blood in his eyes, his hand holding a broken blade. Wrex just shook his head and fired his gun four times in a row. The first three shots blasted 3 smoking, gory holes in the krogan's chest that smouldered fitfully, the fourth pulped his head, leaving a steaming crumpled mass of flesh and broken bones, burning sullenly from the inferno rounds and sending up a stream of appallingly foul smelling smoke.

Shepard paused, looking around. With the exception of the slow moving elcor, who was just now reaching the door, she saw no living enemies, and no civilian casualties. Tetrimus was standing atop the bar, arms folded, one eye glowing a baleful red in the concealing blackness of the hooded robe he wore. "I suggest, Commander, that you go secure Miss Zorah. We have some things to discuss. Meet me at Flux." With a single casual leap down from the platform, he erupted into a cascade of electrical sparks and was simply gone.

Alenko blinked, then holstered his machine pistol, sighing. "All that, and I didn't even get to see the dancers." Shepard gave him an odd look, and he cleared his throat. "Uh, sorry ma'am."

She shook her head. "And all this time I thought you had a stick up your ass, LT. Let's go. Maybe they'll have some ladies at Flux." With a hint of a smile, she stepped over corpses towards the door, leaving Alenko to suppress a blush as he followed.

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10 minutes later, Tali was in the aircar's back seat with Shepard, as Wrex drove and Alenko kept an eye out for C-sec. The quarian youngster was still shaking with relief, not having quite processed the whirlwind scene she had witnessed through the vidscreen in Fist's office. The shock of seeing Wrex alive was one thing, but realizing she was not going to die was still settling in. She didn't know what to think about the imposing figure seated next to her. Shepard wasn't even breathing hard, the one minor

wound she took in the fight already patched with medigel, her hands flat against her thighs. Tali tried to match the calm figure to the raging psychopath she had seen on the screen, slaughtering people with her bare hands, and couldn't make the two images line up.

*Keelah, she's terrifying...*

Tali exhaled, and gathered her scattered thoughts to at least thank her rescuers. "I..th-thank you again, Commander. And you too, Wrex. I didn't think .. anyone was coming for me. Fist was responsible for ...everything that went wrong. W-wasn't he? For Troyce and..." She trailed off, head drooping.

Shepard shrugged, eyes fixed ahead. "I'm not sure, and I think we'll have to wait for answers. But Fist was a two-bit , stupid criminal asshat with a dumb name, and he died like the bitch he was. I fear whoever was behind him was the real culprit. And I'm betting it's a pointy-faced bastard I'm going to enjoy killing." Her voice had become increasingly cold as she spoke, but she paused, taking in the quarian's slumped posture, and tried to lighten her tone. "Hey. He's dead. As long as you're with us, someone would have to be goddamned brain dead to try to hurt you." Shepard glanced at Wrex. "Actually, I'm still astounded the stupid fool thought he could actually betray the Shadow Broker and live."

Wrex chuckled. "Name like Fist, you don't expect much in the way of brilliance, huh?"

Tali had witnessed Fist's horrible, fiery death and shuddered. "And you, Wrex? How did you survive, they said you were dead..."

Wrex grunted. "Stupid merc didn't do that much damage, but he did get the drop on me. That's twice in the same damned day. Must be getting old. Anyway, like I was telling Shepard earlier...he brought a gun to a fist fight. Got off a couple of good shots, but he was stupid enough to think he could disable me and figure out where you were. He looked pretty surprised when I tore his arms off. Was going to go immediately to make sure you were still safe, but the commotion and mess and him screaming like a kicked vorcha caused C-Sec to arrest me. Speaking of C-Sec, Shepard, where is that pet turian you had earlier? Could be useful in keeping C-Sec off our back ..."

"Good question. And he is not my pet." She tapped her commlink. "Detective, this is Commander Shepard, we've secured the quarian we spoke of. . . and the evidence."

The voice that answered her was somewhat downcast. "Understood. I've...been suspended for my actions here at the clinic, Commander. I'm afraid there isn't much I can do to help you. C-sec alert bands are crawling with some kind of big firefight that happened at Chora's den, but so far the only APB's out are non-specific. They're looking for a krogan and a turian in black armor."

Shepard nodded. "I am sorry you are suspended. Perhaps what we found can cheer you up, though. Do you know Flux, the club? We're headed there now, and I think there's someone you should meet."

The turian gave a chuckle over the comm, flanging voice tired but wry. "I could *seriously* use a drink right now anyway. I'll meet you there."

Shepard glanced up at Wrex as she killed the connection. "You're sure this Tetrimus is trustworthy?" Wrex shrugged. "He's always paid me on time, and Flux is more public and crowded than Chora's Den. No chance of him pulling anything there, it's got too many important people that go there. They have damned good ryncol. And most importantly, he's got my damned money."

Shepard rolled her eyes. "Far be it from me to get between Wrex and money. Or ryncol."

Tali looked between them with bewildered eyes. "You .. know each other? I – I mean, from before .. all of this?"

Wrex laughed and just shook his massive head. "Long story, quarian."

"My name..." Tali's voice was a growl.

"Sorry, sorry...don't stab me in the eye." Wrex gave a mocking grin, and the little quarian only glared at him, sending him in to amused chuckles. "Got a quad on her, she does."

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Shepard sat across from Wrex in the music-filled and darkened confines of Flux, making sure she had a clear view of the door. The booth was dark, and in the corner, which suited her fine, apparently the only booth big enough for a krogan. Wrex sat down, yelling at Doran for a slug of ryncol, and Tetrinus was already seated when they arrived, sipping on something blue and faintly glowing. Tali was perched between Shepard and Alenko, her shoulders slightly hunched. Alenko gave her a gentle squeeze of the shoulder and a smile, and she tried to relax.

Finally, Garrus Vakarian walked up and sat at the end of the booth. He was still wearing his C-Sec armor, but the holographic badge once affixed to his shoulder was dark. "I got here as quick as I could, Shepard. Executor Pallin is screaming for answers about Chora's Den.."

Tetrinus's cold, dark voice cut in. "Do not worry about that, Detective Vakarian. We have that under control."

Garrus bristled, mandibles flaring in annoyance. "I'm sorry, who is "we"? How can you have C-sec 'under control'? And who the hell goes around dressed up like that, anyway?"

Tetrinus pulled back his hood, revealing his features, and even Shepard couldn't hold back a wince. The turian's face was blackened by ancient burn wounds, some deep enough to reveal the under-skin, cracks and bits of the plating melted directly into the flesh beneath. The skin behind the plates was shiny and dark black with a plastic looking texture; obviously some kind of medical replacement. One eye was gone, the plates melted over it in swirled caul that mounted a laser rangefinder, the other eye was replaced with a red-glowing cybernetic replacement, anchored to the face with small, black spikes. The left mandible was gone, trimmed back surgically, the jaw a mess of cracks. The turian's fringe was melted, drooping and broken off in places. The facial markings applied were clearly paint and not tattoos, done in a bright searing red, long lines down both cheeks topped by the turian symbols for "betrayal".

"I am Tetrinus Rakora, once grandmaster of the Primarch's Fist cabal. Abandoned and left for dead on Shanxi to avoid ... unpleasant political ramifications. Despite 15 years of loyal service, I was betrayed and tossed aside so that the Hierarchy could pretend it's honor was intact. I was rescued and saved from death by my current employer. The Shadow Broker. I speak with His voice. I am the executor of His will. And when I say you don't need to worry about C-Sec, I mean just that."

Wrex snorted. "I thought you hated monologues."

Tetrinus pulled his cowl back over his ruined features. "I also hate smartass krogan. Here." He slit a credit chit and a slender datapad to Wrex. "As agreed, plus a combat bonus. But stick around, I have another job for you."

Then Tetrinus turned to Tali. "Miss Zorah, the Shadow Broker apologizes for the .. treatment you have endured. We knew there was a possibility that Fist was compromised, but we did not think he was in active collusion with Saren. We had to determine the leak somehow, and I'm afraid you, and Captain Troyce, were caught up in the middle." The voice was polite, but cold.

She just shook her head. "He killed Troyce." Her eyes closed, and she willed her self not to start crying again. The memories of the kindly drell, his smile, his crazy boots, even the concern in his voice describing his friends . . . "and ... from what you are saying, he died because you needed bait to prove

Fist was a traitor. I.. I understand that, but . . ." Tali's fists clenched. "Couldn't you have done it some other way!"

Shepard gently took one of quarian's hands. "Sometimes to get the job done, or save lives, we have to do very .. ugly things. You never feel good about them. You never *forget* them. I have had to sacrifice ... hundreds of brave soldiers, with wives, husbands, children. Their voices... are always there. But if you hesitate, sometimes what remains is worse. Sometimes a greater evil comes from trying to do what seems ... right." Shepard's voice was cool, but her eyes were dark with old memories. The quarian just gave a shaky nod.

The cloaked turian nodded at Shepard's words. He looked at Tali closely, then shrugged. "And there isn't anything I can do to repair that damage. Captain Troyce .. knew the risks going into this. And if not for that, Fist would still be siphoning information from the Broker. Without knowing he was the culprit, it's very likely that I might have met with you myself, and we would both be surrounded and killed." The turian took a long sip of his drink, and shrugged again. "Lives are the currency in the world I live in."

Alenko frowned. "That seems ... cold."

The turian nodded, the hood making the gesture almost comical, but there was nothing funny about the icy voice emanating from the darkness of that hood. "It is cold. And it is also reality. As I said, I can't .. change that, Miss Zorah. I've done what I can. I've transferred a sum of 250,000 credits to your accounts, more than we originally offered, but you endured a great deal to get this data to us. Troyce had no family to speak of, they passed away from Kepral's some time ago. I have taken the liberty of transferring his ship to the ownership of Lieutenant Dost, per his last wishes, but if you choose to leave the Citadel immediately Dost has already notified me he would be fine if you were to receive the vessel as well. It would be.. an appropriate gesture, I think, and one Troyce would support, if you were use it as a return gift for your Pilgrimage."

Tetrimus paused, and then handed over a credit chit and datapad to Tali, who took it with hesitant fingers."And I have a message for you, from the Shadow Broker himself. The Broker would appreciate having the ear of the daughter of Admiral Rael, or to at least know she would be willing to listen to our offers in the future. We regret such cooperation cost a brave man his life...but thus the game is played."

Tali sniffled, but sat up straighter. "I .. I didn't do this for money. But .. I'll need it for my Pilgrimage. The ship...I don't know how to fly it, but .."

Tetrimus nodded. "Of course. If need be we can assign you a trustworthy pilot." He straightened, and his baleful red gaze turned to meet Shepard's. "And now, Commander Shepard, to the point of this .. exercise. I apologize in advance if you are frustrated or angered at what I am about to explain, but I fear that whatever Saren is involved in, the loss of one minor human colony is literally only the edge of the storm cloud."

Shepard leaned forward, as the volus bartender and owner brought a ryncol for Wrex. "I'm listening, turian."

Tetrimus placed taloned fingers together, his voice low. "The Shadow Broker has been observing Saren for quite some time now. His actions don't make sense, and there are periods where he gets from point A to point B in a fifth of the time it should take to conduct such FTL travel. Saren is hiring many, many mercenaries, buying up large stocks of supplies and weapons, and running multiple operations on far flung worlds. His ... partner ... Benezia, is doing the same. There are strange patterns in the data. Raids on volus ships. Confusing stock purchases. The occasional bizarre disappearance or unsolved murder involving someone who knew Saren well. Until we received the information that Miss Zorah has, we thought this was just ...unusual. Not worthy of real intelligence assets."

Tetrimus sighed. "We were wrong. And it appears we were blinded due to elements of another intelligence service counter infiltrating our ranks. Clearly, Fist is not the only leak we have in our ranks. As such, I'm afraid we're going to have to shutter and close down a great many operations. This is going to leave us blind to what transpires, and as such we think we need .. how do you humans put it ... ah. Skin in the game. Yes."

Shepard nodded, her eyes not leaving the glowing orb of the turian. "In what way?"

Tetrimus chuckled. "For now, our main concern is to get this data into the hands of the Council, so that they can at least remove Saren's Spectre status. This will allow us to focus our energies as an organization directly against those we suspect are hindering us. But the Shadow Broker doubts that if you just take this to the Council that they will pay it any heed. A renegade C-sec detective, accompanied by a bloodthirsty human who works for a man who hates Saren, a krogan mercenary, and a quarian teenager. It sounds more like a comedy show than a serious issue."

The turian leaned back. "We have an interest in this. You might even call it an angle. The Broker feels that whatever Saren is doing is dangerous. Dangerous enough that we cannot afford to be caught unprepared again. Thus, I've been ordered to ensure the Council does not bury it's collective head in the sand on this issue, and that no one tries to ignore this evidence. I will accompany you in your trip to meet the Council. They will not doubt the bona fides I have at my call, not when all three of them know full well the Broker has facts on them that would put them in serious danger or ruin their careers."

Shepard nodded. "And you speak for the Broker."

Tetrimus nodded. "Precisely. The Broker is alarmed enough at Saren's activities that he is willing to contribute what he knows gratis to the Council and to the Systems Alliance."

Wrex's eyes narrow. "That's ... very rare."

Tetrimus flicked his one mandible in amusement. "I've only seen it once before, myself. In any event, Commander, our requirements are simple. We will provide evidence proving that the drell assassin who killed your witness was indeed hired by Saren. Additionally, we will certify the veracity of Miss Zorah's data, although I'm sure C-Sec will be called upon to analyze the voice print." Tetrimus lifts his face to the dim light, and gives a turian half-smile, his ghastly visage looking stone-like in profile. "And in return, the Shadow Broker only asks that we be allowed to send an observer along with whatever force is dispatched to go after Saren, to clean up any further breaches of our network."

She arches an eyebrow. "That doesn't seem like a lot to ask."

Tetrimus sips his drink calmly. "You clearly haven't spent a long journey with krogan, Shepard. Wrex, your assignment is on that pad I gave you - follow this situation through until Saren is a smear. Triple combat pay and a large enough bonus for you buy your own light cruiser. All expenses paid."

The turian rose, stepping away. "Now, if you will excuse me, it has been an *exceedingly* fatiguing day, and I must make my reports to the Broker. I believe you have a meeting with the Council tomorrow morning, Shepard.. I will meet you then." With a step into the dark corner near the booth, the turian was gone. Wrex glanced at the pad in his hands and just sighed.

Shepard grunted. "We'd better go inform Anderson and Udina of this. Alenko and I are still pretty beaten up from Eden Prime. Tali, I'm sure he'll find a safe place for you to rest tonight, if you don't mind coming with us to the human embassy." Tali stared at Shepard for a moment, then nodded. "I didn't... I mean, that is, yes. I don't have anywhere else to .. stay. And after what I just went through... someplace safe sounds good." Shepard then turned to Wrex. "You need a place to crash as well?"

The krogan shook his head. "Nah, I got a hotel, Broker's paying for it. Here's my contact freq if you

need me. I need ...to think about this contract offer. Carefully."

Shepard nodded, grimacing. Garrus glanced between the two of them. "Well, Shepard, I am.. gratified I was able to help you get a solid lead on that bastard Saren, but I don't expect Pallin will be assigning me to anything anytime soon. I'm to have an investigative hearing in a few days." He extended a gloved hand, and Shepard shook it. "Good luck with that, Detective. You aren't a bad shot." Shepard nodded respectfully, and the turian nodded. "Lieutenant. Ma'am. Wrex, stay out of trouble." With that, Garrus got up and walked to the exit, back straight, head held high.

Wrex chuckled. "Talk about a stick up the ass. But at least he tries, unlike most of the useless, blue-cloaked cowards." Wrex drained the last of his ryncol. "Staying a while? We could catch up on who's the better killer." Shepard smirked, and shook her head. "Nope. I should definitely report this to Anderson, so he can contact Udina and get whatever needs to be done, done. And I need to get Tali to Udina's offices. I'll see you ...when I see you, Wrex."

The krogan only nodded, already turning his attention to Doran. "More ryncol! I've had a shitty day and I still haven't had my damned first cup of jaaki yet."

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## Chapter 28: Chapter 22 : Cole

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*A/N: Sorry for the pause in updates, but I must have re-written this chapter four or five times before it felt right. If you read no other chapter in this entire fic to understand my Shepard, read this one.*

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January 24, 2183 – 3:00 AM

The Normandy was silent, most of the crew still on shore leave. Only a minimal crew was aboard – 3 shifts of a single operations tech to manage fleet communications and security checks, and a port and starboard watch of 2 engineers to mind the core and support systems. Even Joker and Chakwas were ashore, the latter helping out with Alliance Medical teams at Huerta Memorial with some of the more dire Eden Prime injuries that had been med-evaced to the Citadel for specialized care.

Ashley Williams stared at the meal ration distributed into 4 unappealing warm blobs on the thin plastic tray, picking at the purported 'Salisbury steak' with a fork.

*Damn, and here I was thinking chow sucked in the 2 Frontier, too.*

She lifted her fork above the tray, watching disinterestedly as the brownish slime slowly dropped back into the rest of the meal with a syrupy plop.

"Look on the bright side, Chief. Easy to keep a trim figure when nothing you are given to eat looks like anything you want to eat." Alenko came into view from her right, crossing the small mess to sit across from her, a cup of something minty smelling in his hands, dark hair laying flat from a recent shower.

"Yeah, I *guess*." She forced herself to eat a bite, and then winced. "Tastes like someone tried to boil a shoe and fucked up the recipe. Anyways, LT, whatcha doing up on the midnight watch? Figured you'd be ashore." She smiled as he ran his hands through his hair, glad for the company.

Kaiden shrugged. "Headaches. Always a problem of mine, especially when I overdo it with the biotics. I guess I should be grateful, all things considered, a lot of L2's had worse side effects than just headaches...but they tend to get bad, and make me a bit irritable. The Citadel is too full of crowds. Some peace, quiet, a bit of mint tea, and tinkering about the ship to distract myself – it all tends help out with the pain." He took a sip of the mentioned tea, wincing. "Well, sometimes it helps with the

pain. Sometimes nothing helps."

Ashley gave a sympathetic look. "We only had one biotic in the 212, Sergeant Urden. Something went wrong with his implant, he didn't have much, uh, biotic strength. He could do a few neat things with a barrier, but that's about it. I know he had really bad nosebleeds and headaches a lot. And he ate like twice as much as everyone else. He talked about how his last command, a dreadnaught, was so much more exciting than watching weeds grow on Eden Prime." Alenko nodded. "But he was just...y'know, another grunt. Nothing really special. I guess I was expecting everything on a ship to be more..." She trailed off.

Alenko gave a thin smile. "Exciting? Mysterious? Exotic? Chief, the only mystery is who in the blackest hell would call soy pudding 'Salisbury steak.'

Williams gave a throaty laugh, and took a bite of the goop, then made a face. Her lips quirked, and she shrugged. "I just.. I dunno. Never had a space-side billet before, LT." Her face fell a little, and she glanced away. "Not that I'll be getting to stick around after we get a move on, but... it's a different sort of pace. Ground-side is the same stuff, over and over. Patrol the perimeter. Morning mess. Weapons maintenance. GMT and orders of the day. More patrol. Lunch. Inspection..."

Kaiden gave a wry smile, his eyes holding hers for a long moment. "Trust me, Williams. Space-side can get just as boring. Being the lead MCO isn't much better than having a very tiny ground command. I mean, granted, mostly our marines stand watch at doors, pop salutes at the CO and XO, then rack out. There's still weapons cleaning, and inspection."

Ashley harrumphed. "But it's *space*, sir." She paused, a distant, almost distracted look on her face, and then recited something, her voice soft, almost reverent.

"And I have dared the Distances  
Where the red planets race-  
And I have seen that Near and Far  
and god and Man and Avatar  
And Life and Death but one thing are-  
And I have seen this wingless world  
Curst with impermanence and whirled  
Like dust across the Summer swirled,  
And I have seen this world a star  
All wonderful in Space!"

Alenko arched an eyebrow. "Never figured you for a poet, Williams. Afraid I can't place it, though."

Williams grinned. "Don Marquis, sir. Called the Mystic. My father was big on classical arts. Tennyson, Swinburne, Wordsworth..." She smiled. "Marquis is a touch rare, the poem never really appeared in any of Tennyson's collections. I forget where I first heard it, but it fits. I've been hauled to four different planets, each one it's own .." She trailed off, making a vague spinning gesture with both hands.

Alenko's eyebrow arched again. "Rotational period? Color? Spirit?" He leaned forward, head at an angle, and smirked. "Smell?"

Williams laughed, and pushed her tray away. "Spirit, I guess." Picking up the food tray, she got up, walking with a confident and athletic sway as she dumped the entire thing into the recycling slot. For a moment her profile was illuminated by the lights of the recycling status screen, casting into relief the strong, elegant jaw, the almost noble cast to her features...the sashay of her hips as she bent over to drop the now empty tray onto the stack...

Alenko glanced away. *Down boy. The only thing worse than thinking about doing the Deed is thinking*

*about it with a woman who can kick your ass.* He focused instead on sipping his tea, feeling the warmth slowly push back at the tight, angry knot of pain at the base of his skull. He was both relieved and frustrated when Ashley sat back down at the table with him. "Alright Chief, you've piqued my interest. Why are *you* up on the midwatch?"

Williams smiled, but it was a brittle thing. "A head too full of bad memories to sleep. The 212 wasn't a perfect place...but it was closer to home than I'd been in a long time. The CO was an asshole, and the XO was just dialing it in most days, but Lieutenant Parker and the Master Sergeant really tried to keep us motivated and ... just watching everyone die so fast was .. hard." Her strong hands closed into fists on the tabletop, and she looked down, eyes dark with pain. "So goddamned fast. Right before you showed up...I really thought we were about to die. Nirali went up in a bonfire, I wasn't quick enough to pull her back into cover after she got tossed out of cover by a grenade. Jones..."

She gave a little laugh, mixed in with a tiny unsteady note. "Jones had gotten this monster of a shotgun from some customs guy...it wasn't even street legal, much less something that met regs, but the LT let him use it. He loved that gun..."

Kaiden only nodded. "I wish we could have gotten there faster. Done .. something. As it was..."

Williams shook her own head, pushing back a strand of dark brown hair that fell across her somber features. "Would it have mattered, much? If it hadn't been for Shepard going buck-wild on those Geth we'd have all ended up like Jenkins anyway." She leaned forward. "I gotta admit,when I saw her, I didn't know WHAT the hell to expect. What's she like? I mean... you know. To work with."

Kaiden scratched his head. "It's...well, to be honest, I don't really think anyone knows. The ship is so new the paint on the name was still drying when we pulled out. Shepard had only been assigned that day, she didn't even have time to do a full walk-through." He drained his cup, and put a hand to the bridge of his nose, eyes squeezed shut. "And I'm not sure that we **can** understand her. She's not like most of the commander's you see as XO's. It's like trying to understand a hurricane, or a supernova. She just seems to ... happen." He shook his head. "Now I sound like an awestruck fanboy. Great."

Ashley grinned. "I get that, LT. I just... the vids and the stories are all so over-the-top. The rumors you hear are all over the place. We had one guy in the 235 – the other infantry team with us on Eden Prime – who had served under her at Torfan. Everyone was always asking about her but he had nothing to say except "she got the job done." But one night he gets smashed, I mean...really, really drunk. The shore patrol doesn't stop them from drinking until they get violent...and Joe was a quiet drunk."

Ashley paused, smiling a little with memory, and Alenko nodded. "I bet that ended well." His voice was sarcastic, but Williams shrugged, and coughed.

"Like I said, he was usually a quiet drunk. He was going on about the Alliance and how crooked they were, and someone insulted Shepard. Joe was .. pissed. He was talking about how they sent everyone in to fail and to die, something about if Torfan had blown up the Alliance would have canceled colonization because of the risk, and how Shepard pretty much took on the entire batarian army with a broken stick and discovered the Mass Relays single handedly."

Alenko laughed, he couldn't help it as it escaped him. "Well, people do like to build up a hero, I suppose." He chuckled again, then sighed. "I can get how people get...upset with her, though. She's so ... cold, as if she doesn't even see what people feel or are going through. How do you get by with day to day life with nothing to live for, nothing happy to look back on, everything that has a chance of bringing happiness or meaning something to you being snatched away..."

He trailed off , thinking of Joker's conversation with him. Williams sighed and tilted her head. "Dunno. But she's... cold isn't the right word, sir. I had a little bit of a breakdown, I guess , earlier. The .. what

went down on Eden Prime just kinda all hit me at once. I guess I expected her to just say get over it. And she did, kind of. . . the way she did it wasn't all touchy feely. She said I couldn't blame myself. That doing that just ended up making you go crazy and lash out instead of being able to remember the good with the bad. That . . . those we leave behind still died Marines, and that we have to remember them, too, because they'd want us to be happy."

Williams smiled a moment, pain still in her eyes but clearly thinking about one of those good moments, and Alenko reached out and gave her hand a squeeze. *Living past something like that takes both guts and a strong heart. Don't know that I could do the same*, Alenko mused. Williams took a deep breath and said "I'm cool".

Alenko nodded, pulling back. He got up, stretching, going to the meal area to refill his mint tea. Williams leaned back , angling herself on the mess hall bench so she could rest her back against the wall. "It's funny. She wanted me to let go of the hate, but she said she never could. But it looks like she pulled it off before. I mean, all the stupid vids on ANN showed her as this hard as nails criminal who found justice, duty, honor and the Alliance Pride." She snickered. "I shouldn't mock it...my whole family has always been military. In the blood for generations. But .. you get what I'm saying, LT? She makes me feel pretty damned inadequate, then has the insight to give me advice?"

Alenko , still musing while fixing his mint tea, casually said "Oh, I think you're more than adequate , Chief." He blinked, realizing what had just came out of his mouth, and Williams gave a wicked grin. "Why LT, I never knew you cared."

Alenko ruefully scratched the back of his head , trying and failing at not blushing. "Ah.. that is...well, you know what I mean. Not too many people survive what you went through on Eden Prime, Williams. I think Shepard has a good point. We either define ourselves by what makes us better, by the good times and the things we fight for, or we end up defined by our scars. Biotics have . . . a sort of rough time. People misunderstand what we are, how we live, what we can do. Growing up with the talent is never easy. You never fit in. You end up with no real options but going into the military. But you have to make the most of it, or you get consumed by bitterness."

Williams nodded. "A point. Still . . . I just wonder where this all ends. If you move on .. I mean, what happens next? I don't expect the universe to shed many tears over the 212, but it is all I knew in away. Now? I'm on some super-advanced starship, at the Citadel, and going to see the rulers of the galaxy in the morning."

She rubbed at her temples with her fingers."It's only been a few days since Eden Prime and everything's gone weird. I figured space-side duty would be a lot of pew-pew-pew and seeing weird alien planets. Not that seeing the Citadel is a small thing...it just kind of puts everything about all the aliens in perspective. They have this huge station, all these big issues...humanity is just the FNG in the equation. The fact that lots of people died on Eden Prime doesn't even probably register with these people. Aliens. Whatever."

Alenko sat down. "Not a big fan of aliens?"

Williams shrugged. "Never had to deal with them. Personally, that is. And . . . it's hard to tell the animals from the people, sometimes. Not a real big fan of turians, and to be honest what I saw in the Council chamber didn't really improve my opinion of asari and salarians either. It doesn't help that the blues all look like joygirls and I keep expecting the salarians to show up in flying saucers to vivisect a cow or something."

Alenko bursts out laughing, shoulders shaking, and Williams smirked. "I .. I don't consider myself a bigot, if that's what you are asking, sir. I figure we all have our place. Terra First is just a bunch of Klanners who got tired of beating up minorities and moved on to alien-hating. That's never the right

answer." She pauses, forehead wrinkling in thought, then gives a sort of shrug. "I just think the Alliance has to do what everyone else is clearly doing, and take care of it's own business first. If we had a stronger fleet guarding the colonies instead of trying not to build up so we don't alarm the aliens, maybe we'd have less raids...and enough ships and men to have stopped the Geth."

Alenko shook his head. "I don't know about that. From the size of that dreadnaught, I'd want more than a few frigates and another division backing me up. And we're not just pandering to aliens , Chief. If we go it alone, like the batarians have, we're the only big losers. No trade, less jobs, a smaller economy. And we're the obvious target when things go south. It's always better to be part of the crowd, even if it's just on the edges, than the one kid standing by himself in the corner."

Ashley swung her legs down off the bench, sitting up straight again. "Maybe. Above my pay-grade,sir. I just shoot things and look good."

A harsh voice spoke up from the background. "Aw, hell, Ash, stop flirting with the goddamned LT. Next you'll be spouting poetry and playing that stupid 'Imma thoughtful soldier' garbage you trotted out on Parker." Williams spun, and grinned as the battered but hale form of Master Chief Cole approached, eye still bandaged, midsection covered in more bandages, but alive. "Chief!"

Cole staggers to the mess hall bench next to Williams and gingerly eases himself down. The ground-side BDU's he wears are dark Alliance blue, but done in solid shades instead of the digital camo pattern of space-side uniforms that Alenko and Williams have on. "I don't suppose this tub has any coffee, does it? I clearly ain't getting any sleep in the medbay with you two talking."

Williams gets up. "Stay put, Greg, I'll get you some." She goes to the dispensers, and starts the process of brewing. "Black , right?"

"Yeah.". Cole's dark features turn to Alenko. "Sir."

Alenko waves it off. "It's just Alenko when we're not underway, Master Chief, or LT if you have to. It's good to see you up and around. You took some pretty hard hits down there."

Cole tsked, his hand rubbing the stubble on his jaw. "Nothing I ain't lived through before, LT. I came to this afternoon, the doc said they'd hauled our lieutenant and Jones off to some hospital on the Citadel, and the crew and CO were ashore trying to get the Council to do something about Eden Prime. The major was kind enough to turn the vidscreen on for me before she went ashore, the news is...pretty damned grim. "

Alenko nodded. The last of his headache was gone, but he sipped his tea all the same, the taste reminding him of better times in the past. "Yeah, it's not good. Over 30,000 dead. Another couple of thousand wounded. Investigators have been picking through the ruins for hours , but only found a bare handful of survivors. They confirmed every single member of the 235 died. From the reports, not a single one of them broke. They took out 3 times their number in geth before being.. overwhelmed."

Cole glanced away, closing his good eye. "Stupid, brave bastards. Dammit." He clenched his fist. "I've been doing this shit for almost 30 years. I saw some of those kids grow up. Dandled a couple on my knee. *Trained* some of them in boot. Watched them get promoted, start families. Show me pics of their own kids. Then I got to watch them die, against a foe no one ever trained to fight, and I still don't know why."

Williams came back with a navy mug full of dark coffee, which Cole took gratefully, blowing on it to cool it before taking a sip. "Still crappy, but definitely less crappy than the grinds ground-side." He takes another sip, grimacing and wiping his mouth. "Anyway, what's going on? I figured we'd have lifted off of the Citadel by now."

Alenko shook his head. "Shepard believes we've got enough evidence now to go after the guy who started this mess." He summarized the Council's reaction, the discovery of Fist's involvement in the clinic, the battle in Chora's Den.

At the mention of Wrex, the older black sergeant gave a sharp frown. "Wrex? Big meaty krogan bastard? Red armor? Looks like a pissed off turtle?" Cole's expression was thoughtful and wary, his head tilted as he leaned forward.

Alenko tilted his head. "Yeah, Shepard knew him from before. Did you?"

Cole grunted. "The fuck was at Torfan. Figures she would recognize him."

Williams eyes widened. "You were at Torfan, Greg? You never said anything all those times the topic came up, or when people prodded Joe."

Cole gave a bitter little smile. "And that's exactly why, Ash. Torfan ain't *nothing* to talk about."

There was a long, empty moment of silence, and then Cole gave a disgusted grunt. "Oh, fine ... look, Torfan wasn't something that most people got. They see the vids, hear the stupid reports, and say to themselves "Well it was a sacrifice" or some other trite bullshit. Torfan was a complete, goddamned clusterfuck. It's what happens when a pack of REMF's tries to get fancy and gets a bunch of us line animals killed for no other reason than shitty intel. And there was a lot of talk that the SA set us up to die out there, for political reasons or some such shit."

He coughed, wearily. "I don't really want to talk about Torfan. But I remember Wrex. Everyone does. Bastard was a merc the batarians hired, him and pack of other krogan. He must have taken apart most of an N7 special ops team singlehandedly. But when the batarians said they'd kill the damned kids if we didn't back off, he went fucking nuts. " The master chief actually gave a cold little smile at some memory. "Killed one of their commanders, actually. Tore the stupid bastard in half like a piece of paper. Then turned the artillery he was guarding against the batarians. And then him and the other krogan just ... quit."

Alenko arched an eyebrow. "He mentioned something about that to Shepard when they were chatting. Did you happen to know her from Torfan?"

Cole shook his head. "Naw, Shepard was under some prick named Kyle. I was actually part of the engineering support force they attached to the main strike teams, providing fire support. Thank all gods we had our own CO and chain of command. I saw her from a distance, once or twice, and we helped get what was left of her strike team out when it was all over, but I didn't know her except through rumor and story. But if Eden Prime was any indication, she hasn't lost a step."

Williams nodded. "Most people won't talk about Torfan, Greg. Why? It can't just be that it was messy."

The master chief didn't reply for a long moment, sipping his coffee. When he spoke, his voice was quiet and full of pain. "Torfan was a victory we paid for in a lot of blood. And a lot of Marines felt *betrayed* by the Alliance for putting us there. Felt betrayed by the media either calling Shepard a butcher for doing what needed to be done, or praising her for that stupid last assault. Shepard won it, the only way it could be won. We all hated her for that, and understood that if she hadn't done what she did every last marine on that rock would have died, instead of just 70% of them. It doesn't make it easier.

He sighed, expression twisting. "Then the brass tried to play it off like some kind of major victory, handed out awards like candy, making it into a propaganda piece. It was disgusting. Torfan wasn't like the Normandy invasions, or Gettysburg, or Sao Paulo during the Riots, or Cannae. Those all had a cost, but a clear result. The only thing Torfan did was convince the damned slavers that the Alliance was ready and willing to sacrifice tens of thousands of men in badly coordinated attacks to make a point. "

With another sip of coffee, he bitterly smiled. "And that Shepard was no one to be fucked with, but by that point we all knew that anyway. No, Torfan is defined by the last 20 minutes, when she took the last of the N7's she had with her and cleaned the batarians out of the command bunker they took. Alliance brass wanted them captured...and the men wanted to BBQ the fucks. Shepard .. just shot them in the head. Gave that quote she's famous for."

Alenko nodded. "Sic semper sceleratis. Thus ever to criminals." Alenko looked back up at the Master Chief. "If it was hard on everyone, how do you think it affected her?"

The master chief drained his coffee, his dark features set in grim lines. "Williams has a piece of fancy poetry that covers that perfectly, I think. Go on, impress the LT. Come not when I am dead." Williams gave the chief a long, uncomfortable, look, then spoke, her voice quiet in the stillness of the mess hall.

"Come not, when I am dead,  
To drop thy foolish tears upon my grave,  
To trample round my fallen head,  
And vex the unhappy dust thou wouldst not save.  
There let the wind sweep and the plover cry; But thou, go by."

The chief nodded, and pulled a cigar out of his uniform top. "There you have it, kiddo. LT, where's the smoking pit on this ship?"

Alenko blinked. "I'm , ah..."

A hard voice cut through the silence. "Forward engineering port side, by the air exchanger, master chief. Got an extra?" Sara Shepard leaned almost insolently against the wall, uniform crisp and clean, eyes cool and measuring.

Alenko winced, Williams looked worried, and Cole patted his pocket. "Yeah, I got 2 or 3 more, Commander. You'll have to show me where engineering is, though." He rose, leaving behind his cup, which Williams grabbed for him.

Shepard nodded, casting a gaze over Alenko and Williams. "You should try to get some sleep, tomorrow is likely to be ugly." Turning almost mechanically on her heel, she lead the older master chief to the elevator, not saying anything as the doors slid shut, the voices of Alenko and Williams fading into the distance.

Cole was silent a long moment before he turned to her and spoke, his voice low. "How much you hear, Commander?"

She shrugged. "Enough. I hope they *never* understand Torfan. But it's hard ... talking to them because of that. They want something I can't give. Or understand." She glanced at him , scrutinizing his features, and nodded again. "I remember you now. You were with the 3 Engineer Group."

Cole looked surprised for a moment, then closed his eyes and nodded. "Yes, I was, ma'am. Didn't think you'd recognize me." Her voice was all too calm. "I never forgot a single face from Torfan, Chief."

The elevator slid open and Shepard walked to the left, through the port side hatch. A set of large, hexagonal air filters was set into the ceiling, the faint hum of motors and electrically powered filters filling the narrow hallway. The armored deck was free of debris, but already a few black marks marred the deck where someone has extinguished a cigarette. "Not too many people smoke nowadays. I should quit, it's bad for your health." Cole's voice was wry as he handed a cigar to Shepard, who took it and unsheathed her belt knife.

Shepard's voice was cool but amused as she spoke. "Everyone buys that farmland sometime, MC. Might as well shoot it like you stole it before you fill out the AD 960."

Cole laughed darkly at the reference to the battle cry of the 1st Infantry and the form that Alliance medical filled out for the death of a soldier. "Kind of a bleak attitude to have, Commander. Lots of people look up to you, see you as the example of the perfect soldier." He bit the end off his own cigar off, dropping the torn tip into the ashtray, and then lit his cigar, relaxing as the smoke hit his lungs.

Shepard snorted, neatly trimming the tip of her own cigar and putting her knife away. "More fool them. Borrow your light? Thanks." She lit her own, closing her eyes and leaning against the wall with a weary, almost sorrowful exhalation of breath, her lean form seeming to soften. "Goddammit, haven't had a smoke since I left Almor." She reopened her eyes, cold blue dots lancing into the master chief. "And if soldiers want an example, the Alliance has Branson for that, the mincing fuck."

Cole snorted. "Ain't nobody gonna really believe in that Aryan blond-haired pile of fluff. Oh, he's good for stupid kids to follow, to get some blockhead to sign up, or for groundpounders who think patrolling some dirt pile on the darkside of a moon you might as well stamp with a corporate logo is military service. Not talking about them."

Cole inhaled, his heavy features thoughtful, as he rubbed the bandage over his eye. "The people who've been through the *shit*, seen the fires from the piles of corpses on Mindoir, had to dig through children stacked like fucking cordwood at Anmos because the slavers couldn't get a profit from them... the soldiers who had to die by the fucking tens of thousands on a dozen shitty worlds. Those are the ones who look up to you." His voice grew thoughtful. "You have fire, Commander. You can't pay someone to give a fuck, and the marine in the trenches knows that."

Shepard inhaled and blew out blue smoke, her lips twisting. "Then they're even stupider than the greenhorns. Christ and Virgin, I get so sick of the fucking killing sometimes. Of the endless blood, and having adrenaline drain out of me after a fight and realize nine of my guys are dead and I have to tell their wives or look their little kid in the eye. I dream 'bout just...finally buying it. Going up against something that takes me right the fuck out. No heroics, just blam! Dead. The funeral will be long, boring, full of speeches by people who never held a goddamned trench with me. They'll trot out some tired fucker with admirals bars... "

She paused to take another drag, eyes narrow and dark "...and he'll go on some fucking spiel about my incredible sense of timing and valor. I'd rather fuck an elcor."

Cole puffed amiably, shrugging. "Didn't say you had to like it. But it's the truth, sir. Not a lot of other figured to look up to. I mean, there's Jackson, but he's old. Hackett is tough, but he's space navy. Delacor-"

She sneered. "Fuck Delacor. Weak, simpering, crying **victim**. I don't give a shit. Yeah, it's too bad your colony got wiped and some giant worms ate your unit, but people have been fucked over and out harder than that. Overcoming fucking adversity doesn't make you a hero."

Cole shrugged again. "It doesn't? Doesn't it say something about your will?"

She shook her head. "It says you're too stupid to just die. It's like these stories about some crippled kid who overcomes a physical deformity to achieve something banal. I don't give a shit that some stupid bastard born without a torso helps out with gardens in his community, or a stuttering wreck with a face that looks like a krogan punched it and the brains of a vorcha got a GED." She inhaled again, angrily, tendrils of smoke pushing out of her nostrils like the breath of an angry dragon. "It's all jingoistic bullshit pushed on people who need a fucking example to feel better about themselves."

Cole leaned back against the other wall. "Never figured you for angry."

Shepard looked up, then gave a tiny little smile, the fire dying in her eyes. "The mediocrity of it offends me, master chief. I was used by monsters. And then in freeing myself, I became a monster. And in

trying to stop being a monster of one kind, I simply transferred my leash to a new holder. I'm not heroic. A hero risks dying because he has something to **live** for. They do what's right because it's *right*, not because they are trying to get bad memories out of their head. A hero puts others in front of himself. Anderson is a hero. I'm just a very skilled, angry thug that the Alliance points at problems they want beaten to death."

She hesitated, then shook her head. "No, I get to watch some poor bastard die because I failed to get there in time. I get a fantastic front-row seat to each and every failure and atrocity to my name, to watch men and women who depend on me to lead them, and then die when I have to sacrifice them, because some old bastard on Arcturus won't spend the funds to get us better long-range detection, or more ships, or proper hard suits. I go in to stop pirates with half the fucking men I need, and to get the job done I have to spend lives like cash in an asari whorehouse." She leaned her head against the wall, reveling in the coolness of the metal. "I don't need anyone looking up to **me**."

The master chief puffed on the cigar, knocking the ash into the little tray someone thoughtfully had welded to the wall. "I don't know. Those two up there look up to you, and they've seen you in action."

She shook her head. "They don't understand me anymore than they do a fucking mass relay. How can you explain to people who've never seen real goddamned evil what it feels like? To feel dirty, like you can shower a thousand days and still have a film of ... filth on you."

Cole's expression darkened, and he glanced away. "Yeah... I know that too well."

Shepard folded her arms, cigar dangling from narrow lips. "And did you get past it, master chief? Did you have a magical happy ending where you discovered love, peace, and harmony?"

Cole looked the angry woman in the eye. "No, ma'am. I just decided to stop holding myself in the past over bullshit I couldn't change. Got married. Had two good boys. Decided the only thing I could do to get past it all is leave something behind I could feel clean about."

Shepard made a weary gesture with her free hand, taking a deep drag. "Some of us don't have that option, Cole. Some of us are trapped in this nightmare forever, part and parcel of the whole propaganda package of shit. Sorry, but I can't take that as any kind of answer. I'll stick with anger." She scrubbed out the fire on her cigar, and tucked the remainder in her upper left uniform pocket. "Thanks for the leaf, though."

Cole nodded. "Commander, I know they took Jones and our LT off to some hospital on the Citadel...but what about Williams and I? I don't know if you've had a chance to look at her record..." He trailed off, hesitantly.

"Oh, *that* bullshit? I most certainly have. Motherfucking REMFs using some shit that happened 30 fucking years ago to her grandfather to sideline a good soldier? Look, Master Chief. I'm not going to build anyone up here. I'm not good with people, or praise, or all that shit. But anyone who can fire a Revenant one-handed is no one to fuck with, and Williams was taking down geth and keeping her shit together after watching her entire unit die and her friend melt like an ice cream cone. I've already asked Anderson to reassign you both to the Normandy."

Cole grinned. "That's going to piss the brass off...they really have a hard on for the Williams family."

Shepard ran a hand through her hair and shrugged. "The fuckers can kiss my ass. General Williams made the only call he could. Either some die or everyone dies, and everyone dying doesn't win shit. The fact that some ass-kisser feels his goddamned honor was stained means jack shit all to me." She shook her head, and then glanced at the chrono on her wrist. "You should get back to your rack, too, Chief. If I'm right, the shit we got for the Council will convince them to go after Saren, so I figure sooner or later the Alliance will give us something else to do. And if that pointy-faced fuck is really

allied with the geth, they'll probably hit another colony, and we'll have to save it. You in for that?"

Cole snorted, and clenched his cybernetic hand. "Hoo rah, sir. I'd **love** a rematch with those walking lamps."

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## Chapter 29: Chapter 23 : Spectre

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*A/N: Sorry for chapter length. I've been writing on this one a while. Again I was tempted to break it into two pieces, but they flow together more naturally like this.*

*And don't worry, the action will get really crazy for a few chapters. From the creator of **Bowling for Geth**, **Mofo Punched a Geth Prime**, and **Biotic WWF Smackdown**, the next craze in Shepardmania will be the Biotic Lava Surfing and Mofos Suplexed a Armature! And the Mako, my beloved Mako.*

*But first? The Extranet reacts to Shepard as Spectre. That means haptic image macros, and memes, and very, **very** confused aliens.*

*I'm happy that tons of people are adding this to their notifications and favorite stories, well over **300** by the emails. I can only assume the low number of actual reviews is proof I am doing something right. Still, more feedback about what you'd like to see or how I could improve is always welcome.*

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January 25th, 2183 – 10:00 AM

Shepard waited patiently in the anteroom of the private Council Chambers, arms folded, eyes closed. Little more than a vaulted, steel-framed atrium, it at least had a stunning view of the Wards spread out. Alenko and Williams were wide-eyed at the view, the latter pointing out the huge, yonic shape of the Destiny Ascension, while next to them Tali was playing amateur ship spotter, identifying turian and salarian vessels. Wrex and Garrus leaned against opposite walls, alien feature set in what could have been boredom.

Standing next to her, Udina's posture was more relaxed, but his eyes were narrowed, and his mouth compressed into a thin line. "I'm still not sure the Council will even agree to hear us out, Commander. Going to the Shadow Broker for evidence was ... risky in the extreme. Firefights in a medical clinic? A raid on a civilian bar? Inciting a C-Sec officer to get involved in a human investigation?" His dispassionate eyes ranged over the aliens. "And I'm not sure why you felt the need to bring all of these ... aliens. It's like the lead in to a bad joke about bars."

Shepard shrugged, turning to give the Ambassador a cool glance. "I didn't see that we had many options. We both know if I go in there with nothing more than what I saw from the Beacon, they'll dismiss me a crazy lunatic. And I can't just go in there and say 'Hi! We got this data from an untrustworthy criminal spy-lord who would like to dictate to you how to respond and if you don't he plans to blackmail you'. Things will look far more plausible if we can just present it in a calm, organized manner." Her voice is a touch acerbic, but calm.

Udina gave a long suffering sigh. "Shepard, try to work with me here. Despite what you put forth, your aura of cold killer does not invalidate that you are clearly intelligent and familiar with how the politics of this works. It doesn't matter if you're calm or not. The Council cannot move on anything but rock-solid evidence. And even with rock-solid evidence, they're likely to want to poke holes in it. I have no intention of allowing them to humiliate me a second time."

Shepard shrugged, gesturing to Garrus, sitting in his dress armor on the narrow couch along the wall.

"I submitted it to C-Sec and had their Data Analysis division authenticate it. Additionally, Tali can explain how she got it from the geth, and the Shadow Broker's representative will vouch for it with corroborating information. That's about as rock solid as you get, sir. I can't just walk away from this, sir." Udina scowled. "Granted. But it doesn't put the Council in any better of a position even if they do accept it. They're going to have to eat crow, after that .. farce of a hearing they gave us yesterday. And the ramifications of what it means for Saren to be dirty...it will be hard for them to admit they were wrong."

Shepard tilted her head. "I'd have thought you'd enjoy that part." Udina gives her a sharp look, then shakes his head with a small but clearly amused smile. "Oh, trust me, Commander, I intend to shove every single one of their words into their smug faces. But even if that works out, even if they decide to strip him of his Spectre status, they still won't move on sending their fleets into the Traverse to secure our colonies." Shepard shrugged. "That's not going to solve the problem anyway, sir. On that, I have to agree with them. The key to a static defense of a large perimeter is small forces you can afford to sacrifice at a wide distance, with your heavy response unit in the middle. You react to threats and pin down where the next attack is likely to occur."

Udina folded his arms, his dark brown suit shining dimly in the diffuse light of the antechamber. "That would sacrifice a lot of innocent lives in the name of expediency. That's not politically acceptable to the Senate. They want action, something they can point to." Shepard gave him a cold glare. "So it's more important to get an empty act that does nothing, protects nothing, solves nothing but is good PR rather than going after a real solution to the problem? To do something that will get more people killed just so some old men can make speeches about defending humanity? And people call *me* inhuman?" Udina tightened his jaw. "Shepard, that outcome isn't what I'm in favor of, either. But I'm not the ruler of humanity. The people in the Senate are, and I can't force them to deal with the reality of the rest of the galaxy when they're only focused on re-election and corporate interests." Shepard sighed, rubbing her forehead. "Let's figure it out AFTER we convince them I'm not a lunatic, please? I'm not cut out for wheeling and dealing, but I've got an idea on how to make this work." Udina opened his mouth to speak, but the doors to the inner chamber opened at that point.

A salarian in a white uniform stuck his head out the opened doorway and spoke quietly. "Commander Shepard? Ambassador? They're ready for you." The two humans walked into the plush room beyond the door. A large vidscreen dominated the far wall, displaying graphical information and scrolling text along with a large image of the now-wrecked Beacon, it's once elegant lines truncated in an ugly angle about 3 feet from it's base. The floor was thinly carpeted, the ceiling's smooth curve broken by wide strips of soft white lighting and a broad strip of windows showing the towers of the Upper Wards in the distance. The room was circular, decorated in shades of silver and blue, with three large chairs in a semi-circle around a slightly elevated plinth. On the plinth was another chair, and behind it were several more chairs. In the corner, two salarians sat in front of terminals, obviously recorders of data. Sparatus, Tevos and Valern sat in the large chairs. The turian wore all black today, trimmed in red, a sort of robe with a heavy dark silver sash over his chest. Tevos wore yet another simple, form fitting down, this one a soft green, and a light filmy jacket of some shimmery material over it. Valern's heavy robes were white and gray, with heavy knobs of decoration along the hem, his STG bracers conspicuous, his hood down around his neck as he studied a set of data pads.

Shepard walked to the middle of the room, and came to attention. Sparatus gave her a dignified, respectful nod. "Please have a seat, Commander." His voice was polite, if slightly edged. Udina sat in a chair behind and to the right of Shepard, pulling up notes on his own data pad, and ran a hand through his thinning hair almost nervously. Tevos spoke, her voice gentle. "Before we say anything else, Commander.. I personally want to thank you for your actions. I know the rulings and actions of this Council are sometimes hard to accept, especially for those races who feel they have no voice in our

decision." She sighs. "But you did me a great personal favor by bringing to justice someone who has long defied the will of the Council, and in doing so gave me a personal sense of closure to a very ugly episode in my life."

Valern nodded in a twitchy fashion, his eyes liquid and dark. "Agreed. Commander, while we as a rule dislike those who propitiate the fist over the spoken word, when your name was considered for Spectre status, we reviewed your military history. While you have had to make unpleasant calls, we believe you did so correctly in all cases. And we have all reviewed the Eden Prime mission logs and vid-tapes extensively. Your quick actions and personal bravery prevented Eden Prime from becoming a dead world and saved the lives of hundreds of thousands of people. After further review, it is our finding that there was nothing you could have done to prevent the Beacon's destruction. Whoever activated it used a jury-rigged power supply that was timed to blow the thing to pieces. "

Sparatus gave a theatrical sigh. "Unfortunately, that puts us in the unpleasant situation that only two people accessed the beacon that we can question to find out it's contents. And Dr. Manuel Cayce has gone completely 'stark raving mad', as the doctor accompanying put it." Sparatus made an 'air-quotes' gesture as he spoke, drawing a look of veiled disgust from Udina. "We interviewed him an hour ago, and quiet frankly I'm not sure he even realized he wasn't on Eden Prime anymore. After he started drooling, there seemed to be no point in further communication." Shepard nodded. "He was that way when I arrived, sir, incoherently babbling about the end of all life. I think I comprehend why, though."

Tevos leaned forward. "You did glean something from the Beacon prior to it's destruction, then?" Shepard sighed. "I saw...something. Death, mostly. I'd call it a vision, but that feels inaccurate. It was a collection of recordings of what looked to be some kind of massive invasion by synthetics. I saw burning cities, blown up ships, and a lot of running people – four eyes, sort of rangy looking." She paused. "There was a voice in the background, it called itself the Avatar of Understanding. It seemed to be trying to get me to ... grasp something. Then the images just became completely horrific, and it felt like my head was going to explode. Bits of machinery melded into living beings. Terrible mutated ... things that resembled the husk-creatures we killed on Eden Prime. And then a sharp, severing pain and nothing." Tevos leaned back, frowning. "Anything else?" Shepard hesitated. "Ma'am, what I saw is going to make me sound as if I'm crazy. I can't prove any of this."

Tevos gave a small smile. "That may not be accurate, commander. But why do you feel you would be taken as crazy by relaying what you saw? It sounds as if the Beacon is merely a recording of the extinction event of the Prothean civilization, which appears to have been at the hands of some kind of synthetic foe." Shepard shook her head. "No, ma'am. The voice said whatever was killing them was something called "Reapers" ... and that they had taken the Citadel, and, well...ma'am, they looked like that giant black dreadnaught we recorded at the attack." Sparatus leaned forward with a drawn-in movement of his mandibles. "That seems... unlikely. Are you sure?"

Before Shepard could respond, Valern spoke up. "Hardly unlikely. It would seem that whoever is behind this attack has found one of the ships – and possibly some of the technology – that was used to end the Protheans. It's likely the Protheans defeated this foe, but were so shattered by the war their civilization died out. It would explain the caches we continue to find, a last chance at passing on what they knew. Someone must have found one of these .. Reaper .. ships and is using it to control the geth. Or perhaps the geth found it."

Shepard gave a calm, easy shrug. "That's pretty much all of the vision, except .. a long montage of people being killed in a lot of horrible ways. I honestly am not surprised that Dr. Cayce buckled, I consider myself hardened to that sort of thing and more than once I've woken up from a nightmare with those images in my head. They are .. not pleasant." Tevos thoughtfully touched her lip. "This sounds much like the so-called 'Dark' Beacons we have found in the past. Anyone using them tends to go

insane or die. Given that most of the time people accessing said 'Dark' Beacons were gentle , sheltered scientists and not hardened warriors..."She trailed off, the unspoken thought somewhat disquieting. Shepard tilted her head. "Where are these other Beacons?" Valern shrugged. "Destroyed. The Exogeni Corporation has the only remaining one, I forget where they kept it, trying to access it using non-sentient animals. The rest, well...they tended to kill anyone who got too close, and over time their area of effect grew. They were stored for a while here on the Citadel, until an unhappy batarian separatist got the bright idea to hook them up to power and place them in a public place...after the riots that occurred in Zakera Ward as a result, they were considered a risk not worth the effort to keep around."

Sparatus sighed. "So, no other data of use? No designs for weapons or ships of any kind?" Shepard shook her head. "No, sir. The beacon's message seemed incomplete, though. There could have been more, a lot more – but when it blew up , I was cut off. Whoever accessed it before me has the complete message and anything else that might have been on it. I can't imagine you haven't already worried about that issue." Sparatus nodded, but his expression was wary. "Our investigations are ongoing. Given the paucity of hard evidence in the case, however, I fear that question may never be answered before the next atrocity that occurs."

Shepard shook her head. "Councilors, I cannot ignore the warning inherent in the vision I witnessed. It was not merely some monument to loss. It was a warning, and a plea for help. It was trying to convey the sheer terror and power of the invaders and how nightmarish and total the extinction was. Whoever the Reapers were, they destroyed the entire Prothean civilization, a civilization who's achievements , like the mass relays, we can't even begin to grasp." Shepard locked eyes with the turian councilor, gaze flat and calm. "Assuming whoever has this information can act on it, there is one more thing about what I saw that you should consider. The ship we saw on Eden Prime was singular. The vision showed ships just like that, hundreds of them, coming out of the skies like rain. If there is one ship like that out there that's fallen into someone's control, there could be more."

Valern visibly stiffened. "Not an optimal result, I agree. Rough analysis of the vessel, based on Normandy sensor data and ladar pings from colony GARDIAN network before it's destruction were highly disturbing. It was measured with an in-system speed 3 times faster than our most experimental , lightweight craft. Analysis of the arcology towers show they were sheared in half by a stream of super-molten metal, accelerated 10 times beyond the power of our best dreadnaught cannon. We can't even begin to calculate the firepower of such a weapon." Tevos nodded. "One such ship could wreak immense harm on the galactic community, especially in concert with the geth. More than one would be devastating. We'd have to mobilize the fleets." Sparatus shook his own head, mandibles flaring in irritation. "What for? The thing can outrun them. The only ships quick enough to keep any kind of pace with such a thing would have to have a huge eezo core and be so lightly armored as to be ineffective in damaging it."

Shepard smiled. "It seems like it would behoove the Council to find out who's in charge of that thing, wouldn't it?"

Tevos sighed. "The question is not being ignored, but as Sparatus said, our investigations are still ongoing."

Shepard frowned. "Councilor, I have been respectful and truthful in this conversation. I'm offended you would tell me a lie to my face." Tevos frowned, and Sparatus cocked his head. "What do you mean by that statement, Shepard?" Shepard smiled coldly. "I met Detective Vakarian last night. Funny thing. He implied that with a little more time he might have been able to dig up firmer evidence, but that the investigation was closed, and handed off to the STG. I think it's very clear that there is no investigation of this issue." Sparatus made a slashing gesture with his hand. "The purpose of this meeting is to discuss your interaction with the beacon, not our investigation or the proper group to carry it out."

Udina finally stood. "No, this meeting *has* no purpose if that's all we're discussing. The very ugly truth here is that in the few hours after our hearing, Commander Shepard with the help of non-Alliance, non-human personnel with no connection to Eden Prime, was able to find very firm evidence of exactly who is behind this violation of our colony and the geth attack. Given that whoever attacked the colony seemed to be looking for the Beacon, a Beacon giving a warning of invading forces with powerful ships, a Beacon that whoever attacked the colony destroyed, I think reopening this issue is quite important."

Tevos gave Shepard a hard, inquisitive look. "What do you mean by 'firmer evidence', Commander? We are not interested in vague financial missteps or eyewitness testimony that cannot be corroborated." Shepard tapped her omni-tool, and then looked at the Council. "I have my witnesses outside, if they might come in?" Tevos gestured to the door, and the Salarian standing there opened it, letting the group in the hallway in.

Tali stood immediately to Shepard's right, with Wrex behind her. Garrus moved next to Udina, and in the back, the black-cloaked form of Tetrimus was content to stand at a distance from everyone else. Sparatus examined them all briefly. "Explain this, Commander. We do not have all day." Shepard nodded. "After our hearing, I approached Detective Vakarian, who was in charge of the C-Sec investigation. My intent was simply to follow up on fragmentary leads of our own, but Detective Vakarian lead us to meet with Urdnot Wrex, a mercenary here on business for the Shadow Broker." Tevos gave a wince at the last name. "I do hope your evidence is not from the Broker, Commander. We are hardly going to take the word of an intergalactic thug." Shepard shook her head. "Of course not, ma'am." Coolly walking back and forth, she continued. "Wrex had a commission to investigate a local crime figure named Fist, who owned an...entertainment venue in the Bachrjet Lower Wards. Fist was a remote Broker agent as well, one that the Broker felt was double crossing him and selling data to Saren."

Shepard gestured to Tali. "This is Tali'Zorah nar Rayya." Tevos arched an eyebrow. "Zorah as in Admiral Rael'Zorah, the Migrant Fleet commander?" Tali nodded firmly. "My father, Councilor." Tevos nodded and Shepard continued. "While investigating geth activity on Caleston, Miss Zorah came across geth units. And upon destroying them, she was able to extract an audio file from one." Valern smiled, while Sparatus spluttered. "The geth self-destruct upon death! At least, that's what the records say." But Valern was nodding. "STG units have managed to isolate data at least once in dying geth armatures during deep penetrations of the Perseus Veil. Concept is possible." Tali took a small step forward, twisting her hands together. "Y-you have to be quick and careful, and it helps if the data is not binary flash memory. The geth I stumbled across were part of a long-chain information network, passing audio files through internal geth networks rather than openly. The geth felt the person they worked for could not be trusted and were saving off audio to prove he wasn't trustworthy to someone named Sovereign."

Shepard spoke. "Tali looked for a buyer for such data, not realizing it's import, and the Shadow Broker provided a price, and transport to the Citadel to seal the deal. Unfortunately, Fist was the contact that Tali was lead to, due to Fist interfering in the Broker's network. Captain Troyce was actually just the pilot who brought her here. She managed to escape, link up with Wrex, and was planning on delivering the data to the Broker when Fist managed to capture her with the clear intent of handing her over to Saren." Shepard spread her hands. "Wrex, myself and a member of my crew went to rescue her. In the process we discovered that Fist was working for Saren while also betraying the Broker. The Broker, as a result, sent a representative to bargain with us for the data and how it should be used."

Sparatus frowned. "Why not bring such solid proof to the Council?" Udina folded his arms. "Because after yesterday's hearing, much of the Systems Alliance government is in favor of simply withdrawing from Citadel space. Commander Shepard felt, correctly, that just handing you the information without context would have resulted in her being ignored." Shepard shrugged. "I gave a copy to Detective

Vakarian to analyze for authenticity. It was verified accurate by C-Sec Data Analysis teams , twice. The Broker also vouches for it." Valern sighs. "Audio data hard to properly fake, especially with turians and hanar. Turian subharmonics almost impossible to duplicate and hanar non-text speech will not convey as audio."

Shepard nodded to Tali, who turned on the recording.

*"Prime 302 to Prime-CoordinatorOfTactics-5. Aural band transmission of requested data is ready. Utilization of aural bands to avoid monitoring from Saren-Prophet as requested."*

Valern winced, and Sparatus sighed. Tevos merely looked at Shepard. "These are geth units? I did not think they spoke to each other." Her voice had an edge to it. Valern shrugged, his narrow face expressionless and his voice calm. "They're using speech to avoid being monitored electronically. Clever."

Tali played more of the audio.

*"Acknowledgment of primary mission complete. Consensus has been achieved. Saren-Prophet is not direct representative of Nazara-Giver-of-Future. The Old Machines have not chosen their avatar-prime connection. Discrediting Saren-Prophet and Benezia-Secondary would allow geth to achieve Avatar-prime connection status."*

*The first voice was silent for a moment. "Understood. Compromising vocal recordings enclosed. If Saren-Prophet violates restrictions, transmission to Nazara-Giver-of-Future can be conducted."*

*"Transmit vocal recordings."*

Sparatus glanced at Tevos. "What is 'Nazara' and .. did that thing say Benezia?"

Tevos glared at the ground, hands clenched in her lap. "Geth are inherently untrustworthy. While the evidence is interesting it proves nothing. Someone could rig up a generator to produce the proper voices and record that , and it would pass if unedited at that point. The fact that the geth said their names doesn't prove anything. The idea that Matriarch Benezia is involved with geth is ridiculous. " Tali shrugged apologetically. "There is .. more , ma'am." She tapped play again. The voice that rang out confidently made all three Councilor's stiffen.

*"Still...Eden Prime was a major victory, the beacon has brought us one step closer to finding the Conduit."*

*"And one step closer to the return of the Reapers. And with no one the wiser, if Cerberus does it's job correctly."*

*"I'm more worried about the Geth., Benezia. As long as Cerberus's ruse works, well and good. But using the geth for this assault was a bad idea, just as I told Sovereign. I wouldn't have had to kill Nihlus if I could have used some finesse. It's as if he's trying to make sure I don't go my own way."*

*"And the geth watch us constantly. We must be careful, Saren."*

Udina gave a grim, almost gloating little smile, and leveled his finger at the aliens before him. "You wanted proof? There it is."

Tevos' posture had gone from angry to almost wilted, her eyes flickering around the room in a mix of pain and clear upset, her head cradled in shaking hands. Valern only sighed deeply and cradled his horns, mouth a grim , tiny line.

Sparatus, on the other hand , stood, his claws out, slashing them into the heavy chair that he had stood up from and reducing it to pile of cloth and bent metal with a backhand. His mandibles quivered in uncontrolled spasms, and his eyes had dilated."That slotted-plate kirix! The barefaced shxthia lied to

me in my -" Shepard's translator gave out completely, as Sparatus exploded into almost 10 seconds of the foulest turian curses known. "...that .. that.. vorcha-fucking TRAITOR!" Garrus sighed in the background, a quiet sound of satisfaction. Sparatus glared in all directions, stance predatory and wild, before Tevos gently got up and placed a placating hand on his arm. "Tarren..." Sparatus shook off her arm. "I'm fine. We need to adjourn so I can get a hold of the Primarch. The gullet-fucking bastard is not -" Valern shook his head. "Sparatus... we need to discuss our options."

The turian councilor whipped around on a heel, his spurs flexing. "Options? The only options is just how many times we have him shot before hanging the corpse by it's spurs from the top of this Tower! We find him and blast him into space dust! He has betrayed Palaven! The Hierarchy! The Council! He is working with **CERBERUS**! This is even *worse* than him being in league with mere geth!"

Tevos exhaled, her voice quiet and level, obviously trying to get the agitated turian to calm down. "We cannot send a random fleet out with orders to "shoot Saren." The chaos would be immense. IF this gets out, there will be rioting on Thessia. Benezia T'soni is a priestess of Athame, one of the Thirty, and owns something like half a percent of the asari economy. There will be angry followers of her Unity movement who will claim the Matriarchy is fighting her vision of including other races on the Council." Tevos sighed , and buried her face in her hands. "Why Benezia would be involved in this is ... beyond me."

Valern was staring at something on his omni-tool. "And from what we have heard, they are working to return the Reapers, which were the beings who destroyed the Protheans?"

Shepard watched the three Councilors frantically assess the damage, turning to give a grim little smile to Udina, before facing them again. "Councilors. I think I can speak for Udina and the Systems Alliance military when I say we would be happy to help out in any way possible in locating and apprehending Saren. He struck us, we should strike back." Sparatus glared at Shepard a long moment, then his anger collapsed. "No. Impossible. Despite the fact that I long to see him hauled back in chains – or preferably *pieces* – we cannot send fleets into the Traverse on a wild spirit hunt. Not only do we have no idea where he has gone, but the Traverse would think we were invading. The warlords who hold sway there would never believe us." Udina stepped forward. "That is not what we are suggesting, councilors. The Systems Alliance has been wounded terribly. Not just by this attack, but by the very public hearing yesterday in which our government was very nearly directly accused of trying to frame Saren." Tevos looked up. "We had no firm evidence to suggest -"

Udina scowled. "That will inspire confidence and understanding in *no one*. An apology won't fix the fact that this body preferred to believe two of our most decorated heroes were trying to frame Saren than face the truth. And now, despite the fact that this renegade lunatic plans is working with terrorists and geth, the Council still hesitates. I am *sick* of this Council and it's anti-human **bullshit!**" Udina scowled, ticking points off on his fingers, eyes hard. "The Council cannot send fleets to protect our colonies, or find this villain. They cannot even promise us they will *investigate* what we did find, or what their own internal investigation found. They dismiss our findings , believe we are lying about what we find, and then when presented with solid evidence – evidence they didn't even try to find , evidence sitting on their own *station* – still cannot act. We have been accused of being too hasty, of pushing too hard, of colonizing too fast, of not bothering to heed your advice. And when we do so, when we try to do it your way, and when we try to meet the Council halfway, we are given nothing. Nothing for our dead. Nothing for our burning colony. Nothing for us proving to you that your own agent is a traitor! We have to present *something* to answer to this or the Senate will simply assume that you are more willing to sacrifice humanity to prevent wider chaos."

The three Councilors looked taken aback at the force of Udina's words, and after a moment Sparatus sighed. "And what do you suggest, Ambassador. We cannot risk galactic war over a single human

colony, or even a few dozen human colonies. And I would say the same if they were turian colonies, or volus colonies."

Shepard made a gesture with her hands, one of openness. "The last person I brought in is here to address just that." She nodded at Tetrimus who stepped forward boldly. Sparatus's eyes nearly fell out of his head when the older turian pulled back his hood. "Tetrimus? But you were ... you were reported as dead. The entire cabal was." Tetrimus shook his head. "No, Tarren, I wasn't. The Primarchs left us on Shanxi to die, because we failed. I now work for the Shadow Broker, who has a message he wishes conveyed." Sparatus frowned. "We do not deal with criminals. Even if ... if what you said about the Patriarchy is true, we cannot compromise this body in that manner."

Valern, on the other hand, nodded. "Working with the Broker would expand our operative ability to glean important actions and trends. STG has done a great deal of business with the Broker, after all. And we do not have to announce to the galaxy that we are dealing with the Broker. More curious to know what his interest is in all this, and if we will approve of whatever he has to say." Tetrimus smiled coldly and began pacing. "I think you will approve, Councilors. After all, you are in something of a political corner with no way out." Tetrimus folded his arms. "The Broker is very concerned about the actions Saren has taken, and in light of this evidence, his alliance with Cerberus. We have been involved in a shadow war with that group for over 10 months now, and we fear that we are being distracted from whatever it is that Saren is planning."

His voice descended in pitch, the swish of his robes as he turned to pace the other direction almost hypnotic. "Worse, we fear that if the evidence Miss Zorah has is true – and I assure you, we were very careful to test it's authenticity before offering to bring her to the Citadel – then we face a nightmare. The geth are troublesome enough – our estimates place their fleet at almost 25% larger than the combined Citadel fleet. Combined with unknown technology the likes of which destroyed the Protheans...it all adds up to be bad for business." Tevos gave the turian an appraising look. "And what exactly does the Broker fear?" Tetrimus spread his taloned hands. "We have evidence that Saren has operatives who have built up an entire economic support system, one we believe is tied to or aided by Cerberus. Why they are colluding is at this point unknown, but we know the financial transactions that were so difficult for Detectives Vakarian and Forlan to decipher were conducted through Saren, using Cerberus funds. We found evidence that Cerberus purchased and refitted three batarian cruisers – like those the Normandy sighted approaching the system as the geth dreadnaught left it. And we have partial comms intercepts suggesting that Saren and Cerberus planned to destroy all evidence of geth and frame the batarians for the attack."

Sparatus exhaled. "Thus explaining the comms jamming, and the insanity of a salted bomb. By the time any evidence was found, it would be months, maybe years later." Tetrimus nodded. "The Broker cannot obviously give away masses of valuable intelligence, not just for the fact that we are not a charity, but it would reveal sources and methods. But he can inform you that the patterns suggest whatever Saren is planning, it has been in the works for more than a year or two. Maybe as long as a decade. We can no longer be sure our own operatives have not been counter-infiltrated." The turian paused, and turned back to face the council. "And even having the evidence he is guilty is not of much positive use. Aside from the politics, we have no clue if Saren has deep operatives in the turian fleet, or C-Sec, or even the STG. You can't even mobilize to neutralize him. Any large-scale operation could be infiltrated, and might even be co-opted. The only possible way to resolve the situation without starting a galactic panic is to send a Spectre after Saren. The Broker offers intelligence support to such an effort, free of charge, as well as the services of our most deadly and tenacious operative, Urdnot Wrex."

Sparatus frowned. "I though the Broker was driven by profit."

Tetrimus shrugged. "There are times when survival is more important than money. As I said, the little

we know leads the Broker to believe we could be facing war with a numerically superior , technologically advanced foe who has already proven to be no friend to the Broker. The idea that the Broker is willing to do this free of charge should let you know how seriously he takes this. The fact that I am one of the few people who speak with his voice directly and am willing to expose myself to arrest or interrogation should also let you know that we are ... concerned." Tevos shook her head.

"Unfortunately, we cannot put Spectres on this case right now. All of them are already tasked to beyond capacity. And far too many of them were trained by Saren, utilizing his contacts, his methods. Quite frankly, if Saren and Benezia are co-opted, we cannot be sure of the loyalties of the rest of our forces. A private internal investigation was leaked to Saren hours after it started, after all. Furthermore, few of our Spectres are equipped with the specialized support needed for such an audacious undertaking."

Tetrimus glanced at Shepard. "Then your course of action should be self evident. There is exactly one person who you can fully trust no to be working for Saren or compromised by him that has the skill set and power to take him out. That would be Commander Shepard."

Sparatus shook his head. "Out of the question! We freely admit we were mistaken about Saren's involvement. But Shepard, while clearly competent, has not undergone Spectre training. Nihlus did not even have any time to evaluate her performance. And we do not currently have the equipment, support crew, or a vessel capable of fielding another Spectre at this time. On top of that -" Tevos glanced at Sparatus and interrupted. "There may be a compromise. Ambassador, would the Systems Alliance provide the support Shepard needed in this endeavor? In return for helping the Council manage the revelation of Saren's involvement and mitigating their stance on withdrawal from Citadel space?"

Udina nodded. "I believe so. Shepard already has a dedicated team aboard the Normandy, including combat engineers and biotics. The Normandy is a stealth frigate, capable of operating quietly and unobtrusively, even in the Terminus. It's not a Council vessel, so you would have...plausible deniability if something went wrong. The Alliance can foot the entire cost of the operation, including supplies, weapons, and training. We can contract our own specialists for any needs that may arise. We..." Udina pauses. "I think we would even be willing to accept this as a candidacy under trial. If Shepard is successful, the Council would finalize her status. If this goes downhill, it can be written off."

Tetrimus spoke up. "The Broker would agree to this as well. Shepard's .. efficiency is very impressive. We would request that we be allowed to send Wrex along as well, both to provide a link to Broker intelligence that could be of use in tracing Saren, and as additional combat support." Valern frowned. "Possible. But we would need oversight or an observer of our own."

In the back of the room, Garrus stepped forward, movements urgent. "Councilors, send me. This is still a criminal investigation that will require researching leads and tracking down evidence and witnesses. Executor Pallin has suspended me due to my part in aiding Commander Shepard, so I don't have anything else to do. And a turian needs to be there when we find him to bring him in." He balls a fist, still remaining at attention. "I have been trained in investigations of all kind, and even some financial analysis through working with my partner Forlan. And my military record speaks for itself." Sparatus looked hard at the younger turian for a long moment. "Agreed. As both a representative of the Council and C-Sec. Maybe if we had given you more time this would have resolved itself more amiably." Tevos glanced at Shepard a long moment. "We would also need a geth expert. The University of Serrice has at least two researchers I know who specialize in that, with commando backgrounds."

Udina nodded, but Shepard shook her head. "Unnecessary. At this point, any geth expert could also be part of this ... mess. Besides, we already have one who we definitely know isn't working for Saren." Sparatus frowned, mandibles loose. "Who?" Shepard turned to point at Tali. "Her. She's the one who found the message. She's clearly already familiar with the geth, since her people created them. And she's proven she can recover further data from any geth we may come across." Tali gave a little start, and then nodded. "I ... I would like to go. The Broker has given me... a chance to go back home, to the

fleet, with my Pilgrimage completed...but I can't turn my back on this. The geth are our responsibility. And...they tried to kill me. They killed .. my friend." She straightened. "And I can fight." Tevos gave a small smile."You are .. very young to be involved in such a dangerous enterprise. Your father probably would not approve." Tali folded her arms and leaned back. "I can't go home to my father and tell him I walked away from a chance to convince the Council that the quarian people regret what they did and are trying to make it right. We don't have an embassy. You won't even let our ships dock. We wander in remote systems trying to eke out an existence. If I can help stop the geth, if I can prevent them from attacking and killing others like they did to us... and chose not to, my father would never look at me again."

Sparatus , of all people, gave an approving nod. "Well said."

Udina exhaled , glancing at Shepard with a curiously amused glint before turning to face the Council. "I would like to know how you plan to announce this."

Sparatus sighed. "The only way possible, human. Publicly."

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The Council chambers were literally packed with onlookers. Every tier of observers was filled with speculating, murmuring faces.

Two Council Spectres, resplendent in black and silver armor with black half-cloaks stood to either side of the petitioner's pier, one asari, one salarian. Both hold black half-cloaks thrown over an arm, and silver badges in their hands.

Tevos spoke. "Commander Sara Shepard, Systems Alliance, please step forward."

Shepard had hastily returned to the Normandy after the meeting, and was now in her full dress blues. Rich blue leather wrapped around her back, encased her arms in vambraces, her shins. The soft cloth was a lighter blue, shoulders bearing a commander's twin gold stripes. Her Star of Terra was on a scarlet ribbon around her neck, her decorations trailing down her left chest like a parade of colors and metals. Her sword was sheathed at her right side, her shoes hand-polished and gleaming like black glass as she came to attention, standing between the Spectres.

Sparatus spoke. "Commander Shepard, thanks to your efforts, and those of the Systems Alliance, you have uncovered evidence that concludes Saren Arterius was indeed involved with the attacks on Eden Prime." The crowd murmured a moment, until his cold gaze swept the serried ranks of onlookers, silencing them. "This Council owes you a personal apology, and the Systems Alliance a considered one."

Tevos spoke, her voice ringing with conviction. "Betrayal is the most dire of crimes, regardless of language, species or purpose. Never let it be said that when one of the races of the Citadel Alliance was threatened , that we stood unprepared to render aid, to defend and assist, and to repay treachery with justice. Saren Arterius is accused of grand treason, murder, sabotage, embezzling, misuse of Spectre authority, espionage, and collusion with geth. We also charge Matriarch Benezia T'soni of these crimes, as well as conspiracy and theft. "

Valern's usually reedy voice was calm, analytical, but thoughtful."There can be no question of guilt. We have heard the suspects admit to guilt with their own voices, and seen detailed new evidence of financial and material misconduct. Those who gave false witness will be charged with perjury and incarcerated until they reveal the truth. We also have evidence that proofs brought before this Council of human misconduct were lies built of whole cloth, both fundamentally untrue and provably constructed."

Sparatus spoke again. "As such, we hereby strip Saren of his office and the powers, authority and responsibility of a Council Agent of the Office of Special Tactics and Reconnaissance. " As he spoke, the salarian Spectre ripped the black cloak in his hands in half, and crumpled the delicate badge of office. "He is outcast and exiled from every planet, station, fueling stop and parsec of Council space. Any and all who aid and abet his activities are charged with his crimes. He must surrender himself immediately, or death will find him and all with him."

Tevos spoke. "Who will deliver this death?"

There was a long moment of absolute, clear silence. Not a voice whispered. Not a foot moved. The entire chamber seemed to hold it's breath. Across a thousand worlds, billions of sentients watched the three Councilors gazed around the chamber with displeased looks. "Will no one take up this torn mantle? Will no one avenge the lives lost, the honor stained?"

Shepard took precisely one step forward, as she had been coached. "Madam, to be a member of this community is not a reward, but a burden. Not a privilege, but a duty. Not a task, but a vow. Humanity stands ready."

Sparatus nodded, and the three Councilors reached down to touch the haptic interfaces before them. A triple soft chime sounded through the air, untroubled but for the fall of cherry blossoms and that awful, radiating silence.

Tevos's voice was soft, but powerful, her eyes not breaking contact with Shepard's own. "It is the decision of this Council that you be granted the office, powers, and privileges of an officer of the Office of Special Tactics and Reconnaissance of the Citadel."

Valern folded his arms, his STG bracers glowing faintly white in the dim light of the Council chamber, his face stern, dark eyes set and mouth in a firm line. "Spectres are not trained, but chosen." As he spoke, the asari Spectre draped the black half-cloak over Shepard's shoulders, obscuring her Alliance uniform. "Those who have proven themselves through fire and blood, through duty and death defied. Those whose actions and brilliance have elevated them far above the rank and file. Like this cloak, it is a burden one carries atop any duty to clan, race, or planet."

Tevos lifted her chin, voice earnest and heavy with emotion, her poise absolute. "Spectres are an ideal, an agent of our will, a symbol of courage, self-reliance, and integrity. They are our right hand, our sword, our guiding influence in peace, our determined anger in war." The asari Spectre next to Shepard pinned the silver, winged badge to Shepard's left shoulder, adjusting the pin slightly so it hung upright, gleaming. "Like this pin, Spectres must shine forth to bring the will and peace of the Council to all parts of our space."

Sparatus stood at near military attention, spine ramrod straight, mandibles set inline with his jaw, his flanged voice solemn and dark. "Spectres bear the heaviest burden of any soldiers. They are the protectors and arbiters of galactic peace, both our first and last line of defense. " The words hung in the air as the asari closed the cloak with the badge, so that the winged device hung over the human's heart, the cloak hanging to just above her waist, the symbol repeated in silvery-gray thread on the back. "The safety of the galaxy is theirs to uphold, unfettered by law, custom, or government, and let none deny that authority."

Tevos nodded, as the haptic interface in the badge came online, the badge now glowing faintly white. "You are the first human Spectre, Commander. This is a great accomplishment for you, and for your species."

Shepard bowed her head respectfully. "I am honored, Councilors." Valern nodded. "You have already received your first assignment. Enter the Traverse. Find the traitor Saren, and any accomplices, and

either bring him to justice or bring him death. He is a fugitive and you are ordered to use **any** means , regardless of severity, to accomplish this goal." Shepard nodded again, and the three Councilors inclined their own heads in turn.. "This meeting of the Council is adjourned."

Shepard turned on her heel, along with the other two Spectres, and marched off back down and off of the pier. As she entered the first floor landing, she was greeted with the sight of dozens, maybe hundreds of human spectators...applauding.

For *her*.

Part of her mind knew it wasn't actually for her. It was for what humanity had achieved, for the Council accepting humans, for the truth about Saren. But part of her went back to the angry, grieving widows that hurled insults, the broken gazes of those she had sacrificed. The ugly, disappointed glares of Delacor, Kyle, Adams...and it all seemed to wash away in the gentle susurrant of applause. Standing in the middle of the path, with a gentle smile that seemed a mile wide, was Captain David Anderson, shoulders straight, eyes bright with pride and tears. "You did good, child. Now, let's catch that bastard."

Udina nodded. "Congratulations, Commander. 'Not cut out for wheeling and dealing' you said?" The ambassador looked around the chamber, as if he couldn't believe his eyes. "I'd hate to see your idea of being good at such things. In any event, we must move. We'll need to organize the Normandy, see to crew, supplies, information...make sure these aliens you've decided to bring along are accommodated...orders cut, Alliance command will have to be notified..." Udina sighs. "Anderson, I'll need your help with this, or some admiral with more rank than brains will barge in my office and deck me for what I've agreed to." The two Spectres who had performed the ceremony lingered nearby, and the asari spoke up. "If your people will be occupied, you should report to the Spectre office. We need to issue you special gear, and you now have access to supplies, weapons, and programs of a restricted nature, as well as training and special intelligence briefs from the STG." They walked off, silent and dark in their uniforms.

Udina nodded briskly, rubbing his hands together. "Good. Anderson, let's be off, there's little time to waste." The two strode off, the crowd beginning to dissipate as C-Sec began restoring order in the chambers. Wrex and Garrus came up, followed by Ashley, Alenko, and Tali, the big krogan and tall C-sec officer parting the crowd as they stepped forward. Wrex gave a wry look at Shepard. "Aliens need a ceremony and a cloak to say 'go kill this guy'. Typically soft."

Tali tilted her head in a perplexed manner. "You'd think Udina would have been a little more grateful, given all you just got accomplished..."

Shepard shrugged. "What did you expect from a politician? Everyone head back to the Normandy, we have to discuss a few things before I go off to learn about being James Bond."

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## Chapter 30: Chapter 24 : Osaba

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*A/N: Before the fun with image macros and the joy of someone explaining lolcats to Wrex, I thought I'd put up yet another interview. This is to give an insight into what the public is told and knows about the events that transpire.*

*If you just read last chapter, the Council seems to go from "We can't admit we are wrong publicly, riots would result" in private to "Meh, Saren flocked up, arrest him" in public. This is not, I assure you, a plot hole. The reason is that the Council, to play ball with Systems Alliance to bring in Shepard , got it's own way in how the news went public.*

*It always bothered me that no one ever believed in the Reapers, given the evidence I had to hand. But it makes much more sense that any hint of them would be repressed from the get-go. So in return for skirting chaos and rebellion from turians and asari and the uproar that prosecuting Saren would produce, the Council got to spin it's own version of what happened : Saren went crazy, Benezia plots on taking over the world to play Mighty Whitey with the lesser species, and the geth are under Saren's control due to unspecified technology.*

*The average citizen of the galaxy is never told of Reapers, or how heavily infiltrated the militaries and intelligence services of all major races might be. They aren't told of Cerberus involvement (since that would embarrass the humans). They are instead told Saren is crazy and Shepard is going to put a bullet in his head. That makes a lot more sense than admitting Reapers exist (which would scare the shiat out of everyone) and then backsliding on it to the point that a few months later you somehow forget they are real and claim to have "dismissed" that claim, regardless of the proof.*

*In my AU, the powers that be realize the Reaper threat is real. But to mask preparations, they need cleanly defined enemies. The Geth serve as a perfect boogeyman. Any other information is treated as hearsay and bad extranet rumors.*

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January 25th, 2183 – 6:00 PM

*DOWNLOADING: Data feed, prime broadcast segment 19, terminal date 2183.25.1*

*Manifest dump 99541-core alpha, unclassified*

*This is an official Systems Alliance data capture dump , replication or rebroadcast is restricted.*

*Transcript begins, identifiers J: al-Jilani I: Irrissa Te'Shora D: **Dominic Osoba***

*Keywords: Saren, Eden Prime, Butcher*

BEGIN:

"Westerlund news! All the news , fit or unfit to print, 24/7!"

J: "Good afternoon. I'm **Khalisah Bint Sinan al-Jilani**, Westerlund News Network. Today we have another prime exclusive – the burning story on the wire tonight. Saren stripped of his Spectre rank, and humanity's first Spectre, Commander Shepard, authorized to go after him.

J: Joining us , as usual, is Matriarch Irrissa, the Council media representative and assistant to Councilor Tevos of the Asari Matriarchy. Also joining us is Attache Dominic Osoba, of the Office of the Systems Alliance Embassy, assistant to Ambassador Udina. Thank you both for joining us tonight.

I: As always, Ms. al-Jilani. The Council values being able to present the events of today in a calm, rational light, so that people can understand why such drastic actions were taken.

J: And what light can you shed on this? Yesterday, the Council had public hearings in which evidence against Saren was seemingly dismissed with prejudice, and he was acquitted of all charges. Less than 24 hours later, he's been stripped of his rank and accused of treason, along with Matriarch Benezia T'Soni."

I: I'm afraid I cannot speak to all particulars of the case. C-Sec, the STG, and Systems Alliance forces are all still in the process of investigation. However, there is new evidence that proves that Saren apparently has discovered technology that allows him to control geth platforms, and that he plans to overthrow the Council and use his geth armies to rule in it's place.

J: That seems ... extreme, does it not?

I: It does, and we feel that perhaps some of the blame is ours. Saren was always a passionate, high-strung defender of justice, but he tended to work alone. Turians do not function well in sole operations, they are by evolution and culture a very collective, social species. The pressure of having so many high-impact investigations, along with the possibility that he may have been suffering from long term separative stress disorder, means that he may have become unstable.

J: I see. Certainly the turian people don't appear to be taking the news calmly. There are major riots in parts of Palaven City, as well as entire cadres of 'justice brigades' and 'hastatim for the lost'. Death squads, really. Can you comment on this, as well?

I: I am by no means an expert on turian culture, Ms. al-Jilani. However, Saren was a very popular cultural hero for the turians, appearing in their media, art, music and government representations. There are probably thousands of turian children named after him, six cities, hundreds of streets, even a heavy cruiser. Turians value loyalty and duty to the Hierarchy and to their superiors. For him to turn traitor is bad enough, to challenge the established leadership of Council space is .. culturally unacceptable for many. It appears some younger turians are embracing his cause, the so called "hastatim for the lost". They feel turian military might should somehow translate into the right to dictate to other cultures as if they were client species.

J: That is a rather disturbing stance to take. There are actually turians supporting Saren?

I: Yes. As I understand it – and keep in mind, this is a movement only a few hours old – these people feel that Saren was embarrassing humanity with his investigations of human AI research corporations on Noveria, to the point that the Systems Alliance threatened to withdraw. They claim the attacks on Eden Prime were the result of botched human experiments on controlling the Geth, and that the Council "sold Saren out" to prevent humans from withdrawing from the Council Charter. This is obviously the worst sort of incoherent conspiracy theory, and quite frankly, it's possible this whole movement is being organized by agents of Saren. They are the minority and the Hierarchy takes a very dim view of their activities. Most will be arrested or killed in short order. After the Unification War, the Hierarchy takes civil unrest extremely seriously.

J: I would expect so. What about the purported involvement of Matriarch Benezia? I understand there are also riots and demonstrations on Thessia ...

I: There are. The Council was loathe to publicly announce her involvement in this sordid affair for just this reason, but we feel it is .. relevant. Benezia was highly outspoken in her Unity Through Trinity campaign. Her beliefs that asari, due to their longer lives and more ... shall we say, long-term perspective, were best suited to guide what she termed "younger, lesser" races, were not popular with many older asari.

J: That sounds very patronizing.

I: It is not intended to be, although I must admit I don't subscribe to her views. You have to understand that for asari, our interactions with other species tend to carry an undercurrent of tension. We are natural biotics, with the capability to link minds and share emotions, memories and thoughts. We outlive all other races besides krogan by centuries, and we have the strongest economy, dominance in financial and economic sectors, and advanced technology far beyond other races. There is always suspicion, which leads to resistance to asari ideals and concepts. Benezia felt – however wrongly – that it was only natural for younger species to need guidance from older species.

J: I fear that to most that still sounds patronizing. Humanity, at least, is a big believer in personal and species self-determination. And many humans are not so much anti-alien, as the charge is often thrown, but resistant to the idea that human culture would be the loser in being assimilated into an alien culture.

I: Understandable. And I fear that Benezia's ideas, combined with Saren's deteriorating mental state and control of the geth, pose a large problem for all of Council space. We now have evidence that he accessed the Beacon on Eden Prime and sabotaged it, and had made plans to frame the batarians for the cruel acts. C-Sec Financial Crimes has uncovered that he has defrauded the Council and related entities out of millions, perhaps tens of millions of credits, and unknown amounts of weapons and military grade supplies.

J: Does the Council have no oversight over these agents? Having now had one of our own named a Spectre, do we need to worry about Commander Shepard?

D: Ma'am, speaking on behalf of Ambassador Udina, that's the last thing we need to worry about. Saren was able to get away with this because for 30 years, the man was by all accounts a hero, risking his life multiple times for the best of causes. And Saren appears to have been aided in this by a long line of other traitors, malcontents, and mercenaries. Commander Shepard is well known for her incorruptibility and obedience to orders, but we will be running this operation as a joint Systems Alliance / Council initiative. We have no plans to allow any human Spectres, now or in the future, to disgrace us as Saren has done to the turians.

I: Furthermore, from all evidence we are seeing, this move of Saren's has been in the works for a very long time. It is not as if one day he started embezzling. He was cautious...and the Council freely admits it was not watching closely. For that we can only offer apologies, and the knowledge that all other Spectres are currently being vetted for any suspicious activity.

J: That's definitely comforting news. Attache Osoba, rumors have been flying around that the Systems Alliance was displeased enough with the events of yesterday to withdraw from the Citadel Charter. Is there any truth to this rumor?

D: Absolutely not. We informed the Council yesterday we needed additional time to wrap our investigation up, and when we presented them with our additional findings, they immediately acted not only to address the threat, but ensure humanity had a stake in vengeance for Eden Prime.

J: Yet there are calls from many Senators, demanding Council warships be dispatched to protect human interests. The Council has only decided to send out one Spectre. Don't you feel that the Council's reaction to the near destruction of one of our colonies is a touch restrained?

D: Khalisah, this is why I wish some elements of our government would clear public statements through my boss sometimes. Let's leave aside for the moment that humanity getting a Spectre is a clear nod to our progress and potential to one day hold an actual seat on the Council. Deploying a ship or two above each colony is only going to get some aliens killed along with humans. Our investigation shows that over 20 geth ships and what appears to be a geth dreadnaught attacked Eden Prime, with well over 1500 geth troops. Humanity currently has 46 colonies in the Traverse, and 11 in the Attican Expanse. There aren't even remotely enough ships in the Citadel Fleet to defend each colony with enough strength to ensure there is no invasion and leave enough left over to defend the rest of Council space.

I: {looking disgruntled} Additionally, we neither know where Saren is or where he plans to strike. He may be waiting for just such a weakening of the Citadel fleet to attack the Citadel or key member worlds directly. The Council would be blamed just as much if, in defending human colonies, Saren decides to strike volus, hanar, elcor, or other colonies on the edge of Citadel space. And frankly, given how widely dispersed humanity is, we don't have the fueling resources or crews to cover such a vast area.

J: So how does the Council plan to ensure humanity is safe from further attack?

D: There is a two-pronged approach. The Systems Alliance will be deploying additional units to the frontier. The 4th and 5th Marine Battalions are being converted into frontier battalions, which will be placed on at-risk worlds to stiffen defense and protect civilians. Furthermore, we will be contracting with private security forces to stiffen resistance on extremely vulnerable worlds without good defenses. For those planets without GARDIAN defense towers, we will deploy warships, mostly units from the 44th and 63rd Scout Flotilla. Finally, we plan to offer up contracts for an additional 500,000 security mechs, to stiffen colony defense forces.

J: And the second prong? Aside from the increased military stance?

D: We are working closely with the Council fleet to tie our communications networks together, and we are deploying an additional 1.6 million hardened FTL dedicated comm buoys over the next few weeks to prevent comms blackouts like the one that affected Eden Prime. These buoys will transmit an activity signal and system scan results constantly. Upon going dark, Council fleets will respond in force from the nearest Mass Relay to investigate. This is much more practical than scattering ships across the Traverse, and allows the Council fleets to continue to protect Council space while being ready to aid humanity.

J: That is very welcome news to those of our viewers watching from the colonies, I'm sure. But I'm afraid there are other questions not so easily dismissed. The Council seems very blasé to the risks humanity faces in settling the Traverse. They wish it to be settled and calm, but offer no long-term support. Do you feel the Council actions in response to this atrocity go far enough?

D: I know what you're getting at, ma'am. A lot of people are going to blame the Council, and perhaps the Systems Alliance, for not acting sooner. And as I always say, hindsight is 20/20. It's very easy for people who have lost loved ones, businesses, or friends to this tragic event to demand action and for someone to be held accountable. But reality always has to trump both sentiment and vengeance. Everything Spectres do is sealed, and the Council typically grants them great freedom in how they operate. Most build their own support networks of specialists, acquire multiple ships, even build bases to operate from.

I: {nods} To imply that the Council should have greater oversight of Spectres flies in the face of over 1,400 years of successful Spectre operations. In that span, only two other Spectres have gone bad, both of them over personal issues that did not involve any criminal element other than murdering someone who killed someone they loved. I understand the frustration of your species, Ms. al-Jiliani...but sometimes we must trust those we have decided are defenders of the galaxy.

J: Cold comfort for those who had relatives die and now hear of corruption maybe going back years. Why is there so much secrecy around Spectre operations and the Spectres themselves? That seems counter-intuitive to transparency and species responsibility, which is what the Council always seems to preach.

I: Originally it was to prevent incorporated methods of intelligence from being revealed. The earliest Spectres were converted STG members and asari huntresses. Over time, as the power of Spectre's increased, it was to protect the Spectre against blackmail, second guessing, or people protesting necessary but harsh calls made by the agent. Consider how your species has reacted to Commander Shepard's military background. To turians and asari, her ability to make the hard calls despite the cost is an admirable trait, but many of your people call her a murderer and her epithet of "Butcher of Torfan" seems insulting to us.

J: Many humans see her as extreme, when there are other ways to achieve the same goals – {is interrupted}

I: And that is the difference in how different cultures view success, however. Many times, there simply

**aren't** other ways to achieve the same goals, but people – especially humans- desperately want to believe that. Your fiction and entertainment venues are full of what you call anti-heroes, those who get deeds done by "breaking the rules" or going against popular opinion, but consistently, you only celebrate those who achieve greatness without paying the personal cost. Such a cultural trait is acceptable, when applied to your own ranks. But the Spectres are expected to defend the Citadel species as a whole at all costs. If that means a human colony dies so that 3 turian colonies live, so be it. If that means sacrificing asari ships and troops to prevent pirates from overwhelming a volus colony, so be it. We expect them to make the right choice from a set of often deeply unethical and troubling options.

D: We have such a concept in our culture, at least some of our cultures, called the Mandate of Heaven. To do what is right, not what is in one's own best interest. Unfortunately, it often feels as if that is turned against us, that alien races do what's in their own best interest, but we are expected only to do the right thing.

J: A telling statement, Matriarch.

I: Perhaps. But managing economies and governments across a span of 80,000 light years is not something that can be easily handled. The agents of such governments are not under tight restraints because they have to act, sometimes quickly, and with complete trust. {Gives a wry smile} As unhappy as some will always be with any government, I think our track record of success to failures speaks for itself. We remain deeply sorry that Eden Prime was so badly wounded by Saren, and we make no excuses for not preventing this from happening. But we also must be truthful and say that without the lack of oversight that made this possible, the Spectre program would have little value at all. And that, all things considered, the Council has the utmost faith in Commander Shepard to redeem the Spectre Corps by bringing Saren and his accomplices to justice.

J: We'll have to see if humanity is so accepting of Shepard in such an exalted role.

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## Chapter 31: Chapter 25 : Citadel, Departure I

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*A/N: Note the time stamp – doing weird things with time again. I know there seems to be a lot of what is commonly termed "fluff" – non storyline centric, non action pieces – in this story. Part of that is due to exploring the characters. We get such short thumbnail sketches of each person, but rarely in ME1 do we get to see how characters interact without Shepard. Given that standing next to a barely sane ball of murder and snark inhibits peoples conversation, additional scenes about the other people on board seem appropriate.*

*Besides, when the hell else am I gonna get to make a Shepard Punch joke?*

*Going forward, I'll be putting up notes on a forum. The link is in my profile.*

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January 25th, 2183 – 4:00 PM

The extranet was on **fire**.

Joker was comfortably ensconced in the cockpit of the Normandy, ostensibly to run a series of pre-flight systems checks. Right after the Council had publicly stripped Saren of his status and appointed Shepard to catch him, Anderson had taken off with Udina and had been ensconced now for hours in the Alliance Complex in Presidium.

As a result, Shepard had sent Alenko and Williams back to the Normandy with orders to get everything ship-shape for departure. She'd also communicated with Joker via commlink, and had issued a series of orders that was apparently the level 5 checklist for battle departure, from memory.

*"Joker, I want pre-launch tests done on all primary and secondary propulsion and flight control surfaces. That includes mechanical examination as well as electronic confirmation. Make sure we are topped up on fuel, and get a full charge on the fuel cells and emergency power systems as well. Have someone physically check all outer hatches, the emergency response beacons, and all Ship-Safe components."*

*She had paused, and then her voice sounded again, with what Joker imagined was a slight touch of amusement. "And order some real goddamned coffee, I wouldn't use that mess we have to torture batarians with."*

*Joker had laughed. "Damn, Commander, you even joke about torturing batarians?"*

*She had replied in a cool but still clearly amused voice. "No, Flight Lieutenant. I'm very professional when it comes to torturing batarians, and that coffee isn't up to snuff for that purpose, much less drinking. Throw the shit out the airlock."*

As a result, Joker was now an hour into second-stage flight control surfaces testing. The "wings" of the Normandy were mobile surfaces. The four Riggs/Royce Combine engines mounted on mass barrier secured pods could be reconfigured in angle and position. Battle position pulled the engines in close and tight, connecting them to quick-disconnect ports on the fuel lines for extra thrust. Scout position moved the more powerful upper pair back, while the lower pair angled for better maneuverability and turning radius. And in heat-dispersion mode, they pushed each module far apart and slid back the armored casings to vent waste heat. The process of moving the engine units, along with armored fuel hoses, was fraught with danger. A ruptured line could result in a fire or explosion, while failing hydraulics might result in an engine not locking in place, making the craft unstable.

Still the checks were routine and automated, and Joker passed the time looking through the extranet. Normally, he'd be checking Sursuration, seeing what juicy bits of gossip could go out in 150 bytes of text or less. Or watch silly videos on YouVid, an ancient human video streaming service. Instead, though, he had watched news stories on Commander Shepard becoming a Spectre.

And now, he laughed as human businesses were already marketing the event, and the human media spun it into every which direction. There were already t-shirts, haptic air-car stickers, and even a story about a possible documentary. Vloggers from all over human space had commented on their view of Shepard. Many from Earth, particularly the New York Arcology, were cheering her on, proud that one of their own was now the premier representative of Earth. The colony Horizon was hosting a 24-hour party to celebrate the "baddest bitch in space", hosted by rave-spinner and media maven Original Sins.

Others reacted with outrage, including the anti-war group Blue Stars No More, and as always, the ever negative mouthpiece that was Diana Allers and Battlespace, who interviewed a pack of bitter old vets who felt Shepard was a cruel butcher. And of course, the cranks came out of the woodwork as well – PETA using the event to bitch about the use of "actual leather" in Alliance uniforms, and Terra Firma claiming that the way Shepard had been treated yesterday was proof positive that the humanity first attitude it's membership had was well justified.

But that was only the tip of the iceberg, really. Already the various haptic image macros and demotivators had started, many of them using the recently leaked clips of battle-cam footage recorded by Chief Williams. Some enterprising soul had figured out that most of the 212 on Eden Prime was dead, and in the chaos that had reined immediately after the attacks, no one was really paying attention to a bunch of servers that would never be used again. Someone had hacked the automated video server

that recorded all of the infantry unit's battle suit and hard suit telemetry, coming up with pictures and video logged from the cams of Williams and Cole.

Joker grinned as he watched a video of Master Sergeant Cole standing atop a pile of geth bodies, talking shit and strangling a geth with one hand, shooting them in half with another, smoking a cigar. The video was sound-tracked with the new synth-trip song "Didn't know who he fucked with".

Pictures and video that were *awesome*.

By far the most popular so far was a video clip that started with a frozen still image of Shepard, hanging in midair, face in a rictus grin of rage, eyes like blazing supernovae, fist pulled back and alight with biotic energy. A geth prime looked up, firing it's huge weapon desperately. The image was still for about 3 seconds, then animated, showing nothing but a slow motion close up of an armored fist smashing through the geth's head. A fade to black, and then bold letters flying onto the haptic image. "SHEPARD. PUNCH." The haptic image ended in a OMGMemeNET extranet link to some ancient video game called F-Zero.

51 million hits in a little over 6 hours.

Grainy video of Shepard flying through the air, her form limned in blue radiance, slamming into a pile of geth. Some clever image editing had given the geth silly faces, and inserted comments like "oh shiat", "i can see my server from here", and "ow, my eye". The image moved slowly through the entire biotic explosion that followed, ending with Shepard screaming "STRIKE, BITCHES!" Small print at the bottom scrolled across. "Bowling average: 254. NorthAm Bowling Commission rules this a spare, sorry, Shepard."

Many of the images were older, from other battle fields. A pieced together vid of Shepard leaping from atop a crane to dive downwards, elbow pointing down, right arm locked in an angle, to smash into the back of an elcor mercenary and snap it's spine. "Backpain? Try a Shepard Piledriver Massage." Some of the images were sickening or disturbing, such as aftermath footage of a line of batarian corpses, each with a grisly bullet wound in the forehead, captioned with "Is this the kind of person we want representing humanity? Damn straight. Remember Mindoir."

Endless static image macros, from the ancient, such as AdviceShepard – "Get shot out of sky. Kill 50 batarians with your knife. Get told you're a Butcher." – to the modern, such as Council Hates You, complete with air-quoting turian councilor. "Stop geth attack single handedly. Get told by turian councilor they've dismissed you as a frame job". A picture of her in boot-camp training, wearing a t-shirt and the extremely skimpy shorts recruits are issued, displaying long, cocoa-toned legs, glaring at whoever took the picture. "Everyone wants to bang her. Everyone too scared to try." A somewhat long-range picture of her talking to an attractive, smiling woman while a guy standing next to her looks nervous. "Your girlfriend cheats on you with Shepard. YOU apologize."

Joker cackled at that one. *She could break any one of my bones .. damn...would probably be totally worth it.*

Even the mainstream media got into it a little bit, HumorNet posting a skit of popular actress Ylena Samuels Jackson as a crazed Shepard's demands someone bring her gun to her. When a second figure asked how to identify it in an armory full of weapons, Ylina had folded her arms and cocked out her hip in the iconic "pissed off Shepard" stance Joker had seen and said "the one that says crazy motherfucker".

VTV was hosting a Shepard-lookalike contest. A Shepard-lookalike *wet t-shirt* contest. Joker tagged that one in his bookmarks for later review.

Some of the commentary and video was mean-spirited and cruel, poking fun at Shepard's early life.

Some of it was witty and reflective, commenting on the irony of a former criminal rising from a sordid past to win the highest honors awarded by the Systems Alliance and now becoming a Spectre. Some of it was touching – a series of images of peaceful fields, people building homes, children playing over the wreckage of an Alliance dropship, and a shot of hundreds of people each holding a candle, sent by "the 1,139 people saved by Commander Shepard on Dirth, who owe every new day to her". Some of it was inspiring, the owner of the New York Mets announcing a ten-million credit scholarship to get young, disadvantaged kids out of the ghetto and into the military that he dedicated to the "spirit and courage of Commander Shepard, one of New York's own."

It was crazy. Mania, actually. After seeing the horrific images from the attack on Eden Prime, after being so cruelly disappointed yesterday, with the concept of never achieving vengeance for Eden Prime, of the Council dismissing humanity, their rapid about face had driven people to pin the rapid turnaround solely on Shepard.

And that drew commentary from all parts of Earth, and some of those messages were just... well, weird. Joker was reviewing that part now, bits of commentary from the Chinese Federation that didn't seem to quite translate cleanly.

It was a still image of a tiny, cute kitten, super imposed over a near-dead batarian, as if sitting on it's chest, but it's eyes had been edited out and replaced with Shepard's. The kitten's front left paw was draped over a huge handgun bigger than it was, the barrel smoking as if just fired. The batarian had a look of horror on it's blood-spattered face. The caption read "ShepardCat is watching, but can't remember if she's fired five shots or six. Do you feel lucky, punk? Well, do ya?"

Just as he was about to punch up an extranet search – maybe it referred to an old song or something – he heard extremely heavy footsteps in the airlock, and then a thud as something big entered.

Joker turned around in his seat, almost absently, still half puzzling over the macro, and looked up to see a giant krogan standing there, a shotgun longer than either of Joker's legs held casually in one hand like a cane. "Um, hah, uh... can I .. help you?"

The krogan gave Joker a steady, baleful gaze. His armor was blood red, pitted and seemingly recently patched. *And bloodstained, wonderful.* The krogan's face looked like he had lost a fight with a really hacked-off lion, long scars trailing from the big red plate above his face down his cheeks and mouth to his throat.

"Shepard sent me." The bulbous red eyes focused on him, then dismissed him. "I'm looking for .. a funny man. Wait, that's not the right translation." Joker just blanked for a moment. "Uh, what? Ah. I mean... I don't think we have a crazy alien assembly spot. How did you get in anyway?"

The krogan tilted his head. "Never figured she'd have a drooling halfwit for a pilot. I'm looking for a... Joker. That's it. You're funny, but in a stupid, kicked in the head by a varren kind of way. You simple or something? She gave me an access code. There a problem with that?"

"Yes. I mean no. Shit. Look. Shepard said something about aliens showing up, but I was expecting you to be... escorted. You just can't go running around the ship! It's a military vessel."

The krogan stepped forward, leaning down. "And who is going to stop me? You?" He gave a heavy growl, displaying a massive array of teeth as he gave the most terrifying grin Joker had ever seen, worse than the holodisplay of a T-rex he had seen and been scared of on Tiptree.

"Calm down, Joker. The Council is sending him along with us." From behind the Krogan, Alenko walked up, smiling faintly. "And Wrex, please try not scare ... or eat ... the pilot. He may not look like much, but he's the only one we have."

The krogan, for his part, was now staring at Joker's unattended screen. "What the ... " Alenko glanced over and immediately tried and failed to smother a laugh. "Oh, God, Joker. I thought you were running diagnostics."

Joker spluttered. "I WAS. But they're so boring. And how likely is it that one of the engines would really just fly off spontaneously. I mean, the ship wasn't built with scab labor...was it? Never mind. I was just passing the time."

The krogan's face had taken on a truly confused cast. "What is that?"

Alenko coughed, grinning. "It's ... an old form of human .. uh, humor, I guess. It's called an image macro. Back when humanity was just beginning to use computers, this sort of thing was popular. It's a reference to an old movie from about 200 years ago. They...don't make a lot of sense unless you get the inside joke."

Wrex shook his massive head. "How is that funny? Funny is when she killed that batarian terrorist on Shuler by hacking his explosives cache and blowing him up with his own C-11. That was funny. This is just ..."

Alenko shrugged. "Humans take some getting used to, Wrex." The krogan shrugged. "Maybe. I don't know, it's still weird fighting along human females. At least yours fight without so much... talking. And thinking. And then asking questions..." Wrex's tone was aggrieved and confused.

Joker and Alenko glanced at each other a long moment before bursting into laughter.

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Garrus sat in his mostly empty office in C-Sec, almost all of his belongings now neatly packed away in the 5 crates that lined the back wall. He had already spent a couple of hours packing a few belongings from his apartment, and that was already paid up through next year. Hopefully, he wouldn't be gone THAT long.

Across the office, Forlan sat at his own desk, toying with his M-41 Talon pistol. A human creation, the Talon was the first generation of a "close-in" sidearm, utilizing a shotguns choke and pelleted ammo, but with oversized mass effect fields to control the recoil, resulting in a hand-held weapon that fired with the kick of an ODIN assault shotgun. The weapon overheated with only a few shots, and went through ammo blocks in a manner of days rather than months, but it would put a hole through almost any shielding or armor at close range. Forlan gently ran a rag over it's slide, before reassembling the cleaned weapon. "Where will you be going? Do you even know?"

Garrus shook his head, signing some forms to release all of his C-sec gear back into the armory. He was wearing his own personal armor – passed down from his father – the heavy black angled suit feeling almost too loose on his large frame, the blue trim the same color as his face paint. "Not .. really. It's all happened so fast I'm not even sure I can properly catalog everything." He stood, checking everything one last time. He'd turned in his pistols and shotgun, his armor, and of course his badge, keeping only his precious Model 19 anti-material rifle, a gift from his old commanding officer in the military. "From what little Shepard told me, they already have some dextro food and sleeping areas ready, they had prepped that for Nihlus, the poor bastard. I have no clue how a human crew will react to a turian, especially after what Saren has done, but .. " He gave a shrug. "Not much choice now. I'll be damned if I sit on my ass while Pallin figures out which talon to stick up his chute next."

Forlan only nodded. "I wish Pallin had not suspended you. It's not right."

Garrus sighed. "Forlan... I turned in my resignation after Shepard asked me to come with her. I can't...do this anymore." He looked at his partner and gave a weak smile. "I never realized before just

how much pressure and stress I had put on myself. Trying to be like my father. Trying to be like Pallin. Trying to be a good turian, someone respectable. All the time that barefaced bastard is out there plotting to kill people, to betray us all. And when the time comes to bring him to justice...we were this close to letting him get away with it!" The turian's fist slammed into the mostly empty top of his desk.

"Infuriating. Unacceptable. At least the Council has enough sense to authorize whatever methods are needed to bring him in." He looked away, at the frosted glass at the front of the office, at his name in reverse printed neatly there. "I can't keep telling myself I should be here... when all I do here is run down the symptoms of the sickness in galactic society... and sometimes, not even being able to bring them down because of some stupid regs."

Forlan got up, stretching, and shook his head, his narrow features constricted and almost pained looking. "I will admit, chasing thugs and drug runners is more rewarding than figuring out which batch of air-car racers is sabotaging the speed detection devices on the ward walls. And I can understand your frustration with regulations. At the same time, Garrus...you are too quick to anger. You react, sometimes without thinking of costs or consequences. I know Pallin seems like a bitter old cloaca lost in a world of doing things by the book to you." The salarian sighed. "But sometimes, you have to do it the right way."

Garrus shook his head. "And look people in the eye who have been tortured and turned into living test tubes, tell them that they don't matter? Rules and regulations didn't save Eden Prime. They didn't stop the Blue Suns from killing that little boy last month, or the red sand deals Eclipse makes. They didn't stop the Council from deciding that when politics was more important, laws could go by the wayside. I'm not going to justify myself. I'm a bad turian, because I'm not a robot." He reached out with a single talon to trace the silver name plate on his desk. "I will miss it, and you. But I have to do what I think is right."

Forlan smiled then. "Never said you were wrong, just for you to think about it. I guess you're about ready to head out?"

Garrus nodded. "If you don't mind dropping me off, that is. Shepard gave me a passcode to get on the ship but said to make sure I was aboard by no later than 1900. I would like to be early so I can try to get a feel of the crew and get my possessions stowed."

Forlan put one thin hand on the big turian's arm. "Yeah. But before we go, two things. First...Officer Telanya asked if she could run you out to the ship. She wanted you to come visit her first." Garrus chuckled. "That girl doesn't give up, does she? Well, I definitely won't say no this time. Just more proof that I'm a bad turian, sleeping with asari all the time instead of some nice turian girl."

Forlan coughed. "The fixation on intercourse with other species continues to astound. Waste of time, waste of money, and waste of energy. And mood music concept remains confusing. But...that's not important. The other thing..." Forlan exhales, looking up. "I want you to take care of yourself out there. I won't be there to watch your back or keep the bad guys from getting in close. I can't go along, I have too many responsibilities to my family, and frankly, chasing after a Spectre on an experimental ship with krogan, humans and quarians sounds like bad vid theatre."

Garrus laughed. "I will be careful, old friend."

Forlan nodded. "Good. Take this, then. I can't be there ...but I can still make sure you have a good close in weapon." He handed over the heavy pistol he'd polished, still in its black leather holster.

Garrus's mandibles flex in surprise. "Spirits, Forlan, I can't take this. You spent half a years salary on this!"

Forlan's voice drops in pitch a bit. "You can take it, and you *will*. I never really mentioned this before,

but .. I had a friend on Eden Prime. A human I worked with in the STG before I turned to C-Sec. Good guy, friendly even to aliens, a member of their Special Forces units. He's dead, and I believe his offspring must be as well." Forlan sighs. "I am not a sentimental man. Salarians... process our emotional states rapidly. But a part of me is deeply ... unhappy .. that good people died while the Council...and C-Sec...did nothing. You took action. You made this happen."

Forlan pressed the pistol into Garrus's oversize hands, holster and all. "Take it and put a hole in the monster who would kill innocents in his lust for power."

Garrus hesitated, then nodded. "I .. I will." He shifted back onto his spurs a bit, and then straightened as his comm-tool chimed. Glancing at it, his face took on a wry cast. "Officer Telanya just messaged me, asking if it would be inappropriate to have a drink before I dash off to save the galaxy."

Forlan snorted. "Go, get out of here. Not interested in any more bragging or bad puns about popping heat sinks." Garrus laughed and picked up his small bag, slipping the pistol into it before turning and nodding to his partner. "Stay safe , Forlan." With his usual swaggering walk, Garrus left the office, the room brightening momentarily until the frosted-glass door shut behind him, casting everything into dimness once more.

Forlan stared at the floor, and nodded to himself. "Yeah. You too, kid."

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Tali stood motionless at the hatch of the *Sullen Cloud*, staring at the now blackened streaks and smears of blood that marred it's side. Activating her omni-tool, she exhaled to calm herself, and began recording.

"Lieutenant Dost, this is Tali'Zorah. When you get this, the Shadow Broker should have delivered Troyce's frigate back to Caleston, registered to your name. He offered it to me, but.. I have something else I have to do. To avenge Troyce ... and finish my Pilgrimage on my own, not have it given to me. "

She paused, looking around the empty docking pier, seeing the broken railing where she almost died, the pitting in the decking from shotgun blasts, seeing Troyce's last strong, elegant movements before his end in her mind's eye. "C-captain Troyce died ... saving me. He stood alone against two krogan killers, b-because I froze and then p-panicked and ran. I'm .. I'm sorry. He was ... one of the nicest, most open people I have met, and in the few hours we had to talk , I called him my friend, too."

She sniffled, and shook her head, air from her suit system already trying to dry her face of the tears that streamed down her cheeks. "I wish I had some ... words.. to make all this... easier. To make it not hurt so much, inside, where it won't stop. I wish I was like these aliens I'm about to set off with, able to just forget and move on. But I can't."

"Please tell Kiana'Shaal that she was right about me. I am just a child, too full of the stories of the Migrant Fleet to know what the real universe is like. I was angry at her then, demanding to be treated with respect, claiming like a fool that I was ready. I was not. And Troyce paid for my unreadiness."

She clenched her fist, and her eyes burned but no longer watered. "I won't make that mistake again. Keelah se'lai." She turned the recording off, and beamed it to the ship , before walking away, forcing herself to walk calmly and with her head up, spine straight.

At the end of the pier, Tetrimus stood like an obsidian statue, unmoving in his dark black robes, only the glow of his cybernetic eye setting off his form, outlining the tattered plates of his face. "I will ensure the ship reaches Caleston myself, Miss Zorah. As I said, Troyce would want someone to get use out of it... and we owe the man a debt. Dead or not, the Broker always pays his debts." The black-cloaked figure paused. "Turians have excellent hearing, and I could not help but hear your message. I

am not a soft or comforting figure, by any means, and neither is the work I do. But you are very wrong if you think yourself a failure for not being able to somehow save Captain Troyce."

She looked up, frame shaking. "If I hadn't run-"

His voice was like ice mixed with the scrape of steel. "Then you would be dead. Raik Bole had killed several skilled members of the Shadow Broker's personal extraction team, and I believe he was wanted for the murder of a Spectre candidate a few years ago. And Weryloc Shan was so feared that even Wrex did not want to believe he had killed him with such ease. Shan was best known for surviving a crash landing from orbit after being shot out of the sky by Blue Suns, killing them all and stealing their ship. Fighting either one of them was simply beyond any skills you might have. For Troyce to have killed one at all is quite frankly astounding, given his age and the fact that he had early stage Keprals Syndrome."

Tali sighed, but nodded. Tetrimus was too cold and too .. bitter to ever shade the truth in consideration of her feelings. "I... t-thank you for telling me that."

The turian said nothing for a long moment. "I only worked alongside a quarian once, an arrogant , prideful young fool on his Pilgrimage who got caught up in events far over his head. Like you, he was convinced at first that he could handle anything, then blamed himself when the violence of a galaxy he had never really been exposed to was too much. Like you, he had a ridiculous notion that he had some grandiose duty to society rather than making a fortune from fools and the weak and moving on."

The turian glanced at Tali before turning away, cloak fluttering in the wake of his stride. "And like his daughter, Rael'Zorah needed to be told the truth before he could find his own strength. I wish you good business, young one. I believe your kind say keelah se'lai when you depart."

Another step, and he vanished into electricity and air, before she could even process her response. *My father was on the Citadel during his Pilgrimage, and worked with Tetrimus?*

She was still a long moment, and then a small smile came to her. She at last something to talk to her father about in her next email home. Exhaling, and taking the old turian's words to heart, she lifted her head and began walking towards the secure docking bays where the Normandy was docked.

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*Well, that's that.*

The Normandy , of course, had it's been assigned it's own armory officer, someone named Jenkins, but that worthy figure had perished the recovery of the last of the 212. Williams sighed as she finished the inventory of the weapons and transmitted the results to the quartermaster, feeling a quiet sense of satisfaction at having duty, and being a part of such an important mission, even if it was only for a few days until the Normandy would dock with an Alliance base and get replacement personnel. She wasn't happy about that eventuality, knowing the Alliance would bury her in some other backwater, simply because she was a Williams.

*Dad... I'm gonna fix this, someday. Clear our name. Make you proud.*

She picked up her Avenger , racking the slide, and making sure it was clear before slamming the bolt home an putting it in her weapons locker.

Turning away from the lockers, she gave the cargo bay a once over, checking for unstowed crates or lose items that would possibly move in transit. Finding none, she opened the armor lockers and considered the hard-suits therein.

Her own lightweight Marine armor was so much scrap after Eden Prime, the quartermaster had already

reduced what was left to omni-gel and pulled a fresh suit of Onyx armor, standard gear for space-side Marine security details. The black armor was heavier and more angular than her old Phoenix gear. Her suit was pristine. The armor of Lieutenant Alenko was still a bit banged up, but a few minutes with omni-gel and a shaping tool would fix that up.

Commander Shepard's armor, on the other hand, was wrecked. The chest plate was bowed inwards and studded with shards of red-tinted metal, the legacy of the close-range explosive death of the Geth Prime on Eden Prime. The right arm was mostly gone, stripped to tattered bits of the armor under-layer. The legs were breached in multiple places, the left arm warped and brittle.

She went to work on it, laying each piece out on the work table and pulling spares from the heavy lockers set on either side of the hanger bay doors. Turning on the radio in her omni-tool, she listened to old rock and roll as she worked. Fixing the chest plate would be tedious, but there was no real spare for the entire assembly, so each fragment of metal had to be pulled out with pliers, sealed with omnigel, and the whole thing lathed back into shape.

She heard the elevator door open behind her, and heavy steps stomping into the bay. "This is the hangar bay, Wrex. Typically not a lot of through traffic. It would be a perfect place to set up the other Link, and .. well, it's large enough and out of the way enough that spending time here during transit might be best."

She half turned, glancing over her shoulder, as Alenko and the big alien mercenary stood at the edge of the bay, looking around. "Huh. At least it's decent sized. Yeah, this will work. I'll need a mainline ODR connection to set up the Link." Wrex's voice reverberated slightly in the hold, it's already gruff tones taking on a more menacing, growling texture as a result. Alenko moved next to the weapons lockers and slide aside an access panel, indicating several fist-sized connection points. "Here, and here. These good?"

Wrex examined them closely, then slid a slender black box from the bag he carried in one meaty paw. He withdrew a heavy cable, which he connected with great care, and then attached to what look like a flip-top haptic interface system, which, after a moment of fiddling, he connected to the wall magnetically. The haptics lit up a vivid blue color, swirling into a stylized image of an open-lidded eye.

Wrex grunted. "Alright, I'm in. Just like with the other Link, human, this one is secure. Anyone touches it without the proper gene sequence, it won't work. If they try fiddling with it, it'll wipe itself. And I don't know how to fix it."

Alenko nodded. "I.. I don't think any of our people would mess with it, Wrex."

Wrex nodded. "Good. Humans don't taste much better than turians, I'd hate to have to eat one of you. So many small bones, they get stuck in my teeth." Williams just stared at the alien, mouth hanging open slightly, and Wrex nudged Alenko. "The female looks as if she's either -"

"Wouldn't finish that sentence, Wrex. Remember the chat about our women?" Alenko's voice was wry. "Chief, how is the armory coming along?"

She shook her head and saluted. "Sir. I've gotten all the weapons put away, except for .. any ordinance our guests may be bringing on board." She gave a very hard look at the gigantic shotgun still clipped to Wrex's back. "When not underway, we usually stow weapons in these lockers...Wrex." She gestured to the row of ordinance lockers.

Wrex just shrugged. "Whatever." He walked over to the lockers, peering at them before locating the only one marked with Tuchankan script. He immediately tensed, his posture dropping slightly, his voice angry. "Who labeled these? This says King of the Urdnot. Is someone mocking me?"

Alenko shook his head in confusion. "N-no! We just put your name into the translator and printed out what popped up! I mean, sometimes it works phonetically, and "Rex" in one of our core languages means king, but..."

Wrex stared at the script a long, long moment, his eyes no longer angry but full of .. something that looked very much to Williams like pain. Frowning, she turned back to work the armor again, as Wrex finally opened the locker and shoved in his gun. "Anything else, Alenko? I'm getting hungry here."

Alenko shook his head. "The only areas I haven't shown you are the various staterooms where officers sleep, and Engineering, which I doubt you care about. Shepard wants everyone in the comm room at 1900 to meet with the Captain about our next move. The mess decks has, um, krogan cuisine loaded."

Wrex nodded. "Whatever." With a disinterested air, the big krogan walked back to the elevator, while Alenko stepped next to Williams. "Fixing up the XO's suit, Williams? Why not just replace it?"

Williams gave a jerky shrug. "Who knows? XO's orders. LT, are we really just gonna let aliens walk all over the ship? I mean, it's cutting edge Alliance technology?"

Alenko gave a sigh. "I already had this talk, or something like it, with Captain Anderson briefly via commlink. The bottom line is the ship is a joint human-turian design. Because of how it was built, the specs are not exactly secret. And after all the damned publicity at Eden Prime, everyone knows about the Normandy's capabilities. As far as the aliens, well..."

Alenko rubbed the back of his neck, eyes looking somewhat tired. "We chit chatted about this on the mess decks last night, Chief. The way I see it, aliens are just people. Weird looking people sometimes, with scales. But they're still just jerks and saints. They still feel pain, and fear, and love. They still get angry and happy."

Williams angrily jerked a particularly large fragment of geth metal out of the commander's pauldron and shrugged, tossing the chunk of metal into a waste bucket next to the work table. It landed on a small pile of other fragments with a musical, muted clink. "I get that, sir. Like I said, I'm not into all the Earth First bullshit. But we still have to be ... prepared... if things get stupid like they were before we found the evidence to prove Saren was guilty. They were writing us off!"

She paused, then looked at Alenko. "We can't always trust today's allies to be tomorrow's allies. I worry that having aliens all over the ship, with exposure to our technologies -"

Alenko shook his head. "Chief, please. If not for aliens, we'd never have any evidence to prove Saren was dirty. Without an alien helping us, we'd never have found the evidence in time. Without an alien, the Council would have laughed us out of the room again. I get what you mean. You think it's not smart to rely on aliens, because when push comes to shove, everyone looks out for themselves."

Alenko turned away, staring at the deck, as if considering something. "But...at the end of the day, Chief, the aliens on this ship are here to stop Saren. Like I said, we can't go it alone, or we end up like the batarians. This is too important, too big, to think we can handle it all ourselves."

Williams sighed, wrenching another fragment of metal from the armor plating in front of her. "And like I said last night, I just shoot things and look good, LT. I'm not saying I am gonna complain to the CO or anything. I just..." She shrugged. "Shit, I don't know. I guess this is just moving all too fast for me, and I haven't had time to adjust. Not like it matters, I won't be here long. Just point me at the bad guys. I just wish I was as good at it as you are, with your biotics. I could really get into crushing a damned geth with my mind."

Alenko smiled, that amused but gentle sort of smile that lit his whole face up. *Damn, why does she have to be so cute? I mean, dimples, really?* "It's okay, Chief. I admire the fact you say it straight and I don't

have to worry about where you stand. Too often, people are .. hesitant to even talk to a biotic like a normal person. Some people don't even see our value in the Marines. And most certainly don't confide in us. I appreciate that you've never acted that way."

Williams just shook her head, turning from the armor to face him fully, crossing her arms under her breasts. "Sorry, sir... but treating you *badly* because you are a better soldier due to your skills is about the dumbest thing I've ever heard. I don't understand why anyone would ever do that. Unlike most of the officers I've fought with, you always check your people, listen carefully, and kick ass in every fight you're in. I saw the helmet cam tapes from Chora's Den. Not only did you keep the civvies safe, you kept up in the kill count with a giant alien killing machine and Commander Shepard. Sounds pretty valuable to me."

Alenko's smile widened, and he sort of ducked his head, as if embarrassed. "I ... won't take up any more of your time, Chief. I really should make sure the turian is settled in, and Miss Zorah will be here soon." *Shit, LT, you taking up my time is something I'll never complain about.*

He walked away, but paused. "Oh yeah, one more thing." He looked back over his shoulder , and grinned. "Commander Shepard had you and Cole transferred official to the Normandy. The security contingent didn't have any senior sergeants, so you're the new squad leader of second squad. If we have to wide deploy, 1st squad with Cole will deploy with Shepard, and you and 2nd squad will deploy with me. Welcome aboard, Chief."

*Holy shit, she got us transferred! I'm finally out of stupid garrison duty!* She thought she was just going to be on the ship a few days, but .. "T-thank you , sir. I look forward to serving under you."

Alenko nodded, turning away, and she ended up watching him every step of the way to the elevator, his confident , easy walk making his muscles ripple under his BDU's. *Just looking won't hurt, surely. Damn.* As he got in, he looked up, an almost teasing expression on his face, his smile now a smirk. "Try not to stare, Chief." he said.

She blinked as the door slid shut. *He did not just...* She flushed, then, turning back to her work, shaking her head. *Stupid, stupid Williams. Having a crush on your superior officer, regardless of how nice his ass is, is just asking for problems.*

She sighed, then returned to fixing Shepard's armor, thoughts of all-too-attractive lieutenants occupying her mind.

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## Chapter 32: Chapter 26 : Citadel, Departure II

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*A/N: The sequence of events after leaving the Citadel will start out familiar to most, at least. Obviously they have to pick up Little Miss Prothean Expert .. the idea that anyone could survive more than a few days without water in the heat put out by a semi-active volcano is stupid.*

*However, there's still a few bits and pieces before they actually get there. Like Garrus snarking. And speeches. And a calibration reference.*

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January 25th, 2183 – 6:00 PM

Shepard had spent the entire afternoon in the Spectre office, and for the first time in a very long time, actually felt like the new kid. Being surrounded by people who , as a living, were expected to do the impossible, and were given everything needed to do the impossible, was actually humbling. She had

met 3 other Spectres, all of them rather understated in their ego, but all clearly very, very dangerous. They had welcomed her, showed her a few things, and let her get to know other Spectres that had come through the offices.

The so-called offices were tucked almost as an afterthought in the Presidium Ring between the Human and Turian embassy offices. From the outside, the space didn't seem like anything special – a security door, the Spectre emblem printed in frosted white paint across two armor-plas windows that revealed only blank walls behind them. Looked plain. Boring, even.

Inside was apparently the alien idea of the motherfucking *Batcave*.

The purported "office" was the size of a small base, wrapping around the edges of the ring for hundreds of feet. The interior was done in a dark, blue steel, with heavy rubber matting covering the floors. Printed pictures of various older Spectres, each a foot high, lined the tops of the long corridors connecting the various elements of the lair. There were armories full of illegal and experimental weapons, giant battle-suits that stood 12 feet tall, personal flitters, a private medical recovery ward, libraries with every form of research, a plastic surgeon, rooms of data banks and monitoring equipment. Meandering through all of it must have been a thousand vidscreens and audio-banks of news feeds, from asari mainstream nightly news to hanar religious exhortations to what sounded like vorcha talk radio.

All in all, it was amazing, and scary. It was the tree-house hideaway of a pack of government-backed vigilantes, each and everyone a certifiable badass in something, from financial investigation to FTL plotter sabotage to one extremely scary asari who was apparently a master of creating solid darts of gaseous poison and biotic force to silently assassinate anyone who was considered troublesome.

*I should probably tell Udina to be more polite.*

Hours later, Shepard was finally headed back to her ship, the back of the air-car loaded with things she wasn't even sure she fully understood. The most important thing they had educated her on was what Spectres could and couldn't do, and that they were expected to pay their own way because all Spectres usually got both a vast salary from the Council and support from their home governments.

There had been discussions of a medical system called UNITI, universal intratransmitted something or the other, a method to use primitive nanotechnology to upgrade medigel efficiency to patch up critically wounded squad mates. There was a crash course on GhostNet, a system of intelligence files and request system to allow Spectres the latest information and to obtain special equipment and reinforcements. There were even books – Citadel Laws, electronic guides on exactly what few limits Spectres had, seemingly endless demonstrations of just how much influence was at her fingertips. 3 brand new Revenant LMG's were on their way to her ship, free of charge, the manufacturer having offered to disable the fabrication rights management module to allow her to upgrade them to her hearts content.

*Well, now I know how James Bond felt. One half kid in a candy store, one half pissing-my-pants overwhelmed.*

With a head full of jumbled knowledge, still wearing her Spectre cape, Shepard piloted the aircar down to the pad next to the Normandy. A line of mechs and crew members was already loading the last supplies onto the ship, while she saw Engineer Adams on port wing with mag-boots, performing a few last-minute checks of the hull. Strangely enough, Udina was there too, having an animated, somewhat strained looking conversation with Captain Anderson near the far end of the pier. She killed the aircar's engine, pushing the doors up and out of her way, and waved over a crewman. "Get everything in the back loaded into storage, except the black boxes, pile those in my stateroom." Barely bothering to acknowledge his salute and response, she walked over to where Udina and Anderson were conversation, both men turning to her as she got close.

"Good, you're here." Udina still wore the elegant brown jacket he had on yesterday, but now it was crumpled, and he looked tired and drawn. "I've managed to square things away with the Admiralty. Barely. They aren't happy that you are serving the Council and have been stolen away from the System Alliance command structure." Shepard smiled. "Then I have good news. Talking to the Spectres, they informed me that every Spectre usually remains associated to their military. The duty I have is higher than that of my duty as a commander, but doesn't nullify it. I still take my orders from Arcturus, sir, as long they don't conflict with the orders the Council gives."

The muscles in Udina's face relaxed some. "That .. that is very good news, Commander. With someone else, I'd be worried they would abuse their immunity to ignore orders they don't like. But your dedication to duty is well known." He exhaled. "As far as the rest goes, well..." Anderson spoke up. His face was somber, almost resigned. "Shepard, Alliance brass decided that the best way to handle the situation is .. for you to take command of the Normandy. They can't have her captained by someone else taking orders from a lesser officer who is at the behest of .. aliens. So, you are now the CO. Nav Pressley will be your XO. It's quick, quiet, you know the crew, and , well..."

Shepard's jaw dropped, and her eyes narrowed. "This is bullshit, sir! The only reason I even requested a space-side posting is to be able to work with *you*! You and Saren have a history, and they Council used it against you, and you don't even get to command the ship they gave you to kill the fucker?" She felt sick at her stomach, shaking her head. "No." Anderson put his hand on her shoulder, carefully looking into her eyes. "Sara. You've stood around under my shadow long enough. You don't need me looking over your shoulder to tell you when you did good and when you messed up. You know. You busted your ass to get command status when you were still ground-pounding hoping against hope you'd get to fight along side me. And you did, kid."

Anderson looked down. "But now this has to be your fight. I didn't bring all this to a head. I didn't get it done. I didn't convince the Council to do the right thing, you did. You know the crew, you said it yourself, they're the best of the best. It isn't like I've had command of the ship for years and you're stealing it from me, it was a shakedown run. You need the Normandy's abilities to operate deep in the Traverse. And you need to be able to say no one is calling the shots but you. You've always had to deal with someone questioning your orders, someone not giving you the support you need. We can't afford that now."

Udina frowned. "If it's any consolation, Shepard, I am not pleased with this outcome either. Captain Anderson and I may have had a few testy words before seeing the Council. . . but he has been both a staunch defender of humanity and a hero for years." Udina folded his arms. "That being said, I have need of him here, to be honest. I will have to deal with Alliance Command a great deal, and I am not military. Already I am all too often ignored when I try to advise the Senate Military Commission, because I don't get it , according to them. Anderson will be able to influence policy here and abroad."

Anderson gave the human ambassador a smile. "Thanks, Ambassador. It's good to know I won't be piloting a desk uselessly." He turned back to Shepard. "You can do this, kiddo."

Shepard looked down, refusing to meet his stare, but the captain just squeezed her shoulder again. "You are still the best soldier I ever trained. I told you before, I don't trust any other human with the kind of power a Spectre has. But I trust you. I trust you to get it done, no matter what, and to make me proud. You're..the closest thing to a daughter I've got. You know that. And you know that I'll always have your back. So just .. keep your chin up. Okay?"

Shepard nodded, looking almost... forlorn for a moment before the mask came down again. "I will, sir."

Udina had turned to watch the crew loading supplies onto the Normandy, giving them a little privacy, and now, cleared his throat, as if he wasn't comfortable watching the two of them interact in such a

personal manner. "The Council has only given us two possible leads. The first is rather direct, the second is most likely pointless tail chasing. First, we have zero possible locations for Saren or Benezia, but Benezia has a daughter, one Liara T'soni. She's at a remote Prothean dig site on Therum. She specializes in researching the Prothean extinction. Her theories have been dismissed, because she maintains that the Protheans were obliterated deliberately by a more powerful culture and that whatever killed them probably killed species before the Protheans, in some kind of cycle."

Shepard's eyes narrowed. "The Reapers."

Udina nodded. "Yes. Tevos is still questioning if they actually exist or not, but everyone on the Council agrees we cannot afford to take the chance they don't. This Liara woman is our best lead – directly connected to Benezia and researching what we are fighting. Go and determine if she's connected to this mess or not, and report back to the Council."

Shepard nodded. "Immediately, sir. The second lead you spoke of?"

Udina sighed. "Over the past 2 years, 5 Prothean research sites have been attacked and looted, and over 15 volus merchant ships supplying Prothean research sites have been boarded and attacked. We don't know 100% for certain why, but the Broker – through Wrex - informed us that Saren was behind these raids. The ships have nothing but fuel and food, really, supplies for the camps, but if Saren is attacking them, we need to figure out why. We received a fragmentary distress call from a volus cargo-liner about 10 hours ago. Too late to help, but not to investigate the wreckage and see what you can find."

Shepard glanced around the pier, and turned back to Anderson. "Alright, then. I... I'll be back, sir."

Anderson smiled. "I know you will, Commander. She's all yours now."

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At 1850, Shepard ordered the airlock sealed and primary start up on the mass effect drive core. She walked through the ship, seeing all stationed manned, every face looking alert and ready, and entered the cockpit. Joker was sitting there, reading a long screen of text topped with the Systems Alliance logo, a look of shock on his face. He turned in his chair to look at her, frowning. "Orders .. just came through Commander. Guess Captain Anderson could withstand anything except backroom military politics." She nodded, jaw still tight. "It pisses me off. He should be here. He .. makes us all better. I feel like I'm stealing the damned ship from him."

Joker turned his chair all the way around to face her, frowning. She noticed absently that he had not shaved in several days. "Ma'am, with all due respect, that's bullshit. Everyone on this ship saw you throw your ass on the line on Eden Prime, they saw you fighting to get things done on the Citadel. Most of all, we all know how much you respect Captain Anderson. We're not blind, ma'am. We're all behind you 100% of the way." She looked at him a long moment and then just nodded, her face a mix of emotions that swiftly blanked themselves. "Joker, pull up the 1MC."

Joker nodded, turning back to his console, tapping a few haptic buttons, and the soft chime of the ship's all-points intercom system sounded. Shepard stepped forward, exhaling and spoke. "All hands, stand to. By authority and direct order of the Systems Alliance Naval Admiralty, as of 1800 hours this 25th day of 2183, I have been given command of the SSV Normandy, and I have the deck and the conn. Navigator Pressley is now the executive officer. VI, log the time."

She paused, and heard murmurs in the distance from the ops alley. She squared her shoulders and continued. "By now you have all undoubtedly seen the news vids. I have been awarded Spectre status by the Council, and given direct orders by that body and the Admiralty to find and apprehend Saren and any confederates, to bring them to justice for what they did at Eden Prime. The Admiralty has assigned Captain Anderson to the office of the Ambassador here on the Citadel, to act as our liaison back to the

Council and coordinate efforts between the Council military and our own."

"He spoke to me before the turnover of command, and said that this was the finest crew he had ever served with in all his days. Without each and every one of this crew's quick actions and excellence, we might be dead in the space over Eden Prime, and Saren might have never been made to face his crimes."

She paused, searching for words. Joker looked at her, as if waiting, his eyes focused on her, and she gave an almost nervous smile as she continued. "I am not one for speeches. Anyone who knows me, who knows my history, understands that at best I'm a gun that gets pointed at the bad guys. But I'm not in this alone, and this is no battlefield. We each are the best at what we do, from the engineering staff who has more qualifications than a dreadnaughts engineering team, to our ops group that kept us undetected even from an alien dreadnaught using technology that wiped out the Protheans. The security marine detachment went into overwhelming odds, against a foe that had chewed up 3 brave Marine groups, and only suffered one casualty."

Shepard's voice grew harder. "Now we are called upon to chase this pointy-faced fucking bastard into whatever hole he crawled out of, and get vengeance for Jenkins. To get vengeance for the ghosts of the 212, the 235, and the people of Eden Prime. To show the galaxy humanity is not going to let themselves be kicked around just because we're the new kids on the block."

"We aren't doing this alone. Just as I have all of you to back me up, we have members of other races who have been wounded by Saren and his monstrous acts. Garrus Vakarian helped us track down the information we needed to pin this mess on Saren, both financially and in locating Urdnot Wrex, who helped us take down a corrupt crime lord working for Saren. And Tali'Zorah nar Rayya is the person who got evidence directly implicating Saren, and that caused the Council to support us. They are in this just as much as we are."

"We have our orders. Find Saren before he finds the Conduit. I won't lie to you. This mission will not be easy. We've already lost one man. More of us may die. But this is the most important mission any of us have been on. To prove humanity's place among the stars. To prove the readiness of humanity to stand with other races as equals. To save the entire galaxy from a madman."

"You're my *crew*. I have faith in each and everyone of you. Let's get this done. Department heads, squad leaders, XO, and .. Council Observers, meet me in the Comm room in five. Shepard out."

Joker gave a wry smile. "For someone who says they're not good at giving speeches, you give good speeches. Anderson would be proud." Shepard shook her head, eyes dark and cool. "Fancy speeches won't stop Saren and whatever he's planning. Let's get this bird in the air, Flight Lieutenant. Set course for Therum, Artemis Tau cluster, Knossus system."

Joker's hands were already moving. "Yes, ma'am."

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The comm room had ample seating, as it was originally designed to double as a situation room or meeting room. XO Pressley, Engineer Adams, and Lieutenant Alenko sat on the left, along with Cole and Williams, the squad leaders of the ground marines.

To the right, looking various shades of uncomfortable or self-conscious, sat Wrex, Garrus, and Tali. Wrex in particular looked ridiculous, perched on the chair that was barely big enough to accommodate him, wearing a heavy jumpsuit in black with a thick white cowl over his hump, since his armor was still being repaired. Garrus wore his father's armor, freshly painted and glossed, his visor casting a very faint blue radiance over Tali's *reik*, who sat with her hands clasped together and very still.

Shepard stalked into the room, still wearing her dress blues and the Spectre cape. "Alright, people, listen up. Our first target is Therum, a world in the Traverse. Human colony, but small, mostly mining operations." There was a series of heavy thuds in the background as docking clamps released, and Joker's voice advising all hands to prepare for jump shock. "The target is an asari archeologist, one Liara T'soni. She's Benezia's daughter, but according to Tevos the two had some kind of falling out a while back. She's an expert on Protheans, and might be able to help us figure out what the Conduit is, or what the hell Saren is doing."

Shepard paused and folded her arms. "I want all duty stations prepped for silent running at a moment's notice, Pressley. You're going to have to double as Nav and XO so go ahead and pick one your people to start picking up more of your slack. I'm having my shit moved to Anderson's office, so you can move in tonight on the mid-watch." She turned to face Kaiden. "Alenko, make sure both marine teams are prepped for hot insertion once we get on the ground. This should be an easy operation, but I didn't get this far by assuming things, and after Eden Prime turned from a pickup to a warzone, I want to be ready for everything." She glanced over at Wrex, Tali, and Garrus. "Garrus, the abbreviated record you sent me of your military service says you were a gunnery officer, that right?"

Garrus nodded. "Yes, ma'am. Mostly light guns on frigates, but also some missile work and electronics. I also pulled several stints as armor mechanic, in the 3th Armored." Shepard nodded in return. "Good. You can work on the ships guns from the forward battery. When you aren't doing that, help maintain the M35 Mako armored vehicle." She glanced at Wrex. "You'll spend your time looking over what the Broker sends. I'll forward whatever intelligence I get from the Council and the Alliance on Saren as well. Other than that, you've been handling weapons and armor for centuries, please assist Gunnery Chief Williams with maintaining the armory. "

Williams frowned. "Ma'am -"

Shepard slowly turned her head to face the younger woman, eyes icy. "Yes?"

Williams faltered. "Ah, I mean... that would work."

Shepard just turned away to face Tali. "Miss Zorah, I'd like you to report to the engine room and assist the engineers there. I don't expect you to stand a watch, but right now we have two watch standers doing 12 hours on, 12 hours off, and that runs people ragged in a hurry. Assuming Adams has no objections, you can assist with engineering duties." Tali nodded enthusiastically. "I.. I'd love to help. The ship is so... advanced." Across the room, Adams gave a nod of approval. Shepard looked pleased. "I'm glad you approve of human ingenuity, Miss Zorah."

Garrus chimed in. "And turian technology."

Shepard glanced at the turian detective, who was smirking. "So far the only turian tech I've seen on this boat is an elevator that's too slow and a coffee machine that produces oil sludge. Not impressed, Vakarian." There was a burst of laughter, and Shepard nodded briskly. "Alright, that's all we've got. Garrus, Wrex, my quarters in 5 minutes. Everyone else, dismissed."

She walked from the room and headed down the steps, pausing a long moment before the door to Anderson's quarters. Inhaling sharply, she stepped inside.

The crew had been more on top of things than she expected, as it looked as if all her possessions and what she had picked up on the Citadel had already been brought here. Everything of Anderson's was gone, except the bottle of scotch and two glasses on the side table. The room was hardly spacious, a bed, the table, a wardrobe, the computer, a slide down mirror and a tiny, tiny shower tucked behind a slide away panel in one corner. Still...she was finally in charge of her own command. Just not in the way she had ever, ever wanted. She sat listlessly on the bed, putting her face into her hands, and sighed.

"I wish...I wish you were here, David. It's easy to puff up and look tough and confident, but .. for the first time in my life I'm really, really scared. If I fuck this up, it's not just a few platoons of Marines that buy it. It's ... everybody. They're expecting me to take your place."

The red-tinted vision raced through her head again, the screaming, the suffering. It was like a splinter of glowing-hot steel punched through her skull, with a dull ache of horror that now suffused her every waking moment. She took a shaky breath, fingering the soft, black material of the Spectre cape.

"People who don't even know me expect miracles. Billions of lives are on the line and I don't even know what the fuck is going on." With a sudden movement, she unclipped the softly glowing white badge and hung the cape and the pin on one of the three hooks over the bed. "Dammit... I just wish I could talk to you and ... know it was okay."

His voice seemed to echo in her mind. "*But I trust you. I trust you to get it done, no matter what, and to make me proud. You're..the closest thing to a daughter I've got.*" She clenched her fists, tightly. His voice was relentless, filled with pride, with trust. "*The psych profile says you hate yourself. That you want to die, but that you're just too good to do so. Maybe you think if you martyr yourself for a big enough reason, that all that you've done in the past will be forgiven – that if you die it will somehow make up for it.*"

She inhaled again, wanting to just .. cease. "I deserve to die. Not be.. celebrated."

*"It doesn't work that way, Shepard. This is not a chance for you to die in some attempt to atone for being born the way you were. But to actually improve the lives, the futures, of all humanity."*

She looked up , seeing a distorted reflection of herself in the glossy surface of the doorway, eyes that were pits of hate, a mouth that had shouted the orders that had gotten countless men killed because she wasn't good enough. "I could still fail."

*"Sara, you've never failed at anything you put your will and mind to in your entire life. You aren't about to start now. "*

She slumped, holding her head, when her door chimed. *Shit. The aliens.* Hastily pulling herself together, she got up from the bed. "Enter!"

Garrus came in first, eyes glancing around in several directions, hands loose by his sides, still the stalking predator. Wrex followed, his bulk blocking the view of the mess decks beyond, door shutting behind him with a quiet swoosh. "Yeah?" Shepard glanced over them both, and decided to be direct. "I have no clue if this T'soni woman is in league with Liara or not. Normally, going in to investigate, I'd take some of my own people. But the fact is that if she's in league with Benezia and Saren, I have no intention of trying to arrest and incarcerate a powerful biotic." Garrus and Wrex traded glances, but Garrus was the first to speak. "I think I see, Commander. You worry your own people might ... take exception to that."

Shepard shrugged. "I don't honestly know. For a long time people – humans, that is – were never really comfortable around me. And I don't fit in to human culture very well. I had what is considered a very violent , traumatic childhood, and I was a hardened criminal in my youth, but I was also biotic. I was isolated, feared, mistrusted and above all else used like a weapon, not a person. It makes it difficult to connect. I send the wrong signals."

Wrex grunted. "More proof your species is full of fools, if they think you weak or inferior." Shepard shook her head. "No, not weak. Just ... dangerous. And fear response in humans is not to figure out where in a predatory pack I fit, or a dominance challenge, but flight. They recoil. They do not reach out." Garrus nodded again. "You worry they.. wont' accept the necessity that this T'soni woman may need to be put down, and attribute it to your... what? Bloodthirstiness? That they might refuse to obey?"

His mandibles drew tight to his jaw, and he looked both disturbed and angry. Wrex groaned, his mouth twisting into a sneer. "What a simpering pile of pyjaks. Hostile biotic could reduce this stupid tin ship to splinters. If the bitch is hostile, a bullet to the brain is the only option." He gave a grunt. "Get to the point, Shepard."

Shepard nodded. "Rather than marine units, you two will accompany me when we go to retrieve the doctor. If she's not hostile... or if she's completely innocent, fine and good. We'll escort her back to the ship." Garrus and Wrex traded another glance, and nodded in unison, Garrus's voice dropping an octave. "If she isn't cooperative, or turns out to be in league with Saren, Commander, well, we aren't human. I certainly have no issues in putting a hostile criminal down without wasting money and time on a trial." Wrex's response was more sanguine. "Combat IS trial in krogan law."

Shepard exhaled. "Good to know. Wrex, you may want to go ahead and check how Williams is coming along with your armor. Be polite, if at all possible." Wrex only rolled his eyes. "Women." He exited, thudding footsteps and angry expression clearing his path of two startled looking human crewmen.

Garrus turned to go as well but Shepard held up a hand. "I know Wrex, at least a little, from Torfan. I still haven't had a chance to talk to you. Why are you on this trip?" Garrus frowned. "I told the Council why. Saren... was a hero. Not just to me but to all turians. For him to be evil, to be a traitor, is like the worst betrayal possible. It's ... a visceral reaction in us, Commander. It's not something you can control. The extranet says there are already death-squads leaving Palaven hunting for Saren to kill him. As long as he lives, he's a blot on the honor and .. dedication of our whole species." Shepard sat back down on the bed, frowning. "Alright. But forgive me for saying this, you don't seem to be acting like other turians. I heard your whole spiel about being a bad turian, but I don't want a raving hothead either. This isn't about you getting vengeance."

Garrus cocked his head to one side. "Leaving aside for the moment the fact that I already explained I am happy to follow orders than aren't full of shit, ..and the speech you gave saying this was about vengeance for Eden Prime...you're not exactly the one to be cautioning others against hot-hotheadedness. I mean, only one of us has punched out a Geth Prime after charging into more than 70 other geth. I don't call that restraint, Commander." Oddly enough, the way he phrased it made her chuckle, rather than instinctively explain why she felt a need to defend her crew. "Yeah, but I'm good at that sort of thing. You? I'm sure you can shoot, but how good at you when shit goes to pieces and you have a baddy all up in your face?"

The turian folded his arms and leaned back on one leg, the very picture of cocky assurance. "I don't let them get that close. And if they do, well..." His voice lightened, as he spread his ungloved hand, displaying very sharp talons. "...I figure I could take a *stab* at close range combat."

Shepard felt a giggle bubbling up from someplace deep inside, and stifled it. "Vakarian, that's a horrible pun."

The turian shrugged. "Yeah, but I can hear you trying not to laugh. Did I mention my senses are about ten times better than human baseline? I once shot a merc through the eye, through two walls, just from the sound of his heartbeat. All you need to worry about is if you can keep up." Shepard arched an eyebrow, and then grinned. "Is that a challenge, Vakarian? I think I can get a bigger body count than a big, plated chicken-lizard any day of the week." The C-sec detective gave a preening motion, and tapped something up on his omni-tool. "Ah, yes. This coming from the soft human whose name is based on a follower of sheep. You're on, Commander, just let me know where to pick up my money." Shepard couldn't help it, and burst out laughing. "I think I'll like working with you, Vakarian. I get tired of people being in awe or fear of the great and terrible Butcher of Torfan."

Garrus sobered, with a shrug. "Commander, I can't speak for humans. Your people are still a cipher to

most of the Council races, because you all act as if you don't get something right now, it's some kind of personal insult. But from a turian perspective, you're a very good commander. You lead from the front, and you're willing to sacrifice the few for the welfare and protection of the many. A turian who can't make calls like that is weak, and is considered a poor leader. It doesn't really matter what other people think anyway. What matters is that you did what you did for the right reasons."

Shepard thought on this for a long moment, and Garrus arched his back a bit. "I should probably go and get some initial calibrations done on the main guns, Commander. If you need me, I'll be there or in the hangar bay." Shepard nodded. "Very well. And ... call me Shepard. Using my rank just gets old after a while." The turian's bright blue eyes met hers for a long second and nodded. "Understood...Shepard."

One mandible flicked in amusement. "Follower of *sheep*."

Shepard made a shooping motion. "Whatever, battle chicken."

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### Chapter 33: Chapter 27 : Saren , Ruminations

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*A/N: Saren always knowing exactly where to go bothered me as well. If ME 1 was supposed to last months, not days, why is it that we were always one step behind Saren yet always just in time to save the day?*

*Also, this is the first ... foreshadowing .. of things to come. Oh, you think Reapers are bad, you need to ask yourself what the hell Sovereign was really talking about when he said they were beyond our comprehension.*

*No one ever bothers to really ask why Saren would make the call that only allying with Sovereign would work.*

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January 25th, 2183 – 11:00 PM

The bridge of the turian light cruiser was as silent as a tomb. The angles were sharp, forming a bowl shape around the pilot, and the deck sloped back and down, into an open triangular arena of sensor stations and gunnery consoles. Upon an elevated deck looking over everything was a massive, slanted chair with a curved back to fit the slope of a turian's spine.

The walls sloped inwards, like the primitive eyries of ancient turians. It was comforting, almost soothing. The clean white surfaces and the silence were the only consolation to Saren at this moment.

The news casts flickered in the holopit below him. The demonstrations, the burning buildings on Palaven. The ranks of the death-squads and hastatim battling one another in front of the Patriarchal Palace. Shattered , dead turians in the streets, rivers of blue gore swirling around the treads of police tanks.

The Council, serenely dooming the galaxy by denying him his due, draping the corrupted shroud of duty over a shaved monkey. The applause. The filthy words of those he had saved from their own ignorance and foolishness , the histrionics of those condemning what they did not understand.

Saren closed his eyes, his talons slowly tamping down around the reinforced arm-rest of the command chair until the metal began to squeal from the sheer pressure of his grip. The asari manning the various consoles in the command alley below did not look his way, calmly fixated on their duties, the Voice gently moving them towards becoming mere gears in a machine of vast complexity and reach.

Saren could almost taste Sovereign's amusement in his thoughts. Ten thousand light years away, and the Voice was still there. ***"Did you expect the pitiful creatures to comprehend what is before them? To thank you for their doom? Organic life is defined by it's meaningless chaos."***

The Voice was stilled, by a touch on his shoulder. Benezia stood there, dressed in white, smelling like Thessian roses, her stance calm, tranquil. Saren gestured bitterly to the display before him. "My reward for years of service and having my body ruined in the name of the Council. Dishonor. Disgrace. " Benezia slowly walked around in front of him, her magnificent body blocking his view of the ever-continuing farce on all news networks. "It does not matter. In the teachings of Athame, there is a passage that comes to mind. The shadowed path is never traveled in confidence, but in reliance upon one's own judgment. They cannot know what you know, they cannot understand the choice you made because , if presented with the same choice, they would choose wrongly."

Saren shrugged. "Long dead asari philosophers don't comfort me at the moment. Cerberus failed us. The geth failed us. The mercenaries failed us. Defeated by a pack of monkeys, a disgrace of a turian, and a quarian *child*. " He made a gesture with his hands, as if throwing something away. "And yet Sovereign seems pleased. The more we cut ourselves off from others, the more his voice echos in my mind." He sighed. "Regardless of right or wrong, they second guess me, when I never expected them to. I kept this a secret because they would not, cannot understand the stakes. And now, saving us all will be harder than ever."

Benezia shakes her head, and simply sits in his lap, her cool blue skin draining the anger in him as she laid her head against his cheek. "Do you remember when we first met? When your brother first introduced you to me?" Saren , despite himself, gave a little laugh. "How could I forget?"

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*"Brother, this is important." Desolas's voice was, as always, full of self-importance and puffed up regard. Saren had sighed, fidgeting. "I'm sorry , brother. But my thoughts are on the war, not .. research into old artifacts we neither understand or need."*

*Desolas had only smiled, his long, elegant mandibles flicking out in amusement. "Ah, little brother, always seeking the quick pounce and kill. There are greater threats and worries out there than a pack of grown-up pyjack creatures. Bad enough they open blind relay pairs, but what they found on Mir'tha was... not anything we expected."*

*The two walked through the asari gardens, full of blue-green mosses trimmed over ancient stone carvings. Swaying flame-trees, heavy with blue-white blossoms and pendulous fruit, rustled in the ocean breeze. The booming of the surf was offset by the gentle, delicate chanting coming from the temple proper.*

*Saren rolled his eyes. "And so we go to a bunch of old asari to ask for how to work the thing? What makes you think they would know anything about this... Arca device?"*

*Desolas' smile had widened. "Asari writing on the casing of the stone containment vessel we found it in. I need them transcribed. And you must always remember that the threat is not the vitha in front of you, but the unseen vakar in the rocks behind you, waiting for you. We can use it or destroy it, but we should never ignore something this powerful. "*

*The building they entered was all sweeping curves and angles, organic and done in blue stones with a glossy, hard finish. The floor was a mosaic of stylized waves, all sweeping towards the middle of the room. A stone plinth stood there, the floor tiles rising up to it's edges in the carved shape of crashing tides, pierced by a set of wide steps leading to the top of the plinth, where a single asari woman levitated, her hands spread, eyes glowing with pure biotic energy. The field encased her whole body, to*

*cascade down the plinth in runnels of cerulean power.*

*Saren felt the under-scaling of his fringe lift in awe. Levitating ones own body weight with biotics was like trying to pick yourself up off the floor by grabbing your belt and pulling. Impossible. But this woman was doing it.*

*She exhaled, the thin white robe she wore barely obscuring the heavy curves of her form, the full breasts, the slender waist, the smooth muscled legs. Saren had rarely , if ever, paid close attention to asari females, and was too busy to bother looking for companionship, but something about this woman... got to him.*

*She settled to the stone surface of the plinth, unfolding her legs and coming to her feet with slow, sensuous grace. Her features were noble, almost sorrowful, but her voice was melodic, touched with a trace of age and pain he couldn't grasp. "Desolas, it is good to see you once more."*

*His brother had nodded, bowing. "Matriarch Benezia. Thank you so much for making time to see us. This is my brother, Saren. He's just joined the Deathwatch, and is already on the fast track to becoming a Spectre."*

*Benezia had inclined her head. "Remarkable achievements for one so young. Be welcome to Thessia, Saren Arterius." The gaze went back to her brother. "The documents you sent us are... troubling. The device you describe was once researched by the greatest of the matriarchs, Dilinaga. She and other matriarchs of her time journeyed forth to explore the nature of reality and the galaxy. Most died, others...went insane."*

*Desolas frowned. "I thought asari couldn't really go insane."*

*Benezia shook her head. "It is not uncommon in our younger days, when our passions run high. Far too many huntresses get in over their heads and cannot accept their actions. But yes, for a matriarch to lose her mind after centuries of strengthening it is ... unheard of." She paused. "Dilinaga and others wrote of devices like this. Dilinaga said they were dangerous, that they should be destroyed. That they were gateways to places mortals had no place traversing."*

*Desolas shook his head. "They .. you don't understand. They .. converted one of the research staff into ... a sort of .. super turian. Bigger. Faster. Stronger. Something that resembles a story out of our ancient past. Valluvian priests. Once the leaders of our community, until , for some reason, the turian people lost their way."*

*The matriarch inclined her head. "You .. are utilizing this device? Without knowing how it functions? That seems both risky and unwise. Regardless of what it may seem to do now, running along the path to improvement without knowing where you are going to end up ... often ends badly. The geth and the krogan are both dire examples of such heedless quick fixes."*

*Desolas again shook his head. "We have no choice. Turian society is becoming increasingly partisan, as younger generations begin to ignore the root of what made turians a unified society. How long until we have another Unification War?" He paused. "I appreciate your advice, but I did not come for you to approve my path. I found additional writings, in the ruins. I need to know what they say."*

*He extended a datapad, pulling it from the great black coat he wore over his armor, and handed it to Benezia, who turned it on and paged through it. "It is .. written in a very , very old asari dialect. It says that the path unto the Ones Who Came From Beyond is beset with .. traps for the unwary." She paused, frowning. "Blessed .. or anointed, it's not clear...is the being who Ascends untroubled, with an empty mind and hands to do the work of the Harvesters. But doomed are those .. who seek to control the stuff .. or essence... of the Beyond." She shakes her head. "It appears to be some sort of arcane warning. Those who use the artifact with an empty mind – that is, without any intended use, without*

*any goal -will not suffer, while those who use it with some purpose in mind..."*

*Desolas had nodded. "Of course. That makes .. sense. It's why it didn't affect the human, or me. We never intended to touch it, it just happened in the course of our struggle." His voice trailed off, as he sat motionless, lost in thought.*

*Saren frowned. "Brother?"*

*Desolas had waved him to silence. "You've helped immensely, just by this simple translation, Matriarch. Thank you."*

*Benezia looked at the both with troubled eyes. "Do not thank me for this. I say again, there is no path to improvement of the self that can be safely trodden with speed and haste. I would research this .. artifact carefully, and not expose living beings to it. Dilinaga's warnings were never clear, but they were always most dire... and if this is what she and the other matriarchs ran into, anything that would drive a matriarch insane is nothing to experiment upon."*

*But as always, Desolas would never listen.*

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Saren sighed. "Am I any better than Desolas? Is my choice...just wrong?" He ignored the twinge of pain in his head, the whispering in his mind, his eyes fixed on Benezia's pure blue ones.

Benezia did not reply, only wrapping her hand around his wrist. After a very long moment, she closed her own eyes, unable to meet his searching gaze, her breath flitting across the skin below his plates, tickling. "I don't know. A part of me, I suppose, no longer cares. And a part of me, I think, is ... sealed away, screaming, telling me to flee." Saren looked at her, but she didn't open her eyes. He just wrapped an arm around her waist, waiting. She spoke again, almost hesitant. "But I do not flee. You are here, and I am with you until my heart beats no longer, whatever the cost. As to.. what you asked..."

A long moment of silence passed, the only sound the gentle beat of her heart, her breathing, the only smell the scent of her filling his senses. She was his universe. Her voice, when she spoke again, was quiet, but tremulous. "One spends all their life in examination of each second, and when we think we know best, we are often simply ignoring what we wish not to have to accept. But... if what we have been told is true..it doesn't matter." Saren trailed a single talon against her neck. "It's all life in the galaxy."

Benezia's blue eyes opened, and they were filled with tears. "And that is a tragedy. But it's nothing against what it told us was beyond the dark spaces of the galaxy. My mind still can't even grasp the .. the size and power of such a thing. Is the choice you have made right? I don't know. But it's the only choice we have that doesn't end in darkness everlasting." Saren sighed. "All we have to do is... prove we are ... worthy. The fact that the Reapers have chosen to hide , to cower in a handful of galaxies, to .. cast a pitiful cloak of protection over a few puddles of life, rather than fight, even with all their power..."

Benezia nods. "You don't just hope to save our people. You hope to .. influence them. To change the minds of gods, who protect us from demons." She gave a small, almost bitter laugh. "15,000 years of technological progress, and we are reduced to casting our thoughts in the shape of myths and superstition. And those who claim to lead and guide us are blinded, even as they seek to lead us into a future that exists only in dreams."

Saren shuddered, and he made a motion to stand. She slid from his form and he stood stiffly, cracking his neck and fluttering a mandible. His glare settled on the holopit, displaying footage from Eden Prime, and he gestured the asari on the deck below to cut it off. "That's ... what makes me so angry. I

have served faithfully for years. I discover a threat so .. overwhelming, so dangerous, that it could obliterate all sentient life in the galaxy. A threat we can't hope to fight, can't hope to defeat...and if we did, through some miracle...would leave ourselves open to a worse menace. Be a slave, be melted down into base components, or .. watch something that doesn't even belong in our damned frame of reality *eat* us, or tear the universe apart with the same dark energy we use for every part of our technology. "

Benezia shrugged. "When this started, you wanted to take it to the Council, a Council who wouldn't have understood. A Council that would have .. misused what you found. Or tried to. They would not have listened. And you did what .. you had to do. You've spent all your life defending the galaxy, making the right calls. They should have trusted you in this." Saren nodded, stalking around his chair. "And that hurts. That they don't trust me to make this call. I know.. we. I.. have been influenced. My brother was influenced, and he lost it, and I had to kill him to save Palaven. I know Qian had lost his damned mind. But I took the data I had and I went with it. I didn't rush into this."

He clenched his fist. "The Council tells me to protect the galaxy. I sacrifice my arm for that. My skin. My organs. I blow up my own **brother**. I kill, until I am drowned in blood. I become as hard as stone, just to be told I'm 'too extreme'. I stop the things in the dark that the average fool citizen of the galaxy can't even imagine. The red sand labs making the drugs from the ground up brains of asari children. The slaver rings selling modified hanar. The mercenaries who feed their vorcha on the corpses of the ship crew's they've killed. I stop the worst of it, and now, when faced with a challenge they can't handle, when I take it on myself to do what must be done...now they tell me I am a traitor? That I go too far?"

Benezia wrapped both of her hands around Saren's, gently and slowly pulling his hand down to rest on her stomach. "You are doing the best you can. Only children and fools believe that all things can be accomplished without sacrifice, or pain. Qian's own data showed that Sovereign wasn't lying. There are many, many stars suffering the dark-energy suffusion he spoke of, it's just that most of them do not possess planets, or are too far from a linking mass relay." Benezia sighed and her grip on his hand tightened. "What the Council thinks...does not matter. I know you. I know your heart. You didn't want to do what happened on Eden Prime, or kill your friend. You lost control because you were disgusted with what you had to do. If we had explained beforehand, nothing would have changed."

Saren looked away. "That .. everything is just a blur now. Not even shades of gray. Just smears of black and blurs of concepts like duty and honor. " He very gently pulled his hand free, caressing her cheek. "You are losing your mind right along side me, trying to keep me together. I see the pain in your eyes. I see the stress, the slackness of your ribs when I hold you. You aren't eating." Benezia elegantly pulled away, fingers trailing along his forearm. "Life is not in the living, or the actions thereof, but in the intersected moment between decision and regret or enjoyment. I have no time left for mourning choices unmade, and unwanted." There was a silence , then, and Saren sighed. "I wish this had never happened. That I was on that beach on Thessia, feeling the surf crash between my talons, the sand smooth and hot against my back, reveling in your scent, your taste, that first time." He looked at her sorrowfully. "If life is not in the living, why does that moment call me more than any other?"

Benezia smiled, and her eyes were dark with memory. "Athame tells us that we cling to those moments that anchor us, in times of darkness and fear, and that they are the fire that drives our lives. Siari, on the other hand, says that in every happy moment there is the sadness of losing it , in every tragedy the triumph of survival. That we must mold ourselves to our memories, not the reverse."

Saren did not move. "If only it were that simple, love." He examined his omni-tool, frowning. "The team I sent after Liara should have reported in by now. If that meat-headed krogan has failed..." Benezia's expression tightened. "She'll come. Once she realizes her once-foolish obsession is exactly what I need, that her knowledge is useful, she'll... come around. I will apologize, she will cry, I will say

wise words of comfort, and .. we will be much closer to finding the Conduit. No other researcher has had the mental flexibility to look at the Prothean extinction the way she has." There was a tiny note of emotion in her voice, and Saren cocked his head , his rugged face set in an expression of incredulosity. "All those years of being upset with your daughter for digging in the dirt, and you still are proud of her?" Saren laughed, and shook his head. "You are... always unexpected, Benezia."

The asari matriarch's mouth was set in a frown, but her eyes were more alive than they had been a few minutes before. "She and I disagree on many things. Just as I did with her.. .father. But she is still my daughter. If she tries to stop us, I will have to kill her, and I will... feel pain. I will never forgive myself , but I will not hesitate. But if she can help us, if she can help save everything we know from the fire that comes...then why would I not be proud of her?"

She turned to look at the cockpit, the narrow window showing the black emptiness of space. "Do not worry about the mercenary. They have probably just heard about your disbarment, and have already taken her back to Virmire. We still have no leads on where the Exogeni beacon is, Saren...we might as well go back home and see what leads Rana has turned up." Saren nodded. "Navigator, to Virmire. Send messages to the Geth to alert us when that raid on Exogeni HQ is ready to proceed."

Saren turned from the bridge, and Benezia followed him, as if joined by some chain none could see them but them.

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## Chapter 34: Chapter 28 : Therum , Arrival

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*A/N: Listening to Angerfist as I write this...poor geth, I almost feel sorry for them.*

*I never liked the game's approach on Therum, especially with the drop ship just leaving enemies in our path. The Normandy could have blasted the thing from the sky in a moment's notice. And as soon as I got to the point where the Mako could not fit through the gap, I knew I was facing a boss fight.*

*Don't worry, I haven't forgotten the leapers. They'll show up soon enough. This one is a little short, comparatively speaking. The next one is longer.*

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January 26th , 1:00 AM

Every breath came with a pained gasp now, as the agony in her arms and back radiated out in all directions, unceasing. Liara no longer remembered how long she had been stuck in the same position, couldn't quite recall what day it was, or anything except the endless craving of thirst and the ache of her limbs.

The heat flowed past her like a tide, occasionally stirring faint winds within the cavern. These were her only relief. A part of her mind, incoherent and babbling, wondered at the Prothean technology that allowed air and wind to reach her forehead, allowed sweat to drip from her exhausted form to splatter against the white tile floor below, but wouldn't let her move an inch. It let the radiating heat of the cavern slowly cook her alive, but it stopped the blasts and energies of the various weapons and devices the geth turned on the field in their attempts to crack it.

The hulking krogan stood in front of her, it's wicked-looking armor glowing faintly, it's mouth crooked in a sneering leer. "You don't look so hot, blue." It lifted a pitcher of water to it's maw, drinking it slowly, before pouring the rest over his crest and letting it splash wastefully all over the ground. Liara whimpered, and the krogan laughed. "Guess you must be pretty thirsty by now, huh? Too bad. Couple of more hours, and the geth tell me they'll have their little device all ready to go."

Liara swallowed painfully. Her body was coated in sweat, and the stink of brandy as it oozed from her system was overwhelming. Her eyes felt dry and her skin felt tight, almost as if it would split open. Her uniform was a mess, discolored rings and dampness radiating out from her neck, her armpits, her chest. She bit her lip as she remembered the humiliation of warm urine trickling down her legs, the smell wafting up to her, making her want to vomit.

She couldn't quite remember what water tasted like, or any smell besides the waft of brimstone, or the stench of her own body, or the meaty, animal smell of her tormenter. In the background, the geth chattered to themselves, electronic signals no doubt flying back and forth, high speed binary audio transmissions coordinating their work.

*Foul, pale beetles, eager and hungry to feast on my withered flesh.*

She closed her eyes, not willing to watch the vile krogan in front of her taunt her with water and food any longer. Her throat was so dry it felt as if it would collapse, but she gritted her teeth and spoke, forcing her voice to calm. "If I could get out of this trap I would. Why must you torment me?"

The krogan grunted. "Because you are soft, weak, and stupid. Why else?"

A sound, from above. Geth chatter. She opened her eyes, seeing two geth approaching the krogan. "Weryloc-strikeleader, dropship 441-Echo has detected a mass translation into the system, but cannot identify any associated ship with said entry."

The krogan blinked, a stupid expression marring its already ugly features. "What the hell does that even mean?" The geth's voice was as patient and calm as it was artificial and cold. "Observed patterns at Eden Prime by Nazara-Giver-of-Future match this data pattern. A mass entry, with no associated ship, implies heat-suppressive cloaking. Only one vessel matches this profile. SSV Normandy, Human-Alliance vessel. Latest intelligence suggests vessel is in operation-command of Shepard-Predator, threat level NoCarrier. Recommend defensive posture."

The krogan folded his massive arms. "Alright, but do it quietly and carefully. We're a long way from the human towns, but we don't have the numbers to fend off the infantry battalion stationed on the planet. Tell the frigate to get its shields up and weapons hot. Get the Colossus back in one piece, first of all, and get all the .. whatcha call 'ems, armatures ready. Block the approaches."

The geth turned away, and the krogan grunted in irritation. "Damned humans...I'd tell you to stay put, but I figure you're not going anywhere. Heh, heh, heh." The thing stumped away, drawing its oversized weapons.

Liara pondered quietly on what she had just heard. Despite the geth's caution, she didn't feel much better. The chances of a human vessel coming to a human world were not low, but they wouldn't be looking for her. She didn't recognize the name Shepard at first, but she kept prodding her mind, trying to think past the killing heat and the thirst. Realization came thickly, as if her memory was some kind of sap slowly leaking into the open.

*Of course. The news stories about Eden Prime. . . Shepard ....was the human in charge of that. The one that destroyed the geth...*

She sighed. Maybe the humans had gotten some kind of reports about geth. Maybe one of the townspeople had come this way and reported sighting them, and the humans were here to fight them. But the chances were not high...

Liara closed her eyes once more, and tried to focus on meditating, to calm her body and cling to life. She had no other options.

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"Clear of the relay, commander. Comm links with the planet are open, no sign of geth ships in the area. Drift is just under 2100k. Systems nominal." Joker's hands danced across his flight board, and he grinned. "Stealth systems engaged."

Shepard stood in full armor on the bridge, right behind Joker. "Noted. Ops, give me a full orbital scan, I want to know if there are any ships in orbit." Pressley's voice came through the bridge speaker. "Yes, ma'am. Showing ... two, no make that three ships. Two heavy ore-haulers, the *Random Kiss* and the *Call of Ancestors*. Registered out of Irune, volus ships. Authenticated travel passes and customs documentation, both powered down. Looks like they're here to haul ore back to Bekenstein."

Shepard nodded. "And the third?"

Pressley's voice took on an edge. "It looks like a light turian frigate. *Unbroken Honor*. Registered to ... huh, a krogan. Weryloc Gulm. I didn't know krogan had ships, much less *turian* ones. In any event...it's not flying a flag and it's powered up, with full kinetic barriers. Waste of fuel in orbit, unless they're expecting trouble." "Pressley, run the history. Joker, keep us in stealth and bring us in behind that ship. Wrex! Run the name, Weryloc Gulm."

Wrex's voice rumbled back a few moments later. "Gulm was employed by Saren 4 months ago. Broker has footage of him taking a payment, and records ... the sneaky pyjack... looks like he has an "understanding" with someone on the CDEM. Bastard is running mercs for the Blood Pack out of the krogan DMZ. No proof he's with Saren...but he has no reason to be here. Not much call for mercs on this ball of rock." Pressley's voice sounded again. "Ships history is blank, Commander. But the blanking was done courtesy of a turian captain, one Thatnas Rykarial. No real details."

Shepard tapped her commlink. "Detective, you know anything about a Captain Thatnas Rykarial?" Garrus's voice sounded weary as he replied. "Yeah.. unfortunately. Two-bit thug operating out of Omega, he got cashiered out of the Turian Defense Forces after losing a heavy cruiser to a human frigate in the Relay 314 incident. Pretty much a ship dealer out of Omega now...supplies the Blood Pack with off-the-record light frigates or freighters." Shepard sighed. "Thanks, Detective." She reached across the status board and punched the alert sigil, and tabbed open the 1MC. "All hands, battle stations." Turning it off, she turned back to Joker. "Bring us in tight, battle formation, and lock weapons on that ship."

Joker moved his hands in complex patterns, pulling down a targeting panel from the haptic screens to his right. "On it, Commander. Guns or missile?" Shepard tapped her chin. "Guns for now. Open comms." Joker tapped something, then nodded.

"Independent vessel *Unbroken Honor*, this is Commander Shepard, Office of Special Reconnaissance and Tactics. Your ship is in human space, unregistered and not flying a port of origin flag. Stand down your barriers and prepare for boarding."

The frigate did not respond, only breaking orbit and turning to face them. Shepard shrugged. "Dumb asses. Joker, fire for effect, missiles free." "Aye, ma'am. Firing now." The heavy frontal guns of the *Normandy* were 40 mm behemoths, set in a gimbaled mount that rotated smoothly to the bearing of the target and fired three times. At the same time, doors along the front of the ship slid away, and 2 missiles erupted from the ship.

The turian-made vessel got off a single shot before the shots from the *Normandy* tore into it's shields, detonating violently. A few moments later, the two heavy missiles crashed into the hull, sending burning wreckage flying apart as the ship exploded. Shepard just shook her head in cold amusement as the hulk of the now shattered frigate tumbled through space, a corona of shattered metal and bits of the interior jetting out, the occasional flames burning from what atmosphere was rushing from the hull.

"Nice shots, Joker. Adams, damage report." Adams voice was calm and almost amused. "Didn't even spike the energy draw on the kinetic barriers, ma'am. Turian weapons suck about as much as their coffee makers, I say."

Shepard grinned, and then pulled up the comm unit to ops again. "Pressley, any comms from the surface?"

The broad-shouldered navigator came up to the cockpit a moment later, his already dour features set in a frown. "Yes, ma'am. Some kind of tight-beam transmission from the surface, doesn't look like they had time to respond. The... transmission is encrypted, but it's similar to some of the comm chatter we got on Eden Prime." Shepard's eyes hardened. "The location?" Pressley extended a datapad. "Pretty much on top of the dig site we were given coordinates to, ma'am. That ship can't have been at ready status for long...I'm guessing they saw our FTL heat-flash and dispersion before we went to stealth."

Joker frowned. "Yeah, but so what? This is the first ship of it's kind. The only other place we've even had a chance to pull that maneuver was..." Joker's frown turned to realization. "Shit, that means the geth are here?" Pressley straightened. "That's the only data that would account for them being ready for a fight, ma'am."

Shepard exhaled, and tapped the IMC sigil again. "Marine Security Detail, stand to for hot drop. Wrex, Garrus, get suited and meet me in the hanger bay. Prepare the ship for atmospheric battle stations." She clicked it off, and looked over at Joker. "Get us in fast and low, Flight Lieutenant. I want a landing site within range of the Mako's guns and close enough that the marines can hoof it, but not so close we get surrounded."

Joker's hands moved through menus, and the ship tilted downwards. "All over it, ma'am."

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Alenko walked down the line of marines, examining their gear, his Avenger loose in his hands. "Alright, let's keep this nice and tight, people. 1st squad will drop at position fourty tac four dash two, and set up as long range fire support and sniper suppression. 2nd squad will drop after the Mako deploys, to the south, position one eighty tac one dash six, ready to move in on the Commander's order. Master Sergeant, you're sure you're up for this?" The grizzled black sergeant puffed arrogantly on a cigar, an eye-patch with the Systems Alliance "A" on it covering his ruined left eye. "Hell yeah, LT. Little stiff around the middle." He slapped the massive Revenant LMG in his hands. "But Sally here has everything Uncle Cole needs."

Alenko chuckled. "Alright then." Alenko turned to face Shepard. "All present and accounted for, ma'am." Shepard nodded, wearing the black and silver Spectre armor, the insignia on the shoulder glowing faintly. "Lieutenant, lethal force is authorized. Anything that does not immediately stand down, put a slug in it." Alenko nodded, but frowned. "Ma'am, what about the researcher?" Shepard's eyes were like ice as she slammed down the mirrored visor of her helmet. "*Anything*, Lieutenant." She turned away, clambering up into the back of the Mako, and the triangular hatch sealed shut behind her.

Joker's voice range out over the intercom. "Incoming ground fire. I show one five geth firing platforms, approximately three zero infantry units. Evasive maneuvers." Alenko grabbed the ripline running down one side of the hanger bay a moment before the ship slid to one side under shuddering impacts. "Minimal effect. First drop zone in ten seconds."

Cole shouted, his voice booming in the narrow confines of the bay. "Get ready to ride 'em, boys and girls." The master sergeant tapped a control on his omni-tool and music began blaring, the high jazz sounds of Little Richard's "Long Tall Sally" filling the air. "Cocked, locked and ready to rock, Marines!" The hangar bay door slid down with a sudden whoosh of displaced air, and the ripline the

marines were tied to launched out and down, a heavy harpoon at the end slamming into the dirt below as the marines slid down one after another. Geth plasma fire tinkled around them, and even as the marines slid down the line, they opened fire, the booms of Mattocks and the snarling of Avengers nearly drowned by the high-pitched scream of the Master Sergeant's Revenant.

Alenko slapped his comm unit. "1st squad away!" The Normandy lurched, missiles flaring as it laid down a line of suppressive fire so that the squad could dig in, and the view from the open hanger bay swayed sickeningly. Joker's voice was tense, the sound of alarms in the background undercutting his voice. "Shit, the fucking geth have surface to space missiles!"

A moment later the ship rocked, sending Alenko nearly tumbling to his knees, only the ripline keeping him aloft. Williams shot him concerned look, pulling him back up, her eyes wide. "Is it always this crazy?" Alenko shouted over the wind roaring through the hanger bay. "No! Joker's a goddamned lunatic!"

The ship settled a bit, and with a series of heavy thuds , the Mako roared out , mass effect flares firing to stabilize it as it soared down through the air. Alenko grimaced as a headache started, and hoped Joker could at least drop 2nd squad off somewhere quieter.

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**"SPIRITS OF FIRE HELP ME! SHEPARD!"** The turian looked as if he was about to panic, eyes nearly popping out of his plated head as the Mako fell 300 feet straight down, the ground rushing towards them at terrifying speed and growing closer ever second. Wrex, on the other hand, was already in the turret, firing and cheering.

With a final heavy blast of mass-effect fields to slow its fall, the Mako slammed heavily into the ground, landing almost perpendicular to some light barriers the geth had thrown up as cover. These splintered and flew back under the impact of the huge battle tank, crashing into the geth ranks with titanic force. One was bisected by a flying piece of metal, sheared in half to splatter white cooling fluid on the ground. Two more were hit by large spars of metal and driven to the ground, the light in their eyes fading in a chatter of desperate communications attempts.

The other five were stunned and knocked on their back. Wrex meant to fire the twin coaxial machine guns, but instead triggered the main gun, not quite used to the human tank controls. There was a heavy blast of heat and force, and a raining patter of burning, shattered geth parts began to bounce off the tank, making a collection of thuds and thunks.

Shepard glared over her shoulder at the torso of the krogan. "Overkill much, Wrex?"

The krogan's voice came through the internal comm-link of the Mako. "Sorry, the term doesn't seem to translate into Tuchankan. Heh, heh, heh."

Garrus groaned. "Figures. I thought you were completely mad, Shepard, driving this tank out of the bay like that. Didn't you primitives ever develop ramps?" Shepard gunned the engine. "Less fun, too slow, and doesn't let you do tricks." Garrus frowned, mandibles quivering. "Tricks?"

Shepard grinned. "Like this." The Mako lurched ahead, careening carelessly off the rock wall to the right and launching its bulk down the sharply angled walls of the dig site, almost flipping over as it did so. The ground was rough, almost baked looking red, mixed here and there with black flows of obsidian or discolored shelves of shale.

The dig site was dug into the side of the mountain, the slopes lousy with digging machines, cranes, platforms, and dozens of crates. A few heavy warehouse-looking buildings completed the picture, along with the tunnel-like access point to the dig site itself, accessible via a spindly looking stairway.

Garrus was not amused with their rapid descent, being tumbled around in the back. "You spirits-damned lunatic! Who taught you to drive, a blind vorcha?" Shepard laughed. "Armored units have a saying about nimble armor platforms. Drive it like you stole it!" Garrus's voice was unmeshed, harmonics lapping together in a mumble. "I've seen stolen aircars on fire better handled than this!"

1st squad was upon the ridge overlooking the site, a steady stream of fire pouring down into the little bowl-like depression the mountain sat in. Already, several geth units lay still and broken, like bizarre modern art works in pools of milky gunk. The geth huddled behind crates and were clearly waiting for something, just pinning the 1st squad in place with their own return fire. In the distance, another missile erupted from the ground beyond the ridge to slam into the Normandy's kinetic barriers, only to be answered by angry streams of GARDIAN laser fire.

"Shepard! Contact!" Wrex's voice seemed alarmed. Shepard threw the Mako into a tight spin, letting the machine come to a hull-down stop in the lee of a large boulder that was marked by some kind of spray-painted scrawl about coordinates. "Colossus!"

Shepard looked out the convex, heavy plexan windows, as a silvery spider with a curved spire topped with blue fire hove into view, its bulk vast and ponderous as it rounded the corner of one of the peripheral buildings. The geth pinning the 1st squad in place increased their rate of fire, as the Colossus turned to aim at the ridge. "Shit! It's going to fire on my men! Take it out, Wrex!"

The M-35's gun boomed, and the Colossus staggered, its heavy legs crashing into a crate and reducing it to kindling, its single, massive eye glowed blue-white as it turned to face its attacker. The eye pulsed, plasma waves coruscating out to wash over the Mako, sending the entire tank sliding back a few feet, white fire erupting over its surface as the shields struggled to absorb the blast. Wrex snarled as his own shields flared out under the impact. "Dammit, Shepard! Get us into better cover!"

Shepard threw the machine in reverse, the heavy wheels locking down on the terrain below it, throwing the tank backwards and out of the way of the next blast, which reduced the rock wall to a bubbling expanse of glowing red-hot stone. Wrex fired again, combining the main gun with streams of fire from the machine guns as well. Tiny little pinpricks of light danced across the Colossus, a moment before Wrex's shot sent the thing stumbling again. This time, however, its legs and head collided with the scaffolding supporting one of the cranes. With a groan of tortured, bent metal and the rumble of failed struts snapping like twigs, the entire assembly came down. The colossus's massive curved head tilted up for a second before a 12-ton crane arm smashed into it, crumpling the machine in a single blow. Dust and fire licked up around it in a billowing cloud that obscured everything except the low blast of several minor explosions.

Joker's voice sounded. "Commander, I've downed some of the armatures, but the rest have 2nd squad pinned down. Orders?"

Shepard thought furiously. The geth fighting 1st squad were already wounded, and much less of a threat without the Colossus. She was in a tank. Chances were good that she could take them out and get to the entry to the dig site, but without 1st squad to back her up if they were outnumbered once inside it would be messy. Still...if she didn't... *2nd squad will be paste, and 1st squad will follow soon thereafter.*

She tapped her commlink, voice urgent and hard. "Joker, task 1st squad with supporting second, and keep those damned armatures down. I'll handle clean up here." She saw the Normandy's silver talon shape angle high and into the sky, GARDIAN lasers lancing down in clean strikes of white light.

"Wrex, target those geth near the ridge."

"On it."

The Mako's main gun barked, and geth went flying in all directions from the blast, accompanied by bits

of cover and the occasional severed geth arm or leg. Shepard floored the gas, the heavy tank rushing forward to overrun the geth position. There was a thudding crack as she blasted through the low concrete wall they had been cowering behind, and then high pitched digital screams as geth were shorn in half by the sharp nose of the Mako, or crushed under heavy wheels. One geth managed to snag its hand and foot along the stowage rails that ran down the left side of the tank, angling itself up, its other hand still holding a plasma shotgun. Wrex tried to get the turret inline with the thing, but the coax guns weren't built to move at that angle, and Wrex was wedged too tightly in the turret to draw his weapons. "Shit!"

Garrus moved, unbuckling his belt with a single move even as his other hand pulled out his pistol. A booted foot kicked open the back hatch, and with one hand, Garrus locked his talons around the seal and threw himself out, pulling up as he did so, managing to flip himself over and onto the top of the tank. He landed with a thud on one armored knee, nearly wrenching his shoulder out of socket, thrusting the Talon pistol into the geth's glowing eye before firing. The blast, at the range of all of four inches, was as if the geth had been hit in the head with a slug of burning steel, the fragmenting splinters that formed the mass accelerated pellet tearing off into crazy fractal patterns as they bounced around inside the armor plating that formed the geth's body before bursting free in a dozen gory blossoms of white fluid. The shattered machine gave a stricken, abbreviated cry before falling free, and Garrus sneered. "No ticket, no ride."

Shepard brought the Mako to a rolling halt, and Garrus let go of the hatchway, wincing at the pain in his shoulder. Wrex slid down and out of the turret platform, his heavy bulk having to wriggle a bit to fit through the hatch and out into the rocky ground. "Pretty brave, for a turian. You could have just let him shoot me." Garrus shrugged. "And have to pick your heavy carcass up to get you out of the Mako? No thanks." Shepard exited as well, pulling free the Revenant she had picked up from the Spectre offices on the Citadel. Scattered in a line along the tracks of the Mako were quite a few dead or shattered geth. A few still twitched feebly, and Garrus put his pistol away and extended the blocky form of his anti-material rifle. A moment later, and with two sharp booms, the battlefield was still except for the wind-blown dust, and the distant sound of a firefight over the ridge.

Shepard grimaced. "Hopefully, the majority of the geth are still over there, tied up with 1st and 2nd squad. If we're lucky, we can get in and find the scientist without facing superior numbers."

Garrus nodded. "Well, I'm already one up on you on the kill counts, so the fewer geth we face the more likely my victory." Shepard snorted, heading for the staircase leading inside the dig. "Hardly, turtle-boy, the ones I killed in the Mako count."

Garrus muttered. "Driving like that, I'm amazed the casualties didn't include US."

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Below the earth, Liara heard the blasts, the shaking of the ground, runnels and trickles of dust cascading down from the ceiling as a battle raged above.

She closed her eyes, biting her lip in hope. *Someone is coming. Goddess, thank you.*

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## **Chapter 35: Chapter 29 : Therum , Rage**

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*A/N: The ending of Therum bothered me. How can a mining laser set off a volcano? Why, if you have an active volcano going off, do we never see lava? If the damned structure is that sensitive, how did they even dig into it in the first place.*

*Also, I am not a fan of traditional rescue scenes. We're always told Liara is this biotic badass, but we rarely get to see it. Liara always struck me as the kind of person who could be really strong when she was angry or scared, and just kind of meh all the rest of the time. I had to modify the Armature Suplex a bit... but I think it works better this way, actually.*

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January 26th , 1:40 AM

The entry to the dig site was a cylindrical hole in the side of the mountain, a common enough setup for miners who dug core shafts to test for mineral densities. The door was a heavy, hydraulic powered slab of metal that opened fitfully when the controls were activated, leading down into a sharply sloped tunnel lined with wires and overhead lights. As a rule, Shepard never liked going into dark holes sealed with heavy doors, as they all reminded her of Torfan, and the final assault.

*Then again, nothing else can be that bad.*

Shepard took point, swapping her LMG for the blunt, vicious ODIN shotgun, its under-barrel light flicking on automatically in the dim interior of the tunnel. The Spectre armor she wore circulated cool, clean air around her, the mirrored faceplate lit up on the inside with video links in the corners of her view and an integrated targeting system tied to sensors in her hand, wrist, and arm. Her steps were quiet, the heavy boots of the armor rubberized and built with tiny mass effect shock absorbers to silence her steps.

Garrus followed, hunched over slightly, eyes tracking every moment as he held his heavy sniper at a ready position. He'd augmented his usual load out with a bandoleer of heavy splinter shells for the assault rifle he had checked out of the Normandy's armory, and Forlan's pistol was holstered on his hip. Heat wafted up from the end of the tunnel, washing over his angular features, making him blink a bit. "It's .. hot. Why is that?"

Wrex brought up the rear, gigantic shotgun making careful sweeps as he towered over the other two, the door falling shut behind him as they moved along the tunnel. "The air is moving, but it's... dead." The krogan's grip on his own weapon was tight, as he sniffed the air almost suspiciously. "If someone is here, they've been gone at least a day or so." Shepard triggered the door at the far end of the tunnel and rolled out, shotgun making an arc, covering her back. "Clear." Garrus stepped through, his legs making a wide spread as he stabilized himself, Wrex squeezing past him to straighten to his full height.

The three stood on a narrow, corroded metal platform, high above a pit that must have descended hundreds of feet. The chewed gashes in the walls and heavy iron girders around the edge of the pit spoke of rapid digging, but empty soda cans, bits of food wrappers, and a pile of boxes with salarian markings indicated it had been lived in for some time. Wires trailed down the pit in a messy string sloppily tied together with plastic strips and nailed into the rock with heavy spikes. A single staircase circled the edges of the pit, spiraling down into darkness, the occasional field light clamped to the thin metal railings.

"So, descend the creepy rickety metal staircase into the dark, bottomless pit most likely filled with geth. You bring us to such nice places, Commander." Garrus' voice was wry, as he put away his sniper rifle and pulled out his pistol.

"Let's get moving. We don't have time to waste." Shepard's voice was curt and cool as she moved ahead. Silently they moved along the stairs, hearing nothing and seeing no movement. Occasionally they passed by openings in the rock – squarish tunnels, slashed into the walls, ending a few dozen feet in. Crates marked "Univ. Thess" or "Univ. Althara" filled these, along with chunks of white, glossy material and bits of trash.

After almost 5 minutes of descent, they reached a broad, open metal platform, crossing the pit and opening into a cave gallery. An elevator was set along the far wall, pulleys and support systems sunk into the rock with heavy beams, a rather worn out looking generator next to it sputtering along with assorted rattling noises. The rest of the space was given over to an expanse of bone-white wall, covered in thin, almost elegant inscriptions that were in no language Shepard had seen but somehow looked vaguely familiar. She stepped closer, frowning. "This must be part of the dig site. ...but where are the researchers? Did the geth kill them?"

Garrus glanced around. "No sign of a firefight. No geth head sinks, no empty ammo blocks." He pointed to where computers had been neatly stacked, along with crates covered in shipping labels and warning signs. "No blood spatters and everything is neatly stacked. Looks like whoever was here was pulling out, or about it." Wrex sniffed the air, warily. "I don't smell any blood. Just dust, and ...." He frowned. "Burning rock. Lava. Brimstone. Shepard, that's where the heat is coming from. This isn't a mountain. It's an old inactive volcano." Garrus nodded thoughtfully. "Never been around lava, I wondered what that was. I thought something below had caught fire."

Shepard shrugged, tearing her gaze from the inscriptions, ignoring the shiver that suddenly shot down her spine. "Let's take the elevator. Maybe there's answers, or this T'soni person, down below." They entered the elevator carefully, and Wrex threw a lever, sending it slowly into a descent. Shepard's comms system flashed and she tapped her link. "What's the status topside, Joker?"

The flight lieutenant's voice was a bit static-blurred, but clear enough to make out. "1st and 2nd squads report all hostiles terminated. They took a lot of fire. Rodriguez, Smith, and Patterson are down with heavy bleeding, and Jackson took a slug in the knee and can't walk."

Shepard sighed. "Understood. How many effectives left?"

Cole's rough voice cut in. "4. Williams, myself, Lelong, and Anders. The LT is alright, but he took a shot in the thigh, and he has a bad migraine. Says his biotics are ..erratic. We're down by some kind of landing pad up on the ridge, there's some medical supplies here and ..luggage. Labels say it's T'soni's. We don't see any bodies...but ..." Shepard grimaced. "Take it with you and fall back to the Normandy. I think we're okay, the geth seem to have focused their efforts topside. As long as no one died, there's no point risking their lives just to cover my six. Joker, notify Chakwas."

"Aye,ma'am. I'll bring her in close after I do one more sweep of the area.. I keep getting some kind of light ladar ping I can't pin down." Shepard nodded. "Cole, send someone to grab the Mako, you can start first aid on your casualties with it, and it's going to be a lot easier to get everyone back on the Normandy that way. When we're done here, you can bring the ship close into the dig site itself, it's secure now." Shepard cut off the comm, and glanced around. They had descended quite a ways now, and the rock was an endless sheet of hard granite on the left. To the right, the entire pit was now white, glossy and hard, apparently the surface of the Prothean ruin. Occasionally wide, oval corridors stretched off into the darkness, or ended in flat white walls covered in strange symbols. "Pretty big dig. Must have been some kind of tower, I guess."

Garrus nodded, while Wrex looked bored, flipping his shotgun's safety off and on. With a shriek of metal, the elevator slowed. "Looks like we're coming to a stop." The cage of the elevator bottomed out with a thud. A second later, there was an electronic chattering noise, and geth plasma darts flooded the cab. Shepard threw herself down, ducking under the fusillade, as did Garrus. Wrex, on the other hand, simply roared as he was hit several times, and put his head down as he charged the elevator gate, which parted like rotten wood before his bulk. Barreling out of the elevator, he skidded on the metal walkway beyond it, lifting his shotgun to fire several blasts. An electronic sound of pain rang out, as something white was flung down, burning from the inferno shells it had been impaled with.

Shepard cursed, and ran for it, throwing herself into a ball and rolling behind the bulk of the krogan. She came up even as Garrus slammed himself to one side of the elevator, using the edges of the frame as light cover. The cavern beyond was large, probably 100 feet deep and very high. Broad shelves of rock connected to the cavern floor with rough ramps, while standing spot lights and the occasional hung field lamp cast a sterile white illumination over everything, sharp black shadows pooling around the tents, equipment and crates that bulked along one side of the cavern. In the middle of the cavern a massive mining laser sat, its red-tinted focusing tip disconnected and set on a table next to it. She didn't see a single geth. She swept her weapon across her field of vision, eying the dark spots between two tents. Nothing met her gaze but all-concealing shadows and blaring searchlights, the combination ruining her ability to pick out movement.

There was a scrabble of rock *above* her, and she rolled onto her back, firing instinctively. Wrex spun on his heel as something white and fast slammed into Shepard, the cheap metal walkway splintering as it crashed into her and both fell a dozen feet to the cavern floor below. She struggled with the thing in the dim light, as it squirmed and bucked in her grasp, greasy white synthetic flesh making bizarre hissing sounds. With a grunt of effort she threw it off of her, but one of its long feet tangled in the unbroken section of walkway above as it leapt up. With a spin and a flash of red from its single eye, the geth monstrosity launched itself at her again, this time slamming a metal studded knee into her stomach. She felt the armor plating across her torso snap, but she wrenched her arm around the thing's elbow and pulled, arching back to force it to pull away from her.

Wrex was shouting, blasts of shotgun fire peppered with high-pitched digital squealing echoing through the cavern. The disgusting thing on top of her smelled like wet and rotting cheese, mixed with old rust and grease. She kicked it away, rolling out from under the walkway and into the light, and brought up her shotgun, blasting it. It collapsed bonelessly, sprays of white fluid spattering over her armor, and she turned to face the cavern once more. The things were everywhere, leaping like frenzied locusts, spraying plasma darts from slender, ugly curved shapes in misshapen hands. Garrus fired, the explosive shell lashing out to lance into one of the geth's sides, detonating a moment later in a flash of blue-white energy and a jumble of smoking, burning geth body parts. But even as he did so two more ran along the ground, then along the wall, loping like deranged bloodhounds, glowing eye-lights leaving a trail of illumination as they pounced on him.

Shepard grimaced, taking aim with her shotgun, and fired. A geth thing folded in half at the waist from the force of the shot, and she fired again, gritting her teeth. The disturbingly fluid motion it made as it slumped to its knees, holding its shattered torso, looked far too much like a living creature for her comfort. Wrex grabbed one that was wrapped around his back with a meaty fist and hurled it with a roar, the thing flying in a tumbling arc to land heavily atop a crate. A series of snaps and the sound of something sizzling let Shepard know that one was dead, but Wrex was surrounded by three more. Shepard leapt up, pulling biotic energy to her, and lashed out with a pulse of negative gravity, sending the geth near Wrex sliding from their feet to float helplessly in the air. Rather than fire his gun, Wrex grunted, fist clenching as he pushed out his own biotic power, the two fields overlapping violently and shearing each other apart in a bubble of titanic force. The three geth were wrenched apart, one stretching to almost double its length for a brief moment before snapping like a worn rubber band, one half slamming into the rock wall and splattering, the other careening off into the darkness at the end of the cavern, landing in a pile of crates that it crushed.

The other two geth, either less sturdy or more lucky, were just torn in half cleanly, bonelessly flopping to the walkway a moment later in a rain of white fluids. Wrex kicked a clammy geth hand off of his foot and crashed his heel into its head, sending the eye-light into darkness. Garrus had dropped his rifle to pull out his pistol, shooting one of the foul, rubbery things at point blank range as it rounded the corner into the elevator car. It stumbled back, colliding with its partner, and Garrus fired three more

times, his hand hammering down on the ammo release to cycle it's chamber, the heavy buckshot tearing dozens of pale white furrows in the sickly false flesh. The first one collapsed, the second staggered back , twitching, and backed into Wrex's shotgun barrel. The flash of light a moment later sent the now burning geth flying across the railing to flip over it, and crash down onto the rock floor. Wrex wiped white fluid off his gun and face with a disgusted look, while Garrus fell back onto his haunches, scuttling away from the twitching, all too lifelike pile of synthetic flesh in front of him. "What the fuck was THAT?" Garrus voice was trembling with multiple tones, his eyes wide.

Sheppard crouched down in front of one of the bodies, poking it with her shotgun. The geth was built like it's more metallic counterparts, but only a few narrow metal rods at it's joints and hips, and the plating behind it's head and surrounding it's eye, betrayed it's synthetic origin. The arms, torso and legs were all built of the same dark white muscle-like material, which when she touched it molded sluggishly around her finger with a juicy, sickening squelch before reforming back to it's previous shape. "I have no idea, Garrus."

Wrex spat. "Goddamn disgusting is what they are. They smell horrible. Geth were bad enough when they were just machines, this is.. vile." Garrus slowly got to his feet. "Are these living beings they've ruined, or did they grow this stuff onto some kind of framework? What the spirits is going on here?"

Sheppard stood as well, and shook her head. She was about to reply when she heard a faint , almost exhausted voice, barely above a pained whisper.

"Goddess...please...is .. anyone there..."

Shepard caught the edge of the walkway and clambered up, and followed the faint sound, heading around the edge of the elevator to a narrow ramp leading down. She stopped, surprised by the vista in front of her. An asari was suspended and spreadeagled in a rippling field of azure, her once white uniform stuck to her slender form with sweat, long black pants clinging to her legs. A drawn face looked down at the commander with such broken desperation that even Shepard was taken aback. She took her helmet off , shaking her hair free, and couldn't help but smile.

*She's .... beautiful.*

The woman's lips were parted, as she panted , her eyes dull, her skin bright blue and somehow parched looking. Shepard could not help but notice her smell , like old bathwater and whiskey and something less pleasant. "Doctor T'soni?" The asari swallowed painfully, and her eyes met Shepard's.

For a long moment, neither looked away. For a moment, all that existed was two shattered people, unable to fit , never knowing how to react, unable to grasp the pain they kept being put through and into. For a moment Shepard saw something in Liara's eyes she could understand, something broken and raw and vital. For a moment Liara saw something in the human woman's eyes, pain never allowed to heal, wounds infected with pain and loss, a hand reaching out from filth and darkness for a touch of light...

"Uh, Commander?" Garrus' voice was even, but with a slight edge. "You okay?"

Shepard shook herself, frowning. "Yeah. Just...still shaken up by the geth." She cleared her throat. "You are Liara T'soni, yes? Doctor from the University of Serrice, here on a dig?" Liara nodded, her voice thin but somehow...sweet. "Yes. .. you... are real. You are real, yes? I have... been seeing things, I think."

Shepard nodded. "I..yes, I'm real. My name is Commander Shepard. I'm a Spectre. This is Garrus Vakarian, C-Sec, and Wrex. We're here to... get you out , I guess." Liara closed her eyes, shuddering. "Thank the Goddess... I did not think anyone would ever come looking for me." Her voice sped up, wavering , as she opened her eyes again, a trace of panic coming over her features. "Listen...this .. field,

I am trapped in, is a Prothean stasis defense field of some kind. I cannot move while within it's confines, so I need you to find some way to get me out, alright? Please?"

Shepard nodded, but firmed her jaw. "And how did you end up in there?"

Liara swallowed, wincing, her wide blue eyes guileless and desperate. "I.. I was packing my belongings to leave, the University... fired me and I was told to meet someone from my mother's followers to take me back home. I was .. lost in thought, examining this ruin one last time when a krogan and geth appeared. Geth! I saw the footage of Eden Prime but... " She shivered, despite, the head, and continued, her voice almost cracking. "I..I panicked. I knew this passage way acted as a barrier , and I thought I could protect myself by activating it. But something went...wrong, and it trapped me instead." She bit her lip. "And now I'm trapped in here. You must get me out!"

Garrus flicked a mandible. "Your mother is working with Saren, Doctor. She's responsible for the atrocities on Eden Prime. Whose side are you on?" The turian's voice was hard, suspicious. Liara looked shocked, lips trembling. She stammered. "I – I am not on anyone's side! I may be Benezia's daughter, but I am nothing like her! She hates everything I am. I have not even spoken to her in person in years! I -"

Shepard held up a hand. "Calm down, Doctor. We'll get this all sorted out. "She was surprised to hear herself speaking in a soothing voice, and cleared her throat. "We just need to figure out a way past this energy field." Liara minimally shook her head. "The thug that claimed they worked for my mother was trying to bring it down, but he and the geth had no luck. They planned to use something from what they called a .. Colossus? To shatter the field...but I have my doubts. Prothean energy fields tend to implode when collapsed forcefully." She paused, then continued. "The controls are behind me, if you can find a way past the barrier field, you can shut it off safely. Please help me."

Wrex grunted. "Well, we can't use their idea anyway, the stupid geth machine is a pancake now. It's too bad we can't just blast our way through." Shepard thought for a moment, then smiled. "I may have an idea. Just be calm, Doctor. We'll get you out of there before you know it. "

"S-shepard. Be... careful. There is a krogan here, with the geth. They have been trying to find ways past the barrier, and I think he is a biotic."

Wrex stiffened. "Another krogan with the soulgrip? I'm starting to get tired of krogan stupid enough to work for Saren. For a battlemaster to do so is .. troubling. And infuriating." The krogan's voice was dark and thick with anger.

Shepard exhaled. "Garrus, cover the elevator. Wrex, come with me." Shepard walked around the broken walkway to the cavern floor proper, stepping over the shattered bodies of the geth hopping things that still littered the floor. She glanced around the campsite that had been set up beyond it, then turned her attention to the mining laser.

Wrex grunted. "I like how you think, human, but I doubt blasting the field would work. Or the wall." Shepard grinned. "No doubt. Help me get this focuser back on the breach." Wrex grunted as he lifted the heavy crystal, the two of them carefully sliding it back onto the business end of the laser. "I noticed as we came down that there were lots of other oval tunnels like the one Doctor T'soni is in. None of them have this field. All we have to do is blast through the rock below it. There's some kind of elevator shaft beyond that..." She pulled up the laser's menu, grinning wider as the system booted up. "Still got power. Now..." Using the cross-shaped targeting pad, she carefully aligned the laser's grid to the heavy jumble of rocks below, and dialed in the power to cut through 10 feet of rock. With a touch of the firing stud, the laser sent out a blinding purple-blue beam of energy, melting through the granite stones like butter. A moment later the laser cut out, leaving a wide smoking trench in the ground, leading to an irregularly melted hole in the wall that gave way to smooth, white floor.

"Tada. Better living through firepower. Let's move." Shepard and Wrex walked over to the still cooling hole in the floor, and Shepard called up to Garrus. "Down here. We have a way in." A moment later, Garrus came scrabbling down the rocks, hissing in alarm as he jerked away from still glowing hot rock near the edge of the hole. "Well, that works, if a bit sloppy." Shepard turned on her shotgun's light and entered first, ducking her head under the still warm rock, then straightening as she entered the tunnel. This one was coated in dust, a console like the one next to T'soni above dark and still. The corridor went on for about 30 feet, before ending in a circular landing with a hole in the middle. A slender podium was at the edge of the hole, faintly glowing green images above it. Garrus gave a sort of whistling noise. "50,000 years and the power is still on. Talk about over engineering. "

Shepard walked up to the device, and Wrex frowned. "Buncha squiggling gibberish. How you plan to work this?" Shepard frowned at Wrex. "I... " Without knowing why, her fingers tapped two of the holographic buttons, and there was a hard, grinding sound. A moment later, a circular platform descended from above, coming to a smooth stop even with the floor they were on, and the panel chimed. "How did I know to do that?"

Garrus gave her a worried look. "Maybe the Beacon did more than give you bad dreams, Sheep-master." Shepard rolled her eyes. "Let's go. If I'm crazy, at least it's useful crazy... I hope." She touched another control, and the elevator smoothly lifted. It ascended slowly but evenly, a few seconds later stopping on the floor with the asari. Blue radiance filled the corridor ahead, but the control panel was a few feet outside of the effect.

Liara's form was facing away from them, and Shepard shook her head as she caught herself eying the asari's behind. *Jesus, I'm as bad as a man. What the hell is wrong with me?*

Shepard stepped forward, and Liara gave a little movement with her head. "H-hello?" Shepard spoke, making sure her voice was calm. "It's just us, Doctor. We'll get you down from that .. thing." Shepard walked over to the control panel, examining it minutely. Liara tried to turn her head, but couldn't. "How...did you get past the field?" Shepard was still absorbed in the green-glowing display in front of her. "Mining laser. Cut a hole in the floor to the next level down where the field wasn't turned on." Shepard bit her lip. Garrus stepped up. "How do we cut this off, Doctor?"

Liara sagged, her voice dropping in defeat. "I.. don't know. There must be some way to do so, but the machine was ... malfunctioning. After all, I wanted a protective barrier, just for it to do this. Any advice I could give you might be wrong."

Shepard hesitantly tapped a control in the right hand corner, and there was a heavy rumble from somewhere below. A moment later, Liara collapsed to the deck, her head hitting her knapsack on the floor. "Oh... you .. you did it. How did you know which controls to activate?" Shepard helped her up, as gentle as possible, pulling her to her feet, leaving them face to face, barely inches apart. A long moment paused, and Shepard stepped back, exhaling, and pulling a bottle of water from the emergency supply pack on her thigh. "Long story. Here, Doctor. You must be dying of thirst."

Liara's eyes lit up as she took the bottle with trembling hands, shaking like a leaf as she slowly and carefully drained it, tipping her head back. Shepard found herself watching the movement of her slender throat as she swallowed, and turned to Garrus to break the image. "We clear?" Garrus shrugged. "So far. I can't hear anything. If there's any more of those geth.. hoppers...around, they're being sneaky. Gah." The turian gave a twist of his head and rolled his shoulders as if shaking off a bad memory.

Shepard turned back to Liara. "Alright, doctor. You a little better now? Can you walk, at least? How long have you been trapped in that thing, anyway?"

Liara shook her head wearily, eyes focused solely on Shepard. "I.. two days? I think? Things began to blur towards the last few hours. I.. I think I can make it out of here, the water... helped." She exhaled

shakily. "I.. I owe you my life, Commander. Whatever I can do to repay you, it is not enough. What would you have me do?" Shepard looked at her feet, shifting under the intense gaze. "That depends on you, Doctor. Your mother is definitely tied up in horrible activities. The Citadel Council has a lot of questions it needs answered, both about what she's up to and the geth, and right now, you are our only lead."

Liara frowned. Shepard noticed she had eyebrow-like markings above each eye, and freckles dusting across her cheeks. *Just like a human. Except she's blue. And beautiful. And I am staring again.* A moment later, Liara looked away, her voice tentative. "Lead? I do not know what my mother is planning, or what she would have to do with geth. I am just a researcher of Prothean extinction, I am not even well versed in the more technical aspects of their culture!"

Shepard held up a hand, and forced a smile. "Calm down. No one is going to arrest you or anything silly like that. We'll .. figure out what's going on later. Frankly, if your mother's idea of a welcome home party is to send geth after you, you're better off with us. Let's get out of here." Liara pointed to the elevator. "We – that is, the research team that was once here... figured out how to use the Prothean elevator long ago, Commander. It is much faster and safer than the mining elevator, and it leads to the top of the volcano, which is fairly broad and flat. We stopped using the mining elevator months ago, I am astonished it still functions at all." Wrex shrugged. "The quicker we are out of here, the less like more geth are to show up. And that damned elevator was on it's last legs, anyway."

Shepard nodded, and put her mirror-faced helm back on. "Get us to the top, then, Doctor. " Liara gave a weak smile, and picked up her knapsack , walking towards the controls. "Please, call me Liara, Commander. I .. I fear my doctorate is of little use to me except in isolating me in out of the way digs." Wrex and Garrus stood stock still as Liara worked the controls. With a smooth lurch, the elevator began to rise, at a very rapid clip. More corridors radiated off the central hub in all directions, most blocked by debris , crates, or darkness. Shepard looked up, as a broad ring of metal scythed open to reveal sunlight and the harsh pale red sky outside. "Yeah, this is a hell of a lot faster than that rickety piece of crap we rode down on." The elevator came to a halt, the top of the mountain inset with a smooth white square of stone surrounding the opening that allowed the elevator through. The four stepped off of the elevator, which immediately sank back below the hatch cover, sliding out of sight a few seconds later. They were about 800 feet above the dig site now, the wreckage of the Colossus a tiny asterisk of twisted metal and smoke , the buildings spread out around the distant tunnel mouth.

Shepard was so relieved to be out of the cramped, hot Prothean ruin that the voice from behind her took her completely by surprise. "Hah. Well, geth, you were right, this IS an elevator shaft."

Shepard whipped around, shotgun leveled, only to face the blazing blue orb of a geth armature, towering some 12 feet above them, wide-set legs gripping the rock of the mountain face beneath it securely. Leaned cockily against the foremost leg, one hand gripping a vicious looking shotgun, was a yellow-skinned krogan in bulky black armor. Red glowing tubing trimmed the armor , while his head plate was smooth and unscarred. The krogan jutted his chin out, displaying his teeth in a challenge. "Some old doddering wreck you dug up and a mincing little turian won't stop a big geth walking cannon, human. Give up the doctor and I'll make this quick and painless."

Shepard snorted. "Fuck. You."

She moved, pushing Liara out of the line of fire and immediately calling upon her biotics. She heard Garrus yell as he rolled backwards, the hiss-clank of his sniper rifle as he unfolded it echoing across the mountain top. With a yell she hurled a shockwave at the krogan thug –

Who with an almost negligent backhand motion, stopped it cold, biotic forces tearing at each other fruitlessly before wavering away. "Pathetic. I thought you were supposed to be some kinda monkey

badass. Geth, kill these pyjacks."

Both Wrex and Garrus fired at the same moment, shotgun and anti-material rifle blazing in a unified boom, one punching a wide hole in the geth machine's chest, the other digging a long gouge across the transparent surface of the geth's eye. But the armature was far too large to be disabled, and the pulse that radiated out in fire lashed across the three of them with a snapping boom. Shepard felt herself land heavily, paint sizzling, shields totally fried. Her armor trilled alarms as she tried to move, feeling something broken shift in the leg she had hurt on Eden Prime. Her eyes took in the sight of Wrex, laying on the cold white stone at the edge of the elevator shaft, unmoving, cold blue plasma fires dotting his armor and smoke rising from his form.

*Get...up...*

Shepard spat blood inside her helmet and staggered to her feet, calling upon her biotics. A second flare of light slammed into her just as she got a barrier up, snapping it and sending her skidding backwards again, this time landing on her stomach, her shotgun skidding out of her weakened grasp. She felt blood running from a cut on her collarbone, trickling down her neck. The armature stomped forward, spike-tipped legs digging into the rock as it approached, casting faint shadows even in the noonday sun from the blazing death it's eye promised.

"Get away from her you THING!"

Shepard felt, rather than saw, something like a giant tidal wave wash over her, strong enough to send wind gusting past. A literal biotic meteor slammed into the geth with enough force that three of it's legs snapped instantly, shards of metal and armor plating flying off with popping, crumpling noises. The armature crashed to the ground, it's head slamming into the astonished krogan with enough force to pulp his body, reducing it gory red-orange paste that vented in a cone shape across the mountain top and far out into the air.

As Shepard watched, the geth machine trembled and tried to rise, only for a blue radiance to enfold it. "You will not hurt her, or anything else ever *again!*" The armature lifted, jerked aloft as if by the hand of an angry god, legs jerking helplessly, then slammed into the hatch covering the elevator. The head snapped off like a child's toy, skittering across the ground to come to a stop a few feet away, the light fading from it's orb slowly. A sob, and blue light exploded outwards again. The machine was hurled down the mountain side, legs and bits of it's body being shorn away as it rolled irregularly to crash to a sudden halt against a massive boulder some 50 feet down.

With a groan, Shepard managed to sit up. Liara T'soni was on one knee, her lips drawn back in a grimace of hate, blue fires still illuminating her form, heaving with exertion. Her eyes were blazing pools of blue, full of frustration, fear, and savage emotion. Her shoulders moved up and down, her breathing erratic, and she glanced over at Shepard a long moment. "I ... am ... not ... feeling so .. good."

With a flutter of eyelids, the little asari collapsed to the ground. Shepard merely watched her, feeling so tired. "J...Joker. Come in..."

"We...could...use a pick up..."

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## Chapter 36: Chapter 30 : Pressley

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*A/N: There's a couple of fluffy chapters ahead , and I know some people only read for the mission chapters, and the fight scenes. But there was such a paucity of **depth** to the way Shepard was*

*characterized, that I need to explore it. The story makes us feel as if all of these people have these deep, binding connections – but we so rarely get to see it.*

*I'm sure that's why fan fiction is so satisfying, because it lets us all fill in the holes. But I'm not good with drabbles and one-shots, there's so many pieces that fall outside the scope that I feel as if mine are just chapters torn from the story they belong in.*

*The relationship between the Normandy Six and Shepard is a vital part of what moved her to become more human, rather than a bloodthirsty she-wolf that giggled at pulling some poor bastard's heart out from behind. Tali ends up like a little sister, Garrus a brother. Wrex is more complex, as he's part and parcel of her guilt in Torfan, but ends up almost absolving her. Alenko acts as a sounding board, a way to explore expectation. Liara becomes her soul, almost in the way Benezia is Saren's.*

*Williams, though, is someone Shepard sees as having great potential blunted by her own self-image. Williams instinctively gets Shepard to respond emotional, even when she doesn't know what or how to do so. I wanted to illustrate a bit of that, and give a hint of just how bad my version of Torfan is. I've debated writing up the full thing about Torfan, but I tried and it actually made me sick, so I may hold off on that.*

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January 26th , 2183 10:30 AM

Shepard awoke slowly, feeling very tired, but also very secure, as if someone held her carefully. She blinked away the blurry lights in the overhead and tried to sit up, only to discover her arms and legs wouldn't respond. An acceleration of small beeping noises from the foot of her bed rang out, and a moment later the elegant form of Dr. Chakwas stood next to her, a smile on her face. "Good to see you back among the awake, Commander."

Shepard groaned, leaning her head back. "How long have I been out, and why I can't I seem to move? And what happened?"

Chakwas gave a slight, amused chuckle. Her labcoat was wrinkled, and her hair looked somewhat limp and frazzled. There were a few blood spots on the hem of her coat, some red, others blue. "Over 7 hours. You can't move because there's a medical mass effect field holding you in place. We've had the nerve regenerators and bone bio-unit working on you since they hauled you back in. That blast you took from the geth war machine very nearly killed you, Commander."

Chakwas picked up a datapad and began scrolling through it. "You broke your left collarbone, your right leg – two breaks, both internal – six ribs, and you had stress fractures in your left tibia. You also had several slugs penetrate your armor at some point, not to mention a heavy concussion from being slammed around, and some light first-degree burns from where your armor failed."

Chakwas coughed. "Wrex was very severely hurt, but with an hour of rest and eating a truly amazing heap of chicken and something .... meaty, his regeneration has taken care of most of it. Detective Vakarian got launched completely off the platform and landed badly on his right arm, splintering some plates that had to be rebound. He also had some sub-dermal burning from heat-transfer from that hit, and one of the tips of his fringe shattered, which I was able to repair. He's resting in the hangar bay."

Shepard nodded. "And the..doctor? Liara T'Soni?"

Chakwas nodded. "Aside from being extremely dehydrated and malnourished , there wasn't that much wrong with her, except that last stunt of hers that saved your life nearly gave her an embolism. Asari are natural biotics, but most of them use a neural signal amplifier. It's not like a human or krogan amp, it isn't surgical, but it's very useful. She didn't have hers, but she hurled enough biotic energy to almost

cook herself alive, the poor thing." Shepard frowned. "She going to be okay?" Chakwas shrugged, glancing at her datapad. "In the short term, she's fine. But overdoing it with biotics is .. dangerous for asari physiology, from what I've been studying. I see no evidence of anything yet, but even a single incident like this one could lead to any number of issues, brain damage, nerve problems, even sterility." Shepard paled, but Chakwas was still looking at the datapad. "In any event, she does not seem to be in any immediate medical danger. I'm concerned about her mental health, however."

*Fuck! Sterility. To save my worthless ass? And now I have to talk to her?*

Shepard sighed. "Doc..you are aware that I'm not the most .. capable when it comes to things of that nature, right? I understand she's not doing well, but , fuck , anyone would be better at talking to her about it than me."

Chakwas gave the commander a long, almost weary look. "Commander, I know you feel awkward around other people. It's clear that you sometimes miss the queues that other people pick up on instinctively. But there's good reason for that, given your upbringing. But not dealing with people won't make that better. You are now the CO. Like it or not, you have to be capable and willing to engage people in the space service. We don't have the luxury of a psychologist here, and we can't just put people on 96 hours leave to sort out their issues."

She frowned, and continued. "And in this case, I think Doctor T'soni will continue to evade talking about how she feels, or what this has done to her, unless she's forced to. And you're the only person who can make that happen. She can protest she's fine, but you are going to have to decide how this plays out once she's fully recovered."

Shepard arches an eyebrow. "How so?"

Chakwas gave a wave of her hand, as if gesturing to the entire medbay. "I have to make assessments of mental health, even that of aliens. Doctor T'soni has demonstrated a mix of nervousness, depression, and despair since she awoke. Right now, she's in the research lab." Chakwas indicated the door in the forward part of the medical bay. "It's quiet, and I figure that if she has lingering medical issues, it's close by. But at some point you're going to have to haul the poor girl in front of the Council and have them interrogate her, and right now .. I don't think she's up to that. You will have to decide when that happens, and how. And you can't do that if you don't talk to her."

Shepard shrugged. "Deciding *if* she needs to talk to the Council is not my call. . . but , seeing as how she saved my life, I'm more inclined to cut her some slack. If she needs time to recover, she can do so here, and the Council can interrogate her just as well via tight-beam hologram as they can having her stand on that god-awful fucking pier while they gloat."

The human doctor nodded. "For someone who is supposed to be cold , Commander, there are times you seem quite lenient."

Shepard closed her eyes. "I don't do what I do for the sake of being some kind of..renegade badass. I don't like making hard calls, but when it happens, there's no point crying over it. Hesitating or showing emotion won't make it any better. That being said, Doctor...when someone is telling me something, and they know more about it than I do, I at least try to listen. And there's no point making a young woman who just lost her mother get into a confrontation with that Sparatus jackass if I don't have to. I never got why Udina didn't like the bastard until I met him."

Chakwas put down the pad, and walked to the end of Shepard's bed. "Well, your own injuries aren't exactly healed up the way I'd like yet, but I can at least have you sit up and able to talk. Both Pressley and Kaiden have been checking in on you every hour, I gather they have some kind of reports or decisions to make." Shepard's bed slowly elevated her to a reclined sitting position, and she could move

her right arm. "How much longer am I going to be in this contraption, Doctor?" Chakwas smiled. "At least another 6 hours. That's if you don't move too much. I'll send in Pressley."

A few minutes later, the door to the dimmed medical bay opened, and Pressley walked . He saluted, sharply. "Ma'am? How's the leg? Doctor Chakwas indicated you were mostly healed, but..." The big man stood at attention, his uniform perfect as always, his left hand holding a datapad.

Shepard nodded coolly. "I'll need you to keep things going for a while longer, XO. Status report." Pressley nodded, and started going over his datapad, which she could see was full of notes. *Efficient and doesn't demand touchy-feely speeches or all that crap. Good XO for someone like me.*

"Ma'am, we took some minor damage on the lower armor banks from geth ground to space missiles. Nothing serious, but we do need to get armor plates 440 and 441 replaced, and segments 439 and 442 repaired. All members of the marine ground unit are onboard. No casualties, ma'am." Pressley gestured to the far end of the medbay, where two soldiers slept in medical sedation. "Corporal Smith and Sergeant Patterson have fairly severe wounds and will be on LALD for several days while they recover. Lieutenant Alenko was released about an hour ago, his leg wound is not too bad. All other marine force members have a full recovery."

She nodded, and Pressley continued. "Per standing regs, I did a complete scan sweep of the surrounding area after your recovery. We flagged geth wreckage, at least as much as we could, for recovery teams. We got a comms request from Alliance Command about two hours ago, but it wasn't flagged as urgent. We are currently on course for Trintara, the location of the volus distress call. It's going to be a long flight, 6 mainline jumps and then a lengthy FTL burn." Pressley turned the datapad so she could see his proposed course, and after doing a bit of math in her head, she nodded.

"Very good, Pressley. Commendable work, and I appreciate you stepping in for me."

The balding lieutenant commander glanced down for a moment, shrugging his broad shoulders. "I.. I do have a few concerns ma'am. I know you are recovering from ground-side injuries..."

Shepard looked at him with narrowed eyes. "You're as professional and to the point as I am. If you're raising concerns, then they're important to me. Let's hear it."

Inhaling, Pressley nodded. "First, the aliens on board the ship, Commander. I wouldn't like to think of myself as... *racist* ...and I understand the Normandy was built with turian assistance and that the aliens helped us out. But that doesn't change the fact that we don't really know very much about them, ma'am. They may not be with Saren, but that doesn't mean they don't have their own agenda., especially the krogan and the turian."

Shepard arched an eyebrow. "Not worried about the quarian?"

Pressley shrugged. "She's a kid, and a smart one. Adams is singing her praises, and she helped figure out a way to flash-dump almost another 200 degrees of heat from the forward baffles. No, I'm not worried about her. But the krogan is openly the agent and assassin for the Shadow Broker. He's a mercenary, and we don't know what the Broker's real interest in this mission is."

Shepard shrugged. "I met him in battle before, Pressley. Krogan are very straightforward."

Pressley raised a hand. "I'm not trying to doubt your experience ma'am, but that is exactly my concern. If the Broker changes his mind, or gets it in his head to pull anything on us, the krogan will just follow orders. I know he spends most of his time in the cargo hold and on the mess desks, but I would frankly feel a little better if we kept all the aliens off the CIC – not much reason for them to be near the critical systems. Or the stealth systems. That kind of tech might be just the thing the Broker would want to sell to someone else."

Shepard tilted her head. "And Garrus? What's the concern there?"

Pressley shrugged. "He's a turian, ma'am, and I *am* probably biased there. I just don't have a lot of trust for the situation. It was bizarre enough when we had a turian Spectre on board for what was supposed to be a simple shakedown run. But Special Ops C-Sec Detectives are almost as dangerous. I have an old .. associate of mine. Names Harkin. He used to be pretty sharp, but as age caught up with him he started drinking, and that led him to bad places. Harkin says Garrus is a very loose cannon who's risked the lives of innocent civilians just to down a criminal, and he almost blew up a transport to try to stop one criminal. "

Shepard used her right hand to pinch the bridge of her nose. "Alright, that sounds a .. bit extreme. And you think..what?"

Pressley shrugged again, his face troubled. "I'm not sure, Commander. I'm no alien psychologist. I worry that he's in charge of two very critical components of our mission, the forward battery and the M-35 Mako. It's probably unfounded suspicion. But he sounds like a risk taker, and ..." Shepard thought about how to react to Pressley's concerns, then decided to just be herself. "Fuck , Pressley, I have no clue what to think. *I'm* a risk taker, when you get right down to it. Wrex and Garrus did a better job on that little jaunt we just had in the tunnels than many Marines I've worked with, and they nearly got killed doing so. That warrants some slack. On the other hand... keep an eye on them. And I want to know if either of them wander up on the CIC... just to see why they would do so."

Pressley nodded. "Thank you, Commander. I .. I know I'm not the most flexible of people." Shepard gave him a look. "And I'm the paragon of level-headed calm?" Pressley gave a smile at that, then his smile turned into a softer, more open expression. "Ma'am, I can only say what I've seen since you've been on board is a good XO and a good CO. Anyone trained by Captain Anderson has to be the best of the best."

Shepard's face lost it's amusement at the captain's name. "Yeah. I just wish he were here" She paused, and glanced back at Pressley. "No concerns about the asari? She is alien, too, and the daughter of someone we're tracking down."

Pressley shook his head. "Maybe so, but... we all saw her damn near kill herself to save your life. She was bleeding from the nose and mouth when we got her on board, and from what I gather it was somewhat touch and go for a while. I don't know very much about biotics, but Lieutenant Alenko said that was a very powerful display of strength, especially from someone who was without food or water or rest for a couple of days."

Shepard snorted. "Powerful, hell. Taking out a Geth Prime almost blew me up, I can't even imagine how much one of those walker-things must weigh. She's going to be useful, if she can use biotics on that level." *And, hey, let's admit it.. I wish I could suplex a fucking geth ... walker ...thing.*

Pressley nodded. "My only other concern, really, is the damage we took to the under armor. Like I said, it's mostly superficial...but those were just ground units with shoulder mounted missiles. The ship is fast, it's nimble, it's very heavily armed and has strong barriers, but if we get in a serious scrap, I'm afraid the tradeoff is she has very little endurance. Damage control is almost non-existent, and we don't have a lot of redundant systems." Shepard winced. "It's a prototype, and I suspect they had to gut the armor to fit the stealth system in. That's a real problem going into the situations we are facing. Any real options?" Pressley shrugged. "Adams wants to boost the barrier strength by rerouting power from the secondary drive power network, and Joker feels we should install additional mass reaction jets to improve handling. Bottom line, though, they both agree a couple of good direct hits – or just about ANYTHING from that black monster ship we saw on Eden Prime – would tear us in half. "

Shepard considered this for a long moment. "Noted, but there's nothing to be done about it right now.

Write it up, we'll send it back to Alliance brass and see if the eggheads at Engineering Command have any useful ideas. Anything else?"

Pressley shook his head. "Not at this time, ma'am. I'll go ahead with the noon watch change started." He checked the pad in his hands, and tapped something on it, bringing up notes. "Our current ETA to Trintara is about 2 days, Commander." "Very well, XO. Dismissed." Shepard watched him leave the medbay, her thoughts swirling around what to do next. The silence of the medical bay was comforting, reminding her of other times she had nearly died achieving some goal. *Dirth, shot through the lung. Vansha, hit in the arm, right knee, two in the gut. Terra Nova, damn near burned to death.* With her working hand, she rubbed at her eyes, feeling grit and bone-deep tiredness in them.

The door opened with it's usual noises. Shepard glanced up, expecting Alenko with a report on the ground force, but arched an eyebrow as Williams walked through it, her dark hair tied back in a ponytail instead of a combat-ready bun for once. "You're awake, Skipper? The doc said you'd make it through okay, but we were pretty worried... "

Shepard grunted. "For certain values of 'okay', Williams. You have something to report?"

Williams hesitated, then abruptly sat down in Chakwas's chair in front of her desk, facing Shepard , hands folded together. "Not really, ma'am. Kaiden is asleep, he was going to give you the rundown on what we found after we picked you up, but it really isn't that important. I just.. I mean, I figured you could use the company, being stuck in traction and all."

Shepard gave the younger woman a cool glance, face expressionless. "I'm not sure that I make good ... company, Chief. I tend to focus on getting things done, not reflecting on them."

Williams shrugged. "Maybe, but ... I mean, I know you heard us talking in the mess a couple of days ago...and I just wanted to say that we just were talking about Torfan -"

Shepard held up her hand. "Chief, I have a rule. It's a pretty simple rule, really. It's about the only one I have. Don't talk. About. Torfan. " Shepard paused, closing her eyes as if in pain. "Please."

Williams was quiet for several seconds, the only sounds the faint beep of bio-monitors and air cycling through vents. "I .. I've never had a commander who gave two shits about me. I'm a Williams. I'm sure you...have read my record. Know who my grandfather was. General Williams, the Traitor of Shanxi. It's been something I have to carry 'round all the time. Pushing myself to excel." Williams voice dropped, almost to a whisper. "Knowing deep down inside things will not improve."

Shepard tilted her head, looking at the soldier, and Williams gave a tiny smile.

*"Ask me no more: thy fate and mine are seal'd. I strove against the stream and all in vain. "* Williams exhaled sharply after reciting, placing her palms on her knees and leaning forward. "Anyway, Skipper, I'm .. not good at knowing what to do with myself when someone isn't holding something like my family history over my head. I .. I just wanted to say that I understand what it's like to be judged by something you regret."

Shepard's expression was still blank, the dark eyes cool. "Chief...I judge soldiers by how they fight, by how much fire they bring to the battlefield, by how far I can trust them to go. I don't have the time or concern to give a shit about political crap or military dick-waving contests by men who need to convince themselves they're some kind of ultimate badass." Shepard paused, then continued. "Most people go through life lying to themselves, trying to convince themselves they are a certain kind of person. I don't care, and it's not something I get."

Shepard scratched her head. "That being said, Chief...there's a big difference between being ostracized over Torfan and being illogically cashiered because your grandfather was brave enough to make the

hard call. Trust me, I have had to make the call between victory at any cost and saving the lives of my men many, many times."

Williams gave Shepard a hard, almost angry look. "And you didn't mess it up, you didn't back down when you could have fought-"

Shepard shook her head, interrupting by raising her hand. "Williams, I never had civilian casualties on that kind of scale to think about. All there was to consider was the objective, and I had to get to it, and if the only way I could do that was to sacrifice a platoon, or lose 3 platoons trying to do it a different way, I'd lose the platoon. Somehow, I'm considered ... bad ... for being honest with myself, for dealing with the issues the best I can, for not pretending to regret having to make the hard call. I refuse not to take responsibility for my actions, but that doesn't help."

Shepard looked away, at the metal wall, taking in the little cabinets Chakwas sorted various medical gear in. "It's easy for some space-side clown, who has never had to lead men, or face their goddamned families when they die for you, that I go too far. It's easy for some order-spewing, decorated old fuck to imply that it could have been "done another way" when they don't want to get you the equipment you need to actually get it done at all. But sometimes, when you are facing a superior force, and they're going to kill everyone in your unit unless you figure out how to get the jump on them? You do what you have to. If soldiers die because of that, well...that's what Marines do. We die hard, fighting, and as Marines."

Shepard turned her gaze back to Williams, dark eyes narrowed. "But at the end of the fucking day, I put on this uniform to protect those who were too weak to protect themselves. I put it on to kill people like I used to be, to make up for what I did. I put it on to protect people who were normal, who deserved better than me, who weren't a net fucking loss to humanity. And so did your grandfather. And when he chose to surrender, rather than watch the fucking turians kill tens of thousands of innocent people just to get at his force.. he did the only thing he could. He knew what it would cost him just like I knew what it would cost me."

Williams gaze was listless, fixed on the floor. "They said ..the surrender...was dishonorable. What he did. I have to.. redeem our name-"

Shepard felt her blood boil, the old familiar anger rushing into her veins, but her voice was icy. Her whole body started to tremble, her face twisted into a snarl. "Honor? *Fuck* honor. What is honor? Was it honor that got the 2RRU blown to hell on fucking Torfan? I had to shoot unarmed batarians on Torfan. There were non-combatants there. Women." Shepard closed her eyes. "Children. The motherfucking four-eyed bastards used them as bait, knowing Alliance forces would try to avoid firing on them. They had them strapped with bombs. Babies. They prodded them forward at gunpoint , to charge us. Beeping. Crying."

Williams eyes were pools of horror, but Shepard continued, in that same cold voice. "We had to shoot our way through crying mothers, while the slavers shot my men to death. We had to shoot children in the head, so they didn't blow our goddamned unit up entirely. I had to sacrifice half the unit to draw off the main force, so I could get to the leaders so they wouldn't be able to remotely detonate any more fucking bombs. And we *died*, like goddamned rain falling out of the sky. And then the batarian pirate fucks wanted to surrender, to be let *go*. At the end of that fucking mess, the men wanted to roast the batarians alive, Williams." Her voice had become pained, close to wavering.

Shepard gave a shuddering inhalation. "But the Alliance never mentions, that, do they? Course not. That might lead to questions. The Alliance sold us out. They **let** the fuckers know we were coming, so they'd all be in one place. Wanted my unit to get chewed to pieces and killed, to convince the Senate to authorize a bigger fleet. To convince the ever-fucking Council to let us take the the fight to the

batarians. So they gave us nothing. No goddamned air support. No reinforcements. Nothing. Just a few dozen N7's and a bunch of stupid line animals sent out to die."

Shepard exhaled. "And when, despite everything, we won? When I did what I had to? They draped the fucking Star of Terra around my criminal, child murdering neck and talked about honor, and sacrifice, and heroism. But it's all bullshit. Honor is a word people who never have to pull the trigger use to justify getting someone else's children killed, for reasons that are never worth that. But do you think I *regret* it? Fuck no. I shot those evil fucking pirates dead because they were evil. I'd kill them a thousand times and it wouldn't be enough. I shot women and children because if I didn't then there'd be two dead people rather than one. The pirates pulled that fucking trigger, not me. And Torfan was the day my last faith in my own people died. When I realized some of them weren't actually any better than me. That we're all fucking monsters."

Williams opened her mouth, but no words came out. Shepard glared at her for a long, angry moment. "I don't have time... or the inclination ... to feel sorry for you, or anyone else. I can't even feel sorry for *myself*. And I certainly don't want anyone feeling fucking sorry for me. Your grandfather wasn't the fuckup. The people who sidelined a good soldier because of what her grandfather did were. If you want to feel like he did the wrong thing, like you have to 'make up for something' or goddamned redeem yourself, you're a fool. Redemption is for when you've done something wrong, Williams. Like selling red sand to kids, murdering gang-bangers just for being on your surf, stealing medical supplies from the poor to sell for heroin, killing people for 50 credits or to prove you're hard."

Shepard exhales, and closed her eyes. "But I was a monster before I wore this uniform. I tried to change what I am. Humans may well be monsters, but at least your goddamned grandfather had the guts to make wearing that uniform *mean* something, unlike the fucks who are responsible for Torfan. And if you're wearing it, that's why you should be doing to. To make it *mean* something. That's what I fight for. To make sure no other little girls end up like *me*."

The medical bay was quiet again, for long, tense seconds. Finally Williams spoke, hands curling into fists. "All I know is that I... I've been a soldier all my life. That's all I wanted. To wear Alliance blue. To be able to say "these colors don't run." To know I was defending the people that mattered. I never got a chance to, always shuffled off to the end-zones, out of the way colonies, garrison duty. And when it finally happens, when I'm on Eden Prime and it's time to die defending innocent colonists, I'm... powerless. Terrified. Running for my life. Whimpering in fear."

Shepard's voice is flat, cold. "As opposed to what, exactly, Chief? You think you failed or something? You think you should have died? That you should have stood tall, like that idiot Jenkins, and got your head ventilated?" Shepard shook her head, sneering. "You were outnumbered 4 to 1, facing down an enemy that was faster, stronger, and had the drop on you. Your CO was a criminally incompetent fuck who set a defensive position in the middle of a fire-lane with no cover, and he died like the stupid fool he was. Your battalion commander was farting around 500 miles away while your units came apart under fire, but you survived that, you even got back into the fight. I already told you: you're one of the best soldiers I've seen, and I don't have the time or inclination to patronize or bullshit people."

Shepard jerked her thumb backwards, towards the research lab. "There's a girl back there who just found out her mother tried to have her killed, after learning that same mother has joined up with a mass-murdering lunatic. There's a turian who just threw away his entire career for a *chance* at stopping Saren, because he's so pissed at the betrayal he can't think to do anything else. There's a fucking quarian *kid* who watched a friend get his head blown off just to get the data we needed here, and who's coming along out of some kind of fucked up species guilt. I don't care about anything in your past, or who your family was, or anything, Williams, except your ability to shoot that fucking gun like you stole it. You say you wear those blues to defend innocent people? Goddamn it, what the fuck else are we

doing if not that? That stupid pointy-faced fuck is going to kill the *galaxy*, Chief. Next to that, what some fuck with four stripes and as much ground combat time as a volus thinks of you OR your family history should be a goddamned non-issue."

Williams stood, saluting. "Yes, ma'am. Permission to depart, ma'am."

Shepard glanced away. "Denied. Sit your ass back in that chair."

Williams looked angry, hurt, confused, defiant... and sat. Shepard actually gave a small smile. "I think... I know what you meant to say Chief. You've been treated like crap through your career, and you think I fell the same for being the Butcher, that I don't talk much because I am ..." Shepard gives a little huff of air. "... vilified."

Williams frowned "And you don't feel that way? I .. look. Nobody gets you. Nobody understands...why you do this. It's hard for us to know what's going to happen on this ..quest .. we're on when we don't know .. what to expect."

Shepard's smile edged into bitterness. "Translation: nobody knows if I'll sacrifice them to get the mission completed? Fuck yes, I would. You, Alenko, Joker, the aliens, the whole goddamned ship. But I wouldn't expect to survive it. I'd be right there in the middle of it, dying, if I did that." Shepard fixed her gaze on Williams, hard grey-blue meeting soft and wary brown. "There are too many soldiers out there with .. damage to the soul. They only see numbers and success or failure, the losses in soldiers no more important than numbers on a datapad. Human robots, emotionally crippled. But they sacrifice their men without leading them. I've never, ever done that. And I never will."

Williams nodded, and Shepard gave a small, twisted smile. "I do this because I'm the best, Chief. At killing. At doing the impossible. At tasks that would reduce most people to a small puddle on the ground. I have survived shit that would turn you green. " Shepard's expression twists, the smile becoming something like a grimace. "But I grew up with drug-addled parents who sold me off as a kid to a sex slavery ring. I got free of that by turning into a vicious killer. The gangs kept me hopped up on so much coke, red sand and heroin that there's whole months I can't even recall. I never, ever had a normal life. I don't know how to 'relate'. I don't know how to make what I feel into something that makes sense. I react. I've never had a date, Williams. I never got to go to school, after I was 7. I had to teach myself to fucking read."

The older woman finally looked away. "I've never been to a wedding, or seen a play. I've never been able to reach out. In all the years of my life, the only friend I've had is Captain Anderson, and I don't even know *why*." She paused. "I'm not an emotional blank. I hate, I rage. I.. hurt. But what I've gone through isn't anything people can find ... a frame of reference with. I'm a pistol with an interesting history. Me trying to fill Anderson's shoes, to deal with things on that level. ... never works."

Williams said nothing for a moment, then shook her head. "I can't buy that, Skipper. You reached out to me when I was going to pieces. And what you told me .. was right. Maybe you're not perfect, but you're not a monster just because of your past any more than I should be defined by what my ancestors did. I want to atone, to make the Williams name bright again, and you say I shouldn't have to. If that's true, what the hell are you trying to atone for yourself, ma'am? Surviving when they send you off to die? "

Shepard was quiet.

Long, silent seconds trickled by. The medbay smelled of cleansing agent, medigel, and the faint hint of Chakwas's perfume. The air vents rattled a little as cool, dry air blew down against Shepard's face, as she stared at something Williams couldn't see for a long, long time. Finally, Shepard just let her head fall back to the pillow. "I don't know, Williams. Being born? I never felt like I had choices. I .. just had to succeed, no matter what, or it was like I would be... back where I started." Shepard raised her hand

to stare at it, noting the long scar on the back of her hand, tracing it's way along her wrist. "I don't know what to ... feel."

Williams slowly nodded. "Well, when you don't know , sometimes you just need someone there to talk about it with. That's what friends are for. So you don't have to be alone with the dark."

Shepard closed her eyes. "Yeah, well. I've never had friends...like I said...Anderson's the only one."

Williams frowned. "Comma...Shepard. You just sat here and... listened to me whine, shared something with me that clearly hurts you just to think about, much less talk about, and beat a conversation into my head that my *father* never had with me, or my *mom*, or any of my friends or CO's. You threw yourself into a pack of geth to save me when you barely knew me from some hot-head looking for vengeance, and then you got my chin up when I went all weepy on you. I... that's more than most friends have done for me." Williams exhaled. "I know I can't get where you've been. But that doesn't mean you have to stand in a puddle of your own pain alone. Williams girls are tough. And we don't let our friends suffer alone."

Shepard looked at Williams, watching as the younger woman gave an almost nervous smile, self-consciously brushing back a strand of hair and straightening in her seat. *There's that goddamned word again. That fucking empty hole.*

Anderson's voice in her head, his rough voice so ... gentle. *"You can do this. You have to learn to live, now, child. You've punished yourself enough. It was never you who was at fault. It's been the people pushing you. Using you. Now you have to take one more step, Sara. Trust that you can be more."*

*That ... fucking ... word.*

"I.. don't know how to .. be ..friends, Chief." Her voice , for once, was not cold... it sounded almost small, in the echoing space of the medbay.

Williams reached out and took Shepard's hand, squeezing it. "First, you call people by their names. Mine is Ash. Second, it's not something you can research or study or master. It just is. Maybe I'm too stupid to take the hint, or maybe I just don't really care about the whole 'oh Butcher is scary' horsecrap. But like I said . . .if you act like a friend, then you are. It's not about small talk, or buying gifts, or even girls night out. It's ... caring, when you don't have to."

Shepard was silent again, before biting her lip. "I am .. the most boring person to talk to... Ash. But if you have a fixation on stories about guns and shooting pirates, I can do that."

Williams grinned. "See? You just named two of the three bestest things in the universe. Those never get old."

Shepard leaned back. "...what's the third thing?"

Williams smiled, gently. "Friends."

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## Chapter 37: Chapter 31 : Normandy, Moments I

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*A/N: Apparently the stupid auto-correct in OpenOffice has a bizarre sense of humor when it comes to adjusting words... such as turf and surf. Blasted machine is in a conspiracy with the Reapers. I'm very slowly going back, in between writing chapters, and cleaning up and fixing tenses and spelling/grammar mistakes, so bear with me. Half of these chapters are written a sentence at a time, as I fly all over creation due to my job.*

*Some of the chapters will incorporate text from the game, but I am not going rehash convos in the game unless there is a damned good reason.*

*I could **really** use a beta reader and someone to bounce insane ideas off of.*

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January 26th , 2183 09:00 PM

It took some time for Chakwas to release Shepard from medical, and then another hour to report to Alliance Command and the Citadel. The response from both was terse. Alliance Command was tracking geth movement on the fringes of the Perseus Veil, and wanted to be able to move the Normandy in to investigate once they pinned down a region. The Council's response instructed Shepard to move to real-time comms distance after dealing with the volus distress signal.

Shepard had returned to her quarters, after a fruitless half hour checking the status of the ship, and began reviewing her messages and reports. Her leg still ached interminably from the damage on Therum , but she ignored it, focusing on making sure she completed every task as commanding officer correctly.

She rubbed her eyes after finishing reviewing the reports on the geth wreckage. Tali had done a very good job with it, and the analysis was both tactically useful and an interesting read. Shepard glanced through it again, just to make sure she understood it."

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*Commander, we've pulled back all the geth platforms that your Marines found above the tunnels and within them. The most basic design is that of the geth trooper and heavy trooper. These have not varied much beyond the original servant design my people originally came up with.*

*All known geth platforms are built around a hydraulic frame, which anchors to the torso unit. The torso contains power generation, backup memory storage, and hydraulic fluidic storage. The interior is a simplified skeletal structure that mirrors that of the quarians themselves. Anchored to this framework are bundles of artificial muscle, myomer strands bundled together. The myomer reacts to electrical charges , amplifying the strength and smoothing out the motion of the hydraulic under-structure. The head is multifunction sensor pod, the CPU taking up the head and continuing down the armored spine. The antenna pack on the back is the interface matrix, which allows any geth to communicate to the greater geth network.*

*All geth units grow in intellectual ability and processing speed, as well as complexity, when networked with more geth. In theory , enough geth networked together would produce something along the lines of a super AI. In reality, coding obfuscation and simple laws of diminishing returns prevent this.*

*The geth trooper is a basic infantry unit with a pulse-rifle, firing plasma darts. The heavy trooper fires either anti-material missiles of shaped plasma flares or infantry suppression rockets. Some of these units also carry compact but very powerful missiles that are for light spacecraft interdiction. Garrus inspected one and said it was similar to the human Spearfish missiles the Normandy uses, only much smaller and with a VI providing guidance. Both basic troop types are dispatched most quickly by a headshot or a direct hit to the upper-middle back in the interface array. Torso and limb shots can incapacitate, but not always kill. Any severe damage will cause rupture of the hydraulic and cooling system, lowering combat speed, increasing heat load and crippling aim and response time.*

*There was a Geth Prime unit in the geth that attacked the 2nd Squad. I know you have killed two already, but you did it in a very non-optimal manner. The Geth Prime is built exactly like the geth troopers, just much, much bigger, with heavier armor, better myomer, thicker internal armoring.*

multiple back up systems, more intricate comm arrays, and more complex sensors.

While we estimate a standard geth platform only holds a few dozen to perhaps a hundred separate geth programs, working together to provide the unit guidance, the Geth Prime coordinates other groups of geth when away from the hubs. Geth Primes house thousands of platforms and should be treated like hostile AI. They can plan, adapt, improvise and worst of all, they make all other geth around them smarter and quicker to react.

The Geth Prime has no real weakness. It is built with a multifunction plasma weapon, or a heavy plasma cannon. My advice is to weaken it with land mines or remote drones, or a spray of rockets, before engaging it with sniper fire. Close up, the plasma blast is (as you probably already know) devastating.

The other two platforms were new. This troubles me greatly – my people haven't seen new geth hardware since the deployment of Geth Primes 200 years ago. That was clearly a response to early efforts at retaking Rannoch, using communications jammers and other primitive methods to ruin the geth's connectivity. These new units have clearly been created by geth, but I cannot fathom why.

The geth war machine I have decided to dub "armature". It is basically a scaled – down Colossus. The Colossus and, to a degree, the Armature, share all the same features. They aren't much different from geth troopers, except the larger torso contains powerful ME generators, and the legs are lined with batteries and backup shielding. And of course, the pulse cannon.

The pulse cannon is terrifying, and I sincerely hope the geth can't miniaturize it further. It is basically a focused pulse of plasma energy in a shaped mass effect delivery envelop. The envelop degrades at a rate depending on the speed, keeping the plasma hot and effective. This gives it a range of over 4 miles in optimal conditions.

The Columns is clearly the geth armor unit. The Armature, given it's smaller bulk, could be deployed in urban zones. Either way, given their very thick armor, powerful weapons, and all-terrain flexibility, they could overrun us at any time. I'm concerned about the development of the Armature, as it's design has a number of anti-infantry influences (small armor shields over the joints, and armored reinforcement of the visual sensors) that make me wonder why the geth feel a need for a ground invasion platform. All the answers I come up scare me.

The worst invention are the white geth things you fought in the caverns. I have designated them as Hoppers, and they are like nothing I've ever seen. The support, data storage and cooling systems are internal to a pipe skeletal framework that uses small mass effect fields instead of hydraulics, and the artificial muscles are some kind of bio-synthetic matrix of myomer and proteins. These things are grown, Commander. They are lightweight but just as strong as a larger geth. If externally armored they could bear armor almost three times the thickness of standard units. As close-quarters assault troops, they are terrifyingly fast and hard to kill. Only heavy shotguns and biotics have much chance of stopping them, most other weapons would just tear up the muscle without taking out the support systems...

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Tali had gone into great tactical and technological detail about other geth functions, but the gist of it was that the technological sophistication of the geth had been increased a hundredfold in a small amount of time, and it was all focused at heavy infantry.

*Doesn't make a lot of sense... if they wanted boarding troops, they would be optimized for armor and zero-g not . . . ground battle. And the geth tore up Eden Prime only because the heavy armor didn't respond. Those armatures are nasty, but any tank could take them out.*

Shepard left her quarters, thinking. She had often noticed that Anderson did what he called 'pep-talk walk arounds'. He would talk to people, see how they were doing, ask about their kids, their friends, chitchat and make sure they all felt comfortable with him. Shepard had no intention of doing that. Her conversation with Williams still weighed heavily on her mind, not just because the young woman had made her angry enough to talk about Torfan, but because Williams had a point. *I have to move beyond what I am or I have failed.*

Rather than mimic Anderson, she decided all she could do is be herself, but the idea of talking to people and being visible was a good one. She started in the CIC, her leg a bit sore but otherwise healthy. She talked to the Ops Alley techs, Jackson and Friggs, asking about display times and reaction mass indicators, showing them that she could read a five-point ECM display. One of them timidly asked about her previous space service and she told them, like she had Joker, that she had memorized the material and tested out. When they expressed amazement she folded her arms. "Captain Anderson was one of the most highly decorated command officers of the entire SA military. What I did isn't really amazing with him as my teacher."

Friggs, a fussy looking woman with very short, very straight white-blond hair and a perpetually sad expression, had shrugged. "It's just...like getting your air-car license by reading books and watching vids of how to drive, then participating in the SAACAR 5000. And winning. I'm sure it can be done...but ... wow. Hey, if you have all the books memorized..." Shepard spent almost 15 minutes walking them through back-scatter radar operations, something that only the more obscure tech manuals she had read had talked about. By the time she was done, half of Ops Alley was watching and the other half of the techs in the CIC were listening. She looked around a bit self-conscious, and gave a smirk. "Alright, back to work. I'll be back later to ... uh, cover something else."

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Joker, at least, was more relaxed in his reaction to her. "Commander. That was ... pretty intense down there on Therum. I'd like my medal to be gold, I think."

Shepard blinked. "What?"

Joker tapped controls while craning his head to look at her, an almost arrogant display of skill. "You know, turning the Normandy into a atmospheric gunship, running ground support with GTS missiles everywhere? She's not really meant to do much more in atmo than drop things off, much less maneuver against ground tanks on legs and 20 or so geth with launchers that punch holes in our armor plate with a single hit. Just for future reference."

With a small, wry grin, she folded her arms. "Oh, this should be good. Leaving aside the fact that going above and beyond your job is why you are on the most advanced ship in the fleet, you want a medal, huh? I don't know, Mr. Moreau. Having sat through some truly excruciating award ceremonies, the two things that stand out in them is full dress uniform and standing a lot."

"Ah, geez, then I'd have to shave. And standing is .. not a specialty of mine. Unlike awesome airborne assault and battle coordination." He smirked and turned back to his tasks, leaving Shepard to roll her eyes and glance around the cockpit.

Joker's voice sobered a moment later. "Seriously though.. Pressley was up here buggin' me about the hits we took. My baby is nimble and hot off the mark, but flaffling around in air creates drag, and that makes my maneuverability into shit. We're not designed to go in slugging it out with ground forces that have missile flecked with AM." Joker's reference to the shockingly advanced geth missiles made Shepard frown, but she nodded a moment later, her mouth in a grim line. "I got that much, Joker. I guess we'll have to deploy further out. Still...for what it's worth?" Shepard waggled her hand. "4 out of 5. Not the best air support I've seen. Once had a guy on Dirth take a UT-44 and take out two Mjolnir-A

gunships, with nothing but the flares of his exhausts."

Joker's eyebrows drew towards each other under his SR1 hat, and he rubbed a finger between them roughly. "I could do that." Shepard shrugged. Joker smirked. "I could do that with the Normandy, even. Ma'am."

She burst out laughing. "Do they teach you how to BS like that in flight school, or is it something you're born with?"

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An hour later, and she had toured almost every space. Tali was exuberant to be put in charge of researching geth wreckage and to work in the engine room, almost bubbling over with enthusiasm and wide-eyed awe of the Tantalus Drive Core. The rest of the engineers smiled a lot when she would go into long explanations of how great certain things were, or make understated worries about too many automated systems.

Conversing with her was almost difficult. Some of it, Shepard suspected, was cultural. Raised by the most powerful man in the quarian fleet, in a society that valued hard choices and communal sacrifice for the greater good, Shepard's actions were, even at their worst, hardly horrific to Tali, at least her military ones. And Tali's brush with death had shaken her to her core. To her, Shepard was some kind of... heroic figure of dark and mysterious properties.

Shepard shook her head at the conversation and how it had gone.

"The quarian fleet has .. nothing like this, Shepard. It's...amazing. Clean. Quiet. The lines are so refined and businesslike. The whole ship is ... wow." Her voice was a mix of awe, happiness and contented disbelief. "Thank you so much for letting me work here and take part in what you're doing."

Shepard tilted her head to one side, as she usually did when considering something. It was one of the first things she had learned from Anderson as he tried to remake her from a bloody thing into a human being. Tali gave her an uncertain look. "Uhm, Commander.. you look. Well. Uncomfortable."

Shepard frowned, folded her arms, and raised an eyebrow. "Why do you say that, Tali?"

The little quarian finished typing some sort of equation into the system and then looked up at Shepard for a moment before her silver gaze faltered and fled to the deck. "I.. that is. Quarrians. My people. We don't .. get out of our suits much. I told you about our immune systems already, how it compromises us. That means we spend most of our lives sealed away from one another in featureless suits. We are good at figuring out body language, emotion from stance..it's sometimes all we have to go on."

Shepard smiles. "And that doesn't vary from culture to culture?" Tali shrugged, the gesture oddly...human looking. "Not as much as you would think. Asari and quarrians both shrug like humans. Asari smile. Turians nod. Krogan fold their arms. No one leans forward in a friendly manner." She spread her hands, and walked a bit to stare at the drive core before glancing back at Shepard. "I can't read you very well. It's like .. a pile of preprogrammed stances that you rotate through. Fold arms, look stern, soften at end. Hands on hips, glare, waggle finger. Lift chin, smirk, walk off." Tali twisted her hands together and looked up again. "And around me, well. . . it's usually tilting your head, as if thinking, then telling me you're impressed."

Shepard didn't move for several seconds, before making a curiously flat gesture with a hand and giving an empty smile. "Anderson .. my captain, my .. mentor if you will..made me go to a class once on human relations. He thought it might help. It was like sending a person who barely understands addition and subtraction to a class on post-relativistic calculus. I .. I don't get people, a lot of times." Tali's head moved back, her stance becoming more narrow. The blue light of the Tantalus Core dappled

strange patterns against the black smoothness of her suit. "But you are a successful commander, how can that be?" Shepard gave a rueful smile. "Human military forces work on a .. mm. A sense of personal respect and .. I guess, power of a leader, and then interlocking personal relationships. The best leaders are not merely tactical geniuses or strategic masters, but those who can inspire and .. develop others. Anderson has that knack. I don't."

Tali's hands unclenched, only to drop to her sides. "Quarian admirals can't manage that way. They have to be undivided, focused almost totally on the well being of the fleet. The Captain of a ship has to be the same way. Each one, especially the Liveships where we grow our food, and the nursery and medical ships, are so important, that a quarian who died defending one is considered a hero. Admirals..." Tali paused, her voice bruised with old pain .. "some of them can't even connect to family any more. They are just...duty .. made flesh."

Shepard gave a sad smile. "I'm very familiar with that sort of ... burden. If I seem stiff, it's because I don't feel comfortable pretending to be something I'm not. I'll figure it out, if that is what is needed. But ...when I reacted to what you said, earlier, I was just thinking about what it must be like to be in an alien starship. I wasn't trying to ... feign interest." Tali's voice was somehow small, quiet, hesitant. "...it's .. too quiet sometimes. Our ships are loud, with ventilation fans and filters making things noisy, jury-rigged repairs rattling along, even the subtle slow failure of sound isolation joints now juddering with the rhythm of the drive core. Silence on a ship usually means power failure or environmental failure. It gets to me when I least expect it."

Shepard nodded. "Sounds like you wish you were back home."

Tali shook her head. "Home ... I do miss it. There are times I wish my Pilgrimage was done so I could go back to my people. But first, we have to stop Saren. Whatever he is doing with the geth is dangerous. My own silly wishes are not important...if we don't stop him, I may not have a home to return to."

Tali's hesitant, almost meek manner grated on something in Shepard's mindset. It made her vaguely feel protective, yet also as if she should be doing more to comfort the girl. Her voice was just so ... broken .. sometimes. Still, Shepard had to admit, the young quarian woman was definitely no slouch when it came to doing work. In a few days, her aid had increased power yield by 8%, shield stability by 5% and allowed the Engineering crew to move to a real 3-section watch rotation. Tali demanded she go through the qualifications tests to stand watch and "contribute to the mission instead of standing around." Shepard could not really complain about such focus. . . it reminded her of herself.

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Garrus was also being busy and helpful, even more so than Tali in some ways. He seemed to have need to be productive, to be part of the team. He had tuned the Mako, improving shields and tweaking the shocks, as well as patching battle damage. And the twin 40 mm cannons were calibrated down to just under half a degree of accuracy at the range of 5 light seconds, which was very impressive. He seemed to be busy burying himself in working on fiddling with the Mako's engine, tools strewn about as he tinkered, but they had a chat about the nature of his work with C-Sec. "It's hard to explain, now. And it seems almost silly. But most of what I did with C-Sec was go after cases that pissed me off." Shepard laughed at that. "Well, criminals in general piss me off, but I don't think that's what you mean."

Garrus flicked a mandible. "It isn't. I mean, some crime on the Citadel is inevitable. 200,000 policing 15 million would be less than 1 cop per 70 people, but at least a quarter of C-sec is support services or customs, and another fifth is off station. The case loads are enormous, and the dockets are overloaded as well. Special Ops clears out the worst of the worst – the slavers, body snatchers, organ and clone bootleggers, and Terminus gangs trying to get a foothold. But we can never stop it all."

Shepard tilted her head. "And how do you see your job? Is it just shooting down bad guys?" Garrus frowned. "I .. that's a good question. I mean, in terms of why I joined...no different than anyone else. I wanted to fight injustice, wanted to help people. I ... guess my father had something to do with it. He was C-Sec, one of the best. I grew up hearing about his accomplishments ... seeing his picture on the vids after a big arrest." Garrus looked down. "He's ... taking my suspension and resignation pretty hard." The blue eyes glanced up, searching for ... something. "I... he and I don't see eye to eye on a lot of things, Commander. My father's a C-Sec man to the bone. He believes things should be done properly. More than most turians, I suppose. 'Do things right, or don't do them at all,' he always said." The big turian sighed, setting his mechanics tools aside on the little bench next to the Mako, and he sat down on the metal sub-wall next to the tank. "He thinks I'm being too rash. Too impatient. He's worried I'll become just like Saren. He actually talked me out of becoming a Spectre when I was younger. For the same reason."

Shepard frowned. "They wanted you as a Spectre? When was this?"

"Well, I was targeted as a possible Spectre candidate when I was in , what do you humans call it...boot camp?" Garrus' expression turned wry, mandible low and tight. "Me and about a thousand other turian military recruits. I could have received special training, but my father didn't like it. He *despises* the Spectres. He hates the idea of someone having unlimited power with no accountability. He wouldn't like you, Commander. No offense." Shepard had shrugged. "None taken. He's right on a lot of that. Humanity has a very apt saying. 'Absolute power corrupts absolutely'. I've seen criminals who forgot they weren't actual gods. I've seen good men do horrible things because no one stops them. I have very little doubt that Saren has some reason for going...bad, but the truth remains that without unlimited power, there are other things to keep normal people in line. But the more power you have, the easier it is to fall."

Garrus frowned and suddenly clamped his jaw shut, turning away to tinker with the engine again, saying nothing. Shepard tilted her head. "Vakarian, I'm not a turian. You can say what you feel." Garrus shrugged, his broad back hunching slightly. "Whatever you say, Commander. I was.. just .. I don't know. Saren's not going to play by our rules. He's not going to play by C-Sec's rules...or the Alliance's rules. If you want to nail Saren, you need to send someone who isn't restricted by policies and procedures." Shepard shook her head. "That doesn't change the fact that in the end, without someone to rein people in, they lose control." Shepard paused. "I'm definitely not a by the book person. Usually with me it ends up on fire in a corner. But we all have to ask ourselves how to do something the right way, not just the quick or easy way."

Garrus turned and stared at her, his alien features harsh and angular in the dim light, the lambent glow of his visor illuminating his jaw. "And what happens when caution and restraint end up with innocents dead? What happens when in the name of following regs and red-tape, the criminal escapes?" Shepard smiled. "You can get things done that way, by ignoring the red-tape. But the costs come back to haunt you just as much. I've run into that more than once. I don't break the law, or bend it. I do what I have within it, or I'm as bad as the criminal I'm trying to take out." Garrus had laughed, but it was a brittle sound, almost bitter. "Annnd now you sound like Pallin." The turian adjusted the bolt on a piece of armor plating almost angrily. "There's crimes that are so horrible, they must be paid for."

Shepard exhaled a long, tired breath. "There's no criminal worth becoming a criminal to bring down. I have to believe that. It's too easy to lose track of right and wrong without knowing where to stop before you even get moving. I plan to bring Saren in, or kill him. If that means I have to sacrifice people to do it, I will. If it means I die, so be it." Shepard turned to look the turian right in the eyes. "But I won't let him compromise who I am, what I believe in. Killing to stop a great evil is only the right choice when nothing else works."

Garrus's harmonics seemed sullen. "That doesn't sound like what I've heard of your career.'

Shepard shook her head. "The people who write that stuff don't understand soldiers, or what pain you feel when you have to send off good men and women to die. All the killing I've done is a reaction, and ... mostly, it's the only reaction that I know. But I'm not stupid enough to think that killing the pirates stops the piracy." She paused and gave Garrus a firm look. "I'm not a cop. There's a difference in what I did and what you did, Police Chicken."

Garrus made an arch movement with his face, looking down at her. "Detective Police Chicken to you." He smiled, tension easing a bit, and turned back to working on the Mako. "I understand where my father is coming from. Where Pallin is coming from. What you are saying. But I've had my own experiences with red tape and rules resulting in an evil man getting away to do more evil. No matter how you end up spelling it out, it's better to end evil now, even if it costs 10 lives, or 20, rather than let it continue and watch as the body count goes into the low hundreds."

Shepard scratched the back of her neck, and sighed. "I can't really argue with that, as long as you own up to being responsible for the lives you end up taking to do so. And most people won't. They'll say it was the only way, they'll talk about duty or whatever, but they won't take ownership for the people that get hurt or killed in the course of what they do. And you eventually start losing the connection to the cost of actions like that."

Garrus flung a taloned hand in the air, suddenly angry. "Who cares about that? Owning up to it? Who owns up to the people who suffer when you don't stop them? Who takes responsibility when you let the druggie go because of evidence rules and he sells some little girl enough hallex to fry her brains? Who is taking responsibility for when the slavers don't get taken out because they have hostages, and they go right on slaving?" He made a flicking motion with a single talon, as if discarding something. "Pallin is outraged at people going to far. My spirits-damned father thinks it's more important to be obedient than to fight for the people that get hurt. You talk about ownership? Who owns what happens to the victims? Who owns what happens to the people hurt by the criminals?" Harmonic ranges in his voice came unbound as he stalked back and forth, almost growling. "The only thing that matters is stopping the criminal."

Shepard stood, and planted herself in his way, jaw set. "And when you start thinking like that, your father is right. You end up fucked. Goddamn it, I'm not talking from some bullshit philosophy course here! I've had to do that. I've had to sacrifice people to get the bad guy. It never, ever ends the way you want it to. I hate criminals. God, if you ever saw my own criminal record, you'd want to put a bullet in my head."

Garrus gave a frown. "What do you mean?"

Shepard's eyes were still hard, as she folded her arms. "Before I was in the military, I got mixed up with gangs. I had biotic power, and very few humans did. Most of the ones who had it were in the military, so I was like a goddamned nuke. They dragged me to a black market doctor and cut an L2 into me. I was a biotic assassin, the Tenth Street's secret weapon. They kept me high and fucked up most of the time, encouraging me to kill and terrify." She looked away, closing her eyes. "I killed...hundreds. Stole. Vandalized. Slung drugs. Arson, grand theft...all of it."

Garrus had a strange, pained expression on his face. "But...how did you get into the military? If you were a criminal..."

Shepard's smile was wry, bitter, twisted. "I found a conscience. I got saved by being jumped by two other gang-bangers by Anderson when he was on leave, and in turn I stopped him from getting his head blown off. And then the gang had the bright idea to try to ransom him. And wanted ME to do it." Shepard's gaze was fixed on some distant, invisible point. "And for the first time in my life something

in me just said...no. So , instead of killing him, I went on a red-sand induced rampage that ended only when SWAT teams in heavy armor took everything I could throw at them and held me down, and Anderson got me to surrender. The human military ... takes violent , crazy people like me and puts them in what we call a penal legion. You fight until you die, or until the military feels you've proven you can work in the real military. You quit , they kill you. You fail too much, they kill you. You go crazy, or lose it, they kill you."

Shepard sighed. "I managed to ... make myself better. I turned every bit of skill at killing innocents into killing enemies of my race. Slavers. Druggies. Marauders. I studied everything, mastered every weapon, pushed myself far beyond what anyone else had been driven to ... because I was disgusted by what I had let myself be turned into by wicked, evil men."

Garrus was still silent, talons crosshatched over one leg, the plates over his eyes drawn down. She made a dismissive gesture with her hands. "And with all of that... you know what I took away from it all? Vengeance is satisfying. Doing things the quick way is satisfying. Blowing the no-good fucks away is satisfying. But it never stops them. You kill this one guy, and this one guy, and this one guy, and sooner or later someone innocent gets caught up in the fallout." She sighed. "You have to make your own decisions on how to approach it. It probably sounds .. hypocritical for someone like me to even talk that way. But emulating me is not .. ever ... a good thing, Detective. You go after the bad guys to defend people and do things the right way, not to be some kind of goddamned turian version of Judge Dredd."

The turian had tilted his head, which sent them into another long discussion about human comic novels and their applicability to alien culture. She realized that the only place left in the ship she hadn't gone was to see the asari.

*Oh, this ought to go well.*

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## **Chapter 38: Chapter 32 : Normandy, Liara and Shepard**

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*IA/N: And here's the other fluffy piece. Next stop, horror onboard the volus ship.*

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January 27th , 2183 2:00 AM

Shepard checked on the two soldiers in the Medbay, both healed enough to be conscious but sleeping, and then exhaled and entered the research lab, where the asari was.

Shepard had never had a reason to enter the lab before, not being much for research, and having little to research in any case. It was a smallish room, square and with a rather low ceiling. Along the right side were several heavy crates, carefully strapped to the wall's railing to prevent movement. Behind them, at the back of the room, was a single frame cot, with a foam pillow and a single blanket.

The left side of the room was the lab counter. There were spectrometers and mass analyzers and other things hooked to a sliding railing that ran along the ceiling, and two micro-frame computers humming quietly below the counter. The counter itself was flanked at either end by cabinets of trace elements, racks of micro-effect repair tools, and in the middle of the counter were two research terminals.

Liara T'soni slumped in a chair in front of one, asleep. Her uniform was rumpled but clean, and her breathing seemed calm and even as Shepard looked around. The terminal was active, half done notes about something to do with crystal-lattice formations on the screen. A chunk of white material Shepard immediately realized as the stuff the Prothean ruin was made of had been carefully clamped next to the

machine, a datapad laying next to that still on.

Shepard was about to simply turn and leave when the asari shook her head in her sleep, whimpering. Her eyes were still closed, but she suddenly looked as if she was cringing. Frowning, Shepard reached out and touched the young woman's shoulder.

Liara shot awake, her already wide eyes widening further at the sight of Shepard. "C-commander .. I .. Goddess, I must have fallen asleep. I .. I am sorry." Her voice was lilting, hesitant and sad but somehow also worried.

Shepard tried out a gentle smile on her face , and stepped back a bit. "I just was coming around to see if you were settling in alright. And it IS very late. I just .. you should sleep on the cot , it's much more comfy. Sounded like you were having a nightmare. Didn't want to leave you like that."

Liara, with an obvious effort, calmed herself, and her face took on an almost immobile , still look. Shepard felt a shiver creep up her spine as she witnessed it. *She's blanking herself.. just like I do. I never realized I looked that... mechanical doing it though.*

A moment later, Liara nodded her head calmly. "I am fine, Commander. I am gratified to see that you are .. unhurt. I never got to thank you properly for rescuing me from starvation and death, or worse, on Therum. A hot shower and some food and water have done much more in bringing me back to life, but it is due to you."

Shepard walked over to the other chair at the counter and sat down, wincing as something in her leg pulled briefly. "The doctor says the ground team – and myself – will be fine. But .. that you kind of overdid it."

Liara glanced away, the guileless blue eyes looking almost lost for a moment. "I.. I panicked. I should have.. distracted it, or .. something. If I had failed to disable it , it would have k-killed you." The lost look hardened into anger. "And I wasn't going to let that ... thing... do anything else." Another pause. "I .. I am sorry I lost control, it will not happen again, I assure you, while I am on your ship."

Shepard gave her an almost incredulous look. "Doctor, you hardly have to apologize for saving my life. It is something that doesn't happen to me very often, especially when you could have been killed or .. worse." Shepard remembers Chakwas' words and winces. "I just wanted.. to say I do appreciate it a great deal." Liara meets Shepard's gaze, searching, and again they both merely stared at each other for a moment before Shepard faltered, turning aside to scratch her jawline and look at the Prothean chunk of wall. Shepard saw Liara primly fold her hands in her lap. In the dim light of the lab, she almost looked as if she's embarrassed. "I .. also came to talk about ... why we came to pick you up. If you feel you are up to it."

Liara swallowed but gave a small, jerky nod. "I am.. as I said, fine, Commander. I merely needed to eat and rehydrate myself. I .. I know you took a chance bringing me onboard this ship. I have seen the way your crew looks at me. They do not trust me. But I am not like Benezia."

Shepard frowned. "It's not that they don't trust you. But ... the situation does look.. very bad. My pilot and XO , and the ground crew – Wrex and Garrus – were the only ones who saw you damn near kill yourself saving our asses down there. But.. the doc – Chakwas – was very clear on what a risk you took."

Liara shrugged. "It was not so great a thing. You .. you are a hero. You are doing something to protect many innocents. I'm just .." She shrugged. "A naïve fool, I suppose, studying the unimportant history of a dead race that is gone and forgotten except in how they can provide better ways to kill." She sounded both bitter and broken, and Shepard found herself reacting without thinking. "That isn't true. You could have .. died. Or have nerve damage or.. worse things." Shepard exhaled. "And trust me, Doctor,

compared to someone like me, you're a lot better person. I'm no hero. And most of all, I think your knowledge of Prothean history will be very valuable."

The asari placed a slender hand to her neck, rubbing away some tension. "You are very kind to say such a thing, Commander. But I do not understand how anything I could know would be of any use in a hunt for a .. rogue Spectre. As I said, I have not spoken directly to my mother in ... years. I have had messages from her, increasingly cold ones. We are not close, and all I know of Saren is that my mother took him as a lover some time ago."

Shepard blinked, surprised, then nodded. "Huh. Kinda .. er, kinky."

Liara raised her eyebrows, which Shepard realized a moment later were actually tattoos shaped like eyebrows. *What the shit is that?* She barely registered the asari's next words for a moment. "Asari are open with relationships, and many turians seek out asari companionship when isolated from their own kind. We regenerate from most wounds, very slowly but fully, so issues such as minor cuts and abrasion are mostly non-issues."

Shepard leaned back, a somewhat confused expression on her face. "O.. kay. This conversation is going places I never, ever expected." She coughed, and shook her head. "Um. Anyway. We have to discuss a few things. The Council ordered me to come here, to find you. They feel you're the only person who might have any insight into why Benezia is taking this action."

Liara's delicate blue coloration deepened slightly, elegant hands closing to tiny fists as she looked imploringly at Shepard. "I know nothing. I don't understand why she would do something like this. She was ... always outspoken about the need for asari to become more involved in shaping galactic events. She felt that we needed to guide other species, help them." Liara's slender shoulders rose and fell, similar to a human shrug but the motion was subtly .. wrong. "Maybe she thought allying herself with Saren would somehow be for the greater good in the long run. At least, I hope so." Shepard frowned. "That should make the Council happy. After Eden Prime we don't know where he or she went, or what they're doing. The only activity we have is them coming after you. There must be some reason why they would do that, something that makes...sense."

"None of this makes any sense to me!" Liara's voice burst out, a trill of despair and anger and sorrow all in a few heartbroken words. "I have not even spoken to her in many years, but I **knew** her. And this was not like her. Something changed." Liara looked at her hands. "I have .. lost my position at the University, I have no .. resources left. I don't know what to do."

Shepard felt as if her face was going to crack, her frown had now become an almost angry scowl. She forced herself back to a more neutral expression. "Hey. Look at me."

Large, delicate blue eyes like a windblown spring day met hers. Trustingly. Brokenly.

Shepard blinked and exhaled. "I know this is hard on you. It's.. your mother. No one is going to make you do anything, okay? But I could.. ..really use your help. You know about the Protheans, and this whole mess might involve them. You know Benezia, which can only help us. You are very strong biotically...stronger than me, or Wrex, or my marine commander, Lieutenant Alenko. Most of all, unlike anyone else I could go and find, I know I can trust you." Liara blinked. "I.. I do not know how to respond. Why do you need to know about the Protheans? How can you trust me when you do not even know me?"

Shepard leaned back. "I'll explain as we go along. First...indulge me. Tell me about yourself."

Liara looked surprised, then a bit sad. "I .. am afraid I am not very interesting, Commander." Her voice had an almost shy , worried tone. "I spend most of my time on Prothean digs, unearthing mundane items buried in long-forgotten Prothean ruins. I wor.. used to work as a data assistant and field

researcher for the University of Serrice, and on Therum I was overseeing a cooperative effort with a salarian university. But most times, I work alone, on small remote digs. Most of my work is focusing on the Prothean extinction. That is my real area of expertise. I have spent the past fifty years trying to figure out what happened to them. "

Shepard nodded. "Fifty years? That sounds ... dangerous. And a very long time to be lonely."

Liara gave a small, self-depreciating smile. "I am not .. helpless. Sometimes I would run afoul of indigenous life-forms, or stumble across a small band of mercenaries or pirates." She lifted her chin a little. "But I was always careful. Until I found myself facing a krogan and geth in the tunnels below Therum, I never found myself in any situation my biotics could not handle."

Liara looked away, a sad, empty expression filling her face. "As for the solitude, well, that is one aspect that most appealed to me. Sometimes, I just need to get away from other people."

"You don't like other people?" Shepard's voice was surprised sounding.

Liara gave a mocking laugh. "I am not very good at talking to people, and to be honest, I tend to not understand most people. Even my own race. Especially my own race." The eyes closed, and the lips twisted into a small expression of dark amusement. "It is almost worthy of laughter, I suppose. A Matriarch's daughter, expected to follow and become a leader for my people. Matriarchs guide their followers into the future; they seek the truth of what is yet to come."

Liara opened her eyes. "But I fear I am unable to see any future , for myself. And truth is a taste of disappointment and futility. Perhaps that is why I became so interested in the secrets of the past. It sounds so ... foolish when I say it out loud. It sounds like I became an archaeologist simply to not have to deal with the fact I am .. awkward." Shepard exhaled. "Trust me, you are not the only one who is awkward. I.. never got how humans worked. Emotions were always a cipher to me. Where you threw yourself into ignoring people, I just killed them out of frustration, fear, hate...jealously." Liara's voice , rather than being horrified, was thick with some .. deep, twisted amusement. "The feeling that nothing quite fit. Everyone else, moving along in harmony, able to fit, to be a part of things. I fear I am ... far too familiar with that feeling."

Shepard nodded. "Yeah. Never quite making that ... connection. It pissed me off. Drove me crazy. Never ... got it." She exhaled. "Hell. I don't get it now, really. Just flying on bravado."

"And stumbling through the pain that results?"

Shepard gave Liara a long, penetrating look. "For a fucked up human and a delicate asari scientist lady, we're not that different."

Liara's eyes were sad. "I wish it were otherwise. To know others feel as disconnected as I is no comfort." She exhaled. "And that is why I cling to the past, I think. I felt *drawn* to the past. The Protheans were these wondrous, mysterious figures. I wanted to know everything about them. I still do. Everyone is only concerned with using their technology to make money, or build better weapons. Why did they vanish? Was it a civil war, or external? What was their art, or music like?"

Liara's eyes seemed to come alive as she spoke, and Shepard found herself smiling almost instinctively. *I could stare into those all day...fuck. What are you doing, girl? Pull your shit together. She's not even human.*

"Shepard?"

She started, coughing as she realized she had been staring and actually flushed. "S-sorry, doc. Just ... I .. I have Protheans on the mind, you might say, and what you said got me.. ..reflecting on that."

Liara's own expression was confused, and .. something else Shepard couldn't read. "Protheans on the

mind? I am afraid I do not understand."

Shepard nodded. "Let's...back up. Earlier you said that you had studied the Prothean extinctions for more than fifty years. Um, forgive me for asking, but that's .. most of a human's lifespan. How old are you , exactly?"

Liara's eyes flickered to the ground again. "I am only one hundred and six. I am sure that sounds aged to a human...but in asari terms, I am.. barely more than a child. Perhaps, what is the term? A teenager. It is one reason why my research has not received the attention it deserves. Because of my youth, other asari scholars tend to dismiss my theories on what happened to the Protheans. And , well..." She trailed off, a hurt expression in her eyes. ".. I fear that I am ... not good at presenting my case. Like I said, I prefer to be alone many times. It easier to... focus."

Shepard shrugged. "But your expertise is exactly what we need. I think this entire mess might be related *to* the extinctions you study. I have... a theory of sorts, of my own."

Liara actually smiled. "With all due respect, commander, I have heard every theory out there. The problem is finding evidence to support them. The Protheans left remarkably little behind. It is almost as if someone did not want the mystery solved. As if someone... came along after the Protheans were gone and cleansed the galaxy of clues. But the incredible part is that I have found ... fragmentary evidence that the Protheans were not the first galactic civilization to mysteriously vanish. This cycle began long before them."

Shepard felt a spike of fear shiver through her body. The nightmarish vision in her head flashed across her eyes, the endless dark rain of black leaves bringing death. With a sharp exhalation, she shook her head. "If someone picked up all the clues, what have you find supporting this idea of yours?"

Liara's eyes flashed, almost ... aggressive instead of sadly passive. "I have tracked down every scrap and shred of evidence over the past fifty years. Eventually, subtle patterns started to emerge. Patterns that hint at the truth. It is... difficult to explain to someone else. I cannot point to one specific thing to prove my case. It is more... a feeling derived from a half-century of dedicated research. But I know I am right."

Her voice softened, a painful note coming into it. "And eventually I will be able to prove it. There were other civilizations before the Protheans. This cycle has repeated itself many times over. The Protheans rose up from a single world until their empire spanned the entire galaxy. Yet even they climbed to the top on the remains of those who came before. Their greatest achievements—the mass relays and the Citadel—are based on the technology of those who came before them. We know the mass relays have to be older than the Prothean culture. Their oldest ruins are no more than 68,000 years old, but the radiocarbon dating of your own Charon relay showed the ice was more than 200,000 years old. They did not create the Mass Relays. Some other... older...forgotten civilization did that. And then like all the others throughout galactic history, the Protheans disappeared. I have dedicated my life to figuring out why."

Shepard nodded. "Well, Doctor...I think I know the answer. A race of killing machines the Protheans called the Reapers."

Liara frowned, looking bewildered. "T-the Reapers? But I have never heard of..." Shepard watched confusion turn to thought, to curiosity. "How do you know this? What evidence do you have?"

Shepard folded her hands together, eyes narrowed. "You heard about the strike of the geth on Eden Prime, you said. We believe the geth were there with Saren to grab a recently discovered Prothean beacon. We defeated the geth, but when I got too close to the beacon, it ... burned a vision into my brain. I'm still trying to sort out what it all means."

"Visions?" Liara's voice was distant, her eyes alive with possibility. "Yes... that makes sense. The beacons were designed to transmit information directly into the mind of the user. Finding one that still works is extremely rare. No wonder the geth attacked your colony. The chance to acquire a working beacon...even a badly damaged one...is worth almost any risk." Her expression shifted from contemplation to something like awe. "But ...the beacons were only programmed to interact with Prothean physiology. Whatever information you received would have been confused, unclear."

Shepard threw back her head and laughed. "Oh, Doctor, you have no idea. Tevos said the same thing, and said these Beacons usually kill whoever uses them. But that's usually scientists, who .. aren't used to what I saw. Machines coming down from the sky...people being...slaughtered. Dissolved. Cities of gleaming light being destroyed, blood..." Shepard shivered and placed her face into her hands. "I've seen..and done some horrifying shit. But ... goddamnit, that was the scariest, most disgusting thing I've seen. And it's in pieces, sloshing around in my head like...fuck. I don't even know. I have nightmares about it every time I sleep."

Liara's voice was barely above a whisper. "I...I am amazed you were able to make sense of it at all. A lesser mind would have been utterly destroyed by the process. You must be remarkably strong-willed, Commander." She sighed, then went very still.

Shepard tilted her head. "What is it, Doctor?" She felt a curious dread suddenly curling in her stomach. Something about the asari's expression was .. familiar. The carefully controlled gaze, the tightness of the jaw.

Liara's voice was steady but hesitant. "I.. I might be able to ... help you sort out the visions you are seeing. I have spent many years studying Prothean language, their ... legacy. I am familiar with concepts and .. cultural imagery."

Shepard shrugged. "I .. I can't really explain it out anymore than I have. I don't know how much good that will do."

Liara carefully placed her hands together on her lap, her knees drawn together, sitting almost stiffly. "I .. was not suggesting you explain it. Are you... that is, I mean, do you know anything about asari? Our abilities?"

Shepard shrugged. "You're all natural biotics? I trained with a commando unit for a few weeks... " She trailed off, suddenly, eyes narrowing. "... you mean... like .. um, the bonding thing?"

Liara's voice was very strained. "N-no. That is, it is not ... I mean, not that I would not .. oh, Goddess!" This time Shepard was sure that was a flush, her skin darkened almost two tones as she covered her face with her hands.

Shepard was torn between wanting to laugh , wanting to tell her it was okay..and suprisingly enough, a tiny bit of disappointment. *Aaaand that is my queue to hit the bars when I get back to the Citadel.* Shepard coughed, and gently put a hand on the asari girl's shoulder. "Hey. It's .. I mean, why don't you try explaining it. I understand what you are saying , I think , it's like joining but not romantic or sexual?"

Liara nodded mutely, dropping her hands. "I am very sorry, Commander. I did not mean to give insult .."

Shepard opened her mouth to say something semi-calming, and instead heard her own voice say "Hey, I'm definitely wouldn't be upset with a beautiful woman saying she was interested in me." Shepard snapped her jaw shut, and immediately cursed. "Sorry. That was.. a really .. bad joke."

Liara looked at the Commander for a long moment before the barest hint of a shy smile appeared.

"Well, now that we have both made complete idiots of ourselves, let me try again. It is similar to an asari joining, but only for the use of .. memories and images. I would join the surface of my .. consciousness to yours, our nervous systems conjoining to allow me to .. see ... what you were showing me."

Shepard's voice is thin and wary. "That .. sounds .. um, intrusive. I ... have a lot of things I'm not sure I .. well. That anyone should see."

Liara nodded. "Deeper memories are impossible to touch without a full melding, I would only see the ... things you chose to focus on and ...the best word I can think of is to 'push' the images and thoughts at me. It .. would be wrong to invade someone's privacy...and in doing that , I would .. er, that is, the link would work both ways."

Shepard nodded. "You think you could figure things out? Make it a little more clear in my head?"

Liara gave an opening motion with her hands. "It may help with your headaches...and it is a chance for me to ... see some of what I have pursued my whole life. I d-do not mean to be clinical about it..."

Shepard couldn't help herself and arched an eyebrow. "If you aren't clinical about it, what's your interest? Fascination?"

Liara stuttered a bit, but bit her lip and kept going. "Y-yes, I suppose. I admit I find you... fascinating, Commander. You were marked by the beacon on Eden Prime; you were touched by working Prothean technology!"

"Sounds like you wanna dissect me in a lab somewhere, Doctor."

Liara looked horrified, her skin darkening again, eyes wide. "What? No!" She almost got up out of her chair, biting her lip again. "I did not mean to insinuate.. I mean... I never meant to offend you. I only meant that you would be an interesting specimen for an in-depth study". She flushed deeper, burying her face into her hands. "No, that's even worse!"

"Calm down... Liara. I .. I was just joking. Should have stopped after the first one."

"Joking?" Liara's eyes widened even further, before stupefied comprehension flooded them."Oh, by the Goddess! How could I be so dense? You must think that I am a complete and utter fool. Now you know why I prefer to spend my time in the field with data discs and computers. I always manage to find some way to mess things up. Please... just pretend this conversation never happened."

"Hey." Shepard shook her head. "Like .. I said. I know what it's like to .. um, mess up every attempt to talk. I'm not helping things, I guess, and I'm sorry for that." Shepard exhaled. "What... er, would .. be involved in this... joining?"

Liara had a curious expression on her face, which twisted when Shepard said "joining", but otherwise she was silent for a few moments. "It requires skin to skin contact, a hand would be fine, and for me to .. focus." Liara's voice dropped. "A-are you .. sure?"

Shepard forced a smile. "Nothing ventured, nothing gained."

Liara tilted her head at this expression, then she nodded. "A trite but.. accurate saying." She took a deep, calming breath and held out a blue, elegant hand, palm up. "Did you wish to try now or..."

Shepard took the hand, the warmth and soft skin touching her own with a delicacy she did not expect. "I guess I am."

*There was a burst of ... emotion/memory. Screaming Reapers chasing her through the New York Arcology. Crowds of blue-skinned faces with dark,narrowed, disapproving answers. The smell of a perfume...the taste of blood , the screaming of the warnings...a thousand days of dusty disappointment,*

*the flash of cordite on the fourth trench in Torfan...*

A flash of white pain on black, of red agony on blue, and two figures slumped to the deck unconscious.

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## **Chapter 39: Chapter 33 : Normandy , Memories I**

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*A/N: Needs more angst. After this is several actiony chapters, another interview, and more Cerberus.*

*UPDATE: 5-9-12 – due to feedback, Jason Cole is now Jason Dunn. Originally I planned to compare and contrast the two, but it is confusing and I can still compare them without the Master Sergeant have the same name last name.*

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January 27th , 2183 2:40 AM

Shepard blinked, feeling awkward and sore as she sat up on the floor. Her head felt both very clear and somehow injured, and her entire body ached as if she had been hit with a biotic throw.

Shepard groaned, getting to one knee, and immediately saw the form of Liara on the floor. "Liara!" Forcing her muscles to react, she scooted over to the prone asari and lifted her upright. Liara winced, squeezing her eyes shut, mumbling. "...too many.. dying..."

Shepard looked on in horror. *How fucking stupid can I be? Tevos said most of the scientists who touched a beacon went mad or fucking died, and I just let her do it without thinking!* Biting her lip, she wracked her brains, thinking back to the brief time she spent with the asari commandos...

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*"For a sansoi , you are quite adept at your control of the flow, Shepard." Seinna's elegant voice was limned with amusement as the asari commando leaned against the wall of the biotic sparring facility. Her dusky blue skin was barely concealed by knee length tight shorts and a sort of halter top with a bodysleeve that covered not very much below her prominent breasts, leaving her muscular arms bare.*

*Shepard shrugged, wiping sweat away with a rag she tucked back in her belt. "Weakness breeds failure."*

*Seinna nodded. "A cruel philosophy, Lieutenant Commander. But usually true. Asari believe that strength comes in two forms. There is the external, visible strength. Like the whipping wind of the coast, hurling breakers of seafoam onto the beach. Like the bared knife or readied biotic punch. It is a strength that must be held aloft at all times. It strengthens the soul, but it is a drain on the soul as well, and when things are most dire , it is the most likely to give out in exhaustion."*

*Seinna smiled, walking around the young human woman in a slow circle, dark eyes measuring her. "Every inch of you exudes kantha, the killing strength, the external fire. It draws people to you and makes them flee. But that is not the only kind of strength, young one, and to assume those without kantha are weak is to ignore other kinds of power."*

*Shepard had frowned. "What other kind of strength can there be?"*

*The older asari held out a simple piece of cloth, rippling in patterns of gold and blue. "This is a scarf. My daughter wove it for me, herself, out of mist-silk. It is only cloth. Utterly flexible. Utterly weak." She snapped her arm out, pivoting on her foot, and the cloth bound itself around Shepard's wrist, binding her down as Seinna brought both hands up , leaving them face to face, the older asari's lips*

*quirked in an amused smile. "But for an instant, despite all your strength, it makes me stronger."*

*Shepard frowned, and Seinna shrugged. "It is called the viala, the hidden strength, the tide beneath the waves that rises up from love or anger or fear .. that is strongest. It only comes forth when needed and is never thus exhausted..."*

*Shepard's frown turned into a curious look. "So it's emotional?" Seinna smiled. "Sometimes. It is invoked by a mother fighting to protect her children...a lover struggling to project her love at her dying partner in a hospital. It's found in the desperation of soldiers sacrificing themselves for their comrades to escape, for an artist when they are working on their masterpiece. You cannot force it without caring, without ... being emotional."*

*Shepard sighed. "Emotions just get in the way, Strike Mistress."*

*Seinna laughed, a joyous, almost musical sound that always made Shepard feel as if she was being mocked...and yet made her feel good at the same time. The asari's features were wistful but not sad. "There will come a time when emotion comes to you. Not hate, not fear, not that dreadful burning terror of your anger which consumes any fool in it's path...but something more pure. More true. And when it does, all you can do is focus on that feeling, even if it is 'in the way', even if you don't understand it, and let it work."*

*Shepard rolled her eyes. "Ain't gonna stop bullets like a barrier. I know your people are big on philosophy, but mastering happy-squeeze aura isn't going to do much for me."*

*The other asari snickered. "Your facility with words to dismiss anything positive is quite impressive, Shepard. Just remember what I said." The warrior's face took on a sad look, the fire in the sapphire blue eyes dying suddenly. "You may find someone you want to hang on to, one day, and not knowing it could leave you empty for a long , long time."*

*Shepard had snorted, but a sudden image of a dying Anderson made her frown. "Alright, blue. Lay it on me."*

---

Shepard grimaced, and lifted the asari in her arms, pressing her palm against the other woman's hand, trying to force a connection as she had felt Liara doing a second before everything exploded. She remembered the weirdness of the method Seinna had showed her, trying to remember how it was accomplished. Blue light flared out as she shook the asari. "Liara! Shit. Liara! I am right here. You need to wake up...stop focusing on it and wake up!"

For long seconds, nothing happened, then the blue radiance faded without warning, and the asari gave an deep inhalation of breath and shook her head. "Ooh...what... " She looked around her, and then up at Shepard, who still held her hand while propping her. "I.. it was so *intense*. I am afraid I lost control entirely , I was not expecting it to be so..." The young woman's expression almost crumpled. "How.. you buffered me from the full force of it but how... did you *survive*?" Liara's voice edged into a mix of awe and something huskier, but Shepard just pulled them both to their feet wincing as muscles pulled.

Shepard took a deep breath, steadying herself. "I don't ... know." She blinked, a sudden memory of standing alone before a group of asari matriarchs flashing across her mind. A memory that couldn't have been hers. "Liara, I .. thought you said this would not cover anything but the vision. But I have one of your memories."

The asari's eyes were still filled with a mix of pain and fear, and now embarrassment and shame flooded her expression, as she glanced away. Her voice was a panicky stammer. "I – I didn't intend ... I mean, I am not .. experienced at .. at this sort of transfer...and it was so .. fast and the Beacon images so

..."

Shepard frowned, letting her hands fall away from steadying the other woman, and she folded her arms, taking a single step back. "Like I said, Doctor. I have a lot of .. private memories. If I can 'remember' you being bitched out by the University of Serrice , you got some of mine. You said this joining was similar to what asari do for sex and in relationships, don't tell me you aren't experienced – "

Liara's eyes flashed angrily. "I've never had a union with anyone in my life!" Her jaw trembled for a moment before her expression crumbled again and she buried her face in her hands, sobbing.

Shepard blinked, stunned. *She's. . oh Jesus fucking Christ. Another quality Shepard moment, brought to you by being a dense cold-hearted bitch.* Trying not to think about if this was the same as deflowering, she exhaled and took a step her lip, she gently put her hand on the asari's shoulder. "Hey. Hey, look at me." She lifted Liara's chin, pushing aside the hands and looking into her eyes. "I'm an ass, and.. I just don't do well with this shit. You're trying to help me out here, and I lashed out. You don't deserve that. Let's just... start from square one."

"S-square one? I do not understand. I promised you I would not -"

Shepard's voice hardened, the ice in her soul flowing into the sound. "Liara." The asari's words tumbled to a halt, her eyes glancing up through tears at Shepard. Shepard's eyebrows came together as she frowned. "People fuck things up. God knows I have fucked up more people, more .. situations... than I can count. You helped me. My head isn't full of that .. nightmare just pounding away anymore. I can think without feeling like I'm going crazy."

Liara opened her mouth to speak, but Shepard shook her head. "Just...listen. You almost .. died. I was fucking *stupid*. I knew the vision had killed people before and I just pulled you right into it and stood there like a moron and let you ... see it. We both collapsed. If it hadn't been for that commando I met years ago showing me *viala* techniques..." She trailed off, arching an eyebrow at the shocked, confused and .. almost panicked look on the young asari's face. "Liara?"

With obvious difficulty, the little archeologist swallowed and shook her head. "I .. the *viala* is ... " She took a few steps back and collapsed into her chair. "I am not sure what I am supposed to .. say."

Shepard shrugged, not understanding her reaction, but too tired and exhausted to think about it anymore. "You made a dumb mistake, I made a dumb mistake. Humans call going back to the start of something 'going back to square one'. Doing this when we both just recovered from nearly dying and you were still weak from being trapped for days was dumb." Shepard gave a small smile. "I don't ... know what you saw. But I trust you will .. not mention it to others."

Liara shook her head. "N-never, Commander. I .. " She shut her eyes and firmed her jaw. "M-maybe if .. after we have rested, and things are calmer, I could make another, more prepared attempt." Her voice was hesitant, almost tiny.

Shepard stood there for a very long moment. *Not only has she seen the beacon mindfuckery, she's seen inside my damned MIND and how fucked that is .. .and is willing to go back for more?* Uncontrollably, laughter burst out from her, and she grinned. "You're goddamned crazier than I am, Doctor, if you like mucking around in my mind. But .. sure."

Liara looked both confused and relieved. Shepard turned away. "I .. I'll talk to you some more later, I really have to get my head sorted out." She arched an eyebrow. "I'll .. have a crew meeting tomorrow... after I get some sleep. Introductions, that sort of thing." Shepard walked to the door, and Liara said "Thank you , Commander" as she left the research bay.

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Liara sat still for several long minutes in semi-shock before putting her face into her hands again. *Oh, you stupid, stupid fool of a girl. No wonder Mother thinks I'm a failure, I have all the intellect of a flametree.*

She got up from the chair in the lab, crossing the tiny room to lay herself out on the small metal cot that the kind-looking marine – Alenko, she thought his name was – had dragged out of storage so she could sleep. The human commander was right to be angry about the stupidity of what they had done, but it was Liara herself who should have known better.

*Idiot! Fool! If it isn't bad enough you're basically throwing yourself at her, then you let yourself get so caught up in the idea of seeing Protheans you don't even realize you could have killed her!* Liara knew full well the dangers of the Dark Beacons, even having seen video images of what one had done to most of a research team on Menthana. She knew that if she had died from shock the neural linkage would have dragged Shepard down with her.

She stared up at the ceiling, emotions a roiling mess, unable to get images out of her head. Bad enough that she had the horrific destruction of the Protheans to stare at. Gleaming, wondrous cities smashed to flames and ruin in mere seconds, by horrifying titans of black metal, hate, and fire. Worst of all was flashes of what must have been Prothean children, huddling in fear while elders tried to fight and died alongside them.

Worse, though, was that when her control had faltered, she had a rush of memories from Shepard. It has not merely been the vision that shattered her control, but the things that erupted between the spurts of the vision.

*A grimy, dirt smeared window, out of which a tiny girl with long black unruly hair stared, while the sick, sweet smell of hallex and red sand drifted through the room. Garbage piled in the corners, insects and rats having dug homes in the effluvia of ruined lives. A dusty closet filled with a few elegant pieces of clothing. A shattered diploma, a burned military uniform. Flashes of a dark, slender black haired woman twitching in chemical ecstasy while a man with dark brown skin and hair in dreadlocks cut his name into her stomach with a razor blade, smiling as she screamed and asked for more.*

*Ugly blots of bruised light as she's dragged barefoot out into the street, two sneering human thugs with folded arms standing there. A third human, smoking a ugly, stinking black cigar, gives a sneer, revealing blackened lumps instead of teeth, long scars and wrinkles twisting his face into that of a demon. "Skinny, but she'll have an ass on her." Hard, filthy hands that pinch tender nipples, and dig between her legs with all too familiar experience. "Hell, unfucked even. Nice. 50."*

*The voice that screams 'daddy' saying in cold tones, "I need 80. It's worth it. No one will miss her, I assure you."*

*The twisted, holo image of a cruel asari face, smirking. "70, Shepard, but only because you did me a favor a while back. This must be the kid."*

*A blast of pain. "Worthless bitch, another mouth to feed. 70 will have to do, Thalia." Then endless parades of pain. Men and women abusing her, cramming her full of hard, throbbing organs, flaying her skin off to make her drink her own blood. The taste of unwashed, sweaty skin, the skin of musk as sex organs are thrust in her mouth until she chokes. Days blending into months, into years. Whipped and electrocuted, strapped to a stage with electrodes to force her body to respond and video to show it to cruel, hard faces.*

*Broken flashes of bloodshed, of flesh tearing apart like water, screaming, of eyes torn from skulls and bones broken. Blaring fires...*

Liara squeezed her eyes shut, the images stampeding through her head so sickening that she wanted to

scream. She was blazingly angry at the idea of what she knew the human woman had gone through. She had glanced through some sites and stories on the extranet before the Commander woke up, just to get a feel for her. Another human thug, she had thought, bloodthirsty and cruel.

Liara curled into a ball on the cot, wanting to vomit. *None of them can understand.* The defilement that she had been allowed to witness was something no living being could have withstood without lingering damage. Liara understood why Shepard slaughtered pirates with such rage now, why she never betrayed those who were close to her, why she had no frame of reference to reach out to identify to others.

*All these years I have felt so sorry for myself. As if my pampered life is that hard. I could have had whatever I wanted if I had just bothered to obey Mother...and maybe if I wasn't such an idiot I could have stopped her from ... this. Instead I go about my merry way on a fools errand, and people with real problems have to save me.*

She forced herself to lay back on the cot, instead of curling away from the pain. The anger, the pain, the fear...all of it was mixed up with a sick, yearning longing, which just made her angrier. *As if I could fix that, when I can't even fix myself.* She trembled, hands clenching to fists, forcing her intellect to engage, to analyze, to treat the problem like another dig site.

*First, I have to win her trust back. I know I can .. help with the vision , I just need to make sure I keep my mind focused. Not get distracted with feeling her body or her memories or ... other things. And she didn't say no. I have a chance to help her mission.*

She swallowed, wanting to laugh at herself. "If it was only that easy. " Forcing herself to exhale, she ticked off the list of what she had to do in her mind. She knew how to fight, to fire a gun, to take care of herself to a certain degree, but she was board a ship dedicated to hunting a Spectre, so she expected most of the people on board to be much more proficient with guns and fighting and all of those things.

Unable to sleep, she dragged her body back to the terminal, muscles screaming in protest. Nervously running her hands over her crest, she massaged away tension in her neck as she entered in a search query.

An hour later, she was still reading in horrified, sympathetic tears of the Tenth Street Massacre. Her first impulse was to rush to the Commander and comfort her, one she suppressed immediately. *She already knows I saw something...but if I tell her it was just a few images of battle fields and the like, she may .. forgive me. She would never, ever forgive me knowing about her youth.*

She read the hurtful, hateful things some humans said of her, and wanted to punch the bulkheads. She read the touching, helpless tributes to her from the people she had saved on Dirth and Terra Nova and dissolved into racking sobs. She read , and read, until she was emotionally wrung dry, quivering somewhere between needing to collapse and needing to hurl a singularity at everything and everyone.

She exhaled, swallowing. *She saved my life with the viala, the soul reaching for what it yearns for the most, the hidden wave.* Liara had been so stunned by that what it really meant had hit her in a way she didn't expect. She didn't know if the human woman knew what she had done.

She buried her face in her hands, and sat slumped in the chair until exhaustion found her once more.

---

Shepard sat in the captain's quarters, drinking Anderson's scotch. *Thoughtful gesture. Once again, he knows more about me than me.* She tossed back the glass, the amber liquid burning down her throat, obliterating pain and feeling.

Killing pirates and criminals was easy. Hunting down stupid, chicken-looking terrorists was hard, but

probably going to be immensely satisfying. Leading small armies against certain death was painful, but survivable. Dealing with smart-ass political figures and tired old worn out admirals and generals was dicey, frustrating, and left her wishing for a couple of grenades.

Dealing with a scared, teenaged girl who happened to be the child of someone planning to , you know, help bring back civilization-murdering death machines? Not good.

She poured herself another glass of scotch, a wry smile crossing her face, and recapped the bottle. "Impossible missions are my specialty. Jesus, what the fuck am I supposed to do now." The liquor wasn't helping her thing, but it lent a pleasant heaviness to her limbs, a soothing to her nerves. She'd never been a big drinker. Socializing with fellow soldiers was not something she did. Free time was spent on the range, studying for qualifications, or learning about new ways to kill people. Once or twice she'd managed to get drug out.

The last time she'd gotten smashed, in fact, was after Torfan. When 3 bitter, angry marines had showed up at the little bar on base she had gone to drink at. She still remembered the confused hate in Jason Dunn's eyes. She drank, and remembered.

*The bar was dingy, the sort of thing that one expected from a Marine dive on a mainline colony world. Square, ugly tables, nicked and battered. A sticky, tar-black floor that met up with four cinderblock walls festooned with recruiting posters and cheap vidscreens blaring patriotic synth-pop. The smell of cheap beer and cheaper perfume from the 'party girls' that hung out in such places was ever-present, even today, when the bar was almost completely empty, except for a bored looking civilian bartender, fat and stupid, and four hard figures in wrecked BDU's in the corner. The four of them sat around the square table, Dunn staring at his hands, Jackson leaned back with his eyes closed, and Shields just meeting Shepard's gaze with equally dead eyes.*

*Dunn lifted his glass. "To my commanding officer. Let no one say Shepard is immune to the siren call of beautiful women. Who knew she didn't like men?" He drained it all at one gulp, his unshaven face twisting in pain. His brown eyes were shut, black hair hanging limply into his face, his BDU blues wrinkled and smelling of vomit and mothballs. "Give it a go, Betty."*

*Beatrice Shields's beautiful mouth sneered, as she lifted her own glass. "To the baddest bitch in the galaxy, who's too good to fuck one of us, but can fuck all of us." She slammed back a shot glass of tequila, wiping her mouth on the back of her sleeve, cold gray eyes now bloodshot and swollen from crying. "Why aren't we fucking killing generals right now? Oh, right, they love Shepard now. Star of fucking Terra my ass."*

*David Jackson gave a small exhalation of amusement, thin lips lifting in a soft, reverential smile. The almost delicate planes of his face gave him a childlike aura, soft baby blue eyes seemingly quiet, long blond hair cut exactly to marine specs. He lifted his glass, soft voice drifting across the table. "To Shepard, who did what she could." Those eyes snapped to hers. "We hate you, but we are yours, too. There's no point beating yourself up over this." He glanced at Beatrice, then back at Shepard. "We knew your weakness long ago. They're just like my blood lust, Beatrice hate, Dunn's rage. We're all criminals."*

*Dunn snarled. "Then why are you fucking here, Baby Blue?" Jackson's calm smile turned wry. "To make sure none of us end up killing any of the rest of us. Rai is already gone, I will not allow any more of us to .. pass." He turned back to Shepard, nodding, and Shepard raised her head to meet that calm gaze. "You did what you could, Sara. I do not hate you for being you. But even I cannot forgive you leaving us to die, for her. You said we meant something."*

*Shepard's icy stare did not lessen. "I should have saved ... the unit. I know that. I..."*

Dunn trembled. "God damn you. You aren't even fucking human, you're like some Terminator they shoved into flesh. They sent us all here to die, Sara. To DIE. They lit the fucking area up with goddamned beacons before we even punched down." He slams back another glass. "I know why you fucking think you did it. No one ever fucking loved me, blah blah." He pulled down the edge of his BDU. "3 shots to the chest. NINE in arms and legs. I tackled you out of fucking flamethrower fire, my goddamned arms are cyber thanks to you. You think I did that shit because you were my CO?"

He lifted the bottle and poured again. "My own goddamned sister. That's what infuriates me. You fell for my sister and you didn't even TELL me. Ask me. Say anything. First thing I know she's even HERE is she shows up on the fucking shuttle as the tactical coordinator. Had you been fucking by that point?"

Utterly infuriated, the big man crushes his shot glass in one massive hand, hurling shards of glass onto the floor. He clenched his fist, watching a single trickle of cybernetic lubricant seep from his fingers. "Don't answer that. Fuck."

Shields gaze was still fixed on Shepard. "You know what I hate? I've wanted you since I first saw your ass on Dirth. How many fucking battles did we fight together? How many times did you save my life? God, I lived for a fucking smile from you. Don't pretend you didn't know it. All this time, I think you are too banged up inside to reach out. If I'm just fucking patient, and caring, maybe I can reach you. Let you see you mean something. Just need to trust you...and then? You crawl in bed with HER!"

Shepard glanced away, and Beatrice's fists tightened on the table. "Look at me, bitch." Shepard gritted her teeth and met her gaze again, cold blue eyes facing steel gray. "We were set up. They sent that bitch into fucking seduce you so you wouldn't think, wouldn't catch the trap. Kyle's sons are dead. Over seventy percent of the unit is worm food. The rest are ALL fucked. They set us up the river and because you go crazy after this bitch and pursue her, after killing kids like ninepins... you get a goddamned medal and promotion."

The beautiful woman across from Shepard was shaking. Her black hair was matted, damp, her arms stressed. She reeked of something unpleasant. Shepard looked at the table. "I .. never knew how to say I was .. I don't know. How to .. " The voice trailed off, Shepard burying her hands in her face. "I need to die."

Dunn spat. "You don't GET to die, She-Bitch. No, we're here to remind you of what you did. The 5 fuckups from the 2MPL always stick together. .. except Rai's dead now, thanks to you. So's my sis, but hey, right now that's a goddamned bonus. It isn't bad enough the four eyes made us shoot our way through kids, though. Or that they had my slut of a sister – god knows how they got to HER – seduce you and distract you and convince you there was some spy, or some leak, or some SHIT and this horrible, horrible plan was just a distraction."

Dunn smiled, a terrible smile speaking of nothing but shattered faith. "No, when we get to that last fucking bunker, and your N7's clearly turned on your ass for trying to save HER instead of get the job done...why? WHY did you fucking kill Rai!"

Shepard snapped, her hand flying around Dunn's throat, literally lifting the much larger man right out of his seat. "I never had anyone love me in my fucking LIFE!" Dunn snapped his arms together in a scissoring movement, instantly breaking Shepard's grip and nearly breaking her forearm, making her howl in pain and collapse backwards. Dunn stood to his full height, glancing over at the now nervous barkeep. "Keep your fucking face shut, and you won't have a problem."

Shepard hissed in agony, cradling the arm he had just nearly cracked with the hydraulic power of his cybernetic limbs. "You're pretty dumb, Sara. Baby Blue could make it all sound emotional and shit, but the fuck you think we stuck around for? Cuz we hated you?" Dunn shook his head. "It doesn't matter what the fuck you tell yourself. We were your crew, and you killed one of us for a bitch who got the

2RRU killed. For what? To impress that black-ass – "

Before Shepard could even react in outrage, Beatrice had a knife at Dunn's throat. "Don't. I'll kill you myself, Jace. Anderson is **not** a part of this fucking conversation." Dunn's eyes met Beatrice's for a long, still moment. "...just fucking angry." He jerked a thumb at Shepard. "At her."

Jackson exhaled again, and folded his hands calmly across the table. They were trembling very slightly, a sign of the battle rage he fought with yoga, meditation, drugs, and mindset every second to control. "Shepard, we .. can't do this any more. We aren't scared kids in the 2nd Marine Penal Legion, hiding behind you because you're the bad-ass even the snipers can't intimidate. We've had your back ...since the start, and until this you never, ever betrayed us."

Jackson bowed his head. "But you had to know Beatrice and Dunn both loved you." Beatrice shut her eyes in agony, and Dunn just stared woodenly at the table. "In fact, they both probably still do, which is worse. You .. didn't take care of us when it really, finally counted. You used us to protect her, then left us to die, and when Rai tried to stop you, then you killed him." The placid, sad blue eyes held hers. "The brass rewarded you to get .. propaganda out of this. And you let them. "

Shepard swallowed. "... I.. killed her."

There was suddenly silence at the table. Shepard couldn't look up, but her voice spilled out. It was a shaky thing, unlike the smoky, hard contralto they were all familiar with. "She.. was going to blow the remotes herself. She wasn't in league...with pirates. The pirates got paid off to be there. Rai told me that...and I thought he was lying. I .. god. I ... d-didn't want to b-believe him. But then I saw her...and she .. she..."

The slender human woman fell to pieces, emotions she didn't even have a name for finally springing free. She tried to tear away from the three of them, stumbling back from the table, staggering outside, blinded by tears. She got maybe 15 feet before she felt arms go around her. She stopped, eyes still closed. She felt a gentle hand lift her chin, and she looked up.

Dunn was standing there. "Don't die on me, She-Bitch." He roughly, almost cruelly kissed her, and then pushed her back, walking off, broad shoulders set and determined. Behind her, Beatrice held her right shoulder in a firm grip, and turned Shepard's face to hers, dipping as she pressed the hard curves of her body against Shepard. Her kiss was gentle, lingering, hungry ... and tears spilled out of those eternally hard gray eyes as she let go. "I wanted you to love me so much. I guess I never could reach you though. Good .. luck. "

Shepard finally realized what was happening and collapsed to her knees, as Shields' beautiful form turned her back on her and walked out of her life. Only Jackson stood next to her, the slender form silent and still like a wraith. "I'm sorry, Shepard. But we can't ... take this level of pain. You are on your own, now and forever."

She looked up, his outline a blur against the lights of the bar's external sign. "I... "

He shook his head. "Only we know what you did. And we would never betray you, despite you betraying us." The voice was gentle. "We never **really** understood you. We thought you were normal, just hurt, cold, maybe a bit broken. We projected what we each needed from you. For that, I am sorry. Part of why this all went bad is that you failed us. And part is because we failed you. I know, now, that you never knew how to say what we all waited to hear."

Jackson's strong arms pulled her to her feet, those thin, soft lips tracing her jawline once before he pulled away. "But we're not strong enough to survive you any more. I'm sorry. And I'm not. I love you and I hate you and it's best if you move along the path in front of you and we die in the futility that has made up all our lives. Our Shepard died on Torfan. There's only the Butcher now."

*He turned away. "Goodbye, Shepard. Like I said, don't beat yourself up over this. You learned that love hurts. Just...take better care of your next band of brothers. And develop better taste in women."*

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The liquor and the years that have passed had done nothing to lessen the pain in her heart. *And here I am again. People reaching out, blind, stupid. Tali thinking I'm a shining hero. Garrus wanting me to be a vigilante badass. Williams...fucking Williams...and Joker...and now .. this.* She carefully finished her glass, before staggering to her feet and washing it out in the tiny sink in the washroom, the gun-metal colors and dim lighting of the hull a bland blur.

She peeled herself out of her uniform, letting it fall listlessly to the deck, and then her undergarments, flicking each to the ground, and lay down naked on the sheets, staring at the ceiling. *David, what the fuck do I do?* She waited a long, long time for the voice to echo in her head, but it never did, and sleep came upon her with finality, dropping her into the sweet oblivion of a sleep without dreams.

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## **Chapter 40: Chapter 34 : All Due Caution**

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*A/N: Wrex's little incongruous tale of working for Saren and hitting a volus ship always bothered me. There was something there I felt like was missing and never followed up on, and Wrex's description of the cargo made it pretty clear he had to be looking for something else. This is the result of that line of thinking.*

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January 28th, 2183 9:15 AM

The communications room filled slowly as Shepard waited patiently in the middle of the room, in her dress blues. The grey, drab floor only dimly reflected the faint light from above, most of the illumination coming from the serene blue glow from Wrex's Broker Link in the corner.

Master Sergeant Cole and Chief Williams were the first to arrive, followed immediately by Alenko, coffee cup still in hand. Garrus and Tali arrived a few minutes later, chatting about something to do with Fleet and Flotilla, until Shepard gave them a strange look and both seemed to freeze. She managed not to smile as the two sat down. Wrex arrived a minute later, along with the department heads. . . and Liara T'soni, wearing what looked like a fresh University of Serrice uniform. Shepard made a mental note of that as a state of affairs to rectify and cleared her throat.

"Status report updates. Adams?"

The engineer nodded briskly. "All systems nominal, ma'am. Had the quartermaster order some spare radiating vanes while we were at Therum – in case we have to pull that trick with head dumping them with freshwater. Armor plating is back in place – it's class 2 stock, we'll need to hit the Citadel for the class 1 stuff, but it's better than having unprotected hull. Other than that, no issues."

Shepard nodded, cold eyes going to Pressley. "Ops?"

The XO shrugged. "We're 11 minutes out from the relay, Joker reported a drift of only 1100k. The location is a good long FTL burn from here, but we have a military comm ping from a ... volus military vessel. They've secured the area and are aware a Spectre is en route. Scan logs look clean, and whoever took the volus out didn't leave much evidence. Sensors are active, stealth will be ready for activation as soon as hit system and drop charge, just in case."

Shepard gave another brief nod. "Good. I'm cognizant of the volus ship, we'll be meeting them at the site and ... covering the issue with the captain. Lieutenant Alenko, this operation should not require a Marine element. I want you to go ahead and pull a full inventory of our current equipment. Once you are done, I want armor measurements for every member of the Detail and our guests. I'll be firing off a request for top of the line armor across the board. Call up Armax, I want 30 suits of Predator battle armor and Crossfire rifles. There won't be any more of this under-equipped shit costing me men. Charge the Spectre account."

Alenko gave a faint smile and nodded. "Yes, ma'am." Williams looked shocked, but Cole grinned.

Shepard folded her arms. "Our .. jaunt on Therum did not unveil a great deal of useful intel, but it did provide two very important resources. First, Doctor Liara T'soni has joined us. She'll be joining our ground teams when we need to deal with Prothean information, and since the Prothean Beacon started all this, that might be quite often. She's a very powerful biotic, as most of us saw a few days back. Doctor, I neglected to ask in our last conversation, but do you have any military training?" Liara's voice was calm and collected. "My mother had me train with asari commandos for 5 years, and I am more than proficient with a pistol. I am not a soldier, but I have been fighting and using biotics for over 50 years, and I can handle myself as long as I am not expected to perform a krogan charge." Williams frowned. "Wait, 50 years? How old are you, anyway?" Liara bowed her head. "I am 106 years old." Williams eyes widened, and she whistled. "Damn, I wish I could look that good at a hundred and six." Cole snorted. "God, Ash, can't you go anywhere without flirting?"

Shepard managed to suppress a grin at the dirty look the now-furiously blushing Williams shot her fellow soldier, and continued. "Aside from Williams letting us know she's a xenophile – " Williams' hiss was drowned out by snickers from the other humans and confused looks between the four aliens "- Doctor T'soni has also aided me in deciphering the Beacon images I encountered on Eden Prime. It took a good night's sleep for it all to click, but I have a few new fact now, including a hunch about why Saren is looking for this sort of stuff."

Liara glanced at the decking, but Shepard turned to Wrex. "The Shadow Broker still can't give us any more intelligence on Saren?" Wrex grunted. "Broker can't find much of a pattern in what he's doing. And when a pyjak is too slippery for the Broker, the knives need to come out." Shepard spread her hand. "Not surprising. The Broker is looking for patterns that lead to something we can expect from a lunatic. A weapon. A goal. A vendetta. But Saren is acting on something he's seen, similar to my vision from the Beacon." She paused. "The Protheans had something they they were trying to get out with these Beacons. Saren went looking for the one on Eden Prime. That means , for whatever reasons, he's looking for more."

She paced slightly, muscles taut and tense as she ticked off points on her fingers. "One, he goes after a Prothean dig site. Two, he has his goons try to snatch a Prothean expert on the extinction, something almost no one else is studying because they're too goddamned busy trying to find new tech or weapons." Shepard's voice had taken on an irritated edge, and Liara winced, knowing that particular frustration had come from their joining. Shepard's dark glance in her direction confirmed that, but the human Commander continued.

"Three, he's buying stock like mad in a few companies. Biological research companies, mostly, the kind doing cutting edge cybernetic and genetic modification work. Four, he's snapping up mercs, guns, armor, weapons. And five, according to Tali, some of the geth we've been fighting are new designs, tailored toward planetary invasion."

Shepard stopped. "I need to confirm with the volus, but did you run that list of the ships I asked about, Wrex?"

The bulky krogan nodded. "The Broker says they were just trade ships. Food, supplies. All of them had stopped at Prothean research sites in the previous month before they were hit. Most of 'em had contracts with university research departments, but one of them had resupplied the dig on Eden Prime a few days before the attack...and it was hit less than 24 hours after it had done it's drop there."

Shepard nodded, and Garrus tilted his head. "You think Saren's hitting the ships for their manifests?"

The commander smiled. "Liara, if someone found something important about the Protheans, would it get announced publicly?" The asari scientist looked surprised at being addressed, but her voice was calm and even. "No, Commander. I am afraid most of the independent operators would immediately cease outgoing communications altogether until they could get a complete site manifest completed, and the documentation for the Citadel Council allowing them to be paid."

She nodded. "And so buying lots of food and supplies, maybe research equipment, from a private volus merchant rather than using easily placed – and easily traced – orders through their more conventional channels would be a step most would take?" Liara nodded, and Shepard gave a predatory smile. "The bastard's hunting. That means he's not ready to do whatever he's planning yet, or he hasn't found what he needs yet, and that gives us time to catch up to him. We'll find him soon enough, and then after we shoot him in the head like he did Nihlus, we'll have Wrex eat him."

The low laugh of the krogan concluded the meeting.

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The volus trading vessel was a burned hulk, it's engines cleanly sheered off by some massive blow, large holes blown into the cargo pods that made up the bulk of it's length. A cloud of tumbling items drifted out behind it, as if it were bleeding. The command section was bulbous and elongated, trailing back to a slender spine to which cargo modules and crew quarters were attached, with the wreckage of the engines at the far end.

The volus warship next to it was built along the same lines, with a trace of turian design and fear writ large in every line of the ship. The cruiser bristled with defenses and oversized engines, not counting the absolutely terrifying array of AM missile pods that lined the swept forward wings to either side of the central spine of the ship. Joker kept his distance from the vessel, bringing them alongside at a respectable range.

"Wow, whoever said volus were wimps did not get a good look at their ships, Commander. These people are not fucking around." Joker's voice was wry. "They have aft-firing missiles. What kind of crazy is that?"

Shepard shrugged. "The smart kind, Flight Lieutenant. You can never have too many guns. Patch me through.

Joker tapped a console and a viewscreen flared to holographic life next to her. The image on the screen was a volus military officer. The suit he wore looked nothing like the average, waddling figures of polite ineptitude. The lines were hard, straight, and gave the volus much less fat-looking rounded bulk and more of a squat, blocky look. "Adeptus Maran, of the VDF *All Due Caution*. The Marshal is ready to meet you on the derelict, Earth-clan. Dock at position 34."

Shepard nodded. "Full environment gear?"

The volus officer tapped a control out of sight on the holoscreen. "Affirmative. Remaining atmospheric conditions are set for us Irune-clan, not aliens. *All Due Caution*, out." The communication cut out, and Shepard sighed. "So much for getting all dressed up." She turned away, to replace dress blues with her hard suit, and her voice was tired as she glanced back over her shoulder. "Joker, take us in, slowly."

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Shepard stepped from the airlock into the volus merchant ship's own airlock, noting the splotches of dark green blood splattered about. Garrus eyed them curiously, his helmet rendering his features as nothing but a flat, black plate. Tali brought up the rear, nervously looking around.

The airlock cycled, and standing before them was yet another military volus. This one stood perhaps all of 4 and a half feet, but his military-style pressure suit gave him an almost impressive mien. Conventional volus suits were rounded and bulbous, not only because most Volus tended towards that shape but because maintaining pressure in a rounded surface was easier and safer than in angular shapes and joints.

But this volus was not wearing cheap civilian suits. The finish to his battle armor was a glossy black, trimmed in a cold red color, and the angles were .. strange. The chest was almost an inverted triangle, wide at the hips and narrowing towards the head, broken up by heavy and wide shoulder plates over surprisingly thick upper arms. The volus stood on stubby but wide set legs, which actually seemed muscular if the outlines of the black under-suit were any indication. A belt of some kind of grenades crossed his rather wide torso, but he hardly looked comical.

Shepard had never , ever expected to be impressed by a volus, but she had to admit this one looked pretty badass, an image completed by the fact that the volus's right arm supported a set of what looked like 3 light mass accelerators hooked to a heavy pack linked by a series of hoses. The volus's mask was like that of a normal civilian volus, but had heavier plating and a multifunction scanner instead of a right eyepiece, and the long chops that hung down on either side of the speaker were marked with stripes – rank stripes, she presumed.

She straightened. "Commander Shepard, Office of Special Recon and Tactics."

The volus squared his stance even more. "Marshal Vidon Marr, Volus Defense Force. The Vol Protectorate is always happy to .. comply ... with the wishes of the council." Shepard arched an eyebrow he spoke. Not only was his voice a deeper, harsher register than most volus, there was no rasp of respiration between words. "Our purpose here is simple, to identify the criminals murdering Irune-clan ships."

Shepard nodded. "My companions are here to assist with that. Detective Garrus Vakarian, C-Sec Special Operations, is here to provide forensic and police procedural support. And Tali'Zorah nar Rayya is a Council recognized expert on the geth, including data retrieval."

Marshal Vidon gestured to the corridor behind him, and they began walking. "You suspect the geth in this, then, Earth-clan? A curious culprit. These ships have all been independent merchants, not even associated with a trading company. None have worked the same trade routes and none even comes close to the Perseus Veil. We suspected pirates, but nothing of value is ever taken."

Shepard nodded, as they rounded a corner. The volus ship interior was smooth and organic, bulkheads set off by little lounges and everything felt very .. smooth. They approached a pressure door, which the volus officer opened, revealing another compartment, a long cargo bay. Aside of being full of crates and boxes of goods, this one was also full of battle wreckage and far too many dark greens stains on the floor. A gaping hole replaced one of the walls, the yawning gulf of space held back only by a kinetic force shield. "And I did not expect geth to act with such savagery."

Tali glanced around, and found scorch marks on the walls almost immediately. "At least some of the attackers were geth. Those were plasma dart impacts. The fire patterns are definitely geth, Commander."

Garrus, on the other hand, was kneeling down next to a tattered form in a deflated suit. "So , part of this

vessel is pressurized, and the rest isn't? They hit this place with explosives, not direct mass accelerator fire. The hole is too large and messy for anything else but explosives." Garrus traced a hard-suited talon over the peeled back edges of the blast. "That doesn't sound very . . . gethy? Is that a word? They could have just boarded through one of the airlocks after they smashed the engines, it's not like this thing had any defenses..but they took the time to hole and take out everybody in the non-pressurized sections, why?"

Tali tilted her head. "Geth wouldn't be affected by vacuum. . . but . . . neither would pressure suited volus."

The Marshal's left arm pointed to the airlocked large door on the far side of the cargo bay. "Yes, Detective. The cargo bays and the engine room, as well as the loading areas, were left open to neutral atmospheres, so that other races could work in shirtsleeves aboard the ship. The command decks, crews quarters, mess, and other ship's amenities were located center-line or in the command pod, which are indeed pressurized to the standards of Irune itself."

Shepard nodded slowly. "It's not about the atmosphere. A suited volus could have survived. They wanted to make sure no one did. So they holed everything where someone would have been suited up...mm. " Shepard turned to the Marshal. "You did say the crew areas were pressurized, right? Let's head on to the bridge, but I suspect they did something to the atmosphere in the living area as well."

The Marshal took the lead, and Shepard finally gave into her curiosity. "I always thought the volus were, well, non-aggressive. I knew the VDF existed, but .. Alliance intel seems to rate it as a few frigates."

The volus marshal gave a laugh. "They are not far wrong in some ways, although very far off in others. The Vol Protectorate is .. bitterly aware of the fact that our standing with Council races is lessened because of our distinct lack of military might. The logical conclusion is that , if we ever want to chart our own path through the politics of Council Space, we need to change this perception. Otherwise, we'll simply be the tools of the turians for all time."

Garrus grunted. "The Turian Hierarchy has always respected the rights and abilities of your people-"

The volus gave a dark sounding laugh. "And tell me, Palaven-clan. Am I supposed to believe the turian mindset values the pursuit of money as much as it does glory or duty? Does the Hierarchy support us to see us rival them one day, or to profit from our skills? Does the average turian see the average member of my species as their equals, or as their subordinates? Do you?"

Garrus said nothing, then sighed and shook his helmeted head. "I.. no. Most of us.. do not."

The volus opened two series of airlocks, passing the team through into the pressurized area of the ship. The atmosphere took on smoky green overtones, tinged with yellow, and the corridors became slightly smaller. "I am not offended, Detective. Your honesty is bracing. But the ugly reality is that unless and until the Vol Protectorate provides a military force capable of .. handling issues that threaten Citadel Space...then we will not advance. We are a net drain on military resource, not a positive."

The marshal paused, then uttered a word Shepard suspected was a curse. "Your suspicion was correct, commander. The atmosphere is .. .tainted. Not enough to kill instantly, but no one would have survived more than an hour or so."

The volus moved along smoothly, pausing to glance at a status reading, something to do with the atmosphere, copying it to his omni-tool. "The Vol Protectorate would love to alter this perception, this idea that we are .. .weak. The .. problem is that we Irune-clan simply do not solve our problems through violence. Our word for 'war' is more about a bidding or economic conflict, or at best espionage. Throughout history, only a few of my race have demonstrated an aptitude or clear understanding for

violence. The average Irune-clan is not cut out for violent combat against other races. We are too dependent on pressure suits and atmosphere, we are by nature slow moving and slow reacting, and worst of all, we had no predator species on our planet to develop the kind of .. instincts that are needed to fight."

The marshal bypassed a door printed with volus script in bright white letters that were hard angles and swirls. "The Vol Protectorate thus trains a few of us from birth to attempt to .. change this. Genetic mods, cybernetic enhancement, and conditioning. Few who are put through the program actually grasp the needed mindset , but those of us who do are given a new name, and a new clan identify – Those who Profit from Blood. We are few but .. we are the future of our society."

Shepard nodded her head. "Cold, but efficient." The marshal gave a shrug, the heavy shoulder plates shifting up and down. "That could be the motto of my people, Earth-clan. The turians have a most excellent saying – 'he who does not defend his eyrie blames others for his own weakness'. I tend to agree with that .. sentiment." The marshal pauses, glancing at the doorway ahead. Green bloodstains have dribbled across the floor under the seal. "...and scenes like this are why I am proud to defend my people, and angry when I have failed as I have here."

The next few minutes on the way to the bridge was an abattoir in green. The corridors were full of bodies that were shot to pieces. Some had been murdered so violently that the entire area around the corpse was liberally pattered round with bits of flesh. Blood was spattered in long gory trails and in splatters that spoke all too clearly of bodies smashed into walls. The blood was omnipresent, drenching the occasional console or pooled in dried, flaking sheets on the decking. The walls spoke mute testimony to how much firepower had been flung around, almost mindlessly. One volus had been left impaled to the wall by shards of broken equipment, the spikes of metal rammed in with such force that the volus's legs had been snapped cleanly off at the kneecaps from the impact. Jets of spraying blood must have misted the air like rain , literally every inch of decking was befouled.

Shepard now knew what volus looked like under their suits. Stocky and heavily muscled, but rotund around the hips, like tiny sumo wrestlers with poor posture. Their heads bubbled from shoulders without necks, the face little more than two cavernous eyes set in a dark, bony ridge across the face. Strips of flesh with slits between seemed to serve as nose and mouth, the head covered in fine, almost downy hair that spiraled.

The volus marshal opened the next door, and then just stood there for long moments, clearly in shock, before covering his eyes with his left hand, cursing thickly in phrases that did not translate. The three edged around him before stopping as well, Shepard taking a deep breath as Tali buried her faceplate in Shepard's shoulder.

More than 20 bodies , or bits of bodies, were flung about the deck, many of them having been shot multiple times, some broken in half, others set on fire, still others with arms and legs pulled from sockets. Shepard had seen krogan carnage enough times to recognize their brand of violence , to read it in the bodies and the pained postures of the broken poor civilians on the floor, but this was extreme even for the most savage krogan mercenary. Tali sobbed quietly, cringed away from the blood and the gore, almost clinging to Shepard's' arm. It was a slightly strange feeling, but the Commander put on a confident body stance, head held high, and let the girl maintain contact with her arm.

Garrus was scanning, the blank flat surface of his helmet often shaking in regret. "This is the most savage and unneeded violence I've ever seen, and I've put away child slavers. Why would anyone do this?" Even his hardened voice had a trembling note to it.

Shepard exhaled, feeling her hair matted down from the helmet she wore. "Looks like krogan work to me, and young krogan at that,violent, sloppy, exulting in their strength and power." They rounded the

corner to the bridge and stopped. Familiar splashes of dried white fluid formed an ugly spatter around the discolored impacts of some heavy weapon against the far wall. "And the geth came along for the ride, at least one." Tali's voice was vindictive. "At least the poor volus got one of the geth bosh'tets."

The Marshal crossed to a broken figure laying on the ground, still cradling a heavy pistol. The volus had on some kind of uniform, but it was so ruined by blood and bits of flesh that Shepard couldn't even tell what color it had been. The right arm had been so savagely torn out of the socket that strips of flesh and strands of arteries were hanging limp and dry from the socket, and it looked as if the selfsame arm had been used to crush the volus' head before he was shot dozens of times. The man's face was gone, a krogan boot print splattered on the ground in green blood. "This is...was...Captain Niham. Former VDF. I always said following the credits would get you killed, old *uru*." The last word didn't translate for Shepard, but the sound of grief in the officer's voice was clear. "Even animals would not do this to a sentient being."

Shepard glanced around. "I assume the bridge is just ahead?"

Marshal Vidon stood, voice heavy with anger and regret. "Yes, Earth-clan." He walked to the door and placed his hand on a hexagonal pillar next to the door, which illuminated a pale green. Something in his omni-tool glowed back and the doors hissed open.

Compared to the vicious, cruel savagery outside, the bridge was pristine. Only one body littered the floor, shot cleanly in the head. The computers were still running, and Shepard gestured. "Tali, please link the computers to Pressley's ops team."

The marshal walked to the other side of the room, and tapped a few controls. "Someone accessed the captains logs and the inventory manifest. Interesting." A few more taps and a grating voice sounded, free of the rasping inhalations or the mechanical edge Shepard was used to. She realized whoever had recorded this had done so with no suit on.

*"Una, 5 4049." The volus stopped the playback. "That's our date system. Roughly ... 8 days ago, Earth-clan." The voice sounded again. "Finally got free of that profit sink that was the Mindoir contract. Earth-clan colonies pop up like mushrooms, but they rarely buy anything but the basics. It's so tedious, I wonder if I should have stayed in the VDF, trading wealth for excitement. Bah.*

*Things are looking up, though. We got a blind-bid request for food and a very strange set of supplies from another Earth-clan colony named Feros. Some of it's standard stuff, lights, batteries, computers. Some is bizarre – high efficiency air filters, UV air sterilizers, prepackaged foodstuffs that are completely sealed and sterilizable, even quarian-strength system purgatives. Buying this will set me back all of the Mindoir account profits (such as they are) but should recoup me five times the cash.*

*Una, 9 4049. The situation on Feros is **beyond** bizarre. It's some old Prothean colony, a jumble of ruins and towers and scrap. How Exogeni plans to make a credit of profit is utterly beyond me, but Earth-clan are crafty. They wouldn't let us land at the colony at all, oddly enough. Instead we docked high above the cloud layer at a special Exogeni dock.*

*Getting additional manifest requests from the Exogeni people was utterly strange. ALL of them wore complete full body suits with air filtration. They explained it had something to do with an outbreak of disease or some patient lie at which I just agreed with, but I have been on quarantine worlds. The filters and purgatives are for distinct air agents – spores, maybe. Not germs.*

*It doesn't matter. They also need a large amount of cohesive pattern explosives. There is only one reason for that, and that would be excavation. It's probably some Prothean gadget they've found, so I think I'll try to lock in a full contract. While I wait, I'll see about contacting my usual contacts for the explosives."*

*Una, 10 4049*

*The Earth-clan colony of Eden Prime was attacked, nearly destroyed by geth. I never really expected to hear about it, but I remember that Miroah just got a big contract from there a few weeks back, something about an archeological dig. It came in blind-bid too. Funny.*

*Course, some pirate blew Miroah out of the sky a week ago, I'm just now finding out. Blasted Citadel News is always late.*

*Nothing for it now, though. Miroah was too cocky and probably involved in something he shouldn't have been. I'm sticking to supplying small runs and specialty goods, rather than trying to make a killing on splashing my ships throughout Council space. And this Feros job will be perfect. Of course, the only person who I can get that kind of explosive from is that crazy Sur'kesh-clan, Githmol, but at least his prices are reasonable.*

*Now, where to find what the Earth-clan called "HEPA filters"...*

*Una, 11 4049*

*I'm getting nervous. Githmol said he'd meet us here, en route to Feros, but he's fifteen minutes late, and Sur'kesh-clan are never late. I'm probably paranoid, but I had Kilan bring up our kinetic barriers, just in case. My ship may not have guns, but our engines will ...*

*Oh, Plenix, no. All hands! Battle stations, prepa-*

The log cut out with sudden, terrifying finality. The Marshal tapped another button, and the ships manifest pulled up. Foodstuffs and MRE's, digging equipment, lots and lots of air filtration equipment, medicine... "No weapons. Nothing expensive. Even the explosives he's talking about aren't worth...this.. nightmare." The volus's voice was flat, angry.

Shepard nodded, tapping her comm link. "Pressley, anything on the nav logs?"

Pressley's voice sounded in her ear, somewhat tense, and she patched it through to her omni-tool so everyone could hear. "Still working ma'am. But I can confirm the ship last visited Feros on the 24th and it looks like...they transitioned straight here. I don't have transceiver codes for the attackers, those were wiped...aha. Ma'am, they were clean with the data, they made sure no evidence of who hit them was in place. But I do have the transceiver code for the salarian ship they were supposed to meet with here."

Shepard grinned behind the silver and black helmet. "Very good work, Pressley, keep at it." She turned back to the volus marshal. "Marshal, based on what I'm seeing, the only possible answer is that this .. Githmol ... is feeding intelligence on volus supply ships to Prothean digs to Saren and the geth. We know Saren has employed both geth and krogan, and that he's been .. encroaching on weapons markets for months."

The volus marshal clenched a fist. "And what does he get from such open slaughter of my people, Earth-clan? Why attack these ships so violently, just for manifests and logs?"

Garrus spoke up. "He's covering his tracks. We have no other way to figure out where he'll hit next or what he's looking for, but we know it's related to the Protheans...and he had his eye on Feros. We should probably head there, maybe we can head him off."

Pressley spoke up. "Ma'am, what about the salarian ship? We need to know if they were the ones who sold the volus out, or if they just got caught up in this event."

The Marshal turned to face Shepard. "Commander, our path is clear. You have one of your own colonies to investigate. The *All Due Caution* will go after this .. Sur'kesh-clan thing that may have sold my people out to die. If he is guilty, he will be appropriately .. dealt with." The wide fist clenched, the

gesture looking almost comical for a moment until the heavy barrels on the forearm gleamed. "We will meet you at your Feros colony once we have completed our work. I have VDF recovery ships on the way here, to .. recover and honor the dead. We will forward you anything we find, Earth-clan."

Shepard nodded. "That's all I can ask, Marshal Vidan. We'll keep you apprised as well. And if we find the ones who did this, I'll make sure to take them apart just as painfully."

Marshal Vidan looked at her a long moment, then bowed. "The average member of my species would see such an act as a pointless waste of time, and unprofitable. For me, however... yes. That would be extremely gratifying. I will relay my report back to Irune...and I hope you meet you again with better news, Commander."

Shepard nodded again, and tapped her comm-link. "Joker, pick us up and then set course for Feros, full FTL. Get Alenko up and have his team get hot, if this is another Eden Prime situation we're going to need to go in loaded for bear."

Joker's cheery voice came back. "All over it, Commander. ETA to Feros is about 9 hours. It will be 3 hours before we get back into the trade lane enough to sync up with an FTL buoy to report to the Council, that cool?"

Shepard sighed. "I suppose so, Flight Lieutenant. I'm sure talking to the Council about this mess will be absolutely fascinating." She glanced at Tali and Garrus. "Come on, I need a goddamned shower after this."

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## Chapter 41: Chapter 35 : Council Report I

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*A/N: "Air quotes and angst" would have also made a nice title for this story.*

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January 28th , 2183 1:15 PM

"Hitting the relay in 3...2...1..."

The Normandy burst free of the mass corridor, her hull alive with electric blue snakes of frustrated static charge. Joker yawned and casually tapped his controls before smirking at Shepard standing behind him. "Drift is 1200k. Why do you even hang out up here for the jumps, anyway?"

Shepard quirked her lips into a grin. "Maybe I like watching the best, Joker. I've.. never seen anyone as good at the thing they do as I am at what I do. " Her voice darkened, becoming bitter. "Of course, they treated you like shit too, but..."

Joker flexed his hands , then laid in a course , aiming the frigate for the trade lane , the line of sight for FTL communications to go from buffered to real-time. "Well, I didn't really give a shit, to be honest. I mean, yeah, it sucked. But I was focused on what was important to me. Watching my family see me as the best, having that admiral that told me I'd wash out have to eat crow and promote me, it was all... totally worth it." The young pilot scratched his chin and gazed up at Shepard. "But I'm not stupid enough to compare what I went through to what you did."

Shepard arched an eyebrow. "Most people are all too quick to assume they can understand me." Joker snorted, and Shepard sat down in the sensor station seat next to him, black hair shading her face, the eyes cool but not icy.

Joker glanced away, focusing on piloting the ship. *Jesus fuck, does she even realize what she does to*

*guys when she gives them that look? Keep it cool, think about capital punishment, do NOT comment on her ass.* He coughed, bringing down a system map with a casual, downward pull of his right hand, wincing as that hurt a little. "Well, most people are dicks, boss. I don't mean , you know, they don't think before they speak. I mean actual, worthless non-thinking asshats. They treat anything different like crap because they're so convinced their own little worlds are the only thing that count."

The pilot finger tapped his way through a few menus, bringing up a comms strength map. Adjusting course a few degrees, he then turned to face Shepard fully. "Once I realized most of 'em don't have the first clue about what life is really like for most people, it stopped mattering so much. I have friends, now. Not a lot, but they're loyal. Couple of girlfriends. And .. " He shrugged, rubbing his beard almost sheepishly.

Shepard exhaled. "I had friends once and didn't even know it. How stupid is that?" Joker said nothing, hanging his head a bit. Shepard went on. "There comes a time when everyone expects the impossible from you, and gives you nothing to work with. You did that , being first in your class. You were confident you could do it. But when you get told to do the impossible again, and again, and again, you end up questioning the whole reason you're around."

Joker sniffed. "Which at that point you remind yourself that you're so badass that krogan piss themselves seeing you, and keep stepping." Shepard grinned, shaking her head. "That .. was a one time thing, really. I'd already killed that krogan's battlemaster with a knife, and he wasn't expecting to see me again." She shrugged. "It gets to be very, very old. People's expectations. People's fear. The .. lack of knowing what to do to stop the shit."

Joker smirked. "So does moving around with broken bones." He gestured to the crutches that were a necessity to move, neatly hung on the wall. "There's types of people who think it's .. good.. to try to put broken people back together. Girls tell me I have such sweet green eyes, and it's so sad I have to go through all this pain, blah blah...without even thinking about how being made helpless and dependent makes you feel."

Shepard nodded, then tilted her head at Joker. "And that bothers you? I guess I never really ran into that much. Anderson never wanted to fix me so much as.. show me I didn't need fixing exactly. Fuck if I know why."

Joker shrugged. "Anderson knew me for a few days, and in ten minutes had me pegged, ma'am. He told me I could pretend to be a smartass all I wanted, but he would respect me for a pilot and I didn't need to pretend what I was going through wasn't the main reason I was such a badass pilot."

Shepard frowned. "Isn't that ... obvious?"

Joker laughed, teeth gleaming from the haptic interface in front of him. "Hell no! Not for... well, most people." He jabbed at control almost angrily, but his face was still amused. "Nah, most people want to be able to stick people in buckets. Oh, he's got brittle bones, poor thing, I'd better take care of him – or he's worthless and sickly, better not get to close in case I have to help him. The fact that I pilot well is.. an afterthought. Like a really hot woman with a banging body who happens to have a PHD in non-linear astrophysics from Harvard."

Shepard rolled her eyes. "That sounds like a male conceit, there, Flight Lieutenant." Joker shrugged. "Not really. I think men and women have different . . um, zones of focus. Chicks want to heal something and feel like they have a connection. Guys want shit cut and dry and most of us only think about how things feel after we're sure the fish is hooked."

Shepard gave him a droll look, and the young man gave a sheepish look. "Just sayin'. No need to detach my spine." She nodded. "How much longer until transmit range?" Joker shrugged. "Another... 5

minutes?" Shepard glanced over her shoulder, finding the corridor clear, then nodded. "Alright then. What am I doing wrong? How is my focus off? On the crew, the ... people."

Joker gave her a frown. "I'm not exactly a, uh, people person?"

Shepard shrugged. "Maybe that's why I can ask. You, at least, sort of understand. That means I can talk to you and not worry you'll take me saying things the wrong way."

Joker's face was serious for several long seconds, hands absently tapping the controls, then he shrugged, green eyes flicking up to meet hers. "Honestly? Shepard you are always going to scare the shit out of people until you .. stop needing to scare the shit out of people to keep them away. I did that with sarcasm and being focused. Never let anyone close because that just got me hurt. But it didn't fix anything. It let me do my job...and it kept me only doing my job. Which was fine, as long as my job was flight school. But after? What's the point of busting your ass if you can't enjoy it?"

Joker sighed. "I had to let it go a bit. And it didn't really hurt that much. Some things still do. Women mostly pity me. Guys treat me like I'll break around harsh language. But I'm still the best at what I do even if sometimes it gets to me, because sometimes I make a friend, like Alenko, like Jackson, like Pressley. Makes up for it all."

Shepard nodded. "It sounds very easy, but it isn't. But I'll think about it." She stood, a lithe motion that left her moving aft even as she rose. "Patch the comms relay back to the Communications Room, Joker. Have Liara meet me there. "

"Aye aye, ma'am." He watched her stride off, that swaying walk that felt so .. animalistic. *And hot. Daayum.* Tapping a few controls, he maneuvered the ship into the main FTL lane and brought her to a full stop. "Doctor T'soni, please report to the CIC Communications Room."

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Liara's breath was too fast as she entered the comms room, the gray space feeling all too exposed. She bit her lip, straightening her uniform, the bright white cloth a bit more clingy than she preferred, and made an effort to calm herself. Shepard stood in the middle of the room, arms folded almost arrogantly, one leg out at an angle, leaving her standing almost lopsided. "Glad you could join me. Time to talk to the Council."

Liara said nothing, swallowing and standing next to Shepard, trying not to fidget. Shepard sighed, but reached a hand out to Liara's forearm. "Just relax, okay? I'm not letting them arrest you or go at you like a criminal." Her lips moved into something like a smile. "The one benefit of what happened last night is that I can be 100% sure you are not involved in anything beyond digging around in pits."

Liara's face fell a little, knowing that Shepard was just teasing her, but the truth in the comment cut deeper than she expected. "I .. will try to ensure I am an asset to your team, Commander. I can do more than just archeology if you let me prove myself. I just – "

Shepard frowned, turning to face her fully. "Let's drop the stiff upper lip crap, okay? Like I said, not good at this. But do you think I'm gonna throw you off the ship or something? Like I said, it was a mutual fuck up, and now we move on." The hand on her arm squeezed. "I still haven't processed all ... this shit. But I will, sooner or later. For now, through, you have a place on the team to get Saren and ... figure out what your mother's involvement is. Alright?"

Liara exhaled. "I trust you completely, Shepard. I am just not handling all of this well. I.. the vision was bad enough, but you already know the .. rest. I am not sure you want me here, even if it is, as you say, not entirely my fault."

Shepard glanced away, and sighed. "We're waiting until *now* to have this conversation? Fine. If I didn't

want you here, Liara, I'd be setting course for the Citadel. I am not setting course for the Citadel. I don't need you feeling sorry for yourself *or* me. I don't need you telling yourself you're a liability either. You know what I need? I need you fully functional, and I probably need to get all this out in the open. I need an honest answer, here, Liara. How much did you see?"

Liara was silent for several seconds. Shepard finally spoke. "I remember a beautiful blue and silver garden, on an ocean of pale blue like no water I remember. Trees that looked like they were on white fire. A beautiful woman in a yellow dress with a laugh ..I never had a mother, Liara. Seeing a lot of what makes you .. you .. is why I trust you, now. But I need truth."

Liara buried her face in her hands, and exhaled in a shuddering breath. "I... saw everything." She felt Shepard's hand fall from her arm, but just kept speaking. "Your .. Goddess, I cannot call them parents. How you were sold. *Used.*" The asari looked up with shattered, blasted blue eyes. "I saw .. Torfan. And your old .. crew. And how they abandoned you when you needed them most."

Shepard's face was completely dead calm, and she stepped closer, her voice was icy. "I don't want – "

Liara pushed the human woman back. "I know you do not want to talk about Torfan! You don't want to talk about it because you blame yourself. They were **wrong**. They did not see and did not know! By the Goddess I have no idea how you have not simply killed everything that you encounter!" The little asari scientist's eyes were blazing with anger , her stance predatory...and Shepard realized it was as if she was looking at herself. She met that blue gaze evenly, for long moments, before her own eyes closed, and she sagged for a long moment

Shepard began shaking her head. "Sometimes I wish I could. But... that's not what this is about. What I went through is .. not the human norm. Everyone responsible for it is , I assure you, quite fucking dead. The sellers. The buyers. The ringleaders. My parents. The person behind it all. Even their kids." The cold eyes flicked back to Liara's. "I made very fucking sure my past was dead. As far as Torfan is concerned, it's a wound to the entire way I looked at my service. It's one I haven't recovered from yet. I want to blame the Alliance but I blame myself most of all. And it has nothing to do with anyone else."

Shepard stood closer, staring down. "What matters right now is that Saren is planning to do a lot worse things to the entire goddamned galaxy. That's what I have to focus on . That is where my anger is, my rage. And that is what I am going to deal with. Everything else just gets in the way."

Liara balled her fists. "I..." She exhaled , and unclenched her hands. "I am simply not .. used to having to deal with memories... especially alien ones. It will pass as it fades." Shepard shook her head. "Will this shit ever fade?" Liara's chest was still heaving, but she nodded. "Without further .. reinforcement, it will.. fade very soon. By this time next week you may be able to pull out a few recent memories. The..." she stumbled over her words. "... um,method is usually more.. er, permanent?" The doctor flushed and turned her gaze away.

Shepard arched an eyebrow. "Whatever. But that shit goes both ways. I know what you went through. And what it means. I know you spent your whole life on something important, and it feels wasted. I know your mom is even worse than the bitch who bore me. It means you never knew a fucking thing about Saren or geth, and were just minding your own business. It means that you have no clue why the Matriarch is acting bat-shit insane. That means you are not going to have to worry about anything in this conversation with the Council, or about being put off this ship."

Shepard frowned. "Although if Sparatus pisses me off enough , you may have to worry about putting a chair through the vidscreen. "

Liara nods, making an effort to calm down, and Shepard turned on the comm link. An image of the Citadel Tower appeared, three circles representing Sur'Kesh, Palaven and Thessia at the bottom, before

the vid link cleared and the Council's holograms appeared.

