Mass Effect

by Demonika

Summary

Lt. Commander Shepard, the White Death of Elysium and borderline pariah, is named commander of the Fifth Fleet's newest frigate, the SSV Normandy. Her task? The sort of thankless, redaction-heavy missions N7s train for, on call to do cleanup whenever and wherever Admiral Hackett says go. Along the way she forms an unlikely band of misfits into a highly effective army, and discovers just how thin and flimsy the galaxy's veneers of normalcy truly are. (An AU/"Reaper-free" doorstopper TV-Show-format series. Cross-posted on FFdotNet)
Caretaker

Chapter Notes

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See the end of the chapter for more notes

Episode 1: Caretaker

She knew the ship had decelerated out of the mass relay corridor by the split-second kick to the gut before the inertial dampener field kicked in, the shudder of the floor underfoot, and the disappearance of an ambient hum caused by vibrations passing through the bulkheads. Wan reddish light filtered through the viewport of her private cabin. Arcturus was distant enough to be nothing more than a red marble against the void of space.

With that as her notice, she got up from her seat at the small desk and moved across the tiny space to the large duffel bag on the foot of the room’s only bed.

The cabin door chimed.

“Enter.” She said calmly.

The door swished open and in stepped a young serviceman. He stopped two steps inside the doorway, snapped to attention, and saluted. Though he met her gaze, his eyes flicked to the wall behind her quickly, avoiding her pale grey eyes. “Commander Shepard, ma’am, the captain sent me to announce we are forty minutes out from Arcturus Station,” he announced.


The serviceman turned on his heels with all the efficiency of a machine and left. As the door closed behind him, Shepard could not help but add one more notch to her mental tally of poor servicemen utterly uncomfortable around her. She glanced out the viewport again and wondered for the umpteenth time why she was summoned to Arcturus Station in such haste.

Six months of ‘leave’ working a desk on Earth effectively ended by one late-night written message with all the proper seals and authorizations. Admiral Hackett gave her twenty-four hours to pack her full gear and report to him on Arcturus in person. He had even arranged her transport, just to make sure nothing would prevent her from being there. The haste was strange, but the fact that he wanted her with full gear meant a deployment. As far as deployments went, not getting details in the orders was stranger yet. It made her think that maybe there was something secret going on, something that could not be discussed or even mentioned on a less-than-absolutely-secure communications channel.

She went about packing her spartan belongings. Most of her things and equipment, including her armor and weapons, were packed into a locker in the cargo hold. The duffel she had with her contained just her casuals, sleepwear, and personal kit. There were also her officer’s uniforms, a navy blue gold-trimmed standard, and a white gold-trimmed formal. She wore the former while the latter hung sealed in a vacuum bag over the bed.
She was running a comb through her chin-length bobbed black hair in her cabin mirror when the ship began its final approach to the station. A minute later she tossed the comb into her kit and closed it before she returned to the mirror to hand-straighten her fringe and the centimeter-and-a-half-wide streak of white running through it. The streak of natural grey was a physical relic left by a long, nightmarish Elysium night. She had cheated death, but exposure to the cold, long hours in a state of perpetual stress, with mental and emotional overload on top nevertheless left a mark. When she was presentable, and knowing there was little else to do but wait, Shepard returned to the viewport.

Arcturus Station was a white saucer with two extensions that orbited the Arcturus-Themis L5 point, trailing behind Themis, the first planet of the Arcturus system. The installation always struck Shepard as crab-like, but busy as a beehive. With a five kilometer diameter saucer section, the station was hardly a pit stop. Ships of various sizes, civilian and military, floated nearby, while others docked to cradles. Arcturus Station was the most heavily guarded Alliance outpost this side of the Charon-Arcturus relay corridor. To say nothing of it being the seat of the System Alliance parliament, or that of the eight Alliance Navy fleets, six called Arcturus their home port.

What caught her eye was the elongated, blunted grey wedge shape of a Kilimanjaro-class dreadnought looming off in the distance. At one kilometer in length, dreadnoughts were roving towns, not ships. Its outboard lights shone brightly, announcing its presence against the void of space. Pressed up next to it, and connected via an extendable gangway, was a cruiser, similarly shaped, but at around three quarters the size. As far as parking jobs in space went, this was slightly unusual.

Then as her transport ship turned to come alongside one of the station’s arms to dock, Shepard caught the lettering on the dreadnought’s broadside, the SSV Kilimanjaro itself. Suddenly it was like the pieces of the puzzle started to fall together, forming an image. First Admiral Hackett’s orders, and now the Kilimanjaro here at the same time. Something was definitely going on. She could not see the cruiser’s identification, because it was blocked from view by the dreadnought’s broadside, but she would bet on it being the SSV Tokyo. This meant the Fifth Fleet Triumvirate was gathered in one place.

Fifteen minutes later Shepard was at the airlock, waiting for the pressure difference between the ship and the station to equalize. From what she had seen out the viewport she knew not to expect the gangway beyond to be empty. For all the subtlety of flying in on a frigate, one of many arriving, the right people would always know who was on board. Due process and all formality were expected, but it left her wondering who was going to greet her. Finally the outer hatch opened with a soft hiss and her eyes landed on the pair of young lieutenants.

“Attention!” The senior ranked of the two called as they both snapped to in unison before snapping perfectly synchronized salutes. “Welcome to Arcturus Station, Commander Shepard. First Lieutenant Theresa Carrere and Second Lieutenant Michael Yager, SSV Kilimanjaro, reporting.”

Shepard returned the gesture comfortably, though relatively briefly. “At ease,” she said as her arm dropped back down to her side. As the two junior officers slipped into parade rests she took a moment to take stock.

Carrere had dark brown hair pulled into a tight French twist at the back of her head, brown eyes, and a vaguely familiar sort of expression that Shepard suspected to be an imitation of her Captain’s. In contrast, Yager seemed to be the meek one, despite being taller and physically larger. His crew-cut flax-colored hair and brown eyes were non-descriptive. The two of them had probably been waiting for her transport to dock for a while, yet despite that their navy-blue uniforms were immaculate and
closed just so, neither looked capable of slacking off.

“What have you got for me?” Shepard wondered.

“Well, ma’am, we were told that you had orders to report to Admiral Hackett immediately, however the captain told us to tell you that Admiral Hackett is in a meeting right now. He will be available within the hour. In the meantime, the captain wishes to speak with you, we are to show you to the lounge.”

“Understood.”

“If you will follow us, ma’am.”

Shepard nodded and Carrere fell in step with her on the left, Yager a step behind. The docks at Arcturus Station were a lot like a ship, long featureless corridors broken up by doors that could be sealed shut in the event of a hull breach. The bland grey décor made getting lost in these labyrinthine passages quite easy. Her ship arrived to a side cradle designed for frigates, so everything was just a little more packed together and further away from the main saucer section. Eventually they got clear of the docks and could take a transport vehicle into the saucer section.

There was no conversation the whole way; the two lieutenants did not seem to be chatty, nor did they give into curiosity. The vehicle took them out into the more spacious sections of the station. As it happened the saucer’s rotation relative to the stationary arms put them rather near the main military compound of Arcturus. There were security checks involved, but eventually they left the car at a designated lot and Shepard followed the lieutenants on foot.

The lounge they showed her was a small on-base location, a place for officers to relax while remaining within a walking distance of the admiralty headquarters. The main room was full of off-duty officers of all ranks, but the division line was clear enough. The junior grades milled around the cocktail bar, seated on stools, or clustered around tall standing tables, drinking, and ribbing each other. The higher ranks sat in booths, enjoying their own drinks and conversation. There was music, but it was at a manageable level, and the lighting was turned down, but in no way dark. Overall it felt like this was the up-scale watering hole; a modicum of discipline remained in effect.

Shepard followed the two lieutenants to a side room, and Carrere announced their presence by tapping the console on the locked door. The lock turned green and then the door opened, admitting them inside.

Shepard stepped at the lead and scanned around the room quickly. It was a private lounge, with couches, vid screen, a low coffee table, and carpet on the floor. There, seated on the couch, was the Kilimanjaro’s captain. As their gazes met, the woman set her teacup down on its saucer on the coffee table in front of her, followed by the white tea towel she had been using to protect her lap and slacks, but she remained seated. Shepard snapped to attention and saluted, echoed by the two lieutenants on her left.

“At ease,” the captain said.

The older woman presented the visage of someone who wore her Navy-blue and gold officer’s uniform as if she was born in it. At fifty, her hair was still as black as someone twenty years younger, and pulled back and up into a bun at the top of her head. The expression on her face was all business; her blue eyes were outright glacial.

“Carrere, Yager, you are free to take your leave. Be ready for departure at eight hundred hours, sharp. Dismissed.”
“Yes, ma’am.” The two replied in a single voice.

It was the first time Shepard had heard Yager speak, and even then his voice fell below Carrere’s bell-like clarity. The two made an about face in tandem and exited the room.

The door barely closed behind them when the captain got up and tugged the bottom hem of her uniform jacket down into place. “Jocelyn,” she greeted.

“Mother.” Shepard replied.

Hannah Shepard drew close for a head-to-tow appraisal.

Shepard knew better than to protest. “You wanted to talk to me?” She asked.

Even before she joined the military, she knew her mother had two modes, and she employed both freely and interchangeably. Right now it remained to be seen exactly which dominated. To most, Captain Hannah Shepard was the “Titanium Lady” of the Alliance Navy, a title that came up due to her professional demeanor and cemented when she got command of the SSV Kilimanjaro a year ago. The idea went that titanium fit because it was both strong and resistant to tarnish and corrosion. Hannah Shepard was known for her strict but fair command style, and the reputation of the Kilimanjaro being one of the tightest-run ships in the eight fleets. Despite this, the Kilimanjaro was also a dream posting. Serving on it came with responsibilities and expectations. That was probably the reason Carrere and Yager could go for gold if the Olympics had an event in pair’s synchronized military drills.

Hannah shook her head, “Six months of desk duty and you are still exactly as you were the day they made you an N7. Still running marathons and making everyone look bad, hmm?”

Shepard sighed; now she knew whom she was dealing with, Hannah Shepard, the mother. Though doting, supportive, and always there no matter what, she was quick to give honest and unabashed critique. If there was one thing Shepard had done that Hannah had not, it was becoming a N7. Going through the Interplanetary Combative Training program to make N1 was already a feat, but making full N7 was grounds for a quiet sort of awe and reverence.

Shepard knew that her mother the Captain could and did respect that achievement and what it represented. However, Hannah Shepard still wanted to be a grandmother one day, and as far as Shepard knew, her mother thought the odds of that were inversely proportionate to the number of different ways her daughter could kill someone. Shepard was supremely confident with a sniper rifle, pistols, and her trusty combat knife. The list of possibilities was extensive even before she had to fall back on improvisation.

“Well never mind that. It can’t be helped. If you were not dedicated to your career we would not be meeting here today.”

Back to business, Shepard mused. “Admiral Hackett was in an awful rush to have me here.”

“And with good reason,” Hannah replied.

Shepard instantly knew her mother was in on the whole thing, and from the start. “I assume this means I’m getting a deployment. Not on the Kilimanjaro, though, I hope.” Shepard raised an eyebrow. There were regulations about children serving under their parents. She would hope they remained iron-clad, even if her mother tried to bend Admiral Hackett’s ear.

“No, of course not!” Hannah laughed. “Just think of my poor crew, they’d have two Shepard women on hand. You’d give my marines an inferiority complex before breakfast, day two!”
Shepard smiled. If her mother thought her marine platoons would feel inferior after watching one N7 at work, who was she to argue?

Hannah turned and placed her hands on her daughter’s shoulders. “What Steven has in store for you, dear... well, the opportunity is the once-in-a-lifetime kind. That’s all I’ll say. I’ve already said too much. I’m mum!”

Shepard shook her head, “Just how much of a hand did you have in this, mother?” she wondered.

“I may have suggested… or was that David? Well never mind. If you weren’t capable of it, whatever may or may not have been said would not have mattered.”

“That cruiser parked next to the Kili… It’s the Tokyo, Captain Anderson is here. So what’s going on?”

Hannah sighed, but Shepard could not help but feel like her mother was enjoying every bit of this conversation and affecting due melodrama, because she could. “It was supposed to be a surprise. He did tell me you’d get one look at the Kilimanjaro and Tokyo and know something was up, but you know… we wouldn’t miss this for the world! Now really, I’m mum! All I want to do right now is bask in pride. A mother could not be prouder!”

Shepard had a distinct feeling that she had walked onto a minefield even before she knew there was a minefield. Her mother was weaving her webs, she made Captain Anderson an accomplice, and probably had bent Admiral Hackett’s ear. Hannah Shepard was also the sort of woman that few said no to. Between her glare and her ability to talk people into doing things they may not necessarily want to do, she had her ways of getting what she wanted, and fully expected to get it.

A soft beep announced the arrival of a message. Hannah raised her arm and her omni-tool lit up, “Ah here it is. The admiralty meeting is over; we need to go see Steven now. Come along.” Just like that the captain’s mask slipped in place and Shepard fell in step on the woman’s left as they exited the room together.

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The walk from the lounge to the admiralty offices was a showcase of the sort of respect Captain Hannah Shepard commanded. Every time they passed someone who was not a civilian, salutes were snapped. Hannah responded with simple thanks for the non-commissioned, and a returning salute for the commissioned officers. Shepard echoed the system, but she noted that while the salutes applied to both of them, people definitely looked toward her mother when they snapped them. It left her feeling vaguely like she was in her mother’s umbra, otherwise invisible.

Hannah knew exactly where she was going and before long they were standing in front of the doors to the Fifth Fleet’s offices. When they made their way inside, the admiral’s secretary shot up to her feet so quickly her chair ended up sliding back all the way to the wall behind her desk.

“Hello, Claudia. Is Steven in yet?” Hannah greeted.

“Yes, ma’am. Admiral Hackett is in his office. Captain Anderson has arrived as well. Please go on ahead.”

“Thank you.”

“Of course, ma’am.”

Hannah barely touched the lock mechanism to announce their arrival when the door opened.
Shepard squared her shoulders and straightened her spine as the two of them stepped inside. The door closed and a faint beep announced the lock re-engaging. Shepard found herself in a rather plain office, a space devoid of excess comforts or very many personal touches. It said something about the man who worked in it.

Shepard snapped to attention and saluted, “Admiral Hackett, sir. Commander Shepard, reporting as ordered. Captain Anderson, sir.”

The admiral nodded, “At ease, Commander.”

The commanding officer of the Alliance’s Fifth Fleet; he was close in age with her mother, but with salt-and-pepper hair, goatee, mustache, and a prominent scar on his left cheek that made him look a fair bit older. His blue eyes bore through people with a keenness of someone who had seen and done much. Seated now at his terminal, his uniform hat hanging on a rack by the door, he looked stately.

“Shepard did you imply we were here to discipline her?” Anderson asked without missing a beat.

“I’ve done no such thing! David, I’m affronted you would think I would.” Hannah protested.

Shepard remained firmly as formally at ease as she could as her mother moved to stand on the left side of the room. The admiral spent a moment appraising her. This was entirely the norm as far as she knew. The admiral had his circle of most trusted officers; most of them were long-time friends. Hannah Shepard and David Anderson were right in the center of it. As far as Shepard knew their friendship went back twenty six years, right to the First Contact War. That meant a great deal of familiarity, which allowed her mother to act as she did; including being on a liberal first name basis.

Captain David Anderson commanded the SSV Tokyo, a cruiser assigned to the Fifth Fleet. An ICT alumnus and a N7, he had the reputation for exceptional leadership, though Shepard had never served directly under him. He was only one or two years older than her mother. With dark skin, close-cropped dark hair just turning to salt-and-pepper, and brown eyes that had a certain quality of being piercing one moment, and kindly the next. He often presented a calm, if grave ambience. Yet Shepard knew that underneath it all was a person who truly cared for others.

“To business then,” Admiral Hackett began. “Has Hannah told you anything?”

“No, Sir. She was… mum.” Shepard replied.

Hannah smiled and folded her arms under her bust as she flashed Captain Anderson a self-satisfied ‘I told you’ look.

“Good. The lounge was neither the time nor place to discuss this matter. It is a sensitive issue.” Hackett went on, as if oblivious to the non-verbal exchange happening in the room.

“May I hazard a guess that this involves a deployment for me?” Shepard wondered.

“More than that, it involves a command position.”

Shepard froze as the thought filtered through, a command position? For her? A simple deployment aboard some ship, as part of a marine detachment, or even in charge of one was one thing. That role she could fill, she had done it before. This was much bigger, essentially a promotion, though she did not think anyone would be pinning more bars to her shoulders any time soon. Having two Captain Shepards in the fleet might cause chaos; she really did not think she would make Captain until her mother made Admiral. Something her mother was not in a hurry to do.

“I am assigning you to the newest ship in the Fifth Fleet. The SSV Normandy, you may have heard
about it.”

“In passing, Sir.” Shepard replied as she tried to contain her overwhelming surprise. That might have been the understatement of the year. The naming convention of the Systems Alliance Fleet was such that the ship could not be a cruiser, which carried city names. That meant the name was a reference to the Battle of Normandy, and any ship named after a battle was a frigate, but she had heard some rumors. If just half were legitimate, then this was big.

Shepard’s main source was a lieutenant she met about six months prior, during her previous furlough on Arcturus, just after she had graduated ICT. Shepard knew no one on the station at the time, and having a drink alone had not been particularly appealing. He had been friendly without being too friendly, and so a chance meeting turned to conversation over drinks.

Mid-way through the first beer the talk turned to dream postings, and before long he regaled her with a tale about the Normandy, finishing with how much he would love to fly her. They maintained sporadic email contact after that, though she had not heard from him in over two weeks. The last email said he was going to be busy and loving every moment of it. Now, Shepard idly wondered if he had gotten the post, because she would like to have a familiar face on board. As an added bonus, if his bragging was backed by actual skill, he could make a frigate like the Normandy dance ballet if needed.

“The Normandy is our best worst-kept secret,” Anderson noted.

Admiral Hackett focused a piercing look that asked a thousand questions right at her. “I do not offer this command lightly; the Normandy is not just another frigate. The responsibility for it, and the mission I want it to undertake, will not be easy.”

“I understand, Admiral.” Shepard replied.

“Now that you’re standing before me, I have to ask. Do you want this command?”

Shepard was surprised that the admiral even needed to ask. Yes, she wanted this. She wanted this like a thirsty man in the desert wanted water. She would be utterly out of her mind to say no. What other options did she have? There were no other deployment prospects, not with her record having a pronounced red streak over the fact that she had a Star of Terra, and despite years of grueling training.

Still, this was different from a mere deployment. This was command, a mandate, a ship-full of people reliant on her decision-making skills every day. Maybe that was why the admiral felt the need to ask. Small as it may be, it was still more than she was used to, more than she ever had, more than some might think she could handle or deserved.

ICT trained people to execute difficult special ops missions either on their own, or with just two to four fellow operatives. Her training in particular emphasized covert special ops: infiltration, espionage, sabotage, and even assassination. She was an agent, not just an officer. In some ways her uniform was already a disguise. Nothing about it set her apart from every other officer in the fleet. Giving her command was further obfuscating most of her skill in a smokescreen of lowest-common-denominator expectations. Did they really want someone like that in charge of a ship?

“Permission to speak freely, sir.”

“Granted.” Hackett replied.

Shepard cleared her throat and glanced at her mother and Captain Anderson in turn, two of the
people to whom she owed the most. Her mother had glared down plenty of people who wanted to
give her an honorable discharge following what Shepard thought was the biggest mistake of her
career back when she was deployed again after Elysium. When people said she was damaged,
possibly irreparably.

Captain Anderson had been the one to get her into ICT; a way to forestall said discharge while the
situation cooled down. A combination meant to keep her commission active, keep her out of action
while the incident blew over, give her direction, and a chance to get her head back on straight. Some
expected her to wash out, the final fall from grace. Yet at the end of the day no one protested too
cricerously. Captain Anderson was staking his reputation, not theirs. Shepard worked hard not to

crash and burn, but despite that no one wanted anything to do with her when all was said and done.
Some probably still thought she would crack; others resented all the opportunities she got. She
came the Alliance’s golden screw-up.

The silence was growing a tad too long as Shepard settled her reeling mind. As if to shift tracks
physically, she straightened her back ram-rod straight and gave the admiral her best look of
determination. “Yes, I want this command.” She would take this command, and she would do her
absolute best at it. There was no other choice open to her. If she refused this, she might as well retire.
“Still, how many people would want to see me fail?”

Admiral Hackett actually smiled a little.

“But don’t mind that lot. I’ve had my share of criticism after I got command of the Kilimanjaro. There’s
always going to be that crowd.” Hannah added. “We have all seen your scores.”

“It’s not that. It’s more that I want to know how many enemies I’m making, and how many of them
might actually bite.”

“Already assuming tactical position,” Anderson noted, amused.

Shepard hated politics, politicians, and all that. She hated being in the middle even more, but it was
just an unavoidable fact. Politics might as well be the real black hole in the center of the galaxy. The
Systems Alliance and its fleet were mired in byzantine layers of it, both external and internal. Both
the Parliament and the Admiralty had personal visions. Sometimes the two did not meet. What more,
the Admiralty had internal politics played out in a twisted feudal court made up of Admirals and their
circles.

The fleet had their Medicis, Machiavellis, and Borgias. Admiral Hackett tended to play the first.
Giving her this command was well in-line with his ‘benign patronage’ policies and steady iron hand.
Captain Shepard acted like the middle of the three; nothing was sacred when she set her mind to do
something. Captain Anderson tended to fall in between the two, more former than latter. It looked
like she was going to become a piece on the admiral’s board as well.

Admiral Hackett withdrew a data pad form his desk drawer and laid it out for her to take. “This pad
contains information that will familiarize you with the Normandy and her crew, your crew. Needless
to say some of that material is classified.”

Shepard picked it up, but did not look at it; there would be time for that later. “I understand, sir.” She
could feel the shift of atmosphere in the room. Now they were getting to the gritty details.

“The Normandy is state of the art experiment in design,” Anderson began. “She was built using
technology reverse-engineered from Turian wreck salvage, but also artifacts found on Mars.
Essentially our first true stealth warship, equipped with a state of the art cyber-warfare suite that will
allow you to cripple hard targets before engaging in direct combat. Then her experimental armament
gives her more bite than the average frigate.”

“I imagine the price tag must be something.” Shepard mused. Experimental technology was never cheap, nor readily available. Stealth technology was an ace up the sleeve. Of the two species that had the tech, the Turians guarded their stealth ships jealously, and the Salarians would not share without wanting something big in return. Obviously the Alliance would not want to deal with either, so research had to be done the hard way.

“It has been called an expensive toy.” Hannah said.

“And I get to play with it first… lucky me.” The responsibility was piling up faster than she could shovel it.

Shepard could see why the Normandy was top secret; it was a cloaked dagger. Suddenly Admiral Hackett’s choice in naming her its commanding officer was beginning to make sense. The ship was designed to operate the same way Shepard was trained. It was also as controversial. A match made in heaven.

Having systems that were reverse engineered from wrecks meant someone had scoured said wrecks. In the current galactic climate that was a ticking time bomb. Knowledge of this salvage work could lead to a heating incident in the cold war between the Systems Alliance and the Turian Hierarchy, an atmosphere of mutual distrust leftover from the First Contact War. Despite the Citadel Council’s wish they keep the peace, there was still plenty of suspicion.

The top suits made overtures of peace in order to maintain humanity’s foothold on the galactic political stage while they schemed behind closed doors to get humanity a council seat as soon as possible. The Turians had one, and for most that made not having one unacceptable. The Alliance had its own idea of a preferred balance of power. Both political and military brass were firmly convinced that it was humanity’s right. Not only did they fend off the mightiest military power in the galaxy on short notice, but as a result, they got an embassy on the Citadel Presidium faster than any other associate race. The feather in the cap would be a hat trick. The Turians took a century and participation in the Krogan Rebellions to get a council seat. Humanity would beat that record in peacetime.

Even thirty-five years after the discovery of the Mars Cache which enabled humanity to spread its cosmic wings, they were still catching up. It made sense that someone would floss wrecks for shortcuts. There was no disputing that the Turian military had sound engineering. In some areas they were still ahead of the Alliance. But humanity was humanity; to Shepard it seemed like everyone operated on the old adage of “anything they can do, we can do better”.

Now Shepard got the keys to one such attempt, and she could not say no, because doing so would be putting a bullet through what remained of her career. Really Admiral Hackett was not doing her any favors with this. If anything, he put her in the same situation as Captain Anderson when he nominated her for ICT. People would expect her to fail, to come down crashing and burning.

“Now as to your operation overview,” Admiral Hackett picked up. “The Normandy’s stealth capabilities will allow your team to insert into situations where discretion is of utmost importance. There will not be any patrol runs; I have other ships for that.”

Translated, Admiral Hackett wanted a skilled operative who could work from the shadows. An operative that could shoulder the demanding, dirty, unsung sort of jobs that made pages upon pages of redacted black on one’s career record. In other words, she was getting the sort of deployment for which she trained from the moment she began ICT, but it would be under immense scrutiny, with no recognition when it was all said and done, and the Admiral expected her to be grateful. She was
effectively caught in the accretion disk around the Admiral’s inner circle.

“Your first assignment is also in that pad,” the Admiral finished, reaching over to his console. A beep announced that he had unlocked the door. “We’re done here. I assume you wish to see your new ship?”

“Yes, sir.” Shepard replied.

The Admiral smiled faintly. “Good, Hannah and David will take you to the dock.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you for this opportunity, sir.”

“Don’t waste it,” the Admiral warned. “Dismissed.”

Shepard came to attention and snapped a salute, made an about face, and exited the room. Her mother and Captain Anderson were automatically on her right.

They had to walk back to the parking lot to get another vehicle which would take them to another dock. Captain Anderson led the way with his usual calm. This second drive proved shorter than the first, and from there the walk was a relatively quick affair. They were closer to the station’s center of mass, the saucer, here the docks got bigger, designed for bigger vessels and higher security.

The passages steadily grew wider, the activity level increased, and Shepard knew they were drawing nearer. As they passed another set of doors, the corridor opened up to an observation gallery with large viewports on the vastness of space.

“You can see her now,” Captain Anderson stated calmly.

Shepard moved to the viewports and looked down, and there she was. Where most Alliance vessels were a variation of a blunted wedge with stubby, vaguely triangular wing-like nacelles to support the main drive, effectively looking angular and bulky, the Normandy’s curves seemed almost organic in comparison. Brilliant white, with black and sky blue running across her arched back, the black was nearly unbroken on her drive nacelles, and up into her twin aft sensor masts. She looked less like a floating gun, and more like a graceful dolphin resting at the surface of the ocean.

Docking clamps held her in place in the middle of a large U-shaped dock. There was a gangway extended to her bow airlock just aft of the bridge, and a walkway underneath her long bow. Judging by the train of EVA-suited dockhands moving sleds loaded with sealed crates across it, the shuttle bay and cargo holds opened onto there. Whatever Shepard expected, this was not it. The Normandy was quite possibly the most outright beautiful ship she had ever seen, and there was no shame in admitting that.

“They experimented with more than just her systems,” Hannah explained. “Some elements of the profile and interior are also borrowed from source material.”

Shepard grinned; ‘source material’ was certainly one way to put it, a polite way of saying that the Alliance ‘borrowed’ all they could, to run tests. “I think I’m in love.”

Hannah laughed, “Did you hear that, David? I knew it.”

“No one bets against me.” Hannah said, though it was hard to tell if she was stating a fact, or actually
annoyed at that.

“Captain Anderson, Captain Shepard, Commander Shepard.” A cold voice drifted over the moment.

Shepard turned away from the viewport. Whom she saw made her snap to attention and salute instantly; a move echoed by the two captains next to her, though a lot more leisurely. The man returned the gesture. That was enough for Hannah to drop the formality, while Anderson assumed calm at ease stance. Shepard remained at attention. When it doubt, stay at attention, it was her rule of thumb with senior officers.

“Rear Admiral Mikhailovich,” Hannah acknowledged. “To what do we owe the pleasure?”

“It is true then? Hackett is again showing favoritism?” The man wondered.

“Favoritism?” Hannah wondered, her tone deepening.

For Shepard it was like watching a storm roll in from the horizon, it got darker and darker, and then the lightning came. Gone was her laughing mother, Captain Hannah Shepard was assuming control.

“Don’t play innocent, Hannah.” The man rebuked sharply. “We all know that the Normandy is going to your daughter because she is your daughter. I had hoped Hackett would change his mind, but I suppose that will not happen as long as you are in the same room,” Mikhailovich leveled his own glare right back at the woman, but Hannah did not even flinch.

Then his gaze turned and Shepard found herself in the crosshairs. “Commander. I had hoped you’d display more common sense than this, but then it is true; the apple does not fall far from the tree. To give you a command position is overestimating your capabilities, but to give you the command of the Normandy? She is not a five hundred million credit frigate. The Normandy represents an investment of two and a half billion. We could have built three heavy cruisers for that price! Now tell me, why should I believe you are qualified to command her?”

Was he implying that she would fly the Normandy into a black hole? “With all due respect, sir.” She paused. “My aptitude scores show that I am qualified.”

“Your scores, maybe. It is your record that leaves much to be desired.”

Well technically he was right there, Shepard mused. Her record as a ‘screw up’ was clear. Then, if one thought about it, ICT had taught her to command small units, not a whole ship. Aptitude scores were theoretical values; no one really knew how a person would react when faced with this scale of responsibility. Leadership was not really something one learned from a book. Someone either had it, or they did not. Still, a private admission that he was technically right was all she would give him; she would be dead before she admitted it aloud.

Maybe she was restrained by command structures, but she was nobody’s fool. Right now, standing next to her mother and Captain Anderson, this attack was not going to find its mark. Admiral Hackett was giving her a chance, and she would not blow it by looking like a timid rabbit before she even stepped foot aboard the ship, her ship.

“Nearly six years have passed since my mistakes. I have learned from them, and I have learned much in ICT.” First, stress that she was no longer that twenty-three year old. Many would hold her disgrace against her, yes, but how was she to prove herself if they had their day? “Admiral Hackett saw it fit to give me this command, and I intend to treat it with utmost seriousness.” Second, stress the rank; remind Rear Admiral Mikhailovich that he was second-guessing his own superior, something that he really had no place to be doing. She could say little else, as words were ultimately
useless when it came to dealing with people who wanted to see you fail. Her actions would vindicate her in time.

“Like mother, like daughter.” Mikhailovich finally said. “Fine, we shall see whether we get an Iron Lady, or a final fall from grace. The Normandy is yours, Commander.”

Shepard snapped to attention and saluted. Mikhailovich returned the gesture pro forma, and then walked off without saying another word.

“What did he mean by the hand-off?” Shepard wondered as soon as she was positive the man was out of ear-shot.

“Mikhailovich was in command during the Normandy’s test flights and trials,” Anderson explained.

“He can decry its price tag, but it is obvious he wants it for the Sixty-Third Scout Flotilla. Steven wouldn’t let him have it.” Hannah added.

Shepard nodded, that made sense. Someone had to be temporarily in charge while a new ship just leaving the shipyard was checked for loose screws and funny squeaks. Annoyance at not getting the fleet’s shiny new toy would fill in a few other blanks.

“Well, David. I think we best leave her here.” Hannah began, her smile returning in force. “I don’t think she wants mother around when she meets her underlings. She can intimidate them on her own.”

“Thanks for everything, really. I… don’t know what to say.” Shepard ventured.

“Say nothing now. But I do expect emails, maybe an occasional call. If you are having trouble I am always available to offer advice. I’m the soul of discretion when it comes to it.” Hannah offered with a smile.

“Likewise, Commander. The transition from our norms to the demands of command can be jarring,” Captain Anderson added.

She smiled, nodded, snapped to attention, and saluted both with full parade rigidity. The captains returned the gesture and turned to leave. Shepard turned to the door leading toward the loading area and the gangways.

Shepard walked through the doors opposite to the ones she entered and had to take the steps down a level, where she found herself at the end of a passage with three sets of doors, these led to gangways. The first two sets were locked and sealed, but at the far end of the passage was a set that was open. Standing at the foot of the gangway were three figures in uniform, two men and a woman. One of the men and the woman wore marine’s fatigues; the last man wore officer’s blues.

She figured they were some of her crew coming to greet her, and so set a casual pace, not meaning to startle them out of the conversation they seemed to be having. The youngest of the three noticed her first and snapped to attention so hard that the heels of his boots clicked. The other two followed with salutes.

Shepard smiled and returned a brief salute. First contact with her new crew, so far so good.

“Staff Lieutenant Kaidan Alenko, ma’am.” The older of the two men began.
“Gunnery Chief Ashley Williams, ma’am.” The woman echoed.

“Corporal Richard Jenkins. Ma’am!” The third finished. It was hard to miss that he was practically glowing with excitement.

“At ease. I assume you know who I am?”

“Of course!” Jenkins jumped in. “You’re Commander Shepard!”

“Easy, Jenkins, don’t hurt yourself,” Ashley chastised.

“I just wanted the commander to know that I think it is an honor to serve aboard this ship and under her command,” Jenkins explained.

“Are you always this eager, Corporal?” Shepard wondered. Jenkins seemed like a good kid, but hero worship was a dangerous thing. He had light hair buzzed close under his beret, light colored eyes, and was noticeably the youngest there, yet to see any real action. She figured he was probably only a year or two older than enlistment age, so he was yet to learn to control his impulses. This tended to be the norm of peacetime service; all the fun of military life with few of the sobering horrors.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Well, you’re also honest, that’s good.”

This effectively caused the young corporal to break into the biggest happiest grin someone could have.

Ashley shook her head, “He calms down, ma’am. I promise.”

Shepard made a mental note that Ashley was probably the overly serious one. With her brown eyes, black hair in a bun, and her rigid stance, she reminded Shepard of Carrere, though there was a difference between the two women. Carrere had the look of an officer; compete with a commanding stare and a certain poise that came from the officer’s training school. Williams was a marine through and through, her stance spoke of someone who was used to shouldering weapons and using them. Even the way she spoke was less formal. This was someone who had dwelled in the barracks, not in the snobbery of the officer’s school.

“It’s fine, Gunny. A little exuberance does not bother me. Frankly, the Normandy is a frigate; for the foreseeable future we won’t have the luxury of space needed to maintain rigid discipline. I expect performance on whatever mission Admiral Hackett will toss our way, but if you want to play poker in the mess every week after your duty cycle, I don’t mind.”

“We’ll hold you to that, Commander.” Kaidan said.

Shepard spared him a nod, as the senior of the three and a commissioned officer as well; she could understand that she was dealing with the relatively quiet one. Was he the senior lieutenant on board, her XO even? She had not even glanced at the crew roster on the pad in her hands, in hindsight, that was a minor oversight. He had black hair and she could tell his brown eyes were measuring her, but there was no sign of hostility there, he was merely taking stock of the new CO, taking a tactical position as Captain Anderson would call it.

“Have you three been waiting here long?” Shepard wondered.

“Fifteen minutes ma’am, it’s no problem.”
“Well don’t let me hold you longer. We will probably not depart until morning, so in the meantime, your time is yours.”

The three of them snapped salutes and proceeded up the gangway to the airlock. Shepard stood back, letting them go on ahead without her. There would be time to get to know her people later, right now; she wanted to get to know her ship. Some part of her wanted to go on a self-guided tour, make a few stops, and talk to some of her crew at work, where they might feel a little less called-out for “a talk”. She really did not want to be the disciplinarian her mother could be. Formal discipline was required on a ship like the Kilimanjaro, whose crew population rivaled small cities, and no one knew everyone by name. That would not be the case on the Normandy.

She waited for a good five minutes, just watching the EVA-suited dockhands below through a viewport, before she turned and made her way up the gangplank. The outer hatch slid aside with a hiss as she stepped in. As the airlock went through its decontamination and equalization cycle, Shepard turned to the pad in her hands. There was an encyclopedia of things on here, a lot of material meant to familiarize her with the ship, her crew, and at the bottom of it all were her first orders. As the inner doors opened, she decided to give herself an hour or two to settle in before she popped open that can. Admiral Hackett certainly could not expect her to depart on his first mission tonight, right?

“Ah, I was wondering where you’ve gotten to.” A familiar voice echoed from her left.

Shepard looked up sharply and then she could not keep the big bright smile off her face.

Sitting in the big pilot’s chair, scruffy as she remembered from six months ago, except now in fatigues, and wearing a baseball cap with “Normandy” over the bill, all the while grinning like the Cheshire cat, was Lieutenant Jeff “Joker” Moreau.

“Surprise!” He called.

“Joker!” Did she not wonder if he got the Normandy post just earlier? “I see you’ve got your dream job.”

“Well yes! And look, I even got them to put in this chair! It is real leather, memory foam, and all the good stuff. The fit is just perfect. I don’t want to get up ever again!”

“That is not recommended, Lieutenant Moreau,” a feminine voice chimed over their heads.

“Ah. There’s the cloud raining on my parade.” Joker glanced up. “Commander Shepard, meet EDI.”

“Welcome aboard, Commander Shepard.” The voice said. “My builders call me EDI, which is phonetic short-form for the acronym E.D.I. or Enhanced Defense Intelligence.”

“They have an AI on this ship!” Joker cut in. “And that’s it.”

“C’mon, can’t be that bad.” Shepard argued.

“That bad?” Joker asked, “I don’t like backseat drivers!”

“I do not fly the ship, Lieutenant Moreau. My primary function is to operate the ship’s cyber-warfare suite. My secondary functions are to assist with sensors and communications as well as ship security. I am not here to challenge your skills as a helmsman.”

“So it says,” Joker grumbled.
“So EDI, you’re the operations officer?” Shepard wondered.

“I can fulfill that function, yes,” EDI replied.

“Well, it’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Likewise, Commander.” EDI sounded a little bit more pleased than it did a moment before.

Joker rolled his eyes.

Shepard could not help but smile at that. She really had nothing against synthetics. Sure, everyone knew how bad they could go, but Shepard was not the type to believe that making a synthetic intelligence automatically meant it would go bad. Nothing in the universe was ever that black and white.

“Well, I need to make a tour of the ship, make sure my gear was brought over, acquaint myself with other people; we will catch up a little later.”

“Sure thing, Commander, I’ll be here.”

Shepard nodded and turned to her right, noting what looked like the Command Information Center. This was where her tour began.

Eight hundred hours the next morning Shepard emerged from the elevator onto the Combat Information Center, deck two, commonly called the CIC because the full name was a gloriously awkward mouthful. The morning shift crew turned to look, pausing in their activities. In that instant she realized that this was it, the Normandy was about to throw off her proverbial mooring lines and set off into space. The knowledge added lead weights to her boots as she walked forward toward the cockpit.

“Morning, Commander,” Joker greeted just as soon as she passed the threshold.

“Good morning, Joker. Do we have departure clearances?” She asked.

“Yea, we’re good to go. The supplies arrived and were double checked, the crew is accounted for, and ship systems are green across the board, just awaiting your orders. The Kilimanjaro and Tokyo will be standing by at the relay to see us off.”

Her mother was putting on a show again. Could the pressure get any heavier? “Alright, Lieutenant, let’s lose some docking clamps.”

“Aye, aye. Would you like to say a few words to the crew?” Joker wondered as his fingers began to dance over the controls.

Shepard froze; did she want to make a speech? The occasion did call for some words to be said. Swallowing hard she leaned over and tapped a command to open a ship wide comm link.

“This is Commander Shepard speaking.” Keep it simple with the opening, now for the hard part. “The Normandy is now departing Arcturus Station.” A pause to quell the rising nervousness from showing in her voice, it simply would not do for the crew to hear their commanding officer falter. “The Normandy, you as her crew, and me as her commanding officer have one directive; we are to serve the Alliance in whatever capacity we can, in the best way we can.” Brutal honestly, maybe that would work. The ship was top secret, but she was never ordered to keep her crew in the dark. “Our
missions will be unpredictable. The challenges we will face might test us to the limits.” Was it obvious that she had absolutely no clue where she was going with this one? “I give you my solemn vow, here and now, as the commanding officer, I will give this ship and her crew the full hundred percent of my dedication and skill. All I ask is for the same in return. I look forward to seeing what we can accomplish together.”

The ship’s natural noise picked up, now a faint whispered thrum, much quieter than any ship Shepard had ever been on. Yet it was there, like the pulse of life. The ship was moving sideways, away from the dock.

“Let us begin. Take us out Mr. Moreau.”

“Aye, aye, Ma’am!” She could tell Joker enjoyed that. A series of taps on the control and the ship was moving forward.

Shepard leaned over his chair one more time to close the comm link, as she did; she caught the pilot’s faint grin.

“I’m horrible at making speeches,” she said.

“I can tell, but that’s fine,” Joker grinned. “You are Commander Shepard, the Hero of Elysium. Words did not put all those assholes into coffins, your skill with a rifle did. We’re here because we want to be, and one kind-of-cheesy speech won’t send us running. Besides, we’re all sadists, we like a reminder that our CO is still human.”

“Thanks, Joker.” Shepard chuckled as she laid her hands on either side of his headrest.

“So where to?”

“I relayed some coordinates via EDI last night, when I got a good look at the first mission Admiral Hackett handed down.”

“Oh yea, those.” His fingers were flying over the keys. “Course set, about thirty minutes to the relay. What’s this about?”

“The first mess we have to clean up. We’re Admiral Hackett’s troubleshooters, go in, clean up, and get out, like night shift caretakers.”

“Hah. At least they gave us the best floor sweeper.”

Shepard paused, but then she gave into her impulse and patted Joker softly on the shoulder, “I’m glad you’re here Joker. It’s good to have a familiar face around.”

“I’m glad I’m here too, Commander, and it’s good to have a familiar face issuing the orders.”

Shepard shook her head and walked off; she wanted to do more reading. Admiral Hackett did send her an encyclopedia.

Chapter End Notes

**Author Notes:** These will be quite long, but only for the first chapter. The idea for this story was born in July 2015, just after I really got into Mass Effect, when I bought the
first two games on a Steam sale. I have since played all three, all the DLC, and Andromeda, read some of the comics, you get the idea. I am very familiar with the ins and outs of canon, to the point that this work expanded into a complete universe rework. It is formatted like a TV series, meaning that each episode has a self-contained plot, and about every 26 is a season with an over-reaching arc of sorts. This structure allows me to keep my plot straight, but much planning does go into it. It takes a while to write, because I am just one recently graduated university history-major working in my free time.

**General Notes:**

**Science Contents** – The Mass Effect universe is shockingly high on the “hard” side of the science fiction spectrum. I am fortunate enough to have a functional grasp of Newtonian physics and science in general, and will be using it. Concepts and ideas will be explained when they come up, via notes. Mass Effect also uses metric unit measurements as standard, and being a Russian-Israeli-Canadian, I grew up knowing only metric. So I do apologize to the American readers, but I am unable, and honestly unwilling to break canon to accommodate the imperial system. There are converters available on the internet.

**Research** – I do my research to the best of my ability. However, I will say it now that I have never served in the military. I do not know the ins and outs of what soldiers go through, my research into the norms of service, training, and such, is purely academic. I base much of Alliance standards on what I can collect on the various branches of America’s armed forces, as the sources for that are more accessible. Fundamentally this story is meant to entertain, and it is a Space Opera, thus, absolute realism is not sought, or required, though I do have a bit of a minimum standard.

**The Normandy** - Yes this story goes right to the SR-2, because it is bigger, and has a nastier bite, and I wanted to pull EDI in, because I love her. I have plot lines in mind to explain everything. Yes, I also had my way with its interior. Less ‘video game’ and more ‘realism’. Much of it is indeed straight out of the games, but slightly twisted up. My Normandy has a shuttle bay arrangement that’s ME3, but the rest is ME2, save for my addition on the CIC. The ME2 armory was replaced with an “Officer’s Duty Room”, which is fondly called simply “The OD”, pronounced like the word ‘odd’. I wanted to give Shepard an office to have conversations and meet people in. I am not ashamed to admit that the idea came from Star Trek. Specifically the ready rooms we see Captains Picard, Sisko, and Janeway practically live in. Specifically, the OD is modeled on the ready room as seen in Star Trek Voyager.

**Chapter Specific Notes:**

**Alliance Uniforms** – I know in ME we see only the blue and gold, which is assumed to be a formal uniform, but for the realistic tone I’m seeking, I’m making that a basic officer’s uniform, and adding a white and gold one as formals.

**Lagrangian Points** – This would be the fifth Lagrangian point. These points are places where a small body can maintain a stable orbit, held in place by the gravitation forces of two celestial bodies. For Arcturus station, the bodies would be the planet Themis and the star it orbits, Arcturus.

**Politics** – This note pertains to styles of politicking. The Medici presented themselves as the benign “well meaning” rulers of Florence, patrons of the art. They had their moments of ruthlessness, but generally they curried favor through lavish expenditure.
Machiavelli saw things on more pragmatic terms; he knew both benign policy and ruthlessness had their uses. The Borgias? Well they would do anything for power, period. (For the record: Udina would be the Borgia.)

**Kilimanjaro Crew** – I am using aircraft carriers as a benchmark. The American Nimitz class carriers, the largest ever built, have a crew of 6000, and they’re only 332 meters long. The Kilimanjaro is a kilometer long! It’s safe to assume the Kili would have twice, if not thrice those numbers. Furthermore, in canon, the Destiny Ascension is mentioned to have a crew of “maybe” 10,000. They’re comparable in size.
Episode 2: Poltergeist and Spectre [Part I]

Shepard was seated on a couch in the Officer’s Duty Room, enjoying her morning coffee and operational reports. The room was situated on the port side of the ship just aft of the CIC, connected via a short corridor to a science lab on the other side and the Communication-Conference room tucked behind the Normandy’s sole elevator. Such a room was a standard feature of larger ships, so its inclusion on the Normandy was peculiar, but definitely welcome.

Its design was split in two by a half-wall just behind the door leading to the COMCON. The section closest to the CIC was an office space for the CO, complete with a desk and a private terminal. The deeper half was done up as a casual space with an L-shaped couch and a coffee table set under the large rectangular viewports. There was also a sideboard with refreshments: tea bags, packets of instant coffee, cups, and an electric kettle. In the very back was a tiny officer’s washroom. The coloring was sterile, gunmetal-grey walls, black couches, and silver-grey furniture, but Shepard knew that on most ships the officers made it their own with additions. As the only officer aboard who would use this room with any frequency, she simply did not have the time to personalize yet.

Counting her and the marines, the Normandy only had twenty-four people, the smallest crew in the Alliance. Other frigates, even on skeleton, already had at least thirty. EDI’s multitasking, a difference in design, as well as the Normandy’s non-combatant mission parameters allowed for reduction of personnel. The AI was helpful, polite, and sometimes even engaged in short conversations. After a week Shepard was already mixing her pronouns. While it would have been technically right to call EDI an it, Shepard’s tongue lapsed to she most of the time. EDI did not correct her either. The rest of the crew seemed more than alright with the AI as well.

Shepard was also happy to say she finished the documents Admiral Hackett gave her. She would be the first one to admit that engineering matters were wholly beyond her, so some of the material took a bit of background to grasp. A few conversations with her chief engineer, Lieutenant Adams and the ship’s two other engineers, Donnelly and Daniels, and she was now sure in her knowledge of the Normandy’s capabilities. It also helped that the three of them did not seem to mind her lack of knowledge and just how fast they could lose her in jargon.

Adams had a hand in the design of the Normandy’s systems, while Donnelly and Daniels had worked together on a number of ships before they were hand-picked specifically for the Normandy. Due to the compact size of the Normandy’s engine room and the turian-derived simplification of the core design, two engineers were deemed adequate to take care of the power plant and engines, and the Normandy got more than adequate. With Adams’ supervision and expertise the ship would run at
The first job Shepard pulled with her marines had been an easy one; a settlement in the traverse reported their supplies vanishing in the middle of the night. Shepard took all three of her marines with her to investigate. The four of them made quick work of tracking down the culprits, a band of Blue Suns that overstayed their welcome. Fixing the problem was even easier; even twenty mercenaries did not have the skill to match four trained Alliance soldiers, they did not stand a chance against her alone.

Despite how throwaway the job had been, it allowed her to get to know her marines and begin building the sort of rapport on which to build solid teamwork. It also allowed her to find her footing in command and learn things about her people that only a true combat scenario could reveal.

Ashley and Kaidan worked well together from the get-go, her skills with weapons complemented by his biotics and knack with tech, they supported each other near effortlessly. The two of them could also rein in Jenkins and his inexperience. Shepard noticed that Jenkins seemed to respond to Ashley better than Kaidan. It was hard to miss that the gunnery chief managed to establish her authority over him, and the corporal looked up to her as a fellow marine. Of course he also looked up to his commanding officer, but there was a difference. With Shepard he acted as if she was an authority figure, not a friend per se.

“Ugh… Commander?”

“Yes, Joker?” Shepard looked up from her report.

“Admiral Hackett is on the horn.”

“Thanks, I’ll take it in the COMCON.”

Setting down her coffee and pad, Shepard got to her feet and made her way to the communications room. In the few days since departure she had swapped her officer’s uniform for a set of dark grey fatigues that were more appropriate to a soldier than an officer, but they were more comfortable.

When she entered the COMCON, she made a straight beeline for the console, “EDI, if you will.”

“Putting you through, Commander.” EDI replied.

The COMCON was a simple room with the same gunmetal-grey walls and no decorations, dominated by a wood-topped conference table and chairs, enough to seat six, though there was also standing room for a few more. Buzzing picked up as the holographic projector at the center of the table came to life. As soon as the image of Admiral Hackett solidified, Shepard came to attention and then snapped a salute.

“Commander,” the admiral greeted, “at ease.”

Shepard shifted and clasped her hands behind her back. “What can I do, Admiral?”

“I read your report on your first mission. You did exactly what I wanted, a clean in and out, excellent job.”

“Thank you, sir.” Shepard replied, but she knew that this was more than just a pat-on-the-back sort of call, that could have been sent via text.

“Now, I have another job for you,” the Admiral went on. “One of our settlements in the Zeta Cluster has had some mercenary problems in the past couple months. They only came to us because
as of a week ago the mercenaries turned to overt extortion at mech-point.”

The Zeta Cluster, if Shepard remembered her star charts, was an out of the way corner of the Attican Traverse. One system had a relay, but it was often a stop-over, because the whole cluster was poor in anything worth mining on any scale other than local use. “Who are we looking for, Admiral? There are a lot of mercenaries out there, almost as many as slavers and pirates.” Shepard wondered.

“Eclipse. I am forwarding the relevant coordinates the settlers provided us. It is likely that the place is a staging ground as well as a depot for contraband. I want you to take your marines, get in, and make sure that whatever Eclipse have there, they lose.”

“Understood, sir.”

“I will remind you to thread lightly. This colony is on the edge of the Terminus for a reason. The civilians who contacted us have done so despite opposition. Some of them are willing to pay the protection fees rather than have what they call ‘heavy-handed’ Alliance interference.”

“If Eclipse is there, Admiral, I’ll serve them the eviction order.”

“Good. Report to me when you get this done, Hackett out.”

The hologram faded and the buzzing stopped. Shepard gripped the table as she ran through the possibilities. She would give the odds a fifty-fifty split; they could get there and find nothing. The fifty percent she pegged for the base actually being there divided in two again, thus twenty five percent odds of the base being too big for four marines to take on all by themselves. This was more ICT training run than their shakedown job. Fortunately they could even out the odds using the EDI’s bag of tricks. Still, this would take recon and planning.

“EDI, I need to talk to Joker.”

“Of course Commander,” EDI replied.

“Commander?” Joker asked.

“You should have gotten coordinates from a data packet.”

“Yea, they’re here. Nu-Zeta, huh? You want me to get us there?”

“Set a course, Joker.”

“On our way, Commander. Our ETA is ten hours.”

The link beeped to indicate a closure. Shepard turned exited the COMCON.

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Joker knew what he was doing, when the ship entered the system, he immediately rigged it for silent running without even a word from her. It took longer to make planet approach without using the main drive, but this way, unless someone had a damn good telescope pointed at just the right part of the sky, the Normandy was invisible to any conventional sensor net.

Shepard stood behind the pilot’s chair as they approached and made synchronous orbit. Nu-Zeta had a system of four planets, with an asteroid belt dividing it in half. Of the four bodies, Howe, Zealand, Campbell, and Chatham, only the second, Zealand was habitable. A tiny garden world with an atmosphere a little bit thicker than Earth’s and the temperature a few degrees warmer, but the gravity
was comparable. From orbit she could tell why the settlers chose this little corner of the galaxy. The equatorial region was one giant desert, but there were pockets of greenery at higher latitudes. Virgin forests of alien trees, possibly even jungles and rainforests. The poles had no ice caps, but there were plenty of large water bodies, but only one she could call an ocean.

A group of a thousand human settlers made their home on the bank of a large freshwater lake, making up a single town. They were there for the clean air, the rural feel, and all the land they could farm and ranch on. New Wellington was a galactic frontier town, now complete with a band of outlaws.

“Commander,” EDI spoke up. “I am detecting a coded distress beacon.”

“From where? The colonists?” Shepard wondered, tearing her eyes away from the picturesque vista below them. Was the Eclipse mounting a raid on the poor town?

“No, the signal is coming from one of the planet’s moons,” EDI explained.

Shepard hummed as she pondered this; an encrypted distress beacon was not typical fare. Most ships in peril sent a call across all bands. Distress was a universal thing; few would compound someone’s woes in such a situation. A coded beacon meant that the sender was sending for someone specific. EDI probably only picked it up because the Alliance had teams of cryptanalysts whose only job was to crack these things. EDI could probably detect many more encoded things because of background work by the crypto unit.

“Can’t be civilian, Commander. They’d go for an open band,” Joker said.

“My thinking exactly. Move us into the moon’s orbit, Joker.”

“Aye, aye, ma’am.” Joker was already tapping the controls.

Shepard stood behind Joker’s chair the whole way, watching the ship move. Unlike Earth, this planet had two rocky satellites. They orbited the planet on opposite sides, giving Zealand both a night and daytime moons. This particular one was the larger of the two, though still only half the size of Earth’s Luna. Just to show how unimportant it was, the charts called it Zealand Alpha. It was just another barren rock with no atmosphere, heavily cratered and bleached almost white by cosmic radiation.

“EDI, what are we looking at here? What’s its registration? How big is the ship?”

“Sensors indicate a personal craft, thirty meters long, registered as the Defiant, Hierarchy merchant marine, Port Cipritine.”

Shepard hummed; this was getting more interesting by the minute, a personal craft transmitting a secure distress beacon, from the Turian Hierarchy merchant fleet, straight from Palaven? “Any idea what happened to it?”

“I am detecting a hull breach in the aft section; the damage is consistent with impact from a mass accelerator cannon projectile.”

Shepard let her hands drop from the back of Joker’s chair. “EDI, whatever attacked that ship might still be around. Keep an eye out.” The ship that brought down this craft could not have been particularly big if the craft remained intact, but if they sneaked up on the Normandy, it could still get ugly. She did not want to have to explain to Admiral Hackett that she let some sorry lot put a hole in the Normandy a week in.

“What are the odds that we’re dealing with real turian merchant marine?” Joker wondered.

“You’re still going to investigate.”

“Yea, I’m going to take the marines down there to look around. If this is a genuine distress call, then I can’t just ignore it.” It simply would not sit well with Shepard, even if the person in distress was a Turian.

“Bring me back something nice!” Joker called at her retreating back.

The Kodiak shuttle was being prepared as Shepard made the final checks on her N7 grade armor, making sure all the seals were closed and tight. Her armor was custom colored obsidian black and wine red, accented by crimson lighting elements she could turn off at will, her one true vanity.

The suit always took a bit of precise slotting to put on, as underlying the protective plates she had an exo-frame joint motorization system. The mechanisms showed in the gaps between plates at her shoulders, elbows, hips, and knees. Her model was not designed for heavy lifting, but it helped with hand-to-hand combat. Mostly, Shepard had it for the fringe benefits. When not giving her right hook added oomph, or making her kick like a horse, the system helped to redirect recoil and stabilize her arms under the load of a heavier weapon. This improved aim precision, and precision was her area of expertise.

Once the suit was on, she strapped on her webbing and peripherals. Most people used magnetic attachments for peripherals, but those could be demagnetized, so she went for reliability. Most being thermal clips, including a good thirty in the big pouch at the small of her back and another twenty in another pouch behind her right shoulder.

Finally came her arsenal, first she slipped her twin Carnifex pistols, Sin and Dex, into their holsters high on the outside of her thighs. Rigid accelerator rails for shot-after-shot precision and a flipped thermal clip receiver on Sin meant that the twins could no longer fold up for carry, and so adjustments had to be made. Then she passed Vincent the Mantis sniper rifle, her long-time partner, behind her back on its extra long strap. The final weapon, her combat knife, she slipped into a sheath on her left calf. While not a super hard monomolecular blade, what her knife lost in absurd sharpness, it made up for in resilience and utility value.

Her arsenal of choice consumed clips at an alarming rate, but as far as she was concerned the math was on her side. Three trunk bullets from the twins or twelve bullets from a rapid-firing assault rifle, still half a thermal clip, and really just as much damage as you could only kill someone once. A precision tooled weapon and practice shooting thirty to forty clips a day with each hand allowed her to put trunk and head shots with pinpoint accuracy with either hand. Add laser sights and she would do it akimbo.

“Alright people, let's do this,” she called, moving toward the open door of the shuttle. “I don’t expect any real trouble; but keep alert. We are dealing with what appears to be a Hierarchy merchant marine ship. We go in, look for survivors, and get out. This is a purely humanitarian.”

“You don’t think this could be a trap?” Kaidan wondered.

“The thought crossed my mind, but… it begs the question, who benefits? The colonists have nothing that could hole a ship. If it was Eclipse and they have a ship, I’d like to know what kind, and maybe where it is. It stands to reason we may find more of them than we’d like down on Zealand,” Shepard explained.
“Coded distress beacons, Turian ships where they don’t belong… something does not add up, Skipper.” Ashley spoke up, suspicion clearly in her tone.

“No, it does not. Still, if someone out there is in need of aid, I can’t just look the other way.”

The Kodiak eased onto the moon’s surface a hundred meters away from the grey, elongated ship, a safety margin should the ship be a trap rigged to blow. The four of them checked their helmet seals one last time before opening the Kodiak’s side door to the void of space.

Shepard took point walking toward the ship. The moon’s gravity was slightly above Luna’s; it allowed them to walk at a brisk pace with limited bounce. The Defiant had crashed in the middle of an open plain, at a clearly controlled angle, leaving a long furrow in its wake. Still, it looked like it snagged something under the surface as it plowed along, leaving bits of hull at the bottom of the through. One of the ship’s nacelles had ripped off and was now in chunks some distance behind the primary hull. When the ship finally came to a complete stop, its nose ended up partly buried, sand-like material settling over and partly obscuring the bridge viewports, its rear pitched up a few degrees. There in the ship’s aft starboard side, above the stub of the amputated nacelle, was a huge gaping hole where the round had hit. The plating had buckled inward and was charred black by the heat the round carried. From what Shepard could see, it vented a large mostly open space.

As they approached what looked like a forward airlock, Shepard wondered just how much of the ship had vented by way of the bullet hole. She raised her right hand and brought up her omni-tool. The airlock interface lit up in response.

“Hah, lock is still engaged, that’s a good sign.” She announced, tapping away at her tool. If there was something Turian design could be relied on, it was hardiness, and layers of encryption on everything. As she worked, it occurred to her that maybe it even made sense that this ship would have an encrypted distress beacon, hailing allies, and not just random passer-byes. Still, none of this explained what a merchant marine vessel was doing so far outside Hierarchy space.

The lock finally gave way, and the outer door opened with tremendous difficulty, clearly damaged, or just fouled up by the fine, un-weathered, razor sharp material of the moon’s surface. There was no rush of decompression; the dust at her feet did not even stir. Shepard was the first one up, followed by the other three.

When the outer doors closed behind them, the airlock did not cycle and inner door controls did not offer resistance. When they opened, there was no decompression into the voided airlock either. Shepard was the first into the pitch black cavern of the ship, reaching for Sin as she pressed herself to the bulkhead near the doorway. Kaidan and Ashley made entrance back to back, assault rifles up, flashlights lit, as they swept the long hallway spanning the ship. Jenkins brought up the rear, fleeting through Kaidan’s beam to the other side of the ship, pressing himself against the opposite bulkhead.

Shepard tapped the side of her helmet, turning on her twin temple-level flashlights. The beams revealed a mess: wires and cables hanging everywhere, a few of them still sparked. A metal beam had come loose from the ceiling and was hanging off one side. The deck was strewn with an assortment twisted metal, chunks of stuff, broken things, and other fragments she could not hope to identify. There was also surface dust everywhere, shimmering ghost-like in the light beams. With the ship voided out, everything was silent as well; the only sound being the faint wheeze of her suit’s breathing apparatus.

As her eyes adjusted to the gloom, she became aware that the darkness was not absolute. The light of the system’s sun penetrated through tiny gaps in the surface material over the viewports on the
bridge. As she turned aft, she spotted an access-way to the deck below. There was also a pair of
doors, one on each side of the long passage. The door on the starboard side was shut, but buckled
outwards, with a ghostly beam of sunlight passing through a crack between its misshapen halves.
Shepard knew without a doubt where the round had hit. If impact had damaged the inner doors, it
was no wonder the whole ship vented out. It was a testament to Hierarchy engineering that the inner
bulkheads withstood the impact as they did

“Alright,” Shepard turned back to her marines, “Kaidan, Ashley, I want you two to sweep the deck
below. Keep in radio contact; you so much as think that you’re not alone down there… radio in.”

“Got it,” Kaidan replied.

Shepard watched them go toward the access way and when they vanished down the ladder she
turned to find Jenkins still pressed up against the opposite bulkhead, his own assault rifle up, beam of
light sweeping the darkness rhythmically.

“C’mon, Corporal. We’ll check out this deck.”

“Yes, ma’am!” he replied.

Shepard first made her way to the bridge, putting her gun back in its holster. Her light beams caught
nothing more than dust and damage. More downed wires, signs of a minor electrical fire, but
everything was largely intact. An experimental tap on the computer console caused a flicker, but the
system was in a minimum-power state. Perhaps it was locked out, to conserve emergency power for
the beacon. Most importantly, there was no one in the pilot’s seat. The ship had clearly come down
at a controlled manner; if the pilot was not slumped over the console then they were somewhere else,
quite possibly still alive.