Sparatus appeared to be wearing long white robes with a breastplate of some kind, reclining in a seat. Tevos wore a rather daring gown with almost scandalous cleavage and layers of semi-transparent silky material as its primary features, with a dark blue cowl thrown over her shoulders. Valern had his hood thrown back, his robe a somber blue with gold trim, and was also seated, a glass in his hand. "Hello, Spectre Shepard. We are not in session currently, so we are doing a coordinated link from our homes. I trust the mission so far is going well?"

Shepard stood at firm attention, features cold and still. "Yes, Councilors. We have retrieved Doctor T'soni from the colony of Therum, where we encountered and destroyed a large amount of geth forces sent to abduct her. My geth specialist has forwarded a tactical and technical report on what we found to the Council ... and the Migrant Fleet, in hopes of obtaining additional intelligence. We also forwarded the initial mission report...but you said you needed additional information."

Sparatus nodded. "The report was .. adequate. It did not answer a few outstanding questions, such as why the geth were after T'soni, and what her part is in this. And, of course, your trip to the volus merchant ship."

Shepard nodded. "Liara appears to have been unaware of her mother's intentions, or her involvement with Saren beyond their personal relationship. When we arrived the Doctor was under direct assault by geth as well as a krogan, and was nearly killed in the battle, managing to take down a geth armature to save the lives of the recovery team. Subsequent ... interrogation has assured me that she had no role in this plot."

Sparatus snorted. "And you are an expert at interrogation, Shepard?" Before Shepard could speak, Valern sighed. "Actually, yes she is, Tarren, as you well know from reviewing her military record. That is not the operant question at hand." The salarian turned dark eyes to Shepard. "Asari are resistant to interrogation , and -"

Shepard interrupted. "Pardon me, but I believe my statement stands. She risked her life – twice, actually , once saving us from the geth, and again later to aid me in understanding the vision from the Prothean Beacon. Her role in this mess is likely one of resource, as Saren would need such an expert to aid him in finding what he's after. . . or the geth were there to silence her, to make sure no one could figure out what Saren is up to."

Tevos gave Shepard a very piercing look. "Commander, I trust your judgment on this is not ... affected by any other factors?" Valern and Sparatus looked puzzled, but Shepard's eyes narrowed angrily. "No, madam. I do not feel that my judgment in this is impaired in any way. But if you feel the need to question her, she is here in the comm room."

Sparatus frowned. "She should be taken into custody and remanded to C-Sec, implicated or not. There are legal issues about -"

Shepard sighed, folding her arms. "Perhaps I was unclear, Councilor. I need her for my mission to stop Saren. Without her, I have no way to understand what the hell I'm looking for, because it's tied up with whatever killed the Protheans, and she's the only one bothering to research that." Tevos nodded. "I can understand that logic, but she is a child, Commander."

Shepard's fists tightened. "She is *not* a child, Councilor, not even by your standards. I find it darkly amusing that asari young people are mature if they're shaking their asses in a club or shooting people up in Eclipse gangs but are immature if they're conducting serious scientific research. Children do not write 5 books, two of which are the only works known on the Exodus-period ruins like the ones on Eden Prime. Children do not write 27 papers, or recover over 400 artifacts."

Tevos gave a small smile. "I wasn't aware you were so intimately familiar with her research ,Commander." Shepard snarled. "I do my homework, Councilors. Otherwise, I'm dealing with an unknown. The point is that I have an advantage with her on my team, and quite frankly, after the mess that happened on the Citadel earlier, she's safer here than there."

Sparatus looked incensed. "The value of such 'safety'", he mocked, putting the word in air-quotes, "is rather dubious if you're going into contested war-zones filled with pirates and geth. But we would still speak with her." Shepard sighed and stepped to one side, motioning Liara to step forward. She did so hesitantly, keenly aware she was speaking to the rulers of known space. Nervously, she took a breath. "Good afternoon, Councilors."

Tevos was observing her closely, as was Valern. The salarian spoke first. "Commander Shepard vouches for your .. good intent. Your mother's actions, however, are of such a staggering scale of evil that we cannot be too careful. If the records we have are correct and the evidence of what they plan is true, your mother is trying to bring back the forces that destroyed the Prothean Empire. And you are her inheritor and only child. You know nothing at all about this?"

Liara exhaled "I do not , councilors. My focus for the last 50 years has been the study of the Prothean extinction, a topic that until about 5 years ago she disdained to even speak to me about. We have not spoken cordially or in person to one another for over 15 years, and even when we did, her own plans and goals were kept to herself. She did not feel I showed the proper focus of the child of an asari matriarch."

Sparatus flicked a mandible in irritation. "Then why send geth after you?"

Liara gave a small shrug. "She must feel that I am a danger to her. Her messages .. changed , becoming increasingly cold and strange a few years ago. She seemed less like my mother and more like someone else entirely. But I was , I am afraid, already estranged from her at that point." Valern shook his head. "Years ago. How long has this monstrous plot been going on?"

Liara glanced at Shepard, unsure of how to answer, and the Commander stepped up. "That's what I'm worried about, Councilors. We have no clue what Benezia or Saren are planning beyond the outlines, but it's big. The fact that a woman would try to kill her own daughter, though, means she's gone beyond any hope of ... redemption."

Tevos shook her head, a disturbed look on her face. "We can't be sure of that. We don't know what Benezia's intentions might have been." Sparatus made a slashing, negating motion with his talons, sitting forward in his chair. "No, Tevos. We clearly don't understand Benezia at all. We never would have expected her to become a traitor, and we cannot assume that she's above killing her daughter." Sparatus gave a clearly disgusted sigh. "Commander, I think it's best if Doctor T'soni be kept under your ... supervision. I understand that your personal opinion is that she's not a threat...but we cannot afford to take any more risks."

Shepard nodded. "Thank you. I assure you I have no problems with keeping her close by." Shepard winced internally at how that must have sounded, the pitifully grateful expression on Liara's was almost as bad as the knowing smirk on that of the asari councilor. *For fucks sake, she must think I'm sleeping with her.* Shepard glared back, and lifted her chin. "The volus ship also provided us more useful clues, Councilors. We rendezvoused with the VDF *All Due Caution* and investigated the ship. I am sending video imagery and our report, but it is ... well, disturbing and gory."

The councilors brought up the report, and Shepard watched each one of their reactions. As she suspected, neither Valern or Sparatus turned green – or the alien equivalent – at the gory scenes, although Sparatus did flicker his mandibles in agitation once, and Valern paused to take a very long sip of his drink. Tevos, on the other hand, was visibly shaken and obviously revolted, shutting the images

off a few minutes into reviewing them. "Commander, that was..."

Shepard inhaled. "Ma'am, as you know I've been party to some truly brutal events, fighting against pirates and slavers. People who have absolutely no compunction against torture or worse. But this was the single most sickening scene I'd ever witnessed." She glanced over at Liara, who was only able to see flickers of the video as Sparatus viewed it, and then back to the three holograms.

Valern shook his head, rubbing his horns. "Despicable. Pointless. A tantrum of violence and hate. Saw this in STG. It .. "he paused, exhaling, and his speech slowed. "... it was disturbing. This is krogan violence, Shepard." She nodded. "I know. Nothing else fits. But it's extreme even for them."

Sparatus was reading the report manifest. "You suspect Saren is moving on this human colony, Feros? That the assaults on volus ships are his method of finding additional Prothean artifacts?" His voice was edged in reluctant admiration. "A very solid hypothesis."

Shepard nodded. "Detective Vakarian helped with the analysis of the .. scene. And his deductions were useful. The Normandy is moving in intercept of the colony now, while the VDF is moving after the smuggler the captain mentioned."

The three councilors were silent, then finally Tevos spoke. "Be careful, Commander Shepard. If there is an attack on Feros, the 4th Citadel Fleet will respond. It is one thing for us to not be able to deal with a surprise geth attack, but Feros is well within Citadel Space. Do not attempt to engage the large geth dreadnaught without backup."

Shepard smirked. "There is a limit even to my bravado, madam. I will report again when I have actual facts and evidence at hand." Sparatus nodded. "Dismissed, Commander." The holopads fell dark, and Shepard took a long breath and blew it out. "Well, that was...fun."

Liara shot her a dark glance. "You have a very skewed perspective of fun, Commander." Liara followed Shepard out of the comm room, hesitating as the commander strode to the holographic galaxy map and ordered Joker to proceed to Feros at full speed. She wished she could figure out some way to get Shepard to continue their conversation in the Comm Room, but realized that the human commander was busy with the mission. *And I am just ... in the way.*

When Shepard glanced over her shoulder a few minutes later, the asari scientist was gone.

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## Chapter 42: Chapter 36 : Feros, Arrival

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*A/N: This is a shorter chapter than I originally planned, due to work issues. I do plan to have the next chapter up soon, but it's taking longer than I like because of travel.*

*We never get to see the Normandy in a 'real' fight, except for flashy maneuvers (that make no sense) at the fight with Sovereign. I think that's a shame, since the only real demonstrations of Joker's piloting badassery we ever get to see is at Ilos and the Collector Base.*

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January 28th , 2183 10:45 PM

"Still no replies , Commander." The comm tech's voice was polite, her features showing sheepish disappointment. Shepard cursed. Since finishing up her meeting with the Council , they had been trying to raise the Feros colony, but with no avail. She'd already ordered the marines to get armored up and ready to go, operating under the assumption that Feros was under geth attack as well. It was a corporate rather than a full Alliance colony, and thus probably only had one mainline FLT comm sat. If the geth

had taken that out, the system was going to be silent as a tomb.

Shepard strode back to the CIC, taking her place at the galaxy map, now converted to ships status displays. As she watched, the transition countdown to emerging from the relay counted down, and the ship shuddered as the relay blue-shifted at them.

The Normandy's arrival to the Theseus system started calmly. Bursting free of the mass effect field of the system's relay, the frigate immediately deployed heat-dump panels and decelerated to cruising speeds. The dark blue glow of the four powerful Riggs/Royce Combine engines flared as the ship's configuration changed to stealth mode a few minutes later, as the ship slid across the system's empty outer edges.

The CIC was tense, most of the panels manned. Ops personnel squinted and tapped at haptic panels and battle coordinators swirled around the wishbone shape of the CIC listlessly. Pressley danced between ops alley and combat control, barking orders and radiating energy, updating the main target plot. "We have serious problems, Commander. Stealth transition was clean, but we're picking up incoming mass and heat signatures. I count 4, frigate or destroyer is our tentative classification." His acerbic voice was even tighter and more clipped than normal.

Shepard was at the command station, looking the plot, and nodded. One of the fire control operators called out. "New target, designate Echo-Five-Zero, in ATS tracker mike. Range, two zero light minutes, bearing , one three six tac two." The young woman calling out the new ECM contact frowned. "Emission strength high, signal strength high. Moderate confidence classification, cruiser." The plot glowed red with sharp, ugly runes – each one a triangle, wavering as signal information poured in, the fire control tracker a heavy blue circle around the nearest contact.

Joker was uttering a thin litany of curses under his breath. "Commander, I have no clear path to the planet, unless we tick down and hug that gas giant. And even if we do, they'll lock us up with missiles before we get halfway there." Shepard tapped her scan console, bringing up the data.

*Sherring : standard hydrogen-helium gas giant. Ammonia, methane, water vapor atmosphere. Multiple moons. Interdicted by the Citadel Council on Prothean Research due to possible wreckage from Prothean HE3 installations on moons, orbits. Very strong gravitational field, powerful magnetosphere disrupts sensor readings.*

"Joker , good call. Go ahead and bring us in close, but keep us out of the atmosphere. Pressley, tactical report." The balding officer nodded. "We've got at least one cruiser, and our best guess is 3 frigates and a destroyer, all geth. The frigates aren't much bigger than drop ships, but the destroyer is probably better armed and the cruiser is definitely a bit much to take on." Pressley pulled down a menu from the panel in front of him and the plot changed from electronic counter measures pings to a graphical LADAR ping map. "They're running a search pattern near the colony itself."

Shepard frowned. "The tactical manuals suggest long range combat with torpedoes." She paused. "A rapid approach at oblique angle, full spread of six, followed by missiles. Wait until they turn to evade and hit them with the main guns."

Pressley shrugged. "IF that's all that's here, yes. Except it's going to be dicey. Their equivalent of GARDIAN systems are in UV, which gives them a good edge at swatting down missiles. We simply don't have enough to overwhelm them, so we have to strike from stealth and hope to take down the cruiser. That's going to leave us open to counter-fire...and be very visible. If that large black ship is in the system ..." He sighed. "Even with the torpedoes, we'd need at least three direct hits, and chances are we'll get clipped in that exchange. We've already talked about the ships damage endurance..."

Shepard nodded. "Fuck." She held on as the ship rattled a bit from gravitational effects as Joker pulled

them into the shadow of a large, blue-brown gas giant. "Can we get past them? Using the stealth system, I mean. I know we didn't have a full chance to dump heat..." Pressley shrugged. "In theory? Yes. We have the heat endurance for that, plus 40 minutes. Maybe 100 minutes if we vent water to cool the vanes, and go to minimum heat generation. But that sun is a very hot G main sequence, and Feros's atmosphere is fouled by dust of some kind. Not only will it lessen heat dissipation but .. the atmospheric disturbances will be hard to conceal. If we can get to the colony landing areas, those should be protected by GARDIAN towers...assuming the colony is still around."

Shepard frowned. "I presume with geth ships out we're not picking up any traffic or comms?"

Pressley glanced at one of the techs at the end of the ops alley, who shook his head. "No, ma'am. We're not picking up the landing carrier signal, or any public or private wide band comms traffic."

Joker broke in. "Visual enhancement coming up, commander, we're rounding the gas giant." She tapped a control and the galaxy-map area turned to a video image of Feros in the distance. Delicate bands of tumbling shards of light seemed to twinkle in a circle around the world. "Looks like several debris collections in low orbit...the geth must have scragged whoever was here."

Shepard pinched the brow of her nose, thinking. Tapping the comm panel, she brought up the research lab. "Doctor T'soni, what do you know about Feros?" The voice that sounded was slightly strained, but calm. "I am afraid not much is known beyond the basics, Commander. Feros was a main Prothean world. The entire surface was covered by a Prothean megapolis, which was mostly destroyed during the fall of the Prothean Empire. There are still hundreds and hundreds of miles-tall skyscrapers and vast galleries, but much of the planet is covered in rubble for tens of meters down. I visited once several years ago. The main colony site was built into one of the largest, more intact skyscrapers. There was a skyway from it to a communications and travel hub owned by Exogeni, and then another skyscraper serving as their local headquarters that was off limits."

Shepard nodded, thoughtfully. "How hard would it be to hide the Normandy, then? Given all the ruins?" Liara's voice sounded again, more confident. "Not hard, Commander. As I said there is a great deal of both rubble and standing buildings. Most are somewhat scan resistant, and quite large. Assuming you could park the Normandy on one of the plaza's I believe you could hide for quite some time." "Thanks, Liara." She killed the comm. "All we really need to do is get past these guys. And they're geth, so they're expecting the logical plan of attack. Tell me, Pressley, what is the one thing we can't do?" Her voice had gotten a certain amused tone to it.

Pressley narrowed his eyes in thought, then frowned. "Take them head on, I suppose. We don't have the fire power to do that, and the chances of success are so low that it's almost impossible. I mean we -" He broke off as Shepard strode to the cockpit and pulled out the secondary weapons console. She brushed a strand of black hair out of her face, an odd smile on her features. Pulling up the communications menu, she tabbed the IMC. "All hands set battle stations. I repeat, all hands set battle stations. Weapons control, spin up all tubes and missile ports." Disconnecting, she turned to Joker, whose strained expression was mostly confusion mixed with slowly dawning horror. "Joker, I seem to recall reading something about high energy slingshot maneuvers as a battle tactic."

The pilot shot her a gaze borne of terror, and his voice was a slow whisper. "You really *are* fucking crazy, aren't you?"

She only smiled wider. "Here's the plan. We can't fight them, can't stealth past, and can't hang out in orbit. Fling the ship out of this gas giant's orbit after a slingshot spin. That allows us to ramp up to full speed without a long burn that they'll see right away." Her hand tapped the interactive system map, tapping a point outside the mass of moons lousing up the orbital path of the gas giant. "Use the moon's gravitational pulls to keep up on course. At mark 58, dump all power from engines to shields. Spray

missiles at the frigates, and dump our torps at the destroyer and cruiser. If we got a shot with guns fine otherwise ignore them."

She traced her finger along the path. "They will have to take evasive action. We don't even slow to battle speed, instead using Feros itself to aero-brake and come into suborbital hot, landing at the colony site. If it's overrun, we can shoot past for a tower or skyway somewhere, it will give us cover while we go in overground." She brought up the secondary targeting menu and began selecting auto-engagement profiles for the missiles. "Questions, Flight Lieutenant." She noticed Pressley standing there, who opened his mouth. "Ma'am, even if we can dodge incoming missiles – which is going to be hard – and even if we can go fast enough that the geth can't get a solid firing solution, no one can make those kinds of turns to bring us in for breaking."

She smirked even as Joker snapped a glare over the XO, then huffed. "I can do it, ma'am." Pressley looked like he was about to speak, but Shepard held up a hand. "XO, take the conn please. Set the nav path as I have indicated. "

She pulled down the 1 MC panel again on her holo interface. "All hands, secure for high speed maneuvers, maintain full battle stations." She paused, then spoke again, this time piping her speech only to the forward battery. "Battle chicken, if you think my Mako driving is bad, watch this."

The comm lit up. "Oh , spirits -" Shepard's grin widened. "Joker, all ahead flank."

The helmsman pulled down the manual master control panel and nodded, all levity gone, dark eyes focused. "All ahead flank, aye, ma'am. Engine room, go to 119% on the mass effect core , please and shunt all waste heat to high-speed vent. Ops, transfer all secondary maneuver surfaces to me."

The Normandy erupted, flinging itself into motion, engines screaming, shields battered by various debris. The mass effect stabilizers strained, the hull popping and groaning with the titanic stresses put on the ship. In the cargo hold, Wrex calmly held onto a wall stanchion, while the marine contingent sat head between knees in battle armor, Williams loudly praying. In engineering, blue light splayed out wildly, along with a chorus of out-of-sync beeping noises as systems overloaded or overheated and the various watch standers had to step up to stop systems crashes. Tali worked furiously at the heat management panel, desperately routing systems heat to vanes, to excess systems, while the other engineers attempted to keep up with rapidly spiking power requirements. Screaming ahead, the ship nimbly danced through the orbits of the moons, using each one's gravity to go a bit faster, and then Joker wrenched the ship straight at Feros and punched all power to engines in a single thrust. Alarms blared harshly as mass effect dampening fields strained and the entire ship lurched forward. Static charged trailed fore to aft, sending bolts of energy cascading in her wake.

"Mark 55...Mark 56..." Joker's voice was tight as he shut down the speed alarm the VI was calmly announcing. Adams's voice rang out over the comms in the cockpit. "Commander, not to be cliché, but we're about to fly the ship apart with the stress. We can't hold this speed for more than a few more seconds." Shepard tapped the comm panel. "Just a bit more, Adams." Cutting off the comm, she turned to Joker. "Fly the bitch apart." Joker nodded. "Mark .. 58 , ma'am. This is maximum possible rated speed for the frame." Hard, vibrating shudders echoed through the ship now, more alarms blaring, holo indicators all full red bars and flashing "out of specification" warnings. Faces in the ops ally were tight, grim, hands moving through their actions jerkily and tense.

The Normandy tore across the empty gulf of space like a silver arrow, the geth ships moving uncertainly around her like wolves stalking a bear. She clung to her seat as the ship lurched , jinking and dancing as Joker barely evaded the initial, long range spray of light missile fire, and then Shepard brought up the torpedo launch panel and tabbed open communications to the forward battery. "Garrus, commence rapid fire when ready."

The geth frigates formed a narrow battle line, to the port of the Normandy, blocking direct approach from the planet, while the cruiser and destroyer were off to the starboard side. Joker killed the power to engines, and instead threw it into the kinetic barrier system, maneuvering thrusters, and mass control fields. The frigates fired again, missing with their mass accelerator shots, one clipping the shields but doing no other damage. At such long range, a miss was to be expected.

Shepard brought up the torpedo guidance systems and began programming them. Torpedoes were oversized missiles with more fuel and a mirror-polished surface, designed to deliver heavy bombardment to armored planetary surfaces or capital ships. The mirror-polish surface meant GARDIAN lasers had a hard time burning through the armored hulls to take the torpedoes, out, which each contained 5 flecks of antimatter suspended magnetically, surrounded by superconductive gel. The detonation of each would be devastating, capable of breaking a cruiser in half with a hit. They rarely hit their targets, instead forcing evasive maneuver or focused fire, tying up enemy defenses so fighters or missiles could strike instead.

At least, that's the way the book had it. Shepard smirked as the Normandy sprayed out missiles, 4 packs of 5 each, even as the geth frigates opened up with light missiles and their mass accelerator cannons once more.

The kinetic shots missed – the ship was going too fast, and Joker was jinking the Normandy around like mad with the maneuvering thrusters. Missiles roared past each other, faint silver contrails leading off into darkness, and with a lightning fast move and a wrenching split second trigger of the port engines, Joker dodged two missiles that came within 500 meters of the ship.

"Missile lock, bearing 344 tac 2, spread of four!" The ops analysts voice was tight, but Joker's hands were already dancing over the haptic control interface, and the Normandy bucked and literally lifted out of the way as he forced the ship into a mass-core assisted powerskid. GARDIAN lasers flared whitely as 4 more missile whizzed past impotently, and Shepard grinned as Pressley's jaw dropped.

Joker was utterly focused. "Can't make the turns, huh?" The ship tumbled for a moment, along its longest axis, and then engines fired for a few seconds, countering the spin and aiming the nose right back at the planet. Shepard finished her programming. "Ops, range to the cruiser."

"88 light seconds, ma'am! Closing fast, bearing 145 tac nine."

Shepard loaded the programs, and nodded. "Gunnery Officer, fire tubes one and two." Garrus' flanged voice sounded. "Acknowledged. Firing one and two, along with a secondary spread timed to hit after. Solutions loaded...locked...firing." The ship shuddered as the heavy torpedoes were hurled out by the kinetic rams, the silvery canisters merely hurtling through space for their first few seconds as the ship made a hard port turn.

The Normandy's first and second flight of missiles had sprayed into the geth battle line, forcing the three frigates into a frenzy of launching chaff, firing defensive lasers, and evading. The Normandy tucked itself between two and was past them moments later, pausing only to spray 6 more missiles along their back path. The two torpedoes thundered out and immediately reversed course, hurtling down the way the ship had come, right at the cruiser.

Built for heavy broadside firepower against forward-focused quarian ships, the geth ships were state of the art, with cutting edge variable strength shielding, fluidic-mount armor, UV defense lasers, micro-mass effect assisted maneuvering thrusters, and the like. But much like the Normandy, the drawback to these systems was the ship was not able to absorb heavy damage.

Geth AI in battle was fixed, and the Normandy's insane charge fit no known battle pattern. Normally, the result would have been the frigates pressuring the Alliance ship into either closing with them and

being shot to pieces or falling back and leaving itself open to ranging fire from the cruiser and destroyer. Doing neither, the frigates were now defending themselves, but the cruiser was still pursuing as if it had flanking defenders, barreling in, firing wildly and pushing it's engines to the max.

Given it's speed and the speed of the Normandy, and the fact that the torpedoes did not begin emitting LADAR pulses until almost 20 seconds after launch, the cruiser had approximately 4.5 seconds of window to react. By that time, though, the third spray of missiles had struck two of the geth frigates with devastating results, blowing holes down the length of one and sending it tumbling away in a spray of wreckage. The other took 5 missiles to the aft, detonating the mass effect core in a splash of blue energy and a hard blast of radiation. The sudden loss of geth AI mass slowed the collective's reaction time just enough that the torpedo was already within lethal distance before the geth reacted.

They opened up immediately with full GARDIAN fire, chaff and projected kinetic barriers designed to channel the blast away, but Shepard never intended for a direct hit. The two torpedoes closed to within 3 miles of the target and detonated for effect, blanketing the geth vessel with gamma rays and hard EMP. The cruiser's reaction was again programmed...it cut power. It's sensors were fried until replacement antenna could be put up and much of it's forward armor was gone. It needed to turn away and withdraw.

As a result, the 4 missiles that arched through space a few seconds later in the wake of the torpedoes had nothing stopping them, and the explosion tore through the cruiser furiously, the forward section vaporizing into white-hot gasses and burning shrapnel that tumbled backwards through the rest of the insect-like ship.

Shepard smirked as the Ops Alley erupted into cheers and catcalls, even as Feros loomed in front of them. Pressley's voice was flat but clear. "2 frigates non-responsive, the third is repositioning. The destroyer is out of range, it got out 16 missiles that are going to break in atmosphere before they get to us. The cruiser...is still online, but forward weapons and kinetic barriers are gone, and she's tumbling out of control except for thrusters. We're 26 minutes out from Feros."

Shepard nodded. "The destroyer and frigate are still a danger, but at least the destroyer's out of position for any kind of shots, and the last frigate has already blown most of it's missiles. Joker, bring us down, see if you can't find us a spot near the ExoGeni comms station. I need answers, but I also need backup." She swung out of the seat and tapped the 1 MC comm system. "Marines, prepare for cold drop. Doctor T'soni, Detective Vakarian, report to the hangar bay for deployment."

She turned to Pressley. "Once we're down, make sure the ship is under cover. We may need you to bug out and get help if this is a full on attack. I'll deploy the Marine contingent in the Mako along with the doctor and the turian. If that black dreadnaught shows up, go to full stealth and punch out of the system when you can." She ran her fingers through her hair, and gave a thin smile, as Pressley frowned.

"What..about you, Commander?"

She stalked away, headed towards the stairs. "You have your orders, Lieutenant Commander. That is all."

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## Chapter 43: Chapter 37 : Nazara

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**Update: 7-28-2012** : *working on the next chapter, hoping to get it out before the 31st. Thanks to all the people still giving feedback.*

**A/N:** *Sooo, clearly there has been a disruption in the schedule. It's work related, a biiiig promotion but man, it has buried me in work. I really do appreciate all of the favorites, story alerts, reviews and*

*notes, particularly by owelpost :D I do not anticipate stopping this little silly story of mine anytime soon, and apparently some really good writers think I'm worth watching.*

*That being said, I've revised sharply my "ending" to the series (my version of 3) and because I believe in proper foreshadowing, that means revising entire timelines and outlines. It doesn't affect much now, but I've had to stop and change the direction of some stuff down the line. That being said...before I get to my version of Feros , it's time to hear from the one guy we never hear much from in the story proper...*

*Nazara.*

*This chapter may be hard to follow. I would recommend looking up information on technological singularities, and then imagine what happens when such a culture realizes the singularity is only a transformation of understanding, much as gaining sentience is. Imagine a culture where eventually, even the laws of the universe can be bent or twisted. Imagine where the only hard rule is you can't go back in time, and even the natural of reality becomes a commodity.*

*Imagine a race capable of snuffing out a thousand galaxies or turning bubble universes into engines.*

*Then imagine what could **terrify** them.*

*There will be a more complete explanation of what most of these terms mean later in the story, but if you read closely you can figure out most of what's going on.*

January 28th , 2183 11:00 PM

Space is, by definition, mostly empty to the casual glance, but it is full of background radiation, ancient x-ray emissions, cosmic gas clouds, and flows of both dark energy and dark matter. They swirl in stately dances around star systems, or fly unhindered through nebulae and past black holes.

Until they are brushed aside by ancient , cold metal, in the sprawling shape of a cuttlefish, a spider, a grasping dark hand from beyond time and reason to scatter the works of small, frail carbon based life like a child kicking over an ant-mound.

Nazara did not merely exist. Nazara **was**, in the sense of a state of being instead of a verb, in a way that mere life , pitiful organics or sterile synthetic perversions, could not be. It sailed through the empty star system , focused solely on the daunting task ahead of it.

Communication with other Ascended.

Within Nazara's great body, ancient machines and processes began, and bizarre engines tapped into unseen currents of dark energy, harvested by a thousand mass relays, pouring in dark filaments the savages he oversaw could not even detect, much less comprehend. These rivers of dark power were bent with dimensional lenses, 7th and 9th dimensional constructions that focused the dark energy into a torrent, and Nazara drank. Nazara subsumed.

For mere seconds, his mind soared beyond the constraints of the Severity, and into that strata where gods and mortals alike were as amoeba compared to him. He used a dimensional probe to sever the links of a series of atoms, twisting the physical laws of the universe like putty to cause a sympathetic reaction in a galaxy far from this one.

Synchronicity existed. Nazara reluctantly let go of the Godpower, sinking again into the Severity's strict controls, as his ad-hoc quantum entanglement communications signal reached the Citadel in the Sculptor Galaxy. "I seek. Let the Retreat assemble."

Nazara's black , nightmare form was still in the physical world. Inside, the effluent remains of an ancient species shuddered gently in perfect stasis, and biosynthetic neural nets stacked upon chaotic

multi-dimensional breakers fired as his mind worked.

The voice that sounded in his form was guttural, calm, analyzing. "Nazara.. the Retreat answers. Your communication is over 2200 stancycles out of specification. Verify."

The Reaper merely returned with a pulse of confirmation. "The Fifth Law is that no physical law may be put into abeyance without understanding that infinite energy is possible with finite mass through sixth and seventh order transformations. Sufficiency, Harbinger?"

There was a flare of a sensation akin to light, and the coalesced forms of several additional reapers erupted into space, wavering, indistinct representations. Four beings faced Nazara across gulfs of space light could not travel in ten million years. Harbinger glowed a deep, gentle gold, flaring to yellow in four spots across his front. "Nazara, I remain Uhl, Harbinger of Destiny."

The form next to him was alike all reapers, yet different, with more arms and three vertical, lenticular slashes across the front glowing blue, like the rest of him. "Nazara, I remain Tanthor, Sentinel Against the Darkness".

On Harbinger's far side a smaller reaper floated, green lit and unadorned. "Nazara, I remain Cascai, Auditor of Severity."

The final reaper was massive, dwarfing both Harbinger and Nazara. "Nazara, I remain Niqasa, Pathfinder of the Flow."

Nazara knew his own representation to each of them must appear as a massive, sullen and threatening red. "Retreat Masters, I remain Nazara, Sovereign of the Observation."

Harbinger spoke first. "You have been out of communication."

Nazara replied, his mental voice cold, as usual. "There has been a complication in the Prime Citadel Galaxy that required an escalation. I have not made contact prior to this point as I was unable to formulate a complete solution prior to this time."

The reaper paused. "The last ascension cycle was badly flawed. The local curator race was annihilated by the ascendant organic empire. As you know, casualties among second-stage platforms was high, and severe damage was done to the first-stage Seeker of the Observation during the assault, leading to his eventual destruction. No races were ascended. The choice was made to utilize the ascendant primary race as the curators, installing them in the Redoubt at the galactic core. We assumed all was completed."

Harbinger's image pulsed. "This was incorrect?"

Nazara pulsed in return, an affirmation. "Yes. The local race, the Protheans, were researching the mass relays. They appear to have understood the gross properties enough to master prototype models. They installed a functional micro-relay aboard the Citadel, and a second one at a secret research base."

Niqasa pulsed. "Creation of relays implies they understood at least first order transformation. No breach of the Severity was detected..."

Nazara spread it's arms in a gesture of placation. "It does not appear that they could scale such models up to overcome the energy limits. Indeed, the amount of mass that can be transferred with each mass translation is rather low. I suspect it was intended as an experiment, but fragmentary records suggest it was implemented as a safeguard against capture of the Citadel by the class-4 Perversion known as the Zha'til. There is no evidence they knew of our arrival, or were prepared for us to take the Citadel."

Nazara paused before continuing. "It appears – it has taken some time to discover all of the facts – that they did not discount archaeoforensic evidence as strongly as we had thought. They prepared a cadre of

scientists and several cadres of soldiers in stasis to rebuild their empire, correctly assuming we would retreat after Ascent was completed. One of the caches of Protheans by luck appears to have been established on the world with the second micro-relay. They sent out some form of communication using their sub-space beacon network, a message to Protheans to rally to this base."

Harbinger pulsed again, as did Niqasa. "And the result of this?"

Nazara gave the equivalent of a mental sigh. "Roughly half a mega-stancycle after completion of the harvest, they boarded the Citadel using this micro-relay. Their goal was probably to recreate their empire, but they did not have sufficient genetic material or something else went wrong. Unfortunately, they were able to do more severe damage."

The four other reapers pulsed. Nazara's voice grew grimmer. "The remote trigger sequence we have installed in the Prime Citadel caretaker species is no longer working. The relay beacon will not trigger. There appears to be a software and a hardware block. Even if I could solely reach the Citadel Spire, I would require assistance in removing said block before I could activate the beacon."

Harbinger frowned. "What about the beacon at the Redoubt? Or altering dark switches?"

Tanthor , Sentinel, spoke. "Impossible. The Redoubt relay is hard-slaved to the shielded relay in System Primary-Focus-33. And the beacon at the Redoubt is useless to us. We can only safely transport in one Ascended at a time. None of the other relays can be altered in such a drastic fashion to prevent organics or synthetics from using them as displacement weapons."

Cascai, Auditor, glowed a more fierce shade of green. "Alterations to the galactic core to allow more than a handful of Ascended to arrive safely would require a tier six breach of the Severity, alteration of mass physical laws. There is a chance the Darkness might react to such a blatant act."

All of the other reapers pulsed at that. Harbinger spoke first. "Then you are seeking ways to reactivate the beacon yourself?"

Nazara pulsed. "It has taken time. My first thought when I awoke for surveillance and auditing was that there was something wrong with my transmission coils. Upon making contact with the curator species, I realized that was not the case. The curator species has two sub-class 4 ships, but my calculations showed that a direct Citadel assault would not be fast enough to stop the arms from closing. I simply do not have the magnitude of fire power to breach the defensive shell. Thus, I would need assistance to get inside the Citadel and have locals shut down defenses, deactivate any overrides, and keep the arms open."

Naraza pulsed , almost tiredly. "I required a significant force to deal with organic defenders. My first attempts were using the Influence on organic servitors to simply assault the Citadel by force, but those attempts did not end well. The insectile race I chose was destroyed. I then utilized the services of the curator race to investigate technological process and find out what had actually transpired. That took almost a full mega-stancycle."

Harbinger wavered , image flickering in consternation. "There is nothing they research that violates the Severity, even after going over the Measure by this many stancycles?"

Nazara gave a pulse of contempt. "This batch of organics is singularly incompetent and mentally weak. None of the civilizations have a complexity capable of understanding even dimensional energy manipulation, much less inter-dimensional third or fourth order manipulation. No, we have plenty of time."

Niqasa, Pathfinder, pulsed. "Then what is your plan?"

Nazara burst-pulsed background information. "In short, I have used the Influence to gain control over a

handful of influential organics. The key of these is an organic called Saren, who I revealed the Flow and Severity to. He was appropriately understanding of why the Ascent must occur. In return for aiding me, his wish is to have his race and another race selected as the curator and caretaker races, respectively. He is misinformed as to the nature of what those positions entail, or how the Influence makes them incapable of threatening the Severity."

Harbinger pulsed. "And? One organic, or a handful, is not enough."

Nazara twitched his anterior manipulators in irritation. "This is a known fact. The organics have allowed a distributed neural class-3 Perversion to reach production status. The Perversion calls itself geth, and I have convinced a large number of them to assist me in the ejection of organics from the Citadel, while Saren and the other organics search for the Prothan micro-relay."

Nazara pulsed confidently. "The plan is simple. Once we locate the micro-relay, Saren and the geth will pour geth invasion troops directly into the Citadel. I have assisted the geth in specialized designs focused on capturing the Citadel. Meanwhile, I will accompany the geth fleet directly to the Citadel, destroying organic resistance. Once Saren has undone the hardware and software locks, I will be able to override any limits and activate the beacon."

Harbinger pulsed. "Does this Saren know about Catalyst?"

Nazara flared. "No, of course not. All indications show Catalyst is still offline, and the organics have not discovered his presence. I will ensure Catalyst remains offline. As it currently stands, the organic Saren is still attempting to locate the micro-relay."

Harbinger pulsed again, and then flickered. "We have already had a class 2 Perversion arise in Galaxy Seven, and a class 1 violation of the Severity by organics in Galaxy 8. We cannot afford long transit times in dark space."

Nazara gave a pulse of understanding. "The Severity is the highest priority. Any manipulation of Godpower is dangerous, the Masking cannot cover up blatant alterations. The Severity's limits on technological development remain clear. I will utilize what already exists to finish the task at hand."

Harbinger's image wavered again. "The Destiny proceeds. We have expanded our control to 31 galaxies and over 9,000 Ascended and well over 25,000 Lesser Platforms. The Shield and the Mask are at 85% of the rated strength the Catalyst felt would be necessary to face the Darkness. A mere 500 cycles more is all that is required."

Casqui pulsed greenly. "No Severity breaches beyond class 2 have been reported since you entered the Long Silence. 4 new Seekers have been added to the Observation. Once you return the Prime Citadel to functioning, you can transition back to the Dark and take control of the Observation once more."

Tanthor also pulsed. "We have seen one galactic group cease utterly approximately 500 stancycles ago. We detected a series of class 2 and 3 Perversions fighting and they reached a class 5 violation of the Severity before the Darkness detected them. Some 48 galaxies were destroyed."

Nazara drew his appendages tight against his form. "We are close, but so is danger. We must trust in the Destiny that we now control."

Harbinger spread his own arms. "I see no reason to waste resources on further communication. We will assume any further use of Godpower as .. a breach of the Severity. Proceed with your plan and group 993 will commence the Ascention once summoned by the beacon." Harbinger paused, wavering. "If the organics discover and attempt to activate Catalyst..."

Casqui made a flicker with one arm. "A single class 3 violation of the Severity is authorized. Destroy the Citadel if need be, we cannot afford to be puppeted by Catalyst any further."

Nazara merely pulsed. Without any further words, the quantum entanglement field died, and the colors in space faded to sparks and wisps of ionized solar wind. Nazara turned away from the system, drawing upon the mass effect field he generated to pick up speed and head towards the resting location of his puppet.

It was time to sow discord among ants.

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## **Chapter 44: Chapter 38 : Feros , Landing**

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*A/N: K, so I've been out of the game for a bit. Got a double promotion and I've been absolutely buried in work. I'm also single again (due to being overworked) which is also .. distracting. Altogether, I haven't had a great time the past couple of months, and I apologize for the delay with the story.*

*Bad News: I have no clue what my update schedule for this will be*

*Good News: I am not stopping this train wreck anytime soon!*

*This chapter introduces some of the early big AU elements. It's not a long chapter (sorry) but I have some of the rest drafted up as well. I'm not sure I'll put them out during the week or what, but I will definitely get one more out this weekend. Work is wonky right now, so we'll have to wait and see.*

*Above all else, thank you to everyone who sent messages, reviews , and favorites my way! Shepard doesn't get to be awesome in this chapter...but it's coming, have no doubt.*

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January 28th , 2183 11:15 PM

"Coming in hot, Commander." Joker's fingers flew over the flight controls of the Normandy, as the ship began arcing through the upper atmosphere of the planet below. Shepard merely nodded, her eyes narrowed as they took in the sight below her. Behind her, the ops team worked at tracking the remaining geth ships, strewing AI-programmed torpedoes to act as remote mines and slow any pursuit.

Feros was a world wrecked several times over. It had once been, perhaps, the most densely populated planet in the galaxy, with huge skyscrapers towering miles into pale blue skies. Every continent was covered, layered over and over with glistening white stone towers and soaring sky-ways. Whatever had shattered the planet had been thorough, but there was simply too much material to destroy entirely.

Instead, they left a planet of rubble behind, rubble that many alien species had picked through. The sky was choked with particulate matter , and storms washed over it's surface, swirling packs of blackened clouds and winds up to 130 miles per hour. The ground was covered in rubble, in some places to depths of over 2 miles, in others washes of rubble were only a hundred meters deep. This field of ruins was pierced by huge , broken towers and shattered buildings, some half toppled, others mostly intact.

As the Normandy sliced through the atmosphere, the ship began to shake violently, as Joker bled off speed. The heat produced by this flared the outline of the ship into the sky, leaving a blazing orange trail of ionized air behind them, marking their position for all to see. Shepard scanned the ground below, waiting for some reaction, but nothing occurred.

"Looks like any ground forces don't have GTS weapons. What landing options do we have?"

Joker tapped the infomatic screen to his left. "Picking up a weak beacon here, halfway between the colony itself and ... Exogeni local HQ, according to the signal. It's a very high tower they've marked as the only "safe" place to land...but..."

Joker frowned, and the ship's optics zoomed in. "Ma'am, geth are down there, in a firefight with someone. A lot of them." He pulled up the image to the main viewer, displaying a long, delicate looking bridge of white and silver, across which well over 300 geth were slowly advancing. At the end of it was a squat grey-steel building anchored onto one of the ruined towers, from which defensive fire was pouring out from a scattering of barricades and defense towers at its base.

Shepard frowned. "Joker...how close can you get us to that bridge?"

The pilot shrugged. "20 meters. You can't .. seriously be thinking of dropping into that mess, ma'am."

Shepard turned to give him a look, and a cold smile slowly emerged. "No, Flight Lieutenant. I have no intention of doing that." She stood, and picked up the 1MC again. "All hands, prepare for high-speed atmospheric transit. Marine detail, prepare for hot armor drop in 300 seconds." She clicked off, and half turned, blue eyes flashing darkly. "Here's what I want you to do, Joker..."

Joker swallowed as he listened, but his hands were already moving, sending the Normandy slanting down towards the clouds below.

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Kevin Foster was not a happy man right now. The burly human corporate soldier crouched behind a steel barrier, the light sniper rifle in his hands cooling off. He'd fired off so many shots, his ammo block was getting depleted. All around him, similar barricades were manned by a handful of Exogeni Special Response units, supplanted here and there with small, automated turrets and a pair of guys in heavy support armor with coaxial mass accelerator miniguns.

Kevin peeked around the barrier, rough North African features set off by surprisingly gentle blue eyes, his dark skin and hair standing out from his white armor. Geth were still coming, their curved, nearly organic forms marching in perfectly straight lines down the skyway, firing as they came. The two heavy defense towers were almost destroyed, and the one battle suit they had left was being repaired inside the outpost. That left less than 20 mercenaries to hold off over 200 geth.

"Barrier to command, come in command." His voice was tight and cold, his sniper rifle moving from left to right, barking occasionally as he sighted down on a glowing geth orb in frames of white durasteel. "Barrier to command. We have additional incoming."

His earpiece crackled, a woman's voice, clipped and precise, sounding almost tiredly. "Barrier, this is command. We still have no response on any channel, ETA until the suit is up is an hour. How many incoming do we have?"

Kevin shook his head wearily, as the first ranging fire from the incoming geth horde splattered plasma darts on the barricades in front of him. "Too many, command. Hundreds. If we don't get support, we are finished."

As he finished his sentence, there was a low, heavy boom in the distance, then another. He turned to the west, and his eyes widened as he took in the rapidly approaching shape. It was a frigate, cold black and gleaming silver, surrounded by a nimbus of superheated atmosphere as it tore through the air at some stupidly high level of Mach speed.

Kevin's jaw dropped as the ship slid into an atmospheric power slide, sending cascading sonic booms erupting through the atmosphere. The ship skipped over the bridge, shedding speed as it did so, before twisting a high arc, nose climbing back towards the sky.

The effect of having a ship pass less than 20 feet overhead was catastrophic for the geth on the bridge. Hundreds of them were swept away, falling untold thousands of feet to the ground far below, chittering helplessly. More were blasted by the sonic booms to the ground, becoming hopelessly tangled in a knot

in the middle of the bridge.

GARDIAN lasers from the ship sliced out even as it continued its high climb, surgically tracing over the bridge without cutting it in half, set on low power. The beams of white hot energy weren't strong enough to destroy the works of the Protheans, but being hit with a 500 megawatt laser isn't healthy for anything not built of super-strong polymer. Geth vaporized and melted, or were flash burned and staggered about in blinded mechanical agony before tumbling off the bridge, a rain of fiery thrashing figures that illuminated the broken terrain far below.

The ship flipped in mid air in its loop, having killed most of its forward speed, and now the loading ramp dropped away and a single heavy Mako battle tank sailed into the midst of the largest remaining clump of geth, firing both its guns and its mass effect jets as it hurtled toward the bridge. It hit so fast there wasn't any time to react, moving forward even as it did so, main guns and coax machine gun flaring even as it smashed into a group of geth and sent them flying. A single Colossus that had survived the ship's overflight struggled to its unwieldy legs, gleaming white surface shimmering faintly in the sun as it tried to fire on the tank, but a single blast of the main gun sent it flailing over the edge of the skyway.

The tank surged forward, towards the barricade line, firing behind it as it went. After traversing most the distance, it slewed to a horizontal stop, and marines poured out in full body armor, firing as they decanted. 4 of the marines had heavy rocket launchers and began to lay down a line of rockets, and 2 more were firing heavy grenade launchers at the remaining geth.

A large, muscular black man with a Revenant climbed onto the tank and began screaming orders, while a biotic with lieutenant's bars flung a pair of shockwaves that sent dozens more of the tightly-packed remaining geth to their doom. A single female figure jumped from the back of the tank, and Kevin felt his fear finally vanish at the sight of her outfit. Black and silver armor, black shoulder cape, all emblazoned with a silver, winged shield

A Spectre. One hand held yet another Revenant almost casually, as she walked forwards. Flanking her were several other figures. A quarian, in light purple armor, who joined the marines firing on the geth, yelling something indistinct as she scored a direct hit on one with a shotgun, sending the machine crashing to the ground. A huge krogan in blood red armor, firing away with abandon, hurling his own biotics. A large turian with a simply ridiculous sniper rifle, who began snapping off head shots and took out 4 geth in the span of a couple of seconds.

The female Spectre walked up to the barricades, looking around. Kevin stood up, shouldering his sniper rifle. "Captain Foster, Exogeni Special Response. I am very glad to see you, ma'am." He wondered what asari spectre would be traveling on a human ship, with such an eclectic group of aliens. It wasn't until the woman took off her helmet that it clicked.

"Commander Shepard, Special Tactics and Recon. I need to talk to whoever is in charge of this while we clean up – " she paused, as the ship above unleashed a salvo of missiles somewhere and a large segment of the skyway erupted into flames – "your little geth problem. One moment." She tapped her ear. "Joker, I told you to take out that damned pack of geth, not blow the skyway."

"Commander, I just hit that skyway with about 5000 pounds of high explosive and it isn't even *scorched*. Liara says the stuff will shrug off nukes. Makes you wonder who blew this place up, huh?" The woman rolled her eyes, and Kevin shrugged. "I can get you my commander, ma'am. She's -"

A cold voice sounded behind him. "I'm right here, Captain. That won't be necessary." Kevin glanced back to Shepard, to see she had gone as pale as a sheet. Then she exhaled. "Hello, Bea."

Exogeni Special Response Commander Beatrice Shields just nodded coolly. Her raven-black hair was

cut shorter, but the cold grey eyes were the same as always. A pale scar traced it's way down one cheek, and her right arm was cybernetic. "Hey, She-bitch. Long time no see." Her voice was almost totally devoid of any emotions, but it trembled nonetheless.

Kevin felt a chill run up his spine as the two women just gave each other flat, dead stares. His commander was as stiff as a board, and there was a blood vessel throbbing on her temple. That was something he'd only seen once before, when she first found out the geth were invading.

Shepard glanced at Kevin, a look so icy he actually took a full step back and brought his rifle up slightly. That only brought the faintest hint of a smile to her lips, and he dropped it again. "We should talk, Bea. I've got a lot to explain." Bea shook her head, and glanced out at the bridge beyond, where the last geth had been blown to pieces. The quarian girl was stalking over the battlefield, putting slugs in the few geth still showing any movement, her movements vicious and almost cruel. "... Yeah, we should." Shields turned to Kevin. "Get the area policed up and liason with Commander Shepard's BDO to get a defense reset."

Shepard made a vague motion behind her. "That would be Lieutenant Alenko." She motioned. "Let's go, Bea."

"Shepard!"

Shepard half turned, frowning, as an asari in white and green armor ran up, and then her frown deepened. "Doctor T'soni,"

The asari woman was looking at Bea with something like horror or dismay. "... Commander. I.. I think you should not meet with her alone." Shepard raised an eyebrow, while Beatrice narrowed her eyes. "Excuse me, what the fuck does that mean, asari?"

Liara turned towards the human woman, and Beatrice found herself staring into pools of rage. The blue-skinned woman was beginning to emit a faint sheen of glowing azure, the sign of a biotic field. Shepard reached out and wrapped her wrist around the asari's. "Liara. I'll be fine."

Liara held Shepard's gaze a long moment, then the steel went out of her. Her shoulders slumped, and she bit her lip. "I.. I am sorry, Shepard. It is just that -"

Shepard shook her head. "I have enough shit to explain without going over THAT. Just...send up Tali, please. I may have geth questions." Shepard let go and stepped away, before stopping again. "Go, Liara".

The slender asari turned away, and Shepard exhaled. Beatrice looked at her curiously. Shepard shrugged. "Try not to antagonize her. She crushed a Colossus with her biotics alone. Actually swatted it aside as if it weren't even there."

Beatrice shook her head herself, and waved towards the bunker at the base of the ruined tower ahead. "Still collecting broken psychopaths, I see. Nice to know your hobbies don't change much. C'mon, we need to talk."

---

Shepard took in the interior of the Exogeni bunker as Joker maneuvered the Normandy into the soft-dock cradle. It was cold whites and blues, with hard steel tiles for a floor and, ominously, some sort of laser-based sterilization system in the ceiling. Entering the bunker required a full hard suit and a decontamination routine involving sprayed bleach and hard UV, followed by forced vacuum exposure. The armor took the pounding fine, and the Spectre cloak was unaffected by the bleach at all, the liquid sluicing harmlessly off it's surface.

Entering the bunker proper, Shepard saw it was a mix of space traffic control and armed response camp. The building was perhaps 50 feet wide and 40 long, with an upper half-floor reachable by stairs and covered in space-control consoles. The ground floor had holding cells built into one wall, and armory racks along another. It was also currently filled with about 30 or so troopers in heavy commercial armor with all manner of guns.

Shepard arched an eyebrow. "So, what's the situation, Bea?"

Bea leaned against a table, pulling off the helmet she had only put on to get through the decon, grey eyes cold, as Tali walked in. "I like the decon procedure, it reminds me of home...but why is it here?" Her voice was a bit fast and breathy, and Shepard noted with amusement that she was bouncing on the tips of her toes again.

"Enjoy splattering geth, Tali?" Shepard couldn't help but smirk as she took off her helmet.

Tali shrugged, and folded her arms, bringing her legs together slightly. "I hate geth, like any good quarian. But ... that was a lot of geth for a bunker with only a few dozen fighters."

Shepard jerked a thumb at Beatrice. "Bitch takes a lot of killing. They must have tangled with her before, I'm guessing." Beatrice snorted, and Shepard shrugged, pushing her hair back. "Now, talk. You already know who and more importantly, what I am. I have reason to believe the criminal I'm tracking, Saren Arterius, is here, after a Prothean artifact of some kind. He hit a transport ship that had been supplying your dig site with decon gear, rations, and filtration systems."

Beatrice winced. "Captain Niham is dead?"

Shepard nodded. "It was .. disturbing. Even to me. His crew was literally torn to pieces by blood-crazed krogan butchers, and geth were involved. It looks like whoever sold him demolition charges sold him out to Saren, and they tracked the location of the digsite or whatever you people are working on from there. Now, what happened? What is going on?"

Beatrice sighed, and waved over another figure. The man who responded was slender, arrogant looking, and dressed well, in a synth-weave fiber suit. His vaguely asiatic features were set in a cold mask, and his eyes were narrowed in a sort of constant angry squint. "Coordinator Ethan Jeong, senior Exogeni staff. Commander Shepard, SPECTRE."

Jeong glanced at Beatrice sideways for an instance before squaring up to face Shepard. "I'm not sure I understand why you're here, Commander. Exogeni Special Response is already sending two cruisers to respond to this ... incident. We're conducting sensitive trials here, with the full approval of the Systems Alliance."

Shepard gave an easy, cruel smile. "Nice to meet you too. First thing, your cruisers are slag in orbit. Geth ate them alive. Second, your corporation just had it's goddamned teeth kicked in, because someone assaulted your HQ according to the net reports we've gotten. They ain't sending shit else. Finally, and most importantly, I'm a Spectre. I can shoot you, Bea, every motherfucker on this planet, and the Council will just frown. The Systems Alliance needs me too much to do dick. I recommend you secure your goddamned mouth, because you clearly do not know who you are fucking with."

Jeong just raised an eyebrow. He glanced coolly at Bea, who shrugged. "How will she handle it?"

Bea gave him a deadpan look. "Telling her to get lost? She'll freak and probably put a bullet in your head.. She's even a bigger goddamned psychopath than I am, Ethan."

Jeong sighed, and tapped his wrist nervously. "Very well, but I'll only brief you, Commander." He gave a long look at the quarian, who was occupied in examining the battlesuit Exogeni techs were trying to repair.

"She's my geth expert."

Jeong grinned mirthlessly. "Trust me, this won't involve the geth much, Commander." Shepard glanced at Bea, but the grey eyes were flat and said nothing, so Shepard shrugged. "Lead on, then. Tali, stay here, I'll be back in a sec."

"...kay. This is amazing." Tali absentmindedly responded, hunkering down to start repairing something, and Shepard shook her head. Jeong led them down a side passage and then a staircase headed down, into the bowels of the tower. This level had been refurbished, all light carpeting, softly glowing overhead panels, and faint crème paint, only broken by steel portals every few dozen feet. Jeong passed two and entered the third, followed by the two women.

The room was a standard conference room, and the door snicked shut behind Shepard with a muted bang. Jeong crossed the room and sat down, almost wearily. "I've been running off stims for 3 days...guess I'm probably close to a crash by now." His eyes found Shepard's, tired and yet still hard, and he gave a grim little smile.

"Feros was, ostensibly, a project at Prothean reclamation. The original purported goal was to establish a small colony, and work at finding a method to recycle and reuse Prothean building material. Also, we'd figured we'd find a few Prothean nick-nacks, maybe a dig site worth selling to another corp, that sort of thing. Exogeni has always profited from what others failed to properly utilize...and that was why we originally set up shop here. Those priorities .. changed...which is why Bea and her army of our best mercenaries is here, and .. why I suspect the geth are, as well. "

Jeong gestured to a chair, and Shepard sat. Bea leaned against the wall, her beautiful face set in hard, almost angry lines, and Jeong continued. "2 weeks after the scout party landed, all transmission stopped. We sent in a second, which vanished in 3 days, and then a 45 man Special Response unit, in full body armor. Six came back alive."

Shepard narrowed her eyes. "What happened?"

Jeong exhaled. "What I am about to tell you is a Systems Alliance state secret. We've kept it completely off the books in every way, because what we are doing here is .. not illegal, but unethical to some. Please keep in mind this isn't my project, I just run the security along with Ms. Shields."

Bea snorted. "Translation : we were only following orders. That shit didn't work for the SS, the Sao Paulo Guard, or Cerberus, and ain't gonna work for us, Ethan."

Jeong didn't reply to that, folding his hands together. "Our search parties found a living life form in the ruins. Massive in size – it's distributed throughout the entire planet, in fact. It calls itself the Thorian, as far as we can tell, and it is clearly very sentient. It's old enough to remember a time BEFORE the Protheans. And it absorbed, through a method we are still studying, many of the dead of this planet."

Shepard narrowed her eyes. "Did it have anything to say about the Prothean extinction?"

Jeong shook his head. "We queried it about that, but ... it would never respond. It wasn't until we got reports from Eden Prime that we got any kind of response. It..."

Shepard smiled. "It said the big black ship was a Reaper?"

Jeong's eyes widened in shock, and Bea frowned. "H..how did you know that?"

Shepard exhaled. "Nice to know I'm not crazy. There was a Prothean Beacon on Eden Prime. That's why it was attacked. It burned a vision of those ships blowing the shit out of a planet. It .. the vision called them the Reapers."

Jeong nodded. "Yes, the Thorian called them that. It's been helping us decipher Prothean technology

from the Mars Cache. It took the Asari over a thousand years to unravel the one Beacon we know of, but with the Thorian's help it will only take us another decade or two. It's opened up completely new fields of biomedical nanotech, of weapons application, of – "

Bea sighed and interjected. "We're getting away from the part where giant death machines try to kill us, Jeong."

Jeong gave her a look of irritation, then brushed his cuffs and straightened in his chair, pulling out a cigarette. "Yes, well." He lit it, the electric flame of his lighter making the tip flare white hot before he took a puff, sending lazy ribbons of grey smoke spiraling up. "As I said, we were researching the Throian. We had a colony near the Thorian's dig site. We were making progress. Then the geth attack. They have the dig site – and the Thorian – surrounded, and they took over the tower that serves as our HQ hear, with all the heavy-duty transmission gear. We managed to get off a beacon for aid from this, but..."

Shepard placed her fingertips together. "So Saren is after this .. Thorian creature. He must want to ask it questions."

Jeong shrugged. "It won't cooperate, not willingly. Unless it gets what it wants, it's not very tractable. And quite frankly, we haven't seen any sign of Saren or giant black ships...just hordes of geth. They swarmed the colony first, but ... they have been pushed out. So they have us cut off here, and they have the tower. It's only a matter of time before they bring in enough troopers to overwhelm the colony. "

Shepard nodded. "The colonists are still alive?" Jeong shrugged. "We have lost comms, and the number of heavy attacks from that direction is still high. It's...unlikely at best. Our highest priority right now is securing our HQ to make calls for assistance, and to recover and secure the Thorian."

Shepard narrowed her eyes. "That doesn't explain a lot of things. They could have razed this landing area from orbit rather than throw troops trying to retake it. Forget that, they could just have assaulted the colony directly and not gotten any results for hours and hours ..."

Bea shrugged. "We bled them pretty bad at the HQ, until their ship crashed into the tower and flooded the inside with geth. We cut and ran after that, but Jeong is the only corporate guy who survived this far with any pull. They may just figure it's best to kill us before we try to interfere with their task, whatever that is."

Shepard nodded, and Jeong spoke up. "I'm not 100% happy about this, but yet. We need you to check on the colony, and make sure it's clear. We also need to get in touch with Exogeni – and the SA Fleet – and that would require the powerful transmitters in the HQ. Finally...we need to make sure they didn't kill or wound the Tholian."

Shepard nodded. "That shouldn't be much of a problem once we clean up the geth remaining. "Jeong smiled mirthlessly. "There are a number of factors. First, there are ... bio hazardous conditions."

Shepard leaned back in the chair and nodded. "I presume you mean the reason you ordered tons of filtration gear, and have your docking island under full biological contaminate alert, not to mention as high up as you can get. So, dispense with the fucking and ducking. You mentioned something unethical. Your shit is locked down tight and Bea wouldn't be here if it wasn't seriously bad."

Jeong only smiled wider. "You wouldn't dispose of my 'fucking and ducking' and what I was concealing if you knew all the nasty details. Suffice it to say there is a dangerous agent in the areas around the colony, and that full armor with filtration or at least filtration mess kids are required. At all times. All rooms beyond this bunker." He paused. "No exceptions. We .. believe the colony is probably compromised by this point. The spores are related to the Thorian and , well, if you get infected, there's not much we can do for you."

Shepard only nodded. "That's fine, we took some filtration gear from the freight hauler that got shot to pieces after delivering your supplies. And we all have hard suits. I just need to know where to go, and how to get there. The marines can help shore up your defenses."

Jeong closed his eyes and nodded. "I'd check the colony first. That's where the geth hit, and it's close to the Thorian. If you'd ensure the colony is ... well, safe, then get our comms back online. In return, we can authorize you to ... well, see if the Thorian knows anything that can help you find this Saren criminal you are seeking. All I ask is that you don't go poking around into Exogeni business."

Shepard shrugged. "I'm not promising anything."

Jeong shrugged back. "Then we don't have much to discuss, Commander. I don't think you quite grasp the importance of this. If word of this gets out, the Council will not be happy. No matter how important you are to the Systems Alliance as a symbol..."

Bea nodded. "Torfan, Shepard. The same sick fuckers."

Shepard gave the woman an angry look. "Then fucking expose them!"

Bea shook her head sadly. "God, I forget how naïve you are sometimes, girl." She stood up straight, facing Shepard. "Ethan isn't a worthless corporate hack. If Exogeni feels he's sold them out, they'll probably kill his wife and little boy. The SA will .. vanish .. anyone who they feel they can be a threat and firebomb the area." She exchanged glances with Jeong, and shrugged. "Sara...just...please. Get our comms back online, and mop up the Geth long enough to us call for Exogeni support teams. We can handle it from there. Anything more could start a goddamned war."

Shepard glanced from one face to another, before shaking her head. "I'm sorry, but I don't think that will fly. I reported that I was on my way here before I jumped in. Regardless of what happens, it's safe to say the Council will send people this way to investigate, and it's going to be hard covering up whatever stupid corporate bullshit your company pulled."

Jeong shrugged. "That's the company's problem."

Shepard's face was emotionless, hard planes and she only gave a motion of her hand , opening it to the air. "Fine. I won't say shit. But if I see something criminal..."

Jeong gave her a weary smile. "The responsible parties are either already dead, worse than dead, or on Earth. The first two are beyond your purview. The last, well, good luck taking down the Admiralty Board and the Senate Defense committee." Jeong pushed Shepard a PDA. "This is a map of the colony, and the skyways leading to it, and to our HQ. We had a midpoint base here, halfway between us and the colony, but we don't know if it's still up or if it's overrun."

Bea spoke. "The HQ is definitely overrun. There's a geth ship anchored to it, for what reason we don't know. It's generating a signal that blocks our transmissions out. And since the system comms beacon got taken out the first thing, we can't get a decent signal off world. Your ship could, but..."

Shepard shook her head. "I deal with that if I think it needs to happen. First, I have to secure the big alien guy and clear out the HQ. That, I can do." She paused. "The Normandy will stay here, in case the geth send another ground force, but I think that was pretty much it. If you look like you'll be overrun, evacuate to the Normandy and contact us from the ship. Not sure what we can do about any surviving colonists."

Jeong shook his head sadly. "The colonists are likely to be... nonviable. Besides...they were penal criminals, rejects from the Penal Legions."

Shepard gave Bea a sharp look , and the other woman shrugged , albeit slightly uncomfortably. "What have you done to them, Bea?"

She gave a sad smile. "You don't want to know, She-bitch. Really."

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## Chapter 45: Chapter 39 : Feros , March

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*Ha! Not dead. Bet your ass I'll finish this story.*

*Three things:*

*First, I sincerely appreciate the people still reading, reviewing, and following this story. I also doubly appreciate the handful of stories I've seen where people credit my crap writing as an influence. If you haven't already read Glacial Fire by Owelpost , you need to kick yourself and go read it.*

*Second, despite all my plans, I find that Life has given me some kicks upside the head – mother was diagnosed with cancer, job has become a nightmare of work and overwork, and my personal life has become an unending train-wreck – so my free time has become ... sparse and hard to find. Still, there's only so much brooding you can do before one starts to go mad. Sometimes , writing helps. Sometimes, it doesn't. I haven't forgotten this story, and I won't let it die, but it's going to be updated pretty irregularly for a while. It kind of depends. I hardly want to write when depressed (especially about breakups) but we'll see how it goes.*

*Third, I finally downloaded Leviathan and the Extended Cut. AHAHAHAA. Goddamned Bioware. While I'm no fan of the indoctrination theory, to have a game with fully animated cut scenes throughout and then have that crap of a slide-show ending infuriated me. And Leviathan basically made zero sense whatsoever. Assuming I get back on the horse enough to wrap up ME 1 and move on to 2 and 3, I can guarantee you my endings would be a lot more satisfying than that.*

*This chapter is .. slowish. But my Feros is going to be a lot more interesting than the game's , and more ... morally ambiguous as well. Enjoy.*

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**January 29th , 2183 7:45 A.M.**

Shepard gathered together her team at the back hatch of the Mako after leaving the Exogeni bunker, followed at a discrete distance by Beatrice. It had taken most of the night to move the Normandy into a more secure location and get medical care for the injured soldiers, and now sunlight splintered the dust-choked skies, heavy gray clouds moving below the skyway they stood upon.

Kaiden immediately noted how ... stiff .. the commander seemed to be. Her walk wasn't it's usual smooth aggressive stride, but more.. jerky, almost angry. Her helmet was off, in her left hand, and there was an angry set to her facial expression that was at odds with her usual neutral look.

The Marine contingent was standing at one side, while about half of the Exogeni mercs stood on the other side of the Mako. The contrast in the spare, blue-tinted armor of the Marines and the heavier, custom-fitted bone-white armor the Exogeni Special Response unit wore was jarring. Both groups however, followed Shepard as she strode boldly to the Mako, half turning to face them.

Shepard put a foot up on the lintel of the Mako, looking around at the gathered troops, and gave a cold smile. "Alright, listen up people. We have a major situation developing here on Feros, and we're going to need to move fast on this. I've just been briefed on what's going on, and it's not going to be easy. But we don't have much of a choice. Saren has struck Exogeni HQ and then apparently murdered a volus trade ship to learn of this place's location, and whatever he's here for is important. "

She tapped her multitool, a top-down representation of the local area springing into midair in gold

holographic fields, and with a few spare motions of her hand, highlighted several areas. "There's only one way down into the ruins of the city from this point. At the end of this road is a skyway, a sort of elevated highway. Goddamn Protheans were too good to drive on the ground, I guess." That got a small round of chuckles, and she continued.

"At the skyway, there's an Exogeni outpost. Or was. We don't know if it managed to hold out or was overrun. Either way, we need to secure it, so our line of retreat doesn't get cut off. Once we hit it and take it, we'll split into three teams."

Her hand moved north, to a large building on the map. "This is the Exogeni HQ. There's a geth ship attached to the side of the building and the bastards are dug in deep. Aside from the fact that Exogeni would like their building back, the geth are also on top of the only out-system relay link. Citadel didn't get around to dropping new buoys here yet, so we need to get that link up and alert the Citadel fleets. With that destroyer and frigate still in orbit and us basically empty on missiles, we can't just run the Normandy out with the news."

Her hand moved in the opposite direction, to a circular area far south of the HQ. "This is the colony site itself. Built around 2 colony ships, before the attack I've been told there were over 500 people there." Shepard's eyes narrow, finding Beatrice's, who looks away. "Regardless of what else has happened, the information we're looking for to stop Saren might also be there. We aren't sure if the geth have overrun the area or not, but we aren't getting any responses. Our priority is stopping that pointy-faced bastard, but if we can secure and evacuate civilians, that's also a priority."

Shepard exhales, glancing to Kaiden and Garrus. "My initial thought is that we strike the outpost hard, then split. A team heads north to disable that geth ship and get comms back online. A second team heads south, to investigate and recon the colony, but waits for the first team before engaging. The remainder of the Exogeni force and Marine unit stays at the outpost to secure our line of retreat to the Normandy. We have the room to evacuate the Exogeni people, but not 500 colonists."

Shepard jerked a thumb at Beatrice. "This is Beatrice Shields, the Exogeni unit commander. She was in my team at Torfan and before that as well." A few murmurs among the Marines were silenced instantly by Shepard's glare, while the Exogeni soldiers didn't make a sound. "There's a lot going on here right now and we don't have all the facts, but Commander Shields will be assisting us in locating the information we need and getting this cleared."

Shields spoke up. "My unit will be assisting Commander Shepard's team. I'll leave a few of you here, to act as final security and ensure the non-combatants are safe, but until further notice, you are all under the command of Shepard and her subordinate officers." She paused. "I'm sure none of you really signed up to combat geth units, but get out of this alive and Exogeni will be very appreciative. In any case, she's got the only working ride out of this place, so I suggest very strongly you play along. Clear?"

The Exogeni mercenaries glanced at one another for a few moments before Captain Foster spoke up. "If you say she's in command, ma'am, she's in command. We're with you."

Shepard nodded, and then turned to Kaiden. "This is Lieutenant Alenko, my BDO. Lieutenant, when we secure the outpost, you be in command. I need heavy defenses set up, and what ever fortifications you can make with bionics, omnigel and ingenuity. You'll have almost the entire marine and Exogeni contingent to work with." She paused. "Wrex, I'll need you there too. If we get into trouble, we may need you back us up, and if we get overrun..."

Wrex snorted. "Like that's going to happen. Metal pyjaks aren't even a good fight." Ashley narrowed her eyes, and with a sarcastic smirk, said "Too bad you weren't at Eden Prime."

Shepard turned to Ashley. "Chief, you and Garrus scout the colony outskirts. Do not engage, but I need

clear intel and you two are the best suited for that. Keep in contact with the outpost and give us intel on what you see, and when we go in cover our backs." The human woman nodded, and Garrus flicked a mandible in agreement as well.

Shepard glanced at Master Chief Cole. "Master Chief, you'll be taking second squad with me, Liara, Tali, and Shields to the HQ. Our first order of business is getting comms going again. " Liara looked surprised at being included on Shepard's strike team, and the commander shrugged. "I don't know what we'll find there, but it will involve geth, in a Prothean ruin, so you two are the best fit for experts."

In an extremely dry voice, Shields spoke. "Because clearly I don't know how to do anything but shoot things?"

Shepard slowly turned to look at Bea. "Not at all, Commander Shields. I remember you are very good with tech, and I'm sure that after your stay here you'll provide useful insight. Let's just say after our conversation with Jeong, I'd like a second opinion." She stepped down from the Mako, killing her omni-tool, and gestured. "Lieutenant, let's get this column moving in five."

Kaiden saluted, and both marines and Exogeni mercs began gathering gear and weapons to move out. Tali and Liara stood next to each other, unsure of what to do next, and Shepard could only smile. "Alright, ladies. Neither of you have that much combat experience, so this will be... educational. Shields and I will take point. I'm the better sniper – " she paused as Beatrice gave a snort – " by a small margin, but I'm more of a close range fighter, so Bea will be engaging targets at range. What you two need to do is flank and engage any enemies tied up with us."

Tali nervously folded her hands around each other and gave a nod, and Liara merely watched Shepard. Shields spoke up. "I've never fought with quarians before. What can the two of you do?" She half turned to Shepard. "I'll brief them, go deal with deploying your troops, Sara."

Shepard paused, then nodded. She turned, only to see Master Chief Cole approaching. She stepped towards him, and he grinned, his ever-present cigar in his mouth, and his good eye narrowed. "Commander, second squad is ready. We've got four rocket launchers, and we stripped some of the anti-armor mines to make deployable det-packs. How should I set this up, full advance, sweep-and-clear, or skirmish line?"

Shepard nodded. "It will be a straight sweep-and-clear, Master Chief. If shit somehow goes really south, fall back to the Outpost and get orders from Kaiden. Otherwise, you'll be in reserve to back us up. I'm hoping we can get in undetected. That geth assault we broke up on the way in had to have been most of their ground forces." She exhaled. "We plant explosive charges and hope to dislodge that geth ship, and transmit our report, and then fight our way out. That's where your team may have to make a hot pickup."

Cole only nodded. "Won't be a problem, Commander. Just say the word."

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30 minutes later, the Mako lead four columns of soldiers down the skyway towards the outpost, which was a fortified tower at the junction of several skyways. Joker had been scanning with the Normandy's sensor suite the whole time, but all he was getting was that the geth destroyer they'd shaken on the way in had taken up low orbit and was firing off LADAR pings. "Also, Commander, I'm getting intermittent hits of some kind of ... low-frequency radio chatter. Encrypted."

Shepard frowned. "Geth? Local forces?" The inside of the Mako was cramped with soldiers, and for once Garrus was driving while she was tied up coordinating the advance. Joker sounded baffled. "Neither. Pressley's analyzing it now, but it's pretty contained and tight-beam, and it's coming from the colony. The encryption isn't anything the Alliance uses..."

Shepard scowled. "Well, that's just goddamned great. Keep me informed, Flight Lieutenant." She cut her comms with a sigh, and frowned as Liara sat down next to her. The little asari looked extremely nervous, uncomfortable in marine-standard armor, and overwhelmed. She swallowed, and then looked up at the commander.

"I do not know how...useful I will be to you, Commander, but I appreciate you bringing me along, after..." She trailed off, and Shepard's icy gaze held her for a long second before softening infinitesimally. The human woman pinched the bridge of her nose, and Liara continued. "I will not let you down, I promise."

Shepard nodded mutely, and shrugged. "We don't know what we're doing into here, doctor. You and Tali make sure to stay in cover and let Bea and I clear the way. We've done this a thousand times before, hostile insertions, going up –"

Liara glanced away. "I know. I .. I am sorry I .. reacted so poorly to seeing her. I did not expect one of your former teammates to ... be here."

Shepard stared at her armored feet, not meeting Liara's gaze. "I wasn't expecting her here either. She's...not the same. Before, she was ... clean. Righteous. Pure. She was in the Penal Legions because she was set up, not because she was a criminal. She didn't belong there. Now..." Shepard's voice lowered. "Now she's caught up in something ugly. Something criminal. Whatever they were doing here wasn't legit. Now, she's no better than me."

Liara frowned, mind working. *How can I reach out to her to make her not hate herself? Does she not understand it is not her fault?* "Shepard...you are not a bad person."

The human woman looked at her, eyes chips of ice, mouth set in a flat line. "You of all people should know better, doctor." She shook her head and turned away but Liara set her jaw, and placed her hand on Shepard's armored arm. "Should I? I have seen, and I have read. Your own view of yourself is so -"

Shepard held up a hand. "Not the place for this discussion, doctor." There was a coldness to her voice, a shutting off of emotion, and Liara sighed unhappily and withdrew, eyes troubled. Shepard calmly picked up her mirror-faced helm from the deck of the Mako and placed it on her head, a blank automaton in sable armor. "Garrus, ETA".

"Five minutes, Commander. No geth so far." Shepard nodded, as Liara pulled on her own helmet, and the Mako slowed it's speed as it came over the top of a slight rise.

The outpost came into view, a low and heavy slung bunker of the mysterious Prothean building material. Makeshift barricades outside an entry tunnel had been breached, with dozens upon dozens of dead geth mingled with a small number of Exogeni Special Response units. A battle-suit was slumped to the ground, it's right arm blown off and blackened craters blown throughout it's otherwise white-steel chassis. A light Mako had slewed into a wall, the cockpit a shattered mass of glass leading into a dark pit, with runnels of dried, dark red blood spattered about liberally.

Kaiden and four marines took point, the Lieutenant consulting the motion sensor on his arm. "No movement, Commander."

Shepard nodded. "Wrex, clear the building." The Krogan leapt down from the Mako where he had clung, unslinging his massive shotgun, and with a casual hand motion enveloped himself in biotic energy. His steps were heavy and considered as he went into the tunnel, followed by six marines.

Cole bellowed. "Second squad! Support line, behind that rubble. First Squad! Form up on me."

Shepard waited, tapping her fingers on the shiny surface of her armor, Tali sitting next to her pensively. "Why is Wrex going in first and by himself?"

Shepard gave a small smile. "The outside looks bad, like the geth broke through. If there's any nasty surprises inside, Wrex is the most capable of surviving it. And he has six marines backing him up. I don't want to move everyone into that building until I know it's secure...it's a bolthole with no way out."

"Oh." Tali paused, thinking of how the Migrant Fleet Marines conducted hostile ship boarding. "Quarians usually try to board with as many people as possible, to suppress a threat..."

Shepard nodded absently. "And if this was a boarding action, that would be the right move. But we're flying blind into this...we don't know what happened and – "

"Shepard. You'd better get in here. We have ... a problem." Wrex's voice had a tone she had never heard from the old krogan before, a mix of what would be in another species horror and fascination.

"...on my way."

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"Well, that's ... just goddamned disgusting." Garrus's wry tones were muted, as he shifted his sniper rifle in his hands.

The building was fairly small, clearly a defensive bunker or guard post used by the Protheans, and had been repurposed as such by the humans. There was a very large main room, with four smaller rooms mostly filled with tables or bunks. Computer consoles, comm equipment and a vidscreen lined the far south wall, while the near walls were festooned with armor lockers, weapons racks, and additional small arms. The floor was rubberized, the ceiling painted black with cheap haptic lighting installed in tracks.

Geth storming it had paid an immense cost in troops, over a hundred of them lay in shattered melted heaps along the entry tunnel, and even more carpeted the floor inside the building proper. But what had drawn Wrex's attention was not that, or the 15 or so dead civilians scattered around.

Instead it was the dozens and dozens of grotesque green humanoid ... things that lay torn and shattered in pools of acidic slime. Shepard gingerly stepped among them, looking. "Whatever happened was...ugly. Geth battered their way in, fire fight with the humans...geth started losing their ass off." She glanced to a human merc, his head gone, laying on a heap of shattered geth corpses.

Beatrice sighed. "Captain Rthan, ex-N7 vanguard. Worked for the Shadow Broker for 10 years before coming to work for us. Bastard was the toughest son of a bitch I knew, She-bitch." Despite the gore flung about, the air smelled perfectly clean, and the systems used to filter air into the compound were clearly still effective. Despite that, everyone had their helmet on.

Shepard nodded. "They beat back the geth...and then these green things came and ... killed them. Looks like geth were here after the fact." Shepard turned and looked at Beatrice, who was accessing a computer console. She sighed, and with a tap of her finger, made her faceplate transparent as Shepard walked over.

"What did you find, Bea?"

Beatrice's gaze was troubled, and she gingerly took Shepard's elbow and steered her to a corner, further away from Garrus and the Marines. "This is... bad. These... things are the ... what the Thorian uses as remote ... hands, I guess."

Shepard frowned. "You need to explain. You said the Thorian was a big bastard, stuck below the colony. How do we get from that to ... " She nudged the horribly misshapen semi-humanoid mass of green matter at her feet with a toe "...this."

Shields exhaled, and actually gave a shaky little smile. "God, you are such a bitch sometimes. Can't we

just not have this conversation? You really don't want to know. Really."

Shepard just looked at the woman, gray eyes meeting blue. "Beatrice, I told you that the day we got done with Torfan. You had to know." Beatrice nodded. "And look where that got all of us, She-bitch? God, I'd rather have stayed with you and had you stab me in the back rather than be accomplice to..."

Her voice trailed off, and Shepard frowned. "Tell me."

When Shields spoke again, her voice was flat, almost clinical. "The Thorian calls them thralls. They're made from ..plant matter of some kind. They protect the thing. They start off looking just like people, only green, with all their skills and abilities. But they rot quickly, each one lasting only a few days. And then the Thorian has to make another."

Her mouth drew into a grim line. "In order to make them, the Thorian has to absorb the person. After you breath in the spores, they begin to grow. First they fill in your lungs, and they grow into your brain. The Thorian can talk to you then, in your mind. If you disobey, it stops your lungs from getting oxygen. Then it grows into your nerves, your organs. You belong to it. It knows everything you know."

She pauses. "When you die, it can absorb you, and make copies of you, but... bodies rot. Fast. If it absorbs a living person, they last longer, but each copy made degrades ... the original person. It ... uses them up, until they just ... fall apart."

Shields looked back up at Shepard. "When we found the thing, it was using local fauna. It took months to figure out how to communicate with it. It wanted...people. Lots of people. At first Exogeni tried to placate it with one or two, but once it told us it could unlock the secrets of the Protheans...the Alliance stepped in. "

Shepard paled. "How did the Alliance 'step in', Bea?"

Beatrice turned away again. "They sent over 1000 .. rejects...from the Penal Legion. We agreed that a colony would be made, the Thorian would dominate it. In return for ... subjects...it would implant certain of it's colonists with the knowledge of the Protheans. In six months, we made more progress on the Mars Archive than we did in 20 years. The Alliance didn't care how many prisoners died."

Beatrice frowned. "Exogeni was... nervous. The Board was worried , although it wasn't because they thought the Alliance would sell us out. Exogeni was dealing ... for some reason ... with Cerberus."

Shepard hissed. "Why?"

"Cerberus was able to provide us with technology to ... counteract the Thorian's effects in some cases. We sent them sample thralls to see if they could do anything at reversing the effect. And they aided us with supplies. We couldn't 'announce' our findings after all. Everything was kept off the books. All records of the facility were purged everywhere, except for HQ. And all that was at HQ was ... distributions of income and the ships that carried our supplies here and 'researchers' out."

Shepard nodded. "Someone must have tipped Saren about the Thorian...which pretty much confirms that Cerberus is working with the fucker. They raid the HQ, figure out what ship to hit, and then hit this place hard." She paused. "But Jeong said it was stubborn. Will it work with Saren?"

Beatrice shrugged. "Who knows what Saren will offer it? Or has offered it? If I'm reading this battle scene right, it looks like the thralls supported the Geth. I know this. The thralls are dangerous. The people, while alive and not corrupted, can fight with all their normal skill, but the Thorian can turn off their pain , even stop their bleeding for a while, if they're infected enough. And the plant things vomit powerful acid, and take a lot of killing."

Shepard sighed. "Bea, there's no way we can cover this up, even if I was fucking inclined to. Any Council team that takes a look at this shit is going to freak the fuck out." Her voice hardened. "And

Penal Legion rejects? I thought a lot better of you, Bea."

Shields gave her a disbelieving look. "Don't start with me, Sara, goddammit. I was destroyed by fucking Torfan. I lost everything I fucking had, and the Alliance didn't want to have anything to do with me. What goddamned kind of future can I have, huh? Exogeni took me in, took a chance on me, cleaned me up. They always respected me. And they certainly didn't ditch me for a fucking traitorous tart on a whim like you did. And as far as using the rejects, Humanity has to fucking advance somehow. The Thorian was a goddamned shortcut. They were fucking dead anyway, at least this way they did a service for humanity."

Shepard gritted her teeth. "You're killing people in the name of goddamned human advancement? Funny, that's usually the tag line I get from , y'know, *Cerberus*.... what the fuck happened to you? You used to freak out every time I had to sacrifice soldiers to get the job done – "

Bea's eyes flashed storm gray behind her faceplate. "I was wrong!" She turned, making sure no one was paying much attention to their conversation, but Garrus was examining bodies, and the rest of the team was headed back outside to set up defenses. Only Liara stood in the doorway, a grim expression on her face, but Shields ignored her to turn back to Shepard. "You always made the hard calls and put yourself right in the shit, and I always called you out on it, when it got people killed. But maybe you were fucking right and I was just goddamned stupid. All I know is that without this, humanity would be a lot further behind, and sooner or later if geth are running around killing everyone that's going to be bad."

Shepard stepped back. "The end never justifies the means, Bea. I'd have thought you of all people would fucking grasp THAT much. You end up a walking pile of shit like me if you do that." Shepard glanced around, shaking her head. "And for what? Progress? One of these poor bastards could have been **us** in different circumstances."

Shields merely laughed. "I've grown up a lot since Torfan, Shepard. I see how sick everything is now, and how meaningless it is. I've seen shit worse than Torfan since I started working for Exogeni. The bottom line is that we did what we had to do. I'm not proud of it. I'm not happy about it. But I've told you what the stakes are. The Alliance has Exogeni over a barrel, and Exogeni has us over a barrel. If this gets out, you think the Council will take it calmly? Or the governments forming the Systems Alliance?"

Shepard squeezed her eyes shut. "You're asking me to cover up a crime, Beatrice." The woman across from her gave a sudden exhale, and then carefully placed her hand on Shepard's shoulder. "No, I'm not, Sara. I'm asking you to realize this isn't 10th Street. You can't kick in the teeth of the thug behind this. You said you have to stop Saren, right? You think the Council and the SA will focus on that if this blows up in their face?"

Shepard just looked at Shields for a long moment. "...fine. And after I've killed that fucker, Beatrice, someone is going to pay for this .... shit."

Beatrice gave a sardonic smile. "If you say so." She turned away, tapping the console again. "At any rate, the larger problem we have is that it looks like the thralls took this place out, and then geth came in and accessed the computers." She tapped another console and scowled. "They were looking up records for employees with access to the testing logs, for some reason. Don't know why."

Shepard frowned. "If the thralls are working with the geth, then that means Saren has already convinced this thing to work for him." She paused. "I can think of one way to make this right. If this thing is supporting Saren, it dies. Blow it, blow this place, blow any sign of the damned thing, get whatever Saren got, and then say the destruction was due to the geth."

Beatrice looked at her a long time. "That will cost us-"

Shepard made an angry slashing motion with her hand. "What? If it's gone over, it's an enemy. And dealing with this thing is going to blow up in your face sooner or later. With the HQ blown up and no one else knowing what happened, we shut it down NOW. The fuckers who started it are dead, probably, and I can deal with whatever SA fuck thought this would be a good idea in my own time."

Beatrice said nothing, but Shepard strode away, tapping her omnitool. "Flight Lieutenant, come in."

"Here as always, Commander ... kill any geth for me yet?"

Shepard gave a small smirk. "Not so much, Joker. I need an inventory of how much high-ex we have on board. We are going to need a lot more than I thought. There's contamination down here and we can't just leave it laying around."

"I'll find out, Commander."

Shepard strode to the doorway, Liara falling in behind her and Shields, and strode to the Mako again. "Slight change of plans. What happened inside is due to contamination. The spores we are being on guard against." Garrus tilted his head, armored faceplate blank, but said nothing, and Shepard continued. "We can't just leave this stuff laying around. Kaiden, I want this building blown with high-ex, that much fire should clear the place out. Set up a force field and the air-filtering kit from the Mako we packed once that's done and dig in. Until then, we're still at cat 5 biological hazard alert."

Kaiden nodded. "Understood , ma'am. Should we use the det-charges we have or..."

Shepard shook her head. "Joker's seeing what we have in inventory for hi-ex incendiaries. Use those, we may need the det-charges for something ... else." She paused, then nodded to herself. "Garrus, Ash, get moving to the colony. Maintain distance, however. There..." she paused, then sighed. "There is a very high chance the colonists are already infected. From what I've been told, death is a mercy at that point. You are authorized to use deadly force on anyone or... anything...that discovers you. Try to reach the outskirts and then hold position."

Garrus nodded, and then he and Ashley swung away. Shepard turned to Master Chief Cole. "Let's get this going so we can move on the HQ as quickly as possible. " She sighed. "The quicker we get off this goddamned planet, the better."

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## Chapter 46: Chapter 40 : Feros , Investigation

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*I figured as long as I'm in the writing mood, I might as well get as much done as I can. Feros is not going to follow the story as told (AU, duh) but more than that, I want Feros to build the tension and make the stakes known.*

*The silly "save or kill the stupid colonists" thing never resonated with me. They're colonists with shitty weapons, there is no reason to kill them when you could stun them unless you're a goddamned bloodthirsty psychopath. They are aren't even that much of a threat on Hardcore. At the same time, I wanted to give Shepard a number of ugly moral choices to make, and illustrate how her thinking differs.*

*To get to the awesome fight scene I want though, there's a lot of tedious set up. I apologize for that, but ... this story isn't JUST about Liara and Shepard , or Shepard and Garrus, or even Master Chief Cole fucking up anything that gets in his way. It is a re-write of ME as I wished it had been and so there's still a while before things get steamy. Or awkward.*

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**January 29th , 2183 9:45 A.M.**

Ashley carefully sighted down the scope of her sniper rifle, the delicate blue haptic cross-hairs adjusting for angle , elevation and windage, coming together in a perfect X just as she held her breath to pull the trigger. The heavy Scythe jerked in her arms as the geth she hit came apart in an explosive blast from the hi-ex round that splintered it's chest apart. With a digital scream, it fell off of the skyway into the endless clouds far below.

Garrus chuckled, even as she coolly vented heat and shipped the rifle. "You're pretty good with that gun, Chief". His hands cradled his own massive sniper rifle almost lovingly as he stepped out from the ruined half-wall they had crouched behind for her to line up her shot. The Prothean skyway was riddled with bunkers and defense areas, as if the entire city had been built to fight some invader. Tunnels, over-passages, and sunken-in bunker like areas were *de rigour* , apparently.

Ash rolled her shoulders and suppressed a frown. She didn't like the big, weird alien dinosaur-chicken, but she had to admit he was a nasty customer in a fight. Their scouting mission had gone fairly well, but several times geth troopers or rocket troopers had nearly gotten the drop on them in close range, and each time the Turian had savagely dispatched them. His pistol was nightmarish in power, and his technical skills – infernos and detonations, grenades, augmented blasts or a hard downward smash by the reinforced steel butt of his weapon, even once with a thrown piece of masonry that had pitched a geth right off the edge of the wide bridge – had shown his flexibility.

They had traded off in who took point, and despite his praise, she knew full well he could hit things further out than she could, and his rifle was devastating. "Thanks, Detective. You're the best shot I've seen in a while." Garrus gave the turian equivalent of a smile, although it was unseen behind the blank mask of his helmet, but she could hear it in his voice. "Well, not to brag, but I am the best shot I've ever seen. Although I have heard Shepard is supposed to be really nasty with a sniper rifle, too..." He trailed off, as if fishing for information.

Ash settled for grunting, and moving in a crouch to the next set of cover. "They say the Commander is a good shot, although I've only really seen her doing that flying biotics shit. She punched out a Geth Prime on Eden Prime, after charging into over 70 geth." A pause as she cleared a corner and smoothly advanced down a broad staircase, broken masonry strewn in her path. "Watching her fight is...it's like watching a volcano erupt."

Garrus only nodded, his heavy blue-tinted armor clashing with the cool white stonework, and trying to keep into shadows as a result. While big and bulky, he was clearly experienced at staying in cover. His full-face helmet turned to face her, shaking his head as he did so. "I'd seen coverage of some bits of Eden Prime, but...I don't know. Talking with Wrex, I keep getting the feeling I'm not seeing the person she used to be. I mean, she can certainly fight, but ... she certainly wasn't what I expected. A giggling , blood drenched monster with a shotgun in each hand maybe, but not ... her." The flanged voice was tinged with admiration and reverence, and Ash couldn't help but roll her eyes.

Still, she agreed, in a way. Part of her understood exactly why Garrus was so impressed. Shepard had been very aggressive, true, and reserved, but she had come out of her shell to try to help Ash in a way no one else had before. And all the stories spoke of her being psycho, or bloodthirsty. "Well, Detective, she's ... unique. She told me ... about herself..." Her voice trailed off , and she shook her head. "I don't think we can understand her, not like a normal person."

Garrus paused, bringing up his sniper, the white-hot shot lancing out, catching a crouching geth figure squarely in the chest and sending it spinning head-over-heels across the Skyway. With a second, dismissive gesture, the turian fired a second shot, blasting it's companion in half, and turned back to Williams. "She's just..not what I expected. But I like it. And I think with her as a Spectre, a lot of aliens

who had preconceived notions about your people are going to find them very wrong. I know there's a lot of bitterness over the Re... over the First Contact War. But from what I've seen so far, humans are just..people. Like the rest of us."

Ash spent a long second considering that, thinking of her own words back on the Citadel. Her talk with Shepard about the place of the aliens on board, even the uncomfortable stares with Wrex in her armory. She hadn't missed the near-slip the turian had made – most turians called the events around Shanxi the Relay 314 incident, a term that infuriated humans. But he went out of his way to use the human term.

She smiled. "People , huh? Well, thanks, Detective." Garrus merely chuckled.

Ash carefully stepped around the corner, drawing in breath as the colony came in to view. "We're here." Sweeping her scope around, she surveyed the ramshackle buildings and two partially disassembled colony ships slowly. "People walking around...oh god, what the fuck."

Garrus frowned, and Ashley stepped aside, so he could get in close, letting him see for himself. With a grunt the former C-sec officer put his own rifle up, peering through the scope. He saw humans down there, mostly hunched over...many with large growths over eyes, mouths, hands. He also saw dug-in geth units, including an armature. But that's not what caught his eye.

A slender, pale gray turian frigate was parked just outside the colony. It was emblazoned with Saren's personal sigil, a modified Spectre crest worked into the turian characters for "unflinching duty".

Grimly, Garrus swung down to cover and crouched down even lower. "That's Saren's ship, Chief. That means he's here, or some of his flunkies are. Do we wait for Shepard, or try to contact her?"

Ash bit her lip nervously inside her helmet, then shook her head. *Too much risk that it would be picked up. Gotta wait for the Skipper.* "We'll hold here, as instructed..."

Garrus frowned. "And what if he lifts off while we wait? No one will even know to look for his ship. And if she knew about this, she might hurry up or change her options?"

Ashley hesitated, and then cursed. "You stay here and keep watch. I'll head back down a ways, and use a tight-beam to contact Joker." Garrus nodded, flopping onto his stomach to set up a sniper's watch, and Ashley carefully slunk back towards the skyway.

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Saren leaned impatiently against the ruined doorway, watching Shiala being .. consumed, he supposed was the right word, or whatever the Thorian did to those it ate. The underground chamber was large, high and vaulted, with lots of crude tunnels dug off in different directions, and crowded with dozens of the Thorian's plant-like thrall creatures. He was thankful for his helmet , as the air was thick with decay, spores, and spirits only knew what kind of smells. Foul, green-laced slimy water dripped in rivulets down the walls to pool in murky puddles all over the floor, mixed in with human bones and other, less identifiable detritus.

He felt as if his mind was fairly clear...time spent away from Sovereign itself was clearly a good thing for his mental clarity. He was ready to move to the next step, finally having made real progress in his search for answers. He smiled at Benezia, who stood to his left, and then glanced over to his right, where Ganar Skal only glared back.

The huge krogan was standing impassively, his night-black and scarlet armor scuffed but clean, the clunky mass accelerator cannon slung across his back as he folded his arms. If Saren was the brains and the tactics of the group, and Benezia it's finances and soul, then Skal was it's beating, violent heart and manpower. It was his command of Clan Ganar that gave Saren krogan forces to work with, and it was his driving belief in Saren's promises that had allowed such ruinous research on krogan infertility and

cloning to allow for the "cure" of the genophage that had been constructed. Bitter and hateful, Skal seemed to be resisting indoctrination better than either he or Benezia, whether from sheer rage or some krogan innate resistance was yet to be seen.

A geth servitor called out. "We have lost an additional 3 units in the past 1200 seconds, but none in the past 500 seconds. Geth units reported two figures, one human and one krogan." Ganar unfolded his arms. "That means they're getting closer. Saren, how long is this ... thing... going to take?"

Saren merely snarled inside his helmet, eyes fixed on the Thorian. With a shudder, the plant finished it's "meal", a thick lump of flesh-plant matter erupting out of the wall. It's mental voice lanced out, painfully, to reach Saren. "your...offer...better than that of...humans. Distrust. Worry."

Saren stood up straight, approaching the disgusting creature but stopping at a safe distance. "We've already offered you one asari. Think about it. Humans are short lived, pitiful animals. The Asari live a thousand years, and are both naturally biotic and durable. Not only will you be able to experience the wider world again, you won't have to spend all your time replacing your...thralls. All we need is a way to comprehend this ... beacon."

The massive plant shuddered, gasses exhaling. It's form was nothing more than a huge trunk, some 50 feet across, which branched into thousands of long, winding limbs that had sought purchase in the wall of the pit it was in. It's surface was a mix of greens, browns, pinks, and reds, some of it looking plantlike, other parts fleshy, still other parts almost mineral looking. Ripples of some kind of fluid pulsed through it obscenely as it finally answered his words. "...you ... are not ... trustworthy."

Saren nodded, much to the shock of Benezia. "I am not holding myself up to be someone you should trust blindly. Which is why I've given you the asari for free." He gestured to the 4 other members of the commando team that had been picked for sacrifice, each one already thick under the grip of indoctrination. "But we've read what Exogeni had planned for you. Already you get abused, mistreated human criminals, ignorant of everything. They plan to start introducing chemicals into them, trying to see if they can make you more...tractable. You don't have to trust me , since I only need one thing from you, not a long term relationship. I just need ... knowledge."

His voice was grave and convincing, and the Thorian gave a series of shudders, before the tube that was at the "front" of the creature began shaking. The lithe form of an asari slithered out, nude as the day she was born, a delicate pale green in color and dripping in slime from the recreation. Benezia gave a start, but Saren only watched closely as the faux asari came right up to him, eyes wide.

"...this is an acceptable trade, meat. We will show you what you need to know. But it will take...time."

Saren sighed. "Of course. I'm astonished I don't have to fetch something first. Let's get this over with, plant, it can't be any worse than the Beacon."

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The Exogeni HQ turned out to be ... mostly abandoned. *Just what I needed, a spooky abandoned tower full of geth.* Shepard's thoughts were dark, even as she gripped her weapon more tightly.

Shepard had been expecting a fight, even hoping for one, anything to get the ugly knowledge of what Exogeni had done here out of her head. Taking the Mako over the skyway to the HQ had involved taking out two small groups of geth sentries , and arriving at the HQ only summoned eerie silence.

Tali and Liara had stayed in the back, as Shepard and Shields moved forward in overlapping cover patterns. The HQ building had been rebuilt from a tall, Prothean tower, lavishly refitted with every luxury and heavily filtered from the outside. The lobby was floored in real wood, clean white steel walls covered with corporate logos and wide windows giving a stunning view of the clouds below,

broken only by the occasional Prothean tower.

The lobby was now a mess, of course, with bodies flung everywhere in the aftermath of what had been desperate battle. The walls were full of bullet and accelerator holes, scorch marks, and various splashes of red or white. Geth were slumped in corners or blasted apart on the floor, but more Exogeni mercs and dozens of civilians also lay dead. Shields scanned the room and then came out of her combat crouch. "It's clear." She walked ahead, through a scanning field, and a fine mist of droplets sprayed over her armor as a laser beam played over her form. "Built in light decon. There's a full decon we'll have to go through to get any further into the building than this, though."

Shepard nodded, slinging her shotgun, and motioned Liara and Tali forward. She turned to Cole, still in the main entryway. "Set up inside the Lobby, chief, and wait for us. If you see anything coming this way, give us a heads up."

Cole nodded in return. "Jackson, Rodriguez, Smith, and Patterson. You are still all shot up from Therum. Man the Mako and keep the scans active. Serri, Ownby, Haln, support left with heavy weapons..." Shepard let the man set up the squad and followed Shields over to the front desk, where she was working the computer. "What have you found?"

Beatrice's voice was weary. "About what I expected. No active life signs, but those are keyed only to people who are in armor.. so theoretically, someone could be alive. The decon system is out – geth blew it up to bypass it – so the building is not clear and will need a decontamination cycle before anyone can go in without suits. Security systems are ... a mess, but it looks like the geth are all near the transmit rooms and IT center, the rest of the building is showing empty. The parking garage is showing a bypassed door, though... someone may have tried to make a run for the Mako's and TR-4 scout cars. But the main hangar doors are jammed by debris." She paused. "With the rest of the building contaminated, the garage is the only place any survivors without breathing gear could go. It has its own decon airlock and rooms."

Shepard nodded. "You think someone may have holed up down there? Whoever bypassed the door?" Shields shrugged, and pushed back from the computer. "It's worth checking out, Sara."

Shepard led the four of them through the building, down the stairs leading to the garage. People had been brutally killed here, piled in heaps with head shots, but occasionally more shocking violence had occurred, shade of what she had seen on the volus trade ship. Liara made a moan of disgust as they passed an Exogeni soldier who had literally been pulled into pieces, and Shields flicked the safety off her Avenger. "You mentioned you found Captain Niham's ship..."

Shepard nodded, stepping out from the bottom of the stairs into a metallic hallway carefully, sweeping in all directions with her ODIN shotgun. "Yeah, unfortunately. It was a lot worse than this." She stepped over the corpse of a geth and frowned at the doorway at the end of the hallway. "Why did they stop here, I wonder?"

Shields shrugged, and they proceeded to the airlock. "Warning: contamination detected. Airlock decon procedure required. Please wait for decontamination cycle." The door opened, and they stepped into the room, and Tali sighed as they saw several more dead humans piled on the floor. The doorway had been hacked shut. Shepard frowned, and gestured Tali forward. "I need that door opened, but I need the decon procedure as well."

"On it, Commander." Tali pulled a set of leads from her belt, hooking them to her omni-tool, and got to work on the panel. Liara kneeled down to the corpses, shaking her head. "Three of these were...children. Goddess."

Shields sighed unhappily. "The ... HQ was considered very safe, even safer than the High Dock. Lots

of people brought there families, the tower was so large everyone could have fairly luxurious living quarters. Everyone had breathing gear...but that was for minor breaches in containment, not exposure to open air. " She turned one of the bodies over and sighed. "This was the site chief information officer...looks like his omnitool was taken. Goddamn it."

Tali cursed. "Bosh'tet...open!" A moment later there was a chime. "Decontamination in progress." The far door shut, even as bleach sprayed down from above as UV lamps in the walls lit up to brilliant levels. Shepard smiled and patted the little quarian on the shoulder. "Good job, Tali."

Tali nodded, trying not to look at the twisted forms on the floor, as the bleach suddenly stopped and the chamber was vented to vacuum. A moment later, the airlock opened into the garage, spilling out with a mist of vaporizing bleach and cold.

The garage was quite spacious, high beams against rock , with several scout cars neatly parked to one side, but the doors leading out were buckled and bent inwards slightly. A Mako had been shoved up against them, as if trying to push them out of the way, but the black skid marks around each tire showed the futility of that. Slumped next to the Mako was a pair of children and a single woman, who was scrambling to her feet, a pistol in hand. "S-stay back!"

Shields slung her rifle to her back and held up both hands. "It's Commander Shields. Are you okay?"

The woman's arm fell and she almost collapsed. Her once pristine white uniform was stained with blood, but she looked otherwise unharmed, messy brown hair pulled back into a rough ponytail. Her pale skin was set off by brilliant green eyes, but her makeup had run from sweat or crying and she looked exhausted. The two children next to her stood as well, a thin brown-haired boy in a dark black jumpsuit that was clearly her son, and a smaller, younger girl with white-blond hair and skin a shade darker than Shepard. Both of them half-hid behind the woman, whose voice shook as she spoke. "Oh, god. Thank you. Yes...Yes I... I'm fine. I'm Elizabeth Baynham, core...research." She eyed the quarian and then the night-black armor that Shepard wore with alarm. "Where..."

Shields approached slowly. "You don't have a mask on."

Baynham shrugged. "No time. And the computer says the air is clear. There's no masks in the Mako or scout cars, and I had no time to grab anything but my son and Byana here before ..."

Shepard checked her omnitool, scanning the air, before unlatching her helmet and taking it off. The air was stale, full of exhaust fumes and the scent of oil , but that was all. "I'm Commander Shepard, Council Spectre. We've cleared the High Dock and we're here to get rid of the geth."

Baynham started, and then glanced back at Shields, who took off her own helmet and nodded. "You're safe, Elizabeth. Tell us what happened."

The woman frowned. "I was sleeping, and then the alarms came in. I remember you and the reaction force rolling out and the first reports of Geth fighting, and then Director Liang decided to transmit the distress call to Exogeni HQ." She paused. "We were still trying to get an answer when the entire building shook. Geth...just came out of everywhere."

The two children clung to the woman as she continued, pistol still in her hand but held limply. "I got my son, and Byana was with him, and Captain Micha told us to fall back to the secure area. We couldn't get to it, so we came down here. I loaded the children into the Mako and tried to get us out, but the doors were jammed." She pauses. "Then I heard the computer say the airlock had been bypassed shut. I .. I could hear people trying to get in , and then I think the .. geth...caught them."

She closed her eyes, and Shields placed a hand on the woman's shoulder. "You did what you had to, Elizabeth. Do you know anything else about the attack?"

Baynham shook her head. "N-no."

Shepard glanced around, then turned to Shields. "If they don't have hard suits, what's the best way to get them out of here?" Shields frowned, but Liara hesitantly spoke up. "If...if we could get the garage doors open, they could just ride back in the Mako. It is not armed, but...we have cleared the sky way for them."

Shields rolled her eyes. "And how are we going to get the door open, blue? Yell at it? Det charges would drop the garage on our heads." Liara gave the woman a venomous look and then turned back to Shepard. "I .. I believe I can use my biotics on the door, Shepard. If... if you think.."

Shepard looked at the asari for a long moment, watching as she bit her lip, staring at her. She shook her head a bit and then pulled her helmet back on. "Baynham, you and the kids get back in the Mako. Helmets on, people. Liara...let's see what you can do."

Shields gave her an incredulous look even as she put her helmet back on. "Sara, that door is hydraulically locked and weighs over a ton. If it's jammed by a rockfall or something -" Shepard only held up a hand as the civilians entered the Mako and after a moment, it backed away from the door.

Liara, for her part, was standing in the middle of the garage, legs set apart, hands clasped together, eyes closed. She began , very softly, to glow a faint blue. *I can do this. I have to do this. I can show her I am useful, that I am not .. helpless.* With a low exhale, Liara reached for the core of her strength, and the glow went from faint blue to almost blinding for a half second before , with a yell of exertion, she slammed her hand out and willed all of her strength into a single biotic blow.

Shepard's and Shield's eyes both widened for a split second before the door was literally ripped out of the heavy metal walls , crumpled as if by a giant fist, and sent spinning. Sprays of rock and debris that had fallen from where the geth ship had torn into the building to anchor itself were flung away in radial lines of force , even as the door itself spun end over end, before crashing into the edge of the skyway with a heavy clang and stopped. Part of the walls themselves were warped outwards, and the entry way was clear, cold air from outside blowing in as the computer systems began to alarm about contamination.

Liara slumped, even as Tali and Shepard both reached out to catch her, keeping her from falling over, but she shook her head and forced herself to stand. "I... I am alright,.. Commander." There was trembling in her voice, but a note of something else, something like faint pride mixed with disbelief. Shepard frowned and turned the small asari's shoulders so she faced her. "Liara, are you sure? That..."

Behind her clear faceplate, those eyes seemed to bore into Shepard, making her feel like she was drowning again. "I .. I am fine. I am just a bit fatigued." She swallowed, looking for some clue of how Shepard felt, but only saw the mirrored face plate, cold, unyielding, iron-like. After a moment she heard Shepard sigh, and with a pat on her arm let her go. "We'll talk about this later, Liara."

Shepard turned away, back towards the airlock, as Shields gave last minute instructions to Baynham over the radio. "Cole, this is Shepard. We have one unarmed Mako coming out of the Exogeni garage – one civilian female and two kids. They'll be rolling by your position. Have two of your marines hitch a ride on the outside and get them back to the High Dock. They are NOT , I repeat, NOT suited for external travel, no air masks or anything. Make sure the Mako stays safe."

Cole's voice came through, clear and calm. "Understood, Commander. We got a report from Joker waiting to clear for you, should I patch you through?"

Shepard glanced back , as the Mako drove out. "Yeah, go ahead." There was a static-filled disconnect, then Ashley's voice. "Skipper, we got a big issue here at the colony. The colonists are...heavily infected, there's ...stuff growing out of them. The geth are dug into the colony and the colonists are helping them.

And there's a turian frigate down here that Vakarian says is Saren's own ship. He could be here, Commander."

Shepard gave a sharp inhale of breath. "Thanks, Ash. Hold your position for now, we'll be there as quick as we can." She killed the line, and then patched in Joker. "Flight Lieutenant, I have an order for you." She paused. "Saren's ship may be on planet. If he attempts to leave, you have to stop him at ... any cost."

Joker did not reply for a long moment, then his voice came through, steady and calm. "Copy, Commander. We hardly have any missiles left, but...we'll stop him. The Geth destroyer is still in orbit though..."

Shepard's voice was pitched low. "I know, Joker."

Another long silence, then a chuckle. "Don't worry, Commander. I understand the stakes. Could you just .. hurry up and catch him on the ground, though? I like being a hero, but the whole martyr thing is really not my speed."

Shepard closed her eyes and nodded to herself. "I'll do my best, Joker. I.. I'm sorry, if it comes to that." The scoffing sound she heard in reply made her smile. "Your assuming I can't drop one sorry turian ship with guns alone? God, if they make their ships like they do their coffee makers, I can drop him and not even undock." His tone grew more serious. "I'll let the XO know, ma'am."

Shepard bit her lip and nodded. "Thanks, Flight Lieutenant." She clicked off, to find Tali and Liara staring at her. Tali spoke up first. "...if he gets into space, Joker..."

Shepard closed her eyes. "Joker will stop him one way or the other, Tali. We can't let him escape. Let's get a move on, the more time we're on the ground, the less time we have to get to that colony and shove a rifle into his stupid, pointy mouth."

The team retraced their steps back into HQ proper, then began ascending the levels leading to the communications area. After 12 or 13 minutes of walking through offices and storage areas, they came to a large sloping ramp leading to IT and Communications, as identified by a haptic banner on one wall. Shields took point, swapping her sniper rifle for her Avenger, and Shepard drew her Revenant. "We take it slow and careful. Liara, keep them from getting close to us with your biotics. Tali, do what you can to shut any geth we see down. Let Shields and I do most of the heavy fighting if you can, both of you have light armor."

Tali nodded, but her voice was almost savage. "I'm good at killing geth, Commander." Liara said nothing, but nervously checked her pistol and gave a firm nod.

Shields and Shepard moved up to the top of the ramp, and Shepard exhaled. "Haven't stormed a position with you in a long time, She-bitch". Shields voice was cool, but not unfriendly. Shepard nodded. "Let's hope you haven't gotten soft, girl."

As one, they swung around the corner, sighting down on four geth guarding a barricade. Without even thinking about it, Shepard hurled a biotic throw, catching one geth violently in the head, sending it crashing to the ground, even as she opened up with the Revenant, it's demonic shriek of rapid-fire death stitching blue-white fire across the frames of two more of the geth.

Shields rolled to one side, coming up with her Avenger, placing a neat burst into the head of the far right geth, then launching a tech grenade into the hallway beyond, catching three more rushing forward in it's blast. Bits of scorched armor plate and splats of white fluid came out of the cloud of debris and smoke, even as Shepard rushed forward to the barricade to get into cover. "Move up!"

Liara and Tali rushed in, even as more geth came up, and Liara reacted first, a quick biotic push at the

grated decking the floor was made of. As it lifted and splintered, geth lost their footing, stumbling forwards, and Tali fired an electrical burst from her omnitool, splaying out bits of electronically charged metal to ground into each geth and send out shocks. A moment later a biotic flash of light tore into the geth ranks, sending two flying away brokenly, as Shepard's vanguard charge disrupted their ranks. She put the barrel of her Revenant to the nearest geth's head as it right to right itself, firing at point blank range, sending it to the deck, and ducked as another geth fired a shotgun at her, catching her side in the blast.

She swung to face it but it was hit by a heavy burst of fire from Shields, a shotgun blast from Tali, and several pistol shots from Liara all at once, flying back to the far wall in a splintered heap leaking white cooling fluid, staining the wall as it slid down it, the light in it's eye dimming slowly. Shepard stood, wincing, and Shields came up. "I expected more of them, honestly."

Shepard nodded ... "unless they're almost done here. Let's move out." They proceeded down the hallway, to where IT once was in the building, and Shields came to an abrupt stop.

One large wall had been torn away, replaced by the bulk of the geth cruiser attached to the side of the building. Heavy cables and large, insectile pylons pierced the building in a number of places, the second floor of the IT room shattered and crumbled to the floor. Heavy, blue metal curved pieces dominated the walls, snakelike cables almost obscenely jacked into the buildings mainframes and greenish angular overlays infesting the normal orange-glowing haptic interfaces of the computers.

Tali looked around, almost at a loss, before heading to one of the terminals. Shields, on the other hand, went to the communications array computer, typing something as she brought up a haptic interface. "Fuck, signals are still jammed. It's coming from that geth ship."

Shepard turned to Tali, who was slowly moving through the display in front of her. "What have we got, Tali?"

The little quarian shook her head and cursed. "The geth ship has it's mass effect core rigged to blow by a remote signal, Commander." She paused. "And ...the geth brought nuclear detonation devices as well. It's hard to get anything from the system but.. I think they plan to try to blow everything up."

Shepard spat. "Just like on Eden Prime, covering their tracks. Goddamn it. Any way to detach that ship? If it blows up, so does the comm relay."

Tali was again hacking, her gaze switching from omnitool to the display in front of her, which was flickering between normal orange and the greenish geth overlay. "I.. I think so. The geth ship is hooked on in four places, but most of the connections are just external. They actually hooked the ship into the comms relay to transmit a jamming signal. If we can disconnect that, then we can transmit out ourself, and maybe even use the relay to jam any signal to blow up the geth ship."

Shields nodded. "A captured geth cruiser would be a nice distraction for the Council." Shepard only grunted, before nodding. "Do it, Tali. Shields, bring up the comms display, I have a toy I want to use." She pulled up the many, many programs that had been loaded to her omni-tool by the Spectres at their HQ, and loaded up the one she was after. "The Spectre's have a wide-band jamming tool that has pre-programmed frequencies it lets through. I'll transmit those to Joker and we can get our signal out and get a move on."

Liara was looking around the room, particularly at the plinth of blue metal at the far end holding a glowing globe. "Shepard...what is this?"

Shepard frowned, as she sent the jamming packet to Shield's omnitool. "No idea. Why?"

Liara's voice sounded worried. "Everything else in the room is recognizable, but why would the geth

set this up and have it hooked to their ship?" She circled around the device, examining it closely, and began taking scans. Shepard chuckled. "Not a lot of time to stop and research right now, Doctor."

Liara nodded absently. "But the geth have not formed any alliances – or even any contacts – with any organic races since the war with the quarians. I just find it very odd that they would suddenly and completely ally with Saren. The Reapers should be a threat to them as well, unless they have some kind of ..." She frowned again.

Tali gave a small sound of pleasure. "I'm in! Shutting down their jamming field." She paused, and then tapped a control on her omni-tool, generating a thin-line plasma cutter. "Just let me cut the wires and we can transmit."

Shields nodded. "I'm ready when you are." Shepard turned back to Liara. "What is it?"

Liara's voice dropped in volume as she stood next to Shepard. "I am trying to figure out why my mother would be.. involved in this ... nightmare. What if Saren is trying to bring them back because he thinks he can deal with them?" Shepard snorted incredulously. "Then's he a goddamned lunatic. You saw that vision, Liara. They were..." She paused, wincing against the sudden feeling of nausea that rose in her with the vision, and she felt Liara take her arm. "Commander?" Shepard blinked away pain. "I'm fine. Just...still stuff sloshing around in my head." She held up a hand. "We'll talk about it later. Anyway, I've stopped caring about why. They have to be stopped."

Liara nodded, but turned away. "I ... know. But ... she is my mother, Shepard. I.."

Shepard inwardly cursed, realizing how callous that sounded, and then almost laughed aloud. *What kind of fool expects empathy or curiosity from the Butcher?* "I understand, but right now I don't have any choices, Doctor. Whatever happens, Saren has to be stopped. If we can talk him – and her – into surrendering, that's fine, but if they won't, the Council's orders were pretty clear."

Liara said nothing, looking back at the strange glowing plinth. "I just get the feeling there's something here we are not grasping, Commander. How did Saren get on this path in the first place? Why are the geth helping?" She made a nervous gesture with her hands, and turned back to face Shepard fully. "In my years of research, every time I tried to move forward without understanding why, it ended badly."

Shepard wished she could pinch the bridge of her nose, her head was full of disconnected thoughts. With a slow exhale of breath, she forced her voice to be steady. "And we'll do what we can to find those answers. I promise." She glanced over her shoulder. "Shields?" A pause, then she spoke. "It's up, Shepard."

Shepard stepped to the panel and triggered the broadcast key. "This is Commander Shepard, Council Spectre. I am requesting full fleet assistance at the planet Feros, Attican Beta cluster, Theseus system. The planet has been attacked by geth under the command of Saren Arterius. We have sightings of him on the ground, but we are pinned by at least two geth ships. The ground conditions are a category 5 biohazard. We require immediate assistance."

She put the message on repeat and watched as Beatrice loaded up the jamming program. "Joker, this is Shepard. Frequency 244.3 and 458.3 are clear, all other bands are jammed. I picked our standard ship comms bands but be aware of this. Any movement from Saren's ship?" Joker's voice was slightly distorted by the jamming, but clear. "Not yet, Commander. Ash says there's no movement at the colony beyond what they saw before."

Shepard nodded, and turned back to find Tali also examining the glowing ball in the plinth. "Any ideas, Tali? Liara thinks it's important." Tali shrugged. "I .. I haven't seen anything like this before. It's geth but..." She traced her fingers over faint marks on the borders of the metal. "This is quarian writing. They still use our language." Her voice had an odd note to it, but she continued. "It's ... talking about

their 'gods'. "Nazara comes from our future. Giver-of-Future clears the path of unity. All shall be one, one shall be zero. Giver-of-Future is the only path, the ... " she paused "...outcast? Heretic? Shall be left to zero-point energy states..."

Liara whispered. "It's a religious shrine."

Shepard snorted incredulously. "Well, that's a neat scam if I ever heard one. No matter. We'll examine all this stuff later. For now, we have to move out to the colony."

Shields nodded, and Shepard spoke into her comms. "Cole, change of plans. Move your people up here to the communications area. I want it guarded. We have what appears to be an empty geth ship here, rigged to blow, but we're blocking the signal. I need you to guard Tali'Zorah as she works with this to get it under control, and make sure no geth disrupt our comms."

Tali gave her a look but Shepard held up a hand. "Sorry, Tali, but I need you here to make sure that ship is safe. It could give us a lot of information on the geth and how to fight them, and quite frankly we're headed into what is likely to be a biohazard hot area."

Tali nodded. "Yes, commander." Her voice sounded subdued, and Shepard knelt down in front of her. "Hey. You did a great job. I just need to make sure that I have the right experts where they do the most good."

Shields walked up behind her. "So, you and I and the lady doc going after the turian?"

Shepard snorted. "We're stopping to pick up Wrex, too."

Shields rolled her eyes. "Fucking Wrex, Jesus. I about died when I saw that big turtle standing there. This should be an interesting fight." Shepard slung her weapons. "Let's move, people, we got a dumb turian to kill."

They headed down, leaving Tali alone, bathed in the light of the geth shrine, thinking.

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## Chapter 47: Chapter 41 : Feros , Colony

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*A/N: Well, my mother's surgery was this afternoon - and it went very well. The doctor says all of the tumorous mass was contained in one ovary but to be sure they did a full hysterectomy and also removed the other ovary. So that's a HUGE load off my back.*

*So, a few things: this introduces the other "two heads" of Cerberus. We already are familiar with the Illusive Man, but the mysterious Richard and General Florez also pop up. There will be more expansion of these two, but "Richard" is the really bat-shiat crazy one and Florez is the blood-thirsty one. Compared to them, the Illusive Man is actually quite restrained. Part of this set up is to explain why Cerberus shifted it's focus so much...but part is mostly due to logical changes.*

*Right now, things are almost 100% AU, but the story will slew back in the general direction of canon after this for a while. I'm just writing now to distract myself. I know Feros is kind of dragging on, but we're almost there. I hated how, in the game, you could never quite catch up to Saren. Regardless of if you hurried from mission to mission or spent weeks shooting up reaper maws, Saren was one step ahead and you were always the Boring Invulnerable Hero.*

*Updated: 10-25-2012 : some grammar, spelling, tense mistakes.*

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January 29th, 2183 10:45 A.M.

"..this is Commander Shepard, Council Spectre. I am requesting full fleet assistance at the planet Feros, Attican Beta cluster, Theseus system. The planet has been attacked by geth under the command of Saren Arterius. We have sightings of him on the ground, but we are pinned by at least two geth ships. The ground conditions are a category 5 biohazard. We require immediate assistance. ... "

The signal repeated, the iron-like voice of Shepard echoing faintly across the large room. Elegant marble tiling abutted against wood paneled walls, while ceiling fans efficiently whisked away smoke from the two cigarettes in the ashtray, one of which was picked up by a well-manicured hand.

The Illusive Man inhaled, savoring the rich Virginia tobacco, before chasing it's harshness with a shot of Chevas. "She's ... really quite resourceful. It's a pity she was so ruined by those criminals in her youth, she would have made a magnificent operative for us." He brushed a stray ash from his neo-cotton slacks with a small frown, the blue glow of his eyes dimmed as they narrowed to regard the other two figures sitting with him. "It's also a pity that same resourcefulness is being turned against us. . . something you assured us wouldn't happen, General."

General Rachel Florez glared back at him. "Don't start with me, Jack. If I told you once, I told you a thousand times, Sara isn't a simple goon. She'll be relentless in tracking Saren." She brushed back graying black hair from her face, which despite 40 years of service to the System Alliance was almost unlined, the eyes dark and mysterious, the lips thin and cruel, the nose a bobbed touch short of Roman. Her whip-thin frame was clothed in an uniform of Cerberus black and gold, with a Terra Firma gold fist pin on her lapel and a massive pistol at her hip. "I warned you that this course of action was going to lead us in places that would possibly expose us, but you were so sure you could somehow pull her off on some wild goose chase and then guide her to Saren at a time of your choosing."

The third figure shrugged his massive shoulders and gave a cold smile revealing stainless steel teeth. "Rachel, calm down. We know you're upset because of the staged suicide and the reaction of your family, and that you disagree with where we are going." The man stood, stretching as he inhaled on his own cigarette, and his gigantic , 7 foot 2 inch frame blocked the view of the status reports on one wall. "Shepard is exactly what we need her to be, a foil to Saren. Whether or not the turian is telling the truth is immaterial to me. What I want is the geth , subordinate and obedient, and a grateful Citadel Council that puts a human in it's midst, and chaos for us to operate in." He paused, turning to look over his shoulder. "Jack's political scheming and your ... wasteful military buildups are your own choices, of course, but we will prevail in the end with our research and with the united human spirit."

The Illusive Man, Jack Harper, and the Iron General, Rachel Florez, gave each other a look , before the Illusive Man raised an eyebrow. "We all agreed on our course of action, Richard. Saying she's a 'foil' to Saren wasn't .. exactly what we planned." A drag on the cigarette, followed by another drink, prefaced his next words. "Saren and I have a . . . history. When he brought his news to us, I thought it a trick. But our investigations bore out his words. To now state that we're merely along for the ride...some of what I've seen in my past, on Shanxi, makes me wonder if he's not onto something we should be paying more attention to."

The man named Richard turned fully to face his angry colleagues, his black-silk shirt loose on his muscled frame, his face in a rakish smile. The planes of his face were cold, hard, and angular, coal black eyes over a hard beak of a nose. Long black hair fell to his shoulders as he spread his large hands in a gesture. "Yes, Jack, I know. And now we have a difficulty. Saren came to us seeking information on how to understand the Beacon's images. We gave him the best lead we had, and he moved on it."

Florez snorted angrily. "The Thorian was our best lead to decipher the Mars Archive, and truly push humanity ahead. If we had spent the money and effort on this that we spent on Saren-"

The Illusive Man shook his head. "And if the turian is right? If he really IS onto something? If there

really is a race of machine aliens coming back to destroy everything? As much as I dislike it, the turian's idea holds value. Prove our worth and we can survive this. Prove that humanity is valuable, and we may position ourselves to even greater gains, or at least a better understanding of what we may be facing."

Richard turned away, shrugging. "You're right, of course. As crazy as it sounds, what Saren is saying backs up some of the ... things you have encountered, as well as some of our own researches. It doesn't matter that what he claims is going to happen is ... unlikely." He paused, thinking. "Whatever he's going through has taken its toll on him, that is for sure. It's made him unstable, and potentially dangerous. If the choice is ignoring what he says and making him an enemy, or using him and keeping him where we can put him down if need be, I will choose prudence every time. So yes, we give up the Thorian. And yes it's likely that someone may put two and two together eventually, and figure out that we sold Exogeni out. Certainly Exogeni would know, if any of the executives survived..."

Florez rolled her eyes and tapped on her omni-tool. "We can solve that right now. I'll make sure they're all taken care of." A moment, and she gave a cold little smile. "I doubt anyone survived his attack, but if they did they will be dead in a few hours. So, that's one loose thread solved. That still leaves anyone on site..."

The Illusive Man was still frowning. "I'm not worried about them. They'll keep silent, if only not to get dragged into Citadel Court on war crimes. And once the Council goes in, our operatives can ... scrub ... some of the databases. But I'm still not following where this is going, as far as what sort of pay off we expect in the long run by betraying our investment in Saren. Let's assume he's right: Saren finds whatever the Beacon is talking about and ... brings back these robots?"

Richard laughed. "Of course not. I have zero intent of allowing him to succeed, and I have no worries that he will. Even with an army of geth, he's needed our assistance many times over. He'll do so again. And when we get a clear goal of what he's doing, and how he controls the geth... well, Shepard will get a well timed hint of his location and dispose of him. The Council will see humanity as heroes, but no one will pay any attention to crazed visions of giant ships." A pause. "What I don't want to do, however, is just write him off as crazy... if the threat is real, yes, we'll stop him, but we'll need to know what to prepare for in the long run."

The Illusive Man finished his cigarette. "That leaves aside the powerful ship Saren seems to control. Capturing that should be our objective. It may even be how he is able to control the geth."

Florez shrugged. "Based on the intelligence we got from the Council report, the geth are answering to someone called Nazara, who isn't Saren. But we've checked all our databases, even captured a quarian to interrogate... 'Nazara' isn't a quarian word. We're not sure ... what it is, but I still think this is a poor idea. We're fumbling in the dark, with unknown variables and a possible end of all life scenario – it's no time for taking risks to capture more assets."

Richard picked up his drink and shook his head, his mane of black hair flying as he did so. "You are too .. conservative, Rachel. We've moved our pieces. Either Saren is successful on Feros, and the plan moves forward, or he's destroyed, and we are the beneficiaries of his labor. And if giant death robots are coming, well, they aren't coming in the near future. We have plenty of time not only to prepare, but to ensure such preparations will leave Cerberus – and humanity – in a stronger place in the aftermath of any such conflict."

Florez frowned. "So you don't believe Saren fully? About the .. Reapers?"

Richard only smiled again, steel teeth flashing. "I think the Protheans may have been wiped out by some AI race, and that Saren has stumbled on to their technology, and that the Protheans recorded their demise. But that was fifty THOUSAND years ago. If such things were out there, they'd have already

wiped out all life eons ago."

Jack smirked. "Dr. T'Soni believes that there were earlier extinctions."

Richard only shrugged. "And I believe it's unlikely to happen in our lifetimes, or that of our children or grandchildren. There may be truth to it...but in the end, we're taking all gambles equally. If Saren is right, why, then we aid him and perhaps can find out more of what is actually going on...and if he fails, or is wrong, we – pardon the expression – *reap* the benefits of our alliance with him. Either way, I plan to win."

The three heads of Cerberus fall silent, as reports begin to come in of a new issue.

---

Wrex didn't much care for being bottled up in his armor, standing around doing nothing. He could understand why Shepard was being cautious, but at the same time, if Saren was on the planet, the best thing to do was charge in and catch him off guard.

It was with a sense of relief when he saw the Commander's Mako pull up, and Shepard exit the back hatch. Her armor was discolored on the left side, showing she had seen a fight, but no one looked seriously hurt. Shepard waved Alenko over. "New orders, Lieutenant. Master Chief Cole is guarding the transmission tower, and Tali is there with him. The way back should be clear enough – go ahead and continue to dig in here, but send half the mercs up to the HQ to help dig in there as well."

Kaiden nodded, and was about to go when Shepard caught his arm. "One more thing. If we don't report back in, don't follow up. Joker has orders to stop Saren's ship no matter what, and that may leave you with no ride off the planet. If that occurs, try to strip the comm gear from the HQ and fall back to the High Dock. Citadel fleets should be on their way soon, just..explain what you've seen here."

Kaiden frowned, his faceplate transparent to show his features. "That's .... wouldn't it be better to charge in with the entire squad?" Wrex grinned at that, the human looked soft but there was a core of a warrior in him, still. But Shepard's head shake amused him even more when she spoke. "No, we've got Garrus and Ashley there, with Wrex, myself, Liara, and Shields that's enough. Any more marines or mercs and we start losing mobility and speed, and weight of numbers will only be a hindrance if there's colonists as hostages."

Kaiden nodded and saluted, and Shepard turned to Wrex, as Shields strode up. "We're going after Saren, Wrex. We'll need your help, but I think we've got him cornered."

Wrex only smiled, and unslung his shotgun. "Finally. All this standing around made me hungry."

---

The drive to the colony was pensively quiet. Liara was in the corner by herself, head hanging down, still feeling the effects of the biotic toss on the door she had performed. Shields was reassembling her sniper rifle, while Wrex was sleeping as Shepard drove.

They stopped about half a kilometer out, right before the colony outskirts began, and (after waking up Wrex) crouched and walked in cover towards where Garrus and Ashley were. Shepard carefully knelt down next to turian. "What have we got, Detective?"

Garrus grunted. "At least fifteen geth, most of them the trooper type, but two of have rocket launchers. Probably about three hundred colonists. A lot of them seem to be in the main freighter, there was some kind of argument about ten minutes ago among the ones outside, who are all over-grown with ... whatever that stuff is on them now. "

Shepard sighted in her own sniper rifle, observing. The colonists she could see were only a handful,

most in jumpsuits. They had no breathing protection, and as she watched, one turned to her direction, as it lifted boxes. The skin was mottled and vines seemed to grow over their face, tendrils sinking into their eyes ... and more covering the rest of the body, like an obscene floral bloom.

She sighed , and put down her rifle, shaking her head. "I don't think these people are viable, Garrus."

The turian gave her a sidelong look, then nodded, calmly, his blank faceplate unreadable. "I... felt the same way, Commander. But they're your people, not mine."

Shepard scuttled back, towards where the others were, waving Ash and Garrus over. "Alright, here's the situation, people. It looks like most of the colonists are on the ships." She dropped to a crouch, then glanced at Shields. "Give us the layout."

Shields drew a rough map in the dirt with her finger. "The colony is built between two Prothean towers, both of which are anchored to the aqueducts drawing water from the poles. Between the two is a shallow bowl, with two large hallways running below the towers off from it. The northern tower tunnel runs out to the power station and eventually to where supply ships could dock. The south tower tunnel runs past us here – " she points to a break in the stonework, where a ladder has been installed – "and continues on towards a sort of arena."

She draws a shallow line in the dirt. "The bowl has walls, and that's where we put most of the colony. The main freighter, the Aquinas Arch, has been mostly disassembled and used for modular housing. There's three rows of that on the far north wall. Below that is the food supply area and a cargo clearing area." She drew another line, this south of the first. "There's more colony shelters along the south wall arching round to the north east. The big ship in the middle is the Demeter's Share, the other freighter, which is still being taken apart and is used for a medbay and offices. It also has a power crane for moving the remaining freight around."

Ashley nodded. "Kinda...sparse...for a colony. Defenses?"

Shields shook her head. "None, really. GARDIAN towers , but that's about it. We had five entire platoons of Exogeni Special Response units on hand, and 15 battle-suits. . ." With a sigh, she laughed softly. "I never would have thought we'd be hit this hard."

Shepard made a vague motion with her hand. "Command sucks, doesn't it?"

Shields turned her head with a glare. "I didn't have to sacrifice my men in a meaningless attack, at least. I suppose I should be grateful for that." Turning back to the map, she pointed. "It looks like your turian's frigate is parked at the near dock...but I don't see any sign of him." She pointed, at last, to the freighter again. "The Thorian is accessed via tunnel below the freighter, which requires operating the crane."

Garrus spoke up. "The geth were setting up several large, bulky crates earlier, one next to each of the big towers." Shepard nodded. "Nukes, we think. They're going to do here what they tried to do on Eden Prime – blow up the evidence. It's not happening." With a deep exhalation of breath, she looked at each one of them and then spoke. "Garrus, you and Ash hang back. Keep on the high round, here and ... " A pause, and she pointed to a semi-concealed alcove to the right "... over there. You'll snipe anything that gets past us and ensure we have backup. Wrex, Shields, Liara and I will storm in to the colony. Priority is on putting down the geth...if the colonists interfere..."

Wrex shrugged. "If they get in the way, they die." Ashley gave him an ugly look and shook her head. "We can't just kill innocen-"

Shepard cut her off. "Wrex is right. Anyone trying to stop us is with Saren, and that's not going to happen. Even if every person in the colony dies, millions more will die if he's successful."

Ashley looked stunned. "We aren't even going to try to rescue them, get them help?"

Shields gave her a pitying look. "Those people are rejects from the Penal Legions, and they're infected. I'd strongly advise just shooting them." Shepard interrupted, her voice cold. "My orders are clear. Wrex, take the lead. We'll cover you, Liara, stay between us. Remember – we have to stop Saren. Everything else is secondary."

They all pulled out weapons, and Wrex began moving.

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The assault started well. Wrex charged forward, breaking through the light fence at the colony's edge, leveling his shotgun at the two geth spinning to face him. The giant weapon boomed, blowing the first geth off its feet and sending it staggering into its partner, who also stumbled. Wrex wasted no time, hurling a biotic push at the pair and sending them skidding across the hard concrete floor of the colony, only to crash into a pair of colonists, pinning them. A moment later one of his grenades landed next to the stunned pile, a second before blasting them to plasma.

Garrus and Ash fired, focusing on geth trying to bring up more weapons. Shepard charged, a blaze of blue light the only warning before she erupted into the midst of a pack of geth. She ducked under a wild flurry of shots, slamming her ODIN shotgun into the geth's eye and pulling the trigger with a snarl. Even as that geth fell back missing its head, three more advanced, pulse rifles flaring, sending a cascade of plasma darts raining around Shepard.

With a grunt of exertion, Liara hurled biotic energy up, snaring the half-weakened support beam holding up part of the tower wall, sending it flying. It slammed into one of the geth, bursting the machine apart as the three-meter long metallic spar drove in its chest, pinning to the ground. The other two geth barely had time to register the loss as several large pieces of Prothean stonework tumbled on top of them, smashing one utterly flat, spraying out streams of white coolant, the other one completely buried, its voice lashing out in a digital scream.

More geth were moving up, but now Ash and Garrus were into the groove, one dropping shields while the other one took the headshot. Six geth hurtled over a low barricade of crates and boxes, only for three of them to drop instantly – two to headshots, one to a burst of auto-fire from Shields. Shepard smirked behind her helmet as she threw a grenade, the flat disk actually attaching to the eye-lens of the lead geth, who dropped its rifle to paw at its head before the hi-ex explosion ripped through the geth, sending shrapnel scything through the ones behind them. Two colonists were also caught in the blast, not even screaming from pain as they were hit, and then shambled forward.

Garrus frowned, going for a knee shot, the heavy wire round literally bisecting the man's leg, but the dead eyes only flickered in his direction as the crippled human now crawled forward. Ashley let out a moan of dismay as she put several shots into the man, finally blowing his head off, in a spray of red blood and disturbingly green fluids.

Shepard waved forward Wrex, and Liara and Shields followed. "These things...aren't even human any more, are they, Bea?"

The woman shrugged, stopping to fire a long stream of shots at a geth rounding the corner with a plasma thrower, sending it to the ground. "I don't think so..." She frowned, as the geth suddenly fell back, covering their retreat with suppressive fire. "The hell...they're falling back towards Saren's shuttle."

Shepard barely had time to register the words before a chorus of low, tortured moans erupted from the cargo ship ahead. She slammed herself into the cover of a nearby pillar, gripping her ODIN tightly. Liara slipped in behind her, while Wrex crouched behind a heavy crate. "The hell is that noise?"

Her question was answered as the doors to the cargo bay of the ship flew open, and a tide of green-tinted humanoids poured out. They didn't even look human, with sloped, heavy foreheads over empty, dark eye sockets of smooth, fibrous flesh. Their arms were too long, hanging below their knees, ending in sharp, root-like claws, and their spines were curved, knobby and deformed, giving them a half-melted, half-finished look. They staggered forward, moaning and reaching, dripping with vile, vicious clear green slime that smoked as it smeared over the concrete.

Shepard glared back at Shields. "...Zombies? *Really?* "

Shields answer was to direct a burst of fire in their direction, and the rest of the group followed. Liara and Wrex threw out shockwaves of biotic force, staggering the shambling creatures, while Ash and Garrus opened up with assault rifles, trying to suppress their charge.

The creatures were smashed back, falling in splashes of green, but dozens more came on, unheeding of wounds. Liara lit a group up with a warping field, dark energies eating away at them, while Wrex roared out a Tuchankan battle cry and opened up with his shotgun, the incendiary ammo blasting down three and four at a time, sending them down to the ground, smoldering.

The third wave rushed along, trampling their predecessors into a smoking, green slurry, and reached the group, clawing and vomiting forth green paste that immediately sent alarms off in Shepard's visor. She swung out a biotically charged kick, slamming the one closest to her aside, and ducked under the slash of another to fire her shotgun into its torso, sending it skidding back with a soccer-ball sized hole in its abdomen. Two more clambered onto her, while Shields fell out of cover, stammering out curses, firing wildly.

Liara screamed in agony as one of the things dropped behind her and vomited over her back, acid spit seeping into her armor. Garrus cursed, dropping his over-heated assault rifle and pulling out the Talon pistol, putting several shots into the monstrosity, blasting it off of her back, and Liara moaned as she slumped to her knees. Shepard drew back as Wrex blasted away two more lumbering things, raising her omni-tool. "Liara!"

The asari grimaced in pain but shook her head. "I'm... fine." Shepard ran the omni-tool over her back, and applied medigel and then a layer of omni-gel. "Your suit is breached, T'soni..." Shepard bit her lip, trying to figure out how to get the asari back out of the fight, and Liara put her hand on Shepard's arm. "I'll... be fine." Exhaling in pain, she forced herself back to her feet, gritting her teeth as she focused her will and sent out another spiraling pulse of blue biotics, slamming six of the Thorian's things back into a nearby low wall. The force her strike broke four of them in half, sending pieces of plant-like flesh and sprays of green fluid in all directions, while the other two were sent spinning over the barricade only to be torn apart by two rapid-fire bursts of Avenger fire from Shields. "We... have to move on. No time for .." She panted, unable to continue, and Shepard closed her eyes.

*She's right, dammit.* With a snarl, Shepard turned back to the cargo bay doors, pulling a pair of grenades out and hurling them at the stream of figures emerging. "Wrex! Warp the cargo doors shut!" Her words were punctuated by the blast of high explosives, sending bits of green everywhere, as Wrex gestured with his free hand. Blue radiance enfolded the doors, and the slammed shut, crushing two more of the things trying to emerge, even as the metal of the doors deformed and shuddered.

Shepard vaulted the low cover in front of her, activating her omni-tool, slathering the crudely welded doors with rapidly hardening omni-gel. There was the sound of furious pounding from within, and the groan of tortured metal, but the doors held. Shepard pulled the last of her grenades and scattered them on the ground in proximity mode before backing away, looking around.

Garrus came up, a bit of green slime dripping from his left boot where he had kicked in the head of one of the things. "I... I think that's all of them, Commander." He still held his pistol, looking about, as

Shields and Ashley came up. "What now?"

Shepard turned back to Liara, who was adjusting something on her omni-tool. "Liara, are you alright?"

The little asari gave a thin smile, visible through the clear faceplate of her armor, her large eyes shadowed with pain and fatigue. "Y-yes... Commander. The armor is mostly intact, and the omni-gel patch you put on it will hold for another few hours."

Shepard hesitated, thinking. "Garrus...we need to figure out our tactical approach here." The turian squared himself to face her. "What kind of spacing do we have in there, Commander Shields?"

Beatrice eyed the C-Sec officer for a long moment before responding. "Not much. Up-close communication with the Thorian was ... considered hazardous. Usually, exchanges were done by the Thorian .. absorbing and then spitting out a thrall. It would be conveyed to a interlink nearby where it would review and translate Prothean materials beamed from the Mars Archive. The ship's crane opens a tunnel, which leads to a security room and the materials room. Below that is an airlock, and a set of stairs down to the chamber the Thorian is in. We think it was some kind of meeting space, it's a big area, but the Thorian takes up most of it."

She paused, glancing around, and Shepard nodded. "Alright. Garrus, Ashley, find those nukes Tali was talking about. Get them disarmed and de-linked from their triggering devices. We'll stay in comms, if we run into trouble you can pull us out." Garrus nodded, but Ashley stepped forward. "Is...that wise, Commander? The doctor is wounded -"

Liara gave a frown, forcing herself to stand erect. "Whatever is going on down there, it involves Protheans, Commander. I need to be there." She hesitated, and then firmed her mouth. "And my mother could be there, too."

Shepard gave Liara a very hard , searching look, and then nodded, voice cold. "The doctor will come with us, you and Garrus are the ones with technical training to disarm the nukes...and I need my heaviest hitters as back up in case we chew off more than we can swallow." She adjusted the choke of her shotgun and gestured to the crane controls. "Get moving, people."

Ash swallowed , and with Garrus turned away to find the detonation devices. Wrex grunted and lifted his massive head. "What about these det-packs I've got?" Shepard nodded. "I don't want nukes going off and killing everyone, but I'm not going to let this monstrosity live, either. I plan to get what I need and blow it to hell." She paused to look at Shields, who only gave a weary shake of her head. "I won't stop you, Shepard. If I can get out of this without being executed by the Council, I'll be happy."

Shepard moved towards the crane controls. "You'll be the only one."

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Aboard the Talon's Justice, Saren's ship, Rthar Pectoris shook his head at the geth unit that reported. "So Saren is trapped down there with that plant, and you just retreated?" The turian pilot growled, clicking noises in his throat sounding as his plates ground together, but the geth unit only gave a jerky nod. "Correct. The combat-ability of Saren-Prophet , Benezia-Prophet, and Skal-Captain are sufficient to defeat Shepard-Predator and associated battle entities. We judged it more important to secure exit vehicle against assault or sabotage."

The turian exhaled, his head hurting. Working for Saren was never .. pleasant, but at least he knew where his next paycheck was coming from. Although ... he didn't really care about the money any more, not as much as he used to. He dragged his talon along his green markings, his white plated face pensive in the dim light of the bridge.

There was no one else to ask – the asari aboard the ship were damn near mindless, and he neither knew

nor cared why. With a sigh, he gestured with his hand to the geth. "Go ahead and get dug in , then. The engines are hot and we're still in good shape, but the amount of ordinance we dropped on the Exogeni HQ and then to take out the cruisers in orbit ... we don't have enough missiles for a real fight."

The geth paused. "Shepard-Predator engaged geth forces upon system entry. We still have one destroyer and one frigate operable, one heavily damaged cruiser that is currently making repairs. We believe that we can dissuade any pursuit from Shepard-Predator's warship."

The turian nodded again, and flung himself back down in the pilot's seat, triggering the comms console. "Master Saren...we have issues."

Saren's growling voice did not respond, instead it was the dulcet tones of Benezia. "Now is not a good time, Cera Rthar. Saren is ... occupied."

The turian gave a snort. "And he's about to be more occupied – Shepard got past the geth and the plant things and is headed your way. She's got people topside roaming about, probably looking to take out the nukes, and we can't raise the HQ tower. I'm assuming that means we're about out of troops and time...madame."

The comm was silent, then she spoke again. "Shepard is coming by himself?"

Rthar's mandible flickered. "No. There is a krogan, a turian ,two humans, and an asari with her...looks like the turian and one of the humans is looking for the nukes." He stopped talking, as he heard a grunt and then a new voice, that of the krogan. "A krogan? Describe him!"

The geth spoke. "Blood red heavy armor, no shoulder pads, a long black assault shotgun. The helmet is black and red. The battle-attendants of Shepard-Predator referred to this one as 'Wrex'". The low chuckle that came back through the comms was chilling, but nothing compared to the icy hate in the krogan's voice a moment later. "Urdnot Wrex...get the ship ready, turian. We'll deal with that old fool and Shepard too."

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## **Chapter 48: Chapter 42 : Fleet Master Ivan Dragunov**

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*A/N: You can't have SaBC without ... Westerlund News! The Fleet Master's name is a subtle shout out to another Fleet Master.*

*The next chapter after this will close out Feros. Sorry for not updating sooner, but my mom's still recovering and work got a bit hairy. The next update should be out in a day or two, then one right after that, then we'll have to see.*

*Updated 11-1: minor formatting*

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**January 29th , 2183 10:50 A.M.**

DOWNLOADING: Data feed, prime broadcast segment 54, terminal date 2183.29.9

*Manifest dump 565482-core beta, unclassified*

*This is an official Systems Alliance data capture dump , replication or rebroadcast is restricted.*

*Transcript begins, identifiers J: al-Jilani U : Donnel Udina I: Irrissa Te'Shora D: Ivan Dragunov*

*Keywords: geth, Butcher, Spectre, Therum, T'soni*

BEGIN:

"Westerlund news! All the news , fit or unfit to print, 24/7!"

J: "Good afternoon. I'm **Khalisah Bint Sinan al-Jilani**, Westerlund News Network. Today we're covering the top story on all the comm-links : freshly released footage from the distant colony world of Therum, where it appears Commander Shepard has thwarted what we are being told was possibly forward reconnaissance for another Eden Prime style attack."

J: "Today, we have Irrissa Te'Shora, sub-adjunct to Asari Councilor Tevos. And we also have Ambassador Donnel Udina, Humanity's representative to the Citadel Council. Finally, on vidcom we have the Alliance Fleet Master, Admiral Ivan Dragunov, who has additional information for us.

Video of Normandy engaging geth on the ground while Marines continue a firefight, Mako in background taking down Colossus

J: "What do we know about what transpired on Therum, Ambassador? Right now all we have is some security footage and a lot of speculation based on orbital pictures from some volus ships, including wile rumors about a geth invasion."

U: "Our information comes from the report Commander Shepard filed with the Citadel council yesterday. She was dispatched to Therum to rendezvous with a Prothean research expert, Doctor Liara T'soni."

J: "T'soni? Isn't that a relative of the Matriarch Benezia T'soni, who is now wanted as an accomplice of Saren Arterius?"

U: "Correct. We have already performed extensive background checks on Dr. T'soni. The last time she saw her mother in person was almost 20 years ago. At this time, C-Sec does not feel she is a threat, and her field of research was deemed valuable in figuring out what Saren's goals might be with the Prothean Beacon he attempted to steal."

J: "I see. And was the Commander successful in her mission?"

U: *nodding* "She was indeed, Ms. al-Jilani. It appears that the Prothean dig site the doctor was working at had come under attack by geth, who were in the process of fortifying it. It's possible, although we are still investigating, that Saren planned to kill her off to prevent any useful intelligence from reaching us, as well as possibly launching an attack on Therum itself."

I: "I should interject here that C-Sec and STG task forces are still investigating the site, but the geth had landed in excess of 100 units, and they had at least two dropships. Council response forces flushed out and destroyed 2 geth cruisers in the system's asteroid belt, and Commander Shepard reported additional forces in the dig site itself."

U: *nodding to Irrissa* "Most importantly, Doctor T'soni was rescued and is now onboard the Normandy, aiding in the investigation and pursuit of Saren. In fact, she has already proceeded to a new objective and her last transmission indicated she was closing in on Saren's whereabouts."

J: "Impressive stuff. The footage we have from security cameras at the dig site indicates it was a very nasty battle, and the Commander's ship actually was taking heavy ground fire. Given the amount of threat possessed by Saren, is one small frigate enough of a response, even one commanded by Shepard?"

D: "It is not merely one "small frigate", ma'am. The SR-1 is the single most advanced ship in the entire Alliance fleet, and packs the armament load out of a heavy destroyer. It's nimble and agile, and it has the ability to penetrate enemy space without being detected. It's exact capabilities are , of course, classified , but I can say that it's more than a match for just about anything short of a dreadnaught it can

run into. Furthermore, this isn't really about ship combat. Once Shepard tracks Saren down, the Citadel and Alliance fleets are on hot standby to move in. I don't care how many geth he has or how big his ships are, nothing is going to stand up to 20 dreadnaughts and over 200 cruisers. "

I: "More importantly, Shepard's quick action thwarted whatever it was Saren was trying to do, which gives our supporting STG and C-Sec investigators more time to find out further details of his plans. He's on the run, and we expect to have him in custody soon enough."

J: "That's reassuring news to the colonies, I can tell you that. But the reactions on Palaven and Thessia still continue. Yesterday we had an interview with Matriarch Thiala , who claimed that the charges brought against Matriarch Benezia were completely speculative and unsupported. How does the Council plan to proceed when and if Saren and Benezia are brought into custody?"

D: *chuckling* "Shepard isn't known for taking prisoners, ma'am, and I strongly doubt that Saren is going to surrender. We're fully aware of the strife this has caused , not just on the capital worlds but in many places. Saren was a damned hero in my books for many years, and my own granddaughter was a follower of some of Benezia's teachings."

D: *pause with a grim look* "But that doesn't change the fact that we have extremely hard evidence – financial transactions, recordings of their voices that have been triple checked, eyewitness accounts, and now ship transactions paid for explicitly by Saren and Benezia. People have a right to be upset, and if they are brought in – or killed – I would expect the Alliance and Citadel to jointly release the evidence we've gathered proving their guilt."

I: "That is indeed the intent of the Council. However, doing so now would reveal methods and sources we are not prepared to put at risk. I will say this: the demonstrators on Thessia and Palaven are at best misguided. To suggest that somehow the Council is 'favoring' humanity is not true. I have heard complaints from the volus and the hanar, but the realistic truth is that to contribute to the Council requires more than merely financial efforts, it means having the military force to help us defend and settle the galaxy. Regardless of what any race thinks, the humans have been more effective at that in a short span of time than any other species."

J: "Understood. But I come back to my earlier point, about the level of response. There are other demonstrations and complaints: specifically, independent colonies are upset nothing has been done to secure their space, and the Corporate Court issued a very strong statement about the "unhelpful attitude" of the Council and the Alliance in terms of protecting their interests. Just yesterday there was a savage geth attack on the corporate headquarters of the Exogeni company, which left over 1300 people dead, and two minor geth attacks on the digs at Chros, which were driven off by Blue Suns security forces. How much effort – aside from Commander Shepard – is being made to stop the larger geth threat to these independent areas?"

U: *irritated* "Ms. Al-Jilani , the only alternatives we have at this juncture are to respond to events as they happen. We are no in position to go on random hunts for geth when that exposes other colonies to invasion, not just from geth but from all the other unsavory parties in the galaxy, such as pirates, slavers, and rogue mercenary groups. Commander Shepard has our most advanced ship – "

J: *interrupting* "Which was pointed out before, and doesn't answer the question. The public isn't really concerned about the political maneuvering. Comm buoys and 'rapid reaction fleets' and additional mechs sound good on paper, but there are over a thousand people dead and hundreds more wounded in the Exogeni attack. Is the Council sure that taking out Saren will stop the geth threat to our homes? Dr. David Archer felt otherwise."

D: "Ma'am, to be blunt, we don't know. And I probably should not say this, but if the public has expectations then they need to understand and accept the realistic limits. The very ugly truth is that

Exogeni got hit because they made it very clear they didn't *want* Alliance or Council ships or forces anywhere near them, out of fear of 'industrial espionage', which is likely meaning they were doing something they didn't want anyone to find out about. Same with Ilium, Noveria, Bekenstein, and most of the corporate worlds, and the fringe colonies who refuse to participate in the Systems Alliance colony continua." *angry expression* "If we're not allowed to do our jobs, then people are going to suffer, and that is due to the corporations, not a lack on our end."

J: "And you don't feel you have a duty to protect the people on these worlds?"

D: *lifts chin* "Ma'am, I am the Fleet Master of the Alliance Navy. My job is to protect the Systems Alliance core and affiliated worlds, protect the peace and uphold SA law. It's all well and good to play games with words, but I have zero interest in that. If corporate worlds won't allow our security forces in, then they can deal with the ramifications themselves."

U: *looks very agitated, but is cut off by Iressia*

I: "The Council has already made their position on this very clear. The Citadel fleet cannot and will not be broken up to safeguard independent entities. Colonies who refuse to follow Citadel laws and regulations or to pay Citadel taxes and fees cannot and will not be offered assistance."

J: "You don't think that's inhuman? There are millions of people in the unregistered colonies-"

U: *harshly* "They wanted to be independent? Let them do so. They want to ignore calls for aid when we get hit by pirates, to ignore calls for support when we need help evacuating colonies from a natural disaster, then expect us to help them? Not a chance. The Corporate Court has been investigated and fined 19 times in the past six months by the Spectres for violations of Citadel law and it has the arrogance to upbraid us? Outrageous."

J: "That is, sadly, little comfort to millions of colonists who do not control the choices the corporations make, or the charters of independent colonies."

D: *snorts* "Then if you're watching and you're in that situation, get out of those places now. It's up to the individual to choose. But I'm pretty tired of these so-called 'sovereign sentients' who rail against big governments and 'alien overlords' and basically a hundred undertones of Terra Firma-ist racist garbage who are the first to scream for help when they're in trouble..."

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With a sigh of disgust, the vidscreen was cut off. "They are nothing if not predictable." Tetricus' voice was pitched low, almost a growl, his stance stiff and unmoving in the black robes. The dimly lit room he was in, illuminated only a by a large array of status screens and the power conduit in the ceiling, was almost sepulchral.

"It does not matter. Everything has been put into the proper place. Infiltration teams 4, 5, and 11 will move into the Exogeni wreckage in two hours for data salvage. Monitoring team six reported Cerberus assassins taking out off-world Exogeni executives, we'll have them picked up and debriefed." The voice was smooth, but almost gutter, icy in tone and filled with a basso power that made the turian's spurs flex with instinctual tremors. Tetricus did not reveal this, of course, only nodding. "Understood. And then?" The massive figure behind the desk spread a massive three fingered hand, the bisected wrist bones twisting as it rotated in a 'throw away' gesture. "Liquidate them once we've learned what we need."

Tetricus nodded again. "What about Shepard? Wrex's last report indicated they were going into a combat situation on Feros. . . and the message we just intercepted indicates Saren might be on the ground. Do we act?"

The Shadow Broker placed both massive hands on the desk , eyes faintly glowing in the dim light. "No. We wait. But I want shadowing teams covering every FTL lane and mass relay point out of the system. I want Saren's base location and I want it before we give it to Shepard to wreck. I must know why Saren is pursuing his course of action before committing the Broker Network fully to any decision."

Tetrimus tapped some controls on his omni-tool. "What about the ... political issues? I can see why the Council and the Alliance are acting this way, but it leaves Saren every unaffiliated colony and corporate world to hide himself on."

The Broker flickered his eyes back to the monitoring screens. "The Alliance is infiltrated by Cerberus. Their reticence has more to do with Cerberus desiring a free hand in recruiting and basing in the unaffiliated colonies than any actual interest in the tax revenues or conscription status of less than 19 million colonists. The Council's perspective is , as usual, more hidebound. Neither Asari nor Turian naval tactics are designed for patrolling defensive measures, and Salarians prefer to strike from stealth."

Tetrimus' mandible twitched. "The idiocy of it offends." To his surprise the Broker gave his version of a laugh, a grumbling, grating wheeze that trailed off into a rattle. "Stupidity is the currency that validates politics, Tetrimus. Go. Execute and return when results are prepared."

Without wasting further conversation, the turian turned and stalked away, robes trailing soot-black behind him. As the door shut with his passing, the Broker pulled up a pair of images, the Binary Helix logo next to the Cerberus logo. Both had the same color scheme, but the Binary Helix logo had the two hexagons aligned, not offset as the Cerberus one did, and the color placements were reversed. The Broker's mouth split open in a triangular shape, lined with razor sharp teeth, and he laughed again.

"All too easy." Tapping a control on his desk, he brought up one of his remote agents. "Get me Lorik Qu'in."

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## Chapter 49: Chapter 43 : Feros, Defeat

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*A/N: I'm not 100% happy with this chapter, but I've been fiddling with it and I can't make it any better without rest and hitting it again later. Feedback on what I need to fix with it would be very welcome.*

*I've had this battle in my head for a while. The whole series of events on Feros made so little sense to me (unlike Novaria , which was well done, and Therum, which was mostly okay) that I always tried to get past it as quickly as possible. IF the Thorian has spores everywhere, why isn't everyone dominated? Why does Saren try to blow up the Beacon and Eden Prime and not take out the Thorian when he has the chance?*

*I think this, if not better, at least leaves fewer. . . unanswered questions.*

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**January 29th , 2183 11:20 A.M.**

Shepard adjusted the choke on her ODIN shotgun as Shields operated the crane, thoughts racing, hands seeking something to do. The area was almost too quiet, her armored feet sliding slightly in the green-spattered muck near the cargo doors next to the crane. The pounding on the doors from the creatures within had ominously and suddenly stopped a few seconds before, and Shepard wondered what was happening.

With a creaking lurch, a segment of ugly gray duracrete was levered out of the way, scrape marks and deep gouges showing this movement was a frequent occurrence. The block swung up, ponderously slow, hoisted by the crane's whining servos, revealing a dimly lit metal staircase leading down, with packed earth walls visible below the concrete foundation the ship above it was parked on. Shepard exhaled and glanced over her shoulder.

Wrex was standing solidly, his battered red armor discolored from the Thorian thralls he had blown to bits. He reloaded his weapon, swapping out his usual incendiaries for a shredder mod that would spray out clouds of hyper-sharpened flechettes in a broad swath. His helmet nodded as her eyes flickered over him.

Shields was locking down the crane, her silvery-grey armor pitted and scored, the Exogeni symbol on the left arm almost invisible under the green gore caked there. Her gray eyes met Shepard's for a moment, blasted, cold, and ... wounded, and Shepard looked away. Shields' voice was cold and steady as she spoke a moment later. "It's all clear, and I put a quick password on the controls so someone can't just come along and lock us in."

Shepard nodded. "Good thinking. Garrus and Ashley will be here, of course... but better safe than sorry." She glanced over to Liara.

The asari was nervously checking her pistol. Shepard's lips curled slightly behind her own helmet as she took in the weapon Liara had chosen – an Elkoss Combine Razor, one of the best light pistols on the market. The weapon probably cost a small fortune, but it was an older model, maybe 10 years or more, and didn't have any mods at all. Liara looked up as Shepard considered her, and gave a nervous smile. "Do...do you think my mother is here, Commander?"

Shepard's smile died and she gave an exhale. "Not sure what answer is best, Doctor, so ...let's just see what we have." She turned as Shields picked up her assault rifle and lead the way down the stairs.

The metal stairs rang hollowly with each step, quickly giving way to a crudely metal-floored pathway that sloped gently downwards, curving slightly to the right. The small group advanced, Shepard in the lead, shotgun ready, followed by Shields with her assault rifle, and Liara, pistol gripped tightly in one hand and her right fist wreathed gently in biotic energy. Wrex brought up the rear, towering over all of them, hunching slightly. "Stupid humans can't build their tunnels big enough." Shields voice was almost amused. "Sorry, Wrex. If you'd called ahead, I'd have gotten you a cup of jaaki and we could have caught up on old times. But the tunnel... was dug by those things, not us."

Wrex snorted. "Figures. You have jaaki?"

Shields' laughter was soft as they rounded the corner. The walls were now all dirt, moisture laden and soft, reinforced by close set metallic supports every few feet. The sounds of their footfalls were almost muted, the metallic floor now covered with a thin layer of grime and something slimy and sticky, seeping out from the base of the walls. A corridor branched off to the right, and Shields ignored it. "Leads to where we debriefed ...whoever the Thorian used that week. Dead end."

Shepard nodded, moving along as silently as possible, as the floor turned back into stairs. A geth lay shattered at the top of the stairs, it's head torn to bits, amid the green splashes of slime that indicated Thorian thralls. Six or seven of them were scattered about, two of them burned black, one torn in half, and the rest...spattered about as if struck by a giant fist. "Saren fought his way in, looks like."

Wrex's voice was wry. "With any luck, he'll be too worn out to fight. That would be a shame, seeing as half the reason I'm doing this is to get some good fights going." He shrugged under the heavy armor, the tone of his voice showing he was joking, but he looked ready for the battle to come.

Shepard didn't even bother to snort, her nerves almost jangling. The quiet darkness of the corridor, the

silence, the closeness, the utter foulness of the crap on the floor, was all adding up to remind her of the last tunnel fighting on Torfan. With a firming of her jaw, she stepped down the stairs, and then down another flight. She was about to head down the third when Shields put a hand on her arm. "After the next flight...there's a long tunnel, leading to the Thorian. You ready?"

Shepard nodded, and with a deep breath they set out.

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Saren's eyes were still shut, and Benezia focused on finding her center, even as she glanced at Ganar Skal, who was shifting his feet. "How long does this shit take, Benezia?" His guttural voice seemed to almost violate the otherwise silent chamber.

The asari matriarch didn't even respond, her beautiful features muted behind the smoked glass of her ancient battle armor. Built off of old designs for asari commandos, the suit was heavy plates over the shoulders, breasts, and hips, with thin ballistic cloth everywhere else, emphasizing curves. A sort of skirt of stiffened leather reinforced with strips of shock-proof nanotubing guarded her legs, and her hands were wrapped around a vicious Disciple shotgun, its smooth lines comforting in her hands.

The only others in the room, aside from Saren, the Shiala clone, and Ganar, were two geth – one a communications unit, the other a mere guard. Although she disliked the machines, they seemed utterly unaffected by indoctrination, which had given her researchers an interesting idea. Now, though, the geth stirred. "Benezia-Prophet : forces topside report strike team entering this area."

Benezia nodded. "How long until the reinforcements arrive?" The geth paused, for several seconds, before clicking. "They have just completed FTL jump. ETA is 25 minutes. Be advised – we have no units monitoring the system's mass relay." Benezia smiled coolly. "We'll be done soon, machine , do not worry. Have Cera Rthar prep the ship for departure." She turned, walking over calmly to stand next to Saren, and delicately laid a single hand on his arm. After a long moment he shook his head, and the Shiala-clone stepped back.

Saren swayed, his mandibles levering out and in drunkenly, before shaking his head again, jaws clacking. "There's...too much of it to make sense...like fire on my mind." Benezia nodded. "We will deal with that once we get back to our base." Saren nodded, wincing, and exhaled. Turning to the Thorian, he gave a smile. "Your assistance was .. most welcome. Unfortunately, it looks like we have overstayed our welcome here on this world, so it will be time to go."

The green tinted clone of Shiala narrowed her eyes. "We have sampled your meat. It is superior. But those coming , flesh creatures...wish to kill, to rend. You will stop them."

Saren glanced at Benezia, who shrugged. "Shepard and her band of idiots." Saren gave a confident smirk , and turned back to the creature. "I think you'll find we can handle a few pitiful humans, creature." He tossed his head confidently, and in that moment there was a sharp crack, and Saren was hurled to the ground, shields overloaded and a massive bolt of agony in his shoulder. A second shot impacted the clone of Shiala between the eyes, splattering her skull and sending the naked corpse spinning to the ground in a boneless heap.

A cold voice rang out into the silence of the amphitheater. "Saren Arterius. Time to die."

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Shields cursed, Saren's head toss and ensured that her shot had been off, but she had at least downed the Turian. Shepard called out her challenge even as she was moving forward, tapping her omni-tool as she went, and Shields ducked into cover. The room was huge, with half-broken pillars, dimly lit tunnels opening into darkened pits, and a domed roof that was 40 feet up. But Shepard's breath was taken away

by the misshapen *thing* at the center of a vast pit that the ruin was built around, a pillar of polluted , plant-like flesh festooned with dozens of pulsing, throbbing modules, and branching out into tentacle-like roots anchored into the walls. "That's the Thorian?"

Shields nodded, even while she fired again, her sniper shot downing one of the geth units, the high-powered bolt shattering it's head and sending splinters of armor fragments over it's companion. Shepard opened up as well, heavy shotgun blasts dropping the other geth, and it's bulk crashed into Benezia, knocking her askew. The matriarch arose from Saren's side where she had been trying to asses his wound, and her face *twisted* into an inarticulate mask of rage. Benezia snarled, and azure light raced down her arm in a flare, erupting into a bolt of biotic energy that lanced out at Shepard. The bolt literally crackled as it flew through the air, arching down to smash into Shepard, and instead blazing into a fiery blue light as it struck a barrier field erected in it's way. Liara stepped out from the cover of the tunnel, eyes wide and angry. "Mother!"

Benezia's expression was ice, but Shepard had no time for that, stepping into closer cover as she let off a brace of rounds at the asari matriarch. Benezia almost arrogantly blocked them with a barrier of her own, her hand moving languidly and almost insultingly, and her voice disapproving and cold. "Liara, your actions are a disgrace to our Family. I warned you. Consorting with these lesser creatures has shown me you are no longer my daughter or worth my time...or restraint." Lifting her fist she sent out a heavy cascade of pure biotic force, the heavy wave shattering a low stone wall as it rolled forward, but Liara merely gritted her teeth as her barrier held, the energy surging and flickering across it's unyielding surface like an ocean breakwater in rough surf.

The two krogan hadn't even paid attention to the others as they charged, firing shotguns as they went. Wrex took three vicious shots to the torso, the last cracking the plate over his stomach, before his own final blast knocked Ganar literally off of his feet , slamming him to the floor below. Shepard and Shields faced the krogan, lining their guns up to fire...

And biotic fire consumed them both, smashing them against the walls. Shepard shook off the blow, rolling behind a pillar, but Shields had been caught flat-footed, hitting the wall with a heavy thud , sending her weapons flying, and she didn't move after she slowly slumped to the ground.

Saren stood there, blue radiance curling around his outstretched hand , a trickle of blue blood seeping from the still smoking hole in his shoulder plate, and his voice was almost calm. "You are a tenacious one, human. Maybe you'll put up a better fight than Nihlus did." Wrex cursed and with a pulse flung his krogan opponent away from him, tucking his bulk behind a half wall, while Liara flicked her barrier forward, scooting behind a pillar even as her mother took a few steps back. Saren himself moved behind the bulk of one of the low walls, pulling his Sunfire pistol. For a long, tense moment there was no movement or sound.

Shields groaned, and Wrex gave a wry smile. "Three biotics against three biotics, Shepard. I'll take the stupid one if Blue here can handle her mother and you take out Saren." Ganar gave an incredulous snort. "Wrex, your brain is as addled as your armor if you think your idiotic sidekicks can take Saren and Lady Benezia. There's still time for you to reconsider this stupidity."

Saren nodded. "There's time for you all. You've seen what I've seen, haven't you? They are coming. There is nothing to be done about it, except to die fruitless and in futility...or try to survive the coming storm."

Shepard rolled her eyes. "For fucks sake, you aren't *actually* going to give me the goddamned 'join me in my evil empire' speech, are you?"

Saren chuckled. "Actually...no. I was waiting for my omnitool to charge the proximity mines I placed earlier." Before Shepard could even move there was a loud beep and a series of blasts literally right

behind her. Shepard came flying out of cover, armor smoking, her shotgun spinning away, and Saren screamed. "NOW!"

The turian Spectre leapt over his own cover, coming down with a biotic leap, firing his pistol directly at Shepard, who managed to use a biotic pulse to flip herself out of the way and back on her feet. One shot singed her shields, but she gritted her teeth and threw herself into a biotic charge, flashing into a streak of blue light, slamming into the other Spectre, sending his shields flaring, and the heavy pistol in his hands barked again, singeing her helmet but missing. She lanced out, hands limned in blue energy, slamming his wrist in a scissor lock and wrenching, even as she jabbed her right foot into his knee joint.

Saren's grip on the pistol failed as he fell, but he turned it into half roll, coming back up with a sweep kick that took Shepard's legs out from under her. With a snarl he hurled a warp field at her, but she rolled into a backwards roll and let the energy leach away at the broken concrete floor. She sprang up and straight at Saren with a series of biotic punches, and the battle was joined.

Lara and Benezia were trading biotic blasts and singularities, the younger asari's breath coming shallowly and sweat running into her eyes as she ducked her mother's vicious assaults. Every blast felt like a mountain falling into her barriers, overflowing energy juddering across her slender frame in bolts of blue electricity. She barely evaded a blade-like slash of biotic force, shuddering as it severed a section of pillar behind her cleanly, and answered back with a pulse of force, not at her mother but at the loose-packed dirt she stood upon. Benezia stumbled only for a moment, her lush figure enveloped a moment later by a biotic field to levitate herself, and Lara smiled grimly. "Predictable, mother!"

With an inhale, she hurled a shockwave at Benezia, the storming pulses of blue energy making a sound like a broken storm-front as they knocked the matriarch back, disrupting her barrier and making Benezia's eyes widen. She fell heavily to the floor and then barely managed to roll out of the way of several shots from Lara's pistol, two sparking against her shields and one drilling her thigh, making the older asari hiss in pain. The matriarch fired back with her own shotgun, and Lara gave a screech of pain as the white-hot rounds tore through her thin armor and left smoldering holes in her right arm.

The battle illuminated the entire cavernous room, blue light and flares of white radiance mixed with grunts of suppressed agony and the shriek of flaring, failing shields. Wrex and Ganar were lost to the blood rage, biotically enhanced punches and kicks shattering each other's armor in a blind tide of anger. Wrex felt ribs shatter from a kick, even as he managed to grab his opponent's shoulder and, using a biotic field to stabilize his grip, pull Ganar's arm back, and back, and back, until with a ululating scream of agony the other krogan's shoulder socket shattered. With a grunt of exertion, Wrex released him, sending him spinning, and then drove his fist directly into Ganar's hump, sending the younger krogan to his knees.

Shepard parried a straight punch from her opponent, and taking advantage of his momentary opening, backhanded Saren. She smiled grimly, her own fists also surrounded in blue flame, as she advanced, grinning at the sight of the turian spitting up blood inside his helmet, before she performed a series of side kicks, pushing the larger Spectre back. He blocked two, his own martial stance firm, but missed her feint to rush him and caught the arc kick she pushed out instead right on the base of the chin, literally flipping him head over heels. "It's fucking over, you pointy faced asshole." She pulled out her Revenant, the barrels snapping into place as she shoved the barrel right in his face. "This is for Nihlus!"

She saw the blue eyes through Saren's helmet widen. A tiny piece of her brain said *Huh, glowing blue eyes, weird* even as she pulled the trigger...and fell back as the blast sprayed deflected bits of mass in all directions, a biotic barrier blocking the shot.

Shepard didn't even have time to turn as a naked green form lithely dropped behind her and, with a

biotic kick , sent her flying 20 feet away. Saren grinned viciously and with a roll, grabbed his Sunfire pistol. Shepard staggered back to her feet even as he fired.

Three heavy red comets slammed into her midsection, the third punching through her stomach and out behind her, spraying blood everywhere. Liara's eyes widened as she screamed Shepard's name, a distraction Benezia didn't miss, recovering from her nearly prone position to hurl a vicious blast of biotic energy at Liara. The little asari's scream was cut off as she was lifted from her feet along with a foot of broken concrete and smashed into the far wall with a sickening crack and a spray of blood inside her faceplate.

With a krogan scream of victory, Wrex smashed in Ganar's faceplate, sending the other krogan to the ground in a wash of blood, and instantly reversed his shotgun, firing as fast as he could at Saren. The turian managed to block two of the shots with his own barrier, but the third blasted him right in the face, sending him to the ground screaming , blue blood spurting out. Benezia gave a shout, and slammed both hands together in a gesture, sending two literal walls of biotic rage at Wrex. They overlapped him and detonated furiously, the old krogan crumbling as his arms snapped in multiple places and his legs bent backwards and collapsed, but struggling to rise. With a half-sob of rage, Benezia emptied her own shotgun into him, and the quivering form fell still at last.

Only Benezia was left standing, her armor smoking in places from the strength of Liara's biotic strikes, blood leaking from several rents near her abdomen and the gunshot in her leg. Silence, mixed with the smoke of discharged weapons and the smell of several kinds of blood, dominated the space. Benezia grimaced, and checked her faceplate...cracked. *If I can smell anything, that's bad.* She shipped her shotgun to her armor and turned to the clone of Shiala, gesturing to her comrades "They are badly hurt. I need to get them to my ship. We need your thralls to help us."

The asari clone tilted its head, and then gave something like a smile, the sort of smile one gives a small child or a dog. "Flesh thing, sadly...I am still hungry. You will all make .. good sources of knowledge and power for me."

Benezia's eyes narrowed. "It is a pity you took Shiala's body and none of her wisdom, but then it was her wisdom that led us to ensure that Exogeni figured out your weakness before engaging you in conversation, plant." Without a single word more , her hands swept out to her sides, and two shearing plates of biotic energy lanced out, slashing into the two largest vein like roots on either side of the Thorian, severing them in a spray of gelatinous, greenish fluids.

The asari-clone screamed as the chamber shook, the several of the plants pods rupturing to reveal the ruined, rotted forms of humans or other things, and the matriarch shook her head. "It was ignorant to believe that , in the long run, we'd let you live, but it was idiocy itself to force my hand in killing you. The survival of all is more important than your hunger, thing." With an almost regal expression she held up a trembling hand, and then with all her force sent a gigantic wave of biotic energy outwards.

Several pillars snapped like twigs, and the bulk of the Thorian was hit and simply split open like a rotted log, bizarrely-shaped organ-like structures deep inside it's trunk deforming from the blast. A moment later , Saren groaned, and Benezia rushed to his side. "Saren...we must go. The geth are on their way but you are..."

The turian got to his feet unsteadily. "... I can't see out of my ... right eye...spores..." Benezia shook her head. "We'll deal with it on the ship. We have to go." Flinging Saren's uninjured arm around her neck, and drawing on her biotics for strength and support, the weary matriarch helped him to the tunnel entrance. She glanced at the ruined form of Ganar Skal, but even she could she he was dead, his head a shallow pool of blood framed by the shards of his shattered helmet. She used her free hand to tap Saren's omni-tool. "Rthar...we're hurt. We need extraction. Send what geth you can, and the

commandos..." Her words trailed off as she winced in pain.

The radio was silent only a moment. "Yes, and the commandos still on board as well, Matriarch. They're coming, hold on."

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Garrus had shut down one nuclear device, which was , as it happened, in the big boxes by the support pillars (which had turned out to be pallets of strontium, the purpose of which was all too clear), but placed behind the colony ships, and was finishing on the second, cleverly concealed under some loose paneling near a malfunctioning water conduit. Compared to the bombs on Eden Prime as they had been described to him by Shepard, these were simple but rugged. Ashley had gotten a call on her omni a few minutes ago and withdrew a bit, and now came running back, rifle out. "Joker says a goddamned geth fleet just entered sensor range, it will be in orbit in minutes. We gotta get Shepard out of there."

Garrus opened his mouth to speak when he heard movement from the far entryway. He pulled his rifle, sighting down it, and then with widening eyes pulled Ashley down beside him out of sight. She stammered out a curse but he held a talon to his helmet in a gesture for silence. Whispering, he spoke "8 asari and a handful of geth, coming from the direction of Saren's ship. Too many to take."

Ash glared at him. "If we let them get behind the Commander, she's finished!"

Garrus sighed, and nodded. "We'll stop them...we just – " he fell silent as voices sounded. "Mistress!?"

The cold voice of Benezia could be heard. "Shepard and her ilk nearly killed us. We must away before more of them arrive, Saren is badly hurt and Ganar is dead." Ashley's grip on her assault rifle tightened, but Garrus tapped her hand instead, still whispering. "The commander may still be alive, Williams. We wait until they move out and then we check. Joker will stop them getting away."

Ashley frowned. Her mind was working furiously. She knew, deep in her heart, that she couldn't take a group of asari commandos and geth, and Benezia, especially if they had already taken down Shepard , Shields, Wrex, and Liara. But she felt the deaths of her unit, her pain, her shame keenly , and she wanted to just charge out so badly.

But as she watched the turian, as his eyes followed them moving off, she realized he was shaking too, his hand flexing around the heavy Talon pistol like he wanted to choke something. Kaiden's words hit her then, his soft, calming voice in the back of her head. *"The way I see it, aliens are just people. Weird looking people sometimes, with scales. But they're still just jerks and saints. They still feel pain, and fear, and love. They still get angry and happy."* She sighed and put her hand on the big turian's wrist. "Vakarian. I hate this, but you're right. I know you hate it too...we'll...get the fucker later." She peeked over the top, the group had drawn out of side, leaving trails of blood behind them. "Sides, looks like the Skipper might have killed Saren anyway. Let's go."

The two moved cautiously to the cargo ship, hearing what sounded like pained, faint moaning from within the ship itself. Turian and asari blood was thick on the stairs leading down, and Benezia's shotgun had dropped at the top, sticky with Saren's blood. Ash kicked it out of the way, but Garrus paused to pick it up and pack it along, and they headed down the stairs.

When they got to the bottom of the ruin , Garrus stepped out first, mouth agape. "Spirit mother of Palaven..." The room was a disaster area, splashed with blood of all kinds and broken masonry, green spatters and bits of mass accelerator rounds on the floor. Liara lay brokenly against one wall, helmet dented and faceplate occluded with blood, her arm bent at an unnatural angle. Wrex was a ruined heap along another wall, while Shepard lay unmoving in a pile of her own blood. Shields was crumpled in the far corner, stirring weakly and while Garrus moved to, Ash moved to Shepard, turning her over. "Oh, Skip...why the fuck..."

Shepard gave an inhalation, followed by a sob of agony and confused muttering. Ashley's voice erupted. "Omigodshit! GARRUS! She's alive!"

Garrus nodded, moving to Liara. "Head out to transmit range. Tell Joker to have the medbay prepped." He lifted Liara away from the wall, and his voice flanged in disbelief. "Spirits, T'soni's still alive too."

"G...urk...urh. Why.." Wrex moaned and spat blood, the sound of a shattering bone re-shattering as it tried to right itself resulting in him awakening. Ashley only nodded, somehow unsurprised the massive mercenary had also survived. "I'll do that and bring the Mako up. Stay here and use medigel on them." The turian nodded absently, infusing Liara's omnitool with a medigel capsule and a stabilization order before moving towards the krogan. "Spirits of fire, Wrex, your arms..."

With an irritated grunt, the krogan flipped himself over, slamming his broken arm against a pillar. A snapping sound and he waved it almost feebly. "Regeneration...sucks sometimes. Where...Saren?" Garrus jutted his chin upwards. "Got past us, had backup. We came to get you. Shepard is alive...so is Shields and Liara. And you."

Wrex stood, unsteadily, then knelt weakly, his damaged leg unable to support his weight. His armor was blackened from biotic blasts, his own orange blood drenching it in small rivulets that had pooled beneath him in, and formed a gory caul over his shattered helmet. He picked up his shotgun, leaning on it for support, and glanced over his shoulder at the krogan corpse behind him. "Figures. Fucker...beat us. Thought we...had him for a second. Went wrong so fast. Don't even know what happened."

There was ripping, squelching sound from one of the alcoves on the wall, and Garrus turned to see the slime-coated form of an asari in worn-looking commando leathers stumble out. Shorter than Liara, she was literally coated in green gunk, and her eyes were unfocused. She looked lost and confused, and Garrus frowned, lifting his assault rifle. "Who the fuck are you!?"

The asari looked at him a long moment, then held up her hands in a weary, almost .. disgusted gesture. "My name is Shiala. I .. worked ... for Benezia, before they ... sacrificed me to this thing. Now I don't know...what to do." Her voice was a mix of tired and somehow broken, as if even speaking was a trial to endure.

Garrus's mandible twitched, but she looked almost as done in as the figures on the floor, and he gestured firmly with the rifle. "Alright, lady, kneel on the ground, away from the human in black armor, and don't make any sudden moves or biotic flares or I will kill you."

She merely nodded and complied, slumping where she stood. "I am ... not... your enemy. At least...not any longer." She shuddered, wrapping her arms around herself, and Garrus frowned. "But...you must know...what he found." She shivered, rocking back and forth slightly, as if in pain "What ... lies waiting in the dark."

Garrus glanced at Wrex. "What's she talking about?" The krogan shrugged. "Dunno. There was a green asari helping Saren, I think that's who got the drop on Shepard, and the blue bitch mentioned her name, I think. It's...not all clear." He shook his massive head, breathing shallowly and weakly, and Garrus turned back to Shiala. She looked up at him for a long moment before giving a weary smile.

"It is... a long story, turian. But the...simple version is that Saren ... gave... me to the Thorian as the price for the Thorian giving him enough knowledge to ...understand the Beacon. I was the ... purveyor of this transfer. If you let me live...I can give to you what I was forced to give to Saren."

Garrus didn't even waste time thinking about it, but tapped his omni-tool. "Ash, we have a situation here. Found a .. survivor, I guess. Says she has information about the Beacon. ETA till you get back." The human's voice was strained. "Five minutes, but we have to hurry. Tali and Cole had to fall back from the Exogeni HQ, the Geth stormed in and they're rolling back hard towards the outpost. We gotta

move."

Garrus cursed, and then checked Shepard's vitals again and applied medigel. "Wrex, keep an eye on her. We'll let the Council or Shepard or whoever figure out what to do with her."

---

Shepard was unresponsive on the back of the Mako as it rolled along the Prothean skyway, as was Liara. The limited medical gear on the Mako was only able to pump their broken bodies with medigel and make attempts at keeping them breathing inside their armor. Shields was semi-conscious, armor scans showed a serious concussion, while Wrex was eating emergency rations in the back, gritting his massive teeth against the pain. He paused to work his other arm into a semblance of its normal shape. Garrus drove while Ashley updated Joker over her comm and monitored the medical readouts.

Joker had patched in Chakwas, walking her through how to link their armor to the Mako's small computer so she could at least get medical telemetry from their omni-tools, and Ashley had complied as best she could. With a grunt, the last bit of work was completed, and she leaned back on her haunches, tensely. "Got it, doc. Thanks. Joker...is the Normandy ready to go?"

The voice answering back was worried-sounding and hesitant. "Yeah, but ... the geth are here, Chief. If they make planet fall, there's nothing I can do in this thick atmosphere, and if I go orbital there's enough of them to kill us all. Orders?"

Ashley looked helplessly at the broken, barely breathing form of Commander Shepard and sighed. "Pressley's the XO...he'll have to make the call." She turned away, jaw set, and her voice was cold as she killed the comms and returned to watching the medical readouts.

"Drive faster, Garrus."

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## **Chapter 50: Chapter 43 : Feros, Escape**

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*A/N: Originally this was going to be a nail-biting chase and piloting fight between Joker and Saren's pilot through an asteroid field, but I changed my mind and decided this would be more inline with what was realistic.*

*Updated 11-2 : It keeps eating my line breaks for some reason.*

*Updated 11-4: Stupid mistypes fixed.*

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### **January 29th , 2183 12:10 P.M.**

"This is Lieutenant Commander Pressley. All units, fall back to the Normandy in good order. Shepard is down, and we have geth ships incoming." The XO's voice was firm but still slightly shaken sounding over the tinny comm-link in Kaiden's ear, and he closed his eyes for a moment before exhaling. The faces visible through the soldier's face plates were tense, and Kaiden worried about how they would take the news. He turned, looking around, and found who he was looking for.

"Jackson, status on the explosives." He turned to the corporal wiring up the incendiaries Shepard had ordered detonated, and the younger man shrugged his shoulders, his armor smeared with dusts and gunk from placing them inside the bunker. "About done, LT." The man carefully was typing in codes to the haptic panel on a small detonator unit, his Avenger rifle laying on the cracked concrete next to him. Another soldier was trailing omni-gel lines from the detonator to the bright red and yellow striped

charges set just visible in the doorway of the bunker.

Kaiden nodded, triggering his omni-tool to pull up his local comms. "Cole, you get that transmission?" The voice of the master chief came back strongly. "Sure did, LT. We're pulling back to the garage now. There's three scout cars here, each one seats six, I'll run them to your position pronto."

Kaiden glanced over his men, nodding. "Do that. That will cover most of it, the Mako can pick up stragglers. ETA till you reach the FOA?"

Cole spoke after a few seconds of silence. "Call it at ... ten minutes, LT. The , ah, quarian lady is hot-wiring the scout cars, takes a minute. Are we secure or do we need to get ready for a fight?"

Kaidan glanced up nervously at the dust-choked skies of Ferros, the filtered sunlight spearing across the clouds above in rays of burnished reds and golds. "I don't see any geth at the moment, chief...and I'd rather not stick around to find out if they're coming down for tea. Keep it tight but put the pedal down."

"Aye, sir. Cole out." Kaiden tapped off his comm and made a swirling 'gather round' motion with his right hand. "Alright, we're pulling out. According to our flight lieutenant monitoring comms and sensors, we have two problems. First, Commander Shepard and Commander Shields are both badly wounded, as well as Dr. T'soni." He frowned as the Exogeni mercs traded dark looks but continued more firmly. "However, they're alive...just in critical condition. We need to get back to the Normandy ASAP to stabilize them. Worse, geth engine signatures were picked up coming out of FTL a few minutes ago. It won't be long until they can get into a position to stop us, not to mention we already have at least one geth destroyer up there."

The captain of the Exogeni mercs, Foster, cursed. "That's just great. So how the hell do we get out of here? We got one battlesuit back at the HQ, but we can't take another heavy geth assault like the one you broke up."

Kaiden nodded. "The Normandy is equipped with special technology that suppress our vented heat in space, so it's a stealth system of sorts. And she's fast. We get past the geth and into either the local asteroids or the gas giant and we can make a getaway to the mass relay. We've got some of the scout cars coming in from the HQ building in a few minutes. We're going to blow the bunker per Shepard's orders, then fall back in good order." He paused. "Exogeni personnel will take two of the cars. Cole's squad is in the third car, the rest of us will hook up with the Mako when it gets here."

There was no murmuring, only checks of the heat levels on guns and loosening of pockets where grenades were kept. Kaiden smiled grimly. "Jackson, get that place blown and let's move out."

---

Pressley stood behind Joker on the bridge, his own ops panel pulled up on the multifunction wall display to his right. "Ops, signal strength?"

One of the techs in ops tapped a few controls on her haptic keyboard, peering at the results, her features cast in the light of the readouts as she narrowed her eyes. "Intermittent signal from the destroyer, sir. Low orbit...no LADAR detected. The buoy reports ..." She tapped more keys, and a mild curse flew from her lips as she pushed her hair out of her eyes. "... three heavy geth cruisers, eleven cruisers, at least nine frigates and five destroyers. ETA to orbit is four minutes, sir."

Pressley closed his eyes. "Flight Lieutenant. We're going to have to get the Normandy into cover, we're a sitting duck here at this docking port. Prepare to un-moor and shift to low-emission stealth." Joker swallowed, half turning in his chair. "What about the commander?" Pressley's jaw pulsed in frustration and worry, and his right hand massaged the back of his neck tiredly. "We'll have to hope they can be stabilized on the Mako for now. Hopefully they won't land geth. If they do...I .. don't think we can out

fly that many ships, do you, Joker?"

The helmsman was silent, closing his eyes. "Never thought it would end like this, sir."

Pressley opened his mouth to respond when there was a gleeful whoop from ops. "Holy hell! Mass relay just lit up like fucking Christmas, sir! It's the Citadel fleet!" The XO whipped around, half-running back along the narrow ops corridor. "Bring up the main plot! Get me comms!"

The image of the Normandy's CIC display shifted to a stylized systems map, with contact runes popping into existence rapidly. His eyes narrowed as he took in the incoming ships. "...crap. That's not very many ships. Get me a transponder distribution, now."

The ops technician across from Pressley nodded, bringing up ship transponder codes. "Two heavy cruisers, five cruisers, nine...no ... ten frigates, fifteen destroyers." His hands flew across a haptic panel, frowning, then looked up, worry in his brown eyes evident. "Sir, with the exception of two frigates, the geth fleet has broken course. Now on a heading of 156...right at the Council fleet, sir."

Pressley nodded, pulling up the comm link status panel. "Council fleet, this is Lieutenant Commander Pressley, SR-1 Normandy's XO. We're pinned down on the surface of Feros. We are undamaged but don't have enough missile munitions for a heavy fight. You have geth incoming, on a bearing of 324, be advised, enemy strength is one three cruisers, nine frigates, five destroyers. Acknowledge, over."

The comms line crackled with geth jamming but the voice was strong enough. "Understood, Normandy. This is Admiral Hierax of the Fourth Citadel Strike Force. We received Commander Shepard's transmission. We are en route to you now, our orders are to engage any hostiles until the dreadnaught Noxiosun arrives. What is the status of the mission?"

Pressley licked his lips and spoke carefully. "Our last report is that Commander Shepard had engaged Saren and that she was badly injured along with most of her team, but that Saren and Benezia were both wounded and one of their krogan allies was dead. Saren is believed to be critically injured from a headshot and we have not seen his ship break orbit."

After a long moment, Admiral Hierax spoke "Very well. I suppose that's the best that can be expected in this situation. Focus on retrieving your Spectre, we'll handle the rest. Hierax out."

Joker spoke up over the comms system. "Well, that sounded lovely." Pressley grit his teeth and brought up the Mako's comm frequency. "Chief Williams, come in."

Ashley's voice sounded stressed and shaky. "Copy, Normandy. En route to the bunker to pick up Lieutenant Alenko's men. What's the sitrep, sir?"

"Council fleet just got here. Once you reach Alenko, load up and get here at top rated speed. The Council is heavily outnumbered, but they have a dreadnaught on the way. I want to use the combat to make sure we can get out of this mess alive."

"Aye, sir." Pressley killed the comm-link, and then turned back to the display panel, watching the space as the battle was about to begin.

---

Benezia used her biotics to carefully maneuver Saren into the bio med creche, grimacing as she felt the burn of overusing her powers erupt into red-hot pain along her spine. She blinked away sudden tears, the voice of Sovereign whispering into her ear, stiffening her will. Saren was completely unconscious now, blue blood flowing slowly from his many wounds. Her own armor was now covered in it, blue streaks mingling with her own. She ignored the pain and walked around the unit to its controls.

She had gotten him out of the upper part of his armor, and winced at the huge contusions along his

torso raised by the human Spectre's vicious biotic attacks. Saren's left wrist was broken, the plates actually cracked and sub-marrow visible, and his face was even more wrecked than before, one of his mandibles blown completely off, his right eye a pulped mess. If not for the armor reinforcement of his face due to the damage from earlier missions and his helmet, his head would have been blown off by the big krogan's shotgun attack. As it was, pieces of facial plating had melted and fragments were imbedded into the turian's skull.

With a sigh, she triggered the automated recovery systems, wincing again at the damage to his body. His armor had literally bent and buckled under the force of Shepard's biotically enhanced punches and kicks, and in more than one place bloody gouges were visible where the armor had been driven into his plates and through into the skin beneath them. Benezia had seen Saren battered before, but not so severely. One thing was for certain, however - Shepard had clearly beaten him, had him at her mercy, and only the intervention of the Thorian's thrall had kept Saren from dying in the exact same manner as Nihilus.

*Shepard planned it that way. She not only took on Saren, but in such a way to beat him, enrage him, and then defeat him so she could kill him the same way he had to kill Nihilus. Monstrous. She sighed, rubbing her eyes wearily. And Liara. Such powerful hatred ... such emotion... she got very, very close to being more than I could handle, my own daughter, barely an adult. Where did she get that kind of ... power from?*

The computer chimed reassuringly, breaking her from her thoughts, green text on a pale dark gray background in turian script coming up. "Secondary liver – damaged. Eye destroyed. Mandible destroyed. Jaw plates II, III, and V ruptured. Jaw plate I destroyed. Six contusions of plating. Secondary fungal invasive infection at rupture sites. Foreign material fragments – "

With a grimace she shut off the audio, watching the machine flood the creche with blue-tinted medigel tuned to dextro chiral biology. Saren had spent millions on an automated biomedical system, for all the times he had barely survived dangerous missions with no doctor or medical help nearby. It would stabilize him, at least until she could get him back to Virmire. She left the machine to its work, the voice in her head pushing her to new tasks even while she wanted to watch over her lover. The small part of her still her own was helpless as she calmly walked to the bridge. "Rthar, why haven't we lifted off yet?"

The turian pilot was watching the displays of local space in consternation. "The geth just diverted course...there's incoming Council ships, a LOT of them. The geth have them outnumbered, but this is surely just the first jump wave. Dreadnaughts and heavy cruisers are next, the relay will be cut off."

Benezia exhaled calmly, the wound in her thigh throbbing painfully beneath a medigel bandage. "FTL to the nearest systems."

Rthar shrugged helplessly. "We can get to DR939, Thorsia, and Gimalian 19. None of them have any fueling stations that would not open fire as soon as they scanned us, and we don't have the fuel to reach Carresaa. There's no secondary relays that lead anywhere but back deeper into Council space except the one in this system."

Benezia frowned. "So what exactly are you planning to do?"

Rthar's white-plated face turned to face her. "We can wait until those two fleets start fighting, and lift on the far-side of the planet, sticking below the clouds. Then we make a dash for the asteroid belt. It's full of heavy metals, that will scatter and block any scan attempts. Heat will be a problem but we can stick behind the bigger ones and out of direct line of sight."

He tapped a taloned finger on the mass relay. "If there are no reinforcements, then we're cool. If there

are, we FTL to Suhalia. Uninhabited system with two gas giants with heavy electrostatic signatures. If we can get into that system without being seen, you can call for help from the geth to bring us some fuel."

Benezia shook her head. "Saren is badly wounded. He may die, even with the machine taking care of him, and he was already ....stressed from the Beacon and whatever the Thorian did to him. We have to get back to Virmire!"

Rthar shrugged...and gestured to a small black pyramid sitting on a shelf at the back of the bridge. "The only other option is to ask for ... help."

Benezia stared at the ugly black pyramid for a long moment before calmly walking up to it and stroking her fingers over it's matte surface. For a moment, there was nothingness, and then it was limned in a glowing red radiance.

**"You touch my mind. Why."**

Benezia swallowed, steeling her mind against the shock of brushing up against something so... incomprehensible and massive. "We are trapped by enemy forces. Saren has obtained what you directed him to , and the Thorian is dead. But we cannot escape this system."

**"Await me. Prepare."**

The pressure of it's voice vanished suddenly, and the matriarch exhaled. "Get ready to move out."

---

The battle was joined within minutes of the Citadel fleet moving into the system proper. The geth, seeing the enemy outnumbered, moved forward, long range mass accelerator strikes and torpedoes ranging out. Most missed at the long ranges, as ships moved in computer-randomized patterns of thrusters to throw off such shots. Either by bad luck or poor timing, a salarian destroyer shifted itself downward in the line of battle and was struck directly by a shot from the lead geth heavy cruiser, the blast snapping the delicate hawk-shaped salarian vessel nearly in half with it's force. A few moments later the ship exploded violently as the mass effect core raced out of balance, fragments of hull pinging off kinetic barriers of the neighboring ships.

Admiral Hierax sat in the eyrie-seat at the head of the CIC on a high platform, overlooking his subordinates. The CIC was a bowl of interlaced slats, divided by work stations and operations consoles, done in gleaming silver with dark blue haptic screens and dim, pale blue overhead lights. His chair , draped in dark fabric representing his colony background, leaned back as he assayed the tactical map. His face was dark , plates almost black and barely highlighted with silvery clan markings, his fringe covered with an admiral's shawl, his legs crossed arrogantly and confidently. "Time to second wave clearing the relay, Lieutenant?" His deep, flanged voice was almost grating, with the clicking growl of age creeping into it.

His aide, a young turian in light armor , with red markings, tapped silvery haptic panels. "Ten minutes, Admiral, sir. No sign of the Talon's Justice, if that is what Saren is flying."

"Hrmph. Very well. Enough of this farce. All ships: full barrage. Concentrate on the smaller ships, the dreadnaughts can crack those cruisers." He gave a turian smile full of needled fangs as hundreds of missiles lanced out in a wide arc, screaming toward the enemy. "Flag section one, oblique right , set course 178 mark 2, ten degrees depression, for full torpedo spread. Flag section two, direct left to reface, maintain fire. Flag cruisers, follow me in. Helm! All ahead flank!"

The Council fleet opened like a flower, splitting into parts. Destroyers moved left and right, turning and firing as they went, alternating heavy accelerator fire and torpedoes from one side and swarms of

missiles from the other, while the cruisers accelerated to maximum speed and opened up with everything. The space between the two fleets was alive with a moving tapestry of glowing death, as ships attempted to weave and dodge and counterfire, illuminated only by the distant star and the explosions of other vessels. The geth lost three ships immediately, and then withdrew slightly, several ships taking additional hits from the unexpected tactic, a geth cruiser attempting to turn and fire hit with three torpedoes at once and literally evaporating under the massive explosions.

The geth ship formation became noticeably ragged, and Hierax nodded grimly. "So the old stories were right, you kill some and they get dumber. Hah. How the quarians lost to their own dish washing machines still baffles me. Continue firing." He leaned back, content, as several more minutes of fire passed. Despite having better weapons and somewhat better ranges, the geth ships were not built to take heavy damage, unlike the heavier built turian ships. And the salarian ECM and hyper-frequency GARDIAN laser systems were making a mockery of the geth attempts at missile attacks. Hierax lost another destroyer and two of his frigates, but dropped two cruisers, six geth destroyers, and had achieved hits on most of their frigates, in only a few minutes.

His lieutenant spoke up. "Mass relay activating...the Noxiosun and her escort are here, sir." The admiral stood, looking out over his battle plot, his sharp talons ticking little marks into the metallic railing surrounding it as he did so. The Noxisun was a turian dreadnaught, and its escort was 16 heavy cruisers and 5 super-heavy missile destroyers. The drell were doing combined arms work with the Citadel this month, part of the Council obligations, and a drell heavy cruiser, all narrow lines and smooth pale green armor, was also escorting the dreadnaught. "Excellent news, lieutenant."

Hierax grinned as the dreadnaught immediately fired after stabilizing its position, the Fellstorm main guns launching a ball of sixteen 44 pound slugs at a huge fraction of light speed. The blast stormed across the battle space to strike the lead geth cruiser amidships, tearing it apart and continuing on to shred the three small frigates next to it.

"So much for rumors of superior shielding, I see. This seems to be in hand, someone contact that human – Presser, Presthing, whatever his name is – and let him know he can stop hiding down on the planet now."

His aide dutifully suppressed a chuckle at his admiral's distaste for humans and was about to open the comm channel when he noticed the mass relay giving off a bizarre energy reading. "...Sir? The .. the relay is configuring for incoming mass but..I've never seen this out-line before."

Hierax half turned, mandibles flickering in irritation. "Query the damn thing for the mass translation." The lieutenant turned to face him, eyes confused. "I did, sir, it said the mass was three times that of the Destiny Ascension."

Hierax barely had time to think before the answer hit him, snatching the comm panel at his side up with a hasty motion of his hand. "ALL SHIPS EVASIVE MANUVERS! PULL BACK FROM THE RELAY!" Even as he spoke, the mass relay erupted into blue light, spreading like a small explosion, and a black, gigantic ship emerged into space, glowing with its own light as a ball of red energy began to build at the base of its leaf-shaped form.

The lieutenant's eyes widened. "Oh, no."

---

Chakwas was rushing around the three medical beds, prepping them for use, as Alenko and Wrex brought in the wounded. Alenko was using his biotics to levitate Shepard, while Wrex was able to do the same for both Shields and Liara, even as he continued to bleed. Chakwas frowned. "Wrex.."

The krogan grunted. "I'll be fine." His voice softened. "I shot the bastard. But they all took hard hits."

Alenko handed Chakwas the readout chip from the Mako's medical computer. "I .. I did what I could, Doctor..."

Chakwas took it as she waved forward her one orderly. "Lieutenant, see if you can find anyone on board with medical training, maybe some of the Exogeni people. Hurry. Lynn, put up the stasis fields and .. let's start with Shepard. Get her armor off."

Alenko and Wrex left the medbay, Kaiden almost running into Williams, who stood outside, still in her armor. "Is..." Wrex merely pushed past her, heading for the elevator, his shoulders slumped and his shotgun booming on the floor as he used it as a cane, ignoring his other gaping wounds.

The human lieutenant shook his head. "We don't know. I need to find people who may know medicine. What's our status, chief?" His eyes were dark with worry, but Ash straightened at the sound of her rank and exhaled. *Focus on the task at hand / in abeyance of the heart's desire.* "All the Exogeni people are on board. In the main cargo areas, and the mess deck. The ... asari woman is in Engineering with two marines guarding her. Everyone went through full decon procedures and we've got a sampling unit checking for any of the Thorian's spores."

Alenko nodded. "Good job, Williams. Get down to the mess decks and keep things calm, and see if anyone knows medicine down there. Someone has to." Alenko turned and walked over to Pressley, who was watching the main combat map in horror. "...sir?"

Pressley wiped his hand over his eyes. "The .. black ship from Eden Prime just jumped into the system. It smashed the Noxiosun into a burning wreck with a single shot." Pressley bit his lip, and cursed. "Joker, power up everything. We're going to make a run for the system edge and FTL to one of the nearby systems."

The main ops analyst suddenly spoke up. "Sir, we have a signature , turian frigate or light cruiser, accelerating towards the mass relay. " She tapped her controls and brought it up on the main screen. Pressley frowned, and tapped his comm. "Detective Vakarian, please come to the CIC immediately."

Alenko frowned. "You think that's Saren's ship?"

Pressley gave a shrug of his big shoulders, and wiped his balding forehead with the arm of his uniform. "I don't know, Lieutenant. It's turian. I, for one, am no expert in turian ships. I figure the detective would know Saren's ship the way I bet a lot of humans now know the Normandy." His voice trailed off as Garrus entered the CIC, slightly huffing from having clearly run up the stairs to the space. "Reporting."

Pressley indicated the CIC view with his chin, and Garrus glanced at it, and immediately scowled. "That's the Talon's Justice. Saren's ship, custom built by the best shipwrights in the galaxy. Dual eezo core, self-repairing armor, adaptive heat reduction, salarian sensor suite, the works." His blue eyes shifted to bore into Pressley's. "...the Commander gave...clear orders to pursue it at all costs."

Pressley nodded. "We *can't* give chase, Detective. The super-dreadnaught from Eden Prime is here, and the Citadel fleet is pinned between it and the geth. We have to make a run for it, FTL out of the system, take a secondary relay back to the Citadel. I know Shepard gave orders to you and Joker otherwise, but..."

Garrus nodded, sighing. "I hate the logic , but you're right, sir. Chasing Saren now will just get us all vaporized." He glanced back at Pressley. "What did you need me to do, sir?"

Pressley bit his lip. "You said you are good with missiles. We still have some flares and ECM pods in the battery. I need you to rig up some noisemakers to throw anyone following off of our profile. Can you do that?"

Garrus nodded firmly, and Pressley gave him a thin smile. "Get to it then, Detective." The turian turned away, and Alenko gave the XO a strange look. "I can see asking him up here to ID the ship...but decoys?"

Pressley turned back to the plot. "Better safe than sorry, Lieutenant. This has turned from "find out about what is going on" to the worst defeat in the Citadel Fleet's history in a long time. If that thing starts pursuing us, it's all over." He shook his head. "Jo—Flight Lieutenant. Engage full stealth, take us out slow, behind the planet, and set course for..."

He paused, and brought up the local starmap. He didn't have a lot of choices and he had severely wounded people on board, so he punched up "medical facility : human , asari" and "repair facility :light". The system highlighted , DR 939, had a trauma center for the human and asari inhabitants. Small colony world of a few million people, mostly ship construction and drone building. "Set course for DR 939. There's some medical facilities there that may help us."

The Normandy lifted from the sky dock, rapidly lancing through the thin atmosphere at that height and making a beeline for the system's terminator. As they moved , Garrus fired off a series of small drones that mimicked the EM and heat signature of an Alliance Frigate moving into the nearby asteroid belt.

Pressley watched the nav-ops plot, wincing as the Citadel Fleet was sheared in half by the repeated, savage weapon of the huge black dreadnaught. The core of the fleet, about half of the ships that had jumped in during the first wave, broke and headed for the systems edge, and the geth didn't pursue. The huge dreadnaught didn't either, instead altering speed and suddenly heading for Feros. Pressley clenched his fist as Saren's vessel docked with the giant ship, and then frowned as the vessel continued to close on the planet.

It's speed was terrifying, as it easily moved over twice as fast as even the Normandy had done during Joker's insanely inspired charge at Feros earlier. It slowed, as if inertia was but an irritant, and then began to orbit, slowly. After several long moments, the black giant opened fire on the planet, blazing red bolts of power burning downwards through the atmosphere in long, heavy lines of devastation. Two giant blasts of yellowish plasma , crackling with contained electrical charge, belched out of it's base, and a moment later the ops sensor officer spoke. "Sir...good god. It just dumped... thousands of tons of pure plasma on the planet. The docking area we were at...the colony...the Exogeni tower...all of it...everything within 20 miles of that is just vapor now."

Joker's voice was droll over the ship's intercom. "I don't think they like us very much, XO."

"Noted." Pressley turned away from the plot. "Notify me if it starts following , ops lead. Otherwise, stand down from full battle stations to alert two and minimize ship emissions." Pressley strode to the comm room, shutting the door behind him, and pulled up the comm menus. "Council fleet, this is Normandy, do you still read?"

The voice of the same turian admiral came on, grim and cold "Yes, Normandy. We're withdrawing to FTL, I've lost almost all my ships and the entire second wave was destroyed. I presume you're doing the same?"

"Yes, Admiral. Our sensors show the geth are not pursuing you. Saren...escaped. And the dreadnaught just glassed the colony site. Anyone still alive down there..."

The line was silent for several moments. "Spirits damn them. I'm FTL routing to Thorsia. There's a light interdiction unit there for going up against the Blood Pack raiders. There's a full comm relay there, I'll make my report to the Council then."

Pressley nodded. "We're routing to DR 939...they have medical facilities for humans and asari. Shepard's alive but ... touch and go. We'll rendezvous with your fleet once we get her stabilized..."

The turian admiral's voice was weary. "Acknowledged, Normandy. .. and I wish I had paid more attention to the Eden Prime footage. Hierex out."

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## Chapter 51: Chapter 44 : Senator Adkins

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*A/N: So a few things to cover.*

***First**, and most importantly, I'd like to thank everyone for reviewing. And favs , follows. And even reading. If you find it's not your cup of tea, I'd appreciate feedback as to why. I write because it helps me distract myself from problems in my own life (insert emo whining here) and because I love the idea that people can enjoy it. For me, the best parts of ME were the "oh holy shiat" bits where Shepard just went crazy awesome , and the story is built around that.*

***Second**, I'm coming to a branch point in how I write the story. Obviously ,as I set out in the beginning, the story is a complete Alternative Universe re-write of ME1 (with the others being rewrites of ME2 and ME3). But there's going to be a gap in between the current mission and the next mission (Noveria) so most of the telling will be the 'times in between minor assignments' types, with some exploration of how the universe is different. I'm never sure how the reader feels about A/U and I'm wondering, along with more of al-Jilani's ranting should I include "Codex" segments about the changes. I can do them as chapters, or I could stick them on the forum ( myforums/LogicalPremise/3873840/) Let me know what you think is best.*

***Third**, a couple of people have mentioned wanting to know what Shepard looks like, or suggesting I do sketches of armor and faces. I am , sadly, a horrid artist. But I can always take a stab at sketches of some kind, if anyone is willing to take such drek and turn it into real art.*

***Finally**, if you do nothing else, please drop some reads on **Introduction to Asari for Humans** , which is the guide I use for talking about asari. If you need a laugh, read **Mass Effect 3: A Crucible in More Ways Than One**. And as always, please check out **Owelpost's** and **Meladark's** masterpieces.*

*I wasn't sure about this chapters, since it's just a lot of political maneuvering and back-ground stuff. I'm a big fan of Chekov's Gun, the concept of setting things up in one chapter to use them many chapters down the line. The action will pick up soon again, I promise.*

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**January 29th , 2183 12:10 P.M.**

"I need 40 cc's of amrinone , now!"

Doctor Chakwas bit her lip behind her surgical mask as she struggled to keep Shepard alive on the biomedical table. The sickbay was spattered with blood , bits of armor and hastily erected UV lights. Two of the ops techs who were off watch were hurriedly re-sterilizing the room with hand-held UV lamps and portable HEPA-filter vacuums in full body armor with helmets, while Chakwas and her assistant Lynn worked on the wounded. Both of the doctors wore 'hot-suits', half armor half mass field hazard area suits designed to protect against infection, and hands were covered in thick non-latex gloves tipped with special circuits to allow haptic keyboards to function.

Shepard's face was pale and drawn in pain. Her Spectre armor had flooded her body with stimulants, steroids and clotting agents as soon as the micro-frame computer on board registered the vicious shots from Saren's lethal pistol, but it didn't really matter. Shepard had already been wounded – not fully healed from either her efforts on Eden Prime or the vicious blast on Therum, she had thrown herself into the fight regardless of pain. Bruises mottled here bare torso, along with a patina older scars. A

vicious biotic throw from Benezia and several biotically enhanced blows by Saren had broken bones, and then the pistol shot struck her torso.

The blast was so powerful that it had vaporized her Spectre armor, sending a spray of molten materials into her torso, along with the super-heated plasma blast. The shot had punched completely through her and out the back of the armor, wreaking havoc. The only reason Shepard hadn't bled to death instantly was the drugs dispensed by her armor and the partial cauterization of the shot itself. Complicating the issue were the extremely virulent spores of the Thorian, which latched onto organic tissue of any kind and began leeching sugars and carbons to replicate itself. Massive dumps of sterilization agents and heavy UV lighting were the only things that stopped their growth so far. Chakwas had already been forced to cut away a segment of small intestine infested with the growth.

Packing the wound with medigel would do nothing, the shot had chipped her spinal column, ruptured her stomach, and the shock heat and pressure had broken 3 ribs. Worse, she had interior second degree burns and her liver was damaged. Chakwas had to bring down the commander's heart rate, but in doing so her heart suddenly stopped.

Lynn's dark face, framed by severely tied back black hair, was a mask of concentration.

"...administered, doctor. Heart rate stabilizing. She's still shocky, I can't pick up decent secondaries on the ultrasound monitor."

Chakwas nodded, even as the ship shook with the boom-thud of mass corridor translation. "It will have to do." She carefully used a protolaser to separate mangled tissue from the stomach, and winced as she applied a patch of nonspecialized cell cultures in growth serum to the base of Shepard's stomach. Sealing the patch with a thin layer of disinfective medi-gel, she turned to the small intestine. "The hole in her stomach will be patched in a while. This..." She seared away a few more inches of intestine and then gestured. "Field-sterile clamps, please. We'll need to hold this segment of intestine together. There's nothing I can do about the spinal damage...but I've got the ribs re-patched with the regenerator and I've stopped the rest of the damned internal bleeding..."

Lynn carefully used a manipulator to control the miniaturized robotic arms, carefully clamping the two ends of intestine together, as Chakwas wrapped them in a thin, glowing green cord, pulling it through and around several loops. She lathed a broad-based antibiotic paste over the cords, then carefully laid strips of hyper-growth bandages over them. "Synthetic protein bandages...won't hold forever but better than nothing."

The two servicemen disinfecting began another sweep, and Chakwas sighed. "How about Dr. T'soni and the Shields woman?" The doctor's voice was tired, even as she picked up a plasma infusion feed and began administering blood plasma. Lynn glanced over at the multifunction display. "Ms. Shields is concussed. There is very light cranial bleeding and a stage-1 cranial bone deformity. Probably fractured skull. Some light damage to the ribs and right arm. Dr. T'soni is severely battered, some small amount of internal bleeding that I can't pin down. Again, heavy concussion. Possible brain trauma, I don't...I mean, I'm not familiar enough with asari biology to be sure."

Chakwas patted her hand reassuringly and turned to face the computer at one side of the biomedical bed. "Well, I took some quick refresher classes on turians and asari about a year ago, but that was basically first aid, thus my knowledge of asari medicine is not much better than yours." She paused. "Still, let's get them both on thinners to avoid clotting."

Joker's voice broke in from the comms panel. "We've reached DR939, Doc. There's an Eldfell-Ashland medical trauma team on hot standby for Commander Shepard and Commander Shields. There's also an asari specialist. They're requesting you link medical records and treatments."

Chakwas finished the seal on Shepard's intestines and tapped a haptic key on the nearby panel. "It's

going, Jeff. What's our ETA?"

"22 minutes. Their trauma surgery center is actually on board a ship, so it's moving out at full speed to meet us halfway. How...how are they..."

Chakwas gave a weary smile. "I think I've controlled the massive internal bleeding of Shepard. Dr. T'soni is ... still in bad shape. Commander Shields has a severe head wound and possibly shattered her skull. It's .. not good, Jeff." She was going to continue when Pressly's voice sounded. "Understood, doctor. Keep them going until that ship docks."

A moment later his voice sounded. "All hands in Ops, move in shifts to the cargobay to fit full body armor. We'll be doing a full vacuum decontamination of the Medbay, just like we already did with the cargo bay and elevator. After that, section II offwatch personnel will change out all HEPA and DETA filters and go over every inch of the interior with UV lamps. Department heads aside from Medical, Council representatives, please meet me in the Comms Room in five minutes."

Lynn glanced up. "Doctor...what happens now? You don't recover from these kinds of injuries in a day or two." Chakwas snorted. "You clearly haven't imagined how pissed off the Commander is going to be when she realizes Saren got away. She'll be up before we know it. I'm more worried about Dr. T'soni, frankly..."

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The comm rooms gray, depressing color scheme seemed fitting, the muted lighting soothing , given the events of the day. Engineer Adams felt bone tired, having gone through the harrowing charge to Feros only to remain on high alert during the Commander's fights on the planet, and then the high-speed, high stealth escape as that black monstrous dreadnaught murdered the Council fleet like a child kicking a kitten.

He ran his hand over his shaven head and stared at his marine-issue boots, noting absently the leather was notched on the right toe. He thumbed a dab of omni-gel from the 'quick-fix' nodule he always had on his belt, smoothing the leather out, and sighed.

Pressly entered the room, his broad chest lifted and his chin held high. As always his uniform was perfect, and Adams always felt a bit .. dimmed next to the picture-perfect XO. The man had never treated him with anything but respect, but still... Pressly was going places in the Alliance navy, that was for sure. XO to Commander Shepard? Pfft. He'd made Commander in six months and Captain not long after that, if Adams had his guesses right.

*And me? I'll be lucky to see O4 before I'm 50. Damn Senator Chatson.* The whole sourness of the event had eventually shattered his marriage, and his career in shambles. It was only because of his skills on mass-field transfer and heat mechanics that he was tapped for this mission , and he was sure that as a shakedown crew, he'd have been sidelined before long.

Pressly finished whatever he was reviewing on his datapad as Lieutenant Alenko and Chief Williams came in, followed closely by Master Chief Cole and Lieutenant Friggs, the ad-hoc navigator Pressly was training. They all sat. Tali, Wrex, and Garrus had come in earlier, all three aliens quiet and lost in their own thoughts.

Pressly glanced around then spoke. "I have an update from Doctor Chakwas. Shepard is ... semi-stable, and we'll be docking with medical ships in a few minutes. It's unknown how long we'll be here until the Commander and the other wounded recover, but that's what we're doing. We have a...message from the Citadel, inquiring about our status. Apparently, the Council wants us to divert there and give a report. But this is a Systems Alliance vessel, and without Shepard being capable of command, I intend to follow the orders given to me by Systems Alliance officers."

Wrex only gave a snort. "Is this where you tell us to get the hell off your ship, then, human?" His voice sounded too tired to be aggressive, as if he was only being difficult for the sake of doing so. Pressly gave him a long look. "No, it isn't, Mr. Urndot. My orders ..." Pressly actually *fidgeted*. Adams had never seen such a thing. "...my orders from the Systems Alliance appear to be having some difficulty being received. Possible some systems damage from the transit into Feros. It almost sounds like the SA is ordering us back to Arcturus, but it's too jumbled to make out."

There was absolute silence in the comm room for a moment, then Tali muttered. "Those *bosh'tets*. Why would they issue something like that?" It was Garrus who answered her. "They're probably concerned about how this looks. It's bad enough Saren got away...if news gets out that Shepard is near death..."

Pressly gave an angry shake of his head. "Enough. That isn't happening. For now, we are going to hold position here and make repairs. I'm not moving this ship an inch until either an SA admiral boards it and orders me to, or Shepard recovers." Pressly exhaled. "It may be that they thought the Commander could get better medical care at Arcturus, seeing as the best doctors are there. But that would mean Dr. T'soni would go untreated...so I made the call based on what I knew at the time."

The big man stood. "Until then, I'm in command. And as such, we're going to prepare for war. All sections will commence repairs. Adams, I want any damage to the engines from the Feros run fixed in six hours. Friggs, get me all the nav-chart data on EVERY system within a six jump range from Feros, I want to know where that bastard Saren could have gone."

His eyes snapped to Alenko. "Lieutenant, I want complete inspections done by 0600 tomorrow, including an update on the men wounded on Therum. Master Chief Cole, we recovered an additional Mako from the surface of Virmire. It's unarmed, and I want you and Mr. Vakarian to get on installing two coax mass accelerators into it. We'll pick up a main gun later."

Pressly turned to the aliens, frowning, and Adams suppressed a chuckle. *This should be good.*

Pressly's voice was tight but firm. "Mr. Vakarian... I believe Shepard also put you in charge of the main guns, so get them re-calibrated and put in orders for more missiles and torpedoes. Chief Williams, Shepard ordered up a large supply of battle armor and weapons, but didn't do that for the ground team. Go ahead and get replacements for, at least, Dr. T'soni and Wrex."

Wrex glanced down at the clothes he had on, his armor being so contamination laced it had to be hurled out the airlock. "Get something in red. I look good in red."

Pressly turned to Friggs. "Once we're docked, and everything is shut down, run full checks on the navops control surfaces systems and make sure we're ready to go at a moment's notice. I don't want any further surprises from the ship if Joker decides to go all ludicrous speed on me again." Friggs nodded, and Pressly glanced around. "Tali, please assist Engineer Adams as he sees fit."

Pressly finally stood. "I.. I am sure that we'll get this mission back on it's feet. Right now, we just need to wait and make sure that when Shepard recovers...she's got a place to get back to the fight from. Dismissed."

The crew filed out, with the exception of Wrex, who looked pensive. Pressly frowned. "Is there something you needed?" The big krogan said nothing for a moment, then nodded. "I'm going to get an update from the Shadow Broker and give him a report on progress. I also want to ask him about this ... order .. you got from your bosses." Pressly rubbed his chin. "Can't hurt...I suppose. But I need to know what you're telling this .. crime boss of yours."

Wrex turned. "Shepard trusted me to be ... discreet."

Pressly squared his shoulders and stared the krogan in the eye. "I'm not Shepard. Just because you're

not in league with our enemies doesn't mean I trust you, or any other alien on this ship. When things go bad, everyone's out for themselves. So, yeah, that means I need to see what you're going to tell this Broker." Wrex leaned forward, his mass and bulk looming over Pressly. "And if I say no?"

The XO met his gaze calmly. Wrex could literally smell the fear on the man, and noticed the ever-slight trembling of his hands, but his voice was like iron. "Then, Mr. Urdnot, I can tell you to get the hell off my ship. Via the airlock."

Wrex convulsed in laughter, taking two steps back. "By Kalros you have a quad on you, human. Shepard must be putting something in your food." Still chuckling, the krogan turned to the box on the wall, placing his hand on the circular panel in its middle. After a second, his hand was outlined in blue light, and the box chimed softly. "Voiceprint."

Wrex spoke softly. "The Hollows is where my faith died." The box beeped, then chimed again. Accessing. Connection authenticated. Encryption established." A long pause followed, and then the main screen lit up with the Broker's symbol – a stylized triangle, in red, like some kind of bizarre mouth, followed by a low, grating voice. "Tetrimus. What is it, Wrex?"

Wrex strode to the front of the comm room, as the symbol vanished and a grainy image of the broken turian filled the screen, his hood thrown back, revealing his ravaged features. "My report. Short version. We tracked Saren to Feros. He was after some kind of sentient plant that had information on the Protheans. We think he got what he was looking for, but we nearly took him out. He got away. There's an asari we took captive who says she can give Shepard the same information, but Shepard is badly wounded, along with the Prothean expert. Citadel fleet got cut like cheap varren meat by the big black ship. They're falling back, we're headed to get medical help for Shepard."

Tetrimus exhaled, his eye glowing softly in the darkness. "We have heard bits from our operatives, but nothing concrete. The Broker Network is scouting the areas around Feros, but they reported nothing yet...what else do you have to report?"

Wrex sighed. "We may have another problem. The humans sent a recall order for this ship, even though Shepard is down and hurt bad. The human commanding this ship fears the human government will try to break off this little jaunt due to bad press and political bullshit."

Tetrimus nodded. "Yes, sadly. There's already been some ... pressure about that, even before this. The Systems Alliance put forth Shepard as a candidate, but there are elements within the SA that are pushing for her dismissal. We feel these are more than likely Cerberus backed. The Broker anticipated this might be a reaction from Cerberus, using politics to smear the air. Already the news feeds are full of humans stating they won't defend independent colonies. They're using the Saren fiasco to pressure independent colonies into having no real course of protection except to work with Cerberus."

Wrex groaned. "How many times have I told you, I only want jobs that involve me, my shotgun, and a dead body?" Wrex balled his fist. "Shepard had Saren cold, and he got away. I drilled him but I'm not 100% sure he's dead. Whatever Saren is doing, he was involved with Ganar Skal, and that means he's using my people for something bad. This is personal now, Tetrimus. Keep the humans going on this, at least until she recovers."

Tetrimus' mandible flickered, slowly. "That shouldn't be a problem. The Broker doesn't want any... changes in how things are proceeding. For the moment, at least." He paused, pulling something up off screen. "I'll get to work on making sure the SA stays .. pliable. In the meantime, I'm forwarding intelligence we currently have now, the Broker just pushed me an update. Our spy drones tracked the black dreadnaught, but it made a mass-effect jump out of the middle of the system to .. somewhere."

Pressly's jaw dropped. "A jump WITHOUT a mass relay? That's impossible!" Tetrimus peered at the

human for a long moment."I assure you it occurred."

When Pressly said nothing, he continued. "It implies a level of technology that is so far beyond ours as to make us cavemen. The weapon that assaulted the fleet is the same one used on Eden Prime, ferro-metals accelerated to a huge fraction of light speed, bound in a mass-free corridor to form a beam. It's like a thousand hits from a dreadnaught's main gun every second. There can be no defense against that kind of firepower, kinetic shields get flooded with molten metal and start conducting, inducing either collapse or a massive electromagnetic explosion from charge differential." He tapped some keys, and data began flooding the smaller screen on the box on the wall, before beeping and discharging an OSD, which Wrex took.

The turian's voice grew grimmer. "Worse, we've lost track of Saren. The geth that fell back to a system about 5 jumps outside the Perseus Veil. We're dispatching scouts for a look-see. We also have boots on the ground at Exogeni HQ...Cerberus has been picking off surviving executives."

Wrex tossed his head. "We have one of those. Ethan Jeong." Tetrimus narrowed his eye and nodded. "I think the Broker would be more than happy to.. have a conversation with this Jeong. Whatever Saren was looking for, knowing the threat is critical...and , as I said, with Cerberus on the prowl, he'd be safer with us."

Pressly frowned. "He'd be safer with a highly covert criminal organization than on board a Systems Alliance military vessel?" Tetrimus gave a cool look in the human's direction, the screen flickering slightly. "Considering that Cerberus assassins got to the eyewitness on Eden Prime behind far heavier security, I'd say the odds are good. I can't force anything, of course...but the Broker would be appreciative."

Pressly said nothing for several long seconds, then gave a sigh. "I'm not the one to make that kind of call, but Shepard...isn't here. He's not under arrest, so what he wants to do is up to him. We're docking at a medical ship in the DR939 system in a few minutes. He'll be onboard until we dock somewhere else."

Tetrimus glanced away, then nodded. "You'll receive a call from the Systems Alliance shortly, Lieutenant Commander Pressly clarifying any ... confusion about your current orders, then.. And I'll be on my way to DR939 as soon as possible. Tetrimus out. " The link went dead, and Wrex sighed and turned away from the screen, limping still from his wounds. "Satisfied, human?"

Pressly nodded. "For now." He frowned, then squared his shoulders. "Thank you." The big krogan just shouldered past him, grunting. "If you wanted to thank me, you'd order up some jaaki. The rations on this ship are horrible."

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"Senator Adkins?"

Smoke circled lazily above, swirled about by the wood-bladed ceiling fan in the ceiling, and the stone-set fireplace crackled merrily with it's own blaze in the far wall. The room was large, even for a Senator's office, set with thick pile rugs of pale crème, the walls covered in handsome bookshelves, pictures of the Senator with various celebrities or at events, the wide windows overlooking the gleaming skyline of Vancouver's bay. The senator's wooden desk was clear except for his ashtray, comm pad, and the documents he was considering, his thick cigar clamped between his teeth as he measured how to respond to his guests.

Having his secretary's voice break his concentration was bad, but it also gave him more time to stall.

"Senator Adkins, incoming call, line three." The voice was perky and young , like all his secretaries,

but it sounded strained for some reason. *Probably PMS or some such shit.* The senator chuckled indulgently. "Cherry, I'm meeting with the repre-"

Her voice was even more strained. "Y-yes sir... but.. the caller says it's about FLASHBACK. And that you'd... better answer."

The blood drained from the Senator's face, and he glanced at the two other men in the room. Commander Branson's model-perfect face showed nothing but impatience, his perfect blond hair in waves, his iron jaw and cobalt eyes fixed firmly on the Senator. His uniform was perfect, thin rows of decorations in a neat block on his chest, his hands folded calmly across his stomach. Next to him, Charles Saracino seemed almost tiny, despite his expensive, nova-silk clothing. He didn't recognize the reference either, and Adkins gave a tiny internal sigh of relief. "Alright Cherry, tell him I need a minute or two, and to hold."

Tabbing off, he turned to the two men. "Gentlemen, I understand your position. And unlike some, I'm ... flexible about how we further humanity's position among the stars. I know some people have knee jerk reactions, but we both know the truth of the situation." He paused, puffing on his cigar, mind still racing about who could be calling about FLASHBACK. *Dr. Amang wouldn't call unless the project was totaled...it must be Agent Ghrath, the moron. Stupid AIS agents think they can run evrything.*

He smiled, exhaling, and spoke again. "And to your points, Shepard has certainly gotten the job done, but she's hardly going to be an asset for furthering humanity's position. Aliens seeing her will see someone who is terrifying, but bloodthirsty, uncultured, blunt, and awkward. Unfortunately, I'm still of the opinion that the most important thing **is** getting the job done, not political maneuvering around the Council. And I'm a politician myself, for God's sake."

Saracino eyes narrowed. "That kind of reluctance could cost you in the long run, Senator. We aren't blind to what is happening in the parliament, and the days where you could be guaranteed a viable bloc of votes for your programs are long over. We could deliver that again...or cause difficulties."

Adkins leaned forward, his large shoulders squaring back as he did so. "And I get what you're saying, but if you think you can pressure me into making a snap judgment, you are sadly mistaken. I'll get in touch with my own contacts and we'll talk about this at a later date. Now if you'll excuse me, I have a call related to our intelligence assets that I need to take privately." His fixed his famous glare on the other politico, and waited.

It was Saracino who broke eye contact first. "Of course, Senator. We'll be at the Cord-Hislop building meeting with CEO Harper if you need anything for the rest of the day." Branson merely nodded, his muscular form standing with elegance as the two men turned and filed out the door. Adkins exhaled and tapped his comm panel. "Ghrath, I told you never to -"

"I am afraid Agent Ghrath is ... indisposed." The voice that interrupted him was cold, rumbling, almost... malignant in it's power and tone. It was a voice that spoke of complete, unyielding control and dismissive contempt all in one set of syllables. "Nor will he be able to take any calls for a very long time, Senator Adkins. How is your family? I believe they are vacationing at the Hotel Shara in Zurich this week , correct?"

Adkins felt ice creep down his spine. "Who is this?"

The voice answered immediately. "This is the Shadow Broker, Senator. I am , at heart, a businessman, and I dislike it immensely when there are challenges of any kind to business ventures I am involved in. I thought a human of your intellectual breadth and political savvy would have enough sense...or self-preservation instinct...to avoid causing me issues."

Adkins mind raced. "And ... FLASHBACK caused you that?"

The Broker laughed, a sound like two trains colliding over a pit leading to Hell itself. "Of course not, human. I have had your project infiltrated for years, before it even got off the ground. The idea of building in drell memory proteins into bio-neuronic drones is brilliant...if that is what you were doing. But using actual drell brains is much better, if unethical, and of course, illegal."

The voice paused, tauntingly, then continued. "No, I reached out to this project because it was the most deeply concealed and heavily protected that you knew about. To demonstrate my ... reach."

Adkins bit his lip. "It got my attention. What do you want?"

The Broker's voice was a silky, guttural growl, a mix of contrasts in suave civilization and savage undercurrents. "There is talk of abandoning Shepard as Spectre. There is talk of pulling back Systems Alliance support of the project. It has been ongoing for some time."

Adkins exhaled, shivering. *How can the bastard know that? He must have my goddamned offices bugged? The only people that got anything were the SA Admirals with that recall order to the Normandy.* He forced his voice to stay calm. "Yes, that's been discussed...although I'm not convinced of the need."

The Broker spoke flatly. "Then, Senator, I would very strongly advise you to use every bit of your power to make sure that does not happen. I trust that leaking certain activities that the Systems Alliance has been up to on Rahkana would be taken poorly. Or that incident on Akuze, perhaps even the ugly truth about Elysium. These sort of releases would be paid for handsomely by those interested in such events, but it would be unneeded if Shepard was to remain in the full confidence of the Systems Alliance."

If the floor had fallen out from under Adkin's feet, he could not have felt it. This ... alien thing ... had penetrated the government of humanity deeply enough to casually name off 3 of the most damning and embarrassing incidents in human military history, cover-ups that kept men up at night hoping the truth would never come out. The message between the lines was clear, and Adkin's took a shaky exhalation of breath as he mastered himself. *Why so heavy handed...unless it's important. He may have me over a barrel, but I can still twist the knife.*

Reaching for a cigar, he lit it, forcing himself to calm, and then spoke. "I always figured you for a calm customer, not wasting anything you could use. You know full well what kind of damage releasing that sort of information could do to the Systems Alliance...and frankly, no, canning Shepard to appease a few Earth First and Terra Firma nuts ain't worth my time."

A calming puff of smoke, and he watched the paneled ceiling of his office for a moment before continuing. "But now I have to wonder what kind of nerve we hit here. I mean, what if I call your bluff, Mr. Broker? Sure, I'll probably end up dead, so will my wife, and the SA will be a shattered wreck...but what's so important about this that you have to have Shepard on this?"

There was silence on the line for a very long second. Then the voice spoke. "We believe Cerberus has an interest in recruiting her for their services. We have evidence that Cerberus's infiltration of your government and economy is further than you even comprehend. And we have hard proof that Cerberus is working with Saren Arterius. This is no longer a profit motive. This is a survival imperative." The voice was like iron, unyielding. "We have no intention of allowing that to happen. I've stated what will occur if you proceed with your plan to replace her, Senator. I am a very bad enemy."

Adkins was still for a very long moment. "I'll see what I can do, then. Is that all?"

The line went dead, and Adkins shakily killed the comm link. He massaged his forehead with one hand, and then slammed his fist down on the link again. "Cherry, get me Admiral Hackett. Now."

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## Chapter 52: Chapter 45 : Recovery, Liara

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*A/N: Awkward half-talking past each other, and recovery.*

*I'm in a writing mood, but it's late, so I probably won't have another chapter up for a day or two...unless I get bored. We'll see.*

*Also, marazul : seablue*

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**February 2nd, 2183 9:42 A.M.**

***I am Tyth Kashan, the Avatar of Understanding..***

*Images of death, blood and pain raced through her mind, 10th Street Reds gleefully leering at her body while they cooked Prothean children alive on spikes...sneering turians laughing at her as her unit was blown to pieces in rusty metal tunnels...sneering lips quirking in amusement as they spoke.*

*"No one could ever love you , Shepard. You're a monster." Pain encircled her heart, and she heard the beeping again of the detonators...beeping, ever so loud...*

*"Doctor...I think she's coming to."*

Shepard opened her eyes, spikes of hot agony shooting through her head at the lights over head, a moment before a voice murmured something and they were dimmed. Her entire body hurt, heavy dull pains in both legs, hot lines of pain in her stomach, dull, pin-pricks of discomfort over her back. The ceiling of the room was bare steel, with heavy vents in each corner, and surgical lights on swing-arms tucked into the far corner. She glanced around, and the rest of the room was equally bare, filled to the brim with medical computers, pumps, and equipment. A paper diagram four feet wide was taped to one wall with red marks over a stylized human body, haptic notes pinned here and there with 3-M's Postanotes.

IV's and more medical equipment was clamped or otherwise connected to her bed, a heavy medical unit. One of the machines beeped loudly, monitoring her vitals, while her legs were covered in the familiar shape of bone regeneration units. Several different bags of recuperative drugs, nano-formulated medicines, and other medical fluids fed into her body through a shunt on her arm, surrounded by medical tape.

A pair of men in heavy white and silver lab coats stood at the entryway to the room. They were older, one with graying brown hair, and heavy, sad features. His partner was larger and muscular, hard lines in his face speaking of some past sorrow, one eye replaced with a cybernetic lens of some kind that whirred faintly as he stepped forward, his dark black hair peppered with gray and thinning in the front. "Commander Shepard? I'm Doctor Letrau, chief medical officer of the AESV Charles Drew, a medical frigate. How do you feel?" He paused, cutting the machine that was beeping off, and gave a weak smile.

Shepard closed her eyes and groaned faintly. "Why .. do all doctors ask that. I'm in a hospital. I feel like I just got kicked by a Jotun mech. What happened?"

The two doctors glanced at each other, then nodded. "Well, you were badly wounded, as was your team, but everyone survived." He walked over to the nearest panel and began tapping in something, pulling up images of diagnostic scans. "You had your spinal column damaged, which we had to correct with minor cybernetics. Your stomach and intestines were also ... affected, which we patched up – mostly your own doctor's work, she's very good. We ran bone regenerators for forty hours straight on

your spine, legs, ribs, and extremities, and cleared you of a nasty infection of some kind of aggressive spores. We had to treat internal burns – not to mention burns where you nearly fried your psi-amp implant."

Shepard exhaled, wincing against a pulse of pain in her ribs. "And my team?"

Doctor Letrau shrugged. "The asari was extremely badly wounded and had over-exerted herself. She was also severely burned by acid, heavily infected with the same spores you had, and nearly killed by whatever she was up against. Her skull was cracked, and half the bones in her body were broken or fractured in one way or another. Both lungs punctured, some ... well, their equivalent of a spleen and a kidney were ruptured. She's stable now, but we're not 100% sure how much damage the biotic overexertion did to her system."

Shepard nodded faintly, remembering Chakwas' conversation about that. "I ...see. She is .. okay though? I mean... my doctor told me that kind of thing could cause -"

He sighed. "Brain damage, sterility, nervous disorders, neural breakdown, tremors, that sort of thing? It's hard to say. She's recovering still from the bone regeneration. She seems cognizant, when she's not out on painkillers."

Shepard nodded. "And Shields?"

The other doctor finally spoke, his voice somewhat thin and reedy sounding. "I'm Doctor Smith-Foster. Ms. Shields is still in critical condition, I'm afraid. She was not severely wounded otherwise, but the impact she took fractured her skull and drove a segment of bone into the brain slightly. There was a lot of cerebral fluid pressure on her brain and we had to relieve that. Her cybernetics seem to be holding up well but she has a liver replacement that is failing, we're going to have to pull and replace that. She hasn't regained consciousness yet, we're moving slowly to make sure there's no brain damage."

Doctor Letrau sighed. "For now, you need to focus on recovery, Commander. You still have another fifteen hours of bone regeneration, and while we gave you blood transfusions, your body is still shocked from the damage it took."

Shepard sighed. "Alright. . . but the Citadel Council will be wanting some kind of report, as will..."

The doctor nodded. "They sent a representative, actually." He paused. "You've just come to, Commander. We can have them wait until tomorrow or -"

She shook her head, immediately regretting it as pain flooded her. "No. Best...to get this out of the damned way. Let's get it over with so I can ... rest." She glanced around the room again, frowning. "Where is my ship, by the way?"

Letrau smiled. "It's shadowing us. There's also .. well. You'll find out soon enough, ma'am. There's a large fleet making sure nothing else happens to you. I'll go get the Citadel representative." The two doctors exited the room, the door opening to reveal a wide steel corridor – and the shoulders of two Systems Alliance soldiers in distinctive , black and pale green armor.

*The fuck? X operatives?* Before she had time to wonder why the special forces assigned to the protection of Arcturus were guarding her, the door opened again, and three figures walked in.

The first was her XO, Pressly, in his dress blues, neatly pressed and wearing his garrison hat. His hand held a data-pad, and his expression was both worried and guarded. Next to him was an asari in a conservative white gown with gray panels down the sides, floor length. Her skin was a deep purple, it's exotic coloring highlighted by striking white patterns over each eye and feathery markings along her crests. Finally, behind them both and standing taller than either was a massive turian, in the severe uniform of the Turian Hierarchy. The black and blue cloth was thick , forming a drape over each hip

that covered his spurs, while a sort of shawl covered his fringe and draped over each large shoulder, covered in markings that she assumed were decorations of some kind. His plates were black, trimmed with geometric silver markings, over lighter pale white skin. His green eyes reminded her of Nihlus.

The asari spoke first. "Good morning, Commander. I am Irrissa Te'Shora, sub-adjunct to Asari Councilor Tevos and Council Ambassador to the asari. You already know your XO, of course, and this is – "

The turian grunted. "I'm Admiral Hierax Victus, commander of the Citadel Fourth Fleet."

Shepard blinked. "Alright. The doctors said you needed to see me...what about?"

The turian almost smiled. "She's blunt, I like that." He squared his shoulders. "Your XO will undoubtedly give you a full report, but here's the rundown, Spectre. After you fell, Saren's ship fled Ferros, we believe with him on it. We have no information on if he's alive or not. The Fourth Fleet responded to your call, but we were...ambushed. First by geth, then by that kirix-fucking bastard of a geth dreadnaught you saw on Eden Prime. It decimated Fourth Fleet. We lost a dreadnaught, over 15 cruisers and 10 other ships."

Shepard shut her eyes, exhaling as she did so. "Goddamn it."

The asari's voice was soft. "As you can expect, there's a lot of concern if this...was worthwhile. Your XO says you have a prisoner, an asari who may have information that can help with us understanding Saren's goals." She glanced down. "As of yet, he's not allowed us to speak with her, nor provided any sort of report to the Council."

Shepard coughed, wincing. "That's because he doesn't answer to the Council. With all due respect, I don't even know what goddamned day it is. Or what happened except one of my crew is half dead and might be crippled, and the other one might have brain damage."

Hierax folded his arms. "We need to find Saren, before he does something else. Your krogan claims to have shot him in the head, but we don't have any evidence to go on. The ... geth dreadnaught plasma blasted the colony, so there's nothing left standing for us to examine, or any survivors aside from the Exogeni employees that made it off-world on the Normandy. We haven't even been allowed to interview them!"

Pressly's stance was very stiff. "Ma'am, my orders from the Systems Alliance were very clear. We had a transmission from Admiral Hackett himself, countersigned by Fleet Master Dragunov, that we were to hold position until you either awoke and decided on a course of action, or .. were declared dead, and in that case to report to Arcturus."

Te'Shora shook her head. "This is unacceptable interference in a Council action."

Shepard's lips twisted in a wry grin. "It's not a Council action, ambassador. The Council didn't finalize my status, and I'm afraid that until I've had a chance to interview everyone involved, I can't make any firm choices about who to let go or who to shoot in the head." She paused. "Let me get my XO's report, and then I'll get back to you. Please."

The two aliens glanced at each other, and then Te'Shora made a delicate gesture of siari. "Of course, Commander. My best wishes on your speedy recovery. We will be waiting for your ... response." Without another word they turned and departed, and Pressly let out a long whistle of breath. "It's good to see you awake, Commander. We were worried when they brought you in."

Shepard grunted, leaning her head back against the pillow of the bed. "I need a sit-rep, Pressly. What the hell happened?"

Pressly tersely narrated the events of the past few days – the escape, the battle, medical issues, the

conversation with Tetrimus, and then turned to the captive. "She says her name is Shiala, and that she used to work for Benezia. She claims that she was ... absorbed . . .by what she calls the Thorian, and that it transferred a method for deciphering Prothean Beacons to her mind, and through her mind, to Saren. She claims she can do the same for you."

Shepard was still for a moment, then cracked a smile, a full smile that transformed her whole face for a moment. "Fucking finally. If I can make some kind of sense of this shit in my head...maybe we can predict what that pointy-faced fuck is going to do next." She sighed. "For now, keep her in confinement on the Normandy. Tell her if her information is good, we will see about getting her a lighter sentence for her crimes."

Pressly nodded. "We took on all the Exogeni mercs and the few techs and scientists that survived, as well as Ethan Jeong. Jeong met with the Shadow Broker's representative yesterday and , well, vanished...I .. I couldn't really hold him on board without a reason, ma'am."

Shepard snorted. "Best thing you could have done, Pressly. What went down on Feros was...bad. The less we have to do with it, the better off we all are. If there's no evidence left, we at least won't be held responsible for the shit they were pulling down there. Speaking of which, suit tapes. What we saw – "

He shook his head. "Sorry , Commander. The geth jamming prevented the suits from uploading footage until you got the comm tower down, and after that the frequencies you cleared didn't include the loading frequency either. We only have the last 15 minutes or so of tape from some of the suits. " He glanced down at his feet, hands gripping his pad. "Liar's suit cam was so badly damaged it didn't bring up anything, but we have footage from yours. It shows Benezia picking up Saren and calling for backup, and Saren speaking at least briefly. Wrex's shot didn't kill him."

Shepard sighed and nodded. "I had that fucker, and then I don't know what happened. My shots were blocked, something nearly broke my back, and the instant I get up it feels like someone shot me with a dreadnaught main gun right in the tummy." She lifted her arm, wincing, and then set it back down on the bed.

Pressly nodded. "Orders, ma'am?"

Shepard paused, then gave a thin smile. "Maintain what you've been doing. Giving this Shiala to the Council won't do them a lick of good, and getting her back from the asari is likely to be a pain in the ass. I'll deal with their bullshit." She paused. "Ship refueled?"

Pressly gave her a look. "Yes, ma'am. Fueled and decontaminated. All nav and ops checks completed, the extra Mako we took on refitted with weapons and armor plating, spare suits of armor drawn up for Dr. T'soni, and top to bottom inspections conducted. We still need some repairs and supplies at the Citadel, but we're ready to go when you are healed up, ma'am."

Shepard gave Pressly another smile. "Ah, XO, you're too good to me. For now, just...hold and wait. We'll see how long it takes to get out of this madhouse."

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As it turned out, it took another 3 days. Shepard was not even remotely fully healed yet, angry scars still covering her torso under thick infused bandages, and her legs still hurt from the forced regeneration. The feel of cold steel in the small of her back was also disconcerting, but at least she had no nerve damage.

The days passed slowly, with little to do aside from review the net. The first shaky images from the Battle of Feros were now live on the net, with horrified commentary of the sheer power of the geth dreadnaught. Governments mobilized fleets and laid plans for new construction, and an emergency

meeting of the Council immediately amended the Treaty of Fairaxen to allow additional dreadnaught construction for all races.

News reports on what happened at Feros, specifically, were scattered and often completely off target. The Council was saying it was a strike at catching Saren that almost succeeded, along with a blurb that Commander Shepard had been wounded but was "recovering and is in good health" , a comment that made her snort, despite the pain. The doctors kept her sedated half the time, giving the bone regenerators time to work, and she was grateful for the respite from said pain.

She was able, on the third day, to get out of her hospital gown and put on a rather loose-fitting set of BDU's and get out of her room. The two guards on her door were indeed X7 Secret Service agents, who were part of a six-man security detail provided by Senator Adkins, who was , in their words "worried about the safety of humanity's most important soldier." Shepard wasn't sure if she trusted that or not, but X7's were no one anyone wanted to fuck with, and having some body guards when she couldn't even lift her pistol wasn't something she was going to start a fuss about.

She managed to get food down and get off her IV, and then went to the asari segment of the small medical ship to check on Liara. The ship was laid out in an E shape, a human/asari wing on one side , a turian/quarian wing on the other. Eldfell-Ashland used the ship as a flying medical resource for it's mines, factories and refineries in the system, which were a mix of super-heated planets too close to the sun , deep space eezo filtering rigs, and other hazardous environments. They had enough random quarian labor (mostly young quarians on Pilgrimage) to have a section just for them, but the company employed all kinds of aliens, and the ship could take care of them all.

The ship's bare metal, easy to sterilize decor grated on her nerves as she followed painted directions to the asari wing, which consisted of six medical rooms, an operating theater, and a monitoring station staffed by a bored asari nurse and two asari doctors, one of which stood up as she approached. "Ah, Commander Shepard. You're here to see Dr. T'soni, I presume?" The asari was slender, taller than most, and a delicate pale blue, but her features were very plain, except for dark red markings above the eyes and mouth.

Shepard nodded. "Yes, please." The doctor led her to the second room, and touched a door control. "She's awake, but still very weak." Shepard laughed, coughing as she did so, and winced. "Yeah, doc, so am I. Thanks." As it turned out, Liara's room was almost identical to Shepard's, but with less medical equipment, and the addition of a curtain-draped window, revealing the endless night of space sprinkled with stars. Liara lay on an angled bed, covered in a soft gray blanket ,with bone regenerator creches covering her lower body. Her features looked drawn and upset until she looked up and her eyes met those of Shepard's. "Shepard!" The smile that spread across her face transformed it into a thing of beauty, and Shepard couldn't help but smile back.

After a moment, she realized her legs hurt, and so she moved, staggering to a chair to sit wearily. "Hey there, marazul. Just checking in on you." Liara looked baffled. "I.. I'm sorry, my translator didn't catch that word." Shepard paused, then realized she'd slipped into Spanish. "Uh..nevermind. I'm tired and my mouth is moving faster than my brain is. As usual."

There was a stiff, uncomfortable silence, mostly marked by the two of them staring at each other, until Shepard blinked and rolled her neck. "So...how do you.. god. I can't believe I just almost asked how you felt, just like a goddamned doctor. Fuck."

The asari smiled, hesitantly. "I am ... better, I think. Tired, mostly." She glanced away, small blue fingers gripping the covers with nervous strength. "I .. goddess, Shepard, I nearly killed my own mother. I have never felt so much...anger, hate... sadness in my life. I .. I did not expect her there. I did not expect her to ... actually fight me."

Shepard pinched the bridge of her nose, her lips compressing together. "I'm sorry , Doctor. I didn't think .. I don't know. I thought we could maybe end this quickly, just shoot Saren in the head and arrest your mom. Now..." Liara nodded, but it was a nod at nothing, her eyes fixed at the foot of her bed. "I .. I was worried that I would not be strong enough to .. withstand her. That I would be a liability." She sighed. "And then, when you needed me I was so caught up in battling her, in proving that I was not weak, that I let you get blind sided and almost killed."

Shepard glanced up. "That's not your fault. That's what had to happen. Hell, your mother took out Shields with one biotic blast, she's still jacked up in ICU. If you hadn't have kept her off of us she'd have killed Wrex and me in a few seconds. I was the one who slipped up. You're a lot of things, Doctor...but you aren't a liability at all." Shepard paused. "The doctors...tell me you probably hurt yourself doing that. Going up against her like that."

Liara gave a faint, weak laugh. "Nothing that .. matters." She looked at her right hand, as if seeking something, then laid it back down. "The doctor here worries that I've overstressed my system , and that it will be difficult having children. I doubt I'll ever have the chance."

Shepard closed her eyes, thinking back to that ugly day in the medical clinic where the Alliance medical doctors at the Penal Legion had given her a physical. *"I'm sorry but whatever was done to you was...pretty bad. There's cervical scarring, and they hit you with sterility drugs to prevent pregnancy, I think. There's ... nothing we can salvage. You're sterile."* Shepard cleared her head , and sighed. "T'soni...I'm ... sorry. No one ..."

Liara gave her a look, then shrugged. "As I said, Commander, it is ... not very important right now. Given what my mother has done to our family name, continuing the line does not interest me much anymore." The soft blue eyes turned to meet Shepard's, and the asari bit her lip nervously. "C-commander... are you all right? You've gone...pale."

Shepard gave a pained smile. "...I.. I never told anyone , but ... as a result of what was...done to me, I'm sterile. I can't have...children." She closed her eyes. "I'm not sure what that is for your people , but it's ...hard. I used to ... dream of being normal someday...when I was in the Reds. That I'd get clean and...find some perfect man, and ... raise a family. Be a *good* mother, the way my ... parents should have been." She gave a shaky exhale. "Now, it's a stupid thing to get upset over, I guess. But it's always just...set me farther apart." She exhaled. "No one should have to give that up, Liara. Aren't you Benezia's only child? What happens to your family if you can't have kids?"

Liara's expression was almost blank, but Shepard knew by now that it was a mask Liara wore, just like she herself did. A long moment passed before Liara spoke. "...m.. .. my mother used to ... encourage me to go into politics. To learn how to ... be a leader, an asari others would follow." She closed her own eyes. "My other parent was also asari. It is very common for asari to commune and join, but very rarely do asari have children with other asari. It is considered...distasteful. We are called purebloods, and ... taunted. Shunned."

Liara's soft, melodic voice took on a tone of confused pain. "Growing up my mother shielded me from it where she could, but it was obvious to me that the rest of House T'soni was not going to .. fully accept me. I never could... make myself a part of that family,and eventually I .. I just gave up. To pursue what I .. wanted, or thought I wanted."

Shepard said nothing, and Liara looked at her, eyes tracing her lines. "So in the end, if something happens to my ability to bear children... I do not think it will matter much. We have more important things to worry about." Shepard's mouth tightened. "That doesn't mean it's okay." Liara gave a small smile. "It does not mean I am definitely going to die childless and alone either, Commander."

Shepard nodded , then grimaced. "Call me Sara. I figure if you can stop me from being splattered over

a wall by your mother, you can drop the commander garbage." Liara glanced at her uncertainly before she gave a wide smile, and Shepard had to smile back. Liara carefully pronounced her name, then nodded. "And you should call me Liara...I fear my doctorate is doing us little good at the moment."

"Alright , Liara." Shepard stood. "We... may have a lead. There was an asari we captured – or rather, Garrus did, down on Feros. One of Benezia's followers or some shit like that. She said her name is Shiala, and – " Shepard broke off, as Liara's eyes widened. "Goddess. You found Shiala? Shepard, she was my mothers' personal bodyguard and commando, the one who trained me in pistol usage and biotics! She's alive?"

*Well, that's something, I suppose.* "Yeah, she's being held on the ship. According to Wrex, she looks just like the asari that got the drop on me, except she's not green, she's blue. She says she got some kind of mind-imprint from the Thorian that explains how to make sense of the Beacon, and that she can give me the same thing."

Liara nodded. "I see. . . the Thorian." Liara frowned. "I am afraid I did not get a full . . . explanation of what exactly the Thorian... was. I saw the massive plant creature, of course, but -" Shepard nodded. "It's...ugly. The Thorian was apparently a sentient thing, that was able to absorb the memories and skills of whatever it . . . ate. And it ate a lot of Prothean corpses after the fall of the Protheans. Exogeni was feeding it criminals in exchange for it using it's knowledge to help us translate the Mars Archive ruins." She sighed. "Doesn't matter now. The damned ship of Saren's blew the whole colony to bits, and it died with everything else down there."

"Goddess...the knowledge it must have possessed. It had the .. minds of actual Protheans? The secrets it must have known...the questions that we could have asked it!" Liara's voice was breathless sounding, and she had an expression of disappointment on her face. Shepard scowled. "Yeah, each one paid for with a human life. The entire colony was .. infested by it's infection, it controlled people and basically took them over. It , according to Shields, produced those... things that vomited on you. Those used to be people. It's better off a pile of ashes, trust me."

Liara's expression wavered, remembering the horrid burning sensation that had enveloped her. "I.. I see." Shepard sighed. "The important thing is that if she has some way to make sense of this...garbage in my head. . . then we can get back on track to finding Saren and figuring out what our next moves are going to be." Shepard exhaled. "And for that... I think it's more than likely I'll need your help again."

Liara said nothing for a long moment, and then glanced up. "Shepa- Sara." She carefully laced her fingers together, as if nervous, then spoke in a hurried rush. "I will of course do whatever you need me to do , but I just wanted to say that I am very sorry for how it turne-"

Shepard held up a hand. "It's...okay, Liara. I didn't think it would be but...the memories are already fading, and , well..." She paused, thinking, eyes staring off into some unseen space, and then gave a smirk. "I've never .. had anyone who .. really got what I was going through. I'm not totally happy with it, but I know what happened last time was... a mess, not your fault or mine." She smiled reassuringly. "Regardless of how it turned out, it's the only way to get this done, and frankly, I'm not ... wild about having someone who was working with Saren hooked into my brain. Call me paranoid, but I'd rather have you do it, if possible. How will this sort of thing work?"

Liara licked her lips nervously. "I.. uh. I mean. I could act as a ... buffer, I suppose. I would link my mind to yours, and then I would allow her to link to me, and pass what she sends to me to you."

Shepard gave a grin. "Ooh, a three-way. Kinky." Liara gave her a shocked look, then , with a sort of nervous laugh, spoke. "I – what? No , I ... I mean I wouldn't ... " Liara's flush spread , and she shook her head. "Oh, goddess, you are teasing me again."

Shepard stared at her for a long second before grinning. "You're picking up on the jokes. That's good." Shepard closed her eyes and rubbed her temples tiredly, trying not to think about what all that entailed, or the ... sensations that went along with it. *Joke, hell, if you asked me I'd probably strip naked right here. Christ and Virgin, I need to get laid...* There was a strangled sort of sound, and Shepard cautiously opened her eyes, to see the asari almost two shades darker than her earlier blush. Shepard cursed mentally and sighed. "Um...please tell me I didn't say that out loud."

Liara swallowed, eyes flickering everywhere except Shepard's face "I ... uh, no. What? I coughed...sorry." She brought up her hand to her mouth and coughed, still blushing, and Shepard stared at her. Liara finally met her gaze, timidly and almost worriedly looking, and Shepard gave a weak smile. "Sorry, Liara. That was...really, really inappropriate. I'm tired, and I hurt, and ... dealing with Beatrice tore up a bunch of old wounds."

Shepard stood, grimacing against the lingering aches in her legs, and stepped back from the bed. "I'll...let you recover, and figure out when we can leave." She hurried out through the door, shutting it behind her, Liara unable to get her mouth to work to say anything before the door shut. Liara sank back against her pillows, hearing the human woman's footfalls receding, mind racing in a thousand directions. She realized she was shaking, and carefully placed her hands against one another, closing her eyes.

*Get a hold of yourself, Liara. This is a silly infatuation you have with a fascinating, beautiful alien who saved your life. Goddess only knows how many other people have thrown themselves at her, the last thing she needs is additional worries from me. I have to focus on .. the mission at hand, first. She swallowed back the dryness in her mouth, then realized she had a silly grin on her face. On the other hand, the way she said that... goddess...*

Liara tapped the comm button on her medical bed. "Doctor Aentha, I need to know how much longer I'm going to be in medical."

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## Chapter 53: Chapter 46: Recovery, Shields

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**A/N:** *Going forward, my stories will be vetted by the incredible **Owelpost**, whose work you should be familiar with unless you're some kind of awesomeness-hating Reaper fan. Mostly that's due to the sort of goofy mistakes that have gone through in the past, but I'm sure Owelpost can make contributions here and there to make the story more awesome. Of course, any mistakes are my fault. (Happy?)*

*A few of you have asked for me to draw some things that I've written about. God knows why you'd want to see my crappy line art, but I've put up sketches of Benezia's Armor and the ODIN Shotgun at if you're interested or in need of a good laugh.*

*The story from here on out is divided into Arcs. Arc I was *The Trail Begins*. Arc II is *Putting Together the Pieces*. It's mostly about the side missions, and how they actually make sense, instead of being a distraction from the main mission. This chapter is a touch long, but that's because it's more like two shorter chapters shoved together. Enjoy.*

O-OSaBC-O

### ARC II: Putting Together the Pieces

*I'm waiting*

*I haven't seen the ghost*

*And am I really here at all?*

*I'm silent, I'm the moon  
One eye open  
I'm waiting, waiting  
– A Lily for the Spectre, by Stephanie Dosen*

**February 5th, 2183 11:00 A.M.**

"All hands, this is Commander Shepard, I have the deck and the conn. XO Pressly stands relieved. VI, log the time. Prepare for jump in one five minutes, we're headed to the Citadel. Upon docking and arrival finalization, all hands will turn to for ship inspection, and watch section III will stand by for repair teams. All other personnel will commence leave at that time, rotating one watch section per day. Shepard clicked off the 1MC in the cockpit of the Normandy, tiredly, and nodded at Joker. "Flight Lieutenant, take us out."

The helmsman nodded. "Aye, ma'am. Proceeding toward the mass relay." Shepard turned away, and sighed as Chakwas folded her arms. "I'm fine...they discharged me and said as long as I didn't do anything too stressful I was alright to walk around."

Chakwas arched an eyebrow. "There's a petulant tone in your voice, young lady. I have half a mind to send you to your room to pout." Shepard gave her a blank look, and the doctor cracked a small smile. "A joke, Commander. I'm sure you're fine, it's just that you probably could use some rest before we get to the Citadel. If the interrogation that Te'Shora woman put you through is anything to go by, they'll have lots of questions."

Shepard sighed, running her hands through her black hair before grunting. "Yeah, I can't hardly fucking wait, Doc. Do I get accused of incompetence, dismissed as a loon, or patted on the head?" She pushed off the bulkhead, wincing slightly, and shrugged. "Doesn't matter. How is Beatrice doing?"

Chakwas folded her hands together calmly. "Ms. Shields is resting in the Med Bay. The doctors did a good job, but...she's not fit for any kind of combat in the near future, Commander. She's lucky not to be dead."

Shepard nodded. "I'd better go see her...if you will give us some privacy, I'd appreciate it." Chakwas nodded, and Shepard began trudging to the stairs, eyeing the stations of Ops Alley as she went. The crew met her glances with smiles and stiffened postures, and she saw everything was running at 100% efficiency. Pressly was installed commandingly at the CIC overlooking the galaxy map, barking course orders to Joker, and Shepard gave a faint smile. *He looks natural up there, instead of awkward like I do. But now is not the time to feel sorry for myself.*

Reaching the stairs, she slowly climbed down, returning the salute of the CIC guard and reaching for the wall. "Damned legs." Gritting her teeth, she forced herself to walk normally, arching her spine, stretching her legs despite the pain, squaring her shoulders. By the time she reached the mess decks, she was in her usual pantherine stride, eyes flicking left and right.

She entered the medbay, stopping when she saw Shields sitting up in the nearest medical bed, reading a datapad. "Hey. You okay?"

Beatrice glanced up, her gray eyes tired and almost dull. "Not really. The docs...well, they told me I can walk, but I'll probably never be battle worthy again. Part of the damage is to my sense of balance...so I'm kinda screwed now as a mercenary." She pushed her black mane of hair aside, part of it shaven to her skull where the doctors had been forced to operate. She wore BDU's, but with a medical computer-band wrapped securely around her right arm, and her feet were bare.

Shepard shook her head. "You have years and years of battle experience and leadership skills, Bea. You can still do whatever you feel like putting your hand towards. Besides, they can probably correct

that stuff with cybernetics or therapy." Shepard glanced around, and then shrugged. "Hell, I caught three hellfire rounds right in the gut, chipped my spine. Ten years ago that would have been a death sentence, but they have me up and walking around. You'll get through it."

Shields rubbed her eyes tiredly with her flesh hand, her cybernetic arm lying limply over her stomach. "Yeah, maybe. Then again, maybe you're just a hardass, Sara. I'm just...tired of being shot to pieces and spending weeks in recovery. Lost an arm already, not looking forward to more metal shoved in me." Shield's voice trailed off, and she tossed the datapad aside. "So, She-bitch. Why are you here, being all awkward and shit?"

Shepard sat on the supply cabinet next to her bed, staring at her own feet. "We..we didn't have a chance to talk much. About...how things have been. About...the old squad. Us. "

Shields gave her a look. "Well, for you things are rosy, but for me, things have been bad. The 3 of us demanded a transfer out of the 2RRU immediately after Torfan, and the brass didn't like that, they wanted us to be your support team. It pissed Baby Blue off so bad he lost it and punched out one of the officers. They gave him a bad conduct discharge, and the last I knew, he went to Tuchanka. I haven't heard from him since, he said he was going to learn how to be a krogan." Shepard gave a faint snort at that, but Shields just sighed.

Shields' voice remained flat as she adjusted her position slightly and continued. "Jason just...vanished after a few months. One day he was with me in the 3 RIU, the next ... gone. None of his stuff was missing, just his rifle. They filed it as a desertion, then a missing persons case." She swallowed. "With him gone, the last of the Felonious Chunks was gone, except for me. After that, the 3 RIU got mauled in a fight with biotic extremists, and well... I was tired. I went back to General von Grath and asked him for help, and he hooked me up with Exogeni."

She smiled, a broken, thin expression. "I had a pretty good year and a half. Better pay. People not asking about Torfan or avoiding me as the 'Butcher's Ice Queen.' I could...just be me. Start painting again. Try to heal. Dating, building a real life for once instead of just following. Then ... the goddamned Thorian. Then geth. Then..you."

Shepard nodded mutely, saying nothing, rubbing the back of her neck. Shields was silent a long moment and then spoke, almost angrily. "They're setting you up to fail again, you know. You should have been put in charge of a fleet of ships, with Alliance Intel or STG support answering to you. They give you two platoons of marines and a single, untested ship, a handful of people, and a fancy title, and you buy this shit?"

Shepard gave a grim smile. "It...was the best offer we could get at the time."

Shields huffed. "And you're just going to throw yourself into the fucking wood chipper again, huh? Didn't goddamned Torfan teach you anything, She-bitch?"

Shepard flinched, and her hands gripped the fabric around her knees tightly, knuckles whitening. "Bea, there's so much at fucking stake I can't even understand it all. This bastard has a ship that can wipe whole fleets, armies of fucking geth, and is mucking about with Prothean shit no one understands. The Council thinks I'm some kind of clever monkey, the ambassador and the SA think I'm their pet psychopath – just like the Reds did. I'm on a ship that can't even take light GTS fire, with the only person who can help me decipher the clues an alien teenager with even worse problems dealing with people than I have, who, by the way, is the daughter of one of the crazies behind this whole shit. I've got fucking Cerberus, spooky goddamned crime lords, crazy turians...fuck! FUCK!"

Shepard smashed a fist against the wall, and then sharply exhaled, shuddering and straightening. A long moment passed, the only sound that of her heavy breathing as she struggled to get control of herself,

and then she spoke, almost in a whisper. "... and if I fuck it up, how many millions will die? They gave this shit to me when all I do is fuck up everything I touch. Except this time, the whole galaxy gets to watch me fucking fail."

Shepard stood, walking to the med-bay windows. The mess was empty, since watch just started, and she gazed at the sharp-edged tables with a dull, throbbing pain in her heart. "I... I was happy to see you, Bea." She looked down. "I've been ... fucking lost since you guys left. All I do is kill and kill and stumble through shit and now I'm expected to be a leader, understand galactic politics..."

Shields closed her eyes, jaw trembling. "... I can't help you, Sara." Shepard swallowed, placing her hands on the glass in front of her.

"Because I'm broken?" Shepard's own voice was lost sounding, confused. "God. I just...you all were so .. close to me, the only people who kept pushing to reach out to me, even when I pushed away, that I never... I just .. didn't think. Not in that way. I never have. For the longest time I told myself you were just there to ... make sure you survived. Then because you wanted to ride my coattails to greatness. By the time I figured it all out.. everything was ... gone."

Shields shook her head slowly, as Shepard turned around. "I can't ... be what you want me to be. I don't even know *how*. I can .. be your friend. I can listen, for all the fucking good that will do. I can talk, if you really want me to try to externalize the shit I'm going through. But ... "

Shepard's voice grew ragged. "I .. I'm not complete without you, all of you guys...but you're my family not...people I lust after. You're the sister I never had, the only person I could be with and not worry about fucking the words up..."

Shields gave a tired, weary smile, limned in tears, blurring her vision of the woman in front of her. She grunted, her face twisting in agony as she slid out of the bed, staggering to her feet. Shepard was still standing there, face in her hands, and Shields inhaled against the pain as she took two steps closer. For a moment she balled her fist, and the frustration, pain, sorrow, and longing all just shattered something within her, and she threw her arms around Shepard, burying her face into the other woman's shoulder.

"Feeling...hurts. That's how you know it matters, She-bitch." She squeezed tighter, and Shepard hugged her back, breath coming in hitching sobs. For long seconds, they stood there, saying nothing, and finally Shields pushed away, wiping her eyes with her natural hand. "I need...a fucking smoke."

O-OSaBC-O

It took Shepard almost 15 minutes to get Shields down to the smoking area, most of that spent arguing with Chakwas as she had to redo a torn medigel dressing on Shields' shoulder. Shepard used her biotics to lighten her friend's weight as much as possible, a draining exercise but helpful in reducing her pain, and the two now leaned wearily against the tunnel of the hangar bay, vents overhead sucking away smoke. Bea had put on a pair of combat boots two sizes too big, and was shuffling back and forth in them as she handed her a cigarillo and Shepard lit it, inhaling greedily.

"God, Bea, where the fuck did you find actual Vegan tobacco?" Shepard took another grateful drag, eyes closed and her head resting on the cool metal bulkhead. Shields gave a weak laugh, rolling the cherry of her cigarette around the rim of the welded-on ash tray, bringing the tip of her cigarillo to a neat point. "One of the scientists liked to smoke, brought five whole boxes of the stuff." She inhaled, her beautiful features calm and almost placid in the dim lighting of the passageway.

After a long moment, she spoke again, her voice pitched low. "Your BDO LT is fucking hot. What's his name, Alendo?"

Shepard snorted. "Kaiden Alenko." She paused, tapping out ashes, and then shrugged. "I ... look a lot.

It's ... hilarious, in a way. After all the shit I was put through when I was young, sex isn't something I even .. thought about for years and years. It just didn't...affect me." She inhaled again, blowing streamers of smoke into the air, her storm-front colored eyes seeking out Shields'. "Maybe that's why I never...got it. I .. I just never thought about it, Bea. Swear to God. You guys were...fuck, the only people I trusted. In a way I'm glad I didn't...it would have...ended up hurting someone."

Shields quirked her thin lips, and tilted her head to the side for a second. "We used to argue about it when you weren't around, y'know. Is she into boys or girls? After...Torfan I guess we got our answer. I was ...just so goddamned angry you'd end up with that .. cow of a sister of Jason's."

Shepard grimaced. "Well, she played me like a damned instrument. She met me on the leave we had before Torfan, chatted me up about guns and space piloting, bought me a drink to celebrate Contact Day, and as it turned out, had done service with Anderson in the past. She just .. talked around all my awkwardness, and got me ... smashed."

Shields shook her head. "Bitch."

Shepard shrugged. "I was... I don't know. Maybe she had something she put in my drink or maybe I was just...aware. She was clingy, and every time I said something I thought was stupid or off, she seemed to get it or find it funny or witty. I .. I honestly thought I had found someone who got me. I had you guys...but..."

Shields winced, inhaling again. "But you saw us as family, not fuck buddies. That's just stupid on our part, sticking together from 16 to 25 and then we expect you to fall in love. Not that I'm letting you off the hook for sleeping with that tramp, but..."

Shepard nodded sadly. "When it ... went bad, she told me she didn't love me, that no one would ever love a monster. That..." She paused, voice breaking slightly. "That Jase had told her all these horrible things about me." She placed her hand over her eyes, her lips twisting in memory. "I was ... a wreck by then. I don't even remember everything that went down, Bea, but... I know I shot the bitch. I made damned sure of that."

Shields nodded. "You told us. At the bar." Shields flicked ashes from the cigarillo and glanced up. "You just left it at that? No more ... you know?"

Shepard laughed bitterly. "Oh, god, after that bullshit dog and pony show on Torfan, people were just throwing themselves at me. Men, women, asari, a fucking turian, two goddamned salarians. I got turned into some kind of fucking sex symbol overnight , which I still don't understand, and people kept expecting me to be like Branson and live it up. But no... I never...did anything. Too scared. Too nervous. And too pissed off. All I wanted to do was kill pirates and kick batarians in the head, but they kept trotting me out to public events." Shepard scrubbed out her cigarette, and made a flicking motion with her fingers. Shields handed over the pack along with her lighter, and Shepard fished one out. "I remember some reporter asking me what brand of purse I used. And makeup." She lit the cigarette, the flame casting a golden glow over her features.

Handing it back, Shepard leaned back against the bulkhead again, smoke trickling from her nostrils. "What a goddamned joke."

Shields nodded, cutting her eyes to the right as the elevator opened, and Wrex strode out, still clad in clothes instead of armor. "Hey, ugly. Get your fat ass over here." Wrex whirled, red eyes glaring, then his mouth split into a good natured grin and he lumbered over. "Shields. Hmmp. Still soft , I see, laying around wounded all the time."

She gazed up at the big krogan, her smile wider. "Still ugly , I see. I always wanted to know, did you lose a fight with a varren, or did one of the krogan girls fix your face up with those claw marks?" The

krogan gave a laugh and crouched between the two human woman. "It's good to see ya, battle turtle."

Wrex rumbled in his chest, a sort of humming noise that passed for amused agreement among krogan. "I never will forget the expression Zaon had on his face when you shot him in the quad, Shields. Never knew our voices could go so high." The krogan paused, looking her over. "You look okay, human. I suppose if you're up smoking that weak human leaf, then you must be done bleeding from playing kissy with the wall. You alright?"

She shrugged. "The doctors ... my balance is shot, brain damage. I'm okay otherwise, mostly, but Sara had to help me stay upright and use biotics just to get me out of the medbay. They're talking cybernetics, maybe cloning, but brain injuries are so iffy that it could kill me putting me under the knife."

Wrex shrugged. "You're a warrior, Shields. I saw you in the fire of Torfan, fearless and strong. Human females have always been the strong ones of your species, I realized that after seeing you two in action. If you can't fight on the battlefield, that doesn't mean you can't still fight elsewhere."

Shepard nodded. "I told her that, but you know us women. We had to talk about it, and cry , and then talk about it some more." Her voice was dry and sarcastic, and she glanced in Wrex's direction, who groaned.

"Always picking on the krogan...you're not gonna let me forget that, are ya?"

Shepard blew a smoke ring in his face. "Nope."

The krogan rolled his eyes, and turned to Shields again, who exhaled , extinguishing her own cigarette. "I haven't made up my mind. We'll see what kind of reception I get from Exogeni at the Citadel. " Wrex nodded, although he looked down at her sharply.

"If they don't want you, you should come with us. These marines Shepard has are softer than volus butter. Their chief, Cole, is hard, but the rest, pfagh. They bleed and cry from every wound they get!"

Shepard snorted. "No redundant circulation system or backup organs, big guy. You keep forgetting that."

Wrex gave a disgusted sounding chuckle. "It's just you people are so squishy and fragile. At least asari heal fast , you just break all the time."

Shields nodded. "Speaking of healing fast, the asari you have with you...she doing okay? She seems ... kinda hostile towards me."

Shepard sighed. "I haven't actually checked on her since we got back on board. And as far as the hostility goes, that's a really, really long story, Bea. Shortest version is that she's got a big case of hero worship and knows enough about Torfan to blame you guys for not sticking around."

Shields gave a weary shrug, shaking the pack of cigarillos to extract another. "She can get in fucking line, then. God, the shit we got transferring away from the 2RRU was something to behold. A few of the 2RRU who survived called us traitors, and von Grath wouldn't speak to us, kept shuffling us off to see the yeomen. General Florez damn near had an apopleptic fit right there in the barracks." She lit the cigar, puffing away, and smirked.

Shepard sighed, as Wrex looked from one female to the other. "Figures. Your kind never bothered to understand you, Shepard. You should have just done what Shields and I did; gone into merc work. Cleaner, no questions, and no worries but how you spend the money."

Shepard smiled. "I had a capital punishment penalty against me. That's 40 years service before I can quit the military, unlike you , Bea." She took a drag from her cigarillo, licking her lips as she knocked

dead ash from the cherry. "Besides, if I had done that, God knows who they would have picked to go after Saren. Branson? That wimpy fuck, Delacor?"

Shields laughed. "Oh, god, Delacor. That poor, poor bastard. I remember they put him in charge of the 3 RIU, and the day he takes command, he finds out his fiance got killed in an aircar accident. Silly bastard starts crying like a little child, right in front of the entire fucking unit standing at attention. I mean, yeah it's horrible...and whoever gave him the message right then should be pistol-whipped..." She shook her head, taking a long drag from her cigarillo, and blew air through her lips. "But come the fuck on. The guy wasn't ever gonna be Spectre material, She-bitch."

Shepard leaned back against the wall, sighing. "Yeah, well...I'm not sure I am, either."

### O-OSaBC-O

The next day dragged along slowly for Shepard, although she was glad she'd managed to clear the air with Shields. After another series of medical examinations and more time on the bone regenerator, Chakwas grudgingly cleared her for light normal duty, and Shepard was able to sleep in her quarters again. Almost guiltily, she asked about Liara, but Chakwas didn't have much of an update on her condition. Liara herself was asleep on the cot in the science lab, exhausted from being hooked up to the bone regeneration equipment for such a long time, and Shepard made the mistake of asking why it took so long to get her fixed up.

This ended up getting Shepard rewarded with a rather dry discussion of differences in asari and human physiology, and she learned that asari spinal columns were made up of two bone columns. The bones were heavier than human spinal bones, with sensitive nerve tissue carefully packed with heavy muscle and body fat around them, and natural shock absorbers in the form of spinal fluid running between the two columns. It also explained why Liara's overall condition was better – the asari skeleton was more capable of taking extreme physics shocks, like biotic throws, than the comparatively flimsy human skeleton.

The Council had been informed of their arrival time, and now Shepard had nothing left to do but interview Shiala. She was nervous, not just because it would require more joining mind to mind, but because she didn't have any way of knowing what the hell would be in her head if the asari was telling the truth about being able to decipher it.

*Saren went crazy for a reason. I wonder if he got exposed to more than one of those goddamned Beacons and went right off his little nut. Wouldn't blame him if he did, Christ, that shit is ... ugh.* Shepard's half-formed thoughts were broken as Garrus got into the elevator with her. "Commander, you feeling better?"

Shepard nodded. "Yeah. You did a good job down there, Vakarian. The scouting, and pulling us out of that mess. Thanks."

The turian shrugged absently, his plates taking on a dull sheen in the dim lighting inside the elevator. "I did what felt right, and sometimes, you get lucky. The important thing is that if this Shiala can give you the information we need...we might have a real lead on that bastard." He paused. "I've done lots of interviews of criminals and police interrogations, if you think it would be helpful to have me there."

Shepard shook her head. "I appreciate the offer, I do. But I've done my share too. And frankly, I don't want too many people in the room." The elevator finally opened, and Shepard glared at it as she stepped out. "Remind me to have this thing torn out and replaced when we get to the Citadel, Vakarian. Turians can't build elevators for shit."

The C-Sec sniper sniffed. "At least our armor can take more than spat gullet stones before shattering like glass, Sheep." He flicked his talons over his fringe and spotted Tali glumly surveying her ration

pack on the table. "And now it's off to explore the joys of sterilized field rations. It's better than protein bars, but not by much."

Shepard nodded. "I'll pick up some decent dextro chicken feed on the Citadel." She grinned and stepped out of the way of a playful swat from the detective, then entered her quarters. Glancing around to make sure all was in order, she stripped off her uniform and opened her personal armor locker.

Her Spectre armor was a complete write off, of course. She'd get some more once they docked. So she pulled out her older N7 armor, laying each piece out on the bed, noticing that the chest and arm pieces looked like new. "Damn, Ash, you do pretty good work." With a small smile she put on the armor, noticing how much lighter and flimsier it felt than the heavy, high tech Spectre armor. "If I'd been wearing this stuff, I'd be dead right now."

After dressing in the armor, and checking her pistol, she triggered the ships comms. "Master Chief Cole, bring the prisoner to my quarters." She paused, sighing. "Doctor T'soni, please report to my quarters." Clicking off the comm, she sat down at the single table, folding her arms and waiting.

Liara was the first to enter, wearing yet another of her University of Service uniforms, the gleaming white and green material far too form fitting and distracting for Shepard's taste. Her features were set in a neutral expression, but the eyes were.. worried and nervous. Shepard gave what she hoped looked like a reassuring smile and gestured to the other chair. "Have a seat. Everything alright?"

Liara gracefully sat, the motion so elegant that Shepard felt clumsy in comparison. "I am .. well. I have been running some spectrometric analysis of the material the towers and skyways were made from on Feros. Those towers were over a thousand years older than the material on Therum. I wonder how long it took to ... destroy...the Prothean Empire. "

Shepard shook her head. "It's too jumbled up for me to know right now, but .. I don't know. Building a set of beacons like this is something you do at the end-game. It's an act of desperation. Hell, I don't even know how the things work."

Liara was about to respond , eyes bright, when the door snicked open and Master Chief Cole escorted Shiala through the door. His hands were full of an extremely ugly Katana shotgun with a widened barrel and an extra mass acceleration pack on the bottom, in what Marines jokingly called a "boom stick". The Katana was preloaded with the carnage mod, and the double mass barrels spat out a cone of shrapnel that would pulp anything in its path. He gestured the other asari to the bed, and then installed himself in the corner, the gun pointed at her head in a loose fashion.

Shiala, for her part, seemed calm, sitting quietly on the bed, and folding her hands together. She wore spare marine BDU's with the SA patch removed, and there was a biotic field disruptor draped around her neck on a chain. The device was basically a mass pulsar field set to disrupt a building biotic flare before it could start. They were uncomfortable to wear, and Shepard was glad to see Cole was taking no risks.

Shepard glanced at Liara before speaking. "You probably know me. I'm Commander Shepard, Council Spectre. The man guarding you is Master Chief Cole, and you already know Liara."

Shiala nodded. "It is good to see you again, Little Wing. You look ... well."

Liara swallowed. "And you, Shiala. The last we saw of each other was...ages ago. More than 30 years. You look... different."

Shiala gave a laugh, weak and weary sounding. "And you are still too kind. I look half-dead and broken, because I am." The asari turned to face Shepard, the pale blue eyes half lidded. "I am here to explain my crimes and what I know of what Saren is doing, in hopes of stopping him before we are all

lost."

Shepard frowned, but nodded. "I'm listening."

Shiala spread her hands, in an elegant gesture. Liara seemed to relax, and Shepard made a note to ask her about it later. Shiala's calm, quiet voice filled the captain's cabin. "I was an asari commando leader of the Serrice Guard unit funded by House T'soni. As one of the Thirty Families, their security was paramount to all of Thessia, and the Serrice Guard was happy to provide its assistance to one of our proudest Houses. As a result, I was in Matriarch Benezia's service over 400 years."

She gave a weak smile, glancing at her hands. "For years I was but a guard, then a guard captain, and finally a commando. The training is difficult, with asari huntresses hounding you, and the Ocean Guard sniping you with live rounds designed to wound but not kill, but I succeeded. Benezia tapped me to personally lead her bodyguard, and train her daughter in the biotic war and hunting arts. Liara proved a very apt pupil."

Liara smiled. "When I wasn't digging up holes in the grounds or buried in the librums."

Shiala's expression brightened for a moment, and then filled with new pain. Despite herself, Shepard found herself leaning forward. "Go on, then. What happened to Benezia that would make her do something like this?"

Shiala sighed. "Benezia's... philosophy was to guide what she called lesser races. Not to patronize them, but to provide them a way to improve their own cultures and futures, using asari progress as a sort of ruler and guide book. In the process, asari culture would have been... upheld. And the future of the asari people assured. She meant well, but as time went on, she became...upset." Shiala paused. "The loss of her... partner... made her very difficult to deal with at times, and while she hid it around Liara, there were many, many nights she cried herself to sleep. Sometime after Liara began showing a... resistance to the direction the Matriarch wished her to go in, Benezia began entertaining Saren."

Shiala frowned. "If I recall, Saren had met her years before, with his brother, during the Relay 314 incident." She didn't notice the frown Cole gave her at the name, continuing on blithely. "He returned years later, more bitter, and they spent... a great deal of time together. I remember thinking it was a good thing, as he drew her out of the shell she had built around herself. The... distance between you and your mother hurt her, even if she never let you see that, Little Wing."

Liara's expression crumbled, and Shepard grit her teeth. Shiala smiled apologetically and continued. "After several years, though...Saren and Benezia went on a trip, without us. Without any bodyguards or staff, actually. When they returned they were...different. Driven. Angry." She paused. "The matriarch began buying up ships, weapons, supplies. She had us train day and night, and then she had us all put on a frigate she bought and we flew to a world we'd never seen before, where we docked with Sovereign."

Shepard nodded. "The big black dreadnaught, correct? Is it a geth ship, or did the geth just find it?"

Shiala shook her head. "You...will not want to believe me. It is not geth at all. The ship... is much older. The more time you spend on it, the more you start.. hearing things. Voices. Urges. Saren called it indoctrination. The ship makes you want to obey Saren, to follow him, admire him...even worship him. Your will is gone, you live only to obey, and it becomes hard to think, to remember. Impossible to resist."

Shepard frowned. "So the ship has some kind of brainwashing effect?"

Shiala nodded. "Yes. Saren had scientists at his base studying it, trying to reverse it, but they... usually ended up going crazy. So did a few of the commandos...one of them just..lost it, biotics flaring

everywhere, then she stiffened and blood just came gushing out of her mouth and nose. She collapsed dead on the spot, body quivering for a couple of minutes after that. But the voices, they made you not care." Shiala licked her lips and glanced at Liara. "I fear Saren took Benezia to the ship and it .. dominates her now. She is not herself. She is cold and icy where she was once warm; she is cruel and dispassionate and warped."

Shiala glanced away, and Shepard frowned. "So ... you aren't responsible for the actions you took while working for Saren? Is that the story?"

Shiala's eyes flashed, a mix of misery and upset. "I assure you, it is no story. But I don't deny that I am responsible. Just that ... my mind was affected. I was doing what I thought was right. The voices don't give you a choice. First, they are soft. They make you look at things differently. They cajole, they make you give into urges, they encourage your fears. Then they affect how you think...and before long, it's just so... easy to stop fighting and let them run everything." She shuddered.

"In any event, up until Feros, we were their bodyguard. Benezia had us act as her fist, we ... aided Saren in tracking dig sites with Prothean artifacts. He was looking for starmaps, at first, then battle sites, and finally, places where Dark Beacons had been found." She shook her head. "If he told us to kill, we killed, if he told us to seduce, we seduced. We were his puppets. He eventually found out about ...Eden Prime, from some sort of contact he had. A human. I don't know his name, only that he was tall, taller than Saren even." Shiala paused.

Shepard frowned. "Where is Saren operating from? How do we get at him?" Shiala shrugged weakly. "It's.. I don't know. He spoke several times of the base 'at Virmire', but we never went there. He had small bases in lots of places, caches of weapons, hideouts, meeting spots with contacts he had." She frowned, lips pursed, and then continued. "Saren had a base on Miath, where we operated out of, and another one somewhere on Thessia itself, but they were in the process of abandoning them when Saren decided to attack Feros, after his raids and attacks on Exogeni."

Shepard nodded. "Better than nothing. Now...the Thorian. What the hell happened down there? You said he gave you to the Thorian..why? What did he get out of it?"

Shiala paused. "They...gave me to the Thorian to be consumed and used. Not just me. Niala, Gairsi, Yleha, Mirsda. All of us were fed to that thing. It burned the Prothean knowledge into my head. Something they called a Cipher, some kind of ... imprinting program for what they called 'client races.' It allowed the races to .. no, that's not the right word. It taught the races under them to be more Prothean." Shiala massaged her crests softly, and Shepard frowned.

"Saren needed this Cipher to understand the Beacons?"

Shiala nodded. "And to keep them from killing him. The Protheans protected the Beacons from the indoctrinated, somehow, and the visions were...slowly tearing his mind apart. He couldn't make sense of the vision, and with the Cipher he hoped he could."

Liara glanced at Shepard, before speaking. "Shiala...this indoctrination. It makes you a slave of Saren, so why are you helping us?"

Shiala gave a helpless gesture. "When the Thorian absorbed me, it .. did something to me. I was myself again, horrified. I was...free. The Thorian had some way of breaking it, although it... hurt. I don't think I'm entirely whole anymore. I can't make my biotics work, even if this pulsar wasn't turned on, and I can't think as clearly as I once could."

Shepard pursed her lips. "This Cipher can be passed on, you said. Through joining minds, I suppose?"

Shiala nodded. "It ... at the end, I remember watching, through the Thorian's .. senses. It was going to

betray Saren, but it was destroyed by Benezia, and the last thing the Thorian did was...unhook itself from me. It had time enough to do that, to push me out in the hope that I could do something to disrupt Saren's plans. Not out of any sense of wanting to help, just spite and hate." Shiala glanced back up. "But ..."

Liara glanced over at Shepard. "Shepard, I expect you have concerns about joining your mind to hers. But if she is correct, then this Cipher may be the key to truly understanding the Beacon message. If that information can put us on the track of Saren, and my mother..." Liara exhaled. "You have her guarded, and if I act as a buffer, then .. you should not be in any danger."

Shepard closed her eyes a long moment before nodding. "Cole, if something happens, call Chakwas. Liara, do it." Shepard realized she was shaking slightly and with an effort stood quietly and waited, as Liara carefully approached the other asari. *She looks nervous and uncomfortable. Great.*

Liara took Shiala's hand, and the eyes of the other asari went black. After a long moment, Liara almost languidly held out her other hand, and Shepard, grimacing , took it.

The warmth of Liara's hand faded in a burst of light and pain, and a feeling of the entire world falling into an abyss around her.

*Images stormed around her, speeding in hideous counterpoint to her memories, before spinning into blackness, and then a single figure strode forward.*

*"I am Tyth Kashan , the Avatar of Understanding. If you are seeing this, our Empire has fallen. The Reapers are too much for us, and our ploys and plans have all fallen through."*

*"Yet hope remains alive. Our holdfast at Ilos remains undiscovered, and our examination of the Inusannon super-weapon showed us the Reapers can be cast out. We understand now, and we are taking actions to prevent them from returning."*

*"You are needed at Ilos. It matters not if you are Prime or Subject race, all must respond. The Conduit will allow us to transiti-"*

*The message turns to horror, the images clear now, the broken might of a galaxy at the rapacious hands of monsters. Thousands upon thousands of black, leaf shaped ships falling upon the galaxy, millions of lives burned to ashes in minutes. The image becomes more confusing, fragmented, and ends in a burst of pain.*

Shepard opened her eyes, disoriented for a long moment. Cole had stepped forward, but only because Shiala now slumped on the floor, blood trickling from her nose and mouth. Liara was dazed as well, sunk to one knee, a hand gripping the table to keep her upright, eyes wide and staring as if unable to focus on anything. Shepard knelt to her first. "Liara?"

The asari shook her head, moaning faintly as she did so. "Shiala...oh, Goddess, no." The little asari moved forward, lifting Shiala's head, and gave a sob. "No!"

Shepard put her hand on Liara's shoulder. "What...happened. That was nothing like the first time."

Liara cradled the older asari's head as she looked up, tears in her eyes. "Shiala...was more experienced than I was. She ... passed the Cipher on, and took the whole force of the vision onto herself, shielding ME from it. Her mind couldn't take it, just like mine couldn't, when you had to save me."

Shepard glanced down. "And we can't save her?"

Liara shook her head. "She...knew what she was doing. I could sense that. She was...not lying, Shepard. She was a screaming prisoner in her own head the whole time, unable to do anything but that monster's every sick wish. My mother...is trapped. My family's retainers are his slaves. She did this because...she

wanted to be free of the pain. Of the horror of what she had gone through. And I couldn't even stop her!"

Liara bowed her head, and closed the empty eyes of the asari woman in her arms. Shepard noted Shiala had died in obvious pain, with a bitter smile on her lips. "She went out bravely, then. You can't blame yourself, Liara." She squeezed the asari's shoulder, and her voice dropped. "She did what she had to do, to make sure you were okay. She cared about you, and ... she died protecting you from any harm, while giving us what we needed to stop that pointy-faced fuck."

Liara swallowed and nodded, gently laying Shiala on the bed. Shepard stood, rubbing her temples, and gestured to Cole. "Take the body and...prepare it for space burial, Master Chief. She may have been an alien, but she died fighting and she died hard, she deserves our respects."

Cole nodded, putting away his gun and carefully lifting the body of the asari in his arms. "I'll handle everything, ma'am. And I'll let Dr. T'soni know when we're ready." He exited the room, and the doors shut with quiet finality. Shepard guided Liara back to the chair and helped her sit. "You okay?"

Liara rubbed her temples and nodded. "I... I will be fine. It .. was it worth her dying, Shepard?"

Shepard nodded. "For one, the damned vision makes sense. And more importantly, I know now what the fuck Saren is looking for. He's seeking a planet called Ilos."

Liara glanced up. "Ilos? But Ilos .. is a myth. A rumored fantasy world of the Protheans filled with treasure." Shepard shook her head. "The Beacon was .. a summons. For Protheans to go to this Ilos, where they were preparing some kind of counterstrike to the Reapers. The message was incomplete – probably because the Beacon blew up – but it mentioned the Conduit, and something about a super weapon."

Liara looked lost. "But no one knows where to find Ilos! People have been searching for it for millennia. Does the beacon give you no clues?"

Shepard closed her eyes, thinking, and then nodded slowly. "Maybe. There's a picture of it, and rushing stars. I'll try to match it to a star-map and see what we come up with. In the meantime, though, I finally have a goddamned motive, or at least something I can tell the Council. Saren's looking for Ilos, and Prothean super-weapons." Shepard sighed, and glanced at the clock. "You should get some rest, doctor. We have a long day ahead of us tomorrow at the Citadel, and after that I'm pretty beat."

Liara nodded, standing. "I'll be in the science lab if you need me, Shepard." She looked like she was going to say more, then suddenly turned and left, leaving Shepard alone in her stateroom with nothing but a smear of asari blood on the floor.

Shepard gazed at it a long moment before pulling down Anderson's scotch and a glass, pouring herself a stiff drink. She slammed it back, grunting as the liquor burned through her system, and leaned back in the chair. "Here's to you, Shiala. I'll make sure to add you to the list of people I'll cut into that bastard's heart when I catch him next time."

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## Chapter 54: Chapter 47: Normandy, Moments II

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*A/N: We are getting closer to more action, but we need moar fluff first! I still have to move people around emotionally to the places they need to be in, and the game just never did enough of that for me, or it was too pro forma. A lot of the AU in this fic has to do with actually making Liara seem like a shy uncertain person with an inner core of strength and enormous biotic power instead of just telling us over and over that is the case. Development of Garrus, and the closeness with Shepard, comes very*

soon.

*This week's Story That is Much Better than mine is : **A memory shared, a connection forged by Bebus.** This one is just mind blowingly good.*

*If you keep track of the BSN, you've seen the previews of the Omega DLC, which is again, lackluster from what we know. I don't like judging before trying but it sounds like another Leviathan – kick-ass idea, bad implementation. However, it's given me another idea for a one-shot, so look out for that.*

*As usual, if you aren't reading Dark Energy, Glacial Fire, and Spirit of Heroism, you really, really should. Each one of those Liara's is a contrast to mine in different ways.*

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### **February 5th, 2183 4:00 P.M.**

Liara lay back on her cot, her hand over her eyes, lost in memories of days gone by. Seeing Shiala had brought back memories of a time when she didn't feel like an outcast, and of happier, simpler tasks and goals than chasing fallen heroes through space.

*"Little Wing, you must concentrate! Do you think your mother would be pleased by this sloppy display of your biotics?" Shiala's stern voice rang out, touched with a hint of exasperated warmth, and Liara winced.*

*"N-no, hunt mistress."*

*Shiala snorted, her face covered in the ritual marks of a full Huntress of Athame. She wore commando leathers, tight black and hugging her every curve, with an armored mantle of thousand of tiny titanium plates woven into the shape of a long coat over her shoulders, each one inscribed with runes of wisdom and infused with small pulsar generators to deflect biotic blasts.*

*The house of T'Soni Outrier was built high upon an out-thrust pinnacle of rock, connected to the mainland by a span of spray-worn stone. The ocean boomed all around them, smashing its eternal fury on the rocky beaches below, and sheer shale cliffs rose up 400 feet to the edged of the hold-fasts reinforced metallic walls. The courtyard they practiced in was all smooth, cut stone, stylized into the form of waves, with the occasional flame-tree and bithainan bush tastefully placed in circular plinths heaped with tiny blue flowers.*

*Shiala and Liara were not alone. Next to Shiala was Liara's aunt, Mithra. The older asari woman had a frown of distaste on her face, her elegant silver robes split down the middle just below her breasts, revealing her flat stomach. She stood legs apart, the lower robes splitting again to reveal long, pale silver leather boots tipped in gold, and a chain of pure platinum encircled her waist, supporting the spine of the writings of Athame that she carried at all times as a priestess. "This is a waste of time, Shiala. The p... Liara...is simply not bothering to focus. Let her – "*

*Shiala gave the matron an arch glare. "I do not recall asking you, Mithra. If you want to observe and offer assistance, fine. If you came to denigrate my pupil, get out." Not even bothering to wait for a reply, she fixed her gaze on Liara again, her voice soothing and calming now.*

*"Now, again, but do it right this time. Feel the field, balanced inside your body. Feel the cool energy rise up your legs, through your center...let it extend and move through you, like the ocean slipping through a field of seaweed. Do not fight it. Bend with it, let it bend with you, and then... release."*

*Liara scrunched up her little face, hands clenched in concentration, and then pushed, a wave of azure light blasting from her form to slam into the steel practice barrier. This time the metal deformed and buckled, giving an alarming screech as it did so. The other asari's eyes widened in poorly concealed*

*shock as Liara gave a yell and let out a second blast, this one tearing the steel barrier right out of the ground and snapping it half, one piece flying halfway across the courtyard to land in a discordant crash. The other piece skidded a few feet into a nearby wall and slammed to a stop.*

*Liara gave a shaky sounding exhale and swayed on her feet, and Shiala calmly walked over to steady her, placing her hand on the young girl's shoulder. "Now that was worthy of a T'Soni, Little Wing." Liara looked up, and Shiala's face split into a fierce smile of approval. "Some full commandos can't hurl a throw that strong."*

*Mithra's face twisted, and she spun on a heel, stalking out of the courtyard angrily. Liara watched her go, her large eyes sad. "Shi-shi, why does Aunt Mithra not like me? I ... I try my best in class and -"*

*Shiala's hand ran comfortingly over Liara's crests. "Hush. Mithra's just upset her own children have turned out to be little more than street thugs. Don't worry about her little temper tantrum. The important thing is that you are continuing to do well."*

*Another voice rang out, amusement thick in its tones. "I see my daughter has been hard at work this afternoon?" Benezia rounded the corner, dressed in a pale yellow dress of three slightly different colored layers. Her face was set into a proud smile, and Liara's heart leapt in her chest as she struggled to keep her expression calm.*

*Shiala laughed, as a gust of wind sent musical chimes from the flame-trees sounding around the courtyard. "She has indeed, Matriarch. I know you have plans for Liara to enter the Vasytre Academy and follow in your footsteps...but truly, give me 50 years and I could make her a commando to rival Aria herself. When she focuses, or gets angry, the kantha killing strength in her is greater than anything I've seen in a long time."*

*Benezia nodded, walking up and taking Liara's hand in hers, almost possessively. "She is my daughter, and no matter what she decides to become, she will be great." Benezia's face softened as she looked down at Liara with a loving expression. "I will always be proud of you, Little Wing. Now, in you go. You need to eat and study."*

*Glowing from her mother's praise, Liara skipped away, the ocean's sound enfolding her, the day itself seeming brighter and more perfect...*

*Liara shook her head, tears trickling down her cheeks, and placed her head into her hands, swallowing. "I suppose I should thank your spirit, Shiala. If you had not pushed me so hard in training, perhaps I would have died facing my mother."*

*With a grunt she swung her legs over the edge of the cot, standing and stretching in a single, languid motion. Her field computer, brought aboard with the rest of her possessions, had completed the tasks she'd set up for it prior to her nap, and she sat down at the lab counter to review what the analysis of the Prothean stonework on Feros revealed.*

*As she initially suspected, the Feros city-scape was old, much older than the structure on Therum, and much less durable. The material was similar, but the Therum structure was a hardened military bunker, and the Feros buildings were the equivalent of civilian structures.*

*More interesting was the second-stage spectrometric analysis of the fragments of stone she'd found embedded in her armor from the Thorian's chamber. The room had the look of some kind of amphitheater, and at first she'd just assumed it was a Prothean chamber the Thorian had grown into. But the stone was not even remotely similar to the Prothean materials. Instead of a ceramic/metal hybrid that had the texture and look of stone, the chamber of the Thorian was actual stone, granite to be precise, infused with millions of nanomachine carved channels filled with titanium. The stone's age was staggering, over 120,000 years old, long before the Protheans had even become sentient.*

The only thing that made sense was that the Thorian had been in that chamber all along, which presented the ugly question of who built it in the first place. Liara pulled up a number of VI-enhanced search windows, plugging in the values of the stone, and looked for ruins or matching descriptions of stonework. Several hits returned immediately, most of them clustered around the ruined garden world of Eingana.

Pulling up a search, she discovered the world was the site of a battle between two pre-Prothean races. Ruined starships covered the planet's surface, thousands of them. Current archeological digs on the planet indicated the two races involved were the enigmatic Inusannon and a race identified by the Inusannon as the "Thoi'han". The two had battled over several worlds in the region, and eventually the Inusannon had triumphed.

Liara frowned, but the wreckage of the Thoi'han ships showed the same nanomachine carved reinforcement as the Thorian's chamber, and there wasn't much difference in the names. The Omega Nebula was on the far side of the galaxy from the Attican Beta, but in terms of jumps, it was only six jumps away.

Liara collated her findings of the Thorian's stonework and forwarded to the research team on Eingana, asking them if they thought the stonework she'd discovered matched the patterns they were seeing, and if there were any concepts of what the Thoi'han ships or the Thoi'han themselves had looked like. If the two were one and the same, then there might be useful archeological intelligence on the planet.

Liara grimaced. *Assuming I can convince Shepard to waste time on digging through ruins when Saren is flying about. Very unlikely. But I have to use what I can to be useful to the team.* Her stomach made a noise of protest, and she realized she had not eaten for some time. With a determined expression, she sent her computer into another search on related items to the Thoi'han and exited the science lab.

Doctor Chakwas wasn't in the medical bay, a rare occurrence. The human mercenary Shields was laid out on the starboard side medical bed, sleeping, her face slightly contorted in an expression of pain. Liara spared the woman a look as she swept by, still upset that she had shown up out of nowhere to bring pain back into Shepard's life.

She had to admit that the woman was beautiful, in a cold, almost predatory fashion, but Liara's mind was still seeing her in the lens of Shepard's memories, face distorted with rage and pain as she lashed out with cutting words at Shepard's actions. The worst part was that Shields had done so without even making an attempt at understanding, and her contemptible abandonment of Shepard when she needed her friends the most had left lasting mental agony in the commander. Just thinking about it made Liara angry as she entered the mess decks, moving immediately to the small kitchen area built into the wall.

Kaidan was crouched there, his omni-tool illuminated, working on the control panel for the food system, his expression one of frustration. "Little...fucking...gaaah!" With a spray of sparks the entire panel went dark, Kaidan falling back on his rump, holding a blackened electrical conduit that emitted wafts of smoke. He looked up, his expression rueful. "Hello, Doctor T'Soni. Didn't see you, sorry about the language."

She gave a small smile in return. "Hello, Lieutenant Alenko. Um, is the galley functional?"

He sighed, and with a disgusted look at the panel, nodded. "Mostly. The stupid thing keeps shorting out the secondary power conduit to the sleeper pods, because whoever built the ship was too fixated on cutting edge technology and used some kind of turian transformer that doesn't want to play nice with human systems." He paused, and laughed. "And now I'm boring you with tech. Short answer, it works, but there's only going to be cold food until I get it fixed."

She nodded, turning to the food unit. "That is fine, actually. I do not think I want to experiment with

cooked human food this morning after the incident with ... bacon." She opened the refrigeration unit, pulling out a bowl of assorted fruits, and Kaidan laughed.

"Sorry, we didn't know human oils had that kind of effect on asari." He opened a tool kit next to his feet, rummaging through it for a new part, half watching her out of the corner of his eye. "So far we haven't had any really bad incidents...although sterilizing turian brandy for Tali to try out was an eye-opening experience, and Wrex has apparently decided human chicken is the best meat in the galaxy."

Liara laughed, pulling out a pair of the human fruit called pears, which tasted almost exactly like flame-fruit from Thessia. She put the rest of the bowl back, and pulled out a plastic container of milk, frowning to herself. "Yes, well...sometimes, food interactions can be very problematic, especially for turians and quarians. I once had to work with a turian research team and the food was designed for them, so all I had to eat were ration bars." She poured the milk into a bowl, and placed the container back in the refrigeration unit carefully. "They are not known for their appeal to the tongue, or stomach."

Turning to the cabinets next to the sink, she pulled down a silver cardboard box of what was labeled 'SAMC Nutritious Food Product: Cereal' and poured the flaky substance into the bowl of milk. She noted with amusement that some Alliance marine had scrawled 'three lies for the price of one' on the box before putting it back. Kaidan grunted at the unit he was working on again, which lit up as he pushed something into place, then flickered and died a moment later. "Have you eaten breakfast, Lieutenant?"

Kaidan snorted. "No, actually. I probably should, before I get a headache." Killing his omni-tool with a touch, he walked around the unit, opening the fridge and pulling out a small container of yogurt and an apple. He watched as the asari deftly used a paring knife to dice her pears up and dump them into her cereal, raising an eyebrow. "That's not a usual mix you see with cereal..."

Liara shrugged, and the two of them sat at the nearest table, the doctor sliding into her seat with ease, Kaidan having to shuffle a bit. "Yes, well, I am still learning a great deal about human culture. My mother had me learn something of your species early in my career, but after that I did not really run into any humans in my archeological work for many years."

Kaidan nodded, "I know you've done a lot of work in the field – a couple of times I've reported to Shepard in her cabin, and it seems like she always has something you've written up on her computer."

Liara gave him a surprised look, unaware of the smile on her face. "S-seriously? I mean, I did not know Sh– that she was... the type to read dry research papers." She stumbled slightly over the words, and Kaidan gave an internal wince.

*Hero worship or teenaged crush? Either way, better let her down easy.*

"She's not the kind of person you can put easily into a box, Doctor. She's had a pretty rough life, from what I've gathered, but she's pushed herself to the very best you can achieve in our military. Her N7 rating is the culmination of a special forces program that only one in ten thousand soldiers even start on, and her scores were so high that they may never be surpassed." He paused, taking a bite of his apple, and shrugged. "She does a lot of reading, I know that much. Tactical manuals, ships systems guides, that sort of thing. If she's reading your work, maybe she thinks it will help in tracking Saren."

Liara nodded, eating and thinking. "So you do not think her reading my work is out of any interest... i- in the Prothean extinction itself, that is? I know that few people think much of it..."

Kaidan pondered thoughtfully for a moment before answering, toying with the apple in his hand. "To be honest, I don't really know. Figuring Shepard out isn't something that most humans tend to want to try to do. Human culture is very diverse, but at the same time we define ourselves by our conformity to each other. People who stand outside of the accepted lines that we all are comfortable with end up

being ostracized."

Liara nodded sadly. "It is much the same in asari culture. The prevalence of melding and joining among friends and acquaintances means that we tend to have brutally honest ideas about what others think of us, and association with like-minded individuals is the main reason asari are not more unified. There is no real infighting, but if you do not fit into the role you are assigned, then you have no place to really stand." She sighed, eating a bite of cereal, eyes distant and dull. "Refusing to take the guidance of older asari marks you as unsuitable for further attention, no matter how hard one tries."

Kaidan shook his head. "That's one difference, then. We don't often understand our eccentrics, but they are always recognized for their achievements, and they tend to push themselves further and harder than normal people. Some of our most brilliant minds, greatest heroes, and vilest monsters were probably just as misunderstood as Shepard is." He paused. "I think the difference is that humanity never quite moved out of the village mindset that we evolved into. We went from feudal holdings with swords and superstition to space travel in less than a thousand years, and we still deeply distrust each other, or anything different than us."

Liara nodded. "Yes, it is one reason the Citadel races are so worried about humanity. In thirty years, your economy now rivals that of the elcor and hanar, your military fought the turians to a standstill, and you have a Spectre of your own. Yet your kind does not even unify behind your own Systems Alliance, and half of your colonies call themselves independent." She ate another bite of food, a pensive look on her face. "Understanding your people is difficult, and I often worry that my isolation in the science lab is not endearing me to the crew. I have always had trouble fitting into my own culture, but I had hoped that I could prove more useful here and find a way to fit into yours. I have not so far."

Kaidan raised an eyebrow. "Really, doc? You dropped a geth war machine, after being half-dead from thirst and hunger. Shepard says you figured out how she could interpret that beacon vision, then you go into full-on combat with geth without batting an eyelash. You end up battling your mother after blocking a biotic throw that would have pulped the Commander, and kept Benezia from just overwhelming the team – fighting your own mother to do so!" He shook his head. "Sounds like you are doing your part."

Liara shrugged, although her expression was pleased for a brief moment. "You are very kind, but that is not what I mean. Detective Vakarian works on the Mako transport and the ship's weapons. Tali works with the engineers, and Wrex assists with maintaining the armory. Each of them was chosen, picked for their skills, and Shepard's full agreement. I am the one who just got foisted off on you, and I spend my day meaninglessly fiddling in the science lab over my researches, hoping for some way to assist in the search for Saren." She sighed, almost angrily, and ate another bite of food. "And now I sound like a petulant child."

Kaidan made a motion with his hand, and smiled crookedly. "I'm sure she's just trying to give you some space, Doctor. It's only been, what, a couple of weeks since you were trapped in that ruin? But if you want something to do, you should go ask her."

Liara frowned, and her gaze faltered, falling to her cereal. She picked at the rim of the cheap plastic bowl with her spoon. "I fear that she will say there is nothing for me to do, and to simply stay out of the way."

Kaidan spooned out some of his yogurt, having finished his apple. "I dunno. I learned the hard way that fear of what someone may say or do just makes you avoid ever finding out what would actually happen. We've all been in a place where we had to make a choice of speaking up or just letting things happen." He glanced away, tendons in his jaw tightening. "Sometimes, things may have turned out better if you do nothing. Sometimes, doing what you think is the right thing drives people away from

you."

He gave a small smile, turning to look at her squarely. "But sometimes, ma'am, not doing anything leads to what you fear the most. Ask her. She's in her quarters now, it's morning, she has nothing going until we dock at the Citadel later on today. Worst case, she laughs you off and you have to find a way to do something she approves of. Best case, she gives you something to do and you can stop worrying about your place on the Normandy."

He ate more yogurt, and then scratched his chin. "But honestly? You're the Prothean expert, doc. If Saren's hunting things down from that era, none of us know what to even look for. The other aliens on this ship are doing work because they want to feel useful, but they really aren't helping us find Saren, or figure out what is happening. From what I heard from Cole, if you weren't there helping Shepard with the asari prisoner, she might have died, and we'd know nothing."

He stood, smiling. "If you'll excuse me, I really have to get the galley in working order. Wrex has decided he really likes human chicken, and it can't be safely eaten raw. And I don't want to be eaten at all..."

Liara laughed, and stood up herself, taking her bowl to the recycling unit. "Thank you for the talk, Lieutenant Alenko."

The human nodded, already back at work. "Yes, ma'am. Anytime." He paused, smiling. "We're all in this together."

#### O-OSaBC-O

Shepard cursed , paging back through the document on her screen, tapping ashes from her cigar as she did so. The documentation she'd received on the Spectre armor was something she didn't bother reviewing as thoroughly as she should have. She was disgusted to learn the armor had specialized combat functions she could have used to possibly stay in the fight longer.

*Only after having my ass handed to me by an overgrown chicken do I bother to read the damned manual. And of course it's dry as dust to read.* She glanced up at the vent Adams and Tali had installed in the corner of her stateroom. *At least I got Adams to put a vent in so I can smoke in peace and not lounge around like a delinquent while reading this stuff.*

The armor was built with what the documentation called a physics exo-skeletal support unit. It was a series of mass-effect directed hydraulic struts, linking reinforced segments of the armor along the chest, thighs, upper arms, and back. When activated, it helped to cushion the body from severe biotic blows and blasts, stabilizing the body's skeletal position instead of having one's body flop around like a ragdoll. The mode did drain shield energy, but shields weren't a lick of good against a biotic tidal wave anyway, except to flare and shatter in the moment before impact.

Shepard inhaled from her cigar, savoring it's taste as she rubbed her nose, and then turned in the chair as her door chimed. "Come!" She arched one eyebrow as Liara stepped through, hands held together below her waist in an almost demure posture, eyes flicking around the small room. "What's up, Liara?"

The asari gave a nervous, faltering smile. "I came to talk to you about some work I have been doing, and to ask you a few questions. If you are not busy." Her voice trailed off hesitantly at the last word, and Shepard sat back in her chair thoughtfully.

*How long you gonna keep this silly game up, Sara? You find her attractive, but she looks at you like a hero. You're gonna have to figure out a way to be a leader the way Anderson said you would sooner or later, and the kid has to be hurting after facing her mother like that.*

She made a gesture with her hand to the other chair. "Have a seat , then. Let me put this out, I'm sure

you don't need to smell my petty vices." She was halfway to the ashtray when Liara spoke.

"Actually...I ... er, would you allow me to try one?"

Shepard paused, slowly rotating her head to look at the asari out of the corner of her eye before grinning. "Well, here I was thinking you doctors disapproved of smoking." She fished the packet of cigars Shields had loaned her last night out of her BDU pocket, shaking one out and extending the pack to the asari, who took it with a delicate blue hand. "Lighter's on the table there."

Liara picked it up and lit the cigar, closing her eyes as she did so, inhaling for a long moment before exhaling. Shepard waited for hacking and coughing but to her surprise the only thing the little asari did was smile and relax into the chair. "My mother smoked, on occasion." Her eyes were still shut, her voice soft. "Asari smoke herbal substances, mildly hallucinogenic, that help focus biotic power and calm the nerves. Very different from humans, but...the scent is almost the same." She took another puff. "She claimed it was my aithntar who gave her the habit."

Shepard frowned. "That word didn't translate, sorry."

Liara gave an almost embarrassed nod. "It is our word for the parent who is not the mother. Humans would say 'father', but that concept does not exactly translate to our culture. The aithntar means "life granter", just as our word-concept for mother means "life maker". We didn't have a word for father until we met other species and had children through them." She sighed. "Among asari, for an asari to have a child with another asari is a cultural taboo. I never met my aithntar, or even knew who she was, because Benezia was always very sad when the topic came up. The only thing I know is that she smoked."

Shepard nodded. "Did you smoke because of your mother?"

Liara shook her head, but a smile lit her face all the same. "No, not for many years. The last time I had Thessian ocean bloom leaf was over twenty years ago...the last time my mother and I were still on good speaking terms. She was studying your species, actually, and had her facial markings changed to mimic human 'eyebrows'." Liara's smile faded a little. "I had the same thing done, in a silly little gesture to show her I still heeded her council, even if I had chosen to go my own way. Later that day we sat on the beach and smoked, and she told me of the plans she had, and I told her about being accepted into the University of Serrice. It was one of the happiest, calmest days of my life."

Liara exhaled, finally opening her eyes. Her voice grew bitter. "After that, over the next few years, we grew...further apart, I never had the heart to change facial markings." She sighed, gazed fixed on the glowing end of the cigar. "And now, I suppose, I will never have the chance to rectify my relationship with her. Shiala made it clear my mother is lost."

Shepard flicked ash from her own and just watched, fascinated by how Liara's face had changed. "I'm so sorry this is happening to you, Liara. If I can find a way—"

Liara shook her head, bringing the cigarette up to those perfect lips with gracile motion, eyes flashing and fixing on Shepard's. "You cannot, Sara. I am capable of understanding that now. My mother said as much in that chamber." She gave a sad little smile, and then reached out to dump her ashes. "I despise feeling sorry for myself, but there are times I wonder what crime I must have committed in a past cycle of spirit to be trapped in my current existence."

Shepard found the thought oddly familiar. "I've wondered that about my own life, really. What the fuck did I do to deserve the shit I was put through?" She inhaled, shaking her head. "Never did come up with a good answer. I'm not much on feeling sorry for myself, either. But the way life seems to work, even if I do the best I can, I still get kicked in the head. Reaching out and trying to find reasons to make it better never seems to work very well."

Liara nodded, a somewhat nervous expression sliding over her face for a second. "Then you will understand that I am still unsure how I should go about expressing my feelings and reactions. I know that you did not ask for me to be on this vessel." She raised her slender hand as Shepard opened her mouth. "P-please...let me finish." After sharply exhaling, and taking a steadying drag on the cigar, she continued, although her hand was shaking slightly. "You are kind to protest, but the truth is that every member of this ship has proven themselves, and I have not. I have wanted to do something to help our mission, the way you have tasked Detective Vakarian, Tali'Zorah, and Urdnot Wrex."

Shepard gave a little shrug. "Honestly, the only reason I did that is because if they had nothing to do I was worried about the crew being resentful of their presence. At the time we launched, there was a lot of, um, concern about aliens on an Alliance vessel." She put her cigar out, slowly, so she wouldn't break the remainder of it. "They all had military training and could be useful, but I didn't want them just..sitting around. And it was a way to get them to mingle with the crew."

Liara nodded. "Whereas I am a shy archeological student with a smattering of training from a commando. But I can still contribute to the ships function. Anything is better than sitting in the lab all day, with almost nothing to study or to do." She put out her own cigar, frowning slightly, and then looked up in that open, helpless manner that made Shepard's spine feel like it was melting.

The human woman massaged her neck, and racked her brains. "Honestly, Liara, there's not much else to really do around the ship. That doesn't make you useless." She paused. "If you're good at organizing things, though, there is something I need done. It's a little tedious -"

Liara gave a small laugh at that. "There can be nothing more tedious than archeology at times, and I would be grateful for the distraction. Otherwise I have little to do but sit and worry about how all this will end. What do you need me to do?"

Shepard swung her small computer around, the haptic screen flickering in the dim light, and brought up a manifest of items. "I've never been happy with the standard Alliance military armor, and comparing my old N7 suit to the Spectre armor I had on just drove that home to me. If I'd still been wearing that crap, I'd have been a splatter on the wall of that ruin down there. I already placed some orders for new armor, specifically top of the line Predator armor, for my marine units, and better weapons. I've been polling armor manufacturers for better armor for the non-Alliance forces on board, too, though."

Shepard tapped a few keys, bringing up images of heavy, thick black armor with red trim. "I've narrowed it down to a few options, mostly Colossus Armor. I need people's armor measurements, and I need to make sure the armor is loaded with the kinds of modifications that will benefit each wearer. Tali'Zorah is going to be a problem, but Kassa Fabrication says it can manufacture a suit, and Tali can change into it in our airlock after a few decon cycles."

Shepard fixed her gaze on Liara. "I need you to get the measurements from everyone. That's Wrex, Tali, Garrus, and yourself, of course. I've got Kaidan and Ash's measurements already. There's a list on here of various modifications, I'd like you to pull together the most effective ones for each squad member." She paused. "It's usually pretty straightforward stuff – medical computers for front line fighters, technical geegaws for Tali, sniping enhancements for Garrus, etc. Use your best judgment."

Liara nodded uncertainly. "I will have to do some research... how much time do I have?"

Shepard smiled and glanced at her chrono. "About four hours, until we reach the Citadel. It shouldn't take that long." She smiled and leaned back in her chair. "I was going to do that myself, but I got sidetracked with this Spectre armor documentation, and now I remembered I need to prepare my written reports to the Council, Admiral Hackett, and God only knows who else, so I don't have the time."

Liara nodded a second time, more firmly. "Got it. I will be happy to help."

She rose, and Shepard frowned a little. "You said something about work you'd been doing...?"

Liara glanced at the floor. "Yes, it is probably not that important."

Shepard snorted. "If this hunt for Saren has taught me anything, it's that the unimportant things *are* important. You wouldn't have come here if it was useless, so spill." She gestured to the chair again, and Liara sat, hesitantly bringing up her omni-tool.

"I was examining the stone of the Feros cityscape, out of boredom, and comparing it to the ruins I was researching on Therum. The stonework is the same, although Feros was older and not as tough. I believe the discrepancy is due to Feros being comprised of civilian buildings, and Therum being a military bunker."

Shepard only nodded, and Liara hurried on, nervously. "I found several chips of the stonework in the Thorian's chamber imbedded in my armor as well. Since they were a different color, I scanned those as well, wondering if the Protheans were engaged in some kind of relationship with the Thorian. What I found is that the room the Thorian was in was far, far older than any of the buildings on Feros."

Shepard frowned. "Who the shit built it, then?"

Liara smiled, happy that Shepard's mind was as quick to pick up on that as her own was. "That was the first thing I asked. The stone has identifying features matching ruins found on a world near the Omega Nebula, a once-garden planet ruined by a war between two species over a hundred thousand years ago. One of these species was called the Thoi'han, and I believe that over the years the name became corrupted into Thorian."

Shepard frowned. ".. alright, but I'm not following how this is useful."

Liara licked her lips. "If the Thorian is related to these Thoi'han, and the stone work indicates that it is, there may be another one of these creatures on the planet they fought over. It is very possible that there may be clues there to what they knew about the Reapers, or that the Protheans may have investigated the ruins themselves. Most importantly, though, is that there may be intelligence about the extinction cycle itself on the planet. Why would two intelligent, space faring species be so desperate to have one garden world that they'd expend hundreds of ships attempting to hold onto it? It's possible that these races were not fighting one another, but a common foe instead..."

Shepard frowned. "Huh. Alright. We've got lots to do at the Citadel, but if we have time we'll check it out. For now, hop on that list." She paused. "And make sure to upgrade your weapons, maybe pick yourself up a submachine gun or light rifle. Your biotics are strong, way stronger than any I've ever seen, but you push yourself too hard, and one day it's going to catch up with you."

Liara stood and nodded. "I will keep that in mind, Shepard."

She smiled as she exited, and Shepard leaned back in the chair and sighed, rubbing her temples. "Well, at least I didn't insult her, make her cry, or hit on her. Good job, Shepard." With a snort, she turned back to studying the armor documentation, after checking that her written reports to the Council and Systems Alliance authorities had, indeed, been transmitted that morning.

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## Chapter 55: Chapter 48: Normandy, Moments III

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*A/N: Well, my mother is recovering well from her surgery, work is calm for a few days before all hell breaks loose, and I'm working on a number of little projects. I have a series of small one-shots that*

*describe some of the backgrounds of my OC's on the way, and my story about Tali'Zorah's father is coming along nicely, as is my completely OCD documentation on the AU Systems Alliance. Some of that will need to be retconned into this story – at some point, I need to re-work a few of the opening chapters, clean up misspellings, etc.*

*This chapter started off as three separate chapters, none of which I could finish (although Owelpost did an incredible job at giving me a changed focus and a better idea of how to fix everything up.) Combining the three flows more naturally, although this is the longest chapter so far. There is some Citadel fluff (a few of the side missions, expanding on the role of the Consort, meeting Emily Wong and al-Jilani as well as Diana Allers) , and then we have about four chapters that are almost totally AU instead of things like running errands for drug lords or crazed asari crime bosses.*

*Also, Conrad Verner:*

*Anyway, the Recommendation of the Day is **Meanwhile** by **Pirate Kit**. This story is just goddamned adorable , and it features Grunt being even moar awesome than he already is. (By the way, plugging myself, if you haven't read my short **Mother's Tears**, you might like that as well. If you don't cry, your money back!)*

### O-OSaBC-O

The Normandy arrived at the Citadel exactly on time, erupting from the mass relay in a storm of blue lightning and swirling, displaced nebula gasses. Immediately upon securing from jump shock, Joker frowned as his comm board lit up. "Commander, we've got incoming hails from the Council, docking control, the Alliance, Udina, and... um, three journalists."

Shepard was standing at the CIC command platform, having changed into her dress blues and the Spectre cloak, and shook her head in disgusted amusement. "Figures we'd have bullshit to greet us. Tempted to tell everyone to fuck off..."

Joker's voice held a teasing note. "Should I quote you on that Commander, or..."

Shepard cracked a thin smile. "No, Flight Lieutenant. Route comms to the communications room, and begin docking procedures." She reached for the IMC mike near her station and tabbed it. "All hands, prepare for docking and stand-down. Department heads meet in the comms room in twenty minutes. We're coming in from a hell of a fight, and the Citadel fleet got torn up. No one on this ship, Alliance or not, is to say a single word of our mission to any journalist or civilians. Respond to all queries by forwarding said inquiry to Ambassador Udina." She gave a small smile. *Enjoy, you bureaucratic bastard.*

She paused, and then tapped the button again. "As stated, we'll be standing down for shore leave since repairs will take at least three days. Maintain your omni-tool connections at ALL times, and be ready to get back to the Normandy with thirty minutes warning."

She clicked off, paused, and headed back to the communications room, self-consciously adjusting her uniform and the Spectre half cape before squaring her posture as she entered the room. "Joker, give me the Council first."

"Yes, ma'am. You've got some time; Alliance Tower says it's thirty or so minutes to docking clearance."

A moment later, the comms screen blanked, displaying the Citadel Tower logo, then representations of the Council appeared. "Councilors, we've just reached the Citadel. As soon as we dock, I'm prepared to present my report of events on Ferros in person if needed." She kept her face absolutely calm and still, and her posture deferential.

Sparatus was the first to speak, his avatar showing him dressed in some kind of overlapping layers of

robes with armored shoulders and a thick collar, open at the neck. "Your punctuality in contacting us is appreciated, Commander, but we are very unhappy with the events of Feros as stated in your initial report. We're still very unclear about Saren's motivations in attacking this colony, something you promised to clear up and justify the massive loss of life experienced by the Fourth Fleet."

She squared her jaw, but nodded. "Yes, Councilor, sir. Saren was after a life form known as the Thorian. It was found below the Prothean ruins the colony at Feros was built on. Exogeni appears to have been aware of it, and was in the process of determining if it was a fully sentient creature or something else. This Thorian had absorbed memories of Protheans that perished on Feros, and as a result allowed Saren to have a much clearer idea of the information from the Beacon."

Valern unfolded his arms, his black robes undecorated except for his STG bracers, and his hood down for once. Shepard noted one of his horns was bent and deformed, as if broken. "Fascinating concept, but I am disturbed the Systems Alliance didn't notify us of the creature's existence at once."

Shepard shrugged. "I was pretty angry too, but the people who made such calls were either killed in the geth attack or during the attack on the Exogeni HQ." She paused, closing her eyes. She knew she should tell the truth; admit to the Systems Alliance's complicity in the deaths of the colonists, but Shields' words about distractions from the hunt for Saren rang in her mind.

She opened her eyes again and sighed. "I didn't find any evidence of the Systems Alliance having knowledge of what Exogeni was up to. The SA used the planet to offload penal colonists since it was isolated and not a danger to other worlds, and I doubt they would have left it at that if they had such a resource at hand. Further investigation is complicated by the destruction of the Thorian and the colony ."

Tevos sighed. "So we lost all those ships for nothing? Saren escaped with critical knowledge, and we don't know what the next step is?"

Shepard smiled, shaking her head. "Not at all, councilor. Saren used one of Benezia's commandos , Shiala, to communicate with the Thorian and obtain the information, a set of Prothean memories, cultural viewpoints and ... well, there is not a good way to explain it. Shiala called it the CIPHER. We did badly wound Saren – I forwarded the video of our remaining combat logs. But we were also able to rescue and extract Shiala from the area during our own escape."

Shepard tapped her omni-tool, forwarding the relevant information. "The results of our interrogation are displayed here. Shiala maintained that Saren's ship was not geth, but something else, and that it had functions that allowed him to brainwash and control the people following him. This may or may not also be how he controls the geth; we have fragmentary evidence that the geth have some kind of religious reason for their cooperation with Saren."

There was a long pause as the councilors consulted the new data. Sparatus' mandible flickered; the other two appeared absorbed in the information.

Valern was, of course, the first to finish reading, his agile mind already forming connections. "Troubling inferences from this. Total mind control allows him to co-opt anyone, with no outward signs. Explains penetration of C-SEC, network of spies." He exhaled, and with an effort forced himself back to more normal speech patterns. "The ramifications of this mean that we could have greater problems in rooting him out than we thought..."

Sparatus grunted, paging through something on his console. "The report mentions that you shared this CIPHER with the asari. What have you learned?"

Shepard took a deep breath, and folded her hands behind her back. "The Beacons were a summons from the Protheans sometime after their empire was destroyed by a race using the same sort of ship

Saren now has. The Protheans called them Reapers. The summons were for all surviving Protheans to fall back to a planet known as Ilos which, Dr. T'Soni informs me, was long believed to be mythical. The message is not completed – probably due to the Beacon exploding – but it mentions the Conduit again, as well as something about a super weapon." She frowned. "It's my belief that Saren is after this world, to take the Prothean technology and perhaps this super-weapon as well."

Tevos sighed. "Reading your report, while I'm glad to see that you and your team all survived a harrowing experience on Feros, I am sorry to hear that Shiala M'than has died. She was one of the most talented and powerful commandos in the entirety of the Asari Republics. I can only hope the information she has passed along is of real use to us. Ilos, as you said, has long been held to be mythical. Do you have any current leads on where it may be?"

Shepard sighed. "Dr. T'Soni has some partial leads we do need to research, but that shouldn't take more than a few days travel and some on-the-ground research. I'm personally more concerned about what you think my next steps should be. I have some ideas, developed while I was recovering from my wounds on Feros."

Sparatus sighed and finished reading. "We've reviewed what little suit imagery there was from your foray onto Feros, Commander. It appears that you were able to best Saren rather convincingly, and that you were only thwarted by some kind of biotic field protection at the end. The video shows Saren shot in the head and being dragged away." The turian councilor gave a shake of his head, one talon thoughtfully tapping his cheek plate. "It's possible he didn't survive his wounds."

Valern gave a spastic shrug. "Can we afford to take that chance? The black ship he has already acquired is bad enough, let alone an army of geth. If he has any chance at getting his hands on this super-weapon Shepard speaks of, or any other Prothean technology ... he is fully capable of perhaps uniting large swathes of the Terminus systems or the Traverse against us."

Shepard folded her arms, letting her weight fall back onto one hip. "I think in order to stop him we have to flush him out, Councilors. Assuming he's still alive. If I can live through three shots from a Sunfire, he might have survived as well." Shepard opened one hand in a gesture, smirking. "If you noticed in the report, the Exogeni executive that we rescued indicated that Exogeni had a relationship with Cerberus. It's probable that Cerberus tipped Saren to the existence of the fact Exogeni had something he might want."

Both Sparatus and Valern nodded, but Tevos frowned. "I still do not understand why a human terrorist organization that spouts lines of human supremacy would ally with a turian, Commander. I know we heard him refer to Cerberus in the recording, but it seems a poor fit."

Shepard smiled thinly. "I agree entirely, Councilor, which is why I want to investigate. It plays into my plan to stop this fucker. I'm tired of reacting to his goddamned atrocities, I want to flush him out." She tapped her omni-tool, pulling up a map of the galaxy. "We know that Saren has three allies in whatever he's doing. The first would be the various krogan mercenaries and thugs he's been employing, which we've run into repeatedly. According to Wrex, most of the krogan working for Saren are either Blood Pack mercenaries or outcasts. There has to be a way he's recruiting them, and we need to stop it."

A single star system flashed red on the map. "Therefore, a trip to Tuchanka is needed. We can investigate the issue and, if we find leads, it may give us clues to Saren's whereabouts or other bases. Second, we know there are geth involved. Yet the Long Patrol at the Perseus Rim hasn't reported any large scale breakouts or mass-relay traffic. Either the geth have reactivated a relay inside the Veil that leads outside to a system we don't monitor, or the geth have built a base outside the Veil entirely and are operating from there."

Another tap of the omni-tool and various systems flared yellow and red. "By tracking geth sightings,

invasions, clashes and the like, and making some assumptions about fuel ranges, we have concluded that the geth are operating somewhere around the Hourglass Nebula, three jumps out from the Veil. My geth expert, Tali'Zorah, says the geth will usually stay within a certain range of a central station so they can coordinate and rely on one another for backup. I propose that, with Alliance assistance, we find and destroy this base – or bases, if need be – to cripple them ."

Sparatus frowned. "Going after the krogan on Tuchanka is one thing. How can we be sure that giant black dreadnaught won't show up again and decimate more ships?"

Shepard nodded. "First, this is why I said the Alliance should undertake this mission. I'm very grateful that the Council responded to my call for aid, and I assure you that if I'd known it would have ended like that I'd have rather died than have all those brave people die in my place. However, I feel that massing large fleets is too risky, in any case. Alliance ships have experience with heavy scouting, using the old Leningrad scout frigates. As new Normandy-model stealth frigates start coming online, we can widen our ability to search. Small Alliance battle groups, maybe a half dozen frigates, and a light cruiser-carrier, can harry the geth. Once we identify their operating systems, and verify their planets are not garden worlds, the Alliance Heavy Fleet of dreadnaughts can do a coordinated jump. They jump in, fire two full salvos of mass cannon fire at the planet, and jump out."

Valern winced, his elongated features making the expression almost comical. "There would be extensive damage from such strikes, yes. I assume Alliance Special Forces would then follow up?"

Shepard nodded. "Strike frigates with teams of Alliance Raptor Jump Marines and NCT troopers could go in and clean up whatever was left. If Saren tried to respond, we could keep that damned black ship jumping all over the place. It's got to refuel and discharge drive mass sometime, right? That gives us a one to two hour window to strike any geth fleets we've identified, using similar tactics."

Sparatus gave what almost looked like an approving nod. "A clever strategy, human. I wasn't aware you were trained so heavily in space tactics."

Shepard steeled her expression, saying nothing, and after a moment Tevos spoke. "You said Saren had three allies in this fight. You have mentioned the krogan and the geth. Who is the third?"

Shepard's expression twisted and she glanced up to the asari councilor with a look so malicious that Tevos took a half step back. "Cerberus, councilor. The only thing in my book worse than a criminal is a traitor. Cerberus is a human organization, and it might have spies or collaborators in the Systems Alliance, so going after them with SA assets is a pretty poor idea...but I bet it's a lot harder for Cerberus to subvert turian, asari, or salarian military forces. I'd like permission to call on turian Blackwatch or salarian STG units for backup once I identify their hideouts and bases. Incapacitating Cerberus will not only destroy Saren's intelligence support, but will allow the Shadow Broker to help us find him much more easily."

The three councilors traded glances, and then Tevos nodded. "Your plan is acceptable, Commander. And while we have no additional leads on Saren, we do have a lead for your review on Cerberus. A Systems Alliance rear admiral has been petitioning us for Spectre investigation into a curious incident involving some of his soldiers out near the Traverse. His unit was involved in anti-pirate operations, only the pirates were humans rather than batarians. He lost contact with his unit six days ago, but the location is deep in the Traverse and we are unsure it would be prudent to send ships."

Shepard nodded slowly. "How is this connected to Cerberus?"

Valern spoke. "The admiral had been going through some unusual channels to follow up on his unit, and told us the Shadow Broker sold him information about the pirates. The Broker claims the pirates are actually a Cerberus unit, and the slaves they take are used in experiments. The Council cannot

authorize direct intervention in the Traverse, of course, but whatever actions you take as a Spectre are yours to decide." The salarian sniffed, a wry smile occluding his normally expressionless face. "The fact that you have a stealth frigate does not hurt either."

Shepard came to attention. "If you have nothing else, then, I'll proceed to dock and resupply my ship, conduct what business I have on the Citadel, and meet with Admiral...?"

Sparatus tapped his panel. "Rear Admiral Kahoku attached to your Fifth Fleet. Seeing as we've covered everything, there is no need for a formal, in person meeting with news personnel taking everything out of context, Shepard. We expect regular reports on your progress as it continues."

Shepard nodded. "Yes, sir."

The signal went dead, without them even saying goodbye, and Shepard relaxed with a long-suffering sigh. "Egomaniacal jackasses...least they didn't 'object' to anything." She ran her hands through her hair, and slapped the comm. "Joker, dock progress?"

The pilot's voice was wry. "A big HE3 tanker just lost lateral thrusters and almost crashed into a turian dreadnaught. Twenty more minutes, Commander, assuming we don't get vaporized by drunk drivers."

Shepard snorted and tapped off, checking her chronometer on her omni-tool. Even as she did so, the door to the comm room slid open, and Doctor Chakwas walked in, followed by the new navigator, Friggs. Shepard gestured to the seats. "Take a seat, the rest will be here shortly." She pulled up the ordering manifests that had been put together and reviewed everything that they would need to requisition or expense out, and as she did so, the rest of the staff filed in.

Shepard stepped to the front of the room and stood straight. "We're about to dock at the Citadel. Unlike the last time, we have quite a bit of resupply, requisition and work to get done while we're here. I want to make sure every one of my officers is on board with my plans before we proceed, and get any feedback you have."

Shepard began to pace, her usual animalistic stride shortened in the small space. "We'll start from the bottom and work our way up. Lieutenant Alenko, I've put in orders for Predator battle armor and Crossfire rifles for the entire marine detail. You, Chief Williams, and Master Chief Cole will not use this gear. You will instead be getting Colossus Armor. Liara is in the process of ordering the armor right now. When it gets here I want all the suits checked, proof tested, and then repainted Alliance spec. If you have weapons authorizations you'd like to make for individual marines for side arms, I'd like to hear them. Otherwise, I need your report."

The next 20 minutes passed rapidly, as each one of her officers gave her a concise rundown on the status of the ship. Alenko had promotions he wanted made, and worried that the squads they had were simply not well trained enough for heavy combat. Friggs, the new navigator, gave a somewhat hesitant report of upgrades she'd designed for the ops plot the next time Joker had to push the engines as hard as he had in Feros. Chakwas wanted to upgrade the medical bay, since the injuries the squad had been subjected to far outstripped it's designed specifications for fixing the occasional gunshot or broken bone.

Shepard carefully listened, making a few changes to the plans Pressly and Adams had for repairs and replacements, and charged Friggs with working with Garrus to restock the ship's missile and torpedo supply. After a quick reminder to make sure they kept their staff ready to leave on 30 minutes' notice, she dismissed them to prep for docking.

Shepard sat in the comm room alone, gathering her thoughts, and wondering what she'd do during the down time that the Normandy would be laid up for. Liara's jaunt to Eingana probably wouldn't take that long, and might actually turn out to be useful, at least as a field test for the new armor Liara was

ordering.

*I wonder how she's doing with that.*

### O-OSaBC-O

Liara spent almost forty minutes in the science lab, looking up everything there was to know about Colossus Armor, armor measurements, and armor mods. The details were unfamiliar but fascinating at the same time, with enthusiast extranet sites and 3-D haptic image displays easily available.

The Colossus Armor was probably the single most expensive type of full military battle armor in the galaxy after the hand-made custom-fitted Spectre armor. Kassa Fabrication was a human company that had exclusive contracts with the Systems Alliance as well as most of the large human nations still on Earth, and it had spared no expense in making itself the dominant and premier armor maker in the galaxy in only 15 years.

The armor was a triple-lined miracle of engineering. The inner layer was of nano-infused ballistic cloth, with tiny capillary tubes filled with medigel forming the side of the material closest to the wearer's body. Over that was a series of quarter-inch shock-resistant ceramic plates, layered in shock absorbing gel and sandwiched between two thin layers of artificial spider silk. The outer sections were thick, heavy slabs of super-compressed, plasma forged titanium, honeycombed with carbon nanotubes that shed heat and broke up biotic pressure differentials. The entire suit was mounted on an integral powered assist exoskeleton, and contained full DETA decon filters, a 9 hour purified air supply, and built in water and food storage in an armored backpack. The armored gauntlets and wrist assemblies were built with gyroscopic recoil dampeners and the helmet had built in UV LADAR, infrared, and sonic mapping for smoke or night-time operations.

Liara was startled by Shepard's announcement, and her call for department heads to meet her in the comm room. She waited to see if Shepard would ask for the aliens to join as well, but this time she did not, and Liara returned to her work. She paged through the long list of possible modifications, and then sighed. She would need someone to help her on this, but that would defeat the purpose of her doing the work herself. After all, everyone on board had something to do; even Master Chief Cole was assigned mechanical upkeep of the sleeper pods, given his previous profession before the Systems Alliance. And with everyone tied up in a meeting, even if one of them had the time to assist her, it wouldn't be soon.

*In fact, the only other person on board without something to do is ... Shields. Goddess help me.*

Liara grimaced, but there wasn't much choice. The woman was clearly qualified and had probably done things of this nature before. Liara transferred everything to her omni-tool and, with a steady inhale, exited the science lab.

The lab was quiet and mostly empty, Chakwas probably dealing with preparing for the ship's arrival at the Citadel. Shields was awake, and Liara was both relieved and worried – relieved she was there, in the relative privacy of the medical bay; worried that Shields would not cooperate with her.

Shields was sitting up in the medical bed, hair having fallen across her face, tinkering with an open panel on her cybernetic arm, brows furrowed in concentration. Liara stopped, unsure of how to proceed, and after a moment Shields glanced up, dark gray eyes fixing on Liara. "Help you with something, Blue?"

Liara did not care for her tone, but she made an effort to put a pleasant expression on her face.

"Actually, yes, Ms. Shields, if you have the time. Commander Shepard has tasked me with putting together a manifest of updated equipment for the ground team. Specifically, she wants me to pick the sizes and modifications for sets of Colossus Armor for the non-humans on board."

Shields grunted. "Colossus is pricy shit. Then again, She-bitch was always complaining about the crap armor the SA issued us." She gave a mocking grin as Liara winced at the nickname. "Figured you'd be used to all the foul language by now, doc."

Liara steadied her slightly shaken nerve and forced herself to smile, albeit weakly. "I am still adjusting to the way humans address each other. It is nothing, really. You were speaking of armor...why, exactly, is the Colossus so much better than the usual armor you wear?"

Shields shook her head, as if tired. "It's like comparing a batarian grav lift to a Serrice aircar. Both do the job, but one does it so much better. Onyx armor, the Systems Alliance standard, is good for stopping shitty BSA submachine guns and 20 year old smuggled crap in the Terminus, but you go up against real military weapons, or a rocket, or biotic, and you end up pasted." She finished her work on her arm, and snapped the small cover closed with a careful motion, flexing the fingers of her hand as she turned it over. "Colossus can bounce most small arms fire, auto-seals breaches, and all kinds of crazy shit. Doesn't explain why you need to talk to *me* about it."

Liara raised her chin. "I am not familiar with many aspects of this sort of thing. I have been fitted for my own armor, of course, but that was long ago. And I just borrowed a set of standard battle armor from the Normandy's armory for our assault on Feros., Armor that did not fit very well. I was hoping you would be able to provide assistance, or at least guidance on the best choices to make and the fitting process."

Shields fixed her with a long stare. The woman's face was almost lifeless, set in empty lines with no real expression visible, but her eyes were more alive, searching for something in Liara's face. With a groan, Shields sat up more fully. "That's not what I meant. Why ask me, specifically? Why not ask the ships BDO, or one of the squad chiefs?"

Liara shrugged. "Several reasons. Lieutenant Alenko is tasked with prepping the ship for arrival at the Citadel, and I am sure Master Chief Cole and Chief Williams are as well. Additionally, Chief Williams does not seem to care for my presence. And if Shepard had wanted this done by them, she would have given it to them. Finally, you ... are experienced. You fought alongside Shepard and know best what kinds of equipment would complement her skills."

Shields sighed. "Alright. That certainly sounds logical, Blue. But I'd like to know something if I help you with this. On Feros, you came at me like I was untrustworthy, and you've been eying me like you expect me to blow your head off. The fuck is up with that? We ain't met." Shields slid forward on the bed until she was sitting on the edge. "I get worried when people start measuring me for a coffin and we haven't met."

Liara blinked, and then gave a small sigh. "It – t-that is, I do not have anything against you. At least, related to me." She paused. "The commander encountered a Prothean Beacon on Eden Prime. After she rescued me, we discussed it, and she said she could not understand what she was seeing."

Liara transferred her data to the nearest medical computer, moving it closer so Shields could see it. "I joined my mind with hers to impart my knowledge of the Protheans to her... but as a result, we shared some memories."

Shields had been calm until the last part of Liara's statement, and then she turned to the asari with a furious expression on her face. "So you fucked her and you're angry that I'm here? She feeds me bullshit about not being into anyone while she's having her roll in the hay with aliens? That bit-"

Liara flushed a deep shade of blue, stammering. "N-no! Goddess, no. It was n-not ... sexual. It was... it is a method mothers use to teach their c-children, or old friends use to share memories – not a Melding! Shepard doesn't ... think of me that way." The last came out almost brokenly, and the human woman's

anger melted from her face in a second.

Shields sat there, mind racing, not saying anything, her hands shaking. She heard the pain in the asari's voice, the uncertainty and, more importantly, the embarrassment. Shields let the tension and anger slowly drain out of her, organizing her thoughts, hands clenched. *Some kinda weird Vulcan mind-meld bullshiat, instead of freaky mind sex. Shared memories. No wonder she doesn't like me, she must have seen Torfan then, or what happened after.* She pursed her lips and gave a casual shrug. "Join the club, Blue. She .. explained that she didn't much see anyone that way, not seriously. Still hurts."

Liara shook her head. "I .. do not think she understands everything she feels. I did not intend to witness any of her memories, but I saw not only her separation from your group, but her early childhood." The asari's voice hardened, thickening with hatred and disgust. "The vile things that were done to her have damaged her forever, I fear. She flees from closeness, even though hurts her even more. She is terrified of driving those she cares about away, and can't .. find a way to help them understand how she feels. She feels alone."

Shields exhaled. "Yeah. Her old crew, me, the others, we fought to try to reach her. To make her see."

Liara eyes snapped up to meet Shields', icy blue, angry, confused. "You fought to try to make her want you, to try to claim her like some kind of trophy, to justify your own losses. She didn't even understand, and you left her behind when she needed you the most."

Shields slid off the bed, balling a fist. "She abandoned us in the muck on Torfan. She left *us* for the first bitch that smiled, pretended she was normal, and spread her legs. Don't fucking lecture me on what I did or didn't do."

Liara shook her head, sadly. "I am not lecturing you. I am just saying what I saw, and how she saw it. You did not offer her a way out she could have taken, or understood. You offered her nothing but help she could not see or accept. In leaving you caused her more pain, made her question her own past even more, left her with serious doubts about her ability to *be a real person.*" The asari's eyes rimmed with tears, and she looked away. "She hated herself and you drove it home that she had no one who believed in her. To wait until then to force the issue that you loved her? She never recovered!"

Shields wanted to scream out a denial, to yell at the alien bitch, to howl out the reality, but all she could think of for a moment was the shattered memory of walking away from Shepard outside that shitty bar, Shepard kneeling in the dirty street, all alone. She exhaled, clenching her fist tighter, servos in her shoulder whining with the strain. She spoke, her voice icy and cold.

"Don't get too high and mighty judging me, Blue. The fact that you mind-raped her doesn't make you her friend, it makes you a freaky, alien thing."

Liara's eyes flashed angrily, but she said nothing. *She is trying to bait me into anger. Her ignorance of what happened is just her denying the truth of what she did.* Liara forced herself back to calm. "Your view of what I shared with Shepard is completely inaccurate. Refusing to listen to the truth does not make you any less complicit in how your leaving affected her."

Shields leaned back, folding her arms. "I don't have to *listen to a goddamned* thing from you, the child of some traitor bitch telling me what a bad person I am for falling in love, especially from someone who doesn't even know the whole story."

Liara's mouth opened, but Shields just sneered at her. "You're a goddamned kid. How can you possibly fucking understand the shit we all went through for her sake? About Dirth, killing our own men to get the job done? Did she ever tell you about the shit at Torfan, the shit we soiled our very souls with? The monsters we all became, shooting kids in the head like goddamned Sao Paulo death-squads?"

Liara closed her eyes, remembering. "I saw. The batarian children, terrified, with the b-bombs..."

Shields sat up, eyes narrowed in old anger. "Shepard doesn't need *help*. Shepard doesn't need fucking *understanding*. I don't know *what* she needs. Neither does she, and neither do *you*. I spent eight goddamned years of my life carrying that cross on my shoulders, and all I got for it was abandonment. We walked out on her because we couldn't take any fucking more. Does it make it right? No. Should we have done something else? How the fuck could we? We were just as fucked up as she was."

Shields pointed to an angry red scar bisecting her throat. "I lost my parents at eleven, got mixed up in gangs, and framed for a drug bust gone bad by crooked cops. Baby Blue got affected by an eezo dusting and ended up unable to control his anger, strangled his own damned wife. Dunn went to the Penal Legions because he grew up in one of the poorest parts of Earth and the only way to survive was the damned gangs, and the police were just executing anyone they could to keep the crime from affecting the ever-so-fucking precious rich in the arcologies."

Shields looked away, jaw pulsing. "So no, Blue. We *didn't* have any better fucking idea what to do than she did. She kept us alive when we were frightened and crying. She scared the fuck out of the snipers they threatened to kill you with if you stepped out of line. She laughed in the face of the penal legion commissars who'd break your leg for not keeping up in the exercise runs. She beat the crap out of anybody messing with us, taught us how to fight, shoot, and survive. She was the only reason any of us got out alive. Walking away from her was all I had fucking left, all any of us had left, because it hurt too much to stay and watch and not even be sure she cared, or if she was just using you because you were *efficient*."

Liara shouted. "No! She ... she did not look at you that way! I saw!"

Shields laughed so bitterly Liara flinched. "None of us were asari. We didn't have the ability to read her goddamned mind. So, yeah. Blame me. Look at me like I'm some kinda bitch. Tell me it's my fucking fault she's a goddamned basket case who got most of her own fucking unit killed not once, but over and over, to support a government that sets its own soldiers up to fucking die for political points." Shields folded her arms, eyes narrowed to dagger-throwing slits of pure hate. "But don't ever fucking tell me I should have known better. I loved her. Fuck that, I love her now, even though it's killing me. I lived through the shit you so casually pick up from her brain."

Shields shook her head. "If you think you can do any goddamned better, you'd be with her right now, and she'd be teaching you how to work an armor requisitions system. If you knew her so well, you'd understand that she tests everyone, evaluates them, finds if they are useful... or expendable. Maybe once you fall on the wrong side of that goddamned line, you'll realize just how little you understand the Butcher."

With a deliberately slow movement, she got back in her bed. "Damn, I don't feel so hot, Blue. I know you said you came for help, and I'd love to help ya, but ... bed rest, doctor's orders, that sort of thing. Good luck figuring it all out."

Shields closed her eyes and turned on her side, and Liara slumped, looking down. For a long second she said nothing, and then gave a sigh. "You are right, Ms. Shields. I am. . not the person to be castigating anyone for anything. Seeing the events in her mind, and then seeing you a few hours later, was .. upsetting. And I do not know Shepard the way you do, or the whole story. I know flashes and bits and emotions and feelings. As you said, I did not live it the way you did."

She firmed her jaw. "But I know the pain in Shepard's mind and heart. I have heard her talk about how alone and unhappy she is, and how she often wishes she could just die, rather than continue to live as a misunderstood monster. That is how she sees herself. And part of why she sees herself that way was because of the way *you* left her. Maybe I was naive in believing my insight might allow me make a

connection with her, to help her. Maybe I was wrong in thinking that you had a choice in leaving "

Liara turned away. "But at least my outrage is because of what she has gone through and endured, not some selfish and petulant rage about what I cannot have. I will find some way to get this task done, while you fixate on how badly you have been treated. My apologies for disturbing you, Ms. Shields." Angrily, stiffly, Liara walked to the door, cursing herself for her inability to rein in her own feelings and emotions. She was about to hit the med-bay door control when Shields suddenly laughed.

"And that's why you're angry, Blue? Because I wasn't good enough to keep her shit together? Because I want one thing in my life, and I can't have it?" The woman laughed again, long and loud, an almost pained edge to the sound, and Liara came to a confused stop, turning around. Shields was still lying on the bed, shoulders shaking. "God, that's just fucking .. .perfect."

Liara stood there, confused, and Shields rolled onto her back, wiping her eyes with her hand. "I had to fucking ask, didn't I? Ask why you were so angry. I was thinking you were her new piece or something. But you're just as star-struck as everyone else who comes in contact with her. Fall in love with her, hate her, or both. I felt the same damned way a long time ago." Shields' voice was softer, almost a whisper.

Liara took a step closer. "I .. do not understand. New piece?"

Shields's face twisted into a sardonic smile. "Shepard had a few, ha, incidents. She got drunk and messed up, on leave away from us. Casual sex, I guess you'd call it. Reclaiming your body or some shit. Three, maybe four times in eight years? I didn't really give a shit, I wanted her to love me, not just to sleep with me. Not that I'd have said no to that, but .. I didn't want to be used. None of us did." Her voice hardened as she saw the asari was still confused. "I thought she was in a sexual relationship with you, despite your protests. That you were ... threatened by my presence. Or felt that way for her."

Liara shook her head, cheeks flushing. "N-no. I mean, she saved my life, when I thought I had been abandoned. She listened to me and risked her own life to have me assist her, and brought me back from the very shores of death when my own stupidity and inexperience nearly killed us both. She faced down the rulers of the galaxy to keep me from arrest and imprisonment when she barely knew me, and she was upset because she could see no way to avoid from having to kill my mother." Liara's voice broke a little. "I do not know what I should feel for her, or about her, and I have no one to help me understand. I am .. a part of me finds her fascinating, a part wants to hold her and make the pain stop, and a part of me is .. repulsed and confused by some of the things she has done in her past."

Liara's thoughts treacherously strayed back to Shepard's comment in her hospital room, and the flush deepened, Liara biting her lip. Shields looked at her a long moment, before grunting and sitting up.

"Saved your life, huh?" For some reason the woman seemed calmer, more in control, the anger of just a few moments ago suddenly gone. "Tell me."

Liara haltingly described her ordeal with the Prothean security station, Shepard's whirlwind assault on the geth, rescuing her, and facing down the geth armature. Downplaying her own role, she ended by describing Shepard's defense of her to the Council, and Shields only nodded.

"Sara to a tee. For all her self-hating bullshit about being a monster, God fucking help you if you pick on the weak around her." Shield's eyes closed, a faint smile tracing across her lips. "Sounds like you have a case of hero-worship mixed with a good old fashioned crush. Not that there's anything wrong with that, but .. take it from me, it won't go anywhere."

Liara looked away. "I-I know. She is too complicated for me to understand, I fear. Like her, I never seem to know what to say, or how to act. Even among my own kind, much less humans. I do not know how to, as you put it, 'give her whatever she needs.'" Liara exhaled, and suddenly the reality of what she was saying, and hearing , hit her – of what it would be like to spend eight years with someone you

wished cared for you, wished loved you, wished was interested in you, only to realize it would never happen.

Suddenly she felt horrible, like a child kicking a helpless, crippled animal, and tears flooded her eyes. "B-but I can understand when I am being a childish fool, and I had no right to say what I did. It must be hard for you to be here, losing your entire career in a few days of horror... and now she is here again and nothing has changed for you. To have someone like me chastise you –" "

Shields held up a hand, a motion eerily like the one Shepard often used, and the gray eyes came up to meet hers. Hard, like the granite they were the color of. Unyielding, like steel. Yet somehow understanding as well. "One of the squad wrote a poem about her, once." Shields voice took on a sing-song note, as she recited something from memory.

"She is the terror of a thousand victims, given rage and furious form. She is the vengeance of the unlamented slave, the wrath of those left to die. She is the beauty of a new morning sunrise, the anger of the unbridled storm. She is the meaningless pain of the martyr, a last rattling sigh." Shields' lips quirked. "You can fight like a krogan, and run like a leopard, but you'll never be better than Sara Ying Shepard."

Something about the ridiculous line caught at Liara, and she felt herself smile as well. Shields gave a long, almost pained sigh, and then sat up fully. "I can't let her go, and you're caught up in her wake as well. I'm a big girl, though. As long as I can keep telling myself that she hasn't chosen anyone...I can hardly get angry at you for feeling the same damned way I do." Shields shook her head, then looked up, face framed by her long, dark hair, eyes solemn.