“Commander, all is clear down here. Engineering is surprisingly intact, but there is a breach in the
bow section, I’d say ripped open during the crash,” Kaidan’s voice cracked over the radio.

“There’s nobody here, skipper, and I mean no bodies either,” Ashley added.

Shepard turned her head aft, her beams did not reach that far, but suddenly she had a feeling she
knew where their missing pilot was. The faint beam of light penetrating the buckled door had shifted
a little as the moon moved in its orbit. It now caught the edge of the second door across from it.

“Got it, I’m honestly glad you’ve found no one. Jenkins and I are on the bridge, but we are moving
aft. It’s the only place left to look.”

“Roger that, ma’am. We’re coming up.” Ashley replied.

Shepard took her time, weaving around the debris and the part-collapsed beam, making sure not to
touch it, who knew how secure its remaining attachment really was. Even at this low gravity, if it
came down, it could seriously hurt someone. “Jenkins, mind the beam,” she warned.

As she approached the two doors at the aft, she poked the console leading to the impact room. It was
unlocked, and unsealed, had someone tried to open it? When she touched the mechanism, the door
twitched, but it could not move more than a few centimeters, it was well and truly stuck. There was
soot on the very edges of the crack, a fireball, now long extinguished by vent out, had raked the
space after the round hit. There would be no one alive in there, but she could say she tried.

Jenkins was on her left, his rifle’s light beam trained on the other door watchfully. Shepard turned
around and tapped that door’s console. It lit up red, locked. She raised her omni-tool and fired up her
decryption program. At the edge of her twin light beams she saw Kaidan’s royal blue, white-lined
armor materialize from the gloom, followed by Ashley’s more navy blue.

“This is the only room left, the buckled door is stuck,” she explained.

“The engines were manually shut down and the ship’s core is on minimum output.” Kaidan replied.

“Well that’s interesting. The ship came down in a controlled manner, then shut down the engines and put the core to minimum power to reduce heat output, letting the ship void and cool. The owner played possum. I just hope they’re still playing, you know?”

The lock turned green and Shepard lowered her arm. She pressed her palm to the mechanism and the door slid open slowly, stuttering. There was more darkness, more downed wires, and more dust in the light beams. Shepard let her omni-tool turn off as she reached for Sin and made entry, casting her helmet beams into the corners in a wide but quick scan, making sure to hit the opposite corner on her immediate left.

When no one jumped out, Shepard moved further in, scanning the room slowly. This was a private cabin. The viewport blast shutters were closed, admitting no light. She inched along, scanning. The beams encountered a desk bolted to the deck. The chair that belonged to it was upright on its casters, more evidence of someone surviving the crash. On the opposite side was the small bathroom, she flitted inside, sweeping the corners, no one and nothing other than a big mess. Everything not bolted down had fallen in the crash. From the doorway she saw the three marines make entry, their light beams sweeping, moving deeper into the main room.

“Commander, we found the pilot.” Kaidan voiced over the radio.

Shepard moved back into the main room, locating Kaidan only by the beam of his rifle’s flashlight, a few centimeters higher off the deck than Ashley’s. Both had their weapons trained on the bed, and there, on it laid an unmistakable shape of a turian in charcoal black and burgundy red armor.

“Is he…” Jenkins began, but trailed off. He hovered behind them, almost entirely invisible in his smoke grey armor, save for his beam of light.

Shepard raised her hand, her omni-tool flared to life; she activated her first aid scanner and passed her arm over the pilot. The readout made her smile brightly under her helmet. “He’s alive.”

“Wow,” Jenkins breathed.

Shepard’s light beams moved up. Turian beds were heavily padded to accommodate their carapaces, but with no atmosphere the padding deflated almost flat. The pilot was on his back, his head further supported by a sizable but almost ineffective square pillow block amidst a sea of conventional pillows. But Shepard spotted the unmistakable and familiar shape peeking out from underneath.

“Stay back, pilot’s armed!” She commanded, reaching for the gun’s butt with her right hand. Her fingers had just touched it when his right hand shot out and grabbed her wrist. “Hold you fire!” she commanded as she turned her wrist, attempting to slip free. His grip did not waver.

The beams of light from three assault rifles combined into an intense glare right on him, but the marines did not fire. His helmet faceplate was completely opaque, making eye contact impossible, but he had to be staring right at her. She hoped the marines realized he was possibly disoriented if not outright injured, and that did not mean he was dangerous, weapon or not.

Then, all of the sudden he let go. Shepard stepped back, taking his weapon with her. A hefty, powerful looking shotgun of a make and model she did not recognize offhand. The same hand that had been around her wrist now moved slowly toward the side of his helmet, tapping at it. Shepard
heard a faint clicking buzz on her communicator; she reached up to tap the authorization button, allowing their suits communicators to synch.

“Who are you?” he asked.

Shepard could not help but raise an eyebrow he would not see. Someone was awfully commanding for being the distressed party. “Commander Shepard, Alliance Navy, and you are?” Shepard replied.

“Nihlus Kryik, Council Spectre.”

Suddenly the pieces clicked into place, everything began to make sense: the ship’s identification, the coded beacon, the weird location, and even the unfamiliar weapon in her hand. A Spectre! She took one more step back, to keep the shotgun out of his reach. Spectre or not, she was not taking chances. She could not see any other weapon on him, but who knew, the shotgun may have been peeking out simply because it was quite large, he could still have a smaller gun stashed away. At what point had he woken? Had his game of possum been good enough to fool her? It helped that she had absolutely no idea what a Turian’s normal sleeping heart-rate was.

“My ship picked up a distress beacon,” Shepard explained. “We came here expecting to rescue a crew from the Turian merchant marine, not a Spectre.”

“I would not be a very good Spectre if my ship broadcasted it,” He replied.

Shepard never took her eyes off him, even as she motioned for the marines to lower their weapons with her free hand. “Hmm… point.” Shepard replied. “Alright, you want to get off this rock?”

“If you are offering. Yes.”

“Weapons?” She asked.

He sat up and lifted the pillows to show her that he had nothing more hidden in the pile. “Just the one you confiscated. Most of my armory was in the cargo hold when Eclipse decided to use my ship for target practice.”

In other words, most of it was at best spaced, at worst destroyed, either way that meant it was gone. If most of that stuff had been Spectre-spec then it might have cost him quite a bit. Spectres had to supply their own gear, or so the rumors went. Factor in the ship, which looked ready for the scrap heap, and suddenly Shepard realized just how big a disaster had befallen him.

The rifles trained on him drifted away, light beams scattered, flooding the room with diffused light. Shepard kept her helmet beams on him, but angled her head down slightly to prevent the glare from shining directly into his eyes, common courtesy was a thing.

“Well, guess that means welcome to the Normandy, huh? C’mon.”

“Can I have my gun back now?” he asked, clearly amused, as he got to his feet.

He positively towered over her. Would the crown of her head even reach his jaw level? She was hardly little at one meter seventy-five, but he had to be over two meters tall. Shepard glanced at the shotgun and then up at him. She wanted to give him the benefit of the doubt; surely he would not turn on her with three marines in the room, right? She offered him the shotgun butt-first. He took it and clipped it to his armor at his lower back with practiced fluency.

“There are things I want to get before we go.”
“Hopefully you have some food rations left. I’m not sure what, if anything, we have on board that’s dextro.” Shepard replied.

He paused, sparing her a look, and probably some sort of expression that she could not see.

“I’m being honest here,” she assured.

Forty minutes later, as Shepard jumped down from the airlock onto the moon’s surface, she raised her hand to her comm. “Shepard to Normandy, come in.”

“Reading you loud and clear, Commander.”

“Mission successful, Joker. We are coming back with a guest. Be in position to pick up the shuttle.” She glanced over her shoulder as she watched the Spectre carry the final crate. Low gravity was really a good thing in this case, because those cases felt quite heavy even then.

With some effort and a cutting torch they managed to pry open the cargo hold doors and get a look inside, the whole cargo room had vented during the initial fire and decompression, but there were some empty flat-packed cargo crates still in their racks on the wall of the hold. Three of the most usable ones were packed with personal effects from his quarters.

The fourth crate came from the ship’s galley and was full of emergency rations and some vacuum-packed foods from the cooling unit that survived exposure to the void. The only thing from his small pantry that survived was a large metal container, yet unopened, full of some sort of instant drink that vaguely looked like the dextro answer to good old coffee. Overall it looked like he had food enough for more than two weeks, which was more than long enough to finish their job here and drop him off at the Citadel.

“Any signs of other ships out there?” Shepard went on.

“Nothing so far, Commander. EDI is monitoring.”

“Good, we’ll be back on board in about ten to fifteen.”

“Did you remember my souvenir?”

“I did. I got you a finger-nail sized shard of the projectile that hit the ship. Shepard out.” As her hand dropped away from the radio, she realized that the Spectre was looking at her again; their links were still synchronized, so he could hear her half of the conversation. “My helmsman. Now you know why I was digging shrapnel out of your bulkhead with my knife, hope you don’t mind.” She explained and moved toward the shuttle.

“Does he collect trophies?” he wondered.

“He just asked me to bring him back something nice.” She chuckled; let that teach Joker to be careful of what he wished for.

Ashley was already in the shuttle when the two of them caught up. Jenkins was checking on the straps that tied down the three crates already inside. Kaidan was still scanning the surroundings. The fourth crate was put on top of the others and tied down, and then all of them strapped into the seats.

The shuttle came to life as its door swung shut and sealed. The ventral thrusters ignited and shuttle lifted off. Then there was a light punch of acceleration when the drive thrusters kicked in, pushing
the shuttle’s nose up. A minute later she heard the first sound from outside, a series of loud beeps, which indicated the cabin had pressurized.

A quick glance at the wall panel to confirm pressurization and Shepard undid her seals and pulled her helmet off. She set it down in her lap and ran a hand through her hair to set it in a modicum of order and out of her eyes. She hated EVA work; the recycler never did a good enough job to keep the air from becoming stale, and then there was the absolute absence of outside sound. There were silent rooms, her domain, and then there was absolute void silence. Something about that total absence of sound unnerved her no matter how much she tried to ignore it. To say nothing that sensory deprivation of that sort could mess with the mind, EVA madness was a thing to those unused to it. When she looked up, the other three marines removed their helmets as well.

It was probably the fact that everyone else had done it that caused the Spectre to reach for his own helmet seals and finally take it off. Shepard could not say she was some sort of expert on turians; still, this one easily fell into the ‘most striking’ category. Dark mahogany plates, mocha skin, and linen-cream colored colony markings in a complex design that spanned from his chin and mandibles, over his face and forehead, and around up to the outer edges of his long fringe, with a central stripe running the crest’s length from the diamond-shaped forehead plate right to the tip of the central spine.

The complexity of the design reminded Shepard of the facial tattoos of the Maori people she had seen in a history book. Yet perhaps the most arresting were his new-leaf green eyes which almost glowed against the backdrop of the dark skin around his eyes. He seemed keen on something above her head and it was a heartbeat before Shepard realized it was the stripe of white in her hair. She grinned; it looked like they both saw something curious in the other.

Shepard glanced at the other marines; Jenkins was staring out the side viewport with a thoughtful look on his face. Ashley was sitting as far away from the Spectre as the shuttle would allow, across and in the other corner. Kaidan was staring at the deck plates, but he must have felt her gaze because he looked up. “Are you alright?” she asked.

“Of course, Commander.” He replied.

Somehow, Shepard could not help but feel like there was a large pachyderm in the shuttle. The silence was far from comfortable or even relaxed. It had everything to do with the Spectre, but Shepard would not blame him, and she could not blame the marines for being out of their plates. As the shuttle continued to climb, a flicker of reflected light shone into the cabin for all of a second.

Shepard glanced out the viewport; the Normandy loomed beyond, the star’s light reflected off the ship’s arching back. There was absolutely nothing to do with this; it was her executive decision to go on this rescue mission, knowing full well that they would bring a turian aboard a top secret ship that was part built on borrowed-without-license technology of his people. That was even before she had known he was a Spectre.

She glanced at said Spectre out of the corner of her eye; he had turned to the viewports as well. Idly Shepard wondered just how obvious the borrowed influences were, but asking was absolutely out of the question.

When the shuttle landed back in the Normandy’s bay, Shepard was the first off. Joker apparently spread the news of their new guest, as their arrival was met with three armed servicemen. Shepard dismissed them and the marines as well. The Spectre made short work of his cargo crates, but left them by one of the support pillars, so that the shuttle could be stowed away in its overhead gantry cradle. With that task done, Shepard personally escorted him to deck three. As they rounded the
elevator, she made a beeline to the locked doors of the unused XO’s cabin.

Mid-shift as it was, the mess area around the elevator was almost wholly clear, just Second Lieutenant Dean Matthews, who was in charge of the galley, and two curious, bleary nightshift crewmembers. It took about five seconds for them to take their fill of Spectre-spotting. Both got up and slunk off via the opposite way around the elevator. As if they could not have made their curiosity any more obvious. Shepard glanced up at the Spectre and caught his mandibles giving a flicker that almost looked like a grin.

“This is a nice ship,” he said.

Shepard somehow thought he was commenting on the crew. “Still got that shipyard smell wafting from the ducts.” She keyed the code to unlock the door. The lock turned green readily and the door swished open. The XO’s cabin was an open room with a built-in bathroom, sitting area, office space, bed, and two viewports that right at that moment showed a vista of Zealand.

“This is yours as long as you’re on board,” she said.

“Thank you.”

“Hah, you might want to hold on to the thanks for a moment. I do have a few… restrictions. I ask that you do not venture onto decks two or four. However you are free to use the observation lounges on this deck, or if the mood strikes you, the gym area in the shuttle bay on deck five.”

“What of deck one?”

“That’s my private cabin. Common courtesy applies.” She could not help but smile. “If you do need something, and if we have it aboard, I’ll do my best to accommodate.”

“Understood,” He moved deeper into the room, looking about.

“Are you alright… how many hours were you down on that moon?”

“Around thirty Galactic Standard hours.” He stopped near the closest viewport and looked back at her. There was that ‘looking through someone’ quality to his stare that bothered her a little. “It is not enough to slow me down.”

Shepard could not help but wonder if he was soldiering. His armor showed no serious damage, just the sort of scratches and paint chips that would accumulate with field work. She had no real medical knowledge, so her ability to pick up on signs of injury was limited. It was nothing short of a miracle that he essentially walked away from a crash like he did.

Though maybe it made some sense, all in all his ship was gouged and ripped by the moon’s unweathered surface. With inertial dampeners and low gravity, the momentum transfer inside could have been reduced. Still, there was nothing to do about it; she could not just drag him by the arm to see the doctor, so she would have to let it go.

“Just one more thing.” Shepard figured a bit of formality might not be a bad thing. “You said Eclipse brought down your ship?”

He glanced back at her, “I was wondering when you would ask. I am curious what an Alliance vessel is doing out here.”

He wanted *quid pro quo* huh? Well she could do that. “There is a settlement on the planet; the settlers requested we investigate mercenary activity. Eclipse has apparently resorted to extortion.”
clinical explanation of what they were doing here, but it would do.

“Then our goals align. I was investigating Eclipse smuggling. The cell I am tracking has a base in this system. I would like to join you down on the surface.”

Give a clinical explanation and get one back, quid pro quo. “I have no problems with that, but…” She wondered if that was entirely a good idea, given that most of his armory was now orbiting the planet. How would a Spectre even work with a squad of Alliance marines? She had no authority to order him around, and he had no authority over her either. Such a situation was a logistical nightmare under the best of circumstances. “How will this work? I am not in the position to defer command to you, Spectre or not.”

“Normally I conduct my investigations alone, but in this case I am willing to let you lead, though I will collect my own evidence.”

“When you say you are willing to give me the lead…”

“I leave the plan up to you.”

Ah so he was deferring the tactical decisions, but he wanted to do his own snooping. “I can work with that. I’ll be blunt with you; my orders are to stop Eclipse harassing our settlement.” She shifted her weight from foot to foot, “I intend to go down there, cut through if I have to, and then I’m going to sabotage their power core. Best way I know to stop them.”

“I would plant explosives on the power core. The explosion will be spectacular, and there is no guesswork involved.” His tone was matter of fact, but there was that quick flick again, now she was sure it was a grin.

It took a long moment for what he had actually said to sink in, and when it did, Shepard could not help herself, she laughed. “Well, it’s the way to go if expertise is in short supply. I happen to have certain… expertise.” She did not know what possessed her to say that, but suddenly it was as if some sort of ice had broken between them.

“Fair enough.”

“Either way, they’re not going to be bothering those settlers ever again.” Shepard affirmed. She just could not believe the direction this conversation took. Very few people discussed their methods of sabotage, mainly because they did not want to look like they enjoyed their work. She did not enjoy wanton destruction, but she was trained to be good at causing it. “Well I think I’ll leave you be, I have no timeframe for this job, it can wait about twelve hours. Rest up, we’ll talk later.”

“Yes, we will talk later.”

The tone of his voice had something in it that made Shepard wonder if he was indeed alright, still, there was nothing she could do. She turned, exited the room, and made her way to the elevator. “EDI.”

“Yes, Commander?” The AI replied.

“I need your best scans of that mercenary base; could you have them on my terminal in the OD when they’re done?”

“Of course, Commander.”

“Thank you, EDI.”
Right now though, she wanted out of her armor, after that a shower, and then a hearty meal. That would probably burn off an hour or two, and then she could take a good solid look at the scans.

Sixteen Terran hours later the shuttle was once again down on the deck. Shepard was down there with everyone going planet-side, buckling on her webbing, checking her guns and her kit. The final piece of equipment was a reinforced case that contained three demolition charges that she personally assembled and configured. She opted for the combined detonators, with both timer and remote detonation being an option.

The Spectre arrived in full gear, though his weaponry was only the shotgun he had on him. Shepard slipped Vincent behind her back and reached into the weapon cage for one of the spare Avengers and another Carnifex. She walked over to the Spectre and held out the weapons, “Spectre Kryik, here. It’ll round out your ranges. Would you like one of our spare sniper rifles as well?”

“No, these will do.” He replied.

Shepard smiled, “Gunnery Chief Williams knows her stuff, and so, while they’re not Spectre spec they will serve you well.”

“Thank you,” he took the rifle and clipped it to the back of his armor at his right shoulder, the heavy pistol to his right side.

Shepard nodded, reaching for her earpiece, “Joker, we’re about ready to go.”

“The Normandy is already in position. Just say when.”

Shepard turned to the three marines. “Alright people, hustle! EDI got us a thorough scan of the place, complete with layout. All of it should be on your Omni-tools -that includes yours Spectre Kryik-” She tossed a brief glance at the Spectre. “We’re going in there outnumbered, yes, but we’re not blind, and we’re definitely not stupid. They don’t know we know the layout, they don’t expect marines, and they definitely won’t expect a N7 and a Spectre. We’ll show those mercs that when it comes down to it, military discipline has no substitutes!”

“Oorah!” Jenkins cheered, pumping a fist in the air.

“Is there always a speech involved?” the Spectre asked.

“No, I save them for special occasions.” Shepard replied, moving past him toward the shuttle.

The shuttle landed about a kilometer away from the base in a clearing surrounded by monstrous alien trees. It was about an hour before sunset on this part of Zealand. Unlike Earth, this planet turned in such a way that the sun set in the east, but everything else was somewhat the same. The air even smelled of wet soil and rotting leaves, familiar enough to a certain degree. Shepard was the first one off the shuttle. Sunlight barely filtered through the canopy to the forest floor, but she had a navigational lock on her omni-tool, so getting lost was impossible.

“Are we doing a night attack?” Kaidan wondered.

“Yes, I figured it’ll give us the best entry. The base is in a natural lower area, and the only way down that does not involve rappelling harnesses is a vehicle access road. It is much too open without the cover of darkness; just on the off chance they have a sniper worthy of the name.”
“Have you rappelled, ma’am?” Jenkins wondered.

Shepard stopped, glanced back at him, and grinned. “I’ve rappelled, rock-climbed, parachuted, flown wingsuits, and done base jumps, some in a wingsuit. Some of that I’ve done just for fun.”

“That’s… quite a list,” Jenkins echoed awed.

“Haven’t bungee jumped though, never saw the appeal. C’mon, we have ground to cover.” Shepard turned and began to walk, turning to her omni-tool for the directions. She had started recreational parachuting before the Blitz, the dozens of jumps clocked by the time she entered ICT had allowed her to pick up those modules as part of her training. It was exceedingly rare that she got to use those skills, but she had the background on her record.

She was not at all surprised when the Spectre fell in step with her. “Wingsuits?” he wondered.

“Spectres don’t do parachutes or long free-falls?” Shepard wondered, unable to help herself from teasing.

“No. Most of us prefer our feet to remain on something solid.”

Shepard grinned but said nothing more on the subject.

The rest of the walk passed in relative silence, which bothered her simply because it looked like she was the only one who ever talked to the Spectre. Kaidan was merely aware of him being there, a temporary ally. Jenkins listened to their conversations with a sort of awe on his face, and he acted as if it was not his right to speak up. Ashley seemed to keep as much distance from the Spectre as was politely possible.

They stopped at a rock outcropping about fifty meters away from the top of the roadway. A dirt track from the top of the ramp-like feature led north, the outcrop was south from it, and so even if a vehicle came up or down the road, they would not be spotted easily.

“We’ll hunker down here for an hour or so, until it’s fully dark. Meantime we can hash out our game plan.” This probably should have been done on board the Normandy, but discussing missions in the mess was not a good idea. The mess was a high traffic area, she would not ask her crew to sacrifice their space for even half an hour just because there was someone on board she needed to keep off the CIC. She would have liked to do this sort of planning around the coffee table of the OD.

As the five of them settled in the shelter offered by the rock cropping, Shepard raised her omni-tool and projected the base schematics into the space between them. The base was rectangular, with prefab sections of various sizes and configurations arranged in two rings that formed a sort of figure eight with the narrow sides facing north and south. “Alright, so, our final goal is this space here,” she poked at the projection, indicating a big room almost at the center of the smaller ring of prefabs. “The core room. I have demo charges on me that will give us a delightful display of fireworks.” It was her thing to put a bull’s-eye on the final destination first, and then explain how they were going to get there.

“There are two main ways to get there,” she glanced up, catching the eye of every team member before she went on. “Fortunately these clowns took the guesswork out of everything. Here along this one,” she traced the eastern passage of the bigger ring, southern ring, “is their security office. We go there first and quiet; take out their alarms, cameras, and any internal defenses. We also lock down the vehicle bay if they have a gunship. Stealing a vehicle won’t help us if they deploy it during the retreat phase; we have no cover anywhere here. Security offices are also a place to start on data mining. If not that, then further along that same passage they have a cold room that is likely the main
“Whoever designed this wanted to be infiltrated,” Ashley noted.

“Yes, their barracks are too far from the strategic locations likely to be hit first. It will delay their response even if we trip an alarm.” The Spectre voiced.

“We do this right, there won’t be alarms. This is Eclipse, they’re undisciplined. That said they are also likely to have two mechs for every one of them, and a few biotics on top. The hallways will funnel us and offer no cover for prolonged firefights. We have to do this covertly.” If this was just her, she would have used the ducts. There were never cameras in the ducts, and she could be at the power core before the mercenaries even realized they were compromised.

“What if they have patrolling mechs?” Jenkins wondered.

“Ever seen a LOKI have an IFF glitch, Corporal? If you know how to get into their systems, you can make them work for you.” She called that parlor trick her ‘Party Protocol’. Something she picked up from an engineer friend of hers who loved to get into systems just for the fun of it. You had to learn to exploit all opportunities if you were just one person facing uncertain odds. “Now, our entry point is here,” she continued, indicating a doorway on the southern side. “We’ll just have to cross this hallway here, and we’re straight through to the security room.”

“Looks simple enough,” Ashley voiced.

“I’m leaving our exit strategy somewhat flexible. If they don’t have a gunship, we will exit by the vehicle bay. They will likely have a something with wheels there. Now I’m going to open the floor for input, anyone?” Shepard finished.

“The important parts were covered,” Kaidan said, and glanced at Ashley.

“I’m good with this.” She agreed.

Shepard glanced at the curiously silent Spectre, of them all she thought he would have the input, but he just let her lay out the plan and said nothing. Was he deferring that much authority, or was her plan up to code? She met his gaze and held it for a moment, but then he looked away. It was as good as words.

Chapter End Notes

**Author Notes:** There’s Nihlus! I'm rather fond of him, despite the brevity of screen time. I felt rather bad for him, and for my story being AU, I decided that I wanted him as part of the main cast. I have my own sort of interpretation of him, and as you saw in this episode, he's not above playing games.

**Chapter Notes:**

**Port / Starboard** - These nautical terms refer to the side of the ship when looking toward the bridge. The left side would be called port, while the right is starboard.

**Firearms** - ME weapons use magnetic rails to accelerate slugs, like miniaturized rail guns. A folding weapon would need rails that can come apart into sections and fold up as well. When unfolding, micro-misalignments would throw shot precision off. Rigid
one-piece rails would eliminate that, but prevent the weapon from folding up. Basically this means the barrels of Sin and Dex are fixed for precision.

**Mirrored Receiver** - Did you notice that when reloading in the trilogy; the spent thermal clip bounces out of the right-hand side? Sin, which Shepard holds in her left hand, has a fancy flipped receiver that makes it eject a clip to the left. There is a very logical reason for having such a thing. As with spent shell casings, thermal clips are hot when they come out, and no one wants one of those bouncing in their face. Shepard also uses a practiced tandem reload, if the gun was “regular” as it went into its holster on her left side, the receiver slot would not be “out” and ready to accept a new clip.

**Chirality** - Turians are a dextro-Amino life form, and thus would get no nutritional value from levo-amino based “human” foods. The allergy thing is debatable to outright wrong; as we consume dextro foods everyday (artificial sweeteners are dextro!), and they pass through undigested, but we don’t die from them. I am going by that, a levo eating dextro (and vice versa) will not derive nutrition from it. Allergic reactions will be limited to the minority of cases, like a general food allergy.

**Timekeeping** - Humans still have their method, which we all know, now called the “Terran Coordinated Universal Day” in-verse. The Citadel (and by proxy Council Space) keeps to “Galactic Standard”. It goes like this, [1 GS second = 0.5 TCUD second], [1GS Minute = 100 GS seconds], [1GS Hour = 100 GS minutes], [1 GS Day = 20 GS hours], and [1 GS year = 343.97 GS days]. Thus a GS day is 27:46:40 our time, and a GS year 398.114 TCUDs. The GS allows coordinating activities that are conducted across the galaxy. For example, the galactic stock market’s GS-set hours would still be the same on Thessia as they would be on say Ilium, thus eliminating guesswork for transactions.
Episode 3: Poltergeist and Spectre [Part II]

Sunset was a truly spectacular thing, no matter the planet, or how eccentric, and Zealand was eccentric. Not only did it turn clockwise on its axis, it only took twenty-two hours. The sun set in the east, and total darkness settled quickly. The sky shifted colors seemingly by the minute, showing practically every color in the visible spectrum in narrow bands. Half an hour after the sun’s disk vanished below the horizon there was near-full darkness, broken only by the pale light from Zealand Beta, just peeking over the horizon. It was then that Shepard motioned for the group to move.

She paused on the very edge of the depression and kneeled to look down. The Eclipse base was set at the bottom of what looked like a sinkhole of epic proportions, with the steep vertical rock faces revealing their geological strata. There was only one way up from the base, a narrow shelf-like roadway, barely wide enough for a vehicle, winding up the eastern side. It looked like Eclipse had used explosives to blast it out, and then tossed the refuse down the side. It was a natural bottleneck; no wheeled vehicle would be able to navigate it at any speed other than crawl.

The mercenaries obviously were not worried about the rocks around them coming down, and efforts to conceal their base were limited to its location. The whole compound and the surrounding bits of terrain were brightly lit with floodlights, and essentially wide open. Shepard reached over her left shoulder for Vincent. “Not a tower in sight, what a shoddy way to secure the grounds.”

“It’s like you said, they’re undisciplined.” Ashley said.

Shepard raised Vincent’s scope to her eye, using the magnification to see the details. The rifle’s normal snow white housing had been colored grey long ago, a way to camouflage the rifle when half-buried in the snow. Its muzzle was dipped in white paint, to diffuse the muzzle flash, though right now it glowed in the moonlight. “Well I’ll be… they got mechs patrolling, four LOKIs and two FENRIS on the south side.”

“Same on the north side,” the Spectre said.

Shepard grinned, a plan fast forming in her mind. The external security had rather obvious gaps she could just strut through. “Shooting them is out. We have a window every time they are on the long east and west sides of the base. We go down, and you see those fuel silos? I don’t see cameras on them. Their shadow will conceal you four while I go in for the camera over the door and the door. The camera sweeps, but it has a blind spot right under it, and that’s all I need.” She got to her feet and tucked Vincent behind her back again.
“You’ll have thirty seconds a sweep, can you hack it that fast?” Kaidan wondered.

“Don’t need to.” Shepard replied, “The cables are exposed at the back, I’ll yank the signal cable. We hit the security room fast enough after that and it won’t matter. They’ll run diagnostics before they send someone to look at it.” She chose not to loop it, as that would require the precise timing of the LOKIs. If she got it wrong, the flaw would be a dead give-away that someone was messing with them, more-so than a single camera losing signal.

“Let’s move,” she motioned to the dirt road, “Space out and hug the cliffs, we don’t want to cast too big a shadow. We take it nice and slow.”

Once on the vehicle access road, she marveled at just how narrow it was. There was absolutely no safety equipment on the edges, not even little lights. A vehicle would not be able to use this path at night without serious risk.

She led the column down, watching for any sign of movement from the base, but also at the top. Without running lights, there was the constant danger of not seeing the edge. As long as they kept one hand on the cliff, they could be sure to minimize it, but the change of direction always came as a sudden hairpin, and judging from the rocks skittering down, the cliffs were also somewhat unstable. It took a good twenty minutes to get down at a stealthy but steady pace, the gradient had to be at least twenty degrees, and so going up without a vehicle would not be easy on their legs.

Once down, Shepard held up her hand, back to the marines, indicating they stop. She was dimly aware of the silent Spectre standing next to her, and hoped that the signals were universal enough for him. Ahead of them, the line where the floodlights reached was stark. Right now, they were in the deep shadows beyond the beams, but they would have to move through some light to reach the silo’s shadows.

A group of LOKIs came around the southeast corner, making their passage across the wide side of the complex. Shepard motioned with two fingers for a slow advance as she began to skirt the base, heading south, toward where the shadows of the silos were longest, where fleeting through the light would be briefest. She heard the clicks as her marines drew their rifles.

When the LOKIs turned to the north side, Shepard jerked her hand, and all five of them made a dash for the twin silos on the southeast corner. Their tall bulk was a blind against the camera mounted on the building as well as the second group of mechs making a passage along the south side. Once there Shepard pressed her back to the cylinder and scooted around as far as she could. The base was about twenty meters of open, floodlit space beyond.

“I’ll wait for the LOKIs to turn the corner, that’ll give me the most time to hack the door.” She whispered. “Once I get it open, I’m going in to check for other cameras on the inside. When I figure that out, I’ll tell you. Wait for the LOKIs and then make a dash.” She glanced back, looking at the four of them. The marines nodded their heads; the Spectre’s focused look was just as good.