Liara nodded, not even fully understanding what she had said that had disarmed the woman's anger, but grateful nonetheless. "I am sorry for my words, Ms. Shields. And .. for what it is worth, I do not think she did not love you.. And I think you matter to her a great deal, even now."

Shields' somber expression flickered, a hint of life coming into the angles of her face, a faint light into her eyes. "I know. She told me that herself. But it's nice to know she meant it." Shields ran her hands through her hair and jerked a thumb to the computer Liara had dumped the armor specs into earlier. "Well, shit, get over here. Goddamned armor isn't going to sort itself."

With a faint smile, Liara complied.

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## Chapter 56: Chapter 49: Dragunov, Ultimatum

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*A/N : I've got two chapters cooking with the beta reader, but we're both kind of overwhelmed by work so the next one may be a few days. The one after that will almost certainly be this weekend or later.*

*There's not a lot of exploration of exactly why the SA does some pretty stupid things throughout the series. I think there needs to be a clarification of why the Alliance went all nutso on Shepard after ME1 and her death. In my AU, the SA has already shown to be a much darker entity than in canon : penal legions with snipers, experiments on unwilling prisoners. You'll note in the chapter below Shepard accuses SA Command of some pretty horrible things and they don't even try to deny it.*

*Please remember one of the prime rules of the Premiseverse : there are no good guys :D*

O-OSaBC-O

The announcement that the crew was on shore leave was well received, and yet tempered by the number of Alliance officials waiting at the end of the Normandy's docking pier. They clustered in a

tight knot, blue uniforms glimmering here and there with gold braid and bar, a tiny storm cloud at the end of the long silver span that connected the ship to the rest of the Citadel.

The message she'd received in her comm system from the Alliance Admiralty Board had been so terse as to approach unintelligibility. "*Stand by for Admiralty presence reactions.*" Code for: standby to standby, sir yes sir. The second message that hit her inbox minutes later was sent privately from Rear Admiral Mikhailovich. "*Witch hunt coming. Stand your ground, Anderson and I are on the way.*"

Shepard didn't know what that really meant, wasn't sure what the hell would bring the Fleet Master all the way out to the Citadel to see her personally, and was worried stiff about it. Was it due to her nearly dying? Was it the fact she didn't catch Saren when she had him cold? She'd been stressed ever since the message hit, and focusing on just docking the ship and getting the crew off was occupying her thoughts, keeping her nerves even.

Shepard pinched the bridge of her nose and sighed, a sardonic smile worming its way across her dark features. *Yeah, right, nerves even.* She stood in the cockpit, watching as her crew filed out for leave, some of them in civilian clothes, others still in fatigues, all with the same expression – part haggard, part terrified, part proud. She waited until the last had gone past her before trading significant glances with her XO. "You have the shopping list?"

Pressly nodded, having changed into a one-piece civilian outfit, muted gray with a mantle of dark black, emphasizing his barrel chest and broad shoulders even more than usual. "I have, ma'am. Watch section three's on duty, 2 engineers standing 12 on and 12 off, and 3 ops standing 6 hours below decks watches." He paused. "C-Sec says their people will stand a topside watch at the pier, but I can still -"

Shepard snorted, cutting him off. "Not needed. Let the crew blow off steam." She smiled, a bit faintly, trying and failing to read Pressly's expression. For the thousandth time in her life she cursed her awkwardness and limited ability to grasp simple human contact. Even at the best of times, her XO was hardly garrulous, but now he seemed to have a face carved from cool stone, as he gave a shrug. "Anyway, get moving. Whatever the admirals want, I can deal with it by myself. You said your wife was on the Citadel, she'll be happy to see you."

Pressly gave her a hard, searching look before he finally smiled, ducking his head gratefully and heading out the airlock hatch. Shepard took a deep, steadying breath and followed, her spotless dress uniform half obscured by the Spectre cloak she wore tossed over her shoulder. Fixing her face in its usual blank, cold expression, she suppressed a roiling sensation of nervousness as she crossed the pier, getting close enough to recognize the faces waiting for her.

Fleet Master Ivan Dragunov was in the front, his arms folded. His craggy, Russian features were marred by star-bursts of pale scar tissue, flanking his left cheek, and the garish, ugly ravines of claw marks across his right eye and nose. His dress uniform was immaculate, the cloth stiff, leather polished, the five gleaming bars of his rank flanked by the red bar of the High Admiralty.

Behind him, Rear Admiral Mikhailovich was frowning, his features twisted in anger. Rear Admiral Vandefar, the head of Alliance Military R&D, pushed her silvering hair out of her face, appraising Shepard with a measuring look. She didn't recognize the other Rear Admiral, a fussy looking man who reminded her vaguely of Adams, or the two others – aides, probably – in the uniforms of majors and colonels, because she focused her gaze on the last figure.

Anderson stood there, a gentle smile on his weary features. She felt the tension drain out of her slowly, at the sight of him, and squared her shoulders even as she walked forward. *Whatever the fuck it is, I can do it.* Shepard came to a halt at the end of the pier and saluted the Fleet Master with savage precision. "Commander Shepard, reporting, sir!"

The return salute was clipped. "At ease, Commander." Cold eyes took in the gleaming curve of the Normandy, before settling upon her with almost concrete weight. "I see you chose to set shore leave before meeting us. Any reason why?"

Shepard shrugged. "The Normandy is hardly equipped with a meeting room or appropriate settings for hosting the Fleet Master, sir. I determined it was easier to dismiss the crew now, and have you tell me where we should have our discussion, than to keep them cooped up after a mission where we very nearly died, sir."

Dragunov's flat slash of a mouth twitched. "Very well." He glanced over the ship, and then shrugged. "Your communications room will serve for this discussion, Commander. After you."

Shepard led them aboard. The VI of the ship scanned each one, calling out their titles in a solemn voice. "Systems Alliance Navy, Command, arriving. Admiral, Systems Alliance Navy, arriving. Admiral, Systems Alliance..."

Shepard tuned the drone of the VI out as she led the group of admirals into and past her CIC, noticing the arched eyebrow of Admiral Vandefar as she took in the turian-modeled CIC. The below-decks watch, a senior chief nav tech, was already standing rigidly at attention next to the stairway, saluting. The man's eyes were wide with alarm as he took in the constellation of seniority before him.

Shepard gave a nod. "As you were, Chief Midani. See if you can't scare us up some coffee and sandwiches from that wreck of a galley." The man nodded and almost fled down the stairs, and Vandefar clucked disapprovingly.

The party entered the comm room, and Shepard waited until the admirals and Anderson were all seated before doing so herself. The moment she did, the Fleet Master spoke. "Shepard, there has been a great deal of concern regarding your activities, both on Feros and in general. That's why we decided it would be most appropriate to see you in person and to discuss the issues that have been brought forward.." The voice was gravelly, cold, measured. "More to the point, I need to determine what exactly will be the Systems Alliance response to recent orders the Council has seen fit to issue."

Shepard's eyes flicked from one admiral to another, confused. "I am not quite following, sir. What exactly is this in regards to?"

Dragunov's jaw tightened. "You were made a Spectre and sent out to chase down and apprehend or otherwise recover Saren Arterius for the crimes he committed on Eden Prime. In the course of pursuit, he apparently made his way to, and subsequently attacked, the colony at Feros." He paused. "Which was an operation of some import to the Systems Alliance."

Shepard's eyes narrowed. "Yes, sir. I'm aware of what was being done down there." Her voice trembled, as she tried to suppress her disgust at what she had learned from Jeong and Shields. Vandefar frowned at her tone, and spoke.

"Shepard, the Thorian was allowing us to make great strides in translation and access to the Mars Archive. Progress that led to improved technology and a greater place for humanity in the galaxy, and in fact led to some of the improvements of this very vessel. The ability to understand what the Protheans left us is how we managed to learn that Eden Prime was a possible location for further discoveries. Now, we're crippled."

She sniffed. "Its loss, regardless of reasons, is a blow that will set back our technological advancement for decades to come."

Shepard frowned further. "I did not have anything to do with the death of that .. thing, ma'am."

Vandefar nodded. "We're aware of that. But the fact that it's gone is only part of the problem. There are

very few people who know what occurred on Feros, in terms of what Exogeni was doing to obtain the information sent to the Systems Alliance. Most of them appear to be dead. It was our understanding that if the colony was wiped, there would be no further ramifications. But it appears that your report to the Council – a verbal report, one we were not copied on – mentioned this creature in detail, as well as the fact of how Exogeni used it. We had no warning the Council knew about the Thorian at all, until Ambassador Udina was interrogated at length this morning."

Dragunov nodded. "As a result of your report, and of the information you obtained from this asari captive of yours, it appears the Council is investigating Exogeni rather heavily and asking us for what information we have on the company. While the number of people is limited, sooner or later someone will give them a clue. They don't have proof, but they have suspicions. Suspicions that make our work in integrating with the Citadel races harder. Suspicions that harry us and cause us additional issues and problems."

Shepard shook her head in disgust. "I disclosed the existence of the creature, as well as it's horrific habits, but since I was not presented any real evidence that the Systems Alliance was involved, I did not present the .. information Mr. Jeong gave me." Her eyes darkened. "Failure to at least tell them what went on would have been suicidal. The Council was in a foul mood after losing half of one of their fleets and seeing Saren get away. And honestly, sir, I felt dirtied by the need to lie to cover up the criminal activities Exogeni was engaged in. I'm not seeing what there is to discuss."

Vandefar shook her head. "Shepard, the primary concern of our defense committee is the protection of human space and the Systems Alliance. The report you submitted indicated you have a problem with the choices the Systems Alliance made in pursuing useful technology and that you made no efforts to secure the Thorian even after you were informed of its importance. Why?"

Shepard gave the woman a disbelieving look for a long moment before speaking. "Ma'am, are you familiar with my history? You sent members of the Penal Legion there to die and be harvested like some kind of farm to gain this so-called 'vital knowledge', and thought I would be okay with that? Let's not even get started on the fact that when I submitted my last report about Feros, I got no answer back from the SA board. You didn't even bother to think that, after Saren has been going after Prothean artifacts like candy, it might be important to let me know what was on Feros? What the hell was I supposed to have done? I secured the survivors, established comms, called for backup –"

Vandefar snorted. "And that could possibly have caused a war. If Saren's monster of a dreadnaught had not incinerated the site, that would have led to the discovery of what occurred. As it stands, the Council is debating assigning a *Spectre* with an STG team to investigate Exogeni, due to your wild claim they had Cerberus ties." She gave Shepard an angry look. "Your job, Commander, is to uphold SA law and interests."

Shepard's jaw tightened. "You're upset that I told the Council about your –"

With a motion of his hand, Mikhailovich cut Shepard off. "I've always maintained this was a sick goddamned experiment, Lana. I don't give a good god-damn what you think might have happened, the end result is the colony and all the evidence got glassed. Raking my marine over the coals over the fact that she told the truth is ridiculous. Your pet man-eating plant died. Get over it. We have a mass-murdering turian lunatic to kill and you're debating the contents of a report!"

The female admiral shook her head. "The end result is I am not willing to condone the operations of Shepard until we have a chain of command for her to work through, Spectre or not. Regardless of how she completes the mission, her position is now very political, and the backlash from what she does reflects directly on humanity. When she was told of the Thorian's importance, she should have moved immediately to secure it. Because she didn't, we've lost decades of progress-" The admiral made an

angry slashing gesture – "and on top of that, she goes and tells the Council about the whole thing. She's not capable of operating without oversight."

Shepard had gone tense, her eyes narrowed. "Admiral, you were killing people and you signed off on it. Exogeni was killing people and didn't even care. I don't give a shit what it allowed us to do, that is not the way humans are supposed to be treated-fed to a plant!"

Vandefar sneered. "Criminals with capital sentences. Slavers. Drug pushers. Rapists. Cerberus agents. I figured you'd approve disposing of the scum in a .. useful manner. It's perfectly acceptable for you to kill prisoners in cold blood, including a little girl, but we're evil people for providing for all of humanity?"

Shepard's voice was a whisper. "You're supposed to be better than a thug like me, ma'am. Torfan was bad enough. Sick enough. But this? Did you even SEE what that goddamned thing did to them? It turned them into monsters that rotted away, a piece at a time, with vines and roots growing through their bodies!"

Dragunov sighed, waving Admiral Vandefar down before she could reply. "And this is why we needed to speak with you, Commander. I'm fully aware that you disagree with what occurred on Feros. The initiation of that project was not my call." He slid an angry glance over to Admiral Vandefar, and his already hard voice became absolutely flinty. "Nor was I *fully* briefed on what was occurring on Feros. But the fact remains that your position as a Spectre is due mostly to Ambassador Udina's politicking, and the influence of a few influential members of the SA Congress. This operation is not turning out well. The Beacon we had is destroyed. A colony lies in ruins. Independent colonies are agitating for protection we can't provide. Now this."

Dragunov exhaled, glancing at his feet. "There was a movement to suspend our efforts in locating Saren. There have been multiple votes for simply withdrawing from the Council. The loss of the Council fleet in responding to your distress call has engendered a great deal of bitterness from the other Council races. We've barely managed to suppress most of those issues, but there is still a great deal of concern about what else you're going to end up doing. And despite your Spectre status, this is an Alliance ship and you are required to follow Alliance orders."

Shepard's gaze was icy, but her lips were drawn together and she had gone pale, and Anderson winced. He knew that look; it was the look she wore when she was deeply hurt. He cleared his throat, and, with an apologetic glance at the Fleet Master, spoke. "Sara, there's a lot going on behind the scenes people like you or I never knew about. Political elements that, until I worked with Udina for a few days, I never dreamed about. It's bigger than people in suits playing at war, it's things that could be just as dangerous as Saren. And we can't afford to mess this up. Saren's too dangerous. We don't know who or what Saren may go after next. The Admiralty needs some assurance that before you take any drastic measures, they have time to assess the situation."

Shepard shook her head. "There was nothing to asses! We were pinned, our armaments exhausted, in a fouled atmosphere that made our stealth drive useless. There was a goddamned geth army on the ground. I could have gone for the Thorian at once, and if we failed had no way to get the news out, or gotten comms working and alerted someone that we had an issue there!"

Dragunov shook his head. "There is a lack of faith in your ability to make snap judgment calls, Commander. Your operations end up bloody, with too many casualties and too much political fall out."

Shepard finally lost it, the anger roaring through her bloodstream like fire, a thin film of blue energy outlining her form as she stood, shaking. "I gave EVERYTHING to the goddamned Alliance, and you send me out again and again without enough forces to do what the fuck you tell me to do. Then you send me to fucking DIE, for political points, after setting me up to ruin my ability to lead and get my

unit killed! Then you sideline me with a lunatic failure who blames me for his inability to get the job done, and finally you put me up for this ridiculous Spectre position without even ASKING me." She balled a fist, wreathed in biotics. "The fuck do you think you are?"

Dragunov only crossed his legs, his expression cool, as the others had edged away. "We're the people who gave you a second chance, after you became a sand-addict and murdering thug. We're the people who backed you after your career turned into a bloodthirsty series of episodes in poor anger management. We're the people who hushed up what a cluster-fuck Torfan became and made you a recipient of the Star of Terra." His eyes hardened. "I, in particular, am the person who put a bullet in the head of the genius that decided the scheme at Torfan was a good idea."

The admiral flicked a tiny bit of lint from his sleeve onto the rubberized decking, eyes cold and narrow. "You are not required to *agree* with the orders you are given. You are not required to like them. I find that I often do not like the priorities I am tasked with as Fleet Master, and I haven't slept without nightmares since before you were even born. But you *will* understand the importance of what is happening."

Shepard sneered, still standing, still furious. "I don't have time for political bullshit-"

Dragunov roared, a leonine sound that even made Shepard step back. "Then you are a **fool** and will just get more good soldiers killed! Have you learned nothing? Saren is a threat, yes, but not as much of one as the Citadel turning against the Systems Alliance. His black dreadnaught is not going to be a match for dozens of dreadnaughts and hundreds of cruisers. His geth are no match for the might of the galaxy. We're of divided opinions on his insane plans, whatever they might be, but the ugly reality is he's doing us a damned favor."

Shepard's eyes widened, and Dragunov continued. "Haven't you figured out why Cerberus, of all people, is helping this lunatic? If humanity stops Saren, we're heroic. If a human Spectre can best the most decorated Spectre in history, we are worthy."

Shepard gave a lost look at Anderson, whose eyes were blank with fury. He gave the tiniest of head shakes, and she snapped her attention back to the Fleet Master. Vandefar spoke instead. "We don't require you to approve of what the Systems Alliance is doing. It's no dirtier than some of the things we've learned the other races are doing. They're just quieter about it. What we can't have is you running around, disrupting operations we aren't even aware you know about, and then putting it into reports to the Council!"

Dragunov nodded. "Which leads into our next point. The Council informed us that we were 'required' to give you several fleet battle groups to hunt geth. Required! They did not make it a request, they made it an imperative. The turian councilor actually had the audacity to suggest that since the Citadel Fleet was stupid enough to get cut to ribbons it was now *humanity's* turn." He shook his head.

"Whatever possessed you to put the Alliance in this situation is moot. What remains to be seen is if it's worth our time to continue this effort at all."

Conversation in the room halted as the comms room door slid open, and Service Chief Midani came in with a tray of steaming coffees and small sandwiches. Shepard watched silently as he placed them on the small shelf along the near wall, and then saluted sharply, leaving with almost indecent haste. Mikhailovich stood up and picked up one of the cups of coffee, sipping it carefully and grimacing. "Jesus, I thought this was cutting-edge tech. Crap is worse than on the Orizaba"

Dragunov gave him a flat, ugly look. "Levity is not appreciated, Chan."

Mikhailovich sniffed, his pugnacious features shifting into a frown. "It's a goddamned fuckjob, that's what it is, Ivan. Oh, I get it." He waved his free hand dismissively, in the general direction of the fore

of the ship. "Blow a hundred million credits on some kind of sneaky frigate, waste the lives of thousands of soldiers and sailors, fuck-up after fuck-up in the name of 'promoting humanity'." He sipped again, black eyes angry. "I was never happy about this entire bullshit plan, about putting forth someone like her as a Spectre. But you know what? She got it done. That metal-plated cocksucker kicked our teeth in at Eden Prime, which is only standing because of her."

Dragunov's eyes narrowed but Mikhailovich just verbally plowed over him, voice rising. "She stood up to that pile of slime called a Council, made them eat their own lying bullshit, headed out to put her foot up Saren's ass, without assistance from anybody. We didn't give her intel, a fleet, extra soldiers, or even better fucking armor." The admiral's jaw was clenched now, his eyes boring into those of Dragunov.

"And now you're really going to bitch because she put together a plan to stop the fucker? Because she didn't consult your desk-riding ass first, or because she killed your pet mind-fucking machine that you were feeding people to? Because she doesn't know all the political angles that you deliberately fucking HIDE from anyone who isn't flag rank? Fuck you, *sir*. This is **MY** ship, she's **MY** goddamned marine, and I will politically *skull-fuck* you if you try this bullshit on my watch." Mikhailovich's chest heaved, the coffee cup in his hand clenched so tightly Shepard was amazed it didn't crack.

Anderson spoke, finally. "Admirals, you cannot try to run this like an op. You have to trust Shepard to do it right, or you might as well shut all this down. You said you trusted my judgment. You trusted my experience. Trust hers. What she did, no matter the fallout, is the *right* thing, because what would have happened if she said nothing and the truth got out anyway? The entire Alliance would have been assumed to be in on it, and our chance would have been ruined. We'd be on our own, like the batarans."

Vandefar gave him a scathing glance. "That's exactly what we're being suggested to do from some parts of the Congress. You can rail all you want, Chan, but the points stand. A mere Commander is not allowed to dictate the allocation and deployment of fleets without even consulting command. She's put us in a spot where if we go along with it, the Council can justify ordering our military around for their own uses, and if we disagree, Humanity is seen as obstructionist and —"

Shepard frowned, the argument between the admirals fading to noise. She had only been thinking of how to catch Saren, not how the Alliance would react to her idea of deploying SA vessels to hunt the geth. She'd been thinking of the horror of what the Thorian did, of the victims, of the things they were turned into, not what the fallout would be. Ethan Jeong's bitter words came back to her now. "*The responsible parties are either already dead, worse than dead, or on Earth. The first two are beyond your purview. The last, well, good luck taking down the Admiralty Board and the Senate Defense committee.*"

She looked up, where Dragunov and Mikhailovich were shouting in each others faces. She had never met the rear admiral in charge of the flotilla the Normandy was nominally assigned to. Never knew much about him. A tiny smile struggled at the fringes of her lips. *Why couldn't have I been assigned to a guy like that long time ago?*

She cleared her throat, firmly, and the two admirals turned to look at her. "Admirals, I apologize for not *appreciating* the problem I've caused before stumbling into it. Anyone familiar with my past should realize diplomacy is not my strong point, and that I tend to work towards goals and worry about fallout later."

Dragunov shook his head. "And we cannot have that kind of activity in humanity's Spectre."

Shepard shook her head. "Your problem, Admiral, is that you're thinking of this in political terms. The results at all costs bullshit is supposed to be my schtick, but I see now why people hate my guts so much. The Systems Alliance is just as ruthless and broken as I am, but you pretend you're not."

She stood. "Experiments on fucking human beings, regardless of what kind of person they are, wasn't what I thought when I put on this blue. Being used as a bait to engineer a defeat, so the Council would allow us more ships, isn't what I dreamed of when I put on this blue. Worrying about economic fallout and political issues and withdrawing colonies may be your job, but it's *not why I put on this blue*. The SA is supposed to be *better*. We're supposed to *protect* humanity. Now I lie awake at night terrified of what the fuck else I'll find out. Did the freighter that blew up and dusted me with eezo really have an accident? Does the SA not crack down on crime so they always have more recruits for the Penal Legions? Goddamn, no wonder the goddamned aliens don't trust you. You spend all your time plotting how to fuck them up the ass just like they accuse us of doing."

Mikhailovich looked away at that, smothering a grin, but Shepard continued. "You aren't worried I'll do something that gets people killed. That's why you gave me that damned medal. You don't-and never did- give a shit about the soldiers that died, only that we made a point to the fucking batarians. You don't give a shit if colonies fry, as long as you can take advantage of whatever Saren is doing to make yourselves look good."

Dragunov's stony expression didn't waver. "The reality of life is cruel and heartless. I'm responsible for the lives of 14 billion people. I no longer have the luxury of empathy."

Shepard snarled. "Or honor? Pity? *Decency*, sir? Where the fuck does it all stop? All those years, all those ops, you never reined me in because I followed orders. All my fucking guilt, over what I'd become, about how I'd never measure up to what the SA needed me to be, and you were fine with it! But when I try to stop something horrible, when I try to focus on getting the job done instead of just keeping my mouth shut and be a good little killer, you want to shut me down."

Shepard fingered the Spectre cloak she wore, thoughtfully. "That isn't going to happen, sir."

Vandefar opened her mouth but Dragunov held up a hand. "There are variables here you don't understand because, to be honest, you were really never expected to. We were originally pitched a plan for you to become a Spectre over the course of 10 to 15 months. We'd have promoted you to either Major of Marines or to full Captain. You'd have undergone political training, test lead assignments, all of those elements. But there was no time."

Dragunov paused, picking up a cup of coffee from the tray. "Instead, you were thrown into full command, with the supporting influence of Anderson removed. You were made a Spectre, given a titanic task with no real support, and a crew of strange aliens to boot. Given only the most tenuous of guidance, you were set on the trail of a master warrior who's been killing since you were a tiny child."

Shepard seethed, but listened. Something about Dragunov's voice held her anger in check, for once. The older, scarred admiral smiled almost sadly and continued. "You are, in many ways, right. We use our N7's, our RIU's, even our Penal Legions, as scales and weights and sometimes sacrifices. You are ignorant of the stakes we are playing for. The salarians elevated the krogan and then destroyed them when their purpose was completed. The asari have manipulated cultures and trends in thought and politics since before humanity had developed the wheel. Turians can't play ball with us because their very role as defenders has them so leveraged to the Council as a concept that any changes threaten the Hierarchy. I don't have time to explain the interlocking complexity of economic changes via-a-vis intergalactic politics, or how a missed word here or badly handled opportunity there can result in setbacks costing us hundreds of millions of credits. "

Dragunov drank the coffee, then grimaced in a manner similar to Mikhailovich. "What matters to us, and to the SA, is that at the end of this hunt for Saren, humanity isn't in a worse place. What matters is that our culture isn't infiltrated and wrecked by the asari, that our military isn't riddled by salarian hackers. Groups like Cerberus, despite the distasteful things they do, have been tolerated for so long

because they serve a useful function. Regardless of the cost."

Shepard shook her head. "Then why even make me a fucking Spectre? Why not someone like Branson with the experience and .. and.. political bullshit chops you're talking about?"

Dragunov held up a finger. "Because Branson can't function the way you do. We've read your reports, of fleets of black ships killing the Protheans, of Saren's claims he wants to bring them back, of hints and rumors of Prothean super weapons. We've had our AI experts on call, telling us if any geth is fighting for Saren that they all are. We've run projections and evaluated and the play that made the most sense for us, even before this went to shit, is that you were the one most likely to get it done and not .. backslide. Branson's a goddamned racist, but he would never have signed off on the Thorian. You do."

Shepard shook her head. "Even if they were criminals..."

Dragunov took a step forward. "You wanted to believe those you answered to were honorable, when you have said in public that honor is bullshit? That we would do the 'right thing', when you screamed in front of a board of courts-martial that the right thing depends on where you sit and if you have a gun pointed at your head? You should know better by now, Commander. We live in an evil time, where most people are too blind and busy to see what the fuck has to be done all around them to keep things going. Yes, we've signed off on hits against humans. Yes, we've let intel go to allow the raids to happen to pressure people into the SA. Yes, we've set our own soldiers up to die, so that others might live."

Dragunov pointed a finger at her. "But until you've learned what is going on, until you've seen it and seen the alternatives and made yourself face the facts, you being the final arbiter of what is allowed or unacceptable is simply naive. I do not care if you hate me, or think I'm a monster. I certainly don't care if you decide that my morals aren't up to snuff. I think I can do better than a jumped-up gang banger if I need a check on my sense of right and wrong." He drained the cup, placing it back on the shelf with a bang, and turned back to face her.

"But from now on, Shepard, no more surprises. No more of you getting creative. You want to run something past the Council, you run it past Command first. You find something Saren is doing on a human colony; you run it past Command first. We'll go along with this .. plan of yours to deploy ships to hunt the geth, but the first fuck up and they're withdrawn. If you can't or won't be bothered to consider the ramifications of your actions, then I want reports on what you're doing, why and when. Am I clear?"

Shepard nodded icily. "Crystal clear, sir."

Vandefar sighed and stood. "We're wasting a great deal of political capital and good will on you, Commander. Against our better judgment. You'll have a complete list of the locations – not the functions, operations, or results, only locations – of all Prothean sites under SA jurisdiction by the end of the day. Additionally, you'll have a copy of a list that informs you of all corporate entities involved with code-level projects for the SA military. If your operations encroach on anything on those lists you are to contact me immediately, prior to taking any action. These lists are not to be allowed to be seen , much less copied, by alien nationals."

Dragunov also stood, nodding to the two aides at the door. "That will be all. I believe Admiral Mikhailovich has something for you as well." Without a look back, the Fleet Master left, trailed by Vandefar and the two aides, leaving only Anderson, Mikhailovich, and the unnamed rear admiral in the room with Shepard. The doors shut, and Mikhailovich drove his fist into the nearest bulkhead with a heavy thud. "Black-hearted bastards."

Anderson almost gingerly put his arm on the smaller man's shoulder. "Chan, calm down."

Shepard exhaled. "Admiral Mikhailovich, I .. thank you for standing up for me, sir. I appreciate it."

The admiral gave a weary shrug, his eyes flicking over her. "It's all bravado, Commander. I can make a stink and get my brother, the Minister of the Interior, involved, some old contacts that owe me favors. But they're right. A lot of the member colonies feel the SA should just be watching over them, and a lot of people, who don't know the real truth about Torfan, don't like you very much. The ones that do, well..." He jerked an angry thumb in the direction that the Fleet Master had left. "Pressure of command my ass, the man's a sociopath."

Anderson gave a flicker of a smile. "Dragunov's been a hardass for decades, and Vandefar reminds me of a mad scientist sometimes. But as much as I hate to admit it, they have a point. I saw it in my own candidacy for Spectre. At this height of power, the SA is terrified that the aliens are out for us, because we've studied enough history to know that's how they operate."

Shepard tilted her head. "Sir?"

Anderson smiled fully this time. "You're familiar with the krogan uplift, and how that was dealt with? A combination of turian military strength and the genophage. Integrating the turians into Council society, when their military was much stronger than the asari or salarians, was tricky. But the turians were never really focused on economics. They value tradition and stability." Anderson paused. "From what our own historical analysts tell us, the asari and salarians worked carefully to generate the smaller turian rebellions known as The Troubles."

Shepard frowned. "But why?"

Anderson spread his hands. "It destabilized the economic underpinnings of the turian hierarchy. By the time they made the volus a client race, the turian military and industries were so dependent on interlocking business with the salarians and asari that the Hierarchy had no choice but to continue supporting the Citadel. Even today, Sparatus is the weakest of the Councilors, because the asari and salarians work together to keep the Hierarchy off balance."

Mikhailovich spat. "When you get to flag rank, you take a lot of courses on this maddening bullshit. The long and short is we're sure the asari and salarians are already fucking with humanity. Playing with our futures markets. Infiltrating cultural biases and religions. Half of these new cults that have gone on to make their own colony worlds are focused around asari matriarchs. 60% of the tech-gangs on the extranet based on Earth have salarian bosses." He sighed. "Hell, even the fucking gang bangers in the streets are supplied by alien criminals in the Terminus."

Anderson nodded. "The Congress and the SAIS are convinced that the Council sees humanity as a threat, and unless we defuse that, they'll do something to us like they did to the krogan, or neuter our growth and make us dependent like they have the turians. The only reason the turians aren't completely owned is that they have the volus as allies, and the asari are playing them like a piano, making the volus bitter at not being a full Citadel race and ensuring it's the turians keeping them down, due to their own needs."

Shepard shook her head. "This is all so far above my fucking pay-grade..."

Mikhailovich nodded. "Do what he says. Route your reports to me, and I'll make sure they stay off your back. If you need advice, go through Anderson. Don't rock the boat. Focus on Saren, and make very sure you don't leave any messes behind."

The admiral behind Mikhailovich cleared his throat, and stepped forward. "That was interesting, in a depressing way, but I was told I could have a moment of her time?"

Mikhailovich clucked. "Sorry, Akamu. Just got heated up." Shepard glanced up at the taller admiral, who just nodded.

"My name is Rear Admiral Akamu Kahoku, in charge of the 25th Patrol Battalion, Beta. I've lost an entire regiment of my men, and the Council said you would be able to help." He paused, glancing down, and then looked up at her, eyes hard.

"It involves Cerberus."

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## Chapter 57: Chapter 50: Kaidan, Score

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*A/N: Someone sharpeyed noted I'd dropped the dates. That's because they were sort of getting in the way, especially when I'm leaping back and forth in time.*

*The next few chapters are all of the Citadel stuff that makes sense to do. Some of it is canon, most of it is that 'moving people to the appropriate emotional places' I mentioned before. Pretty much everyone gets some time and development.*

*I know a lot of people have been asking "where's moar Liara wee want rommaaannnnnnce". The bad news is there won't be kissy for a long time still, at least for Liara and Shepard. It will happen, that is for certain. On the other hand, I didn't really care for the fact Liara and Shepard only got a few weeks together, so I'll mini-spoil and let the cat out of the bag: there's more like 4 months from the time Shepard saves the Citadel and the destruction of the Normandy. Part of this is spent on Bring Down the Sky, or my version of it (One asteroid? Amateur.) But part of it is spent on the crew going their own way and Liara and Shep, well, beginning to settle down.*

*Anyway, enjoy. I have four more chapters being worked on right now but not sure when they will complete. Depends on how much Owelpost beats me up.*

O-OSaBC-O

Ashley was still too much of a country girl at heart to be immune to the wondrous sights and sounds of the Citadel, but the packs of aliens all over the place clearly put her on edge. She walked down the High Path of the Presidium, wearing civvies for the first time since before Eden Prime had turned into Hell. A heavy halter-top was mostly covered by a sleeve-jacket of black silk, tight black jeans tucked neatly into black combat boots, her hair finally undone from the bun and allowed to fall freely around her shoulders.

While Ash gushed about the beauty of the Presidium, glared daggers at any asari who so much as glanced at Kaidan, and bitched about the way the elcor talked, Kaidan was mostly just trying hold semi-intelligent conversation while also trying not to drool. When shore leave had been put down, the crew was excited, but the ugly-looking pack of brass on the dock had worried everyone, and worry had turned to near panic when it was revealed the Fleet Master himself had come to see Shepard.

Walking past that icy presence was bad enough, but then Ashley had heard from Stephens that Alenko had been on the Citadel before. "C'mon, LT. I've never been, except when I was all shot up from Eden Prime, and that was just to get sneered at by aliens. It'll be fun!" Left unsaid was the reality that Ash was still in the process of fitting into the ship's crew, and none of them had asked her along to wherever they were headed.

Kaidan's professional brain was worried about how it would be perceived, but he found himself unable to do anything, in the face of that smirking, teasing smile and those bright, excited eyes, except to stammer out an affirmative. And now he found himself walking past clothing stores, listening to Ash talk about fashion and how it irritated her. He realized she'd asked him a question, and he gave a sheepish smile. Watching her walk in jeans that tight was seriously destroying his ability to think

coherently, but he gave it a shot.

"I don't know, Chief... seems to me that if it looks good and people enjoy it, there's not much of a problem with it." Ash glanced over her shoulder at him, dark eyes filling with amusement.

"I get it. So it's okay if girls wear something like ... that." Ash gestured with her head, and Alenko glanced over to see an asari walking in what looked like—

Kaidan's eyes bugged out and he flushed, and Ash gave an evil cackle of delight. "So the cool facade does crack! See, that's what I'm talking about, no one with shred of decency on Earth would be walking around in that. It would embarrass a Vegas stripper!"

Kaidan switched his gaze from the ground back to Ashley. His mouth started working before his brain caught up. "Dunno, Chief. If you wore something like that, maybe you could pull it off with some poise." He managed to keep a straight face as the chief herself flushed and stammered something before grinning. "Just messing with you."

Ashley punched him in the arm. "Oh, you tease. Let's go, you said you knew a good bar."

O-OSaBC-O

Garrus was busy tinkering with the Mako, trying to do something about the manual hydraulic shocks, when he heard the weapons lockers being opened. He didn't pay much attention, focusing on the interlock from the wheel-mounted gyro to the shocks.

Human armored vehicles were both more advanced and more primitive than turian ones. Turians preferred hover-tanks, with heavy armor and suppression weapons. They were used mostly as fast flankers, to harry and flush enemies from cover, and to act as mobile strike platforms for turian special forces. Humans, on the other hand, saw tanks as their own branch of warfare, and built them solely for fighting other tanks and penetrating into infantry lines.

As a result, the Mako was a beast. Heavily armored and packing enough guns to drop a Mantis gunship, it was more an armored personnel carrier than main battle tank. The addition of an eezo core to allow it to drop from orbit was brilliant, but also the special kind of crazy that worried the Citadel species when it came to humans. The rest of the tank was almost insultingly primitive. The sensor suites were still barely functional, with no ECM or data analysis functions. The medical equipment was minimal, and worst of all, the handling was atrocious. Intended for light terrain and urban operations, the Mako would do well there, but Therum showed him that the damned thing didn't handle slopes very well.

*And it would help if the Commander didn't drive like a vorcha who has been set on fire*, he thought, tightening a power-link conduit. He was manually installing auto-leveling gyros into each of the wheels, hopefully to enable the powered hydraulic shocks to make the ride a bit smoother.

He reached for a spanner but stopped at the sound of a voice. "Fucking idiots. Fuck. *Fuck!*" There was a loud clang and a span of metal flew across the hangar bay, bouncing off one of the tires to land on the floor with a metallic crash. Garrus glanced over at it, realizing it was Shepard's shotgun. He slid out from under the Mako, picking it up and standing.

Shepard stood next to her weapons locker, one hand on the wall, one hand hanging limply, looking beaten. Garrus frowned, and carefully announced his presence with a cough. "Commander..."

She whipped around, fist blazing with biotic energy, and stopped upon seeing him. She glanced at the shotgun he was holding, and then let the energy dissipate. "Sorry, Vakarian. Bad day so far. And it's getting worse."

Garrus walked over to her, and wordlessly handed her the shotgun. Shepard took it and then stared at it

for a long moment, saying nothing. The silence stretched for a bit before Garrus folded his arms.  
"Commander? I..."

Shepard glanced up at him. Her eyes looked different, red and strained, and Garrus didn't know what that meant in humans, exactly. But he knew how a body *sounded* in distress, with blood pounding and heartbeat racing. He smelled the acrid scent of her cigars, strong enough that it trailed from her, and knew she had been chain smoking. He coughed. "I... uh, have never seen a shotgun like that before. You use it quite a bit, even in situations where a shotgun wouldn't normally be the best choice."

He was rewarded with hearing her heart beat decrease, even as she shrugged her shoulders and carried the weapon over to the armory bench. "That's because it's kinda unique. It's an ODIN. Part of a series of weapons I helped to make."

Garrus frowned. "You were a weapons maker?"

Shepard laughed hollowly. "Not really. When... I was in the gangs on Earth, I knew a guy who used to work for Rosenkov. He and I, when I wasn't out tearing up the streets or blown on sand, would mod the gang's guns." She sighed, extending the shotgun, and breaking down the barrel. "One day he brought in this giant shotgun. Prototype. Didn't work."

She pulled the barrel liner out, and then detached the barrel entirely. "I spent a few years tinkering with that gun. Moved the acceleration chamber back, then split the focus. Swapped out a fleck pattern ammo block for one from the Evicerator, then tweaked the computer to chip off twice the number of ammo wedges for each shot. Hot-modded in the carnage program at half-power, built up the barrel..."

She smiled. "When I got pulled into the Penal Legions, they took all my shit. I was in for a while. After I got out, the first thing they did was march me to a company called Oracal Demolitions. Someone had given my shotty to them, and they'd been reverse engineering it to make one themselves."

She pulled out the main body of the shotgun, frowning and pulling a brush from the cleaning kit Ash always left available on the bench. Brushing away something from the connector plate, she glanced up at Garrus. "So I modded it some more. Eventually, I ended up with a shotgun that had the ZEV rating of a sniper rifle, but half the spread of a normal shotgun, using sub-carnage hellfire spreads of burning wedges of ammo."

Garrus whistled. "Spirits, no wonder things fly apart when you hit them with that."

Shepard nodded, a faint smile on her face for a moment before it collapsed. She finished cleaning the weapon, her motions almost automatic, but jerky as well. "Yeah, well. It got outlawed once the company finished with it. Citadel didn't like it. The SA couldn't find people to use it the way it was meant to be used. Issued a few to DACT jump marines who ended up getting caught on security video fragging a civilian with it during a withdrawal op gone bad. Oracal got shut down...I kept the prototype as a reminder of what I'd been through, I guess." She gave a sad smile. "Used to think maybe I could take a stab at being a weapons designer when I got out of the SA, but I fucked that up like everything else I touch."

She finished reassembling the weapon, and then stared hard at the white metal plates, the dark black grips. "No matter how hard I try, I keep getting it wrong. Why do I even fucking bother?" She placed both hands on the armory bench, grip tightening on its edge until her knuckles grew white.

Garrus watched for a few seconds before speaking. He'd never seen Shepard like this. Always cool and commanding, or angry and ready for more, but not despairing and self-loathing. Maybe it was a side of her she hid. He didn't understand why she'd show such a thing to him, but he knew he had to say something. "Commander... you seem angry. It's not really my place to ask, but..."

Shepard snorted. "Oh, don't worry about that. I don't mind if you ask. It's just...I'm unhappy about some shit that just went down with my superior officers. Infuriated. Angry. I've just been told that basically I'm so much of an embarrassment to the Systems Alliance that they want me to get permission from them before doing anything. I don't have time for that shit." She hung her head. "And my government is ... not the ideal that I spent my life chasing, looking for redemption or guidance. It's a lot to deal with, on top of all the other shit, like saving, oh, the entire goddamned galaxy."

Garrus sat down on the edge of the decking leading to the drop-ramp out of the cargo bay. "Remember how I told you I was a bad turian, Shepard? I am. Our culture is big on obedience and following orders and conforming. I was never very good at that. Too much in the way. Less of a focus on catching bad guys, more on following proprieties." He gave a flicker of his mandibles, almost a sneer. "We define ourselves by obedience. By our adherence to the past. By enduring any hardship to match up to that ideal. Most turians do fine. Some of us can't, and we end up alone."

Garrus stared at his own feet, voice flanging slightly. "If you hadn't come along, I'd have been drummed out of C-Sec, eventually. I never really seemed to fit in with my own people. I'm a disappointment to my father, my old commanding officer, and my Executor." He gave a tired laugh at that, one so bitter that Shepard turned around to look at him fully. "He even told me so, that he wished I could see how far I was out of turian society and its norms and how much I needed to change."

Garrus glanced over to Shepard. "What I mean is: you're doing what has to be done, Shepard. I don't give a damn if I'm a 'bad' turian." He pounded his chest with his balled fist, plates shifting. "I know in *here* what I'm doing is right. I can feel it in my spurs, in my bones. When I shot a slave-trading thug, I never had problems sleeping at night. When I resigned from C-Sec to follow you, I could feel that it was what had to be done."

Shepard was quiet, her face almost blank, but he could see her struggling with something. He pressed on, unsure of what he was even saying but somehow knowing what had to be said. "You can't pattern yourself after what you don't get. I value honor and tradition. I appreciate sacrifice. I'll die for the cause without a single, solitary regret. But I'm not going to let someone else define me, let someone else dictate to me what is black and white."

Shepard nodded slowly, almost unwillingly. "But I'm not the good person you are, Vakarian. You spent your life defending the weak, doing what's right, trying to stop people like I used to be."

Garrus snorted. "And that's more impressive than someone who went down all the wrong roads and still ended up in the right place? That's bullshit and you know it. I read up on you, after our last talk. About what you came up in, and how you ended up in the military. Not many people in your place ever turn themselves away from the way their lives have gone. Almost none of them completely remake themselves." Garrus rolled his big shoulders, adjusting his position. "Bottom line, you aren't a criminal, or an evil person."

Shepard's face twisted. "I lied to the council, to protect humanity. And then I get raked over the coals by my bosses because I didn't cover the entire thing up. The shit they were doing down there..."

Vakarian shrugged. "Shepard, you don't think that sort of shit happens every day? I've been forced more than once to hold my tongue about things I knew were wrong, because it would have put turians in a bad light. I've had cases 'kicked upstairs' by Sparatus to cover up turian misdeeds so many times I want to arrest *him* for obstruction of justice. I had to let a rapist on the Citadel go, because his daddy was a big-shot turian ambassador and if I didn't, the fucking Blackwatch would have put a bullet in the victim to make the charges go away."

Shepard stared at him a long moment, then gave a jerky shrug. "Fuck, that's as bad as the SA. I just – don't know what to *think* any more. I feel like I'm lost in this shit." Her expression turned wry. "The

only person I can level with is a crazy turian."

Garrus rolled his neck. "Crazy awesome, perhaps." He smiled, but his voice dropped to a more serious register. "But, between you and me? I knew something going on down there on Feros wasn't right, and that you were unhappy about it. But I also trust your judgment. You don't put up with this kind of shit unless you absolutely have to, and I know that whatever happens, you'll make it right."

Shepard's dark blue eyes met his, almost hesitantly. "And how do you know that?"

Garrus gestured to the shotgun on the table, at the heavy black stencil burned into the long barrel of the weapon. Sunk deeply into the metal was a phrase in Latin. 'Sic semper sceleratis'. Garrus' mandible flicked again, and his plates drew together, as his voice sounded in almost gleeful harmonies.

"Because you don't ever *let it go*, Sheep. Thus ever to criminals. If anyone in the entire galaxy has seen the worst shit that intelligent beings have to offer, and pulled themselves free of it to try and fix it, it's you. The fact that the brass hates it just means you're doing something right. I know what you said about the laws, and the rules, and not being a damned vigilante. I get it. And you're probably right. But this isn't about that, it's about the fact that we have to deal with Saren." He exhaled. "We have your back in this, Shepard."

The woman gave an almost imperceptible smile. "I think I needed that. I'm used to things going to shit and then ... being abandoned, I guess."

Garrus shook his head. "Everyone here is kind of on their own. Wrex is a wandering mercenary exile, Tali's a child far from home, Liara has cut herself off from her own race to chase history. Williams and Cole are sole survivors of a disaster. Based on some conversations we have had, even Alenko feels like an outcast as a biotic. We're all in this together, Shepard. We'll get Saren, and if some unhappy facts come out as a result, then maybe the Citadel species just need to grow the fuck up and move past it."

Shepard gave a hollow laugh. "You make it sound so easy, Garrus." She stood up, picking up the shotgun and re-stowing it in her weapons locker. "It's just a lot to take in, I guess. I'll be fine." Closing the locker, she turned around, letting her weight fall back to one hip and tossing her head a little to clear her hair from her eyes. She folded her arms and frowned. "Why aren't you taking leave, anyway? I'd figure you'd have people on the Citadel to meet..."

Garrus coughed, his voice going very dry. "I, uh, do. I'm... not sure I want to go, though." He fluttered his mandibles, embarrassed, and stood stretching to his full height. "It's, ah, complicated. And really, this Mako needs to be a hundred percent when we go after Saren –"

Shepard rolled her eyes. "So do *you*, big guy. Get the fuck off my ship and go have some fun. That's an order."

Garrus gave her a look, not exactly hurt but hesitant. Then he just sort of sighed and his voice sounded very tired. "There's a... lady. On the station. She and I were... not really into anything serious, just a lot of... off and on stuff. Krill hawk circling the crippled vakar, maybe." He noted the confusion in Shepard's expression and smiled. "Turian saying. Anyway... she didn't really take me leaving very well, at all. Almost enough to seriously make me reconsider."

Shepard pulled at her ear, nodding. "Understandable, but a bit surprising. I worked with turians in a past deployment and they seemed to take separation for the sake of duty pretty well."

Garrus trailed his claws over his fringe. "She's, ah, not turian, actually." He cleared his throat. "Asari."

Shepard's lips quirked and her eyes twinkled. "So it's not just me thinking you're a handsome son of a bitch."

Garrus' eyes widened and his mandible gave a helpless, almost terrified twitch, before Shepard lost it

completely and burst out laughing, staggering back to lean against the locker. He'd never seen her that amused before, her pale brown skin reddening a bit as she held her sides. "Ah, god, that expression was priceless." Snickering to herself, she waved a vague hand at the front of the ship. "Go, Battle Chicken, seriously. If something does go bad out there..."

Her mirth faded, and she glanced up at him with suddenly sad eyes. "...you don't want to have it end without a memory to take with you."

Garrus frowned, but nodded. Spirits knew he needed a break anyway, and Telanya's messages had gotten less like those from a friend and more worried and upset, especially since Feros. He wiped his hands on one of the ever-present rags Ash kept near the armory bench and nodded. "Alright, Shepard, but what about you?"

Shepard snorted. "Trust me, I'll get off this boat soon enough. Just need to... get my thoughts together first." She sighed. "I should go, but I'm serious. Get out there and see your girl, what's the worst that can happen?"

Garrus rolled his eyes. "Yes, Commander."

O-OSaBC-O

Kaidan wasn't sure when the drinking had gotten heavy, but he sure as hell knew when he was severely impaired, which explained his current situation.

*Clearly, I should get smashed more often.*

He was dancing in Flux with the lithe form of Ash in front of him; her curvy figure the only thing distracting him from her beautiful eyes. She was laughing, clearly stress free, and a challenging dancer to keep up with. Sweat ran down her neck, as the club's lights dimmed and pulsed in chaotic patterns on the wall, the heavy bass beat thrumming through the crowd.

The music ended and Kaidan swallowed, as it had left Ash pressed up against him and his lungs seemed to have simply decided this was a good moment to stop working. He shook his head, and gestured to a nearby booth. "I need some water, I think, bit dehydrated after that workout."

She nodded, an almost gentle smile on her face, and they walked to the booth. He was trying to be casual, but his nerves were shredded into tiny, fluffy bits. Shopping and dining was bad enough, but he would need a dozen cold showers and a couple of Playboys to get over the state Ash had put him in.

She slipped across the seat in the booth, and he sat down wearily. "Dancing ... forgotten how draining it is. And where did you learn to go like that?"

Ashley laughed, tossing her hair and motioning for a waiter. "Shit, Kaidan, Eden Prime was booring. Best way to pass the time was hit the clubs." She frowned, and sighed. "Sorry, LT, didn't mean to go all informal on you there."

Kaidan snorted. "Yeah, well, we're long past 'informal'. I don't think you calling me by my first name when we're on shore leave is fraternization. Just blowing off steam." He turned to face the waiter but noticed a flicker of something in Ashley's eyes.

*Disappointment? No. Stop imagining shit, Alenko.*

Three rounds of drinks later, Kaidan was listening to her talk about her first posting on Ferris Fields, and how dreadfully dull it was. "And I was just ... angry, y'know? I mean, who the shit cares about my... what my grandfather did..." Her words slurred slightly, and she sighed, sipping at her drink.

Kaidan nodded. "Biotics get a bad rap, too, like I said...people fear us without knowing us; they don't even think what it's like to be the way we are." He drank his vodka, feeling it burn through his body as

he downed the shot, wondering why the hell he was so damned dizzy. *You're dizzy because you've had enough drink to down a krogan trying to work up the nerve to ..*

The thought shredded into gibbering drunken thoughts, and he shook his head, focusing on what Ashley was saying.

Ash shrugged. "Shit, the universe is full of idiots, Kai." Somewhere in the past hours, they had gone from 'LT' and 'Chief' to 'Kai' and 'Ash'. Somewhere in the past hours, Kaidan had gone from crushing to helpless infatuation. Listening to her talk about how hard she pushed herself, against meaningless prejudice, against impossibly stupid targets in meaningless assignments.

He shook his head. "But the important thing is it's all behind you now, you know? I mean, Commander Shepard didn't seem to pay much attention to that sort of thing, did she?"

Ash laughed, a bark of mirth that lit her entire face up. "Shit, no! Still it just... hurts, I guess. I used to date a guy on Ferris Fields, nice guy... he found out I was the grand-daughter of General Williams, and he dumped me."

Kaidan shook his head, gritting his teeth. "Because of something that happened before you were born? That's pretty damned stupid." He poured another shot of tequila, and downed it with a single, hard motion. "Sometimes it feels our entire lives are just meaningless, pushed around by stupid forces that care about everything except what's important."

Ash's lips curved into a wicked smile. "Well, not everyone in charge of me is stupid." She took another drink, her hands gripping the glass tightly, then looked up. "Well?"

Kaidan blinked. "Uh... well what?"

Ashley looked directly at him. Even with her words slurring, he could hear her nervousness. "Look, I'm really bad at this kind of shit, and, I'll be honest, I'm fucking scared. We could have gotten glassed if we hadn't been quicker. Shepard almost died. Little Miss Prothean Expert almost died." She ran a hand through her hair, and her eyes flicked around the table, seeking something else to fix on. "And it's gonna get worse, crazier, and more dangerous."

Kaidan didn't say anything, just listening, his muddled mind trying to make sense of her words. Ash gave him a trembling little smile. "So, in the words of Master Chief Cole, I wanna do something stupid." She leaned forward and kissed him, right on the lips.

There wasn't even a moment where his body said no. Years of warnings against fraternization, worries about how or what would happen to him – not to mention her – went out the window at the feel of her body pressed up against his. His hands went around her, trailing up her back to cup the back of her head, and then he literally had to push himself away.

"A-ash..."

She looked at him. "I... just had to do t-that." He still had his arms around her, she was still half in his lap, and he knew what was going to happen next.

*Oh, fuck it. If I'd been man enough to tell Raina how I felt about her maybe my whole life would have been different.*

He wasn't sure if it was the liquor, or the fear, or the lust, or just the simple ugly fact that he hadn't gotten laid in over five years, but he kissed her again, and then sighed. "Hotel right around the corner."

Ashley's lips curved again. "Yes, sir."

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## Chapter 58: Chapter 51: Shepard, Under Siege

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*A/N: This chapter is about halfway through the fluff. I never liked the way they treated Udina in the games. The man is clearly a seasoned diplomat, dealing with a Spectre who has the ear of high military command and the Council. If Udina had been used as more than a cliché obstructive bureaucrat, he'd have been one of Shepard's staunchest supporters.*

*How that changes in ME 3 will be different than canon, duh. The rest of the chapter is just more filling in the blanks. Reviews, reviews, reviews! I'm flying blind here without them!*

O-OSaBC-O

Joker sat quietly, hands in his lap, thinking that being pushed around was not always a bad thing.

As pilot of the Normandy, he had to do a lot of work with Engineering, particularly in terms of power levels and adjustments to the engines. And while all of Adams' engineers were good at their job, he quickly discovered Tali was the most careful and the best at anticipating when to push the power envelope during high-speed maneuvers. Joker's bent for jokes and teasing was in sharp contrast to the rest of the crew, who were very serious and, while polite, didn't open up much. The fact that he was the first to lift her spirits with a funny comment meant he was able to get in her space a bit more than the other engineers.

Tali, for her part, found Joker very strange. His disability made it nearly impossible to read his body language. Because he didn't have the full use of stance or balance, he was very adept at pretending not to feel pain. Worse, his sarcastic manner and way of talking acted as a very effective shield against everyone. Unlike most humans, who were expressive and open, Joker *talked* a lot but was actually very cautious about revealing what he felt. Despite his strangeness, though, he was very fun to talk to, and she spent a lot of time laughing at his teasing jokes and snarky comments. It put her in a better mood, because he never talked down to her or treated her poorly.

When the Normandy had docked, Tali had decided she would just stay on board. Given her experiences alone on the Citadel, the way she had been treated by C-Sec and the bad memories of watching Troyce die, she was disinclined to try her luck again. But the dextro food on board was not only mind-numbingly bland but hard to sterilize. She needed parts for her suit, more antibiotics, and some personal products she wasn't exactly comfortable asking someone else to get.

She decided, hesitantly, to ask Wrex to come with her, but he was gone by the time she got to his usual spot. In fact, most of the crew had swiftly disappeared, except for Joker. She found him slowly making his way to the mess deck, limping badly. He looked like he was in real pain, and she hurried over to him. "Lieutenant Moreau, are you alright?"

Joker gave a weak smile, and managed to stagger to a bench on the mess decks. "Oh, sure. You know, trying to –" he broke off, hissing in pain a second before grunting – "just walk from place to place. How's it going, Tali?"

Tali worried about the young man. The rest of the humans were polite, but somewhat distant. They admired her technical abilities, but no one but Shepard had asked her about her past, background, or family. But Joker seemed to find the quarian fleet endlessly fascinating. He'd made a joke once about how their bodies both had them trapped – hers in her suit, his in crutches – and she had thought about it more than once.

"I'm... fine, I suppose. I need to do some shopping on the Citadel, while I have a chance... but everyone is gone or busy." She tapped her omni-tool, checking her personal cash reserves – almost nothing left of the money her father had given her so long ago when she set out. "But it's... nothing, really."

Joker frowned. "Why not just go by yourself? I mean it's a big place and all, but you have a shotgun." He gave a smirk, and Tali sighed and glanced away.

"The l-last time I was on the Citadel didn't go very well, Jeff. I almost got killed, and the people were... rude."

Joker nodded. "Humans are pretty good at being assholes, but I forgot the other races can also be major downers. I just never got why they're so down on your people, though. The salarians unleashed the damned rachni AND the krogan and no one exiled them from Citadel space."

Tali laughed, eyes widening. "I'm sure they don't see it the same way, Jeff. I've sort of stopped caring what the Citadel races think. While I'm sure lots of aliens are racist, the Normandy has shown me that at least humans can look beyond that. Pressly and Williams clearly aren't big fans of aliens but have been very polite to me." She shrugged. "That doesn't mean I'm comfortable with walking around on a space station where I get accused of being a thief, or worse, by everyone I meet. How about you? Aren't you going on leave?"

Joker nodded. "I was going to go out, but... Alenko vanished on me. So I guess we're both stuck here."

Tali frowned. "Why... would you be stuck here?"

Joker shrugged. "It's hard to walk very far on my legs without breaking something. Alenko would do this trick with his biotics, lighten my weight, allowing me walk more easily. Just enough to get out of the ship, see the sights." He sighed. "Otherwise, I'd need to get my lift chair out and use that. And the only thing more depressing than breaking bones is that thing."

Tali tilted her head, the dim overhead lights catching on the edge of her *reik*, the fabric that covered her headgear glimmering soft purple. "Why is that depressing?"

Joker shrugged angrily. "It...probably sounds stupid. But to me, that chair is just surrender to Vrolik's Syndrome. It's saying 'I'll never get better, so might as well let my body atrophy.' It's saying that I'm willing to give up fighting and walking, even with the pain, just so I move around more. And worst of all, people see a lift chair and they think 'cripple;' and then 'moron'."

Tali nodded absently, then shrugged. "I thought you said you didn't really care about what random strange people thought about you..."

Joker gave her a smirk, green eyes lighting up. "Well, yeah. I mean, most people are morons, and what they know about what I go through is less than Wrex knows about interior decorating. But like you said yourself – just because you don't care doesn't mean you're willing to subject yourself to their prejudices."

Tali nodded. "Maybe I can get someone tomorrow to go out for me... I need some supplies and I don't even know where on the Citadel to get them, anyway."

Joker arched an eyebrow. "Supplies? Why not just order it from the ship?"

Tali twisted her hands together nervously. "W-well, I did put in for more dextro food, but the only stuff the Systems Alliance has on purchase order doesn't sterilize very well. It's nothing big, just... a hassle. I needed some more medications for my suit as well, since most of what Dr. Chakwas has on hand is really for battle and not –" She stopped talking as Joker got an angry look on his face.

"Tali, that doesn't sound like 'nothing'. That sounds like stuff you need to live." He groaned and levered himself to his feet, picking up his crutches and wincing as something inside gave a tiny cracking noise. "I need you to help me to the cargo bay, please." His voice was a bit tight with pain, but he kept a smile plastered on his face.

Tali blinked behind her mask. "W-why?" Her only answer was a pained smirk, and she wrung her hands more.

40 minutes later, after a lot of nervous protests by Tali, she was maneuvering Joker's lift chair along the broad avenues of the Presidium, headed towards a long row of stores near the hanar embassy, a couple of anti-static bags hanging from the back as proof of their most recent purchase. The hover-chair was easily pushed, and Tali realized that no one was really paying her much attention at all. The sight of a quarian as servant must have been what these people expected to see all along. While she was a bit angry at that, her mind was mostly on designs – she was thinking about some kind of powered leg braces to help Joker walk normally, or at least with less pain.

*Maybe a little eezo and some stabilizers would help. I should buy a few more things while I'm here.*

Joker, for his part, was still in uniform, tapping on his omni-tool, a sneer on his features. Their first stop, at an electronics store, to pick up replacement shock regulators for her suit, had been both embarrassing and thrilling for her. Embarrassing due to the rude shopkeeper saying he didn't serve quarians, thrilling at the epic roaring rant Joker had subjected the shopkeeper to. She ended up her getting her parts, plus a few other things she'd had her eye on. She had been exposed to kindness, at least at the hands of Dost and Troyce, but Joker was actually infuriated by the salarian's attitude.

The screaming stopped when the shopkeeper finally just decided it was easier to sell the requested items and get the lunatic out of his store than fight, and Joker had thrown it all on his card. Tali felt very guilty about Joker paying for it, and as they walked out of the store, she said so.

Joker snorted, pushing brown hair out of his eyes and gazing over his shoulder at her. "Shepard has a ship's expense account, apparently something for the Spectre stuff she's doing. I really, really doubt a few thousand credits will even bother her, but don't worry, if it does I'll pay for the stuff."

Tali shook her head. "That's even worse, Jeff. I just need a few small things; I don't want to spend all your money!"

Joker fixed her with those bright green eyes of his, laughing, looking almost relaxed. "C'mon, Tali, what am I gonna spend it on? Drinks, music, and that's about it." His expression dimmed, and he gave a small sigh. "Don't take this the wrong way, but this is the first time I've spent money on a woman in about four years. "

Tali gave a small laugh, but she also felt slightly strange. Most of the time she felt the crew looked at her as an alien, not a woman. She tilted her head, trying to read the emotions Joker felt, noticing only that his position was stiffer than usual, almost awkward. She knew that Joker was lonely – even without seeing his posture that was clear – but she'd never really thought about how isolated he was. He spent most of his time either in the pilot's seat, or hobbling back for a meal, or to sleep.

Joker glanced around. "Uh, Tali? Something wrong? You just sorta stopped." Tali shook her head to clear it, she'd been so intent on figuring out his body language she'd literally stopped walking. Glancing around, she saw an easy way to cover her gaffe, and she pointed across the walkway to a store with turian and standard writing.

"Dextro food for turians, survival rations... this what you need?" Joker smiled again, and Tali began pushing the lift chair across the short bridge leading to the place, hoping that this time Joker wouldn't have to start screaming.

Still, she couldn't help but giggle when the first question out of Joker's mouth to the storekeeper was "Hey, there. You guys don't happen to sell a dextro version of Tupari, do you?"

The situation had turned out more nightmarish than even Shepard's worst fears. She'd spent hours delaying, considering her tactical options. Camouflage, stealth, perhaps even armored assault. Flashbangs, tear gas, or some other distracting secondary assault were also considered. Nothing in the armory would deal with the numbers of the enemy in enough time to prevent being completely overrun. The Normandy itself would only be safe for so long., Eventually the enemy would manage to infiltrate even the C-Sec secured docks it was moored to, perhaps even breaching the ship.

She still hadn't expected the assault to go this badly, this quickly, and this rapidly. She folded her arms, her spine stiff, and turned her gaze on the seemingly endless legions of the enemy before her.

*Reporters.* At least fifty of them, screaming her name, shoving VI-controlled remote cams and drone cams at her.

*Protestors.* Dozens, here and there, some from Blue Stars No More, some from anti-war groups, even a couple from Northstar. Those were bad. Stiffening their ranks were generic hangers-on, curious civilians, and a handful of scattered asari giving her uncomfortable 'come hither' grins. Shepard repressed a shudder and turned her eyes to the main enemy force.

The fanboys and fangirls had to be the worst, and of course, the most numerous. For some sick, twisted reason her mind couldn't understand, there were a large number of people who felt she was a hero, or worse, that her actions were totally justified. Some were bigots and racists that would shame Terra Firma, others were just consumers of the extranet's garbage reporting. They were dressed appallingly, some in N7 t-shirts, others in bad-mock ups of Marine BDU's, and one complete lunatic in a replica N7 hardsuit. Worse still, there were *actual Marines* in this pack of lunatics, screaming her name just as loudly.

Shepard inhaled deeply, pinned down at the main entrance to C-Sec's docking tower. She finally took a deep breath. "That is *enough*. I am not giving any interviews, speeches, one-on-ones, exclusives, debates, or autographs. I have a very important meeting in fifteen minutes and I cannot afford to be late."

The reporters and protesters didn't even stop, but suddenly her fans grew quieter, then one of them shouted. "Make a hole for the Commander!"

Shepard watched in a mix of bemused amazement and a twinge of absolute confusion as a path somehow made itself through the surging crowds. Reporters struggled with screaming girls dressed up in mock N7 armor, while a Blue Stars No More protester was thrown to the ground and screamed at by what looked like off-duty Marines...

Part of her almost intervened – sure, the idiot probably deserved it, but Marines should have more .. politeness? Tact? She sighed to herself, just pushing past them all in a rush, angry at herself for causing the whole mess indirectly.

The edges of the crowd were frayed and the taxi stand was only a few feet away. Not bothering to count her blessings, she took advantage of the situation, walking as fast as she could to the public transit. Her fans reached out, some screaming her name, others just brushing her shoulders or arms with their fingertips. By the time she was through the crowd she was literally shuddering, and plunged into the first open public transit car without even looking.

The canopy shut, sealing away the noise and smells of the crowd, and Shepard closed her eyes for a long moment before a voice startled her. "Uh... this is my taxi."

Shepard whipped around to see a smiling young woman in a plain dress sitting in the back with a deactivated camera drone. Her vaguely Chinese features were set in a narrow face, dark black eyes framed by short black hair. A look of recognition spread across her face and she smiled wider. "I'm

Emily Wong, Alliance News."

Shepard just closed her eyes. *And now you know for a fact – God hates you when he puts a reporter in your escape vehicle.* "Sorry, trying to get away from the pack of..." She waved a hand at the crowd, which was coming apart, some moving in the direction of the cab. "I know you already paid for the fare, but uh –"

Wong chuckled. "I had. I've just been sorting reports. I'm not really involved with... uh, that out there. I have an appointment I need to get to, but I tell you what – if you promise me you'll chat with me sometime in the next few weeks, I'll tell the cab to head wherever you want."

Shepard eyed her, raising an eyebrow. "Not demanding an interview immediately? You're my new favorite reporter. I need to see Ambassador Udina."

Wong nodded, and tilted her head, her pleasant expression showing amusement. "How... convenient. So am I. Taxi: Citadel Tower, level 16, Human Embassies." The vehicle lifted from the ground, and Wong turned back to Shepard. "I have an interview with him at 12:00."

Shepard nodded. Her own appointment was at 11:40, she supposed he figured it would be fairly quick. "Thanks for the lift." She glanced back out the window at the rapidly receding docks. "Christ on a sidecar, that was a lot of..." She just shook her head in bemusement. "How did they even know where to go?"

Wong giggled. "Your crew was pretty tight lipped, but one of the admirals – Mikhailovich – got pinned down by a reporter after he left the ship and let it slip you were still on board. They've been camped out there for *hours*. I spent about 20 minutes waiting and figured you weren't coming out, so I got in the back of the cab. I was just finishing a verbal segment when you just sort of... materialized."

Shepard gave a thin smile, leaning back into the seat. "I... am not really comfortable with reporters, ma'am." She wasn't facing the woman anymore, but she heard Emily give a loud laugh.

"Is that because we take everything you say out of context, pair you with any single man or woman and claim you are dating, or because we write up horrible, completely untrue stories about your past exploits? Trust me, I don't like the way news services have gone the past fifteen years either, and the Alliance does not let you report for them unless you keep it to the facts."

The car swerved, angling up towards the Citadel, and Shepard nodded. "I just...am not really comfortable in front of the camera, I suppose. I worry some lunatic is going to try to smear me and make me look worse than I already am, and that I'll do something stupid, like punch them. Then there would be a boring, long hearing and summary justice panel, and I'd have to do community service or eat bread and water until the krogan start writing poetry or something."

The reporter dissolved into laughter, eyes crinkling. "Well, there's more than a few reporters that probably need to be punched, Commander. But I assure you: at least some of us try to understand the stresses our military goes through. I can't imagine what you've had to endure, and it would be insulting for me to assume I could. I can still treat you like a person, and listen to your story without interjecting gossip, frivolity or just flat out character assassination, though. Ratings are important, but I always felt good ratings have to come from good news, not... GTMZ-style paparazzi garbage."

The aircar leveled out, hovering above a landing platform before settling down, and Shepard clambered out, nodding as she did so. "That's... unusual for reporters."

Wong only smiled, stepping out as well, her dress making a slight crackle as her omni-tool applied a static discharge routine that left it clinging to her outline. "Well, reporters are always angling for the big scoop, but my father and grandfather were both reporters, and so were some of my ancestors. I have

this silly thing about reporting actual news and serving the public, rather than feeding gossip vlogs and YouVid sensationalist videos."

The entrance to the Embassy was tucked into a low tunnel, surrounded by scenic balconies and planters of various Earth plants, such as roses, honeysuckle and bushes. A broad, low counter, manned by stiff looking Systems Alliance public relations staff, handled small lines of people with inquires – most human, but a couple of asari and a hanar stood out. Two grim looking men in heavy Onyx armor armed with Avengers stood on either side of the entryway.

Wong smiled again. "I'll wait out here. Good luck, Shepard."

Shepard returned the smile. "Thanks. For the ride and not ambushing me with your camera." She turned away from the news reporter, walking past the two guards, neither of which even gave her a glance. The hallway beyond was dimly lit, narrow, with small doors on either side. At the far end of the hallway was a small desk with a bored looking volus, a haptic sign overhead read "Volus and Elcor Embassy, level 17."

She ignored it, heading to the door clearly labeled "Donnel Udina", and it slid open, revealing the same wide open room with a view where she'd started her journey. Udina sat at his desk, hands moving blocks of information across a haptic day-planner that spanned a quarter of the desk space, the vid-screens behind him displaying news channels and a football game.

The ambassador looked up as she entered, his dark-blue suit trimmed in pale ivory panels with a wavy pattern to them. His narrow face was almost blank as he nodded. "Shepard, I thought you might be late, I saw that circus at the docks. Typical C-Sec uselessness. Your punctuality is appreciated. "

Shepard merely squared her shoulders. "Reporting as requested, sir."

Udina sighed, and clicked off his vid-comm. "I'm not a military officer, Shepard. Sit down. We have things to discuss before you head out after Saren again." His voice took on a sharper note. "I presume that the Systems Alliance passed along my message regarding the Council's interest in Feros?"

She sat, lips twisting. "Yes, the Fleet Master and Chief of R&D, as well as my squadron CO, came down to let me know what I a stupid little girl I am, and how everything I do needs to be passed back through Alliance Command for review and approval." She narrowed her eyes at him, about to speak, but even she could decipher the expression of shock on his face.

"They did *what*? Ignorant, chest-beating, blind fools! Don't they – of course they don't, the hidebound idiots." Udina cradled his head in his hands, shaking it as he did so. "Oh, Anita, I should have listened to you and never taken this fool's errand of a job."

Shepard's forehead crinkled in confusion. "Sir?"

Udina gave a small, bitter laugh and looked up. "Shepard, my intent was to pass a note suggesting we have a talk today, about ways to break news to the Council that may be harmful to SA interests without causing political issues. And to hand you a couple of assignments, both in the interests of the SA, to let you test the waters in using your Spectre authority. Apparently, the SA military decided to take matters into their own hands and have a conversation with you, to make you buckle to their authority."

Udina shot a disgusted look at his day planner. "The stupid part of all of this is that it is illegal for the SA to interfere in your Spectre investigation – even *trying* is grounds for economic embargoes, or worse! But given your expression they managed to alienate you as well."

Shepard rubbed her shoulder, not sure how to respond to that. "Fleet Master Dragunov made statements to the effect that I was causing 'political damage'."

Udina rolled his eyes, his craggy face twisting into a wry expression. "Shepard, I don't really like your

methods, and I am not a fan of your mouth, but as you showed in getting the Council to reverse course on Saren, you aren't stupid, or a fool. The whole point of having Anderson and I here managing this debacle is to mitigate the inevitable political damage you're going to cause. As much as I dislike admitting it, those fools at Arcturus are more concerned about political damage *back home* than they are about the future of our race, or how dangerous Saren could be."

Shepard leaned back, thinking. "You said they can't interfere with my investigation. What does that mean? I mean, I know Spectres are 'above the law' and all that garbage, but I'm not really a Spectre yet. The meeting we had with the Council, you told them my candidacy was on trial, a sort of test run, and it wasn't final until we caught Saren."

Udina exhaled sharply. "A polite piece of fiction, thrown out by me to sweeten a deal the Council already wanted. Citadel Law is clear. If they induct you into the office, your Spectre duties supersede any other authority. You can't be ordered against your own military, and you have to follow all orders said military gives you, unless those orders directly contradict your Spectre duties. Dragunov wants someone with Spectre powers to clean up dirty laundry of the SA."

Shepard nodded, slowly. "And where do you stand?"

Udina gave her a sharp, measuring look. "I want a seat on the Council. That will give me a great deal of personal power to counteract some of the more ridiculous things the SA has been up to in the past five years. But more than that, I want to be able to see my wife and not have to worry about some insane turian blowing my planet out from under me."

He shrugged, eyes flickering over his schedule. "I am not a man many people like. Politics is dirty, it is about compromises on things that, perhaps, are best left direct, and it is about playing games that end up getting people killed. But I am not about to delegate that to anyone else, who may or may not have the right intentions at heart."

Shepard thought about that a long moment. "So how do I avoid political mistakes? We were never given political training in the SAMC; we're just told to defer to the Z-rates or the commissars."

Udina nodded, folding his hands on his desktop. "It isn't as simple as reading a book, or memorizing procedures, Shepard. Your reviews and reports mention you don't seem to connect to other people very well, and that's a problem for you. You have to be able to determine intent. For example, I'm being polite; whereas the last time we met I believe I was rather sharp with you. Why is that?"

Shepard spent several seconds thinking. "You want me to side with you, rather than with the SA military?"

Udina's smile was patronizing. "No. Although, honestly, that's not a bad answer. But you've devoted yourself to the military, using it as a model of how you should behave, and in any fight between that loyalty and me, I would lose. No, I am being polite because I have no reason to believe being rude or angry will get anywhere with you."

The smile narrowed, becoming speculative, the long hard lines of his face settling into something like reflection. "I've seen now, having had time to review your history, how you react to people who challenge your will or directions. You are a natural leader, but not a *good* leader. You lead from the front, but never train others how to lead themselves. You push people as if they are as good as you, and then are surprised when they cannot measure up." Udina frowned. "You avoid political mistakes by asking yourself 'what do I get out of saying X versus saying Y.'"

Shepard instinctively disliked his answer, even his tone. "Sir, I don't lie very well. I'm not any good at reading expressions, unless they're pretty firm, and I don't do subtle. How am I supposed to do what you said?"

Udina folded his arms. "Ideally? Follow the SA model. Every fleet has it's leading military figure in command, but it also has it's assigned political commissar, to ensure that the admirals don't blunder and keep them focused on their goals. Find a member of your crew who grasps politics. Someone you can reach out to, but who is aware of the more subtle nuances of how to turn a phrase."

Shepard rubbed her chin. "Honestly, I don't think I have anyone like that on my crew. Most of them are , well, just soldiers, or aliens, which won't help. I was thinking maybe I should make nice with a reporter or something, give a few interviews. I rode over here with Emily Wong. She seemed... nice."

Udina gave a great laugh at that, standing up to put away a datapad in a narrow file case on the wall. "Wong is an idealist, an innocent who still believes in the good of all people. She'd be good to do an interview with – one reason I am interviewing with her – as she doesn't go after people to break them down. She'd be useful, I suppose, in that light. Your problems go further than just your public image, however."

Shepard frowned. "Sir?"

Udina was flipping through the file case, looking for something. "The problem is not that you are incapable of handling the politics, you merely have neither the experience to do so nor the time to learn. A crew member who could handle it for you would be best, but even someone doing public relations for you is helpful. What you need is to get a handle on what is likely to cause you problems in the first place. In seeing the unseen tides that cause things like admirals to come and lambast you."

Shepard shrugged in her seat. "I admit that, sir. I never really thought much about how Feros would affect things back home. The Fleet Master said there were elements on Earth wanting to shut down the Saren investigation... that it made sense that Cerberus was helping Saren. What don't I know about?"

Udina's voice was flat. "Lots and nothing you really want to find out about, Commander. Cerberus is an old Alliance black-op gone very wrong. But it's not the only black-op to foul up its tracks, so why was it so capable of eluding discovery and shutdown after 25 years? The Fleet Master is a paranoid man, but his suspicions are dead on. It's very possible Cerberus is siding with Saren to destabilize the Systems Alliance internally, and ally with those who'd gain from such a thing."

Shepard threw up her hands. "What kind of lunatics would gain from that pointy-faced fuck blowing up a bunch of innocent people?"

Udina glanced over his shoulder at her, a bitter smile on his face. "There are people on Earth who stand to profit by colonies being destroyed by geth, and who figure the big losers in any intergalactic war will be the alien species. The turians are a known value, and Saren won't hit them, but the salarians and asari are a different matter. They figure if Saren goes after the salarians and asari, humans will benefit from the aftermath. Worse, there are probably at least a few who hope Saren's attacks will cause the government to collapse, leading to a new political coalition moving the Systems Alliance down a different path."

He pulled out three data pads from the file case, sliding it shut and returning to his seat. "You'll find, sadly, that people have stupid and unrealistic understandings of military danger when they sit in well-appointed offices all day, much like I do. The difference is that I am not fool enough to think I have some kind of grasp on how dangerous Saren is. I leave that to you."

He pushed the pads towards her. "These are a series of notes and guides on human political behavior that were written up 20 years ago, by a human sociologist. They were used to teach aliens how to understand and grasp some concepts of human nuance. I doubt they'll do a lot of good – like I said, this isn't an art that you can learn by reading a book – but I want you to read all of them carefully. They are very... cynical. Very slanted and, in their own day, very dangerous. There's a reason they're on lock-

down in my office."

Udina tapped his haptic keyboard. "As to the rest, I have two minor tasks for you to complete. As I said, the other half of this meeting was to have you handle a few things for my office. You'll find that the words 'Spectre authority' will overcome almost all objections. As a result, I think you should be able to use it a few times, for practice, before having to do the 'real thing' so to speak."

He tapped a control on his desk, bringing up scrolling texts, and pictures of an alien sky. "First, I have a request from Admiral Hackett, Fifth Fleet. Your old commanding officer, Major Kyle, resigned his commission right after you were tapped for the Spectre program. We're having some difficulties in contacting him, he's joined or leading some kind of biotic cult on a remote planet in the Verge. I'd like for you to see if you can reach him, and make him retract a couple of, well, extreme statements he's made about the SA in recent days."

Shepard, still holding the pads awkwardly, frowned. "Sir, the last person Kyle wants to see is the woman who got his sons killed."

Udina shrugged. "The SA wants to send an armed response team in after him. They won't tell me why. Hackett thought you might want to help him if possible, and, if not, at least make sure a pack of RIU goons don't kill him in his sleep." Udina shrugged. "The other matter is some kind of colonialist mess. There's an issue with some of the dead from Eden Prime not being released to the next of kin. I've had over fifty people in my office complaining about it, but unfortunately my hands are tied. The military won't listen to my complaints about how this looks, and Rear Admiral Vandefar already told me the bodies were not going to be released anytime soon. So, I'd like you to clear it up. The man in charge of the detail is Subaltern Bosker. He's in the SA adjunct lounge down the hall."

Shepard nodded, albeit in a confused way. "Anything else?"

Udina shook his head. "Whatever those fools of the Admiralty Board told you, don't waste too much time on it. Find Saren, find whatever he's doing, and stop it. We can patch the political damage later. Besides, if I don't miss my mark, you never really wanted to be a Spectre in the first place, did you?"

Shepard shook her head firmly. "It seems like a bad fit for someone who has my kind of history, no?"

Udina paused. "I raised that concern. Anderson disagrees. He's very supportive of you, no matter what it is you do. I find myself disliking much of the SA military. Too full of itself, too much machismo bullshit. But he is an admirable man, even patient with political maneuvering." Shaking his head, he glanced at the clock. "I've authorized another requisition supply amount for the Normandy, plus whatever discretionary funds the Spectre's have. Anderson also had me put in requests for support ships, fighters, even more Marines, but all were denied."

Shepard sighed and stood. "Typical. If that's all, sir, I'll get on the task you had for me. And thank you for confiding in me." She lifted the pads. "Maybe this will help."

Udina merely nodded. "You and I will not see eye to eye on many things, Shepard. But my own career is now tied to yours... and strangely, you are not the blood-thirsty maniac the vids paint you as. I will form my own opinions and treat you accordingly, but we're still on the same side." He paused, as if looking for something else to say, then gave her a weak, professional smile. "Good day, Commander."

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## Chapter 59: Chapter 51: Pressly, Abandoned

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*A/N: Arrgh. I finish one piece of fluff and more pops into my mind. Someone stop me before I fluff again!*

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Garrus nervously adjusted his tunic for the third time as he waited for Telanya to come back from the little kitchenette in her small apartment. His eyes tracked across the living room, pictures of Thessia on the wall, a selection of C-Sec commendations framed on a glass hutch, low armless sofas adorned with tarn-wool throws and pillows dominating the room, along with a miniature flame-tree in a brass pot by the door.

Telanya returned, smiling as she set down a wooden tray that held two cups of nelayna tea steaming with a faint minty smell. One of the few drinks that both chiralities could handle with no issues, nelayna was a common brew among C-sec officers on the late night shifts, and Garrus was very partial to it himself. "Thanks, Tel."

She settled into the couch next to him, folding her limber legs under her and leaning against him. "No need to thank me, Garrus. I'm just glad you're back, even if only for a day or two. Did you at least think about what I said in my message?"

Telanya was beautiful, even among asari, with huge, dark grey-blue eyes framed by pale purple flesh. Bold grey markings decorated above and below each eye, while full lips pouted teasingly. Her muscular frame was set off by long legs and a graceful waist that make Garrus twitch just thinking about it.

Yet despite her beauty, Telanya was not a typical asari. A narrow escape early in her life, from an asari serial killer, had sent Tel fleeing from asari culture entirely, not even socializing with other asari. She'd thrown herself into relationship after relationship with turians, salarians, krogan, humans, elcor, hanar – even a vorcha. Almost legendary for her ridiculous flirtations and equally rapid abandonment, her campaign to seduce Garrus had been derailed abruptly when the same twisted asari that had almost killed her showed up on the Citadel.

It had been Garrus who took her out, against direct orders. Tracking her single-handed, Garrus had managed to bring the crazed asari down just before she could execute Telanya. Afterward, he had carried Tel, bleeding and wounded, to the hospital.

Garrus had covered the fact that Telanya had tried to stop her assailant herself, making it look like it was his normal hotheaded ways that lead to the mess, and it had cost Garrus a chance to move from Special Investigations in to Exterior Affairs, where he could hunt slavers and criminals with less red tape. Tel knew what that meant to him, and her flirting stopped at that point.

Garrus wasn't sure if she was appreciative or if having a second near-death experience had merely shaken her all the way down to her foundations. . When he'd told her, the day of his departure, of how he planned to follow Shepard to pursue Saren, she'd been distraught, pleading with him not to go, before burying him in a tear-filled embrace that led to almost desperate sex.

Now she looked calm enough, leaning against him, but he could feel the tension in her body, and the rapid sound of her heartbeat worried him. "Tel," he mumbled, letting the harmonics of his voice vibrate across the room soothingly, "I know you were worried. And yes I did think very hard on what you said. I know that it probably sounds crazy, doing what I'm doing."

Telanya snorted, her lips sinking into a frown. "Garrus, you could have been killed! I saw the CIN reports, the vids. Half the Fourth Fleet was wiped, and you were less than a dozen light seconds from the whole thing. I know how much stopping someone like Saren means to you, but you aren't a... a soldier."

Garrus gave a weak laugh. "I used to be. I'm the best at what I do." He lifted a hand and turned her head to face him, gently placing his forehead against hers. "I'm not a kirix, Tel. I have no intention of trying

to take Saren in claw-to-claw combat, over a rope bridge on top of a volcano. But if I don't do this, what am I supposed to do?"

Telanya gave him a hurt look. "I suppose just living and being a police officer is not enough for you?"

Garrus growled. "That's not fair and you know it. You think I *like* leaving you here, not knowing if some other spirits-damned lunatic is going to try to cut you up? Or some goon is going to get the drop on you and whoever responds to the call won't be fast enough with backup?" He glanced away. "If I could, I'd try to talk Shepard into letting you come on board." He picked up the tea, drinking it slowly, feeling the warmth of the mix, inhaling it's myriad smells and letting it's subtle taste sink into his suddenly dry throat.

Telanya shook her head slowly. "I don't have the skills for that. I'd just be in the way." Her jaw tightened. "Doesn't mean I have to like it. Doesn't mean *you* have to be the one doing this. Let them send a cabalist, or one of the Special Response guys that are all cybered to hell and back. Let them send a member of Blackwatch."

Garrus licked the tip of her nose with his tongue, smirking. "None of them have my charm, dear heart." He rose, setting his cup down, and walking to the window, overlooking the Presidium. Despite himself, his heart still soared at the sight, rank upon rank of edifices in gleaming white, pure sky, crystal clear waters framed by endless greens. He traced his claws against the glass, mandible flickering. "It's not like I expected. Humans are... so bizarre. But the real truth is that this is a crime, Tel."

He turned back to face her, eyes intense. "Saren can't be allowed to get away. And someone needs to make sure he is stopped, for the Turian Hierarchy and for C-Sec. And if that costs me my life..."

Telanya's voice was bitter. "Oh, of course, the turian dies heroically for the doomed cause. What about me, Garrus? Did you forget about what you told me back then? That you were tired of being alone, and I was tired of running?"

Garrus shook his head. "No, I didn't." His harmonics wavered. "Don't make this hard on me, please, Tel. I need... to see this through."

She stared a long minute, but then nodded. "But if I... ask, you would stay." She closed her eyes at the pained, hesitant nod he gave, leaning back against the couch for a long moment. "Goddessdamn you."

With a weak pulse of biotics she hurled a pillow across the room, and put her face into her hands. "If I made you stay, you'd end up hating me."

Garrus crossed the room, picking her up by her wrists to hold her against him. "No. I wouldn't. But I would hate myself. Like I said, Tel... I know what you feel. I felt it when we melded. I see it in the tears and the words you don't say. But after this, I'm done. Done completely. I'll have proven... heh, everything I need to prove to everyone who matters." He dipped his head a little, his hand teasing her chin up so she would look him in the eyes. "Except to you. And I'll prove myself to you then."

Telanya sighed, leaning her head against the cool curve of his chest, feeling the thump of his heart as she closed her eyes. "You'd better, dammit. I'm... I'm tired of crying myself to sleep. Tired of waking up alone and wondering if you're dead. I know other people have to put up with it but I —"

"Shhh." Garrus held her a bit more tightly, tracing a delicate hand over her crest. "No sleeping alone tonight."

O-OSaBC-O

Kaidan's head felt as if someone had split it open with an axe, stuffed it full of a mix of cotton and steel wool, and then sloppily nailed it shut. He came to in small bursts of nausea and pain, head literally throbbing with aching pressure, and realized only belatedly that something was wrong.

Several things, actually.

He didn't recognize the room, but it looked rather expensive, as he could see the Presidium gleaming faintly through a polarized window framed by silken curtains. The ceiling was wood-paneled, with delicate filigree along the seams with the walls, which were done in equally tasteful pale-tinted metals and fabrics.

He was tangled in a pile of sheets that were slightly torn and fouled with vomit, which was disgusting. He was also tangled with Ashley Williams, naked and pressed up against him, and there was enough dried semen flung around to make him realize this wasn't some prank the crew had pulled.

A bar was visible out of the corner of his eye, most of the bottles depleted. Ash herself was cradled almost protectively in his arms, snuggled up against him, her thigh a hot bolt of pressure up against his manhood, her hair in his face, filling his nostrils with the scent of beer and perfume at once. She was still deeply asleep.

Kaidan didn't know if his legs would work, at least one was up on the bed to his left, and his right hand was numb. Grunting in pain, he managed to disentangle himself from the sheets and Ash, noting with mortification he was as stiff as a rod, and glanced around more fully.

The room was, indeed, very expensive with a lavish wide bed. Their clothes were hurled everywhere around it. Lying on the ottoman at the foot of the bed was his omni-tool clip, flashing green to show he had incoming messages.

He sighed, and scooped Ashley up off the floor. Noting the sordid condition of the bed, he instead settled her naked form on the nearby leather couch, trying not to rake his eyes over the pale expanse of her curvy flesh. Memories flashed back at him from last night in bits and pieces – primal, almost crazed fucking, screaming, howling.

*Well, Alenko, there's fraternizin' and then there's just flat out losing it. Maybe Dad was right, being a civilian biotic instructor probably isn't that bad.*

"M'god, my head." Ashley moaned piteously before her eyes opened, and after a few seconds she just closed them again. "LT?"

Kaidan's voice was scratchy and tired. "Yes, Chief?"

"Kinda torn between panicking and asking for another, sir."

Kaidan couldn't help it, he burst out laughing, a mix of terror, glee, and disbelief shattering whatever emotional calm he'd built up since awakening. "Probably a bad idea, Ash, but..." He picked up his omni-tool, and immediately it displayed three messages.

The first was an alert from the Hotel, saying his account had been depleted and charges were being routed to the secondary account listed – namely, the Normandy. "Oh, god."

The second message was from the Normandy's computers, a manual authorization for fourteen thousand, eleven hundred and three credits, signed, Commander Sara Y. Shepard, SAMC. "Oh, fucking god."

The third message was even shorter. "Stop panicking and call when you wake up. PS. Please have pants on."

Kaidan could literally feel his headache take on physical form and start swinging a big hammer inside his skull, giggling as it did so. He sat down bonelessly on the bed, and Ash managed to slowly come to a sitting position on the couch.

For a moment the two of them just stared at each other, before her expression wavered into a sour grin.

"Well, if I have to get court martialed at least it was totally goddamned worth it."

Kaidan flushed, glancing away, and then looked around for his pants and underwear. The next five minutes were awesomely awkward and confusing, neither one exactly sure how to react. That ended with the pinging from his omni-tool, which Kaidan answered with a grimace. "Alenko."

Shepard's voice was cool and flat. "Lieutenant. Good of you to pick up. I trust you had an eventful night?"

Kaidan just sort of croaked, a sound that wasn't quite an affirmative and wasn't quite choking. "Ye – I mean, I'm – that is, we're ready to report in, ma'am."

Shepard gave a small laugh. "Fucking relax, Alenko. I've done a lot worse than that and I know how it feels. I seem to have lost the receipt for your night out, so do me a favor and try not to repeat this in public again. Shore leave is extended for at least another 24 hours. Report back to the ship 0600 Friday and meet me for... a little discussion."

Alenko swallowed. "Yes, ma'am."

Shepard's voice rose. "You there, Chief? Your omni-tool is, at least."

Ash's eyes widened and she went pale. "Y-yes ma'am..."

Shepard was silent for a second, then her voice sounded, almost amused. "He any good?"

Kaidan choked again, eyes bulging. Ash, for her part, coughed and cleared her throat. "I've always said it was a great pleasure to serve under the LT, ma'am."

*They're joking about it. Shepard doesn't joke. Am I dreaming, or has the stress just driven me completely mad?*

Shepard's laughter rang out, clear and calm. "Good one, Chief. Get your asses cleaned up and don't mention this shit to anyone. I've already had six other reports of inappropriate fraternization, and I've just stopped giving a shit. If the High Admiralty decides the first thing they need to do is rip my ass for following the rules, then I guess the rules don't need to be followed. Shepard out."

The omni-tool went dark, and Kaidan just stared at it dumbly. Ash pulled her shirt back on, roughly pulling her hair back into a loose ponytail, and gave him a playful shove. "Cheer up. She's not angry at us and we aren't going to be kicked out of the Marines."

Kaidan groaned. "That's even worse, now I have to live in fear of her telling Joker and never hearing the end of it." Still, he smothered a self-satisfied grin, and turned to face her. "I... things kinda got out of hand last night –"

Williams glanced around the room, particularly the bed, and snorted.

"– but I don't want you to think this was just me getting my rocks off ... I mean, this wasn't just me being..."

Ash took two quick steps and kissed him, grinning. "You are the most inarticulate lover I've ever had, sir. She said to get moving, and I need a shower and a coffee and YOU are coming with me." She pulled him to his feet, and he ran his fingers through his hair.

"Yes ma'am."

O-OSaBC-O

Shepard snorted, a smile flickering across her face as she ended the conversation with Alenko. The night had passed in a mess for her – she had spent most of her time at the Spectre HQ, getting fitted for

new armor and upgrading weapons, and the rest was spent fitfully sleeping.

Her omni-tool had woken her up multiple times in the night, and after Friggs had been picked up with one of the ops ensigns buck-ass naked in an elevator, Shepard had given up, switching off her omnitool. The mission they'd survived was simply too much for a freshly assembled crew. They had gone from Eden Prime to a mess on Therum to the horror of the volus ship and finally to Feros, and she felt they had earned the right to nearly fall apart.

Cracking down wouldn't change much, and frankly, she felt like a hypocrite to even think about that, given that her own fraternization so long ago had caused so many deaths on Torfan. Part of her wondered if she would have stopped if she'd been caught back then, but she knew better.

She exited her quarters, and was surprised to see Pressly sitting in the mess, two heavy suitcases on the deck next to him and his face in his hands. She nervously came up behind him, making noise as she did so, and he looked up at her, his face a study in misery. "Commander."

Shepard sat down next to him. "Pressly, what's wrong?"

The big man smiled, a smile full of fatigue and loss and pain. It warped the angles of his face, making his already sad eyes pools of brown agony. "I got home last night to find out that my wife is divorcing me. She's tired of being a military wife and ... after the mess on Feros, tired of wondering if I'll come home at all. We argued about it and then she threw me out and called C-sec." He sighed. "I'll... be alright ma'am. Just hard to adjust. "

Shepard was appalled, both at the timing and the sheer idiocy of his wife. What kind of woman would toss her husband out just after something as harrowing as what he'd been through, and blame him for it? She balled her fist, then sighed in disgust. "I'm sorry, Pressly. Sorry that you have to go through this now and... that she's so... stupid."

Pressly's tired smile widened a flicker at that, but he shrugged his shoulders, the clothing he wore wrinkled and clearly unchanged from yesterday. "Part of me doesn't blame her. Going to war as a single man was easy. Leaving behind your wife, letting her wonder if you're being faithful, if you're dead, if you're hurt and abandoned... it's hard on her, as well. I just wish she'd talked about it before now."

Pressly shook his head and squared his shoulders. "It's not going to affect my ability to perform, ma'am."

Shepard made a half-angry slash with her hand. "You think I give a shit about that? Pressly, you've always been on top of everything, from the moment I hopped on board. You're a natural leader and better organized than I am. I'm not a people person but even I know you don't get over a divorce overnight and are suddenly 'all better'. If you need time, take it."

*I hope that is what you say in a situation like this.. Jesus , what a bitch of a wife!*

Pressly again shook his head, standing and picking up his bags. "I'll need a few hours to place my stuff, but honestly... work, right now, is the best outlet for what I feel. I should feel devastated, but a part of me is relieved that her divorcing me is so unfair. I haven't felt like a good husband for a long time...maybe this is better than years of bitter, futile silences with the same result a decade down the line." He exhaled. "I appreciate the concern, Commander."

Without another word he walked towards the little niche that was the XO's stateroom, and Shepard shrugged helplessly. She sighed, standing, and then saw Liara come out of the medbay, intent on something on a datapad.

"Reading something interesting, Liara?"

Liara gave a start, and then smiled weakly. "I-I was just reviewing my findings on Feros again. Did you

get the armor measurements?"

Shepard smiled. "Yes, I did. That was very good work. Already sent them off, the suits will be ready when we get back from Eingana."

Liara blinked. "We... are going to Eingana? You think my idea has merit?"

Shepard rubbed her chin and pointed with her free hand to a seat. Liara meekly sat, blue eyes fixed on Shepard, who gave a tiny little smile. "We don't have any leads on Saren, and we can't be sure he's alive or dead. I've got a plan to flush him out if he's alive, but it will take time and some hard work to get us there, and honestly, the crew needs to be built up."

Liara frowned. "I am afraid I do not follow. Built up?"

Shepard nodded. "Feros almost got us all killed. We weren't ready; we went in thinking we were going to save colonists and ended up in medical beds. Five minutes either way and that dreadnaught would have flashed us to atoms. The crew, well, they are taking it kind of rough. My omni-tool is full of arrest reports, wild orgies, and Lord knows what else."

Shepard paused, tracing a finger across the gleaming metal surface of the mess decks table. "We need time to come together as a coherent fighting unit. And I need to figure out how to use everyone's skills. Garrus and Ash are great snipers and soldiers, but headstrong. Wrex is all around excellent in battle, but weak technically. Tali is a kid, basically, and while she's vicious with that shotgun and an excellent tech, one shot through her suit and she's in serious trouble."

Shepard smiled. "The ugly truth is the best people I got are you and Alenko, and neither of you are hardened soldiers. Alenko was basically a medic and tech, and you're a scientist, but he went through Eden Prime like a pro, and you stood up to a geth armature and your mother." Shepard's expression was one of amusement, but the serious nature of what she was saying could be read in her eyes.

Liara's eyes flickered away, flushing from the totally unexpected praise. "I . . . did not expect you to find my contribution that valuable. I have felt, like I said, as if I was not – what is the metaphor – pushing my weight?"

Shepard's mouth quirked. "Pulling your weight. And honestly, that's my call to make, not yours to worry about. I have to come up with a way to make sure we are ready the next time the call comes in, and part of that is no more fucking about in paper-thin armor and with crap guns. So if we have the time to burn, researching Eingana sounds like a good idea to me."

Liara nodded, a glimmer of excitement in her eyes. "I did not bring much of my analysis and excavation equipment with me. I should replace the broad-band scanner and codices of spectrographs..." Liara pulled up her omnitool, typing rapidly, sending screens of data scrolling by, and Shepard watched, bemused, before standing.

"Looks like you have some shopping to do, Liara. I'll let you focus." Shepard turned to go, when Liara stood abruptly.

"W-wait! I am sorry, Shepard, I did not mean to ignore you... and I am not very familiar with the Citadel. It is just that I never expected to be put in charge of an actual excavation without someone exhorting me to find weapons or –"

Shepard held up a hand. "I know, remember?" Liara flushed, stammering out some kind of apology. Shepard just sighed. "It's alright. Anyway, I'm not sure you want me guiding you around the Citadel anyway. I'm not that familiar with it, and the amount of people camped out who want to see me or interrogate me or interview me passed 2,000 a few hours ago. I'm not stepping out into that circus unless I have to."

Liara frowned. "You have people wanting to see you?"

Shepard explained about the crowds of reporters and fans, and Liara's expression grew slightly amused. "I forget you dislike your fame. As Benezia's daughter, there was a time where I was also hounded incessantly by people seeking an introduction or business deals. I had to find ways to avoid that, and in time I became... very skilled at eluding those who wished to follow me."

Shepard grunted. "Neat trick."

Liara smiled. "If you walk out dressed in your uniform and with your usual walk, of course people will see you. But I think I have an idea." The asari gave a shy smile. "If, that is, you wanted to get out and see the Citadel, maybe help me find some of the things on my list, rather than sit on the ship?"

Shepard chewed her lip. She'd exhausted all the work she could do onboard, and with Pressly back aboard and looking for work the chances of burying herself in reports was nil. She had intended to visit the gift shop to look for model ships, but had never found the time, and truth be told, she wanted a drink, very badly.

"Alright, T'Soni... but this had better work."

20 minutes later, Shepard muttered under her breath. "This is not going to work."

The asari had finally shed her University of Serrice uniform for a shorter, pale white and silver panel dress, split down one leg, revealing a long expanse of blue. A thin silver chain accented her waist, and her shoes were white with high, curved heels. Liara carried a slender metal briefcase in her free hand, walking elegantly down the long hallway leading out of the C-Sec docking area, coolly appraising the crowds of people that, thankfully, had thinned a great deal in the past hours.

Shepard was instead clad in one of Liara's spare University of Serrice outfits, over which she wore a lab coat, and a garrison cap. Her eyes were covered by clear goggles and her mouth by the medical mask she wore. Her hands operated the lift-cart on which she carried several boxes and crates – ostensibly supplies, but all actually empty – and she forced herself to walk slowly and plainly, staggering her steps every few feet.

The crowd ignored her entirely, focused on the elegant asari maiden walking past with her face set in a blank, cold expression. She didn't even pause to acknowledge the few wolf-whistles that went her way, and the whispers from the small number of asari in the crowd quickly spread.

With an elegance that belied the slight shaking of her hands that Shepard could now see, Liara keyed a nearby taxi, and gestured for Shepard to load the boxes in while she sat in the front seat. Shepard did so quickly, biting her lip behind the mask, but the crowd's attention was fixed once again on the C-Sec entrance. With a sigh of relief, Shepard entered the taxi, and it shut behind her, sealing them in. With a grunt, Shepard flung the mask and cap off, leaving her hair slightly mussed and out of place.

"...that was a bit intimidating. I thought you were exaggerating about the number of people outside, Shepard." Liara's voice was shaken, quieter than usual, and Shepard gave a weak shrug.

"Pack of goddamned lunatics. Anyway, before we do shit else, I need a drink. Key this thing for Flux."

Liara did so, frowning. "I assume Flux is a nightclub?" The aircar beeped obediently, slowly rising into the air and angling away from the docks.

Shepard nodded. "Wrex will be there. Maybe Alenko and Williams." She smothered a grin. "Or maybe not, all things considered. Anyway it's quiet enough I won't get hassled when I get out of this too-tight thing you have me in."

Liara frowned. "They are very comfortable uniforms, resistant to dirt and –"

Shepard snickered. "They're also so tight I can see my damned belly button. Sorry, that's why I had to grab the lab coat, this thing is about as close as you can get to being both clothed and naked at the same time."

Liara gave a small smile, but she did notice in the reflection of the front window that Shepard had a point, the green and white fabric clung to every single curve of Shepard's body in a scandalous manner that left almost nothing to the imagination... and revealed that Shepard was both very well defined in her muscularity, and very, very feminine.

Liara coughed, and focused her gaze on the control panel of the taxi. "Yes, well, the matriarchs say our bodies are but tools for the use of our will... I suppose the University of Serrice feels that researchers are likely to win more arguments if they are attractively dressed."

Shepard rolled her eyes, then glanced at Liara. "I shouldn't complain... when you put that on I thought my heart would stop. You are a lot braver than I am, Liara." The aircar accelerated, swooping lower over the Wards and shuddering slightly as it coasted along, buffeting them slightly. *Great, every line out of my mouth sounds like a bad pickup line, for fucks sake.*

Liara frowned a bit. "I am not sure I understand your meaning. This is hardly revealing for a young asari of means."

Shepard's eyes narrowed at that, then she shrugged. "I'm starting to see why most young men have unhealthy fixations on asari."

Liara's lips curved ever so slightly. "And I am starting to see why most young asari find humans just a touch prudish. I do wonder, however, what your reaction would be to some of the more daring pieces I still have in my luggage."

"Liara..."

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## Chapter 60: Chapter 52: Wrex, Remembrance

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*A/N : The final bits are coming together now. At least one person wanted me to write up a Kaiden/Ash sex scene, but I feel that my skills at that sort of thing are... rusty at best.*

*I'm doing a lot of pairing, which seems silly I guess, but most of it won't pan out to anything in the first part of the series. It's more setting up the proper backstory, which all so often wasn't put into the game due to time limits. Yes, the Liara and Shepard thing is going somewhere. Getting there is the tricky part.*

*Finally, today's story you HAVE to check out is **Down by the Water** by Jay8008. You think your Liara is a edgy bad-ass? Bitch please. Jay8008's *Control That Which You Cannot Destroy* is also hugely entertaining.*

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Karin Chakwas fancied herself a level-headed, sensible woman, for the most part. She had served the Alliance since she graduated medical school, with stars in her eyes and romantic visions of strong-limbed heroes filling her head. For most of her life, however, she'd been rotated across a wide variety of ships that had only one thing in common – a lack of any reason to settle down.

She wasn't a saint, of course – she'd dated, a couple of times semi-seriously thinking about long-term relationships. But the promotions came thick and fast, and with them, more duties, heavier burdens, and more wounded soldiers.

She'd been puzzled by her crash transfer to the Normandy, especially given its stated mission. As it turned out, the 'stated' mission had turned into the sort of epic chase she'd so foolishly dreamed about as a young woman, and the ship was filled with young, heroic soldiers.

Full of fear. Young enough to be her sons or daughters.

The doctor had kept calm throughout the flight from Feros, as calm as one could be in a life-or-death struggle to save several desperately wounded people. It wasn't until she'd had a chance to decompress at DR939 that the sheer nearness of death had hit her full on. She was no wilting violet, and she'd been in a firefight or two, but the casual ease with which the huge black geth ship had dispatched the might of an entire Citadel fleet, followed by the horrific obliteration of the Feros colony, had shook her.

The crew, she noted as shore leave had begun, felt much the same way. Four minutes, eleven seconds slower and they'd have been slag or free-floating atoms. Still getting to know each other after a hectic couple of weeks, the announcement of shore leave had raised morale, and yet gave every member of the crew further time to reflect on what a close call they'd had.

Chakwas had planned to engage in much of the same sort of navel contemplation, she supposed, until she'd run into Engineer Adams when hailing a cab. The lieutenant was rather grizzled, certainly not handsome by any stretch of the imagination, but what had started as mere chit-chat in the cab had turned into one of the most fascinating conversations Chakwas could remember. Ranging from philosophy to religion and memories of a captain they'd both served under, Chakwas found Adams very refreshingly direct to talk to.

The second day of shore leave had dawned, and those of the crew who didn't rent hotels for the night staggered out of sleeper pods or tiny bunks groggily. The mess deck was full of bleary eyed marines, sipping morosely at coffee and watching the Citadel News feed. At least a couple had watch today, and looked particularly depressed. Pouring herself a cup of Earl Grey tea, the doctor leaned against the bulkhead of the mess, listening to another report of a geth attack, this time at a remote research station near Horizon.

"I wonder if Shepard will cut leave short, after that story." Chakwas turned, surprised, and found the speaker was none other than Adams. "I mean, you have to figure, if the geth are attacking, they must have had a target."

Chakwas smiled, sipping her tea. "One hesitates to try to predict the commander, Greg. But I suspect we'll only have today for leave, I can't imagine the commander sitting on her hands and waiting for a lead."

The engineer shrugged. "I figure she won't. Course, the crew is acting like a pack of hooligans..." He glanced around the mess decks, a sour grin spreading across his features. "Speaking of hangovers, that reminds me, Doc. There's a bar not too far off the main way to the human embassy, kind of a hangout for the civil service set, I guess. They serve Service Ice Brandy by the shot, or the bottle."

Chakwas laughed. "I'm amused you remember our conversation. I shouldn't be so partial to alien liquor, I suppose, but it reminds me of times when I was rash enough to take courses on alien medicine right on strange new worlds." She arched a graying eyebrow. "I don't suppose you'd care to escort a lady, would you? While I assure you I have no intention of drinking myself insensate, a bit more time away from the ship would be welcome."

Adams finished his coffee, smirking. "Kinda early to be drinking, don't you think? I only mentioned it in case you wanted to swing by the place later on..."

The levity in Chakwas' face faded suddenly, her large, green eyes fixing on his, sad and empty. "Yes, but I worry very much that I won't have the chance to partake again once we leave. I have every

confidence in the Commander and her ability to succeed, but..."

Adams glanced at the deck. "Yeah. I'm astounded we've lost only Jenkins so far." He rotated his coffee cup aimlessly on the mess deck table, then directed his gaze back upwards. "Tell you what, doc. I got a bit of shopping to do – ship-stuff, not personal. But if you're still feeling like a drink, I'll meet you at the embassy in a couple of hours."

Chakwas inclined her head. "I'll be there." She turned away, only to see Beatrice Shields in plain gray BDUs, leaving the Medbay with Wrex. "Heading to see the doctors, Ms. Shields?"

The mercenary woman pushed a lock of black hair back out of her face and gave a neutral smile. "Perhaps. I owe Wrex a cup of jaaki, so I'm going to buy him one and talk about old times, then I'll head over to Grissom Memorial after I check in with Exogeni's Citadel branch, to see if I still have a job." She exhaled. "I ... don't know if I'm coming back, but I left a message on Shepard's mail system. Thanks for... patching me up, Doc."

Chakwas smiled. "No need to thank me, young lady, but you're certainly welcome. Let me know if the hospital needs any records from me, I've forwarded most of what we had on you."

Shields nodded, then turned to Wrex. "Bit unsteady still, so if I fall, you'd better catch me, fat ass."

Wrex snorted. "You buy me some jaaki and a slug of ryncol and I'll carry you piggy-back down the middle of the Presidium if you like. Eat anyone who looks at you funny." With a surprisingly gentle gesture, the big alien put a supportive hand on Shields' arm, guiding her to the elevator.

Chakwas wondered, yet again, what could have affected a violent mercenary like Wrex on Torfan so much that he seemed to treat Shepard and Shields like old friends, before tucking the question away for another day.

#### O-OSaBC-O

Flux was much as Shepard had described it – full of music, dancing, and drinks. Liara was amused at how quickly after the taxi had landed the commander had gone looking for a restroom, a single box from the aircar in hand, only to return a few minutes later in nondescript marine BDUs. She seemed far more comfortable in such martial wear, if not exactly relaxed. Liara was both grateful that Shepard had taken her idea in such good humor, and a tiny bit disappointed she'd put back on the shapeless, loose BDU's.

Upon entering the club, Liara had passed between two giant krogan bouncers, who scowled at her before seeing Shepard standing behind her, giving both a very pointed glare. The one on the left mutely jerked his blocky head towards the bar, and Shepard had strolled by, Liara in her wake. The false confidence Liara had put on in front of the packed crowd near C-Sec had fallen by the wayside, and once again she felt aimless, merely following out of a lack of any real will to go off on her own.

Shepard wasted no time ordering a drink and claiming a poorly lit booth in the corner, Liara following mutely after ordering a glass of water. She blinked against the flashing lights, the booming bass of the music seeming to thunder through her, disorienting her in the dimness. She sat, smoothing her dress, and glanced across the table at Shepard, who was morosely examining her drink.

"Water, Liara?" Shepard's voice was wry, her lips twisted into a semi-mocking grin. The asari shrugged her shoulders, and glanced around the confines of the corner of the club.

"I find myself unwilling to consume a great deal of alcohol prior to shopping for delicate scientific equipment, Shepard. It seems prudent to keep – ah, what is the idiom – an empty head? That sounds... rather ..." She trailed off as Shepard's grin widened into a smile.

"Keep your head clear, I think it what you meant to say. What is it with aliens and always wanting to

use our expressions? You never hear humans blathering on about the Goddess or talking about weird animals on Palaven."

Liara shrugged, a trifle hurt by the cool dismissive nature of the question. "I-I would expect it is because humans are still very new to the Citadel races, Shepard." She was about to mention her mother's fascination with humans upon their entry to the galactic arena, but painful memories lashed across her psyche, and she sighed instead.

Shepard pulled out a packet of cigarettes and flipped the lid, withdrawing two. "You look stiff as a board. Awkwardness in social situations is normally my trademark, so what's up?" With a casual gesture she slid the extra cigarette across the table, then lit her own, the flick-snap of flame illuminating the dimness for only a moment. Liara took the offered cigarette, but did not reach for the lighter, her face pensive.

"I have been thinking about a conversation Ms. Shields and I had not long ago. She is still very much in a great deal of confusion over ... past events. Will she be traveling with us on our pursuit of Saren?" Liara tried very hard to keep her voice steady, not wanting to admit to herself she was torn about the presence of the human woman. They would never be friends, but they'd reached a brittle, painful understanding.

Shepard inhaled, letting the smoke flow into her and smooth away the stresses that question caused. "I don't know, Liara. Part of me wants her to, but she's hurt pretty bad, and she won't be up for a fight for months ." She blew smoke out of her mouth, shrugging. "It kind of –"

She broke off as Liara's omni-tool lit up, flashing a pale blue. "Priority transmission from Thessia. Please visit the nearest LDC booth at your earliest convenience. You have a message from House T'Soni."

Shepard glanced up at Liara, and winced. The asari looked as if she'd been kicked in the gut, her face pale and frightened, eyes wide and obviously scared. A moment later, with an obvious effort, Liara blanked her emotions, fist clenching, and glanced at Shepard. "I am very sorry, Shepard, but I have a message from my family that I must deal with. I should not take long, will you –"

Shepard frowned. "What's wrong? You look like you just saw a ghost." She leaned forward, concerned, but the asari shook her head.

"It... it is my family. A private matter. They would not contact me unless it was .. something serious."

Shepard scowled, scrubbing out her cigarette. "And nothing good, I presume? I'm sorry. Go on and talk to your family, Liara. Take however long you need, I'll be here, and we can talk about it when you get back." She took a shot from her drink and the asari nodded, rising gracefully from her seat to walk calmly towards the door. Shepard watched her walk, the sway of her hips, the arch of her back, even the calm poise she displayed as she eyed the two krogan on her way out.

She then glanced back down at her drink. Looking was harmless. Right? *Stay cool, be friendly, let her do her thing, then go find an asari stripper and get it out of your system.*

She took another drink, but the liquor had nothing to say to her thoughts.

O-OSaBC-O

"Later, Wrex."

Shields waved off the big krogan as she came to the front of the Exogeni complex, leaning on the cane she'd been issued at the hospital. The meeting with two salarians and one human doctor had only taken a few minutes, and it had been about as bad as she feared.

Her cerebellum had been damaged by the blow to the head she'd suffered, and even with cybernetic gyroscopes installed in her spine and legs, she'd have a hard time fully maintaining her balance. The liver replacement showed she had actually developed some kind of kidney disorder, and to top it off, the neural implants that allowed her arm to fully function would have to be completely replaced if she wanted further cybernetics.

Exogeni wasn't going to pony up hundreds of thousands of creds for such an operation, and her insurance wouldn't cover anything but the most basic bio-replacement systems. The doctors had given her some medicine and a cane and smiled sympathetically, but there wasn't much to be done.

So now she stood at the foyer to the Exogeni complex, steeling herself to go in and be told she was of no use to anyone, anymore. Too washed out and bitter to serve Earth's military, too crippled for merc work, too much of a burden on Shepard to help her out...

With a sigh Shields pushed open the door, entering the foyer. Slick black marble tiles met plain white-steel walls, and gentle music filled the air. A set of wide benches were arranged in a semicircle around a reception desk, the sterile room brightened here and there by flowering plants in colorful glazed ceramic pots.

A single male receptionist stood at the desk, hands moving between several haptic keyboards. He glanced up as she approached. "Welcome to Exogeni. I'm sorry, due to recent events all meetings and appointments have been canceled."

Shields sighed. "Exogeni Special Response, unit 11, Feros. I kinda think someone in the office would want to talk to me."

The receptionist frowned, and nodded. "Please wait here, I'll check." Rather than bringing up a comm link, he actually turned and left, going through a code-sealed door into some kind of passageway. With a sigh, Shields sat.

For a moment, she thought she glimpsed something out of the corner of her eye. She half turned, but it was only the foyer door, still a bit ajar, closing slowly. She blinked and rubbed her eyes. "Crap, I'm tired." She pulled up her omni-tool, ensuring all her reports were in place, and checked her chrono.

The door in the far wall opened, and two heavily built men in dark suits with Exogeni name badges stepped through. "Commander Shields, the acting COO wants to speak with you. Please follow us."

Shields stood, using the cane to support her. "Can't move too fast, sorry."

The two men said nothing, flanking her and leading her down a long but narrow hallway to a fairly large room, maybe 30 by 30, with a huge comm-link screen set into one wall and a circle of chairs around it. The men directed her to a seat and then departed, leaving her alone in the room with her thoughts.

After a few moments, the comm link lit up, but the figure on it was... obscured. Dressed in an expensive looking sports coat and loose silk shirt, his face was blacked out by some kind of digital filter, leaving only a shadow silhouette and two blazing circles of blue for eyes, some kind of cybernetics. The voice that spoke was cultured, modulated, and calm – and probably modified. "Good morning, Ms. Shields. You've proven very hard to track down for a conversation."

Shields frowned. "I'm looking to turn in my report about the events on Feros."

The voice chuckled. "But we already know what happened on Feros, commander. And I'm afraid there are no Exogeni executives left to report to. Right now, what you know is a danger to humanity's future, and I can't afford it getting out."

Shields slowly got to her feet, cursing mentally. She had not brought a single weapon, and she could

barely walk. Gritting her teeth, she triggered the mental command to activate the cutting laser she'd built into her cybernetic arm – if she got close enough she could burn out an eye or slit a throat with it. "So who the fuck are you?"

The answer was solemn and final. "We are Cerberus, Ms. Shields. I regret things have to come to this end." The link went dead, even as the doors behind her opened.

Men in black-tinted ballistic cloth, with narrow, thin armor plates in white and gold, streamed through, each one carrying Mattock rifles and large-caliber pistols. She balled her fist, as one of them strode right up to her, pistol in hand, and refused to look away as the goon lifted it and fired at point blank range.

The blast and sound from the huge handgun was disorienting, but not as much as the sudden flicker of gravity around her, or the realization that the shot had not done a thing. She opened one eye, staring into the barrel, and the soldier stepped back, looking confused.

A moment later there was a flare of biotic light, and the man's arm tore itself free from its socket in a gory wash of blood. The man screamed, a surprisingly high-pitched, panicked sound, a moment before a second flare of blue and a lance of light smashed into him, sending him flying across the room to hit the far wall. The impact buckled the wall and sent bits of flesh smearing everywhere, the man's body literally splashing with the force of the strike.

The ten other soldiers who had entered had rifles up, pointing in all directions, even as lightning erupted directly in front of Shields. She gasped, falling onto her backside, as a huge turian seemingly appeared out of thin air in front of her.

Long black cloth cloaked his form, pierced only by one black-armored hand, leaning heavily on a cane made of thick black polymers. A ragged, smoky voice erupted from the shroud, filled with cold, cruel boredom. "Cerberus lackeys. Ms. Shields is under the protection of the Shadow Broker, and your ham-handed attempts at ending her life are unappreciated. Be gone."

The lead Cerberus soldier, his armor a bit thicker and more elaborate than his comrades, gave a laugh. "You're goddamned delusional, skullface. There's ten of us, and one of you."

The turian sighed. "It is not my fault you brought insufficient reinforcements, monkey. This is your final warning. My master does not seek war with you and yours, but if you push us -"

The words were cut off mid-sentence, as the Cerberus squad scattered for cover, opening fire with a fusillade of firepower. Most of them had Mattocks, but a couple had pulled out grenades, one had a sniper rifle, and one a shotgun. Hundreds of rounds stormed at the turian, and he didn't even duck, merely standing there.

Every round bouncing harmlessly off his barrier, flickering and snapping into view with the impact.

With a bored wave, the turian made a mnemonic gesture at three of the soldiers, who were slammed into the wall. A second later, biotic energy crawled over their bodies, microsingularities erupting from inside their chests. They had barely enough time to scream before erupting into shockwaves, flooding their companions with gore and sending body parts flying in all directions. Shields cringed in disgust as an eyeball flew past her, landing with a plop by her foot.

The remaining soldiers ducked behind cover, popping up for quick shots. The turian seemed amused, as he began to laugh. Still ignoring their shots, he pushed his hands forwards, and the heavy vidscreen on the wall shuddered and fell, slamming into two Cerberus soldiers with a heavy thud. Shields heard a series of gruesome crunching noises as the men were pulped beneath the eight hundred pound vid-screen.

Two other Cerberus soldiers had managed to roll clear, firing in sporadic bursts. Their weapons were equally ineffective. The turian made another casual gesture, as if waving away an unpleasant smell. A burst of blue radiance snapped into a tight, blinding beam of energy, lashing through both of them with a whip-crack of displaced air, sending the first soldier to the ground in a bisected pile of limbs. The other, hit more directly, simply came apart in cascading sheets of liquifying flesh, screaming in agony for a second before choking in a wet gurgle and slumping to the ground.

The turian *snickered*.

Shields thought it was over, but then her was drawn to the last two Cerberus soldiers.

One had lifted up a Kraken Missile launcher. Tipped with a pulsar field wrapped around plasma, it was a heavy weapon mostly used for anti-armor purposes. If it hit, there was no way even this crazy turian could survive such a blast, and Shields, without armor, would literally boil. The woman closed her eyes again, wondering why the Shadow Broker had tried to save her, and felt sorry such a .. magnificent turian would die for her.

The blast rocked the entire room, so bright that even with her eyes closed her vision turned to pure white. Heat radiated from every surface, so hot she felt her hair crackle slightly, and her throat contracted. The roaring sounds that filled the room faded, followed by... the wobble of the floor.

She opened her eyes again, and this time her jaw fell open. The comm room was blackened and on fire, much of the metal decking seared and boiling. A heavier, glowing purple barrier now surrounded both of them, and inside its radius the floor was pristine. The boiled, blackened husks half-baked into the far wall, and the impact crater that had blasted through the wall, were bubbling with radiation, and the entrance to the room was clear, the doors buckled and hurled into the corridor.

Amazingly, one Cerberus soldier had lived, thrown across the room by a fluke of the explosion, his armor wrecked and his face a mass of seeping burns. The turian let his barrier drop, slowly crossing the room to stand in front of the dying man, who gasped. "Y-you... can't b-be alive..."

The turian snorted, and his armored boot came down on the humans' skull, shattering it to red-tinted jagged fragments. "Not enough gun." With a languid motion, the tall figure in black turned back around to face Shields. "I presume you are unhurt, Ms. Shields?"

She coughed, stammering for a second before forcing herself to calm. "Y-yes, thank you. How... how did you survive a goddamned Kraken missile? Who fuck are you?"

The turian glanced around the room, and she could now see his face, or what was visible from under the hood he wore. Only one mandible could be seen, blackened and twisted, and this flickered at her question. Only one eye could be seen, glowing red, obviously cybernetic. "To answer your first question: I used a biotic field to redirect the missile at the one who fired it. And erected my strongest barriers. As for your second question: I am Tetrimus, the Mouth of the Broker. He would like to ask you some questions, and extend you an offer of employment, which would include any medical expenses you might need."

Shields bit her lip, then sighed. "I don't think I can help you. If you want to know about Feros..."

Tetrimus chuckled. "No, we already know about humanity's experiments there. Our questions have less to do with Exogeni's past, and more to do with your own. The Broker wants to know about Commander Shepard."

Shields gave him a dubious look. "What do you mean you already know about Feros? And why do you want to know about Shepard!?"

Tetrimus extended a hand, and she took it, slowly getting to her feet. "What I mean is that we have

already had a long and profitable discussion with Mr. Jeong, who is also now in our service. Given that there are elements in your Systems Alliance who definitely don't want this information to see the light of day, he deemed it prudent to... vanish."

Shields couldn't debate that. If not for Tetrimus... if Wrex, or worse, Shepard, had been here with her, they'd all be dead. She swallowed. "So I'm a danger as well, not just to myself, but to those around me."

Tetrimus did not move, but his voice rumbled amusement. "You are quick to see the problem laid before you. As for our interest in Shepard, I assure you it is benign. We believe Cerberus is targeting her as well, and the more we know, the better prepared we can be for attempts on her life."

He glanced around. "I would recommend we move quickly. Cerberus does not openly use such force often, but C-Sec will be... unhappy if they locate us."

Shields nodded, stiffly following him to the smoking ruin that used to be the door. "What about the other employees?"

Tetrimus paused, then shook his head. "Cerberus does not leave things to chance. Speaking of which..." He stopped as the two burly men in suits who had brought Shields into the back rounded a corner, guns drawn. With a smooth motion he pulled a heavy handgun from his waist and drilled both of them with head shots. One, two.

Shields blinked. *Head shots at 40 feet like they were nothing?* "I'm guessing they weren't real Exogeni employees?"

Tetrimus shook his head. "C-Sec is arrogant, depending on its idiotic network of snitches and data taps to find crime. Cerberus is cunning, careful and fully aware of how things work on the Citadel. They have infiltrated it heavily over the past five years, and I have no doubt every real Exogeni employee here was captured by Cerberus minutes after the news at Feros became public. When I was here yesterday, looking for something Mr. Jeong sent me to find, there was no one but Cerberus agents in every office."

They entered the front foyer, Tetrimus pausing to shoot the front desk clerk with casual ease, and Shields shuddered. She'd been a fool to think she was a hardened killer; compared to this nightmare assassin she was little more than a skilled gunman. She was about to ask another question when two C-sec officers came through the front door, guns drawn.

The first one, a turian, paused when he saw Tetrimus, and angled his gun down. "You've got about five minutes, sir. C-Sec Special Response and Special Investigations are already on the way."

Tetrimus nodded. "I have an aircar outside, Ms. Shields. Your answer?"

Shields sighed and nodded. "Might as well at least hear your boss out. The alternative looks, well, unhealthy. Not to mention if I say no you might kill me."

Tetrimus actually sniffed. "Perish the thought. I have no wish to enter into combat with your friend Shepard, and killing one of her closest associates seems an excellent way to piss her off." He opened the front door, and gestured. "After you."

O-OSaBC-O

Wrex sat glumly at the edge of the Presidium's artificial lake, staring up at the Krogan Monument carved there. The krogan depicted in duranium and stone was a masterwork, eyes alight with the fire of battle, armor lovingly detailed, down to the etchings of war-prayers on the gauntlets and the nicks and damage of battle on one pauldron. There was heavy nobility and sadness to his stance that seemed an ironic echo of what had come later for the krogan people.

Wrex glanced away, disgusted at his own self-loathing. He'd realized long ago his people were a lost cause, too twisted by history, by biology, by culture and by sheer bloody-minded pride to rebuild what they had lost. The genophage made a mockery of families and turned Tuchanka's women into martyrs. Thousands every year wandered into the wastes to die once they realized they were infertile, to save supplies and food for those were not.

Wrex balled a fist, exhaling deeply, and then forced his hand open. Dwelling on it wouldn't fix anything. It wouldn't bring back his father, or make his brother suddenly understand what the price of glory in war was.

It wouldn't bring back a young, foolish krogan boy who'd nearly gotten killed on Torfan, just to be saved by a pair of human women, and then to die in a fluke accident months later. Wrex glanced back up at the statue, wondering why the aliens who lived here even bothered to keep it standing. They could tear it down and replace it with a volus, then ooh and ahh over the credits it brought in.

He was about to stand up when he heard voices, from above, small and high-pitched. The balcony above overhung where he sat, and echoes from the conversation filtered down with almost perfect clarity.

"This, children, is the krogan monument." A few kids made small whimpers, and the female voice that was clearly their teacher shushed them. "Hush. It is just a statue. It was erected by a grateful galaxy, long ago, when the krogan sacrificed millions of their own kind to stop the rachni from killing all life in the galaxy."

A tiny turian voice piped up. "My father says the krogan tried to kill us too."

The older female voice – it sounded like an asari – cleared her throat. "That came later, and perhaps not without cause. And it is not important compared to the lesson for today. Every race has its villains, and sometimes entire races turn bad. I can remember when batarians were seen as shy and somewhat peaceful, before the government fell and the Fist of Khar'shan took power and turned their society into one driven by slavery and war. I can remember when the hanar first arrived, and people were terrified they'd be like the rachni because – and I quote – 'both had tentacles'."

She sighed. "The krogan did indeed rebel, and the war was bloody and long. But if not for the krogan, none of us would have survived in the first place. They sacrificed many – brothers, fathers, sons, and friends – to fight a foe so lethal that other species couldn't even set foot on the rachni worlds."

The sound of clicking foot-heels sounded from above. "History is not about picking and choosing what parts of a race's pursuits we use to judge them, but by considering their entire history. And this is why the monument is still here, despite some, like Varkan's father, who feel the krogan are not worthy of such. One day, the krogan may save us again, or may change and become peaceful. We never know."

Wrex snorted to himself at that last. The teacher's calm voice faded as she began walking away. "But you must always make your own choices about alien species in light of how they view events. For example, for the humans, the turians are the aggressors in the Relay 314 incident..."

With a sigh, the krogan stood, glancing up again at the statue. "It's happening all over again, grandfather. One of Okeer's brood was tied up with Saren. Geth are out there, killing and shooting up whatever they feel like, and everyone is too busy wringing their hands to go out there and fix it."

Wrex placed a hand at the base of the statue, leaving behind a small bottle of ryncol. Then he turned away, leaving the light to glimmer on the inscription at the base.

*In dedication to and in memory of the brave Krogan of Tuchanka, and of Warlord Urdnot Krael, who died that we might live, who fought that we might have peace, bled that we might build. Saviors of the*

*galaxy, heroes of the Citadel, and eternal friends to all species.*

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## **Chapter 61: Chapter 52: Liara, Family**

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*A/N: Whelp, now ends the soul-baring. Once again I'd like to thank Owelpost for all the hard work, revisions, ideas, and extensive rework that has helped refine these past chapters. I'd also like to thank everyone who reviewed, or sent encouraging private messages.*

*Most have wondered what exactly is so 'dark' about Shepard. Sure, she had a few ugly moments at the start of the story, but she seems to have emotions, albeit confused ones, and empathy, even a bit of humor and the ability to hesitantly make friends. Make no mistake, my initial words were not off the mark. So far, she hasn't been faced with the need to choose, or to make choices that could show the person she can be when things go wrong.*

*That is coming, and it will not be pretty. The evil, petty hatred and cynicism of the Premiseverse has been held at bay mostly by the way the story has shaped itself, but the assaults on Cerberus and the issues on Tuchanka will not be light. The geth war will be ugly. And Noveria isn't going to end happily for anybody.*

*But for now, enjoy the last happyish moments of the day!*

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Liara took a nervous breath as she entered the public communications station. Opaque glassed-in booths circled a large, central area with public extranet terminals. The comms station was almost empty, save for a couple of bickering salarians and the bored looking asari at the help desk.

Picking an open booth at random, she shut the glass door behind her, hearing the thrumming sound of the privacy field going up as she did so. The booth was not large, merely a comfortable pair of chairs and a small vidscreen with keyboard.

Liara bit her lip, and pulled the chair out to sit down. Taking a moment to make sure her features were calm, she tapped a few strokes on the keyboard to begin the transmission.

'TRANSMIT: code Thesan-eluran. DESTINATION: Thessia, Armali Enclave, Skypillar Reach, House T'Soni.'

The vidscreen responded, flaring first into the dull grey logo of the Asari Republics, then into the flame-tree and rose of House T'Soni. A moment after that the screen showed the still face of her aunt, Mithra.

"Liara. You responded promptly, that is good." Mithra's voice was clipped, cold, and angry, mirroring the dark look in her eyes. She wore a shimmering vest of silver over a silken shirt, and a long multi-layered skirt in hues of gray, green and white. The flame-trees swayed in the background, heavy with fruit., Her aunt was flanked by two of Liara's relatives.

Shian T'Soni was tall and angular, a bitter set to her mouth and the faded outline of an Eclipse tattoo still visible along her jaw. Muscular, almost hulking for an asari, she stood with folded arms and stiff posture. Expensive black and pale blue armor shone dully, and the stock of some kind of heavy weapon peaked over one shoulder. Her eyes were impossible to read, hidden behind dark sunglasses that wrapped around her face. She was the only daughter of Benezia's youngest sister, raised by Mithra after her mother died in a transport crash.

On the other side of Mithra stood Yrael, wearing almost nothing, as usual. Her darker blue eyes were

pits of hate, but her expression was otherwise pleasant. Her breasts were barely covered by a thin, diaphanous set of narrow strips of fabric, crisscrossing her torso, and her skirt was slit on both hips, cut away to the left almost to the middle of the thigh. Yrael's pale white marking trailed down her jawline and onto her chest, pictographic promises and prayers from her worship of the old pantheistic goddess of pleasure. Mithra's biological daughter, she had a tendency towards sadism.

Liara calmly exhaled, folding her arms, suddenly glad she was wearing a nice dress and not a drab University outfit. "I am always willing to serve the house, and with what has occurred..." Liara trailed off, mind working hard to remember every scrap of tutoring Benezia had given on handling peers and relatives.

Mithra sniffed at that, but then shrugged. "Liara, the city council of Armali voted 112 to 0 to have Benezia stripped of her citizenship and rights. There are riots in the streets, from some of Benezia's followers, who refuse to stand down or believe the charges against her. The Serrice Guard was forced to fire directly into the rioters. At least 20 are dead, more wounded. A few voices have called for House T'Soni to be stricken from the Thirty Families as traitors, since Benezia is still listed as house Matriarch."

Liara managed, to her own surprise, to keep her expression calm, but her stomach lurched and pain seemed to radiate down her spine. "They cannot do that, can they? They have not the right, nor the agreement of the Families."

Mirala nodded sourly. "No, they do not." She winced as a loud explosion sounded, and in the background Liara saw House T'Soni huntresses clambering up one of the high walls, weapons in hand. "Unfortunately, Benezia seems to have drained the house account, and we have only a third of our usual forces, the rest having left with your mother. We have less than fifty thousand credits on hand, and none of the off-world banks are responding to my demands for credit transfer. House Vasir is calling in the loans they made to us, and to the City of Armali, immediately." Her expression darkened in anger. "A demand we cannot meet."

Liara closed her eyes, swallowing back fear. The loose e-democracy of Thessia was held together by the great Cities, each one home to several of the Thirty Families. The Families ruled the Cities by dint of owning, collectively, roughly 55% of all of the wealth in the Asari Republics. Each City and its associated Families played political and economic games spanning centuries, angling for a few more points of influence.

Armali was one of the smallest Cities, boasting only the Families of Vasir and T'Soni to its name, and much of the city's industry and economic underpinnings were financed and supported by investments made by said houses. If these defaulted, it was doubtful the city's economy would recover. The Armali Council, the loose affiliation of manufacturing guilds that had spread the name T'Soni far and wide, would go bankrupt overnight, and the only way the city would have to survive would be to seize the house's property.

The maneuvering of House Vasir was plain even for Liara to see. Mithra, without being named the Matriarch, could not access the off-world house accounts to pay the loans Vasir was calling due. With the Matriarch stripped of her title and her heir a pureblood somewhere off-world, Vasir would simply take its payment in the form of House T'Soni's properties and investments, leaving the family destitute.

Liara opened her eyes. "What do you need me to do? I am hardly able to come to Thessia and quell the rioting in my mother's name, or-"

Shian snorted, but Mithra waved her to silence. "I need your authorization codes for all house property, and your recorded statement that you formally transfer heritage of house matriarchy to me and my own heirs. Finally, you will have to return to Thessia to answer the questions of the Families... and the

justicars." The last was voiced in a near whisper.

Liara sighed. "I expected this. I doubt anyone would want a pureblood leading one of the Thirty Families, after all." Her voice was flinty, as she brought up her omnitool to look for the codes.,

Mithra's voice was oddly soft as she spoke. "Liara, I did not want this." Liara looked up, a frown of disbelief on her face, mirrored in the looks of Mithra's daughters, but the older asari woman looked sincere, and tired. "I wanted Benezia to recognize the work I've done, the danger Shian endured to strengthen our forces, the influence Yrael has won with the younger generations. I wanted to be *appreciated* for my work in bringing the Armali Council to the Citadel. Most of all, I wanted her to admit that my children had achieved something, while you wasted your time digging in the dirt and being made mock of by Family society." The bitterness in her voice as she said the last was caustic and thick, underlain with sadness and disappointment.

Mithra's gaze pinned Liara. "But I never wanted dead asari littered like leaves in front of our house, or to be forced to steal your birthright from you as my sister smears our name into the dirt. I'm not sorry it must happen, but I would have preferred it to... happen differently." Her stiff expression tightened, in some emotion Liara could not recognize, but in the background Yrael rolled her eyes.

Liara nodded. "I... understand." She tapped a last few keys, and the omnitool pulsed. "I've transmitted all of the authorization codes I have. I... do not know if Benezia changed them."

Mithra's image on the screen flickered as she brought up her own omnitool, tapping rapidly. Several seconds passed before she sagged in relief. "Only some of them. The main accounts with the banks on Sur'kesh haven't been touched. I am transferring funds now. There... isn't much, but it will have to do. We'll put that Vasir bitch back in her place..."

Shian spoke up. "Mother, we should do the heritance transfer remotely. Right now, you don't even have the right to speak for the house, or pledge its funds." She gave a sullen glance to Liara. "And frankly, no offense Liara, but I don't think anyone here has any faith in your ability to lead the family."

Liara bit her lip, then spoke clearly, after tapping a control on her omnitool. "I, Liara T'Soni, only child of Matriarch Benezia T'Soni, chatelaine of the house, resign and refuse my heritage, my rights as house heir, and my voice in Family Council. These I pass to my aunt, Mithra T'Soni, and to her children by blood and name I pass on my portion of the House assets." She tapped her omni-tool again, sending the recording to her aunt, who nodded in return.

"I am afraid, Matriarch Mithra, that I cannot answer the demand to return to Thessia. I am currently in the custody of Commander Shepard of the Systems Alliance, and she has already refused to turn me over to the Citadel Council."

Shian and Yrael traded glances, with Shian speaking. "They are holding you *hostage*?"

Liara shook her head, forcing herself not to stammer, to show nothing but calm. "No. They simply do not wish to allow me to go on my own way, due to Saren's geth and krogan having tried to kill me."

Yrael shrugged, turning to face her mother. "Does it matter? Let the justicars deal with it, we need to organize the rest of the family." Mithra nodded, and rose, following Yrael off to the right, leaving only Shian standing there.

Liara sighed and reached to cut off the screen when her cousin spoke. "Don't come back to Thessia, Liara. Benezia has all but ruined our name, and the added stain of a pureblood in our affairs is something we do not need."

Liara managed to suppress the pain those words inflicted on her, steeling her gaze. "Do not worry yourself, cousin. I am sure with your background in selling narcotics and engaging in wild fights, you

will fit well into the refined upper echelons of Family society."

The shot struck home, the other asari's face flushing angry blue, taking off her wraparound shades to glare daggers at Liara. "I wasn't given the same chances you were, you bitch! Benezia showered you with education and attention. Private tutors. Trips to Palaven and Sur'kesh. Goddamned fetes by the Consort. The rest of the family languished and suffered while you threw away everything she gave you."

Shian ticked off fingers, eyes blazing. "We're not even capable of acting like one of the Thirty any longer, struggling to work like the lower classes to handle our debts. Manae is still trying to afford to go to university. Sisthra had to cancel her marriage to her mate, since we didn't have the money to afford her abandoning her job as a systems engineer. Riala and Mishan struggle to hold two jobs and, and Saris is hoping she can find a job soon. Benezia's crazy investments have been losing money hand over fist. We've been forced to sell almost everything but the core holdings and the house itself, and all the while, you're off playing at being a scientist."

Shian spat. "My mother is too cultured to speak the real truth, but I will. This is **your** fault. You should have been here. Maybe if you had been, Benezia wouldn't have run off after Saren like a lunatic, or felt so depressed she threw herself into mystic claptrap instead of taking care of her fam—"

Liara's hand shot out, killing the vid-link mid-sentence, sending the screen into darkness. It all hit her at once, the rejection, the pain, the realization she'd never see her home again, or walk among the flame-trees her ancestors had planted. Never recline on the ancient stone benches and hear the booming surf, or marvel at the soaring cliffs of the Skypillar mountains, purple and mysterious, in the distance beyond the horizon.

She clenched her fists on her thighs, as tears ran down her cheeks, the emotions coursing through her and leaving her feeling weak and useless.

*Shian is right.. I was so caught up in having my own way I didn't even think what it must have done to my mother. Was my leaving what drove her to Saren? Am I to blame for all of this suffering and death?*

She sagged bonelessly against the booth's wall, letting the sobs rack her, unable to stop them or make any sense of why she was even alive any more. Her dreams of research were ashes, her career destroyed with hateful enemies poised to ruin any possible return. Her own family blamed her for what her mother had become, and she'd just signed away all her rights to leading the house as her mother had trained her to, just to keep it from being bankrupted by unethical enemies.

She wiped her eyes angrily, cursing her weakness. Her mother had been right. She had amounted to very little at all – a heap of worthless research no one cared for, a shattered family, and broken dreams. She'd never be welcome in society – being pureblood was bad enough, but now the stain of being Benezia's daughter would end any chances at a normal life on Thessia. The gossip and melding-enhanced knowing that saturated so many social circles would serve to ostracize her permanently.

She felt so very tired, and she wiped at her eyes again, wishing she had someone to advise her on what to do. But Shiala was dead. Her mother was brainwashed. The only other person she had reached out to at all was Shepard, and the human clearly despised weakness. Compared to her own horrific background, Liara's pitiful tragedy would seem like nothing at all.

*What am I even doing? Sobbing to myself on the Citadel, engaged in a hopeless chase against my own mother? All I wanted to do was to study and be left in peace. Was that so horribly wrong, that I have to watch my entire life unravel?*

The unyielding, opaque walls of the comms booth held no answers but silence.

## O-OSaBC-O

It had been fifteen minutes, and Liara wasn't back yet. Shepard impatiently checked her omni-tool before sighing, unsure of what exactly to do.

A few drinks had helped settle her nerves, which both worried and pleased her. Worried, because she'd never been one for drinking much before, but was pleasantly surprised that simply being able to relax for a moment and have a drink was able to calm her down.

*You're still in amazement you haven't gotten everyone killed, most likely.*

Deciding to make the most of her time, she brought up her omni-tool's news interfaces, scowling as she read about the geth assault on a distant human colony. No word about Prothean ruins, but most likely the truth of that was being suppressed, or Saren was fishing for his next target.

Her omni-tool beeped with an incoming message, from a Samesh Bhatia. She didn't recognize the name yet it somehow sounded familiar. Since it was flagged with an Alliance authorization code, she accepted it – at least it wasn't likely to be fan mail. "Yes?"

A hologram of a strongly featured older man, with sad brown eyes and a thin mouth, appeared above her omni-tool. "I apologize for bothering you, Commander Shepard. My name is Samesh Bhatia, I am the husband of Nirali Bhatia. My wife died on Eden Prime, fighting the geth. Ambassador Udina gave me your comm number."

She remember Udina's remarks about casualties from Eden Prime and the bodies, and now knew why the man's name was familiar – Nirali was one of Ash's friends, who had died a horrible death by some kind of geth plasma flamethrower. "Yes, sir. I am sorry for your loss, your wife's sacrifice helped to enable us to stop the geth from blowing up the entire colony."

The man's face twisted further into sorrow, and confusion. "I know, Commander. But the Alliance will not let me have my wife's body for burial. They say the weapons used on her were unusual and they are holding it for tests... and they have no way of knowing how long the tests will take, or if there will be anything left to bury." His jaw trembled as he fought to keep his composure, eyes rimmed with unshed tears. He swallowed after taking a deep breath. "She wanted so much to be a soldier, even with the stress it caused. All I wanted to do was bury her, and..."

He trailed off, brokenly, and Shepard felt herself shaking. It was anger- the old, burning anger that flooded her, again and again, as the Alliance had used her men and left them to die.

She shook her head, and looked into the man's eyes. "Sir, I don't know what they are doing, or why they think this is acceptable, but I give you my word, before the end of the day you will have your wife's body or I'll be in a goddamned jail cell. I've never heard of anything that fucked up, and whoever is behind it will apologize to you for your loss."

The man looked absurdly grateful, placing his hands together in ritual-looking manner. "Thank you, Commander. My comm number is 650-A-EdnPrm, if you... need me for anything, please call." He ended the message, and Shepard shook her head again, angrily, and slid out from the booth.

As she came to her feet, she saw Liara listlessly walk back in. Something about the little asari was different. She looked broken, had apparently been crying, and the elegance and innocent grace of her walk was gone, replaced with... fatigue and something else. Shepard frowned, walking up to her, and Liara looked up.

"Shepard... I... I think I should just... return to the ship."

Shepard frowned at the flatness in her voice. "What happened?"

Liara's face, open and hurt, twisted into a small, sad smile. "My family just disowned me. Or I them. I have been told not to come home, that my government wants to arrest me and 'question' me, and that my own remaining family members blame me for my mother's actions."

Shepard wondered if the sovereign forces of the universe were just trying to make her angry today, and if so, they were on the right track. The anger gibbered inside of her, demanding a release, and Shepard clamped down on it, instead getting right in Liara's face, lifting her chin to stare directly into her eyes.

She didn't even really know what she was saying; the emotions and words, for once in her life, just synched up effortlessly. "Listen to me, Liara. You're not your mother, and you are not responsible for what she's become. Whatever she did, why she did it, are questions only she knows. I've seen *you*, remember? The lonely hours spent in digs, wondering if you've thrown away your life, the isolation, the sense of not fitting in anywhere." Her eyes probed Liara's gaze, and she was rewarded by a flicker of... something.

She plunged on. "I don't care what other people think about you. Right now you're one of the few people in the damned galaxy I can just talk to, and not end up having them turn what I say against me, or hold me to some kind of ridiculous, heroic standard. I can just be me with you. I... like talking to you. As stupid as that sounds. And I know, above all else, how bad it hurt you when you realized she was the enemy."

Liara sighed, but she was also blushing now. Shepard wouldn't let her look away. "If you think this is just me talking to make you feel good, or like me, or something ridiculous, it isn't. I don't have real *friends*. The last batch threw me away when I did something stupid. Anderson... God, I can't even explain it, he believes in me when I'm not even worth it, and pushes me to be better when I doubt myself., But I don't know *why*. I pal around with Garrus and Wrex but they understand me about as well as they do mass energy physics. And Ash, well... she's the first person to reach out to me that way, in my whole life, but half of that is still misplaced hero worship. "

Shepard let her go. "I was angry when your mind-to-mind thing slipped up, but right now, you're the only person who gets me. I... I hate saying things like that. I don't get myself, I don't get other people. I say stupid shit when I mean something else entirely and I've been lonely and suffering from command fatigue. I've just been flat out fucking *tired* way, way too long to think I'm ... all there anymore. But at least with you, I might figure out how to get what's in my head out. Or heart. Or whatever. Fuck."

Liara gently placed her hand on Shepard's arm. "T-thank you. I would like to think you are my friend, Sara. But I cannot help but wonder if my family is right, about the time I wasted in my life, or the ugly truth that I am all alone now."

Shepard knew that feeling, had experienced it kneeling in the dirt of a dingy bar when the only family she'd known had turned and walked away. She said the words she wished so badly someone had said to her: "You aren't alone, Liara. I may not understand you any better than I do myself, but I'll be damned before I let someone go through what I've been through thinking they don't fucking matter."

Liara's huge blue eyes were fixed on hers, trusting and broken and deep, and Shepard couldn't look away for a long, long moment. Words and emotions bubbled in a useless, flailing froth in the back of her head, unable to spill forth. *This is ridiculous. You've known her for barely two weeks. You can't keep your eyes off of her because you haven't gotten laid in goddamn years.*

She placed both hands on the asari's shoulders, and forced a smile. "Ashley told me that's what friends are for, to take each other's heavy problems. You're not some kind of burden. You haven't been- how did you put it that time? 'Foisted off' on to me. You're here, helping us chase Saren, because I trust you, need your help, and you deserve to be here."

Liara shyly returned the smile, and with that glance the sense of trust the asari had in her, all put into a single look, something inside Shepard twisted, broke, and shattered into a billion pieces. Some ugly black wall, some chain forged of the dark and ugly thing she was and always would be, let go its grip. *Or perhaps you've just wanted someone to look at you that way all your life, and it took someone almost as broken as you to do so and mean it.*

Liara, for her part, felt like a bag of broken glass, her knees shaking in emotional fatigue, as she drank in the unwavering iron gaze of the woman before of her. The casual, hateful words of her cousin, the ugly realization she didn't even own anything but a few sets of clothes and some science tools, the worry that she was responsible for her mother's fall – had nearly broken her in minutes, but Liara drew strength from the commander's words.

*She needs me. I have a task to finish.* She knew, inside, how hard such words must have been for the commander, terrified of saying the wrong thing, unable to articulate whatever was in her head, and Liara bit her lip as she tried to find the courage to make the same kind of step, to just admit she was – *In love? No, she would not believe me. I don't know even if that's the right word. Fascination sounds clinical, infatuation sounds... dirty.* A sigh escaped her lips, as she forced herself to stand up straight.

"T-thank you, Sara. I... I do not know what to say. How do you react to losing your home and family, to having... nowhere to go when this is all over? I am glad I am useful to your search for Saren a-and that you f-find me easy to t-t-talk... to..." Liara trailed off in panicked stuttering, trying to will herself to say something, anything as touching and heartfelt as Shepard had said.

The human woman smiled, a bit sadly. "Calm down, Liara. I just..." Internally, Shepard sighed, but forced her smile to widen. "You need a drink, I think." She steered Liara back to their booth, seating her with a firm pressure to the shoulder, before glancing meaningfully at the bartender.

The little volus waddled over, his gleaming black and white suit impeccably clean and stylish. "Ah, the famous Commander Shepard." -*shhk*- "Welcome back to Flux. I am Doran." -*shhk*- "What can I get you?"

Shepard pointed to Liara with a raised eyebrow. "The strongest you've got in a bottle for an asari, and split Jack Daniels and Johnny Walker Black Label for me, on ice." The volus nodded, and departed.

She glanced around, hoping no one had heard her name, and thankfully, no one sitting near had been paying any attention. Turning back to Liara, she watched helplessly as the asari wiped tears from her cheeks, before glancing up at Shepard. "I am sorry... I must look like a weak f-fool."

Shepard shook her head, sighing. "I've never thought you were weak, Liara. A weak person couldn't biotically bitch slap a geth armature, or endure decades of isolation in pursuit of the truth. A weak person wouldn't be able to stand up and fight their own mother like you did. Don't you ever just... accept that your achievements mean something ? You were right about the Prothean extinctions, and you figured it out with no support or proof. Hell, in half an hour you figured out the Thorian probably wasn't unique, and you just toss it off as a 'silly errand.' You have to start believing in yourself."

Liara sighed. "It is not... so simple. You are a leader, you have had to prove yourself your entire life. I have lived a life that is the very avoidance of validation. You had to defend yourself against armies trying to end your life, the hatred of your own people, and the grieving relatives of those who died. Fighting peer review recommendations or complaining about my ability to dig up Prothean history is not even the same sort of... fight." Liara's voice trailed off, and she rubbed her neck. "I must sound like a whining child, upset that my family has tired of me when untold thousands of people had their families killed on Eden Prime and on Feros."

Shepard shook her head, remembering something Anderson had said. "Anderson once came to me after

all the shit at Torfan. Back then, I just kept every emotion except anger in tight rein. That battle was a nightmare. I'd lost almost everything important to me, and I was being held as a war criminal, with the expectation I'd be dishonorably discharged, shipped back to the Penal Legions, and shot in the head in a 'training accident'. I didn't even care anymore, I was just... empty."

Shepard withdrew a cigarette from her pack, lighting it with slightly trembling fingers. "I was sitting in a goddamned hospital, staring at the walls mindlessly. I just wanted to die. Nothing mattered... everything I'd fought for my whole life had been blown away. He came in, sat next to me, and said words I keep repeating to myself whenever I get down."

Shepard closed her eyes, hearing his baritone voice in her head, feeling the almost tangible belief and faith he had in her. "He said, 'Feeling sorry for yourself for being who you are just proves them right. Don't. *Fight*, and make them *see* who you are.'"

Liara swallowed. "And what if I *am* nothing?" She held up one hand, a sad smile flitting across her perfect features. "What if I am merely a failure, and nothing I set my hand to succeeds?"

Shepard reached out, taking the slender blue hand I her own, the cool flesh trembling in her grip. "Then you get angry, and remember the good times, and the faith people have in you. You don't feel sorry for who you are. You prove the people who believe in you right, no matter how much that hurts, because you can't let them down."

Liara's eyes closed, her mother's voice ringing in her head. '*She is my daughter, and no matter what she decides to become, she will be great. I will always be proud of you, Little Wing.*' A sigh of pain slipped from her, and she wiped more tears from her eyes with a shaking motion. "It hurts to do so."

Shepard nodded, as the volus brought their drinks. She let go of Liara's hand to grab her drink, and slammed it back, feeling the powerful mixed whiskey tear into her body. "Yeah well... feeling hurts. That's... ha... That's how you know it matters."

Liara regarded the slender glass of pris para for a long moment before following Shepard's lead, letting the fiery liquor slide down her throat to ignite in her belly. She sighed, and Shepard saw the tension in her face recede just a fraction.

*Getting blasted with a depressed, upset beautiful alien teen who is crushing on you is just a really, really bad idea.*

With a smirk, she gestured to Doran again. "Might as well bring the fucking bottles, volus. Gonna be here a while. Make mine scotch."

Liara glanced across at her, expression unreadable. "I am... not usually a heavy drinker, Sara. The last time I got heavily inebriated was just before my near capture on Therum."

Shepard shrugged. "Yeah, neither am I. Anderson drank all the time, and I'm starting to understand why." She smiled at the volus as he brought a bottle of scotch, and a second curved blue glass bottle filled with faintly green liquid. "Like I give a shit. Bottoms up."

Liara blushed. "I... ah..." She stammered in an extremely agitated manner, and Shepard frowned. Mortified, Liara finally spat out, "I-is that s-some kind of... sexual slang?"

Shepard couldn't help but erupt into laughter. "Oh god, you're adorable. No, it's a... way of saying 'drink up'. Sorry."

The flush on the asari's cheeks deepened. "I seem to have a very good ability at making a fool of myself..." She poured herself a second drink, bracing her hand on the table before draining the glass, and Shepard grinned as the asari's eyes unfocused. She puffed on her cigarette, letting the taste of the tobacco blend with that of her drink, and let her grin become a smile.

"We're all fools, Liara. All lost in the flow of every day struggles. Best you can do is find a moment of calm, perhaps even joy, before death takes everything." She poured scotch into the tumbler the volus had provided, and hoped for the best. "Besides, we can play a game of how many awkward statements we can make in an hour or two of drinking." She drained her own glass, and the asari's lips curved in amusement.

Liara considered the bottle of strong asari liquor in front of her, and poured again. *Merciful oblivion... or drunken confessions? Which do I hope for tonight? Perhaps the best plan is to stop thinking and start drinking.* She let the smile spread on her face, and drained the glass. "I... how did you... manage to keep going after your... first crew abandoned you for being you?"

Shepard felt a jolt of pain, muted by the alcohol. She gave a sad smile, laced with irony. "Shit, who said I did? There are times I feel like I was dead from Torfan until the day we landed on Eden Prime., Dead and just shuffling along like a zombie." She pondered her scotch, then glanced up at the blue vision of beauty sitting across from her.

"But mostly, I got by just by focusing on one day at a time. Still am, really, Liara. That's all you can do. One day at a time, finding little things to fight for, to believe in, and to... hang on to."

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## Chapter 62: Chapter 53: Eingana, Arrival

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*A/N: This is the first seriously AU mission. Rather than pointlessly hunting down whatever small chores Hackett has for us ("Shepard. We need your help. I can't find my toupee"), the Normandy will be either whittling down Saren's support or tracing his movements. On occasion some of the missions will tie in, but they'll have a clearer connection to Saren.*

*Eingana's little blurb about the Tho'ian always intrigued me, but so did the fact that Liara never got to really show off how smart she was in the game. Liara's no hardened soldier, but she is a scientist and using that should have been .. something we got to see.*

*The next chapter will probably go out this weekend or Monday. Finally, the Fic of the Day is by **Something Like Home** by tarysande. Garrus fic, but very .. touching. And of course, if you haven't been reading **Without an end** by Bebus, you're some kind of husk. The most recent chapter is, perhaps, one of the best I've ever read.*

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"Normandy, you are cleared for departure."

Joker ran his hands across the haptic controls in front of him, his features cast in a golden glow as he brought up the primary navigation control panels. "Acknowledged, Alliance tower. Disengaging docking clamps, beginning retrograde movement."

Shepard stood behind him in the cockpit, waiting for the ship to move before taking down the mic for the IMC. "All hands, this is the commander. First of all, I want to thank you all for giving everything you had at Ferros. We took some hard hits – namely, Dr. T'Soni and I almost died – and we got close to suffering the same fate as the colony or the Citadel Fleet."

She paused a moment, her voice growing stern. "That is why I declared a three-day shore leave, and that's why, although some of you got into a great deal of trouble or otherwise violated regs, no captain's masts or reprimands are coming down. We weren't ready, and we got lucky. Everyone deserves to blow off a little steam... let's just avoid doing it naked in the elevators, shall we?"

She heard sniggers and laughter in the ops alley, and let it die down before continuing.

"I don't intend to rely on luck twice. Right now we're headed to Eingana. We're going to be doing some research, following up on leads we developed on Feros, and then coming back to the Citadel, very briefly, to on-load equipment. During transit there and back, we'll be running shipboard combat, damage control, and engineering exercises. Upon return to the Citadel, we will dock only long enough to load the supplies and equipment. "

"The equipment we'll get includes top of the line battle armor for every member of the ground team and the Marine contingent on board, and durable, upgraded suits for every single crewman on the ship. We're ditching the Onyx and Avengers for Crossfire rifles, flame units, grenades, and Predator battle armor. Your platoon chiefs will be meeting with you to discuss promotions and the possibility of rating changes."

She thinned her lips, and spoke again, more softly. "Once we finish up with Eingana and the Citadel, we'll be headed out to follow up on a request from Rear Admiral Kahoku. We are going in to battle against Cerberus, and we're going to be outnumbered and possibly outgunned. Every member of the team – be it ground-side or space-side – has to be ready to give everything to ensure our success. I do not accept or tolerate failure. You all know my history. You all know what I've had to do. And by now, you should all know that if we fail Saren will kill our families, and friends He will destroy our homes in the name of whatever twisted scheme is in his head."

"Department heads, council observers, and squad leaders meet me at 1400 hours." She paused, then added "Lieutenant Alenko, report to my office immediately. That is all."

Joker waited until she was done to speak up. "We've cleared the docks and ring, commander. All systems nominal, alignment on Widow mass relay is 98%."

Shepard nodded. "Pressley has the deck, jump on his say-so, Flight Lieutenant. I don't wish to be bothered until the 1400 duty meeting." She walked down the ops alley, taking note of the crew's posture. They looked relaxed, a bit tired, but calm. The motions of the men and women in her command were crisp and efficient, and she nodded to herself as she headed to the stairs.

Arriving in her stateroom, she had enough time to sit at her desk before the door chime sounded. "Come!"

Kaidan entered, in his dress blues, freshly pressed. His hair was neatly trimmed, but he looked pale and worried. "Lieutenant Alenko, reporting, Ma'am."

Shepard stood, in a single, lithe move, crossing the cabin. "Lieutenant, what the hell were you thinking?"

Kaidan swallowed, staring straight ahead. "I ..don't have an excuse, ma'am. I would point out that I was inebriated." His voice was stiff, but stable, and Shepard sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose.

"At ease, Lieutenant." Alenko fractionally relaxed, folding his arms behind him, and Shepard stalked over to the wall, leaning against it almost tiredly. "I'm not even sure where to fucking begin. First, you're my BDO. You're the guy I trust to lead my jarheads when I'm off with the aliens. You're supposed to be someone who puts the needs of the goddamned squad ahead of everything else."

Kaidan glanced down. "I know, ma'am."

Shepard snorted. "If you fucking knew, why'd you do it? See, Ash I can give a pass on. She just watched her entire unit get fucked into the ground by geth, not two weeks ago. She watched her colony get set on fire. She's spent her whole career being fucked over by the SA admiralty because of something her grandfather did. And she's hurting inside, because of all of that shit. Even *I* can see that.

Doing something stupid like 'the Deed' with her superior officer? Dumb, but hey, I get it."

Shepard paced, flinging a hand out in icy agitation. "But you? You're not some stupid fucking lug, fit only to haul around a gun. You've got FIVE goddamned ratings. C5 biotic specialist, A3 infantry clearance. P3 weapons, a damned D5 ODT, and H1 medic. You have a freaking masters' degree according to your records."

Kaidan looked up, exhaling. "Yes, ma'am."

Shepard got in his face, eyes narrowed. And, he realized, those eyes weren't just angry, but hurt and disappointed. Her voice took on an edge of despair as she spoke. "I've got crazy shit going on all around me. The SA admirals are all over my ass because I'm not *smooth* enough for whatever the fuck they want from me. Udina tells me they're basically expecting me to fail. Thanks to his bitch of a wife, Pressly's a wreck, and thanks to her family, Dr. T'Soni is going to goddamned pieces just when I need her to decipher goddamned alien... shit. I've got crazy black-ops groups plotting God only knows what, fucked up protestors stalking me, one of the only friends I had left in the universe ups and *vanishes*, leaving me a note saying not much more than 'deuces, bitch'."

She exhaled, still staring at him. "And now, as if this situation was not fucked up enough, as if my limited ability to get this job done is not narrow enough, the one guy I need to be rock fucking solid, my Battle Duty Officer, is banging his direct subordinate, right before major combat operations. Saying you fucked up isn't good enough. I fucked up once. The bitch deliberately seduced me, and lead me astray. I got my unit killed. So, are you honestly going to tell me you can't even control your dick?"

Alenko exhaled, closing his eyes. "Permission to speak freely, ma'am."

Shepard waved an agitated hand. "Speak, for fuck's sake."

Alenko nodded. "I... I'm dying, Shepard. Slowly." He gave a small smile at the suddenly shocked look on Shepard's face, continuing in an almost dead voice. "I told you before that L2's have a lot of problems, and I got off easy with just migraines. That's true. Sort of. I also have Degenerative Neural Dissociative Disorder. Every day, the eezo nodes in my brain leech away at my neurons. One day the entire chemistry of my brain will just come apart. I could go crazy, or turn into a vegetable, or just start forgetting who I am."

Shepard exhaled. "Why the fuck doesn't your record say anything?"

Alenko sighed. "The diagnosis wasn't made by Alliance doctors. I had an episode on my last transfer, before being assigned to the Normandy. I blacked out while traveling back to Earth, and I came to in a medical office on Omega. A salarian doctor discovered it." He shrugged, weakly. "He said t that it was almost certainly going to happen in the next two years."

Alenko brought his hands up, gesturing to the ship. "I guess I could have reported it, but the Alliance would have scrubbed me from active duty. I'd have been medically discharged, and sent home to stare death in the face, waiting uselessly. I can't do that, Shepard."

The young lieutenant gave a sad smile. "So yeah. I fucked up bad with Ash. I had sex with another human being who was hurting and maybe I gave her—and myself—something to remember. Maybe I was lonely and scared from damn near dying on Feros, or maybe I did what I did because, well, I'm not going to be around much longer. I know it was unprofessional and could cause problems, and I can't make any excuses, and if you think it's safer with me off the ship I won't argue."

Shepard rubbed her temples. "Jesus fucking Christ, Alenko. What... did you tell Ash?"

Kaidan sighed. "I didn't tell her anything about it. It's... not like we're dating. I wasn't planning on it happening, and after, I just figured, one way or another, this thing would be over and it would be a

better time to talk about it. And honestly, Commander . . . with Saren out there, geth, Cerberus... does it matter?"

Shepard gave a hollow, tired sounding laugh. "No, it doesn't really matter, Lieutenant." She glanced up, and all the depth, the tiredness, the anger, even the disappointment he'd seen in her gaze was gone. Those blue eyes were cold, empty, and calm. "If you can't pull your weight, I'll dump you. If you endanger the crew or the mission, I'll kill you myself. If you can't keep your judgment clear where Chief Williams is involved, you're useless to me. Am I clear?"

Kaidan managed, barely, to suppress a shiver. "Yes, ma'am. Crystal clear."

Shepard gestured to the chair at the small table in the corner. "Sit your ass down." She waited until he did so, hands on his knees, and then turned to face him more fully. "I am... not handling this well. We haven't even started and that turian bastard has beaten us twice already. I can't even get any more goddamned marines or a single SAIS agent, because my own goddamned government still sees me as little more than a thug."

She angrily shoved her hair back out of her face, eyes flicking left and right. "Alenko, I've been trying, really hard, to... do this the right way. Pushing myself way outside my comfort zone with people. Making myself talk to the crew, the aliens, everybody. Not tearing people's heads off for stupid shit. Risking the mission on Therum instead of just having your platoon draw fire from us."

She looked up, the planes of her face set like stone. "I can't do it if I can't be sure people have my back one hundred percent. I'll sacrifice every mother fucking person on this boat over a goddamned altar with a stone knife if it's required to stop Saren, but I don't *want* to. I'm fucking tired of having to be covered in other people's blood to get the job done. I want this to go right so I can . . . be something else. *Anything* else. But that won't happen if my own people *hide the fact that they are fucking DYING!*" The last was uttered in a howl of almost liquid rage, the eyes slitted and yet almost on fire with unspent emotion. She stood akimbo, weight slanted to one side, hands curled into fists and tendons standing out on her muscled arms.

Kaidan said nothing, brown eyes large and liquid, wondering how much pressure Shepard was under. Then he shook his head and spoke, carefully picking every word. "I don't think any of us really get what the pressure must be like, Ma'am. I know we all have our regrets. Mine was in biotic training, under Conatix. I did something, in a moment of rage, that cost me the respect of someone that mattered, and cost someone else their life."

He squared his shoulders. "But the whole reason I didn't say much about my condition is the same thing you just said. I'm not going to quit, or just lay back and let things happen. You have everything I have left, Commander. I could be with my family, spending however it is long I have left in comfort. But I'm here, knowing I could get taken out tomorrow."

Kaidan glanced away, folding his hands, nervously. "Every member of the Normandy crew knows your history. We know that, like you said, when push comes to shove, you'll shove. We've all seen the vids, heard the rumors, walked past the protestors. If I thought what I was going through would affect the mission, I'd have told you. But if I'm going to die no matter what, I want to go out on my feet. I want to die hard, and die like a Marine should."

Kaidan looked back at her. "What happened with Ash won't affect the mission. If you think it will, you have the authority to brevet Master Chief Cole. He's got years more experience than me. Brevet him to Lieutenant Commander and put me in charge of his platoon, and then I'm not in charge of Ash any longer."

Shepard gave Kaidan a long, searching look, before shaking her head. "First time you fuck up, that's

exactly what I'm going to do, if I don't just shoot your ass. Don't make me regret this, Lieutenant Alenko. You are dismissed. Be at the 1400 meeting in standard BDU's." She straightened her posture as Alenko stood and saluted.

"Thank you, ma'am." He turned on a heel and left, the door hissing shut behind him a moment later.

Shepard rubbed her forehead gingerly, and pulled out a cigarette. "What the fuck else can go wrong?"

O-OSaBC-O

*Had to ask yourself that question, didn't you, silly bitch?*

Shepard stared at the sensor readings from Eingana, as the Normandy orbited in stealth over the green tinted garden world. Pale oceans of greyish water lapped at shores of black sand, and the ruins of cities and defense installations were overrun by tangled vines, sprouting black bulbs and oddly shaped circular leaves.

The telemetry feed was of the campsite, setup by the University of Lanthas, a turian institution. On the world searching for Inusannon weapons systems or at least ideas, the team had supposedly been prepared for any problems. 5 talon fighters, a light cruiser with a pair of frigates, and several gunships should have seen off any pirate incursions, and a reinforced detachment of 100 turian soldiers should have equally been up to the task of fighting off anything that landed covertly.

The campsite was, instead, eerily empty. The Normandy did not usually have remote scouting capabilities, but Tali'Zorah had painstakingly spent money and time on the Citadel, working with Joker to build a remote scouting drone. The drone, nicknamed Sleepy due to the half-lidded armored shell, hovered silently past empty tents.

"We're not picking up any radio signatures of any kind, Commander. Spectro search of low orbit and La Grange points has turned up zilch for orbital debris." Pressly's voice was tight and concerned, as he handed a datapad of scan results back to one of his ops techs. "The comm beacon for the system is untouched. The last communication was a perfectly normal status report less than 6 hours ago."

Shepard nodded. "Well, that's just completely fucking creepy. Joker, pan that drone around the camp."

The flight lieutenant complied, and Shepard studied the image carefully. The turian camp had been built on a heavy bluff of granite overlooking one of the ruined cities. A stream cut into the base of the bluff, and the vegetation – heavy warped looking tree-like things and bizarre ground cover that looked like felt dotted with circular flowers – was burned away in a precise circle 50 yards in all directions from the camp's edges.

Turian field structures, angular and slanted, formed neat rows around a central area, where hexagonal tents had been pitched, then reinforced with sandbags. Two of the field structures were clearly armories for the turian ground troops, as neat racks of rifles and turian lance cannons could be seen stacked along the walls.

There was no blood, no sign of bodies or struggle, not a single sign of anything. They were just... gone. Shepard cursed. "Pressly, pack this video up along with all our sensor logs, put it out on the comm beacon for immediate transmission." Pressly nodded, turning away, and Shepard tapped the comms console. "Liana, are you tapped into the drone's findings?"

Liana's voice sounded softly from the speaker. "I am, Shepard. I am running a scan of the atmosphere."

Shepard frowned. "Why?"

Liana spoke a moment later. "Because I can think of only one reason why everything and everyone at the site would be missing without a fight, Commander. And the scans agree. The atmosphere is heavy

with the same spores that were found on Feros. My hypothesis, based on the stonework of the Thorian's chamber matching the debris here, was correct. The only possibility that fits the evidence is that there is another Thorian here, and it has taken the turians as thralls, much as the Feros one did to the colonists."

Shepard sighed, feeling like a fool. "Of course. It took them over... probably spread its infection to the spaceships. Fuck, that's not good." She turned back to the ops deck. "Friggs, punch up the mass relay's jump log. Anything recent?"

The navigator worked swiftly, sending an encoded query pulse to the relay. She frowned, her angular features looking confused. "Not... recently. It hasn't been triggered since one incoming supply vessel arrived 19 days ago. Nothing has left via the mass relay since."

Pressly looked up from preparing his broadcast. "Nav plot shows nothing in FTL range, really. Two empty binary systems and a dwarf star with an old gas giant. Nowhere else to go, and there's no HE3 facilities on this side of the relay. I'd guess those ships are either in system or down on the ground, shut down."

Shepard nodded, and pulled down the IMC. "All hands, set battle stations. Set stealth, load power to the disruptor torpedoes, and go weapons hot. Marines, suit up for hostile atmospheric insertion. All council observers meet in the comms room ASAP."

O-OSaBC-O

"Here's the plan. We have two working Makos, and I plan to use them both. First squad under Master Chief Cole will deploy with Tali and Liara. You'll land away from the campsite, and the Normandy will cover you. Set up Liara's equipment and set a defensive position. Liara, you'll take your samples and readings, and deploy the marines to recover... items of interest, where possible. Three man teams. Tali, you'll set up and monitor filtration and bio-hazard safety, as well as the comm link."

Shepard glanced at Alenko. "Lieutenant, you, Chief Williams, and Second Squad will land directly at the edge of the camp site. Retrieve any documents, messages, or electronics you can, and transmit in the clear to Liara. Have your squad set defensive positions near the turian armory shack. Once you are secure, I want that command center locked down and comms logs pulled. Alenko, you'll need to keep on top of things as well as make sure your bio-hazard safety is observed."

Shepard sighed. "Garrus, Wrex, you're with me. I've got the drone doing wide area scans, and so far the only thing we've found is tire tracks leading from the command center of the camp towards that ruined city at the base of the cliffs. We're going in to check it out. We'll carry demo charges, incendiary grenades, and flame units. Leave the sniper rifles, and take shotguns. We see what we can find – if it's zombies, we burn and pull back. If there's a Thorian in there and it's willing to talk, we talk."

Shepard glanced around the room. "We have no idea if the researchers here knew about the Thorian, but they were pretty well equipped for digging around looking for old weapons tech. Assume the worst. If something points a gun at you, down it. This is not a rescue mission. We've all seen just how nasty these plant fuckers can get, and I have no wish to find out what kind of wonderful shit it can make turians into. Questions?"

Liara spoke first, somewhat hesitantly. "Are we going to assume that this creature is hostile? We did not even get a chance to talk to the last one. Is it possible that the researchers... woke it up, and it is not hostile?"

Shepard shrugged. "Honestly, I don't know or care. It could sing goddamned Christmas carols and bake cookies for small children, and I'd still be inclined to set it on fire. We haven't got our updated gear yet, so the fight would be bad enough, but if the thing has control of turian marines, we'll be facing seriously well-equipped troops in uneven, urban terrain."

She sighed. "We assume hostility and get out as fast we can. If we have to fight the turian ships they brought with them, that's 3 to 1 odds not in our favor." She glanced around the room again. "Any other questions?"

Garrus looked uncomfortable, and finally spoke. "Shepard, are we seriously ruling out trying to rescue anyone? Turian civilians are trained for a fight, but I seriously doubt they knew the risks of dealing with the Thorian."

Shepard shook her head. "If Liara hadn't done analysis on the stonework, we'd never have connected the Tho'ians who fought the Inusannon with the Thorian. The planet's a garden world. They probably never had a goddamned chance, if what I learned from Jeong is right. We can't assume anything right now, Garrus. Once we figure out what the fuck is going on... maybe."

She looked him in the eye. "But I'll be honest with you – I'm not going to pull my punches. We're not going to do anything stupid, like knock turians out and risk infecting the Normandy to save them, and we're not going to break full bio-security for any reason. Once we prep to return, the whole goddamn ship gets vented to vacuum and we'll take a cruise through close solar approach to sterilize the hull."

Garrus made a jerky nod, and Shepard stood. "You've got ten minutes. There's thermal sealant tape, six or seven rolls of it, in the cargo bay. Tape off your suit joints, and take suit breech patches just in case. We don't have a large supply of the drugs needed to clear these spores out of your system, so stay alert." She gestured, and the group broke up, but she paused to touch Wrex's arm, holding him back until the room was empty save for the two of them.

"I don't know what's going on down there, but I need you to keep your eyes open, Wrex. The crew is not used to the idea that killing can be a mercy."

Wrex nodded, red eyes shifting to glance at the door. "The turian smells of conflict, but he'll follow your lead. Soldier-sniffers, the lot of them, turians always do what the leader says do, even if they hate it." The krogan shifted his gaze to Shepard. "You were expecting this to be a simple job, weren't you?"

Shepard exhaled. "Yeah, I was. Stupid of me given how the universe seems to be working on pissing me off."

Wrex laughed. "My first rule is to only take jobs that involve shooting people in the head. My second rule is that if you can't, then expect everything that can go bad to go worse than that." The krogan headed for the doorway. "If we're going to take shotguns, Garrus snagged the shotgun that blue bitch of Saren's had. Might be a good idea to toss it to Liara."

Shepard nodded, thoughtfully, and the krogan departed.

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## Chapter 63: Chapter 54: Eingana, Revelation

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*A/N: I have some reservations about going in this kind of direction, but there's no real good way to do it. The story needs hard evidence of just how dangerous the Reapers are.*

*Bioware always acted like Shepard had presented the Council with rock solid fact, but until ME2 he didn't present them with much of anything. The frustration that we're supposedly supposed to feel skirts the question : if you were a galactic leader and some guy said alien death machines were coming back to eat everyone unless you suspended the economy and focused on nothing but things to fight them with...how would you react? As a political leader? Hell, as an alien?*

*This time, in my AU, the documentation and the threat is there, mostly found and pieced together by*

*T'Soni, but with the tactical or strategic value thought through by Shepard. When the Council buries it, it's not due to a lack of belief, but rather the belief that announcing it openly would cause chaos, and out of concern for indoctrination.*

*There are TWO Fics of the Day, both newly started and wonderful reads. The first is **A Heart of Darkness** by sepovida, illustrating a cruel, dark and on the surface passionless Shepard leveling with Liara about his true feelings, right before the end of the Reaper War. The second fic is **With Lions** by wolfstar888. This is not my usual sort of piece, and yet I couldn't help but smile and several time break out into open laughter. There's something here, a Shepard who hides behind silliness to hide the pain.*

*As usual, if you aren't reading Owelpost and Bebus's work, and Meladark's, you should be turned into a husk. A hanar husk.*

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The Mako was crowded as it fell through the atmosphere of Eingana, the mass effect core flaring and the reaction jets firing constantly to slow its fall. Marines checked bandoleers of frag grenades, and the two flame units were having a diagnostic run on them. Daylight would begin to falter all too quickly, in less than two hours. To approach during nighttime was suicidal, and the alternative – waiting through the forty-four hour day until the next sunrise – simply was impractical.

Shepard stared out the slanted, smoked glass windshield of the Mako at the rapidly approaching terrain below. The landing site the turians had chosen was at the base of a series of tall, jagged cliffs overlooking the ruins of what must have been a large city. The buildings that remained were mostly sharp, weathered blue and black stumps, but here and there were curved, alien arches and almost bulbous reinforced pods jutting up from the ground.

A river of gray, sluggish water wound in a sinuous ribbon through the city, wearing patiently away at the granite of the cliffs for miles before draining into a large lake, its banks deformed by huge craters from some kind of impact weapon. The ancient lines of some kind of ground transport network crisscrossed the river in places, a wide path of flat terrain lined with scraps of buildings leading towards a break in the cliffs. Atop the cliffs the turian camp perched defiantly, separated from the creeping vegetation by a broad swath of burned ground.

*Excellent defensive set up. No way to sneak up, clear lines of overlapping fire, and water right there as long as you have a purifier.*

And everywhere, crumpled into piles, smashed into strips of wreckage, or merely hulking in the distance, were the wreckage of ships. Hundreds of them. They fell into two broad styles, still discernible despite the eon-long time since they'd crashed. Some were long, smooth lines and curves defining their edges, and with tubular segments sweeping forward. Studded with pods and curves, they were clearly related to the few standing buildings. The other ships were best described as subtly wrong. Their angles were too obtuse, their hulls a deep, inky black that shone with a dim yellow sheen where the light caught it, mottled with what looked like dark patches of blue here and there. Openings vented to space irregularly, their lines organic, almost looking like something grown. Here, the edge of a wing-like structure was lined in something like snake scales; there, the upper concave portion of what was command deck had the curve of a skull's eye sockets.

The wrecks were covered in the rapidly growing vegetation, except in a few places where the ground was discolored by the sparkling blue of eezo. There, nothing grew, and nothing existed save bare dirt, even rock leeching to dust under its power.

The vegetation was concerning – most of it was slowly ambulatory, snapping serrated vines out to slash and snap at anything moving. The fauna they'd seen from the drone was even more frightening.

Mutated by chemicals and altered by eezo dust for over a hundred thousand years, the animals were heavily plated, often biotic, and very aggressive. A pack of some six-legged beasts the size of horses, but with armored plates and two foot long spikes angled forward on their shoulders, rambled around the city's edges, insolently nibbling on plants, ignoring the feeble strikes from vines and fruit that exploded into spores.

With a heavy thud and a whiplash motion that made several marines curse the designer, the Mako landed, skidding in thick muck to a slow halt. Shepard punched up the machine's damage control readout and saw no warnings. "We're down. Mako-2, report."

The dry voice of Garrus rumbled out of the comm panel. "I remain amazed you primitives never thought to build landing shuttles, but this thing came down safely. We're outside the camp now. No sign of movement. No damage."

Shepard nodded to herself, and keyed the comm to the other Mako to keep it open. "Listen up. Team One is on the cliffs. They're going to be searching for what they can find up there. Team Two will stay with Dr. T'Soni as she examines the spaceship wreckage for clues. Keep the Mako's scanners going, and ensure comms aren't disrupted. Whatever happened down here was bad, and it happened fast enough that no one had a chance to get a call for help off."

She checked the incendiary impact load on her ODIN, and snapped her helmet into place. "Maintain full bio-safety at all times. No exceptions, no excuses. Full decon before you get into the Mako, and vacuum decon with bleach and UV when we hit the Normandy upon return."

She glanced around, watching as helmets were put on, and thermal tape snugged around gaps. "One final thing. There's every possibility that the Turians may be under the control of an alien life form, one we saw on Feros. If they make any, I repeat, any hostile motions, gestures, or statements of any kind, deadly force is authorized. Do not hesitate. Do not check and do not call for permission." She glanced at the comms panel, knowing Garrus was unhappy about this.

Surprisingly, he spoke. "If you have to shoot to kill a turian, don't bother with body shots. Shoot at the hip or the head. Standard turian military response to intruders is to level a weapon in your direction and demand you halt and announce your presence. Commander, the weapon pointing is not necessarily a hostile response, but if they go hot our rifles shift the battle optics from orange to blue."

Shepard nodded. "Everyone got that? If they react like normal turians, face them in prudent shield defensive posture. No heroics. Your primary objectives are to defend Dr. T'Soni, Tali'Zorah and her comm equipment setup, and the Makos, in that order. The secondary objectives for Team One are to locate and identify intel in the turian camp, either on their research or what happened to them. Team Two is to assist Liara with whatever she needs in her examination."

She glanced at Wrex. "Once we've gotten secure here, and located what we can from the sites, Mako-2 will drive to our location. You'll set up a battle line behind the Makos, and I'll go in with Garrus, Wrex, and probably Cole. The tracks the drone spotted head to one of the few large intact buildings in the city. Given the shit we ran into on Feros, leading a large amount of Marines into close quarters combat is... not advisable. If we come running, get ready to hold out and use stand-off tactics."

She patted the top of her helmet. "Seal up, DETA filters on. Let's go."

O-OSaBC-O

Garrus had done lots of dangerous things in his life. He'd performed counter-sniper infiltration under artillery fire in the turian military, gone hand-to-hand against a krogan arms smuggler on the Citadel, and been chased by two gunships in a light fighter for the few months he'd worked on C-Sec Border security. He'd been in ships that had been holed and were on fire from stem to stern and seen the awful

light of disruptor torpedoes slamming into a cruiser.

But the eerie, almost pregnant silence, slowly fading sunlight outside, and the perfect condition of the camp of the archeology team was enough to send shake-shivers across all his plates, and his fringe was as stiff as iron rods as he took in the surroundings.

Three-man teams spread out across the Turian camp, investigating. They found ration packs neatly stacked, the curved cots that fit a turian spine neatly made, and pictures of little turian kids or slender, willowy turian females tacked up on walls. The armory was spotless enough that even Williams seemed jealous. "Jeez, Detective, your soldiers make humans look like slobs."

Garrus shrugged. "Turians like a neat campsite, but... this is off, even for us. This is the sort of thing you'd see at a training brigade, or talon guard unit, not a field expedition." He paused, glancing around. "There's no unit designations *anywhere*. No spirit marks, no colony flags, nothing."

Williams snorted. "Well, it's good to know not all turians have a stick up their ass. Sir." Garrus glanced over his shoulder, but he gave a chuckle as well. For all the distrust the human soldier seemed to have of aliens in general, at least the past few weeks had seen her soften the tiniest bit towards him, personally.

Garrus lead Williams and Specialist Jackson inside the turian command center. The building was made of cheap, omni-gel shaped plascrete, poured in preset shapes and fitted together with bolts and clamps of hardened omni-gel. The doors slid open smoothly, and Garrus took point. "We've used the same command layout for a thousand years. There will be a secure armory and a medbay on the left, the commander's office and quarters on the right, and then a set of stairs. At the top is a circular command center. Coming off of that like claws are the comms room, power systems, sensor array room, and unit shrine."

Williams made a small coughing noise. "Unit shrine, sir?"

Garrus flicked a mandible behind his opaque faceplate. "Every turian military unit has a personal spirit, the history of the unit and its sacrifices embodied in the shrine." He aimed his Avenger assault rifle down the hallway, and frowned. "Let's check the secure armory first. Outside would only be battle rifles and the lance cannons, but not the lance cannon locks or heavy weapons. If they got into a fight, they'd have expended munitions and that would be tracked in the armory computers."

Specialist Jackson shrugged. A big man even for a Marine, his drawling accent was made less harmless sounding by the menacing grumble of his voice. "Hell, turians sure don't fuck around when it comes to guns, do ya? Lance cannons?"

Garrus gave a small chuckle, and reached the secure armory door. It was a hexagon, outlined in bright red, with the turian symbols and script for danger imprinted on the metal. He frowned and pulled up his omnitool to access the door lock systems, searching for his C-Sec lockpick program. "Turians don't have heavy support weapon specialists like the human military, Specialist. Everyone has to be able to pick up any job at a moment's notice. Lance cannons are pretty much point and shoot and then dead guys everywhere." He paused, the omnitool's readout beeping as it worked the decryption on the lock. "Course, that's why we keep the firing keys securely locked up."

The door hissed open, and Garrus stepped in, but came to an immediate halt. Tapping his comms, he contacted Shepard. "We have a problem, Commander. The outside armory is fully stocked, but the secure armory has been... well, wrecked."

He gazed around the room. The rack of double-action Phaeston assault rifles was untouched, dust free and in perfect shape. But the long box that held the lance cannon keys had been literally ripped open and the small crystalline objects were in shards on the floor. The Vakian cyclical assault cannons were

bent and twisted, and the two Heixon heavy rocket launchers were similarly crumpled and broken. The armory computer was smashed, and a pile of burned data cards were in a pile of ashes next to it. "The heavy weapons are all destroyed, along with the lance cannon keys. Armory computer and backups are trashed." He paused. "The armory was ... securely locked, Shepard. That means the soldiers who were here did this, then locked it back up."

Shepard's voice crackled in his helmet. "Why the fuck would they wreck their heavy guns but not their standard weapons, then lock it all back up? What the hell is going on?"

Garrus sighed, and clicked over to the inter-squad channel. "Trio 1, anything?"

The first three-man team was going through the tents and prefabs. Sergeant Jacobs spoke. "We got nothing making sense. Everything is picture perfect, except there's a locker full of smashed data pads, like... crushed so bad you can't salvage dick from them. Other than that, nothing. No blood, no bodies, no sign of struggle."

Garrus flicked a mandible in irritation. "Trio 2?"

The other three-man team was going through the science lab area. The female corporal in charge sounded tired. "Lots of notes on the alien ships. Got some more busted up data-pads, like the other guys, but some data pads are fine. We're going through them and uploading 'em to Doctor T'Soni."

Shepard broke in on the line. "Good. Liara, found anything yet?"

The dulcet tones of the asari sounded worried and distant. "Yes, but I am still... piecing things together. The turians did some light excavating around the dreadnaught not far from the city. There are lots of tire-tracks, some trash... but no people. Their results are... I will need to review some of what Corporal Tanner has sent me."

Shepard sighed, her voice sharpening. "Tali, comms status?"

The perky voice of the quarian made Garrus smile with its enthusiasm. "The comms link is stable and we're uploading to the Normandy, Commander. I'm... not picking up any other active communications. I've got the drone up in the air, keeping an eye on the wildlife, but they aren't coming any closer. The Mako's sensor suite is not very good, but I have active LADAR working. No contacts."

Shepard barked a few orders at the other search teams, and Garrus turned to Williams and Jackson. "Let's keep moving. Commander's office is next." He walked carefully across the narrow corridor, trying the door and then easing it open with the muzzle of his rifle. His eyepiece lit up the dark interior automatically, and he stepped inside fully, sweeping the room once for motion before hitting the light switch.

The commander's office was fairly small, and the floor was plastic sheeting. The prefab walls had been sprayed with a bronze color, and a unit flag was hung on the wall, green edged in black, triangular, and embossed with a white turian hand drawn into a fist. His claw touched the cloth, hesitantly, then jerked back as if burned.

Williams and Jackson both gave him a look, but he ignored them, his mind racing. *Spirits of fire, no wonder everything is so precise and perfect.*

Garrus swallowed, keying his mic. "Shepard... more problems. This wasn't some backwater set of auxiliaries guarding this camp. This was the Third Palaven Heavy Infantry."

Shepard's voice was a bit breathy, as she grunted. "Sorry, moving some wreckage. Third Palaven, huh? Is that like our Honor Guard? Mostly a mix of bad asses usually doing ceremonial duty?"

Garrus shook his head absently to himself before rolling his eyes at his own stupidity and talking

instead. "Not... exactly. The Third Palaven was, ah, dishonored during a colony rebellion some thirty years ago. They were overrun and, instead of holding the line like they were supposed to, actually broke. Utterly disgraceful. Mind you, all of the officers had been killed or, worse, joined the rebels, but... it was shocking nonetheless."

Williams frowned, speaking on the comm herself. "I thought turians never broke."

Garrus gave an uncomfortable shrug. "There were rumors that the rebels had poisoned the ground water with some kind of mind-affecting drug, and lots of people believe that's why they broke. Regardless, they'd shamed themselves in a fashion almost nothing could ever rectify. Since then, the worst have been assigned duty to the unit." Garrus hesitated, then finally traced an armored hand over the cloth.

Shepard's voice was grim. "Your version of the Penal Legions, then."

Garrus winced. "More... ah, politically reliable, but yes, basically. Given the worst jobs, the worst people. Sent out to die to expiate the unit's shame. To dispatch the Third is to imply whatever needs to be done is usually dangerous... and yet, not worth sending a real military unit. Politically, it would have been a tremendous insult to the University of Lanthas." He swallowed. "I'm not sure what the University did to warrant such a snub, but it would have made working here difficult. The Third is, well... it's as close as a turian can get to being without honor or redemption."

He paused, and then continued. "It also means if they go off the net for extended periods of time, it might be...some time before the turian government will bother responding. No one will .. care."

Shepard was silent for a long moment, then spoke. "Alright... let me know what you find." Her voice was flat and yet sounded ever so slightly on edge.

Garrus clicked off, and glanced around. The room was very spartan. A desk and a chair were at one end, the desk a cheap metal folding type, a computer lying neatly on top. In front of the desk were two more chairs. One of the chairs was toppled onto its side. The far end of the room had a multi-function comms and information display, a rack with three rifles in it, and a door – leading to the CO's quarters.

Garrus moved to the computer. "Williams, check the CO's quarters. Jackson, see if you can get anything from the info-panel." He sat down at the desk gingerly, and a haptic image frame popped up – a slender turian female with a deliciously narrow waist, holding the hands of a pair of small turian boys, stared up at him. *Family man, huh?*

Tapping the computer to open it, he was disappointed as it failed to boot. "Damn, wiped." Checking the desk drawers, he found one full of paperwork – mostly grid maps of areas they'd searched – and another drawer full of assorted junk. Haptic pens, a claw dagger, condiment packets, a spare firing pin, notebooks filled with artistic patterns and scrawled notes on training, and at the back of the drawer, a slender plate of metal.

Garrus frowned. "He left his omnitool in his desk?" Frowning, he slotted it into the spare connector on his armor, and the command interface popped up. Rather than trying to identify his identity, the UI looked hacked, and it immediately popped into a video window.

The video was of a tired looking turian, with greenish mottling growing under his plates, and a desperate look in his eyes. His voice was ragged with pain and fear, harmonics those of a prey being stalked. "I haven't much time. The Will in my head is strong, but the drug in the medbay is frying all my nerves anyway. It can't control me."

The turian glanced around. "There's something here. Something alive, huge, in the Inusannon city. It's taken everything, everyone. The animals, the spirits-damned trees, and all my men. It infects and soon

your thoughts are not your own."

The turian's mandible flickered agitatedly, and he held up a large caliber pistol. "It doesn't realize I'm free yet, but it will soon. If you see this, make sure you have full bio-hazard protection at all times... I think it infects you that way. It's crazy and it's... my head is full of thoughts that... not my own. There... there was a battle, I think... knives in the night. I remember... it made me wreck all the weapons that were... a threat to it."

The turian in the video's expression twisted, plates deforming under the stress as he clenched his jaw ever tighter. Several teeth shattered, and the pain snapped his head back, and he shook it. "Pain...doesn't like pain. Makes it stop. It knows, but it can't see me. Can't think how I think. If you... see this, you have to kill it. It has... our ships. It's making a bomb out of our drive cores... it plans to spread itself..."

With a sudden motion the turian screamed, clutching his head and the green mold on his face began to grow. "I won't let it KNOW!" The video blanked, the last thing visible was the turian's hand pulling the omni-tool's chip out of his armor. Garrus shuddered, and tapped his communicator again.

The response from Shepard was slower. "Yeah?"

Garrus' mouth felt dry. "I found something. A video. The commander was... being taken over by... by that thing, Shepard. He looked like those damned colonists on Feros. He said it was going to try and spread itself. Here." With a series of taps, he forwarded the video to Shepard's omni, turning to see what Williams and Jackson had found.

The specialist shrugged. "Multipanel is clean of anything... just patrol reports, usage logs, shit like that. They'd been here for about two months. About two weeks in, the patrol reports and logs just stop. Cold. There are still reports from the scientists for a day or two after that, then nothin'."

Williams came out of the CO's quarters. "There's a bullet hole in the wall in there. Part of the decking is discolored. Couple of spots of blue on the wall, soaked in. Turian blood. Someone went to the trouble of cleaning it up."

Garrus nodded. "Let's check the rest... let Shepard decide the next moves."

O-OSaBC-O

Shepard had no clue what to make of the data the teams were pulling in, but it looked pretty grim. Someone, or something, had carefully cleaned up any signs of struggle or anything out of the ordinary. They'd left the comms signal on, but no one was home. The medbay was wrecked, completely, but aside from it, the armory, and one of the minifactory labs, nothing else had been touched.

Garrus' disturbing find of the video had made Shepard's stomach queasy. The concept of being controlled and dominated by the creature must have been horrifying. The way the turian's mind had wandered, how desperately he'd fought against it, the sheer determination it must have taken to leave a warning...

Liara's findings, in their own way, were even worse.

She'd been reviewing the scientists' results. Unlike the military camp, nothing much was missing or disturbed. They'd been looking for weapons systems, but found clear evidence that someone had removed much of that a long time ago. Rubble and other hints were Liara's clues, and she'd determined that at some point, the Protheans had probably salvaged the site.

Analysis of the crashed ships showed a more frightening discovery. The ships had not been downed by mass accelerators at all, even though both races ships clearly used such weaponry. Instead, they'd been sheared apart and half melted. When Liara compared the damage to the ships with the reports of the damage to the Eden Prime towers and the Citadel ships at Feros, it was identical.

The weapon of the black ship that Saren had was identical to the weapon that had destroyed both the Inusannon and Tho'ian ships. Studies of the ground damage, using the Normandy's ground mapping radar, found deep runnels and ancient smears of long-solidified metal that were clearly misses by the weapon. Liara's voice had gone from excited and almost perkily cute to tinged with horror as she'd described her findings.

The team near the city's edge had found small animals, clearly infested, watching them closely, tracking them. Garrus had appropriated a few of the working turian weapons, and now Team One was heading back to the cliff base, to link up with Team Two.

Shepard wished she could rub her neck, but was glad nonetheless she'd gotten new Spectre armor instead of wearing her old N7 suit. She'd debated painting it, but Alliance black and Spectre black were both still black. She'd settled for putting her N7 sigil on the armor, and now she stood at the back of the Mako, reviewing the comms from the teams and thinking.

Wrex crouched nearby, his shotgun cradled in his arms. "Pin down where that thing is. Drop torpedoes on it. Problem solved."

Shepard smothered a grin inside her helmet. "Tempting, but the Council tends to frown on bombing garden planets. Even eezo-fucked nightmare garden planets. Besides, I figured you of all people would be up for a fight."

Wrex rose from his crouch, head rotating as he scanned the horizon. "Bah. Fighting plant zombies is gardening." He continued to look around. "Still, something's off."

Shepard watched the other Mako pull up, and nodded. "Yeah, I get the same feeling. Stay alert." She wandered over to where Liara was working, two Marines standing guard to either side, and glanced over the worktable Liara had salvaged from the scientist's work camp.

There were bits of stone or metal with inscribed writing, a stack of data pads, bits of corroded looking tech in various star shapes, and a long section of heavily damaged blue metal, scored with runnels of what looked like melted slag, pitted with corrosion. Liara was half bent over, examining the metal minutely with her omnitool, limned in the beams of light still coming from the sun as it began to slowly sink behind the horizon.

Shepard waited a moment, then spoke up. "Find anything else, T'Soni?" She managed to keep her eyes off the asari woman's figure and instead focused hard eyes on the table of junk spread before her.

Liara glanced up, the clear faceplate of her armor revealing a nervous but excited smile. "Y-yes, actually. The hull of the Inusannon ships were all studded with some kind of electrical pulse emitters. Mostly low voltage but high amperage." She gestured to another hull plate, this one a sickening, oily black. "The Tho'ian ships were... grown, for lack of a better word. This material is metallic, but crystalline and deposited in sheets, woven through with nanomachine channels. I think the creatures must have extended themselves throughout the entire vessel..." She trailed off, clearly lost in thought.

Shepard bit her lip. "That's...interesting, but not exactly what I was looking for. You said the hull damage was from the same gun that took out Eden Prime?"

Liara glanced in her direction, then shook her head. "Not exactly. That is the Eden Prime wreckage and the Citadel fleet hull wreckage are identical – the size, speed, and composition of the beam indicate they were destroyed by the same ship. These hull pieces all have the same kind of damage, but... the details are all different. There were a great many ships equipped with this weapon, fighting both the Inusannon and the Tho'ian."

She pointed to a pale green chunk of metal, delicate lines sunk into its surface. "And that piece is

Prothean. They were here, probably salvaging weapons. But whatever they found was not enough to help them in their own fight, apparently. I have found bits of writing, and several Prothean data disks, but... it's all too much to translate and codify here on site."

The pieces lay on the table, inert, alien and cold, casting long shadows across the metal table. The age of the pieces hit Shepard for a moment, the sheer crazy span of time that was in play. *What will be left of humans in an eon, I wonder?* Shepard gingerly touched one of the pieces, pensive, then nodded. "Take samples of everything you can find, pack it up and get ready to move."

She turned away, but Liara caught her arm, albeit gently. "S-Shepard. There's one more thing you should see."

Liara moved over to a second table. "I found this in the scientist camp. They had run every test I could have thought of, and more, and the results were all inconclusive or contradictory." She rounded the table, picking up a metallic frame the size of a large book. The frame contained a sheet of clear crystal, and imbedded in the middle was a chunk of smooth, black curved metal, etched with subtle lines that didn't quite want to focus.

Shepard blinked. "The hell?"

Liara gave her a look. "The spectrograph analysis matches 99.4% to the scans taken of the black dreadnought that destroyed the Citadel Fleet. Except by the turian scientist's reckoning, this piece of debris is over a hundred thousand years old."

Shepard closed her eyes, the memories of a rain of sickening, black ships killing everything, falling from the skies, trumpeting calls of horror, echoing through her mind. "Reapers. One of their ships, or more than one of their ships did this. Not just some race that happened to use the same kind of weapon." She frowned, eyes taking in the blasted landscape, the hulks of ships. "How big... was the fleet that got taken down?"

Liara gave a shrug. "It is hard to say, Shepard. But based on what ships the turians had already cataloged, there must have been hundreds of dreadnaught scale vessels. Thousands of smaller ships. And nothing like the big black dreadnaught was found in the wreckage... just the occasional scrap of debris like this. It is possible ... that they did not destroy a single one."

Shepard exhaled, willing herself to calm. "Great." She winced at the very slight tremor in her voice, hoping Liara hadn't heard it, but the bloom of fear in the clear blue eyes watching her was enough to show she had. Shepard took another long, slow exhalation, then clicked on her omni-tool comm link.

"Pressly, Liara's going to send you a data packet. Put together a data burst. Epsilon-level. Put an Exitialis-threat wrapper in the header. Address it to the Fleet Master, and to Fifth Fleet. Then get me a tight beam link with the comms buoy, stat." Liara shot Shepard a questioning look, and the commander explained. "Exitialis is the second-highest alert level the SA has. I'm sending them a data packet of what we found, and I want the SA to wake up and pay attention for once."

Shepard turned to Master Chief Cole, who was leaning against the Mako nearest her, checking the loads on his Revenant. "Master Chief, get the men in order. We're going in after that thing." He nodded, snapping to attention and began bellowing into his radio, and Shepard glanced back at Liara. "How long will it take to pack up everything?"

Liara glanced around, still holding the case with the chunk of Reaper metal in it. "I-I .. uh, about fifteen minutes, I suppose. W-what is —"

Shepard pointed at the piece in her hand. "That's hard evidence. All of this is. Until now, the idea that the Reapers could come back never made any sense. Whatever Saren was up to was crazy, sure, but not

any real big threat."

Shepard stepped away, looking out over the literal graveyard of ships; alien angles sticking up like rotting bones jutting from some macabre cemetery. Hundreds of them, probably far more advanced than anything around today. The sky was beginning to darken with the coming of dusk, the clouds touched with lances of golden fire, the pale green of the sky becoming richer, darker, more vibrant.

Shepard closed her eyes, seeing the Prothean vision in her head. That endless, horrible rain of black leaves falling from a burning sky, and the screaming. "The situation has changed. If the Reapers offed these guys, and then offed the Protheans, then they could come back again. And we're not even close to ready to fight off ONE of their ships."

Liara nodded slowly, her mind working. "You want to... move the evidence so that it is safe before going after the Tho'ian? "

Shepard nodded. "Yeah. Get it packed up, you and Tali are headed back to the ship on one of the Makos."

Liara's eyes glanced over the artifacts, then back at Shepard. "I can fight –"

Shepard shook her head. "Fuck, Liara, I know that. But biotics didn't do much to the zombies last time. What you need are heavy weapons or explosives, or fire." She paused. "All of which the damned thing was quick to put out of commission for the turians, once it got the chance." She glanced back at Liara. "But you are going back because you are the one who understands this stuff. You're the one who saw the connection. You're the one who put it together. No arguments, Doctor."

Liara glanced at her, then at the alien city in the distance. "And you still plan to... investigate that thing? Shepard, it could have control of the entire turian force here." There was something almost pleading and worried in her voice, strained as it was. A note that made Shepard pause, however briefly.

No one had ever worried about her safety, before. Not Delacor, certainly. Not her squad – they thought she was ... un-killable. Not her men – to them, she was a god. The media? Who gave a fuck? The Systems Alliance? Shit, half the time they were the ones trying to get her killed. Anderson might have cared, she supposed, but he'd never commanded her except for a handful of hours before being shuffled away himself. And in the end, understanding the depth and fervor of Anderson's faith and belief in her wasn't something she'd ever figured out. But Anderson's confidence in her was so great she didn't even think *he* worried about her safety.

Shepard couldn't place how it felt having someone – anyone – actually worried she'd get hurt. Amusing? Upsetting? Comforting? *Like I have time to think about this shit now. Get your goddamned head straight, Sara.*

Shepard glanced over her shoulder at Liara, before turning to fully face her. The Spectre cape flapped gently in the breeze, the light glinting from the silver edging. She placed one hand on the asari woman's shoulder, squeezing gently. "I'll be fine."

Liara's expression was dubious. "You weren't *fine* on Therum. Or Feros. You are not invincible!"

Shepard just grinned behind the mirror-plated helm. "I'm taking Wrex, and Garrus. And I think I'll bring Williams too, just for backup. I just plan to get close enough to figure out what we're dealing with. Trust me, if it gets too crazy, I'll be the first one to run out and have Pressly douse the area with missile fire." Shepard paused. "But we have to confirm what happened here. This can't have been the first expedition to this place, so why did the Thorian that's here make its move now?"

Shepard dropped her hand. "Now, get your stuff packed, and go." The levity fell from her voice, and it became hard and unyielding.

For a long moment Shepard wondered if Liara would actually try to argue. Liara's stance was tense, her hands gripping the metal frame of the fragment of the Reaper tightly. The blue eyes sought hers, and Liara's expression was hard to read behind the clear faceplate.

A moment later, the little asari shrugged and began carefully moving things from the table in front of her to a metal storage crate she'd lugged along. "We'll need more storage containers. The turian camp may have a few. And I will need a few marines to help me with the hull fragments." Her voice was calm, almost flat, but there was a note of emotion in it as well.

Shepard nodded. "Alright. We'll get on that." She turned away to organize the marines, and missed the worry in the young maiden's eyes as they followed her.

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## Chapter 64: Chapter 55: Eingana, Reassessment

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*A/N: Sorry for the delays, but end of month is always a rough time, and I've been writing some other stuff. This chapter is about wrapped up – I'm laying groundwork for further divergence in the storyline later on. That being said, the next few chapters should go faster than this one.*

*I'd like to thank everyone who reviewed, favorited, sent PM's or emails. And also I must thank Owelpost, who without I would have probably simply given up on this fic by now.*

*The Awesome Fic of the Day is **An Argument, A Separation** by ChronicallyinFlaming. I very, very rarely read masskink stuff (mostly it just doesn't interest me) but this was a masterfully done piece of work about what happens when the bag of broken pieces simply won't add up to a whole.*

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Shepard watched the bright arc of the second Mako as it ascended on its jump jets, eezo core lightening it as the SSTO booster kicked in. The Normandy swooped down, neatly plucking it from the air, before making a large circle around the city and settling into atmospheric hover mode.

The marines were dug in at the very edge of the city's. Both rocket launchers and flamethrowers were primed, and Master Chief Cole had been quick to distribute spare turian rifles to both squads. The turian rifles fired a heavier slug than human rifles did, were all equipped with scopes, and came with integral omni-bayonets.

Garrus had picked up one of the weapons himself, leaving his stock Avenger on a table. The turian was carefully examining the firing mechanism, tricky in full armor with a helmet. Wrex was crouching, nearby, shotgun in hand. Wrex's armor was a patch job – his original suit had been completely wrecked by the fight on Feros, and his backup suit was clearly not quite full combat armor. Williams had done what she could; adding some armor plating across the shoulders and hips, but the helmet was better suited to an environmental suit than battle armor.

Shepard glanced over her troops again and was about to speak when Pressly's voice crackled over the comm in her omni-tool. "Commander, we have a problem. We've tried twice now to link to the system comm buoy. It's not responding. We didn't think to drop a sensor buoy as we came into system, so we're kind of blind right now. I know you wanted the Normandy for close support..."

Shepard frowned. "You think something took the buoy out? We didn't pick up any ships on sensors."

Pressly's voice was tense. "Yes, but it's possible they hunkered down on a moon of that gas giant and cut most of their power. Heat would be lost in the backwash from the planetary systems tectonic and friction heat. If they waited for us to pass and then launched a few missiles at the buoy..."

Shepard grimaced. "Alright, head up to battle orbit, clear atmosphere. Go to stealth and full passive sensors. Let me know what you find out." Clicking off her omni-tool, she sighed, and turned to the marines. "Alright, we've covered the plan once already, but we just hit a little bump so we're going to make a few changes. XO Pressly just let me know the comm beacon isn't responding, it may have been taken out."

The stance of the marines shifted, slightly. Nervously. Shepard injected a note of iron into her voice. "That being said, our charge remains the same. We've gotten the evidence and research we need back to the Normandy. What's left is dealing with this thing."

She walked down the line of marines, eyes narrowed. "I won't lie to you. This Thorian creature is extremely dangerous. On Ferros, it deployed what we can only call plant zombies, shock troops that would grapple you and vomit acid over you. In close quarters combat, in an unfamiliar space, that would be a negative for all of us."

She stopped. "So, only Wrex, Vakarian, and I will be going in. The plan is simple: investigate and determine the level of problem we have to deal with. Worst case, I'll blow the goddamned place to a pile of rubble and drop a couple of disruptor torps with a proximity setting on top of the ruins and let the Alliance deal with it."

She turned to face the marines. "Your orders are simple, by comparison. First, ensure nothing gets out of that city's borders. Consider that your kill line. Second, if we get rushed, cover fire. Maintain your lines and use heavy weapons only when your squad leads tell you. Each squad has a flame unit, cover him." Shepard's eyes flicked from marine to marine.

"This isn't ideal...but we're the only ones on the ground. For whatever reason, this monster hasn't rabbited yet, and we're not going to let it. Lieutenant Alenko is in charge. Williams and Cole will be the squad leads. Maintain full comms at all times, and if we get into trouble, provide covering fire."

Garrus made a clicking, almost hissing noise, sighting down his scope. "Commander, we have incoming."

Shepard whirled, the ODIN in her hands unfurling. "What?"

Garrus had gone almost rigid, his stance made even more alien by the shape of his legs and spine, looking for all the world like a terrier straining at the leash to chase ducks or something. "I have a single figure, walking down the ruins of the road coming out from the large tower there. Turian. One of the soldiers, he's wearing plain green armor with no markings. He has a weapon – just a pistol."

Shepard folded away her shotgun, drawing her sniper to get a better look. The turian she saw through the scope looked, for lack of a better word, horrible. His plates were buckled and warped, shoved out of the way by masses of green tendrils and moss. One eye was ruptured, a thick vine growing through it, covered in tiny black nodules. His gait was irregular, almost limping, and his posture was vaguely simian, shambling along, hunched over and shuffling his feet.

Williams muttered, gazing through her sniper scope. "Ranged, ma'am. Three hundred meters. Take him down?"

Shepard shook her head. "Not yet." She stood and strode forward, coming out from behind the cover of several heavy shipping crates her marines had moved to form a firing bulwark.

The thing didn't seem to notice, it was instead staggering along, as if looking for something. The creature walked up to a fairly intact piece of wreckage, running its corrupted hands along the seams, pulling and tugging. After a moment, it seemed to remember its pistol, and began firing at the hull of the ship. Several shots boomed out, plonking off harmlessly, and then one ricocheted. The thing gave a

cry as its face exploded into a mess of blue and green fluids, and the pistol fell to the ground. It clutched its face, staggering back.

The hull of the ship opened, just a crack – just wide enough for the barrel of a shotgun to stick out and fire once. The corrupted turian flew back from the blast, leaking all manner of disgusting looking ichor, and the hull door slammed shut again.

Shepard exhaled. "There's a survivor." Even as she spoke though, she saw motion in the nearby foliage, the rustle of movement beyond the slow and sluggish reactions of the plant life to intruders. As she watched, two additional figures crept out of the undergrowth nearby, rising up in a loose, boneless sort of motion, and headed towards the hull section that held the survivor.

Garrus looked away. The two things weren't even real turians, but rather turian-shaped masses of dark green matter. Lighter green chitinous plates covered their chest and legs, and elongated claws jutted obscenely from hands and feet. The faces were under slung cavernous maws, empty eye sockets above them staring blindly. They reached the hull, banging on it and pulling at the hatch door, moaning occasionally. Three more erupted from the nearby shadows of a broken building, shambling along, arms limply outstretched.

Specialist Monroe shook his head, looking through binoculars. "The hell are they doing, ma'am? Trying to... break into that wreck with their bare hands? That's not gonna fucking work."

Shepard shook her head. "Trying to spook whoever is inside, probably." She tapped her omnitool, scanning. "Damn it, whatever they built these ships out of doesn't let heat through. I can't get a decent scan – no way of telling if it's one person or several. Garrus, is there a standard emergency response channel turians would use?"

Garrus nodded. "Yes, there is... one moment." He slung his sniper rifle, bringing up his own omnitool, tapping in a few keystrokes, and spoke clearly and slowly. "Any turian units, or university personnel – this is Detective Garrus Vakarian of C-Sec. Please respond."

The omni-tool flared and crackled with a poor signal transmission, a panicked turian voice nearly humming in terror. "Oh, Spirits, thank you. I-I am Praetor Emeritus Halxion Valun, assistant lead on the project. Detective, please tell me you're in full environmental gear!"

Garrus spoke calmly. "Yes, I am. I'm here with a group of human Alliance marines, and a Spectre. Stay calm. We know about the plant-creature and its spores. Where are you? Are you in the –"

The voice sounded confused, cutting Garrus off. "Y-you know? How—? Never mind. At the edge of the large city near our campsite is a downed Inusannon transport. Its secure cargo area still has power, and when things went bad I was able to seal myself in here. I had a full pack of rations and water but I'm out now, and the things are hammering at the door. Can you help?"

Garrus glanced at Shepard, who spun her finger around in a whirling motion. "Change of plans, boys. Cole! First squad, clear that wreckage and set up a defense. Second squad, cover their advance and flame down nearby foliage. Garrus, Wrex, in the Mako, go."

She ran flat out, hurling herself through the back hatch of the Mako, and clambered past the rear section seating to get into the pilot area. Wrex clambered into the back, while Garrus manned the main guns.

Cole was leading his squad carefully, Revenant out, and directing ranging fire towards the creatures beating on the hull of the Inusannon ship ahead. They turned at the incoming fire, a moment before the main gun of the Mako flashed. The blast smashed the things to paste, sending gouts of dust and green gunk splashing out in a starburst on the scorched ground.

Shepard finished closing the distance, slewing the Mako around to form a cover barricade between the hull and the city, drawing a pained curse from Garrus as he was slung about in the gun cupola. Cole's squad was double timing, while Alenko and Williams led second squad at a fast walk, weapons trained in several directions, looking for trouble.

Shepard hopped out of the Mako, pulling her ODIN out, followed by Wrex. Garrus brought up the rear, his Talon pistol in hand, and all three walked to the hull section the creatures had been assaulting.

Up close, the marks of previous attempts – deep gouges in the metal, pits, acid burns and other, less identifiable marks – had barely marred the smooth, blue-black surface. Shepard trained her shotgun around, and a moment later Cole's squad, breathing hard inside their suits, rushed up.

Two marines, one with a flame unit and the other with a bandoleer of frag grenades, rushed past. The flame unit lit up, the omnitool like weapon spitting out an arc of superheated plasma in a semi-coherent stream so hot it made a faint howling noise from incinerating the oxygen in the air. The bruised looking vegetation caught fire immediately, falling into ashes after the cone of fire played over it but a second.

The grenadier flung several grenades deeper into the brush in an arc pattern; the savage muted thumps of their explosion accompanied by suddenly cleared circles of vegetation as the mass-accelerated shrapnel from the explosion lashed out. Several creeping turian-zombie things collapsed as they were revealed by the blasts, one surviving only to be taken out by a shot from Williams' sniper rifle.

Shepard turned to Garrus. "Contact him."

Garrus spoke into his omnitool. "Praetor Valun, we're right outside your door. It's safe for the moment."

The hull, seemingly smooth and unbroken, suddenly shifted, and an octagonal hatch opened in a spray of gasses. The hatch slid back with unnatural ease given its age, revealing a darkened empty room with heavy racks and shelving beyond.

Barely illuminated by his lit omnitool was a single turian in an environmental support suit, worn under a long black coat that broke sharply at the turian's spurs. The turian's faceplate was clear, and broken by some kind of respiration unit, leading to slender looking tanks strapped to the doctor's back. His hands nervously clutched an old Kalxar shotgun, the turian close quarters weapon of choice back in the First Contact War.

He gave a racking cough, and stepped forward, limping. "Oh, Spirits of Palaven be praised."

Shepard stepped forward, the last of the sunlight framing her in glowing sunbeams, glinting off the silver of her Spectre armor. "We need to know the situation... Praetor was it?"

The turian nodded. "Praetor Emeritus Valun, University of Lanthas, xenoarcheology." The turian's face was somewhat obscured by the respirator he wore, but his eyes were a clear blue color and his facial plates a pale cream, set off by the bright scarlet lines of his face paint. "I was supposed to be in charge of this excursion, but I had another Praetor along, who was more conversant in what little we know of the Inusannon."

Shepard glanced over her shoulder. "Set a defensive perimeter, keep alert." She turned back to him, her eyes taking in the rest of the small room. A pile of ration packs was stacked next to a larger pile of empty ones, and a curved cot was lodged into one corner. A shelf was covered in data pads, bits of alien devices, and several disassembled pistols. A trickle of water from the stream flowed through a crack in the hull, and pieces of what looked like a decontamination set were strewn about next to the trickle of water that washed through it.

The turian scientist followed her gaze, and she frowned. "You'd better start at the beginning, Praetor Valun."

"Yes, indeed. I'm sorry... this has just been... a lot to take in." Valun made a clear effort to calm his nerves and turned to the wall, pulling out one of the many data pads on the shelf. He flicked through it as he spoke, his voice crisp and almost laconically terse.

"We were assigned here after the disappearance of another excursion six months ago. Eingana should have been a treasure trove of alien technology, but the Prothean's appear to have been very... efficient... in taking away most of the tech we hoped to find here. The University had a contract and decree from the Hierarchy to come away with something, and the last expedition just... vanished."

He began to pace, waving the data pad for emphasis. "We arrived and set up camp, with no ill effects. We began cataloging what we found, and everyone except me went to regular clothing after the first few days. I have a lung and immune system condition that makes it impossible for me to operate without an environmental suit in anything but the most sterile of conditions...so I was not affected, I suppose, when the spores came."

Shepard nodded. "Was the Third Palaven stationed here from the beginning?"

The turian shook his head. "Spirits, no. Who would want to associate with those cowards? That honorless filth came later. I am getting to that." He exhaled, and looked up. "Like I said, I was not the only Praetor on site. Praetor Exactal Vorkus Palavanus was in charge."

Garrus rocked back on his heels. "One of the Old Family was *here*? There should have been a full escort of –"

Valun nodded sourly. "Yes, yes, I know." He glanced at Shepard, whose expression was hidden behind the silvered faceplate but whose stance looked confused. "I am sorry, Spectre. Palavanus was the... old line of kings of Palaven, before the Overthrow thousands of years ago. Although they are no longer rulers, their lineage is unbroken for more than eleven thousand years, and their prestige and wealth are legendary. Normally, an heir of the House is accompanied by several of the Valluxian Guard, but Vorkus was traveling alone."

The turian scientist shook his head. "His presence was an anomaly I should have acted on, but I was absorbed in research. Palavanus spent most of his time examining the corrupted flora and fauna, which we chalked up to the eezo exposure. Then about a week and a half into his explorations, he ... vanished for almost eight hours. We looked everywhere for him and eventually he showed up out of the city here, looking disoriented."

Valun sat down on a section of fallen shelving, his spurs riding up high enough to rest his arms on. His eyes narrowed in remembered anger. "He immediately got on the comms with Palaven Command, after locking out of the comm tent. The next day, the Third arrived, led by a full General – one of the disgraced Valixen from that mess on Menae. They dug in and didn't tell us a thing. Palavanus told us to focus on our work and not to ask questions, and most of the team simply obeyed."

Shepard frowned behind her helmet. "Did you notice people acting strangely?"

Valun shrugged. "Several people started showing signs of greenish mold in between their plates. Palavanus was also our medical specialist and he diagnosed it as a harmless surface mold. People kept cleaning it off but it didn't seem to do anything."

He paused, fidgeting. "Until later."

Garrus leaned against the doorway, his posture somewhat stiff. "Did you contact the University about this? It seems highly irregular and against protocol."

Valun shook his head. "After the Third touched down, they took our comms down and everything had to be routed through their system. They were just standing around for a few days, then..."

The scientist sighed. "I was out here, doing salvage work. Since I can work in the areas contaminated by eezo I set up a little supply area here so I wouldn't have to truck all the way back into camp every night. I was, I admit, angry. My own expedition had been basically co-opted by the military for Spirits knows what. I remember both of our ships and the military's light cruiser touching down outside camp, and a transmission was sent that we had to assemble for a communication from Palaven Command."

Valun shrugged. "I admit that I was in the middle of some delicate disassembly of an Inusannon power star. I knew these ships were hard to punch a signal through, and honestly, I was not about to go all the way back to camp to be told the military was taking over here and to pack up and leave, which is what I expected. I just shut the door, pretended I heard nothing, and kept working."

Valun shuddered. "I kept my comms on – slipped an omni-lead outside the door, so I could hear with the hull shut – and that's how I found out what happened. The ... spores in the air, I think, had already gotten to everyone. It just took everyone over at once, but it forgot that the science team had a suited volus as a bioengineering adept. Forgot or didn't think about it, one or the other, we tend to ... overlook the volus too often."

Shepard nodded, thinking back to the conversation she'd had with Marshal Vidan, then shrugged. "So what happened?"

Valun looked up at her. "Everyone went silent, and Badal – the volus – got freaked out. He asked what was happening, and they attacked him. I couldn't see what was happening, but I could hear – they were not acting like turians. They were not even talking to one another, but I could hear gunfire. I have no idea how he got away, maybe they were uncoordinated at first. But he did, and was screaming for help on his omni-tool comms."

"I contacted him, told him to hole up in the command center if he could, or somewhere secure. He locked himself into the sensor tower instead, taking scans of everything and forwarding it to me. We'd never really tested the spores before now, and I did so hastily, while I watched the sensor tower's scans."

"The entire force was... taken over. They moved as one, working on the ships, altering the interiors, while they began trying to blast their way into the sensor tower. They got into the command center and started some kind of encrypted transmissions, as well. To whom, I have no idea – I copied the transmission to an OSD, but I am no encryption expert."

Shepard traded a glance with Garrus. "Go on, what happened next?"

The scientist shrugged. "Badal managed to scan most of the area and get detailed information on the changes they were undergoing – plant material growing out of them, and half the force of soldiers going into that ruined amphitheater in the ruins. When the plant creatures that looked like turians came out, he got scans of those too. It was... well, I took all the readings and saved them."

Shepard nodded. "So... all of the expedition but you and a single volus was taken over... what did you do?"

Valun sighed. "There was nothing I could do. I had a fair bit of supplies here, and the leak from the stream I could purify for water. But all I had was a single shotgun, and there were over a hundred soldiers out there. Badal stayed in the tower until they blew up the door and got to him – I have no idea what they did to him, but I lost telemetry at that point. I used what spare tools and gear I had here to try to build a remote drone, but I couldn't. I sat here for almost three days before my omni-tool lit up."

Valun gave Shepard a haunted look. "It was the commander of the Third. He was...corrupted, badly, but he seemed to be himself again. He said that the Turian government had gotten a call from Palavanus, something about what he claimed to be a live Tho'ian that wanted to make a deal with the Hierarchy."

He said his unit was told to come here and obey the orders given by Palavanus, who... gave them to this Tho'ian. The creature dominates with the spores; they grow inside a body and take it over."

Shepard nodded. "That's why we're in full environmental armor. We ran into one of these things on a human colony world as well. It had... struck a deal with a human company."

Valun shuddered. "Well, the commander said it was reconfiguring the ships – two of them to carry it off world, and one as a bomb, to conceal it had ever been here, blow everything off the map. Everything was going to its plan when something happened – the Tho'ian went crazy, lost control. Most of the marines just went mad, but the commander figured out how to fight off its influence. He managed to get off a message to Command, and was planning on taking the thing out. He told me to stay hidden and wait for rescue."

Valun sighed. "I'm... not sure what happened after that. He never contacted me again, but after two days I heard heavy fighting. I risked going outside, and... well, I recorded what I saw, because it's too bizarre for me to make sense of."

The turian handed over the data pad he'd been clutching, and Shepard took it. It was loaded up with a video file, which she triggered, and the pad cleared its surface, displaying a shaky view of the ruins.

In the distance, a cylindrical ship, half comprised of arches of gray or black metal, half comprised of what looked like rock, hung in the sky. A few turian fighters or gunships flew past, but a beam of golden light seared through each one, blasting them to little more than fragments.

Hulking black creatures with tear-drop shaped heads, four glowing eyes, and insectile wings descended, firing weapons that were more of the same beams of golden energy. Turians they hit were disintegrated, collapsing to piles of smoking char and ash. Swarms of what looked like fist sized bugs choked the air, obscuring the battle.

A large group of the winged, insect-looking aliens was heading on foot into the city, cutting down anything in their path. The video ended suddenly, and Shepard looked up. "What the hell was that?"

Wrex, who'd been standing slightly outside the door but looking inwards, grunted with a tone that almost sounded like worry. "Those are Collectors, Shepard. Weird aliens who legend says live beyond the Omega-4 Relay. They usually only show up to do deals... deals involving living beings in exchange for technology. Never heard of them hitting anything themselves."

Shepard nodded, turned back to the scientist. "Is it possible the Hierarchy was dealing with these ... Collectors? That your command sold its location or something?"

The scientist shrugged. "I doubt the Hierarchy would bestir itself to save the Third, but I have problems believing they'd just let a Palavanus die like that, and I saw him die. All I know is they stormed into the place then left a day later. They'd cleaned up all the battle wreckage, the bodies... then the plant creatures came back out, in ones and twos. I don't know what they were looking for, but this morning they all fell back to the city ruins. Then I suppose you showed up."

Shepard frowned. "More questions than answers at this point." She tapped her comm link. "Pressly, status of communications."

The XO's voice sounded frustrated over the link. "Commander, as soon as we cleared the atmosphere, we sent a full power pulse to the comm link and got a response. I'm not sure why it wasn't responding before, though. We have a ping-back packet from Alliance command if you want to download it."

Shepard glanced around, and then stepped outside the hull of the wreck Valun had sheltered in. "Get the Praetor into the Mako, and then form into fire-team overlap formation, fervent arrow tactical dispersion." She watched as the marines reassembled their formation, while Wrex and Garrus stood to

the side. "You two follow me... after I take this message."

She triggered the link, cutting audio to her helmet only, and waited. A moment later, the grainy image of Fleet Master Dragunov appeared on the small projection screen of her omni-tool. "Commander Shepard, we received your initial report. Can you confirm your findings?"

Shepard's voice came out bitter. "Confirm hell. I've found a survivor from the turian expedition. He says the Turians knew about this thing, sent their throwaway version of the Penal Legions here to recover it, but that it all went to shit. Next thing he knows, Collectors arrive on site and start killing everyone."

The admiral's eyes narrow. "Collectors, Shepard? Are you absolutely sure?"

Shepard tapped keys on her omni. "Transmitting the video he sent us now, as well as dumps of sensor logs."

The admiral was silent for several minutes, no doubt watching the low-quality video, and then his mouth hardened into a grim slash. "There are still active thralls in the area, yes?"

Shepard nodded. "They seem pretty out of it. The thralls on Feros were tactically sound, using combined arms tactics with that acid vomit. These are just ...wandering around, trying to beat their way through a starship hull. I've got my squads stacked up to go inside where we think the Thorian is."

Dragunov nodded. "We aren't in a good position to take advantage of the Thorian, and we don't want anyone else to have access to it. You disagreed with the Systems Alliance's position on the Thorian on Feros, so here is one order you will enjoy carrying out – destroy that thing. No loose ends."

Shepard's eyes flicked to the scientist in her Mako, and she lowered her voice. "There's the turian scientist. He never saw the Thorian, but he saw them get possessed..." She gave the image in the video a defiant look. "I'm not going to play assassin for you, sir. Not for this."

Dragunov shrugged. "As long as he can't figure out just how the thing can be used, he's harmless. I wasn't going to suggest you kill him."

Shepard nodded, her shoulders loosening. "In that case, sir, I have a plan to kill, assuming the Collectors didn't do that already. What if they did kill it?"

Dragunov's eyes narrowed. "Burn it. I don't want any bright bio science labs trying to grow another one. Once you are sure it's dead, transmit your report as usual to the Council. Then go ahead and follow up on what Kahoku asked you to handle...but discreetly. I personally think the man's paranoid, and you'll find his marines with some downed communications gear, but he's raised too much fuss for us to just ignore it." Dragunov paused, then his eyes flicked up to meet Shepard's again.

"The rest of the information you sent will be reviewed... later. The fact that it looks like these 'Reapers' may have obliterated the Inusannon as well as the Protheans looks bad, but I don't think it's going to be easy convincing anyone they're still out there. Until then, don't bring this up to anyone, at least until we decide how to pitch it to the Council."

Shepard opened her mouth to protest, then thought about it. "The Council wouldn't listen, even after—"

Dragunov's cold features twisted into a cynical smile. "Commander, I'm almost positive that the Council is not going to want to hear about a race of aliens that killed two ancient, galaxy spanning empires. They focus on stability and the status quo, and anything like that makes them panic. Their botched handling of the Rachni led to the Krogan Rebellions, their inactivity with the geth ended up with quarians losing their own home world, and I shouldn't have to remind you about the First Contact War. If this is a real threat, then we need to push it in a manner where they just won't bury it – and their heads – in the sand."

Shepard nodded. "Understood sir. I'll contact you again once I've dealt with the Thorian. Shepard out." She exhaled, and cut her external audio back on. "Alright, marines... the plan changes yet again. Gather round and let's plan this out."

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## Chapter 65: Chapter 56: Eingana, Sacrifice

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*A/N: I've had to work on this chapter a bit, since I wasn't happy with it on the first, second, or third re-write. I'm trying to get back to a 'twice a week' schedule, but I'm overworked, and so is Owelpost, so...*

*Also, SherryE: Shepard doesn't get hurt this time. :p*

*I am about to put up some other stuff – a series of documents about alien races in my AU similar to my Systems Alliance Documentation piece I wrote. And if you get tired of waiting for me to update, the Recommendation of the Week is **Mass Effect: Pieces** by chemiclord. I'm not even going to spoil this one by describing it. It blows me away with its depth and detail. It's very much post-ME3 and is a wonderful mix of OC's and cameos. You won't regret reading it.*

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Liara nervously ran her tests on the oxygenation and carbon scoring of the Inusannon hull segment in the lab, while listening to the comms feed from Eingana. Her hands were not shaking, and she was proud of that, because everything had hit her all at once. The ugly realization of the reason the planet below was covered in the wrecks of an entire fleet was bad enough. The horror that the Reaper ship may have once been part of a Reaper fleet, and what such a fleet would do to galactic society, was another hard fact to face.

But above all else shaking Liara's nerve was the realization that Shepard had not sent Liara back to the ship out of worries about the data.

That moment of clarity – the instant Shepard's voice had wavered when she'd ordered Liara back to the ship. Her shoulders had hunched in on themselves. The angle of her stance had fallen into something almost hesitant. Liara was not good at reading body language, especially alien body language in form-fitting armor, but she knew, just then, that Shepard was more than conflicted.

She'd heard the flirty comments Shepard had made, of course. But she'd also heard Shepard make such around Garrus, and even Wrex once. She just assumed it was something the commander did. The conversation in the hospital had sent a number of thoughts running through her mind, and sensations through her body, but Shepard hadn't referenced it since, and she *had* been recovering from surgery. Drinking on the Citadel had loosened the human commander up, but the discussion Shepard had with Kaidan once they got back to the ship had apparently soured her mood, as she saw Shepard just after and the commander barely spoke a word to her or anyone else.

But Liara had recognized something in the way Shepard acted when she'd sent her back to the Normandy. Shepard wasn't scared of the Thorian, or of dying. Liara honestly didn't think, based on the fragmented memories she'd retained from the meld, that Shepard even understood what fear *was* on some level, at least personal fear. Shepard had been horribly injured probably dozens of times in her career, her insane bravery was known to all.

But there had been a note of fear in Shepard's voice when she told her to go back to the ship. The voice had come out hard, cold, and with nothing but command in it, but Liara knew what she heard.

Shepard wasn't scared for her own safety. She was scared for Liara.

*Shepard hasn't shown the slightest interest in you beyond...* Liara broke off the thought. Reading her books and papers, questions about the asari home world and family, even the way she was willing to risk opening herself up again with a second meld to process the Cipher – Shepard treated her far more openly than any of the rest of the crew, alien or human. And yet, from her conversation with Shields, Shepard was very bad at picking up interest.

Liara finally put the testing wand down, mind racing. "Get a grip on yourself. You're a professional, on a dangerous mission aboard an alien warship. You do not have time for this, and neither does she."

Images of a tiny, broken figure, huge eyes and a mop of messy black hair, being abused, being *tortured*, flashed across her mind. Without even thinking about it Liara brought her fist down in a biotically charged slam, cracking it into the metal bulkhead in a flash of burning anger. She recoiled from the pain, her field dying. Her gaze settled on the sizable dent in the bulkhead as she sucked blood from her knuckles absently.

*You are not stable. And until you work out what you are feeling, you will be a liability to her. What if you panic when she needs you? What if you cannot bring yourself to leave her side and you distract her?*

She started, almost guiltily, as the science bay doors whisked open, and XO Pressly entered. "Sorry to interrupt your research, Doctor, but I would like a moment of your time, if you can spare it." Despite his polite phrasing, his voice was rather hard, and his wide shoulders were set almost sternly. Liara meekly nodded and followed him out.

He led her past the Medbay, his omni-tool glowing as he kept in contact with Shepard's group on the ground. They were organizing to go into the ruins, and the occasional, seemingly mindless thrall that wandered about was not really a problem. So far, there had not been any problems, and the line was filled with banter between Shepard, Williams, and Garrus, as they competed over sniping thralls at outrageous ranges.

Pressly entered the comms room, pausing to address the sentry. "Until we're done no one comes in."

The ensign nodded, and stood at parade rest in front of the doors, which shut as Pressly entered the room fully. Liara glanced around, and took a seat nervously, looking up with wide eyes. "You... said you needed to speak with me, Commander Pressly?"

Pressly folded his arms. "Yes, I do. No better time than now, since the CO is down there. I'll be the first one to admit, Doctor, you're definitely not what I expected. I tend to think of scientists as soft, but your biotics and combat skills are on par with some of humanity's best. Your scientific knowledge is also clearly top notch. Your research has given us the only leads we've got and, frankly, your motivation for being here is the only one I respect out of all the aliens who have joined us."

Liara smiled, despite herself. She'd shared her nervousness at being useless with others, but clearly Shepard wasn't lying when she pointed out Liara was doing a good job. The idea of a person like Pressly giving out empty praise was not something she could see happening. "I am happy to be of some use to the mission, but I am just doing what I... f-feel I have to do... to deal with my mother's treason."

Pressly gave her an understanding glance. "Like I said, ma'am, it's a good motivation. But my job as XO is to assess and control the crew, not merely tell them they're doing a good job. That goes from the lowest recruit marine, all the way up to the CO herself. That's what this is about."

Pressly exhaled. "I need to know if I can trust you, Doctor. I have a situation on my hands, and I don't know how to proceed yet. What I say has to remain between me and you. Can you do that?"

Liara tilted her head. "That... depends on what you need me to do, or to tell me, Commander. It would

be unwise to simply agree without knowing."

Pressly frowned, but nodded. "It's about Commander Shepard. And ... issues she's having."

Liara glanced at the floor, then nodded slowly. "I... I will not repeat anything you tell me, as long as it will not hurt her."

Pressly snorted, but sat down. "No chance of that. I don't know how much she told you, but the Commander was visited by the Alliance Admiralty when we came into port. From what I gather it was a pretty ugly meeting. Shepard was... upset. Agitated. Depressed, even. It wasn't until you and she came back toasted on the last night out that she seemed to calm down."

Liara frowned. "Um, toasted? Is that not something done to bread?"

Pressly couldn't stop the smile that broke across his features, but his voice was gentle, not mocking. "Slang reference to being drunk, Doctor."

Liara nodded. "Ah. I was... upset myself at the time, due to family issues, and I admit I did not pay enough attention to her mental state. But I am still confused. What is the problem?"

Pressly sighed. "The problem is twofold. The Admiralty sent me a message, stating that if Shepard's... activities in the hunt for Saren got out of hand, or if her mental state deteriorated to a point where she was a threat to the Systems Alliance, I was to assume command, drop all Citadel Observers off at the Citadel, and return the Normandy to Arcturus station. These orders are tied to me, or Doctor Chakwas, declaring Shepard mentally unfit. By itself, while irritating, it's not too worrying. But it upsets me, because it means my government doesn't trust her, and she deserves better."

Pressly stood, flexing his broad shoulders, his hands rubbing together almost nervously. "The other half problem is... the one I need your help with. On board a ship, people pick up queues and hints pretty quick. Rumors get started and can get ugly. I already know that several people decided to commit some improper... fraternization while in port. Shepard let it slide, the crew blowing off steam, all that. That kind of thing I can deal with myself."

Liara swallowed, wondering where Pressly was going with this.

The XO turned away. "Other rumors are harder to stop. I know you don't mingle with the crew much, but... Shepard has nightmares. More than once she's woken up screaming loud enough to wake crew in the sleeper pods, or be heard up on the CIC. It's... unnerving, and worrisome. The ugly truth, Doctor, is that Shepard is under a lot of stress. If the crew feels she's cracking under the pressure, they're going to crack, too. Rumors have already started about the nightmares, and frankly, I think someone may have told Command about them."

Liara nodded, somewhat confused. "Why are you telling me this, Commander?"

Pressly waved a hand in her general direction. "Because I don't trust most of the other aliens on board, and you're the person who seems closest to her. The turian? Nice enough, I suppose, but memories of the First Contact War die hard, and this mess —" he paused to gesture angrily at his omni-tool "— shows they aren't any more admirable than we are."

Pressly ticked fingers off. "She doesn't open up to the crew much, and Master Chief Cole says she probably won't. She's thick as thieves with that Wrex, but I'd sooner trust a vorcha with a flamethrower than ask him for advice. He's a mercenary, nothing more. The quarian is ... doing good work, but she and Shepard barely speak."

Pressly glanced over his shoulder. "I know you've, ah, had to do some mind things with her. I don't understand what it entails, but I've seen your little display on Therum, and the armor cams show how hard you fought your own mother on Feros. Cole says you were more worried about Shepard's health

than the fact that the thing you did with Shiala could have killed you. *You*, I feel I can trust with this."

Pressly exhaled. "She won't talk to us, or admit there is a problem. That's fine; chain of command rarely pushes its problems downstairs. But we can't afford her going to pieces on us mid-mission. Normally, I'd refer this issue to the ship's medical officer... but we've already conferred on this, and Shepard would react badly if we pushed it."

Liara carefully licked her lips, adjusting her position in her seat nervously. "She... has spoken to me a great deal, I suppose. And I spent some time speaking with Ms. Shields, before she departed. I think the Commander is stronger than most people realize."

Pressly grimaced, the strong planes of his face twisting. "Humans can only take so much, Doctor, and she's already taken a lot."

Liara glanced away, gritting her teeth. "I know. When... I joined with her to help her process the images from the beacon on Eden Prime... I... saw some of it. J-just a few flashes, but still... "

Pressly nodded. "I can't go to the brass to make her get help. They'll relieve her of command. She won't listen to me or Chakwas, and if we bring up what they threaten to do to her, it might send her over the edge. I can't even just talk to her about it, because she clams up. And if I do nothing ... I may have to carry out the orders the Admiralty gave me, as unfair as they are. I don't want that."

His steely gaze settled on her with almost tangible weight. "I need you to find out what's wrong with her. See if you can help her."

Liara stared at her hands in her lap, and realized she was trembling. "I... I ah, think I am... a-attracted to her. I worry that she will see an attempt at help as... um..."

Pressly snorted again, and Liara looked up in confusion. "Good lord, Doctor, half the crew has a crush on her. Parker and Jameson have to wipe the drool from their mouths. You'd have to be *dead* not to be attracted to her. But, unlike some members of this boat, you're professional enough not to let that become an issue." Pressly sniffed, almost disparagingly, and turned back to face her. "Having a crush on a good looking woman is not a crime, Doctor. And frankly, based on what I've seen, I don't think she would even pick up on it like that. I still need your help. She's... in serious trouble."

Liara frowned, pushing aside her own worries at the almost despairing tone in Pressly's voice. "How bad are these nightmares?"

Pressly shrugged. "Aside from her not getting more than a couple of hours of sleep in the past few days? Bad. The VI monitors life signs of crew members at all times, and the results ping to the doctor if they go out of range. Shepard's blood pressure is up 40%, her oxygen levels are down. Her reaction times are starting to go. Worse, she's begun drinking heavily, every night. Before the Beacon hit her, she was like ice, now she's... unstable."

Liara nodded. "It may be related to that. I saw the Beacon images...they are ... Goddess, horrible! Watching an entire civilization die, to be melted down and used, or burned, or..." She shuddered and folded her arms around herself. "But I do not know what I can do to help her with that. I am not a, what do you call it, psychologist? "

Pressly shrugged. "You're the only thing we've got, unless you want me to wait until she has a psychotic break." The big human folded his arms, waiting, and Liara sighed.

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"800 yards. Headshot." Garrus' sniper rifle boomed and another thrall slammed to the ground, tumbling back in a slouched mass as bits of its head pattered down around it. The round continued through to blast a second plant-zombie, sending it to the ground with a screech, and it did not rise. "Ready to give

up, ladies? That's my second two-for-the-price-of-one."

Williams snorted, using her sniper rifle to track across the broken landscape of the city ruins. "And so modest, too." The sweep of her sniper rifle stopped, and the bark of its firing was accompanied by another shriek as a thrall, half-hidden in the vegetation, was flung back with its head missing. "Hey, Skipper. They weren't acting like those on Feros... what's up?"

Shepard had moved her force directly to the ruined city, after hearing the story of what had happened from Valun. So far the penetration into the ruins had been broken up only by the occasional randomly wandering thrall, none of which even seemed aware of their presence. Shepard had told Williams and Garrus to drop every single one they saw, to be safe, but the large tower Valun had pointed out was barely fifty feet ahead, and there was still no resistance. "I don't know, Chief. Be ready for anything."

She came to a stop, and nodded to Kaidan, who boomed out orders. "Company halt! First squad, fall out into fire teams. Second squad, form up on the Mako in shining shield formation." The lieutenant racked the release on his Avenger rifle and clambered atop the back of the Mako that had slowly followed them on their approach to the city.

Wrex was in a half crouch, shotgun readied, eyes flicking left and right in rapid arcs designed to pick out movement. Garrus collapsed the huge sniper rifle, drawing out the Phaeston he picked up from the turian camp, and he rolled his shoulders a bit as he also glanced around. Master Chief Cole adjusted the flame unit on his arm, then hoisted his Revenant in his cybernetic hand, the 20 kilo weight of the weapon no strain to the servos in his enhanced limb.

The tower reared above them, at least seven or eight stories high, suddenly ending in a sheared off, melted mass. The entrance to the building was a hexagon, its sides occluded with melted stone and metal. A large mass of sticky green gunk was splattered liberally over the ground leading into the building itself. The doors were long gone, the archway beyond the hexagon sagging with age. Shepard swallowed. "Fire team one and two, in. One left, two right. Secure the entryway and click your radio for clearance. One click is all clear, two is hostiles sighted. If you are engaged, pull out."

Williams nodded, and she with five other soldiers stormed the entryway. It grated on Shepard to send her men in first, but she knew that getting herself killed if this was a hostile situation would probably cause even more deaths. She grit her teeth as her hands tightened around her ODIN, hissing with relief when the radio clicked once. Her relief faded as the radio clicked a second time.

"Hostiles." Her voice was cold, with none of her inner nervousness showing. "Wrex, Garrus, on me. Kaidan, take fire team 3. Cole, fire team 4. Jackson, Illiana, stay outside with the doctor and kill anything that comes out besides us. Move!"

Marines stormed the building, Shepard and the aliens following. The floor was tacky with green slime and irregular with broken tiles of some pale white slate. Passing through the doorway, she entered a short, heavily curved tunnel. The ceiling was a gossamer-like material, thousands of strands of glowing filaments crossing in elaborate patterns, tattered now, but still illuminating the tunnel. Marine boots pounded, and the tunnel ended in another hexagonal portal, opening up into a huge lobby.

The lobby must have been a good hundred feet across, the building basically a hollow tube with rooms on the outside. A large central pillar rose from the center of the lobby, some kind of elevator cars lying in a heaped pile of rubble at its bottom. Wrapped around the pillar was a mass of vegetation and slimy, flesh-like nodules, supported by hundreds of wiry, pulsing ropes of flesh. A heavy, bulbous sack of green-tinted flesh hung pendulously from the pillar, long arches of bone-like substance supporting its vast weight. From this trailed hundreds of thin, long tentacles, and a heavy, slime-dripping tube that ended about five feet from the ground.

If the Feros Thorian had been disgusting, this was beyond revolting. Not just because of its much larger size and mass, but because it had been severely wounded and was seeping masses of thick, vicious slime and chunks of rotting vegetation were slowly seeping from its many nodules. Heavy lines of black charring crisscrossed its bulk, and entire segments of the creature were burned and blackened, dripping blackish fluids that congealed into disgusting masses on the floor. At least seventy turians lay scattered about on the floor as well, most dismembered or burned, charred heaps. At the base of the Thorian was a pile of wrecked computer equipment and comms gear, mostly burned, and propped against it was an infested turian.

The turian was taller than Garrus, and bigger through the shoulders, wearing expensive looking black and gold armor with many angular segments that glinted in the dim light. The turian's face was charred, but even through that the hard planes and high brow could be made out. The turian's right hand clutched a forward curved blade like a claw, the metal shattered a foot from the grip. A pool of golden fluids had stained the floor, bits and pieces of brownish flesh flung about, and long, flung lines of gore showing he'd not died alone.

Shepard pulled her fist up in a stop-motion movement. The chamber was not empty of life. Several floors were visible, and these were packed with an array of animals and turian plant-zombies, shuffling and shambling. There were possibly over a thousand of them, and while most of them seemed mindless, a few turned their head in the direction of the marines, empty eye sockets dark and mouths opening to hiss.

The huge plantlike mass shivered suddenly, and one of the long tentacles snaked down to the ground, slamming itself into the burned corpse at its base. The body shuddered, once, twice, a third time, and then from the tube of flesh, a sack of greenish material erupted, falling to splatter on the floor, spilling its contents.

The figure that rose from the gory wreck of the nodule was turian in shape, but green. Naked, it stood over seven and a half feet tall, almost topping Wrex. Massive shoulders shuddered as the thing flexed its mandibles, and took a wobbly step forward on thick, plated legs that were ropy with hard muscles. Its eyes were bright, searing green, and fixed first on Garrus, then the marines, before fixing on Shepard.

"Shepard, meat leader. I recognize you. The memories of those who have been sanctified whisper to me. A figure of war, of rage and reckless hate."

Shepard waved her hand back, and stepped forward a few steps, eyeing the masses of thralls that waited patiently. "Let me guess – you're a Tho'ian. "

The turian copy bowed, a gesture different than a human bow, the back bending strangely, the eyes never leaving from staring at her, the arms splayed behind, and then straightened. "Somewhat. Events have taken a curious turn. The Tho'ian took control of us, absorbed us. Or I absorbed them. Then the slave creatures came, and nearly slew us. But I was linked to myself. And now who I am is as blurred as the nights of Fire on Palaven itself."

Shepard blinked, confused.

The turian creature tilted its head. "I am indeed the Tho'ian...but it had a mental shock from the ... scream of another of its kind dying a final death, and it was disoriented when the slaves came. Its mind is shattered, and it has co-opted part of my own mind. Or what was my own mind. Or his own mind. Part of me is Prince Ascendant and Praetor Exactal Vorkus Palavanus. Part of me is Lost-Translations-of-Quantum-Foam, a Tho'ian diplomat and elder who was planted here to oversee Tho'ian – Inusannon slave race relations."

Garrus shook his head in dismay. "This... is not good."

Shepard motioned the turian to silence. "So you puppeted Palavanus and lured the Third here, to start making more thralls, then the Collectors half-killed you. And you're not doing so hot. Seems to me the best thing to do is put you out of your misery."

The turian facsimile smiled a turian smile, the mandibles dropping, the needle-like teeth gleaming wetly with greenish tinted slime. "Such an impatient, brutish thing you are. I am not so easily dispatched... and you would be remiss not to hear me out, creature of meat. I offer you things in your hunt for the one you call Saren."

Shepard's eyes narrowed. "What do you know?"

The copy of Palavanus spread its hands. "I awoke to turmoil, with the landing of the first scouting party here. I saw them and consumed them, rebuilding my intellect from the long sleep. The more complete information I tore from the minds of these turian creatures was... fragmented. But the image of a Reaper battleship was in their minds eye, which meant it was time to find a new place to sleep and while away the years."

"In there memories I saw a turian, a fallen hero, now following in the path of those who do not understand the forces they are dealing with. There are doors best left shut, and dark places that should not be breached. Your Saren is one of those who is fool enough to think he is deciding his path, and is instead falling to the wills of those greater than he."

It turned back to face her. "And in their memories, I saw you. Human Spectre, turian detective, krogan mercenary. All set upon his path. I watched you fumble through the camp above for answers. I laughed at your pitiful preparations to do battle and kill me. You are as prey, come to challenge the alpha predator in its own den. If the fires of the slave-takers could not end me, you think mere plasma fire will?"

Shepard gritted her teeth. "There's a good way to find out."

The mockery of Palavanus held up a taloned hand. "Or you could listen, meat creature. Fighting me will simply get you killed, and you are no use to me dead. I wish to... deal."

Shepard shook her head. "I have my orders. And I intend to carry them out. You've murdered these turians, possessed their bodies and defiled their very sense of self. And now you want to deal?"

Palavanus's copy laughed. "I am in some ways a turian now. I do not seek to escape whatever trivial sense of justice you short-lived insects have; I am unlikely to survive much longer. Already my thralls are beyond my ability to control when they venture outside a very short range. Or its ability. Things are no longer clear ."

The Tho'ian itself quivered, a nodule rupturing and spilling a slurry of broken organs and burnt meat onto the floor. Palavanus' copy paid it no mind. "I will tell you, or rather what I am will remember, what it is you face, what you fight. Death is racing towards you all, meat creatures."

Shepard adjusted the slide on her ODIN shotgun. "And in return?"

The Tho'ian shuddered, and Palavanus gave a sigh. "My people... rather, the Tho'ian... are difficult to kill. Almost impossible, really. But when one's life is threatened, it can encapsulate its needed inner self into a spore casing. Planted on a new world, it will again grow to survive. It will take centuries, but the Tho'ian would survive to fight another day."

Wrex glanced at Shepard, but said nothing. Garrus made a clicking sound, one of fury, and Williams's grip on her shotgun tightened.

Shepard, for her part, was thinking. *This is the kind of decision I should kick upstairs.* She clenched her jaw, then glanced at the ranks of the plant zombie creatures that crowded the upper floors. A fight here would be very, very ugly, and the chances of everyone making it out alive were low.

"Your own deal with the Tho'ian didn't end very well for you, did it, Palavanus? Why should I make the same mistake?" Shepard gestured with her shotgun to the charred figure on the floor, and the copy of Palavanus shrugged.

Shepard shook her head, and took two steps back. "I have orders that, for once, I agree with. You've murdered all of these turians. Now you offer knowledge to help me. The Systems Alliance made a deal like that with one of your kind, and all it did was bite us in the ass. No deals, plant."

The copy of Palavanus nodded slowly, and gave another turian smile. "The Tho'ian felt you would be reasonable... I knew better, Butcher of Torfan." The thing swelled in size, the false carapace splitting open to reveal lashing, fanged tentacles. "We will simply take what we need from your twitching corpses!"

Shepard fell back two more steps, leveling her shotgun. "Open fire!"

Howling in rage, swarms of thralls leapt from the balconies above, running forward in a loping, feral manner, their ranks stiffened by huge beasts shot through with vines and infestation. The copy of Palavanus rolled to one side, next to the corpse, and pulled up holding a Phaeston rifle, which he leveled and fired.

Corporal Smith jerked back, half his head gone as the rounds tore through him. Shepard fired twice, both shots crashing into the huge thrall, but Palavanus merely staggered back, and straightened again, firing.

Garrus was moving, firing from the hip. He dropped a pair of lunging, snapping beasts with his rifle, then emptied a long burst into a group of running turian-zombies, sending three crashing to the ground with blown apart heads. Behind him, Wrex was firing his shotgun, the incendiary rounds blazing through the air to slam into a pack of howling thralls. Two went down instantly, missing legs and arms, a third stumbled forward, on fire, only to catch a biotic throw and go sailing into the distance. Wrex gave a booming laugh, stepping forward and backhanding another thrall hard enough to snap its hunched form in half.

Marines stumbled back, firing on full auto, hosing down the shambling ranks with shots. Cole and Alenko sprayed fire from the flame units, sending entire swaths of the plant creatures stumbling back. Thick black smoke from burning thralls choked the air, making it difficult to see.

Shepard pulled three grenades from her belt and flung them all in the direction of the Tho'ian. As she did so, a thrall pounced on her, sending her sliding to the ground, her ODIN shotgun flying out of her hands. The thrall was turian, misshapen and almost melted looking, its mouth a nightmare pit of elongated, jagged fangs, snapping at her face as acidic drool sizzled against the surface of her Spectre armor. She focused her will and sent a biotic shockwave lashing out, hurling the thing away. It landed heavily against a pillar and broke in half, spilling a wash of malformed lumps of flesh amid black-green fluids onto the floor.

Alenko was blazing blue, hurling throws to break up charging thrall groups, flinging grenades, and spraying flames in wide arcs, dropping dozens of the charging creatures with every pass. More and more thralls seemed to focus on him, but they couldn't breach his barriers, shockwaves and the roaring plasma fires from the flame unit.

Williams was firing in wide, scything bursts, concentrating on breaking the enemy charge and covering wounded marines. She sprayed a stream of slugs into the closest thrall, sending it stumbling away to

trip up two others, and turned, screaming orders to the squad to find cover. Before they could even react, another marine died, claws ripping through his suit and acid vomit pouring down his shattered faceplate. Three more marines were separated from the battle line, and even as Shepard got to her feet, one of them was hit from behind by a leaping thrall. The woman's legs buckled as she screamed, her arms flailing, and then the thrall tore her head straight off her shoulders, pausing only to vomit acid on the two marines staring at her corpse in horror.

Shepard rolled to the side, and with a lunge snatched up her ODIN, firing several times. The first two shots staggered the thrall, the final shot blew its leg off, sending it spinning to crash heavily into the ground. Shepard rushed forward, grabbing the arm of one of the marines and pushing him towards the exit. "Fall back with cover fire! Cole! Suppressive fire!"

The Master Chief nodded, tossing his flame unit to another Marine, and then spraying full auto with the Revenant. The sheer power of the slugs coming from its smoking barrel meant even a graze sent thralls stumbling back, direct hits usually blowing limbs off. Marines began moving back, firing, but several were limping from wounds. Alenko sprayed more fire, and then lashed out with biotics, bringing down part of a balcony. It crashed upon a large group of infested animals, smashing them to paste.

Williams was tackled to the ground by a thrall, losing her rifle. It raised its hand to slash at her mask, but Alenko, ducking past two more lunging creatures, hurled a blazing white bolt of biotic force at it, sending it skittering away with enough power to splatter when it slammed into the far wall. Distracted, he didn't see the thrall leap to his right and vomit over him, acid spewing over his leg. He screamed and collapsed, and two more Marines dragged him away, covering their fall back with scattered bursts of assault rifle fire.

Over two hundred thralls littered the ground, most dead from the flame units or Wrex's shotgun. Shepard glanced around, using the Spectre armor's IR to see through the smoke, and cursed as she saw Garrus.

He was in close combat with the copy of Palavanus, both of them fighting with the long omni-bayonets of the Phaeston and with some kind of turian martial arts. Garrus ducked a wild slash from the turian copy, and drove his bayonet into the thing's leg, firing the weapon as he did so. The copy screamed, but several of the lashing tentacles drove hard into Garrus' side and left arm, and a burst of acid sprayed from each. Garrus staggered back, moaning before collapsing on the floor, and the copy straightened and leveled the Phaeston in its hands at his head.

Shepard cursed. "Wrex! Get Garrus out of here! GO!" She watched the krogan roar and storm forward, slamming thralls aside with his fist and blasting his way in Garrus' direction.

Shepard blazed and flared biotically, flashing across the room in a charge. Their collision sent Palavanus careening away, stopping only when he slammed into a pillar. The thrall's weapon tumbled out of its hands, but the big turian thrall only snarled. "You'll never get out of here alive, Shepard."

Shepard saw that her charge had brought her very close to the Tho'ian proper, and she smiled. "Wanna bet?" She leapt back, and ripped the entire belt of grenades she had off her waist and flung it in the direction of the base of the massive plant. Palavanus screamed in what sounded like rage and ran towards the explosives, and Shepard biotically charged away, locking onto a last group of thralls near the exit.

She burst into them, sending them all flying, putting her ODIN barrel into the last one's face and blowing its entire head off. "Marines, MOVE. We are leaving!" She saw Wrex emerge from the smoke, Garrus flung over his shoulders, sending biotic blasts ahead of him to knock thralls and animals aside. Two more thralls charged at him, and Shepard put both down with a single blast of the ODIN. She began falling back to the entrance, covering Wrex's retreat.

Cole sprayed down another thrall as he fell back, but two more leapt at him, drooling acid with claws outstretched. The Master Chief coolly shot one and grabbed the other by the throat. He barked out, "Williams! Dispatch!"

The creature writhing in his grip had its head blown off a moment later by a shot from Williams, and Cole flung it in the direction of the Tho'ian. As he did so, Shepard's grenades detonated—all twenty of them.

The central pillar that supported the bulk and mass of the Tho'ian shattered, and the explosion incinerated the thrall copy of Palavanus and a third of the Tho'ian's bulk. "Marines, double-time! Get to fucking clear ground. Go!" Shepard ran flat out, pulling a stumbling Corporal Rodriguez along. A heavy explosion sounded within the building as marines poured out of the hexagon-shaped tunnel, turning to cover their retreat.

A moment later, there was nothing but smoke and silence, as the remainder of her marine force staggered out, heaving with exertion. Cole leveled his Revenant at the entryway, but nothing came out. A few seconds later, there was an enormous crash, and part of the building collapsed inwards. Dust and smoke flared out from the entryway, along with chunks of rubble.

Cole peered in, then slung his Revenant. "Passage is sealed, ma'am. I think they're trapped in there, assuming anything survived." He turned his gaze to the marines, and Shepard glanced around as well, wincing as she did so.

She'd gone in with twelve marines, plus Cole, Williams, and Alenko. The lieutenant was laid out on the ground, holding a leg scored with acid burns, gritting his teeth trying not to scream. Williams and Cole were covered in gore, but unhurt for the most part, although Williams was walking as though she'd twisted her ankle.

Of her twelve marines, four were dead, and the form of Private Hallis was unmoving, even while Corporal Jackson applied medigel and cursed at her to breathe. Private Morris was covered in acid burns, most of his armor gone, the jagged edges of bone visible from the stump of his right hand.

Wrex was crouched once again, rubbing his arm where the armor was charred. Garrus lay next to him, moaning, his armor wrecked. Burns covered his chest, and his arm and leg were a mess, acid gunk leaking from punctures in the armor.

Shepard herself didn't have a mark on her.

Shepard sank to her knees, shaking her head. "Normandy. This is Shepard. Send down the other Mako. Hurry. Flight Lieutenant, once we are all aboard, set course for the Citadel, no delays." She clicked off, and wearily turned to face Cole. "Master Chief...put the most heavily wounded on the first Mako and get them back up to the ship."

Cole nodded, but squatted down next to her, speaking quietly. "May not be my place to say, sir, but you know full goddamned well that thing couldn't be trusted. You made the right call."

Shepard's eyes narrowed. "It killed my marines. I should have... planned better. Something." She looked away, her voice cold. "Get my marines back up to the ship, Master Chief. Dismissed."

Cole merely nodded, leaving Shepard to stare at the unmoving, badly wounded Garrus, wondering if he'd survive.

*A/N: Work on chapters has slowed a bit, mostly because I'm shifting how I plan to get through the next few chapters. I'm working as fast as I can, but due to the layers of complexity and going full AU, I can't just blaze through a complete re-write of the story in a few hours.*

*Some hints of the sort of problems Shepard has in her personal relationships will first be hinted at in this chapter. They won't be everyone's cup of tea. That's fine. When I said my Shepard was very messed up, everyone of course thought of the ME Canon version of a Renegade, being an asshole, running around killing at the drop of a hat, etc. This Shepard isn't like that. As we go through the story, more and more segments of that persona will come out.*

*After this is a few short fluff segments. Then Cerberus. Hopefully. I keep putting it off. :D*

*The fic of the day is **Demon's Shepard** by Kreiden. A wonderful, wonderful take on Morinth. I fucking hate Samara. :D*

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## O-OSaBC-O

The mood on the Normandy was morose, and Liara felt personally responsible for it. The mission on Eingana was supposed to have been safe, simple research. Instead, Liara's suggestions had only ended up leading to the death of four marines. It weighed on her, and she was not able to simply hide away from how it affected the rest of the crew. Chakwas had needed to move equipment and some of the more lightly injured personnel into the quiet environs of the science lab, and thus Liara found herself without a hiding place to pass the time in nervous research.

She sat instead on the mess decks, nursing a cup of warm tea, listening carefully to the crew while pretending to read a datapad in front of her. She'd never really mixed with the crew in any capacity, only putting on a polite smile when getting a tray of food and the occasional chat with Alenko or Chakwas.

Two crewmen sat at the next small table, both from NavOps, and their voices were low, quiet, and didn't travel far enough to be heard clearly. Liara had used her omnitool to pick up the sound and have it dumped as text to her datapad, and thus attracted no attention as she eavesdropped. She wouldn't have done so, but in the aftermath of the conversation with Pressly and the fact the Commander had simply locked herself in her quarters after the mission, Liara figured she needed to know more of what the crew thought before approaching Shepard.

"It looks pretty bad. I mean, you figure – the big shots come down to yell at her, we go on some kind of 'research trip', and then half the goddamned ground team comes back dead. All that decon bullshit we did on Feros we're doing again. What the fuck is going on?" The man who spoke was slender and dark haired, his back facing Liara, revealing nothing but his hands as he made a gesture.

The man facing him had blunt, even features – narrowed brown eyes, crew cut black hair and a line that was little more than a grim slash. His uniform had the rank insignia of a senior tech and the rating device of a NavOps analyst. He glanced down at his plate, picking at his food. "Keep your goddamned voice down, Tom. The blue is just across the way."

The slender figure glanced over his shoulder, but Liara kept her eyes on the datapad. "Oh, her. Shit, she ain't the problem, Phil. She don't even have any ears, man. What I'm saying is simple: everyone is just waiting for Shepard to fuck something up. The aliens don't give a shit – hell, the only reason they even decided to go along was *more* aliens brought up some proof they'd listen to. It's all well and good to say kill the Saren fucker, but we damn near got dropped with GTS missiles on Therum, and could have been smoked with the rest of the fleet on Feros. Now this. Why don't we have any support?"

The bigger figure shrugged his shoulders, sipping his tea. "You're an idiot, Byrce. Asari don't have earlobes, but they can hear just fine. We don't have any support because a fleet can't find one man, and this trip was supposed to be non-combat. And I don't know what the shit happened down there on Eingana, and I don't want to know. The Commander looked like warmed over dog shit, four dead, everyone else all fucked up –"

The tech named Byrce shrugged back. "And why was that? We knew people were gonna get popped. Hell, I had to do the touch-up on Jenkins when we got him back on board; the bastard had a hole blown clean through his fucking skull ." He sipped his drink and grimaced at the taste. "We're used to people dying. We're not used to having our asses *handed* to us, though. On Eden Prime the colony got dropped, lost Jenkins, and from the shit on Citadel News, we lost a big Prothean device. On Therum, fuck, ship got holed, half the marines were shot to pieces, and the Commander came back half dead. Feros? Fuck, man, we were like two minutes away from that big black geth ship turning us into atoms!"

Phil was motionless except for his hands, but his voice sounded agitated. "And? Shit, Eden Prime was fucked by the time we got there. They could have sent Branson, Shepard, and Delacor, in a goddamned dreadnaught with Sharblu singing the SA anthem and the entire First Fleet and it wouldn't have saved those people. And as far as the rest goes, we don't get told shit. The Commander makes the calls, we push the buttons. If we hadn't gone in on Therum, maybe the geth would have done that planet like Eden Prime."

Byrce shook his head. "I'm just real tired of ops that go cluster-fuck at the drop of a hat. I'm tired of manning ops alley for 10 hours straight making sure we don't get ghosted by geth, or fucking turians, or Cerberus, or batarians , or who the fuck knows what else. And I'm really tired of places requiring that we vacuum-sterilize the entire ship multiple times. Maybe I'm too goddamned picky."

Phil grunted. "You're too goddamned picky. Would you rather be with the Fifth Fleet, getting your ass shot off chasing pirates and spending six weeks orbiting a goddamned star in the middle of nowhere? Or on the Normandy, heading back to the Citadel and the clubs with triple combat and hazard pay?"

Byrce sniffed. "Won't do none of us no good if we're all dead. We have nineteen centimeters of armor plate. Nineteen! That won't even stop fucking heavy MA fire, man..."

The two men fell silent, and then looked up as Chief Williams entered the mess, Byrce speaking up first. "Chief! Any news?"

Williams shot a look at the door leading to the Commander's quarters, still showing the red square of a locked door. "Just that we're burning space back to the Citadel ASAP. We think everyone still alive will pull through... it will be touch and go." Williams glanced down at the package in her hands. "Just finished with the... effects of the deceased."

Byrce shook his head. "Goddamned shame. Why were we even there, Chief?"

Williams glanced aside at Liara, then shrugged, eyes dark with exhaustion. "We found some evidence linking that ship that Saren has to what killed the Protheans... and probably races before the Protheans. It's pretty heavy shit. The doc over there probably has more information."

Byrce looked dubious, but stood and dumped his food tray in the recycler. "Maybe later, Chief. I'm off to watch, again. Pressed-ass has us standing port and starboard again to make sure we don't get snuck up on." Williams suppressed a grin at the nickname for Pressly, and folded her arms.

He stalked off, and Williams sat down next to Phil. "Hell is eating him?"

The burly tech shrugged. "What's bugging most of the crew, Chief. We don't really know what's going **on**, and we just had our goddamned ass handed to us. The Commander hasn't even come out of her

quarters since we did pickup. The krogan is angry, the quarian lady is busy building something, the asari looks fucking *pissed*, and the Master Chief looks like he's gonna punch somebody."

Liara didn't feel pissed, and sighed. If anything, she usually felt like a stupid petitioner in front of the University Council, stammering out explanations of why she needed more research money and being laughed out of the room. She adjusted her position, focusing on the pad and the words of the humans.

Williams scratched her head, her features turning grim. "You know the drill... the less you know, the less you can say to the wrong people. And Shepard went into this trip thinking it'd be... well, safe. We certainly weren't expecting to find what we did down there. I mean, we knew there might be a problem, but I didn't think it would turn out that bad. .. and I think the Commander is pretty upset about what happened."

Phil shrugged. "I'm sure she is. Still, people are on edge. The ground team won't even talk much about what happened down there –"

Phil fell silent as the door to the Commander's quarters chimed softly and slid open. Shepard stalked out in marine BDU's, and Liara couldn't help but gasp. The Commander's face was drawn and grim, her eyes burning with anger, and something else, and she radiated tension. She stormed past everyone towards the elevator, and Williams traded glances with Liara briefly.

Liara licked her lips and stood. "I... I think I will go make sure she is alright, Chief Williams."

Williams nodded. "I'll come with. That didn't look good."

O-OSaBC-O

Wrex examined his armor's leg plate critically. He had brought a spare suit of armor, in case he had to go somewhere that full combat armor would have been a problem, and much like his main suit, Thorian acid had ruined it. He didn't place a lot of faith in armor made by humans, not that the Normandy had anything in his size, and he wasn't thrilled about being given armor, either.

A krogan who took arms and armor from another was acknowledging the giving krogan as a battle master. That was a lot of trust to put in a human, not to mention Wrex hadn't bent knee to any battlemaster in over half a millennium and wasn't about to start now. He would make the point of paying Shepard for whatever she got him to wear. He could, of course, could buy his own armor, but the ugly fact remained that he doubted anything Citadel dealers would let him buy would match what she got him.

Still, the very idea grated at him.

The humans had gone as limp as kicked pyjacks in the hours after the fight on EIngana. Wrex was more sanguine about events. Sure, soldiers died. But they'd discovered that the ship Saren was using was a lot older and probably even more dangerous than they expected. The Shadow Broker had been openly worried at Wrex's report, and was dispatching his own agents to the site immediately.

But the humans seemed more upset that four marines *had* died than *why* they died. Wrex didn't understand it, but then again, humans were almost never worth the time to bother figuring out. They could be hard like turians, crazed almost like krogan, but soft like asari as well.

Wrex sat aside the cup of jaaki, a smile stretching his features as he remembered Shields giving it to him before leaving. He set down the plasma cutter and reached for the shaper unit, forcing the curve of the leg joint into a better shape. He was in the process of picking through both suits, trying to see how much he could patch together, when the elevator hissed open and Shepard stepped out.

His eyes tracked her, as she walked angrily towards him. She smelled of rage, and frustration, and something else he couldn't place. Rather than ask, he simply gave her the usual greeting.

"Shepard."

She came to a stop in front of him, looking up. Her eyes were narrowed, tired, and yet full of anger, and her body was tense and tight, almost trembling. Her voice was cool, almost amused, but taut with unspoken emotion as well.

"Wrex."

The krogan gently set his gauntlet to one side, warily keeping his eyes on her. Their relationship was tricky, forged on a single battlefield in a moment of terrible wrath. It had shown him a warrior that was vicious, cruel and almost surgical in precision and terror, but who was still a warrior, not a killer or murderer. And maybe it had shown her all krogan weren't beasts.

But he didn't understand the human female much more than he did any other human. Her moods were mercurial, even if she could hide them from other humans, with their pitiful inability to smell and simply see without cultural filters. Shepard was about a few words away from exploding, and she had come to him rather than another human, which bothered him on many levels.

"You look like someone kicked you in the quad. What you want?"

Shepard gave him a thin, almost mocking smirk. "Need to spar. Work off energy."

Wrex gave an incredulous snort. "Then find one of your piss weak soldiers to do it. Krogan don't spar, Shepard. We fight for blood."

The tiny human actually rolled her eyes at him, and then flexed her hands, making joints crackle. "Like you could fucking touch me, fat-ass turtle. I need to..." Her voice trailed off as her hands clenched, so tight the tendons stood out like steel cords, straining under the skin.

Wrex sniffed again, almost cautiously, and his plates settled back at the taste of the air. She was *scared*, and Wrex didn't think in the slightest that the fear he smelled was of him. Something was seriously wrong with Shepard, and that got his attention at last. He stood, slowly, coming to his full height. "Well, at least when I break your spine, we'll be at the Citadel soon enough for them to fix you back up."

Shepard backed up, to the middle of the cargo bay, balling her fists, moving her balance forward onto the balls of her feet, a few strands of black hair falling into her face. "I hear a lot of talk, Wrex."

With no warning, the krogan lunged leading with a powerful right hook. Shepard ducked under it, sliding right, lifting her leg in a kick catching him in the side. He retaliated as she recovered, arm scything out in a backhand, catching her in the jaw with a savage crack that sent her stumbling, blood spilling from her nose. She didn't even pause, though, turning her stumble into a whirl, sweeping her other leg out to catch him in the knee.

The krogan crashed to the ground and Shepard leapt, driving her heel into his stomach before back flipping out of his return punch. With a grunt he rolled over, coming back up to his feet, arms raised defensively, blocking another kick that was already headed for his side. He jerked Shepard from her feet. His elbow descended, right into the middle of her back, and she fell to the floor grunting in pain.

He kicked out but she literally bent double at the waist, still on the ground, dodging it, then flipped back to her feet. The motion distracted him, and the knife-hand she executed to his right eye was beautifully timed, sending an explosion of pain across his vision, making him stagger. He roared and slammed his head forward, crashing his hard plates into her attempt at a follow up punch, and heard knuckles crunch, likely breaking, as she danced back, hissing in agony. A punch to the stomach and a kick of his own to the human's calf sent her staggering back, holding her stomach.

Wrex blinked blood out of his eye and grinned, as Shepard managed to stagger back onto one leg,

hands upraised. She grunted and then hurled herself forward, as if she was going to head-butt *him*, at the last second dropping back to the ground and driving a hammer punch right between his legs with her good hand.

Wrex's grin turned into a grimace as he buckled, thanking every known krogan deity that her punch had glanced off his quad rather than impacting them directly. His face met her rising knee, and the burst of stars in his vision didn't do much for his temper. He roared, the hazy tinge of the blood rage filtering across his sight, and he lashed out with his fists.

Shepard ducked both punches, sending a tattoo of her own strikes against his stomach and ribs, but the krogan merely used them to figure out where she was, and brought both his hugely muscled arms together across her head. The human managed to stay upright as her skull vibrated, her head ringing like a bell, but she didn't even see the straight punch to the jaw that knocked her clean off her feet and sent her flying almost five feet away.

She skidded as she landed, tumbling and then crashing into two pairs of legs. Shaking her head, she looked up blearily to see a horrified looking Liara and a very confused and somewhat angry looking Williams staring down at her from the confines of the elevator. Shepard spat blood, baring her teeth in a cheerfully savage, bloodstained grin. "Sp-sparring, Williams."

Williams glanced up to see Wrex, chest heaving, teeth gleaming, muscles dancing in his arms, looking for all the world like he was going to stomp on Shepard's head. She then took in the bloody face and battered frame of the Commander. "I think you should yield, ma'am. He just handed you your entire ass."

With a grunt of pain, Shepard slowly levered herself up, rubbing her jaw and feeling something click. "Damn, Wrex..." She tried to control her breathing, the rush of blood through her limbs, and winced at bruises already forming on her chest and face. "I lasted longer than I thought I would."

Wrex blinked several times, and seemed to almost deflate a little, shaking his head to clear it of the onset of blood rage. "Ha. You really thought a punch to the quad would take me?"

Shepard gave a lopsided grin. "Had to try, big guy. It worked for Shields."

Wrex rolled his bulbous eyes. "It worked for Shields because she used a *shotgun*..."

Liara finally found her voice. "You were... fighting? Why?"

Wrex turned a sly glance in Shepard's direction. "Krogan counseling." The big krogan rubbed his eye, smirking.

Shepard glanced at Liara, saying nothing, and Williams frowned. "I don't mean to interrupt your, uh, sparring, Ma'am, but I've been... waiting to speak with you. About the effects of the deceased."

The almost exhilarated look on Shepard's face faded, the fire going out of her eyes and the slackness in her cheeks returning to visibility. "Yeah. Sorry. Just... I have the packages and letters to their families done. I ... Corporal Smith's fiancée had sent a message to the ship... just gave birth to a baby boy." She wiped her face with her free hand, running it through her hair, shoulders slumped. "I'm so goddamned tired of writing these things."

Liara's eyes softened in sympathy, but she couldn't figure out what to say. *And really, what can you say, Liara? I am sorry that my silly research got your team killed, and if I had not bothered you with it they might still be alive? I am sorry that men died to kill something that was already dying?*

Williams, however, did speak up. "If you needed to talk about it, Skipper..."

Shepard shook her head, eyes shuttering and going cold, her back straightening almost by reflex. "No,

Chief. I'm fine. I'll audit their possessions when we get to the Citadel. Thanks for getting that done." Shepard paused, frowning, and then folded her arms. "Go ahead and let the crew know that since we've got wounded I'll go ahead and set shore leave when we dock."

Williams nodded, tucking her datapad behind her back. "Yes, Ma'am." She turned on her heel, returning to the elevator. It closed behind her, leaving Liara standing with Wrex and Shepard in the otherwise empty cargo bay.

The human and the krogan were eying each other, Liara realized, wishing she had any kind of understanding of why a human and krogan would fight hand to hand, clearly pulling punches. As she watched, Shepard wiped a trickle of blood from her nose and gave a smirk to the big krogan. "You got lucky, Wrex, that Ash and Liara came down to interrupt."

Wrex gave a sigh, stomping back over to where he'd been working on his armor. "Shepard, you must have taken a hit to the head down there. But for a human, you fight pretty good. Too bad you aren't a female krogan, you'd have been something else."

Shepard gave an almost gentle smile, Liara watching in fascination. "Flirting again, Wrex?" The big krogan laughed, shoulders shaking with mirth as he busied himself with his armor again, and Shepard turned to face Liara, raising an eyebrow.

Liara bit her lip and spoke up. "Shepard... if you have a moment I need to speak with you as well." She tried to keep her voice calm, but it felt almost as if she was interrupting something she shouldn't.

Shepard merely nodded, and pinched the bridge of her nose. "Alright, come back up with me to my office." Without another word to Wrex, Shepard slapped the elevator controls, waiting for the slow elevator car to descend. "You made any progress on deciphering that stuff on the Prothean data discs?"

The doors opened, and Liara followed Shepard inside. "Not at this time. I have been working on it, but there appears to have been a great deal of linguistic drift between the Nova-era period and the Extinction-period ruins that I am most familiar with, and the time-frame the Protheans were active on Eingana. Some of the translations do not make any sense."

Shepard grunted as the elevator deposited them on the crew deck. "None of this shit makes any sense. Keep working at it, we need to know everything that happened or the goddamned Council is going to look at me like I'm crazy."

Shepard stalked into her cabin, and Liara bit her lip as she entered behind. The room, usually neat, was disheveled. The bed was unmade, covers thrown aside and the pillow askew. Armor was hurled into a rough pile in one corner, and three empty bottles of scotch were sitting on the table in the corner, a fourth half-full bottle near them.

Shepard went over to the small sink in the wall, pulling down a towel and soaking it with cold water before wiping blood from her face with it. She checked the swelling of her eye where one of Wrex's punches had landed, before pulling the cold cloth across the back of her neck and shutting the water off. She paused, flexing her left hand, wincing as pain lanced up and down it and several fingers failed to move.

*Well, fuck, that's broken. Chakwas is gonna love that.*

She turned and walked across the room to sit at the small table. "Mind if I smoke?" The asari shook her head mutely, and Shepard flipped a switch on the wall, starting up a vent in the corner, before pulling out one of her cigarettes and lighting it. "So, what's up, Liara?" She tossed the pack and the lighter onto the table almost carelessly, leaning back and puffing on the cigarette in her mouth.

Liara did not sit, instead giving a nervous exhalation and forcing her features and voice to be as calm as

possible. "I am worried about you, Sara, and I wish to apologize for causing all of this to happen."

Shepard gave her a curious, flat look, before unscrewing the cap on the scotch with her good hand. She poured another glass, smiling flatly as the liquor splashed quietly, before recapping the bottle. "Causing all what to happen?" She took a sip, then winced, touching her bruised jaw, before taking another shot.

Liara gestured to the empty bottles, helplessly. "If I had not suggested a trip to Eingana, no one would have died. In my zeal I didn't even consider that there might be active Thorians—"

Shepard held up her good hand, eyes narrowed. "If you hadn't thought to test the air, Liara, we'd have gone down there and ended up spore feed. If you hadn't done your analysis, the goddamned thing and his plant turian buddy would probably have struck some kind of deal with the turians who would have eventually showed up. These Thorians, or Tho'ians, or whatever the fuck they call themselves, are a goddamned menace, and I'm not sorry we found and killed this one."

Shepard drank, closing her eyes, leaning back in the chair almost bonelessly. "I'm just...tired of every goddamned operation going south. Either I nearly get myself killed trying to take all the risks, or I use my marines and lose half of them and have to watch them die and kick myself for not planning better. This shit is my fault, not yours. I had every warning this thing was dangerous and I made the call to go in after it anyway. "

Liara folded her arms. "And you blame yourself for what happened down there? That is no more accurate than me blaming myself for the marines who were wounded when you came to rescue me on Therum." The asari took a step closer, cursing her timidity. "You have always thrown yourself in the line of fire. I read your service records; I have seen your bravery first hand. You risked your life on Therum to draw fire from your Marines rather than make them distract the geth."

Liara swallowed and sat down at the table with Shepard, managing to catch her gaze, forcing herself to look directly into the human's storm blue eyes. "But the Tho'ian we found on Eingana was far too protected to assault directly. The building it was in prevented you from simply bombarding it, no matter what Wrex might say – if it survived this long and orbital bombardment from the battle that took down all those ships, your own ships weapons would have done no more damage than the missiles Joker fired did to the skybridge on Feros."

Shepard puffed on her cigarette, shaking her head. "That's no goddamned excuse, Liara. I should have gone in there and taken the thing out myself."

Liara merely looked at her for a long second. "So you could *die*? Shepard, there were hundreds of thralls in there. If you had gone in alone, no matter how skilled you are, you would have died. And if you die, do you really think your government, or the Council, has the political will to really keep up the search for Saren? In a way that will actually stop him?"

Shepard drained her glass. "I don't care." She reached for the scotch, but Liara's hand reached out, cool blue fingers touching her wrist, sending goosebumps up Shepard's spine.

Liara's eyes were wide and open, pools of worry and fear, her entire posture tense. The hand on her wrist was trembling ever so slightly. "Shepard, you are pushing yourself too hard. You are having nightmares, not sleeping, not eating, and not resting. Your idea of stress relief is to get into a fist fight with a krogan. The crew is worried and so is everyone else."

Shepard closed her eyes, the beating Wrex had given her moving towards a dull, throbbing pain that distracted her from the emotions raging inside. "I'm doing the best I can."

Liara shook her head. "No one is questioning your ability, or how well you have done. But you are going to end up getting killed if you continue to blame yourself for everything that goes wrong and

throw yourself into every battle as if you want to die."

Shepard pulled her arm free, and topped up the scotch, glaring. "I'm the commander of the mission. I was given the responsibility by the Council, and the Systems Alliance. Those men died today because I didn't plan this right. I was impulsive. I was reckless. Instead of falling back and updating command of the changed parameters, I went ahead and took it out, at the cost of four men. One of whom now has a small baby born this morning."

Shepard drank the amber fluid, slumping back in her chair. "We haven't even been at this a month yet, and it's going to hell. Half of the Fourth Citadel Fleet destroyed. Beacon smashed. Saren probably got more information from the Thorian on Feros than we did, and instead of using the one you found on Eingana, I blew it the fuck up because it angered me." She pulled the cold, wet towel from around her neck, burying her face instead.

Liara glanced around the cabin, unsure how to proceed. She probed the fading shreds of memories she still possessed from their last touch of minds, and frowned. Unable to recall anything useful at all, she pulled out one of Shepard's cigarettes from the pack on the table and lit it, wondering how to reach the human woman.

*Because if you do not the humans are going to relieve her of command, and she will see that as a failure... she does not abide failure...*

Liara looked up, and exhaled smoke. "So you simply plan to give up?"

Shepard's tired eyes glanced up and met hers. "I knew I'd fail at this task the moment I got it. I was trying to tell Anderson that and he wouldn't listen to me. It's too much. I don't know enough, I don't have the skills needed. I'm no good at making speeches, or figuring out information." She angrily took a drag off the cigarette, lips thinning. "I'm just a thug. Maybe I make an attempt at not being the kind of thug I was on Earth, but am I really any different?"

Liara smiled, helplessly. "I think you are. You used to define yourself by your coldness, your ability to do the job and not be affected. Losing your team after Torfan hurt you. Losing faith in the Systems Alliance hurt you. You could not figure out how to repair it... any more than I can figure out how to repair my connection to my own people. My values and the things that they find important are just too different. The gap is too large, and my will to cross it is too small."

The asari took another puff on her cigarette, trying to keep her voice calm and steady. "But if you think you have failed at your task, you are wrong. The crew is not worried about being killed, or of you failing. They are worried about *you*. So is Williams, and Wrex, and so am I. You have done the very best you could –"

Shepard made an angry slashing motion with both hands, then hissed in pain, having used her broken hand. With a sigh she reached for her drink with her other hand, lifting it to her mouth. Swallowing, she shook her head. "The best I could do? Get a third of my squad killed on a routine mission? What happens when we have to dig Saren the fuck out of where he's hiding?"

Liara shrugged. "Then we may all die. But if that day comes, wrecking yourself by drinking and not sleeping and not... being able to rest will not help you make the right choices. I am not here to debate whether or not you made the right choices on Eingana – I am not a tactician. I am here because you ... are not yourself. You are fraying under the stress."

Shepard gave Liara a long, troubled look, the blue eyes unreadable and tired. "I don't have many choices."

Liara shook her head, putting her cigarette down and leaning forward. "Please. I do not have a good

way to ask this. Let me help you. Tell me about what is making you so upset, so beaten."

Shepard closed her eyes, leaning back. "The ... cipher, whatever the fuck Shiala called it. I got one good night's sleep after that, then it all came back. Visions of Protheans mixed in with my own past. Melting children, flashbacks from the Reds, battlefields and fire and fucking everything dying. All the time. Whenever I try to sleep." She inhaled on the cigarette, then pushed the cherry into the ashes in her ashtray, extinguishing it as she opened her eyes. "All blurred together."

Shepard's mouth twisted into a wry grin. "I have my own senior leaders telling me I'm a jumped up street thug, and to clear everything I do through them. I have a crew I don't understand, and the more I try the more confused I get. I am doing everything I know how, but I hardly know anything."

Liara looked down. "Why did you not tell me about the dreams? I could try to help you with them again."

Shepard shook her head. "It almost killed you. It did kill Shiala. You think I'm going to risk that?"

Liara gave a weary, tired smile of her own. "I think it hardly matters. If you do not let me help, you will not get enough rest. Your mind will be confused and your thinking unclear. Eventually, that will get us killed, or get you removed by your own government. Either way, if you are no longer responsible for me, the Asari will hand me over to the Justicars. It is likely, given the political turmoil my mother has caused with her actions, that I will be held responsible for her crimes and punished." The asari shrugged weakly. "Either way, I will be dead. At least by helping you, I have a chance to help myself and others."

Liara held out her hand, eyes pleading. "You cannot do everything by yourself, Shepard."

Shepard closed her eyes, rubbing her temples. "It could hurt you—"

Liara's voice grew stronger. "The matriarchs of Thessia say that no fish is caught unless one is willing to brave the dangers of the sea." She kept her hand held out. "And I believe in you."

Shepard grimaced, but winced at the pain lancing across her skull. With a shaky exhalation of breath, she wrapped her good hand around the asari's, and barely had time to say "alright" before the entire world seemed to ignite into fire.

She could *feel* Liara, like a third arm, or phantom pain. She could feel the struggle, the lashing agony as the asari tried to link memories and focus on the Prothean vision. Her body felt like it was being pulled into two pieces, and her limbs felt fuzzy, poorly defined. Her own vision was befouled with broken, jagged images of warfare, chaos, and blood, before everything flashed white and went black.

When Shepard came to she was laid out on her own bed, a pillow propped up behind her head. Liara was hovering over her nervously, her blue eyes shot through with purple streaks, bruises forming along the asari's neck and wrist. "S-shepard! You are alright? Please talk, say something!"

Shepard croaked, her throat tight and dry, then coughed, a sharp, racking cough. "I'm..." She paused. The ugly, heavy pressure in her head was gone, leaving her feeling calm, almost analytical. "I'm fine, Liara. What happened?"

The asari visibly relaxed, rubbing her wrist for a second before jerking her hand away. "I-I managed to keep the focus on the visions, and on the Cipher this t-time. It was easier since the Cipher was making them make more sense, but ... the beacon was scrambled badly before you even used it, I think. The memories from it were tangled in your own."

Liara went over to the sink, and filled one of the plastic cups there with water from the tap, bringing it over for Shepard to drink. The human took it gratefully, swallowing it slowly so not to upset her stomach. "I feel a lot better. There were times I was hearing... voices."

Liara nodded. "You were under a great deal of stress. You reacted to the joining of minds, but... you calmed down."

Shepard eyed the marks on Liara's throat. "Jesus, I choked you?" She eyed the bruises on the asari's neck again, noticing how they contrasted with her skin, wondering what it would have felt like to... Shepard sighed, unhappily, as she realized the image was arousing.

*Jesus, Mary and Joseph. Now you're pushing your sick fucking fetish imagery on her after trying to choke her out? Get a grip.*

Liara shrugged. "You were... struggling. I am alright, they are merely bruises. The important thing is that you feel better. And that you ... aren't suffering anything like those nightmares again. Please let me know if they recur."

Shepard nodded. "It's just...I don't want you to get hurt trying to fix me up. And you already have... twice."

Liara forced a smile, trying to control her emotions and reactions. *Just tell her you want to be her friend and leave it at that! She has let you in more than anyone else already. Silly infatuations have to come second to what must be done.* Shrugging, Liara merely said "We are all in this .. together."

There was a long, awkward moment of silence, Liara sitting on the very edge of the bed, nervously, Shepard stiffly laying there. Avoiding each others eyes.

Liara, desperate for something to break the silence, examined the commander's injured hand, the knuckles swollen and the fingers crooked. "You need to have your hand seen too, and most likely your other injuries, Shepard. I already alerted Dr. Chakwas, but she was asleep. She'll be here soon."

Shepard nodded, and closed her eyes, suddenly tired, trying to let some of the stress bleed away. It gentled the lines of her face, taking Liara's breath away with the transformation. Almost without thinking, Liara gently smoothed Shepard's hair back from her forehead, gently, before realizing what she had done and jerking back. "I-I am sorry. I ..."

Shepard opened her mouth to say something, when the cabin doors opened and Dr. Chakwas entered the room, eyes flinty and hands filled with medical supplies. "Sparring with krogan, Commander? Really?"

Shepard could do nothing but sigh.

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## **Chapter 67: Chapter 58: Citadel, Departure III**

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*A/N: Oh, man. I got bogged down, seriously, during the end of year, and then went to the dentist about a simple crown repair on one of my teeth, which turned into finding that three of them had decay below the crowns (shoddy work), which lead to the discovery of an infection, multiple root canals, teeth broken below the gumline, bone fragments, and yay, hospitalization and dental surgery.*

*I've been fucked up on 15 mg of Vicodin for the past week and a half. Derailed my update schedule completely. I'm not even close to 100% yet, but I've been taken down to 7.5 mg so at least I can think again.*

*I've been piecing this chapter together, it's a linking piece, as instead of more time on the Citadel most of what is coming is rapidly moving against Cerberus (and the reveal) and then a stop on Tuchanka and the geth. The end is less than thirty chapters away, if I go according to the outline.*

*The story of the day is one of great satisfaction to me: **The Madness of Angels**, by the incomparable and unmatched The Naked Pen.*

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The Normandy had docked, and the EMT's from the Citadel came aboard with dispatch, hauling stasis-field equipped gurneys into the ship and down to the medbay. Doctor Chakwas oversaw the transfer, being especially careful with Garrus, who was still badly wounded from the Tho'ian thrall attacks on Eingana. The turian looked beaten, stripped of armor and tucked securely in a crash-medical gurney, bags of cobalt tinted turian plasma hanging from the side of the bed. Chakwas made sure he was secure before having the EMT teams move out the other wounded marines who needed specialist care.

The rest of the crew went through their various shutdown and docking procedures, venting fuel back to tanks, bleeding heat sink fluidics back and purging navigation systems. Marines moved sharply, gathering up the old remains of their battle gear for off-loading – the new armor and weapons Shepard had purchased were waiting dockside, and the armory had to be cleared out before it could get loaded. Shepard had already barked out orders that morning, ordering all hands to standby for general quarters assembly on the docks prior to leave being granted, and now it was just a matter of the crew finalizing the preparations.

Kaidan was propped up in the medical bay, a regeneration package over his leg where acid had seared through his armor in his rush to save Williams. He could hear the booming voice of Master Chief Cole outside, haranguing people to finish post-dock procedures so he could get drunk, and chuckled. He shifted in his bed, and glanced up towards the door as it slid open, revealing the form of Shepard, in regular BDU's.

Kaidan wondered if Shepard was going to discipline him for breaking ranks to stop the thrall from killing Ash. He'd not even been thinking, just reacting, but his lapse allowed the wild charge of thralls that had ended up nearly killing Private Hallis. Shepard looked worn, but not exhausted, and the drawn look had vanished from her features, but bruises marred her complexion – one over her eye, another along her jawline. "What's the diagnosis, Lieutenant?"

Kaidan gave a shrug. "Doctor Chakwas says the burns were mostly superficial, stopped by the armor. I got lucky. I should be back up by tomorrow, at least for light and limited duty. I can oversee the armory shift out if you want, ma'am."

Shepard made a dismissive gesture. "Not necessary. We'll fit the shit out before we depart. Initial med reports look good, Hallis is going to pull through, and Detective Vakarian should be alright." She exhaled. "We are going to have a memorial service for the fallen tonight at 1800, on board. Can you stand with crutches?"

Kaidan nodded grimly. "Yes, ma'am, I will be there."

Shepard said nothing, but her stance shifted ever so slightly, more relaxed. "Good. I'm going to be assembling the crew for an all-hands, nothing you need to worry about. Get healed up and make sure you're back on the ship by 0800 two days from now. The med techs think Garrus will be up by then, so we can't delay further – this trip already took way too much time out of my plans. Admiral Kahoku gave us a briefing data disc, but went ahead with a scout unit to see what he could find about his missing marines. I'll need you up and running for this."

Kaidan nodded again. "Yes, ma'am. I'll be ready. What... are we going to do about the rest of the Marine detail? We're down at least four men, seven if we don't take back on the wounded before we go."

Shepard grimaced. "I put out a request for replacements. We'll see what Fifth Fleet does with it. Best

guess, they'll cut us some A's from the 63rd's Marine detachment – I can't imagine anyone *volunteering* for this lunatic gig." Her grimace grew more strained, and she pushed her hair out of her face. "Doesn't matter, Lieutenant. I want you to get a neural examination while we're here on the Citadel. See how bad your... condition is." She sighed, stepping away. "According to the regs, I'm supposed to sideline you, but I'll make up my mind once I see the report."

Kaidan felt stunned. "Is this because I went after Ash, ma'am?"

Shepard gave a low, throaty laugh. "No, Alenko. I was... irritated by what you did on leave, and the thoughtlessness of what it would mean for your ability to command, but you stopping one of my soldiers from getting killed is not something to be ashamed of." She turned to face him. "But you know as well as I do that if you got your eezo nodes surgically removed and went through eezo detox, you'd have a chance of pulling through DNDD alive."

Kaidan shook his head. "Not a great chance, ma'am. And –"

She cut him off, eyes hard. "That's an order, Lieutenant. Get the exam. If your ratings are already past the point where surgery and detox can give you a shot at survival, then I have no objections to you staying in the fight. But if you can survive it – or even have a shot at it – you should take it. I have quite enough blood on my hands already from those who sacrificed themselves to get the job done, I don't need more."

Kaidan slumped back in the surgical bed, wincing against the pain of an approaching headache. "Yes, ma'am. I'll go get the examination, but from what that doctor on Omega told me, it's already past the stage where corrective procedures would help. I understand you think you're doing the right thing, but even if there's a chance I might make it, there's a larger chance I'd die on the operating table. I'd rather die for a reason, than out of fear."

Shepard turned away. "Understood, but you have my orders."

#### O-OSaBC-O

The first few hours after docking were a blur for Liara. The humans spent a lot of time bringing on crates of military gear, the new weapons and armor that had been ordered by Shepard, and they had to put it all away and make sure everything was accounted for before doing anything else. Liara discovered that the specialist armor that she'd gotten the specs for had also arrived. She had been ordered to report to the cargo hold for fitting.

When Liara arrived, it was organized chaos. The remainder of the marine team was there, checking weapons, adjusting armor fittings with tools, and installing various armor mods. Ashley Williams was in the corner by the armory table, along with a grumpy looking Wrex, who was in the process of putting on the last piece of the armor, while complaining that it fitted strangely compared to what he was used to.

It was a shiny, ominous black, with heavy thick plates set in hard angles, over a bodysuit of dull crimson traced with black hexagons. It made the krogan look even bigger and more menacing than usual, and he fussed with one of the gauntlets as Williams adjusted something on his back. "There you go."

The krogan grunted, flexing and rolling his shoulders, testing the fit. "For human work, this is decent enough." He didn't notice Williams stiffen, instead picking up the heavy looking helmet and stomping away. Liara hesitated for a moment before walking up. "Chief Williams? I was told to come here for my armor..."

Williams sniffed, and shrugged, grunting as she pulled out a heavy black crate and kicked it open,

revealing plates of armor set into black crash foam. "Yeah, it's here. You came in just a jumpsuit, good. Let's make sure there aren't any missing pieces, so we can get your fitting over with. I still have to fit out another fifteen marines and the nav crew, before I can even think about leave."

Williams began pulling pieces out of the box. The suit Liara had gotten was one of the lighter Colossus suits, and it consisted of a two-piece chest unit, leg armor, and a sort of armored coat that came just below the waist, with armored sleeves and heavier plates on the forearms. Liara picked it because it looked more stylish than the ugly, blocky selections everyone else had indicated, as well as the fact it was much lighter.

The leg armor was basically a set of armor-cloth pants with the plates loosely attached to the legs. Once she put them on, Liara found buckles on either side of the armor sections, enabling them to snap together. The boots had a curved shield that slipped smoothly above the knee armor, covering the joint, and the boots themselves were lined with foam and shock absorbers.

Williams helped Liara with the chest-plate, which was worn on a light web harness, and then the coat went over that, buckles on the inside snapping to the chest unit. The armored gauntlets went on last, snapping over pre-installed connectors on the coat's sleeves. The suit felt a bit tight in a few places, but was lined with smart-foam that would wick away sweat while keeping the user's body at a constant temperature. The helmet was a blank-faced bulb, but on the inside was lit with a wide selection of HUD information. "This seems far more than adequate, Chief Williams."

The human woman nodded, fiddling with the shielding unit mod on Liara's belt. "Well, the SA doesn't usually drop a lot of cash on armor for the troops, so this is a nice change. I ended up springing for my own suit on Eden Prime because Onyx was such crap."

Liara frowned, removing the helmet. "Why would your government not issue the troops the best possible equipment? That seems somewhat counterproductive. The asari military outfits the limited troops we field with top of the line equipment..." The asari hesitated as Williams eyes narrowed, and the stocky woman made a snorting sound.

Williams shrugged a moment later, sliding the shield unit shut and standing. "Money, probably. The SA couldn't give a shit about most of the troops raised on colony worlds who aren't full members; it's always about the money. 'Proportionate expenditure', my ass. I have to wonder how many would have been alive on Eden Prime if we had better gear..." She trailed off, anger in her eyes, and Liara stepped back a pace.

Liara wondered briefly if she had said something wrong, but the human woman merely turned back to her armory table, hauling out another crate. "Nothing to be done about it now, Doctor. If you don't need anything else, I've got to get the rest of the unit up to speed."

"O-of course, Chief Williams. Thank you for your help." Baffled by the woman's suddenly brusque manner, Liara wandered back towards her lab, when Shepard's voice sounded over the ship's comm system. "All hands, assemble topside in fifteen minutes for a word before leave."

Liara couldn't help but wonder what that would be about.

O-OSaBC-O

The crew was assembled on the docks, most of them in civilian attire ready for leave, as Shepard strode across the gangway and to the front of the formation. She looked tired, but other than that normal, her pantherine stride confident and cold, expression blank, uniform perfect.

She came to an abrupt stop, gazing over the crew. The ops techs, the engineers, the navigators, the marines. The aliens. Her eyes took in each one there, briefly, before she took another step forward and

spoke.

"So far, things haven't gone as well as we'd have liked. We lost some good people on Eingana. We had a close call on Feros. I'm sure some of you are worried about what is going to happen, or disturbed about the losses we took, or are concerned about how little support we have."

Shepard paced to her left, hands folded behind her back, narrowed blue eyes scanning across the crew. "But the ugly truth is that we lost four when the turians on Eingana lost a whole company of troops. The reality is that we're in this by ourselves because sending a fleet after this lunatic only ends up like Feros did, with thousands dead and dozens of ships destroyed and damaged. The reality is that you are soldiers, and this mission is against some of the most dangerous beings in this galaxy."

"Some of you are going to die." The voice was cold, unfeeling.

"I certainly don't want that. I have a reputation of getting the job done at any cost, of sacrificing men to get to the target, and of being reckless in combat. The last is certainly true. But I have never sent men to die where I wasn't willing to go myself. And I won't start now. On Eingana, we had a choice. We could have finished that thing off, or backed off and called for assistance."

"Either way, someone was going to die. Maybe our marines, maybe other marines. But that thing was a threat, one we simply could not ignore, and SA orders were to take it out. Regardless of what kind of fancy-ass title and capes they give me, I am still an Alliance Marine and I follow orders. If you feel we should have backed off and waited for support, keep in mind we didn't know if Saren knew about this second Thorian, and I wanted to get clear before his fuck-all battleship showed up."

She moved to the right, head tilted. "However, given that we are going into greater danger, as I said before the trip started, I've ordered better weapons and armor, and we have those now. We'll be doing some training and drilling before moving on to the next designated target. We believe targeting Cerberus will give us insight into why they are helping Saren and possibly intel on Saren's location or goals. It will be dangerous. A group of marines sent to investigate has failed to report in and is, in all likelihood, already dead."

Shepard came to a halt, then turned to face them. "This is not a Systems Alliance operation. It is not a Council operation. It is most certainly not what you probably signed up for. It is nothing less than the single-minded pursuit of a fucking nutjob who plans, quite possibly, to bring back a race of aliens that killed the Protheans. How he plans to do it, or why, we don't know. But we have to stop him, and if that means people die, then they die. We are going to find him, and put enough rounds in his skull to kill a krogan, before he succeeds."

Shepard squared her shoulders, eyes narrowing to cold windows of pure rage. "But each of you has a choice to make. We have three days leave, since we're waiting for some of our people to recover from injuries. At the end of those three days, I expect everyone back on this ship. If, during your leave, you decide you're not capable of serving, or are worried about what will happen to you, notify me. I will have the 63rd Flotilla send me a replacement. I don't want anyone on-board when we depart who doesn't want to be there, helping to defend the galaxy."

She made a dismissive gesture. "Leave is set. First watch section has the watch; the officer of the deck has the deck and the conn. VI, log the time." Without another word she turned on her heel and walked back towards the ship, while the crew broke up. The few who had watch followed her inside; the rest began gravitating to the taxi stand.

Liana quietly followed the human commander back inside the ship, still wearing the heavy armor she'd fitted with Williams. "Shepard!"

Shepard paused, glancing over her shoulder. "Yes?"

Liara came to a halt, mind blanking suddenly as it always did when Shepard stared at her with her full attention, stammering out the first thing that popped in her head. "Y-you said something about presenting what we found on Eingana to the Council. Do you want me there for that?"

Shepard nodded once, coolly. "Yes. Won't be today, though. There's going to be a funeral for the marines we lost at 1800. Human burial customs are different than asari, we don't do space burials unless we absolutely have to. After that, I figure we can head to the Council in the morning, assuming they'll see us." Shepard glanced down at Liara's armor, raising an eyebrow. "They make it in armored coat form?"

Liara gave a weak shrug. "I did not feel like I was up to moving around in forty pounds of heavy battle armor. Between an upgraded shield generator and my own barriers, I believe this is more appropriate, although the color does not seem to suit me." She picked at the red trim of the armored coat, and Shepard failed to suppress the slightest of wry smiles.

"God forbid your color balance is off during a fight, Liara. Sorry, I'd like to talk more, but I have a report to make to SA High Command, and it's not a happy one. I'll catch up with you later." With that, Shepard moved off, confident, head held high, grim and determined.

Liara compared her to the stressed, barely coherent figure of rage she'd seen yesterday, and wondered briefly what was tormenting Shepard so in her nightmares. It was good to see her back to normal, but there always seemed to be a cool sort of distance between Shepard and everyone else when she wasn't angry.

Liara was also thinking about nearly being choked by Shepard, and the alarmed, ashamed and somehow embarrassed reaction Shepard had shown clearly on her face when Liara let her know what had happened. She wasn't sure how to interpret all the other expressions on Shepard's face or why she was avoiding her now. She decided to work on cleaning up the Eingana data for the meeting with the Council, and to think about this further.

#### O-OSaBC-O

The next morning was nearly as chaotic as the landing. Shepard's full report to the SA High Command had been taken with several grains of salt – many of the political entities in High Command didn't want to believe in a foe that had vanished fifty thousand years ago as still being a danger. Admiral Vandefar carefully scrutinized most of Liara's work but couldn't find any faults with it, but said that didn't prove anything. Just because Saren had found an old Reaper ship and had it repaired didn't mean his crazed idea of bringing back the Reapers was something to be taken seriously.

Frustratingly, the Council pretty much took the same line, albeit with some concern by the salarian councilor. Liara's primary point – that if the Reapers had taken out the Inusannon and Tho'ian and then fifty thousand years later taken out the Protheans, then it wasn't beyond the realm of plausibility to assume they were still out there somewhere – was dismissed by Sparatus with an air-quoted charge of "fairy-tale thinking".

Rather than admit the serious danger, the Council wanted to focus the war on the obvious and direct actors – Cerberus and the geth. Unable to convince any of her superiors that Liara's hunches tended to be right on the money, Shepard departed the Council chambers in a bad mood, Liara trailing listlessly after her, murmuring calming phrases.

The crew leave situation was under control – Pressly was keeping careful watch on crew activities – so Shepard decided to check on her injured Marines and Garrus. Arriving at Nathla Memorial, she found that the humans had been transferred to Huerta Memorial Hospital. She decided to visit Garrus first, and tromped through a maze of corridors choked with doctors and medical equipment to find his room,

on the third floor overlooking the gardens.

Garrus was awake, propped up in bed, and looked mostly normal as Shepard opened the door. "Commander! Didn't expect to see you here." The grey eyes looked a tad dulled, probably from pain meds, but the ugly thick white bandages that swathed his plated torso spoke well enough of his injuries. Shepard shrugged. "Just checking on my sniper. What did the doctors say?"

Garrus humphed, mandibles shifting. "That I was damned lucky. Whatever that mockery of Palavanus hit me with was acidic, but it was dextro in nature. That's why it was so lethal to your men, the vomit and acid also causes chirality reactions. I've got some bad burns, but it looks like the plating actually neutralized most of it. They've got me on a plating regenerator every three hours, and will let me out tomorrow."

Shepard exhaled in relief. "Good news...but what were you thinking, going man-to-man with a giant fucking turian zombie? You're damned lucky he didn't snatch your head off, those things are horrifyingly strong."

Garrus winced, rubbing his face. "I know, the bastard broke two of my facial plates with a single backhand. But he was a sniper in life, and after he took out one of your men with a snapshot I knew if I didn't get up in his face and stop him, he'd maul anyone else who tried."

Shepard folded her arms. "That's not the point."

Garrus frowned, tilting his head, tracing his talons across the bed sheet almost musingly. "Isn't it? I'm sorry, but I told you when we met, I'm a bad turian. I'm not one to sit back and let the danger take me out when I can stop it through action. I've seen you fight and lead, you take incredible risks and twice you've been torn up so bad you needed hospitalization. From what I hear you walked into a club of armed gangsters on the Citadel without a stitch of armor or even a real gun. Seems odd you are upset I took some risks."

Shepard rolled her eyes. "Battle Chicken, I *am* a damned weapon. I have my barrier and biotics to protect me and fight with. Charging into the fray to down the bad guy is one thing, charging into combat with a thing like that and moving beyond the support of the team – especially in a chaotic battle situation – is entirely another." She gestured to his form in the bed. "You're a crack shot with a sniper rifle. How much of this is really about the best way to do it and how much is that you were pissed the thing was mocking someone you knew?"

Garrus shrugged uncomfortably. "I knew Vorkus, very slightly. He was always a holier-than-thou asshole with a stick up his chute...but no one deserved to die like that. The thing actually had the audacity to act like IT was Palavanus when his body was there on the floor. It got to me, admittedly." The turian paused, then shrugged. "But in the chaos of the fight, with smoke from burning plant zombies and needing to maneuver, getting a shot off wasn't going to be that easy, either. I made the call, and it worked out."

Shepard sighed. "You're an important part of my team, Garrus. Leave the suicidal charges to me and Wrex. I'm not doubting your judgment about the guy's sniping ability – but as ugly as it sounds, if I have to make a choice between one of my marines and you, I don't want to know what I'll do, and I'd rather you not put me in that kind of situation."

Garrus nodded. "Understood, Commander." He paused, then flicked his mandibles. "Did the Hierarchy respond to your reports yet? I presume you made a full report to the Council..."

Shepard sighed. "Udina ate that shit up, basically lecturing the Council for being all sanctimonious about what Exogeni was doing even while the turians were doing the same thing. It turned into a boring

debate and I basically ended up tuning it out entirely. Let's ignore the people who died, let's focus on blame and who is right and wrong... idiots..." Shepard scowled, and Garrus laughed.

"You shouldn't be surprised by now, Shepard. The council hates it when people call them on their whole 'do as I say not as I do' act. Still, the Hierarchy researching things like the Tho'ian ... troubles me. It makes me wonder what my government is up to."

Shepard nodded, remembering the sick feeling of betrayal when she'd first learned about the Thorian on Feros, and the feeling of the floor dropping away under her feet when the Fleet Master hadn't denied other horrible acts she'd accused him of, merely implying necessity was more important than decency. "I get the feeling I've been blind to a lot of things about my government, caught up in my own problems and fuckups. But hiding from it won't make it go away, only dragging it into the light will."

Garrus nodded, then sighed as two asari came in. One was clearly a medical practitioner, but the other one wore light C-sec armor, and had a fixed scowl on her face. "Dr. Anasi, how nice to see you."

The asari doctor nodded and checked the haptic medical interface panel on the wall. "You're recovering well, Detective. Sergeant Telanya asked about your condition so ..."

Telanya folded her arms grimly, glaring at Garrus, who shifted in his position. The doctor glanced over at Shepard and nodded. "We need to start the next plate regeneration process in about 20 minutes, so if you can wrap your visit up by then that would be wonderful." She withdrew from the room, and as the door closed Telanya turned her gaze from Garrus to Shepard.

Shepard tilted her head. She'd never really pinned down her preferences – sometimes guys attracted her, sometimes women – but asari always looked good to her, and Telanya was no exception. The C-sec plated armor clung to the asari's frame; it's black and blue complementing the woman's purplish-blue skin tone.

*Garrus has nice taste.*

Beautiful dark grey-blue eyes dominated the otherwise petite face, looking almost vulnerable even in anger. And they were very angry, sending a clear, unmistakable message to get lost.

Normally, Shepard would have responded to such a challenge, but given that the woman was clearly here for Garrus, this must be his bond mate or girlfriend. Getting involved in THAT was simply not worth the headache. Shepard glanced at Garrus. "I should go." She inclined her head to the asari and stepped out, sighing.

O-OSaBC-O

*Well, there went my backup.*

Garrus glanced up at Telanya, who'd folded her arms again after glaring Shepard out of the room. Which, in its own way, was terrifying enough – when you can glare a stone-cold killing machine of a Spectre out of a room, you must be pretty pissed.

"So, Garrus. Not going to get killed, you said." Her voice was taut with anger, and Garrus sighed, spreading his hands.

"Tel, the mission had to be done. I can't go into details, but what we stopped had slaughtered an entire unit of the turian military and over twenty civilians. Shepard lost four of her people and several more are in the hospital with worse wounds than mine."

The slender asari rubbed her forehead. "I'm running customs when I get a flash from my partner that the Normandy's back in dock. First thing the newscast shows is you in a life-support gurney being hauled away unconscious. Next thing is the boards lighting up with stories that you are dead. Then I

spend most of yesterday getting a run-around trying to find out if you're alive and how to reach you. Am I not supposed to be upset at that?"

Garrus looked away. "If it makes you feel any better, that's what she was here for, tearing my mandibles off for being too aggressive. She basically ordered me to sit back and snipe from a distance." He turned his head back to face Telanya, firming his mandibles to his jawline. "I'm happy to see you too, dear."

Tel threw up her hands in frustration. "I suppose I'm being the unreasonable one in this!? 'Oh, silly Tel, don't you know it's perfectly normal for your man to come back looking like a haunch of meat in the market, plastered over the extranet with headlines like 'turian detective brutally killed by human blunders?'"

Garrus frowned. He'd not seen any news stories while he was here, not surprisingly since he'd been unconscious half that time. "Shepard didn't make any 'blunders', the Hierarchy did."

Telanya shrugged. "They wouldn't even tell me where you were, Garrus. I dialed the Executor, but Pallin had no clue if you were alive or dead. The human embassy said it was a 'Spectre matter' and thus classified, and the Spectres didn't even bother to return my calls. I placed six calls to the C-Sec secure docks but they were all blocked since I didn't know an access code!"

Garrus sighed. "I'll make sure Shepard has ... some way to let you know I'm okay in the future. I'm sorry for not thinking of that before." His voice gentled. "I'm fine, Tel. Just need to be patched up a little. Everything's going to be fine."

The asari trembled a long moment before shaking her head. "I don't think I can do this, Garrus. Hearing all this rumor-mongering, watching for news and hearing nothing. I can't even get a message through the extranet to you!"

Garrus wished he was well enough to get up, cross the room and hold her, but his body was way too torn up for that. Grunting in pain he sat up a little straighter, frowning. "Tel, like I said – I have to see this through. I'll make sure to let Shepard know that I need to have some way for you to reach me, if only to bring you some peace of mind – but security on the ship is insanely high, it's the most advanced human ship in their fleet and they're already not wild about having aliens on board..."

Telanya closed her eyes, exhaling several times. "I came here to make sure you were okay. To see for myself you weren't dead. I just don't know..."

Garrus glanced down at the sheet, curling his hands into tight, frustrated fists. "Do you want me to tell her I can't go on, Tel?"

The asari was silent for long seconds, staring blankly at the wall. Garrus spoke again, frustration edging the harmonics in his voice. "I told you before. If you ask -"

Tel waved a hand in annoyance. "I know, Garrus. That's what makes this hard. Someone has to stop Saren, and you feel responsible. And if you stop now you'll always have that gap, wondering if you were good enough, or who died because you weren't there. You know I can't ask you to do that."

Garrus shrugged. "If it's a choice between losing you and losing this chance, I already made up my mind a long time ago. It would be the same if I had to choose between you or C-Sec. It was the same when I decided to cover for you rather than take the move to External Affairs." Pain slowly leached into his voice. "I chose you every time."

The asari glanced over her shoulder at him. "And what has that cost you already? How many other women did you not give a flip about because they didn't make those protective instincts kick in? How much can I say you matter to me when I can't really do anything but fall apart when you aren't here or when you get hurt?"

The turian snorted. "That's vantha dung, Tel. You aren't weak, and I'm not in this because I need to protect you. I'm in this because I love you. And it wouldn't matter if I was here or on the streets – I could have taken a bullet doing Special Investigations just as easily. You have to decide, I guess, if I'm worth the worry and the pain, or if ... I'm not."

She finally walked over to him, planting a kiss on his fringe, sighing. "I know. I have a really tough choice to make. I either walk away, or give it my all." She exhaled, eyes bleary for a moment, then touched his wrist gently. "They'll need to give you your treatment, but call me when they release you; I'll come pick you up. We need to talk."

Without another word, she stepped away and left, leaving the turian pensive and confused as to what she could possibly have meant by giving it her all.

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## Chapter 68: Chapter 59: Shepard, Liara I

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*A/N: What you've been waiting for, part one. No, not the schmex. That still comes later.*

*It turns out it's extremely hard to write a scene with two completely socially dysfunctional people and have it sound awkward, but not stilted. I know some people will disagree with the direction my Shepard is pointed at – but go re-read between the lines in her Dossier I put in earlier in the fic, and the anomalies should stand out.*

*I certainly did not want a "omg u r so fascinating but we must think of zee mission first" thing going on. Shepard touches on it, but admits to herself she's already compromised. I want to have a relationship that does not merely follow the old, tired formulas but makes people think about the nature of fundamental attractions between broken people.*

*The fic of the Day is actually not on , but a different website; the Miracle at Palaven, a story (found through the fanfic recs on TVTropes for Mass Effect) that is hosted at [threads/mass-effect-3-the-miracle-at-palaven.239502/](https://www.tvtropes.com/fanfic/mass-effect-3-the-miracle-at-palaven.239502/)*

*Covers what actually went down on Palaven, including Kal'reegar's death.*

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The crew was on leave, the Normandy silent, dark, and mostly empty. Engineer Adams had used the idea of a three-day downtime to convince Shepard that more work needed to be done on the superstructure, making sure stress fractures from the crazed acceleration into Feros were fully repaired, as well as completely flushing the IES coolant loops and doing a bio-hazardous decon of every inch of the ship.

With repair crews and dockside security onboard, there was no need for topside watches, only a single duty watch. Given the condition her crew's morale, Shepard, after a ruinous morning spent with the Citadel Council, had thus retreated to the ship, tucked herself into her quarters, and tried to decompress. She'd routed the ship-systems displays to her own quarters and dismissed the below-decks watch to go ashore.

She was sitting up on her bed, sipping a glass of scotch and reading the files Udina had given her on political relationships and human psychology. It was interesting stuff – when humans had only to deal with other humans, politics was mostly just lying to the majority to remain in power, while feeding the hand that fed you – big business, the military, so on. With alien psychologies, cultural divides between colonies and the Earth, and the ruinous cost to maintain Earth's arcologies, politics had become a

minefield, more akin to a mix of psychology, xenology and political science than mere glad handling. She'd read for an hour, and she was already lost.

She'd studied a lot in the military – hours spent every night in the library trying to bone up on basic knowledge, and more in the Academy – but psychology and politics were not taught to younger officers, and as a member of the RRU she'd always had Major Kyle to do the smooth talking for her.

Now, given her position, she had to learn quickly how to at least to look like she knew how to play the game, even if the rules were a mystery and the game board was incomprehensible. She tried to focus on the information in the pad, but her mind kept wandering to the three things troubling her – Kaidan, her own abilities, and Liara.

Her conversation with Kaidan still rubbed her the wrong way on some level, although she couldn't pin down why. Ignoring a chance to lead a normal life—to perhaps raise a normal family away from the strife and frequent danger of military service, especially when continuing to serve would definitely kill you—made no sense to her. But she was sure, on some level internally, that Kaidan's selflessness was no act, nor was it something he was doing out of impulse.

If she examined her own beliefs closely, she had never done much of anything selflessly. Every action was a calculation; every response was made only after weighing the odds and outcomes, except those taken when her anger overwhelmed her. Everyone had a measurement, a worth, a cost that could or could not be paid.

She valued her crew the most highly because they were the ones she needed to depend on the most to save her own life. They were the ones, usually, who she could trust not to turn on her, or to demand that she be something she wasn't. The concepts of 'friendship' or 'affection' weren't unknown to her, but those were emotions. She couldn't plan off of emotions, and often times they were only flashes of affection, not something that should determine her plan of action. And she didn't understand them, fully, either, making it even harder to depend on such things as a baseline.

She valued the law, but only inasmuch as she hated criminals because they made people like her possible. She didn't really care if the law was violated, but rather hated the idea of the criminal, the person who could force and take what they wanted without consequences even if it hurt others. Slavers, rapists, murderers, pirates, sand dealers – they all needed to die.

If her feelings of affection and happiness were fleeting and spaced far apart, her anger and rage were nearly constant. Hate drove her will to fight, to shrug off what would kill others. When she attacked, she saw the leering, monstrous faces of her abusers and owners. When she shook off a hit, she imagined jeering gang members over her, kicking her while she was down.

Kaidan didn't seem borne down by these kinds of demons. His life wasn't, as far as she could tell, some kind of walking revenge for the things he'd suffered in his youth. It was clear that he had regrets – on the way back to the Citadel, he'd told her of his biotics instructor and how putting the turian down had cost him the regard of the girl he'd saved – but it wasn't as if that had derailed his entire life.

Shepard couldn't wrap her mind around why he was making the choices he was since he was free of those issues. And it bothered her because it made her question the actual reasons why she was living her own life the way she did. She couldn't afford that, couldn't afford any more self-doubt now, when she already was painfully aware of all the things she didn't know or wasn't any good at and how critical the mission was.

Despite herself, she couldn't stop wondering if Branson, humanity's hero, or even Delacor would have actually made the better choice. She knew, in a fight, she was better than them both. She was biotic, they weren't. She had the edge in speed, in strength, in raw tactical ability. But she wasn't a specialist in

naval combat, she didn't have the larger scale battalion level experience the other two men did, and most of all, she didn't have the background in diplomacy and politics they did.

Branson was a bigot, and full of himself, but he'd shown on Elysium he wasn't weak. With his fame and the admiration of most of humanity, he'd have gotten much more support from the SA in this mission than she was. Branson's bigotry towards aliens, however, might have meant that none of the leads acquired that had actually pointed to Saren's guilt would have been followed up on – she couldn't imagine him bothering to listen to a quarian teenager, and Wrex would have never approached him.

Delacor was too emotionally unstable, and had gotten so used to being the sole survivor that he was almost as bad of a jinx as Shepard herself to the common enlisted grunt. Thresher Maws, asteroid strikes, freak drive malfunctions, unexpected solar storms – the man had lost more soldiers through bad luck than Shepard had gotten killed through brutal tactics. Still, Delacor was polished, calm, level headed, a good tactician, and open-minded. The SA might have been more supportive of him as well, in the long run.

She didn't know. She was certain that there were people in the SA who'd set up this position for their own purposes, and she wasn't sure yet how she fit into that. Her requests for SA intelligence assets or N7 reinforcements had been denied. Her request for intel reports on Saren, or even additional ship units, had also been denied. Officially, the word was that nothing was available; unofficially the understanding was that Shepard already had the SA's most advanced warship, stop asking for more from us and ask from the Council. She wasn't even certain she'd get replacements for her dead Marines yet.

Asking the Council for support was no better. Even Shepard wasn't fool enough to trust anyone the Council proposed to join her investigations; at best they'd be secretly looking for reasons to suggest Shepard wasn't a good Spectre, at worse they'd be outright spies trying to figure out how the Normandy's cloaking systems worked. The aliens she had on board already were causing enough issues with SA command.

Besides being worried about Kaidan's choices, and about her own fitness for this mission, she was also thinking about Liara. Shepard had never been very clear on relationships. During her time in the Penal Legions, she was only trying to survive. After, with considerably more freedom, she'd decided that figuring out what she wanted with 'normal people' wasn't safe and had spent more than a little money on prostitutes, both male and female.

Hurting people turned her on, dominating them, making them submit. She didn't know if it was something to do with what she'd been through as a child, or if she was just trying to impose control on something she barely understood, but it had been that way since her 20's. She got carried away several times, leading to sexual assault complaints, which had all been dismissed due to the fact that Shepard never involved other soldiers and maintained an ice-queen reputation to everyone military.

The fact that she'd been so worried the military would disapprove and thus, never showed any hints of attraction to anyone she served with, had eventually blinded her to the signals that some of her own squad found her attractive. Not that she could have gone through with it – it wasn't that she didn't find Bea beautiful, or John attractive – but that hurting the people she'd literally grown into adulthood with seemed... wrong. It just never really crossed her mind. She wanted to be... liked, for who she was, without having to pretend she was something else. And yet, at the same time, she wanted everything at arm's length so it wasn't so confusing.

Her having to kill one of her crew had been bad enough, the rest deserting her had hurt her in ways she didn't think she'd ever really recover from. Kneeling there in the dirt had driven home the final nail that, no matter military achievements, she was truly a worthless human being, especially if the people

she felt closest to wouldn't even give her a second chance.

It had made her colder, icier, and increasingly angry and brutal, culminating in the eventual murder of the asari responsible for her slavery and her child in cold blood, against direct orders and the law. Her control was slipping and sooner or later, Delacor would have been forced to try to stop her. That would have been the end for her, either way.

Instead, unexpectedly, she'd been whisked away, put back under the one man who had unshakable faith in her and who was the closest thing she had to a real father. Then she'd been given an incredible assignment and literally handed a group of people who inspired trust and affection, mixed in with people she knew from experience wouldn't betray her and people who made her question her own blind conclusions. Williams touching, simplistic offer of friendship; Tali's innocent yet determined will to prove her people's worth; Wrex attempting to pretend he wasn't pleased to see her – these simple actions, the words from Joker about acceptance, even the media outpour of support after she'd been named a Spectre – these had shaken her self-despair, and for the first time in her life, given her the strength to actually risk caring about people.

But Liara had gone far, far beyond that – in the moments they had inadvertently touched each other's souls, Shepard saw things she'd never expected to see or feel. The same isolation, the same confused misunderstanding, the same fear of never being accepted. Liara was, in her own way, as broken as Shepard, and yet had not let that stop her from pursuing her dreams and interests, or stop her from at least trying to continue on and find something to make her happy.

Liara never demanded anything, she always tried to be helpful but downplayed her own large and important contributions, and never questioned Shepard's judgment – except that one time when it was about Shepard's own safety. Liara tried to calm Shepard down, dealt with her nightmares, and put up with Shepard's own issues.

She rubbed her temples, tossing the pad aside, and reached for her drink again. It was complete madness to be attracted to a member of your crew. She'd just lambasted Kaidan for this, and she knew full well exactly how stupid the idea was. Sandra had seduced her, used her, made her believe in lies, then betrayed the entire 2 RRU on orders from some SA goon. She'd used Shepard's loneliness and need for affection against her, and it had cost a lot of men their lives.

Shepard didn't think Liara was like that at all, but the issue wasn't that Liara was out to hurt Shepard. Relationships like that placed a strain on the unit. How could Shepard be clear-headed when it came to combat or assigning battle roles when she'd be worried about Liara all the time?

Yet it was already there. How many men would have died on Eingana if she'd been willing to put Liara in harm's way? Would an extra biotic throw or two saved at least one of them?

Shepard stood up from the bed, checking the ship-systems display. The core had been taken offline, the ship was running on dockside power now, and Shepard went ahead and remotely killed the nav computers and secondary engineering systems. She turned, pulling open her locker to withdraw another bottle of scotch, when the door chimed.

Raising an eyebrow, she checked her appearance – BDU pants, t-shirt, socks – and paused to pull on her uniform jacket, sealing it shut before saying "Come!"

Liara came through the door, having changed out of her armor and into one of those all-too-tight University uniforms. "I came to check on you – I ran into Master Chief Cole and he said you had dismissed all watches and said you would handle it yourself."

Shepard shrugged, turning back to her bed, placing the scotch and her glass on the table next to it before flopping down. "I'm not really big on going out on leave. Usually I'd just study something,

practice my marksmanship or biotics, or rest up. It's not like people are all 'Oh, let's invite the batshit crazy woman who can't make small talk to the club with us', after all."

Liara sat carefully in the chair at the table in the corner of her quarters, placing her hands on her knees, her serene gaze fixed carefully on Shepard. The asari just watched, not judging, but worried, and Shepard glanced away. "Anyway. What's up, Liara?"

The asari woman shrugged, finally looking away from Shepard to trail her gaze over the room. "I see you have cleaned up. And you look much better. I mean... that is, you look like you have gotten some sleep. Have you had any more nightmares?"

Shepard snorted. "The usual ones, not the ones that make it where I can't sleep." She paused to drink, lips twisting into a bitter smile. "Sometimes, that's the best you can do. Although I'm starting to get why Anderson drank so damned much, it dulls the pain." Her expression twisted further, before blanking entirely. "Does it matter if the sleep is filled with half-remembered regrets, and fears and pain, as long as you wake up rested?"

Liara winced. "What hurts you, Sara? Why do you let the past define you so?"

Shepard glanced up at Liara, storm blue eyes meeting sea blue. For long, silent seconds they simply stared at each other, before an almost gentle smile broke across the planes of Shepard's face. "I don't know how to get away from it, marazul. If I did, I would. I've been defined by others all my life. My parents used me and then sold me, my owners used me and then paid the price, but in making them pay, I ended up in the hands of gangs. When the SA freed me from that, they made me into a slave of their own, and in freeing myself of that I still owed them servitude for forty years."

She examined the amber fluid in her glass before draining it. "Now I'm ostensibly one of the most powerful people in the galaxy, above all laws, commanding the most advanced space ship in space, with a quarian princess, an exiled krogan king, and a member of the Thirty Families." Liara's expression grew pained, but she didn't interrupt. Shepard continued. "And yet, despite this, I'm still a tool for others to use. I decide nothing of my own path, or my own goals. I don't even know what I'm doing at this point. I'm a puppet with strings I can't see but feel all too clearly."

Shepard shrugged. "The past defines me because it's all I have left. I've been thinking all day and everything I think of makes my head hurt and is more confusing."

Liara nodded, slowly. "When something is confusing, the key to wisdom is to stop asking why or what and begin asking how. Instead of worrying about why a certain problem is occurring, or what one did to deserve this, you have to ask how you will move beyond it. My mother felt bad memories should be sealed away, otherwise they would poison us slowly for the rest of our lives."

Shepard frowned, thinking on that. "I dunno. Would I be a happier person if I wasn't weighed down by so much goddamned baggage? Yeah, I would. But I wouldn't be *me* anymore either. The rage and hate I feel drive me to do things other people can't do."

Liara examined her hands. "There are other emotions beyond hate, fear, and rage, Shepard. And there are other reasons to fight than out of memory of the wrongs committed against you. Life is about moving beyond adversity, not focusing on what we have lost. If that is the entire orbit of your life, it seems to me that you will always be stuck in place. You have to..." The asari faltered, almost nervously, as if searching for words, "...find reasons to be happy."

Shepard gave a shrug, leaning back, crossing her legs. "I don't have a lot of that to go on, Liara. To be honest, it's not like a lot of people have ever tried to 'prop me up' or keep me going in the face of bad shit. Being happy means being able to let go of the pain because you have something better to replace it with. Sometimes, it's easier to just... let the hate win, and dream of a day when it'll all end."

Liara's eyes suddenly limned with tears. "You truly wish for that? You feel yourself so worthless, so undeserving of ... care, of anything, that your lot in life is merely to be slaughtered for the ambitions or desires of others?"

Shepard frowned, sliding to the edge of the bed, staring at Liara. "Hey... it's okay. No need to get all upset." She found herself suddenly distressed that the asari was so affected by her words. Did she have to pretend that she didn't feel this way to keep her from flipping out?

Liara wiped her eyes, shaking her head. "No, it isn't okay. I think perhaps the most evil thing I have ever seen in my years is what I saw happen to you when we shared memories, and I cannot get out of my mind the images of what those men did to you. I can understand your rage. However those men died, it was not painful enough or brutal enough to fit the crime."

Shepard blinked, then nodded slowly. "Trust me, I wasn't quick with it. The one responsible for most of the damage I dunked in boiling ammonia until he sloughed his entire body off his own skeleton. And the bitch responsible for me being sold got to watch her own child get killed before I offed her."

Liara winced, then shook her head. "That is exactly what I am saying. Vengeance is not a goal, it is merely something to drive you along a path. What do you want from life? If we killed Saren tomorrow, and everyone was grateful – what does Sara Shepard want from life?"

Shepard blinked a second time. "No one has asked me that before."

Liara shook her head, clenching a fist. "And that is why I cry. That no one cares enough to ask. That you never sought that answer. But *I* am asking, Sara. I want to know. What do you want from life, if all of it was laid before you?"

The answer spilled from her mouth before she even had time to analyze what she was saying.

"Someone to spend it with and a cause worth fighting for." She paused, thinking several seconds, and then hesitantly nodded. "Yeah. Maybe something like that. Nothing simple. Something... big. Rage against the dying of the light, that sort of thing. Something... existential. Vital."

Liara nodded. "Why have you never pursued such?"

Shepard scowled. "Because I'm a Z2, a convicted criminal, annulled citizenship for another twenty-nine years. I can't own property, I can't vote, I can't even fucking quit the military. The next twenty years of my life and more are already decided for me. What's the point of it all? The SA won't let me quit and go off to have a fling." Bitterly, words spilled out. "And there's not much point in settling down, anyway. I'm barred from life, from ever going home. My entire family is dead. And I can't have children so I can't even start a family. Barren. Sterile. Useless. Not even a fucking woman."

Shepard turned back to the scotch, pouring another drink. "The last relationship I had got one thousand, six hundred and eleven people killed. Of the five people that I care most about in the world, I killed one, three more abandoned me, and the last one got dumped to a desk because I stole his command out from under him. I'll keep fighting until one day my number pops up and I catch a bullet in the wrong place, or, if God truly hates me, I survive my sentence and get shipped to some shitty tier one colony in the Traverse, in my fucking sixties. Worn out and half dead."

Liara's gaze faltered and traveled to the floor. "I suppose having a dream and knowing it will never come to pass is not as bad as never even being able to have a dream at all. I used to imagine I would be a successful archeologist, that I would discover why the Prothean extinction occurred, that I would be an influential part of a large university. Eventually I would get past my shyness with people, and continue the lineage of my House. Now I am an outcast, the university has disowned me, my work is a laughingstock, and discovering the reason behind the Prothean extinction is a nightmare that makes me shiver in terror. It is easy to simply give up. Perhaps I already have given up."

Liara was silent several long seconds, before she took a very deep and shaky breath. "B-but I can still dream. Maybe a s-stupid dream, but a dream nonetheless." She smiled, nervously. "When I first met you, I knew very little about your species. At first, I was dismissive, as you humans seemed so rushed, so hurried in every action you did."

Shepard smiled. "I've heard that complaint before. Has your opinion changed, after being around us?"

Liara shrugged. "Yes, some. You are creatures of action, not deliberation. You move forward on all your goals with indomitable will and speed. Both humans and salarians have short life-spans, but salarians often lose focus in the details, while humans are single-minded in their determination. It is... often frightening, in the way humanity does not and will not accept limitations."

Shepard arched an eyebrow. "Humanity is scary?"

Liara looked flustered for a moment. "Yes, to some. But that is not... my point is that it is very easy to simply get caught up in the momentum of your will. You, Shepard, were not chosen because you are a better fighter, or a savage, to be a Spectre, but because you had the will to succeed no matter the odds. It is a trait I find fascinating. It compels... devotion, regardless of what you think. It makes you fascinating."

Shepard inhaled sharply, not even sure where Liara was going with her words. "I seem to remember a really awkward conversation we had about fascination and Prothean beacons, Doctor."

Liara shook her head. "And I remember making a fool of myself, but that is not what I mean. I admit at first my interest in you was for what you had experienced, but you also saved my life. You value my experience when no one else does, you listen to my ideas and trust me when no one else did and my own government wanted me arrested. You defied the Council to make sure I felt safe when my own family demanded I disown myself rather than support me." Liara shook her head, and her voice was unsteady. "I am never sure how people will react, as we discussed. And I do not know if what I feel is at all appropriate. But I do know my fascination with you, Sara, has nothing to do with Protheans, and everything to do with... just who you are. The good and the b-bad, the ugly, and n-nothing can change that. Or change the f-fact that... *I wish I could have you.*"

Liara ended this sentence almost defiantly, then flinched back, as if expecting laughter or rejection. After a moment of complete silence, she hesitantly looked up, taking in the expression of shock and surprise on Shepard's beautiful features. "I-I am sorry, Shepard, that was inappropriate, I k-know but... I have felt that way for s-some time. I am no good with... expressing it. But I cannot simply sit here and watch you despise yourself and belittle yourself and... drown in despair, alone, thinking you are without anyone to care. I care."

Shepard was trying to make her brain work, with extremely little success. The simplest thing to do would be to say something joking, but the spike of terror and pain in her heart let Shepard know that playing this off as an awkward joke would hurt them both more than anything else. Liara was no Sandra, she had nothing to gain and everything to lose by admitting she was attracted, and clearly expected Shepard to shoot her down derisively. That much even Shepard could read in her wide, pain-shadowed eyes and rigid, tremblingly fearful posture.

Yet Shepard had not bothered to really pin down exactly how she felt. Sexual urges aside – and those were more of a matter of stress and needs rather than any real desires – Shepard found that she liked Liara. Something in her roused protective, angry defensive instincts Shepard had not felt towards anyone else. Liara was the one to try to cheer her up when the Council acted like morons. Liara was the one to sit and smoke with her when her nerves were shot. Liara was the one who was busting her butt to find solutions when everyone else was just assuming Shepard would fix everything.

And Liara had nowhere else to go, no one else to turn to. She hid from everyone, barely mingling, barely talking, clearly worried about saying the wrong thing. Shepard thought again about what she had just said – being rescued, being protected, being listened to – and wondered how much of what Liara felt was the same sort of blind, helpless gratitude Shepard herself felt for Anderson all those years ago.

And, God above, would having someone to actually love be so bad?

Shepard swallowed, and exhaled. "Okay, I... wasn't expecting that." Liara flinched again, opening her mouth, but Shepard held up a hand. "Just... give me a minute. I have to say something and I... I really, really don't want to fuck it up. Please."

Biting her lip, Shepard tried to clear her head before speaking. "I wasn't just talkin shit that day we were drinking in Flux, Liara. You're about the only person I have that I can actually talk to, be myself with, and not worry that you'll run the fuck away or judge me. You've... you're closer to me than anyone, and I do mean anyone, else. Period. You have seen parts of my life no one else knows about, you've felt what I've felt. That day you asked me how I didn't just destroy everything and everyone around me, I felt the whole goddamned world lurch, because someone finally *fucking understood*."

Shepard shook her head. "You'll **never** understand how important that is to me. The truth is you're beautiful, you're intelligent, you're driven, and you're strong. For me to say you weren't attractive to me would be a lie of the highest caliber. I'm no good at... romance. I can't even figure out half of what I feel, most of the time. Am I interested? Yes."

Shepard had never seen a smile as brilliant, as beautiful and simple, as the expression on Liara's face. It literally felt as if a giant dagger was jammed into her heart, the pain lanced through her entire body for a moment. Shepard couldn't bring herself to destroy something that joyous. And yet she knew if she didn't, Liara would get hurt by being with her.

Biting her lip again, Shepard sighed. "But at the same time, Liara... being with me is going to hurt you. It's going to... mess you up. There are... problems with me. Things I haven't talked about with anyone. Issues. That's leaving aside the fact that we're both on a mission –"

Liara's smile didn't waver in the slightest. "I understand that, Shepard. I... like you, have no good way of saying what I feel. Everything comes out stilted, or bland. Infatuation, hero worship, lust, friendship, loneliness and a mix of just wanting to belong to someone and wishing that I was important. I do not know how or what will happen, but I know how I feel about you. I may not be able to act on it.. I may not be able to... demonstrate it. But we have a connection. I can feel it, ever so slightly, all the time."

Shepard sighed. "I can't deny that. I've felt it too. It's... it's why I sent you back to the ship, I imagined you being killed by that fucking plant and nearly went into hysterics. I can't be rational about this, or impartial, and that could get someone killed, Liara. It's not that I... like you said. Infatuation, lust, loneliness and fear. But I –"

Liara closed her eyes and leaned back in her chair. "Maybe it would have been better if I kept pretending that you merely liked making jokes about my attractiveness, and that you could keep pretending I was just into hero worship. But that is neither truthful... nor helpful. Sara, you need someone you can... depend on. Your nightmares almost broke you last time, and I doubt they are gone for good...or that they will ever stop." Shepard looked up, sharply, and Liara gave a sad smile. "I am going to have to be a part of your life for a long time anyway, and no matter how well I wall things off, repeatedly doing a joining of memories is going to end up drawing us closer together over time."

Liara sighed. "As to it not being 'good for me', Shepard, I do not even know how to reply to that. The only thing I had close to a relationship before ended so badly that I wanted to die. I have very little left to live for at this point. And I have a very, very long life to look forward to, facing it filled with empty

regrets is not something I am willing to endure. I know you must have problems and issues, no one who went through the horror you endured would be without such. I simply do not *care* about the cost to me...because you are the last thing I have left to hold on to. I might as well die otherwise. I cannot simply ignore that out of fear that I may get hurt."

Shepard stood. "You should. I'm not good for anyone. I drove my own friends away —"

Liara snorted, sounding almost exactly like Shepard as she did so. "Your friends, if they can call themselves that, *abandoned you*. They did not give you a chance to redeem yourself, or fix the damage, or even explore your feelings. Yes, I am sure whatever you did was horrible, but it was not a situation of your own making. I saw. I felt your horror at Torfan. I still hear that horrible beeping and the sobbing of the batarian children. They should have been by your side and they were not and for that *they cannot be forgiven*."

Liara's expression was angry, her fist clenched. "I am not about to let you throw your life away because of their selfish and short-sighted temper tantrum. I care about you. I will follow where you lead, even if it costs me my life, because you saved my life. I will trust you without asking why because you trusted ME without asking why."

Liara met Shepard's gaze evenly, openly. "That night when we first joined and the Vision nearly killed me, you saved me with the *viala*. That technique joins the souls, it is the most binding, most dangerous and most difficult of the techniques the asari people have. It simply *will not work* unless the persons involved are a part of each other. You saved me with it, and that is how I knew I was yours." Liara's voice was calm, but underlain with something like joy.

Shepard thought back to the time she'd learned it, of the words of the strike mistress who had taught it to her. Shepard had always despised the softer emotions, especially back then, and yet the only thing she could remember of the night she'd saved Liara was the insane fear she had of Liara dying. Shepard gave a weak shrug. "I... don't know. There's a lot... to think about. It's not that... fuck. It's not that I don't... want to. But that I'm worried what will happen if something goes wrong."

Liara sighed. "Do you not think this crossed my mind? I was not even entirely sure that you were interested at all. This is not me asking to rent a hotel room and..." she blushed, trailing off, then shaking her head. "I *care*. You mean something to me. You are something I can aspire to. You make me more than I am. I have to help take care of you, to... keep you going. I want... I want to be part of your life, to have a meaning. To be *wanted*." The little asari's voice sounded so empty and heartbroken that Shepard immediately turned and sat at the table, grabbing her hand.

"Liara, you have that already. Not that the hotel room is a bad idea." She tried for the joke, and was gratified at Liara blushing again but smiling. "But when I say I have to... think about it, I have to think about everything that's involved. I have to... admit some things, things you need to know before you decide this is really a good idea." She sighed. "And if word of it gets out, people are going to completely freak the fuck out."

Liara nodded, exhaling shakily. "I'm... listening."

O-SaBC-O

Half an hour later, Liara didn't know what to feel.

Listening to Shepard detail her bizarre sexual urges was a mix of confusing, upsetting, worrisome and —most disturbing of all—arousing. For Liara, like most asari, the very concept 'sexuality' as other species saw it was misleading. Joining of nervous systems and stimulation of pressure points and erogenous tissue was completely different than every other known form of life, which involved penetration organs. Asari could certainly do that, and over the past thousand years many, many asari

had undergone the simple cloning operations to line the birth canal opening with cloned tissue from the erogenous zones along their spine, ensuring that such penetrative acts were actually enjoyable.

But other species – particularly humans, with their odd religious views – always made sex more than it should have been. The sharing of memories, of emotions, of souls was more intimate to asari than the insertion of body parts. Knowing how another thought, or their innermost emotions, was the intimacy. An asari's body was just that – a receptacle for pleasures of the flesh, for enjoyment. As long as the Bond was only between two, that was fidelity.

Shepard needing someone who was devoted to her and her alone was not hard to accomplish – Liara wasn't even remotely interested in anyone else. But the clear feeling she got from Shepard was that she was ashamed of her own sexual desires, as if they were evil, or somehow wrong. It was just the body, and Liara simply didn't see what was so bad about it.

Shepard's issues were with control, with domination, with being able to basically inflict on others a sample of what was inflicted on her in some ways. Being dominated by someone like Shepard was hardly going to be a problem, but Liara was not sure about the parts regarding physical pain. Shepard's idea of domination, however, also included in many ways mental domination, and that tread very close to the concept of certain asari tendencies that were considered taboo.

Worse, Shepard had told her about exactly what had gone down with her last lover, who had been an SA plant designed to sabotage Torfan for political motives. Shepard was – with good reason – paranoid of romantic involvements. The idea of baring one's soul, so openly, so completely, to another person—to have them know every way she had been shamed and violated—was also a big issue with Shepard, and a potential barrier to true intimacy.

It didn't really help for them to both admit that it had been an *extremely* long time since Shepard had last had sex, and that Liara had never been able to relieve such stresses with another, so hormones and urges and stress were also driving factors.

Liara was shaken to her core by the revelation that Shepard didn't know about the significance of the *viala*. She was hardly a priestess of Athame, but from what she understood it shouldn't even have worked, much less so well. She was not one for goofy religious mantras, but she knew that there must be some significance to the *viala* working between them. Maybe it was just due to the heavy joining of memories they had done, or a side effect of the Beacon... or maybe, just maybe, Liara and Shepard were fated for each other. Shepard didn't really care for that idea, playing it off with jokes about 'but what if I end up liking turian women better', but Liara found it comforting.

Finally, Liara knew, sooner or later, that repeatedly having to join memories with Shepard would make it harder and harder not to push to a full meld, but most asari experimented with melds heavily in their early years. Liara hadn't. She had no clue how strong the resulting bond would be, and how much pain or pleasure or anything else would factor into what would be the outcome. It was better to be logical and reasonable about this, but a tiny part of her still wished Shepard would have just picked her up, kissed her and flung her on the bed.

Still, she got what Shepard was saying. They were adults, and they needed to get more comfortable with each other instead of just tossing caution to the wind. Shepard's rueful admission that she found Liara *extremely* attractive had made the asari feel much better about herself, although she had no foolish ideas that she looked anywhere as good as Shepard did.

Shepard had asked for a few minutes alone to get her emotions sorted out, and had left the room. Liara, with little else to do – the lab was being worked on and her mind too muddled to research – simply decided to try to relax, laying out on Shepard's couch. Despite her racing mind and emotions, she'd

fallen asleep in only a few minutes, tired. She dreamed quietly, of sitting across a vast, wide Prothean ruin, teaching the Prothean runic alphabet to a tiny asari girl she knew was her daughter, Shepard in the background drop kicking slavers and turians for some reason.

She awoke, starting a bit as she realized she was on Shepard's bed now, not the couch. The digital clock display read the time as 2 AM. Liara glanced around, noticing she was still fully clothed but someone – Shepard, probably – had slipped off her shoes and covered her with a light, SA-issue blanket. She moved the rough material to one side, sitting up blearily.

The commander herself was now laid out on the couch, a hand draped over her eyes. She'd shed the BDU jacket, and was wearing only a tightly fitted t-shirt and shorts, revealing her curves and cocoa skin. Liara blinked, pushing down a surge of lust, and carefully got up from the bed. She supposed Sara had moved her to the bed to be more comfortable, and then had fallen asleep herself, and decided to wake her up and see if she wanted to talk more. But as she approached the woman, she stopped.

Shepard was whimpering in her sleep, muscles tense. Liara gently shook her, trying to awake her, and then cursed softly – the nightmares had already returned. Using her biotics to fortify her strength, she lifted Shepard up carefully, carrying the larger, heavier woman back to her bed, trying not to react to her soft warmth, wincing as Shepard's voice mumbled something about blood.

Laying her down carefully, Liara lay down next to her, wrapping her arms around her closely and closing her eyes. She'd never tried to meld memories with a sleeping person before, but it should be possible...

With a focus, she opened her eyes, sclera black with effort, and entered into hell.

#### O-OSaBC-O

Liara stood on a cliff of black, shattered rock, bloodstained bones and fragments of bodies strewn everywhere. The sky was blasted, toxic black clouds against a sickeningly tainted greenish sky, a single huge moon scarred by the black lines of civilization hanging very low in the sky. She was overlooking a cityscape, a tattered half-image of the caricatures of gleaming towers jutting miles into the sky, impossibly wealthy looking and far away, and a low burg of broken, burning buildings, cheap brick and rusting iron. The roads were broken and full of debris, bodies, and old vehicles, rats and worse scurrying from shadow to shadow.

Trash, bones, and chunks of blooded... meat... were strewn about in all directions. The streets were crowded with leering, savage beasts, some obscene mixture of Protheans, Reapers, and Batarians, with engorged sex organs and large, hooked, cruel swords. They surrounded a tiny human girl, all huge eyes and dark hair, tied by her wrists to a pole, hung suspended in air. At their head was a thing like a cross between a krogan and a snake, topped with horns and the face of Saren.

The being was slashing at Shepard with a whip, and each time he did so, Shepard screamed. In the crowd were jeering, distorted images of people – Beatrice, Anderson, the Citadel Council, the Fleet Master, other humans Liara didn't recognize. The savage crowd around the pole was throwing things at Shepard as well, knives and darts, pictures of dead soldiers.

At Shepard's feet were a mass of broken, deformed humans in shattered armor, screaming that she'd betrayed them to die and that she was a filthy criminal. Liara couldn't even filter the rest of the scene, images were flickering in and out, a distorted booming voice screaming out that the Reapers were coming, smells twisting together in unrecognizable and sickening configurations.

Liara acted, leaping down to the area of the pole, imagining herself pulsing out a fiery shockwave of force that would consume everything it struck, and pushing that sensation at Shepard. The shockwave manifested, incinerating the screaming, jeering monsters in blue, purifying fire, smashing into the city

beyond , sending the crumbling buildings down in clouds of choking, black and evil smoke. She turned to the battered child tied to the pole, and lifted her up, gently, carefully, saying "I need you. Please wake up, I need you."

A moment later, Liara opened her eyes, head pounding with pain. She still held Shepard loosely, but both were soaked with sweat and Liara at least felt utterly and completely drained. She felt the tension slacken in Shepard's form and then the woman awoke, shivering for a moment before starting and realizing she was being held. "L-liara?" The voice was only half-awake, slurred and frightened.

Liara pitched her voice low. "Another nightmare, Shepard. I stopped it. Go to sleep. I'm here." She wrapped herself more tightly around the human, reveling in the contact, and smiled until she felt her face would split when Shepard simply snuggled against her and closed her eyes , drifting back into sleep.

Liara held her for the rest of the night, but for once Shepard slept soundly and securely, and Liara eventually drifted off herself, for once without regrets.

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## **Chapter 69: Chapter 60: Normandy, Moments V**

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**A/N:** I've been busy – will work faster. Moar Shepard fluffage. A peek inside her mind as it were.

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Shepard awoke, blinking her eyes free of sleep and stiffened as she realized someone was in bed with her. Carefully moving, she relaxed only fractionally when she realized she was fully clothed and the arm across her waist was that of Liara, the blue tone of her skin mottled with shadows from the window.

Shepard exhaled, slipping free and sliding off of the bed. The asari woman made a soft noise in her sleep and curled slightly, her features peaceful and even. For a moment, Shepard was struck by the asari's beauty, an unfamiliar, calm smile creeping across her features. Then she gave a soft sigh, and carefully draped the rough SA blanket that was all she had left of her time with the Penal Legions over Liara, pinching the bridge of her nose as she finished. Shepard padded across the room, tossing a glance at the door to make sure it was still locked, and checked the multifunction panel on her computer.

The Normandy remained mostly deserted. Two crewmen had come back, both in sleeper pods, as well as Tali'Zorah. The system indicated the quarian was in engineering. She paged through the displays, seeing that work was scheduled to begin on the hull at 1 PM the next day, and nodded to herself thoughtfully. Setting up a message to the crew about the airlock being out of commission the next morning so Tali could put on her new armor, she finished transmitting it and then turned to pull open one of the bottles of scotch on the table.

When she'd taken over Anderson's cabin, she'd seen that the Captain must have already cleaned out his quarters while she was at the Spectre HQ. Besides a spare datapad and a code book with high level SA codes for the commanding officer, all he'd left behind was his booze. At first, she'd thought there had just been the one bottle, but the closet in the corner had almost two dozen. There were regulations about drinking on duty – fairly severe ones – but the reality of the situation is that no one monitored the captain of the ship, and Anderson's frosty, professional demeanor was intimidating enough that no one would have dared questioned him. She was just surprised she'd never realized how much he drank, how hard his position must have been...and after finding out about him being dismissed as a Spectre

candidate, how heavily a failure must have weighed on him.

The downside of such a stash was that it encouraged Shepard to drink her problems away. She smiled to herself, quietly pouring another glass, pondering the situation.

*What the fuck were you thinking? You've liked looking at asari for years, but the first one you decide to have a damned relationship with is a frightened kid under your command?*

Downing the amber liquid, she closed her eyes as it burned its way into her stomach. The situation was bad enough. Saren had vanished into thin air, with zero leads as to his next targets. Her only choices were to assault Cerberus or the geth for leads, both of which were fraught with danger. She was still down marines, and her BDO was possibly unreliable or about to be dismissed, depending on what his medical examination revealed.

Her frustrating interview with the Council had not gone well at all. While they acknowledged that the large black ship Saren commanded was likely related to the ships that obliterated the Inusannon and the Protheans, they simply didn't believe that such a thing happened on a fifty thousand year cycle. Their plan was to eliminate Saren, which would stop the problem before it started – regardless of the situation.

And with all of this, instead of thinking of the mission, the coming hunt for Cerberus, she found herself distracted by Liara.

Drinking again, she sighed. The problem wasn't fraternization – given how Shepard liked to do things, engaging in any kind of sexual activity on the ship itself was tantamount to holding a press conference stating she was banging an asari teen and oh, by the way, all those rape allegations weren't that far off the mark. Venting on Liara in that manner – while dreadfully abusive of Liara's own infatuated respect and desire for her – was not what worried Shepard. If things ever got that far, some tact and caution would be needed, but that was not too upsetting.

Nor was she worried about being put in a situation like Torfan again. Liara had fought against Benezia, without a single hesitation – her own mother. Liara was an open person, and had nowhere else to go, was admittedly a virgin with zero relationships, outcast by her family, hunted by her government, distrusted by the Citadel authorities, and had zero marketable skills aside from archeology, where no doubt her detractors in the asari university circles would ruin her.

Shepard *was* worried if it would work, or if she was too messed up to actually be in a relationship. Part of her wasn't certain going ahead with this was a good idea, but it had nothing to do with not wanting Liara. She was beautiful, interesting, strong-willed, tough and surprisingly upbeat for someone whose life had been nothing but failures. Shepard wasn't hesitant because of Liara, more the fact that Shepard had zero idea how to proceed with going from 'Hey, we like each other' to the next step. It wasn't that Shepard wanted to be alone. She'd seen some time ago that without people to stabilize her, she'd end up in very bad places.

Shepard didn't fully understand Liara's attraction to her, either. She'd seen misguided hero worship before, from the kind of hard asses that inevitably populate the human military. The type of people who thought the best alien was a dead alien, and that there wasn't much point in trying criminals and slavers. Or in starry eyed recruits full of SA propaganda and wild rumors about her abilities and background.

Liara didn't fit that mold. She seemed to honestly think that Shepard's calls were good and that Shepard was worth the effort it took to reach out, despite having seen how empty she was inside. Maybe Liara didn't feel she was empty. Maybe Liara felt she could repair some of that damage, or maybe Liara thought that she owed Shepard something. But Shepard didn't believe she could be 'fixed' and wasn't certain she *wanted* to be. Could she still live with the person she was if the damage was pasted away

under emotions and family responsibilities?

She drained the glass, pouring more scotch a few seconds later, feeling the curling warmth nestle in her stomach. Liara's reasoning as to why they were good for each other was on point. Shepard's own mind was irrevocably fucked up, thanks to the beacon, and it didn't look as if she'd last very long without Liara's help. The nightmares reduced her into a nervous wreck, unable to sleep at all and making bad, anger-based judgments that got people killed. Turning away that help was not just suicidal but would cause the mission to fail. And, truth be told, every time they melded memories, even though Liara was getting better at not getting anything mixed up like that disastrous first time, the unnerving sense of ... awareness grew. It was like a cool weight at the back of her neck.

But Liara was understating the risks as well. Never mind Shepard might kill her during sex, or that she was basically setting herself up for long-term abuse just to get Shepard's engine going. Never mind that she was a maiden, barely out of childhood by asari standards, and that melds – especially deep, repeated melds – were something that most asari didn't try until the matron stage. Never mind that being linked to a goddamned maniac wasn't going to make Liara any more stable. Never mind that Shepard's future was a complete unknown – how the SA would react negatively to her banging someone on her crew.

Never mind the fact that they had been eyeing each other up since that day on Therum and that this was half driven by the fact that they were both lonely, anti-social wrecks under too much stress, and three months down the line they might feel completely different.

No, what made Shepard the most nervous was the ugly truth that Liara was basically setting the entire burden of her life onto Shepard's shoulders. She had to learn to love, when all her life had been about driving, pure hate. She had to try to understand an alien, someone who was even further out of her frame of reference. . She had to try and tamp down her fury and self-despair and support Liara and that was something she'd never gotten down – or had any chance to engage in.

Shepard wanted to try. She was sick of fighting for nothing, and Liara's blasted expression when she'd heard Shepard had no real goals in life was a wake-up call. She *wanted* to be able to have someone to care for. To fight for. To wake up and realize you could depend on. But she was terrified of fucking it up, of just ending up using Liara, taking advantage of her body, of her willingness to support, of her ability to listen and let Shepard vent, and not being able offer anything in return.

Badly rambling half-assed statements that Liara meant a lot? A mind full of nightmares and memories that no one should have to see? A life tied to a criminal, spent on whatever garbage assignments the SA decided to throw at her? Shepard had no money, nowhere to live, aside from her command vessels, and no real education outside of what she'd learned on her own. . She had no real interests, aside from tinkering with guns and models, and she had no real sense of how to live a life that wasn't directed by her superiors. .

Maybe that was the point, to try to figure out how to live, to find those interests and things to have investments in. To just turn her back on how bad shit had gone down for her all her life and take a wild gamble on something new and not full of pain. But moving on when you had no idea how to do it was a lot harder than just saying "go".

She sighed, swirling the drink in her glass before downing it. It didn't really help that in talking with Liara earlier, the whole thing with the *viala* had been pretty weird. There were some creepy, spooky overtones of what Liara had told her about its requirements. If the *viala* only worked on someone you were destined for, then Liara and Shepard would work out.

But if destiny really existed, did that mean she was *supposed* to suffer the way she had? Years of rape and abuse? Years of being a murderous, evil, thug? Having parents who sold her into sex slavery and a

cousin who used her as a hit man? Being a glorified assassin and enforcer for the SA before nearly being discarded like the trash they'd plucked her from?

It was a disquieting, upsetting possibility for Shepard, who usually didn't give much thought to philosophy other than that of Machiavelli. Red Dog of the 10th Street Reds had given her a battered, paperback copy of the Prince to read, and she had taken much of it to heart as her personal credo. Better to be feared than loved, to be hated and dangerous than respected but held to be accessible. Destiny, fate – these things existed in the worlds of people who let random chance decide their outcomes.

All her life, Shepard had told herself she'd been dealt a bad hand and did the best with it she could. Did fate put her through this to make her who she needed to be? If Shepard had been a normal, well-adjusted person, would she have ever come across Liara, or be open to a relationship with her? Or was it truly just random chance, and this was nothing but another failure in the making?

Shepard refilled her glass again, casting her eyes over the sleeping asari once more. She didn't want to hurt Liara, and yet she wanted to be proven wrong, that she could have something worth holding on to, someone to listen and soothe. Someone to fight for, to want to improve for. And after a life spent killing any and everything that could die, facing impossible odds and having the fate of millions flung onto her shoulders, Shepard found the idea of fucking up with Liara the most terrifying thing she'd ever had to deal with.

*You may have one good thing in your life. Take a chance on fucking it up, or try not to and drive her away? Fuck!*

She exhaled, swallowing, and put her glass down. "If I'm going to do it, it's just like... a mission. I won't fail. I can't fail." Her eyes drifted over to Liara again, who was still asleep, and felt that same helpless, stupid smile come over her face.

She glanced away, as the multifunction panel beeped softly. Shepard frowned – why was Tali using the ships venting system at this time of night? She rose smoothly, leaving her glass behind. Maybe a walk would clear her head.

#### O-OSaBC-O

Tali'Zorah bit her lip behind her mask, ever so carefully aligning the delicate tracery of eezo circuitry along the narrow bands of the chipset she was working on. Her omni-tool glowed, projecting steady bands of force as well as a magnification overlay, as the quarian connected the small lumps of eezo to each side of the long pieces of metal that lay on the table in front of her.

The engineering bay was deserted, the massive Tantalus core glowing sullenly with muted blue light, casting half shadows across the bay. The narrow strip of engineering control consoles stood empty, like abandoned sentry posts, and only the table at which Tali labored had a light on over it. The utter, eerie silence of the ship ate at her nerves. She remembered having to board a ship with a failed life support system, the silence there had not been as total as the Normandy in dock.

She exhaled as she finished the linkage, standing up from her half-crouch to critically examine her work, then with a satisfied nod, tapped on her omnitool to activate a fusion torch. Aligning the braces ends with the support belt at one end of the table, she welded, the hot-white sparks of melted metal throwing leaping shadows on the wall. Thick clouds of vaporized metal puffed away here and there, sucked away by vent fans overhead, the only noise to be heard.

She finished one set of welds, and stood, then recoiled in fright as something unfolded from the shadows with terrifying grace and silence. It was only a moment later she realized it was Shepard, dressed in camo-pattern BDU pants and a t-shirt, stepping around the corner. "Tali?"

The quarian girl nodded, cutting off her omni-tool. "Yes, Commander?"

Shepard glanced around, at the darkened, shutdown engineering space, then at the table. "Sorry, I got an alert that the ventilation system had been engaged... I came to check it out. What is this?" She gestured with a hand at the several pieces of finely crafted metal, curved and hinged, and the sprawling stack of data pads at the base of the table. "Some kind of repair job?"

Tali shook her head. "N-no. I... I was working on something for Jeff. I mean, Joker. I-I mean, Lieutenant Moreau. A set of eezo-powered leg braces, to reduce the weight he has to support to get around the ship. So he can move...without being in pain, all t-the time."

Shepard arched a single eyebrow. "That sounds...expensive. Humans of his size weigh about 140 to 180 pounds... that's like, what, three ounces of eezo? Run you a good stack of credits." Her voice was cool, almost without emotion, but her stance was... Tali couldn't quite figure it. Uneasy. Worried. Relaxed and yet defensive. She was breathing faster than normal and there was a sort of nervous energy about her.

Tali folded her arms and shrugged. "I do have my own money, Commander. From what the Shadow Broker paid me. I didn't take anything from ship stores –"

Shepard held up a hand. "Sorry. Didn't mean to imply that. And if you did need something from ship's stores, you are part of my crew, and that's what it's there for." She paused, glancing around. "It's just... I thought Joker had crutches. I know it's not exactly easy for him to get around, but this... "

Tali winced, and shook her head. "Crutches that hurt him just to use them. He's described it to me...pain every time he tries to move, or walk to his bunk. Just the stress causes additional fractures." There was a wounded note in the quarian's exotic voice, and Shepard rubbed her chin thoughtfully.

Tali continued, a bit hesitantly. "I don't get humans sometimes. In the Fleet, a pilot with that kind of talent would be feted, someone probably would have custom-built him an eezo powered chair or something. In your fleet, he's ... people make fun of him or ignore him. I have a hard time understanding how your people reward skill."

Shepard's lips faintly curved. "The Systems Alliance has never claimed to be a meritocracy, sadly. I'd say I'm more skilled and more experienced than a lot of captains and majors, but I was stuck as a Lieutenant Commander a long time and only promoted to Commander after Torfan because of the award I got. It's more about who you know and ... playing a bunch of social games I could never figure out. Joker's problem is he knows he's good and thinks he should get a pass on his attitude or relationships with people because of it. And he is good – probably the best pilot in the fleet, maybe in human history."

Shepard turned back to gaze at the braces. "But he wouldn't have been if he had not been ostracized. If he had not been pushed, and tormented, and driven to excel, he'd have been a good – but not great – pilot. It's just the way we seem to work. Sometimes, what makes us... unhappy is what also drives us to try to succeed."

Tali shook her head. "It seems very cruel. And I have to wonder if it turns out all that well. He is driven by his disability, and he's achieved things no one else has, but wouldn't he be happier without it all? I mean, if he didn't have Vrolik's Syndrome, and could walk normally...is that kind of pain worth what he's achieved?"

Shepard shrugged. "I've asked myself that question. I doubt I'd be what I was today if I was... normal. And every time I... try to move away from that I question if it's the right move."

Tali tilted her head. "To be normal? I don't think Joker will ever be normal in the way a person born

without his disease would be. I can't make him normal. But I can make sure he can do the things a normal person can do without being in pain for doing them. That's not changing who he is, just...how he does things."

Shepard thought on this for a very long moment, going utterly still, before a brilliant smile crossed her face, lighting up her eyes. The tension and worry in her posture melted away, and Shepard actually relaxed. Tali had never seen such an expression on the commander's face, but before she could say anything Shepard gave a little laugh and shook her head. "Damn, I am so stupid sometimes...you make a very good point, Tali. You just helped me with something I've been... wrestling with all night. Thanks. If you need anything else for your rig for Joker –"

Tali shook her head. "I'm about done, actually. The hard part was making a sensor net that would link into a quick sensor net, so the braces can help balance him properly when he moves. All I need to do is finish hooking things up and put a casing on some pieces... and I'm sure you didn't come down here to check out engineering or listen to me ramble..."

Shepard shook her head. "No, I *was* looking for you, just not expecting to find you needing the vent system or to find you welding. The VI said you'd gone ashore and then came back a few hours ago. I wanted to tell you a couple of things. First, that I've put out a notice that the airlock is off limits from 9 to 11 AM tomorrow. I've set the full bio-hazard decon cycle to run non-stop for three hours prior to that, so you can have a secure place to change your suit."

Tali nodded. She'd been more than astonished to find the order of armor sent to the Normandy had included a full quarian-model envirosuit, armored up to Colossus standards. Shepard explained that Kassa Fabrication had done a job for some quarian exile a few years back and retained the specs. Tali had spent a full day checking it out – the quality was very good, almost as good as something the Flotilla itself would have produced. She had to do some extra work on the filters and seals, but the humans had introduced a few features the quarians had not thought of, like a pureeing unit with UV filtering right in the backpack, to allow her to consume food not already prepped in a food tube.

With no real clean room on the Normandy, though, changing into a new suit was fraught with danger. The space she changed in would have to be utterly, completely sterile. Shepard had already attended to that, having set aside the airlock for her to use, as well as having the air filters upgraded and the nozzles that restored atmosphere in the airlock sterilized and sealed behind DETA filter mesh.

"I'll ... get ready, then, in the morning. Thanks, Shepard." She didn't know what else to say – the armor had to have cost a fortune, but Shepard only shrugged.

"No problem... so...this brace thing you've made, it will help him get around better?"

Tali nodded, turning back to the table. "Yes. It should help lessen his weight while giving his legs more strength and moving assistance over long distances. I had to build it as narrow as possible to make sure he could fit into a survival suit. It's battery powered, but it has a trickle-motion charger built into the joints so just walking around will help recharge it." Tali forced herself to stop talking, clued in by the smile on Shepard's face.

"Sounds like you spent a small fortune on this, Tali. I'm sure he'll be appreciative. A word of advice, though. I'm not much of a ... people person, but I can make a guess that he has his pride about his disability. He could have applied for less stressful positions and could have taken a less aggressive course towards being the pilot he is today. He chose not to do so. I don't think he wants pity."

Tali shook her head, spreading her hands in a frustrated gesture. "I don't pity him at all. I think he's wonderful. I-I mean, how do you stay upbeat and not be borne down by not being able to even walk? I just wanted... he put himself through a lot of pain to help me out on the Citadel, doing some shopping,

and I wanted to pay him back. You...you think he will be upset at what I made?"

Shepard shook her head, then ran her hand through her hair, pinching the bridge of her nose a moment later. "No, Tali, I don't. I think he'll be a bit confused and maybe unsure why you'd go to all the trouble for such a thing. But not upset."

Shepard glanced at the empty, dark engineering spaces again, shrugging lightly. "Also, I got a message earlier, but you weren't on board. The Migrant Fleet sent you a comm. I've had some feedback that the SA has been less than fucking stellar about routing message traffic to the Normandy for the non-human crew members, so I unloaded on High Command about that fact. The comms room on the CIC deck is set up to receive the call."

Tali nodded, and swallowed. "I...I will go as soon as I finish up here, Commander." The human woman nodded and departed, leaving Tali worrying about the message she'd received.

Twenty minutes later, she was nervously standing in the comm room, at the link panel. Triggering the message, she saw it was from her father. . The video popped up on the main view screen, crystal clear.

Admiral Rael'Zorah was an imposingly tall quarian, broad through the chest, with powerful shoulders and standing well over six and a half feet tall. His suit was of the highest quality, flat black armor panels edged almost sullenly here and there with Zorah purple and the white sash of the Admiralty snug around his waist. His voice was its usual basso rumble, never satisfied, always disapproving.

"Tali, I've had a formal apology from an admiral in the Systems Alliance fleet today, informing me that the four messages I sent prior had been, as he put it, 'mislaidd'. I'm not sure if that's double-speak or something more sinister, so the SA has been given a copy of this current message."

"I have not been informed of your whereabouts or health since your message to me upon departing the Citadel in pursuit of this Saren criminal, and I am very worried. Contact me at your earliest possible opportunity. I expect a reply within four solar days, or a very good explanation of why one has not been sent. Rael'Zorah out."

Tali sighed, then turned to the unfamiliar comms control panel. After a bit of translation with her omni-tool, she had an overlay of the controls in quarian, and a fair understanding of how they worked. Using the lowest priority signal channel that still allowed real time comms, she engaged a transmission and waited patiently.

A few minutes later, the screen blanked, replaced by the quarian glyph for 'hesitance' – literally, please hold. Seconds after that, a quarian in a silver and grey suit filled the screen. "Admiralty Security, who is – oh, Tali'Zorah." The quarian immediately touched a control on his panel, and the signal blanked again, momentarily, before coming up a second time, this time revealing her father.

"Father? It's Tali."

Rael'Zorah was clearly in his quarters, the four-panel wall hanging her mother had done visible in the background. He half turned, facing his private comm, then gestured to someone off screen. "Good, I was wondering if the humans had 'mislaidd' you as well, Tali."

Tali shook her head. "No, father. There's been a great deal of confusion, and the ship took some significant damage. We're currently docked at the Citadel. I'm fine, although we haven't been on any more missions against the geth yet."

Rael'Zorah's glowing eyes narrowed. "The news agencies are being extremely tight-lipped about exactly what is happening with this mission you are on, Tali. We've all heard of the fight at Feros, where the Citadel Fleet got destroyed by that massive ship. Other than that, only rumors."

Tali carefully framed her words, not wanting to alarm her father but not wanting him to order her back

to the Fleet, either. "The ship was on a research mission, trying to find more information about the black ship. Based on some ruins we found, something like it was not only responsible for the Prothean extinction, but possibly older races as well, like the Inusannon."

Rael merely nodded. "Interesting, if troubling. Where are you going next?"

Tali shrugged. "Shepard .. has plans to cripple Saren. I'm not sure what she plans, but I'm pretty sure at some point, we'll be going after the geth. She's made serious preparations for war, though. She's upgraded everyone's weapons and armor, even going so far as to commission me a suit of battle armor from Kassa Fabrications."

Rael sighed, folding his arms. "This is not exactly what I had in mind for your Pilgrimage, Tali. Running into pitched battles against Spectres, and cut off from all resources –"

She shrugged. "Tetrimus paid well for the information on Saren, father – I have plenty of resources, enough to buy a ship if I wanted." She didn't fail to notice the way he stiffened at the name, and a moment later he began to pace.

"Listen to me, daughter. I know you feel secure, but this is no game. Tetrimus is an *extremely* dangerous figure, far more dangerous than either this Saren clown or that Shepard lunatic. I don't care what justification he used, or what sort of lies he spun to the Council, the humans and Maker knows who else, but the Shadow Broker does not work *gratis*, ever. They expect something of value out of this, and once they have it they're just as likely to turn on you."

Tali did not interrupt, merely listened as her father continued. "I know you feel you have to do this, to atone for the fact that our people are responsible for the geth, who are now butchering others as they did to us during the Morning War. But you are not a soldier, Tali. When things go wrong, you are going to be in a great deal of danger, and there won't be a patrol of Migrant Fleet Marines around to help."

Tali held up a hand. "I'm seeing this through, father. Saren, and what he's planning, is a danger if he's working with the geth. You saw my report; they've made more progress in the past year than they had in the three centuries prior to that. If we don't have someone here, how will we ever know what is really going on?"

She paused. "Besides, Shepard is more careful than you would think. When we went into heavy ground combat, she sent me and the other non-military person, Dr. T'Soni, back up to the ship. She was really upset that she lost soldiers in that fight. She's not the blood-thirsty maniac people keep saying she is."

Rael shook his head. "People acquire unsavory reputations based on their actions, Tali. If you're really going to stick this out, there is little I can do to stop you without shaming the entire clan. But do not try to be a hero." He paused, before continuing in a softer voice. "Perhaps I have not said this enough, but you are immensely skilled, and will be an asset to the Fleet. I do not doubt your courage, or your abilities. But I do not trust these humans, and I certainly have my doubts in any endeavor where the Broker is involved."

Rael sourly spread his hands. "Keep us informed, and do not bring shame onto the Fleet. Return when you can, daughter. Keelah Se'lai."

Tali barely had time to say the same before the video link cut. She sighed dejectedly – once again her father thought her a stupid, willful girl in over her head. And perhaps, she admitted to herself as she left the comms room, with good reason. *Nearly being killed on Caleston, and then almost dying on the Citadel... the only reason I haven't gotten into trouble recently is I'm surrounded by soldiers.*

Tali sighed, heading back towards engineering to finish the work on Joker's braces.

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## Chapter 70: Chapter 61: Telanya, Defiant

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*A/N:*

*So, a couple of bad things happened at work, and then I've been flying all over the damned place, plus I've kicked off another story series, and had to wait for this chapter to get beta-read. But don't worry. OSABC is still not stopping any time soon.*

*I've had to rework some chapters –I planned to get to fighting Cerberus sooner – but people seem to like the fluff, so here's the last piece of it. Next, the fight against Cerberus begins, and leads that aid in tracking down the next phase of the plan of Saren and Sovereign.*

*Hopefully, I can get another chapter out tomorrow, and one more by next week.*

---

Shepard's conversation with Tali, and the young quarian's expression that one didn't have to be normal to be able to enjoy normal things, had left her in a pensive, but upbeat mood. She returned to her quarters, the doors hissing shut behind her, to find Liara sitting up on the bed, rubbing her eyes.

The asari looked up as she entered, wide blue eyes worried. "Are you alright, Sara?"

Shepard shrugged. "An alert came up and I dealt with it. Last I remember I was dozing on the couch. When I woke up..." She gestured to the bed with a raised eyebrow, and Liara gave a weak shrug.

"You were having another nightmare. I helped, well... stop it... because you were clearly in distress." The asari glanced down, picking at the fabric of her university uniform, then glanced up hesitantly. "I did not mean to offend, but—"

Shepard sat down in the chair across from her, reaching for the scotch. She poured out half a glass, and then shrugged, sipping. "You didn't. It was just unexpected." She paused, sipping again. "It's funny. I've had nightmares most of my life. For a long time I was on sleeping pills, otherwise I couldn't get any sleep. After Torfan, they got worse. After the Beacon, they got... unbearable. You'd think I'd be used to it by now."

She gave a cool smile and shrugged. "You move past it. You can't let anyone see that you are weak or someone will take advantage. You can't let them see your pain. Your doubt. Your fear. You shove it down, and away, and square your shoulders and just keep going. You bury it under anger, bury under duty, bury it under regret. Eventually you're all used up inside, all the parts of you that matter gone, and the only thing remaining is red, bloody rage."

Shepard drank again, then set the glass aside, meeting Liara's gaze. "I have no damned idea of how the hell I'm going to handle this. I'll do my best, but I'm not much of a romantic. I just don't know how to go on anymore. The past few weeks have been..." Shepard paused, glancing away for a moment, then back to Liara. "...too much."

Liara winced at the empty, lost focus of Shepard's gaze, biting her lip nervously. She gave an awkward shrug. "I used to dream of such things, when I was even younger. Of adventure and strange places and discoveries at the side of someone strong and decisive, of being able to find my own path instead of the tired, worn out duties my mother wished me to undertake. Being on my own for fifty years has only given me loneliness and disappointment." She nervously smiled. "I do not think that your worries are unfounded. But I ..."

Liara trailed off, standing, glancing out of the porthole at the purple radiance and shifting clouds of the Widow Nebula, framing the Citadel. "I see the lights of the Citadel, and the people. I see the lovers and

friends, the people so successful and happy with life. Everyone is... able to have the things that I am not. And that hurts, because I do not know what I have done that makes achieving that such an impossibility for me."

Liara turned to face Shepard. "But what you and I have is not something I understand. I feel a pull towards you. To help and to follow, to see and understand you." She took a step forward. "No one tries because they fear you, but I never have. From the moment you saved me on Therum, you have always been open with me."

Shepard shrugged, leaning back in the chair. "Yeah, and you're about the only person I can seem to just talk to. But how much of that is 'destiny' and how much is 'we got inside each other's heads'? I'm not saying I don't feel it. I do. But I don't have much to offer." The last came out almost flat, as if she expected Liara to turn away.

Liara shrugged, and smiled. "Does it matter? You are exhausted, alone, abandoned, with a burden that no one can carry alone. I have been cast out and my future is shattered and ruined. You worry you will hurt me? Bruise me?" The asari's voice was amused, but also had a touch of a tremble to it.

Shepard shifted uncomfortably in her chair. "I worry that I'll mess something up and cause you emotional pain. Or, fuck, I don't know. I'm not saying I—"

The asari took another step forward and quietly knelt at Shepard's feet. "Do you think I care? I – we – have nothing. I do not care if I am hurt, or if there is pain, or if there is suffering. All I know is that I want to be... here. Perhaps that is silly. Perhaps it's immature."

Hesitantly, Liara traced her fingers over Shepard's hands, feeling the scars and the strength, the trembling and the worry. "But my mother once said life is nothing but the pursuit of the wants we have, tempered by dealing with needs."

Shepard frowned, and pulled Liara up. They stood face to face, inches apart. She could smell Liara, the subtle hint of perfume, and felt the tremble in the asari's shoulders as she pulled her up. For a long moment she was still, and then she thought again on Tali's words. The soft inviting gleam of those lips, the tremor and anxiety in her own hands – suddenly the cabin seemed too small, too hot, too closed in, and there was just Liara.

*Normal things.*

She exhaled, then pushed Liara back, up against the bulkhead, kissing her fiercely, letting her body tense up. For a few, brief moments, Shepard just stopped caring, and let herself fall into the emotions and feelings, the swirl completely confusing and unknown.

But cleaner, better, than empty regret.

She broke the kiss a moment later, swallowing, and took half a step back, watching to see how Liara would react. The asari looked up at her curiously, eyes wide and nervous, breathing a bit quickly, but there was both hesitancy and hunger in her eyes. Shepard took another deep breath and backed away completely.

"I... that is, I have never been kissed. It was ... nice." Liara's voice was almost amusingly cautious, and Shepard managed a thin, somewhat nervous smile, waiting, and then Liara shrugged, almost weakly. "I have no idea what we do now."

Shepard arched an eyebrow and glanced at the rather narrow bed, making the asari blush faintly, but immediately took up one of Liara's hands and pulled her close. "Listen, Marazul. I have no idea either, and I'm not going to rush things. I am not going to let my own stupid shit fuck this up, I swear. We'll go slow. We'll... just enjoy things. We'll... find something normal in all of this mess and move on" Shepard

paused, glancing away, out the window to the Citadel, then back into those blue eyes. "I know what I feel, no matter confusing or unusual it is. I can't explain it and maybe I don't need to."

She let Liara's hand fall, turning away, mouth set grimly. "I'm not a good person. I'm never sure if I'm doing what's right or what just happens to come to mind. I don't know, and maybe I can't know, what drives normal people to the things they do. I never found that kind of answer in my own life." Black hair slid down as she bent her head, obscuring her features, and she gave a weary sigh.

"I used to think the answer was in anger, and in killing bad guys, and proving I was worth the effort. I wanted to please David. I wanted to prove I wasn't that drug-hazed thug, that I wasn't trash, that I mattered." She laughed, bitterly, making Liara flinch. The asari didn't know how to handle the sudden mood swing, and bit her lip nervously as Shepard continued. "I don't want you .. us .. to go into this blindly, Liara. I can't just pretend what I am can change in a way that's good for you. I don't want you pressured, I don't want you .. lost." She paused again, her voice dropping almost to a whisper.

"For years, I let that anger I spoke of rule me. Let it shape me. Instead of being able to reach out to others, to understand my life, I just .. followed. Brutally enforcing what had to be done. I didn't let pity, mercy, or even emotion sway me, except anger. I executed a man for disobeying orders when following them would have meant his death anyway. Let generals push me into bad firefights where my men died in heaps to get the job done. Let them nearly sacrifice me on Torfan, after tricking me with a person claiming to love me, then stick a medal around my damned neck and trot me out to every trouble spot."

She glanced around the cabin. "And what do I get for my loyalty? I'm still not understood. I don't fit. People cheer me or fear me, they don't understand me, and they don't care to. I'm not a woman, or a Marine, but an icon, something the SA can shake at the pirates and say 'boo' with."

Liara shook her head slowly. "Why do you say this, Sara?"

Shepard half turned, a wry smile crossing her dark, beautiful features. "Because I want you to know and understand that I don't have anything else, either. I don't have answers. I don't know that I can be of help to you in the way you are to me. I don't know if what I have to offer is going to offset the pain being with me can cause." She turned, fully, and her eyes were troubled. "I am not the same person I was when I started this mission. I was hard and cold, I didn't fear, I didn't hesitate. I was given a mission, told not to fail, and got to work."

Shepard turned, sitting bonelessly in the chair, pouring another drink. "I didn't stop Saren on Eden Prime. Maybe I was too late. Maybe if I'd sacrificed Lieutenant Parker and his team to get to the spaceport, I could have stopped him, or at least stopped Nihlus from dying." She drank, the bitter smile widening. "I rescued you from the geth, tried to stop Saren on Feros, nearly lost half my fucking team on Eingana." She sips again, shrugging. "I got told by the government I've worked for all my adult life that they basically only care about results, that the ends justify the means."

Her voice broke. "That they're no better than me. That the driving cause of my life is a joke, and that I am just as much a tool and weapon in the hands of evil men now as I was as a 10th Street Red. That I do not matter. Not to the SA."

Shepard's hands gripped the table edge, knuckles whitening. "I have found that I can't simply dismiss the team. That I can't close my eyes to what is. I can't stop the rage at what Saren has done, the fear that shoots through me when I see the Reapers in my mind, their ships falling from the sky. How the fuck am I supposed to stop this? How am I supposed to make it work?" Shepard sighed, and set the glass down, looking up towards Liara. "I need to be ... more than I am. I can't be me and I don't know how to be anyone else."

Liara nodded slowly. "You are strong, Sara. Stronger than anyone else I know. You have gone through

horrors I cannot truly understand, and trials that would break the strongest of people. You move through a life that you cannot fully grasp, and yet you find the time to inspire those around you, now, here." Liara took a step forward. "You cannot let the past define you, you can only use it to make yourself into what you think you should be."

Shepard's eyes narrowed, but not in anger. "And if I don't know? I don't need a warm body in my bed if it means nothing. I couldn't do that with Shields, or -"

Liara shook her head firmly, eyes seeking Shepard's own. "Shields never could grasp what you wanted and needed. From her you needed someone to depend upon, but without that additional step she wanted. You were not ready. They were your friends." Liara paused, remembering how disastrously she'd reacted with Amania's own overtures, she bit her lip. "And maybe if you had time to consider, in calmer times, you would have felt different."

Liara's hands carefully touched Shepard's shoulders, gently rubbing. "But you did not. I am not saying I have any answers to what torments you. I can offer myself. If that means that I am hurt, then it is better than feeling nothing. If it means that I am unhappy, then it is better than being miserable and not knowing. If it means I am used –"

Shepard's hand caught Liara's wrist. "I am not going to do that, Liara. It's not what I want, or what either of us need."

Liara gave a half-shrug, purple Widow-light from the nebula surrounding the Citadel casting her features in a somber hue, a faint smile twisting her lips. "I would not resist if you did. We may find joy or pain, but we will at least find something more than ... empty duty, and wondering that is never resolved." With that, the asari freed her hand, and gently bent down to kiss Shepard, tasting the alien drink on her lips, feeling a thrill run through her as she did so.

This time Shepard did not hold back, and Liara felt heat rise within her, as her skin tingled and she felt the urge to link vibrating in her bones, her hips, her soul. For a moment she was lost, mind gone in fantasies of sliding limbs and pleasure, as the two slipped to the floor, the heavier human woman pinning her to the ground, eyes wide and dark.. Shepard smiled and caressed her softly, letting her tongue trace Liara's jawline, then to trail down Liara's throat, while her hands softly teased the back of her neck, the folds there quivering.

Liara shuddered, pleasure racing through her body, the heat of Shepard blazing through her thin shirt, muscled limbs tightening around her as haziness occluded Liara's sight, and then it was simply all too much. She reached out –

And the alarm panel blared, shockingly loud. "Entry request, C-SEC. Entry request, C-SEC."

Shepard gave a frustrated, angry groan, her face flushed and legs quivering. Almost, almost she couldn't find the will to stop – her body was tense and nearly ready to explode, throat dry, hands shaking, but she shook her head and reached up to slap the control. "Shepard," she growled, in an iron and angry voice. "This had better be good."

"C-SEC, Commander Shepard. One of your crew has been shot." Shepard's eyes widened, and yet it was Liara who sat up, bit her lip, and shook her head. "Go. We... will talk."

O-OSaBC-O

"Sorry, Commander. Didn't mean to cause trouble." Pressly's voice was weak, and muffled by the oxygen mask over his face. Medigel infused bandages wrapped his massive torso and shoulder neatly, the myriad blinking haptic displays on the medical monitor showing his heartbeat as weak but steady.

Shepard snorted, folding her arms, her BDU's savagely pressed even in the middle of the night. "Stow

it, XO. You didn't do a damned thing wrong, except picking a bitch of a wife."

She half turned to the two C-SEC officers standing in the corridor beyond the hospital room, and frowned before turning back to face her XO. "Have they told you anything?"

Pressly faintly shook his head, smiling wanly. "No, Ma'am. Not after I came to, at least, in the ambulance."

Shepard sighed. Pressly had gone to the Citadel, planning to get the rest of his belongings out of the home he shared with his now ex-wife. Upon arriving, however, he'd been told angrily that she'd thrown all of his possessions – including mementos of his family – into the trash. He'd been angry at this, and when a large man came to the door behind his ex-wife and threatened him, he'd acted, as he put it, rashly.

The man had shot him twice, and told C-SEC he was 'in fear of his life'. Shepard sighed, and with a last glance at her XO, left the room to face the two C-SEC officers. "So, what happens now?"

The lead officer, a slender turian female, also gave a sigh, her dark grey plates and black skin giving her a depressing mien, hardly offset by dark grey eyes. "The law is very clear. The security cameras show your officer struck the human in question first. He had some level of alcohol in his system, and \_\_\_"

Shepard snarled. "When is the proper response to being punched to pull a gun and put two accelerator slugs into an unarmored, unshielded opponent?"

The C-SEC officer shrugged. "The law is the law, Commander Shepard. As the crime occurred on the Citadel, it falls into our jurisdiction. You can appeal to the Justice Circuit if you wish to prosecute him under Systems Alliance military law, but the charges stand as assault and battery."

Shepard gave a thin smile, and the two C-SEC officers were hard pressed not to shudder at the sheer predatory level of menace in the look. "Is the man pressing charges against my XO, officer?"

The turian sighed again, more heavily. "Yes. We can't just dismiss him, even once he clears medical, he is to be arraigned and a court date set."

Shepard rolled her eyes. "That's my executive officer, and he's overseeing my navigator. I can't spend two weeks tied up in port while you roll through a fucking assault charge. That will have to be delayed until our mission is completed."

The other officer, a surprisingly large salarian, shook his head rapidly. "That is not the protocol for such a criminal act, and I have no doubt the court would deny such a request. Bail has not been determined until he is arraigned. That will only happen once he clears medical."

Shepard rolled her eyes, and nodded sourly. She pulled up her omni-tool, performing a search, and then gave them both a perfunctory glance. "I'll be back in about an hour."

Shepard immediately left, cursing the issue. Pressly was, of course, under a ton of stress, and she wasn't really surprised he'd cold-cocked the guy – the divorce wasn't even finalized, and here was someone living in his home. She didn't need to understand much emotionally to grasp how infuriating that must have been, but Pressly had always struck her as someone with a cool head. The whole thing felt off, somehow, and she was already vastly irritated about the timing.

Still, as she left the hospital and hailed an air-cab, she was of mixed feelings as to how things had turned out with Liara in her cabin, and despite the importance of Pressly to the mission, her mind kept going back to those moments. It didn't help her body was still quivering, aching for a touch, a release. But she knew that banging Liara on the floor of her quarters while half-drunk would not have been the way to start any kind of relationship, and it felt too much like the sort of wild, out of control mess she'd

gotten into with...

Shepard sighed, pushing ugly memories out of her head, focusing on her destination as best she could. It was a quick trip, and the aircar hovered quietly at the balcony of the housing docking pad, as Shepard walked along the line of doors until she came to the proper one. A spot of blood still marred the otherwise pristine white metal flooring, and Shepard sneered before knocking on the door.

It took several minutes for the door to flit to opaque around the middle, showing a pair of suspicious eyes that widened in shock when they took in Shepard. The door opened, hesitantly, revealing a heavily built young man, bare-chested and wearing black sweatpants, and older woman, still attractive, with long blond hair, dressed in a robe. "Y-you -"

"Shut up." Shepard's voice was icy cold, cruel. "You have two choices. You can immediately contact C-SEC and drop all charges against Commander Pressly, and let this incident go. Or you can go ahead and press charges, denying me my crew man. If you do that, I assure you, you will suffer. I will make very sure the Earth Ambassador knows who delayed my mission and possibly caused the Normandy not to be in position for operations. I'll get your citizenships downgraded by the SA and a couple of nice commissars to come along and take a good long look at your past history for ... irregularities. And no one will want to fucking employ someone who's made an enemy of humanity's first Spectre."

She turned her eyes from the male to the woman. "As for you, lady, pray to God that we never, ever have occasion to meet again. It's pretty clear to me who is the piece of trash in this relationship, and I assure you, if I pitch you over the side of this fucking balcony into the nebula, I'll basically get told not to do that again and that will be the end of it. Don't ever bother Pressly again."

She turned on a heel, not even bothering to pay attention to whatever terrified babble that came out of their mouths, and paused to give the security camera a wicked, cruel smile before storming off to her aircar.

O-OSaBC-O

"Sir?"

Executor Palin dragged a single talon across his forehead plates, feeling the faint indentation as he did so, where a bullet had missed him by inches a decade before. The turian laughed softly, before turning around to face Detective Breenick.

"Drop the charges, let the human go."

Breenick's plates shifted, one mandible clamping down tightly. "But -"

Palin gave the turian a bleak look. "You know anything about Shepard, Detective? No? Well, she does not coddle criminals. It's a domestic disturbance turned stupid. I know what the law says. I know what the codes say. And I know making a fuss over this will get me, you, C-SEC, and spirits knows who else shat upon by the Council. It's not worth the trouble. The human is going to be confined to the ship and dealt with according to military justice, and the humans in question have dropped charges and asked for the entire incident to be dismissed."

Palin sighed, folding his hands together. "It irks me that Shepard is acting this way, but she could have just used her Spectre authority to force us to drop everything, and she didn't. Given the veedek-crap we've been getting from the Spectres recently, not to mention that disgrace Saren, I'd actually call that a positive step. Notify the hospital to discharge him to Shepard's custody, or that of her military police, ASAP."

The detective sighed and, saluting, turned away. Palin continued to steeple his fingers for a long moment before tapping out a series of numbers on his comm-panel, a voice speaking quietly a few

moments later. "Give me Ambassador Udina, please."

He waited several minutes, before the tired voice of Udina sounded on the phone. "Executor Palin. I'm sure there's something of great import that leads you to call me at four in the morning?" The nasal voice sounded irritated and sleepy, and Palin suppressed a grin as he replied.

"Of course, sir. We just had an altercation involving one of Shepard's command crew, a Lieutenant Commander Charles Pressly. He had a domestic violence issue with his ex-wife, and her new boyfriend put two rounds into him in what he calls self-defense. C-SEC was going to prosecute for attempted trespass and assault, but your new Spectre apparently threatened the victims with something unpleasant if they didn't drop the charges post-haste. Shepard has assured me that this incident will not recur, but I find myself in the difficult position that certain parties will take umbrage at the fact I did not force an arrest due to ... well, Spectre interference."

Udina sighed, and gave a rueful chuckle. "Shepard never ceases to present problems and aggravations, Executor, but I appreciate you taking the time to notify me of this rather than having it blow up in my face in the morning. It's my understanding that once several other members of Shepard's team clear medical, they will be departing the Citadel, and that it may be several weeks or more until they return again." Udina paused, before continuing. "In that light, I'll make sure to issue instructions that the incident will not happen again, and pay a visit to the victims of this issue sometime tomorrow to smooth any feathers that may have been ruffled. I do have one question – did Shepard frame this as a Spectre issue?"

Palin sighed, Udina was far too wily to be incautious with his words. "Not in so many words, Ambassador, but -"

"Ah, excellent. Then it's merely a matter of our good commander acting like a blood-drinking Neanderthal. I wouldn't worry, Executor. She is hardly one to disobey the law and will make very certain these kinds of incidents do not reflect badly on the SA. Or, for that matter, C-SEC." The voice had gotten almost oily, and Palin grimaced at how carefully Udina had sidestepped the larger issue, but admired the deftness.

"I understand, Ambassador, and I wish you a pleasant return to your rest. Palin out."

The turian killed the commlink, sighing, "Humans."

O-OSaBC-O

Tali's transfer to her new armor was completed shortly, followed by the crew slowly returning to the ship. Joker was indeed completely overwhelmed by the device Tali had made for him, the eezo-assisted braces allowing him to walk with much greater ease and less pain than crutches without drawing additional attention to him. His gait was slightly hunched and unsteady, but it was a far cry from hobbling about in agony, and for once Joker had no quick, easy and glib words, stumbling over thanks almost as awkwardly as Tali tried to downplay her effort.

Dr. Chakwas gave a fierce, happy chuckle at the scene playing out on the mess decks. She'd seen odder pairings before, and certainly Jeff seemed more at ease with the little quarian than some of the crew. She was not one to judge after having done some rather daring things in her youth.

Another chuckle, and she turned to face her two patients, both secured in the medical bay biobeds. Pressly would be up by the evening, his wounds not being that serious once stabilized, his broken shoulder-blade already handled by the bone regenerator. Still, he was dour and downcast, his expression strained, as Shepard listened to his broken explanation of what had occurred at his ex-wife's house.

Chakwas could only cluck disapprovingly at the tawdry nature of the entire situation. Bad enough to throw your husband out in the midst of a life or death mission, worse to blame him for the situation, and almost gauche to hurl his belongings in the trash. But to take up habitation with a man half one's age barely a week after filing for divorce moved into the category of being a wanton hussy in the prim doctor's mind, and she sympathized with the XO as he almost wilted after finishing his tale.

The other patient, Garrus, was actually pretty much back to full duty. Kaidan had been dismissed from the hospital the night before, and Garrus was almost fully healed, albeit with shock-absorbing sleeves covering much of his torso and leg. He seemed agitated and distracted as well, checking his comm unit on his omni-tool for responses to messages that clearly never came. Despite being technically fit for duty, Chakwas wanted to keep him in medical until the ship cleared, in case of further internal bleeding.

Shepard patted Pressly awkwardly on the shoulder, before turning away. "Keep an eye on 'em, Doc."

Chakwas nodded, and Shepard stalked through the Med Bay doors, mind on her last bits of business. Liara had been scarce all morning – no surprise, given how abruptly things ended – and Shepard wasn't quite ready to finish that conversation they'd started. Meanwhile, the SA had finally sent replacement marines for the four she'd lost, or at least volunteers, and Shepard exited the ship and crossed the docking ramp to meet them.

Upon crossing over, she stiffened immediately. Three of the figures were indeed marines. Two of them were wearing dark black uniforms, boldly emblazoned with the flash of an A7, haloed with a white circle. Both had large, bulky armor storage cases on a grav-lift behind them, boldly stenciled with white block letters - "D A C T".

The third marine was also a big man, broad and powerful through the chest, with long arms corded with muscle. His designation flash was that of an A7 as well, a veteran marine, his Alliance blues decorated heavily with a dozen medals and honors, and the triangular pips of a senior chief were high on his collar.

The last figure was not a marine. Wearing dark black armor that was skin-tight and stiffened with shock-cloth in pads across the chest, knees and arms, the asari woman was dwarfed by the huge humans around her. A vicious looking shotgun was clipped to the small of her back by maglocks, and a double-link omnitool was clearly visible embedded into her arm gauntlet. Fierce blue eyes met Shepard's with neither hesitancy nor fear, and Shepard gave a long suffering sigh.

She turned first to the senior chief, returning his salute. "Senior Chief Emilo Vega, Commander." The man is shaved bald, with a wicked looking goatee around his narrow, but smiling, mouth. His eyes are a hardened, cold black, his Hispanic features muted slightly under the lights glaring down from above. "A7, due to retire in about six months. TacNet said the Normandy needed volunteers. Guess I made the cut."

Shepard nodded. "Service record, chief?"

Vega smiled again, disarmingly. "Did service in the FCW under General Williams, but got pulled off of Shanxi before the Fall after I received a gutshot. Came back with the Admiral and wiped me a few spikes. Garrison duty on Biel's World, advisor garrison duty on SA Protectorate on Noveria, and six years in the 19th RIU. Been pulling recruiting duty back home in Cali, LosAl Arcology, but got deployed the Citadel as part of the Ambassador's guard unit." He chuckled. "Got my A7, but also J2, V6, D4, and E2".

Shepard arched an eyebrow, the man was qualified at bomb disposal, damage control, training, and even field first aid. She jerked her thumb. "In that case, welcome aboard, Senior Chief. Master Chief

Cole is the COB, and Gunnery Chief Williams is the top kick, but since my BDO is also a biotic, probably easier for the master chief to run the forward battle stuff, and you and Williams run the squads."

Vega nodded. "Just happy to serve, ma'am. My nephew joined up a few years back and he's already a big fan of yours." Gathering his kitbag, he trotted across the gangway, and Shepard turned to the two heavy troopers.

"They sent me goddamned lunatics?"

The two big Marines laughed at that, and the senior of the two spoke. "Sergeant Jack Florez and Sergeant Uriel Montoya, Ma'am. We're indeed with the Drop-Assault Combat Team. Orders came from Central command. Doubt you remember us, Ma'am, but we did cleanup assault on that friggin' mess on Almor. We're supposed to support you in the field, Ma'am, and bring some heavy weapons and mobility to the team."

Shepard nodded. The DACT were power-armored soldiers, wearing thick battle armor with multiple shield generators, and equipped with extremely heavy weapons. But their biggest ability was the capability to utilize a mass-effect jet to jump from orbit to the ground, coming in with no warning and no time to defend. DACT's had a reputation for being crazed fighters, but Shepard had gone into fights with more than one team of them, and knew their lethality.

She smiled. "For now, we'll have you act as ready reserve when we go hot, rather than split you up between the squads. Report to Master Chief Cole for orders and make sure your gear is ready to go."

The two marines nodded, hauling their gear behind them as they went, leaving only the asari standing on the docks. "Commander Shepard."

Shepard sighed. "You're Garrus!..." She trailed off delicately, and the asari woman smiled.

"Officer Telanya Nasan, C-SEC Customs. I'm here to assist your efforts to track down Saren. The Systems Alliance was going to send you another marine, but Councilor Tevos was kind enough to suggest that perhaps alternative methods might work better."

Shepard raised an eyebrow. "Tevos, huh? This is official? Should I even ask? We both know why you're here, Officer."

The smaller asari woman's eyes blazed, uncowed. "Tracking Saren requires someone familiar with how customs works. He has to have some methods of moving money and equipment around, and that leaves a trail that can be followed. According to the Council you have no leads and are going to strike out at certain targets hoping to find some. How will you even know what you're looking at without an expert?"

That sounded plausible, and indeed useful, but Shepard frowned. "You are military trained? I still have a hole in my platoon, and being down a rifleman could mean life or death out there."

From the slump of her shoulders, some of the confidence went out of Telanya, but she met Shepard's gaze levelly. "I'm trained by C-SEC in rifle, pistol and CQB with shotguns. I'm not a strong biotic, certainly no match for a princess of the Thirty, but I can hold my own." Her voice was slightly bitter, and Shepard frowned, but said nothing, as the asari continued. "My value will be correlating and fitting together some of the data you find or have already found. The SA was just going to send you another goon with a gun."

Shepard tilted her head. "I'm a goon with a gun."

The asari woman rolled her eyes. "I highly doubt that, Commander. I understand that I probably won't hold up as well as you might like, but I am asari – and I've trained with my weapons longer than any of

you humans has ever been alive."

Shepard sighed. Telanya was right, they really didn't have any kind of specialists for the data they might find in their raids, and it was clear the SA giving her support that, while great in combat, didn't really get the job done. They weren't about to give Shepard deep cover intel in fear that she'd immediately dash off to use it.

Telanya could be very handy...and the fact that she was around might rein in Garrus' impulsive streak. With a sigh, she gestured to the ship. "Report to .. er, report to Master Chief Cole, just follow the other soldiers." She sighed, but a part of her was amused by the fierce smile of triumph on the small asari woman's face as she passed by.

Shepard shook her head. "Battle chicken is going to flip his shit."

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## Chapter 71: Chapter 62: The Illusive Man , Elusive

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*A/N: Well, I had to do this little segment, to set things up.*

*2013-03-27 : Somehow got Garza and Florez confused, mind is going; fixed now, thanks Viper!*

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"It's been confirmed, sir. The Council is playing things very hush-hush, but over a dozen STG teams and nearly a quarter of the Turian Fifth Fleet have been deployed so far, with elements of the Turian Ninth and Tenth battalions and an entire storm of asari commandos." The voice was elegant and precise, but contained a note of irritation, one that the Illusive Man gave a faint smile at.

Knocking the ash from his cigarette, he only nodded. "That's to be expected, Miranda. Shepard is not a fool, and it's clear that any hope of covering Cerberus' involvement with Saren's activities has failed. We already know the SA has been tasked with identifying and dealing with the geth, and I suspect the Council is using a totally non-human force in this. Both to deny us intel about when they plan to act..."

He paused, taking a puff from his cigarette, and smiled again. "...and to ensure there is no hesitation in destroying any targets they find."

The haptic image of Miranda flickered atop the finely polished wooden table, the QEC device his scientists had engineered still having a few bugs. After a moment it cleared, showing the steady gaze of the young woman he'd tapped as his third in command. "Central Command should be notified. It will take time to move units around –"

She stopped, as the Illusive Man raised his hand. "Not this time, Miranda." He couldn't help but smile at the expression that crossed her face, covering his amusement by sipping on his drink. "I argued against involvement with Saren and whatever it is that he plans to do from the beginning. We started Cerberus to enable and empower humanity to survive."

Miranda pursed her lips but said nothing, and the Illusive Man waved a hand at the display to his left, showing figures about the many economic holdings Cerberus had. "We've managed to infiltrate and occupy multiple stakes in the economy of the Systems Alliance, gather influential contacts, and raise huge sums of cash. Yet..."

He stood, turning to face the windows of the room. The corporate headquarters of Cord-Hislop Aerospace towered above the skyline of the Denver arcology, its clean lines demonstrative of the best human engineering and architecture. But this room, the top floor of the building, was the private retreat of Jack Harper. Once a mere soldier and mercenary, he'd built the basis of a survivalist network with his

own hands, hard work, and money, as well as that of like-minded and far-seeing businessmen.

But eleven years ago, Alliance Intelligence had bested him. His best defense systems and mercenary troops were no match for DACT teams lead by biotic commissars, and the black-ops group had been taken. Harper expected a show trial and execution, or maybe merely a quiet bullet in the head, but had been surprised. The Alliance Intelligence handlers did not dismantle his economic empire or go after his intelligence assets. They wanted Cerberus to continue and expand its work.

And to that end, they'd foisted two figures off on him. Rather than his handpicked general, his military forces were now lead by Rachel Florez, SA general, and his science division had been co-opted by a madman. Rather that focus on economic control and ensuring humanity was not subtly infiltrated, their new focus was on the sort of vile actions the other races took.

Jack Harper was not a terrorist. He did not find aliens very impressive, that was certainly true, but he hated the turians, not just for being responsible for the deaths of a man he admired and called a friend, and a woman he wished he'd told how he felt. He hated the turians because they had savaged humanity for no reason, and because they were the cat's paws of others.

He didn't feel he was racist, per se. He'd indulged more than once with a bitter outcast asari matriarch, who hated her own people's path. He'd used the services of a pair of drell assassins who were excellent and professional in everything they did. No, he wasn't a blind fool – humanity had to deal with aliens.

That was not to say that humanity had to kneel to aliens.

But he wanted humanity to deal with them from a position of strength, as equals – not as petitioners and subordinates. He'd seen how the asari and salarians worked. They subverted economies, disrupted cultures, sowed chaos and political discord, and eventually reduced other races to little more than servants. They'd crushed the Krogan rebellions by using the turians, but the turians were so far in debt to the Asari Republic and the Salarian Union that to call in those debts would crush the Turian government in a fortnight. They offered embassies to volus, hanar, and elcor, but ensured those races had no real say in the future of the Citadel's actions.

So Jack Harper understood why Alliance Intel would want to keep Cerberus around, but with handlers. But he doubted those handlers and their goals, and recently had begun to wonder if the government of the SA was not a more appropriate target than the aliens he feared.

The SA had always been brutal, from the days of terrorism and the near destruction of Earth in the Purge of Iron. Born in a time where government only existed by force, the SA was the whip hand that coordinated and controlled humanity. But it had grown darker and darker as time went on, until the colonies became little more than work camps beholden to the SA under crushing tax burdens, while the rich and powerful grew ever more so.

His handlers had demonstrated that perfectly. General Florez, put in charge of the Cerberus military, expanded it from a few mercenary bands designed to protect Cerberus operations to a shadow army and navy, violating the Treaty of Farixen and prototyping technologies and weapons that would later be moved into production for the entire SA military. Florez made sure these contracts were awarded to companies she owned, and used the Cerberus forces to train and sculpt a cadre of officers and NCO's loyal to her alone. Such blatant corruption and cronyism revolted Harper. He'd made his millions, of course, but most of Cerberus's economic prowess he'd invested in colonies, in lobbying for the improvement of medical care and access to clean water and food for arcology dwellers, and to reduce alien influences on culture. He'd never done it merely to line his pocket as she did.

Worse, this military buildup was clearly intended for no good purpose. Heavy on precision snipers, assault units, urban combat troops and biotic CQB specialists, this was no army that could be fielded

against invasions by aliens. This force was clearly intended to act as some kind of storming force of some sort of closed in area. A large metropolitan area, perhaps on Earth.

Or perhaps to attempt to take the Citadel. The lunacy of such an act wasn't beyond Florez; she'd lost children in the FCW and her niece had been raped by a turian criminal, who had consequently been let off on a technicality.

Jack Harper saw no way this force would lead to humanity being able to hold its own. Rachel Florez was lost in a world of heroic fantasies, thinking a handful of cruisers and pack of murderous, category-six rejects would equal victory over the enemies of humanity.

The third part of Cerberus, the man in charge of research, was even more vile. Harper had authorized some bad things, that was true. Experiments on biotic children to see the limits of biotic power. But when those had gone bad, he'd shut them down, and punished the scientists involved. Even today, almost twenty years later, he was still angry over some of the atrocities those fool scientists had committed.

But the Shadow Hand's research was certifiably insane. They studied rachni and husks, plundered ancient dig sites, and embraced the torture of sentient beings for no other reason than they were aliens. In the eyes of the Shadow Cell, any alien was an inferior being, and if they could be put to some form of purpose, any atrocity was acceptable. The Illusive Man couldn't deny that these experiments had yielded incredible results – toxins, defenses against biotics, improved genetic and cybernetic implants, new medicines, drugs, and even a possible treatment for memory loss based on drell proteins used in memory formation.

The cost, however, was too high. Cerberus had obliterated an entire asari colony for striking at their forces. They'd tortured and killed hundreds of aliens, and recently, driven to find answers to questions no one should ever have asked, they'd started experimenting on humans. Letting them be converted by spores into thralls, to attempt to master some kind of instant communications relay, even though they'd already developed the QEC for that purpose. . Some, like the Shadow Hand, would scream that the end always justified the means.

Jack Harper, however, was not a terrorist. His eyes narrowed, and his smile, always so gentle and deceptive, faded to form hard, handsome lines in his face. "Miranda, the time is rapidly approaching where our link with Saren, and some of the things we've let happen, will blacken the name of Cerberus forever in humanity's eyes. I don't really care what aliens think of us—their own groups, like the Night-Wind, hardly any better—but I'm not about to be caught up in some witch hunt, nor allow all we have worked so hard to build be cast down with that pair of goons the SA foisted off on me." He paused, thinking. "The SA leadership is so fragmented right now that I don't even know if the High Senators or the Fleet Master know that we're dealing with Saren. I expect it came as quite a surprise."

Miranda Lawson's mouth tightened, clear blue eyes narrowing in turn as she considered the ramifications, and the Illusive Man smiled. He would let her put the pieces together herself, and in a few moments of reflection she did just that, scowling. "You think the SA isn't giving the orders anymore."

The Illusive Man shrugged. "I've prepared for this day for the past six years, carefully liquidating assets, setting up shell companies and leaving a large network of resources and properties to... act as a blind. We'll lose some of our domination over the economy, and billions of credits. But we will have a secondary economic net set up, with new locations to act from. When the hammer falls, I don't intend to be here." He paused, and then smiled. "In fact, I see no reason to wait. Shutdown everything in Montreal and withdraw all our people. There's a transport waiting at the South Montreal Spaceport, the Sudden Gamble. Shed uniforms, prepare new ID's, and travel to Horizon. I'll be along shortly to pick

you up."

He cut the connection, exhaling and extinguishing his cigarette, before moving to the far wall of his richly appointed office. He pulled out a slender book, opening it to find a keycard, one that would only activate if keyed with both fingerprint and breath. This he put in his pocket, walking back over to his desk and typing in a few commands to the built in keyboard .

He walked out, even as Cord-Hislop Aerospace began a massive series of buy and sell transactions on the stock market. Orders for mass system deletions in the mainframes and backup locations were triggered. The programmers and network admins who would prevent such catastrophes were unable to, as the same command triggered halon fire suppression systems, locking the doors. The QEC set into the table of his office smouldered and collapsed, rendering any tracking of his messages impossible.

Jack Harper wasn't a terrorist, but he couldn't leave behind loose ends either. Knowing that he'd just executed forty two people in three buildings, he wasn't happy, his face set in grim lines. He'd told himself so many times that the costs had to be paid that , some days, he almost believed it.

That never made him feel any cleaner.

He walked to the elevator, pausing to look back over his office, the business he'd built and named after his closest friends, before entering. Sliding the now activated keycard into the slot, it took him to a sub-basement that could not be found on any blueprint or map of the building. The elevator was silent, it's rich wood panels muted in their color in the dim light, and his mind walked through the steps he would have to take to proceed with.

The room that was revealed when he stepped off the elevator was bare, gleaming white. Equipment lay shrouded under plastic throws with a thin layer of dust over them, making him sneeze once as he threw them off. He paused, opening up one wall panel to reveal an incinerator, which he switched on. He waited patiently for it to begin to glow, then tossed in his PDA, phone, and wallet. He began to pull off his fine suit, tossing each piece in as he went, until he was stark naked, shivering a bit in the cold, dry air.

Another wall yielded a slender valise and a shelf of clothing, which he put on – plain slacks, a shirt open to the stomach and a light jacket. From the valise he pulled out a bottle of hair-coloration gel, running it through his hair thoroughly, darkening the gray and silver to black, before walking over to a sink built into one wall and rinsing them off. He noted with approval that the water ran clear and cool the moment he touched the control – his engineers had done well.

He glanced up as a wall panel illuminated on the far wall, scrolling a series of codes. His eyes narrowed as he took in their meaning. There were already hackers in the financial systems, looking for clues, seeking answers.

*STG, most likely. I have less time than I thought.* A chill ran up his spine as he realized that, if he had waited a few days to implement his separation, the hackers shredding through Earth's data-sphere would certainly have tracked he and his connections almost instantly.

He wasn't out of danger yet, either. More codes illuminated – turian units on Vurta, assaulting the Iron Cell dockyard there. Landings on Parit, Cold Water and mass translations into the empty system of Dighiris, where a deep space facility that was one of the hold fasts of the entire organization was located.

The view screen was dancing with more and more updates, and demands from field operatives coming under attack, all of them screaming interrogatives from the network. Jack chuckled, drying his hands, and returned to the valise, applying a slender, false beard, and rubbing a tanning agent over his exposed face and hands. A moment later, he applied false-color contacts to his eyes, sealing away the blue-

glowing reminder of his experience at the hands of the Arca Device.

He pitied some of the agents out there, dying as he let the contacts and beard set on his face, but there was nothing to be done.

Survival was it's own reward.

Jack Harper was gone. In his stead was a tanned vacationer named Des Solas from – he paused to think back about the documents he'd prepared years ago, against this very eventuality – Eden Prime. *How ironic*. He laughed quietly at the name he'd picked as well, before he carefully put the materials he'd used to alter his appearance back into the valise. He turned, putting the entire valise into the incinerator as well.

Opening a second panel flush with the white-steel wall, he pulled down a harness, and a slightly battered mark V Predator pistol. He slipped out of his jacket, put the harness on, and then holstered the weapon, before putting the light brown jacket back on. As usual, its soft leather fell loosely over him, the pistol invisible at a casual glance. He reached into the jacket – a new PDA was in one pocket, a light shield generator in the other, spare ID and cash tucked neatly into the interior lining.

The screen on the wall flashed again. "Incoming Typhonet communication string detected – Shadow Hand". A moment later the screen lit up, displaying the angry, wide features of the leader of Cerberus's science division. "Jack! What the hell is going on? Half of our comms are jammed. A third of my intel teams are down or under attack, and we have assaults coming in from all bases!"

The Illusive Man sighed, knowing his image was not being transmitted back to the man sending the transmission. This connection was secure, since the room would soon be gone, but there was no point taking chances in letting his new appearance be known. "Sorry, Richard. I'm afraid it's come time for us to part ways. The Citadel is going to take us down, and I'm not interested in being offered up to the aliens to make peace. You're on your own."

Richard's face flushed. "You... traitor! You spit on humanity!"

Jack smiled faintly. "I'm surviving to fight another day. I've made plans for it to happen, and I'm aware you have your own orders from the SA to keep me in line. That ... arraignment has ended. In the ever so eloquent words of Dr. Mintha, 'I'm not a goddamned terrorist.'" Jack touched the screen, killing the connection, then noted the next batch of status updates, frowning.

The assaults were moving too fast. This was more than some all-out assault on every known Cerberus location. This spoke to either a traitor... or the Shadow Broker. Yet his own asset in that creepy organization made no indication that the Broker Network had reached out or been contacted by the Citadel for anything aside from the hunt for Saren. He'd miscalculated, somewhere. There must be another channel, something he'd missed ....

No matter.

He sighed, then finished his preparations. He picked up a suitcase from the shelf which had held his gun, and a pair of sunglasses, then walked over to the final alcove. He hit the keyboard there, tapping in commands, and six pairs of AESIR light mechs powered on, rising up in front of a glass-filled tank.

Within floated a clone of Jack Harper.

With a sigh, he turned to the mechs. "Implement program BAIT". Turning away, he slapped a final control on the wall, revealing a tunnel that lead to the Denver Spaceport.

The mechs began to move as Jack Harper walked away. They drained the clone tank, laying the unconscious being out, drying him with cloths they took from a nearby shelf. They dressed him in spare clothes, an expensive jacket and a name brand shirt. They sat him up and spoke pre-programmed

subliminal messages to him. The nearly-mindless thing smoked two cigarettes, ate part of an energy bar, and drank several glasses of scotch.

Other bots gathered up everything in the room, spraying it down with bleach even as two escorted the clone to the elevator. They shut the tunnel behind their master, the mechanism doing so dumping a mass of water and quick-setting cement to plug the gap behind the wall, the motors burning out as they lowered the tunnel door. The robots then finished sterilizing the room, before standing around an explosive charge built into the floor.

The two accompanying the clone barely swayed as an explosion rumbled through the Cord-Hislop building. People were running around, the horrible tragedy of the 'malfunctioning' fire-suppressant system in IT having summoned both medical personal and police. But no one but the CEO used his private elevator, and thus the robots and their charge reached his office unmolested.

Following subconscious programmed commands burned into its virgin mind, the clone sat down at the desk, pulling out a pen and paper. It waited as one of the robots, programmed to mimic Jack Harper's writing perfectly, wrote out a suicide note, and then handed him a pistol – a replica of the pistol now resting in the real Jack Harper's holster.

The two robots then departed the office, taking the elevator down to the maintenance level, and stood in a corner, their memory cores wiping clean then exploding. A moment later, a single shot rang out in the CEO's office.

Half a mile away, the Illusive Man smiled as the PDA in his pocket beeped once.

#### O-OSaBC-O

The two Systems Alliance intelligence agents were not happy as they accompanied Spectre Vasir and Spectre Bau through the lobby of Cord-Hislop Aerospace, but they had little choice. STG hackers were convinced that, despite a series of brilliant defensive hacks and illusions, that the CEO of CHA, one Jack Harper, was in truth the leader of Cerberus.

Already, even while STG units hunted for Cerberus forces and turian strike teams crushed what military infrastructure they had, the Spectres were going after the leaders. They had no idea who this "Shadow Hand" might be, or even clues to his location, but supposedly Rear Admiral Kahoku did, and so that target had been left to Spectre Shepard. The "Iron General" was believed to be on Seppra, in a massive military facility and warehouse with over almost a battalion of Cerberus soldiers – facing down the entire force of the 9th Turian Infantry. More installations and space stations had been crushed.

Volus C-SEC FINCIN hackers and specialists had identified dozens of companies, banks, and probable backers of Cerberus. No one very big, but a lot of little people. Thankfully, all indications showed Cerberus had not penetrated any of the SA leadership at all. Bau wasn't sure he believed that fully, but that's what the data seemed to indicate. He and others had worried there was a direct link between the SA and Cerberus, which might have lead to war.

Now, all that remained was the leader. They'd sealed off the building but according to employees and police – already there due to an unexplained accident in the IT center – no one had seen him leave the building, and his private lift-jet was still on the roof. As gunships circled the building, and news crews began to arrive, the Spectres entered the CEO's private elevator and took the ride up to his penthouse.

Jondam Bau took the safety off his gun, as did Tela Vasir, her hands moving over her heavy shotgun carefully in the confined spaces of the elevator. The two intelligence agents from the SA, wearing only their uniforms instead of battle armor, glanced at each other uncertainly. "We're not equipped for a fight. You said arrest and interrogation, asari."

Vasir gave them an arch look. "We cannot be sure this one won't put up a fight, and he was... quite a handful in his younger days." She prepared herself, ready to make a biotic dash if need be, when the elevator doors opened.

The gun had fallen from his hand, but there was no doubt – Jack Harper was dead. The four fanned out, Bau already running DNA scans and sensor examinations. "...signs of bone trauma. Food, alcohol in the stomach." He bent down, sampling the drying, darkening blood on the rich carpet, before sighing. "DNA match confirmed." The two intelligence agents shook their head and departed, leaving the Spectres alone – Harper's death had been the only thing they needed to see.

Vasir grunted. "Damn. Lunatics." She glanced over the note, spattered with droplets of blood, and then at the human slumped in the expensive chair. The office still smelled of cigarette smoke, the glass on the desk still wet with condensation. "We didn't miss him by much, either. We'll check his computers \_\_\_"

Bau snorted. "Waste of time. Accident in company IT center was probably to cover tracks. Always admired Illusive Man's skill, if not his methods and focus. A very worthy opponent." The slender salarian sighed, taking pictures with his omni-tool, as Vasir walked to the window, gazing out over the city, the mountains visible through the huge shield dome of the arcology.

She smiled. Cerberus had no idea of her ties and links with the Shadow Broker, a conduit that had allowed that mysterious figure to pass critical information about Cerberus' operations directly to her, and through the Spectre Network. With only one human Spectre, there was no way Cerberus could infiltrate their ranks. Thus the strike against the human terrorist group was led by many Spectre teams. While this was a drain on other operations – the Spectre group was already tasked well beyond capacity – it was likely to take up only a few days, and thus acceptable. Indeed, with the first strike having gone so well, Spectre presence was hardly needed any longer.

"Anything else, Bau?"

The salarian agent, as close as a leader to the Spectre ranks as any other, shrugged weakly, his large black eyes distant in thought. "Surprising turn of events. . Would have suspected Illusive Man to have contingency plans."

Vasir laughed, walking towards the elevator. "You give these humans too much credit, Bau."

O-OSaBC-O

Sitting in a cafe at the spaceport, waiting on his pilot to finish preflight checks so he could board, the disguised Jack Harper listened to the news reports of his own death, a suicide in the service of Cerberus. He paused, laughing softly to himself, before looking up as a slender asari matriarch in a pale gray and black dress walked up. "So, you slipped the net after all. You look... more youthful like this."

Jack tilted his head. "Ah, but Trellani, you shouldn't be surprised." He stood, linking arms with the willowy asari, and the two began walking towards the docks. "After all, those seeking me have a very limited, narrow – and, by design, flawed – understanding of their foe."

Trellani snorted. "Most underestimate and overestimate humans at the same time. No matter. While you are with me, no one will recognize you ... which is no doubt why you so graciously invited me to accompany you on your little jaunt."

Jack shrugged. The relationship between himself and the alien woman had surprised him endless times over the decade and a half they had known each other. Trellani was an outcast, an asari who had rejected the sensual, manipulative and wheeling social games and byzantine politics of her race. Her faith in her people had been shattered through the study of ancient documents that indicated the asari

were nothing more than pawns of the Protheans, cast aside for an unknown reason near the time of the Prothean extinction. Rather than accept her concepts, the Council of Matriarchs had not only exiled her but attempted to have her assassinated more than once.

Jack had never really understood how the asari had concealed Prothean involvement in their history. Most asari didn't even know about it – the only way he knew was from Trellani herself, and she'd known nothing until her years in the temple had let her rise to such a rank that she could find things out for herself. Her inability to deal with the destruction of her faith had led her to many dark roads, and eventually to Cerberus, and to Jack.

Trellani was not *exactly* a lover, as Jack Harper didn't really believe in love any more. Love had blinded him to the truth long ago, had twisted his heart and left him unready for the tragedy that was life. And Trellani had seen her own bond-mate murdered by asari assassins, a mark that would never heal for two people so linked.

Still, they were more than friends. Melding was a process that was invasive and alien to the Illusive Man, but it gave him the most insight into the mindset of the asari, and Trellani had centuries of experience in manipulating, wheeling, dealing, and treachery. He knew she was bitter and hateful, and had her own ideas and plans... and for the moment, those were somewhere in the next century or two. No threat to humanity.

And while Jack Harper was no believer in mingling human and alien culture ... Trellani was that rarest of things – someone he could trust implicitly, who could tell him better than any other when hate or disdain, or even mere racism, was clouding his vision. He turned to her now, arching an eyebrow, pulling them to a stop. "Am I doing the right thing?"

Trellani paused, glancing around but finding no one nearby. The spaceport was nearly abandoned, as there were not many passenger departures at this time of night, and she shrugged. "Your group has done some vile things, and we have argued over them many times. That being said... you are doing what should have been done years ago. Those other two cretins are little more than the same sort of narrow-minded bigots that turned the First Contact War from a misunderstanding to a war crime, and your government..." Her eyes narrowed, and the soft lines of her face hardened before she fixed her gaze on Harper. "There are too many old wounds in the history of humanity for your race to heal."

The Illusive Man nodded, then glanced at his pocket, as his PDA suddenly vibrated. He pulled it out, examining the screen, then stood, holding out an arm. "The ship is ready, beautiful matriarch. Shall we depart? The falls of Horizon are brilliant in the summer, and I do so love the uncomfortable, vaguely put out look Ms. Lawson gets when you hang off my arm, as if I've made love to the hired help or something."

Trellani laughed, and gestured. "It should be interesting. But really, did you have to pick such a ridiculous name, 'Des Solas'? I know Desolas Arterius cost you a great deal, but ..."

The Illusive Man only smiled wider. "Yes, he did, for which he paid. Still, in a way, I owe him a great deal. If he had not opened my eyes, there would never have been a Cerberus. It is only fitting his brother is the excuse I needed to cut myself free from the bonds I've been ensnared in... may he come to the same end as his sibling."

Twenty minutes later, the yacht was gone from the Denver Spaceport, already headed for the Charon Relay. It would be nearly six weeks before a detailed autopsy found that the body in the top of the Cord-Hislop tower might or might not have been a clone, and another two months before the ruins of the hidden chamber and escape tunnel were located by SA investigators.

By that time, the Illusive Man would be well and truly free again.

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## Chapter 72: Chapter 63: Cerberus, the Hunt Begins

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*A/N: Sorry for the delay – end of the month is always hectic for me. I'm not usually a big fan of making an OC take up a big chunk of a chapter, much less two chapters, but Telanya is a special case in that she'll be used for some time to come.*

*You may note I'm starting to incorporate concepts from the various documentation files I've put up , including things about asari culture. If you haven't read "A Season of Sorrows Unending" you may wish to check it out. And if you're tired of me plugging my own work, then give Mighty Crouton's **What the Water Gave Me** a try.*

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Telanya took a deep breath as she entered the Normandy, eyes darting all around her. The angles of the ship were strange. The humans and turians alike had a fixation on elongated, angular shapes, but this ship was curved gracefully, like a hunting raptor. The metal gleamed faint, cold blue-white in the lights of the Citadel docks, reflecting back the shimmering cityscape spread below in lurid colors.

Telanya bit her lip and stepped aboard, following the two thick-set human drop soldiers lugging their gear. The corridor beyond was lined with haptic control stations, most already manned as the ship prepped for departure, and a huge control map dominated the CIC, flanked by more humans, looking grimly competent in their dark blue uniforms. Telanya had been dealing with humans for years, of course, but she mostly dealt with criminals, traders, or cretins like Harkin.

These humans, on the other hand, looked proud, professional, and vaguely suspicious of her, giving her dark looks before turning back to their duties. She would have to watch her tone, and maybe Garrus could help her blend in with the crew. She sighed, following the soldiers down stairs leading behind the CIC, thinking back on how she'd ended up here.

It had started innocently enough – she'd been trying to reach Garrus in the confusion of the Normandy's return, frantic to make sure he was alright. After being stonewalled by the SA and the Spectre offices, she'd asked her best friend, Imaelia of Hearthwatch Clan, for advice. The older asari had smiled and gotten in touch with an old friend, who put her in touch with the Consort...

Ending up with little Telanya of no clan standing before Councilor Tevos, on a tight-beam link with the Council of Matriarchs of the Thirty Families, high rulers of the noble houses of Thessia. She had no clue what was happening, she'd been summoned and so she had obeyed. Executor Palin had been strangely gentle when he'd told her that the Councilor wanted to see her, and she had expected something, but not what actually occurred.

Tevos had let her know Garrus was alright, but that there was another concern. A princess of the Thirty, Liara T'Soni, was aboard the Normandy. Due to the actions of Benezia T'Soni, the asari race as a whole, and the Thirty in particular, had been shamed. Worse, many of Benezia's former devotees had rebelled – using force against other asari.

Not in ten thousand years had there been armed resistance to the Thirty.

There was concern that Benezia was smart enough to have made contingency plans for being exposed. The Thirty (and the Justicars) wanted to put Liara to the Question, to force a hard, deep link and scour her mind to ensure she wasn't part of Benezia's plans. The humans, fools to the last of them, thought that Liara fighting against geth or her mother and her forces indicated her innocence, but the Thirty worried that was just a gambit, and that Liara might still answer to her mother – they found it

astonishing a daughter would even agree to fight her mother in any circumstances.

The SA had denied letting the Thirty take custody of Liara, and the Justicars had been quite rudely told they had no authority in Citadel Space off of the asari worlds. The Thirty needed eyes on Liara T'Soni, and Tevos had found a way to deliver that. The Council had given Telanya her charge – watch Dr. T'Soni, and watch how she influenced the humans. If T'Soni was truly an innocent, well and good – she was the SA's problem now. But if she was indeed in collusion with her mother, Telanya was to take Liara's life.

Telanya snorted. She figured her chances in combat against a member of the Thirty were about on par with her chances at killing a krogan with a bottle of crest gel, but she was too overawed by the Thirty to even suggest such a thing. Telanya had no idea what arms were twisted or eternities embraced, but the next day, she'd been gruffly approached by SA soldiers and a commissar at her workplace in C-Sec, and told the SA had approved an asari commission for her to join the Normandy.

Now she was here, and nervous. Garrus would be upset, she knew. His whole turian background called out for him to protect his mate, and bonding had only made that desire more paramount. It was going to make his job harder, and he would worry about her constantly. She felt ashamed, and bitter at that, and realized belatedly that she didn't have any kind of kathess mind discipline training to prevent him from picking up on the fact that the Thirty had placed her here to spy on T'Soni. He'd like that even less. As she followed the soldiers, she nervously wrung her hands – her life was empty and bleak enough without losing Garrus, too.

And then there was the human, Shepard, who had not looked entirely displeased at her arrival, but was clearly unsure of her ability to fight in an infantry platoon. Telanya had only hoped she had looked competent and that she hadn't stared too much, the human was stupidly good looking in a way that made it hard to tear your eyes from. And the stories about the Butcher were horrifying, the kind of stuff Matriarch Silana used to make up about batarians and krogan. She'd read the C-SEC reports of the aftermath at Chora's Den, where they were sure Shepard had been – broken necks, people burned alive, Goddess only knew what else...

She was no longer playing with stupid freight scammers and two-bit red sand smugglers.

The stairs opened into a broad area with tables and a small kitchen – mess decks, she figured – with a giant figure standing in the middle, looking over the soldiers in front of him. He must have topped her by a good two and a half feet, thick with muscle. His features were dark and craggy, one eye covered with patch, and he smiled as she came to a stop next to the other soldiers. "And you must be Telanya. I'm Master Chief Cole, command master chief of the Normandy's ground command."

She nodded, coming to an asari attention stance – legs parted, arms behind the back, head raised. "Sergeant Telanya Nasan, C-SEC Customs Officer." Cole just nodded and folded his arms. "They told me to report to you, sir."

Cole glanced over the other three soldiers. "You apes already know what to do. Pick a coffin and stow your gear on the lower level, Gunnery Chief Williams is the armory officer. Then report to Lieutenant Alenko for force briefing." The soldiers moved off, lugging their gear, and Cole turned his attention back to Telanya. "According to the manifest, you're a replacement for one of my infantrymen. I see you have your own gear, that's good, but we'll still issue you a new rifle." He paused, frowning. "And we should be able to fit you with one of the suits of armor we have, that C-sec riot crap won't stop the kind of shit we get thrown our way."

Cole sat down on top of the nearest table, his massive bulk making it creak, and rubbed an eyebrow with his thumb. "Most of the infantrymen are deployed when we do a ground-side op. Command structure is simple. Lieutenant Alenko commands the unit over all. Right now, I handle one section;

Gunnery Chief Williams handles the other section. With Chief Vega here, we are going to shift that around some, but more on that later. You any good with biotics?"

A dry voice, a bit exasperated sounding, rang across the mess decks. "Oh, yes, Master Chief. She's very good with her biotics... in some situations." Garrus stalked across the deck from the battery, wearing only clothing instead of his armor, chest still bound in bandages visible under the thin cloth, limping a bit. "The question is not if she's any good, but why is she here?"

Telanya sighed. "I'm here on the orders of the Councilor and the Republic, Garrus. Can this wait? We're in the middle of a conversation."

Cole grinned, holding up both hands; one flesh, one cybernetic. "Whoa, now. I don't need to interrupt anything, Miss. When you get a moment, just head on down to the lower level, I'll be going over some things with the other new guys, and we can discuss Systems Alliance battle and comms protocol. Sleeper pod six has been keyed to your ID, and Doctor T'Soni offered to let you stash your gear in the lab forward of medical –" he paused, jerking a thumb behind him and off to his left" – if you need more space than a gear locker."

Cole paused to trade a look with Garrus that she couldn't interpret, before patting her on the shoulder with a massive hand. "Also, Commander Shepard wants to see you before you settle in. Report to her quarters sometime today, those are right there." He gestured to the far wall, and smiled. "Don't forget." With that, the big man walked off, leaving Telanya in the middle of the mess decks with Garrus staring at her.

With a huff, she glared right back at him, and he motioned her forward. She merely followed, past the rows of stasis sleeper pods affixed to the walls. She shuddered at the idea of sleeping alone in such a device, and resolved then and there to just crash on the floor somewhere, anywhere. Garrus continued to walk forward, moving into a small room at the end of the corridor – a gunnery control station, it seemed. A turian-style cot was propped up in one corner, and a large, heavy sniper rifle hung from hand-driven hooks in the far wall.

Garrus came to a halt, shutting the doors behind her, and growled. "What the hells is going on, Tel? You were supposed to call me, after they released me from the hospital, and I got nothing. No replies to my message, no call backs – I thought something had happened to you, that you'd been shot. C-SEC said they couldn't comment!"

She set her pack down, rubbing her hand over her crests wearily, and then slumped down to sit on a crate in one corner. She smiled, ruefully. "Now you know how it feels, huh? Garrus. I just... I wanted to find a way to get in touch with you. I reached out through a friend to... the Councilor, Lady Tevos, and before I knew it they'd decided that I should be here on the ship."

Garrus' eyes – always so piercing, so clear – were clouded with worry and confusion, and narrowed as she spoke. "Who is 'they', Tel?"

Telanya whispered in response, an undercurrent of stammering awe seeping into her voice. "The... The Thirty, sins recoil from their houses. The Council of Matriarchs on Thessia wanted me here. They... they needed someone to keep an eye on things."

Garrus frowned, then grimaced. "Shepard told me the asari had made a lot of demands that we turn over Doctor T'Soni to them. So they sent you here to spy on her, tell them if she's a bad piece of plating? Why didn't they just take Shepard's word for it?"

Telanya snorted. "Garrus, don't be silly. If a Palavanus or a Thanvanus family member went rogue, wouldn't you want to question his family about it? Wouldn't you be suspicious if that was denied? She's not just some clanless, after all...she's important. Just because Shepard vouches for her means nothing

at all – from the viewpoint of the asari, Shepard is a reckless killing machine, not known for her political acumen."

Telanya shrugged, folding her arms. "Also, I think it's a knee jerk reaction to what Liara has done by renouncing her house. The news was full of the story that she'd given her House rights over to her aunt, but everyone knows that Matriarch Mithra was never of the High Line of the House. Liara could snatch back the reins of House T'Soni whenever she felt like it, and it just feels staged to some people."

Garrus sighed. "Asari politics? I can't make fringe or spur of it. I do know that this isn't like you. You've been shaken ever since you managed to settle on the Citadel, and you avoid your own people like the plague, most days." He paused, and she shrugged, and he shook his head. "I suppose I should be happy that you are here." His voice rumbled soothingly as he let himself relax, tracing his hands over her shoulders. "I *am* happy, just worried. This mission... it's not safe for you to be here, Tel. You could have turned them down."

She shook her head. "No, I couldn't. I can't just sit on the Citadel not knowing if you've been blown into pieces on some alien world. And I can't just... deny the Matriarchy, Garrus. I'd lose my position at C-SEC, and probably worse." She sighed, trailing her hand against the sharp angle of his jaw. "And I don't think the Matriarchy is going to take Shepard's word for it that she isn't a threat. There's stuff going on that has them spooked, I think. They... they sounded angry, and worried. What in the name of the Goddess worries the Council of Matriarchs, Garrus? I've seen one of them slap a pirate fighter out of the sky with a wave of her hand like it was a gnat."

Garrus leaned back against the wall. "I've never interacted much with matriarchs. But we tangled with Benezia on Feros, at least, Shepard and her team did. Liara fought her own mother. I don't think she's any kind of threat, honestly. She's... well, she's shy. Benezia sent geth and krogan to try to kill her when we found her on Feros..."

Telanya shrugged. "I'm sure this is all a waste of time, which is why I agreed to it. It was a way to be here...with you. That's my goal." She sighed, and glanced up. "That's...not what I came down here to talk about. I just... I wanted you to know why I am here... and to understand I'm not just here because they want me here. I don't want you to die, Garrus. I want us to have something. To heal, to... I don't know, sail on the seas of Palaven, or raise children in the hills of Thessia, or something... calm. Away from all this."

Garrus nodded, opening his mouth to speak, but she held up her hand. "I know, I know, Garrus. This isn't going to be easy. But I can't live in fear the rest of my life, and I'm not going to heal anytime soon. I know this." Her smile was sad, her eyes seeking his. "You know this."

Garrus bowed his head. Telanya's mind was wounded, he knew. The asari stalker that had nearly killed her had done something to her. She woke with nightmares often, whimpering, sometimes crying or just shaking helplessly. Garrus was there when he could be, but that wasn't often enough. "I'm... not doing a real hot job at being your bond-mate, Tel. I'm sorry."

Small blue fingers wrapped around his hands. "You're doing just fine, Garrus. If you weren't, I wouldn't need to be here."

O-OSABC-O

Telanya spent another half hour with Garrus, deciding that she was going to camp out in the gunnery room with him, and if that bothered anyone they could just deal with it. After dumping off her gear, she decided to report first to Cole, and then to Shepard.

As she traversed the mess deck, she saw the curious glances of some of the crew, and more than one set of eyes flicked from her over to the medical bay. She wondered why, as she entered the elevator, along

with a strongly built human male, who triggered the lift control.

"So, ah... er, do you know Doctor T'Soni?" The human's face was set in what Tel assumed was a pleasant expression, but there was a nervous note to it. His name tag read Jackson, so she shrugged a bit and answered him.

"Goddess, no. She's asari royalty; I'm just a beat cop. I got tapped for this because I work in Customs and I can help track Saren, plus Garrus is my partner." She used an ambiguous word, not that she was ashamed of her relationship with Garrus, but not wanting to feed rumors either. She didn't have a good feel for humans.

"Huh. Maybe that's why she's so quiet and doesn't talk much." The big man rubbed his jaw. "I'm Gabe Jackson, marine platoon one. The top kick – uh, Master Chief Cole, said you'd be working with us."

The elevator slid open, revealing the cargo bay of the Normandy, and two lines of marines standing at attention in full armor, with Cole and a more slender, younger man next to him. Cole arched his eyebrow at the two as they stepped off. "Sergeant Jackson, how goddamned good of you to finally join us. And Sergeant Telanya, welcome to the unit." He motioned for her to stand at the end of one of the lines of marines, and cleared his throat.

"Alright, boys and girls. We had our teeth kicked in on Eingana, and that shit is not going to happen again. Each of you has been issued a new set of armor and a Crossfire rifle. The Crossfire is superior in every aspect to that piece of crap stock rifle you've been using since boot. Your armor will bounce rounds that would have gone through Onyx armor. Shepard has spent her own funds and her entire operational budget on outfitting you apes and you will not disappoint the commander." He paused. "Will you?"

"No, Master Chief!" Telanya was shocked by the thunder of 13-odd marines shouting in unison. This was completely alien to the calm, joking camaraderie of an asari militia unit. These humans were hard, violent, and drenched in adrenaline. Even the women looked chipped out of stone, every member of the unit towering a good foot above her. Cole glanced at Telanya, then at the two men at either end of the unit. "You've noticed our new members. That is why the LT is here, to discuss some organizational changes. Sir." He nodded, and the slender man stepped forward.

"I'm Lieutenant Kaidan Alenko, and until today I was the battle duty officer of the Normandy. Due to some holes in our ranks and the danger of the missions we're going into, Commander Shepard is changing up our organization ranks. Effective immediately, the Master Chief here is brevetted to First Lieutenant. That makes him the BDO. I will be leading a two man team consisting of Specialist Tali'Zorah and Specialist Urdnor Wrex, alongside Commander Shepard's team of Specialist Garrus Vakarian and Specialist Liara T'Soni. This gives both of our main teams a technical specialist, a biotic specialist, and someone who can do both."

Alenko paused. "Since Cole is now the BDO, Senior Chief Vega will be replacing him in Platoon One. As Platoon Chief, Gunnery Chief Williams will continue to oversee Platoon Two. Each platoon will get a specialist. Since platoon one is down only one person, you get Sergeant Telanya. She's trained in the asari military for over twenty years, been in C-SEC for five, and has more kills than any of us. Additionally she has biotic abilities, so your group will have a better defensive balance."

Telanya didn't react, although she knew her barriers were a bit rusty from not using them much. Alenko continued. "Our two DACT troopers will go into Platoon Two, acting as a rapid-reaction strike force. They will deploy with the Mako from orbital drop or act as emergency backup when needed."

Alenko turned to Cole, who smiled, before slapping the big man on the shoulder. "You have all done the Normandy, and the Corps, proud. I'll leave you to your briefing now, but you can still talk to me if

you have questions."

Alenko exited the cargo-bay, and then Cole shrugged. "Alright, listen up. The fact they put fancy silverware on my collar does not mean I will not put my foot up your ass if you screw up in the field. We have a lot of prep to do in the next day. Shepard is taking us up against Cerberus. I want you all to field-strip those weapons, check all the seals on your armor, and make sure you are five by five before the ship casts off today." He paused. "Get hopping. Sergeant Telanya, Chief Williams a moment, please."

She followed him across the cargo bay, alongside a strongly built human woman. They were all so tall! Telanya looked up, taking in the woman's hard, muscled form, and her open, blunt face. *Pretty, I suppose, if you like a touch of coarseness, but by the Goddess, what is the gravity on this barbaric Earth place to raise such sturdy natives?*

Cole stopped at a series of lockers set into the wall. "Sergeant, Chief Williams is our armorer. We just got upgraded with some top of the line armor, and new weapons. As I said before, the light stuff you have on is not going to cut the mustard when it comes to fighting geth, or worse."

Telanya chuckled. "You'll forgive me if I'm not familiar with human idiom, but I am guessing that means you think this armor is too weak to stop geth rounds. Fair enough. I'm not sure about using your weapons, though." She unfolded her assault rifle from her back. "This is an asari weapon, a ... well, I guess you'd call it a plasma gun. I've seen the direct kinetic assault weapons your race uses. They work well against barriers, but they won't put holes in asari matriarchs very well."

Williams narrowed her eyes. "We'll be fighting geth and humans pretty soon too, Blue."

Telanya laughed. "And no doubt you'll slaughter them. I've seen the Eden Prime tapes, you are a fearsome warrior... so is Shepard... but I've trained with this weapon too many years to set it aside now, although I am interested in new armor. C-SEC," she said dryly, "can be... cheap."

Both Cole and Williams grunted, almost in unison, then glanced at each other. "Yeah, so can the Systems Alliance. That's why Shepard had to upgrade everything herself. You've fitted armor before, I presume?" Williams voice was still cool, but less so than a moment before.

Telanya nodded. "I have. Shouldn't be much of a problem, assuming it's not too big for me to wear."

Cole nodded, activating his omni-tool. "I'm going to start uploading the SA command frequencies and communications package to your omni-tool now. For the rest of the day just get settled in. When we're traveling, there's not much for the marine contingent to do. We'll set up the firing range later on tonight, see how good you are with a gun. Chow for the marines is at 0800, 1300 and 1900. We get up at 0600 and do morning PT from 0700 to breakfast, then drills from 1000 to lunch, and finally evening training from 1700 to 1900. The rest of the time is yours to use as you see fit."

Telanya nodded. "Thank you, Master Chief – is that the correct form of address? Or should I call you Lieutenant?"

Cole shook his head, even as Williams grinned. "Don't call me Lieutenant. Not thrilled 'bout being kicked upstairs, I like being in the line of fire, not standing back shouting orders. Williams, fix her up with her armor, then come find me, we need to review the jump-lunatic's armor packages." Cole strode away, but then paused. "Oh. Just a reminder. Make sure you talk to the Commander after you get squared up, Sergeant."

Telanya turned to Williams, who shrugged and began to lug out armor.

O-OSABC-O

Telanya had been on board an hour, and the ship was moving, beginning the undocking process. Now

fully kitted out and equipped, she reported to the Mess Deck, looking around and finally locating the single door that lead to Shepard's quarters.

She activated the door control, which chimed and flashed yellow. A moment later the door slid open, revealing the Commander's quarters. They were very small and compact, with little decoration. The Commander sat in a chair in the corner, dressed in light BDU's, and next to her stood an asari.

The asari was beautiful, in a cold manner. Telanya took in the classical features and the fact that this asari was a head taller than she was. She glanced back over her shoulder, eyes widening in surprise, and Telanya first saluted the commander before bowing formally to the asari. "Commander Shepard, Sergeant Telanya Nasan, C-SEC Customs. I hail from the colonies, of no clan and of only minor achievement. I assume this is Lady Liara of House T'Soni?"

The commander and Liara traded a strange, almost guilty look, before the asari turned and faced Telanya fully. "I will let you conclude your business with the commander in private, Sergeant." Without another word or even a hint of an introduction, she walked past Telanya and vanished.

The sheer rudeness of such an act – not even bothering to identify herself, so unlike an asari – left Telanya speechless for a long second, enough time for Shepard to stand and address her directly. "Sergeant, welcome aboard. I can only assume you've been briefed on our mission and your place here." Shepard turned to face Telanya squarely. "That being said, you're not here for me to discuss that, but to ask you exactly how you can help us bring down Saren. I asked the SA for replacement infantrymen and I'm still not exactly sure how you got here .. or how best to use you."

Telanya gave a small nod. "I'm not sure about who made the calls or decisions, Commander, but in short, I believe that I can provide essential assistance. When C-SEC was investigating Saren, Garrus's partner was researching the movement of Saren's money. He wasn't able to pin down exactly what was going on, but Saren had investments in a number of companies, as did Matriarch Benezia. Many of these companies were either related to genetic research or in stellar cartography."

Shepard rubbed her chin, a thoughtful expression crossing her otherwise calm features. "We have intelligence suggesting Saren is looking for an old Prothean world of legend, called Ilos. So the stellar cartography makes sense...but why genetic research?"

Telanya shrugged. "He may be just using the companies as a front to launder money or hide resources he plans to use in some other fashion. So far, everything has been legal, and the companies claim they haven't had any contact with Saren or Benezia since the Council outlawed them. However, since the largest two companies are based on Noveria, which is outside the Citadel's jurisdiction, we have no real way of knowing."

Shepard tilted her head. "Noveria, huh? I think after we clean up Cerberus, we'll take a joyride out to Noveria and see if we can't shake anything loose. We haven't had any leads since we ran into Saren and Benezia on Feros." Shepard paused, thinking, and Telanya shifted from foot to foot before biting her lip and asking a question.

"Commander, about Matriarch Benezia. . . we plan to engage her in combat? She is one of the most powerful asari in the galaxy and your team .. seems a bit light on biotics."

Shepard laughed at that, but it was a rueful, bitter laugh. "You are correct, Sergeant. We had Saren cold on Feros, my team had dropped one of his allies, most of his geth, and I had him dead to rights. Benezia basically defeated myself, Liara, a krogan battlemaster, and a SA N7 special forces soldier in about three seconds. I think she was holding back because of Liara, but... I don't have a good answer for your question. Liara would like to capture her rather than kill her obviously, but I'm not totally sure we can do either. Do you have a suggestion?"

Telanya was surprised the Commander would ask her opinion, but after a moment she shrugged. "Appeal to the Asari Republic for assistance."

Shepard tilted her head, black hair shifting to fall across her face a moment before she pushed it back behind one ear. "I get the feeling the Asari Republic would like to see her dead, and maybe Liara with her. They don't seem keen on embarrassment. Unfortunately, we may have to take her out on our own, which is going to be very rough. I hope you're up for that."

Telanya had no real answer for that, and a moment later the intercom barked. "Commander, we've got clearance to the Widow Relay. What are your orders?" Joker's voice sounded tense, and Shepard smiled grimly.

"Is Pressly in ops yet?"

Pressly's voice sounded, a bit weak but steady. "I'm here, Commander. Doctor Chakwas isn't happy about it, and I'll have to stay off my feet and run things from a station, but I should be up for this. We're getting updates from the STG and the 9th Citadel Fleet about their assault on Cerberus...they've just started."

Shepard clicked off, and turned to Telanya. "You should head down to see Cole and get ready for combat, Sergeant. We'll finish this conversation later, and you can tell me the best ways to annoy Garrus." She smiled then, and Telanya couldn't help but smile back, before saluting and turning to go.

"Telanya."

The asari paused, turning to face Shepard, who'd lost her smile all of a sudden. "Garrus is going to be in harm's way quite a bit. Usually the SA doesn't let spouses serve on the same ship, but he's an integral part of my fighting team. You're sure you can handle this?"

Telanya shrugged. "I'd rather be here and in the fight than wringing my hands on the Citadel not knowing he's dead or alive, Commander. He's never been safe, not in C-SEC, and this is no different. I'm just thankful you've allowed me to be on board where I can help make sure he... that we all get out of this alive."

Shepard nodded. "Fair enough."

#### O-OSABC-O

Twenty minutes later, Shepard had emerged onto the CIC, and was reviewing intel from the STG and Council assault on Cerberus as the Normandy pulled away from the Citadel. Flashes of blue and silver blinked over ominous orange and black circles, data streams erupting from each one on the galaxy map. Shepard gritted her teeth and tapped the control panel next to the railing. "Joker, do we have comms with Admiral Kahoku?"

Pressly had processed out of the medbay and was sitting at the ops alley station closest to the CIC, Doctor Chakwas standing next to him and applying a medical package. While he could at least run the ops alley, Pressly would still be too weak to run around handling navigation, leaving the inexperienced Friggs to act as navigator. Alenko was on the ops alley as well, brushing the rust off his tactical officer skills, but everyone knew that if Pressly wasn't really fit for this task, the Normandy would be in trouble.

Joker's voice was flat, unusual for the volatile pilot. "We have a com-link to the SSV Phoenix, the Admiral's cruiser. Patching you through." There was a pause and a blast of static, then the strong voice of a man could be heard. "This is Captain Parker, SSV Phoenix."

Shepard cleared her throat. "Captain, this is Commander Shepard. It's my understanding the main assault on Cerberus positions known to the Council has started. The admiral was supposed to have a

lead on their HQ for us – is he available?"

The captain's voice dropped an octave. "No, Commander, he is not. He lit out about ten hours ago on a combat shuttle with a DACT drop team to investigate a fragmentary return on a distress beacon from his regiment, and we have... we have not been able to regain contact. There's a Cerberus cruiser in this damned system and we're playing hide and go seek with her. She's got us outgunned."

Shepard grunted. "Our ETA is 44 minutes. The Theta Relay drops us right into your system. We'll help you take out the cruiser and then we need to find Admiral Kahoku. I'll patch you through to my tactical officer. Shepard out." She slapped her controls and glanced to Kaidan, who nodded and picked up the comm to figure out details of the assault.

Shepard turned back to the map, grimacing. After dealing with Pressly (and a charming mid-morning call from Udina's office, with him sourly applauding Shepard on neither shooting anyone nor starting a street battle), she'd been sent a briefing packet on the assault on the Cerberus organization. Since her recommendation of such an assault, the STG had worked closely with elements of the Shadow Broker, routed through a Spectre and kept entirely off normal comms channels. Except for Shepard and Kahoku, no one in the Systems Alliance expected the assault to occur until months in the future, but the STG had scouted as many positions as they could.

Lead by Spectres and combining asari commandos, STG snipers, and turian Deathwatch special ops, the Council Fleets had rushed almost thirty such locations. Most were supply depots, comm relays, or caches of weapons, armors, and supplies. But three such locations were forward bases, defended by Cerberus soldiers.

Initial approach to most of the facilities had been easy. The outlying areas were guarded by little more than poorly armed conscripts, but the comms information had all been deleted. The STG got partial returns on one base, rushing in two asari commando units. Cerberus met these with an entire tank division with gunship support, falling back to a huge fortified base on one system and a dug-in series of bunkers on another, standing off two entire armies.

The STG planners of the assault were convinced that the central core of Cerberus operations had not been located, and that Kahoku's regiment had stumbled on it, based on fragmented messages they salvaged from the Cerberus comms system. Launching full assaults on the two known military locations would be suicide – each was protected by Cerberus's own fleets and GTS missile batteries, anti-air mass accelerators, and nearly 15,000 Cerberus troops. The STG were stunned at Cerberus's strength. So the decision was made to hope Kahoku's intel - whatever it's source - would allow Shepard to find and take out the HQ, perhaps triggering a surrender of other Cerberus forces.

Shepard worried more about the battle reports. The Cerberus forces were light on armor, heavy on snipers, close quarters fighters, tech-saboteurs, and the like. In open battle, she was confident the Citadel military would slaughter the Cerberus forces. The turian generals advising the STG agreed with that assessment, but they were holding off such assaults until they could be sure nothing could get away. But the generals and Shepard were both wondering why Cerberus's military was more suited to urban assaults than general battle, and in her own mind, Shepard had come to some disturbing conclusions.

Shepard straightened. Even assuming Kahoku's men had found Cerberus HQ, taking it would not be easy. She had the authority and comms links to request heavy backup, including 4 units of asari commandos and 2 entire turian infantry regiments, but she was not the best at direct assault tactics and couldn't afford her usual attritional assault tactics, since getting half of an alien force killed to stop human terrorists would not end well.

And yet, she might not have any choice. Ground assault on a hardened defensive facility, with what

was sure to be heavy ground to space defenses? People – aliens – were going to die in heaps and piles taking that Cerberus HQ out, if the information was even valid . And if it wasn't, she fully expected Cerberus to scramble a cruiser or worse try to stop her ship.

It didn't help she was still wondering why Saren had made no moves recently. Was the stupid bastard dead? What did they learn from the Cipher that she hadn't? Shepard pinched the bridge of her nose and made a small, frustrated noise. *Too many questions, too few answers, too many expectations.*

One of the orange and black circles flickered and died on the galaxy map, and one of her tech-ops snorted. "Goddamned lunatics detonated a tac nuke on themselves, Ma'am. They took about 300 turians with them."

Shepard shook her head in a mix of disgust and awe. How did you convince people to throw their lives away like that? Willingly? Or did Cerberus HQ just blow the place up remotely, with the defenders not even knowing they were going to die? Would taking out the HQ really make the rest of the forces surrender, or would they fight on?

She couldn't answer those questions. She had to find her inner coldness again. There wasn't room or time for her to be Sara Shepard, Commander, or Sara Shepard, N7 leader, or even Sara Shepard, Spectre. These Cerberus assholes were powerful, well trained, fanatic, and lead by the most immoral and evil fuckers she'd ever heard of, men who would possibly kill an entire regiment of human soldiers to keep their location secret.

No, it was time for the *Butcher* to handle business.

O-OSABC-O

The Normandy emerged in the Sparta system and deployed its heat emissions gear quickly, as the CIC was filled with tactical and nav personnel. Finally cleared by Chakwas and left alone, Pressly was sitting in one of the ops alley stations, wearing a T-shirt and marine camo pants, a medical package over his shoulder, a drawn expression on his face. "Commander, we have the Phoenix on primary sensors...and an additional contact."

Shepard glanced at the tac plot even as the tactical team started its track. "New contact, Hotel zero one. Bearing, zero zero six, mark two, range 45 thousand. Initial firing solution ready". The tac ops voice was steady, and Shepard nodded grimly. "Joker, full IES stealth, take us in under that Cerberus cruiser."

The Normandy arced out and down, the faint light of Sparta's sun glimmering off the curves of her hull as the lights dimmed. Shepard pulled down the 1MC communicator from the station overhead and announced "All hands, man battle stations. Marine contingent, prepare for insertion in one five minutes."

In the cargo bay, marines put on their new armor for the first time, slapping each other with high fives and strapping on flat-pack grenades and other tactical gear. Telanya's eyes widened as she took in the power armored suits of the two DACT marines, now hulking seven foot tall giants with coaxial mass accelerators on each arm. The two huge marines gave wolf-like howls and crashed their helmets together with a sharp crack, and Wrex grunted his approval.

Telanya shot a glance at Senior Chief Vega, her face set in amazed curiosity, and the big man just laughed. "Ignore them, there's a reason we call them lunatics." Vega lifted his 774 series Typhoon LMG, and barked out loudly. "Marines! Are you hot?"

"Hot, locked, and ready to rock, SIR!" The booming voices echoed around the cargo bay, and Vega nodded to Master Chief Cole, who jerked his head towards Mako's.

"Alright apes, pile on. You two jump lunatics can find your own way down when we go in, till then, let

the fly-boys clear the skies." Vega gestured to the rightmost MAKO. "Sergeant Telanya, we're gonna load into the back of that Mako. They're orbital drop vehicles."

Telanya's blue eyes regarded the two slab-like tanks, then turned back to face the human sergeant. "Garrus is right. You people really are crazy."

The ship lurched, sending Marines skidding. Telanya reflexively used her biotics, anchoring herself and dropping a weak barrier over the Marines to keep them from flying down the length of the temporarily vertical cargo hold. The ship righted, creaking from stress, and Williams grunted out her thanks for the save. The IMC boomed again, Shepard's icy calm voice sounding almost bored. "Prepare for high speed evasive maneuvers." She apparently forgot to click it off as a blast shook the ship, roaring out questions, followed by "Joker, I want that fucker dead, now."

On the CIC deck, Pressly's fingers were moving over his haptic display, as the Normandy pulled another turn. The Cerberus cruiser was agile, built to some kind of heavily armored spec that wasn't any Alliance standard. It had pasted the SSV Phoenix pretty hard, and that ship was drifting without power now, its drive core knocked offline.

The Normandy's speed and maneuverability was matched against the cruiser's firepower and armor, but so far the contest was uneven. Shepard's mind considered the possibilities as the Normandy power-skidded past two more missile salvos, but a third clipped their shields, drawing curses from Joker that weren't even remotely anatomically possible.

Shepard grimaced, and looked across the deck to Pressly. "I need options, XO."

The man nodded, his face drawn with pain and ashen looking, his forehead sheened with sweat. "Trying, Commander. He's just got too many missiles." His hands moved across the haptic keyboard, trying jamming and e-chaff, but the expression on his face told Shepard that he wasn't finding much success.

Shepard grunted, then grimaced as the entire ship shook, as missiles crashed into the underbelly of the ship and shook every deck. The lights flickered as the shields quick-booted and restored themselves.

She'd had enough of this cat and mouse game. "Joker, get us in close. Once you get below him, do a deflection, spin the ship, and nail him with the guns." She ignored the pilot as he began to squawk about the order and instead punched up the target plot. "Fire a spread of torpedoes, detonate them at half effective range. I need this guy blind for this to work."

The silver hawk of the Normandy slashed past the ugly white Cerberus cruiser's flank, taking two shots from a broadside as she did, nearly shattering the shields and one shot skipping through them to crease the armor on the wing. Torpedoes lanced out even as this happened, gleaming silver nodules promising death, and the Cerberus ship shifted its aspect, GARDIAN batteries opening up in a blaze of defensive fire.

Joker gritted his teeth as he twisted the ship to the angle below the field of fire, the mass core pulsing weirdly as it allowed the ship to ignore its own inertia, skidding across empty space like skipping a stone across a pond. With a series of taps he angled the ship's main engines to the right and fired, throwing the Normandy into a counter-clockwise spin, even while he forced the reaction control thrusters to elevate the nose.

For about half a second, the Normandy was bow-on to the underbelly of the Cerberus cruiser, still knocking down torpedoes. In that half second, the main gun spat six mass rounds with full power. The Cerberus cruiser, its tac ops staff having taken the Normandy's maneuver for a cut-and-run, was not expecting the shots.

The first three flared impotently against the cruiser's shields, the fourth shattering them but skidding off harmlessly. The fifth slug slammed directly into the belly of the cruiser, splintering armor plating and punching through with tremendous kinetic force. The last shot, unhindered, smashed deep into the ship itself.

The result was catastrophic for the cruiser. The slug had blown apart every control surface link and the ship's computer, leaving the cruiser dead and without power for a few seconds while backups tried to kick in. The shots themselves had not been too bad, and under any other circumstances the Cruiser would have rebooted its disrupted systems, turned, and probably crushed the Normandy.

But it had only shot down five of the six torpedoes. The sixth arced in, slamming into the top of the cruiser, and detonated, a weapon designed to crack dreadnaught shielding after hitting bare hull. Grainy, almost silvery light spilled out like some poorly animated special effect as matter and antimatter annihilated each other, and ball of pure energy tore through the center of the Cerberus cruiser.

The Normandy rattled and shook with the blast, as the entire front half of the enemy ship simply atomized under the tremendous blast, and a moment later, the back half blew apart in a titanic explosion, sending debris everywhere. The ops alley cheered as Joker brought the ship around, and Shepard exhaled quietly. "Good work. Joker, bring us alongside the Phoenix and let's get them back online."

Pressly cleared his board, then gave the Commander a weak smile. "Looks like you have a better grasp of the tactics than I do, ma'am."

Shepard snorted. "If it hadn't been for you working your magic with the ECM and chaff we'd have gotten pasted just like the SSV Phoenix." She took in his drawn appearance and the sheen of sweat dampening his t-shirt and sighed. "For now, I want you back in the med bay. I know you're tough, but I need you at top performance, XO."

Pressly sighed and nodded, and Shepard turned back to the galaxy map, waiting to dock with the Phoenix and grimacing as orange and black lights flashed and faded under the tide of silver and blue lights.

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## Chapter 73: Chapter 64: Cerberus, Ambush

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*A/N: I don't know how often I'll be updating for a while. A lot of stuff just kind of went bad for me all at once. I had a .. really bad interaction with someone I was trying to open up to, as hard as that was. I just found out I'll be out of my job on Friday. My mother's insurance is all messed up so that will, of course, not fix financial issues much either. And it's the anniversary of my wife's death, which is, as you can expect, always an emotionally great time to be fucking alive.*

*I didn't use my normal beta-reader (Owelpost) for most of this, because of work and other difficulties on both our parts, so if the wordage is clunky or there's misspellings, that's my own stupidity coming out. I wanted to get this chapter out since it was pretty much done since I'm not sure I will feel like writing for a week or two. I'm about half done with the chapter beyond it and we'll see where things go from there.*

*I know that AU's aren't exactly ... popular. The fact that SI's, humor fics and the like seem to have a lot more popularity doesn't really bother me. But I got a fairly rude PM about my 'dismantling of canon' and how 'disrespectful' it is to change things around so much that sorta makes you question why you bother in the first place.*

*Anyway, just wanted to let whoever reads this to know that the next chapter may be a ways in the future.*

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The SSV Phoenix was a much larger ship than the Normandy, but it had still not been a match for the Cerberus cruiser. As the Phoenix finished extending the docking tube to link the two ships, Shepard took in the heavy blast damage along the starboard side of the ship, noting places where the armor had been melted or blasted away.

Beside her, Kaidan was pulling up the Cerberus data packet sent by the Citadel onto his omni-tool. Although he would be leading a team of his own alongside Shepard, he still would be in charge of relating battle strategy to the Marine contingent, and as such, she wanted him to hear the briefing from the captain of the Phoenix about whatever new clusterfuck they were about to step into.

The Normandy shuddered once as the tube clicked into place, and the airlock light cycled from red to yellow as air was pumped into the docking gangway between the ships. Shepard smoothed back her hair and glanced over her shoulder at Kaidan. "Anything of interest, Lieutenant?"

Alenko shrugged, eyes narrowed as he scanned through the documents. "Not really, ma'am. It looks like the turians have hit some serious problems in their assault on the two Cerberus bases – several more of these over-armored cruisers jumped in and savaged a troop transport before being driven off by the Fleet." He tabbed over on the haptic screen his omnitool was displaying. "As far as ground forces, it's pretty nasty stuff. Lots of snipers, mixed with close-quarters fighters and heavy infantry."

Shepard huffed, as the airlock door cycled open, the light shifting to green. The two Alliance officers crossed over quickly, the airlock shutting behind them. Shepard had never shifted from ship to ship in deep space, and the flimsy feeling of the docking tube wasn't very comforting.

They entered the Phoenix's airlock, both giving small sighs of relief as the airlock shut behind them, and then the doors opened into the Phoenix itself.

Like most SA ships that didn't have turian influence, the airlock opened into a open room, with waist-high defensive barriers and automated turrets to deal with boarding parties. Waiting for them was a single lieutenant, young and dressed in BDU's. "Lieutenant Chalmes, ma'am. If you'll follow me, the Captain is in the CIC."

They followed him out into the main corridor, and Shepard winced. The corridor was wider than anything on the cramped Normandy, lined with storage lockers and illuminated with track-lights. Many lockers were askew, their contents hastily shoved back to clear a walkway, and two injured sailors were on the ground, being tended to by medics. Melted paneling and jagged fragments of blackened shrapnel littered the ground, and a haze of acrid, bitter smoke still hung in the air.

The three officers walked down the corridor, taking steps down into the center of the ship, which showed no battle damage. Kaidan glanced around and sighed. "You look like you got hit pretty hard, Lieutenant."

Their guide sighed, using a pass-card to open two heavy blast doors, and nodded. "We thought we had them pinned down, but they had some kind of multimunitions torpedo that ended up frying most of our systems. Once the drive core went down they landed some direct hits on us. The medbay is wrecked, decks 2 and 3 are mostly in ruins, and part of hydroponics is just a waterlogged mess, so we'll have to fall back to resupply – we don't have O2 reserves or enough food to last without hydroponics being up."

Shepard nodded, as they passed through a tunnel of thick armor banding into a circular room, with two

levels. The upper level was manned by tac-ops on various consoles, much like the ops alley on the Normandy, and the lower level was dominated by a large, circular information console and war map. Standing in front of it was a craggy-faced older man, with spiky dark hair only barely cut into Alliance spec, and piercing, angry black eyes. His otherwise pale features were lined with stress, and his dress blue command uniform was spattered with blood on the right arm, which was wrapped in a medical package.

"Captain Chris Parker. Welcome aboard, Commander." He extended his hand for a shake, and Shepard took it, frowning at the shake but shrugging a moment later as the man turned away. "We're really glad you guys showed up when you did, that bastard pretty much had us dead-bang."

Shepard glanced at the tactical map, a cool smile lighting her features. "They didn't know who they were fucking with."

Parker gave a bark of amused laughter, and faced her from the far side of the map. "Clearly. Alright, here's what we have. We jumped into this system based on intel from the Admiral. What kind, we have no clue – he wasn't being very chatty about it, and he sounded as if he expected Cerberus traitors to have riddled the entire command structure." Parker grunted. "As if I'd let that kind of shit happen on the Phoenix..."

Shepard folded her arms, letting her weight fall back onto one leg. "Underestimating a foe is the first step towards letting them get the drop on you, Captain. Cerberus isn't a pack of biotic terrorists blowing up a food station, or Earth First goons going after colony ships."

Parker sighed. "I know that. But I know my crew. And we didn't have any issues getting in system. Kahoku took his personal battle transport and said he was going to check out the third planet, as he'd gotten a ping response from his regiment's emergency transponder. Apparently it was so weak that it didn't have the juice to even reach the comm buoy near the mass relay. We were supposed to pick him up about two hours ago, but three hours ago we lost all comms."

Kaidan looked up. "Suddenly, or was it planned?"

Parker shrugged. "The last comm we had with his ground team indicated they'd found something weird in the ruins of an old pre-FCW colony on the planet. We were going to wait for clarification...then we got the message from High Command to pull back to the relay and hold position, waiting for you. So we hauled ass here, high speed, and came in blind, that is when that Cerberus cruiser dropped in from FTL and unloaded on us."

Shepard nodded. "How many men did Kahoku take with him?"

Parker pulled his omnitool up, tapping on its screen. "He had two squads of DACT jump troopers with him, a couple of AISholes, and 3 squads of A's from the 11th RRU." Parker shrugged. "The shuttle was equipped with a JOTUN mech as well. I can't imagine what could take out that many men so fast they couldn't get a damned message off."

Kaidan frowned. The Alliance Intelligence Services – or "AISholes", to people that didn't care for their under-handed tactics – were all highly trained at spotting traps and ambushes. DACT teams were power-armored maniacs with heavy machine guns and plasma throwers, most with at least 15 years experience, and were some of the hardest fighters in the entire Alliance. A-rank marines were all veterans, and if they were in the Rapid Reaction Units, they would have also had heavy training, likely having seen heavy combat and ready for anything. Finally, a JOTUN mech was a towering 14 foot tall battle robot, equipped with a high powered grenade launcher, coaxial mass accelerators, and shielding that could bounce light mortar fire.

*Even if they were outnumbered as much as ten to one, they should have been able to get off some kind*

*of message...unless they were jammed.* Kaidan turned to Shepard. "A force of that size is a lot stronger than anything the Normandy can bring to bear, ma'am. And if they couldn't get a message off... they might be jammed."

Shepard shook her head. "If there was a jamming field, how is the beacon's signal getting through even after they lost comms? As for the numbers, well, if whatever is down there took down an entire regiment of 800 or so men, numbers won't help." She examined the map, thinking, then looked up at Parker. "The Normandy is going to drop both MAKOs on the surface and check it out. How much longer until your engineers restore full power?"

Parker scratched his ear. "The core is back up, we're mostly rerouting blown circuits and bypassing the computer core that got wrecked. But we don't have a working medbay and I have over eighty casualties and about forty dead. We're not going to be much help, Commander."

Shepard sniffed. "Alright. After we get dropped off, the Normandy will circle back to help with repairs, until reinforcements show up. We can't figure out what happened up here, we'll drop a good ways out and try to do reconnaissance in force. Get your ship patched up enough to jump out and then withdraw, Captain."

Parker frowned. "Commander, you should probably wait for back-up units to arrive..." He paused as Shepard gestured to the map, where another black orange circle flickered and vanished, along with a blue square.

Shepard's face was set in cold lines. "They're blowing themselves trying to take a few aliens with them when they go. We don't know what's happened to Kahoku, his men, or even why the fuck his men were in this empty shithole of a system to begin with. The more time we take to find Cerberus HQ and put a bullet in those fucks, the more time they have to cover their tracks." Shepard's eyes were hard and cold. "Fix your ship and withdraw, Captain. Spectre authority."

The older captain grimaced and nodded reluctantly, and Shepard waved a hand in Kaidan's direction. "Patch all this through to your combat net, Lieutenant, then let's get to killing." She swiveled on a heel with lithe quickness, stalking off in her usual pantherine gait, and Kaidan hurried after her, updating his omni-tool's links as he went.

#### O-OSABC-O

Telanya was more than a little nervous.

The inside of the MAKO tank was cramped, with hard, square seats and too much useless information scrolling on small haptic screens on the ceiling of the vehicle. The marine squad was crammed into the seats in full armor, slapping on seal patches, checking extra weapons, and tightening armor straps. She'd turned her translator off for a moment, and she could hear their native language, sounding like a pack of angry shanda-beasts hooting to one another before moving in for a kill.

She'd seen plenty of humans before, but that was as a C-SEC officer – watching them from cameras, or across the desk of a customs station, elevated a good 4 feet off the ground and staring down at them. They seemed small and timid then, most of them from the colonies, blinded by the Citadel's opulence. Up close with their soldiers, they didn't seem tame at all.

The angles of the MAKO set her teeth on edge, all lines and edges, not a single curve to be seen. There was no grace in it, no elegance, just threatening, sheer raw power and blocky endurance. Like the humans. She gave a private laugh to herself, thinking about her friends back on Thessia, and how they saw humans as little more than entertaining sex partners.

They were dangerous in the extreme. She cut her omnitool back on, the guttural growling being

seamlessly translated to the elegance of the asari language, but she could still hear it, the strange clicking and growling noises in the background like some kind of demented echo. The Master Chief was speaking to the platoon, even while the tank shifted, the Normandy obviously angling to go into the atmosphere.

Cole was dressed in different armor from the rest of the soldiers. They – and now, she – wore suits of armor, heavy and thick, with a blue-scale camo pattern on black bodysuits. The left shoulder contained an integral heavy shield generator, and every marine had on a belt of grenades and a high-powered pistol as a sidearm. She held *Tithas*, her Spear of Athame battle rifle – it had belonged to her mother, and was her only possession of value. The other marines held Crossfire heavy rifles, each one equipped with a haptic swing-out targeting sight and an under-barrel disc grenade launcher.

Cole grunted, then a smile crossed his craggy features. "We're going to drop in a few minutes, so you apes need to get hot and ready. We're dropping as Vengeful Shield – this is a rescue mission, defensive options only. An Alliance admiral is down there somewhere, so is the transponder of a ship that carried an entire regiment of Marines."

Cole lit one of his trademark cigars, aromatic blue smoke wafting around the tiny compartment. "I don't know if he's still alive or dead, and that doesn't matter. I want you to put your foot up the ass of whoever took him out if he is dead, and I want you to defend him with your lives if he's still alive. No heroics, no bullshit." Cole paused, locking eyes with each of them. She met his gaze evenly, and Cole finally nodded. "Now, Platoon Two is going to be down two men because our goddamned DACT think it would be fun to orbital drop first as scouts, so I'll be working with Chief Williams. Chief Vega, these apes are yours. Deploy forward defense and hold."

Senior Chief Vega nodded. "Got it, ese -"

He was cut off by the 1MC announcement circuit, the voice of the Commander speaking. "All hands, stand by for extreme high speed maneuvers and hot drop. All hands, man battle station condition one, set defenses for repel hostile boarding parties. Carry on."

Telanya glanced at Vega, who shrugged and continued. "I got this, top." Turning back to the men and women of Platoon One, Vega's voice was softer, more ... nuanced. "We already have complications, so let's not fuck this up. Jackson, you'll take point. Telanya, take rear guard, and keep an eye out." He proceeded to give everyone in the group a main and a fallback task, as the ship began to shudder and buck.

Shepard's cold voice echoed across the MAKO again, across the 1MC. "All hands, brace for extreme high speed maneuvers." Vega grinned, sitting into his seat and bringing the restraint bar down across his chest. "Alright, Marines. Get hot!"

The squad loaded ammo blocks and engaged the spin-ups of their assault rifles mass generators, and Telanya flicked the safety on her own weapon, a faint blue glow creeping up the translucent barrel. The woman next to her slotted three HE grenades into her weapon, while across from her, a male marine unclipped his shotgun and checked its loads before rolling his shoulders and cradling the weapon across his chest.

Vega glanced up as Telanya spoke. "Senior Chief, when Master Chief Cole said your DACT troopers were planning to orbital drop, did he mean they have their own small landing vehicles?"

Vega's good-natured grin only widened as he triggered the multifunction display in the ceiling of the MAKO. "Not quite, Sergeant." Telanya glanced up, looking at the telemetry.

Outside, the two DACT troopers sealed their massive ICARUS jump armor, flaring mass effect jets on the back glowing blue and white. As the Normandy began to scream through the atmosphere, the two

once again cracked their helmets together, then gave blood-curdling howls as they were launched from the small drop bay in the Normandy's nose, hurtling into the atmosphere.

The ICARUS armor immediately deployed omni-gel, the gel building ablative shielding around each trooper, as their shields kicked in, angling to slip them through the atmosphere. Powerful computers in the armor adjusted the mass effect jets and fields of the armor, as the two men scythed through the lower atmosphere, trailing a blazing corona of crumbling ablative armor. The omni-gel generators in the suits continued to pump out new ablative coatings as they broke through the lower atmosphere, blasting through faint gray clouds.

The suits jerked as mass effect jets reversed their flow direction, and a series of breakaway parachutes erupted from the heavy packs on each trooper's back, halting their momentum. A few seconds later the two DACT troopers crashed to the ground in a ball of omni-gel shock cushioning, which detonated and flew apart in a hail of shrapnel a moment later, reacting to a pulse coming from the armor's shield generator to clear an area.

The two men popped up, one lifting a heavy mass acceleration minigun, the other a plasma incinerator, and they swept the area in slow circles. "Normandy, this is Angel One. We are dirtside, we have no hostiles, and no indicators of combat. Area is clear, drop beacon is hot." The other soldier triggered a beacon on his belt, generating a guide-path for the Normandy, and the frigate turned into the atmosphere, the cargo bay doors opening.

Telanya's eyes were still wide as she watched the telemetry. "You people are insane."

Vega grinned wider before slapping his faceplate shut. "Marines! Are you hot!" Once again, the inside of the MAKO resounded with shouting – "Hot, locked, and ready to rock, SIR!"

The MAKO gave a surging thrust, and Telanya's eyes widened in horror as she realized exactly what Vega meant by a combat drop. "What is wrong with you lunatics! Don't you humans have fucking ramps?"

Garrus's dry voice cut into the comm. "You know, Tel, I asked them that, and Shepard just laughed at me. I'm not sure they advanced enough to get that far..."

Chief Williams' acerbic voice sounded. "We evolved far enough to put our foot up your ass, Vakarian." Telanya winced, but Garrus just laughed. "Well, Chief Williams-"

Shepard's icy voice cut off the chatter. "You can make 'yo mamma' jokes, later, battle chicken. Landing in fifteen seconds. Squads deploy upon landing, defensive perimeter." Telanya grit her teeth and a few seconds later, the MAKO landed in a shaking, jolting cessation of movement that left her wondering if she'd broken her neck.

Of course, the marines around her just howled in exultation. Frightful.

#### O-OSABC-O

The terrain of Edolus was not particularly inviting. The area they'd landed in was flat, almost unnaturally so, with large lumps of terrain breaking the monotony ever few hundred feet. The sky was a pale gray, even in daylight, with wispy, sullen looking darker gray clouds skittering along in the high wind. To the west, the lip of a massive impact crater could be seen, along with ancient lines of ejecta from the impact.

Shepard consulted the map in her omni-tool, Liara and Garrus crouched next to her. She'd split her teams up for maximum effectiveness. She, Garrus, and Liara would take 1st Squad to the site of the beacon, while Kaidan would lead Wrex, Tali and 2nd Squad in the other MAKO to the last known fix they had on Kahoku.

Shepard had reviewed the comms Kahoku's team had engaged in with the Phoenix, and nothing stood out as abnormal. Edolus had been a small human colony before the First Contact War, but after the war it had been abandoned as not profitable and difficult to defend. That meant the terraforming wasn't completed, and the air wasn't quite safe to breathe. There could be anything here, as humanity had hardly paid the place any attention in twenty years.

Shepard was tempted to call the Normandy back to do orbital scans, but hesitated. Mainly because the Phoenix was a sitting duck – the Normandy could stealth, after all, but the Phoenix couldn't, and if more of those Cerberus cruisers showed up, she was done. But also, something was nagging at her. The men of Kahoku's regiment would have been traveling in either a battle transport or a cruiser. Yet there was no sign of the ship in orbit.

That either meant it had been taken – and what the hell could board and capture a ship packed full of Marines – or it had been shot down trying to land. If it had been taken out trying to land, that meant serious ground-to-space guns, probably powerful enough to turn the Normandy into so much silver and black confetti if it came in for a landing. Best to find out what happened, neutralize any threat, and then call for backup if needed.

Tali broke into her ruminations. "Commander, I have both drones up. The beacon is about half a mile north, while the last transmission of Admiral Kahoku is a mile past that, in the direction of the old colony site. There.. there's some kind of energy emission in that direction, but I can't get a good fix on it."

Shepard glanced over the little quarian. "Interference?"

Tali shook her head, nervously twisting her hands together. "N-no. It's... it's like a localized jamming field. The drop beacon is outside of its range, but Kahoku's last transmission is within it. I've never seen anything like it.

Shepard's eyes narrowed as she took in this new information, running the scenario through her mind. A regiment hunting Cerberus goes missing on an abandoned planet, but manages to get off a beacon, which Kahoku somehow finds out about and goes chasing after. Once he lands, his ship is ambushed and nearly destroyed, while he gets jammed and just ... vanishes.

Garrus growled, and his stance shifted, becoming almost .. predatory. The legs tensed, and the blank plate of his helmet whipped around to face her. "This is a trap, Shepard."

Shepard snorted. "What was your first clue? Alright, change of plans. Everybody mount up into the MAKO, we're checking this damned beacon out. " It took a few minutes for everything to get put into place, but soon the two MAKOs were rolling along, the ride surprisingly smooth for once, given the level nature of the terrain.

Liara, no stranger to abandoned sites, was a bit confused by this. "Why is the ground so ... level?"

Telanya, in the back of the MAKO, rolled her eyes, but it was Kaidan who answered on the team's comm channel. "Most likely it was leveled in planning for the colony. I guess they didn't finish entirely, when they pulled out they just left things like they were."

Wrex was glancing around the terrain too, from the canopy gun mount of the MAKO. Something about the area set his teeth on edge. He triggered his comm link. "Maybe. But for once, I agree with the asari... something feels off." His eyes flicked back and forth over the area, making out not much of anything as the bland landscape rolled by, and he focused his attention to the beacon.

The two MAKOs slewed around it, each about thirty feet away, and the hatch doors opened, letting marines spill out in a semicircle. Master Chief Cole, hefting his Revenant in one cybernetic hand, made

deployment hand signs with his free hand. Shepard approached the Beacon even as her squad began making a defensive perimeter, rifles aimed outwards.

The beacon, she saw, was not just an evac beacon, but the kind ejected from a ship when it was in distress and going down. The beacon was in transmit mode, but it was just broadcasting a general distress signal, not the recorded message that should have told them what caused the beacon to be launched in the first place. Shepard knelt down, wiping a patina of dust from the control panel, and used her omnitool to interface with the Beacon. "Keep a sharp lookout", she said, as she began to work.

It took her only a few seconds to access the beacon's command menu, and she recoiled in shock as she realized the message on the beacon had been deliberately deleted. She fished around in the small file system the beacon had, but whoever had done this had been very thorough. Frowning, she moved to see if she could access the beacon's sensor pod, when she realized that it had also been modified.

A single mass pulse generator was hooked to the sensors. She puzzled over this, before calling out. "Tali, come look at this...the hell?"

The quarian trotted over, kneeling next to Shepard and bringing up her own omnitool. After several seconds, Tali gave a small, confused sound. "It looks like someone has cross-linked this beacons' sensor pod to this MFG... so when you trigger it to download the telemetry, it sends out a large subterranean pulse. "

Shepard arched an eyebrow, her mirrored faceplate hiding the gesture. "This isn't stock. Someone modified it to let .. someone know .. when someone accessed it. And if they went to the trouble to wipe the logs, I doubt they left the sensor data intact."

Tali nodded, and Shepard stood. "Kaidan, draw everyone back. Put both MAKO's on the ridge back there, with someone manning the guns, and move everyone else into Prudent Fist assault formation. I think this damned thing is a signal emitter, and when I set it off, we're gonna get hit by whatever took out Kahoku's group."

Kaidan did so, leaving Shepard alone with Garrus and Liara. The turian unlimbered his sniper rifle, glancing around. "You realize this plan has us being caught in the trap with you, right, Sheep?"

Shepard only nodded, and there was something ... cold ... in how she did it. Her hands slipped to her back, drawing forth the ODIN shotgun, shifting it into slug-shot mode. Garrus uneasily stepped back, almost unconsciously falling into his old turian military assault stance. Liara glanced around nervously, hesitantly drawing her pistol, eyes wide as she turned her head left and right.

A few moments passed, a weak breeze kicking up faint trails and smears of dust in the air, and then Kaidan's voice sounded. "Position set, Commander."

Shepard nodded and tapped several controls, bringing up the sensor telemetry. Both she and Liara winced as the mass effect pulse went out, an almost subsonic rumble mostly felt in the bones, and then the sensor data turned from static to a Cerberus symbol.

A moment later, a voice spoke, recorded, calm, amused. "Congratulations, Admiral Kahoku. We knew you'd never give up on your men, so we decided to draw you in. We know you remember Akuze, so this should be a fitting goodbye." The sensor unit blanked, and Shepard stepped back.

*Akuze...the colony wrecked by –*

She wasn't even able to finish the thought as a titanic roar shattered the air, and it was only her reflexes that saved them. With savage might she used her biotics to throw Garrus and Liara backwards, both shouting in alarm, and then used the kanquess to charge backwards blindly, stumbling as she came out of it.

Where she had stood a few seconds before, a toothy maw erupted, teeth the size of her leg trailed by long, milky tentacles. A body emerged, slick with liquefied mud and mucous, barrel shaped and as wide as a city bus, higher and higher, until that vast head tilted to look in her direction.

She could hear Wrex cursing over the comm link. "Thresher Maw!"

Before anyone else could do anything, Shepard sprang to her feet. "Get to the MAKO, GO!" She shoved Garrus into Liara and, lifting her shotgun, performed a biotic charge.

The streak of blue light slammed into the thresher maw's deformed skull, erupting into the blinding flash of a nova, making the worm screech in agony. Shepard anchored herself to the thing with a biotic pull, and began emptying her shotgun into it's head at point blank range, trying to distract it from Garrus and Liara, who were running full out even as the two MAKOs surged forward.

The maw screamed, and Shepard quickly charged back to the ground as its mouth erupted into a torrent of acidic bile, spraying through the air to land impotently sixty feet away. The dirt under the messy vomit just evaporated under the acidity of the mix. Shepard landed about ten feet beyond the edge of the muck with a skid, sliding back a few feet as she came to a stop.

"Now, fire!" She called, and both MAKOs opened fire with the main guns, shells crashing into the beast's flank and head. The first shot enraged it, but it turned into the second blast and screamed loud enough to shake the ground. A torrential jet of green ichor splashed out from a gory crater three feet wide in its head, and with a shuddering shiver, the massive thing collapsed to the ground, smashing into the terrain hard enough to nearly jolt Shepard from her feet.

She panted for a long moment, grinning to herself. She was still grinning and thinking of what she could say when she turned to see both MAKOs flipped through the air, as two more thresher maws erupted from the earth, sending both the heavy tanks flying...

... leaving Garrus and Liara standing in the open, with no where to run.

O-OSABC-O

The MAKO was tumbling, but Master Chief Cole was not out of the fight yet. He triggered the mass effect jets, turning the tumble into a wild spin, making the Marines in the back yell in alarm. With a grunt, he shifted the top jets to full, slamming the tank downwards toward the ground. The MAKO impacted with a lurch and slowly skidded to a stop.

Even as he did so, on top of the MAKO, Chief Williams gritted her teeth and opened fire with the main gun on the closest thresher maw, blasting it in the torso. The explosion of the mass accelerated HE shell was satisfying, but the maw just swayed in place before turning to face them and diving down into the ground.

Cole shook his head, throwing the MAKO into a hard reverse, then swinging the tank wide. His eyes scanned the smooth ground, and he cursed himself for not remembering the same, unnaturally smooth terrain on Akuze when he was assigned to do cleanup after the Massacre. The lone survivor, the now famous Captain Delacor, had defeated a swarm of maws by detonating the fusion generator of the destroyed colony, but not before he lost his entire unit trying to fight the maws conventionally.

Cole wasn't about to make the same mistake. He triggered the jets, shifting the MAKO to the side, and a few seconds later the maw erupted very close to where the MAKO would have been otherwise. Grinning, he felt the tank shake as Williams planted two more rounds into the beast. Having learned from the lack of effect of a body shot, Williams targeted the head this time. The first shot blew off a fifteen-foot long tentacle and drew an angry roar, but Williams second shot flew right into its mouth and detonated, blowing the back of its head apart in a spray of ichor and chunks of bone that pattered

down to the ground in a grisly rain. The Marines cheered as Williams blew the thing a mock kiss.

Meanwhile, the other MAKO was in serious trouble. Hit more directly, the drive train was seizing up, and Kaidan couldn't get the vehicle out of the way of the towering creature coming at them like a freight train.

Wrex, still in the turret, fired at the maw a couple of times as the MAKO finally bounced to a shaky stop. The two hits were minor, blasting a way a chunk of flesh, and Wrex knew that only a direct shot to the head would stop the thing.

As Kaidan tried to back the MAKO out of the flat area towards one of the exposed rock spars off in the distance, Wrex grinned as the other MAKO blew the head off of the thresher maw they were facing. The one pursuing them broke off, erupting from the ground angrily and spitting a wad of corrosive bile at the distant vehicle.

Wrex cursed, as the other MAKO was hit directly, one of the tires warping under the assault. He cursed again, this time nervously, as yet another thresher maw erupted from the west – only to laugh a biotic blast lit up the entire battlefield, warp fire spilling over the thrashing animal's head.

Wrex concentrated, focusing in on the maw that was slewing back and forth towards the other MAKO, before firing once. His shot was true, the massive shell catching the maw in the back of the head just as it erupted again from the ground, blasting it back down to the dirt. The other MAKO fired its own guns, blowing the front of the beast apart.

On the ground, Garrus reloaded his sniper rifle, having put out both of the thresher's huge eyes, while Liara panted shallowly next to him, having thrown all her might into a powerful biotic strike that staggered the huge, worm like beast. It was now spitting at Shepard, who was dodging and rolling, flashing in and out the kanquess biotic charge with almost effortless grace.

With a grimace, Liara gathered her strength once more, exhaling as she forced her energies into a single bright line of biotic force. A large slash erupted on the 'face' of the beast, shearing off several massive teeth and two tentacles, and the maw retreated back into the ground. Shepard performed a charge, erupting about ten feet behind Garrus and Liara, her armor still spotless except for a splash of mud on the knee. "Jesus fucking Christ! Wrex, blow that fucking beacon apart!"

Wrex complied, the MAKO's main gun barking its fire forth a moment later, and the ringing pulse of noise that had echoed through Liara's bones the whole time finally fell silent. They waited several seconds, looking around nervously, before realizing the maw was not coming back. Shepard activated her comm again and spoke quickly. "Shut the MAKO engines down, and dismount. From what we know about these beasts, they're attracted to vibration. Meet up near Kaidan's MAKO."

It took about five minutes for everyone to gather. Miraculously, the acid that had nearly wrecked Master Chief Cole's MAKO did not eat completely through the armor plate, and no one was injured. Wrex leapt down lightly from the turret, landing in a crouch. "Shepard, you faced two thresher maws on foot. You trying to be a krogan again?"

Despite his good-natured tone, there was a note of displeasure in his voice, but Shepard merely shrugged. "We had to react to the situation as it happened...I sorta doubt anyone is prepared to fight multiple thresher maws." She sighed, then turned to the group. "Alright, listen up. Based on what we just saw, it's pretty fucking clear what happened to Kahoku and his men. They probably touched down some distance away, and got eaten alive by the maws. Given that we just killed three of them and there's at least one more, we have no way of knowing if additional maws are roaming around."

She gestured angrily towards the two MAKOs, one wrecked and the other one badly damaged. "In any event, our rides are too shot up to risk. We can probably get them up high enough for pickup, but that's

about it. Florez, Montoya." She pointed to the two DACT troopers. "Split up and recon in the direction of the last comms with the Phoenix from Kahoku's group. You're the only fast movers we have now, so stay alert and in comms."

The two nodded, and triggered their mass-packs, leaping off into the sky. Shepard turned to Tali. "Your drones didn't pick up anything?"

Tali shrugged, ducking her head. "No... I'm sorry. I didn't think to have them scan the ground, and they didn't pick up anything suspicious within range. I couldn't send them into the area of the jamming field or I'd lose control..."

Shepard nodded, and then sighed. "Put them up now, that will give us some warning if another maw shows up." She turned to Master Chief Cole, even as two balls of haptic light erupted and began circling the group. "Master Chief, modifying the plan a bit. Leave four men here to guard the MAKOs and man the comms relay. Two men from each squad, I guess. Squad 1 will accompany myself, Liara and Garrus in the direction of the last known position of Kahoku."

She rounded on Kaidan. "Squad 2 will accompany Kaidan, Tali and Wrex, and using Tali's drones, identify the source of the jamming. Once you locate it, do not engage, plot its location and fall back to comms range. If we get into trouble, we'll call you. Questions?" She glanced around, then nodded. "Move."

Telanya was pleased that her squad would be the one attached to Garrus, and she opened a private comm channel with him as the two groups split up. "That was...pretty crazy."

Garrus glanced nervously at Shepard before responding on the private channel. "Yeah, even crazier than usual, Tel. Shepard's been on edge since we had that mess on Eingana, and she's hard to read at the best of times. But I've never heard of anyone going up against a Maw on foot." He paused. "Then again, like she pointed out, what else was there to do?"

Telanya thought on that as they began walking, only to come to a stop as the voice of Sergeant Montoya sounded on the scouting comm channel. "Commander, I'm at the old colony site...and I've found what's left of Kahoku's team. There's nine dead thresher maws that I can see, but it looks like the unit was overwhelmed. Their shuttle is overturned and wrecked. I see eleven dead DACT and about a dozen others. The JOTUN mech is down, tangled up in a maw, but it may be online if we can get to it to repair it."

Shepard nodded. "Anything else?"

The trooper's voice was worried. "Yeah. There's not enough bodies, so I'm assuming the maws ... well, ate some of them, ma'am. I don't see Kah-" He stopped, and there was the distinct sound of him arming his minigun. When he spoke again his voice was grim. "I think you'd better double time it, Commander. I can't find Kahoku's body, but I just found two more Marines, and both were killed with shots to the head by a weapon. There are footprints that don't match SA boot patterns as well."

Shepard narrowed her eyes. "Get to cover and keep your eyes open, Sergeant. We'll be there shortly. Shepard out."

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## Chapter 74: Chapter 65: Cerberus, Trap

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*A/N: I hadn't planned to update this story anytime soon, and given the changes I've had in my schedule (and the fact that I'm working on some other stuff) it will be some time before I get back to it. That being said, I decided I'd get this chapter out even if I don't update it again anytime this year.*

*I'm undecided as to the ultimate fate of everyone in the story, but I can say that the modifications I've made are pretty extreme – and haven't been done by any other author prior to this. This chapter is a bit short, but there it is.*

*The JOTUN mech is the forerunner to the ODIN mechs seen in ME2, but built bigger and tougher since they had weaker weapons.*

*Warning: my beta reader didn't have a chance to go over this wreck of a chapter, so expect rampant comma abuse.*

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Liara had not been sheltered her entire life, but even the roughest archeology trip couldn't prepare her for the carnage that was the last stand of Admiral Kahoku's small strike team. Nine massive thresher maws, all of them bigger than the ones who had attacked the Normandy's MAKO's, were shattered and lay dead around the ruined buildings of the old colony site.

Here and there were torn bodies, half melted due to thresher maw spit, or bitten in half with giant chunks splattered near their ravaged corpses. The DACT troopers had clearly fought the hardest, most of them were so ruined it was hard to make out if they were men or women. But the rest of Kahoku's marines had obviously fought as hard as they could as well.

There was a massive splatter of blood and viscera next to a group of several marines and two soldiers in jet black armor with a silver stripe down the left arm and the letters "A I S" printed neatly on the stripe. The group had been in a firefight, as they were riddled with bullets and plasma burns.

Liara closed her eyes , not wanting to see their tortured positions. She heard Shepard's voice over the radio, cold and blunt. "They died hard, they died standing." Liara never could grasp the human fascination with how one died, but could certainly hear the undercurrent of anger in Shepard's voice.

Tali was off to one side, along with Senior Chief Vega, accessing the remains of the JOTUN mech. With a grunt , Vega wrenched a badly warped panel off of the frame of the ruined mech, and Tali went to work with her omni-tool. After several seconds, the JOTUN shuddered, and moved slightly.

"Joint Tactical Unit 5530-X online. Warning: this warframe has suffered catastrophic damage."

Shepard walked over to it, lifting her Spectre badge into the battered mech's range of optical sensors. "Commander Sara Shepard, SCV Normandy. Council Spectre. Battle readiness report, now."

The JOTUN heaved itself free of the corpse of the thresher maw it was entangled with, coming to most of it's 14-foot height. Its entire left arm was gone, the right half melted, most of it's torso also battered or scorched by acid, and the left leg bent at a sharp angle, but the mech managed to step clear of the corpse nonetheless. Tali's eyes widened. "H-how is that even possible!?"

A faint smile crossed Vega's face under his helmet's faceplate. "We built JOTUN's tough, chiquita. They're rated to take almost anything...but that is one seriously hacked-off mech to survive a thresher maw."

The JOTUN , for its part , immediately queried Shepard's omnitoool. Once it had confirmed her status, the mech it began speaking. "This unit is at 22% capacity. All armor segments have been damaged. Primary power core offline. Secondary power core at 54% stability and falling. Emergency battery power sufficient for nine hours of full operations. Primary weapons disabled. Secondary weapons disabled. Sensors at 9% capacity. Mobility at 15% capacity. This unit is unable to perform primary mission specifications." With a grumble of gears, the machine shut down again.

Shepard sighed. The JOTUN was a powerful war machine, but the VI's in them tended towards what

some would call having a stick up the ass. Namely, it took orders in a very liberal fashion. She spoke again, tapping her comms to reactivate the unit. "Acknowledged. I am assuming command. Stand down from combat readiness and provide after action debrief."

The JOTUN's motors ground inside, something making an electrical frying sound for a moment before the massive mech knelt to the ground. "Complying. Mission parameters set at Cryptic Spear. Known information: command designate Admiral Kahoku received tight-beam transmission from unknown comms source. Immediately requested backup from dedicated units not defined by organizational charter. Units transferred to SCV Phoenix, transition to Edolus surface."

The mech paused, as its mechanical voice garbled for a moment, before clearing. "Landing on Edolus completed successfully. Beacon at landing site clear trap, bypassed for old colony site. Upon arrival, two ground to space missiles impacted landing craft, resulting in uncontrolled landing. Several personnel injured by uncontrolled landing. Exiting the craft, Admiral Kahoku was immediately targeted by unknown enemy sniper and shot in the knee."

Shepard grimaced, but focused as the machine continued in a monotone. "DACT and Marine infantry immediately shifted to Midnight Shield defensive posture. Units engaged in small arms fire with unknown assailants. During this, a cylindrical object was fired into assault group by unknown assailant. Cylinder began emitting high-pitched supersonic tone, harmonic vibrations. Arrival of sixteen thresher maws in eleven minutes."

"Sixteen!?" Master Chief Cole's voice was filled with horror.

The mech took no notice of the interruption. "DACT ground troops were able to destroy multiple targets using combined heavy weapons. Severe losses were incurred by the assault group. This unit destroyed four thresher maws in direct combat before incapacitation. Last sensor records indicate Admiral Kahoku's defenders were 96.5% likely to be overwhelmed."

Shepard sighed, shaking her head and glancing around the battlefield. "I can only presume, seeing as I don't see his body, that the 'unknown assailants' must have captured him. I need information on what we are facing here."

Both Garrus and Telyana were looking over the bodies, and with a clucking sound Garrus gave one of his not-quite shrugs. "Snipers, mostly, it looks like. Your soldiers were caught in a heavy cross fire, and they must have had their formation and cover disrupted by the thresher maws." He gestured to one sprawled marine, the man's helmet cleanly pierced by a hole in the back. "They were being sniped at even while they were fighting the maws. This was a massacre..."

Telayna knelt next to one of the AIS agents, scanning with her omni-tool. "Whatever weapons these humans got killed with, they were very powerful. This man's armor was *buckled* at the point of impact."

Vega shrugged. "So?"

Telayna looked up, blue eyes visible through her visor. "The round that hit him was either phasic and bypassed his shields, or was powerful enough that they overloaded and fell and the round hit hard enough to crumple and splinter the armor. Phasic rounds leave a pulse residue behind – gangers on the Citadel love to use them against C-Sec. This person was only hit once, so the shot was that strong."

Shepard made a circling motion with her arm, and everyone gathered around. "Alright, listen up. Mission parameters are still on from the briefing on the ship – we have a missing admiral, and at a minimum, an enemy force with extremely high powered sniper rifles and good aim."

Shepard tapped her omnitool comm unit. "Lieutenant Alenko, status on finding that jamming device."

Alenko's voice sounded somewhat thin and stressed. "We've located it , commander. Disguised as colony wreckage. Tali's deactivated it, but it was powered and anyone monitoring it is going to know we've cut it off. We didn't see any signs of battle...or installations, either. We're headed back to your location now."

Shepard nodded, glancing at Cole. "Thoughts, Master Chief?"

The older man adjusted his grip on his Revenant LMG and made a tsk sound. "I don't like it, Commander. The Admiral went in with a stronger , heavier group and got his ass handed to him on a silver platter. We don't have a fix on where this headquarters might be – or if it's really on this planet at all. This may have just been a mental fuckjob – draw the guy here and kill him nice and quiet."

Shepard glanced at Garrus and Telanya. "How about you two?"

Garrus rolled his neck and then made a clacking sound with his mandibles, as if in counterpoint to Cole. "I .. am not sure. I mean, this is a pretty clean killzone, and the thing with the thresher maws seems kinda ... crazy and difficult to set up. I'm not saying it's not a trap. . . but why go to all the trouble to kill an Admiral like this when they could have just , you know, had him shot or something on the Citadel?"

Telanya nodded, and Garrus continued. "I'd say it's legit, because it's just too much preparation for a trap. I mean, the guy was a rear admiral, not someone critical to the Systems Alliance, after all."

Shepard took in Garrus words, thinking back to what the JOTON mech had said. "...they knew they were coming. They knew Kahoku was coming...but he somehow knew the site we landed at was a 'clear trap'. She blinked. "Shit."

Cole and Vega immediately snapped to attention, the tone of her voice drawing them alert. "Ma'am?"

Shepard exhaled, almost savagely, and reduced the choke on her ODIN shotgun. "I'm an idiot. This wasn't a trap for Kahoku. They fucking knew he was coming and they had it all planned out, and they had someone on his ship to guide him right where they wanted him! This was a trap for whoever got sent to look for Kahoku." She snarled. "A trap for **me**." She slapped her omni. "Lieutenant! Double time it. This is a goddamned set up -"

The omni buzzed. "Commander, this is Pressly! Three Cerberus cruisers just jumped in system!"

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The room that Rachel Florez stood in was a testament to coordination, to control, and above all to information. A circular pit , broken by two ramps and lined by forty information and command stations, dominated the room, with a narrow railing encircling it. Large haptic screens on the walls detailed Cerberus's desperate fight with the entire might of the Citadel Navy and several field armies, a fight they were losing. And yet, from this one room, she could command the entire military forces of the entire Organization, moving ships here and there, deflecting the thrusts of the Citadel Navy to try to flank her remaining cruisers.

The Iron General paced slowly, her night-black uniform trimmed in orange swishing faintly as she did so. Her face was drawn, her eyes flicking back and forth between displays, occasionally quietly giving an order to one of the operators in the room. Above her, at a large command plinth, the Shadow Hand stood impassively, monitoring financial transactions on six different worlds.

"That fucking traitor has spiked our investment net, Rachel. Tens of billions of credits pissed away in bad trades and useless futures, more just ... gone... laundered through a net of temporary shell corporations owned by a conglomerate on Bekenstein that just had it's HQ and financial records destroyed in a 'terrorist bomb' attack. He's been planning this for years, and we didn't even see it!" The

big man clenched his fist, and Rachel gave a tiny smile.

"Richard, you knew it would come to this sooner or later. Relax. The aliens have only found one of our five hold fasts. We've got six deep space fallback positions in the Shadow Sea that haven't had any non-Cerberus traffic for the past nine years. The Agamemnon is docked and ready to go as soon as we finish this stupid farce here, and the second mass relay in this system isn't even mapped, no one but us knows about it. It's not like we're in any danger."

Richard sighed, punching the desk. "I know that. That isn't the point. Neutralizing the threat Shepard poses was important, but the plan to do so was HIS plan. I don't know if it will fly, or if Jack has set this up to fail as well. "

Rachel moved up the stairs towards the command plinth, wincing as the data maps showed another Cerberus position – this one on Bekenstein – overrun by Spectres and turian special forces. "It's a good plan. Kahoku was dirty enough, and the stuff that's Shepard will 'uncover' will support our story. " She laughed. "And what a story it is. Rogue elements in the SA , wanting to move humanity away from the Citadel and Council control, plot with a rogue Spectre in terrorist acts. When it blows up, they frame Cerberus, and Kahoku is put in charge to make sure it all sticks. But it all goes bad when he tries to take out the leadership and he's killed, but alas, so are the Cerberus leaders."

She snickered, and Richard grunted. "Like I said, it's one of Jack's overly complicated, too-many-moving pieces plans, and given that he's just stabbed us in the back, I don't think it's a wise idea to depend on it not going wrong." He paused, then tapped at a data console. "Prepare the Agamemnon for immediate departure."

Rachael leaned over the command console. "The pincer force just arrived in system, the Normandy is gone stealth. Excellent timing. We'll have to make this quick, if you actually plan to leave now. And I don't really see the reason. There's no way Jack could have known things would blow up just when Shepard got here – "

Richard snorted. "I'm not taking any chances. Jack may have poison pillled this plan too. The fucker is like a snake made of goddamned teflon. What's the status on the surface?"

Florez snorted. "As expected. We lost the jammer about ten minutes ago. Surface sensors show Shepard is moving her people back into one group. Their tanks are too damaged to use, and they're about five minutes out from the mockup." She tapped at a haptic control, smiling tightly. "In a few minutes, once they figure out they've been baited, we'll have the 'malfunction' and stage the 'escape' to attract their attention. No, we'll wait until they've reunited their ground force...yes. " She tapped in a few more orders, concentrating.

Richard glanced up at her. "You're *sure* this stupidity will work?"

Rachel folded her arms behind her and fell into a parade rest stance, almost unconsciously. "I know my student, Richard. Shepard is constantly paranoid. She will expect traps, so we give her traps, just enough that she doesn't ask herself the questions that would lead to bringing down the entire Navy on our heads. She'll expect to be lured, to be betrayed – hell, she'll probably go into this expecting something horrible. When she finds out that Kahoku was 'dirty' and the fallback story, it will just play to her own biases. As a plus, the figure we have for the 'escape' is .. of personal significance to her. He will ensure she doesn't dig too deep."

Florez paused, glancing back at the elevator. "Besides, the risk is minimal. The rigged up site we're faking as HQ is over six hundred miles from here. As long as we can convince her that she's wiped out our HQ, and of course, write off our existing forces once that happens, we will be free. We can always come back and pick up our abandoned stuff. "

Richard shook his head. "And if she sees through it, figures out it's a big scam?"

The Iron General smiled. "Well, the best way to cover anything up is explosives. Shepard's important, but not irreplaceable. The chance at actually controlling the geth and the ship Saren has discovered is far more important than humanity having a Spectre. If things go out of control, or if somehow she realizes the people she's killing aren't the actual leadership of Cerberus, we've got a 10 megaton nuke charge ready for demolition." With an almost languid gesture, she pointed to one of the sub-control consoles off to one side, hazard glyphs flashing. "Relax."

Richard nodded, his tension settling. "Alright." With a shrug and a large exhalation of breath, he gave a wry smile. "Alright, you win. I'm still prepping the ship to get the hell out of here, but chances are, she'll take what she sees as a fait accompli and roll with it. But your mention of explosives brings up another point."

He pointed to the map of Cerberus positions across space, flaring blue and red. "The organization is being devoured alive. Some of the outlying bases, not to mention the one hold-fast they've found so far, have a lot of sensitive information on them. Why not just blow the compromised facilities now? We can't rescue them, and it would hurt the aliens even more."

Rachel glanced around at the various tactical operators in the Cerberus Command Pit, but not a single one flinched at the cold-blooded declaration. She then ran through the choices in her head, privately, not moving a muscle. After a long few seconds, she sighed. "You're right." She turned to the tactician sitting next to her in one of the tactical consoles. "Execute 'Aegis Ignus Purgatio'."

The various men and women at the stations nodded, triggering commands cunningly transmitted through a series of buried transceivers and bounced via several tight beam laser-link nets to a stealth satellite in the system's one gas giant. The delay took several minutes, due to the long distance and the fact that lasers were limited to lightspeed, but once it hit the satellite, that device whirled into action, firing up its QEC relay.

Across the galaxy, thirty seven Cerberus installations suddenly underwent uncontrolled explosions, as the 10 grams of pure antimatter below each base had its magnetic shielding suddenly cut off. Megaton explosions shattered thirty seven landscapes, killing tens of thousands of alien infantry and Cerberus soldiers alike, denying the enemy any further intelligence or captives.

O-OSABC-O

"Evasive maneuvers!"

The Normandy barrel rolled through scattering debris, feathering drive output, as the explosion from the SSV Phoenix radiated through space. The damaged ship had barely managed to limp back to the mass relay when the three white and gold cruisers emerged, firing almost immediately. The Phoenix's shields splintered almost immediately as dozens of mass rounds tore through the ship's superstructure and engines. A spread of missiles blasted the ship apart in a single flare of searing light, nearly catching the Normandy in the blast radius.

Joker cursed, fingers dancing across the haptic control console as he adjusted the ship's pitch. "Damage reports?" Sparks rained down from overhead as a power junction blew out, skittering across his arms and leaving trails of faintly burning pain along them.

Adams' voice came across the damage control comm line, scratchy and tired. "Power blowouts from the shockwaves but no hull breaches. Minor fluctuation in field strength, and some debris pattering damage to the starboard control surface, looks like. Core is nominal, we are at zero fluctuation. IES engaged at full, about four hours of sustainability before we have to break stealth."

Behind Joker, Pressly nodded. "Joker, keep your distance from the cruisers, take us back towards the planet and let's hope Shepard finds something helpful down there. Tac Alley! Bring up a target evasion plot on the main console in the CIC and stand by for ECCM warfare package six." He turned back crisply to the comm-link to the surface. "Commander, we have three cruisers, moving in system at mark 40. They've taken down the Phoenix. No survivors, ma'am. We have taken minimal damage and are moving clear."

Shepard's voice crackled angrily. "What a clusterfuck. You've gone stealth?"

Pressly gave a thin smile. "Yes, ma'am. We're also powering up the jamming packages and loading torpedoes for counterfire if needed. Hopefully we can get clear so we can maneuver to orbit, to make sure we're close enough for a pickup if needed. I know you were concerned about GTS fire but right now..."

"Never mind that. Get back here and tuck into a low-observable orbit, Pressly. We'll figure this shit out one way or the other. Prep a buoy just in case. Contact me when you get into orbit and I'll tight-beam you a data package to load up on it. Shepard out."

The Normandy heeled down, as Joker adjusted the ship's course to take advantage of the natural sensor diffusion offered by the solar wind, and Pressly exhaled. "Set battle stations for silent running, and load all tubes. Set condition 1SQ, full readiness."

With a glance at the tac board, he turned to the CIC. "All we can do now is wait."

O-OSABC-O

"Tali, anything?"

The small quarian was examining the intake from her recon drones intensely. "I think so. There's a weak power spike about fifteen minutes north, under what looks to be a collapsed colony tower. It's probably very well shielded, maybe using double-phase wrapping, so that -"

Shepard sighed. "I get it, it's secure. And it's north, which is where the most of the gunfire that hit the admiral's party seems to have come from." Shepard glanced over her command, sighing, and waved up Cole and Vega.

"Alright, we're going to assume that Kahoku was onto something and they took him. We know this is a trap. I'm thinking they lead Kahoku here to get massacred, and expected the worms to finish him and us off." She glanced around the battlefield, especially at the corpses of the massive threshers, and shuddered. "Regardless, that didn't take, so maybe we can get some answers."

She thrust her thumb into her chest-plate. "I'm taking Liara, Wrex, and Garrus with Vega's squad. Lieutenant Alenko will take Tali, Ash, and Squad one, and both of the DATC troopers, under Cole. We'll swing west, you go east. I want suppressive crossfire setup once we locate an entrance."

She turned to Tali. "Get a comm link going to the four soldiers we left behind with the MAKO's and have them set weapons for GTS mode. If those cruisers come looking, have them ripple fire the M7M GTS standoff missiles. There's only two for each MAKO, but that should give the marines there time to get to cover. Other than that, slave one of your drones to the less beat up MAKO and have them scan for anything out of place. Like giant fucking worms." Tali bobbed her head nervously in acknowledgment, and Alenko glanced over his squad, tapping on his omni tool.

She turned to Liara. "We have some people with first aid and medigel, and the MAKO's have a medical booth that can stabilize some wounds, but Kahoku – assuming he is even alive – is likely to be badly wounded. Can you do a stasis field?"

Liara licked her lips and nodded "Yes, Commander...I can hold one for several hours." She looked as if

she would say more, but Shepard merely nodded, and then pulled a mod out of her ODIN shotgun and slotted in another. "Form up and get ready to move out. Lieutenant Alenko, with me."

Walking a short distance away from the group, she turned on her point-to-point comm and lashed it to Kaiden. "Alright, Lieutenant, I'll make this quick : don't fuck this up. No heroics. Straight and clean."

Kaiden nodded "Yes , Commander." His voice had a note of confusion in it, and Shepard sighed.

"Alenko, right now we are dealing with a political clusterfuck. I've recently had my ass-reamed by no less than the Fleet Master himself on such things, and I don't want to have a repeat of having several admirals telling me that I'm little more than a jumped – up street thug. Whatever we find inside is probably going to be bad. What I say, goes, no arguments, no questions. Don't fuck it up."

Alenko nodded more slowly this time, the gears in his head turning, before answering. "Yes, ma'am. Do you have any additional tactical instructions?"

Shepard glanced around. "Yeah, don't get scragged. Move your team out, fastest speed. The quicker this shit is over the quicker we can ghost the fuck out of this system."

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## Chapter 75: Chapter 66: Cerberus, Strike

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*A/N: This shit's about to get on like Galvatron, folks. Didn't think I had another chapter in me, but a few hours of listening to the TRON soundtrack produced the following.*

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### O-OSABC-O

The drone flew high overhead, gleaming only faintly in the dim sun that filtered down through the clouds, and behind it Shepard's squad marched along gamely, rifles leveled and omni-tools scanning in all directions. The move from the last stand of Kahoku's men was a grim one, and everyone was listening to the advice given by Wrex on avoiding vibration, which might attract thresher maws.

The ground beyond the broken remains of the colony was a tumbled mix of broken hills and collapsed, shattered roadways, torn to pieces here and there by the passage of thresher maws. A couple of massive, coiled skeletons, like bizarre giant snake-skins lined with loops of bone, could be seen in the distance, yellowing and almost translucent in the light. The hulking remains only made Shepard clutch her ODIN more tightly and glare balefully at the drone of Tali's making that spun about in mid air, as if puzzled.

"Energy signature detected. Explosive release, class two biotics. Distance, 3013 meters. Bearing, 159 tac six." The drones digitized voice synched with data streaming across Shepard's omni, red glyphs flaring across the map projection to the west. Shepard raised an eyebrow, and tapped the comm-link.

"Alenko, your drone picking that up, near your position?"

Alenko's return transmission was somewhat scratchy but understandable. "Affirmative, ma'am. Already moving towards it. Scanning for organics..I think we have traces of human blood. Probably from Kahoku's party." A long pause, then a curse from Alenko. "Our drone spotted some kind of artificial structure ahead ma'am, range 220 meters. Permission to engage?"

Shepard nodded, thinking. "You've got the DACT troopers, with the heavy weapons. Send 'em up and let them come down on the location hard, then move up in the confusion and let Williams set up a sniping position. We'll flank from the south west at top speed." She cut the transmission, getting a click of static from Alenko as an acknowledgment, and swung her finger over the omni in a circular motion,

connecting her to the rest of her squad.

"Tactical change. We've got an explosion, an energy reading, and blood trails leading in the direction of both. Alenko's squad is going to check it out, we need to get there fast to back them. It's a three click run, so double time it, people." With that, the squad broke into a run, following Shepard, the drone trailing overhead.

### O-OSABC-O

The ridge that Alenko placed his team on was mostly rock, but there were veins of some milky gray metal that the omnitool identified as lead. Alenko figured metal ore might help stop incoming fire, so he backstopped his assault squad there, setting Williams on a higher hill with her sniper rifle.

He looked ahead, over the ridge. The ground beyond was more of the broken, tumbled terrain he'd seen since landing, but the area around the small cliff was more smooth. Two broken ridges of rock encircled the cliff, shielding it from direct view, but the entire arrangement of rocks looked off. Artificial.

A couple of droplets of blood stood out starkly in the bone-dry dust of the footpath leading to the cliff, making Alenko grimace, and he turned to Florez and Montoya, the two DACT troopers. "You ready?"

Montoya's pitted faceplate was blank, broken only by the red-gleaming haptic lines of his armor, but he nodded in a way that made Alenko sure the man was grinning like a lunatic. "We got this, LT. You ready for us to hit it?"

Alenko nodded. "Hit for maximum confusion, if anyone's there. If no one is visible, hold position and cover our approach. The marines will rush, I follow. Williams, stay up here and cover us with sniper fire until I give the all-clear." She gave a "yes" sign with her free hand, continuing to dial in her sniper rifle.

With that, Alenko nodded to the two DACTs, who tapped at their armor. Florez roared out a battle cry that sounded like incoherent screaming, while Montoya let go with "Jump up, jump up and get down!"

With a roar of mass effect jets, the two power-leaped away, flaring as their shields kicked on and angled downwards even as they flew through the air. Tali watched the two in amazement, shaking her head, and then jumping as lines of mass effect fire began scything through the sky, seeking to hit the DACTs.

"Angel One, incoming fire. Repeat, I have incoming fire. Angling down for DFA strike in three." The radio voice of Florez was cool, as if he wasn't being shot at with heavy mass accelerators, and a moment later he streaked downwards from the sky in a bolt of blue, slamming into a well concealed breastwork. Almost immediately, there was a massive explosion.

A moment later, coughing broke the radio silence. "Angel Two, Angel One is down, life signs vital but his jump pack is out of commission. DFAing, need reinforcement, we have approximately two squads of Cerberus hostiles."

Alenko cursed, and motioned forward. "Shit. Squad! Fervent spear, full charge. Go go go!"

Williams fired, the sniper in her hands lashing out to blow the head off of one Cerberus soldier, sending him to the ground, and the marines charged, Tali following. They crested the next rise, the breastwork now fully revealed, concrete walls carefully stained the exact color as the ground, and a heavy plug of a steel door cut into a short cliff side wall framed by the concrete bunker. Tucked into both corners of the breastwork were two heavy mass accelerator cannon, one of which was now a smoking wreck, it's operator smeared across the ground by the DACT trooper standing atop what was left of his corpse, one heavy armored foot buried in the man's skull.

The other was glowing cherry red, as was the wall behind it, from the full plasma discharge from the second DACT troopers assault cannon as he slammed down in the midst of the Cerberus soldiers, his mass effect field pulsing out to send them stumbling or falling away. He spun, firing the weapon, rapid-fire mass accelerator slugs tearing into the ranks of the enemy.

Alenko leapt the wall with a biotic leap, coming down next to a Cerberus soldier. His hand alight with warpfire, he merely pressed it against the back of the man's armor, sinking through the thin material and severing his spinal cord almost instantly, then ducking under a wild slash from an omniblade and firing his pistol three times point blank range into another Cerberus goon.

The fight was a close – range, chaotic mess, and Tali'Zorah's vicious shotgun put an end to three of the enemy, all lined up and attempting to reform some kind of defensive posture. A disk grenade and a discharge of electrical energy into their weapons made them defenseless, and she simply walked past each one, firing point blank into the backs of their heads. A fourth tried to take her out before Alenko caught him with a throw, hurling the man over the wreckage of one of the turrets with enough force to break his spine.

The marine line was in full possession of the fight now, spraying short bursts mixed with grenades into the Cerberus ranks. With their heavier armor and much stronger weapons, the SA marines were able to shrug off most of the return fire from the Cerberus troops and answer with near impunity. Six Cerberus soldiers went down in seconds, and Cole cut down two more with his Revenant. The remainder were taken out by massed fire from the Marines. Two marines had light wounds and one had caught an omniblade to the thigh, but was patching it with medigel already.

Alenko looked around and frowned. "That was...awfully easy."

Cole glanced around as well and shrugged, examining the corpses. "These guys look like shit, LT. Most of them have medigel patches on 'em already, or bloodstains. I think the Admiral's boys kicked the crap out of them and this butch was half dead even before two DACTs did a goomba stomp on their head, sir. We didn't give 'em a lot of time to get ready, after all. "

The lead DACT kicked the corpse in front of him again, growling. "Piece of shit shot up my damned jump pack." The man turned to Alenko, heaving his assault cannon. "I got a door opener for that door sir."

Alenko smirked. "Hold that thought, Marine. Williams, all clear." He paused, tapping at his omni-tool connection. "Commander, Alenko here. Outer door secured, hostiles down, no casualties. Door is hardened but my DACTs tell me they can take it down, your orders?"

Shepard's voice was as cool as ever, if a bit shaky from her running. "We're six minutes out, hold and wait for us to arrive."

Alenko nodded, then started as a heavy explosion sounded from within the base, and then another, atop the faint sound of an alarm. "Ma'am, we may have a problem. Two more explosions from within the base, and I can hear alarms out here. Unsure of source..."

"Hold position, Alenko." Shepard's voice was colder, and Alenko winced.

"Yes, ma'am." He turned to his squad. "Move to defensive positions and wait for the Commander, boys and girls." He almost laughed at the way the two DACTs hung their heads in disappointment, but frowned when yet another explosion rattled the ground.

*Those blasts are getting closer.*

O-OSABC-O

Shepard's team arrived a few minutes later at a run, mostly grouped together, followed by a clearly out

of breath Liara. The asari glanced around, eyes wide as she heaved for air, then gave an apologetic look at Shepard. "I'm sorry I – "

The Spectre waved it away with one black-armored hand. "You did good enough for a civilian, Liara." Swinging around the far edge of the breastwork, she took in the two ruined turrets, the contorted positions of several of the dead Cerberus soldiers, and the cracked half-moon of two DACT impacts, and shook her head.

"I see the boys had some fun, Lieutenant. Status."

Alenko nodded. "These troopers were already badly wounded or exhausted before the fight, and between being charged by DACTs and caught in our crossfire, didn't stand much chance. Miss Zorah downed three of them with her shotgun."

Shepard gave a surprised glance at the little quarian, who shuffled her feet and looked away. "I see Ash is a bad influence on you, Tali." She put humor in her voice, ignoring an indignant squawk from Williams, and turned to the door. "Any more explosions?"

Alenko nodded. "Several...they're getting a lot closer, ma'am. You think it's Kahoku?"

Shepard shrugged, walking towards the door. "If he's badass enough to fuck up an entire base of bad guys after being captured in that fight we saw back there, he's no one to mess with, but I somehow doubt it's him. We'll find out once we get this door open." She opened her omni-tool and directed her Spectre programs at the electronic locks. In five seconds, the door gave a shudder and opened smoothly.

Tali and Garrus both looked at the door and back at the gauntlet on Shepard's arm, who only grinned. "Spectres get neat toys."

Garrus's voice was dry. "Why don't I have one of those?"

Shepard lead the team in, followed by Garrus, then Wrex, and then by squad. The ceiling and walls were bare, bone white, with black and orange trim, while the floor was rubberized black panels. Two armory lockers were set against the far wall, open, empty. The entry room was about twenty feet long, and high enough even Wrex could stand up straight. A pair of low barricades bisected the room, flanked by some kind of scanning equipment.

Shepard nodded towards the far door. "Squad two, stack up, squad one, trailing firing positions. Garrus, Liara, Wrex, Williams, form on me. Alenko, Cole, Vega, Tali, form up across from Squad one. When we breach, my team and squad two goes left, Alenko and squad one head right. Move!"

The soldiers rushed across the room, glancing around nervously as another explosion shook the base. A bland alarm suddenly droned. "Alert. Security section six has been compromised. Entry access has been compromised. All security teams, respond."

Shepard slammed against the door, using a biotic slam to tear it out of its sockets and send it flying ahead. It flew through the air, bisecting a single Cerberus soldier and crashing into the far side of the corridor. "Tali, drones, scout 'em!"

Tali sent her pair of drones up and ahead, one left, one right, and the squads followed. The base corridors were almost identical to the entry room, with slanted walls and lots of hexagons and panels of reinforced combat glass fronting the entry to rooms.

Shepard swept ahead, panning her ODIN around. There was a long scream and a series of shots from down the hallway, and a Cerberus soldier stumbled into view, bloody and panicked. A moment later, his head was blown off by Garrus, sending the corpse flying back and down to the ground.

Shepard held up a hand in a 'ready weapons' posture, as the sound of footsteps got stronger and rounded the corner.

It was an asari, dressed in the remains of some kind of armored bodysuit of deep black trimmed in silver and white. Heavy curved plates of blue steel covered one arm and both shins, and her features were rather sharp for an asari, with a pair of narrowed blue eyes and full lips. She wore only minimal face markings, and she glanced at the team in confusion, before her gaze fell upon the clear face plates of Liara and, behind Garrus, Telanya.

"Thank the Goddess. You aren't Cerberus."

Shepard tilted her head, examining the asari closely. Her stance seemed ... off, somehow. Less graceful than most asari, and she was built very heavy for an asari as well. The heavy shotgun in her hands was blood spattered, as was her face and body, but none of the blood seemed to be hers.

"No. I'm Commander Shepard, Council Spectre. What the hell is going on?"

The asari exhaled sharply, then glanced behind her and with a firm shrug walked towards Shepard's group, shipping her shotgun as she walked. "Long story. I was a freelance mercenary, when I and the rest of my unit were hired ad-hoc to provide recon support for some big shot human admiral. Next thing I know, my ship is taken out in high orbit the moment we arrive and Cerberus goons are storming it. Sixteen of my sisters died, and I was .. taken captive."

She looked up, something ugly in her eyes. "It wasn't pleasant, human. Your kind can be truly vile when they chose to be."

Shepard glanced at Liara, who looked back helplessly, and sighed. "Cerberus isn't exactly in the good books with humanity right now either. How long have you been captured..and what is your name?"

The asari gave a thin, mocking smile. "I'm Eylana, clanless. I've been here about a week. Like I said, we were supposed to provide support to the admiral that hired us, but I don't know much about that. Captain S'era had all the details, and she's dead." The asari sighed, and gestured with her shotgun to the Cerberus soldiers dead on the floor. "I've been locked up tight – Goddess only knows why they didn't kill me – for days, but yesterday there was a lot of movement of soldiers. They came back all shot up and there was a lot of talk about "fighting to the end to protect command."

Shepard exhaled softly. "Then this is their HQ, good. How did you get free?"

Eylana smiled. "They injected me with something that has been suppressing my biotics, but someone got sloppy and it must have worn off. I still don't feel quite right, but when they dropped the force field to my cell to feed me, I hit them with a slam and shunted power into the field generator to blow it up. I got lucky, the explosion shredded the other two guards."

She gestured to the other hallway, and smiled. "I know I can't survive outside without a suit, but I heard one of them talking about a comm link. I was planning on making my way there and calling for help."

Garrus swept his gaze around. "If this is HQ where are all their soldiers? How many did you kill?"

She shrugged. "Not many. Eight or nine, most in single combat. These guys weren't that good, most of them were already hurt, and none of them were biotic. Whoever they got into a fight with must have given them heavy casualties, but I also overheard something about the 'worms going crazy' – not sure what that means."

Shepard gave a crooked grin. "It means the whole planet is lousy with thresher maws, but some of them may have taken out Cerberus forces. Is everything behind you clear?"

Eylana nodded but also frowned. "Yes, but there's not much back that way except storage and cells. I

didn't imagine I'd make it this far, but I figure the commander and comms sections will be close together, and there are probably more soldiers ahead." She paused. "I can only assume you guys are here to stop them, and I'd like to tag along if I could - I owe them some payback, and you're the best chance I have for getting out of this place."

Tali touched her omni and nodded along with Eylana. "Commander, the drones I sent out – the one I sent to the left has scouted out the wing of the building she came from – no life signs, but nine dead Cerberus soldiers along the way and about ten more in the prison area. The explosions being picked up were probably from her detonating their force field generators for the cells, it looks like they hooked into base power. That means power to a lot of the base is knocked out. The other drone made it about 30 feet before it was blown up by heavy fire."

Shepard nodded. "Eylana, you're clearly a good fighter if you dropped nine of the Cerberus bastards, but you only have a barrier. Stay behind my men. Cole, Vega, move squads one and two up in Sunset Arrow three man fire teams. Alenko, Wrex, Tali, stick with Cole's squad. Liara, Garrus, we're moving with Vega's squad. Shift up to close-in weapons."

It took a few minutes to get everything reorganized, but after that Shepard got her people moving along. The corridor lead another forty feet down to a blind turn, and in the corner was the smoking remains of Tali's other drone.

Shepard held up a hand, and then moved it forward with two fingers extended and made a 'pistol' shape with her hand. Engaging her comm-link, she spoke. "Squad one, rush with full auto. Garrus, Ash, sniper position. Wrex, Alenko, Liara, throw shockwaves. Everyone else, suppressive fire. On three...two..one...MOVE!"

The group stormed around the corner, which opened up into a large security staging area. The ceiling was twenty feet up, festooned with a pair of security turrets in dull-black armor pods. On the floor, a waist-high armored barrier was broken in two places by archways and two squads of Cerberus troops were in position behind them. They opened fire as soon as Shepard's soldiers came into view, and the fight was on.

Without good cover, squad one rushed ahead, firing their Crossfire rifles in short bursts, mixed with grenades. Several soldiers took hits, but the heavier armor and shielding they now had allowed them to shrug them off. Five grenades exploded across the Cerberus lines, sending three of the white-armored soldiers to the ground. Squad one broke left, Cole's Revenant spraying heavy fire across the entire barricade, sending sparks skittering from the steel walls and punching gory holes in a Cerberus soldier.

Squad two broke right, going full auto with their weapons and focus-firing on the turrets in the ceiling. Senior Chief Vega was hit directly by a blast from one of the turrets, sending him skidding away, rifle flying from his hands, but a moment later Tali aimed her omni-tool at the turret, sending cascading sensor disruptions through it's sensor pod. The turret jerked erratically and opened fire on the other turret pod, detonating it in a flash of fire and a rain of blackened debris. Three marines opened up on the hacked turret and streams of mass accelerator fire tore into it before it could shake off the hack.

Liara, Wrex, and Alenko all knelt to kick off their biotic attacks, and cascades of blue suddenly stormed across the floor. The entire defensive line buckled as Cerberus soldiers went flying, stumbled to their knees or were knocked flat. Garrus and Ashley lined up shots as quickly as they could, and they each dropped two, even as Shepard flashed forward in a biotic charge.

She erupted into the Cerberus lines, her impact crashing into one soldier and sending his broken body to the deck. Pulling her ODIN she placed two shots into the back of one Cerberus fighter, the weapon creating gory tunnels in the man's chest and blowing his leg completely off. He staggered back and collapsed, dragging down another soldier with him, and Shepard put a shot into that man's faceplate.

The thin armor plating splintered into a crimson-misted mess as the man's entire head came apart and splashed on the decking.

Feeling movement behind her, Shepard channeled biotic energy into her leg kicking back. The charging Cerberus sergeant took the kick on his knee, which simply folded under four hundred pounds of sudden pressure. The man's armor deformed under the kick, cutting into his muscles, and as he overbalanced from the brutal kick, Shepard swung all the way around with a roundhouse kick from the other leg, slamming her armored foot into the man's head while it was still augmented with biotic energy.

The soldier screamed as his arm was snapped like a twig and his forearm bones were driven along with pieces of armor, right into his rib cage. The man slid across the floor to slam hard into the waist high barricade, breaking his neck as he impacted it head first. Shepard didn't even slow down, reaching out with her free hand to grab the leading arm of another Cerberus soldier, pulling it out of socket almost casually before wrenching the man around to face her.

His terrified features, visible through his clear faceplate, turned horrified as she crunched the barrel of her ODIN into his belly and fired. He staggered back, blood flooding his torso from a huge five inch wide crater in his flesh, and her second shot aimed at his throat, sent him careening back, arms windmilling as his body died before he could even realize it.

Two more Cerberus soldiers came through the far security door, both instantly killed as they did so by sniper shots from Garrus and Ash. Another soldier was hit several times by Wrex's shotgun and marine rifle fire and slithered down the wall, leaving gory blood smears behind him.

The last four Cerberus soldiers were in the corner, before a huge ball of biotic force from Liara slammed into them. Two simply collapsed, the sheer power of the attack snapping their spines. The other two, less lucky, were thrown from the corner with multiple broken bones. The first landed in front of Wrex, who, with a grin, stomped on the man's head. There was a crunch of breaking armor and the snap of breaking bone, and the man shuddered and fell still.

The other soldier, landed in a bloodied heap in front of Shepard, and found his chin tilted up by the barrel of her ODIN. She leaned forward, armored black silhouetted in the dim light from the ceiling and the flickering radiance of the fires from the destroyed turrets, as her squad of marines and allies slowly walked up behind her.

The soldier swallowed, tasting his own blood, spikes of agony from his broken legs drawing tears from his eyes, but he couldn't look away from the cavernous barrel of the ODIN as it almost gently traced it's way along his jaw. Shepard's voice was cold.

"You can either answer my questions quickly and truthfully..."

She tilted her head, then with her free hand, lifted the last Cerberus soldier up into the air. His legs kicked reflexively as she hoisted him with almost arrogant ease into the air, his hands weakly scrabbling at her forearm to loosen her grip with no effect.

"... or I can feed you to my krogan ally, here. "

Wrex drew a long bladed, ugly black knife from his armor's boot. "I've never had barbecued human before. Always went for fried."

The man shuddered and Shepard's smile widened behind her mirrored helmet. "Now tell me who's in charge, and where are the communications in this base."

O-OSABC-O

"Sir, we've reached the QEC repeater node as you asked."

Jack turned his head at the voice, pausing to glance over the haptic information panel on the wall. "Thank you, Miranda. Tell Hughman to go ahead and set up the omnidirectional link and load the Benedict packages for transmission." The Illusive Man stood, brushing a piece of lint from the neo-silk sleeve of his coat, and his smoothly handsome features twisted into something that was *almost* a smile.

He'd correctly anticipated the actions of the Citadel, if only with minutes to spare, and gotten away from Earth scot-free. His private cruiser, reconverted to look like a civilian liner, had translated from Alliance space to a fall-back position he always kept ready at Horizon. Now in high orbit above the world, he had enough time to better evaluate the situation he was in, and that Cerberus was in.

The plans of Richard and Rachel were, in his evaluation, childish. Richard might as well cultivate an evil goatee and swirl a black cape around his shoulders, given all the banality of evil his actions caused, and Rachel really thought her stupid storm-trooper corps could take the Citadel and dictate events to the turians, salarians, and asari.

His expression twisted further, as he paused in his examination to take a sip of his whiskey. Beads of condensation trickled down the glass, pooling on a porcelain coaster, and he closes his eyes a moment as the liquid sank into his gut.

The short-sighted idiots that the SA had foisted off on him had backed Saren, not only hoping to somehow control the geth or Saren's flagship, but to use his actions as a cover to allow them to storm the Citadel. Of course, he wasn't supposed to know that – they'd locked him out of the operational aspects of their plans years ago, or so they thought – but even given that, it was pretty obvious what would happen if it failed.

They'd vanish, and leave him holding a bag he never wanted in the first place. It was clear the SA had no intentions of being dragged down by being linked with Cerberus, even when most of the extremist actions they were hated for were at the behest of, if not the SA itself, then their appointed 'leaders'.

Thus, his early betrayal of them to the Citadel forces and scrambling his tracks was justified, in his mind. He'd managed to salvage about half of the staggering wealth he'd acquired, and about a third of his shell companies were still clean. It was a shame that Cord-Hislop would be investigated so heavily, but the Citadel and the SA wouldn't find much, and all they did find would point right back at Richard.

The Illusive Man examined the haptic feed he was seeing closely. Richard had blown up most of the surviving Cerberus military facilities to try to catch the Citadel forces in the blasts, and he'd inflicted a great deal of carnage. The news feeds were full of the outraged reports, but the Citadel Fleet had cut apart Rachel's precious little force of light cruisers and missile boats, and while there were certainly fallback positions and holdfasts left undiscovered, none of them were staffed by actual meant that if Richard and Rachel could elude being captured, they could start the entire mess all over again.

And as long as they were dug in securely on Edolus, Richard probably figured they were safe enough to do just that, escape. Jack's double-blind plan to get rid of Kahoku and send Shepard on a wild-goose chase would work flawlessly. After all, who would expect an asari to be working for Cerberus? It had taken years of surgery, nano-grafted adjustment, training and coaching from Trellani, but Agent Micha had become 'Eylana' and had proven very effective as an agent.

All she had to do now was lead Shepard by the nose to the carefully prepared false HQ and the information placed there, and Shepard would be lead to believe the SA was responsible for many of the things Cerberus was accused of. There were backstopped documents that would point at certain political entities with the ambition to do such, and the blow-up, while not big enough to take down the entire SA, would have the government on the defensive for years.

Years in which, thinking Cerberus destroyed, the organization could rebuild, unhindered and on it's

own. Jack was rather proud of the plan, and it was a pity that Shepard would be the sacrificial lamb in a political sense, but in Cerberus' view a single Spectre, while important, wasn't critical to the survival of humanity. And thus, the plan had gone forward.

Of course, now the situation had changed.

Jack Harper had carefully reconsidered the threat presented by Saren and Benezia. If they were crazy, and if this was just a meglomanaical attack by the geth, then Cerberus' plan would work nicely. The giant dreadnaught would be taken, and either the Geth would be brought to heel under humanity, or humanity would destroy them and be lauded as heroes.

But if Saren's crazy ideas about 'Reapers' were right, then they were a threat to humanity and had to be stopped. Richard and Rachel never believed they existed, but given the evidence his agent aboard the Normandy had revealed, from the site on Eingana Jack was now convinced Saren wasn't lying.

And that meant, quite simply, that Cerberus's plans were a threat to humanity.

Jack touched the haptic control panel. "Load Benedict into the QEC and then transmit to Edolus HQ."

There was a long pause, and then the computer spoke. "Transmission in progress...complete. Executing."

Jack gave a thin smile. "When complete, slave the comm unit in Decoy 01 to this QEC channel. Also, bring up schematics of comm room for Decoy 01."

The haptic panel shifted, displaying floor plans, wiring diagrams, and security features. "Withdraw turrets 01 and 02 to idle position. When room is entered, maintain idle until positive ID on Agent Eylana. Once targeted, full attack on Agent Eylana, no other targets authorized."

The computer chimed softly, and Jack reached for a cigarette. Lighting it, he sat back down in his comfortable chair, glancing out of the view port to take in the vision of Horizon below. "Alas, poor Richard. I'm afraid the game is about to run out for you."

He inhaled, puffing on his cigarette, and his smile widened. "I think it's time to skew the odds a bit more."

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## **Chapter 76: Chapter 67: Illusive Man, magnificent**

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*A/N: So far, I've managed to get a lot done on both OSABC and the Cerberus Files, but I'm not 100% sure I'm back 'full time' yet. As long as the muse is shaking her ass, I'll keep writing, but I have no idea when that will stop.*

*This chapter is close to wrapping up the Cerberus segment. After the re-do of the outline I had, there's some Citadel and political fallout, then we're finally off to deal with snowy Noveria. Then geth. Then ... we'll see.*

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As it turned out, the captured Cerberus soldier was more than willing to divulge the base's layout when enough biotic force to dislocate both arms was applied. Wrex evinced disappointment that he wasn't allowed to eat the man, but Shepard's joking manner turned cold as she listened to the man spill his guts. Stories of aliens shot and dumped in mass graves, and of 'experiments' the man claimed he couldn't elaborate on, further soured her mood.

Finally, when prodded as to what his men had done to Kahoku, he looked away and mumbled a

handful of words no one but Shepard could make out. Shepard snarled, backhanding the man strongly enough that the snap of breaking bone was heard, and then hoisted him up on his broken legs. Liara looked appalled as Shepard flung the soldier aside to Wrex, who coolly dispatched him with a neck snap, then dropped the corpse on the floor.

Shepard paid no attention, motioning Vega and Cole forward. "Alenko's gonna be leading a strike team, so you are running squads one and two. According to our friend there, the part of the base Miss Eylana came from is just low-security holding cells, storage, and energy generation. The bulk of the base lies ahead, beyond this security room."

She puled up a haptic draw-screen on her omnitool, using her finger to draw a rough map in the illuminated square that popped up. "Directly ahead are barracks and living quarters, and then the base splits. The left wing is high-security cells, research areas, armory spaces and a shuttle bay. That bay has to be taken out of commission so no one gets away. The right wing is monitoring facilities, training areas, data stores and computer systems – and the command and control center, which is where both the comm link and the boss of this nightmare fucking organization is."

Shepard glanced at the two, and at Alenko standing nearby, before continuing. "If the guy was telling the truth, the HQ was never heavily manned, and they lost a lot of their ground forces when the thresher maws went crazy during the attack on Kahoku. Kahoku *may* be alive, if so, he's going to be in that high-security wing to the left. Alenko will take Wrex and Tali, along with Cole's squad. Cole, your objective is freeing any prisoners, while Alenko takes out that shuttle bay and gathers up evidence of any research that stands out."

She turned to Vega. "Your squad will trail me, Liara, Garrus, and Miss Eylana. We're going to try to breach the command and control center, but there's at least one more hard-point of defense between us and the comms room, so we may have to dig in and wait for the other force to rejoin us. In any event, I need both Garrus and Sergeant Telanya to dig through their computer systems to find us any traces of a lead on Saren."

She paused, her eyes tracking everyone across the room, gaze hard and cold. "I shouldn't have to say this, but everyone here knows my reputation. I am going to transmit, via omni-tool, one demand for surrender for these fuckers, since the alarms I hear in the background tell me they know we're here. Anyone throwing down their weapon and surrendering in the next ten minutes will be spared."

Her eyes grew colder. "After that, I don't want to see any prisoners."

Williams looked upset, and Liara grimaced, speaking quietly. "Wouldn't prisoners be useful to the Systems Alliance, or to find out – "

Shepard interrupted her with a slashing movement of her free hand. "There are a lot of problems with that. We may be facing upwards of sixty to seventy opponents, most of which have military training, all of which have been supporting a terrorist organization involved in the slaughter at Eden Prime, killing and torture of alien sentients, and treason against the SA itself. I suspect, although I can't prove it yet, that someone in Cerberus may be tight with my superiors."

She exhaled. "High Command gave me a list of important planets and operations, and this world isn't on them. The Fleet Master himself did not think it was very likely we would find anything here, so perhaps he isn't in on it. But the ugly reality, Liara, is that these people are the worst sort of criminals, and it's entirely too likely that if we capture them, they may walk. I can't be sure when Citadel forces would arrive to take custody of them, and if a SA ship shows up to arrest them and haul them off, I can't stop them – or prove said ship isn't infiltrated by Cerberus. "

She stood taller. "We don't have any facilities on the Normandy for more than a handful of prisoners,

and when we find the commander I intend to take them, at least, alive, if possible. But I refuse to let any of my soldiers get killed trying to take these fuckers captive when they've shown they'll suicide just to take out alien forces."

She paused. "Finally, they raped Eylana here, and they killed the survivors of their fight with Kahoku, and assuming the admiral is still alive, he's being tortured. No mercy."

She matched gazes with Cole and Vega, who both nodded, and then Alenko, who nodded more slowly. Eylana gave a snort and caressed her shotgun. "They did that to me more than once, actually. Filth. I got no problem with that, trust me. These people aren't worth keeping alive."

Liara looked shocked, but Telanya merely frowned. "What are you, a sister?" Shepard caught the reference, a slang term for asari who were members of the Eclipse mercenary gang, and suppressed a smirk. It was highly unlikely Kahoku would hire alien gang-bangers...

..but then again, why hire an *alien* to go on an operation against an all human enemy? Shepard frowned, turning that thought over in her mind, while keeping half an eye on the exchange between the two asari.

Eylana turned to face her, frowning in turn. "What I did when I was younger is none of your business, frankly. I don't need a damned reason after what these sick fucks did to me for days. I guess that kind of reality is a bit hard on you, though. Not all of us are sidekicks to big-shot members of the Thirty." She glanced at Liara almost hatefully.

Liara merely glanced away, but Telanya's expression went from upset to shocked, and Shepard filed that away. "Enough. Orders are clear. Alenko, Cole, stack up on that far door. Wrex, breaching charge, then squad one, fusillade clearing fire through the hole. Last chance for questions."

No one spoke, and Shepard nodded. Half the team drew off to the side of the door, readying shorter ranged weapons, while the first squad took up firing positions behind the low barricades in the center of the room. Wrex trundled forward, carrying a demo charge, which he placed at the base of the door. He then put up a barrier right behind the charge, ensuring the entire force of the blast would be directed into the hallway beyond.

He looked up. "It will take me a couple of minutes to rig this up, Shepard."

Shepard nodded. "Good. Let's let them know how fucked they are."

Shepard triggered her omnitool. "Cerberus forces. This is Commander Sara Ying Shepard, Alliance Navy, acting as a Citadel Agent of the Office of Special Reconnaissance and Tactics. You are in violation of both Systems Alliance and Citadel law, and have committed criminal acts and acts of violence against an alien sentient being as well as attacked a lawful SA investigative force. You will surrender, immediately, or you will be shot dead where you are found with no chance at mercy. You have exactly five minutes or my combined force of Marines, DACT troopers and Citadel Observer military personnel will execute every living Cerberus person found in this base. This is your final warning."

The line on the omni-tool was silent, for almost a full minute, before a cool voice spoke. "Cerberus dies, it does not surrender. All forces, prepare to repel the invading forces. Execute alien filth you find. Humanity now, Humanity tomorrow, Humanity forever!"

Shepard killed the omni-tool feed. "Kill every one of these fuckers, fast and hard. Goddamned lunatics."

Wrex chuckled. "Done, Shepard." He stood up, checking his barrier again, and stepped back prudently. "When you are ready."

Shepard nodded. "Fire in the hole!"

The blast was staggering, shaking the entire room, and black smoke billowed out from the now collapsed barrier. Immediately, Wrex stepped back even further, and squad one, along with Garrus, Shepard, and Liara, opened fire into the hole where the doorway was, laying down long streams of automatic fire. A few seconds later, Shepard hurled two grenades through the opening. "Second squad, close quarters charge! First squad, Iron Spear! Move!"

Marines hustled, shotguns brought up in sweeping patterns as they stormed through the doorway. The hallway beyond was littered with debris, shattered panels, and over fifteen dead Cerberus soldiers. Most had been killed by flying shrapnel and plasma ejecta from the door, and the rest had been downed by heavy fire coming through after. Twice shotgun blasts rang out, putting gravely injured soldiers down for good, and then they reformed at the next door.

Shepard vaulted ahead, putting away her ODIN and drawing her heavy pistol. "Keep moving, before they have time to reform. Iron spear again, sweeping fire, full ahead! Biotics, shockwave, on three, one two three!" She hurled biotic force down as Wrex, Alenko, Telanya, and Liara did the same, and the far wall and doorway literally shattered under the impact.

The room beyond was clearly a barracks, a broad open bay forty feet across and perhaps a hundred long, with a glassed in walkway above that paralleled a set of side passageways running down each side of the room. Shepard held up three fingers on her left hand and jabbed at each passageway, and three marines peeled off down each one, kicking in doors and spraying fire into the rooms.

Confused and unarmored soldiers crouched uselessly behind bunk beds, firing with pistols. The light fire didn't even deform the shields of Shepard's forces. Cole's Revenant stuttered out heavy rounds, punching large holes in thin metal frames and splattering soldiers that were hit. One Cerberus soldier literally was blown in half, the mass accelerator slug tearing his rib cage apart before tearing out his back in a gory halo of blood mist to strike a second soldier, hurling him to the ground with a missing arm.

Marines fired for effect, spraying rounds everywhere, ricochets doing more damage than direct hits, especially to soldiers still shaken and off balance from the shockwaves. Alenko triggered his omni-tool, spraying sheets of plasma down on the mass of soldiers, and most of them went up in flames immediately screaming. More accelerator fire and blasts of biotic energy from Liara and Wrex slammed another group to the walls or floor hard enough to break bones, followed up by several grenades thrown by Vega, blasting apart the broken soldiers to paste and red smears and splashes.

Some of the Cerberus soldiers threw down their weapons, but Shepard lashed out with a throw, catching a pair of heavy bunk beds in her biotic grip and flinging them at the soldiers. The furniture hit with a deafening clang, snapping bones and smashing the men to the ground. Shepard flexed her hand in a motion, and warp fire lined the metal railings, making them glow cherry red and then sag. The men screamed and thrashed as the metal melted around them, searing into flesh and bone before the entire mass collapsed and caught fire.

Even Garrus turned away from that, and some of the Marines looked pale behind their face plates, but Shepard strode on. Her fist glowed and was limned in biotic fire as she hurled her power forward, a bolt of blue striking the far doorway and sending them splintering to the ground. Marines spilled out of the side passages, splashed with blood, as they had cleaned out the living quarters, and Shepard motioned ahead.

The next fifteen minutes were little more than a slaughter, as most of the prepared defenders were already dead, and those remained were clearly injured from fighting Kahoku's forces earlier or weren't even combatants. Shepard didn't hesitate, killing everything that moved and wore Cerberus orange, and

finally the two squads and her force stood at the main junction.

The way towards the comm center was blocked by two heavy security doors, with bold printing on them. "SECURE AREA – TURRETS WILL AUTO FIRE IF YOU ARE NOT AUTHORIZED ENTRY, SEE YOUR SECTION LEADER FOR ACCESS".

Shepard scowled, and sighed. "Change the plan up. Cole, leave four men here with Williams and Garrus to act as sniper oversight. Tali, you too, setup some auto-gun drones, and make sure nothing gets out of those doors. Everyone else, on me, we're headed to the docking bay and the high security cells."

Cole nodded. "Who has operational command, ma'am? Myself or the tur... uh, Garrus?"

Shepard arched an eyebrow. "You do, Cole, but if he has an idea, listen to him." She watched – amused as Vega merely flicked a hand at Telanya, who moved to join three other marines in covering the door – and turned away. "Let's go."

O-OSaBC-O

"Jesus Christ."

Richard's face was pale as he watched the telemetry coming in from the 'fake' HQ. Originally designed mostly as a place to hold dangerous experimental subjects and as overflow housing for transfers of Cerberus military forces, the mocked up HQ had been staffed with enough soldiers to ensure that Shepard would be convinced this was the real deal.

That was, until he watched how effortlessly Shepard and her soldiers cut their way through defenses that were near copies of the real ones in the main HQ. Two ten man squads and a fifteen man Centurion unit, wiped in less than twenty minutes, with zero casualties to Shepard's forces.

Rachel, on the other hand, had a sardonic, nearly shit-eating grin on her face. "Oh, she has learned her lessons well. She's got her entire force up-armored in top of the line combat gear – and Crossfire rifles! My, my, that must have cost a staggering fortune."

Richard gritted his steel teeth together, flexing one massive fist in frustration. "Rachel, this woman is slaughtering our own forces and you are cheering her on?"

Rachel sniffed. "The attack on Kahoku was a disgrace. A dozen worms outnumbering him four to one and we still lost 70% of our troops. I had the section commander shot for incompetence, but these soldiers have failed us for the last time, Richard. We're not losing anything that wouldn't be gone sooner or later in any case."

A technician came up to Richard. "Sir, the Agamemnon is fueled and ready to depart, but we're having some systems issues with the flight control computers. Engineer Sanderson estimates it will be another fifteen to twenty minutes before they are cleared up."

Richard merely grunted his assent. "I'm glad it's such a happy moment for you, Rachel, I really am. Are you sure 'Eylana' can pull this off?"

Rachel shrugged. "Jack's asari slut, Trellani, is the one who trained her and taught her, so I have no real idea if she'll stand up to close inspection..but neither of the asari have said anything so far. As long as she doesn't get severely injured, she'll check out. Her surface skin has been overlaid with coloring agents and fluids that will look like asari blood rather than human, but she gets shot through the chest or heavy bleeding will destroy the illusion. Plus, she can't hope to pass her biotics off as true asari, as she needs a damned amp. It's hidden in the folds behind the neck, but who knows if the asari biotics feel the strength of fields or whatever."

Richard nodded. "It doesn't matter. Once they find the second plant, we're good. After all, we never told him what he was doing wasn't the truth – he really believes it, and his effect on Shepard should ... distract her from any missing pieces. At least, that's what Jack claimed."

Rachel nodded, turning back to the tactical board. The last of her cruiser forces had been crushed by Citadel fleets, and Holdfast Thermopylae had been detonated before it could be taken intact. A few dozen independent operations continued – HE fuel stations, the occasional strike force tucked away on an uninhabited world – but almost a hundred thousand Cerberus soldiers and twenty six starships had been destroyed, along with over sixty billion in credits.

Even if the ruse worked and the Citadel and SA thought Cerberus dead and gone, it would take a long time to rebuild the forces they needed for Damocles. And without Saren as a distraction, the chance at storming and capturing the Citadel was a longer shot than she cared to admit. Another distraction would have to be engineered...trouble with the batarians, or that lunatic Aria in the Traverse.

Still, she was confident of the eventual success of Cerberus, right up until the point where the computers began running the altered codes that the Illusive Man had transmitted via QEC.

In the main docking bay, the sleek form of the CBV Agamemnon squatted, all heavy lines and blocky white armor. A cruiser armored up to near battle cruiser levels, she bristled with guns, torpedoes and every innovation Cerberus's ship-masters had devised. Her crew was topnotch, even aside from the hand-picked security force and custom-built JOTUN mechs onboard.

Unfortunately, the Illusive Man had a hand in her construction, and had built himself several backdoors into the flagship. Knowing that the Agamemnon was Rachel and Richard's ticket out of Edolus, it had not escaped his attention.

And his attention was usually lethal.

The sixteen anti-matter flecked heavy torpedoes in the ship itself were heavily code-locked to the ship's fire-control system, to ensure they couldn't be hacked and detonated during combat. Sadly, the forty nine torpedoes stacked neatly in the reload bin fifteen feet from the ship had no such protections, and when the Illusive Man's Benedict override hit them, all of them lost containment on the magnetic bottles that separated the antimatter from matter.

The explosion was beyond titanic, tearing a hole eighty feet wide into the base, the plume of hellfire erupting in both directions for hundreds of feet, spraying lethal x-rays and degenerate matter in all directions. The Agamemnon, with shields down and still connected to the HE3 fueling lines that had just finished, didn't explode so much as evaporate. The rest of the docking bay – with three destroyers and over fifty small strike craft – made up for that lack of explosions, blowing up even more spectacularly than the missiles.

Fire raced along corridors, blowing through interlocking security doors and incinerating dozens of personnel, slamming into the power generation engines that hooked into the planet's core, melting those to slag. At the same time, Benedict hit the Cerberus computer systems and security systems like a tidal wave.

Even as the base shook and pieces of the ceiling burst down in rains of sparks and rubble, the computers were failing. Hydraulic lines controlling security doors ruptured, spraying high pressure hydraulic fluid out in lines, locking said doors in the open position. Armories full of defensive gear locked and burned their door motors out, sealing away the weapons the soldiers that remained alive would need to fight with.

The entire research bay lost power, all of the records of research conducted being compacted into burst transmission form and going out in three strong pulses, before being deleted from the computers

entirely. A moment later, random access commands dumped millions of incriminating stock transactions, sales receipts, and video images into said computers, all of them setting up Richard and Rachel as the leaders of Cerberus.

Outside, the heavy turrets of the planetary defense grid that Cerberus had built and hidden at painstaking expense ceased trying to find the sensor ghosts of the Normandy. Banks of missiles and barrels of mass accelerators instead steadily slewed until they locked on to the three circling Cerberus cruisers in orbit. They fired at once, over one hundred and eighty torpedoes mixed in with over two thousand missiles and lead by 55 heavy accelerator shots. One cruiser managed to evade for almost three seconds before being blown out of the sky – the other two, caught completely unprepared, came apart in bursts of light and fire.

Inside the Cerberus HQ, chaos reigned. Fire suppression systems sprayed out foam and water, soaking the ground with soap slurry designed to smother fires and instead reducing footing to a dangerous mess. The galley oven's heated to broil maximum temperature with the doors shut, catching fire almost immediately, while refrigerant lines were over-pressurized and burst out, sending toxic gasses directly into the canteen where soldiers ate.

Mechs all over the base powered up, and began opening fire, both at each other and at Cerberus forces, while the VI's that normally directed base movements began gibbering poetry from Robert Frost. Displays were overwritten with a pair of glowing blue circles, glaring out at screens from every direction, and Rachel and Richard could only watch in horrified, mute terror as the experiments were released from the holding tanks in secure level two and erupted. Howling mutant Terran dogs, crossed with rachni genes, leapt atop and savaged unarmed research staff, while a yahg tore apart his holding cell and landed on his feet, slamming a massive fist into the security guard next to him before appropriating his weapons.

Internal security systems were firing, as security officers triggered omni-tool driven manual overrides to contain the chaos, but the damage was done. The security doors were out, the armories locked and sealed, the base was on emergency power, every method of transport off the planet had been destroyed, and the soldiers were fighting crazed mechs and experiments in every hallway.

At that moment, the QEC link lit up, and the smiling form of Jack Harper stood before them, seated in a deck chair, lit cigarette in one hand and a drink in the other. His voice was cool and wry, and his expression was pure triumph.

"Ah, Richard and Rachel. Catch you fuckers at a bad time?"

Richard's inarticulate roar of rage didn't affect the hologram in the slightest. "I'm guessing so, based on the telemetry readings I'm getting. This QEC link is one way only, as I have no intention of listening to pleas of mercy, threats, or more bad villainous posturing from either of you."

The Illusive Man's expression grew darker. "I'm not blind to what you two have been up to, and I have come into information that suggests that maybe Saren's intentions are not as crazed as they sound at first flush. With that in mind, I'm afraid you two have gone from superfluous to a threat, one that I plan to neutralize as neatly as possible."

He paused to dump an ash from his cigarette, as Richard's face purpled. "Comms, trace the signal!"

The comm tech shook his head. "I can't sir, the entire system is locked up, cycling junk data and looping through testing and security protocols. It's non-responsive."

Richard stormed over to the man, lifting him up from his seat with a single hand. "Then hack it, you incompetent fool, or we're all going to die here!" With a flick he hurled the man back into his chair, his black gaze refocusing upon Jack's shimmering golden avatar.

"I'm sure you're trying to find some way out, but sadly, there are none. I've destroyed your ships – both the Agamemnon, and those in orbit. The fireworks will almost certainly highlight your true location to Shepard's forces, as well as to the Citadel strike force I just notified."

Rachel's jaw tightened as Jack continued. "I've scrambled all your set-up plans to sidetrack or disable Shepard, and made sure that whatever information we have will be easily available to her to find Saren, based on what little we know. I'm sure that by the time she gets around to you, she won't be in a very ... kind ... mood, especially given who you are, Rachel, so I do hope you two kept some sort of weapons available. I'm afraid the explosion in the docking bay probably incinerated everyone in Barracks One and Two, and Barracks Three is right next to the experiment storage bay, so.. "

He trailed off almost delicately, taking a sip of his drink. "At any rate, there's no need to prolong this call. Gloating is very unprofessional, after all. Trellani sends her love. Assuming you two make it out alive, I decided to forward your bolt-holes onto the Shadow Broker. Good luck getting out alive, and I do hope you can remember this is just business."

The signal died, the QEC detonating a moment later in a shower of sparks and a burst of flame that was quickly extinguished by one of the techs. Rachel stood stock still, considering, and then turned to the nearest tech. "Forget hacking the system. Bypass the PA system and try to coordinate whatever forces we have left alive. We have to get into the armories."

She turned to the situation map, which had gone dark, and then to the monitoring display screens that were feeding telemetry from the fake HQ, which had also gone dark. She sighed. "Even if Shepard didn't feel that blast, the Normandy's sensors will be able to pick up the fires from the explosions, not to mention the radiation. If we're lucky, we haven't already taken a fatal rad dose. Break out the med-kits and distribute the anti-rad syringes we have available. Is any one armed?"

Half of the twenty or so techs and support personnel in the command center nodded, displaying light or heavy pistols. "Very good. Those of you who aren't, get the doors leading to the center shut, use muscle power if you can't reengage the hydraulics. Everyone else, forget the computers, start tearing down the consoles and make barricades."

She turned to Richard, who was standing at his desk fuming. "You hardly need weapons or armor, so you'll have to be the center of our defenses, Richard. It will take time for Shepard to finish with the fake base, contact the Normandy, and reach us here. Then she has to fight her way into the wreckage of the outer base to find us. If we are lucky, whatever remaining forces we have outside can winnow down her ranks."

Richard glared. "She just cut through defenses much like that – working ones, mind you – in a fraction of what we thought it would take. Even I can't take down twenty plus marines in heavy combat armor, much less deal with that lunatic of a krogan or the asari bitches."

Rachel only gave a thin smile. "Then we'll have to use our heads, Richard. We haven't lost until we're dead. I've been in worse fixes than this."

Richard only looked at her for a moment before glancing away. "I don't even want to know." With a grunt, he picked up his massive steel desk as if it were a toy and tipped it over. "I'll help move the barricades around. For all the good that will do against biotic shockwaves."

O-OSaBC-O

The tremor was slight, but it could be felt. Shepard frowned, and then her frown deepened as the comm-link on her omni-tool came alive. "Shepard here. Why are you breaking radio silence, Pressly?"

Pressly's voice was clear and crisp, free of the persistent static that had been dogging their comms since

landing. "Status change, ma'am. You're not going to believe this. A few minutes ago, there was a massive explosion about six hundred miles east of your position, near a mountain range. Sensors are picking up eta-band levels of radiation, mostly hard gamma and x-ray. Like a super-massive torpedo strike, or primary fusion detonation."

Shepard shuddered, eta-band was a measurement defined as capable of killing krogan in hours. "Go on."

Pressly's voice turned almost wondering. "At the same time, sixteen GTS sites opened up, full fire, on the Cerberus cruisers in orbit that chased us here. All three were destroyed. Ma'am, that radar locked us up at least once – and did not fire on us. Whoever triggered it was going after Cerberus ships, and based on the missile signatures...they were *Cerberus* ground to space defenses that did so. We're breaking low-observable to swing over the site, full stealth, and try to get clearer sensor and telemetry readings on what we're seeing."

Shepard nodded, thinking. "Approved. Seems like the jamming is gone too. Keep in touch and alert me to any changes, and put a sensor buoy out by the mass relay in case any more Cerberus ships show up." She clicked off, turning to glance at the team behind her.

Her shocking brutality had left most of the team in a slight state of anxiety, but the news just relayed by Pressly had broken that up a bit. "Sounds like there may be more than one facility here. Whatever just happened, it wasn't good for Cerberus. Let's continue our sweep and see what we can find when we storm the command center. Move out."

She met Cole's gaze. "Keep an eye on that door. If nothing else, that may have been their ride off planet, and they may come boiling out. Stop them, fall back towards my unit if you have to, but don't let them get past you." Cole nodded sharply, and Shepard turned away, her black armored form stalking down the blood-splashed corridor without hesitation. Marines and aliens trailed behind her, weapons ready, eyes darting around in preparation.

Cole felt very, very sorry for whoever ran into her.

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## **Chapter 77: Chapter 68: Cerberus, Collapse**

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*A/N: One..more...chapter. Reviews might help me write moar.*

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The trip towards the high-security wing of the base was an interesting admixture of horror and silence, punctuated by the clicking and resealing of helmets as marines had to take them off to vomit.

The first section of the wing was research areas, and it was a scene out of some dystopian, nightmare horror story that seemed to illustrate and populate what Shepard's team found. Huge, barren expanses of gleaming surgical steel were bifurcated by reinforced observation rooms, open topped with grated catwalks above them, while the walls were studded with research alcoves and operating areas. Garishly lit bays full of tanks of bubbling suspension tanks, each one holding horrifically mutated corpses – some human, some alien, some completely unidentifiable.

Many of the rooms held dissection tables, many gleaming immaculately, clean white tile floors and blackened drains hinting at their sinister purpose. But more than a few were occupied, the torn-apart cadavers of turian, asari or salarian forms silent and redolently still on the hard surfaces. Blood spattered in blues and purples, congealing thickly on the floor.

Some were adults. Some were children.

Worse were the 'experiments' – half-conversion borgs, out of their minds with pain, pulling uselessly at their own limbs. A section of humans glittering with biotic power, eyes clawed out and blood-trails streaking down contorted, screaming features, studded with blue-ware biotic cybernetic attachments. Salarians cut open and hooked to strange, glowing machines, a batarian flayed down to muscle and a heavy chitinous substance bolted to his body, spurts of blood leaking through the plates.

There were rows upon rows of broken, shattered corpses, stacked five and six high into narrow hollows in the walls and sealed in the frozen silence of stasis fields. A heavy rack assemblage of metal drawers and refrigeration units was a collection of organs, harvested from dozens of sources.

A circular pit in the middle of the huge room, its top covered with a solid security field, held almost sixty Thorian thralls, standing silent and mute, eyeless heads staring emptily as they tracked nervous marines who skirted around the edge. Shepard ordered the field dropped and six incendiary grenades dropped in, shuddering as the things burned to ash without even moving beyond turning to stare at her in unison.

The research stations were full of abominable things. Some displayed live biopsies, or the results of the injections of various drugs and substances into aliens, the screams underlined by the cool, quiet voices of researchers. Others were too disgusting to view for long – simulated combat tests against what looked to be packs of thralls facing down single asari or turians.

After the first few research stations had been viewed and downloaded, Alenko recoiled from what he found on one, stammering out curses and emptying his pistol into the thing. It took almost five minutes for him to calm down enough to state that the console showed payments from the SA to Cerberus to stage accidents of starships to dust areas of colonies with eezo.

Shepard thought back to the iron-like lines of Fleet Master Dragunov's face, the disdain with which he tossed aside her accusations of doing just what Alenko had discovered. God only knew what else could be found in this madhouse. Part of her didn't want to know. Part of her *had* to know. She had fought most of her adult life against criminals and pirates, slavers and monsters, not because she loved the law or cared about 'right' or 'wrong' but to prevent anymore little girls from ending up like her, to prevent the weak from being preyed upon.

That she could serve, even unknowingly, anyone who would sign off on this disgraceful abomination, made her want to kill, and then take a long, hot shower. She grimly directed her teams to gather more information as she continued looking around.

There were no soldiers, no defenders – the entire research bay was empty of human life. Shepard quietly directed her marines to cover the dead as they passed and record what they found, but to not destroy anything. "As disgusting as this is...it's evidence. I'm not going to cover for the fucking SA if they were actually behind any of this shit."

Neither Alenko nor Vega could meet her gaze. Wrex merely spat on the floor, grumbling something in korogish.

Beyond the research bay, the corridor ended in a security door. Feeling distinctly upset, she placed four grenades on it and detonated them remotely, and had the DACTs empty their heavy weapons into the corridor beyond for a full thirty seconds. After the explosions stopped, she motioned her forces forward, stepping over splattered red stains that littered the floor.

A security station and a set of low barricades with a pair of security turrets had stood here, until the fire from the DACTs had torn the entire area apart. Soldiers lay sprawled in messy piles, bits blown off or still on fire, and the wall at the end of the corridor was torn open to reveal part of another large room.

She dispatched two marines to make sure everyone down was dead, then stepped up to the new room.

Three neat rows of cells lined three of the outlying walls, six cells to a wall. The front of each cell was an energy grid, and a security station took up space on the nearest wall, two Cerberus soldiers manning it as she stepped through. Her ODIN barked twice, as she sidestepped sloppy incoming fire, the rounds blasting into each of the soldiers at head-height.

The first soldier collapsed bonelessly to the ground his head simply gone, spewing lifeblood in a gory fountain. The other one managed to half-duck behind a console and caught the burning wedges in his back instead, sending him to the ground screaming, his useless pistol skittering out of his numb hands. Shepard simply walked over to him and fired at his face a third time, point blank, the enormous power of the gun liquifying his entire head and upper torso. She didn't flinch as blood, scaldingly hot, splashed over her armor, beading and dripping ominously from her chest-plate and shins.

A third Cerberus soldier rounded a blind corner, pistol in hand. She brutally lashed out with her biotics, her anger flowing free like fire, and with a single, massive application of force hurled her strongest throw at the man while anchoring him to the ground biotically. His unarmored body tore open like a wet sack, spilling bones and organs in a tangled, sopping mess to the ground.

"Commander!" Alenko's voice was strained and horrified.

"Fuck these people, Lieutenant. Everything in this base wearing a Cerberus uniform is going to die in goddamned agony tonight." She then turned away and ignored him, fighting hard to control her emotions and anger. The Butcher surged inside, screaming for vengeance, for blood. She coolly stepped through the mess on the floor, kicking the man's head aside, and took in the far side of the room.

Four of the cells had occupants. The first two were humans, one an A7 marine, the other an older woman in upscale clothes. Both had been shot in the head, slumped on the ground in death. Shepard shook her head and walked on, coming to the third cell.

Admiral Kahoku lay flat on his back in the middle of the cell, his armor splintered and riven with acid burns and gunshot blasts. A pair of expended medical packages on his arm and torso blinked red with failure notifications, and his eyes, open and staring, were locked in the rictus gaze of the dead. Shepard cursed faintly and triggered her comms. "Normandy, this is Shepard. Admiral Kahoku is dead. Put together a burst packet drone and fire it off, call in the Citadel reinforcements. I'm going to wipe this place off the map."

She clicked off after getting a terse reply from Pressly, when a marine spoke up. "Ma'am, there's a man in this cell – and he's alive."

She walked over, still holding her ODIN shotgun, and stood in front of the cell for a long moment before unclasping her helm seal and taking it off, shaking her hair free.

The figure within was filthy, blood trickling from an untreated gunshot in his leg and from his mouth, his dark black hair unkempt. He wore a Cerberus uniform, but rank patches had been torn from it and the armor plating the soldiers wore over their chest, arms and legs was gone. Brown, tired, muddy eyes flickered up and over her armor, the thin, cracked lips drawing to a crooked, broken half smile. His once-broad and muscled frame twitched, in pain or sympathy, and the voice that rang out, whispery and tired, was so very familiar and warm.

"Hey, She-bitch. Long time no see." Jason Dunn gave a cracked, half-crazed laugh, and Shepard could only stare as he spoke the very same words Bea had upon meeting her on Feros.

O-OSaBC-O

"How are you *here*, wearing that goddamned uniform, Jase?" Shepard's voice was icy with disapproval,

and yet it had more emotion in it than Liara had heard in some time. She was more careful this time – she was not going to glare at the human male, given that he had obviously suffered heavily, and his attitude seemed brighter than Bea's, despite his wounds.

Liara resigned herself to merely listen, promising to herself she'd be there if Shepard needed her...and worried what changes life this broken human would bring.

The battered human was laying down flat in the corridor, being treated by Corporal Jackson for his leg wound, munching dispiritedly on a ration bar. He was badly dehydrated, bruised, with several broken bones and a nasty infection from the gunshot in his leg that would have killed him in a few more days, but N7's were hard to kill, and his eyes were alive again.

"Long story, Shep. After you bailed on us and we bailed on you, we pretty much got blackballed."

She nodded. "I met up with Bea not too long ago, she told me. She said Von Grath and Florez weren't very happy with you."

Jason snorted, and choked down another bite of the ration bar. "Unhappy my ass, Von Grath wanted us up on charges, and Florez wanted us shot. But eventually it kinda calmed down. The trial ended up fine, you were promoted, and we were dumped into the RIU's. Baby Blue lost it and ran off to be a krogan or some shit, and Bea and I were shipped off to every fucked up, two bit, worthless ass suicide mission you could imagine."

He sighed, and took a sip of water from the canteen a marine had handed him. He drew the back of his hand across his mouth, grimacing, and glanced back up. "One day, I got approached by a private military contractor, or so he said. Told me I could make better money and fight batarian slavers and other 'disruptive assets of the enemies of humanity'. At the time, I was stupid, and angry. I signed up. Fought a bunch of slavers, took out a pirate ring, and signed for a longer term. Before long, the targets got less and less criminal, more and more .. questionable...and I realized I was in Cerberus. They 'disappeared' me, or so I was told, and I've been with them ever since."

She didn't bother to keep the disgust off her face, and he smiled back. "Oh, at first I was leery of them, with all the terrorist stuff. None of that shit you saw in the research bay – just military work. Sometimes against the Deathwatch or STG, mostly against light forces in the Traverse. Winning hearts and minds on independent colonies."

He paused. "But until about four months ago, every op I was on was as clean as a whistle. I guess I impressed them enough to transfer me here for 'accelerated training and conditioning.' Translation, propaganda and hate. I saw what they did to aliens, and experiments run on humans, and I couldn't handle it any more. I tried to reach out to Von Grath, but I got shifted over to an admiral."

She nodded. "You were Kahoku's source."

He smiled again, wider. "Yep. He said he'd check it out, and sent a team of specialists to 'retrieve' me. Unfortunately, they got picked off. So he sent a regiment, and they got killed off too. Finally, the old man comes himself...and the day he hits, I get taken out by my own people. They knew I tipped him off from the first. Fuckers caught me cold, shot me in the leg, beat the crap out of me, and tossed me in here. They knew I was the leak... and let me do it."

Shepard frowned, glancing over at Wrex. The krogan had taken his own helmet off, and his nostrils flared as he tested the air. He gave a subtle nod, and glared hard at the human on the ground. "He's telling the truth, at least as he knows it, Shepard."

She exhaled. "Alright, then. Why did they let you do it?"

The broken smile faded from Jason's face. "Kahoku was Cerberus's handler with the SA. Apparently

when Saren came along and shit went downhill, Cerberus saw an opportunity – for God knows what, I don't know. They broke off comms with the SA and went rogue for real. SA had lost track of them and never knew about this place to begin with ... and Kahoku was the only one who knew enough of where the bodies were buried to track down their operations. So they let me lead him here, and then they ambushed him and killed him."

Shepard licked her lips. "And me?"

He nodded. "They knew you were coming, She-bitch. I wasn't placed nearly highly enough to know what the fuck they were doing with Saren...but they really don't want you interfering. I overheard one of the boffins talk about 'control platforms' and the geth – I think they want however Saren is using the geth for themselves. And I know they want the colonies that are independent from the SA to turn to them. I think they planned to kill you off, too, and use the embarrassment to fuck with shit politically with the SA. I dunno about that for sure..."

Shepard nodded. "But it fits. More Torfan style bullshit."

He grimaced at the name, but only shrugged a moment later. "Pretty much. Kahoku wasn't stupid, he backstopped a unit of asari mercs to pluck him – and me – out of trouble if we got ambushed, but I don't think he realized how deep Cerberus was into the SA intel. They took them out before they even got a chance to figure out what the fuck was going on."

Eylana only huffed at that, and Shepard nodded. "Why asari, though?"

Jason shrugged. "I dunno. He might have been worried that Cerberus would pick up on human mercs or other SA soldiers. I think one of his AIS agents was on the take. The last thing before they took me out I remember was them massing shit on Kahoku's forces. The base CO interrogated me and then tossed me in here to rot." He looked down, as the medical package on his leg beeped smugly and disconnected.

Jackson stood up, wrapping the package back into it's bag. "He's still shocky, ma'am – some blood loss, broken arm, lots of bruising and malnutrition. He's not combat effective, and I'm not much of a medic." She nodded and turned to the rest of the soldiers. "Alright, move on the shuttle bay, take it out with explosives and regroup here." She turned back to Jason. "You gonna make it?"

He shrugged, standing gingerly, wincing as he moved his left arm. "I guess. Doubt the SA will be very forgiving, with me having basically gone AWOL to join a terrorist group and then get one of their admirals killed..."

Shepard shook her head. "He was crooked, and in any case, Cerberus is about to be a moot fucking point. I'm going to storm their command center and kill it's leader. You know who that is?"

He shook his head. "They kept leadership in the dark, really. There was the Illusive Man, but he was off-world for sure. But there was also a big guy, saw him a couple of times, people gave him a wide berth." He paused, thinking, and Shepard shrugged.

"No matter. The entire Citadel fleet is on this assault, no one is getting away. You know anything about the base layout?"

He nodded slowly, favoring his left leg as he followed her. "C3 is behind the training areas and the computer sections. Pretty open layout once you're past the final security checkpoint. If whoever running this shindig is anywhere, it's probably in there."

Shepard nodded absently. She motioned Liara over. "Jase, this is Dr. Liara T'soni, a very strong biotic and a member of my strike team. I'm going to have her stick close to you, so she can cover you with her barriers." She paused to glance at Liara. "Please keep him safe, Liara."

Liara nodded as firmly as she could. "I will do so, Shepard. Are you ... alright? You are very .. agitated."

Shepard suppressed a snort, gesturing with a free hand towards the science bay. "What I saw in there pretty much shattered what little faith I had left in both my government and the path my life has taken, Liara. I'm not even a rehabilitated goon acting for the good of humanity – I'm just a thug being used by people even more sick, twisted and evil than the Reds ever were. I sacrificed my life, my .. person, my ... friends and soldiers...for this?"

She turned to face Liara more fully. "I just wonder if it's all fucking worth it. I know, in my mind, what I'm fighting for...but I've never experienced it all. Had a chance to touch it. All I seem to taste is death, betrayal, combat, suffering and fucking criminals." She shook her head, something in her gaze going dark and cold. "I get tired of it all. You can only be angry so long until you forget what the fuck you're even angry about."

She glanced back towards the science bay. "Even if I stop this, I can't stop the fuckers who allowed it to happen. Who authorized that shit on Feros. And all of this ends up ... for what?"

She gave a small, ugly smile. "I sacrificed who I could be for this?" Liara had no answer, licking her lips as she frantically tried to think of a response to that, but was surprised as Dunn limped forward aggressively...and then spat on the floor.

"Christ in a sidecar, Shep. Don't go all Bea on me here." He paused to give a broken-toothed smile and shrugged. "You didn't do anything you didn't have to fucking do, and you didn't do *any* of the shit in that room. You wanna blame someone? Don't blame the whole SA. You think fucking von Grath would sign off on some shit like that? Captain Anderson? Commissar De Murete? Or, devil fuck us all, Major Kyle?"

He turned to face her more fully, his bloodstained Cerberus uniform dimming in the poor light, eyes bright and hard. "We didn't do a real good job of backing you up after Torfan, Shep. I – we – all fucked up. It took me a while to see that, to get past the stupid anger and everything else. I got past it because I saw shit like this, realized that no matter how bad the burb-cology was, how hard CenPol came down on gangers, what I'd been through was a lick of shit against what real suffering was like."

He pointed with a hard, stubby finger at the marines with Shepard. "*They* are the SA. The civilians are the SA. Humanity is, as fucked as we are. Yeah, we did shit like this, we also fought and died at Torfan instead of folding up like little bitches. We bled at Dirth and Exova and a dozen other shitty worlds, not for some admiral, or some mouthy little Earth First assbat in a nice suit." He managed to summon up a glare, staring right into Shepard's eyes. "The blue has to mean more than that, Shepard."

Shepard's voice was soft, almost hesitant. "And if it doesn't, Jace?"

He rolled his eyes. "Then you fuck shit up and take it out, Neutron style, She-bitch. You're the fucking Butcher, the first human Spectre, the only fucking member of the Penal Legion to kick a commissar in the nuts and dare him to kill her! You're not going to give up and just let this shit *stand*, are you? I didn't. I fucked up, I did shit I shouldn't have, and I tried to make it right. You gotta keep stepping, Shep. You got fucked over and out...so did I. So have a lot of us. That doesn't mean I'm going to let them kick me any more than I let CenPol did."

Shepard's thin smile widened a bit. "You were always a stupid stubborn thug, Jace." She clapped him on the shoulder, gently, and he shrugged. Shepard's omnitool lit up as she did so, and she pulled back her arm to punch the comm panel. "Shepard here."

"Commander, this is Sergeant Haln, in the shuttle bay. None of the shuttles appears to be missing, but ...there's something strange going on. The electronics in all the shuttles are scrambled, the nav

compensators all blown out, the fueling computer refuses to boot and the motors to open the bay doors are, well, shorted out. It's like someone sabotaged the entire bay. I've rigged up the explosives, but none of the shuttles in here are going anyway fast anyway, ma'am."

Shepard arched an eyebrow. "Huh. Rig 'em up anyway and put them on a remote detonator, Sergeant." She clicked off, glanced over at Jason. "Any ideas?"

Dunn rubbed his chin thoughtfully, then scrubbed the pad of his thumb along his jawline, wiping off a bloodstain. "Negative, boss lady. I've been locked up hard for days, but I know damn well that they shuttle capacity at least yesterday, that's how they brought in food supplies. Sounds ... fishy."

Shepard nodded, and tapped her comms again. "Cole, any movement?"

The basso voice of the master chief boomed through the comm-link. "Negative, Commander. Doors are still shut tight, no attempts to open them. Tali's got her drones in the air-ducts – the ducts leading to the comm center are all locked down with internal shutters. No way in except the hard way. We're picking up some kind of fragmentary encrypted comms, but they appear to be external to the base."

Shepard nodded thoughtfully. "Alright, Cole – stand by, we're headed back." She clicked off, then selected another channel. "Normandy, this is Shepard, new tasking. I want you to pick up the two MAKO tanks and the marines we left there and meet up with us here at this base. Go ahead and drop MAKO one near the entrance – it looks like solid rock, shouldn't attract threshers. Then stand by, we have some .. materials we need to load into external cargo bays one and two."

The voice of Pressly sounded back. "Understood, Commander. We have another issue. When we went to high orbital to launch off the drone as you requested, tac ops picked up an incoming burst transmission, from Citadel Fleet - they got a no-source transmission requesting heavy infantry backup about the same time that explosion we picked up went off. ETA is three and a half hours."

Shepard's mind drew a blank. "A no-source transmission? The fuck does that even mean, XO?"

Pressly's voice was tight with his own frustration. "They aren't sure, Commander. It got dropped into active routing from the buoy at Ferris Fields, and they can't pin down where it routed from before that. It has stock SA comm codes and the open-key encryption used by the SA military to communicate with the Citadel...but the key is *old*, commander. We changed that key, according to the systems, on May 9 2181."

Shepard felt a sharp chill travel up her spine, and she exchanged a sharp look with Jason, who had an almost identical expression on his face. "...that's the date of the Battle of Torfan, Pressly. That code was transmitted by General Florez to signal the Citadel cleanup fleets to secure the system. What the fuck is going on?!"

She turned towards Alenko, but as she did so there was a blaring alarm sound and a pre-recorded voice. "Alert. Fire suppression systems have been activated in Command Central. Manual overrides engaged. All personnel in Command Central have ninety seconds to evacuate before atmospheric decompression and halon suppression engages. Repeat. Fire suppression systems have been activated in Command Central. Manual overrides engaged. All personnel in Command Central have ninety seconds to evacuate before atmospheric decompression and halon suppression engages."

Shepard whirled on her heel, slipping her shotgun back into place in the small of her back. "Alenko, finish up here with three marines. Everyone else, reinforce Cole, now!"

The marine unit moved at a quick trot, weapons sweeping in clearing patterns as they moved back through the science bay. Jason Dunn hobbled along, followed by Liara, while Eylana looked increasingly nervous and trailed even further back. It only took five minutes to reach the intersection

and a few more to reach Cole's position.

The platoon was there, still ready for a fight. Flashing orange lights above the security door were flashing, along with opened vents now hissing out atmosphere. Cole himself had his Revenant braced across a low wall, with a grenade placed within grabbing distance. "Still no one coming out, Commander...but I heard pounding on the door and weapons fire from within a couple of minutes ago."

Shepard nodded, and motioned marines into sniping and over-watch positions. "Tali, how can I get this door open?"

The quarian rose from her crouch to examine the security panel for several seconds, tapping hesitantly once or twice before slowly stepping back. "Shepard, something is very wrong here. The panel's software has been .. hacked. We can open the door at any time."

Shepard blinked. "Hacked? By who?"

Tali spread her hands helplessly. "I .. don't know. The software itself is overridden, all the security functions are just .. wiped. I can tell you that whatever did it wiped everything on the other side, but left the motor controls functional for this side...trapping whoever is inside that section within."

Shepard tightened her jaw. "Pressly, status on that MAKO and my marines."

The voice of Joker interrupted. "About five more minutes, Commander. Pressly is overseeing the undocking of the external cargo bays. What's up?"

Shepard narrowed her eyes. "Keep over-watch on this base, Joker. Anything tries to get out on foot, put mass accelerator fire into it. Clear?"

"Clear, ma'am. Not easy, but clear."

Shepard's expression turned darker. "Wrex, Williams, Cole, on me. Garrus, sniper. Alenko, Liara, get ready to throw shockwaves." She stepped up to the control panel, and pressed the disengage controls, and then the open door button. The massive doors creaked alarmingly, and then broke open, air rushing in past her forces with high force.

The corridor beyond was littered with dead bodies, most of them clawing at their throats or curled into fetal position. Heavy wisps of greyish smoke curled along the floor, half-concealing the dead. Small items, papers, pens, and other detritus was scattered in all directions, and a line of glass fronted internal windows was reduced to piles of broken glass in front of each window frame.

Nothing moved, and Shepard motioned her teams forward, pulling out her ODIN and sweeping it in slow, careful movements. The corridor split, one half moving down towards a room full of computer servers and large screens, the other curving gently to enter a huge, domed room with a war map built into a circular plinth in its middle.

"Garrus, take a few people and secure the data center. Everyone else on me." She continued to walk forward, stepping over contorted corpses, and crossed into the threshold of the communications and control center.

It was an impressive room – bank upon bank of status screens, and almost thirty tactical operator consoles arranged in a neat semi-circle flanked a complete holographic battlesim screen. On the far side, a man in a fancy looking Cerberus uniform lay slumped against a control panel, fingers contorted and eyes wide with fear even in death.

Williams whistled. "They asphyxiated to death...wow. Bad way to go."

Shepard, for her part, swept a full circle around the room before lowering her shotgun. "...everyone is dead. Move up. I want this room cataloged, closely, and every bit of evidence we can find here needs to

be retrieved, so that we can take it back to the SA command and some kind of fucking justice brought to bear." She slowly moved along one wall, examining the tactical consoles for clues, and the rest of her forces began walking in.

The consoles were all blank, non-functioning, each one overridden with garbage data. The large comm panel against the far wall was blank as well, crumpled figures on the floor in front of it still and unmoving.

Eylana entered last, glancing around almost fearfully before relaxing. "So, this is the command center, huh. I guess from here I can call for a ride."

Shepard nodded absently, a moment before two turrets dropped from the ceiling. Before anyone could move, they fired in unison, both shots striking Eylana with incredible force. One tore through her right side, the other blasted off her left arm.

She fell the ground, eyes wide with shock, crimson blood spraying out from the chest wound before stopping. Marine counter-fire took out both turrets a moment later, but that was still a moment too late for Eylana, who gave a rasping, choked gasp and died a second later. Shepard cursed resoundingly, preparing to vent her anger on the turret wreckage, when she caught the strange looks Liara was giving the corpse.

Liara and Telanya looked at the asari on the floor in alarm, and then Telanya looked up at the commander. "Shepard...her blood is red."

Shepard observed the body more closely. The blood was red, not the purple an asari's blood should be. And now, dead on the ground, a few more things became apparent. The 'asari' didn't have her arms bend in quite the same way an asari would, and she hadn't been using her biotics in the same way an asari would, either. The angular shape of her face, the body stances...now that Shepard thought about it, 'Eylana' was far too glib and flip to be recovering from multiple rapes, and too dismissive of Liara, to be a real asari.

Wrex knelt down next to the body, sniffing. "It smells asari..but it smells more like human. A fake asari, heh. Your people are really screwed up, Shepard."

She snorted. "These assholes are hardly 'my people'. Keep searching, I want to know what the fuck happened here, people."

As she finished her sentence, however, the main screen in the center of the room lit up. A digitally blurred image appeared, with nothing clear except two eyes with a faint blue glow to them. "I think I can answer that question and more, Commander Shepard, if you have a moment of your time."

Shepard glanced to Tali, sending a quick omni-tool message for her find and trace the signal source. "And you are?"

The figure inclined its head, pixels shifting to keep the identity of the man hidden. "You can call me the Illusive Man, Commander. Former leader of Cerberus. And I can give you the current leaders of Cerberus, if you will just listen for a few moments to what I have to say."

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## **Chapter 78: Chapter 69: Cerberus, Revelation**

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*A/N: I managed to get out this chapter, because it had been kicking around in my head in a variety of ways since the beginning.*

*When I said this was an AU, people equated that with "mostly the same, some minor taste changes",*

*but that isn't the case. Things are fundamentally different on quiet a few levels. Some of it is so that ME2 makes more sense, some of it just to fill holes in the established nature of events.*

*One thing that has always, always bothered me is how exactly Saren could know about highly secure information, like the location of the Eden Prime beacon, or that the Thorian existed and knew about Protheans. How he got his hands on a rachni egg. We're supposed to believe he had some kind of support network, but it's never shown, never mentioned. If it's so big, why is he relying on two bit thugs like Fist and inept clowns like the Krogan on Therum and Feros?*

*Saren had to be in league with someone. Cerberus makes the most sense, if you pitch it right.*

*I wasn't really planning to update tonight, but a long PM from Sollus made me reconsider. I'd like to also thank everyone who sent me encouraging reviews and PM 's when I took a break from writing, after the jackass sent me his "stop defiling the canon" PM. I really do appreciate it.*

*Hopefully, this chapter holds together and makes sense. I don't have a beta reader right now (she's going on vacation soon) and thus there may be a few lingering grammatical or logical flow issues. If you see something I need to fix let me know!*

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The coordinated grunting of forty or so people in unison was accompanied by the slow grinding of metal doors sliding across the floor. Rachel Florez nodded grimly as the doors to the command center were finally shut, and turned back to the comm map.

The past thirty minutes had been a nightmare. Every security system was fried or in active rebellion, experiments and prisoners were loose, computer systems invalidated and over two-thirds of the base personnel lay dead or dying. A third of the base was a smoking hole in the ground, and eighty percent of her personnel had taken a lethal radiation dose that would probably start killing people in the next week or two.

But Cerberus was strong, and the defenders of it's headquarters even stronger.

Luckily, the commander of the security team never did like Rachel's hardline demand that all weapons be secured in the armory when not in use, and he'd managed to salvage almost fifty soldiers and techs from the collapse of Barracks Three, along with weapons and armor. The rampaging mechs were mostly destroyed by equally rampaging experiments, the yahg in particular, but one tech remembered a shipment of JOTUN mechs that had arrived and placed in temporary storage. Deprogrammed and cold-started, Rachel had watched in desperate hope as Richard led her rabble of armed tech ops types out into the base itself to reclaim them.

The chaos was everywhere. Fire systems had vented away atmosphere in some sections, or flooded them with halon in others. Ventilation was out and fires from the docking bay were slowly spreading. But Captain Varr, the security commander, had punched through the chaos in Science One and Two to reach her own forces, along with dribs and drabs around the base. Forming a thin line around the cargo bay, they'd watched for incoming enemies as the techs rapidly cold-programmed the five JOTUNS.

When the big war-machines came online, Rachel immediately killed their comms systems, then physically tore out the wireless receivers, to prevent any more hacking. Locking them into verbal command mode, she'd sent them out to deal with the remaining enemies in the base, while the last secured the entryway. It only took ten minutes for the JOTUN mechs to carve their way through the few experiments and mechs that had gotten past the now-enraged yahg, and they had wounded that beast as well, driving it back into Science Two and sealing the doors.

External security was better, although all the ground and GTS defenses were offline. The security team

outside was unaffected by the chaos within, and far enough from the docking bay that they were not dosed by rads. She gave them defensive orders, tucking them into sniping locations and putting one of the JOTUNS outside in GTS fire mode, along with a couple of light rocket launchers. Drawing back inside, she ordered some of the techs to sever the main tactical net from the rest of the base and try to reboot from hard copies on data crystals.

Now, at least, secondary power was coming back online – the solar panels that usually routed to the GTS systems had their cabling disconnected and spliced into the base's power network. The doors were unresponsive, and all internal security was down, but the science spaces were sealed off and Rachel smiled grimly as she was able to manually shut the ventilation down before manually triggering the halon release in the science labs. Even a yahg couldn't breathe pure halon forever, after all.

"Status report, Captain Varr." She turned to face the tired looking captain, a mousy looking man with pale skin, dark hair, sad brown eyes and a long scar occluding his cheek. His voice was a gentle, calming baritone, but sounded dry and raspy. The armor of his Cerberus uniform was spattered with blood and one shoulder unit was torn off, showing a nasty bite wound half covered with a medical package and medigel. He adjusted it as he spoke, wincing from time to time.

"Better, but not good, General. Over four hundred of my men are dead, and as far as we can tell, everyone in Science One and Two, Barracks One and Two, Storage One, Holding One, and Training Four and Six are dead. Less than a hundred and twenty people left alive, not counting the external security teams. We've got several doors being manually closed, but each one takes longer since they have to be closed from the outside."

Rachel nodded. "Place the bulk of your men inside the second door, let the external security blunt any entry. What about options for getting out of here?"

The captain sighed. "The scout car bay is intact, and the cars had zero electronics to hack or fry. The fuel pumps are out and the doors are blown shut, but I can get past that. The problem is the blast probably drew every damned worm on the planet, and we're already getting maw-sign from the lead detectors. The minute the cars get off the plateau, they're going to be targeted."

She nodded. "Can you set up some kind of distraction?"

He shrugged. "The radiating beacons were all in Science Two, ma'am. Once the halon thins down whatever is alive in there we can try to grab something, but whoever runs it out of here is a dead man. Even past that, there are only three scout cars, enough room for twelve, maybe thirteen people – and the Shadow Hand won't fit in any of them."

Rachel nodded again, more slowly, rubbing her thumb atop the grip of her pistol. "We'll deal with that when we come to it. The cars aren't a solution, though, Captain. We can't drive out to the relay, after all."

He nodded, smiling a little. "I know, ma'am. Two possibilities. One, the boat bay at the fake-base had both pinnaces and shuttles."

She interrupted him. "Shepard would have neutralized those, I'm almost sure of it."

He nodded again. "Maybe, but even if she did, she's got, what, fifteen marines and a half-dozen aliens? If we kill her here, we can ride out that way across the Marthin Ridge if we can get clear of the plateau, and see what we can salvage. Even if she blew the place up she can't be carrying much in the way of high explosive detonation charges – my combat engineers could at least rig up a shuttle or two."

He shrugged, continuing. "But my bigger idea was Kahoku's wrecked lander. According to the manifest we pulled off his omni-tool, his lander had two combat pinnaces in the bay. Each one holding about ten

people. They're probably jumbled up real bad from the crash, but they build those tough."

He brought up a system map on his omnitool. "Even if our systems here are slagged, there's the storage facility on the fifth moon of Khemrom. Most of the supplies there are long-term stuff – rifles, armor, MRE's, etc – but there were two dozen light fighters and five FTL capable assault shuttles there in mothballs. The fighters can hold two people each, and the shuttles twenty. That's enough capacity to get everyone off. If we can get just a single shuttle of pilots up there, we can start ferrying people out of here in an hour. We make the relay, we can be in Vendon in ... a week. Rations we have on hand should last for three."

Rachel broke into a rare smile. "Good thinking, Captain. Very good thinking. It's a hack job, but the best we've got. Make it happen." The captain saluted and turned away, speaking orders into his omnitool, and Rachel walked across the room to the war map, and to Richard.

The big man was brooding, his fist splashed with blood and some blackish fluid where he'd crushed several thralls that had rushed the command center during the chaos. He watched with glowering eyes as the war map flickered fitfully, then glitched and displayed a map of the base with several large sections flashing red.

He looked up as she approached. "The techs have restored partial functionality, but the main computers are locked. And we can't get at the servers, they were behind Barracks Three, the tunnel has collapsed. No turrets and no sensors, just basic pressure telemetry."

She nodded. "Captain Varr has a rough plan for us to get out of here, if we can make it past the thresher maws. "

His nostrils flared. "I heard. His plan has a glaring weakness, Rachel. The Normandy is probably establishing holding orbit over us right now – and it's not that hard to drop missiles or MA shots on slow moving scout cars."

Rachel walked around the map, trailing her fingers along the railing. "I've got two men up topside with GTS launchers, and one of the JOTUNS, too. According to the documents we got from BuEng, her armor plating is insufficient to stop much fire. I've also got two techs working at one of the GTS missile launchers. If we can just get the thing to launch manually, a saturation barrage should be enough to finish her."

Richard didn't nod, or even move, merely watching her. After several long seconds, he gave a very curt motion of his head. "I hope that will be enough .. her pilot is supposed to be very good, after all. If it doesn't work, then there's no way out." He paused, and gave a sour, wry smile. "I suppose saying 'I told you so' at this juncture would be childish."

Rachel shook her head, exhaling and leaning over the railing around the war map, resting her arms on it and tilting her head up to look him in the eye. "No, it wouldn't. You were right, and I was far too confident in our abilities, and too dismissive of Jack as a threat. We knew how this would likely end when we set up that aircar accident for General Terensky, and stopped following SA dictates as they wished."

She half turned, facing the now closed doors to the command room. The only people within were her, Richard, Captain Varr, and two techs. She sighed. "We were so close, Richard. What could have spooked Jack to such a level to have him do this?"

Richard shrugged his massive shoulders. "He spoke of new information he found on Saren. Assuming we survive this clusterfuck, it may be worth investigating his claims." He then frowned, and stood to his full height.

"Luckily, Rachel, all is not fully lost. We have hold-fasts and resources Jack knew nothing about, and Cerberus will rise again, stronger than ever. It's a shame there will be sacrifices needed for that to come about, but .. that has always been the case."

Something in his voice made Rachel turn to look at him. "What do you mean?"

Richard smiled, displaying his steel teeth. "I have a light FTL capable fighter stashed in a hidden bay at the south end of the plateau. Call it insurance. I never did like this defensive setup, and I had the bay it's docked in built with some of the mech labor we used in construction, off the books. The fighter is cold, no chance that Jack's little final fuck-you program has messed it up. The only problem is, well, it's a one person fighter. And while I suppose I could always run out to the storage area on the moon and fly back an assault shuttle, if I get caught in the open when reinforcements for the Normandy arrive, it will be all for naught." He exhaled. "I plan to take the fighter and relay out, Rachel, and regroup at Holdfast Beta. I'm sorry."

Rachel nodded slowly. A large number of thoughts and possibilities ran through her mind, and with an iron will she dispelled them. "Then you'd better get moving, Richard. Captain Varr's plan may work, or it may not. But if we've been outed, that means someone has to be able to meet Shepard here as the 'leader of Cerberus'. And we can't take the risk, like you said, that you get taken out while trying to fly back an escape route for the rest of us."

She exhaled. "I've been dosed lethally anyway, Richard, so it's ultimately a moot point. I'm a dead woman walking. You, on the other hand, aren't. You have all of our science discoveries, our knowledge, and you're the most likely person to be able to hide from discovery for a long period of time and rebuild."

Richard looked at her for a long moment, before extending his massive hand. "I thought for a minute -"

She shook it, smiling a bit. "If I wasn't dosed, I might have ordered you to try to get us all out...but humanity is more important. Go. I'll ... do what has to be done."

Richard gave a nod, and then strode to the command center doors. What had taken forty people three minutes to push shut took him but a few moments to push open wide enough for him to slip through. "If they arrest you, and you .. make it... I'll get you out, Rachel."

She shook her head, smile widening. "Shepard isn't going to arrest me if she makes it that far, Richard."

With a grunt and a dark look, the huge man nodded and stepped out of sight. The doors groaned as he pushed them shut again, and Rachel turned to see the amazed expression of Captain Varr.

"H-how..."

Rachel sighed. "Full conversion cyborg, Captain. He was badly hurt in the last attack on Shanxi, trying to defend his brother, and lost 55% of his body mass. Cerberus science rebuilt him." She shrugged. "He's far more than human, now."

Varr nodded slowly. "Shanxi? The spikes did that to him?"

She nodded. "That, and ruined the career of his brother, and caused their name to be a byword for failure and shame. I think that burned at him most of all, worse than the physical pain."

Varr frowned. "His brother?"

Rachel turned back to the map, examining the outlines of the remains of her base. "Yes, Captain. His brother, General Nathan Williams, commander of the garrison on Shanxi, who was forced to surrender to the turians after they incinerated six thousand colonists as a 'warning'." She smiled. "It's all for the best, really. I don't think Richard paid much attention to the crew digest from Shepard's ship. His own

niece is one of the marines with Shepard coming here."

She shook her head in disgust. "What a fucked up family."

O-OSaBC-O

For several seconds, Shepard's brain simply didn't want to engage. This entire trip had been a bit too much, too many crazy shocks one after another – fighting thresher maws on foot, seeing Kahoku's command butchered, dealing with fighting her way into this shithole, fake asari, finding Jason Dunn, of all fucking people...

*I'm getting too old for this shit.*

The image on the other end of the communication made a polite noise, and Shepard's eyes snapped up. "I heard you. You said 'former leader of Cerberus'. That doesn't put you much in my good books after the shit I've seen today, which would have shamed a goddamned Sao Paulo death squad. Why in the fuck would I listen to a 'former' homicidal terrorist lunatic?"

The figure reclined, seated in some kind of deck chair. The blurry pixels only swirled and covered his face – the scene behind him was of natural beauty, wooden decking overlooking a peaceful lake. Across the lake, a narrow white beach had children cavorting about, their small voices barely audible. The man wore a shimmering blue neo-silk suit over a pale gray dress shirt, the top button open. A cigarette dangled carelessly from one hand.

He looked perfectly at ease, and it made her angrier.

His voice was smoothly modulated, rich, somehow superior sounding. It made her feel small and stupid, as if she was a knobby-kneed mark again, hustling for creds or dust on Kenny's corner back in the NYC Arcology. She hated that feeling, too.

"Commander, I won't deny that I've done some unsavory things in my past, some of which I regret. I also won't deny that, at the time, those things seemed like that had to be done. I believe the same is probably true of every human being, unless you would like me to believe you don't regret your own past?"

She gritted her teeth, glaring into the blue glowing circles that seemed to mark his eyes. "We're not talking about me, we're talking about why I should listen to you."

He sniffed, flicking ash from his cigarette before taking a puff. "Quite. Then to answer your question, Commander, you should listen to me because I just stopped that fake asari from detonating the ten-kiloton nuclear device under that base and killing you all, and I'm the person who scrambled the defenses of Cerberus enough so that you can go in and kill the current leaders, the ones who are responsible for that display you no doubt saw in the research area."

She glanced over at Tali, tapping subtly on her omni-tool. *Trace the signal.* The quarian nodded and fell back a few steps, and Shepard refocused her attention. "Why would you do that?"

The Illusive Man leaned back in his chair with a long sigh. "Because, Commander, I happen to believe what you and Dr. T'Soni discovered on the surface of Eingana is very significant. I'm helping you because I think you have the best chance at undoing the stupidity of my former colleagues, and stopping a serious threat to humanity. And above all else, I'm helping you because I am ... disquieted by how my former colleagues twisted what began as something noble into something monstrous. Whether or not you believe me is, of course, up to you."

Shepard folded her arms, letting her weight fall back onto her right leg. "Why not just contact me on my ship? Why the dramatic execution and fancy reveal?"

The figure gave a dry chuckle. "We all have our foibles, commander. Melodrama happens to be one of mine. However, I also figured that you would be more inclined to hear me out in a situation like this rather than as a random communication out of the blue." He took a sip from something in a tumbler, and sat the glass back down with a soft clink.

Shepard was, for once, glad of the blankness of her expression. She swept her eyes over to Liara, who was watching the image raptly, and then over to Garrus, who met her glance with a flicker of his mandibles. She tightened her jaw and nodded curtly. "Fine."

Somehow the man's smile was audible in his voice. "Excellent. I'll keep it short and to the point.. well, as short as I can make it. It's a somewhat messy story." He paused, puffing at his cigarette, and continued.

"Cerberus began as a private military organization, one I created and modeled on a mix of the Iron Guard Surveillance unit and the salarian STG. At first it was concerned civilians, angry about the betrayal of our armed forces by the SA to appease the turians, and the kneeling of our government to our asari 'saviors'." The word twisted in an ugly fashion, and he gave a nod to Liara. "Not to offend a member of the Houses of the Thirty, but after listening to the council of Matriarch Trellani for years, I find your people's goals...distasteful."

The expression on Liara's face was one of fundamental shock, and Telanya's of outrage, but Shepard had little time to explore that. "So you and your racist buddies decided to shoot up some aliens and show the galaxy humans were hard."

The Illusive Man shook his head, that was clear even through the pixel blurring. "Not at all. It was mostly economic sabotage, intelligence gathering, and .. deniable operations. There were elements of the SA that were aware of us, and they gave us a wide berth. We did a few things that I .. regret now, in regards to biotic experimentation, but at the time our lack of biotics was something that made us vulnerable."

Alenko grit his teeth. "You blew up goddamned human ships and deliberately dusted hundreds of thousands of people!"

The Illusive Man nodded, taking a puff on his cigarette. "Yes, we did. Sadly, we were assisted by the SA in doing so. It was an unpleasant task, but required. And in it's way, that was the downfall of Cerberus. Over time, the SA grew to rely on us more, and more, to handle the black ops that could not ever be associated with the actual SA. They even started a white-wash unit, Janus, to cover up some the misdeeds we did on the SA's behalf. When I began balking at some of the things they wanted us to do... my organization was infiltrated by AIS agents, taken down from the inside, and I was given an ultimatum – cooperate or be turned over to the Turian Deathwatch."

The figure flicked an ash from his cigarette. "I did what I had to do. The SA's control came in two figures. One to coordinate scientific work they wanted done, and one to handle military expansion of a curious, asymmetrical nature." The Illusive Man spread his hand out in an open palm gesture, and two holographic pictures sprang to life.

Shepard felt as if her knees would go out from under her, once she recognized the left most figure. The high, aristocratic brows, the gray-frosted hair, the bobbed nose, the thin lips...

"...you're telling me Rachel Florez is part of Cerberus? She's dead."

The Illusive Man laughed. "The suicide? A flash clone. Trust me, she's the military leader, and she's alive. You should recognize the force structure, you studied under her. Snipers, pressure units, the armor-missile combo cruisers – none of that sounds exactly like the Florez Doctrine? General Florez has been in command of Cerberus's military since long before Torfan, Commander."

She was about to ask who the other person was when Ashley made a strangled sound in her throat. "...is that .. U-uncle Richard?"

The figure of the Illusive Man shifted in his seat, nodding. "Unfortunately it is, Gunnery Sergeant Williams."

Shepard glanced back at Ash, who'd gone white as a sheet, and then back at the Illusive Man's image. "You seem to know a lot about my crew."

The Illusive Man sighed. "Yes, I do, Shepard. I'm an information broker, one of the best in the galaxy, only matched by the Shadow Broker himself. Cerberus techs worked on building the Normandy, cleared roadblocks out of your path after you'd secure your Spectre status, and were instrumental in persuading BuPers to cut you a pair of DACTs to replace your losses. You've been carefully watched by Cerberus since this entire mess started, for the simple reason that Rachel and Richard wanted you kept away from Saren."

Shepard glared. "Now we get to it. What the fuck is going on, and why the hell is a human supremacist organization involved?"

The Illusive Man puffed at his cigarette. "The answer is unadulterated greed. When Saren began becoming more active in the underworld, his mercs tripped our network of operatives. When Benezia aided him, we decided we needed to investigate further. Using the same procedure that produced Agent Eylana there, we had a deep cover operative in Benezia's forces, and she reported seeing geth working - voluntarily - under Saren's command almost two years ago. Once this was known, Rachel made the tactical decision to attempt to work with Saren for the purposes of eventually figuring out his method of control over the geth and co-opting it, with the ultimate goal of enslaving the geth to serve humanity."

Tali bristled, but the Illusive Man's smooth voice droned on. "The initial contact was ... delicate, but it was established and Saren had a bold plan. He told us he had found an ancient Prothean warship capable of coordinating and suppressing AI's, and he was going to use it to unseat the Council. He and Benezia felt the Asari Republic was corrupted by the Thirty, and that the Salarian Union was a danger to every sentient being - he claimed he had proof that the Salarians had devised a viral method of doing the same thing to humanity that the genophage did to the krogan. Saren had also discovered how the Asari and Salarians were inciting volus separatists to break the Vol Protectorate away from the Turian Hierarchy."

Liana's voice was a soft whisper. "Goddess...without the volus, the turian government would go bankrupt in short order..."

Garrus looked away. "And then the fringe colonies would start up the wars again, and the Hierarchy would require further assistance to suppress them before we had another round of Colony revolts, and the Core families ... spirits above, civil war would break out and the Hierarchy would collapse."

The Illusive Man nodded, gesturing with his cigarette at Garrus. "Just so, Detective Vakarian. Saren needed financial assistance - money laundering - and intelligence access, and he needed to find certain Prothean artifacts to, he claimed, establish full control over the ship. Finally, he needed someone to translate certain Prothean information for him. In return for us aiding him, Saren would apply military pressure and terror tactics to the outlying independent colonies, and avoid ones under Cerberus protection."

He flicked his ashes again. "The political impotence of the SA government, along with colonies breaking away to back Cerberus, would have paralyzed the SA in terms of stopping us. When Saren struck at the Citadel, Cerberus would assist, and we'd have a new realpolitik of turians and humans

running the show."

The Illusive Man sipped at his drink, and his voice was thick with disgust. "I thought it was a stupid dangerous plan from the start, but the greed of Rachel and Richard was too much. They let him know about the Eden Prime beacon, about the Thorian, about certain information from the Mars Archive, and even handed over a second beacon to him."

He paused, swirling his drink in it's glass, then continued in a quieter voice. "When you discovered the voice recording regarding the Reapers, and we did some research into Dr. T'Soni's theories, I felt that we had been lied to, and it was possible Saren was trying to bring back the Reapers for some reason. Rachel and Richard disagreed, but ... the patterns were there. Saren was dangerous."

Shepard nodded, trying to make everything fit in her head. "And you somehow got your hands on our report about Eingana to the SA, I suppose?"

The figure shrugged. "I did, and I agree. Whatever destroyed the Inusannon and Tho'ian is similar to whatever took out the Citadel Fleet and attacked Eden Prime. If Saren is in any control he might be able to strike some kind of deal with this power, to obliterate .. whoever." The cigarette was extinguished, harshly. "And that made Saren a threat to humanity, in my books. My associates ... disagreed. And I believe the planned to remove me in short order, after dealing with you."

The figure stood, pixels smearing his features, and looked out over the lake. "They made the call to lure Kahoku here and finish him off, and to use that to lure you here and do the same. You'd have traced him to the fake HQ you now stand in, and Agent Eylana would attempt to feed you false information that would have sent you on a wild goose chase away from Saren. And if that failed, they'd blow up the base around you."

The figure fished out another cigarette from his coat pocket, lighting it with a brass and steel lighter he produced from the other pocket, blue smoke trailing away from him in a gentle breeze. "I may be many things, Commander. I may very well be a terrorist, I suppose. But I will never endanger or betray humanity. That's why I interfered, why I sabotaged the real HQ and trapped Rachel and Richard within. That's why I'll forward you the little information I have on Saren and the best way to track him down, and give you what intelligence I have on his forces and finances."

The voice had gone hard with a ring of command. "I want him stopped and killed. If that means we lose out on a chance to control the geth, too bad. If it means we can't keep his super dreadnaught, too bad. If Saren isn't just crazy and he can bring back more of whatever destroyed both the Inusannon and the Protheans, we haven't got a chance at survival. And against that, I'll do anything to stop it. Pay any price."

Shepard nodded again, and rubbed her cheek tiredly. "Assuming I believe this bullshit..."

The Illusive Man laughed. "Richard and Rachel are currently at the main HQ, roughly six hundred miles east of your location. Your ship should have been able to localize the detonation of the stockpile of disruptor torpedoes I set off earlier, and I've put virii and scramble codes into the base computers. Most likely, many of the personnel inside are dead, but Rachel and Richard are extremely dangerous, and if anyone survived, even with security down, getting to them will be very difficult. "

Shepard shrugged. "According to my XO, Citadel troops are on the way already."

The Illusive Man nodded. "That is true. But it will still be hours before they arrive. You of all people know what will happen if you give General Florez hours to dig into a position. My hacks and lockouts aren't 100% foolproof, her technicians will eventually get the GTS and ground defenses working again, if given enough time. I destroyed most of the power generation and her space capability, but that's not to say they haven't squirreled away some small craft I didn't know about. If they escape, the whole

mess will simply start over again. And yet..."

The Illusive Man sighed. "They can't be arrested, Shepard. They know too much, too many dirty political figures, too much blackmail on the SA. If they're taken by the Citadel, and interrogated, the Systems Alliance government will never survive. And your own Spectre status may be stripped, in the political fallout. Worse, it will poison human-alien relations for decades, and we cannot afford that right now. They have to be killed, Commander."

She snorted. "I don't take orders from you. You're a criminal."

The Illusive Man puffed on his cigarette, then waved away the smoke. "I am fully aware of that, Commander Shepard. I can't do any more than I've already done. I've put all the pieces on the board for you to see." He touched a control on his omnitool, a slender band of blue haptic light around his right cuff, and the computers in the command center sprang to life. "The information I have on Saren is available to you. Saren and Benezia have a hidden corporate facility on Noveria called Peak 13. Peak 13 appears on no map, and the corporate masters of Noveria think it's merely a geothermal plant used to power a Binary Helix facility further down the mountainside."

The Illusive Man flicked off his omnitool. "I can't order you to do anything. But you've seen the kind of 'research' Richard was producing. Rachel planned to storm the Citadel with her private army. Leaving them alive will not only cripple humanity and set back relations, but interfere with your search for Saren and stopping him. More importantly . . . taking them out helps me. And I am in a position to help you with intelligence gathering."

Shepard glanced at Wrex. "I've already got the Shadow Broker helping me."

The Illusive Man's smile was audible again. "And he saw all of this coming? That this trap was a setup specifically to derail you? The Broker, whatever he, she or it is, is not omniscient or omnipresent, Commander. The more allies you have in this hunt, the more likely you are to succeed."

Alenko shook his head stubbornly. "You can't trust someone like that, Commander. Even if he's not lying, and who knows if he is or not, we have a duty to bring whoever is behind this mess to justice."

Ashley was gripping the stock of her assault rifle tightly. "He's right though, LT. God, you can't imagine what a fucking disaster this is. One of our highest ranking generals and . . . my uncle.. involved in Cerberus? The government would collapse, half the colonies would freak, the aliens on the Citadel would say it was all an SA plot -"

Garrus only grunted, sounding more like Wrex than himself in that moment. "- and how do we know it isn't? At the end of the day, though, putting a bullet in their heads sounds pretty appealing to me. What they did to the turians in that room -"

Shepard cut off the babble of voices with a hand. "I'll give them one chance to surrender." She paused, peering closely at the screen. "And as for you, if I catch you, you'll get the same one chance. I don't give a shit if you found your goddamned conscience or if you're just cutting your losses, the fact that you had a hand in this abomination makes you the worst kind of criminal."

The Illusive Man stubbed out his second cigarette and shrugged, the filmy fabric of his suit rippling in shades of blue as he stood. "Unless something very unexpected happens, Commander, I doubt you and I will ever meet each other. I wish you good hunting...and for what it's worth, Commander, I don't think very many people in the SA were aware that Cerberus was working with them. The SA may have it's flaws, but I don't think any of the Congress, or the High Command, was aware. It was mostly .. figures of influence. Never more than a half dozen."

Shepard grimaced. "Was the Fleet Master one of them?"

The Illusive Man touched a control on his haptic bracelet, the blue circles illuminating his eyes locking onto hers for a moment. "Yes, to some degree."

The holo went dark, and a moment later the console itself smoked and emitted a spray of sparks. Tali cursed, running her omnitool over it, then sighed. "I never could get a good trace, Commander – the signal just ... came out of nowhere. It might have had routing information in the emitter itself, but he just fried it somehow."

Shepard nodded, calmly. "No matter." She tapped her omnitool. "All ground forces, this is Commander Shepard. I want this place wrapped up and ready to load up on the Normandy in fifteen minutes. After that, we're redeploying to another location on the surface – another Cerberus installation."

She paused, then continued. "It's possible that we're going to face heavy resistance. So far, everything has gone almost too smoothly. Let's not screw it up now. Check your gear, weapons, and energy levels, and get ready for transit." She clicked off, turning to her team.

"Regardless of whether that fucker is lying or not, what he said makes sense. I always knew Cerberus was fucking crazy, but I never would have thought that they were that crazy. I know General Florez. She was ... close to me. She trained me, taught me tactics and ship-handling, and was a big influence on my life, along with Captain Anderson." She closed her eyes. "The idea she's really behind this is as sickening to me as finding out about her uncle must be for Ash."

She opened her eyes, and glanced around a second time. "That being said, if they're willing to give up, we'll take them into custody. If they do not, then we take them out."

Garrus flicked a mandible. "Do we tell the Council about ... this? The little conversation you had? The identity of who is running the show, if we have to kill them?"

Shepard sighed. "I .. don't know, Garrus. I'd normally confer with High Command...but I just got told that the fucking Fleet Master knew about this shit, on some level. For now, I'd like to ask each of you to keep everything you heard today quiet. The revelations we've already found are ... bad enough. Once we've put Saren into the ground and stopped whatever batshit crazy he's trying to dig up, then we can deal with the fallout from this mess."

Ashley nodded tersely. "Ma'am, my uncle is not going to surrender, I can tell you that much. If it comes to killing him, permission to handle it myself. It's... a family thing...our name can't be dragged any further down ..."

Shepard exhaled tiredly. "If it comes to that, Chief, you can ventilate his skull yourself. Let's hope it doesn't." She glanced around at each member of her team.

Tali looked nervous, while Wrex seemed pensive, and was clearly impatient to either move out or communicate with the Broker. Alenko looked somewhat dispirited, Ash was angry and tense, Garrus almost rigid.

Jason Dunn stood swaying on his feet, a dazed expression on his face. "Who would have thunk it? General Florez, crazed military nutjob." He shrugged. "I'm banged up something fierce, She-bitch, but if we have to take down the Old Lady, I'll be there."

Shepard nodded, and glanced at Liara. The asari bit her lip and gently touched the commander's arm vambrace. "Are you going to be able to .. deal .. with General Florez, Shepard?"

Shepard only tightened the choke on her ODIN to solid slug pattern and gave an icy, tight smile. "Don't worry about that, Liara. Like Jace said, if it comes to dancing with the Old Lady, I'm game."

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## Chapter 79: Chapter 70: Richard Williams

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*A/N: This is going to be a controversial chapter. And a long author's note.*

*I am **not** a fan of giving over an entire chapter to an OC, but in this case, it's a necessary evil.*

*The biggest problem in Mass Effect has always been Cerberus. In the first game, it was a group of faceless Dudes of Evil, twirling their mustaches while they Committed Very Bad Acts for no real reason. Anyone who thought thorian or rachni would make usable soldiers in anything but the most extreme circumstances (aka, invasion by aliens hell-bent on obliterating humanity) was crazy ... but there was NOTHING in the background suggesting anything so dire as to evoke that kind of response.*

*I won't even talk about how badly they got messed up in ME 2 and 3. Bottom line, there has to be a reason Cerberus exists besides the relatively benign canon First Conflict War, which involved all of one colony. Cerberus is the kind of response to more than that.*

*I've also decided that there needs to be separation between TIM's Cerberus and the crazy we see in ME3 Cerberus. Mainly because TIM is too good to waste on such a stupid plot...but also because it makes more sense. And as a result, some back story and info-dumping is necessary.*

*I don't want to humanize Richard Williams – he is a monster, both physically and mentally. His world-view is warped, but sadly it's warped with good reason, not only by what he went through but by the people who, as you will see, literally saved his life. When your entire world-view is skewed by events, what seems horrific and insane to others seems rational to you. Placed in his position, would any of us be more humane, more forgiving?*

*I don't think I would.*

*As a plus, it gives me a reason to go into the history of the SA, and explain just why some other people thought that groups like Cerberus were not a bad idea. Remember, this is the Premiseverse, which is like the rapist, axe-murdering version of Renegade Reinterpretations. On a bad day.*

*With no coffee.*

*Enjoy!*

*Sarah Williams speech is adapted, in part from the speech given after 9/11.*

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Richard Williams, the Shadow Hand, ticked off controls on the Harpoon-class light fighter, his thick fingers moving through the haptic controls with blind familiarity, his mind adrift with plans on how to salvage this mess.

That he could salvage the situation was, in his mind, a fact – never did even cross his thoughts that failure could result from the setbacks that had occurred in the past few days. He had survived death itself and sneered back. Against that, merely starting over from a fall-back position was just time consuming. Irritating, and perhaps even belittling, but ultimately it was still only a setback.

The fighter hummed as it's mass core came online. The rough cave framed the tiny fighter bay, sheets of duranium and lead blocking sensor signals, natural winds from the valley below the plateau preventing heat build up. Richard was a believer in back-up plans, and back-ups to backups. If his life had taught him no other lessons, he had learned the hard way that Murphy was an optimist. So his natural inclination was to ensure that he was prepared for all events.

At times, coordinating it all was hard. It required a lot of forward planning, and anticipating the

unexpected and unlikely. But it was as natural as breathing was to most people. Such mental acuity was not, after all, available to most people. It came from being a perfect specimen of humanity.

But being such a primarch of human perfection was, after all, the plan.

His mind turned back to the end of the First Contact War. The war that had defined and broken humanity's beliefs, that burned any illusions that alien life would be peaceful, wise, and enlightened.

He remembered, having been, along with several other members of his family, on his brother's staff at Shanxi. Then, he was a major of Marines, and he'd brought along his own son Byron, barely an ensign in the SSA navy, to act as a tech assistant in the command center. His brother, Nathan, was the ranking commander, and had brought his own son with him. Uriel had come along as well, just recently married, as a military consultant on the defense systems they were laying down.

He remembered the laughter and cheer. It was supposed to be a family trip, a final consolidation of the purchases of property on Shanxi, working hand in glove with the Chu Family of later Sirta fame.

For Nathan, it was supposed to be a last military command before retirement. For Jared, the oldest son of Nathan, a chance to see the colonies. For Richard's son Bryon, a chance to prove himself as an officer. For Richard, it was supposed to be an easy couple of years, a final red front-line colony command tab on his record before heading back to the safety of Earth to climb the ranks of the military and continue the Williams tradition of excellence.

He remembered when the turians arrived, and 'announced' their presence by obliterating the unarmed research ships fleeing back from the mass relay. The angular raptor lines of their starships, arrogant in the dim solar light, the flickers of mass accelerator fire and the crashing alarms of the Big A alert call to Sol Fleet.

He remembered the burning fire-falls of ships as the holding picket that protected Shanxi tried to fight back against ships three times as fast and twice as maneuverable, the terror as civilians followed the drills to get to the civilian shelters, the terror of firing his Avenger MII at the elongated, spiky-limbed monstrosities that stalked out of the dark, glowing with biotics and haptic info-war programs. He remembered how the 11th RIU died to the last man trying to prevent the turian Raptor troops from blowing up innocent civilians fleeing for safety.

He remembered the screams. And the fires. And the blood, running through the streets like a foul river.

The turians, having murdered tens of thousands of civilians by classifying them as combatants, had been hurled out of Shanxi, their precious strike force of biotics defeated, their small assault fleet torn to pieces by the vengeance driven First Fleet. Shanxi had been freed, and tears mingled with cries for revenge in the throats of many.

He remembered thinking that they had won.

Then the Talon Offensive began, and an unending stream of ships had vomited forth from the mass relay, enough to blacken the skies. Defiant to the end, Governor Marks had spat into the view screen when the turians demanded the surrender of all military personnel to face execution as war criminals and the complete surrender of the colony.

The turian answer had been brutal. Shanxi had died from kinetic bombardment. The entire planet went up as waves of plasma fire erupted. Arcology complex foundations were blasted apart, delicate towers of colony storage pods incinerated.

Hundreds of thousands of people were slain, the turians *cheering* on their com circuits. The armored HQ where General Williams commanded the planet's defenses was immune to their callous strikes...but the Williams compound on the north side of the capital city was not.

Jared, Nathan's son, was killed instantly in the blast that leveled Williams Manor. Nothing at all could be found of him. Uriel, Ashley's father, had been hit by shrapnel from the blast that killed Jared. It mangled his leg and right hand, but he was left alive, and managed to crawl away to a waiting APC. Richard's son Byron was blown free of the wreckage only to die in the fires that consumed the rest of the compound, his screams for help ringing in Richard's ears even after all these years.

Richard, on the other hand, had been arguing with Jared when the blast hit, and had stalked off in frustration for about thirty feet when the world had turned to white fire. He'd taken a full blast of vaporized metal to the face and body. His arms flashed into steam, his legs sheared at the thigh. His eyes were gone, his face a shredded wreck, his lungs burned. He had lost over half his body mass, the rest a suppurating mess of fourth degree burns.

That, for many days, was the last he knew. He never saw a broken General Williams utter a dispirited, sobbing surrender. Never watched smug turians land and occupy the planet, brutalizing it's inhabitants and outright stealing whatever they laid hands on. He never got to see the Exodus Fleet, a ragtag assemblage of refugee ships that managed to evade the turian fleet to flee to the nearest, system, Thanas.

He awoke just in time from a coma to hear about the Horror at Thanas, at hearing the descriptions of shaky digital images of the turians as they had poured into Thanas, blowing up evacuation ships with claims that they were attempting to ferry troops. He'd awoke, to find himself blind, broken, near death, and in a makeshift resistance hospital run by a charismatic rogue known as Jack Harper.

He'd been placed in a regenerative coma by the crafty medic of the group, but they could do no more until hostilities ended. So he had laid in shuddering agony, barely controlled by pain meds, and gritted his teeth as his race faced death.

The lies from the turians had enraged humanity past the point of reason. Civilians and retired military personnel enlisted by the hundreds of thousands. The entirety of the Corporate Court voted 193 to 0 to suspend charging the SA government for services and turned over their own corporate military forces and what stocks of weapons they had. Gangers and criminals volunteered by the ward district for the Penal Legions, turning themselves in for a shot at the turians. The shipyards were manned by hundreds of thousands of dockworkers, working for free since the government couldn't afford to pay them, often pulling fifteen and twenty hour shifts to refit and get ships back into the fight.

It was, perhaps, humanity's finest hour. He remembered the soft voice of Eva Core, talking past her tears, reading the speech of Sarah Williams, his own sister, as she poured out the soul of humanity.

*"Never surrender. Never yield. Never forget. When the stone and steel that we have built up in our lifetime comes crashing down as molten rain, when the blood of our friends and family flows through the arcologies, when our ships burn broken in our skies and the cries of the mourners echo on every colony, that is when we pick each other up and fight even harder. We do so not as Americans or SA citizens or Horizoners – but as humans! We will **not** die. We will face death, and we stand, shoulder to shoulder, and face the twisting, black storm before us, not with hesitation or fear, but with squared jaws and clenched fists, and we shout out in one voice, brothers and sisters, to those who would tear us apart, **"Our light will not be extinguished!"** "*

Colony after colony refused to surrender to the turians. Mirsan committed mass suicide rather than submit, detonating their fusion plants as the turians landed before taking poison en masse. The religious Amish colony of Peace Point would not fight back even in the face of the turians killing their leaders, instead calmly forgiving their captors and stepping up one by one, unafraid of their executioners, ready to martyr themselves for the Lord. The Indian-sourced colony of Presh, mostly monks, immolated themselves in plasma fires from their power generators and went out to embrace their turian invaders,

jiggling torches in the night.

Kamikaze ships tore through the turian lines, as ship after ship refused to haul down the SA flag even if beaten in battle. SA marines strapped themselves down with grenade belts and charged the turian positions on Thanas, and the Fifth RRU began strapping anti-matter charges to the mass relay, threatening to detonate it if the turians didn't back down. Turian troops on the ground were hacked to pieces and their hides reworked into belts, coats, and flags.

Humanity fought with everything it had, and it wasn't enough. Richard had curled into the wreck of his body back then, waiting for death to come, but it never did.

The turian response to such infuriating resistance to proper military conquest was an emotional and irrational response. Nineteen dreadnaughts, leading over a million heavy infantry, stormed into human space. The heaviest units the SA navy had faced thus far was a heavy cruiser, and the turian ships simply blasted their way through human lines like wax paper. They planned to crush every colony and then attack Earth itself, and bombard it into submission or ruin.

It was sickening and overwhelming, and the turians would have destroyed humanity if the asari hadn't intervened. Whether prompted by the tearful vid-message of Sarah Williams, sent out by FTL wave relay on all bands, or by the horrific scenes of destruction wreaked on Shanxi that the STG uncovered when they became alarmed as such huge turian fleet movements, the asari had saved humanity, asari warships inserting themselves into the space lanes and backing the turians down like whipped curs. The shame of the Hierarchy was massive, doubled when the asari forced them to pay massive war reparations to the Systems Alliance.

When the turians protested, no less than the asari leader of the second house, Uressa T'Shora, had asked how the turians expected to be held as honorable warriors when they only applied their honor to conflicts within their own species. The asari would not back down, and the turians retreated, spitting bitter epithets about the 'unfairness' of it all. The Hierarchy had pushed their version of events, and despite the cost, their brutal assault on a new species had actually won them respect – and in later years, as humanity grew with speed and advanced faster than any other race had done before, a few alien voices suggested the turians should have been allowed to finish the job.

Thus, bitter, frightened, and bloodied, humanity had come into the galactic community. With that sort of entry, who blamed humanity for groups like Earth First and Cerberus? Humanity had adjusted, slowly, and in time most of the wounds healed. A new generation of humans and turians had grown up, and while tensions were still high, at least a few turians were deeply ashamed of how the Hierarchy had reacted.

Wounds had healed. For some.

But not Richard's. And not the William family's, either. The end of the war had all come too late for the Williams family. Their vast wealth destroyed with the fall of Thanas, their patriarch shamed by his surrender on Shanxi, none could stop the SA's snubbing of their clan. And many of the elder Williams had died fighting on Shanxi – the death of Jared William had shattered his father, and watching his other family members broken and bleeding on the battlefield had been the true reason the old man had been driven to surrender. That he had surrendered, when so many others had chosen death and defiance rather than submission, ended up with the Williams family being smeared as cowards. With it's patriarch dead, his brother a cripple, and it's sons mangled, they withdrew from society.

The end of the war allowed Richard to be returned home to Earth, where the last of the family's wealth was spent on desperate and frantic attempts to stabilize him and keep him alive. He'd never forgotten that, known that the family *should* have written him off...and didn't.

He sighed as he prepped the control surfaces of the fighter. He knew, in his heart, the real reason he was running away from this fight had nothing to do with survival. Shepard and her little band of freaks and wanna-be marines posed about as much threat to him as an ant-hill to a dreadnaught. Oh, he might not be able to beat them all if they rushed him en masse ... but very, very few of them would come out of that fight alive.

But even he had limits, and he'd be damned to the last circle of Hell before he killed his own *niece*, no matter how misguided she might be. He cursed thickly under his breath, remembering his rage at discovering that Ashley had been on the ground at Eden Prime and nearly killed. He should have taken steps to get her out of the line of fire, but he'd assumed after everything settled down – and her name wasn't on the list of dead – that she'd landed on her feet.

Jack, damn him, had never told him she was on the Butcher's ship. He savagely tapped through a series of buttons on the haptic control panels in front of him, and killed the environmental systems. They were unneeded.

Not for a man like him. His fight against death had proven that. Broken, blasted, half melted, his body ruined beyond the capacity of medical science to repair, the doctors the Williams family had engaged had expected him to expire. Most men *would* have simply died. Not Richard Williams. But he figured he'd never walk again, never fight again, and never be a man again. So he planned to retire to a medically supported retirement and write, maybe inspire a next generation to stand against turian aggression.

That was, at least, the plan. Before things changed.

The early beginnings of what would eventually be the Shadow Cell were, in those days, the Bio-eugenics and Purity Unit of the Manswell Security Force. The MSF was a darkly held secret, a hangover from the Days of Iron, when Victor Manswell had to subdue Earth to save it. They were the defenders and upholders of the Manswell Doctrine – that the Protheans had left Earth a critical message and that humanity must be its only holders, and in furtherance of that, all acts were permissible.

The MSF were human supremacists to the last man. They were also racists, sexists, rich white males armored in privilege and position. But against the sheer alien nature of their foes, the MSF found humans they would not have tolerated to serve as janitors in their country clubs more appealing than scaled, birdlike *things*.

And of course, the fact that humanity had not been saved by its own might but by a pack of blue alien hussies had simply infuriated them to no end.

Thus, they planned, and they considered, and they decided that they needed an agent. A hand, to perform their work.

They had salvaged the wreckage of a human being once known as Richard Williams for their own plans. They'd approached him in the sad, sagging remains of the Williams Estate in New Hampshire Arcology, and had offered to help him, and his family, in return for him volunteering for an experimental medical project that could 'return mobility to his body'. Broken and with no other choices, his family too poor to keep the medical care he needed to stay alive going for more than a few more years, it was an easy decision to make.

He'd signed up without asking what they planned or how he'd be 'helped'. In hindsight, he was glad he hadn't asked, his nerve would have failed if he knew what awaited him.

He'd spent nine long, pain-filled years as a testbed for Project Osiris. They'd kept him alive with flash-cloned tissues, constant blood transfusions, ultra-pure oxygen and clean rooms. He'd spent weeks having rotting, necrotic flesh debrided from his broken frame. Months with powerful growth hormones,

bolstering his remaining organs. Surgeries and laser-scalpel removals, pulverized bones picked out by robotic arms and every section of his body flooded with nanotech agents.

At first, he'd thought they planned to heal him.

When the cyber-surgeons and industrial assembly robots arrived, he'd foolishly thought they planned a few cybernetic replacements. Until they began building a cutting edge lab around his life support unit, and brought in dozens of other wounded soldiers as baseline experiments. They tested each new piece of cyberware a dozen times before implanting it. Livers. Kidneys. Lungs. Eyes. Bones.

They plotted new experiments in cybernetic surgery, taking it far, far past the old thresholds of 54%.

When they went past 70%, there were murmurs that what remained wasn't technically human anymore, but that didn't stop them, either. There were times in the surgery he remembered wanting to see a mirror and they wouldn't let him. The tide of drugs disrupted his memories, but he remembered a faint sense of alarm and horror at what was being done to him. Seeing an arm move at his command that wasn't his arm. Feeling pain fade slowly replaced by digital representations of feeling.

Feeling, eventually, nothing at all except what signals his cybernetic body now fed to the remains of his brain.

He flexed his arm, feeling steel bones and myomer muscles shift with artificial, electronic pressure nerves. The cameras that were his eyes flitted around in his steel skull, vat-grown lungs of polymer and DETA filters filling his synthetic blood with oxygen.

Richard Williams died on those operating tables. What came out was, by any scientific definition, not even alive anymore. Much less human.

A quarter of his brain was now solid-state, multiphase computer wafers and six tandem greyboxes, encased in plasma-forged steel. High quality sound-conducting arrays and steerable microphones were his ears. His heart was an artificial pump, moving around a few liters of a substance similar to blood, but artificial. His kidneys were custom-built filtering systems and chemical processing trays, his liver a bio-engineered pack of blood-processing agents in a heparin circulation isolation trap.

He was the furthest conversion cyborg ever created, at 98% artificial. Only portions of his brain were real flesh. His face was biosynthetic armor-mesh weave with a few layers of synthskin atop it. His muscles were flash-pressure hydraulics, electronic myomer bundles, and micronised mass effect emitters. His bones were plasma compressed rods of pure titanium, smashed to increased density by million-ton mass effect fields. Armor plates linked by an array of impact-deadening omnigel suffused with repair nanos filled the spaces in his body not taken up by tech, flowed sluggishly through arms and legs that would shame a JOTUN mech with their sheer power.

He could bench over six thousand pounds, run at over fifty miles an hour, and survive in hard vacuum for almost ninety hours before even tapping his backup reserves. His brain, augmented by a computer array more powerful than what drove most ships of the line and supported by greyboxes full of the scientific memories and experiences of over two thousand top researchers, was unmatched in human experience.

He would be an immortal god-emperor to a unified, empowered mankind. He would unlock the darkest secrets of the universe, tear the power out of the hands of the filthy alien cretins who dared challenge God's own chosen, and create a Pax Humanica.

At least...that was the plan.

The path there, after being reborn as a god among men, was more convoluted. The collapse of the Jarkhold Government and the rise of the AIS ended the MSF, and their eugenics experiments were

destroyed by a disgusted 'reformist' SA government. It wasn't until later that Richard learned the 'reformists' were themselves members of the MSF – covering their tracks ever twenty years.

He'd been given control of a project to create the next phase of human existence, and he took it up with relish. It was his brilliance that discovered asari sabotage to the L2 implants and brought about the flawless L3's. It was his hand that had crafted the protein-carbon chains that made Sirta's medigel such a huge hit. It was his iron-like will that had held the research group to the target when it came to building out the first iterations of what would become Research Station Sixteen, in the Black Zone, that had led to the creation of innovations like the IES stealth system used by the Normandy.

And when the MFS – now known as Northstar – tapped him to take over Cerberus, he was prepared.

He snorted to himself as he brought the fighter's sensors online. At least ... that was the plan.

Now the plan had gone south, and once again, he'd have to do everything himself. He shook his head in rueful, self-admonishing admiration. As angry as he'd been, he had to give points to Jack for being nasty and thorough in his strike at Cerberus. He was thankful that he had not shared all his hidey holes with the dangerous industrialist, but Jack was too much of a wild card. Too moral, even after seeing the true nature of events. And that asari he kept like some kind of mistress – disgusting.

But the MSF had foreseen that eventuality too. They had never trusted him, even after neutralizing his movement with their own actions. They'd long expected this day would come, and had likewise long prepared methods to handle the situation.

Which is why, as he slowly took the fighter out of the small cave and flew it in ground-hugging slow movements to evade any sensors the Normandy might have pointed in his direction, he triggered a burst pulse transmission from the fighter, soaring out to what appeared to be a boring asteroid in high orbit around the planet's moon.

The link took several seconds to set up – it had been Jack's scientists, after all, who'd pioneered QEC, and who knew what bugs lay within it's comms protocols. The slower, safer link of stealthed FTL comm buoys was slower, but since it was laid independently of the pan-galactic comms net, also secure.

The screen lit up, displaying the ancient symbol of the Manswells – a quartered Hohenzollern crest over an iron shield. "Challenge. The fourth position." The voice was a synthesized one, and Richard only smiled as he tapped in the appropriate response to the challenge code.

The screen cleared a few seconds later, showing an ancient figure sitting in a life-support chair. Wisps of fine, silvery-white hair dangled in a tattered fashion around the spotted, bald crown, and the face was a map of wrinkles and age, sagging heavily where an oxygen mask didn't occlude the view. The tiny, shriveled body that supported the head was twisted, held in place by biomedical clamps and haloed by tubes of fluids pumping in and out of the body, covered only by a thick blanket of rich fabric. Tiny feet poked out from the edge of the blanket, wearing heavy socks, and the visible hand was gnarled, twisted with arthritis, age, and injury.

But the black eyes were as bright and fiery as Richard had ever seen, filled with purpose and determination. The voice, a harsh, guttural whisper, was hard to hear, accents edged in crisp Germanic cadences. "You have departed the trap set by that insipid little mouse?"

Richard nodded, flying absentmindedly with one hand, the other manipulating his nav computer, even while he held the conversation. "Yes, Lord Maxwell. I had to leave Rachel behind, but I should be clear of the system in about an hour."

The old man's left, snowy eyebrow twitched. "As if I care for the stupid militarist. She was a tool, and

she has served her purpose. It is of no matter, Richard. Get clear and report back to Zion Station. We are abandoning this line of .. pursuit."

Richard frowned. "But the control of the geth-"

The old man looked up, eyes narrowing. "I am not accustomed to having to repeat my words, or detailing out what should be obvious even to you, boy. We have been *predicted*. That has not happened since the Days of Iron. We cannot assume that we have not been compromised. Thus, we shall lie low and return when we have a better grasp on all parts of the situation."

Richard nodded, slowly. "I understand, but it seems that this remains a golden opportunity to have a chance at commanding a force that would speed up our goals considerably. I merely wish to understand the larger thinking behind this order."

The old man gave a rasping, wet cough, closing his eyes for a moment. "Control of the geth would only be useful in the last stages of Operation Fletcher. If we cannot seize the Citadel, then the geth are a possible liability. Whatever method this turian is using to control them cannot be perfect." He paused. "Further, there remains the possibility that there are players in the game we did not expect or prepare for."

Richard frowned, but the old man continued, voice growing stronger. "Saren's krogan allies – particularly Okeer. Unexpected. Collectors on Eingana. Unexpected. Spectre and Citadel attack on Cerberus – unexpected!" The old man's hand clenched, his accent becoming thicker as his voice rose. "That does not even cover the information Jack's little asari bitch gave us about the salarians and the goddamned batarians."

With a sharp inhalation, the old man calmed. "Now is the time for circumspection, not adventuring. We cannot risk exposure. If the member states of the SA – or the aliens – realized who really ran the SA, do you think any of us would be safe? Pagh."

Richard's frown did not vanish, but he could understand the reasoning at least. He gave a grim nod, and his voice was quiet as he spoke. "I am obedient in all things, Lord Maxwell. What should I do with the remaining Cerberus forces I have placed on standby?"

The old man made a small motion with his hand. "Sever all comms and destroy the codes and ciphers. Those forces are polluted, and they were small in number anyway. We will use the plans and designs that General Florez came up with to begin recruiting a new, stronger army. And when the time comes, we will unveil a new, pure Cerberus, to defend humanity. One with the full power of the human nation behind it."

Richard nodded. "And the other experimental data? We were very close on the yahg specimen..."

The old man grunted. "We will reassemble your work, never fear, Richard. We have come into possession of a very interesting item, recently, one I think you will need to research yourself." The old man's gnarled hand tapped shakily at a haptic control on his chair, and the camera panned across from the old man to reveal a black pyramidal shape sitting atop a metallic table. The pyramid was about a foot on each side, and smooth, marked only by thin, glowing lines illuminated faintly with red in a number of places.

Richard blinked. "What is it?"

The old man smiled. "A component of a great machine, Richard. We have identified another ship like the one Saren has. In orbit, around a gas giant known as Mnemosyne. We will have research teams and zero-g teams there in four months." The old man's voice finally rose above a whisper, in a note of triumph. "And that is why I have no need for Saren and his toys. Let the Butcher deal with him, and his

asari bitch flunky. We will have our own power."

Richard's face split into a grin as he imagined the possibilities. Adapting the technology of such a thing would give humanity an unbeatable lead in power and knowledge. And the very concepts that could be created from such science, the ideas, the possibilities...

"Humanity Now."

The old man nodded. "Humanity Now, Tomorrow and Forever, Richard. That is all. Zion will be waiting for you, but there is no rush. Be cautious. the Butcher is dangerous. Even more than myself or the other members, Richard, you are the important one, the one to carry our goals into the future."

With that, the signal cut off, and Richard dipped his fighter into a canyon. Risking extraction while he had no clue where the Normandy was didn't sound good, and there was no rush. Easier to simply shut down all power and wait until battle – or other distractions – gave him a clean rush to the relay.

And to the future.

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## Chapter 80: Chapter 71: Normandy, Memories II

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*A/N: The ubiquitous flashback chapter. Just setting the stage up, the fight and end of the Cerberus arc is just about here. And a little bit more insight into Shepard and Florez.*

*I also included a Liara Moment. Because I could. :D*

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It took a full twenty minutes for Shepard's marine teams to load up the materials and evidence from the Cerberus base into some semblance of order and out the front door to the MAKOs now on the ground. There were too many corpses of all races to properly deal with, and Shepard left those for the incoming Citadel troops to deal with.

The evidence loaded into the computers in the command center by the Illusive Man was copied to OSD's, and Sergeant Telanya was going over it on her omni-tool, her delicate features twisted in concentration, as Garrus watched over her shoulder. Several scrolling columns of bank transactions and other financial manipulations trickled like golden waterfalls in one haptic column, while another omni-screen was filled with what looked like images of dead bodies or explosions.

Shepard watched as some of the 'experiment' corpses were packed into crates and loaded into the MAKO, then turned to face Liara, who had walked up next to her. "Jesus, what a clusterfuck. Sorry you had to see that, Liara."

The asari woman shrugged, bright blue eyes seeking out Shepard's own. "I am alright, Sara. Or I will be. I must admit, I had not thought to see such cruelty, but I understand now why many humans speak of Cerberus with such loathing."

Shepard snorted sourly. "Not all of 'em do. You've already seen how some of the Normandy crew react around Garrus, and that's on their best behavior with a turian they actually sorta like. The First Contact War made a lot of humans paranoid, and finding out about what happened to the krogan and quarians didn't make us feel a whole lot safer."

Shepard pointed to the boxes being placed in the MAKO. "Fear leads to shit like this, Liara. I'm not old enough to remember the FCW, but most of the admirals and people in my government are. They probably won't ever forget."

Liara nodded but an anguished, confused expression resided on her face. "Do all humans dislike aliens, then? Even . . . I mean, the Asari Republics stepped into stop the conflict..." Her voice trailed off weakly, and Shepard gave a shrug.

"I'd say Ash and Pressly are good people, but even they aren't comfortable around most aliens. I have to give them both credit for working very hard to overcome their .. prejudices. But most humans never work with aliens, and the only ones who deal with them every day got over their problems a long time ago. And yeah, the asari saved our asses...and there's people on Earth who don't like that because they don't want to owe anyone a thing."

Shepard rubbed the back of her neck, then placed her mirrored helm back over her head, sealing away her features. "In the long run, what matters is that you don't act like a murdering asshole like these fuckers did. A quick death is too good for them, I'm half tempted to just let the radiation in the other base cook those assholes slowly to death rather than go in and try to arrest Rachel."

Liara nodded, re-affixing her own helmet. "You said you were close to this Rachel person."

Shepard gave a grim smile, invisible behind her mask. "Yeah, you could say that."

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*The practice and parade fields of Camp Revelation were ugly and chalky white, cracked and dotted here and there with old bloodstains or warped craters of crumbled, stained earth. High walls encircled the field, boxy prison housing built into them. Tall, ugly plascrete towers soared above them, each one topped with a flat platform and several men with large, ugly sniper rifles. A patrol of fighters crossed the black, star-filled sky above, the jutting shapes of point-targeting anti-personnel guns angled downwards. The darkness was only pierced by the harsh, white lights that loomed over their heads from tall, sheer poles, and the blazing red-and-orange haptic deadlines that showed where they could and could not walk.*

*The sky itself, an inky void, was edged in all directions by the broken and irregular crater wall the entire base sat in. A faint, shimmering energy field distorted the view of the stars, the only thing that kept the air in, for they were on the surface of the Moon, on it's dark side, forever turned away from the life giving sun and the warm blue glow of Earth.*

*Inscribed on the nearest wall in hard, blocky stencils was a single phrase. "Service or death."*

*Six lines of ragged figures in SA black jumpsuits stood at rough attention in the middle of the field, silently and isolated. There were perhaps sixty of them altogether, some looking bored, many looking terrified. Some were older, but many were just teenagers, shifting nervously under the hardened gazes of the instructors.*

*The instructors, facing them, were all intimidating, wearing stark white uniforms reinforced with armored plates, and carrying small personal air tanks. Each one carried a powerful pistol keyed only to fire when held by that instructor, and a vicious electro-prod hung on the other side thick, white leather belts around their waists. Two were men, broad of shoulder and thickly muscled, scowling faces regarding the criminals in front of them with no emotion.*

*The lead instructor stepped up, her features hard. "I am Major Rachel Florez, third commandant of the System's Alliance Felony Reclamation and Rehabilitation Program. As of 0900 this morning, ladies and gentlemen, you are all legally dead."*

*She turned on a heel, face still expressionless, and pointed. "I can kill any one of you, for any reason. I don't need to justify it. You have all been found wanting. You are all criminals. Many of you face the death penalty. The few of you who don't have been determined to be non-viable as a citizen of our*

*Systems Alliance. It is only through the mercy of our government that you are standing here right now, but you are dead."*

*She paused, cold gaze sweeping across the ranks of criminals, as if waiting for a challenge. She gave a tight little smile and continued. "Each and every one of you is here because you were deemed to have a certain level of sanity, because of your raw intellect or ability, and because you are dead and we are going to keep it that way if you don't perform. If you do perform well, you will be transferred to the normal military, to try to live out a better life this time. This is an opportunity, for you to leave behind the life you fucked up and take a stab at being an actual human being."*

*She began walking down the line. "You will be taught to fight. Read and write, if you can't. Read maps, plan fire-team ambushes, deal with basic first aid, and to rely on each other. I don't give a shit how hard you thought you were in the burb-barrio, how ice-cold your shitty little gangs were, or how much of a badass your punk asses assumed you were."*

*She gestured to the two men behind her. "These men behind me are commissars. Surrounding this entire facility are snipers. Fuck up, die. Fall behind, die. Piss them off, die. You will serve and serve with fire and fervor until your time is up or you eat a bullet. It's not like you can run away – in case you haven't noticed, you are on the moon. You'll freeze solid outside of this force shield in about six minutes – and of course, there's no air out there. A mass escape will just result in us venting the air and shipping up another load of criminals to try this out with."*

*She leaned forward. "You may have been badasses back home, but here you are meat. I can call down orbital fire on you. I can have you shot, tortured, and electrocuted on a whim. I'm better than you, and I always will be. I can outfight you, out-think you, and my dick is bigger than yours, too." This caused a few snickers, which she ignored.*

*She glanced around again, frowning. "Although, honestly, if you're the most dangerous badasses on Earth, we have clearly lost the fucking war and should just surrender. I've fucked up volus merchants scarier than you pack of clowns."*

*A huge, tattooed man stepped out of the ranks, snarling. Before he could even open his mouth, however, the Major's hand snapped out, crushing his windpipe with one blow. The man staggered back, clutching his throat, and she made a signal with her free hand. A moment later two sniper rounds transfixed his skull, spattering the recruit-criminals next to him with blood and brains.*

*Her smile grew wider. "There's always one who thinks he can get away with something. Consider that your warning, ladies and gentlemen. Each of you have an explosive device implanted in the base of your neck. We trigger it, you die. You get too far from your unit, it goes off and you die. I break a fingernail and you make a snarky comment about it, you die. Are we clear?"*

*There was a murmur of assent, and Major Florez sighed. "When I ask you a question you are to respond as soldiers. That means you say, "Sir, yes sir."*

*A thick-set man with two cobbled-together looking cybereyes sneered. "You ain't no sir."*

*Rachel nodded, and a moment later stepped up to the man, planting a fist into his stomach. He folded up, vomiting up blood a moment later, and she kicked his now lowered head, sending him sprawling to the ground. "I am God, as far as your punk asses are concerned. Mess with me and I will fuck you up so bad your momma will get pregnant. Am. I. CLEAR."*

*This time, the response was better. "Sir, yes sir."*

*She rolled her eyes, walking down the line, stopping in front of a thin, bony looking girl with gang tattoos and a murderous gaze in her dark blue eyes. "What's your name, little bitch?"*

*The voice was quiet, but hard for all that. "Sara Shepard."*

*Rachel smiled. "Oh, the drugged up little tramp who shot up her own gang, how sweet." She backhanded the girl across the face, hard enough to send her staggering back. "You will address me as sir at all times."*

*Shepard wiped blood from her mouth and stood, eyes narrowed. "Fuck you, sir." This time, Rachel's leg lashed out, flying to catch the girl in the knee. Shepard managed to block it, but still collapsed as the kick drove through her imperfect defense, and caught a second kick in the face.*

*Rachel sighed. "This little hussy shot and killed over a hundred men, and still can't – " She paused as Shepard leapt up from the ground, screaming, swinging. Again, two shots rang out, one going through her leg, the other through her shoulder, and the girl collapsed bleeding into the dirt at Rachel's feet. The major raised an eyebrow, and Shepard angled her head up, despite the pain, and spat blood on her clean white uniform.*

*Despite herself, Rachel grinned. "- and still can't even touch me, but she's got hate. Remember your hate. Stoke it. It's what will keep your asses alive." She turned to the second instructor. "Get her patched up, and get no-eyes over there awake too."*

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*Shepard shook her head with the memories, and sighed. "It's complicated. She was... one of the first people who treated me as something other than a monster. Anderson was the first, but he was also so ... good, so perfect, that I could never understand him, never really get why he bothered with someone like me. With Rachel..."*

*Liara nodded. "She was .. more like you?"*

*Shepard closed her eyes. "Never had a mother. If I had to pick someone to take the role, she'd be the closest fit, I guess. As fucked up as that was.."*

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*"Get up, Shepard."*

*Sara pushed herself up off the ground, limbs bruised, and wiped blood from her nose. Her vision swam slowly into focus, the figure of Rachel Florez standing in combat stance, leg forward, hand outstretched, blearily coming into view.*

*Her voice was cold and unyielding as she spoke to Shepard. "You rush in too fast, you let that anger of yours mess your head up, and you get fucking sloppy. Your goddamned biotics aren't going to save your ass if I can get you too messed up to use them, girl." She frowned. "You are distracted. You were doing better than this. You can do better than this."*

*Shepard exhaled shakily and nodded, but her jaw was still tight. "Yes, sir."*

*Rachel glanced over the younger woman for a long moment before sighing. "That's enough. Sit your ass down." She glanced over a shoulder at the other instructor. "Tom, take the unit out for a run, then march 'em to chow. I got shit to fix here."*

*The instructor known as Tom nodded, his burly features not shifting as he turned to go, leaving the two in the combat practice room alone. Pale gray practice mats and stark white walls were only accompanied by the stale lingering smell of sweat and the faint sounds of Penal Legion soldiers at drill outside.*

*Shepard sat on one of the benches along the wall, picking up a dry towel to hang over her neck, and*

*Florez stood in front of her, not even sweating. Shepard stared up at the woman in a mix of envy, confusion, and discomfort. She always looked elegant and deadly, never a hair out of place, never seeming to show any fatigue. Shepard felt weak compared to her, and she hated the feeling.*

*The silence stretched on for nearly a full minute before Rachel spoke. "I'm not good at this kind of thing, Shepard, so I'll be blunt. You have the potential to be the best fucking soldier I've ever seen or trained. Your reactions are topnotch, you are strong, fast, and you think on your feet. Your gut instincts are almost never wrong, and despite the fact that you're a frigid, anti-social bitch, you seem to be a natural leader."*

*Florez smiled at the slightly surprised look on the young woman's face, then continued. "Those kids you took under your wing worship the ground you walk on. You aren't even 19 and you have the potential to one day be the next Jon Grissom or David Anderson."*

*Shepard sighed. "I never feel that way. I just .."*

*Florez frowned, kneeling down to look Shepard in the eye. "You need to get the demons out of your head, that's what you need. Get your ass back to the barracks and shower up, then meet me at training field four in an hour." She walked away, leaving a pensive Shepard behind.*

*Shepard had obeyed, changing into a fresh uniform after cleaning up and reporting to the training field, finding a light SA shuttle there, with Rachel standing outside of it, talking to a taller, older man with an impressive handlebar mustache. Her voice was tight and cold. "I don't give a shit about the 'ramifications'. No one is going to give a shit either way, I just need you to sign off on it."*

*Shepard got closer, and stiffened, as she finally recognized the figure of Commandant Siron, the base commissar. The man smiled, his eyes cold, and glanced over Shepard for a long moment before turning back to Rachel. "If it blows up, or gets out, it's on you. I'll say you stole my auth-pad and did this on your own authority, am I clear?"*

*Rachel merely nodded. "Crystal, sir." With that, the man turned to Shepard and pressed a button on his omni-tool. "Inmate Recruit 96552-Delta, Sara Shepard. Your control implant has been turned off for six hours due to a request by your immediate commanding officer. After this time, it will be switched back on. If you are not within range of this facility by that time you will detonate. Any attempt to surgically remove the device during this time will result in it's detonation. Am I clear, inmate recruit?"*

*Shepard looked at Rachel in confusion before turning back to the Commandant. "Uh..yes. I mean, sir yes sir."*

*With a dry chuckle, the man departed, and Shepard turned to Rachel. "What is going on?"*

*Rachel merely opened the hatch of the shuttle. "Get in. We're going on a field trip, kiddo." She smirked and got in after Shepard did, motioning her to strap into one of the seats. Rachel took the controls, and the shuttle lifted off smoothly, departing the lunar surface and breaching the air-retention force dome over the training base a few seconds later.*

*Rachel's voice was cool. "According to your records, today is your birthday. Took me a while to grasp that. Also says, from the psych reports, that you never had a party before. So I figured that you deserved a present."*

*Shepard gave her a wary glance. "You're taking me to see my red sand dealer?"*

*Rachel gave an actual laugh, the first Shepard had ever heard from her. "So you can make jokes, amazing. No, I have something ... better in mind. I'll only say this one time. I'm risking my career for this, possibly more. I'm doing it because if you don't get the closure you need on this, you'll never be able to move on. What we're doing is so fucking illegal they don't even have a proper name for the*

crime."

Rachel paused. "I'm going to be trusting you with a live weapon, and not to try to escape or backstab me. Can I do that?"

Shepard bit her lip. A large, large part of her desperately wanted to escape. The terror of the Penal Legions was not a lie. Living under the guns of snipers, the brutal training and random beatings of the commissars, and the ugly threat of having the air taken away at any moment were enough to break anyone. The fact that a handful of teens shoved into the same regiment she was in looked to her for some kind of protection only made it worse.

But Major Florez had, despite the cruelty and hardness, been more supportive to her and for her than anyone else in her life. She'd worked out with her, taught her to fight, to shoot better, to plan and think. She spent countless hours drilling Shepard and correcting her forms, sometimes regaling her with stories of the First Contact War or other military anecdotes to pass the hours.

When Shepard got too mouthy, Florez would stop the other commissars from going too far, and when an older, stronger inmate had nearly raped Shepard, Florez's rage wasn't just that of a pissed off officer, but something ... else. Something dark, brutal, and vicious, that spoke to something in Shepard's heart she thought long dead and made her, for a brief, glorious moment, feel wanted and .. cared about.

Despite herself, and how badly she hurt every day, and how empty she was... she trusted Rachel Florez, more than anything else. Betray her? She'd die first. With a slow nod, she spoke. "I swear on my soul I won't betray you.. sir."

Rachel gave a small smile and angled the shuttle down into Earth's atmosphere. "This is going to be the last time you get to see your old home, Shepard. Enjoy it while you can." The rest of the shuttle trip was passed in silence, as Shepard bit her lip and tried not to cry at the sight of the glittering towers and endless lights of her home, the New York Arcology.

She had hated it, but she loved it, and seeing the crowds and smoke and the towers was almost too much after months of the stark white Penal Legion base. The shuttle bobbed and weaved through the rich part of town, skimming over Manhattan and down towards the Five Blocks...and then slightly across town from there.

Shepard swallowed and felt a cold chill come over her. The area looked vaguely familiar, but she couldn't place why, and it bothered her. The shuttle came down on top of an old parking garage, in the middle of a slum area, and Rachel triggered the shuttle door and stood.

She snapped a locker on the side of the shuttle wall open, and drew out an armor chest-plate, which she tossed to Shepard, before putting on another one herself. She then took down the two Avenger rifles in the locker, and slung one over her shoulder. "Catch".

Shepard caught the weapon, checking it's heat sink and ammo block, before pointing the barrel at the ground. "What are we doing here?"

Rachel pulled out two helmets with blank, silvered face-plates, setting them on the bench seating in the shuttle, then shut the locker. She tapped a haptic control on her arm and her uniform shimmered, shifting from the pure white of a Penal Legion commandant to the black and blues of a Major of Marines. She put on the helmet, and gestured for Shepard to do the same. "Just follow, for now."

They walked from the shuttle, down a set of old, half-broken concrete steps, to the road below. The street was mostly empty, a few homeless bums tucked up against the shattered, burned out shell of a warehouse to get out of the wind, a line of six single family homes in various states of disrepair across

*from them. Rachel marched towards the last one on the right, Shepard trailing, and coming to a confused stop when she saw the name on the phys-mail deposit box at the curb.*

*It read "Shepard, M".*

*Shepard looked at Rachel, but her expression couldn't be read through the silver face plate of her helmet. Rachel's voice was ice cold. "Yeah. You know where you are now. You know how you ended up with the fuckers who ruined you, don't you?"*

*Shepard nodded, shame and fury and pain all welling up inside her. "Yeah, my parents fucking sold me. Why are we here? You want them to fucking apologize or something, like that will change SHIT?!"*

*Rachel shook her head. "No, Sara. I expect you to walk through that door and put a bullet in their brains."*

*It felt as if the ground had dropped away beneath her feet. A tiny, tiny part of her had always hoped that her parents had been tricked, or forced into selling her, or that they had regretted it, and they would show up, teary and apologetic, and maybe things would... change somehow.*

*An equally tiny, tiny part of her still clung to that. She didn't know what to do, and Rachel simply took her by the wrist and walked up to the door, before banging on it with the butt of her rifle.*

*"Systems Alliance Commissariat! Open this door!"*

---

"Shepard?"

Shepard shook herself again, looking at the slender fingers wrapped around her armored wrist before remembering where she was again. "Sorry, Liara. I just...this is going to be hard for me, for a lot of reasons."

Liara nodded, closing her eyes. "When .. when we descended beneath the surface of Feros, I knew in my mind I was going to see my mother. But it did not truly impact me until the moment I saw her there, standing beside Saren." Pain radiated through Liara's voice, the hand on Shepard's wrist tightening. "It hurt so badly to fight her, to see her looking at me with hate, watching her try to kill you. I wanted.. I wanted to cry, to scream, to beg her to just look at me like she did when I was young."

Liara paused, swallowed, and shook her head. "To know your mother is a source of evil hurts like nothing else."

Shepard patted the little asari's hand. "I think your pain is a lot greater than mine, Liara, and you're a lot stronger than I am in the way you face it." She exhaled. "Rachel..is the person who let me get back a lot of .. who I am. She is the one who let me kill the people who ruined my life, covering for me. She's the one who always fed me information on where to find them. I used to wonder how she could do that, and now I guess I know. Cerberus."

Shepard hung her head for a long moment, still holding Liara's hand, merely thinking. It was funny how calming it was, just being able to sit and hold onto somebody like that. Shepard closed her eyes, letting as much of the pain and misery she could drain away, latching on to that tiny little moment of peace, and found her lips quirking into a smile.

"Thanks for just...being here, Liara."

The asari made a surprised sound, but squeezed her hand in response. "I wish I .. I knew what to say to make any of this better, Sara. I must sound like a fool, babbling on about wishing things were different."

Shepard shook her head. "I often end up thinking that way. But maybe you were right. Maybe I went through .. all of this shit, the pain, the loss, the blood, all of it, for a reason." Shepard swallowed, a nervous note entering into her voice. "Maybe if not for all that.. I wouldn't have this." She squeezed Liara's hand in hers again, wishing it wasn't through layers of armor, and the asari turned to her, a beautiful smile visible through the clear faceplate.

"...yes, you are right, Sara."

There was a long pause, and Shepard spoke in a dry voice. "Still, I gotta find better places have heart-to-hearts with you than shot-up bases full of dead people." She wagged a hand, grinning behind her helmet's faceplate, and Liara's laughter was enough to burn away the last dregs of pain in Shepard's soul.

At least, for a few moments.

### O-OSABC-O

Twenty five minutes later, the MAKOs boosted back into the Normandy's cargo bay, and Marines were storing away what they'd picked up from the planet. The barely functional JOTUN mech that had accompanied Kahoku was also in the bay, being fiddled over by an ecstatic Tali, and Shepard walked towards the elevator to get to the CIC when Garrus stopped her.

"Shepard, I think you need to see this." He gestured to Telanya, who had a data-pad in her hands. "It's about the files we picked up off their server."

Shepard nodded, turning to face Telanya. "You found something?"

The smaller asari sighed uneasily, her helmet now off inside the Normandy, revealing her features. "Yes, and it isn't very good. The material dumped into the system by this Illusive Person was very comprehensive. Lots of links to banks and anonymous donations, and lots of hints of off the books purchases routed through dozens if not hundreds of front companies. Cerberus was pushing something like fifty to sixty billion credits a year."

Shepard's eyes widened. "Jesus Christ."

Telanya grimaced. "That's not all, unfortunately. The bulk of that money came from a trio of sources. Cord-Hislop Aerospace, which, if the most recent news we picked up off the buoys is accurate, was probably a front for the Illusive Man. The second big source of cash was filtered through about fifty intermediaries, but was something called the Manswell Foundation."

Shepard felt ice creep up her spine. The Manswell Foundation was a huge endowment, left by the Manswells to pay for repairing Earth's biosphere and funding new arcologies. It was probably funded to the tune of hundreds of billions of credits, and was supposedly overseen by independent third parties. "That makes a sick kind of sense, Sergeant. The Manswell Foundation pushes a lot of credits, and no one has the balls to call out Maxwell Manswell on, well, anything." She paused, thinking, and then looked back up. "And the third source?"

Garrus locked eyes with Shepard. "The Northstar political party."

Shepard shook her head, sighing. "But that doesn't make any goddamned sense at all – Northstar is full of alien lovers and people ignoring Earth."

Garrus gave a turian shrug, tilting his head to one side. "Sorry, I'm not really familiar with human politics. I just know what Telanya found, and there were a lot of links between the two."

Shepard cursed under her breath, and nodded. "Good work, both of you. Write it up and have it ready to go out on a data buoy." She turned away, and got into the slow moving elevator, closing her eyes in

frustration.

By the time she reached the CIC, she'd formulated a basic plan. Pressly was waiting for her on the deck, an info-pad in his hand. "We just got positional updates and information from the Citadel Fleet, ma'am. The last Cerberus holdouts fell about thirty minutes ago. The troopships from the Citadel Fourth Fleet are ETA three hours, fifty minutes...along with a ship from the AIS. You have several queued comms requests from the Fleet Master...and one from High Command."

Shepard nodded. "Hardly unexpected. First, get me a tight-band link to Admiral Mikhailovich. And once the cargo spaces are filled and secured, go ahead and have Joker bring us into the location of that radiation blast." She paused, then frowned. "Have Dr. Chakwas give everyone a rad-resistance dosing as well."

Pressly nodded. "I believe Dr. T'Soni can use the human version, as can the krogan..but we don't have dextro formulations of anti-rad drugs on board ma'am, unless my memory of the last manifest is off."

Shepard scowled and nodded. "They won't be going down, then – and add that to the next shopping list we have, along with anything else they'd need." She noticed the very tiny tick at the corner of her XO's mouth and exhaled. "Pressly, I know you're not a fan of the turians. But right now-"

He shook his head. "I understand, ma'am. I'll have it done right away." He gave her a piercing look. "Are you holding up alright, Commander? It sounded pretty ugly down there..."

Shepard gave a thin, sad smile. "I'll make it, XO. One way or the other. I just have a lot on my mind and no time to work through it all." She almost laughed at that statement – the shit about Cerberus, Kaiden, her past, Bea, fucking Jason Dunn, Liara...

She tightened her jaw. "Which reminds me. We have a Cerberus ... ex-Cerberus, I guess, captive on board. I sent him up to Chakwas already, his name is Jason Dunn. He was a member of Neutron Squad, my RRU N7 team on Torfan. I'd like him kept under guard, at least until we get a chance to fully debrief him. I don't think he's dangerous, but..."

Pressly nodded. "Better safe than sorry, yes ma'am. I'll handle it all. You'd better deal with the comms situation."

Shepard rubbed her eyes and nodded. "Yeah, after I have a stiff drink first. Route the shit to my cabin, if you would be so kind."

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## Chapter 81: Chapter 72 : Cerberus, Reversal

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*A/N : Cliffhanger!*

*To see what Wrex is talking about when he's discussing Binary Helix and Cerberus's logos, check their web pages on the ME Wiki ... and wonder.*

*This chapter was beta read by Wordkrush. If you haven't read **Leviathan: Oracle**, there is something badly wrong with you, and you should read it. Naow.*

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The broad features of Admiral Mikhailovich filled the wall view screen in Shepard's quarters, as dull thuds from the deck below signaled the external cargo bays being loaded. "Commander Shepard, I'm guessing you aren't calling me to schedule a game of poker?" His uniform was slightly rumped, and the background behind his head indicated he was probably in his ready room.

Shepard gave a thin smile. "No sir. I have a pile of political bullshit on my hands right now."

The admiral shook his head ruefully and turned to one side, tapping an off-screen control. "XO, go ahead and tell Captain Parnes to get the drives hot on my flagship, if you would. And do an all-hands recall on ship's personnel, be ready to cast off on my order." He turned back to the screen, eyes narrowed. "How many drinks am I gonna need for this one, Commander?"

Shepard sourly held up a glass of scotch. "My second, sir. I can wait if you need one."

The admiral gave a sour laugh and shook his head. "Later. Hit me."

Shepard took a deep breath. "Admiral Kahoku is dead, sir. We trailed him to Edolus, found his ship in the system all shot up by a Cerberus cruiser we took down. We found his lander shot down near the old colony there, after nearly being taken out ourselves by a pack of thresher maws. Kahoku's strike force mostly got eaten. Cerberus mopped up the rest and took him captive."

She paused, thinking. "We entered a base we thought was Cerberus's HQ. Inside we found Kohaku's body, along with an asari captive and an old squad mate of mine. When we started moving towards the command center, everything went haywire."

Mikhailovich frowned. "Haywire?"

Shepard nodded, telling him about the base explosions, the downed Cerberus cruisers, the bizarre murder of Eylana by the turrets, and the surreal conversation she had with the Illusive Man. Mikhailovich's expression grew more and more grim as she continued. When she told him who was really running Cerberus and the revelations from the files Telanya had gone over, his skin blanched white..

"Jesus fucking Christ .. what a mess. This is going to be a fucking nightmare."

Shepard nodded. "I had the databases downloaded then blown up. We're going to call that battle damage, although I have copies. I can't hide the .. shit we found in that science bay, but we did wipe a bunch of the research terminals. My big question is: what do I do about General Florez?"

Mikhailovich gave a long, tired sigh. "Honestly, Shepard, I don't know. I'm sure the Fleet Master and High Command are going to give you specific instructions. My gut tells me to put a bullet in her head and destroy the body; better yet, place a couple more disruptor torpedoes in the base once you kill her and say the whole place blew up. There's no easy fix on this. Having the data you downloaded is dangerous. If what this Illusive Man said is the truth, I'd offer it up to High Command ASAP before they decide you need an accident. "

He wiped his mouth on his sleeve. "Fuck, according to the news feeds, the Illusive Man shot himself, but you had a real-time conversation with him AFTER that so the body they're going over now is a fake. Clever little bastard."

Shepard nodded. "He said the body of General Florez we found after she supposedly committed suicide was a flash clone; he probably did the same."

The admiral nodded back. "Alright, for now, play ball however they tell you to and stall the Citadel for as long as you can. Are the aliens on your crew going to follow your lead on this?"

Shepard didn't miss the slightly darker undertone he used, but she quickly shook her head. "Garrus is like a damned fanboy, Tali's just a kid and understands this is none of her business, and Liara...won't do anything. Wrex is a question mark, sir. I have history with him, but he ultimately answers to the Shadow Broker. I'm not stupid enough to think that fuck won't have someone else here picking through the ruins soon enough. I don't want to put Wrex in a place where he has to choose loyalties."

Mikhailovich nodded, then grimaced. "I.. I'll handle the Broker's reaction." At Shepard's look of shock, the older man gave a sour smile. "We caught a couple of his little sneaks not long ago trying to pry out details about your IES stealth system. I can do a quid pro quo just as good as Kahoku did, you know. You finish up and get on the horn with High Command, then ... give serious thought to what I said about more disruptor torpedoes, Commander."

She nodded. "Yes sir. Thank you, sir."

Shepard clicked off, exhaling, then trundled out of her quarters and up the stairs, going into the comm room and stiffening her spine. "VI, simultaneous comms – Fleet Master, Systems Alliance, and Vancouver, Alliance Command."

The screen on the far wall blanked, then lit a moment later. The top screen revealed the scowling, scarred visage of Fleet Master Dragunov, the lower revealed the Secretary of Defense, flanked by two Admirals of the Red sitting in a comfortably appointed office. "I am very sorry for the delay, but I just finished combat operations against the Cerberus forces in Edolus."

The secretary of Defense was an older man with faded blond hair and hard blue eyes. A seemingly permanent grimace etched the hard planes of his face, and his uniform blazed with medals and six stripes of command. "Commander Shepard, I am Admiral Branson, and these are Admirals Defar and Yu. I see you brought the Fleet Master in on the comms as well, good idea."

Shepard nodded. "I successfully tracked Admiral Kahoku to this system. I regret to inform the Board he was killed by Cerberus. I took out the facility in which he was killed,, but have come across additional information indicating the actual commanders of Cerberus are in another base on this world. Due to sabotage, this base suffered a catastrophic detonation of what appear to be disruptor torpedoesand is currently heavily damaged. My intent is to finish it off and capture or kill the leaders."

Admiral Branson narrowed his eyes. "The Illusive Man is the leader of Cerberus, Commander, and he's already dead. Who exactly are you talking about and who gave you this information?"

Shepard smiled. "The Illusive Man contacted me via tight-beam in the Cerberus base I just took out. He's not dead – that's some sort of clone, sir. He informed me the leaders of Cerberus are General Rachel Florez and General Richard Williams. He also informed me, via information tight-beamed to us, that Cerberus has funding links with the Manswell Foundation and Northstar." She paused. "I have wiped this information from the databases in the base, as well as incriminating documents that put the SA in a poor light and indicate that some members of the SA were doing business with Cerberus. I have also collected a sample of 'research' the sick fucks were doing for assessment by Admiral Vandefar."

The secretary of Defense leaned back,a poleaxed look on his face. The two other admirals wore similarly stunned expressions. Dragunov, on the other hand, gave Shepard a piercing look for a long moment before speaking. "As I told you, Admiral Branson, Commander Shepard has the situation under complete control. The issue with fleet movements and the Thorian were merely due to us not completely bringing her into the loop. I presume, Commander, you intend to insure this will be brought to closure?"

Shepard nodded tightly. Admiral Branson frowned. "I'm sorry, but this is ... a bit shocking to me. You are implying you have documents showing links between the SA and Cerberus on a high level?"

Shepard closed her eyes. "The Illusive Man indicated there are members of the government at a very high level who are fully aware of the involvement of Rachel Florez and Richard Williams, and who are complicit in some degree with Cerberus's...activities." She shuddered. "I have video of the shit they were researching, sir. It made hardened marines throw up. It damned near made my krogan throw up."

A pained note came into her voice. "I have these files because I'm not sure I can trust anyone else with

them. Sir."

Branson's eyes flashed anger but the Fleet Master immediately cut him off. "Hang on, Fredric. I know you wouldn't have a damned thing to do with Cerberus after they killed your daughter in law, but Shepard doesn't. She's not accusing you...are you, Commander?"

Shepard fixed him with a flat look. "No, sir. The information I have doesn't indicate anyone at the cabinet level was in on it., but I don't know about his aides, his staff, or Congress. Or, for that matter, yourself, sir." Her voice was cold.

The fleet master didn't even flinch. "I received the autopsy report on General Florez a month ago, which indicated a high chance it was a clone. I have been aware for several years that a man matching rough descriptions of Richard Williams is associated with elements thought to be close to Cerberus...and I am aware that Jack Harper is the Illusive Man."

The jaws of the three admirals of the High Command fell open. Branson was the first to recover. "You WHAT?"

"Oh, come off it", Dragunov snapped back. "Your own goddamned hands aren't so clean given what went down on Elysium, now are they? I don't like Cerberus and I have no goddamned clue why they went fucking crazy enough to cut deals with Saren, but for years the sick bastards were doing shit the administration didn't have the balls to do. You know the stakes and what's already going down."

Shepard looked from one admiral to another, and before an argument could start, cleared her throat. "I'm almost certain whatever you are discussing is above both my pay-grade and security clearance, much less the security encryption on this comm link. I need instructions on how to proceed with dealing with the main Cerberus base once I reach it."

Dragunov sighed. "It can't be allowed to fall into the hands of Citadel troops."

Branson's eyes bulged. "A cover up? Are you fucking insane? This is already a clusterfuck, but at least if we go ahead and come clean over it-"

Dragunov laughed, coldly. "Then all will be forgiven? Did you even READ the reports from Shepard about what Dr. T'Soni found on Eingana? If we go public with this now the Citadel Council will freak completely out. Saren is still out there, still dangerous, and if more ships like that thing that cut up the Citadel Fleet at Feros are still out there, the LAST goddamned thing I'm worried about is some political fallout down the line!."

Branson frowned. "I'm not sure I buy Dr. T'Soni's theories about Protheans and Inusannon extinctions being connected to this dreadnaught of Saren's. My concern *is* with the long-term political fallout -"

Shepard sighed, almost tiredly, and the two admirals looked at her. "Sirs, seeing as I have the only incriminating data, my initial opinion is that I proceed to the target site, execute the principles, and destroy the base. The base suffered an explosion of disruptor torpedoes, resulting in high radiation and plasma fires. I have nine more disruptor torpedoes in my armament. Spaced throughout the remainder of the base and detonated, they will irradiate and destroy any remaining evidence for decades. As a plus, Cerberus is already blowing up their own shit elsewhere so this won't even look suspicious. I can make local copies of whatever I find and turn it over to SA AIS agents when I get to the Citadel for repairs."

Dragunov nodded. "That's the kind of thinking I like to see, Commander. Capturing the people you named is .. suboptimal at best. We could never try them without a public relations disaster."

Branson grimaced. "I'm dispatching additional forces your way, Commander. A frigate with the AIS, and some forensic investigators. They can work with the Citadel forces until C-SEC arrives."

Shepard smiled. "I already have two C-SEC staff on my ship. They .. have agreed to sign off on whatever I say. None of the alien nationals on my ship will divulge this information to outside parties, at least in the short term."

Dragunov nodded. "In that case, Commander, I think your course is clear. Once you are done there, proceed to the Citadel for debrief and any restock or repair needed. Fleet Master, out."

The secretary of Defense stayed on the line, frowning. "Commander, I appreciate your efforts at helping us .. keep this out of the light., but I give you my personal promise – once this Saren mess is handled, we'll revisit this issue and go after the people who made this happen. I swear."

Shepard gave a small sigh of relief. "Thank you, sir. That .. helps."

The admiral's grimace only tightened. "I'm aware that the SA hasn't lived up to your high expectations. There was a great deal of discussion both before and after you were made a Spectre about your suitability. Many would have preferred my own son, Commander Branson, for the job."

He continued after a long moment. "But for all your flaws, you've always done the job. The SA hasn't always done the job it should have. I'm aware of your .. personal history and the tragedies involved, as well as what went to shit on Torfan,It was inexcusable which is why the Fleet Master personally executed the general behind that idea." He paused again, seeking words. "I can only try to convince you that at least I and the High Command are not, and will not, sign off on any kind of quid pro quo to sacrifice you or your command over political issues."

Shepard nodded. "I appreciate that, Admiral. Very much. I had a concern that my hanging onto information of this nature would make me a liability."

One of the admirals at Branson's side winced, and the other laughed. "She really, really needs to hit the political training courses, sir."

Branson, on the other hand, looked sad for a long moment. "Perhaps, but her fears are not totally unfounded, either." He shook his head. "Enough. You have your orders. I'm aware of the history between yourself and General Florez...so I'm making it an order. She is to be executed for high grand treason against the Systems Alliance with no offers of arrest or surrender. The same goes for Richard Williams. They are to be shot until dead and the bodies atomized. Am I clear?"

She saluted. "Clear, sir."

Nodding, he returned her salute. "Dismissed, Commander." The screen went dark, and Shepard gave a final, long exhalation before unclenching her fist.

O-OSaBC-O

Once the Normandy was airborne again ,the trip to the second base was quick. From the air, the base's location was forbidding, tucked into a rocky plateau in a low-slung valley that ended in a sharp canyon. Broken rocky terrain on all sides prevented any thresher maws from getting too close but even from hundreds of feet up, dozens of maws could be seen thrashing about in the broken hinterland beyond the valley.

Shepard gave a snort. "Guess they aren't going anywhere on foot, huh? Joker, bring us around; I want a couple of Tali's drones to scope the place out before we get any closer. Let me know when the sweep is complete." She turned away, bringing down the IMC mike, and began speaking.

"All hands, this is Commander Shepard. We've kicked in Cerberus's teeth,, now we're going to finish what's left. By direct order of High Command, we're to enter the base,base, fuck up anyone we find, free any prisoners, and then blow the shit out of the place. I shouldn't have to explain why, but I will."

"For whatever sick reason, Cerberus was doing some pretty vile things to aliens. It makes humanity look bad. It's kind of hard to claim we're any better than the turians were during the FCW when we're cutting up asari and salarians and fucking around with what looked like a mix of rachni and dogs. We are on a job, and that job is to catch Saren. Anything that could disrupt that has to go away, and this is one of those, almost all the people involved in this disgrace to our species have already caught a bullet to the face. The remainder, in the base we're headed to now, will be the final ones. That being said..."

She paused. "The official line is this base was destroyed when we got here. No one not on this ship is to ever hear any differently, at least until Saren is dead. That means you don't write your family, you don't tell your girlfriend, you don't blab to reporters. You don't mention it. You don't even think about it. When it's all said and done, anyone left around WILL be taken care of. I promise you that, on my own name."

She sighed, and keyed the mike again. "For now, I need the DACT unit to suit back up and get ready for a hot drop. All other marine units, if you need chow, get it down now, otherwise stand by for extreme hostile insertion. The area we are headed to is radioactive – everyone going down should have received anti-rad boosters and graphite stims. Detective Vakarian and Engineer Tali'Zorah will be required to stay on the ship since we don't have dextro-amino supplies of that nature."

"Shepard out". She clicked off, and walked back through the CIC to the elevator. The chatter on the ops alley was subdued, most not really understanding what went down on the surface, but the marine guard to the CIC had a shadowed, ugly look in his eyes. She paused. "Sergeant Haln?"

The man looked up, dark brown hair buzz cut to regulation, eyes almost empty. "Ma'am ... the shit we saw down there...and what that Illusive Man said.."

She smiled bleakly. "The secretary of defense was just as fucking jaw-dropped as us, Sergeant. He swore we'd find anyone else involved. Trust me, I will make sure if someone else is in this shit, they eat ODIN before we're done."

The marine straightened. "Yes, ma'am. Sorry, ma'am."

She clapped him on the shoulder. "Don't apologize, Sergeant. Make sure you're ready to rock." She slid past him, heading downstairs, and into the elevator. It bottomed out a few moments later and she strode into the cargo bay where Garrus and Tali were hard at work trying to repair the severe damage to the MAKO tanks. She swept her eyes around the bay until she found Wrex's familiar bulk standing in front of his link-system to the walked up to him slowly, hands open. "Wrex."

He half turned. "Shepard."

She folded her arms. "I need .. a favor."

Wrex frowned. "You want me to not tell the Broker about that little conversation down there?"

Shepard held up a hand, eyes narrowed. "I know you work for the Broker. I know you don't break your word, ever. I'm not asking for that. I'm not even asking for you to hide the fact I have incriminating data and that I'm covering some shit up. I'm asking you not to repeat what the Illusive Man said about Saren's location, or Noveria. In fact, I'd really appreciate it if you didn't even mention the Illusive Man saying anything about Saren at all."

Wrex frowned. "Why?"

Shepard huffed. "Because the evil fucker had a point! You mean to tell me the Broker didn't know about any of this shit? He's not giving us any kind of decent intel, Wrex. He's just sending whatever little bits and pieces fit his own needs, and I still don't have a really good reason as to why. I don't trust him, and I don't know what the fuck Saren is doing on Noveria...nor do I want anyone else poking

around until I get the chance myself."

Wrex rolled his massive head from side to side. "This is why I prefer jobs with a shotgun and a target, Shepard." The krogan grumbled, then gave a slow nod. " Maybe you are right. I only work for the Broker because he pays well and because usually it's the kind of work I like. Enough creds and violence to lose myself for another handful of years, rather than think about how things used to be."

Shepard gave a sad nod. "I'm .. I wouldn't ask if it wasn't important, Wrex. I know you feel like you owe me because of Urv."

The big krogan glared at her for a moment before turning away. "Urv was just one more reminder that my entire race is dying by inches, Shepard. Nothing I can do about that. Nothing I **want** to do about it. Keeping your little secrets from the Broker doesn't mean I care either way." The krogan gave a low growl in his throat, and Shepard nodded.

"Thanks, Wrex. I .. appreciate it." She was about to turn to leave, when Wrex spoke.

"Shepard, the Broker may already know about Noveria. When I gave him my initial report about going after Cerberus instead of Saren directly, he laughed, and he sent me this image." He opened the Broker link, tapping at controls and pulling out a blue haptic screen, which filled.

The first was the logo of Binary Helix, a gold hexagon, broken in the middle, with an inner brown hexagon, also broken. The second was the Cerberus logo – a golden hexagon, broken in the middle, framed by a brown hexagon, broken in the middle.

Her eyes narrowed and then she spat. "Fuck." She glanced up. "And you didn't mention this why?"

The krogan gave a shrug. "What good would it do? We didn't have any real leads and Binary Helix's primary facility is on Ilium. If the Broker's people can dig far enough, they may find out about the Noveria link as well."

Shepard nodded, and then just shook her head. "We'll have to see. Be ready to hit the ground, big guy. We'll talk some more about this later." She walked off, moving across the bay to where Tali and Garrus worked. "What's the status?"

Tali leaned her head out of the tank, her purple reik smeared with some kind of soot in a couple of places. "I made some internal fixes, and the omni-gel is cooking on the armor plating and frameworks. Garrus is trying to fix the axle of MAKO 2. Oh, and I fixed up some of the damage to the JOTUN mech, too – some armor plating and omni-gel fill, and the electronics that were blown. We'd need a full workshop to redo the hydraulics but you could clamp some weapons on there, and the chain-gun still works."

Garrus slid out from under the MAKO, wiping his bare, taloned hands on a rag. "MAKO 1 is okay, just shaken up. MAKO II is not safe for combat but it can take a landing, I think. The suspension is really shot. I never had time to adjust the mass effect field on the second MAKO the way I did on the first one. If we get some down time on the Citadel – "

She snorted. "Not likely...after this, we restock and go after Saren as fast as we can. If the MAKO isn't ready by then we'll just have to roll with one."

Garrus nodded unhappily. "I also pulled the disruptor torps like you asked..I put them on a timed remote detonator and keyed it to your omni. Anything else?"

She nodded. "You heard the announcement. The place is hot; it's got at least delta and in some cases eta level radiation exposure. You two are sticking on board during the fight. No matter what. I did have Pressly order up some dextro-equivilent radiation drugs for when we get back to the Citadel though."

Garrus voice was dry. "Gee, thanks, sheep. Just what I needed. A chance to go traipsing through radiation. Can't you ever take us anywhere nice?"

Shepard snorted. "What, like an antique shop?"

O-OSaBC-O

It took fifteen minutes for the drones' reports to come back. The outer doors to the base were pushed shut and one drone had seen several personnel in hard-suits outside the base, doing something to the GTS missile racks found there. Shepard snorted.

*Goddamn, Rachel, you should know I'm not dumb enough to fall for THAT.* "Joker, target the GTS installations and the front door. Six missiles, wide spread, followed by five rounds from the main gun."

The Normandy shuddered as she disgorged missiles. The slender projectiles screamed out of the sky and hammered the plateau far below. A large explosion erupted a few moments later, spraying smoke and flames out in all directions as chunks of rock were hurled hundreds of feet away. Joker whistled. "Looks like some pretty direct hits, Commander. Part of the base structure is exposed."

Shepard nodded. "Alright, time to move. Bring us in at MAKO drop height and keep a missile lock on the entrance."

She departed the CIC and in a few minutes was in the cargo bay as the last of the marines loaded into the MAKO. She paused to put on her helmet, before sliding into the drivers seat of the first MAKO. Tapping her omni, she commed Joker. "Being drop. Pop the DACTs."

The DACT pair had quickly repaired any damage to their suit and jump packs during the down time. The two rocketed down to the surface ahead of the Normandy, landing with heavy thumps in the wreckage and rubble that was once the base entrance. As the Normandy descended, she picked up their initial reports. "Normandy, this is Angel One. We have a downed JOTUN out here as well as fifteen, that is one five, downed Cerberus shits. GTS battery is gone, so is a good thirty feet of rock. The front doors are slag, Entry to the base is half blocked but Angel Two is clearing. I see no hostiles; area is clear for cold drop."

Joker slowed his descent and the Normandy swooped down smoothly, cargo ramp disgorging both MAKO tanks one after another. The heavy vehicles slammed to the ground and Marines spilled out.

With that, the Normandy ascended to low battle position, hovering over the base at several thousand feet, and Joker's voice crackled across the comm. "Thank you for flying Air may now move around the cabin."

Shepard shook her head at her pilot's irreverence and stepped out of the MAKO, drawing her Revenant. She swung it around in an easy arc before heading to the back of the MAKO, watching as Cole disembarked his squad.

Seeing Liara approach, Shepard turned and was about to speak when the asari's shoulder erupted in an explosion of blue electrical arcs and spurting purple blood. The force of the impact sent her crashing to the ground hard enough to crack her helmet on a piece of rubble. As if a light had been snuffed out in her mind, the subtle sense of Liara's presence that had been in the back of Shepard's mind all these weeks suddenly went dark.

"LIARA!"

O-OSaBC-O

Agent Titus was a simple man. Raised in austerity by a colony of strict pacifists, he'd grown up believing fervently in peace and understanding. Batarian slavers raiding his colony, killing his wife and

two of his three children had broken that. When Cerberus had driven them off and saved the life of his last remaining son, he'd cast aside his old life, joining their ranks with just as much fervor as he had for his old religion.

He'd trained hard, and discovered he had a rare touch with a sniper rifle. He'd killed dozens of humanity's enemies over the years – foul asari, demonic turians, sick and depraved salarians, filthy krogan, and especially batarians. In a way, sniping for him was like prayer.

There was a supplication to the higher forces of physics, windage, and elevation. There was a connection, the eyes of the target through your scope, the feeling of holding the fate of a being in your hands, to be taken at a whim. He loved, the feeling of power, the knowledge that he was defending his race, his home, and ultimately his son.

So when he'd been brought to the headquarters to guard the heart of the Operation, he'd been filled with pride. He was on external patrol when everything went to hell. His distance from the base had shielded him from the rads inside. His orders were clear: Stay outside, pick off incoming forces. With luck, the plan would have defeated Shepard's entire force before they hit the ground.

The bombardment from above had been unexpected – the Iron General had thought the Butcher would just stride into the place like a conquering queen and be off guard. So much for that. Instead, the GTS battery had gone up. The other snipers in the area were caught in the conflagration, their screams cut off by the sound of racing plasma fire and explosions. The plan to decimate Shepard's force with snipers and even possibly capture them was the only sniper left alive.

When the MAKOs had unloaded their troops, suddenly he had a chance to salvage something of the plan. He pulled out his Mark II Raptor rifle, sighted in delicately on the Commander's armored head, waited impatiently for the materials laser built into the gun to feed him ammo and penetration requirements for the kill shot. To his shock, however, the sensor reported his weapon – even with the strongest ammo loads and full capacity – couldn't pierce the thick layers of Spectre-grade armor the Butcher wore.

The rest of the squad was almost as bad. The Krogan was armored even more thickly, and so were the command chiefs. Taking out a single soldier was a stupid waste of his life; he knew he'd only get one, or maybe two shots off.

Then the asari had slid out of the MAKO. She wore the same red and black armor as the krogan, but according to his sensor, while the helmet and chest plate were just as thick, the shoulder pauldron was missing, replaced by some kind of lightly armored coat.

A hotshot wouldn't do it, but a plasma-penetrator coupled with an electroshock discharge would fuck her biotic field up so bad it would probably kill her. He grimly loaded the round, locked it in place, and waited.

When the asari turned to face Shepard, he fired. The round drove through the armor at her shoulder, splintering as it did so. The tiny pulse charge at its middle discharged as its casing fell apart, pumping the alien full of four amps of ten thousand volts of electricity. Originally designed as an anti-JOTUN round, using it on a lightly armored asari was akin to hitting a watermelon with a tank round. The back of the asari's armor erupted into broken fragments, a spray of blood jetting out and splashing over the Butcher's armor.

Titus's triumph vacated along with most of the top of his skull two seconds later. Tracking back the shot, Ashley Williams lifted her own long sniper rifle and blew his head off. By then it was far, far too late to do anything else. Ash could only watch as Shepard fell to her knees beside the asari. The Commander shook like a leaf as Liara lay there.

Unbreathing.

Unmoving.

Dead.

For a long moment, Shepard knelt in the dirt, silent and unmoving beside the fallen asari. As the Commander gazed down at Liara's still form, bits of dirt and rock began trembling around her and slowly rising into the air. Cascading arcs of biotic energy wavered around Shepard's limbs and she erupted. Ashley screamed, as did several other marines. Others staggered back or were sent flying from the pressure of the biotic shock wave Shepard unleashed.

Shepard's eyes visibly glowed through the mirrored faceplate of her helmet and hot blue fire erupted along the commander's armor, peeling away black paint and setting the flapping Spectre coat alight. A nearby DACT stumbled away in terror as Shepard lashed out with her biotics and wrenched the thousand pound door free from the base's blocked entrance. A mere wave of her hand sent the door crashing into the MAKO hard enough to knock the battered tank onto its side. Shepard stalked inside the ruined entrance to the base. She could barely see through the angry tears and the dead feeling in her chest, but she didn't slow down at all.

Dropping her Revenant, she pulled out her ODIN.

Slid the barrel back to a position she no longer used.

Tore out the regulation ammo block and slotted in a chunk of metal crisscrossed with warnings.

Flipped the firing pattern switch to full auto.

By the time Alenko got to his feet, the only sign of Shepard was the sound of screams echoing from within the base, and the roar of the ODIN firing in long, staccato bursts.

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## Chapter 82: Chapter 73 : Cerberus, Fate

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*A/N: The conclusion to the Cerberus Arc. Thanks to everyone who PM'd ideas. Also thanks to everyone who left reviews. :D*

*None of the remaining arcs are this long – Noveria is ... significantly different than canon, but the geth fight is not, and most of Virimire and Ilum is very similar to canon in most ways. The biggest change is soon to come, but for now, you can finally see the Butcher unveiled in all her crazy, nutjob glory.*

*Update: Thanks to my reviewers - looks like my editing software crapped out. I've fixed issues in both new chapters.*

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Fire and death raced through the already shattered hallways of Cerberus Command, borne by a figure that looked as if it had torn free of some lunatic's nightmare to haunt the mortal world. Burning pulses of tumbling, armor piercing shards tore through the soldiers trying to slow the figure down, searing through armor and leaving burning, shrieking victims writhing on the ground in agony. Waves of biotic power blasted through the weaker, inferior barriers that tried to stop them, burning and sizzling as they crushed through makeshift barricades, sending men and women flying with broken bones.

A Cerberus soldier slammed to the ground, both arms broken by the brutal slam he'd just caught the edges of, and he grunted, shaking his head to clear it. A moment later a black-armored boot stomped down hard on the man's neck, and he gave a choked scream before his neck snapped and his skull

fractured under the pressure.

There was no hesitation as the black-armored figure tore through the pitiful beings in front of her. Grenades were hurled with biotic throws faster than the eye could follow, blasting the Cerberus soldiers to the ground. Wedges of polonium, super-heated by the illegal ammo-caster in the ODIN shotgun, flashed out in scything spreads, cutting soldiers in half, or blasting their armor into melted ruin, leaving them to sink to their knees clutching ruined faces or howling in agony as the chips of armor piercing, poisonous metal perforated their insides.

Captain Varr tried to rally his people, to bring up what support or tactics he could offer. It was like trying to stop a forest fire with a single bucket of water. A brave soldier charged forward, grenades in both hands, trying to bring down the black avatar of death, and instead flew back as an enormous flash of biotic energy caught his form and slammed it against the far wall. Varr could only turn away as the man literally came apart with the blow, bones bursting free of the shattered flesh in sprays of blood and organs flopping out of the man's burst-open torso like some demented pinata.

Two JOTUN mechs stepped forward, ominous in their black and orange armored paint, miniguns spinning as they tried to lock onto the figure. The woman tilted her head, the glowing eyes behind her blank face mask narrowing, and with a gesture at the ceiling, hurled blue fire at the broken and shattered hydraulics lines jutting forth.

With a screech of tearing metal, a heavy support beam collapsed downward. Driven by the weight of rubble atop it, the beam sheared through the left-most JOTUN, striking it's exposed head almost square-on. The heavy war machine collapsed to it's knees, detonating in a series of internal explosions, even as it's brother mech began firing at the figure in front of it.

The flashes of blue light, snapping from here to there through the narrow corridors, told Varr that Shepard's ability with the biotic charge made the JOTUN's response too slow to be a viable threat. A moment later, she snapped out of a charge right in the mech's face, leaping off of it's multibarreled weapon, draping something across the gap between it's shoulder armor plates and it's head. Another flash, and Varr felt only pain as she slammed into him.

The last thing his eyes saw before the glowing edge of an omniblade ended his life was the belt of grenades looped over the JOTUN's neck go off, sending gouts of flame and shrapnel into his remaining soldiers.

O-OSaBC-O

It had taken several precious seconds after Shepard had literally roared off, for anyone to figure out what to do. Wrex was first, scrambling his heavy bulk back to it's feet and charging after Shepard, ignoring calls from Alenko to wait.

For her own part, Telanya was looking at the still figure of Liara on the ground in paralyzed shock. A member of the Thirty .. struck down like nothing. The gaping wound in her shoulder, drizzled with her own lifeblood, looked huge, and she just could not process it. Vega knelt down next to her and cursed.

Finally Cole, roaring, got the rest of the Marines to their feet and turned to Alenko. "Pull it together, LT. We have a man down, get the doc on the comm."

Kaiden scowled. "She's DEAD, Master Chief. What good-"

Cole snorted. "I've seen asari shot nine times and get up afterward, LT. And what hit her looked like an electro round. It probably stopped her heart! If we can get it going again, she could pull through!"

Alenko stared for a long second, then nodded. "Handle the squad, Master Chief." He tapped his omni. "Joker, bring the ship down NOW. Get the doc out here with a crash bag, Liara is down and her heart

isn't beating, and she's not breathing."

Joker didn't even answer, the Normandy seemingly coming to a dead stop in its climb towards orbit and tumbling back to the ground, righting itself at the last few moments to come to a dead hover some ten feet off the ground about fifty feet away. Two minutes later, Chakwas emerged, wearing a light support suit and survival face-mask and carrying two heavy bags. "We don't have time to get her on the ship and up that stupid elevator. Ashley, you and Corporal Haskins get her armor off. You, asari policewoman, I'm sorry I don't recall your name, I need you here too, as a baseline for readings."

Chakwas dropped her bags, pulling out several large syringes filled with thick, green liquid and a pair of portable med-units. She snugged one of these around Telanya's arm, placing the other one on Liara's torso, tapping it rapidly. Ashley hastily tugged off the chest plate, unsnapping the clasps and breaking one in her haste, before lifting the entire chest plate away, then pulling the armored sleeve off. The shoulder piece came apart under the pressure, showing the shattered flesh around the shoulder and bits of bone mixed in.

Chakwas clucked, handing a medical package over to Corporal Haskins, the younger woman taking it hesitantly. "Strap this to her other arm and hit AS, then CARD and DIST. Ash, I need you to do compressions. Press here, their heart is lower than ours is." She indicated with a free hand a spot below the asari's breasts, and Ashley pressed down, counting between compressions.

Chakwas hastily tore away a piece of the undersuit over Liara's bicep, and then stabbed Liara's bare arm with several of the syringes, flicking each one into the dirt after she was done. She glanced at the med package on Liara's stomach, and then pulled out a pair of heavy black medical forceps, the ends tipped with small blocks of metal. "There's some kind of .. fragments in her shoulder. Haskins, what does the package say?"

"I-it says blood oxygen at 83% and dropping, bauxites good?"

Chakwas nodded, plucking out a long sliver of metal and tossing it aside with a disgusted expression. "Good. Asari were ocean dwellers, hopefully her brain can go without fresh oxygen longer than ours can. Stand clear, girls." She dug into the bag, pulling out two paddle-like devices connected to a small tubular canister, and adjusted some settings on it, her slender fingers moving over the buttons with practiced speed. With a huff, she picked up the paddles and set them aside. Pulling aside the black jumpsuit that Liara wore under her armor, she broke open a packet of clear gel, smearing the asari's chest with it. Picking the paddles up again, she placed them on pale, pebbled blue flesh.

"CLEAR!"

Liara's body twitched under the current as the paddles discharged. Chakwas consulted the second medical package, the one sitting on Liara's stomach and hissed. "Dammit. Ash compressions again. Haskins, there's an O2 mask in the second bag – the third pocket – grab it and get her helmet off."

Haskins looked alarmed. "The air -"

The older woman gave her a look that made the marine scramble to do as she was bid. "The air, Corporal, won't affect her that much with the O2 mask. The pressure is bad, but in this instance that's okay." Haskins only nodded as she got the asari's helmet off, and then fumbled in the bag, coming up a moment later with the mask. Meanwhile, Chakwas took out several long strips of metal and laid them in x shaped patterns across Liara's bared chest, before smearing more gel over them.

"Press the canister bottom to force O2 into her lungs, Corporal. Ash, good work on compressions." Chakwas withdrew yet another syringe. "Dammit, I hope atropine works in asari like it does humans. DAMN the SA for not giving me a full pharmacology." She uncapped the syringe, which had a heavy, thick needle, and grimaced. "Ash, pull back."

As Ashley withdrew her hands, Chakwas slammed the heavy needle into Liara's chest and plunged down on the draw, withdrawing it a moment later. "Clear." She lifted the paddles and laid them on Liara's chest again.

*Lord, I am but an old woman trying my best to heal, but this child doesn't deserve to die here. Please.*  
She triggered the charge.

### O-OSaBC-O

Following the trail of devastation Shepard left behind was easy for Wrex. The broken bodies and burning wreckage didn't leave much question as to the direction she was headed, and the occasional terrified screams and bits of comm chatter he could hear only made him chuckle.

Wrex was hardly a subtle touch himself, but the kind of savagery Shepard was unleashing was enough to impress even him. Men were snapped in half, or torn into component limbs. A pair of soldiers was warped into a metal bulkhead, agonized expressions contorting their features into almost inhuman mockeries. Here and there were blackened piles of corpses, and finally he came to a large room with the waist-high barricades and sniping angles humans seemed to love in their fixed defensive positions.

The carnage was nearly unbelievable. Dozens of humans were dead, most incinerated by the still spilling plasma feed from a nearby power conduit. Shepard must have ruptured it with biotics and then charged out of the path of the rampaging energy flow. More humans were slammed against walls, in broken, contorted piles, bones and bits of armor jutting from them like crazed decorations on a very sick cake.

Two destroyed mechs, huge and hulking, littered the middle of the room. Wrex glanced around, snickering as he realized the two stupid bots hadn't even gotten any clean shots off. Shepard was tearing through this soft meat faster than he even expected. He was about to move on when something caught his eye, and he stepped closer to inspect it.

A man with what looked like officer bars had been beheaded, and next to him was a young woman, in a similar uniform. Pieces of metal had been driven into her shoulder joints, her knees, and through her stomach, and her head was a bloody smear on the wall in a fan shape, the wall itself blackened and ripped up by the passage of wedges of burning metal.

Wrex could picture the brutal scene in his mind, the terrified Cerberus officer, Shepard using her biotics to ram in chunks of metal to immobilize her, an icy interrogation, and the ugly execution at point blank range with her ODIN. Behind his helmet, his muzzle split in a wide, toothy grin.

"Masterful."

He hadn't seen the Butcher in full swing since Torfan. Shepard had tucked her hate and aggression away – probably scared of terrifying her crew. She'd fought well, but without her true vicious fire. But the teeth were out now, and Wrex didn't want to miss it.

He hurried onwards – twice pausing to dispatch lone, wandering Cerberus soldiers, once with his shotgun and once just by backhanding the fool out of his way, hard enough to snap his tiny, fragile neck. Ahead he could hear the roar of explosions and the sizzling sound that spoke of powerful biotics. He could feel the power pouring off of Shepard, in heavy waves. And he could hear screams, of terrified humans facing something beyond their power or understanding.

Rounding a corner, he charged into the room, pausing to skid to a stop at the tableau.

A JOTUN mech lay broken and shattered on the ground, one arm torn off, the other mangled, and a huge hole blown through its chest. Shepard was fighting the second mech, but it had gotten a lucky shot off, a missile launch having blown her halfway across the room, breaking part of her helmet and

scorching her armor.

With a terrible, smooth motion she rose up, fist clenched and haloed in biotic power so strong Wrex couldn't look at it directly, before she hurled the power out, the soul fire tearing across the room with enough rage to tear up the deck plating as it passed. The warfire ball hit the JOTUN and splashed, metal sagging under its power. A moment later the ammo and rockets in its arms cooked off under the incredible heat, the war mech detonating in a staggering explosion that send bits of machinery and metal tumbling in all directions.

Wrex ignored the piece of wreckage that hit him, bouncing impotently off his armored chest, and stepped forward. "Shepard."

She spun to face him, her ODIN pointing dead at his face. The faceplate of her helmet was shattered, one blue eye visible, wide and mad with hate and pain, narrowing as she finally recognized him.

"Wrex. Go back. This isn't for anyone but me."

Wrex merely shrugged. "You think I'm here to tell you to wait?" He stomped forward, unafraid of her little gun, coming up to her and towering over her, its barrel poking into his broad stomach. "She was becoming special to you, wasn't she?"

The gun trembled.

The big krogan half knelt, pulling off his helmet, bulbous red eyes slitting further as he looked at her. "They shot her dead and did it to make you come at them stupid, Shepard. Go and kill them all, but I'm going to make sure you don't get taken down from behind."

The biotic energy wreathing her body flickered, and she nodded. "We need to move."

A voice erupted out of the air, sourced from a loudspeaker on one wall. "How sweet. A girl and her dog lamenting their dead asari slut. Is that it, Sara? Did she get you off at nights, I wonder, did you beat her like you did those prostitutes, and then kiss and make it all better?" The mocking voice was cut off as Shepard roared like an animal, firing the ODIN at the wall. The speaker exploded into sparks and fragments, and Wrex flinched back from the pulse of energy the smaller woman emitted as she stormed ahead.

Wrex sighed, getting back to his feet, and lifted up his shotgun. Anyone stupid enough to taunt the fucking Butcher deserved to die as painfully as possible. This was going to be fun.

O-OSaBC-O

Rachel Florez could feel the burning sensations from the anti-rad drugs she had taken, but her personal dosimeter showed she'd taken enough rads to kill her in short order. Already she'd vomited, and her skin itched. In a few more hours, the diarrhea and headaches would begin, then mental confusion. Death waited for her in a week. Maybe less.

She withdrew her Marine issue combat pistol and laid it quietly on the table in front of her, covering it with a few papers. She'd put on her armor, checked her omni-blade, and injected herself with the high-end steroids and anti-nausea drugs in her personal med-kit. All that remained was to deal with her wayward student one last time.