The LOKIs and the FENRIS drew near the silos. “Here we go,” she whispered. The machines had rather poor detection sensors; the silos were probably just far enough that the FENRIS mechs would not smell them. Nevertheless Shepard’s hand slipped down to grip Sin. She watched them for any sign of detection, sudden stops or falters, anything that would indicate their cover was blown.

As the FENRIS turned the corner, she rolled her wrist and her omni-tool flared. The last LOKI stepped around the corner. “Going Geist,” she muttered, the omni-tool flashed, and she felt a familiar tingle as her kinetic barrier turned off and the tactical cloak activated. As soon as it settled, she was out from behind the silo, dashing in a straight line for the target side door as the camera panned right, passing the angle where it would stare right at the silos.
At the end of its cycle, the camera paused for a split second and then began to pan left. Shepard slipped into the blind spot under it just as it turned right at the silos. She pressed herself against the wall and looked up. There were two black cables going into the back, one thicker, one thinner. She reached up and yanked it out until only the tip was still inside. No leaving obvious signs of tampering, like dangling cables. The camera kept moving, but the solid red status light above the signal socket began to blink.

She scooted across the wall and slipped into the slightly recessed alcove around the door, raising her arm, bringing up her omni-tool as her cloak turned off, going into recharge. The decryption program was already up, and she got to work. Time was short, the LOKIs would make a passage soon, and now she was too close. If they came up on her from behind, they would detect her, and the gig was up. The lock was not terribly sophisticated, but it would not do to trip any alarm, silent or otherwise.

“Skipper, the LOKIs,” Ashley whispered on her comm.

Shepard did not reply, talking now might expose her. The lock panel turned green, she slapped her hand on it, and the door began to open. Her finger slipped to her cloak controls, hitting the actual button to activate it. She slipped in the door just as the LOKIs entered her peripheral vision.

The door closed, Shepard stopped just beyond it, listening for any sign of detection. She had to be between two prefab rooms, and so it created a short narrow passage which led to the main ring hallway. There was no camera aimed right at the doorway on the inside.

Shepard inched along the short passage to the intersection with the main hallway and glanced down toward the security room, there was a camera scanning from the corner where the two hallways met at a ninety degree angle. A quick glance in the other direction told her there was another on the opposite corner. What more the two cycled in such a manner that the hallway was never unwatched. “Alright wait for the window, and come inside and hold position. I’m cloaked, keeping an eye out for security on this side.” She whispered.

“Roger that,” Kaidan replied.

Two cameras, she could not knock them out without it looking suspicious, so her options were limited. She would have to slip into the security room alone and kill the guards; there was no other way to get four uncloaked people to that room without a security triggering an alarm. As it was, just opening the door behind them might make them jump the gun.

The door opened behind her, but the footsteps were so light that she barely heard them at all. It was then that she ducked back into the blind hallway and turned off her cloak. “We have a situation, two cameras on this hallway, one on each corner, and they have no blind spot. I can’t get you guys to that security room without being spotted.”

“So what’s the plan?” Kaidan asked.

“I’ll take care of it.” There was no other way, as far as she knew she was the only one there with a tactical cloak. “Stay here and keep an ear out for someone coming from the other side. We need to keep our stealth here, this is the only way we can do that.”

“As you wish, Commander.” Kaidan said.

Shepard nodded mutely, even as she noticed the cool look the Spectre gave her. He was clearly not happy to be told to hold, but Shepard really did not see many other options. Still, he was taking orders, she could be thankful for that. She did not need issues of command structure on top of everything. “Alright, I’m going in.” She raised her arm and scooted as close as possible to the corner
before activating her cloak.

As soon as it settled in, she was around the corner and making a hasty, but silent dash toward the security office just around the base’s southeast corner. Even from a distance she could see the door was merely closed, not locked. Shepard took a deep steadying breath and drew her knife before laying her palm on the mechanism.

The door mechanism hissed as the two halves began to slide open. She was through almost as soon as the gap was wide enough. The room beyond was semi-dark, lit up only by a bank of monitors and two tube lamps above. Seated at the console in front of her were two guards in garish yellow and white armor, a human, and a salarian.

“The hell… the door just opened,” the human looked up as his hand groped for the rifle resting by his side.

The salarian turned in his chair, one hand still on the virtual keyboard, his big dark eyes briefly staring right where Shepard was as she crept up on them, knife up, but rendered invisible by the cloak. “First camera. Now door… something is wrong,” he said.

“Who’d be nuts enough to come here?” the human wondered as he got to his feet, rifle in his arms.

Shepard skirted around as widely as the space allowed and shifted her knife to an overhand grip. One large step brought her right in front of the salarian.

“Shit!” The human shouted.

Shepard knew he must have seen the faint mirage-like ripple flaw of her cloak, a clumsy refraction of multiple light sources, visible only up close and while she was moving. But it was too late; she grabbed the salarian by the front of his armor, and shoved her knife into his side where there were no armored plates, just the undersuit. The weave gave way to her hardened alloy combat knife.

She heard a gun’s safety disengage as the human turned his gun on where she stood. Shepard twisted the knife ninety degrees once, back, and yanked it out and let the salarian drop to the floor. His green blood welled up rapidly, which was all the evidence Shepard needed to know her blade found its mark in some major blood vessel.

“Overload charge!” She commanded. Her omni-tool lit up, glowing right through the cloak as it began to charge.

The Mercenary’s finger slipped to the trigger, but Shepard slammed her glowing hand on the weapon. Her omni-tool gave a loud crack as it dumped the overload pulse right into the weapon. The rifle’s status lights lit up bright red, thermal clip instantly at capacity, and then it begun to click where it should have normally fired.

The mercenary’s eyes bugged out behind his eye shield. Shepard smiled, stepped in, and grabbed him by the front his armor. He grabbed at her hand but Shepard was still faster and shoved her knife into his side, aiming up under the ribs into his lung. One twist, then back, and she yanked the knife out. He dropped to the floor, gasping, blood flying up onto his lips.

Shepard watched him as he tried to reach for his rifle, but the blood filling his lung rapidly made breathing difficult once it was up in his upper respiratory tract. “Eyes on me,” she whispered into his ear. The phrase was also her cloak’s voice command shut off, and as the cloak fizzled, his eyes widened. It was a comical how most never saw a woman killing them in cold blood. Then again, the gender ratios in the army were still skewed, so there was some truth there.
She knew the exact moment he began to fade out of consciousness, so she let him slump to the floor as she raised her left foot onto a vacated chair and slipped her knife back into its sheath. The guard would be dead in less than a minute more. Only then did she raise her hand to the communication controls at her ear, “Security room is clear. You can come in.” She would have liked no one to see her handiwork, but it was unavoidable. The consolation was that they would not know exactly how she did it. She turned to the console and found the small image on which she could see her team and watched them move.

The door opened about thirty seconds later, and Shepard could also pin the exact moment when they saw the bodies. The look on Jenkins’ face was wide-eyed. Ashley grimaced. Kaidan averted his gaze from the bodies outright. The Spectre’s eyes were locked dead on her, calculating. Shepard looked away; right now her most disturbing skills were showing. “As I said, no alarms.”

“You alright, Skipper?” Ashley asked.

“Yes.” Shepard replied coolly. “They computers are all yours Spectre.” She motioned to the console. “I'll do the lockouts on my end.” She turned to the monitors, scanning the collage for a view into the hangar bay. When she spotted it, she keyed in a code to enlarge the image.

The hangar was not terribly big, probably only room enough for three vehicles at the best of times. Right now it was stacked full of crates, but in the furthest corner of the room was a shape she wished was not there. “They got a gunship alright,” she announced. The black craft stood next to a brown troop carrier truck. Ideally she would have loved to take the truck, but the gunship had missiles, they would not make it up the road before it blew them to bits.

“Lock out the bay doors, but we will take the gunship when we exit.” The Spectre said next to her.

“Huh?” Shepard glanced at him. He had one hand on the haptic interface, his omni-tool active on his left.

“The road is unsafe. The best way out is the gunship. I will pilot it.” He explained blandly.

Somehow she sounded vaguely like he was talking down at her, or was that just her imagination? Sure, he had his own ship; so he very likely knew how to pilot a gunship, so it was not an issue of skill. “Alright.” She turned back to her console to access the security protocols. What more could she say? She would have to trust him that far. Somehow she wanted to think his decision to fly them out was indicative of some camaraderie forming. They were not just Spectre and Alliance, for this mission they were a team.

The room was quiet and cool; she could hear the occasional clink of armor as the marines shifted around. Right now they were safe; the mercenaries had no way of knowing that there was anything wrong going on. She had the alarms locked out; the codes scrambled, and moved on to the hangar bay doors.

“I cannot get sufficient access to their network from here,” The Spectre announced.

“Then our next stop is the server room after all,” Shepard mused. She raised her own omni-tool and input a few commands. “Alright I’ve locked out their security and the hangar bay, let me route the camera feeds to my omni-tool and we can move on.” Her omni-tool blinked, and just like that she had remote access. She flicked cameras until she came up on the one in the server room. “There is no one in the server room or the hallway outside. Let’s move.”

The marines straightened instantly; Shepard nodded to them and went for the door. “I’m going ahead. There should not be anyone there, but I take no chances. Going Geist!” She felt the cloak
settle over her as she stepped out the door and already moving down the hall.

“Meant to ask you about that word, what sort of spirit is that?” she heard a flanging voice in her ear over the communicating link.

Shepard listened to her surroundings; she could not use her omni-tool while cloaked, as it glowed right through. Convinced that there was absolutely no one out in the halls for now, she chanced replying. “My people once believed the dead left imprints behind, ones bound to a location, sometimes visible, sometimes not. Seemed fitting, what else would you call my vanishing act?” She explained as she moved down the hall toward the server room. It was also shortened from her ICT call sign, ‘Poltergeist’, given to her because she could be every bit the malicious ghost that moved things, made noises, and harmed people it deemed unwelcome. Her team thought they were being cute.

“I see.”

Shepard disconnected her cloak and turned to the server room door lock. “How you guys holding up? Not boring, I hope,” she murmured.

“We’re fine with this sort of boring,” Kaidan replied as he drew near.

“I’m not bored; this is awesome, real spy stuff. Like something straight out of Blasto or something.” Jenkins added.

“Keep your head on Jenkins. Besides… we all know how realistic Blasto is, don’t we?” Ashley asked.

“Erm… Spectre Kryik, sir, there are no Hanar Spectres, right?” Jenkins wondered. Ashley’s comment deflated him.

“Not to my knowledge.”

Shepard chuckled, “Careful, he might think they’re so top secret that even another Spectre doesn’t know.” The lock turned green and the door opened. “Let’s get some data,” she said as she breezed into the room. Hearing Jenkins actually speak to the Spectre for the first time seemed to affirm that this was doing something to ease the tensions.

This room was colder than the rest of the base, darker as well, with very spaced out lighting fixtures. It made sense, no use lighting a room full of server hardware. The computers were organized in two long rows, splitting the room into three aisles. Here and there one of the cases jutted out like a tooth, and there were gaps that connected the three aisles, but it was a straight through and through. At the furthest side were more computers and a long desk with two terminals.

The Spectre passed by her on his way to them, but Shepard lingered to glance back. She did not need to say another word; the marines already knew to take up guard positions by the door. She turned and joined the Spectre as he got to work on the data.

As she watched him work at the network security, the irony of the situation hit her fully. What she was doing on the orders of Admiral Hackett, he was doing similarly on the behest of the Citadel Council. He was a real deal Spectre, she was assigned Spectre tasks in everything but name. The machinations of people in power really did have only one universal language.

The Alliance big-wigs wanted in on a club that really did not offer anything past a fancy name. Did they even realize that a Spectre would not be their marionette? The Council would be pulling the strings. Sure she could see how it would mean respect, but in her mind the points did not connect.
Having a Spectre was not a magical shortcut to Council seat. The club was quite exclusive, and they wanted to keep it that way. The Volus practically systemized the galactic economy and they were a client race to the Turians. If that was not enough to get you a seat, what was enough?

The sound of the door opening jarred Shepard out of her musings. She looked back sharply; in the doorway was a salarian in Eclipse armor. He stepped into the room, looked up from the datapad in his hands, and his eyes widened. His free hand immediately shot to his sidearm.

Shepard reached for Sin, but Kaidan was closest, and suddenly he was glowing blue. Before Shepard could say a word, the lieutenant raised his hand yanked the mercenary deeper into the room. The Salarian shouted instinctively.

“Damn it!” Kaidan cursed as he swung his arm, slamming the salarian right into a wall. When the field vanished, the mercenary slid down into a sitting position, but remained sitting, he was out cold.

Shepard grimaced, but said nothing. She knew full well that the blame was more her own, not theirs. She turned right back to the consoles, meeting the Spectre’s gaze. “Are you getting anything?”

“I am still running decryption,” the Spectre replied.

Shepard turned to her camera feeds. Why had she allowed herself to be distracted? She should have been monitoring feeds the whole time. If she had, they would not be in this situation. Of all the people there, she should have been the last one to screw up.

There was a thud behind them, Shepard looked back. Jenkins had dumped the body on the floor somewhat unceremoniously. She turned to watch the Spectre work; the Eclipse had quite a few layers of protection on their system. Idly she wondered if she should trust him, reveal EDI. The AI could hack this system in an instant and download everything.

Her eyes turned back to her feeds, and there she saw a group of Eclipse troopers in the barracks hurriedly gathering weapons. The decision made itself. “Stealth has just gone out the window. Lock and load!” Shepard reached up to her earpiece, “Normandy come in, this is Shepard, EDI you there?”

“Of course, Commander.”

Shepard raised her omni-tool, keying in commands as she spoke, “No offense Spectre Kryik, but we’re on the clock. EDI I’m linking you into the system, give Spectre Kryik full access to Eclipse files. Also download a copy of everything they got, just in case.” Shepard passed her omni-tool over the console.

“Accessing…” the AI replied. The monitors blinked, shifting to raw code.

Shepard lowered her omni-tool and drew the twins, shifting them to disruptor ammo mode, ducking behind one of the server cases.

“Decrypting…” EDI announced. Code scrolled by so fast that Shepard could not hope to make heads or tails of it. She saw the Spectre’s mandibles spread wider and lower, somehow there was universality to a slack-jawed expression of complete surprise.

Shepard met the Spectre’s gaze and shook her head; hopefully this would not come to bite her in the ass later. “Focus on the data; we’ll handle the welcoming committee.” Maybe it was not obvious that EDI was not a person but an AI. She could hope, right?

“Access granted…” EDI announced. Shepard saw the Spectre’s omni-tool blink as well. His shock
vanished instantly as he turned back to his task. EDI had not high-jacked his tool, though she could have, effortlessly. This way he could not say the data was tampered with. “Downloading…”

At that moment the door opened and four eclipse troopers walked in, sweeping the room with their assault rifles. They saw the Salarian, and one of them moved to check for life signs.

The marines had scattered about the room, taking cover where they could. Shepard inched around the case she was hiding behind to get a better angle to cover the Spectre, her back to two of the aisles. To her right Kaidan had similarly leaned his back to the other row of computers, watching two aisles. Where were Ashley and Jenkins? Shepard could not see them, so probably both were in the right aisle. As she looked over her shoulder down the center, she saw the mercenaries scatter.

“Two are going to Jenkins.” Ashley whispered.

“You got him?” Shepard whispered back.

“Yea.”

The silence hung, Shepard could hear faint footsteps drawing near. She looked back at the Spectre. Right now he was an objective; she would not let the mercenaries harm him as long as she was there.

The rapport of an assault rifle cut through the silence from the right side of the room. She heard Jenkins shout something that got cut off by another burst of gunfire.

“Jenkins!” Shepard called.

A third burst of assault rifle fire followed.

“We got this.” Ashley announced a long heartbeat later.

Footsteps echoed somewhere to her right. Shepard craned her neck to listen, but then there was nothing. Whoever it was, had stopped. In that moment, she had a different priority than waiting for a mercenary to work up the nerves to come and face her. “You okay, Corporal?” She wondered after a few seconds.

“Yea, I just… I’m fine.” He sounded rattled, “I got one, and the Chief got the other.”

“Commander, your nine!”

Shepard whirled, saw the trooper, and raised Dex instinctively as she sidestepped. Bullets peppered the computer case where she had just been, Shepard pulled the trigger. Dex’s round shredded his shield, she raised Sin and fired. The mercenary jerked as the round entered his forehead, and then he collapsed.

“Thanks,” She replied.

Kaidan nodded and stayed put.

Shepard glanced down the left aisle, “Now where’s that fourth one?”

As she inched along the row of servers, the silence lingered, which was not something she wanted right now.

Suddenly she heard it, a click somewhere behind her. It seemed the last mercenary had two brain cells to rub together. Shepard turned, gun whipping up, fully expecting to see the merc behind her, but there was only air. Or was there? She bolted back toward the consoles, the sound had come
somewhere behind her, but it could have also come from the other side of the hardware cases, from the middle of the room.

“Spec-” An assault rifle cut off the rest of her warning, and then a single thunderous crack pitched lower than anything any of their weapons could produce. She came around the row of computer cases in time to see the mercenary hit the ground and the Lieutenant and Spectre lower their weapons.

“We got him,” The Spectre said blandly.

“Yes… yes you have.” Shepard lowered her guns. The mercenary never stood a chance, Kaidan’s shots ripped his shields, but the shotgun obliterated his chest armor, he was probably dead before he hit the floor.

“Stealth has gone out the window,” Kaidan noted wryly.

Shepard looked back at the monitor; the Spectre had turned back to the data, slipping the shotgun behind his back again as if nothing had happened.

“Download complete.” EDI announced as the screens blinked off. The AI had pulled out of the system as smoothly as she had got in.

“You’re the best, EDI.”

“Your gratitude is appreciated, Commander.” The AI replied, her tone as much as an AI could be.

“I have what I need,” the Spectre announced, shut off his omni-tool.

Ashley and Jenkins appeared from the right aisle, Shepard was glad to see that Jenkins looked no worse than mildly rattled. This was the first time he probably encountered a tough situation like a hold order when every instinct told him to shoot first. She could pat him on the back later.

Shepard turned to her feeds, “They know they’re under attack. I’m seeing mercs arming. But half the job’s done; our goal is the power core room. We exit, turn right to the corner, then left, cross into the second ring, and take the eastern passage again. The hallway between the rings is a bottleneck, so mind that.” It was still eating at her that it was entirely her fault that stealth had gone out the window, despite all the assurances she gave them that they could do this. Had she been watching the feeds, she would have seen the mercenary coming and acted accordingly. She had to tell herself that there was no use bemoaning it now, she had to adapt. “Let’s go!”

Shepard was the first one out of the room. She did not feel the need to say it, but right now they could not afford slow and steady, now was the time for a blitz play. They had to get to the power core room, and after that, it was only a matter of getting to the hangar, they would have to shoot through if needed. It was like the Spectre said; the barracks were on the west side of the second ring, too far away for a swift response, and the mercenaries were far from a disciplined bunch, they did not don their full gear and line up for action in under ten minutes.

As they turned into the eastern passage of the second ring, the Spectre fell in step with her, shotgun at a ready. She raised her omni-tool and brought up the scrambler, a few taps and a hand passed over each doorway scrambled the locking mechanisms. If the Eclipse had mechs there, they could not summon them.

She could have done that from the security room. Hell, she could have scrambled all the doors, locked the mercenaries in their barracks, but it was somewhat a cowardly thing to do. To blow up people, even criminal mercenaries, locked in rooms like cattle; that was not in Shepard’s playbook.
Locking mindless, VI-driven mechs in storage rooms was crowd control, not murder.

Suddenly the Spectre held up his hand, mimicking her earlier wordless command. “Mercenaries around the corner, I can hear them.” He whispered.

Shepard turned to the camera feeds; the hall in front of the power core room had six guards, three of whom had their guns pointed to the other passage. “Quick play. I am going for the three aiming for the other passage. Ashley, when I deliver the opening strike, blitz the one closest to you.”

“No problem, skipper.” Ashley replied, reaching for her sniper rifle.

“Kaidan, Jenkins, when she does, that’s your cue, take another two.”

“You got it,” Kaidan replied as he cocked his rifle.

Shepard nodded, pulled out her knife, and activated her cloak. The cloak settled and then she was around the corner running.

As she darted past the first mercenaries, she saw them jerk. “Cloaker!” One human trooper shouted.

“Where?”

An assault rifle fired somewhere behind her, but the bullets hit the wall on her left, the mercenary missed.

“Don’t fire! You’ll hit me!” a third called.

“Shit, lost him. Look for a faint ripple!”

Shepard shifted her knife to overhand, and lashed out, embedding the blade in one of the mercenaries, twisting it, and twisting it back.

“Shit! There!”

Shepard was already moving, knife abandoned in the trooper’s side. The assault rifle came to life again, bullets peppered where she had just been, the dying mercenary’s shield flared, one or two rounds flew by her. She drew the twins and turned.

There was a crack; one of the troopers went down, a neat heart shot from Ashley’s sniper rifle down the hall. Jenkins and Kaidan appeared. The troopers split, two turned to the marines, two to her. Shepard raised both her guns on her pair and pulled the triggers; up close there was no shield in existence capable of halting disruptor rounds from a Carnifex. As the mercenaries lost their footing, Kaidan and Jenkins opened fire as well. The other two tried to return fire, but their shields fizzled first, and after that the Alliance-issue rounds found home in their bodies.

Shepard holstered her guns and disconnected her cloak. Then she bent down to retrieve her knife, and slipped it back into its sheath. The others were already gathered around the power core room when she brought up her decryption software. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Kaidan and Jenkins turn to one side, Ashley and the Spectre to the other.

“I can hear mechs,” the Spectre announced.

“Almost got this lock.” Shepard replied.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw Jenkins raise his rifle, and just then a LOKI appeared around the corner, a FENRIS bounding at its feet. Two assault rifles opened fire, an auto-tune whine, a small
explosion, followed by another, and parts rained onto the floor.

“Got to reload.” Jenkins announced.

More scampering, another FENRIS, a burst from an assault rifle followed by an explosion. She focused on the lock, and with a few final strokes of the keys the lock turned green. She slammed her palm onto the mechanism.

“We’re in,” she called. “Go! Go!” She drew her guns, and sidestepped, allowing Jenkins to slip in, followed by Kaidan, Ashley, and finally the Spectre.

More LOKIs rounded the corner; Shepard raised both her guns and opened fire. Two shots a kill on each one, four kills and the twins began to smoke. She practically flew into the core room. “There’s more, grab cover, and hold the fort. I need time to get the charges in place!” She was barking, and she knew it, but now was not the time for calm.

She ghosted her index fingers on the clip releases and flicked her wrists to eject the glowing hot thermal clips, stuck both guns into their holsters, and reached behind her back for a fresh pair. With practiced symmetric ease she slammed the cold clips into the exposed receivers, the twins closed with clicks, but she did not draw them again.

The core room was the largest single prefab unit the Eclipse had, split between two levels. They were currently on a large ring walkway that surrounded the small fusion core that dominated the room. Cables and pipes spanned from the core, some vanishing into the ceiling, some into the floor. Pipes brought in coolants, helium-3, and deuterium, while the cables were conduits that distributed electricity to the base. The core was just large enough, quite possibly repurposed from a ship, to supply a base this size. Still, that meant that causing it to go haywire was a matter of knowing what to do to it.

“You could reach the core from here,” a flanged voice teased.

Shepard stopped, looked up at the Spectre, eyebrow raised. He returned the look with a by-now somewhat familiar grin-smirk flicker of his mandibles.

There was limited cover here, but the mercs and mechs would be bottlenecked through the door, so the four of them should be able to handle it. “I’m going for the controls,” she announced, dashing around the walkway. The control booth was at the back, away from the door. With the core as it was, she only needed demo charges on the right pipes to take out the fuel regulator and cooling lines.

With no coolant and the fusion reactor would begin overheating. When the emergency shut down tried to choke fuel, the busted regulator would prevent shut down, and the reaction would run away. The beauty was the fuel was helium and hydrogen. The latter was quite explosive, but neither was radioactive, so there would be no atmospheric contamination or fallout. The explosion would be spectacular, but Eclipse had built the base at the bottom of a rut, which would help contain everything.

Some would quibble over how much this was wrong, but at the end of the day, Eclipse was a ruthless mercenary band that would do anything if paid enough. They victimized whoever they could. If she left the base standing, they would come back, and there would be hell to pay. They would know the colonists called for aid. No, the base had to be erased from the face of this planet.

Her fingers barely landed on the engineering console to bring up the core schematics when she heard gunfire erupt. She looked up, tracing the pipes with her eyes when the shooting died. “What’s going on?” She wondered.
“We’re holding, nothing to report.” Kaidan replied.

Shepard turned back to the console and tapped a few more keys, “Good, I am going to need to time. To create a runaway reaction I need to destroy the coolant lines and jam the fuel regulators, both are on the level below.” Shepard explained as she exited the control booth and moved to the maintenance ladder that led to the base of the core below.

“Door!” Jenkins called.

More gunfire erupted as Shepard gripped the edges of the ladder, planted her feet on the sides, and slid her way down. The main coolant pipes were labeled with nice blue labels; she reached for her special pouch and popped it open.

The demo charges looked like little crabs, big round head and four metal legs that could either grip on something, or stick into it. She tapped at their heads to pop open their pincer legs, and then twisted the cap to arm, before clipping them onto the coolant pipes, one charge on each coolant pipe, double checking their flip up covers to see that the hidden status light underneath was blinking. These little wonders would not be noticed from just a casual scan of the core room, but they packed a shaped charge that would cut right through twenty-five centimeters of solid rock, never mind pipes full of liquid. The pressure breach would crack the pipes open even more.

More gunfire erupted from above.

“I think they’re massing outside,” Kaidan said.

“I have something for that,” she replied as she brought up her omni-tool. Her additions to the core registered nice solid green signals; she could trigger the charges at will. “The coolant is ready to blow, now the regulators.” She moved over to the big wall-mounted panel under the control booth. Safety demanded that there be an independent override system for the fuel regulators, in the event that a glitch with the main controls prevented an emergency shut down.

There was another rapport of fire from above, but she ignored it as she brought up her omni-tool and passed it over the console, a quick series of taps and her scrambler program found the VI controlling the switch and brought it offline. With no VI there would be no recognition of unsafe circumstances and no emergency fuel shut off. Shepard honestly thought they would have been safer with a good old fashioned lever. It would have taken longer, and she would have had to get creative to jam that solidly enough. “Core sabotaged. I’m coming up.” She announced, moving over to the ladder. Once on it, she clambered up as fast as she could.

“So how are we breaking out of here?” Kaidan asked.

“Give me a second,” Shepard replied as she came around the walkway to the doorway, eyes already on the camera feeds. “Well I’ve got good news, and bad news. The bad is that I see ten LOKIs, as many mercs, and one’s an Asari.”

“And the good news?” Kaidan wondered.

“They haven’t got an YMIR.”

“I fail to see how that’s the good news, skipper.” Ashley said.

“YMIRs are much harder to hack. They’re about to learn that turnabout is fair play.” Shepard replied. This was as good a time as any to use Party Protocol. The LOKIs were throwaway and weak, but in numbers they would probably cause just the right amount of chaos. Their strength and flaw was exactly the same thing, their ease of use. Most people networked their LOKIs so that orders
could be passed down quickly with one press of a button. However the base model also had rather horrible firewalls installed, it did not take much to access their controls. The simplest, quickest way to mess with them was an IFF definition change. Tell them that their masters were the intruders and stand back.

With a few taps she found their network, and from there it was a matter of getting in and accessing the IFF protocols. She worked as fast and as accurately as she could. Once in, she changed the IFF to designate Eclipse armor transponders as enemies, saved the settings, and initiated reboot.

For a long breathless moment there was a silence as her omni-tool reported the control signal had gone down, but was coming back up. Then suddenly there was a whine, and then the gunfire and shouting started, quickly climbing to a thunderous crescendo of assault rifle, shotgun, and whatever pistols and submachine guns the LOKIs had.

“Turnabout huh?” Ashley asked.

“That’s bordering on cruel and unusual.” Kaidan agreed.

Shepard shrugged. All was fair in love and war.

Within half a minute the firefight began to fade, and in under a minute there was a final whine and something thudded against the door, three quick shotgun blasts followed, and then silence.

Shepard turned her omni-tool back at the camera feed. “The asari is hurt, but she still has her barrier. Two other mercs are still alive, though hurt, LOKIs are gone. Let’s go before more of them show up. Going Geist.” Shepard slapped the door mechanism even as her cloak settled over her.

“Commander!” Kaidan called, but she was out the door already, dodging to the other side of the hallway.

She heard footsteps trail behind her, followed by a blast of a shotgun and a thud of a body hitting the ground.

The asari rose to her feet shakily, hefted up her shotgun, and fired. The recoil jarred the wound in her side, most of the shot went well left of where Shepard was, but her cloak rippled and fizzled, a moment later she felt a slight sting at her left elbow, as if bitten by a bug. The asari saw the flicker and turned her shotgun. Shepard grabbed the housing with her left hand and shoved the gun’s barrel down; the second shot hit the floor in a shower of shrapnel. Shepard drew Dex with her free hand and brought it up just enough to fire a single tap, point blank into the Asari’s chest. Her shotgun dropped to the floor, and the asari followed.

“Did she hit anyone with that first?” Shepard wondered as she holstered Dex.

“Nothing shields didn’t stop,” Kaidan replied.

“She hit you.”

Shepard blinked, and the Spectre motioned to her left side, and it was only then that she realized that the stinging sensation was not her imagination. She turned her arm; there was a tear in her undersuit at her elbow. The gouge was bleeding, but it was not deep. The asari’s first shot had actually grazed her, and since her cloak could not work in tandem with her shields, there was damage.

“It’s a flesh wound.”

Nihlus did not look amused, but Shepard was not the type to care. This was what she did best, if at
the end of the day she had a few scratches and bruises, so be it. This whole thing was partly her mistake, and she would fix it.

She turned and led the group back the way they came from, past the locked out storage rooms, to avoid the other passage where the barracks were. As they rounded a corner at the juncture between rings she saw a pair of salarians, both stopped cold, eyes widening, Shepard grinned. Their hands instantly flew to their Omni-tools, drones deployed. The glowing orbs shot at her. The salarians raised their handguns.

A hail of bullets flew past her, and one drone exploded before it could even come close. The salarians fired, Shepard saw her shield flare. She raised both guns, but a black and red blur shot through her peripheral vision. The Spectre’s shotgun gave one crack, and the second drone exploded.

Shepard ghosted her thumbs over the back of the twins, laser sights activated as she shifted her aim. The dots stabilized on target and she pulled both triggers. Their shields exploded, but the salarians still had tech armor.

The shotgun cracked in echo, right into the chest of one, shredding the armor and flesh underneath. The other salarian recoiled, eyes widened. Shepard raised Sin’s muzzle a few degrees, the laser dot pointed between the salarian’s eyes, and she pulled the trigger.

Suddenly the Spectre turned, “Mechs!” he called.

LOKIs appeared from the hallway leading to the hangar; “Shoot them down!” Shepard ordered.