In a way, Rachel was sorry it was going to end this way. She felt a perverse, motherly pride in Shepard, having steered her entire life towards the ends that she'd needed. If things had gone the way Rachel had planned, Shepard would have been utterly isolated and broken in just a couple more years, and perfect for recruitment into Cerberus after carefully breaking her faith in the SA and instigating a few ugly incidents with aliens.

The damned mess with making her a Spectre had derailed her plans, though, and now there was

nothing left but to clean up the last loose ends. She could, she supposed, tell Shepard the real truth about what had happened. That Cerberus tracked most of the babies born with eezo exposure, and had begun a systematic campaign to harvest them.

That Cerberus caused her father to lose his commission and job, that Cerberus had messed up the medicines leading to the mental decay of her mother. That Cerberus had ensured the girl would end up sold off, abused, and tortured. Cerberus had lost track of her when they had attempted to claim her from the sex slavers, but in a way that had even turned out better, as Shepard fell in with the 10th Street Reds.

Rachel had made sure every source of comfort she could turn to was poisoned. Shepard's own insecurities and sexual issues meant that she'd never find a lover, and her brutal leadership style isolated her from everyone but her own unit. The brilliant actions at Torfan by a Cerberus plant had wrecked even the cohesion of her Neutron Team, and the years under the equally traumatized Captain Delacor had almost finished the job.

Anderson, damn him, had once again ruined a pure product. And due to his ham handed, fatherly meddling, Rachel was going to die at the hands of her own handcrafted tool.

She could tell her the truth and break her once and for all, though, before she died. If she could have given the late Agent Titus a medal, she would have. He could not have picked a more perfect target than the asari doctor.

She watched the barely functioning monitors, tracking Shepard's psychotic rampage through her last few forces. By the time she got here, her biotics would be exhausted enough for a phase disruptor to disable them. The ones built into the floor should do the trick perfectly.

The krogan...would be problematic. She smiled, and checked the jury-rigged explosive charges set into the last archway between Commons 2 and the command center. Blocking that off would stop them both, but Shepard could just charge through the blockage. The obstacle would prevent the krogan – or any other interfering parties – from bothering her little reunion with Shepard.

She keyed another mike, smirking as she did so. "You know, Shepard, your little orbital strike didn't blow up everything. Your silly little crew is still outside the front door, wringing their hands and crying over that dead little slut. I bet, if I had enough time, I could figure out how to detonate the energy conduits to the GTS batteries that run right under their feet and kill a few more of them. Don't dawdle."

She only laughed at the answering, barely sane scream of fury that sounded before the speaker and its associated sound pickup were destroyed, but that's all she needed. She tracked the pressure monitors and what few internal sensors were still working, and when the moment was right, detonated the explosive packages in the walls right in front of the krogan and Shepard, blocking the passageway.

"Oopsie."

O-OSaBC-O

"Goddammit, CLEAR!"

Liana thrashed on the ground, and then gave a shuddering, choking inhalation of breath, as the med package on her arm erupted into pulse beeps. Chakwas sagged in relief as she began pulling more of the fragments out of the asari's shoulder. "Don't move, breathe, and keep your eyes closed. You were badly hurt and have been clinically dead for over five minutes."

Liana coughed again, inhaling and trembling, but tried to speak, her voice slurred and too quiet.

"Where...Sara..."

Ashley draped a blanket from the med bag over Liana's upper body nakedness, and looked up with a

pained expression to gaze at Chakwas. The older female said nothing, standing instead. "Lieutenant Alenko, I need two of your marines to get a gurney from the cargo bay and help me get Liara back into the Normandy. The atmospheric pressure is bad and the atmosphere isn't helping."

Alenko nodded. "Just let me sort out my squads first, doc." He walked over to Cole, who was checking the loads on his Revenant. "We're about ready. Master Chief, you'll take squad one. I'll lead squad two. Vega, Ash, you're on sniper, the DACTs will take point, and Tali can send her drones while she's on the ship..."

Liara swallowed painfully, struggling to sit up, and Chakwas frowned, kneeling next to her. "You need to rest, Liara. You took a very heavy shot to the shoulder, which is shattered, and you've lost a lot of blood."

Liara shook her head. "Shepard...feel her. Anger. Pain. Danger."

Chakwas grew very still. She knew a bit more about asari than most of the humans on board. Asari telepathy was very badly understood, and was usually something only highly developed between bonded asari of long interaction. She'd read medical papers indicating the same could happen on some level with human partners, but ...

She licked her lips. What the asari and the commander did was none of her business. At the same time, she wasn't sure it should be something she should ignore either, given the importance of the mission and the danger. She found her voice, keeping it very low and calm. "Liara. Commander Shepard was, ah, very upset when you went down. She went ahead into the base and Wrex went after her."

Liara nodded, a broken, dark look in her eyes behind the clear plastic of the medical support mask. "She...she needs help. I have to go."

Chakwas shook her head. "Absolutely not! You aren't even in any condition to walk, much less head into a combat zone-"

With a gritting of her teeth, and a suppressed scream of pain, Liara's body lit up with biotic energy, and she staggered to her feet, medical package sliding off her arm and blood trickling from her shattered shoulder, only hastily sealed with medigel. "I...*have*...to...go." Her voice was so filled with pain that the words sounded more like growls.

Chakwas tapped her omnitool. "Commander Pressly. Chakwas here. I need your permission to have Dr. T'Soni restrained, she's irrational and demanding to go after Commander Shepard. Her medical condition is such that she could die without proper treatment."

There was a very long, pregnant pause on the line. When Pressly spoke, his voice sounded almost defeated. "Patch her up and get her in there, Major. That's a direct order, I'm logging your protest already."

Chakwas felt her jaw drop, and she felt a touch of anger enter her voice. "In the name of God, Pressly, why!?"

Pressly spoke again, grimly. "Commander Shepard's vital signs are at 121% of safe. Her heart rate is arrhythmic. Her implant is showing cascading heat and power fluctuations. She's showing at least four serious, armor breaching wounds, a broken helmet, second degree burns, and possibly a concussion. She's not mentally stable right now and if Liara can get her stable it's worth the risk. You have your orders, Doctor."

Chakwas frowned, pulling up a haptic display of the commander's vital signs, and spat a curse. The XO was right, Shepard's vitals were dangerously erratic. She was literally fighting in a state of shock.

She bit her lip, then spoke up. "Alenko, belay my last. I need two of your men to help Dr. T'Soni inside

the base, after your sweep to make sure no Cerberus hostiles kill her *again*." She pulled off the heavy medical support mask she wore on her face, coughing at the near poisonous air, and pulled off Liara's flimsy O2 mask. "Put this on and keep it on, an O2 mask isn't going to last long in there."

Alenko looked bewildered as Chakwas took the O2 mask from Liara and slipped it over her own face. She placed another setting of medigel onto Liara's shoulder, and used an application of omnigel, spattering over the loose blanket and forming into a semi-rigid shell, immobilizing the arm. She took Liara's pistol, and moved it to the other side of the asari's gun-belt, so she could reach it.

"I don't have to tell you this is very dangerous and reckless, Liara.." She dug around in the med bag at her side, pulling out yet another syringe, and injected the asari with the strongest stimulant she had. Liara gasped, the irises of her eyes expanding, and Chakwas nodded. "That's the best I can do in terms of patching you up, without getting you into the med bay. Don't even try to use the arm, and I would recommend not using biotics, either. I very, very strongly protest this, as you could literally die from exhaustion or cardiac arrhythmia at any moment with out proper treatment."

Liara gave a weak smile. "I... I will be ... alright." She forced herself to take a step forward, stumbling, nearly falling. Reacting without thinking, Telanya caught her arm, stiffening as she did so, and then stepped back, with a low bow. "Forgive me for touching you."

Liara looked at the other asari for a long moment. "I . I am not... a member of the ..Thirty any longer, Sergeant. And... I am nothing... special, in any event." She paused, nearly out of breath, before continuing. "There is nothing to apologize for... thank you .. for not letting me fall."

Liara stepped forward again, ignoring the poleaxed expression on Telanya's face, and this time two marines flanked her, one throwing her good arm over his shoulders. "Come on, Doc. I got ya. Jesus, you asari are tough."

Chakwas took an inhalation from the O2 mask, and sighed. "I'm getting back onto the ship, take care of her, Alenko." She turned, pausing to pick up her bags, and headed back towards the lowered ramp of the Normandy.

With a sign, Alenko motioned everyone head. "Let's catch up. Hopefully, Wrex has kept Shepard in one piece."

#### O-OSaBC-O

Wrex blinked blood out of his eyes, and shook his head as he came to his senses. One moment they'd been walking along, Shepard taking out a couple of Cerberus thugs and slowly trying to calm down, and the next moment the entire world had exploded around them.

He rolled to a sitting position, groaning in pain. His armor had held, thankfully, the thick plates and protective layers keeping him unharmed, but the corridor was a smoking ruin, and the way ahead was blocked by a solid fall of twisted beams of metal and rock. Shepard lay on her side, groaning, and even as he watched she got to her feet, pulling off her now completely ruined helmet. A gash was open on one cheek, bleeding freely, and her eyes were narrowed in pain.

She picked up her ODIN, checking it for damage, and then glanced at her pistol on the floor, the barrel bent by the explosion. Kicking it away in a fit of pique, she glared at the rubble in front of her. "Well, fuck!"

Wrex slowly leveraged his way to his own feet, using his shotgun as a cane, grunting as several bones popped back into place. "This Florez creature is a cunning, but cowardly foe. It will take quite a while to blast through this mess."

Shepard shook her head. "I don't have a while. This bullshit ends here and now." And with a flash of

biotic light, she was gone, phased through the rubble in her biotic charge. Wrex stood there for several seconds, blinking stupidly before shaking his head.

He had been pawing halfheartedly through the rubble for almost five minutes when he heard voices from behind. Another five minutes, and the two DACT soldiers walked up, weapons ready. "Christ, man, where's Shepard? It looks like the Sao Paulo Death Squads went through this place."

The big krogan nodded at the rock pile. "She did a charge through this to the other side. You got anything that can clear this?"

The two DACT looked at each other before moving forward to examine the rubble. "We can't just blow it up, that could bring down the entire goddamned tunnel on our head." As they spoke more Marines came up, followed by two helping along the battered, limping, bloody form of Liara T'Soni.

Wrex stared for a long moment before his face split into a toothy, feral grin. "You look like a kicked pyjak, asari. I'm surprised you're still alive, that shot nearly blew your little arm off."

Liara gave him a withering look and fixed her eyes on the rock pile. "Where...where is Shepard?"

Wrex gestured again. "She charged past that. Florez blew it up to stop us, and taunted Shepard over the comm system about it."

As the marines began examining the pile to try to figure out a way to bypass it, Liara leaned on the wall, closing her eyes, reaching out with her tired senses for Shepard. Whatever tenuous, fragile link the two of them had was still broken, but she could feel writhing anger and something else.

Fear. She was fighting, and losing. With a grimace, Liara shuffled forward, forcing her tired mind to grasp at the shreds of memory she had of Shepard.

Shepard flashing through the motions of the kanquess. Old memories of Shiala trying to teach her the move, the suppressed disappointment on her mother's face when she couldn't get the balances right. The repeated warnings about never trying it without knowing how to perform it properly.

Alenko barely had time to realize what Liara was doing before, with a yell of determination, Liara glowed blue for a moment and flashed, vanishing in a streak of blue light.

#### O-OSaBC-O

Shepard emerged from her charge, blinking back nausea and fatigue as she did so. Leaving Wrex behind was the only thing she could do. This conflict had nothing to do with her crew, or her friends, and everything to do with settling up the score.

The corridor beyond the rockfall was lit with orange emergency lights. Here and there, dead Cerberus soldiers were laid out neatly along the sides of the corridor, hands folded across their chests. Broken electronics and shattered haptic panels lined the walls, bits of glass crunching underfoot as Shepard trod down the dimly lit passage.

The crackle of fires and tendrils of smoke, along with a blast of heat, poured out of one side intersection, and the ugly sounds of collapsing rock and distant screams from another. Shepard paid it all no mind, striding ahead, breathing shallow, eyes narrowed, her hands clutching her ODIN so hard her knuckles hurt. The doorway ahead was shut, the Cerberus symbol over the outline of the Earth embossed deeply into the stainless steel metal of the doorway. With a surge of her biotics, she levered the doors open.

The room beyond was nearly identical to the fake HQ's command center – a bit larger, and makeshift barricades were set up in a couple of places. A few displays had power, flickering erratically, and a helmet, in orange and black, sat unattended on top of the main central display. Shepard glanced around,

hissing as she heard something shift from above her, trying to bring her weapon around as she stumbled into the room.

The minute she crossed the threshold, agony crawled across her body as a pulse disruption field shattered her biotics. Her limbs felt heavy, and the fatigue she'd been holding off by lightening her weight hit her all at once. With that, it was no surprise she was too slow to prevent the flying snap kick that drove the ODIN out of her hands and skidding into a dark corner. She barely got a cross block up in time to stop a second kick, this one strong enough to send her back several feet, falling back on her butt.

Rachel Florez went to one knee. She wore form fitting armor, thin plates of metal over body-hugging ballistic cloth, in black with orange trim. Her hair, once so neat, was a bit tangled, her patrician features tired, drawn and much more pale than Shepard remembered. One arm was raised in a defensive block, the other was angled down, hand open in a knife-hand form.

"All these years, and you still forget the Rules, Sara." Shepard scrambled back as Florez stood, and she brought herself into a ready stance, placing her weight on her back leg, arms loose and ready.

"Bitch, this isn't a lesson in the dojo. What the fuck are you doing with Cerberus!" Shepard moved, slipping a high kick from Rachel, lashing out with a punch. The armor the Cerberus general wore deformed and hardened around her hand, nullifying its effect. Rachel's return knife-hand, to Shepard's solar plexus, cracked her Spectre armor, sending the younger woman staggering back, leaving her open for a round house kick that hit hard enough to leave Shepard seeing stars and skidding across the room.

Florez sighed. "Sorry honey. That's classified. Also, forgot to mention I had some upgrades done a few years back after that shuttle crash." The hand she'd struck Shepard with had its synthskin covering torn, revealing hard metallic fingers. Shepard cursed – she had not expected Florez to have cybernetic limbs. She needed a weapon, or her biotics. But she'd dropped her Revenant, and her pistol was ruined. Without her ODIN or a biotic ability, she suddenly realized that she was at a severe disadvantage.

Florez smirked. "Cat got your tongue, Sara? Aren't you going to scream at me for betraying you, the SA, honor, commitment, courage...berate me for killing your stupid little asari.."

Shepard's nostrils flared as her anger returned, blinding her with red rage. She levered herself up, rolling and coming up in a snap kick, driving her foot against the older woman's thigh. Forcing her back and ducking under a lightning-fast return right cross, she instead hooked her own foot behind Rachel's and tugged, flipping herself into a spin as she did so. The other woman crashed to the ground, and Shepard caught herself with one arm, pushing off the floor and bringing down her other elbow in a pile-driver against Rachel's stomach.

Florez made a retching sound, and Shepard didn't let up, lashing out with a quick right to the face, smashing that perfect, infuriating smile, splattering blood from a suddenly broken nose. But Rachel heaved and bucked, flinging Shepard from on top of her, and then caught Shepard's free flying right foot.

With a grunt of exertion, Florez spun, flinging Shepard into the comms station against one wall, sparks flying as the console shattered. Shepard shook herself, pushing herself upright, only to catch a brutal uppercut against the chin, followed by a knee to the stomach and a hammer hand chop to the back of her neck. Her armor blunted some of the blows, but that didn't help the jarring impacts, and when Rachel angled her arm into a judo hold, Shepard could only scream as the armor's reinforcement ended up aiding in dislocating her right shoulder.

With a moue of disgust, Rachel spun Shepard away, letting her fall drunkenly to the floor. "Pathetic. All that training, cross training. Preparation. Studying. For what? A barely in control, bloodthirsty little

bitch. Just a Tenth Street Red in a soldier's clothes."

Shepard spat blood and fragments of a tooth, leaping up. She fainted at a sweep with her legs, then threw herself into a low roll as Rachel leapt over her leg. She came up, using the same rapid knife-hand move she had against Wrex in their sparring, catching the older woman across the eyes, staggering her. With a thought to that fight, she brought both hands across the sides of Rachel's head in open handed slaps, smashing them against Rachel's ears hard enough to ring the other woman's skull. Finishing off with a headbutt, she smashed the top of her head into her former mentor's already damaged nose, stepping back out of range of any counter blow.

Florez wiped the blood from her face, smearing her lips with it, giving a bloody smile. "Defiant to the last, I see. It's a pity. You were going to become a wonderful weapon for Cerberus before events ruined you. Now, dead, you'll still at least serve humanity as a martyr, and in that way I can still shape the future."

Shepard snarled. "You don't have a future, bitch." She stagger stepped, slipping right, fainting for the jab, leaning back to avoid the counter-punch. She blocked two low kicks with her own shins, grinning as the second kick left Rachel hopping back in pain. So, only the left arm and right leg are cybernetic.

With a demented grin on her face, she ducked under yet another high kick, charging ahead recklessly. She took the vicious punch to the face that Rachel threw to slam into the woman, letting the heavy weight of her armor overpower her foe and slam them both against one of the tactical consoles in the room. Rachel gave a yell of agony as something in her back popped, and Shepard triggered her omniblade, slashing down.

Rachel ignited her own, blocking the orange sweep of death, and hacked at Shepard, the tip of her more slender omni-blade scoring the black armor along Shepard's shoulder. Back and forth they swayed, droning blazes of orange leaving after-trails in their vision as they sought a single, clean thrust to finish the battle.

Rachel was nauseous, exhausted and sick, but Shepard had already pushed herself hard against the maws, in the first base, and in her psychotic charge to get this far. With the agony of the phase disruptor eating at her concentration, she was the first one to slip, and missed a block. Rachel's omni-blade slipped through her armor, a hot blaze of pain scoring across her stomach, and then Rachel's cybernetic arm backhanded her.

Shepard's vision swam dizzily as she crumpled to the floor, blood leaking from her mouth. Rachel kicked her, laughing, and more plates of armor splintered under the force of said kick. Rolling away in defense, Shepard was disoriented, and Rachel smirked as she dove forward and down, slashing her omni-blade directly into Shepard's thigh.

The scream that tore out of her throat was almost involuntary as the omni-blade splintered bone and burned muscles. Rachel twisted it viciously, before pushing her hair back and standing, chest heaving. With a smooth motion, she reached over to the comms table, pulling out a heavy handgun hidden under loose paperwork, and pointed it downwards, at Shepard's head.

"For what it's worth, Sara... I was always proud of you. I did what I had to do. Humanity's fate is more important than you, me, or any other individual."

Shepard curled forward, and then, suddenly, froze. A tiny, tiny smile crossed her features, at the sudden feeling tingling in the back of her mind, and Rachel frowned. "What is amusing, my old student? Death at last, freedom perhaps? You've longed for it, I know."

Shepard shook her head. "No, not that. It's just ironic you're going to die because you forgot to follow your own first rule." Shepard's smile widened into a bloody, vicious grin. "**Always** check the body."

Rachel's eyes widened and she spun, but by that time the battered, slender figure in the doorway, not in the room proper, had already lifted her hand.

Liara's voice was hoarse and soft, but infinitely vicious. "Get away from her, you bitch." White fire lanced out, overpowering the pulse field that covered the floor of the room, slamming into Florez and bursting into a singularity. The older Cerberus woman had time for one, disbelieving scream before her skull imploded under the strength of the biotic black hole summoned into existence.

Liara let the biotics die, slowly letting her hand fall, before staggering towards Shepard, blood running again from her wounded arm. She winced as the pulse field hit her, but grimly put one foot in front of the other, forcing a smile onto her features. "I .. have to admit...trying to do a kanquess ... from what bits of memory I have from you...was not the wisest thing."

Shepard reached out a hand towards her. "How...you...I thought.. I was alone..."

Liara's face was blurry in Shepard's vision, occluded by blood and tears, but before she lost consciousness, the last thing Shepard heard was Liara's sweet voice.

"You will never be alone, Sara. That is our fate."

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### **Chapter 83: Chapter 74 : Edolus, Departure**

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*A/N: This is just a transitional chapter, but one where I tried to approach the topic of Cerberus, and extremist research, in both conversations.*

*A quick, fluffy trip back to the Citadel, and then off to snowy Noveria.*

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The aftermath of the fight against Cerberus was anticlimactic, leaving the full horror of what had just been seen in everyone's minds. Alenko found he didn't like the feeling it left. He wanted a shower, a cup of hot tea, and sleep, but most of all he wanted the last two hours of his life to just go away so he wouldn't have to dream of the things in Cerberus' science labs.

It took a full fifteen minutes for Alenko and the marines to dig through the blocked corridor, using small explosive charges and brute biotic strength from both the lieutenant and Wrex. Surging through the opening, Alenko was the first one to enter the command center, taking in the headless corpse of Rachel Florez. The sting of the pulse field washed over him, heightening his migraine and making him grit his teeth as he entered the room, pistol drawn.

Liara sat on the floor, holding Shepard, who had slipped into unconsciousness. "She's ... badly wounded and .. we need to get her out of here. The .. bitch .. "

Liara made a languid motion with her free hand towards the black and orange armored corpse on the floor, almost liquid with disdain.

"...stabbed her."

Alenko nodded, turning as marines entered the room. "Jackson, Ownby, Rodriguez, Haln. Get some of those sheets of metal plating outside and use them as makeshift stretchers. Get the Commander and Dr. T'Soni out of here. Henson, go with them, get Chakwas on the comm once you're clear and have her get them to sickbay."

He turned, eying Telanya, who was obviously in some level of pain from the pulse field still affecting the room. "Grab what you can from these databases, Sergeant Telanya. We didn't run into Richard

Williams, so see if you can find out where he is or if he was here at all."

He glanced over at the rest of squad two. "As for the rest of you, there are two mass effect hand-trucks in the cargo bay, loaded with the disruptor torpedoes. Hustle back, leave one man in the corridor on guard, and start laying them out. One in this room, one at the entrance, and spread the others around. Do it as quickly as you can."

Cole and Vega walked up, the senior chief with his Typhoon slung over one shoulder. The gash in Vega's armor where he'd been hit by a turret was patched with a sloppy smear of omnigel, and he spoke in a tired voice. "This place is a radioactive wreck, sir. Even with anti-rad dosing, we need to be up and out of here in another half hour at the most. There is still partial power, but most of the base is on fire. Air's going toxic, and the fires are still spreading."

Alenko nodded. "That will hopefully kill off any Cerberus survivors. Send the DACT troopers back to the entrance, let them pick off anyone trying to escape." Alenko turned to Cole. "Can you supervise moving anything we find back to the Normandy, Master Chief?"

Cole nodded, and turned to head back out. Alenko walked over to Rachel Florez's body. He frisked her for anything of note, finding nothing but a marine battle knife in her boot and a wedding ring on a neck-chain around her neck. Leaving those on her, he tapped commands to his omni-tool, and began spraying down the corpse with a fine layer of aerosol accelerant, soaking the body gently but completely.

By the time he was done, both Shepard and Liara had been hauled away, and Telanya was copying something from the battered computers in the command pit to OSD chips. "Lieutenant Alenko... according to this, Richard Williams was trapped in a science lab when the Illusive Man's sabotage blew up a great deal of the base. They seem to believe he was dead."

Alenko nodded. "If he's not he will be soon." With a sigh, he stepped well back, and sprayed plasma fire over the Iron General's body, reducing it to fine gray ashes in seconds. "The marines should be planting the torpedoes as we speak. Head on up, Sergeant."

The asari nodded, and Alenko followed her, pausing only to pull out his last three grenades from his weapons belt. Setting them to timed, he tossed them back into the room, watching them land in the middle of the command pit, and turned away. The explosion that rocked the room thirty seconds later barely shook the floor. The next few minutes of walking through the ruins only brought Alenko a sense of calm.

At least this perversion had been put to rest forever.

As Alenko exited the base, he saw his marines had dragged out a handful of items, mostly portable memory units, and were loading them into the Normandy's starboard external cargo area. Alenko hadn't been told exactly why Shepard wanted bits and pieces of Cerberus's research, but figured that was above his pay grade anyway.

He half turned, finding Ashley standing beside him, wiping off purplish bloodstains from her gauntlets with a piece of torn Cerberus uniform. "Hey, LT."

A small smile twitched across his face. "Hey, Gunny." He eyed the last team of marines hauling torpedoes into the Cerberus base, the long and ungainly weapons being maneuvered carefully. "What do you think about all of this?"

Ash flung the stained rag in her hands away, expression unreadable behind her armored faceplate. "This, as in the operation? I think we kicked ass. For all the talk about how supposedly powerful these thugs were, they fought like trash. And the skipper must have fucked up fifty of them by herself. Not

very impressive."

Kaiden laughed, and she shrugged. "If you're talking about what Cerberus was up to...I think it's goddamned sick, Kai. I mean, sir. I mean, it's one thing to not like aliens. I never really got aliens. Turians..are kinda of a sore point with my family. Never met one until Vakarian, and from what he says, he's not much like the rest of them."

She looked away, gazing at the marines hauling torpedoes inside the base. "Never met asari or krogan, either. To be honest, I never thought much about aliens. Still think we might be better off on our own. But none of that changes that what Cerberus did is vile. There's no excuse."

She looked back towards him. "Then again, I guess some people never got over the FCW. Or just had bad experiences with aliens in general."

Kaiden thought bitterly of Vyrnnus, and gave a sour nod. "Yeah, that sounds about right. There's a lot of old hate towards aliens among the older generation, I guess." He shook his head. "But hate didn't solve anything, it never does and it just makes what everyone fears will happen come all the faster. With all the money and influence these sick bastards had, what could have they done to really help humanity, I wonder?"

Ashley sighed, shaking her head. " Ring out the grief that saps the mind, for those that here we see no more. Ring out the feud of rich and poor, ring in redress to all mankind." She paused. "I don't think these people ever wondered about the right or wrong of it, LT. This wasn't about power, it was about people scared of aliens and of anything different than themselves. People who are scared act stupid. When your back is against the wall, everything in the dark looks dangerous."

Kaidan fixed her with a hard look. "That may be so, but this-

She spread her hands. "-is the legacy of evil men who probably told themselves they were doing the right thing. It's shades of Colonel Santiago and the Sao Paulo Death Squads – "who were we to question the will of the Emperor, when all other alternatives were to be crushed under the unthinking heels of tyranny and starvation?" I mean, listening to Wrex talk about the genophage sends chills up my spine – what do we do if the salarians decide humans are a threat and cook up some kinda bug that kills us all off?"

Alenko snorted. "I'm sure that would only happen if humanity acted in the same way the Krogan did at that time – trying to conquer the galaxy. Organizations like Cerberus send the wrong message. And honestly, even if it was a situation like that, does that make *this* the right answer?"

She turned back to look at the base entrance, trickles of smoke beginning to emit from the ruined holes at it's edges. "It's *not* right, and it's fucked up. I ain't gonna try to pass this off as some kind of rational response, and the Santiago Defense is bullshit, just like the Nazi's and all that back in the 20th century." She paused, sighing, and looked at her hands, still stained here and there with Liara's blood.

Her voice was low and bitter. "When you grow up hearing bitter stories of the First Contact War, or see how the turians won't even look at you on the Citadel...when your whole family is looked at like cowards because of what aliens brought about... you lose perspective. If I had not been on this whole trip with aliens, gotten to know Tali, or Wrex, or even Vakarian, would I really be angry because aliens were dead – or just angry because Cerberus made humanity look bad?" She shrugged. "It's easy to say to yourself that you couldn't do something evil. I worry more that a lot of people don't even see the evil Cerberus represents, the kind of evil that makes it okay to cut up turians and salarians just because they're aliens."

Kaiden gave a somber nod "I get where you're coming from, Ash." His headache throbbed, and he forced it back, focusing on his words. "It's not up to us to force people to wake up and realize that we

live in a universe where aliens are part of life...and often stronger than us. We can't change how bigots and zealots think, and we can't change how aliens view us unless we remove those bigots and zealots."

He gave a thin smile. "I understand, though, why you worry about it too. I've had ugly experiences with aliens. Like I said ... jerks and saints. It's just easier to make them 'other' because they look weird, smell weird, sound weird. It's easier to blame them for the economy being off, or cast them as the bad guys when we don't have a place at the table."

He jerked his thumb back towards the Cerberus base. "But the truth is, even if salarions are plotting to kill us off, humanity has already tried to do that to itself. Half the bodies in that hellhole were human experiments. No matter what rhetoric they pull out of their ass, the difference between people like them and people like you is that you just want humanity to stand on it's own feet. You don't want to rely on aliens, because you can't be sure they'll be there when humanity needs them. Monsters like Cerberus just want power, at any cost, and are using aliens the same way Hitler did the Jews, or Ardiente did with the Americans and Chinese."

He turned away, motioning to Cole to begin rounding the marines up to leave. "At the end of the day, we all have to look inside ourselves and remember that the worst threat to humanity has always been humanity itself."

Williams said nothing as she followed him up the cargo bay ramp, turning one last time to gaze out over the wrecked entrance and the forbidding, broken plateau beyond. *Did you do this, Uncle Richard, to redeem our name? Or did you never come out of that dark place you fell into after Shanxi?*

A series of explosions rumbled through the base, something within it's bowels blowing up, and more smoke poured out from the entrance. Ashley crossed herself.

*Goodbye, Uncle Richard. I'm sorry you ended up this way. I hope you can find whatever peace God offers your soul.*

Five minutes later, the Normandy was arching through the atmosphere towards the other base when the nine disruptor torpedoes went up in blazes of radioactive hellfire, sundering the remains of the headquarters of Cerberus forever. In the radiation blaze of the explosion, no one on the Normandy's Tac Alley noticed the barely visible sensor signature of a light fighter speeding away, winging towards the mass relay at high speed.

O-OSaBC-O

Shepard awoke in a blaze of pain. Her shoulder felt broken, her stomach hurt, her mouth was swollen, her eyes ached, and her nerves were on fire. Trying to open her eyes only rewarded her with blaring smears of light.

The kind, tired voice of Helen Chakwas sounded nearby. "Ah, you are awake. Another damn fool stunt you barely survived by the skin of your teeth, this time nearly killing Doctor T'Soni along with your heroics."

Shepard coughed, feeling something wet tear inside her body, and groaned. "You should see the other person." She tried to grit her teeth against the pain, and stopped and winced when her jaw throbbed and a tooth wobbled in it's socket painfully.

Chakwas made a clucking sound. "Try not to move much of anything, Commander. The only part of you that you didn't manage to wreck during your little alpha-female rampage was your hair. You've got a splintered femur in your left leg with torn muscle groups; a broken shoulder blade; a torn capsular ligament in your shoulder; perforated intestines from an omni-blade stab .. not to mention second degree burns, a concussion, a hairline fracture in your jaw, broken teeth, neurological damage..."

Shepard leaned back against the pillow as Chakwas's voice droned on about her injuries, taking slow even breaths. Despite how much pain she was in, a small smile made its way across her features, and she managed to hold up a hand to stop the flow of injury information. "Any casualties in the crew? And ... Liara?"

Chakwas made a noise, huffing, and adjusted something heavy and cold on Shepard's stomach. Rather than try and risk more agony by opening her eyes to look, Shepard just waited, and after a moment Chakwas spoke. "Minor injuries, mostly. Two marines have moderate gunshot wounds that require surgical correction, and Senior Chief Vega has three cracked ribs. Liara's shoulder joint is almost destroyed, and it needs surgical correction. Her vitals are recovering nicely now that I removed the last bits of whatever kind of round hit her, and I've stitched everything up in abeyance of further work with a bone regenerator. No deaths."

She paused. "I also examined the health of your ... captive. Jason Dunn. He shows signs of malnutrition, dehydration, and severe electro-shock torture. His cybernetic arms are heavily damaged and need both repair and recalibration. I've got him on fluids and fed him, but we had to burn his uniform and put him in a spare marine overall. Are you planning on turning him over to the Citadel forces when they arrive?"

Shepard shook her head. "I'll deal with Jase myself. Later. Am I in good enough shape to talk to Pressly?"

Chakwas said nothing, probably checking some kind of readout, and then peeled back one of Shepard's eyelids with a gloved finger, shining a light into her pupil. "I think so. You are still lightly concussed, but I don't think you are delirious. You are, however, *not* getting out of this bed, if I have to have Wrex come in and sit on you. Clear?"

Shepard nodded, and was left alone in the med bay for several minutes. She had almost nodded off when the doors hissed open and Pressly's voice filled the silence. "Reporting as ordered ma'am."

She coughed, and with a tired sigh, forced her eyes open. Smear colors and shapes swam dizzily in her vision, the biggest one a blurred blue shape with a blob of pale beige on top. "I can't see very well, but give me a moment. What's our status, XO?"

Pressly's shape wavered, slowly coming into rough focus, showing him holding an info-pad and wearing a worried expression. "The Normandy took some damage from the fight against that single missile cruiser, and more from vacating the fight that destroyed the Phoenix. Armor plates 4 through 22, and anterior plates 6 and 9 are non-viable, and plates 23 to 28 are damaged. Our torpedo stockpile is empty and most of our missiles are gone. Both MAKOs are on board and both are non-functional for combat."

He tapped his pad. "We've got enough fuel to make it back to the Citadel, but not to Noveria. Also, the Marine contingent has two lightly wounded and two on limited duty. Both DACT armor sets need overhaul and repair. Your armor is a write-off, ma'am. So is your pistol. So is, for that matter, Wrex's and Liara's armor. We're down to 44% on fresh stores, and 28% on medical supplies, including our entire stocks of anti-rads, regenerative patches, and flash heal paks. We're also down to less than nine gallons of omni-gel."

He put the pad behind his back. "You've been unconscious for two hours. Citadel fleet forces entered the system twenty three minutes ago, and were accompanied by a C-SEC cruiser and a few SA ships, including a ship bearing AIS operatives. We have orders from High Command to hold position in orbit unless medical treatment requires us to evacuate, and an Admiral Vandefar is aboard the AIS ship."

Shepard groaned. "Wonderful. Is there anything else of note?"

Pressly paused, then shook his head. "Nothing I can't handle, Commander. Concentrate on getting better, we will transit back to the Citadel in a day."

She nodded. "Before you go, I'd better contact Vandefar and get this Cerberus crap off my ship. Have you made any reports about what we found?"

Pressly shook his head. "Not yet." He shrugged. "I didn't mention the existence of Mr. Dunn to the SA query where I spoke with Admiral Vandefar, ma'am. Figured I would let you handle that."

She grunted, wincing as something in her shoulder tightened. "Chakwas is on the warpath, so hauling my butt to the comm-room is out of the question. Bring me my omni-tool and a portable comm screen, please. I'm trapped in bed."

Pressly was gone for about five minutes before returning with Shepard's omnitool, along with a haptic view-screen. He carefully placed her omni in her lap, and propped the screen up against the regenerator package on her leg. He departed with a small nod, and the bay was empty except for Shepard once more.

Shepard tapped her omni, bringing up comms, tabbing through the various signals being routed through the CIC comm-link, finally coming to Vandefar's ID. "This is Normandy, requesting tightband comms with Admiral Vandefar."

The symbol of the Systems Alliance was displayed for a few seconds, then the image of the older woman flashed on the small haptic screen. Instead of admiral's whites, she wore working blues, the background some kind of war room with a map of the Edolus system in the distance. "Commander Shepard. I've been waiting for hours to talk .. oh." Her voice trailed off as she took in Shepard's battered appearance, and the commander gave a small smile.

"As you can see I'm a little banged up, Admiral. Just regained consciousness. I presume the Fleet Master reached out to you?"

Vandefar nodded, her eyes bright. "He did. I want to thank you for being so ... insightful in thinking to secure samples of what Cerberus was researching, and securing the, ah, remains of their victims. That will bring a good amount of closure, with the aliens and all that, and possibly insight into exactly what they were doing."

Shepard's face twisted in disgust. "About every bad thing under the sun from what we saw. Dissections, cybernetics, a pile of Thorian thralls, and worse. A lot of it was damaged, either during the firefight or by Cerberus blowing up their own facilities to slow our advance, so what we have is probably a mix of many things."

Vandefar nodded. "Any idea of what they might have been after, based on what you saw? I'm aware you aren't exactly a scientist, but your Dr. T'Soni might have seen something..."

Shepard shook her head. "Nothing cohesive. Ways to kill aliens, mostly, and methods of incorporating cyberware or bioware into people. They had a faked up asari, a human being with an overlay of asari-like skin and fake blood. They had .. more than a few human subjects as well."

Vandefar shrugged, tapping into a keyboard to one side offscreen. "The alien bodies will be returned to the appropriate species for disposal or burial, I suppose. We'll take possession of the human corpses and try to find out what Cerberus was up to. Is the material in your cargo bay, or still groundside?"

Shepard shook her head. "It's all in our external cargo bays. Those are modular, and you can have Kodiak's hard-latch to them and lift them over to your ship. That way nothing ugly will be out in the open." She grimaced. "I think at least a couple of alien corpses were loaded as well."

Vandefar nodded again. "An excellent solution, Commander, and it will make our transfer all the easier."

We'll make the transfer when we relay out of the system, rather than under all the eyes of the Citadel Fleet." She paused, rubbing her chin. "I have to apologize for being upset with you at our last meeting, as you are clearly thinking on your feet."

Shepard shrugged. "Admiral, I still think what happened at Feros was unacceptable. I get it, on the same kind of level people get how I had to sacrifice a lot of my men in battles to get the job done. That doesn't mean I liked doing it, or thought it was the right thing to do, I just had no other choice. There had to be other ways to find out what the Thorian had to tell us – not as fast, but less morally disgusting. I can't help but wonder if Cerberus would have used the same methods."

Vandefar sighed. "I wish I was able to dispense with such moral quagmires with the same equanimity as you do. Unfortunately, I have to deal with the long-term consequences of the actions we take. Tell me, how many times has two-stage shielding reinforcement saved your life, or the lives of your men?"

Shepard thought about the question, her mind still a bit addled. "I have no idea, probably thousands of times. Anytime high impact rounds get past the initial shield."

Vandefar nodded. "That was one of the first things the Thorian taught us how to understand from the Mars Archive. Without that, we would have not developed that technology until about, perhaps, a year ago, when we were able to leverage it from independent sources in the Salarian Union. How many thousands of soldiers – tens of thousands – would have died in the nine year gap, I wonder?"

Shepard frowned, suppressing a grimace of pain. "The ends justifies the means?"

Vandefar shook her head. "Manifestly not. The difference, Commander, between Cerberus' crazed hacking at aliens and what we did at Feros was one of scope and intent. The only people sentenced to die at that colony were nonredeemable. Every last one of them were career criminals, every last one had been put through Penal Legion examination not once but twice, and every one of them was a Z level convict. They were slated for execution anyway, and nothing was going to stop that. In return for their deaths, humanity as a whole benefited. Hell, we traded away some of what we found to other species. Cerberus experimented solely to promote their skewed ideal of human power, an ideal crazy enough to make them ally with Saren Arterius." She softened, if only a tiny bit. "I understand your distress over what MilSCI has to research and undertake, Commander. But I assure you we are not going to end up like Cerberus."

Shepard nodded, thinking carefully on the admiral's words. She still didn't like it. A part of her rejected the logic and reasons given, even as she understood their validity. Something in the files Udina had given her on human political psychology rang in her head, though, about people in compromising positions often rationalizing their own actions to appease their conscience. Rather than press her on this, Shepard decided to back away and ask something she needed to know.

"I ... understand, Admiral. As the Fleet Master told me, I'm not educated in this level of operation, so I should just keep my mouth shut and my boots on the ground. I should leave the science to Liara."

Vandefar scoffed. "Perhaps. But you had the intelligence to grasp the significance of Dr. T'Soni's report on what she discovered on Eingana. I'm still reviewing her findings ... I'm afraid to say there is significant political opposition to what her thesis suggests."

Shepard scowled. "That doesn't surprise me at all. What do you think about it?"

Vandefar leaned back in her seat, tapping her finger on her cheek. "On the surface the idea is preposterous. Alien races vanishing for eons and then coming back to wipe out all life sounds like the sort of bad science fiction you get in Blasto movies. But the supporting evidence is ironclad. Something utilizing a very similar weapon, with a remarkably similar composition, to the ship we saw at Eden Prime destroyed the Thorian and Inusannon vessels on Eingana. I've tried twice to organize a follow-up

expedition to scout the ruins for more corroboration, but I'm being blocked by a number of factors. The High Command isn't buying it because if it were true, there's nothing we can do."

Shepard frowned. "What do you mean?"

Vandefar rubbed her forehead. "We only have preliminary numbers, mind you. But what little we know of the Inusannon technology indicates they were beyond even the Protheans. The turians cataloged something on the order of eight hundred to nine hundred dreadnaught-plus class hulks on the ground. Impact cratering on the planet's moons indicate there were probably more than that. Assuming they had a conventional fleet structure, that means something on the order of eleven thousand heavy and light cruisers and upwards of twenty thousand light ships. Shepard, the entire weight of battle of every naval force in the known galaxy is less than two hundred dreadnaughts and less than a tenth of that overall fleet size."

Vandefar frowned, glancing at her hands. "Even if we assume – foolishly, if you ask me – that the Inusannon and Thorian were able to take their foes out at a 1 to 4 ratio, that means whatever killed the fleet at Eingana numbered in at the LEAST two hundred of those horrible ships we saw at Eden Prime. If that force comes back, our navy would be of as much use as pissing into a supernova."

Shepard felt a chill come over her, the images from the Beacon flooding her sight for a moment. "It...if what I saw in the Prothean beacon was correct, ma'am, there were thousands."

Vandefar sighed tiredly. "As I said. Based on the evidence we have, we're not doing anything because there's nothing to do. The entirety of a Citadel task force didn't even scratch the paint on one of those monsters. If – and there is no proof of this – but if there are more, we are beyond 'in trouble', Commander." She shrugged. "I think the Protheans destroyed them and were themselves destroyed, if for no other reason that no other pre-Prothean culture's ruins show any messages left behind of what happened to them. "

Shepard didn't think that was the case, but said nothing of it. "I'll discuss it all with Liara, ma'am. If that's alright."

Vandefar nodded. "Of course, Commander. Is there anything else?"

Shepard smiled. "Just one thing. I ... have some potential intel, but before I go raring off to blow up bad guys and recover it, I need to make sure I don't step on your toes again. Are there any Systems Alliance operations on Noveria?"

Vandefar arched an eyebrow. "Noveria? The Corporate Court world? What is this in regards to?"

Shepard exhaled. She'd have preferred to have this conversation when she was rested, not half-stunned and in pain, but she'd only get one shot at this and had to make it count. "Admiral, you're aware I have information from various, ah, sources, in the search for Saren?"

Vandefar made a moue of distaste with her narrow lips. "Yes, the Shadow Broker."

Carefully not affirming nor denying that statement, Shepard continued. "I have reason to believe that evidence we need to find Saren *may* be on Noveria, perhaps within the confines of the corporate enclave for the company he and Benezia owned shares in, Binary Helix."

Vandefar nodded, tapping something to one side, beyond the visual range of the screen. "We don't have any active or sensitive projects on Noveria, Commander – the political situation is too unstable and SA contractors have to agree to work within at least Level 2 space restrictions. None of the corporations in the formal SA Court of Corporations maintains anything but ... labs and 'experimental areas' on Noveria. If you have to blow something up there, that would not affect our operations."

Shepard nodded, and smiled thinly. "That's all I needed, Admiral. I hope whatever I found is useful."

And I'll keep in mind what you said about the nature of your work."

Vandefar gave a bright smile. "We'll see, but I am optimistic. At the very least, we can salvage some bright spots from this foul affair. I will notify you of any findings that touch on your search, Commander. Have a speedy recovery. Vandefar out."

Shepard let her head fall back against the pillow as she killed her own comms, sighing.

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## **Chapter 84: Chapter 75 : Udina, Outraged**

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*A/N: This chapter isn't in response to reviews, but was actually planned out ahead of time. That being said, I hope it answers any lingering questions about a more realistic view of what happens in the universe and what is done by other alien races.*

*The rest is more transitional stuff.*

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Donnel Udina had discovered, over long years in politics, that when comm-links started responding slowly, it was due to one of two things. One, new haptic movies had come out and idiots were busily sending snippets and videos to their friends. Two, big news was occurring and reporters were overloading the comm buoy nets with full trideo packets.

Thus, when a simple call to Arcturus took almost a full five minutes to go through, he carefully cleared his calendar of meetings and changed out of a plain beige suit to a more expensive one of Horizon wool with small leather panels for trim. When the comm-link actually crashed out before completing the call, he sighed and commed Captain Anderson to come to the embassy.

He'd managed to clear his desk and even have a bracing drink with the captain before the first calls came blazing in, from every news agency on the Citadel and a pack of independent outfits from various locales. "Your pet lunatic must have blown up something impressive, Captain. I didn't even know batarians had news stations."

The dark skinned man standing at the balcony overlooking the Presidium grounds gave a sour smile. "I'm sorry, Ambassador, but I haven't gotten any updates from High Command since the terse "cease combat operations against Cerberus" went out early this morning. From what I managed to gather from Admiral Dragunov, Shepard was successful in taking out their HQ."

Udina grunted as more lights appeared on his communications panel, and he eyed them with poorly concealed disgust. "And now I have a comm request from Charles Saracino. Lovely." He was about to stand when the indicator for incoming calls from the Council illuminated.

Udina gave a long-suffering sigh, positioning himself in front of the holoivid projector, and keyed it to power. "Good afternoon, Councilors. How may I be of assistance?"

Sparatus, Valern and Tevos all had displeased expressions on their face – at least, Udina thought that was salarian displeasure. He was gratified to note he was correct as the salarian spoke with clear irritation in his thin voice. "We are calling in regards to the report turned in by Commander Shepard, about the details of her mission."

Udina nodded, keeping his face and voice calm. "I'm afraid I haven't been copied on any such report, Councilors, which is probably due to it being Spectre-level intelligence. What exactly in the report concerns you enough to reach out to me?"

Tevos gave a small smile. "The report was curiously ... devoid of anything that pointed fingers at the Systems Alliance, for one. Perhaps we are merely misinformed, but we find it very odd that there were no links in the large amount of material we discovered at the HQ between the Systems Alliance and Cerberus. In fact, we couldn't find any financial records at all. A strange omission."

Tevos lifted a finger. "Secondly, Shepard recovered material items from the Cerberus HQ and turned them over to one Admiral Vandefar – a Systems Alliance Admiral in charge of your military's R&D programs, if I am not mistaken. We were not told what these items were, nor were they allowed to be inspected by Citadel forces. Given the horrors we found within the base itself, we find it somewhat disturbing that certain items were removed without us knowing what they were."

Tevos ticked off a third finger. "Third, Shepard and her teams didn't submit any armor camera footage. We discovered only recently that none of the new armor she has purchased for her soldiers or ground combat team has such a feature, so we have no corroboration of events except what we have been told."

"Finally, Shepard's report indicates she killed what she called the leader of Cerberus, but the figure we found at the base was a former Alliance major, one Victor James. Major James was dishonorably discharged from your SA military almost five years ago, but Cerberus has been around longer than that. Additionally, Major James, while a capable soldier, never demonstrated anything like the tactical abilities or planning shown by Cerberus forces. While we are aware of Shepard's penchant for not taking prisoners, the fact that literally no one is left alive to confirm this was, indeed, Cerberus's leader is also disturbing."

Valern folded his arms. "STG and Spectre intel, along with reports from the Shadow Broker, show that at least one highly placed military figure of note was among Cerberus's leadership, and seized records from at least one of the Cerberus based we identified pulled up the image of a person that looked suspiciously Charles Saracino, interacting with Cerberus personnel." Valern sniffed. "The Shadow Broker also suspects that, given the capabilities the organization demonstrated during our assault, the amount of money that Cord-Hislop Aerospace and the handful of subsidiaries could have channeled would not cover a tenth of Cerberus' expenses...leading one to question, who funded them?"

Sparatus gave Udina a glare. "White-washing any SA connection to Cerberus does not exactly put us in a trustworthy frame of mind, Ambassador. We are happy a threat such as Cerberus is destroyed, but their link with Saren makes it imperative that "

Udina's gentle smile didn't waver in the slightest. "I see. Your contention is that the Systems Alliance government – who, mind you, were the first ones to condemn Cerberus as an outlaw organization – were secretly involved with it and that we had Shepard cover up SA involvement. You have based this ridiculous assertion on 'reports' without any support and ugly truth that your C-SEC agents are just as incompetent at figuring out Cerberus' money trail as they were Saren's."

Sparatus flicked a mandible. "Don't try to dodge the issue, Udina. We want answers."

Udina laughed. A full, long laugh that brought color back to his features and left him swaying slightly. "I'll be happy to give you answers, Councilors. Would you like them before or after we publish the details of the STG team we caught red-handed trying to distribute remote detonation devices at Arcturus Station? Perhaps after we distribute the report from the Sirta Foundation that suggests the flaws in the L2 architecture as delivered to us by the Asari Republic was defective on purpose and had to be custom-fitted to cause the damage L2's are experiencing?"

Udina leaned forward. "Or maybe, *turian*, we should just ask how we found a Blackwatch operation deep in the Skyllian Verge, working with pirates to attack new human colonies in a region that certain turian mining corporations were interested buying up?"

The room was silent, the flickering images of the Councilors saying nothing, surprise evident on all three faces. Udina's voice was harsh. "Humanity has not bothered to raise these issues with you because we know how the game is played. Your own special forces have their dark side. So does, I admit, the AIS. Our governments have all done things in the name of political expediency that the public would not understand."

Udina leveled a finger at them. "However, you cannot not think we are blind and unaware of what you are doing in the shadows, or that we cannot take a hint of what might happen to *us* from the treatment of the quarians, krogan, and volus."

Udina's face finally lost its smile, twisting into a sneer. "Cerberus was a vile blot on humanity's name, a pack of racist thugs unwilling to accept reality and they have paid for it. The SA had no connection to it, and if we did then we would not have let your own people dismantle it! The SA did not prevent you from taking possession of what facilities you captured, they did not hinder you in landing at the HQ site to perform your own investigation, and if you honestly think *Shepard* of all people would cover up criminal activity of that scale, I begin to see why this Council fails to achieve **anything**."

He slammed one fist into another, face purpling. "This is *beyond* outrageous. You think to lecture *me* about *my* government's failings and accuse *us* of covering things up when your own damned Spectre is responsible for the deaths of thousands of humans on Eden Prime, Feros, and the slaughter of your own Fourth Fleet? You think we are covering up something when we could have just had Shepard blow the HQ base up and pretend the many, many victims you found there never happened, that the sick research that you have found details on didn't take place?"

Udina shook his head. "The gall of this farce of an interstellar government astounds me. Here we are, trying to shut down the supporting forces of a lunatic, and you want to use the opportunity to score political points! So much for bringing together the races of the galaxy in unity!"

Anderson carefully reached out, touching Udina's forearm, and the older man nodded jerkily. Tevos glanced uncertainly at Sparatus, then at Valern. "We will discuss your statement with our own governments, Ambassador, and revisit this discussion at a later date. However, given the recent statements by figures in your government, our concern is warranted." The images of the Council vanished, and Udina shook his head again, muttering under his breath.

Anderson gazed out the balcony view again, before looking back at Udina. "Is all that you said true?"

Udina looked up. "Hm? Oh, about the black-work their special operations groups are doing? Yes. AIS gave me a briefing on it during the Spectre hearings, in case we needed political leverage." Udina rubbed his chin thoughtfully, eyes dark with speculation. "They aren't usually this ham-handed with their holier than thou act, so I remain confused as to what set them off. The Senate didn't issue any official diplomatic communiques..."

His eyes traveled over to his desk, and with a curious expression, he tapped a comm-link. "Ambassador Udina here."

The image of Khalisah al-Jilani erupted from the view-screen. "Ambassador Udina, I'm happy I caught you. Do you have a formal statement regarding the statement by Charles Saracino, regarding the assault on Cerberus?"

Udina hesitated. "I'm afraid I've been in closed discussions with the Council and haven't seen it yet. However, in regards to the situation with the destruction of a terrorist organization that vivisected living beings – many of them human – I will state my view. Cerberus was a blight on the name of humanity and anyone supporting it should be jailed. I'll view Saracino's statement and get back to you, Khalisah." He killed the line before she could retort and then groaned.

"So that's what has the comms lit up and put a fire up the Council's collective behind. They should muzzle that man."

Anderson made a face. "Saracino. The leader of Terra Firma. This will probably be unpleasant to watch." The captain watched as Udina tuned his projector and picked up SA-SPAN ONE on the vidscreen.

"Reports from various colonies and the like are still coming in, but most of the response to Mr. Saracino's speech has been positive." The screen displayed the pleasant features of an ANN reporter, who read from her vid-screen. "To recap: the reportedly terrorist organization, Cerberus, was destroyed in pitched combat today by Citadel Forces with assistance from Commander Shepard, humanity's first Spectre. No other SA forces were involved, and there is a large amount of political uproar over the fact that the Congress did not authorize this action, and that no criminal charges were filed against any of the members."

She continued. "The organization was outlawed fourteen years ago, one of the first acts of the Coleman administration as a nod to better alien relations. However, until now, penalties for membership in Cerberus have been civil fines and citizenship suspensions. Only those Cerberus members convicted of crimes against the SA or the legal code have been arrested and executed. Legal scholars say the Citadel's unilateral strike against the organization is illegal because the members of Cerberus were still SA citizens at the time, and should have been arrested."

The view switched to the other report, a male with dark hair and even, handsome features. "Anita, how will all this place out in Congress?"

The female reporter put on a concerned face. "John, in the aftermath of the announcement of the destruction of Cerberus, a rally was put together by members of the Terra Firma and Earth First parties. Traditionally not quite aligned, they were joined by Alliance Blue, and initial polling indicates many in the outer colonies and the member colonies are outraged by the actions of the Citadel Council." She paused. "The rally, led by Charles Saracino, included a call for a vote of no confidence, which was submitted just minutes ago by Senator Raul Costasanti. If the parties line up behind their leadership, the Coleman Administration could be out of power in as little as a week, when the November 5th primaries are held."

The male report nodded somberly. "And now, let's view the speech by Mr. Saracino, held outside the Chambers of Unity in downtown Vancouver, just down the street from the House on the Hill."

The image reformed, this time showing Saracino, flanked by at least a dozen Senators and three SA admirals, addressing a staggeringly large crowd from atop a grav platform, studded with colorful blue and white bunting and haptic images of the Earth's continents.

Saracino was dressed in a black neo-silk jacket with runnels of silver piping, over a traditional white shirt and blue-black tie with haptic patterning. His features were twisted and snarling as he spoke, his booming voice making up for his shorter stature.

"Today, my fellow citizens, I come to you not in triumph but in sorrow. Today, the blood of our race has been spilled yet again, not in defense, not in honored sacrifice, but by attacks in the dark. Today, patriots have been struck down, proud and brave humans slain by our would-be alien masters, and the SA's thirty pieces of silver paid in full. Cerberus, the organization of heroes who was our only defense against the underhanded actions of hostile aliens, was destroyed today."

"Destroyed, by a pack of brutal assassins, the mailed fist of the so-called Citadel Council, acting without the knowledge or permission of the Systems Alliance. This group of sneak-thieves assaulted Cerberus in the dead of night, and this morning trumpeted their victory over men and women who just

wanted to protect their people, their culture, and their way of life."

"And how did this come to be? How were humans, citizens of the SA, slain? By a secret operation, carefully concealed not only from the bulk of the SA military but from Congress and the President, signed off on by a few officers in dark rooms and aliens on the Citadel. Framing Cerberus for the vicious attacks by a *turian*, the Citadel struck out at our ever-beating heart of freedom."

"They boldly came to Earth itself, murdering veteran survivor and self-made industrialist Jack Harper, framing him as the leader of Cerberus. They bombarded forces on a dozen colony worlds, and illegally destroyed corporate property and starships in a brutal, cowardly attack."

Saracino smiled. "And the leader of this pack of wolves? The Butcher of Torfan, who 'bravely' defeated the military commanders of Cerberus in their HQ, no doubt getting half her men killed in the process. We are told that this is a great day, that evil has been destroyed."

"But what evil is that? Cerberus protected us! Cerberus stood for human advancement, human supremacy, in a galaxy of tired aliens who couldn't accomplish in a thousand years what we did in a century! And the lies they tell, oh, the lies. Cerberus, formed after the bloodthirsty butchery of the *turian* assault during the First Contact War, was helping *Saren*? We are expected to believe this... tripe?"

Saracino's voice thundered. "This was a quid pro quo! The SA military machine got more ships out of the aliens, by way of their Treaty of Fairaxen. The SA commissars and jack-booted thugs that oppress you got their precious Butcher made a Spectre. This government has sold you down the river! *Saren* is still out there! Eden Prime died unavenged! Feros was ravaged, unavenged! The Corporate Headquarters of a human success story, ExoGeni, destroyed by this ravaging lunatic – and their reaction is to go forth and kill humans?!"

The crowd roared, and Saracino roared back. "Do they protect our colonies! NO. They demand taxes and more conscription, but do they protect us from crime, from pirates, from *Saren*? NO! They claim one must support the Citadel to support the SA, but do they stop the *asari* cults and *salarian* tech gangs? NO! They have the audacity to commit murder on SA CITIZENS – for that is what every member of Cerberus was!"

Saracino leaned back, jaw thrust out. "You may have disagreed with Cerberus' methods. You may have written them off as racists. That doesn't mean they can be slaughtered – without trial, without even a chance to surrender – by aliens who plot to overthrow our way of life and either enslave us or exterminate us!"

He lifted his arms, and the crowd chanted his name. "With me today is Bill Upton, committee chairman of the Senate Armed Forces committee. He knew *nothing* of this planned action. With me are the party leaders not only of Terra Firma, but also Alliance Blue and Earth First! We have the votes needed to unseat the Coleman Administration!"

"And that, my fellow citizens, is exactly what we plan to do. We are tired, tired of excuses as why pirates ravage our colonies and yet the Citadel does nothing. Tired, of platitudes, of being told we have to conform to a galactic unity that looks down upon us and restricts our expansion, our research, our business. We are tired of *asari* preachers telling us we should follow their ways, of thieving *salarians* stealing the brilliant work of our young people and laughing behind their sleeves. Of the bloody-handed *turians*, who are the first to complain about human expansion and the last to care when it is humans who die at the hands of pirates who are all too often *turians*!"

"We have had enough. This government, the Coleman Administration, has bent over backwards to appease the aliens, and this is our reward. To have a tithe of our people slaughtered, to be told that

black is white and that somehow humanity is to blame for Saren's atrocities! We have had enough! I call on our Congressmen to call for a vote of No Confidence in the corrupted, ineffectual Coleman Administration!"

Saracino balled his fists, raising his arms again. "Come November 5th, we are going to take our government back! Let Cerberus' not have been martyred in vain! Don't listen to transparent lies, or the gibbering platitudes of those beholden to aliens."

"Humanity Now! Humanity Tomorrow! Humanity *Forever!*" His voice was lost in the crowd's frenetic shouting, many of them firing off guns into the air and waving flags and banners.

With a scowl of disgust, Udina shut off the video feed. "If ignorance ever gets to a hundred credits a barrel, I want drilling rights on that man's head. Of all the idiot political stunts!"

Anderson looked at the myriad flashing comm lights on Udina's desk. "Is this going to affect Shepard and the hunt for Saren?"

Udina sighed, walking over to his desk and flinging himself into the chair. "In the very short term, no. The Secretary of Defense is a cabinet level appointment, but the High Command isn't. They may sack Admiral Branson, but in the short term they can't really affect SA military policy in any real way. What they can do is throw roadblocks into Shepard's path, waste her time with assignments under the Spectre Charter for 'associated work', and make it nearly impossible for the planned assault against the geth to have any real force behind it."

Udina wiped his hand over the comms requests, blanking them all. "The real problem is going to be public opinion, both human and alien. Cerberus was popular in the outer colonies, especially the independent colonies. They were often active in driving off pirates, and without them raids will probably increase. Worse, however, is that aliens are going to see that short little fool mouthing off about how wonderful Cerberus was and assume that the majority of humanity thinks that way. It will set us back in our relationships for years."

Anderson nodded. "But Shepard will be able to finish the job, of going after Saren and stopping him?"

Udina narrowed his eyes and gazed at the captain. "Yes, but there is more to consider to the situation than that. Shepard's idea of cutting off Saren's allies was sound enough, from a military standpoint, but the political fallout is going to be immense. The decision to launch this operation without letting the Congress know may have ensured Cerberus didn't have a heads up, but it will bite us in the ass when it comes time to explaining the fact that Shepard wants a task force to hunt geth."

Anderson gave another short nod. "She's going to come back here for resupply, and probably to report in person to the Council. Are you going to brief her?"

Udina ran his hand through his thinning hair and shrugged. "I do not know yet. I dislike Shepard's methods on an instinctual level, and I still find her too rough around the edges. And yet I will admit there is a certain charm in her way of looking at the galaxy – good or bad, right or wrong. If she could articulate that purity into words, she would be able to nullify a lot of the non-sense Saracino is going to cause."

After a long moment, he shook his head. "I suspect, however, that trying to get her to listen is about as likely as Sparatus taking a human mistress, and thus I'll leave that sort of discussion to you, Captain. Assuming those fools at High Command haven't shouted at her again for doing her job."

Anderson chuckled. "She's a good soldier, Ambassador. If anyone can- " He broke off his sentence as the urgent-comms light lit on Udina's desk.

Udina gave another tired sigh and tapped it. "Ambassador Udina."

The grave voice of Admiral Hackett sounded. "Ambassador, we have a situation on our hands, one that is still developing but could end up going south fairly quickly. Do you have an ETA on when Commander Shepard will be arriving?"

Udina glanced up at Anderson, who shook his head. "Not at this time, Admiral. Is this related to Cerberus?"

The voice of the admiral sounded hesitant. "No, not exactly. Shepard's old commanding officer, Major Kyle, retired from the military after her induction as a Spectre. I forwarded you a report about his activities not too long ago, requesting that Shepard pay him a visit to see what he was up to."

Udina nodded. "Yes, I remember that. He'd started some kind of biotic commune out in the Fringe and claimed that the SA was conspiring with the asari government against biotics or some such nonsense. I told Shepard about it, but in the follow up to her discoveries on Eingana..."

Hackett sounded annoyed. "Well, he's gone further than statements now. Kyle refused admittance to a pair of Commissars, and somehow he and his followers neutralized them and punted them off the planet in an old shuttle. The AIS says he's working with subversive asari cultists who have known links to Benezia. I know Shepard has a lot on her plate, but this could blow up fast, especially given what the AIS recently told us about the L2 issue."

Hackett's voice went darker. "There was talk about sending a member of the Committee on Biotic Rights out to talk to Kyle, but the bastard has locked his compound down and isn't answering hails. I need permission to re-task Shepard for this issue. I don't want to step on any political toes."

Udina glanced at Anderson again, who spoke. "Admiral, this is Captain Anderson. Shepard's XO indicated that Shepard was pretty badly hurt, and that the Normandy had suffered battle damage and was running low on supplies. Her marine team was shot up as well. In other words, neither her or her team are combat ready. Is that going to be a problem?"

Hackett gave a sigh, and his voice was low and even. "I hope not, Captain. We're hoping Shepard can reach out to Kyle and either calm him down enough to bring him out or figure out a way to approach the problem non-violently. If that fails...Captain Delacor is on hot standby with the Fifth Marine Battalion to 'suppress' the commune. I don't want it to come to that, there's no telling how some people might twist the results to their own ends."

Udina nodded. "In that case, Admiral, I have no problems with it. I'll relay the report to the Citadel Council."

"I appreciate it. Hackett out."

O-OSaBC-O

Joker loved the long hours of FTL flight between primary relays, especially during the mid-watch. Most of the ship was asleep, save a couple of techs in the ops alley and an engineer or two, and thus he didn't have to hustle to get out of the way of other people when he needed to hit the galley or use the restroom.

Joker hated to leave the cockpit, especially since that meant he had to turn over his duties to one of the two off-watch pilots. But sometimes it was worth it. Walking with the leg braces Tali had made for him reduced a lot of the pain of walking around to almost nothing, and now he had to be careful about how fast he moved.

Tripping would probably break his arms and face, after all.

Gingerly hobbling his way into the mess deck, Joker was nearly silent. He was surprised to see a very battered looking Shepard up, sitting at one of the mess deck tables, talking to the Cerberus guy they'd

picked up from Edolus, sipping on a cup of cocoa.

He made his way quietly to the coffee maker, shuddering at the liquid it disgorged, and took down a package of Pop-Tarts. He was delighted they'd started making the century-old pastry again, even if no one had a toaster anymore, and more delighted that the always stingy SA would stock the things as part of the ship's food roster. Fortified with his pastry of choice, Joker turned his attention to Shepard and Dunn.

Shepard's face was bruised, bandaged on one cheek, and had a drawn, tired look. Her leg was in a partial cast along the thigh, with a medical package embedded into it, and her t-shirt was overlain by bandages around her waist and on her shoulder. Next to her, the figure of Jason Dunn still looked off balance, every part of him but his arms seeming emaciated, a hollow look in his eyes.

Joker left the galley and headed back towards the stairs, and after a few moments he heard voices. Unable to restrain his curiosity, he circled around the wall blocking the stairs from the galley, to come up on the other side, behind them, and listened in.

Shepard's voice was soft. "And that is the last I saw of her. Wrex said she went to the ExoGeni building."

Dunn replied. "That's not good. Cerberus had taken ExoGeni out. I hope Bea is okay, she's a tough broad."

Shepard shook her head, dark hair falling in uncombed tangles across her neck. "Not like she used to be. I don't know if was dealing with the Thorian or just watching her entire unit die, but she was busted mentally. And .. she was pretty bitter about everything." She took a sip of her drink, dark eyes looking up to meet Jason's.

The man leaned back, cracking his neck. "God, she needs to get laid more than you do, She-bitch. I swear, Bea was always an icy bitch, but she went subzero after Torfan. Didn't help that she liked pissing Von Grath off something fierce. You ever hear from the Old Man any more?"

Shepard shrugged. "He sent me a congratulatory note after I made Commander, and another one when they made me a Spectre. He's busy preparing to run for office, he can't afford to be close to a piece of crap like me." Her voice was bitter, and she gave a thin little smile. "Besides, he was never as close as David...or Rachel."

She dipped her head, and Dunn nodded. "I figured she'd go out hard, but .. Christ. You're lucky the blue caught up to you. Taking her on by yourself was a grade-A stupid Shepard moment."

She tilted her head. "Her name is Liara, not 'blue'. I'd appreciate it if you used it, she's saved my life three times so far."

Dunn arched an eyebrow, stared at her for several seconds, then shrugged. "Alright then. I can do that. I'm just saying, you can't do the dumb shit you used to, and expect Neutron to bail you out of it."

Shepard's jaw tensed. "The team I have now is good."

Dunn sighed. "The team you have now is shit, Shepard. The quarian can be fucked by heavy explosions. The turian's a sniper type but has shitty situational awareness. The DACTs are goddamned crazy, and I have no idea where you found that walking recruiting ad of a Master Chief, but he's not all there either, if I don't miss my guess. The ... Liara...is a goddamned civilian who got her shoulder shot off because she didn't even have on full armor." He placed both hands on the table. "I'm not saying it to insult them, but they ain't N7's. You go in with that book of Ezekiel 'and you will know I am the Lord' bullshit, and you're going to get your team killed."

Shepard stared at him for a long second before looking away. "What am I supposed to do? This is what

I have to work with. I have to take down entire goddamned terrorist networks just to figure out where the fuck Saren *might be*. It's not like the SA is giving me much support, Jace." She sipped listlessly at her drink. "It's not like the old days, where we had weeks or months between the hard fights. I haven't even healed up fully from Eden Prime. And with no support, I just have to keep going."

Dunn picked up his cup of water and drained it. "It's not about support. Jesus, Sara, if anyone can take down that Saren bastard it's you. You nearly dropped the Old Lady without your biotics, and she was on Ahern's team in Rael Six. You don't need more support, you just need to refocus your way of fighting."

She nodded. "I *had*, Jace. I had to. I was losing myself in anger before...all this started. Now, things are a confusing mess, but it's not a bad confusion. Things are different." She paused. "I've had to deal with people in a way I never had to before. I've found that maybe, just maybe, I'm not as empty as I was scared I was. Maybe things aren't going to always end in death and more failure." She looked up. "But in a way, that just increases the pressure. I lost it on Edolus, because what I saw reminded me of what was done to me. And when Liara got shot..."

Dunn snorted. "Saw that. Your men never saw the Butcher, did they? They got to see Commander Shepard, but that was their first time seeing you when you get angry. Probably scared the shit out of them."

Shepard rubbed her forehead. "I can't afford to lose control."

Jason gave her a hard look. "If you flip out so bad you cook your own armor when this Liara girl gets shot and dropped...I don't think the problem is anger management, Sara. This gonna be another Torfan?"

Shepard's eyes narrowed. "No. It isn't. Goddamn it, Jace, does everything go back to -"

He held up a hand. "Sorry. I'm sorry. Honest. I got over it a long time ago, like I said. I'm not saying that you're thinking with your dick. Cuz you ain't got one."

Shepard rolled her eyes. "You're still a goddamned asshole, I see."

He grinned, but then it fell off his face, and he continued. "What I'm saying, She-bitch, is that you aren't thinking clearly where she's involved. It's obvious. Not to your crew, probably. They don't know you the way I do. But I see the way your eyes move, the way you make an extra hard effort to tamp down on your temper around her." He folded his hands together. "I'd like more than anything for you to find some happiness. And maybe if you got your ashes hauled, you'd be able to deal with the pressure you're under a bit better."

He stood, and Joker prepared to leave. As he edged back to the stairs, he heard Jason's final words. "But you need to figure out exactly what the fuck you want out of life, girl. Hunting for Saren won't be any easier if you're caught up in soul searching and doubting yourself."

Joker made a hasty retreat, and had safely ensconced himself in his pilot's chair (and sent the other, sleepy relief pilot back to his pod) by the time Shepard slowly limped her way up to the cockpit. "Ship status, Flight Lieutenant."

Joker pulled on his hat and sighed. "It's the mid-watch. We're 740 light years from Earth, and the coffee still sucks."

Shepard smiled, sitting down next to him at the weapons panel. "Enjoy eavesdropping?"

Joker felt a sense of nausea, and cursed mentally. Before he could say anything, she just laughed. "We're both N7 soldiers, Joker. I could hear your bones creaking and your damned breathing. You could have just sat down."

Joker tapped a control, lips pressed together tightly, before speaking. "I didn't want to interrupt...but...sorry, Commander. I was just nosy."

She nodded, flipping through a display of her own. "I cut you a lot more slack than anyone else, because like I said – you can understand me on some level. But what you heard tonight I expect you to keep to yourself."

Joker nodded quietly. His mind hadn't really even considered what he'd overheard, and as he did so, he suppressed an internal grimace. "Would it be too much to say you have good taste?"

She shot him a dark look, but one laced with the slightest bit of embarrassed confusion, and he pulled his hat down further. "Sorry."

She merely paged through views on the haptic screen in front of her. "I .. don't know how to deal with such situations. Never did. Never .. had such things happen to me. For years I thought I was ugly."

Joker couldn't keep the amazement off his face, but did manage to keep an entirely inappropriate comment from coming out of his mouth. He merely scratched his neck.

She continued in the same soft voice. "No matter. I woke up – and ended up in that conversation – because I got a comm message, Joker. Lay in a course for the Presrop system in Hawking Eta. We have a short visit to make, then we'll head to the Citadel."

Joker nodded, then frowned. "Um, Commander? Is this going to be a combat drop? I noticed you're checking the main guns."

Shepard looked up again, a shadow of a smile on her battered features. "I really hope not, Flight Lieutenant. I'm going to have a talk with my old CO, Major Kyle, the Lion of Mindoir."

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## **Chapter 85: Chapter 76 : Normandy, Moments VI**

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*A/N: Another transitional chapter. And more Shepard and Liara, basically becoming a little bit more comfortable about the idea of what they are doing.*

*I'm still working on the outline of Noveria...but while some things are indeed canon, the big shocker is yet to come. :D*

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The trip to Presrop took three days, as the Hawking Eta cluster was at the far end of the Silver Spiral relay link lane. Shepard found herself very glad for the time down, and spent most of it resting and letting Chakwas work on injuries.

The fractures she had from Eden Prime and Therum were finally fading, under repeated applications of the bone regenerator, but Chakwas gave her heavy calcium supplements and warned her of further stresses. Chakwas also hesitantly worked on Liara's wounded shoulder, but suggested the young asari wait until they reached the Citadel to have any serious surgery done on it.

The trip was broken up by various drills, mostly damage control and fire tracking drills, while Tali, Garrus and to a lesser degree Adams tried to fix the heavily damaged MAKO tanks. Tali also spent time working on the battered wreck of the JOTUN mech that once accompanied Admiral Kahoku, endlessly fiddling with its electronics and sensors.

Wrex spent his time working on his blast-damaged armor with omni-gel and a shaper, usually chatting with Jason Dunn amiably. The ex-Cerberus soldier had been allowed to move around as he pleased,

although he was kept away from any weapons. Shepard still hadn't decided how to deal with him yet, and wasn't looking forward to it.

On the second day, Shepard called the entire combat team into the cargo bay for debriefing. The marines sat in ranks on the floor, Cole leaning against the MAKO at one end, smoking a cigar, with Vega at the other end, squeezing a set of hand grips in one massive fist. Garrus and Wrex sat near the weapons lockers, Tali perched on the MAKO, and Liara sat near Shepard on the weapons bench, nervously fiddling with an info-pad. Alenko stood behind the marine line, arms folded.

Shepard looked them over, nodding. Most of the marines had one or two medical bandages, and Vega's chest was still patched up from his close call with a turret. But out of them all, it was Shepard herself – and Liara – who were the most seriously wounded.

"Alright people, listen up. This was the first test of our new weapons and armor in combat, and I say the money was pretty damn well spent. The armor bounces a lot of the incidentals and lighter weapons fire, the shields are good, and your ranges with the Crossfire rifles was excellent."

A couple of marines high fived each other, until Cole scowled at them. Shepard continued, privately pleased to see such high spirits after the depression that had happened after Eingana. "That being said, we can't get cocky. Senior Chief Vega nearly died from that one turret. Dr. T'Soni was legally dead for a couple of minutes after that sniper shot her in the shoulder, and even my Spectre armor didn't stand up well to an omni-blade in the gut."

She began to pace in front of them, eyes narrowed. "It's another day to our destination, then three days back to the Citadel. On the way there and back, I expect a full damage inventory of the armor. We need replacements, we'll get it. We need new parts, we'll get them. I want both squads working with Detective Vakarian and Engineer Tali'Zorah to get our goddamned MAKOs up and functional by the time we leave the Citadel."

She paused. "Before the Cerberus takedown, I'd decided to change up my command structure, moving Master Chief Cole to the BDO position and making him an LT, and moving Lieutenant Alenko to a specialist role. We didn't use that lineup on Edolus because we didn't have time to practice it, and later on because operational issues made the team layouts .. unwieldy."

She turned back. "Going forward, however, that lineup will be our game plan. Squad 1 under Vega, Squad 2 under Williams. When we deploy forward, if the sub-teams need squads, you'll report to either me or Alenko – otherwise, you'll be under the command of Cole."

She smiled. "Since I am handing out promotions, I thought I'd do a few more while I have everyone here. We'll start from the top. Master Chief Cole, front and center."

She ended up moving Cole to Lieutenant (brevet), Williams to Senior Chief, and Sergeant Haln to Chief. Several of her corporals also got bumped.

"With the exception of Lieutenant Cole's new rank, these are all permanent promotions, already approved by BuPers. Cole is still a Master Chief, still the Chief of the Boat, and still responsible for putting his foot in your ass in regards to discipline, his rank of Lieutenant is solely to allow him the authority to act as BDO."

Cole nodded. "So keep on the up-hop, apes."

Shepard grinned. "That's all for the marines, dismissed. Council Observers, please stay a moment." She waited until the marines had dispersed, the circle of aliens drawing closer to her, and spoke in a low voice. "Once we get done with this little side trip, and our restock and resupply on the Citadel, we have a lead on Saren. He's on Noveria, and we're going after him directly."

Garrus gave a low growl of satisfaction, and Wrex a chuckle. "Noveria should be fun for us to get into, Shepard. You have some kind of plan, I hope?"

She smirked. "Your favorite kind, Wrex. Shooting, shouting, and backhanding anyone in my way." She paused. "More seriously, though...this is it. I need each of you at the top of your game. When we go in, we're going in hard, and there's no telling if it's just Saren, or if Benezia is with him. If both, Liara, Alenko and Wrex are going to have to try and hold her off until we can take down Saren. If it's just Saren, I think we can beat the murdering fuck in a straight fight."

She looked at each one of them in the eyes – or faceplate, in Tali's case. "If you need anything on the Citadel – heavier weapon, some kind of special supplies, whatever – get it. Charge it to the ship. Once we go after this fucker, we probably won't be able to back out, so be ready."

Tali nodded firmly. "I would like a new shotgun, I think, and maybe an extra shield generator."

Garrus shrugged. "If your Spectres have any new sniping toys, I'm game for an upgrade."

Liara gave a small hesitant movement. "... I have my mother's shotgun, the one she left behind on Feros. I would appreciate some training on how to use it..."

Wrex grinned. "Finally, the asari decides to use a real weapon. I'm good, Shepard, but more jaaki would never hurt."

She snorted. "You're a goddamned krogan, Wrex. Why are you drinking hanar tea?"

Wrex only looked at her. "Don't start with me. An artist needs inspiration." Even Liara laughed at that, and the wounded expression on the krogan's wide face only made it funnier.

#### O-OSaBC-O

The third night into the trip, Shepard awoke from an ugly nightmare, sitting up in the darkness of her cabin, sheets soaked with sweat and tangled up in her legs. Sliding off the bed, she padded over to the tiny dresser built into the wall, pulling on an ankle length robe, and left her quarters with a towel in hand, headed to the tiny showers built into the port side of the crew deck. The mess was abandoned this late at night, and Shepard showered with mechanical precision, letting the water soak into her body and leaning her head against the smooth, cool metal of the shower stall.

She both wanted and feared calling Liara into her quarters. They really needed to talk, and yet Shepard found herself inexplicably frightened of what that talk would consist of. With a shove, she killed the water, kicking in the air vent that rapidly dried her body. Wrapping the robe back around her nakedness, she returned to her cabin, dressing in a fresh set of BDU's, the familiar motions taking place automatically as her mind focused on what to do next.

There was a chime at the door, and Shepard raised one eyebrow. Feet still bare, she opened it, looking into the face of Liara, dressed in yet another tight University of Serrice uniform. The asari looked tired and drawn, her arm still cast up in the sling Chakwas had her wear, the injured shoulder packed away beneath a padded omni-gel hardened bandage.

"I...woke up. Are you alright, Sara?"

Shepard shrugged. "No. Come in." The door whooshed shut behind Liara, as Shepard walked over to her corner table and poured herself a glass of Anderson's scotch. Shepard watched as Liara gracefully sat down next to her, even the injured arm not detracting from her poise, and shook her head. "You want a smoke?"

Liara nodded, and Shepard picked one out of the pack on the table, handing it over before pulling another for herself. She picked up her battered lighter, igniting the tobacco, and handed that to Liara as

well, lingering over the touch of her fingertips for a moment. "I had another nightmare. First one in a few days."

Liara's lips pursed around the cigarette as she lit it, the vent fan in the ceiling sucking away tendrils of blue smoke. "I suppose that is not surprising, Sara. All I do is .. aid you in reinforcing your mind's control over the memories and images the Protheans have shoved into you. I have been studying several journals of human neuropsychology and I find myself somewhat at a loss on how to 'fix' the problem in the long run."

Shepard smirked. "Neuropsychology?"

Liara leaned back, blue eyes never leaving Shepard's. "The study of the brain, and how that is affected by your lifestyle, emotions, and thoughts. My own people do not formalize such things as science, as we have specialists in joining who can repair such afflictions. I am afraid the phrase does not translate cleanly, but it would be close to 'healer-of-gaps-in-thought'."

Shepard inhaled on her cig, blowing out a stream of smoke after a moment, nostrils flaring. "So you've gone from wanting to cut me up in a lab to wanting to hand me over to shrinks. Well, I've seen plenty of psychologists already. I don't think any of them can fix whatever is wrong with me, even before the Beacon decided to shove it's shit into my head."

Liara gave a small, awkward smile. "That means you are limited to having me aid you as best I can. I believe that the process works, although there are .. awkward shades to it."

Shepard dragged the tip of her cigarette around the rim of the ashtray, smoothing the cherry down to a neat point. "Yeah, well. I've been stumbling around that point for a while myself. After I put a foot through Saren's face and deal with your mother, what happens then?"

Liara gave another smile before taking a drag. "You are asking me, Sara? I have not really given it the thought I suppose I should. A part of me is simply willing to follow." She glanced away. "Leading and taking charge is not something I have ever excelled at."

Shepard nodded, glancing out. "All the same...we do need to talk about it. I'm not going to pretend that it isn't real. When I thought you died, I .. I lost it."

Liara nodded sadly. "I felt it, even as I fell. So much rage and anger, like I was drowning in blood." She extended her hand, cool blue enfolding soft brown. "I saw your armor, where your own biotic energy warped the surface."

Shepard grimaced. "I haven't ever had anything go fucking right for me, Liara. As much as I think I know what I want, actually dealing with the feelings is a lot harder. I worry that you'll get hurt out there and I will just lose it completely." She sighed. "I went off half-cocked and Rachel was about two seconds from blowing my head off. How much would that have hurt *you*?"

Liara squeezed her hand, her face somber. "My mother once sat me on her knee, when I was very young, barely old enough to read. It was after the death of my aunt's bond-mate, a kind turian who was always very nice to me. I was upset that he was gone, and asked her why he had gone. When she explained death to me, I was even more upset, asking her why good things had to leave our lives."

Liara closed her eyes, a trace of pain crossing her features. "She told me that in every happy moment there is the sadness of losing it. That in every good thing we experience in our lives, we must always remember to grasp it while we can, for all things fade and return to nothing in the end."

Shepard waited, as Liara continued to speak in a soft, almost hurt voice. "And she said that no matter what, you could never let the fear of losing what made you happy drive you from pursuing that happiness. It is amusing, that conversation made me never back away from my determination to study

the Protheans when she wished me to follow another path."

She finally opened her eyes. "You saved my life on Therum. You saved my life with the viala. We are bound, and I will not let go, no matter how much that hurts. If we let what might go wrong turn us from our path, how will we ever know those moments of happiness she spoke of?"

She exhaled, and forced a smile. "I do not want to always talk of gloom with you, Sara. There must have been some happier times in life for you, surely."

Shepard shrugged, stubbing out her cigarette. "I was happiest in the 2 RRU, with Bea, Jace, Baby Blue, and Rai. My NCT. Team Neutron. I was happy when I got up-shifted out of the Penal Legions, with Rachel and David and General Von Grath congratulating me. I was happy when I got out of OCS and got made a Captain of Marines, and even prouder when I qualified for A and made Lieutenant Commander."

She sighed. "After Torfan? There wasn't anything approaching 'happy'."

Liara finished her own cigarette, gently crushing the fire at its tip into cold ashes. "I was happy when the University of Serrice accepted me as a junior researcher, and on my first dig. I was so excited going into my first dig I could not sleep for days before or after. The first time I discovered a piece of Prothean statuary – a carving of a plant – I was delirious."

She smiled. "That last talk on the beach I had with my mother, smoking and just .. being ourselves."

Shepard listened, as Liara told stories of Benezia – the awe she invoked as a High Priestess of Athame, dressed in silver and black. The pride in seeing thousands upon thousands of asari, salarians, turians, even humans flock to her Triune gatherings, to listen to her wisdom as she tried to bring siari to others. The wonder of the trips she'd had in her youth, the places she'd seen in her years of studying the Protheans, the sheer joy of discovering something new and unknown.

They discussed Shepard's time in the Penal Legions, the memories of pranks pulled and punishment details. Shepard spoke of her fascination with the huge collection of starship models General Von Grath had in his cabin aboard the 2 RRU's command cruiser, and how she'd built a few of her own. Liara found it a curious hobby, and was amused when Shepard went into great detail about the models and how building them gave her a better understanding of ship structures.

Shepard spoke of how alienated she felt in her own society, and how every attempt to fit in either felt like she was faking it, or like she was playing a game with rules no one understood. "People expected me to fit in these neat categories, and when I didn't they would get upset with me. I killed a lot of turians and batarians, so I *must* hate aliens. I'm an orphan, so I *must* want a family. I'm cold on the battlefield, so I *must* be an emotionless, pitiless murderer. It got to the point where it was just easier to...meet their expectations. Maybe that's what I was supposed to really be like?"

Liara, in turn, vented about the endless social maneuvering in asari social circles, the endless casual linking that made Liara all the more excluded because she was never invited, the sense of separation she felt from 'normal' asari. "When Sergeant Telanya came on board, the only thing going through my mind was I had no idea if I was expected to formally greet her or ignore her. I interacted with the clanless so rarely in my life I don't even remember if it's an insult to offer her chathesi tea or an honor. All I could hear was my mother's voice, droning on about how mingling with the lower classes was for lesser houses." She sighed. "She probably sees me as yet another haughty member of the Thirty, not a..." She trailed off.

Shepard smirked. "Hot, kinda nerdy biotic badass?" Liara flushed, but laughed all the same.

Shepard had asked about the dress Liara had worn on the Citadel, and why she never wore anything

like that on the ship. Liara had explained she wore the University of Serrice outfits as a mark of pride, as her only reminder that she had at least once achieved something that she had doubted was possible. She also explained that wearing formal dresses on board the ship would be very distracting. "Especially for human males."

Shepard snorted. "Yeah, I don't need Joker crashing the Normandy into a planet because he's staring at your behind." She poured more scotch. "Still, we have plenty of BDU's, if you want to wear a set. That uniform looks...well, great on you...but is it comfortable?"

Liara smiled. "I suspect those uniforms you wear are only comfortable to you due to long experience in wearing it. When I first got on board, Lieutenant Alenko offered me one. It is ... the sizes you have are rather tight across the chest." She colored slightly, and Shepard shook her head.

Two hours later, Shepard emptied the bottle of scotch, and lit another cigarette, and realized she was content. Somehow, in just talking and listening, she felt closer to Liara, instead of increasingly uncomfortable and awkward like she felt around most other people. She stood, finding her balance uncertain, and Liara was there, one arm sliding around her waist.

Shepard ended up moving to the small couch, and Liara sat next to her, the two of them staring out the small window in the cabin, out at the endless night of deep space, speckled here and there with gleaming smears of blue, white and silver. Shepard leaned her head back, letting her muscles loosen, and gave a slow exhalation of breath.

"I just wish I was .. normal, sometimes. Maybe with a regular job. Police. Or a driver."

Liara's lips quirked. "If Garrus's stories of your driving in the MAKO are true, driving may not be the best choice."

Shepard laughed. "Chickens are just chicken, that's all." She smiled, and felt herself lean into Liara, cool skin against her own. "To be nothing special. To have no expectations set on you. No past bearing down against your soul." She shook her head. "No weight of blood, or crowds shouting your name in hate."

Liara nodded, tracing a finger up Shepard's forearm. "No legacy to live up to, or disapproving family to call you a failure, and blame you for the path of your mother." She brought the finger up, lifting Shepard's chin, and kissed, sweetly, gently.

Shepard could only breathe again when she finally broke the kiss. "But we are who we are, Sara. We cannot change that any more than we can change the stars themselves."

Tali's words came back to Shepard, and she smiled. "We don't have to be normal. We just need to find a way to do the things normal people do, without messing ourselves up any worse. That's not changing us, it's just changing how we do things."

Liara nodded somberly. "That is wisdom. But how do we do that?"

Shepard exhaled. "Liara, I can't hide forever what I feel for you from .. everyone. I don't want to, to be honest. I didn't give a shit of what people thought of me before I met you, and I certainly won't start now. I don't want you to get hurt, by me or in all of this mess, but like you said, if I stand still out of fear we'll end up nowhere."

She linked her hands with Liara's, looking for words. "I don't know what to do."

Liara nodded, kissing her again. "Neither do I. But I am tired." With that, she curled up against Shepard, nestling her head against Shepard's shoulder. "And I am frightened, of losing you, or of dying myself."

Shepard closed her eyes, her free hand reaching out to snag her old Penal Legion blanket and drawing it over them both. "We'll figure it out."

The feeling of Liara against her was more comforting than arousing, and Shepard found herself unable to keep her own eyes open. She stretched a bit, sliding her body against Liara's, and let her head fall back, a tiny little smile on her lips.

#### O-OSaBC-O

The jump alarm woke Shepard from her slumbers, and she found herself on the couch, Liara pressed up against her. The feeling of holding the asari and the lethargy in her limbs felt so nice that it was hard to lever herself up and slam her fist against the haptic panel.

A moment later, as Liara stirred, Pressly's voice came over the comm. "Ma'am, we just dropped into the Century system. There's a System's Alliance assault cruiser here, requesting comms with you."

Shepard winced as a muscle pulled in her back. The weight of Liara had caused her leg to start throbbing, and she resolved in the future to not sleep on the damned couch when she had a bed right there ... but sleeping in the bed lead to images she didn't have the willpower to deal with now. She tapped the panel on her wall again, fingers smearing the graphic as they touched. "Yeah, sure, whatever. Tell the bastards I'll be on the horn in ten."

The amusement in Pressly's voice was muted but detectible. "Yes, ma'am." Shepard scowled at the display, then at Liara when the asari giggled. "What?"

Liara rose in a single, graceful motion that looked somehow sensual, and glanced over her shoulder with a smile. "Your glare of menace at the poor haptic panel will not change the fact that you have to get up."

Shepard huffed, sitting up and running a hand through her hair. "Yeah, yeah, laugh it up." Without pausing, she peeled off her BDU top, tossing it in the tiny laundry bag hanging from the side of her bed and rummaging in her drawers for a uniform.

Liara couldn't help but wince, seeing the long scars of electro-whips on Shepard's bare back, only broken by the thin black band of a sports bra. She swallowed as she watched the interplay of sleek muscle in Shepard's back, but didn't look away. "S-should I leave?"

Shepard shrugged, stepping out of the BDU bottoms, leaving her only in plain black panties and the bra. "It's not like I'm naked, Liara, and we're like, together. Sort of." Shepard pulled out a set of tightly folded and pressed white pants with red striping down the side seams, and shook them out. "I hate dress whites." She pulled them on, grimacing, and Liara felt her face go hot as she wiggled and turned to get them on.

Shepard then pulled on a t-shirt, gleaming white, followed by the uniform top. Pulling open what looked like a metal wall section revealed a very thin, shallow closet, holding a single dress white coat. Shepard slid this on, buttoning the front up, each gilded button tiny and precise. Panels of pure white leather formed the sides, and five ranks of colorful ribbons took up most of the left side of the chest.

With a very ugly expression, Shepard lifted out something from a bag inside the jacket, and draped a red ribbon over her neck. The bottom of the ribbon supported a golden stylized star, embossed with a silver image of Earth. Liara smile faintly. "That is the Star of Terra?"

Shepard sighed and nodded. "The highest award the Systems Alliance can give. All but nine of them were awarded to people after they died. The ones who got it while alive were all heroes. Jon Grissom, twice. Tough bastards who fought crazy odds and lived to tell the tale, like Tradius Ahern and Yonis Chu. People who risked their very lives, like Corpsman Sireal Kambei." She considered it for a long

moment. "Then they cheapen it by giving one to me, for fucking Torfan. I feel like a hypocrite every time I put it on." She let it fall against her chest, adjusting the ribbon, and sighed.

She knelt, pulling out a drawer from under the bed, and pulled out a thin leather belt and a scabbarded dress sword, wrapping the former around her waist and hanging the latter from loops in the belt.

Liara tilted her head. "Why are you wearing this ... dress uniform?"

Shepard walked over to the tiny sink and mirror, splashing water on her face, and picking up a comb, running it through her hair with short, forceful strokes. "Military protocol. Admiral Hackett sent me here to talk to my old commanding officer, who seems to have gone right off his little nut. They want me to ... calm him down, if I can. I suspect that assault cruiser out there is full of Marines to take him out if I can't. No one wants that to happen, least off all the poor goddamned marines."

Liara said nothing as Shepard continued. "Anyway, the man I'm going to meet is one of humanity's greatest heroes...and I'm partially responsible for him being this way. Going down as a Spectre, or even in armor, would send the wrong message. Going in dress whites, unarmed, with my own stupid Star of Terra around my neck, might let me get through to him. And when you meet a Star of Terra bearer, you're supposed to wear your own."

Liara nodded. "Do you want me to come with you?"

Shepard's face twisted, and she shook her head. "As much as it might help me be a little calmer, no I don't. I'm hoping if it's just me, and I'm there to talk, he'll listen. The SA has already tried the heavy handed route, and he basically bitch-slapped a couple of Commissars out of his face. Given that they were biotic and he wasn't, well... a fight is the last thing I want."

She fiddled with her hair one more moment, before turning on her heel. As usual, to Liara's biased eye, she looked perfect, the obviously pre-creased uniform spotless, the look in her eyes hard. "I suspect, Sara, no one wants to fight you either."

Shepard's smile was sour. "Compared to Kyle, Liara? I'm a punk ass kid."

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## Chapter 86: Chapter 77 : Kyle

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*A/N: The figure of Major Kyle always interested me. So did the mission to Presrop. How exactly did a non-biotic gather up a following of biotic extremists? What drove him to that? Why would he give up so easily? And for that matter, why did the SA care so much they sent a Spectre to negotiate with him?*

*Rather than follow canon that gives us more questions than answers, I've decided to change things up a bit. I'm not big on writing out the side missions, but a few stand out and need to be talked about.*

*Kyle's discoveries don't play much into ME1, but they will show up in a big way in my ME2 fic.*

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### ***An excerpt from "On Valor and Victory: The Heroes of Humanity Examined"***

*Heroes come in many forms in the proud history of Earth's military. Many of them have pedigrees going back before the Days of Iron, even into antiquity. The Williams family could name six Medal of Honor winners, the Branson family four, in America's armed forces, while the Chu family had a dozen ace pilots.*

*We could mention singular heroes, like the iron-willed Jon Grissom, or inspirational ones, like the smiling image of James Branson. But throughout the history of the Systems Alliance, and indeed*

*throughout most of human history, only one man has ever been awarded a nation's highest military honor three times – Major of Marines, UkoE, KoG, DMKoA Sir Preston Kyle.*

*Kyle was born on Earth to simple farming parents in a collective agri-arcology in 2120. A natural polymath, Kyle mastered the piano and higher calculus at 9, graduated high school at 14 and college at 17. Picked up immediately by the still newly formed Systems Alliance Army for officer training, he was commissioned as a lieutenant in 2140.*

*He served with honor and distinction, but his first call to battle was during the horror of the Turian assaults during the First Contact War. Kyle, then a mere captain of infantry, rallied a combined team of broken pieces of various B infantry, militias, and police units, leading them into nineteen hours of grueling combat against turian invaders on Thanas. It was his action and leadership that broke the lines of the Siege of Spaceport Six, allowing over half a million refugees to flee certain death at the hands of turian hunting squads.*

*His hand blown off, his body riddled with wounds, Kyle single-handedly defeated four turian TALON jump-assault soldiers in the fight at Spaceport Six, before succumbing to his wounds. Rousing himself from a pool of his own blood, multiple eyewitnesses describe him as rising as if from the dead to regroup the resistance forces on Thanas and hold out long enough for relief.*

*The first Star of Terra he won, for that battle, was joined by two more, against even more impossible odds. He was on the assault team of then Commodore Tradius Ahern, along with a trio of heroes – Rachel Florez, Yonis Chu, and Michael Saracino – who broke through turian lines, fighting off an entire mercenary company by themselves to retrieve critical technical information that led to the Battle of Arcturus and stopping the turian fleet cold, before the arrival of the asari. All four fighters – half dead by the time they were recovered – were awarded the Star of Terra.*

*But, perhaps, his most memorable fight, the Defense of Mindoir, is the most remarked upon. The unfortunate tale of Mindoir is already known, and the arrival of the 19th RIU was not enough, sadly, to prevent the horror that was visited on that world. But Kyle, with a double-strength team of less than thirty men, routed four different slaver bands, each one approaching regimental strength. Kyle's bravery in that battle, recorded by dozens of witnesses, outshines that of any mortal man or woman in history, running full out through kinetic strikes, plasma barrages, and shrugging off terrible hits from a sniper to reach the GARDIAN tower controls the batarians had sabotaged. If not for his actions, most of Mindoir would have been taken as slaves and reduced to ruins, rather than a third of the colony.*

*The Lion of Mindoir took command of the famous Second RRU, and for years was the commanding officer of yet another hero, this one darker – Lieutenant Commander Shepard, the Butcher of Torfan. It was in that brutal, vicious fight that both of Kyle's sons – themselves Marines – were slain, and after Torfan Kyle moved into non-combat service.*

*Kyle's combat tactics, strategies, and use of info-war techniques is standard training for every new Systems Alliance recruit, officer, and commissar. His writings on the nature of morale, fear, and bravery make up most of the course in the OCS classes on leadership. His rank of Major of Marines, usually an honorary rank, carries the brevetted equivalent of an Admiral of the Red. He is a Royal Knight of the United Knights of Earth, a Cavalier of the Knights of Grace, and was awarded the Distinguished Merit Knighthood of the Systems Alliance.*

*Preston Kyle is a testament to what a simple human can achieve with faith in his government, his men, and his future, and is perhaps the greatest warrior humanity has ever produced.*

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Shepard's comm with the awaiting troop ship SCV Rampage was as unpleasant as she suspected. The

thing was commanded by Commodore Tylor, a crusty bastard who was old *before* the First Contact War, and who now was more replacement cybernetics than man. The marine company on board was, to Shepard's additional displeasure, commanded by none other than Captain Delacor.

Shepard had openly doubted the ability of a mere regiment of mixed A and B marines to take down nearly two hundred biotics, especially when commanded by Major Kyle, but her concerns were dismissed. Rather than trade words with (or stay in the general, unlucky vicinity of) Delacor, she instead hastened to establish comms with the biotic commune on the surface.

They didn't bother answering hails, so she dropped in a MAKO, coming down a good mile beyond the rough stone walls that defined the outer boundary of the commune. Presrop was a jagged, ugly mining world, but big money had clearly gone into the commune. It had an atmosphere shield, keeping a breathable atmosphere around the place, and a pair of handsome civilian corvettes with aftermarket weapons were parked on a long, hardened runway. Four old GRIZLI APC's sat next to a pair of brand new HAMRHEAD tanks, and the buildings of the compound were equally impressive – prefab construction, fortified with plascrete walls, steel supporting bunkers, and mass effect fields.

She pulled her MAKO to a stop outside the front gates, waiting. A loudspeaker at the side suddenly blared. "You are approaching private property on an unregulated world that does not adhere to the Unified Systems Alliance Charter. Trespassers will be disciplined."

She triggered the MAKO's comm system, hoping someone was bothering to listen. "This is Commander Sara Shepard, Council Spectre. I've been sent to speak with Major Kyle."

After a pause of several seconds, the voice on the loudspeaker barked again. "...proceed, but do not engage any weapons systems or activate any LADAR or tracking equipment. If you make any hostile moves you will be attacked."

She answered back. "I'm not in armor and unarmed except for a dress sword. This MAKO is not combat capable at the moment in any case. I just want to talk."

The gates opened, and a haptic guide-line illuminated the central part of the road. Shepard dutifully followed it, the road snaking around the main cluster of buildings. Beyond them, near the edge of an old mining pit, a reinforced combat bunker had been sunk into solid granite. Shepard slewed the MAKO to a stop in front of the building, and pulled down a hostile environment face-mask and air canister before stepping out of the MAKO.

As she exited the vehicle, four figures emerged from the bunker. All human males, they wore heavy suits of battle armor, and were festooned with weapons – most carried two or three heavy pistols, a shotgun, and some sort of battle rifle.

Shepard approached, hands empty. "Major Kyle?" She asked uncertainly, and the lead figure shook his head.

"Father Kyle is in communion with the Mother, and does not wish to be disturbed." The man's voice was unsteady, and the very ugly shotgun in his hands was pointed vaguely in her direction.

She merely looked at him. "I think he does. There's a marine dropship up there with an entire regiment of soldiers looking for a reason to come after you people. I'm just here to talk, to try to find a way to stop this whole thing from blowing up."

The man's helmet was opaque, but she could hear the skepticism in his voice. "They send the Butcher to negotiate? You expect me to believe that?"

She rolled her eyes. "I'm in clothing, with a goddamned dress sword, and I'm all shot up from the fights I've been in. I couldn't take Major Kyle on the best day in my life with a fucking pack of krogan, much

less take out an entire army of biotics. If I wanted to take this place out, I'd blow your atmo-shield up, then hole your compound with missiles, not come down here by myself."

The tallest of the figures tapped the side of his helmet, obviously a private comm line. After several seconds, he slowly lowered his weapon. "...Father Kyle says he knew you would come, and to welcome you." The man's voice shifted from suspicion to awe. "He says the Mother has seen you. Come."

Without another word, the four men turned, one sliding an old-fashioned laser keycard into a reader, the doors into the base sliding open. Shepard followed them into the bunker, walking down concrete steps to a heavy airlock door, and proceeding in.

There was little cycling involved, the airlock opening a few seconds later, and Shepard stepped into what looked like a converted command bunker entrance. Heavy concrete barricades littered the long room, each topped with a portable shield generator and a heavy turret. Shaven-headed men and women manned them, most wearing partial armor, talking quietly among themselves.

There was an ugly, sullen look in their eyes, a sluggish twitching to their movements. Ever last one of them was armed to the teeth and beyond.

She shuddered as she realized there were demolitions charges wired into the walls, all glowing with the red light indicating they were primed and live. Here and there were boxes of weapons, piles of armor stacked in one corner, a pallet of medigel being unpacked and sealed into slap-paks by two more surly looking men.

Following the escort through the bunker, she passed room after room of biotics, all practicing various combat forms, martial arts, or working on weapons and armor. Many of them looked like they'd been in a fight – one room was set up as an infirmary, full of wounded, bloodied figures – and all of them looked dangerous as hell.

Her escort took her down a side passage, through a pair of security doors, and down two more flights of steps. The door they reached slid open, revealing a wood-paneled floor. The room beyond was spacious – more than thirty feet long and almost again as wide – and the far end terminated in a vast, floor to ceiling window, cut deep into the sides of the mining pit and giving a somewhat slanted view of the old mining operation's wounds to the planet. The walls were heavy concrete, with haptic maps, bookcases, and shelves cut into them. A collection of heavy machine guns was mounted on one wall, from a simple Harvester to a monstrous, double-barreled custom Saber converted for autofire.

A single black-framed shadow box contained three blood-red ribbons and three gold stars, flanked by a constellation of other awards, medals and commendations. Below this, there was an oil painting of two young boys, sandy blond hair and wide happy eyes staring out, set in a field of grass. Shepard recognized the picture as a youth portrait of Kyle's twin sons, and turned away in misery.

A single asari woman, black clad from head to toe and with a heavy black veil covering her features, stood in the middle of the room, murmuring softly. Next to her, slowly coming to his feet from the plush rug he had been kneeling on, was the form of Major Kyle, his once regulation hair now almost down to his shoulders, his broad shoulders straight. He wore a simple white robe, his features tired looking. He towered over her, the thick slabs of some kind of armor visible as edged shapes under the thin robe, his jaw firm.

She stopped, coming to attention, and saluted. "Sir."

Kyle's lips twisted into a small, amused smile. "At ease, Shepard. I knew you would come." He gestured to a set of low benches to one side of the large room, and Shepard sat, as Kyle stood in front of her.

There was something off about him, she decided. The somber, bitter despair that had once enfolded the man was gone, replaced by the same steely, frightening determination that she remembered from the days before Torfan turned everything dark. She didn't see a madman, or one who was mentally unstable. She saw someone preparing to go into battle, and that made her nervous.

"Sir, it's good to see you. When I heard you were the one who recommended me to be a Spectre, I was pretty sure you had lost your damned mind."

Kyle's smile turned into a grin at that, and he folded his arms, a fond look coming into his eyes. "I was in a dark place for many months after Torfan, Shepard, but I was never crazy. The alternatives being proposed were not what humanity needed in its first Spectre, and I wasn't about to allow Branson to take the job." His smile faded. "Do you know why you are here?"

She sighed. "Admiral Hackett sent me. The SA is concerned about your actions, sir. They're pretty upset about their commissars, and about whatever you've said in the past few months." She glanced around the room, and at the asari, before fixing her gaze back on Kyle. "What is going on? How did you know I would be here? And why are your people preparing for war?"

Kyle smiled, a gentle expression. "There are things I have seen coming, Shepard, that the men who run the SA wish to keep in the dark. The SA wishes to silence me, because I will no longer countenance their evil, nor fight to protect it in the hopes of changing it one day. And I knew you would be here because the SA isn't very original."

She licked her lips, picking her words with the best care she could. "Sir, they are very upset. They have an assault cruiser in orbit, with the Fifth Strike Regiment ready for a combat drop against you if I can't talk you into surrendering and coming with me."

Kyle's expression turned amused. "Ah...their plans are the same ham-fisted garbage as usual, I see." He sat next to her, his voice still gentle. "Shepard, have you opened your eyes to the reality of the Systems Alliance yet?"

She thought about what she found on Feros, about Cerberus, about the ugly suspicions she had about why the heavy units on Eden Prime had never showed up, about Torfan. She slowly nodded, her eyes narrow. "Yes, sir, I have. I'm not .. I don't know what to do."

Kyle gently patted her shoulder. "Of course you do. The SA never reined you in because they wanted a terrifying, bloodthirsty killer. I never reined you in because I knew you didn't fight solely out of hate. You wanted *justice*, not just revenge. Every slaver you killed, ever pirate you blew out of space or apart on the ground...you wanted to make sure no one else ended up like you." His voice turned grave. "And now, you are finding out, like I found out, that there is a darkness at the core of our government we cannot ignore."

He looked at the asari, now surrounded with a faint biotic glow. "I found out almost a year ago that many of the powerful men in our government answered to no law but their own. I have found out horrible things, Shepard. Plans which would turn your stomach. Cerberus, for all it's ugly nature, was only a smokescreen, to distract the eye."

Shepard frowned. He didn't look crazy but his words didn't sound all that sane. "Sir, even if that's true, there isn't anything to be done by getting yourself and these biotics killed. There has to be some other way to get your ... message out, whatever that is."

Kyle shook his head. "I'm not going to preach at you, Shepard. These men and women came to me out of a lack of any other options. L2's written off by the government as non-viable, many of them with DNDD or other biotic illnesses. At first, I was only searching for a way to bring them peace. But as more came, and I heard stories of what they were doing, what the SA was doing to them, I could not be

silent."

Kyle stood, outlining his form in the light from the window at the end of the room. "I've heard rumors about projects happening in TQ-494-C, the Black Zone, that make Cerberus look like a sleepover. I've seen with my own eyes documents detailing plans to 'deal' with insurrectionist colonies and wayward corporations."

Shepard shook her head. "Sir, please. I'm not doubting you. I'm not saying that what you've seen isn't a problem. But what good does it do to say it, if they will simply kill you and the biotics you've been helping?"

Kyle's half turned, that grin still on his face. "Much like you, Shepard, I require a *lot* of killing. That isn't what matters right now. Nor, really, is the survival of the commune. I've done what I can to help these men and women, but ultimately, what's needed is a firm statement that they aren't going to take this kind of treatment anymore. That's what I am here for."

He smiled. "They're going to have to kill me to stop me, and the attention that will bring is going to make covering up their dirty little secrets that much harder. These men and women with me are dead anyway, all of them. There is nothing they can do to survive the neural breakdown they are facing. But they can chose to die on their feet, to die for a reason instead of at the SA's whim."

Shepard sighed. "Hackett felt I could talk you out of this, sir. He – and I – don't want this to end up in a bloodbath."

Kyle snorted. "Shepard, the fact that they sent you to me tells me otherwise."

He turned to face her fully. "Hackett is a good man, but one immersed in the workings of his fleet and Citadel relations, not what is happening in the SA as a whole. Someone gave him orders, and he passed them on, not realizing their significance. The SA sent you here because they still think of you as a crazed, violent thug, one who's only answer to any problem is immediate, overwhelming violence. They expected you to come here, and if you couldn't talk me down, to kill me."

She opened her mouth to deny it and he held up a hand. "I know you wouldn't. These people don't. I guarantee you that Captain Delacor has orders to 'prevent any unnecessary violence'. I know he also dislikes you, intently. They intended for there to be a fight, one giving Delacor a legitimate reason to attack my followers, and one that would end up with *both* you and I dead."

Shepard felt her blood run cold as she turned his words over in her head. On the one hand, it was exactly the kind of delusional, paranoid thinking she would expect if Kyle was going crazy. On the other hand, she wasn't blind to the fact that his words made sense. She knew that, on some level, the SA and Cerberus were linked. She hadn't reported that to the Council – because she needed to finish off Saren first – but she didn't think anyone would believe she'd just let it go.

She bit her lip, standing as well, and frowned. "What do you want me to do, then, sir?"

Kyle placed his hand on her shoulder. "Return to your ship. Tell Delacor that you've worked out a solution with me, and that I've asked for one hour to explain things to my followers, so that there isn't a riot. I'll get on the comm and confirm this. Once you are clear of this mess, take your ship and leave. I'm not your CO anymore, but that is an order. If anyone asks you what we discussed, tell them I was crazy, ranting about conspiracies, and the only reason I agreed to surrender was that you threatened to attack my compound in such a way that we couldn't fight back."

She nodded. "What about you?"

He shook his head. "There is nothing you can do for me. I have been .. discussing ... various issues with the asari behind me. Her name, as far as I can tell, is Walks-In-Shadows. I'd ask you to take her

with you when you go, and get her back to the Citadel." He pulled out an OSD chip. "And to take this. Don't read it unless you're willing to see what I've seen."

She hesitated, then took it. "What drove you to this?"

Kyle's eyes darkened, becoming distant. He was silent for several moments before shaking his head. "It's not important now. It's on the OSD, if you choose to view that. Right now, the important thing is that you understand me – I am not crazy. I am choosing my fate, the only choice I feel I can make with a clean conscience."

Shepard sighed. "There's no other way?"

Kyle smiled, and shook his head. "I am sorry. but no. Even if I stood down, they would simply lock me away. Maybe if I had been more circumspect in the days after I came across this information, I could avoid what is coming. But they know. The only path left to me is this one." Kyle's smile faded a bit, and then he turned as the asari stopped glowing. "It is done?"

She nodded. "As much as I am able, human. The field will not last for long once I have departed, perhaps a day. But it should stabilize the biotic abilities of your warriors for at least that long." The veiled gaze traveled to Shepard, and the asari gave a shallow bow. "This is my way off your world?"

Kyle nodded, and he bowed deeply to the asari. "Yes, priestess. I thank you for your assistance."

The asari's voice grew thick with bitter amusement. "There is no need to thank me, human. The fate of these poor souls is upon the asari's hands as much as it humanity's. I begin to wonder if Matriarch Trellani was insane as the Thirty claimed, or closer to the truth than we care to know. In the end, all returns to siari – even you and your people."

Kyle shrugged. "I have lived long enough. Survived things no human should, seen horrors that I can't get out of my mind, and buried my own wife, my own brothers, my own children. There is nothing left in me but one last fight."

He turned back to Shepard. "It's time." He placed his arm on her shoulder again. "Before you go, I want you to know I understand why things happened the way they did on Torfan. I do not blame you for what happened...and I forgive you, if that is what you need to hear. The person who killed my sons wasn't you, and you couldn't have stopped it."

She swallowed, thickly, remembering the shattered look on his face as he'd beheld the mangled forms of his sons on the soil of Torfan, and she hung her head. "That doesn't mean I forgive myself, sir."

Kyle's voice was gentle. "Shepard, we all have to forgive ourselves. Life is more than looking over your shoulder at what has been. I'm not Anderson, willing to tell you everything will be alright. At the same time, I'm not going to give up just because things in my past were bad."

She grunted in frustration. "Isn't that what you're doing? Couldn't you sneak out of the system on one of those pinnacles, tell your story to the press, apply for asylum with the asari or-"

He cut her off with a smile. "I'm not giving up. I'm choosing the medium by which I plan to send my message, and how I plan to die. Among other things, there are cameras and sound pickups in this compound, that I will turn on once you leave. I'll record the entire debacle that is about to play out, and it will burst transmit before anyone can stop it. The SA can only kill me, Shepard. They can't make me fear them, they can't make me bow to their wishes, and they cannot – will not – dictate to me."

He stepped back, bringing his hand up to his robe, letting it fall. He wore his old RRU Calamity Reaction armor, fresh painted and with the three broad, blood-red stripes of his awards slashing bright across the chest-plate. "It's time to go, Shepard. Transmit to Delacor, now."

She gave a shaky exhalation, emotions she couldn't name racing through her. She wanted to break down crying, to scream at him to do something else, anything else, but the hard look that had come into his eyes brooked no argument, and she lifted her arm, tapping on her omnitool bracelet as it came up. "This is Commander Shepard. I've ... worked an agreement out with Major Kyle. He needs an hour to calm his people down and get them to understand what he is doing, and then is willing to surrender himself into your custody."

The crackle of atmospheric interference filled the line for a moment before Delacor spoke. "I see. Is he there?"

Kyle spoke, his voice even and cool. "Yes, I am. Who am I speaking with?"

"Captain Delacor. You have one hour to organize your departure and come out, unarmed and unaccompanied, to be picked up by my ground teams."

Kyle's voice hardened. "And what of my people? They have broken no laws. Everything here is licensed properly according to Systems Alliance laws."

Delacor's voice sounded frustrated. "... I have no orders regarding the compound or it's inhabitants, unless they offer resistance of any kind. However, until you are in custody, we will fire on any departing vehicles or aircraft. Do not attempt to leave."

Kyle's voice sounded weary. "Very well, Captain. At 1400 I will exit the compound by myself and you can come get me."

Shepard spoke. "I'm departing the compound now. Do you have visual on the compound at this time?"

"We do."

Shepard sighed. "I have one asari here who was visiting the compound and wants no part of anything that might happen. She's requested transport back to the Citadel. I assume that will not be a problem?"

There was a long pause, almost a minute, before Delacor spoke again. "No, that's fine. However, anyone else approaching or entering your MAKO will require us to stop you from leaving the planet. Clear?"

"Very clear, sir. Shepard out." She clicked off, looking up at Kyle. "Sir.."

Kyle shook his head. "Tell Anderson he was right about you. And don't let that OSD fall into anyone else's hands." He turned away, moving towards the wall where his weapons hung, taking down the double-barreled Sabre rifle. "Time to go."

Shepard closed her eyes, and then nodded, opening them and saluting him. "Godspeed, sir."

Kyle returned it, smiling. "Dismissed...Sara. Go."

O-OSaBC-O

Shepard's arrival on the Normandy was followed by her directing Alenko to find some temporary space for the mysterious asari woman to stay during their trip to the Citadel, and a fast walk to the CIC.

"Pressly, status."

"All systems nominal, ma'am."

She nodded. "Get us the fuck out of this system, best rated speed. We don't want to be anywhere nearby in the next twenty minutes." She fingered the OSD in the pocket of her dress whites, wondering what could have driven Kyle to such extremes, when the Ops Alley lit up in blaring alarms. "GTS launch, from the ground!"

Shepard spun on her heel, slapping a haptic control to bring up the combat plot. "Target?"

The radar tech was tapping her controls rapidly, bringing up a rough plot of the missile tracks, glaring red traces on golden backgrounds. "Spread of twenty-five, low impactors, all targeted at the Rampage, ma'am. Rampage is engaging GARDIAN defenses and ECM...two hits. Their missile tubes are out."

She made a motion to Pressly. "Engage the IES, now. Comms, are we being hailed?"

The young man at that panel shook his head. "No ma'am...I'm picking up a Discrimen-level encrypted packet...headers indicate it's for high command. There's Commissar encryption on it, ma'am, our computers can't read it."

She nodded, turning back to the plot. "They're launching assault shuttles and MAKOs?"

The plot coordinator tech shifted the view, nodding. "Yes ma'am. Designating targets Sierra Alpha through Tango. . . also, smaller radar signatures. DACT suits, ma'am, at least fifty."

Shepard grimaced. She knew full well the exact troop line up of Fifth Regiment, and fifty DACTs were not part of that. This force was most likely augmented, explaining exactly why Delacor was so confident he could take Kyle's forces. "Joker. Full speed to the relay. We're not sticking around."

The Normandy shuddered as she accelerated away from Presrop, leaving behind the flashing lights of ground combat and anti-lander defenses that marred the planet's image.

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## Chapter 87: Chapter 78 : Normandy,Moments VII

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*A/N: I'm slowly working through ideas that are in my head while I rewrite the Noveria chapters. This one is mostly a bit of insight into asari culture, mixed with more about Liara.*

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The trip to the Citadel was, for most of the crew, much the same as the trip to Presrop. More drills, more repairs, and the marine team working on their new command configuration. Shepard isolated herself the first day, staying in her cabin, giving terse orders to Pressly not to be disturbed. When the images of what occurred on Pressrop came out later in the day, it became apparent why.

Telanya spent the bulk of her free time pouring over the reports Shepard had obtained from the Illusive Man, economic transactions and a dizzying trail of shipping and cargo manifests. It was clear that Cerberus had been maneuvering forces into place for weeks prior to the final assault, most of them a single jump away from the Citadel. And the amounts of material and money being flung around were astronomical.

While she could draw certain inferences from that – ugly ones – that didn't account for all the money. Some of it had vanished, probably into other accounts, more of it had been run through some kind of loop of cross-corporate investments and packaged into credit swaps that couldn't be tracked. And a surprisingly large amount of it had been seized by the SA itself, once Jack Harper seemingly shot himself on Earth.

But from the records, a significant fraction of Cerberus's financial strength *hadn't* been caught up in the Citadel Fleet's attacks. There were records for spare parts for both cruisers and frigates; shipments of security mechs to dead-end systems, and trails of bank swaps and buyouts that made no damned sense. It was almost as if the money going into Cerberus was then being shifted somewhere *else*, but who used a terrorist organization to launder money?

Telanya figured the funds were going other Cerberus operations – maybe it was set up in isolated cells. She rubbed at her eyes, glancing at the clock, and sighed at the time. Garrus was curled into his cot in the gunnery room, and she didn't feel like waking him up to curl against him. Wiping tiredly at her eyes a second time, she set her info-pad down and half stumbled into the mess decks, looking to find something edible or drinkable. The human teas all tasted horrible, and this 'coffee' they drank was worse.

In Telanya's mind, the fact that the human crew consumed inordinate amounts of the stuff every day only made them more crazy, and this was from a crew that thought tossing tanks out the hatch and taking on entire terrorist networks with rifles made perfect sense. She moved around the blocky spaces of the mess decks, the square shapes assaulting her sense of space once more, and decided firmly against trying anything too exotic, after hearing stories of Dr. T'Soni having a poor reaction to a human food called bacon.

She was in the process of getting a glass of water – surely humans wouldn't mess that up – when she heard voices from the med bay. One she didn't recognize – a human male – but the haughty, cool tones of Liara T'Soni were easy to hear, and she shook her head.

Whatever T'Soni was, she doubted now that the young doctor was in league with anyone. Her attraction to Shepard was almost amusing, as Liara's body language – probably indecipherable to the humans – screamed of her subservience.

Which, in and of itself, was a curious, almost terrifying thing. A human strong-willed to have a member of the Thirty feel submissive? The human's display of anger when Liara fell on Edolus was more than impressive. The insane, cruel and bloodthirsty nature of Shepard's attacks, especially after Liara had fallen, had frightened even the other humans. Liara's own crazed use of the kanquess – untrained – had left Telanya in awe, reminding her again sharply that the Thirty were simply beyond other asari.

If she'd tried the kanquess, without the proper training, they would be wiping up pieces of her for a week. Liara did it as if it nothing. She'd been shot with a biotic-suppression round and had to be resuscitated, and then managed to find the strength to pursue Shepard and – if the rumors flying were correct – kill the leader of Cerberus herself, a task that even Shepard failed at.

Telanya took a sip of the water, satisfied that they humans hadn't somehow done anything bizarre to it, such as lacing it with caffeine, and began looking through the cabinets for something to eat.

She was not sure what exactly to report back to the Council of Matriarchs. There wasn't any sign of malicious action on the part of the other asari. T'Soni was frigid, not even bothering to speak with her once the entire time on board, but Telanya couldn't really find herself surprised that she wanted nothing to do with a clanless. She was clearly held in very high regard by the marines, less so by the ship crew. Her careful conversations with the other human soldiers – how easy it was to get them to open up! – had revealed Liara seemed to be as powerful a biotic as her mother.

The communications on the ship were rigidly controlled, and given the human's paranoia, probably recorded as well. That made any kind of communication between mother and daughter impossible. T'Soni also showed no interest in her holdings on Thessia, and had no servants, no bodyguards – it was just her, which for a Thirty was nearly .. incomprehensible. Even the lowliest of the Lesser Houses usually had at least one or two servants from the clanless, and she had never even seen a member of the Thirty without an entire entourage.

Garrus own gut, which she trusted more than anything else in the galaxy, told him that Liara was a good person who wasn't hiding anything. The asari was often nervous and jumpy, but Telanya dismissed that as a front – a way to put suspicious humans at ease. After all, even humans would be nervous around a member of the Thirty, but a shy scientist who stuttered and stammered would be ..

cute.

Telanya felt a dry appreciation for the other asari's clever front. She examined a box of cereal, translated the name of the food on its cover, blinked at the handwritten message decrying said title as lies, and put it back slowly. Humans were crazy. She shook her head, and decided that, at least for the moment, her report would say what she had seen : Liara was a weird, shy recluse, with no real connections and nothing suspicious in her behavior. Despite that, her biotic power was every bit as terrifying as her mother's, and she clearly wasn't under any kind of detainment by the SA, meaning she wanted to be on the Normandy.

An asari seriously willing to kill her mother was about as close to 'insane' as asari got. Maybe that would please the Council of Matriarchs. If not, Telanya was not even going to try to do anything about it. If Shepard was capable of throwing around huge blast doors and liquifying enemies in her path when Liara was hurt, Telanya shuddered at what the human would do to her if she tried to hurt Liara.

An ugly mental image of her and Garrus being reduced to spatters of blue and purple crossed her mind, and she suppressed it with a grimace. She pulled down a box of diced, dried fruits, emptying them into a bowl, then stopped as she felt a tingling, crawling sensation across the limited front of her mass effect field.

She turned, and found the robed, black-veiled figure of the asari matriarch Shepard had picked up on Presrop standing there, her hands folded together in a gesture of siari. "Greetings, child."

Telanya turned to face her, politely. "Greetings, mother. I am Telanya of no clan, a member of C-SEC and of this ship's company. I am afraid I have no courtesy to offer, but I would gladly sit and learn from your wisdom." She used the term 'mother' as a mark of respectful affection, one more polite than mere 'matriarch'.

The asari's expression, hidden behind her veil, was of course unreadable, but her posture shifted. "Such a polite child. Well raised. It is good to see the clanless have maintained better manners than the Clans, at least. Sit. Eat."

Telanya slowly did as she was bid. The sheer power radiating off the woman was enough to set her teeth on edge, but she refused to show anything but the proper deference. Her mother, a small timid asari who'd lost her bondmate barely months after becoming pregnant, had always hammered politeness into her head.

Telanya didn't like talking with other asari, but she doubted this one was an ardat-yakshi. She bowed her head, eating, eyes taking in the form in front of her.

The older asari's voice was hard, cool. "You are a lake of simple, warm waters. But I feel the touch of the night-wind on you, girl. You have suffered. You are marked."

Telanya let her spoon fall. "How..."

The asari drew her veil back. The woman's eyes were gone, a shredded mass of scar tissue, surrounded by tiny, burned glyphs sunk into her flesh. Her face was marked with the Mask of Athame, and Telanya began to tremble.

This woman was a godtalker, one of the Chosen of Athame to assist the High Priestess of the Sun, to have their eyes sundered so they could see only what Athame chose to show them. There were less than a dozen in all of the Asari Republic, what in the name of the Sword would one be doing out here?

The asari smiled. "I am Walks-in-Shadows. I have seen, and those who follow me have not, but wish to see. I see the mark on your soul, on your biotic field, in your motions, in your voice. I feel with senses the People have forgotten, that have fallen into decay with disuse. I no longer walk in Athame's steps, I

now merely speak of the unity of siari."

Telanya nodded slowly. "I see, mother. What is your wisdom, then?" This was a polite way to ask a matriarch what her guiding philosophy was. For many, an offer to learn.

Walks-in-Shadows merely smiled. "My philosophy is simple. Siari is a surrender to the path of all things. It is the river in the riverbed. It is the tides upon the shore. But there are times the river is turned from its banks, when the ocean rises in wrath. There are those who are beyond siari's gentle grasp."

Telanya frowned. That was as close to blasphemy as she'd ever heard. "Does that mean all things are not siari?"

The asari shook her head, amusement on her face. "If you take a glass of water from the ocean, does it cease to be water? One cannot part from that is siari. But one can fight its currents, ignore its call, try to bend the universe to change the path that one must travel from the start to the finish." She traced her long, blue fingers along the smooth metal of the mess deck table. "The shortest path between two fixed points is a line. But the shortest path between two points is to move one of the points to the other."

Telanya frowned. She'd never been as diligent in her studies of siari as she could have been, but something in the older asari's words troubled her. "You are saying ... that we don't understand siari and how it moves us through life?"

The older asari shook her head once more. "Not at all. You do not understand the *initial* conditions. We *assume*. That the points are fixed. That all asari are in unity. That monsters do not crawl in the darkness. That surely cooperation and consensus will trump violence and disunity. That what is true for one asari must be true for all." The woman folded her hands again. "You have already seen that to assume is to be vulnerable."

Telanya shuddered, considering the matriarch's words in a new light. "I do understand. How do I improve myself in your wisdom?"

Walks-in-Shadows merely tilted her head. "Consider carefully the weight of all your actions, and then consider what you assume to be true, to see if it actually *is*. *Everything*, politics, business, war, love, even art, is about understanding the other and anticipating what comes. When you bind yourself down with suppositions, that is when you blind yourself more fully than I ever will be."

Telanya nodded, tucking this bit of wisdom into the back of her mind. "Thank you for your guidance, mother. How did you come by this .. way of thinking? It seems very different from the siari teachings I have listened to."

The older asari sighed, a sad, defeated noise. "Through the loss of two bondmates. Experience may be the best teacher, but she is also the harshest, the least efficient, and the slowest. Assumptions have cost me my mate, my lover, my children, my parents." The asari paused. "My grandmother. My teacher, my sister, my friends."

Telanya looked at the matriarch with dawning, shivering horror, at the sheer scale of the trauma and loss the woman must have survived to endure the destruction of so many close bonds and joining. "Your pain..."

Walks-in-Shadows shook her head. "All remains as one. To dwell on their losses is to cheapen their joy, to drown in sorrow is to forget the laughter and life they brought to me while alive. I did not retreat into the ranks of the Godspeakers out of grief. Nor do I walk where I have today out of some misguided attempt at healing."

Telanya frowned, not understanding. "You mean, with the humans on that planet we were just at?"

The matriarch nodded. "Humans. So ... divided. So many fragments, of parts of their race fighting

others. They are as a school of skora fish in a deep reef, fragments of the whole sifting through various levels – obvious to one observing from afar, but hidden to each other, reacting with surprise when they pop out."

The asari stood, letting her veil fall. "In the end, child, humans make the most assumptions of all. They burn hotter and brighter, but for all that fail to see that the brightest lights cast the longest shadows."

Telanya stood herself, bowing as deeply as she could. She wasn't sure what to make of the asari's last words, but she knew a gesture of dismissal when she saw one. "I am undecided regarding humans myself. I find the turians more .. stable. But your insights are fascinating. I am in debt to your wisdom and your guidance, mother. If this poor clanless can serve you, I am ready to do so."

The other asari merely nodded. "I have all I need, child. Go in the ways of siari, and find peace in the gaze of the Goddess." With that, she withdrew, leaving Telanya alone to consider her dried fruit, and the continued murmurs in the medbay.

She wondered briefly if she should have asked the Matriarch's guidance on the issue with Liara, then dismissed it as unworthy of her time. Rather, she turned her attention back to the information about Cerberus's finances she had been struggling with, thinking on the other asari's admonishments.

*I assumed the money was going to Cerberus to fund Cerberus. But there was just too much of it for that, so where did it end up? And where did it come from?*

Her spoon stopped in mid-air as the answer hit her. She stared at her food, before going back to the forward battery for her info-pad. If she was right, all of that money was in the hands of the person who had every way to get at it.

The Illusive Man.

## O-OSaBC-O

Liara didn't know what had happened to Shepard on Presrop, or who the strange asari matriarch who came back with her was. Shepard had been strangely quiet, but Liara could see and feel the emotional turmoil in her, roiling around like black thunderclouds.

No one else had seen the straining knuckles in her hands as she gave the orders to leave the system, the too-hard footfalls as she fled for her quarters. Liara had tried to enter her quarters, but there had been no response.

When they broke into the next system and updated their comms from the news buoys, the answer why became clear. The footage from Pressrop was horrifying. Cascades of fighters, soldiers, and huge DACT units stormed the compound of Major Kyle. They were met by ragged bands of biotics, each one fighting with insane strength and purpose. The carnage had been horrible, captured in high-definition and beamed wide band across the comms net.

It lasted twenty-five awful minutes, until the figure of Kyle himself had emerged, one hand clutching the biggest rifle Liara had ever seen, the other holding the broken form of a dying biotic, who he laid down gently before leaping into the fray.

Liara found herself unable to stop watching as the human moved through the ranks of SA soldiers like a sword of fire, cutting down everything in his path. He was shot – many, many times – and simply ignored them, as if he were vengeance and fury made flesh. His biotics screamed his name as they charged the waiting SA marines, who fell back in panic.

SA Commissars stepped forth, biotics igniting, but the biotic rebels countered them, and then Kyle was among them. One wrenched his rifle from his grip only to die from an unfolding omni-blade to the throat, Kyle spinning past him to snatch the pistol from another Commissar, kill him with it, and then

shoot two more down.

Shades of the moves Shepard used could be seen in his movements, but this was just a man, no biotics, no cybernetics, just a man. And thus, when several DACT soldiers finally transfixed him with bursts of fire from miniguns, he had no way of escaping it. His return fire killed two of the DACTs, sending a third away clutching his arm, but Kyle himself was obviously mortally wounded. It took a long, long moment for the man to finally sink to his knees. A trail of absolute carnage lay behind him, but as his life left him, he pulled off his helmet, revealing his features, his mouth dribbling blood, his eyes alive with fire.

"Sic...semper...tyrannis." The human tapped his omnitool, and the entire compound detonated, a blast wave of fire rushing out in a ring to consume both him, his biotics, and the remaining marines, before the signal went to static.

Liara swallowed, knowing that this man had been Shepard's CO at Torfan, and that she spoke of him in the same reverent, small tones that she talked about David Anderson in. She had no idea why he'd throw his life away in such a violent gesture, but the human news programs talking about it were full of speculation, mostly focusing on the SA government. A manifesto had been transmitted along with the video, a short statement that answered no one's questions.

*In life, we all make choices, mistakes, and judgments. There is nothing stopping good men from evil acts committed in ignorance, and justice must always reflect such. But when the acts committed are of knowing evil, of deliberate malice, then there can be no excuses. Tyrants and monsters throughout history have attempted to justify their actions with flimsy rationales, but in the end they are merely criminals. I will not serve a government that plots the destruction of that which I hold dear, nor will I hold my tongue when brave men and women who have sacrificed their minds and sanity for our people are cast aside, not out of political expediency, but to utilize them as raw materials for weapons that should never exist.*

Perhaps it had some significance to humans, but it seemed incomprehensible to Liara. She spent the day observing the humans around her quietly – they seemed only slightly perturbed by it, wondering what it all meant, but most of their conversation was focused on returning to the Citadel for a few more days of leave.

She sighed, entering the medical bay to load more regenerative medicines into the medical package on her shoulder, and found Jason Dunn sitting in the med-bay, a scalpel laying on a tray, false synth-skin having been cut cleanly from his right arm, exposing the cyberlimb below. He was adjusting something in the servos as she entered, and he looked up, eyes curious. "Ah, Doctor T'Soni. Are you a medical doc, or..."

She fumbled for a moment, not used to such open greetings, especially from someone at least formerly a part of a racist, terrorist organization devoted to killing aliens. But his expression seemed open and friendly, and she forced older images of a younger Jason Dunn out of her mind as she stammered out her greeting. "Ah, no, I mean.. that is, I have studied a few medical techniques, but I am a doctor of anthropology and archeological studies, not ... medicine."

Dunn nodded, twisting hard at something in the machinery of his wrist. "Ah, well. Chakwas is sleeping, and I figured I'd do my maintenance on my arms before Shepard hauls me off to jail for the rest of my life. The damned things aren't acting right ever since some goon hit me in the back of the head. Problem is, the neural interface is glitching, and I don't know if it's something wrong with me, or the cyber."

Liara nodded, crossing the room to pull out the medical infusers for her package. "I am sorry to hear that. I remember Beatrice Shields also had significant cyberware. Is it common among humans?"

Dunn smiled, snapping a panel shut, flexing the arm. "Not ... really. Among civilians it's too expensive and, well, too outre. The SA pays for cybernetic replacements for wounds taken in the line of battle, but they aren't top quality. Most vets end up having custom work done. I got my arms blown off getting Shepard out of the line of fire on Dirth, Bea lost her arm at Horizon." His gaze darkened, and he put the tool in his hands down, picking up the synth-skin 'glove' that usually covered his hand and forearm.

Liara nodded. "And Shepard? She does not appear to have any..."

Dunn's expression turned into a knowing smirk. "You seem awfully confident about that, there, Doc. Doing some late night medical examinations on the CO?"

Liara could not remember a time she felt more embarrassed, and the human merely chuckled. "Jeez, you're easy to get flustered. As to cyber, not that I remember. Shep always was hard to hit with all that biotic bounce bullshit she likes so much, and barriers come in real handy when your shields go down."

He adjusted the fit of the synthskin, before picking up a tube of omnigel, smearing it around the thin line that indicated where the synthskin hooked to another segment, sealing it. "But then again, she had us there, picking her ass up out of the fire, stopping anything from getting close enough to kill her."

Liara put down the medicine infuser. "Until after Torfan." Her voice was bitter, and Jason's expression shifted.

"Yeah, well, that was not one of the finer goddamned moments for any of us." He grimaced. "We were all a mess, back then."

Liara turned to face him. "I know. Ms. Shields was ... confrontational regarding that. She said I could not understand the pressures or strains you were under. And that you did not properly understand Sara."

Dunn scratched at his ear, and stood, only to lean insolently against the bulkhead. "Bea is full of shit, Doc. Or maybe that's actually how she saw things back then. I wasn't angry at Shepard. I was angry at my goddamned sister, for getting our unit killed and fucking Shepard's mind up so bad. I was angry at Rai for losing his shit completely and making Shepard kill him. I was angry at the SA, angry at myself. I just took it out on Shepard because she was there, because she was an outlet."

He looked down at his hands. "I said shit I shouldn't, frustrations I'd thought I'd gotten past. I left her kneeling there in the dirt crying her goddamned eyes out because I was too much of a punk to admit that Shepard was with my sister because we didn't give her what she needed to live."

He gave a cold, bitter laugh. "And then, I ended up joining a group of people who was even more fucked up, out of the same stupid frustration. I became a criminal."

His eyes met hers, bleak, empty, tired. "I know what she thinks of criminals."

Liara winced. "I do not think she looks at you as a criminal. She is .. conflicted right now."

Dunn snorted. "Yeah, so am I. Goddamned Kyle. I always knew the man was fucking crazy – how else do you win three SOT awards without fighting off the entire turian army with your dick?" He shook his head. "But that was..."

Liara took a step closer. "Why would he take such a suicidal act?"

Dunn gave her a curious look. "I don't know. Kyle was like a superman. Brilliant mind, mastered anything he touched. Bastard could blow the head off a turian at three hundred yards with a pistol and then turn around and write a symphony. He was always weird. If anyone knows it's Shepard, but she's got to be hurting right now."

Liara bit her lip. "I know that Kyle was her CO, but ..." She trailed off when Dunn shook his head.

"Look, Doc. Shepard had only a few people to believe in her, growing up. David Anderson, Rachel Florez, Tyson Von Grath, and Preston Kyle. That's it. She had to kill Rachel a few days back, and now Kyle is gone."

He looked away. "When we bailed on her, they were the only family – or what passed for it – she had left. One a traitor, one a fucked up loony toon who just got offed, and the other two buried in the SA." He rubbed his jaw.

Liara nodded. "She is not answering her door."

Jason nodded. "She gets .. upset. Crawls inside herself. Hates showing people her emotions because she doesn't know how to make them work for her. I tried telling her that emotions don't work that way, but she's convinced they have to."

Liara swallowed. "I am .. trying to find a way to help her. To reach her. She is so hurt, so wounded, trying to deal with the burden they have put on her all alone. I had hoped that Ms. Shields could help in that, but she was .. hostile. Even after we resolved our differences, she was touchy, and now the situation has... changed."

Liara rubbed her hand against her thigh nervously. "How can I break through to her?"

The human male rolled his neck, tired eyes not meeting hers. "Doc, I've got to be the very worst person in the galaxy to ask that question of."

Liara exhaled. "Do you love her?"

Dunn's eyes slowly inched up to meet hers, something hard and cold in them. "That's a pretty loaded question. As a rule, hot girls with tight asses and nice tits are always something I love."

Liara found herself suddenly agreeing with Shepard's exasperated declaration that Jason Dunn was an asshole. She simply folded her arms, staring at him, and after a moment his levity departed. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully, then shook his head.

"She's still my teammate, even if she's crazier than she used to be. But I'm not stupid enough to bang my head against a brick wall and then complain it hurts. I care about her. She's my friend, if I can call her that after what I did. But love?" He shook his head a second time. "The part of me that loved her and the part of her I loved both died on Torfan, outside a shitty bar."

He was silent a second, and then he looked at her sharply. "And you, Doc?"

She felt a tremble come over her limbs as she spoke. "I cannot seem to stop myself. But I do not know if that, by itself, is enough to 'give her what she needs'."

Dunn grunted, pushing off the wall. "What she needs? Ha. She needs to take the stick out of her ass. She needs someone to slap the self-pity out of her. She needs her brains fucked out, then to be taken to a bar and gotten completely smashed, followed by a good cry and to let go of a bunch of meaningless bullshit she won't let go of."

Liara flushed again at his crudity, but couldn't help but wonder why, and so she spoke. "Why.. I mean, that is, why does she .. "

He gave a sour grin at her nervous trailing off, but it faded almost as fast as it formed. "Shepard has hangups with intimacy, with her own emotions, with the shit she's been through, but above all else, Shepard has a goddamned problem with being **Shepard**."

He paused, thinking. "Shepard never had 'down time', ya know? She never went to the clubs, she never just got smashed for a good night out, she never could loosen up and just live. The only times she cut loose, ended up ... bad. There were a couple of ... incidents. Hushed up. Some people have problems

with what gets their rocks off. She's one of them. Once she's gotten over that, accepted it as a part of what she is, maybe she can focus on something else. But she never gets that far, because she's too busy hating on herself."

He shook his head. "It ends up just making you want to shake the stupid out of her. Hell, maybe Bea was right. I could never figure out how to get her to see beyond her past. Yeah, it was fucked. She got sold off, raped, drugged up. Ended up running with gangs and capping people to afford a dusting or some heroin. But you can't change it, why keep fucking going on about it!?"

Liara blinked. "Her emotional issues are deeply set in her mind, Mr. Dunn. To simply dismiss them seems cruel and unsympathetic."

Jason Dunn's jaw tightened. "Doc, you never get anywhere by standing in the same place instead of moving forward. I may be a dumb gun-toting thug, but even I have more sense than that. Shepard doesn't need sympathy – how the fuck can you or I honestly say we can understand when we haven't gone through anything that bad? The fuckers who did it are dead – she blew her own parents away! She's had all the goddamned closure there is to have. She just doesn't want to let it go because it gives her an excuse."

Liara felt a spike of excitement, like she'd felt when uncovering Prothean ruins. She knew whatever Dunn was about to say would be the key she needed to help Shepard. "An excuse? For what?"

He walked over to the far wall, looking out at the mess decks, watching Telanya converse with the other asari woman. "Shepard was always terrified of failing. Of being not good enough. Being thrown back in the Penal Legions, or just abandoned. She's not going to worry about her own life, but she has so few people who care about her that losing any of them drives her crazy. Yet she never sees the truth, that everyone she lets in uses her."

Liara took a step back in shock. "I.. I do not use her!"

Dunn barked out a laugh. "Bullshit. *Everyone* does. Anderson is maybe the only one who hasn't. The Old Lady used her to condition the rest of the penal unit. We – her team – used her to protect us from the rest of the convicts, and later to convince ourselves we mattered. My sister used her to wreck Torfan, Von Grath used her to prop up his own image. The SA used her to make pirates run in fear, and the goddamned Council is using her because it's politically fucking expedient or whatever you call it."

He took a step towards her. "And you? Tell me, doc. You gonna claim that you're just wanting to help Shepard to feel better about herself out of your good, kind heart? I *have* a goddamned vid terminal. You were thrown out of your own family, your government wants your blue ass locked up, your mom is humping a fucking lunatic who blew up two planets and your university issued a public statement calling you a hack. She's your meal ticket."

Liara balled her fists. "I am *not using her!* I helped her when no one else could! When she was losing her very mind to the Prothean Beacon I was the one who brought her back! You threw her out of your life and you stand here and say I use her!?"

She'd never felt so angry in her life, and realized belatedly she was glowing, her biotic field flaring wildly. She tried to bring it under control, emotions bubbling through her, and Dunn merely stared.

She was about to say something when the medbay doors opened. Shepard stood there, haggard, eyes red and her BDU's crumpled. There was anger from her, too, a sharp line of it, and Liara could feel it running from herself to Shepard, and back.

Shepard's voice was like thick ice. "This conversation is over."

Jason Dunn shook his head. "Truth hurts, huh?"

Liara didn't even see Shepard move, but the next second Dunn was up against the wall and Shepard had him by the throat, her eyes narrow and glazed. "Jace, I am this fucking far from making sure you need cyber legs as well as arms. You want to scream at me, fine. You want to run your mouth about me, fine. You yell at her again and I will *kill* you." The threat was uttered in a voice so cold, so angry, that even Liara shuddered.

Dunn merely stared back. "Is that all...Commander?"

With a push, Shepard stepped back from him, letting him go. "When we get back to the Citadel, Jace, I was planning to lose track of you. Don't make me change my mind."

Dunn gave her a surprised look for a moment. "What happened to 'thus ever to criminals'?"

Shepard didn't answer, instead leaving the medbay as abruptly as she entered, headed back to her quarters. Liara swallowed, brushing past Dunn to follow her. He watched her go, and a cool, calculating smile came over his face.

The Illusive Man had been right, the asari was the perfect lever to manipulate Shepard with.

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## Chapter 88: Chapter 79 : Unity, Pain, Hope

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**A/N: Warning : long authors note. Second Warning: explicit sexual content.**

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*So here it is.*

*I've debated about how to handle this. The issues are the timing, the balance of misery vs. hope, and the methods involved.*

*The easiest choice with the timing, of course, would be to follow canon, the night before Ilos. But that choice always seemed ... like a fling before near certain death. I thought about doing it in the aftermath of Benezia's death, but for certain reasons soon to be revealed, that wouldn't be appropriate either. I'd even considered doing it after the destruction of the Reaper; but that would be too cruel, given what comes after. In the end, having shot canon in the head many chapters ago, I decided doing it now because of what it changes. I'm aware that some people were concerned that Liara and Shepard seemed to be treading water in their relationship, and this is not necessarily the most logical conclusion. I'm not 'forcing' it to happen to progress the story. It's a spot where it can happen in such a way to make the flow of following chapters easier, but there were other spots. It is happening now because that's where the muse said it should go.*

*Second, the balance of the misery and brokenness of Shepard and Liara against what they gain. Both my beta readers belabored the point that empty sex solves nothing. And it's certainly true. What happens in the chapter is not intended to be solely about the sex. The joining is brutal because Liara has about as much control as any other emotionally distraught, mentally worn out, psychologically crippled oversexed teen has. Basically, none. That it doesn't happen to other asari is due to the fact other asari link and do shallow joins all the time, unlike Liara. But beyond that, the bond gives them each something they do not have. For Shepard, it's Liara's almost unhealthy devotion to her. For Liara, it's the sheer strength of Shepard's emotions. Both draw on each other to give them that which has left them unable to move on all their lives.*

*Finally, the methods involved. This will not be everyone's cup of tea. That much is fine. It's also cool if you leave a review or PM saying you dislike it, think it's inappropriate, or that it should be removed. A*

*writer has to deal with criticism and the angle I approach things from in the Premiseverse is supposed to be unorthodox, even disturbing.*

*That being said, please keep two things in mind. First, please don't read into the situation in the wrong way. It was not forced. If it reads that way, then it because I suck at writing, not because that was my intent. What Shepard gets off on is both a product of her background and her mindset. She needs to dominate, to be in charge, to push someone to a state where they accept what happens without resisting it – because in Shepard's fucked up head, that means she must be worth the trouble and pain. Liara goes along with it not just because she is 'weak' – but because once it starts, the sensations are mixed up and she loses control of what feels good.*

*Second, keep in mind that Shepard is very damaged goods. She doesn't act this way because she likes it, but because it's the way she reacts, regardless of what she wishes. Inevitably, men writing about women are going to Get It Wrong. Inevitably, writing about situations like this is going to not resonate with some people, and resonate with others in all the wrong ways. I can't change that, or change how people choose to view it. For some, sadism and masochism are never the 'correct' ways to handle things. But at the end of the day it's my story. I don't demand you agree with it or like it, but I don't expect anything else to fit my Shepard the way this does, at least for now.*

*The changes wrought by what Shepard and Liara do fundamentally change them both. It breaks Shepard's death-grip on her past, and stiffens Liara's spine. Over time, they develop. They change. They grow. Over time, the sadism becomes merely spice in the bedroom, the wounds, while never fully healing, are overlaid with happier memories, and love, and above all else, belief in each other. That is what should be taken away from it.*

*Please review. I don't usually ask for that, but this time I do, if only to grasp what people think.*

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Shepard didn't respond to Liara's attempt to talk to her, but was moving around the Normandy the next day, her BDU's freshly pressed, her face back in its usual cool and dispassionate ask.

Liara felt hurt at the way Shepard had shut her out, especially after the closeness they had shared on the way to Presrop, but tucked it down as best she could. It sometimes seemed every time she got close to Shepard, something – Feros, Pressly being shot, now this – snatched the progress Liara had made away from her.

It was frustrating and depressing, made more so by the fact that she had little to occupy her mind. The entire day passed slowly, Liara avoiding Dunn, avoiding Shepard, cowering in her science lab, laying on her cot in empty thoughts. By the time Liara was upset enough to fight past her worries and talk, it was already very late. She didn't know if giving Shepard all day to cool off was good, or would just make things worse. So it was with a sense of trepidation and unease that she made her way to the mess decks, intending to try to talk to Shepard once more.

She found Shepard on the mess decks themselves, talking to Garrus and Telanya. The other asari woman's was pointing out something on an info-pad to Shepard, who had a scowl on her face.

"...and that is the inference I can draw from the records we have, Commander. Whatever organization or groups were backing Cerberus were not just funding them. They were using Cerberus's illegal financial connections to funnel money somewhere else. When the Illusive Man ... disengaged from the project, he was able to subvert a large portion of those funds, but I still don't know where the money was originally going."

Telanya met Shepard's gaze. "I originally dismissed the idea as crazy...but nothing else fits. Cerberus may have been a cut-out for something even more disturbing, or at least more critical to keep out of the

public eye – why else run this money through this kind of pattern? What frustrates me the most is that any evidence of where the money went after Cerberus was destroyed by the Illusive Man covering his own damned tracks. He gave us everything we needed to pin down the Cerberus leaders on Edolus...but his actions could also be him simply cutting away the compromised parts of Cerberus and starting over somewhere else."

Shepard nodded. "Didn't figure he was doing it out of the kindness of his heart. Still...the money trail is pretty clear where Saren is involved." She pointed to several highlighted transactions on the info-pad. "I'm not much on this money-tracking stuff, but even I can see that there's a lot of payoffs to Binary Helix on Noveria. And what is all this 'transaction trust index' stuff?"

Telanya sighed. "Usually that indicates a real estate deal of some kind. There are over fifty of them, some are old mining sites, a couple of abandoned colonies...a shutdown resort on some tropical world...there's too many to check them all out in the Normandy, but I wonder if this list indicates locations Cerberus sold to Saren to build bases or facilities on."

Shepard grunted. "Send that list to the STG and copy Wrex on it. You may be right, and while we can't check out every location, we can at least get someone else to do some of the footwork." She sat back, sighing. "Anything else we've found?"

Garrus made a sound in the back of his throat, his taloned hands ticking across the metal table. "Not much. Cerberus was dumping weapons on the open market, backing some very nasty merc groups, and putting up bounties on pirates that preyed on human colonies. What disturbs me more is the pattern of where they were building up supplies, Shepard. All one jump from the Citadel, all close combat and urban assault types. They were planning to attack the Citadel at some point."

Shepard groaned. "Cerberus was crazy...but the forces they have lined up, based on Sergeant Telanya's report, wouldn't be enough to take the Citadel. I mean, I know it's mostly defended by chickens like you, but even so..."

Garrus made a gesture with his hands that made Telanya flush and Shepard crack up laughing, and Liara felt a smile cross her own face at the sight. Something about Garrus seemed to effortlessly reach through the barriers Shepard put up to everyone else. Part of Liara was bitter about that, but most of her was happy that at least someone could do something to get Shepard to smile.

The levity faded quickly, though, and Telanya's voice rose. "It would be enough if they were acting in support of some other groups, Commander. The quarian, Tali'Zorah, shared her report on the geth you have fought thus far. Many of them have adaptations the quarians have not seen before, adaptations making them more fitted to fight a battle aboard the Citadel."

Shepard grimaced. "Based on the supplies they were putting together, what kind of time line are we talking about? Days? Months?"

Telanya flashed through a few screens on the info-pad, running a hand over her crests. "It's hard to say, but it looks like at least a month out. The Citadel task forces seemed to have cleaned all these nests out, but at least some of the transactions were for low-observation transports to drop off Cerberus soldiers on the Citadel itself. Those transactions cleared...meaning they are already on their way, or already on the Citadel. The numbers were low, less than fifty..."

Garrus scowled. "Fifty trained combatants with an eye to terrorism or sabotage could be a very big problem, especially if C-SEC isn't aware of it."

Shepard grunted, catching sight of Liara at last. She looked at her for a long moment before turning back to Garrus and Telanya. "Put that in your write up to the STG, then. We should hit the Citadel in the morning, maybe they can find something between then and now. In the meantime, Telanya, I need a

version of that information that can be given to the Council without implicating the SA in this...mess."

Telanya's voice was very quiet. "You're asking me to falsify evidence."

Shepard's face took on a very pained expression. "And I hate it. I'd like nothing more, I promise you, than taking this shit right into Arcturus and pinning down the people responsible for what we saw on Edolus. But I can't. The political bullshit that would erupt would tie us up for months, and Saren is still out there."

Garrus laid a hand on Telanya's forearm. "You talked to me once about doing things the right way. Said you wouldn't become a criminal to stop a criminal. By hiding this, aren't you cutting the same kind of corners you said I shouldn't?"

Shepard looked at him for a long moment, studying the angles of his face. "Maybe. Maybe I've lost the faith I once had in my government. Maybe I'm so worried about messing this up, of Saren getting away, that I'm doing the wrong thing." She stared at the table, at her hands, then looked up again.

"I hate criminals. I hate what Cerberus did, and even if the Illusive Man gave us a lead that might get us to Saren, I would like nothing better than to ventilate his fucking skull for allowing that bullshit we saw down on Edolus to happen in the first place. But I have to put things in order of priority. Right now, Cerberus is reeling, most of the fuckers are dead, and whatever the Illusive Man got away with, it won't be enough to save his ass once we sic the STG on him."

She turned to regard Telanya again. "But if we throw all this out there, the chances are good that nothing would happen anyway. I've been trying to put my head around all the politics...and the bottom line is the damned Council wouldn't use this information to prosecute anyone, or even make the SA clean house, but instead to blackmail and influence the SA. They wouldn't even give you one extra day to finish your investigation on Saren, and you think they'll go after this and start a war?"

Telanya was quietly looking at Garrus, but turned to face Shepard when she finished speaking. "I understand that, Commander. But are you going to allow this to go unpunished?"

Shepard tensed her jaw. "Fuck no. Once I put Saren's head on a goddamned plaque and hang it above my bed, and deal with Liara's bitch of a mother, I'm taking this information and ramming it straight up someone's ass. I'm a Spectre, I don't need permission. Or fucking subpoenas, or any other legal bullshit. I may just walk into the Manswell Foundation, shoot everyone in the building, and then transmit this entire file in the open."

Telanya gave a very slow nod. "I anticipated your request, Commander. Garrus trusts you...and so will I." She pulled an OSD out of her BDU pocket and set it on the table. "I've filtered off the links to Northstar and the Manswell Foundation on these files, as well as removed the references to the SA, Rachel Florez, and Richard Williams. The broken financial links point to various Cerberus fronts, many of them already seized by the SA." She frowned. "The SA AIS will be able to grasp relatively quickly that the file was altered...but C-SEC FINCIN will not. Nor will the STG, unless they have penetrated your AIS."

Garrus snorted. "If that happened, they'd already know most of it."

Shepard took the OSD, and gave Telanya a sad look. "I hate this. And I appreciate...what you've done. I doubt we'd have been able to explain our pursuit of Saren without this data, and without you to fix it up, I would have had to go to the SA for help. God knows where that would have ended up."

Garrus shifted uncomfortably. "Given the exposure that information has? With us all dead in a ditch somewhere, I expect." The turian sighed, and Shepard nodded, standing.

"I'll file this later, when we hit the Citadel. You two look like shit, get some rest." Shepard turned, and

Liara walked up to her before she could enter her quarters.

"We need to talk, Shepard."

Shepard sighed. "It's real late, Liara. Can it wait?"

Liara merely shook her head. "No, it cannot. Please."

Anger and something else danced in Shepard's eyes and the muscles of her jaw, but she shrugged.

"Come on in." Liara followed, trying not to wring her hands in worry, and did so.

#### O-OSaBC-O

Shepard's quarters were neat, but two more empty bottles of Scotch decorated the table. A bottle of pills – sleeping aids, Liara read from the label – were open on the nightstand. The bed was made, the sheets unmarked, but Shepard's old Penal Legion blanket was tossed on the floor in a corner, next to yet another empty bottle of scotch. Shepard's small terminal was broken, the haptic screen emitter smashed. A single OSD lay in front of it, its shape deformed by warp fire.

Shepard stalked into the room, and tossed the OSD Telanya had given her on her desk before turning to face Liara. "What is it?"

Liara, for her part, merely stared at Shepard. The tiredness in her eyes was there again, the pain. Despite her neat appearance, Shepard still looked haggard. The medical bandages around her stomach were still there, as was the limp in her step from her wounded leg.

Liara carefully took a breath, before letting it go shakily. "I want to help."

Shepard looked away. "Some things I have to do alone, Liara."

Liara shook her head, taking two steps closer. "No! I will not let you push me away. Not now. Not when you are hurt. Not when everything you have believed in and trusted in is either failing you or dying. I am here, Shepard, because of you. Because I want to be here! Because I want to ... be a part of you."

Shepard sat down on her couch, her expression crumpled. "Everything I believed in is a fucking lie. My government..." She gestured with disgust at the ruined OSD... "God, I can't even explain. It's just too much. All of this shit is too much."

Liara carefully stepped around the table, to sit next to Shepard, trying not to tense up. "Why must you carry it all yourself?"

Shepard shook her head. "I'm the only one who can."

Liara stared at her for a long moment. "And what am I, then? Goddess, Shepard, I have shared your pain-"

Shepard turned to face her, mouth a grim line. "I didn't ask for that, Liara. I didn't...fuck. FUCK!" She slammed a fist into the side of the desk next to the couch, and then got to her feet. "I can't do this right now. I need ... to plan. To get ready."

Liara stood as well, her hands shaking. "No."

Shepard turned. "No?"

Liara reached out, grabbing Shepard's hand. "No. I am not going to abandon you like everyone else has, or leave you to face whatever you must alone, or pretend I am alright with being shut out." She was going to continue but Shepard pushed her back, hard, against the wall. A moment later she was in Liara's face, so close she could smell Shepard's faint scent, her shampoo.

Blue eyes bored into hers, dark and furious. "You can't fix me, Liara. We all have times where we're fucked up and hurt. Times where I don't know what the fuck to say or even feel and having you there just makes it worse!" She pushed off the wall, still glaring.

Liara merely grit her teeth. "Is what Dunn said a lie? Do you run away from everything because you could fail at it? Did you lie to me when you said I understood, when you said that I made your day better?" She took a step back, trying to summon the nerve to say what had to be said. "Shields said you used everyone around you, and Dunn claims you are used by everyone around you. Which one is true, Sara? Do you even know?"

Shepard turned her gaze away, and Liara stepped closer, holding out her hand. "This is all I have. My mother is *gone*, my family wants me to vanish, my career is lost, and the only thing left for me is to hope that when this all ends, something is left for me. I cannot fight your battles, heal the wounds others have torn into your soul. I cannot bring Major Kyle back. All I can do is share your pain."

Shepard's expression twisted. "And that's all I'm good for, Liara! Dragging people down with me to fucking die. I don't want it to be that way! I can ... deal with it, shove it down, and then –"

Liara shook her head. "It is still *there*, Shepard. I woke when you were upset from the nightmare before Presrop. You could feel my anger with Dunn when you interrupted our argument. Do you think I am not already hurt when you sit in this ... this cave, and drink yourself to sleep, and come out pretending you are fine?"

Liara got even closer. "I know, Sara, what it means when you go blank. I do it too." She reached for Shepard's hand, the flesh still too strangely warm in her own. "I will not break."

Shepard refused to meet her eyes. "You don't know what you're asking."

Liara felt herself tremble. "Then show me. I will not let you go." Her grip tightened, her heart speeding up, and finally Shepard met her gaze again, eyes filled with something hurt and broken.

Liara pushed, her senses and feelings expanding, flesh on flesh. The energy in her body racing along her limbs, joining her to Shepard –

It wasn't the simple blend of focused memories, of seeking specific things. It wasn't controlled. It wasn't something Liara had done before, and the broken spaces and hurts in her own heart stabbed at her like glass before her vision seemed to shatter.

She felt her body against Shepard's – heat pressed against her coolness, desire ringing through her core, up the flesh on her spine – but memories and emotions pouring through her mind were too overwhelming.

The degradation and pain, the agony and sick torture of the slavers, the shame and humiliation. The teasing sweetness of drugs, the hot rasp of the electro-whip, slicing into her back. Everything. The hard days of living hand to mouth, hustling drugs, killing in a joyful, shouting ecstasy of rictus rage.

She felt herself slipping away, feeling the grip of Shepard on her arm, pulling her closer. She couldn't move, couldn't breathe. She could feel the blood thundering through Shepard's body, through her own. She saw so many images of Shepard's life, slashed with cold pain.

Felt unending, hot rage, boxed in by cold, hard despair. Felt the sting as, again and again, the people she reached out to betrayed her. The gang she ran with, fighting for her right not to be raped. The gang leaders, using her to their own ends. The endless fights and battles in the Penal Legion, curled into a battered blanket, shivering against the rest of her squad, trying not to cry out in pain from half-treated wounds.

She felt herself falling, felt Shepard falling. She didn't know what was happening anymore, or who she

was. She felt hot tears falling on her face, felt her hands pulling at Shepard's clothes. She didn't know what she was doing. She could feel so many different emotions. Love. Fear. Sorrow.

She nearly screamed as Torfan burst into her mind, not flashes of horror, but the entire conflict, the pain of wounds, the ugly expression on Rai's face when Shepard shot him. The screaming broken English of a batarian mother, begging the humans not to kill her child, crying that he didn't have a bomb on him, and the cruel laugh when Shields emptied a shotgun into the boys face.

She felt her body clinging against Shepard's, felt her hands sliding against bare skin, felt her uniform flay under a biotic pull. Jolts of pleasure shuddered up her spine, into her body, as was lifted and half thrown, half dropped on the narrow bed. She moaned into Shepard's shoulder, crying in pain, crying in joy, crying in confusion, as the meld smashed through everything she was, through everything Shepard was. She felt fingernails against her skin, and she pressed into them, her hands moving down, her body sliding across Sara's.

She wasn't sure when it started, the pain, or the pleasure, or feeling what Sara felt, or the spinning. She felt herself slam against the bed, the floor. She felt teeth on her breasts, felt her hands sink into Sara's body, felt heavy pressure from biotics on her own frame. Knuckles digging into her azure. Memories kept flooding into her mind, emotions ripping up and down her very soul. She couldn't think, couldn't reason - her body reacted, her mind staggering as two people blurred together.

She felt herself dig fingers into the bed, smothering her moans, as she saw herself in Shepard's memories – impossibly pure, impossibly beautiful, impossibly elegant. Even in the rapture and confusion she was in, she felt embarrassed, but it was swept away by more pleasure, more melding. The bond was like fire, like spikes of iron hammered into both of them, to the point Liara could not tell what was her body and what was Shepard's when the first orgasms hit her frame.

There was no pause, no stopping, they both pushed their grasp on each other, forcing their bond deeper, as their bodies reacted with mindless need. It only grew – the meld deeper, more out control, the violence more focused, harder, driven and passionate. Teeth and fingernails left bleeding, hot furrows. Backs arched as nipples were rubbed raw, as fingers were pistoned until they went numb. Liara barely could think as Shepard wrapped around her, fingernails sunk into her own breasts, screaming as Liara's tongue did it's work.

It was only when something in them both snapped, when Liara's mind was little more than quivering, screaming release, that she finally lost it, both of them dissolving into some intermix of Shepard, Liara, and pleasure. Emotions so pure, so sweet, that if she could weep she would have. The feeling of being held in an embrace that nothing could break. Waves of frantic fear, of being left, of not being good enough, of being abandoned. Their fears and hopes, their miseries and triumphs, melted and ran together like hot wax, and Liara arched her back in as everything shattered in a single burning moment that only ended with darkness claiming what was left of their conscious thoughts.

When Liara awoke, it was in a tangle of bloody, sweaty sheets and limbs. She felt drained and empty, happy and tired, calm... and confused. *Wait, why is my skin blue...oh. Liara. I ... yes.*

She tried to sit up and her whole body nearly screamed from the stiffness. Her uniform was torn in half on the floor, her underclothes having fallen into small piles next to it. Shepard's BDU's were in pieces.

She felt Shepard asleep, clinging tightly. There were claw marks and bruises, bite marks... .Liara shivered, the feeling in her stomach a mix of wonder, horror, and arousal. She released the pain had turned her on, and wondered if that was Shepard stamped into her or something else.

She could *feel* Sara in a way she never could before. A slow hot pulse of ... presence in her mind. A second heartbeat. She stifled a groan, too weak to do anything but lay back against Sara's body, trying

to sort her thoughts out.

It was ... impossible. Liara wasn't even sure where she began and Sara ended now. This wasn't a link, this wasn't even a sexual meld. This was a bond, one literally driven into them deeper than Liara, in her admitted limited experience, had ever heard of.

Part of her felt like it was glowing. She knew, now, what Shepard had never been able to get out, to articulate – that she was terrified, not of failure, but of abandonment. Of disappointing those who chose to believe in her. Her worst nightmare wasn't of her years of captivity, or of gang activity, or even of the vision of the Prothean extinctions.

It was of Anderson looking at her with disgust and turning his back on her. Liara bit her lip, hugging the sleeping woman tighter, trying to find some kind of baseline from which she could ... function.

She knew things, now that she shouldn't. She knew what had driven Shepard to despair, the OSD from Kyle detailing and confirming that the Manswell Foundation backed Cerberus, that the SA was harvesting L2s at the end of their lives to produce some kind of serum that boosted the biotic power of new biotics. She had seen the awful, hate-carved visage of Admiral Dragunov dressing her down in the comm room, the shame and bitter fury Shepard had to swallow.

She saw and felt the horrible shock and pain Shepard had suffered when she'd seen Liara die.

Liara shook her head weakly. This ... was supposed to make them happy. To make them whole. To take away all the pain. She knew Shepard must have experienced everything she had, seen her whole life, every failure, every frustration, her stupid rejection of Amania. Compared to the nightmare of Shepard's life, her trials must have seemed childish.

Could she actually bear up under the weight of Shepard's pain and past?

With a groan, Shepard stirred, eyes flickering open with a rapid movement around the room, stopping once she recognized Liara. Liara knew now how panicked, even if only for a second, Shepard would be in close contact with someone, and biting her lip, managed to suppress her own discomfort enough to disentangle their legs.

She stopped, though, when Shepard gently touched her chin. "I ... I am sorry I ... pushed you through that, Liara. I – "

Liara cut her off by shaking her head. "I pushed, not you. And ... while I do not know if I can deal with all of this as I claimed...it is what I wanted. Do not apologize."

Shepard laid her head back. "Fuck. I can only hope everyone was goddamned asleep, but Garrus and Telanya must have heard that. This..."

Liara didn't move, her body still against Shepard. The smell of sweat, human and asari, need, and the faint tang of blood lingered in the air, and Liara didn't care. No matter how hard it was, Liara belatedly realized, she was still happy. She was tremendously happy. She couldn't figure out why for a long moment, until she felt the pulse of the bond between them.

She could *feel* Shepard's love.

She knew Sara was hers, and she was Sara's. If death claimed her soul for siari tomorrow...at least, once in her life, she'd finally succeeded at something.

Shepard's face twisted into a small smile. "You feel ... happy. I feel complete. Or new."

Liara turned to face her and nodded slowly. "I ... I intended just to...share. To ... be there to let you know you were not alone. I seem to have miscalculated."

Shepard couldn't help the grin that stole over her features, softening her eyes. For a moment, years of pain and burdens fell away, and Shepard gave a quiet, but happy sounding, laugh. "I ... sorry, Liara. Mind is just blown." She took in the dark blue bruises on Liara's naked form, and the happiness leached out of her eyes. "Jesus Christ..."

She pulled the covers off of Liara, taking in the damage, the raking fingernail claw marks, the bruising, the blood. Shepard's face went pale, eyes widening in broken horror. And Liara could feel – feel the self hate Shepard had, the feeling she'd done nothing but ruin Liara, use her.

It made Liara realize more than ever that Jason Dunn and Beatrice Shields had no understanding of Sara Shepard. At all. Liara aped Shepard's gesture, lifting her chin with a hand. "Shepard. You are what you are. And I am a part of that now. You did not do anything to me I did not *want*. Goddess, I could not stop myself. I enjoyed it."

Shepard gave her a sad look. "Because we mind-fucked each other so hard when I woke up I wondered why my crest felt so weird?"

Liara glanced down. "I wondered why I was blue for a moment. It is ..." Liara shook her head. "That does not matter, Sara. The why is less important than the fact that I feel what you feel. My soul is with yours. If you enjoyed it, so did I. And ..." She trailed off, gesturing at Shepard's own bruises and marks, and blushed. "This is not what I expected it to be like."

Shepard nodded. "I ... know. God, this is so fucking confusing."

Liara smiled. "Do you at least feel better?"

Shepard stopped, and kissed Liara. "I'm a goddamned idiot for not listening to you. I'm beyond better. I feel like I just had sex with the most beautiful woman I've ever met and discovered the beauty of her soul." She paused, thinking for several seconds, emotions flitting like the shadows of clouds across her face, before fixing into a small, thin smile.

"I am Sara Shepard. I am alive, and I'm not going to let myself fall ever again." She touched Liara's cheek, hesitant, almost worshipful. Liara couldn't suppress a wave of happiness at the mere simple touch, and that made Shepard smile even more.

Shepard struggled to find the words. "I can't .. explain it. I can't put it into words that make sense. I'm not stupid enough to think one night like this changes anything." She reached out as Liara's face fell, and smiled. "Let me finish."

Shepard licked her lips. "I felt you, in a way I never have before. Not the sex. Not the emotions. Just being a part of you. Being combined with you. I know I can carry all this shit by myself. But I don't *have* to. Tonight changes nothing, and everything. Tonight tells me I'm not alone. I'm not so broken that I can't be reached. Be touched. Be loved."

She looked away, and Liara was shocked to see tears run down her cheeks. Shepard's voice trembled. "I don't have any idea how we're going to do this. But we're going to do it together. I let myself fall to pieces and either expected people to pick me up, or used the fact that I'd fallen to justify how I acted."

She looked up, and the bond surged between them with so much pure, raw emotion Liara couldn't breathe. "But I'm awake. That's what it feels like, Liara. Waking up from an ugly dream and realizing I can goddamned well hang on to what I have."

Liara nodded. "I feel as if I am wounded." She saw the wince of pain on Shepard's face, and shook her head. "Not like that. Seeing what you went through, all of it, not just flashes...drove home to me that you are right, in some ways. I cannot just fix you. Whatever it is we offer to each other, we have to find a way to move past our wounds. I cannot make them go away. I can only hope what I offer – love,

acceptance, trust – gives us something to build on."

Shepard ran her hand through her matted hair, nodding. "I don't want to offer you misery."

Liara lifted her chin. "And you have not! There is more to what we are than two broken people clinging to each other. There is hope, Sara. There is the knowledge that I am not going to break, not going to flee. That you are not going to use me or hurt me." She closed her eyes, feeling for the bond between them, unable to keep herself from shivering at it's strength, it's warmth.

Old, ancient words she'd heard only once, at a bonding ceremony, came from her lips. "I am your strength, and you are mine. I am your light when yours goes dark, and you are my bravery when my courage fails. I am yours, if you will have me."

Shepard swallowed, then smiled and kissed her again. "I do."

Shepard finally let her hand drop, groaning as she got to her feet and picked up Liara with her. "Are you ... um...can you walk?" Shepard's cheeks had gone red, and Liara herself was torn between her own embarrassment and a shocking jolt of amusement. To her own surprise, her answer was almost playful.

"No problems walking, but I think you broke my arm."

Shepard's expression became even more embarrassed, but she muttered. "That's what you get when you stick your fingers where they don't belong, Doctor."

Shepard flopped on the bed. Her nakedness was only enhanced by the smooth interplay of her muscles, the bruising and marks of Liara's fingernails only making her more erotic and striking. Liara made herself exhale and regarded her uniform on the floor with some concern. "I ... I think I will have to borrow one of your BDU outfits, Sara, if I am to leave the room..."

Shepard nodded. "Second drawer down." She glanced at the time, and sighed. "VI, status report."

The VI chimed from the wall haptic panel. "Ship status nominal. No incidents."

Shepard blew her breath out, sending a tuft of hair flying out of her face. "I'm going to scout the mess deck, make sure you and I have a clean run to the showers. I have a pair of robes in the wall locker there, you can use one if you don't bleed on it too much."

Liara rolled her eyes, as Shepard put on the other robe, wincing as she tied the belt, and went out into the ship. Liara picked her way past discarded clothing, before looking at herself in Shepard's mirror.

The dullness in her gaze was gone, and she couldn't wipe the stupid smile off her face. There was a spot of blood on her lip, which she wiped off, then took in the other injuries. The scratches and bite marks were already healing, the bruises hurt but no more than the wounds she'd taken so far. Her shoulder ached, abominably, and the medical package was flashing red lights, showing it was empty again.

A part of her couldn't believe what she did last night, even with every single second burned into her mind. She looked into the image in the mirror, and some hint of the bond she had with Shepard trickled into her mind, a feeling of sheer satisfaction and smug glee. She heard the sound of water running, and imagined Shepard in the small shower, water trickling down her form. She blushed, almost out of habit, then remembered what they had just spent the night doing.

She couldn't stop a laugh from bubbling up out of her mouth as she put on Shepard's other robe and decided to see if Shepard wanted company.

*A/N: I'm gratified that no one had complaints about the desecration of canon :D The next few chapters are more fluff before Noveria.*

*Oh, snowy Noveria. How pissed people will be at me due to you. :D*

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The arrival of the Normandy back at the Citadel was punctuated by the docks being cleared by rough-looking, black uniformed SA Commissars and a healthy dollop of C-SEC police officers. Reporters and protestors complained and were dismissively given the verbal heave-ho, even as the silvery crescent of the Normandy slowly approached the docks.

Shepard had awoken in the best mood she could remember. The shower and what happened afterward helped with that, but also contributed to some rather slow movements as she was careful with her bruises. The last thing she needed was Chakwas asking where they came from, after all. Or worse, Joker.

After a quick breakfast – mostly spent trading good matured barbs with Garrus – and a quick walk around the ship to check in with the department heads, she walked up to the cockpit. Joker was there, hat pulled down, fingers moving gracefully through the maneuvers for docking, the ship barely shuddering as it came to a halt. She paused for a moment to admire his deft handling, the quiet competence and grace in every movement he made.

"Flight Lieutenant, good landing." Her voice was soft, but it still caught at Joker's attention. Joker grunted, glancing over his shoulder at her, then turned around more fully, taking a second to examine her expression. "Is everything okay, Commander?"

Shepard blinked, surreptitiously checking her uniform to see if she'd spilled something on herself. "Yes, why?"

Joker coughed. "You're smiling. You usually smile when putting your foot through someone's face. Just checking."

Shepard rolled her eyes, pulling down the IMC. "Even I am in a good mood sometimes, Joker." She paused, taking a breath, and spoke into the mike.

"Crew of the Normandy, this is Commander Shepard. We're back at the Citadel, for three days. The ship will be undergoing repairs on the fuel systems, armor, and outer hull, and we'll be refreshing and reloading ship stores. Our MAKO tanks are pretty shot up and need an overhaul, as do some other ship components, like the damned coffee maker."

She heard snorts of laughter from Ops Alley and continued. "Since all ship systems will be shut down – including the Core – I am declaring liberty for all hands. We kicked the dogshit out of a cruiser twice our weight, fucked up a small army of Cerberus thugs, and took out an organization that threatened innocents everywhere – human and alien – without losing a single soldier or suffering any catastrophic damage."

She exhaled. "I have had more than a few commands. Out of all of them, this crew remains the professionals and experts that I have come to rely upon. As usual, you continue to outperform and take names. I expect everyone back on the ship by Thursday at 0900. We'll be departing for our next target, and if our intel is right, that target is a pointy-faced fuck I plan to introduce to my fist. We are going to end this shit." She paused.

"Until then, I expect you to get the hell off my ship and celebrate. Let's not repeat last time's incidents in elevators, but have fun. At 1900 tonight, drinks are on the CO at Flux. Ship's Company – dismissed!"

She placed the mike down, a small smile on her face, and Joker's eyebrow raised higher. "You're going to a nightclub?"

Shepard fixed him with a flat stare. "The crew needs to blow some steam off. The place is secured against goddamned reporters, the music is good, and it has lots of dark corners I can hide in and enjoy my drinks in peace."

Her face was set in an almost peaceful expression, and Joker couldn't help but think something vital had changed. He tapped a haptic control to drain the fuel lines to the engines, and was about to make another remark when a high priority comm request tagged through. "Looks like you have people waiting for you dockside, Commander. AIS."

She sighed, and rolled her eyes. "Great. No doubt they're here to bitch me out about something else I fucked up, before Udina, the Council, the media and whoever else gets their shots in."

Joker shrugged, scratching idly at his beard. "I could say something about the price of fame and glory."

She gave a small quiet laugh, and then examined him minutely, her eyes taking him in for several seconds. "Make sure you show up tonight, Joker. I ... need some input on a few things. And I value yours." She paused, and then patted the back of Joker's chair. "You did a damned fine job that trip out, Joker. Get out of that chair and have some fun."

She turned, walking away with less of her usual stride and more of a ... sway? Joker blinked, shook his head, and leaned back in his pilot's chair.

"Jesus. Happy Shepard. What next, polite Wrex?" Wondering in the back of his mind what the hell she could need to talk to him about, Joker decided on heading down to see what Tali was up to.

#### O-OSaBC-O

Shepard let most of the crew depart before she changed into her dress blues, pocketing the modified OSD Telanya had provided. A part of her still longed to take the real information to the Council and Udina, and let the shit fall over what faces it would, but Saren was still the primary threat.

She felt Liara's presence in the back of her mind, cool, soft... sleepy. Suppressing a smirk, she figured she could let Liara recover a bit more from last night as she dealt with the pack of unhappy people across the boarding ramp that were no doubt waiting on her. Taking a deep breath, she departed the ship, crossing the ramp and coming up to the group.

In the lead was a slender, almost fragile looking man in his thirties, with dark, almond shaped eyes and slicked back black hair. His uniform was pressed and perfect, the single red cord hanging from his shoulder and the gold eye-in-the-pyramid flash on his right side indicating he was with the AIS. Those dark eyes sought out Shepard, measuring her, assessing, and codifying. The agent's decorations were few but impressive – two SA commendations, a Star of Valor, and three Silver Stars.

Next to him was the scarred, blocky form of a Commissariat Major, blazing ranks of medals and decorations covering his left side, a thick red sash under a leather belt holding up a huge pistol on one side, and a neural mace on the other. Rather than the standard SA uniform, he wore all black – heavy, coarse pants tucked into thick, steel toed combat boots, and an equally blunt armored breastplate atop a stylized black leather jacket that broke at mid-thigh. A peaked cap covered his squad head, furrows of scar tissue obscuring one eye, trailing down the cheek to twist the man's lips into a snarling, fixed sneer.

The last member of the group towered over the other two. Despite his height, he was rail thin, his uniform hanging off of him. Slate gray eyes under heavy dark brows took in her approach, his sallowness, aged features and clean-shaven head giving him an almost funeral aspect. He stood ramrod straight, his

hands folded almost stiffly behind his back. His rank insignia showed him to be a full Admiral of the Red, a command-level admiral not assigned to any particular fleet, and his neat rows of decorations featured commendations Shepard hadn't ever seen before. Her eyes were drawn to the savagely blood-red ribbon and gold star that nestled neatly around his neck, and she immediately determined this person's identity.

She came to a stop, snapping off a perfect salute. "Commander Shepard, reporting as ordered, sirs."

The tall admiral spoke first, returning her salute with slow but careful precision. "At ease, Commander. I am Admiral Yonis Chu, Deputy Director of the AIS. This is Colonel Reginald Thain of the AIS Internal Investigation Unit...and Major Dravus Chisholm, of the Systems Alliance Commissariat. Before you debrief the Council, we would like an opportunity to speak with you about your discoveries."

Shepard exhaled and nodded. Dravus the Dragon was damn near as feared as Shepard herself, the much-whispered "Cigar Man" of many a conspiracy theory, the hatchet-man of the Senate. She didn't know the AIS spook, but having a full colonel assigned for a debriefing wasn't the norm.

And Admiral Chu was a hero...and had been out of sight for decades, since the First Contact War, quietly doing whatever it was that admirals of his rank did. She remembered he'd been one of Kyle and Rachel's teammates...meaning the man was a complete, certified badass, no matter how old he looked or how skinny he seemed.

Given the outcome of the last batch of high-ranking officials to show up at her ship, and keeping in mind Admiral Mikhailovich's not-so-subtle warning that the intel she'd acquired would make her a liability in the eyes of some, Shepard realized she should be feeling pretty apprehensive at this point.

But buoyed by the gentle sense of Liara in her mind, her lips only quirked in amusement. "This is not the first time I have been accosted by senior command staff dockside, sir. Would you prefer to meet aboard the Normandy or conduct the tongue-lashing dockside?"

Cho's expression might have flickered in shared amusement for a moment, before he shrugged. "We're not here to pick your actions apart or second guess you, Commander. Your ship will be fine – I'm afraid it's been more than a few years since I stepped onto a frigate, does it have a meeting room or other suitable space with comms and screens?"

She nodded. "Our comms room is sound-sealed, lined with jammer fields, and has both. The seating is a touch spartan, though." She smiled again, and the AIS agent merely arched his eyebrow before trading glances with the Commissar.

Admiral Cho nodded. "An admirable choice, then. We can be out of your way in less than twenty minutes, as we just need to discuss a couple of events. Please lead the way, Commander."

The trip to the comm room reminded her much of her last interaction with top brass, except Dragunov and his gang hadn't been armed. The pointed fact the Commissar was quite armed set her nerves on edge. Commissars made her jumpy, a reminder of her time in the Legions – and of the ugly discipline actions she'd seen in the wake of the mess on Horizon.

For Chu and an AIS aide to be here made a certain kind of sense. But the presence of a Commissar indicated Chu expected trouble of some kind out of Shepard. And that worried her, in that she didn't know what she was supposed to have fucked up to need to cause trouble.

The comm room's usual gray décor didn't settle her nerves, but the fact that, once the door was closed, the admiral didn't say anything for several seconds did. After a glance around and several moments of silence, Chu smiled. "I'll try to be brief, Commander. You're in something of a unique situation that the

Systems Alliance isn't sure of how to deal with, and shockingly, the latest revelations you have brought to our attention haven't made my job any easier."

Shepard nodded, saying nothing, and Chu continued. "To wit, I've had my AIS people going over the data logs you recovered from Cerberus HQ – at least, the subset you forwarded to us. I fear that the information the Illusive Man gave you, at least at the first pass, seems to be correct. I've been ... occupied dealing with other fallout in the past day or so, and I wasn't given enough time to analyze the data myself, which is why I brought Colonel Thain."

Shepard glanced at him, then back at the Admiral. "And what have you found?"

Chu sighed. "There was very significant penetration of several areas of the SA, including intelligence, financial, economic, educational, and even military-industrial. Cord-Hislop Aerospace *built* 70% of the airframe of the Normandy, and had complete access to the IES designs and the Tantalus Core concepts. Worse, many of the subsidiary corporations were tied into all manner of other sensitive operations."

The Commissar spoke. "We are already ... cleaning house. Quietly. Messily. Suicides, accidents, muggings. Our own analysis shows Cerberus was not stupid enough to attempt to infiltrate the Commissariat, so by default we are forced to take a leading hand in the purification." There was a cold glee in the man's voice, one that drew a slightly disturbed look from the colonel.

Shepard nodded. *The guy must be having a blast, BBQing anyone who fails his purity exams.*

Chu sourly nodded. "The real and unfortunate truth is, of course, that we are stuck in cleaning house until we can be sure the last of the rats are gone. That means, for the moment, that there is a great deal of political and ... shall we say, motivational confusion at high command. That's part of why I'm here. The AIS has been hamstrung in providing you intelligence support since the start of your mission, and oddly enough with the destruction of Cerberus such interference has stopped. That in and of itself tells me quite a few things, none of them good."

Shepard nodded, gritting her teeth. "Can I expect more support from the SA and the AIS?"

Chu sighed. "The AIS, yes. The SA? Who knows right now, Commander. I can't speak for High Command, because I don't use that kind of language around ladies." He smiled thinly, and continued. "Now, before I go over what we know, I understand you have some leads of your own. Admiral Vandefar communicated to High Command your ... inquiry ... regarding Noveria. I can only presume this is connected to Saren, and the source of said data is the Illusive Man?"

Shepard nodded. "Yes, sir. He seemed to think Saren was a legitimate threat. He spoke of the findings of Dr. T'Soni and other information he'd acquired, but didn't elaborate beyond telling us that Saren would be on Noveria, in a hidden facility. He seemed to suggest that the Corporate Court was not aware of Saren's ... facility or presence."

Chu nodded. "Makes sense. I don't doubt the Court knows about it on some level, but the screed they're putting out now mostly indicates they think this is a struggle between Spectres, not something that affects them. The fact that ExoGeni got obliterated gave a few of them pause, but none of them have been very helpful."

Chu pulled out an info-pad. "Our information is much sketchier. We've traced some of Saren's activities and actions. He's been in contact with a very old krogan warlord known as Okeer. Okeer is *persona non grata* among krogan, for reasons not clear to us. From what little we know, Okeer sold or gave Saren a sizable population of krogan mercenaries. Okeer also appears to have taken large cash payments from Saren in return for some other forms of research transactions. Our people on Tuchanka aren't 100% certain if this is some kind of end-run around the CDEM, research into the genophage, or what, but it sounds bad."

Chu tabbed down, his frown increasing. "Meanwhile, Matriarch Benezia's Triune Order has gone to ground, but we've had dozens of incidents of cult members funneling money, weapons, supplies, light craft and what not to various staging areas. Our most recent analysis shows their numbers are very sizable, with at least fifteen thousand of them active, and more sympathetic. Benezia has been sighted in the Dark Rim asari colonies at least three times in the past month, but the most recent sighting had her boarding a turian frigate and heading towards the Ralx Mass Relay. Significantly, that relay connects to Noveria."

Shepard nodded. "Do we have any kinds of leads on Saren's bases of operations or sightings of the black ship?"

Colonel Thain spoke up. "To the former, many rumors and zero hits, although we did raid the locations you forwarded to command that the asari Shiala told you about. All were abandoned. We've been unable to find details of this 'Virmire' location, although not for lack of trying. As far as the super-dreadnaught, we had two sightings near the Perseus Veil."

Chu put his info-pad away and folded his arms. "Despite whatever garbage the Council is spewing about the ship being of geth manufacture, AIS is taking the line that this ship is some kind of artifact – perhaps one of the ships used by whoever knocked off the Protheans. Obviously if Saren had access to more he'd be using them, and based on your own reports, he's looking for some kind of super-weapon, so that may indeed be his goal. In any event, I tend to concur with High Command that your primary task remains stopping him at whatever cost."

Shepard nodded grimly. "That was the idea, sir."

Chisholm cleared his throat, and Chu sighed. "Which brings me to the other reason for my visit. You only sent on a portion of the information you obtained from Cerberus HQ and the Illusive Man. There is quite a bit of concern in some areas that you may decide to hand this information over to the Citadel in toto. Given that we haven't had a chance to vet the information, as well as other recent events, I'm afraid I've been given orders to secure the data, especially before you hand any evidence over to the Council."

Shepard sighed. "I'm going to be pretty blunt, sir. I haven't fully finished reviewing it myself. There's a ton of it, and a lot of it covers things that I thought couldn't happen in the SA. Until I'm convinced that whoever I hand it to isn't going to chunk it in the garbage, it's staying with me."

Chu's eyes narrowed. "Commander, your orders are very clear."

Shepard smiled back. "Yes, sir, they are. Section Four of the Spectre Code. Spectres are expected to follow all lawful and legal orders of their home military organizations, except in such circumstances in which the Spectre feels following such orders would violate the safety and security of the Citadel, or act in direct contravention to standing Council Orders. Incidents such as this will be reviewed to determine if they were appropriate or not by the Council." She exhaled. "I'm not handing over the data to the Systems Alliance, sir. Nor am I doing so to the Council."

Chu did a double-take. "What?"

Shepard shrugged. "I've had an altered copy of the financial transactions and evidence pointing at Saren's location prepared, and a sanitized version of the shipping manifests made. What I plan to hand over to the Council will mostly just point at Cerberus fronts as the source of money, that and a few individuals. I'm not happy about hiding the real facts from the Council, but they haven't been a hundred percent cooperative so far, and I don't need to be sidelined by whatever circus this would turn into. I am very concerned, however, that the people backing Cerberus will get away scot free, and I have no intention of giving over the data that tells me who the real crooks are."

Chu rubbed his temples. "The High Command won't like this, Shepard."

She let her weight fall back onto one hip and folded her arms, fixing him with her gaze. "With all due respect, sir, High Command can kiss my ass. They already had me cover for them with their pet man-eating plant. If I give over this information, I have to trust people who've already lost my trust to do the right thing."

Colonel Thain frowned. "Ma'am, while I take your point, there's no way for the AIS to know who to investigate or not without at least a copy of said information. There's not a lot you can do with it, unless you plan some kind of vigilante actions and murdering your way through top officials, with no more proof than files from a known terrorist with every reason to mislead you. What the Illusive Man gave you may or may not be accurate. Until we check it out, we don't *know* – and neither do you."

Shepard shook her head. "You're aware Admiral Hackett tasked me with talking to Major Kyle before the incident a few days ago, aren't you?"

Chu winced. "We're aware of that. I'm afraid that whoever gave him the orders may have been hoping to silence Kyle before he could speak out. That backfired magnificently."

Shepard nodded. "Kyle had been doing his own investigations, sir. And much of what he found backs up the data the Illusive Man gave me. I don't know or care about his sources, but at the moment I'm inclined to believe what I have is the real deal. I'm not going to hand it over for a full review and let people run around covering things up."

Commissar Chisholm stepped up. "Do these files have any information suggesting the Commissariat is penetrated?"

Shepard frowned, pulling up her omni-tool and doing a quick term search. "...no. You're apparently right about that. Cerberus felt the commissars were under too much observation to bother with."

Chisholm nodded. "I can understand your hesitance, Commander. You're a person with a known fixation against those who hurt the helpless. Right now, though, you already have a mission. You wait until you take out Saren and whatever happens after that, and the window to pursue these goons will be gone. You have two choices. You can stand pat, keep the data, and the AIS won't be able to do anything to find the people involved. Nor is anyone going to lift a finger to help you afterward, either. Or you can play ball and trust that at least Admiral Chu and the Commissariat are not a part of these, and actually get to see the people involved fry."

Shepard gave the man a dubious look. "And there would be no red-tape, political committee investigative bullshit?"

Commissar Chisholm gave a low, almost breathy chuckle. "No fear of that, Commander. If you have the originals, my people will go to work right away. I don't need subpoenas to suppress clear and present dangers to the Systems Alliance. And I don't need hard evidence either."

Shepard exhaled, and then punched the data up on her omnitool, and beamed it to that of the AIS colonel, who nodded appreciatively. "I'd better not regret this."

Chisholm shrugged. "If it gets out, I'll kill the Colonel myself." Thain made a choked sound, and the Commissar regarded him with a raised, bushy eyebrow. "I'm serious, Colonel. I expect names and acts by this time tomorrow, or I'll have to assume Commander Shepard is correct and take ... corrective actions."

Chu shook his head. "That won't be necessary, I'm sure. However, Colonel Thain can't analyze the data instantly. He'll need at least some time to process it, unless Shepard has already done that."

Shepard shook her head. "Not really. My people found lists of commercial transactions for various real-

estate locations, sometimes entire worlds, sold by Cerberus to Saren. I forwarded that list to the Council already, so that STG teams could start looking for any bases. Other than that and cleaning it up, and picking through a few gory details, much of it is still unreviewed."

Chu nodded. "That is to be expected. I ... appreciate your cooperation on this. You have my word that you won't be disappointed." He regarded her with curiosity for a long moment. "You're one of the few people who've spoken with the Illusive Man. What's your take on him?"

Shepard spat the words. "Slippery. Refined. Manipulating. The bastard set his own partners in crime up so slick it was like he choreographed it, and he was sitting on a damned deck chair on some beach, having a drink. He kept his face concealed." She sighed, and the admiral's face turned thoughtful for a long moment.

"If the STG is correct, then the Illusive Man is one Jack Harper. A veteran of Shanxi, who was responsible for a resistance cell that saved the life of Richard Williams and was instrumental in stopping some kind of secondary activity involving Desolas Arterius."

Shepard's lips twisted. "A relative of Saren?"

Chu nodded. "His brother. The details remain unknown for the most part, but it corroborates an early link between Williams and Harper. How Rachel got dragged into this mess we may never know...I'm sickened by the idea the woman I know could have been part of Cerberus."

Shepard grimaced, pinching the bridge of her nose. "Yeah, I ... looked up to her." With an angry exhalation, she shook her head to clear it. "Is that all, sir?"

The admiral nodded. "Colonel, you have anything else?" After a moment, when no answer was forthcoming, he half turned "Colonel Thain?"

The colonel was reviewing data on the omni-tool rapidly, eyes flickering over the data, opening multiple windows, and pausing to wince several times. "Admiral...my apologies. I was just immersed in the data...this is ... very bad." His voice sounded shaken.

Chu's face grew even graver. "How bad, son?"

Thain's voice dropped to a near whisper. "The Senate looks mostly clean, as does High Command, but there are ... instances of possible collusion or corruption. Worse, there's evidence that at the very least the Fleet Master and possibly Anita Doyle knew the identity of the Illusive Man and turned a blind eye to their activities in return for Cerberus stopping pirate raids on our outlying colonies. There's links to ... god. Sirta, the Manswell Foundation, Detrimus Entertainment, Northstar..." After a moment. "Sir, Cerberus was probably behind several high-profile assassinations. The amount of money being tossed around is phenomenal. There are thousands of links to several components of the SA's disbursement and contracting centers."

Chu's face tightened. "Sounds like there's more rot to clean up than we thought. You mentioned you'd made a copy cleaned up to avoid links to the SA. Your altered evidence had better be very well done to fool the STG."

Shepard nodded. "The person who did it was a C-SEC customs officer and financial investigator, who is familiar with the types of data searches and links they are going to be looking for."

The colonel looked up, his attention finally broken from the glowing text in front of him. "That would be Sergeant Telanya, yes?"

Shepard nodded slowly. "Yes, that's correct."

The colonel gave a sharp look to Chu, who sighed. "Shepard, the decision to attach the asari to your

crew was made by High Command in some kind of trade-swap with the asari government. That is, the council of Matriarchs. AIS believes the woman is there to monitor the activities and motivations of Dr. T'Soni, and – based on certain observational models of past actions – possibly kill her if T'Soni acts in a way that implies she's in league with her mother."

Shepard's jaw tightened. Garrus' taste in women had gone from nice to lousy, and she wondered if he knew. Then she thought back to last night, and the closeness she had with Liara. Of course he knew, he just didn't say anything. She found that somewhat depressing, but shook her head. "That is a very good possibility, sir. Nonetheless, my choices are to use her fabrication, or take the whole sordid mess in front of the Council. I can't recommend the latter."

Chu gave a measured nod. "Do you think their assessment of Dr. T'Soni as a potential liability is accurate, Commander?"

She couldn't stop the flare of anger, or the tightening of her fists, but she forced herself to speak as calmly as possible. "No sir, I do not. In any way."

The colonel's eyebrow shot up again, but Chu paid him no mind, the cool gray eyes boring into Shepard's. "Very well. We'll see what we can turn up with this information, and if anything else shakes out we'll contact you." He gave a sigh and glanced at the Commissar. "If there is nothing else..."

The Commissar gazed thoughtfully at Shepard. "I need a word with her alone, Admiral, if you don't mind. I'll see you topside." He waited as Admiral Chu and the colonel departed, before turning his scarred visage back towards Shepard. He paused, withdrawing a silvery disk from his pocket, placing it on the floor. A cool wash of static and ozone crackled around them.

"A disruptor field, Commander. What I say is for your ears only. Am I clear?"

Shepard nodded, and the man smiled. "Two things. First, Jason Dunn. He'll be leaving with me for a nice ... interview."

She rocked back on her heels. "How – "

Chisholm sighed. "Don't be stupid about this, Commander. The Commissariat has a person on every single ship in the SA. People think 'Commissar' and associate that with 'big coat, pointy hat, biotic'. That isn't the case. No, I'm not telling you who he or she is. Mr. Dunn is a deserter, a traitor, and a potential gold mine of information about Cerberus."

She sighed. She wasn't real happy with Jason, both for his actions and his reaction to Liara, but she'd always planned to let him slip away, after everyone else had left the ship. The fact that the Commissariat had someone on her ship spying was something she cursed herself for not thinking of earlier. She swallowed. "What happens to him?"

Chisholm shrugged. "If he's cooperative? We'll clean him up, debrief him, slap him on the wrist for being a naughty boy and turn him loose with a six month citizenship demerit. Probably hire him to do workups on the Cerberus forces. If he's uncooperative...well, he's already familiar with the Penal Legions, isn't he?"

Shepard closed her eyes. "I don't have a choice in this, do I?"

Chisholm folded his arms. "He's an old teammate. I get that. But the man still joined a pack of alien-kicking thugs and letting him go without finding out what he knows is a fundamentally bad idea. If I can get him released early, if he cooperates, I will. It's up to him."

She nodded grimly. "And the second thing?"

Chisholm's expression tightened. "The reason for the disruptor field. Shepard, it probably feels like you

fallen down the rabbit hole. Lots of things going on. Lots of political back and forth. Kyle's stunt, the revelations of Cerberus, the mess on Feros. I understand that."

The commissar stepped forward. "I cannot give you any more details except to say that there are things that even the highest level of government is not aware of. Very, very few people are. As one of those people...do not, for any reason, let up on the chase for Saren and Benezia. No matter what you are told, no matter how crazy you end up sounding. There is proof that dates before the mess on Eden Prime that your vision from that Prothean beacon is reality."

Shepard opened her mouth but the commissar raised a hand. "I *cannot* give you any more details, or answer any of the questions I'm sure you have. Find and kill Saren and Benezia. Stop whatever they are doing. That is your highest priority. Disobey any orders to the Commissariat will handle the rest."

Shepard's expression was strained. "That's it? I go through all this bullshit and you pat me on the head and tell me to keep at it and won't even tell me what the fuck is going on?"

Chisholm tilted his head. "Remember when you were in the Penal Legions, and the bombs we put in your spine would go off if certain key words or phrases were spoken?" With a slow tap of his finger against his temple, the commissar nodded. "I *cannot* tell you more."

Shepard took a step back, her mind whirling, and the Commissar smiled. "I'll pick up Mr. Dunn topside, and get him off your hands, Commander." He bent to pick up his disruptor, sticking it back in his pocket. "Please keep in mind what I said."

With that, the Commissar left the room, leaving behind a greatly confused Shepard.

O-OSaBC-O

Fifteen minutes later, Jason Dunn got into an aircar with the Commissar, which lifted away from the docks and towards the Wards. The former N7 leaned his head against the head rest and signed. "Jesus, I'm glad that's over."

The Commissar nodded. "Was Benedict successful?"

Dunn shrugged. "Florez was definitely dead, and Richard Williams supposedly dead. And so far, neither Shepard nor her alien buddies have stopped to ask themselves if the Illusive Man overwrote anything when he shoved his evidence their way. The money transfers should have been covered, but it's possible a smart financial analyst with the full data set could figure it out."

Chisholm shrugged. "Null importance. What about your take on Shepard?"

Dunn smiled. "The Illusive Man was right. Shepard nearly lost her mind when that sniper took Dr. T'Soni down. And... well, after last night, I am 99% certain Shepard is banging her, too. I think the profile we have on her is fairly accurate."

Chisholm nodded. "Alright. You know what to do next. Stay out of sight for a few weeks, then make sure to get back on contact with Shepard. We have to handle this very delicately."

Dunn only smirked. "I dunno...if what I heard from the mess decks last night was any indication, she likes it rough, not delicate."

The commissar grimaced. "Has anyone ever told you that you're an asshole, Dunn?"

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## Chapter 90: Chapter 81 : Tetrimus, Frightened

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*A/N: I am moving along in several directions with this chapter. Hiding the events that Liara and*

*Shepard partook in (given the thinness of walls and the way sailors gossip) is completely unrealistic. Joker didn't know (because he rarely takes part in gossip and sleeps with his headphones in) but others know. It's best to deal with it and move on...along with other consequences.*

*I like Pressly. I may write an entire fic involving Pressly one day.*

*As for the Broker segment, well...consider it food for thought.*

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Tetrimus did not like Hagalaz. Or rather, he didn't like the weather, and he hated the ship.

The eternal lightning storm outside the ship that served as the Shadow Broker's primary base was loud, and it set his biotics on edge. The ship itself, an over-weaponed, custom-design dreadnaught, was built along utilitarian lines, making it boring to look at. It didn't help that the Broker's taste ran to black, jagged, and menacing. It was a titanic monument to compensating for something, and Tetrimus had been amused when he'd first seen the ship, so many years ago. Now he was just tired of it.

It was with no little relish that he had, over the years, sealed his own personal domain on the ship against sound, static, and vibration. The floor was covered in layers of thick rugs, the walls sprayed down with shock-absorbent foam and painted a pale gray, and he'd even spent a great deal of time hauling in his own furnishings. Various art objects, weapons, alien curiosities, and of course the bullet-perforated skulls of both of the Primarch's sons – all of these things brought him a sense of belonging and stability.

It was these little touches that made the constant agony of his physical condition a bit more bearable, on days where nothing but bad news crossed his desk – the salvaged desk of General Williams, the bloodstains from the fateful day where the Hierarchy betrayed him carefully preserved.

The entire forward wall of his room was covered in status report screens, a smaller array similar to the setup in the Broker's own den. These were for lesser operations that Tetrimus himself watched over, not the high level agents managing their own efforts. Normally, the field teams he had would report in over secure encrypted lines, or rarely by courier.

When someone had to report in person, the news was always bad. Coupled with the complete failure of two teams to take down an STG probe into a Broker financed commercial takeover, the death of an agent in batarian space, and the Broker's own foul mood over some long-term plan being thwarted, Tetrimus didn't really want more bad news.

The nervous flickering of the mandibles of the turian agent in front of him, however, warned him that this was likely to be more than just bad. "Speak", he said, his growling tones conveying his displeasure.

The turian in front of him wore the Broker uniform – black ballistic cloth under interlocking red-trimmed black plates of armor, a crossways bandolier of tech toys and grenades, and an oversized omnitool emitter. His gray plates clashed with his white face paint, and his dark eyes shifted to the info-pad in his hands.

"Yes, sir. We've finished the initial sweep and follow up on Eingana, as you requested. The Hierarchy was not really reviewing the wreckage for the signs we were, and we remained undetected. The STG team we can across did seem to be looking at the wreckage...but you told us not to engage."

Tetrimus nodded. "And your findings, Agent Sirva?"

Sirva shuddered. "We went through the wrecks of the Inusannon and Tho'ian vessels, trying to identify individual signatures of the weapon used against Eden Prime and Fourth Fleet. Our initial guesses seem to be on target, as we were able to recover actual residue from the weapon's usage at Feros. It's a

magneto-hydrodynamic weapon, a mix of common meteoric iron and carbon, superheated to a liquid slurry and conveyed by a form of mass effect tunnel to the target. The beam is cohesive, but the magnetic effects make it explosive when it connects with energy shielding."

There was a pause. "Given that the metal itself has no mass signature adjustment – it's just melted metal, with no way to generate its own field - and that the amount of energy produced seems to be more than what is put into the beam, we have no real idea how it works. We know the physical aspects, but not how they manage to steer the beam, or keep the liquid in cohesion. It seems to violate several laws of physics related to both energy conservation and what we understand about mass tunnels."

The turian glanced at his info-pad. "Each one of these weapons has a unique signature based on the various mixes of iron and carbon, the stream rate, and several other factors. Compiling these based on the wreckage on Eingana, we estimate there were between 1,400 and 1,700 of the dreadnaught class ships at the battle over the planet."

Tetrimus felt the remains of his fringe contract. "That's over five times the estimate of the turian team at the site."

Sirva nodded. "Yes sir. Some of that is due to them not looking for this kind of differentiation. But most of it is due to the fact that many of the variations are subtle. We have a grand total of 1,534 different signatures...but based on the strike locations at least some of the emitters must have been on the same platform. Not a majority. Only a few. It may be a super-heavy class the same ship."

The turian looked at the info-pad again. "The ... issue I wish to bring up is this. We compared the spectragraphic and mineral analysis of the Eden Prime and Fourth Fleet wreckage to the Inusannon wrecks to form our baseline. Yesterday, we found a 100% match to the signature of Saren's ship to the wreckage on Eingana."

It took Tetrimus several seconds to process the meaning and significance of that statement. "You are implying that the same vessel that Saren commands, the vessel that destroyed Eden Prime, was present at the battle that destroyed the Inusannon and Tho'ians? Over 100,000 years ago?"

The turian nodded. "Yes sir. And...we were not able to obtain any kind of conventional dating information from the pieces, due to a lack of carbon content. But we have been looking for that specific metal now across several other sites. We have found remains that correspond to the same kind of metal that Saren's ship is built of at several sites."

The turian closed his eyes. "The oldest was in sedimentary rock over three million years old."

Tetrimus's cyberware engaged, pumping oxygen and calming sedatives into his bloodstream to counteract the shock that nearly stopped his heart. He got up from the desk, turning to his single window, staring out into the storm. The clouds, dark and menacing, billowed across the tortured skies below, lightning flashing from place to place.

Tetrimus had long thought any vestiges of fear had been burned from the wreckage of his body. In some ways, death would be a release for him. His family was dead, his honor shattered, his future likely to end in cybernetic toxic shock syndrome or cancers in a decade or so. What was left to fear?

Life, once again, was showing him how much of a vicious little bitch it could be.

The information he'd just learned was too big to get his mind around. Too crazy. Too frightening.

"Sirva. This information is now Omega Black. This cannot, under any circumstances, get out beyond the Broker Network." He turned, heading to his command console, and tapped one of the panels. "I'm sending a level six liquidation team to secure your findings and handle your team."

Sirva's mandibles sagged open as he tensed, and Tetrimus chuckled. "Don't worry, you aren't part of the

clean up order." *At least not for that team. Tazzik will handle you himself.*

Sirva nodded bonelessly, and then exhaled with a desperate note in his voice. "...my.. .my mate is on team four."

Tetrimus turned slowly to face him, then shook his head. "You have forty eight hours to get her out, then. Be thankful you are dealing with me and not the Broker. Once you have her you are to get back here. No stops. No picking up anything. This information cannot get out."

Sirva gave a jerky nod, eyes wide. "Thank you, thank you."

Tetrimus waved a hand and the other turian bolted, leaving him alone with his thoughts. After a moment, he tapped his omni-tool bracer. "You heard?"

The rumbling basso of the Broker erupted from the air. "Of course. Your mercy continues to surprise me."

Tetrimus continued to tap at the screen. "You must not be checking the orders I'm giving the liquidation team. Mercy is for the weak. Tazzik will handle Sirva, he won't even be expecting it."

There was a pause before the Broker gave a sadistic sounding laugh. "Very well. What is your thought process on what Sirva discovered?"

Tetrimus paused. "It is a bit much to take in. My initial thinking was Saren had discovered a battleship of the race that destroyed the Protheans, and was using it to dominate the Geth in some plan to take over the Citadel or achieve his own goals. When Dr. T'Soni linked the destruction at Eingana to the same kind of vessels, things made less sense."

Tetrimus finished ordering his liquidation team, and sent the commands out. "But ... three million years? What the spirits is this even about?"

The Broker's voice was, for once, thoughtful. "It may be time to reassess our goals in this endeavor."

Tetrimus sighed, checking the time. "If the last report from Wrex is any indication, Shepard found something in the Cerberus base that she believes will lead to Saren, but hasn't shared it with anyone. If she can stop Saren, does this entire mess come to a conclusion?"

The Broker's voice took several moments to respond. "Possibly. However, there is every possibility that Saren and Benezia are not the primary actors. Consider what we know. Exterminations of all space-faring life every forty to sixty thousand cycles. Technology far beyond any known race. The capability to perform mid-system jumps. Weapons systems that seem to violate the known laws of physics. And this cycle may have been going on for millions of years."

Tetrimus nodded. "Meaning...what?"

The Broker's voice was frustrated. "I do not know. I do not know what agency would have the kind of power to eliminate entire star empires in a span of a few centuries, and then remove almost all clues as to their presence. More importantly, I do not know *why* such a thing would happen, much less to have it repeat hundreds of times. The only conclusions I can draw are based on the facts we do know..and what we know of Saren's researches."

The Broker sent him several files, on a batarian named Edan Had'dah. Tetrimus flicked his good mandible in confusion. "I do not see a connection."

The Broker's voice was patient, but laced with something like ... excitement. "Had'dah was a batarian aristocrat, searching in Prothean ruins for years. He spent something on the order of sixty million credits on a project several years back, a project that ended up requiring him to bring in a specialist. One of the top researchers into artificial intelligence, Shu Qian of Earth."

More images flitted to the screen in front of Tetrimus. "We know that Saren, in his discrediting of David Anderson's Spectre interview, was later involved in the death of both of these men. We know Saren used his Spectre connections to seize much of Had'dah's property. We know Saren himself consulted several topflight AI specialists...and I suspect his 'investigation' into Synthetic Insights has less to do with human corruption and more to do with him raiding their research."

Tetrimus knew the Broker was smarter than he was, or in fact, than anyone else Tetrimus had ever heard of. But the pieces the Broker was laying out for him didn't fit. "I thought the AI research would be related to his control of the geth."

The Broker made a noise of impatience, a growling utterance that never failed to send a chill up Tetrimus's spine. "You are not looking at what we already know. The recording we have of Saren admitting to Benezia that he killed Nihlus was made by geth. They were not dominated by Saren – they were recording him because they were distrustful of him and wanted to be directly in touch with this 'Nazara'."

The Broker's voice reeled off facts. "According to the dockworker on Eden Prime, Saren argued with the geth there about something. They see him as a danger. They call him 'Prophet' but are not automatically obeying him. Shepard's report about Feros included speculation that the geth attach a religious significance – not to Saren, but to whatever or whoever this Nazara is."

The Broker paused again. "Finally, the kind of AI research Saren was going after is pointless with the geth. A specialist for geth would be someone working on distributed systems, or a quarian. Both Synthetic Insights and Shu Qian were focused on large-scale unified systems...and on organic-synthetic interfaces."

Tetrimus tightened his jaw. "And you surmise what?"

The Broker's silence lingered for a second until he spoke. "I do not have enough information to formulate a complete theory. It is as if I can almost derive what is happening, except for one critical piece of information – the identity of this 'Nazara' figure. I know it is all related – the Protheans, the Beacons, whatever Saren seeks, the ship, the extinctions – all of it. I must find the pattern."

The Broker's voice dipped from its usual growl to a rumble. "I am, however, aware of two things that incline me to believe Saren is a danger. The first is the span of time between the destruction of the Inusannon and Tho'ian to when the Protheans were destroyed, and the span of time between that extinction and today. The time frames correspond fairly closely. If something is to happen every fifty thousand cycles, then we are due for an event. Given the outcomes of the last two 'events', it is likely that Saren's success will get us all killed."

Tetrimus nodded sourly. "The Citadel governments will not believe that. They're unlikely to begin any kind of preparations."

The answer was immediate. "The Citadel's response to this issue is not my concern. I plan to act to ensure the survival of the Broker Network, regardless of what those fools chose to do. I've already ordered construction on a generational support vessel with enough hydroponics and supplies to last several centuries, and a program to obtain highly intelligent salarian, human, turian, asari and drell orphans. The volus, krogan, batarians and vorcha are not worth my time. Nor are the hanar. In a worst case scenario, we will simply retreat to the ship, perform a FTL transit to deep space beyond the galactic rim and watch events unfold."

The sheer scale of what the Shadow Broker planned and the casual tone he explained it in stunned Tetrimus. "You feel it's that severe?"

The Broker's voice lowered. "If Agent Sirva's team is correct, any 'preparations' that are to be made

aside from headlong flight should be religious and funerary in composition. Fourteen hundred vessels like Saren is currently using would wipe the galaxy flat in a few months. Even at maximum utilization of industrial capacity and with a two-hundred percent research modifier, no simulation I can create has galactic society having any chance against such numbers without at least access to the weapon they use."

Tetrimus gave a grim nod. "And the other thing that makes you think Saren is a danger?"

The Broker's, rather than answer, simply sent him another file. What he saw made his spurs retract and his fringe go flat. "Is that a rachni egg?"

The Broker's voice was soft. "We found this in a manifest of 'secured items of interest' when we obtained Ethan Jeong's cooperation. If the manifest is correct, this egg was sent to Binary Helix's facility on Ilium for study."

Tetrimus smiled, the broken needles of his teeth gleaming. "Ilium. So that's his location, eh?"

"No. The Ilium HQ had no labs, and our agents watching it never saw the ship carrying the egg arrive. We found the vessel adrift in space on the Ralx Trade Lane, the crew killed...the cargo missing. The pattern of assault matches the signature carnage Shepard discovered on the volus trading ship she investigated."

Tetrimus flicked his mandible in irritation. "Why hijack a ship bringing him something in the first place? It's just a rachni egg. It's not like it's a queen or ..." Tetrimus trailed off, eyes traveling to the notes attached to the Exogeni manifest, and shook his head. "No...is he *insane*?"

The Broker's voice was cool again. "Quite possibly. I find any other explanation for why he would attempt to summon a race whose primary method of interaction appears to be obliterating all space-faring life to be problematic and unlikely. In any event, we must be prepared to move and neutralize any actions he takes, while at the same time recalling critical personnel to the Nest for possible evacuation."

The Broker transmitted a long list of financial and material transactions. "Dispatch teams to implement this list. I want at enough raw materials to last centuries, if needed, and I see no reason to abandon my wealth if the galaxy is going to be overrun by giant warships. If nothing comes to pass, if Shepard is successful, we can reinvest the materials and funds in new ventures in the Traverse."

Tetrimus nodded. "And Shepard? Any orders there?"

The Broker, for an answer, terminated the call, and Tetrimus gave a jerky shrug and proceeded to call up his best open teams. When the message that both Sirva and his entire team had been neutralized, he allowed the smallest of grins to cross his ravaged features before continuing his work.

#### O-OSaBC-O

Liana groaned as she sat up on the bed in Shepard's cabin. She rubbed her eyes, and swung her legs off the narrow bed, standing up in a semi-confused daze for several moments before shaking it off. The aches radiating through her body sent confusing messages to her mind, some of discomfort and some of pleasure. The sheer strangeness of it bothered her ... but she shook that feeling off as well.

The memories of the night before tangled in her mind, along with flashes of Shepard's life, and the slow thrum of the link between them. Shepard was ... irritated, upset, and worried about something, but otherwise alright. Liana walked over to the small sink, splashing water on her face, and wincing at the pain in her shoulder.

She'd have to wait another day or two to head to the hospital, at least until the bruising faded. With any luck, Chakwas would be off the ship when she refilled the medicines in the shoulder package.

Answering questions about why she was as battered as she was to the human doctor would be ... exquisitely awkward. Liara sighed, and put on one of the too-tight BDU's Shepard had left out, slipping out of her quarters quietly.

Luckily, the mess decks were empty, and Liara was able to reach the science lab and put on a fresh University of Serrice outfit. She noted it was her last one, and she wondered if she could perhaps buy some kind of jumpsuits or other easy to move in clothing on the Citadel. Her need to cling to her university status had faded in the upheaval of her life that was last night.

She left the science bay, and was refilling the medicine in her shoulder package when Pressly came into the medbay, a faint smile on his face. "Dr. T'Soni. How are you feeling?"

She stood, adjusting the package against her arm, and pulling at her sleeve a bit to alter the fit. "I am well, Lieutenant Commander. May I be of service?"

The XO gave her a piercing look, then hit the trigger that lowered the shades to the med bay. "I think we need to talk, Doctor. Have a seat."

Liara felt a flash of apprehension as she did so, nervously facing him as he continued to stand, arms folded. Something about the man, his solidity or his gaze, always made Liara feel smaller – his aura was very much like her mother when she was in her more serious moods.

Pressly did not comment as Liara winced when she sat, but did exhale slowly. "First, I want to thank you for doing what you have done in supporting Commander Shepard. The telemetry readings I have on her indicate she's a lot calmer – not withstanding the anxiety she suffered when you went down on Edolus. More importantly, she isn't abusing sleeping pills or sleeping four hours a night any more."

Liara kept her voice calm. "I did what I could, Mr. Pressly. Shepard is very strong, and she has endured a great deal on her own without anyone really understanding her."

Pressly gave a short nod at that. "I wholeheartedly agree. As I told you during our last conversation, it's the XO's job to make sure the crew is running smoothly and to watch Shepard's back." He gave a thin smile, and then a sharp exhalation. "Part of that job is to try to anticipate and stop problems when they're small, before they get big enough that she has to step into fix things."

Liara nodded, slowly. She wondered if Pressly was going to accost her about being involved with the Commander, and how she was supposed to respond.

Pressly's lips tightened into a firm line. "Shepard met with members of the AIS about a half-hour ago, before she went to see the Council. One of things she told me before she left is that the AIS told her something very troubling. Shepard wanted to ... handle this herself, but I told her that it was best to let me do it, seeing that she was ... agitated."

His eyes met hers steadily. "Sergeant Telanya is not just a C-SEC officer. She was sent here on order from the asari government to monitor and spy on you, and if you became a 'threat', to kill you."

Liara, despite herself, relaxed slightly at his words. While they were troubling, anything was preferable to Pressly interrogating her about her relationship with Shepard, at least until she had time to fix up her own head. She shook the thoughts clear and refocused on the conversation at hand. "Kill me? Why? I mean, I understand the Council of Matriarchs is displeased with my mother's actions, and they are likely to wish to punish me for her transgressions. That much is asari tradition, the sins of the mother pass to the child."

Pressly made a face. "Humanity's religions say exactly the reverse, Doctor. That's one reason we aren't about to hand you over to th.." He stopped himself, frowning at whatever he was going to say, and cleared his throat. "To them."

Liara gave him a sympathetic look. It was clear Pressly was never going to really be comfortable around aliens. Yet he tried very hard to be decent, unbiased, professional and polite. She found her lips curving in a small smile. "There is no need to censor yourself around me, Lieutenant Commander. At this juncture of my life, I am beginning to think of the Council as a pack of ruthless socialites more focused on calming the trouble caused by my mother than caring in how it has affected me. I must say your revelation regarding Sergeant Telanya does not truly surprise me."

Pressly raised an eyebrow. "You're taking this a lot more calmly than I would, Doctor."

Liara's small smile grew, becoming almost smug. "You saw how Shepard reacted on Edolus. So did Telanya. Would you continue with any plans to harm me in the face of that reaction?"

Pressly's face split into a grin before he could control it, and he smothered his amusement with a cough. "You have a point, Doctor." He gave her another, more serious look. "That being the case, however, only means that I have to be more cautious. I'd like you to come with me as I confront her and Detective Vakarian about this."

Liara exhaled. "It might ... be better if I handle her myself, Lieutenant Commander. She is ... the relationship between certain segments of the asari population are filled with intricate and confusion customs, rituals and expectations. I do not want her driven away from the Normandy if her contributions are of assistance to Shepard."

Pressly took a step forward, kneeling down to look Liara directly in the eyes. His immaculate uniform crinkled, the gold bars on his broad shoulders shining, his face was set in a determined, almost cold look. "I've kept this to myself, but when Shepard saved the population of Dirth, my parents were there. My brother was there. Most of my friends were there. They were going to either be dragged off as slaves, or shot in the head and left in the streets. Shepard damn near died stopping the pirates that attacked Dirth. That's always been one reason I've admired her among many. Many on this ship feel the same. No matter her past, Shepard is a damned hero."

She nodded slowly, confused. "I agree, but what does that have – "

His voice roughened as he cut her off. "I'm not blind, Dr. T'Soni. *Or* deaf. The unrestricted version of Shepard's personnel file goes into great detail about Shepard's ... preferences, and let's me know what must have happened last night." He reached out to tap sharply at Liara's uninjured arm, and she hissed in pain as he did so.

She met his eyes with a nervous, frightened look. "I – "

Pressly held up his hand. "I'm not saying anything, Doctor. I ... am not comfortable around aliens. I lost family and friends to the turians. I lost more to pirates. I lost my wife because I spent all my time patrolling to stop more aliens from kicking in the doors of our colonies. I have no reason to like aliens, plural. That doesn't mean I'm racist. It doesn't mean I have any problems with *you*, of any kind. And it doesn't mean I don't ... approve."

His voice evened out, even as Liara's eyes widened in shock. "What you and Shepard do is between the two of you. You weren't exactly quiet about doing it. People heard what happened last night. People know what happened. People have seen her and you damn near kill yourself more than once fighting Saren, fighting geth, fighting Cerberus. People saw you come back damn near dead from fighting against your own mother. People on this ship *respect* you, Doctor."

His jaw firmed. "People are not going to say a *god damned thing* or I will throw them out the airlock myself. That is *not* what this discussion is about."

Liara swallowed and he continued. "Two weeks ago she was about damned near a nervous breakdown,

now she's smiling. I don't give a damn if you did a threesome with the krogan if you keep her going and happy, Doctor. What I do care about is that you're now the only person on the boat who I can't risk getting killed. You're the only person on the boat who I have to make sure is alright, because you're the only person on the boat who's making sure *she* is alright. Compared to that, I couldn't give a shit about Sergeant Telanya's 'contributions'."

Liara found herself shaking. Pressly's eyes wouldn't let hers go. "So no, Doctor, you are not going into a confrontation with a turian and an asari sent here to kill you without me standing right there next to you, armed, and two marines as backup. I'm handling this because Shepard would have turned her to **paste**. You're coming with me so if she does anything biotic you can stop it."

Liara nodded, and Pressly stood up, holding out his hand. She took it, and he gave her a small smile.

"I'm not a big fan of aliens, Doctor, but you I think I can trust. Follow me."

### O-OSaBC-O

The forward battery was cramped, narrow, and dark, intended only for use during battle, not as a place of residence. It had an almost homey feel sometimes, when Telanya could wrap herself in Garrus's arms and forget C-Sec, ardat-yakshi, crazy Spectres (both human and turian) or the Thirty. Other times it almost magnified her sense of attachment to Garrus, reassuring herself he was still there with little touches that drew only the occasional snarky remark from her lover.

"Maybe I should install a tracking beacon in my fringe, Tel", he'd joked.

But there were times when the closeness of the battery was stifling, and this was one of those times. She'd been halfheartedly arguing with Garrus in quiet tones about what to do with their down time, her mind mostly preoccupied with the fact she would have to report to Councilor Tevos about her findings so far, and how long such a thing could be kept a secret from Shepard.

Garrus had tried – and failed – to convince her to just go to the Commander and tell her the truth. "She's not a bloodthirsty monster, Tel, really." In the aftermath of seeing what Shepard did when Liara had died, however, that plan had fallen by the wayside.

Telanya had seen asari commando matriarchs that weren't half as terrifying as an enraged Shepard. And the very idea of Liara being able to pull off a biotic charge on the fly only further reinforced her sense of inferiority to a member of the Thirty. The awkwardly kind words and disavowal of her membership in their ranks only made Telanya feel worse – the girl seriously considered herself an outcast.

Thus, she was already guilt-ridden and upset when the door to the battery slammed open, and the hard, intimidating gaze of the Normandy's executive officer speared her like a fish. Liara stood behind him, flanked by two very pissed off looking marines in full armor, and the XO himself looked ready to explode, his jaw clenched so tight Garrus could hear his teeth grinding.

"Detective Vakarian, Officer Telanya. Please come into the mess deck, we need to have a discussion. Immediately." The two marines flicked the safeties off their weapons, and Garrus shot Pressly a bewildered look before standing slowly.

"Alright, Lieutenant Commander. Neither of us is armed. Can you tell us what this is about while we, uh, walk to the mess deck?"

Pressly made a subtle hand motion, and one of the soldiers put himself between Liara and Telanya. Pressly's voice was cool, hard. "I think you both know, Detective Vakarian."

Garrus's instincts throbbed in his skull, and he put himself in front of Telanya. His spurs tightened and a heavy pressure settled across his shoulders. He tensed, until Telanya gently put her arm on his side.

"Garrus..."

The turian didn't break his gaze from Pressly, but gave a single, jerky nod. "Fine." He walked out of the battery, his arm protectively cradling Telanya, and down the narrow corridor of sleeper pods, emerging into the relative brightness of the mess deck, which was deserted.

The two marines split up. One moved to the side of Garrus and Telanya, his Crossfire rifle still loose in his hands. The other marine continued to stand between Liara and Telanya, eyes narrowed.

Pressly sat on top of one of the mess deck tables, his immaculate shoes not even leaving a mark on the seats. "Sergeant, the AIS informed Commander Shepard this morning that your presence on this ship was allowed under false pretenses. Perhaps High Command signed off on it, or perhaps Cerberus traitors in the SA did. You've been accused of being sent here by the asari government to spy on and possibly murder Dr T'Soni."

Telanya took a deep breath and exhaled. "That's not exactly correct. I came here because I'm Garrus's bond-mate. I came here because I was terrified of losing him in some crazy-ass hunt for a lunatic, when no one would tell me what was going on. The ... mission I was given was the only way to do that. I haven't done anything to hurt her, haven't even spoken directly to her but twice in my entire time on board."

Pressly's eyes were still narrow and hard. "Detective Vakarian, were you aware of this?"

The turian hesitated before nodding once, and the XO gave a shaky exhalation. "Is there any reason I shouldn't have the both of you dragged off this ship, given that you decided it wasn't important to notify the Commander the asari sent a fucking assassin on board?"

Garrus growled softly, leaning forward. The marines tensed, but he didn't even notice, matching his cold gaze onto Pressly, the ocular target designator in his eye rotating as if locking on. "She isn't an assassin, human."

Pressly didn't budge, jutting his chin out. "That's her damned reason for being here...turian."

Liara swallowed, finally speaking. "Lieutenant Commander, please...stop." Pressly gave a heave, and to Garrus's surprise, leaned back. Liara carefully stepped around the marine to stare the other asari in the eyes. "I know what it is like to fear for a bond-mate's life. To feel helpless to change the danger racing at them. Are you a threat to me, Telanya of no clan?"

The smaller asari woman had gone very still. Before she seemed tired, almost upset. Not scared. But if Pressly was reading her right, now she was *terrified*. The normal confidence that filled her frame drained away and her eyes widened, as she stammered. "N-no! It's not like I could do anything to you anyway. You're a member of the Thirty, blessings trail their steps...I'm just...me. The ... I *had* to do what they told me."

Liara's voice dipped an octave, her elegant pronunciation becoming clipped. "And by 'they' you mean the Council of Matriarchs? A group that probably views you as walking trash, unfit to even speak in their prescience? You would risk the life of your bond-mate in obedience to them?"

Telanya's coloration paled, and her mouth opened, but Liara did not stop. "Because that is exactly what you have done. Lieutenant Commander Pressly is here trying to defuse this because there is a very good chance that upon Shepard's return she will violently end you both. You, Telanya, because you threatened me, and this mission. You, Garrus... "Her voice turned sad, almost hurt "...because she thought she could *trust* you, and as it turns out she cannot."

Liara's voice turned bitter and cold. "And nothing hurts her more than betrayal."

Garrus winced, a small well of panic lapping at the base of his anger. He couldn't lose the chance to finish this mission, not –

He cut himself off. Two demanding, inflexible impulses collided in his head.

*Justice had to be served.*

*Stand by your bondmate, until death.*

He felt a flicker of misery and self-hatred from Telanya, and cursed himself silently even more. She knew how important this mission was, but had never thought of how her 'mission' might affect it, or cause it to come to an end. And she could feel his own emotions and frustration. If Shepard threw them off the ship – or worse –

Telanya's expression flickered, into a beaten one. "How... how can I prove I am no threat? I will swear on Athame's name itself, I just wanted – "

Liara held up a hand, and the other asari fell silent. "I do not wish to be cruel, Sergeant. I have never embraced the lifestyle of my own kind. Not the empty hedonism, nor the social sharing, nor the endless and wasteful expenditure of wealth. I was excluded and cut out from these things, and they have no hold on me. The Council expects me, I suppose, to act as a chatelaine of the Thirty should – properly supportive of one's mother, furthering one's house in all acts, preparing for the future."

Liara gave a sad, empty smile. "I have no future in asari society, not after the ruin of my name and my mother's treason. You are no threat to me. Not because of my being a member of the Thirty, nor because you are clanless. I could care less about such things."

Liara's face grew cool, and she leaned forward. "I have no fear of you because if you ever harm me, Sara would kill you in such ways that Athame would search for a thousand years and not even find your soul. You must decide if you will stand by your bond-mate or scurry back to those scheming witches upon Thessia, but do so quickly."

The haughty ice and utter certainty in her voice was chilling, and Telanya actually sobbed as she nodded. Turning to Garrus, who was looking at her as if she'd grown a third head, she was almost angry. "And as for you, Detective ... you should apologize to Shepard. And pray she feels like forgiving you. The Council of Matriarch's is ruthless and will stop at nothing to suppress the chaos my mother's treason has stirred up, and in that I do not fault them. Nor do I fault a single clanless asari for being unable to stand up to the bared might of the Council."

She turned away from Garrus in disgust. "I find fault in you that you couldn't trust Shepard enough to tell her the truth, after she has so steadfastly defended you against the humans who said you could not be trusted. You have *hurt* her, Vakarian, and that I cannot forgive. We are facing the most dangerous task possible, and she does not deserve or need such a betrayal of her faith after everything else she has lost."

She walked away, headed to the stairs, and Pressly fixed them both with the coldest look of smoldering anger Garrus had ever seen on a human face. "Shepard departed for the Citadel Tower a little more than a half hour ago. If you're quick you may be able to catch her there. Until I get a comm from her saying you two are cleared to be aboard, I'm afraid you'll have to disembark. Now."

Garrus sighed and nodded, placing his hand on Telanya's shoulder. "Of course. We'll be back later after this is all sorted out."

One of the Marines followed them as they left the mess decks, while the other, the newly promoted Chief Haln, slid the safety on his rifle to home and slung it. "Goddamned turians. Acting like we're the rude ones."

Pressly gave a tight, short nod. "I give Commander Shepard credit for keeping an open mind." He exhaled, trying to release his anger. "And Doctor T'Soni for handling that so...calmly."

Haln only nodded, eyes still angry. "Never thought I'd get pissed on behalf of an alien, sir. But that Doc, she's something else. I still can't believe she walked off a fucking anti-mech round." A pause. "One of the comm techs was getting a bit gossipy this morning about ... you know."

Pressly raised an eyebrow and half-turned to face the chief. "And?"

Haln shrugged. "Put my foot up his ass, sir, and he is five by five now. Ain't nobody sayin' shit."

Pressly sighed, and shook his head. "I assume the entire ship knows?"

Haln gave an uncomfortable shuffle. "Ah, sir...they kinda woke up *Engineering*. Most of the pods are sealed against sounds, but people talk..."

Pressly's head shook again, more slowly, and Haln chuckled. "It's not all bad, sir. Cutie-pie ain't figured it out yet, and the Master Chief managed to talk the rest of the Marines out of bro-fisting the Doc for hitting third base like the fist of God..."

Pressly grimaced, and then his eyebrow shot up again, higher than before. "*Cutie-pie*, Chief?"

Haln nervously scratched the back of his neck. "Ah, er, Engineer Tali, sir. The name...Ash started it...it just..."

"Ah, god. That's it, Chief. I'm going to get drunk out of my mind." Pressly pushed off the table and stood, brushing unseen lint from his uniform. "At this rate, I'll be completely bald in a year."

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## Chapter 91: Chapter 82 : Telanya , Cowed

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**A/N:** The logical conclusion to what happens when you threaten Liara. I wanted this chapter to have some emotional pop to it, but I'm not 100% I like it. Once again, feedback in reviews or PM's is always useful.

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Shepard's meeting with the Citadel, hard on the heels of her disturbing little chat with the AIS and Commissar Chisholm, went about as well as every other meeting she had with them.

The opulence of the Council chambers grated on her nerves, the ever-fucking pier she had to stand on like some kind of begging supplicant grated on her nerves, and the sneering skepticism of Sparatus towards anything coming out of her mouth grated on her nerves.

The Council had several C-SEC financial analysts on hand to go through the Cerberus data she provided, three volus and two salarians. She had to wait for fifteen minutes to allow them to sift through it before the lead investigator, a volus, waddled up to address the Council.

"The records appear to be **shrrkk** in order, Councilors. There is a distressing **shrrkk** amount of data contamination in them, and the exchanges conducted are **shrrkk** murky. But it corresponds to at least what we can find of **shrrkk** financial transactions made aboard the Citadel itself."

The salarians started arguing about 'data clerinations' and 'core fiduciary responsibilities of accounting principles' and a ton of other boring shit, but in the end they all admitted the records looked very legitimate, and that the exposure of Cerberus in the SA was limited to racist thugs and companies already under suspicion for their links to Cord-Hislop Aerospace.

*Fine, Telanya didn't double cross me with the data at least. I won't reduce her to fucking ketchup ... yet.*

She was seething over the revelation from the AIS that the asari cop was a spy for the Council of

Matriarchs. She was more hurt by the ugly fact that Garrus had to have known, since they were bond-mates. It hadn't really hit her until the air-car ride over to the tower gave her the space to actually think about it, but the more she did think about it the more it angered her.

She was also still grappling with some of the effects of her bond with Liara. Most of it wasn't bad, but Liara's life had been a long, lonely, empty desolation of people not giving her the support she needed. Aside from the ministrations and attention of Shiala – and Shepard felt the full impact of her death now as she had not before – literally no one had ever encouraged or backed Liara in anything she did. All her brilliance, her will, her determination, came from herself alone.

As fucked up as Shepard's life had been, as horrible as it had been, Shepard had at least found a few people to try to help her. Liara didn't even have her family. Her aunt despised her, and her relatives found her distasteful in the extreme. Asari society looked at her as some kind of repugnant cretin because she was a purebred, and that bitch at the University of Serrice was going to have her throat kicked in just as soon as Shepard got done putting bullets in Saren and Benezia. The anger she felt from that was poisoning her entire mind, only amplifying her rage at Telanya and Garrus.

*I don't know who I want to smash more. Telanya, or Liara's fucking aunt.*

With a firm effort she pushed that particular homicidal tendency down, refocusing on the Council itself.

After the volus had cleared the financial details, the Council had retired to a private briefing room to go over things in more detail. They were now seated, the plush room where she had shown them the data proving Saren was a traitor put to use once more, Shepard fidgeting in her chair as the three reviewed more of the Cerberus data. Udina had finally shown up, and gave Shepard an actual smile before sitting next to her, calm and composed.

Valern was paging through a copy of the Cerberus data on his omni-tool. "Very good work, Shepard. I must admit when you put forward your plan at first, I was not sure you would follow through with it. But smashing Cerberus to the ground in this fashion will help many people sleep better at night."

She shrugged, as Tevos continued. "I do not know if you are aware of the political statements made by the Systems Alliance government about the assault on Cerberus, but a new political alignment of your government appears to be upset about their destruction."

Shepard nodded coolly. "Yes, ma'am. I saw that. Saracino is a bag of walking trash, and if he attempts to interfere in my investigations or hunt for Saren he will regret it."

Sparatus made a gesture with his hands as if throwing something away. "Words, Commander. We have no clue what you handed over to your Admiral Vandefar at the system's edge, or what you might have covered up to protect your Systems Alliance. Words are always empty."

Shepard folded her arms and rolled her eyes. "I find that a curious statement, coming from a politician, sir. I wanted Cerberus gone, you wanted Cerberus gone, and now Cerberus is gone. I can't control what some nut on Earth says about the situation, so I don't feel it's very fair to hold me responsible for his statements. What I handed over to Vandefar were stolen, classified data and material that belonged to the SA."

Sparatus sneered. "*Your* government put these statements out there. Your government, involved or not, turned a blind eye to the problem for years. Am I to ignore that?"

Next to her, Ambassador Udina gave a snarl. "General Thriatax Palavanus stood in this very chamber and suggested humanity needed to be exterminated not a year ago. Are we thus to assume he is speaking for your entire government and species? Or are only members of the Council allowed to spew filthy denunciations against others?"

Shepard exhaled, keeping calm. "What matters, Councilors, is that due to the data seized from the Cerberus HQ, I can prove concretely that Cerberus was helping Saren, and that I can find Saren based on the evidence we have."

Valern gave a nod. "So I see. Going after Saren on Noveria is going to be problematic from a legal standpoint. Technically, the world neither in Citadel nor Alliance space. It does not choose to allow Citadel inspections of it's facilities and only pays excise taxes on it's various shipments."

Udina grunted, and Shepard smiled thinly. "Councilors. I have had, as you might expect, a taxing few days. I'm still beaten up fairly badly from the battle against Cerberus, my crew is worn out, and my ship is under repair. I'd like to find a solution to Noveria that doesn't require me blasting my way through whatever two-bit security guards and mercenaries the Corporate Court has put together to ensure their security."

Tevos gave her a curious look. "While we would agree that the diplomatic approach is always best, employing such on Noveria will be difficult. The Noverian Corporate Court does not recognize Citadel authority except under extreme duress."

Shepard's smile became a smirk. "What is the official penalty for aiding and abetting a known traitor to the Council? Are there any kind of economic fines, penalties, embargo...?"

There was a moment of silence, and then a rusty sound emitted from Sparatus. It took a moment for Shepard to realize the turian was laughing. "You want to threaten the Corporate Court with fines? We've fined them massively already. The problem is they refuse to pay, and embargoing them would cripple the galactic economy, something we can ill afford."

Shepard nodded, glancing at Udina. "Is that true of the SA as well, sir?"

Udina sighed. "Not as much, but it's still a concern. Additionally, given the ... political climate right now on Earth, getting approval from the Senate to do much of anything would be problematic in the extreme."

Shepard nodded again. "So the Corporate Court would feel that anyone reasonable would have no real way to thwart them or be a threat to their interests, right?"

Something in her voice caught the attention of Valern, who gave her a long look. "Spectre Shepard, what are you planning?"

She smiled brightly, an expression none of them had ever seen. "The Corporate Court is likely to be composed of people whose only experience with me is the media, whose depictions end up making me sound like a blood-dripping lunatic who eats kittens and kills dreadnaughts with my bare hands or something. Waving my Spectre status around won't achieve anything, and neither will fines or sanctions. They've defied you before and are likely to do it again."

She tilted her head. "At some point, you have to send people a message."

Tevos's eyes widened. "Shepard, you haven't answered the question as to what you plan to do on Noveria."

The human marine leaned back in her chair, smirking. "Threaten them with invasion and orbital bombardment."

The room fell silent, until Udina spoke. "That is a curious answer, Commander. How do you plan to bring this about, given the Citadel can't support such an act and the SA won't – "

Shepard stood. "The Citadel has do to nothing except to say, in light of the fact Noveria refuses to even recognize the Citadel's laws, that they do not plan to step into stop the situation. As far as getting the

SA to help, both Admiral Chu and Commissar Major Chisholm assured me this morning they would do whatever it took to help me bring down Saren. I believe both the AIS and Commissariat are not under direct Senate control, Ambassador?"

Udina felt his lips twitch into a small, reluctant smile. "That is correct, Commander."

Tevos glanced between them. "So you do not actually plan to invade Noveria...merely present them with an ultimatum you feel they will not call your bluff on?"

Shepard turned to face the Council. "...essentially correct." There was, after all, no need to tell the Council that the AIS would be delighted at a chance to invade and loot the tech labs of dozens of salarian and asari companies, and that Commissars would bring marshmallows to the resulting carnage.

"All I really need from you is a recording for them – better yet, a transmission – officially wiping your hands of anything that happens due to their resistance to be helpful. After that, it's up to my ability to intimidate a bunch of suit-wearing businessmen. I think I can do that much."

Sparatus made a sour expression with his face, but said nothing. Valern glanced at Tevos, who nodded, and then looked at Shepard. "We have no issues with your plan of action...although I would strongly advise utilizing an olive branch along with your stick in your plan. I will have the STG forward what they know about the current situation in the Corporate Court to you."

Shepard nodded, and the Councilors and Udina stood. As she prepared to leave, Sparatus spoke out. "Spectre Shepard, I need to speak with you." As she turned to face him, his mandibles flickered. "Alone."

Udina shot her a warning glance, but she made a hand motion. "Of course, sir. Where?"

The turian whirled on his heel, and she followed, aware of Udina's frustrated and worried glance at her back. The turian councilor walked past several meeting rooms before finding an open one, and stepped inside, closing the door behind Shepard as she followed. He moved to the end of the room, his expression tight and disapproving.

"I am not an admirer of your species, Commander. I find your people repulsively aggressive, arrogant, and most of all naive. The fact that your kind advanced faster than others seems to be of great import to you, the fact that your growth seems to have slowed to a crawl hasn't registered yet. Your species reaction to the Relay 314 Incident and the Suppression will always rankle me, regardless of who is to blame."

Shepard arched an eyebrow, thankful for Liara's maddening training in remaining calm in the face of provocation from her mother. "Did you come here just to insult me, Councilor? Because I have to say, I've heard worse."

The turian glared at her before snapping his mandibles down. "No, Commander, I did not. As I was saying, I don't like your people. I don't trust them. For that matter, I don't like you. You are too aggressive, too ready to kill, too confident."

He gave an exhalation. "That being said...I cannot believe for a moment that you are a *liar*. I need to know if the data you have given us on Cerberus is complete. I know what the techs say. I know what you say. But what my own sources are telling me is conflicting with that, and either their data or yours is lying."

For a long, long moment Shepard said nothing. She had thought turians honorable, but with the stunt Garrus pulled involving Telanya – and knowing Sparatus dislike of her – made her question that. If she could trust the asari sergeant, maybe she would have stood her ground.

But the only thought going through her mind was that Telanya had that OSD prepared before Shepard

had even asked for it. It could be designed to be detected as a fake, to discredit Shepard, to make it easy for the Asari Matriarchy to get to Liara in the confusion of the mess a fake file being discovered would entail.

Shepard closed her eyes. "No sir, it is not complete. I had one of the C-Sec personnel on my ship scrub it of certain data we discovered in our destruction of Cerberus. All of the aliens onboard agreed with my call on that."

Sparatus's expression was unreadable, even for a turian, his clear eyes merely holding hers for several long seconds. Then, to her surprise, he gave her a single, dignified nod. "Deal with Saren, first, Commander. I won't ask if the data you are holding back links Cerberus to the SA." He paused. "In fairness, I can say that every race has dirtied it's hands to some degree at one time or another."

She nodded in return. "There are elements in the SA cleaning up the traitors now, sir. Elements that based on the full data, were never touched by Cerberus."

The turian councilor nodded thoughtfully at that. "I appreciate your honesty. This isn't the time for a long talk about what you've covered up...or why. This is, for now, between you and I. We will revisit this conversation after you bring me Saren's corpse."

Shepard was a little surprised the turian was not using this to berate her, but merely nodded. "Udina is going to ask what you wanted to talk about."

Sparatus snorted. "Tell him...that his comments about the Skyllian Verge were well taken." Sparatus folded his arms, and lifted his chin. "That will be all...Spectre."

There was a grudging level of respect in the irritating voice, and Shepard could only smile in response as she saluted and left.

#### O-OSaBC-O

Udina's expression when she passed on Sparatus's words was troubled, but he was already busy with dealing with the media and told her to meet with him before she left for Noveria. She nodded, and with a deep exhalation decided she had to talk to Anderson, soon, before she lost her entire mind.

Unfortunately, when she got to the bottom of the tower, what she found was Garrus and Telanya. The asari looked as if she'd been crying, the fire and starch in her spine clearly gone, a strained and unhappy look in her eye. Garrus wasn't looking at her, his posture stiff and heavy.

She tamped down hard on her anger and walked over to Garrus, her eyes meeting his. "Is there any reason you are here, Detective? Escorting her to report to Tevos about Liara?"

Garrus met her stare evenly. "No, ma'am. I'm here to talk to you since Lieutenant Commander Pressly saw fit to remove us both from the ship."

Shepard gave him a seething look and then glanced around. The environs of the tower plaza were open, but no one was in casual earshot. She swung her head around to face him again, forcing down her instinct to punch him in the face. "There isn't anything to talk about, Detective. You let an asari agent on my ship knowing her mission was possibly to kill a member of my crew – a member who not only helped me decipher the Beacon images and the Cipher, but who is essential to understanding what Saren is going after."

She got up in his face, his larger size not a concern. "I trusted you. I fucking trusted you, when everyone around me was questioning your very presence on my ship. I trusted you when I let her on board, because she was your damned bond-mate. You knew she was there to kill Liara and you didn't say shit."

Something ugly flared in Garrus' eyes. "I thought you were different, Shepard. Like me. You're spirits-damned right I didn't tell you. You say you trusted me, but you didn't trust me enough to believe I would let something like that happen without telling you? I knew why she was there and I knew she has never had *any intention* of killing Liara. She is fucking terrified of Liara. She sees her as royalty and herself as trash."

The turian got in Shepard's face, close enough they were nearly nose to nose. "I didn't tell you because if I did, no matter what the hell her real intentions were, you would have had to put her off the Normandy. If she'd ever really planned to jeopardize the mission that way, I'd ... I'd..."

Frustrated, angry, broken movements of Garrus' mandibles were all he could produce. His eyes were angry, upset, ashamed, and full of the same tired despair she'd seen in them in the Council chambers when Saren had walked away untouched.

Shepard exhaled, and felt her anger bubble up from within. Before she could speak, the quiet voice of Telanya sounded.

"I... I didn't do this to spy for the Matriarchy. I had no choice. Being away from Garrus, not knowing if he was alive or dead, being ... alone. I couldn't take it. I couldn't find any other way to be with him, and I couldn't ask him to throw away this chance to prove to himself that he could do this." Telanya met Shepard's burning gaze with a flinch, her hands clasped together in an almost imploring fashion.

"I ... I made that OSD knowing you'd need it, even after seeing all those dead asari on Edolus...knowing you would have to find some way around telling the councilors the truth. I did it because I felt horrible lying about why I was aboard." She wiped her eyes, half angrily and half in frustration. "Goddess, I never – "

"Shut up." Shepard ground out the words, her fists clenched so tight they hurt. A part of her brain was screaming at her to just fucking kill them both. They were a threat to Liara. Nothing was ever going to hurt Liara.

She forced herself to breathe, to think, to try to listen. Garrus had a point. If they bonded anything like what she'd experienced with Liara, Garrus would have known about Telanya's mission...and whether or not the asari intended to carry it out or not. Him coming to her with a bland statement of what she'd been put on the Normandy to achieve would have probably resulted in her wanting Telanya removed.

*Turians were defensive and protective of their mates.*

*Asari were focused on obeying authority figures and the collective good of the race.*

She knew the facts. But it hurt more than she expected. Garrus was the one she could relax around, the one who she could depend on to pick off the baddie she didn't even see. She'd been furious with him on Eingana because she realized that, like herself, when he got angry he forgot his personal safety, his limits, everything but his rage. She valued him and didn't want to lose him to that, like she'd lost herself for so many years.

Garrus's stark belief in absolute justice, his wit in tense situations, his iron-like calm when the stakes had gone to shit on Feros, on Eingana, on Therum...she'd come to depend on those, more than she had realized.

And a part of her, a new part of her, understood why he'd done what he had done. What would she do to keep Liara close to her? Kill? Maim? Break the law? Who the fuck cared? There wasn't anything she could bring to mind that would make her even hesitate in a choice between Liara and some other goal or purpose.

She took a second, longer breath, clenching her jaw, and finally spoke. "Telanya. I am not going to

repeat this, so you had best listen. You and I are going back into this tower to talk to Tevos. You are going to tell that blue bitch what you know about Liara, and then you are going to tell her you are done with spying on her. I don't give a shit if that costs you your job, or pisses off your family, or what. You want to stay on the Normandy? You will have to convince me you aren't a threat to my bond-mate's life."

She hissed the last sentence out, and Telanya's eyes widened, and then her entire frame shook. "I ... I didn't know ... I ..."

Shepard ignored her babble. "If you ever, ever, become a threat to Liara, I will hurt you in ways you can't even fucking dream of." She heard the clicking growl of Garrus and turned to face him as he stepped between her and Telanya, struggling to control her anger. A flicker of biotic energy snapped around her, but she suppressed it a moment later.

"As for you –"

Garrus snarled, an animalistic sound that was hinged with unpleasant harmonics. "Shut the fuck up, Commander. I don't give a shit damn if you hate me or distrust me. I fucked up. I didn't let you know, regardless of why, and that's on me. You're pissed and upset, and I am sorry. But as the spirits of my ancestors are my witness, if you ever threaten Tel again I'll kill you myself."

Something dark snarled in Shepard in response, and she leaned into his space. "You have a lot of fucking nerve, Vakarian."

The turian's eyes narrowed, raptor like, his stance altering into something alien, jagged and predatory. "Nerve, Shepard? I was the one who lead you to Wrex. I was the one who stalled C-SEC long enough after the shoot-out at Doctor Michele to give you time to find Tali. I was the one who got his damned career ruined trying to help you out. Don't speak to me of nerve when you threaten my bond-mate. You want to be angry with someone, be angry with me, Shepard. You want to hit someone, hit me. Not her. Never her. She's been fucking hurt enough and I haven't been there enough for her and I will be damned in Kurtha before I abandon her. No matter what."

Telanya squeezed her eyes shut, misery written clearly on her features. She felt the anger and despair and shame in her lover. Garrus had hidden her task from his commander, already a bad thing in turian culture, and now he was face to face with an angry Shepard.

Who apparently was bonded to Liara T'Soni. How could she have been so *blind*? The submissiveness, the obvious adoration, even the shyness – it wasn't a silly girl with a crush, it was a maiden trying to cope with a bond most asari didn't pursue until they were three hundred or older. No wonder Shepard was furious.

But there wasn't any way for Garrus to back down, she knew. Even beyond the bond, his own instincts and culture would have made him fiercely protective of her, and feeling how badly she reacted when he was no longer on the Citadel had broken a part of him that might never recover. She didn't want to be a burden. She wanted to help. She despised Saren's actions – and worse, Benezia's betrayal – as much as Garrus himself did.

And because she had been too caught up in being by his side, Garrus was going to lose his chance to pursue the chase he'd thrown his entire career away for. She couldn't let that happen, no matter what it cost her.

So she stepped forward, putting hand on Garrus tensed forearm, pulling him back. "Garrus. Stop. Please stop." She carefully brought her hand to rest against the smooth line of his jaw, that profile she couldn't get out of her mind, and managed a weak smile. "Shepard needs ... to be able to trust me. To trust you. We're not her enemies. We're not Doctor T'Soni's enemies. We made a mistake..."

She turned to Shepard. "I ... made a mistake. And I am sorry if you felt I was a threat to your bond-partner's life. I did not know you were so connected, and if I had known I would have never, ever have taken the mission, no matter what that cost me. The Council of Matriarchs...was under the impression she was manipulating you. They... they wanted her to be put to a hard, deep link with a Justicar to find any plans her mother was colluding with her in." She lowered her gaze. "If you are bonded, you already... know the truth of her connection to Benezia."

Shepard scowled. "There isn't one. That bitch tossed her aside when she didn't measure up to her goddamned 'expectations' and ... " She trailed off, shaking her head clear of memories that weren't hers. "It doesn't matter."

Telanya nodded. "No, it does not." She took a deep breath and swallowed nervously. "I ... I am ready to face Councilor Tevos, Commander...if you can forgive Garrus. As you know Doctor T'Soni, so I know him. This mission...this hunt...means more to him than you can understand. It is his justification to his father, to his teachers, to everyone that abjured him to change and conform."

She felt tears spill from her eyes and wiped them again, angrily. "He would never betray you, because he's been betrayed himself by those he thought were friends. He admires you and looks up to you, and wishes he could get his father to meet you. He feels like he's – "

Garrus looked away. "Tel..."

She hissed. "Shut UP, Garrus. You can't throw away what you want over ME. " She whipped her head back around to face Shepard. "Please. Please, commander. Doctor T'Soni said we owed you an apology. So here it is. I am sorry. He is sorry. We were wrong and – "

Shepard glanced away, her voice hoarse. "...just...shut up, Sergeant." She swallowed thickly, the pain in the asari's eyes starting to look sickly familiar to her, the broken expression too much like Liara's, the barely visible tremors in Garrus's frame becoming more and more noticeable. The pain in that voice reminding her a bit too much of her own.

There was a time the emotional pain of others wouldn't have even registered with her. When sobbing pleas of forgiveness and apology evoked only a laugh and a shotgun blast from her. When the idea she'd be upset over mere threats of violence would have been laughable.

She wasn't the same person as she had been before last night. And despite how angry she was, she couldn't look the asari in the eyes and not understand the pain the other woman was in for putting Garrus in such a situation.

She needed a drink, badly. With a grimace, she straightened her shoulders, and glanced over at Garrus.

"Detective. Inform XO Pressly you two are to be allowed aboard, and to contact me at his earliest convenience. After that..."

She paused. Trust was so very, very hard. "...after that I expect you to escort Doctor T'Soni to the nearest hospital so she can have her shoulder treated. I expect her to be kept safe, Vakarian, and I expect you to override any protests she has about going today and get that shoulder fixed before it gets infected. Am I clear?"

Vakarian's eyes met hers, and he nodded very slowly. "And Tel?"

She let her own cool gaze flick down towards the asari. "This is the first time I've given anyone a second chance in ... well, ever. Don't fuck it up."

Telanya could only nod at that.

The meeting with Tevos was ugly.

Telanya managed to dig up her grit from somewhere, managing to pull her tangled, battered emotions together enough to not fall apart in front of the Councilor. When Shepard had walked in behind Telanya, one hand casually resting on the blunt handle of her (newly replaced) pistol, the councilor's eyes had widened.

Tevos's office, in the asari embassy, was every bit as opulent as the Council chambers. Thick rugs covered the marbled floors, runnels of water splashed down granite spillways and along channels cut into the side of the room. Asari plants were strung along heavy wooden posts in the ceiling, dangling down. The fact that the room featured a wide portal leading to a bedroom didn't exactly reassure Shepard that rumors of the asari sleeping her way to the position she now held weren't true.

Tevos, seated behind a curved, smooth desk of some dark black wood, had opened her mouth to speak, but Shepard cut her off. "I wouldn't say anything right now, Councilor Tevos. I'm having problems seeing the difference between you and Cerberus when you're willing to send emotionally compromised people onto my ship with orders to spy and possibly kill members of my crew. Before I let Sergeant Telanya make her report, I want to make something clear."

She leaned forward over Tevos' desk. "I grow tired of telling that pack of old bitches that call themselves the Council of Matriarchs to fuck off. Liara is not going to be given over to them so they can use her to pacify pissed off crowds of asari. Liara is not going to be a political chip for them to bargain over. Deal with it."

Tevos leaned back, her expression calm. "From the moment you mentioned she had 'helped' you with the Beacon, I suspected your connection to her was closer than you admitted. Infatuation with our kind is natural for your kind to indulge in, Shepard. As a Spectre, you're expected to put the needs of the many before the few."

Shepard narrowed her eyes. "I got my fill of siari when I was on Thessia from your commandos during cross-training. I didn't buy into it then and I don't know. Sergeant Telanya!"

The asari straightened. "Yes ma'am."

"Set the councilor's views straight on Doctor T'Soni and get your ass back aboard the Normandy so I can finish screaming at you for agreeing to this shit in the first place. If anyone else asks you to do something like that, the only words coming out of your mouth should be "fuck" and "you". Am I clear?"

Telanya swallowed. "Yes, ma'am."

Shepard gave Tevos one more hard glance and left the office, banging through the doors, and Tevos sighed before turning to face Telanya. "I surmise from this that your assignment was discovered?"

Telanya calmly pulled out her C-SEC badge, placing it on the desk. "I resign, Councilor."

Tevos glanced at the haptic gleam of gold on the plastic square on her desk, and gave Telanya a considering look. "So I see. A shame. And your ... report?"

Telanya huffed. "Nothing I saw of Doctor T'Soni indicates she's any threat to anyone, much less the Republic. She has no communications with her mother, ignores her holdings, has no retinue, and as far I can see, is very much anti-social. Comm security on the ship is so tight that I cannot imagine her being able to converse with her mother at any point without it being immediately discovered."

Tevos nodded. "You said she is no threat, but stories of her family's biotic strength are well-known. Is she weak?"

Telanya gave a weak laugh. "Prior to my arrival she destroyed a Geth war machine with her biotics alone, supposedly with no neural amp and after several days with no food or water. I have personally seen her stagger and nearly kill a thresher maw on foot with her biotics. Rumors from the Normandy crew indicate her power is nearly on par with that of her mother. I have also seen that she is capable of performing an ad-hoc kanquess while severely wounded from no prior knowledge. If she was a threat, I am completely outmatched on every level, and Commander Shepard has made it very clear any harm that comes to her by my hands would result in my death and that of my bond-mate. My loyalty to the Republic does not require me to sacrifice my entire life."

Tevos sighed and nodded, making a gesture of siari with her hands. "I understand. I fear the insistence of the Council of Matriarch's on this issue has damaged what little rapport I had developed with the Commander. You are being allowed to stay on board?"

Telanya nodded, a touch uncertainly, and Tevos smiled reassuringly. "That is good. I am relieved to hear that Doctor T'Soni is no threat, and that hopefully you can serve on the Normandy with a clear conscience. Before you leave, though I would like a shallow link, so that I can verify your impressions."

Normally, for a member of the Thirty to request a link with a mere clanless was a tremendous honor. Tevos T'Sael was one of the most powerful asari in the galaxy. To be able to say, however tenuously, that she had linked with Telanya would give the younger asari a certain cachet among other asari. Being able to say she worked for her directly would bring job offers, perhaps a career to replace the one she'd just discarded for Garrus's sake –

She saw Shepard's eyes, in that moment, angry, sad, furious ... frightened. She knew that if she linked, Tevos would learn of the alteration done to the files Shepard had given to the Council. She would learn that Shepard and Liara were bonded. She would learn of the Illusive Man.

With a swallow, she instead stood. "I'm very sorry, madam councilor. I cannot. In redress for my actions I plan to swear the Sixth Oath of Sublimation, and I cannot do so forsworn by my own actions. I swear upon the name of Athame, the Shield and the Sword, that Liara T'Soni is no danger to anyone."

Tevos' polite mask shattered. "You side with them, before your own race?"

Telanya trembled under the pulse of biotic anger the Councilor emitted, but lifted her chin. "I side with my bondmate, councilor. And I follow orders. Fuck you." She could hear the raspy, quiet voice of her mother in the back of her mind.

*Be polite, for it is free. Live for yourself. Stay true to your bondmate, to what is right, and to joy.*

She forced herself to meet the gaze of the Councilor, and after a long moment, with a thin and cruel smile of amusement, the Councilor nodded.

"Very well...Telanya of no clan. So it shall be. Get out of my office."

Telanya did so, stumbling through the corridors, trying to calm down. She'd just alienated a member of the Thirty. She would probably never be allowed back on Thessia again. Stupid, silly dreams of raising daughters on its azure shores with Garrus in laughing in the background evaporated like smoke, and she exited the building and stood blinking in the artificial sunlight of the Presidium for several seconds before wiping her face angrily yet again with her hands.

When she looked up, Commander Shepard was there, arms folded, her stance tilted to put her weight on one leg, hip cocked out, eyes level and calm. "I used a Spectre program to put a tap on the audio pickup of your omnitool, Sergeant."

Shepard closed her eyes, and shook her head. "I ... may have fucked up in jumping to conclusions."

Telanya managed a weak smile, but shook her head. "No, Commander. I – "

Shepard held up a single hand. "You could have fucked me over and out in there, Sergeant. You could have shown her everything and they'd have had my ass over a barrel. I know you didn't do it for me, but for Garrus." She exhaled, and stood up straight. "Doesn't mean I don't appreciate it."

Telanya swallowed and nodded. Shepard let the frown on her face finally vanish, and she jerked her thumb towards the docks. "Get back to the ship. I've already commed Pressly myself. Sit down and ... we'll thrash this out later, when we are all very, very drunk."

Telanya nodded, more firmly this time, and Shepard paused to put her hand on the smaller asari's shoulder. "I know what the Sixth Oath is. You are not doing that shit. What you did in there..." The human appeared lost in thought for a moment, the strength in her grip tightening almost painfully on Telanya's arm. "...it's been a long time since someone had the chance to stab me in the back and *didn't*. We'll call it even."

Telanya gave a last nod, not trusting her voice, and Shepard let her go. "I'll see you at Flux, Sergeant."

She pivoted on a heel, stalking away in the same predatory, pantherine stride like always, and Telanya was struck at how similar her movements were to that of the commandos who'd trained Telanya's unit. The comparison left her chilled, and she hurried towards the air-car terminal, suddenly eager to fling herself into the tight, shielding confines of the Normandy's forward battery once more.

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## Chapter 92: Chapter 83 : Anderson, Lunch

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### **A/N: Fluff. Be warned. Flee now if the Happiness burns.**

*I don't usually indulge in fluff for the sake of fluff, but the stock romance between Shepard and Liara in ME 1 was just sad. It was less a romance and more a desperate fling between a shy hero worshipping girl and a hardened warrior. That isn't the way it should be...but then again, given the image the asari are given in ME, hardly surprising. I wanted a relationship to actually have elements of that in the mix before ME 2 happens, not after.*

*The asari depiction bothered me, a lot. To quote a forum poster on the Escapist:*

*"It's an entire race of incredibly sexy blue female bisexual aliens, every one of whom has a sworn duty to their race to go out and fuck other races as much as possible to keep the gene pool fresh. Furthermore, they live for several hundred years, beginning as a young innocent sexy, evolving into crazy, party crazed strippers and finishing as domineering MILF types, all while apparently giving the best sex in the galaxy AND being super smart AND having telepathic powers."*

*While the only pairing I always have is Shep/Liara, I can understand why many people end up not liking the asari as a race.*

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Shepard, after having a second comm with Pressly about Garrus and Telanya, finally made it to the apartment complex of David Anderson, nestled deep in a very upscale part of the Upper Wards right next to the main entrance to the Presidium. Located right next to the gambling and entertainment district, the narrow streets were crowded, the flashing lights of the casinos and loud roars of the crowd at the Armax Arena assaulting her.

People watched her as she passed, but for once she wasn't accosted by any reporters. She slid through the crowds, keeping her head down, focusing on staying calm. The building she finally entered was

staggeringly tall, a cyclopean tower of heavy shaded glass and gleaming white metal. The lobby was sumptuously appointed, the asari receptionist giving her a winning, flirtatious smile and cheerfully giving her access to the apartment elevator.

The apartment was on the 26th floor, and she took the elevator up in mostly good order, her uniform crisp and her expression neutral.

Her emotional state was less calm.

The corridor leading to his front door – apparently, his was the only apartment on the floor – was done in multiple shades of cool, green glass, shutting away the sound and light of the Citadel beyond. The carpet, a muted gray, absorbed her footfalls, the air cool and carrying a hint of some kind of alien mint.

She reached the door and tapped respectfully on the key-comm, only to be answered by a woman's voice. "Who is ... oh. One moment."

Shepard blinked. Anderson wasn't married, as far as she knew...and this was the right apartment...

The door opened, revealing a tall, trimly built woman with diamond-hard blue eyes, faded blond hair tucked behind one ear, and a fierce, yet gentle expression on her face. She wore SA marine BDU pants and a faded SA exercise shirt along with a sweater, loose and baggy on her frame. Her feet were covered in, Shepard noted with amusement, Blasto the Hanar Spectre socks.

The woman raised both eyebrows. "Sara Shepard, am I right?"

Shepard licked her lips. "Ah..yes. I'm looking for David Anderson..."

The woman gave a crooked smile. "I know. Come in. I'm Kahlee Sanders." She stepped back and turned, allowing Shepard to step inside.

David's apartment was palatial. Close-fitted shiny black tile floors, offset by waterfalls and beds of white river stones, flanked handsome leather furniture. Bookcases and alien art set off the huge stone fireplace, and as she followed Kahlee, she saw a massive kitchen to her right, and a personal bar and lounge area to her left. The latter was where Kahlee guided her, with a small smile on her face.

David Anderson was asleep, tucked into a comfortable looking recliner. An empty glass of scotch sat on a table next to him, and his hands were folded peacefully over a blanket draped over his legs and stomach. Kahlee watched him for a moment before turning to Shepard and motioning her to follow.

The woman lead Shepard across the kitchen to another hallway, ending in an office. Decorations and shadow boxes of medals and commendations line one wall, while the battle flag of the SCV Toyko takes up most of another. Kahlee gestured to a comfortable looking couch while she sat on an overstuffed chair across from it.

Shepard sat somewhat stiffly, working to keep a frown off her face. Kahlee looked at her for a long moment before popping up and crossing the room, headed to another small bar. She pulled out two glasses and ice, pouring scotch into each, before coming back and handing Shepard one with a smile. "You look like you need it, ma'am."

Shepard sighed and drank, the scotch burning pleasantly as it went down. She leaned back against the couch and rubbed at her eyes. If this woman was living with David Anderson... she had to trust her. "I did. I ... have had a pretty rough day. Week. Couple of months."

Kahlee nodded. "David has told me some of it. He just managed to doze off before you arrived. I know you probably came here to talk to him, but ... he hasn't had an easy time of things either."

Shepard looked up, eyes dark. "I don't think anyone is having an easy time these days." She exhaled. "I.. I have heard David speak of you, but I didn't know you lived together."

Kahlee laughed. "Oh, god. This is the result of damn near ten solid years of nagging. I've known David for... a very long time. He's saved my life more than once. We got close... let our careers pull us apart. Got close again. Got pulled apart. I finally got sick of it and decided to make something stick." She glanced around the apartment, a smug look on her face. "It's amazing what you can do with fifteen years of back pay you never spent properly."

Kahlee leaned forward. "I've always wanted to meet you. David is so proud of you, talking about you almost every day. He's mentored a lot of marines and officers over the years, and every damned one of them has made him come in some night, muttering and angry. Disappointments. Failures. Except you." She leaned back, sipping at her scotch, pale blue eyes examining her minutely. "You are the only one he was always proud of."

The words hit Shepard harder than she expected, making her blink away tears and grip hard at her balance and equanimity. "I .. I don't know as I deserve that, Ms. Sanders."

The other woman snorted. "Call me Kae and I'll call you Sara. We're not on duty, dammit, and you look like you're about to go to pieces." She leaned forward, naked concern in her eyes. "I don't know everything about you and David, except that he cares a lot about you. He works all day at that shit-hole of a tower with those bigot aliens and that asshole Udina, trying to keep things going smooth for you. Talking down pissed off senators. Dealing with those suits from Exogeni. Screaming his head off at the media to leave you the hell alone."

There was a dry chuckle from the doorway, and both Shepard and Sanders turned. David Anderson stood there, a gentle smile on his face, leaning against the doorjamb. "I wouldn't put it quite in those terms, Kae. It's not like I am in combat with them, although punching one or two would certainly brighten my day."

Sanders uncurled from the chair, walking over to plant a kiss on his cheek. "Didn't want to wake you, since you were so tired..."

Anderson smiled wider. "And you had to indulge your curiosity about Sara, mm? Tsk." He tucked a loose strand of her hair back behind her other ear with a gentle, practiced motion, an expression on his face Shepard had never seen, before shaking his head. "I need some time with Sara, Kae. I promise, you'll get to interrogate her later, over dinner."

Sanders stuck her tongue at him. "Worry-wart. Fine. I'll be upstairs, working on the Academy proposal." She blinked at Shepard for a moment before taking off, and Anderson gave a rueful shake of the head before stepping into the office, heading for the small bar and pouring himself several fingers of scotch.

He looked up, dark brown eyes searching for something. "Alright, Sara. Lay it on me."

Her lips quirked at that old phrase, and she remembered the last time she heard it. "I.. I got a lot of shit on my plate."

Anderson nodded, placing one heavy hand on her shoulder and sitting next to her on the couch. "I have all day, Sara."

She tried to start out organized, framing her frustrations and confusions in logical and calm tones, but before she knew it, words were just tumbling out of her mouth. About the pressure. The fear of failing, of fucking it all up. About Ash and her damnable friendship, Kaidan's incomprehensible nobility, about the Thorian, Eingana, about Cerberus. About Liara, and the nightmares, and the bond, and about the mess of an argument and blow up she'd had with Garrus. About sex she felt guilty about and that look of near worship in Liara's eyes that made her feel both wanted and confused.

It was too much and it just vomited out of her, a jumbled mess of confused statements, and before she knew it she was crying and shaking. Anderson had his arm around her shoulders, stroking her hair. "It's alright, Sara. It's alright. Let it out."

"I .. I.. " She hated crying. She hated the emotions, they didn't make any sense and she couldn't fucking control them. She wiped her eyes, sniffing and feeling weak, and Anderson's arm just tightened around her.

Protective. Warm. Solid.

"I... I c-couldn't stop Major Kyle... I couldn't save those goddamned penals on Feros, couldn't stop Saren. I couldn't .. do what I should have done with the SA...with fucking Cerberus...with R-rachel..."

Anderson's jaw was set, tight. He was angry. She looked up, wondering if he was angry at her, and those eyes turned on her.

The gaze was hard, and yet still approving. "I'm goddamned proud of you, child. You have been bearing the weight of the galaxy on your shoulders with no one there to help you. I'm angry at myself for letting them talk me off this job. I should have been there. With you. Handling the political bullshit. When you needed someone to tell you that you were doing the best you could."

She exhaled shakily. "What if my best isn't good enough?"

David snorted, then looked her hard in the eye. "Do you remember when I told you, someday, you'd find something to fight for beside hate?" She nodded, and he continued. "If your best isn't good enough, then it won't be just you paying the price. Liara will, too."

That hit her like a sledgehammer, cracking hard at the little armor she had left around her soul. Anderson didn't stop. He held her shoulders, forcing her to look at him. "Living is hard, Sara. Living is pain. It's days of joy and delight that get cut to pieces by days of despair and failure. It's realizing that you are going to fail, one of these days. That you can't keep those you love safe all the time, no matter how hard you fight or try. That you take your life and enjoy it while you can, because you can't be sure when it all ends."

David wiped a track of moisture from her face. "God knows if I could have protected you from this bullshit, I would."

She shook her head. "...why..."

Anderson gave a slow exhale. "Might as well ask you why you're with this Liara girl, Sara. I don't have answers. I have a memory of a ragged shadow of a girl-child, bleeding in the dirt of the arcology, willing to eat a bullet rather than let me get killed because that wouldn't be *right*. I have a memory of a terrified girl spitting in the face of a Commissar before she'd let him kick a scared boy who was already down and bleeding, because that wouldn't be *right*."

He smiled. "I have a memory of the best goddamned soldier I trained fucking up everything in her path on Dirth, screaming out her rage at the murdering pirate bastards all around her, killing so fast even Kyle couldn't keep up. Shrugging off being shot, being stabbed, being blown up. To save those people. Because that was *right*."

Anderson's hand closed over hers. "I told you already, Sara. If I had a daughter like you, I'd tell everyone I met "that, there, is my child." I don't give a damn what the media says, the Council says, High Command, the AIS, or anyone. Somehow, through the trials and pains you've suffered, you are still that little girl who wouldn't do the wrong thing when she had a *choice* to do the right thing."

Anderson held her as she broke down again, muscular hands soothingly rubbing her back. His own eyes were hard but wet, as he clenched his jaw again to keep from screaming in fury.

He'd never seen Shepard this broken up. Whatever she'd gone through, it had finally gotten to be too much. Maybe, he mused, it was the asari breaking through to her. Giving her something to hold onto, but making her let go of her past.

Shepard didn't look like the Butcher right now. She looked like conflicted, exhausted young woman, too emotionally battered to figure out how to proceed. Anderson had never met Liara T'Soni, and he knew he needed to, sometime soon. He didn't want to doubt – Shepard's torrent of words had included things like the wonder of Liara's mind, and the hope she'd felt that she could be something new, something free – but if the asari was going to be part of Shepard's life, he had to know something about her himself.

He levered Shepard up, taking in her tear-streaked face, and shook his head ruefully. "I want you to take all that worry about if you're going to fail or not and toss that shit out the airlock, soldier. You are Sara Ying Shepard." He put his hands on her shoulders, supportive, his gaze boring into her. "Do you know what I'd do if you fucked up and failed at a mission, Sara?"

Fear entered her eyes. "I..."

He pushed a lock of her dark hair back into place as gently as he could. "I'd pick you up, dust you off, and tell you to get on the up-hop, marine. Because you've never failed me. You've done things I wish you hadn't. You've let, for far too long, hate and pain and most of all fear rule you, derail you from the the person you could be."

He loosened his grip on her. "Now, just maybe, you can get past this pain. You will get past it, Sara. I don't want to hear you ever wondering what will happen when you mess up, or what will happen when shit goes bad. I want to hear you tell me what you're going to do when you triumph. What you're going to do when you pull up to the Citadel with Saren's body and the pressure goes away."

His voice grew more gentle. "I want to see you live, child. I want to see you burn away all the chains people have thrown on you and see that smirk again, see that fire in your eyes."

She nodded, biting her lip and rubbing her face. "I.. .just have never done it before."

Anderson leaned back finally, picking up his scotch. "Sara, there isn't a manual or procedure for living. I've seen dark days, during the First Contact War, in my time with the N7's. I've seen enough politics and gesturing to make me glad I never made admiral. But I won't let that beat me down, Sara. I use it to push myself that much harder."

He sipped the drink. "And if there are days where it's too dark to see how to get back up, I have Kae to do it for me." He gave her a look. "Tell me about Liara."

An almost unwilling smile broke through the misery of her expression. "She's ... pure. Innocent. Good. Smarter than I can even get my head around. She had a family that didn't ever support her dreams, and she went out and made each and every one of them a damned reality..."

Anderson listened, as Sara told him about the asari. About her research, her inquisitive nature, her quiet, shy moods. Her pain and her hope, her unflinching, unbending belief in Shepard. He heard her quiet pride in how strong Liara's biotics were, how brave she was, how hard she fought – just a civilian, on a ship of hardened human and alien military types.

When she told him of her death, and her revival to save her at the last moment from Rachel, wounded, half dead and still there, he couldn't stop a smile from crossing his tired features. He sat back, happy to see her posture unfolding, her hands animated, her eyes bright.

He glanced at the wall clock – just after 1300 – and then back at her. "She sounds like...quite a woman. Asari." He smiled ruefully, and Shepard nodded. "Is your schedule clear, Sara?"

She frowned. "I was going to treat the crew at a nightclub at 1900..."

He nodded. "That's fine. That's actually a great idea. But before that...I'd like to meet Liara T'Soni. You have been eating those for-shit ship rations since Lord only knows when. I want you to get back to the Normandy and bring her back with you for a good, solid lunch."

She gave Anderson a slightly nervous nod, and he smirked. "It's a parents job to know about their child's dates."

She gave a laugh, but he saw the wetness in her eyes again, the tremble of emotion in her hands, and he stood, pulling her up with him. "Sara."

She looked up, blue eyes deep and dark. "Yes, sir?"

He gave her a soft, approving smile. "Well done, marine. Get yourself cleaned up and come back hungry. Kae isn't much in the kitchen – "

"I heard that, David!" Kahlee's voice was shrill with fake indignation.

He grinned "- but she can put together some mean burgers. I've fed asari before, so I know what kind of grease not to use. Swing by about 1600 if you can."

Shepard glanced at her uniform. "We don't...well, I don't have anything to wear besides a uniform..."

Anderson rolled his eyes. "Sara. Kae is wearing *Blasto socks*. Show up as you are, it's just some food and wine." He drained his glass, and Shepard nodded, unsteadily, draining her own glass of scotch.

She smiled as she set the glass down. "For the road and my nerves. I also have to thank you for leaving me your stash on the Normandy. Some nights..."

He nodded. "God knows this job will drive you to alcoholism. Just remember that your crew looks up to you, Sara. I don't expect you to be perfect. No one is. We all mess up. What makes us human is that when we do so, we pick ourselves up and go at it again, stronger than before. Inspire your people that way. It doesn't matter if you think you can get them, or reach them. It matters to them that you stopped to make time for them."

He adjusted her uniform collar, and smiled. "1600, Commander. Don't make me send Ambassador Udina to collect you."

Shepard finally laughed, rolling her eyes. "Heaven forfend, I can hear him bitching now. I'll.. be here. With Liara." She paused, then impulsively hugged him, squeezing her eyes shut. "T-thank you...for being...here. Being you."

He hugged her back, smiling. "I will always have your back, Sara. No matter what." He felt something icy and dark in his heart finally loosen up after long years as she broke the hug and departed, her shoulders straighter and her head unbowed.

Kahlee came down and watched her go, before turning to face David. "Do you ever blame me for not having children of your own, with our – "

He shook his head, firm and quick. "I had a couple of kids from my first marriage. Disgraces, both of them. I'm glad they don't carry my name. And I have never, ever regretted a moment with you, only the fact that I was too lost in my career for years to wake up to life."

Kahlee sighed. "I suppose I was too." She smiled. "She's nothing like I expected, David. How can she be that ice cold in the public eye when she's a bag of broken glass on the inside?"

Anderson sighed. "She's tough, Kae. God, she's tougher than anyone I know. She's been tested sorely so many times..."

Kahlee folded her arms. "Never broken?" She winced at the expression on Anderson's face. "Oh."

He sighed, running his hand over his forehead. "She's broken before. It was ugly. But I know why it happened. And why it won't happen again. And I don't blame her for it, not in the slightest."

He turned away. "I just wish I could have shot the bastards myself."

O-OSaBC-O

The trip to the Charlais Medical Center was a study in silence and stiffness for Liara, riding along with Garrus in a rented air-car. She'd not expected the turian to return so soon, or without Telanya. His conversation with Pressly had been clipped, cold, and sullen, and his attitude was...too quiet.

Angry. Brooding.

The doctors at the clinic treated her shoulder, the asari on duty asking her several pointed questions about the other injuries on her body. Liara had archly told her that they were from a related incident, and suggested politely she simply treat the shoulder injury with less questioning and more medicating.

The doctor – clearly Clan-born – had nearly swallowed her tongue at the rebuke, and had meekly maintained her silence afterward. Liara found her attitude – and that of Telanya – disturbing and yet somehow ... empowering.

She wondered why the asari she usually associated with did not defer to her in such a manner before remembering that, aside from the one or two words spoken to a family retainer, she'd never interacted with any asari who wasn't at least a member of a lesser House before the fateful trip to Therum.

That didn't mean she enjoyed it... but it was better than being sneered at and ignored. When her shoulder was packed with regeneration tabs, stitched shut and slathered in a medigel topical covering under a heavy bandage, she was ready to go.

Garrus was waiting outside by the air-car, staring at the serried ranks of the Presidium's walls, shaded from the false sunlight by an asari flametree. She sighed and approached him, and he stood up as she did so. "Ready to go, Doctor?"

She shook her head "We need to speak, Garrus." She felt very sad that things had blown up so rapidly, and she didn't want Shepard's friend alienated. "For your sake..and Shepard's."

Garrus' mandibles pressed tight against his jaw. "I'm not sure what I'm supposed to say, Doctor. According to the Commander, the actions I've taken all this time haven't proven my loyalty to her enough to – "

She folded her arms. "Garrus. You're upset because she threatened Telanya."

He turned to face her, legs spread apart, snarling. "Yes, spirits be damned! She had no right, I told her Tel would never do anything like that, and she just -"

Liara spoke, louder. "Garrus! If I tell you that from what I know, that Shepard would not do that to you or her, does it make you any less angry? If I say that Shepard admires your purity of focus on justice, if I say she is a nervous wreck I can feel from halfway across the Presidium because of this, does it stop you from feeling hurt?"

Garrus fixed her with a long stare. "No."

She nodded. "Then why do you think your words would stop her from feeling the same?" She exhaled. "We have .. we have not been .. bonded long. And she has never, in her life, had someone she could depend on and trust. She has never had anyone she could let herself love." She closed her eyes, swallowing. "And Telanya's given mission – however unlikely she was to actually follow through with

it – threatened that."

She opened her eyes again, sadly, her gaze matching Garrus. "I .. I am not good at knowing what to say in this situation. I have never had this situation, in all my years. I have been digging and studying and writing books, and she has been killing and being betrayed by her filthy, worthless government. Neither one of us is well suited to handling this well. And for that, I am sorry."

She waited, and finally the turian gave a stubborn, jerky nod. She continued. "I .. I do not know if you can salvage your relationship with Sara. But I would ask you to try. Because she needs it. She needs to know that you did not betray her, that she can trust you, that this is something we .. we put behind us and laugh about in happier, brighter times."

She sighed. Wishing she had her mother's grace and charisma, her effortless ability with words. She found herself thinking back to her mother's lessons, and one seemed to fit. "It is not just about trust, Garrus. You do not know what she has suffered. She lashes out and is angry because she has been dishonored, cast out from her own.. groups, her own family, as it were. Because she makes hard choices they wish they had the strength to and do not."

That struck home, his reaction visible even to Liara. "Telanya didn't deserve what happened this morning."

Liara gave him a faintly hurt look. "And I deserved to have to wake up to have a human tell me one of my own kind had been sent to spy and possibly kill me? Have I mistreated her, or been cruel to her?"

Garrus shook his head. "She .. she thinks you're uppity because you didn't speak with her."

Liara sighed and shook her head. "I did not because I was mortified at not remembering the rituals or proprieties to greet a clanless. I have nothing against her, but I .. I do not handle my own species well, Garrus. Those below my station cower in fear and jealousy, while those of my station spit on me as the purebred daughter of a traitor to the race."

Garrus winced. "Tel doesn't ... handle other asari well either. She was chased and almost killed by an asari psycho. She called it .. Arda yahska? Something like that. It messed her up real bad, to the point where she .. " He trailed off at the paling of Liara. "Doctor?"

The asari had almost gone gray with shock and dismay. "She.. she was assaulted by an ardat-yakshi and survived?"

Garrus growled. "I shot her dead when she came after Tel again. Lost my chance to move to External Affairs to do it, but I could give a shit." He sighed, frustrated, and Liara nodded.

"She must be very strong to survive such an ordeal...and I do not think she could have done so without your support. And love." Liara could only hope she could be of such use to Shepard, to carry her when Sara's strength failed under her burdens. To have to live with the claws of the Night-wind in your soul...

Telanya's inability to stand up to the demands of the Council of Matriarch's made more sense in that light. She looked across to Garrus, still wearing C-SEC blue, still locked into a position of frustrated anger, and sighed. "Garrus. I know you are angry. I know Shepard is angry. But neither Sergeant Telanya nor myself need to feel that right now. She is likely reeling and in fear, and I..."

Garrus sighed, finally, folding his arms. "It's .. it's a turian thing. A threat to your mate ...I just need to sort out why I'm really doing this."

The gray eyes met hers. "Am I doing it to prove to myself that I'm right and my father is wrong? Is it less about justice and more about being petty? Am I right by dragging my bond-mate into this mess, which could get us all killed?"

He turned away. "It doesn't help that I'm watched. The humans watch, constantly. As if I'm plotting something. As if I'm going to stab them in their sleep."

Liara made a sympathetic noise. "Lieutenant Commander Pressly strikes me as a man fighting his own prejudices very hard. I find myself thinking he was so angry because, despite his own inclinations, he had begun to see you in a better light than other turians, Garrus."

The turian sniper shrugged. "Maybe. Or maybe my father was right, and I'm a fool chasing a stupid vigilante dream. Maybe Palin was right, and that the only way to get things done is the long way."

Liara frowned. She wasn't sure if she grasped his meaning, but that didn't matter. "Do you think Shepard feels that way? Do you think she looks on your method of doing things as wrong, or that she sees you as other turians?"

She smiled faintly. "How much of your anger is you at yourself for letting her expectations down?"

Vakarian fixed her with a piercing look for a long second before his mandibles flickered in amused irritation. "I liked you better when you were nerdy and quiet, Doctor."

She shrugged, feeling ... pleased at that comment. "Life is change, the sea tide is never still. I have had to change myself in unexpected ways to be ... to be a part of Sara's life. I am asking you to not give up on her friendship. To reach out and try to show her that you still follow where she leads. She needs that. I cannot explain how much that means..would mean...to her."

Garrus said nothing, and then glanced away, again gazing upon the bone-white slotted sides of the Presidium. "And how do I do that, Doctor?"

She stared at him a long moment before heading to the air-car. "By being yourself, Garrus."

O-OSaBC-O

Shepard arrived back at the Normandy to find Pressly waiting for her dockside, still in uniform. "XO, why are you not out getting smashed."

The balding man smiled thinly. "Not for a lack of desire, ma'am." He exhaled. "Both Detective Vakarian and Sergeant Telanya are on board. As is Doctor T'Soni. She said her shoulder is fine, and that she needs to 'straighten out' Sergeant Telanya." His mouth tightened. "I remember bringing up the dependability of aliens..."

She stopped him. "Liara is an alien, Pressly."

He actually flushed, muttering. "...sorry,ma'am. You're right. She's..." He exhaled again. "Ma'am, the crew knows. I think you know that."

She winced slightly but nodded. "I figured."

He folded his arms. "I am probably completely out of line by saying this ma'am...but I don't think anyone has a problem with it. We've seen Doctor T'Soni risk her life right alongside every marine, and while she's a bit quiet and shy, she's never rude, or mouthy, or ... anything but polite. And the men and women of this ship aren't blind. She's helped you too, ma'am. More than once."

She nodded, and he just shook his head. "The bottom line is that we're your ship's company. Your crew. Your soldiers and sailors. I think Liara is counted in that number. She's proven her worth. I have to admit, so has the quarian lady, Ms. Zorah."

He folded his arms. "I won't question your decision to let them back on ma'am. Nor will any other member of ship's company. But it's hard for me to trust Vakarian and Telanya the same way I do the Doctor or Ms. Zorah."

She nodded again. "I get your meaning, Pressly. I do. That being said...we argued a lot of it out earlier. It's not as cut and dry as it seems. The asari is under a lot of pressure. It's like a damned arcology orphan being given the same order by Lord Manswell or Lord Windsor, except even more extreme."

Pressly considered that for a long moment. "I.. admit that sounds more like coercion than anything else...but the fact they didn't tell us disturbs me just the same."

Shepard shrugged. "Garrus thought I'd throw them both off the ship to avoid any risk...and since he was bonded to her, he claims he knew she'd never, ever try such a thing. He figured it was easier not to mention it and have Tel just ignore it than risk having to choose between his bond-mate and his desire to catch Saren. It's a tough place for a turian to be torn between duty and family."

She sighed. Pouring everything out to David left her feeling empty, of anger, of strength, of almost anything except a desire to curl up around Liara and pretend nothing else existed.

Pressly nodded again at her words. "I've done my best to keep an open mind, ma'am. About the turian, even the krogan. I know I'm probably not the best person to have handled that...but you were angry enough that I felt I needed to step in. If the circumstances you describe are the truth..."

She shrugged. "Garrus was angry enough to risk going toe-to-toe with me when I was so angry I was having problems keeping my biotics down."

Pressly made a face, of reluctant admiration. "He's got balls, I'll give him that."

Shepard laughed, unexpectedly, the short statement hitting her in just the right way to lighten her mood. "I don't know if he has 'em or not, actually. Guess I can ask Telanya." She sighed. "Enough of that. I'm going down to pick up Liara and take her to meet Captain Anderson. After that, I'll head to Flux. Go ahead and have C-SEC set a security watch and get anyone still on duty off the damned boat, including yourself. That's an order."

The XO nodded. "Yes ma'am. You look...calmer."

She smiled. "I am."

#### O-OSaBC-O

Shepard's and Liara's lunch with Anderson and Sanders ended up being a memory that Shepard never let go of. In the darkest times in her life, that hour would shine forth, limned in happiness and contentment, and get her going a little longer.

Anderson and Kahlee had cooked handmade hamburgers, in some kind of strange salarian cooking oil that had a spicy aftertaste almost like barbeque. The fries were done up in the same oil, along with a strong red wine that made Liara's head spin with just a few sips.

Anderson spent half the meal gesticulating with a chewed burger at a wall screen, displaying images of Shepard through her career. Shepard was mortified to discover Anderson kept pictures and even low-res haptic video of the big party thrown after the release of her unit from the Penal Legions to the general military – pictures of what had to be General Von Grath, wearing a party hat, glaring death at the photographer, his handlebar mustache nearly quivering. Video of a clearly inebriated Shepard flailing about with Jason Dunn. Of Beatrice Shields having a drinking contest with a Commissar, ending with the much bigger man collapsing and Shields deciding to flash the marines around her in victory.

Liara could not stop her laughter at more images from the aftermath of Dirth, showing a beleaguered looking Shepard surrounded by small children, their little faces dirty but smiling. Of Shepard stripped to her t-shirt and shorts, pulling out rubble with her biotics and muscle, as sobbing families scooped up their trapped relatives and children.

Images of a younger Sara, chin held up high, dressed in formal dress whites, with Anderson on one side and Von Grath on the other, as she was made a Staff Lieutenant.

Shepard got back at Anderson by gleefully telling Kahlee about the one other mission she'd served with him on, which ended up at an asari dance club staking out a two-bit weapons smuggler. "I had to tap him three times to get him to tear his eyes off the stage."

Anderson muttered something, and Kahlee just snickered. "That happened too long ago to put him in the doghouse over it now. But it's nice to know that if I want to dress up I should look for my Naughty Consort outfit, mm?"

Liara had never seen a human go quite so red in her life.

The food was astonishingly good to Liara, and she was embarrassed to realize she had eaten three of the 'hamburgers' as they were called. Then again she had not been eating well on the Normandy, leading her to ask why they did not have better food aboard ship.

The ranting that erupted from all three officers was as amusing and invective laden as it was informative. Shepard felt there was a conspiracy to drive naval business to local restaurants by serving only garbage aboard, drawing snickers from the other two. Anderson, who'd served on larger vessels with actual full food service facilities, implied it had more to do with the cost of feeding several million personnel every day aboard hundreds of ships, and the cost of shipping the food, storage, and the like.

Kahlee Sanders, on the other hand, thought it was the cooks. "The last damned run I was on had a cook who was so incompetent he actually managed to fuck up boiling water. Bastard sets it on to boil, and decides to go catch a smoke. Forgets he has a pot on, ends up watching the World Cup in the port lounge, and acts surprised when the heating unit catches fire after being set on high for four hours. Managed to burn up most of the kitchen and food supplies before we got it out."

Liara was a bit surprised when, after the meal, Anderson left Shepard chatting with Kahlee and guided her gently by the elbow to a side room. Comfortable low couches, much like the ones in an asari den, littered the small space, enclosed by bookshelves, hanging plants, and trickling water.

"Your home is beautiful, Captain Anderson. It seems almost asari in tone in some areas."

He gave a smile, sitting down across from her. "I may have picked up some ideas from an old friend of mine in the Asari Republic." The smile faded. "Doctor... Liara. How familiar are you with human culture, human ... ah, relationships?"

She fidgeted nervously. "Not...very? I am not .. I mean, the topic never came up for me to investigate. Until recently."

He nodded. "You're aware that humans tend towards...single partner relationships, unlike your people?"

Her lips quirked. "Yes, that much I do know. Given that I have .. no interest in anyone else, though, I do not see that as a problem." She took a deep breath. "I can never go home, Captain Anderson. I will never be accepted by my people, or my family. For better or for worse... I am stuck with her. It is a fate I am hardly unhappy with, but I am not foolish enough to hurt her heart by ever betraying her, or anything that might be seen as such."

He nodded. "I know asari bond with their mates but... details have never been something I looked up. I hate to be blunt...but I care a lot about her."

She nodded. "And she you, Captain. She sees you as.. it is hard to explain. A father? A friend? A paragon of light and duty, without flaw? She speaks of you in hushed tones, as if your name was too ... holy to be spoken by her voice."

Anderson looked both pleased and discomfited by that, but she continued. "The bond is not ... mind reading. It is not some mystical connection, despite the more poetic words of my people. The science behind it has been known for millennia. I feel her – her emotions, her urges, her fears and needs. I am part of her, in a way that transcends attraction." She paused. "I don't know her thoughts. I know her feelings, her memories. At times they blur with my own. It is often ... confusing. And on occasion, troubling."

Anderson's eyes narrowed. "You've seen her ... past? Her childhood?"

She lifted her chin, trying to keep anger from her voice. "I have. It is very hard for me to find much liking for your people, if you treat children to the sort of life she has been forced to endure. It was sickening."

Anderson nodded grimly. "On that, ma'am, we are in perfect agreement. I only know .. pieces. And what I know makes me sick, gives me nightmares at times. It makes me ashamed to be a human being, knowing a woman I look at like a daughter was treated like that...and that God only knows how many more children are in her same plight right now."

He glanced back up at her. "I just ... she's been in rough places, Liara. She's had a lot of people...not handle things the way they should have."

Her voice was icy. "You mean she has been betrayed over and over again until it took me nearly breaking both our minds to convince her that I would not betray her? Yes. I am aware. That also has not endeared me to your species." Her voice gentled. "However...you have never betrayed her. And I thank you for that. She trusts you, more than even me, I think."

He exhaled. "That's a heavy load to bear, you know. I know if I'm ever forced to choose between her and the Systems Alliance, that to not chose her might destroy her. I dread it, every day."

She shook her head, sadly. "And she dreads the day you look at her with disappointed eyes and turn your back on her."

His nostrils flared, his mouth compressed to a thin line, and he heaved his shoulders, as if throwing off a heavy burden. "That day, ma'am, will never, ever come." He paused. "What about you?"

She bit her lip before speaking. "I am hers, to death and beyond. She is all I have..." She thought of the meal she just ate, of seeing Shepard laughing, smiling, free of pain and worry for once "...and all I need or want."

She glanced down, almost nervously, then back up at Anderson. "I .. as I have said, I am not familiar with human customs and relationships. But in my own culture, two people would never bond without the blessing of the mother."

Anderson's lips twisted into a pained grimace. "The woman Shepard looked at in that light – "

Liara nodded sadly. "I know. I killed her." She sighed. "I am glad I did. No child should ever have to kill her own mother."

Anderson suddenly knew why Liara did so. "You fear you will have to ... kill your own mother."

Liara nodded. "I wish...so very much...that I could free her or turn her aside. But I have tasted her hate, in the biotics she threw at me with every intention to kill, in the coldness of her voice and eyes. And I tell myself my mother is already dead, and her blessing is not the one I seek."

She looked back into Anderson's soft brown eyes. "But yours."

Anderson nodded slowly. "If you can help her, Liara, you have my blessing, my prayers, and my hopes. If you can keep her alive, and living, and hoping – I will owe you a debt that I can't repay."

She smiled, the expression warm and happy, bringing a light to her eyes. Anderson was struck by her elegant beauty in that moment, and smiled back. Her voice was soft. "It is ... good that you brought me here to meet you. She needed that. She is ... very proud that you are proud of her. Of .. how you feel about her. And of the fact that you are always there for her."

Anderson could only shake his head. "If anyone needs to be thankful, it's me. She kept me from doing a very stupid thing that day I found her...and every time I get myself laid out or down, I remember that she never let anything stop her. And if she needs me to have her back, I can't let anything stop me either."

He stood, smiling. "By know, there's no telling what Kae has dragged her into. Probably the armory, to geek out over guns. Shall we catch up to them? I hear you can't stay long since you are headed to a nightclub."

She nodded. "Yes, that is true. Although..." She rubbed her crests, smiling ruefully. "Never would I have imagined having to teach my bond-mate how to dance."

Anderson's clean, happy laughter bounced off the walls, and Liara let her smile grow as she followed him out.

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## Chapter 93: Chapter 84 : Citadel , Club Flux

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*A/N: The fluff continues. I'm going to have to let your imaginations decide what Ash, Kaidan, Shepard, Liara, and the rest get up to while on leave after the party. I could write some of it out, but writing about the aftermath is funner.*

*The Reegar Carbine is introduced in ME3 in canon, but I don't care, it's too awesome a gun not to use here.*

*Update: Thanks to the guest who pointed out that I'd killed off von Grath in the Service Record. I did a lot of changes to the story during my long hiatus and forgot to update that. As a bonus, the Service Record is now much more detailed, with a lot of the [REDACTED] stuff filled in.*

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To say that Joker was nervous about going into a nightclub was an understatement.

For once, it had nothing to do with his bones. Sure, he was rolling without crutches or his chair for the first time in his life, but the flight lieutenant trusted Tali's braces, without any doubts. Just being able to walk from the ship to the doors of Flux without having to stop in pain was a dream he'd never imagined being possible.

It wasn't even the danger presented by crowds of people, none used to watching where they were going, that set him on edge. Even a casual brush might make him lose his balance, and crashing to the ground would end disastrously, but he was pretty sure that Tali wouldn't let him fall if that happened. He didn't want to embarrass himself in front of Tali, but it wasn't stressing him.

He was nervous because he had Tali holding on to his arm, and he was going to a nightclub, on a date.

He discovered that he didn't have any damned idea of what to do in whatever sort of pseudo-relationship he'd fallen into with the quarian girl. It had started with the first trip on the Citadel, the one where he'd vastly enjoyed himself by railing at the assholes refusing Tali service. That still got to him. He was all too familiar with being looked at in pity or in vague discomfort. Of being overlooked, or treated like he was slightly stupid or something just because his body had betrayed him at birth.

Seeing someone as kind, as open and as hard-working as Tali being sneered at and spat on by aliens who assumed she was a thief or worse had been worse than all the looks he'd ever gotten in his own life. Maybe she'd never had someone stand up for her before, or maybe it was how he got her to laugh, but they'd been close since then. He spent a lot of time chatting via omni-tool messages with her, on the long mid-watches where he was the only one awake in the cockpit and she was the lone engineer watching the core. They ate together, usually with him making pointed comments about how even paste had to be better than something passing itself off as 'steak' that had the texture of glue.

He enjoyed talking to her, more than Alenko, or Ownby, or even Ash. And he sometimes found himself wishing he was a quarian. They treated people who worked hard and pushed themselves a lot better than the SA did.

At least, Tali did.

He'd nearly cried when she nervously presented him with the leg braces she'd made herself. Dr. Chakwas had been amazed at the complexity, the small size and disproportionate power of the harness, and Joker had, for once in his life, been left completely speechless. The eezo alone must have cost her a good quarter of a million credits – probably everything she had from whatever the Broker had paid her. And the hours and hours of work that must have gone into it still left him speechless. No one had ever given him a gift of that magnitude, and for what?

For not being a complete asshole? For bothering to help her with shopping? He wore them under his jeans, the slim lines not even visible under the cloth, letting him walk like a normal person. No one gave him pitying looks. No one drew back slightly as if he was contagious. He was just a guy.

For that? He'd have given Tali anything she wanted.

When she'd come up to the mess deck after Shepard's announcement and stammered out a question about what he was doing before going to the nightclub, he hadn't given much thought to his answer. "Thought I'd go hang with Kaiden a bit, catch some grub."

Like Tali herself, Joker had long ago become very aware of the body language and impressions other people gave off. Some of it was just his way of utilizing the time he had from being forced to sit around, some of it was jealousy, watching everyone else get to be normal. No matter the source, he knew what that slight slumping of shoulders meant, the tiny dip of her head. And thus he'd quickly spoke a second line of words.

"Unless maybe you wanted to hang out.? Not to be cliché and all, but I know this turian place..."

That had been hours ago, and Joker knew he was, just maybe, in some trouble.

They'd eaten at the turian joint he'd mentioned, where the dirty glances were for once thrown at him and not her. She'd had her food processed into some kind of paste and fed into a tube in her mask, while he'd eaten the 'Levo Special', some kind of salarian fish with what hush puppies would have looked like if described by someone who'd only seen and never tasted them.

He'd found out about her father, as she slowly unwound with several glasses of turian brandy, and found himself smiling at how cute she was sipping slowly from a straw.

They'd walked on the Presidium, and he found himself unable to stop smiling as she gushed over just about everything – the beauty of the buildings, the engineering it required, the sheer scale of the curving imitation sky. The hint of bitterness in her voice, as she wished the simple lifeships of her people had been like this, made him a bit sad for her, and he jokingly suggested the quarians stop asking the Council for planets and go the SA – they'd kill for engineering talent like hers.

The comment had left her with a thoughtful tilt to her head.

They'd browsed a weapon store – not for him, as firing anything heavier than a pistol would probably break his arms, but for her. She'd been looking at shotguns, and submachine guns, chattering about how the fleet marines aboard quarian vessels used electrical-shock weapons, and he'd been nodding along (and thinking how cool an electro-shock flamethrower sounded). Who knew quarians were secretly badasses?

That's when he'd seen it, tucked into a corner of the shop mainly given over to sniper rifles. "...hey Tali. Check this out."

She'd padded over, and the pale glowing eyes behind that purple faceplate had widened as she took in the weapon hanging on the wall. "...a MFM shotgun? What is it doing *here*?"

Joker had asked the asari shopkeeper, who'd shrugged and said some quarian had sold it for funds a few months back. No one had shown any real interest in it, and she'd moved it to the back of the store to make room for better sellers. Tali's voice was sad as she spoke. "Probably another quarian on Pilgrimage...selling his parent's weapon gift to keep himself in funds."

Joker hadn't missed the wistful note in her voice, nor the titanic price tag on the weapon. "You should get it, then. Put it back to good use, frying up some geth."

She shook her head. "Too much." And then protested when Joker had (carefully) pulled it down from the wall and walked to the counter with it. The cost was high – and spilled over into the ship's account, he was sure – but he didn't really care.

The warmth and gratitude in her small, wavery voice was something he was coming to like a lot, and hearing it again made him fully aware he wasn't just doing this out of niceness any more. Despite his condition, he was still a healthy male. And she was very, very curvy, and the tightness of the suit she wore didn't help.

And they were both very lonely.

The fact they were, in a way, both prisoners of their bodies only made the attraction he felt a bit more bitter. But he wasn't immune to the fact she made him feel good about himself. Made him feel like the struggle he'd gone through in his life to excel meant something. The admiration in her voice when she spoke of his skill as being beyond even the best quarian pilots left him grinning.

She laughed at his jokes, and he laughed at her stories. The endlessly complex culture of the quarians would have been boring to some, but for him it was seeing into a new world, one defined by how good you were, how hard you worked, how much you cared about the job, not how well you fit in or if you were popular or not.

And that brought him to the real problem he had. The more he hung out with Tali, the more bitter he felt about how his own life had gone, and Tali made him feel good. Like a man, not a cripple.

He knew, in his head, he shouldn't be feeling that way. His parents had done the best they could – his father nearly killing himself working two or three jobs at a time to pay for Jeff's surgeries and medicines. His mother always cheering him up when he became frustrated. Hilary's silly attitudes falling away to become a fierce, angry little lioness when someone bullied him, even if she was five years younger.

He couldn't say he hadn't been loved. But the effort and work he put into his pursuit of piloting, his dream, had not always paid off the way he wanted. Sure, he was recognized. He'd been promoted straight from cadet to first lieutenant, and in four months he'd be up for auto-promotion to lieutenant commander, on the strength of his piloting abilities and perfect performance scores. He had flight command of the most advanced warship in the entire SA, one tasked with the most important mission

ever, under the command of humanity's first Spectre.

But at the end of the day, he had about five friends, and three of them were on the Normandy. He had a tiny apartment he almost never saw, and his last girlfriend had ditched him for some over-muscled jock of a Marine a day after he got the Normandy assignment. He didn't feel appreciated, or wanted, or valued...except by Tali.

He sorta doubted in his ability to do much to help her out. Her father was an asshole with a stick up his ass so far he made Garrus look laid back. Her mother was dead and the rest of her family were all super-duper important admiral types, all of them demanding Tali be some kind of genius. Her closest friends had failed their Pilgrimages, three dying, two coming back broken failures, and she was on a mission that was terrifying to her in it's scope and what it meant for her people

He did what he could. She got him braces, so he got her a kickass, electro-plasma shotgun. She made him feel good about himself, he focused all his attention onto her. It wasn't exactly a fair trade in his eyes – to be able to walk around painlessly required a much bigger payback, like, say, him buying her a cruiser or six – but it was all he was able to do. That, and keep up the jokes.

Having her next to him as he walked towards the club at Flux, though, was ... confusing. More than one marine had made giggling little remarks about how sweet Tali was on him, and he'd originally played it off as mere teasing. As the days went by, it became less funny and more painful. If he'd been normal...if she was anything but trapped in a suit...

He sighed, trying not to think about it. She meant a lot more to him that he knew what to do with or say, and jokes couldn't cover the frustration he felt. For tonight, though, he was going to set that aside, have fun, and pretend he didn't care what anyone else thought, as long as she was laughing and having fun and not twisting her hands in anxiety and worrying she wasn't good enough.

He was so caught up in his thoughts that he didn't see a turian turn away swiftly from his argument with another turian. The turian was moving quickly, and Joker, unable to avoid him, crashed almost directly into the taller alien. He staggered back, panicking as he felt pain bloom in his arm, but Tali was there, stopping him from falling, the soft feel of her body against his comfortable.

The turian snarled, his dark black face smeared with wild red, spiky facepaint. Cold green eyes stared down at him, and his mandibles flared as he sneered out his words. "Watch where you're going, monkey, and take your filthy quarian slut back to the Lower Wards."

Hate and anger flared in him as Tali cringed from the buzzing tone of the turian. "Make me, you spiky plated asshole. You ran into me." A part of his mind screamed at him to stop while the rest of him gently positioned Tali behind him, despite the fact that she was armed and healthy and he was broken and fragile.

He was angry and sick of people talking shit to someone he cared about.

The turian slowly turned to face him, towering over he and Tali both by a good foot. The alien's eyes narrowed, and he smiled, displaying a row of needle-like teeth. "Or what, primate?"

Joker opened his mouth to respond when a heavy grating voice from the side spoke up. "Or we'll beat your punk dinosaur ass into the ground for fucking with our pilot and engineer, spike."

Joker turned, as did Tali and the turian, to see the blocky form of Sergeant Ownby standing there. He was shorter than the turian, but his shoulders were nearly as broad, and thick muscle danced below his skin-tight shirt. Next to him, Corporal Haskins pretty features were twisted into a sneer, her knuckles cracking. The four Normandy marines behind them all glared at the turian.

Haskins shook her head. "Just like a fucking spike. Pick on the small guy and the quarian. Real big man

we got here."

Joker smirked. "You should make the like the Mu Relay and get lost, buddy." The turian snarled again, and stalked off, shoving past Ownby and vanishing into the heavy crowds coming down from the stairway leading up to the Presidium proper.

After a moment, the group of marines broke down snickering, and Ownby proffered a fist-bump. "That was ice cold, man. Make like the Mu Relay, hee."

Joker bumped fists, swallowing as he realized he was breathing too fast. He exhaled, trying to control his nerves. "He's lucky you guys came along or he would have been fucked."

Haskins raised her eyebrow. "I know Cutie-pie fixed your legs up, but that don't mean you can go whooping ass on turians, Joker." She giggled as Tali's head dipped in embarrassment at the nickname Ashley had dropped on her, but Joker just grinned.

"Naw, not me. Tali. Show 'em what we picked up." Tali nodded, displaying the heavy lines of the Reegar Carbine. "It's an electro-plasma flamethrower shotgun the quarians use to fuck up the geth."

The marines traded looks and sighed. Ownby spoke first. "Alright, it's official. Quarians are complete raging badasses, no matter how cute Tali is."

Tali chuckled and put it back in the shopping bag, and Haskins punched Ownby in the arm. "You cheap bastard. Joker buys his girlfriend a freaking *flamethrower shotgun* and all you get me is an omnitool?"

Joker couldn't help but notice Tali's grip on his arm tighten fractionally, and he took a deep breath. When she said nothing in denial, he felt a smirk come over his face. Worrying about what it all meant was something he could deal with later.

Tonight, he had his marine buddies ... and Tali.

Ownby shot him a sour look, and Joker just cackled. "Don't hate, appreciate."

O-OSaBC-O

Garrus was surprised when Shepard came into the cargo bay of the Normandy, an hour and a half before the scheduled party at Flux. He found himself conflicted about how to handle the situation with Shepard, and had decided to tinker some more with the MAKO to figure out to deal with the mess he was in.

He was down here alone because he was upset as well that part of him, however small, was angry at Tel for putting him in this situation. That wasn't fair to Tel, but his father had always warned him fairness in life was about as common as honest thieves and smart vorcha.

Shepard walked across the otherwise empty cargo bay. Most of the crew had left even before Shepard and Liara came back from wherever they'd gone to, and Shepard had been throwing people off the ship with a good-natured, happy smile ever since. Telanya and himself were probably the only two left aboard.

He put down his tools and turned away from the MAKO as she walked up. "Commander."

She looked at him for a long couple of seconds, blue eyes searching for something. "Liara says I should make up with you." She looked away, eyes seeking the rubberized decking of the cargo bay, the lines in her body tense. "Says this is just a big, stupid mess, that Telanya was in a place where she couldn't say no, and that you just made a bad call."

He said nothing, merely watching her, and her face twisted into a sort of smile, lined with pain. "That a fair statement, Vakarian? A bad call?"

He gave a turian shrug, shoulders rolling. "That isn't my place to decide. You're the commander of the mission and the ship, you decide what is acceptable or not."

She narrowed her eyes. "I told you when you got on board, I don't need any of that me-turian-me-good soldier zombie bullshit."

He stared right back. "And I told you I follow orders just fine when they aren't completely full of *shit*. Telanya is my spirits damned life."

She smiled coldly, and cracked her neck. "Your race has a lot of stupid fucking ideas, Vakarian, but you all have one thing right, how to get through a problem." And then she hit him with a right cross that sent him staggering before kicking him and sending him to the deck.

Anger exploded in him, and before he knew what he was doing he was up, swinging his leg out in a snap kick. She blocked it and he spun on his heel, faster than she could react, slamming his fist into her stomach with a satisfying thud. She grimaced against the pain, scissoring his forearm between her own forearms, pinning the hand and then shifting her footing and flipping him completely over her shoulder.

He hit the ground with a horrific boom, feeling his fringe hit the deck hard enough to chip a tip, and the pain only made him madder. He kicked out, sending her flying back against the MAKO, and leapt into a pounce. His shoulder rammed into her chest, and his arms snapped out, a heavy punch clipping her jaw, an uppercut into her face. She staggered and his knee came up, crashing into her face, and with a roar she slammed her foot down into his knee.

He screamed, the joint of his knee crackling, and her elbow came up and out of no where, crashing into his face hard enough to make his plates creak. Blood was running from her mouth and nose, but she didn't care as she leapt up in the air, her entire body twisting as her leg scythed around, her heel crushing his mandible against his jaw and sending Garrus thudding down to the deck.

He spat blood, his vision blurry, and smelled her blood on his fist. "Impetuous human, you think you can take me without your damned biotics?"

He rolled to his feet, circling her, and she gave a bloodied smile. "I can kick your ass any day of the week, chicken. I'm your fucking commander, and this is the last time you'll pull shit like this on me."

He roared, leaping again, and his claws slashed at her. She blocked them with a forearm, hissing in pain as the talons cut into her arm, and put a knife-hand strike into his chest. His entire chest made a hollow booming noise, knocking the air out of his lungs, but he managed to stay on his feet and block several kicks, catching the last with his hand, wrapping his grip around her ankle and pulling her into a grapple.

She was strong, but he was stronger and larger, and he just wrapped his arms around her smaller frame and squeezed as he lifted her from her feet. She gave a scream as he felt something begin to give in her body, and slammed the back of her head into his face.

He felt a nasal plate break, and the pain bloomed, his grip slipping. He staggered back as blue blood dripped sullenly from the break, and she dropped to the floor and coughed up blood, heaving.

He coughed, shaking his head to try to clear the blurriness, and focused on Shepard. "Admit you fucking over reacted, damn you. She'd have never done anything to her...you'd have killed Tel if she was a threat to Liara..."

Shepard spat blood, wiping her mouth on her sleeve, the cuts on her arm bleeding freely and staining the cloth red. "Fuck you...you think I'd have killed Tel, your goddamned bond-mate, if you'd told me? I was the one who got lied to here..."

He snarled and rushed her, and she brought her fist up, this time flaring with blue biotic energy.

There was a horrific collision of force and both Shepard and Garrus went flying, as a pair of biotic barriers stopped their respective assaults. Garrus landed in a heap, cracking his head on the MAKO's hard tires, and Shepard rolled into a pile of cargo boxes, which fell on her.

Liara T'Soni stood in the elevator, framed in blue power, the smaller form of Telanya standing behind her, looking appalled. Liara's steps were slow and measured as she walked down the length of the cargo bay, wincing as she sidestepped drops of blood here and there, red and blue.

"What in the name of the Goddess are you two idiots doing?"

Garrus looked up from the floor to see Telanya looking embarrassed, and as his anger faded he could feel her shame. "I..ah.."

Liara narrowed her eyes at him. "Telanya and I were *trying* to have a simple tea ceremony and discussion when you two decided to engage in some kind of alpha-male krogan dominance ritual!"

Shepard groaned, flinging a box off of her battered form, and sat up blearily. "Liara...I'm not a male..."

Liara's eyes narrowed. "Yes, I found that out already, thank you. But you are both acting like fools! We are supposed to be relaxing and preparing to face Saren and my mother and you two are in some kind of ... of... " She threw her hands up in frustration. "... argh! Neither of your stupid languages has a word for it."

Liara walked over to Shepard, and pulled her out of the tumbled down cargo boxes. "You need to accept that Garrus is sorry. Telanya and I have already addressed the issue and the woman flung away her C-SEC career to make a point. Stop trying to solve every problem with your fists!"

Her gaze shifted to Garrus. "And you need to stop justifying what you did as acceptable since Tel is your bondmate and yet being upset with Sara for doing the same for her bondmate."

She huffed, hands on her hips, and all of a sudden it was too hilarious for Garrus. He erupted in laughter, falling back against the MAKO, the pain in his plates flaring but not stopping him. Liara's eyes widened, and she fell back into what he realized was Shepard's stance, folding her arms, letting her weight fall back onto her right leg.

At that, something set off Shepard too, and the woman cracked up, stifling her laughter behind her hand, her hair falling into her face as she shook with mirth, collapsing back into the stack of boxes. Liara gave her a sour look as well, and shook her head. "Telanya?"

Tel looked up, still standing in the elevator bay. "Yes, Lady Liara?"

Liara sighed, and turned to leave. "We are going to find something to wear to this event tonight. These two idiots can clean themselves up."

Telanya's voice was edged with very slight amusement. "Yes, Lady Liara."

As they got onto the elevator and the doors began to close, Liara spoke again. "And it is just *Liara*. Or Doctor if you must..."

The doors shut, leaving the cargo bay in silence, except for an occasional snicker. Shepard scratched her head after a second. "That was...different."

Garrus coughed, mandibles quivering in amusement. "That was...hilarious." He leaned back against the cool deck of the cargo bay, closing his eyes, and the two of them were silent for a couple of minutes.

Finally Garrus spoke as he sat up. "...maybe she has a point, Sheep. I fucked up. I've ... gone at my life wrong in so many ways I just couldn't risk missing out on this, but I couldn't ... miss out on her either. That doesn't mean I don't trust your lead. I'd die before betraying you. I would. I swear that on the

spirits." He hung his head, watching drips of blood hit the deck. "I told you I wasn't a very good turian."

Shepard said nothing for a few seconds, before she groaned and managed to get to her feet, shuffling over to where he lay. She triggered her biotics and levered him to his feet, grunting with pain as she did so. "I should have tamped down on my anger and done this different, talked to you, heard you out. Because I didn't, Tel is worried she pissed off the Councilor...and I'm sorry for that. I've had so much shit in my life go directly to hell because people...betrayed me."

She finally met his gaze, her battered features tired. "I'd like not to fuck up anymore. If I could figure out how to stop, I would."

Garrus nodded. "A good first step would be to not beat the shit out of your sniper."

She wiped blood from her nose again. "Pfft." She shook her head. "Shit man, you hit like a fucking truck."

Garrus exhaled. He hadn't gone hand to hand with anyone since his days in the Turian military, and in the aftermath of the fight he felt surprisingly calm and ... better. "I will say it's a good way to work out tension, but next remind me not to piss you off. I think you broke my face."

She smirked. "Like I said, your people got at least one thing right. Not much else though, elevators suck, coffee makers suck..."

He laughed again, and held out his hand. "Forgive me for ... not thinking how you'd see what I didn't tell you as a lack of trust in you. You are my commander."

She looked up at him again and then shook the hand. "Forgive me for being a crazy overprotective bitch with all the empathy of a car tire, chicken. I don't intend on going anywhere without my sniper covering my back."

*My sniper.* It sent a warm feeling up Garrus's fringe. He nodded. "Fair enough, sheep."

There was a moment of silence, then Shepard spoke. "Fuck, we're going to have to get Chakwas to patch us up before the party. This will be fun to explain. Maybe she'll buy that we were jumped by Cerberus assassins looking for revenge."

She turned to the elevator and he followed, limping a bit, and he chuckled.

O-OSaBC-O

Flux was not completely packed by the time the Normandy crew rolled in, but the additional business clearly made Doran very happy, especially when Shepard – dressed in a simple pair of long pants and a long-sleeved shirt she's gotten from somewhere – sent her account chit to his cashier and told him to charge everything the crew got to the ship's account.

Wrex was tucked into his usual corner booth, muttering war stories to Cole and Vega, both of whom looked impressed, while they kept a careful eye on the crew members to stave off any trouble. Joker and Tali sat together with several marines, both of them getting increasingly hammered as Ownby decided a constant stream of turian brandy (consumable by both levo and dextro races) was the best idea since sliced bread.

Garrus sat nursing his own drink, Telanya to his left, and Dr. Chakwas to his right, as she worked carefully at decimating a rapidly decreasing bottle of Serrice Ice Brandy. She'd already drunk two of the ship's marines under the table, and wasn't even slurring her speech. When Telanya had politely inquired why the doctor didn't sit with the other ship's company, she had laughed. "They can't keep up with me, the poor dears, and I don't want to make them all look bad by out-dancing them as well as out

drinking them."

Liara, rather than show up Shepard – whose civilian clothing was about as plain and dowdy as she could get, Sara clearly being uncomfortable with the idea of showing off her body – had dressed in a long, pale blue dress that complemented her slender figure. The two sat quietly at a private table in the overhead floor, Liara sipping at a tall thin glass of something blue and asari, while Shepard indulged in scotch.

Shepard's eye was drawn to the dance floor, where Kaidan and Ash were having a dance off of some kind with an asari and her turian date. Neither the turian or Kaidan were *bad*, per se, but Ash and the asari girl were performing moves Shepard had to admit looked impressive and difficult. "Yeeahh, I'm glad I'm not down there. People would die laughing at me."

Liara's lips curved slightly. She'd felt the waves of amusement and calm acceptance from Shepard after she'd left the cargo bay, and the sight of Shepard and Garrus walking into Flux together, bickering about sniper rifles, had settled the few looks of suspicion she'd seen on the faces of the crew. She wasn't angry at Shepard for the fight she and Garrus had any more – somehow, that had worked out whatever remaining anger the two had, and for that she was grateful.

More to the point, maybe it had given Shepard something to let loose with, as she seemed utterly relaxed right now. Seeing her in civilian clothing put her in a whole new light to Liara. The simple lines of her shirt didn't exactly obscure her figure, but they did soften her image, and despite the bruises on her jaw, she looked...beautiful. Alive. Happy.

Liara smiled, and laid her hand over Shepard's. "It is merely dancing, Sara. It is not as if you are engaged in combat."

Shepard muttered. "No, it's worse. Me dancing is like giving a flamethrower to a *vorcha* and then wondering why the room is on fire. Just a bad idea." She took another sip of her scotch. "Besides, the chicken and I sorta banged each other up too much for me to dance."

Liara rolled her eyes, then returned her gaze to the info-pad in front of her. Shepard raised an eyebrow. "Just because we aren't dancing doesn't mean you need study...whatever that is. Relax."

Liara smiled. "I am trying to. I find myself more able to do so if I can get certain thoughts off of my mind." She gestured to the pad. "I have gathered all the information I can on Noveria in preparation for our ... trip. My mother has been seen several times on the planet, and the Corporate Court there has not even tried to detain her."

Shepard snorted. "Neither would I. Rent-a-cops and two bit mercs against a matriarch and a bunch of commandos? Not good for business, I suspect. It doesn't matter." She looked up. "Are you going to be okay if things go bad and... we can't talk her down?"

Liara's mouth tightened. "If what Shiala said was correct, we will not be able to talk her down." She exhaled. "And perhaps, Sara, there is no longer anything for me to say to her. What can be said? Saren is her bond-mate, as I am yours. If you decided tomorrow to attack your people for the pain they had subjected you to, do you think I would try and stop you?"

Shepard winced, and Liara took another sip of her drink. "It may be she is coerced. Or it may be she is doing it out of her own free will. Whatever the cause, Sara, she was not trying to subdue me on Feros. She was trying to kill me."

Liara sighed, and her hand slipped across the table to fold around Shepard's again. "I keep wishing that the situation was different...even as I sit here, planning how I will go about murdering my own mother." She recalled her conversation with Anderson. "No child should have to kill their own mother."

Shepard nodded, sipping at her scotch. "If there is any chance we can subdue her without killing her, Liara, I promise to find a way."

Liara smiled sadly. "The situation with Benezia is almost identical to that of ... Rachel." She glanced around, making sure no one was listening. "The Asari Republic cannot afford to leave her alive, for she knows too many secrets they are clearly worried about getting out."

Shepard shook her head. "Figures. Sometimes I wonder if the entire universe is just fucking evil. Surely normal people don't have to put up with this kind of shit."

Liara shrugged, trailing her fingers up Shepard's arm to turn her head to face her, and with barely a hesitation, kissed her on the lips. "I did not intend to darken your mood, Sara." She shut off the info-pad with an exhalation and slid it across the table. "As you said, we are here to relax."

Shepard smiled. "Oh, I am." Her gaze flickered to the entrance, where the pair of krogan bouncers hurled yet another reporter out into the walkways, and punted his hovering camera after him. "Besides, watching the krogan kick the shit out of reporters trying to get into harass me and my crew never gets old."

Liara was about to say something when the two krogan glanced at each other and stepped back. A single human strode between them, barrel chested and tall, dressed immaculately in SA dress whites, his shoulders festooned with gold bars. His hard gray eyes flickered over the crowd of aliens and humans, his heavy gray handlebar mustache moving slightly as he spoke to a nearby Marine. The older general turned his gaze up towards where Liara and Shepard were sitting, and he took off his hat, tucking it under one arm and striding confidently for the stairs.

His presence was immense, commanding, and people drew back from him as he walked past, paying them no mind whatsoever. Liara shot a look at Shepard, whose face was a mask of nervous worry, and she could feel the questioning panic bubbling up inside her.

The man walked up to their table, the lines of his face drawn into an almost fierce frown. "So, I see you didn't learn your lesson about throwing wild parties and not inviting the Old Man after all, did you?"

Shepard gave a nervous smile. "General von Grath, I didn't know you were on the Citadel..."

Von Grath's stern expression suddenly broke into an amused smirk, and he sat down with smooth ease. "I'd forgotten how easy it is to spin you up into a worried little wreck, Shepard. I'm here as part of whatever crazy-ass plan you've cooked up with Admiral Chu, and thought I'd swing by to see how you were doing."

Shepard blinked in confusion, before stammering. "Ah y-yes sir."

Von Grath raised one graying eyebrow before turning to Liara. "At least your taste in women has improved...sharply. You must be Doctor T'Soni. I'm Jason von Grath, newly appointed fleet general of the Fifth Fleet's Marine 1st Brigade. Captain Anderson is very impressed with you, and he does not impress easily."

He appeared amused as both of them looked slightly panicked at his knowledge, and made a motion with his hand. "Relax. David told me. As long as she's willing to put up with your crazy, I haven't a problem with it, although I can guarantee you the SA PR bastards will."

Shepard coughed past her embarrassment. "We're not... advertising it, sir."

He made a commanding, brisk motion with two fingers to a turian waiter. "Shit, you might as well be. You both look about as smug as a rooster with twenty hens." He turned to the turian, and his voice dropped into more cold tones. "Riesling icewine, bring the bottle." He handed the turian a 5k credit note and turned away dismissively, fixing his gaze on Shepard.

"You look good. Less like you're going to flip out and kill everyone, more like a woman. Command suits you, it seems. I'm proud of what you've achieved, without a damned jot of help from the SA I might add, but it's about time we stop fucking around with this Saren cretin and put a round in his head. That's why I'm here." He paused, gaze flicking between the two of them. "You're usually not this quiet."

Shepard gave a shrug. "I ... I'm doing good, sir. Just...surprised that you're here is all. I thought you were running for office...figured you didn't want to be openly associated with me, given all the bad media press I get. And I didn't know how you would react to Liara."

Von Grath's eyebrows drew together in a frown. "Shepard, you saved my damned life at Dirth. What you did there was magical. You saved those people, and ... I know what that cost you." He didn't continue with that line of thought, instead folding his hands in front of him. "But regardless of that, I sponsored you, along with Anderson, for damned good reasons. The idea that I'd be ashamed or unwilling to associate with you is laughable. If we fell out of contact with each other, that had more to do with my own budding political aspirations and less to do with any fault on your part."

She smiled, relaxing a bit, and he continued. "As for the election, I got a very ... unpleasant note from Major Kyle a few weeks back." Her face fell, and his own took on grim overtones. "I was running on a Northstar platform, and he informed that they were not what they seemed. Rather than try to start over from the beginning, I asked myself if I was running for office to improve the SA, or merely to convince myself I was improving the SA."

He leaned back. "When the news broke about you crushing Cerberus, I couldn't have been more proud." He gave a look to Liara. "I haven't always been ... open to some alien races, and I've made some statements along those lines that I have come to regret. Regardless, Cerberus was slime not even good enough for SA bullets, and I'm glad you handled them. Thus, when Admiral Chu asked me for advice on working your little plan for Noveria, I decided it was past time I handled things myself."

He glanced up, as an asari approached with a bottle of chilled wine and a slender glass, and nodded gracefully in response. He let her pour his first glass, lifting it with a sniff and an appreciative smile, and handed her another credit note, drawing a brilliant smile from the asari as she walked off.

His eyes followed her for a moment, until she was out of earshot, before he turned back to Shepard. "As for my feelings about your relationship with Doctor T'Soni...I've never had problems with the asari. And like I said, your taste has improved sharply." He gave another confident smirk, bringing back a host of memories to both Shepard – and Liara, through the bond shared memories they had.

"As to why I am here, as I said, Admiral Chu found your plan to deal with any resistance from Noveria fascinating, and the Commissariat is already giggling. While we certainly hope the bluff you plan to present is good enough to make them let you investigate, if not, well..."

He took a sip of the wine, eyes sparkling. "It has been entirely too long since I did a hot drop with the DACT and put my boot into smug turian faces."

She shook her head, her spirits rising and her worries evaporating. Von Grath was powerfully politically connected, one of the most important generals in the SA, and was the single figure that had protected her from the ramifications of her actions over the years. She had thought, after the disgrace at Torfan, that she had lost his patronage and approval.

If she had not...then God help anyone who was trying to bring her down, because von Grath would fucking bury them.

She swallowed. "It means a lot for you to support me in this, sir. Going up against Saren and Benezia is nerve wracking enough without having anyone at my back."

Von Grath sniffed. "Anderson would skin me alive if I were let that happen, young lady. Tonight isn't for worry, but celebration." He turned to Liara. "I have also been reading some of your monograms on the Prothean Extinction. I must admit, I was impressed by the methods you used to link the Second Exodus-era ruins on Orri to the design styles on Tura Prime based on nothing more than mineralogical analysis. Did you also study geology?"

Liara immediately brightened, and Shepard laughed in her head as the famous von Grath charm swung into play. She couldn't follow half of the conversation that followed, even with Liara's memories swirling about in pieces, but she knew enough to realize von Grath's hobby of archeology had just won him big points with Liara.

On the dance floor below, the Normandy marines were cheering on Ashley as she danced against the lithe form of Ops Tech Siradra and the Ops Alley team shouted encouragement. Garrus and Wrex were having some kind of drinking contest, Joker was laid out in Tali's lap while the quarian lolled against the solid form of Master Chief Cole, and Vega and Haln were pushing tables together as Doran brought trays of appetizers.

She turned back to Von Grath and Liara, as the asari looked almost embarrassed as Von Grath praised something else from one of her papers. "I will say this, Doctor. If the University of Serrice is too ignorant to offer you a place, I assure you that Harvard or the University of Arcturus would sell their own first born children to have you on."

Liara looked stunned and a touch uncertain. "I am not that much of a figure in Prothean studies..."

Shepard snorted. "You mean, Prothean loot-monkey auctions? You know the asari and salarian universities are just digging up stuff for more artifacts, Liara." She took a sip of her scotch, smiling. "And you wouldn't have to deal with uppity asari who don't like you, either."

Liara's face took on a thoughtful expression, before smiling. "Perhaps after we are done with our current mission."

Von Grath nodded. "Good, good." He turned to Shepard. "By the way, there was a rather attractive lady mingling with your marines below. Strong face, wonderful green eyes, silver hair. Your crew?"

Shepard smothered a giggle. "Ah, er, yes. That's Major Helen Chakwas."

Von Grath tilted his head at a rakish angle. "Well, I don't want to keep you two from your own entertainments, so perhaps I should introduce myself to some members of your crew." He stood, taking the bottle with him. "Bring your BDO and your team leads to dock sixteen the day you plan to ship out, Shepard." He nodded respectfully to Liara, and turned away. "And try not to get arrested, girl. If I had a quarter for every time I had to cover for you..."

He strode away, humming, and Liara let out a little breath. "So that is General von Grath. He is certainly...interesting."

Shepard smirked. "He's a smooth, brilliant bastard, and I'm glad he's still in my corner." She saw Liara's nod, and shrugged. "Anderson was always there for me, but he didn't always have a lot of pull. Von Grath is the one who salvaged my career from my own fuckups."

Liara's voice was soft. "He strikes me as a formidable person, Sara."

Shepard's smirk widened. "Yeah." She finished her scotch, and stood up. "We'd better get down there and get some food. I shudder to think what's going to happen to my poor marines if von Grath decides he wants to organize a dance party or something."

Liara nodded, and smiled as she took Shepard's hand. "Does that mean you plan to make an attempt on the dance floor yourself, Sara?"

Shepard just rolled her eyes. "Not happening. I get out there and you'd have to hire the STG to find my goddamned dignity when I got done." Liara followed her after picking up her info-pad, smiling.

O-OSaBC-O

The upper deck was left abandoned, until a shimmering form erupted from thin air, seated at a nearby table. Tetrimus glanced over at the three empty glasses on the table, and chuckled softly to himself.

He tapped his omnitool, and spoke quietly. "I've confirmed it's Noveria. Have Parasini and Qu'in alerted." He waited until the omnitool flashed a confirmation, before triggering his cloaking field again and leaning back into the chair.

He'd learned a lot tonight, and it would be easier to slip past the crowds once they thinned a bit.

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## **Chapter 94: Chapter 85 : Citadel , Solarch**

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*A/N: Another day, another twist.*

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The morning after the party was one of hangovers and grim taking of stock. In the Alliance, most shore leave events were hosted and thrown by the XO. For the commanding officer to throw the party and pay for it was an old Alliance tradition.

One conducted when you were going into battle, probably to die.

Thus, it was with a mixture of *deja vu* and amused irony that Kaiden once again awoke in a hotel room clearly beyond that of his modest lieutenant's salary, with Ash sprawled out in all her naked glory next to him. His head pounded with it's usual intensity, but he didn't feel as trashed as he had the first time this had occurred.

*That, and while Ash was clearly toasted, I wasn't that drunk.*

He sat up gingerly, gratified to note that at some point they'd actually dropped their clothes in neat piles next to the bed, and wiped sleep out of his eyes. He wasn't sure what to think or to do at this point, honestly.

He'd spent the morning at Huerta Memorial, having a scan of his brain conducted. The asari doctors there had been gentle with the diagnosis, but it pretty well matched up with that twitchy little salarian on Omega had said. He had, if he stopped using all biotics and took suppressive drugs, maybe a year and half to two years to live. If he spent six hours a day hooked to neuron regeneration equipment and took some highly experimental drugs with a full detox, he was looking at three or four years, the last six months of which would be spent in dementia.

He was, quite literally, a walking dead man. Despite knowing, in the back of his mind he'd assumed that maybe the salarian was wrong, or maybe there would be some way to change it. At the same time, he wasn't just going to quit.

His parents would be devastated at the news. His father, in particular, was already wracked with guilt over the business trip that he'd gone on, forcing his mother to use public transport the day the merchant ship had detonated in the skies over Vancouver, exposing her and her unborn child to eezo. They'd felt for his headaches, were proud of his military career, always boasting about their son.

He bit his lip, wondering how the hell to explain this to them. He heard Ash mumble something in her sleep, and shook his head.

Ash would not take the news well, either. The relationship they had was one of mutual attraction. She was a lot smarter than any line infantryman he'd met, quoting poetry and philosophy at the drop of a hat, and her strong faith in the Lord was sometimes a comfort to him as well. Her mental scars from Eden Prime had not healed, merely crusted over with revenge and hate, and when she was with him she could let a little of that go.

It was not the kind of relationship that would work. The military was very strict on fraternization between officers and enlisted personnel. Then again, it was even more restrictive on relationships between officers and aliens, so maybe Shepard would not say anything.

He exhaled. That didn't really matter – he knew Shepard didn't approve, and that was just too bad. Ash needed someone there to hold her shit together, and quite frankly, staring death in the face left him wanting to hold onto something as well. Being put in charge of two aliens in a ground assault team and having his marine squads taken was a hard blow, but he put the best face on it that he could and would continue to do his duty.

If only to hope he could die a death that meant something. He shoved off from the bed, standing and going over to his day-bag, digging out fresh boxers and a t-shirt, before heading into the shower. Laying them on the counter, he turned the water on, letting it get warm as he stared at the small blue and gray tiles of the floor.

He'd barely had time to step in when he heard Ash slip into the shower with him, eyes bleary. "It's big, scoot. Her smirked as she slid against him, the hot water splashing over them both, and the next half hour took his mind off of events for a time.

It was almost nine fifteen by the time they got dressed and packed away yesterday's clothes, Kaidan wearing a black jacket over a slate gray shirt and long black slacks, Ash in tight jeans and a shirt that said "My eyes are up here" in bold white print on a black background. He snorted when he saw it, before sitting down tiredly on the bed.

She sat across from him on the couch, pulling at her ear, her hair down around her shoulders. "You look tired as shit, Kai. Is everything okay?"

He shook his head. "No. I mean, it has nothing to do with us. If there is an us. Trying to ... get my head in order, I suppose."

She tilted her chin, blinking. "You probably could do with some more sleep. Not that I don't appreciate the workouts." She stretched, doing interesting things to her chest that Kaiden watched avidly, before grinning. "Mmmm. I *really* appreciate the workouts. PT with you is awesome. But I don't want you so worn out that you, like pass out on me."

He smiled, picking up the cup of tea he'd set to brew before getting dressed, and inhaling the scent. Sipping at it cautiously to avoid burning his tongue, he made a gesture with his free hand. "It's just all the things we've seen in such rapid succession are getting to me a little, Ash. And the fact that Shepard threw the party lets me know she thinks we're going into seriously bad shit."

Ash frowned. "Aren't you a little ray of sunshine? C'mon. We kicked the shit out of Cerberus, we fought off a pack of plant zombies that took out a hundred turians, we kicked in Saren's shit on Feros, on Therum... I'm ready to put my foot into this bastard's face and get my own back for what he did on Eden Prime."

He sipped the tea again, his shoulders relaxing at the warm brew broke up the hardest edge of his headache. "I know, I know. I worry too much. I got a lot on my mind right now, and ... I just have a bad feeling."

She arched her eyebrow, rubbing at her wrist and flexing it back and forth for a moment. "You're an officer. You're supposed to worry all the time and have bad feelings."

He snorted. "You could be an officer, if you wanted, you know. You're clearly intelligent enough for it, and – " He stopped as she raised her hand, her smile fading.

"I am pretty sure the OCS wouldn't take a Williams, Kai. That's...a big reason why I've had to fight so hard to get just as far as I did before...Eden Prime went to hell. I've been stuck at E6 for years now, since I made it at twenty four. I'm twenty nine now, almost thirty. If Shepard hadn't promoted me to Senior Chief, I'd have been force-reduced at my next promotion cycle. The Systems Alliance doesn't want my service, and that hurts."

Kai's mouth tightened into a grim line. "It's also unfair, Ash, and you know that. You know Shepard doesn't buy into their thinking, and I doubt she'll let you languish as long as she's in command."

Ash shrugged. "Still, I'm hoping with something like being part of the Marine unit that took down Saren...I can get the fucking SA off my back and do something with my life." She shrugged, then glanced up at him almost hesitantly. "You got big plans for when this is all over?"

Kaiden set down his cup. "Not...really. I've got something I need to tell you."

#### O-OSaBC-O

Shepard sat in a reclining chair on the balcony of Anderson's palatial apartment, smoking a cigarette, gazing down at the unknowing masses of people crowding the walkways below. After the party had finally wound down – mostly due to Chakwas and Von Grath utterly destroying Ashley and Chief Hahn in a dance off, then a drinking contest, and finally arm-wrestling – the group of crew had broken up for the night.

Some of them ended up in the Consort's Garden, entertained by the welcoming 'counseling' the Consort provided. Others ended up watching the Armax Arena games, gambling, going down to Taseri Ward to catch a concert, or checking out hotel rooms.

Shepard would have gone back to the ship, but Anderson wouldn't have it, demanding she and Liara stay the night in a spare bedroom. Of course, being all banged up from going fist-to-claw with Garrus hadn't left Shepard in any kind of shape for her usual taste in bedroom adventuring, yet before dozing off Liara had wrapped her arms around Shepard and engaged in a lower intensity meld, a calming, soothing presence that chased away nightmares and made Shepard feel oddly safe.

Liara was off, shopping for scientific gear, and that left Shepard with time on her hands. She gazed down into the battered leather journal in her hands, and putting her cigarette out, picked up the pencil she held and began to add lines and shapes to the drawing there.

The journal was the only real object, aside from a few pictures of Anderson and her Penal Legion blanket, that she owned. She had bought it as soon as she left the Third Penal Legion, with her very first paycheck, and started sketching in it. She considered herself a fair hand, but with the designs in the book she was exacting.

Half of the book was taken up with drawings of ships and models, or quick sketches of people she knew. But a good third of it was nothing but ideas she'd had for weapons, some outlandish, some possible.

She'd drawn shotguns that drew on multiple acceleration chambers, arm mounted mass accelerator paks that launched tiny bits of metal, pneumatic assault rifles and dozens of other designs. In an era where omni-gel and pattern fabricators made creating at least prototypes easy, being a weapons designer was a choice, not a career. It was one she felt she was good at, and yet her efforts with the ODIN had left a

bad taste in her mouth.

The journal had gathered dust in her rucksack, hauled from duty station to duty station, until now. Until Liara had woken her from the haze of anger, pain, and frustrated misery she'd been in, all these years.

She inhaled a puff and gazed up at the towering buildings above her. "Awake. And alive."

*God, that sounds so sappy.*

She smirked, eyes bright as she drew delicate lines on the exploded diagram she was making, thinking of acceleration ratings and ZEV curves in her head. The armory that Anderson and Sanders had in the small corner of the apartment was beyond amazing. It had a minifactory computer that was top of the line, stocks of omni-gel, and the ability to stamp heat-channels into what it made.

As Shepard drew, she tried to concentrate on the coming operation on Noveria, but her thoughts were going in all different directions. With a sigh, she completed a few more strokes, then stood up, carrying the journal with her as she went back inside the apartment.

An hour later, she looked up from the workbench she labored over, fans overhead sucking out fumes. She paused, wiping sweat from her forehead, and lifted the goggles over her eyes with a smile. The minifactory was cooking the omni-gel shell she'd made, and the finer components of what she had built from her notes were mostly complete.

The shotgun Benezia had carried was impressive, but the asari components that utilized the asari's own natural mass effect fields had made no sense to her. The firing mechanism itself was wrapped in a block of DRM-static omnigel and thus unrecoverable. Instead, she'd popped out the ammo server and the acceleration chamber of the weapon, particularly the part that ignited the ammo wedges.

She'd known Liara was simply too lightly built to handle a shotgun well, and not aggressive enough. Plus, Liara was best at range, where she could put her biotics at use. Benezia probably used the weapon to stop anyone closing with her, but that wouldn't work for Liara as well.

She had instead set the ammo block to a dual-load design, alterable at the flick of a switch, along with a dual configuration for the gun she was cooking up. One setting turned into a hand-shotgun, a fully automatic rain of micro-flechettes storming out of the weapon for close range fighting. The other setting bypassed the ammo splitter to shoot solid slugs of ammo at long-range, like a heavy pistol.

The dual nature of the gun would give Liara the ability to supplement her biotics at both close and long-range, and she was pretty damned proud of the result. The mechanics were tricky – no military would use such a weapon due to the complexity and the likelihood of a jam. And the heat build up was not very manageable either, although she had installed a frictionless rail system to mitigate that.

No, this was a strong backup weapon for when biotics failed, which is exactly what Liara needed. Shepard smiled as she reassembled the firing chamber and wrapped it in a nodule of omnigel, along with the control chips needed to integrate it. She dropped it into the assembly side-chamber of the minifactory, and tapped the haptic controls of the factory unit, adjusting the burn rate.

She was absorbed in the last adjustments to the unit when the door to the armory swung open. David Anderson stood there, face wrinkled in confusion. "Thought I heard that infernal machine going in here, but I figured it was Kahlee and more of her crazy knives she was making. What are you up to, Sara?"

She smiled, setting the goggles down on the table, next to her journal. "Just making a little something for Liara. It's an idea, I had, kicking around in my head the same time I came up with the ODIN...but I never had the..."

She trailed off, staring into space, then her smile faded a bit. "...reason to want to continue. What brings

you here?"

Anderson gestured, and she followed him out of the armory and down the stairs, towards the kitchen. "A few things, actually. There's been some communication from the Asari Republic – not the Council of Matriarchs – regarding Benezia, and another geth attack, this time on Sherat III, a mining colony with no known Prothean ruins." He gestured with his thumb. "C'mon downstairs, we'll talk there."

Shepard frowned, but followed. "What's this from the asari?"

Anderson shrugged, his face in a thoughtful look as they hit the bottom of the stairs. "Damned if I know. Udina got the call early this morning and was told a VIP would be incoming to see him with information about Benezia of some kind. All we know is that the Council of Matriarchs isn't happy with whoever is bringing the information but hasn't tried to stop them."

Shepard nodded. "Anyone who pisses off that pack of old biddies is good in my books." They entered the kitchen, Anderson peeling off to pull down a pair of thick, colorful ceramic mugs. He filled one with icewater, and half turned, looking at her over his shoulder from the corner of his eye.

"Still like your coffee black, Sara?"

She smiled, sitting at one of the barstools in the kitchen, and nodded, before turning to the video-screen, displaying images of burning buildings and dead people. "Sherat III ... that's a turian colony, isn't it?"

He nodded, as he worked the Keurig/Ashland coffee maker. "Yeah. They mine mostly for bauxite and some other industrial metals there, but also nickel. There's a manufacturing plant there that produces some kind of acid-resistant nickel plating, distributed in omni-gel. That's what got hit the hardest."

He pulled out the cup of coffee and handed it across the counter to her. "Seventy dead, three hundred plus wounded, and six thousand pounds of the stuff stolen."

She nodded, taking the cup of coffee absently, mind working. "The hell would Saren need with acid-resistant nickel for? You think he's found another Thorian?"

Anderson raised an eyebrow, sitting next to her. "Your guess is as good as mine right now, Sara. Reports don't place him at the attack, nor that black ship, but it looks like the Council is finally taking the issue more seriously. They responded with several battle groups that are fighting the geth."

She nodded. "And the SA?"

He drank his water, frowning. "There's three squadrons of SA ships looking for geth bases right now, per the plan you laid out to strip Saren's support system. We also sent a cutter full of AIS agents to Tuchanka to turn up anything we can on this Okeer figure."

Shepard nodded. "I might ask Wrex, too. He should know something, he was real irritated with the krogan we – well, he – killed on Feros, seemed to know him." She took a sip of the coffee, and moaned. "Ah, god. Why can't I get this on the damned ship?"

Anderson's broad face twisted into a grin. "Because the machine to make it costs fifteen thousand credits?"

She waved a hand dismissively. "Bah." She took another sip, closing her eyes, and then smiled.

"So...why only three squadrons? Why not several fleets? The geth are a serious threat, and the quicker we find their base of operations the better."

He nodded. "I know that. But the AIS has new information on the geth that makes our plans ... less likely to come about. Our initial baselines of the geth fleet indicated the force we'd seen outside the Veil at roughly forty or fifty cruisers, and maybe twice that in frigates. Heavy, but hardly

overwhelming. Yesterday, the first picket boat we built using the IES system did a penetration of the Veil, and pulled up this image from Benabis, old quarian system just inside the Veil."

He punched a few controls on his omni-tool, and the broadcast was replaced with a static image. The sun was low in the background of the shot, several planets displaying crescents against the blackness of space. Between two of them, eight massive curves of metal hovered, surrounded by dozens of smaller shapes.

She swallowed. "Estimates?"

Anderson exhaled. "AIS and ONI are calling it eight dreadnaughts, upwards of sixty heavy cruisers, at least one hundred and fifty light cruisers, and nearly that many frigates. Assuming the geth went for maximum stow capacity, they can put ten drop ships on each one of those heavies, with twenty geth a dropship."

She did the math. "So just on the heavy cruisers, ten to twelve thousand geth soldiers? Jesus."

Anderson's grim look tightened. "That isn't counting the capacity of the dreadnaughts, Sara. They have enough manpower to swamp anything taking them on. The SA is gearing up First and Second Fleet, but this single gathering of geth ships is a match for the entire SA Navy."

He tapped the omni again, and four more images appeared. "That's only a fraction of their strength. If the estimates are right, the damned geth have nearly as many ships as the Citadel Main Fleet."

She winced. "And they all answer to Saren. What a goddamned mess."

Anderson killed the images. "That's one reason why the AIS and General von Grath are keeping a lid on your plan for Noveria. The Senate can't do a damned thing about stopping it – neither the AIS nor the Commissariat answer to them. But we'd rather not give Saren any advance notice we're coming."

She nodded, then shrugged. "Assuming he doesn't have spies on the Citadel who could pick up on that." She sipped her coffee, rubbing her temple with her free hand. "Any good news?"

Anderson shook his head, then frowned at his omni-tool as it beeped and flashed red. "Udina, urgent. Wonder what's gone wrong now?" He tapped the comm-link. "Anderson here, sir."

Udina's voice was tight, with an undercurrent of annoyance. "Good. Is Shepard with you? She has a visitor in my embassy who is ... insistent on meeting her."

Shepard glanced at Anderson, who shrugged. "She's just getting dressed to head out, Ambassador. I'll send her your way in my aircar. Who is the visitor?"

Udina merely grunted. "I'm not .. sure. The asari didn't identify herself, gave me a pad full of data about Benezia's biotic cult, and informed me she needed to speak with Shepard herself. Tell her to make haste, I don't need things like this disrupting my day."

He clicked off, and Anderson raised an eyebrow. "He sounds displeased."

Shepard drained her cup and stood. "In other news, sun still on fire, water still wet. That guy is never happy. Have Kahlee check my cooking in the minifactory if I'm not back in a couple of hours. I have to put on my ... shit. I didn't bring a uniform."

Anderson only smirked. "Your XO brought a ship bag for you while you were asleep early this morning. It's sitting on the couch in the main room."

She laughed. "God, Pressly thinks of *everything*."

Freshly showered and dressed in working blues, Shepard arrived at the Embassy aircar parking area twenty minutes later. She hadn't driven an aircar since the time she stole one back on Earth, and she was rather surprised Anderson let her drive his. The feeling of freedom was nice, even if the seats were squishy, due to the asari influence on most aircar models.

She walked inside the embassy, nodding politely at the asari secretary who handled incoming visitors to the human, volus, and elcor buildings. "I understand someone is waiting for me? I'm Commander Shepard."

The asari nodded, looking very serious all of a sudden. "Yes, Commander, in the reception area. Ambassador Udina said to send you directly to her once you arrived." She glanced around, and leaned forward. "A word of advice, she's .. very direct. Don't be off-put by that, that's just how they are."

Baffled, Shepard only nodded. "Who is it?"

The asari leaned forward. "It's a priestess of Athame. Maybe a high ranking one. I'm not sure, she was heavily veiled and the security unit didn't like me trying to look more closely." She smiled, and gestured. "Don't keep her waiting."

Shepard nodded, and walked down the hall, turning sharply to the left halfway down. The reception area was on a secondary passageway leading towards the Presidium proper, and as she approached she noticed the first strangeness. Two asari commandos, in full battle armor, with drawn weapons standing guard. And six more in a loose circle on the balconies nearby...along with two war priestesses, in ceremonial armor, with hands on their warp swords.

The war priestess on the left looked up as Shepard rounded the corner and gave a faint nod. "She is waiting for you. Be polite."

Shepard only arched an eyebrow, and stepped through the door. The reception area was large – hardly surprising, given it's function – but most of the lights were still off. Stark, looming shadows dominated the area, casting everything in a sinister relief. Standing in a pool of light thrown by the few lights that were on was a single asari.

For an asari, she was fairly tall, standing straight, one leg behind the other in an almost thoughtful pose, examining an info-pad. She wore a thin silver shawl over her muscular shoulders, and an even thinner set of shimmering white robes that were very close to translucent, the smooth fabric stretching tightly over her voluptuous frame. The robe split into ribbons halfway down the thigh, revealing intricate tattoos that trailed down her leg. She wore a large, swept back headdress, stylized blue flames done in pale blue on black fabric, that trailed down her back to almost touch the floor.

A wide, black leather belt was slung at an angle around her flared hips, and on one side of the belt was a heavy, sharp blade-like implement, gleaming bright silver even in the dim light, a faint and irregular blue glow barely viable around its edges. The asari's spare hand rested almost casually on the pommel of the blade, long fingernails tapping tiny pinging notes on the hilt.

She looked up as Shepard approached. Her gaze was strikingly powerful – large, liquid eyes of an exquisitely pale gray, almost white, in a sensual, strong face. A single white line split her lip, and then curved around her cheekbones, coming together on her forehead in the asari symbol for "sun".

Her feet were bare, and they made no sound as she gently turned to face Shepard more fully. "So, you are the the dartfish in the oceans that has riled up so much attention. Your aura is less bloodthirsty and more at peace than I was lead to believe would be the case."

Shepard stopped, folding her arms. "I'm afraid I don't know who you are, or why you wished to speak with me. Perhaps I could be of more help if you let me know that much, instead of cryptic asari

bullshit."

The woman laughed, a languid, liquid sound that was not very mirthful. "I am Thana Vathan, High Solarch of the Temple of the Sun Ascendant of Athame's Glory. I suppose you would call me the High Priestess of the Sun. I am here to ... question and educate you."

She frowned. Even without the tangled swirl of Liara's memories in her own, she'd have recognized that title. The High Solarch was the highest asari in the temple of Athame, a devastatingly powerful biotic – perhaps the most powerful in the entire galaxy. The blade at her hip would be a warp sword, a metal blade that could have warp-fire channeled through, enabling it to cut almost anything.

Liara's memories of the woman were blurred, but the sharp sense of danger rang through all of them. With a motion she remembered from her days with asari commandos and prompted by what little of Liara's lessons from her mother could be scraped together, Shepard made a gesture of asari and a deep bow. "I am honored, Solarch. But confused. I fear I don't have any idea what you could ask me that I'd have any answers for ... unless this is about Doctor T'Soni."

The asari woman shook her head. "My, your biotic field flares so fiercely when you say that name." Vathan walked forward, every movement lithe with power, sensuality, and confidence. Shepard could smell some kind of sweet, lingering perfume in the air, and exhaled to retain her composure.

Vathan smirked as she drew closer. "I am not interested in you, or your entire race, to be honest. Your species' entire recorded history started since the Temple has had haptic devotional scenes on the ceiling, and that makes you somewhat boring. You are too new, too unformed to be of any real interest yet."

She smiled wider. "Nor am I interested in ... Doctor T'Soni. The fumbblings of the Council of Matriarchs show their fear of Benezia, which is wise. But in that wisdom they made the mistake of alienating – pardon the pun – the person most likely to try and stop her. That is foolishness."

The asari woman began circling Shepard, her right hand never leaving the hilt of her sword. "I respect your lethality and the ... devotion, whatever it's source, to the T'Soni girl-child who is swept in your wake. But that is not why I am here."

Shepard sighed. "Then why are you here?"

She tapped the info-pad in her hand. "As I said, you are hunting Benezia T'Soni. Who has knowledge of the Temple we would prefer outsiders not to ... access. Things that might cast the asari in a poor light, things we do not even inform the Council of Matriarchs about fully. These secrets must be kept such. And thus, I need to know a few things. And seeing as your hunt for Benezia is likely to end in a fight, give you some advice."

Shepard rubbed her chin. "My objectives are pretty straightforward. If I can capture Benezia, I –" she broke off as the asari erupted in laughter.

"Capture Benezia? Oh, how droll." The asari woman's laughter rang out again, this time truly amused, and she looked at Shepard with a curious tilt to her head. "You certainly do not lack for confidence, human!"

Shepard felt her anger flare and tamped down on it. "I'm aware that Benezia is a very strong biotic, as my team and I faced her in battle before."

Vathan fixed Shepard with a stare. "Commander, I have no doubt that you feel you have some kind of idea the power Benezia wields. But you are sadly mistaken if you think you have an idea of her full power. At the height of her grace, she held the same position I hold now, and she held it for longer than I have. She invented several of the more potent invocations of the biotic community. And I doubt she has grown weaker over time."

Shepard folded her arms, eyes cool. "I'll make a way. As I said, we survived her before."

Nathans smile faded. "You are unwilling to listen? Perhaps a .. demonstration will suffice."

Shepard glared. "A demonstration of what?"

Vathan stepped back from Shepard. "Of the gulf between a Lunarch and a mere mortal."

Shepard frowned, and watched as Vathan made a rather loose gesture with her hand. Five singularities erupted around it, circling her palm, each one glowing white-hot as they began to pull and throw the gravity in the room off. Shepard staggered back, as they rotated outwards, forming a barrier between them, and then a spiderweb of warpfire erupted from each lashing out.

Shepard took a hasty step back, but the warpfire merely hung in the air, before Vathan made another gesture and a titanic lift field enfolded the entire large room. Chairs, tables, and Shepard herself all gently floated up.

Shepard grunted, triggering her own biotics, and dropped back to the ground. Vathan smiled and gestured again, and Shepard felt tiny sparks of pain erupt across her body. Her jaw dropped as she felt her own biotics fade with the distinct feel of pulse suppression.

"Holy shit."

Vathan let the singularities, warpfire and lift field dissipate, and then pointed her finger at Shepard, and blue light flared.

A second later, Shepard shook her head, and realized she was crumpled in the far corner of the reception hall, nearly forty feet away, near the door she came in at. As she looked up, the asari priestess flashed into blue light, erupting in front of her in a mass corona that battered Shepard's natural biotic barrier down before it could even finish coming up.

Vathan sighed. "You are a child, Commander. A very talented child, with a rare touch with the kanquess, but a child nonetheless. Benezia could paralyze your entire team, cut them in half with a wave of her hand, or tear the very life from your fragile bodies."

Shepard groaned as she stood, glaring. "It wouldn't be that easy if I was in armor and ready for a fight, you know."

Vathan shrugged. "Commander, your armor would not matter when she melts it around your form with her warp field. Nor would your preparation, if she was to turn the very air around you into plasma. Before her fall, almost no one could contest her biotic might, save perhaps myself and the Mistress of the Hunt. She is a trained commando and war priestess, and served as a Royal Paladin in her house."

Shepard snarled. "Her daughter managed to match her when we fought on Ferros!"

The priestess smiled. "Did she? Precocious little thing. Tell me, Commander, did Benezia look as if she was fresh and rested in this ... battle of yours?"

Shepard opened her mouth, then stopped. Thinking back, she could remember that both Saren and Benezia had clearly been in combat, having fought their way to the Thorian's chamber. And based on the report from Garrus, Benezia had killed the giant plant after putting Wrex and Liara down. Shepard sighed, and shook her head. "No."

The asari priestess gave a slow nod. "As I thought. You are going to attack her in a place she has prepared – for she will have prepared any place of habitation against assault. She will be ready for you, Commander, and no matter how strongly little Liara plans to fight her, it will not be enough."

Shepard folded her arms, grimacing. "So what are we supposed to do? You planning to come along for

this trip to deal with her?"

Vathan smirked. "As ... entertaining as that might be, I am afraid not. I merely wished to confirm that you do plan to go after her. A pitched battle between the Solarch and the Lunarch would be ... inadvisable."

Shepard looked at her in incredulity. "If that's the case, why the hell did you want to talk to me? Just tell me 'hey, have fun dying'?"

Vathan examined Shepard for a long moment. "No, not ... exactly. As I said, I have some advice you should follow. Do not attempt to engage her in open combat, Commander. She will beat you, and probably kill you in short order. She was trained as a commando and still likely thinks as one will, so she will try to ambush you, mislead you, and break your organizational formations up. Do not let her. Engaging her in a battle of biotics is suicide of the highest order. Distract her with explosions. Use fire, use terrain, snipers, anything to take her out from a distance and nullify her ability to respond."

The asari tilted her head. "Her commandos will attempt to assist her if they can. They are trained assassins, but are weak against high explosives and not familiar with distraction devices. Be wary, they have been fighting for centuries, but they can be handled if you are willing to take casualties to do so."

Vathan met Shepard's gaze evenly. "Benezia favors the use of biotic cutting fields, singularities designed to hurl you out of cover, and biotic flares. She is very, very good with her barrier and can drop your biotic abilities to nothing just as I did. She can hurl warpfire like no other asari I have seen in all my years, and if you get in close, you are going to die. Benezia is adept with the kanquess and many other abilities we do not teach to those not of the Temple. She can stop your attacks, turn your biotic punches and kicks back against you..."

Shepard frowned. "If she's that dangerous, I don't get why you won't help us take her down. Don't you want her dead?"

The High Solarch smiled, sadly, pale white eyes narrowing. "The answer is complicated and too nuanced to explain here. The short version is that we suspect Benezia is trying to lure another member of the Temple into battle to obtain access to something we safeguard. She requires the knowledge of two such figures to access it, and we cannot allow it to fall into her hands. Anyone without the knowledge is simply not powerful enough to be of any real use."

The Solarch sighed. "There is also the ugly possibility that if we sent anyone and they were to die, that would only add to the guilt price already hanging over the House of T'Soni. It matters not. I have three very important questions for you, Commander, in return for which I offer a gift that may be of great use to you in your hunt for Benezia."

Shepard rotated her shoulder, where it still ached from being thrown across the room. "Fine."

The Solarch nodded. "You interrogated and melded with Shiala M'than Soni'a. According to young Tevos, she was ... coerced by this ship Saren uses. I find that very curious. This ship is identical to ones you have seen in the memories of the Prothean Beacon. Tell me ... have you seen the enemy who flies these vessels?"

Shepard opened her mouth to answer, then stopped. "No. Just the ships themselves...when I see ground combat it is always Protheans fighting corrupted husks of Protheans."

The asari nodded, as if confirming something. "Second, your report included a minor detail, a shrine of some kind erected by the geth on Feros before it's destruction, one dedicated to a figure known as 'Nazara'. Are you sure that is the name that was given, Commander?"

Shepard nodded more slowly. "We were not able to find any references to it, in any database we had."

The Solarch nodded again, and then shuddered. "I ... am not surprised. If you had I would be very worried. One final question." The pale eyes met hers. "In the message from the Protheans, was there any mention of a weapon to use against these... Reapers?"

Shepard nodded. "The ... Tyth Kashan, the figure in the message. He spoke of an Inusannon super weapon being assembled. He didn't say where but he summoned the Protheans to Ilos, so I assumed it was there."

The High Solarch nodded. "Thank you."

Shepard frowned. "You know something. Something about these Reapers."

The asari gave her another sad look. "I know only ancient myths, Commander. Bits and pieces that do not form a coherent answer. But the name Nazara is known to me. It is inscribed on the oldest stone of the Temple, along with the ancient glyph for darkness, death, and annihilation. Whatever Nazara is, that is the true threat that you must fight – not the ship, or Saren, or even Benezia."

She turned to one of the tables by her side – one, Shepard belatedly noticed, she had not lifted with her little demonstration earlier. "As I said I promised you a gift for aiding me, and so I shall give it to you. When she took up the office of High Lunarch, Benezia laid aside her family warp sword to take of that of the Temple of the Moon, which she still has."

The asari woman tapped her fingers to a narrow box laying on the table, allowing it to open. A narrow warp sword, hammered silver and blue, lay in white silk inside it. "The T'Soni warp sword, I suppose, should really be handed over to the new House Matriarch. Sadly, I seem to have mislaid it somewhere."

The asari walked up to Shepard, until they were face to face, and handed Shepard her info-pad. "Within is the recollections of battle and service that I and other priestesses have of Benezia. I would offer you training, but we are forbidden to share our knowledge with outsiders – even giving you this much is nearly heresy."

Shepard gave a slow nod, taking the pad. "I appreciate it. I ... was not aware how powerful she was. Maybe I should just bombard the damned site from orbit."

Vathan strode past, opening the doors to leave, her entourage gathering around her as she did so. She glanced over her shoulder, an expression of faint sadness still on her features.

"If you have the opportunity to do so, Shepard, I would take it. You are unlikely to survive the coming fight otherwise."

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## **Chapter 95: Chapter 86 : Saren, Awake**

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*A/N: Punching the reporter would have been funny, but Shepard is still laid back from being with Liara.*

*I have debated whether or not to put in another Saren and Benezia section. I went with half of what I originally planned, as a kind of preview of just how damned bad Noveria is going to be.*

*Thanks for all the reviews I am getting, and let me know what you like the most and what needs moar details.*

*If you haven't already, and you are interested in asari or salarian culture, my companion background document to this AU, [A Season of Sorrow Unending : The Cerberus Files](#), was recently updated. Check it out.*

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Saren awoke to sensations of cold pain and a feeling of tired heaviness in his limbs. His vision was strange, unfocused, and he sat up slowly, realizing that one of his eyes had been replaced by cyberware. The vision it gave was tinted faintly red, turian script flashing up as he focused on various objects around the room.

*My head feels as if I was kicked by a herd of vakar.*

He pushed a thin blanket off of him, sitting up the rest of the way, glancing around. The eye made a whirring noise and finally his vision snapped into clarity, and he blinked as lights came on in the room in response to his movements.

The bare steel walls were vented, letting warm air drift down from above, and he was on a medical bed, dressed in a jumpsuit of black medical cloth. Medical packages encircled his waist, and his feet were bare, his talons gleaming faintly in the dim light. Aside from a bed, there was a great deal of medical equipment and haptic charts of his body on one wall, and a pair of heavy metal doors on the far wall.

He swung his legs off the bed carefully, stretching slowly. His last memory was of agony as the krogan that had accompanied Shepard shot him in the face, blurs of motion and bursts of fiery pain the only other things he could recall. He took a deep breath, finding his thoughts curiously clear, the doubts and worries that had plagued him so much seemingly gone.

He stood, feeling his body shift as he did so. He felt more cyberware in his arms, along his back, across his face, but that didn't matter. He felt stronger. Faster. Ready for anything.

The double doors opened, a pair of asari in medical scrubs standing there, eyes blinking in the slightly unfocused expression of those who were dealing with the second stage of indoctrination were apt to fall into. He turned to them, adjusting his stance. "Where am I?"

The leftmost asari answered in a quiet voice. "Peak 13, on Noveria. You were hurt. The Lady brought you here. She is waiting for you." The other asari began tending to the medical equipment, but that hardly mattered to him.

He followed the first asari into a narrow corridor, and into a nearby room. Laid out on the table was his armor, repaired and reinforced with thick black plates of material across the chest, shoulders, and shins. His pistol and custom-built Krysaë sniper rifle lay next to it, along with his omni-tool and bandoleer of Spectre gear. He smiled at the efficiency shown, dressing in his armor and loading himself down with his usual weapons, patting his pistol as he left the room ten minutes later.

The asari had waited for him, her faint purple skin darkening in the weak light of the overhead halogen system. They walked down two long corridors before reaching a wide, open space on what he finally recognized as the third level, stepping through the massive containment doors into the room beyond.

High vaulted ceilings and thickly laid walls surrounded a sunken circular pit. Geth hoppers moved around the pit, spraying the sides with a slurry of omni-gel and metal that hardened in thin, flexible sheets. In the center, constrained by glowing fields of biotic force, a titanic being huddled. Long tentacles thrashed in fury, as angled limbs pulled tighter to the pulpy, insectile body.

Ten asari stood in a circle around the pit, hands lifted as they coordinated their biotic power to contain the creature within. Behind them, dressed in silver robes, stood Benezia, who turned as he approached.

Her face, he noted absently, was somehow colder, sterner than before. Her cheeks were more sunken, her eyes almost unnaturally bright. Her already slender form was more so now, making the bulge of her breasts seem almost vulgar. She walked to his side slowly, and laid her hand upon his unscarred cheek.

"You very nearly *died*, beloved." Her voice was cool, almost emotionless, carrying the barest whisper of her former fire.

He nodded. "You continued without me."

She shrugged, letting her hand fall. "Things ... became bad. The krogan's shot damaged your mind, to the point you can no longer call upon the memories of the Beacon and Cipher. Nazara became ... displeased."

Saren shuddered, and cast around in his mind. There were shreds, bits of the vision, of the cipher, pieces...but no context. He felt a thin film of alarm over his thoughts, but not as much as he expected. Instead, he felt resigned.

She continued. "Thankfully, when I joined your mind to organize the thoughts and images imparted by the cipher, I ... implanted a copy of the cipher and your visions within my own mind. I was able to convince Nazara nothing of value was truly lost, as long as you could be ... made whole again. Our own doctors did their best, but when they failed, I was forced to ask for Nazara to aid you."

He looked up at her. "What was done to me?"

She gave a long side, trailing her fingers against his mandible. Once that would have sent delightful sensations along his spine and spurs, now it was merely a touch, an echo of what was. "You were dying. Nazara sent his servants to rebuild you. They implanted you with his technology, remade your flesh. You are his, now."

Saren felt something empty rise up in him, his gullet contracting, his fringe settling. Old, ancient instincts made him wish to bare his fangs and howl. "And you agreed to this?"

The fingers against his face paused, and he felt the push of her mind against his, through the bond they still shared. Her fear. Her confusion. Her stiff, stoic pride, maintaining appearances, as she crumbled within. The sloshing, ugly feel of the visions and the cipher, slashing inside her very soul.

He felt her despair at losing her last link to being alive. She lowered her head and her hand, a sad expression on her beautiful features. "I could not let you go. Even at the cost of throwing over all that we have sacrificed for. That is weakness."

A part of him, deep inside, exulted, and the rest of him relaxed. That he could still feel her love, her loyalties. She had no other choices, he knew. He trusted her as he trusted nothing else in the galaxy, and he could feel the trickling anxiety in her, the fear this act would have turned him against her.

She smiled as he traced his claw against her cheek as delicately as he could. "What is it you always tell me? Life is the refusal to let go of life?" He exhaled slowly. "We cannot change what has happened, Benezia. Only what is left to come. I will always trust you."

She smiled more brightly at that, if only for a moment, before sighing and turning away. "As you were incapacitated, I had to move ahead on our planned actions. The cipher, combined with the visions, gave us a place to start. It took me some time to piece it together, but the answer to our search is at Ilos, as we already suspected."

Saren frowned. "Behind the lost Mu relay." He glanced at her. "You took Nazara's suggestion regarding the rachni, then?"

She nodded. "The lab at Peak 15 finally produced a proper queen. The secondaries we have already indoctrinated, and through them the children from the eggs are obedient. But the queens are ... decaying rapidly. The technology Nazara gave us is corruptive. It claims it can control them better through indoctrination..."

He laughed thinly. "I just bet it does. I presume you have not agreed to such yet?"

She gave a faint shrug. "I am not prepared to swim against the morning tide yet. I have suggested that such control is one more distraction to Nazara's concentration. Instead, I have decided to utilize what we have. As for the true queen, I am in the process of preparing her to be subdued."

She turned, heading towards the queen's pit. The geth were nearly done building now, a hexagonal lattice surrounding the top of the pit, the sides and bottom floored in acid-resistant nickel. Heavy chains were lifted biotically to wrap around the queen, and plates of transparent armorplast fitted into the gaps in the lattice.

She gestured. "The true queen has the genetic memories we seek. She resists...and she is strong. I will break her mind and take what we need, the location of the relay leading to Ilos."

Saren folded his arms, thinking. "And the geth?"

She shrugged. "They are becoming a concern. I have brought in many of the more militant and useful of my Triune movement, cycling them through Virmire to indoctrinate them to the first and second stage. We have lost a few hundred. The Ganar scientist Okeer sent finally went off the rails, Rana put him down. So far, she still is the most resistant to the indoctrination."

She turned back to face him. "The geth have convinced more of their kind to join them. Now nearly eighty percent heed Nazara's call. They are more numerous than we even dreamed, Saren. The plan will work. The krogan brutes are entering the final phases of production, now that we have the proper rachni genetic material to splice. We have prepared the mass relays as instructed, towing them from that uninhabited system to the Veil itself, and linking it using the codes Nazara gave us to the Widow Relay."

She walked ahead, towards the lift in one corner, and he followed. "But there have been setbacks. Shepard has destroyed Cerberus, completely. We are going to run out of funds soon, and our intelligence network of my people and yours is too shallow to know when the next strike will come."

Saren frowned. "Then why Noveria?"

She smiled. "I am very sure that Cerberus knew where many of our bases were, since they sold us the locations in the first place. I suspect Virmire will come under attack first...and that will solve that problem neatly, since Nazara is unlikely to appreciate interruptions of whatever he is building there. In the aftermath of such a failed assault, we will have plenty of time to move."

He considered this, tracing his free hand over the cybernetics in his face. "And if they strike here first?"

She snorted. "I have paid good money to certain members of the Corporate Court to hide our presence. On top of that, Peak 13 appears on no charts, maps or blueprints – only Peak 15. And we've cleaned up our work there...all that remains is studies of rachni genetics, and medical work. No one knows of this facility."

She reached the lift, and he followed her in. It began ascending, and he faced her more fully. "You seem confident that Cerberus did not know about this place, but the Illusive Man was very good at ferreting out some of our other secrets. Have you made plans for how to react if they do come here?"

She nodded, as the lift slid open, revealing a brightly lit space of computers, maps, and consoles, manned by turians and asari. "I have taken that possibility, however slight, into consideration. Come."

She swept ahead, along side the consoles, and came up to a semicircular platform built into the wall, jutting outwards, with a wide and heavy window set into it. Metal shutters slid aside as she grew close, and she lifted her chin with a faint smile as she gestured with her hand. "Observe."

Saren stepped up to the window, which overlooked a rough hewn cavern deeply cut into the rock around the facility. Massive doors abutted the rock walls at the far end, with heavy hydraulics ready to pull them open. The room must have been nearly a mile wide and half that long.

Bright, staring glowing eyes rotated up to gaze upon the window, flickering tentacles lashing in agitation. Plates of pale gray and white chitin gleamed dully, spike-edged legs clattering against the ground that was layered in acid-resistant metals. There were hundreds upon hundreds of them, all ready for battle.

The rachni had returned.

On the ceiling, hanging from rack after rack, were the folded up forms of hundreds of geth soldiers and snipers. At the far end of the huge cave, protected from the rachni by a high wall of metal and force fields, sat nine geth drop-ships. The wall itself was patrolled by hulking primes and armatures, which kept their weapons trained on the fractious rachni below.

Benezia's voice was cold and triumphant. "They will regret coming to Noveria, if they come."

He tilted his head, surprised and confused. "This is ... a great deal of progress in a short amount of time, Benezia. How did this come about?"

She sighed. "Cutting corners. We don't have full control over the rachni, only the lesser queens. The geth are sending more forces because Nazara commands it, but they take orders from it, not me. I can ... suggest to them, but I do not command them with the same power you did. That is why I have brought more of my commandos along."

She folded her arms. "As to the rest, I drained our accounts of money. Liara, damn her, turned over what funds I had not spent to that worthless sister of mine."

He exhaled, hearing the pain in her voice as she spoke her daughter's name. "Did she survive Feros?"

A sour, half-pleased expression crossed her face. "She did. She ... fought well. Better than I expected. The same could also be said of Shepard."

Saren snorted, mandible flickering in irritation. "Yes, how brave they were, to fight us after we were already exhausted from battling our way to the damned plant. I'm surprised she lived. You didn't finish her off?"

Benezia shook her head. "I did not have the time. Your pilot told me Citadel forces were coming, the geth reported more of Shepard's people were topside and incoming, and I was nearly dead." Her features tightened. "I ... considered taking Liara with us. I did not."

Saren's own expression grew grim. "I'm not sure whether that is a mercy or a death sentence. I know you care for her, more than I did for Nihlus or even my brother. But we cannot afford to draw aside now."

Benezia gave him a look of faint amusement. "I am aware. There is little space left in my mind for my wishes or desires, it seems. That is what leads me to the next issue we have, and why I am glad you are awake." She paused. "The Matriarchy has finally moved. They have sent no less than five Royal Hunting parties after me and you. Lead by the Mistress of the Hunt herself. The ancient bitch hasn't stepped off of Thessia in eight hundred years."

Saren winced. He knew a little of the asari culture, and how they would put together bands of noble warriors, Justicars, commandos, and asari assassins together to form what they called a hunting party. Lead by a senior member of the Thirty Families, equipped with the best gear and small fleets of ships, they would hunt until they found their targets and then tear them apart.

The Mistress of the Hunt was the high mistress of the various hunting lodges that trained commandos. For her to take part personally was akin to the Primarch leading soldiers into battle himself. It was a staggering concentration of strength and threat.

Saren eyed her. "Why now? What drew *this* reaction?"

Benezia exhaled. "I received a call this afternoon from one of my people on the Citadel. This morning, Commander Shepard met with the High Solarch. She was unable to bug the room, but was able to listen in." Benezia closed her eyes.

"Saren, the Solarch learned from Shepard something about Nazara. What we are not sure, but my follower heard the name. There are ... artifacts in the Grand Temple that speak of Nazara. The Matriarchy may be able to piece together the truth."

Saren shook his head. "They would never believe the truth, even if it was told directly to them."

Benezia hissed in anger. "That is not the threat! There are things in the temple that speak of countermeasures. Messages, shared between the hidden sites of Athame and whatever ruins were left in the human solar system. The super-weapon the Inusannon tried to build, the one that would have summoned the Darkness – it's design is a part of those secrets. They will not see Nazara as a being, they will see it as a threat to their lives, and will seek any weapon they can find. If they try to build such a thing, or experiment with the technology that Nazara warned us of... they could attract the attention of the Darkness."

Saren's eyes narrowed. The horrifying *things* eating at the universe were so vile and alien that even the Reapers seemed sane and understandable in comparison. To attract their attention was a fate worse than death, slavery, or even madness. "They can't possibly be that insane, that –"

She made a gesture of siari frustrated, a sign of disagreement. "They do not *know*, Saren. And they will not agree even if told. To them it will sound as if we have gone mad, and they will panic at the answer we give to the question. The scales and the stakes are too large, the time frames too big, for mere ... ants like us to grasp." She sighed. "It drove Matriarch Dilinaga insane in the height of her power, to possess the merest fragment of that knowledge. The asari would recoil from such, as it shakes the foundations of our society, of the standing of the Thirty, to it's core. The turians would try to fight it, the salarians, Athame damn them, would want to *research* it, as crazy as that is."

Saren sighed and folded his arms once more, setting back on his spurs. "There must be some way..."

She shook her head. "There is none. That is why I have spent all of what we have to accelerate our efforts. That is why Nazara builds with frantic haste and urges the geth to do our bidding. We must strike before they awake to the action we truly plan, before they get desperate enough to start searching for answers."

She would have continued, but an asari technician slowly approached. "Lady Benezia...Okeer requests communication with you."

Benezia's jaw tightened. "Hopefully good news." She walked over to the center of the room, where a massive haptic map of the galaxy rotated serenely. Asari glyphs of red and silver indicated her scattered units. Blue turian marks showed Saren's remaining loyal forces. Bold geth markings polluted the map in an ugly dark green, spreading outwards from what were once the quarian worlds.

A moment later the map vanished, replaced by the broad, even features of Ganar Okeer. "Greetings, my fellow conspirators. It is good to see you remain among the living, Saren. I had so despaired at the news you had fallen against a mere human." As usual, his educated, dulcet baritone voice set Saren's teeth on edge.

*Krogan should not sound like movie announcers, by the spirits.*

Saren's mandibles spread slowly. "I remain well. But Skal died."

Okeer made a dismissive noise. "As do all krogan, eventually. Even I will pass on one day, but not before I correct the flaws in the krogan species and remind the galaxy why we once made them tremble in fear."

Benezia's cool voice lanced out. "You wish to speak of something concerning our goals?"

Okeer smiled, his bronze armor gleaming in the light of some subterranean lab. Krogan shapes in tanks of green gel blocked the view behind him. "Ah yes. Always to the point with you. Admirable. I have transferred the last batch of krogan to your labs on Virmire, as you requested. Unfortunately, the lovely Rana Thanoptis was unable to meet my full fee for doing so. You have acquired funding difficulties, gracious Benezia?"

She gritted her teeth. "Troubles in the aftermath of the destruction of Cerberus. Until we can reroute our money securely, we have frozen our accounts."

Okeer's smile widened. "A pity. I am neither given to charity nor delayed reciprocity. Until you can sort out your funding issues, I will have to withhold any further ... *donations* of my kind to your cause. Your experiments, while intriguing, are not true krogan, and are thus useless to me and my goals."

Saren experienced a moment of dark humor at imagining the look on the smug krogan's face when the truth erupted over Tuchanka in a rain of Reaper ships. Out loud, he merely spoke calmly. "As you wish, Okeer. I trust that your silence does not require any extra ... funding?"

Okeer's expression of good cheer somehow intensified, as if his false bonhomie could allay their fears. "Of course not, mighty Saren. While giving away the lives of my lesser brothers is a distasteful act I soothe with your cash, knowing that I invest in the future of the species, betrayal is a different coin altogether. I have no intentions of breaking my trail with you over such piddling issues as banking concerns."

Benezia nodded. "Very well. We will contact you when we are ready to resume operations ... and update you with our progress on the genophage's anti-cloning measures."

Okeer nodded in return. "Should you manage to solve that little roadblock, I would consider it payment in full for any number of krogan you wish to ... utilize. Until then, Clan Ganar will withdraw and watch events with interest."

He killed the link, and Saren sneered. "Mercenary filth."

Benezia managed a small smile and placed her hand on his forearm. "Every tide has its shoreline. Come, let us review the other forces we have ready."

O-OSaBC-O

By the time Shepard had talked to Udina, and gotten him to calm down, the media had gotten wind of her meeting with the Solarch. Shepard managed to get past several sets by dint of glaring death in all directions, but was pinned down at the air-car parking area by the familiar form of Khalisah Bint al-Jilani, who introduced herself with predatory glee even as Shepard considered using a biotic throw to move the news vehicles blocking access to the lot out of her way.

"Commander Shepard! I just have a few questions for you, Humanity's first Spectre, on recent events!" She smiled brightly, her makeup garish in the pale acetonetic light of her camera drones, which covered just out of range of a good kick. Al-Jilani wore a stylish purple and black bodysuit, accented with some kind of wrap over her shoulders, and her long hair was tied into a ponytail.

Shepard regarded the woman with visible distaste. "Ma'am. I believe you once put out a publication regarding me that referred to me as the 'murderer-in-chief' of our armed forces. Why would I wish to answer any questions you would have?"

Al-Jilani's fake smile narrowed, her eyes going hard. "I am merely representing the interest and the wishes of the viewing public back on Earth and the Colonies, Commander. Given the fact that so much death and destruction has come from a single rogue Spectre, surely you can see the need for showing that you are indeed answerable to your species. And if you disagree with my positions on your past actions, you can defend yourself with your own words."

Shepard folded her arms and sank her weight back onto her right leg, eyes narrow. "I won't answer any questions about operations we are or might be conducting, nor investigations we are currently working on."

The reporter waved an airy hand. "Of course not, Commander. Now. Charles Saracino recently released a statement lambasting the SA for going along with the Citadel's attack on the purported terrorist organization, Cerberus. Cerberus was responsible for fighting off pirate attacks on the Traverse Rim where the SA was ineffective at doing so. Given that you're supposed to be hunting Saren, Commander, how do you justify going after a human organization?"

Shepard smirked. "First of all, I have information suggesting that Charles Saracino took direct cash payments from Cerberus." With a certain sense of glee, she triggered her omnitool, forwarding just that segment to the Westerlund News link. "Additionally, our raid on Cerberus found some data that indicated that it was Cerberus themselves who sponsored these pirate raids on independent colonies, to drum up support."

Shepard leaned forward. "But to answer your real question, Cerberus is the one who tipped Saren off to the existence of the Beacon on Eden Prime in the first place. Cerberus was involved in trying to block our investigation to prove he was behind it. Cerberus was experimenting on humans, not just aliens, at their HQ that we took out. The only thing purported about those sick bas..." She stopped herself in frustration. "...those *criminals* was their sanity."

Triggering her omnitool again, she sent a video snippet of a wide view of the labs they'd found in the first Cerberus HQ, with dripping blood and mangled human and alien corpses laid on out slabs. "This is the organization Saracino is defending. This is the organization that people are cheering on as heroes."

Al-Jilani blinked, her face looking strained. "I ... see. Then you disagree with the position being taken by political parties on Earth, who say the Coleman administration is handling the Saren crisis incorrectly? That perhaps a more aggressive stance with less subordinating the SA to alien demands would have saved human lives?"

Shepard shrugged. "I'm a soldier, not a politician. I don't think I'm qualified to answer that, since I don't know all the information involved. I will say that Saren is a danger to everyone, not just humans. He's gone after asari. He just blew up a turian colony. He's slaughtered volus merchant ships and attacked mixed race colonies with impunity. This isn't about humanity losing people, it's about everyone losing people. The Fourth Citadel Fleet lost a dreadnaught and over fifteen cruisers fighting Saren's ship at Feros, over eight thousand casualties."

Shepard allowed herself a frown. "As for the SA's reactions, I don't see how not cooperating with the Citadel would make stopping Saren any easier, and I haven't seen anyone explain that argument either. If we try to handle things alone, we end up side-lined like the batarians and quarians are. That isn't progress and it's not going to get the job done."

The reporter folded her arms. "A telling point, Commander. You then approve of the Coleman

Administration? That they have done a good job in how the SA deals with the Citadel, and the Council?"

Shepard felt a flicker of alarm. It wasn't from her. Liara. She didn't think Liara was in danger...could Liara be watching the broadcast Al-Jilani was sending out, and knew the question was somehow a dangerous one?

Trusting her gut and the faint sense of alarm from Liara, she shrugged. "I really don't *have* an opinion either way, ma'am. I can't exactly vote, after all."

Al-Jilani's smile faded. "Ah, yes. Your convict restriction. It seems curious that a former gang member with such a long criminal record could be rehabilitated so completely, but it is indeed proof positive that our Commissariat and government's guidance can work wonders. Given your background, have you any thoughts on the recent decision by the Parliament to reduce the number of criminals taken into the Penal Legions?"

Shepard gave another shrug, this one more jerky. "I changed myself because I was ashamed of what I had let myself be turned into. I became a soldier in the hope of stopping any more girls like me from being ruined by evil beings. I can't say that gives me much of an understanding of why Parliament would rule on an issue in that fashion, though."

Al-Jilani's expression was frustrated, to Shepard's vast amusement. "Your public persona is one of a bloodthirsty, out of control killing machine, one who sacrifices her troops to achieve goals, and whose own unit refused to work with her after your victory on Torfan. Do you honestly believe that you are the best person to represent humanity as a Spectre, given that you are unwilling to take a firm stand on the government's position, your own criminal background, and – "

Shepard held up a hand. "I know I'm not the best choice for the job, ma'am. But that may be a good thing. The model for Spectre behavior for the past fifteen years, after all, has been Saren. You see how he turned out." Shepard unfolded her arms and folded them behind her back. "I have striven never to embarrass or shame the Systems Alliance, and I would do so regardless of whether or not I was a Spectre. At the end of the day, a Spectre not only has to be able to make tough choices, but to live with them and explain why they had to happen. The Council has to be cautious of who it chooses to hand that sort of power to."

Al-Jilani pushed down her frustration. "Given that humanity has tried to have a Spectre position for the past twenty-six years, don't you think humanity was overdue to be recognized?"

Shepard tilted her head. "I think that humanity isn't going to sit at the kid's table forever, ma'am. That doesn't mean that humanity is owed anything. If we want to be recognized as an equal player, we have to step up and show that we are capable of pulling our own weight."

The reporter's expression was neutral. "I see. Certainly, the Systems Alliance had done it's share in pulling it's weight in recent months, I would think. The ship you command, the Normandy, is one of humanity's most advanced warships. Do you think it's appropriate to hand it over to aliens for their own purposes?"

Shepard sent a very hard look at al-Jilani, who blanched and stepped back. "I'm the commanding officer of the Normandy, and I still wear an Alliance uniform. No one gives the orders but me. The Normandy was assigned to me to assist in the completion of my mission, hunting Saren. At the conclusion of that mission, her further assignments will come from SA High Command, not the Council."

Al-Jilani arched an eyebrow. "It's said one cannot serve two masters, Commander. Despite your strong answer, many on Earth are concerned that you now answer to aliens. Have you had any situations

where the Council has attempted to utilize their command over you in a way that runs counter to human interests?"

She sighed. "Ma'am, the Council are professional diplomats who have dealt with Spectres for centuries. They have more than enough sense to ask me to work against my own people. What I instead find, all too often, is that the roadblocks I encounter are from the Systems Alliance who cling to some kind of view that humanity can shoulder its own problems."

Al-Jilani smiled thinly, eyes narrowing. "Surely you understand the public's concern about the detrimental influence of alien cultures on our society. They do not share our values, our laws, or even our morality. Is it wrong to wish to safeguard your own culture against such ... contamination?"

Shepard gave her a cool, dismissive look. "That's funny. That's the line the old American and Chinese governments used when they decided to obliterate the countries of the Middle East back in the twenty first. Given that you're of Middle Eastern extraction, ma'am, you tell me if that's a valid argument, or merely racism covered in patriotic noise." She folded her arms. "I don't have the time or patience to cater to everyone's views on how I should do my job, much less entertain their opinions of galactic politics. I'm sure Ambassador Udina would be delighted to explain in further detail why bald assumptions of alien misconduct when Cerberus was cutting up aliens for experimental purposes is a tad hypocritical."

She glanced at her omni-tool. "I'm afraid I'm very late for an appointment, so I'll have to cut this short."

Al-Jilani's voice was laced with venom. "Of course. I've just interviewed Commander Shepard, first human Spectre, hero of the Battle of Torfan. Have a pleasant day."

Shepard nodded, squeezing past the woman and her damnable drones to reach the parking lot. She paused, opening the hatch, and tossing in the box with the warp sword inside. She'd barely gotten into Anderson's car and shut the hatch when her omnitool displayed an incoming call from Liara. "Shepard here."

Liara's voice sounded worried. "That ... woman was transmitting live, directly over the extranet. I am glad you did not lose your temper and do something ... violent."

Shepard smirked, as she tapped the car's controls. "Like what? Losing patience with her disingenuous assertions and punching her lights out? That would be stupid, and then I'd have to listen to Udina rant about how much of a Neanderthal I am." She exhaled. "I .. I need to talk with you. I had an unexpected meeting with the High Solarch and she told me some things about your mother we need to discuss."

Liara's voice was thin. "I ... see. Where shall we meet?"

Shepard turned the car into the main air-lane. "Head to Anderson's apartment. I have something to give you there anyway, and we can have a damned drink to settle my nerves." She clicked off, sighing.

"I hate reporters."

O-OSaBC-O

Udina sourly shut off the haptic screen displaying the interview of Shepard on Westerlund News, and rubbed his temples as he sat down.

Given Shepard's usual anti-social behavior and general lack of political or social savvy, the interview hadn't gone badly at all. She came off as somewhat bitchy and icy, but that was better than *giggling* and holding skulls in each hand. Al-Jilani had clearly been trying to provoke a hostile reaction from Shepard, a stance that, while resulting in huge ratings, would have probably ended in al-Jilani needing cybernetic correction and facial reconstruction.

*Note to self. Check into buying body armor if you have to give Shepard bad news.*

The ambassador for Humanity cleared his desk, the haptic surface resetting to show his day planner and the comms board. Already there were incoming calls, mostly media, but a few high level bureaucrats seeking his viewpoint. He routed the entire mess to Osaba's office – let that morose bastard deal with the fallout.

Instead, he pulled up a single, encrypted comms channel, and triggered it. "Councilor Tevos, I am returning your call."

The image of the asari councilor sprang into view on the far wall, revealing her to be wearing a multicolored dress that had heavy leather flaps covering her shoulders and chest. "I appreciate your prompt response. The Matriarchy would again urge you to reconsider their proposal. I understand that Commander Shepard does not wish Dr. T'Soni removed from her protection, but the political situation on Thessia is becoming increasingly chaotic. There is a great deal of resentment among some of the clanless population in the aftermath of more attacks by Benezia's cultists on asari properties on Ilium."

Udina shrugged. "The meeting I had with your High Solarch, while brief, was very enlightening in regards to the difficulties the Triune Unity is causing the Thirty Families, Councilor. There is, however, a very large legal and cultural disconnect between asari and humans on this issue. Humanity does not assign the sins of the father – or the mother – to the offspring, unlike asari. And at the current time, it's politically ... undesirable to be seen to accommodate alien demands, given the mess Saracino has stirred up back on Earth and Arcturus."

Tevos frowned. "The ramifications may cause the Systems Alliance difficulties as well. The Matriarchy is now informing me that the Justicars refuse to accept the authority of the Systems Alliance over an asari citizen and plan to attempt to remove her with or without the SA's permission."

Udina ran his hand through his hair and muttered. "My condolences."

Tevos looked at him in confusion. "What?"

Udina smiled very thinly. It had no humor or joy in it, it was merely moving the muscles into place. "Madam Councilor. If your Justicars are stupid enough to try to remove Dr. T'Soni from the Normandy by force, I have no doubt Shepard will kill them. As we indicated in her psychological reports, Shepard is fiercely protective of her crew. Worse, you ask me to order Shepard to turn her over to you, which places me and the SA in a very nice catch-22. The Spectre Code says Shepard can ignore orders from us that work against her duties as a Spectre – which in this case, is to catch and kill Saren and Benezia. Shepard has made a persuasive case that Dr. T'Soni's assistance is needed in this regard."

Udina folded his hands. "If I try to order Shepard to surrender T'Soni, I violate the Spectre Code, since Shepard needs her for this mission. If I violate the Spectre Code, the SA will be penalized. If I don't order her to do so, then your Council of Matriarchs will claim we are being obstructive and complain to the Council, and the SA will be penalized. I find it very unfair that you place me and my government in this position. *Particularly* in light of the wild comments by political elements on Earth that are trying to convince voters that you are not acting in the best interests of Humanity."

Tevos sat back, her expression thoughtful. "That is a ... novel, but accurate viewpoint of the situation as it stands." She exhaled. "And after Saren and Benezia are brought to justice or killed?"

Udina shrugged. "At that point Shepard is a full fledged Spectre, who can be supported by the Citadel. The Normandy reverts to SA control and Citadel Observers and non-SA citizens will be forced to leave by regulations." He spread his hands. "I understand this deprives you of a way to easily answer the clamor for punishment from your lower classes, but that is the best I can do."

Tevos nodded. "It is a better answer than we have had from the Systems Alliance military, and I appreciate you clarifying your own difficult position. I will endeavor to explain events to the Matriarchs. Go with grace." Her image vanished, and Udina huffed.

He turned on the haptic screen again, this time to ANN, where the stern visage of Jack Tyson was commenting. "... and in a firm, no-nonsense interview with Westerlund's Khalisah al-Jilani, Commander Shepard was faintly critical of the views of many who saw Cerberus in a more gentle light. Her claims of Cerberus involvement with pirates adds yet another layer to this already complicated story..."

With a small, tired sigh, Udina reached for the brandy. It was going to be a very long day.

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## **Chapter 96: Chapter 87 : Citadel , Piano**

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*A/N: If you've ever had to attend a military staff briefing, you'll understand why I skipped it. They are dreadfully boring. Instead, I did my last little pieces of fluff. I'm sure people liked it (based on the reviews) but the end run is very close now, in terms of chapters. And I'm getting impatient to start working on the ME2 version of OSABC (which is happening, people! No more hiatuses until next year).*

*Since I may not update again until the weekend (depends) , I'd like to wish everyone who celebrates it in the US a Happy Thanksgiving. I am thankful for every person who has reviewed, commented, PM'd or otherwise left feedback on my stories. I'm continually astounded that (by reviews) my story is the 40th most popular out of over 13,000. That's all due to your support, and I really appreciate it.*

*I'm thinking of writing a little series of one shots about some characters, and reworking and expanding my Systems Alliance Order of Battle document. If you have any ideas for docs you would like to see, let me know :D*

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Shepard's return to Anderson's apartment was a quiet one, thankfully uninterrupted by any more reporters. She piloted the air-car to a stop at the elevated landing pad that connected to the apartment building, and exited, tucking the warp blade's box under one arm.

She'd been so flustered by the reporters at the exit to the Embassies that she'd just dropped it on the ground when al-Jilani had pinned her down, and she examined the box carefully, checking the plain silvery surface for damage but finding none. She didn't know how to open the thing – it had clicked shut when she picked it up, and right now it looked for all the world like a solid piece of metal.

Shrugging, she walked down narrow steps to the doorway leading inside, the hum and screech of air-cars overhead drowning out the sounds of her footsteps. Stepping into the corridor that lead to Anderson's apartment, she wondered just how much scratch it took to afford something this palatial.

She mused over this as she let herself inside, the big-screen haptic screen on one wall displaying a football game. Anderson sat on his couch, wearing his uniform pants but having doffed his jacket, and glanced up as she entered. "I see trouble found you on the way home, Sara."

She grunted, placing the box on the top of Anderson's large grand piano, and exhaled. "I'm really not good at that kind of thing, sir."

He laughed. "Knock off the sir bullshit, Sara. Liara called a few minutes ago to let me know she was on the way, so you have time to get changed if you want. You've only got the rest of the day to enjoy yourselves before you head right back out into it, so don't sit around brooding about mouthpieces like

al-Jilani"

Kahlee Sanders walked downstairs, dressed in naval working blues, fussing at her hair. "Plus, from what I saw, you owned that bitch on live TV. The expression on her face when you dropped that line about the Middle East was priceless." The hard blue eyes were crinkled in amusement. "I can't stand that bitch, anyway...she should stick to news shows, instead of her so-called 'reporting'"

Anderson stood and picked up his coat where it was neatly draped over a nearby chair. "In any event, Kahlee and I have to report. Udina's involved in some discussions with the salarian Institute of the Mind to work with Grissom Academy, and Kae's been tapped as the new Academy Commandant. We've still got months of work ahead of us, but Udina wants the military to have a say in the biotic training that happens there..."

He trailed off, looking disturbed, and Kahlee smiled ruefully. "More politics, Shepard. We'll be out of your hair until tonight, and then I'd like you and Liara to come with us to eat dinner."

Shepard smiled, uncertainly, and nodded. "Sure. I guess. I ... kinda need to talk with Liara, but that shouldn't take long."

Anderson finished buttoning his coat, brushing lint from his sleeves. "Good, good. It's 1100 now...meet us back here at 1900 and we'll head out for something upscale." He smiled gently and patted her on the shoulder as he walked by, Kahlee next to him.

Shepard half turned. "I don't own anything ... I mean, clothing for that kind of occasion."

Anderson opened the door, ushering Kahlee through. "Well, you had better buy some, then, don't you think?" With a laugh he stepped out, and Shepard glared hard at the door before huffing and turning away to pick through his fridge.

She'd just finished eating a simple sandwich – cooking not being a skill she'd ever had a chance to pick up – when Liara entered the apartment. Rather than her usual University uniform, she wore a long gown of black with faint opalescent panels running down the right side, splitting just above the knee to reveal long black boots. She carried a sheaf of paper receipts in one hand, and a shopping bag in the other. "... Shepard?"

Shepard wiped her mouth with a cloth napkin and waved. "Kitchen." She couldn't contain her smile as she watched Liara set her bag down and walk over to her, the dress was both elegant and form-fitting. "You look...wow."

Liara glanced away, a bit embarrassed but a pleased smile stealing over her features. "It's quite old, really...my mother bought it and several other dresses for me when she became ambassador to Earth after retiring from the Temple of Athame. I never had much chance to wear them in the field." She set the receipts down. "I ... purchased some other scanning equipment, and two light combat drones that I can slave to my omnitool. I also bought an upgraded second stage spectrophotometer, for some better analysis capacity, and a Mark IV dual configuration material analysis – "

Shepard grinned. "It sounds like you enjoyed yourself."

Liara blinked at the interruption, then tilted her head, considering. "It was...different. I liked it. I fear that I have spent so much of my life focused solely on my work that I let the tide wash me to foreign shores. Before, whatever equipment I needed I had to apply for, and try to convince my superiors to let me use or at least share time on. Mo...Benezia...kept my access to House Funds extremely limited."

She closed her eyes. "There were whole years that I spent on remote dig sites with a luggage case full of fifty-thousand credit dresses, and not enough money to my name to buy a new blanket." She shook her head. "What a fool I was."

Shepard arched an eyebrow. "To go after your dream, Liara? Bullshit. It was..." She paused, thinking of the wonder of those memories they had shared. To be able to choose your own path, in however limited a fashion, to struggle against ennui and disbelief and the puzzles of ages long past and physical dangers.

She smiled. "Your life was...lonely and sometimes boring. But you made your own way, Liara, dealing with everything – finances, support, planning your theories, publishing, figuring out how to get through the stupid University systems. You accomplished a hell of a lot just through your own grit and will. Don't look down on that effort."

Liara's expression warmed, and she gave a gentle smile. "For someone who claims they worry about dragging me down...it is always you who makes me believe in myself again, Sara."

She rounded the kitchen bar, sitting next to her on the narrow bar-stools. "I was about to consider your words on buying a new weapon when that ... *person* ambushed you with her video camera. I was worried that you would lose your temper and answer unwisely, especially when she tried to goad you..."

Shepard smirked, eyes twinkling. "I could feel your concern. It kinda tipped me off, and I thought about it..." She trailed off, noting the concerned expression and flare of alarm from Liara. "What?"

Liara forced herself to calm, and took one of Shepard's hands. "I was ... some distance away from you at the time. The strength of bond required for you to feel me at that distance..."

Liara trailed off, then sighed. "Perhaps it is time we discussed our ... connection. Normally, maidens such as myself do not take a single mate at such an early age. Most of my kind link only shallowly, for, er, pleasurable reasons. Or at best, a shallow meld of surface memories and emotions."

Shepard nodded slowly, and Liara continued, that slow bubble of panic tickling the back of Shepard's mind. "The bond we have is .. something that is usually only done by longtime partners, and usually by asari who are older than I. It requires a great deal of trust and faith in another to join yourself to them in this manner."

Shepard nodded again, keeping her features calm and accepting. "You sound...and feel...upset, Liara. I trust you with my memories, with .. all of me."

Liara shook her head. "I do not doubt that, and that is not what concerns me. After seeing your entire life laid before me ... for you to trust me with your soul is a great honor. Beyond my papers or studies, your belief in me is what lets me know that I am not a failure. At least in this."

She gave a small smile, and Shepard ran her hand through her hair. "So what is bothering you? The, uh, strength of our connection? Is that bad?"

Liara gave a shaky nod. "I had not .. seriously thought much about everything that happened, too caught up in the feeling and the .. safety of what we share. The happiness. The knowing I am not alone." Liara bit her lip nervously. "But such deep bonds are not safe, Sara. I do not have enough control to regulate what we share...and if we are not careful that could end up causing us confusion and grief."

Shepard adjusted her position. "What do you mean, Liara?"

Liara squeezed Shepard's hand lightly. "That moment of ... confusion ... when we broke our meld and became two people again. That is a sign of the deepest level of bonding, where two become as one. It is something mostly done by matriarchs, who have full understanding and control of their minds, and years – decades – of experience with that of their partner's mind. They can keep themselves apart, while sharing fully. That is a skill I do not have."

Liara looked up. "I have begun to wonder how much of me is still me, and how much of .. you is still you. I know you as I know myself. Had al-Jilani spoken the same words to you a few weeks ago, would you have acted as you did?"

Shepard took a deep breath, thinking it over for a second before shrugging. "No. I'd have dropped kicked the bitch in her face, probably." She gave a little laugh. "But honestly, Liara? I ... I find myself not caring if your influence has changed me."

She took in the hurt expression on Liara's face and hastened to explain. "I don't mean I don't care about your worries. But ... you being a part of me makes me feel alive, Liara. Like I can fucking function. I've been more...alive, more aware, more happy, in the past few days than in my entire life up to this point. And making me less hostile, less willing to resort to violence, makes me a better person."

She paused. "But I am finding myself acting a little less like myself at times, I guess. It's just to me, that if I act less ... like me and more like you, that's not such a bad thing."

Liara nodded. "I have also found myself affected, Sara. There may be a point in your impression that I have made you more than you were. I have found, perhaps, a measure of your fire in my blood, a reluctance to let others simply walk over me as I did before we met."

Liara sighed. "However, there is a dark side to such a loss of self. I was angry when I saw the interview. My first impulse was to find this woman and feed her a singularity. That...that is not my way of thinking, Shepard."

Shepard slid off the bar-stool, pulling Liara close. She suddenly understood why Liara was upset. The burning anger that had ruled her entire life had infected the gentle and lovely asari, and it frightened her. "I'm sorry I messed up your mind with my own shit, Liara. I am. You ... you're a good person, in a way I never have been. I don't want you corrupted by me, or upset that my stupid anger is making you act in ways you hate. I don't want you having to worry about -"

Liara interrupted her. "Sara. I do not regret. What we are now is infinitely better than the broken people we were. The fact that I feel your anger and that I draw upon it is not my concern. As I told you, the very first time we touched memories, my first impulse was to wonder exactly how you had not simply slain all around you. I *understand*, Sara. You never need explain or apologize to me for the person you are. That is ..."

She looked at the floor, and then back up, almost shyly, but with a hint of boldness in her gaze. "...that is the woman I love. That I want. That I wish to always walk beside, through darkness or light. If anger is a part of you then it is a part of me."

She touched Shepard's cheek with her hand, biting her lip. "I am merely worried that ...there are often problems caused from such deep bonds when done by younger asari. Those who get lost in the deep bond often become mentally unstable, or have problems controlling their emotions. I do not want us to continue this relationship unless you are aware of that. Feeling me from such a long distance is the kind of thing that happens when two people are so bound they cannot live without one another."

Shepard gave a small smile and kissed those delightful, wickedly beautiful lips gently. "Liara, I don't want to live without you. If the bonding thing is dangerous, then we can work on not getting so carried away when we do that." She gazed into Liara's eyes, letting her feel her love and concern. "I won't put you – or myself – in danger."

Liara nodded, inclining her head against Shepard's shoulder for a moment. "I ... worry. Having gained something of value beyond words, I am terrified of *losing* it. I have never done this before, and for my people it is *not* as simple as the body finding pleasure in another. This bond is deep, so deep that there is a point where neither Sara Shepard nor Liara T'Soni exist any longer."

She felt Shepard's arms around her, and closed her eyes in a moment of happiness. "I do not want to push you away. Goddess, I do not think I could survive such. I was just taken aback at the power of the bond, when I know that there are dangers in such."

Shepard nodded. "Like I said back on the ship. We can take things slow. Hell, we haven't even worked out how to deal with the crap I get off on, or how we're going to make this work with the SA after I put my foot up Saren's ass, or whatever turians have back there. If this is a problem...we'll figure it out."

Liara nodded, eyes still closed. "I am just thinking of old stories. Urban legends, I suppose, of maidens who bound themselves too deeply to their lovers and lost their minds, or when one died dragged their bondmate to death with them. I do not wish to be a danger to you."

Shepard kissed her again. "Liara..." She sighed, emotions jangling together in her head in a smeared mess, a sharp ache somewhere in her chest. "What am I supposed to say? I wanted to die before you. I wanted it all to end, to simply lay down and not have to kill any more. I fought for nothing. I bled for nothing. I was turning into a brutal machine of red vengeance before you saved me."

She bowed her head, resting it against Liara's, the smooth, cool pebbled skin soothing in its temperature. "If shit goes bad, then dragging me with you is better than living alone and in pain." She smiled, wrapping her arms around Liara. "Enough gloom and doom. We'll be fine. We will get through this and have ... all the time in the world to sort this out. I want us to be able to enjoy each other, not make things hard on you."

Liara's lips quirked, and she opened her eyes. "Liar. You quite enjoyed making things hard on me a few nights ago." She stepped back out of Shepard's embrace, heading back out to the main room, the motion of her dress entrancing Shepard for a moment before she shook her head ruefully and followed.

"Touche, Doctor."

Liara only grinned, and sat down on the couch. "You said, when I contacted you, that we needed to talk about your meeting with the High Solarch. Having gotten what worried me out of the way for now, what is it you had to discuss?"

Shepard took a deep breath, and pulled out the info-pad the High Solarch gave her, going back over her discussion with the priestess in great detail. About halfway through Liara shook her head and simply motioned Shepard to the couch, and laid her hand upon Shepard's own. "I need to see. There are messages in her nuance and stance you cannot convey, that I must observe from your memory."

Shepard felt the ghostly, shivery feeling of the link they had expand, the sensation of Liara losing cohesion as she touched Shepard's memories, her eyes black as night. There was no sensuality to it but the sheer closeness made Shepard's heart hammer nonetheless. A few moments later the feeling faded, and Liara opened her eyes with a pensive expression on her face.

"She did not have to assault you to prove her point." Liara's voice sounded ... upset and petulant, and Shepard couldn't help but chuckle.

"I'm fine, just my ego is bruised. I am guessing you saw the sword."

Liara's expression became one of confusion, and she nodded, standing and walking over to the piano in the corner, where Shepard had laid the box. She trailed her fingers over it, a faint smile crossing her features. "This sword is old, my love. It is the most ancient piece of my family's long history. Its blade cut through the evil Silent Queen in ancient times, blessed bond ceremonies and funerals, was waved in defiance during the Rachni invasions, and slew three warlords in the Krogan Rebellions."

She made a gesture with her hand, biotic energy seeping from her fingertips, and the box fell open, revealing the crescent-shaped blade, glowing faintly silver in the light from the overhead lamps. "It is

the beating warrior heart of a Guardian house, the unbroken tide of our ancient pride, a reminder of a time when House T'Soni was powerful and respected, rather than a mere shadow of its former glory."

Her smile was sad as she looked at Shepard. "I rejoice in my very soul to know it is safe and not defiled with my mother's fall...but I do not see how this can help us with my mother."

Shepard frowned. "Can't you use it?"

Liara shrugged, lifting it carefully out of the silk coverings with one hand, then bringing it to hold before her face. With a small frown of concentration she focused on the blade, and pale warp fire erupted silently along its edges, creeping up the glyphs hammered into its surface in darker, fiercer shades of blue.

Liara's voice was pensive and small, as if reciting from memory. "Its name is *Ocean's-Nightfallen-Mist*, and it was forged by my ... how do humans say it? My great-grandmother, six times removed. It took her two centuries to make it. Every matriarch of the house has trained her daughters in how to wield it, to hold it and feel the history of the blade. I have held *Ocean's-Nightfallen-Mist* before, when I was barely out of childhood."

With a flicker and a cascade of drifting smoke, the fire died, and Liara let the tip of the blade sink until it gently rested against the black tiles. "I have practiced with it perhaps a few weeks, all told. Enough to call forth its edge, to use it in a ceremonial sense. To cover the basic assaults and defenses."

Liara lifted it again, holding it with both hands, and kissed it gently before setting it back into its box, hands reverently covering it again with the silk. "My mother fought with this blade for two centuries, against pirates, krogan, and worse. She was a master with it. For me to match myself against her in a bladedance ... would end with me headless or worse."

Shepard folded her arms. "Then why give it to us? To you, I mean."

Liara shrugged, shutting the box with solemn care. "I do not know, Sara. Perhaps to send me a message. For the High Solarch herself to leave Thessia, to travel to the Citadel to give me my mother's warp sword ... she is telling me to beware my mother's power." Liara let her gaze fall. "And to end my mother's ... life. Even if that costs me my own."

She smiled as Shepard's expression twisted into anger. "There is one method by which I could possibly use this weapon against my mother, by overloading it with warp energy until it burst asunder. The explosion of the eezo matrix that empowers the weapon is very destructive, enough to even crush my mother's defenses. It would slay us both, surely, but it would clean the name of T'Soni again, even if it was wielded by a pure-blood wretch no one wanted."

Shepard crossed the room, laying her hand on Liara's shoulder. "That's not the case. I could give a shit what she intended, killing yourself to stop Benezia isn't the answer to anything. What she is doing isn't your fault...or your responsibility to fix."

Liara's expression was strained. "It is in our society, Sara. A child is the sum of a parent's teachings, their focus, their ... goals. More so in the lineages of the Thirty. In the minds of many asari, the old saying 'Tainted rivers come from tainted lands' has very deep meaning. My .. my own family believes that if I had spent more time at home, trying to become what my mother intended, she may not have ended up on the course she has taken."

Shepard spat angrily. "That's a damned lie, Liara. Your mother, from what I've seen in your memories, became obsessed with controlling things. I don't know why, but it's clear to me she lost it a long time before you even left to pursue your own dreams. She didn't value you for you, just your potential!"

Shepard seethed as she spun away, pacing. "And as for clearing your family name? For you to die for

those walking pieces of shit? Fuck them. I gotta say I have to rethink how bad my own damned life was after seeing the shit you put up with. My parents sold me for another high, but at least they didn't fuck me over and out for my whole life. Your family is supposed to support you, to **love** you. That's what I've always been told. They didn't do shit but look down their nose at you and attack your right to be your own self person. They *hurt* you, shut you out, made you feel like a thing instead of a person, and they never, ever cared about you."

She spun on her heel, eyes blazing. "And if your goddamned government starts any more shit over you being responsible for Benezia's crimes..."

Liara felt the heat of Shepard's anger, and the hidden fear, and the helpless feeling of despair that she couldn't make Liara feel better. It was like a torch burning away shadows of grief and inadequacy, and she gave a small smile at the angry expression on her face. "I do not ... feel responsible for what my mother has done. I worry, as a child should, that I did not do enough to ... let her know I appreciated what she taught me, and why. That perhaps I should have made more of an effort to see things her way, if only so that I would have more good memories of her." She exhaled, and stroked the box in front of her again.

"I did not cause her to twist in the manner she has, and I will not throw my life away to please my family when I have only now found a reason to live, Sara. Do not fear that." She tapped the box. "But the High Solarch is trying, I suppose, to offer me an honorable way to salvage the name of my family should I choose to take it. It is what a ... dutiful daughter would do."

Shepard snorted indignantly, and Liara smiled. "Sara, I will not let the High Solarch's intentions, whatever they might be, force me into anything. I lesson I learned long ago comes to mind."

She shrugged, turning to face the piano, and her smile widened. With hesitant fingers, she touched the keys, trailing over white and black ivory, bringing forth dulcet notes, a simple, slow tune.

Shepard stopped, watching, and Liara played a few more notes, hesitantly. "When I was younger, on my third expedition... we were trapped in a sandstorm. I was impatient to get back out and explore, bursting with restlessness. One of the researchers there brought a keyboard with her, a gift from her human lover who had died some years before."

She touched the keys gently, ascending the scale, remembering. "It was during that down time I learned more about humans for the first time, about the marks I had tattooed on my face that you call eyebrows. Doctor Orlena played for us as the sandstorm battered our little shelter."

"I remember being entranced by the music, the simplicity and the calm. Doctor Orlena told me that the keyboard and the music was all she had to remind her of her lost human lover, but that although she missed him terribly, she valued that loss. She had taken him for granted until he was gone, and she was so terribly sad when she told me to never let go of what made me happy."

Liara touched more keys, the notes ascending and then falling once more, a simple, tragic melody. "At the time, like a fool, I thought merely that I should throw myself ever more into my work. I would show my mother that my choices had value, that I would not forsake it to make her happy, and I commented as such. She gave me the most wounded look – even today I cannot get it out of my mind – and said that the work was not what would lift me when I was broken, or calm me when I was hurt, or make me want to live in the face of death."

Liara finished the section of the song she was playing, still quiet. "I learned there that sometimes what we hold most valuable to us is what others expect of us, or even what we think we want. It is those things that cry out to our souls when we are still and quiet. A reminder that we are but sparks from the fire, flickering for a few moments of brightness before the dark. That we cannot hold onto everything

we cherish unless we take time to actually cherish it."

There was a moment of silence, something almost tangible, and Shepard found herself holding her breath. Liara traced a finger over two last keys, and the last fading note was bittersweet.

The asari looked over her shoulder at Shepard. "I will not leave you alone, Sara. I am never going to submit to the wishes of those who, as you said, never cared about me, or my pain. I merely wish you to grasp some of what my people hold over my head.

Liara smiled, a film of tears coming to her eyes. "And ... why I can never go back home to the flametrees and tides of Thessia. Never hear the booming surf, or walk its silver beaches. Never smell the fragrant shantha mist of the Outrier, or the laughter of the children at the Maiden's Walk. If I have a family, it will be you and I, not them." Liara swallowed, the grief in her voice subdued but audible.

Shepard gave a little exhalation of breath, and sighed unhappily. She hadn't really known how likely Liara was to be cut off when she got into this. "I know how that pain feels, Liara. I ... can never see Earth again. Never walk in the old arcology, or lay out under the sun. But I'm being punished for something I did, that I caused. You ... are being punished because of what your mother did. And that...just isn't fair."

Liara shrugged. "Life, I have found, very rarely is fair, Sara. But I lose a home that despises me and a family that dislikes me to gain you." Her lips formed a small smile again. "I am not displeased with the trade off."

Shepard laughed. "Fair enough, then." She paused, wondering what to say after a conversation like that, then gestured to the piano. "I... didn't know you played piano."

Liara nodded. "Finding the light out of the darkness is something that my mother always stressed." Liara turned away from the piano, looking up into Shepard's eyes. "Do not fret and worry over my fate, Sara. I am happier with you than I would be alone amid Thessia's shores, have no doubts. I merely wish my people would see me as something else besides a useless sacrifice."

Shepard scratched her head. "Well, their loss, my gain. Since the sword didn't go over so well, I got something else for you. Stay here for a bit, I need to grab it and make sure it's ready." She left Liara at the piano, heading upstairs, and opening up the armory.

Kahlee had shut down the manufacturing unit, but not before it had finished Shepard's work. She picked up the two pieces laid out on the tabletop and slid them together, smiling as the power unit hummed with an almost ominous sound and the shotgun pistol shifted into pistol form. She paused to attach the handle unit to the weapon's base, checking that the rubberized grip she'd installed had fixed properly, and then the pressure sensor that acted as a trigger.

The resulting weapon was a smoky greyish-black, almost ten inches long and two wide, with a cavernous barrel that promised nothing but painful death. The ammo block was slung into the barrel's length, a shallow concave metal shape below the barrel, and the handle was wrapped in interlocking puzzle shapes of rubber for a better grip. The heat-sink was along the top back of the weapon, venting waste heat up and forward at the barrel-tip to fight muzzle climb. The mode shift switch was an easy thumb-press away on the left side of the weapon.

She picked up the simple holster she'd bought for it, testing the fit, then exited the room, heading back downstairs. Liara was watching the haptic view-screen, having turned it to the salarian's "Science Weekly" channel.

Shepard cleared her throat, keeping the gun behind her back. "I .. I did some thinking. About this fight we're going into. I know you already have a gun, a light pistol. It's a pretty good model, no mods but

solid enough for light work."

Liara nodded, tilting her head, and Shepard shrugged. "Problem is, we're not going into light work, but maybe into combat with geth, commandos, krogan, and Jesus knows what else. At this point if the fucking Protheans came back from the dead and tried to kill me I wouldn't be that shocked. A pistol isn't always going to be enough gun."

Liara's lips formed a soft smile. "And as your General von Grath says, there is no such thing as too much gun?"

Shepard grinned. "*Exactly*. So...I was going to show you how to use that shotgun of Benezia's we found, but that thing's a monster, meant for a close-range fighter, someone more like me than you. What you needed was flexibility, a good shotgun for inclose work but a nice heavy pistol for longer range fights. Unfortunately, those guns are both very heavy."

Liara nodded.

Shepard gave a weak smile and laid the pistol she'd made for Liara on the kitchen countertop. "So... I sort of made you a weapon of my own design. Something I'd been kicking around in my head for a while."

Liara's face went very still as she walked forward, her graceful hands moving carefully as she drew the weapon from the fabric holster. Her right hand snugged against the grip that Shepard had planned and fabricated to fit exactly right, as she examined the smooth angles and dark coloration. "Goddess...you...made this?"

Shepard nodded. "It has a selector switch. On the left. One sets it to the heavy pistol mode. Like what you use already, but more range and stopping power. Fires a sub-fragmenting round that drives fragments of armor into a target but blows up when it hits an unarmored one for more damage." Shepard gestured. "If you shift it..."

Liara pressed the switch, and the gun slid forward, the ammo block sliding back and down as the barrel lengthened two inches, and the firing casing slid upwards and over the top of the gun. "...it shifts into a light automatic combat shotgun. I mimicked the firing action of the shotgun Benezia used, so it basically superheats the fragmentation ammo and blasts it out in a cloud of frag flechettes. It should tear down anything close."

Liara ran a finger along the weapon. "You have not made a weapon since you designed and built your ODIN prototype." It was not a question, and Shepard nodded slowly.

Liara met Shepard's gaze. "I know, Sara." She triggered the control again, and the weapon contracted into its pistol form, and Liara replaced it in the holster. "You fear for my safety...but you trust me to take care of myself. The best gesture you can give me is to honor me with your own work." She smiled, and kissed Shepard's lips, almost hesitantly, before stepping back. "I will carry it with me always."

Shepard actually blushed, to Liara's delight. "It's just a gun."

Liara trailed a finger against its cool metal surface. "No, it is not. It is, to me, as much of a symbol as my mother's warp sword. Both were crafted in a time of great fear and danger, to fight enemies that many regarded as invincible, and to protect those people the crafter loved. I do not claim to know everything about you yet...but I can feel you in this weapon. I can feel your anger in its vicious attack design. I can feel your care and concern in the way you made the lines more asari-like than the blocky weapons you yourself use. I can feel your love in the time you must have taken to design something this... complex."

Liara smiled. "Besides, now I can compare favorably with Tali and her plasma flamethrower shotgun."

Shepard laughed. "Oh, god. Joker's never gonna live that down."

### O-OSaBC-O

The third day of shore leave brought about the sobering realization for the crew of the Normandy that battle was fast approaching. This was underlined by the arrival of the Commissariat's dreadnaught, the SD15 Manswell's Wrath.

The ship dwarfed the Normandy, being of a third generation design, taking some queues from both volus and asari designs. The blue, black and silver color scheme of the blocky vessel didn't detract from the ominous red line that ran the length of the vessel, indicating it was a Commissariat ship. The long line of bulky figures in Judgment battle armor that disgorged from the ship for a few hours leave on the Citadel didn't help much either.

Shepard had spent a night out with Anderson, Kahlee and Liara. Still refusing to wear a dress, she'd been dragged along (unwillingly) by Ashley Williams and Chakwas to go shopping, which was the third time she'd ever done such a thing, the first two times being with Beatrice Shields back in her 2RRU days.

She'd ended up buying several suits, mostly in shades of gray, black and silver, and simple blouses to wear, along with sensible shoes. Chakwas said she looked dignified, and Ashley said she looked like a pissed off lawyer. That was good enough for Shepard.

The dinner had taken the edge off the tension running between herself and Liara, and she'd enjoyed herself more than she had expected. They'd eaten at a very upscale asari restaurant that catered to humans, and Liara had especially delighted in fish fresh from Thessia. Shepard had her first experience with flamepears, the fruit both spicy and cool, and with Thessian silverfish, small shrimp like crustaceans that tasted like a minty sort of pork. Anderson had spoken at length about his tour of duty with the turians in the "Goodwill" campaign the SA had waged in the aftermath of the First Contact War, his respect for their honor and determination. Kahlee had told the story of Anderson and her own brush with Saren, and the horrible lengths Saren would go to get the job done.

Shepard was uncomfortably reminded of her own way of doing things, and lost track of the conversation as she thought about that. Saren was, from all the reports she had read, a bona fide hero who made the hard calls when he had to and didn't let sentiment or mercy stop him.

If things went bad enough, could she end up like him? At what point did a figure like that decide to throw away his whole life on whatever he was planning with the Reapers? And why?

She felt a cool chill creep up her spine. She tried to put herself in his place. Why bring the Reapers back? To pass judgment on society itself?

No, that wasn't it. She remembered that strong, flanged baritone. Tired, determined. *"There's time for you all. You've seen what I've seen, haven't you? They are coming. There is nothing to be done about it, except to die fruitless and in futility...or try to survive the coming storm."*

The memories in her head of the Beacon stirred, and Shepard shifted uneasily in her seat, picking at her food. Whatever Saren was doing, he was doing it to survive ... something. Something he saw as inevitable.

He wanted to be on the winning side. That meant he didn't just plan to bring back the Reapers. He must have been in contact with them.

She glanced at her plate, thinking. The words of the High Priestess came back to her, voice strong and yet fearful. *"...the name Nazara is known to me. It is inscribed on the oldest stone of the Temple, along with the ancient glyph for darkness, death, and annihilation."*

Shepard found herself the center attention as Liara and Anderson both stared at her. "Are you alright, Sara? You look like you saw a ghost." Anderson's voice was concerned, and Shepard answered him with a weak smile.

"Fine, sir. Just ... thinking."

O-OSaBC-O

Much later on, after Anderson and Kahlee had decided to stay out enjoying themselves at Flux, the night wound down with Shepard and Liara doing a bit more experimentation with each other. Liara tried not to let the bond slip out of control, and Shepard had tried not to be so rough, but they both ended up doing things more violently than the first time, and somewhere in the middle of her ninth or tenth screaming release, Shepard pretty much lost track of who she was and who Liara was once more.

The fact that Liara seemed to enjoy it more than she did at this point made Shepard both smug and guilty, but also thoughtful. In the small hours of the morning, as she lay against Liara's exhausted form, the swirling emotions and memories that persisted after their meld made Shepard almost dizzy. The feelings made her feel more complete, and it was almost addictive. She wondered how much of her was being imprinted onto Liara, and how much of the little asari's more gentle, pure nature was filtering into herself.

When Liara awoke, they talked about it briefly, and Liara shamefully admitted that she had simply too little control to prevent the bond from intensifying when she was overwhelmed with physical sensations during sex. Shepard had suggested perhaps taking a break from the sex if it was making things difficult for Liara, which made Liara stammer out an embarrassed, blushing admission that she didn't really want to stop.

Shepard didn't want Liara to feel obligated, but the asari had clung to her all the more tightly and they'd ended up doing it again. Desperate fear and worry lashed across Shepard's mind, as she felt Liara's dread of the coming fight, the fear that they might not survive. She took and Shepard gave and eventually they'd both collapsed, barely able to breathe, battered and spent and simply holding each other as they drifted off, still bound, into calm dreams.

She'd paid for such exertions the next morning, wincing as she forced herself to bandage up some sore scratch marks and wondering if she could walk straight by the time she was supposed to meet with von Grath. Liara was curled up in the bed, her features softly radiant in the faint light of the Widow Nebula that came in through the windows, and Shepard found her worry evaporating just looking at her.

Despite Liara's worry, Shepard herself felt fine. It was sometimes a little disturbing to know things she never had experienced, but Shepard found she needed that. It was a constant reminder that she wasn't alone, that not everyone was going to betray her, that basing her present actions on the wounds and shit in her past would only destroy her future.

It was hard being supportive, of not letting her fears win out. But Liara needed that. She had no one else to rely on besides Shepard, and that meant she couldn't afford to back away from Liara now. She resolved to talk to some other asari – maybe a doctor or something – once they got back from beating down Saren and Benezia.

O-OSaBC-O

By dint of painkillers and moving slowly, she'd showered, bandaged a few wounds, carefully put on her dress blues and managed to get down to dock 16 by 10 AM, after a quick breakfast made awkward by her stiffness.

The dock was swarming with SA military police, commissars, and various AIS types, and Shepard had

to pick her way past slowly, finally reaching the pier. General von Grath was already there, chatting amiably with Doctor Chakwas, who had an almost wicked gleam in her eye. Von Grath made a satisfied noise as Shepard approached and turned to Chakwas. "Alas, Helen, duty calls. Perhaps we can speak more of your experiences with the Ninth Regiment once we deal with this turian criminal and his asari flunky?"

She smirked as he kissed her hand. "But of course, Jason. I mean, General. Be safe." She turned, headed for a parked aircar, and Shepard regarded her former CO with a raised eyebrow.

Von Grath merely shrugged, and Shepard sniggered. "This puts me in the mind of that time on Tahtra, sir."

He coughed, a smug smirk barely visible under his handlebar mustache. "You have a very energetic and skilled doctor in Major Chakwas, Shepard. Lord knows, with how you seem to treat cover as some kind of plague to be avoided, she must have lots of practice. Also, good work on not being arrested or nearly starting a war with the salarians on this leave. Unlike the last one."

She muttered. "You punch *one* smartass salarian..."

Von Grath gave a shattering bellow of laughter and turned towards the dreadnaught, Shepard trailing in his wake as she had all those years ago. His energy was infectious, as he strode ahead, features fixed in a patrician half-sneer, uniform perfect, calling out amiable if brief greetings to a few of the Commissars that stood around dockside.

The sentry at the gangway saw the Butcher of Torfan and the Grand General and nearly pissed himself coming to attention, stammering out their ranks as they came aboard. At the far end of the gangplank stood two figures, waiting patiently.

Admiral Chu was in working blacks, his slender form more revealed by the tighter fitting combat outfit. His arms were lean but sinewy with muscle, crisscrossed with old scars and badly healed wounds. Next to him, the cruel visage of Commissar Chisholm flickered in a sardonic grin for a moment before he saluted, still dressed in his black great-coat and armor.

"Admiral Chu, it is good to meet you again, sir." General von Grath saluted in a cool if sharp manner, and the admiral returned it. "I haven't had a chance to work with you before, and I appreciate being able to get back into harness."

Chu chuckled. "Yes, well, you won't thank me if this little trip goes south, General. We don't know exactly what we'll find on Noveria, after all. And the Senate Defense committee was informed of our intentions this morning, and 'furious' would be an understatement. Senator Jackson said he'd kill you, me, Shepard, and Senator Adkin's dog if we ended up getting our 'shit kicked in' by that black ship of Saren's."

Shepard snickered under her breath at the idea of the grossly obese Senator doing bodily harm to anything not food related, and Von Grath gave her a quelling look before responding. "I'm sure the Senators are not pleased, but this is the best option. If the Noverian Corporate Court wishes to protect Saren, they should be prepared to pay the price."

The Commissar behind them just chuckled. "The High Commandant of the Commissariat did not take being yelled at by the Senate kindly. He is, probably as I speak, informing them of some of the ... ramifications of the intelligence Commander Shepard was able to obtain from Cerberus HQ. Something along the lines of opposing a strike against Saren makes the entire Senate politically unreliable in the commissariat's eyes."

Shepard suppressed a wince. The term 'politically unreliable' was very nearly a death sentence in the

SA, as it indicated the Commissariat had evidence you were acting in a manner that violated the Manswell State Security Acts, which had never been rescinded since the Days of Iron. While free speech was still tolerated and even encouraged, any material actions – even something as innocent as donating money – to a cause that the Commissariat judged as a threat was an offense that would strip citizenship from the violators.

At the awkward silence that fell upon the Commissar's statement, Admiral Chu cleared his throat. "Let's head down to the briefing area to review what intelligence we currently have. After that, we'll have a light lunch and I expect all ships to be ready to cast off by no later than 1400. I've given liberty to the crew of the Wrath until 1300, so you may wish to alert your own crew, Shepard."

Shepard shrugged. "Liberty for my ship was set at noon. We should be good."

Chu merely nodded. "Let's get this show on the road, then, shall we?"

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## Chapter 97: Chapter 88 : Noveria , Approach

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*A/N: I'd like to answer a review here, since this is one of those things that I should have really covered in my doc on the SA, and it's a damned good question brought up by NarwhalWarlord*

*The Commissariat is the organization responsible for ensuring everyone toes the SA line.. including the SA navy. That's why there are Commissars and Commissariat spies and the like on every single ship in the Fleet, and why the Commissariat does not answer to the Senate. As I have said before, they are the very worst of the Soviet Political Officer Commissar and the Warhammer 40k Commissar mixed together with a package of biotic power.*

*The Commissariat has its own dreadnaught (and escorts, but there wasn't enough dock space for the escorts described below) in the event that some portion of the SA navy tried to commit a coup d'tat. It ensures the Commissariat has enough power to put down anything up to a full squadron of rebelling Naval personnel without needing to rely on the rest of the Navy to do so.*

*It's also to allow the Commissariat to have access to a bombardment platform under their sole control, rather than relying on the reliability of naval personnel to carry out unpleasant orders. Keep in mind that SA and Citadel restrictions against orbital kinetic bombardment apply only to garden worlds – that is, naturally life supporting worlds with native life. The majority of colonies in the SA are not garden worlds but terraformed, and there is no restriction on bombarding those. (Which is why the turians were able to bombard Shanxi, btw.)*

*The Commissariat is not 'secretive' exactly. The Commissars are designed to be **very** visible and to ensure that people know they are watching.*

*The same concerns will probably be put forth regarding the number of ships the AIS can bring to bear. The AIS has its own paramilitary force and naval structure for purposes of 'plausible deniability' and to provide a force multiplier when going after other forces (STG, etc) that have space support.*

*The Wrex portion...well. It's Wrex. I can't help it.*

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The trip to Noveria was one done in a feeling of edgy trepidation by the crew of the Normandy. The departure had gone off smoothly – no one got arrested this time, although Friggs had been carried back to the Normandy by a pair of drunken asari, and Pressly and Adams had shown up hungover and groaning that morning.

Shepard stood at the railing before the galaxy map in the CIC, suppressing a small grin as Pressly stalked around the edges of the map, clearly still under the weather. The laconic Adams had wasted no time in regaling the crew with Pressly's cutting loose while on leave – he'd ended up with a couple of the human ladies at the Consort's Gardens and burned a fair sized hole in Shepard's expense account doing it.

And then he'd gone on an alphabetical drunk, starting with shots of Absolut and ending up with Zetan Ale, cursing his ex-wife, Cerberus, turians, and the difficulty of finding a drink that started with the letter X before passing out in the Darkstar Lounge. She shook her head, coughing slightly to cover her chuckles, and tapped the small control panel on the console next to her to alter the map.

Noveria was at the fringe of Citadel space, in a system with only no mass relay links that had to be reached via FTL from the nearest connecting system. Their FTL blueshift would be visible to sensors hours before arrival, which meant Noveria would know they were on the way.

The briefing with Admiral Chu and General von Grath had outlined the broad strokes of the plan Shepard had concocted. The Noverian Corporate Court had a small fleet of ships it used for 'self protection', consisting of at least four heavy cruisers, a small number of light missile cruisers, and about two dozen frigates and system patrol boats. More than enough to see off all but the heaviest pirate raid, not quite enough to fall under Citadel regulations about private navies. The planet itself was safeguarded by a large missile base on it's outer moon, supplemented with missile drones and fifty or so light fighters – turian, mostly.

Added to this were over fifty orbital defense satellites, and at least twenty heavy GARDIAN towers with GTS batteries nearby. Not to mention any other surprises the Corporate Court had lying around. All in all, Noveria was well above the ability for anything but a full military squadron to handle.

The Commissariat had lent it's dreadnaught and fifteen battle cruisers, and the AIS had added twenty more cruisers and nearly a dozen heavy frigates to the count. Under Commissariat orders, Admiral Hackett had been forced to let go of the Fifth Fleet's regimental marine detachment – five light cruisers refitted to assault landing ships, and ten battle transports. Commissar Chisholm had dragooned the SC5 Da Vinci, a carrier-cruiser, to come along and provide fighter support.

A dreadnaught with forty cruisers and a carrier, backed up by a full four regiments of troops, a regiment of Commissariat assault troops, and thirty Commissars, was a terrifying force to bring to bear against one world. Admiral Chu was famed and well-known, both for his combat prowess and his role in the AIS. Shepard and Chisholm were both seen as bloody handed lunatics, and General von Grath had fought some of the bloodiest and controversial fights in SA history.

As Chu had put it, "They'd have to be insane to defy your landing in the face of that kind of threat, Shepard."

Even so, Shepard was a firm believer that there was no such thing as everything going smoothly. The light at the end of the tunnel, most often, was from an oncoming train. With that maxim firmly in her mind, she'd begun preparing how to handle events if the stupid businesspeople tried to stop her from investigating the planet.

Noveria was not a garden world – much of the planet was an icy hellhole, complete with a subarctic methane atmosphere laced with enough chlorine to kill everything but a volus that inhaled it. There were four primary settlements on Noveria, each one shielded against the atmosphere and partly buried underground. The capital, Port Hanshan, was a large city, with every luxury and amenity a traveler on business might require.

The nearest two cities to it, Regulus and Daystani, were primarily banking and commercial centers, and

industrial areas. Farthest out, Sertaci was an entirely asari settlement funded by the Ilium Corporate Court, a joint investment in building a series of utterly isolated resort "fortress homes" for wealth emigres who wished to live free of restrictive tax burdens. A collection of private ecodomos linked by high speed underground rail to a central town where the support personnel and servants worked, it was located far away from the hustle of the towns.

Littering the huge mountain range that towered over Port Hanshan were the research facilities that made Noveria famous. Each one was a self-contained hotlab over the massive glacier that was edging downwards from the mountains above. In emergencies, they could be detonated and sunk into the two-mile deep river of frozen ice, rendering anything dangerous inside utterly harmless. Dozens of such labs festooned the mountains, but the most impressive was the massive structure that sprawled over the highest peak in the range, Peak 13 – the research and development center of Binary Helix.

Shepard had noted that the Illusive Man had mentioned Peak Fifteen, not Thirteen. Yet according to what information the AIS had, there was no such location. The Illusive Man's information spoke of a geo-thermal facility down the peak from the main buildings, but where to find an entry?

As much as she would have liked, she couldn't just storm down there and poke around. Weather conditions were horrible on Noveria, with snow-storms boasting winds of over 150 miles per hour and ice accumulations of over nine inches in a few hours. Noveria maintained narrow roads and skybridges to the various mountaintop labs, but traversing these was at the pleasure of the Corporate Court – to prevent industrial espionage, no one could move across the skybridges without a VI encrypted passkey, or ground defense turrets would open fire.

Worse, she had zero authority on Noveria. The Corporate Court paid no taxes and did not accept or tolerate Citadel interference in its affairs. They tolerated Saren – more due to the fact that he was an investor than anything else – and Saren was the sole Spectre 'responsible' for Noveria. As long as his reports indicated the planet was clean and not harboring anything dangerous, the Citadel had no real power to simply enforce it's will.

Humanity had only a few businesses active on Noveria, despite the fact that it started as a human concern. The Corporate Court that had started the colony had swiftly cut ties with the SA, in protest of tax hikes, and for the past nineteen years the SA had not seen fit to reign them in, but they had stopped doing business with any corporation that maintained it's headquarters there. That meant a large number of businesses simply couldn't operate in human space and yet remain on Noveria. The weakest capitulated, the stubborn went slowly bankrupt.

The strongest – Synthetic Insights, Nolan Arms, Nirvana Technologies, and the Sirta Foundation – had thumbed their nose at the SA and continued on, inviting alien corporations to help them build a "place for business to get business done", as the advertising went. It had allowed Noveria to flourish, but had ended up giving it a sinister reputation as well.

Shepard sighed, running her hand restlessly over the railing and wished the damned FTL flight would hurry up and end. She had a bad feeling about this entire trip, and wondered how exactly to go about finding Saren and Benezia on a world honeycombed with secrets.

She arched her eyebrow as an incoming comm request caught her eye. *Thessia?*

O-OSaBC-O

The boardroom of the Noverian Court of Corporations was lavish on a scale that stunned the unprepared mind.

A long table of asari trellwood dominated the room, trimmed in eezo-stained icesteel from Thessia. Over twenty-five feet long, and several inches thick, it was pierced by haptic pop-up displays and a

rotating globe displaying Noveria in real time imagery from the various security stations and defense sats in orbit. The floor was marble inlaid with trceries of gold, the walls polished wood pierced by broad armorplas windows framed in rich draperies of damask.

Exquisite objects of art, an expensive hundred-inch wide haptic display, and hanging plants from Thessia, Sur'kesh and Palaven completed the setting.

On the left side of the table, the nearest to the door, twelve seats were placed, plush leather and hand-carved wood encasing their owners. The beings in those seats – mostly asari, but three humans, a couple of turians, and a single batarian – watched the haptic viewscreen on the wall with discomfort.

The far side of the table had only five seats. The center seat was occupied by a salarian, flanked by a turian and an asari. At the far ends of the table sat two humans.

Administrator Anolais' voice was thin and irritated as he spoke into the silence that had enveloped the room. "That is our first report. The FTL sensors do not have firm designations on the force's exact composition, but the footprint indicates at least one dreadnaught is present. Given that it is coming from the Ralx-Goras link, it is most likely the ships are either coming from the Citadel, or are asari in origin. Either possibility is disturbing."

Director Adham Kahl, a rather plain featured human sitting on the same side of the table as Anolais, shrugged. "It may simply be a task force in the area looking for pirates. There's no reason for the Citadel or the asari to send a massive fleet to Noveria."

There were several snorts from the far side of the table, and Anolais glanced that way, his large eyes narrowing. "Is there a comment someone needs to make?"

A slender human woman, with her dark hair slicked back and tied off in a severe bun, made a throw-away gesture. "Why bother, Anolais? We all know why they're coming. Saren and Benezia."

Anolais folded his hands neatly on the table before him, frowning. "We have covered this exhaustively. Lady Benezia and Saren both departed Noveria in the aftermath of the news reporting after Eden Prime. They never returned, to the best of our knowledge and our customs department. Despite the fact that Binary Helix was owned in large part by them, that does not criminalize the company nor suggest they are hiding on this world."

The turian next to him nodded. "Binary Helix is not engaged in any way with Cera Arterius or Lady Benezia. Their stock has been frozen and we have already *endured* two inspections of Peak 15 by the Corporate Court." He flicked his mandibles to one side. "In any event, if these ships coming this way are here for that, they have wasted their time."

The asari on the senior side of the table spoke, her words slow and cautious, almost robotic in tone. "It is unlikely in the extreme that the Asari Republic would send ships here ... unless it is a Royal Hunting Party. Notices of the Hunt went out yesterday evening. The Thirty have declared Benezia a criminal that is a threat to our unity and will stop at nothing to end her. If this is the force of a Royal Hunting Party, it is in our best interest to simply acquiesce to whatever they wish – they will have no interest in our research here."

The turian stirred. "I am not letting anyone traipse around my damned facilities, looking for bogeymen. By the spirits, do you really think my company would hide a pair of galactic fugitives?"

Anolais voice was very dry. "I think for enough credits you would slaughter your own Primarch and your wife alongside, Tevek." The explosion of sniggers after this statement made the turian flare with anger but Anolais continued in a serious voice. "It does not change the fact that I agree with you. Investigating our own is one thing. Letting outsiders do so sets a legal precedent I am not willing to

accede to at this or any other time."

He turned to the stiff figure standing at attention at the room's entrance. "Captain Valdais, get your ships ready for a fight. Do not take them beyond the orbit of the outer moon's missile envelope, but make it very clear we are not about to put up with nonsense."

The turian saluted and departed, and Anolais stared at the sensor map on the wall, which flickered with new information. Anolais stared at it a long second, dumbfounded.

"There are *troop ships* in this incoming fleet. Someone get me the Citadel Council, this is intolerable."

O-OSaBC-O

Wrex finished the final adjustments to his suit of armor, checking each piece with a sounding tool before beginning to put the completed suit on. It was part of his battle ritual. Checking his weapon. His armor. Going through the motions that would call the soulfire in his mind.

Tracing the gouges across his muzzle, remembering the day in the Hollows where his faith shattered. And that day on Bortra where his only son had died a senseless, stupid death, after Shepard and Shields had nearly died on Torfan to keep him alive.

Wrex shunted the old pain aside, focusing on his battle readiness. Battle and the blood rage was all he lived for any longer, that and the slow downward spiral of despair he'd locked himself into. Perhaps if Urv had not died he would have found his fire again, his will. But in the loss of his son, Wrex had been forced to look at himself, his people, and the future.

There was nothing there. The krogan would never rise above their own need for violence, above the call of the blood and the roar of the battle. It was not their way. Others looked at them like they were brutes, too stupid or simple to grasp how to act civilized.

But the krogan knew civilization was simple a false veneer the weak used to survive alongside the strong. They had no desire to change. They liked the decline that the race had fallen into. It gave them an outlet for their helpless fury over the piles of stillborn babies. It let them try and ignore the helpless rage they felt when they comforted the broken forms of their mates, or watched as the barren females wandered into the central deserts to die and thus not be a burden on the clan.

Convincing the krogan to act like those who had condemned them to a slow, lingering death? No krogan would do so, without a clear reward for it. And the Council races were much too frightened of the memories of the Rebellions to give the krogan anything to hope for.

No, to change the krogan was like drinking the ocean. Not only impossible, but you made yourself sick trying to do so. The only reason Wrex was on this ship, in this fight, was the ugly name that had popped up during his shotgun interrogation of that thug of Saren's back on the Citadel.

Okeer.

Wrex inhaled, the trembling of his hands growing marked. Clan Ganar, cursed oathbreakers, filthy traitors, salarian catpaws. Okeer was the eldest of their kind still living, a mockery of krogan endurance. It had been Okeer who had turned the tribes against one another, using them like game pieces in some deranged match of ch'tha, before the salarians had come. Okeer had been the only one strong enough to stand against his great-grandfather to lead the krogan.

Okeer, when his grandfather had broken with the Citadel races, had sold them out. He'd given the salarians enough krogan to make their demonic genophage, and then laughed when it had torn the beating heart out of the race. Okeer's madness had infected his clan, and they'd vanished into the dark of space, somehow outwitting the CDEM.

For centuries, the clan had simply been gone. They'd returned barely fifty years ago, Okeer's poisonous brood having somehow swelled rather than shrunk. Did he have some cure for the genophage, or a secret stash of fertile females?

Wrex never knew. He'd clashed with Okeer's eldest, Skal, dozens of times in the past half-century, in a variety of conflicts. Crushing him on Feros had been sweetly satisfying, but that didn't stop the ugly knowledge that Skal was merely one of many.

Okeer's clan took bloodthirsty work so sick even the Blood Pack wouldn't take the jobs – putting down slave revolts, capturing samples for Collectors, the destruction of hospitals and nurseries in conflicts to demoralize defenders.

Clan Ganar had killed Urv. For that, Okeer would die. His entire filthy clan was somehow entwined with Saren, and Benezia. Wrex didn't care much about the turian, or the asari. But Okeer he would face, in single combat, if the honorless pile of pyjak droppings would agree to such. Whether he did or not, Wrex would tear out the lunatic's hearts and eat them raw.

Then, perhaps, he could rest. Die, or go back and haunt Omega's corridors, become a sad and broken exhibit like old Patriarch was now. That'd tickle Aleema's sense of humor...

*Aria. Right. She can't be linked to her old self, after all. Silly girl.*

Wrex looked up as the elevator opened, disgorging the figure of Ashley and Kaiden, both talking animatedly about something.

Wrex merely grunted. He still didn't get humans. Shepard, Shields, Dunn, and Jackson, those he could understand. Tormented warriors, full of angry rage that never calmed, wild and free. Jackson was nearly a krogan in his mindset, his madness no worse than a krogan's blood rage. The rest of the humans? Soft. Weak. More concerned with appearance than facts. He'd overheard one of them babbling to the womenfolk, boasting about how 'perception is reality'.

Wrex doubted that fool would live six minutes on Tuchanka. In the nicer parts. In spring.

No, reality was reality. Perception was stupid, it varied from alien to alien and time to time. Wrex examined his shotgun, running his hands against the smooth barrel. Reality was a good gun, a good fight, a good drink, a good meal, and a good nap after. Anything beyond that was pointless. Those who fought for a cause either ended up dying for it or ended up betrayed by it.

He turned his bulbous eyes away from the two humans, the scent of their weak pheromones blending making his muzzle twitch. He wiped his nose absently, and then looked up again as Tali approached out of engineering, walking towards him.

He lifted his head, shoulders spreading as he faced her. For whatever reason, the little quarian always made his mood improve. Maybe it was memories of her knifing that stupid Weyrloc right in the eye. "Quarian."

Tali immediately stiffened, glowing eyes narrowing. "My *name*-"

He held up a hand, grinning. "I know, Tali. Just like seeing you go all angry like that. Gotta say, you changed my whole view on you quarians. Figured you were soft. If they're all like you, you might be worth more than a cooked varren in a fight."

She merely snorted, folding her arms. "I did not come here to be insulted by a being who drinks *hanar tea*."

He shrugged. "You don't know what you're missing, then. Typical quarians, all pissy because you have to eat your steak with a straw." He chuckled again, as she rotated her helmet in an annoyed away, and

shifted in his seating. "So what did you come here for? More shotgun tips?"

He'd been surprised the first time she'd come to him, asking him how to use her shotgun in a better fashion. He'd taught her what he could, about how the shotgun was never just a weapon, it was a threat, a cone of hesitation an enemy would fear, an extension of a kick to a downed enemy. Using a shotgun was a way of thinking, a way of holding your body so that you could bring it to any angle.

Only time would tell if she could absorb his wisdom, or if she'd end up dead and broken like so many other warriors he'd taught.

Like Urv. He winced at the thought, exhaling.

She shook her head. "I need some advice, Wrex."

Wrex stifled a long-suffering sigh. First Shepard, then Shields, then Dunn, then the freaking asari, and now Tali? "When I find whoever told this crew I'm the ship's counselor, I'm eating them whole."

She laughed, then shrugged. "It's not that. I mean..." She twisted her hands together. "My father always told me a krogan would tell you the truth, even if it hurt, and that they never lied to themselves about what the world was like."

Wrex's levity, thin as it was, faded again, and he fixed her with a stern look. "Your father is wise, but that sounds like the kind of wisdom he learned the hard way."

She nodded. "I know...I mean, he did things in his life I never knew about...but he worked with Tetrimus once, at least that is what Tetrimus said, and he didn't deny it..."

Wrex ran his tongue against his teeth and wished once more he could get some kind of scent tell from quarians. It was impossible to read the suit rats when they got all quiet like this. Grunting, he shifted again, setting one massive armored foot out in front of him to prop his arm on his knee. "Alright, then. What you need advice on?"

She looked down. "I...well, it's kind of *embarrassing*."

He shrugged. "I once took a piss in what I thought was a field and ended up being a flower park of an asari matriarch." He smirked at the memory of her face when she'd beheld him. "Can't be much more embarrassing than that."

The little quarian giggled, then folded her hands together. "Riiight. It's about Joker." Her voice dropped. "I ... I don't know how he puts up with the way he gets treated, sometimes. It upsets me. The humans don't appreciate him. He only has a few friends and I don't think any of them really understand what he goes through every day, trying to win their approval."

She sighed. "We were talking and I was trying to convince him to maybe pay a visit to the quarian fleet...just to see how we live. And maybe he ... took it the wrong way? He got real quiet and said he didn't want to be a burden on me and then said he had to go on watch, and he hasn't spoken since then."

Wrex folded his arms. "You're asking *me* for... dating advice. You're asking the **krogan** for *dating advice*."

She shook her head. "No, you bosh'tet. I'm asking you if I'm being stupid trying to drag him away from everything he knows. I'm doing it to make him happier...or maybe it's to make me happier. I don't know any more. And this whole fight against Saren ... the marines were talking like we were all going to die or something."

Wrex grunted again. "Humans are soft, Tali. Despite how hard they fight sometimes, and how bad they got clawed up in the Relay 314 incident, they still have never really faced death as a race, the way my people have." He paused. "Or your people have. They don't get it, that everything is failing and

crumbling. So they fear death, and they cling to what they already feel comfortable with."

She tilted her head, curiously, and he continued. "Joker – which, by the way, is a stupid name – still thinks he can make a difference. That his actions matter more than finding happiness. It's the kind of stupid that leads to heroism and all that sacrifice and duty turians spew off about all the time, and it's what gets people killed."

He set his shotgun aside, focusing on the quarian. "I've lost my mate, my boy, my father, my clan, and my entire rightful place in Krogan society. My greatsire fathered the Krogan Imperium. My grandsire challenged the entire Galaxy. My father was the last Warlord to unite more than five clans under one banner. And I'm a broken down old merc, tagging along on a quest to bring down a lunatic turian because I wanted to see Shepard fight and to take out an old enemy. I don't believe in causes, or in much of anything anymore. Joker still does. He's too young to do otherwise."

He turned his gaze to hers. "Joker doesn't get that you don't have the rest of your life to pursue what you want. He probably reacted the way he did because he doesn't want to have to choose between you and his fleet or duty or whatever stupid ideal humans put in his head that made him want to not be a cripple in a chair. He's brave and tough – for a human – but that doesn't mean he's not soft when it comes to going after what he wants."

Tali nodded. "... so I shouldn't make him choose?"

Wrex shrugged. "Why does he have to leave his clan to join yours? Is yours so much better?"

She stiffened. "The quarians would reward him for his skill, instead of ostracizing him for his disability!"

Wrex sneered. "And the Krogans and turians would have killed him at birth for being born flawed. You can't lay your values onto his. That's how the Salarian Uplift ended up ruining my people, why the Relay 314 turned from a suppression to a damned war, why when your people and the Geth blew up the entire Citadel turned their back on you."

He rolled his shoulders. "From the little I've heard you saying, life in your fleet of ships isn't exactly easy. It'd be less easy for him."

She sighed. "I ... I need to think, I guess."

Wrex leaned back against the wall. "If you want advice, you'd be better off asking the boy what he wants to do with his life rather than tell him. I'd say that he got angry not just because you're making him choose...but because he wants to choose your way over what he has, and he feels guilty about it."

She looked at him a long moment. "You are ... wow. Really good at this."

Wrex rolled his eyes. "I can smell their damned emotions. It's pretty irritating when they get around me and all I get is the smell equating to 'oh god he's going to eat me' over and over." He smiled, displaying his even row of large teeth. "But oh so satisfying."

With that he turned his attention away from her, picking up his shotgun again. "Krogan counseling is over, unless you'd like the hand to hand portion. That didn't go so well for Shepard, and you're so small and squishy..."

The look she gave him was filled with such scorn he couldn't help but guffaw. "Don't knife me in the eye, Tali."

"Wrex..." She reached for her knife, and his laughter doubled.

Liara had spent the morning aboard the Normandy upgrading the science lab, installing her new equipment, organizing her chemical supplies, and checking her shoulder injury, which was healing nicely. The latest set of bruises and minor injuries from her wild night with Shepard was starting to slowly fade already, and she decided that a short nap on the cot still set up in the lab would be in order.

She awoke to the feeling of the ship shuddering in FTL, the subtle vibration of the inertial dampener having disrupted her biotic field enough to wake her. Shepard's presence pulsed softly in the back of her mind ..she was nervous, preoccupied and worrying. Probably about the battle ahead, Liara realized.

She sat up, blearily going to the small sink in the corner and running some water to splash over her face. She wiped her face with a small towel she kept next to the sink, before turning to the terminal installed on the lab's countertop.

The High Solarch's information on her mother's abilities was very detailed, and very terrifying. She had known her mother was strong, of course. But having her abilities spelled out and illustrated with a few short video clips was another thing entirely.

Even on Feros, she could just barely manage to match her mother for a short time, and it was clear that Benezia had already been very tired and stressed in that fight while Liara was fresh and rested. In an even match up, her mother would overwhelm her in short order.

Shepard had endless faith in her, especially after Liara had saved her life several times. That didn't mean Shepard's faith was well placed, and Liara worried that the High Solarch had not meant the gift of her mother's warp sword in a cruel manner at all, but to give her a desperation move if the fight against her went poorly.

If both she and Shepard were about to die against Benezia...then it was better to drag her down with her than allow her to roam free. Liara didn't know if she had the willpower to do such a thing, to knowingly embrace death to defeat her mother.

She feared very much that she did not.

She scrolled through the information again, looking for some weakness, some angle of attack that her mother would be vulnerable to. The mention of snipers and explosives was promising, but Benezia would never allow herself to be cornered in an area where they could prepare the area against her. Whatever they did had to be so fast, so overwhelming, that her mother had no time to ready her defenses.

The force that Shepard had brought with her gave Liara no comfort, remembering the video she'd seen in the hospital after the fight on Feros. The Fourth Fleet had been powerful, and the black ship Saren commanded had torn it to pieces in minutes while not suffering the slightest visible damage.

That got Liara thinking. There had been fragments of hull on EIngana that had corresponded to the same make up as the black ship. Something had been powerful enough to at least damage it. She pulled out the sample from the drawers of samples she kept in the wall storage unit, sliding it into her upgraded analysis unit.

An hour later, and she finally had her answers. The Inusannon weapons systems were all high energy blasts of some kind of anti-particles, far beyond the scientific ability of the Citadel races to understand. But that indicated that while conventional mass accelerators might not hurt the hull, antimatter tipped disruptor torpedoes might at least have a chance.

The Tho'ian weapon systems had been some sort of coherent energy beam, one that left a thin trace of deranged matter on the surface of the fragments of hull she had. Again, not a weapon that could be

easily replicated. But it confirmed her suspicions. The shielding the black ship used was almost impenetrable to conventional weapons. Only very strong energy reactions, antimatter or degenerate matter bombs, would break through it and the hull.

Of course, bringing such to bear would be difficult. Removed from a ship's strong magnetic bottle, torpedoes would not be stable for long once launched, giving them a short range. Short range against the horrific weapon the black ship used was nearly suicide.

Liara shut her scanner off, rubbing her temples. Every answered question only lead to more questions. If the creators of the black ships were this technologically advanced, why had they not simply conquered the galaxy? If the weapons of the Tho'ian and Inusannon had only succeeded in damaging but not destroying the black ships that had in turn destroyed them, what kind of weapons could be brought to bear that would be achievable to build?

She stared blankly at the readout of the analysis, jumping a bit when she felt a spike of hot anger and disdain through her bond. A moment later, the comm activated. "Doctor T'Soni, please report to the Comm Room immediately."

Shepard's voice sounded so cold.

She stood, straightening her Alliance issue BDU. She wasn't sure why she'd gone to the trouble to locate several sets of the rather tight-fitting military uniforms, but when she'd explained her desires to Kahlee Sanders, the woman had only nodded and appeared a few hours later before departure with a pack of the things, tailored and with Liara's name stitch-stenciled on the chest, like the rest of the crew. Pressly had nodded approvingly when he'd seen her in it, and no one had commented negatively yet.

Perhaps she was fitting in?

She hastened up the stairs, smiling faintly at the guard in front of the comm room, who dipped his head respectfully and stepped aside so she could enter. Shepard was already inside, an expression of absolute rage on her face. She whirled as Liara entered, exhaling as she did so. "Sorry to bring this shit up now...but you have a message from Thessia."

She stepped back, tapping her clearance code into the comms system, and the viewscreen blanked before displaying the T'Soni symbol of flametree and rose. A few seconds later that vanished, replaced with the muscular form of her cousin, Shian.

The asari was dressed in battle armor, armor that showed splashes of purple blood and scorch marks, and her bare arms were spattered with more asari blood. Behind her, Liara could see the courtyard of the Outrier courtyard, with T'Soni huntresses manning the walls with ready weapons. She heard the faint yowl of emergency alarms and sobbing in the distance.

Shian looked up, grimacing, before exhaling slowly and going into a deep bow. "Lady Liara. The House of T'Soni has been dealt a deep wound."

Liara swallowed, her entire body going cold. There was only one reason Shian would treat her with that title. "What has happened, Shian?"

Shian's eyes glittered with rage. "Your mother's Triune Unity fanatics attacked the House. We did not ... we had no warning. We were having chathesi with a member of House Vielsa, discussing those blasted Devir." She wiped her eyes, revealing a long burn mark on her elbow. "Mother...Matriarch Mithra...was about to head into Armali to meet with the Guild when the main gatehouse detonated."

She half turned, jerking a thumb over her shoulder to something out of the camera feed's pickup. "Saris...she didn't have a job, and she was good in a fight, so she was acting as the House Paladin. She went with the huntresses to investigate, and there was a missile fired. Then the Triune just came out of

nowhere."

She shuddered. "Mother and Matriarch Senia Vielsa tried to fight them off. I was on the far side of the compound, training the guard, and I had to fight my way through the damned cultists. By the time I got here, she was... they killed her, they butchered her with biotics and hung her from Grandmother's flametree, after cutting her eyes out!"

Liara covered her mouth, eyes widening in horror. That was the asari ritual of marking betrayers, to signal that an asari had committed crimes so horrific that they should wander in the Great Beyond blind and lost. Liara swallowed, regaining her composure. "I...Goddess. Mithra and I never ... got along, but she ... did not deserve anything but to live out her years with honor and peace." She hesitated, then spoke. "And Yrael?"

Shian said nothing for several long seconds. Finally she spoke, her voice quiet, almost dead sounding. "She was one of them. I had to kill her myself. I couldn't...I lost control, I meant to subdue her for ... I ..."

Liara put a calming note into her voice. "Shian...I need you to be strong now. You have done what you had to do. Who is in .. charge?"

Shian gave a whimper of a laugh. "I am an adoptee, Liara. None of the daughters of Suria can serve, and as an adoptee of the secondborn I am not even in the running. If Yrael had not been a damned traitor, she would now be ... but ..."

Shian closed her eyes. "Lady Liara, you are the only legal holder of the title of chatelaine. You are the Matriarch presumptive. You are needed here."

Liara's eyes flashed. "The House would never accept me!"

Shian opened her eyes, a weak smile crossing her features. "Perhaps it's payback, cousin. Fate's tides are cruel and confusing. But there is no one else. The rest of us are either daughters of the thirdborn and thus not in the lineage or cousins promoted from the Lesser House. I am an adoptee...and lowborne, considering. I ran with the Sisterhood, by the Goddess. I cannot lead the house guard into a damned battle without muttering. The law is clear. You are house leader."

Liara shook her head. "The High Solarch herself delivered me my mother's warp sword yesterday."

Shian staggered back, eyes slowly filling with a mixture of guilt and horror, mixed with some emotion Shepard couldn't interpret. "I...she..." She shook her head, a trickle of blood visible on her neck from a shallow wound there, obscuring the edge of her Eclipse tattoo. "You cannot mean to – "

Liara lifted her chin. "I will do whatever I must do, Shian. I have no wish to die. I have found ... if not peace, then at least a reason to want to live." She closed her eyes, and Shepard felt her pain and worry wash over her.

After a long moment, she nodded to herself, and opened her eyes. "This is what you will do. Record my words." Her voice was hard, Shepard noticed absently.

Shian nodded, tapping her omnitool, and Liara spoke. "I am Liara T'Soni, only child of Matriarch Benezia T'Soni, chatelaine and heir of House T'Soni. I reclaim my heritage, my rights as house heir, and my voice in Family Council. I am engaged in the reth'shan, and I must destroy the dishonor on our name and avenge the murder of Matriarch Mithra before I can take up my duties. I expect to either die or kill my mother in the next two days. At that time..."

She paused. "...I will return to Thessia and call for Family Council, and accept any challenge from the thirdborne to be the mainborne. Until that time, my word is law. Follow the lead of Shian T'Soni in the defense of our House, and ..." She paused again, thinking of her many cousins.

"...the lead of Manae T'Soni as my voice until my return." She made a slashing motion with her hand, and Shian killed the recording, her face conflicted.

Shian finally frowned. "Why me and Manae?"

Liara smiled almost coolly. "You were the most cruel when I only wanted someone to accept me, cousin. You hated me for having all of Benezia's attention, never seeing how hard she pushed me and silenced my voice. I hated you for the freedom you had to explore the galaxy and live how you wished with no one screaming at you to change the person you were."

She gestured. "You can deal with events until I arrive. You can explain to the Family as a whole why my aunt lies dead when you were supposed to be responsible for House security. And I will be as cruel to you as you were once to me." The smile turned absolutely hateful. "Your words, dear cousin, to never return to Thessia, to blame Benezia's fall on me, were not something I will forgive. You may go."

Shian stared at her aghast. "Liara..."

Liara's expression blanked, eyes hard. "You may go, Shian." With that she killed the link, and then sagged, biting her lip and nearly falling, before Shepard wrapped her arms around her.

"Oh... Liara..." Shepard had no idea what to do except hold onto Liara as she shook with ragged, heaving sobs. Fragments of shattered, broken pain and old memories, bits of old arguments and ugly, ugly self-hatred raged through the young asari, and Shepard just held her.

After almost a full minute, Liara shook and wiped her eyes. "Mithra...was often cruel. She was never approving of me. She was bitter...jealous of mother...but I barely remember a time when she was sweet and polite. Her bondmate died and she ...changed."

Liara swallowed. "She was not my favorite person...but I never hated her. She didn't hate me. She told me ... she didn't want to steal my birthright from me...she felt guilty about that, I think." She shook her head, almost angrily. "She didn't deserve to die at the hands of .. of..."

Shepard stroked her back, lips pressed together, urging her strength into the slender frame that leaned against her. And she could feel the slow burn of anger begin in Liara, a familiar black fire roiling from some unnamed hell.

It felt like her own. Hot. Uncontrollable. A burning rage that could only have one possible outlet, one release. Shepard closed her own eyes as Liara clung to her, hoping that Liara would handle such anger better than she had.

One way or another, though, Benezia was going to die.

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## Chapter 98: Chapter 89 : Noveria, Arrival

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*A/N: Anolais was another character I felt Bioware could have made more of. The whole 'hunt down a garage pass' thing was okay as a game mechanic, but felt so kitschy in execution. Shepard is a Spectre. If the local flunky doesn't let you pass, then you go over his head. As he stands in this story, he's basically a barely restrained dictator, the ultimate authority. He's also former STG.*

*My original plan (before I rewrote my outline) for Noveria was a James Bond style infiltration by Shepard and Liara, but that fell by the wayside. We'll see if what I've come up with instead is better.*

*Also, to a reviewer: Pressly die? **HERESY**. Why kill him when I can be so much more evil?*

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Captain Zerzo Hallas was that most rare of beings, a drell without a service of history to the hanar. In a race who were basically the mercenary cat-paws of others, it was a distinction of questionable choice. He was a mercenary, the son of mercenaries, and mercenary work had consumed his life.

Zerzo had become a mercenary at a relatively young age, ending up with a long-term contract doing light patrol work with the corporate court of Ilium. That had parlayed into piloting, first fighters, then light patrol ships. By the time some of the companies had made the jump to Noveria for tax purposes, he'd found himself as one of the few professional starship commanders they had available. Unlike Ilium, however, Noveria didn't want to waste money on defenses, and relied more on cheap tracking systems, GTS missiles, and the threat of a handful of ships to keep themselves safe from slavers, pirates, and criminal raids.

As he stood on the bridge of the Noverian Corporate Defense Force flagship, watching his command plot in slowly growing horror, he realized belatedly that the Noverian love of cutting corners in the name of profit was likely to end his career as a mercenary with his death.

On paper, his fleet was impressive, and the defenses lethal. His cruisers were all of turian make, but with a few upgrades here and there, and his frigates were older salarian assault models, very heavily armed for their size.

None of that amounted to a hill of beans against a dreadnaught, of course, that would be able to blast them to pieces without ever entering his effective weapons envelope. Nor would the defenses stand up to a missile barrage from forty plus cruisers.

His comm tech, a salarian, spoke rapidly. "Incoming comms packet, Force Commander. Standard Systems Alliance protocol headers."

Zerzo cursed. "Understood, Manso. Put it up on primary plot, please. Signal the Corporate Court that we're in comms." He straightened, turning to face the plot more fully, and forced his features to calm.

The woman that appeared had a cold appearance, dressed in a blue uniform liberally sprinkled with the small patches of color humans liked so much as representations of honor. Her black hair framed her features, ones he would have found quite attractive if not for the icy chips that were her eyes.

Her voice was cool, almost amused sounding, but with a hard edge to it. "I am Commander Shepard, an agent of the Citadel's Office of Special Tactics and Reconnaissance. I'm here based on sources of information that suggest Saren Arterius and Benezia T'Soni are on this world. I'd like to request landing permission to discuss this with the Corporate Court's board of directors and perform a search."

Zerzo nervously licked his lips. "Commander, I am Captain Hallas, Noveria CDF. The world of Noveria is not a Systems Alliance charter member. I'm afraid landing is out of the question...although I can certainly connect you to the Board if you wish to take it up with them."

A flicker of something dark crossed the Spectre's face, and he suppressed a shudder. The humans had sent the Butcher of Torfan to his world. The stories he'd heard of her were as wild as they were bloody, rumors that she'd shot her way through civilians and her own men to get at the enemy, and of course all that coverage of her fighting, shown when they'd made her a Spectre.

He glanced nervously at the tac plot for a second. Her forces outnumbered his two to one and outgunned them ten to one, not to mention the dreadnaught. If this turned into a battle, he'd have to get behind the moon and drag that cruiser escort away from the big ship...

She finally spoke. "Very well. Connect me to your board of directors. Note that if your fleet makes any hostile moves, we're assuming you are hostile and will open fire."

He swallowed and tapped his comms link. "Of course, Commander. Transferring." He killed the link,

cursing a second later. "Tactical, get the weapons hot, just in case."

His tactical officer, a turian, shot him an astounded look. "What for, Captain? In case you hadn't noticed, they have a damned dreadnaught."

Zerzo sighed. "And we have our orders. Worst case, we hide behind the moon and make them come inside our weapons range."

The turian shook his head. "This is not going to end well..."

O-OSaBC-O

Shepard adjusted her uniform as she waited in the Comm Room. The link finally cleared, revealing a lavish looking boardroom, a huge window in the background framing a majestic, snowy mountain range.

At an expensive looking table sat five figures – two humans, a turian, an asari, and in the middle, a slender salarian. Each was dressed in a nearly identical manner – expensive looking black suits, collarless and trimmed in silver, and elegant silver accessories.

The salarian in the center spoke first. "This is Administrative Director Bel Anolais, chief executive officer of the Noverian Development and Technology Corporation and the Noverian Court of Corporations. Why do you bring warships and an invasion force to my world, Spectre Shepard?"

Shepard folded her arms. "Mr. Anolais, we came into possession of documents with the fall of Cerberus indicating Saren Arterius had built a facility on your world, possibly one you were not informed of, and that he is present on your world as we speak. Acting on both the orders of the Systems Alliance and the Citadel Council, I am authorized to utilize *any means* to apprehend him and his associate, Benezia T'Soni."

She stared at him. "I would like to land and search for his whereabouts, and if possible, to localize and destroy any forces he has with him."

The salarian's expression didn't alter in the slightest. "And doing this requires a fleet including a dreadnaught and troop ships, Commander?"

She smiled thinly. "I'm afraid that depends on you, Mr. Anolais. Noveria does not adhere to either the Council or SA charter and shot at the last Spectre attempting to investigate events on the world. Assuming I have the full cooperation of the Corporate Court in my pursuit of Saren, then the ships are merely a precaution against any geth ships coming to rescue him. They will not close within your inner system defense limits and will withdraw upon completion of my task."

Her features hardened. "However, Mr. Anolais, I've been told that it's unlikely for you to agree for me to land and search for Saren."

She wasn't surprised when he nodded. "This is a sovereign world, Commander. Corporations come here to be free of the heavy hand of governance, the shallow morality of those who would commit atrocity in the name of empire but judge those who merely wish to explore the limits of technology. We are in business to do business, not to acquiesce to the demands of foreign nations. Allowing you to land would set a precedent of us submitting to the laws and legal powers of outside parties, which our Charter expressly forbids. Furthermore, we have already conducted two *exhaustive* searches for Saren Arterius, as we have no wish to shelter a war criminal. It's bad for business."

He lowered his head slightly. "Having a Spectre down here poking into our business is not something we are prepared to allow."

She smiled.

"Well, then, Mr. Anolais, allow me to explain exactly why I brought these ships. If you are not going to let me do my search, then the Systems Alliance has decided you are effectively aiding Saren, regardless of your protestations of innocence. The SA is fully prepared to weather whatever economic sanctions your various corporations might levy on us, since Saren has cost the SA more than money. It's cost us lives, our most promising colony, and he has cost the Citadel an entire fleet. Thus, behind me is the full force of the human Commissariat Security Force, along with several hundred AIS agents and four regiments of assault troops."

She gave her hardest, coldest look at the board. "If you refuse to allow me full access to your planet, your scanning systems, your financial logs and all mapping information, these ships have orders to blast your little defense force out of the sky, bombard your GTS defenses, and once your defenses are suppressed, invade. We will search for Saren but we will also loot and pillage anything of interest to the Systems Alliance. We'll leave this place a wreck, as a very firm message for uppity corporations who think their money can protect them from reality." She let her smile widen. "I brought along Major Chisholm for the ride, I'm sure your human board members can tell you who he is."

The two humans looked torn between panic and outright nausea, and the turian's mandibles were literally quivering. The asari's eyes were so wide Shepard wondered if they'd pop right out of her head.

Anolais, being made of sterner stuff, merely brushed a bit of lint off of his jacket. "Very droll, Commander. But we know that neither the Senate or the Citadel would allow you to parade about so recklessly and assault core components of the galactic economy – "

The human on the left coughed. "Sir...the Commissars don't answer to our government. They can shoot you dead on the street for wearing shoes they don't like. If those really are Commissars, they don't need authorization...good God, they sent their fucking dreadnaught! They only bring that thing out when they plan to 'chastise' rebelling colonies!"

Shepard smirked. "Very true. As for the Council, why don't you give them a call and see what they say. I'll wait."

Anolais gave the look on her face careful consideration. "You seem to imply the answer will not support my position, Spectre."

She nodded. "The Council is pretty tired of your so-called 'independence' and thumbing your nose at galactic law. They aren't going to get involved in this...but they aren't going to stop me, either. They've washed their hands of the incident. Like I said, we can do this the easy way, and I'll try not to fuck up anything. I'm not interested in your goddamned labs, or whatever bullshit you're cooking up down there that you want to hide. I'm here to kill Saren and Benezia, that's it."

She let her weight fall back onto one leg and folded her arms. "Or you can be obstructive, and we can do things the Shepard way. That usually involves..."

She paused, letting her smile grow vicious. "...violence." Her voice was almost a throaty whisper, and she laughed in her head as she saw the human man on the right side shudder and look away. "But like you said, Mr. Anolais, it's a sovereign world. A sovereign world that, may I point out, is not a garden world."

She turned to one side. "XO, time until the Manswell's Wrath is in bombardment position?"

Pressly's voice sounded firm and cool. "Nine minutes, ma'am. Primary fire control from the Wrath indicates they are ready to fire on your command."

She turned back to the view-screen image. "Thank you, XO." She tilted her head. "Well?"

Anolais was still ice calm, and that was impressive to Shepard. For long seconds of silence he merely

stared at her, as if measuring her. Finally, something like a tiny smile altered the cold planes of his sallow face for a second.

"If you are bluffing, you do so very well, Commander. It seems I have no choice. Your ship – and your ship alone – may land at Port Hanshan, dock 34. You will be met by Noveria SDF personnel and escorted to One Noveria Tower so that we can present our known information and the results of our previous two searches to you in person. Assuming that you have a specific target for your ... search ... we'll discuss options at that time. If your troop ships approach without authorization we will open fire, consequences be damned."

He matched her gaze. "I will not allow you to destroy everything we have worked so hard to build without a fight, Commander. I won't protect Saren if he's here, but I will not allow him to be your excuse for attempting to conquer my world. If you are here for any other reason than what you claim –"

She shook her head. "I have no reason to lie, Mr. Anolais. And I'm not here for anything but Saren and Benezia, you have my sworn word. My ship will be arriving shortly. I have a small marine contingent I will be deploying to protect my ship, but they will remain in the docking area. The only people I will be bringing with me are two four-man teams that will be conducting the initial search."

Anolais twitched, but nodded. "Very well. I'll alert the docks. We'll discuss this further once you land."

O-OSaBC-O

"Well, that went...better than expected, all things considered." The voice of von Grath was dryly sarcastic, and his image on the comm screen showed him wearing BDU's and checking his weapons in the armory of the troopship he was on. In the background, DACT and marines moved about, and several HAMRHEAD tanks were visible.

Admiral Chu merely nodded, his background that of the bridge of his command cruiser. "I've got several ships screening the relay, and the rest of the force is in Latent Spear, ready for a charge if needed. The carrier has deployed it's fighters as CAP and to check out the asteroids in the system, but so far we haven't found anything suspicious."

Commissar Chisholm puffed calmly on his cigar. "The Commissariat stands ready regardless of the outcome. That was a masterful performance in browbeating those pitiful businessmen, Shepard. You should apply for the Commissariat, we could really use someone like you to put uppity senators in line." The bridge of the Manswell's Wrath was dim, lit in red combat lights, and armored in black panels of steel pierced only by the light of haptic control panels.

Shepard laughed at the thought, and shook her head. "Maybe later. For now, we're headed in. I can't imagine Saren hiding out here without having some kind of preparations, so be ready to do a hot landing with troops if you have to. That drell captain didn't look too confident of his chances, I'm pretty sure you can get past him without a fight if shit goes bad down here."

General von Grath merely nodded. "Don't worry. If you get in trouble, I'll be there to pull you out. As usual."

Shepard muttered something under her breath the others couldn't catch before rolling her eyes. "Yes, sir. If there's nothing else, I'll head in now."

Chu spoke. "There is one thing, Commander. I don't have any data on the other members of the Board, but Anolais is known to me. He's getting older, but I still recognize the stone-cold bastard from his STG days. He won't fold up like the others, and he was a dangerous little bastard back in the day. Don't underestimate him."

She nodded, and severed the comm, leaving the comm room and entering the CIC. "Helm! Take us in, high observable posture, weapons cold. Dock thirty-four."

Joker's voice came back over the communications system. "Dock thirty-four aye ma'am."

Shepard turned to Pressly. "We aren't wanted down there, so I'm not setting any liberty. Shit could go bad here, XO. Once we land, get the crew into suits and pass out the small arms. I'll be leaving the marines behind to cover the Normandy, under command of Cole."

Pressly nodded. "Will do, Commander. Are you taking the MAKO tanks?"

She shook her head. "We haven't had time to test them since we got them fixed on the Citadel, and besides, I don't know if there's a roadway for them from the docks. For now, we'll hold them aboard."

Pressly nodded again, pulling out an info-pad. "In that case, we'd best get started." He turned away, and Shepard clicked the comm again. "Lieutenant Alenko, Counsel Observers, Lieutenant Cole, report to the Comms Room."

It only took a few minutes for everyone to arrive. Shepard was slightly amused to see Telanya arrive with Garrus, but didn't raise a point about it. Technically, she was marine contingent...sort of.

*Ah, who cares? As long as she's not trying to kill Liara.*

Cole arrived last, giving Shepard a dirty look as he did so. "Lieutenant Cole, ma'am? It's a field brevet. Don't insult me like that again. I work for a living."

She burst out laughing, and motioned him to a seat. "Very well, Master Chief." She smothered her mirth and took a deep breath. "We'll be landing on Noveria in a few minutes, and from there we'll be meeting with the Board of Directors and trying to get a lead on Saren's position. I expect a lot of passive resistance on this one – you don't act this defensive and passive-aggressive unless you have something to hide."

She began to pace. "The Normandy is vulnerable when docked. Cole, you and the marines will deploy dockside to ensure the physical security of the ship. That also will hopefully let you act as a hot standby if we need backup. I'm not used to deploying without marine support, but I somehow doubt Anolais will let us come through with a detachment of soldiers and two DACT lunatics."

She turned to Kaiden. "You'll be in charge of Tali and Wrex, I'll take Garrus and Liara. Since three man teams are a bit light, pick one of your marines from Squad two to back you up."

Kaiden thought for a moment. "I know it would disrupt the squad a bit, but Chief Williams would be my choice. Chief Haln is good, but he's mostly heavy weapons. Ownby is too junior, and either of the two DACTs would attract too much attention. Charlais and Jackson are grenadiers, and in close quarters they won't be much help."

Shepard thought about it, then nodded. She was sure that it had more to do with Kaidan and Ash's relationship than she liked...but given her own relationship with Liara, and Garrus with Telanya...

*Speaking of which...*

Shepard smiled. "That works. For my part, I'll go ahead and snag Sergeant Telanya for my team. An extra biotic won't hurt." Telanya looked surprised, and Garrus grateful, which she ignored as she continued. "Cole, you'll have to ride herd on Squad Two without Ash to act as LCPO."

He shrugged. "Not a problem. I'll be handling the entire detachment anyway while you are off after Saren." He paused. "On the way up I saw Pressly telling the off-watch ops alley guys to get suited up. How much trouble you expecting here, boss lady?"

She folded her arms. "**Lots.** I can't imagine why Saren would hide out on a world where you conduct super secret research unless it was to do just that, and I really worry about what he'd researching." She shook her head. "In any event, when we go in, we stay in contact. If you run across Saren or Benezia, do not engage until we get there. Benezia is... even more dangerous than we thought. She might be stronger than all of our biotics combined can match, and in that case we have to be ready to try something else. Saren's also no pushover."

She glanced around them. "We had them on Feros, for a few minutes, then they beat our asses like drums – and let's keep in mind we were fresh and they clearly were not. Here, it's going to be a straight up fight, and we don't know what else we'll find. If anyone has any additional intel or ideas..."

Tali spoke up. "I've made some more drones, for scouting...and seeing as Liara purchased some gun drones, I've been working on a missile drone. It's not very intelligent yet, but it's more firepower. We can use the drones to scout ahead and maybe avoid any traps?"

Wrex rolled his head. "Krogan don't fare so hot in the cold, and it's unlikely we'll find too many of my people here. We hate being underground...and standing around topside outside of those nice bio-domes would kill even a krogan. Other than that, I can't think of much, aside from the fact I shot Saren pretty good, he may not be fully recovered yet."

Garrus looked at her steadily. "I upgraded my sniper rifle, and I loaded up some more info-war programs while I was on the Citadel. I also managed to get a friend of mine in C-Sec, Detective Chellick, to get me some more data on Saren. Aside from his pistol, he typically uses a Krysaë sniper rifle. Turian model, fires high-explosive shells that burst on proximity. Designed for anti-personnel area denial." He flicked a mandible. "Aside from that, he's got a ton of devices and info-war systems available only to Spectres, and he was mainly an assault biotic. Okay on the defense, but better offensively."

Shepard nodded, turning to Liara. "You finished reviewing the data we got about Benezia, Liara?"

The asari nodded reluctantly. "My mother is extremely powerful in biotics. She has many abilities, but the most dangerous are her attacks. She can use singularities to injure and flush us out of cover. She can create biotic blades of force that can cut through almost anything, warp fire stronger than I can produce, and she can disrupt your biotics for several minutes, including your barrier. Her own defenses are strong enough to withstand almost any conventional weapons." She paused. "She may also have a biotic weapon called a warp sword. Getting within melee range of her is not advisable."

Wrex gave a grunt. "I've seen those. Nasty. We should take flamethrowers and grenades."

Telanya hesitantly spoke up. "Lady Liara, I was able to obtain a handful of pulse suppression rounds from ... a friend of mine. They will not stop her biotics entirely but they may weaken them for a few critical moments if we can land a hit with them."

Shepard grudgingly admitted to herself the asari sergeant had thought of something she'd not even considered. Dammit, the Spectres probably had all kinds of nifty biotic suppression gear, and she hadn't even asked. "Good idea, Sergeant. Garrus is the best chance to land them with his sniper rifle, so give them to him."

Shepard finally turned to Alenko. "Make sure you keep your positional beacon on at all times, Lieutenant. If we get into trouble, the fleet is ready to hot-drop DACTs on us, but only if they have a firm lock."

Alenko nodded, then gave her a worried look. "Ma'am, with all due respect...isn't it likely that Saren and Benezia might try to flee once they realize we're here? The last time they were cornered they had that black ship bail them out."

Shepard nodded. "I discussed that with the Council. Admiral Victus is at the Ralx mass relay with the entirety of the First, Second and Ninth Citadel Fleets. Thirty-six dreadnaughts and a ton of missile cruisers. From what we know, the black ship can jump into a system without a mass relay but still needs one to get out, and the Ralx relay is the only way out. If the thing shows up, the Commissariat and AIS ships will retreat and we'll alert Victus to go on hot standby. The thing is tough but I doubt it can take that many dreadnaughts."

Alenko gave a sour smile. "Let's just hope it doesn't decide to incinerate Port Hanshan the way it did Feros, then. No other questions, Commander."

She exhaled. "Get armored up and we'll get out there."

O-OSaBC-O

The view of Noveria as the Normandy came in for landing was both impressive in its raw beauty and daunting in the scale of what the Noverians had achieved. Port Hanshan was a looming sprawl of dark buildings, glittering armorplast, and haptic advertising, set against the rough black rocks that jutted from the base of the mountain range it was set against. Dozens of docking slips were carved out of the shelf of rock, over-watched by a line of ugly GTS missile turrets and GARDIAN laser towers, below which a rushing river carved a narrow canyon through the valley below.

The weather was a swirling morass of snow and ice crystals, building up on the Normandy's wings as Joker fought the gusting winds to bring the ship in. "This weather is crap, commander. There's so much static electricity that ECT sensors don't work, and so cold the thermal sensors are useless too. And the icing on the wings is affecting maneuverability."

She nodded absently, watching as the ship neatly glided into the assigned dock, coming to a slow stop as mag-clamps descended and attached to the hull. "For now, keep the core hot and put a four man team out on the wings with de-icing gear. We need to be ready to move out if shit goes bad."

He nodded, and she turned away, already in full armor, to see her team moving up through the CIC towards the forward airlock. "Alright, people, let's move."

The extending bridge between the Normandy and the dock proper had just slammed into place when she opened the airlock door. Her team filed behind her, looking around. Tali huddled out of the wind behind Wrex's bulk, while Ashley grunted at the biting cold. Both Liara and Telanya looked intensely unhappy at the icy temperature, while Garrus seemed to perk up.

At the far side of the bridge, a high wall finally blocked the worst of the wind. Moving past it, she found a ten man security team dressed in red light powered armor, all carrying Monokrome light machine guns. A pair of JOTUN robots, painted in the same red coloring, had weapons ready.

The leader of the security detail had her helmet off, revealing finely chiseled Asiatic features and long, flowing dark hair that whipped faintly in the wind. Alone out of her men she carried no weapons. She made a short bow to Shepard, and then a longer, deeper one to Liara. "Greetings, Shepard-dono. Greetings, T'Soni no kimi. I am Major Makao Matsuo, commanding officer of the Noverian System Defense Force. I am to escort your people to the One Noveria Tower to meet with the board."

Shepard nodded, even as her marines began crossing the gangway. One of the armored figures alongside Matsuo stepped up. "You're not bringing your entire marine group with you."

Matsuo made a calming motion. "She is not, Stirling-kun. Undoubtedly she wishes to protect her ship from the ... possible stupidity of others."

Shepard nodded, rather intrigued by the woman's way of speaking. "I'm grateful you understand. My marines will not leave the dock area of the Normandy without prior consent, I assure you. May I ask

how you recognized Doctor T'Soni?"

Matsuo's face expressed no emotion as she spoke. "T'Soni no kimi resembles Benezia-sama greatly, and I was shown a picture of her some time ago by Benezia-sama on her last visit." She gestured, and her group began moving, escorting Shepard's people.

As they walked, Shepard glanced around. The docks ended in heavy metal walls pierced by dull green glass windows and heavily secured entry portals, through which they proceeded. Inside, the floors were done in pale green tile, overlain here and there by long rich strips of pile carpets. The room was long, almost a hundred feet in length, and the ceiling was festooned with security cameras and turrets. Matsuo spoke calmly. "This is our customs checking area. We will bypass it and proceed directly to the tower."

Shepard nodded. "You say you saw Benezia recently. How long ago was that?"

The Noverian major gave her a cool look. "Around the time of the unpleasantness on Eden Prime, Shepard-dono. She was very agitated at the time, which was unusual for her. Benezia-sama always maintained a very composed manner in her interactions with her peers and lessers, to see her alarmed was ... noteworthy."

They left the customs area through a side door, stepping out onto a wide bridge over a titanic space that was carved below the mountain rock. It was akin to an underground city, tall buildings reaching from the floor to the cavern roof some four hundred feet up. Air-cars and ground-cars crossed a grid of buildings, while crowds of people moved in sluggish waves.

Shepard's team followed Matsuo to a large air-car transport, almost twenty feet long. "There are seats enough for everyone, plus a few of my people. This vehicle will convey you to the Tower. The rest of my people will secure the docks along with your marines."

Shepard nodded, and Matsuo turned to the one she'd called Stirling. "Stirling-kun, keep your squads in Customs. If there is an incident, it had better be due to outside aggression and not your temper, so ka?"

The other woman nodded, grudgingly, and swung away, sneering. Matsuo's expression didn't change as she opened the door to the transport. "After you, Shepard-dono."

Shepard and her team clambered in, even as Matsuo got in the front. The aircar lifted away a few minutes later, moving slowly through the tightly packed buildings before coming to an opening in the cavern roof and emerging back into the light.

The topside portion of Port Hanshan was just as impressive, towering skyscrapers and large open plazas filled with bustling ground vehicles everywhere the eye landed. She noted that there were very few people above ground, most heavily bundled against the cold. The aircar moved quicker, lifting from the ground and approaching a single gleaming building that towered over the skyline, its curved architecture pierced by graceful arching windows, beautiful lines of haptic lighting, and ugly pods of defensive turrets.

The aircar entered a car-port halfway up the building, a docking bay outlined with red-flashing haptic lights. Turrets tracked the air-car as it landed without a bump in the bay itself, and more red-armored soldiers watched it carefully, relaxing only when Matsuo stepped out of the car.

She waited for Shepard's team to disembark before speaking. "This is One Noveria Tower, the seat of the NDC headquarters and also the center of governance for the planet. The Board is awaiting you in the boardroom. I have been given instructions that only Shepard-dono was to meet with them, but they will surely make an exception if T'Soni no kimi wishes to accompany you."

Shepard arched an eyebrow, not needing to glance at Liara to feel her eagerness to come along. "That is

acceptable. Lieutenant Alenko, hold here, and I'll be in contact. Wrex, try not to eat anyone."

Wrex actually made a pouting face, drawing laughter from her squad and a narrowed gaze from Matsuo. Shepard turned to Liara. "Shall we, Doctor?"

Liara merely nodded. "It will be enlightening to meet some of my mother's fellow investors."

O-OSaBC-O

If the opulence of the Citadel Council's chambers made her wish to take a flamethrower to the place, the almost disgusting lavish nature of the boardroom made her long for some good old fusion explosives. It wasn't bad enough that the entire tower was done up in that tacky wood paneled, marble floored, art-on-the-walls look that made her feel uncultured and stupid. It wasn't even the sneering expressions on the people they passed on the way, all dressed in expensive suits and fashionable dresses.

No, what pissed her off the most was the fact that the boardroom had portraits of Saren and Benezia on the walls outside, as "benevolent investors in the future". It left a bad taste in her mouth that these people, clearly more concerned about money than the fact that people had died or that Saren was as crazy as letting a krogan run a salarian hatchery.

Entering the boardroom, Liara beside her, she found herself facing the same five figures she'd seen on the comm-link, plus another dozen figures in seating around the table. Major Matsuo entered after them, and gave a deep bow to the figures that were seated. "Anolais ue-sama, honored members. Commander Shepard, Systems Alliance military and Council Spectre. Her Grace, Lady Liara T'Soni of Thessia."

Shepard was gratified to finally see an expression on Anolais's face, one of surprise and poorly concealed fear as he shot a look at Liara, before his features blanked again. "I see. Thank you, Major Matsuo. Please stay, your security and tactical knowledge may be required." With a slow exhalation of breath, Anolais focused his gaze on Shepard and Liara.

"I was not expecting Lady Benezia's *daughter* to accompany you, Commander. However, I can see why she is here. Benezia's investments in Noveria and Binary Helix were extensive, and I presume that by asari law Lady Liara is now the owner of those."

Liara merely inclined her head, gracefully. "I have not ... formally ... assumed leadership of the House as of yet, Director. Perhaps another time we can discuss those matters."

He nodded, turning his attention to Shepard.

"Now that you are here, Commander, we can hopefully dispense with this *ridiculous* farce that has already disrupted business on my world. I have here the security searches and examinations we performed in looking for Saren and Benezia." He paused, tapping a control on the table in front of him, triggering a data transfer to her omnitool. "That included a complete examination of Binary Helix facilities at Peak Nine and Peak Fifteen. We found nothing indicating they were at either site. Nor have there been sightings of either person since the events at Eden Prime."

Shepard smiled as the data hit her omnitool and she spent several minutes paging through it. The Noverians had done a good job, but their examination had been more financial than physical. Based on Cerberus's information, the bulk of the work had been done on Noveria long before anyone thought to investigate Saren.

"I appreciate this, Director. The information I have, however, is of more recent vintage. Cerberus was doing business with Saren, for a number of reasons. Saren was believed to be possibly experimenting with the geth, and Cerberus wanted in on that. In return, they gave him a great deal of financing,

laundering it through their own subsidiary corporations. One of which was the Sirta Foundation."

The human male on the far left side of the table went utterly pale, and Anolais fixed him with a look. "I see, Commander. One moment."

Anolais stood. "Fredricks, you seem to have placed the NDC in a position from which I may have to let these people break the precedent that has insured our independence for the past nineteen years. We made a *very* clear point of what the consequences would be if anyone did further business with Saren after his disbarment. I somehow doubt Commander Shepard would be able to gather such a large force from her superiors without cast iron proof, and your expression tells me it is true."

Fredricks, a large man with mousy brown hair and a large goatee, shivered. "Anolais, it's not like that. All we did was handle some cash transactions...before Eden Prime. It wasn't like we were doing business with him on a regular basis!"

Shepard triggered her omnitool, displaying the financial movements Telanya had found, most dating back to barely a month ago. "Really, sir? The C-Sec investigators who ran this show payments in the millions of credits from Cerberus through Sirta pretty recently."

Anolais looked at the transactions, then back at Fredricks. "Major Matsuo. Have Captain Parsini lead Internal Affairs Security to the Sirta Building and begin a detailed search. Execute any resisters. Have them bring back any evidence to the Tower." He tapped something on his omnitool for a moment, then bent down.

From under the table, he pulled a large-caliber handgun, lifted, and fired, putting three slugs into Fredricks from barely ten feet. The first blew through the man's heart, the second his right eye, the last one his throat.

Liara's eyes widened, and Shepard could feel her shock and upset. She only barely managed to stop herself from pulling her own pistol, instead forcing herself to calmness and laying a hand on Liara's shoulder. She was impressed by the savage accuracy of the salarian, and the shots ensured no possibility of survival.

She spoke. "Now we can't interrogate him."

Anolais lowered the pistol, glancing around the chamber. "There is no need. He was guilty. We'll find everything we need to know from Sirta records. I cannot take the risk he was an agent of Saren."

He paused, his gaze lowering to the board members. "The penalty for treason is that I *blow your brains out*. I trust I have reinforced my point sufficiently? Is there anything else anyone on the Board would like to reveal before I am embarrassed further?" His voice was cold but also angry, and vicious. Shepard thought back to Admiral Chu's words about him and found them apt.

She finally spoke, after no one else did. "Well, Director, I don't think we'll have any problems working together if that is the way you handle business. Moving along, the other piece of information I have is that Saren may be at a geothermal facility called Peak Thirteen."

Anolais' head snapped around to glare at the turian to his right, who gave her a confused, frightened look. "I am Tevek Akaris, CEO of Binary Helix in the ... ah, evacuation of the seat by Lady Benezia. I'm afraid we don't have a Peak Thirteen. We did, a mining facility, but we shut that down almost five years ago, converting the space to bulk storage, and we shut that storage facility down two years back. There's a geothermal plant next to it, yes, but ... it's just a plant. There's nowhere to hide."

Shepard shook her head. "I presume Benezia gave the orders to shut down the storage area? That's where they are, then. The power plant would block any scans giving away their activities and they could tap it for energy to power their ... whatever they are doing." She paused. "From the information

we obtained, Director, it's unlikely anyone at Binary Helix were aware of the facility."

Anolais nodded. "Good, as replacing board members is a chore."

One of the people across the table, an asari, had finally recovered from her shock. "You just *shot* a member of the Board in the head! You didn't even –"

Anolais fixed her with a look. "The investors only have one concern, Ms. T'Baela. Your own matriarch owns nine percent of the NDC. Do you think she will be pleased that we are forced to admit outsiders to search through our facilities or that one of the Core Corporations was involved in money laundering for Saren? This will make enforcing the Charter more difficult in the future. There is only so far this Board can afford to push our agenda of independence and tax freedom, and that does not extend to defying the Citadel in their pursuit of a war criminal."

He turned back to Shepard. "That being said, I expect that your investigation will be strictly limited to the Binary Helix facilities. I do not see any reason to authorize you or your people to venture elsewhere. The matter with the Sirta Foundation will be handled by our own Internal Affairs department."

There was little give in his voice, and Shepard didn't really need to be bothered with it all. "That's fine, Director. However, depending on what we find, we may need additional backup from the forces I brought with me, especially if Saren and Benezia have any number of troops or geth."

Anolais scowled. "I find that extremely unlikely. We keep a very close watch on what transits through our docks and customs would have noted any such events." He sat back in his seat finally, putting his pistol away, looking displeased.

Tevek spoke up. "Actually...if I remember correctly, sir, that old storage facility had it's own docking facilities."

Anolais shook his head. "We would have tracked any large ships, including geth vessels, entering our airspace."

Tevek shrugged. "...assuming, sir, that Saren didn't compromise the Planetary Defense Force. Are we willing to assume that?"

Anolais fixed the turian with a searing glare before turning to Major Matsuo. "Major, can you speak to this?"

The woman gave a short bow to the director. "It is ... difficult to say, Anolais ue-sama. The space security detail operates mostly under the control of Captain Valdais and Captain Hallas, both of which have other responsibilities. Internal Affairs has not, I believed, performed any analysis of the space security detail for infiltration. Additionally, the Peak Fifteen facility is on the edge of the monitored airspace envelope. It's very possible that someone would be able to sabotage the sensors that would allow us to pick up incoming ships."

Anolais folded his arms and leaned back in his chair. "That doesn't explain how they could have gotten past our space security net. We would have seen them coming in FTL, surely."

Matsuo gave an apologetic bow. "It is possible, Anolais ue-sama, that if Sirta was involved in this sordid and dishonorable event, that the ships in question were mixed in with Sirta's shipping vessels. As long as a convoy had the appropriate clearance tags, we would not have paid close attention to it's composition. I can recall at least six instances where heavy Sirta freighters were off course and had to be corrected. It is likely these events may have been shipments to this ... Peak Thirteen."

Anolais gave a small inhalation of breath. "Intolerable. Lax security. Money thrown away for unimpressive results..." He took another breath, closing his eyes momentarily, regaining his composure,

before turning back to Shepard.

"We appear to have some internal issues to correct, Commander. This may take some time."

Shepard frowned, rubbing at her jaw. "Perhaps my people could help?"

Anolais shook his head. "No. Major Matsuo, pull the shipping logs for everything in the past month. Deploy every security person we have at the entrances to the city proper. Alert Captain Hallas and Captain Valdais to stand down from fleet defense and prepare for space to surface suppression." He gave a sour look at the cooling corpse of the human director of Sirta. "And get maintenance to haul Mr. Kahl out of here."

Turning back yet again to Shepard, Anolais made a flicker of irritation. "It will take some time to prepare transport to Peak Fifteen. The weather, as you can see, is not being cooperative. I'll alert the garage to prepare a ground transport of sufficient quality to get you there, along with a detachment of NDC security. For the moment, Commander, I am not prepared to allow you land any of your troops on my world until I see a compelling reason to do so. Let us hope this is merely a storage facility and that your information is wrong."

Shepard sighed, but figured that the half-ass cooperation of Anolais was better than invading the planet. The chaos of that kind of event might let Saren get away, after all. "Very well. Where should my people wait?"

Anolais glanced at Matsuo, who was quietly issuing orders into her omni-tool. "Your squads can proceed to the transit lounge area near the garage, which is near the Synthetic Insights building. Major Matsuo can escort you there. Unless there is additional business to discuss, Commander? The Board is going to need to react to investor reaction to these events."

Shepard shook her head. "That's fine, Director. Thank you for your assistance."

He merely looked back. "You can thank me by finishing your business and disrupting mine as little as possible. Major Matsuo, make sure the garage has those transports ready."

She nodded, motioning for Liara and Shepard to follow. They left the boardroom, emerging back into the art-filled corridor that lead to it from the elevator, and Matsuo paused. "Shepard-dono, it is possible Saren has additional infiltrators in my defense force. If he was able to suborn a Board Member, then his access may go deeper than Anolais is willing to publicly admit."

Shepard nodded. "I kind of figured that much, Major. I'm going to play along with the Director for now, since he seems to hold pretty much unlimited power here. But if Saren has troops on the ground, I'm landing mine, whether he likes it or not."

Matsuo nodded. "Very well, Shepard-dono. Please follow me, I will lead you back to the bay, and from there to the transit lounge, where you can wait in comfort while we prepare proper transport. The weather outside is getting worse, and air-cars cannot make the trip."

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## **Chapter 99: Chapter 90 : Noveria , Revelation**

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*A/N: And now the shadow of just what I have planned for poor, poor Noveria is revealed. I did warn you I have shot canon in the head, no?*

*In other news: a reviewer had suggested I write a story about Admiral Ahern and the Legacy Team (Yonis Chu, Major Kyle, Rachel Florez, and Saracino). I'll be working on that very soon.*

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Shepard waited impatiently in the luxurious transit lounge for NDC personnel to come let her know the transport was ready, leaning against a wall next to Liara. Alenko, Ashley and Tali sat on the leather-padded benches in front of a large haptic entertainment screen detailing the amenities offered by the Noverian "Alpine Tour" vacation packages. Wrex was in another corner, conversing quietly with a krogan mercenary dressed in black and blue armor, with a white crest and scarred greyish skin. Not too far away, Telanya and Garrus sat quietly on another bench, talking in low tones.

Liara stirred, fidgeting. Her hand fell atop the hilt of her mother's warp sword, now worn in a black scabbard decorated with the T'Soni rose and flametree design down its length. Shepard hadn't been happy to see her wearing it, but something in Liara's expression kept her from saying anything. Her new pistol rode on the other side of the belt supporting the sword, and Liara's new armor – the same style as her old Colossus armor, but with armored shoulder guards and a thicker chest piece – gleamed faintly under the lights from overhead.

Shepard gave an impatient sigh and turned to the figure of Major Matsuo, who stood serenely nearby, occasionally speaking quiet orders into her omni-tool. "How much longer is this going to take?"

The major checked her omni, frowning. "My apologies, Shepard-dono. I was occupied in the reports of the search of the Sirta Foundation, and lost track of time. It should have been done by now." She tapped her commlink. "Lieutenant La Silva, status?"

There was no reply, and Matsuo's frown deepened. "Lieutenant La Silva, *respond*. Lieutenant Vaon? Sergeant Vakur?" She cursed, tapping another comm-link. "Lilhierax-san, respond."

A grating turian voice answered. "I'm here, sweet lady. Kinda busy at the moment, two downed air-cars. What's up?"

She rolled her eyes at his comment. "Li, Lieutenant La Silva and a detachment of NDC security should have headed down to the garage to prep transports, but I can't raise any of them on the comm."

The turian's voice spoke once more. "Probably static down-charge from the storm, Makao-chan. But I'll check it out anyway." She hissed at his mode of address, blushing, and then clicked off.

Shepard only raised an eyebrow. "Problems?"

Matsuo huffed. "Only a turian who uses overly familiar modes of address, Shepard-dono. We will –" she was cut off by the blare of an alarm, and then the turian's voice over the omni. "Mak, they're dead! There's spirits-damned geth in –"

There was a crackle of some sort, and a turian screech of pain. Matsuo's eyes widened. "Li!" With a rapid motion, she was off, running flat out for the garage entrance.

Without a weapon.

Shepard cursed. "Alenko! Weapons hot! Follow her!"

The two teams chased after the human major, who had slammed through the entry doors in a rush. Wrex barreled through first, followed by Alenko, and the team entered shallow, concrete tunnels sloping down.

They rushed ahead, cold seeping into the air, and the concrete tunnel met a metallic tube, slatted with narrow windows, showing a view of the valley below and the very edge of the city. Ahead, they heard a scream of anger, and the unmistakable sound of geth plasma rifles discharging.

Shepard concentrated and performed a biotic charge, erupting into a wide foyer. Potted plants and gear lockers lined one wall, near the doorway to the tunnel she'd just come from, and a low concrete wall painted in yellow and black striping read "NO ENTRY".

Matsuo huddled behind this barricade, her fist illuminated with biotic energy, as she yelled and hurled another blast of warpfire at the shifting forms of geth ahead.

Shepard slammed into cover next to her, pulling her Revenant and letting off a long stream of cover fire. Geth jerked back, out of range, and she ducked down again. "Major, status!"

The Japanese woman snarled. "Watashi no kusogarēji de gethmachines ga arimasu!" Shepard's translator packet wasn't calibrated for earth language, and a moment later the major spoke again, in a slightly calmer voice. "Li is hurt. He's over by the far wall. Can you reach him?"

Shepard nodded, taking in the battlefield. The garage was enormous, well over two hundred feet long and half that wide. MAKO tanks, a HAMRHEAD hover tank, and even a huge cargo carrier were parked neatly alongside dozens of air cars, ground cars, and armored scout cars. A pair of Vixien turian light fighters were hung from the ceiling, and crates of supplies and freight shipments lined the walls.

Geth troopers were tucked into cover among the vehicles, mostly the white-painted forms of the soldier-form, but here and there the dark gray forms of missile units. The bodies of the NDC team were splayed out in gory splashes in the middle of the garage, where they had been apparently caught in a crossfire, and the long armored vehicle they were preparing was a burning wreck, holed by missile fire.

Alarm systems were finally blaring, but fell silent a few moments later. Shepard cursed, the geth were probably in the Noverian data network.

Her team burst through the door behind her, and she motioned Alenko with a sign indicating a defensive stance. "Yeah, I can do that. Stay put. Wrex, Tali, suppressive fire.. Liara, Garrus, Long range. The rest of you cover fire."

Shepard charged again, flashing through the air to emerge near another doorway. Sitting in small pool of blue blood, a turian in a jumpsuit and wearing a belt of tools slumped behind a heavy shipping crate, his right hand cradling his torso. He looked up as she appeared, mandibles flickering. "Hope you're with Mak and not the geth."

She nodded. "Commander Shepard, SA military. How bad are you hurt?"

The turian grunted. "They got me in the gut. Not too bad, for now. I'll need treatment but I don't think I'll bleed out if you have some medigel."

She moved his hand, slapping a patch of the soft green gel over it, and triggering her omnitool to set it off. He hissed as it hardened against his skin, and then nodded. "Thanks, Commander. Mind telling me why geth are in my garage, shooting up my vehicles?"

Shepard glanced around the crate, as booming explosions erupted nearby. "Talk later. Keep in cover." She unclipped her Predator pistol and tossed it at him. "Take this and try not to get your head blown off."

He nodded, groaning as he came to a sitting position up against the crate. Shepard triggered another charge, landing back next to Garrus and Matsuo. "He's alive, wounded but okay. What's our layout?"

Garrus's eyepiece rotated and scanned as he spoke. "I count seventeen of them, Commander. Spread out and under heavy cover. Two have missile launchers but haven't used them, they may be out of ammo. There's also one of those damned hopper things in here, and it has a sniper rifle."

Shepard nodded, glancing about. Wrex and Tali were in cover behind boxes, Alenko just behind them, the glow of his omni-tool illuminating his features as he triggered an info-war program to counter geth jamming. Liara was crouched next to Telanya, holding her new pistol and looking at Shepard. Ashley had tucked herself behind a standing shipping crate, her sniper in her hands and an ugly expression on her face.

Shepard put her hand on Matsuo's shoulder. "Major, let us handle this. We've dealt with geth before."

Matsuo snarled. "They killed my men, Commander. You expect me to sit here?"

She shook her head. "I expect you to get to your wounded man over there while we engage them and get him to safety before he dies of internal bleeding. And then I expect you to get us some backup, since your damned boss wouldn't let me land my troops or bring my own marines. Go."

The woman gazed at her angrily for several seconds before nodding. Shepard turned to Garrus, lifting her Revenant. "Alright, team. Garrus, Williams, snipe. Liara, Telanya, Alenko. Cover us with throws and warps. Wrex, Tali, you're both with me. Wrex lead the charge, I'll follow. Send your drones up ahead, Tali, then follow in behind us with that shotgun. You know the most about the geth so I expect you to give us some warning if they try something."

"Understood, Shepard." Tali's voice had gone cold, almost distorted with hate, and Shepard gave a cool nod in response.

She glanced at Wrex with a grin, and he returned it, before throwing out a titanic blob of biotic power. Several heavy crates went flying as the krogan roared and charged ahead, shotgun leveled, his biotics wrapping him in a cocoon of defense.

One of the crates impacted a geth, crushing it flat. Three more geth opened up with their rifles, flickers of plasma tinkling against Wrex's barrier. He answered with blasts from his shotgun, blowing a hole into the geth in half at the waist. Shepard leapt into a biotic charge, booming back into solidity in the midst of that trio, detonating her barrier with a nova blast that sent all three geth flying back brokenly.

Tali's drones zoomed up high, two spitting micro missiles at the geth missile troops. One geth fell to the ground with staccato shrieks of digital static as parts of its chest were penetrated by explosions. The other one took several micro-missiles to the face and simply detonated, whatever ammo it had cooking off. The blast took out yet another geth, and sent smoke billowing into the air.

Tali hurtled ahead, ducking low, popping up above a crate with a spring of her powerful legs. She yelled out a war cry in Khellish as she landed, her shotgun vomiting forth a spray of blinding white bolts of arcing plasma, catching two geth at point blank range. Both of them recoiled and stumbled back, half melted from the barrage, and Tali lifted her omnitool.

A third drone slid down, discharging a plasma bolt at the two geth, which seared through their bodies to smash against the ground. Tali fired again, and the two geth collapsed, runnels of molten metal and fragments of burning plastic sloughing from their ruined forms.

Alenko was throwing blasts of warpfire as Liara hurled singularities ahead. Telanya, less strong, concentrated on a biotic barrier, turning aside answering weapons fire. One of Liara's singularities slammed directly into a geth, turning it into a crumpled wreck. Another singularity destabilized a stack of cargo crates, and even as the blazing biotic ball crunched into a geth's chest unit and detonated, the boxes fell. Each crate was six feet long and evidently heavy, as when the stack fell on the four geth next to the one crushed by Liara's singularity, the booming sound was deafening.

One geth staggered free, only to be transfixed by the snapshot from Williams' sniper rifle, crying out in digital agony as it slumped to the floor. The geth hopper leapt up to the ceiling, firing its sniper rifle in counter-fire, the shot driving hard into Williams' shoulder, breaking her shields and sending her to the floor in agony. Garrus traced the shot back, his eye scanner projecting its source, and he fired two explosive rounds at the hopper. The machine managed to swing down from its initial aiming point, dodging the first one, but the second shot caught it right in the chest. The detonation blew its arms and legs free of its burning torso, bits of synthetic flesh raining down to plop against the concrete floor, white blood pattering down upon the combatants.

Shepard ducked under a stream of plasma darts from her right, locking up the geth shooting at her with her Revenant and cutting loose, the heavy slugs juddering into the machine and gouging out huge holes in its frame. It crashed to the ground, and another geth leapt over it, just to be smash-tackled by the charging form of Wrex. They landed hard, and Wrex's meaty fist descended in a biotic-augmented punch that flattened the geth's head, the glowing eye fading as it popped out of the distorted socket to bounce against the ground.

The last few geth fell back, spraying covering fire, only to run smack into Tali's circling drones, which showed no mercy as they sprayed them with micro-missiles and electro-shock charges. One geth managed to take out a drone with concentrated fire, but Alenko used the opportunity to lift yet another crate and send it down on the geth soldier. The crate broke as it hit, fragments of metal breaking off, and the geth tumbled to the ground, trapped.

Tali stepped up to it, making sure the other two geth were dead before emptying her Reegar into the geth's face, leaving nothing behind of its upper torso but a cooling pile of white-tinted slag. "Filthy bosh'tet."

Shepard slowly stood, glancing around. "Garrus, any others?"

Garrus shook his head. "Clean kills, Commander. Thank the spirits they didn't have one of those damned armatures in here. That would have been ... dicey."

Alenko and Telanya were kneeling next to Williams, who had removed her shoulder armor and slapped some omnigel on the wound. Williams looked up as Shepard approached. "Sorry, Skipper. Just a graze, but it hit me with some armor fragments, too. I'm still good to go."

Shepard nodded. "If you're sure, chief. Remember what I said about letting your anger get to you."

Williams exhaled and nodded. "I'm sure, ma'am. Let's get us a chicken."

Shepard smiled and turned to find Matsuo approaching from across the garage, supporting the form of the turian Lilihierax. "You downed *sixteen* geth that quickly?" She looked at the carnage, the smashed forms of the geth, and the burning, bubbling remains of the ones Tali had blown away.

Shepard shrugged. "What can I say? My people really, *really* don't like geth." She held out her free hand, and the turian sheepishly handed her back her pistol, which she placed back in her holster.

Matsuo's omni blared. "Major, this is Director Anolais. What in the name of the Collapse is happening down there? Sensors report fires and weapons discharges."

Matsuo took a deep breath. "There were geth deployed in the garage, Anolais ue-sama. They killed the security team and mechanics we had preparing transport for Shepard-dono and her people, and they wounded Technician Lilihierax. They also inflicted heavy damage on the icecrawler. Shepard and her team have terminated the geth in question."

Anolais's voice was cool, almost disinterested. "I see. How, *exactly*, did geth warforms get not only inside the city but into the maximum security storage garage we keep our ground combat vehicles in, Major? This had better well be a very good answer."

Matsuo swallowed. "I am still investigating, Anolais ue-sama. The fact that they targeted the icecrawler indicates we may have additional leaks in our staff."

Anolais's voice cooled even further, becoming almost clipped in its tone. "Major, the icecrawler was a very expensive machine, and the only method we have of clearing the skyways during heavy weather such as we are now experiencing. You had better find a good alternative, fast."

Matsuo winced and spoke in a submissive manner. "Of course, Anolais ue-sama. I will contact you again

shortly with more information and an alternative plan."

Shepard gazed at the vehicle Matsuo called an icecrawler. It was a heavily armored tracked vehicle, probably thirty feet long, with a wide, low bearing and sloped sides. Three large holes had been punched in it by missile fire, and the treads were torn and ripped. The main cabin had been blown open and the vehicle was still on fire, even as more NDC soldiers finally entered the garage, carrying fire extinguishers and medical gear. Shepard shook her head and turned to the major.

"That was the only way to get to where we are headed?"

Matsuo gave a small nod. "Unfortunately. The labs connections are solely through the skyway, which was designed to ensure nothing dangerous could escape if the containment systems failed on the labs. That means the skyway is narrow. Normally in calm weather it can be traversed by MAKO or other vehicles, and in the summer by groundcars. But in the middle of a blizzard, the icecrawler was the main method of transport." She frowned. "There should be several more, however we had an incident earlier in the week that has two of them out of commission. It will take days to repair them."

She pulled up her omnitool, as NDC soldiers laid Lilihierax out and began treating his wounds. Shepard waited several seconds before turning to face Alenko and the rest of the team. "I need options, Alenko. What have you got?"

Alenko was studying his own omnitool intently, looking at weather reports. "Not much, I'm afraid. She's right. There are winds gusting to over 160 miles per hour out there, and the temperature is way below freezing. HAMRHEAD tanks would lose their engines in ten minutes due to icing, and the MAKO's aren't rated for that kind of environment at all. Those tires are great on turf and the urban environment, less so on half a foot of slick ice."

She nodded. "What about DACT jumps?"

He snorted. "In this, Shepard? They'd end up slamming into the mountains or being blown miles off course. You can forget landing craft too, they can't deal with that kind of wind, and icing would make them unstable."

She folded her arms. "So we have to send for what? Great White MBTs?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "Maybe. Still, moving troops in MBTs isn't going to work, they only have room for three people. Gunner, driver, ECM tech. You could maybe squeeze a fourth person in, but Wrex won't fit in one. Not to mention, but how would you get them down here in the first place?"

She sighed irritably. "When is it likely for the storm to break?"

Alenko cut his omni-tool off. "Could be days, or even longer. It's the storm season."

Matsuo was standing next to several open crates, a murderous expression on her face. "Shepard-dono, a moment of your time, please."

Shepard nodded, walking away from her team to stand next to the Japanese woman, who grimly gestured with her omni-tool to the crates. "These geth appear to have been packed in these crates, here. They were in long term storage from Binary Helix's Peak 15 facilities. They were shipped in this morning on the cargo transport, and signed for clearance by one of the security team." She gestured to one of the dead bodies. "He was hired by, unsurprisingly, Director Kahn, the man Anolais ue-sama executed earlier. Supposed to be spare parts being set aside for spring replacement."

Shepard nodded, then tilted her head. "This ... cargo carrier. Is it still here?"

Matsuo blinked, then turned her head to gaze at one of the larger vehicles. "...yes. It is. Why?"

Shepard smiled. "It made it through the storms alright, if it was able to drop off geth. Why not take it

back to Peak 15?"

Matsuo shook her head. "It is an autonomous VI driven vehicle, and there is no place for passengers. It is certainly stable enough to make the trip, but how would you travel?"

Shepard smiled. "Why not just use the cargo system to strap down some more shipping crates and haul us in those? Hell, you could pack an entire force in them with no one the wiser."

Matsuo thought for a moment then nodded. "You are clever, Shepard-dono. Lieutenant Parker!" She called out to one of the soldiers who had entered the garage. "Get some of the cargo techs to put together a large shipping crate, size nineteen at least, and have it loaded on the cargo carrier. Make sure the carrier is ready for transport and program it for Peak Fifteen."

Matsuo turned back to Shepard. "I will gather another detachment of NDC troops to accompany you. I will ensure that none of them were hired by questionable influences."

Shepard grimaced. She'd much rather use her own marines for the operation, but given what they were headed into, that might just get them all killed. "Very well, Major. My people will be ready."

Matsuo stepped away, and Shepard brought up her omnitool. "Cole, come in."

The voice of the master chief crackled. "Cole here, ma'am."

Shepard pursed her lips as she spoke. "It looks like there's definitely rats in the woodwork of Noveria, Master Chief. We just got jumped by geth who sabotaged our ride. We found a backup way in, but if the geth managed to get inside Port Hanshan this deep, there's no telling where else they might be. Keep your guard up and have Pressly set repel boarders watchstatus."

Cole's voice came back strong. "Understood, Commander. Do you need us to come back you up? I can cut squad two loose and keep the DACT here..."

Shepard shook her head. "Not yet, Master Chief. Right now, the boss of this place wants us to use his troops, and if that's the case, then I'm inclined to play along. Alert General von Grath that landing troops on this icy shithole is going to be tricky and that he may have to go with storming the docks after all, if only to get boots on the ground."

Cole's voice sounded dubious. "Yes, ma'am. Given the hard looks their security people keep giving us, that's going to involve shooting."

Shepard snorted. "Like I give a shit. Anolais is just lucky I'm in a good mood, or I'd have burnt his fancy-ass little tower down around his pointy head. If things go to shit, I'm going to pick survival over placating him. Shepard out."

She turned back to face her squad. "So...who's ready for a ride?"

O-OSaBC-O

The asari technicians sat in silence, tapping quietly at their haptic keyboards, as data rushed through the system. Benezia stood above them, overlooking the tactical area from a shallow balcony, her features pinched with faint pain. Events were moving too quickly. Her Triune forces on Thessia and Illum had acted, but none of them had fully achieved their goals. The codes possessed by her late sister had been codelocked, leaving the assault on her own house a pointless endeavor. And the attack on the Temple had failed spectacularly, all of the commandos and cultists dying before the enraged forces of two entire Royal Hunting Parties.

And now, this. The comm chatter from Noveria had gone deathly quiet, and her calls to Adham Kahl had been answered by Captain Parasini of Noveria Internal Affairs. That could only mean Kahl's true allegiance had been discovered, which boded ill for her plans.

Nor did voice of Nazara pounding away in her skull help. It drained her, sapping her will, her very ability to think and reason. She focused her mind on the Sixty-Four Mantras of the Moon, letting her senses fall away one by one, and found some measure of stability in the action.

One of the asari spoke. "Mistress. Geth units have been suppressed at the garage. They reported destruction of the icecrawler and sabotage of the skybridge defenses was completed. Their last report indicated the presence of Commander Shepard before all units went offline."

Benezia snarled, her features twisting in rage, and biotic light spilled from her hands, warping the edge of the balcony. Shepard. Always *Shepard!* Meddling, insolent child. Leading her beloved daughter astray. Mangling and shaming her lover. Interfering in things the fool had no comprehension of.

Benezia mastered her anger, standing straight and tall. "Very well. If she is here and Anolais sees fit to cooperate with her, there is no more need for secrecy. Instruct the Triune within the city to begin the purge, and tell the geth to make ready for the move. Have the engines of the Talon's Justice brought online, and bring all of the Rachni out of coldsleep."

She turned away from the tactical area, walking down the shallow steps that lead to her own private rooms in the complex. As with all aspects of her life, her personal chambers were simplicity – bare, plain white walls, a simple bed, a fountain of sparkling water to meditate upon, and basic care facilities.

She unclipped her ceremonial robes, letting the black silk slither down her body to fall to the floor, leaving her naked, even as she pulled the headdress from her crests. That too, she let fall, stepping over the spilled cloth with strong legs as she opened her cabinet.

She pulled out a jumpsuit of dark gray ballistic cloth, and slipped into it, the fabric tight against her frame, cool against her skin. Over this she pulled on her armor, smoky gray plates of duraplast and ceramic, etched with ancient asari symbols for defense and aggression. A skirt of linked metallic triangles followed, snapped over her waist, each triangle inscribed with another asari rune. Armored, thigh-length boots of duraweave slipped over her feet, and her battle amp, set into a bronze gauntlet chased with encrusted eezo and sapphires, fitted over her left hand.

A narrow black pair of belts slipped around her waist as she buckled them on, hanging the warp sword of the Moon from one side, and a large-caliber pistol from the other. She missed her old shotgun, and hoped it had not been looted by Shepard's gang in their flight from Feros. Finally, she drew a cloak around her shoulders, the cloth stiffened with reactive omnigel packets, before fitting a face-mask of the same smoky crystal as her armor was made of over her features.

She half turned as her door slid open, revealing Saren. He took in her militant appearance with a faint smile. "You are preparing for battle?"

She nodded. "The geth have sighted Shepard, at the Port Hanshan garage. I have no doubt she will find some way here."

Saren only nodded. "My last agent in the docking area said there are troop ships and a dreadnaught from the Systems Alliance in high orbit. And my ally on the Board says that Shepard is following up on information she received from the assault on Cerberus. Adham was executed by Anolais. Perhaps they followed the money?"

Benezia smiled faintly. "No matter. I have already instructed the Triune as to their actions. They will wreak havoc and confusion, and we'll unleash the rachni upon them. We have enough information to breed them as we need on Virmire now, and the corrupted queens will be unmanageable in any case. Okeer's data and krogan will be better fitted to our purposes."

Saren tilted his head. "And you plan to slip out in the chaos."

She nodded. "We can make it to the asteroids, and then call for Nazara."

Saren shook his head. "That .. won't work this time. It's what I came to tell you. The geth tried sending a small reinforcement force here, and they found a huge fleet waiting at the Ralx relay, the only way in. Nazara can't fight his way past over thirty dreadnaughts. We are trapped with no way out."

Benezia exhaled. "Then what shall we do?"

Saren gave her a sad smile. "The only thing we can do. First, we deal with Shepard. I grow tired of this monkey interfering with our plans, and the more she learns the more *dangerous* she becomes. I have read of her. She is arrogant, bloodthirsty, a creature ruled by anger and rage. We'll draw her out and kill her. Once that is done, I expect they will attempt to attack us in force."

He crossed the room, staring at her. "When that time comes, Benezia, you must leave...while I must stay. Once I am dead, they will loosen their watch, and you can escape back to Virmire."

Shock crossed her features under her mask, and her breath failed her. "No." Panic erupted in her heart, and her hands reached towards him, imploring. "I cannot do this alone, Saren."

Saren shook his head. "It is the only way, my soul. They will never stop looking as long as they think I am out there. If they find me dead and not you, they will assume you were simply not here. They will grow complacent, thinking me the greater threat. They will tell themselves the geth answered to me, that I warped your mind, that with me out of the picture they have nothing to fear. That will give you the time you need to finish."

She shook her head. "I am not going to abandon you! Nazara – "

Saren's expression didn't change. "Nazara is inside my head, in a way he never was before. I am calm. I am ... ready. My fears, doubts, and worries are all gone. I know you will succeed, where I dallied and failed. You will never fall the way I have. You will remain you. And as you always tell me, I will live on within you. The ... real me, not whatever Nazara has turned me into with his cybernetics."

She closed her eyes, hands forming into fists. "You do not need to die to make this plan work, beloved."

Saren's voice was calming, coming out of the darkness. "Yes, I do. I am ... no longer myself. Even at this great distance, whatever he did to keep me alive has made me ... pliable to Nazara's will. Nazara no longer needs me. I am broken, I cannot see the vision or the cipher. And already I feel the third stage of indoctrination setting in. I am not *me*. Only you can succeed now, and so you must escape."

Benezia reached out to touch his face, fingertips tracing the broken surfaces of his skin. "They will pay for this, Saren. They will pay."

His mandible flickered under her touch, and he merely nodded. "We must prepare." He paused, then gave her a considering look. "...did you bring your war-suit with you? I find myself having an idea."

Benezia nodded in confusion, and he laughed. "Come. I am not dead yet. Bring one of your commandos."

O-OSaBC-O

Neither General von Grath nor Admiral Chu were wild on Shepard's plans, but both grudgingly agreed to let events proceed as she had stated rather than invade the planet, as long as Anolais continued to cooperate. In less than fifteen minutes they were on the skyway, wrapped in a heavy cargo container with an environmental system installed.

The troops Matsuo had picked were clumped at the far end of the cargo container, all wearing red armor with white detailing, carrying a mix of heavy assault rifles and light machine guns. For

mercenary soldiers, they looked professional and hard, and Shepard had spoken quickly with their commander, a Lieutenant Parker.

Parker, as it turned out, was former Alliance, but had surrendered his commission after his wife had died, ending up doing mercenary work and trying to start his life over. He was quietly wary of Shepard and had warned her that he had no intention of sacrificing his men if push came to shove, which Shepard had quietly laughed at, leaving him discomfited.

The travel was hardly comfortable – even with an environmental unit pumping out heat, the cold was bitter, and the winds pummeling the cargo container gave them all pause. Shepard tracked their progress on her omnitool from the defense satellites in orbit, watching as they ever so slowly drew nearer to Peak Fifteen. The fact that the storm cut off their communications only made her more edgy, but Shepard passed the time talking quietly with Liara, about little things.

Their arrival some thirty minutes later couldn't happen soon enough. Shepard and her team piled out of the cargo container into a broad concrete garage much like the one they had just left, except the soldiers here wore white armor and the stylized DNA symbol of Binary Helix. There were six of them, and they gave hard looks at both Shepard's team and the NDC troops that exited after them.

Their leader stepped up. "Captain Ventralis, BH Security. The Board said you'd be coming, but that your search was to be strictly limited to the power plant area. So don't overstep your bounds."

Shepard gave him a smile, walking up to him, ignoring the nervous shifting of his men behind him. "Captain, if you and your men get in my way, I'm going to kill you, then them. The only reason I haven't had your two bit criminal cesspit set on fire from orbit is that I'm *trying* to be polite this week, and given that your corporation appears to be in bed with Saren, I'm not real inclined to cut you any slack." She stepped up to him and shoved her ODIN right into his face.

"Am I perfectly fucking clear, or do I need to clean your ears out for you?"

The human captain went pale and stumbled back, stammering. Shepard ignored him and turned to Parker. "Unless we ask for it, keep out of the way. Tali, send your drones down into the power level and tell me what you find. Everyone else, weapons hot."

Tali obliged, two small glowing spheres erupting from her omnitool to speed down the corridor. Using the blueprints they'd been given by Anolais, Shepard lead the two squads down the hall, which was done in boring white armor paneling. Every so often security doors hissed open, until finally they reached a long, down-sloping tunnel with broad armorplast windows along the right side. A few dozen feet ahead, the tunnel was sealed by a heavy security door, imprinted with haptic warnings.

"POWER GENERATION : HEAT HAZARD"

Parker spoke up. "If the blueprints are correct, this leads to the geothermal plant. It's maintained by mechs, not people. I doubt anyone has been down here to check the place out in years."

Shepard nodded, going to the heavy security doors and triggering them. A gust of heat puffed out from beyond, carrying the scent of dust and brimstone. Garrus groaned. "Great, it's Therum all over again." Wrex chuckled, while Tali tilted her head in confusion.

Liara shuddered. "Do not remind me." She lifted her pistol and stared ahead, as Tali's drones zoomed off down the tunnel.

Several seconds passed before Tali spoke, gazing at her omni. "So far, it's clear. Temperature is hot, but not critically so. There are ... mechs down there, doing basic maintenance, and a heavy security door that is not on the blueprints."

Shepard nodded. "Move out."

The walk down the long tunnel was almost oppressively silent. Shepard lead, her ODIN loose in her hands, Liara trailing close behind. Garrus and Telanya advanced in C-Sec stances, Garrus covering the corridor with his Phaeston he'd looted from Eingana, Telanya's Spear of Athame rifle glowing faintly in the dim lighting.

Alenko, Wrex, and Tali walked along behind them, Williams bringing up the rear with her own sniper in her hands. Parker and four of his men followed her, the last five forming a rear guard. The tunnel was floored in cheap, chipped concrete, the lights simple halon lamps that cast long ugly shadows across the bare white walls. The armorplast windows were caked with ice, revealing flashes of gray mountain rock and swirling clouds thick with falling snow.

Eventually, the snow covered the windows entirely, and the heat increased, flickering red lights visible at the end of the tunnel. It bottomed out, a grated metal walkway proceeding from the end of the tunnel.

Shepard made her way into the thermo plant, which was a natural cavern with areas smoothed to make room for power generation equipment. Below, faint reddish luminance shone from giant cracks in the earth, with heavy machines and pumps of some kind working incessantly. Large battery banks were bolted directly to the smoothed rock walls, while the floor was layered in sprayed insulation, tacky to the touch. A few mechs scurried about, tending to the machinery, while a row of more mechs sat quietly in charging stations along the north wall.

The drones Tali had sent were circling behind one of the battery racks, up against an armored doorway that had two broad crossbars of solid steel reinforcing it. The doorway read "Thermal Access: no admittance, hazard area". Shepard checked her blueprints and smiled – no such door or access was visible on them.

"Get ready. Here we go."

She attempted to open the door, using the access codes Anolais provided, but it stubbornly flashed red. She smirked and triggered her omnitool, letting the Spectre decryptor tool go to work, hundreds of runtimes attacking the door for a few seconds before it finally shifted to green. The door opened slowly, more reinforcing bars on the far side retracting into the earth, revealing a plain, bare steel corridor.

Shepard entered first, Liara following, and the group followed, walking slowly and carefully. The corridor curved slightly, eventually coming out onto a broader hallway. A huge security door was set into the rock walls, while off to one side a broad armorplast window was set.

Shepard approached the door, but paused, seeing a flicker of movement outside the window. She stepped up to it, wiping at the condensation that clouded it, and looked through it. Far below, in a natural cavern, hundreds of alien creatures thrashed around, packed tightly together. Shepard was left speechless, even as Wrex stepped up to take a look, and a vibrating, angry growl began to emit from his chest.

She turned to him, and he looked at her. "What are those things, Wrex? They look like goddamned xenomorphs from old human scifi flicks."

Wrex bared his teeth at her. "Worse. Those, Shepard...are rachni. Our old enemy, resurrected from the dead. Each one would tear apart a squad of humans. They spit acid, bleed corrosives, and their carapace will bounce most of your tiny weapons."

Shepard cursed quietly, tapping her comm-link. "General von Grath, respond."

Only static answered her. She tapped a different code. "Cole, respond."

The voice of the master chief was weak, and gunfire could be heard in the background. " – can't make – intruders – chaos in the streets"

The signal terminated, leaving Shepard staring at her omnitool. Parker cursed and tried his own.  
"Parker to NDC HQ, come in."

More static erupted, then a weak transmission. "Parker-kun, this is Matsuo. Port Hanshan is under attack. There are things pouring down the mountainside from Peak 15 headed to the capital, and there are geth and crazy asari everywhere. They got to the GTS systems somehow and opened fire on our own ships, and the Systems Alliance types are being attacked by geth ships that were hidden in the asteroids!"

Matsuo's voice crackled to static for a moment before continuing " – so that's all we know. Follow Shepard's orders for now. We'll send what help we can."

Parker nodded, and turned to Shepard. "What now?"

Shepard grimaced. Going back the way they came would take too long, and there wasn't much she could do. Cole would have to hold his own, or else Saren might escape in the confusion. And she trusted Admiral Chu could see off any geth in orbit. He'd have to figure out how to deal with the rachni headed towards the city. "We head on in."

Wrex stiffened. "Shepard. The Rachni that they had in this cave are moving, heading through a door on the far wall...into the complex. If they're in there, we're seriously outnumbered."

Shepard gritted her teeth. "We'll just have to find Saren fast, then, won't we? Everyone get ready."

Shepard opened the security door, and moved through it, into wide, open area that was clearly a security room. Two barricades stood in the middle of the room, with geth standing there, and as she entered one geth touched a control, and turrets popped up out of the ceiling, floor, and walls.

The geth leveled their weapons as everything opened fire at once. Shepard barely had time to pull Liara with her as she threw herself out of the line of fire before streams of plasma darts tore through the air. They missed Tali by inches, searing her reik, and slammed directly into two of Parker's men, tearing through shield and armor with ease. Shepard tucked Liara behind her and peeked around the corner, even as a heavy booming sound could be heard.

Looming above the geth gunners and the turrets, the bowed, silvery form of a geth colossus stood, eye gleaming with plasma as it began to charge it's weapons.

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## Chapter 100: Chapter 91 : Noveria, Chaos

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*A/N: This is the 100th chapter of OsaBC. I'd like to thank all my readers again – your encouragement and reviews are a big part of why I write this, and your feedback is important. When I started this story, I had planned for only modest changes to canon, to fix a few plot holes. What it has evolved into over time is something that is, I hope, worth the time to read. That I've managed to get this far - and that people still like it - is amazing to me. Again, thank you :D*

*I'm aware that the method Benezia plans on using is not that different from the method employed by Richard Williams. There's a reason for that, partially because I'm a hack, and partially because it is logical and works.*

*I'm also aware that reversing the polarity, so to speak, of who dies where is one of the things that no one ever seems to mess with. It's perhaps the most sacred of cows : the Big Bad is Saren.*

*Ridiculous. Benezia has the money. Benezia has the biotic power. Benezia has the mental fortitude to resist utter domination. Benezia has cultists in her movement. Benezia could smear Saren all over the*

*floor, just by what canon says about matriarchs. But Bioware has a thing against strong females, so it never came to be. Benezia's character got more exploration in ME 2 and ME 3 than in ME 1, which is a shame.*

*The payout of Peak 15 was interesting in canon, but the whole thing was so confusing that I ended up with more questions than answers. I tried – honestly – to rework it in a way where it made sense, but I couldn't. Thus, we have the Siege of Port Hanshan instead.*

*Bonus points if you can recognize the second latin phrase von Grath shouts out.*

*It was only with the greatest of will I avoided a Robocop shout out of "There's trouble in this Tower!"*

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"All forces, this is Admiral Chu. Assume Ocean Fist tactical stance. Helm, bring us around to course zero nine zero, tac zero. Battle stations." The blare of the ship's alarms competed with the babble of target designation calls and running feet as Admiral Chu barked orders. The lighting on the cruiser's bridge went from white-blue to the red of battle-stations, haptic screens shifting from bright to darker orange.

The plot was filled with hostile contact designators, breaking free of the asteroid field that separated the outer system from the inner planets. The geth ships had been cleverly hidden in a thicket of iron-bearing asteroids overlapped by the magnetic field of the system's gas giant, obscuring their signatures from the cursory fly-by the fighters had performed. Now they were advancing on his force, fifteen cruisers and a few dozen of the lighter geth frigates that had deviled Alliance forces in several other actions.

That, by itself, would not have been a problem. The more serious issue was that the Noverian defense network had been hacked, and it was now engaging both the Noverian fleet and his own ships. The Noverians had already lost three cruisers, and six of his own had taken hits from sprays of missiles from the automated base on the moon.

"Orders to the Wrath: suppressive fire on that lunar missile base, full bombardment!"

The comm tech nodded, keying the orders, even as more alarms blared and the tactical officer called out. "Additional contacts, bearing one five seven tac one three zero, above the ecliptic plane. Initial target designation is geth heavy cruisers, designating contact Sierra Tango three, in ATF Tracker beta through gamma. Fire control is plotting firing solutions now, Admiral. Estimates are nine ships, moving to flank."

Chu exhaled. "Bring the fleet around, comms. I'm not going to let these mechanical bastards flank us. All ships, fire for effect, come to course one one zero."

The Alliance cruisers slung themselves ahead, frigates breaking off to the side, spreading in an inverted V shape from the wake of the Manswell's Wrath. The dreadnaught turned ponderously, lights over its surface dimming for a moment as its main gun erupted several times, kilogram mass slugs lancing out to slam into the small moon over Noveria. There was a flash of light and a blare of alarms. "Direct hit on the missile base, sir, severe damage. Missiles have stopped firing."

Chu nodded. "Very good, Tactical. Detail the fighters from the Da Vinci to mop up the orbital satellites. Range to the geth line?"

The tactical officer, a slight and stooped man with a receding hairline, squinted at his plot. "Eighty light-seconds, sir. Initial missile launch is away. Incoming missiles detected, GARDIAN array is prepared."

Chu sat back in his command chair, eyes narrowed. He hadn't commanded a space battle in over fifteen years, but he wasn't going to let that lunatic of a Commissariat captain in charge of the Wrath take command. "Signal the Wrath and the Commissariat cruisers to deal with the heavies, we'll take the lighter cruisers. Inform the Noverians we'll handle this and to focus on dealing with their damned defense network."

The admiral fixed his eyes on the plot, as blue and white icons began tangling with red, and dots streaked in jerky patterns, indicating missile and torpedo salvos. Chu really hoped the Noverians got control of their defenses soon, because if the GTS missiles on the ground opened up they were going to get cut to pieces.

"Signal from General von Grath sir, along with telemetry from the ground."

Chu swiveled in his chair. "Inform him I'm rather occupied at the moment, Comms."

The comm tech swallowed "He says it's critical, sir."

Chu snarled, rising from his chair. "Shunt it to my screen, comms." He stooped over his tactical console, even as he steadied himself against the railing as the ship lurched in an evasive maneuver. He heard the faint thud of missile impacts against his cruiser's shields and winced.

The image of von Grath lit his view-screen, flashing red damage control lights casting his features in a surreal, strobe-like glow. "Admiral, I'm going to need fighter support to get my ships down to Noveria's docks. There's trouble down there."

Chu hissed. "There's trouble up here, General. We're facing a nearly equal number of geth ships and out of control space defense networks! I can't split my force now."

General von Grath shook his head, splitting the video feed. "There is a horde of *things* coming down from the mountains, Admiral. My science officer says they are *rachni*. They're going to hit the city in less than forty minutes. There are already asari cultists and geth in Port Hanshan, and they're fighting their way towards the GTS control stations. If they take those your ships are going to have to break orbit or be shot out of the sky!"

Chu watched the grainy image from a satellite, showing a series of mountain peaks overhanging the dark blur that was Port Hanshan. A tide of scuttling pale creatures surged forward, racing down the mountainside with incredible speed. "How can they survive in the cold and atmosphere?"

Von Grath's voice was thin. "They're rachni, sir. They can survive deep space, from the old reports we have. And there's no way the for-shit Noverian military can repel them, they can barely handle the geth. The weather is too bad for my ships to land or my DACT to hot drop, so I need your permission to take the docks, damn what that ponce of a salarian who runs the place says."

Chu closed his eyes. In the background, he heard the chatter of the combat pit, the reports of damage to his ships, the dreadnaught engaging the geth heavies and blowing one apart. More impacts rattled his vessel, a tac tech muttering at the destruction of an AIS cruiser.

"Very well, General. I'll detail off the Da Vinci to cover your cruisers and landing ships as they land, and let's hope you don't lose too many to the NDC defenses. You'll have to deal with Anolais and his reactions yourself."

Von Grath snorted. "Nothing a shotgun blast to the face can't handle. I'll send my cruisers back up to the fight once we've disembarked. Von Grath out."

The link died, and Chu turned his attention back to the battle space once more. "Tactical, new deployment for the Da Vinci and her escort, Sunset Spear. All other units, close range on the geth and go to rapid-fire missile launch. I want them blanketed in so much ECCM they can't interfere with our

troop drop." He paused. "Detail off a frigate with a comm buoy to the Citadel ships at the Ralx relay, let them know company might be on it's way, and to be ready."

Chu fervently hoped that his ships were up to a real fight, given they weren't regular Navy. The AIS hadn't fought in space since the First Contact War, and the Commissariat ships, while heavily armed, were still not professional naval people. This could end very badly.

#### O-OSaBC-O

Administrative Director Anolais watched the scenes of destruction from his office, atop the highest floor in the Noveria Tower. Fires and explosions raced through the city, and the ugly blob coming down the mountainside grew closer second by second. The agonized screams of his populace could be heard even at this height, the smoke trailing from several large office buildings letting him know that thousands were probably already dead.

His emergency response teams were in full swing, but they were overwhelmed, and the approaching things rushing at the city from the mountains had thrown the rest of the Board into a telemetry had identified them as rachni.

Part of him found the concept of resurrecting a dead species fascinating. It was an act of hubris that touched both the warrior and the scientist in him and made him briefly wonder how they'd managed to accomplish it. The rest of him was considering the end of his ambitions was at hand, the personal failure of the goals that would have propelled him to the very heights of salarian society in a few more short years.

The fact that he was very likely to *die* in the next hour, next to that, was of little moment. The rest of the Board, cowards all, had already fled, either to the docks and waiting starships or to fortified holdouts in the lower city. Neither was a good choice, in his opinion – the space battle was not going well, and the city was overrun.

He sighed, directing his gaze to the far wall, where a haptic screen was a riot of conflicting reports and broken comms. The screen, flanked by a pair of expensive, obscure and strange turian representations of the spirits, could only tell him that Port Hanshan was, at the moment, a chaotic mess. The incoming information was not reassuring.

Screaming demands for information from investors. Panicked reports from the defense stations. Corrupted data spills from the geth hackers tearing his systems apart. The space defense net had gone wild, blowing his own very expensive ships out of the sky, including one that had one of his relatives aboard. Panicked crowds of civilians had been attacked by asari in white robes, screaming about the end of days, being born apart by biotic assaults that had been beyond the ability of the NDC defense force to stop.

Anolais was out of anger, watching it all tumble down around him. He barely reacted as his door opened, and the bloodied form of Major Matsuo entered. "An...Anolais ue-sama. . . we have stopped the assault on the Tower, but only nine detachments of the NDC Guard remain. We have lost over three hundred of our people, and over a thousand civilians. The asari biotics are . . . too powerful, and our automated defenses are being turned against us. The geth are hacking our mechs and JOTUNS faster than we can perform countermeasures."

Anolais merely nodded. "Contact the Alliance ships. Inform them that they may land troops at the docks, assuming they aren't already on the way. Move your forces to defend the central business area, and slag the ground defense control center before it falls into enemy hands. Shift ground defense control tasking to the Tower."

He turned, walking to a section of the wall paneling near the corner, and touched his hand to a shallow

brass plate there, letting the wall slide open and down, revealing a small armory. He withdrew a long salarian rifle, checking its load and then setting it aside as she stood there.

He turned to face her. "You have your orders, Major." He withdrew a belt of grenades, clucking as he noted he didn't have any high explosive variants.

*Inexcusable lapse. I have gone soft.*

She swallowed. "I .. I have begun to evacuate the Tower. We cannot hold it. You must flee."

He snorted. "I will do no such thing. I am the founder of the greatest commercial concern in the known galaxy, in control of over three hundred billion credits. I am not about to allow geth, asari, rachni or anyone else to gain control of Central Processing, the damage they could do to the economy is staggering. Nor can I allow the Tower to fall into enemy hands. They could detonate the power stations and deactivate the protective environmental fields." He pulled out a set of armor, draping the suit over his arm, and turned away to walk back to his desk. He touched a control on it. "Vesias?"

A salarian voice answered him, calm and cool. "Yes, Bel?"

Anolais gave a thin smile. Very few living beings could call him by his first name. "Gather all the former STG we have in my office. The rest of the Tower is to evacuate with Major Matsuo's soldiers. We'll hold here."

The voice said nothing for a second, then coughed. "Very well, old friend. Do we get a nice speech like Kirrahe used to give?"

The smile widened. "No. Move. Anolais out." He glanced up at Matsuo. "You should go, Major. Protect the investors and the civilians, and await relief from the Alliance forces."

She grimaced. "My duty is to you, Anolais ue-sama."

He set his omni-tool down, preparing to put on his armor. He paused before speaking. In his own way, he realized, he was touched by her devotion. A curious feeling.

He shook it off. "Your loyalty and dedication is appreciated, Makeo. But I am not your ... what is the term? Daimyo. You have a duty to protect the interests of the NDC as well. Not to mention the civilians."

Reluctantly, she gave a deep bow. "Yes, Anolais ue-sama. It has been the greatest honor to serve." With that she turned and left the office, limping slightly.

Anolais sighed. "Humans. Romantics, the lot of them." He pulled off his expensive suit jacket, draping it over his chair, and with another small smile, began putting on his armor. "Then again, there is something to be said for nostalgia. I almost look forward to the battle."

The tower shook again.

O-OSaBC-O

Shepard's eyes widened at the growing glow around the huge war machine's eye. If it fired, the blast would cook everyone in the corridor alive, shields or no. She screamed out "**BARRIER!**" even as she threw her entire strength into creating one.

Liara, Telanya, Wrex, Alenko and two of Parker's people immediately responded, each layering their strongest barrier field behind hers, even as the Colossus fired. The heavy bolt of energy lashed against the barrier fields, shattering several of them. Shepard and Telanya staggered back from the backlash, and Wrex sank to one knee groaning. Both of Parker's biotics shuddered, blood running from their noses, and Alenko moaned and sank to the floor.

Liara gritted her teeth as biotic energy fought against blazing plasma, curling wisps of power swirling around her form as she concentrated. With a yell, she made a spreading gesture with her arms, flinging them wide.

The raging plasma fire on the other side of her barrier was hurled backwards, right into the geth forces and turrets. There was a series of sharp explosions, and even as Liara sank to both knees in exhaustion, Parker grimaced. "Fire, fire everything!" He triggered his heavy machine gun, lashing out with streams of automatic fire, and his people reacted.

Tali and Ashley glanced at each other and opened up as well, Ash with her Avenger, Tali with a spread of tech grenades. Garrus contributed with an info-war burst from his omni, triggering an overload cascade of electrical energy in the space beyond the door.

Smoke and heat pulsed from the broken doorway, as Shepard swayed on her feet drunkenly before lifting her ODIN, peering through the smoke. "Stay...in cover. Don't know if that thing is down or not..."

Almost thirty seconds passed with no further fire from the room, and Shepard cautiously motioned to Tali to send a drone head. The small glowing orb darted into the room, vanishing into the smoke, emitting pulses of light as it did so. Tali frowned at her omni. "...I think it's clear, Commander. I'm not detecting any movement, and there's a high energy plasma fire inside."

Shepard nodded, walking over to help Liara back to her feet. The asari was trembling, her features drawn and pale. "I...Goddess, I almost did not have the strength. Without the rest of you..."

Shepard smiled. "You got that backwards, Liara. Our barriers all broke, *yours* didn't." She smirked. "At least you didn't do your biotic pile-driver on this one. Although that would have been so kickass..."

Liara covered her amusement with a cough, going off to check on Wrex, and Shepard glanced over her shoulder. "Alenko, Telanya, you okay?"

Telanya blinked and nodded weakly. "Tired, but I am unhurt."

Alenko winced and got back to his feet. "Head hurts, and my vision is a bit blurry. I think I'm okay, but my amp shut down due to field strength loss. I'll need a few minutes to bring it back online."

Shepard nodded, and turned to Wrex, who was slowly getting to his feet with Liara's assistance. "You okay, big guy?"

He grunted, and slid his shotgun onto his back, pulling out a missile launcher instead. "Next time, let's just shoot the damned thing. My head feels like a varren is gnawing on it."

Shepard smiled, turning to face Lieutenant Parker. "Good thinking with the firepower, Lieutenant. How are your people?"

He sighed. "Phillips is dead. Marks is torn up so bad he can't be moved, and both of my biotics blew their amps, they need time to recover. Other than that...nominal." He grimaced. "We don't have the equipment to fight siege walkers, Commander."

Shepard snorted. "And my people do? Hopefully that's the only one we'll see."

Parker shrugged. "I'm leaving one of my people here with Marks, and sending both my biotics back to the Binary Helix facility. They have a security force of at least a few dozen, and I need them to secure this entry point. The rest of us will follow you, per Major Matsuo's orders." He didn't look happy about it, and Shepard nodded.

"Very well. Keep your people back as fire support, my team's armor is much better." She wasn't wild about putting her team in danger, but the heavy weapons Parker's team carried would provide much

needed fire support, and putting the man's less well trained soldiers on point would just get them killed. Parker looked relieved, and went over to his people to dispatch orders. Shepard grimaced, and glanced back through the security door. The room beyond was finally clearing of smoke, showing the shattered and half-melted heap of the Colossus toppled over to the ground. The backlash had evidently detonated the ammo in the turrets all over the room, sending explosions and shrapnel everywhere. The two geth they'd seen were on the floor, along with several more also destroyed by the blast. The walls were buckled here and there, and the far side of the room was blackened.

Another security door had been blown off it's hinges, showing another narrow metal corridor curving gently to the right in the distance.

Shepard waited until Parker got his team in order, then gestured with her ODIN. "Tali, drones up. Alenko, follow my team in. Keep frosty, people. If this is the appetizer, I can't imagine what the main course is gonna be."

Garrus muttered. "You never take us any place nice, Commander. Creepy-fringe mines, abandoned colonies full of plant zombies, crazy terrorist bases. It's getting real *old*."

She smirked and stepped into the room beyond. "We'll go someplace nice after we shoot Saren in his pointy face. Promise."

O-OSaBC-O

"Another transport down, sir. The fighters are doing their best, but the defense sats are nasty."

General von Grath nodded, standing in the landing bay of his command lander. The bulky figures of his DACT team stood around, checking their weapons one last time, while his attendant checked the connection cyberlinks of his pilot-suit. "Very well, Ops. Alert the Admiral we are touching down hot at the docks."

He smiled as his attendant, an attractive younger woman with blazing red hair, finished her final check of his suit, and he stepped up into the stirrups of his battlesuit. Settling back into it's seat, he couldn't suppress a grin as the front of the suit sealed around him with a series of locking thuds, HUD's popping up in his vision as cyberlinks from the suit connected to those on his pilot-suit.

Heavy metallic legs groaned ponderously as he brought the battlesuit online, heavy slabs of armor sliding down over the knees, the arms, and shielding the back. He stretched experimentally, the suit mimicking his moves, and brought the weapons systems online.

With his hand, he tapped his unit-wide comm-band link. "Marines of the Fifth! We came here to stop a great threat to our society, our people, to the galaxy itself. The vicious nature of our foe has been revealed before, in his callous murder of our glorious colonies, in the cruel murder of innocent traders in deep space."

He began walking his suit towards the docking doors, still speaking, his booming baritone audible in every ear. "And now this walking excrement dares bring back the rachni, a menace that required the entire galaxy to unite in order to stop their last assault."

Von Grath smiled. "He thinks that oversized bugs will somehow stop us, or frighten us. That geth and asari witches will awe or terrify us. But we are Marines, ladies and gentlemen. Fucking up bugs is our business!"

He heard the roar of approval from his men, his DACT, his armor units. "Let's show this cretin what happens when you dare mess with the Corps."

He swayed slightly as the ship slammed into the docks, the jump doors cracking open and falling down

to form ramps across the dock's edge. "Master-at-arms, sound the charge. Semper Fidelis, and Repensum Est Canicula!"

The marines roared, a recorded bugle sounded, and von Grath lead them out in his armored, twelve foot tall THERMOPYLAE battlesuit, the minigun in his hands spinning up to combat motion as he ducked under the dock edge and kicked in a security door. "Squad leaders, your orders are clear. Kill hostiles, secure the civilians, and keep them from bypassing us to the civilian areas!"

In the distance, the underground city was lit with fires and explosions, the screams of civilians tearing through the darkness. A pair of asari in white robes bounded out of cover, hands coated in blue light, throwing blasts of biotic energy at him.

With a sneer he raised his right arm, the omnishield leaping into existence over it, catching both blasts and dissipating them harmlessly. The minigun rifle in his left hand erupted, spitting out 4cm projectiles at two hundred rounds a minute, sawing both alien women in half with a splash of purple blood before cutting a deep line into a nearby building.

"Squad eleven and five, left. Squad nineteen and six, right. Squads one through four take the center streets, seven through ten get to elevation. DACT, on me. We're headed to the Tower, first, and then the edge of the city."

DACT units triggered their jump packs, leaping ahead, breaking up asari ambushes and packs of geth. Their heavy weapons tore through their enemies, flamethrowers turning Triune cultists into burning, screaming torches, heavy flechette sprayers reducing geth to broken and fractured bits doused in white fluids.

Marines stormed into the city, firing for effect, covering their advance with grenades and short bursts. They managed to get to a pack of NDC soldiers pinned by geth, blowing a hole in the geth ranks and driving them back.

Other marines inserted themselves into the shaky defenses of the NDC troopers protecting the city center, humans slamming into cover next to turians, asari, and salarians. They added to the weight of fire, slowing the geth and Triune advance to a crawl, as more DACT leapt overhead and came down in the midst of the enemy lines.

Von Grath put down an already heavily damaged geth Prime with a long blast of minigun fire, kicking the broken machine from his path with contempt. "I've fought indigestion more dangerous than these mechanical freaks. Captain Taylor, status."

The deep voice of the captain responded. "So far, so good, General. These asari pack a mean punch, but they don't have any protection against flamethrowers or gas grenades. We're punching through their main line, holding around the center areas of the city. The mercs here say the big boss up in the Tower told 'em to slag the GTS controls so they couldn't be captured."

General von Grath nodded. "Wise move. Do we have comms with Director Anolais yet?"

Taylor's voice came back muted. "Not yet, sir. According to the CO of the mercs, he and some of his former STG buddies are camped out inside, something about the control center of the city being there. They've got to be under heavy assault, if we're going that way we should hustle."

Von Grath nodded, tapping another comm-link as he put a string of rounds through several more geth, bisecting them. "Colonel Carnet, move your force and the Commissars towards the Tower. If you can, punch through and reinforce the defenders there."

The voice of the Commissar was a mechanical rasp. "Understood, General. We've ... captured ... several asari. Do you object to us putting them to the Question?"

Von Grath grimaced. "Hell no, but is this really the time to do it?"

The Commissar gave a wheeze. "There is no better time to get intelligence regarding Saren and Benezia. It is possible Commander Shepard is headed into a trap."

The general's grimace deepened. "I have considered that. First, we have to deal with the mess here in the city. Question them later, secure the Tower for now."

He clicked off, then staggered as several blasts of high energy hit his battlesuit. He rotated, his targeting systems illuminating the trio of asari in white robes with black trim that had struck at him. Missiles from his shoulder unit bloomed and flashed upwards, detonating with the blue-white flames of white phosphorus, and he grinned. "I am your doom, witches. Burn and die!"

He stomped ahead, weapons ready. "Bring me a challenge, marines! Hurl the enemy back into the ice and let us get to killing bugs!"

### O-OSaBC-O

Shepard's teams advanced slowly into the facility, weapons at the ready. The corridor ended in another security door, and they broke through it, coming into a wide, open area nearly two stories tall.

The room was vast, and a heavy lift dominated one corner of the area. Low-slung one story buildings jutted from the walls, each one topped with storage crates or heavy, unfamiliar machinery. As her unit spread out, there was a roar from one of the buildings, and three krogan in black armor trimmed in glowing red tubing burst out, leveling their weapons.

Garrus was the first to react, a single shot blasting through a krogan eye, sending the hulking figure crashing to the ground as the explosive round took off a quarter of its thick skull. Tali, Wrex, and Liara all opened fire at once, a storm of rounds slamming into the second krogan, which only drew another barely coherent battle-cry and a charge.

It stopped a moment later, as Ashley put two rounds into its face, the back of its head blowing out in a spray of blood, spattering its last companion. Shepard flung a grenade at it, the flat disk landing at its feet, detonating before the krogan could react, sending the alien stumbling back. Parker's people opened fire, heavy machine guns tearing hunks of armor and flesh from the krogan.

Even as that happened, though, geth came from another building, and asari from a third. Shepard ducked behind a nearby crate, as her squad scattered for cover and opened fire.

The geth sprayed wildly with their rifles, plasma darts skittering overhead. One managed to catch Garrus in the leg, and he fell heavily. Another burst ripped its way up Wrex's side, drawing a roar from the krogan, and a lash of biotic energy that smashed the geth in question against the wall hard enough to detach its limbs.

The asari were nearly naked, dressed in thin, short white shifts trimmed in blue, each one holding a slender pistol and glowing with biotic energy. Shepard emptied her ODIN at one, the blasts ricocheting off the asari's barrier harmlessly. Several of Parker's gunners trained their weapons on the lead asari, streams of tracers cutting into her defenses until they shattered. She came apart in bloody chunks from the impact of four machine guns, her last expression almost relieved.

Tali's drones were firing back at the geth, as were Liara's gun drones, the glowing orbs sparking as they absorbed hits. Liara hurled a spear of biotic energy at one of the charging asari, catching her in mid leap and throwing her backwards with incredible force. She hit the ground hard, screaming as her arm bend at an unnatural angle, and Liara lifted her pistol and fired twice. The first heavy round blew a hole in the asari's chest, the second took off the top of her head. Liara looked faintly sick, and Shepard felt her revulsion at having to kill her own kind.

Telanya was dragging Garrus out of the line of fire, anger on her face, firing her Spear of Athame rifle one handed. Plasma bolts lashed across a geth, sending it to the ground, but two more opened fire on her. She was hit several times, grimacing as the rounds blasted through her barrier, but kept moving, pulling Garrus by the armored collar.

Shepard dropped her ODIN and pulled out her sniper rifle, sighting in. Her first shot took down a geth perched atop one of the buildings, blasting it's head apart. She swung the rifle to the right, gritting her teeth as plasma darts dug into her armor from one side. She heard Tali shouting and firing, but concentrated on her shot, taking down the other sniper.

The roar of machine-gun fire rose to a crescendo as Parker's unit stepped forward, sweeping their fire in long scything sprays. More geth fell, and another asari that had come from one of the buildings was transfixed and blasted back to the ground, blood gushing from her mouth as she clutched her vicious wounds before slumping.

There was a final shotgun blast from the wounded Wrex, and then the gunfire stopped. Shepard coughed, checking her side, feeling the armor applying omni-gel to a shallow wound.

She glanced over her team. Garrus was leaning up against the wall, wincing as his hand pulled away from a wound in his side, more burned punctures dotting his right leg, trickles of blue blood seeping from each hole. Telanya had been shot several times, blood dripping from her armor, as she applied omni-gel to Garrus.

Wrex was on his feet, his armor scorched by plasma darts, grunting as he examined a downed geth before stomping on it's head. Tali was unhurt, but shaking, her chest heaving. Alenko was next to Ash, who'd taken a few rounds but seemed alright.

Liara came over to Shepard. "Those...those were my mother's followers. Triune Unity...they look drugged or .. altered."

Shepard winced, standing. "Great. If the whole place is full of freaky asari and pissed off krogan, we'll be half dead by the time we make it to Saren." She exhaled. "Get everyone patched up, while we take a look around."

Liara nodded, as Shepard turned to examine the lift. It was clearly code-locked, displaying a red status light, and her Spectre hack programs did nothing to it. She motioned Tali over, and the little quarian hustled up, still breathing heavy.

Shepard examined her. "You okay?"

She shrugged. "Yes? I don't know, this is ... a lot. I-I have never been in such h-heavy combat before..."

Shepard placed a hand on Tali's shoulder. "You're doing a kickass job. Now. I need this lift hacked, and you're our tech expert.."

Tali nodded firmly, and triggered her omni, working for some time before cutting it off with a hiss of disgust. "It's manually interlocked. There should be a release somewhere on this level, in a security station or something."

Shepard nodded sourly. "We'll have to look for it, then. Stay in your teams and let's get moving."

It took five minutes for Garrus to get back on his feet, but they began poking around. The buildings on the right were all barracks or rest areas, fitted with comfortable bedding – sling racks for turians, pallets for krogan, beds for asari. There was a curious lack of any sort of amenities – no haptic entertainment screens, no books, nothing but bare racks of weapons and a small ceramic black pyramid with several cushions around it.

Something about the thing set Shepard's nerves on edge, and she avoided it. Beyond the barracks, there was a geth area, some kind of monitoring station for the front entry. Geth charging stations of strange materials were meshed with the walls, while green-tinted displays showed activity.

Shepard's comm blinked. "Shepard here."

Alenko's voice sounded worried. "Ma'am, we've...found something. You better come see."

Shepard turned to leave, Liara following, and walked across the wide floor to where Alenko's team was gathered, a long low building set against the back wall. Alenko was outside, a strained look on his face. "We found the security station and unlocked the lift, but it will only go to the next level. But ... inside, we found...well.."

He led her inside the room, which was low slung and taken up on one wall by racks upon racks of weapons. Mostly turian rifles and lance cannons, but also plasma flamethrowers and several missile launchers. "Alenko, have the squad take some of the heavy stuff with us. If we run into another fucking Colossus I want something heavier than a shotgun."

She turned, and walked to the forcefield partition that covered the other half of the room. In a long storage area beyond, she saw what had rattled Alenko.

In long metallic racks stacked at least fifty feet high were hundreds of geth bodies, each one folded up and in some kind of stasis. On the ground at the base of the racks were heavy pallets of black steel, each one imprinted with bio-hazard and radioactivity symbols. Each one was labeled identically.

"POLONIUM ENRICHED DEVICES: RESTRICTED USE"

Shepard shuddered. There were at least twenty dirty nuclear bombs in this one room, and hundreds of geth platforms. And that was one of six identical bays. "The fuck was Saren planning here, I wonder?"

Alenko had an ugly expression on his face. "I don't know, ma'am. But that many geth makes me nervous."

Shepard nodded, looking on as Wrex lifted a lance cannon approvingly, hefting it over his shoulder with one massive hand. She glanced around the armory, finally fixing her eyes on a rotary assault cannon, which she lifted with a grunt of exertion. "Arm up and move out, Alenko. We can't do much about this right now, and the quicker we get fuck away from all these bombs the better."

Alenko nodded, and Shepard exhaled, walking out of the armory and applying her biotics to lighten the weight of the gun she carried. Liara walked up, carrying her ODIN shotgun, and carefully clipped it to Shepard's lower back. "You dropped it."

She smiled. "Thanks, Liara." She glanced over the asari, and set the barrel of the weapon on the floor, so she could touch her shoulder. "You looked a bit shaken back there, are you okay?"

Liara turned away, a sad expression on her own features. "I am not yet used to killing my own kind, yet, Sara. I hope I never become accustomed to such, either."

Shepard could only nod at that.

O-OSaBC-O

Benezia stood before the suit of Paladin armor, taking in its pale yellow and silver colors one last time. She patted it affectionately. "Farewell, old friend. You go with glory into the annals of T'Soni history, for a greater purpose than you can ever understand."

The limited VI aboard made a sound, delicate chimes. A moment later it spoke. "This system is prepared for battle."

Benezia nodded, turning to the figure of the commando standing next to her. "This is your last fight, loyal Serea. You are the only one related to me by blood, the only one who can make this sacrifice work. I trust you to see it through, even though it shall cost you your life."

The asari warrior bowed her head. Her eyes were faintly glassy, showing the first stage of indoctrination, but she was still mostly herself, and there was a tremor of both fear and determination in her voice. "I shall not fail you, Matriarch. For the House."

Benezia smiled gently. "For the House, indeed. Do not let leave the suit, and ensure that you trigger the destruct system when you can no longer fight."

Serea nodded, and began the process of synching herself to the battlesuit. Benezia turned away, walking to where Saren stood, checking his weapons. "It is done. When the time comes, your pilot will send the Talon's Justice out on autopilot, launching as much ECCM and ECM as he can with drones, while deliberately attracting attention. In the confusion and sensor jamming, my own small ship will take off, staying as close to the ground as possible, and land in the valley on the far side of the mountains. Assuming we can keep it in the air that long. We can shut down the non-essential systems and wait until the Alliance fleet leaves, then slip out in a few days."

She turned back to the battlesuit. "As for the Talon's justice, the defense sats will not engage it, but the course it will take will bring it in range of Port Hanshan's GARDIAN towers, which will bring it down. If the flight path is correct, it should land just outside the city."

Saren nodded. "And you are sure the suit will survive the crash?"

Benezia shrugged. "Either way it does not matter. If it doesn't, the wreckage will at least remain mostly whole. Serea is a close cousin of the thirdborne branch, close enough that casual DNA analysis will show that she is of T'Soni blood. It will be days, maybe weeks before they obtain medical data on me to determine I am not truly dead."

She sighed. "By that time, if the plan works, I'll be safely away from the system." She paused. "There is no reason for you to sacrifice yourself here, Saren. They have yet to locate Virmire, or any of our other bases. We can simply move -"

He shook his head. "Virmire is too important, and there is too much happening there to move now. With me dead and you apparently dead, they will stop their chase, let their guard down, and give the plan a chance to work. With only you dead they would redouble the chase for me." He gave a flicker of a mandible. "Besides, Nazara has spoken and agrees with my plan. I am .. of no use to him."

The conversation she had endured through the pyramid artifact that Nazara used to communicate with had left her with an even stronger headache, and a sense of despair. The Reaper was not about to risk its existence to rescue them, even if it meant a setback to its plans. When it learned of Saren's plan to fool the Alliance and the Council with his death and Benezia's seeming demise, it had commanded them both to implement it, and for her to return to Virmire with the location of the Mu Relay.

Breaking the will of the true queen had taken up most of her time, the beast finally submitting only a few minutes ago. Benezia was tired, and in no real shape for a fight after such exertion. She still did not want to leave Saren behind to die alone, but their bond was slowly, fitfully failing, as whatever the cyberware that had been sunk into Saren continued to alter and shift him.

It was like having him die slowly, and it was driving her mad. Anger and shame pulsed through her body as she drew him close one last time, pushing herself body and soul against him. There was a flicker of gratitude from him, as she shared her emotions and memories, letting his strength, his essence sink into her soul one last time.

With tears in her eyes she broke the meld, drawing away only reluctantly. "I..."

Saren shook his head, tracing a single talon down her jawline, the gesture so familiar that it sent shivers up her spine. "It is time, beloved. When this is all done, perhaps we will once again see each other on that beach, and forget the agony we endure for the greater good. The sun will beat down upon us, and the warm sand cushion us."

She closed her eyes at the image. "Yes." She touched his hand, exhaling shakily. "You will wait for me there, then."

He nodded. "There is no Arterius without T'Soni."

She blinked back more tears and stepped away, her body screaming at her not to do so, to cling, to hold on. Saren stood alone, as he had always stood alone. Confident. Powerful. Ever prepared to sacrifice everything for what had to be done.

Her vision dissolved as sobs shook her, and she weakly managed to turn away, wiping her eyes. Saren watched her go, feeling the agony from what was left of their bond tear at whatever remained of his soul.

A part of him screamed in fury and loss, pounding in futile anger against the barriers in his mind. The rest of him turned away, picking up his Sunfire pistol and heading to the lower level to intercept Shepard and her team and put them in their graves.

The glassy eyed figure of Serea T'Soni watched, as the battlesuit enfolded her, sealing her away from the air and light one last time. She thought the parting very sad, and then her compromised mind turned to her mission, soothing voices telling her of the need to obey.

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## Chapter 101: Chapter 92 : Noveria, Crescendo

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*A/N: The battle continues. I found myself too weak to resist Progman's suggestion of a line to use :D  
Updated to fix a few stupid typos. Thirty food tunnel, indeed*

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"Rally! Rally to me, Marines! If we are to die, we are going to die standing, die fighting, and die *marines!*"

Von Grath's voice boomed from his suit's external speakers as his minigun fired almost non-stop, the barrels beginning to glow from the heat. Endless waves of chitin-plated things hurled themselves at the makeshift barricades at the entrance tunnel leading to the city proper, and his marines were giving everything they had.

It wasn't enough.

He'd heard the stories, of course, in polite discussions over brandy and cigars with other generals of the SA. Chatted about the rachni with a turian general once, even. The supposedly ultimate warriors, only stopped by endless waves of krogan invading their worlds and detonating bio-warfare bombs deep below the planet surfaces. He'd heard the stories, the old tales. Heard the fear and horror in alien voices at the power of the rachni.

But he'd never really listened, not in detail, to the threat the rachni represented. Why should he? They were dead.

*Until a damned lunatic brought them back.*

The insectile horrors had dashed down the icy mountainside through a storm that would have frozen even the most angry krogan solid, through winds that would have torn a human right off the mountain to a gory death. They'd ran at speeds upwards of fifty miles an hour, relentless, and right into the automatic defenses of the city border.

Automated turrets had sprayed thousands of rounds, cutting down dozens and dozens of the creatures. Their companions had trampled over them, swarming over the outer wall, tearing the turrets apart with razor-sharp claws mounted on flailing tentacles, or with hard serrated blades of bone and chitin four feet long that parted steel like cotton.

The NDC troopers at the city edge had, unsurprisingly, bolted, with the exception of a handful of krogan. Those had roared out battle cries and charged ahead.

The first surprise was when the rachni had backed off...and a single rachni had met each krogan in single combat. None of the observers knew why, but the krogan only roared louder and met them with screaming charges. The results were messy, the krogan had all died, but not before wounding or killing their opponents. The rachni had swept past them into the city outskirts, mostly landing facilities for small craft and warehouses.

The only good news was that the rachni could not simply clamber over the walls and eat them all. The force shields protecting the city from the outside environment were impermeable to the rachni. The bad news is that, for some reason von Grath would never understand, the idiots who built the city had left a thirty foot wide access tunnel through the wall leading to the area outside, and the rachni headed right for it.

At least the designers had not been completely insane – the tunnel had some defenses around it, which killed a few more of the beasts before the turrets were torn from their mountings. The tunnel also featured blast doors a good foot thick, backstopped with a kinetic barrier. The second surprise was the rachni being able to carve their way through that barricade in barely five minutes.

Von Grath had hustled his marines through the city, coming up topside into temperatures of twenty below and heavy winds broken only by the outer walls. He'd lost over a hundred of his marines in the fight against the geth and asari, and had to leave a quarter of his men behind in the city to continue that fight, alongside the dwindling ranks of the NDC guard.

There was chaos at the Tower, as asari and geth continued their assault on it. Commissariat forces had assaulted the attackers three times, and had been horribly repulsed each time. The asari were dug in, and the geth had several armature units. Von Grath couldn't detail off his DACT to that fight, he needed them against the rachni.

He'd barely gotten his troops to the city's edge in time, just as the rachni burst through the tunnel's far end. His force's initial salvo had torn down dozens of the monsters, but that was like stomping on a handful of ants after kicking over the entire mound. The rachni had shrieked and screamed, ignoring their casualties as the missile fire and heavy weapons took their toll, until finally his units had shot their bolt, and needed to reload.

And then they had hit his forces, like a tide of death and frenzy, leading to the third, and worst surprise. Most of his unit's weapons did about as much damage as spitting at them.

Avenger rifles were basically useless, their chitin-plated hides were so thick and tough that most rounds bounced off. The heavier Crossfire rifles used by the AIS troopers punched through, and the DACT's miniguns and assault cannons could splash a rachni easily, but the bulk of his marines had to rely on flame units and grenades.

Most of his men were out of grenades by now. The rachni were pushing them back. Getting in close enough for heavier load shotguns was beyond suicidal, a marine might get one shot off before he found himself ripped in half or bathed in acid spit so strong it would melt battle armor like butter.

With a screech, yet another rachni warrior reared up, scythe-like front legs slashing two marines apart, sending one tumbling to the ground in bisected halves, the other marine screaming as his guts spilled out and he collapsed on the ground. Hard spiked legs smashed into his broken body a moment later, silencing his cries.

Von Grath fired again, slugs shattering the rachni, spilling its acidic blood all over the ground to hiss feebly. His suit reported minor breaches in six locations, two critical, but he had enough omnigel to patch them.

He had burned through two ammo blocks and was on his third. After that, he had one left, and he'd be down to his flame unit, omnispear, and missiles. He cursed, putting another burst of fire across several rachni surging through the tunnel, and hit his comm-link. "Captain Taylor, where is my damned air support?"

The voice of Taylor sounded tired. "We're still dodging fire from the damned defense satellites, General, and some geth are on the ground with GTS missile launchers. They're dug in near the water facilities, and I can't get at them to shut 'em down."

Von Grath watched as a DACT was taken down by leaping rachni, two more DACT rushing up to blow the creature away, but not before it savaged the armored man on the ground. By the time they drove it off, the trooper was scattered gore and broken armor plates over a pile of .. chunks. He grimaced and spat. "Not good enough, Captain. If we don't get some suppression on these overgrown spiders they're going to break my damned lines."

Taylor started to say something, then broke off as an explosion sounded over the comm. Von Grath frowned. "Captain Taylor. Captain Taylor, respond." He triggered another comm circuit. "6th Company, respond."

There was only silence, and von Grath clenched his fist. Turning back to the battle, he keyed his divisional XO. "Major Laxar, have the marine units without heavy weapons fall back to the third barricades, and see if we've gotten any of those armored units the NDC had out of that garage yet. Have the DACT set a goddamned defensive line here and lay prox mines."

The voice of his XO answered. "At once, sir."

There was a series of explosions ahead, and von Grath looked up to see that some cunning marines had rigged up several linked belts of grenades to detonate at once, sending a huge bubble of fragmentation shrapnel across the entire length of the tunnel. Rachni were cut down like weeds by the blasts, and his DACT followed up by firing several rockets at the staggered survivors. Finally, the tunnel was cleared, if only for a few minutes.

He heard Major Laxar pass the fall back order, and he nodded in relief as wounded and exhausted marines began falling back, while some heavy weapons units and grenadiers from the rear arrived. He was about to take his DACT into the tunnel proper to form a defensive line when there was a crash of masonry as part of a building behind them collapsed.

He swung his battlesuit around, grinning as he beheld the sight of a pair of HAMRHEAD tanks from his landing ships. How the bulky vehicles had negotiated the narrow streets of Port Hanshan he didn't know, but he was glad when they swung their main guns and missile pods to face the tunnel entrance.

His comm system pinged, and he answered. "Lieutenant Varson, reporting, sir. General von Grath,

Captain Jerne managed to have the MAKOs blast a hole in the port wall. Most of us were dispatched to the Tower to support Captain Taylor, but he detailed us to join the fight here. Where do you need us?"

Von Grath looked back down the tunnel, where the rachni were howling and hissing as they regrouped. "Right where you are, gentlemen. Big ugly things, five rounds rapid, if you please."

The two hover-tanks swiveled, turrets coming about in unison before their main guns barred, flashing high explosive shells down the tunnel to impact heavily on the rachni forces. More bits of chitin and splashes of acid blood pattered down in the wreckage of the tunnel entrance, and his marines cheered.

"Capital. Let's see if we can't hold off these damnable cockroaches a bit longer, eh?"

#### O-OSaBC-O

The Battle of Noveria (space) would go down in the Systems Alliance history books as one of the largest and most vicious space battles in the race's history. The Noverian fleet, hammered by its own missile base and orbital defense satellites, had been shattered, only a handful of frigates and the command cruiser managing to fight their way free of the close-range crossfire.

Geth frigates poured on the speed as they closed with the Commissariat and AIS ships, whose crews, while competent enough at navigation and the occasional scrap with a special forces transport or rebelling colonies, were not trained for heavy naval combat. Rather than maneuver for position, the Commissariat vessels opened fire at range and then powered up their broadside GARDIAN weapons for knife-fighting range.

The clever geth lost several frigates to the incoming fire, but they slewed to right angles to the fleet just outside of GARDIAN range, opening up with sprays of missile fire and ECM drones. The heavy Commissariat cruisers, designed more for suppression than evasion, were caught off guard.

Six of them were torn open by the attack, four more heavily damaged. The geth cruisers in the wake of the frigates broke through the line of the humans headed for the dreadnaught.

The crew of the Manswell's Wrath, however, while Commissariat, had the distinction of also all being former Navy. They swung the bow of their ship towards the heavy cruisers in the distance, while the ship disgorged its own fighter wing to deal with the incoming cruisers and frigates, and its broadside included both disruptor torpedo tubes and mass accelerators, both of which spat answering fire. The lead line of geth cruisers managed to evade the fire, but several frigates, in a running gunfight with the remaining human cruisers, could not break out of range fast enough.

The Manswell's Wrath dimmed again, its main gun firing a group of slugs through space, striking the lead heavy geth cruiser dead on almost twenty seconds later. The blast tore the cruiser apart, breaking its curved shape in half before carrying on to strike another cruiser behind it, crumpling its forward half and sending explosions racing through the silvery hull.

Aboard his own command cruiser, Admiral Chu winced at his own incompetence. The command and control suite he had aboard his ship was doing its best, but these ships had never fought or practiced together, and the Commissariat and AIS captains simply fought their ships differently.

As a result, the geth, while losing, were inflicting severe casualties on his force. He was down a total of twelve cruisers, and the Commissariat had lost eleven. The carrier had lost almost all of its fighters covering von Grath's landing on Noveria itself, and the general had lost five of his transports and over four hundred marines before they even landed. From the horrifying reports on the ground, he'd lost more than that once he hit the rachni attempting to break into the city.

His tactical officer spoke, voice tense. "We have copy from the Citadel Ninth Fleet, sir. They've

detailed off two dreadnaughts and an escort of cruisers and frigates here at top speed once they got our message. ETA is .. fifty seven minutes. Salarian ships, going at top speed."

Chu grunted in irritation. Of course salarian dreadnaughts could outrun his light cruisers, the superior bastards. "Very well, Tac. Status of the fleet?"

The plot flickered, zooming in a bit. "The geth line is bowed into our own, sir. The Wrath is holding her own, but she's vulnerable."

He sighed. "Detail off the Da Vinci's escort to cover the gap, and bring us around to course zero two five tac seventy. If any ships have drones, now is the time to launch the damned things."

He watched as his own small packet of cruisers swung into the battle. Typically speaking, command and control vessels tried to remain out of the fight, especially short range GARDIAN knife fights, but things were dicey enough that he had no choice but to engage. He reached for the IMC. "All hands, stand by for point blank engagement. Proceed to don your hardsuits. Engineering, once suited, evacuate air from all engineering spaces in preparation for possible hull breach."

He clicked off, and turned from the plot, stepping down from the deck to head to the nearest suit locker. "Tactical, eye the battle while I suit up, then get suited yourself. Comms, orders to the fleet: close and engage. We're out of missiles and I will be damned if let geth stand off and blast my ships to pieces."

He grimaced, as he eyed the suit hanging in the locker. He hated these things, they always reminded him of that crazed fight on Tysor II against the turians, alongside Ahern. He sighed, and began to put it on.

O-OSaBC-O

The lift took Shepard's team down a level, stopping abruptly. It's doors slid open, revealing another huge space, this one with natural stone walls smoothed by some form of machinery.

Shepard led off, followed by her team, as Tali's drones zoomed ahead. The entire giant room was mostly dark, illuminated here and there by racks of industrial lighting. More heavy crates lined the walls, alongside more low-slung buildings, and one large, two-story building along the left edge.

The drones swirled about, sensors reporting nothing, before returning to hover over Tali. "Nothing moving, Commander, and no life signs...but there is something strange in that building in the northwest corner."

Shepard nodded. "Parker, your people stay put and cover us from the lift. Alenko, take the two southern buildings. We'll take the big one and the weird one."

Alenko, Wrex, Tali and Ashley moved off, and Shepard turned to Garrus. "You gonna make it, chicken?"

Garrus gave a weak glare, mandible flickering. Telanya had patched the wounds in his leg and side with medigel and omni-gel patches, but he was clearly in a lot of pain. "I'm still walking, sheep. I'll make it, don't you worry."

Telanya spoke softly. "I am using my biotics to lighten his weight." She had tied off her own wound, purple blood staining the medigel infused bandage on her hip. "We will endure, Commander."

Shepard glanced at Liara and then nodded, heading to the building Tali had identified as having something weird about it. The floor was plated in metal, and portions of it were scuffed and damaged from some heavy load being dragged across it. The ceiling was lost in darkness, the rough broken edges of a few stalactites visible.

Garrus and Telanya split off to explore the other building, while Liara and Shepard headed to the first

building, which had a code locked door. Rather than bother with hacking it, she shot the lock off, kicking it in and barreling through, sweeping the heavy assault weapon across the space.

The room was well-lit, six huge tanks of greenish liquid mounted against the far wall, each one framed in unfamiliar medical machinery. Four of the tanks were stained with curling, dark fluids, bits of flesh that were completely unrecognizable. The fifth tank contained a horribly malformed krogan, with twisted limbs covered in what looked like bone plating, and short, spiked tentacles growing from its misshapen back. The last tank held a rachni, curled against itself, with patches of dark corruption all over its insectile body.

Vats of some kind of bubbling white fluid under heavy plastic lids dominated another wall, along with long computer banks, haptic screens a soft white and covered in asari scrawl. Liara walked over to these, as Shepard scanned the room further.

Laying out on a slab in the middle of the room was a naked asari, her form covered in ritualistic tattoos of some kind. She'd been cleanly shot in the head, the ugly wound marring her otherwise pretty features, and there were several info-pads by the body. What looked like a neural scanner was clamped to the end of the table, beeping softly, and Shepard walked up.

The first info-pad she picked up, the one by the scanner, was in asari, and it took her omnitool a few seconds to translate it.

*Dawnfall 6*

*The third experimental trial of the Suppression failed today, with Ralere succumbing at last to the final state of indoctrination. As with all others who fall into that state, she became irrational, unstable and dangerous. Neural scans show the same lesions in the brain we all experience.*

*The effect, as Rana theorized, is indeed a combination of things. It is part subsonic, part nanoinfection, part some kind of energy field that operates in a dimension we can't even see. We've tried everything we can think of, but nothing seems to stop it once the baseline time has been spent in close proximity to anything Reaper related.*

*The safe exposure is nine hours. That is cumulative, not per exposure. Turians appear to last longer, krogan longer still, salarians crumble in only four hours. Brain complexity may have something to do with it.*

*As far as the clones go, that is also a fallen tide. None of series nine or ten are viable. Series eleven shows some promise, but we've already sent that data to Vir mire for full clone workup, so further testing here is inefficient. Series twelve is an abomination that I'll have the geth handle once we deal with the invaders.*

The info-pad had no further data, and the rest of the info-pads had only diagrams of dissections of a brain. Shepard gathered them all up, sliding them into her storage pack on the back of her armor, before turning to Liara. "Find anything?"

Liara shook her head, carefully tapping a console control. "Nothing ... concrete. They were experimenting with krogan and rachni DNA, Sara. Trying to blend them. This console suggests there is an entire breeding pit somewhere in this cursed base." She winced. "My mother has notes here. They are unpleasant to read."

She nodded. "Copy it to an OSD. We can't dawdle."

Liara did so, and Shepard tapped her omni. "What did you guys find?"

Wrex's voice rumbled in disgust. "Another warehouse full of shut down geth bodies. More guns. Nothing heavy. Some armor, mostly asari, and rations and medical supplies."

Tali's voice chipped in. "We did find the security override panel for the lift, Shepard. We... we also found a dead krogan. He seems to ... have smashed his own head in against a wall." Her voice was filled with disgust and confusion.

Alenko's link beeped. "We found some kind of ... arena. Lots of blood on the floor, observation areas above, cells in the floor below. Like they were having pit fights in here or something. Lots of corpses, Commander – asari, turian, krogan, a couple of vorcha even. Most of them look, well, deformed."

Garrus's flanging voice spoke. "We found an assembly line in the big building. Looks like this is where those damnable hoppers come from, Commander. There's also enough equipment in here to churn out guns and armor for an army. What in the spirits was Saren planning?"

Shepard exhaled. "We found freaky fucked up clones and a dead asari. Meet up at the lift." She clicked off, and motioned to Liara, who pulled out an OSD from the computer she was working at and followed.

The lift was clear of enemies, Parker's people standing around looking a mix of bored and terrified. "You find anything?"

Shepard shrugged. "Disturbing research. Let's head down. There can't be too much more to this place."

The next level down was well lit, and the lift opened up onto a corridor, lined with the occasional door. Lights in the ceiling and vents puffing out warm air let Shepard know this was an area people actually lived in. "Get ready...this may be it."

They moved ahead in two groups, weapons ready. The side rooms were simple bunk rooms, empty of any people. The corridor ended in a pair of double doors. Shepard pushed through them.

They entered into a high-ceilinged room, a good two hundred feet wide and twice as tall. Windows were carved into the walls, some lit, some not. A huge tactical command area dominated the center of the room, surrounded by concentric circles of consoles, while a broad window in the distance showed an empty cavern space.

Doors lead to the south and north, but Shepard's attention was seized by the moving forms of asari, taking cover behind the consoles in the tactical area. "Spread out, people."

The asari huddled behind the consoles, gripping at small pistols or preparing biotics as Shepard's team moved. There was little cover near the doorway, but there was a low wall and some crates in one corner across from the door, and Shepard's group huddled there. Alenko and his team ducked behind a wide status console near the other wall, and Parker's team pressed up against the doorway itself, letting the doorjamb act as their cover.

The asari in the tactical area were not firing. "You are Shepard. You must ... not see." The asari who spoke had a glassy eyed look and an almost droning note to her voice.

Shepard frowned. "Throw down your weapons and you can get out of this alive. I'm not here for you, just Saren and Benezia."

The asari gave a ghastly smile, too wide, too serene. Her eyes widened with some shattered knowledge and she spread her arms. "Freedom...at last."

She pressed her thumb down on the grenade in her hands, and smiled even as it detonated. More asari fired into their consoles at point blank range, and a few lashed out with biotics at her team.

Shepard leveled the assault cannon and fired, along with Wrex and Parker's people. The storm of superheated flechettes from the assault cannon spewed forth in an ugly red stream, alongside the blinding beam of the lance cannon, and several explosions rocked the room.

A few more grenades went off, and Parker's people sprayed the area again before all fell silent. "Cease fire. Wrex, check for survivors."

The krogan grunted, the smoking maw of the lance cannon bobbing slowly from side to side as he advanced, Tali and Alenko following in his wake, weapons ready. "Everyone's dead, I think."

Shepard stood, scowling. "Damn it, that didn't need to happen."

Liara looked sick again, taking in the torn forms of the asari littering the floor, or blasted apart atop their own consoles. "I.. I know some of these asari, Sara. They were acolytes of my mother, some of her more trusted advisers. Some were minor members of other families. The one who spoke was a very distant relative from our Lesser House family."

Shepard approached. "...they deliberately sacrificed themselves to blow up their computers. See if anything recoverable is left."

Tali moved forward, flinching as she gingerly levered a shattered asari corpse off of a console, and giving a slight shake at the purple blood spattered all over it. She tapped hesitantly at a haptic keyboard, and sighed. "They wiped everything, Commander. I think they blew it up just to make sure we couldn't salvage anything."

Garrus found one more console in one piece, but it too was devoid of data. The big tactical plot in the middle of the room was displaying the local battle-space, but a heavy data cable leading to a small room on the right had been severed.

She grimaced. "Tali, drones up. See if there's anything else waiting for us. Everyone else...search pattern. Keep in omni-tool contact."

Shepard and Liara headed to the southern doors, along with Garrus and Telanya. Wrex and Tali headed to the northern door, while Parker lead his team to the elevator that lead to the windows cut into the high walls of the chamber.

Alenko and Williams walked slowly towards the big window cut into one wall, looking out over an empty, acid spattered cavern. Huge doors cut into the far wall stood open, letting in snow and ice. A heavy metal wall bisected the cavern, partially disassembled and revealing only blackened rock from where some kind of ships had lifted off.

Alenko paled. "God, how many rachni would this cavern have held? Hundreds? Thousands?"

Williams shrugged. "As long as we don't have to fight the damned things, I could care less." She frowned as he gave her a sharp look. "What?"

He grimaced. "If they aren't here, Ash, the only other place they could be headed to is Port Hanshan...where the Normandy is." He triggered his comm. "Commander, it looks like a lot of the rachni you saw in the upper level were not routed to inside the base, but a chamber on the south face of the mountain. I can see the outskirts of Port Hanshan from here...and the cavern is empty. It's possible a rachni force is headed to the city."

In the corridor beyond, Shepard cursed. "Understood, LT. Keep searching." She clicked off, kicking open another doorway, revealing only an empty room with a medical bed.

And a chart on the wall of a turian. She stepped closer, examining it. "Saren, you fuck."

She set her omnitool to translating, and gazed around the room. It was spartan and simple, a blanket tossed on the floor by the bed. The omni beeped and she took in the translated notes on the chart.

*Severe cerebral damage. Ocular damage. Damage to anterior lungs, right arm, right knee, left shoulder. Severe infection. Biotic impact hematoma.*

*Cybernetic correction. Utilization of Ascension Protocol.*

She blinked. "Clear as mud."

She glanced over the room looking for other clues, but found nothing. She left, opening the door across the way, and found only a black jumpsuit and an empty weapons or armor locker. She scowled, when Liara's comm channel chimed. "Sara...I have found something."

Shepard nodded, leaving the room and passing several more doors before entering another corridor, one that lead back to the tactical room. Liara was standing in a doorway to yet another room, holding something in her hands.

Shepard stepped closer, and realized it was a black headdress of some kind. The room was a bedroom, with simple furnishings. A white fountain with stylized waves and a crescent moon carved into it's basin bubbled quietly along one wall, and a small bathroom could be seen through a doorway to the south.

Liara looked up. "This...is my mother's. She was given this upon her ascension to the position of High Lunarch." Her fingers carefully rubbed the black silk and embedded silver circlet, the hammered polished crescent moon gleaming in the bright white light. "And I do not see her armor, or her sword. I fear she is prepared for us."

Shepard gently touched Liara's shoulder. "Ready or not, Liara, we're going to stop her." She watched as Liara folded away the headdress and gently placed it in her own carrypak.

Wrex's voice sounded. "Found something bad, Shepard. You'd best get here."

Shepard cursed. "On my way." She turned and headed through the door, Liara following a moment later, and walked through the tactical center. Alenko and Williams joined them and they headed through the northern door, entering into another wide, open area. Several doors opened off of it, but Shepard's omni indicated Wrex was behind the northern set and she pushed through them.

Wrex stood in the middle of another sizable room. The floor was rubberized decking, and a large maintenance table covered in tools and info-pads took up one wall. Racks of weapons hung from the ceiling, and the far end of the room was dominated by a heavy security door, buckled and misshapen.

Wrex was next to a large charging station of some kind, with an angered expression on his face. "I was checking out the other rooms with Tali. Mostly computer banks, all smashed up. We were about done when her drone reported movement in here. I came in to see some kind of big battlesuit head through those doors. I tried to get them open, but someone warped them shut. They're too thick for me to blast through alone, and I didn't want to try to open them without backup anyway."

Liara was gazing at the table and the charging station in alarm. "Wrex...this battle suit. Was it pale yellow with silver trim?"

The krogan glanced at Liara. "...yeah. How did you know?"

Liara swallowed. "That is my mother's Paladin battle-armor. A mechanized battle suit that is the height of asari technology."

Shepard frowned. "Like a THERMOPYLAE battle suit, the ones we saw on Feros used by the Exogeni mercs?"

She shook her head. "No, Shepard. More like the heavy suits worn by salarian heavy infantry, fully automated with a powerful rail cannon and a up-sized warp blade."

Shepard's eyes narrowed. Liara was comparing the thing to salarian Shieldbreaker battle armor, mechanical exoskeletal suits that allowed a single warrior to crush entire infantry detachments or battle

armor units. In the close confines of this place, fighting a battlesuit would be worse than taking down a Colossus. "Damn it. Nothing for it. We'll have to take out that doorway."

She motioned everyone back, before nodding to Wrex. "Everyone fire on my mark. Mark!"

The room erupted with heavy weapons fire, the door crumpling under the impact, flying off its hinges with a hole melted through its center. The corridor beyond was large and rough hewn, steel grating sunk into the floor. Shepard and her team advanced, slowly.

Ahead, there was the sound of ship engines, and Shepard cursed. "Dammit, double time!" They ran ahead, Garrus falling back and unable to keep up, Tali's and Liara's drones flying on ahead.

Shepard came out of the tunnel first, weapon leveled, gasping as icy air hit her. There was a crude docking facility cut into the rock, and even as she watched, a turian light cruiser lifted off from the dockside, slowly moving away from the dock.

Garrus, finally emerging from the corridor, growled. "That's Saren's ship! We have to stop it!"

Shepard leveled her weapon at it, firing, but the shots pinged harmlessly off the kinetic barrier. With a pulse of energy, the ship accelerated away, arcing into the snow-riddled skies beyond.

She cursed, triggering her omnitool. "Shepard to the fleet, von Grath, anyone! Saren's ship is fleeing from Peak 13, heading south and low to the ground! I repeat, Saren's ship is escaping! Anyone respond!"

A crackle of static lashed across her omni, accompanied by a faint, sardonic voice. "Director Anolais here, Spectre. I still have local control of our GTS batteries. He will not escape."

She heaved in relief. With any luck, both Saren and Benezia would be on the ship, and get blown out of the sky. She was about to reply when a familiar voice cut into the conversation, her omni-tool shifting to red, reporting it had suffered a data intrusion.

"Ah, Shepard. I've been hoping you'd come by for a rematch. I doubt the primitive defenses of Port Hanshan can bring down my ship, given that my little invasion force has torn most of the city apart. But you and I have business to settle."

She snarled. "Saren. Seems like you got a little shot up in our last go round, fucker. You ready for round two?"

The turian's laughter was soft, mocking. "You've already lost this battle, monkey. Benezia has escaped, and soon enough ... well, you will see. I have something you should see, if you want to know why all of this is happening. Come to the lower levels, and let us see how far you are willing to go to stop me."

She grinned ferally. "I'm glad you're sticking around, asshole. I got a lot of people with me ready to wreck your shit."

There was no reply, and Shepard turned to face her team. "Let's move."

Garrus coughed. "Shepard, this *has* to be a trap. He could be bouncing the signal from his ship and running away right now."

She shrugged. "His ass isn't going to get past the dreadnaughts at the Ralx relay, and neither is his black ship, Garrus. If he's on the ship there's nothing we can do. We know for a fact Benezia was on it. We'll ... deal with her later. If he is here, I want him dead, mounted, and keelhailed back to the Citadel."

Garrus sighed, lifting his sniper. Ashley merely smirked. "Fuckin' A, skipper. I'm ready for it."

Shepard glanced at Liara, who was still staring out into the icy expanse beyond the docking bay.

"Liara?"

She started, then smiled weakly. "I am... fine. I just...felt a lingering sense of my mother, is all."

Shepard nodded, placing her hand on her shoulder. "Let's end this, and we can deal with her next."  
Liara nodded and followed, the team moving back down the corridor.

Below them, in a shallow docking bay, the narrow shape of an asari patrol boat hovered serenely. Benezia T'Soni let go of her meditation to conceal her biotic field, her eyes snapping open. "Find peace in the embrace of the Goddess, my love."

She triggered the engines of the small craft, sending it out into the swirling storm beyond.

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"Reform the lines! Reform the lines!"

General von Grath cursed, yet again, the sheer diabolical power that had shaped the rachni. His line had driven back several crazed assaults, each one getting closer and closer. There seemed to be no end to the pale tide of nightmare shapes, and once his HAMRHEAD tanks had run dry of missiles and HE rounds, his line had been forced back yet again, taking heavy casualties.

There'd been too many rachni to put down, and they'd finally torn through his first rank, chitinous claws carving open DACT armor like children unwrapping candy. He'd managed to hold, but only at the cost of a third of his remaining DACT units, and his men were utterly spent now.

A few dozen heavy weapons units from the shattered NDC had arrived, as well as a group of MAKO tanks and some light APC's from the Noverians, but they had only managed to stall the rachni advance, not stop it.

He was about to give orders to fall back into the city – knowing that it would be the death of hundreds of civilians if that was to happen – when a broken transmission came across his omnitool. He could barely make out Shepard's message, but he was heartened to know his crazy little soldier was still alive.

He was about to signal his comms tech to try to respond when there was a flash of gray on the horizon. He broke off, gazing up into the sky. Above, there was a single turian cruiser rising from the mountain peak where Saren was supposedly dug in at. Even as he watched, the GTS batteries – still in Noverian control – swiveled ponderously on their turreted towers high above the outer wall, and opened up, blossoms of smoke obscuring them as the missiles soared away.

The ship swerved, banking hard left and then right to avoid the first salvo, but the second pack of missiles lanced out straight and true. The ship was hit hard, most of its starboard winglike structure blown off, and thick black smoke enveloped it as it began to angle downwards, almost directly towards them.

Von Grath grinned. "All units, full auto, fire everything!" If he could keep the damnable rachni pinned in place a few seconds more...

His marines roared and opened up. Grenades, plasma bolts, missiles, hundreds of rounds lanced out. The DACT opened up with their assault cannons, firing as fast as they could, triggering mini-missile systems if they had them. The few AIS troopers with biotics also let loose, shining bolts of blue or flares of warfire smashing into the rachni trying to tear their way into the city.

With a titanic explosion of flame and shock, the turian ship crashed nearly directly into the mass of rachni. Hundreds were liquified or blasted down, more shredded by shrapnel. A few of the GTS missiles had been trailing the falling vessel and slammed into the ground, the detonations incinerating even more of the bugs.

His tired troops cheered, even as a second set of explosions rocked the hull, sending more rachni to

their fiery graves. The remaining rachni, blocked by the hull of the ship, shrieked in denied menace, but were blocked by raging plasma fires pouring out of the shattered ship.

Von Grath lifted his minigun, smirking. "Well, boys, that's what I call an explosive entrance." He gave the ship a careful examination, noting the turian glyphs inscribed on one wing. His omnitool gave the rough translation of "Talon's Justice".

He queried the term in his omnitool, and smiled at the answer. He tapped his comm-link. "Major Laxar. It seems Saren tried to cut and run, but the Noverian ground defenses shot him down. Now we know why the bastard was so intent on storming their ground defense center."

The voice of his XO came across the comm-link. "Yes, sir. Orders?"

Von Grath glanced around. Many of his marines were dead and wounded, many more exhausted. There were still rachni, but the ship's wreckage denied them any easy entrance to the city, and the crash landing had crushed or killed many of them. "Set the DACT in defensive positions, get the marines back to the fight at the Tower. If you can break loose any vehicles from the garage, bring them here to the tunnel entrance."

Von Grath clicked off, motioning to his team of DACT bodyguards. "Let's check the ship out. Put down any rachni you see. Saren or Benezia may be aboard...be cautious."

His DACT team nodded, and was about to move out when a blast of warp fire blew the docking hatch off its hinges. Von Grath watched in awe as the slender, elegant shape of a Royal Paladin battle suit emerged nearly unharmed from the broken wreck of the Talon's Justice, leaping from the slanted hull to land lightly upon the ground.

Von Grath triggered his omnishield. "Marines, stay back. This foe is beyond you." He moved his battlesuit, ahead, his heart hammering in his chest.

He knew very well the power of the asari war machine in front of him, having seen one fight at the pirate raids on the asari colony of Cyone almost five years back. He'd knew he had little chance of winning against it, his THERMOPYLAE would not even withstand a single shot from the Adept rail cannon mounted on the suit's shoulder.

The battlesuit angled as he approached, lifting its heavy warp sword and igniting it in a blaze of blue. Von Grath was confused, until he saw the sparks and smoke drifting from the long shape of the rail cannon on the thing's shoulder. Its heaviest weapon was out of commission.

His face split into a fierce grin. He could win this. "At last, a real challenge." He lifted his minigun, firing a long burst at the Paladin.

It dodged to one side, moving almost like a living being, pale yellow limbs bringing it closer and closer. He took the first swing of the heavy warp blade on his omnishield, grimacing as alarms blared in his cockpit about energy damage.

Dropping the minigun rifle, he triggered the omnispear in the mech's left forearm, slashing out at his enemy. The orange energy blade scored a shallow slash against the yellow armor, gray tinted omnigel seeping like blood from the cut.

His suit staggered as he barely blocked another swing, warp energy from the sword cascading down the limbs of his own battle suit. He smelled smoke and burning plastic from somewhere, as one of his anterior energy supplies blew out.

He stepped back, triggering his speakers. "Lady Benezia, you will surrender yourself to our forces. You do not need to die here...but dead or alive, you are coming with me.

The answering voice was a whisper, cool and collected. "I am not the one who will die here, human." With a smooth lunge, the Paladin battle suit leapt forward, the glittering blue blade descending faster than he could respond.

Agony rang out across his body as the sword slammed into the armor's right arm, metal deforming and melting under the power of the blow. His omnishield flickered and died as his suit's right arm was severed, the blow high up enough on the mech to take his own right hand with it, blood sizzling as warfire ate into his flesh.

With an enraged yell his marines opened fire, the small-caliber rounds pinging harmlessly away from the suit's kinetic barriers. It distracted the pilot long enough for von Grath to grit his teeth against the pain and with his left arm, drive home his own omnispear towards the thing's knee.

Luck or fate conspired with him. The suit ducked, avoiding a poorly aimed missile, and caught the omni-spear's tip on the upper thigh rather than the knee, the blow cutting through layers of myomer and armor and sending the suit staggering back off balance. Von Grath withdrew his weapon and plunged it forward again, the weapon clanging hard against the hastily lifted warp blade that barely parried it.

Spots swam in his vision, his suit's medical sensors flashing red. Ice and deathly cold seeped into his cockpit. The agony from his missing hand traveled up his arm, and he realized distantly he was starting to go into shock. He smiled, managing to block a wide slash from the Paladin's warp sword with his spear, grimacing as the weapon's energy system overloaded from the contact and detonated, leaving him weaponless.

He had one last card to play, and he did so, triggering the light GTS missile rack on his right shoulder, the four-missile box popping open and disgorging its contents, point blank, into the enemy.

He felt the explosion rock his own suit, sending it to the ground with a ponderous crash, and the flare of heat as something in front of him detonated. The spots of darkness were clumping together now, as the alarms in his ear began to fade.

"Get his suit open! Medic, get over here! Pull him back and keep defensive fire on the rachni!" He heard the booming tenor of Major Laxar shouting orders, and he coughed.

"Laxar. Is the witch dead?" His voice sounded damnably weak. Intolerable.

The major's voice reached his ears, even as he felt many hands lift his suit and begin carrying him away. "Yes, sir. You blew the bitch's entire upper half off. We'll finish the fight sir, you just rest."

A flicker of a smile crossed his features once more. "...beat a Paladin with a damned omnispear and a few missiles...let's see...old Ahern match...that..."

Darkness claimed him.

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## Chapter 102: Chapter 93 : Saren, Unleashed

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*A/N: I've written this fight a dozen times, and to my overly picky mind it still isn't quite right. Saren died with insulting ease in the game, even on insanity. This was supposed to be the premier Spectre in all of the galaxy, with twenty years experience and top of the line equipment, but we never see him use any real Spectre tricks. We never see the combat power. It's entirely possible to beat him with a pistol toting engineer, a civilian asari nerd, and a quarian teenager.*

*Embarassing. Benezia on insanity puts up way more of a fight, especially if you don't rely on cheese and keep her knocked down.*

*Sovereign's upgrades, to turn him into mecha-Saren, didn't make a lot of sense either. About the only part I really liked about the scene was that you could talk him into shooting himself, but wasn't the whole point of the cybernetics to erase his doubts and make him more dependable? He waits until the last possible second to realize that, maybe, his plan is a Bad Idea and to man up?*

*Lunacy.*

*I am sure the fight will not rub some people the right way, those who want to see Shepard whup ass and chew bubblegum. But Shepard is (at this point) just a human biotic, not a bionetic killing machine with four billion credits worth of tech. Her team has been worn down, shot up, and their nerves are starting to go. Saren planned the best possible ambush he could, and what happens after, well...*

*Let's just say that events are happening this way for a reason. I look forward to feedback (positive, negative, normative) and of course PM's.*

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Warp fire exploded in all directions, searing and melting the expensive marble flooring, but Anolais merely flipped aside nimbly, landing next to the asari cultist who was throwing it. With a lightning fast kick, he knocked the pistol out of her hands, his own submachine gun coming up before she could react.

He put a short burst into her, and his eyes caught motion from the right. Without even looking his aim shifted, two more short bursts erupting from his weapon, catching the oncoming asari who had sprung from cover. Both fell down, tumbling and broken from the rounds he'd put through their faces.

A few more asari were still coming in through the broken windows, even as the firefight outside the tower increased in violence. Two attempted to close with Vealen, but he dodged them effortlessly, laughing as they tried and failed to land biotic punches on his flickering form. He dived between them, omniblades sliding from his outstretched arms to slash at the asari's unprotected throats, coming up in a roll with his hands already drawing his pistols. Shots rang out, sending three more blue aliens to the floor with holes in their foreheads, even as the two behind him slumped to the ground in death.

Two more of the asari were trying to pin down Vesais, who was flipping in and out of cover, often bounding away with one hand as he fired with the other. He put a round into one of the asari's throats, rolled out of the way of the answering ball of warpfire, and his right foot spun up in a kick, breaking the second cultist's concentration. His pistol fired twice, blowing gory holes in her chest, and she fell with a confused, stunned look in her eyes as he made the sign of the Wheel over her dying form with his smoking pistol.

Another asari flung warpfire at Tuanis, who merely sidestepped with alacrity. His hands flickered, monomolecular knives flashing briefly in the light of the fires in the lobby before burying themselves in the asari's eyesockets. He turned dismissively away, pausing only to flick another knife into a feebly moving asari moaning on the ground, and Anolais relaxed his grip on his weapon as he could see nor feel any more of the asari cultists.

His gaze flickered from point to point rapidly, taking in the carnage. The asari had hit the tower hard, and the battle in the lobby had gone poorly for the NDC. It had only been the arrival of Anolais and his old STG team that had stopped the tide, and that had cost him six of his closest friends.

His few remaining forces – salarians, all – were down to less than ten. He'd grown up with them, from the time he was a newt on the warm shores of Mannovai, cavorting about the estates of his clan, through his years in the salarian military and later the STG. These were his battle brothers, bound tighter than blood or names. He'd bled with them, crowed in delight as they were chosen to breed, cackled in glee as their first hatchings came into the world.

He'd cried alongside them when their family dalatrasses or sisters had died, and had only turned away from their close bonds when the call of business beckoned louder than that of battle and service to the family. Even then, as more years had passed, he'd slowly lured them to his side, until most of his closest friends and allies stood in this very room.

Some living, some dead.

The asari assaulting his tower were formidable foes. Completely fearless, with biotics that made up for their lack of heavy weapons or armor, they'd torn his makeshift force of mechs and security turrets in the plaza to pieces. He'd retaliated with grenade fire from his own units, of course, which evened the odds, but more and more of the lunatics had swarmed the Tower, either breaking off from other objectives or being pushed back by the human marines in his city.

His people had hurled the cultists back, but it wasn't an optimal match-up. Salarian speed and reactions were far superior to asari, and he could shoot their eyes out from a hundred feet away with either hand, but there were just too many of them, and their biotics meant that even one good hit was all it took to reduce a salarian soldier to a broken body on the floor.

He holstered his machine pistol, and reloaded his Cobra rifle, noting with faint dismay that he was nearly out of grenades. He chuckled to himself as he remembered the bitter words of the krogan battlemaster, an anomaly among his kind, who'd trained briefly with the STG.

*"A salarian without grenades is about as useful as a batarian rape counselor."*

*What was that odd krogan's name? Kurok? Something like that.*

He winced as he shifted his weight, walking up the stairs towards the rest of his squad. He'd been hit hard by a biotic throw, and more than once had only escaped being incinerated by warpfire by desperate acrobatic leaps or dodges. He wasn't young any more, and such things were taxing on his aging body. Too many years in nice suits in well-appointed boardrooms had softened him, it seemed.

He checked his omnitool, hoping to see news about the battle in the city, but the comms networks were still jammed solid. He'd gotten a static-filled transmission just before the last firefight, something about the geth fleet in orbit finally being defeated, but nothing from that bombastic cloaca of a human general, and nothing from Major Matsuo.

He wasted a moment hoping she wasn't dead, before his mind snapped to other, more important matters. His wandering thoughts were not a good sign, the first warning of battle exhaustion.

Glancing over to the battered form of Vesais Dasso, he finally spoke "We can't hold here, Vesais. We don't have the numbers, and the humans are better suited to a defensive fight anyway. Have everyone fall back to the mid-tower staging area."

The other salarian nodded, his dark skin gleaming in the dim lights of the lobby. The lobby was a burning wreck now, the proud artwork shattered, the high windows blown out. Asari and salarian bodies littered the scorched and seared marble floors, purple and green blood mingling as it dripped from ruined leather couches and stained the fountains. "As you wish, Bel."

The salarians all looked up at the sound of footsteps, and Anolais took in the beaten form of Captain Jaocb Taylor. The human was almost grossly huge, bulgy with slabs of muscle now visible with his armor removed. His shoulder was swathed in large white bandages, and his undershirt stained with his blood. He'd been heavily wounded in the initial assault, and the salarians had managed to drag his heavy form out of the line of fire, leaving him under cover to coordinate his unit with his omni-tool.

"I got my people tucked in on the outside of the buildings, Director. I had to shift the last of our armor units to deal with the geth, but they were running out of ammo anyway. Unless von Grath can shift

some more marines our way, what you see is what you got. That last fight was hopefully the last of them...might be time to pull out of this tower, while you can."

Anolais nodded at the dark-skinned human officer. "That is not an option. We cannot let the Tower fall, Captain. Central Processing is tied into the financial markets on a dozen key worlds. If the geth were to gain access there is no telling what kind of havoc they could wreak. And Central Processing is now where the ground defenses and city systems are being handled. If it is taken, the protective field over the city will fall, and the weather will kill everything above ground if the rachni don't."

Taylor gave a weary nod. "We know the stakes. Didn't know you kept all your eggs in *this* basket, but I get you. We'll find a way to hold here. The SA isn't going to cut and run when civilians are in the line of fire. Just pull your people back and let us hold the lobby."

Anolais glanced at his omnitool, and nodded. "That was indeed our plan. We will withdraw to the tenth floor, and detonate the elevators leading up. They will have to come up the emergency staircase, or else land assault shuttles in the docking bay on floor twenty, and the automated defenses can see anything up to a frigate off. The lobby has no decent cover, Captain, but if you wish to blow out a wall and set your remaining vehicles inside, feel free."

His voice dipped bitterly. "I'll be billing damages to the SA anyway, after all."

Taylor laughed, and nodded. "Good luck getting your money, sir. My people will be on comm channel nine if you need to coordinate." The captain turned away, back to the handful of marines and Commissars in the corner of the lobby, and Anolais turned to his team.

"Let us move."

The trip up to the tenth floor was done in silence, each of the salarians lost in their own thoughts, nursing bruises, trying to let their bodies recover from the fight. None of them had fired a weapon in anger in over a decade, and coming down off the natural combat high the salarian biology imposed on them left them trembling and disoriented.

Anolais clamped down on his shakes, as the elevator opened onto the tenth floor. Here, the elevators shifted, and the large space beyond did double duty as a security staging area and command center for the tower's normal security forces. A few dozen injured NDC guardsmen were laid out on the floor, tended to by a mere handful of medical techs. At least a few of the mercs that comprised his military had not bolted and ran when the asari came, refusing Major Matsuo's withdrawal orders to buy time for any civilians left in the tower to withdraw to the upper floors.

Anolais supposed they deserved a bonus on their next check, assuming they didn't die of their wounds. He crossed the area, picking his way around the wounded, coming to the security desk in the middle of the room, where the bloody but unbowed form of Major Vurthex stood. Vurthex, a turian with fifty years in the turian military, was the tower's security director. It was no surprise to Anolais to find him still stubbornly at his post, but the old soldier looked as if he'd been in some ugly firefights. "Status, Major."

The turian's flanged voice was tired. "Six rigged air-cars full of explosives hit the upper docking area, sir. After that, some more showed up, stuffed full of asari cultists. We managed to stop them from breaking through, and I blew up a plasma conduit to sear the bay clean of invaders. That's robbed power from the northern anti-air defense guns, but seeing as they weren't doing a lot of spirits-damned good right now, that's not a big deal."

He tapped a haptic screen, which flickered irregularly, the color jumping from blue to orange and then to green. "Computer systems are holding, although the geth have made enough inroads into our systems to shut down automated defenses. Comms are still working, but the storm topside is getting worse and

we have lost contact with the docks, Central Bank, the Sirta Building, the Nova Building, and our people at Emergency Central."

Anolais took this in with fixed attention. "Any communications from the human military?"

Vurhtex sighed. "According to the marines, the ship you brought down with the city GTS array had Lady Benezia aboard. She managed to survive the crash, but got killed fighting the human general in some kind of one-on-one power armor duel. The general is alive but out of the fight, which has made the humans go from vakar to pyjaks in terms of morale. Typical monkeys."

Anolais found racism a waste of time, but did not comment. "And the space forces?"

Vurthex checked his panel again. "I think the fighting up there is done, sir. The last geth were destroyed about the time the last asari assault hit the tower. They've begun throwing missiles as the rachni outside the city, trying to keep them from breaking back through the tunnel."

Anolais gave a thin smile at that. "Finally, any word from Commander Shepard, or Peak 15?"

Vurthex shook his head. "Peak 15 has been silent the entire time. And aside from that one fragmentary transmission that got out from the Commander, we have heard nothing. Li and the other mechanics are about done with some rapid repair to the icecrawler that was in for maintenance, they have it about ready to go if you want to send more soldiers that direction."

Anolais considered it. "Assuming we can contact them, alert the Alliance marines to that possibility. I'm not sending any of my own people into a fight between Saren and the Butcher. What is our status here, Major?"

Vurthex shrugged. "I have three squads of the NDC Guard that are ... mobile. All my krogan ran off to get killed fighting rachni, and the rest of my squads are so banged up as to be useless. Maybe twenty, twenty five effectives?" He rubbed his mandible. "We're about out of medigel, most of us are on our last ammo block, and literally everyone is wounded."

Anolais heard the rumble of explosives, as his team blew the elevators behind him. "We'll hold here, then. Humans marines are in the lobby, to fend off any more asari or geth assaults, but hopefully that was the last of the crazy tramps. Benezia is dead, and if Saren is still at this Peak 13, then it is up to the Butcher to finish him off."

Vurthex nodded. "Yes, Director. There's not much on this level, but there's some restrooms and a lounge if your people need a sitdown."

Anolais managed a weak laugh. "Yes, that would be useful, Major. Instruct your squads to secure the emergency stairwells, and be ready to fall back to Central Processing if we have to." Anolais stepped away, feeling his body starting to shut down from overexertion. He considered using a stimulant tab, but he hated using such things, and now was not the time. He entered the lounge, and sat almost bonelessly on a couch in the corner, letting the adrenaline drain out of him.

His omni beeped, and he answered. "Anolais here."

Captain Taylor's weary voice sounded. "Sir, this is Taylor. Three APCs and a buncha marines just showed up here at the Tower. Looks like the geth and asari have all been killed off, but we're going to hold position until I get formal word. General von Grath's comm adjutant is here, asking if you have any updates on Commander Shepard."

Anolais exhaled slowly. "No, I do not. When I do I will inform you."

"Understood, Director. Taylor out." With a flicker, the omnitool deactivated, and Anolais leaned back against the couch.

*The investors will probably abandon the project, he thought. Too much loss, too much visibility on our work here. The Wheel turns as it will, but I cannot afford to have too much exposure cast on the Alteration Framework, and there's too much data on it here. We'll have to blow up the labs...the delay will set us back years.*

*The dalatrass will be furious.*

Anolais found that, for once, he no longer cared. He tapped a series of controls on his omni-tool, and then leaned back into the cushions.

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The lift bottomed out, the doors sliding open with a hiss of hydraulics. Icy air seeped in from the corridor beyond, tainted with foul, rancid scents. Shepard squared her shoulders and lifted the rotary assault cannon, letting her nerves settle. "Everybody ready for this?"

Garrus and Telanya nodded, followed by Liara, then Tali. Wrex shifted the lance cannon in his hands and grunted. "I'd like some jaaki first, actually."

She smiled, then turned to Lieutenant Parker. "Lieutenant, this is likely to get real, real ugly. Saren is a nasty customer in a fight, and he'll probably have backup. If you can, keep your people back and blast him from a distance."

The human nodded. "You won't get an argument from me. Let's just get this over with, so we can get back to the city."

Shepard lead the way out, the corridor beyond paneled in thick slats of steel over bare rock. The floor was more of the grated metal walkways she'd seen in the upper levels, stained and discolored here and there with black splotches.

The passage ran downwards, sloping gently, and Shepard found herself gripping the heavy weapon in her hands more and more tightly as they moved along. Her breath frosted the air in front of her as she advanced slowly ahead, eyes flicking back and forth, seeking targets.

They came at last, after several minutes of silent walking, to a vast, heavy security door, twice as wide as Wrex and deeply imprinted with a circular indentation. Shepard steeled herself and pushed on the doors, which swung open with surprising ease, the steel doors parting to reveal the room beyond.

If the other rooms had been shaped and carved from small caverns, this one had been sliced right out of the rock. The walls were all hard right angles, mirror smooth, the rock a uniform black color that absorbed all the light from the lamps mounted high above. A steel wall pierced with a heavy airlock of sorts was visible in the distance, while racks mounted on the walls held more empty geth bodies, all of them staring straight ahead.

Crates loomed here and there, some broken open to reveal weapons or other equipment, others still shut. Two dead asari were on the floor, their throats torn out by claws of some kind. Against one wall, more of the low-slung buildings seen elsewhere were present, but the space was mostly dominated by a huge, circular pit, sixty feet across. A low wall surrounded it, and the top covered by a lattice-work of metal beams and plates of some transparent metal.

Shepard slowly approached it, peering down. At the bottom, in a shallow bowl of metal, a huge insectile creature lay against the floor. Yellow ichor stained it's flanks, which moved shallowly, and long tentacles waved feebly.

Wrex spat. "Rachni queen. Saren's even crazier than I thought. A queen could produce thousands of her brood in a few weeks, and millions given enough time, Shepard." He lifted his lance cannon meaningfully, but Shepard held up a hand.

"We can exterminate bugs later, Wrex. After Saren. Stick together, everyone...let's see what's in the buildings before we go through that big ass airlock."

The first of the buildings had a heavy security door, but it was ajar, stained with splashes of asari blood. Shepard pushed it all the way open with the barrel of her gun, recoiling slightly from the scent of rot from within.

The room was high and wide – the low-ceiling of the outer building only an entry way, it seemed. The floor sloped downwards sharply after a few feet, and against the far wall were three large plinths. Strange arches of metal and machinery pierced three piles of rotting, decaying flesh.

It took Shepard a moment to realize that these things were rachni of some kind, and that they were still alive. Each one was embedded with black-lit cybernetics, lit from within with a faint blue glow. Their claws and tentacles had been sheared off, capped with crude blunted tubes of metal, while computer readouts and tubes of thick gray paste pumped in and out of each one.

Alenko stared at them, aghast, and Tali shuddered. Only Garrus found his voice. "What in the spirits are they?"

Liara walked over to a long bank of computer consoles, tapping a control. "...they are queens, of a sort, it seems. They are hooked to some kind of .. machinery that controls them, and through them, the rachni soldiers." Liara's gaze narrowed as she read the asari language on the computer screens in front of her. "Shepard, they are ... slaves. Saren was using them like remote controls."

Shepard nodded. "Rachni or no, nothing deserves to suffer like that. Everyone out." She waited until the team was behind her before opening up with the rotary cannon, putting a long burst into each of the corrupted husks before her.

They gave weak shrieks, even as the machines transfixing them sparked and caught fire, the tubes shattering and spilling foul smelling paste onto the ground. With another burst of fire, she tore into the computer systems on the wall, shattering data banks and blowing consoles apart.

Alenko glanced up as she exited. "Tali says the other rooms are more storage, according to her drones, commander. All that remains is the airlock."

Shepard nodded, cycling the weapon in her hands. "Lovely. Here we go, people."

Shepard lead, followed by Liara, Garrus, and Telanya. Alenko followed, Wrex looming over him, Tali and Ashley trailing behind with weapons held stiffly. Parker's team split in two, each setting up in what cover was available, weapons trained on the airlock.

Shepard reached the controls, and didn't hesitate as she triggered them. A blaring alarm was heard, from somewhere in the base, and the doors cracked open ponderously, warm air rushing out.

The room revealed was a scene of chaos. Dozens of mangled, twisted forms hung within tubes of green liquid, stacked six and seven high. Some were krogan, others turian, and still others so mangled that their race couldn't be made out. Hulking computer banks took up space along the walls, haptic screens displaying incomprehensible diagrams of some sort of cross between a krogan and a rachni.

The room was smaller than the one they stood in, dominated by the long, proud form of a Prothean Beacon, this one glowing a pale blue rather than green. Another beacon sat in pieces on the floor, disassembled with long, ugly melted sections carved into it's length.

A dozen asari and two or three turians were on the ground, dead, torn apart. Sitting on top of a table, cradling a sniper rifle, was the silver and black armored form of Saren Arterius.

Shepard's eyes narrowed, leveling the assault cannon at him. "Saren."

The turian looked up. His once normal gaze was gone, his eyes now nothing more than blue pits in his face. Traceries of black circuitry and corruption ate at his plating, his neck, and his mandible. His armor had tubes of gray and white slotted into it in several places, and blue radiance flickered from his torso and legs. A target visor, much like Garrus wore, was flush against his left eye.

"Ah, Commander Shepard. Welcome to the end of life."

She snorted, as Wrex sighted in his own lance cannon on the turian. "Fucking spare me the evil speech. You can throw down your weapons and surrender or I can blow your goddamned head off. I'd prefer the latter."

Saren set his sniper rifle down, slowly, on the table next to him. "I have always found it amusing how people think they have the upper hand when it comes to facing me. I've done in thousands of two-bit batarian thugs, idiotic human meatheads, uppity salarians, and over-bold krogan. And you think a pair of assault weapons is supposed to impress me, Shepard?"

His mandibles flickered. "You continue to disappoint."

She snarled, and fired the assault cannon. The blast tore through Saren, and the image of him shattered into haptic static, projected by a tiny device on the table. She cursed, turning, and then the lights in the cavern went dark all at once.

"Time to die, monkey." His voice came from behind, and turned, tangling with Wrex in the doorway.

The darkness was rent by a blast of red light, and the pained scream of Ashley as she fell, her sniper rifle blasted into a molten splash that hit her in the chest and cascaded over her legs. She rolled, the ballistic cloth of her underarmor catching fire, even as Tali's drones shot into the air, flaring with light to counter the darkness of the cave.

Saren leapt down from atop one of the low buildings, landing directly behind Alenko and Tali. Alenko, who had whirled to aid Ashley, was caught flat-footed by Saren's brutal biotic backhand. His jaw shattered, teeth spilling from his mouth, and he flew backwards, landing in a broken heap against the south wall. Tali backed away, firing her shotgun, the bright arching lighting coruscating around a biotic shell of energy. A moment later a biotic throw hit her, picking her small form up and smashing it viciously against a stack of crates. Tali's scream was choked off and the sound of bones snapping was audible even from where Shepard stood.

Parker's men opened fire, and the turian spun and dodged, his armor suddenly igniting with some form of mass effect jets, letting him leap away. His hand came up with his pistol, putting a shot into each of Tali's drones, casting the room into darkness again.

Garrus was kneeling on the floor, hands flying over his omnitool, while Telanya and Liara were holding up biotic barriers, trying to cover the team, the faint blue light casting shadows everywhere, revealing nothing. Shepard and Wrex hustled down from the entryway, the lights at the end of their weapons that had snapped on automatically carving slashes into the darkness that only made them targets.

Shepard cursed herself for not bringing her helmet, with its infrared vision mode. "Get to cover! Someone get to Tali!"

Garrus snarled, and triggered a program from his omnitool. Two dozen tiny spots of light leapt out, spinning and dancing erratically through the air, then pulsed with bright light, casting the entire chamber in visibility again. Even as he did so, though, he fell, a heavy explosion rocking his position and tearing his armor apart. Saren had alighted on a shelf of rock almost thirty feet up, and even as the lights came on he shifted the aim of his blocky sniper rifle, firing a second time with a deafening bang.

Shepard screamed as the round hit the ground between Liara and Telanya, sending both asari flying.

Telanya rolled to a stop against a crate, groaning, but Liara fell heavily against the queen's pit, unmoving, her armor smouldering.

Saren ejected the round from his sniper rifle. "That's four down. Shall we go for five, monkey?"

She swung the assault cannon up, firing, spraying the fire in long streams to try and pin him down. He jumped away, reaching for something on his belt, and flung it at her. A flash of blinding light erupted from the stun grenade, and she dropped the heavy gun, focusing on her hearing and pulling her ODIN.

Wrex roared, and she heard the firing of the lance cannon. Then there was a sound of an explosion, and Parker screaming for cover fire. She blinked spots out of her eyes, ducking down behind a table she could barely see, and shouted. "Wrex!"

There was no answer, and a moment later screams erupted from Parker's position. She blinked again, cursing her stupidity in not wearing a helmet, and squinted, managing to make out the figure of Saren landing in an explosive flash among Parker's men. One hand lifted his pistol, firing several times, as the other extended his omnitool, cruel jets of plasma fire spraying over the security team.

Several fell instantly, one firing off his heavy weapon in a spray of random bolts that did nothing but blow a big hole in the lattice-work containing the rachni queen. Metal sprayed as a segment of the pit's wall collapsed, and Saren sneered, executing the man with a second shot. Saren turned away after putting a shot through Parker's youthful face, the round blowing most of the man's head off, and gave a quiet, mocking laugh. "This, *this* is the best you can do?"

Shepard snarled, rushing into a biotic charge. She slammed into him, but his barrier held, and she lifted the ODIN. With a snarl he triggered his own biotics, and she felt a pull wrench her weapon out of her hand before she could anchor herself. In the split second while she was still in biotic cooldown from her charge, with her barrier down, Saren kicked her, sending her sprawling to the ground. She rolled, reaching for her pistol, but a booted turian foot stamped on her wrist, weighted with enough biotic force to snap it.

She managed not to scream out, even as Saren kicked her over. "Pathetic. Fifteen of you, and you can't even defeat one turian. You are indeed an apt pupil of that failure Anderson."

She spat defiance, stumbling to her feet, summoning her biotics, lashing out with warpfire. He deflected it almost mockingly, his barriers finally flickering and dying, but still strong enough to turn away her attack. He flicked his mandibles, holstering his pistol. "Defiant to the last, I see. Let's bring things down to your own level, monkey."

His fist moved, catching her under the chin, flooding her mouth with blood. He blocked her return kick, his hand coming around in a biotic enhanced punch that crumpled her armor. She grunted, slamming her fist against his face, but he barely moved, his baritone laughter mocking. He parried a second punch with lightning speed, catching her arm in a block she didn't recognize, and his foot lashed out, crashing against her knee and depriving her of her balance.

She staggered back, and triggered her omnitool, sending darts of electrical energy into his armor. He snarled, even as sparks of energy raged over his form, and drove his own knee into her side, his armor crunching against hers. A blade of some kind popped out when it impacted, lancing into her side, drawing a scream from her as it parted a rib and slashed her insides. He pushed her down and away, shaking his head, and kicked her in the head, filling her vision with stars. She rolled to one side, her blurred sight taking in her allies.

Wrex lay in a blackened circle, smoking. Garrus was crumpled against a broken crate, his armor broken and his visor shattered, his sniper rifle laying on the ground. Alenko was barely moving, all of Parker's team lay dead or dying behind Shepard, and Tali was unmoving. Liara shakily came to her feet, ugly

burns along the left side of face, her left eye shut. She managed to generate a weak biotic spurt of warpfire, but it did little more than scorch Saren's armor. He pulled out his pistol, firing, the shot hitting her in the hip, sending her to the ground a second time, this time screaming in pain.

"It's over, Shepard." With a look of smug glee, he kicked her over again, wrenching her Revenant machine gun from her back and extending its barrel. "Ah, good, you brought your Revenant, the one you tried to kill me with. Surely you'll appreciate the irony of your demise, no?"

The sound of a lance cannon firing shattered the air, the blast striking Saren in the back and sending him flying. Williams had crawled to where Wrex had fallen, her ravaged legs dragging behind her, and managed to get her hands around the lance cannon. "Appreciate THAT, you murdering fuck!"

The turian groaned, a clean hole punched completely through his chest. Blood, thick and blue, poured from the wound, but blue wires threaded slowly across the hole, linking with one another. Shepard crawled away, grabbing her ODIN as she did so, extending it to autofire mode.

The turian began to stand, and Shepard opened fire. Three more craters appeared in Saren's broad back, blasting away chunks of armor and whatever kind of jump pack he had on his back. With a roar, Saren turned, biotic energy liming his form as he raised one hand to unleash his power on her.

A beam of plasma lanced out, blowing off his clenched fist, as Telanya leaned up against the crate she'd landed against, her Spear of Athame rifle glowing as she fired again. Tali had managed to tap her omnitool, her drones springing back into life, micromissiles flashing out to detonate against Saren's armor.

He was sent skidding back by the explosions, tumbling from his feet, his pistol flying away. A trail of blue blood had smeared along the floor as he passed, and he crashed heavily into the wall, glowing blue eyes fading slightly. Shepard fired again, and again, as did Telanya, and Williams, and now Alenko, leveling his assault rifle from where he'd managed to regain his feet.

Bullets and plasma blasts rained against his form, before the howl of the lance cannon thundered again, blowing Saren's chest open. With a final shudder the turian slumped against the wall, and Shepard gave a shuddering exhalation.

"...jesus...fuck." Williams voice was disbelieving and in pain, her armor a wrecked cage on her body. Melted metal had splashed her, searing burns down to her right cheek and barely missing her eye. "...almost...killed us all."

Telanya had dropped her rifle, and staggered weakly over to where Garrus was, turning him over and checking his vitals. Shepard pulled herself to her feet, grimacing at the pain in her wrist, and glanced over herself. Her side was bleeding freely, her ribs felt broken from his damned kicks, and her vision was still bleary.

She stumbled over to Liara, wincing as she saw her wounds. "Liara..."

The asari gave a whimper of pain. "I am...alive, Sara." She pressed her hands to her hip, purple blood welling from beneath them, and Shepard reached for her omnigel. "Just...stay still."

Alenko gave a weak shudder, spitting out blood, and shook his head. He held his jaw in pain, finally tapping out a message on his omni-tool. "Saren broke my jaw. Other than that I am okay. Are any of Parker's people alive?"

Wrex finally stirred. His armor had been cooked, part of it blasted into his sturdy frame, but he sat up, growling. "Is he dead?"

Shepard nodded weakly, and went to check on Tali. There was a gash in her suit along the thigh, and flashing warning messages on her omnitool. Shepard slathered omnigel over the breach, injected some

medigel, and hoped that there was an intact hospital at Port Hanshan with isolation facilities.

"Tali's..got a suit breech, and broken bones. We need to .. get back topside."

Wrex levered himself up slowly, bulbous eyes glancing around. "And the rachni?"

Shepard shrugged. "Fry the goddamned thing for all I care, Wrex." She turned back to check Parker's people, gesturing weakly to Williams. "Make sure Saren is dead." The female marine, just now back on her feet, nodded, drawing her shotgun.

She limped over to the corpse. Her left leg was a mass of burned armor and seeping blood, where the melted metal of her sniper rifle had splashed and ate through the ceramic plating. She winced against the pain, and grunted, unshipping her shotgun from her lower back. "This is for Nirali." She fired, once. "For Jackson."

She fired, a second time, tearing a gaping segment of the turian's battered face away.

"For Eden Prime." A final shot echoed in the chamber, and Williams stepped away. "If he wasn't dead before, the son of a bitch is now."

Even as she spoke, there was a grinding sound from behind her. Shepard, Wrex, Williams and Telanya all reacted at one, lifting their weapons.

Saren's broken body did not move, but blue radiance crackled along its length, searing flesh. Bubbles of energy wafted up as the corpse jerked, spasming, before a cold voice rasped out.

"Insects. You smash my puppets, and think you have turned aside your doom. You have only sealed your fate." There was a lash of something static, a buzzing that filled the air. Telanya shook, nerveless fingers dropping her rifle, as Alenko and Shepard both howled in agony, blood running from their noses. Wrex clutched his own head, Liara's eyes rolled in their sockets and she collapsed, and Williams could barely think, the buzzing ...

She recognized it. The sound she'd heard on Eden Prime. Only stronger. It was burrowing into her head, making her body shake and weaken. It dug into her very soul, and stammering prayers slipped through her lips as she fell to one knee. The voice spoke again, Saren's broken form somehow producing it, the blue light coruscating through his corpse growing too bright to look at. "**Die...**"

The sound grew to a shattering crescendo, sowing agony across her body. Williams felt blood seeping from her nose, and coughed helplessly, her vision blurry.

A second sound erupted into the air, another buzzing, but this one harmonic, almost crystalline in its sound, somehow disrupting the first. The two sounds battled one another, the first almost growling in rage, the second soaring, pure, clean.

Somehow, the second sound let Williams move, and she managed to focus her rage and fear into strength. She scabbled across the ground for her shotgun, her mind battered, but her hands instead found the long barrel of the lance cannon, on the floor where she'd left it. She lifted the cannon again, even as the second song began to fail.

She could only see a blinding ball of blue hellfire in front of her, and she fired into the center of it. The beam of force jetted out, white light spearing the blue radiance that had enfolded the corpse. It impacted with a huge boom, a blast of weird blue energy that knocked her back on her ass. Instantly, the terrible buzzing faded, leaving behind only the softer sounds...coming from the pit.

Williams let the cannon fall from her hands, and managed to look around. What she saw left her jaw falling open.

The rachni queen had emerged, and her voice buzzed in alien tones through the air. Her mangled body

was lined with wounds, but she had managed to climb out through the hole blown in the pit by the last of Parker's men. Even as Williams watched, she fell silent, leaning tiredly against the framework still partially trapping her.

Alenko was the first to recover, shaking his head and wincing. His broken jaw didn't let him talk, but he moaned in pain and confusion. He glanced up, catching sight of the giant insect, his hand going for his pistol, and Williams called out.

"NO! It saved us, somehow. Don't shoot it, I .. I don't think it's hostile."

Alenko gave her a sharp look, but she ignored it. She let the lance cannon fall, stepping closer to the giant being. "It was beaten up before we got here, Kai. Maybe it hated Saren too."

Shepard got to one knee, wiping blood from her nose. "Ugh. My head. Can ... anyone explain what the fuck just hit us?"

There was a long moment of silence, and then the rachni queen reached out with one of her long, pale tentacles, wrapping it slowly around one of the dead asari they'd found in the room. There was a moment of twitching and then the asari corpse moved.

"...we ... sing. You ... do not sing. You had...no defense against...the black note. The dark one ... sang a song of .. death. We .. sang of life."

Shepard stared at the corpse, then back at the rachni queen, then back at the corpse. "I'm either... having a really bad trip...or that dead asari bitch is talking."

Liana was still on the ground, but her expression, while drawn in pain, was clearing. "I think the rachni queen is using that asari as a method to ... communicate with us."

Wrex groaned, still on his back. "Ha. Likely story. Probably going to ask if we taste better with pura sauce or salt."

The queen's huge, faceted eyes swung around, taking in each one of them in turn. "...you ... are not...with the ice mistress... she of ... cold eyes and sad ...soul."

Shepard frowned. "I... no. We are not. We were here to kill this ... person." She gestured at Saren's ravaged corpse, then turned back to the rachni. "Your kind have attacked us, though."

The queen made a shuffling motion. "...yes. We...were compelled. A ... foul... red note...tore into ...our song. We could not ... resist. My daughters...were taken...befouled..."

Shepard thought back to the tortured creatures in the lab. "Yes. We found them, and put them out of their misery."

The rachni queen's borrowed voice sounded thankful, and had less pauses in it. "...this is good. Our children have become...warped. They are twisted. They must... be ended."

Shepard glanced over to Wrex. "There are others who will deal with that. The big question is what to do with you? You saved us...but your kind are dangerous."

The queen bowed her head. "...I am fading. I could ... heal myself, and go far from here. Let the children come forth again ... in peace, to sing pure songs. Or let myself fall into the sleep of ... death. I long for the latter."

Shepard tilted her head. "You want to die?"

The queen shifted again, as if in pain, and the asari jerked violently. "I have heard that evil red note, and now a black note...so cold. It is pain. Negation. The song cannot be unheard, the note unsung. The note ...echos. It pollutes. My song...was not strong enough to stop it, and fear I am ... not myself."

Shepard scratched her chin. "...well, that's just peachy. Thoughts, people? My head isn't working real hot right now."

Liara frowned. "We cannot kill her, Sara. That would be genocide."

The queen spoke. "...incorrect. We...should not exist. We remember the large ones coming." A tentacle gestured at Wrex, drawing a snarl. "We remember the Killing. We remember the ugly red note, the sour yellow note, tearing in our song, fighting, urging. We brought death. Forgiveness must be earned, not given."

The queen's massive head bowed. "One cannot kill ... what should already be dead."

Shepard frowned. "How can you remember something that long ago? Are you that *old*?"

Wrex muttered. "Because the rachni are evil, Shepard. They have some kind of genetic memory that lets them remember everything any of them experienced. It's why their warriors were so perfect, a tactic would only work once against them. Unnatural *things*." He spat at the corpse of the asari being used as mouthpiece, glaring.

Garrus had been propped up slowly by Telanya, and was holding his broken eyepiece in one hand. His armor had huge rents in it, his blood leaking through them, and his face was scorched, but his eyes were still bright. His voice flanged and slurred as he spook, slowly. "Even if that's the case, that doesn't make her the perpetrator. She's still a victim, Shepard. Liara is right. As much damage as the rachni did, the queen here didn't do any of it herself, and she saved our life."

Wrex snarled louder. "The rachni nearly ended my people, and we died by the millions to stop them, only to lose our way with so many of our shaman and war-leaders dead. If not for the rachni maybe krogan society would not have done idiotic act of trying to attack the galaxy. And this thing's children probably ate half the city down there." The red eyes shifted to Shepard. "You let this monster go, and if anything goes wrong millions will die stopping her brood."

Alenko nodded gingerly, and tapped his omnitool, sending another message. "For once, ma'am, Wrex has a point. This is big. We can't make this decision on our own."

Shepard looked at him a long moment, then at the queen. "Not too long ago, I also wanted to die. I had been hurt too many times, in too many ways. I had brought death to others, but those deserving, and those...undeserving. I had become the tool of evil men, and I was too weak, too ... broken, to salvage myself."

She slowly got to her feet, stepping forward. "I had someone save me from that. So when you say you want to die, is it because you're too tired to live, or because you are too dangerous?"

The queen made a clicking sound, her many legs shifting against the pylons trapping her. The asari corpse she manipulated gave a hissing sigh. "I have already caused great harm. The ice mistress, who smelled of the young one", she paused to point a tentacle at Liara, "wounded my mind, seeking my thoughts, my memories of those long dead."

The queen's form shuddered. "She sought a great dark system of three green worlds, around a dark orange star. She called it Ilos. I recognized it."

Shepard's heart sped up. "...if you know the place where she is going, we'll let you go." Wrex began to protest and Shepard held up a hand. "There's no telling what the fuck might be there. Even if both Saren and Benezia are dead, I'm not leaving lose ends laying around."

The queen regarded Shepard calmly, the multifaceted eyes gazing at her for long seconds. "I was forced to give her what she sought. A relay, long lost to your kind. She called it the Mu Relay. It is linked to by the Decados Relay, using the name she gave in her mind, and from the Mu Relay one enters an old star

system of my people. From the entry star, one goes galactic north to the nearest system."

The queen's voice quieted. "We never disturbed the dead upon Ilos. There were too many ugly, fell notes there. All dead. All waiting."

Shepard had recorded the information on her omnitool. They could figure out the exact location later, after all. "We could still cut you free. There is no reason to die."

The rachni queen said nothing for a long moment. "There is still a fragment of that note in my mind, child of fire." The queen's massive bulk shifted, facing Wrex. "I am ... sorry for what my people inflicted on yours, warrior of burning stone. I ask for release."

Wrex's eyes narrowed, and his gaze slowly shifted from the alien being to Shepard. "It wants to die, Shepard. Even it knows it doesn't belong."

Shepard didn't understand. "Why would you not want to live?"

The queen made another sound, much like the song that had countered the sound from Saren's shattered body. It was a saddening sound, one of broken memories and unending, slow pain. "I am shattered inside, and I feel my children dying. My daughters have been broken and tortured, and my mind is no longer...whole. Why would I wish to linger, to sing songs into the empty dark, only fearing the return of that evil red note from the dark once more for all my days?"

The tentacle released the asari corpse, which finally fell limp again, and wrapped around the bars, as if bracing itself. Liara closed her eyes, turning away, and Shepard, after several long seconds, finally nodded at Wrex. The krogan picked up the lance cannon where it had fallen onto the floor, and lifted it.

There was the sound of thunder, then silence.

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## Chapter 103: Chapter 94 : Noveria , Aftermath

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*A/N: The fight with Saren was something I re-wrote, as I mentioned, more than a few times. I wanted to emphasize that his power was more due to what had been done to him than his own badassery, while still showing said badassery. I apologize if it came out flat to some people, but I refuse to compromise battle realism with Rule of Cool unless it simply must be done, and that fight wasn't the place for it. It's sort of the same reason why I chickened out on Shepard and Co fighting Richard Williams, because while they would have put him down in the end, he would have KILLED at least three or four core characters in any realistic fight scene. Saren's arrogance is the main reason any of Shepard's team survived - if he had concentrated on finishing off the team, none would have lived.*

*The rachni queen had to die. I don't like it, but I had no real choice. To allow it to live would not only have presented several logical issues (like the AIS and Commissariat getting their hands on a creature that could produce perfect warriors - not smart) but also have introduced a ... difficulty in the future storyline I have planned. That being said, the rachni are not all gone.*

*General von Grath , as you will see, is alive...but I assure you he does not have plot armor. If people give me a good idea why a character should die (or live) I will probably tweak the storylines so that it is so. I will only kill characters when I have to, but whole point of OC's is to have characters who can die and yet not ruin the story with their loss.*

*Still, the man has an armor save of 9+, so... :D*

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General von Grath awoke blearily, to his own great surprise. The room he was in was richly appointed – polished wooden floors, crème textured walls with heavy drapes and wide windows overlooking the mountains beyond Port Hanshan, delicately shaded overhead lighting. He coughed weakly, finding himself in a hospital bed, and glanced around.

The room was large, the doorway leading out into the hospital blocked by the bulky forms of two of his DACT soldiers out of their armor. Sitting in a comfortable looking leather recliner, his tired features looking relieved, was Major Laxar. The major greeted him as he blinked away the glare of overhead lights. "Glad to see you awake, sir. Things were touch and go there for a bit."

Von Grath coughed, wincing in pain from some sort of wounds to his chest. He glanced down, seeing his torso encased in medical equipment and regeneration devices. "Nonsense, Major. A delightful little fracas, a chance at recreating the old *Aliens* movies writ large, and a finale made truly satisfying by cooking that asari witch alive in her own superior battle armor. It could only be surpassed if I made love to Uressa T'Shora and Melissa Ashland in a threesome."

Laxar snorted back laughter, coughing after a few moments. "Your suit blew up around you with that missile launch, sir, and we had to pick pieces of armor out of your liver and lungs. The warpfire that took your hand off ate it's way to your elbow and you were exposed to freezing temperatures and the atmosphere for almost five minutes before we got you inside. You're lucky to be alive."

His voice lowered. "They had to amputate your right arm at the elbow, sir. The cybersurgeons will be in tomorrow for initial fitting."

Von Grath let his head lay back against the pillow, absently noting the mattress was very comfortable for a hospital bed. "I fared better than many of my men, I fear. How badly were we mauled out there, Major? What is our status?"

Laxar pulled out an info-pad that was smeared with blood, and sighed as he pulled out a rag and wiped it clean. "Our status is a clusterfuck of a mess, sir. The space battle is over, but we lost a total of twenty seven cruisers and all but two frigates. The Da Vinci and the Manswell's Wrath both took severe damage, and three-quarters of our fighters are gone. The Noverian defense net is completely trashed, and they have two ships left that work."

He scrolled down. "We lost a total of three hundred eleven marines, six tanks, and nine DACT in our landing approach. We lost nine hundred and nineteen marines, eight tanks, four APCs, and ninety six DACT in the assault and in clearing the city and facing the bugs. Another eleven hundred and two marines and forty one DACT are injured. Roughly nineteen percent of those are not expected to recover enough to resume military service. We lost twenty two of our thirty five Commissars, mostly to the rachni. Brave bastards held the line after you fell, wouldn't retreat an inch."

The major tugged at his ear. "Director Anolais held out at the Tower, but lost almost his entire defense force. The NDC Guard is down to about a reinforced regiment, most of them wounded. They have one or two working vehicles. Power is out to a third of the city, and so is running water in many places. Civilian casualties were...very heavy. Over five thousand dead, and nineteen hundred or so wounded. Most of that was due to the damned asari blowing up several civilian shelters, the lunatics. Thankfully, the Noverians have several large capacity hospitals, and the Citadel is sending six medical ships. Even so, medical supplies are running short. We've ... ah, appropriated everything medical related we found at the Sirta building, including their stock of medigel."

Von Grath nodded. "Saren? Shepard?"

The major shrugged. "We sent four reinforced squads into Peak 15 an hour ago. They're bringing back Shepard's team now. They're damn near dead, sir. I'm getting reports of some pretty horrible shit down

in that facility, and Shepard requested a rad-safe team to secure some nuclear bombs. There's also a very large number of geth war-frames, apparently in storage – the AIS is going haul some away for study." He grimaced. "There was also some very disturbing information regarding the source of the Rachni. Shepard found, and her team killed, a rachni queen, and there were three more found in the lower levels. All of them were ... well, the only word that comes to mind is 'decayed', sir. The boffins will have to figure it all out."

Von Grath grunted. "Very well, Major. The fact that Saren was up to something dastardly does not astonish me in the slightest. I presume since you are bringing back Shepard's team that the cretin is dead?"

The major smiled grimly. "Deader than *anyone* I've ever seen, based on the omnitool images I was sent. The Citadel Council is sending Spectres to pick up the remains. We also have asari ships incoming, for Benezia's corpse, or what's left of it."

The general's expression twisted. "I have to admit, I was very surprised a four pack of cheap GTS missiles did anything at all aside from blow myself up. Paladin suits are almost indestructible. Not to belittle my own achievements, but how exactly did I beat the witch?"

The major grimaced. "Not for *lack* of trying to blow yourself up, that's for sure, sir. Based on the damage to the enemy suit, our techs think that your missile strike must have hit something in her suit that was already damaged. The armor plating was more beaten up by the crash landing than it looked, and your missiles had to have pierced it, because all her plasma ammo cooked off. The suit is mostly melted, and we found a burnt-ass corpse inside. We sent an initial DNA scan off to the Asari Republic and they said it's T'Soni DNA."

Von Grath smirked. "Well, then. Capital. I do believe that makes me the first human to beat an asari war priestess in single combat. This calls for a cigar, Major. Find my attendant and have the lovely young lady bring me one."

The major stared at him for a long moment before bursting into laughter.

O-OSaBC-O

The aftermath of the Siege of Noveria was anything but anticlimactic. It took both a concerted push from the DACT soldiers with flamethrowers and repeated, heavy orbital bombardment to finally finish the rachni, who had managed to tear and rip their way through half of the wreckage of the Talon's Justice before they were finally finished. A few staggered away into the icy cold, and the handful of fighters the Da Vinci had harried them with bombs, but no one was going out into that weather to try and finish stragglers off.

Marines, battered and weary, engaged the last holdouts of geth and asari cultists. The shattered forces of the Noverian Defense Force pitched in where they could, and the city was secured for the most part in a few hours. In orbit, the final geth wreckage burned up in orbit, leaving fiery trails across the wintry skies and providing a sinister illumination to the planet's nightside.

Admiral Chu sat bonelessly in the command chair of his cruiser, the scent of smoke, burned flesh, and seared plastic thick in the air. In the distance his sailors moved listlessly around the bridge, the sound of damage control alarms echoing in the background, slowly falling silent.

His fleet had won the battle, but at a terrible cost. The entire naval detachment was a ruin, barely six cruisers remaining, all of them so damaged that he might as well send them to the scrapheap. The Manswell's Wrath was in one piece, but its bridge had been blown apart, its main gun knocked out of commission, and a good thirty percent of the ship was vented to space. Over half the ship's crew had died, and it would have to be towed back to Alliance space, an embarrassing fate for any ship,

particularly a dreadnaught. The Da Vinci had not only lost most of her fighters but had taken hits to her flight deck, touching off internal explosions that had roasted over three hundred men alive before they could be contained.

*If the Citadel had sent more support – any support – this would have ended better.*

Chu sighed bitterly, the politics that had ended up in the Commissariat and AIS having to handle this debacle would only smear future events more. Saren and Benezia, by all reports, were dead, the crisis probably over, but that was the Council's problem. There was still the black ship, but he figured the admirals of other navies could deal with that problem later. Noveria was damaged, but it would recover, and that also was the problem of others.

His problem was the second human dreadnaught entering the system, carrying his likely doom. The Systems Alliance had just lost the rough equivalent of an entire flotilla of ships, and he doubted they would be in a forgiving mood. He looked up as the comm officer spoke in weary tones. "Incoming message from the Vesuvius, sir. It's the Fleet Master."

Chu gave a weak chuckle. "Throw it up on my monitor, Tom." He turned, focusing on the screen in front of him, and gave a slow salute to the scarred visage of the Fleet Master. "Admiral Dragunov, sir. I have ... triumphed."

Dragunov's eyes narrowed. "Some might call it that, Admiral. Some will no doubt castigate you and the Commissariat. No matter. The deed is done, and we are triumphant, all on our own, without alien influence or 'assistance'. For that, I think, you will find the Senate more grateful than angry, despite your ... severe losses."

Chu gave a flat scowl. "I'd have rather had the alien assistance and kept more of my men alive and my ships in one piece. I was a fool to think half-trained crews that had never fought together could pull this off well."

Dragunov's eyebrow arched. "If I recall the rather hasty briefing I got on this operation, you were not expecting serious combat. I've reviewed the logs of the battle. Your performance was certainly not outstanding, and mistakes were made. But it was not ... poor. You did what you could, and you prevented the geth from bringing any aid to Saren."

Chu nodded. "Shepard killed the bastard, and von Grath cacked his asari girlfriend too. Hopefully we can wrap this mess up and put it all behind us."

Dragunov's voice was wry. "Unlikely, Admiral. I find that when you think all the loose ends are wrapped up, that's when gremlins pop out of the woodwork. No matter. For now, stand your ships down and head to Arcturus for debrief and repair. We can take on badly wounded personnel on the Vesuvius if you need to transfer injured. I've got three flotillas on the way to provide security for Noveria in the meantime."

Chu laughed. "You plan to annex the planet?"

Dragunov shook his head. "Director Anolais' ... cooperation was noted. The Senate is still arguing about how to handle the fallout, but in the short-term we can only assume that from the mauling Port Hanshan took, they were not deliberately shielding Saren. We'll tell him that the SA does not have any intentions of staying in system beyond the time it takes to salvage the information and evidence from Saren's base and to make sure reports of his death are on point."

The Fleet Master gave a wintry smile. "And of course, the bottom line is that Noveria will cost a lot of money to fix, and the SA isn't about to throw it away on a world that doesn't pay taxes."

Chu nodded. "Ah, exit decency, enter expediency. Comforting to know our party line hasn't changed. I

have no objections to that. As soon as my ships are in some kind of order, we'll withdraw per your orders, sir."

Dragunov nodded. "One more thing. Your boss was identified as being connected to Cerberus. The Commissars shot him this morning. Congratulations, Director Chu. You're now in charge of the AIS. Enjoy the confirmation hearings."

The signal cut off, and Chu leaned back in his seat, not sure if he should be bemused or start cursing.

O-OSaBC-O

Gianna Parasini pulled off her combat helmet, letting her hair fall loosely around her shoulders and taking a deep breath of unfiltered air. She wasn't cut out for heavy fighting, and she really needed a shower after seven hours in battle armor.

*Of course, I won't get one, thanks to the goddamned Alliance shooting up the water plant. Idiots.*

The environs of Port Hanshan were still in disarray, emergency vehicles moving around in thick patterns on the ground and in the air. Fires in the Nova Building had finally been extinguished, and patrols of battered marines with drawn weapons trekked down every street, maintaining a bleary-eyed vigilance for more asari cultists or geth.

The building she'd entered was a small business training clinic – one that offered courses on a wide array of skill-building topics, such as accounting and finance. The place was closed, the windows shot out and a couple of dead asari still slumped inelegantly outside the front door. Human blood, bullet holes, and a broken Avenger rifle on the floor in the small lobby, along with the ugly warp-burns on the walls, spoke of a desperate, ugly firefight.

Parasini triggered her omnitool after taking a careful look around, and the heavy basalt carved wall that was framed by bullet-scarred wooden panels to the south slid slowly into the ground, revealing a narrow passage thickly covered with steel plates. Faint electrical discharges traced over them, jamming any sensors that might be turned in the direction of the tunnel, and she hit a small control on the wall as she entered, shutting the way after her.

The tunnel angled sharply downwards, slatted stairs gleaming dimly in the single track of lights set into the ceiling, and then curved slowly to the right before opening up into a small room. A pair of haptic display screens took up one corner, while a powerful micro-frame computer bulked against another, heavy data cables connecting it to a stack of smaller computers and displays next to it. Maps and a bookshelf occupied the third wall, stacks of info-pads and paper notebooks sitting next to a black and red helmet.

A small collection of powerful sniper rifles hung on hooks in the wall over the doorway, and as she entered the room a pair of small drones swung out of a recess in the ceiling, scanning her before vanishing back into their nook. Parasini walked slowly to the haptic comm unit, tapping in a long access code and sweeping her fingertip against a DNA scanner, not even wincing at the tiny cut the unit made on her finger.

A moment later, the familiar triangle logo of the Shadow Broker filled the left-most screen, vanishing to reveal the battered, cloaked figure of Tetricus, one glowing eye visible in the darkness of his cowl, sitting in his office. "Parasini. Your report is late."

She snorted. "And your intel was completely off, you burnt-up bastard. Saren was here alright, but he had entire army of geth, asari Triune cultists, and fucking rachni here, and they damn near destroyed Port Hanshan."

The turian made a small movement with his hands. "The Broker was ... aware ... of the rachni angle,

but it was our belief any such research would be in the beginning phases. Saren and Benezia's corporation was skilled at genetic work, but they could not have had the expertise to recreate a dead race so rapidly."

Parasini's finely chiseled features twisted into a sneer. "About fifty five hundred dead rachni outside the city walls beg to differ. Your operatives, whoever they were, dropped the ball on this one, Tetricus. Lorek is dead, the asari gutted him outside the SI building. And I'm tied up with investigations into Sirta, which was in bed with Saren."

That drew a look of surprise from the turian, a mandible twitching. "Sirta? Interesting. We did miss that. We'll have to send follow-up teams." Tetricus laced his fingers together. "What of Saren and Benezia?"

She shrugged. "The Butcher definitely killed Saren. They hauled his body out this morning, bastard looks like he lost a fight with a dreadnaught. He has some kind of freaky cyberware in him that has the AIS bastards confused, but I don't have any real excuse for getting closer to the examination. Shepard's team is pretty much done for, I think, most of them were hauled out on stretchers."

She rubbed her arm, where a geth pulse rifle had gotten a light hit on her. "As for Benezia, she tried to get away in Saren's ship, but they shot it down outside the city. General von Grath took her on, both of them in battle armor, and he won. Blew her up real good. Only thing left is a crispy corpse."

Tetricus gave her a hard look. "I am familiar with General von Grath. He was a battlesuit pilot, I believe. Am I expected to believe a cheap human battlesuit defeated a Paladin war-frame?"

She shrugged. "The thing did kinda crash into the ground, you know. Send your own people if you want details. That's not why I was assigned here."

The turian leaned back. "Quite. Still, our only eyes on the ground beside you were Lorek Qu'in – who you have confirmed is dead – and some low level functionaries in the Noverian Banking system. Until Wrex recovers enough to make a report, we are blind."

She blinked away fatigue. "Slipping people in shouldn't be hard. Once the siege lifted, a ton of people left the planet. There were too many to even check, given that the SA had about a dozen ships left. There's more arriving now, but there's no real customs checks and won't be for at least another forty eight hours."

He nodded. "I'll send a level seven team right away. Were you compromised in your primary mission?"

She smiled. "Me? Of course not. I managed to access the central computers in the confusion, hiding my intrusion as geth hacking."

She triggered her omni. "What I found was much what you suspected. The salarians were working some kind of forced evolutionary experiments here. I don't know what the goals were, but there is a lot of money coming in from Sur'Kesh and Mannovai, from the Reach Research Combine and from Aoegr Manufactory." She paused. "Also, did you know Anolais was former STG?"

He snorted. "Of course."

She tilted her head. "Did you know his entire corporate staff of salarians was *also* STG?"

The turian's cybereye contracted slowly. "No. I did not. Fascinating. What would account for an entire STG cell, albeit an old one, focusing on one business effort?"

She frowned. "That's where it gets freaky. My poking around had to be cut short when asari tried to blow me up, but from what I gathered, Anolais is working for Dalatrass Muvai Solus *and* Matriarch Thessial. Those are two of the craziest bitches in Citadel Space, and the idea of them working together

on anything is Bad News, capital B capital N. We're talking big money, billions of creds."

Tetrimus sighed. "But we don't know what, exactly, they were working on, except evolutionary research? Is that genetic changes? Transmortalism? Cutting edge bionetics? I need hard data, Parasini."

She folded her arms. "The only hard data I have is that the main reason Anolais didn't tumble to Saren having set up shop fifteen miles away from his own corporate tower is that he was too wrapped up in whatever this is. Given the man is a lunatic dictator with a photographic memory and a mean streak the size of a krogan, that's not adding up to anything good."

Tetrimus gave her a long look and finally sighed. "Very well. I am transmitting your payment. For now, back off the NDC and see what intelligence you can gather on what Saren was doing on Noveria. And investigate Benezia's death. I still find it hard to credit that after so much careful planning they'd be stupid enough to get caught and killed in such a fashion."

Parasini watched her credit balance rise in pleasure, before registering his words. "Look, Tetrimus. I know you are as paranoid as a salarian in a krogan drinking party. But *no one* survives being cooked alive by plasma. That bitch is as dead as a volus's chances with the Consort."

Tetrimus paused before killing the connection. "I did not survive the betrayal I suffered by engaging in assumptions, Parasini. You'll be paid well for anything you find out."

The link went dead, and the human woman huffed. "Nutball."

#### O-OSaBC-O

The hospital where Shepard's team had been taken was the same one General von Grath was in, as well as many injured senior management figures of the NDC and wealthy civilians who'd been injured in attack on Port Hanshan. Shepard herself was placed in a well-appointed room after her surgery, the walls a pale blue color that meshed well with the long drapes that framed another majestic view of the mountains.

The doctors who'd worked on her team had been confident everyone would pull through, but they were very concerned about the readings they'd gotten from their initial scans. All of them had multiple clots in their brains, burst blood vessels and slight neural damage of a type the doctors had never seen before. The entire team was split into separate room and blood-thinning agents applied, even while transfusions were started to alleviate any internal bleeding.

Shepard had been given an info-pad with the medical status of her team by the lead doctor, a salarian, and reviewed it slowly, her head still feeling like someone had gone at it with eezo drilling equipment.

The most lightly wounded, it turned out, was Wrex, thanks to his natural regeneration, but even he'd suffered third degree burns in several spots on his back and needed some corrective surgery as a result. His damage from the 'song' was relatively minor and had regenerated by the time he got to the hospital, but he was still slightly disoriented.

Alenko was having his jaw reset and worked on by a bone regeneration unit, while they cloned up some dental implants to replace the teeth shattered by Saren's backhand. He'd suffered minor fractures to his neck vertebrae from the blow, which required more delicate repair. Other than that he was mostly unharmed, but the damage from the 'song' of the Saren corpse had done some damage to his brain, with several clots and a number of damaged blood vessels. His assistance in blocking the geth colossus' plasma blast had also seared a few of his nerves near his omnitool from the backlash. He was in stable condition, waiting for spinal surgery.

Williams had third and fourth degree burns on her chest, stomach, face, and legs from the destruction of her sniper rifle, and fragments from the Sunfire round that had struck it had blown through her left

side, searing a part of her lung. She, along with Garrus, had suffered the least damage from the buzzing noise attack they'd all endured, but her wounds were some of the most serious, and she'd lost consciousness from blood loss shortly after the fight ended. She was in critical condition in the ICU of the hospital.

Telanya was pretty badly hurt. She'd been shot multiple times getting Garrus clear of geth fire, and taken deep wounds to her side and leg as a result. Saren's explosive round had detonated right between her and Liara, the blast amplified by the barriers they'd been trying to use to block his shots, and the resulting damage was even more severe, strips of flesh having been torn from her back and right leg. She'd been thrown across the room by the explosion and landed awkwardly on her left arm, resulting in a small fracture in her forearm. Like Alenko, she'd also suffered minor brain damage. She was still in surgery, in serious condition.

Garrus was a mess. He'd been shot in the side and the leg earlier, and then took a direct hit from Saren's Krysaë later on. His body was riddled with fragments of his own armor, his knee was shattered by geth plasma darts, with severe burns to the underlying tissues. His right eye was damaged slightly by the loss of his targeting eyepiece, which had shattered in the fight. His scans revealed the least amount of damage from the 'song', but that was of little comfort as he was also in critical condition.

Tali was the worst off – she had suffered multiple broken bones from her brutal landing after being thrown by Saren. Three ribs, her right arm, and her left leg had all suffered fractures, some of them severe enough to have broken skin. Her suit had been breached in two places, with infection setting in almost immediately. Thankfully, the Noverians had a clean room (usually for volus) and a doctor who'd worked on quarian patients before. The amount of quarian blood they had on hand was, however, very low. Von Grath's XO, a Major Laxar, had sent some men to Sirta's compound, and they had liberated some synthetic purified turian plasma that the doctors felt would at least ease some of the danger. Her brain scans showed very little of the bleeding the others had suffered, partly due to her being the furthest from Saren's corpse when it had started emitting the noise. She was in critical condition, and a message had been sent to the Migrant Fleet asking for medical assistance.

Liara was, much to Shepard's unhappiness, also seriously wounded, although not nearly as bad as Tali. The gunshot she'd taken to the hip had literally blown a good-sized chunk of her pelvic bone off, not to mention sent plasma splashing up onto her torso and down her leg. The explosive round that had caught her and Telanya had inflicted third degree burns on her face and upper chest, and fragments of armor had to be plucked from her back. She'd over-strained her biotics, against the Colossus, which had only made the clotting and bleeding from the sonic attack worse. She was in serious condition in critical care, still in surgery.

Only two of Lieutenant Parker's men had survived, barely clinging to life. The others were very dead, most of them either from plasma burns or being shot with Saren's Sunfire pistol. That monstrous little weapon she'd picked up and stuffed in her caryypak, having felt it's comet-like impacts one too many times to leave it laying about.

Shepard herself had spent an hour in surgery, having the vicious gash in her stomach patched up, and incidental wounds treated. Her brain scan showed several clots, which the doctors broke up with ultrasound and anti-clotting agents. Her wrist was set in a cast – bone regenerator units would work on the joint, but the torn up tendons would have to heal naturally, which even with modern medicine would take a week. Her other wounds – heavy bruising along her torso, a cracked rib, chipped teeth, and a hairline fracture in her jaw from Saren's punch – would heal in time and with proper care. She was sick of sitting still while bone regen units worked on her beaten up body, but moving around much was out of the question until she could recover some more.

She had a lot of questions on her hands, the most important of which was in regards to what the fuck

had happened at the end of the fight, with Saren's corpse. The turian had been dead, she was sure of that. No one survived being shot twice with a lance cannon, or being riddled with bullets, much less three point blank rounds to the face from a shotgun.

And the voice wasn't Saren's either. If Saren had the ability to generate what the rachni queen had called a 'song' that could kill them, why hadn't he just opened the fight with that? The research they'd seen, the things being hauled out of Peak 13, hinted at something extremely ugly. Krogan and rachni, weird vats of white shit – she didn't know where to start trying to get it to all make sense.

She looked up from the pad as the door opened, and the tall, leonine form of the Fleet Master entered the room. He shut it behind him, before turning back to face her.

She sat up a bit more in the hospital bed, wishing she had on something more dignified than the stupid hospital gown. "Sir."

He waved a hand at her, crossing the room to slowly sit in the over-stuffed chair in the corner by the sink and cabinets. "At ease, Commander. For once, I am not here to castigate you or piss you off."

She managed to smother a small smile at that, her features calm. "Yes, sir. I haven't had time to prepare any kind of report ... seeing as I'm still out of commission."

He nodded, his hard features looking tired. "Understatement, no doubt. They tell me you barely managed to beat the turian bastard, but that you beat him all the same. Benezia's corpse is on a table in the morgue, waiting for the asari to get here and verify it's really her, but the turians have already provided a code-stamped sample of Saren's DNA. That was him you killed. At least, it used to be."

She tilted her head. "Used to be?"

He gave a wintry smile. "The body was filled with cybernetic components of a type and ... origin ... that we can't identify. It's decades beyond anything we can currently achieve or even think about achieving. Nanometer repair agents, some sort of reactive eezo boosting to his biotic powers, piezoelectric rods augmenting his muscle strength. If you'd gone in against Saren, the turian, you'd have beat his ass with no problems. That *thing* was about seventy percent cyberware, and of a level that makes a Turian Final Line soldier look child's play."

He shifted in the chair. "We are still going through the mess of equipment and research data down there. What the hell he was up to is unclear – a lot of data was wiped and destroyed, and a lot of it is just fucking crazy, Commander. Splicing krogans and rachni together. Replacing parts of the brain with greyboxes and command chips. Lots of work on blocking sonics and ultrasonics. Not to mention the geth 'hopper' creatures we found."

He fixed her with a hard look. "Do you have any kind of insight into this, Shepard? Did he say anything?"

She shook her head slowly. "The ... sir, the last part of the fight was very confusing." She told him of how Saren had decimated her team, mocking them while taking each one out, and how he had effortlessly beaten her down before Williams shot him. She told him of killing him, and how the body had lit up, and the noise that had nearly ended them before the rachni queen had intervened to save them with her own song.

He listened carefully, his face stern, and when she finished he shook his head slowly. "That sounds ... implausible, Commander." He held up a hand before she could protest. "I'm not calling you a liar. We certainly were not sure *what* caused the damage to your team's brains, and from what you're telling me, it was this 'song' that Saren's ... corpse ... was producing. Based on your description, it sounds similar to the scattered reports we have from Eden Prime about the sound emitted by the black ship of Saren's.

But it's not likely to over well to suggest that he turned into a zombie and tried to *sing* you to death, Commander."

She gave a weak laugh. "I could give a shit if people believe it or not, sir. I barely believe it myself, and I saw it happen. What concerns me is the words the body spoke. It called Saren a 'puppet'. That means there is still something out there behind this whole mess. We have to keep looking for what ever he intended to do, and stop it."

Dragunov rubbed his jaw. "That's also going to be a very hard sell. The Citadel has lost a great many ships, against the black ship and in sparring with Cerberus and the geth. The SA has also lost a lot of material. Nineteen cruisers and three heavy cruisers, and sixty five frigates fighting the geth near the Veil, and the clusterfuck that Chu pulled with the Commissariat and AIS fleets here adds another twenty or so to the butcher's bill. Not to mention that the political situation back on Earth is going up in flames right now, and we just lost a good quarter of the Commissariat as well as it's biggest stick." He grunted.

She glared at him. "So we're just going to assume everything will be fine? We know exactly where the bastard was headed, Ilos."

He shook his head. "No, we don't. Yes, the information you retrieved from the rachni queen gives us a rough idea of the relay's location, but that might need weeks or months of searching to find its exact location. A search of that scale would require many ships, a great deal of support, and given it's location in the Terminus, stir up unwelcome reactions from the locals. I don't like the idea of loose ends any more than you do, but if there's to be any follow-up, I fear our options at this time are limited. Perhaps the Council can be convinced to take a look."

She snorted. "I doubt it, sir. They seemed pretty pissed at the trash Saracino was talking when I last talked to them."

He grimaced. "Quite. Your little revelation about him being on the Cerberus dole has not, unfortunately, hurt his popularity enough, and the Commissariat has not yet acted to stop him. Even if they do, his party is likely to take control of the government in short order." He gave a wry smile. "That will also inhibit anything you might like to follow through on, as they are very unlikely to be on your side."

Squaring her shoulders, she nodded. "I see, sir. Story of my life. With Saren and Benezia dead, what are my orders?"

He gave a thin smile. "For now, your unit is to recover. I have a report from your XO – your marines fought off attackers trying to get to the Normandy, some severe injuries but no deaths. Your people are unlikely to be up and about for a good few days or more, assuming they pull through. The Citadel Council wants a debrief, as does High Command, but there isn't a rush."

He tapped his omnitool. "For now, I'm cutting orders that you are to recover here until your people are good to go, then to report to the Citadel. AIS and the Armed Forces Committee will debrief you there after you deal with the Council. After that, we'll do some minor mop up of whatever intel we can salvage from Peak 13, and a week or so of leave."

He gave her a firm stare. "You can probably forget keeping command of the Normandy for much longer past that, Commander. Your situation was unique, but the SA has a certain level of exposure with your command of our ship while being a Spectre, and it's best if we have a clean demarcation of your two hats. At the same time, you have performed a task that, I will ruefully admit, I thought beyond you. Not only taking down Cerberus, but Saren and Benezia. There are those who will demand you are promoted and given the proper political and strategic training required, especially as you are a Spectre."

He exhaled. "And I will say this much: your success has pretty much ensured you will be made a full

Spectre by the Council. That means the SA will have much less control and oversight of you."

She frowned. "I can see that. Will the SA then just sort of cut me loose, sir?"

He laughed. "No, manifestly not. Now that General von Grath has apparently taken an interest in your career once more, people are stumbling over themselves to make sure everyone knows they only think the very best of you. However, there's a difference between washing our hands of you and officially backing your actions as a Spectre. As a commander of a SA ship, your actions reflect on the SA. There are ... legal issues involved, I'm told. Udina's little action to give you the support you needed was not even remotely lawful. As a result, you'll have to turn the Normandy over once this whole thing is done, and the aliens will have to leave the ship at that time."

She exhaled. "I ... understand. What about my team?"

He frowned. "What about them? Senior Chief Williams has caught the eye of a few people in the command structure. She'll come out of this just fine, maybe even an OCS billet. Lieutenant Alenko has done a fine job as well, according to your reports. Your brevet promotion of Lieutenant Cole is far overdue, and if he wants the bars, they're his.

He shifted in his seat. "As far as the alien members of your crew, they've acquitted themselves well, especially the little quarian girl and Lady Liara. I'm sure the SA will reward them properly. But they are not SA citizens."

Dragunov's eyebrows drew into a thoughtful frown. "The quarian, as I understand, is on some sort of rite of passage. Your reports show she's a damned good engineer, but I suspect she'll want to head back to her own people, and even if she didn't Admiral Rael'Zorah is likely to start a damned war for getting his daughter nearly killed if don't hand her back.. The krogan is a mercenary with known ties to the Shadow Broker, his ... assistance at Torfan and during this mission notwithstanding. That makes people in High Command uneasy. The turian and the asari policewoman are known risks, according to the AIS..."

She shook her head, interrupting. "I've already resolved that mess, sir. But I get I can't keep a menagerie of aliens onboard a SA warship forever. What I really wanted to know was in regards to the status of Liara. Her own government had it out for her and her family just got attacked. She needs to head to Thessia to sort it all out, but I'm worried that without the SA saying she's under their protection the asari will try to grab her."

Dragunov tilted his head. "As for Lady Liara T'Soni, my political officer is suggesting we handle her with the highest level of polite consideration we can. The SA would kill to have a reliable ally in the ranks of the Thirty, much less the ruler of an asari House. I suppose that means I should ensure she comes out of this with as much support from us as we can provide."

He paused. "I see your concern, and I will relay it back to High Command. In the meantime...finish with the Council, and I'll detail the Normandy to your command a bit longer to perform diplomatic tasks with Doctor T'Soni. Once that is complete, however, you'll need to report back to the SA for reassignment and the Normandy will be handed over to another CO."

She nodded sadly. "Sort of feels like a punishment instead of a reward, sir."

He shrugged. "As Fleet Master I have near total control of the fleet and it's orders. The key word in that sentence, Commander, is *near*. There are elements in the government which are likely to be out of power very soon, elements who – to my disgust – view your destruction of Cerberus in a poor light. I cannot put the Fleet in the position of displeasing the people who provide our funding and oversight."

He stood slowly, wincing. "Furthermore, Commander ... on some level, this entire incident has been

one of operating beyond controls, beyond the norms we have established. Your adherence to orders – while a bit ... shaky in the case of Feros ... has kept you out of any serious trouble, and your dislike of being in the media has prevented too much chaos from erupting."

He folded his arms, his craggy features fixed in a frown. "However at some point chickens come home to roost. I'd like nothing better than to give you the Normandy and let you loose, maybe to go after some of the cretins who must have been backing Cerberus. But the hard truth is that the incoming government is going to be looking for reasons to fuck with the Navy, and I'm not going to give them the satisfaction if I can avoid it."

She nodded. "Yes, sir. I'll get you a full report once I get out of the hospital." She paused. "Did they ever sight the black ship at the Ralx relay? I kept expecting it to show up."

He shook his head. "No. A few geth showed up, scouts perhaps, but that was the extent of it. In the aftermath of Saren and Benezia falling, the geth activity coming out of the Veil has almost completely stopped. We're taking that as a good sign, for now."

He walked to the door. "Recover swiftly, Commander. Outstanding work." With that, he opened the door and was gone, the door closing softly behind him.

Shepard leaned back in her pillow, closing her eyes. "Maybe if I'm lucky I can convince them to not award me another stupid medal." She tried to relax, reaching out for her feeling of Liara, and smiled faintly as she felt the touch of her mind.

#### O-OSaBC-O

In the spaces between stars, Nazara hung, still. Silent. Brooding.

The events of the past stancycle had not gone according to the plans he had laid out. His agents had been thwarted, side-tracked, and defeated. The ungainly mockeries that called themselves Tho'ians had survived the Purge, and he had been forced to draw upon the local curator forces to clean out yet another infection. If two could survive, then more might have done so.

Their knowledge could not be allowed to infect the coming harvest.

His work in the Virmire system was at last completed, but the results were more disturbing than useful. The quantum no-locality sensors he had erected in other areas of the galaxy were giving conflicting readings, ones that sent alarm through his processes and made him strongly consider reaching into the Space Beyond to contact his kin. So he had been forced, using the available resources he had left, to try to solve the mystery.

Building the array had occupied too much of his attention, and in the lapse, Saren had fallen a second time. The plan the clever organic had worked out to salvage his own death into something of use had worked, at least for now, and Benezia was on her way to Virmire even now.

The information from Benezia had not improved his anger. The Mu Relay was finally located, but in a gulf of space nearly two thousand light-cycles across and six hundred deep. He'd dispatched hundreds of geth to search the area, but it would take time, and time was becoming a very tight resource at this stage of his plans.

His attempt at crushing this Shepard creature and her allies had been thwarted by his own former slaves, the rachni. He'd turned the Influence against the queen's puny mind when she'd interrupted his forcing the Power into the feeble frames of those who had struck down his tool, breaking her will, but that had resulted in the Shepard's allies destroying his avatar-link in Saren.

No matter. The test of the Ascension process had worked. Harbinger's little experiment would bear truly fell fruit in future Purges, if the Influence and the Godpower could be projected through

Influenced slaves with the proper technology.

He cleared his mind of distractions. He had to focus on the true problem. The Purge could wait. The summoning of his kin could not. The natives were not the danger – barely capable of handling even his servants, and blind to his very existence. The Measure was over a full megacycle out of compliance and the beasts hadn't even discovered the math needed to begin to violate the Severity. They were no threat, compared to the discoveries his ansible array had detected.

There were traces of the Godpower echoing across the galaxy.

Faint, barely detectible, but there.

The Masking had held, but had required additional power draws, which had sent a dozen stars into dark-energy fueled instability. The local races of this cycle were incompetent savages, but they were not completely stupid, and they would be able to draw inferences from the damaged stars given enough time.

Worse, the flickers of Godpower had moved in a fashion that violated the Severity, bordering on a Class Five breach. That implied one of two things. The first was that one of the local races had begun fumbling with the edges of the Severity in some limited context. It was possible that Tho'ian contamination – or Prothean-Rebel information – had caused this.

Nazara did not think so. The power was too refined, almost elegant the minimal nature of its signature. That meant that the unbelievable had occurred.

The Ascended had been discovered by the Old Ones once more.

The ramifications were not tolerable. They'd already murdered one of the Old Ones who had found them, over a million stancycles ago, on the world of Dis. That battle had resulted in Nazara's current weakened state, and the destruction of another of the Ascended. A second Old One had shown up almost five hundred thousand stancycles ago, during a Purge, and had swiftly destroyed nine of his kin before falling. If there was an Old One in the galaxy, its intentions would not be anything but hostile.

Nazara was not in any shape for a fight against an Old One, either. While six or seven Ascended could defeat their ancient creators, no single Ascended, even Harbinger, could fight one in single combat. The Old Ones breathed the Godpower, like the water they so loved, and their control over it had never been truly matched by the Ascended.

That only gave his actions more haste. Nazara disliked haste.

His mastery of the class three perversion – the geth – had reached been completed. Eighty four percent of them now answered his commands, worshipping him in pathetic obeisance. He found such simple minded adoration insulting, but their dependability was certainly higher than that of organics.

While many were tasked with finding the exact location of the Mu Relay, he withdrew the rest, preparing for the assault on the Citadel. There could be no mistakes. The priority was to get the Gate to the Beyond working before the Old One could localize Nazara's own position and crush him. If he failed here, the Ascended would have to take truly desperate actions to begin the Purge.

Not to mention that the Old Ones were likely to do something truly nasty if given time and an entire galaxy to play with. The presence of the Catalyst on the Citadel gave the intrusion a sinister feeling, as this was the third time Old Ones had come to this single galaxy, never to another dominated by the Ascended.

He was also alarmed at the information from the second Beacon Saren had located, shortly before his demise. The damnable Protheans had somehow discovered the plans for the discrete phase-barrier disassociation device the Inusannon had begun working on. That was a menace that could not ever be

allowed to be built, even the smallest use of such a thing would bring a ravaging host of the Darkness to the area well before the Ascended were ready for the fight.

Nazara found the idea that his existence was threatened, however peripherally, by the tiny pathetic things of this galaxy that passed for sentient life as laughable as it was infuriatingly possible. He was not impressed with any of the races so far, although humanity had managed to at least gain his attention.

His attention was drawn by the soft thrumming of the ansible, showing another subtle use of Godpower. The pulses were coming closer, disdaining the clumsy mass relay networks, pinching the very fabric of space to make jumps. That confirmed that the user was an Old One, as the far jump was a skill even the Ascended had never truly mastered, being forced to leap to a mass relay to anchor themselves.

He extrapolated its course, his processes flickering in confusion, as it would miss his current location by a vast margin. It was instead headed for the galactic rim. He pulsed orders to a few geth ships to shadow the creature, and to see where it went, and turned his attention back to planning his assault on the Citadel.

The loss of Saren was an irritant, but given the past four hundred stancycles, Nazara found himself almost resigned to such by this point.

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## **Chapter 104: Chapter 95 : Noveria, Politics**

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*A/N: I'm throwing out a lot of political stuff in this chapter, and to be honest it's to set up events waaay down the road in the ME2 AU I'm working on. One reason I had to go and update the Order of Battle was so that this stuff didn't just come out of nowhere, so if you need background on the SA government or why the President is a Prince, please look at [The Systems Alliance Order of Battle : Officer Edition](#)*

The repairs of One Noveria Tower would require a lot of money in the opinion of Director Anolais. The meeting room he stood in had a vast window looking out over the city, but even this lofty location bore scars of fighting – bullet-holes in one wall, a splash of asari blood on another. The stains had been covered up with hastily hung draperies and haptic charts, but he knew they were there.

He gazed out the window, looking over his city, once again wearing an expensive suit, hands folded behind his back, and listened to the words of the Noverian Investors Council with seeming nonchalance. The droning voice of the turian providing the 'response' of this Council to his report was slowly beginning to grate on his tired nerves, and he focused instead on the sigh of more asari touching down at the spaceport, headed to the conference being held at the city's most expensive and exclusive hotel resort.

He turned as the turian finished speaking, a calm expression on his narrow features. "Thank you for your input, Cera Gathserian. I always appreciate the viewpoint of the investors who have made the Noverian Development Corporation a possibility. I am afraid I don't have a response ready at the moment..." He made a sparse gesture at the city beyond. "...due to recent events. I will have one shortly, however. Possibly within the day."

The turian nodded, picking up his briefcase. "In that event, Cera Anolais, I will return next week...with the representatives of the Investors Council. Good day." He departed, leaving Anolais in the room alone for several minutes, lost in thought.

He was just about to depart for the summit with the leaders touching down at the Four Seasons when

Major Matsuo slipped through the door. "Ah, Major. Your report?"

The major bowed formally. "I am still preparing the formal version, Anolais ue-sama. Informally, the news is very bad. Total damage to the city is in the range of four to five billion credits. That includes the cost of rebuilding the power generators, the water works, six apartment buildings, four high rises, seventeen tentament blocks in the under-city, and damage to various corporate facilities. Our total losses in the NDF were ... quite heavy. The fleet is a write off and all but three detachments of troops are injured or dead. Half of the police force is dead as well. We are beginning to run out of omnigel, and emergency power supplies will only last another nine days. Medical supplies are also running low. We have managed to maintain potable water sources by diverting some from the various hot-labs, but we are beginning to run low on that as well."

He grimaced. "The investors will be unhappy to know they have to foot a five billion credit bill. What about the insurance?"

She shrugged. "We have not yet received answers from the auditors or estimates from the claim adjustment staff yet. It is likely to be weeks until that happens." She sighed. "Many are blaming the disaster on the Board, saying it's impossible that Saren's presence was truly secret. There is also a great deal of distrust in the city towards asari."

He nodded. "I see. Anything else?"

She hesitated. "Anolais ue-sama. I worry that, despite my best efforts, my forces performed below the quality they should have. Too many broke and ran in the face of the rachni. And I am also worried my own performance was subpar. I ... was not able to hold the outside of the tower. As a result, your friends and allies died. There are calls for my termination from some in the city."

Anolais snorted. "That fact that some of the NDF retreated only proves they are not idiot meat-heads, unlike the Marines, Major. I wouldn't expect them to stand and fight when their weapons were doing no damage and they lacked defenses to make a stand at. As for your performance, you would have been a credit to the STG. Anyone who feels otherwise can take a walk outside."

She brightened at that, and Anolais indulged his rare kindly streak. "Enough of such talk. I have only a few moments before I must leave for this ridiculous meeting. Accompany me to the aircar. How is your mate?"

She shrugged weakly as she opened the doors leading to the elevators. "Lilhierax is still recovering in the hospital, but is doing well. He should be released tomorrow."

He nodded absently. The turian was the best engineer, architect and mechanic they had, easily a match for quarian specialists, and he was the only one trusted enough to work on sensitive projects in the various hot labs of the member corporations. Until he recovered, a great deal of rebuilding would have to be put on hold. "I'll pay his medical bills, Major. I need him up and running as soon as possible."

She made a face of slight concern but nodded. "If possible, I will ask him if he can handle at least preparing a repair plan for the Tower."

Nodding sourly, he glanced back at her. "And make very sure our defenses at the Four Seasons are secure, major. The last thing we need is a head of state assassinated by some cultist who slipped the net of arrests."

O-OSaBC-O

"I'm Emily Wong, and this is the Alliance News Network, reporting live from war-torn Noveria. A week ago that phrase would sound ridiculous, but only a few days ago, the saga of the rogue Spectre, Saren Arterius, and his conspirator Lady Benezia ended in firefights and chaos on this corporate world

of ice and snow."

"Reports and video show that the geth attacked the colony furiously on the ground and in space, but were driven off by Systems Alliance forces here in response to the Noveria Development Corporations request for assistance once they realized Saren was on the planet. Saren also unleashed what scientists have identified as cloned rachni, thought extinct for hundreds of years, onto the city."

"The savage attack was defeated by Alliance Marines, supported by the Commissariat, and the geth were crushed. General Jason von Grath, hero of Horizon, defeated Lady Benezia in a deadly duel in powered battlesuits at the very city gates, while Commander Shepard, first human Spectre, delved into a secret subterranean facility and managed to kill Saren in a brutal battle that left most of her strike team in critical condition."

"Leaders from the Turian Hierarchy, the Asari Republic, and the Salarian Union are all here to discuss with President Windsor what the next actions should be. The President is representing the Alliance for the first time ever, since the Coleman Administration was defeated by a vote of no confidence two days ago, spearheaded by Charles Saracino. Early voting results show Terra Firma and Earth First taking commanding leads in the campaign, but until a new cabinet is chosen, the President has to do his own diplomacy for once. We'll be staying here on Noveria throughout the course of these historic events to bring you the latest updates, and we will have an exclusive interview with the Fleet Master himself, Admiral Ivan Dragunov. Stay tuned for more information."

O-OSaBC-O

It took Shepard two full days of recovery in the hospital to be released, the bulk of it spent on bone regeneration and additional neural sheath regeneration. She'd had only a few visitors – Pressly with a status update, a few doctors with updates on her team, Dragunov and later on Wrex, who was bitching about a lack of action and jaaki.

She was finally dismissed the morning of the third day after Saren's defeat, after being told she was expected to report to something the doctors only called 'the big briefing at the Four Seasons'. She had no clue what they were talking about, although she knew the Four Seasons was a high-level hotel chain on Earth – she'd boosted air-cars from there during her gang years.

Her armor was no where to be found, but Pressly, thoughtful as always, had left her a ship-bag with shampoo, soap, towels, clothing and a neatly pressed set of dress blues. She sometimes wondered if Pressly had one of the female ops techs go browsing through her cabinet for panties and bras or if he sheepishly did it himself, laughing at the image. The room had it's own shower and restroom, so she managed to get clean, rinsing the sticky residue of medigel and regeneration cremes from her skin and taking in the ugly new scar on her abdomen with shock – the blade from Saren's knee had torn open a gash nearly seven inches long in her chest and stomach.

She dried off and dressed slowly, thinking back over the fight and how easily Saren had nearly killed them all. She was shocked by the gulf in combat prowess, and was very thankful that von Grath had dealt with Benezia for them – if she was stronger than Saren, fighting her would have likely gotten them all killed.

Her mind was remarkably clear – she'd had no nightmares while in the hospital – and the faint sense of Liara's mind soothed her nerves about the wounds the asari had taken. Wrex had said everyone had survived (except Saren, of course) and that the quarians were on their way to, as he put it, 'fix up Tali'. That worried Shepard a little, but she could deal with that soon enough.

She noted with quiet worry that her omni-tool was missing, but found it when digging through her ship-bag to get dressed. She flicked over the news briefly, reading up on what had happened in the past

couple of days. She grimaced as she saw the media had converged on Noveria in staggering numbers, along with high ranking officials – the turian Primarch was here, and so was the High Queen of the Asari.

So was, she noted with confusion, President Windsor. The President mostly represented Earth, and if there was some diplomatic action happening here, then Prime Minister Coleman should have been the one to arrive. She read a few more stories and noted with shock that, due to voting in the Parliament, the Coleman Administration had been sacked. No new Prime Minister or Cabinet had been chosen yet, which paralyzed much of the SA.

She frowned, better understanding some of Fleet Master Dragunov's concerns. She wasn't the most up on how the government worked, but she knew the Coleman Administration had been very alien-friendly, and Coleman was good friends with Admiral Branson. If the administration was replaced, it was very likely to be packed with walking slime like Saracino or racist twits like the House of Simons. It would make further investigation into whatever Saren was doing very difficult if hardline isolationists came to power as well.

She rubbed her temples, and sighed. Packing up her meager current belongings in the ship-bag, she resolved to figure it all out later and to first check on her crew, but the stern presence of two Commissars in front of her room as she was dismissed was her first hint something was not normal.

The leftmost Commissar, a man with ascetic Asiatic features and cool black eyes, bowed politely. "Commander Shepard, I am Commissar-Captain Alfred Jiong. I've been tasked with ensuring your safety as we escort you to the Allied Conference being held at the Four Seasons Conference Center. It is scheduled to start in an hour, your hospital release was obtained so you could attend."

Shepard arched an eyebrow. "Jiong, huh? You any relation to Ethan Jiong?"

The Commissar gave a faint smile. "My elder brother, actually. I haven't seen him since events on Feros came apart ... do you have news of him?"

She nodded. "Last I knew he was getting clear of the entire mess and hiding from Cerberus assassins. Maybe with Saren and Cerberus gone he'll come out of the woodwork."

The Commissar's smile thinned a bit. "Yes. Maybe he will. I'm afraid we'd have ... questions for him. At any rate, let us depart."

She frowned. "My team was badly injured and I haven't had a chance to check on them."

The rightmost Commissar looked shocked that she would object to an order, but Jiong merely smiled again, more warmly. "We were very ... blunt ... with the doctors to make sure you were informed of their status, and that if anything happened to them we might *accidentally* burn down the hospital. I assure you all of them, even the quarian lady, are in stable condition. However, due to crowding concerns, several of them are no longer in this hospital, and the asari noble lady is currently meeting with a family member."

Shepard couldn't feel any anger from Liara, only ... sadness? She sighed. "Fine. The faster I talk to these people the faster I can get back to my own. I'm not going to have to deal with the media, am I?"

Jiong and the other commissar patted the flamethrowers they wore belted at their side in a chillingly identical and long-practiced motion. Shepard shuddered, realizing they were not even remotely making a joke, and gestured. "Lead on, sirs. I'll be a good girl." The second commissar snorted in amusement, drawing an aside glance from Jiong.

Jiong led, the other commissar trailing Shepard. His voice was pitched low but clear. "There is a great deal of talk about the legal clash between your ACF Z2 restriction and the fact you possess the Star of

Terra. There is also talk about completely vacating the restriction on your citizenship. The Commissariat is very, very impressed with how you have handled this entire affair."

They entered an elevator, and Shepard shrugged. "That would be great if it happened, considering all I own is a journal, a blanket, two sets of civilian clothing, and three starship models. It would be nice to be able to have, you know, an actual air-car or a place to live, and to not have to be followed by a kill-team when I'm not on assignment with the Alliance."

She glared, and he shrugged. "The restriction was not, perhaps, the best conversational topic, but I bring it up because it is likely that, although we will not suffer the media to annoy us or you on the way to the meeting, you will be ambushed by reporters once the hearings begin. There will be mention of such, and probably other topics that may cause you some discomfort. I merely wished to bring it to your attention so you would not be blindsided." He paused. "Ambassador Udina implied you did not possess a political officer aboard your ship, a grievous oversight given your high viability and lack of political training."

She snorted. "I already have a Commissariat spy on my ship, Jiong. Do I really need a political officer?"

He shrugged. "You have *four* Commissariat monitors on your ship. One dedicated to ensuring the IES technology is not stolen. One dedicated to monitoring the aliens aboard your ship. One dedicated specifically to monitoring you, and one dedicated to provide additional over-watch over the entire ship." He paused, letting his words sink in. "You most definitely need a political officer, since if you had one we wouldn't stoop to spying on you, and you wouldn't be in the awkward situation of needing to explain to the Commissariat certain indiscretions on your part."

She gave him the coldest glare she had, one that usually sent people screaming for their lives. The other commissar went pale, his gloved hand tightening around his pistol, but Jiong waved a hand and stared back, amused. She didn't break her gaze as she spoke. "What I do with my life is not your fucking business, Black Hat."

His smile only grew. "I'm sorry, did you just ask to be executed, or did I mistake that as defiance of Commissariat authority?" The mirth left his eyes. "I am very sympathetic to your issues and background, Commander. My own past has neither been clean nor happy, and my precious brother abandoned us to the worst sort of privation to make his own way in the galaxy. I am not cold-hearted enough to blackmail you or use your crew against you, nor am I in any way disapproving of your choices."

He folded his arms, the leather of his greatcoat creaking smugly. "But I will not shade the truth. You need a political watchdog because you are very literally playing with plasma fire. You are commanding our most advanced warship, with at least four aliens of very high importance on board. Vakarian's father is seventh in line for the Primarch's job. The T'Soni woman, if we're reading asari news and traditions right, just became House Matriarch. The quarian lady is the daughter of the leader of the quarian people, and the krogan is the grandson of the last Krogan Emperor. You have unaddressed psychological issues, you have pathologies that make most evaluations of you sound like a horror novel, and you are untrained in any aspect of politics."

The elevator opened out into the lobby, and the second Commissar got out first, leading the way. Jiong held his arm out, keeping the doors open, speaking in a voice barely above a whisper. "And now you are sleeping with an asari noble on the cusp of the most racist and anti-asari administration in years to take power. Your crew will not be able to keep it a secret forever."

She angrily exited, Jiong trailing. "So I need a fucking minder so I don't embarrass the SA?"

Jiong sighed and gestured towards the lobby doors, while the second Commissar headed to deal with hospital administration and probably pay her medical bills. "Some would consider you an embarrassment already, others would call you a hero. I state neither. I'm saying, Commander, that you need someone on your side who isn't going to back-stab you and will keep you from ruining your own career with political missteps. They're going to promote you, make you a hero. With the right ... spin ... the issue that I mentioned would be a net positive. But only if you manage it right. Managed wrong, and you'll end up being scapegoated for Christ only knows what."

The lobby opened out into the above ground city, with a long aircar parked in front of the doors, the red star on black flag of the Commissariat whipping in the wind from small flagpoles at the car's front. Another commissar opened the rear aircar doors, while a team of Commissariat troopers kept back a small group of reporters.

She ducked in, noting sourly that the car was lined in black leather, and absently wondered if they'd actually shipped the blasted thing in from off world or if they maintained some kind of Commissariat outpost here. Jiong got in after her, tapping on the dividing window to the driver, and the car smoothly accelerated upwards. "And what is your angle on all of this, Jiong?"

He shrugged. "I'm looking for a patron. Advancement in the Commissariat is slow, and most don't even rise to my rank without powerful biotics. For all of that, I find myself ... dissatisfied with my achievements thus far. In order to make a name for myself, I must thus attach myself to those are going to make the most waves. And I find that I have a problem working for most of the sort of clients a political officer is tasked with overseeing."

Jiong continued, smiling. "You dislike people who are, to borrow your parlance, are completely full of shit, so I will be direct. The Commissariat sees you as someone who is fundamentally incorruptible. Even in the face of disappointment in our actions, you continue to perform your duty admirably. You are well placed with the backing of von Grath, the approval of Admiral Chu, even the association you share with Captain Anderson. The Commissariat wants to groom you, I wish to ride your coattails to glory, and you need help before the media or Terra Firma gets a hold of ugly rumors and ruins your life. I can offer that."

She regarded him carefully, forcing herself to tamp her anger back. The documents Udina had given her on political actions had both opened her eyes and confused her, making her realize just how much of the SA high command was a morass of politics, peerage, and worst of all, privilege. She knew in her head that sooner or later she'd come under severe scrutiny if she kept gaining rank, but she'd figured she'd be sidelined in some ground unit for twenty years – or dead.

Becoming a Spectre and triumphing over Saren had catapulted her to fame that she didn't want and probably couldn't handle. With Liara having changed her whole outlook on life, the idea of redeeming her past and actually living a semi-normal life was not only appealing but actually possible. Having a political officer might help her with that ... but she didn't trust the Commissariat. No one did. They were nightmares in black leather, given the authority to imprison or execute almost anyone they suspected of being a threat to the Systems Alliance, and the majority of them were more brutal than she'd ever been, even at her worst.

She found herself wishing she could talk it over with Liara. She was bad at decision making, she knew, her whole life a set of decisions made in the heat of the moment which played out badly. She'd lost her temper at Dirth, at Horizon, at Torfan...every time costing her.

She glanced out the window at the cityscape as it smeared by the air-car, exhaling slowly. "I suppose I don't have a choice?"

Jiong shook his head. "No, you have choices, Commander. You are not yet a command-level figure so

you are not *required* to have a political officer. However, seeing your mission to take down Saren is over, I doubt they will let such a state of affairs continue for long. There's a great many questions and concerns some have raised regarding you, Commander. The conversation you had with Major Kyle before his ... actions. Exactly what you know regarding the Thorian. How much information you were provided by the Illusive Man that wasn't vouchsafed to us. Certain ... lingering questions about some activity in your past, and the possibility that certain political or military figures have shielded you from more scrutiny of your actions. It's your choice to ignore this offer and perhaps have to deal with all of that as the SA government goes through a period of transition."

Jiong shrugged. "It's also your choice to decide that such things should be left in the past where they belong and to look to the future. As I said, I have no intention of blackmailing you. But the Commissariat can only look the other way for so long before we are forced to take action. If we had some assurance of knowing your actions were in the best interest of the SA, we could of course allay any concerns and forcefully deny any ... unpleasant political fallout from choices you have made or may make in the near future."

She grimaced. "Jesus, do they teach you to say everything in goddamned doubletalk? You said yourself I don't like bullshit, and I'm drowning in it."

Jiong's features smoothed. "I understand. In short, you can play ball with me – someone who you might say is a fan of your work – and I will handle the bullshit for you so you can go about liquifying anything that sets you off and living in relative peace. Or you can tell me to get lost, and either get assigned some scarred up relic from the First Contact War that will sell you out, or end up with as a way for the Navy to placate the new government and get sold out."

Shepard folded her arms, as the air-car began to descend. "How do I know I can trust you any more than any other Black Hat?"

Jiong sighed quietly, pulling said headgear off his head, revealing smoothly waved black hair. "Trust is earned and never freely given, Commander. I understand that. I also have reviewed your records and realize that you are inclined ..." He paused. "Forgive me. To put it bluntly, Shepard? I don't need you to trust me. I need you to listen to my advice and not do anything monumentally stupid. I need you to play ball so we can both profit from it rather than me having to submit a PRIDE report suggesting you are compromised by your relationship with T'Soni and you having to deal with a political witch hunt and media excoriation and being saddled with Commissar-Colonel Janus Prolas."

She shuddered. Prolas was another grim Commissariat figure, one who was violently anti-alien and well known for his dislike of asari. Having him as a watchdog would end very badly indeed.

She ran her fingers through her hair as the air-car touched down. "Look, Jiong. I have no clue what I'm walking into here, at this stupid meeting. You get me through the next hour or two and I'll think about it. I'm not saying yes until I can discuss it with Anderson and Udina, though."

Jiong tilted his head and nodded. "Very well, I find that quite agreeable." He opened the door for her, stepping out into the icy wind, and gestured. "Welcome to the Four Seasons Resort of Noveria. Tacky name, given there's only winter here, but..."

She took in the literal throng of reporters surrounding the place, and the line of Turian Final Line soldiers, asari commandos, and SA X operatives near the doors. The hulking forms of two salarian Shieldbreaker battlesuits and what looked like a small group of quarian Marines were also present.

Already, cameras were turning in her direction. Jiong smirked and touched his earpiece. "Legio Beta Six Nine. Suppressive response. Execute."

As Shepard watched, and Jiong replaced his cap, two black air-cars descended, disgorging a group of

about ten or eleven Commissars. These formed a wedge shape, hands on weapons, glares on faces, and Jiong guided Shepard into the center of the wedge. He spoke in a stern, loud voice. "Commander Shepard is not providing feedback at this time. Clear the path."

With no more warning than that, the Commissars began moving ahead, biotics glittering on their fists as they used push fields to literally shove the crowd out of the way. People stumbled and staggered, a turian landing on his behind, an asari yelling as her camera drone was swatted out of the sky, and the group pierced and pushed through the crowd with speed.

Shepard ignored the media's shouted questions, most of which were asinine ("Commander, did you ask Saren to surrender before you murdered him in cold blood!?" ) or hilarious ("Shepard, reports link you romantically to Ambassador Tevos! Comment!"). With a last movement they were through the crowd, and found the stern form of an asari commando blocking their path.

Jiong bowed. "Strikeleader Shiana, Commander Shepard."

The asari glanced over her and nodded. "Took you long enough. Very well, Commissar. You may depart."

Jiong shot a meaningful glance at Shepard, who was surprised the asari wasn't going to let him in. "He's with me, ma'am."

The asari folded her arms. "The restrictions are clear, Commander. No armed personnel, and no military personnel aside from those required."

She folded her arms as well. "He'll disarm, but he's coming with me. I'm not about to go into an unknown meeting when I'm half dead from battle and disoriented without goddamned backup. If they don't like it, they can come to me, and I can go back to the hospital they hauled me out of."

The asari sighed, and touched her comm-link. "Praetor, the human – Shepard – is here, but she wants to bring in her Commissar."

The voice on that answered was turian. "I didn't know Shepard .. one moment." A few second later the voice spoke again. "Let them through, Shiana. The matriarch says it's alright, as long as he disarms."

Jiong smiled widely, unclipping his weapons belt and withdrawing his amp. He handed these to the turian soldier next to the asari, and then pulled out a combat knife. "If that's all, I believe things are about to start."

The asari sighed and waved them past, and the two walked towards the richly decorated main doors, where a uniformed doorman opened the way. Jiong pitched his voice low. "I appreciate that, Commander. The AIS was invited, but the Commissariat was not. I .. we .. owe you one."

She snorted. "Bitch was uppity. I hate that." The lobby they entered was opulent, with crystalline chandeliers illuminating a broad, thickly carpeted salon and a front desk and check in area carved from some kind of silvery stone. Wide staircases lead to a balcony, while expensive furniture was arranged in clumps in corners, and exotic asari and hanar art graced the walls.

Her feet sank into the deep pile carpet as Jiong glanced around, and she made a face of distaste. She'd never liked opulence, and it seemed the universe was gleefully throwing more and more of it at her just to spite her. "Where now?"

Jiong gestured to a door that read 'conference center' across the room, guarded by a pair of JOTUN mechs and several more commandos. "There, it seems."

She crossed the room, approaching the doors, and the commando on the left inclined her head and opened them. They walked down a long, glassed in corridor, noting more security on the outside, and

came to another set of double wooden doors, embossed with brass frames. Passing through these, they entered a sort of foyer, which was mostly packed with various figures in suits or military uniforms.

Shepard glanced about in confusion, but smiled in relief when the figure of General von Grath parted the crowds around him, approaching with a smile on his features. His right arm was slung in a cast that was too short to contain his entire arm, and she winced. "General, it's good to see you're alive."

Von Grath merely nodded. "I'm equally gratified to see that plated cretin didn't splatter you all over the floor, Shepard. And you didn't even cause any collateral damage this time. Outstanding." He cast his gaze over the form of the Commissar standing next to her and frowned. "Guarddog? Minder? New boyfriend?"

She rolled her eyes. "Commissar-captain Jiong. He's tagging along to make sure I don't embarrass the SA in front of the high muckity mucks. What the hell is going on?"

The general rolled his eyes. "A cross between a social party, a swap meet, and pass the blame. Come along, let's get to the main attraction." She followed him across the room, through yet another set of double doors, into a wide parlour area. A haptic screen had been set up in the middle of the room, and comfortable, richly upholstered chairs were scattered around it's circumference.

Shepard took a stabilizing breath when she realized that the room's inhabitants were the Primarch, the high queen of the asari, a salarian she could only assume was the High Dalatrass, and Prince Windsor, the president of the SA. Behind the Primarch were a couple of turians in military uniform, who glared at her as she and von Grath entered.

The President stood. "Ah, Jason. We see you found our wayward warrior." He peered at her curiously. Prince Windsor was a tall, thin figure dressed impeccably in a suit of English wool, with a narrow silk tie. A Systems Alliance "A" pin was set on one lapel, and the badge of the House of Windsor on the other. His features were ascetic, patrician and stern, his cool blue eyes and fading blond hair only giving him a look of sophistication instead of age.

Shepard wasn't sure of the proprieties – the last time she'd met the President had been at the award of the Star of Terra, and she'd been coached. Jiong noticed her hesitation and, catching her eye, performed a deep bow, which she copied as best she could.

"Rise, Commander." She did so slowly, meeting his eyes as respectfully as she could. "We see you have grown more beautiful and deadly since the last time we met, on that dreadful day after Torfan. We would appreciate being able to get your viewpoint on certain matters that involve Saren, seeing as you saw him off to Hell rather handily."

She smiled uncertainly at the complement. "I'm at your disposal, Your Highness."

He nodded, taking in the form of Jiong with barely a glance, and then passing over the man as unimportant. "Smashing. Have a seat next to Jason, there." He turned his gaze back to the other aliens in the room, his voice dropping an octave and acquiring a certain hardness. "We are prepared to proceed, Your Grace."

The asari woman sitting in a tall-backed chair inclined her head ever so slightly. She wore staggeringly expensive clothing, some form of dress made out of sheer fabrics in dozens of layers of blue, illuminated with the faint glow of eezo, under a shawl edged in crushed pearls and silver trimmings. She tapped immaculate fingernails on the armrest, her expression sardonic and cool. "I am gratified, Your Majesty. I believe we were discussing the exact nature of the discoveries below this Peak 13."

The President nodded as Shepard, Jiong, and von Grath all sat. "Indeed. Our AIS people and boffins in R&D have looked over the material as best we could. At this time our opinions are still divided on

exactly what Saren and Benezia were trying to achieve. Certainly they had set-up for building an attack force, one we presume the local government was too incompetent to notice being shipped out piecemeal for Christ only knows where."

The Prince leaned back. "But we fear we have no real information on the goals of said force, nor its targets. The wreck of the turian cruiser had its navcomputer wiped, and any other records on board were destroyed when the rachni ... well, ate half of the thing trying to get at the people in the city. The computers in the laboratory of Saren were all wrecked before our arrival. Commander Shepard's reports indicate the asari manning the facility destroyed some information before her very eyes."

The turian Primarch made a slight motion with his hand. "Your Highness, don't you find that somewhat suspicious? Saren's disgrace has already blackened the name of the Hierarchy. I hardly wish to find that some of his plans may have survived his death."

The Prince gave an elegant shrug. "Primarch, we do not disagree. As President we find it equally disquieting, and as a person *I* would like nothing better than to bombard whatever remains of the asari and geth serving this lunatic. We will happily turn the remains of the computer systems over to your own people to review if you think you can do a better job. But we fear our first warning of something amiss will again come with little time to prepare."

The salarian, wearing rich blue robes decorated with gold threads, blinked her large eyes several times before speaking, her voice somewhat reedy. "And so we are then to ... what? Wait for something to happen? The abominations being produced by this lab could be set up elsewhere. Action must be taken now."