The Marines opened fire. Shepard turned and raised her guns, but just then four more Eclipse mercenaries appeared from somewhere behind the mechs. Shepard cursed silently, just how many of them were there? Well it no matter, she was not out of tricks yet. Ashley and Jenkins’s spray had already brought down two; Shepard knew she had a moment at best to pull this off.

“Kaidan! Throw an intact LOKI between the mercs, now!”

She could tell the exact moment Kaidan saw the mercs. A breathless instant later his hand snapped up as his whole body ignited blue. One of the LOKIs rose off the ground, flailing and whining in its auto-tuned voice. With a flick of his arm Kaidan sent the mech back into the wall at the end of the bottleneck between the rings. Shepard raised Sin and focused down its sights, ignoring the laser, and pulled the trigger. The LOKI’s head exploded, and the rest gave a loud whine and began to beep.

“Grab cover!” Shepard ordered as she hurried to get out of line of sight in the bottleneck.

The mercenaries shouted in alarm, and the LOKI blew thunderously, like a grenade in a tiny room.

“That’s a hell of a shot, Commander.” Kaidan said, awed.

“Using a LOKI as a grenade… now I’ve seen everything.” Ashley affirmed.

“Lots of practice on flying holo-targets,” Shepard said as she holstered her guns.

Silence reigned, and Shepard dared to hope those were the last of the mercenaries. The Spectre ejected a hot thermal clip from his shotgun and reached behind his back for another. Shepard opened her mouth to order them to move out when out of the corner of her eye she saw a shadow slither along the floor from the bottleneck corridor.

Shepard looked up and saw a mercenary in tech armor stumble out of the bottleneck, clutching at her
side, Carnifex raised. The woman focused on the first target in her line of sight, the Spectre. Shepard saw where the merc was aiming, and suddenly knew a warning would be too late; she just charged, bodily knocking the Spectre out of the way. The gunshot echoed. Shepard heard the Spectre stumble, even as she did. Something hit her from the back, sending her to her knees, and just like that her blood was on fire. She shut her eyes and ground her teeth together as the pain washed over her body like a tidal wave.

“Commander!” Ashley shouted. An assault rifle beat a single staccato burst.

Shepard raised her left hand to her right shoulder, and it was like someone took a hot poker to her flesh. A shadow knelted in front of her and a three-fingered hand landed on her left shoulder. She whimpered. “Shepard is hit!” a flanging voice called close over her ear.

“Williams, Jenkins, finish whoever is still alive back there!” Kaidan barked, close now.

Shepard felt another hand lift her shoulder guard, the movement caused fresh pain, and she hissed. At that moment she could only count her breaths and hope she would not pass out. Then there was a faint hiss from her armor and the spreading cold touch of Medi-gel.

“That was the last of them.” Ashley reported.

“Good,” Kaidan replied, somewhere behind and on her right.

The pain receded little by little, replaced by spreading numb coolness.

“How bad is it?” the gunny asked next.

“Right shoulder, from the back, through and through. It missed major blood vessels.” Kaidan replied. “Medi-gel’s deployed, it should stop the bleeding.”

“I’ve… had worse,” Shepard said as she opened one eye, only to see the Spectre kneeling in front of her. “Just… just gimme a sec.”

“That was reckless, skipper. You could’ve died.”

“Could’ve.” She repeated, “Spectre would’ve. Shoulder’s in Medi-gel.”

“Are you really alright, Commander? Jenkins wondered.

“Yes.” Shepard replied. Geez, so her shoulder was Swiss cheese. It was more embarrassing than anything. Just one more on the long list of times she screwed up today. Feeling fairly angry with herself, Shepard forced her body to its feet to punctuate the point. It sent a jolt of pain through her shoulder, but her second step was more careful and then she could walk just fine.

However when she attempted to wiggle her fingers, they did not respond past a few spasmodic twitches. Her arm hung useless at her side. The Medi-gel had numbed it so thoroughly that only looking confirmed that it was still there.

The Spectre was on his feet as well, looking no more convinced than he was about a minute before. Her embarrassment only compounded. “We have to move,” she said, looking down to check that the twins were still in their holsters.

“Let me take point,” Ashley volunteered. “Come along, Jenkins.”

“Ye… yes!” he replied and hurried after the gunny.
Kaidan stood there, worry clearly on his face. Shepard shook her head and followed Ashley. The Spectre followed, leaving Kaidan to walk to take up the rear.

“Not one of my finer moments. Did I hurt you with that tackle?” she asked the Spectre.

“Perhaps it was not one of your finer moments, but I will live with being tackled,” he replied.

Shepard nodded. If he had been trying to make light of the whole thing, she could not muster amusement.

They passed by the bodies of the mercenaries. The exploding LOKI had done its job, the damage was truly horrendous. Shepard thought Eclipse really ought to rethink the cannon fodder mechs, but she would not educate them. Their reliance on the shoddy-made disposable tin-cans worked for her a few times over.

Beyond a final left turn, the hangar bay doors were larger than any other set in the base, her lockout was still active, the mechanism glowed bright cheerful red. “Watch my back,” she ordered as she raised her right leg, catching her useless arm on her thigh, and braced her knee into the wall, so she could bring up her omni-tool. It was clumsy, undignified, but it got the job done. First thing she did was access her armor’s systems and lock her right arm’s exo-frame joints in that position, which allowed her to drop her knee. Then she brought up decryption and got to work on the door lock.

“It’s too quiet,” Jenkins noted. “Did we really get them all?”

“I hope so, but don’t let your guard down. There might be some in the hangar,” Ashley replied.

The door lock flicked green; Shepard turned and pressed her back to the wall, drawing Sin. Sure one of her arms was no good, and she had only three shots in Sin, but she could make those shots count.

The door opened and the Spectre took point, Kaidan and Ashley entered next, followed by Jenkins, and only when she was sure that no one was on their six, did Shepard follow them. The Hangar mercifully proved to be empty save for the forest of cargo crates. Some might contain offline LOKIs, but there was probably no one left who could activate them.

“We’re taking the gunship?” Kaidan asked.

“It is the best option,” the Spectre replied as he moved across the hangar.

Shepard met Kaidan’s gaze and nodded. Right now, she was incapable of driving up the access road, even if taking it was the best damn idea ever. He shook his head in resignation. Shepard followed the Spectre. She could not believe that what should have been cakewalk ended up going sideways this bad.

Then again, she preferred a perforated shoulder to someone getting hurt worse. Maybe Ashley was right and what she did was reckless, but in her head, even with her aim, she would not have had the time to kill the merc before she shot the Spectre. Sometimes one had to choose the least of two evils and roll the dice. In the end her roll had come up a relative winner.

She turned, Ashley and Jenkins were set on keeping an eye on the door, and Kaidan was keeping an eye on them. She approached the console that controlled the main bay doors and got to work decrypting her lockouts. Something behind her hissed and Shepard turned her head; the Spectre had opened the gunship’s rear hatch and climbed inside. She turned back to the console and in the next minute the bay doors began to rattle open.

“C’mon people, let’s get the hell out of here!” she called as she moved toward the gunship. The rear
ramp was down, she stepped aboard and moved forward to climb into the co-pilot’s seat. It took her about half a minute to figure out how to snap the four-point seat belts shut without jostling her numb arm too much. Having settled into the seat she stretched out her legs and just watched the Spectre run through pre-flight checks. As the marines filed inside and strapped in she reached for the hatch switch.

“We are good to go,” The Spectre announced. The gunship gave a shudder and there was the unmistakable hum of an eezo core powering up. “I do not suppose you will be keeping the gunship, will you?”

“What for? We have a shuttle.”

“It could just take us straight up,” he stated.

“We have nowhere to stow it. The colonists can come pick it up. Who knows, having one might deter more mercs. At the very least it’ll make a passable flying crane for setting up light prefabs.”

The gunship gave another shudder and then it was in the air. Shepard reached over and tapped at the central console to bring up the infrared combat scanner. The gunship moved, slipping quietly past the hangar doors. As soon as they were clear it began to rise. “Can you hover just over the rim?” she asked, bringing up her omni-tool.

The gunship rose effortlessly, at the top of the rise the Spectre brought it about, nose pointing at the base below. The IR scanner was showing a very pretty black and white FLIR picture, but it was going to get prettier. Shepard keyed in a sequence on her omni-tool, the green signal indicators on her screen shifted red and began to blink. She pressed the final button.

“Did your charges go off?” the Spectre asked.

Shepard watched the IR scanner, her eyes on the roofline of the second ring of prefabs. “Tool says yes, but that’s why I got the infrared up, I want to double check. If it doesn’t work… well we have what… sixteen rockets?”

“Twelve,” the Spectre corrected.

“They’ll do.”

The Spectre hummed a quiet sort of assent.

Suddenly there was a whine from the sensors and she saw an unmistakable white spot form on the sensor image. “We have fire. Go! We got maybe two minutes before the core goes critical and blows.” Shepard shut down her omni-tool and leaned back into her seat as he brought the gunship around. A moment later craft accelerated rapidly, pinning her to her seat.

She reached up to her ear, “Shepard to Normandy, come in.”

“Hey Commander. EDI picked up a heat spike from the base, and wow… it’s climbing.”

“I sabotaged their reactor, it’s going critical. Mission complete. We borrowed an Eclipse gunship, have EDI send the colonists a message about picking it up at our LZ, maybe they need a crane. Also tell them about the base, I don’t know how much useable material will survive, but it will do as recycled salvage.”

“Will do.”
“Shepard, out.” She let her hand drop and sank further into her seat as her head fell back on the headrest. She sighed deeply and let her eyes close. The flight was absolutely rock steady and smooth, and the vibrations felt nice. She could not help but smile when she thought what Joker’s reaction would be if he knew that she was admiring someone else’s piloting. Joker would declare a feud with the Spectre on the spot if he knew. The possibility was amusing, but very unlikely since in a manner of a day or two at most they would part ways.

The adrenaline rush was fading, and without it there was absolutely nothing to keep exhaustion at bay. She was going to crash on the medbay cot tonight, even if Doctor Chakwas let her out after treatment.

Tomorrow morning she would need to write up a report for Admiral Hackett, and she could not sugar-coat that she let the Spectre on board. Hopefully the Admiral would not have her head; it was a humanitarian job. Right now the Spectre was paying that back in dividends.

Chapter End Notes

Author Notes: This episode posed quite a bit of a challenge to “choreograph”. Action scenes have always been a bit of my bane. The title is very much an allusion to both Shepard and Nihlus, the “ghosts” that they are. I saw quite a few similarities between the sorts of jobs they do and how they do them. This was very much my way of introducing my portrayal of Nihlus, which is a little different from what I seen others do.

Chapter Notes:
Zealand’s Rotation – The great majority of celestial bodies rotate “counterclockwise” on their axis, Earth and most of the planets in our solar system are like that. Zealand would be the odd duck in that it rotates clockwise. Venus and Uranus do that, though Uranus is doubly eccentric in that its axis of rotation is turned 90 degrees, it turns sideways.

Call signs – For the uninitiated, these are typically used as radio aliases by pilots in military craft. Interestingly enough, they are often decided by the pilot’s “friends”. Most of the time there is a story behind them, and getting a “badass” name is atypical. Your first might very well be insulting. Most range on puns with your name (E.g. calling someone with last name Gillette “Razor”), something you did (E.g. CYNDI, short for “Check You’re Not Dumping, Idiot!” – The pilot in question had a fuel dump valve open as he flew over a carrier’s deck), or appearance (e.g. calling a redhead “Carrot”).

Helium-3 Fusion – Helium-3 is an isotope, containing two protons and one neutron in its nucleus. It is not radioactive, very stable, and when fused with the nucleus of a deuterium (hydrogen with one proton and one neutron) atom releases no radioactive by-products, and is highly efficient. Helium-3 is released by most stars, carried on the solar wind. Earth’s atmosphere filters it out, but a lot of it has gathered in the sand on Luna’s surface. We just haven’t figured out how to contain the heat/pressure required for the fusion. Still, as far as theoretical power sources go, this one is more possible than most Sci-fi franchises go for.
Paradigms

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I do no own Mass Effect, I do not claim to own Mass Effect, I am only doing this for fun.

Author Notes: Another Friday, another exciting episode. Please do leave a review, even anon, even just one line. Besides telling me that you are reading, it is great encouragement to keep going. This production takes a lot of energy, thought, research, and time to put together. TV shows have background script writers and producers and all those added staff to figure this stuff out. But here I take up a lot of those jobs myself.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Episode 4: Paradigms

Shepard’s only order of business on returning to the Normandy had been to order Joker to keep orbit, partly so EDI could confirm the thorough destruction of the Eclipse base, and partly to ascertain if the mercenaries sent any sort of communication or distress signal. She did not want to leave the colonists to face their wrath. She also had EDI send a coded message back to Arcturus, saying that the job was done, though due to her minor injury, the report would be delayed a few hours. It allowed Shepard enough time to figure out how she would actually go about writing the report.

Thoughts of how to best explain her humanitarian job occupied the foremost part of her mind as she went to the medbay in order to have her shoulder mended. Fortunately, the Normandy was graced with one of the best doctors the alliance had to offer.

Doctor Chakwas was a matronly woman in her sixties with grey hair and green eyes that seemed to see much without being in any way threatening. In many ways she reminded Shepard of her own mother, albeit a little more relaxed in her professional persona. Chakwas was a career military doctor who was never content to work anywhere that could not travel. She had served on the SSV Tokyo and requested transfer to the Normandy because it promised the most variety of challenges. Shepard would not say it, but she suspected the doctor also wanted a slightly more personal work environment with a smaller crew where everyone knew everyone. She also had a feeling as to why Captain Anderson approved the transfer.

Doctor Chakwas was not surprised when Shepard told her how she got her shoulder injury. She was also unreserved about ordering a Spectre out of her medbay; under threat of a physical he should have submitted for previously. She was no less threatening to the trying-to-be-helpful Kaidan.

Shepard spent the night on a medbay bed, her shoulder immobilized in the grasp of a regeneration frame, having to sleep on her back when she normally slept on her belly. She was to take it easy for a few days, let the sore, freshly regenerated tissues finish healing on their own, but that was in her forecast anyways. They could not take any more jobs until she could requisition a new shoulder guard and undersuit. Maybe more than one even, just in case.

She left the medbay for the final time in the morning after a post-shower bandage change, wearing her fatigues. The wound was closed, but the outer layer of skin was still tender, so the bandage was needed to protect it from irritation. The marines were at the mess table, eating their breakfast.
“Good morning, Commander,” Kaidan greeted as soon he saw her.

“Good morning, everybody.” Maybe she sounded a little chipper, but she did not care.

“How’s the shoulder, Skipper?” Ashley wondered.

“Doc got me good as new, won’t even scar.” Shepard replied. Which was really a good thing; in her line of work she could not afford scars that looked more serious than an accident with a kitchen knife while cooking dinner.

She still needed to run her arm through some personal tests to make sure that there was no lingering muscle weakness or nerve damage. Being mixed-dominant was a funny thing, despite having a dominant left eye and left hand when it came to shooting, it was her right punches and kicks that packed more force. Fifteen to twenty minutes with the heavy punching bag in the shuttle bay ought to be enough to see if she was within her normal numbers.

“Good to hear,” Ashley smiled.

Shepard could not help but feel like Ashley’s barely veiled problem with the Spectre was still the elephant in the room. But right now was not the time to pick it apart, especially in the presence of the others. “You did stellar job back there, especially you, Richard.” At the mention of his name Jenkins looked up from his meal and beamed around his spoon. That was really all Shepard needed by way of reply. She might have just made his day.

As far as Shepard was concerned, Jenkins had pulled through in spades considering how little actual combat experience he had. She had read his file. Compared to Ashley and Kaidan, former with a laundry list and favorable comments by commanding officers, and latter with a few special commendations to his name, Jenkins’ file had been short and thin. The only positive note was from boot camp; his instructor noted he had a rather favorable lack of rotten attitude. He followed orders when ordered the first time.

“I need to go check up with Joker, but as far as I’m concerned out next destination is the Citadel. I figure we’ll have twenty-four to forty-eight hours. There will be leave for everyone.”

“Yes!” Jenkins cheered.

“Never been to the Citadel, have you, Jenkins?” Ashley asked.

Shepard turned and made her way to the elevator, raking her hand through her hair. She could use some leave herself. Even if the Admiral did not sign off on it, there was the fact that it would take about a day for the requisition office to deliver her replacement armor parts.

As she called the elevator, her mind began to run through possibilities. If the current pattern held, and they were doing a mission a week, then they might as well hang around the Citadel for a day longer, until the next orders came. Of course she could also see why Admiral Hackett would not want the Normandy there for too long. Putting the Alliance’s top secret prototype practically under the Council’s nose was not exactly hiding it.

The elevator arrived and she stepped on, hitting the button for deck two. How badly did the Alliance want to hide the Normandy’s existence? If ‘top secret’ actually meant ‘not on the fleet register’, then secrecy went out the airlock already. At least one person outside the Alliance knew there was a ship named SSV Normandy out there. The information Admiral Hackett gave her did not specify the Normandy was that deeply classified, still, it was a vague possibility, and that made her nervous.

The elevator doors opened onto the CIC, Shepard squared her shoulders and stepped off. It would
not do for the CIC crew to see their CO nervous. She offered greetings as she passed forward toward the bridge.

“Hey, Commander.” The pilot greeted as soon as she was past the door that separated the bridge from the CIC.

“Morning, Joker. How are things?”

“Boring.” Joker replied. “I think I’m about done staring at this planet.”

Shepard grinned, but she needed to be sure. “EDI, any blips on the long range sensors?”

“I detected no ships during the past twelve hours, Commander.” EDI replied.

“As I said, boring.” Joker added.

“And the base?” Shepard wondered.

“Sixty-five percent was destroyed by the initial core explosion, the remaining thirty-five suffered heavy damage in the subsequent fire. My latest quarter-hourly scan detected isolated pockets of heat consistent with residual fire.”

“Was the fire contained to the basin around the place?” Shepard wondered.

“Yes, Commander. Furthermore, explosion debris dispersion was limited to the radius of half a kilometer.”

“Perfect. Thank you EDI, you can break off scanning. The fire should put itself out in a matter of hours.” Shepard looked at the planet, the base was destroyed and with no enemy ships flying in there was nothing left for the Normandy to do here. It was time they vanished into the darkness. “Joker, we can drop stealth. Take us to the Citadel.”

“Got it, Commander.”

“One more thing. EDI I assume you are pretending not to be an omnipresent AI when it comes to our Spectre guest, right?”

“Yes, Commander. I have not revealed my presence to Spectre Kryik.”

“Good. Joker, please give him our Citadel ETA. Let EDI keep up her charade.”

“Yes Commander, should I find out if we have dextro-peanuts and deliver those too?”

“Joker, we have an intercom, it’s not like you’re going to have to go look for him.” Shepard noted.

“Fine.”

She turned and exited the bridge. From Joker’s tone she knew something had definitely stung him while she was convalescing, but there was no figuring it out short of asking. She also knew Joker enough to know what he would never admit to it.

Even before she got to the OD she heard the ship noise shift from what she would call ‘Normandy rigged for silent running’ to ‘Normandy out and about’. As she stepped into her private office there was a faint jolt of acceleration just before the inertial dampener field fully kicked in.

“Ladies, gentlemen, and turian guests, this is your pilot speaking. Our next destination is the
Citadel, and our ETA is ten hours. Enjoy your flight, and thank you for flying Earth Systems Alliance." Joker announced over the ship-wide intercom.

Shepard rolled her eyes; she should have known Joker would find some way out of having to talk to the Spectre directly. She would give him points for creativity though; he even managed to sound like the pilot of an interstellar passenger transport. Probably even his way of letting her know what he thought, too.

Easing into her seat at her terminal, Shepard sighed and brought up her files, Joker’s tomfoolery aside, she needed to get that report finished and sent off. If she could get it done in the next couple of hours, it would not bite into her leave time.

The Normandy’s arrival to the Serpent Nebula coincided with very early evening by Galactic Standard. The Citadel orbited a small star, Widow, deep within the nebula, surrounded by thick gas clouds. Being slightly warmer than the void of space, the clouds effectively masked the outwardly cold Citadel. One had to know exactly where to look to find the station. The clouds themselves were truly a thing of beauty; a trick of composition allowed them to scatter Widow’s light and glow an effervescent shade of pink-purple.

The Citadel materialized from the gloom like a vision out of a dream. The single largest construct in the galaxy, its five vaguely rectangular ward arms, each just over forty-three kilometers long and three hundred thirty meters wide were splayed out, beckoning like a hand. On one end lay the massive Presidium ring, five-hundred-thirty meters wide and seven-point-two kilometers in diameter, to which the Wards attached. At over seven billion metric tons, the station’s rolling generated the equivalent of Earth’s gravity on the wards, and a third on the Presidium. Yet the station could also close into a perfect cylinder, making it impervious to outside attack.

Aboard, there was no cycle of light and dark, day and night were artificial contrivances dictated by an atomic clock. Activity never ceased as ships arrived and departed at all hours. The buildings that sprouted from the inner surface of the wards were always lit, glimmering orange and gold. Sharp eyes could even pick out the gossamer streams of lights, moving skycars, suspended along the designated traffic lanes between buildings. Visible from about anywhere was the Presidium Tower, a spire jutting from the inner side of the Presidium ring toward the center. The tower housed the seat of galactic government and many of its bureaucratic offices.

An hour passed before the Normandy was finally corralled into a docking cradle on Zakera Ward. Getting final clearance was never a quick process. In peacetime, military ships were of lesser priority than the constant stream of various-sized passenger and cargo transports. Once they were docked, Shepard drifted toward the shuttle bay. By now the ship was already connected to the airlock gangway and the shuttle bay door was lowered, ramp extended onto a mobile gangway used to serve cargo hatches.

This particular docking cradle normally served Alliance ships, so there were a detachment of marines in place to enforce security. She could see them patrol across the cargo gangway, wearing hardsuits, assault rifles at hand. Their job was to make sure no one and nothing snuck on board, but they were not allowed to step one foot aboard themselves. Yet in the Normandy’s case it was somewhat redundant. EDI would know if anyone managed to sneak in, but as far as the Galaxy was concerned, EDI did not exist.

Amidst the quiet of the shuttle bay Shepard spotted the Spectre.

“Commander,” he turned away from the crate he had been checking when she approached.
“Is everything in order?” She wondered.

“Yes, everything is set. I was wondering if we would get a moment to talk.”

Shepard looked over the stack and then over him, seeing the crates really brought her back to reality. Their partnership had been a temporary deal, no matter how well it worked out. “Sure.”

“I wanted to confirm how long the Normandy would be staying at the Citadel,” he continued.

“Twenty-four Terran hours at least, maybe forty-eight, I’m not certain myself. Why?” She replied.

“I must leave these here for a bit longer,” he motioned to the crates. “I have vital business to attend to before I can pick them up.”

Shepard hummed, “I see. Well, if we have to leave early, I’ll make sure your belongings are secured with C-sec customs; I’ll also make sure they know you’re a Spectre.”

“That will not be necessary.”

Shepard nodded; she was not going to dig into his business. She figured it had something to do with the fact that his mobile home was half-buried on a moon. Real estate on the Citadel was expensive, so maybe he did not even keep an apartment here. “I suppose this is where I tell you that it was a pleasure to be working with you,” she offered.

“Only if you mean it,” he replied.

Shepard smiled, “It has been a pleasure to work with you, Spectre Kryik.”

“Likewise, Commander. Should our paths cross, I would welcome your assistance again.”

Shepard tipped her head to the side, as unlikely an event as that would be, she would not mind either. “Who knows… it’s a small galaxy.” She very much doubted it was small enough, but she would be polite.

“It is,” he replied.

Shepard caught a faint flicker of his mandibles, as if he was amused at something only he knew. Suddenly she felt like something had been lost in translation, but he turned away and went back to securing his crates.

Idly her mind flashed to the thought that he might try to get himself somehow assigned aboard the Normandy. Spectres were living legal loopholes. As agents of the Council they operated above many of the legal norms. The Alliance, and by extension Humanity, as a Citadel Associate race, was bound by certain conventions and laws. Who knew what was buried in the tiny print. Because there was always something buried in the tiny print. Maybe the Council could assign a Spectre aboard ships. If there was such a clause, the admiral would be greatly displeased, and she would be feeling the fallout. She shook her head, tossing the notion aside. There was no way that a Spectre would have the political graces of a bull in a china shop, so that scenario was relegated to the box that contained all crazy paranoid thinking.

The next few hours were busy. Shepard found herself in the OD, taking care of business. The Normandy became a beehive of activity, everyone aboard seemed to want something from the Citadel while they were already there. She had to set rotating leave shifts just to keep order and make
sure that someone remained aboard at all times for security purposes. EDI was a blessing in those terms. She knew who was aboard, who was coming, who was going, and could even notify individuals that their leave shifts were starting or ending. Truly EDI was the best operations officer a ship could ever have. The AI’s capacity to multi-task and keep things orderly was awe-inspiring.

When the first leave shift left to enjoy their personal time, second lieutenant Matthews approached her with a requisition form for the galley. Mostly topping up what they went through, but also some extra things that the crew wanted, to round out the nutritionally balanced but plain standard Alliance Navy fare. Matthews of course added a few other things that would flavor the meals. Shepard assured him that she would get it done, and he left highly pleased.

Chief Engineer Adams dropped by half an hour later with a suggestion of some parts that the Normandy’s design lacked. Parts that would not be easy to procure, as they were no longer manufactured, but would reduce the maintenance cycles the engineers had to perform. The difference, as he made it clear, was stark. It was something he had wanted to include in the initial design, but the engineers at the shipyard baulked when they could not find the parts new. Apparently installing second-hand parts on a brand new, state-of-the-art ship was going too far. Adams let the issue slide, but now that the Normandy was deployed and he was in charge, second-hand parts in good condition were not an issue.

For Shepard both requests were a no-brainer. The Normandy had an operational budget with room to spare. With a ship this small, running a skeleton crew, and operating in murky waters, they needed every bit of morale they could get. If extra food and engine parts made her crew happy, then she would give them extra food and engine parts. Then she would justify it as necessary expenditure. Really, if the brass did not want a crew coddled, they should not assign a Shepard to command it. The Kilimanjaro operational budget was stretched to the limit for a reason. Her mother ran a tight ship, but one that rewarded discipline and loyalty liberally.

Shepard added the Second Lieutenant’s list of additions to the supplies requisitioned from the Alliance supply depot, to be delivered post haste. With the clerical work done, something that was typically the job of the ship’s XO on larger vessels, Shepard ended up allotting herself the final of the three planned eight hour leave shifts. Once EDI had the full rotation list, she turned in to catch some well needed shut eye in a bed that was more her own.

The chime of her alarm clock came almost too soon, and jarred Shepard awake. She waved her hand over the holo-interface as she sat up to shut it off, other hand raking through her bed-hair. “Morning, EDI,” she greeted, knowing that the AI was omnipresent aboard the ship.

“Good morning, Commander.” The AI greeted.

Shepard plodded barefoot to her bathroom, tugging her oversized tee-nightshirt down as she went, “Status report, please, EDI.” It was her routine to get a brief while brushing her teeth. It helped to know where they stood, even though the update never included anything serious. If there had been an emergency, EDI knew to wake her up.

“All onboard systems are operating at peak efficiency. No security incidents to report.” EDI began. “The first leave shift returned without incident. The second leave shift will be finished in fifteen minutes. Two crew members allotted the second shift are yet to return.”

“It’s fine if they’re a little late,” Shepard murmured around her toothbrush.

“Understood. I shall allow them the customary five minutes for what would be considered
fashionable tardiness.”

Shepard chuckled, “You do that, EDI.”

“Requisitioned supplies have arrived,” the AI went on in her normal flat tone, as if she was standing behind her, reading off a clipboard.

“Food, I assume,” Shepard noted.

“Yes. Though when I compared the list of items ordered, my scans indicate the delivery is incomplete.”

“Well, if the rest don’t come in six hours, then I’ll get on their case.”

“Noted, Commander. Finally, Spectre Kryik has yet to report back for the crates he left in the shuttle bay.” EDI finished.

Shepard pulled the toothbrush from her mouth and spat into the sink, then proceeded to rinse. Well that was certainly an incident, sure she promised him twenty-four hours at least, but what sort of things could keep him away this long? She spat out the water and hummed, “I promised him twenty-four hours, when that’s up… well we have an understanding of what will happen.”

“I am aware of it, Commander,” EDI noted.

“I figured you would be.” Shepard was not bothered by the fact that the EDI essentially knew everything that went on aboard the ship. It worked with her secondary duties as ship’s security. They had an understanding that washrooms and quarters were red zones, whatever EDI happened to overhear in there, she was not to discuss or report to anyone, no matter what. Of course there were some exceptions, if someone was hurt; EDI was fully in the right to call for help. “Thank you for letting me know, EDI.”

“You are welcome, Commander.”

Her teeth brushed, Shepard turned to take a good hot shower. She was in and out in fifteen minutes, running a blow-drier and a comb over her head, to prevent her hair from becoming frizzy and curled at the tips. That look never inspired confidence. Before she could shed her towel and start getting dressed, she heard a beep from her omni-tool. Shepard plodded over to the bedside table and picked up the slim silver cuff and snapped it onto her right wrist. The tool lit up, message already up, marked urgent. When she saw the sender line, her blood ran cold right down her spine. A summons from the office of Ambassador Donnel Udina and she was to report in less than an hour.

Shepard’s mental list of all the reasons why she might be summoned was brutally short, and included nothing that boded well. Her report to Admiral Hackett was sent in yesterday, the most likely reason for the summons was that being the Good Samaritan was about to bite her in the ass. Timing was right; the Spectre had to make a report to the Council about his mission, so it must have all filtered down.

Shepard reached past her comfortable fatigues and straight for her blue officer’s uniform. She was dressed in ten, and had to run through a gauntlet in order to be presentable in formal public. Then she was out of her quarters and in the elevator, closing the final catches on her jacket as she did. There would be no breakfast, and at this rate it looked like her very leave was canceled.

“Good morning, Commander.”

Shepard stopped in the middle of CIC, spotting Kaidan, who was working on something at one of
the stations surrounding the galaxy map, a cup of tea in his hand.

“Oh, good morning.”

“Where’s the fire?” he asked.

Belatedly she realized she should have told EDI about the summons, or maybe even called Kaidan and Ashley to her side, but she somehow did not want to drag them into what would probably be embarrassing for her and uncomfortable for them. Right now, it was somewhat too late to tell them to suit up, and Kaidan looked rather at ease with his tea, she did not want to ruin his morning.

“Business came up,” she replied.

Kaidan set his tea down and hummed, “Is this about the Spectre?”

“Likely.” Shepard replied.

“Do you want an escort? Williams and I can be ready in ten.”

He was not buying her casual act. “No, I think I’m fine, just going to the ambassador’s office.”

“No offense meant, ma’am, but you sound like you’re going to the gallows.”

“Politicians. Might as well be. They probably want me to explain why I’m not cold blooded enough to leave someone stranded on a barren moon.” That was probably the closest to the truth, because if the admiral had not gotten back to her, it had to be the politicians who had a problem with the whole thing.

“Understood, ma’am.”

Shepard continued on her way to the airlock, and the whole way she could feel the staff lieutenant’s gaze on her back. Kaidan was worried, that much was clear. Running into him as she did, she would bet a thousand credits that he would only wait until she was out of his sight to go and get Ashley. She would bet another one thousand credits that they would turn up at the embassy.

She did not stop at the bridge to talk to Joker; instead going straight to the airlock, and onto the station. There were more marines beyond the gangway, guarding the airlock from intrusion and saboteurs. She paid them little attention as she made her way past the lounge attached to the docking cradle, and out beyond, where she could take a Skycab to the embassy. Fortunately, there was a car waiting by the kiosk, she just had to tap in for it to open. As she climbed into the empty driver’s seat, she announced her destination to the VI. A moment later the car closed, sealed, and lifted off.

The ride took ten minutes but eventually the car entered the tunnels leading from the ward to the Presidium. In another ten minutes the vehicle landed in front of the embassy building. Shepard swiped her credit chit over the reader and left the car without paying much heed to the VI wishing her to have a good day. That customary greeting sounded morbid given the various ways she could be in trouble right now.

The embassy building was located right on prime real estate, within walking distance of the access elevator that led up to the Citadel Tower. Nose-bleed close to the most powerful people in Council Space, and as far as Shepard was concerned, one of the last places she actually wanted to be.

Her eyes quickly took stock of her surroundings, noting the people milling about: lots of humans,
some asari, and a few turians in C-Sec armor. No one paid her much attention, which was good. Shepard figured they must have seen dozens if not hundreds of humans in officer uniforms come and go. She brought up her omni-tool to double check the directions before she continued on.

The embassy building was a rather squat white building with three levels, rising along the side of the presidium ring, like much of the Presidium architecture. The floor was actually the outer surface of the Presidium ring, with gravity generated by the centrifugal force of station’s rolling rotation. The embassy overlooked the great artificial reservoir lake that ran the length of the Presidium, and the surrounding parkland.

Past the main doors was a foyer with a chipper human receptionist, a surly security guard, and past them an elevator to serve the building, which she took to the top floor. Once there, the elevator opened onto a second, smaller foyer, complete with lots of glass and potted plants. There were also doors that led to various offices and meeting rooms. Right in front of the elevator was another reception desk, behind which sat a rather shrewish looking receptionist in a black pantsuit.

“Commander Shepard, I presume?”

“Yes, Ambassador Udina summoned me?”

“He has,” the woman began as she got up from her seat and rounded the counter. “I was instructed to direct you to him immediately, please, follow me.”

Shepard followed the woman without an argument. There were no armed marines, no C-sec, and the whole embassy seemed very quiet, just a whole lot of closed doors. All the same, Shepard was far from comfortable, and she would not be comfortable until the Damocles sword hanging over her head either fell, or was removed.

The woman led her to the corner office and pressed her palm against the door mechanism, causing the door to chime. A second later it opened and the secretary stepped away, nodded, and left. Shepard stepped into the office only far enough to let the door close behind her.

The ambassador, a balding man in his fifties, wearing a cream and white suit, stood at the window behind his desk, his back turned to her. “Commander Shepard,” he began as he turned to face her.

Shepard did not quail under his severe expression, even as she clasped her hands behind her back and slipped into a parade rest. “You wished to see me, Ambassador?”

“Do you have any idea why I called you here?”

“None,” Shepard replied calmly. That a lie, Shepard had every reason to suspect this had something to do with the Spectre, but she had learned long ago that there were no rewards for answering that kind of question truthfully.

“I received a message from the Council about one of our captains lending valuable assistance to a Spectre out in the field.”

Shepard blinked, but did not break her parade rest. The Council expressed thanks for the assistance she gave to one of their agents?

“Misunderstanding regarding you rank aside, the message was quite interesting. It would seem that whatever you did to help that Spectre also impressed him a great deal.”

That was a good thing, right? If so, then why did Udina sound like he was chewing glass? “I was merely carrying out orders given to me by Admiral Hackett,” Shepard replied.
“Yes. I have a copy of your report.”

Shepard thought that statement was made in the blandest most unimpressed tone she had ever heard.

“On the one hand, assisting a Spectre, saving his life no less, is exactly the sort of move that benefits relations between the Alliance and the Council. On the other, I was under the impression that Normandy is a top-secret prototype. Care to explain, Commander, why you risked exposing her secrets?” He stared her down with all the intensity of a bird of prey locked onto its victim.

Shepard could practically hear the other shoe drop. “My reasoning is simple. The Normandy picked up a distress beacon from Spectre Kryik’s downed ship. I chose to respond because I deemed the risks minimal. I was not told that I would have to, nor am I in the habit of ignoring distress calls. My considerations were purely humanitarian. At the time I was not aware that the individual I would rescue was a Spectre. He only told me himself, aboard the Defiant. When we returned to the Normandy, I had security measures put in place. Spectre Kryik complied with my restrictions the whole time he was with us. I would know had he not.” EDI would have known instantly, and she would have called security as well. There was absolutely no reason for EDI to lie if the Spectre had gone snooping around.

“So you were not aware you were rescuing a Spectre?” The severe look was back on her again.

“No, sir.”

“Then this makes the situation all the more incredulous. Your foolish actions, for which you would normally be reprimanded, have instead yielded results for which you should be commended. Buy a lotto ticket, Commander; it seems your luck is not abandoning you yet.”

That was an insult if Shepard had ever heard one. “Pardon?” What did she do that was so damn good? She wanted to know so she could decide whether or not she should keep doing it.

“Unbelievable as the idea may be, Kryik put your name forward for Spectre candidacy, and the Council is willing to give you an evaluation period.”

Shepard froze to the spot. That was the absolute last thing she would have expected. If she was truthful, it was not even on the list of things she would have expected. To be stripped of command, sure, or court-martialed, maybe, but not this though.

At that moment, she realized the green-eyed smirking devil must have been planning this at least from the moment they returned to the Citadel. Their conversation in the shuttle bay suddenly took on a whole new meaning, right along with the fact that he did not pick up his crates. He had planned to stay aboard, and the crates became a Trojan horse alarm. If the Normandy had to pull out, she would have had to notify C-Sec customs to pick up the crates. Someone in C-sec would then send the Spectre a message, and then Spectre authority or Council say-so would snarl the Normandy up in departure clearances. It was a perfect trap to keep a ship on the station when one had limited reasons to do so. The Spectre played her for a fool with a smile on his face.

“What do you have to say for yourself?” the Ambassador wondered.

“Nothing, sir. I was not aware Spectre Kryik intended to put my name forward.”

Did he not think she might not want to be a Spectre? Had it not crossed his mind she might not want the attention? Shepard stopped there as she realized that there was no way for him to know just how unwelcome this was, and how much scrutiny it would invite. Everything she had done since Elysium had been scrutinized.
She messed up and got into ICT because she was the apparent favorite of Captain Anderson. She got command from Admiral Hackett, and some would only see it as because Hannah Shepard was his favorite. Now she looked like the favorite of a Council Spectre, merely for saving his life.

“You did not suggest it? Or worse, coerce him?”

“No, sir!” Shepard snapped back, coming out of her thoughts. “I had no hand in whatever made him decide to nominate me.” How did one go about coercing a Spectre into such a thing? Yet the fact that Udina asked was proof that the situation looked too convenient. Some would think she orchestrated it no matter what she said. On the flipside, they would still want her to pursue it with everything she had. Simply because she got a toehold that no one else had. She was doomed to be scorned, damned if she went for it, damned if she did not.

“Alright. Do I need to explain the importance of this opportunity, Commander?”

“No, sir.” She had just been pulled into a game of high-stakes poker, winner takes all, Spectre or bust, with her career in her chips. The brass would not let her refuse this. If she said no, she might as well take her own career out back and shoot it. This was a shot at what the Alliance wanted badly. They would not forgive her if she failed either; it would be the last time the golden screw-up got to screw up.

Shepard felt like she was watching the Spectre pass a little glass orb that was her career from hand to hand. Everything suddenly depended on him, and she hated it. No outsider should have this much say in her life. Yet there he was, and so he did. Without realizing it, Kryik had inundated himself into a place where he was unwelcome.

“Good. Your benefactor has volunteered to oversee the evaluation. If the Council finds no fault with you, he will be your mentor as well.”

“Understood, sir.” Her benefactor? The great irony of that was almost choking.

The ambassador moved to his desk and picked up a datapad on which he tapped a few times. “You will receive relevant information from Hackett in due time. For now, you are free to go.”

Shepard nodded, made an about turn, and raised her hand to the door mechanism. When the door opened she breezed out, her shoes tapping an even rhythm as she walked. Would anyone believe that she entered just an officer, and left a Spectre Candidate? She would have been laughing at the absurdity, if the situation had anything to laugh about. Too much hung in the balance, and failure was not an option. How did one go about passing a Spectre evaluation? Then mentorship? How long would that take? What then? The questions swirled. There were too many unknown factors. She needed to evaluate where she stood and who she was dealing with.

She exited the embassy squinting while her eyes adjusted to the Presidium’s artificial sunlight. Even then, it was hard to miss the two familiar uniformed people standing by the Skycab kiosk. Both Kaidan and Ashley remained in their fatigues, presenting the air of dutiful subordinates. As Shepard drew near, she realized that had she actually found someone to take her sucker bet, she would have been two thousand credits richer right now.

“Commander, is everything alright?” Ashley asked first.

Kaidan was looking around. Shepard wondered if he expected armed marines to come after them. “I don’t want to talk about it here,” She said.
“Oh. Of course,” Ashley stepped back and palmed the kiosk controls to open the waiting Skycab.

Shepard moved around the car and got into the driver’s seat, despite the fact that she would set the cab to fly VI. Ashley climbed into the back, leaving front passenger seat to Kaidan. As soon as they were settled, Shepard told the VI to get them to their docking bay, and the car closed and took off.

“So?” Kaidan broached the subject a good minute later.

Shepard sighed and leaned back into her seat, “Where to start?”

“Are they angry about the Spectre?” Ashley wondered. “Because figures. You can’t do anything without some politician getting worked up over it.”

Shepard shook her head, “I get the feeling the brass is angry, but at the same time, the situation changed, so they have to swallow it. As for the politicians? Well I’m suddenly a person of utmost interest, and they can’t do anything as long as things remain interesting.”

“How come?” Kaidan asked.

“You’re looking at Humanity’s newest and also only Spectre Candidate.”

The silence that reigned in the car was so absolute that Shepard could hear the faint hum of the car’s eezo core.

“You’re kidding right, skipper?” Ashley wondered after a good ten seconds.

“Wish I was.” Boy did she wish she was. “Udina grilled me on how I got a Spectre to put my name forward,” Shepard explained calmly.

“So what does that mean? Is he staying aboard the Normandy?”

“For the foreseeable future, yes.” Shepard replied.

“That’s just great.”

The hostility radiating off Ashley was climbing at an alarming rate. Shepard glanced at Kaidan, who remained quiet throughout the exchange. His expression then told her that he was perfectly aware of the tense situation in the car.

“You don’t trust him?” Shepard asked.

“With all due respect ma’am, no, I don’t. I don’t think I’ll ever fully trust a turian.”

“Are we going to have a problem, Chief?” Shepard did not want to sound crude, but she could not afford the hostility.

“No ma’am. It is that I would be cautious around him if I were you. They look out for their own interests, just like everybody else. I will follow your orders as I have followed them so far, so if you tell me to jump, I will ask how high and if you tell me to kiss the Spectre, I will ask on which cheek. But I will not take orders from him.”

Shepard would give her points for dedication to duty, “I don’t plan to abuse my authority by issuing any kiss orders. Nor will he be running the Normandy. I am still in command, and it is staying that way.”

“Good. Don’t get me wrong, ma’am, I just don’t think he’s nominating you out of the goodness of
his heart.”

Shepard actually smiled; the thought had crossed her mind. “He’d be a saint if he did not have a reason.”

“Just what is that reason, that’s the question,” Ashley finished.

Shepard shook her head, Ashley had a point there. “Well I have no choice in the matter. I can’t say no to this candidacy. Not with my red-streaked record.”

“Why?” Ashley asked.

“The… incident after Elysium.” Kaidan murmured.

Shepard raised an eyebrow as she looked toward the lieutenant.

“It was talked about in certain circles. One of my previous commanding officers was… a vocal critic.” Kaidan explained hurriedly.

Shepard was acutely aware that he was choosing his words carefully; dodging certain intonations that he thought might offend her. She would have to tell him she had thicker skin than that.

“I don’t want to pry, ma’am, but what incident?” Ashley asked.

Ashley did not know? That surprised her, but maybe that was a bit of a blessing in disguise. “You know the reason they call me the White Death of Elysium, right?” She asked.

“Yes, you killed… what was it… two-hundred-fifty-something Batarians in ten hours? You were also on Alliance recruitment posters for six months after that.”

Shepard stared out the windshield, watching the scenery pass. That was the sanitized, short version. “Yes. On my first deployment after that… I killed an innocent, a case of misidentification and miscommunication.” And personal biases, though she did not say that.

“If it was that, then… they can’t hold it against you, can they?”

Shepard smiled wanly, when put like that, it sounded simple, but in reality it was anything but. “My unit responded to a small-scale Batarian raid on a start-up colony. Nothing near Blitz levels.” The skycab came out of the tunnel and onto the ward where they docked. “We secured the colonists, and my CO put me up on the roof of the tallest structure while the rest of the unit went to set up a perimeter. After a couple hours of nothing I saw him, a single Batarian, carrying a big bag and a handgun. The colonists never mentioned an entrepreneur, a peddler really, that came through. I didn’t know it at the time, but the bag contained supplies, and he was there to take shelter. I didn’t radio. I assumed he somehow got past the others and the bag contained explosives. I shot and killed him.” The Skycab shifted lanes, dropping altitude to fly in the slower, lower lanes between the ward’s buildings. They were drawing close. “I fell off the hero pedestal, and they will never let me live it down.”

The silence lingered for a good minute before Shepard sighed, she did not like to tell that story. It had been the worst thing she had ever done, and to the present day she could still see his face in her scope. There had been a moment in which she hesitated, but it had been brief. She had been absolutely convinced that he could only be bad news.

“That’s heavy,” Ashley said after what felt like an eternity.
“We all have something in common then,” Kaidan spoke up quietly.

“What do you mean?” Ashley asked.

“The Commander’s history, your history, my history—”

“Of which we know little of,” Ashley interrupted.

Kaidan cleared his throat, “My point is that none of us are favorites with the brass. I don’t know about you, but I think that should be reason enough to stick together.”

“Oh.”

“Our CO is between a rock and a hard place. I think the best we can do give her our best if she’s to make Spectre.” Kaidan went on.

“I can get behind that. Ma’am, if the brass is expecting you to fail, then it’s our duty to make sure you succeed.”

“We’re with you a hundred percent. As the Normandy’s crew,” Kaidan finished.

Shepard blinked, stunned into silence, awed at how quickly the lieutenant managed to turn the mood around. “Thanks, I appreciate it. I really do.”

Kaidan smiled a sort of glad-to-be-of-service smile.

The Skycab dipped, dropping out of its lane as it approached their dock. The VI drove as if everyone aboard was made out of spun glass, utterly oblivious to the storm that had just passed through. Yet with the odd expression of confidence from her ground team, Shepard felt like this mountain might not be as difficult as it seemed. It was just one more mountain she had to climb. After Elysium, her follies, and ICT, what is one more?

Ashley and Kaidan went in through the airlock just aft of the bridge while Shepard circled toward the gangway that led toward the Normandy’s shuttle bay. She would leave the news-spreading to her marines. This sort of thing would fly down the decks like a wildfire. Engineering would know within ten minutes.

Her leave was shot down in flames, but right now she needed to set some things straight with her benefactor. She needed to talk to him away from the crew’s eyes, and that meant shuttle bay. Normally only Ashley came down there, being in charge of the ship’s armory, but Shepard had told Ashley that she would be waiting for the Spectre down there. Ashley would read between the lines, know Shepard needed to talk to the Spectre alone.

As Shepard ascended the ramp into the shuttle bay, she expected to have to camp out and wait for her victim. Instead she saw the Spectre, in what looked like freshly cleaned armor, already there. What more, he was busy at the weapons bench working on what looked like a brand new assault rifle she could not recognize offhand. There was also a sizable pile of sloppily opened packaging at his feet, part kits and whatnot. He had caused all sorts of trouble for her, and there he was, oblivious to it all, making himself positively at home on her ship. Shepard had to force herself to draw a deep soundless breath to calm her reaction, which would have seen hurricane Shepard make landfall with a deadly storm tide.

Instead, she turned and skirted left, further into the shuttle bay’s cavernous maw. This put her behind
his back, and even then she lapsed into a practiced pattern, smooth as a gliding shadow. Cloaks only fooled the eyes; they did nothing for footsteps, only training and practice fixed that. Most species had peripheral vision sensitive to movement, especially sudden movement. She did not have her cloak right now, but that did not mean she was out of her element.

She came around onto the platform where the armory benches were. Sneaking up on him was petty, and quite possibly childish, but it was also what she did best, it was something that she staked her life on. Suddenly he paused and straightened. Shepard stopped, instantly holding her breath and standing absolutely still.

“Most impressive, Commander,” he announced as he set the rifle down and turned around to face her. “Though I suggest you switch to unscented soaps if you wish to perfect your technique.”

Shepard exhaled slowly; at least he was honest about what gave her away.

“Or do not. I appreciate the warning.”

There was that flicker of his mandibles. He was honest and tactless. The hurricane that Shepard wanted to contain picked up speed. “Welcome back to the Normandy, Spectre Kryik.” She could not be overtly aggressive, but that did not preclude a bit of passive-aggression. She would smile too if necessary.

His brow plates lowered, casting shadows over his eyes. The look he gave her was intense, scrutinizing, but she held it without quailing. Even if the top of her head only reached his chin, she would not flinch; he would get nothing over her, not now, not ever, and not on her ship.

He hummed, “I thought you would be of… higher spirits about now.”

Shepard could practically hear the thunderous rumble of the storm tide and the howling of the wind. “Thank you for the opportunity,” she said, affecting her best smile. Hopefully he would not pick up on the venom. She was of higher spirits, just not the ones he probably wanted.

“You must have questions.”

Shepard let her stance deflate a little; it was all well that she could control herself. Someone else would have been giving themselves away with crossed arms and a glare set to vaporize. It seemed like he thought she was merely wary. She would play up on that. “A few.” She admitted, but she could grill him later. Right now, she needed to find out where they stood more than what she should do. “Only one that’s really… pertinent right now.”

He watched her with that piercing stare, probably trying to figure her out. That seemed to be that thing he had been doing all along. Well, regardless, figuring her out was now his job. The Council would want to see the cogs and gears that moved her thinking. They would want to know that she would not crack under pressure.

“Why me?” she asked. In many ways, that was what she wanted to know most. What reason did he have to meddle in her affairs?

He leaned against the work bench and crossed his arms. Shepard raised an eyebrow, was that the wrong question to ask? The one he would not answer?

“I should have expected that to be the first,” he said after a moment.

Shepard stood by, waiting. If he thought she would back down, he was about to discovered that she never backed down. Not from people who had a weapon to her head, and definitely not from him.
He straightened, and let his arms drop to his sides; the decision to answer made visible in his posture and expression. “I suppose I should put us on common ground.”

She definitely liked common ground.

“Fact is, Commander, Humans are newcomers to the galactic community.”

Shepard tipped her head to the side, this was going somewhere.

“Young species has demonstrated the ability to adapt, even thrive in the face of adversity and sweeping change. What more, Humans do not apologize for ambition. Some would call that being forceful or arrogant. Perhaps it is, but it is also one of your strengths. I see potential in your people.”

Shepard affected a perfectly blank face to disguise the fact that she was officially out for a loop. What did this have to do with her?

“Some would have the Council restrain you. They would say giving you in thirty cycles what some races have not achieved in centuries seems unfair. They would say that until you earn your place, you are not to be trusted with Spectre status.”

Shepard had a sneaking suspicion he had someone specific in mind.

“I believe they are mistaken. Humanity needs to experience things in order to adapt to them. Spectre status is one of those things. Furthermore, I believe I found an exceptional candidate.”

Was that an attempt at flattery? It would get him absolutely nowhere.

“Being a Spectre takes certain traits and characteristics. We operate mostly alone, reliant on our skills and wits. Without a doubt you demonstrated the skills, self-reliance, and the resourcefulness required on Elysium.”

“I did what I could and had to.” Shepard replied.

“Exactly. Still, two-hundred-fifty-nine kills in ten hours is not an easy feat. You single-handedly kept slavers from reaching a camp where five soldiers would have had to protect over fifty easily-frightened civilians. What you did would have been an impressive record for a sniper specialist, but you had only basic training at the time, correct?”

Shepard nodded mutely. He certainly knew a lot. Had the Alliance sent him her record? Did they give him the play-by-play, complete with map? No, they probably would not. If she was one foot in the door, the Alliance would want to make sure her shoes were shined. They would not care for the strict truth. They had clearly omitted the details of said camp being just a ski resort up in the mountains. Nihlus also did not seem to know about Arthur. She had not been alone for a part of that night. She closed her eyes and had to force herself not to correct him.

“I admit, I thought you were lightly armed for the task at hand. That is, until I saw your marksmanship. Your ability to deliver critical damage with precision and efficiency is impressive. Using a LOKI as an improvised grenade is unorthodox, but undeniably effective. That sort of quick thinking is vital to ensure our success.”

“Kaidan was the one to throw the mech.” Arthur had taught her to shoot. Arthur had given her the better position that night. Because of that, he was spotted on an infrared scanner. Something neither of them thought to expect the Batarians to have, much to their folly. Arthur’s death caused her to adapt tactics to compensate. Red hot fury then turned off her ability to hesitate. It awoke a monster within. She survived because Arthur had been the unfortunate one to be spotted. She was hailed the
White Death because Arthur died.

“You thought of it. If you were a biotic, I would have seen you throw the mech. Then shoot it.”

No, the Spectre probably did not care about the truth. He did not even see the error of his logic. Had she been a biotic, her training would have been a whole lot different. She would have ended up a sentinel like Kaidan, or even an adept, very likely either an L2 or one of the early L3s. She would not have been on Elysium that night, would not have gotten into ICT, and they would not be having this conversation right now.

“On top of abilities, you also display an attitude that is uncommon among Spectres. Perhaps even to our detriment.”

Shepard froze; the explanation suddenly veered somewhere unforeseen. A Spectre admitting that their precious group lacked something? The official line made them out to be walk-on-water elite one-person special ops units, demigods among mere mortals.

“Your natural instinct is to help and protect others. Elysium was protecting your civilians from a fate worse than death. You protected me at the risk of your own life. Then you thought of your colonists, what benefits they might obtain from having a gunship.”

“Don’t go advertising I’m that soft. They’ll want the cold, highly efficient sniper.” They would want the monster, the White Death.

His mandibles flicked again, just a brief little twitch, a quick grin. Somehow Shepard felt her anger at him ebbing away. It looked like he wanted something more than an upgrade from his destroyed ship, complete with chauffeur and cook.

“Does that satisfy your question?” he asked.

Shepard inclined her head, “Yes.” To be truthful his answer was clinically satisfactory. However, she was not born yesterday; some part of her would not be satisfied until she was sure that was his only reason. Still, the immediate anger was gone. Thinking about Elysium always drained her. The hurricane within fizzled out, leaving behind an empty sky and a numb calm. Right now she wanted this conversation to end.

“I am glad, Commander.”

Shepard spared him a smile that she knew was as numb as she felt. There was no helping it, was there? “There is just one more thing. If we are going to work together, just Shepard is fine. You are not Alliance… addressing me Commander seems unnecessarily formal.”

“Likewise, ‘Spectre Kryik’ will not do,” he smiled then, a genuine toothy smile, “For you, I’m just Nihlus.”

“I suppose I should give you the orientation of the place, if you’re going to be staying with us,” she offered. Showing him around the ship would give her something else to focus on and allow her to balm the throbbing old wound.

“That would be appreciated,” he replied with another quick flick of his mandibles.

Chapter End Notes
Author Notes: This episode came out of the blue. Back when I wrote it, I basically just stumbled upon this thought of well… did anyone ever ask Shepard what they thought of being tossed in there headfirst? In my canon, that got me thinking, and before I knew it, this came out. Yes, my interpretation of Nihlus makes him quite clever, and quite manipulative in his own (harmless?) way. I figure, he couldn’t have trained under Saren without learning a few underhanded tricks by bad example, that and Nihlus himself comes from outside Hierarchy space (it’s all in his cannon background) so he’s not a ‘good boy’ like Garrus.

General Notes:
Point of View – This story uses what I call “hyper limited third-person” POV. Everything is filtered through Shepard’s five senses and thinking. I will only swap POV if Shepard is out cold, or if the plot absolutely mandates it. This of course follows the game’s POV. However, you will notice that I play with which of Shepard’s senses dominates the descriptions. Where Shepard can’t see something for whatever reason, the description will shift to other senses, mostly hearing. Sometimes the descriptions will not have the auditory component, usually because things are happening in a near or total void. I rather enjoy writing with the challenges inherent in such a POV. I have to think about how to convey a scene depending on what sensory info I can use, and I think the intimacy makes it more vivid.

Chapter Notes:
Mass Relays - Travel via Mass Relay conduit is said to be “near instantaneous”, however travel from relay to a planet, or from a relay to a nearby system, even at FTL speeds (which are said to be 15 light-years a day, on the most advanced ships) still takes actual time.
Episode 5: Eden Prime

As Shepard predicted, news of her promotion spread through the Normandy like a flash-fire. Subsequently none of the crew was surprised to see Nihlus getting the tour or fully settling into the XO’s cabin on deck three. Kaidan and Ashley had been thorough; everyone on board was now set to help her in whatever way they could. About the only one who seemed openly uncomfortable was Matthews, and only because he never actually cooked for a dextro before. The issue being, as he confessed, nerves about whether or not he could do it right without tasting it. Levo taste buds would perceive dextro food to taste completely different, so he had no way of knowing if he was messing something up.

Shepard was even more impressed with just how much material she got via data package. Admiral Hackett had authorized additional forty eight hours of leave to iron out the technical problems of the situation. Mostly there were new supplies to take up, which included not only food, but also medical. The Normandy got a slight increase of operational budget as well, a humble one percent that was earmarked for Spectre Affairs. Coordinating with EDI made the process take less time and effort it would have taken normally. The AI could read the labels of what they had, ask relevant crew-members questions, and the like.

Introducing the Spectre to EDI had been a lot less painful than Shepard could have imagined, and it proved to be a formality. Nihlus admitted he figured out there was an AI aboard the moment he saw it hack through Eclipse’s databases. What was surprising is that he did not seem to care that the Normandy was a flagrant violation of Council law. He had ample chance to blow the whistle, but he did not.

His underwhelmed reaction made Shepard suspect that he took that particular law to be more of a guideline, and what more the Normandy might not be the only violation he knew about. Shepard just did not know whether it was some Spectre prerogative, or a personal stand on the matter. She would not look that gift horse in the mouth here.

All that took up the better part of that day. The next morning, with some supplies already coming in; Shepard formally introduced Nihlus to Doctor Chakwas. The doctor took to the added challenge in a stride. Perhaps it was petty on her part, but Shepard enjoyed that more than she should have. The good doctor all-but forced Nihlus to submit to a general medical so she could have his baselines on file, as it would make treating him easier should he require it at any point while he was on the
Normandy. Shepard left him there, he was entitled to confidentiality, and she did not want him to realize she was enjoying his discomfort. She got the feeling that the doctor was enjoying herself as well, because Nihlus had dodged a physical previously.

The first dextro meal Matthews cooked had been an affair to remember as well. The ex-marine cook was reduced to nervousness uncharacteristic of a man normally all swagger and smiles. He watched the Spectre take the first bite of the stew-like meal, thick with alien meat. When it passed muster Matthews sighed as if he had dodged a firing squad. Shepard assumed the Spectre had not been lying either, because he did not leave anything in the bowl.

Effectively that the first day of their extended leave passed with Shepard buried in micromanaging the situation on the Normandy. She was proud to add that despite a little bit of wariness, the crew treated Nihlus with a polite professional respect at least, and in Jenkins’ case, outright reverence. Her being merely a candidate did not seem to matter either, as far as Jenkins was concerned, she was a Spectre already.

Shepard ear-marked the second day for herself, and that morning she spent in the shuttle bay first ensuring her armor replacement parts fit, and then running her healed arm through its paces. The former task was easy enough, as armor manufacture was standardized; she just had to confirm that the system actually interlocked as it should. The latter was more involving, and scientific. She turned to the sensory in the punching bag, and the numbers were favorable, her right punches were as powerful as they had been before she took that bullet through the shoulder. There was still some tenderness, so she could not keep wailing freely, but that was entirely temporary. She left the gym glistening with an all-over sweat, happy with herself.

A shower and a change of clothing later and she packed Sin and Dex, keen on finding a holo-range to run some drills. Four hours after that she was back on the Normandy to drop off the twins at the armory before she grabbed some lunch in the mess and then went out to some well-deserved personal time.

Shepard was back on the Normandy with ten minutes of her leave to spare, feeling more refreshed. Having relieved Kaidan from temporary command, she ventured to the OD intending to check for any communication that may have arrived in her absence.

The OD’s door barely closed behind her when she stopped cold. There was the Spectre lounging on the couch under the viewport, reading something off the datapad, still clad in full armor as if he expected to fend off an invasion any second now.

“Making yourself comfortable, I see.” She said, pleasantly surprised with herself in that she sounded simply amused. Was this where he spent his whole day? The crew seemed more relaxed than yesterday, so maybe he had. If he was going to make a habit of haunting the OD then she needed to reconsider the term ‘sanctuary’ for it. She honestly wished he would ditch the armor too. Ceramic plates were hard on the upholstery.

He looked up from the pad, “We have an assignment.”

Shepard did not react to the ‘we’ part, she did not need to ask from whom either, after all, the list of people who could give a Spectre an assignment was short. She reached her terminal and keyed in her password to access the secure communications. There was one urgent message in the inbox, an hour old, from Arcturus station, which actually meant Admiral Hackett’s desk. It was also short; the Normandy was to proceed to Eden Prime. Further instructions would come from the Spectre Liaison on board. The message amounted to an authorization; she was to do whatever it was that the Spectre
had been assigned.

Shepard almost snorted in laughter, so that was what they decided to call Nihlus? Well, at least now she knew what to introduce him as, and it sounded better than “bane of Shepard’s existence”, not that he would ever discover that that had been her thought.

“EDI has the crew returned from leave?” Shepard wondered.

“Yes, Commander. Everyone is present and accounted for.”

Shepard glanced at the Spectre, if he was bothered by the fact that EDI knew this much about what was going on, he did not give himself away. “I suppose sooner is better than later. Right?” she wondered.

“You do not want to know the details?” he asked.

“Better get Joker going on those departure clearances first, they take a while.” Shepard explained as she got up from her seat. She could have ordered Joker to do it over the intercom, but hell, she wanted to walk over there. Perhaps it would delay things for five minutes, but she would take those five minutes. As she stepped out of the OD she was surprised to hear footsteps follow her across the CIC. The evening shift glanced up from their consoles, but then went back to their duties.

“Joker.” She called as soon as she cleared the final bulkhead.

“Hey, Commander.” Joker replied. He had been watching something on his omni-tool when she approached, and shut it off hastily, but Shepard would not ask. What was a pilot to do in his off-time while the ship was docked? Joker seemed to love his leather chair over everything, including the rather soft couches in the observation rooms on deck three. “We’re going already?” he asked.