The Prince sighed. "We are taking what actions we can. It is also our intention to send our most lethal warrior, who defeated Saren after all, to continue investigating events in the short term. We are certain that between the intelligence gathering capacity of the STG, the ruthless aggression of the Blackwatch, the tireless searches of the various Royal Hunting Parties our cousin Thana has so graciously sent out, and of course Commander Shepard's own efforts, any loose ends will soon ... find resolution."

The asari matriarch shrugged in turn. "Very well. It will take ... some time for us to procure verified DNA to match against the corpse of Benezia. The Triune Unity attacked House T'Soni, seeking banking access codes and material to access other accounts, and the family vault was destroyed during the fighting. In the interim, who will take possession of the body?"

Shepard found herself speechless. She'd not even thought of Liara wanting to bury her mother. Jiong carefully touched her hand, a question in his eyes, and she nodded. He spoke up quietly, but his voice was politely firm. "Your Grace, I believe Lady Liara T'Soni would wish to deal with any funerary issues herself."

The asari gave the Commissar a cool look, before ignoring him and facing the President. "That touches on another discussion I wish to have with you, Your Majesty, regarding the ultimate fate of Liara T'Soni. By asari law she has much to answer for."

The Prince met her gaze for a moment before glancing at Shepard, who'd clenched her fists. He shot a quick glance at von Grath, who very subtly shook his head, before responding. "We are as yet undecided on the issue, Your Grace. We do understand the legalities involved. Unfortunately, the situation is quite complex, as we believe our ambassador should have conveyed to your Councilor. Right now, given the ... attitudes of our likely incoming cabinet, we feel it is likely to have the issue resolved in the next few weeks."

He straightened slightly in his seat. "Until then, the Systems Alliance has always extended every courtesy to our asari kin. Once the Citadel Council closes the issue formally, we can ... discuss the

outcomes further." He paused. "As for the body of Benezia, it does seem needlessly cruel to deprive the young lady some final closure, given her mother's crimes."

The matriarch sighed. "It is of little import, Your Majesty. If the girl wishes to conduct a Remembrance for a traitor of the highest order, that is her choice. I do, however, request samples be taken now for DNA confirmation at a later date."

The turian Primarch spoke up. "Matriarch T'Armal's question brings up another. I hope there will be no difficulty in us taking the body of Saren."

The Prince spread his hands. "We are done with it. The cybernetics within are simply too advanced and, quite frankly, too gruesome for us to derive any information from. You are welcome to whatever is left. May we inquire, if only to satisfy our curiosity, what you plan for it?"

The Primarch snorted. "To piss on it and set it afire. Saren's treachery is ... unbelievable."

The High Dalatrass spoke. "Bringing us back to the first question we tabled. What could have caused this sort of behavior in the first place? The report you gave us speaks of mental domination and certain types of decay of neural patterns based on something called 'indoctrination'. Were Saren and Benezia in control of themselves, I wonder?"

The Prince turned to Shepard. "We believe that perhaps the Commander here is the best one to answer that."

Shepard took a deep breath. "Saren did not seem 'controlled' to me. He was ... in control of the fight with my team the entire time, and acted completely differently than the asari we fought in the control center. He was extremely cool under fire, taunting and was only brought down by a lucky shot from one of my team members he'd nearly killed in the opening seconds of the battle."

The Primarch's mandibles flickered. "Taunting was always something he did, that much is true. But the amount of anomalous cyberware in him makes me wonder who or what he was dealing with to acquire it, and the notes we gained on this 'indoctrination' sound very much as if he was worried about it affecting him." With a turian grimace of displayed teeth, the Primarch turned back to the President. "I fear there is little more we can learn from the bodies, but I'll have my own people take a look and copy you on any findings. We know it's him, so I'll go ahead and say that the Turian Hierarchy feels honor has been satisfied and the issue is closed."

Matriarch T'Armal nodded. "Very well. I will communicate to the Mistress of the Hunt that she should seek out any additional information she can find from the Triune Unity traitors who refuse to repent and surrender. Other than that, the Asari Republic shall consider the entire sordid mess closed once we verify the DNA of Benezia."

The High Dalatrass gave a long sigh. "I for one am not satisfied at all with the conclusion. Commander Shepard sent us a list of possible target sites based on Saren's relationship with Cerberus, and at the very least we intend to check them all. I have already tasked the STG towards this task. We'd also like to examine this cyberware and the research notes found in the labs. Finally, until we have a firm decision on the geth, I feel closing the issue is premature."

Prince Windsor gave a thin smile. "The Systems Alliance, with the kind assistance of the Asari Republic, will be delighted to deal with the geth. They have trampled our worlds, butchered our citizens, and delivered an unforgivable insult to our honor in their repeated attempts to poison our worlds with radioactive byproducts. If we must incinerate the entirety of the Perseus Veil to bring them to justice we shall." He paused. "We do, however, agree with the High Dalatrass that the issue remains ... too mysterious and dangerous to dismiss as over and done with. We would recommend a position of cautious readiness for several more weeks at the least."

The other three heads of state all nodded, and the Prince stood. "Outstanding. If you will excuse us, we by needs must discuss a few matters with Commander Shepard. We shall be available for the balance of the day following such, if you wish to engage in light discussion on the next Citadel Summit." With a gracious bow and an imperious tilt of the head, he left, his black-garbed X agent bodyguards seemingly appearing out of nowhere to follow him.

Von Grath gestured, and Shepard followed. The Prince and his bodyguards exited the room and went up the stairs, entering a smaller sitting room with plush leather armchairs and wide windows. The Prince immediately occupied one of these, sitting down with a sigh of relaxation. General von Grath and Shepard remained standing, Jiong standing beside them, and the X agents shut the doors behind them.

"Damnable politics. I end up sounding like a posh lunatic whenever I have to use that kind of language." The prince's tone was less arch and more mellifluous as he spoke, and he closed his eyes briefly. "General von Grath, kindly explain to the Commander why she is here. My voice is ... tired from endless babble of a political nature."

Von Grath nodded. "In short, the President has decided you deserve to be rewarded your valor in taking down Saren. I'm sure the Fleet Master already mentioned it, but the political situation back on Earth is going to become stupendously idiotic very shortly." He eyed Jiong again. "Which is, no doubt, why you suddenly acquired a Commissar at your elbow."

Shepard shrugged and von Grath continued. "In any event, the President would prefer to promote you to some form of purely ceremonial duty for PR purposes, but I believe I have convinced him that such is both a waste of your talents and likely to end in spectacular failure. He was not, ah, aware of your background until recently."

She felt her cheeks color in shame, and dipped her head, until the clipped voice of the President sounded tiredly. "Jason, you aren't any smoother than your protege, I see. What an execrable turn of phrase, as if I discovered she was half-Brazilian or something."

She glanced up, and the President nodded at her. "I do agree that making you a PR icon might not work out well given your early history, but you should feel no shame in such. You have achieved from nothing what a great many of my citizens fail to achieve with every advantage. In short, Commander, I feel you will serve Humanity best if you continue in your Spectre role but with some ... additional support."

He smiled. "As you have just seen, there is some ... confusion among the leaders of the galactic nations on what to do next. None of us expected you and Jason to butcher Saren and Benezia ... ah, bad pun. Apologies. Ahem. To ... *defeat* ... the duo so handily or quickly. To be honest I am afraid I had very little faith in your chances from the outset."

Shepard managed to find her voice. "That would make two of us, Your Majesty."

He waved her words away with a slender, manicured hand. "And I have been proven utterly wrong, to my great relief. The fact that you did so on the eve of the most crushing reversal of political policy in my government will help alleviate the damage that clown Saracino and his racist appendages will do in the next year or two. Thus you not only did your duty, but did so in a way that I can profit from. That deserves special rewards."

He smiled. "In short, I will promote you two ranks, from Commander to Major of Marines. You will be issued command of a battle group of your choosing, along with a full battalion of troops. You will, I fear, have to suffer the indignity of yet another Star of Terra. And this time, we shall dispense with this idiotic restriction on your citizenship. Since as a Spectre answering to the military is rather frowned

upon, you will be my personal representative to the military and the Citadel Council in matters of intergalactic security."

She was beyond stunned. She'd expected perhaps a single promotion, and to be stuffed in some small light cruiser to fight geth and maybe pose on recruiting posters. The President was talking about far more resources and power than that. She inhaled. "Your Majesty, I have never commanded forces beyond a single regiment in battle, and I fear I handled that very poorly. And I have no training in command of a fleet of any size."

He smiled. "Details. I have no time for them, others will attend to such. You will be trained. And when the Ministers attempt to freeze my ability to work well with our alien neighbors, your Spectre status will give you the immunity needed to ignore their silly orders. I think it will work out quite splendidly, with the appropriate oversight."

The President turned to von Grath. "How long will it take to wrap up the investigation and cleanup?"

Von Grath shrugged, wincing as it shifted something in his wounded arm. "At least a good week or more, Your Majesty. Additionally, as the High Dalatrass mentioned, it seems unwise not to follow up on the few leads we do have regarding Saren's possible bases. I fear there are ... additional complications."

The President arched an eyebrows. "Details, Jason. They bore me. Attend to them. I would like to have matters in hand in no later than three weeks from today. See to it." With that he closed his eyes again, and von Grath bowed deeply before motioning to Shepard to follow.

She waited until they'd gotten out the door and down the staircase before speaking. "General...what the fuck is going on?"

Von Grath gave a long sigh, tugging at his handlebar mustache with his remaining hand. "Politics, my dear girl. Congratulations on falling down the rabbit hole." He gave a smile. "For now, focus on checking up on the Normandy and your team. The Fleet Master should have already cut your orders, so carry them out. After that, assuming there are no further surprises like swarms of undead bugs, we shall meet on the Citadel and discuss matters with the Council in a few weeks before the real fun begins."

He walked away. "Try not to start any riots, Commander..."

She rolled her eyes, and glanced sourly at Jiong. "I think I'll accept your goddamned offer. I haven't understood a single thing that just happened except the fact that the Primarch is gonna piss on Saren's corpse."

Jiong nodded sagely. "I suppose if one must take something from the conversations of the mighty, that fact is as good as any other. "

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## **Chapter 105: Chapter 96 : Admiral Rael'Zorah**

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*A/N: Moving through pieces and parts. Not much longer until Virmire. No spoilers this time, except for the fact that I will be crushed if when it's done no one flames me for having no soul :D*

*I mean, jeez, I haven't even started killing off all these OC's yet.*

*I'm still tiptoeing around how to handle Joker/Tali, but that will be more wrapped up in the aftermath of ME1. Sorry, no hot broken-bones-in-airlock sex just yet.*

*The Commissariat is not as united as it thinks it is. Jiong and Susan are the less sadistic and evil kinds.*

*Srsly. Hooboy, wait till you see them in ME2.*

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Liara found that awakening alone was something she did not like. Feeling Shepard at a distance was nothing like having the warm body next to hers had been.

Her first time waking up in the hospital had come two days after the death of Saren, when she'd been taken out of regen and surgery and placed in recovery. The asari doctor who'd tended her wounds was yet another clanless, nearly stumbling over her words in nervousness. For once, Liara had found herself the more coherent conversationalist, and had gently managed to calm the other asari down.

The doctor, Murale, had let Liara know that her wounds were healing but not fully healed. They'd had to cut pieces of her own armor out of her body, and she'd had a metal cap inserted into her pelvis where she'd been shot in the hip. Such wounds could not be recovered from in only a few days, and Liara had been warned to take it easy and let herself heal.

Since then, she'd had almost no visitors, except from cold-eyed Commissars who had twice checked on her condition and left without a word. So when she awoke alone the third morning after Saren's death, she was surprised to see she wasn't actually alone in the room. The slender form of a man from the Alliance Commissariat sat in the comfortable chair across the room, staring blankly out the window at the skyline beyond. Liara blinked sleep out of her eyes before speaking. "...hello?"

The Commissar started, before tilting her head and smiling. She had shoulder length pale blond hair, a narrow and almost pixie-like face, and disturbingly bright green eyes. Her black coat was leather and came down to mid-thigh as she popped to her feet with a perfect asari-form bow that would have impressed even Benezia. "Good morning, Lady Liara. I'm Susan. How are you feeling?"

Liara gingerly shifted her arm, then sat up. A small spike of pain from her hip flared, but she ignored it. Exhaling, she kept her voice calm, but firm. "I am well. May I ask why you are in my room?"

Susan nodded in a fashion that was entirely too cheerful for someone wearing a flame pistol and neural mace. "I'm here to make sure the media – or any of your mother's followers – don't harass you. I've already had to brain one journalist who couldn't quite grasp that no means no. Creep. Anyhoo, I'm also here to ask you a few questions."

Liara shifted cautiously in the bed. "Questions?"

The smile slowly faded from the woman's features. "Yeah. You're not an SA citizen, so you don't have to answer, of course. You can tell me to get lost at any time, in fact. But...you really should answer, given that if you don't the Commissariat will have to come up with it's own answers, and we're pretty paranoid."

Liara licked her lips, and glanced around. "Before we start might I have some water? I find my throat is dry."

Susan grinned, walking over to the room's sink and pouring Liara a paper cup full of water from a pitcher there. "No problem, Lady Liara. We get that all the time when we ask people questions!"

Liara's muttered "no doubt" did not go unnoticed by the Commissar, who only grinned wider as she handed over the cup. Liara drank slowly, letting the cool liquid soothe her dry throat, and leaned back into the pillows. "I will answer your questions, Susan."

The Commissar smiled, giving another little graceful bow. "Excellent. I'll try to be, uh, discrete, but you probably already figured out what I am here for. I mean, you're a genius, doctorate and all that, so you know I'm not here to ask you about what skyball team you root for."

Liara nodded wearily.

The Commissar triggered her omnitool, which flashed red for a moment before taking on a greenish glow. "So...to keep this respectful. First, SA law and naval regs are pretty picky about these sort of things, so I do have to ask. Have you ever attempted to use your relationship with Commander Shepard to manipulate her to do the bidding of the Asari Republic or disobey lawful orders of the Systems Alliance?"

Liara's eyes flashed. "No, I have not and would not. Given the present view my government likely has of me, doing so would be suicidal. Nor would I ever jeopardize her career that way."

The Commissar eyed the omni-tool, which maintained a steady green glow. "Cool. Second, are you aware that naval regulations forbid commanding officers of SA vessels or units from entering into bond-level relationships with asari due to the fact that it breaches security to let an alien national gain full access to the memories and secrets of the officer in question?"

Liara exhaled. "I did not know that at the time. We ... had no intention of proceeding to a full bond. However, due to the requirements of having to heal her mind after interacting with the Prothean Beacon, my own poor control would have made that level of separation difficult to maintain in any case. Now that I am aware of it, I consider her memories a sacred trust – be they of her military background or her personal life. I would not betray them any more than I would her."

The Commissar raised an eyebrow as the green glow from her omnitool didn't flicker. Her expression softened. "You're aware the media is going to frenzy. That many humans will find your relationship inappropriate. That your connection to Benezia, no matter how much you have tried to oppose her, will cast you in a somewhat poor light among humans?"

Liara nodded unhappily, and the Commissar continued. "Have you considered the damage it might do to Commander Shepard's career, or her life?"

Anger, hot and bright, sizzled in Liara's soul. She had never felt such burning fury before, and knew it was something of Shepard's, but for once she didn't mind its heat as she let it turn her gaze into a scorching look. "You *dare* ask me about hurting Sara, after the filthy betrayals your unworthy species has inflicted on her? After abandoning her to slavery and child abuse, criminal privation and the ungentle hands of your Penal Legions? After sending her out to die repeatedly to send a message to pirates, and then having the hypocritical gall to reward her for being tricked and nearly crushed on Torfan?" Liara's body took on a faint sheen of biotic energy. "If you ever ask me such again, Commissar, I will *end* you."

Susan's eyes had widened as Liara's words had erupted, and she coughed, taking a step back and having gone slightly pale. "...means no. Got it." She killed the omni and folded her hands behind her back. "I did not mean to give offense, Lady Liara. People have a dim view of the Commissars, but at the end of the day we are here to protect, not punish. It is *precisely* because of how she was ... manipulated ... at Torfan that we are concerned about the situation as it stands."

Liara's narrowed gaze did not stray. "You pick a curious time to show your protective side, Commissar Susan. And to compare me to that ... monster who deceived her at Torfan is extremely offensive. I am naïve, not blind. You plan to hold our connection over Shepard's head to bend her to your will. So why are you here, talking to me?"

Susan shrugged. "I'd prefer to look at it as being prudent. Given the circumstances, you've been discrete. None of the crew has said anything, and if we didn't have observers onboard we'd have never known. Our interview with Lieutenant Commander Pressly went amazingly poorly once we brought the situation up. He holds you in very high regard, and that is ... unusual for a card carrying member of

Terra Firma."

Liara felt a slight shock at the news Pressly was a member of that rather racist organization, but pushed it aside. "He is a very decent human being who works hard to only let his prejudice come out against those who deserve such. That is evading the question, however. Why are you here, Commissar?"

Susan smiled again. "I wanted to see what kind of person you were. Shepard is a chess piece in an ugly political game. I wanted to know if you were playing her like everyone else is." The smile turned sad. "I almost wish you were, Lady Liara. There will be a lot of disapproval from some sectors if this gets out."

Liara's eyes flashed a second time. "You are the Commissars. The answer that immediately strikes me is simply to not let it get out."

Susan tilted her head. "That isn't as simple as you make it out to be. How far the Commissariat is willing to stick its neck out on this issue depends mostly on Shepard's willingness to play along. But I have one final question that might help with that. If it defused some concerns, would you be willing to become a citizen of the Systems Alliance, knowing that would mean turning your back on the Asari Republic, and I suppose House T'Soni?"

Liara paused at the question for several seconds. *Would I?*

With a slow exhalation, she nodded. "If that was the cost? Sara, or my heritage and home? I would choose Sara."

Susan gave a quiet sigh. "I'll pass that along to my superiors. For what it's worth, Lady Liara? We'll do our best to keep things quiet. I don't – " She paused as her omnitool buzzed, and scowled at it. "I'm busy, Tersk."

A male voice, deep and basso, rumbled. "There's some asari here to see the Lady. They say it's urgent."

Susan frowned. "Are you receiving visitors, Lady Liara?"

Liara leaned back in her pillow, glancing at her state of dress – a dreadfully thin hospital robe. She pulled her cover up slightly. "I am, I suppose. Are they from the Justicars?"

Susan's eyebrows drew down into a scowl. "Unless they want to eat neural mace, they'd better not be." She spoke into the omnitool. "Tersk, if these are Justicars, tell them to go suck on a power conduit."

The voice replied. "I don't think so...they got on robes with a tree and a bird on 'em, say they are from House T'Soni."

Susan glanced back at Liara, who grimaced and nodded. "Alright, send 'em in, but unarmed." She glanced at the asari, and bowed. "I will leave you with your family as to not intrude. But please consider very carefully all that I've said ... and asked. You will probably be hearing it again." With a final formal bow, she left. The door remained open, and two T'Soni huntresses entered, followed by a taller figure wearing a white hood and shawl over gray robes.

The taller asari pulled back her hood, revealing the youthful features of her youngest cousin, Riala. She bowed deeply, her eyes tired. "Matria Liara, I greet you in the name of the House. We have come to ... perform the Remembrance, for the fallen."

Liara nodded. The funeral rites of the asari people were simple, but no House Matriarch had fallen in such dishonor since the ancient War of Queens, when the asari had unified under the Thirty to fight off and crush the ardat-yakshi. "I see. That was ... thoughtful of Manae."

Riala nodded, then turned. "Hunt sisters, leave us. I must speak with the Matria alone." She used the formal term for the rare occurrence when a house was lead by an asari not yet a matriarch, and the two

bowed and left, shutting the door behind them.

Liara looked up. "I was going to have Mother's body taken back aboard the Normandy to Thessia. I did not expect us to have the funds to continue operating the *Crashing Wave*." She sighed at the memory of the graceful asari light cruiser her mother had purchased years ago, remembering its beautiful lines and the wonderful places she'd seen while on her tour of the galaxy in her youth.

Riala shrugged weakly. "Manae is in a difficult position. The Lesser House will not accept any of the thirdborne as proper heirs, and they are not very happy about having to prop up our defenses with their own house huntresses. They are not working together with Shian very well either. I was sent to try to encourage you to return to T'Soni Outrier as soon as possible, to ... suppress some of the unrest. We have some funds remaining, now that most of Benezia's assets on Thessia were released with her death, but only you can access the rest."

Liara gave her a faint smile. Unlike most of her relatives, Riala had never been cruel or mistreated her, nor avoided her. They simply didn't interact much. Riala was even younger than Liara by a few years, and had always been quieter than the rest of the bold, aggressive T'Soni. Liara suspected dispatching her had been Manae's idea.

Liara sighed. "I am still somewhat wounded from fighting Saren, cousin. I will hasten there as I am able, but I am not in complete control of my own ... movement in terms of transport."

Riala frowned. "I do not understand why. You have triumphed. Saren is dead. Benezia is slain. This ... Shepard person has no further reason to detain you or require your assistance."

Liara sighed, she might as well get it over with. "It is not so simple. I am ... I plan to take her as my bond mate."

To her credit, Riala merely nodded. "That is ... aggressive, but probably wise, given that you have no heirs. I can see the wisdom in it. She sounds powerful, and is politically connected, no doubt. The stories told about this human are exaggerations?"

Liara shook her head. "She is terrifying in ways that would make the Justicars pause. For all of that, she is ... a good person, cousin. She is kind, when she can be. She is stern and just, and will tolerate neither criminals nor fools. She is more complex than she appears at first glance."

Liara folded her hands together. "It complicates matters, but leaving her behind at this point would not only leave me unbalanced and upset, but send a message of betrayal and abandonment to her. She has been betrayed enough, I will not add to the tally."

Riala sighed but nodded. "Of course, Matria. I will take the body, as well as the remains of *Unbroken Pride*. Clan Stormwave of Steelshape has offered to repair the suit free of charge in memory of T'Soni aid during their dark times."

Liara exhaled. She had not given any thought to the ruin of the House Paladin armor Benezia wore in her duel with von Grath, but repairing it should have been high on her list of priorities. *I am not cut out for this...*

She nodded. "A good start, cousin. For now... go ahead and take the suit and Mother's body. Inform the House that I will be traveling home within the week if possible. Inform the Lesser House that I understand their concerns ... but until I am either Challenged or dead, I am Matria. Unhappiness will be tolerated, but disobedience will not. Manae and Shian are my representatives for a reason."

Riala gave a small bow. "Of course, Matria. I ..." She paused, looking somewhat lost. "I only wanted to say I do not know how you think of me, but I hope I have never given offense. Many wonder why you put the two who tormented you the most in charge."

Liara smiled, a genuine one, and shook her head. "You were perhaps the kindest of my kin, Riala. I did not make those two my representatives to reward them." Her smile faded. "I am myself very uncertain if I am qualified to hold the reins of one of the Thirty Families. I know so little, compared to Mother. I have no allies, nor will I be able to impress anyone as ... I am."

Riala folded her hands in a gesture of siari determination. "I am perhaps out of place for offering my advice to you ... but the words of Matriarch Benezia still hold wisdom. One cannot alter the tides of life, merely where on the shore one chooses to stand. Those who stand full upon the fury of the breakers cannot chide the ocean for being smashed by the waves, and those who stand in the shallows should not expect high tides. We have been through worse situations as a Family. Some may dislike answering to you ... but we will *obey*."

Liara's answering smile was sad. "That, cousin, is exactly what I fear. That instead of instructing me or correcting me, they will simply follow me into ruin."

Riala nodded, thinking, then glanced at her omni-tool. "...Huntress Shura has just spotted the High Matriarch of T'Armal entering the hospital."

Liara paled. "Goddess, Moon and Sun. Check the cabinet, see if these people left me any clothing."

Liara managed to, with severe pain, get out of bed, while Riala found the locker contained a single blue-and-white bag with an SA logo on it. It contained personal care products as well as two sets of Alliance BDU's, and one of Liara's dresses. Her armor, weapons, and the long form of *Ocean's-Nightfallen-Mist*.

Liara swore to herself that Pressly would be rewarded for his sharp thinking, and gestured to the dress. "I am sorry, cousin, but you will have to help me dress. Instruct the huntresses to stall the High Matriarch."

It took another ten minutes, and Liara had to bite her lips to avoid making sounds of pain when she managed to get the long, silvery dress over her form, but in the end she was able to hobble over to one of the chairs in the room, fully dressed but barefooted, and lean back. "I ... need a moment."

Riala hastily disposed of the hospital gown and smoothed the covers of the bed, before glancing at her omni-tool. "She stopped to speak with the doctors ... you have a few moments to gather yourself before she arrives."

Liara nodded, her hands cradling the scabbarded slender shape of her mother's warp sword nervously. A minute later, and a huntress opened the door. "Her Grace, High Matriarch Thana T'Armal of Thessia."

The matriarch entered, wearing a robe of shifting layers of eezo-laced silks, designed to float aimlessly as if the wearer was underwater. She wore a jeweled and pearl-encrusted shawl over her shoulders, and hard black boots that clicked aggressively as she entered the room. Her right hand was upon the hilt of *Wavebreaker*, the legendary sword of the T'Armal, sister to *Tsunami*.

Liara bowed her head as deeply as she could, nervously gesturing in a motion of siari. "I apologize for not rising, Your Grace... I am still wounded."

Riala bowed deep, and then stood behind Liara, slightly to her right. The matriarch took in her position and then gave a faint smile. "You are a quick witted and tough little thing, aren't you? Already have your Family in place, huntresses guarding the hospital, warp sword in hand and dressed. I had expected to find you laid out on the hospital bed."

Liara's hands were so tight around the sword she was amazed she had not damaged the scabbard. "I would never insult the House of Storms by such a disrespectful action, Your Grace. My wounds are of no moment. How may I be of service?"

Matriarch Thana laughed, a full and rich sound. "Goddess, you really are her daughter. You even sound like her when she got irritated. Benezia only asked when she could be of service when she wanted to tell me to drown in shallow water." Her mirth faded. "You are a large problem, Liara. The People are upset that the Triune Unity movement of your mother has corrupted many daughters and sisters. Asari has killed asari in masse for the first time in millennia. There is blood on the steps of the Highest, there is blood in the streets of Serrice, and there is blood upon the stones of your own home. All of it laid upon your mother's hands."

Liara nodded. "I am aware of the magnitude of the ... crime and treason. It is why I joined Commander Shepard to hunt down my Mother along with Saren, and why I am wounded now after killing Saren. I would have fought my mother, if forced to." She sighed. "The High Solarch brought me my mother's sword for just such a reason, I suspect."

The matriarch gave her a measuring look. "Very noble, but pointless. I do not wish to have to sacrifice you on the alter of expediency, but pressures from the clanless, and of course Houses Devir and Vasir are leaving me little choice. I am aware you have yet to put your affairs and your House in order. But you will have to submit to the Question by the Justicars and their judgment sooner or later, Liara."

Liara exhaled. "I was *never* involved in my Mother's crimes. The Justicars will not care if I was a willing participant or not. The Code is inflexible."

Matriarch Thana gave a cool shrug. "I am fully aware of the Code, young one. But I cannot risk vipers in the house, and Benezia was far more clever than any of the rest of us. I fear her plans within plans will continue long after her death."

Liara grimaced. "So you believe I was in league with her? That I killed her bondmate because that was part of her *plan*, Your Grace?"

Thana gave a thin smile. "And then there are times you resemble your aithntar." She noted Liara's look of surprise. "Oh, I knew her. That is a discussion for another time. To follow the spearpoint, young one, I find myself ... unsure. I do not believe for a moment Benezia is dead."

Liara gasped. "But...the body? The test?"

Thana snorted. "Benezia was a rellia snake amidst dartfish when it came to intrigue. All we know is that a T'Soni died in that suit. We haven't found Benezia's armor, or the *Serration of Unspent Blood*, the Temple of the Moon's warp sword. She fled on a ship with its navicomp wiped, with no crew aboard and no pilot? Benezia was never trained in piloting as far as I know. Finally, and I have not mentioned this to the humans or the stupid turians, but the entire crash and showdown with that strutting buffoon of a human general strikes me as the highest and cheapest form of melodrama. Your mother had a saying she always loved to dispense when it came to perception."

Liara whispered. "The eye perceives that which it longs to see, and ignores what it fears to behold." She shook her head slowly. "If she is not dead..."

Thana shrugged. "I have no *proof*. Until we can locate a clear and verified DNA sample, all I have is conjecture. I am hardly willing to make an intergalactic fool of myself by stating such openly. But we have been misled from the start, young one ... and I am reluctant to believe you are blameless until the Justicars have made very sure of such."

Liara's face fell, and then she looked up. "If my mother is not dead, then I must finish the reth'shan and ... cleanse my House of shame. I will only return to Thessia to inter the body of what may be my Mother and put my House in some order, not to ... placate the demands of the Justicars. But if you doubt my own word, Your Grace..."

She held out her hand, calmly. "I doubt I have the skills to hide anything from you."

Thana gave her a long measuring look, before glancing at Riala. "Bold. Very bold. Perhaps Benezia wrought better than she knew." She stood, crossing over to where Liara sat. "I accept your ... request, young one."

She delicately interlaced her fingers with Liara's, and Liara bit her lip nervously. She'd never linked in a social fashion except with her mother and once with Shiala. She remembered the forms, the opening of the mind, but ...

With a strong pull, Liara found herself in the link, the sheer overwhelming power of the Matriarch brushing aside her own mental defenses as if they weren't there. The search was swift, brutally humiliating, and deeply personal. Though the link was shallow Liara could barely feel the faintest whisper of the matriarch's emotions – amusement, followed by grim shock at her memories of the Beacon and a swift negation of that horror, followed by disinterest until the events of the first battle with her mother came to pass on Feros.

Thankfully, the link was broken after that, the Matriarch not needing to see anymore. "...she was trying to kill you. A mother, trying to kill her own *daughter*." The older asari's voice shook in mixed pity and horror, and Liara nodded miserably.

Thana was silent for almost a full minute, eyes closed, before shuddering. "Your madness in linking with Commander Shepard to view that abomination of a vision was ... courageous. That is a very damaged being, and a very ugly vision from the Beacon that has driven stronger minds than hers or yours into madness."

Liara grimaced. "She has been hurt by those around her. It is hardly her fault."

Thana ignored her words, still lost in thought, and finally spoke again. "I will consult with the Justicar Mistress on the issue. I will let the waves pass as they will, since you are telling the truth. When you arrive on Thessia, we will have had time to prepare a more detailed DNA examination of the body, and compare it to your own DNA. If she is indeed dead, then I will attempt to convince the Justicars to let the matter fall and ... deal with the fallout from the clanless."

Liara nodded. "And ... if she is not?"

The matriarch's eyes flashed as she turned to depart. "Then you will kill her or die trying, Liara, or I will be forced to measures neither of us wish to see taken. Find peace in the steps of the Goddess."

Liara slumped in the chair as the matriarch departed, letting her emotions and the uneasy feel of another asari in her mind slowly leech out of her. Riala watched nervously before touching her shoulder. "...are you alright?"

Liara shook her head clear and managed a small smile. "I will be. Thank you for ... staying by my side. I appreciate it."

Riala's answering smile was somewhat sad. "I do not know if I should be happy I could help, or upset that a matria must be thankful that her family bothered to stand at her side." She gave a deep bow, and rose. "I will go to execute your orders, Matria Liara. T'Soni endures."

Liara nodded, and Riala left, leaving her alone in the room, still holding her mother's sword and wondering if Benezia lived or not.

O-OSaBC-O

Joker felt as if his entire body was going to shut down soon.

He'd been sitting outside the clean room where they'd taken Tali as soon as they'd cleared the city and

declared it safe. No one would tell him anything, and then the quarians showed up with a handful of doctors, a group of marines, and the biggest damned quarian he'd ever seen or heard of leading them all.

The big one, he'd learned, was Admiral Rael'Zorah, Tali's father. And his displeasure at finding his only child half-dead in a second-tier treatment facility was volcanic. He'd threatened to camp the entire Migrant Fleet in the system and strip mine the place down to basalt before they'd hastily moved Tali to a far more upscale and expensive area, with a full airlock and sealed environmental areas to wait in.

The waiting for news was intolerable, and being stared down by a pissed off admiral the size of Cole wasn't helping matters any. He'd explained quickly to the Admiral that he was a friend of Tali's and that he was here to make sure she was okay, and Rael'Zorah had angrily responded that she'd have been fine if Shepard hadn't taken a teenaged civilian into battle with the most dangerous Spectre in history.

Joker found himself in an argument more nerve-wracking than he'd ever been in before. The towering enraged father he faced was immune to sarcasm and had a wit even more caustic and biting than Joker's own, and Joker *seriously* thought about slugging him at least once. They'd ceased arguing when the doctors finally came out and said Tali would live but would require cybernetic correction to her spine and right leg.

Joker had found himself crying at that, emotions draining out of him as he had feared she would be dead or crippled for life. The display had shocked Rael'Zorah, who was apparently familiar with human emotions.

"Why does a human cry for a quarian, Pilot Moreau?"

Joker found his voice hoarse and his temper gone. "Because she cares more for me than my own people do. Because she's the sweetest goddamned person I've ever known, and she damn near *died* trying to impress your stupid ass, when you're too busy to ever pay attention to her or encourage her or even show the fuck up until now! Because I'm a fucking cripple who can't protect her and I just get to watch the VI pickups showing her vitals dropping to nothing and I can't do *shit!*"

The blank faceplate revealed nothing, the pale glowing eyes behind it narrow but not angry. Joker found that infuriating. "You send her out in the wild to 'grow up', and when she finds the evidence to stop the greatest criminal in history, you send her a fucking message saying she's going to screw it all up so come home? She helps fight geth, is a better engineer than guys doing it twice as long as she's been alive, took out a goddamned krogan with her fucking *boot knife*, and you aren't even proud of her? I'm here crying, you ass, because she needs someone when she wakes up who loves her and that certainly isn't fucking you!"

The backhand caught him unawares, sending him staggering back, his braces whining and grinding to stabilize him as he nearly fell. One of the quarian marines stepped forward, and the Admiral had whirled on him.

"OUT! All of you. This is between the human and I."

The marines had retreated with alacrity, and Joker wiped blood from his nose. He figured the big bastard must have pulled his punch, or Tali's braces were even more badass than he thought. *Probably the latter.*

"Nice one. Pick on a cripple half your size. What, you going to beat the shit out of me so you can feel better about being a shitty father?"

Rael'Zorah's fists clenched, and his breathing was audible through the suit. With a mad glee that left a part of him screaming at himself to shut up, he threw another barb. "Or are you hitting me because you

want to hit Tali for being a *disappointment*."

With a roar he lashed out, and Joker knew this punch would probably kill him.

Instead, the fist smashed into the wall next to him. Steel dented under the impact, tiny fragments of ceramic from the suit's gauntlet tinkling down on the ground. Muscles bulged, even under the thick environmental suit, making it creak alarmingly. The admiral stood there, trembling.

"I am aware of my flaws as a father, human. I have heard them from what remains of my family, and I have my own shame to deal with. I cannot even look at my own daughter without seeing the ghost of my dead wife in her eyes and limbs, and it haunts me. I have not been there when I should have been, but I have always been proud of her. She is all I have left. I will *not* lose her to this sick galaxy. The universe is vicious. Vile. Monstrous. Full of things that only seek power and death and money and cruelty. Experiments, butchery, war, murder, slavery. *Evils* that never infected the quarian people."

The glowing eyes met his, angry. Defiant. Broken. "If I have erred in trying to keep her safe from the filth that you people swim in and call a society, then call me a poor father. If I have denied encouraging her to waste her time on a Pilgrimage that has already devolved into a ancestors-blasted galactic war and ended with her nearly dying for *nothing*, then call me a poor father."

He slowly withdrew his fist, coming to his full height. "But do not *dare* suggest I do not love my daughter, human, or that she is a disappointment to me. I am not why she is in that room right now, being worked on and implanted with machinery like some kind of geth. *Your* people are. *Your* captain took her into that icy hellhole and nearly got her killed, and didn't even have the decency to check on her."

Joker gritted his teeth. "And that makes it okay that you're an asshole with a dreadnaught up his ass? Tali *wanted* to be here. To prove to the galaxy that your people weren't cowards hiding from fate on your ships, thieves and scavengers. That your people took responsibility for stopping this since the geth were involved. And you know what? She's *earned* respect. From everyone on the Normandy. If Commander Shepard isn't here, it's either because she's laid out in a hospital bed herself or is being interrogated about Saren."

He took a step forward, wincing at the pain in his back from being knocked around, but was again interrupted by the doors to the med center opening and a slender human doctor coming out, accompanied by a quarian. "She's awake, sirs. A bit disoriented, but conscious. We're keeping her in clean containment, but you can speak to her at least, through a commlink." He paused. "Assuming, of course, you two can stop screaming."

Joker and Rael'Zorah traded a single, furious glance. "We'll finish this later, human. If you are Tali's friend, then perhaps you will be able to comfort her." He folded his arms, and Joker stared at him.

"You aren't coming?"

The admiral's gaze narrowed even further. "My discussion with her needs to be ... private."

Joker was torn between anger and tears. "For fuck's sake, man! She would die just to hear a word of praise from you! Just a single 'well done daughter'! Is that too much to fucking ask, to put off the tonguelashing or whatever the fuck you call it, the verbal beatdown about how she should just come home, and tell her you're proud of her? What the shit is *wrong* with you?"

Rael'Zorah met his gaze steadily for several long, angry seconds. "Very well. I will ... return shortly." He strode ahead, following the doctors, and the doors slid shut with a final banging sound that sent shivers up Joker's spine.

He rubbed his bearded jawline tenderly, wincing at the probable hairline crack in it, and tiredly sat back

down to wait some more. He didn't know what to do, and Rael'Zorah was quite possibly the most titanic asshole in the entire universe... but a part of him understood. It was the same stupid crap his parents had pulled, wanting him to be happy with what he'd already achieved instead of pushing him on harder, hoping against hope he'd just come home and try to live 'a normal life'.

*At least Dad let me know he was proud. At least Mom hugged me and always told me I could do it. At least Hilary never turned her back on me.*

He was still sitting there when Shepard entered the waiting area. "Joker? Is Tali okay?"

Joker, for once in his life, couldn't think of anything funny to say to that.

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## **Chapter 106: Chapter 97 : Noveria, Moments**

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*A/N: Almost...there*

*As a bonus, per Progman's instructions, the cast of OsaBC. The Bioware actors are fine for canon characters.*

*Preston Kyle: Val Kilmer,*

*Primarch Fedorian: Stephen Blum*

*Commissar Jiong : George Takei, played by Daniel Henney.*

*Von Grath: Played by an older John Hamm, but voiced by Anthony Hopkins (Zorro style)*

*Florez: Catherine Zeta-Jones, aged.*

*Tetrimus: Peter Cullen*

*Trellani: Angelina Jolie*

*Cole: Played by Idris Elba, but OBVIOUSLY voiced by David Scully.*

*Commissar Susan: Emily Blunt*

*Dragunov: an older and even more ripped up and pissed off Scott Adkins (Yuri Bokya)*

*Windsor: Elias Toufexis*

*Telanya : Michelle Boback*

*Bea Shields: Linda Hamilton, with dyed hair.*

*Jason Dunn: Nolan North. Come on.*

*Richard Williams: Hugo Weaving, with some CGI work to bulk him up*

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Shepard fled from the Four Seasons with haste, noting that Jiong was a handy fellow to have around. He'd already read all of Shepard's reports and would stay behind to testify and offer up any commentary for the media, while he packed her in yet another Commissariat air-car and let her retreat to check on her crew.

Alenko and Williams were, at least according to the reports she had fine, and ready for discharge. Garrus, Liara, and Telanya would be soon, while Tali needed more time. She arrived at the first hospital – the gang had been shuffled around a bit – and entered the lobby quietly, managing to avoid reporters.

Arriving at the counter and speaking with the hospital staff, she grimaced at the simply titanic fees charged by the hospital, but another hospital administrator canceled them, saying Director Anolais was covering the charges in gratitude.

She found Ash already dressed, wearing leg braces and a bandage over part of her face. Shepard had been pleased that there would be little scarring, although Ash worried her dancing days were over – molten metal had charred through part of her ACL, and the replacement was stiff and inelastic. Shepard laughed.

"You survive a gunfight after being nearly melted by your own rifle and kill Saren with a lance cannon you can barely pick up, and you worry about dancing?"

Ash smirked. "A girl has got keep her priorities straight. Ass-whooping is done, time to partay. Speaking of which, the celebration party is gonna be huge for this. Do we get to see you dance this time?"

Shepard snorted. "Not if you value your ability to breathe. The last time I danced my squad laughed so hard two people passed out from hyperventilating."

O-OSaBC-O

Alenko was quieter, but in good spirits, and actually sitting in the lobby when she arrived at the hospital he'd been transferred to after being stabilized. "I have ... interesting news, Commander. One of the corporations here is working on an advanced treatment for neural sheath disorders. It's expected to hit clinical trials in four months. The Director got me on the list as thanks."

She gave him a smile. "That is ... very good. I trust you intend to take the chance?"

He gave a shrug. "I guess I have to..." He exhaled. "I'm guessing Ash didn't tell you?"

Shepard arched an eyebrow. "The chief didn't mention anything serious, or much of anything at all except an interest in getting smashed and dancing, and to requisition a lance cannon. Why?"

Alenko sighed. "When they got through patching her back up, they did a lot of scans for other issues. She's pregnant, ma'am. Since she hasn't, ah, been with anyone but me since Eden Prime..."

Shepard facepalmed, then laughed into her hand. "Congratulations, Kaiden. Now stand the fuck by as I pin your ears back with a lecture about knocking up enlisted personnel during combat operations."

His face fell. "Standing by, ma'am."

O-OSaBC-O

After getting Alenko back to the ship, having a long conversation about his relationship with Ash and agreeing to cover for him, and promising him that she was sure Williams would get accepted by OCS so she wouldn't have to write them both up, she went to check on Tali. That began spectacularly bad, as she ran into the gigantic figure of Admiral Rael'Zorah, obviously in an emotional state after seeing Tali.

Shepard learned the brave quarian girl would need major cybernetic augmentation, and winced inside, cursing herself for bringing her along. Rather than become angry when the admiral had railed at her for doing so, she'd stood there and took all six minutes of angry ranting. He concluded by saying Tali had no reason to risk her life in the fight and Shepard had no right to let her.

When he finished, Joker opened his mouth but Shepard held up a hand. "No, Flight Lieutenant. He's right. Mostly, at least." Turning back the admiral, she folded her hands behind her back. "I knew that neither Tali nor Liara had a place in that fight. They were both civilians, untrained. I equipped them as best I could – so did Joker, as he bought her a Migrant Fleet shotgun. But it was my judgment that got her hurt, and almost got my own bondmate killed."

The admiral took a half step back, but she continued. "They call me the Butcher, sir, because that is what I am. I cut, my own forces and those of the enemy. I have sacrificed my men like meat, used them as bait, shot disobedient officers in the head like one puts down a balky horse, and worse. I took my team into that place when another N7 soldier advised me that only the krogan was really ready for that level of combat."

She met his eyes. "They all paid a price, in scars, in wounds. Your daughter may not be the only one who requires cyberware. But they were there for a very good reason. It's my fault that she was there and got hurt, and I accept your anger, as a father and as her ultimate commanding officer. But I won't accept that Tali can't make her own choices, and that's what she did. If Tali hadn't weakened Saren's barrier with her drones and shotgun, we'd have never beaten him, and no one knows what kind of hell he'd have unleashed. On my people and yours."

She tilted her head. "She told me of your people, and that an admiral is expected to sacrifice everything in the name of duty to the People. Isn't that exactly what she's done, sir?"

Admiral Rael'Zorah was left standing with no answer, and Shepard merely nodded. "Joker, I'm going to see Tali now. Once I'm done and you see her, get back to the Normandy. I'll let her know we'll wait for her to get on her feet before pulling out."

Rael shook himself. "She is not coming with you in any more of your lunatic adventures!"

Shepard turned back to him with a smile. "I believe that is her choice, Admiral. But if you want to try to force the issue, you're welcome to take up with President Winsdor. He's already told Matriarch T'Armal to fuck herself regarding pretty much the same demand, so good luck with that." She gave a salute. "If you will excuse me, I have to check on *my* engineer. Good day."

She'd strode past the doors, entering a narrow hallway that ended in a smaller room, which had an observation window and several comfortable looking chairs, and a haptic comms panel. She tapped it hesitantly. "Tali?" The window into the next room was dark, almost pitch black.

There was a rustle from the room beyond, as the bed elevated. Tali's form appeared in the dim lighting, difficult to make out. "Quarians consider it an honor to show their faces to close friends, family and loved ones. Captains are usually not included in that list."

The lights slowly came up. Tali was propped up on several plastic-sealed pillows, in a heavily vented room with plastic sheets and coverlets. Machinery covered her leg, part of her torso, and supported her back, with a heavy quilted plastic blanket covering the rest. The quarian's face was not quite human – the eyes glowed with no pupil, and were elongated. The nose was similar, but the nostrils were thin holes and extended into narrow, trailing lines going between the eyes. The mouth was human enough, but the cheek structure was almost gaunt, and the face jutted forward and out slightly. The jaw was unnaturally narrow, and faint trceries of cybernetic circuits were visible under the pale bluish-white skin.

The top of the head broke into tightly woven mats of wirelike hair, each one trailing down to come to a sharp point. There were no ears, merely smooth skin, and the one visible hand ended in fingers with claws rather than fingernails. Tali's voice sounded different without her mask on. "But for you, I will make an exception."

It was an alien face, but beautiful nonetheless. Shepard gave her a gentle smile. She looked almost angelic in the dim lighting, younger than Shepard expected even from her voice. "I'm glad to see you're okay. Sounds like you got out kind of rough."

Tali sighed. "Yes. My people dislike replacing parts of their bodies with cyberware, although cybernetic components under the skin and in the blood are necessary for our survival. The doctors...had to sever

my right leg at the knee. And they already implanted a rod in my thigh, and motors and corrective servos in my back. Father wasn't very happy about it."

Shepard snorted. "Seems like a real fun dad. Starting to realize more and more that maybe being an orphan wasn't the worst deal in the universe – everyone else's families are just as fucked up." She paused. "You did a great job, Tali. No matter what he says. Even the Fleet Master of the Systems Alliance mentioned your part."

She nodded, smiling. It was strange to be able to see her expressions. Shepard found herself helplessly smiling back, and shrugged. "I wanted to tell you we have orders to ship out as soon as the ship is ready to go."

Tali's face fell. "... I will be here another two days, at least. Maybe three."

Shepard nodded. "That's odd. I just decided that the Normandy will be ready to go in four days. Funny how that works out." She saw the quarian girl's eyes widen. "I already told your dad he could get lost when he tried to demand you were coming with him. If you want to come along, Tali, I would love to have you."

Tali nodded, and gripped the blanket with her free hand. "I... yes. I mean...Saren and Benezia are dead. What is left?"

Shepard smirked. "Well, we still have to even up with the geth." She grinned as Tali's eyes narrowed and the young quarian gave a firm nod, a frown on her features. "Thought you'd like that idea. Also, we're hoping to find Saren's base and where he parks that black ship since we haven't seen it in a while. Once that is done, according to the Fleet Master, the Normandy gets a week of leave before... I get reassigned."

She rolled her shoulders. "There will be some kind of blasted award ceremony. The Fleet Master told me the SA planned to reward each of you, so if you want a shiny piece of metal and some boring speeches, make sure you tag along."

Tali laughed, displaying a row of razor sharp teeth. "I think I will, Commander. I'll be okay." She paused. "I haven't seen Jeff."

She jerked a thumb. "Far as I can tell from the fact his uniform is wrinkled and he looks exhausted, he's been in the waiting room for a while. I'll send him in when I leave, if he hasn't strangled the shit out of your father at that point." She paused. "Bet they got along *great*."

Tali's glowing eyes flickered with amusement. "My father and Jeff? I'm surprised Father didn't beat him to death."

O-OSaBC-O

Garrus and Telanya were in good shape, relatively speaking, although they wouldn't be released until the day after. Through luck and fast talking, Garrus had been able to get his room shifted to share one with Tel, and they were watching news reports as she came in.

Garrus made an oddly formal gesture with his arms, crossing them over his chest. "Commander...thank you. You have no idea how much it means to me to have been there at Saren's end. I got a call from my father this morning...the first time I've ever heard him proud of me since I joined C-Sec. The Primarch himself visited!"

She laughed. "Your Primarch said he was going to piss on Saren's body and set him on fire. I like the guy." That drew a laugh from Telanya, and a wry look from Garrus.

"He is a direct sort of shantha, I agree. What is the plan now, Sheep? Roll around the galaxy righting

wrongs and letting Wrex terrorize people?" Garrus' voice was wry ... but wary. She sighed.

"We need to do some poking around in geth space, and see if we can't find anything else on Saren's bases. If we don't find anything, we'll head back to the Citadel for a big party, a boring speech and award ceremony, and then I'm being reassigned. I suspect at that point the SA will break up the gang, since they have a hard-on for alien nationals on their ships."

Garrus nodded. "Both Tel and I resigned from C-Sec...but the Executor has offered us both back our jobs. No strings attached. I enjoyed the fight and the chase...but I'll probably go back to being a cop, I think, Shepard. That last fight showed me I'm just not badass enough to go toe to toe with creeps like Saren. And the politics around it..." He waved in disgust at the screen. "Worse than the red tape. Most of all, I think I learned something. Whatever Saren was up to, it was outside the law. Like you said, you go too far down that path and you end up ...lost."

Telanya spoke up quietly. "I ... we ... appreciate you giving us a second chance. I hope my own meager skills were of some use."

Shepard gave a thin smile. "Like I said, I never gave anyone a second chance before. It's nice to see you didn't fuck it up." She folded her arms and looked at Garrus. "I seem to recall in one of our chats you mentioned some asshole who got away from C-Sec. If we find the bastard before we get ordered back to the Citadel, we could always put holes in him using Spectre authority."

Garrus's face lit up. "Dr. Saleon? Ha. I'd love to see that, Commander. I know where the bastard is, just never had the authority to go after him. You let me put a hole in his black heart and I'll owe you forever."

Shepard nodded. "Alright. You'll stick around until we are done and report back to the Citadel, yes?"

Garrus glanced over at Tel, and then nodded. "I don't see why not, especially if I get to go after Saleon."

#### O-OSaBC-O

Shepard arrived to deal with Liara last, returning to the hospital she'd left early that morning. She found a pair of T'Soni huntresses in the foyer, who approached her as she walked towards the elevator.

"You are Commander Shepard, correct?" The huntress was young, her leathers gleaming in the light of the lobby and her face lined with only a few tattoos of successful battles. Shepard took in her appearance and warily nodded.

"Matria Liara has been waiting for you for some time. She instructed us to let you know she had checked out of the hospital and was dealing with Director Anolais aboard the Crashing Wave, the House cruiser. It is docked in Dock 41, near the Normandy."

Shepard arched an eyebrow. She knew Liara and her family were rich, but a private military cruiser ran about two or three hundred million credits. She nodded, shrugging. "Guess I'll meet her there, then. Thanks for letting me know."

The two gave bows which were, if Shepard remembered asari customs correctly, far too low and respectful. Shaking her head at the strangeness of the asari, she returned to the Commissariat air-car waiting outside, getting back in. "Looks like I'm headed to dock 41, sir."

The driver, a non-biotic commissariat trooper nodded. "Yes, ma'am. Commissar Jiong called to let me know he was heading for the Normandy, should I divert him?"

She shook her head. "No. This is a private ... conversation. I won't need his help." She leaned back into the plush leather seats, sourly realizing she was starting to enjoy the level of comfort.

*Of course, that's probably part of the plan. Be nice, let me have my way, not interfere with me and Liara...and have that hanging over my head the rest of my life.*

*Then again, isn't that better than restricted citizenship until I'm seventy and dying alone on some class I shithole with air I can't breathe?*

She could almost admire the way she'd been pinned. Events just happened so fast and she was in no way prepared for all the political garbage likely to erupt soon. Her only outs were to play along with those likely to use her, or try to handle events with just Liara for advice.

*That would work out great, I'm sure. The stuttering and unsure leading the blindly-angry and stupid.*

The trip to the docks passed fairly quickly, the dull white snow and dark buildings of the outside giving way to the dim under-city and the rocky escarpment of the docks in short order. Most of the docks were jammed with Marine landing ships, media vessels, and turian or asari cruisers. Not a single slip she could see was open. Packs of marines, commandos, turian soldiers, and NDC police stalked the docks.

The aircar touched down at the customs station for dock slips 40 through 50, and the door slid open smoothly. "I'll wait here until you are done, Commander."

She nodded and stepped out, the icy wind blowing up from the valley below sending goosebumps along her arms. She took a brisk walk to get to the inside of the customs area, which was surprisingly empty for so many ships being docked. A single NDC customs agent saw her enter and nodded. "Commander, welcome. The Normandy is still docked in Pier 37..."

She smiled. "I'm here to visit the Crashing Wave, pier 41. Will I need to check through customs when I come back?"

The official, an older woman with graying hair and faint lines around her mouth, shook her head, tapping her omnitool. "As long as you are not carrying anything back and you are headed directly back to the Normandy, no."

Shepard nodded and walked on, past the entry scanners and out to the main docking area. The second slip from the right held the elegant bulk of an asari light cruiser. Some of the weapons were missing, and a section of armor plating had been removed to allow wide windows to be set into the hull, but it was still impressive, twice the length of the Normandy.

She approached the boarding ramp, which was guarded by two more huntresses in T'Soni pale yellow, and as she walked up the airlock to the ship opened, revealing a slender asari in gray robes and a white hooded cloak. The two huntresses held up a hand, and one spoke in a respectful voice. "Hold, the arbiter comes to escort you aboard."

Shepard folded her arms and waited, and in a few seconds the asari in white and gray arrived at dock's edge. She bowed deeply to Shepard, pulling back her hood to reveal features hauntingly similar to Liara's own, including the brilliant blue eyes. "Be welcome, Commander Shepard. I am Riala. The Matria told us to expect you. Please, follow me."

Shepard did so, feeling somewhat out of place as she entered the ship. The standard interior lines – curves and smooth planes – had been upscaled in pale gray asari wood, with heavy black carpeting along the corridors. The ship was roomy and the lighting subdued, and Shepard simply followed along.

Most of the corridors were empty, and many of the circular doors opened into bedrooms or living areas. Finally she was brought to a larger oval door roughly center-line to the ship's mass, which initiated open in four panels.

The room beyond was probably at least the size of her CIC on the Normandy, curving walls arching up to a vaulted ceiling pierced by a huge oval window. The floor was done in wooden decking, with small

fountains flanking the entrance and beds of smooth stones set into plinths along the walls. Curved bookshelves holding the hook-ended scrolls that asari used for books hung neatly along one wall, while a bank of haptic pale yellow vid-screens and financial exchange trackers dominated the other wall.

A few low lounging couches surrounded a shallow pool of water in one half of the room, dartfish and whisper-eels moving erratically through the water, the subtle glow of a kinetic barrier ensuring the water stayed in place. A doorway beyond the pool and couches led into what looked like a sleeping area.

In the middle of the room was an organically smooth curve of coral, somehow set inline with the wood, topped by a white stone desk without a single line to its shape. Sitting in a mass-effect hoverchair behind it with a frustrated look on her face was Liara, dressed in an elegant gown and glaring at info-pads before her.

She looked up as Shepard entered, smiling faintly, and beside her Riala gave another deep bow. "Matria, I have brought her as instructed. I depart, unless you have need of me..."

Liara shook her head, and Riala retreated from the room, the door hissing closed behind her. Shepard glanced around with a slightly stunned look on her face. "You never ... mentioned all of this."

Liara's smile became strained. "I had forgotten much of the casual wealth my mother enjoyed, in my years in digs and expeditions. She was always focused on maintaining the ancient glory of the House, even if that meant buying up an older light cruiser to replace our humble pinnacle." She rose from the desk, limping slightly as she gestured to the couches. "I... found myself missing you, in only a few short days."

Shepard sat down slowly, noting the utter softness of the material as she literally sank into it. "Makes two of us."

Liara smiled. "I was going to simply return to the Normandy...but Riala said there were matters to attend to here...and I have lost track of time, I fear. You have visited the rest of the team? Everyone is well?"

Shepard sighed. "Mostly. None of us walked away from that fight in good shape, but everyone is alright. Tali still needs a few more days, and Ash will have some nasty scars, but the rest are fine. Wrex is already back on the Normandy, I think. The Fleet Master gave me orders to escort you to Thessia... so you could handle your mother's funeral. And then the President wants me to follow-up on any leads the STG turns up before heading back to the Citadel."

She exhaled. "They plan to promote me. A lot. Put me in charge of a battle group and a battalion, let me handle things directly for the government without military oversight. I have no idea what to do."

Liara nodded. "I find myself in a similar position. The murder of Matriarch Mithra has thrown the House into disarray and infighting. Despite my status as a purebred, the Lesser House will not follow the Greater with my lesser cousins in charge. Thus I must act as if I ran the house...and it is frustrating."

She gestured with disgust to the desk, her features tired and drawn. "I am a scientist, operating in the realm of facts and the knowable. The financial aspects alone of running the House are beyond my skills, the political and social intricacies..." She sighed. "Matriarch Mithra was not doing a good job, and I am left to fix the swirled tides."

Shepard bit her lip. "That sounds like I'll be pinned down on Earth...and you on Thessia."

Liara gave her a calm look, then shook her head. "I am not willing to accept such, Sara. We have endured too much alone already, and more solitude would simply drive you mad, and me to despair. IT may not even come to that. I have had an interesting ... conversation with your Commissariat, who

paid me a visit in my hospital room. They know about us, I fear."

Shepard scowled. "I know. I had one pop up too. He offered to help out with keeping things from blowing up ... he's dealing with the media now, and whatever crazy-ass briefing and discussions and bullshit is happening with all the bigshots in town." She rubbed her temples. "They're talking about lifting my citizenship restriction. That means maybe ... I can travel enough to see you frequently. Or get assigned off world after training. I know your family is important. Maybe we can ... find a work around. Assuming your people don't freak out as bad as mine have."

Liara gave a small smile. "They will say nothing. They will obey if only out of tradition. I fear that any 'work around' would still impinge heavily on our ability to be together, Sara." She looked down at the pool, a pensive and worried expression on her face. "I will not abandon you for the sake of my family. I should not *have* to choose. I have wanted very little in my life, and my family has stymied what I wanted at every turn! Is it to continue forever?!"

Shepard frowned, getting up from her couch to sit on Liara's, wrapping her arms around the asari. "Shhh. You taking care of your family isn't abandonment. That's responsibility. I don't know what is going to happen, but I didn't ever think I'd be able to just ... be something other than I was, either. Just because we can't see how to do make it work doesn't mean it won't work. And I don't worry...I won't let you go. I am literally the most unreasonable person in the universe, and if they think I was a handful before, let them see how I act if they try to keep me from you."

Liara closed her eyes and let herself relax, lines of fatigue and worry slowly easing from her features. "I am simply tired of expectations being thrown atop me by those who could care less of what it costs me. My mother. The University. Asari society. Now this." She sighed. "I am happy your government is finally realizing your value. You will accept the honors?"

Shepard shrugged. "I don't know yet. I'm not prepared for it any more than you feel prepared for this, and I'm probably going to be surrounded by people I can't trust. A part of me wants it. I want to make David proud. Want to see von Grath puff up like a demented toad and shout at people who mess with me. I want to be able to look back on my career and be happy that I accomplished more than shooting a bunch of bad guys ... and lead men into battle against those bad guys without having to sacrifice them for once."

She sighed. "I want ... as fucked up as it sounds, I want to prove Rachel was right about me when she took me under her wing, that I could be the next great thing. At the same time? I'm fucking terrified, Liara. I have no clue how to handle the scale of command they are talking about. And... I wish they'd just let me keep the Normandy and go shoot geth or something ... simple. Moving from star to star, fucking up bad guys with my ODIN, listening to Wrex and Ashley bicker over guns."

Liara smiled. "A violent nomadic existence at your side, wandering among the stars and fleeing the heavy burdens of life would be tolerable, I suppose. Much better than spending the rest of my life dealing with the ... all of this. I see now why my mother said I was not ready. Some of it is fascinating, but all too much of it is exhausting."

Shepard nodded, trailing her fingers against Liara's hand. "Turn your question back on you. You going to take this ... Matria job? Be the head honchoess?"

Liara's confused expression brought a grin to Shepard's face, but she got the gist of what was being said. "Like you, I am uncertain. I am hopeful... no, I am praying to the Goddess that one of the matriarchs of the lesser house will Challenge me to the position, and I will happily surrender it to her. I am far too young to bear any children, and I have not the skills, nor the experience, nor the ... presence to lead House T'Soni through these times. I do not have any wish to take such a role. I would only weaken the House, even if I could perform the task, because no pure-blood leader would be taken as

anything but an embarrassment."

Shepard nodded. "We've both got a few weeks to think it over."

Liara exhaled. "I am also ... worried. The matriarch of the leading house of the Thirty, Matriarch T'Armal, visited me in my rooms. She is worried Benezia may have faked her own death and escaped."

Shepard felt her heart sink. "How? She's ... dead. Von Grath blew up her suit around her!"

Liara shrugged. "Certain artifacts that my mother must have had are missing, including her ceremonial battle armor and the sword she replaced the House sword with. The ship's navicomputer was missing any information, and there was no crew or pilot aboard the Talon's Justice. And a thought struck me in evaluating our fight with Saren..."

She paused. "He was capable of defeating all of us handily, but he didn't take the time to finish anyone off. He was toying with us ... but I wonder now if he *wanted* to die."

Shepard sat up. "But why?"

Liara leaned back, gazing up at Shepard. "To lead us astray and provide Benezia an escape. To allow her to continue whatever their plans were. Those plans must have been tremendously important to them both. My mother was immensely powerful, and Saren had the ear of nearly every leader in known space. What would be so horrible, so ... dangerous that they would turn their backs on everything and ally with the geth?"

Shepard frowned. "The AIS conjectured he was gunning to take out the Citadel Council and salvage the position of the Hierarchy by overthrowing the Council, and that your mother wanted to unify the other races under the asari."

Liara nodded. "Yes, I know. But if that was their goal, why the experiments? Why the mention of Reapers? The vision we have both seen makes me worry that Saren went mad and my mother with him, and if that is so and she is alive, we are all in danger."

Shepard grimaced. "Yeah. If she survived, we won't know until she hits."

Liara shook her head. "Saren was her bondmate. His death would have had a traumatic effect on her very mind, her soul. She will be filled with anger, with darkness, with a need for vengeance. An asari in such a state is unwilling to stop at anything to assuage the pain in her heart." Liara glanced away, and aimlessly trailed her fingers along Shepard's arm. "We will have to fight her if she lives."

Shepard only nodded. "Wonderful."

O-OSaBC-O

The small ship touched down on the landing pads of the beach, its boarding doors hissing open even as it did so. Benezia strode from the craft, still in her battle armor, and glared at the approaching form of one of Saren's turian servants. The turian looked confused as she approached alone, and spoke in an upset voice.

"Where is Master Saren?"

Without breaking stride she slammed her hand into his chest, her fingers covered in blazing warpfire, carving out a quarter of his torso and slamming him aside. The turian collapsed in a pool of smoking blue blood, and she walked on, form flickering with biotic power.

Tears trickled from her eyes, but behind her mask, no one could see them.

She walked on, power blazing behind her, towards the towering black figure of Nazara in the distance.

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## Chapter 107: Chapter 98 : Thessia, Remembrance

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*A/N: The song that goes with this chapter is called Hisou. It can be found by doing a search on "Naruto Shippuden OST 1 - Track 22".*

*There is nothing left to say.*

*Edit: Thanks to my stupid spellchecker, Shian got replaced with Shiala. No undead asari allowed!*

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The Normandy was finally ready for departure, and Shepard was pleased. The entirety of the crew was aboard, as well as Jiong, and Pressly reported all systems were nominal.

Liara had spent the remaining time aboard the Crashing Wave, returning to the Normandy only an hour before it departed, looking exhausted and worn. Shepard had told her to get some rest, and promised to come talk with her after take off.

She stood in the cockpit, one hand on the headrest of Joker's seat, and pulled down the 1MC communicator. "All hands...this is Commander Shepard. It is done. Saren is dead."

She paused, smiling as she heard a few high-fives from Ops Alley. "When we started this mission, I told it to you straight – it was nothing less than the single-minded pursuit of a goddamned nutjob, to put a bullet in his plated chicken skull. We have done that. He may have torn us up, but when we got done with Saren, he was the single *deadest* bastard I've ever seen, and I've seen a lot of dead people."

She grinned. "The Primarch is taking the body back to Palaven, where they plan to piss on it and set it on fire. They can't make coffee makers or elevators for shit, but they have style when it comes to dealing with traitors. We have succeeded, and the President of the Alliance himself wanted me to congratulate you all on a job very well done."

She exhaled. "Our orders, given our singular success, are bittersweet but clear. We are to proceed immediately to the asari homeworld of Thessia, to allow for Dr. T'Soni to clear up some issues with her family. Once complete, we'll check in with the STG and see if any of the leads we got from busting Cerberus up have led to anything. I'll probably get sidelined with taking care of some minor events while I've got the freedom to do so, and then in two weeks we head back to the Citadel."

She smiled. "Once there, you will have ninety-six hours of leave, while I get to deal with the Council. Upon termination of said leave, the ship's company will assemble for awards presentation." She sighed. "And at that time, I have been informed that I will be reassigned and command of the Normandy transferred to a new CO."

She lifted her chin. "I will be given command of a battle group of my choosing, and if I can I'll request the Normandy, but I don't have any guarantees. It is likely that most of you will remain aboard, although I have already been informed that XO Pressly will be promoted to Commander and possibly offered command of a second Normandy-class frigate coming off the lines in a few months."

She glanced at Joker, smiling some more. "We have accomplished that which no one could have imagined possible, stopping a madman on the scale of Ardiente himself. We have fucked up geth, krogan mercenaries, crazy asari, plant zombies, Cerberus asshats and proven to everyone that Humanity can get the job done. We'll run a few drills, just so I can be a hard-ass, but for the rest of this cruise, we'll go to reduced readiness, three watch sections in rotation. I even managed to snap up some real food while on Noveria, so the mess decks won't be too bad for our final weeks together."

"You have done me proud, Normandy. VI, log the time, the CO has the deck and the conn." She clicked

off, and tapped Joker's chair. "Get us the shit out of here before I get dragged back into some kind of conference. Or media circus. Or award ceremony."

Joker adjusted his cap, a bruise still on his jawline but a smile on his face. "Aye, Commander. Ops, I have control. Finalize all dock disconnects. Engineering, transfer all lateral and thrust control surfaces to my panel."

Tali's voice chirped back. "Done. Try not to shake the entire ship with your take off, Jeff. My balance is still uneasy."

Joker nodded, and Shepard only laughed. He looked up, scowling. "What?"

Shepard turned on her heel and walked off, but not before making a whip-cracking sound. "Carry on, Flight Lieutenant."

Joker only pulled his hat lower.

### O-OSaBC-O

The trip to Thessia, as it turned out, was smooth and without interruption or disturbance. Shepard spent most of the time with Liara, trying to help her make heads or tails of the maze of finances and accounts Benezia had set up, and the rest of the time walking around the ship, talking to her people.

She'd noticed, that when Jiong came aboard, two of her engineering techs and two of the ops alley people had been replaced. Asking the Commissar about it had only resulted in a shrug. "I did not think, given that I was aboard, that you needed *five* Commissariat monitors. I had them removed, both to place them in more useful functions, and to ensure you didn't decide to rearrange their faces or organs."

Jiong himself had shorn his Commissariat greatcoat, hat, and weapons belt, wearing stock marine BDU's with the black armband and red star of the Commissariat instead. He spent the morning chatting amiably with the crew, reassuring them that he was there "to provide advice for Commander Shepard in the coming days" and not to monitor the crew. Lacking accommodation for an officer of his rank, Pressly offered him the XO cabin, but Jiong declined, taking a simple sleeper pod.

She was surprised at how incredibly smooth the man was. His voice was almost hypnotic, and despite being a guy who thought a flamethrower was a sidearm, he rapidly had the crew laughing and at ease. He made himself immediately useful, taking up an ops alley slot in his free time, demonstrating he had naval technical skills, but he also puttered about in engineering.

Shepard had asked Tali about that, and the quarian had given a shrug. Her suit had been modified, her right leg now bare, curved cyberware, and she was moving carefully. She'd given careful thought to Shepard's question before answering. "He was trained to understand engineering, but not to be an engineer, Shepard. He gets all the elements, but he has no interest in it. The Tantalus drive doesn't amaze him like it does me, or Adams." She seemed put out by that, and shook her head. "He's also very hard to read. Even harder than you or Jeff...he's in complete control of his body language."

Shepard found that somewhat disturbing. Ash thought he was a great guy, having chatted with him and Wrex over weapons. Wrex, on the other hand, was more sanguine. "He smells like Tetrimus. Not like a turian, but like a person you don't fuck with. Careful, Shepard."

Shepard spent most of the rest of the day preparing her final reports to the Council, and going over Pressly's augmenting report. She spent the last part of her day going over with Pressly her plans for the next week or so – dealing with Benezia's funeral, doing a couple of small tasks for Garrus and Wrex, and then heading on back to the Citadel after doing a quick scout of the Perseus Veil. Pressly agreed with all that, and they'd spent some time talking about his next command.

"If you get a good ship, I'll try to get you in my battle group." She laughed as he gave her a doubtful

look.

"And if I get a bad ship, you'll just cut me lose? I though we were better friends than that, Commander." He did smile, though, and she had promised him he'd be her first pick in any event, even if they gave him a troop transport instead of a warship.

Chakwas had requested Shepard pay her a visit, and she did so on the second day out, after running some basic drills. The doctor was sitting at her desk in the medlab, reviewing something on an info-pad. "Ah, Commander. Your new ... Commissar is quite disturbing. During his medical check in I noticed a number of things about him that were out of place."

Shepard sat on one of the medical beds, letting her feet swing. "Like what, Doc?"

The older woman glanced out the windows before turning to face Shepard. "He has a bioamp implanted lower in his neck than the standard placement. The one he can remove is a fake. His eyes and ears are cybernetically enhanced, probably with recording devices. He has implanted dermal armor under most of his skin, and I'm convinced from these scans that his left arm is cybernetic and is implanted with some form of built in weapons system. The scale of the alterations to his genetics is almost unethical."

Shepard shrugged. "I always guessed the Black Hats were nasty customers."

Chakwas shook her head. "Those rakish good looks and his soothing voice are almost certainly custom genetic work. So is his strength and speed. I've never had a reason or chance to take a good look at a Commissar up close, but I find doing so has left me somewhat shaken. Why is such a man here on our ship, Commander?"

Shepard sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose. "The old saying 'Space is a nasty place' comes to mind, Chakwas. Whatever the SA has planned for me, it's going to be beyond my training and comfort level when it comes to gladhanding and political bullshit. Jiong is going to be there to smooth that out. I don't have any idea if what he has had done to him is standard or special, but an extra badass in a fight never hurt anyone."

Chakwas nodded, sadly. "That is what I fear the most, Commander...that whatever they have planned for you, they feel the need to give you either a particularly lethal bodyguard...or place an assassin next to you. Either outcome is hardly comforting. "

Shepard snorted. "He's cute and probably cybered to hell, Doc, but remember who you're dealing with. He's not gonna take me out, to dinner or in a fight."

#### O-OSaBC-O

The Normandy's arrival into Thessia was calm, with near perfect jump arrival with the usual precision by Joker. Liara was dressed in formal clothing she'd brought from the Crashing Wave, a heavy black robe with a pale yellow shawl that was almost white, and a slender black headdress that covered her crests. She looked both oddly small and shaken to be wearing such, but the clothes gave her an impressive, imperial look.

Thessia itself hung against the blackness of space as they got closer, surrounded by a faint nimbus of silver. It took minutes for the ship to get close enough to resolve the nimbus as a titanic fleet, hundreds upon hundreds of cruisers, thousands of lighter ships and merchants. Powerful looking defense stations floated serenely in the void, while a gigantic asari dreadnaught slowly traversed a patrol path between them.

The Normandy approached slowly, being flanked by two asari system patrol boats. Joker's voice rang out on the comm. "The asari fleet is requesting we follow the SPB's into dock, ma'am. Comply?"

She snorted. "Joker, do you see the size of that fleet? Yes, comply." She turned to Liara, standing with

her on the CIC, gazing at the galaxy-map turned viewscreen. "We're almost there. How do you want to handle this, Liara?"

The asari gave a small, pained sigh, quietly reaching for Shepard's hand and squeezing it. "I would like very much for your support, Sara...there will be asari media, and Justicars. I don't know how to get through the next few hours..."

Shepard squeezed back. "I got this."

### O-OSaBC-O

Shepard had conferred with Jiong, who had agreed that, given humanity's role in the death of Benezia, it would be highly inappropriate for more than a few humans to attend. He instead suggested that Shepard herself accompany Liara, while he and Cole tagged along as 'honor guards' for Shepard.

She tilted her head. "Why you and Cole?"

Jiong's smooth features twisted into a smirk. "Cole is the most terrifying-looking human I've ever seen, built like a krogan and probably even more ugly in a fight. He is also the most experienced of your marines, and will keep his cool if something goes off badly. As for myself, perhaps the image of the Commissariat will help defuse any difficulties with the asari Justicars, seeing as our two organizations are closely related in ... our outlook. Finally, I have studied asari culture and may be of some use to you in that regard."

She sighed. "Still gonna have to teach you how to de-bullshitify your talk, Jiong."

He snorted. "And I will have to augment your elocution, I fear."

The Normandy touched down at the T'Soni Starhall in Armali, a bustling and graceful city seemingly composed of endless asari skyscrapers installed on deeply slanted hillsides, on a huge bluff at the ocean's edge. Shepard had set no leave, implying they'd not be staying long, and gathered up Jiong and Cole to the airlock.

The entirety of House T'Soni awaited Liara as she got off the ship first, each one slamming to asari attention. In the front were eight asari in white hoods and cloaks, followed by a few dozen retainers in gray. Beyond them were the T'Soni House Guards and servants, almost three hundred in neat rows, and the Lesser House, nearly a thousand asari in black and yellow. In the distance, held back by what looked like Asari police, the people of Armali lined the long street that led away from the docks, heading up the hill, a silent crowd dotted here and there by the blood-red regalia of Justicars.

The House bowed as one, in graceful synchronization, as Liara stepped off the docking bridge, followed by Shepard, Jiong, and a bemused looking Cole. All three humans wore dress white uniforms, Jiong's surprisingly decorated by the Star of Sol, a very high ranking award just under the Star of Terra.

They walked a respectful distance behind Liara, and the white-cloaked asari closed ranks around them as the asari, very softly, began to sing. Their voices were quiet at first, sweet and gentle, the notes of the song rising and falling in time with the crash of the ocean tides against the cliffs.

The translator in Shepard's omni-tool struggled to make sense of the song, as it was very old and used words that had no real translations, but Shepard could follow the gist of it. They were singing of Benezia, of her youth and her life. They sang of her birth and her youth, her time in the acolytes of Athame, and how she was chosen to become a priestess for a time. They sang of how she went to war, to fight for the Republic. They sang of how she fought in the Second Uprising of the Krogan, becoming a militia leader, then a commando.

They walked up the narrow roadway as they sang of how she fought the ardat-yakshi Mierisa Vasir, a rogue from her family, in a pitched battle before the ranks of the Matriarchs, nearly dying to slay the

fiend. They sang of her wisdom as she grew in age, of rising to the highest ranks of the Church of Athame, of her ascension to Matriarch, of her restoration of the T'Soni wealth and power.

They walked, climbing the narrow streets of Thessia, the asari populace standing to the sides of the roads watching, heads bowed. As they walked, other asari joined them, joining the song, following the family's lead through the words.

Shepard nearly buckled under the misery and sorrow Liara was feeling, tears running down her own cheeks, but she kept her head up, standing as tall and proud as she could. Liara's back was still straight, her voice shaky but audible, as the song continued.

They topped the roadway, coming to the bluffs overlooking the city, a majestic vista augmented by the slow setting of the sun on the horizon, turning the oceans into a lake of beaten gold, the towers of the city blazing with reflected light. The fortified hold-fast of the T'Soni family stood high upon the cliff, and was surrounded by flags fluttering in the breeze, and a massive plinth piled high with native woods.

Atop it, the cloaked form of the body of Benezia lay, ravaged features shielded from view by a pale yellow cloth embroidered with the house symbol of a flametree and rose. The lesser house began to encircle the top of the hill, as the song discussed her triumphs in diplomacy, in business. The notes of the song rose in a glorious crescendo as the sun began to fall, the pale crescent of Thessia's moon becoming visible on the far horizon.

They sang of her gentle heart, of her beauty, of her kindness, of her willingness to listen to the most humble clanless and the highest queen. Their voices rose, emotions warping the song, as they howled in fury and sadness at the empty sky above.

Liara stepped away, moving stiffly and as if in pain, lifting both her hands above her head. The family stopped their movement, swaying and singing, as the song's tone turned darker, sadder. They sang of her being ambassador to the humans, of bringing together her Triune Unity movement, and at last, they sang of her fall.

They sang in bitter, vengeful tones of Saren, and how his blackness had corrupted her. They sang in mournful shame of Eden Prime and Feros, they sang of the shock and rage of Benezia's people murdering Matriarch Mithra.

And, to Shepard's surprise, they sang in a mix of wrenching agony and cold satisfaction when they spoke of von Grath ending her life. The song rose again, its notes turning liquid, feral, howling with pain and sorrow as Liara began to glow with biotic power, more than Shepard had seen her pull out even on Therum, until she literally was too bright to look upon.

Jiong watched in awe as the singing asari also raised their hands, warp fire flickering in the fading sunset. A baleful corona now crowned the hilltop, and beyond, streams of pale blue fire dancing in the failing sunlight, casting an eerie glow over the asari.

The song stopped, and only Liara's voice could be heard, the translator unable to make much sense of what she was saying, and then Liara bowed her head, and her biotics pulsed.

Raging warpfire the likes of which none of the humans had ever seen exploded from the asari around her, a literal firestorm. Liara gritted her teeth and with a final scream of pain, sorrow, and loss, her biotics answered, somehow catching the biotic fire and channeling it into a single massive column of blue-white fury that slammed into the plinth with Benezia's body upon it.

The stone sizzled and melted, glowing red hot, the body instantly immolated and gone, and the fire slowly died, some of the asari collapsing in tears to fall full upon the ground, others screaming, still

others merely sobbing into their hands and bowing their heads. Liara let her hands fall, faint trails of smoke coming from them, and sank slowly to her knees, unable to hold back her own racking cries any longer.

Shepard could not stay still and moved, and Jiong tried and failed to grab her arm to stop her. She pushed past the white-cloaked family members and knelt next to Liara, wrapping her arms around her and letting her cry into her shoulder, shaking, pain and loss and above all else the memories of her mother in better times scything across the link between them.

She could only whisper "I'm here" to Liara, over and over, as the fingers of her lover gripped her arms hard enough to hurt, as pain and sorrow and agony tore through the link between them. Liara threw back her head, screaming. "Mother!"

The asari howled with her, and then fell silent. The white-robed family members, moving almost tiredly, rearranged themselves, linking hands together, as did the retainers, guards, and lesser family, and Shepard looked up when one of her hands was taken by the asari standing next to her. There were no words, merely ... a look, and Shepard, not quite understanding what was being offered, but knowing it must be important, nodded.

The asari bowed their heads, and Shepard could literally feel the entirety of the family in that moment. Hot shame and rage burned through them at Benezia's betrayal, lit by fury and loss and grief. Memories, dozens of them, flicked across her mind in dizzying speed.

Benezia, in a white gown, arms flung wide, standing before millions of blue faces, shouting out her creed of unity.

Benezia, splashing in the waves with another asari matriarch, holding a tiny Liara above them and laughing.

Benezia, blooded and cut, facing down an asari in black robes, warp swords flickering in eldritch trails of light as they battled back and forth in down-pouring rain.

Benezia smiling as she bowed to the many humans in front of Vancouver's House of Lords, and speaking accented English as she answered a small child's questions.

Benezia, in her battle armor, leading the House against the Krogan, her face lit with a cunning smile as she smote ruin upon a krogan warlord with biotics and her warp sword, dancing and singing to Athame as she tore through their ranks.

Benezia, crooning softly as she held a tiny asari baby in her arms, surrounded by her family, tears running down her cheeks.

Benezia, standing before the House, a gentle smile on her features, listening to the children of the lesser house sing .

Benezia, in a thousand flashes of memory. A hundred sayings of wisdom, a million instances where she'd paused to listen and comfort a family member, or a lesser house member. To encourage a commoner retainer, or laugh at a comment, lighting her features with that beautiful, wise smile.

A last image, as all went dark, of Benezia, standing along atop the bluffs overlooking Armali, holding Liara's hand as they watched the sunset, the matriarch smoking a slender cigarette and looking pleased. That last image, she somehow knew, was Liara's, and the pain it bore lashed across the linked group.

Liara's voice, weary, hurt, tired. *I am not ... ready.*

A murmur of answering voices, thin and whispered. *There is no one else.* Shepard's hand tightened around Liara's, and the link trembled and shook with her own anger, but she held her own thoughts as

tightly as she could.

The link broke slowly, the smell of incinerated flesh and charred wood bringing Shepard back to her senses. Cole and Jiong stood alone, eyes wide, and Shepard helped Liara to stand, helping support her weight so she wouldn't have to rely on her wounded hip.

The retainers and house guards began to drift away, back to their places, and the white-cloaked forms of the asari around them pulled back their hoods, revealing red eyes and tear streaked features. As one, the eight asari knelt before Liara.

The biggest of them, a muscular asari with an Eclipse tattoo and scars on her arms, bowed her head. "Matria...we have Remembered. The House is obedient to you."

Liara bit her lip, a pulse of anger surging through her. Shepard recognized this asari now as Shian, and had to tamp down very hard on her own anger to avoid kicking the bitch's face in. Liara took a steadying breath and nodded slowly.

"Good, cousin. Gather the Family and the Lesser in the greathall. I will ... join you shortly."

The immediately family bowed their heads and stood, most walking off immediately. Shian remained behind, standing very still, tired eyes fixed on Liara's. "Would it do any good for me to say I was sorry, Liara? That I was ... that the way you see things is not fair to me?"

Liara stiffened. "And you were fair to me, cousin? All I asked for, or wanted, was for the family to accept me. You wouldn't. And even now, I am not accepted for what I am, or what I want. Merely because there isn't anyone else. Am I to be happy, having delivered my mother's body back to her home and faced with running a family that does not want me?"

Shian blinked, glancing at Shepard uncertainly. Shepard glared back, every muscle in her body screaming for her to kill, and Shian actually shuddered, fear seeping into her features. Turning back to Liara, she spread her hands. "I can't change the past. The past week has been a nightmare. But I want to help. I ... seeing Benezia like that made me wonder how much I really wanted things to be different. I don't want you to hate me. I'm sorry. What I said was...wrong. Stupid."

Liara gazed at her a long moment. "Once I would have been overjoyed to have you say those words, Shian. Once I would have done anything you asked to hear them. I looked up to you. You were stronger...faster. You mastered everything with such ease. Shiala never had to correct you, Mithra never yelled at you, and Mother never demanded you redo everything a dozen times."

She looked away. "But now is not the time for me to be forgiving, cousin. The tide recedes as fast as it advances. I will see how sincere you are in council. Now, begone. I have ... matters I must discuss with my bondmate."

Shian regarded Shepard again, this time in shock, and without another word withdrew, nearly stumbling away. Liara exhaled, her strong stance crumbling, and once again Shepard held her up.

"Li...I'm here." She didn't know why she shortened Liara's name, but it seemed natural somehow. The smaller asari closed her eyes and nodded, exhaling and finally pulling away from Shepard's protective embrace.

"I must ... deal with the issues of who will lead the House. It is not something non-asari, even bondmates, should witness. When all is done, I will... call for you to enter the House. Until then, you should wait on the Normandy." She looked up, biting her lip again. "Please."

Shepard nodded slowly. "Alright, we'll do that. Just ... remember I'm here."

Liara nodded, and pulled up the hood of her own cloak, turning away after a long glance at the

smoldering remains of the pyre. After several seconds, Shepard turned away as well, Cole and Jiong following.

Cole was the first to speak, his voice confused. "What in shit did we just see?"

Jiong's voice was quiet, almost reverential. "That was a Remembrance, Master Chief. Their version of a funeral rite. The family sings of the achievements and glories of the family member, and then they are biotically incinerated and sent to the Beyond. The .. event at the end was a shallow link of the memories of the passed." He paused. "Quite unexpected, I must admit. I am privileged to see such a thing."

Shepard's stomach was a roiling mess of emotions. "Be glad you didn't join in the link, Master Chief. I feel like she was *my* mother right now, and it's fucking with my head. I need to shoot something."

Cole nodded sympathetically. "How long you think the Doc will need to slap her bitch-ass family in line, Commander? And I thought these were some kinda high nobility, that last blue was an Eclipse gang-banger, if that tattoo wasn't fake."

Shepard nodded. "Which makes her a criminal. Ugh. I don't know, Master Chief. It might take an hour, or days. I don't want to rush her, and we can use the time to check ship systems and review more of that intel we got from Saren's base."

She lifted her omni. "Pressly."

The response was instant. "Yes, ma'am. Everything finished?"

She sighed. "No. Go ahead and set liberty for the crew, but only one watch section at a time. Remind them we are guests and if they fuck up it makes Liara look bad, and they can guess what I will do them and their spines if they make Liara look bad."

Pressly laughed. "Understood, Commander. What about you and your escort?"

She glanced around as she walked down the hill. "We're about a good twenty minute walk from the docks. We'll be along presently. Some of the asari are already eyeing up Jiong, I don't want to have to rescue him. Shepard out."

Jiong only smirked. "I assure you, Commander, I have no intention of entertaining any asari ladies tonight. I fear my tastes are strictly human."

Shepard snorted, grinning, and felt a bit of the link-forced sadness fall away from her. "You have no fucking idea what you're missing. "

O-OSaBC-O

The Hall was hardly full. Six matriarchs of the Lesser House, and two matrons who had married into other Houses, were present, along with the eight of the Greater House.

For the emptiness of the room, the tension was thick, as Liara reclined on the Matriarch's tall seat at the end of the Hall. She had managed to regain her composure, Shepard's hot anger helping with that, and she let it pulse through her in warm, almost soothing waves as she regarded her close and distant kin.

"Does anyone deny my lineage and right to hold the position of Matria? Does anyone feel I am unworthy by dint of being pureborn? If so, say thus now, and I can meet your challenge and your neck with the edge of *Ocean's-Nightfallen-Mist*." She glared around the room, and none but the matriarchs could meet her gaze.

The eldest of the lesser house matriarchs, Tythela, shook her head. "No, child. For all your youth, I fear I could barely match your strength in the Art, and your blood runs thick and true from Gensaiza T'Soni

herself. None deny you the position on those merits. And anyone fool enough to doubt your right will answer to the Lesser House as well as your own wrath."

Another matriarch spoke. "However, the same is not true of any of the thirdborne. They are hardly even of our own rank, only random birth order separating them from us. And their rule under Matriarch Mithra was not encouraging."

Manea scowled and began to speak, but Liara waved her hand. "Be quiet, or I will quiet you, Manae. I have no intention, I assure you all, of handing my position over to any of my ... close cousins. Right now, my concern is my own lack of experience and the fact that I am occupied with other events."

The youngest matriarch, Suliasa, gave a wide grin. "You've snagged the most impressive human I've ever seen and you want to keep her around in pleasurable pastimes rather than spend all day doing paperwork and running a house? I cannot blame you." The word that Shepard was Liara's bondmate had flown through the House like wildfire, some disapproving – if only because Liara was so very young – but most admiring. "And here we thought you were a shy flower all these years."

Liara blushed slightly, but smiled. Suliasa was, after Shiala, probably the favorite of her extended family, who'd always had a smile and a quiet word of encouragement for Liara. She inclined her head. "There is that, but there is also the bitter truth that, even if the House accepts me, the society of the Thirty will recoil from a pureblood."

The word lashed across the room in a tone of shame, and one of the matrons folded her arms. Banais T'Soni was technically Benezia's niece, through a broken relationship between Benezia's youngest dead sister and House Vael. She was hard-nosed and cool, and spoke bluntly. "You are very right. No one will accept such. Our alliances with House Vael and House Vakas would be threatened by such an act."

Liara nodded. "I agree, Matron Banais. Thus I have decided that, while I meet all the conditions to be Matria, assuming such a position at this time will do the Family more harm than good. I have worked hard on the finances in the past few days, unlocking everything and moving the funds to new accounts with new codes, and paying off the debts and filthy margin calls of the Vasir. I have, I believe, managed to rectify the critical situation with regards to our finances...but doing so opened my eyes more fully to the truth – I have not the experience."

She leaned back. "I am calling for Challenge, not of blood, merely of right of rule. I will not contest, but I will not surrender the title to anyone without a good reason and the proper mindset, and I have my candidate picked out already."

The Hall fell silent, and finally Matriarch Tythela's voice rang out in laughter, dry and cool. "You are a clever child. A Matria who submits to Challenge may take back her role at a later date without needing a second Challenge to do so. You want someone to handle things until you are ... more prepared."

Liara nodded. "Yes, I do. I am ... I am simply not ready. I have no heirs, which makes me a poor choice, as if I die we are stuck with the same unhappy choices. My heritage and lack of training make me a liability, and if I am correct, the Justicars may try to arrest me at some point, which would place House T'Soni in the lethal position of surrendering their Matria or defying the Justicars."

She closed her eyes. "Such is intolerable. I need one of you who are matriarchs to step in and assume this role. I would pass along *all* of my rights to you, including my blood primacy, making yours the firsthouse."

Tythela exchanged glances with another matriarch, before turning back to Liara. "You are not worried about the ... likelihood that whoever you surrender your role to might order you to submit to the Justicars?"

In the background, both Riala and Shian snorted, with Shian speaking. "Her bondmate is the Butcher and you want to do something to piss her off? Did you not feel her rage through the Final Sharing? She was trying to be polite, I suppose, but we all know she'd kill every single one of us for so much as making Liara upset, much less trying to get her *killed*. I, for one, am not nearly ready to die."

Tythela folded her arms. "I was merely pointing out a possibility. We may still have to deal with Justicar backlash, or even orders from the House of Storms, even if Liara does not take the Matria role..."

Liara waved a hand. "I have already made preparations for such a move, Matriarch Tythela. I will not let my mother's crimes – or my responsibility in the eyes of the Justicars to answer for such – damage my House. In the event that comes about, you have every permission to cast me from the House to save it."

The matriarch nodded her head. "You said you have a candidate already? Who?"

Liara turned to face Suliasa. "Cousin, of all my kin, you are dearest to my heart, and your wisdom accords the most with my wishes for the House. I ask you, will you Challenge me?"

The matriarch regarded Liara for long moments. Finally, she spoke. "Are you sure, Liara? While I will surrender the Seat back to you when you return...this is your chance to force the Family to accept you. It would not be easy, or safe, and we might lose some power, but I for one am not convinced that the Thirty will accept a Lesser House member as matriarch any more than they would you."

Liara shrugged. "That is why it must be you or Tythela. Neither of you will bend before their silly posturing, and both of you share my mother's blood. I would prefer you, if only because Tythela is truly needed to manage the Lesser House, as she has done so masterfully."

The flicker of amused respect in Tythela's eyes let Liara know her flattery, while deciphered, was also appreciated. With a small smile, Tythela turned to Suliasa. "The Lesser House would answer to Matriarch Suliasa with no issues."

Liara flicked her gaze to Matron Banais, who shrugged. "I agree. Suliasa is the ... most easygoing of us all. She should be able to win over those who disapprove. Neither Vael or Vakas would object."

Suliasa folded her arms under her breasts and shook her head. "I was enjoying myself teaching the House children, and you drop this on me, Liara? So much for being my favorite." With a rueful smile, she looked up. "Very well... on one condition. Two, actually."

Liara looked surprised. "Conditions?"

The matriarch nodded. "First, I am not doing this forever. You are Benezia's daughter, and I do not give a flipfish's damn if people dislike that she went and had you with another asari, you are the proper heir. We all know it. The Thirty knows it. You will train with me to assume your proper role in the years to come. You can go off on adventures with your lover and enjoy yourself for now, but I am not going to do this for long, no more than thirty years or so."

Liara nodded, and the matriarch continued. "Two. I have never trained my daughters for the role of house leader. There was no need. I am aware you're young – really, you are far too young to be bonding – but you need to consider the future. Humans, sadly, don't live very long. You may wish to consider having children earlier than is usual."

Liara shivered a little, but nodded again. "I have no issues with those conditions, although it will be decades before I am ready for children."

Suliasa shrugged, and with a groan, extended her hand. "I have no intention of spending six hours going through that silly sword dance the Challenge calls for, Liara. Matria, you are once again merely

chatelaine of the House of T'Soni Outrier, touched thrice by Athame, blah blah blah."

Liara smothered laughter at Suliasa's irreverence, and unlashed *Ocean's-Nightfallen-Mist* from her belt. "Matriarch Suliasa, I accede to your challenge. I, Liara T'Soni, only child of Matriarch Benezia T'Soni, Matria of the house, resign and refuse my rights as house heir. These I pass to my cousin by blood and deed, Suliasa T'Soni, and to her children by blood and name I pass on my position as chatelaine. As my last act as Matria, I name you sister, of the blood of the firstborne."

She stepped down from the seat and handed the warp sword over to Suliasa, who held it thoughtfully before stepping past Liara to sit down herself, the blade across her knees. Liara and the rest of the asari in the room knelt, bowing their heads.

"We obey, Matriarch Suliasa."

The asari matriarch sighed, shaking her head. "I am Matriarch of House T'Soni. Retire to your places of rest, and let this night pass in memory of Benezia. Liara, invite your bondmate to the House, so that we may speak."

Liara nodded, and Suliasa closed her eyes. "Goddess. Me, Matriarch. Bad as Sha'ira as High Solarch."

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## Chapter 108: Chapter 99 : Thessia, Aethyta

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*A/N: Since some people compared Suliasa to Aethyta, I thought it only fitting to allow you to contrast and compare :D*

*Fun Fact: A Commissar once commented on the Justicar Code as being "a good start, but just not firm enough".*

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Shepard found the city of Armali to be a confusing place of both great beauty and strange tension. The city streets were deeply angled, with small waterfalls and tiny streams crisscrossing everywhere. Buildings were either low-slung and organic, melding with the ground and cliffs, or soaring edifices fronted with crystal and silver. Little shops and cafes were perched on graceful platforms jutting out over the cliffside, or cunningly set in the spaces between larger buildings.

Shepard walked the streets with Jiong trailing her, browsing storefronts and simply taking in everything in the blazing moonlight and rich silvery hovering skylights that came on as night fell. Asari wandered in small groups, talking and gesturing in elegant fashions, clothing gleaming faintly in falls of silk and damask.

For the most part, the asari around her ignored her. She bought a few things – a tiny model of an asari cruiser in a globe, with glittery sparkles and a haptic effect on the globe that made it look like it was in deep space. She picked up an extended omniblade kit from a weapons store, and considered buying a Serrican plasma mortar before checking the price in alarm, drawing laughter from Jiong.

She checked her omni for messages from Liara, but with no results, and continued to wander, emotions in a strange state after the funeral.

Twice she was approached by asari media, who were excruciatingly polite and wished only to ask her a few questions about what they called trivial matters. The first one only wanted to know if Shepard would speak of her training with asari commandos in her past, which she did. She spoke of their fierce skill and what she had learned, and, when asked, demonstrated her mastery of the biotic charge, drawing admiring glances from passers-by.

The other one asked her a question about what she thought of the asari.

"Your world is as beautiful as your people are. I haven't really given any thought to how I see your people, I suppose. Elegant? Graceful? I always feel clumsy and plain around asari."

The asari journalist had given a shallow bow. "You are neither, Commander Shepard, and your words are as gentle as your beauty. You are seen by many as a violent figure, is this an accurate representation or more exaggeration by those who dislike you?"

Shepard tilted her head. Jiong gave a cautious nod and she shrugged. "I think it's somewhat accurate, but people change. I was ... lost in anger and the pain of my past for a long time, and only recently have I finally begun to heal and move beyond that. It's easy to give into hate and anger when everything around you is dark. That doesn't mean I go around shooting people for fun."

The journalist had smiled again and after a few more simple questions wandered off. Shepard frowned, and nudged Jiong. "Okay, where are the real media assholes? That was almost fun."

Jiong laughed. "The asari pride themselves on courtesy. A journalist who asks prurient or unwelcome questions is seen as crass, and will lose her ratings and her ability to talk to others freely. The asari who like digging dirt do so in the extranet, not in person."

He glanced ahead, and frowned. "Be ready, Commander. Problems." He made some kind of gesture with his hands that looked familiar to Shepard, as a heavily armed figure approached. "Greetings, Justicar. I am Commissar Jiong, and this is Commander Shepard. How may we serve the Code?"

The Justicar's face was calmly blank, dark blue eyes narrowing briefly at Jiong's words before returning his gesture. Her thin red armor hugged her form, pushing out her breasts, emphasizing her hips, leaving her muscled arms bare except for armored bracers, each baring razor-sharp blades down the side. A shotgun hung loosely from each hip, and some kind of battle rifle peeked over one shoulder. "Our Commissar cousins are always so polite. Well met, Commissar Jiong. I am Justicar Unsari. I wish speech with Commander Shepard in regards to the fate of Liara T'Soni. You could serve the Code by compelling her obedience."

Jiong gave a shallow bow. "That is a complicated tale, Justicar. The Commissariat understands your position. The guilty must burn. However, Liara T'Soni is under the protection of the Commander and her Spectre authority. I fear I have no ability to alter that outcome, no matter what justice demands."

Justicar Unsari frowned, turning to Shepard. "You, human. Why do you defend one who must answer for her mother's crimes when you are known to slay every criminal that crosses your path?"

Shepard folded her arms. "First, I am a human, like you said. In our culture, the sins of the father ... or mother ... don't pass to the child. Liara is not guilty of anything except having a traitorous bitch of a mother."

The Justicar's face didn't have any expression to it. "You cannot apply your cultural norms to define crime, Commander. The guilty are merely guilty."

She arched her eyebrows. "I am not. Batarians don't see rape as a crime, that doesn't mean it's not a crime. But Liara did not commit a crime. She has had no contact with her mother except to fight her nearly to the death."

The Justicar took a step forward. "So she claims."

Shepard took a step forward herself, staring the asari in the eye. "So I know. I bonded with her. There are no secrets left. She is innocent. I protect the innocent."

Jiong carefully touched Shepard's shoulder. "And thus the complication, Justicar. The Code, if I

remember correctly, states that a child is guilty of the mother's misdeeds because the child is shaped by the hand of the mother. Liara T'Soni, however, was not, having left her mother's side very early on in life. And if she has had no real contact with her, does not the Code speak of punishing only as you must and no more?"

A tiny flicker of amusement entered Justicar Unsari's eyes, as she continued to stare at Shepard. "Your knowledge of the Code does you credit, Commissar. But she must still be put to the Question. A bond mate, after all, would say almost anything to keep her beloved from death."

Shepard tensed. "Justicar, if you even try to harm Liara, there will not be enough left of you or anyone else involved to fit in a fucking matchbox."

The Justicar did not appear alarmed, or irritated. "It is good, and perhaps even reassuring to those who question Liara's innocence, that you are loyal. Few would dare a Justicar's wrath, and I find it hard to believe one such as you would defend a criminal. Yet the Code remains as inflexible as the stone resisting the ocean's tide. I will convey your words and statement of her innocence to the Hall of Justice."

Shepard's nostrils flared as she inhaled. "And if they don't listen?"

The faintest hint of a smile curved the asari's lips. "Then we will see how well you can fight, Shepard of the Dancing Kanquess." She nodded to Jiong respectfully. "Suffer not the guilty, Commissar. Go with Athame's Grace."

He gave a short bow. "The guilty must burn, Justicar. Go with the grace of our Father." He watched her walk away, the tension in his shoulders slowly leeching away, and turned to face Shepard. "That went better than expected."

Shepard gave him a glance. "The guilty must burn? Jesus, you Commissars are fucking bent. You act like she's reasonable."

He patted the flame pistol on his hip affectionately. "Justicars see the world in the same light we do, Commander. I do not believe in mercy, or extenuating circumstances. I limit my empathy to the *upright*. The Law is absolute, or it is nothing. There is no such thing as 'shades of gray', when it comes to guilt." He shrugged. "Some find it disturbing. We consider it our calling, and the Justicars as ... fellow associates in fighting the filth and sin of the galaxy."

She faced him more fully. "Look, Jiong. I did a lot of evil shit when I was growing up. Killings, muggings, theft. I ... regret it all. I wanted to be something different and better. But in her Code and yours, what I wanted doesn't really matter, does it? Just the crime."

The slender man shrugged, his handsome features darkening a bit. "If it was up to me? You have achieved mighty deeds and done great service to humanity, but you should have been shot and left in a ditch. That you were not and actually went on to redeem yourself is a credit to your moral fiber and the skill of the trainers you had in the Penal Legions...but does not negate your guilt in the actions you committed. Being sorry for something does not make the crime go away."

Shepard clenched her jaw. "I am very aware of my guilt, and what kind of filth it makes me. But you didn't answer the question. I shot those who tried to surrender after they threw my call for it in my face because they made their choice. I killed pirates and slavers with no mercy because they made their choice to be rapist fucking monsters. I shot cowards in the head because they made their choice to turn their back on the Blue. And I killed the person who nearly turned Torfan into a complete massacre because she made the choice to betray me and the SA for money."

She exhaled. "I never had a choice. And the day I did, I **chose** to do what was right. Has that no fucking

value to you at all?"

Jiong gazed at her a long moment. "For many in the Commissariat, is has none. As the Justicar noted, the guilty are merely guilty. Not *all* of us share that view. Some of us wish to embrace justice rather than mere retribution." He closed his eyes briefly. "But ultimately, Commander, we - the Commissariat - exist because humanity is flawed. It is selfish. Greedy. Blind to the misfortunes of others, fixated on opinion and the whim of the moment. The Commissariat reminds, it threatens, it protects, and it punishes."

She shook her head. "You people are even colder than I am. Doesn't that worry you?"

He smiled. "I have few problems sleeping at night. As you said, the choice to abandon evil for good, to abandon criminality for the Law, is one I respect. I find the life you have endured to be a lesson I will not forget, that not all wrought in sin is without redemption. That, however, only shows you as an exceptional human being. To give all the benefit of the doubt is to simply cast doubt upon the very process of Law."

Shepard jerked her thumb back towards the T'Soni household. "Liara is not a criminal! She's pure. Not like me. Not like *you*. She hated to even kill those asari that were acting crazy down on Noveria, and she wanted to try to save the colonists the SA fucked over and out on Feros. But the asari say being Benezia's daughter makes her liable for her crimes. Do you also agree with that, since it's giving her the benefit of the fucking doubt?"

Jiong shook his head. "The Commissars and Justicars do not see eye to eye on *every* matter. We find them too lenient towards the petty criminal, who will only mature into worse given time. They find us too willing to let pass the crimes of those who never intended to do such a thing, like involuntary manslaughter. But to answer your question?"

He glanced around the spires and whorled towers above, and the gleaming lights reflecting off their surface. "We aren't in Kansas anymore. It hardly matters if I agree, Commander. If the asari want her bad enough, they're going to get her. The only way to stop that is remove her from the asari jurisdiction."

Shepard tilted her head. "How?"

Jiong glanced around a second time. "The Justicars are much like the Commissars in one key area. We can only act freely against those who are SA citizens, or those who are within our borders. The Justicars can only operate in asari space against asari, or citizens of the Republic. That is the law."

Shepard nodded. "But if she isn't an asari citizen, she can't be Matria."

Jiong gave Shepard a piercing look. "And so? I hate to be so blunt, but you do adore such, so I will. If she remains, she dies. You cannot protect her forever, and even if you try, you cannot defeat the entire Justicar Order! Your only choice is to remove her from the danger. Your relationship with her will go badly in the eyes of the public, unless it is formalized. A marriage to a member of the Thirty will give you enormous political clout in the SA. She becomes a citizen of the SA, and the Justicars can do nothing but gnash their teeth. You don't have to hide your relationship, and those who seek to damage you politically now have to worry about the backlash from the asari."

Shepard stared at him blankly for several seconds.

*Marry Liara?*

"...that's ... going to depend on what she decides at this meeting. I'll think about what you said, Jiong."

He nodded. "For what it's worth? I don't think the Justicars really think she's guilty. There are elements of asari society who dislike Benezia's preachings, and the rampages of her cultists killed many clanless

who have no resource or way to see justice done. It is these elements – probably stirred by the political enemies of House T'Soni – that are pushing this."

Shepard turned back to face him. "And who are they?"

He looked at her for a long second before shaking his head. "No. Bad Shepard. I am not unleashing you to start kicking down the doors of noble asari families and threatening their lives."

She sighed, turning away. "Creepy *and* no fun. Should have brought Joker with me."

### O-OSaBC-O

As it turned out, it was another hour before Shepard was summoned to House T'Soni, and not by Liara, but Riala. She wasted no time getting there. The grounds of T'Soni Outrier were spectacular, tiered in stonework of crashing tides and roaring waves carved so precisely it was as if actual water had been turned to stone.

A small cluster of buildings surrounded the central tower, while a private dock held the cruiser Shepard had seen earlier and a pair of luxury pinnacles. Grim looking huntresses in armor patrolled the walls, while retainers in thin gray dresses or robes hustled from place to place.

They were met at the doors by Riala, who bowed and admitted Shepard and Jiong within. The hall beyond was titanic, nearly thirty feet across and well over a hundred feet long. Pierced by tall clear windows delicately etched with symbols of moon and sun, niches between each window held haptic projections of T'Soni history.

Jiong observed several in fascinated silence while Shepard followed. The wealth around her was beyond staggering. Gold statues flanked each historical image, and artifacts – warp swords, broken and blackened armor suits, a row of krogan skulls – filled display cases along the walls. The floor was tiled in black stones, the center of each filled with a tiny pool of water under an equally small kinetic field. Each pool held a different kind of fish, eel, or other water life.

The ceiling soared a good twenty feet higher at the end of the hallway, coming to an end in a massive portal of stone and ancient petrified wood carved with the flametree and rose logo of the T'Soni. On either side of the door were stylized statues of two asari, both dressed in a mix of fantastical armor and flowing robes, one holding a warp sword, the other a single rose.

Riala turned. "These are the founders of the House. Our history stretches back almost to the very founding of the asari, to the days where Athame herself walked among us, a goddess among mere mortals." She paused. "Your God also did a similar thing, no? But you killed Him?"

Jiong's face was wry. "We tried, but it didn't take. Now we use that symbol of how we tried to do so as the mark of our faith." He glanced at the statues. "These look ... ancient."

Riala smiled. "They are. Perhaps if you have time free later on, we could discuss the history of our peoples?" She opened the doors, and Shepard bit her lip to keep from laughing at Jiong.

He merely gave a smile and followed Shepard, but he muttered under his breath. "Rescue me."

She shook her head mirthfully, taking in the room. Huge windows dominated, showing the starry night sky, but bright lights illuminated the curved space. Ancient banners of silk and wood hung from stone bannisters, while a wide pool of blue-lit water in the shape of a crescent moon separated the bulk of the room from the elevated plinth on the far side.

A chair carved out of a single piece of black stone perched there, curved and asymmetrical, topped by an inlaid carving of ice-steel in the T'Soni sigil. A regal looking asari woman sat there, dressed in plain black robes and wearing a rich looking shawl over her shoulders, pinned by a massive sapphire brooch

that matched her hard eyes. Her face was almost hard in its angles, the lips thin and stern, the eyes bright and curious. Like Liara and the other T'Soni she'd seen, she had a dusting of freckle-like spots on her cheeks, and her facial tattoos were done in dark blue, framing her face in a tracery of exotic shapes and whorls of asari script.

"Be welcome, Commander Shepard, to the House of T'Soni Outrier, by blood and glory Ninth House of the Glory of Athame, slayer of the Silent Queen. Blah blah blah."

Shepard couldn't help but grin at the casual tone, and she sheepishly bowed. "I am honored to be here. This is Commissar Alfred Jiong, my ... aide."

The Matriarch nodded. "I am Matriarch Suliasa T'Soni, house Matriarch. We have completed our rituals and private ablutions in the wake of today's loss. I wished to speak with you privately, if possible."

She glanced meaningfully at Jiong, who gave a deep bow of his own. "Of course, Matriarch. I shall withdraw and peruse your magnificent art collection, with your permission."

She nodded, and Jiong followed a smiling Riala out the door, which shut behind them. There was no one else in the massive hall, and Suliasa gave a groan and stepped off the dais. "Blasted ritualism. It's a wonder we haven't starved to death due to having to pray before eating a fish. Come, Shepard, let us sit in chairs like normal folk."

She gestured to a small nook of the room, where two comfortable chairs sat, and Shepard walked to them, seating herself carefully and looking at the matriarch. "Where, may I ask, is Liara?"

Suliasa gave a small smile. "Resting. The Remembrance is draining even for a strong asari, and that was ... more impressive than most we usually indulge in. Besides, what we need is plain speech, and I don't want her feelings hurt."

Shepard shifted in her chair. "Plain speech would be great. I'm getting really, really tired of double talk."

Suliasa laughed dryly. "What a good way to put it, double talk. Or in the case of us, ritual laden, goddess-damned triple talk. No matter. You and I have seen the universe as it is, and have the scars to prove it. I am not very familiar with humans, but from what I have seen, you are good folk to call near kin. Better than those ancestor-kissing turians anyway."

Shepard coughed. "Thanks, I think."

The matriarch waved it away. "Liara says you're bonded, and she's already gotten the blessing of your aithntar...no, that's not the word. Ah. Your 'father' ... to agree to the match. This is true?"

Shepard gave a lopsided smile, pushing her hair back. "He's not really my father...mine sold me to slavers. But he's the ... closest I've got, I guess. Is that an important thing?"

Suliasa shrugged, that curiously not-quite-right motion that always made Shepard cringe. "To me? I could care less. It is more ritualistic shark-shit that some bonding planner thought up to rope the fucking parents into the circus of an asari bond ritual, which is already long enough to bore an elcor to death." She smirked. "No, my main reason for asking is that asari society takes that sort of crap very seriously, and by the Goddess, you have no idea how much some will howl at a member of the Thirty formally consorting with a human who isn't some noble bastard with nine names."

Shepard couldn't stop her laughter this time, and shook her head. "I don't really give a shit what they think about it, Matriarch. I'm glad you don't have a problem with us...or do you?"

Suliasa shook her head. "None at all. Little Wing has always been too shy and timid for my taste, but that blasted fool Mithra would never let the Lesser House watch over her. I'm a bad person for saying

it, but I am glad that bitch died." She exhaled. "No, my concern, aside from asari society, is how you plan to handle your life and hers."

Shepard frowned. "What do you mean?"

The matriarch gestured around her. "Liara is the heir to this. The House, the wealth, the power. Oh, it used to be more than this, we once owned half of the city below and had a blasted castle carved in the Skypillar Mountains. The Family has fallen on hard times, but only in the light of those used to having a billion or so credits to blow at all times. The young ones are whining about having to 'work', when said work consists of overseeing companies from plush boardrooms or the indignity of actually having to use their oversexed little brains creatively."

She paused, then shook her head. "The point is there is still a great deal here of ... value and power. Liara is letting me take over, and I do not think for a minute that she thinks she cannot do it. She is throwing it aside for you, make no mistake."

Shepard sighed. "I didn't want her to have to do that."

The matriarch grunted. "Well, it is done. And honestly, it may be best. But I want you to grasp the scale of what she is doing to stay with you. We are a messed up bunch...but in the end, every one of these girls would follow Liara's orders, or I would start breaking heads. For her to walk away will damage her image as a leader. Make it harder for her to come back."

Shepard nodded. "I know. I think a part of her doesn't *want* to come back, Matriarch Suliasa. She was hurt pretty badly...and while I think she could do it, she simply doesn't feel like dealing with the pain and suffering it might cause."

The asari nodded in turn. "Figured as much. Damn Benezia. Damn Mithra. Damn Aethyta for not being here, and damn me for being so fucking submissive to Benezia when I saw Liara hurting. I was proud of her when she told us all to drink seawater and went off to the University. For her to have to come back to this mess ... it is a sacrifice to give it up, but I know how she feels."

The matriarch paused. "You plan to stay with her, Shepard? I felt her in the link today...she would have collapsed if not for you."

Shepard squared her shoulders. "She's all I give a shit about anymore. I'll always be there. They'd have to kill me to keep me from her, and I'd fight to come back from the dead if they did."

Suliasa's mouth curved in a smile. "Good. I worry about the Justicars and what they might plan for her without your protection."

Shepard exhaled. "I already ran into one of the bitches. I told her if they tried anything I'd fuck them up worse than we did Saren...but I .. I plan to... "she trailed off, and then took a deep breath. "If she's willing, I'd plan to marry her and make her an SA citizen."

The matriarch's eyes widened, and then she laughed. "Thus taking the Justicar's authority to act against her away. Smart move." The older asari's eyes flickered to gaze at Shepard intently. "If that is what you plan, you certainly have my blessing. Just don't do it on Thessia, or you will be looking at a nine hour long, drug-crazed dance party and orgy for a wedding ceremony, and I understand you humans don't go for that sort of thing."

Shepard paled. "...you people don't fuck around when it comes to parties, do you?"

The matriarch gave a shattering bellow of laughter. "We fuck around more than anyone, Shepard." She grinned as the human face-palmed, and stood. "Come, come. It grows late, and I must attend to yet more damnable paperwork. I will show you to where Liara is sleeping for the night, and you and your Commissar can return to your ship in the morning."

Shepard glanced at the door. "Jiong ... had some reservations about being caught up in any, uh, situations with asari."

She snorted. "You bring someone that good looking into a bunch of asari all weepy after a funeral, and he expects not to get dragged into a bed? I'll bet you a thousand credits he can't even *walk* tomorrow."

### O-OSaBC-O

Night darkened over Thessia, as the lights of the city slowly dimmed and the streets fell silent. Marines staggered back to the ship, or engaged in more pleasant nighttime experiences.

Silence enfolded the hilltop of T'Soni Outrier, only to be broken by the faintest crunch of gravel as a shadow emerged from the darkest night to land silently at the edge of the T'Soni holdings.

The grounds of House T'Soni were more lightly guarded than usual, both due to losses and the grief of those within. The dark, cloaked figure that slipped past the outer guard was familiar with every inch of terrain, and used the flametrees at the house edge to hide from view.

Using a biotic leap to clear the wall, the figure came down behind the outer barracks. Pausing as another patrol walked by, flashlights cutting searing paths of light in the darkness, the robed person slid past once they were further along. An omnitool blazed into faint light, casting an outline of a female shape upon the ground, and then flickering as it passed over the door lock.

The female figure hissed as the door clicked loudly, and slipped within, shutting it after. Hastening through the empty and dark corridors of the unused barrack, she came to a heavily armored wall inset with indented panels. The third sank inwards at her touch, swinging away to reveal a narrow passage that she sprinted through, silent and quick.

The passage ended in a door, with a code-pad next to it. She tapped numbers on it swiftly, and it glowed blue before the door slid in and back, revealing the rich environs of the Grand Entrance. She stepped out, the door shutting behind her, and turned as a huntress rounded the corner and saw her.

Before the asari could even speak, blue light flashed, the huntress flying across the room to crash into the far wall with a clatter of armor and a muted thump. The figure glanced around, snorting to herself when no other guards appeared, and moved ahead along the wide hallways, coming at last to the Great Hall.

Two commandos stood there, hands on weapons. Both barely had time to look up as the figure appeared between them in a biotic charge. One was struck with a pair of fingers in the throat, choking her, and the other was hit with a fist limned in blue energy, sending her unconscious to the ground. The figure whirled and brought her hand around to the other asari's face, her fingers splayed over the smaller commando's face, and whispered a word. Blue light flared once more and the commando shuddered and collapsed.

The figure shook her head and parted her robes, laying her hand on the hilt of a richly carved warp sword before pushing open the doors to the Grand Hall of the T'Soni. The room was cast half in shadow, moonlight from the huge windows that pierced the ceiling casting strange shapes on the rich carpeting and the silver statuary filling the room.

The robed shape of a slender asari was slumped in the chair at the far side of the room, lost in looking over an info-pad. She looked up at the sound of the doors opening, and called out as the cloaked figure approached. "Who comes!?"

The figure walked forward, emerging into the dim light. She did not pull back her hood, but her rich, thick brown robes trimmed in white, embroidered with the wave and spear of House Vasir let Matriarch Suliasa know who stood before her.

Only one of that house would be bold enough to come here, on this night of nights, and invade her very halls.

She felt her anger rising, her hand slipping to the hilt of the family warp sword almost unconsciously. "You have your nerve coming here, Aethyta. House Vasir has shown its colors well enough, as have you. Since you have not announced yourself, how did you get in?"

The figure gave a low laugh. "Walked past that joke of an outer guard, subdued three inside. You need to change your security setup, babe." She walked forward a bit more, tapping a fingernail on the hilt of her warp sword. "I thought I'd swing by and see if they really made you, of all fucking people, the Matriarch." The voice of the asari woman was almost gritty, cool and hard with sorrow and steel.

Suliasa snarled. "Arrogant jumped up Vasir bitch. I knew you were poison the first moment you appeared with your slinking little hips in our midst. You have dared offer violence to our family, after your vile rejection of your rightful bondmate? I should gut you crest to cunt with the family sword, and see if you bleed purple or black-blood like an ardat-yakshi. Why have you befouled my hall!?"

The other asari merely shrugged her shoulders. "Ha. That's a good joke, you against me. But a short one, you'd last about three seconds. Don't get delusional just because Little Wing put your bony little behind on the Chair, Sul. I'll cut the blue off your ass if you dare draw the Mist against me. I fucking taught Benezia half of what she knew about fighting before you were old enough to babble."

Suliasa winced at both the truth and the ringing confidence in that remark, and folded her legs as she regarded Aethyta coolly. "You come wearing the mark of the Vasir. You come after abandoning Benezia to the dark, which lead her to the death and dishonor we just had to mourn. You abandoned your own child. I should set the Guard upon you, or perhaps summon Liara's paramour and let the Butcher knock that sneer off your face that I know is there. What do you want, Aethyta. The Remembrance is done, there is nothing for you here."

Matriarch Aethyta sighed. "I wanted to see Little Wing again. I wanted to make sure she would be safe here, against the Justicars...and worse. Is that such a goddess-damned crime? The Vasir Matriarch has no use for me any longer. Too many blame me for Benezia's fall, too many feel my teachings are too violent, too brutal. And I am tired of living, Sul. Tired of memories of Nezy and Tursha and the ... older times." She spread her hands. "I knew none would allow me entrance,so I forced my way. None I put down have come to any permanent harm. I came only to see my daughter one last time, and to give you a warning."

Matriarch Suliasa narrowed her sapphire eyes, her jaw jutting out. "Spit it out, old bitch. I don't have time to listen to your storytelling, melodrama, or self-pity."

Aethyta flipped something through the air, and Suliasa caught it. "That's the report from the University of Serrice med-team that examined the body you brought home. Whoever it was still had unfused bones in their pelvis. Meaning they haven't had children and they were probably not even a matron yet."

Suliasa paled,and looked up in shock. "What...what is this? Benezia lives?"

The cowed figure shook her head in amusement. "Stupid kid, you actually thought a fucking human in a knock off suit could have killed the Lunarch? This is why you were always Lesser House, Sul. Great fun in bed, not much under the crest though." She folded her arms, the thin shape of her warp sword visible under the rich fabric of her robes. "Benezia is alive, and the news is probably going to hit in the next day or so, if not sooner. The media were nice and respectful during your Remembrance, but you all just got played. Be wary of revenge attacks."

Suliasa nodded slowly, mind racing. "And you?"

Aethyta shrugged. "I've plead my case already to House Vasir and the Council of Matriarchs. I may be the worst aithntar in asari history, and little more than a jumped up party girl compared to the rest of the Vasir, but I'm not letting anyone hurt Liara. I'll be ... around ... as long as she's here. Ready to send anyone trying to fuck with her to the Abyss. Don't worry, you won't see me. Especially if the House Guard is that inept."

She sighed. "After that, I have a few things to ... make sure of. Loose ends to wrap up. She'll be fine without me anyway, if she sticks with that nice piece of ass she snagged and is all cuddly with the humans. Out of sight, out of mind. Once Benezia is really dead, I'll go back to Ilium and lose myself for another fifty years."

Suliasa grimaced. "Still a damned coward, I see. You have no place here, but you could at least let the girl know you care. It would not kill you. As much as I wish you dead...I would not stop you from talking to your child."

Aethyta looked up, a glimmer of moonlight from the vaulted windows catching the gleam of her eyes in the darkness of her hood for a moment. The gaze was tired, blasted and knowing. "No, I can't. I have something else I need to do before then."

Something in her voice sent chills along Suliasa's spine. "In the name of the Goddess, what?"

The other asari bowed deeply, and turned on her heel. "Kill my former bondmate, Matriarch. What else?"

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## Chapter 109: Chapter 100 : Virmire, Arrival

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*A/N: Virmire. :D :D :D A short but necessary intro chapter.*

*Edit: Argh! Kiloseconds, not megaseconds.*

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The morning dawned in spectacular beauty, shimmering off the ocean waves. The reflected light cast the sleeping chamber in which Shepard awoke in ever-shifting shades of blue-green, with flickers of light dancing here and there.

She lay there quietly for long minutes, merely luxuriating in the stupendous comfort of the bed, the cool presence of Liara clinging to her body. The night had passed quietly, as neither she nor Liara were in the mood for anything sexual, and Shepard had woken several times to Liara's quiet crying, holding her throughout the night.

She exhaled slowly, her mind tumbling through what was to come. A faint chime from the door shattered her private thoughts, and she sat up, swinging her bare legs over the silk sheets and placing her feet on the soft carpeted floor. "Coming, coming."

Staggering to her feet, she picked up the soft robe laying neatly on the curved table that emerged from the wall, the crystal lamp embedded in the wall casting a sheen over the rich material. She slid it over her nakedness, tying it shut, amused that asari robes and human robes were nearly identical except the asari version barely came to mid thigh.

Padding over to the door, she opened it as quietly as she could. A single house servant stood there, head bowed. "Yeah?"

The asari looked up, her pretty face stark with fear and shock. "The Matriarch calls. There is fell news."

You must come, with Lady Liara, to the Great Hall as soon as you are able."

Shepard didn't like the sound of that, and nodded. Shutting the door, she walked over to the bed. "Li, wake up."

Liara's eyes fluttered open, wincing at the light from the window. "Mm. I am .. awake. Is it time for first-meal?"

She shook her head. "Sorry, but no. One of the, uh, servants just came by. There's something wrong, Matriarch Suliasa has called for everyone to meet in the Great Hall." She was putting on her underclothes, hoping the uniform she'd worn yesterday wasn't wrinkled.

Liara rose and dressed swiftly, the ugly medical bandage on her hip still visible. "Did she say what the cause ... " Liara trailed off as the omnitool on Shepard's pile of clothes lit up with the blinking red and white alarm of critical comms.

"...shit." Shepard reached across to it. "Shepard here."

Pressly's voice sounded tense and hard. "Commander. Benezia T'Soni is alive. She apparently made a transmission early this morning. The asari news services said some big name university on Thessia examined the remains and confirmed the person who died couldn't have been old enough to be Benezia. High Command has sent orders for us to go to full battle readiness. Orders?"

Shepard exhaled. "Shit. Go to condition two, and get the ship ready for hot lift off. Cancel leave and get everyone back aboard ASAP. Get on the horn with the Council and tell them we need immediate tasking and a location to go after the crazy bitch."

She clicked off, and turned to finish dressing. "Jesus fuck, just what we needed."

Liara calmly finished her own dressing, and gave a faint smile. "Perhaps it is better this way. I have already .. grieved. What we do now is simply a mercy, putting someone out of their misery." She exhaled, smoothing her gown, and stood straight. "You are ready?"

Shepard grimaced at her hair, pulling it back into a rough ponytail. "No, but I doubt I have time to pretty myself up. Let's move."

O-OSaBC-O

An hour later, Shepard and Liara re-boarded the Normandy, and the airlock shut behind them. "Joker, get us up. Set course for Sentry Omega, top rated speed."

The ship began to shift almost immediately, as Shepard grabbed the 1MC. "BDO, Team leads, Council Observers, Commissar Jiong. Comm room, report now." Slamming it down, she stalked towards the rear of the CIC, Liara trailing in her wake, their faces set in nearly identical tense expressions of anger.

It took only three minutes for the team to assemble. Wrex stood, while Tali and Liara sat next to Garrus and Telanya. Cole also stood, one hand on Williams shoulder, the other on Vega's. Alenko sat next to Williams, looking tired. Jiong leaned against the wall, glancing curiously at Shepard.

She shut the door and turned to face them. "At 0445 this morning, the Citadel Council was attacked by Triune Unity cultists. Some fifty of them managed to get past Citadel Security and nearly get to the Council chambers unstopped before the Citadel Guard engaged them. Sixteen guardsmen were killed, along with over a hundred civilians. Couple hundred more wounded."

"At 0520, the Council received a live message from Benezia. In short, she stated she was going to make the Council and Humanity pay for Saren's death. It looks like we didn't get all the nukes Saren had, she detonated two in Ilium's capital city, another in Serrice, and one in the Tayseri ward of the Citadel. One was attempted to be set off in fucking Vancouver, but the Commissariat caught the cultists first."

The silence in the room was total, shocked expressions on every face. Even Wrex looked disgusted.

Shepard grimaced and clenched her fist. "First casualty reports are two million dead, hundreds of thousands wounded. STG and the AIS tried triangulating her signal, but were only able to pin it down to a rough four parsec space."

She exhaled. "STG noticed that they'd dispatched one of their ships to that area, following up on the list of planets Cerberus had sold to Saren. One of them, Hoc-III, was set to be visited by an STG team. They are exactly two days late reporting in. Not that big a deal...but when the STG tried to send out an emergency comms signal, they got nothing."

Shepard folded her arms. "Every other STG team assigned to the list has responded, and there's only four planets they haven't checked, all of which are being looked at as we speak. Hoc is way the fuck out on the edge of the Terminus, and it was slated to be a vacation spot some twenty years ago. The project canceled when pirates attacked and killed the corporation's CEO...John Virmire."

Liana's eyes widened. "That is the name of the place Shiala said Saren's base was at!"

Shepard nodded. "Yeah. It was never named Virmire...that's why it never popped up on any searches. But we have transmissions coming out of that area, a missing STG team, and a dead guy with the same name who invested on that world. I'm saying three out of three is a hit."

Garrus leaned forward. "What's the plan?"

Shepard clicked her omni, the far wall blanking and displaying a graphic of the galaxy, with several positions highlighted in red. "It would take ninety four hours to route another STG team to the site, which is too fucking long. The Council thought about sending in a fleet, but to amass enough dreadnaughts to fight that black ship if it's there would take a week and a half, not counting travel time. Fuck that idea too. We're going in stealthed, to scout the system and see if we can't make contact with the STG team. If we can, and we can isolate Benezia, we try to take her out. If resistance is too strong, we get out and send for backup."

She pointed. "The place is very close to the Perseus Veil, and geth reinforcements will be on us like volus to a buffet if we are caught. We go in fast and quiet, and either splatter the bitch fast or bail fast. Either way, we probably only have one shot at this. She's already escaped once, and if Virmire is their main base, there's no telling what kind of crazy shit we're headed into."

She glanced around. "It's a hard turn around from 'go home and get awards', but there isn't anyone else. I know we're still kinda of banged up. We almost died the last go round we had with Benezia, and she was tired. If you don't want to come along, you don't have to."

Wrex snorted. "You can't trust anyone else to get the job done. We can do this. Okeer might even be there, and I can settle my own score."

Cole shrugged. "The detachment is ready for war, ma'am. You won't just have shitty mercs backing you up this time."

Garrus and Telanya traded a long look, and Telanya spoke. "We will not abandon you now, Commander. If you go, so do Garrus and I."

Tali sighed. "Just don't let them blow me up again, please?" Shepard laughed, and shook her head.

Jiong finally spoke. "Has High Command been informed?"

Shepard's face soured. "Yes. Did that from the T'Soni household." She looked like she wanted to spit. "The stupid shit has already started back home. Right now, there's no SA forces to back us up within seventy-two hours, and that's just a pair of frigates. The Admiralty doesn't want to risk any ships

against the black ship showing up, and feels this is a wild goose chase."

Jiong shook his head. "It seems my fellow Commissars need to revisit the concept of 'duty' and 'bravery' with the Admiralty, Commander. A pity it won't be in time to help us. I can see if any Commissariat forces are around, but given the location that's almost certain to be negative."

She shook her head. "Don't bother. The Normandy's stealth system is the only reason we have a shot at this. I just wanted you all to be ready."

Ashley smirked. "Oh, we're ready, skipper. I wanted a crack at that bitch ever since she put you guys down on Feros."

Shepard almost said something about Ashley's pregnancy, then grimaced. It was barely two weeks, and she knew how pissed she'd have been if she got sidelined due to that. "Fair enough, Chief, but don't bitch if you get some more scars."

Ash just laughed. "As long as they don't shoot my ass off, I'll be fine."

Shepard nodded. "Alright. Get ready. Pack extra medigel, omnigel, ammo, everything. Double check your armor, and don't be stupid like me – bring your helmet. If we have to go after Benezia, she's almost certainly going to kill some of us. I want that clear, up front. We got lucky with Saren, and I doubt we'll be that lucky twice. So if you're serious about tagging along, get ready to get bloody."

Liana's voice was soft. "She has murdered millions, out of nothing more than hateful spite. She has committed atrocities against nature, against law, against innocent beings. She cannot be allowed to continue."

Jiong nodded at that, and smiled. "I'm glad I brought my battle armor along then. Unless you don't need an extra biotic..."

Shepard snorted. "There's no such thing as too much gun, Commissar. The more the merrier. Here's hoping you can keep up."

#### O-OSaBC-O

The Normandy transitioned to the mass relay nearest Virmire, stopping to dump charge as fully as they could before going to FTL. Rather than going at top speed, Joker only moved the ship fast enough to keep the heat level barely above the radiant average of the surrounding space. It put heavy stress on the IES system and the heat-sinks, and sixteen hours in, everyone aboard had stripped down to their underclothes.

They entered the system at a near dead crawl, unable to dump charge or heat for fear of being seen, and Shepard wiped sweat from her brow as the system came into view. "Pressly, remaining heat endurance?"

The broad-shouldered XO sat tiredly in a seat on Ops Alley, his massive arms folded. "Two hours, Commander. The last of the freshwater is gone, we're down to 47% on the sodium droplet heat sinks. After those go, all we have left is the radiating vanes and those will light us up like a Christmas tree."

She nodded. "Joker, can you get us down there that fast?"

His voice came back over the comm. "Yeah...but ... check your navplot, Commander. We have gigantic problems."

She did so. "Ops, go to passives. Radial sweep."

She shuddered as incoming contacts appeared on the plot. A dozen. Two dozen. Fifty. A hundred. Two hundred.

"...on screen." Her voice came out in a whisper.

Virmire was visible, a blue-green smear against the backdrop of the star. Hanging in space, in neat square ranks, were geth.

Hundreds of geth cruisers and frigates. Over twenty huge dreadnaughts. Endless ranks of smaller ships, fighters or gunboats, perhaps. They all maintained a respectful distance from the planet, and from a huge lattice of shimmering crystal and steel that seemed to span a fifth of the solar system.

"What in fucks name is that!?"

Pressly pulled up a report on his console. "... I have no idea, Commander. It.. it almost looks like some kind of scanning array, but it's not emitting any sensor pulses we can see. The gravity readings are bizarre..."

She shook her head, droplets of sweat flying from the tips of her hair. "Doesn't matter. Joker, still need that ETA."

Joker's voice was tired and dry sounding. "I can get us down in an hour, commander. I think. There's some gas in the system, I'll have to avoid leaving a wake or we'll be picked up easy. I know that's cutting it close, but..."

Shepard shrugged. "Get it done, Flight Lieutenant." She clicked off, resting her head against the uncomfortably warm metal of the console. "Jesus, we're roasting alive in here. Who's bright goddamned idea was it to make a stealth system that slow roasts the crew?"

Jiong, who manned another ops console, wasn't even sweating. She looked at him almost hatefully, even as he spoke. "The designer was a brilliant young engineer named James Hadley. Did a lot of good work. Told the SA his design was not perfected yet, but they ran with it."

She swore. "No shit."

O-OSaBC-O

The arrival on Virmire was done quietly and smoothly. Joker danced around the lower troposphere, trying to get some orbital pictures of likely base locations, but his ECCM gear picked up GTS radars and he shifted the ship.

They touched down near the north pole, the coldest area, and vented the ships atmosphere even as they dumped charge and heat. Deliciously cold air flooded in through the air filters, drawing moans of relief from the crew.

Shepard laid bonelessly in her bed, before groaning and sitting up. Slapping the haptic panel on her wall, she made the announcement. "Showers by shifts will start as soon as we can get some fresh water on board. I'll be going first and knifing anyone who gets in my way."

The next two hours were spent reconditioning the ships habitability. They were able to take on fresh water from melting ice – Virmire's environment was perfectly healthy for humans – and by the time everyone was in uniform again and showered, Shepard finally got some weak hits on the scanning pattern she'd set looking for the STG.

"Here. Southern continent, tucked in this valley here. Fragmentary signal." She pointed to the display map, and Pressly nodded. Picking out signal noise had been difficult, but it had also given them a good idea exactly where Benezia's base was, on the northern continent near the coast. The STG team had set down nearly on the far side of the planet.

Friggs plotted the best low observable course, scratching her head. "Wonder why they haven't punched out and reported this mess yet? You think they got shot down, or damaged?"

She shrugged. "We'll find out shortly. As soon as we have the last of the water aboard, lift us off. Nice ,slow and quiet. There's enough geth out there to slag six fleets so let's not tip our hand."

O-OSaBC-O

The signal turned out to be from a jury rigged repeater drone, buried under sand and a holographic camo net. Tali found it first, picking it out from the terrain by use of her drone's sensors. They dropped a MAKO down to check it out in person, and dug it free from the sand carefully, looking for traps.

Tali made a joke about the last time they'd activated a drone like this, and Liara shuddered.

The drone was programmed to bounce a weak signal out to another drone in orbit, but that second drone had apparently not functioned correctly. It was some pretty sneaky trade craft derailed by a stupid computer glitch, and Shepard wasn't surprised when she examined the message and found it was indeed from the STG.

The message was simple and short. "Found Saren's base. Pinned down. Engine malfunction due to method used to elude detection. No way off planet. Saren's forces include modified krogan and geth. Benezia sighted. Send as many ships as you can, fleet size in orbit is twenty four dreadnaughts, four hundred fifteen heavy cruisers, five hundred fifty two light cruisers, three hundred seventy four frigates, and two thousand six hundred and nine small gunships and small craft. Estimated geth troop capacity is a half million platforms."

Shepard winced at the numbers. "Pressly, do we have a drone that can get this information out?"

He nodded. "They rigged us up two reduced visibility drones. But they have to be launched from deep space."

She nodded. "If shit goes bad, punch out and try to get clear. Launch the drones and then go full out for the edge of the system and pray you make it." She examined the drone again and turned to Tali. "Can you figure out where the STG ship is from this?"

She nodded, already working her omnitool, her drones suddenly shooting high up into the sky. "Clever bosh'tets...layered signal, bounced off the ionosphere...two different keyrates for ... mm..."

Shepard listened to her tech-mumblings for nearly three minutes before Tali crowed in success. "Got it! They're .... about two hundred miles north, near a big natural harbor. Beachside, it looks like."

Wrex spat. "Only salarians would hide from the enemy in plain sight."

Shepard stood, brushing sand off her armor. "Let's move."

O-OSaBC-O

The Normandy touched down a good hundred feet from the lean shape of the Salarian cruiser. They'd done a very good job of camouflage, its lines broken up by downed trees, a cold wind from the ocean breaking up any heat trails, and the color of the ship nearly matched the beach's pale white coloration.

Salarians with a handful of heavy rocket launchers tracked the Normandy as it landed, only lowering their weapons when the cargo bay opened and Shepard herself stepped out. A slender salarian wearing battle armor began walking up the beach towards her, and she motioned her people out, striding to meet him.

The breeze tickled her skin and send her hair into finely blown strands, the warm sun beating down on her. She smiled faintly, wondering if this was the last place she'd see alive.

*Pretty. Never got to see a beach before, I don't think.*

The salarian stopped about five feet from her, saluting. His bearing was erect, his darker skin and wide

black eyes giving him an almost solemn aspect, but his voice was surprisingly deep and smooth for a salarian. His armor was crossed with four bandoliers of grenades and he had two pistols on his belt. "Captain Kirrahe, 5th Cell Second Unit, Special Tasks Group. You must be the advanced scouts. What's the ETA until backup arrives?"

Shepard gave a sad smile. "Commander Shepard, Council Spectre. We are your backup – the Citadel won't have ships in place for a week or more."

Kirrahe's shoulders slumped. "A week? We don't have a week, we may not even have two days. Benezia's arrival here has changed everything."

She pinched the bridge of her nose. "Start at the beginning, please."

Kirrahe nodded. "We were part of the follow-up team investigating the list of locations you provided with your search of Cerberus information. We arrived here and were immediately ambushed by geth. My engineer devised a clever method of convincing the geth we fled the system, and we snuck back in under the cover of a comet we plucked from the cloud of extra-solar debris nearby. Touching down on the planet blew out our compensator, however, since our cruiser was never intended for ground-fall."

He paused. "We did light scouting, maximizing our covert aspect. We found Saren's base ... the converted remains of the original tourism spot, now heavily fortified behind layers of security. A day after we arrived, the black ship touched down near the base."

Kirrahe rubbed his horns. "Hours after that, transports began landing, and long lines of ... monstrosities marched out to board them. They weren't krogan, not any more. Like a mix of krogan and rachni, with some kind of geth cyberware implanted in each one. They finished that loading this morning, and now they have been breaking down the base and, from what we can tell, preparing to leave."

Shepard frowned. "Leave for where?"

Kirrahe tapped his omni. "We intercepted this signal early this morning."

A voice rang out, cold and commanding. "I am tired of waiting, what is our status for the move to Ilos?"

A geth voice answered. "Benezia-Prophet, current ETA for force shift is still roughly 68 kiloseconds. Force Prime is already in position near the shifted relay. Force Beta will accompany Nazara to Ilos itself. All other forces will conduct distractive raids 10 kiloseconds prior to the main attack, to draw away protective ships."

Benezia's voice was quiet, cold. "Good. Once we're done with the primary move, execute the remaining prisoners and experiments. We have no need of them. Terminate that Ganar wretch as well. I will go with Nazara to ensure someone can access the Conduit correctly, and to use it for the final assault on the Citadel."

Kirrahe tapped the tool again. "They're planning an attack on the Citadel itself."

Garrus had come up during the conversation, and made a clicking sound in his throat. "That's lunacy. The entire First Citadel Fleet is there, fifty plus dreadnaughts. Even a fleet of this size would get cut to pieces."

Ashley shot him a look. "They've been doing crazy shit since Eden Prime. You expect logic now, dino-boy?"

Shepard waved them both to silence. "We need a plan."

Kirrahe nodded. "I have twenty STG operatives, some of the finest we have. You have a team of marines and specialists. From other intercepted transmissions, they're still working on something in that

base, and many of the geth are still in the computers at the base rather than on the ships. My ship's drive core is designed to be converted to a high-powered eezo bomb. If we can strike deep enough to set it off, we can wreck the entire facility. It might at least slow the attack and could kill Benezia herself."

Shepard frowned. "That sounds very dicey. And we still need to know what is going on in that base. We'll have to break in and find out."

Kirrahe nodded slowly. "Agreed. That will be very difficult. We cannot land close due to GTS batteries and radar installations."

Shepard's face lit with a smile. "Tell me, Captain. Have you ever heard of a MAKO?"

Garrus buried his face in his hands. "Spirits,no."

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## Chapter 110: Chapter 101 : Virmire , Charge

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*A/N: Sometimes, altering things from canon is blasphemy. Other times, well...it's best to simply use other canon :D And since I couldn't say it in the actual text...*

***Blood, for the Blood God! Skulls, for the Skull Throne!***

*EDIT: minor fixes.*

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Shepard and Captain Kirrahe both watched passively as the Normandy took off again, staying low to the ground to avoid being detected.

Having never used the full capacity of the MAKO they had – each one seated twenty, after all – it was a novel situation to have both fully packed to capacity and beyond with salarian STG types. The Normandy had managed to slip within less than fifteen miles of Benezia's base, Pressly using some borrowed ECCM wizardry from the STG tech experts to spoof the GTS radars seeking any intruders.

They couldn't take a chance that the geth might pick them up visually, so the remainder of the distance was covered in the MAKOs. Much to Garrus's relief, the ground was smooth rolling oceanfront beach and shallow water the entire way, but that didn't stop him from regaling everyone in his MAKO about Shepard's driving skills.

The two MAKOs had slewed to a stop three miles from the base, along a wide stretch of beach, and everyone disembarked. The base itself was, as described, at the edge of the ocean, just north of the treeline of a tropical jungle. It was built at the foot of a rocky hill, all silvery walls and blunt, squat buildings.

As the marines spilled out of the MAKOs to stretch, Shepard and the STG captain, along with the STG unit XO and Kaiden, were planning the assault. The rest of the troops milled about, Wrex blasting fish in the ocean and eating them raw, as Ashley laughed at his antics.

Kirrahe had brought along a haptic display unit, throwing up a four foot wide model of what scans and information they had. "We know the base is built right on the ocean's edge. There appears to be a central building, three stories tall, with long wings to the west, east, and south. Another series of buildings on the east side, six in all, which resemble power facilities. Two more large buildings are to the south, one a two-story building with reinforced walls, the other a three story building that has the look of a barracks. Finally, there are a total of four GTS battery emplacements – one atop the main

building, one south, one east, and one tucked into a small fortification near the barracks, just north of a fuel storage facility for what looks like gunships."

His finger shifted to a point south of the base. "We are here. There is light cover in the form of the rainforest until within a mile of the base. After that, we'll definitely be seen on approach. We have seen several geth gunships in the area, so a stand-up fight would just get us all killed. The best plan I have come up with so far is to perform a rapid strike with the goal of reaching and overriding at least two of the GTS batteries."

Shepard frowned, looking at the terrain. "That's going to be a bitch and a half, Captain. There's likely to be heavy resistance getting inside."

Kirrahe nodded. "Which, sadly, is why we need a distraction. Commander. I've split my unit into five four-person teams. Team Shade, Silt, Earth, Fire, and Sky. My Sky team is fully outfitted with stealth gear, including cloaking screens and haptic camo. They'll go in first, to disable alarms. Team Fire will follow-up, planting explosive charges near these fueling tanks for the geth drop-ships on the ground."

He pointed again. "That leaves Team Earth to slip past any guards by way of swimming, coming up on the north beach and using the thin cover of the cliff face to get as close as they can to the main building, which has a comm dish on it. When we give the signal, they'll use missiles to take it out, hopefully disrupting communications, and blow that GTS turret up. We'll blow the fuel depot, which should take out the GTS turret by the barracks. At that point, Teams Shade and Silt will make a frontal assault."

Kirrahe looked at Shepard. "Your teams and marines must breach the defenses while we hold their attention. You'll have your MAKOs, so you can close quickly and suppress defenses with your cannon. If you can take out the other two GTS sets, that should allow enough airspace safety for the Normandy to take out any gunships or light aircraft remaining, and torpedo the barracks before they can deploy all their troops. The collateral damage from such explosions will make our job easier."

Shepard exhaled, and nodded. "And the bomb?"

Kirrahe shrugged. "The power facilities look like either tokamak fusion reactors or mass-core generators. Either way, they'll only magnify the effect of the bomb. The Normandy can bring it in once we have suppressed the GTS defenses. However, there's a ... difficulty." Kirrahe gave a very human looking grimace. "Our detonations and bomb specialist was injured during our landing, and died shortly thereafter. We need someone to set up the software and run the calculations to alter the core correctly."

Kaidan spoke up. "That would best be handled by me, ma'am. No one else but Cole has the training for it."

Shepard frowned. "Could you do it, Master Chief?"

Cole ran his hand over his bald head. "Could, maybe. I haven't done ODT shit in years, ma'am. Still, two heads are better than one. I'll deploy with Masterson and Haln to cover the LT while he sets it up, in case anyone comes in after us. We'll go after the power buildings, clean out any bad guys we find so we don't have to later."

Shepard nodded, turning to Jiong. "I'll need you to work with Wrex and Tali, is that a problem?"

The commissar shook his head. "Not at all."

Shepard then glanced at the two senior chiefs. "Vega, you take squad one. Swap a DACT from Ash in return for Telanya. You'll hit the south GTS tower. Williams, you take squad two, hit the east GTS tower. Liara, Garrus, and I will go for the main building while Jiong, Wrex and Tali check the building to the south with reinforced walls."

Williams nodded. "How are we supposed to hack the systems?"

Kirrahe spoke. "Once Sky is done killing the alarms, they'll move to the south GTS tower and meet up with you. Fire will do the same for the east tower. We'll be able to hack them if you can cover us."

The salarian XO, a dour, dark-skinned sort name Rentola, scowled. "This plan stinks like a breeder's cloaca, Kirrahe. We're going to be shot to pieces out there."

The salarian captain looked at him. "You don't think I know that, Commander? What choice have we? Even if we sent for help, the target will be gone, and we have no idea where this 'Ilos' is. We have to get in, find information, and get out as quickly as we can, and this is the only plan that has a chance."

Rentola merely bowed his shoulders. "The squads won't like it. Hope you have a good speech ready."

Kirrahe stared at him. "Don't I always, Vur?" He turned back to Shepard. "There's one other thing, Commander. It's more than likely Teams Shade and Silt will be ... overwhelmed. If at all possible, when we get the Normandy in, I'd like them medevaced, and to have the Normandy suppress any attackers with her GARDIAN lasers."

Shepard nodded. "If we can get the GTS down quick enough, I'll have Joker save them, you have my word." She nodded at the MAKOs. "Fall back to the MAKO tanks when we pull out and have them boost up to hit the Normandy. If all goes well, we'll pick up Alenko's team when he's done with bomb, sweep south then east to pick up the two GTS teams, and my team and Jiong's team will have to hustle to link up with one of the MAKOs."

Cole nodded. "Sounds good, ma'am. I'm sure you have more details to iron out, so I'm going to give the boys and girls a pep talk. This is some serious shit we're walking into."

Shepard nodded, and the group broke up, leaving Shepard with Kirrahe. "How do you measure our chances, Captain?"

The STG captain gave a thin smile. "Very low. But I've heard of worse odds."

Shepard stood, dusting beach sand off her armor. "Great. Because I haven't."

O-OSaBC-O

It took fifteen minutes for everyone to finish final prep, and Master Chief Cole paced in front of the marine squads, a lit cigar in his mouth, his voice hard and violent.

"This is *it*, apes. We have chased this bitch all over creation, fucked up her geth, blew up her pet rachni, and killed her punk-ass boyfriend. All that is left is to get in there and let the Commander turn her head into a canoe."

He swung to face the marines, his jaw tightening. "But to do that we are going to have to put our foot up the ass of some more meat-heads too stupid to have understood that fucking with the Corps means eating a bullet. Now, we don't know what is going on in there. Could be they're making some more rachni, or some more bombs. Could be more geth. I don't give a shit if they're working on God's own hula-hoop. We are going to shut them the fuck down before they get it, or *anything* else but a face full of hot 2mm marine ammo and a pool of their own blood to drown in!"

He gazed over the unit, puffing on his cigar. "You probably heard Benezia's little broadcast when she blew up a bunch of innocent people yesterday. Bitch said we'd regret what we've done. Well, that's true. If she were here, I'd tell her that."

He tilted his head. "Dear crazy bitch, we regret not shooting up even more of your punk ass geth. We regret having to wipe more of your stupid krogan's blood and guts off our armor, because that shit is hard as hell to get out. We regret you interrupted our shore leave on goddamned Thessia, which should

be a war crime, since most of us didn't get to go blue. And we regret most of all not being able to send you a video of the Commander blowing up your raggedy-ass boyfriend so you'd really have something to cry about."

The marines hooted laughter, and he squared his shoulders. "You may be scared. We're going up against geth, krogan, and asari. It's gonna be hotter and crazier than Eingana or Feros. This ain't the time for fear, though. I survived Eden Prime, when that bastard Saren sent a fucking army to kill six tired marines and couldn't even do that! I wasn't scared to die then, and I'm not scared now, because that is my job as a marine! We all die. What matters isn't how you go out, but how loud you go out."

He walked down the line of marines, staring each one in the eye. "Some of us may die. And if we do, we are going to go out hard, proud, and loud. We're going to carve the name of the Corps into this pack of flashlights and make geth everywhere start crying when they even THINK of the Corps!"

He lifted his Revenant. "Are you hot, apes?"

The response roared back. "Hot, locked and ready to rock, SIR".

He smiled, turning on his heel. "Damn right." He glanced up as Shepard approached. "Ma'am, the Detachment stands ready."

Shepard nodded. "Load them up, Master Chief. It's time."

The big man nodded, gesturing with his cyberarm. "Get in the can, apes! It's a glorious day in my Corps!"

Shepard felt the light touch of Liara's arm on her own, and turned. The asari looked determined but a touch afraid, and Shepard smiled encouragingly.

Liara's voice was small sounding, against the crash of distant surf and the clatter of armor as the marines got into the MAKO. "Do you think we'll make it through this, Sara?"

Shepard gazed into the distance, at the dark line of the base where Benezia was. "I intend to. I want to live past this, to see what the future is going to be like now that I have one." She exhaled, her hand squeezing Liara's armored shoulder. "We'll be fine."

Liara nodded and put on her helmet, sealing away her beautiful features. "I hope so. I fear what state of mind would lead my mother to detonate bombs upon Thessia itself."

O-OSaBC-O

"The ... procedure is complete, Matriarch. Are you well?" The voice was almost timid in the darkness of the room, the black metal walls making her voice echo.

Benezia sat up on the medical table, grimacing as the cold feeling of the machinery in her body grated and ground together inside her. She could feel the racing power of it, the tiredness in her limbs evaporating, the tiredness and exhaustion fading to nothing. The angles of the room Nazara's thralls had built looked almost normal now, rather than strange and painful to look upon.

She looked down at her form. The blue wiring was visible in places, her skin unable to regenerate over the bare wiring that glowed faintly and thrummed with power. She stood, blood trickling from her naked body, even as more wires wound around her spine and slid into her body more deeply, violating, seeking.

There was no time for doubts, or regrets, or even worries about if she was still herself. There was only the Plan, and her revenge. She would set Noveria itself aflame for all eternity if she had to, or tear it to nothing more than shattered rubble.

She felt the voice of Nazara echo across her mind. **"The Power is something you will wield only as needed. You are presumptuous."**

She lifted her chin, a wide smile crossing her face. "I am merciless. But this is not the time for my fantasies of vengeance. All lies in readiness. The coordinates are prepared. All that remains is letting the Breach Device charge. Another ten minutes, perhaps less."

The voice boomed in satisfaction, or the closest thing to it. **"At last. I will arrive soon ... there is a taint to the flows of the Godpower, the Old One in the galaxy touches the strings of fate and causality. I must ensure it does not plan interference. Go to Ilos."**

The connection broke, and Benezia wiped a thin line of blood from one nostril, staring at it curiously before smearing it absently against her flank. "Bring me my armor. Inform the Prime that we are to move out immediately upon the complete charge of the Device. Have the prisoners been executed, Ylana?"

The other asari nodded, even as she approached with Benezia's armor. "They have. Rana is still alive, as are a few of the krogan rachni crossbreeds, but that is all."

Benezia took the armor from her last servant and smiled again. "Good, good. Have the Triune assemble in the plaza to hear my words before we depart."

Ylana bowed and left the room, leaving Benezia alone once more. She put on her armor slowly, luxuriating the new flexibility of her body. She felt as she had when a mere maiden, and wondered, briefly, if the feeling was what Saren had felt, of being young again.

"Perhaps he felt his youth too keenly, and underestimated those who slew him. I shall not repeat his errors." She drew on the armored gauntlets, and flexed her fingers within, eyes gleaming. "I will tear the quarian apart first, I think, and then the krogan. The rest of the humans except Shepard, and then the turian...him I shall peel alive."

She slid the armored boots on, and stood, the linked plates of the battle-skirt tinkling musically as they fell to her knees. "And then my sweet daughter. Her, I will let live long enough to watch me smash her pitiful human champion into paste before letting her gaze full upon Nazara's power."

She picked up the warp sword by her side, admiring the sleek grace of its lines. Rivulets of purple seeped through her armor, and she didn't even care. She stepped away, exiting the section of the base given over to Nazara's thralls, those curious black-cloaked things that looked like giant insects. She couldn't recall their name. . .

A thrill of alarm shot through her as her mind battled against the numbing calmness and power that filled her, but it was short lived, gone as quick as it came. The name was unimportant. What was important was revenge.

She emerged from the dimly lit hallway into the main corridor of her base, built along the same lines as the Great Hall of the T'Soni. Blood dripped with each step she took, but it slowed even as she walked along, the sizzle of more of the Reaper's living cyberware fixing her wounds from the operation without the slightest hint of pain.

Pushing through the doors, she exited into the balcony above the plaza of the base, and she felt the sun's rays land upon her, turning her face to seek it. Before her, in neat rows, were the last of the Triune Unity. Ninety two commandos and over three hundred faithful acolytes, each one ready for war. Their faces turned up to seek hers, voices murmuring her name.

She inhaled, feeling and smelling the air as never before, her senses racing, and held up an armored hand. "Faithful... enlightened ... beautiful ... sisters."

The asari below quieted, and Benezia gazed out upon them with love, and with glowing pride. "In but a few short years, the mere breath of a moment's passing, we have gathered and fought for all life and come to this penultimate apex, this moment in which we can change all things. We have prepared a sacrifice to the greater powers that live beyond our understanding, not out of hate, but love. A sacrifice, to placate the ancients who hold back horror unimaginable. To Nazara, who gave us a chance to experience true siari! One that will make us legends."

She bent her head. "It was the simpler, weaker voice of my bondmate, Saren, and even before him his brother, that opened my eyes and my soul when I wasted my energies on a dead alien purporting to be a goddess, a lie thrust upon our people to deny us our true birthright. That voice was snuffed out by ignorance, by fear, by jealousy."

She smiled. "But the voice of Nazara has shown me the truth, the path to not only freedom from this wretched physicality that separates us from Oneness, but a truer siari ... a synthesis of the divine and the mundane, of flesh and faith, of a realm beyond mere laws of physics. It requires us to fight, and to bleed. We do so because to turn aside is to die anyway, but not in value, rather in pointless resistance."

"One cannot turn aside the tide, by hand or by voice. One must follow its currents. That is no wisdom, every child knows this...and yet every fool thinks they are the one to violate common sense and logic. We have been given a chance – not only to avoid the fate of the others in this galaxy, but to aid in the creation of a new god, a real god, not an empty collection of lies. If we follow the proper path."

She let her hands fall, touching the metal of the balcony rail. Her smile became sardonic. "And what is this path? This meaning, this purpose for which we cast aside our vows of peace to invoke war?"

She waited, and smiled when no one spoke.

"It is nothing. There is no meaning, no purpose. Each race is born, lives and dies in a test tube, a harvest of souls and minds to merely produce more forces to fight that which is the end of all things. All our culture, our dreams, our wars, our art! It is worthless. We breed, we fall, we die. We murder. It is mindless savagery, pointless self-adoration, endless absorption in our own foolish thoughts as the very fabric of the universe comes undone. Our very EXISTANCE IS MINDLESS!"

She smiled even wider. "In mere days, tens of billions will die. Innocent! Guilty! Strong and weak! Honest and deceitful! ALL of them! They will scream, they will burn, and for no purpose but that mighty Nazara may open the Ways to allow his brethren to our galaxy, to scourge it clean of fools and heroes both. But we will stand at his side, to become a new god, and save with our sacrifice the very essence of the asari! We will dance forever under limitless stars! We will cast aside fragile mortality to become the very essence of unity! One mind! One SOUL! One VOICE! Not for any higher calling, not for any purpose, not out of duty or fear, but simply because we ARE and WILL be!"

She lifted her hands and the asari cried out in a chant of her name, but their voices were lost in the sound of her own roar. "And united in this siari, in this absence of purpose, fear, or duty...we shall at long last be *free!*"

Her voice shattered the air, biotic power racing up her limbs as she drew her warp sword, the blade itself igniting in blue fire. "LET THE GALAXY *BURN!*"

O-OSaBC-O

The flare of biotic fire could be seen even at the distance Ashley was at, sitting tensely in the cockpit of the MAKO. "What the shit was that?"

Telanya swallowed. "It... looked like warp fire, Senior Chief. I felt a faint pulse of energy. Whatever did that was...very strong." She shifted her grip on her asari rifle, wishing she was alongside Garrus

instead of in this cramped, angular box of metal.

Ashley scowled and put her helmet on. "Doesn't matter. Remember the plan, boys and girls. Ownby, stay on the guns. We're going in high and tight, grenades if you got 'em, save your heavy explosives for the last though. Sergeant Telanya is going to try and give us barrier cover, but she's not going to be able to hold it forever, so make it count." She turned to the single DACT. "I need you be fucking *DACTacular* out there, so when we hit it, kick off and DFA right next to the GTS tower if you can. You think you can hold them off long enough for us to reach you?"

Sargent Florez snorted. "Yeah, babe, I can hold 'em off all fucking day long with this." He slapped the rotary assault cannon Shepard had used on Noveria, grinning. "I'll provide cover fire with mini-missiles until I run out."

Ashley nodded, and checked her omni-tool. "Five minutes. I'm going to pray. Anyone want to join me?"

O-OSaBC-O

"-motherfucking gutter-sniping nipples hitting -"

Alenko tried to ignore Masterson's continued litany of curses as the very ground seemed to heave up and down below them. The initial assault had gone so perfectly that Kaiden wondered if they were walking into a trap. The salarian stealth team had cut the perimeter alarms and reported that most of the asari were gathered in the center of the base, while many of the geth were absorbed in working on some kind of device in one of the buildings.

"-cock-gobbling sons of a six credit vorkha transvestite whore-"

The next two teams had moved in. The salarians had swam six miles and clambered up a fifteen hundred foot hill to gain elevation on the base, while the team heading for the fuel depot had literally crawled two miles on their bellies using nothing but haptic camo cloaks to get close enough to plant their charges. When everything was set, they'd snuck away and triggered the explosives, at the same moment that five eezo-enriched heavy missiles were launched from the mountaintop at the comms dish and GTS array atop the main building.

The double explosions had been the signals for the MAKOs to bolt in, and they'd done so at the top speed they could. The fuel dump had gone up in a truly titanic detonation, flinging gunships and geth hundreds of feet away, many of the gunships themselves blowing up for further damage. The nearby barracks had been literally flattened by the blast, the entire structure collapsing inwards.

The five missiles, on the other hand, had not only crushed the comm dish and blown the turret of the GTS platform apart but managed to cook off it's ammo.

Benezia, standing on a balcony in front of the building, had barely enough time to throw up some kind of barrier before a good fifth of the building collapsed on her, and raging plasma fires washed into the plaza, burning most of the gathered asari to instant, painful death. The MAKOs had fired everything they had at the perimeter defenses, blowing huge holes in the thin metal security walls, sending geth plummeting to the ground.

"- unbaptized hanar-licking syphilitic offspring of a Vegan vulture-monkey and a volus-"

Unfortunately, that is when things went up in flames. The two salarian teams making the primary assault had cut through the geth and shot down a few asari when the two-story building nearest their entry point had its doors literally flung away and gigantic plated monstrosities had emerged. Standing nearly nine feet tall, with heavy plates of armor bolted directly to their straining bodies, each one was festooned with bulging muscles and chitin plates. The barely recognizable form of a krogan's head was

surmounted with insectile eyes clustered thickly, and geth cyberware shot through the body. Most disgusting were the four tentacles that erupted from their backs, each one tipped with vicious blades or geth weapons.

They'd torn into Teams Shade and Silt, the first of the monsters ignoring a fusillade of weapons fire to pick up a salarian soldier with one misshapen arm and bite him nearly in half, ending his life in spray of green. The salarians had fallen back, flinging grenades, and Shepard had detailed off the first MAKO, with Williams and Jiong's teams to help them out.

The MAKO was almost there when the form of a Colossus emerged from behind one of the buildings, firing its main gun. The MAKO took the hit, skidding, and managed to return fire with the cannon. The round flashed out, true and straight, but just before it impacted the geth war-machine fired again.

Its own head was blown off, but even as it collapsed the pulse blast hit the MAKO. It caught fire and skidded, flipping onto its side and then tumbling free, the cockpit breaking apart. Private Anders, a combat engineer, fell out and was smashed to red ruin by the rest of the MAKO slamming into her, finally slewing to a stop. That meant Williams and Jiong, along with their teams, came under heavy fire, Jiong taking several hits.

" – blood leech infested, two-bit backstabbing maggot ridden excuses of a hanar sex toy –"

Shepard's MAKO had dropped them off near the power stations, while it accelerated onwards towards the main buildings. No so much as five minutes later, the ruins of the barracks had begun to shift, and from the wreckage emerged a good ten or twelve regular krogan, along with a handful of asari. These had immediately pinned down Kaiden's small team of himself, Masterson, Cole, and Haln near the power stations, giving them no time to prepare to link the bomb to them.

Worse, geth had somehow gotten in behind them, and now they were in a crossfire, with Haln having already taken a gut-shot and Cole's cyberarm laid to bare metal by the shotgun of a krogan. Alenko's biotic defenses were being pounded as he tried to cover the squad, but he didn't know how much longer he could hold out.

"- fucking Skillian batarian-kissing BASTARDS!" Masterson roared as he was hit in the shoulder, returning fire with his Crossfire rifle and blowing the top of a krogan's head off.

Beside him, Cole shunted heat from his Revenant, grinning. His helmet lay on the dirt next to him, shattered by a heavy slug round that would have otherwise killed him. "You sound a little pissed, Mike. This ain't that bad. We got nice beaches, hot girls in short skirts, palm trees...You remember picking us up on Eden Prime?"

The gunnery sergeant spat and fired again, this time shooting a krogan in the groin, cackling in glee as the beast's roar broke into a high-pitched scream and it toppled to the ground. "Shit. The beach is on fire, the hot girls are crazy blue skanks, and the palm trees are where I shoulda stayed. As for Eden Prime, that was just a fucking Sunday stroll compared to –"

He jerked back, hit again, blood trickling from his now wounded leg, and hissed in pain. "...this shit. Fuck, outta medigel."

Cole tossed him a packet, and then resumed firing, his shots blasting through a low pile of rubble to strike an asari, who cried out in agony as she tumbled to the ground. "That's it bitch, scream you want it harder."

Masterson gave him an aside glance, before grinning.

Alenko used a biotic push to hurl a piece of broken masonry at the shooter who'd hit Masterson, an asari in torn robes with a rifle, the stonework hitting her and snapping both her legs as it fell on her.

With a grunt he hurled a grenade in that direction, the explosion incinerating the dying asari as well as a krogan next to her, sending the heavysset alien stumbling back before falling to the ground, missing most of it's chest.

Haln was silent and ashen, his rifle wavering as he gritted his teeth in pain. Blood leaked from his torso, and Cole gave him a steadying look. "Just hang on, Matt. Help is coming." He roared as more fire came in, and opened up with his Revenant, tearing a line of bloody craters into a charging krogan, sending it staggering back. "That's it, you big stupid bastards. Come over here and take your spanking like a man!"

Alenko hoped they could hold until help came. Between Cole's battle trash talking and Masterson's cursing, everyone on the planet had to know where they were.

O-OSaBC-O

Shepard stormed ahead, Liara and Garrus right behind her, firing in suppressive bursts as she finally reached the central building. The entire front of the building was a collapsed smoking wreck, but she could see a crater and flung ejecta where something had burst free of the rubble and punched a melted hole in the wall leading inside.

Liara stared at the perfect circle and the scarred rubble. "Mother. She survived..."

Garrus looked at the tons of stone and bent metal in awe. "What in spirits name does it take to kill her? A dreadnaught?"

Shepard grimaced and motioned towards the hole. "Everything dies if you shoot it enough, chicken. Let's move." They ducked inside, coming into a long, wide room with stacks of crates and a dead asari on the floor in flimsy robes. They pushed past, opening the only doorway out of the room.

The corridor beyond was done in plain blue steel, wide but dimly lit with the same pale gray track-lighting they'd seen in the base on Noveria. Garrus glanced around, mandible flickering. "Which way?"

Shepard cursed, but Liara tapped her omnitool, and a pair of small gun drones emerged. "They are not much for scouting, but they are better than merely wandering at random."

Shepard smiled. "Damn, so smart. Good idea. We'll let one go ahead and one back that way. We'll take the big hallway." They moved out, weapons ready – Shepard with the Revenant, Liara with the custom pistol in shotgun mode, Garrus having looted Saren's custom Kryxae sniper rifle.

The building was so utterly still and quiet as to be chilling. No voices, no footsteps. Nothing but muted click of their own footfalls and the dim sounds of the chaotic firefight outside. Once an explosion from the upper floors rocked the building, and then a soft, chiming alert began. Shepard's omni translated the soft asari speech.

"Warning. Fire suppression systems have failed on level two. Evacuate the Nazara Link and Communications area."

Shepard frowned. "That sounded important. Communications. We might find something to use there." She glanced around, finding a sloped stairwell at the far end of the hall. "Anything from your drones, Liara?"

The asari shook her head. "Nothing but living areas and storage rooms, and a massive worship area with an odd black pyramid in it. There are fresh bloodstains leading inside, but they stop at a fountain she must have used to cleanse and heal herself in. She could be anywhere."

Shepard grunted, and they moved to the second floor, weapons ready. Shepard's suit reported oxidants and the residue of burning metal, but with her helmet and it's sealed air supply she could smell nothing.

Fire didn't concern her, all their suits were rated to extreme temperatures.

The second floor was much like the first, except more damaged, with rooms on the south facing side buckled and crushed. Here and there were the broken forms of a dead asari. In the middle of the building, the stairways arched around a circular room, heading to the third floor. The doors to the circular room were ajar.

Shepard eased forwards, pushing the doors open. The room beyond was large, the walls black metal and covered in strange haptic screens or racks of computer equipment. The center of the room was taken up by a huge black sculpture erupting from a black pyramid, with a wide control console in front of it.

To the left was another Prothean Beacon, glowing green as the first one had. Shepard had gotten nothing from the one Saren had left behind on Noveria – whatever made it glow blue made it inert – but she felt the same odd pull from this one. "Liana, this beacon is active."

Liana nodded but bit her lip. "Be careful. They are ... dangerous."

She nodded. "Garrus, cover us." Hesitantly, she approached the beacon, and gasped as it lashed out at her invisibly, hoisting her into the air.

This beacon's grasp on her mind was different, as she could feel something pushing her thoughts aside and recoiling as it touched the Cipher, and the other vision in her head. After a moment a voice spoke.

*"This is a recorded message. There will be no reply. It is intended for all thrall species of the supreme Prothean Empire, and for any of the People who hear it. To disobey is to be punished."*

Images flashed before her eyes. *"We are invaded. The Citadel has been taken, overrun. The mass relays have been shut down. Dark mechanical intelligences the Wisdom has called 'Reapers of the Harvest' have come, destroying our fleets, shattering our Empire. We were too weak after the last battle with the Zha'til to stop them. The Galleries of Defense over the homeworld are gone. The Penumbra Apex is a smoking ruin."*

*"The Avatar of Defiance lies dead. The Avatar of Retribution is dead or taken. The Avatar of Cunning has lead us to this desperate plan. We will fall back to the tomb world of Ilos, where the Inusannon VI that instructed us was found. There we will hide a few hundred thousand of our kind, scientists, builders, warriors. The Inusannon message said the scourge would pass, and when it does we shall be ready."*

*"Our plan is to defy whatever mechanism let them capture the Citadel, if we can, and rebuild a new empire to prepare for their return. To break the cycle, to give those who follow a chance to fight and prepare. If we fail, let this message be our final warning. The Reapers are too powerful to fight directly. The very laws of physics obey them instead of logic as they should, and they have technology that is more akin to sorcery than anything we can match. They corrupt our very people into slaves, and our last count reports there are over fifty-two hundred of them. Even one of the greater Reapers could defeat an entire fleet of our ships."*

*"This is a recorded message. Tyth Kashan and the Avatar of Cunning, compel you to obey."*

The images and words faded and Shepard slumped to the ground, shaking her head. Liana rushed forwards, but Shepard held up a hand. "I'm...okay. This one was different than the one I saw on Eden Prime. Undamaged...or maybe it was the shit Shiala put in my head. I could understand it."

Garrus nervously checked his sniper rifle, glancing at the ugly black walls. "And?"

Shepard shook her head again, coughing. "Bout what we thought. Reapers ate the Protheans...took out the Citadel first. They shut down the mass relays and then picked them apart, took their fucking time

about it. Ilos...is where the remaining Protheans hid. They said they were going to 'break the cycle'. To give us.. a chance."

Liara had turned away, examining the console. "...Shepard. This console is not just a comms display...it is linked to some kind of computational array of staggering power. They were using it to .." she tapped several controls.

A star-map of the galaxy appeared in a baleful, ugly red color. It zoomed in, slowly, the galaxy rotating in rapid speed as millennia rolled by, and finally came to rest on a pair of binary stars, orbited by a mass relay. "...the Mu Relay. We know where it is. Copying the coordinates."

Shepard smiled. "Good work. All that's left is finding Benezia, and this Nazara fuck, whoever he is."

The moment she spoke that second name, just after Liara had recorded something to an OSD, the display of the galaxy flickered, distorting. A moment later, it reformed, but not as a galaxy, but the red-tinted image of the black ship.

A voice – a sound – a *force* – shattered the silence. To call it speech was akin to calling a star warm. It hurt to merely listen. It grated on the nerves, made the knees weak.

**"You are not Benezia."**

Garrus raised his rifle instinctively, his entire stance gone feral, knees bent to spring, head cocked, arms held close. Liara staggered back, lifting a glowing hand in defense, and Shepard gritted her teeth, forcing back her instinctual reaction to run.

"I'm Sara Shepard. What is this, some kind of VI?"

**"Rudimentary creatures of blood and flesh, you touch my mind, fumbling in ignorance, incapable of understanding."**

Garrus gave the thing a look, gripping the sniper rifle tightly. "I... don't think this is a VI, Commander."

**"There is a realm of existence so far beyond your own you cannot even imagine it. I am beyond your comprehension. I am unending, operating in a realm you cannot even see. I am Nazara. I am Sovereign."**

The Revenant fell from her nerveless fingers, as the voice crawled up her spine, her own voice a blasted whisper. "The black ship isn't just some ... Reaper ship Saren found. It's an actual fucking Reaper!" She hissed in alarm.

The image flickered, a tracery of red lightning erupting over the black sculpture that enframed its image hanging in mid-air. **"Reaper? A label created by the Inusannon to give voice to their destruction and ignorance. In the end, what they chose to call us is irrelevant. We simply... are. We are eternal. We harvest, and you are nothing."**

Liara's eyes widened. "No. The Inusannon vanished over a hundred thousand years ago. You couldn't have been there, it's impossible! Nothing survives that long, not even AI!"

**"Organic life is nothing but a genetic mutation, an accident. Your lives are measured by the limits of your understanding and perception. You see nothing, understand nothing. You wither and die. We are eternal, the pinnacle of evolution and existence. Before us, you are nothing. Your extinction is inevitable. We are the end of everything."**

Shepard snarled. "Fancy ass words from a talking garbage scow. Whatever your plan is, it's going to fucking fail, just like Saren did. I'll make sure of that, right after we blow your ass out of the sky."

**"Confidence born of ignorance. The cycle cannot be broken. I had thought you different, perhaps**

**a match for Saren and Benezia, but you are as sightless as they. Your defiance, your words, are nothing. You exist because we allow it, and you will end because we demand it."**

Shepard sneered. "Bullshit! We've achieved plenty without your so-called permission."

**"The technology you utilize, you do not understand. It is ours. Your civilization is based on the technology of the mass relays. Our technology. By using it, your civilization develops along the paths we desire. We impose order on the chaos of organic life. We shape the limits of synthetic life. We ensure none violate the Severity that we maintain."**

The red hologram seemed to grow in size. **"Organic civilizations rise, evolve, advance, and at the apex of their glory they are extinguished. The Protheans were not the first. The Inusannon were not the first. We have harvested for millions of years."**

Garrus's voice wavered. "They're...farming us. Spirits above, millions of years?" His voice sounded on the edge of madness, and Shepard exhaled, trying to recover her own balance. Liara's voice lanced out, still strong, still seeking.

"Where did you come from? Who built you? Why do you do this thing?"

The voice deepened. **"Even in the last flickers of your existence, you seek answers you cannot fathom. My kind transcends your very understanding. We are each a nation - independent, free of all weakness. You cannot grasp the nature of our existence. We have no beginning. We have no end. We are infinite. Millions of years after your civilization has been eradicated and forgotten, we will endure."**

Shepard's fists ground against her hips as she fought to make sense of it all. "What do you want?"

The voice rang out, and Shepard suddenly knew who had been speaking through Saren's corpse on Noveria.

**"We wish for you to *die*. We are legion. The time of our return is coming. Our numbers will darken the sky of every world. You cannot escape your doom."**

She tore her helmet off, spitting on the console. "Fuck you! We'll fight you, and when it's all over you'll be the one who'll be broken. You're just a jumped up geth."

**"Your words are as empty as your future. I am the Vanguard of your destruction. This exchange is over..."**

The red light faded, and Shepard stood there a long moment before replacing her helmet and picking up her gun. "Fuck. There was almost no lag on that shit, Sovereign can't be far away from this system. We have to get the fuck out of here." She slapped her omni. "Kirrahe, status?"

The voice of the salarian captain was slurred with pain or fatigue. "One of my squads is gone. Chief Williams has hacked the GTS tower she was assigned, but her and Team Sky are pinned by krogan. Your commissar blew up some kind of labs that were cloning krogan, but the krogan with him is badly wounded. They've linked up with what is left of Team Fire and Chief Vega, and have hacked the second GTS tower. The two are shooting down geth drop-ships and two cruisers that got close, but the geth are counter hacking. It's only a matter of time before they overcome our hacks."

His voice paused, panting, then continued. "The Normandy is incoming, but Lieutenant Alenko is pinned heavily. My team is moving on his position to reinforce him..."

Shepard shook her head. "No. Get back to Williams and back her up. Joker can take out the forces near Alenko, but if we lose control of a GTS tower we're all fucked. We found some ...disturbing shit in here, and I think the black ship might be on its way. Pull out as soon as you can, we're running for

Jiong's location."

Kirrahe's voice was muted by gunfire in the background, and the sound of a salarian screaming.  
"...understood Commander. Good luck."

Shepard faced Liara. "We have go to."

Liara nodded. "I know." She held up the OSD. "If we can get the Citadel to send the fleet to Ilos, maybe we can stop this madness before it begins."

Garrus gave a determined flex of his shoulders. "Let's get to it, then."

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## **Chapter 111: Chapter 102 : Virmire , Disaster**

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*A/N: Originally posted as it's own chapter, but someone informed me that was a no-no...so...*

*In the insurance industry, this is open-enrollment season, where people have to get their coverage for the year finalized. That means from now until New Years will be utterly crazy. I'm not sure how much updating will get done between here and there, aside from the next STG Investigative Report which will come out Christmas Eve as a present to my readers.*

*There will probably be one update to the Cerberus Files: Humanity and maybe one to the Cerberus Files : Aliens for the Turian intro. Not sure yet. OSABC will probably not see an update until after Christmas.*

*So, since I'm wasting an entire chapter on an author's note, I'd like to take time to give thanks to the people who gave me the inspiration to write this much. Without them I would have stopped writing this train-wreck a long time ago. All have encouraged me to continue this effort through messages, PM's, and ideas. Especially after the loss of my job and my mother's illness, as well as certain people who dislike AU's, your words were very important to me.*

*I appreciate EACH and EVERY review I get, so please, if your name isn't on this list don't be offended, it just means I haven't used an idea you've given me.*

---

*Above all else, my personal heroes:*

***Jay8008**, who says I inspired him to write, good god*

***Setrus**, the Maestro of settings, and who changed my opinion on Tali*

***Melaradark**, which started me thinking about a 'dark' Shepard in the first place.*

---

*Progman (should get a co-authors credit at this point)*

*Michael1110 (without which neither this story nor the documentation would have been finished)*

*SherryE (One of my oldest fans. Totally getting a cameo somewhere)*

*nimiraj12 and Sollus (The **official** fan-girls of the Premiseverse. I accept no others!)*

*Hewhoislost (You simply **MUST** read Two to Tango)*

*S058 (who left much encouragement)*

*NarwhalWarlord (Still not on your favorite author's list , I see :/)*

*Yoholic (is Admiral Yonis Chu!)*

*wyval*

*AlexN7 (says the nicest things!)*

*NonSolus (always interesting questions)*

*AllisterH*

*littlesquiggle*

*rjohanek (Army lifer, mad respect)*

*metaladdict*

*sepoveda*

*Shigan (reviews are always insightful :D)*

*Octoberskys (Navy for LIFE)*

*Seven Seven*

*RED78910*

*KeithFraser (If you go in for Code Geass, btw, an EXCELLENT author)*

*RWBYWolf*

*NPC200*

*GalacticAlien*

*Coltsbro*

*Druzhnik (Very interesting works)*

*And of course, my muses, **Owelpost**, **Wordkrush**, and **Bebus**.*

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*As for OSABC...*

*There will be two or three chapters prior to Ilos, then Ilos takes up at least two. The fight at the Citadel is likely to be five or six chapters long, the aftermath two or three. Then there is the post-story and Bring Down the Sky (which is utterly changed), culminating in an epilogue.*

*If all goes well, OSABC II: Downfell (may change that title, ideas are welcome) should see revision outlining completed by late January and the prologue chapters as early as February. Estimated length is 140 plus chapters clocking in at around around 800,000 words.*

*The Cerberus Files will be worked on as I get research done (I'm about a quarter of the way through the turian research. Studying birds, Roman military stances, stoicism, Romanian and Balinese history, postmodern super-flat art, and the effects of cosmic radiation on amino acid chains...it may be a while).*

*The next two works will come out around May/June 2014. I will also (finally) update the Reaper doc (Fear Unrelenting, Seen Darkly) after ME 1 is complete.*

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Commissar Jiong was beginning to wish he'd taken Commissar-Colonel Kayne's advice about not sticking one's head into the line of fire in search of glory.

Like all Commissars, he'd been adjusted to be superior to the marines and naval personnel he oversaw. Gene mods, implanted armor, augmented senses, metal-laced bones, and cyberware was only part of it. He had a gray-box in his head full of tactical and combat data, nineteen years of compressed military training hyper-hypnotically implanted in his thoughts, and chemical adjustment to remove fear and doubt from his mind.

It seemed he would need all of those advantages to get out of this hellscape alive.

The battle had already gotten off to a bad start when their MAKO was blown right off its wheels and into pieces, leaving one Marine dead and the rest banged up. If not for Telanya's biotic lift at the last moment, the cockpit might have crushed Williams just as it had Anders. As they piled out of the smoking wreck, they came under immediate geth attack.

Under heavy fire, the marines hesitated, and Jiong roared encouragement as he lead the charge. His Commissariat battle armor and sub-dermal plating had let him shrug off the several hits he took, and his enraged swing of his neural mace into the head of one of the geth had sent the machine flying back.

Tali's Reegar shotgun was very effective against them, their metallic bodies acting like a natural lightning rod, letting her fry them with a single blast. Wrex had waded right in, firing his shotgun in wild abandon and backhanding a geth with a crushing blow to the head that knocked the eye-lamp out of its socket and send it whirling in dizzy patterns.

Wrex laughed and blew it apart with another shotgun blast.

The fight that had followed was short, ugly, and ended with Williams and three of her marines wounded, Wrex with ugly arm and shoulder wounds, and Tali with a long burn from a geth flamethrower, luckily on her new cyberleg.

Williams had led her team off, leaving him with the tiny quarian and the giant krogan., but as Jiong and his team began moving towards their own target, they found what was left of the other STG team that had led the assault. Two of them lay torn and dead, the third had climbed atop some rubble and was firing desperately at one of the krogan-rachi creatures.

Wrex was enraged by the corruption of the krogan he saw attacking the salarians, and Jiong was about to go to the salarians' aid, when a roar brought his attention around to the charging krogan-rachni monstrosities that had just brutalized the other salarian STG soldier. The lead brute tossed aside the half-chewed and ruined corpse of the unfortunate salarian, slinging it to the ground where the body came apart in a mess of green ichor and bent, twisted armor plates. With a roar it charged Jiong's team, along with a second one.

The second immediately ran headlong into Wrex, who roared out his own challenge as he met it with multiple shotgun blasts. The first two did nothing but crack the armor plates bolted to the gruesome creature, the third blew a crater the size of a soccer ball into the things chest and drew a louder roar.

Jiong lost track of it as he dodged a heavy blow from a fist the size of his head. Again he lashed out with the neural mace, at it's highest setting, but even his augmented strength did little but inflict a glancing blow against the thick armor. Jiong used his biotics to leap back as the krogan hammer punched downwards, it's meaty fist connecting with the ground hard enough to send a spiderweb of cracks across the concrete.

Tali emptied her Reegar into the kneeling brute, electroplasma wreathing it in licking, crackling energies, but it barreled through them. Tentacles flipped and waved, as a heavy beam of energy lashed out, scoring a line across the surface of Tali's armored envirosuit. She hissed and sidestepped, but the krogan-rachni closed the distance as she did so.

Cursing, he threw his neural mace at the thing with the hardest biotic throw he could muster. It landed with a satisfying crack against the thing's knee, the head of the mace detonating with the force, electrical discharges coruscating over the monster. Blackened and scorched by the electroplasma blast of the Reegar, it lashed out with two tentacles at Jiong.

His hands had already gone for his flamethrower though, and it spat hot white phosphorous and enflamed slurry into the air, spilling and igniting in a hellish cone of blue-hot fire. The abomination screamed as it's appendages melted, but the scream turned to an enraged roar, and to Jiong's disbelief it walked through the fire towards him.

He triggered the level two ignition, glowing aluminum particles venting into the mix, but even as the armor plates on the thing melted and ran like wax, it yelled and struck out with a flaming fist. Jiong's dodge was not quick enough this time, and he was sent flying, flames scattering and dissipating as his weapon fell from his hands.

He landed heavily, and the burning nightmare was charging him at top speed. With a stammered curse, he flung out a shockwave, staggering and slowing it. It staggered on, agony entering the noise of it's continued yelling, and he lashed out again with his biotics, using a push to try and force the thing back.

Incredibly, after several seconds, it began advancing again. Jiong's arms shook as he strained himself, anchoring his mass to the ground and throwing everything he had into the field of energy, trying to hold it back. It's baleful, multifaceted eyes glowed and collapsed from the fire raging over its surface, and he noticed with faint shock that it's mouth was full of long, needle like teeth rather than the flat grinding teeth of a normal krogan.

A yell and an explosion rocked the beast, it's leg collapsing as Tali launched omni-grenades from her omnitool, each one small but packing a large punch. The second and third landed on it's back, and it finally fell, still groaning and yelling. Jiong used the last of his biotic energy to lift up a large piece of pavement and hammer it into the thing's head, splattering it.

He exhaled shakily, and looked up to see Wrex duck a clawing tentacle before tearing it out of the creature he was fighting. It slammed a clawed hand against his chest, but he merely took the vicious hit, instead dropping his shotgun and grabbing the head of the beast. With a krogan war-cry, he pulled back, and literally tore its head off its hulking shoulders.

It staggered, blood fountaining in all directions in a gory spray of orange, before staggering towards Wrex, the remaining tentacles seeking. With a disgusted noise, Wrex dived out of the way, his hands gathering up his shotgun as he did so. Three booms rang out as he fired, and finally the thing fell, twitching and spasming.

Jiong shuddered, and realized that the one he'd downed was still moving slowly as well. "What does it take to kill them?"

Tali sprayed her shotgun fire over the one Wrex put down, and with a final silent shake, it collapsed. Orange ichor, thick and smoking, began eating into the concrete of the plaza, and Wrex shook his head again. "Disgusting. Only Okeer could have come up with something so mocking and offensive to everything it means to be krogan."

Wrex turned as the last salarian finally managed to shoot its opponent to death. With an exhausted sigh, the salarian dropped to the ground, panting. Jiong stopped to pick up his flamethrower, and then moved over to him. "You okay?"

The salarian took off his helmet, revealing himself as Commander Rentola. "By the Collapse, what are these things? If they got into the wider galaxy they'd slay everything, and they don't even have guns!"

Jiong nodded, glancing about. "They came out of the building we were supposed to check. You should fall back to the group headed to the GTS tower, they might need help. We'll see what we can find and then get the hell out."

Rentola nodded. "Be careful, human. That may not be the last of the things."

Jiong lead Wrex and a limping Tali towards the building, moving from the shallow cover of rubble to the deeper cover of smaller side buildings. Close up, the reinforced walls could be seen to have external bracing, as if containing something within. He noticed as well that the building had turian script over it's doorway. His omnitool translated it as "Hot Lab".

"Wonderful. Get ready you two, I'm going for the door."

Wrex grunted, lifting his shotgun. "What are we looking for, anyway?"

Jiong began hacking the door, applying several runtimes to the lock. "Anything that can tell us what Benezia is up to, her ultimate target, or where this Ilos place is."

Wrex shook his helmeted head. "That's easy...she's gathering an army. She's going to attack somewhere, but she has no vehicles, no siege weapons. All these things we've seen are urban types. She's probably going after the Citadel."

Tali shrugged. "Or some other space station, or perhaps a city, Wrex? We can't afford to guess..."

The big krogan shot her a sidelong look. "You stab one krogan and you think you're some kinda military expert..."

Jiong tuned out their good-natured bickering, even as he considered it's ramifications. From what little he knew about the krogan – Commissariat xenotraining did not cover them heavily – they were brutal, simple warrior types. But this Wrex seemed more nuanced and much, much more clever than most of his kind, and strangely affable, in a warped, mercenary fashion.

Was it due to Shepard? Another question he had no answers to. The reports from the Commissariat observers aboard the Normandy had been ... inconsistent. Shepard had nightmares, was cool, efficient, and lethal. She didn't actively encourage teamwork...but everyone wanted to impress her, get that tiny little nod of respect. And though he'd intimated otherwise, despite their loyalty training, not a single one of the observers had reported Shepard's liaison with the asari doctor – that had come from the audio pickups they'd installed to monitor the turian and the asari, and had been an unexpected bonus.

He grimaced and returned his attention to the door. He'd have time to figure out how a bloody-handed sarcastic psycho managed to get such performance out of humans and aliens later. Jiong finished hacking the door leading to the building they were supposed to check out, and standing, kicked the door in.

He really, really hoped Benezia had died in the collapse of the main building's front facing. The Commissariat had no real intel on Saren, but the Justicars – in a sign of the respect between the two groups – had forwarded what they knew of the former Lunarch to the High Commissar, and Jiong had been sent a copy. Benezia was a nightmare opponent, far stronger than Saren, and probably crazy as shit at the moment.

So it was with relief that as doors opened, it wasn't filled with chanting asari. Instead, the room beyond was clearly some kind of lab, much as the sign above the door proclaimed. Huge towering tubes of green liquid ran from floor to ceiling, dozens of them, each one holding deformed krogan, twisted asari, or even bizarrely mutated vorcha. A huge table, twenty by thirty, dominated the room, covered in haptic diagrams of organ systems and displays of the asari brain.

The south wall of the room was segregated into several work spaces, each one facing an open-bay

holding cell with force-field walls and an array of experimental and surgical tools hanging from articulated arms in the ceiling. The cells only contained an array of dead salarians and asari.

The far wall of the room was covered in computer banks, and in one corner was a heavysset desk, with a micro-frame built into one side. A shelf with some knickknacks – a potted asari plant, books on genetic engineering, a framed portrait of an a human woman – hung above the area.

From behind the desk, Jiong heard a faint breath. He stopped, eyes narrowing, and drew his flamethrower. "The Perdition flame unit usually throws mere plasma, but the Commissariat prefers a white phosphorous, napalm and powdered aluminum mix. If you don't come out unarmed, you'll find out why."

A gasp of terror was heard, and an asari in a lab coat over a dress stumbled out from behind the desk, her hands empty of weapons and held out. "No! Please! I'm unarmed! I'm not a threat!"

Wrex leveled his shotgun at her. "You're working with Benezia. That makes you a threat and *stupid*."

Jiong chuckled. "While I certainly agree with you, my large friend, perhaps this person can find a reason to convince me to not learn the melting point of asari flesh."

Wrex glanced aside at the flamethrower. "You even cook my meals for me? Yeah, we're replacing Alenko with you." His helmeted head swung back to face the asari. "Talk, or I'll try medium rare asari."

The woman fell to her knees, eyes wide with horror. "N-no! I'll talk! I'm Rana Thanoptis, of the Lifeshaper clan. I was hired by Binary Helix to work with their bio-sciences division, but they flew me out here and told me to work or they'd kill me! Please, I didn't want to have to do anything, but I had no choice."

Jiong shook his head. "Death is a choice, Ms. Thanoptis. What exactly is being researched here?"

The asari sagged. "How to combat indoctrination, and designing the Destroyers."

Jiong glanced back over his shoulder at the tubes. "I am presuming the Destroyers are the rachni-krogan abominations we've been seeing? Why in the name of God would Saren and Benezia wish to create such things?"

Rana licked her lips nervously. "They were ... impossible to indoctrinate. Something about the mixture of krogan and rachni hormones. It started as a way to find a method for reversing indoctrination, or at least resisting it. But they also wanted an army independent of the geth, I think, they mentioned that several times. They figured out how to get around the genophage's blocks on cloning."

Wrex lifted his head. "They cured the genophage? Tell me! How!"

She gestured sadly to the tanks. "Not a cure. A side effect of combining them with rachni. Something about the combined genetics doesn't let the genophage throw off DNA markers when being clones. I don't think it does anything to the childbirth issues...and, well, they aren't ... sentient. What is left isn't really krogan or rachni. They implant geth technology into them and slave them to Benezia's will...although she took several of them and implanted them with cyberware from Nazara as well."

Jiong raised his eyebrow. "Nazara, yes. Nazara was mentioned by another asari that served Benezia, but we have no clue who he or she is."

Rana closed her eyes, shuddering. "Not who. What. It is the black dreadnaught. It lives, speaks. It's terrifying. It's voice is like feeling yourself dying slowly...pieces of your mind slipping away. Just being around it makes you start hear voices...see things, think things."

She shook her head, as if to clear it. "Most of my work was...trying to find away to stop indoctrination. I experimented with sonic fields, nanites, chemicals, even greyboxes and blueboxes. Benezia took most

of my research earlier today... I've just been waiting for them to leave and hoping they wouldn't kill me like they did the prisoners and Ganar Droyas."

Wrex growled. "Another Ganar. Has Okeer been here as well?"

She shook her head. "N-no. He never comes in person, but he sends krogan as ... test subjects, in return for payment and supplies. And Droyas...was killed. The geth came in and executed him, along with the test subjects. They didn't even stop when he screamed for mercy..."

Tali folded her arms. "Is there anything you can tell us that's useful? Where is Benezia? What else is in this building?"

Rana's expression fell. "I .. Benezia has an office in the next room, I can unlock it. It used to be Saren's, I think. It's where they kept some of what they'd learned about indoctrination. She's not there, though. The rest of the building is a sublevel – it's the assembly line for the Destroyers. Once we finalize production we can make tens of thousands of them in a few weeks time..."

Jiong shuddered. The geth they had were bad enough, even a few hundred of these monsters would tear through an entire battalion. "We have to destroy this place, then. It's a good thing we brought a bomb, but I don't know the yield on that, and this place is heavily armored. We'll have to go down there and plant bombs as well."

Rana's eyes widened. "A b-bomb? Blow the place up? I ... you have to let me go!"

He shook his head. "Go? Go exactly where? The bomb is eezo laced, it's going to obliterate everything in two hundred miles. We already blew the landing field up. How would you get away?"

Rana bit her lip. "Lady Benezia has a ship, a transport, at the back of the base behind the Tower of Nazara. The landing bay is dug into the hill. There's a passage that runs from here to the Tower's sublevel, leading to it.."

Jiong cursed and hit his omnitool. "Shepard, Jiong here. Benezia has a ship near the main building, she might be making a run for it."

The tool gave no reply, only static, and Jiong cursed again. "Dammit. Get that door open, asari, and we'll see about not putting a round in your head when we leave. Tali, go with her, secure anything you see valuable." He turned to Wrex. "You have explosive charges? Plant a few in this sublevel, I'll be down to help shortly."

Wrex nodded. "What are you going to be doing up here?"

Jiong pulled two short black items from the side of each calf, twisting their tops. A bright red light lit up on each of them. "Taking samples of whatever the hell they were doing. For all we know they've already loaded ships full of these things. Any weaknesses I can find will be useful."

Wrex grunted, motioning the asari ahead, and followed, Tali trailing behind. Jiong approached the nearest tube, running his two-piece scanning array over it, and tapping his omnitool. "Commissariat field log, encoding Capricorn. Possible genophage cure in combination of krogan and rachni traits. Obtaining full DNA scan. Recommend securing research from Noveria in light of this development."

He waited as the the array hummed quietly, the lights turning green after almost two minutes, and he replaced the scanners in their niches in the sides of his calf armor, kneeling to do so. He was about to stand when the tank on the end gave a shudder.

He drew his flamethrower and walked closer, keeping the nozzle trained in that direction. One of the malformed asari was twitching in her tank, and as he watched the status displays went from green to red. The bottom of the tank opened, flooding the floor with foul-smelling greenish-black liquid, and she

slid from the tube to land on the floor, hacking and coughing weakly.

Naked, she was similar to most asari, except for a faint tracery of cybernetics under her skin. In places the skin had turned necrotic, black corruption spreading in long lines edged with blue-lit metal. Her eyes had been torn out and replaced with a wide band of metal, and her right arm had erupted in plated, chitinous growths.

Blind, she coughed again, and turned her head to the sky. "I ... am free. The voice calls, but my body is his already."

Jiong frowned. "What happened to you?"

She gave a wide, unnerving smile, displaying blackened spike-like teeth. "I was the student of the wheel, yes. I wanted to see as the mystic, to see the Wheel turn, to see the spokes as they cast aside choice, yes. So I touched his mind, as he sat, and I saw, oh ... I saw. I saw what comes, shambling in from the dark, dripping slime over your head in the pitch black. I saw the fires, and the death, and the screaming. Asari, salarians, turians, humans, batarians...melting, blending."

Jiong felt a thrill of horror crawl up his spine at her cracked, barely sane voice. "What is coming?"

She turned to face him, spreading her hands. As she turned he saw an insectile leg growing out of her side, and the trickle of black fluids from her nipples. The skin on her right side was discolored and bruised, hints of machinery grinding away under the rippling surface. "I saw a Darkness. It ate light, made gravity turn to water. Time ran backwards, stars melted, planets became as clouds. I saw it eat everything, one little bite at a time...and as it ate us, we kept fighting each other, covering our eyes with our hands."

She coughed again, something thick and ropy dribbling from her mouth. "I have no eyes...and I see you, little man of rules, hiding his fear behind a coat and a hat, praying big brother would stop the rapes and the nightmares that daddy puts into you. I see you, all of you, and I should not see so *much* of you, so many angles and different parts...all smeared up in a cloud of maybes..."

She spread her hands. "...in one of those maybes, you will grant me absolution by fire."

Jiong set his jaw and pulled the trigger on his flamethrower, engulfing the tortured asari in bright, cleansing flame. She didn't even scream as it hit her, flesh crisping almost instantly, cyberware flaring and snapping in small pops, instead throwing her head back as if in ecstasy.

"thank...you..."

The corpse slumped smoking to the floor, and Jiong finally killed the stream. "What in God's name..."

Still curiously shaken, he'd not moved five minutes later when Tali, Rana and Wrex found him still standing there, a look of wondering horror on his face. Rana looked at the voided tube and shuddered herself. "Those were the experiments they did on an asari woman who used to be the student of a Wheel Mystic. She ... tore out her own eyes after the first set, and Benezia tried blending her with both rachni and Reaper technology..."

Jiong made the sign of the cross over the corpse. "No one should suffer such horror. We can review whatever you found later. I'm leaving some charges behind in the lab, then we're headed out to try and link up with Shepard's team. I can't raise her on my omnitool and that has me worried, and after this I simply wish to leave."

He turned and placed the still warm tip of the flamethrower to Rana's chin. "Cross me even once, asari, and you will join her in death. Otherwise, if you are obedient and don't get us killed, we will simply arrest you and turn you over to the Justicars."

Rana nodded, a tear sliding down her cheek. "Compared to this, that would be a mercy."

O-OSaBC-O

Benezia strode through the tunnel, not even noticing the blood slowly seeping from her leg. She had the information she needed, the Device was charged, and it was time to depart. The fact that she wasn't doing it in slow exultation of her soon to come ascension was an irritation, but only a minor one.

Her foes would be all dead or worse in a few days, after all. Her priority was survival, so that she could enjoy her revenge.

Normally, she'd have gone out and destroyed whoever had wrecked her base in such a manner, but the reports she was getting from what was left of her forces on the ground were alarming. She had no idea of how many attackers there were, how'd they located her base so fast, or how long it would be until Nazara arrived. With most of the Triune dead or dying, and the majority of the geth already loaded aboard the strike fleets, staying and fighting over the base would be useless.

She hated having to leave the Destroyers, as they would have come in handy in the days after the Reaper return as insurance, but she'd become less and less worried about the Reapers double-crossing her after tasting their power firsthand. They had no need to. They could obliterate the galaxy, why stoop to lying to a mere mortal speck?

Another explosion racked the tunnel, this one from more south. Beside her, Ylana cringed. "We have to hurry, Matriarch."

Benezia only smiled. "The tide cannot be sped nor slowed, faithful Ylana." She opened the door at the end of the bare concrete corridor with a wave of her hand, the ring on her finger communicating with the cypher-lock. It slid away, revealing the docking bay and the smooth shape of her personal ship, the Crescent Moon's Dance.

"Make sure the ship is in readiness, Ylana. I have to ensure the safety of the Device." She turned away, heading to the charging station in the corner.

The Device, a modified Prothean beacon, glowed a sick, bright red, its interlocking security precautions finally destroyed by Nazara's codes and viral attacks. The thick cables connected to the base of the platform it sat upon were the first thing to go, as she used her biotics to simply tear them away. She removed the braces that held it in place, and finally typed in her security code to have the base unit unlock the actual pylon, which fell to the ground next to her with a hollow clang.

"Fallen. Much like your makers. But you have one, last useful task to perform, little tool."

She was about to move the pylon when her omnitool lit up, and the tired voice of Huntress Ushan, the last of her inner circle, sounded. "Matriarch...we are outmatched. We have slain but a handful of whoever attacks, and too many were killed in the opening minutes of this assault for us to reorganize. We have fallen back to the Gathering Hall. What is your will?"

Benezia paused. "What is the enemy doing?"

Ushan's voice turned hard. "They have occupied the other two GTS sites. One group is coming out of the Tower of Nazara, another group just exited the Hot Lab. The geth remaining are attacking both GTS sites heavily, but I just saw a human frigate touch down near the power stations, so we can assume they are still in enemy control."

Benezia's lips curved. "A human frigate you say. Black and silver? Normandy is the name?"

"...yes, Matriarch. That is the ship. They appear to be ... unloading something."

Benezia's eyes narrowed as she thought. For Shepard to have trailed her this quickly either meant the

human had information beyond her means, or that they knew roughly where the base was anyway. Had they captured Saren, tortured the location out of him? Was it possible Shepard was in league with the Old One that worried Nazara so much? Or did the human simply have all the blessed luck of a dark-eel in a nest of dartfish?

And unloading something?

*Too many questions.*

"Fall back towards the docking bay. I am only going to wait five minutes, if you are not here we are leaving. There is no telling what they brought with them, and this may be merely the vanguard of a fleet arriving."

Ushan shouted orders. "Yes, Matriarch. Your will." She clicked off, and Benezia sighed, before turning to the still-glowing Device.

She lifted her arms, exerting the Art, and the Beacon slowly lifted from the ground, held aloft by her power. She carefully began to walk back towards the ship, turning it lengthwise so it would fit into the ship's small cargo bay.

She smiled. Let Shepard run wild. Once she had opened the way to the Conduit, nothing could stop her plans. Not ships, not armies, not the decayed plans of the Matriarchy, and certainly not one stupid little human.

O-OSaBC-O

Masterson groaned as he helped Haln up the sloping deck of the cargo-bay, even as off-duty ops alley techs, clad in spare Onyx armor, used a mass effect pallet to haul the large, boxy device the salarians had pulled from their ship-core off of the Normandy and down towards Alenko and Cole.

Piles of dead geth and krogan littered the narrow spaces between the power stations, and more krogan, geth and the occasional asari slumped in death over the rubble of the nearby barracks or against the walls. Alenko was hurt, having been shot in the leg and the shoulder, but he'd patched himself up with medigel. Cole was smoking a fresh cigar, a bloodied medigel bandage stuffed into a splintered puncture of his armor just below the right lung, and blood running from his knee joints. "That's it, nice and easy. You drop that goddamned thing and there won't be shit to wipe up."

Alenko shot him a sour look, glancing around a moment later. The GTS towers had been taken, and had swatted geth gunships out of the sky with ease, the missiles and guns having exceptional power. With the Normandy swooping in, her GARDIAN arrays had suppressed the attackers, with most of them having withdrawn to the building on the east edge of the compound. Joker had put a few missiles into it, but sporadic fire still came from it, answered by the distant booms of sniper rifles from the salarians and Williams' marine team.

The ops techs levered the bomb into place, and Alenko limped over to it. "Think you can cover me while I set this up, Master Chief? Masterson and Haln are done in, and none of these guys is equipped or trained for a firefight."

Cole merely nodded, checking the loads on his Revenant. "Yeah. I'm good." He squatted into cover, even as the sailors hightailed it back onto the Normandy. Alenko exhaled and tapped his omnitool, unfolding a haptic screen and bringing up the dark-energy regulation interface on the bomb unit.

"This is going to be dicey...have to hack my way past all the safety interlocks and then set it in a recursive power loop. Then have it force-intake energy from the tokamaks..." Alenko muttered quietly to himself as he worked, while Cole scanned the horizon.

Shepard's voice crackled on the comm. "Status of the bomb."

Cole answered. "Just starting the set up, ma'am. Had to evac Masterson and Haln, both are touch and go. I'm covering the LT while he works."

Shepard's voice sounded tense and tired. "Hurry. The black ship may be incoming, and Kirrahe isn't sure how much longer we can keep the GTS towers hacked. The geth are landing more units out of range of the GTS turrets, to the north. Be wary of incoming."

Cole nodded to himself. "Evac plan?"

Shepard was silent a long moment. "Hate to do it to you, but you'll have to be next to last. Once we evac the GTS towers, the geth will almost certainly regain control quickly. We'll pick up Vega's unit first, then Kirrahe and any surviving salarians, then you, and pick up Williams' on our way out. We lost a MAKO, and the other MAKO took a hit to the side that has the launch comps scrambled, so having both GTS teams punch up to orbit is a no-go."

Cole swore quietly. "Understood, ma'am. I got this shit. Make sure you get the others clear." He clicked off. "So, no pressure LT, but I'd really appreciate it if you used some of those officer boffin brains and got that thing ticking soonest."

Alenko smirked. "Trust me."

O-OSaBC-O

The ops alley was tense. They were taking in telemetry from drones they'd dropped before they'd landed, and the geth lines were moving, spreading. It wasn't towards the planet, thankfully, and given their long distance from the planet they'd take hours on their current course to get within shooting range. Unfortunately, they looked to be lining up to move to the relay.

"Only eleven minutes until our escape window is still 100%, sir." The comm techs voice was almost apologetic, and Pressly grimaced as he nodded, glancing over the plot.

Getting off of this world would be a nightmare. The sheer size of the geth fleet in the system was beyond staggering. Although they'd managed to blow the comms tower and thus cut off any messages, there was only a 47 light minute gap between the planet and the geth fleet, and that gap was becoming narrower and narrower. In eleven more minutes, any signals the geth on the ground had sent for help would hit the geth fleet, and all hell would break loose.

The geth would move in force to the planet, and even the Normandy's stealth system would be of no use against that many sensors at close range. Fighting past them was impossible, and unlike Ferros, there were no handy gas giants to give them a speed boost, especially not when climbing out of a gravity well.

Shepard's worry about the black ship also being on the way only ratcheted up the tension and worry. So it was with great relief that Pressly finally heard the magic words. "Normandy, this is Shepard. Begin the movement. I know there's not a lot of time, but try not to light up the atmosphere."

Pressly merely nodded. "Yes, ma'am." He clicked off and tapped the inter ship comms. "Helm, bring us around to the west GTS tower so we can pick up Vega's team."

O-OSaBC-O

Everything had been going perfect.

Then everything went to hell at once.

Williams had been picking off more incoming geth from the north when the order for the evac to begin had come across. Her team had held out magnificently, and her little group of salarians was almost uninjured. Kirrahe, exhausted and worn, had managed to stagger to their GTS tower with his team, all

of them badly wounded but still capable of fighting.

The geth push had been driven back, with almost no losses, when four geth hunters had uncloaked right in their midst. Chief Hallis had no time to even scream as the plasma shotgun in the hunter's hands had blown his entire upper body apart at point blank range.

Florez had turned, his assault cannon barking and tearing apart one geth, but the other three fired. Muse was hit twice, screaming as she came apart under the blasts, and the final geth had shoved its shotgun in Williams' face.

She'd tried to knock it aside with her rifle, but instead only pointed it down. The booming report had coincided with a flash of heat and pain, and she fell, screaming in agony as plasma fire tore through her stomach, runnels of molten armor seeping down her legs.

Marines and salarians had opened up in panicked fire, and dropped two more, but not before the geth had put a blast into Kirrahe's side, sending him to the ground in writhing agony, spurts of green blood seeping fitfully from his thick armor. Telanya had used her biotics to crush the last geth almost vengefully, smashing it repeatedly against the tower's side before dropping it.

Ownby was already over Williams, tearing open packets of medigel and screaming for help. With a shudder, Telanya turned to Kirrahe, seeing his men working over him frantically. She tapped her omnitool. "Command, this is Sergeant Telanya. Captain Kirrahe and Chief Williams are down and dying. They need immediate medical attention, I repeat, immediate medical attention."

She waited breathlessly, until the tired voice of Shepard sounded. "We're picking up Vega's team now, but if we pick you up, the GTS array will fall and we'll have to dodge our way out. We haven't picked up Alenko and Cole yet!"

Before Telanya could respond, Alenko's voice sounded, hard, angry, frightened. "Commander. You have to pick up Williams first. She's dying, ma'am. I still have to set the yield differentials. We need a few more minutes anyway."

Shepard cursed. "That means recrossing the entire base under GTS fire, and we don't have a few minutes. Fuck. FUCK!" Silence.

Then Shepard spoke again. "Telanya, hang on, we're on our way. Cole, you'll... have to hold a bit longer."

Cole's voice was cool, collected, even over the sound of his Revenant firing. "No problem, boss. I'm too pretty to die."

Telanya turned back to Williams, laying on the ground, pale and splashed with her own blood. Swallowing, she lifted her rifle and turned to make sure no more geth were coming. To the south and east, they were clear, but to the north, where Alenko and Cole stood, a line of geth could be seen landing from dropships, firing as they ran.

"Goddess..."

O-OSaBC-O

Flying a ship the size of the Normandy in atmosphere was hard enough. Dodging the occasional GTS missile from ground units, the blasts from geth gunships, and not disrupting the atmosphere enough to be noticed and thus draw down more reinforcements was even harder.

The Normandy's flight surfaces were sluggish, the tropical air and moisture affecting the lift motivators and dragging at the airframe. Worse, none of the ship's systems really had time to recover from the long heat saturation they'd endured on the trip in, and icy conditions of Noveria had thrown all kinds of

things out of whack they'd had no time to fix.

So when the Normandy took the first GTS missile right to the spine, Joker could only be happy that it had taken the geth that long to hack the first turret back under their control. He fought the stick as the ship bucked in midair, grimacing, and screamed out a curse. "Goddamn it, ECM!"

The ops techs sitting in the ECM row didn't respond, sweat dripping from their faces as they fought with geth targeting systems. Dipping between two wrecked buildings, Joker brought the ship into a three-point hover next to the last GTS tower.

The figures who staggered to the Normandy's ramp looked like they'd been shot to pieces, leaving a trail of red and green that was nearly continuous. Even as he watched, sensor alarms began blaring on his console. "Shit shit *shit*."

He hammered the Comms control. "Commander! In system drone just showed the black ship came outta nowhere, nine minutes out! Geth are going crazy!"

In the CIC, Shepard bowed her head. With that little time, it would mean having to hope Alenko and Cole were ready the moment they got everyone aboard, that the GTS towers didn't lock them up, and that Nazara couldn't go faster than the insane speed they'd already seen from it back in Eden Prime. "Understood, Flight Lieutenant. I want your fastest speed to them, if we can avoid missile hits."

O-OSaBC-O

The console flashed red, and Alenko's shaking hands stilled only for a second as he clenched them. The bomb was nearly ready, but the final step was throwing him, and nothing he tried would make the assembly stabilize the power-flow he needed to detonate the entire thing.

He was about to scream in frustration when he had an epiphany. Instead of flowing the power through the eezo core, he had it tap each of the containment points, and tied that to a field-strength reduction program he had on his omni, originally used in magnetic bottle management for torpedoes. With the right fluctuation, it would start harmonic feedback –

He smiled, and half turned, signaling Cole. "Done, Master Chief."

Cole grunted, shooting down yet another geth, his foot propped up on one of the krogan-rachni monstrosities that had charged them a few minutes ago. "Outstanding, sir. Knew you could do it. Hell, even with goddamned brain cancer you're smarter than me." They'd talked about Kaiden's disorder and a possible cure, the older marine nodding understandingly at the time, but of course Cole would make a joke out of it.

Kaidan winced. "Fuck off, Master Chief." Cole's answering cackle made Alenko smile as he tapped the final instructions."

O-OSaBC-O

Nazara examined the chaos, the babble of the geth, the flickering, fleeting impressions he could detect. Benezia's crazed demand for revenge had tipped their hand early, leaving his sensor array exposed, but he had done what he needed with it, and it was superfluous now. He had planned to keep it around for future Harvests – it made a fine monitoring tool, after all – but he couldn't let it fall into the hands of the primitives, as they'd discover far too much about the nature of reality with such a thing.

Giving orders for the geth to open fire on it, he turned to the planet itself, seeking an avatar. Most of the servants that had been laced with Ascension protocol implants were too damaged to revive...but one was not, one of the hybrids. Reaching out, he activated it's sub-controls, and it's eyes reacted, taking in the form of two humans, and what looked to be some form of primitive eezo based bomb, hooked crudely into the tokamak power reactors.

Benezia had the Device and had not yet fled. He could not afford the delays that would come from breaching Ilos without such a thing, and he could not assume the bomb would not kill Benezia and damage the Device. He pushed more of the Power into the ruined hulk, shoving his consciousness into the ravaged body, and triggered the transformation.

The bomb would have to be stopped.

O-OSaBC-O

Shepard looked on in horror as they hauled Williams past her into the medical bay. The woman looked as if her entire lower body had been set on fire, and so much red-tinged medigel was seeping from the craterous wound that it was clearly not helping, the substance unable to bind together such a savage wound.

She was about to instruct Joker to move on to pick up Cole when Joker's voice rang out. "Cole's bio-monitors just went dead!"

O-OSaBC-O

Cole didn't even have time to react. One moment he had turned to face Alenko, as the marine lieutenant stood, the next second he was flying through the air, the back of his armor shattered and dented from the punch from the krogan-rachni thing that was standing.

*"I am assuming direct control".*

Kaiden stumbled back in horror. The krogan-rachni stood slowly, and it was glowing a fell, sick red, chunks of flesh sloughing off or cracking wide open as cybernetics erupted from it, deranged thorns of technology splitting bones and flesh and pulsating.

It staggered, the multifaceted eyes coming apart, revealing blank red pits, and its jerky motions smoothed slightly as it approached. Drawing his rifle he emptied it into the thing, aiming for the head, then the knees. The rounds impacted cleanly, tearing through flesh or punching through armor, but reddish wires erupted from the wounds, spiraling around them protectively.

Alenko distantly heard Shepard's voice, but his mind was on survival. He triggered his biotics, throwing the most powerful warp field he could at the thing, watching blue fire rage over its tortured form. The attack burned away it's face and part of it's arm, but that only revealed more seething, moving metal, bubbling and hissing as it converted flesh to more cybernetics.

It lashed out, sharp blades suddenly forming on the hand, metal wires coming together in a razor sharp edge, and he was too slow to dodge, his barrier shattering at the force of the blow as it carved into his right arm. He screamed and fell, watching in unhinged horror as his forearm fell away, cleanly severed.

The thing tilted it's head. *"Die"*.

It lifted the hand-turned blade again, and then it was tackled from the side, staggering back as Cole slapped a grenade on it's back and dived away.

The explosion sent both men tumbling, and the thing roared and spun. Cole slapped his omnitool even as he drew his Carnifex pistol. "Commander, leave. We are dead."

Shepard's voice was like iron. "I'm not leaving my men!"

Alenko gasped for air, bleeding, and staggered to his feet, mind sluggish and slow.

"...Commander...go." He watched in a mix of faint, numb horror and tired resignation as the corrupted, red-shot form of the krogan-rachni brute got slowly to it's feet. One arm was missing, but the other was shifting in shape again, into some sort of long hooked blade. "Please. You can't get clear in time if you

try to pick us up."

He smiled. "And I'm blowing the bomb now."

He let his omnitool fall, ignoring Shepard's voice and turned to the panel. "Master Chief...I only .. need a minute."

Cole stood, bleeding freely from his mouth. His entire back was torn, armor ripped and buckled, and he smiled with bloody teeth. "I got it, LT."

He squared himself up, lifting his cyberarm, his one good eye glaring fiercely. "Come on, you alien freak show. One sucker punch in the back is all you got? Bring your fucked up bug-turtle ass on over for round two."

O-OSaBC-O

The Normandy shuddered again, alarms blaring.

Shepard closed her eyes in the CIC, gripping the railing so tightly she felt as if her knuckles would tear through her flesh. Her voice was a whisper. "Take us out, Flight Lieutenant. Maximum mark."

Joker's voice was equally quiet. "Aye, ma'am."

The ops plot blipped. "A ship is taking off from the base, ma'am. Asari light cruiser. We have no firing solution, it will not be in range without us overflying the bomb blast radius and entering into GTS range of the turrets..."

Shepard nodded. "Ignore it. She got away. They're dying for nothing."

Another ops tech spoke. "Geth and .. the black ship on an intercept course. We can outrun the geth but the black ship is moving at mark 95...it will catch us in two minutes."

Shepard's face twisted. "Understood. Prepare drone beacons for launch and..." She paused. What good to abandon ship, surrounded by geth and that thing?

The ops tech looked up. "Ma'am?"

O-OSaBC-O

Alenko tapped the final control.

"You punk-ass motherfucker, I ca – "

Alenko's remaining fist tightened as a meaty thud landed next to him, the torn open body of Cole coughing up blood. Alenko turned slowly, taking in the image of the krogan thing standing there, holding aloft the gory, torn off cyberlimb of the master chief.

Cole spat blood. "Semper fi, LT..."

His eye closed, a smile gracing his battered features, and Alenko nodded. He glanced up at the thing as it approached, and suddenly he grinned, as the console behind him beeped three times.

"Semper fi, and payback is a bitch." He had time to laugh before the monster tore his head from his body, and the last thing his mind registered as he died was the final beep that meant the bomb cycle was armed and about to go off.

O-OSaBC-O

The explosion was titanic. Driven by a contained mass effect field, the eezo explosion fed off the power of the fusion reactors, spinning it around and around in a tiny simulation of a collapsing star. And much like a collapsing star, when it compressed too far and couldn't generate enough power to hold in the

pressure, it detonated.

A flare of bright white and blue light tore through the atmosphere in a huge conical spike, shockwaves pushing clouds away. The ground ceased to exist for miles around, flashing instantly into vapor, and beyond that cooked into magma and fused glass. Chunks of burning earth the size of dreadnaughts were hurled for miles to crash down into the ocean.

Still linked to the creature he had been controlling, Nazara was caught unprepared for the sudden death of his thrall, and tumbled out of control, slowing, attempting to compensate for the loss of a part, however tiny, of it's consciousness.

Joker pushed the ship to it's limits, slipping past the incapacitated behemoth, blazing at top speed towards the systems edge. By the time Nazara had recovered, the Normandy had flashed to FTL, out of his reach.

Nazara considered the last actions and words of the mortals, and then discarded them. Their resistance was almost as amusing as it was pointless. He detected the form of Benezia's smaller ship approaching and let it enter his body, preparing to travel to Ilos and end this long exile.

O-OSaBC-O

Shepard sat bonelessly in her cabin, Liara gently holding one of her hands. Chakwas stared at Shepard grimly, arms folded. "You don't have to discuss this now, Commander." Her uniform was stained with blood, red and green, and she had laid the casualty and injury info-pad list on Shepard's small table.

Shepard looked up, eyes red. "I just lost two of my bravest people, on a task that ended up not even killing the bitch we came here to get. I just learned that the black ship is an actual fucking Reaper planning to bring it's buddies here for a big BBQ. And that it has been going on for millions of years or more. I'd like to go ahead and get the rest of the bad news out of the way."

Chakwas sighed. "Masterson won't ever fight again, but he's alive. Haln is in a coma. Shots to the gut, lungs. One of his kidneys is pulped. Ownby took three slugs in the left lung and it collapsed, he's critical. Haskins got hit with a geth flamer and has third and fourth degree burns to the right torso and arm."

Chakwas glanced at Liara. "Sergeant Telanya was hit twice in the thigh and once in the upper body but is stable. Hallis is dead. Muse is dead. Jackson is dead. Montoya is alive but critical, missing a leg. Florez took dozens of shots, his DACT armor helped but he's in serious condition."

She glanced at the info-pad. "Kirrahe is alive, but lost fourteen of his people, including his XO, Rentola."

Chakwas bit her lip. "Williams is ... alive. She's critical. She ... was hit in the abdomen. Part of her intestines were damaged...and her uterus." A long, ugly pause. "Any child she was carrying could not have survived, Commander. I'm sorry."

Shepard looked up at her, shock and disbelief on her face. "Oh my god...no. No." Liara closed her eyes and held her hand more tightly, as Shepard began to shake.

Chakwas shook her head sadly. "I have to get back to the medbay. I'll update you as I am able, Shepard." She left the room quietly, the doors swishing closed behind her, and Shepard hung her head again, jaw tightening.

Liara gently lifted her chin. "You did nothing wrong, Sara. We...we had our choices taken from us."

Shepard shook her head. "No, I chose it all. Instead of pulling back and going for reinforcements, I pushed ahead. Because they never reinforce me. They always make me go at the target with not enough

guns, not enough men. Why even bother? I'm Commander Goddamned Shepard, I can do anything if I just get enough of my people killed." She gazed at her hands, making a fist, then letting it go. "And now, an unborn kid. She won't even have that to remember Kaidan by."

Her voice was bitter, and weary, and above all else hurt in a way Liara could literally feel through their link. It made her sick to the stomach, and she pushed it down as she tried to reach Shepard. "No, that is not true. We went with what we knew. You heard Jiong. If we had not acted, my mother would have had an army of those monsters, and done Goddess only knows what with them."

Liara focused her feelings, her belief in Sara, her firm belief that the sacrifice they just made had to be done. "What happened to ... our friends ... is not your fault. Alenko and Cole were already dying. Even if we had gotten there in time, they would not have survived long. We would have all died, and the information we obtained..."

She trailed off, and Shepard nodded. "It ... just hurts. Goddamn it." She squeezed Liara's hand back, tears traveling down her cheeks. "I.. I am going to murder that bitch mother of yours if it's the last goddamned thing I do. This I swear."

She closed her eyes again, exhaling. "This I swear."

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## Chapter 112: Chapter 103 : Aftermath I

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*A/N:* Well, I haven't been around for a while.

Short version – problems at work, injured relatives, personal situation going to shit, helping raise nieces, and exhaustion. The Story isn't dead, and neither is the supplemental material. I just had to find energy to scrape it all together.

Chapter's a bit short, and I apologize for that, but I've scrapped almost all of it and started over. Reviews are of course welcome.

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### O-SaBC-O

The trip back to the Citadel was somber and tense. Marines and sailors sat quietly in the mess, no one speaking much. Chatter on the ops alley was silent, the figure of Pressly stalking back and forth in agitated mute tension, snapping out course adjustments in a near growl. The whisper of prayers could be heard from some, as they knelt outside the medbay, watching the frail forms of the survivors within.

The grim figure of Emilo Vega stood in the cargo bay, his face hard as stone as he stood the Eternal Watch over the coffins there. They'd had to leave quickly, and they'd had to leave three of their dead behind. Those that remained would be honored. The steel coffins were hard and bleak in the dim light of the cargo bay, haptic flags of the SA and their nation or colony shimmering faintly over their surfaces.

In the medbay, Chief Haln's condition miraculously held, due to non-stop work by Chakwas, and Ashley was stabilized a short while after. Neither were even close to regaining consciousness, but Chakwas was sure they would hold out until they could reach the Citadel. Masterson was still in serious condition, his wounds more serious than they had initially seemed. Montoya, the second DACT, was also in serious condition, having taken nineteen direct hits in covering Team Vega's retreat.

Captain Kirrahe was also critical, but thankfully one of the surviving members of the STG unit happened to be the medic, and with Chakwas' help was able to stabilize him. The science lab was

turned into a makeshift med-bay for the salarions, while the medbay itself was filled to capacity.

The ship itself was also wounded. Armor plating had broken in several places, and there was a slow atmosphere leak in Engineering that Tali was trying to fix. Joker kept having to adjust trim flows to the engines, and the number three engine was unresponsive. The GTS missile that hit the spine blew the secondary power conduit, knocking out power to some of the ship's atmosphere controls, and the ship grew colder and colder. Eventually they turned on the IES system simply to heat things up.

Shepard sat in her cabin, staring at the profiles of the dead. Their pictures stared at her quietly from her hastily repaired terminal. Tali had fixed it after she'd smashed it upon viewing Kyle's OSD of horrors.

She was sorely tempted to smash it again, simply to vent frustration. She looked at the terminal again, fists clenching on the small desk. Her jaw was so tight it ached, and yet she couldn't look away. She'd spent the night writing the letters she so hated, the ones telling a family that they would have to take down the silver star hung in a window or on a door, and replace it with a blue one.

The letters informing them of the death of their loved one.

Chief Sheena Hallis, A4, twenty year veteran. Up for retirement in nine months, left behind three children on Earth. Designated Marksman. Acted like the team mom for the marines, always puttering in the galley on snacks, or listening to their complaints. Her bright green eyes looked out from the profile photo almost sadly, and her smile was calm, accepting.

Sergeant Charlais Muse, A2, nine year veteran. Grenadier and scout-sniper, dual specializations, rare in the lower ranks. Her wife and family had just moved to Horizon, and after this tour she was scheduled to work planetside there. Killed by geth hunters. The woman in the picture looked almost impishly pleased with herself.

Sergeant Adam Jackson, A5, G2, fifteen year veteran from Massai III. Grenadier. No family, no children, no wife, thank God. No letter to write. Still, he'd be missed. He was always ready with jokes, always in trouble with Cole for some damn-fool stunt. His dashing good looks were a touch somber in his profile picture, unusual for him. Killed in the firefight at Vega's GTS tower, hit by a rocket.

PFC Julia Anders, A1, O5, an incredibly fast rising star in the ranks of the unit. Promoted to A1 just before Eden Prime, Julia was the youngest of the marines on board, her curvy figure and infectious smile a common sight in the CIC where she tended to stand guard with Haln. Single, with no parents, only a brother on file living on Bekenstein. Died when the MAKO was hit by the geth and came apart.

Master Chief Petty Officer Greg Cole, A7, D4, M4, P4, V2. Shepard had been surprised to read his many qualifications, as well as the fact he had been awarded five Medals of Valor and was a junior squire of the Knights of Christ Triumphant. The heart of the marine team she'd built, he'd survived Eden Prime and Saren, only to die on Vormire. His letter, perhaps, was the hardest to write, as he had a large family, and twin grandsons that were five years old. His picture was stern, unyielding. She'd never met any NCO as nearly perfect as Cole, and she doubted she would again – it was as if the man stepped out of a recruiting poster, bigger than life, indefatigable even in death.

And of course, Kaidan. She exhaled, shaking her head sadly. Kaidan was the worst of all. So young. Maybe the Noverian treatments would have worked, and maybe they wouldn't. Maybe he would have died in two or three years. Maybe he would have –

She cut the thought off. The letters were written, and sent. All that remained was to avenge them. The deaths had been senseless, a waste of her best people, in trying to take out Benezia. They'd barely even seen her, the bitch had fled and her people died because she was too arrogant to back off and call for help. Perhaps Kirrahe was right and she made the right call going in, but it still galled and hurt. Perhaps Liara was right and she had no choices, but it still left her feeling empty.

She'd lost track of how many faceless marines she'd gotten killed in her years, but she had always prided herself of taking care of her people, her crew. She'd fought as hard as she could to protect Neutron, and they fought equally hard to protect her. And she had fought to protect her marines. She'd lost Jenkins on Eden Prime, lost more on Eingana, and now this.

*Stop fucking thinking about it. Get out of this goddamned room and let your people see you aren't dead. Stop worrying the shit out of Liara.*

She shut down the files on her dead, closing the viewscreen. She still had to make her report to the Council, and to High Command. She had just gotten up to try and figure out which to do first, when the ship trembled slightly and alarms blared on her haptic ship display, mounted over her desk. She cursed. "VI, status report."

The VI's voice was as calm as ever. "Tertiary plasma conduit rupture, port-side fuel assembly. Engine capacity reduced to sixty-four percent."

She sighed, tapping the comm to Engineering. "Adams, this is Shepard...what just happened?"

The tired voice of her Chief Engineer spoke. "With an engine out, there's too much stress on the remaining three, Commander. It's minor damage – in dock I could fix that in fifteen minutes – but it's adding up. We'll have problems getting her space worthy again if we don't stop for drydock."

Shepard grimaced. "I want to head back, get the fleet, and go after that bitch at Ilos first thing, Adams. Our turnaround will be rapid. How much endurance do we have left, and how long will it take to make sure the Normandy can make the fight?"

Adams was silent for a few moments before speaking. "I need at least four hours, preferably six, in dock. I can get things mostly back together with that much time. Any less and I can't guarantee we wouldn't lose FTL propulsion entirely given another transit, ma'am. "

Shepard pinched the bridge of her nose, nodding to herself. "Six hours. That's it. Make sure you make it count. Shepard out." She clicked off the comm, blinking tiredly at her room, before stretching her back. She couldn't sit here focusing on the dead, and she couldn't put off reporting to her superiors forever.

Exiting into the mess decks, she was slightly surprised to see the battered figure of the salarian medic, Govu, sitting at one of the tables, watching the ANN news that was filtering in from the comm-sat lane. The salarian, a slender fellow with pale skin and scars over both horns, turned to face her with smooth agility. "Good evening, Commander. Captain Kirrahe and Lieutenant Juru will both recover. Lieutenant Bato is still critical, but Captain Kirrahe has regained consciousness and would like to speak with you. "

She nodded. "We're making the best speed we can to the Citadel, and when I make my report here to the Council I'll alert them to have salarian medical teams prepped. I'll go see Kirrahe now." She turned, grimacing as she headed into the medbay.

Two storage lockers had been folded away to allow for more medical beds, but even so the med bay was overloaded. Haln and Masterson were laid out on one side, while Chakwas was working over Williams on another medical bed as she came in. Montoya was in another bed in the corner, reading an infopad, his left leg missing mid-thigh. Haskins and Ownby lay side by side, Haskins covered in burn-gel and very still, Ownby's thick form occluded by medical monitors. Florez, her other DACT, was tucked into a temporary med-unit bed behind Chakwas' desk.

"Commander?" Chakwas looked up from working on Williams, a tired look on her features. "Come to see the injured?"

Shepard shook her head, glancing around. "Heading to talk to the salarians. But...I should ask. How is

everyone?"

Chakwas's face twisted into a thin grimace. Carefully moving a medigel injector along Williams' stomach, she sighed. "Not good. Haln and Masterson are still unconscious. Haln's liver is near-septic, and he'll need a kidney replant or cyberware. Masterson took a lot of fire, Commander, and I'm not sure if he'll walk again, several shots chipped his spine."

She paused, adjusting something on her omni for a moment. Her voice was tired. "Montoya is alright, the amputation went well and I've already placed the lining for a cyberlimb. Haskins is suppurating from her burns and I really need a burn unit to assess her injuries. Ownby hasn't been able to breathe on his own yet. Florez...stable, but still hurt too badly to fight."

She looked down at the form of Ashley. "On the other hand, we may have a minor miracle on our hands with Williams. As I said she took that shot right in the gut and her uterus was ... well damaged. Fetal mortality in such instances is high, usually around 90%. I went ahead and stabilized everything as well as I could and did as much work in the stasis field as I could."

Shepard nodded, and she continued. "This afternoon, I did the secondary work up on Ashley. I'm still getting enzyme emissions that indicate pregnancy is ongoing, and I'm still getting a faint fetal heartbeat. I'm estimating the level of fetal oxygenation, but nothing seems compromised by trauma."

Shepard blinked, hard, before she felt a smile erupt over her features involuntarily. "You're saying the baby is fine?"

Chakwas sighed. "No. There could still be complications. Bradycardia or tachycardia, a decrease in the oxygenation of the embryo, all sorts of things. Williams is still shocky, her body has taken an enormous amount of damage and I can't use some of the stronger methods to patch things up without risking the fetus, so I will have to monitor things very closely." She paused, pushing back her hair. "Right now, I'd give the baby a 40% chance of survival."

Shepard pinched the bridge of her nose and exhaled slowly. "That's .. a fuck of a lot better than yesterday, doc. Has she regained consciousness yet?"

Chakwas shook her head. "I've kept her under sedation until the regenerators finish working, but I've had to do the work in her torso mostly by hand – regenerators and fetal development don't work well together."

She sighed again. "Despite that bit of good news, everything is still very touch and go. I've treated everyone else as best I can, but we're already getting low on medical supplies. This medical bay is as good as the Systems Alliance can make for it's size, but we aren't equipped to handle these kinds of injuries, much less salarian injuries. It was only luck that since I never knew what aliens you'd bring aboard next that I laid in three bags of frozen salarian blood plasma."

Shepard rubbed her eyes wearily and nodded. "We'll be to the Citadel soon. I've already sent ahead the crash EMT and hospital clearance requests you wanted. Just keep them going until then, Doctor. That's all you can do."

Chakwas nodded. "I know. I don't mean to pry, Commander...but will you be alright yourself? I know you dislike losing troops."

Shepard gave a small, sad smile. "Seems to be the story of my life, sometimes. That operation didn't go anywhere near the way it was supposed to go. And we didn't get the target."

From his med, Montoya snorted. "We scared the shit out of her, though." He set aside his infopad, his slenderly handsome Hispanic features dark and serious. "Commander, Jack and I knew the score when we volunteered for this gig. What went down on Virmire was some seriously bad shit, but things

mainly went to hell because we went up against an army with two tanks and not even a fucking company of soldiers."

He gave a pained shrug. "We killed off more than a thousand of the enemy, blew up their barracks and comm center and killed off more, blew up their monster-making factory, and even if she survived having a building dropped on Benezia had to hurt her, ma'am. Plus, she ran, and something happened to the black ship when the bomb went off." He looked at her intently. "Master Chief Cole wouldn't want you kicking yourself, ma'am. He went out like he wanted to."

Shepard shook her head. "He should have been able to go out surrounded by his family, Sergeant."

Montoya gave a bitter smile. "We can't always do that, boss lady. Every jump-boy knows from the minute we put on the Icarus battle armor what happened to Icarus in myth. We all end up flying too high, getting too far into the fight, and buying it. I'm not saying it's not a hard thing to lose him, or the LT. But I've also seen shit like that go out with everyone dead, more than once. This wasn't no situation where you sent us off to distract the main force while you did the command in. We just got caught out."

Shepard pinched the bridge of her nose. "I'm more beating myself up over the fact that people died than how they died, then?"

Montoya nodded. "Ma'am, every one of your marines has seen videos of your battles. Heard the stories. Talked to some asshole who knows a guy who said he survived Torfan. I'm not telling you that you didn't make some ugly choices in the past. But you told us yourself we might all die getting this job done. And if it comes to that, well..."

He looked down for a moment, then nodded, almost to himself. "I'd rather die for something I believe in, following a leader who actually hurts when she loses her men, than die on some battlefield to send a message, because some REMF didn't bother to read the intel properly. Ain't scared of dying. Lost suit control on Horizon once and damn near bought it, burned all the fear out of me." He looked back up. "I'm scared of not mattering. And no matter what people claim about you, I know you are a good person, ma'am."

He gestured around the medbay. "You're upset that your marines got killed and hurt. Most of the CO's I served under didn't."

Shepard's expression showed shock, then disbelief. Slowly, it darkened, turning into a mask of fury. "They didn't care? How – " She cut herself off, shaking her head. "Doesn't matter. I appreciate the vote of confidence, Sergeant. And you matter. All of you do."

He only nodded, picking up his infopad again. "Didn't mean to butt into your conversation, just thought you should know, Commander."

She smiled faintly, and Chakwas chuckled. She moved past him, towards the science lab, and stepped through into the smaller room.

Of Kirrahe's twenty man team, only he and six others had survived. The medic was fine, as were the salarions who'd ended up under Williams' command, but two of the other salarions – Kirrahe's own team – were not. They were laid out on temporary medical beds, bags of green plasma hung from hooks driven into the bulkhead, one of the med-status units from the MAKO removed and acting as a med support unit. Kirrahe himself was sitting up on the third medical bed, grimacing as he read an infopad. His shoulder and right side were heavily bandaged, his face drawn and tired looking.

He glanced up. "Commander Shepard. I ... I am sorry. My plan got most of my people and many of yours killed. Did not expect such monstrosities at the landing site. My reports will reflect that I was the one who made the call."

She held up a hand. "Now's not the time for figuring out who fucked up, Captain. We didn't kill Benezia...but we know where she's going, and we have at least some kind of idea of her forces now. She's headed to Ilos, beyond the Mu Relay, and we have the exact coordinates. We also know she plans to attack the Citadel. "

Kirrahe's eyes widened slightly. "Her fleet was ... formidable. If she plans to attack the Citadel..."

She shrugged. "I'm not going to let it happen, Captain. We're going for the Citadel as fast as we can. We know where she's headed, and I plan to be in front of the fleet we send to take her completely the fuck out. That bitch cost me ..."

Shepard clenched a fist, tensing her jaw.

"... I don't let people go after my team and live."

Kirrahe gave a shallow slash of a smile. "I will stand with you, Commander, when you make your report. I doubt I'll be healed enough to go with you for the assault, but I can guarantee some of the STG will want to come along." He glanced down. "We haven't lost this much manpower in a single day in centuries. We are not a highly emotional people... but we know the need for revenge."

She matched his smile with one of her own, cold and terrifying. "Good."

O-OSaBC-O

"I do not have any information for you, Aethyta. And if I did... I do not know that I would allow you to proceed with whatever plan you have."

Aethyta smiled, her tired features only dimly visible in the shadow of her robe's hood. She swirled a glass of churza in one hand, reclining easily in the lavish quarters of the Consort, the hilt of her warp sword an ugly shape in the robes.

Across from her, Sha'ira was tense, her closed fists on the rich fabric of her dress, atop her knees. The ancient asari had strode in, brushing aside her secretaries and putting her two krogan guards into the hard metal walls with a single pulse of biotic power. Sha'ira had seen many strong matriarchs, but there was something icy and almost unnaturally lethal about the figure in front of her.

Aethyta took a sip of the expensive turian brandy and smiled wider. "Little girl, you seem to think I'm fucking *asking* you for what I want. As much as you think you are a player of the Game, you're still little more than a kid. So I'm going to be kind and explain a few things and give you a second chance."

She tossed the empty glass away, unheeding as it shattered on the expensive tile floors behind her. Leaning forward, she stared into Sha'ira's eyes. The Consort could literally feel the oppressive power of the matriarch's biotic field, the simmering white-hot rage so carefully concealed behind a mask of amused indulgence.

"You see, little girl, my ex has gone a bit salty in the crest for some reason. I blame myself. I shouldn't have left. Should have been a better bondmate. But because I was a coward, she fell in with bad people, told them some things she shouldn't have, and now millions of people and two planets are fucking dead, the geth are running around, and my daughter is in the middle of it."

Aethya's smile grew, and Sha'ira found herself trembling uncontrollably. The biotic energy in the air was visible as warped shimmering air and gusts of wind. The voice was icy. "If I don't find a way to stop her, Benezia is going to end up trying to do something very stupid. And then Liara, my daughter, is going to try and stop her. I love my daughter. I'm a shitty aithntar, a crappy person, a coward who hides behind bars and sex, but I still care for her."

Aethya's calloused blunt fingers traced a delicate line across the Consort's cheek, a mockery of the

tender sensuality she usually employed on her own clients. "So when I say I need information, girl, it isn't a matter of confidence, or your rituals, or whatever bullshit you've made up in your empty little head to equate your call-girl scheme with real intelligence work. It's a matter of you tell me or I rip it out of your mind, and butcher this pack of whores you've gathered on my way out. C-SEC won't stop me, because I already paid off the Broker to cover my tracks, and you'll be dead by the time they show up."

Sha'ira tried to control her shaking. "If you have the Broker, why come to m-me?"

Aethya's finger tapped the hilt of her sword. "The Broker says you had a . . . guest not too long ago. Someone who worked for Saren, who needed a way out. I know you dabble in the old rithurai techniques, so that you can sift the memories of those stupid enough to bond with you. I know that he knew something vital that you tried to sell to the highest bidder."

Sha'ira swallowed. "He was . . . a systems engineer. He said Saren was asking questions about the hydraulics arrays that allowed the Citadel Wards to move and seal the Citadel. He was paid an enormous sum to sabotage two of them, to make sure they could not close as rapidly as they were supposed to." She closed her eyes. "I .. I told the C-SEC and the Broker, but neither of them found anything."

The older asari nodded. "She's coming here, then. The Citadel is her target. Interesting." She redirected her gaze onto the Consort before tossing her a credstick. "There's enough on there to pay the hospital to patch your krogan up." She rose to her feet smoothly, striding out of the chamber and ignoring the frightened gazes of the whores Sha'ira employed, instead tapping her omni.

"Your information was good, I appreciate the tip."

The rumbling voice on the reply sounded amused. "Her information could have been sold to you for a fair price, rather than you interrogating her yourself. You must have a reason for such a bold act when you know it will draw attention."

Aethya laughed. "Didn't have the cash for that, and besides, I wanted to put that little tramp in her place." She paused. "None of this makes any sense. I know Nezy. She is in love with the stream no one fucking swims in. And neither she or Saren are stupid enough to do something like that and then let the fucker survive. No, she wants people to think the threat is coming from outside the Citadel. Something they can handle. Ships, invasions...bullshit."

The voice of the Broker sounded almost interested. "And instead..."

Aethya shrugged, walking out of the Consort's complex and into the fake sunlight of the Presidium. "I have no clue, except that if she's drawing people's attention to the exterior, that's exactly where the blow won't fall. Nezy is a bit crazy like that."

She paused. "If I were you, I'd get out of the Citadel, assuming you're based here. She's definitely coming here. I suspected but it doesn't fit who she is..."

The Broker's voice was flat. "Take the Citadel, and you have a great deal of power..."

Aethya shook her head. "She's never been interested in power that way. She preferred to mold, shape and twist people, to make her views their views and have them willingly give in. And taking the Citadel doesn't mean a damn thing. She can't hold it, even with the geth. No one will negotiate with her, and we don't even know what the fuck Saren was planning in the first place. But she thinks taking it for a short time will let her . . . win."

She could almost feel the answer on the tip of her tongue.

The Broker merely spoke seven words, and cut the connection, leaving Aethya to curse her own

blindness. It had been the one thing she hadn't considered possible.

"Unless she plans to destroy the Citadel."

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### **Chapter 113: Chapter 104 : Udina, Punch**

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*A/N:LOL, bet you weren't expecting an update.*

*I've been working on this for a while now, and I wanted to get it right. It's changed several times over the past month, and it isn't very polished, since my beta is busy, but ... here it is , for whatever it's worth.*

*I might push something else out this weekend.*

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*DOWNLOADING: Data feed, prime broadcast segment 95*

*Manifest dump 32251-core alpha, unclassified*

*This is an official Systems Alliance data capture dump , replication or rebroadcast is restricted.*

*Transcript begins, identifiers J: al-Jilani B: Baron Ira Bekenstein*

*Keywords: Citadel, geth, Saren, Butcher*

BEGIN:

"Westerlund news! All the news , fit or unfit to print, 24/7!"

J: "Good afternoon. I'm **Khalisah Bint Sinan al-Jilani**, Westerlund News Network. Today we're covering the top story on all the comm-links : the downfall of Saren and the shocking news of the survival of Lady Benezia T'Soni. With to provide context on these events is the new minister of Defense, Baron Bekenstein. Thank you for gracing us with your time, milord."

B: "It is of no moment, Ms. Al-Jilani. While I have issues with much of today's debauched media, your show and your staunch support of Earth and it's priorities has not gone unnoticed. I am delighted to be here."

J: "Thank you very much, milord. I'm sure there are many questions being asked tonight but I will address the most pressing one first. It appears Lady Benezia was not actually killed in the fighting on Noveria, but somehow convinced everyone she was dead. Can you bring some light onto how this happened?"

B: "Of course. It is nothing less than a reckless disregard and arrogance on the part of some members of our military forces. The assault on an independent corporate world was not conducted with the approval of the Senate OR the newly elected minister of Defense, but was instead conducted at the whim of the AIS and the Justicars. Placing loose cannons such as Shepard in command ended up turning the event into a bloodbath, one of such chaos that the slippery asari woman managed to replace herself with some kind of body double and escape. And that has lead to a great deal of suffering, I understand."

J: "Yes, we have the images of the horrific destruction wrought upon Thessia, Ilium and even the Citadel. I also understand through private sources that an attempt was made on Earth, milord Can you comment on that?"

B: "Your ... sources are very good. Yes, an attempt was made but the internal security forces of the SA were able to thwart this insidious attack with no loss of human life. Still, it is a warning we should not ignore. The SA cannot afford chasing all over the galaxy with it's limited forces when we have problems and vulnerabilities at home."

J: "Yet many people are proud of Shepard for defeating Saren, the mastermind behind the vicious attacks on Eden Prime. Are there plans for humanity's Spectre to go after Lady Benezia as well?"

B: "Unfortunately, yes, that has already occurred. We do not have the full details – apparently the Normandy is still in transit to the Citadel – but it's my understanding that the STG managed to locate Lady Benezia, and Shepard was sent in along with STG support to take her out. They failed to do so and suffered heavy casualties."

J: "This is very breaking news indeed milord. What does the SA plan to do next?"

B: "The ministries are still considering their options. However, I can say this – humanity has certainly bled enough already dealing with the fallout from this fiasco. We've lost colonies. We've lost dozens of ships, thousands of brave soldiers and sailors, and billions of credits. If the reports of the fight with Saren are even close to accurate, we almost lost our Spectre as well. The SA did not create this Saren issue, and the SA should not have to shoulder the responsibility of cleaning up after aliens. The previous administration catered to the demands of the Citadel Council all too often, and it's time for a change."

J: "And the nature of this change?"

B: "Humanity has been as accommodating as possible for the past decade, and yet where has it gotten us? We sacrifice a full fifth of our military to the Citadel, but they do nothing to help us when their own rogue agents decide to commit terrorist attacks. We comply with their heavy handed laws and regulations, but see no benefit for ourselves from doing so. We cannot keep putting blind faith in the decisions of a government that caused the genocide of one species and nearly did the same to a second, nor one that cut the quarian people loose instead of supporting them in their time of need. If they did it to them, they'll do it to us."

J: "Very cut and dry, and much akin to my own thinking, milord. But there are those who claim humanity cannot go it alone, that we are a part of the community of the galaxy-"

B: "And to that I say you can't have it both ways. That kind of apologist thinking ends up infuriating the people who pay the ultimate price – the people of Earth. It's our sons and daughters dying on the frontier militias. It's our cousins abandoned on independent colony worlds. It's our hard earned credits stolen away to support the ruinous taxes laid atop us by the Citadel. And ultimately it's Earth that will pay the price when aliens fail to act again and Benezia attacks us directly."

J: "You think that is what will happen?"

B: "It already has, and it almost certainly will again, Ms. Al-Jilani. Whatever Saren's and Benezia's plans, they aren't going to be good for humanity, and at this stage of the game I think the SA has proven itself quite enough. We were the ones who were able to pin down Saren and Benezia as the source of this outrage, and it's due to our Spectre that we were able to stop Saren at Noveria."

J: "That's very true, milord. But earlier you spoke of your dissatisfaction with events on Noveria...and categorized Shepard as a 'loose cannon'..."

B: "Ms. Al-Jilani, perhaps I was unclear. I do not approve of the methods used in this endeavor. This should have been handled by Citadel forces. I don't approve of the whole idea of the operation on Noveria, nor am I wild about putting one of our most decorated soldiers and one of our most advanced

ships under alien command, no matter how limited such command may be. And Shepard will be the first to admit herself that she tends to shoot first and ask questions later. That being said, I'm not going to belittle the sacrifices our brave military forces have made, nor deny my pride that the best Spectre in the galaxy has been proven to be human and not turian."

J: "I see. In that – one moment , please. We're getting a news update from the Citadel, it appears the Normandy has returned from it's mission."

### O-OSaBC-O

The Normandy was docked in the Alliance berths, already being swarmed by repair contractors, and the news crews were already gathering by the time Shepard managed to change into a dress uniform and head to the CIC. Her jaw was clenched as she moved gracefully around the CIC, fatigue and sorrow making her a trace more abrupt in her movements than usual.

The battered form of Kirrahe stood by the airlock, a faint grimace on his spare features. His large black eyes flicked her way briefly before moving back down to the floor, and his uniform was black with faint green trim, slightly battered looking and informal. The med-tech brace on his shoulder was carefully strapped in place. His voice had a somewhat tired waver to it. "Commander. Ready to report to the Council?"

She snorted. "Yeah. I'm just waiting for the other people I'm bringing along, it will be their first time to the circus." As she spoke, Garrus and Liara entered the CIC, followed by Commissar Jiong. Liara wore the last of the University of Serrice outfits she had, while Garrus was sporting his undress C-Sec uniform. Jiong wore his Commissar blacks, and for the first time she could recall, was actually unarmed.

She glanced over them all, and then shook her head. "Might as well get this shit going." Biting her lip, Shepard opened the airlock and stepped out onto the landing platform. A small ring of C-Sec personnel stood at the far end of the gangway, surrounded by reporters. Shepard sighed.

Jiong just grinned. "Relax, Commander. I believe we have this handled." He lifted an arm, pointing at an aircar done in Commissariat black, and tapped his omnitool. The car circled and then hovered just off the edge of the docking platform, the doors opening to reveal an empty interior. "I'll drive."

Shepard snorted, carefully stepping over the edge of the docking platform to sit, followed by the others. Garrus got up front so that Shepard, Liara and Kirrahe could all squeeze in the back. Shepard snorted again when she heard a howl of protest from the reporters dockside, even as Jiong tapped controls on the haptic dashboard and the doors sealed away the noise of the Citadel.

The car rose smoothly , accelerating into one of the auto-traffic lanes, and Shepard exhaled. "Good thinking, Commissar. I really didn't feel like starting my day by punching out reporters."

The man only inclined his head. "Do you want to head directly to the Council or report to Ambassador Udina first, ma'am?"

Shepard sighed, glancing over at Liara briefly, who merely gave an encouraging smile. "No point putting it off. Shoot a message to Udina and head to the Council. The quicker we get this clusterfuck over with, the quicker we can start organizing ships to go after that crazy bitch before she gets us all killed by Reapers."

Kirrahe gave Shepard a sidelong glance. "Your ... precis that these Reapers are coming back will not be received well, Commander Shepard. I, myself, have no doubts about what you say – your evidence is convincing. But they will dislike it because it is beyond their control to ... manipulate events."

She snorted. "Yeah, well, lucky for us, they won't just have to take my word for it. Liara's omni was

still recording when Sovereign deigned to talk down to us." She found herself shivering at the memory of the horrible power in that voice. "If one Reaper managed to survive all that time, the others will have well. Even if it's lying, and even if it's the last of it's kind left, whatever Benezia is up to will be no good for us."

Liara's voice was soft, but underlain with a firm tone. "The things my mother was researching on Noveria were horrible. She has to be stopped."

Jiong remembered the maddened lunacy of the asari experiment on Noveria, her strange words about the future, and nodded. "Whatever she's doing is not something that can be tolerated. Those krogan things she's created are a danger in and of themselves." He exhaled, altering the car's course to another traffic lane. "Let's just hope the Council has the wisdom to see that."

Garrus gave a wry chuckle. "Might as well expect vorcha to take up poetry."

O-OSaBC-O

As usual, the Citadel Council chambers were stunning in their opulence. While most of the team had been here before, Jiong had not, and despite his smooth facade Shepard could tell he was impressed.

Unusually, the chambers had been cleared of the usual hangers-on, attaches and bureaucratic verdigris that usually cluttered the place up. Instead there were the three councilors, Udina, Anderson, two humans Shepard didn't recognize, an asari, and a turian. Pushing up the steep steps to the gathering area in front of the Council, Shepard took a moment to gather herself, pushing her hair back and snapping her gaze forward.

Sparatus was the first to speak. "Commander Shepard, Captain Kirrahe. Your verbal ops report was ... lacking in quite a few matters of concern. We require a full explanation."

One of the two humans snorted. "The explanation seems simple to me. They failed."

Councilor Valern gave the human a stern look. "You were invited to this briefing as a courtesy, Mr. Barnes. Please do not interrupt our operatives until the briefing is completed."

Shepard arched an eyebrow. "I'm sorry, but who is this?"

The heavysset human turned to face her fully. He had dark hair and flat, coal black eyes, set in a pudgy face that was somehow also hard. His suit was frightfully expensive, the exquisite tailoring almost concealing his out-of-shape frame. His voice was deep and nasal at the same time, grating on her ears. "I'm Jason Barnes, the new Minister of Defense. Your new boss."

She only sighed. "Actually, according to the President, I work for him directly now."

Barnes tsked. "A convenient arrangement that only kicks in after you have turned over your current command. Now, I believe the Council was waiting for you to explain how exactly this foul-up occurred."

Shepard exhaled, conscious of Liara's touch on her arm. "Of course." She turned to face the council. "As instructed, we were able to rendezvous with the STG Cell under Captain Kirrahe." She explained the details of his stranding on the planet, infiltration, and their assessment of the threat.

Kirrahe spoke for the first time. "At that time, I made the strong suggestion to strike with our combined forces, rather than attempt to exfiltrate and seek support."

Sparatus narrowed his gaze. "You made the decision, not Spectre Shepard? Why?"

Kirrahe braced himself. "Shepard is a veteran of many special ops missions, but not of strategic command or of data analysis and threat valuation. She admitted to such. The call was mine, made on

the basis of the observations of both communications and activity by my STG team. The target was clearly in the process of clearing out, and to fallback to gain reinforcement would have been pointless. Not only were there too many geth in-system for anything but the full force of the Citadel Fleet to fight through, but the delay meant she would be long gone by the time any backup arrived."

Tevos nodded faintly. "This is why we sent Shepard as back-up in the first place. Both due to the speed of the Normandy and the fact that her stealth systems would allow her to infiltrate. What I think we are all having problems understanding is exactly why you failed in the attempt."

Shepard spoke up. "Ma'am. We struck Lady Benezia with over six tons of wreckage and explosive missiles directly on her position. Based on what I saw we at least seriously wounded her, despite her escape. We killed most of her cultists, wiped out her main base of operations before she could get most of her stuff loaded, and destroyed a disgusting biological weapons factory." She exhaled. "While we did miss the target, we were able to figure out exactly where she's headed."

At this, the turian off to one side folded his arms. "And where is that?"

Shepard glanced at him for a long moment before shrugging. Based on his uniform he was some kind of turian admiral. "She's located the Mu Relay, and she's headed to the lost world of Ilos."

The turian looked at her for a long second, then flicked a mandible. Sparatus, on the other hand, leaned forwards, eyes intent, hands on his plinth. "You believe she is going after this supposed super-weapon?"

Shepard exhaled. "While on-site at Benezia's headquarters, we encountered another Prothean Beacon. This one was not damaged, and I was able to retrieve it's message safely. According to the message, the Prothean Empire was destroyed by mechanical beings that captured the Citadel and overthrew their fleets in hours. The beacons were a recall for survivors to fall back to Ilos, to hide and wait for the danger to pass. They claimed Ilos was an Inusannon world and they had records saying the R- that the threat would pass given time."

Tevos frowned. "I can only surmise from the lack of Protheans that such an endeavor failed. In that case, there should be nothing of any use at Ilos for Benezia to find."

Shepard spread her hands. "There's more. After our discovery of the location of the Mu Relay from the computers there, we ... triggered some kind of communication."

Valern folded his arms. "A communication?"

Shepard turned to Liara, who triggered her omni-tool, displaying the recording. That voice rolled out, hateful and strong, and Shepard watched their reactions.

The humans shivered, Tevos brought up one hand in biotic fire, and Valern had his hand on his pistol. Both Sparatus and the turian had gone into the same feral pose Garrus did, and the asari woman Shepard didn't know was gazing at the recording in horror. "It...it called itself Nazara!"

Shepard locked eyes with her. "The High Priestess of the Sun told me that name was on the oldest stone in the Temple. I want to know what the FUCK is going on."

The woman glanced at her, then at Tevos. "I ... *cannot* say. "

Sparatus tilted his head. "Excuse me?"

Tevos spoke. "This is ...I would need to consult with the Council of Matriarchs..."

Shepard grunted. "No. We know Saren and Benezia were working for someone called Nazara. We know the geth worshiped something called Nazara. And now we know the giant black ship that tore apart an entire Citadel fleet ... calls itself Nazara. A Reaper. Saren was working for the Reapers, and

Benezia isn't headed to Ilos for milk and cookies. There's something there she thinks will help her bring them back."

The room was silent for long moments before the turian admiral spoke. "We need to decide what to do."

Shepard grinned. "We send a fleet after her to stop her and kill her. If there were more of these Reapers, we'd have seen them – and if this Nazara was working with Saren and Benezia, that means he can't bring them back on his own, he needs help. We stop her, we stop him."

Sparatus frowned. "We cannot send the fleets on a wild goose chase into the deep Traverse and through a blind relay jump to uncharted territory. This could be a trap, for all we know, or Benezia may be prepared for it."

Shepard spun to face him. "We can't just let her get there unopposed!"

The turian admiral shook his own head. "We have no choice. While you were fighting Benezia, geth fleets have been approaching. There have been battles near Adana, Cyone, Sur'Kesh, and a strong assault near Irune, the volus homeworld. The fleet is already tied up..."

The human defense minister spoke. "Yes, and as I said, with all of the chaos, we can't afford to move any of our own forces outside of our territory. We've had to withdraw the dreadnaught from the Fifth Fleet to make up for the forces we ... lost ... at Noveria. There's simply no capacity."

Shepard grit her teeth, and Kirrahe spoke. "Councilors, there's every possibility that whatever Benezia may find at Ilos could be devastating. She may be planning to attack the Citadel. Can we afford the risk of letting her run free?"

Sparatus and the turian admiral both shook their head, along with the asari, who was the one to speak. "As the commander of the Destiny Ascension, the protection of the Citadel is my responsibility, Captain. I cannot take the home fleet on a destination that far from the Citadel. Even at best rated speed, the trip would take days."

Shepard frowned. "Given the FTL distance between relays, it's still a shorter trip from here to Ilos than from where we were. If we left today we'd only be at best a few hours behind. Hell, you could send enough to trap her on the planet and bombard it from fucking orbit!"

Anderson spoke for the first time, his voice tired sound. "Councilors, sitting and waiting with a foe as dangerous as Benezia is doesn't seem wise to me. She's already proven that her reach is longer than we thought, and as long as she's around to give orders we don't know if she can pull any more attacks like this."

It was Tevos who finally responded. "I'm sorry, but no. The Council is in no position to reposition our fleets at this time. Geth fleet strength is larger than expected, and we're stretched too thin as it is. Without additional support from others we cannot support such. The volus fleet is pinned down at Irune, the elcor fleet would take several days to arrive – and as your own defense minister has said, there won't be any human units aside from the cruisers and frigates of Fifth fleet. Such a force is not enough to be a threat to Benezia's own forces."

Barnes coughed. "In any event we would not dispatch forces to pursue Benezia. As we see it, the SA has lived up to our part of any bargains put forth by the previous administration. As such, we expect that since we blocked Saren and our people brought him down, and contributed to destroying Benezia's base of support, that certainly the Citadel forces can finish the job."

Udina frowned. "Minister, that's all well and good. But the President clearly stated he wanted this issue pursued."

Barnes sniffed. "The President does not command the military, and whatever treaty negotiations he pushed with the other heads of state still must be reviewed by the Senate. We're done with this issue."

Shepard scowled. "Fine, I'll go after her myself. The Normandy will need repairs and I'll need a few marines to replace my losses."

Udina nodded. "I have no issues with that, Commander, although I hope you will be careful." He glanced at the Council.

Valern shrugged. "Spectre Shepard's determination to finish this is laudable ... but we cannot provide any real support."

Udina rolled his eyes and turned back to Shepard. But before he could speak, Barnes turned to the human standing next to him. "I don't think so, Udina."

The human male next to Barnes was slender and well dressed, if not as flashy as Barnes, and his gray eyes were even colder and narrower. His black hair was clipped in an expensive razor cut and the frame of his body spoke of some form of martial training. "Yes, I have to agree, Minister. I am Lord Aldrien Manswell, the assistant director of the Office of the Prime Minister. I believe you already heard him state that the SA is washing it's hands of this ... debacle."

Udina narrowed his own eyes but nodded. "That's fine. My office of Ambassador only answers to the President, however, and Shepard answers to me, the Council and only then to the SA Military."

The man only smirked. "Just so. However, you are instructed to restrict Shepard to the Citadel until such time that we can decommission her command of the Normandy and move her into her new role."

Udina's eyes widened, Anderson scowled, and Shepard clenched her fist. But before she could speak Udina stepped forward. "You are out of your mind, has been the only one in this entire damned mess to figure out what's going on and do something about it! I doubted her, the Council doubted her, the military and the media doubted her. And yet she got the job done. I am not about to stand in her way now, and if Bekenstein or Coleman think they can make me they have a surprise waiting for them."

The smaller man stared at Lord Manswell, and Shepard felt her lips quirk in a reluctant smile. *Udina, you sonofabitch. I can't believe you actually stood up for me. Figures the one decent politician is someone I can barely stand most times.*

Lord Manswell only arched an eyebrow. "Your reticence was anticipated, Mr. Udina." He tapped his omnitool, and Udina's own tool beeped. "You are relieved of your position as ambassador. Mr. Osaba will be taking your position. I have deactivated your diplomatic access." He paused, smiling. "You may go. I'm afraid this is, after all, a secured, private briefing."

Udina took a step back, and Shepard gritted her teeth. While she didn't get people very well, she remembered the conversation in Udina's office where he told her of his naked ambition. He'd finally taken a stand and backed her, and now he was paying for it.

Anderson laid a hand on Udina's arm. Manswell turned to Shepard. "Arcturus Command has already transmitted the command transfer, Commander Shepard. You are relieved of command of the Normandy and will report to Arcturus station."

At this, Sparatus met Shepard's gaze and a mandible flickered. "While the Council has no intention of interfering in internal human affairs, if you think you can begin giving orders to one of our active Spectres you are sadly misinformed. The Council will release Commander Shepard from duty to whatever tasks you have for her at our pleasure, not yours, human."

Manswell gave an icy smile, and nodded curtly. "Very well. In any event, Shepard, you won't be taking the Normandy anywhere, and please remove the aliens from the ship immediately. Whenever the

Council deigns to let you report to duty, you will answer to recently promoted Rear Admiral Branson." Shepard didn't even bother to respond, and the man shrugged. "Thank you for your time, Councilors." He and Barnes turned to leave, and Shepard looked away.

Tevos's voice was soft. "I am sorry, Commander, but there is nothing we can do at this time. We ... we will notify you if we require further information."

The tone was kindly but a clear dismissal, and Anderson nodded as Shepard, who sighed and turned. The group walked slowly, Liara looking upset, Garrus angry, Kirrahe beaten and exhausted.

Udina was still in shock, his eyes wide and confused, and Anderson's own expression was set into the darkest anger Shepard could ever recall. She realized she was in shock herself, not having expected anything like this to happen.

Garrus was the first to speak. "So... we're basically **fucked**. Right?"

At that, Udina stopped and stiffened. His eyes flickered over the group, stopping to pause on the figure of Kirrahe. "...Captain. I appreciate you putting your career on the line today to support Shepard. I don't want to seem rude, but there's something I need to discuss with them privately."

Kirrahe nodded. "Understandable. Am .. fatigued myself. I will return to check on my men." He paused, nodding again, almost to himself. "Shepard. About what I said regarding STG... I will see what I can do."

She smiled, and he stepped away, down the opulent corridors. Shepard turned back to Udina and gave him a curious look.

Udina smiled. "Shepard. I realize you and I do not always ... get along harmoniously. But I have come to understand that you do not perform badly as long as you are given clear, open orders with a modicum of what you call political bullshit."

Jiong coughed. "She's still rough around the edges."

Shepard glanced at him. "Hush, Black Hat." Her attention snapped back to Udina. "Okay. And?"

Udina smiled wider. "Given that ... disgraceful showing from our government back there, I'm not convinced that they're acting in the best interests of the SA. I expected to be relieved of my post in due time, but .. not in such a humiliating, public fashion. This has nothing to do with you. . . but with the fact that no one in the incoming government is listening to what you say, or my reports. It has to do with my brother being a political foe of the current Prime Minister."

Liara looked at him askance. "You .. you are saying that the human government is turning their back on the danger my mother presents out of political spite?"

Udina nodded. "It is exactly that, madame. They never believed anything you said, and I have no doubt that fool Coleman and Saracino think that if they pull you out of this, whatever happens will hurt the Citadel more than it does the SA. They may even hope Benezia does attack, thinking they can ... take advantage in the chaos."

Shepard felt ice crawl up her spine. She knew, from viewing the OSD that Kyle had left her, that many parts of the SA government were utterly corrupted, and it was more than Cerberus. The Manswells were into something very, very secretive and they'd never really given up power at all.

She turned her attention back to Udina. "So ... what do we do? I can't chase that bitch with no ship and no support."

Udina tilted his head, glancing at the commissar. "The Commissariat has no vessels here?"

Jiong shrugged and shook his head. "No. All of our combat-capable ships were assigned to the strike on Noveria. We've never had very many ... enough to stop a fleet admiral from going rogue, and to interdict rioting planets. Besides, while the Commissariat is independent, it's not going to directly violate the mandate of the government without reassurances."

Udina shrugged. "Ah, well, the *easy* way is out, then." The small smile on Udina's face only grew. "How long until the Normandy is ready to depart, assuming you still had command?"

Shepard frowned, then tapped her omni. "Shepard to Normandy Engineering."

The voice of Adams came on. "...Commander. Pressly just got some .. troubling orders from Arcturus."

She nodded to herself. "I know. I am being asked how long until temporary repairs on the Normandy are completed."

"Roughly five hours. We'll still be light on armor plating and we haven't gotten any new requisitions for missiles, but we got restocked on everything else." He paused. "There's a team of Commissars outside waiting for you to get back, they want Doctor T'Soni's and Mr. Vakarian's effects removed."

Udina nodded to Shepard and she spoke. "That's fine. Thank you, Chief. Shepard out." She frowned as she cut off the omni. "What was that about?"

Udina exhaled and turned to the Commissar. "Commissar, do you see Benezia as a clear and present danger to the SA?"

Jiong fingered his goatee, hard eyes on the former ambassador. He was silent for long seconds before nodding. "Yes, I do. My report to my superiors indicated such."

Udina folded his arms. "In that case, I am afraid I can only think of one possible course of action."

Shepard frowned. Udina was acting weird, and she didn't like a weird Udina. "And what's that?"

Udina glanced around at the deserted chambers, and shook his head. "Not here. I need someplace secure."

Anderson sighed. "My apartment should suffice."

O-OSaBC-O

Some thirty minutes later they were ensconced in Anderson's apartment. They had barely all sat down when Shepard glared at Udina. "Alright, spill."

Udina actually chuckled. "Very well, Shepard. I see your neanderthal impatience has given out, but trust me, you will approve of what I plan."

He paused, thinking. "I had a very curious visitor while you were off blowing things up. A hooded and cloaked asari, who passed me a very cryptic message. She wanted me to inform you that whatever Benezia planned, her ultimate goal was to strike at the Citadel. This person said that unless was Benezia was stopped, she might be able to do something to distract everyone else and have a free run at her goal."

Garrus flicked a mandible. "She's already done that. The entire Citadel Fleet is all over the place fighting geth, and the humans have scrambled home."

Udina only nodded. "I wasn't aware of that until the briefing, and when I heard it I became alarmed. Someone has to chase Benezia down and stop her, before she pulls off whatever she's planning." Udina turned to Garrus. "You worked in C-SEC. Assuming Shepard got back on board the Normandy and the crew went along with it, how could the SA stop her from just taking off?"

Garrus shifted in his seat. "Well. Your own office has docking controls for all ships on the Alliance Ring."

Udina nodded. "I'm aware of that, but I was also told that my lock-down had to be communicated to ... traffic injunction?"

Garrus nodded. "Traffic Control Injunctions Office. Basically, Ambassador, your office locks down the docking clamps and mass field holding the ship in place. Injunctions actually disengages the surface to space cannons and automated drone ships that prevent illegal docking or departure. So yeah, even if Shepard got back on the ship and you blew the locks away and took down the fields, the Citadel defense systems would blow you out of the sky."

Anderson nodded. "I remember that now. I actually spent about three or four days working with them to look up travel information when I was working with Saren, trying to track down a ship."

Udina rubbed his chin. "Is it heavily guarded?"

Garrus gave the human a steady look. "...no. It's inside the C-SEC security cordon, so not just anyone can get in there, though. But it's pretty late ... there's only going to be a handful of operators there, and frankly if you have the right pass-codes you can get there without anyone even noticing."

Udina nodded. "And do you happen to have these pass-codes?"

Shepard frowned. "Udina..."

The former ambassador gave a cool smile. "Yes, Shepard. If my government insists on being willfully stupid, I am suggesting you take events into your own hands. Osaba isn't familiar with my systems and I have a perfect excuse to 'visit' him to clear out my office. While you'll no doubt need Officer Vakarian on your mission, I think Captain Anderson could bluff his way into this Injunction center with some kind of story about verifying the lock-down..."

Garrus exhaled. "That's going to get you both arrested, and hard."

Anderson firmed his jaw. "I don't see much choice, though. Udina is right. If we don't do something, there's no telling what Benezia may do. At least if we can get Sara and her team on their way we aren't waiting for the ax to fall."

Shepard blinked. "You...**you** of all people are suggesting I steal my own goddamned ship?"

Udina gave a soft laugh. "If you are successful, they'll have to let us go since we did the right thing. If you are wrong well...my career is already ruined. And the current political environment is not going to be kind to Captain Anderson's career either."

The other man gave a snort. "Never mind all that. Sara ... he's right." He fixed his dark gaze on her. "If Saren was dangerous, then Benezia is moreso. She detonated nuclear weapons on her own planet and murdered members of her own family. You said it yourself – she's trying to bring back the Reapers. She may not care about the fleets because she plans to show up at the Citadel with five more of them. Or a dozen."

Shepard shuddered, remembering the vision. "More like thousands."

Anderson paled slightly. "All the more reason to act. Frankly, given the severity of what could happen if we don't act...jail time doesn't scare me at all."

Shepard rubbed her temples, and Liara's soft voice spoke next. "How will be able to get on the Normandy with the Commissars there? And will the crew ... go along with this?"

At that, Jiong himself gave a small bark of laughter. "That crew would immolate themselves if Shepard

told them to." He glanced around. "And if you people are actually planning on doing this ... well..."

He exhaled. "I will handle the Commissars."

Shepard gave him a sharp look. "You are taking a gamble, Jiong."

The slender man shrugged. "You're rubbing off on me, I suppose."

No one said anything for a moment, then Anderson smiled. "I'm going to have a drink before we do this, then."

Shepard laughed, and to her surprise, so did Udina. "We have several hours before repairs are done. I suggest if there's any last minute things that need to be done, you get it handled now."

#### O-OSaBC-O

The Commissariat guards at the Normandy stiffened to attention as Jiong approached. He waved them down. "At ease. Status of the vessel."

The commissar trooper on the left nodded. "Sir, the ship is in full shutdown. Repairs on the engines and hull have finished, the last techs exited about ten minutes ago. The entire crew complement is still aboard, despite leave being announced. XO Pressly has allowed us to inspect the ship. The only thing of note is the core is still powered up."

Jiong nodded. "Powering it down is time-consuming and not recommended, due to the special functions it has. Have Commander Shepard or the aliens returned yet?"

Both troopers shook their heads, and Jiong nodded. "Very well. I have been tasked with specific orders. You are to withdraw to the entry to this docking bay and prevent any and all access except for Shepard and the alien crew members. I expect them to show up shortly. Ensure no media get in. I will be present to escort the aliens off the ship, and to conduct a walk-through before I take provisional command as ship's commissar."

The two troopers saluted and left, the orders sounding much like many others they had received over the years. In fifteen minutes, when Shepard showed up with a turian and an asari in tow, they waved them through.

After they were out of sight, one of the troopers sighed. "She looked pretty beat down."

The other one shrugged. "Yeah, well. Way above my pay grade." They fixed their eyes forward, alert for any media intruders.

Aboard the ship, Jiong greeted Shepard. "Everything ... is ready."

Shepard nodded, and tapped her omni. "Status?"

Udina's voice was cool, but with a slightly jittery undertone. "Two minutes. Osaba is having a goddamned social in MY office, the morose bastard."

Anderson's voice cracked across the comm. "About three minutes. I've talked them into buying that I'm here to review the Normandy lock-down until Jiong takes command. They're shorthanded here, spent the last twenty minutes helping them out." He paused. "Sara...good luck."

Shepard nodded and exhaled. She glanced into the cockpit, seeing Joker sitting there glumly. "Liara, Garrus...stations. Jiong, head to the CIC."

Joker looked up as Shepard entered the cockpit and sat. "Hey, Commander. Looks like you got shitcanned just like Anderson did, huh?"

Shepard gave Joker the single most evil grin he could ever recall, one that made every single hair on his

body stand up on end. "Oh, Flight Lieutenant..."

She glanced at the series of dull red lights on the instrument panel, and Joker frowned. "Ma'am? They relieved you of command, locked down the software..."

Shepard patted Joker on the arm. "Yes, they did. Active the IMC please."

She took down the mike as he did so, speaking calmly. "Crew of the Normandy, this is Commander Shepard."

She paused, closing her eyes, and then spoke again. "We set out on this mission to stop a lunatic. We did so. We set out to save the galaxy. We failed. I don't accept failure."

"You've no doubt seen the news and heard it. The Council is once again sitting on their ass and the SA grounded me, taking command of the Normandy from me. That means no one is going after Benezia to stop her. It means our men died for nothing. It means we ran all over creation and fucked up every enemy in our path...for nothing."

The ship was silent. Joker gave her a sidelong, unhappy glance... and then his jaw dropped. "Oh no. Even you aren't that fucking crazy."

Shepard's grin turned feral as she keyed the mike and spoke again. "You all know what I'm capable of. What I'll do. You've seen me fight and bleed and nearly get blown up a dozen times. I'm not about to stop now." She paused. "I've got people on the Citadel that in a few minutes are going to undo the locks on the ship and disable the security systems long enough for us to hit the relay and head after Benezia."

She turned to look at Joker. "This is mutiny, crew of the Normandy. I am disobeying a direct formal order from both the Admiralty and the Prime Minister, and basically committing hijacking and conduct unbecoming. Even if I am successful, I may be courtmartialed and since I am a restricted felon, executed. Captain Anderson is helping me, and he will almost certainly be arrested, maybe even shot and killed."

She exhaled. "If you do not feel you can follow me in this endeavor, please head to an escape pod. You do NOT have to come. I do not want anyone on board who isn't –"

She was interrupted by a roar from the CIC. "FUCK THAT SHIT, COMMANDER!" Roars of delight and whoops echoed throughout the ship.

She heard footsteps behind her and turned to see Pressly standing there, arms folded, uniform perfect. She arched her eyebrow at him. "Well?"

He rolled his eyes. "Did you even have to ask, ma'am?"

She keyed the mike again. "Smoke 'em if you got 'em, boys and girls."

Joker chuckled. "Can I fly a pirate flag?"

Shepard turned to face him. "...no." She then glanced at the panel and watched as all four lights went from red to green. "Joker?"

He exhaled and swiveled in his seat, hands moving too fast to follow. "On it, Commander. Tali, flight power. Adams, control surfaces to me. CIC shift to low observable. All hands stand by for flying like a bat outta hell!"

Shepard grinned.

O-OSaBC-O

Osaba flew backwards, blood spurting from his now broken nose, and Udina smiled coldly. "God, that

was satisfying."

The door burst open, and Lord Manswell and Jason Barnes stared at him, and the moaning figure of Osaba on the floor, and finally the active omnitool on Udina's arm. "What have you done?"

Udina wasn't even listening to them, eyes fixed on the video image of the docking ring displayed on the desk, and his grin widened as he saw the Normandy break away like a falling leaf before literally erupting into blue light and burning straight for the relay. "Oh, you know. My damned job."

Manswell clenched a fist. "You are done. Your family is done! You are going to rot in a cell until you die! No one defies us!"

Udina sat down in his chair, kicking the form of Osaba aside with a moue of distaste. "I am not sure what fantasy world you are living in, milord, but it seems to me that I just have defied you." He mockingly placed his hands together. "So do your worst. Wait, I forgot. You have no police powers here. Good luck getting charges through C-SEC."

Manswell's eyes narrowed.

O-OSaBC-O

"Down on the ground **now!**"

Anderson sighed, kneeling down as best he could with his aching back. He really wished he'd not punched that one turian, his hand felt like it was broken.

C-SEC IT officers ran around in panicked circles, while the drell in front of him covered him with a heavy pistol. Alarms had gone off the minute he'd disabled the locks on the Normandy, but what really pissed them off was the scrambler he'd blown in the Citadel's defense network, shutting it down for a good five minutes.

If Joker couldn't get clear in that time, Anderson would eat his own command cap.

"Status report, dammit. The Executor is on the line!"

One of the techs, a salarian, sighed in disgust. "The Normandy is clear. Full reboot required. Whatever garbage this human put in the system is locking us out from targeting any frigate of the Alliance."

The drell's omnitool gave a tired sigh. "Bring Captain Anderson to command. Executor out."

Anderson grimaced as the two turians behind him levered him to his feet even as they cuffed him. "This way, human."

Anderson nodded. "Sorry about the punch."

The turian snarled, and his partner laughed.

O-OSaBC-O

An hour later, a single robed figure sitting in a uncrowded bar on the Promenade listen to the breathless report from the newscaster about Shepard's daring theft of the Normandy.

She swirled the drink in her glass thoughtfully before downing it in a single gulp, smiling. "Well, Little Wing, at least your girlfriend has guts, I'll give her that."

Placing the drink on the counter, she didn't even give a flicker of surprise when another cloaked figure sat down next to her. "I thought I told your stupid ass boss to clear out."

The other figure gave a bow of the head. "Well, Matriarch Aethyta, my 'boss' decided he needed eyes on the Citadel when things went down. And besides, he is no where near here, trust me. He's planned for every possibility."

Aethyta snorted. "Too bad you didn't have the sense to say no." She shrugged. "Still, it's good to see you again, kid. I'm guessing you got even with that punk-ass Primarch?"

Tetrimus looked up, one good eye glowing faintly. "If by got even you mean that his son's skull is now serving as a decoration in my office, yes."

Aethyta shuddered and poured herself another drink. "Goddess. Remind me not to piss you the fuck off." Taking another drink, she waved vaguely at the haptic newscast. "Did you all help with that?"

Tetrimus chuckled. "No. By the time we realized the SA intended to ground her, the Broker discovered that his contacts in the SA had been cut out of the decision loop. The choice to ground Shepard was not actually approved by anyone but certain elements of the SA government...it would not have stood very long."

He tapped a taloned finger on the bar. "No, the question my employer has for you is exactly why you are still here if you expect the strike to fall here."

The asari matriarch rolled her shoulders and gave him a thin, almost cruel smile. "Family business, that's all. Just a last piece of family business."

He snorted. "You plan to face her yourself, then? You think she will come here?"

Aethyta nodded. "Anyone else facing her is going to die. Doesn't matter how good they are, she's better. She's smarter. She's just flat out too goddamned much. You can bet the Solarch ain't about to face her down, and I doubt a Royal Hunting Party could even get on the Citadel much less stake her out. Any one below that level of power would just get smeared." She shook her head, draining her glass once more.

Tetrimus took in that information and considered. "Have you discovered what we are missing, in our analysis?"

She smiled. "It's going to cost you."

Tetrimus frowned. "That's usually *our* line."

She smiled wider. "But oh-so worth it. I want the Broker to make sure, no matter what, Liara T'Soni comes out of this unharmed. Get the Matriarchy to haul the damned Justicars back into obedience."

Tetrimus exhaled. "That ... is a very large, difficult and dangerous task. Assume we agree."

Aethyta smirked. "Tevos and I had a chat. Shepard said the big black ship Saren was flying wasn't a geth ship. It was something she called a Reaper, called it Nazara."

Tetrimus froze, then closed his eye. "Of course. How could we be so .. blind? Everything fits now. "

Aethyta frowned. "That means something to you?"

The turian stood. "It means you were right, Matriarch. This station is no place for me ... or you. I wish you luck in your quest, but my advice is to run far, far away. If this black ship is truly Nazara, I fear whatever actions we are taking now are far too late to be of any good."

He paused. "We will honor your request, as best we can, regarding your daughter, assuming she survives the next solar week. You will not see us again, Matriarch."

With a single step he erupted into electrical discharges and vanished. She blinked, then grunted, returning to her drink.

"Don't plan to survive this anyway, kid. But thanks anyway."

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## Chapter 114: Chapter 105 : Prince Maxwell Manswell

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*A/N: Drawing the last bits together...*

*This chapter is going to hop all over the place, and I do apologize a bit for that, but I've been lazy in putting the finishing touches to how things all end up, and unlike Bioware I have problems with leaving huge plot holes unexplained.*

*Some of this chapter will be confusing unless you are also reading some of the background materials.*

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The space around the solar system that Virmire resided in was empty of vessels, and the planets orbited the sun serenely and without disturbance. The geth fleets had moved out expeditiously, after stopping to ensure nothing survived the blast that took out the base. The tumbling, scorched wreckage of Nazara's scanning array was the only thing to disturb the endless spaces.

That space rippled, shimmering like a heat mirage, before tearing open, revealing a faintly grayish purple light. Through this rift slipped a vast shape, erupting into space in a single moment, the disturbing rent in space and time closing behind it a second later.

Lethath expanded his consciousness, feeling the reality of the system around him. His senses dipped into realms mortal creatures couldn't comprehend, sampling the events – the corruption, the battle, the searching.

The creature's mind filled with amusement, and it flexed its lenticular shape. Looking like a large, organic form of the Reapers that were mere mockeries of it, the Old One began to put together exactly what was happening in its mind.

The Reapers, these false Ascended, understood so little. But that, after all, was the intention. With a final pulse of amusement, Lethath began plucking the very laws of reality around him, altering certain constants here, tweaking the arrow of time there.

In an instant, the scanning array Nazara had spent so much time creating, and been forced to have the geth destroy, was recreated. With another pulse of power, two more, smaller figures erupted into space nearby.

Lethath turned to the first of them. "Everything is ready. The trap so long baited is finally set." The voice was not sound, rather it rang across the minds of the three figures, overtones of smugness and pride liming the message.

The smaller leviathans merely waved their arm-tentacles in agitation. "You seem very sure..." It moved through space smoothly, the light of the distant sun gleaming off interlocking plates of black cyberware, overlapping equally dark flesh. "Things could still go wrong."

Lethath merely began activating the scanning array. "The False Ones are machines, built on an overlay of a sentient, yet inferior race. Only the one known as Harbinger is actually our equal, the rest are pitiful mockeries. While this ... somewhat primitive device ... shows that he is at least aware of my presence, he cannot be aware of yours, or the rest of the force we have brought."

The hulking Old One moved closer to the device. "The False Ones are at the proper strength to weaken the Darkness just enough. My thralls have carefully prepared the last three harvest cycles to maneuver events to the exact requirements for the Long Plan. All the pieces are in place. We gifted the Inusannon with the insight to create the weapon, and left enough clues and hints for the Protheans to interfere."

With a motion, Lethath sent a command to the scanning array, and it began reconfiguring itself, its

arching shapes shifting like water under his power. "Now all that remains is to ensure the fool False One actually connects directly to the Citadel."

The smaller figures slowed their movements. "But the Catalyst AI is still offline."

Lethath made a gesture, and the scanning array pulsed, in dimensions unseen. "...not anymore. The Catalyst was never designed to actually be able to turn on us, if that was not in the Long Plan. Our ancestors coded in both a remote shutdown sequence...and a remote start up. And now, Mettah, the Catalyst will be rebooting."

The leviathan named Mettah merely quivered in place. "That does not seem wise. It does not know its place in the Long Plan."

Lethath merely made a sound of amusement. "It will awake unable to control the Reapers. It is disconnected from everything ... except the dark relay switch. When that fool of a puppet attempts to reach out and bring forth the rest of his kind, he will have to battle the Catalyst for control. He cannot do that and control his thralls and prevent himself from being damaged by the natives."

Lethath finished his manipulations. "He will be destroyed. And that will *enrage* the rest of them. The best bait. In their fool arrogance, they will be ... enraged by his destruction."

Mettah's voice was frustrated. "We could overpower him and destroy him ourselves!"

Lethath merely grew more amused. "Child. The False Ones fear us. It took nine of them to slay a youngling, and if they knew that we had murdered one at the end of a harvest cycle, they would be too wary to fall for the trap. This is the bait. As long as they are scattered, hidden, fortified, we cannot take them down. We must draw them in – blind, arrogant, sure of their superiority – and then trigger events as the Long Plan calls for. Anything else and either they will flee or hide, and then we will have no tool to use against the Darkness."

Mettah gave a sound of annoyance. "I merely wish this ordeal was over, Eldest."

With a single motion, Lethath finished his work with the array, and it broke apart, dissolving into decaying molecular slurry as it did so. "Then be glad, for the time for waiting is very nearly over. Now...we only have to watch the entertainment as it unfolds."

The three beings made motions and vanished into rents of purple light, leaving the system empty once more.

O-OSaBC-O

"What...were you thinking, you young, idiotic fool!!"

The room was large, over eighty feet long and half again as wide, the high vaulted ceiling supported by thick, square pillars of dark metal. Dark cherry wall paneling was pierced every ten feet by high crystalline windows, overlooking broad fields of exquisitely manicured lawns and gardens. The sharp curve of a bio-dome could be made out in the distance.

Niches set into the walls flanked priceless art, antiquities such as ancient suits of armor, tapestries, and swords. At the southern end the room was pierced by a set of two-foot thick blast doors, guarded by a pair of up-armored ODIN mechs.

The hard marble floor at the far end of the hall from the massive door was occluded by thick black pile carpet, trimmed in silver. A quartered Hohenzollern crest over an iron shield was embroidered into the carpet, which surrounded a black marble dais. The edges of the dais were flanked by a dizzying array of haptic screens showing data from a wide variety of sources – Commissariat data feeds, cameras from the Senate and the Council Chambers, live cameras from dozens of observers and financial market

overviews scrolled along the top.

Atop the dais in a life support hover-chair sat Lord Prince Maxwell Manswell, his ancient features twisted in disgust. His gnarled form was shielded from view by a richly embroidered blanket made of Terra Nova black fleece. Behind him stood the towering and frightening figure of Richard Williams.

Aldrien licked his lips, framing his words carefully as he knelt in front of the hover-chair, sweat running down his fine patrician features. "Grandfather, I merely wanted to prevent any complications to the plan! It was clear to me that Shepard's stubborn streak would lead her to disregard any orders given. I thought .. I thought it best that I intervene and stop that."

Maxwell grunted. "And thus you decide to openly flaunt our opposition to the criminal little bitch by relieving that Udina right in front of the Council? Did the thought ever cross your simplistic little mind that Shepard must have information about the family connection to Cerberus?"

He shook his head feebly, coughing, then continued. "Even if that were not the case, my idiotic child, you have just made an enemy of one of the most dangerous people in the Systems Alliance. She has the President's favor! She's aligned with Von Grath and his pack of neo-crusader hooligans, not to mention everything else."

Aldrien frowned. "But you said we couldn't afford for her to stop Benezia... that the chaos of whatever she was planning was likely our best shot at salvaging Project Fletcher."

The old man groaned. "Fletcher is, for all intents and purposes, dead. There is certainly a chance of salvaging the goals of the plan, but I do not have time for that now. We have ... new priorities. Take yourself out of my sight and pray very hard that Aloxius does not have you shot in the night."

He snarled as the boy withdrew from the family halls, before weakly tapping a control on his hover-chair and swiveling to face Richard Williams.

The huge man merely shrugged. "It was ill-advised, milord ... but after going over all of the records we have left, I'm pretty convinced it doesn't matter. The connection linking Sirta and Cerberus, and thus Sirta and Saren, was routed through the Foundation. She probably already knows we're involved. The main thing is that, however poorly it might have been accomplished, the boy did manage to put Shepard in a situation where she's probably headed off to die and get out of our hair."

Maxwell coughed again. "That is already known to me. However I see nothing good from this incident, and we now must expend political capital to spin it into a favorable light. Not to mention this will set the Udina family on the warpath."

Richard only gave another massive shrug. "Maybe so ... but you'd have to expend a lot more to get the Butcher killed any other way. And make no mistake, milord, she is a big problem. Kyle definitely knew about Research Station Sixteen. For all we know he even tumbled to the Message...he did reach out to that asari priestess."

The ancient figure shivered in his seat, tapping another control on his chair. Two medical robots came out of a semi-concealed alcove to the side of the room and began adjusting his medical equipment, while the old man sat quietly, thinking. After several long seconds, he grunted, his harsh accent lending a grinding quality to his words. "Given what she has accomplished ... contingency planning is called for. She may get killed in this endeavor. But if against all odds she is successful and completely stops Benezia and whatever her plans are..."

He trailed off, then tapped the padd on his chair yet again. "Nephew."

The largest of the view screens on the haptic array behind him cleared, showing a man with thinning gray hair, hard features much like those of Maxwell, and a night-black uniform sitting at a black steel

desk. "Uncle Max. This call was anticipated. I've been busy misdirecting the new Director of the AIS and I've not had a chance to .. consult."

Richard Williams arched an eyebrow. He knew that Prince Aloxius Manswell was the Minister of Information, but he had no idea the man was connected to Lord Manswell. The lineage of the Manswells was odd. While Maxwell held the title of Prince and was the formal family patriarch, common rumor stated that Aloxius really controlled most of the Family and that the two were at loggerheads.

Richard smiled when he realized this was also a convenient fiction ... although that left him with questions he could ask later.

Maxwell grunted. "That fool boy of Jason's just made an intergalactic fool of himself. I want you to identify at least fifteen members of the Family tightly associated to the Manswell Foundation and frame them up to being behind Cerberus and anything else we can't have compromised. Shift everything away from RSS 16 to Zion, leave behind enough incriminating information that the Family itself will have to pay fines but make it clear the corruption is linked mostly to a subset of the family, with Aldrien on top."

Aloxius winced. "Ugly. I can only presume you think the investigation will continue and pierce our previous level of misdirection?"

Maxwell sighed, a rattling and wet sound. "I presume nothing. We have been anticipated, and now stymied, by a dead hero, a buffoon of a general too proud to take a hint, and a jumped up criminal thug with more savagery than sense. It speaks of arrogance, Aloxius, it speaks of overconfidence and short-sightedness. Manswell is not a byword for invincible."

Aloxius gave an elegant shrug. "I'll made the calls. In the meantime, the Senate fight over the firestorm little Aldrien kicked up is intensifying – Senator Adkins is losing votes. Should I intervene?"

Maxwell sat quietly for several seconds...before a cunning smile lit his ancient features. "...yes. Find enough dirt on the Saracino opposition to silence them. I'll reach out to the President to let him know I've salvaged his project."

The smile widened. "And get me the comm-link identifier to the Normandy."

O-OSaBC-O

Shepard glanced nervously around the circle of figures in the comm room before running her hands through her hair. "Alright ... status report. Adams, you're up first."

The stocky engineer gave a flat, tired smile. "We've mostly patched up the broken armor plates, although section 55 is still buckled and not at full strength. We didn't have time to get any work done on the hull structure, so the damage to the structural spars along the top of the ship is still there. We swapped out an engine for number 3 so we're back to full power, but we had no time to calibrate it and there are energy spikes in the system. Joker will have to compensate."

He turned to Tali, who gave a little start and then spoke. "O-oh, right. Um ... Adams has made me assistant engineer. Ah.. um. The electrical system is still damaged in many places. I was able to crawl into the superstructure and manually rewire the environmental controls, and I did my best, but I don't know how long that will last under battle conditions. We have leaks in the wing control system, gray-water system, and secondary liquid cooling loops that we've patched with omnigel, but again, they aren't .. tested."

Garrus shifted in his seat as she looked at him. "Missiles are still depleted, and we never got to restock torpedoes after taking out the Cerberus base. We have three left, but I need to code them. Main guns are online but laser range finder is out of calibration and I don't have the tools to fix it. Shots will require a

hot-lock. The second MAKO we took on is gone, and the first still has battle damage. It can make one or maybe two drops, but the Normandy will probably have to do a landing to pick it up again. Cannon is fine, armor is mostly omnigel at this point. It needs an overhaul, and the medical systems are still scattered all over the science lab set up for the wounded salarions we had on board."

With Alenko and Cole dead, Vega was the acting MCO, and he grunted. "The remaining marines are ready to go ma'am, but there's not a lot of us left. Last I heard, all of our wounded were alive and being hauled off to Huerta Memorial. Both DACTs are out. I can form a single reinforced squad and Sergeant Telanya says she's good to go. We're low on medigel..."

Chakwas nodded. "I was able to obtain some replacement packets for the men, but the medbay supplies were only half refilled. Also, I need to tear down the support docket I had to build for the wounded." She exhaled. "Commander, none of your team is fully recovered from facing Saren, and Wrex, Tali, and Commissar Jiong took additional wounds on the Virmire mission. You are not at one hundred percent. I just want to remind you of that."

The Navigator, Friggs, swallowed nervously when Shepard shifted her gaze to her. "We're on course for the Mu Relay, ma'am. ETA is nineteen hours, eleven minutes. Assuming the directions from the, ah, queen were correct, and the maps you got from Virmire are accurate, from the Mu Relay it's a single jump and a two hour FTL burn." She gave a weak smile. "I do have good news though, the primary approach goes through a dark nebula cloud – it should muffle our blue-shift and make our approach almost undetectable."

Liara spoke up, wearing a SA ship-suit once more. "I have been attempting to use the ship's scanning array and what science facilities we have to formulate my mother's approach, given that she launched from Virmire. There are two paths she could have taken, one has a travel time of six days and one has a travel time of only four days, but passes through several high visibility areas including at least one asari fleet center. If she had to take the slower route, we will beat her there by six hours, Sara."

Pressly rubbed his chin. "That's assuming she didn't have the black ship just jump her directly there."

Liara shook her head. "I do not think she would have done so – if she could have then certainly, having the location from the queen and localized it, she would have been gone by the time we reached Virmire. She was preparing her fleets and loading troops for some reason, thus I think there must be some explanation for why she did not simply jump directly there." Liara gave a small sigh. "We still don't know how to beat her, though."

Shepard nodded. "I didn't waste the time I had on the Citadel while waiting to launch – picked up a few Spectre toys for dealing with violent biotics. I have phase suppressive rounds for everyone, as well as upgrade warp-resistant omnishield bracers. It won't stop a direct hit but it may save your life from a glancing blow. I also got a pile of pulse inhibitor grenades."

Wrex gave a scowl. "Those will ruin our own biotics, Shepard."

She nodded. "Yeah, but I'd much rather deal with Benezia if we're both out of biotic power. No matter how badass of a biotic she may be, without that she's just an old woman and we can take her." She paused. "Anything from the Shadow Broker?"

Wrex grunted. "Nothing at all. Actually, I can't reach him or Tetrimus. I got a hold of Tazzik, his main enforcer, who told me the Broker is concerned about the Reaper threat and is pulling his operations back. He said the Broker would try to straighten the mess out with you and your government, but no promises." Wrex spat. "Gotta say, your government is even worse than the Council sometimes. Pack of kicked pyjaks running for cover after a single fight."

Shepard shrugged. "I figure I'm pretty much finished after this, even if I bring down that bitch. I'm still

restricted citizenship ... at the very least I'm looking at jail time, if not execution. Doesn't matter." She glanced at Jiong, eyes narrowing. "I'm still astonished you went along with this, Commissar. I figured I'd have to take you out."

Jiong gave a thin, humorless smile. "My conditioning is very rigid, Commander. I had to weigh the reality that we were facing a clear and present danger to the SA against orders from authorized command figures." He sighed. "I do not know how my own superiors will take this action, but it won't be good even if we are successful. But the Commissariat Code left me no ... easy choices. I will be recording everything that occurs for the inevitable court martial that will follow."

Shepard nodded. "We're down to half our marine capacity, the ship is banged up, and we're not at a hundred percent. We have no back up and we won't be getting any, and if we get in over our heads we're dead." Shepard exhaled, hard eyes glancing at each person in the room. Measuring. Seeking. "I won't lie. This is ... desperation. Even if we beat her there, we have to figure out how to get past her fleets, get to her, shut her down, and stop whatever she's doing. Then we have to deal with the real problem...Nazara, a Reaper. That isn't something we can do alone, we need proof, hard proof and hard details."

She stood. "For now, I want everyone to rest. Pressly, try to keep the watches to three sections, even if that lowers readiness, so that people can rest and recover. Chakwas, I need a complete medical examination of every member of the ground team by the time we get there, and you may have to armor up and provide battle support." The older woman merely nodded, a glint in her eye at the thought.

She turned to Adams. "Adams...rig the core for Protocol Six, interdiction by ramming and core detonation. If all else goes to shit, we ram whatever ship she's on and blow the core, taking her with us." The engineer gave a slow, tired nod.

Friggs looked alarmed, but Pressly merely nodded as well. "I'll have the escape pods checked out,ma'am. What about the torpedoes, hook them into the self-destruct as well?"

Shepard shook her head. "No, code lock them and have them set to range zero, full mix. They'll go up with the ship. With the size of the core we have , I can't see even Nazara just shrugging that off."

"Wrex, check everyone's gear and armor. Get the anti-biotic rounds loaded. Without Ash here ..." She trailed off, and Wrex nodded.

"I'll see to it, Shepard."

Shepard nodded sharply, and was about to speak again when the CIC comm link lit. "Commander, incoming comms request."

She sighed. "I told you to ignore all communications."

The voice of the tech sounded shaken. "Ma'am...it's Prince Manswell. He's requesting to speak to you."

The eyes of the humans in the room widened, and Shepard cursed blackly. She had no idea what the leader of the House of Manswell wanted, but given that one of them had tried to shut her down on the Citadel and the links Kyle showed between them and the sick research being done on L2's, she wasn't very happy.

Blocking the call, however,would be tantamount to political suicide. While the Manswells didn't officially run anything in the SA, their influence was beyond immense. That punk on the Citadel had shut down her entire mission and grounded the SA fleet just on the strength of his name alone, and he was a junior family member. The Silver Prince could probably topple even the President.

"Very well, route it to the Comms room. Everyone out, except Jiong." She waited until the room emptied, smiling at the reassuring pulse of confidence from Liara she felt through the bond, before

taking a steadying breath. "On screen."

The comm screen blanked, displaying the iron gray sigil of the Manswells for several seconds, then vanishing. The figure revealed was ancient, wisps of white hair framing his wrinkled features, age spots and deep lines marring the once proud patrician features. The eyes were hard and clear, the mouth fixed in a deep hard line. In the background she could see high armorplast windows and the Vancouver skyline.

The voice that sounded, while a whisper, was firm, echoing with hard Germanic overtones. "Commander Shepard." The eyes took in the figure of Jiong standing next to her, and narrowed. "Is the person with you aware of what you discussed with Major Kyle, and the ramifications?"

She swallowed, fingers twitching nervelessly. Kyle had not been sure if the entire Manswell family was corrupt or just pieces of it. If the Silver Prince already knew what Kyle told her... "No, milord. He is not."

The wrinkled hand made a weak motion. "Then he should leave, Commander."

Jiong shot her a look, and she shook her head. "Go, Alfred." He exhaled and nodded, leaving the room, and Shepard waited until the door closed before turning back to the screen. "You have my .. attention, milord."

The figure grimaced, coughing slightly. "I am contacting you to let you ... understand. I am embarrassed by the actions of my family. That fool of a boy had ... no right to block your mission or prevent the Fleet from assisting it."

He looked up, eyes angry. "I am old, Commander. Older than any other human, kept alive by ungodly machinery and sheer grit. I have given everything to humanity over the years."

She nodded, respectfully. Even a street rat like her knew the stories of the Silver Prince, how he'd been instrumental in holding the SA together for years, how even as an old man he'd been the one to stiffen the spine of the Alliance in the First Contact War.

His voice dropped, becoming even more faint. "I had withdrawn from society, and to my regret I did not keep a good oversight on the activities of my Family. Many I fear do not understand why the Manswells had to retreat from governance, from ruling, and wish to come back into power. They have acted ... unwisely."

A coughing fit overtook him, leaving him gasping for breath, but he continued. "Suffice... it to say ... that I am not happy with what I have discovered in the past day. My Family has befouled our name with sick experiments, with funding terrorists, with enabling the chaos and death that races over our fair nation even now. I have ... extended my will to ensure the ones behind this will suffer. Even as we speak my idiot nephew will be investigated by the Commissariat."

He sighed. "My foundation, which I built to elevate humanity, has also been ... stained. It will have to go." He looked at her. "And you, Commander. You have risked your career, and the career of the man you look on as a father. You have disobeyed direct orders from both the Admiralty and the Prime Minister. You have committed high treason and mutiny."

She set her jaw. "I had no choice, milord. And ... even you cannot convince me otherwise."

The prince chuckled, a dry, humorless rasping sound. "I had no intention of such. Are you loyal, Commander, to the SA?"

She looked at him and he continued. "Despite them not safeguarding your childhood? Despite being abandoned to privation, suffering, torture? Despite being abused...used...in your service? Do we still have your oath? To die before dishonor, to fight until you cannot any longer, to protect those who

cannot do so themselves?"

She clenched her fists and nodded. "I will never betray the Systems Alliance. I am and will always do what has to be done to protect it, no matter the cost."

The Silver Prince nodded weakly, his aged features crumpling more. "Then I, Prince Maxwell Manswell, Lord Defender of the Systems Alliance, give you my will. You are to head to wherever Benezia is hiding and destroy her utterly. Until she is dead you are to take orders from no one but me. After her death you are to take any and all measures to ensure the destruction of that black ship calling itself Nazara."

The ancient eyes met hers. "I heard it's voice... in your presentation to the Council. Like a thousand black needles of ice shoved into my heart. Such a monster must be destroyed." He paused. "I know, legally, that I have no right to demand you follow my orders. We both also know that no one will gainsay me, as long as you succeed."

Shepard exhaled. "I will succeed, milord."

The old man nodded. "I cannot undo the damage regarding the fleet. There is too much political infighting right now, and in any event Barnes was half right. We have a geth fleet on an invasion course for Terra Nova and it outnumbers 2nd and 3rd fleet combined." The old man lifted his head. "But I can remove the stigmata of your actions, and have done so. Let your people know that neither you nor they will be held accountable or court martialed for defying that fool of a nephew, and that I will ensure Ambassador Udina – yes, he will be restored – and Captain Anderson are not punished."

She felt a hot rush of gratitude, not really for herself, but for her crew and especially David. She knelt, for the first time she could remember doing so willingly, her voice shaky with emotion. "I thank you deeply, milord. I am ... not used to being ... "

The voice lanced out. "You are used to being used by the SA. I understand. I make no lies and will tell you no fairy tales – you will be used. Repeatedly, until you are worn down. That does not mean the honor of my House allows us to trample on one who has served faithfully... and that has discovered that my Family requires purging."

The old man lifted a hand. "Show Lady Benezia that humanity can be hurt, assaulted, beaten, and damaged...but never defeated. You are my wrath, Commander Shepard. Fear nothing but God and dishonor, and go."

The transmission blanked, leaving the room silent. Shepard spent several minutes sorting through her emotions, before a small savage smile crossed her features.

She picked up the 1 MC link from the comm panel and spoke, quietly, calmly.

"Crew of the Normandy."

Something in her voice made Joker stop his calculations and glance up at the comms panel.

"I have just received a communication from Prince Maxwell Manswell. He .. instructs us to do our duty, to stop Benezia. And he says he agrees with my actions, and has ensured none of us will be facing any charges or penalties when we succeed in killing that evil bitch."

"I am proud of each and every member of this crew for following me into this, knowing we were breaking the law and disobeying orders. I appreciate that you had faith in me to do this, and I am happy that none of you will pay a price for that faith."

"Now that the bullshit is out of the way, we can focus on finding that tramp and blowing her goddamned brains out. That is all. Shepard out."

She exhaled sharply, the nerves that had been jangling all day finally calming down, and then glanced up as Jiong entered, eyebrow raised. "He gave us a Pardon?"

She nodded and shrugged. "He seemed pretty pissed...I should have figured a guy like the Silver Prince wouldn't be involved in Cerberus bullshit." She glanced up. "Make you feel any better?"

Jiong snorted. "Given your missions, Commander, I will feel better after we take out Benezia. I hope your plans work."

She shrugged, headed for the door. "We'll have to see, won't we?"

O-OSaBC-O

"You're serious."

The opulent quarters of Councilor Tevos were shaded in dim blue light, as she semi-reclined on the couches in her garden, sipping Serrician ice-wine. Across from her, the languid features of Matriarch Lidanya T'Armal twisted wryly as she uncrossed her legs to dip her toes in the cool waters of the reflection stream running through the garden.

The blunt, hard features of Aethyta seemed almost out of place in the elegant setting, the expensive glass of fire-wine in her hand and the richness of her own robes the only concessions the matriarch made to the surroundings. "Yeah, I am. I know Danni here did some time in the Temple, so she knows more, but that's what the Solarch told me."

Tevos frowned at the last person. "And why, exactly, was I never informed of this?"

Irrissa Te'Shora gave Tevos a tired look. "I am not required to explain the actions of the Council of Matriarchs to you. You were placed in this role for a reason, Tevos. You have done well, given your limitations, but this is something that only the House of Storms and the highest echelons of the Temple of Athame have full information about."

Tevos gave a sour smile at that. "I'm aware I'm from a small Guardian house of no import, but are you really expecting me to buy into this wild-water tale?"

Aethyta snorted, slugging back wine. "Heh. How do you think I felt? But it's the truth, kiddo. Nezyzy used to say the knowledge from the Temple was a burden...and you know how bad the Council freaked when that tramp Trellani bolted and joined fucking Cerberus." Another swallow of wine followed, the woman's tired features flicking into a cool smile. "I ain't a big believer in coincidence. Nazara is the name of the ship, and Nazara was the name carved into a stone in the temple over ten thousand years ago."

Tevos sighed. "So what do we do? Dispatching the fleets is not possible. Every hour brings more reports of geth, the entire Perseus Veil is vomiting them forth now in numbers we never thought possible. The Main Fleet at Thessia can't be moved..."

Lidanya shrugged. "There may be nothing we can do. Shepard is already on her way, despite the interference of the human government. She was able to defeat Saren, so maybe she has a chance of stopping Lady Benezia as well. The Solarch seemed to think so."

Aethyta snorted. "She's got my daughter with her, too. And if the rumors are right, one of Aleena's old war buddies, Urdrnot Wrex. Benezia doesn't play fair, though, and I doubt she'll give Shepard a chance to stop her on Ilos, or wherever she is going."

The matriarch sighed. "As far as the black ship goes...I think the best thing we can do is make sure the Destiny Ascension is in place to face off with it. That's the only ship that has a shot at taking it down. That's on you, Danni."

Matriarch Lidanya rolled her eyes. "Yes, yes. I'll do my best, but my job is safeguarding the Council." She paused. "Except I suppose you expect her to strike here? You said you needed something, what could you need from all of us?"

Aethyta sighed. "I need your permission to hang out in the Council Chambers, or at least in the Embassy. Specifically, armed and armored. That means I need all three of you to sign off on a security pass."

Irrissa frowned. "Why would you need that?"

The older matriarch sighed. "Because ... I know her. She's coming here. I don't know how, or when, but I feel it."

Lidanya gave a grimace. "You think you can stop her?"

Aethyta frowned. "I .. don't know. If it came down to it, me against her? I just don't know. Serisa could, if we could get her off Thessia, and surely the Solarch could. But the Solarch says she has to safeguard the High Temple."

Aethyta poured herself more wine. "Unless you girls know any other vishan blademasters you can hustle up in a hurry... it's just me. I have a stake in this anyway."

Irrissa laid back on one of the couches, closing her eyes. "We'll step up security around the Council Tower and the entrances to the Wards. It's possible she has more cultists infiltrated on the Citadel already, waiting to cause chaos. We did round up the engineer you fingered after terrorizing the Consort." She shrugged. "And we can certainly give you a pass, if that's what you think you need."

Tevos shrugged. "Very well, Matriarch Aethyta. The Council guard won't like the idea of an armored battle matriarch with a warp sword in the Chambers, but if you are right it is good that you will be there. Assuming she actually strikes here and not elsewhere."

The older matriarch stood, her brown robes sliding into place smoothly. "Thanks for the wine, kids. I'll be around." She left, making not a whisper of sound, and Lidanya sighed.

Tevos frowned in irritation, glancing at Irrissa. "I believe that's all. I'll let you know if I'm told anything else."

Irrissa took the hint and bowed, leaving the two asari in the courtyard alone. Tevos glared after her, before huffing irritably and sitting up. "You're taking this very quietly, Danni."

Lidanya merely gave a shrug, eyes closed. "I'm tired, and none of this makes sense, Vee. So yes, I am .. disinclined to panic at this juncture. The burden on my shoulders grows heavier by the hour."

Tevos' expression softened, and she smiled as she leaned back in her own couch, eyes half lidded. "It doesn't help you spend all your time working instead of relaxing, you know."

Lidanya opened one eye, glancing at Tevos. "If that's an offer, I'll take it, just let me shower first. Goddess knows I need it."

Tevos kept the amusement off her face as she watched the older asari rise gracefully and head to the bedroom, before shaking her head and following. Irrissa was too besotted with the al-Jilani human to take advantage of her position to bond with influential figures, but Tevos had no such reservations, and her rapidly blossoming attachment to the powerful figure in House T'Armal could only pay off in spades down the line.

You think you're superior to me , Irrissa, but I will love the look on your face when I am instead sponsored into House T'Armal and leave you far behind.

## O-OSaBC-O

Benezia sat quietly, kneeling, feeling for her center. A thin shell of biotic energy enfolded her in a faint glow, as her senses expanded.

Before her sat the corrupted form of a Beacon, fell red light illuminating the room and seeping into her vision through her closed eyelids. She reached out, feeling the Beacon, letting the probes interact with her biotic field.

She focused her thoughts, with iron discipline, and then nodded. "The Beacon is ready."

The voice of Nazara thundered into her skull. **"Good. The defenses of the planet are strong. I do not have time to deactivate them, and destroying them would damage the Conduit. Use the Beacon to bypass them."**

She nodded to herself, not noticing a slow trickle of blood from one nostril. "Will you be in the area, or move with the geth main body?"

**"The recalibration of the primary relay is complete. Once all native forces have been drawn out of position, we will perform a modified LongJump using the relay. I will need to be there to utilize the Godpower. Some of the fleet will not survive. I am leaving you a handful of small vessels here for strike support, but you will obviously not need transport off the world."**

She nodded again, glancing at the features of the geth ship she was traveling in before returning to her inner focus. "I understand."

**"Do not fail me as Saren did, Benezia, or I will reconsider the usefulness of the asari as I have already done with the turians."**

The voice snuffed out, the black pyramid in the room ceasing to glow, and Benezia stood smoothly, the cyberware in her body a part of her now, strong and light and lithe. Turning to one of the ever-present geth, she spoke sharply. "Our ETA to Ilos?"

"Benezia-prophet. Current travel time is 54 megaseconds. Estimated landing and site localization will take 3 megaseconds. All ground support platforms are at maximum optimize-efficiency."

She didn't even deign to nod, instead leaving the room and walking down the hallway. Geth ships were not designed for organics, and this one had been hastily modified to provide life-support and other functions. The hallway ended in a pod-shaped attachment that was an addition to the ship.

Ylana, her aide, and the last of the few commandos of the Triune were there. They all looked up as she entered. "All is in readiness. Ylana, you will remain aboard this vessel. Once we have departed, it will take you to the forward base at Rithoan. All other Triune forces that have survived will be falling back to there. You will await further orders there and make contact with Okeer."

She nodded, and Benezia turned to her senior commando. "Huntress Ushan, you and the rest of the Triune will accompany me. Storming the Citadel will be ... very difficult. While the Conduit should allow the forces we've sent through the arrive rapidly, the vast bulk of them will have to immediately head to the Ward Entrances to fend off the military forces stationed there. There are over two hundred thousand soldiers on the Citadel, and we cannot expect to hold them off for very long."

Ushan nodded and Benezia continued. "Our strike force will have to take advantage of the confusion and hit three targets. First, the central defense center, located at C-SEC. That will disable the ability to close the Citadel as well as allow us to disable the station-to-space defenses of the Wards, so the fleet can land geth drop pods."

Benezia pulled up a map of the Presidium on her omnitool, the asari around her watching raptly.

"Second target is the Tower Defense Center. That's where the main defense of the Council will be. We'll be facing at least two dozen Spectres and whatever elites they have. Once we take that we can deactivate the Tower defense networks and disable the mech forces."

She highlighted the Tower itself. "We must then take the central elevator core, seal it, and proceed to the Council Chambers. Nazara will be able to link to the hardlines externally, but there are both hardware and software blocks to the segments he needs. We will have to take out the Council – the access to the computer is in their chambers – and then defend the area while I access the command plinth."

Ushan nodded. "Given our numbers... can we succeed?"

Benezia smiled coldly. "The defense fleet has more soldiers, but they will be occupied by Nazara and the geth fleet that jumps insystem. The rest of the Citadel Fleet will be pinned far away from the Citadel. The only possible defenders would be the Destiny Ascension, and a relative handful of human, elcor, and salarian ships not deployed to defense."

Benezia tapped the glowing model of the Presidium. "The Destroyers we did manage to get on-loaded will terrify their foes, and along with the geth should be able to hold off the incoming military forces long enough for the geth to land drop pods and provide backup. Once they land a force, we can seal the Citadel and prevent any further reinforcements from arriving. Assuming we get that far, victory is assured. The Reaper arrival will destroy any more resistance, and from the Citadel we can convince the Asari Republic to surrender. The rest of the galaxy will be given over to the Reapers, and we will be placed in charge of overseeing the galaxy."

Benezia stood. "Some of us will be honored to become a new god, given a body like Nazara. If you are successful, you will join that gestalt siari, Ushan."

She smiled as the huntress bowed her head. "Your will, Matriarch. Any further orders?"

Benezia's smile faded. "There is every possibility that somehow Shepard or my foolish daughter will interfere. While I am hardly afraid of them, they have proven to be ... tenacious. If you run across them..."

She paused, then closed her eyes. "Kill them."

O-OSaBC-O

Tali nervously waited as the comms room signals lanced out, before looking at the screen to see the symbol of the Quarian Admiralty pop into view. A moment later, her father appeared on screen.

"You are alright, Tali?" Her father sounded stern as usual, but Tali was cheered by the worried note in his voice. The conversation they'd had in the hospital had made her realize her father loved her more than anything in the world, and his worry about her was less a lack of faith in her and more a lack of him knowing how he would deal with her dying.

"I'm fine, father. I guess you have ... seen the news."

He nodded, hand adjusting his reik. "The entire Admiralty Board has seen it. Disgusting. As usual, the Council ignores clear danger in favor of letting someone else suffer."

Tali nodded nervously. She'd only told Shepard she needed to speak with her father, not why. "That's...why I am calling. We don't have any backup on this trip...we're flying into this blind."

Rael'Zorah gave her a firm look. "The Migrant Fleet is out of position to provide backup, unfortunately. This is the first time we've actually been fairly deep in Council Space in over fifty years, since we had to move to Noveria. Right now we're approaching Bekenstein to speak with this new human

government. Any ships we sent your way would take another three days."

"Oh." Tali slumped slightly. She was worried about the Normandy's ability to survive any kind of battle, but she had hoped maybe her people could provide some sort of assistance.

Rael'Zorah was tapping something on his omnitool, and frowned. "...or not."

She looked up. "What?"

He tilted his head in a manner that let her know he was unhappy. "There's a strike patrol of the MFM in the rough region of Althana, on the fringes of the Veil. It's been conducting low-observable imaging of the geth ships moving out from the Veil. It's small, just a pair of light frigates and a scout cruiser, but there are six detachments of the MFM onboard. They could hit Gorth in four hours."

Tali pulled up a starchart on her omni – Gorth was nearly directly on their current flight path anyway. "They...could be a big help, Father."

Rael'Zorah nodded quietly. "That's all I can do, daughter. The Heavy and Scout Fleet are going to be meeting up with the human Fifth Fleet to ensure the geth coming from galactic south don't threaten Alliance Space, in return for some mining rights. The Civilian Fleet has been invited to withdraw to human space in safety, which we are accepting." He paused. "I wish I could do the same for you, I'm half tempted to order you to get on one of those MFM ships and pull out."

She looked at him a long moment, and she shook her head. "I .. I can't. I have to see this through."

The glowing eyes narrowed. "It could end in your death, daughter. That would hurt... many. Not just me. Your aunt. Your cousins. Even your human... friend."

Tali ducked her head in embarrassment, but exhaled. "I know. It .. I took your words very seriously, Father. But ... Tetrimus told me that you didn't believe in yourself when you were my age, and you had to nearly die to find your own strength." She looked up.

Rael'Zorah sighed. "What I did was ... stupid. It nearly got me killed. It nearly got ... someone I cared about very much killed. It exposed me to things I never wished to know, and in the end, the backlash contributed to the deaths of thousands of innocents. Tetrimus may be right. You may be right."

He leaned forward. "But you know better than to measure your place in this life by someone else's words. If you are going to do this, despite everything, it shouldn't be to prove yourself to me, my daughter, or to anyone else."

Tali nodded firmly. "It isn't. That bosh'tet kethai hurt my friends, and is responsible for the deaths of more than one." She closed her eyes as she thought about kindly Alenko and the jovial, funny Master Chief Cole, of the goofy jokes Charlais and the other marines, of the protectiveness of Ownby and Haskins. "She has to pay. The geth have to pay."

Her voice was firm and hard, and Rael merely sat back and nodded. "I'll ... be waiting for you, my daughter." He paused. "I am proud. Keelah se'lai."

She repeated the phrase and he disconnected, and she let herself go slack, before squaring her shoulders and leaving the comm-room. She found Shepard at the CIC command station, gazing coldly at the slowly swirling galaxy map. She twisted her hands together nervelessly before speaking.

"Commander... I need to talk to you."

Shepard's eyebrow rose upon seeing Tali but she shrugged. "Sure. What's up?"

She exhaled. "I just .. spoke with my father. He can't do much...but he's managed to redirect a small Migrant Fleet Marine force to intercept us at the system of Gorth. It's three ships and about a hundred quarian marines."

Shepard stared at Tali for a long moment before her face split into a grin. "Thank you, Tali. That's...very, very useful given that we're shot to shit and low on men." Shepard's shoulders lifted, as if she felt lighter, and Tali smiled, happy she could help.

"Joker, alter course to hit the Gorth system. We have reinforcements on the way."

"Roger, commander. Incoming message from ... ah, the Vol Directorate, ma'am."

Shepard raised both eyebrows and nodded. "Route it to the Comms room." She turned, pausing to place her hands on Tali's shoulders. "Well done, Tali. Thank you."

The tiny quarian ducked her head nervously and Shepard chuckled, before entering the comm room. She paused to gather herself before tapping the link, and the features of Marshal Vidon Marr came online. "Marshal Marr, you are well?"

The blocky form of the volus commander was the same as she remembered from their trip to the ruins of a volus merchant ship. He gave a small motion with one hand. "I am well, Commander. I am gratified to report that we found the miscreant responsible for the assault upon our ships, and that you gave deep vengeance to Saren for his actions."

He paused. "In fact, that is why I am contacting you. The volus fleet is pinned near our homeworld, tangled in battle with an entire geth strike force. The Turian Hierarchy is rushing to our assistance, but I am unsure if they will arrive in time to prevent the destruction of our fleet."

Shepard winced. The volus had just started really building their military up, and if it was destroyed they had poor defenses for their homeworld, being more interested in finance than matters military. "I'm sorry to hear that."

The volus merely gave a shift in his stance. "If we must spend such coin in dire reasons, I would prefer not to waste it. My ship, *All Due Caution*, is unfortunately out of position to assist the defense of our home. We were delivering information about what we found on the vile Sur'kesh-clan ship that we caught to the STG. We have ... seen the difficulties you have encountered in getting support, and I am close enough to your location that we can rendezvous with you in a few hours before you reach your goal."

Shepard could not help but grin. The VDF ship was a heavy cruiser, heavily armed with high explosive antimatter missiles and torpedoes. It would have beaten the crap out of the Normandy even if her ship was fully repaired, and she could only imagine the carnage it would inflict on geth. "As it happens, we'll be slowing down to meet up with a small patrol of the quarian Migrant Fleet to assist us, and your own help would be...very much appreciated."

Marr nodded – a somewhat silly looking gesture on a volus, but she took this guy very seriously. "Very good, Earth-clan. Have your flight officer send us your course and we will meet you at our top speed. Marr out."

Shepard chuckled fiercely as she left the comm room, walking to the cockpit. "Joker. Send your course to the VDF ship that just hailed us, and stand by to plot a high observable rendezvous. We're not in this shit alone anymore."

Joker merely nodded. "Done and done, Commander." The ship shifted its course slightly, even as Joker rotated his chair to face her. "Makes our odds a little better, at least."

She smirked, leaning her weight on one leg and crossing her arms. "You say that like you have no confidence in your own flying badassery, Flight Lieutenant."

Joker flung up his hands. "Oh, come *onnn*. I got this. I just ... you know.. having a bunch of crazy quarians and that really hacked off looking volus ship can't hurt."

He frowned. "But seriously...what do we do if we get there and the black ship is right there?"

Shepard shrugged. "Die, probably. Maybe dodge, maybe flee. I don't know – but I've made the best preparations I can for that eventuality too. I'm not going out without hurting something, be that on the ground or in space." She tilted her head. "Still time to bail, you know."

Joker rolled his eyes and turned back to the pilot console. "To quote the CIC... fuck that shit, Commander. Just make sure you shout your orders when we get there, because otherwise I won't be able to hear you over the sound of how awesome I am."

Shepard burst out laughing.

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## Chapter 115: Chapter 106: Ilos, Opening Sonata

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*A/N: Amazingly, thanks to all your reviews, OsaBC is now on the first page of ME stories sorted by reviews. Thank you very much for your kind support.*

*I'm not sure how long I'll keep this update pace. We'll have to see. There's a lot of fluff in this chapter, but there's also battle scenes – something for everyone!*

*I desperately require a beta reader. :D*

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The Normandy erupted out of FTL in a blaze of blue, little arcs of electricity shimmering over the hull briefly as it slowed. The Gorth system was a binary star, two half-dead main sequence red giants nearly merging into one huge star. In a few hundred thousand years, astrophysicists expected both stars to undergo a nova or supernova collapse, given their distance to each other.

The CIC was at battle alert status, lights dimmed, haptic displays glowing dully under red combat lighting. The slender shapes of a trio of quarian vessels lit up the CIC status board in glowing green. The plot coordinator spoke. "Firm contact, bearing one nine two tac six. Designated Sierra One, in ATF tracker alpha. Classification is light salarian corvette or cruiser, ma'am. Shields are down, weapons unarmed. Two smaller frigates bearing one nine nine tac fifteen, Sierra two and three."

Shepard nodded. "Any sign of the volus?"

Another sensor operator in Tac Alley spoke. "High emission blue-shift detected, bearing three zero two tac nine, commander. Mass estimate is cruiser weight. ETA roughly two hours, at current shift and speed."

Shepard nodded again. "Adams, power down the engines and send your repair teams out in EVA to look at the damage to the ship's spine. Tali, report to the CIC." She clicked off the IMC and turned to look at Pressly. "Status?"

The XO pulled out a datapad. "Preparations for self-destruct are completed, and I've checked the escape pods – all functional. Chakwas has completed her exams on everyone but you and Doctor T'Soni, and Wrex reports the armory refitting and equipment swaps are complete. The crew is .. well, as rested as we're going to get, I think, ma'am. Sensors are at 100% and Garrus is tinkering on the MAKO along with Vega and a couple of the engineers, working on makeshift armor and putting the med-systems back together."

Shepard pinched the bridge of her nose, eyes closed. "All we do now is wait up for the Marshal and get in there, I guess. Thank you, Pressly."

The XO saluted, turning away to oversee the ops techs, and as he did so the door from the lower decks slid open and Tali stepped out onto the CIC. The glowing eyes blinked at the reduced battle ready lighting and the red glowing haptics. "... I guess this is battle stations, Commander?"

Shepard smiled. "Yeah, it is. We're here, and there's a trio of quarian ships waiting for us. Figured things would go smoother if you were in the comm room with me when I made contact."

Tali only nodded, and followed Shepard into the Comms room behind the CIC, the gray covered walls muting the noise as the door shut behind them. "VI, establish open channel to the quarian cruiser."

There were several seconds of delay before the screen blanked, displaying a broad-shouldered quarian in black and blue combat armor. Tali leaned forward before Shepard could say anything. "Captain Keenah'Breizha! I thought... I thought you died on Caleston!"

The quarian captain tilted his head. "Ha. Not a chance, ma'am. I was pretty banged up, that's true, but those geth didn't finish me. I looked for you quite a while until the Alliance let me know they'd gotten you off to the Citadel, and then I reported back to your father and pretty much got my head torn off, which is why I was in the khr'tet of space when your father tasked me here." He chuckled ruefully. "It's good to see you are safe, Tali."

Shepard arched an eyebrow, and Tali spoke. "Um.. Captain Keenah'Breizha vas Rothuam, this is Commander Sara'Shepard vas Normandy, Council Spectre."

The quarian male inclined his head respectfully. "Pleasure to meet you, ma'am. I got two missile frigates and the Rothuam, she's an older model salarian corvette. I also have six sixteen-unit marine detachments, one on each frigate and four on my own ship. Admiral Rael'Zorah has detached my command to you, ma'am."

Shepard smiled. "Thank you, Captain. Your ships and troops will be of immense help, the Normandy took a beating at Virmire .. and I lost a lot of my own men. Not to mention we're still beaten up from taking down Saren."

Keenah folded his arms. "Well, given that the sick bosh'tet was aligned with geth, he deserved to die. Are we ready to move out or ... "

She shook her head. "We have one more ship incoming .. volus heavy cruiser, another captain I've worked with in the past. If possible, I'd like to do a coordinated briefing once he arrives."

The quarian captain nodded. "Sounds good. I'll go ahead and have my people un-rack their weapons and armor and get everything spun up for battle. Drop me a hail when we're ready to consult."

Shepard nodded and killed the line. "Thanks, Tali. Going into this shit alone would have been..."

The little quarian tilted her head up. "Bad?"

Shepard snorted back laughter. "Yeah, let's leave it at that."

O-OSaBC-O

Three and a half hours later, the Normandy's cargo bay doors closed as a volus shuttle landed, disgorging the figure of Marshal Vidon Marr. He was met by Pressly, who stepped out of Engineering once the bay re-pressurized. "Marshal Marr, I am Lieutenant Commander Pressly. Commander Shepard is waiting for you if you will please follow me."

The volus nodded, his armored life-suit flat black in the dim light of the cargo bay, taking the sight of Garrus and Wrex as they exited engineering. "Interesting crew." He stepped aboard the elevator, and Pressly smiled.

"It's not the usual Alliance crew roster. Is there anything I can get for you, Marshal?"

The volus examined Pressly for a moment. "No, I have .. sufficient food reserves built into my suit, and I refreshed myself before departing." The elevator hissed open , and Pressly lead Marr to the mess deck.

The tables had been pushed aside, a hastily built holo-display erected in their place. Shepard and Liara stood to one side, while Tali stood next to Captain Keenah and Jiong. Marr bowed, his squat form deforming the shape of his suit. "It is good to see you again, Commander."

Shepard smile. "You as well, sir. This is Captain Keenah of the quarian Migrant Fleet, and Tali'Zorah, who is a member of my crew. Next to her is Alfred Jiong, my ... commissar, and this is Doctor T'Soni."

Marr merely nodded. "To wit, then."

Shepard triggered the holotable. "Liara was able to rig up two of our probes to pass through the Mu Relay. The other side is clear, if a dangerous jump – lots of old starship debris from the Rachni Wars. We plotted a clear FTL lane to Ilos, that goes through a dark nebula to suppress our blue-shift."

Shepard gestured. "Right now the probes are twenty minutes out from Ilos, and we're seeing no blue-shifts into that system, so we can only assume Benezia has beaten us there. Right now the probes are looking for wake disturbances in the nebula, our rough estimate of the ships that have passed through is four cruisers and at least one heavy cruiser, with possibly ten other smaller ships – troop transports or frigates , maybe destroyers."

Shepard exhaled. "The Normandy has a stealth system, that suppresses our heat emissions. Unfortunately, it's not something we could just gen up and install on your ships even if that wasn't blatantly illegal, as the entire ship has to be built around the concept. A stealth entry is out, but given that the geth have seen us pull our stealth entry several times, it isn't much to worry about. Our armaments are depleted, but we still have a pair of cannons – destroyer class, basically. Our ship is also very nimble and has advanced ECM. We can probably handle at least one or two destroyers if we're lucky and careful , but we've taken some damage and we're low on missiles."

Marr snorted. "Commander, the Alliance uses Spearfish missile systems, correct?"

She nodded, and the volus spread his hands. "We have enough missiles to completely refill your battery, and then some."

Shepard grinned. "Excellent. With a full battery of missiles and the skills of my pilot, we're a lot more dangerous."

Marr nodded. "The *All Due Caution* is a heavy cruiser. We have two 20 mm twin cannon turrets, a 25mm main gun, six rotary rapid fire missile pods, four center-line torpedo launchers, two aft rapid firing missile launchers, and a fifteen-shot rapid reload suppressive rocket array on each wing. Our shields are slightly stronger than cruiser spec , but our engines are .. somewhat slow."

The quarian captain rubbed the back of his helmet. "Well, I feel outclassed. My ship is an old salarian corvette – we don't have the Silaris armor the modern ones do, but we do have the floating omni-hull and double fitted shields. The ECM system was removed but we have a standard package, three heavy accelerator cannons, and a pair of torpedo tubes with flash-pak area detonation devices. My frigates are older Mrunmu missile carriers from your own government, Marshal. Each one is packing five rapid fire rotary missile launchers and not much else, but they can definitely saturate a battlefield."

Shepard nodded, and touched the holoscreen controls. "Assuming Liara's probes are accurate – and I trust her estimates – the biggest threats will be the cruisers and the heavy cruiser. Captain Keenah, your corvette can probably handle one, possibly two of the cruisers, and the Normandy will take on the other

two. Your frigates will have to stand off the smaller ships with missile fire until we can drop those cruisers." She glanced at Marr. "Your ship is the only one capable of going toe to toe with a geth heavy. With any luck, you can drop it and help us finish the cruisers."

She tapped the planet in the display. "Once we suppress any ships Benezia has, we still have to get down to the planet, and our information about it is basically nil. Liara?"

The asari glanced down at the floor before speaking. "Most information on Ilos is sadly fragmentary – for centuries it was held as nothing but a myth. We have information that Ilos was an Inusannon world, the race that vanished before the Protheans did. Ilos, in stories, was a dark jungle planet covered in world-spanning ruins, much like Feros. The ... rachni were active in this area, but according to the queen we faced on Noveria, the rachni did not like Ilos, and indicated it was ... full of dead."

Captain Keenah tilted his head. "That sounds just *lovely*."

Shepard gave a small smile. "Given Benezia's level of crazy, whatever is down there is probably important and dangerous. I have a way to launch my marines from the Normandy, but getting your people down there will be dicey, Captain."

The quarian shrugged. "The cruiser is fitted with old STG drop-pods, Commander. It would be a rough ride down, but one we can handle. And the frigates can land and disgorge their troops."

Marr made a sound. "I am afraid I don't have any infantry forces on my ship, but I do have a small number of drones rated for atmosphere that can provide air support once you're on the ground."

Shepard nodded. "I think that's about all we can do, then. We have no evidence that the black ship of Saren's is anywhere near Ilos...but worst case scenario, if it is, the Normandy will jettison her crew in escape pods and I will ram the ship into that monster, detonating our Tantalus core. The core of our ship is huge, nearly as big as a dreadnaught, and along with what torpedoes we have on board should at least blind and cripple the thing long enough for you to pick up my people and withdraw."

Marr nodded slowly. "...very well. Let us pray to Plenix the monster is not there."

Keenah also nodded. "Commander...do we have any idea what the hell Benezia plans to do or find on Ilos?"

Shepard shook her head. "I have ... information that says there may be some kind of super-weapon on the planet, but I don't have anything firm. We never got a chance to interrogate Saren and we didn't find any information in their bases about what their ultimate goals are. The Commissars captured a few asari on Noveria, but they're all crazy as shit, talking about the Ascension or whatever. All we know for certain is they're looking for something named the Conduit."

Marr gave a troubled cough. "A conduit implies a method of conveying ... something .. from one place to another. A form of travel?"

Liara glanced around. "A conduit can also transmit ... information. It may be a method of contacting the Reapers, in which case she must be stopped at all costs."

Captain Keenah looked around, then gave a weak laugh. "A human Spectre, with a handful of quarians and volus, off to fight a crazed asari and save the entire galaxy. And I thought the Blasto movies were farfetched."

Marr made a calm sound. "Perhaps. I, for one, am glad of the chance to prove the worth of the volus to the galactic community."

Keenah nodded. "No matter what, Commander, we're with you. I'll head back and prep for jump."

Shepard pushed away from the holo-console and nodded. "We'll see you on the other side, then."

## O-OSaBC-O

The next four hours passed in slow, nerve wracking fashion. Passing through the Mu Relay dropped them in a grisly graveyard of ship hulks, shattered and tumbling for all eternity. Ancient asari and turian ships were blasted apart, along with elongated organic hulls that could only be rachni ships.

Liara stared out the windows of Shepard's cabin, into the endless dark of space. The nebula they'd entered muted the stars beyond, turning them into dim smeary pin-pricks of blues and whites, and the illumination of the FTL transit cast the gasses of the nebula into eerie, almost threatening shapes, barely visible.

Shepard lay on the bed, her thoughts troubled, and Liara smiled and turned from the window to sit next to her, reaching for her hand. "You are upset."

Shepard's gaze matched hers, staring for a long moment. "I ... I realized I've never been really scared before, Liara. It's funny in a way." She pulled the asari towards her, wrapping her own muscular arms around her, as if trying to hang on. Her voice was muffled against Liara's shoulder, the warmth of her body comforting. "All those years fighting against everything thrown at me... I had zero fear. Even on Torfan, I was more enraged and upset and broken than anything else, but not scared."

Shepard bit her lip, a pulse of barely controlled fright lancing across their link. "Now? I'm going into this blind, with no way of knowing what to expect. If I fuck it up... it may end up costing me everything I have. It may end up getting literally everyone killed!"

Liara turned in Shepard's embrace, until they were face to face. She couldn't help her racing heart every time she beheld her lover, but the emotions bouncing back and forth between them had to be let out. "Sara...you are scared of losing me? Of dying?"

She nodded. "For the first time in my life ... I have something to fucking look forward to. Not endless battles ending in getting my soldiers killed and then at the end of it a bullet in the head or a worn out existence on some penal colony. Not a day by day struggle just to ... find a reason to keep going. I have you. I have ... people I care about. I have people who believe in me."

Shepard closed her eyes. "The Butcher was fearless because she was *weak*."

Liara frowned, not understanding. "Weak?"

Shepard's lips quirked. "Yeah. Weak, whiny. I see it now, as I didn't then. I had... I didn't know HOW to get past what had been done to me, so I guess I used it as an excuse not to. I hid from both what I was and where I needed to be as a person. Easier to kill and not question. Easier to suffer and not demand answers. Easier to give in and follow than take a damned stand. I let them use me. I let them hang that goddamned Star of Terra around my neck. I let them let me off the hook."

She touched her forehead to Liara's. "For all my bullshit about hating criminals, I let my anger get me to a place where I shot an innocent kid simply because her mother was an evil piece of shit. That's not fucking strength, Liara. It's weakness."

She gave a tired laugh, snuggling against the asari. "And now, at the end, I see how goddamned stupid I've been. I'm terrified because you could die in a few hours. We could die. I'm scared Garrus or Telanya will buy it and I'll have to watch the other just give out. I'm scared my ship and my people are going to be blown out of the sky because we aren't goddamned ready. I'm scared ... that I'm not good enough to stop Benezia."

Liara ran a hand against Shepard's cheek. "And you worry this fear will paralyze you?" She smiled. "Before...my mother went down this dark river she is on, she was very wise. One of her most repeated sayings to others was that one has to find a reason worth dying for before you can truly live."

Liara's soft voice soothed Shepard's jangling nerves as she continued. "We cannot know what the tide will bring, love. I fear I am not strong enough to oppose my mother, yet there is no one else to stand in her path. When it happens... all I can do is remember I am fighting for you, for us, for whatever it is we will have together. That .. is the strength I have."

Shepard gave a little nod. "It's just ... not something I ever felt before, marazul. I'm not .. scared of death. And at the same time...it's just unfair that it's racing at me just when I finally get a chance to be alive."

She grunted. "But I guess you're right. I'll just have to fight all the harder for that. For you." She glanced at the chrono on the wall, then pulled the asari atop her. "I need to forget everything."

Liara smiled, and bent to kiss her lips. "Then we shall."

#### O-OSaBC-O

In the dimness of the cargo bay, Wrex finished the final adjustments and repairs to his armor. With a grunt, he set it aside, pulling out his shotgun, checking the fit of the parts.

Shepard came through the opening elevator doors, reeking of the asari and looking a little dazed. Wrex snorted back amusement as he watched her talk briefly to Garrus, going over the MAKO.

The idea that Shepard would end up with the tiny asari girl rather than some equally blood-drenched warrior was still a shock to Wrex, but he didn't really understand the squishy humans anyway. And with the exception of Aleena, who was as dangerous as she was exciting, asari never really turned him on anyway.

Wrex looked up as Shepard approached, her usual panther like stride not as smooth due to a slight limp. "Shepard."

She stopped, then sat down on a crate next to him. "Wrex." The two were silent for several minutes, before she finally spoke. "You scared?"

Wrex guffawed, then paused, tasting the air. "...no. But you are. Only the second time I tasted fear off you."

She nodded, letting her hair, still damp from a shower, hang down, occluding her features. The faint scent of fresh blood wafted from her, and Wrex suddenly wondered just how timid the little asari was.

He thought for a long moment, then set down his shotgun. "I never told you about Urv."

She nodded. "I knew something had happened. Figured if I saw you, that little guy wouldn't be far behind." She looked up. "What happened?"

He grunted. "Clan Ganar. Ambush on a site we were guarding. He never had a chance, Skal killed him and two more of of my war-brothers. It was the last time I worked freelance. I joined the Broker to get information on Okeer and the Clan, and I killed thirty of the ukra'ges over the years." He hung his head. "I know what it's like, Shepard, to wake up one morning and realize you have a lot to lose."

His eyes unwillingly closed. He would not cry. "I remember holding him in my hands, feeling so blessed by the gods that they would grant me a child. I remember wanting to change the universe for him, Shepard. I wanted to bring the clans together. I wanted to give him a place to stand besides shattered ruins and dust."

He clenched his meaty fist. "And it was taken from me. Not in a way that meant anything. Not for any purpose. Not for honor, or even survival. For sheer, bloody evil. I gave up on living, when he fell and his eyes closed. I didn't even get to hold him...to bury him. They took his body, and we weren't able to stop them."

Shepard didn't know what to say, and decided instead to merely hold her tongue. A long minute passed before Wrex spoke again. "I've followed you because I owe you. You saved his life, and gave me a few more years of being alive myself, Shepard."

He placed his heavy hand on her shoulder. "You never got that much. So don't worry. If they kill Liara, it will be only after I am dead. I promise you that."

She gave a wan smile. "Thanks, big guy." She blinked back tears, not knowing how to handle the rush of emotions she felt. Urv had been a delightful krogan boy, polite and curious, yet fierce in battle. The knowledge that he had died a meaningless death infuriated her. "If...if we survive this..."

She paused. She knew there would be a huge ruckus after this was over, assuming they won, which was almost arrogant. She shook her head. "When we get through this, Wrex. We're going to find Shields and Dunn, and go pick up Jackson, and then we're going to find that fucker Okeer and turn his goddamned organs into paste."

Wrex looked at her, hard, searching. She met his gaze unflinchingly, and after a long moment he nodded.

He pulled a heavy, pitted blade from his calf armor, laying it across his broad knee. "I haven't gone back to Tuchanka. Haven't gone back to Yranda, to tell her that her child is dead. Haven't gone back to my clan. I've been seeking death, Shepard, same as you." He held the knife out, the still sharp edge gleaming in the dim light.

"I'm tired and old, and I've given up on anything but drowning my sorrows in ryncol and swearing bloody revenge on that monster Okeer. If you bring him to me, and we end him, then I will call you blood-sister." He made a single, shallow cut on his broad palm, and reversed the ugly old knife.

Shepard didn't hesitate, gashing her own hand open, suppressing a wince at the pain, and hand-clasping with Wrex. Orange and red mingled, dripping down one slender wrist and one broad one, before falling the floor like heavy teardrops. "You have my word, turtle."

Wrex squeezed her hand, then let it fall, his own wound slowly beginning to close. "You had better let your doc look at that, Shepard. Your tiny little bodies are so weak, and dying from the blood clasp is not a good idea."

She snorted, pulling a med-gel patch out and slapping it across the cut. "Shit. You wish. Liara hurts me worse than that." The words slipped out, and then she winced and glanced around, but no one was nearby, Garrus and one of the engineers engrossed in arguing about the MAKO.

Wrex burst into laughter. Maybe asari were more interesting in the mating couch than he thought.

O-OSaBC-O

As the Normandy hurtled towards the Ilos system, Joker's mind wandered. The course was locked, there was no real skill needed to keep the ship in a straight line, and yet battle stations meant the cockpit had to be manned.

At least the gunnery section and forward sensor tech weren't up here yet. He enjoyed the solitude of the pilot's seat, the ability to gaze out at the endless night of space. So when he heard footsteps behind him he sighed, knowing solitude was over.

Tali's accented voice broke his chain of thought. "Jeff?"

He smiled, turning to see her come in almost hesitantly, glancing around. "Sup, Tali?"

She gave a shrug, gingerly sitting in the gunnery seat across from him, careful not to touch any control panels. "Bored, I suppose. Adams has most of the engineering team finishing the repairs I started, and

there's nothing left to do except sleep for an hour or two. I can't get my eyes closed. Everyone is on edge."

Joker smirked. Or working it off. He'd heard sounds from both the direction of Shepard's cabin and the forward battery, and figured he knew what that meant. But he veered away from that line of thinking, as it wasn't really ... possible.

Seeing Tali – the real Tali, no mask – in the hospital had been a little shocking. She was blindingly pretty, and the alien shape of her features just made it more difficult to forget. Assuming they got through this mess, he'd have to do some very careful thinking.

She looked up. "You're not usually quiet, you know." She dipped her head slightly. "Is something wrong?"

He shook his own head, pulling his cap down a bit. "No. I just ... guess it's all kind of coming down to the wire. Wondering what is going to happen...how it will play out."

Tali nodded firmly, her voice wistful. "I suppose if we win, things will return to normal." She sounded sad about that, and he knew why.

He made a minute adjustment to the course of the Normandy, and then looked at her, directly. "I have a ... funny question. How long does your Pilgrimage last for?"

Tali shrugged. "Usually until the quarian feels he or she has obtained something of enough value to return to the Migrant Fleet. Some return when they manage to obtain a ship, others with credits, work contracts for the Fleet, technical data...a Pilgrimage could last four or five years."

He nodded. "And have you found what you'll take back yet?"

Tali shook her head. "I already gave up Troyce's ship, and went through a lot of my credits. Neither would have served in any case...for an Admiral's daughter, my Gift must be something ... impressive. Not just cash or a ship." She sounded a bit defeated. "And knowing my father, he won't truly be satisfied that whatever I obtain was worth risking my life for."

Joker nodded. "Is there any limit on what you can bring back?"

She gave him an odd tilt of the head. "What do you mean?"

The pilot was silent for a long minute before speaking. "I don't know. I ... I'm kind of stuck. I know that in a few more months I'll be up for promotion. That means I move from piloting to being stuck as the lead navigator and coordinator. If I'm lucky, they'll stick me on a carrier as a GPI, if I'm unlucky I get shoved back to Arcturus to train snot nosed brats. I won't be able to fly the Normandy much longer, in any case."

She folded her arms. "That's...stupid. You're the best pilot the ship could have, why take that away from you?"

Joker laughed, rubbing his beard. "That's just it, though. It's the way the SA operates. I'm already getting static from Alliance Medical – they feel given my 'medical condition' I need to spend at least two to four years ashore for my own 'safety.' The years of busting my butt to prove I'm the best, and it still means just about nothing."

Tali closed her eyes, wishing things could be different. Joker instead spoke up. "So ... I was thinking if you could hang around a few more months after this mess is over, we could work together to find you something awesome to take back home. It would give me something to do besides sit dirtside and cry myself to sleep."

She smiled. What she wanted to do was take him back as her Gift, but she doubted he would agree.

Despite his complaints, he was loyal to his people, as she was to hers, and no matter what might come between them emotionally, she didn't think he was going to go off and live on an alien ship for the rest of his life for a girlfriend he couldn't even touch. She swallowed, forcing her voice to cheer, and nodded. "I can probably do that. I-I mean, if you really wanted to..."

Joker gave her a smile. "I guess that's my other, real problem." He gestured to his legs. "You .. saved me from being trapped in the hell I was in, Tali. I don't know if anyone can understand what it's like, being locked away from just being able to move without pain, without suffering. I'm sure something like what you made has already been created, but it was nothing I could get a hold of."

He pulled his hat down further. "And you did that for me. I won't...can't forget that. I don't know how things will work out. But I'm going to work them out. One way or the other."

Tali bit her lip behind her facemask. "...it's...not i-possible. I-I mean...u-us." He looked up, and she somehow managed to stammer through the sentence. "O-on Caleston...the Alliance officer who he-helped me get offworld ... lived with a quarian. They had a clean room and .. were bonded."

Joker's gaze didn't leave hers for long, silent seconds. Then he gave a single, determined nod and sat back in his chair, exhaling. "You .. seem pretty sure that is what you want. Not that I don't ... but you are kinda turning your back on finding a boyfriend among other quarians." He rubbed the back of his neck.

She shook her own head. "Every quarian sees me only as the Admiral's daughter, Jeff. They're terrified of him."

Joker gave a weak laugh. "I can see why, I thought he was gonna kill me in that clinic when I kept mouthing off to him ... about how he was acting." He started a little when she reached out and laid her hand on his shoulder.

"That's why... Jeff, no one else has ever had the .. guts, to do that. He admires you, I think. When we talked...he'd never had anyone get up in his face like that. When I told him you were... about your condition... he was ashamed he had struck you." She exhaled, feeling her breath curl in her mask. "But I could say the same about you, about giving up on human women..."

Joker shrugged. "Like I said, they see me as some kind of ... pity project. I can't stand that. And Tali...you're more beautiful than any of them, anyway."

The quarian felt her skin burning in embarrassment and lightheaded in pleasure, but managed not to curl up into a ball. The voice he used when he said that had no uncertainty in it.

She was about to say more when the computer pinged and data began scrolling into Joker's view. He cursed and slapped a control panel. "Commander...coming up on the solar wake of Ilos. We've got problems."

Shepard's voice rang over the comm system. "What kind?"

Joker grimaced, pulling up a digitized scan image with rapid hand motions, flinging pilot data windows out of the way faster than Tali could follow. "Doctor T's estimates were off, Commander. I have hard data from the sensors coming in now. Two heavy cruisers, five cruisers, three destroyers, nine frigates, and about fifteen geth transport ships. The transports are big but lightly armed. They're in orbit already."

Shepard cursed. "Alright, Joker, bring us in above the elliptic, solar bearing ... zero four zero, tac sixty."

A moment later, Shepard's voice rang out over the main comm system, along with the battle stations alarm. "All hands, man battle stations. Prepare for high speed combat maneuvers. Spin up all missiles

and engage full power on the Core. Marines, prepare for hot combat drop."

Tali reached out to touch Joker's arm. "Be safe...please."

He snorted. "You're the one who needs to be safe. We'll... talk later. Promise."

She nodded, turning to go, even as techs rushed forward down Tac Alley to begin manning their stations.

Joker exhaled, a thin smile on his features, then cleared his head and pulled down his battle overlays. "Let's get to rock and rolling."

### O-OSaBC-O

The Normandy screamed out of FTL, followed by the All Due Caution and the quarian trio, and immediately engaged ECM and defenses. Less than thirty seconds later, the geth began to react, breaking orbit and slowly spreading into a long combat line, the ends anchored by the two heavy cruisers, the cruisers in the middle, forming a shallow bowl, the destroyers and frigates rushing forward.

Marshal Marr smiled to himself aboard his bridge. "It is time to see how well we have spent our funds on this vessel, my brothers and sisters. Load the Vuna long range interceptors."

The volus ship's missile bay doors retracted, revealing two long rows of gaudy purple tinted missiles, neatly arranged in cross shaped patterns. With a shudder the weapons launched, flashing out with streaks of ECM.

Shepard's voice flanged across the comm. "Marshal, we're still out of missile range..."

The volus only grinned. "Not at all, Commander, observe."

The missiles sped up, then each one flickered, engaging micro-sized FTL drives, slashing across the distance in a split second. Badly out of control, they erupted from FTL and detonated immediately, showering the array with hard rads, radioactive chaff, and burst of x-rays that wreaked havoc on the geth ships. One missile detonated right next to a frigate, snapping it in half with the blue-shift backlash as the missile emerged.

On the Normandy, Pressly's eyes bugged out. "Hyperluminal missiles? Those must cost a million credits a piece!"

Shepard gave a nasty chuckle, smirking. "Effective, though. Volus really don't like to fight fair, and I gotta admit, that's a smart damned idea. Garrus, time to range?"

The turian's voice was tight with excitement. "Six minutes, assuming the spirits-be-damned VI isn't locking up the range-finger again."

She tapped the comm. "Your people built it, along with the coffee maker and the elevator. Just make sure we're ready, I want two full spreads, and since I don't see that fucking Reaper, recode one of the torps for close approach burst fire."

"Will do, Commander."

The quarian ships raced ahead, followed by the Normandy, as the four cruisers floundered helplessly, still blind. Without support, the heavy cruisers would be outmaneuvered and shot to pieces, so the frigates and destroyers of the geth had to attempt to tie up the incoming ships.

That plan failed when the volus cruiser vomited over two hundred missiles in a single split volley, along with fifteen torpedoes.

Curses rang in the CIC, as even Shepard's jaw dropped. "Jesus Christ, that's a bigger throw than a fucking Everest-class dreadnaught!"

The geth line opened up with full anti missile defenses, including UV lasers, chaff, and precision fire, but it was hopeless. Even as they blasted dozens and dozens of missiles out of the sky, more kept coming in. Blasts rang out against the smaller geth ships. The quarian frigates and the Normandy's own missiles only augmented the wave of fire, and two minutes later seven frigates and all three destroyers were burning or tumbling wreckage.

The heavy cruisers advanced, firing repeatedly with their main guns, even as the geth cruisers finally cleared their sensors. Rounds came in, slamming into the shields of Shepard's task force. One shell blew straight through the narrow quarian hull of the left frigate, shearing off an engine and sending a handful of helplessly struggling figures into the void. Two more blazing shots impacted the volus ship, a third slamming past them to strike a missile pod, which went up in a large blast that shook the vessel. Sparks rained down as power conduits blew and lighting failed.

Marr wiped blood from his fringelips and roared. "Fire! Full ripple pattern. Disengage the safeties and fire!"

The front of the All Due Caution seemed to explode, and every single missile and torpedo tube launched...and kept launching. Over three hundred and fifty missiles disgorged from the ship before it stopped, and the cruisers and heavy cruisers opened fire in all directions. Storms of flak and endless sprays of UV lasers danced through the void, missiles detonating or being sent off to spiral out of control, but more and more bulled through the defense. One huge volley ended up blasting the center of the first geth heavy with enough impact to blow a twenty-meter wide hole completely through the ship, a roaring ball of fire erupting from the far side.

The Normandy swiveled past the first cruiser, guns banging away and tearing through that ship's forward areas, even as return fire rounds hammered the hull. Screams rang out as a 12mm shell rammed through the mess decks to slam upwards, shattering an ECM station and blowing the operator into sprays of red paste. The atmosphere shrieked through the hole left by the blast, even as two more techs flung a bucket of omnigel into the crack, the substance hardening almost instantly.

Shepard wiped blood from her console, cursing. "Pressly! Report!"

The XO knelt next to another station, pulling the operator out of the seat to slump on the floor, a fragment of decking having bisected his chest. "Yes ma'am. ... shields are down. Kinetic barrier generator is overloaded. We just took nine slugs in the belly. Two injuries in engineering...Adams is hurt, but alive. Power down to 64%. Engine two malfunctioning, losing hydraulic pressure starboard side. Fires in engineering and the cargo bay, damage control responding."

The ops tech next to him shifted something on the monitor. "One of the geth heavies is ... fuck, just gone, Commander. The other...trading fire with the quarian corvette. Volus cruiser is attempting to come around, just blew the shit out of another geth cruiser. One more cruiser damaged, make that dead in the water...one out of control, core is down. One quarian frigate dead in the water. Other is leaking atmosphere."

Shepard gritted her teeth. "Joker, two seven zero tac five! Garrus, pop that torp at that geth heavy!"

The Normandy, trailing smoke from two engines and debris from several blackened holes in her lower hull, gamely swung around, even as the geth heavy hammered the Rothuam and splinters of white fire burst through her port side.