“Afraid so,” Shepard replied.

“Got it.” He touched the interface, bringing up ship’s systems, effectively rousing the Normandy from her three-day nap. A few keystrokes and red safety lights began to flash outside the main viewports, a warning for people who might still be on the gangways. Shepard merely stood back, let him work.

“Shuttle bay door raised and secured… cargo gangway retracting. Main airlock secured, gangway disengaged.” He announced. “I suppose we got new orders, huh? Humor me, Commander; do these come from the Admiral or our new resident Spook? Because if it’s the latter… I’d expect trouble. You know how it is; look up ‘trouble’ in a dictionary, pretty sure ‘Council Spectre’ will be listed as a synonym.”

Shepard cleared her throat and her gaze flicked to Nihlus.

Joker’s hands froze, “He’s… behind me, isn’t he?” he asked as he touched the controls to turn his chair around.

Shepard said nothing; she would not reprimand Joker with the Spectre in the room, doubly so since she partly agreed with him. Spectres were not sent places for soirees, when one turned up, trouble invariably followed. This one was already trouble just being in the same room.

“Spectre Kryik, sir, don’t mind me, I think out loud.”

“I noticed,” Nihlus replied drily.
“Joker, just get the Normandy humming.”

“Sure,” he was happy to turn his chair right back around and get to work. “Where to?”


“Eden Prime, aye, aye, ma’am!” he brought up the communication system to call traffic control for clearances but paused short of placing the call, “Jenkins know we’re bringing him home? He’d probably want you to meet his parents or something.”

Shepard rolled her eyes, trust Joker to shift gears and go on ‘thinking out loud’ about someone else. She would not dignify that with a response, it would encourage him.

“I’ll take that as a no…” He input another series of commands, “Traffic control, this is SSV Normandy, requesting departure clearances from Zakera Ward.” Joker spoke up into his link. There was silence for a few moments as the dispatchers worked on their end.

“Normandy your request was received; you have been queued, priority two. Stand by for final clearance.” The feminine voice of the dispatcher replied. The professional hauteur betrayed her as asari.

“Yea, this might take a while,” Joker said, glancing over his shoulder at Shepard.

Shepard saw Nihlus bring up his omni-tool and input some commands, and then he leaned over Joker’s seat to tap his finger on the communication console, causing Joker to practically leap out of his seat as he leaned as far away as he could with an outraged expression.

“Traffic control, this is SSV Normandy. Upgrade priority two to priority zero. Authorization codes sent.” Nihlus straightened and tapped a few more keys on his tool.

There was more silence, longer than the previous one. Joker’s eyebrows climbed so high his hat moved with them, Shepard knew what he was thinking. There was a priority level above the level one enjoyed by the passenger transports?

“Authorization codes verified, Normandy. The Normandy is now priority zero. Docking clamp controls released, you are clear to depart. My apologies Spectre Kryik. Proceed along departure lane twenty four; coordinates have been sent to your navigation system.”

Shepard blinked, mystified; he got them immediate departure just because he was a Spectre? The Council sure spoiled their agents. How many passenger transports suddenly got a notice to hold? The Normandy was not a small ship like his Defiant; they would hold up the departure lane.

“Coordinates confirmed, control.” Joker replied as his hands flew across the keys.

“Have a safe trip, Normandy.”

Joker closed the link as the ship’s hum increased in pitch as the engines came online in full earnest. “Docking clamps, released.” There was a jolt as the magnetic locking arms detached from the ship’s hull. Almost immediately the Normandy was moving backwards under her own power.

Nihlus spared her a grin, turned around, and walked off. She knew he would be waiting to go over the details of the mission in the OD.

Joker must have been listening to his footsteps fade, because he tipped his head to look over his shoulder ten seconds later. “Couple words and a fancy code and we’re off on our merry way. I guess
there had to be some benefit to having him around.”

“Joker.” Shepard murmured.

“No, I get it, he has no sense of humor, and you have to be nice to him.”

“As long as you know.”

“Don’t worry; I’ll make sure to have a rear view up next time. Now Council Sourpuss probably has trouble for us to get into to discuss. I have calculations to do, relay jumps are not point-and-click.”

“Are you dismissing me?” Shepard wondered, vaguely amused.

“Wouldn’t dream of it, ma’am, I’m merely constituting facts.” He replied with affected sweetness, laughter right in his tone.

Shepard shook her head, turned, and followed the Spectre. Joker was acutely aware of having opened mouth and inserted foot. She also knew that for all his commentary he was also on the Normandy’s short-list of those who would do the most for her. His assurances, such as they were, were proof of that. She would leave him alone, no need to hammer in a point that he seemed to understand already. Of course with Joker, understanding did not necessarily mean he would stop doing it.

~          *          ~          ~          *          ~          ~          *          ~

Shepard returned to the OD and was utterly unsurprised to see the Spectre lounging on the couch under the viewports again, as if that was his territory. The Normandy was now gliding along the length of Zakera Ward, toward its tip, and the relay hub beyond. The Widow system had a rather complex cluster of relays, the densest in the galaxy, ready to send and receive ships to and from all corners of the galaxy. All of them orbited the star at various points as if to keep it company.

She moved past her desk and stood over the Spectre. “So, Eden Prime?” she asked by way of breaching the topic. “Admiral Hackett sent me some fascinating if vague orders, I’m to help our… Spectre Liaison with something?”

He grinned and sat up, but his eyes remained on the datapad in his hands. “A week ago, an archeological team there unearthed some Prothean ruins.”

Prothean ruins, well that was certainly interesting, Shepard mused. The Protheans were the builders of the Citadel and mass relays, a race so advanced that they had a pan-galactic empire at their height. Yet they vanished some time fifty thousand years before, and no one knew how or why. Little was known about them, most coming from accidents of preservation and ruins.

Remnants of their technology were responsible for advancing a number of races, including Humans. In 2148, a major cache of Prothean artifacts was found on Mars, and with it, the discovery of Mass Effect physics. The discovery made things hitherto thought impossible more than possible, including the fact that she was sitting here, talking to an extra-terrestrial being.

Ultimately, Prothean artifacts were deemed vital resources, with the Citadel Council in control of all discoveries made within Council Space. Shepard was beginning to see why a sojourn to Eden Prime dropped on her lap. Established in 2152, Eden Prime was one of the first extra-solar human colonies. The Council would want to send a Spectre to have a look. Nihlus probably got the job by virtue of his new position aboard an Alliance vessel. The Council had already devised a use for their new asset.
“Three days ago they dug up something even more interesting than that, an intact beacon.” Nihlus continued.

“A beacon?” Shepard wondered.

“By what I read,” he flicked the datapad in his hand, “They are parts of a Prothean communication network, akin to our comm buoys. Like our buoys they also have some storage capacity.”

Shepard hummed, “Whatever might be lingering in that beacon’s memory…”

“Precisely.”

They found a proverbial time capsule. The beacon’s memory could contain one thousand and one things, from top-secret research, weapon designs, blueprints, maps, scientific knowledge in a hundred different fields, or even something as mundane as Prothean recipes and vids. Any of it would be fascinating to the academics of some field, and could potentially lead to advancements or further discoveries. The Council sure moved quick to ensure that they knew what was on that thing.

“The archeologists do not have the skills to crack the layers of encryption and security. Furthermore, the beacon’s technology itself is of interest. They requested assistance with shipping the beacon to a high security vault on the Citadel.”

“And the Normandy is to be the armored truck.”

“Yes. I am to oversee the process.” Nihlus added.

Shepard hummed, “EDI, please tell Joker to rig us silent when we hit Utopia System.”

“Right away, Commander.” The AI replied.

“Are we expecting trouble?” Shepard wondered, turning back to the Spectre.

“I always expect trouble, but your understanding of the situation might differ. While the dig itself is public knowledge, the discovery of the beacon is not. As far as the galaxy is concerned, it is just another team of university-affiliated archeologists playing in the dirt.”

She was going to ignore the cocky lilt in his voice. The more she conversed with Nihlus, the more certain she became that whatever qualities he had, humility was not one of them. “Ah, but Eden Prime has some fine dirt. I understand though, precaution certainly can’t hurt.”

“We agree then, good.”

Shepard was not sure if she would expect trouble, but she knew that at the end of the day, she could not afford to be the one who botched this.

“As for Eden Prime. I heard it is quite beautiful. A paradise.”

“Well, I can’t say, but, they must have thought it was. Eden was a garden, a paradise, where the maker created humanity- well according to some old beliefs among my people.” As far as Shepard was concerned it was an unoriginal naming scheme, but naming things was hard, so whatever. As his silence lingered, she idly wondered if she said too much. There was nothing to it if she had. “I imagine you’d want to go down there as soon as possible.” Best shift the topic back to the matter at hand.

“The quicker we can get the beacon on the Normandy, the better.”
“Good. We’re still hours out, I can brief the marines later, for now I suggest we both get some shut-eye. It will be a long day.” She got up from her seat.

“Yes, you are right.”

Shepard nodded. “Have a good night, Nihlus.”

“You too, Co- Shepard.”

She spared him a small smile, turned, and left the OD.


Nine hours later Shepard was in the OD again, seated on the couch next to Nihlus, her marines on the extension. She laid down her datapad and picked up her coffee cup, draining the last of the cooling liquid, satisfied that she had timed things well enough. They were about half an hour out from making Eden Prime’s orbit, and she had just finished briefing the marines.

“As you can see it’s sensitive but not-”

There was a throat clearing over the intercom, Joker’s familiar tone, “Sorry to interrupt Commander, but EDI just picked up something you’ll want to hear.”

Shepard set down her cup, “Put it through, EDI.”

EDI did not reply, but suddenly the OD was filled with the sound of scratchy static and what sounded like an assault rifle at a distance from the recording equipment. “… It’s connected… shit… okay.” A voice murmured. “Mayday, mayday… this is the third platoon of the two-twelfth brigade, Eden Prime garrison. We are under attack and taking casualties. I repeat, we are under attack, taking casualties.” There was another rapport of gunfire, followed by a scream. The speaker cursed so low that what he said was not picked up. “If anyone is picking this up, we need immediate support. They came out of nowhere… oh God.” More gunshots, something exploded, the voice was barking indecipherable orders to others, yet more gunshots, and then the scratching and static resumed.

Shepard watched as the marines exchange glances. She turned to the Spectre whose eyebrow plates drew lower, hooding his eyes pensively.

The static cleared, replaced by the sound of heavy breathing. “There are only about twenty of us left, we won’t hold them for long… please… please hurry.” The voice was frantic now, terrified. Suddenly there was more gunfire, an explosion, and static, before the recording cut out.

“Joker, hustle. We need to get there. Now.”

“She’s going as fast as she can, Commander.” Joker responded.

“EDI, as soon as we’re in range, I need your best scans. I want a topographical layout with potential landing sites, and a confirmation on the identity of the attackers.”

“Of course, Commander.” The AI replied.

“Somehow I don’t think its mercenaries, or even batarians,” Ashley noted.

“If not them, then who?” Jenkins asked, visibly unnerved.

Shepard would not blame Jenkins for what he must feel right now, this was his home colony. She
sighed, a sound that caught the attention of everyone in the room. “Ashley is right. That marine sounded terrified, and needless to say they don’t scare easy.”

Ashley nodded mutely.

“What about the beacon?” Kaidan wondered.

“The beacon is still our objective, but we need to know what we’re up against. The geeks unearth a beacon and the colony is attacked shortly after. I don’t know about you, but I don’t believe in coincidences. Someone knows about that thing, and they want it.” Shepard replied. “EDI will get us the info we need. For now, suit up and bring extra ammo and Medi-gel. If a platoon of thirty marines was cornered, we are facing numbers.”

“Yes ma’am,” the marines replied in a single voice, getting up from their seats. She watched as they cleared out of the room, and then she was on her feet.

“Shepard,” Nihlus spoke up. “I understand your desire to protect your fellow soldiers, but we have no proof the attack has anything to do with the beacon.”

“We have no proof yet, Nihlus. That said, I have a gut feeling, and I’ve learned the hard way not to ignore my gut.” Shepard spared him a chilled look before she breezed out of the OD and made her way toward the elevator. EDI would confirm her suspicions, and then she would be vindicated. Even if she was to be proven wrong, if Nihlus thought she would leave twenty marines to die over a piece of technology, he really did not understand her, and never would.

~          *          ~          ~          *          ~          ~          *          ~

Shepard was in the shuttle bay, strapping optional modules to her webbing within fifteen minutes, just as the Normandy made orbit. She chose to take the extra container strapped behind her right shoulder full of thermal clips for Vincent and an explosives kit with six disk-like high-explosive grenades.

Kaidan, the field medic of her marines, was adjusting his first aid kit in the chest pockets of his webbing. Ashley, already in her armor and loaded to the limit with supplies, was checking the sights of all her weapons, including her sniper rifle, and Jenkins slipped on a whole bandoleer of thermal clips over his right shoulder.

“Commander, my scans are complete and I have relayed the data to your Omni-tools.” EDI announced. “I triangulated the source of the distress call as well; it originated within a kilometer radius of the Prothean dig site.”

Shepard tightened the last strap of her webbing as she moved over toward the Kodiak, catching the Spectre’s gaze. She hoped he was abashed now, because she was right. She wished she was not, but wishful thinking was not a soldier’s best friend. “What are we looking at, EDI?” She glanced back as she spoke. Kaidan, Ashley, and Jenkins had followed her mutely, but she could see the tension building in them.

“I detected what appears to be a ship five kilometers due west of the dig site. I deemed it inadvisable to use high resolution active scans, as that would give away our presence. Nevertheless, based on passive imaging I found a ninety percent match in my database of past and present ship designs.” EDI explained.

“And?” Shepard wondered, watching her marines climb into the shuttle.

“My database indicates the ship to be Geth in origin.”
“Geth?” Shepard repeated. She saw Nihlus’ arms drop to his sides, Ashley stopped cold, Kaidan looked askance, and Jenkins suddenly flashed a look that betrayed his fear. Shepard could not fault him either.

“My database includes a number of Geth ship designs dating to the last sightings; they display a great deal of uniformity, varying only by size. This ship is consistent with a one-hundred-sixty-three meter vessel deemed frigate-class.”

Shepard hummed; the situation had just gone from bad to worse. How were they supposed to secure the beacon like this? Waiting in ambush for the Geth ship to come up into weapon range was out of the question for many reasons. The Normandy could cripple the ship before it returned fire, but that would mean they would lose the beacon and a lot of marine lives in the meantime.

If losing the beacon was out of the question, losing Marine lives would be an unforgivable sin. They had no choice but to ante up and play the cards dealt, but Shepard was not above using the aces up her sleeves. “We have to do what we can. EDI, relay that distress call to Arcturus at the highest priority, use our QEC, make sure Admiral Hackett knows I need backup with bells on.”

“Right away, Commander.” EDI replied.

Shepard stepped onto the shuttle, followed by Nihlus. He had yet to say a word, but Shepard could feel his gaze on the back of her neck, it made all the hairs there stand on end more surely than the situation. Right now though, she could not care less if calling for backup was somehow a violation of secrecy or something. The Council wanted the beacon. This way they stood a chance of getting it. With no backup, the only thing they would get would be a view of a whole lot of caskets. The situation was bigger than the lot of them.

The descent through Eden Prime’s atmosphere was a bumpy affair accelerated by necessity, as the shuttle did not have the stealth systems of the Normandy, so its thrusters would register on whatever sensors the Geth had. The landing itself was bumpier, the shuttle came in from the east, as far away from the Geth ship as it could, just in case. It seemed their luck held, as the Geth ignored them the whole way. The landing zone put them a couple hundred meters down a winding dirt track that led toward the spaceport where the dig team intended to secure the beacon for transport.

Shepard did not like to wear her helmet when fighting groundside on planets with a breathable atmosphere, but protocol was protocol. Nihlus was the only one there who left his in the Kodiak. She glanced up to take stock of the weather, this part of Eden Prime was close to mid-day, and the sky was mottled with wispy clouds that did nothing to block the sunlight. It was a rather pleasant day for very unpleasant business.

“No heroics, no rushes, we advance steadily, keep to cover, and shoot true.” She ordered as they began to walk down the dirt path. “Spectre, I best see what that fancy new assault rifle of yours can do.”

“Will I see the sniper rifle in action?” He replied.

“If you ever see a sniper, they’re not doing it right.” Shepard replied automatically. Perhaps now was the worst time for levity, but the situation was plenty serious enough without being morose about it. Shepard had no delusions; this could very well turn out to be their final hour. If so, then it would be their finest as well.

The dirt path wound, flanked on both sides by craggy rocks and robust trees. As they came around a
final bend, the ground here clopped away sharply, leaving only a single thin dirt path down toward the shipping yard and space port, which stretched below them, set into a plateau on top of a hill. Shepard could see a line of dark green falling further away from the port, and beyond that, fields, fields, and nothing but fields. EDI chose a picture-perfect landing spot and approach, complete with tactical advantage for marksmen. Shepard stopped at the crest of the slope and raised a silent fist into the air, telling her group to stop as well.

The port was not terribly big; it served hopper craft only slightly bigger than their shuttles, not spaceships. The remains of a few hopper shuttles were littered about, all of them in various stages of destroyed, and some still burned. There were scorch marks on the ground, and even without binoculars she could see bodies. The Geth ship loomed a distance away, floating over the forest. It was shaped like a great big grey hornet with no wings. Why the Geth built something so organic-looking was beyond her, but right now was not the time to wonder, let alone ask.

Even from where they stopped she could see just how bad the marines had it. The whole open area between the yard and the port was crawling with geth, easily ten or fifteen units. The automatons had silvery vaguely humanoid shapes, each with light for a face, moving with obvious determination toward a single objective. All of them shining and shimmering in the sunlight like fine kitchenware. On the north side, one of the port’s warehouses was partly open, its shutter-like door scorched and riddled with holes. Whenever one of the Geth got too close, tracer bullets erupted from within.

“The geth must have air-dropped units right on top of your marines, it is the only way they would have suffered rapid heavy losses,” Nihlus mused.

Shepard hummed in assent. “Well, now they have a choke point; they’re holding, so they couldn’t have all been killed.” She dropped to her left knee, reaching up over her shoulder for Vincent, fingers automatically ghosting over its controls, shifting it to disruptor ammo mode. “Gunny, we need to weed them out from here before we can do anything.”

“Can definitely do, skipper.” Ashley replied.

Shepard could hear the increase of optimism in the woman’s voice, and for good reason. This situation suddenly did not seem that dire; the marines had cover and a choke point. She sat back on her left heel and braced her right foot into the dirt, lapsing into a comfortable, steady kneeling stance. Ashley mirrored her, except she was right handed and favored her right leg for balance.

“Start on the left, I’ll go from the right…” Shepard ordered, raising Vincent to her eye.

“On your mark, Commander,” Ashley replied.

Shepard took a deep, slow breath and let it out just as slowly. The climb up the path had accelerated her heartbeat, she had to force herself to calm down, because she could not afford to waste shots. Another deep breath, another slow exhale, her HUD was already ticking down her heart-rate. She peered down her rifle’s scope, the crosshairs almost right on the back of a geth’s neck, as if the rifle itself wanted to kill. She continued to breathe deeply. Range was not too tricky at two hundred meters. Her helmet HUD showed a steady, but slow summer breeze coming up the hill. Her free hand rose to the controls on the side of the scope, adjusting the crosshairs for Eden Prime’s 1.04g at 1.45 atm. Another deep breath and she dropped her finger to the trigger. A quick adjustment her crosshairs, one last millimeter, she exhaled, and as her lungs emptied, slowly squeezed the trigger.

The shot’s crack rolled like thunder along the rock walls around them. The geth’s head exploded, sending some sort of white liquid splashing onto the ground as the machine collapsed. Shepard raked the receiver bolt to eject the spent thermal clip; her hand was over her right shoulder even before the hot cylinder hit the ground. Another crack echoed as Ashley took her shot, another geth went down.
Shepard rolled a fresh clip in her fingers, turned its terminals to the muzzle and slammed it in, the receiver shut. She inhaled, turned the rifle, aligned the crosshairs, exhaled, and as her lungs emptied, squeezed. Another crack, more liquid spray, another geth went down.

“Wow,” Jenkins breathed somewhere over her head.

One more crack echoed as Ashley took her second shot.

Shepard ejected the spent clip, reached for a fresh and slammed it in. Inhale, she turned the rifle, found her mark, exhale, empty, and squeezed the trigger. Another geth unit went down in a spray of white liquid. A familiar calm settled in her bones. Ashley’s third shot barely registered in her mind, she was already reaching for another clip.

The geth finally became aware of the sharpshooters taking them out. Some turned, but they were armed with assault rifles, but Shepard had seized advantage of being out of effective range. Still, she noted a larger unit painted a slightly darker shade of grey had stuck its rifle behind its back and reached over its shoulder for another weapon.

She leveled Vincent’s crosshairs right with its bright flashlight face, and as the machine drew its sniper rifle, she was already on her exhale and squeeze. Vincent gave another crack, the would-be counter-sniper went down; the disruptor bullet ripped through its cranium like a hot knife through butter.

After that Shepard allowed herself to slip into a familiar rhythm. Her fingers rolled each successive clip quicker, and by the time it went in she already had her target aligned. It was only a matter of timing her breaths, slipping her finger down to the trigger, making a final correction, and squeezing the trigger. Ashley fired her fifth shot when Shepard fired her eighth. As that final unit went down in a spray of synthetic fluids, her eye remained glued to scope, sweeping slowly, watching for anything that might be hiding, or just coming in.

“We got them all, skipper,” Ashley announced.

Suddenly there was scratching over her communicator. Shepard dropped Vincent’s scope from her eye and reached up to tap at her helmet; around her the marines did the same.

“Are we already dead, or did we just get a backup squad?” A familiar voice asked, one she could recognize off the distress call.

“If one could call us a squad,” Ashley mumbled.

“I don’t know who you are up there, but from the sixteen of us survivors of the two-twelfth brigade’s third platoon, we thank you. Operations Chief Leon Adenauer, by the way, ma’am.”

Shepard figured he heard Ashley. “I am Commander Shepard, SSV Normandy, in company with three marines and one Council Spectre. We were ordered to retrieve a package and we picked up your distress call.”

There was silence over the link for a long moment and then Shepard heard a woop that sounded vaguely like a number of voices raised in celebration. “Wow. We assumed there was a squad with sharpshooters to spare… we did not expect the White Death of Elysium.”

“What’s your situation?” Shepard demanded, she would remind him that they were not out of the woods yet.

“Right. Sorry ma’am. We have the package in the hangar here along with the surviving
archeologists and dock workers. We have ammo, and grain crates are adequate cover. The flashlight-heads stopped using explosives for now, and that was our biggest problem. I think they don’t want to risk blowing up the package. We suffered casualties, of the twenty-eight of us this morning; we lost twelve since the initial attack along with three of the scientists and some of the dock workers. It was a mess ma’am, very sudden, but I’d say we can hold our position for a while longer, though not indefinitely.”

“With luck, Chief, we’ll have backup within the hour.”

“I hope it is so, ma’am, for all our sakes.”

“We need to move skipper, they know we’re here and the next wave will probably come at us.” Ashley voiced.

Shepard nodded, tucked her rifle behind her back, and got to her feet. “We’re coming to join you Chief. As I said, we have a Council Spectre with us, a turian. Tell your men to hold their fire.”

“Roger that, ma’am.”

Shepard hated having to give up their elevated position in favor of the warehouse, but Ashley was right. The geth had a ship and their ground forces could cover the distance between it and the spaceport just fine. Elevation worked while they had the element of surprise, but that card had been played and discarded.

They would have to rely on the warehouse bottleneck, and if Adenauer was right in his supposition, and the Geth wanted the beacon for whatever reason, they would not just open fire with anything heavier than assault rifles. The lot of them would have to dig in and wait for reinforcements to arrive.

As the five of them stepped past the half open bay door, they were greeted by the tired cheering of a few marines. Shepard could see them scattered about, hiding behind a U-shaped barricade made up of cargo containers labeled as food. The floor in the center was littered with dead geth, or chunks of death geth. Some of the crates had been riddled with bullets and then patched together with bits of wadding and whatever else would keep the grain from running out. There were scorched patches on the floor too, the Geth probably tried to get at the marines using grenades, but it looked like they did not get very far.

At the back, huddled up into opposite corners were two groups of civilians. The scientists were easy to discern, among them two humans dressed in the mostly-grey Alliance science officer uniforms, along with an asari and a salarian, both dressed in blue, with armbands that bore the insignia of the Citadel. A team sent by the Council to appraise the dig. The dock workers were a larger group. Shepard counted seven; all of them were in their work clothes, most dirtied, and some bloodied. Seated next to them were two marines, both also injured, but they were well enough to hold their rifles and provide some comfort for the civilians.

There in the center, also up against the back wall was a large rectangular shipping container, sealed shut and labeled with all manner of indicators, least of all a reminder that the contents were fragile, to be handled with extreme care. The science team had managed to package the beacon for transport before the attack started. Did the marines know what they were guarding? Going by Adenauer’s choice of words, it did not look like they did. She was not going to inform them either.

A marine stepped out around the barricade, lowering his rifle. “Operations Chief Leon Adenauer, ma’am, we talked.” He said with a smile. He was a tall man, with black hair, rough features, dark
colored eyes, and the build of someone who ought to have been playing American Football.

“Indeed. This is my team, Staff Lieutenant Kaidan Alenko, Gunnery Chief Ashley Williams, Corporal Richard Jenkins, and Council Spectre Nihlus Kryik.”

“Welcome to our slice of paradise. Wish we were meeting under better circumstances. As it is, we have maybe five minutes before the next wave of flashlights arrives. Make yourselves at home.” He motioned to the barricades.

Adenauer still maintained a faint semblance of levity, it was a good sign. Marines were funny people; many developed an inappropriately-timed sense of humor, unless the situation was absolutely dire and all hope was lost. It helped cope with some of the harsh realities.

Shepard chose the highest stack of crates to hide behind, and she was not all that surprised to that Nihlus stuck to her. The other marines were not looking a gift horse in the mouth, but a Spectre was a Spectre, she could see wariness in the more tired, more injured marines. She raised her hand to her communicator and switched channels.

“Normandy come in.”

“Commander. Boy, am I glad to hear you. What's going on down there?” Joker sounded audibly relieved.

“I'd say the situation is no longer dire. We made rendezvous with the two-twelfth and are holding decent position. The geth seem keen on our package, so they stopped throwing explosives. That said… anything on long range?”

“Ah... Afraid not, Commander, but EDI and I are monitoring. I'll update the second anything blips, you can bet on it.”

“Thanks, Joker. Shepard out.” She let her hand drop away from the communicator. If it was not for her helmet, she would be raking her hand through her hair right now. The waiting game was the worst part. As a sniper, she liked to be the danger the enemy never knew was there. She did not like waiting for something to surprise her.

“They are here,” Nihlus suddenly called, drawing his assault rifle.

Shepard heard a whine as the weapon unfolded and powered up. She drew the twins and shifted them to disruptor ammo mode, “You heard him! Get ready to fight.”

All around the marines raised their rifles and put their backs to their slices of barricade. A few moments later two rifles on the outer edge of the barricades came to life. There was a small explosion and the sound of something hitting the ground hard. Chattering followed and suddenly it was as if chaos descended all at once in the form of four very audacious geth. One of them was larger than the others by a fair bit.

“Big one's a command unit! Concentrate fire!” Adenauer called from his hiding spot.

The chattering rose in volume as the assault rifles pounded all around. Shepard glanced at her left; Nihlus kneeled behind a waist-high section of the barricade and raised his assault rifle over it. The black and red weapon was glowing with blue status lights; he had disruptor ammo on it. She ducked around to inspect the geth.

It was not hard to spot their weaknesses, they chattered, cluttered, and displayed the grace of beached whales. Two of the smaller units went down to sustained fire, and then a different tempo of assault
rifle jointed the fray. The third unit’s shields flared, and it chattered and whined. Shepard ducked out, raised both her guns, and pulled the triggers. The shields failed, and one of her bullets shattered the robot’s face-light, causing it to go out. Simultaneously the Spectre’s assault rifle riddled its torso with rounds and the Geth went down with a whine, splattering white fluids everywhere.

The assault rifles died for a split of a second and then came to life again, concentrated on the big command unit as Shepard ducked right behind her crate. The large unit returned fire with its pulse rifle, and a blast hit the crates somewhere. One of the marines shrieked and ducked low. Shepard whirled, catching sight of the young woman. She was holding her grazed shoulder. The unit whined as its shield finally failed, and then there was a crack, its head exploded, splattering white fluids everywhere as the rest collapsed.

“Bhatia, are you alright?” Adenauer called.

“Yes… yes, I think so… sir… Medi-gel’s got it,” the woman replied, still audibly rattled. “Give me a minute… I can still hold my gun.”

“Any more of those big fuckers and we’re in trouble.” another of the marines grumbled. “Hope whatever’s in that fancy box is good.”

Shepard glanced at Nihlus; he was reloading his rifle with uncanny calmness.

“It’s good,” she replied. That was a lie. As far as Shepard was concerned, no beacon was worth all their lives, but she had to keep morale up. If the marines folded, they would be dead even sooner.

There was more chatter and a set of heavy footsteps as more geth arrived. Shepard peered around the barricade. There at right in front of the hangar door stood three units. Two she would call regular. The third, however, could have very well dwarfed even the big command unit by a dozen or more centimeters in both height and sheer bulk.

Its black coloration could rightly be described oil-slicked; it had a prismatic sheen that vanished when it stepped into the shadows, leaving just the base abyssal black. It had a large thick antenna behind each shoulder, and unlike all the geth so far, yellow lights. Two in the center, replacing the single of the others, and four much smaller ones embedded in angled pairs at temple level in the hood-like structure that formed its head. Most uniquely, it had mass accelerator canons for forearms, like a damned YMIR.

Its stepped into the warehouse with slow, lumbering, and heavy footsteps, uncaring that it had every gun in the place aimed right at it.

“Shit… they come even bigger than the command unit?” one of the marines mused.

“I think that’s actually the real command unit.” another replied.

“Surrender, Humans.” A deep voice demanded, the sound resonating in the room, pressing on her eardrums like the subwoofer thrum of music in a night club. “We come for that which you call a beacon. Your resistance attempts, though valiant, are ultimately futile. It is only a matter of time until your bodies tire or you use up your ammunition. We will not be denied.”

Whispers passed around the room as everyone seemed to ask the most obvious question.

“Funny, for being so damn sure of yourself, you’re the one telling us to surrender. What’s wrong? Running out of cannon fodder?” Shepard asked.

At that moment she noted the multiple looks of incredulity from the marines around her. Maybe it
was not wise to bait at the geth, but her instinct told her that something made this tin-can come here to make pompous speeches. It wanted the beacon, but something was making it impatient. When the enemy became impatient, it meant something was pressing them.

“We have hundreds of platforms on our ship.” The machine replied. “You are merely delaying the inevitable. Give us the beacon and you will all be spared.” The machine announced.

More whispering, this time some of it came from the back.

“Give them the damn… beacon or whatever it is! I don’t want to die!” someone shouted from the back.