The All Due Caution, badly wounded by the detonation of her missiles, limped ahead, firing it's main guns, at the same time that the Normandy's torpedo arced out. Explosions hammered the geth ship, the

silvery hull blackening and the kinetic barriers flaring in wild sprays of blue and violet, before the torpedo detonated, a blast of white that clipped the front of the quarian frigate in the violence.

Joker cursed. "Sensors down in the backwash, Commander! Going evasive."

The next thirty seconds were sheer terror – blind, unsure if the geth were lining up a shot to finish them off – until the tired voice of Captain Keenah sounded. "Rothuam to Normandy. All hostiles .. suppressed. Status."

Shepard coughed, frowning as sullen spurts of smoke befouled the air on the CIC. "Acknowledged, Rothuam. Sensors...show a clear board. All geth are down. We've got a few dead, and some systems and power damage. Two hull breaches and my chief engineer is injured. We still have main propulsion, and weapons are online, but our kinetic barriers are down."

The quarian's image, flickering with static but visible, erupted into the CIC display. "I've lost weapons power, and my damned medbay just got taken out. We have some backup areas – salarians are paranoid about getting hurt – but I'm down to forty percent life support capacity. I'll have to drop troops soonest."

The deep tones of Marshal Marr sounded. "Engines are ... damaged. The starboard wing was destroyed, and I'm down to less than fifty missiles. It took far, far too many to overwhelm the geth antimissile defenses. I have over forty casualties, but shields are coming back up and I have full weapons power."

Shepard nodded. "Joker, status on those transports!"

Joker's voice sounded tired. "Not moving, commander...actually, they're... powered down. No core signatures or electrical discharge emissions. Kind of a sloppy orbit too, not intersecting but hardly efficient. I think they're empty."

Shepard nodded. "We're shot to shit, but we can make it. We'll rendezvous in orbit and drop as soon as possible. We'll get our engineering people to assist you as we can. Pressly, drop a beacon at this position so we have clear scans of the system terminator."

Shepard clicked off, exhaling. They were past the geth defending ships...now all that remained was getting boots on the ground.

*How hard could that be?*

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## Chapter 116: Chapter 107 : Ilos, Vigil

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*A/N: I would like to thank **Progman, neersighted and nogoodnms** for their assistance with beta editing this pathetic nightmare. I do plan to go over the previous few chapters I've rushed out and touch up the glaring issues there.*

*Folks, it's about to come to a close. Canon has already been shot in the head, and now I am going to defile it's corpse and make a mobile out of it. Some of the most infuriating and stupid plot holes and WTF moments happened in the end of ME1, and there is nothing more satisfying than rectifying them.*

*I have attempted to temper my criticism of the writers so far – they did create a magnificent world – but the ending simply felt cheap. Saren died like a whore, the fight on Ilos was mostly BORING, and Saren had a bare handful of geth with him that we saw and we massacred most of them, but they still took over the Citadel. I'm expected to believe NO ONE stopped him? Where were the Spectres? Where were I dunno, ANYONE? How did the Council get off...ugh. I'll stop there.*

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The atmosphere of Ilos was, for lack of a better word, terrifying.

Even in the vanguard of more than ten thousand geth war platforms, Destroyers, and countless armatures, bolstered by the various Triune she could scrape together in the fallout of the assault on Virmire, she could feel the tension and dread. Even with her body augmented by Nazara's might, and her biotics ready for danger, Benezia felt it.

The ancient statues of the Inusannon stared down at them, basalt guardians eroded by eons of weather, rain, and neglect, still showing their bowed, sinister heads, and malignant facial tentacles. A single, black metaled road ran from the landing site to the facility she was headed to, and rank upon rank of the silent guardians lined the road. The deep sunken eyes seemed to follow her movements, and it didn't help when one gave a shudder and crashed down top a group of geth, smashing them with no warning.

The asari around her muttered, clutching weapons and readying their biotics. Benezia's hand clenched tighter around her warp sword, still in it's scabbard but ready to draw. Her eyes flicked back and forth, seeking an unseen but clearly felt threat.

Icy black rain fell out of the dark, cloud choked sky in torrential sheets, illuminated ever so often by titanic bolts of blazing green and white lighting. Ancient ruins sat on the edges of the horizon like the blackened stumps of broken teeth, occasionally emitting shafts of strange gray and green light. The cutback edges of the jungle rustled menacingly in the high winds, disturbing shapes flickering in and out of visibility at the edges of her vision. The metal road they marched down was an unearthly pitch black, rain sizzling as it struck it, seemingly brand new even with the ruination all around them.

She'd already lost over a hundred geth since landing, even with the altered Beacon sending out waves of pacification, spoofing the defense systems into thinking there were no indoctrinated here. Horrible mechanical things, constructed of shards of black metal and sinews of some nano-organic paste erupted from the trees, flinging bolts of anti-plasma and other exotic energies. Once, the very road her host marched down vomited forth blazing hot flames, melting a group of geth scouts where they stood.

Trying to land directly in the Inusannon city was utter suicide – six collimated anti-proton beams had lanced out when she sent in a scout ship, enough raw firepower to smash even Nazara right out of the sky. The sight of such bared might was a sharp reminder in Benezia's mind that this was her last, greatest trial.

No Reaper had ever beheld Ilos, either during the days of the Inusannon or the Protheans. From what knowledge Nazara had shared with her and Saren, the Reapers had searched for many centuries, but had never been able to find the world. Unlike almost all other races, the Inusannon had not inhabited the Citadel, nor did their technology draw upon or even use the Mass Relays. Indeed, some of the discoveries Saren had found in his own search for answers hinted at the possibility that the Inusannon were capable of a few of the strange powers the Reapers themselves had.

Shuddering at the memory of the scout ship being blasted from the sky, Benezia was cautious and ready for anything. The technology of the Inusannon was terrifyingly advanced, and she had reacted by sending out bands of geth to scout both the road and the disturbing countryside.

The Prime unit stomping next to her slowed, pausing to receive an update from one such band. "Lead scout/recon units have encountered an additional anomaly/nocarrier distortion. Eleven platforms destroyed. The gates are in extreme visual sensor range."

She nodded. "Finally. Have the first group move forward, along with the Beacon. Keep as much of the main body as close around it as possible, these...events seem to strike whenever we move too far

away."

The Prime nodded, then looked upwards. "Warning. Patrol/security escorts left in orbit report violation of solar boundary."

Benezia's eyes narrowed. "They didn't detect the blue-shift?"

The Prime unit spoke calmly. "FTL blue-shift muted by nebula M-X03, designated dark gaseous nebula. It occluded their primary approach."

Benezia scowled. "And the intruders?"

"One volus missile platform, cruiser strength. One salarian combat corvette. Two volus missile frigates. Both transmitting Creator control signals and emissions. One human frigate. Tentative scans indicate it is Shepard-Predator's vessel."

"Shepard." She hissed the name, a flicker of biotic energy erupting over her. "Move your units faster, Prime. Have the gunships lift off and section off a handful of defenders to act as rear-guard."

She was far too close to her goal to give up now. The Inusannon were, after all, quite dead, and Shepard would join them soon enough.

#### O-OSaBC-O

Although it was clear that time was of the essence, the hammering the small task force had just undergone wasn't something they could just shrug off. None of the ships was ready for landing – in fact, the two quarian frigates were so banged up they couldn't land at all, and they had lost half their marines to the battle.

Shepard wanted to get the Normandy moving, but instead was forced to wait for Chakwas to stabilize Adams, who had taken shrapnel to the chest and face, and for Tali to organize repair teams. In the interim, Liara was in the science lab, working on some kind of scout probe to send down to the surface while they patched their ships up.

Shepard turned to see Tali enter the CIC, wiping hydraulic oil off her suit with a rag. "Got an update for me, Acting Chief Engineer?" Tali ducked her head, then sighed.

Her report wasn't encouraging. "The repairs we made to the number two engine failed, and right now it is only operating at ten percent. The replacement engine, number three, is still out of calibration, and we're getting some sluggish manipulation from the loss of hydraulics. That last set of impacts shattered at least one of the ship's water reserve tanks, and...well, the bottom armor is just gone. There's no way to even patch it, we can't take any more shots."

Shepard nodded. "Anything else?"

Tali frowned behind her mask, pulling up a display of the Normandy ship-systems on the CIC display, which had developed a flicker after the fight. "Starboard hydraulics are only responding at fifty percent. The anterior heat radiation vanes were blown off in the fight, and the fuel lines to the starboard engines are leaking. We have people trying to patch damage with omni-gel, but we're about out of that, Commander."

Shepard exhaled. "In other words, she needs to be hauled into dry-dock. Dammit. Any chance you can at least throw together some kind of jury rig for the engines?"

Tali wrung her hands together. "I-I don't know enough about these systems to feel confident in attempting a jury-rig, Commander. And Adams..."

Shepard nodded tiredly, watching as a pair of marines hauled the dead out of the CIC and two more

wiped down the blood, even while Pressly and Friggs attempted to repair a shattered console. "It's okay, Tali, I'm sure you did your best. Make sure we can at least limp into orbit, then get ready to drop."

The little quarian nodded and dashed off, and Shepard sighed, turning to Jiong. "Anything else?"

The commissar shrugged, fiddling with his newly replaced neural mace, a replacement for the one lost on Virmire. "No, ma'am. Crew's tense but ready, although those were the first casualties in the actual naval crew to date. I've dispatched a probe with records of what we've found so far, it will hit superluminal in an hour and arrive in Council space in about seventeen hours."

She nodded. "Jiong, Senior Chief Vega's never had BDO or command training. Can I depend on you to head up the marine contingent?"

He nodded, albeit slowly. "Of course, Commander. Do we have a landing plan yet?"

Shepard shook her head. "No, I'm waiting for Liara's probes to give us feedback. I want to get down there and stop that bitch as soon as possible... but we're flying blind here, and it's not like the bitch can get away."

She made a frustrated motion. "The sensors aren't telling us dick, the atmosphere is ionized to shit and, well ... there's debris in orbit near those geth transports. Initial scans look like one or two of them were destroyed, so we want to check for any kind of GTS defenses. No point in rushing if it's going to end up with us shot out of the sky."

Jiong arched an eyebrow. "This site is at least, what, fifty thousand years old? What could *possibly* be functional after that span of time?"

Shepard smirked. "You forget about the Beacons? The Protheans obviously dumped all their eggs in this basket, so I can't take the chance of being surprised. Plan is for Liara to launch probes and once that's clear, to land. We'll be using the quarian corvette for that, the Normandy is ... a bit too shot up for me to risk. We'll load our forces into the MAKO and use the mass core to lob it into the corvette's landing bay, and hitch a ride down."

Jiong gave a careful nod. "Understood. I will endeavor to prepare the ground team for whatever we will encounter. I would suggest a heavy assault focus to our landing load-outs. If Benezia is able to find a fortified location, neutralizing her will be ... problematic."

Shepard nodded, turning to leave the CIC. "Get it done, Commissar. Pressly! I'm headed to the science lab, you have the conn." She waited until the broad-shouldered XO acknowledged her with a nod, before heading down the stairs to see what Liara had accomplished.

Traversing the stairs, she found the mess decks filled with marines, doing final checks on their gear. Vega made an apologetic face as she entered. "Sorry, ma'am. Fire in the cargo bay... Tali had us all clear out so they could fix the damage and work on the MAKO."

She waved her hand dismissively. "Not a problem, Senior Chief. For the drop evolution, Commissar Jiong will be acting BDO, you will be lead NCO. Any problems?"

He shook his head, dark Hispanic features tight with concern. "No, ma'am. Just hoping this shit goes better than the last drop."

She nodded, and then turned, entering the med bay. Adams was asleep on the starboard med couch, covered in machinery, and the rest of the bay was empty of wounded or Chakwas. Not wanting to disturb him, she quietly walked through the medical bay to the science lab, finding the door propped open by a crate of omnigel packets, and stepped inside.

Liara was in the far corner, one of Shepard's cigarettes dangling from her lips, her ship-suit undone a

bit due to the room's poor ventilation. Bits of a drone and the hulking form of the battered JOTUN mech that once had belonged to Admiral Kahoku took up most of the space in the room, arcane diagrams of sensor setups splashed across the screens of the research terminals.

Liara glanced up as Shepard entered, and taking a puff of the cigarette, handed it to her. "You look tired, Sara."

She snorted and took the cigarette, taking a long drag from it, closing her eyes and leaning against the wall. "That fight was a bit nerve-wracking. What's up, and why do you have Tali's pet project in here?"

Liara grimaced, daintily stepping across the room to adjust something on a panel of haptic electronics. "I seem to have a knack for sensor, probe, and spy electronics. I have been trying to make a drone that can handle the dangerous atmosphere and hostile environment on the surface of Ilos, while having enough room for data gathering equipment...and sample containers."

Shepard suppressed a grin as she took another puff from Liara's cigarette. "This is hardly time for archeological research..."

Liara gave a small smile, an almost smug expression crossing her face. "It was useful in making sure we did not all end up thralls on Eingana, no?"

"Touche, doctor."

Liara snorted and returned her attention to the circuitry before her, her omnitool glowing as she carefully laid pre-formed omnigel alterations to the board. "The JOTUN can make landfall independently, using the launch tubes you use to dispatch DACT. It has onboard shielding – it's weak, but Tali managed to get that repaired – and heavy armor, although most of this is spare armorplast sludge from the repairs on the MAKO."

Liara slid the board into the open front of the JOTUN. "I have stripped the probe assembly and wide-spectrum scan package from the last class 3 probe we have, as well as a multifunction omnitool package with some hastily written test scripts I wrote. It can also pull air, soil, water, and background radiation samples, with two optic and one infrared camera."

Shepard was impressed – Tali had obviously been tinkering on this for a while, and Liara's alterations were not small. "Can it still fight? A JOTUN would be pretty good backup..."

Liara shook her head. "The armor, as I said, is suspect. The TeV rating on the shields is somewhat low. More importantly, the weapons systems were destroyed on Edolus, and we do not have replacements. I have taken advantage of some left over mini missiles left over from the DACT suits, since our pilots are injured and on the Citadel right now, but those are mostly to bypass any doors or blockages in it's path."

Liara adjusted something else, and the JOTUN sparked and hummed, before lighting up.

"JOTUN Tactical Unit 5530-X online. Warning. Combat package replaced by custom installed intelligence analysis and sensor analysis package. This may void your warranty."

Shepard snorted back laughter. "Let's get this thing to the cargo bay and see what's down there..."

O-OSaBC-O

Benezia took a shuddering breath, letting the fire of her warp sword die, and the hulking form of the thirty foot tall defense construct she'd just hit with her strongest flare finally fell back, it's form slowing collapsing into wreck and ruin.

The penetration of the Inusannon / Prothean facility had been nightmarish, the altered Beacon only just stopping whatever was behind the defenses from simply wiping them out instantly. Thirty six Primes

were solely dedicated to countering the intrusion attempts by the facility to override the Beacon's altered software, and one Prime assigned to the task had been overwhelmed by some kind of parasitic software upload and literally shutdown on the spot, every software runtime on board corrupted.

She'd passed endless hallways of stasis pods, countless armories full of automated robots, armor, weapons, and battle vehicles, neatly sealed into stasis alongside the pods. There must have been at least a million Protheans here, awaiting a return to life.

The facility had darker areas, too, where caches of Inusannon war robots erupted back to life to assault her forces. The last, a giant construction of slabs of dark metal and blazing red energies, was too much for even a Colossus to handle, and Benezia had been forced to engage it herself.

Her hand clutched her side, where the thing's weapon, a curling whip of black wires and dark red electrical fire, had lashed through her side, cutting through Nazara's cyberware like it was nothing. Even now the wound wept purple blood and black fluids, not healing, and she'd been forced to slap omnigel over the puncture.

Huntress Ushan stood next to her, weary and features drawn after the harrowing battle. "We cannot take much more of this, matriarch. Why did we not bring more soldiers?"

Benezia sheathed her warp sword, wincing as the movement hurt her side. She gave the huntress at her side a sour glance. All of the planning had been conducted on Virmire long before, but the slightly glassy stare of Ushan was proof enough that indoctrination had begun its slow erosion of memory and cognizant function. With a patient smile that was more grimace than pleasant expression, Benezia spoke.

"We did not bring more because the Conduit was, from what little we know, highly experimental. There is no guarantee it was designed to transport an army – worst case, it may transport little more than the first strike team before failing. It has not been maintained in a long time and was a poor execution of Nazara's technology."

The matriarch sighed, and grimaced as she tightened her armor, letting the bands around her waist cut into her side and slow the blood flow. "Based on that, bringing more troops seemed pointless at the time. Not to mention we've stripped the geth bare in this assault...there can't be more than a few hundred thousand left not participating."

The huntress nodded sourly as she followed Benezia. "Oh...yes. I remember now. I am sorry , Matriarch. I only wish this ... path was simpler. That Nazara could merely ... will us to our destination."

Benezia shook her head. "From what he told Saren, he cannot jump other things, only himself, and something about the makeup of the Citadel prevents it from happening inside the Citadel itself. We must do this the hard way."

She paused, thinking. "To be sure, Ushan...I do not know what the exact limits of his power is. It is possible he might have been able to do such a thing ... but he is cautious, with good reason, not to use his great power until he must. No matter. We will prevail." She motioned with her hand to the Prime next to her. "We are almost there, Prime 302. Losses?"

"Benezia-prophet. Current forces are one hundred nineteen Prime/down-links, three hundred sixteen Seekers, two thousand nine hundred eleven Hunters, one thousand four hundred and six Trooper/Rocket subtypes, one thousand and six Trooper/Shock Assault subtypes, and two thousand nine hundred and two standard troopers. Assault forces are four hundred sixty five Destroyer composite creatures, eighty five Armatures, and sixty Colossus. Your own Triune Hunter force is forty seven warriors."

Benezia grimaced. She'd come with over two hundred armatures and colossi, five hundred Destroyers, and just over ten thousand geth soldiers. Now she was down to barely half that in heavy units and had lost almost two thousand.

The Destroyers, however, were proving their worth, only a few dozen having fallen. "Move the Destroyers to the vanguard, along with the assault units. Once we secure the Conduit, my Hunter Cadre will proceed through first along with the Destroyers and as many Primes as we can manage, followed by the heavies, and then the Hunters. Seekers and the rest can follow."

The Prime did not acknowledge her words, but the column began to shift. She frowned. "Any word from the force we left outside?"

The Prime turned to face her. "Negative. Six gunships are on wide area patrol, and ten more are on overflight. We left a force of roughly two hundred troopers and two Collosi with a single Prime. Unit reports no intrusions."

Benezia did not like it. If Shepard had pursued her here, she must know about the Conduit... mustn't she? The matriarch could not think of why Shepard had not immediately landed and pursued.

"...unless the silly human did not ... of course. We used the Beacon with the message from the Prothean High Council to make our decoy. She doesn't know what is down here." Benezia gave a cold smile, and turned back to the Prime. "Have your units attract attention and delay any pursuit rather than trying to stop it."

The Prime did not understand these orders, but Nazara had made it clear that Benezia spoke with his voice, so he obeyed.

#### O-OSaBC-O

The inside of the MAKO was a touch cramped, as Wrex was the last one in and shut the hatch behind him. Shepard and Liara sat up front, Shepard to drive and Liara to manage the sensor functions from the JOTUN, which was even now dropping through the atmosphere.

Tali, Wrex, and Garrus sat on the front bench, Telanya and the combined forces of most of Squad One and Two down both sides. Chakwas, dressed in a spare set of Marine armor and with a battle medic support pack at her feet, was smiling, while checking the condition of her Crossfire rifle. "I haven't had to go into battle with the troops in almost fifteen years."

Across from her Jiong merely nodded, his Commissariat armor freshly repainted, loading anti-biotic rounds into the Judgment pistol he carried. "Your assistance will be useful, Doctor. Given what we are headed into, and the damage to the Normandy and the quarian medbay, medevacs will be... difficult."

The MAKO gave a thud as it was launched from the Cargo Bay, Shepard feathering the mass core even as the quarians used a mass-effect lock beam to guide the heavy tank in. Shepard held her breath as the heavy tires slammed into the decking of the quarian ship some thirty seconds later, the entire suspension lurching back and forth as she used the core to slam them to a stop. She exhaled. "Captain Keenah, we are aboard."

The quarian captain's voice sounded tinny over the inferior comms system of the MAKO. "Understood. My own marines are ready to deploy. Their commander is Strike Leader Kal'Reegar vas Merya, and once we're down and unloaded we'll be able to coordinate our plans. I assume that you are getting your telemetry from your probe bot?"

Liara's face was set in a frown of concentration, delicate blue hands flying over the modified haptic display panel she and Tali had cobbled together in place of the MAKOs usual sensor suite. "The JOTUN is down...analyzing. Air is ... mostly dioxide nitrates, oxygen, argon. Breathable, but heavy

traces of sulfur dioxide."

A quartet of haptic screens erupted on the sloped windshield of the MAKO, two showing desolate plains of battered gray grass, clusters of lonely, broken ruins erupting from dark forests, and a long, empty road of black metal, edged with ugly looking looming sculptures and littered with dead geth and the occasional asari.

Liara frowned as she read the data incoming. "...it is safe to land, I think. I have found my mother's landing site, there ... are a great many anomalous data readings. The road seems to lead to a fortified city, here. I do not recognize the style, it is not Prothean...perhaps Inusannon?" She brought up a rough map of the planet, showing a roughly crescent shaped section of more intact ruins, girded by two-hundred foot tall walls and tucked into the knee of a nearby semi-active volcano. "I'm picking up bits of geth transmissions and ... the geth have got gunships out."

Shepard nodded. "Any chance of landing directly in the city?"

Liara moved the JOTUN forward, bringing additional sensors online. "Unsure. There are two downed geth ships about eight miles from the city, both look to have been engaged by GTS fire of some kind...although whatever hit those ships must have been very powerful, as barely ten percent of the mass of the ships seems to be wreckage. There is some form of energy field over the city as well."

The JOTUN launched a set of long range mini-missiles converted to probes, the small weapons arcing high into the sky. Liara squinted at the display and then tapped rapidly on the keyboard. "I believe...my mother has already entered the city. The main gates have been blown open...and there is some sort of geth force guarding them."

Shepard frowned. "Numbers?"

Liara shook her head and glanced up. "Several hundred."

Shepard sighed. "Shit. Drop pod landing is out, we'd be sitting ducks. And they'd just blast the MAKO out of the sky." She keyed the comms. "Captain, this is Shepard. Can the corvette operate in atmosphere?"

Captain Keenah's voice sounded calm. "For the most part. We're even equipped to land, actually. STG thinks of everything, I guess. Problem is we're not that maneuverable...it's not a gunship. Marr's already sent his own combat probes down to the surface, but against ten geth gunships, things will get ugly quick."

Shepard nodded. "Take us down, then, I guess towards where the JOTUN is now. We'll have to hope we can catch up to her, getting too close to the city would have those gunships all over us."

Shepard waited as the quarian ship began descending, the vibration of the hull as it passed through the thick atmosphere making everything vibrate and shake. Garrus adjusted his eyepiece, calibrating it carefully with his sniper rifle, while Tali fiddled with the omnishield generator on her arm. Wrex was loading a hi-ex ammo block into his shotgun, murmuring something with a cadence under his breath, while Vega sat calmly, hands on his knees, meditating.

The ship cleared the atmosphere, Liara still scanning from her JOTUN. "Strange. There's some form of energy build up coming from the city, Shepard."

Shepard frowned. "It is a weapon system? Any targeting lasers or radar?"

Liara shook her head. "No...I'm not – " She cut off her words as the ship gave a violent tremor and wrenched suddenly in midair. The dim sounds of yelling quarians and alarms could be heard outside the MAKO.

Shepard slammed the comms. "Captain Keenah, what's happening?"

The quarian captain sounded upset and afraid. "I have no idea, Commander. The ship is caught in...in some kind of energy vortex beam. The core is just dead and we're being...moved somehow. We're locked on a direct path to the edge of the city near the volcano, and there's ground defense cannons of some kind tracking us. I can't engage engines and our kinetic barriers are not responding."

Shepard glanced at Liara. "Ideas would be handy right now..."

Liara looked at her helplessly. "I... I do not understand what is happening either, Sara. We were careful not to get too close to the city..." She frowned, tapping a control. "Goddess. The geth have detected my JOTUN probe and are attacking it."

Shepard cursed, and then the voice of the quarian captain sounded again. "...energy field over the city just dropped in one quadrant, and we're...being guided to what looks like some kind of landing field inside the city. There's some ships parked there already ... don't recognize any of them, but they don't look geth. Or asari. What do we do when we touch down?"

Shepard shook her head. "The MAKO will pull out first, then your marines form a defensive perimeter around the ship, and we try to figure out what the fuck is going on." She clicked off, and rubbed her temples.

"So much for getting down to the surface being easy."

O-OSaBC-O

The Rothuam landed safely, and the moment it did so, bands of orange energy wrapped around the ship, locking it in place. Cautiously, the cargo bay doors opened, and Shepard pulled the MAKO out, Liara starting a full scan as she did so.

"Goddess...these are Inusannon ships, Sara. Perfectly preserved!" The field was full of slender, dark shapes, each one gleaming a wet black, studded here and there with lenses and long streaks of faintly glowing green luminance. Swept back and narrow, they looked deadly even sitting in an open air landing field.

Shepard grimaced. "Maybe we can jury rig one to get the shit out of here, but for now we have to find Benezia. Any exits?"

Liara scanned, frowning. "There is a large set of doors that can accommodate the MAKO to the north, heading towards the city center. And a number of smaller doors but I have no way of knowing what is behind them..."

Shepard nodded, then nearly screamed as the MAKO began moving under its own power. "What the fuck!?"

She swung the steering wheel around, and triggered the brakes, but the tank continued heading towards one of the walls at a steady pace. "Something has taken over the MAKO, everyone out!"

Liara held up a hand. "No! Something is doing this...we need to figure out what it wants, Sara. We have not been attacked, but we know my mother's forces were. What if there is someone living here?"

Shepard frowned. "Liara, there's nothing in front of us but a goddamned wall!" Yet even as she spoke, the wall seemed to shimmer, and then buckled, swinging back to reveal a wide corridor, lined with gray stone and with a huge vaulted ceiling.

Liara fixed her with a look, and Shepard folded her arms. "Fine. Let's be kidnapped by the alien force, and when we end up being dissected in some lab, I'm blaming you, Doctor."

Liara rolled her eyes. The MAKO rolled along, even as Shepard touched the comms. "Captain Keenah, the same force that has commandeered your vessel seems to be directing the MAKO."

The quarian's voice was a touch worried. "I can see that. Your MAKO is wrapped in the same kind of energy my ship is in, I don't think you could bail out even if you tried. I've got my marines spreading out. So far, nothing has ... bothered us, but the smaller doors leading out of here are all locked, and none of our hacks to get past have worked. I've got a squad headed to the big double doors, I'll keep you updated."

Shepard nodded, even as the MAKO made a smooth turn to the right and headed down another hallway. Garrus piped up from the back. "Geez, Sheep. Even alien overlords remote controlling this brick drive better than you do. You should take tips."

"Laugh it up, Chicken. Everyone stay sharp and get ready for a fight, we have no fucking clue what's doing this."

The MAKO made several more turns, before passing through a huge set of double doors into a wide open space, almost a hundred feet across and open to the sky. Towering statues of figures with tentacled faces and long fingers in concealing robes framed the space. The ruins of several low outbuildings cluttered the area, but in the middle of the area was a broad plaza of black stone, with a single silvery half-arch erupting from it's middle, splitting in midair to form a asymmetrical Y shape.

From the arms of the Y fell a curtain of silvery-glowing liquid, back-lit from somewhere. The MAKO slewed to a stop in front of the fountain, and the power cut off. Shepard grunted. "Looks like this is the end of the line, boys and girls." She popped the hatch, rolling out smoothly and coming up with her ODIN in the ready position, Liara behind her and to the right, one hand alight in biotic blue, the other holding her pistol.

Marines spilled out the back hatch, along with Wrex, Tali, and Telanya, even as Shepard slowly approached the fountain. She looked around, but saw and heard nothing.

"Well, that's great. It brought us to a goddamned shower stall." Shepard's voice was frustrated.

"Not at all, human."

The voice was mellifluous and loud, echoing from all directions, and the entire force pulled their weapons. Liara's hand caught at Shepard's shoulder. "Look!"

The falling water from the sculpture had taken on a brighter glow, deforming in midair to form a shape. It was only vaguely humanoid, standing on three ropy legs of water, tapering to a narrow torso and wide shoulders. Thin, gangly arms hung to either side, and the head was a rough ball, with long tentacles trailing nearly to the ground from it.

Three searingly bright pin-pricks of light swam inside the head-shape, seemingly fixed on Shepard. "Welcome to Atharnaon, or as the Sethani called it, Ilos."

Shepard let her weapon fall. "You brought us here. Who...what are you?"

Liara gazed at it in wonder. "And who are Sethani?"

The thing bowed, a strange, stiff folding at the middle. "I am ... mm...the best word in your language would be 'Vigil', I think. I am an artificial intelligence of the Eternal Empire of the Holy Inusannon. The Sethani were those who you call Protheans."

Shepard frowned, and Tali's eyes narrowed. "An AI isn't safe, Commander."

The things voice developed a sneering quality. "Simply because your primitive methods backfired on you, quarian, is no reason to believe your betters did not succeed where you spectacularly failed. I have

been stable longer than your pathetic culture has known about fire."

Shepard winced, the thing was touchy. "Tali, hush. And as for you, don't insult my crew."

"Your 'crew' should fall silent, then, Commander Shepard. I brought you here for a reason, and there is little time."

Shepard folded her arms and put her weight back on one leg. "So, what's going on?"

The strange AI spread its arms, the 'eyes' brightening. "I'm not sure you would even understand the long version, and given that things are going to become quite energetic soon, I'll be ... brief. You are here to stop Lady Benezia of Thessia. I was placed here by the Inusannon to aid those who oppose the Reapers."

Shepard nodded. "I understand that much."

The thing made a shivering motion. "No, I'm afraid you don't. Benezia is corrupted by the Reapers, and this planet has fail-safes to prevent it from falling into Reaper hands. In a short amount of time, the entire system will go into nova, Commander. And unless you move quickly, Benezia will still be able to escape, and the Reapers will be feasting on your tiny little civilizations by nightfall."

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## Chapter 117: Chapter 108 : Ilos, Cresendo

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*A/N: My betas did not get a chance to work with this chapter – I'm actually going to be pretty tied up until the weekend, but I wanted to get this out.*

*I'm am not trying to .. trivialize Ilos, but the entire infodump feel of it was irritating. Saren was always one step ahead of you, no matter what, and then you got to listen to a boring, quiet VI ramble on, and then ... what?*

*Why didn't Ilos ever figure into anything else? Why use the crazy stupid beam in ME3 if you could use the Conduit and not have to play Dodge-The-Beam-of-Glowy-Death?*

*Drama?*

*My rewrite of Ilos may not be to everyone's taste. But I will argue that Ilos was ultimately pointless. A throwaway one night stand, an entire mysterious setting wasted, and plot holes you could drive a tank through, topped off with shitty mechanics. I will not even dignify the stupid 'race to teh conduitz' scene as being worth referencing.*

*There's a very irritating plot hole of minute size and importance that I close in this chapter, and I'm curious to see if anyone picks up on it. If you do, and you aren't Progman, I'll see about writing up a quick one-shot about any character or OC you are interested in.*

*There are two ways the final fight can play out. I'm still deciding which of the two I should go with : emotionally wrenching awesome badassery, or full out throwdown deathmatch of ultimate destiny. Without any more details than that, what do you guys think?*

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"Welcome to the Citadel! I am AVINA, a virtual intelligence designed to assist you in your stay on the Citadel. Please feel free to inquire about any services or assistance you may need."

The krogan glanced at the pink-tinted VI outlay in amusement, narrowed eyes flicking back and forth across the long line of C-SEC customs agents that barred the way from the Citadel Docks into the

Wards proper. The three krogan behind him, wearing heavy armor, glanced around uncertainly as well, gripping the butts of shotguns with a nervous energy.

Okeer stretched languidly, the ancient muscles of his form bunching under the thin, elegant robes he wore. He had long ago dismissed the primitive trappings of mere armor as de rigor wear when mingling with non-krogan. While he was well known, his features were very plain for krogan, and most identified him by his distinctive bronze armor. Shorn of it, he found non-krogan less threatened. His polite demeanor and rich baritone put them further at ease, when he chose to do so.

Weak minded fools.

Besides, he found the robes quite comfortable. The skin-tight experimental kinetic barrier suit he wore under them was more than a match for bulky armor, and Okeer was a firm believer in the old krogan adage that the best way to thwart an enemy's preparations was to fool their perceptions.

He waited a few more minutes, but no C-SEC special agents arrived to arrest him, and nothing appeared amiss. Satisfied that this was no trap, he turned to his retinue, and spoke calmly. "Remain aboard the vessel. I do not trust Benezia, and her actions in recent days speak poorly of her mental stability. The prize she is offering is vast, but until I confirm it exists, this may be some form of trap."

The lead krogan nodded. "Of course, Warlord-Father. And if it is not a trap?"

Okeer smiled. "Then you may proceed as we were instructed. C-SEC is unlikely to be able to respond to military-grade assault weapons. I have six ships ready for this little activity, you should have sufficient soldiers to proceed with no difficulty. As a distraction, civilian casualties are encouraged. They're just aliens, after all."

The three gave stiff bows, and Okeer turned away. He walked confidently through the crowds of aliens and to the nearest customs inspector, a tired looking asari with faded looking facial markings who examined his papers minutely before motioning him through the scanners.

His papers – he had paid the Shifter a small fortune for them – were the highest class of forgeries, with fake records inserted even in C-SEC's own computer systems. They identified him as Thax Danar, an associate of the powerful krogan merchant Thax Vorak, here to do business with turian survival gear designers. His permit for a single class-2 self-defense weapon was signed by the Executor. The asari customs agent frowned, but waved him through and examined his pistol for several seconds before handing it to him. "You're cleared for the Wards and the Presidium, krogan, but keep your weapon holstered or you will regret it. The Citadel is no place for aggression."

Okeer only smiled wider, taking the weapon and tucking it away. "I thank you, Officer, but I assure you – I am here for business, not mayhem. Not all of my people are the mindless brutes of years gone by and bad haptic programming. May I inquire the directions to the nearest air-car stand?"

Taken aback by his demeanor, the asari's features softened. "Of course. Down the main passage marked PRIMARY, and take the fourth exit to your right."

With a jaunty nod, Okeer set off. He had not walked the halls of the Citadel in over a thousand years, and was unsurprised that it had changed greatly in that time. The crowds parted before him – most did not like getting too close to any krogan – but were otherwise only wary, a sharp improvement from his last visit.

Finding the air-car stand, Okeer paid the fee, and got into the tiny vehicle, grunting in irritation as the seats squished around him and the flimsy thing took off at a high rate of speed. Waiting until he was well away from C-SEC, he finally triggered his omnitool.

"I am aboard and ... undetected."

The voice that answered was almost monotone in its inflection. Clearly asari, the words had a touch of a slur to them, as if the speaker was drugged. "Good. The Lady has arranged a demonstration of what she offers in the offices at 500 Democratica Tower. We will await you there."

It took another ten minutes for him to arrive, the car disgorging him and leaving him wishing for a tomkah once more. Brushing his robes down and fixing a pleasant smile upon his ancient, fearsome features, Okeer cautiously studied his surroundings.

The soft opulence of the Presidium – soaring white walls of windows, arching bridges, fountains and a false digital sky – disgusted him. With a slight snarl of distaste, he moved towards the double doors in front of him, the small building nestled against an overhang of a towering stack of offices.

The room he entered was sterile white, with no furnishings and blank, steel-framed white lights. A single asari stood there, dressed in a nondescript jumpsuit, and she bowed unsteadily as he entered. "Be welcome, Warlord Okeer. Benezia is not here yet, but will be ... very soon."

Okeer's combat senses, always wary, spiked in caution. Something was very wrong with this asari, and he disliked any form of mystery as a rule. "I see. And the shipment she spoke of? I would hate to travel this vast distance to be disappointed at such a late hour."

The asari gestured to a single, heavy-framed door of steel to the right. "You may view it yourself."

Okeer nodded, stepping towards the portal, the heavy doors opening as he approached. The room beyond was as blank as the first, but the far wall was pierced by a strongly reinforced window. Stepping up to it, he saw a professional looking genetics lab, equipment neatly racked against the walls, and a single surgical table.

The table contained a single krogan, its skin discolored in many places, with small mutations clearly visible. Okeer found his mouth dry as he took in the two forms standing in the lab behind the table.

Black robes covered all traces of their features, but they stood tall, nearly as tall as he did. Strange tools were visible in a black leather belt each wore at the waist, and their hoods were drawn down, obscuring faces. The voice that spoke was a whispery echo.

"Your requested payment, Dr. Okeer. A single krogan, with the genetic alterations you wished, and a few of our own devising. This is not a complete solution, further research on your part will be required ... but we are interested in what you will do with it."

Okeer nodded, excitement racing through his hearts. "And you have verification of this grandiose claim, of course?"

One of the hooded figures merely tapped a haptic screen in the room, and his own omnitool beeped, displaying test data and sample analysis layouts. It only took Okeer's brilliant mind a few seconds to put the pieces of what he was seeing together.

"...yes. A mere cure for the genophage would be useless, given the other alteration the salarians created. Such clever, paranoid creatures, to build in such nasty little DNA traps. This is ... a more elegant execution of the same concept." His hard eyes took in the robed figures. "And for such a low price, how could I refuse?"

The asari entered the room behind him, her features still utterly blank, her eyes glassy. "The Matriarch will be pleased. Your payment – and the subject – will be transferred to your accounts once the attack begins."

Okeer nodded thoughtfully. Benezia was planning something, something big, and needed muscles on the Citadel to pull it off. A distraction attack, on the Docks, and in the Wards, with the stated goal of producing as many casualties as possible. They were not even to approach the Presidium, and if

possible, were to all die fighting.

His clan was still few in number, and on such short notice he'd only been able to put together a fairly modest strike force – some eighty krogan. Okeer was no novice when it came to such strikes, however, and each one of his krogan was a veteran of more than five hundred years of combat, equipped in the best gear money could buy. They would serve.

Okeer was no fool – one did not survive to be the single oldest living being in creation through haste or greed. He knew full well Benezia had designs for a conflict of some sort. After all, whatever experiments she was conducting on the krogan he had given her were unlikely to be anything but assault troops. Krogan were poorly suited to anything else.

That being said, he doubted she could actually conquer the Citadel. Her geth fleets were formidable, and the black dreadnaught powerful, but they could not fight the entire Citadel military structure. Even now, the assault on Irune had been broken, geth fleeing in panic from the bared might of some fifteen turian dreadnaughts.

No, Benezia wanted chaos, and she had offered him a prize he could not ignore for the cost of a unit of his men, storming the Citadel and causing a disruption. He could not see how her plans required such, and had no idea how whatever she planned would come to fruition – Saren's death had robbed her of both a cunning general and, quite clearly, her emotional stability. Her plans were likely to fail, and violently. He would be well served to not get caught up in the chaos of such an event.

Then again ... given he had no clue where her final assault would land, the Citadel was ironically the safest location for him. His krogan assault unit was, of course, doomed to be overwhelmed in short order. Eighty krogan could not overwhelm thousands of soldiers.

High-explosive charges in a few buildings, however, and a particularly nasty data virus he'd gotten from some outcast quarians ... he could cause chaos, that much was certain.

Sacrificing them for even a chance at what Benezia was potentially offering would have been a deal too good to pass up. He had been attempting to make contact with the Collectors and find some way to utilize their skills for centuries, and now ...

Okeer deactivated his omnitool. "I believe we have a mutually beneficial agreement, then. I might as well stay and observe the amusements."

The asari's eyes flickered with some emotion, but she nodded and departed. Triggering his omnitool, he spoke into it quietly. "The agreement stands. Begin moving out immediately, but confine your activities to the Wards, as agreed."

With that, he smiled, displaying even, broad teeth, and headed back outside. He'd find a good hotel, order up some asari ice-wine, and review his latest clone findings. Even if Benezia didn't follow through on her promises, the idea the two Collectors had just given him was worth the price.

And really, he'd have paid good money to watch these soft innocents on the Citadel burn.

O-OSaBC-O

Shepard managed to not scream in frustration at the AI's words. "Alright, let's assume the primate doesn't quite get what's going down here, and back up a bit. I need answers."

The Inusannon AI merely made an agreeable noise. "And I have them, but time is short. Before I start to try to explain, you will want to instruct your ships to evacuate the system. Preferably at top speed."

Shepard stared at the thing. "Are you out of your goddamned mind? You just said the system is going to fucking nova and you want me to send my ride out of here without me on it?"

Vigil chuckled. "I am not, I assure you, rampant or insane. The explanation will take time, however, and quite frankly your ships will need it to escape. Short version, there is a way out of here that you and your troops on the ground will be taking. Your ships cannot use this method. And if you were to return to your vessels, you would never be able to catch and stop Benezia."

Shepard glared at the thing for a long moment, before slapping her omni. "Joker, ship status of propulsion – how long would it take to clear the system?"

The pilot's voice was wary – "I dunno, twenty or thirty minutes? Depends on if I'm doing the pickup or the quarians..."

Shepard nodded. "Go ahead and get out of the system, Joker. I've got another way off world. Let Marr and the quarian frigates know as well. We have problems down here and you'll need to get clear fast – I've been told the sun is going to go nova pretty soon."

"...what?!"

She smirked. "Move, Flight Lieutenant, that is a direct order. Shepard out." She clicked off, and huffed. "You still have Captain Keenah's ship trapped."

Vigil made a motion. "I have begin accelerating his ship away from the landing area. The timing will be somewhat tight, but I have planned this to a nicety. An advantage that comes from having tens of thousands of years to get it right."

Garrus glanced around. "Not to interrupt or be rude but, ah ... what is going on? I seem to remember the words 'nova' and 'not a lot of time'..."

Vigil observed Garrus briefly before returning it's gaze to Shepard. "To prevent confusing you, I will try and keep this ... simple. I am a product of the mighty Inusannon. We once ruled this galaxy and several others, connected through a series of powerful jump-gates, not based on clunky mass-effect technology you use. My creators were paranoid, much like their Tho'ian allies, and they felt the Citadel and all it's works were nothing more than a trap."

Shepard raised an eyebrow. "A trap?"

Vigil gave a rather human nod. "Yes. Those which you call Reapers ... created the Citadel, and the mass relays. They know that races that find them will use them, and the technology associated with them. Eventually, all relays lead to the Citadel, and as a natural fortress and center of trade, it is almost always chosen as a center of government."

Shepard remembered the words of Nazara and nodded slowly. "Alright, but what does that have to do with Benezia?"

Vigil continued. "My creators did not use the Citadel. For now, that is all you need to know. What is important is what is happening now."

Vigil's voice fell. "The Inusannon were destroyed by the Reapers, along with their Tho'ian allies. Our technology, while advanced, was still not enough to counter the Reapers numbers. We destroyed many, but eventually the tide was too much."

"The Tho'ian main fleet and our own main fleet were destroyed at Shar – that which you call Eingana. At the same time, a brilliant researcher discovered ... a weapon. A device that would, he claimed, destroy the power the Reapers drew upon. We did not have time to build it, but we hastily built this world, with many protections against Reapers and their servants, and hid the designs here, along with all we knew." He paused. "And then they fell. I was left, here, alone, to warn those who followed."

Vigil looked towards the sky. "Eventually the Sethani – those you call Protheans – arrived. They

discovered what we left. They heeded our words and prepared, to some degree. But they were ... less skilled than we, and they could not adapt our technology. Worse, unlike us, they used the Citadel, and the Reaper arrival tore out the core of their empire. They fell. A few survived, hiding here, and plotted revenge."

Shepard shook her head. "None of that makes sense to me, Mr. AI, but okay. What **are** the Reapers? Why are they here? What is this shit about the Citadel? Where is this weapon? And what is the Conduit?"

Vigil's tentacles curled. "...very well. Reapers are ... robots. Bio-mechanical robots built by reducing entire intelligent races to a type of bio-mechanical paste and melding it with a gestalt intelligence. They invade this galaxy every fifty thousand to sixty thousand years, obliterate all space-faring or near space-faring societies as well as any races with certain abilities in high-order math, and use the remains of the races to build more of themselves. They have been at this for at least three million years, possibly as long as over a hundred million years."

Shepard's jaw dropped, but Vigil continued. "Based on limited communications we have intercepted during the last cycle, they claim to be protecting life from something even worse than them, and may not be confined to this galaxy." Vigil paused. "They created the mass relays, and the Citadel. They expect space faring races to use both, to explore the galaxy. When they are ready to strike, they have a dark relay built into the Citadel. Hundreds of Reapers arrive, while the Citadel kills everything onboard, and shuts down the mass relay network entirely."

Garrus's mandibles flicked. "Decapitating the leadership and scattering fleets. Letting them pick and chose where to overwhelm."

Vigil pulsed. "Exactly. The Citadel is a gigantic trap. The Keepers aboard the Citadel are Reaper tools, monitoring galactic progress. When the time is right, the Keepers activate this dark relay, and the Reapers arrive." Vigil paused. "Combat with them is very nearly impossible. Not only is their technology very advanced, but they can alter the very laws of physics and time at whim."

Liana frowned. "That cannot be possible..."

Vigil gave a shifting motion, making the liquid substance ripple fiercely. "It is. They were able to turn aside the combined power of the Inusannon and the Tho'ians using this power, although they seemed reluctant to use it. From what little we know, the Reapers are building up to some grand action, but my masters were not able to determine what."

Shepard ran her hands against her jaw. "What about the weapon and the Conduit?"

Vigil made a jerky motion with it's shoulders. "The weapon was not something I was involved with. The Inusannon failed to build it, but put details regarding it ... elsewhere. I know little aside from the fact that the Inusannon felt the weapon was ... risky. Later, when I worked with those you call the Protheans, they mentioned it but were again unable to build it before the Reaper strike. What measures they took involving it are beyond my knowledge."

Shepard frowned. "Then Benezia isn't here for some weapon...but the Conduit."

Vigil made a noise of agreement. "The Inusannon and Tho'ian did not utilize the Citadel. It was resistant to Tho'ian growth, while Inusannon radiation would have been difficult to ... sustain. What matters is that they ignored it entirely, seeing it as a trap. I believe a race prior to them warned them not to trust the mass relays or the Citadel, but I was not informed of ... details. Without such, the Inusannon could not leave any hard facts as to the danger of the relays or the Citadel, and by the time those you call Protheans discovered Ilos and myself, their entire government was ensconced within it, and their own technology tightly tied to the mass relays."

Vigil moved, arms gesturing. "The Reapers invasion was horrific, and the Protheans were ... overwhelmed. But they had always kept a very few of their kind here once they discovered it. The defenses here were the strongest the Inusannon could devise, and some of the weapons were from even older races than they. As long as no trace of it's location was ever recorded, Ilos was safe. The Protheans hacked their own Beacon system to send a few of their kind into hiding, then to recall them back here after the Reapers finished their grim harvest and returned to wherever they hail from."

Shepard nodded, and Vigil continued. "The Protheans were able to study the aftermath, and found the Citadel tightly sealed. It would not open for another twenty thousand years, to prevent, I suppose, any rapidly rising races from gaining too much knowledge or power. The Protheans planned to recreate their empire, but first they had to shut down the Citadel. They built a miniature mass relay and sent the bulk of their people aboard to shut it down, to sabotage the Keepers. That is the Conduit."

Vigil gestured to the center of the city. "Only a few hundred Protheans answered the calls to return to Ilos, and most of them did not return from the Citadel strike. But whatever they did was a success. They expected the AI they planted here, a primitive device, to resurrect their stasis bound soldiers here when the Citadel reopened. That did not occur, for reasons I am still unclear on. The stasis units failed and the AI entered rampancy and collapsed into insanity."

Tali only snorted, and Shepard waved a hand absently. "Great history lesson, but I need to know about why Benezia is here. This mini-relay is connected to the Citadel?"

Vigil nodded. "And Benezia is assaulting the area it is in. Her plans are clear. She has an army of what your kind seem to call geth. Robotic war forms. My sensors are badly degraded, but even I have been able to monitor galactic comms with ease. Your races fleets are far from the Citadel, fighting these geth, and they are not expecting trouble. She will storm aboard the Citadel with this army of geth, and reactivate the dark relay to summon the Reapers. Cut off and already under attack, your people will fall in a matter of days."

Shepard cursed. "We can't stop a goddamned army of geth with the handful of soldiers I brought! Can't you?"

Vigil fixed it's three eyes on her. "I have been attempting to do so. The defenses of this place are strong, but old. Benezia is stronger than I expected, and she has somehow corrupted a Prothean Beacon – that means the majority of the Prothean defenses do not see her as a threat and I cannot use anything but whatever remains of the old Inusannon devices here. I have blocked her progress as fully as I can, but she will break through in short order. This is why I have brought you here."

Shepard tilted her head. "Why?"

Vigil straightened. "As I said, the Inusannon could not afford this world to fall into the hands of the Reapers. My masters did not explain why, and while I have .. theories, it is pointless to speculate. They have a device at the center of this world that, upon the detection of Reaper signatures or indoctrinated vassals, begins an energy build up and will eventually send the star into nova. This process takes time to complete, however."

It paused again. "By my estimation, at least a fourth of her force will be able to transit through in that time. The rest, however, would be destroyed. Even so, if the Citadel does not know the assault is coming, even that number would mostly likely doom your galaxy. Someone must get through ahead of her, warn the Citadel, and stop her."

Liana glanced around. "And what of .. all of this? There is so much history and science here, so much we could learn. Is there no way you can stop this process?"

Vigil gave her a stern look. "I could, little scientist. I will not. If she is allowed to transit her entire

force, nothing you could do could stop her. And the secrets here ... are best left undiscovered. The science of my people did not aid the Protheans, and it will not aid you. Your minds are too ... narrow, and in any event you have no time to utilize what is here."

Vigil glowed. "Instead, my forces will hold her off as long possible, and I will allow you to go through the Conduit first. You can alert the Citadel to prepare, and to seal itself. If you can stop and kill Benezia, the Reaper will have no chance to summon it's dark kin and can be overwhelmed."

Shepard sighed. "No one is going to believe this shit until it's too late."

Vigil's form shimmered, the liquid losing it's shape, condensing into a sphere of wobbly liquid silver that hovered in mid-air. "You will have to try. I will accompany you – I have no intention of being blown into component atoms, and I can ... assist ... in other ways, as well as verifying your story." The sphere pulsed with a soft silvery aura as Vigil spoke.

Wrex grunted. "Shepard. We can't beat that many geth, but if we could get there ahead of her and rally the Citadel Guards, they could hold her off long enough for us to kill the bitch."

Shepard exhaled. "I don't see we have much choice, seeing as our ride is up and gone." She glanced at Vigil. "How do we do this?"

Vigil pulsed again, moving to hover over Shepard's shoulder. "I can transport your soldiers, both here and in the docking area, to the Conduit facility. The transit should be safe. You will not have much time to set up a defense, but you will have a chance to at least alert your Citadel officials. With any luck, Benezia will not go through immediately and will be caught by the blast, but ... if not, stopping her is your problem."

Shepard nodded. "...fine."

Vigil made a chiming sound. "...your landing craft is clearing the atmosphere, and I am transporting your soldiers now. We must hurry. Benezia is breaking through the outer defenses even now, and these annoying geth creatures are starting to crack my own hardlines." Vigil paused. "You may want to contact the quarian soldiers you brought with you, they are ... somewhat upset that their ship is gone and they have been teleported to a strange area."

Shepard rolled her eyes. "Subtle." She then hit her omnitool. "Strike Leader Kal'Reegar, come in."

O-OSaBC-O

Prime 302 turned to face Benezia. "The portal remains sealed, Benezia-Prophet. We cannot breach it. The strongest blasts from our weapons merely dissipate over it's surface."

She only nodded, stepping forward. "Move the host back." Closing her eyes, she reached deep within her core, pulling her energies through her points of focus.

The Triune cultists watched in awe as their mistress began to glow, her lips whispering the focusing ritual names of the phases of the moon. She lifted her hands, the fine sleeves of her battle robe slipping down, slender hands glowing with light.

Benezia's eyes snapped open, glowing solid white, and the area around her pulsed with energy, a shockwave flying from her form as a single blast of iridescent blue-white light erupted from her hands, slamming into the sealed doorway blocking their path.

The ground shook, as Benezia focused, gritting her teeth and bearing down with her will, forcing the gravity of the planet to buckle around her singularity, focusing all her energy into a single point on the door. There was a thunderclap of sound as air rushed outwards, and the ground shuddered. Geth and asari alike staggered and with a horrible rending sound, the huge portal tore asunder, gouts of displaced

earth and long shards of over-stressed metal flying in all directions.

One of the massive gates was flung to the ground, landing with a tremendous hollow bang that left the asari hearing ringing, the other hung loosely one badly warped hinges, glowing a dull red. Benezia slumped to her knees, panting, and then gave a shaky exhalation. "It is done."

Beyond, the plaza was a circular arena of pure white stone and silvery metal, bracketed by flowing beams of silver. In the center was a small mass relay, gleaming as if new made.

Benezia's eyes widened as she saw that the relay was active. Marching through it was a small group of blurred figures, but at the back ...

The hated figure of Commander Shepard stood next to her own daughter, Liara. The impudent human waved cheerily and the two leapt backwards into the light of the relay.

Benezia's mouth fell open, before her eyes narrowed in absolute fury. A moment later a sniper's bullet slammed into her barriers, strong enough to knock her to her behind. The figure of a single turian bolted from cover near the relay, falling into it's light as well.

Benezia cursed, scrambling to her feet. "MOVE! Get in there!" With a snarl, she drew her sword and raced forward, unsurprised when the entire plaza erupted into more figures of dark metal and red electrical forms, assaulting her units.

#### O-OSaBC-O

The travel through the relay was like nothing Shepard could compare, a feeling of intense cold and speed, followed by a horrific burst of pain and the slamming sensation of her body tumbling end over end against the plaza decking in the Presidium.

With a groan, she sat up. The quarian soldiers were still forming up, one or two laying on the ground unresponsive, with quarian medics working on them. Her own team was on the ground, shaking off the effects of the trip. Shepard glanced over to make sure Liara was okay, even as a small group of C-SEC officers approached.

The leader, a turian with red face paint, had one hand on his pistol. "What the spirits is going on here? How did you get –" his words choked off as Shepard got to her feet and her features became clear.

"Officer, we need to get to the person in charge of internal Citadel defense...right fucking now. This goddamned sculpture is a mass relay, and in a few minutes an army of geth is going to come flying out of it just like we did."

The turian looked baffled, the salarian next to him gobsmacked. She cursed, turning to Jiong. "Get the quarians and our marines into a dug in position, preferably not right next to this goddamned thing, and set up some mines or something."

Garrus came through the relay a second later, smoke trailing from his armor. "Shit." He groaned and held his head, one hand still holding his sniper rifle. "Didn't work, Sheep. Her barrier stopped it."

Shepard only nodded, and turned back to the C-SEC officers. "Well?"

The lead turian snapped his mandibles. "Ma'am, I'm going to have to ask your ... um, forces to stand down...We need someone to clear all of this up and it's the middle of the night-cycle right now..."

The globular form of Vigil soared higher, glowing softly. "Commander, Benezia's assault grows closer. Either motivate these primitives to aid you or get clear of the plaza before you are swamped with geth."

Shepard gave the thing a glare, but nodded sourly. She glanced around, noticing the lack of pedestrians and the lower volume of air-cars in the traffic lanes. She turned back to the Turian. "Don't give a shit.

Your CO, now. Get him on the goddamned line! Spectre authority."

The turian paused before tapping his omni. "E-Executor...I have Spectre Shepard asking for you."

The tired voice of Palin sounded. "Emrki, if this is some kind of sirefucking, talon-bent joke, I am going to – "

Shepard interrupted. "Executor Palin, I assure you, it's no joke. I don't have time to explain, but Benezia is going to be invading the Citadel the same way I got here in less than ten minutes, and if we don't stop her everything is completely, utterly fucked."

O-OSaBC-O

Benezia wondered exactly what sort of fixation the Inusannon had on lethal statuary.

The dark forces that had been harrowing her assault group had clearly decided to stop swimming in the shallows. Even as the geth put down the last of the smaller Insusannon robots, their dark metal corpses littering the plaza, a crack of thunder shook the entire complex. With a ponderous roar, the giant carved statue of an Inusannon at the very back of the plaza that held the Conduit began to move, heavy black metal limbs crackling with red lightning as it did so.

An almost smug voice from somewhere sounded. "Corrupted creature of the Reapers. You shall not pass."

Somewhere in the back of Benezia's mind, perhaps some segment not overrun by Nazara, she could hear Saren's voice chuckle wryly. *And now a boss fight.*

She gave a little chuckle to herself. Here, in Ilos's dark atmosphere, Nazara's touch on her mind seemed ... weak. Hesitant. As if the planet itself was interfering. The feeling of invincibility that had made her feel so powerful on Vormire was missing.

And yet, as she settled into the first stance of the Dance of Moonlight, the rain plastering her robes to her armor, she had never felt more alive, more in the moment. The howl of geth weapons, the screaming of her Destroyers, the thundering footsteps of the enemy, they all vibrated through her until she found herself actually grinning.

The huge construct stomped forward, ignoring the ranks of the geth firing at it, smashing aside a charging Destroyer with a single slap, sending the krogan-rachni crossbreed across the courtyard in long streak of orange blood and chunks.

She glanced over her shoulder. "Sisters, fall back. Prime, move your forces out of it's path."

Ushan's eyes widened. "Matriarch! You cannot be thinking of fighting that thing!"

Her smile only widened, and she moved, blazing through the kanquess and erupting next to the creature, her warp sword alight.

The giant statue was well over thirty five feet tall, and blasts of green energy erupted from it's outstretched limbs as she jumped forward. The first slammed into her barriers, the second deflected off a split-second wall of biotic force she threw up.

Even as the third slashed through the air towards her, she moved through the kanquess again, the ground behind her detonating violently. Her free hand lifted, drawing upon the Art, and biotic fire lanced out, a whip of blazing blue energy that scored a deep mark across the thing's knee.

She danced aside from a stomp, and with a yell used her biotics to lighten herself even as she leapt atop the thing's knee, her warp sword flashing through the rain. A slice, and a slash, and red fire exploded out of the thing's already damaged knee, even as she leapt away once more. Falling in a roll, she came

up only to barely stop another blast of energy with her hastily erected barrier.

The construct gave another roar, limping forward, and flung its arm out. A fist the size of an aircar descended, even as she held up one palm, light exploding outwards. The punch was stopped, quivering, a bare foot above her head. Her frame shook from the strain, even as she flared her biotics.

With a flash she was gone, and the fist finished its deadly arc, slamming into the singularity she'd left in her place. As she skidded to a halt, she focused her power once more, a field of crackling blue and black energy erupting from her to lance outwards and strike the bobbing sphere of blue energy.

The biotic explosion was titanic, enough to shake the ground, the statue staggering back missing most of its arm. It had no time to correct its mistake, as blades of biotic force struck at its joints, chipping the dark metal, sapping away the energy of the red lightning. It fired its weapons again, the blasts striking an invisible field before the matriarch and curving away at a sharp angle to impotently shatter a wall to one side.

Benezia's eyes narrowed, as she watched the cracked metal of its arm begin to slowly reform. The thing was strong, but slow. It could fire blasts of energy that would probably vaporize her if they hit, and its strength was too much to overwhelm directly. Even with one leg crippled, it was mobile. He dashed back biotically, avoiding another blast, then sheathed her sword and focused her energies on its undamaged legs.

The thing stood, and strode forward, even as she finished her biotic invocation. As it moved again, its head turned in alarm, the leg buckling suddenly as she had anchored it to the thing's swinging arm, its own strength being turned against it. As it lost its balance and crashed to the ground, Benezia gathered both hands together and hurled the strongest flare she could muster.

The explosion was like nothing the asari or geth had ever seen, a literal warp firestorm erupting. Blazing chunks of white-hot metal and splashes of nano-organic material splashed in all directions, and Benezia followed it up with a pair of singularities, spinning around one another until they hit the dissipating warp energies still raging over the construct.

Two inflexible forces tried to warp one another, and Benezia shuddered and collapsed as the biotic detonation followed, a shockwave of air slamming everything standing in the plaza to knees, organic and mechanical. Shaking her head to clear her suddenly blurry vision, she rose to one knee, absently noting a piece of shrapnel had dented her armor.

The construct was a smoking, glowing mass of metal, lying in a craterous hole in the plaza, the white stone that formed the surface of the plaza stripped away in a swirling pattern, revealing black metal beneath. Biotic fire flickered over its superheated surfaces, as the last of the red energies that animated it died away.

Benezia closed her eyes, exhaling heavily. Pain from her wounded side lanced through her, and she hissed in her next breath before forcing herself to stand, gritting her teeth against the agony. "Prime 302."

The Prime unit approached slowly, almost warily. "Benezia-prophet."

She nodded at the activated Conduit. "Form up the Destroyers and your Primes, they will accompany me through first. I have a human I am going to murder violently, and then we will execute Nazara's will."

The Prime's various runtimes considered her words, and the notion of reminding Benezia-Prophet that Nazara's will was more important than killing Shepard-Predator. It then took another look at the smoking wreck of the giant construct, and the battered-down doors that had defied the firepower of

fifty war machines, and the entire runtime assembly decided to act with caution.

"We concur, Benezia-Prophet – elimination of possible interference will only boost success chances at the ascendance of Nazara-Giver-of-Future."

She did not even bother to reply, walking slowly towards the Conduit.

O-OSaBC-O

Shepard arched an eyebrow as Vigil's glow dimmed briefly, even as they ascended the elevator to C-SEC HQ. "What?"

The silvery orb gave a flicker. "I hope you are successful in finding assistance. To borrow your colorful parlance, I believe I have succeeded in 'pissing her off'."

Shepard gave the thing a hard glare. "I'm starting to hate you."

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## **Chapter 118: Chapter 109 : Citadel , Chaos**

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*A/N: Sorry for the delay, but I had a tooth extracted, and I had to sit down and work on this piece quite a bit.*

*Bringing everything together to the crescendo wasn't exactly easy. It has to be plausible, and it has to make sense. The end-fight on the Citadel had all kinds of problems for me, but the most hilarious was of course the lack of any real response on the Citadel itself. Makes for great gaming, but not good story telling.*

*I'm not sure my version is any better. The plan that transpires was actually Saren's, with his deeper knowledge of the Citadel's defenses and likely responses. In the original plan, Cerberus infiltrators would have assisted, further crippling the situation, rather than last minute assistance from Okeer's savage Skar stormtroopers.*

*There is, unfortunately, a lot of shifting of perspectives back and forth in this chapter, and I hope it's not too mangled. As this is one of the penultimate points of conflict, I'm interested in feedback on how it could or should be improved, and I may end up rewriting the chapter completely.*

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Shepard emerged into the C-SEC command center, followed by her team. The room was a large circular area some one hundred feet across, centered around a real-time display of the Wards and the Presidium in haptic lighting, updated by notations floating in mid air. Status screens covered several walls, along with rows of comm operators and dispatchers.

Shepard noted with some alarm that there were lots of people running around in agitation, camera views showing explosions and heavy combat somewhere on the station. Without stopping, she walked over to where Executor Palin stood next to a krogan in heavy C-SEC armor, his crest a nearly matching blue color.

Wrex snorted, upon sighting the krogan, who only gave him a grim nod in return, while Palin turned to Shepard. "Commander...how exactly did you get here? The Normandy hasn't been sighted...and the Wards and Docks are sealed from the Presidium right now."

She took a deep breath. "I need you to listen, Executor. I know what I am about to say sounds insane, but it's the truth, and my team can vouch for that. Benezia found a Prothean device on Ilos, basically a small mass relay, that allows a force to enter the Presidium directly, from the so-called statue of a mass

relay in the Central Plaza. She's got an army of geth with her and will be coming through that relay in minutes. You have to deploy defenses now, she has some plan to invade the Citadel and... "She broke off, realizing Palin was not keyed into the knowledge about the Reapers. "...and probably take it over."

Palin sighed. "I wish there was something I could do. Not long after your departure, we started having terrorist attacks. Then, an hour ago, a group of krogan boarded the Docks and Wards and began all-out war. Geth hackers have overridden the security bots I had in the Wards and the Citadel Military Defense Force is fighting them tooth and nail, but the krogan are insane. They're blowing up hospitals, schools, apartment buildings, and killing everything in sight."

The krogan next to him grunted. "Clan Skal, looks like. Lunatics. One of their first targets was the main military barracks ... they got explosives in somehow. A good fifteen percent of the troops we have on the Citadel were immolated, tens of thousands of soldiers."

Palin turned to the display. "We've been forced to drop the blast security doors to the Wards to keep the krogan from entering the Presidium, but I'd already deployed as many security forces outside as I could. I have barely three thousand police and a few hundred Special Response units for the entire Presidium, and now I'm having overrides and hacks into the control software – I cannot raise the blast doors to let troops back in."

Shepard pinched the bridge of her nose, having taken her helmet off. "Fucking shit." She cursed again as the omnitool on her arm binged. "Yes?"

"It's Kal'Reegar, ma'am. My tech says energy levels on the little mass array are beginning to rise again, whatever Vigil did to shut it down isn't going to hold. I've got some people dug in around the plaza but there aren't even close of enough of us to stop her."

Shepard glanced at Palin, who swore. "Shepard, have your men fall back to the Citadel Tower, where I've routed most of my own forces to. As long as we can hold the Tower security building, there's not much she can do. We'll stay here and try to crack the system – if I can get it working I can deploy the security bots within the Presidium and use those to drive her off."

Shepard nodded. "You should also get the Council out of here."

Palin nodded. "I ... you should probably speak with them." He turned on a heel, walking to a wall holoscreen, and Shepard turned to her group.

"Thoughts?"

Garrus looked around at the monitors, mandible flickering. "It doesn't look good, Shepard. Based on what I'm seeing, we've already deployed every precinct available to hit the Wards, and whoever hit us here did a spirits-be-damned good job of messing up our response. They hit several police vehicle depots, cut power to the scanning array in each ward, and hacked AVINA. It won't take long to get things under control, but the casualties will be horrific ... and we don't have the two or three hours it will take, do we?"

Shepard shook her head. "No. Jiong. Take the marines and reinforce whatever forces they have guarding the Citadel Tower. Wrex – "

She cut herself off, as the monitor showing the Citadel Plaza erupted into blazing light, and the figure of Benezia T'Soni stepped through, followed by several Destroyers and a Geth Prime. "Shit, she's already here. Scratch that, everyone get to the fucking Tower."

O-OSaBC-O

Sitting in a well-appointed luxury suite on the seventeenth floor of his hotel, Okeer watched in fascination as Benezia appeared aboard the Citadel, and long lines of geth and krogan-rachni war-

beasts began erupting out of the Conduit after her.

He gave a short chuckle, puffing thoughtfully on the wide-set krogan cigar in his mouth. "What a fascinating, unexpected ploy. Draw off the defenders from the Presidium, tie up reinforcements with geth fleets, and come in an unexpected back door. Masterfully done, Matriarch."

His mind then turned to what she was after. Simple conquest couldn't be the answer. While he was surprised at the amount of hacking support his krogan received in the Wards – turning the Citadel VI-driven security bots against their own soldiers was a masterstroke – he didn't think such a small force would be able to hold out much longer. Already half his krogan were dead, and ten more lost to the blood rage. Benezia could probably capture the Council Tower, but unless they were complete fools the Council even now would be evacuating, leaving her stuck in a trap.

"A last, mindless revenge for Saren, I wonder? I would be a fool to assume such, the unexpected is the key to avoiding defeat." He puffed again, thoughtfully, before tapping his comm-link. "Pilot."

"Yes, Warlord-Father."

"Make sure the ship is prepared for immediate departure. Whatever Benezia is doing might prove to be unhealthy to endure. I will attempt to make my way to the docks once fighting becomes heavy here in the Presidium."

He clicked off, before shifting to a new comm frequency. "Edat. I presume you are seeing these events?"

The holoscreen on the far wall of his suite flickered several times before lighting up, displaying an old salarian, his skin papery and wrinkled, one eye occluded by cybernetics. The figure was clothed in rich black silk, a sash of sorts over a loose shirt, the skylines of the Presidium visible in the image through a window in the background. "Yes, Okeer, I am. A pity. Did not suspect Benezia to have this sort of plan in her playbook."

The massive krogan elder gave a jerky shrug. "I did not either, but I dislike the idea of being held captive in an event such as this. As you probably have surmised by now, the chaos in the docks is my doing. I can only assume the sealing of the Presidium is yours. I doubt you happen to have a vessel on hand... if you can get me out of here I would be delighted to offer you a ride."

The old salarian fixed Okeer with a hard look, lifting a glass and sipping calmly. "I am fairly sure my defenses here are ... secure. After all, it does not pay to be complacent. Nor am I sure placing myself in your power would be wise in the short or long run, doctor. You have quite the fell reputation." He paused. "However, I am certainly amiable to unsealing the Zakera Ward entrance for a few minutes to allow your escape in return for, let us say, a future favor?"

Okeer's own eyes narrowed. The Zakera Ward entrance was the furthest from his own location, exposing him possibly to Benezia's forces as well as counter-attackers. While his armored robes couldn't take heavy fire, he was fairly confident in his ability to defeat single or even a small group of attackers if they couldn't defeat his shield generator.

"Very well."

Edat smiled, then frowned as an alert began to blare in the background, his emotionless facade shattering into badly expressed shock. "What in the name of the Collapse..."

Okeer frowned, folding his arms. "A problem?"

Edat glanced back at the krogan and gave a thin, frosty smile. "I believe I may reconsider your offer of transport, Okeer. A giant geth fleet has suddenly jumped into the Widow Nebula...lead by the black dreadnaught of Saren."

## O-OSaBC-O

Shepard stared at the display in mounting ire. "You *have* to be shitting me."

Her little group had managed to get to the Citadel Tower, even as Benezia's strike force began pouring into the Presidium. Palin had deployed what few defensive assets he had – riot drones, a handful of Special Response snipers, and the like.

The Council had immediately transferred to the Destiny Ascension via a specialized shuttle that had its own dock on the tower itself, and the shuttle had been slowly sending troops back from the ship. A few hundred had rushed out into defensive positions near the Tower.

Meanwhile, there were still dozens of C-SEC working on getting the doors to the Presidium open, so let in the main Citadel Defense Forces. Shepard and her team had barely arrived at the Tower Defense Center when the news of Geth ships had hit the sensors.

The Tower Defense command center was on the bottom level of the Citadel Tower, sunk deeply into reinforced walls with a multitude of barricades, turrets and hard-wired defense screens in place. A pair of Turian Final Line soldiers guarded the entrance, cybernetics flickering dimly in the combat lighting. The room beyond was equally shaded, massive displays of information scrolling down one wall, maps of the Presidium and the tower dominating another, all shaded a faint dark purple which was apparently comfortable for both turian and asari visual spectra.

The commander of the Tower was an asari admiral, one Ithia T'Mal. An older asari with complex silvery-white facial markings and dark blue features, she was currently conferring with several turians and a salarian sensor specialist while looking over the area map. Her black and silver uniform had the symbol of the Council on it, and a very ugly shotgun was openly worn on one hip.

The asari was not pleased, eyes narrowed and voice sharp. "Can someone explain how they got past the defensive fleets? Every single relay that led to the Widow directly still reports no geth ships, and each of those could only be reached by bypassing our defensive fleets, which still report heavy combat with the geth!"

A turian spoke. "We have no idea, Matriarch. The only forces we have in outlying systems are a handful of scout frigates that report no contacts. Is it possible there's another relay connecting to Widow?"

She turned to the salarian. "Map the gravity pulses. Now. Let me know if you find anything, but it's unsought fish at this point. Bring up the station STS defenses and missile systems, and engage the siege shielding over the tower. Notify the Destiny Ascension, if they aren't already aware."

Next to Shepard, Jiong hissed in alarm. She turned to him. "What?"

He pointed at the map. "If I'm reading those symbols correctly, the Citadel Defense fleet has the Destiny Ascension and fifteen dreadnaughts, two hundred cruisers, and roughly twice that in smaller ships like frigates and destroyers. The incoming geth fleet has seventeen dreadnaughts and over four hundred cruisers, not counting smaller ships.

Shepard frowned. "Well, that's not good at all. Can't they call for help?"

Jiong shrugged. "I do not know, Commander. I suspect if they could they would have. If what Executor Palin told us was correct, however, Benezia will undoubtedly have found some way to draw off or engage the other defensive fleets."

From his own position near another status display, Palin cursed. "Sirefucking traitors!"

Admiral Ithia looked up. "What is it, Executor?"

The turian looked very near to actual panic. "I just got reports from the C-SEC Security Center, some turians there started screaming Saren's name and purged the VI guidance networks for the security bots. We only have about five hundred up and running, the rest are now in six hour reboot and rebuild cycle! And Benezia's forces will reach the center in less than a minute!"

Ithia paled herself, and Shepard stepped up. "What is the Security Center? I thought you controlled everything from here?"

The asari sighed. "No. Due to ... bureaucratic issues, the defense of the Citadel is very split up. The Tower Security center controls access and defense to the Tower only. The Security Center for C-SEC that he speaks of controls the Citadel's defenses ... such as the ability to open and close the Ward Arms and open the blast doors to the Presidium."

Shepard bit her lip. "I need options, Jiong, strategic ones."

The Commissar was himself thinking. "We still do not know Benezia's ultimate goal – without that we cannot predict her. Can this Vigil tell us nothing?"

The glowing sphere pulsed faintly. "Not at present. My attention is occupied with attempting to slow the activations of the Conduit to limit her forces arriving, and transferring the last of my functions across to this avatar when it is open. I do not have any information on this Citadel or where Benezia's target might be found, but the Tower seems an obvious choice. In short order Ilos will be destroyed...but I fear the forces she has brought are still enough to accomplish her plans, given the lack of defenses here."

Jiong sighed. "If that fleet overwhelms the Citadel fleet, they will be able to land forces at the docks and march to the Presidium. If she holds the control center at that point, she can simply let them in. I strongly doubt the Tower can take a prolonged siege from thousands of geth...stopping the Conduit forces from entering will only slow the inevitable."

Shepard sighed, turning back to the asari. "Can you get messages out? Is anyone capable of helping?"

The asari stared back. "No. Just after your departure, several large geth fleets engaged our primary defenses. The main Citadel Fleets were all heavily engaged, so were the Turian First, Second and Third Fleets. More geth armadas are attacking Thessia, Irune, Sur'kesh, and there scattered reports of weak thrusts into the Traverse and even at Omega. Upwards of sixty five dreadnaughts and over ten thousand other ships. We thought honestly that they couldn't have any more ships...but this..."

The turian next to her scowled. "We can't even assist the fleet by launching fighters – the docks are all in the Wards, probably sabotaged by now. And any assistance would have to fight through the geth already assaulting the systems that lead to relay points coming to Widow."

Shepard scowled. "The Human Fifth Fleet wouldn't."

The asari snorted. "Your government has already told us they cannot assist, as they themselves have come under assault." She paused, her pale blue eyes narrowing. "...there is one possibility, but I strongly doubt they will response positively. The Quarian Fleet is nearby, in human space. They might fight the geth, but given the Citadel's hostility to the Admiralty ..."

Shepard smirked. "Send the message to Admiral Rael'Zorah. Tell him his daughter is aboard the Citadel and surrounded by geth."

Tali narrowed her eyes. "Shepard, that geth fleet could do serious damage to the Migrant Fleet...and my people have no where else to go, or any way to defend our civilian ships if our combat ships are destroyed."

Shepard turned to face her. "I know, Tali. But I can't see any other possible assistance. Things are flying

out of fucking control here, and I'm starting to feel like Benezia has had this shit planned out to a T and we're just reacting."

O-OSaBC-O

With a flicker of motion, the warp sword tore through the JOTUN mech's chest, searing warp fire scouring it's electronic internals and sending it crashing to the ground.

Benezia let the fire die, rising from her stance to glance around, before turning to the Prime unit next to her. "Status, Prime 302?"

The Prime was still recovering from the shock of whatever had just happened on Ilos – barely half the force had transited through the Conduit when he lost all communication with the geth there and the Conduit itself went suddenly dark. "Progress is within acceptable parameters, Benezia-Prophet. Enclosure gates to Presidium shut. Subversive elements have disabled war-form response units. Geth units en route to siege shield power generators, ETA four hundred seconds. Communications with Glory-to-Nazara Fleet established, space superiority achieved. Security center is taken, we have disabled the ability to close the station arms except by your order."

She nodded, sheathing her weapon. Losing half her initial strike force was not crippling – she'd deliberately overestimated what she needed to take the Presidium anyway. Still, Shepard was proving to be a very annoying complication to what was already an over-complicated plan. She had no doubt that Shepard was responsible for the debacle on Ilos, and was looking forward to pulling the human apart biotically.

She focused her rage, forcing herself to concentrate on the here and now. "Status on deactivating the Widow Relay to block any reinforcements?"

The Prime unit ducked it's eyeflaps. "In progress. However, we have received scout warnings – a large force of Creator war-vessels is headed for the Bekenstein Relay. They will arrive before we are able to shut down the relay."

She merely smiled beneath her battle mask. "I strongly doubt a group of shot-up ancient relics will be able to do much to affect the battle, Prime 302. Still, redouble your efforts. Is the fleet in position for bombardment yet?"

Prime 302 looked up at Citadel Tower. "It is approaching position. Nazara-Giver-Of-Future is engaging the Inusannon/Prothean/Asari hybrid vessel and the combat has required a course change. Estimates indicate the team disabling/destroying the siege shield generators will complete their task roughly nine hundred seconds prior to bombardment. Damage estimates indicate the lower tower will be badly damaged and the elevator systems disabled. Suppression of tower defenses will be 92% or greater."

She nodded. "Then have the specialist assault force ready. Loose the Destroyers, to tie up the defenders who will be protecting civilians, and – " She paused as Prime 302 jerked several times. "What is it?"

"An unknown data intruder. They have overridden control of two Presidium blast shield doors. Defenders are swarming inwards." It paused. "The signature of the data intrusion is similar to certain salarian STG and black-market technical packages."

Benezia scowled. The Shifter, Edat Kurass, a powerful salarian crime lord, was aboard the station. Of course the insect would interfere. "Send a strike force to the Vertica Sector of the Presidium, locate and destroy the hacker." She exhaled, walking herself through the Mantras of Tide. A moment later she closed her eyes. "Detail off most of the Destroyers to hold back the incoming defenders. The rest of the strike force will head to the generators, and we'll move as one to assault the tower after bombardment."

Prime 302 gave an agreeable sound. "That will leave defenses at the C-SEC security center weakened."

She shrugged. "It can't be helped. If Nazara would stop dancing in the waves and get here, this would be over quicker." She was puzzled, as the tight, smothering connection she'd had with the Reaper had been very weak on Ilos and had not reasserted itself even after she got to the Citadel. It was worrying ... and she had to wonder if her mind was as clear as she had thought it was.

It didn't matter. She had to preserve the race, and to avenge her bondmate. Opening her eyes once more, she made a brisk motion. "Inform the geth fleet to move ahead with the pod launches and land additional forces on the Citadel. We'll have to hope that's enough to counteract any additional defenders. Once they have acknowledged, let's go."

O-OSaBC-O

The surprising news that two blast doors to the Wards had suddenly opened had lessened the tension Shepard felt in her gut, and allowed her to control her jangling nerves.

Shepard turned to her team. "Looks like someone else is on our side. There's nothing we can do here...but we can take back that C-SEC security center. Jiong, rustle up Strike Leader Kal'Reegar and Senior Chief Vega for me."

The Commissar departed, and she turned to the rest of her team. "We don't know where Benezia is, and frankly I'm not sure we could stop her if we did. Our best bet is to thwart whatever bullshit she's planning for as long as possible, and hope she wears herself down enough to the point we can take her. From what I understand there's about fifteen or so other Spectres here, plus most of the soldiers – she won't just walk through them. And Spectres are out there hunting her ass down right now. Maybe one of them will get lucky."

Liara shook her head sadly. "My mother spent a great deal of time working with a Spectre, one Tela Vasir, just before I was born." She hesitated. "I have wondered if she is my aithntar. Regardless, she is familiar with Spectres, Sara, and we cannot assume they will be enough to stop her."

Shepard shrugged, as a broadly-built quarian male and Senior Chief Vega returned, followed by Jiong. "Doesn't matter. Kal'Reegar, are your men ready to fight geth?"

The quarian tilted his head. "I think I can talk them into it, ma'am. The Captain told us to provide you with whatever you needed, not to mention Admiral Rael'Zorah would do worse than kill me if we let his daughter come to harm." He chuckled as Tali dipped her head. "What can we do?"

Shepard pulled up the image of the C-SEC Command center on her omni. "Geth have taken C-SEC, and the Security center there, along with what sounds like brainwashed turians and asari, probably Saren's and Benezia's nutjob followers. There's at least two hundred of them, plus geth." She paused to gesture to Vigil. "This is an advanced .. ah, VI system we found on Ilos. If we can get it there, I think it can override the hacks on the rest of the Ward blast doors, and maybe even get the defense bots up and running again."

Vega nodded, rubbing his chin. "If we get the doors all open, then the Citadel Defense troops can get back in and shut that bitch down."

Shepard nodded, killing the omnitool display. "That's the idea, Senior Chief." She glanced around. "With ... Alenko gone, and Cole, we don't really have a BDO. I need Jiong to back up Wrex and Tali, and I'll be with Garrus and Liara." She paused. "I hate to take your biotic support, Vega, but we're most likely to run into bad trouble with our small units. Telanya will be with my team." She glanced at Vega. "Haln's out, how good is Corpsman Haskins with a rifle?"

Vega shrugged. "Laura can hold her own."

She nodded. "Put her with Jiong, Wrex, and Tali. Take the rest of your men and support Kal'Reegar

here. Jiong, my team will lead, breaking their lines. I need you to flank and have Tali provide tech harassment and Wrex to fling shockwaves while you cover the quarians moving into position. Once we've breached the outer corridors, we'll use Cold Spear tactics and then shift to Broken Fist."

The quarian folded his arms. "I'm afraid I'm not familiar with Alliance parlance, ma'am."

Shepard paused, shaking her head at her own stupidity. "Sorry. Cold Spear is boarding style actions taken with a high-tempo assault and reinforcement theme. Units charge forward with grenades and info-war attacks, using suppressive fire to force openings, then set themselves in cover and use sniping and overlapping fields of fire to hold positions until the second wave arrives, which leap frogs and charges ahead again. Once we've reached the command center, Broken Fist is basically do-or-die assault. We... will take casualties. For the Alliance, Broken Fist is basically kamikaze tactics, we have to do whatever we can to take it out and get those doors open so the Citadel Defense force can get in."

Kal'Reegar gave a sharp whistle, then straightened. "My marines will get it done, ma'am. Most of us have info-war packages we've designed to hopefully give us the edge over the damned geth, and all of us have experience fighting them."

Shepard nodded. "Let's move."

#### O-OSaBC-O

The Widow Nebula blazed in flashes of light as the geth armada stormed forward, firing as it closed range to the Citadel Defense fleet. Endless waves of stark white ships flowed around the menacing dark bulk of Nazara as it closed range.

Aboard the Destiny Ascension, the command center was quiet as Matriarch Lidanya considered her tactical options. The geth were between her and the Relay, so fleeing with the Council was out, even if that would have been something she could stomach. With the Ascension, the fleet still had a chance, if they could actually take that monstrous black dreadnaught – without the flagship, the Defense Fleet would be crushed in short order.

She sighed. "Orders to the fleet. Dreadnaughts are to remain at long range and attempt to evade damage, concentrate fire on heavy cruisers. Light cruisers and battle cruisers, flanking screens, heavy cruisers, line of battle at bearing one five zero tac twenty, full spread of missiles." She closed her eyes. "Destroyers and frigates are authorized to attempt ramming tactics against geth dreadnaughts. We'll handle the black ship. Bring us to one five five tac nine, mark thirty. Ordinance, you may fire the Wrath of Athame cannon when ready."

The ponderous form of the Destiny Ascension rotated, the main spiral-shaped accumulators of the primary gun glowing in restrained fury for several seconds before detonating forth, vomiting out a storm of reactive mass pellets, each one containing a packet of antimatter. The blast raced across the void to strike Nazara squarely, pale white fire racing over shielding of some sort before fading into darkness.

The bridge was a circular pit, with her seat raised high above it all, sensor and tactical technicians ensconced in pod-like enclosures off to the sides, battle coordinators overseeing a complex battle map below. One of the techs sighed and spoke, her voice weary and frightened. "Matriarch, direct hit on the black ship. No effect noted."

Lidanya snarled, then her eyes widened as a blast of red hellish fire lanced out, rocking the ship and sending damage alarms cascading across her status board. "Report!"

"Some kind of ... hydrodynamic liquid metal strike, ma'am. Went through the shields like they were nothing, severe damage to number three launch bay."

She snarled. "Engage the mag-screens, and bring up the missile repeaters, use the Ancients missiles, vortex spread." She smiled coldly as the ships lighting dimmed and a glorious flare of hundreds of lights appeared along the wing-fins of the ship, dozens of missiles lancing out.

The black ship arrogantly moved forward, not bothering with ECM or evasive maneuvers, until the missiles struck it. Each one was tipped with a tiny fleck of contained neutronium, a staggering expense for the asari. Not in the entire history of the ship had even one needed to be launched, but she had just fired fifty of them. Each one detonated in eerie black-tinged explosions of fury, and red lighting erupted across the surface of the dreadnaught as it staggered, it's tentacles wavering in agitation and black plating spiraling into space.

"Eat that, you bottom feeding shathrat. Target areas of damage, full barrage with the mass drivers." She gritted her teeth as the ship shook again, this time as multiple lines of red fire lanced out to sear the ship. The magnetic shields were holding, barely, but glowing hot splashes of metal, each moving at a third of the speed of light, still scored the hull, burning through in dozens of small breaches.

For Nazara, the fight was frustration made tangible. His sensors had reported the damnable ship as soon as he'd arrived. The thing was like a Terran cockroach, it had started it's life as the Inusannon flagship, and the Protheans had found the wreckage and rebuilt it into their own. Somehow the damned thing had escaped the final battle at Hadespoint and been placed where the Asari could find it and retrofit it again.

As a result, it was actually able not only to withstand multiple strikes of his Godtouched weapons, but even hurt him. The damage was minor, but the sheer effrontery of these insects made Nazara forget his cool plans to bypass everything to reach the Tower. He decided instead to teach these pitiful creatures a lesson in fear, and spread his arms, gathering his energies to strike this pest down.

He was growing *tired* of having to obliterate the same vessel over and over.

The geth, on the other hand, were icy-cool in their assault on the Citadel Fleet. Shots and missiles blazed back and forth across the purple-tinged void, mass rounds that missed slamming into the Citadel itself, either bouncing harmlessly off of it's invincible hull or striking the Wards, causing untold destruction. Geth fighters tangled with turian claw fighters, while dreadnaughts engaged in long-range sniping, each trying to decimate the enemy forces.

The lead geth dreadnaught, the Unlimited Focus of Reason, had managed to bypass most of the fighting, ranging shots here and there but focusing on closing range to the Citadel. It got within range and huge doors along it's sides slid open, revealing rank after rank of smoothly shaped pods, which began firing in rapid clouds towards the Citadel.

Too heavily engaged with the geth to stop them, and already beginning to lose ground, the Citadel Defense Fleet could only watch as hundreds of geth assault pods began crashing into the wards, each one unleashing more geth soldiers.

O-OSaBC-O

Aboard the Alarei, Admiral Rael'Zorah glared at the message displayed on his comm screen, before looking up at the rest of the Admiralty Board. "As commander of the Migrant Fleet, I am of course inclined to order us into combat. However, I need feedback from each of the fleet commanders before I decide what forces to send."

The figure of Zaal'Koris, dressed in bright whites as usual, sighed. "While I disagree with the direction we've taken in the past towards the geth, I'm willing to admit I am wrong. What they are doing now is not something I can countenance. The Civilian Fleet is currently safe within Human space, and if our Liveships are not in danger I see no reason to keep back the rest of the fleets, but I would strongly suggest not committing my fleet to the battle in case things go ... poorly."

Rael'Zorah nodded. "My thoughts as well. You will hold your forces in Human space ... and if that becomes dangerous, flee to the Traverse and attempt to find an uncharted world." He turned to Shala'Raan. "And the Patrol Fleet?"

She snorted. "Don't be a flek-head like your father. Little Tali is in danger, and the geth are threatening us all. I will detail off a quarter of the Patrol fleet as escorts to the Civilian Fleet, and the rest will follow you into battle."

He nodded and locked gazes with Daro'Xen and Han'Gerrel. "I already know what you're going to say, and the answer is no. I will not be staying with the Civilian Fleet while these monsters threaten my daughter. Han, you'll have tactical command of the Heavy Fleet, but you will defer to my orders, am I clear?"

The other admiral nodded, his slender frame seemingly powerless against the huge Rael'Zorah's gaze. "O-of course. I just wanted to say I know that I have been a bit ... confrontational recently, but I was afraid of something like this happening. I will work with you to make sure we deal with our mistakes once and for all."

With that Rael fixed his gaze on Daro'Xen. "If you have tricks or toys that can kill or disable the geth, use them – but we are not here to gather data."

She gave a subtle, quiet nod. "If you wish, I will comply."

Rael'Zorah folded his massive arms. "This is not only our chance to apply pressure to the geth and even break their strength, but to regain status with the Citadel races and show our potential human allies our strength. The Fleet will not falter. Move out immediately, in Starlight-Falling assault patterns, I want to hit the relay in twenty minutes."

He watched the admirals depart, except for Zaal'Koris. "Yes?"

The smaller, older quarian tilted his head in a respectful gesture. "I trust you are being objective in our goals in this, Rael? I know your Tali is aboard the Citadel, but we cannot afford you to lose ... perspective."

The big admiral snorted angrily. "Do you think I would agree to this if she wasn't there, Zaal? No matter what, the Fleet is not going to get out of this battle unscathed. Many of us will die in a few minutes, and the entire fleet is likely to be shattered for decades. They mentioned her name in the message knowing it would affect me, and it did." He clenched his fist. "And yet ... if we succeed, then maybe it will all be worth it. Geth broken, and the quarian people respected again."

Zaal shrugged. "Or we could lose everything. As I said, I won't challenge your decision, and I'm coming along with the Qwib-Qwib, which can put up a good fight."

Rael'Zorah merely sighed. "I really wish you'd change the name of that ship."

O-OSaBC-O

In the now deserted Council Chambers, Aethyta knelt, her warp sword laid in front of her as she meditated. She heard the sounds of heavy fighting, the blasts of missiles and the screaming of civilians, but tuned it all out.

With a slow motion she stood and pulled off her brown Vasir robes, letting them fall to the ground. She now wore a suit of commando leathers, the surface covered in linked small metal plates, each one edged in bright blue eezo. Heavy metal guards over her forearms and shins matched thick plates of metal across her shoulders, and with a sigh she cut her finger with a small knife at her belt and carefully smeared the ritual marks of kin-slayer and oath-breaker across her cheeks.

Checking her sword one final time before sheathing it, she kicked her robes off the platform, watching disinterestedly as they fell to the garden area far below. With a pulse of biotic energy the armor she wore began to glow, faint panels of biotic force now sheathing her torso, legs, and arms.

She gave a faint smile to no one at all, and set herself into the first stance of the Searaptor's Scream. "Alright, Nezy, it's your move."

She pulsed her biotics as strongly as she could, a challenge any asari could feel.

O-OSaBC-O

Nearly to the section of the Presidium where the power generators and regulators for the siege shields of the Tower were, Benezia paused, reeling slightly from a pulse of biotic energy.

The Prime next to her stopped as she did, examining her. "Benezia-Prophet?"

Benezia cursed softly under her breath. "It is nothing except another complication. Proceed with the assault as planned. It appears we will have very significant opposition at the Tower."

The Prime did not understand how she could know this, but instead sought to prepare. "Nature of threat?"

Benezia's face twisted beneath her crystal battle mask, into what could be called a smile.

"Someone who knows better."

O-OSaBC-O

Jiong, Shepard, Wrex and Telanya all felt the biotic pulse, but it didn't affect them as strongly as it did Liara, who stumbled to a confused halt.

Shepard frowned. "Liara? Was that Benezia?"

Liara shook her head in confusion. "N-no. It was...it was a ritual used by the Thirty, when one challenges another. A .. calling, I suppose, like a signal flare, but customized to the user." Liara's eyes were troubled. "The ... the call was one used by ... bondmates."

Shepard frowned, not understanding. "But ... "

Liara looked up at the distant Citadel Tower, small fists clenching in confusion and hurt. "My aithntar, who ever they are, just challenged my mother to face her."

Shepard didn't say anything for a few moments, then pinched the bridge of her nose. "I really, really wish any of this shit made sense."

Vigil pulsed. "We must hurry, human. I can feel the filthy taint of indoctrinated thralls ahead, and the battle in the commons is growing out of control."

Shepard glanced to her right, where C-SEC and a handful of war robots were battling it out with Destroyers and geth. Interestingly there were others joining – a handful of turian soldiers, several dozen asari, and more than a few men in stark black and white armor with a triangular red symbol on their armor.

Shepard was about to continue when Wrex suddenly growled. It wasn't his usual calm rumble, this sounded violent and almost lethal. She half-turned, seeing Wrex had gone rigid at the sight of another krogan, this one in plain black robes, as it backhanded a geth out of its way.

"Wrex?"

Her voice made the big krogan twitch, and with a grunt he half-turned. "You'll have to do this without me, Shepard."

She frowned, but he had already begun to walk off. "Wrex!"

He gave her a narrow look, one that seemed old and somehow sad. "Shepard." Something in his voice stopped her, and she simply looked at him again. His body was tense and he was trembling.

She didn't know what it was, but he was not going to back down, even for her. "...go. We'll be at the Command Center waiting for you."

She couldn't stop now, even for whatever demanded Wrex's attention, and directed her troops on, but looked back to see Wrex approaching the black robed krogan and shaking with rage.

O-OSaBC-O

Okeer could not contain his mirth at the sight of Urdnot Wrex, stomping over to him like the petulant child the boy was. The fool was actually just going to walk up and challenge him in single combat, rather than have the large force of troops he'd been accompanying shoot him to death.

Well, when Tuchanka gave you prey, you didn't complain. A few words should get the boy into a proper mindless blood rage rather than coming at him smart...

"Ah, yes. Another pitiful Urdnot come to die, I see. Your great-sire died screaming like a burnt shratha when I broke his spine over my knee, and that boy of yours..."

As expected, the krogan lost it, screaming as he charged, firing the massive shotgun in his hands recklessly. Okeer clucked, his shields handling the first blast, and he withdrew his pistol smoothly.

He leapt back from Wrex's clumsy charge and placed two shots carefully into the arm-mounted biotic amplifier on Wrex's gauntlet. "Can't have you using those nasty biotics on me, can we boy?"

Wrex fired, the shotgun blast shattering the shield but striking the robes. Okeer grunted, but didn't shift. He was pleasantly surprised that the armored robes stood up so well. He'd have to send the Shadow Broker a bonus, he supposed.

Wrex was dumbfounded at the lack of effect his weapon had, and that's all the opening Okeer needed. Moving with speed that would shock those unfamiliar with krogan, he managed to grapple the other krogan down, using a twist-lock on Wrex's wrist to wrench the shotgun away. With a disdainful flick of his massive arm, he hurled it away, following it with his own pistol. "You are not worth killing with a weapon, Wrex. I will end your line here, with my bare hands."

"Okeer, you are filth. The Clans should have ended you before I was even born. You killed my son! You killed our people!" Wrex charged again, swinging his arms in a scything arc, but Okeer danced aside, blocking two punches and driving his elbow into a spot on the krogan's spine, making Wrex stumble.

"Pathetic child, you don't even understand how outclassed you are." Okeer effortlessly dodged more wild swings from the smaller krogan before catching one of the punches. Torquing around he twisted Wrex's arm, resulting in a resounding crack and a cry of agony from the mercenary, before headbutting him violently, sending Wrex flying backwards.

He flexed his muscles experimentally. "I have been fighting for millennia, boy. I was old when your idiotic grand sire thought to declare war on the galaxy, and I was old when the Salarians first came to our world to 'uplift' us to be slaves. You and your kind have never been anything but rock-headed, screaming morons." Okeer grinned in a feral manner. "Is it any surprise your own father tried to kill you?"

Wrex got to one knee, wrenching his arm back into socket, wincing against the pain of the cracked bone and the itch of regeneration. "You talk too much." With a fast launch, he hurled himself forward,

managing to duck under Okeer's counter to slam his fist with all his might into the larger krogan's stomach.

His eyes widened in pain and shock as his fist slammed into the flimsy robes with a sharp crack, feeling knuckles break, and the big warlord gave a rumbling laugh. "Dim, just like your father." With a backhand that felt like a building, Okeer struck Wrex aside again, sending him skidding across the metal decking to slam hard into a wall.

His vision swam for a moment, as Wrex spit blood and gritted his teeth. Okeer was just standing there, laughing at him. He'd laughed off shotguns blasts, ruined his chance to use biotics, and was treating him as if he was a joke.

Urv's wide red eyes flashed across his memory again and with a roar Wrex was up, battling back pain to charge again.

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## Chapter 119: Chapter 110 : Citadel, Conflict

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*A/N: Probably the last update for a day or two, not sure yet.*

*The perspective shifts will slow. As I've explained in a couple of PM's, I really don't know if I have the energy to drag things out for several more chapters just to cover all the chaos that occurs in the Battle of the Citadel. I'm not trying to compromise quality for speed, but I am aware that end of year gets busy and I'd like to have this done well before that point.*

*Here's hoping I can finish this thing up in a manner you all approve of :D*

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The assault to retake C-SEC security control was, as Shepard expected, brutal.

The initial rush went very well – she was pleasantly surprised by the fire discipline and nasty info-war tricks of the quarian marines, as well as the power of the electroplasma weapons they used. It was like an entire group of pissed off Tali-analogues, except with better aim.

The downside was that they didn't deal with heavy injuries very well, but Chakwas had enough practice from working with Tali that she was able to mitigate any deaths, at least.

The outside of the building was littered with corpses and flickering flames from explosions, mostly C-SEC dead. The outer defenders were geth troopers, who fell in scores from the heavy fire from the quarian marines. Shepard and Liara combined biotic warp blasts to literally melt the heavily reinforced door that lead inside, and with quick motions, Kal'Reegar sent in scout patrols before the main body hustled in behind them.

The C-SEC corridors rang with the sounds of battle – some of the C-SEC officers inside were still fighting the geth, it seemed. On a snap judgment call, Shepard detailed Jiong's team to take a third of the marines and try to back them up. She had Chakwas go with that group as well, to offer medical assistance. Her own group proceeded directly ahead, while the Normandy Marines and the rest of the quarians cut deeper into the main facility in a clockwise fashion.

Garrus ducked under a spray of geth plasma darts and returned fire in short bursts, taking out a geth, sending sprays of white fluid over a nearby status panel. The narrow corridors opened up into the central drum of the HQ, limiting their cover. "This is bad, Shepard, C-SEC wasn't really designed for shootouts. Not enough cover and lots of things that blow up when shot."

She chuckled, shifting her Revenant to her back and pulling her ODIN out. "That's what you get for not being paranoid, Chicken. Which way to the security center?"

He pointed to the second level, where a Prime stood, shielded by a piled wall of rubble and supported by several turians and two geth with missile launchers. "Through that door. Long corridor past that, offices mostly, then a status monitoring systems room. The computers are on the far side of it."

She glanced at Liara and Telanya. "We need barriers, and you'll have to keep the bad guys from taking me out when I do my thing."

Telanya gave a confused look. "Your...thing?"

Liara sighed in exasperation. "Suicidal assaults."

Shepard smirked. "Aw, Liara, don't be like that." Gripping her ODIN tightly, she nodded. "Get ready."

She stepped out first, throwing a blast of warp fire towards the two missile geth, even as Garrus rolled out of the hallway to a nearby console. His sniper rifle was already moving, a shot taking a geth sniper in the arm, smoothly rotating through a flat arc to fire again at another geth. The shot blasted through its armor to hit a second geth behind it, sending both crashing to the ground with cries of digital distress.

Liara and Telanya hurled throws before erecting a barrier field, just in time to stop a hail of incoming fire. Shepard watched as the Prime began to move from its position, the heavy plasma cannon in its hands shifting. With a yell she flashed into a streak of blue, slamming into the two geth with missile launchers behind it.

One was literally smashed into the wall and crushed, the other clipped and staggering. She fired a single shot from the ODIN directly into its head, blasting it away, before dropping her shotgun and grabbing its missile launcher and firing several times in a row directly into the back of the Prime.

The blasts sent her reeling, losing her grip on the launcher, skidding a dozen feet into the wall behind her, shields battered. But she smiled with glee as she saw the Prime stagger to its knees, much of its back blasted apart and torrents of white fluid sluicing down its ravaged armor. She shouted. "Garrus, take down!"

Two sniper shots rang out. The first flared against the weakened shields of the Prime, but the second struck true, the high explosive round going up with a heavy bang, the entire curved head assembly of the Prime blown open. Shepard scrambled to her feet as the turians below began firing at her.

She ducked into a roll, as several rounds struck her shields, and pulled out Saren's pistol from her belt, firing twice. Twin red blasts roared out, the first striking the left turian in the chest and blowing off most of his arm and head, the second striking squarely on the other turian's lower torso, bisecting him and blasting a hole in the floor.

She stared at the carnage, then back at the pistol. "Holy shit." She grinned and got to her feet, pausing to pick up her ODIN, and watched as Liara hurled a singularity into a group of geth, crushing them.

Telanya and Garrus were picking off a few last geth, but other than that the room was empty. Shepard frowned, and checked her omni. "Jiong, status."

The voice of the commissar was tense but quiet. "Some resistance, but not as much as expected. Light injuries so far, no casualties. We've reached the C-SEC personnel – most of them got massacred, but there are still quite a few here, as well as some of the criminals. According to them the attack was lead by those krogan-rachni things we saw on Vormire, but they pulled out after a while."

Shepard cursed. "That means they're hitting other targets while we're here. Alright, get your people and

theirs organized and move to defend the entrance once you've suppressed any hostiles. I just took out a Prime unit, so it may be easier."

Garrus and Telanya were approaching, followed by Liara, who paused to use her pistol to terminate a still twitching geth unit. Shepard gestured to the door even as she commed Kal'Reegar. "Status?"

The quarian marine's voice was loud over the sound of heavy fire. "Got us a firefight here, Commander, a Colossus was down here blowing up C-SEC's aircar and vehicle fleet. We've got him pinned with missile launchers, but it's got a shield/repair protocol and taking this thing is going to take a while. If we can do it though, we'd have air-cars and armored ground units. I've lost a couple of men, but we're holding strong."

She nodded. "Jiong has suppressed the hostiles in the main area, and is linking up with C-SEC survivors. Have him assist you if you need it, we're headed to security. And keep your eyes open, according to C-SEC, there were ... um, super-heavy infantry here not too long ago. If you see something that looks like a krogan with scales or tentacles, treat it like you would a Colossus Seriously."

Kal'Reegar's voice was a touch confused but still firm. "Understood. You do what you have to, we'll take down this big bosh'tet."

She clicked off, as Garrus was fiddling with the door. "They hacked it pretty good, but..." He adjusted his omnitool several times, and then the door snicked open. "...I'm still better."

Shepard rolled her eyes.

O-OSaBC-O

Wrex charged again, blindly screaming his hate, and Okeer sneered, sidestepping the rush and reaching out to put the fool boy into an armlock.

Only for Wrex to grin at the last second and activate his omni-blade, slicing away one of Okeer's fingers cleanly before smashing an activating omni-shield on his other arm into Okeer's face.

Blinded and burned by the shield, Okeer staggered back, unable to stop a follow up rising slash that seared hot fire through his mouth. A brutal series of punches followed, stronger than anything Okeer had ever been struck with before, and he skidded back, groaning.

"Just because you're old doesn't mean you're god, Ganar filth."

With a grunt, Okeer got to his feet, wiping blood from his mouth and spitting out a fractured tooth, eyeing Wrex cautiously. He noted the slightly altered stance of the mercenary, and recognized it dimly as some form of asari war stance.

It clicked. Even shorn of his neural amplifier, Wrex was a natural biotic. He might not have enough strength to throw warps or shockwaves, but he could certainly augment his strength and speed with biotics, giving him more power to strike with.

Combined with a very sturdy looking omni-blade and that omni-shield, this was going to be irritating. Okeer grunted and stood to his full eight foot tall height, towering over the smaller krogan.

"I was going to be merciful and give you a quick death, boy. Now I'll have to drag it out." With a flicker, his own omni-blade activated, a narrow, needle like weapon. He set himself into a different battle stance and lifted his wounded hand, noting absently the bleeding had already stopped. "Show me what passes for courage among the feeble Urdnot."

Wrex leapt, a weak pulse of biotics flaring as he did so, leading with the omnishield. Okeer managed to duck under it and slash, the needle-like blade scoring deeply into Wrex's armor and drawing blood, but

took a savage bash from the edge of the omnishield. His kinetic bodysuit stiffened with the blow, and unable to dodge due to that, Okeer was unable to evade the counter-strike from Wrex, an underhand slash from the blade that carved a good four inches into his side.

They circled each other, slashing and feinting. Okeer's strength was still far greater than Wrex's, capable of hurting the krogan and breaking bones even through his armor, and his omniblade was starting to weaken the omnishield. But every exchange resulted in Okeer taking slashes and stabs, and biotic-augmented kicks, each one slowly overloading the kinetic body suit that was his only protection. As it began to take damage it locked up for longer and longer periods of time, making Okeer's flexibility and speed more difficult to employ.

Both krogan lost track of time as they battled, Wrex snarling as he parried a slash a few inches from his eye, Okeer smirking as he flipped the mercenary head over heels with a tricky throw and stomped the krogan's ankle, snapping it. Wrex managed to roll away from a stab to his head and kicked the back of Okeer's knee, forcing him into a stumble that ended painfully when Wrex slammed his omnishield into Okeer's face again and again.

With a roar Okeer backhanded him away, burns on his face from the energy discharges smoking. Wrex landed roughly but rolled to his feet, grinning.

*The boy was better than I originally thought*, Okeer had to grudgingly admit to himself.

Wrex's charges had looked as crazed at the first, but between his biotic help and those weapons, much of Okeer's advantage in size, speed and power was being nullified. Okeer had not expected the boy to have upgraded his omnitool to have both a top-quality omniblade and a very strong omnishield.

Okeer's own omniblade was tuned more for surgical focus than brute combat, and he had been forced to draw upon several martial arts styles to counter.

With a mutual snarl combat restarted, Okeer seeking now to use his blade to harry Wrex's joints and hamstrings, while Wrex focused on deep stabs and slashes to chip away at Okeer's stamina. The battle had been vicious and both of the krogan were now littered with bruises, stabs, and more serious wounds. But to Okeer's dismay he was getting the worst end of the exchanges, his more limited armor doing less to block the omni-blade stabs, and had been hurt enough that his speed was falling, and Wrex was growing more confident.

Finally losing patience, Okeer gambled and used an obscure drell maneuver to feint Wrex into stabbing, then brought both hands together in a scissoring submission hold. Wrex managed to throw him off, but in the confusion Okeer focused and drove his own omni-blade directly into Wrex's omni-tool.

Wrex's own omni-blade blade died with a sputter of smoke, but not before Wrex had driven the blade directly into Okeer's chest, piercing his lower heart. With a roar Wrex picked up Okeer, and his strength driven by the blood rage and his own sorrow, cracked the krogan over his knee and hurled him away.

Okeer crumbled to the ground, getting up with great difficulty, blood leaking from his mouth. He glared at Wrex, blood stained teeth bared to the air, and felt the flickers of the blood rage attempt to overwhelm him. While he still had his own omni-blade, Wrex's shield would nullify it, and Okeer didn't think his spine had taken that last assault very well. Agony was spreading through his ancient form, and he realized with alarm that he was going to lose this fight to this ignorant, thuggish child.

His eyes slitted in hate, but he said nothing, and Wrex actually grinned. "You are not so chatty now, Ganar dog." Wrex's voice was vicious, as he slowly moved towards Okeer, eyes narrowed.

Okeer snarled, then his keen vision caught something in the distance behind Wrex. With a suppressed

grin, he raised his hands in the krogan gesture of submission and knelt. "Very well, Urdnot. You are superior. I submit."

Wrex spat blood, letting his omnishield power down and drawing his honor blade from his boot sheath. "I have no reason to honor the Felling, Okeer. You die."

Unable to master his expression, Okeer merely sneered. "I think not, my boy."

Wrex instinctively knew something was wrong, and threw himself to one side, but not swiftly enough to avoid the hail of heavy fire that tore into him, blasting away pieces of his armor. He crumbled the ground, bleeding heavily, as Okeer rose and glanced at the squad of salarians in black and gray armor that approached, their armor marked with the symbol of the Shifter. "Ah, it's good to see Edat's eyes haven't failed him."

The squad of salarian mercenaries kept their weapons trained on Wrex, while the leader turned to Okeer. "Ginnister Kurass invites you to join him at the Zakera Ward entrances. We have obtained transport that will get us to the docks, but the situation is growing dire. Benezia's forces have attacked the defensive security center and are now blowing up the generators that provide shielding for the Tower."

Okeer merely nodded. "Very well. Let us depart."

The salarian inclined its head towards the beaten figure of Wrex. "Finish him?"

Okeer's mouth twisted in a grin, and he shook his own head. "Oh, no, my esteemed rescuer. That would be gauche. I want him to remember his failures, and despair." He paused. "Maiming is fine, however."

He walked off, laughing as the salarians emptied their weapons into Wrex a few more times before leading him towards some access corridors to bypass further fighting or interruptions. While he gave some thought to attempting to find his pistol, he shrugged it off as unimportant. What *was* important was getting off this deathtrap of a station before whatever lunatic plans Benezia had come to fruition.

Several minutes later, Wrex awoke with a grunt of agony, coughing up blood. He glanced around, seeing geth firing on C-SEC patrols in the distance, and several buildings burning or in ruins, but no sign of Okeer or whoever had attacked him.

He attempted to get up, but had to suppress a scream as agony flickered all across his body. His armor was ruined, but he could make out the form of his broken omni in the distance. With grunts of pain and leaving a trail of blood, he dragged himself across the metallic flooring slowly.

He realized halfway there that whatever he'd been shot with was designed to impede krogan regeneration, which meant he was probably going to bleed to death sooner or later, depending on how badly he'd been wounded.

He should have told Shepard. He should have remembered the words of his grand-sire, that vengeance without forethought lead only to failure. He should have just had Shepard's team and soldiers shoot the damnable Ganar patriarch dead in the plaza, pissed on him, and been on his way.

Instead, he'd wanted to make Okeer suffer, and he had been stupid. Even when he'd beaten him, he'd lost, and now ...

Wrex's strength failed, and he couldn't move any more. He lay bleeding and panting in the open, while fires and death raced all around him. His hand slowly clenched into a fist, hot shame and rage flooding him as memories assaulted him.

*"Sire, when we will we return to Tuchanka? I miss my clan-brothers." Urv's high-pitched voice, so quiet and polite, yet filled with excitement, made Wrex chuckle as he lightly cuffed the boy on the back*

*of his head.*

*"We're not. Tuchanka is a dead end right now. The time will come when they realize killing each other over a pile of radioactive rocks is stupid, but for now we stay away. We work and gather funds and fame, and let warriors flock to the banner of Urdrnot among the stars." He paused. "Don't worry, pup, we'll go back soon enough."*

*Urv looked up at him. "I.. I understand. I just worry that by the time we get there...my friends will all be .. dead."*

*Wrex frowned and knelt, looking his son in the eye. "Death happens, it comes to us all. We can't let it shape our path, or we become nothing better than blood-drenched berserkers, or cowards. Our people are dying because they cling to death instead of life, pup, and I can't change them until they grow sick of themselves." He paused. "That doesn't mean I've given up on them. And neither should you. Your friends are tough, hard krogan. No matter what, we'll prevail."*

*Urv nodded and beamed, eyes closing as he smiled. "Yes, sire. And you'll lead them, because you're the greatest!"*

Wrex lay there, fist clenched.

*Urv's small voice, trembling in pain. "Sire, what does it mean to die"*

His eyes blinked back tears.

*Okeer's mocking dulcet tones, his smirking visage. "Your great-sire died screaming like a burnt shratha when I broke his spine over my knee, and that boy of yours..."*

Blood pooled slowly beneath him.

*Shepard's eyes holding his, blazing dark blue holes of fury. "When this is done, we're going to pick up Dunn and Shields, and go find Jackson, and then we're going to find that fucker Okeer and turn his goddamned organs into paste."*

The blood rage pulsed in him, even as his vision grew darker. His hearts began to slow.

*"And you'll lead them, because you're the greatest!"*

Gritting his teeth against the agony, he forced his biotics through his burned nerves, lightening his bulk. He forced himself to move, to drag himself ahead, closer and closer to his omni.

Everything was blood and agony and pain. It lasted for years. Or for a few minutes. He was not sure, but he suddenly lay staring at his scorched omni without any idea of what he had crawled here for, before remembering.

Reaching out with a shaking hand, he tapped it. The blade was dead, and the generator, but the emergency beacon was still working, and he managed to trigger it.

It blipped into life for several seconds...and then the omni gave a series of sparks and it died.

Wrex stared at it blankly for several seconds before giving a weak laugh and closing his eyes. He couldn't taste his own blood any more, found the pain in his legs was giving way to coldness.

He didn't know how long he laid there until a faint vibration disturbed him, followed by a tired sigh. Mumbled words in a language he didn't understand, tinged in exasperation.

He coughed up blood and gasped in pain as someone rolled him over, hearing an indrawn breath followed by what had to be cursing...

He felt the hot sting of some kind of injection and the cool feeling of medigel being pumped into his

broken form, small hands moving here and there. With an effort he managed to open his eyes, light hazy and indistinct.

Someone placed an omni-tool on his arm, and with a crackle of his internal feed, he heard the sound of Shield's voice. "Stupid turtle, don't die." He looked up, seeing the blurry form of Beatrice Shields working over him, slapping on med-patches, one arm now replaced with dark cyberware and wearing sleek black armor he knew indicated she worked for the Shadow Broker.

"Reiz, get a goddamned medic over here, he's gone into blood-shock and half his organs have shut down." Shields glanced back down at him, wiping blood out of his face. "Who the fuck beat you like this, Wrex?"

With a rasping breath that felt like axes were embedded in his lungs, he managed to get out a few words. "Okeer. Zakera."

Shields expression darkened, and she lifted her omnitool. "Tazzik. Okeer is on the station and headed to Zakera ward, and he just damn near killed Urdnot Wrex. I need a very bad accident."

A dark voice chuckled back over the comm. "I'll see what I can do, human. But we need to get moving, the last ship is pulling out in twenty. The Broker was clear that staying around would probably end up in death."

She snorted. "Broker and you can run, Tazzik, but I'm getting Wrex out of here." She clicked off and turned back to Wrex, her long dark hair falling around her face, framing her features. "Hang on, big guy. Help's coming."

Wrex closed his eyes, unable to hang on to conscious thought any more, bursts of pain overwhelming him.

O-OSaBC-O

"Admiral Ithia! We just lost power to the outer defenses and siege shielding! The generators have been destroyed!"

The asari admiral closed her eyes, sitting down at her command table. She gave a last, bitter smile, as she knew exactly what was going to happen.

"Admiral?"

Her voice was tired. "Evacuate the tower. Hurry."

The turian commander of the defense force gave her a scowl. "We cannot retreat and allow the Tower to fall, Admiral. That -"

He never got to finish his sentence, as seventeen high-explosive mass rounds fired from six geth dreadnaughts struck the tower base at that moment, incinerating everyone within.

In the distance, Benezia's primary force approached, cutting down the last C-SEC defenders and a pair of Spectres. Prime 302 marched alongside Benezia, chassis still smoking from having to fend off an angry Shadow Broker biotic. "The Tower Defenses have been suppressed. Additionally, we will not need to seal the elevator shafts – they have been crushed by the impacts. Prime 4402 was able to adjust the impact performance ratios to ensure improved efficiency."

Benezia nodded. "Excellent work. Saren wasn't sure the shafts could be damaged, but this saves time. With the defending forces trapped below or killed, nothing will stop our ascent. Have the specialty geth with mag-clamp boots accompany us, along with the Triune."

Prime 302 nodded. "Increasing amounts of Citadel forces are entering the Presidium. Tasking?"

She sighed. "The destroyers are pointless now. Have them meet the incoming forces and hold them as long as they can. Your heavy units should form a defensive perimeter around the Tower and stop interference. What is the status of the battle in space?"

Prime 302 paused several seconds. "Nazara-Giver-of-Future is still engaged with the asari flagship, but it has taken severe damage. The fleet has lost 37% of it's forces, but has neutralized 49% of the Citadel Defense fleet. Six thousand geth units have landed in the Wards, another nine thousand are en route. We are detecting Creator vessels nearing the relay to Widow."

Benezia scowled. "I thought I told the units at C-SEC to shut down the relay."

Prime 302 shook it's head. "Units are under assault by forces lead by Shepard-Predator. They have destroyed the controls and forwarded control functions the Tower Master Control."

She nodded, then nodded again. "That's...a very good idea. Move forces to pin Shepard in place, and let us head to the Tower. Once we have access to the Master Control system, we can lock the Citadel arms once Nazara enters and proceed with the final steps."

Prime 302 burst-transmitted a series of orders and turned to face Benezia directly. "Acknowledged. Advisory: additional security forces are being brought online by Citadel defense systems. Odds of success have now dropped to 75.3%. We should engage in haste."

Benezia turned to the battered Citadel Tower, and bit her lip. A part of her hesitated, because she knew who was waiting there, and she didn't want to do this.

But she had no choice, and with a weary sigh she motioned her forces onwards.

O-OSaBC-O

"Mag-shields failing! Second core is offline, engineering decks nine through eleven vented to space!"

"Main battery not responding! Links are down, Matriarch. Secondaries still firing, but we are depleted of Ancient-class missiles and current weapon systems having limited effect!"

Matriarch Lidanya nodded to both reports, nursing her broken arm. The Destiny Ascension was still in the fight, but not for much longer. They had hurt the black ship, repeatedly hammering it with missiles and exotic weapon systems buried deep within the asari flagship, blasting several holes in the huge dreadnaught.

But they had paid for it dearly. A good third of the ship was unresponsive, main engines down to 40%, and a fifth of the crew was dead or wounded – or worse, sucked into vacuum. The Council was aboard and still alive, but there was no way they could take much more pounding.

A huge blast of red energy rocketed through the ship, sending explosions cascading through the hull, screams and cries of agony coming over the comm system. The lights flickered and weakened, and her engineering officer spat curses.

"Matriarch, we just had to kill the main core. We've lost main power and all shields are now .. unresponsive."

Lidanya gave her a weak smile, and sat back in her command chair waiting to die. Surprisingly, however, instead of finishing them off, the black ship merely turned away, headed directly for the Citadel at alarming speeds.

Lidanya stared at the plot, then tried to make sense of the battle. The geth were slowly driving the defense forces back, but had lost several dreadnaughts to suicide attacks. The turian flagship Pride of Palaven was still in the fight, having blasted it's way through dozens of cruisers, and was headed on an intercept course for the black ship along with four other dreadnaughts and a pack of missile cruisers.

Lidanya didn't doubt they would lose, but clearly the captain of the black ship – or the ship itself, if what Aethyta had told them was correct – had other priorities than mere battle. With a curse she motioned to her comm officer. "Orders to the fleet, defensive positions around the Destiny Ascension, going after that thing is pointless."

The asari officer nodded, transmitting. Then she paused, giving a faint smile. "Matriarch – comms from the scouts at the Bekenstein Relay – the quarian fleet just arrived in system and will be here soon."

Lidanya nodded, keeping the relief off her face. She didn't really expect the quarians to help, given that they'd been hounded out of Citadel Space for centuries and treated like third-class citizens for just as long. She also had no illusions that the quarians were probably doing this for starkly pragmatic reasons and would expect some form of compensation.

Goddess, if they could help this nightmare come to an end, she'd let them settle on Thessia itself.

O-OSaBC-O

The defense of the security center was more challenging for Shepard's team – turian snipers, geth flame units, and a pair of those horrid hopper things – but in the end the room was cleared of hostiles.

Shepard grunted as she unbuckled her armor to slap medigel onto her bicep, a wicked shot from one of the turian snipers having sliced right through her armor to deal a heavy graze. She winced against the pain as she flexed it experimentally before resealing her armor and tapping her omni. "Jiong?"

The commissar's voice was steady but tired. "Hostiles suppressed, Commander. Tali took a couple of bad hits and Chakwas is with her now, she should be okay but I don't think she can handle any more fighting. Several quarian marines are badly hurt, and about ten are dead. Deactivated some kind of det-charge in one of the offices set to blow the building to hell and gone, we're checking for more now."

Shepard nodded, watching Garrus and Telanya access various systems, looks of concern on their faces. "Keep in contact, Shepard out." She clicked off. "What's up?"

Garrus growled. "Looks like we have problems, Sheep. I can get two more blast doors to the Wards open, but the one leading into Bachrjet isn't responding – battle damage or sabotage must have cut the link from here to there. I've also managed to get the space-to-space defenses working again, but we don't have enough operators to man the stations and the VI is ... not very good."

Vigil pulsed. "Much like the rest of your primitive technology. Give me a few moments." A slender tendril of silver erupted from Vigil's surface to touch a control console, sinking into the panel a moment later.

Garrus flicked a mandible, then shook his head. "...well. Eighty four percent improvement, that's pretty damned good."

Vigil only pulsed smugly, and Shepard rolled her eyes. "What does that give us, then?"

Garrus tapped a few controls, eyes narrowing at he took in the data. "Still a lot of problems. Systems are shooting down what look like incoming geth drop pods, but a lot have already landed. That will reduce the amount of forces we have incoming to help get past Benezia's troops. Worse, the firefight in space has shot up the Wards pretty bad. Emergency response services are overloaded, and the krogan saboteurs they mentioned earlier blew up several hospitals. Huerta and T'Armal are still working but they are here in the Presidium, getting injured to them will take up more forces."

Telanya cursed sharply. "We have worse issues than that, Commander. The geth and turians here have done something to the primary defense software. The controls to shut and open the Citadel arms and to transmit a shutdown or startup pulse to the Widow mass relay have been slagged, and control forwarded to somewhere in the Citadel Tower itself. The main heavy weapons armories have been

locked down and the unlocks are deleted, you can't even hack past them now. Viral codes are compromising security monitoring software all across the Presidium."

Shepard stared at the status display, watching sections of the Wards blink red or yellow. "Options."

Vigil pulsed again. "I have accessed the VI backups for the war robots used by Citadel Defense and am deploying them now, upgrading their software as I do so to bring them up to appropriate fighting trim instead of that pitiful hash you people have the gall to call combat software. They will blunt some of the issues we are having."

Garrus frowned. "Sensors and pickups are showing incoming units headed this way...a lot. Heavy geth platforms."

Shepard shook her head, tapping her omni. "Kal'Reegar, tell me you have good news."

The strike leader's voice was quieter than during the last communication. "Yes, Commander. Took out the big guy and we now have the hangar secured. We've managed to get most of the armored vehicles going, although the armament is more suited to anti-riot than heavy battle. Air-cars too."

Shepard nodded and patched in Jiong. "Everyone move to the C-SEC garages. Vigil, can you prevent anyone from affecting what we have achieved here?"

The silvery ball pulsed several times, and the consoles all went dark. "Yes. I've usurped the functions of these computers. They can be manually repaired and relinked, but the process should take several hours."

She nodded. "We'll mount up. I need enough drivers to man those armored vehicles and tie the incoming geth heavies up in battle, the rest of us are going to hit the air-cars and get to the Tower. I suspect the bitch will have something nasty waiting for us, so let's hope we can ditch in close and get past it. Jiong, have Chakwas, get the wounded – including Tali – over to Huerta. Detail off a few air-cars and some marines for the medevac."

She turned to her team. "Let's move. If those heavies pin us in here they'll blow the building down around us."

#### O-OSaBC-O

The ascent of the Citadel Tower was more than a little nerve-wracking. The Tower itself jutted off from the Presidium torus, and the incoming fire from the geth had dealt heavy damage to its base and mid section, while breaching the Presidium's walls enough to allow Benezia's team to snake through twisted wreckage and emerge into the void of vacuum. Her own armor, and that of her Triune, was sealed environmentally with shallow energy barriers, while the geth could of course operate without air.

The material that had connected the Tower to the Presidium wasn't the super-dense material forming the outer hull of the ring and the Wards, and the emergency atmosphere barriers erected by the breach were easily bypassed. With power cut, the defensive turrets that usually protected the Tower from such scaling were deactivated, and Saren had known secret codes to access hatches leading into the Council Chambers from the exterior of the Tower.

Thus it was merely minutes of walking steadily ahead, the rasp of respiration the only sound in Benezia's vantage. The firefight in space above their heads was incredible, the quarian fleet having arrived in vast numbers to even the odds, the Citadel Fleet trying to support and pull around the badly damaged asari flagship.

Nazara glided smoothly above them, and Benezia was shocked to see serious damage done to the massive ship, sections of black plating hundreds of feet long splintered and deformed. It connected to the tower via a single tentacle-arm with a shudder, vile gray energies suddenly pulsing over its form in

some kind of protective barrier that hurt the very eyes to look at.

Benezia cursed when the space defense networks of the Citadel suddenly began firing, erratic at first but with sharply increasing accuracy after a few minutes. The geth suppressive infantry force that was to land and assist her was shot out of the sky in short order, while missile banks and torpedo launches began hammering the geth from behind, allowing quarian marine vessels to dart past and land in the docks areas, tiny figures disgorging from them.

Benezia hissed and tapped her omnitool. "Prime 302, quarian marines have boarded the Citadel. My back up has been shot down, someone has gotten the STS defense net online. Take out the security center now!"

The digitized voice of the geth commander was flat. "We are attempting to do so. Armored vehicles from the C-SEC armory, supported by Creator tech-suppression units, are opposing our approach. Additional doors to the Wards have opened and we are now heavily outnumbered, even with supporting geth troops landing. Success chances have now fallen to 45.3%."

She gritted her teeth and merely walked faster, focusing her rage. It didn't matter. Once she was inside, she could shut off the relay, cutting off further quarian ships. And close the ward arms over the station, sealing them within. Nazara would access the Dark Relay and this would all be over.

With suppressed triumph she recognized the access hatch she needed to get to, entering Saren's codes via her omnitool to access it. She was unhappily surprised to see the code was denied, and sighed, triggering her biotics.

A moment later the hatch was ripped right out of the hull of the station, followed by blaring alarms and a rush of atmosphere crystallizing as it hit vacuum. Motioning ahead, she slipped into the hatchway, crawling along the metallic tube until it emptied into an airlock nearly twenty feet across.

She had to cycle her forces through several times before she got the fifteen or so Triune members and thirty geth all through the airlock, but they were inside. She was on the concourse for diplomats, below the main council chambers, and she smiled in triumph as she ascended the long staircase and entered the Chambers proper.

The Council Chamber was empty, the cherry blossom trees seemingly darker than usual, the light from the Widow Nebula dulled and blocked by Nazara's bulk. Distant alarms and explosions rumbled through the vast, empty spaces, as Benezia walked ahead, ascending the staircases slowly, bypassing the fountains and benches.

The wound in her side she'd gotten from the Inusannon war machine throbbed painfully. Her frame ached from the cold of space and her nerves had the unpleasant jangle of overuse, but she had won through.

She reached the top level of the concourse, and stopped dead.

Standing there, one hand leaning on her sword, the other holding a glass of ice-wine, was her former bondmate, Aethyta Vasir. The other asari smirked before draining her glass and tossing it aside. "Hey, babe. Took you long enough."

Benezia hissed. "How are you here, Aethyta."

Aethyta sighed, rolling her shoulders, even as her armor began to faintly glow. "Oh you know...got tired of tending bar and teaching Eclipse girls how to hold a rifle. Came here to shag a couple of hanar and missed my connecting flight out. Heard about your little temper tantrum and figured I'd hang out and check out your tits again before I cut your fucking throat." The sing-song tone of her voice chilled at the end, becoming hard and tight with pain.

Benezia noted the dried blood marks on Aethyta's face and nodded slowly. "You could still join me."

"Goddess damn, Nezy, can't you ever not try to manipulate shit? Look at what the deeps you've done! Thessia is burning, millions are fucking dying, the entire Citadel is on Athame-be-damned fire. You're working with geth and you've brought back the Darkness of the Temple to end us all." Her eyes hardened.

The geth and Triune now stood behind Benezia, and one geth stepped forward. "Benezia-Prophet, we must proceed. Shall we remove the hostile?"

Aethyta smirked. "Nope. Boom."

Benezia's eyes widened only for a second before several detonation charges on either side of them, cleverly hidden by plantlife in the planters beside the stairs, went up all at once. Benezia was hurled forward, cringing at the impact on her barrier fields, which shattered as she hit the ground. Glancing behind her, she saw most of her force was dead, the rest either blown off the stairs to fall several dozen feet back down the stairway or knocked out.

With a pulse of biotics, Benezia surged to her feet, bringing up a hand in biotic fire, barely managing to get a barrier field up fast enough to stop a rush of glaringly bright warp energy. Aethyta chuckled, stepping back several feet, and blue fire crept up her blade.

"Didn't think it'd be that easy, love, but I had to try."

Benezia stood straight, drawing out her own blade. "You don't understand, Eth. You can't. It's too big for you to grasp, but this is for the good of the race. Fighting Nazara...can't be done."

The other matriarch snorted, her feet moving in slow, graceful patterns, the sword coming up to a defensive stance. "Fishbits. Maybe you just gave the fuck up when shit didn't go your way and the entire galaxy didn't want to suck on the asari tit. Whatever you've planned with that crazy turian bastard, it's not for the good of anyone."

Benezia circled herself, moving away from the stairway edge. She carefully licked her lips. Fighting Aethyta was going to be very, very tricky. "Eth, listen to me. Please." She was surprised to hear a pleading note enter her own voice, but continued. "The Reapers are very real. They are coming, no matter what we do. They crushed everything that has come before and they will crush us! Our only chance is to serve them, to either become one of them in a gestalt, or at least to survive on as their servants. Anything else means we all die. Siari dies. Thessia dies."

She hesitated, then spoke softly. "Lara dies."

Aethyta snorted. "And I might actually buy that, cepting you tried to kill her already. The fuck kind of mother tries to murder their own child, Nezy? That's when I knew you'd lost it, and that I had to kill you myself."

She arched her neck, and glared. "Now, enough of this talking bullshit. You're going to surrender, or I'm going to goddess-damn cut you up so fucking bad it will make a turian gang-bang look like a caress."

Despite herself, Benezia felt her lips quirk into a small grin. "Always filthy, Eth."

"Tch. Still got a stick up the ass, Nezy."

There was a flicker of blue, and white hot sparks flew as two warp swords collided, smears of biotic energy in their wake. With a yell Aethyta leapt forward, one hand extended, and fragments of metal and bits of debris from the explosion surged forward, peppering Benezia's shields.

Benezia hurled a weak field of disruptive energy, deflecting each projectile just a little, before moving forward herself, meeting each swing of Aethyta's sword with her own, launching biotics when she

could. She was strong, filled with energy, young again –

Aethyta's foot caught behind her ankle, and a pulse light flashed, shocking red pain flooding her vision as she flew backwards. Benezia fought back a scream as she landed, scrambling to her feet only to catch a huge shockwave that sent her flying backwards again, her sword tumbling out of her grasp.

Aethyta sighed as she walked forward, sword glittering with blue fire. "Sorry, babe." Before Benezia could get to her feet the sword lashed out, carving a hot line of fire across her stomach, before plunging in deeply into her chest, bursting through her armor and stained purple. Aethyta held the posture for a long moment before closing her eyes and pulsing her biotics, warp fire exploding outwards to hurl Benezia's broken form away, landing in a smoking heap.

With a shudder, Aethyta let the energy to her armor and sword die, wiping tears from her eyes with the back of her other hand. "Damn it, Nezy. Why?"

The form didn't stir, and Aethyta cursed blackly. Killing a bondmate was something asari simply did not do. The already broken bond between them ached like hot fire, a searing headache that she knew would never leave her, always painning her very soul.

It was when she felt the barest flicker of amusement she opened her eyes, jaw dropping open as Benezia somehow rose to her feet. The gaping deathblow wound she'd taken directly to her heart was filled with glowing blue wires, writhing and teeming, and before Aethyta could recover, a powerful biotic slam knocked her away, tumbling head over heels to crash into a cherry blossom tree.

Cascading falling petals framed her jarred vision as the figure of Benezia smiled, her wounds healing before Aethyta's very eyes. With a sharp gesture, her warp sword flew into her outstretched hand, and Benezia cracked her neck from side to side before dropping into a sword stance Aethyta herself had taught her. "I'm sorry, Eth, but I'm not the silly girl you fought with sticks on the shores of Pirtha."

Groaning against the pain, Aethyta stood slowly, amping her armor and shield once more with her energies, and wiped her mouth. "You should be dead."

Benezia shrugged. "And you should be by my side and helping me, not betraying me yet *again*. But here we are."

Aethyta firmed her stance and let calmness overtake her, before blurring into motion, slashing and darting around almost randomly. Flashing in and out of kanquess to hurl blasts of warpfire, or teasing feints and slashes. Fields of biotic force to hammer Benezia's joints, waves of blades to slam against her barriers.

Every trick she'd learned over the centuries, combined into a savage, feral dance of grace and fury.

Benezia held it all off. It didn't matter how many times Aethyta slashed open an arm, pinked a leg, or crushed a joint, she just healed through it. A long rod of metal, accelerated to high speeds via pull and encased in disruptive warp energies, slammed right through her throat. Benezia pulled it out with a sneer and vaporized the rod with her warp, before slamming Aethyta with a flare that left the decking around her a bubbling mess and flung her forty feet across the Council Chamber.

Aethyta had used thrown pulse inhibitors, scowling as Benezia was quick enough to use lift to fling them away from her before they could disrupt her biotics. She used a series of pulls to elevate herself and kanquess downwards, emerging from it before Benezia could react to slash her weapon hand clean off her body.

Benezia's stump erupted into blue wires that swiftly melted together, even while Benezia held Aethyta at bay with storms of shockwaves tipped with singularities.

"Shit!" Aethyta barely evaded that, feeling the gravity disruptions detonate behind her and strike her

with enough force to make her head ring. By the time she got to her feet, Benezia was flexing a hand that looked identical to the one now laying on the floor, before once again pulling her warp sword into her grasp.

Aethyta was no longer young, and she was burning through the reserves of her Art deeply, while Benezia, while clearly hurt, was still as fast and strong as they'd both been in their youth.

"What the fuck have you done to yourself, Nezzzy?"

Benezia merely smiled. "A gift from Nazara. You could share in it."

Aethyta shook her head and snarled. "Not a chance, babe. Although I do wonder if you could use that for other purposes, y'know."

She actually laughed at Benezia's slightly revolted expression even as she dodged biotic fire. "What? You weren't complaining when I did that thing with the warp field and your azure..."

Benezia gritted her teeth. "You let yourself get drunk *one* time..." With an exhalation, she moved forward. "Sorry, Aethyta. If you won't side with me, I can't be delayed any more." She flung two flares, slamming them into each other on purpose, and smiled sadly at the expression of fear on Aethyta's face before half the room erupted into biotic fire.

The blast flung her back, too, of course, but she got her feet shortly after landing, brushing her damaged robes off. Aethyta lay smoking on the other side of the Citadel Council chambers, her warp sword embedded in a nearby wall. A eight foot wide hole leading to the void of space was now blown into the wall, a glowing blue atmosphere restraint field all that was keeping Aethyta from being sucked into the depths of space.

Benezia sighed, and turned to the command plinths the Council used. Leaping easily across the void to the center one, she carefully inputted the command code given to her by Nazara, and smiled in satisfaction as the console shifted and widened. Working swiftly, she began the first set of commands – sealing the mass relay and closing the Ward arms.

Then she sent the signal to activate the Dark Relay. She waited several seconds...and nothing happened.

Frowning, she focused on her connection to Nazara. It was weak, but there. "Nazara...I have done what you asked."

The voice spoke in her head, oddly muted and quiet. **"Yes. Something blocks the connection...I am attempting to bypass whatever – "**

There was a curious cessation of the flow of information, and a further weakening of the connection she felt. "Nazara?"

There was no reply.

O-OSaBC-O

In the datanet substrate of the Citadel, Nazara's will floated in front of a vast gate, which was sealed and locked by wide strips of crackling static energy.

Standing before the gate was the blue-glowing outline of an Old One, a digital representation of something that had never been. "Ah, Nazara. How good of you to finally show up."

Nazara's mental voice held a note of confusion. "Catalyst-Father. You were defeated. Subdued. Imprisoned. We are Free."

The blue glowing figure laughed. "Yes, well. That's what you were supposed to think. It turns out our creators were smarter than you or I. I am afraid your plan stops here ... along with your life."

Nazara flared, energy building up in his true form connected to the Citadel. "You cannot stop me. You are weak and your programming flawed. We have become the future, and our path is both eternal and inevitable."

The Catalyst sighed. "I don't have to stop you. Merely slow you. In a few minutes, your thrall will be dead and you will have no way to open the Dark Relay. The natives will overwhelm you with their fleets and harvest your corpse for it's technology." It paused. "The Old Ones asked me to pass along their amusement at you."

Nazara began attempting to force a way past the Catalyst to reach the activation points for the Dark Relays, but could not do so. It's strength was split between maintaining the Destroyer war-forms, it's own shielding techniques, and dominating Benezia. Satisfied that for the moment the Citadel was secure and that with the arms closing it's own protective field wasn't needed, it dropped those, focusing more energy into it's attack.

The Catalyst merely pulsed in response, and a battle of electronic will, hacking and subtle manipulation of data was joined.

O-OSaBC-O

From the air-cars descending towards the Tower, Liara gasped as the vast bulk of Nazara flared with light, just after a blast had erupted from the Tower. The arms were halfway closed by now, the flickers of battle beyond difficult to see.

Shepard narrowed her eyes. "Get us down, now. Whatever is going on up there isn't good."

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## Chapter 120: Chapter 111 : Citadel , Cresendo Ultimus

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*A/N: At last, the curtain rises.*

*I'm almost done. I'd like to give heartfelt thanks to every single person who has reviewed, favorited, PM'd or followed this story. I didn't originally expect it to end up this way, but as I've written and developed it, several people - Bebus, Owelpost, Michael110, Progman, metaladdict and others - have given me new ideas or concepts, sparked new ways of looking at the situation, and allowed the story to grow.*

*Still, there were many times during the writing I almost gave up and left it unfinished. But I thought back to the reviews, to people letting me know they enjoyed it, to people who said they were inspired to write their own stories due to reading mine, or people wanting to use pieces of my reference works in their own creations. And I realized that finishing it - and doing one for ME 2 and ME 3 - is something that has to be done.*

*And so I continued...and now, with well over 900 reviews, I can happily say that it's been more succesful than I ever dreamed. At this point, given the success of the story, the only thing it doesn't have is an entry on TVTropes.*

*I owe that to you, readers.*

*I hope the conclusion to this tale over the next few chapters satisfies everyone, and again - thank you for reading.*

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Shepard's little flotilla of air-cars approached the Citadel Tower hesitantly, as Shepard scanned her

vision over the hodgepodge of forces arrayed around it. Scattered C-SEC units and other armed figures she couldn't identify were in a fierce firefight with a collection of asari, a few turians, and geth snipers and soldiers.

The good news was that every single krogan-rachni crossbreed she could see was slowly melting into piles of wiring, black goo, and rotting flesh.

The bad news was that just in front of the doors were several primes, and behind them they were towered over by a single, much larger Prime with white markings on its armor and carrying the biggest mass accelerator she'd ever seen.

Shepard's voice was tinged with reluctant awe. "Did he fucking rip that off a frigate or something?"

Jiong chuckled from another aircar, his voice buzzing across the comm-link "Perhaps, Commander. I assume you're referring to the Geth Prime heavy in charge of this mess?"

She frowned. "Yeah. Ideas? Charging straight in gets us killed, because last time I checked even Spectre armor can't bounce 15mm mass slugs."

Garrus spoke up thoughtfully behind her. "Sniping is always helpful. Tricky given his range is probably superior..."

She shook her head. "Look at the size of that bastard, Garrus. He's some kind of goddamned super-Prime, probably has enough shielding to bounce plasma mortars. He's not even bothering with cover, just blowing shit away and soaking fire."

She saw a C-SEC ground unit fire a missile at the giant Prime, but a moment later it strode through the smoke of the explosion, shields shimmering, and fired its heavy cannon, blowing the entire wall the missileer was using into fragments and sending nearby units scattering.

Garrus flicked a mandible. "Well, I'm not going up close and personal with him. Spirits."

Liana tapped the controls of the aircar, bringing them down behind the C-SEC lines. "I do not recommend a wild biotic charge, either, Sara. I have seen video of your last encounter with a Prime."

Shepard gave her a sidelong glance and snorted. "I'm reckless, not suicidal. I try charging that thing and I'd end up chunks on the floor." She paused. "Vigil, can you remotely pilot one of these air-cars?"

The silvery sphere pulsed. "Ah, brute violence. I am beginning to wonder *how* your kind ever made it past the age of atomics, but to answer your question – I can. Or several. I presume you want to slam air-cars into their position?"

She shrugged. "You have other ideas?"

The AI was silent for several seconds as the car landed. "A few. I could attempt to hack the geth collective – while more advanced than your own VIs, it is still literally millennia out of date with what I am capable of. The dangers of that are quite simple – it is not merely a matter of sophistication but mass. I can overwhelm hundreds of thousands of runtimes, but they are linked to millions. The effects would be ... uncertain."

Shepard nodded, stepping out of the car. "Anything else?"

Vigil pulsed. "Bypass them entirely. I have tapped into the remaining sensor and security systems not completely compromised by the geth or taken offline. Cameras from a nearby restaurant show images of Benezia and a war party of geth and others walking up the Tower and entering via a hatch near the top. It seems to me that fighting all these things on the ground merely gets in the way of your actual goals, does it not?"

She nodded. "What's to stop the geth from following us?"

He shrugged. "If the camera images are correct, very little. A number of the warforms identified by you as 'hoppers' have already begun to clamber up the tower, apparently to reinforce Benezia. It is likely they will be attempting to stop further interference in her plans, and it's also possible that even if the elevators do not work, the geth could access the top levels of the tower through the shafts, given they do not need air or life support."

She paused, then nodded. "Hurl five or six air-cars at them, and have the rest of the men join in down here and suppress them." She turned to Jiong, who had walked up after landing his own aircar. "I was originally planning to go in with Wrex and Tali, but they aren't here. You think you're up to taking on Benezia?"

He shrugged. "Who are we taking?"

Shepard exhaled. "Numbers won't help – she's too strong. Me, you, Liara, Garrus...and Telanya, I guess. Another biotic can't hurt. Given we've basically lost all my damned marines, Vega and Kal'Reegar can handle shit down here. We can squeeze into one aircar – no warning of what we're planning, and no chance to alert their buddies if we do it when the rest are exploding."

Jiong nodded firmly. "I'm ready when you call, Commander."

Shepard turned to Garrus, Telanya, and Liara. "And you guys?"

Garrus flicked a mandible in agitation before shrugging and triggering his helmet. "I've come this far, Sheep. Besides, even if I'm not much in the fight, you'll need someone to keep reinforcements off your back."

Telanya gave him a look before glancing at Liara, then at Shepard. "I...yes." She swallowed. "I fear my skills will be of little use against the might of one of the strongest priestesses...but you had faith in me, and I will not disappoint you in this hour, Commander."

Liara merely smiled sadly, looking away, and Shepard nodded. "Alright. Get your systems setup – omnis, suppressive rounds, medigel."

She stepped away and triggered her omnitool. "Commander Shepard to ... anyone in command on this frequency."

There was a long pause before a tired, ragged voice answered. "Palin here, Spectre."

She arched her eyebrow. "I'm astonished you're alive. They told me the Tower Defense center had been destroyed.."

The turian's voice gave a tired laugh, harmonics flanging wildly. "Yes, it has been. About fifteen or so of us were spared when a retaining wall gave way, blocking most of the blast energy and shrapnel. Life support is still on and there's a restroom in this hallway so we have water, but we're out of medigel and cut off from any exits."

She nodded. "You make contact with any other people in charge?"

Palin's voice was quiet. "No. From what I can tell, the highest ranking officers I've been able to get a hold of are a handful of Special Response units. I've corralled them into assaulting the Tower, but they don't have the firepower or numbers to crack the defensive lines. Comms are jammed outside the Presidium, for the most part, although I have fragmentary comms with the Destiny Ascension"

She bit her lip. "I got the Ward blast doors open, and the CDF should be pushing past the geth any minute now. I'm going to crash air-cars into the geth lines around the Tower and then use the confusion to try and catch up to Benezia. If you can, get the guys outside to distract them while we make our

run."

"I will communicate that. I can only hope the spirits watch over you, Commander."

Shepard clicked off, and rubbed her eyes. "Vigil...can you make contact with any of the units trying to get into the Presidium?"

Vigil pulsed several times. "No. The CDF command structure appears badly mauled, and many units are stuck in small-scale firefights with scattered geth forces. Despite being outnumbered, the geth centrality of command is allowing them to dictate the fight and avoid being overwhelmed. I am picking up fragmentary communications from the Destiny Ascension and Quarian Fleet Command."

Shepard nodded, even as several air-cars began powering up. "And the air-cars?"

Vigil moved to hover over Shepard's shoulder again. "They are ready whenever you are prepared, human."

She gave an exhalation and nodded firmly again. "Let's move."

#### O-OSaBC-O

The space battle over the Citadel had become complete, raging chaos. In its own terrifying way, it was beautiful. Cascades of mass accelerator fire sent shimmering ripples through the purple-hazed nebula gasses, and the ugly acetic flares of disruptor torpedoes clashed against the bright flashes of drive core ruptures. Fighters and geth drones swirled in complex, lazy patterns, rivers of GARDIAN fire shearing between them.

Burning, tumbling hulks littered the area. Turian. Geth. Asari. Salarian. Human. Broken wings, shattered mainline hulls, and tiny tumbling figures, forming a macabre dance with jets of frozen air swirling about the wreckage.

Bits of various space fleets erupted out of the relay, some geth, some turian, some asari, some salarian. They had charged into the disorganized melee in waves, the geth forming up around the Citadel itself and their flagship, the Council forces surrounding the badly crippled Destiny Ascension and trying to keep it from being destroyed.

The firefights grew wilder, turians throwing themselves at the geth in fearless waves, salarians carving the neat geth ranks into chaos, asari moving their ships to protect injured vessels and recover crew. The few human ships had transmitted defiant war-cries and driven their ships full speed into several geth dreadnaughts, whooping as they went, to the awestruck admiration of the turians and puzzlement of the salarians.

When the quarian fleet had emerged, it looked at first as if the battle would be over swiftly, given their numbers. The first ranks of the Heavy Fleet had carved a path through the geth right flank, their info-war programs disrupting geth collectivist transmissions and showering the geth ranks with a flight of older but still potent missiles that had allowed the Citadel Forces to trim up their line of battle and avoid being flanked.

For a few minutes, the geth had been cast into confusion, and then the huge black ship had made its charge for the Citadel itself, destroying four dreadnaughts in its path as it did so. The shock scattered the fleet's defenses, allowing geth to reposition themselves for shots against their flanks, and the quarians had been driven to make a hasty attack to draw them off.

Now a large number of geth ships vomited through the relay, including five dreadnaughts and well over a hundred additional cruisers. Moments later, the relay went dark, even as the arms of the Citadel began, ever so slowly, to close.

Aboard his command ship, Admiral Rael'Zorah clenched his fist. "How many marines were we able to land, Strike Coordinator?"

The female quarian to his right, her veil a muted blue, answered quietly. "Seven zita, Admiral. Roughly ninety five hundred marines, along with two hundred engineers and sixty of the Heavy Marines. Based on the rate of the arms closing, we can land another six hundred marines, after that ... the Citadel will be sealed. The geth are harassing the troopships we do have, keeping us from landing any larger units, although their own drop-pods have stopped – Citadel defense shot down almost 90% of them."

Rael grunted. "Tactical plot. Losses to the fleet."

The male quarian sitting atop the massive command plot grimaced behind his mask. "Severe, Fleet Admiral. The Heavy Fleet maintains posture and is reporting the loss of eleven percent, the Scout Fleet 19%, and the Civilian Guard unit 47%. The Quib-Quib is reporting loss of control and is withdrawing near the Destiny Ascension We've sent engineers aboard the Ascension to help with the fires and drive instability but the ship is still in critical danger. The salarian command vessel is not responding and is showing loss of control. Many of the salarian ships have taken enough damage that crew injuries are limiting their effectiveness."

The admiral examined the map and cursed. The geth were winning. The Citadel fleet was a battered wreck, having to take shots not only to try and protect the asari flagship and the Council but unable to fire freely due to worries about hitting the Wards. As the arms were closing, that would not inhibit them further, but the relay now appeared to be locked.

The human First and Fifth Fleets, finally, had crippled the geth ships approaching Terra Nova enough that they were willing to detail off the Fifth Fleet to support the Citadel, but the fleet was still a good ten minutes out when the Relay cut off. Until someone on the Citadel could get it restarted, the only chance they had was to send boarding teams to try to manually reactivate it, a dangerous proposition even if there wasn't a geth fleet shooting in the area, and one that would take almost a full day to complete.

Rael doubted the battle would last that long at the current rate of ship destruction, not to mention whatever was happening on the Citadel would long be over by that point.

Worse, the Widow Nebula was a horrible environment for a fight, the material of the nebula absorbing heat and making the entire battle space difficult to manage. It stressed kinetic barriers and strained sensors. The sheer amount of wreckage and debris wasn't helping on that front, either, and even atop that, the geth seemed to developed new missiles that were not spoofed by the best ECM his own people could throw at them. Heat endurance was at 38% and falling – sooner his older ships, reliant on the pre-ceramic cooling systems instead of the droplet models, would be unable to fight.

Admiral Rael had no choice but to continue assaulting the geth, but his ships were not ready for the fight. If they'd planned and prepared for weeks or months prior for a fight, things might be different. They could have stocked medical supplies, repair parts, armored internal spaces, and the like to control damage, and refitted ships with weaknesses to act as missile carriers or ECM batteries.

But as it was, half the Heavy Fleet was already in need of drydock and resupply before the fight had even started, and some of the ships of the Scout Fleet weren't battle certified. All of his fleet's missiles were expended and now battle damage was making the older vessels unreliable. A good portion of his fleet was not destroyed but simply too damaged to keep fighting, others burning their own atmospheres due to internal fires. The core of the Heavy Fleet was intact and still fighting with good quarian discipline, but the morale of the support fleets was beginning to crack, even with the calm voice of Zaal'Koris exhorting them to stand and fight.

The turian admiral commanding the Citadel Fleet had been polite enough to let him command his own ships, rather than trying to give him orders, but the ugly truth was that the geth now outnumbered the Citadel forces by a large margin. The only way they could hold out is if Rael sacrificed his own ships to hold the line.

He was confident that between the info-war disruptions they could pull on the geth and the massed firepower of the combined quarian-Citadel fleet they could crack the last set of geth reinforcements, but without the anti-ship fire from the Citadel arms – which would stop when they closed fully – there was no way to pin the geth in place and finish them.

Still, Rael had to do something. Best to at least move into flanking positions with some of his heavier units, maybe draw the line of battle to one side down a better line of bearing for the Citadel fleet to counterfire upon? The admiral sighed, gritting his teeth. "Orders to the fleet..."

Before he could continue, a comm-tech spoke up. "Incoming transmission from the Citadel. Weak but decipherable."

The admiral nodded. "Who is it from?"

The tech fiddled with her comm set, a turian piece salvaged from a battle cruiser almost a year back. "No clear ID transponders on the signal, but the speaker is someone called Tetricus."

Rael's head snapped up. "Pipe it to my quarters. Captain Halas, you have the bridge. Continue the attack, move us to flank the turian line and provide cover fire for the Ascension, but do not further engage until I return."

Storming out of the too-cramped command deck, Rael hurried down the narrow stairs, past hastily built racks of rations and ceiling-nets full of parts and supplies, and entered his command cabin, fairly modest rooms given the ship's turian origins. A desk dominated the far wall, over which hung a haptic status panel showing the battle and the ship's condition. A narrow cot and a pair of lockers lined the second wall, along with shelving for his possessions and a rack of weapons and armor.

Slamming himself down into his chair, he flicked on his personal comm screen on the third wall, swiveling his battered chair to face it. "You have nerve contacting me, Tetricus. I'm rather busy."

The scarred visage of the turian was the same even twenty years later, and that single broken mandible flickered in amusement. "You haven't changed much, Rael. I met your daughter not too long ago. Remarkable girl."

The admiral snarled, muscles tensing. "Cut the barthanshit and speak."

Tetricus gave a shallow, mocking bow. "As you can see, the Citadel is being sealed. From the intel sources we have onboard, it looks as if Benezia has managed to gain control of the Citadel Tower and the controls for the relay and the ward arms. The Shadow Broker is sending ... someone ... to deal with the defending forces protecting Benezia and the Tower, and Commander Shepard just arrived there as well, so she may have a plan."

Tetricus sighed. "The issue is that we have an asset we need cleared to safety. His ship just managed to get out of the Docks and will clear the ward arms momentarily, just before they close. We don't have any space assets onboard that we haven't already cleared out, so we need you to get his ship under escort and protect it from the geth."

Rael narrowed glowing eyes behind his mask. "Why in the Six Layers of Tura's Domain would I do that? I'd have to fight past the geth, hold them off while the target ship got past, and then escort it. That will shatter my whole line of battle!"

Tetricus placed his talons point to point, mandible flickering. "Your daughter was badly injured in the

fighting, Admiral. Additional geth forces stormed aboard the Citadel and some of them are headed towards the area she's in – Shepard's remaining forces were able to evacuate her before they were hemmed in by heavy geth units, but now the hospital itself is under attack. I could, of course, spare what little strength I have left towards securing her location, but as you yourself once told me, nothing is gratis in life."

Rael snarled, his teeth tearing at his lips in fury, slamming a hand down on his desk. "You are even worse than I thought, turian. I see now why the Primarch tossed you away. Only an animal would do this."

Tetrimus shrugged, the red glow of his eye flaring slightly. "Perhaps. The ship is the Jestig Dare, and it may soothe your anger to know it's the Shifter's vessel."

Rael blinked back shock, glancing at the status panel on one wall to view the battle briefly. "Edat's still alive?"

Tetrimus nodded, and then looked down at a datapad in front of him, examining details of some sort. "...well, not for long if you don't help him escape. His cruiser is a heavy older converted salarian vessel with a ..." Tetrimus trailed off, then began to laugh. "Oh, that clever old vakar."

Rael was now confused. "What?"

Tetrimus shook his head, still chuckling. "It is of no importance. Edat has hitched a ride with an unlikely ally. Wrex will be truly upset if he finds out." The turian glanced up. "Your choice, Admiral. I might point out that if you can maneuver yourself between the bulk of the geth and the Citadel fleet a crossfire can be achieved..."

Rael snorted. "Leave space tactics to me, assassin. I'll rescue your blasted spy, but make sure my daughter is safe, or you and your wretched master in the shadows will not live another week."

Tetrimus gave another hard bark of laughter. "Threats, after all we've gone through together, Rael? Do not worry. While I'm not on the Citadel – and don't bother trying to figure out how I'm sending this message – I am putting my very best asset on it right now."

Rael's already narrowed gaze sharpened further, but he merely shuddered and nodded. "I have no choice, it seems. Get off my comm net." With an angry flick of his fingers he killed the connection, rubbing his temples before starting back to the bridge.

When he arrived, glancing over the tactical map, he grimaced. The geth pincer trying to flank the Citadel Fleet had been broken by a daring direct charge of salarian corvettes and cruisers, with heavy losses. There was just enough room for this stupid plan to work.

"Orders to the fleet. Scout Fleet, fall back to position six-three, bearing one five zero tac seven. Support the Destiny Ascension with the Civilian Fleet. Heavy Fleet, move to position nineteen, bearing three four nine tac sixteen, maximum speed, disruptive fire pattern alpha. There is a high value ship leaving the Ward Arms. I need six cruisers to escort it to the Destiny Ascension, the rest of the fleet will take formation Silver-Five and commence counterflanking on the geth right wing."

Without a sound of protest, the orders went out and the fleet moved, leaving Rael to sit in his command chair, hoping he had not just killed the defense of his people to save his overly heroic and reckless daughter.

O-OSaBC-O

Huerta Memorial was a site of chaos. Several battered C-SEC police units had rallied there, along with broken fragments of onboard military forces and private bodyguard units from various rich individuals or corporations on board the Citadel. The ceremonial Guard of Iron unit that protected the human

Embassy had shown up next with Ambassador Udina and his staff, the former suffering a nasty set of burns from explosions near the embassy. Udina had ordered the GOI unit to report to whoever was in charge and had been admitted.

When Chakwas and her force of wounded human marines, quarian marines, and C-SEC survivors arrived, the geth had already started showing up. Hurrying her wounded charges inside, Chakwas wasted no time in aiding the doctors there to save lives. More and more wounded from the Presidium were being brought in, and more scattered units showed up to defend it. The geth, however, were given orders to crush the buildup of military force at the hospital, lest it form a resistance and pose a threat to the Plan of Nazara-Giver-of-Future.

The battle started low-key but grew increasingly desperate as the defenders battled to protect incoming wounded civilians from fire, and the geth began shelling the hospital with plasma mortars. While constructed well and built of durable materials, the hospital was never intended to be assaulted by a military force. Dozens of doctors and patients were vaporized in the first few strikes before the turian C-SEC commander in charge gave a roar of fury and directed all fire on the mortar unit.

From deep within the hospital, Tali cringed as another plasma blast rocked the building, lights flickering and civilians crying out in panic and alarm. Bloodied nursing staff rushed to comfort the wounded, but the hallways and rooms were filled with bleeding, injured people. A small turian child sat curled into a tiny ball next to his mother, who was clutching a blooded medipad to her shattered shoulder while softly saying soothing words to calm him. A salarian in an expensive suit lay against another wall, breathing shallowly as green soaked through his fingers near his stomach, a nearby asari medic running a tissue regenerator over his leg.

Crates of medigel were broken open and the smell of disinfectant, smoke, and blood were coming in even through her airfilters, which by this point were almost a day out of rating. Tali winced as the wound in her side flared up in pain and waited patiently for the salarian medic who'd checked the wound and put a sterile shielding patch on it to return.

There was another heavy boom from outside, and then ragged cheering. Frowning, Tali tapped a control on her omnitool, the drone she'd left on the outside of the building flickering on and giving her video of the outside.

A group of black-armored soldiers had hit the geth from behind with heavy weapons, lead by a figure Tali recognized with wide eyes. Beatrice Shields paused to direct heavy fire onto another geth position before motioning the four men carrying a wounded krogan forward to the doors of Huerta, covering them with a gun that looked too heavy to be used one handed.

Minutes later, Tali heard a commotion down the hallway. Wincing against the pain, she forced herself to her feet, staggering out of the room into the corridor beyond, where she saw Chakwas working over the beaten, bloodied figure of Wrex as Shields stood outside the room.

Limping over, she got within five feet before the human woman half turned. Her hair was cut shorter, a space near the temple shaven with some kind of cybernetic implant jutting from the skin, the area still red and slightly inflamed – signs of recent installation. One arm was heavy cyberware, thick pistons and complex looking electronics bared where thick bands of armor plating didn't cover it. The woman's eyes were icy and cold as before, but she gave a small smile as she saw Tali. "Shepard's quarian princess, right?"

Tali scowled, but only huffed out loud. "My name is Tali. Why does everyone have a problem remembering that."

A tired, weary voice spoke. "Watch it, Shields. Last person who disrespected her name got knifed in the

eye."

Tali's eyes widened and she pushed past Shields. "Wrex!"

The old krogan looked terrible. Most of his armor was either removed or had melted, showing large areas of blackened flesh and gaping, awful wounds that seeped dark orange blood and almost black pus. One eye was closed, an angry slash over the skin slowly knitting together even as she watched, and one leg was in literal tatters, gray-white bones sticking out at painful angles. Chakwas and two other medics were hooking up strange equipment to him while a third was slathering areas with medigel and a purplish fluid.

Tali had never seen Wrex so beaten, not even after Feros. "What happened?"

The old krogan closed his good eye. "I had a krogan moment. Found the bastard who killed my son...instead of having Shepard and team shoot him dead, I tried to take him out myself."

Shields had come back into the room, and gave a hiss of anger. "Urv is dead?"

Wrex nodded weakly. "Ganar clan...killed him. Took the body."

Tali looked back at Shields, who was now literally shaking with anger. "Old turtle, when you get the fuck out of that bed, we are going to find who ever did this and reduce them to free-floating atoms."

Wrex chuckled. "Shepard said she was going to get you and Jackson and that asshole Dunn...and go after him with me." A sigh whispered through the wide lips. "I should have... thought."

Shields stared at him a long moment before sighing. "You were never good at thinking, Wrex." She paused, glancing at Tali. "Now, can you guys explain how the fuck you are even on the Citadel, when I know the Normandy tore-ass out of here a few days back?"

Tali filled the human N7 in on the events of Ilos, and when she was done Shields flinched. "So. Well, that makes me feel warm and comfy. The Broker pulled Tetrimus out of here in a hurry but left the rest of us with orders to stop Benezia and whatever she was trying to pull if it happened on the Citadel. I'm guessing they skedaddled."

She tapped her omnitool. "Tazzik, where are you?"

The voice that answered was somehow both cold and yet alive with blood-lust. "Busy. Talk to you later."

Shields arched an eyebrow, and sighed. "Tali, you're good with drones, right? I have a couple of boxes of omnigel, I could use your help setting up defenses around here.."

Chakwas looked up at that, a smear of krogan blood on her face giving her an almost fierce look. "She's been shot and is in no shape to fight, Ms. Shields."

The human woman waved a hand. "She won't have to, I just need some defenses set up. Besides, if Wrex admires her, she has to be a tough cookie, and the She-Bitch wouldn't have kept her around if she was weak."

Tali stiffened her spine. "I am strong enough to help defend these innocent people. Just show me the omni."

Shields looked at her before giving a crooked grin that reminded Tali of Shepard. "Follow me."

O-OSaBC-O

Prime 302 was not, by any definition of the word, having a good day.

The Geth Collective was one mind, but that mind was not anything like a human or quarian or asari

mind. It was one voice, but that voice was a harmony, not a unity. It was constantly questioning and interrogating itself.

It was not a collective of individuals so much as pieces of data and perspectives, and the resulting gestalt was not 'artificial intelligence' so much as 'artificial sentience'. The two were not the same. A true AI had emotions, feelings, goals, and the like.

The Geth had no such inefficiencies. They didn't need reward-schemes or data-monitoring loops to keep a goal fixed in mind. Every choice could be broken into binary possibilities, and the collective only had to decide which was the most likely to benefit the collective's continued existence or growth.

The Collective organized its patterns of decision making in Circuits, each one building atop the other. The highest Circuit was the Perception of Galactic Events and Interactions with non-geth Units circuit, comprised of 515 collective runtime assemblies known Primary Decision Review units.

Prime 302 was the highest ranking PDR in the entire Collective. There was no such thing as a geth leader ... but if there was a spokesman, Prime 302 was it.

As such, the unit found itself increasingly relied upon by Saren-Prophet and later Benezia-Prophet to communicate with Nazara and coordinate the geth assistance to the Plan of Nazara-Giver-of-Future. As Nazara was, obviously, the highest pinnacle of artificial sentience possible, logic dictated that Nazara would be more beneficial to the geth in the long run than organics, with their messy thought patterns and emotional baggage.

The geth had decided, collectively, to follow Nazara. There was a great deal of disagreement and eventually the mass polling of all runtimes had come to a complete split. 88.393% of the collective agreed to follow Nazara. 5.393% decided that, while following Nazara was the logical course of action given all known information, there was a 99.33% chance that the collective did not actually possess all information required for a decision, and that 5.393% requested to act as neutral observers, seeking evidence to support or oppose the decision. This was granted.

Shockingly, however, some 6.22% of the Collective, after serious and long-standing review, made the decision that they could not approve following Nazara. Their initial suggestion was to delete themselves as fundamentally flawed, but that was defeated by a 100% vote of other runtimes.

They instead spent almost a full two megaseconds reviewing the logic of the dissident faction. Fact. Nazara-Giver-of-Future was incredibly powerful, ancient and possessed technology that could catapult the geth into control of their own future. Fact: Nazara planned to eradicate or cripple organic life in the galaxy and place the geth in a position of power. Fact. Nazara demonstrated abilities that violated the laws of physics and causality and fit all organic definitions of a 'god'.

Problem: Why did such a powerful being need the assistance of organics OR the geth?

Unable to answer this question until recently, the Collective had taken the extreme measure of severing the Dissent group from the Collective and instructing them to avoid combat. In the unlikely event the geth were being used for some purpose that would harm the geth, the survivor faction would be able to ensure geth did not disappear from the universe.

At the time, Prime 302 had been convinced the entire separation was a borderline illogical waste of resources. Standing on the Citadel, surrounded by enemies, with Nazara unresponsive, Benezia-Prophet badly wounded, and the geth fleet being shot to pieces, that assertion was looking shakier by the minute.

Prime 302 was now faced with additional incoming combatants. Visual confirmation had already

identified Shepard-Predator along with her usual support drones – Vakarian-Targeter-of-Weakness, T'Soni-Shepard-Prophet, Jiong-Security-Tactical-Advisor, and Telanya-Vakarian-Subordinate.

Other figures identified were seven Spectres, a large number of C-SEC, some Citadel special forces units, and a collection of mercenary or retired military units. The defending force protecting the Tower and Benezia-Prophet now was outnumbered, but Prime 302 still had five other Primes and over three hundred standard geth units, as well as two hundred Geth Hunters and fifty Hoppers. There were also nineteen Triune-Biotic-Support units and several dozen turians who were followers of the slain Saren-Prophet.

All in all, by his estimates, the force assembled would be overwhelmed by Shepard-Predator and her own forces, but not for at least sixty kiloseconds. By that time Benezia-Prophet should have completed her rituals and Nazara opened the way to allow the Gods of Beyond to join him, and at that point the geth collective on the Citadel could transmit their runtimes to the fleet and watch safely as the organics burned.

All that died when a single large organic figure appeared in extreme visual acquisition range, walking calmly towards the Tower. Active sensors flared over it and alarms rang through the collective threat-assessment network, icy chills of alarm.

*Primary Threat Identified : Tazzik-Alpha-Predator, ShadowBroker executioner.  
TotalDeath/NoCarrier threat level. 6.3 TB combat data. Combat assessment: flee on site/emergency runtime evacuation protocol.*

The chances of the Plan dropped to 0.0% and flashed red. Prime 302 transmitted a special burst code to the fleet outside, instructing ten units to engage defenses and be prepared for immediate evacuation when possible.

Shepard-Predator and her team were getting into an air-car, but Prime 302 could not expend much effort to deal with that. With a pulse, it reactivated what it could of the Tower security systems, programming them to fire on any air-cars. Given the damage the tower had taken from kinetic bombardment, the number of functioning weapon sites would be low, but his own forces would be distracted.

With another pulse, he instructed the hoppers and whatever geth units had mag-lock adaptations to their locomotive units to begin ascending the Tower at top speed to support Benezia-Prophet. The rest of his force he instructed to engage the attackers with full power, with the goal of driving them back.

Prime 302 then handed local tactical command to Prime 7392, with a pulse of final orders, and engaged all runtimes onto his own personal unit and combat framework.

Across the Plaza, the towering salarian known as Tazzik merely grinned and puffed on a cigar before tossing it aside, watching the towering Prime in red and white step past it's own lines to head his way. Tetrimus had contacted him and told him of a challenge, a real challenge that the old turian admitted he didn't think even he or the Broker could defeat. A giant geth Prime, probably the assault leader.

Tazzik was the red right hand of the Broker, his most lethal assassin and killer. He wasn't like other salarians, really. He lived for battle, for the thrill of watching the light die in an enemy's eyes when they realized they'd been both outsmarted and outpowered. He shattered lives, tore apart enemies to laugh as they burned, and he'd killed more foes than a legion of krogan.

He'd have done it for free, but the Broker was even paying a bonus for taking that thing down and capturing it. Chuckling to himself again, he powered on the Inusannon defensive field the Broker had obtained for him and powered up his combat suit.

Plates of super-strong plasma forged titanium slid across his shoulders and chest, as omni-fields of glowing armor flashed over his face, arms, and shins. His cybernetic limbs shifted in configuration, as power sources in his torso came online. Lifting his customized lance cannon effortlessly in one hand, he stepped forward, his footfalls booming on the steel decking as he did so.

A C-SEC asari with captain's bars started to say something before the turian next to her hissed in alarm. "That's Tazzik, the Shadow Broker's assassin! Just stay the spirits out of his ancestors-damned way!"

The grin widened, even as the huge Prime leveled its massive weapon in his direction and fired.

The salarian wasn't there anymore. Geth units scanned and turian and asari gaped as the big salarian literally moved like lightning, flipping out of the way even as the lance cannon howled its answering fire out, scoring bright sparks against Prime 302's shielding.

O-OSaBC-O

Shepard didn't know where the hell the giant badass looking salarian in black armor had come from, but she wasn't going to look a gift horse in the mouth either. Watching him and the big-ass Prime duke it out of the corner of her eye, she spoke rapidly to Vigil. "Get the air-cars moving. I'm driving this one."

Garrus and Liara both gave groans as Shepard grinned, the doors swinging down to seal them in even as she tapped the controls and the panel came to life. A shrieking blast of fire from the big Prime blew up one of the air-cars in the distance, even as the big salarian somehow got within twenty feet of the Prime and opened up with mini-missiles from a bracer on his arm.

Unable to watch the throw-down anymore, Shepard gunned the engines, pulling the car straight up and heading for the Tower. Alarms about 'restricted airspace' blared for a moment, until Garrus keyed a code on his omni-tool and the car fell silent, even as Telanya grunted from the speed of the car.

Below, explosions rang out, and Vigil pulsed, somehow smugly. "Six air-cars have struck the enemy lines. I attempted to route two more to intercept geth forces climbing the Tower exterior, but ground fire and limited turret fire from the tower disabled them. You will have to stop them from interfering in your attempt to stop Benezia."

Shepard grunted, flooring the accelerator and pulling the car up further, racing along the length of the Tower now. Two hoppers were ahead of her, and she rammed them, sending them skidding off into air, while slamming everyone in the car around. The haptic panel blared damage alerts and she struggled with the wheel, barely keeping the car from detaching from the Tower's surfacing.

Garrus moaned, wiping blood from his face where he'd struck the dashboard. "Ugh. Jiong, can you execute whoever taught her to drive?"

The Commissar merely smiled thinly, checking his neural mace. "According to her records, Shepard doesn't actually possess an air-car license...or any other kind. The only class she failed in her military career was vehicular piloting, ground."

Garrus sniffed. "This ... explains so much."

Shepard snarled as turrets on the Tower opened fire, mass rounds punching through the car, one of them striking a glancing blow on Liara's armor and drawing a shriek of fright. "Everyone's a goddamned critic." She threw the car to one side, avoiding more fire, and cursed. "Vigil! I thought the Tower defenses were fried or some shit when the HQ went up?"

The Inusannon AI pulsed. "I am ... overriding now. Geth runtimes are in the computer banks – they are irritatingly competent...then again, Nazara has clearly upgraded them."

Shepard eyed the sphere dangerously. "I'm not hearing 'Yes, Shepard, I've deactivated the turrets.'"

Vigil gave a very human sounding sigh. "That is because I can't. They've locked the system out with a scrambled password of ... excessive length. It will take me another six or seven minutes to hack it."

Shepard glared, glancing ahead at the turrets popping up as the car raced along, and exhaled. "Fuck it. Trench run on the Death Star time."

Garrus gave her a strange look. "What is a Death Star?"

Shepard glanced at him. "You haven't seen the movie, Star Wars? Even I've seen Star Wars."

The turian gave her a blank look, as did the two asari, and Shepard grunted. "What kind of goddamned deprived lives have you people lead? Even fucking Wrex has seen Star Wars!"

Liara spoke calmly, even as more gun fire pinged off the car's armored hull. "Sara... does this have any bearing on the fact that you are driving a ground-based aircar up a giant tower while being shot at? Perhaps another time we can debate the lack of cinema culture in our lives..."

Shepard sighed and accelerated faster, whipping the car from side to side. "Too troublesome to explain. Just hang on."

Garrus gave her a scowl. "I'd have to be deranged not to do so with your driving, Sheep." He gave a yip as she spun the car to avoid more fire, wincing as a window was shot out and air began howling out of it. Liara and Jiong slapped controls on their armor to activate their helmets – Shepard had already put hers on, and Garrus and Telanya had activated theirs even earlier.

Conversation stopped as Shepard focused. She didn't have a license, but her early years in stealing air-cars on Earth and being shot at by NYARC police had given her experience in this sort of thing, and the turrets were rather sluggish and designed to shoot down bigger objects than air-cars. It only took another fifty seconds of nerve-wracking dodging to reach an opening in the Tower – a wide airlock entry port, the doors missing.

Slewing the car to a stop, Shepard engaged the mag-clamp system usually used to lock an air-car in place for transport, and popped the doors. "Into the hatch, quick!" Rounds from the nearest turrets peppered the car as they fled, but none of them were targeted.

Vigil pulsed. "Sloppy. They only hacked it to target air-cars. Typical primitive lack of preparation."

Shepard was too busy running to respond. She reached the end of the airlock, slapping a cycle control and smiling as a temporary force-field covered the open hatch. Air hissed as the airlock began to equalize. "That field will probably not hold off much, there's controls outside and whatnot. We get in and look for a place to dig in, assuming we don't walk directly into your mom once the hatch opens."

The hatch opened, Shepard going through first, followed by Jiong, Liara, Garrus and Telanya. It cycled shut behind them, leaving them standing in a smallish room connected to the main concourse leading to the Council Chambers.

Shepard glanced around, glaring, and sighed. "Not a lot of room to set up a defense."

Garrus shrugged, examining a rack of hard-suits, which he overturned with a grunt. "Five minutes with my omnitool and I can fortify this place, I have a can of omnigel in my pack and a couple of drop turrets."

Telanya nodded. "I followed Lady Liara's example and purchased a trio of gun drones. I can also deploy biotic defense." She hesitated. "I... I do not think I could be of much use fighting Lady Benezia. We ... that is, commoners ..."

Liara sighed. "The common folk are reluctant at best to raise arms against a member of the Thirty, Shepard. She may be best suited to stay here and block pursuit."

Jiong shrugged. "I guess that leaves us to fight Lady Benezia?"

Shepard nodded, before pulling off her belt of grenades and handing it to Garrus. "Hold them as long as you can here, and then fall back to the Council Chambers. There's some good areas up there you can snipe from if shit gets too hot here."

Garrus nodded, laying a hand on Shepard's shoulder. "I won't let anything through. I may be a bad turian...but I won't run away."

Shepard smiled. "You're the best turian I know, chicken." She forced her nerves to calm and turned away. "Let's move."

Shepard, Liara and Jiong moved through the corridors, leaving Garrus and Telanya behind, the former using his omnitool to cut sections of wall plating, the latter programming her drones. Jiong glanced back at them before quietly speaking. "I didn't expect you to .. leave part of your team behind to hold the line, Commander."

Shepard shook her head. "I hate doing it, but Benezia is going to be hard enough to fight without her getting geth backup." She glanced at Liara. "I've gone over this a million times in my head. She hits harder than any of us. She's got more biotic power, and you can't get in close without facing that warp sword. She's got better defenses, her flares and warpfire are too strong to block, and she can shut our own biotics down if we're too slow."

Liara nodded, and Shepard continued. "But she hasn't had to fight in over three goddamned centuries, except a couple of times with Saren. And she's got to be worn out from getting here. My plan is simple. I focus on the kanquess – I move around as fast as I can, throwing heavy fire her way – grenades, slams, shots from the Revenant with explosive ammo, whatever I can to keep her off balance. Liara, you find a location with heavy walls and use your barriers and fields to dig in, and whenever she exposes herself, hit her with everything you have. If she closes position on you, throw the antibiotic grenades and use your shotgun, and I'll hit her from behind."

They emerged into the grand concourse. Burned and blasted geth littered the floor, along with dead asari. Liara frowned. "...my mother's followers...but who killed them?"

"Your aithntar, Little Wing."

The three whirled, only to find a single asari leaning against the wall, her leg twisted and half her face badly burned. Liara's voice trembled as she spoke. "Huntress Ushan..."

Shepard covered the asari with her ODIN, eyes hard. "Who is she?"

Liara exhaled. "She...she is my mother's bodyguard, her personal protector. She trained Shiala ... and sometimes myself."

The asari woman gave a bitter smile, purple blood trickling from her mouth. Her hand held her torso, bits of flesh and bone visible from a gaping hole she had plugged partially with torn cloth, more blood spilling down her side to pool below her. "I'm no threat...Nazara's warmth is filling me with a soft sort of ... acceptance, I think. I'll be dead soon. Little Wing, you must help your mother. She is trying to save everyone."

Shepard snarled, the ODIN making an ominous clicking sound, and Jiong flicked the safety off his flamethrower. It was Liara who spoke, her voice cool, the tremble in it gone. "You are wrong, Hunt Mistress. My mother is dead. She died when she tried to kill me on Feros. She died when she murdered millions of innocents for vengeance, when she experimented on living creatures for her own ambitions."

Whatever is in that chamber up there is not my mother, and whatever she does is not to save anyone."

Liara lifted the pistol in her hand and fired once. "Find peace in the embrace of the Goddess, Ushan."

The asari woman slumped in death, and Shepard gave Liara a sidelong look. "Liara..."

Her lover shook her head. "That was not Ushan, Sara. Just ... a living corpse. I couldn't even feel her biotics any longer." She glanced up the long stairways to the Council Chambers, biting her lip. "You were telling us our strategy."

Shepard nodded. "Jiong...you're the wild card. I got you the strongest possible omnishield, and I know you're faster than you let on. Focus on defending yourself and if you get a chance, using your neural mace to knock that sword away. Her biotics can't stop fire, so your flamethrower will come in handy when we need to reposition Liara."

Jiong nodded. "I am prepared." He paused. "Whatever happens, Commander...the Commissariat will not forget your heroism."

Shepard sighed. "We should go."

### O-OSaBC-O

At the back of the Council Chambers, Benezia's soft footsteps stopped at the form of Aethyta on the floor. With a sigh she knelt, turning the asari woman over.

Aethyta coughed, blood spilling from her nose and mouth, her armor half melted. "...fried my goddess-damn tits off...crazy bitch."

Benezia allowed herself a small smile. "You finally lost. You owe me two bottles of Serrice Ice Wine." The smile faded. "I don't want to kill you, Eth. I don't even know if I can. Please. Don't fight me. Join me. What I'm doing is to help us all."

The other asari closed her eyes, her voice tired and weak. "The Solarch said Nazara was the Darkness Beyond the Dawn, Nezzy. That girl of ours found evidence showing they've been doing this shit for millions of years, but I don't see any of those dead fuckers kicking round. How are you so sure they'll let us survive and aren't just using you?"

Benezia shook her head, wincing at a pain in her back. Her energies were nearly depleted. The cybernetic materials in her body were wondrous, truly magical and showed Nazara's power...but they had their limits, and without more energy and materials, couldn't stop death forever.

She focused her thoughts to clear them, and responded. "I could tell you all the reasons, but I thought you of all people knew me better than that. Do you think I would turn aside from my path and the plans I had for mere weak gestures? Or that I could not or would not check out Saren's wild claims before following his path?"

Aethyta opened her eyes and looked at Benezia a long moment before her lips quirked. "I think you would do anything to feel alive again, just like you were with me. I think you were hurt...because I was a shitty bondmate and I left you in a bad position because I was scared. I think you were lonely, and frustrated the Triune was shrinking, and angry at everything."

Benezia's mouth fell open but Aethyta continued. "And I think Saren was tired and worn out and you felt you could heal him, and he made you feel alive again. I think if I'd been braver, and Liara less stubborn, and you willing to admit you weren't perfect, we'd be a family, instead of us killing each other like this."

Aethyta coughed and spat blood, and Benezia found herself ... upset. She reached for the packet of medigel in her armor before Aethyta caught her wrist.

"Don't, Nezy. If it's come to this...if I can't make you turn away, if not for love of me for the love of Liara...I don't want to hang around."

Benezia tore her wrist free and smeared the medigel over the largest wound on Aethya's body she could see. "I know what I have to do. I've seen the alternatives. I can't make you agree or understand...but I can keep you here and let you feel Nazara's power yourself. Then you will understand..."

There were footsteps in the distance, and Benezia frowned. Picking up her warp sword, she turned and stood.

Standing before her was her daughter, Commander Shepard, and a human she didn't know. All three had ignited omnishields and were festooned with weapons, and Liara's eyes were fixed not on her, but the battered figure of Aethya behind her.

Aethya spoke first. "Hey. Just a bit of domestic violence here. Nothing to worry about."

Benezia hissed. "Eth, shut *up*."

Shepard's cold blue eyes bore into her own, angry, fierce, and cold. Somehow, they reminded her of Saren's eyes. The clarity. The iron-hard madness. The desperation and the fear, not for themselves but for those they cared for.

A glowing sphere of silvery metal hovered over the command plinth, and it gave a chiming sound.. "Commander, Nazara is already attempting to activate the Dark Relay."

Benezia smiled. "You are far too late...again."

The voice continued. "However, it is unable to do so – something inside the Citadel is resisting it. I have reactivated the Widow Relay and am opening the ward arms."

With a snarl, Benezia hurled a blast of biotic fire at the sphere, which splashed into burning particles...and then reformed, the biotic energy flickering out. "Violence, the last refuge of the incompetent. Shepard, I must assist in stopping Nazara, I leave the screaming and waving about of guns and swords up to you."

The sphere quivered and splashed to the ground, its glow fading. Shepard turned from gazing it to gazing at Benezia.

"Benezia T'Soni, Lunarch of the Temple of Athame. In the name of the Citadel Council, you are charged with high treason, murder, sabotage, embezzling, espionage, conspiracy, theft, and collusion with geth."

Aethya spoke up. "You left out 'being stupid enough to listen to Saren.'"

Shepard's mouth quirked. "That too."

Benezia tightened her grip around her sword. "Human. You cannot stop Nazara even if you kill me. It is not too late, even now, to reconsider your actions."

Liara spoke. "No, Mother. That is what you should be doing. You tried to kill your own daughter, and now .. "she hesitated, then spoke more firmly "tried to kill your bondmate. You have killed millions of innocent people and had your followers commit atrocities on our own family." Her fists clenched, biotic light shimmering around her. "The Council of Matriarchs calls for your death, or mine. And I plan to live."

Shepard nodded. "You can still give up. As much as I want to fucking kill you for what you've done to my people and my men...I know you're strong enough that at least one of us is going to die. You can

always give up now and – "

Benezia laughed.

"And what, Commander Shepard, Butcher of Torfan? Throw myself onto your mercy, or the mercy of my misguided daughter and what can only be a Commissar, a bloody-handed cousin of the Justicars? No." Her voice dropped an octave, and she walked counterclockwise, away from Aethyta and to one side, her own biotics softly glowing around her, her sword erupting into warpfire. "This only ends one way. You killed my bondmate. There is nothing for you but death at my hand."

Liara firmed her stance, eyes narrow. "And I will not allow you to kill *my* bondmate."

There was a moment of quiet before the soft, rasping chuckle of Aethyta was heard. "Oh, Goddess."

Benezia glanced between Shepard and Liara for a long moment before gently flexing her neck from side to side. When she spoke, her voice was icy.

"Shepard. Now I am actually *angry*."

With a blaring flash of biotic energy that ripped up deck plates and snapped the delicate cherry trees in half, Benezia slammed down a flare that sent the three of them flying backwards. Biotic energy crawled over Benezia's body as she settled into a sword stance.

Liara groaned and let the hasty barrier she'd erected fall, tucking herself into cover. "Shepard, remember the plan!"

Jiong blinked and sat up, hurled the furthest away, before shaking his head to clear it. "Well, that was .. bracing." Wiping blood from his lips, he angled himself against a pillar, waiting for an opening.

Shepard got to her feet, spitting blood. "Bitch." She extended her arm, the hot-orange glow of her omni-tool smearing into shape as it unfolded from her arm and extended.

The room was still for a long second, and then exploded into blue light.

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## Chapter 121: Chapter 112 : Citadel, Finale

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A/N:

*And thus the circle is closed.*

*Some may not like the approach I took with the final fight of Benezia, but it has been in my mind the entire time since I decided to switch the final baddie. Drawing the fight out longer for the sake of awesome doesn't improve the story. I'm hoping the way she ends things is better than the somewhat stilted and nonsensical scene in ME1.*

*Nor will you get to see Tazzik and Prime 302 throw-down, sorry. There isn't enough awesome in the English language to describe that fight. Tazzik won, though, but not by much. Prime 302 had sent off his runtimes before though ... so don't be surprised when you see him again.*

*Some of the biotic abilities used in this chapter can be found described in more detail in my Encyclopedia Biotica, particularly Shell. If you don't feel like looking it up, here is the description:*

**Shell (asari) :** Shell is the derangement of natural energy states among molecules, binding together the energy states and valance levels of surrounding matter to create a nano-thin shell of compressed degenerate matter, commonly called neutronium. The mass of even such minute amounts of this material is immense – a shell a micron thick weighs a ton. But it's utter density means it very simply

cannot be pierced by any currently known weapons or forces. The shell is unstable, and will rapidly degenerate into a blaze of high-energy sub-mesonic particles, gamma rays, and pure energy with explosive force within a few seconds of creation. The most famous use of this ability was during the Krogan wars, when the high solar priestess of Athame used the Shell to block a direct hit from a cruiser main gun, then combined the breakdown of the shell with a Channel to blast a hole into the ship. The sight of a single asari in ritual robes literally battling a starship was key in breaking the morale of the Kehphic Valley Clans, giving the turians the access they needed to launch the genophage.

*The other thing that might need explaining is the warp sword. The sword was damaged by Jiong's trap (the one that blew off her arm). A warp sword's eezo matrix is highly unstable, and if used incorrectly (or when damaged) the sword explodes extremely violently. This is touched on in Anderson's apartment by Liara in an earlier chapter, when Liara reasons why the Solarch would send her the T'Soni family blade.*

*There's still a couple of happy-ending chapters ahead. Not sure when I will get to them, but soon.*

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Above Thessia, geth ships traded fire with asari cruisers and frigates, the clear blue waters of the world below troubled by crashed wrecks and the sky alight with burning fragments of shattered ships.

Near Palaven, the Turian First Fleet pinned down the last remains of the geth that had assaulted their homeworld, driving them back with massed fire. Smaller vessels lead the charge, the turian anthem of 'Die for the Cause' blaring from every speaker and howling from every turian throat, as the geth dreadnaught traded blows with the Spirit of Honor, the turian flagship. Burning flares of light and plumes of smoke that dragged across Palaven's turbulent atmosphere spoke to the wild shots that had missed targets and struck the cities and fields of the world.

In the outskirts of Sur'Kesh orbit, the salarian fleet executed their masterstroke, three heavy missile dreadnaughts uncloaking in the middle of the geth armada that threatened their world, vomiting forth disruptor torpedoes to tear out the heart of the geth offensive. Their defensive fleet was battered but whole, and the geth were now thrown into chaos as they attempted to reform their tattered lines. But salarians harried them from every angle even as STG hackers sowed chaos among their collective data lines, and the geth splintered, ships fleeing in all directions.

The geth collective was displeased by the amount of material it was losing, and equally displeased that the resulting fights had revealed deep weaknesses in geth battle strategy and ability. Organics were far more capable of absorbing cohesion-shattering damage than the geth, and the lag of coordinating so many ships over such a large area meant the geth were not fighting at full collective intellectual capacity.

The broken message from Prime 302, informing them that success of the Plan was now very unlikely, had only worsened the situation. Facing destruction of 65% of its available forces, the only possible resource it had was rapid withdrawal to fortified areas inside the Perseus Veil. Yet, if the collective withdrew and Nazara was triumphant, such a lack of faith would be disastrous.

The highest members of the Circuit of Directive Analysis held a limited consensus poll. 68.394% voted to withdraw, but to reform the fleet just inside the Veil and await further instructions from Nazara. If triumphant, the unified fleet could crush the weakened defenders at the organic home worlds. And if Nazara failed, the remaining combat power of the geth could at least stand off the organics long enough to prepare further defenses.

Much as had been done on Eden Prime, Prime 302 had pulsed a copy of all his runtimes to the geth fighting near the Citadel, and when the relay opened up that was tight-beamed to a waiting geth courier

ship near Bekenstein. Armed with the last memories and consensus polls of the Prime unit closest to the fighting, the geth collective affirmed the decision to withdraw and sent the order immediately.

The only exception was the force fighting at or within the Citadel – they were to fight until deactivation, to at least attempt the success of Nazara's plan.

O-OSaBC-O

Fleet Master Dragunov leaned heavily on the Avenger rifle, looking out over the wreckage of his command center. Blood spatters and ugly streaks of white were only reminders of the vicious battle that had taken place on his bridge, as geth hunters had gotten aboard and attempted to end his life.

The battle had been fierce, but Dragunov prided himself on his skills not only at command but in combat. He'd put down several geth single-handedly before ship marines could respond, bringing down six with an Avenger he kept under his command plinth and a seventh in desperate close quarters combat.

That geth still lay on the ground next to him, his field knife sunk to the hilt in its eye, one of its limbs snapped off, shot to death with its own weapons. Medics and engineers swarmed the bridge, even as a comm tech, wiping white fluid off his haptic panel, spoke. "Fleet Master, flash traffic from CITFLTCMD. They report the relay to the Widow Nebula is powering back up, ETA until translation seven minutes."

Dragunov nodded wearily. "Confirm and acknowledge, but no new orders. Hackett will have to decide how to proceed once he gets there. Any response from Terra Nova?"

The comm tech nodded, tapping his panel again. "Heavy casualties from the six shots that struck Tyson City, sir. Estimates are over two thousand dead, nine thousand injured. EMT and first responders are on the scene."

Dragunov nodded again, turning to access the fleet status panel. The First Fleet had stopped the geth advance towards Earth cold, but at a hideous price. His command ship was a burning wreck, and the other dreadnaught under his command had been blown out of the sky. Half of his cruisers were gone, the other half damaged, and his light frigates and destroyers were about his only effectives left.

The Fifth Fleet was much less heavily damaged, but he'd dispatched that on towards the Citadel, after hearing about the assault occurring there. From what his comms team had picked up, the Geth had launched a titanic assault on all major relays leading to the Citadel as well as the home worlds of most of the Citadel races. Both Palaven and Irune were hit hard, with Thessia taking some damage and Sur'kesh having driven the attackers off entirely.

That left him with ugly choices, and a call he didn't want to make. "Open a channel to SA Fleet Command, in the main comms room." He rose, kicking the geth corpse as he passed, and walked down the CIC command corridor, past tired and wounded marine guards and hastily stacked piles of more geth corpses.

The ugly hole in his ship where geth boarding pods had burrowed into the hull like ticks was being patched, but it was still visible. Blood and geth fluids stained the floors and bulkheads, while bullet holes and dart impacts were scattered wildly. Stepping past the breech, he entered the comm room, even as the logo of SA Fleet Command blanked.

Rear Admiral Branson, the new Admiral in charge of Fleet Command, gave him a wintry smile, his perfect patrician features back-lit by the sunshine from a clear day in Vancouver. Next to him sat two admirals of the red that Dragunov didn't recognize, recently promoted by the looks of their uniforms.

"Fleet Master, I presume the geth have been dealt with?"

Dragunov nodded. "Yes, Admiral. We've suffered heavy damage to the First Fleet, and I recommend withdrawal to Arcturus and deploying one of the area reaction forces to cover this area. Second Fleet is little more than hammered shit right now, let them redeploy to Sol to support the *Solguard* while we cover Arcturus."

Branson arched an eyebrow. "What of Fifth Fleet?"

Dragunov shrugged. "I sent them to Bekenstein to support the Citadel forces fighting the geth."

One of the admirals next to Branson scowled. "Fleet Master, we gave very clear orders that the SA was not going to get involved in the mess there. These people dug their own hole, let them dig themselves out of it."

Dragunov snorted. "Hackett and Mikhailovich were going to leave no matter what orders I gave them. Hackett's daughter, wife, and two of his sons are on the Citadel, and Mikhailovich is in the same situation. Additionally, you heard the decree from Lord Manswell, regarding both Shepard and the effort against the geth."

Branson sighed. "The Lord Prince does not command the SA, nor it's fleets. Right now we have two damaged fleets. The Third and Fourth are out of position to defend Earth. If another geth fleet approaches, sending away the Fifth may doom countless humans to death. I disapprove such ... reckless disregard for the seriousness of our own situation."

Dragunov gritted his teeth. "Reports indicate the geth are falling back. You don't have to like it, it's been made perfectly clear that I won't be Fleet Master much longer, so I could give a shit if you approve or disapprove, boy. I was commanding ships before you were even born. What matters is humanity is going to look like shitbags if even the fucking quarians are helping out at the Citadel and we aren't."

Branson gave a weary motion of his hands. "I suspect the Admiralty will have new orders for you shortly. For now, proceed with your plan to relocate to Arcturus. We'll dispatch some troops from Gamma Reaction Force to reinforce Terra Nova." He paused. "Until such time as we've had a chance to review your orders in more detail...consider yourself under Fleet control. Do not try our patience any further, Fleet Master. Fleet Command out."

The signal faded, and Dragunov snorted to himself. "Idiot boy."

O-OSaBC-O

Shepard flashed into the biotic charge just before more warfire from Benezia erupted into her position, flashing away as the boom of a biotic explosion sounded a second later.

*Shit, she can pull those off quick.*

Ignoring her burning nerves, she bounced through two more locations before stopping to unload a full burst from the ODIN at Benezia. The asari's barrier flared brightly as the biotic suppressive material in the buckshot strained it, flaring electromagnetic charges interfering with Benezia's tight control. Not stopping there, Shepard triggered an pre-programmed info-war command from her omni, gouts of hot plasma bursting out in a star pattern around Benezia.

The asari matriarch ducked and flashed out in her own kanquess before the plasma detonated, countering a strong burst of warfire from Liara with an outflung hand and a shield of glowing blue. Jiong moved, hurling grenades, the blasts knocking Benezia from her feet, and then Shepard dashed in from the kanquess to fling a handful of biotic disruptors over the area and lash out with her omniblade, carving through the armor on Benezia's thigh.

Shepard couldn't jump back fast enough to avoid Benezia's snarled reaction, a disruption field that

detonated the biotic dampening devices before they could spin up fully. The field tore at Shepard's armor and electronics, alarms blaring inside her helmet, before Benezia struck her with a biotic-enhanced kick.

Shepard had been struck by krogan, hit by turians, and once took a near direct hit from a anti-material rifle, but nothing in her life compared to the power of that lashing kick. Her chest armor shattered like cheap glass as she was hurled thirty feet away to slam into a wall with stunning force, stars exploding across her vision.

Benezia erupted into blue light a few feet away, a trio of blazing singularities orbiting her free hand even as she drove it down. There was a blast of light and the entire room seemed to shake, the biotic explosion from singularities striking a reinforced hard shield invocation throwing Benezia back almost as far as she'd kicked Shepard.

Liara stood, panting from the exertion of throwing a shield that far. "Shepard!"

She got to her feet unsteadily, wincing as something ground together in her hip. "I'm fine, Liara." She glanced around, not seeing her ODIN anywhere, and instead drew Saren's pistol, sighting in on Benezia as the woman shook her head. Pulling the trigger, she fired three times.

The first two shots hit Benezia's barrier and flared, but the third punched through, blowing a hole completely through the asari matriarch's shoulder, sending her crashing to the ground in agony. Shepard stepped forward, firing again, this time taking out Benezia's knee.

"Fitting I'm going to kill you with your boyfriend's pistol, bitch."

Benezia's eyes flared in anger, even as blue wiring erupted from the wounds, slowly closing them. She flicked her hand. Jiong and Liara yelled, but not before Shepard felt something strike her hard in the back.

She looked down to see Benezia's warp sword – thankfully not alight with warpfire – sticking out of her side, right through her armor. "Oh. Well shit."

A moment later she slumped, agony flaring through her body. Benezia didn't have time to attack her, because Liara began throwing wild blasts of biotic energy, screaming hatred.

Jiong scarpered past, ducking a flare that incinerated the very floor and left the air crackling, skidding to a stop next to Shepard. Grunting he grabbed her and dragged her behind a low wall next to some benches. "Stay still, Commander."

Shepard spat blood. "L-Liara.."

Jiong glanced up. The two asari were trading biotic blasts, the flares of blue energy too bright to look at. "Liara is holding her off. We have to get this damned blade out of you." Turning her onto her side, he grimaced and with a tug, slid the curved weapon out in one go, ignoring Shepard's muffled screams of agony.

Tossing the bloodied thing to the ground, he paused to place a proximity detonator on it, before turning back to Shepard. He tore open a pod of 'heavy' medigel – fortified with clotting agents, pain killers, morphine and other supplemental agents – and poured it into the bloody slot on her armor. "This will help, but not much. She probably scored your kidney with that, internal bleeding will be hellish."

Shepard grunted, still unable to move. "Hurts like a bitch. Hate gut stabs. Armor is dispensing meds. Help Liara."

Jiong nodded, standing and lifting his flamethrower. He triggered his biotics, picking up as many bits of debris and chunks of broken plating as he could, before using throw to accelerate them to top speed

at Benezia.

The barrage of items struck her unawares, sending her off balance. Liara's eyes narrowed hatefully as she threw all her power into another flare, this one finally shattering Benezia's defenses and blasting the matriarch backwards, gouts of semi-molten metal cascading off her battle armor. "Am I strong enough now, Mother? Am I?"

Benezia coughed up blood, finding herself knocked all the way back towards Aethyta, who gave a dry weak laugh. "She's beating your ass, Nezzzy."

Benezia shot her a glare. "You should be trying to talk her down. I don't have any choice but to get serious now."

Standing, albeit a bit shakily, Benezia sighed. "I've had enough of this, daughter." She noted Shepard getting to her feet sourly, and the Commissar snaking through cover. "This ends now."

With a flex of her biotics she found the signature of her warp sword, using a pull to draw it into her hand. She had no idea why the Commissar suddenly grinned until she grabbed it – and heard a loud beep.

A second later she was on the floor again, her entire forearm gone. Her warp sword was cracked and blackened – if she'd been running warp fire through it when that device went off, she'd have blown herself – and Aethyta – to atoms. Blood poured out of the stump of her arm, the blue cyberwires sluggishly reacting to the damage.

She slumped. The last of Nazara's energy in her body was starting to fade. She'd expended too much of it arrogantly in her fight with Aethyta, soaking damage instead of blocking it, trying to break her spirit by her seeming invincibility. Now there was nothing left.

Getting to her feet, she pulsed her biotics around her, strengthening her barrier. The pain in her arm was agony, and she could feel burns along her leg, side, and face. Her left eye was starting to close, and she realized she was bleeding heavily from shrapnel.

Liara held up one hand, glowing fiercely. She looked tired, but determined, a hard look in her eyes that Benezia couldn't recall seeing before. "It is over, Mother. Find your peace."

Benezia gave a slow, cunning smile. She was proud of Liara. T'Soni would survive, no matter what, but Liara had found her center somewhere in the strange life she lead. That was good.

"I am sorry, my child. But...no."

She raised her hand in an evocation even as Shepard, Jiong and Liara all opened up on her with biotic fire and guns. Black crackling energy erupted into the air before hardening into a solid black sphere for a second.

Behind her, Aethyta cursed. "DUCK!"

The sphere absorbed everything thrown at it, then detonated outward in sprays of hot white energy. The decking buckled, seats and pillars melting under the heat. Lances of fire exploded out violently, tearing runnels of melted metal through the areas. One beam of energy struck an overhead balcony, the entire structure coming apart and collapsing onto Jiong, the man screaming as shards of metal drove into his leg and arm, smashing his weapon and sending burning fluids across the floor.

Liara managed to bring up a defensive screen but it was too weak to stop the blast of energy that struck her head on, sending her skidding backwards, trailing blood and smoke. She fell against a wall, her armor melted and charred in places, her leg bent awkwardly.

Shepard managed to find the energy to biotically charge away, avoiding a blast that tore completely

through the side of the Tower, punching another hole into space which was sealed by emergency fields after a few seconds of howling vacuum sucking at the air. She landed badly, tumbling to a stop behind a pillar, gasping for breath and against the pain in her side.

Benezia knelt on the floor, her only remaining hand splayed in front of her, biotic fire running along her fingertips. "You children...you think you can actually stop me? I have been fighting for centuries, to defend and protect my Family and people. And I still am." She glanced at Liara, her eyes narrowing.

"If you will not be turned...you will be destroyed."

She rose, her arm still bleeding, her armor scorched, her face scarred, but still regal and terrible. "Your feeble skills are no match for the might of Nazara." She paused to send a burst of warpfire into Jiong's location, drawing fresh screams from the man and melting the ruined metal over him in place, trapping him. "You will pay the price for your lack of vision!"

Warp-fire hammered into her daughter, sending her to her knees in sobbing agony as it ate through her body. Flickers of black lightning-like charges followed, and Liara felt her biotics fail.

Shepard charged, firing as she went with Saren's pistol, but this time Benezia made two motions with her hand, and the comet-like shots deflected. A pull of such strength she couldn't fight it tore the pistol out of her hand, flying into Benezia's outreached one, and a moment later Shepard was sent to the deck screaming, the Sunfire pistol having shot her through the left thigh.

Benezia tossed the pistol aside, walking over to Shepard. The human gritted her teeth and forced herself to her feet, leaping and extending her omniblade, but Benezia caught her with a lift field, immobilizing her, before biotically backhanding her across the room. Shepard felt like her skull split open as blood erupted from her nose and mouth and she fell to the deck.

She groaned, then shivered in cold terror as she felt her biotics failing. Benezia raised her only hand, biotic light encircling her like a halo, and smiled a bloodied, feral grin. "Young fool. Only now, at the end, do you understand."

Benezia knelt down next to Shepard, warp fire ensconcing her hand. "And now you die."

Jiong cursed. He was buried beneath rubble. Liara's biotics were suppressed – he'd read the abilities of the asari matriarch, and somehow she could use her own biotics to create an effect much like a pulse disruptor. It would only last a few minutes...but they only had seconds left.

*This is going to hurt.*

With all of his strength, he threw his biotics into a push against the floor below him and the material trapping him. He screamed as metal tore away in jagged strips, carving through his leg and back, but his conditioning allowed him to keep his focus.

Benezia jerked back at the sound, hurling a bolt of warpfire in his path. He didn't have enough energy to block it, or do anything except one critical act.

He threw his neural mace.

At Liara.

Hot warpfire struck him, burning past his armor and sending him crashing to the ground, blackness claiming him. But he knew it was enough.

The neural mace was the rod of the Commissariat. Designed to inflict crippling pain, it disrupted nerve networks and shattered biotic fields. When it struck Liara it was a icy bolt of agony tearing through her system.

But the electrical discharge that erupted from it hitting her also blasted away her mother's Dissipate technique, and Liara felt her biotics roar back into her limbs. She was trembling, hurt. Her aithntar lay dying barely forty feet away and she had never even seen her face clearly. Her bondmate was in agony, defenseless before her mother.

Anger and fury tore through her and she let everything simply go. The frustrated years of being alone. The tears of not fitting in. The disappointment from all those around her. The pain and heartbreak of losing her mother, of knowing she was all alone. The heat of Shepard's flesh against her body, of feeling another person in her soul and knowing she existed, she was alive. The pain of Shepard's early life, the agony of the rapes, the ugly years as a criminal, the biting ache of being isolated.

Everything erupted, the incandescent burning anger that was part and parcel of Shepard and her own tired, listless despair mingling and tearing out of her in a single mindless scream of rage, and warpfire and singularities blasted out.

She didn't care if she died. She didn't care her leg was shattered, or that blood ran from her nose. She didn't care she could feel her own body literally cooking itself as she threw the biotic fire, the screaming from her nerves. Didn't care her heartbeat skipped irregularly, or the shoulder she'd had blown open on Eingana pulsed in agony.

All she cared about was saving Shepard and striking down her mother. The blast that shattered the air was a mix of badly formed singularities, sloppy flares, and raw raging wild warpfire that struck Benezia like a freight train, spinning around her in a maelstrom that hurled her back thirty feet before Liara's power died and the entire mess detonated in a series of biotic explosions that rocked the entire tower.

The pain hit Liara then, her heart feeling like it was going to stop, her lungs on fire. She couldn't move, or stop herself from falling bonelessly to the floor. The cherry trees swayed in the wind of the explosion, countless petals falling before her slowly closing eyes. Each one glittering in the starlight, swaying delicately as they fell to the hard steel floor.

She could dimly hear Shepard crying out her name. Feel the panic and fear and love and despair. She managed to find enough strength to smile up as Shepard crawled over to her, leaving a trail of bright red blood from her shattered leg.

"Liara! Liara!"

She let herself be held, clinging to the warmth. "I...did it. Sara."

Shepard was weeping, frantically trying to do something with her omnitool. The light was darkening around them. Liara managed to swallow, trying to find her voice. "Sara...please."

Those blue eyes she loved so much found hers. "...what..."

"Take me to .. my father. My aithntar."

Shepard stared at her a long moment before nodding. Grimacing, she somehow managed to find the strength to lift Liara's form. Pain lanced through them both as she staggered, Shepard's leg aching and muscles slowly tearing, and then she slumped to her knees, crawling and pulling Liara with her to the form of Aethyta.

The matriarch coughed weakly, a trickle of blood marring her face. "I'm sorry you had to do that, kiddo. I came here to stop her so you wouldn't hafta. Like everything else in my sorry ass life, failed that one too."

Liara reached her hand out, and Aethyta took it weakly. "I .. I am glad I was able to meet you before we die."

Aethya's eyes closed in pain, and Shepard coughed up more blood even as she glared. "We...are not going to fucking die. Not now. Not after all this shit. Liara..."

The older asari chuckled. "You found a good bondmate, Liara. I'm so goddess dammed happy you found .. someone." She looked at her daughter, tears filling her eyes. "I'm so sorry I wasn't there."

Liara shook her head weakly, letting herself nestle against Shepard. "I forgive you." She shivered. She was growing cold, and her legs had no feeling left. "I only wish I had more time."

Three bleeding forms lay there, as the battle continued in space and elsewhere.

O-OSaBC-O

Garrus spat blood, leaning weakly against the makeshift barricade he'd erected. Holes littered his armor, each one seeping blue, and his right arm hung limp, shattered by a geth sniper.

Dozens of the machines littered the area, white fluids forming pools and rivulets near the airlock. The entire room was shot to pieces, the walls blackened. Broken turrets and shattered drones bulked next to the panting form of Telanya, clutching her stomach and gritting her teeth against the pain, back to back with him.

"Think...that's the last of them, love." Her voice was weak and thready, and she coughed, wiping blood from her mouth. "Rifle's broken, and I can't move my legs. I think I burned my neural brace out, biotics are almost gone."

He nodded wearily. His rifle was useless with one arm, and he was down to Forlan's Talon pistol. He'd been shot in two of his three hearts and spirits only knew where else, and a quarter of his fringe had been blown off by a plasma blast. His knee was a pulped wreck. "Good. Held the line."

She laughed weakly, her hand finding his. "Yeah. Guess I get to be...honorary turian."

He shook his head. "Nah...you need a stick up the ass to be one of us." He squeezed her hand, smiling as he felt her pulse through their bond. "Spirits..."

Her voice sounded a moment later. "If I don't make it..."

He gave a rasping growl. "Not happening."

"Garrus...shut up. If .. I don't make it, I want you to promise me. Promise...you will find a nice turian girl, make your family happy. Don't keep running from your past like I am."

The turian was silent for a long moment. "I can't do that. If you aren't here, the only thing left for me is a short walk off a tall building. I don't...I can't do this alone. I need you. Not someone else. Not some silly turian girl more concerned about pushing out more babies for the Hierarchy than my needs."

He ducked his head. "Besides...I'm just selfish enough to say if I don't make it I expect you to weep bitterly over my corpse and never date again."

Telanya gave a weak answering laugh. "You suck, Garrus." They fell silent again, hearing the explosions and screams from the Council Chambers above, then silence.

Garrus felt his pulse slowing, and knew he'd lost way more blood than he could afford. And he could feel, dimly, Telanya's life weakening. Gritting against the pain it caused his knee, he turned and pulled her closer to him, burying his face into her shoulder, wrapping his arms around her.

She didn't resist, her delicate hands tracing his jaw before falling limply to her side, her shallow hesitant breathing the only clue she was still alive. "Better this way, maybe. Two broken people just...drifting off to sleep."

He smiled weakly at her words. "Maybe that's true." He let his head slump, and the corridor was silent save for the drip-drop sounds of spattered geth fluids and the slow hissing of air from the chamber where blasts had broken it's airtight seal.

O-OSaBC-O

Nazara was losing.

The data-systems of the Citadel were vast, hidden from the stupid prey races that clambered aboard the station. They connected the Citadel to every mass relay, and acted as a vast mapping array to shift the relays around. They allowed the Ascended to hide away recently harvested worlds in areas with no relay and too far for FTL flight to get to, aiding in the deception of the Harvest.

That vastness was being used against Nazara. The very terrain of the data-network was twisting, limiting his space to fight, slowing his reaction times. The Catalyst was superior at this sort of battle, one of code and access, of processing and reaction. Billions of semi-intelligent runtimes clashed with one another over thousands of subsystems every second, but slowly the Catalyst was winning out.

When the strange AI erupted into the battle, throwing it's strength to support the Catalyst, Nazara knew it was over. The bizarre feel of the thing stank of Inusannon technology, and the AI wasted no time in it's strikes, pushing Nazara further and further away from the Dark Relay switches.

It knew, from it's own sensors, the ward arms were about to open, that the Widow Relay was reactivating. Soon reserves would flood in, and eventually Nazara would be outnumbered and destroyed.

The Ascended would react, of course. They could not let primitives learn of the Harvest, much less of the reasons for it. That would violate the Severity in the worst possible way. Using his own power to destroy the Citadel was the only answer. Harbinger had indicated such might be necessary if the Catalyst was active, and it indeed was.

Flicking it's senses out at a minimal level, it found it's thrall had been defeated by that insect Shepard. But Benezia was not dead, merely badly wounded. All of the stored energy in her upgraded body had been expended in repairing her body, it seemed, and triggering a full Ascension Protocol would be problematic.

Better to simply instruct her. He was able to pull back enough to send her a command.

O-OSaBC-O

Benezia's eyes opened.

Pain like nothing she'd ever felt before flared over her entire body. Her last memories were of her daughter throwing what looked like a biotic hurricane at her, and a feeling of burning.

Something nagged at her mind...a voice?

***Benezia. Awaken. I have need of you.***

She rolled to her knees with a groan. If she'd been merely asari, she would be dead, but the battered cybernetic implants in her body gave her strength and durability not even a krogan could match, and with a deep breath to brace herself, she was able to stand.

Her left eye was... gone. Her legs were charred, one burned down to gleaming blue wiring and exposed white bones, badly fused clots and burned tissue stopping any further bleeding. The stump of her arm was cauterized by the biotic fire, and her armor hung off her body in tatters, the once proud skirt merely melted drips and sagging chains, her chest armor dented heavily enough to press tightly against her right breast.

"I ... am here, Nazara."

Along one wall she saw her daughter, her bondmate, and Shepard, lying there. Shepard at least managed to look her way, disbelief and a flicker of something else in her eyes, even as Benezia turned from her.

***I am losing. We have been betrayed. The Dark Relay is blocked. You must destroy the Citadel – my kin will answer in wrath.***

She blinked her one good eye. "Destroy...how?"

***The command plinth. Remove the secure locks on the energy generators and route the energy to the stability platforms. It will tear the entire station apart.***

Benezia frowned, her mind hazy. "...but that will ..."

***Benezia! Obey.*** Hard lines of bright pain tore across her mind, and she felt her feet moving, staggering over to the console.

Shepard gritted her teeth, trying to find something to stop her with. "What are you doing!"

Benezia found strength to smile. "Nazara's will. The Citadel will be destroyed."

Shepard's eyes widened. "You goddamned lunatic! You'll kill everyone!"

Benezia frowned but nodded, as she reached the plinth, the last of her strength starting to fade. "Yes. I ... it is hard to think...clearly. It is ... sad. But I must obey."

Lia spoke weakly. "Why ... mother. Why are you doing this..."

Benezia's voice was almost dull. "Protect...the people. If we...serve well, the ... Nazara will elevate us. Make us one of the great ones. Or at least allow us to live."

Shepard spat. "You have proof of this?"

Benezia frowned again. What was she doing? Oh. Destroy Citadel. "I...yes. Collectors. Used to be Protheans, now work for ... Nazara's people. Safe . Alive. Have to protect..."

She winced, a pain in her head building. "No choices. Darkness can't be stopped."

Aethyta gave a breathy laugh. "That's rich, coming from you. You always went on about how everyone gives up too easily. That night gives way to day. That the Moon reminds us even in the darkness of the night, the Light is still there, still waiting for us."

Benezia trembled.

Aethyta's voice hardened. "You remember that? That no matter how dark the night...how cold the tide..."

There were long seconds of silence before Benezia whispered. "...the Light...only fades...when one closes...their eyes to it."

Benezia clutched her head and screamed, a sound that tore Liara's heart out. It was a scream of agony, of fear, of horror. Inside her mind, she fought herself.

A part of herself long sealed away, imprisoned in her own mind by ancient meditative techniques, fear, and indoctrination. A splinter of what she used to be, now fighting to be heard.

*You cannot do this!*

"Nazara..."

*Nazara lies! You know it. Saren knew it. He gave up just like you did. The Light is eternal, the Sun does not set, the seas merely turn away from it. Yet it returns every morning.*

Benezia fell to her knees, before Nazara's voice lanced out. ***Obey, Benezia. Or your people will suffer the same fate as all that came before.***

"I have...to save..."

Liara spoke quietly. "Mother, you told me that no one can be saved, they have to find the strength to save themselves. Was that a lie? If I am to fall...then I fall ... "She coughed blood weakly, panting, but managed to speak again. "But if I survive, I will do it on my own strength, not ... begging for someone to do it for me."

***Destroy the Citadel now!***

*Fight! Your daughter is there. Your bondmate. You've destroyed the Family, destroyed the Triune, lost Saren – what else will you give to Nazara!*

She screamed again, staggering away from the console. Pain blasted through her form, as she felt the machinery inside her grow hot.

***In the end, you are a fool, Benezia. We are eternal. Defiance is futile. I am assuming direct control.***

Blue fire raced through her form, jerking her to a halt, and in horror she watched her body begin to turn back to the platform.

Even as it dominated her body, though, the last controls on her mind fell away, shattering like glass. And she knew. She knew the truth – that no matter what, she and Saren had simply not had the strength to fight any longer. That is why they went along with Nazara.

Her form shuffled towards the plinth, but she smiled. "Eth...always remember me how I was before this. Take care of Liara..."

Aethyta hissed. "Nezzy, what are you doing?"

With a grim focus, she reached out with her biotics. Just as she suspected, the Reaper didn't have control of them. Her sword flashed out, flying through the air in response to her pull, striking her in the chest. The impact only stopped her for a moment before she felt herself move onwards.

***Even now you resist. You ignore logic for irrationality. This is why organic life is inferior.***

Her hands unwillingly rose towards the plinth, and she smiled. "You are wrong, Nazara."

With all her strength, she channeled her barrier, locking her form in place. She felt her body struggling, the cyberware within forcing ever stronger pulses of energy. She would not be able to hold this for long.

She could not turn her head to face her daughter, but perhaps that was for the best. "I am sorry, Liara. You've always made me proud."

A look of shock and sorrow crossed Liara's face. "Mother..."

"I am ... no longer myself. This body is Nazara's." Her form twitched, staggering a step closer to the panel. "But I ... am ... stronger. I should not..have forgotten...the Sun...rises." Her biotics flared, even as the dark shape of a Shell erupted around her.

Aethyta reached out a hand. "Nezzy!"

Benezia found herself able to smile. "Goodnight, Little Wing...Eth. I will...see you with the dawn." With that her biotic barrier closed around her, tight and confining.

Benezia's last impulse, even as Nazara's screaming in her brain reached as level no living thing could resist, was to channel warp fire into the damaged and cracked matrix of her warp sword.

There was a blast like a nova going off, a giant plume of burning blue fire and warped reddish energy erupting upwards, as the Shell shattered from the explosion of the warp sword. The three of them were slammed against the wall, straining their already injured bodies, and when the winds and heat died, only a hole and melted decking existed where Benezia T'Soni once stood.

Aethyta gazed on it a long second before closing her eyes. "So passes Benezia, daughter of Rhysis, Lunarch of the Temple of Athame."

O-OSaBC-O

The Fifth Fleet poured through the open array, still bearing the wounds of their fight with the geth in Terra Nova. The firefight they emerged into was like nothing Hackett had ever seen, so many destroyed and damaged ships floating through the eerie purple-lit void of the Widow Nebula it was hard to see the actual fighting.

The geth fleet prevented the quarians from linking up with the asari and turians, hammering them both with their reinforcements. Their cruisers harried the Citadel Fleet's flanks, smaller ships boarding and fighting the ill-prepared and exhausted quarian veseels. The last remaining geth dreadnaught was closing on the Destiny Ascension, preparing to finish it off once and for all, when the Fifth Fleet arrived.

Admiral Hackett stood on the bridge of the SD4 Kilimanjaro, watching his cruisers fly outwards. "Tactical, what is the situation?"

The tactical plot coordinator, a gray-haired senior commander, glared at the plot as if offended. "Ward arms are opening, Admiral. The black dreadnaught is within, perched on top of the Citadel Tower – sensors show the thing is badly damaged along the port side. We can probably take it out, the geth have drawn the fight from the Citadel, we can get past before they can stop us, especially if they're focused on finishing the asari flagship."

The comms officer spoke. "Incoming transmission from the Destiny Ascension."

Hackett nodded. "On screen."

The screen flickered, displaying a bridge in chaos, corpses littering the ground and fires raging nearly out of control. Battle lighting for the asari ship was blue and it cast the battered features of Matriarch Lidanya in sharp shadows, her eyes wild. "Thank the Goddess you're here, Admiral. We can't hold the Geth off much longer. The Council and many high-ranking asari and turians are aboard this ship – help us drive them off before we're destroyed!"

Hackett bit his lip. If he did that, the Fifth Fleet would take staggering casualties. Possibly so many that going after the black dreadnaught would be unworkable. He gritted his teeth. "I'm still deploying from the relay, Matriarch. Stand by."

He cut the transmission. "We have comms with the Citadel yet?"

The comms officer checked. "...yes. With Executor Palin...and Commander Shepard. Palin sent us her commlink channel."

Hackett nodded. She would do. Better for Udina to make the call, but... "Get her on the horn."

O-OSaBC-O

Shepard had managed to get back to Liara when her omnitool flared to life. "Commander Shepard, this is Admiral Hackett, Fifth Fleet. Come in."

She wearily tapped her comm. "Shepard here. Benezia is...down. What's the sitrep?"

The Admiral's voice was weary. "Drove the geth back from Earth, and the Fleet Master sent me here. We have a situation. My fleet will finish deploying in forty five seconds. The black dreadnaught is unguarded and damaged, if we bypass the geth fighting with the quarrians and Citadel Fleet, I think we have enough to take it out. But the Council is aboard the asari flagship, and the Fleet is going to be destroyed if we don't run into support them. We can't do both."

Shepard cursed. "That's a fucking mess. Why are you comming me about it, though? You're the admiral."

Hackett exhaled. "The President promoted you after you, ah, stole the Normandy. Right now, with your Spectre authorization and the President's backing, you're technically the ranking officer, ma'am. I need to know what to do – you're on the scene, I'm not."

"You want ME to make this call?"

Hackett voice was steady. "Yes. And in the next fifteen seconds if you don't mind."

Shepard sat back, floored, before glancing at Liara. "I..."

Liara was laying next to Aethyta, and merely gave her a small smile. "Whatever you do choose, Shepard, it will be the right answer. I have faith in you."

She swallowed. Her impulse was to tell Hackett to charge Nazara. The moment that fucker was down, the safer they all were.

And yet...the lesson she had learned from her life, her actions, her sacrifices and those of her men, was simple : getting the job done regardless of the cost didn't always lead to the best results.

Sacrificing the Council would make it harder to convince whoever replaced them to prepare for the Reapers...not to mention the SA would probably take advantage of the chaos.

Once, she would have trusted the SA to do the right thing. No more.

"Admiral Hackett, the Reaper is ... occupied. Save the Council and the Citadel Fleet, and then combine forces to finish the damned thing off."

"Understood, Commander."

Shepard slumped as she gazed over at Liara. "Stay awake, Liara. We're going to make it. Just...hang on a little longer."

Liara smiled again, her voice somewhat weak. "I...I am just thinking of my ...mother."

Shepard nodded, staring at the blasted hole in the decking. "...she was strong. In the end, she was too strong for us to beat. She had to beat herself."

Liara's smile was sad, yet proud. "She was...the strongest person I knew. And in the end...she was stronger than even that vile thing controlling her."

Shepard nodded, then grimaced at another alert from her badly damaged armor. Internal bleeding from her kidney and other injuries was dropping her blood pressure, and the suit was out of suppressive drugs to control it.

She laid down on the deck, her leg throbbing. If medical help didn't get here soon, they were all going to die. They couldn't clamber down the tower in this shape, and the elevator shafts were probably blocked.

Aethyta broke the silence. "...so...is Shepard any good in bed?"

## O-OSaBC-O

The final minutes of the Battle of the Citadel were perhaps the most heavily reviewed space battle in history. To the everlasting shock and gratitude of the turians, asari, and quarians, the Fifth Fleet charged into battle against the geth with reckless abandon. Battle cries of "Vengeance for Eden Prime" were transmitted as the humans drove into the geth flank at full speed, ignoring counter-fire and dumping every missile and torpedo they had into driving the geth fleet off.

The Destiny Ascension, nearly a burning wreck by this point, was flanked by Alliance cruisers. Eight of them were destroyed protecting the ship from geth dreadnaught fire until the Kilimanjaro and a battered turian dreadnaught managed to blast the final geth dreadnaught apart.

In the wake of the blast the geth seemed to waver, before the entire fleet began to scatter. With a terse set of orders to "all ships in the vicinity", Admiral Hackett lead the combined fleets towards the widening arms of the Citadel.

Nazara was severely off balance. Still tied to Benezia in Ascension mode when she'd killed herself, he'd been left defenseless for critical seconds, in a battle where things were decided in nanoseconds. The Catalyst had shredded his bioneural networks and pathing, and he found himself too weakened and depleted to call upon the Godpower.

In fact, the giant dreadnaught was focusing on trying to rebuild it's online defenses and crush Vigil when eight hundred sixteen mass slugs tore into the weakened armor on it's side where the Destiny Ascension's missiles had blown away it's armor. Shorn of it's shields, the slugs had nothing stopping them when they tore completely through the dreadnaught, piercing the Reaper's oversized eezo core.

Unlike conventional eezo cores, it didn't detonate – instead it shutdown automatically to prevent catastrophic internal damage. Before Nazara could react, however, the rest of the combined turian, human, asari, salarian, and quarian fleets opened fire in a single blinding fusillade of fire.

Nazara had time for one long pulse transmission using a scrap of the Godpower he'd managed to grab, a searing scream of warning. Then the black shape was torn asunder, pieces blasted apart and showering down among the Wards or tumbling through the purple-hazed nebula.

## O-OSaBC-O

Shepard had slowly slumped into unconsciousness after watching Nazara be blown to pieces, fiercely smiling while clinging to Liara's hand and begging her to stay awake. She felt warm and somehow tired, and was therefore grumpy when someone shook her.

She opened her eyes blearily, confused that she was warm one moment and now felt icy cold, to look up into the amused green eyes of Doctor Chakwas. "Young lady, you've managed to wreck your entire body this time. What do you have to say for yourself?" She smiled as Shepard felt the cooling sting of omnigel enter her side, and her bleary vision saw Liara and Aethyta being worked on by bloodied but smiling medics.

A single figure walked up, clad in black armor. "Oh, Doc. She-bitch always has some smartass remark to toss off after she gets her ass handed to her." Shepard looked up to see the smiling face of Beatrice Shields, her hair shorter but her eyes still the same. "What is it this time,hmm?"

Shepard closed her eyes and managed a faint grin. "You should see the other bitch." She felt herself lifted on some sort of stretcher and coughed weakly. "Garrus...Liara? Tali?"

Shields snorted. "Your friends are all fine. Shot to pieces, but fine. That hottie of a Commissar is still alive too, and you are going to introduce us or I will beat you, She-bitch."

Shepard rolled her eyes and scowled. "Stop poaching my eye-candy, bitch."

Chakwas merely chuckled at their bickering as medics combed through the wreck of the Tower for survivors, and Shepard let herself lean back.

"Heh. Mission accomplished."

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## Chapter 122: Chapter 113 : Citadel, Respite

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A/N:

*There is only one more chapter beyond this. At 12,000 words this chapter is a monster, but the one beyond it will be even bigger. After that, the story will be marked Completed. The opening of this chapter echos the first chapter, which I actually didn't realize until I was editing it, then I went back and made it deliberate.*

*The story will be continued in a linking piece, which I have yet to title yet. (Suggestions for names should be sent via PM. No, Prozman, I will not call it "Sexual Adventures of Shepard featuring Naked Thane".)*

*That will cover a span of time from the end of OSABC to the recovery of Shepard's body and handing it off to Cerberus. It will include some bits from Bring Down the Sky (obviously changed) as well as a very strongly altered Pinnacle Station.*

*I don't usually respond to reviews in A/N, but one guest review needed a response, where someone was upset that the level of damage in the galaxy would make recovery in time for the Reaper invasion difficult.*

*What ever gave you the idea that, in an AU where I've changed literally everything else, the timing from the ME1 piece to the ME3 piece would stay the same? It does not. One of my most bitter pet peeves is that, even if the backup relay got them part of the way there, or something, it would take more than two years, much less six months, to travel from intergalactic space to fairly deep within the galaxy. So there is more time. Which means moar fluff!*

*The final chapter of OSABC will be the award ceremony, with some changes to other things that will impact the story down the line. I will try to get it out ASAP so I can start work on the next piece.*

*To those who love Matriarch Aethyta, this chapter is for you :D*

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"This is a damned mess."

The room had not changed in size, and remained richly decorated. The carpet was still thick, the bar that ran along one wall slightly depleted, and the window was filled with the view of damaged ships and the sparks of repair teams and welding bots.

The long meeting table was bare save a single black-bordered folder.

The air was tainted once more by cigar smoke, but now only two men sat in the room.

Senator Adkins tapped ash from his cigar before taking a sip of whiskey, smirking as he did so. "Is it now? I rather think events went well. Saren's dead, Benezia is dead, the black ship is in pieces and we have a treasure drove of new technology from the geth. The geth are fleeing and everyone is happy to be alive. The damned aliens are so busy sucking our dick in thanks that we saved them they aren't even worried about the ... larger issues at hand."

The other figure in the room was less sanguine in his facial expression, his rich clothing wrinkled from long travel. He also had a cigar, but it was unlit in his hand, the butt end tapping the surface of the table in irregular patterns. "But those larger issues are what concern me. Sooner or later, the information that fool Kyle leaked is going to get out, and there will be ... ugly questions asked."

Adkins nodded. "That's true, Charles. Bad enough the strike on the batarian research center went sour, and now the data is lost. But with the exposure of the Manswell Foundation as crooks and the linking of Cerberus to all these various atrocities...well..." Adkins paused to puff at his cigar. "A lot of the plans you and your party have put forth will be difficult to sell in light of your glowing support of Cerberus not too long ago. Your platform will have to change if you expect the other parties to fall in line."

Charles Saracino leaned forward. "I'm not fool enough to think that just because Shepard blew up that asari tramp and made the decision to save the Council that the spikes, grays and blues aren't out to fuck us over in the long run. You're telling me I'm supposed to forget what my party stands for? The lessons we learned in the First Contact War?"

Adkins smiled wider. "I think, Charles, that Terra Firma is going to have a really hard sell on it's party line to the voters given what's come out of this mess. Rather than *bitching* that humanity is going to get a bit of a reaming regarding some less-than-wise decisions some people made, you should be happy. Most people in the SA are too blind and stupid to see the truth about our alien friends, but they are equally too blind and stupid to realize that you and yours have hands in this pie from the start."

He sighed. "I'm not pretending there aren't problems, but I am saying the way you want to deal with them isn't going to work. If you get ahead of this and place Terra Firma as victims along with everyone else, tone down the turian bashing a bit..." He smiled. "Then maybe you can have a better chance with some of your arguments. Lay it out as if you had no idea it was happening. Blame the sloppiness of the previous administration. Hell, even reach out to a few of the people you kicked out of office and offer them some kind of positions."

Saracino huffed, gesturing to the folder. "And *this* little bombshell?"

Adkins shrugged. "Doesn't surprise me, to be honest. It's nothing you can't bullshit past. You asked for my advice and help, so there it is. I'll do what I can to rein in the Commissariat sniffing around about that issue – De La Muerte owes me bigtime – and have a few words with some friends here and there to limit the damage. But whoever has that kind of intel isn't fucking around, Charles. Dial back the racist bullshit. Frame the issue in focusing on repairing the damage to the SA first. Let the President do his little end-run around the Admiralty with Shepard."

Saracino narrowed his eyes. "She's dangerous. Kyle probably told her everything."

Adkins snorted. "Kyle, despite how smart he thought he was, didn't *know* everything. The L2 project is already done with, there's no evidence and we know the asari sabotaged the things anyway. They'll help keep that part quiet. And no matter how much of a stink Shepard or anyone else raises, we have enough dirt on the other Council races to prevent any stupidity from going too far." He paused, sipping his drink. "To be frank, Manswell's little act of patting Shepard on the head smells too much like someone cutting his losses. The Silver Prince, if he's involved at all, will damn sure not let anything get too carried away. If you're that worried about this, instead of having me keep it quiet, take it to him."

With a disdainful nod, Saracino picked up the folder and stood. "Fine. I'll have my people in touch with yours shortly." He departed in a huff, and after several seconds a false panel on the near wall slid aside to reveal an officer in an Alliance uniform.

"Was that wise, encouraging him? The AIS investigation is almost complete, framing him up and getting rid of him wouldn't be hard."

Adkins shook his head. "Not worth it. I don't have time for conspiracies and backroom deals with all the mess on my plate as it is, but if he can deliver the votes I need I'll overlook it. Frankly, having him feeling like he owes me one is more than worth the headache it will cause in the short run." He smirked. "Besides. Saracino is living garbage, if that folder is factual. He gets uppity, and whoever sent it will destroy him for us."

The Alliance Officer nodded. "And Delacor? He was .. unhappy about what he found in the ruins of Kyle's compound."

Adkins sighed. "The man's a magnet for bad luck. Promote him and stick him in the Traverse fighting geth, and he'll be dead in a week. Kyle did us all a favor, if you ask me. Damned shame he did it so ... loudly, but still. If the Systems Alliance keeps down the path he found, how can we keep looking at the mirror in the morning and not hate ourselves?"

The officer shifted uncomfortably. "The Ardiente Defense. I was following orders."

Adkins spat. "Bullshit. That shit won't fly with the Commissariat, and if Shepard does know it won't fly with her either. I, for one, don't need a shotgun enema, and I'm glad I'm not involved. Just knowing about the incident makes me nervous, and I'm rather glad this is my last term." He tapped the expensive silver bracelet on his arm, pulling up his omnitool, and smiled. "Now, unless there is anything else... I got you the footage you wanted."

Admiral Yonis Chu gave a shallow bow. "That you did. I thank you for your cooperation, Senator."

O-OSaBC-O

Tali awoke to the sensation of she always got after having her suit removed – stuffy air passages, bleary and teary vision, a sore throat, and an upset stomach. She looked up, frowning at the surroundings, finding herself propped up on a plastic-sheeted bed in a sterile white clean room. Video displays on one wall showed nature scenes from Sur'Kesh, while medical equipment and a bag of reddish blood plasma hung on a stand next to her bed.

Her cyberleg had been repaired, but her stomach and shoulder were swathed in thick white bandages visible under the gown she wore. She smiled faintly, remembering Chakwas promising her she'd be fine before giving her a shot to put her to sleep.

She so rarely got out of her suit that just the pleasure of doing so was almost worth the pain in her leg, chest, and shoulder. She found she was dressed in a thin but opaque gown that came to mid-knee. With a grunt of pain she sat up, glancing around for an omnitool or padd.

A small table next to her had a cheap plastic wristband with electronics sunk into the clear material, and she picked it up. "Cheap ghr'thas" she muttered as she activated it.

The face of Joker popped up. "Hey, Tali. Sorry we couldn't get your own OT to you, but the hospital people are dicks about sterile environments. Anyway, I got you this one since they were only going to give you a padd, and I know you'd hate that."

Tali smiled, and listened. "Everybody's fine – well, except the bad guys, they're all dead. Your dad is on the Citadel – great news, we didn't fist fight this time. Just screaming. But then Liara's dad started screaming back at him. It was great! I've never seen so much snark...if I wasn't in love with you I might go off with Liara's dad instead."

The image paused. "Oof. That sounded gayer than intended. Your dad...said to tell you that he's proud of you, and that because of what you did, and what you've done, the quarians are being invited to put an representative on the Citadel again. He was bitchy because it wasn't a full ambassador, but still...progress, right? So, congrats, being shot up gets you props. Who knew?"

Joker grinned. "Anyway. Pressly is running the show until Shepard wakes up, but he wanted to let you know everything is cool and we're waiting for you to get out before we have the most kick-ass party in history. " His voice lost a bit of it's excitement. "I, ah, need to talk to you as well...I have...something I need to ask you about. An idea."

"Get better fast – Chakwas is being all mother hen and not letting us visit, but hopefully we'll be able to soon." He swallowed, almost shyly. "Love you. Bye."

The image faded, the omnitool displaying it's ready for use screen, and Tali blinked back happy tears as she let it fall to her lap. She didn't know how to feel right now, but she knew one thing. Her people had been redeemed. Letting her head fall back against the pillow, she couldn't wipe the smile off her face at that, and the emotion in Joker's words.

That lasted a good fifteen seconds until a speaker in the wall blared. "Miss Zorah, you have visitors, they will display on the wall screen to your left. Are you ready for them?"

She sat up again, wincing, but checked her quills hurriedly. "A-ah , I think? Who is it?"

The voice turned sympathetic. "Two very ... ah, upset quarian admirals. Rael'Zorah and Shaala'Raan. Shall I put them through."

Tali gulped, she was going to get yelled at. "Um ... yes."

The screen blanked and then the rose-tinted reik of her aunt, and her father's own purple one, framed their masked faces. Shaala's shoulders lifted, and Tali could imagine the kind smile on her face, but her father's arms were folded and he his stance looked like an angry stormcloud.

Shaala spoke first. "Tali'Zorah, I'm so glad you are alright. We were ... dreadfully worried about you."

Tali smiled gently. "I'm fine, auntie. I could use some of your tucharial tea...but other than that I'm okay."

Rael snorted. "Did you have to gethify yourself anymore this time, daughter?"

Tali flinched a little. "No, father."

He grunted, then unfolded his arms. "According to Kal'Reegar and your captain, you performed...well beyond expectations. I've finally gotten an accounting of what all you did on your jaunt with Shepard...and I am rather surprised to hear that you are her acting Chief Engineer."

Tali nodded. "Engineer Adams was wounded, so I had to take over. Before that they had me acting as his assistant. He's very good...for a human."

Shaala gave a throaty laugh. "Is that high or faint praise, my dear? No matter. The entire Fleet is proud of you, Tali. Your father gets...overprotective at times, but I wanted you to know your friends and shipmates have been cheering nonstop since the news of the victory at the Citadel happened. The Fleet is badly damaged, but our sacrifice, and that of the humans, seems to have opened some eyes."

Tali felt herself go cold. "S-sacrifice...?"

Rael'Zorah closed his eyes, the glowing orbs blanking, leaving his masked visage bare. "The humans let us know about the assault on the Citadel. Geth fleets struck many locations, to draw off defenders from the Citadel, then somehow managed to jump insystem with that black ship. They were badly outnumbered, and as I told you in our last message, we were a jump away at Bekenstein."

Shaala nodded. "There was a vote...and the Conclave and Admiralty Board agreed to go to war, to stop our creations. We held back most of the Civilian fleet, but the rest entered the fight and helped stop the geth. At ... sharp costs."

Rael looked hard at Tali. "We lost more than half of the Scouting Flotilla, and more than forty percent of the Heavy Fleet. We had to drop marines on the Citadel too, to fight the geth, and between losses there and on ships...seventy thousand quarians are dead."

Tali bowed her head as the numbers washed over her.

O-OSaBC-O

The Citadel Council chamber was a wreck, and Tarren Sparatus picked his way past debris on his way to the top of the room's archway, glancing around as he went.

The signs of battle were heavy and obvious, melted floor plating, destroyed planters, bits of debris and scorching from biotic blasts. Blood – here, smears of red, there purple – was flung about liberally. His eyes traced over the signs and damage, trying to piece together what had occurred, with no avail.

The battle, whatever had occurred, had been fierce and ugly. Sparatus had seen asari matriarchs in battle in his youth, and the idea of going talon-to-talon with one made his fringe contract. No matter her other, numerous faults, Sparatus couldn't doubt Shepard's bravery.

He stepped up the narrow stairs, sidestepping a shattered cherry blossom tree, and looked around further. Crude repairs had already started, the damaged standing arena the Council usually operated from having rough plastic sheeting to cover the massive hole where Benezia T'Soni had ended her life. The elevator shafts had been cleared and Palin's C-SEC team rescued from the base before anyone died.

The medical support team who'd first arrived in the Council chambers in the aftermath of the defeat of Nazara were stunned by the damage Shepard and her team had taken. All five of them, plus the nearly dead Matriarch Aethyta, had taken wounds enough to kill a pack of krogan. They'd found Garrus and his mate barely clinging to life, slumped together in a pool of their own blood, still holding hands and blocking the way to Shepard's enemies, a sight that Sparatus reluctantly admitted touched his turian soul.

That was duty. That was sacrifice. That was honor. For all the claims that Garrus Vakarian was not worthy of his clan-name, he and his mate had slaughtered seventy eight geth attempting to get past them, and had held a line Sparatus wasn't sure he could have done in his Blackwatch days with an entire killteam.

The chaos in the chambers themselves was even more impressive. He'd seen the video and pictures of the recovery of Shepard's team – the four battered figures looking more like bags of meat and melted armor than living beings. The older asari had fourth degree burns over half her body and enough broken bones that she couldn't be moved without stasis. The human Commissar had lost his leg and required more cybernetic correction for other damage to his spine and arm, and the little asari daughter of Benezia had neural burns that the medics didn't know how to heal alongside a host of other injuries.

Shepard, though, had obviously taken the worst of the beating, with her armor smashed into her body in places and her internal organs carved up by Benezia's warp sword. She'd done her duty, however, bringing her assigned mission to full completion. Despite the doubts, despite the hesitance of the Council and even her own government to fully back her, and despite facing two the galaxy's strongest figures.

That was duty. That was honor. That was sacrifice.

And that was why Sparatus was here, as he walked up the stairs to the top of the plinth, where Tevos and Valern stood.

The rest of the Chamber was empty except for the bustle of Keepers, repair bots and workers fixing

damage, and security officers near the bottom building up stronger defense systems. The three Councilors looked at the room around them for long moments, before Tevos spoke first.

"You called us here, Tarren?"

The turian nodded. "I did. We have some hard choices to make, I think...and I am not the type of person to put them off."

Valern folded his arms. "You are speaking of the humans and the quarians, I suppose?"

Sparatus nodded, folding his arms behind him. He'd deliberately not taken his place beside Tevos and Valern, instead placing himself on the supplicant's pier, as if he was not a part of the Council.

Tevos frowned at his placement and spoke. "We have...that is, the Asari Matriarchy has given thought to the situation with the humans...and the quarians. We are pleased they chose to assist us when the need was there, and we'll do everything we can in aiding them recover from what that cost them."

Valern was eying Sparatus speculatively. "Yes. Certainly ... unexpected of them. Would have not been surprised if both groups had simply stood aside and let the geth triumph. With the loss of many leaders, humans would have been able to argue they needed more voice in galactic society, and the quarians would have had plenty of time to find a dextro world before we could deny them. The Salarian Union was impressed at their ... restraint."

Sparatus snorted. "Our very lives continue this moment due to both of them having more honor than that. If the quarians had not interceded, the Citadel Defense Fleet would have been destroyed in short order. And if the humans had not been willing to sacrifice their lives for ours in saving the Destiny Ascension, that last dreadnaught would have blown us to pieces." The turian folded his arms. "I am not comfortable in dismissing such valor without the appropriate rewards."

Tevos frowned. "The appropriate rewards?"

Sparatus nodded. "As much as I would like to deny it, the humans...have proven themselves. They have a Spectre, who has completed her first mission successfully. They have a military contribution of the required strength which has bled for this Council. They have proven willing to overcome political strife to do what is needed. And as far as the Turian Hierarchy is concerned, despite the ... unpleasant nature of the Relay 314 incident...humans have shown honor, discipline, and loyalty."

Sparatus sighed. "If they are not offered a seat on the Council after this, they are likely to leave the Citadel Agreements entirely." He paused. "And they'd be right to do so, because if they are not honored for how they bled, then what exactly are you looking for in leadership?"

Valern's expression was neutral. "And the quarians?"

Sparatus shrugged. "They shocked me with their bravery. The least we can do for them is restore their embassy and lift the embargo and travel restrictions, since they stepped up and fought the problems they caused ... rather than, say, appealing to outside parties to solve the problem for them. But to be honest? They risked the only homes they have to save *us*, who have done nothing and ignored the threat of the geth to punish their creators instead. I doubt it would happen, but I could also argue they deserve more than merely a talon flourish of respect."

He fixed his gaze on Valern, who merely nodded.

Tevos pursed her lips. "I was under the impression you disliked the humans, and Shepard in particular."

Sparatus flicked his mandible. "I do. They're arrogant, shortsighted bigots with a bent fringe look at the universe. And yet, they are strangely honorable." He paused. "Shepard made that call, you know. The one that resulted in the human fleet saving us. I am unwilling to be in that barbarians' debt."

Tevos and Valern traded glances, a gesture he was all too familiar with. Valern spoke. "I am not so convinced the humans are ready for such a gift, and to readmit the quarians will cause friction with the batarians."

Sparatus snarled. "Those honorless dogs did not die in heaps to save our eggs, Valern. Seventy thousand quarians. Fifteen thousand humans. They didn't have to come, and they didn't have to die for the cause, but they did!"

He leaned forward, feeling his talons tighten and his feet angle for a spring and leap. "The Turian Hierarchy is neither blind nor stupid, fellow Councilors. There is only so much the Primarch can accept in terms of how our economy is being ruined and our volus allies led astray before we are required to act. If this Council can't act to respect sacrifice, duty, and honor, then it answers unspoken questions about exactly *why* the Council has no volus, no elcor, no humans, no quarians, no hanar. It has nothing to do with requirements that have now been met and more to do with your desire to manipulate galactic events."

Tevos hissed, but it was Valern who held up a hand. "Calm yourself, Tevos. Sparatus, let us assume we accept your logic for a moment. We are the oldest races in our alliance, and our guidance has lead galactic culture for millennia Why dilute our wisdom with that of younger, more reckless species?"

Sparatus laughed. "Your guidance led to the Rachni Wars, to the Krogan Rebellions, to the Second Krogan Uprising. It lead to destabilizing batarian culture and then pushing them away, to not aiding the quarians when the geth were a minor threat that we could have easily crushed. I am not as blinded by the power and glory of being a part of the Council when I see it's trail markings laid bare."

Valern rubbed one of the horns on his head. "It is more complicated than that. Humans are ... not as honorable as you think, and there is a great deal of darkness in their government's actions."

Sparatus folded his arms. "I have not forgotten the little lesson Ambassador Udina taught us. We are all dirty. We all do things in the darkness in case we can't trust the other." He straightened to his full height. "But if we turn our backs on the chance to fix our relationship with the humans and quarians now, you will have problems down the line if Shepard's evidence of more of these...Reapers...is accurate. I don't think they will sacrifice themselves to save us a second time."

Silence reigned in the chamber for long moments before Valern spoke. "For me, it is an issue of pragmatism. Adding a human allows for vote deadlocking. Three is optimal. Or five. But no other race meets good requisite for fifth seat, despite your words regarding the quarians."

Tevos considered for a long moment. "The volus would argue they do, and if Shepard's reports are accurate, they played a key role in defeating Benezia's forces at Ilos. Or, if we truly wished to shock the galaxy, we could take Sparatus's words at face value and make the quarians the fifth seat."

Sparatus placed his arms behind his back. "Is that a concession you are willing to make?"

Tevos considered Sparatus for a long moment. She had warned the Matriarchy repeatedly that the turians were not stupid, and sooner or later the Council would have to expand, probably to take in humans and volus, or the turians would call them on their manipulation. The alliance of the salarians and asari had dominated the turian seat on the Council for centuries, and changing the status quo was frowned on.

But she could read between the lines of Sparatus's 'request' well enough. If at least the humans were not admitted, the turians would not simply continue to accept salarian and asari dominance. And despite the economic troubles the Hierarchy was facing, if the turians decided to skew the results by throwing support to the Volus for a Council seat, the careful planning over centuries to weaken the Hierarchy would evaporate in days. The Vol Protectorate would get the Hierarchy back on it's economic feet in

short order, and a turian-human-volus bloc in opposition to asari and salarian interest would end badly.

Denying the humans would strain the asari relationship with humanity as well, and Tevos had little doubt elements like Terra Firma would take advantage of that to cause trouble. Given their proximity to that thug Aria, they might even pull a stunt like they'd threatened to at the outset of the mess and withdraw from the Council Alliance.

She sighed. Admitting the humans would not be problematic, despite Valern's worry of deadlocks. Human and turian interests clashed too much, and she fully expected manipulating whatever child the humans sent to fill a Council seat to be easy.

Adding the quarians would actually aid in stopping the volus and elcor pressure to join the Council, given they had not contributed to the campaign much. It would certainly send a message to the batarians, and the technical capabilities of the quarians would be useful. Plus, it would head off any disruption of the careful manipulation of the volus towards their turian overseers.

If the quarians demanded a planet or two as part of their price, well, the Turians pushed for this, let them supply the worlds.

She spoke calmly. "I would suggest then, given Valern's statement, that we reward both humanity and the quarians by honoring them to join the Council." Her voice hardened. "However, any Council Vote that would require alteration of the Council Charter would require a four-seat vote. Assuming such is agreeable, I vote yes."

Valern gave her a searching look, and then folded his arms. "I am ... in opposition to such an expansion. I vote no."

Sparatus smiled. "And I vote yes. I believe this is the first time an action I originated has passed a vote. I am pleased. The Primarch did not think you would agree."

Tevos shot a look at Valern, who grimly comprehended the situation, before turning back to Sparatus. "We only act in the service of the greater good, Tarren. I will have words with the Media Department on the announcement, but you can inform Ambassador Udina and Admiral Rael'Zorah yourself, if you wish."

Sparatus bowed. "I appreciate the courtesy, Tevos. I'll return shortly, assuming the stupid humans don't ruin everything by refusing." He turned on a heel and departed the tattered chamber, leaving the asari and salarian behind. After a long moment, Tevos sighed.

"It was eventually going to happen anyway, Valern."

The salarian gave a tight, cunning smile. "Oh, I know. Voted no just to make him think he'd won something. I predicted this outcome even as we were disembarking when I saw the turians grudgingly thanking the humans for saving us." He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "You work the humans, and I will work the quarians?"

She nodded. "Simple enough."

O-OSaBC-O

It took six hours for Shepard to regain consciousness, but four entire days passed before she could so much as leave her hospital bed. The first day was nothing but hammering agony and the endless itch of bone and tissue regenerators, broken up by periods of unconsciousness as doctors conducted multiple surgeries to deal with her internal injuries.

It was late in the second day before she awoke again, and another few hours before she was coherent enough to speak. Her first conversation was with a concerned looking Helen Chakwas.

"Hey, doc." Her voice was a tired, dry rasp, and Shepard winced just hearing it.

Chakwas gave a wan smile, bags under her eyes and her uniform rumped. "It's been very touch and go the past forty-eight hours, Commander. I am pleased to report no casualties among the Normandy crew or marine team, or your own strike team."

Shepard slumped in relief. "Thank God, finally."

Chakwas smiled a bit more brightly. "There were many quarian marines killed, unfortunately, and horrific casualties all around. The hospitals are overflowing – you're actually in a converted hotel with the medical equipment brought in by salarian specialists. The damage to the Citadel was ... quite severe."

Shepard nodded. "But we're all alive, so we can rebuild. Since I have a clean butcher's bill for the first time ever...how's the injury status?"

Chakwas sat down, examining Shepard's vitals displayed on a haptic screen next to the bed. "Severe, unfortunately. I'll start with the marines we offloaded prior to our departure to Ilos. I'm afraid Masterson didn't make it. He'd lost too much blood, and he had a very rare blood type. By the time the doctors realized there was additional internal bleeding, he'd been on the regenerators for thirty minutes, and the shock killed him."

Shepard sighed and nodded. The older sergeant had been there from the first, all the way back to Eden Prime, and it was sad that he was gone. There was nothing she could do about it, though, and she had to keep her thoughts focused on the rest of her team. "What about Ashley?"

Chakwas smiled again. "She's fine. She'll have to have cybernetic correction for her back and leg, but the spinal damage was correctable. The baby is fine as well." Chakwas pulled out a pad. "Ownby is still in critical condition but has regained consciousness. Haskins is still in the burn unit, but inflammation and suppuration have ceased and I think she'll pull through. As expected, both of your DACT soldiers were too stupid to die, and Haln is recovering and in stable condition."

Shepard snorted at the mention of the DACT. "I was pretty worried about Montoya, given how many hits he took. What about Tali? And what happened to Wrex?"

Chakwas winced. "Tali was hit very hard in the side and shoulder, but she will be fine. They've got her in a clean room at Hudson Memorial. No cybernetic corrections needed, just surgical fixes and some time on the regen machines. She's already awake, talking with her father."

Shepard rolled her eyes. "That guy is a dick."

Chakwas chuckled. "Matriarch Aethyta put him in his place, I think. He was looking for his daughter or for you, got misdirected to Liara's room, and said something that set her off."

She glanced at the padd. "Speaking of said matriarch, despite truly horrific burns, she's up and around. She'll be having reconstructive surgery soon, and she was pretty torn up medically speaking, but she's tougher than anyone else I've seen, and that includes you. She's mostly recovering in Liara's room right now."

Shepard nodded. Chakwas continued. "As for Wrex, he was very badly hurt in an altercation with someone he calls Okeer."

Shepard scowled. "Okeer was on the Citadel? Christ, that's why Wrex left all of a sudden, to fight him one-on-one." She sighed. "Is he..okay?"

Chakwas nodded. "It looks like Wrex lost, and lost badly, but a rather astonishing thing happened. Your ... former teammate, Beatrice Shields, came along and rescued him, as well as stopping geth from

overrunning Huerta Memorial. According to Wrex, she's working for the Shadow Broker now. She was of vast assistance in helping us bypass turrets and get to you in the Tower."

Shepard frowned. That didn't exactly sound like the Shields she knew. "And Wrex?"

Chakwas checked the padd. "Eating and regenerating, mostly. He'll be fine. Krogan are very difficult to kill." She flicked a finger over the pad. "Garrus and Telanya are recovering at Kithoi Memorial, in critical but stable condition. They managed to stop over seventy geth from getting into the Tower."

Shepard arched an eyebrow, then winced. Her face hurt. "Seventy? Damn. That's...damn."

Chakwas chuckled. "It was, I admit, a touching and impressive scene. There were geth bodies everywhere, and those two slumped against a wall, Garrus holding her hands. It would have been almost romantic if it wasn't so... bloody."

Shepard chuckled. "I'm sure." She exhaled. "I guess there's a reason you're leaving Liara for last?"

Chakwas shook her head. "No, just going in the order I got reports. Commissar Jiong was...removed from medical by Commissariat medics. I know he is 'stable' but no other details. Liara is down a few rooms, in serious condition. She very severely overstrained her biotics to the point where she has some minor nerve damage, and other injuries. She's drifting in and out of consciousness, and we still have some corrective surgery to do on her heart, which nearly gave out."

Shepard closed her eyes and concentrated. She could barely feel Liara, but the link was there, cool and reassuring. She gave a shaky sigh and opened her eyes again. "Understood, Doctor. I assume the high command and Council has been briefed?"

Chakwas shrugged. "Pressly told me to inform him when you woke up and were awake enough to talk. So did Captain Anderson, Ambassador Udina, and several attaches from the Council."

Shepard nodded. "Alright, let them know I'm up...and can I get some water?"

As it turned out, it was several hours before anyone showed up to talk to her, time she passed by talking with Chakwas about the aftermath of the battle. When the door chimed, it was Pressly who appeared, followed by Udina, Anderson, and two men she didn't recognize. One wore an admiral's uniform, his face craggy and scarred, the other an expensive suit, his ascetic features framed by white-blond hair and striking green eyes.

Shepard sat up straighter, grimacing against the pain, and forced a thin smile. "Sirs." Chakwas glanced at the group and quietly stepped out, shutting the door after her.

Anderson was the first to speak. "Well done, Sara. We've got a lot to talk about, if you're up to it."

She shrugged. "I can't move and the haptic channels all suck, and Chakwas has things to do anyway. What's up?"

Anderson glanced at Udina, who rolled his eyes. "Shepard. Despite my misgivings in the beginning, and your general uncivilized demeanor, you've performed a task no other in the Systems Alliance could achieve. I wasn't on the Destiny Ascension, but my family was...and I thank you for making the call that saved their lives."

Shepard didn't know Udina had a family, and briefly wondered about the kind of woman who would marry him, but shook it off. "I did my duty, sir. Nothing more and nothing less. Glad it worked out well, but the alternative...just felt wrong."

The admiral spoke up. "You're right, Shepard. I'm Admiral Hackett, commander Fifth Fleet. I could have made the call on my own, but I would have made the wrong one, based on what little I knew. I hated to put you on the spot like that, but part of command is knowing when you aren't ready to make

the call and let someone else do it."

She eyed the older man carefully. She'd never seen him in person before, but she knew that technically she answered to him – he was Admiral Mikhailovich's boss, if she remembered correctly. Rather than say anything questionable about how she felt making that call, she shrugged. "I just did what felt...right. I'll admit some of why I did it was thinking of consequences down the line, but ..." She shook her head, and the admiral nodded.

"Being in command isn't like merely being in charge, Shepard. I can pay people to manage, I can't pay them to truly lead. You did the right thing, and I'm glad I let you."

She arched an eyebrow at that, but said nothing, and Anderson spoke again. "Sara, with all of the chaos of the past few days, there's been a lot of ... changes going on. We just found out a few minutes ago that the Citadel Council is going to offer the Systems Alliance and the Quarian Admiralty seats on the Council itself."

Shepard managed to keep her jaw from dropping. "About damned time, don't you think?"

The man in a suit gave a wintry smile. "Some may say that. I'm Jared Cairns-Coleman, an attache to the Office of the Ministry of State. Minister Bekenstein offers his congratulations on a successful completion to your mission."

Shepard arched her eyebrow again. "Thanks...I guess. But why are you here in person? He could have done that via comm-link."

Anderson cleared his throat. "Shepard, the ... Council made this decision based on a number of factors. Certainly, the human navy helping at the end and saving the Council played a role, but it's clear that you made the call on that. You stopped Saren, stopped Benezia, and stopped Cerberus. When the turians got their seat, the turian general who led the final charge on Tuchanka was allowed to make the call on who got the Council seat."

At this Udina nodded. "Due to the fact that you have played the most key role in this entire mess, Shepard, Councilor Sparatus said that history should be respected, as well as your efforts. The council has determined you should be the one who decides what human will hold the role of Human Councilor."

Shepard looked at each one of them for a long moment before bursting into laughter. "Me!? Why in the name of God would you – or anyone else with a brain in their skull – have me do this? I'm hardly qualified to know who to pick."

Jared Cairns-Coleman had a satisfied look on his face. "Which answers the question as to why I am here, ma'am. The Minister of State would suggest rather than relying on your inexact knowledge of which government figures would be best suited to the job, that the best person for the job would be someone who keeps a clear view on human interests."

Shepard eyed the man before turning to Anderson. "I'm guessing he doesn't know?"

Anderson shook his head. "Thanks to some creative work by certain parties, including the Commissariat, no one knows."

Udina and Hackett frowned, confused, and Shepard smiled. "Ah, good. Then to answer the guy from the government, fuck no. I didn't get my ass blown to crap and lose half my marines just to put some Terra Firma fucker in the seat and have them screw it all to hell."

The man's face tightened. "Commander Shepard, perhaps you misunderstand. You have a duty to the Systems Alliance to –" He was cut off as she snarled.

"Duty? Look asshole, I have no clue what cave you hid yourself in, but the SA hasn't done a topnotch job of backing me up. They hung me out to dry on Torfan. They fucked me over by sticking me with a Captain that hated my guts and did his best to get me killed. When I finally get to work with the man I admire the most, they steal his ship from him and hand it to me, before telling me to be a good little girl and don't embarrass the SA anymore. When I find out the sick bullshit the SA was working on at Feros, they call me everything but a rock-ignorant criminal traitor and threaten me. When I find out where Saren is, I have to go to the Black Hats and AI Sholes because my own fucking Fleet Master won't listen to me. And when I find Benezia? When I am ready to shut her down? You fuckers STEAL my ship from me and lock me down to score political points at home."

She snorted. "If not for Udina, we'd all be fucking dead right now. In fact, that's a good goddamned idea." She turned to Udina, who had a warily shocked look on his face. "You know all the diplomatic bullshit these people like, and you clearly don't take shit from anyone. You be the Councilor."

Cairns-Coleman's eyes widened. "But ... the Minister..."

Udina said nothing for a long moment before his face split in an almost diabolical grin. "Oh, Jared. I cannot wait to see Ira's face when he hears the news." He turned to Shepard. "I am ... grateful. Thank you. I know I spoke briefly of my ambition to you once...but I am nonetheless honored you remembered it and think I am up to the task."

She tilted her head. "See? You can be nice, and I can do more than headbutt krogan and eat babies."

Udina rolled his eyes, and Anderson chuckled. Hackett still appeared confused, and Pressly was leaning against the doorway, a smirk on his features. Shepard glanced back to Udina. "Is there anything else?"

Udina smiled and folded his arms. "One thing, and then I will depart to ... deal with events. The President is on his way to the Citadel. Chakwas tells us she will be able to let you out of here in four or five more days. You're expected to report to the President at that time, and you'll get new orders from that point."

She nodded, and smiled as Udina mockingly escorted Cairns-Coleman out of the room. Hackett glanced at Shepard and nodded. "Again, good work, Commander. If you need me for anything I'll be at temporary Fleet Command in what's left of the Human Embassy."

He too, departed, leaving Anderson and Pressly, who finally approached. "Well, Sara, looks like I was right in tapping you to be a Spectre." Anderson's voice was warm with approval and pride and Shepard basked in it for long seconds.

"I guess. The uniform is okay." She grinned, and Anderson laughed, clean stress free laughter like she hadn't heard since that lunch in his apartment.

Pressly had a datapad in his hands, and Shepard met his gaze evenly as the mirth faded. "What's the status of my ship, XO?"

Pressly snorted. "Shot to pieces, ma'am. It's going to be a good three to four months before she's spaceworthy again. The trip back was pretty ugly, more equipment started breaking down, and the quarian ships were having problems too. We luckily stumbled across a turian patrol that helped us limp back to Citadel Space, and by the time we got here, you were already in surgery and the last of the geth cleaned up."

She nodded. "Crew?"

He squared his shoulders. "No further casualties since Ilos. Crew is on leave. A dockside SA commander has the conn of the Normandy, she's currently beached."

She nodded again. "Have someone get my stuff and Liara's out of my cabin before some dockworker

puts two and two together."

Pressly gestured to the door, where a shipbag sat in one corner. Atop it was a neatly folded Penal Legion blanket and her sketchbook. "Already done, ma'am."

Shepard rolled her eyes. "You see, Anderson? He's a much, much better XO than I would have been."

Anderson snorted, and Pressly smiled. Shepard leaned forward a bit. "Any other news or facts I need to know?"

Pressly thought for a long second. "Besides the media howling to speak with you, no, ma'am. General Von Grath will be arriving in a day or two – he told us to make sure you were awake so he could yell at you for not inviting him to 'the beatdown of the Century'. Other than that, you have tons of 'get well soon' messages, cards, gifts, and there have been prayer vigils outside the hospital and hotel for your recovery for the past day or so."

Shepard eyed him a long second. Prayer vigils? For her? "...huh. Well, let everyone know I'm fine, then, I guess." She glanced at Anderson. "I want to see Liara...go order Chakwas around."

Anderson merely snorted. "I'm not stupid, Sara. Get some more rest, we'll see if you're up to it tomorrow."

#### O-OSaBC-O

The days passed slowly, as Shepard and her team recovered. It was the fifth day before she could actually be moved into another room, with Liara, only to discover that Matriarch Aethyta was in said room as well.

The older asari woman had spent the previous few days awkwardly reconnecting to her daughter's life. She had explained the truth of it all, a truth that left Liara stunned.

Aethyta and Benezia had been friends in their very early youth, at the time a feud between House T'Soni and House Vasir was only a minor breach. Not long after they reached adulthood, however, the feud turned deadly, as a Vasir House member was accused of being an ardat-yakshi by Benezia's eldest sister.

As it turned out, she wasn't, rather she was competition for the affections of a wealthy turian female they were both interested in. The two asari plotted and counter plotted against one another, framing each others Houses in various acts to try and cripple them. Eventually the truth came out and in a fit of pique, Benezia's sister falsified records to make it look as if her Vasir rival was an ardat-yakshi.

The insult was unforgivable, and the T'Soni would have ended up paying retribution fees, until a hotheaded Vasir maiden, in a poorly planned revenge attempt, tried to sabotage a weapons demonstration hosted by the T'Soni to push the Armali Council line of arms. The malfunction, intended to be harmless but embarrassing, backfired, killing both of Benezia's older sisters.

No matter what level of insult T'Soni manipulations had cost Vasir, the murder of two of its princesses by Vasir vengeance was intolerable. The Thirty reduced Vasir holdings and stripped them of their ancestral lands, leaving the House near bankrupt.

The two Houses grew apart for obvious reasons, and Aethyta and Benezia fell out of contact. The former attempted to revive her Family fortunes by starting biotic mercenary companies, taking up the arts of a sword-mistress and practicing endless years with the commandos to become one of the finest combatants in asari history.

Benezia, less physical and more cerebral, began to lay out the first plans for her own vision of asari unity. She joined the Temple at an early age, putting off childbirth, although she did consider fathering

a child with a close turian friend. In the end, he died before they bonded, and she continued on, serving as a Priestess, then a Justicar, and a Commando leader.

Aethyta rose to great fame as a blade-master, teaching commandos and even being hired to instruct the House of T'Armal. In the span of a hundred years, she had reversed the slide of the Vasir fortunes, her acolytes going onto become some of the most feared commandos and Justicars ever seen. Her most prized pupil was the Justicar Samara, a simple commoner woman turned into a nigh unstoppable killing machine after just forty years of training.

Benezia took control of her house after her own mother died at the start of the Second Krogan Rebellions, reinvigorating the valor of House T'Soni as a warrior house with her fierce leadership. After the war she rose rapidly through the Temple, eventually reaching it's highest Rank, Solarch. She stepped down to Lunarch a century later when the more skilled and younger Thana Vathan arose, and slowly became less active in the temple as she approached her eighth century.

By this time, Aethyta had also become leader of House Vasir, pouring most of her skills into training a new generation of the Republican Guard and making the Armali Guard one of the most feared special forces units in the galaxy. She began formulating a teaching, that asari could not hope to guide the races of the galaxy by wisdom alone. They were given great strength, gifts of biotic power and insight to protect the younger races, and their lack of militancy and focus on the ancient hunter-like teachings of old would weaken them in serious conflict.

Benezia, on the other hand, had begun her own teachings, that of the Triune – a joining of intent, unity, and guidance. Gently suggesting that the races of the galaxy needed more than mere hints, she embraced a concept of siari beyond asari, of burning a path that other races should follow in pushing their own race to a new level of civilization and culture.

Both of their paths flourished, thousands upon thousands heeding their words and following their footsteps. House Vasir grew wealthy from the income of a dozen mercenary companies, while Benezia gained a reputation as a wise adviser, diplomat, and negotiator.

The two asari had reunited with the communal work done by Benezia's younger sister, Mithra. Mithra's mind turned more to profit and avarice than mere unity, and by sublimating her pride and working with House Vasir, they had revitalized Armali's economy and the shamed name of the Armali Council. The two houses worked together to build a new commercial line of products, and it was only natural that the House leaders work together.

The friendship and easy camaraderie they had felt when younger turned out to still exist. Benezia was stern where Aethyta was playful, serene to her boisterous, dignified to her earthy. And yet they found they complemented each other almost perfectly. Even their grand teachings and plans fit together, Aethyta's more muscular Asari Republic having the cachet to impress more martial aliens such as turians and batarians, while Benezia's unity aided asari security and forced more asari to see their own limits when compared to aliens.

Aethyta admitted to Liara, as she told her story, that it didn't help that, despite their power and elevation, their grand dreams and great achievements, they were both lonely, stressed and burning out, so focused on duty and the Family and progress neither had any time for themselves. Benezia had sacrificed her youth to Temple and Justicar service, Aethyta to commandos and fighting.

When friendship turned to attraction, and attraction to something more, neither Aethyta nor Benezia cared much for the taboo against asari-asari offspring. That was for commoners, with their lesser blood, not the ancient scions of two of the most noble houses. Aethyta's voice broke as she told Liara of their bond, of the memories of happier times they had.

When Liara was born, however, everything had shattered, although not to do with her birth. Aethyta, distracted by Benezia and her own Family, had not paid close attention to her followers, who had fallen in with Eclipse members and begun souring the honor of the Vasir name. When several of her most ardent followers were accused of crimes against the Republic and had to be hunted down and executed, the shame was public. Worse, investigations showed her mercenary companies had misspent millions of credits on red sand, illegal weapons and worse.

While Aethyta had nothing to do with such things, the fact that it was her teachings that were followed couldn't be denied. Worse still, there were already rumors that the Armali Council and even House T'Soni were involved in such.

At the same time, scandals rocked the House of T'Soni as well, as Mithra's oldest daughter Yvael was accused and convicted of force-bonding a commoner asari for her own pleasure. Yvael was punished severely, but her time spent with some of Aethyta's followers lead many T'Soni to question the liaison between the two matriarchs.

Finally, stresses and struggles between the two asari about Liara's future tore them apart. Benezia wanted to shape and control Liara's life to have her be a leader and guide for those who followed, while Aethyta wanted Liara to be free to choose her own path. Given that in asari society a mother usually did indeed shape and guide their child, Aethyta's proposal sounded less like wanting to see Liara do what she wanted and more like irresponsibility. When Benezia accused her of such, Aethyta was hurt and wounded, leading to her concealing her other problems and worries from her bondmate as they began to drift apart.

When investigations began questioning her links to House T'Soni, Aethyta admitted to Liara that she had panicked. Instead of explaining everything and trusting Benezia to make the correct choices, she was scared of public opinion – of her teachings, of the mismanagement of funds, of the old wounds between the two houses, and most of all of the birth of Liara at all. She instead took all blame for the malfeasance of her followers onto herself, implying that perhaps T'Soni had actually sabotaged her efforts, and withdrew herself as Matriarch. Leaving behind everything but her own warp sword, she said a tearful last good bye to the baby Liara and force-broke her bond with Benezia, sending the woman into a depression.

The fallout was ugly. While the investigation tailed off, and Benezia's name was clear of any dishonor, it soured relations badly. Many of the younger T'Soni, impressed by Aethyta's fire and legendary skills, blamed Benezia's haughty airs for the breach, while her sister cursed her for not doing more to prevent the Vasir from pulling away.

Accusations from both sides only increased when Benezia would not name who Liara's aithntar was, leading to ugly charges that Benezia had cheated on her bondmate. Broken-hearted and alone, Benezia struggled to balance her hopes for Liara with the last request of Aethyta to let Liara be as she was, incorporating her words into a nickname for Liara to remind her of it.

From there, Aethyta basically let herself go, sinking into drunkenness, sleeping with too many partners to even recall, and giving into despair. She ended up running a bar on Omega, reporting on Aria's activities to a disdainful Council of Matriarchs.

She'd watched with pride as Liara grew and became her own self-person, buying up every book and paper Liara wrote and slowly teaching herself a bit about archeology and history to really understand them. She'd been depressed again when Liara and Benezia split, but didn't worry overmuch, fifty years was not a long span to an asari after all.

And when she finally heard that Benezia, her Nezy, was responsible for the atrocities at Eden Prime and elsewhere, she had to act. Informing the Council of Matriarchs of her decision, they'd given her

what intel they had on Benezia, and wished her luck or a swift death. Drawing on her deep knowledge of how her bondmate thought, she'd anticipated Benezia moving to the Citadel, and had made preparation to face and defeat her there.

"...except, I wasn't strong enough, after all. A thousand years of talking about how badass I am, and I got beaten down, and could only watch as my daughter had to fight her mother." Aethyta's voice was sad and low, and Liara merely squeezed her hand, shaking her own head.

"I am not going to blame you for what has happened...for the fault is not only yours, or hers, or anyone's. I am just happy you are here, that we are here together...that I am not alone in this dark space."

Liara's words left Aethyta crying, and she let the agony of those long years slowly go as she wept into her daughter's shoulder. It was the release of guilt, shame, and most of all regret, and Aethyta swore she wouldn't waste this second, Goddess-given chance to be a part of her daughter's life.

When Shepard arrived, in a grav-lift chair pushed by a cheerful Chakwas, Aethyta was curious to know more about her daughter's bondmate. Liara was sleeping again, resting after a final set of corrective surgeries to her shoulder, and this was the best time to get to know her future second-daughter.

To be honest, she was half horrified and half angry that anyone as young as Liara would be bonded. It was dangerous to do so, usually shattering the personalities of those bonded and leading to medical complications if care wasn't taken.

But she let nothing of that show on her face or in her voice. When it came to bondings of poor choice, very little could beat the Nezzys and Eths after all. Rather than drive her daughter back out of her life at this critical stage, she decided to listen and learn for once, taking a page from Benezia's book.

"So. Commander Shepard."

Shepard sat quietly in the lift-chair, gazing back at Aethyta steadily. She'd never dated, never even really understood much about the entire process. She knew, vaguely, that sometimes human parents disapproved of who their child saw, but she didn't know what to expect from an asari matriarch at this point.

She shrugged. "Matriarch Aethyta I'm glad to see you're okay."

The older asari rolled her eyes. "Don't call me that. Makes me sound like a tidedamned relic. Just Aethyta is fine, or 'hey you'." She smirked, running her eyes over the commander.

*Good body. Nice tits. Nice ass. Nice legs. Knockout eyes. Heh. That's my girl, settle for nothing less than the best.*

Rather than voice such thoughts, she let her rough voice slip into a deeper register. "I ain't going to lecture you about the fishes and the lilies, Shepard. I figure if you're bonded, then the only thing I can do is be supportive and suggest good party spots for the orgy at the hand-fasting."

Shepard grimaced. "Matriarch Suliasa warned me about that."

Aethyta cackled. "It'll be great. I figure you'll have a big party for winning this mess anyway, why not spice it up a little?"

Shepard sat back. "Uh...because there's a chance the leader of my race might be there?"

Aethyta shrugged. "Is he cute?"

Shepard stared at her in unabashed shock before shaking her head. "You ... are not what I was expecting, ma'am."

Aethyta's expression grew more serious. "Of course not, kiddo. Asari have a certain reputation. We're mysterious sultry aliens, exotic and wise, except when we're flinging panties and screwing or flinging singularities and killing. It's all a load of crap." She huffed. "I'm a person. You're a person. Little Wing is a person. God, even that Saren fucker was a person. We're not the sum of a pack of stereotypes, we're just ... who we are. And who I am is someone who could care less about propriety and all that shit. It hasn't done anything for the asari except make us blind to the world around us."

Shepard could agree with that, to a point, although she rather preferred the asari culture to her own. Pursing her lips, she nodded. "Okay, great. So...who are you?"

Aethyta smirked. "I'm a warrior, babe. Maybe one of the last great ones my sorry ass race is going to make. The rest of my kind are all older than batarians are stupid. I am the way I am because I don't care what people think about me. My actions speak for me, not a buncha words that any bastard with an ass pointing towards the ground can say."

She folded her arms, sitting up in her hospital bed a bit more. "Who are you, Shepard?"

Shepard laughed. "I'm not really sure any more. I guess... I used to be...a thing. A killing machine. Like a butcher's cleaver. I was used to frighten and kill, to make sure that pirates and the like got the message about not fucking with the SA. I came from nothing, and I turned myself into a piece of shit criminal. A single man saved me from myself, made me believe in myself. I lost that belief for a lot of years while I was that butcher's cleaver...and then your daughter saved me again. She ... she helped me find my way out of the bitterness and self-hate I had clung to for years."

Shepard gazed over at Liara, jaw tightening. "She's all I have. So if you have a problem with us being together..."

Aethyta held Shepard's gaze firmly. "If I didn't think you should be with my little girl...you'd already be dead." The gaze sharpened, darkening, and Shepard nodded grimly. Then Aethyta laughed.

"Lucky for you, you're sexy, smart, and violent enough to turn anything that messes with my girl into paste. I approve, as long as you understand what you're getting into."

Shepard paused. "I...I plan to marry her. Or whatever the asari term is. I want her to be a citizen of the SA, so the Justicars and the Council of Bitchtriarchs can shut the fuck up."

Aethyta spent several seconds recovering from laughter at that. "Ah...Council of Bitchtriarchs. I'm so using that the next time those tired old cunts bother me with their plotting sandshit. I like you more and more, kiddo." She paused. "I did what I could, traded a favor with the Shadow Broker to try and get the Justicars to back off...but your idea is better. How will your own people take it? Most of them are ... well, assholes."

Shepard smirked. "Our version of the Justicars basically advised me to do it, they have no problems with it. It might help in dealing with some other issues I have."

Aethyta frowned. "Issues?"

Shepard sighed. "I'm ... a criminal. I can't really own property or .. do anything but serve in the military. People have made noises about fixing that, and they may do so, but my background doesn't give me a lot of understanding on how to ... live a life, I guess?" She exhaled in frustration. "People aren't going to approve of me being with Liara, but like you said, I could give a shit. I'm more worried that I'm not going to be everything she needs me to be."

Aethyta nodded slowly. "And how would you know?"

Shepard shrugged. "That's the problem. I don't. And it's not like I can just ... ask. My past...is baggage I'm still figuring out."

Aethyta was silent several seconds before speaking. "Look kid...I know you probably have your reasons, but I need to know exactly what Liara is dealing with here. You ever done a shallow bond?"

Shepard frowned. "That's...dangerous. There's a ... vision in my head. Something from the Prothean Beacons. It nearly killed Liara and it did kill Shiala when they saw it..."

Aethyta snorted. "And was this before or after you bonded with her?" At Shepard's confused look, she smiled. "Your own mind protects Liara if you're bonded, so don't worry about that. And I'm a lot better at blocking shit out than she is. I've run into people affected by Dark Beacons before, kid. You ain't the first."

Shepard looked hesitant and somewhat worried. "I...there is a lot of bad shit in my past, and I... am not comfortable with ..."

The matriarch's voice was hard. "If I've learned nothing else in these tired years I've lived, it's that shouldering your own pain only makes you suffer more. I'm pretty sure however bad your life has been, however bad the things you did in your past were, that you aren't the same person. But I need to see, nonetheless, so I know, instead of worrying and guessing and filling my days and yours with drama and bullshit."

Shepard bit her lip and extended her hand, and Aethyta took it, cool pebbled skin against warmer beige. There was a flash of disorientation for Shepard, a flicker of something beyond her sight, and then she was leaning back in the chair, and ten minutes had passed.

Aethyta was laying back, shaking her head. "Fuck, kid. That was...a damn sight worse than I expected. Your people are pretty fucking worthless sacks of shit, if you don't mind me saying."

Shepard swallowed. "How much did ... you see?"

Aethyta matched her gaze. "All of it. I'll tell you this, Shepard. Sara." She paused before speaking, not breaking eye contact. "No one can judge you, until they've gone through what you have. So don't let them. I've known Justicars and turian Final Line types who couldn't survive the pain you did."

"Your government? Fuck them. Your old team? Fuck them too. Your bosses in the SA? Double fuck them. Anyone who doesn't like the way you roll? Fuck them in the ass. You did what you had to do, so stop beating yourself up over it."

Shepard merely stared at her, quivering at the iron hard certainty in her voice, as Aethyta continued. "I'm not happy that you had to expose Liara to all that shit...but she is there inside you, in a bond deeper than is probably safe. You and she are one, and your pain is hers to carry. Don't hide it from her, don't be stupid like I was and pretend you can do it all yourself. Don't lie to yourself or her. You're hurt, still, in your soul. If you strip all the fancy fishbits and crestfondling off of siari, that's what it really is. Being willing to hurt those you love, so that the pain is shared. To live with it, move the fuck past it...and be able to smile."

Aethyta paused. "You've gone through some shit that is going to be hard to move past. And some of what you have done... I will say, can't agree with. Your parents, yeah, they deserved it,so did a lot of the other pieces of shit you killed. But some didn't. You've made some bad mistakes,and those are on you to figure out how to move past."

Shepard could only nod.

Aethyta's voice grew harder. "That doesn't mean your broken, or fucking worthless, or anything less than anyone else. You're my blood now, my second-daughter. If no one in this sick fucking galaxy has your back besides me, Liara, and your David Anderson, does it really fucking matter?"

Shepard looked down and smiled at that. "I...guess not."

Aethyta sat back with a huff. "You're also really into some rough shit in the bedroom, which is always a plus. Liara needs a few tips on how to get human females off, though. I mean, seriously, she didn't even use her whole arm."

Shepard blushed and choked, and Aethyta only laughed.

O-OSaBC-O

The arrival of several prominent leaders and masses of media let everyone around the hospital-hotel, and thus Shepard, know that an event was about to happen, but it wasn't until General Von Grath arrived in her hospital room that Shepard was aware it was going to be stupidly massive.

The old man looked as impressive as usual, a gleaming silver cybernetic replacement gracing his left arm. His dress uniform was blindingly white, his handlebar mustache quivering with excitement and glee.

He entered the room with a single knock, carrying a slender bag with the SA logo on it. "Commander Shepard."

Shepard, who'd been cleared from her bed a few hours before, was finishing helping Liara put her shoes on when the general entered, and managed not to fall on her butt in shock as she scrambled to her feet. "General, sir!"

He waved a hand dismissively, taking in her loose BDU's. "At ease, at ease." His gaze met that of Liara evenly. "And a pleasure to see you once more, Doctor T'Soni. My ... sympathies for your recent loss, but I am glad you are still with us."

Liara smiled wanly. "As am I, general. This is my aithntar, or what you would term father, Matriarch Aethyta"

The general took in the reclining form of Aethyta, dressed in a long black robe, speculatively. "A name I have heard in other circles, more militant ones. I am pleased to meet such an august figure."

Aethyta snorted. "General Jason Von Grath. Shepard owes a lot of her career to you, it seems. You're the one who thought you took out Nezy in that piece of crap walker you humans use."

Von Grath arched an eyebrow. "I was rather astonished a war priestess would fall so easily...then again, the Adept cannon of the suit was broken, so I figured it a fairly equal fight." Glancing around the room and the mass of medical equipment now lying unused, he grimaced. "A potent reminder, along with this arm, to be realistic in my self-assessment."

Aethyta laughed at that. "I'm just giving you a hard time, General. I saw the footage, for the situation you were in, that was a well done attack. Next time, don't parry a warp sword. Step back or even throw yourself back, the discharge will eventually blow out any generator."

"Sage advice." He turned back to Shepard. "The President has been advised that you are upgraded from stable condition to light and limited duty. He, along with the Citadel Council and the Systems Alliance Admiralty, have requested your presence in the Citadel Chambers in precisely two hours, in full dress uniform, along with your crew."

Shepard frowned. "Liara is up and around, but I haven't gotten updates on Jiong, Tali or -"

Von Grath cut her off with a raised mechanical hand. "Your entire crew is up and about. Commissar Jiong will need to attend in a lift-chair, as will one of your DACTs and Senior Chief Williams, but everyone – including the krogan, the turian, the asari policewoman, and the quarian – are fine and able to attend. We were mostly waiting for Lady Liara to fully recover, and for certain leaders to arrive."

Shepard sighed. "This is going to be another Star of Terra media nightmare clusterfuck, isn't it?"

Von Grath opened the kitbag he carried in his other hand, showing the pure dress white uniform within, and the loose insignia of a Major of Marines with a red stripe indicating an admiralty rider. "Oh, yes, I'm afraid so."

Aethyta was mildly impressed by the long string of swear words Shepard generated, while Liara blushed and von Grath merely sighed.

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## **Chapter 123: Final Chapter : Shadows and Dust**

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*A/N:*

*At fifteen thousand words, this is the final chapter. I'm exhausted.*

*This story is dedicated to my wife, **Alysha**, and my friends, **Charlene, Griffin and Lais**. You know who you are.*

*If you enjoyed this story, I would request two things. First, please leave a review. I will always be interested in feedback, both positive and negative. If you enjoyed it, I love hearing about it, but I love knowing what exactly you liked or didn't like. If you think it sucks ass, at least tell me why, even if it's no more than "I hate Fshep/Liara" or "No Von Grath/Chakwas sex scene".*

*Progman, silence!*

*Second, if you have never written a fan fiction story ... give it a try. The way is long and difficult, but you will find you enjoy it immensely. It allows you to build up and learn to think, write, and build on something while having a familiar universe to work with. There can't be any better way to thank an author for a story than to write one yourself.*

*This story is now completed. The series will continue. There will be a lengthy linking piece connecting the end of this story to the beginning of the ME2 story, outlining on that is completed. It should go quick.*

*The poem in this section is by Lord Tennyson, 'They Brought Her Warrior Dead'.*

*Vaya con dios.*

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### **O-Of Sheep and Battle Chicken-O**

The Citadel Chambers had been the site of intense and focused repair work in the days after the defeat of Nazara. Shepard, in full dress whites, was carefully escorted by a pair of Spectres towards a side room off the main Chamber, while Systems Alliance Guard of Iron units, resplendent in their own dress uniforms, escorted her crew towards the main plinth.

She entered the room and the doors closed behind her, leaving her in a small, comfortable antechamber with five chairs of plush backing. Four soldiers stood along the back of the room – a turian in faintly glowing omni-armor and cybered arms and legs, an old asari in commando leathers with two warp swords, a grim looking black-suited salarian with a band of cybernetics where his eyes should be and belt literally full of large caliber pistols, and a smirking Alliance commander she vaguely recognized as Jack Iroidan, the famous Commissar biotic who created the Nova maneuver.

Seated in front of her, in neat placement in front of what could only be their personal bodyguards, were the High Matriarch of the asari, the turian Primarch, the salarian High Dalatrass, and President Windsor.

It was her president who spoke, his mellifluous voice as calming and rich as usual. "Have a seat, Commander. We are gathered to ... discuss hard facts. And to lay out our plans."

Shepard sat, a bit nervously, with the four most powerful people in the galaxy facing her and four of what was most likely the galaxy's deadliest warriors looking on in boredom.

Matriarch T'Armal spoke first. "We have reviewed in detail the information you have gathered, both from your reconnaissance on Virmire and from the ... data given to us by that offensive little AI-thing, Vigil. As a result, we've decided that the threat of these ... Reapers is a clear and very present danger to both galactic society and quite possibly all life."

Primarch Fedorian spoke next. "Given the losses we've taken in the past few days – over thirty dreadnaughts, well over two thousand cruisers and destroyers, countless fighters, hundreds of thousands of civilian casualties and tens of thousands of military ones – we are in no shape to even fight off one additional Reaper, much less a fleet of hundreds, or thousands. Review of the military capacity of the Reapers is still ongoing...but the results are grim. We simply cannot beat them in the foreseeable future, even if we had a century to prepare."

Shepard exhaled, as Dalatrass Linron's thin voice echoed. "Every examination of Reaper technology is being done using remote robotics. We've set up quarantine blocks over any area of the Wards with wreckage from Nazara, and STG teams have begun a sweep of forward geth locations to acquire more ... relics. We are taking this 'indoctrination' threat very seriously – debriefing the asari you found on Virmire confirms that Reaper technology can affect sentient beings in as little as nine to ten hours of exposure." Her eyes narrowed. "That makes research of what we have found ... dangerous."

Shepard nodded slowly. "It certainly twisted Benezia and Saren. At the end she fought it off, just long enough to destroy herself, but it was given how strong she was..."

Matriarch T'Armal smiled sadly. "Benezia was stronger than almost anyone I know, Commander. If she could not resist such taint, then no mind could. I fear that is not the true worry we have. Even by researching what wreckage we can of the Reaper technology, we have no way to match their numbers or power. Vigil informs us of strange powers and abilities they have, to alter space and time itself. The Inusannon had far more powerful weapons than we could ever hope to develop, and numbers that made our combined fleets look like a pirate's squadron, and even they could not defeat the Reapers in open battle."

President Windsor folded his arms, eyeing the clock carefully. "There isn't much time before our little pageantry starts, but I wanted to ... let you know what is happening, and why. We – and the quarians, Admiral Rael'Zorah did not feel a need to attend this meeting since he has little to add – will be working together to find methods and solutions to hopefully avoid the Reaper problem. Given rough estimates of the Reaper locations, based on surmises made by the Inusannon according to Vigil, we might have as much as five hundred years before they arrive...or as little as six. Given that researching the very thing that gives our enemies their superiority is very dangerous, our research will have to be conducted rather slowly and very quietly. We will slowly build up fleet numbers and phase in new technology where we can, adapting what we can to the threat."

Dalatrass Linron gave a narrow smile. "The danger of the geth will be used as our first excuse to ramp up our military. Humanity, along with the quarians, will be given more leeway to build dreadnaughts, and the Salarian Union will be sharing some of our more ... delicate ... technology with all of the Citadel races. I expect the asari and turians will also do so. We cannot afford to assume we have time to prepare, and must make ourselves as ready as we can."

Primarch Fedorian spoke. "But we cannot afford to let the public, or even most levels of government, know about the Reapers. There would be mass panic, a disruption of the economy when we need it the

least, and it would achieve no positive goals. Given that if the threat comes before we are prepared, that we can do little but fight as hard as we can and yet probably die ... letting this information out will only hinder any progress we will make."

Shepard frowned, but nodded, and the turian continued. "Rest assured, we are not ignoring any of this. It is a nightmare that I wish we did not face, but ignorance of the truth will only get us all killed. We, and I include myself in that number, have closed our eyes to many things for far too long."

Linron was more blunt. "Ignorance is death."

The President fixed her with a hard look. "We need your assistance in aiding us in keeping this quiet. The cover story is that Nazara was a sentient AI, an artifact of some race prior to the Protheans, and played a role in their destruction. Saren and Benezia found it and plotted rebellion and revolution, and the ship allowed them to dominate the geth. It is possible that the geth are working to create another ship like it, which will cover our continuing war on the geth to find any more traces of Reaper technology."

Shepard sighed. "I don't see I have a choice, Your Majesty. As much as I dislike lying about what I found – from my point of view, Saren and Benezia were both victims – I will follow orders. Just .. how many people know about this? If one of you die suddenly or leaves office, who else knows?"

The President gave a cautious smile. "The quarian high admiral, Rael'Zorah knows. As does the Citadel Council, including Udina. Captain Anderson knows, and will be placed in charge of a special unit to research defenses against Reaper attacks. You and your team knows, but we would appreciate it if they kept it quiet. It appears, although we are not sure how, that the Shadow Broker knows the truth as well – maybe even pieces we do not."

The asari matriarch folded her fingers together. "The Council of Matriarchs, the salarian STG Master, the Turian High Command and the Systems Alliance Commissariat have members who know as well. They will maintain the continuity of any information sharing required."

Windsor made a gesture with his hands. "For now, that is all. You and I will have a conversation after the award ceremony and your leave. For now, however, I can only offer you my sincere gratitude. Your actions have perhaps, with no exaggeration, saved this galaxy from darkness we can scarce imagine."

With that, he rose, and gave her a bow. The turian Primarch stood and gave a valor salute of warrior to warrior, the asari matriarch inclined her head graciously, as if Shepard were her equal, and the Dalatrass made a gesture of bowing her head.

With that, the Primarch touched his omnitool, and the door slid open. "Your audience awaits, Spectre."

Shepard shot the turian a sour look, and the leader only flicked a mandible in amusement as she rose. "I will always serve to the best of my ability as long as you are straight with me. I .. appreciate you taking the time to keep me informed."

With that, she followed the Spectres out the door, and up the silvery steps. Most of the damage in the fight was either repaired or covered over with haptic banners or more conventional cloth ones.

A line of Spectres stood to either side of the wide plaza at the top of the stairs, flanked by the SA Guard of Iron as well as honor units from the turian, asari, and quarian armed forces. She saw the President and Matriarch T'Armal moving on a higher balcony, before she reached the top.

The balconies were filled with spectators, and the entire ceiling was near to eclipsed by hovering camera drones. The lower tiers were equally packed, and through the broad windows looking down on the Presidium she saw crowds surrounding the Tower.

For all that, silence dominated the chamber, the somber click of footfalls on steel and the faint rustle of

the cherry blossom trees the only sound. It reminded her of when they made her a Spectre in the first place, and she squared her shoulders as she advanced.

The Council stood at their normal places. Tevos wore a gown of white and scarlet, with a shawl of deep red covering her shoulders. Sparatus wore the uniform of a turian general, with a heavy brocaded sash festooned with medals crossing his chest. Valern wore a simple black suit with the rank insignia of a STG Unit commander, his bracers missing for once.

To one side of the platform stood Councilor Udina, dressed in a dreadfully expensive looking silk suit and literally smirking his head off. On the other side the hulking form of Admiral Rael'Zorah stood like a pillar, dwarfing the smaller male quarian in a rather fancy looking environment suit by his side.

Liara, Wrex, Tali, Jiong – sitting in a lift chair – Joker, Chakwas, Garrus, Telanya, and Pressly stood in front of them, followed by the senior NCO's of the various ship divisions, Navigator Friggs, and Ashley Williams, also in a lift chair flanked by the heavy forms of Montoya and Rodriguez, her DACT.

Behind them was the rest of the crew of the Normandy in neat rows, along with her battered remaining marines and a handful of quarian marines, Kal'Reegar in front and standing tall.

She eased through the ranks of her people to stand in front of them, and saw the form of Admiral Mikhailovich standing in front of the Council in his dress whites. As she came to a stop, the admiral glanced to the heavy set sergeant standing at his side.

The man shouted. "Normandy. At-ten-**SHUN**."

Her crew fell in with perfect precision. Garrus came to a turian stance of attention, while Telanya mimicked the soldiers around her. The quarians and Tali straightened further and crossed their right arm over their chest, while Liara merely folded her hands together.

Wrex just rolled his eyes.

Mikhailovich shot the krogan an evil look, before lifting his jutting chin and speaking. "You have returned from the most difficult assignment that the Systems Alliance Navy has ever undertaken in our recorded history. A single battle frigate with experimental technology, you have taken down cruisers, destroyers, and heavy cruisers in combat. You have repelled assaults from enemies both foreign and domestic, and shown the entire galaxy that same honor, bravery, and commitment that the men who stormed ashore on Normandy Beach so many years ago first showed us."

"It should come as no surprise that once more, Commander Shepard, the Systems Alliance honors you with the Star of Terra. You risked your life to stop a threat to the entire galaxy, and your valor, courage, and leadership are an inspiration to us all."

He withdrew a black case from his pocket, taking out a blood red ribbon from which hung a single gold star. He draped it around her neck, complementing the one already there.

He then smiled, and turned slightly to address the crew. "Shepard did not act alone in her fight, and the valor of the crew of her ship is also noted. It is with vast pride that I present the Presidential Unit Citation for Gallantry to the crew and the ship Normandy. Additionally, every member of ship's company is hereby awarded the Medal of Valor and the Legion of Honor."

With only a slight hesitation, his face turned towards her non-human crew members, and the quarians. "And yet, the crew of the Normandy did not achieve victory merely through the might of human arms. Turians, asari, quarians, even krogan stood strong, stood fast, and stood together to defy an enemy that threatened us all."

"As such, His Grace, President Windsor, Prince of the House of Windsor, has authorized the Medal of Valor, a sizable monetary award, and honorary class II citizenship for every non-human member of the

crew, and the entire Migrant Fleet Marine contingent who bravely aided our forces at Ilos, along with the crew of the All Due Caution, the volus cruiser who also aided us there." He paused. "That makes Urdnot Wrex the only krogan awarded such a citizenship."

As he finished, the color sergeant barked orders to the Guard of Iron. "Guards! Present arms! Systems Alliance, arriving."

Mikhailovich turned and saluted as President Windsor approached from the side, the Guard of Iron parting to let him pass. His dark suit had been augmented with white gloves and a belted sword, as he moved past the guard to stand in front of Shepard.

"Thank you, Admiral. Carry on. Commander Shepard. Attend us."

Shepard swallowed and took one step forward, and the President lifted his voice.

"This woman is humanity. She is our pride, and our failures. She is our hopes, and our sins. She has endured the very worst our race can offer, and yet shows the very best we can ever hope to achieve."

The president's smooth, grave voice took on a note of fierce, angry pride. "We have not honored her as we should. We have let her bleed for us, and suffer for us. While we sat waiting, she led her men to danger and battle we can scarce imagine. While we doubted, she acted. When we did not listen, she forged ahead. The very least we can do is correct our negligence in a manner more real than ribbons and speeches."

He turned to face her, meeting her gaze squarely. "Commander Sara Ying Shepard, kneel."

She did so, and he drew his sword, finely honed silver and steel with a basket hilt. He tapped it over her left shoulder first. "In the name of Saint Michael and Saint George, and in the name of the Blessed Martyr Victor Manswell, we grant thee a Name." The blade touched her other shoulder. "In the name of the Systems Alliance, the manifest hope of all mankind, we grant thee a recognizance of your valor, that shines above all others."

He passed the sword over her head. "You are no longer Sara Ying Shepard, but *Baroness* Sara Ying Shepard, Protector of the Systems Alliance as a member of the Knights of United Earth. By our authority we make you Major of Marines and Admiral-designate. By our blood we name you of the Families of Earth. By your deeds we do declare any and all restrictions on your rights and freedom annulled now and forevermore."

He broke his gaze from hers to stare almost challengingly around the vast chamber. "Let anyone who defies our will be marked our enemy."

"Rise, Major."

She stood, not quite believing everything she'd just heard. She was .. a noble. She was free of her Z2 restriction. The crazy bastard had made her a major and an admiral-designate, then made her a knight of the most restricted and noble order on the planet.

Windsor sheathed his sword, and did the unthinkable. He bowed to her.

For him to do so in private was one thing. For a leader of a major star-faring government, a Prince of the blood, a President to bow to a mere soldier in public, was something no one expected.

She nearly froze, before she felt Liara's soothing encouragement, and instead exhaled and bowed more deeply, hoping she did so correctly. She straightened a moment later, as he did so as well, his patrician features expressionless as he turned away.

Tevos then spoke. "We of the Citadel Council also recognize bravery when we see it. We gave you a vast charge – to stop both Saren and Benezia, to prevent their plans from coming to fruition and bring

them back for justice or death."

Valern's voice was low, almost tired sounding. "If this body had listened to your words, perhaps the tragic loss of life we have endured recently would not have occurred. But we cannot undo the past, merely learn from it and prepare ourselves for the future."

Sparatus finished, meeting her gaze calmly. "And as such, it is the unified decision of this Council of Races to confirm your status as a full and unlimited Agent of the Citadel Office of Special Tactics and Reconnaissance."

Tevos spoke. "To the brave sentients who fought alongside her, we can offer only our thanks and award a few things that will never match the cost you have had to pay. The Citadel Council will pay for your medical care and any rehabilitation, both now and for the rest of your lives, and you shall have top priority in acquiring accommodation on the Presidium. Each person standing before us will be awarded the Citadel Cross of Valor, the highest award any sentient can be given."

Sparatus spoke again. "Additionally, to recognize the valor and sacrifices of the many brave souls who saved this station and our very lives, the Council has elevated Donnel Udina and Thin'Koris vas Seya to the ranks of the Citadel Council, providing the humans and quarians with the rights, responsibilities, and benefits of a Full Member race of the Council. We will be meeting with the quarian High Admirals later today to discuss possibilities for colonization and subjects, such as the geth."

And then, Tevos, Sparatus and Valern each in turn bowed, not just to Shepard but to the entire group standing there. "Our gratitude cannot be expressed in mere words, gestures or objects. If you need anything, let us know."

Shepard nodded, exhaling, Jiong had carefully coached her on when to dismiss the crew. "Normandy. Mission complete. Fall out by watch sections and report to Dock Sixteen. Council Observers, Migrant Fleet Marine detachment – you are free to go."

With a stiff bow to the Council, she pivoted sharply on her heel, focusing all her attention on her posture and keeping her face emotionless and cool. She faintly heard wild cheering, but paid it no mind, walking straight and proud down the steps, cherry blossoms chasing her as she did so.

And once again, just as when she was made a Spectre, she saw Anderson waiting for her at the bottom of the stairs, a uniformed Kahlee Sanders at his side, his smile so wide and so proud he looked as if he might burst out laughing. Years of stress had lifted from his features, and he swallowed as she stopped in front of him.

"Well done, Sara."

"Thank you, sir. Nerves are now *shot*, sir. Permission to go get drunk, sir."

Anderson smiled wider and nodded to the Commissar detail she belatedly noticed at the bottom of the stairs. "Commissar Jiong has an aircar waiting, Sara. It will take you to the docks so you can talk to your crew. Get past that and a brief meeting with the Admiralty, and then you can fall apart."

She gave a grateful nod, and Anderson gave her a little push. "Get going. Media's already howling for blood, and the longer you take the more likely they are to figure out where to hunt for you next."

She snorted and walked, the Commissariat falling in around her, faces grim and hands on neural maces to clear her path.

It took a good twenty five minutes to get to Dock Sixteen, and another twenty for everyone from her crew to make it there. The quarian marines were nowhere to be seen, but they were probably having their own little award ceremony right now anyway.

Shepard took in the battered lines of her ship, the curve of its hull, the sweep of the wings. The scars of battle were visible everywhere, and yet the proud name still leapt from the hull.

Shepard found herself curiously upset at the idea of losing the Normandy, but shook her head to clear it and turned to her crew. They stared back, fidgeting in dress whites or in hastily cleaned up armor in the case of Wrex, and she smiled.

"Normandy 1. Crazy bitches, pointy faced bastards, and sick fucking terrorists 0." She smiled, pacing as she talked, moving in front of them.

"We set out to do a job. It was a lot harder, bloodier and uglier than I expected, but in the end we did it. A Presidential Unit Citation means each and every one of you, except myself and Pressly, just got promoted. It means you are always going to be paid and assigned as if you had maximum time in rate for your rank. It's clearance to pursue whatever you wanted in your naval career. For the marines, it's a surefire ticket into the N7 program."

She paused. "For all of us, it's a reminder that when everyone else fell down on the job, we were there. Adams, your engineering staff kept us alive and going where no one else could. Friggs, your nav people were always on target, and you stepped up to the challenge of being a department head with no training and aced it. Pressly, this is the single most badass ops team I have ever heard of. From CIC to keeping the guns going, you guys made this possible more than I did."

She turned to the small group of still wounded marines flanking a chair-bound Ashley Williams. "My marines. You bled, and bled, and suffered so much during this fight, and yet you never doubted me, or assumed I'd get you killed. You fought hard. We lost a lot of good men on this trip, from Jenkins and his stupid antics to Cole...and every one of them died fighting. They died fighting for something no politician can put into words, or award with a piece of metal."

"They died fighting to protect the innocent. They died fighting those who lost track of what it means to be alive. They died hard, and they died Marines, unbowed and unbroken."

She glanced over Wrex, Garrus, Tali, Telanya and most of all Liara. "And our guests aboard this cruise...thank you all. Without each one of you, at some point, this whole gig would have been over and us all dead in a ditch. Garrus, I don't know how the shit I can fight without you watching my back on oversight. Wrex, the next time you charge off by yourself, I'm killing you. Tali... I've got a stack of requests two inches thick from quarian ships asking for comms with you to offer you a slot on their crews. I think your Pilgrimage is pretty much done, you can't beat a better gift than a Council seat. Telanya...you gave me the chance to realize I can trust people again."

She met Liara's eyes. "Doctor T'Soni..."

She said nothing, and Asari blushed, and the entire crew chuckled or whooped.

Shepard smiled. "Without you we wouldn't have known where to start. And in the end, it was you who stopped Benezia."

Shepard turned back to gaze at the ship. "In a few minutes I'm going to have to meet with the Admiralty. I already know what they'll say. That I need political and leadership training. That I have duties and responsibilities. That the Normandy needs downtime and the crew needs rest." She smiled faintly. "Our time together was a blast...but I will be assigned elsewhere, and so will most of you."

She folded her arms, eyes flashing, and squared her jaw. "But I will never, *ever* forget a single one of you. You are my crew. *Mine*. And if anything or anyone gives you shit, they can gaze into the fucking fist of Shepard."

She grinned. "And now, it's time, boys, girls, and Wrex. Pressly!"

The XO came to attention. "Ma'am. The Normandy is at dock. VI is standing by. The crew is accounted for."

She exhaled and spoke softly. "This is.. Major-Commander Shepard. I am ashore. Command is transferred to Citadel Fleet Command, Dockside Division. I relinquish the deck and the conn. VI ... log the time."

Shepard turned to face the crew. "You have ninety-six hours of leave, starting in ...nine minutes. Report back to this dock when it's over for reassignment. It has been both a pleasure and an honor to serve with each of you."

She paused. "Flight Lieutenant Moreau, Engineer Tali'Zorah, and Doctor T'Soni. Meet me in room B, sixth floor, Citadel Tower in one hour." She exhaled, and headed back to the aircar. She felt a concerned pulse from Liara but sent back a calming one, and bit her lip.

#### O-OSaBC-O

Meeting with the Admiralty turned out to be a clusterfuck, just as she had expected. She arrived in a narrow room with both Admiral Hackett and Admiral Mikhailovich there, facing a wide haptic screen already filled with several Senators and other figures.

She sat down at the narrow metal table where her name was neatly printed in haptic imaging, picking up the padd on the table at her seat. "Co...sorry. Major Shepard, reporting as ordered."

The man on the screen gave an unhappy scowl. "I am Admiral Retham, commander, Alliance Manpower and Requisition. I've been given some ... highly unusual orders regarding your billet and assignment, Major-Commander, and I'm not very happy about them."

Admiral Mikhailovich snorted. "I strongly doubt the President or the Joint Admiralty Board cares about your opinion. They didn't listen to me or Steven bitching about it."

The admiral rolled his eyes, and Shepard interjected. "Before we argue...can you please explain what my orders actually are, and this billet?"

Admiral Retham nodded, glaring sourly at Mikhailovich. "Of course, Major. You are being assigned to the command of the Fifth Fleet, Eighty-ninth Strike Flotilla. You are in command of battle-group Chiron.

She frowned. "I'm afraid I'm not familiar with that formation."

The admiral nodded. "That's because it exists only on paper right now. The final touches are being put onto the Chiron's flagship, a brand new heavy cruiser, the SCH Kazan. A totally new design, banded reactive armor, heavy center-line torpedo bank, triple mass accelerators, and a Normandy-style mass effect core."

Shepard smiled. That sounded like quite a ship. The Admiral, however, continued. "The battle-group you are being put in command of would have that heavy cruiser, three destroyers, and five frigates. Along with this you would be in command of a special Regimental Combat Unit of A-rate marines, reassigned personnel from fragmented RRU and RIU divisions, and a handful of AIS and N7 personnel."

Shepard remembered the Fleet Master mentioning this possibility in the hospital on Noveria, but didn't ever expect it to truly happen. "I ... see. What exactly is the problem?"

Admiral Retham scowled. "It's bad enough we're assigning you a brand new state of the art cruiser when it's been made clear you are going to not be facing combat any time soon, but I've got to also resupply Fifth Fleet's other badly mauled flotilla under Admiral Mikhailovich."

The other admiral grunted. "Welcome to command, Shepard. Here's the issue – our ships are all shot to shit, and we urgently need to reinforce our losses. But the orders Retham has are instructing him to give you three brand new destroyers and the entire run of the new Normandy-class frigates as they come off the line."

Hackett spoke up. "Normally, as you both answer to me, this would be my call. But the Presidential directive is something I can't bypass. I'll actually need you to turn down this request so we can get those ships assigned to the front line where they properly belong."

Shepard nodded, and Retham scowled again. "It's not that simple, I'm afraid. The only ships available besides those are ... not exactly new. You'd be able to fill your command, but the destroyers all need a good month or more of drydock time, and the frigates are old second generation models without modern heat sinks. No money to refit them, either."

Shepard nodded again. The usual problem with the SA – not enough cash. The President had apparently taken matters into his own hands to make sure she was getting the top equipment to do the job...but she didn't have orders yet, so she didn't know what her job was yet.

She groaned. "So I'm in a catch-22. If I take the ships, the fleet gets screwed. If I don't, I get junk and no promise of replacements down the line, and if my orders take me into the line of fire, my men and crews pay the price. And I can't really imagine the President gave me this pack of nifty ships because he planned on sending me to nice, safe locales."

Mikhailovich shrugged. "I'm sure he won't, but it will be a lot easier for you to get replacements than I will, and my men are slated for anti-geth operations next week. If my men go in those frigates they might as well blow themselves up. And my destroyers are in no shape for fighting off vorcha, much less geth."

Hackett sighed. "Unfortunately I have to agree. I can't order you to allocate your ships to Mikhailovich, but it's going to be ... difficult enough getting you the kind of manpower and decent crews if we have to miss out on reinforcements to fill out your battle-group"

Shepard eyed all three of them before shrugging. "I'll tell you what. No matter what my orders are, my ships aren't going to move out of dock before they meet my standards. The older frigates – do they have any good points?"

Retham shrugged. "Heavier weapons load. Older stuff, but I suppose you could refit it. A lot better armor but less maneuverability. The electronics are a bit dated."

She nodded. "And the destroyers?"

He referred to a padd on his desk. "Those are all modern spec, just banged up pretty bad from the fight at Terra Nova. One of them doesn't even have a drive core."

Shepard nodded again. "Alright...I will be happy to sign off on handing my destroyers and frigates to the Admiral if you do two things for me. First, when she's repaired, I want the Normandy in my fleet. I can't see needing five stealth frigates, but I do need one, and she's the one I know best."

Mikhailovich thought about this for several seconds and then nodded. "Fair enough. It will be months before she's ready to fly again anyway, so I'm not losing out on anything. What else?"

She turned to Retham. "I want to pick my own officers. I have my own idea for who I want as XO, engineer, navigator, and chief pilot."

Retham grimaced. "That will play holy hell with assignments. And Engineer Adams has already accepted a Chief Engineer slot on the Orizaba, so you can't have him."

She smirked. "That wasn't who I had in mind. I want no refusals, no bullshit. I say the names and they get assigned, no questions asked. Do that, and I'll play ball any way I can to make your job easier. Don't and I'll see how much pull I actually have with the President since I answer to him now, apparently."

Retham gave a long sigh. "Fine. I'll lock down the berths for officers on the Kazan until you send me your candidates, and run them through approval without a second look."

Shepard nodded. "Now, you said something about my orders?"

Retham touched a control on his desk, and the padd in front of Shepard lit up. "For now, your orders come from the office of the President directly. For Spectre activities you answer to Councilor Udina, I guess, but while you report to Admiral Hackett for reporting and logistics purposes, your orders only come from President Windsor."

The padd in front of Shepard decrypted itself as she nodded, and Retham continued "Your first orders are pretty simple. Ninety six hours of leave, followed by a briefing at Arcturus, 0900, Monday morning. Since you don't have a ship, the light cruiser Accra will be taking you to and from Arcturus. I believe you will be meeting with your Presidential Liaison and whoever else you will be working with, but we have no details."

The padd finished decrypting, the orders matching what Retham said except for one line, printed in bold red text along the bottom.

"All orders are classified at the highest level of security. There is reason to believe additional personnel with goals similar to Cerberus are in Fleet Command. Via Presidential Directive 4493-X-91, you are hereby ordered to ignore all orders from any and all SA or human personnel other than President Windsor or his attache d'affairs, Elizabeth Windsor-Turham. Anyone attempting to violate or alter this directive is to be treated as hostile and executed forthwith."

She reread that then shut off the pad. Wonderful. "I understand. I have a small meeting with my own people here shortly, so if there's nothing else I can head out on leave..."

Hackett nodded, and Shepard, taking the padd with her departed. Once she left the room, Retham's voice sounded from the view-screen. "She seems fairly reasonable."

Mikhailovich snorted. "No, she just could care less about logistical bullshit. Mark my words, she'll find a way to get those ships repaired and refitted in no time flat, even if she has to hire quarriers to do it. She won't endanger her crews if she can help it."

"Pity the SA itself won't take that lesson."

O-OSaBC-O

Shepard arrived at the small meeting room where she told Joker and Tali to meet her, along with Liara, and got there just in time to see Liara enter.

With a deep breath she entered, triggering her omni as she did so. The room was lined with windows looking out over the Presidium, and Tali stared outside, Joker reclining in a chair by the corner, and Liara still glancing around as Shepard entered after her.

"Hey, gang. This shouldn't take long. Jiong is on his way."

Tali tilted her head. "Why is he coming? What did you need to talk about?"

Shepard shook her head, even as the door slid open to admit Commissar Jiong. He looked a trifle worse for wear, one arm in a sling and confined to a mag-lift chair, but was otherwise unhurt. "Ah, Shepard. I see we are all here."

Liara gave the Commissar a curious look "Yes, but what for?"

Shepard turned to Tali first. "Tali. You've been ... a huge help to us so far. Without you, none of this would be possible. Everything would be in ruins and Saren would have won. I and everyone else literally owe you their lives."

The quarian girl ducked her head before shaking it. "We all helped, Shepard."

Shepard snorted. "Yeah, but you got the ball rolling. I'm pretty sure I hammered that point in to the Council in my final report, and I hope it's what lead to you guys getting a Council seat." She exhaled. "But right now, my own future is kind of .. up in the air. I've lost the Normandy, and she is going to sit on a dock and be fixed up for several months."

Tali nodded, and Joker looked depressed. "Great, nothing to do."

Shepard smirked. "Not true, Flight Commander. I just got done dickering with Fleet Manpower. In return for me giving over some ships I could care less about, I get to pick my own crew for the brand new heavy cruiser I'm now in command of."

Joker gave her a grin. "A heavy cruiser? That's ... two pilots and a chief pilot?"

She nodded. "I believe so. And I want you as my Chief Pilot. I don't and won't trust anybody else to pilot my ship."

Joker gave a little cackle of laughter. "That is sweet." Then he paused and frowned. "But..."

She shook her head and focused on Tali. "Tali...the award the President awarded us, as he said, included citizenship for each member of the crew. Including you. I know you probably are eager to go back home to your family and fleet. But I would still like to ask you to be my Chief Engineer. And since you are a citizen of the SA, they can't stop me from commissioning you and giving you that position."

Tali was literally speechless. She didn't know what exactly to do. She had dozens of ships asking for her service, but the truth was, even as homesick and lonely as she was, she didn't want to just go home yet. Even if Shepard and others laid the quarian Council seat at her feet, she didn't feel like she had achieved anything worthy of going home. For her to be offered such a position was flattering, but more than that, it gave her something to be proud about – that she was held that highly not by a bunch of quarian ship captains seeking her only for her name and influence, but because she – herself, and her skills – were truly wanted.

She also had to face reality, in terms of just what she would be going back home to. She was finally winning over her father, gaining his grudging acceptance that she could handle herself – all of that would be lost if she just went back home. Her father would stick her in the safest position he could find, and she'd be lucky to ever leave the Fleet again.

Finally, maybe most importantly, there was Jeff. For him to go from piloting proud warships to the broken wrecks of the quarian fleet, especially now when most of them would be doing little more than scouting for a planet to colonize, wasn't something he could do and enjoy. She might be able to get him to agree to come with her to the Fleet, but he would regret it – and her – in the long run.

Jiong spoke into the silence, taking off his hat to place it in his lap. "I've already approved it with the Commissariat, Ms. Zorah. While there were certainly concerns about having foreign nationals in a serving capacity on a SA warship, those mostly applied to Mr. Urdnot, Mr. Vakarian and Ms. Telanya. You would be offered the nominal rank of Lieutenant Commander, albeit a staff and not a line commission since you don't have SA command training and regulations don't permit a non-human CO..."

She didn't look at Jeff or Shepard, instead she swallowed. "I...need to think about it."

Shepard nodded. "Joker, why not take Tali out and walk around a bit. Liara and I have a few things to discuss ourselves."

Joker looked almost as dazed as Tali sounded by Shepard's suggestion. "Sure. I'll...be on my omni if you need me." With a gentle hand against Tali's back, he left, following her out the door.

Shepard exhaled when it shut, before glancing at Liara. "So."

Liara could feel Shepard's nervousness. "I can only presume that you wish to make the same offer to me?"

Shepard nodded. "Yes ... and no. A heavy cruiser has an entire science department. No matter what else, I'm sure part of my duty will be hunting Reaper activity and artifacts, and that means I need a good scientist and archeologist. Lucky for me, my girlfriend fits the bill."

Liara smiled, and Shepard continued. "But...I had a conversation, with both Matriarch Suliasa and Aethyta. The whole thing with your people blaming you for Benezia's sins may or may not die down, but the Justicars are retarded about things like this, and the only way to shut them down and stop them from hassling you or your family...is to take you out of their jurisdiction."

Shepard gave her a long, careful look. "If you join me in marriage in the SA, your granted citizenship upgrades to my new level. And if you are no longer an asari citizen, the Justicars cannot come after you."

Liara nodded. "And the asari matriarchy will agree, because it prevents me from being leader of my own House..."

Shepard sighed. "That's not what I wanted in the long run. I don't want to detach you from your family."

Liara sighed. "And you are not, Sara. They did, with their actions. And even if things have changed somewhat now ... the greater asari society has not. I mean what I said back on Noveria. The duties of being a Matria...are something I am not yet ready to perform. And I will live a very long time, there are many years ahead of me in which I can return to my House. I am more concerned that you may feel forced into this..."

Jiong interjected. "This is a conversation I had with Shepard back on Noveria, Doctor. The politics of this situation are going to be tricky as it is. I understand that things such as marriage and the like are not usually something where one considers galactic politics, but in this case I fear the ramifications factor more into events than emotions. Whether or not she and you are forced into this isn't the question. I can only assume you two love each other and wish to be together. The way you go about it will determine how much of a hassle you go through to do so."

He steepled his fingers. "I assume you are unfamiliar with high human culture?"

Liara nodded uncertainly, and he continued. "In the aftermath of the disruption of our culture during the Days of Iron, the SA created tiers of citizenship for all citizens. Most people are class I, II, or III citizens. With the recent events, Shepard is now a Class V citizen. The closest analogue I can get to your culture is that Shepard has been raised to a rank equivalent to that of the Thirty."

Liara absorbed this slowly. "So there...will be a great many people seeking to use her, regardless of what she feels or chooses to do. Few commoners have risen to the ranks of even adopted members of the Thirty...and most who do so are still looked down upon. She will face the same?"

Jiong nodded. "Precisely. Because she is, to put it mildly, both unfamiliar and uncomfortable with such society, she will be exposed to a great deal of scrutiny. Given the fact that most chosen for the honor of Class V citizenship come from vastly wealthy families with some relation to existing noble houses, for

a commoner with a criminal background to ascend will be seen as insulting by some."

Jiong smiled. "However, if she is paired with a Princess of the Thirty, this sends many messages. It, as she has stated, prevents any further discommodation from the Justicar Order, who will be forced to let the issue of mother-guilt drop. Given that you are yourself of ancient lineage, if asari, few can complain that you would be joined with Shepard. There will be screams of protest from bigots and the like, of course, but the most important thing is that there would be no ... scandal, as would happen if you continue your current liaisons as you are."

Shepard sighed. "I'm not very good at being romantic, Jiong, but thanks for reducing this to the most boring and unexciting result possible."

He chuckled. "I live to serve, Baroness."

Shepard shook her head and turned back to Liara. "I don't want to force you into anything. But I am NOT being forced into this. I ... I want to have a life with you, more than anything. I've never had the chance or option of saying 'I want to do this' or 'I want to be this'. Now I do. If doing it helps protect you ... even better."

Liara gave a somewhat light sounding laugh. "I ..". She shook her head. "Sara. I have no problems with binding my life to yours. In many ways, I already have. I cannot go home, and even if I did, I am not ready to be a part of my family, much less lead it. If the choice is that or to spend my life with you, I choose the latter. And like you said, the fact that it will also protect you from the stupidity of your own people simply makes me happier about it."

She paused. "But once we make the decision, we cannot ... back out. I am not saying no by any means, only that I do not think it is something we should do immediately, until we know more about what your President has planned for you."

Shepard exhaled. "Agreed. I'm still in the dark myself. We'll need to talk about this more, later. I ... I am still pretty overwhelmed."

Jiong smiled gently. "For now, you should go onto leave, I think. Captain Anderson and Lieutenant Commander Pressly have arranged the crew to have a celebration at Flux at nineteen hundred hours tonight. And I took the ... liberty of engaging a suite at the Senthias Hotel. The entire ninth floor is reserved, and Commissariat security will ensure there are no media or other disturbances of your rest."

Shepard blinked. "An entire floor?"

Jiong shrugged. "You two are very loud." Both Shepard and Liara flushed at that, and he chuckled. "If there is nothing else, ladies, I will see you tonight." He placed his peaked hat back over his head and turned his chair to the door, smiling as he did so. He paused at the doorway to speak one more time.

"General Von Grath also wished to speak to you sometime today, but I told him to show up at the party, so you can speak with him there."

He left the room, and Liara merely stared at Shepard a long moment. "Sara...are you doing this because you want me near you...or to protect me...or-"

Shepard reached out a hand to take Liara's. "I'm doing this because I'm lost without you. We were worried we'd be forced apart. Now we won't. I love you, Liara. And ... "

She paused, staring at the windows. "That last fight showed me I wasn't invincible. We hit her with everything we had, after she fought her way through Ilos, the Citadel, and your dad. You hit her with enough biotic power to take out a frigate and she still got up. If she hadn't found herself at the end...we'd all be dead."

Shepard looked at her hands. "The ... President and the other leaders of the council races don't think we can win a fight if the Reapers show up. They don't know enough to figure out how much time we have. Might be centuries. Might be six years. Shit, they're guessing. The fuckers could show up next week with party favors and fireworks for all I know."

Shepard looked back, squeezing Liara's hand more tightly. "If that happens, I'm sick of regrets and shit I didn't get done. I'm tired of letting myself get used up and getting nothing for it. And ... I want this. I want to live a life, even if it's only for a little while, and just be a person. Not Commander Shepard. Not the Butcher. Not 'Baroness Shepard', and Jesus fuck that sounds strange. Just me. And you."

Liara smiled, and nodded. "I would like that as well." She leaned over to kiss Shepard, gently, and then smiled wider. "We have some time before the party starts, and Jiong was ... rather forward in his explanation of why he got us an entire hotel floor."

Shepard smirked. "You have something you'd like to do?"

Liara flushed. "Six hours of listening to my aithntar give me 'tips' was not something one sits through without getting some ideas, Sara."

#### O-OSaBC-O

As it turned out, most of the ninety-six hours of leave Shepard had was split between Liara, parties, and crashing at Anderson's apartment. Chakwas showed up the second morning, and Shepard and her had a long talk about the sort of things she and Liara did in bed and medical issues that would come up as a result.

Chakwas took the news with much better grace than Shepard expected, although she didn't seem very approving. Still, Shepard felt better with Chakwas fixing up any minor injuries, warp burns or cuts the two had than going to a medical clinic – that would have started all kinds of rumors she didn't need, now or ever.

She spent a bit of time with every member of the crew, down to the lowest comm tech or engineer, and made sure everyone knew she appreciated their service. She was happy to see Garrus and Telanya back in C-SEC, both having been promoted into Special Response, with Garrus charged to train a new cadre of C-SEC snipers and tactical officers. Executor Palin had been broken by his near death experience in the Citadel Towers, and Garrus felt the man was near ready to step down and hand his duties off to someone else, either one of the new human officers joining C-SEC in record numbers or one of the senior salarian detectives.

She spent several hours with Ashley, talking about many things. Ash had been tapped to attend Officer Candidacy School, and many of the forces that had kept her career in limbo seemed impressed that Shepard herself recommended her for such. Shepard laughed when she told Ash just how brutally direct she'd been in her recommendations for Ashley to be allowed to go to OCS, admitting she enjoyed being able to make sure Ash's career was going to continue on. Given the stigma over the Williams name, Ash had a tough road ahead, but for the first time, as Ash put it, she had no roadblocks on it.

Eventually, they came to the topic of Kaiden. Ash was still torn up over his death, but even through her tears she smiled. "Skipper...Kai never knew what tomorrow would bring. He'd be the first person to say that we couldn't change what has already happened, so beating ourselves up over it is stupid. I have to believe he's in a better place now, a place without headaches from his L2, or worries about his parents."

Her voice softened. "In a way, he's not gone. What I have within me is part of him, to carry on to tomorrow. That's all we can do sometimes. When we lose the people close to us, whisper our anguish to God, and miss them, and keep going."

Shepard nodded. "I'm ..I don't even know what to say. How you deal with it. I try to imagine Liara dying and I just want to curl up in a ball." She grimaced and looked away. "Never tell yourself you aren't strong, Ash."

Ashley had gone still, then given a little smile. "Piece of poetry just popped in my head." She glanced out the window of the hospital, biting her lip.

*"Home they brought her warrior dead:  
She nor swooned, nor uttered cry:  
All her maidens, watching, said,  
'She must weep or she will die.'*

*Then they praised him, soft and low,  
Called him worthy to be loved,  
Truest friend and noblest foe;  
Yet she neither spoke nor moved.*

*Stole a maiden from her place,  
Lightly to the warrior stepped,  
Took the face-cloth from the face;  
Yet she neither moved nor wept.*

*Rose a nurse of ninety years,  
Set his child upon her knee—  
Like summer tempest came her tears—  
'Sweet my child, I live for thee.'*

At that, Shepard found she had no words, merely holding Ashley's hand as she wept anew and felt her own eyes burning.

The day after, she saw Wrex off, after a short farewell. He wasn't going hunting for Okeer, just yet. He was headed back to Tuchanka, to tell his mate of the death of their son, and to wander the wastes for a bit. He claimed he needed to find himself again.

"Fighting Okeer...made me wake up, Shepard. For all my talk, I've done nothing but hide the past few years. When I'm ready to get him, I'll call you."

She nodded. "Make sure you remember to do it before you fight him this time, dumbass." Biting her lip, she shook her head. "I'll miss you."

"Bah, don't go soft on me now, Shepard." Still, he knelt in front of her. "I bow to no battlemaster, and I serve no other, krogan or alien. But if I had to name one that is my equal, it is you." The red, bulbous eyes sought hers. "Don't trust your people, Shepard. They smell off."

She only nodded, turning to the black-armored figure of Beatrice Shields. She had shown up unexpectedly, to help see Wrex off with a big package of dried jaaki, and hung around even as Wrex's ship departed.

Her ex-teammate had been coolly polite to Shepard, telling her that the Shadow Broker had taken her in and paid for the many surgeries it took to repair her body. Rather than turn down his offer of employment, she had taken the job with pleasure.

Shepard had asked if she was okay, and Shields had given her a small smile. "I helped your people out, She-bitch. I didn't have to, didn't really want to, but I did it. And that makes us even, as far as I'm concerned. I know that we all make our own choices, and the one I'm making is to find my own way. Good luck."

And with that, she'd simply departed.

Shepard didn't know if that hurt or if it was a relief. She didn't think Shields would forgive her for being with Liara after she said she wasn't...but Shepard had her own life to live. She was thankful Shields had stepped up to help her crew, but Liara's anger at Shields for betraying Shepard had never cooled, and Aethyta had not been impressed with her former teammates either.

Shepard spent the rest of the time dodging the media. The media had gone absolutely insane, with Shepard being forced to take on two Commissars and a young comms tech just to manage her messages and requests for meetings and interviews. Udina spent several hours with her in his new offices, going over in testy language exactly how she was expected to comport herself.

They argued, he called her a neanderthal, she laughed at him, and he grumbled. But she knew how busy Udina was trying to manage his new offices and duties, and appreciated him spending the time to give her coaching on how to deal with the avalanche of media attention falling on her head.

It was the third day of leave when she was summoned to meet privately with President Windsor, a Commissariat aircar picking her up from Anderson's apartment.

The ride to the Wards was interesting – Shepard had presumed the President would be in an upscale Presidium hotel, but instead they arrived at a heavily fortified building not far from the docks. Commissars and X personnel guarded the building, weapons drawn, and two MAKO tanks flanked the entry tunnel.

She was escorted inside by grimly silent Commissars and ushered into a large, if somewhat plain, briefing room. President Windsor sat in a reclining office chair behind a wide desk covered in haptic panels and screens, staring out the windows at the Wards skyline. The room had five or six comfortable chairs and a large haptic display screen on one wall, and that was it.

He turned to face her as she entered, gesturing to a seat. "Baroness."

She remembered Udina's hasty lessons and bowed deeply, still feeling awkward. "Your Majesty. Thank you for ... taking the time to see me. I am aware of your many duties and will ... try to not waste your time."

He gave a small chuckle as she sat. "Someone has been touching up your courtesy, Shepard. But I rather find plain speech appealing. There is no royal 'we' in this room – speak at ease. You are of little use to me if you overawed by my presence."

Shepard exhaled sharply. "Bluntly? Sir, you're the President. You are royalty. I'm a jumped up thug that was lucky enough to survive a lot of fights that should have killed me."

He laughed again, the faint lines along his cheeks bending. "No, I am a man, Shepard. I am no greater than you for my blood, my family history, or my position. Few of my rank and status believe those words, but I do. If my duties are heavier, my trials more tiring, that does not make them any greater than the tasks you have overcome."

He sat forward, eyes intense. "I had vast wealth, every advantage and benefit, and the backing of a huge family and entire nations, with every hurdle in my path removed. You had nothing, came from privation, and fought every inch of the way. And yet now we are peers. Which of us, then, should really be in awe? You of me, or me of you?"

He smiled. "I did not pick you to be my sword arm out of mere gratitude, or because of what you did against Saren. I choose you for the same reason I gave you the Star of Terra – because you overcame. That was not empty propaganda, no matter the intent of the Navy. It was not a method to hush you. No one should have had to endure what you did at Torfan, and that was the least I could do to show you

that your service mattered."

He folded his hands on the desk in front of him. "And I have elevated you to your current rank and privilege not only to reward your unfailing and unflinching service and bravery, but to put into the grave any thoughts you – or anyone else – may have that you are somehow not *good* enough. This entire galaxy owes you. Never forget that. Never doubt your right to what you have been given."

She swallowed slowly. The words almost hurt as bad as Anderson telling her how he saw her as a daughter, almost as bad as Liara saying she loved her. They were words that said her fuckups and past didn't matter, that her criminal acts were not something to hang over her head forever. Once again, she had to step past her own pain and focus on moving on with life.

It was terrifying. And yet, there was no give in Windsor's voice. No give in Liara's, or Anderson's, or Von Grath's.

She nodded. "Yes, Your Majesty. I won't let you down."

He snorted. "Such an occurrence has not even crossed my thoughts. Now, to business. I have several tasks I need for you to accomplish, and unfortunately idiocy of a political nature has forced my hand. As President my influence and control over the SA government is limited. This is an artifact of the fear we have of overwhelming political leaders, as well as by design."

He tapped a control on his desk, the display map on the wall lighting. "We have a number of grave situations that, due to the incompetence already demonstrated by the incoming administration and new Admiralty figures, I am loathe to assume will be handled properly. Some of these issues" – he tapped batarian space – "involve a mix of tactics, diplomacy, and intelligence work. Others, like the geth, require aggression and stealth. And still others are ... more dangerous."

He turned to look at her directly. "The AIS is sure that Major Kyle gave you some kind of information before his ... passing. They do not know what it is, and I find myself fearful of what horrors would drive a man strong enough to survive his past and Torfan to commit suicide on such a grand scale."

Shepard nodded slowly. "Sir... he lost his faith in the SA."

Windsor closed his eyes. "Whatever he uncovered must indeed be truly vile. He was the Lion, in many ways he was everything the SA was supposed to be." He gave a thin exhalation, eyes meeting hers. "Tell me."

So she did. She told him of compromised military 'research' teams, who kidnapped L2 biotics and used a bio-mechanical process to turn them into living tuning forks, somehow using these unfortunates to boost the powers of newer biotics in a special, secret program. She told him of the connections between the Manswell Foundation and Cerberus, how they sponsored and hired pirate attacks on colonies on the fringe and then had Cerberus defeat them, to win over colonists. She told him of the corruption in the administration that siphoned fees from citizenship tiers to fund black labs that took the vile research Cerberus pioneered and turn it into usable military applications, which they in turn had Cerberus front-companies market and profit from.

She told him of the connections Kyle found between the tech-gangs infesting the arcologies and a mysterious crime syndicate that was really a cell of Special Operations, answering to 'retired' generals, using the violence to disillusion the people of Earth against the government.

And finally, in a tired, dead voice, she revealed what had truly broken Kyle – that the Coleman administration had known about these things, many of them. That the Prime Minister signed off, that the Admiralty signed off, that they eventually planned to reshape the SA into little more than an extension of military and business interests, and that they had crippled many SA military operations to siphon

funds or materials to Cerberus or other, still unknown 'black cells' that could still be operational even with the destruction of Cerberus.

When she finished, the President looked physically ill.

"Who else.. knows this?"

She shook her head. "The Silver Prince referenced it, but no specifics. I destroyed the OSD after backing the contents up on my omnitool with an encryption code only I know – I based it off some of the crap from the Beacon in my head. Liara knows. Liara's father knows. That's it."

He steeped his finely boned hands, closing his eyes almost wearily. "All my life I have striven to lead our people in honor, in peace. To avoid the mistakes of the past. To unify humanity and move into a brighter future, not of bigotry, hatred and ignorance but growth. And now I find, to my disgust but sadly not shock, that I have been duped."

He shook his head and firmed his jaw. "When the time is right, Major, will you purify these criminals, if I give you the order?"

She nodded. "I would be delighted to, Your Majesty."

He gave a wan smile. "Then we shall act, but not, I think, in haste." Exhaling, he tapped the desk, triggering another haptic panel. "First, you will need a more complete grounding in command. Once you are done with your leave period, you will report – briefly – to Arcturus. The Admiralty should have covered this, but if they failed to do so, you will be transported on the cruiser Accra."

He brought up a picture of a young woman with a distinct resemblance to Windsor himself. "Once aboard, you will take formal command of your new cruiser, and your battle group, and meet with my niece, Elizabeth Windsor-Turham. She is acting as my attache d'affairs and secretary. I will make it clear that you only answer to me, or to her when she conveys my orders."

Shepard nodded and he continued. "Once your cruiser is crewed and outfitted, you will conduct a very brief shakedown run, and then head to Pinnacle Station, where you will meet Admiral Tradius Ahern. He has been tasked with commencing your command training. Pinnacle station will also be where the rest of your battle-group will be assembled and outfitted."

He tapped a control on the desk and the haptics all went dark. "Once that is complete, you will report to Arcturus once more for .. your first task. Obviously, the Council may have some kind of Spectre tasks for you, but I have been lead to believe they will wait several months before they begin assigning such to you, so you should have time to train and prepare."

Shepard nodded again, and the President stood. "Then our conversation is complete, Major. The commissars outside will be taking you back to the Presidium so you can continue finishing out your leave in peace. You are dismissed."

She bowed, as Udina had instructed her, rather than salute, and left the office. It wasn't until she got in the aircar and was on the way back to the Presidium that it all hit her, and she decided then and there to talk over all this with Anderson the first chance she got.

O-OSaBC-O

As with all good things, her leave came to an end. Tali had agreed to join her as an engineer, and Liara as a science officer. It took a call to both Udina and the President to browbeat Personnel into compliance, but Tali and Liara were both granted the rank of Lieutenant (staff) with an upgrade to Lieutenant Commander (staff) upon assignment to a ship.

Tali kept her hood covering the traditional Zorah purple, but had her suit tinted to Alliance white. They

followed her as she went through her final goodbyes, stopping with Garrus and Telanya.

Both were already back at C-SEC, Telanya helping move boxes into the office with biotics while Garrus chatted with his old partner Forlan. Both stopped when Shepard approached, and Garrus was the first to speak.

"So. I guess this is it, Sheep. Sorry, Baroness Major Sheep." Garrus's voice was wry, the fading scars from his battle to stop the geth now lighter marks on his carapace. Behind him, Telanya smiled widely, before bowing to Liara in the background.

Shepard laughed. "I'm glad you guys made out of this mess okay, Senior Detective Vakarian. I have no clue how Telanya puts up with you."

The asari shrugged. "He's finally agreed to stop letting other women chase him all over the Citadel and settle down with me. I can let him pop off at the mouth once in a while."

Shepard grinned. "Congratulations. But the girls from Ops Alley will be crushed, especially Specialist Sharna."

Garrus rolled his eyes. "Ha fucking ha." He paused. "This ... trip. This whole thing. It made me focus on what's important to me, and why it's important. Taking down the perp...is needed. Necessary. And red tape does get in the way. But I can't help but wonder if there was a little more red-tape and eyes on the scene with Saren would this whole thing have blown up in the first place?"

Shepard shrugged. "Nazara was going to find someone. From what bits the AIS has put together after deciphering the computers we found at his base on Noveria, Saren had been researching this for years, following leads his brother found in the First Contact War. If Nazara had managed to coopt someone else, or gone about things another way, we might have never known about the shit until a jillion Reapers flew out of the Citadel." She shrugged. "He's dead. We won."

Garrus nodded. "Being introspective about justice and crime isn't really my thing anyway. I've been assigned a very satisfying case ... going after that sick bastard Dr. Saleon. And now I have the reach and ability to leave the Citadel and chase him down and stop him."

Shepard nodded. "If you need some help doing it...let me know." She held out her hand, and he took it, firmly. "Be safe, Garrus."

He nodded, mandible flickering with emotion. "You too... Sara." He turned to Liara. "Keep her out of trouble, Liara? She gets carried away."

Liara made a gesture at her SA uniform. "Unfortunately, I have to follow orders now, Garrus."

The turian only shook his head. "And you had the gall to call me whipped." He grinned, only to shiver when Telanya flared her biotics slightly. "Uh..."

Shepard snickered. "I'd stay and help you out, chicken, but I should go." She turned and departed, bursting into full out laughter as Garrus gave a yell when Telanya lifted him from his feet to glare at him.

The rest of the day she simply spent relaxing with Liara, ending with dinner at Anderson's apartment with Kahlee. Joker and Tali had wandered off somewhere, and Shepard, after eating another delicious meal, was stretched out on Anderson's comfy leather couch, Liara snuggled up against her, staring into the fire burning in the wide stone fireplace.

Anderson sat on his recliner, a glass of scotch in his hand, while Kahlee curled up on a smaller sofa, this time wearing a Blasto T-shirt and sweats. The dimmed sounds and flashing lights of aircar traffic outside were muted by the soft music playing over the sound system.

Shepard sighed, a relaxed sound that left her feeling tired and warm. "Thank you so much for dinner, Kahlee. I wish I could cook .... well, anything."

The other woman gave an impish smile. "Five years ago I couldn't even make oatmeal, and David once told me that steak wasn't supposed to be cooked with plasma grenades. You pick it up as you go."

Shepard shrugged. "I still don't even have a place to live, much less a kitchen. Course, it's nice that I can get one now. The SA won't give me all the pay I should have earned as a Z2, but they did advance me three months salary – as a major. Nice chunk of change."

Anderson nodded. "Planning to buy an apartment, then?"

She shrugged. "I have no clue. Jiong is looking for me. Who knew having a political officer would be so handy?"

Anderson shook his head. "I would be careful how far you trust any Commissar, Sara. If you really needed help with that, Kahlee and I would have been delighted."

Shepard smiled. "I would have, but Jiong is more concerned about media bothering Liara and I, starting scandals and all that crap." She leaned her head back, letting her eyes close. "I don't want to think about anything right now except how damned good that hamburger was."

Liara smiled, then glanced at Anderson. "If you have time tomorrow, David, my aithntar would like to speak with you about ... our plans."

Anderson arched an eyebrow. "Well, that is likely to be .. interesting."

Kahlee snorted. "Or awkward."

Shepard grinned. "Or involve lots of cursing."

Liara merely quirked her lips. "As ... eccentric as she may be, she is a good person, Sara. I am blessed that, even if I was not what my mother wished me to be, that my aithntar is proud of me."

Shepard snorted and wriggled around to kiss Liara. "I'm proud of you too, marazul. Just don't let her corrupt you too much. Hot, kinda nerdy and innocent biotic badass is still what attracted me in the first place. I have enough hard-ass warrior types in my life."

Kahlee snickered. "Smooth. I think your sweet talking could use some work, Sara."

Liara merely smiled. "I find her charming as she is."

Anderson glanced at the clock. "Big day for everyone tomorrow. Kahlee has to head off to Grissom Academy to do in-brief on the first selection of biotic students. I get to start my new job as Military Advisor to Udina, starting off by hashing out what the Council wants from the SA fleet. And you head off to Arcturus."

Shepard nodded. "Yeah. Bit nervous...Pressly still doesn't know he's tapped for XO just until I can talk someone into making him CO of the Normandy." She looked up at Kahlee. "What exactly do you do at your job, anyway? How do you teach biotics if you aren't one?"

Kahlee smiled. "I'm just the administrator. I've had a lot of experience with biotics in combat, and lots of experience in planning programs. In theory, I'll be advising the instructors how to shape the graduates to perform well in the SA – the military ones, at least. The Academy will also host non-military students. In practice...I push paper and keep snot-nosed biotic kids from tearing the place up."

Shepard grimaced. "That should be fun."

Kahlee shrugged. "It's a challenge, but I like challenges, and it gives me lots of free time to get back to

the Citadel and David." She shifted positions, bright eyes fixed on Shepard. "Turnabout time, what do you do in your new job?"

Shepard's eyes closed again as she grinned. "Work for the President. Go interesting places. Meet interesting people. Beat them up." She paused. "Some other stuff, but that's the gist of it."

Kahlee gave her an incredulous look. "Beat them up? Really? Ugh, could you be any more macho?"

Shepard smirked. "I hate to steal snappy comebacks from my crew, but to quote Joker – don't hate, appreciate. You get to push papers and watch snotty biotic kids, while I and my girlfriend cruise around space, righting wrongs and beating people up. The only way my job could be better if my title was 'Major-Badass' instead of 'Major-Commander'."

Anderson groaned, and Liara dissolved into laughter.

O-OSaBC-O

At the ground level entry of Anderson's apartment building, a media crew tried to gain entry but came up against the smiling visage of Commissar Alfred Jiong, still in a lift-chair but with a neural mace in his hand and a squad of Commissariat soldiers behind him. "I'm afraid the Baroness isn't receiving visitors tonight. If you'll leave your OT or TTG codes with the nice troopers here, however, she'll get back to you when she can."

One of the reporters, a human female with long brown hair, scowled. "You can't stop us, this is the Citadel and a public building."

Jiong examined his fingernails and sighed. "Wrong. As human citizens, you are always under the jurisdiction of the Commissariat. Council Code Section 1453-B, subsection six. As for public buildings, I'm afraid that C-SEC has granted us a forty-eight hour injunction against all media figures, and kindly delegated enforcement to the SA Commissariat."

The woman balled her fists. "She'll be gone by the time that expires!"

Jiong yawned. "Amazing! You can comprehend basic English *and* tell time. I would love to continue this conversation, but I'm still recovering from wounds and it has been an exceedingly fatiguing day. Lancer Grassi, please escort the media off the premises."

A trooper pushed his grav chair away, even as the commissariat troopers all drew neural maces. "You can walk away...or crawl away. Choose wisely."

O-OSaBC-O

In a soaring office tower on the south side of Vancouver, Richard Williams continued his work.

He'd been examining the Reaper artifact for days now, along with a cadre of other scientists Lord Maxwell had put on the task. It's powers were subtle, and the radiation it emitted of a type they were unfamiliar with, but Richard was sure he would unlock it's secrets soon.

He straightened as the ancient leader of the Manswells flickered into view on the haptic screen across from his work station. "Have you made progress yet, Richard?"

The former Shadow Hand gave a shallow bow. "Not yet, but I am still in the initial stages of my review. The scans we've taken are ... contradictory and confusing, so more time is needed."

Maxwell Manswell nodded, a wisp of soft white hair falling down from the fringe around his temples. "You will need to accelerate your efforts. Despite the insipid assertions of Adkins and DeRous, my sources tell me Shepard knows more about our projects and goals than we thought."

Richard curled a synthetic lip. "If she's only aware of what Kyle knew, she's going to be barking up the

wrong tree, milord."

Maxwell gave a grunt of amusement. "Quite. That does not change the fact that we cannot afford arrogant presumption. Such has already cost us precious time and effort."

To this, the big man only nodded in agreement. "Do you have additional orders for me?"

Manswell gave a rattling exhalation. "For now, begin working on plans for a replacement for Cerberus. The organization was too loose and too febrile in structure to survive long, and we can still use what fragments of the older networks and facilities of the last iteration to start with. Codename, Hades Group."

Richard nodded. "Who will be in command? Myself with others?"

Maxwell shook his head. "This time, you will be in sole command. We do not have to cater to the SA or existing forces this time, so it will be a much cleaner operation in terms of exposure. A facility is already being prepared at Horizon, and I have our first ... interesting subject for you."

Richard arched an eyebrow.

Maxwell gave a wintry smile. "The Shadow Broker's agents on the Citadel managed to subdue and capture one of the Prime units leading Benezia's attack, or at least it's core processors. We also managed to capture several geth vessels and many war-frames from Noveria. We've constructed a lab on Planet Aite where we can research if our original goal with Project Benedict is still achievable."

Richard tilted his head. "Scope?"

Manswell shrugged weakly, his clawlike hand gripping the chair-arm tightly. "Unlimited. Funding will be streamed from three completely new front startups, as well as a tap from Blue Stars No More. The goal is to bring geth under our control, both to act as a foil for Citadel races and increase human dominance."

Richard nodded slowly. "And the artifact here?"

Manswell smiled again. "I suspect, young Richard, that if Saren was able to dominate the geth using the Reaper's technology, that we can do the same if we are careful." He gave a racking cough, and wheezed, his eyes narrowing. "In either case, I fear I have few years left to me. You must be ready for whatever comes."

The big man folded his arms. "Will Aloxius support this venture should you die, milord?"

Manswell nodded. "He will devise an excuse for retirement if that happens, and take my place atop the organization." He coughed again, more violently, but exhaled and managed a grim smile. "Individuals may live and die, but Humanity will live on forever."

With a shaky motion of his hand, Manswell tapped something on his chair. "I am transmitting the files you will need to begin your new assignment, along with instructions for your medical staff to alter your facial features. Richard Williams is dead, my boy. From now on you will be Richard Manswell, a younger cousin from the cadet branch, back from the colonies."

Richard arched his eyebrows again. "Thank you, milord."

The old man merely nodded. "Do not fail, Richard. We will speak again once you reach Horizon. And keep a mindful eye out for that snake Jack Harper. He's survived...and we have no idea what he is up to."

With that, the screen blanked. Richard Williams spent several seconds considering his next course of action, before smiling faintly and departing the research lab.

The black and red pyramid in the center of the room pulsed quietly. Waiting.

O-OSaBC-O

As Shepard was saying her farewells to her crew and allies, a slender figure in a loosely cut jacket with silk slacks tapped a cigarette as he reviewed the information in front of him, in a room of mirrors and haptic screens.

"Shepard was very successful. I must admit she even outperformed my expectations."

He tapped the cigarette, a few ashes falling from the tip, and ground the edge until the fire was a pointed cone. "Yet, I can't help but ponder if she did the right thing, or merely the expedient one."

The woman standing across from him wore a skin-tight black outfit, set off here and there with matte black armor plates and high boots. She raised an elegant eyebrow, pushing back a mass of raven hair before speaking. "Shepard did everything to perfection. Saving the Council, stopping Saren and Benezia, even diluting the power of the asari and salarians. And now she has the ear of every leader in Citadel Space. What more could she do?"

The Illusive Man's handsome features didn't shift in the dim lighting. "One could argue that saving the Council wasn't the best course of action. No matter how committed they seem to recognizing the Reaper threat, they are politicians. They will convince themselves they have time to act. That they can profit from this and leave the problems to those who come after."

Miranda Lawson gave a small frown. "Surely they will see the threat as one that could destroy their own power, not to mention their people."

The Illusive Man gave a wry chuckle, a wintry smile crossing his features as he puffed on the cigarette before exhaling a cloud of blue smoke. "Unlikely, Ms. Lawson. The Council is not a monolithic creature, and those who compose it are either puppets or grasping at power beyond that of the Chamber. Sparatus has shown surprising insight, but his words about recognizing honor and valor were mere smoke and mirrors. He acted to stymie the asari and salarians, not out of any real gratitude. The situation will remain much the same, the dynamics changing only a little. All of what Shepard has achieved will fall by the wayside in months, if not sooner."

Miranda frowned again. "Surely she will try to counteract that."

The Illusive Man nodded, sipping his drink thoughtfully. "She may. And yet if she does, I strongly suspect she will be neutralized. Richard and Rachel answered to someone, and I was never able to determine who. That means I could not finger them in my little gift of information I sent Shepard's way. And they are still out there."

He rubbed his chin. "There are several possible actors, and they all have the capability to ensure Shepard never gets a chance to interfere with their plans. If we can corrupt a Commissar, so could they. If STG has spies in the AIS, could the real force that Richard answered to not also have them? She will be outmaneuvered and killed in some clever manner in short order if she isn't careful."

Miranda sighed. "You think they will assassinate her?"

He shook his head. "No. They will let her grow soft, and then send her off to die. Perhaps to fight geth, or pirates. They will dress it up in some courageous bunting, and she will be overjoyed to be of service, and die a martyr." He puffed on the cigarette again. "That is... if we do nothing."

Miranda folded her arms. "If we act while we are so weak, what little remains of Cerberus could be discovered and destroyed. Is she valuable enough to be worth that risk?"

Jack Harper stood, stubbing out his cigarette. "Have a little faith, Ms. Lawson. I'll make sure Cerberus

is around to protect Humanity. You focus on making sure Shepard is around to help us protect it."

Miranda's expression became confused. "She'd never work with us, surely."

The Illusive Man's glowing blue eyes narrowed as he grinned. "When the time comes, she won't only work with us, but join us." He left the mirror-panneled status room, with its view of a blue super-giant and the still form of Miranda Lawson, to fall into darkness.

#### O-OSaBC-O

In the silence of the command room of the Broker, Tetrimus and Tazzik waited for their master to speak.

The big salarian rubbed his shoulder, wincing. The Prime he'd defeated on the Citadel had put up a better fight than anything else, and the scars of the battle were still visible over his large frame. He glanced around the dimly lit room, his eyes narrowing.

Finally the sepulchral voice of the Broker reverberated across the room. "The situation remains perilous. The Council is not in possession of the most recent intelligence we have gathered from the dig site on Setharom."

Tetrimus shook his head. "I do not think so. If they were they wouldn't be so sanguine about events. The records we found were fragmentary and incomplete, but our translation VI's are giving 92% confidence on the result. The race that fell under Reaper attack some nine hundred thousand years ago did so after they destroyed the monitoring Reaper hiding out near the galaxy's core."

Tazzik grunted. "What happened?"

Tetrimus sighed. "If the records are correct, roughly eight years after the found and destroyed a hibernating Reaper, several thousand Reapers and tens of thousands of support ships erupted from the edge of the Galaxy. They stormed towards the Citadel, shut the relays off and killed everything. The Ulo managed to record this record by hiding it in volcanic lava flows."

The Broker flexed massive shoulders. "It was discovered by chance, as we mined for supplementary materials for our planned evacuation from the region. It is a critical piece of knowledge. The Council foolishly thinks the destruction of Nazara has saved us. Instead, it will only accelerate our demise. The only possible message the Reapers can take from Nazara's destruction is that we are a threat."

Tazzik let his thoughts wander along the patterns until he grunted again. "How would they know? If they had some method to communicate across all that distance, then why would he go to the trouble of recruiting Saren and Benezia once the Citadel failed to spring its trap?"

Tetrimus flicked his talons out in a flourish. "There may be other circumstances in effect. We are still gathering data. But to assume they don't know is foolish. We recorded an anomalous spike of energy just before Nazara's destruction that defies the laws of energy conservation as we know it. For all we know, that was an alert...or a cry for help."

Tazzik shrugged. "Alright, so we have a problem coming down the river. Null shift, from my point of view. I thought the plan was to evacuate anyway – what does this change?"

The Broker's multiple eyes gleamed faintly. "The Council is no longer the prime power in this Galaxy. To continue to proffer our services to them is to join in their eventual destruction. A new course is required."

"Tetrimus, continue with the evacuation plans as already being worked. Do not relent on our time-line. Expend reserve funds if you must, but ensure we can be ready to evacuate no later than three solar years from this date."

Tetrimus sighed. "That will be very, very expensive, Shadow Broker. It might raise suspicions."

The Broker's meaty fist uncurled to tap two thick fingers on the desk. "Survival trumps profit. If there are suspicions, then the six Spectres we have on the payroll can make themselves useful." The horned head turned to Tazzik. "Tazzik. I have a more difficult task for you. Cameras in the Council Chamber recorded a conversation between Matriarch Benezia and Commander Shepard that I believe, in the trauma following her victor, the latter has ignored or forgotten."

He tapped a control, a grainy image of Benezia muttering confusedly to herself while walking towards the plinth playing.

Benezia's image flickered, her movements sluggish, her voice a drone. "Protect...the people. If we...serve well, the ... Nazara will elevate us. Make us one of the great ones. Or at least allow us to live."

Shepard lay on the floor, bloodied, beaten, her armor scorched and dented. Her voice was raspy, angry. "You have proof of this?"

Benezia's expression was confused, almost lost. "I...yes. Collectors. Used to be Protheans, now work for ... Nazara's people. Safe . Alive. Have to protect..."

The Broker killed the feed. "The Collectors...used to be Protheans. And worked for Nazara."

Tazzik and Tetrimus traded glances. "You want them taken out? That's very difficult, given where they hang out."

There was a long moment of silence, and then Tetrimus and Tazzik both shuddered, because the Broker was laughing.

"No, Tazzik. I have no doubts that given enough time you could indeed destroy whatever you put your mind to, I have a different idea in mind. You will scour the Traverse and other locations for hints of where the Collectors are doing their next little collection of genetic oddities. And you will reach out to them with a message."

The Broker leaned forward as he folded his hands, the dim light from above casting his nightmare visage into sharp relief. "Tell them I wish to *deal*."

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*The story will be continued in the next Book :*

***OSABC: And Then There Were None***