Shepard glanced back at the panic-stricken dock-worker who had spoken. The civilians were actually half-way there to believing the tin-can. Suddenly it hit her; the thing had to be going for divide and conquer. It knew there were terrified civilians in here, those who would more easily buy into lies. “Don’t be a fool, man. We give them the crate, and they will open fire on this warehouse with their ship!” she rebuffed. “The crate is the only thing that’s stopping them from using explosives! The only reason it is here, talking big, is because something is up and it is in an awful rush to finish this. Think about it.” She had a feeling exactly what was making the machines rush. There was only one thing it could be. The machines could have picked up incoming Alliance backup, and the only reason she was not hearing about it from Joker was because right now, he had to be busy coordinating things in orbit.

“She’s right,” Adenauer added. “No deal, robot.”

“We gave you a choice.” The machine stated as its MACs rose to waist-level firing position.

Shepard ducked behind her crate again as everyone around them hastened into their cover.

The black unit opened fire, spraying down the crates. The other two geth moved in. The marines returned fire as best they could.

“Shepard we have to bring that thing down. Now.” Nihlus’ said, suddenly very close right next to her ear.

Chattering sounded and an explosion followed as one of the smaller units collapsed. Then the black unit’s MACs ceased cycling.

“It’s gone into cool!” someone shouted.

The second of the smaller units gave a loud chatter before going down as well.

The assault rifles went dead for a split second, and then some came back, all aimed on the black robot. Shepard peeked around her stack of crates. She could see the automaton’s shields flaring, a great big cocoon of periwinkle-colored energy. Then its MACs unfolded again and the machine opened fire.

For all its firepower, Shepard could not help but marvel at its lack of accuracy. It moved and shifted targets frequently, the spray restarting in erratic pulses. The thing was just spraying with the hope of hitting someone, but when it turned on any single marine, they would duck behind cover. The spray also seemed to lag; there was a noticeable delay in its responses to everything. Why was it so slow to process where it was being shot from? Shepard hummed; so far as she could see even the other geth were quicker than that.

The marines returned fire from angles where it was safe to poke out, yet the return fire was doing
nothing at all, the black unit’s kinetic barrier was not failing. Those shields were singularly the most impressive part; just how much power did it have to keep them up?

The unit turned again, both its MACs leveled on one of the tall vertical stacks in the barricade as it opened fire. The stack budged under the concentrated force, the crates began to shred, sending bits of material and then seed flying. Then, with a resounding crack, one of the emptying crates buckled under the weight of the one above it, and the full crate began to slide. Shepard saw it flare periwinkle, but it still slid, hit the ground with a heavy thud, and burst open, instantly spilling its contents and filling the air with grain dust. The MACs fell silent again.

“Jenkins!”

“Martinez!”

The sound of Kaidan’s voice joining Adenauer’s made Shepard freeze. The silence lingered.

“I’m fine… but my foot is stuck.” Jenkins called back from somewhere in the pile of grain.

Shepard could see Kaidan now. He raised one hand as his whole body erupted in a periwinkle-colored biotic glow. The fallen crate lifted off the ground. With a turn of his arm Kaidan moved it aside and set it down, and the glow around him dimmed. A moment later it flared anew, even brighter, and with a flick of his hand Kaidan scattered the grain every which way.

There lay one of the two-twelfth marines and Jenkins. Now that he was free, Jenkins attempted to move, but as soon as he shifted his left foot, he yelped loudly and remained prone. The other marine was not moving at all, there was blood welling up from his mouth. It looked like he took the brunt of the crate’s impact across his back. Kaidan kneeled by his side and pulled up his omni-tool, but a second later he looked up and shook his head.

Shepard turned to look at Jenkins. He had rolled onto his side; hand clinging to his shin, his left foot at an odd angle, ankle clearly broken. In an instant she could only see red.

“The first of many,” the black unit announced, malicious and sneering.

Shepard had to contain the explosion of fury that threatened to erupt from her. Today would not go the way of Elysium. “Laugh while you’re still able, tin can!” She hissed, as she reached behind her back to the pouch that had her grenades. Nihlus was right; they had to bring that thing down, now more than ever.

“We do not laugh,” The robot replied after a heartbeat, body turning, left MAC unfolding. Shepard swung her arm in an arc and sent her grenade flying. It landed at the thing’s feet and began to ping. The MAC opened fire, peppering her cover with rounds. The other marines opened fire as well, spraying the machine down. Shepard dropped into a low crouch and scooted sideways to the closest waist-high section as the tall stack of crates she had been hiding behind began to shred. Then the grenade exploded and the MAC went silent. The stack of crates she had been hiding behind toppled with a resounding thud, more crates bursting open on impact, sending even more grain dust into the air.

“Hold your fire!” Adenauer called.

Instantly the marines ceased firing.

Shepard chanced looking up, the robot was still mostly upright, but the blast had ripped its right leg off at the knee. Some of the bullets had peppered its form as well, causing it to leak that white fluid the geth seemed to have instead of blood. It was trying to balance using its MACs like crutches. She
rose to her knees and brought up the twins, flicked her laser sights, and opened fire into the other knee. After four shots it gave way and detached, sending the black geth crashing to the ground. She was on her feet and over the barricade in an instant, emptying the rest of her shots into the tubing that connected its MACs to its body, severing the power lines, rendering the weapons useless.

The unit raised its head, yellow lights focused on her. “Your victory will be short-lived.” It announced.

“Can the bravado, machine. You are done.” The twins smoked now, clips at capacity, but she had the geth at her mercy. She pressed the releases and rolled her wrists, sending the smoking thermal clips to the floor before she holstered the guns.

“I will remember you, Human,” the machine said.

Shepard reached for a fresh pair of clips from the pouch at the small of her back and slipped them into her guns. “Oh? You will?” she asked, kneeling as she drew Sin, to press the muzzle to the machine’s head. “Everyone else I’ve ever shot can’t remember much anymore… but, I suppose it makes sense you would.” The idiot thing did not even know what it let slip with that one. “Well, remember this…” she hissed, not bothering to tamp down her anger. “Show yourself again, and I’ll send you right back. In pieces.” She pulled the trigger. The machine’s head exploded, splattering yet more white liquid.

Shepard got to her feet and reached up to swipe the splatter off her face shield as she holstered Sin. She was acutely aware of the silence around her, but right now she was too angry to care. “Nihlus, are there any more of them?” She asked as she turned to face the Spectre. His expression was perfectly blank, but his eyes were intense. Shepard should have been worried about what he might think of her display, but right then she could not be bothered to care.

“Not at the moment,” he replied after a moment.

“Good.” She jumped back over the barricade and slumped into a seating position, back to the crates. Her eyes landed on the packaged beacon. She officially hated that thing with a passion. Too many had died fighting over that piece of technology. She sincerely hoped the Council would be happy. They could choke on it too.

Her communicator scratched, “Normandy to Shepard, come in Commander!” Joker’s voice cut across.

Shepard raised her hand to her helmet, still glaring murder at the crate. “Shepard here, what’s going on Joker?”

“Guess your reinforcements!” Joker said gleefully.

Shepard’s took a deep breath to calm her fury, “Now’s not the time Joker…”

“Fine,” He sobered instantly, “The Kilimanjaro just arrived!”

Shepard froze, shocked.

“What is it?” Adenauer wondered, instantly worried.

She looked up, meeting the lieutenant’s gaze, “My pilot called. The Kilimanjaro is here. Knowing her Captain as I do-”

“Commander! The Geth ship is moving!”
Shepard was on her feet and pacing in an instant, and the rest of what she would have said, she swallowed.

“What now?” Adenauer asked.

“The geth ship is moving.” She was not in the habit of lying when it came to such things.

Everyone in the hangar froze, including the civilians.

“Captain Shepard wishes to know if you secured the objective,” Joker asked, now completely professional.

“The package is secure.” What was her mother up to?

“Roger. EDI do your thing,” Joker replied.

“Engaging cybernetic warfare suite.” EDI cut across the link.

Everyone around her seemed to hold their collective breath. Shepard glanced at Nihlus. His suit was synched to the channel they used with the Normandy, so he could hear everything, but his expression gave nothing away.

“The dropship is flying away from your position and climbing.” Joker announced.

Shepard could hardly believe her ear. “The Kili got the geth running scared; they’re not coming here!”

There was a moment of disbelieving silence which soon broke for cheering.

“We did it!” one of the marines shouted.

“Oorah!” a few others affirmed.

The civilians turned to hugging each other.

Shepard sought out her team, affirming that they were alright. Jenkins was still lying on the ground, and despite being in much pain, stuck up a thumb to say he was alright. Ashley looked tired, there was grain dust all over her armor, but she smiled and nodded. Kaidan was by Jenkins, likewise covered in dust. She saw him close his eyes and reach under his eye-shield and pinch the bridge of his nose.

“They just hit the exosphere,” Joker announced. “Wow look at them run. Like a bunch of scared… Oh shit!”

“What is it is Joker?” Shepard wondered.

The cheering and celebrations stopped cold, all eyes were suddenly on her again.

“The Kili fired her main gun! Core hit! Has to be! The Geth ship just exploded!”

Shepard blinked, stunned. Her mother had to be livid to order fire on a tiny frigate from the biggest mass accelerator cannon the Alliance could build a ship around. “The Kilimanjaro fired her main gun on the Geth. Core hit.”

The cheering resumed, now even some of the marines joined the celebrations, thumping each other on the shoulders and back and clinging, arms slung over shoulders, with the sort of exuberance
Shepard would not have thought them capable of given how harried they appeared just minutes before.

“First Elysium, now Eden Prime, I believe impossible odds are your specialty.” Nihlus said.

Shepard jumped; his voice was practically right over her ear. “Don’t praise me, Nihlus. This victory belongs to everyone here equally.”

“Oh. Of course.”

Shepard looked up at him, and it was like he had been waiting for that, because he grinned. Shepard returned the expression, but she did not feel it. This whole thing really did not feel like a win. Soon the cheering would abate, moods would go down, and people would realize what they had just gone through.

There would be fallout from this mess. The other shoe was yet to drop, and odds were, it would find a way to hit her over the head.

Chapter End Notes

**Author Notes:** There you have it, my twist on Eden Prime, in a manner I consider more “realistic”. As much as I love Mass Effect, in the actual game that mission was fraught with the liberal use of the idiot ball. Basically characters making basic mistakes that no one in their position and with their implied training ought to be making, just for the sake of plot direction. That or the writers were too civilian to think these things through.

**General Notes:**

**Ship Sizes** – I use a certain specific size comparison sheet for my ship sizes. Many sizes are not given in canon, and this way I have a consistent system to build up on. If you are interested, look up Euderion on DevArt. Shout-out to that person for helping me!

**Mission Scope** – I want to address this right now. When I think about Eden Prime in game, how it was staged there, compared to what the codex lists as it population numbers… Saren’s attack on Eden Prime was small, and somewhat over-inflated. I’m treating it as what it is, a shocking, brazen attack by someone no one saw in 300 years, but not “they almost wiped out the colony!” event.

**Chapter Notes:**

**QEC Communication** – Quantum Entanglement Communication uses the principles of quantum mechanics, paired particles “entangled” together, when the quantum state of one is changed, the other reacts instantly, even across vast distances. Many pairs of such particles working in tandem can send things in binary. It is expensive and limited by the fact that particles can only entangle with each other. But it’s good for secure ship-to-HQ communication.

**Sharpshooters vs. Snipers** – Ashley is a sharpshooter, Shepard is a sniper. There’s a key difference. Sharpshooters have skill with precision shooting, but they do not have the field craft skills of snipers. Said field training entails picking spots, knowing how to use the terrain, how to disguise self, how to maintain one’s hiding spot, etc. Sharpshooters are often part of a unit, helping with those tricky targets. Snipers are more
lone-wolf, and sometimes even their allies don’t know where they’re hiding.

**Gravity (g)** – G is a standard unit denoting gravity, [1g = Earth’s gravity] or [1g = 9.8 m/s²].

**Standard Atmosphere (atm)** – ATM is a standard unit for atmosphere density, and thus pressure, where [1 atm = Earth’s atmosphere]. Also measurable in bars as [1 atm = 1 bar], pascals [1 atm = 101,325 Pa], or kilopascals [1 atm = 101.325 kPa]. The latter is how it appears on weather reports.

**Exosphere** – This is the outer layer of a body’s atmosphere, where gas atoms are trapped by gravity, but they do not have the density to behave as a gas. They’re there, but too few and far in between. It is also quite universal, as even bodies with a “trace” atmosphere have a definable exosphere. Earth’s moon is an example. This makes this layer an ill-defined transitional zone in between a proper “gaseous atmosphere” and “hard vacuum”.

**Ship Mass Accelerator Cannons** – For the record, the Geth dropship is about 171m long. The Kilimanjaro-class is 1,000m long. A Dreadnought’s main gun runs the length of the ship and accelerates slugs via magnetic rails. From ME2 where we overhear a gunny drilling people on dreadnought guns we know that when the Everest-class dreadnought (888 m) fires a 20kg slug, the slug reaches a velocity around 1 – 1.3% the speed of light (1% being 2,997,924 m/s – 1.3% being 3,897,301.95 m/s). For the Kilimanjaro, being newer, I benchmark it being able to accelerate such a slug to 2% of c, to hit harder, and they can modulate the acceleration at quarter increments.
Citadel Noir [Part I]

Chapter Notes

**Disclaimer:** I do no own Mass Effect, I do not claim to own Mass Effect, I am only doing this for fun.

**Author Notes:** The fallout that Shepard suspects will follow Eden Prime is about to start falling out. Personalities will clash, cameos will be made, and intrigue shall be mongered.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**Episode 6:** Citadel Noir [Part I]

Cleaning up the mess after what happened on Eden Prime was a herculean task. The Kilimanjaro sent down a platoon of marines to secure the space port while two late-arriving platoons from the two-twelfth brigade scoured the surrounding forest for straggler geth that might have been left behind. The injured members of the two-twelfth had to be evacuated for treatment. The bodies of the casualties had to be found and counted. Jenkins’ injury did not necessitate an urgent immediate evacuation, but Kaidan and Ashley went back to the Normandy with him, as he could not walk unassisted.

Getting the beacon onto the Normandy proved to be a logistical nightmare. First, the archeologists did not want marines to touch the crate; they insisted the beacon was very fragile. From the start the Citadel members of the team were not impressed with the Spectre, and then Nihlus lost all credibility when he pointed out that the beacon had survived fifty thousand years buried, so it could probably survive transport. The salarian scientist made a number of choice comments about the ignorance of military types while glaring at Nihlus.

The dock workers scoured the port for anything that could be used to transport the beacon, but the port’s forklift was found to have been damaged in the fighting. It stuttered as it moved, and the scientists did not trust its lifting arms.

At that point Shepard had been a hair’s breadth away from pulling rank, getting a couple of the men together to carry the crate to the waiting Kodiak, arguments be damned, when she realized they had a problem much more fundamental than proper handling. The crate was simply too long to fit inside the Kodiak. No one in their saintly wisdom told her how big the bloody beacon was to begin with. She would need to call the Normandy down, and Joker would have to squeeze a two-hundred-sixteen meter ship up against a landing platform designed for much smaller craft, and hold it steady to boot. Fortunately at that time the Eighth Fleet’s SSV New York arrived, carrying a platoon from the Alliance Corps of Engineers. The gear-heads descended on the Spaceport to assess the damage, and one of them fixed the forklift’s damaged wiring.

After that, Shepard ordered the Normandy to come down. It was a tense moment as the forklift bearing the beacon made the precarious transition from the dock platform to the faintly shifting Normandy ramp. Joker was unable to touch down due to the platform’s size, so half the Normandy still hung over the edge, with only trees below. When it was all said and done Shepard mentally promised to spoil Joker even more rotten. The pilot displayed unbelievable control keeping the
Normandy’s swaying to an absolute minimum.

With the drama out of the way, the dig site staff went back to their shelters, and they could return to their ship. The Citadel staff was assigned to follow the crate, so they were hitching a ride with them. Shepard told Kaidan to show them the observation lounges on deck three, and keep them there under watch. The lieutenant nodded and made his best effort to be a gracious host in her place.

It was while standing in her shuttle bay as the ramp closed, that she noticed they gained an extra Kodiak while she was away. The Normandy’s two shuttles were still in their overhead gantry cradles, but there was a third on the deck below the one closest to the ramp. She did not need to ask EDI who their guest was. She returned her weapons to the gun cage and locked it up; there would be no rest for her yet.

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Freed from the restrictive bulk of ceramic plates and undersuit, Shepard made her way to deck three. She rounded the elevator and would have gone straight to the medbay had it not been for the fact that Jenkins was eating at the mess table, a set of crutches resting against the side, his foot once again in proper alignment, held in place by a rigid support brace. Today’s special seemed to be spaghetti and meatballs.

“Commander!” he called.


“I’m great! Give me a week and I’ll be good as new!” He stuck up a thumb for emphasis.

“He’s high on pain killers and regen stims right now,” Kaidan offered, fork-full of spaghetti halfway to his mouth.

That explained the corporal’s larger plate portion as well. “Enjoy yourself. I am glad you’re alright.” Jenkins nodded like a bobble-head.

Shepard smiled it was a giant weight off her shoulders. Almost losing one of her own, especially the youngest, made her feel guilty. It made her wonder if she had played too conservative and overly-cautious. She had only used explosives when no other option remained. The black geth’s shields took ridiculous amounts of bullets without failing; explosives within the shield envelope had been the only way. She just wished she had done it sooner. That sort of thinking was a mind-killing road-trip, she knew that, but it was very familiar commute as well. “And you, Kaidan?” she asked.

Kaidan looked up, “I’m fine, Commander, just the usual headache. I took my medicine.”

Shepard nodded, “I’m glad.” She could not imagine how it was living with some shade of a migraine each time he used his biotics at any intensity past a flicker. Yet she had seen the bright periwinkle flare when he tried to catch the crate, and again when he moved it out of the way and dispersed the grain to reach Jenkins and the marine trapped underneath.

“Take a break, Commander. Join us maybe? Matthews said the meatballs are his grandmother’s recipe, they’re good, even with the usual meat we get.”

“Thanks, but I still have things to do. How about a rain check?”

“Of course, but I’ll hold you to that,” he smiled and resumed eating.
Shepard returned the smile, but then her eyes drifted to the XO’s cabin door, wondering if Nihlus was there, but if he was, he was entitled to rest, debriefing could wait. She should probably go and find their other guest. With that she turned back to the elevator and took it up to the CIC.

The elevator made a slow ascent, but it was only one deck, hardly time enough to ponder anything profound. When the door opened it was hard to miss that the CIC shift crew was quiet. Normally they exchanged chit-chat liberally, but this time it was wholly absent. It only confirmed for Shepard that their guest made them straighten their uniforms and backs collectively. She made a sharp left to the OD and as soon as the door opened, Shepard knew she had been right.

Seated on her couch under the viewports, with a cup of tea in her hand and a tea towel draped over her lap was Captain Hannah Shepard.

“Ah, there you are. I was wondering if I needed to ask EDI to tell you I’m here.” Hannah smiled.

Shepard moved deeper into the room. “The Council’s supervisory team is aboard for the trip back; please don’t talk to EDI on deck three where they are.”

“Of course. She suggested I wait for you here. I’m a little envious.”

“Thank you, Captain Shepard.” EDI chimed in.

“Are you alright, Jocelyn?” Hannah went on.

Shepard sighed and sat down on the couch, “Yes. Just tired. It was a hellish day. Too many people died over a scrap of technology. Almost lost Jenkins too.”

“Ah yes, the corporal. I saw your marines lead him to the medbay. He’s got surprising mental fortitude, not a whimper the whole way. I assume you went to check up on him first?”

“Yes.” Shepard replied. Now she knew how long her mother had been aboard, must have been something she got out of Joker. Shepard thought of adding ‘have a word with traitorous pilot’ to her to-do list, but then decided not to. Joker had earned a reprieve. Even if he did not, he would probably have enjoyed being chewed out, before claiming Hannah pulled rank, with a smile on his face. After that he would also know that her relationship with her mother had complications.

“That’s good. I wanted to see how you were holding up, all considering. All this added pressure to make Spectre... then this. You gave everyone quite a fright. Fortunately the Kilimanjaro was near a relay when Steven called.”

“Fortunate indeed. Kili’s poor engineers did not have to scramble to pull a Carpathia.”

“Yes,” Hannah smiled. “Well onto business then-”

The OD’s door swished open loudly, “Shepard we-”

Shepard looked up sharply. Of all the rotten timings, Nihlus had to choose now. She would have wanted to keep her mother from meeting him. Perhaps a vain hope, but she had reasons. He was still in his armor, though she noticed that the grain dust was gone.

“My apologies, Commander. I was not aware you were occupied with other matters.” His eyes flicked between them.

“It’s nothing classified.” Shepard replied as she watched his most professional attitude slam down in place with the tell-tale straightening of his posture even as he stepped deeper into the room and the
door swished shut behind him. “This is Captain Hannah Shepard, SSV Kilimanjaro,” She introduced. Nihlus gave her mother a curt nod of his head. Shepard went on as if the silence settling in the room was not becoming loaded. “This is of course Council Spectre Nihlus Kryik.”

“A pleasure. And here I thought I’d have to ask. Well I won’t lie; I was interested in meeting the one to give my daughter a Spectre candidacy.” Hannah said.

Her mother’s tone was benign, her words outright polite, but Shepard knew that underneath it all was a very real second meaning. By the appraising look her mother gave Nihlus, Shepard knew that seated before the Spectre was Hannah Shepard the mother bear.

“Likewise, Captain.” Nihlus said, the flanging effect of his voice deepening into a low rumble, as he moved to stand on Shepard’s right.

Whether that meant he picked up on the subtext Shepard could not tell. She could not look up to see his expression without being too overt. She spared her mother a warning look that she hoped Nihlus would not catch.

“Pleasantries aside, shall we return to business?” Hannah began as she set her tea towel on the coffee table next to her now empty cup. “As I was saying, the Kilimanjaro will escort the Normandy to the Citadel. The New York can handle the situation planet-side.”

Shepard blinked, and suddenly it dawned on her that there was a reason why Hannah was on board, as well as her timing. The Kilimanjaro deployed her marines, she would not be able to pick them up rapidly, but now the Normandy could not run off with the Kilimanjaro’s captain aboard. Now Shepard had something to tell Joker, he would want to know that he had been played.

“An escort is unnecessary. I doubt there is an enemy flotilla waiting for us at the relay. If there was, EDI would know.” Shepard replied, hoping against hope that her mother would abandon this plan. Even if there was an enemy flotilla at the relay, Joker could run it. The Normandy’s Tantalus drive allowed it to approach the relay without using heat-emitting thrusters, essentially still rigged silent. They could fire up the main FTL drive at the last possible moment. An escort of Kilimanjaro’s size would just broadcast their presence. Her mother had to know that, right?

Hannah’s omni-tool lit up; she glanced down on it, eyes quickly scanning the incoming message. “By what I was told, though I have not been read into the full details, the Normandy is transporting a very important artifact. I am here as a representative of the Alliance. In light of recent events it is only proper for us to provide additional resources to ensure the object’s safe transport to the Citadel.”

Shepard sighed, if that was how her mother wanted to play her cards, she could do nothing against her. If she tried, her mother would pull rank. As far as reasons went, this was an official sounding excuse, a technicality, but it was enough. About the only one there who could do something about this was Nihlus. It baffled her why he did not assert his Spectre status and veto the whole thing. Just what was going on in his head? Did he not see the complications this could create?

“My marines are back aboard the Kilimanjaro. We can depart when the Normandy is ready.” Hannah added with a tone of amiable finality that indicated she thought the matter settled. “Your pilot is in communication with my XO, you only need to let him know. Now I suppose Spectre Kryik has come here with something important to discuss. I shall be on the crew deck.” With that said she got up from her seat, tugged down her uniform jacket, spared Shepard one last glance, and turned away.

Shepard watched her go with a sense of trepidation, perfectly aware of the silent Spectre next to her. In her perfect galaxy she would have loved to prevent Nihlus finding out who saved their necks
down there. In the back of her mind she feared that her mother’s antics might reflect badly on her, no matter what excuse she had. Shepard did not believe Admiral Hackett would order the Kilimanjaro to escort the Normandy, but her mother would not get reprimanded either.

The Alliance was one thing; people knew Hannah’s tendencies. To most she was eccentric and overprotective. She also had the sort of service record that earned her a pithy nickname and the right to do as she pleased. But Spectres were a whole other thing. Shepard doubted Nihlus knew the details.

There was even a possibility that Nihlus knowing might do more harm than good. Her mother had served as a First Lieutenant aboard the Everest, flagship of the Second Fleet under Admiral Kastanie Drescher during the First Contact War. She was there when they broke the blockade of Shanxi. As the ship’s chief gunner, her mother had been at the controls of the Everest’s main mass accelerator cannon during the battle, and she had done the calculations and pressed the button that scored a one in a million core hit on the blockading fleet’s flagship.

“Is there something wrong?” Shepard wondered, turning to the turian, affecting her most perfect poker face.

“What?”

“You came in at an awful rush.” She explained as she began to gather the tea things.

“Right. We have things to discuss.”

Shepard supposed they did, a debriefing and a straightening of details would not wait any longer. Eden Prime had gone to the dogs; she supposed the load fell on to the both of them to set it as straight as they could. She was not looking forward to it.

The whole return trip the Citadel had Shepard up to her eyeballs in details and things that she had to do, with Nihlus only compounding the load. Patterns bred habits, and she had already gotten used to him letting her do things her way. Now that he took control, he was as exacting as a slave-driver. Apparently this situation was a big deal; he wanted it handled right, and that meant his way. The suddenness of his attitude change almost gave her whiplash.

He had her put a rush on writing a report to the Council, her side of the story to go along with his. On top of that, he wanted her present when he met with them, to make formal introductions. Shepard would have actually bought that excuse had he not proceeded to ask questions about some of the decisions she made.

He could grin roguishly, make small talk, and he probably thought he was being subtle, but she was versed in lies by omission, half-truths, and vague hints. She also had a mother whose words and actions always concealed something in the subtext. He was not asking for his benefit, Shepard would bet he expected the Council to ask those same questions.

She managed to finish the report in time to make a transmission, and after that she even finished her report to Admiral Hackett. Good thing too, since while doing it she realized that with Jenkins out for a week with a mending ankle she had a logistical conundrum. Fact was, unlike her mother who had whole platoons of marines to deploy, Shepard had a tenth of one platoon. If she was going to be pulling tough jobs like Eden Prime on a small-cell spec-ops basis, she needed a bigger team, a wider array of skill. She also could not expect her marines to do Spectre-caliber jobs involving murderous robots day in and day out without stress getting to them. She needed to discuss the matter with the
When they made approach on the Citadel, the Kilimanjaro remained outside the ward arms. The Citadel did not have a cradle big enough for a ship as large as the Kilimanjaro. At one kilometer long, the Kilimanjaro was one forty-fourth the length of the Ward arms, and almost one thirteenth the diameter of the station in its open configuration. Alliance ships her size had a flotilla of runabout shuttles to ply distances.

The Normandy got priority docking, nose-bleed close to the Presidium, due to Nihlus’ special clearances, and Shepard could not be happier for it. The scientists aboard were eager to get the Prothean beacon into a secure vault, and Shepard was eager to have them off her ship.

The ship was barely locked down with docking clamps when Nihlus’ omni-tool lit up with a message from the council’s Chief Secretary, essentially a summons. Thus an hour after docking Shepard was in her blue officer’s uniform and down at the airlock. It was hard to miss the contingent of C-sec in addition to the marines, effectively doubling the dock security. There were quite a few turians among this detachment, and it made Shepard nervous. She just hoped that the Alliance jarheads did not start an incident over something as petty as someone looking in the wrong place. She did not want a mess on her dock; someone would point the finger and blame her just for good measure.

When she caught up to Nihlus, he had one of the Skycabs open and waiting. He was also armed, which made her feel exposed in comparison. Of course coming in her armor had been out of the question.

“Any last minute advice, coach?” She asked as she slipped into the front passenger seat.

“Keep your details consistent,” he replied as he input commands to the VI driver. A second later the doors slid shut and the cab took off.

Shepard hummed; that was his business tone, deeper, and much cooler than the normal teasing lilt. If he was keeping to his professional persona around her, then something made him wary. That only set her even more on edge.

The scenery whizzed past them as the Skycab climbed into the high-speed lanes heading toward the Presidium entrance tunnel. Soon enough they were inside, with walls flashing past them at dizzyingly speed. Her mind churned through the possibilities, but one thing was clear. Unless the Council was out for her blood from the get go, there was just no reason she should expect trouble.

By the time the Skycab exited the transit tunnel onto the presidium proper, Shepard wrangled her poker face into place. The car finally slowed down and dropped altitude, turning on the spot to slowly ease itself down onto a small landing pad by a kiosk situated right next to the tower’s main elevator. Barely a second after touching down the cab’s doors hissed up. Shepard climbed out and tugged down on her uniform jacket before checking on the toggles that held it shut. When Nihlus moved ahead of her, she fell in step. They waited for the elevator in absolute silence, and it lingered the whole long ride up. She was officially nervous.

The doors finally opened and Shepard stepped out into the narthex, only giving her surroundings a cursory glance as they walked through, up the first staircase and into the nave. The top of the tower was the same grey of the rest of the Presidium, but the décor was trying to make a station feel more like a planet, complete with large planter boxes that contained actual trees. Shepard saw the unmistakable pink blossoms of a Japanese cherry tree in one, and nearby a broad-leafed specimen currently being misted. The fake rain-mist hinted it should have been in a jungle, probably Sur’Kesh. These seemed to have been transplants from a number of Council Space planets.
There were people milling about the nave, but no one paid them any sort of lingering attention. Some were busy on their communicators and Omni-tools, others in private conversation. The galleries leading to the side-offices were empty and quiet. Nihlus did not stop; he went right up, ascending the second set of stairs that led toward the Council apse. Shepard hung back a good two steps.

The wonder of politicians was that they all carried themselves with the gravitas they deemed appropriate, and it was the same regardless of what species they were. Shepard could practically see it radiating from the councilors as soon as she laid her eyes on them. They stood in a loose cluster, discussing something in tones so low that she could barely hear, let alone hope for her translator to pick up.

Ambassador Udina was there, which did not surprise her at all. He turned when they made an approach toward the center platform, and just the speed with which his eyes landed on her reminded her that the Council was not her only problem right now, perhaps not even the main one.

Nihlus had given her the basics of who is who; he warned her that of the three councilors she had to watch out for Valern, the Salarian councilor, when it came to any argument of reasoning. He could easily pick things apart if he fancied the need for it. Shepard did not say it, but she thought she might have more of an issue with Sparatus, the Turian councilor, who according to Nihlus was conservative and traditional. To her that meant he was a military man and probably some shade of not a fan of humanity. About the only one Shepard though might not be out for her head from the get-go was Tevos, the Asari councilor. Nihlus said she was rarely overt in confronting things, and tended to mediate between the other two when they clashed. Tevos noticed them first, stepping back from the huddle.

“Agent Kryik,” she greeted with a faint smile, though perhaps it was less friendly and more simply pleased. She looked rather stately in her white and red long-sleeved, high-collared maxi-dress which brought out the electric violet hue of her skin.

“Councilors,” Nihlus acknowledged.

“And Commander Shepard, of course.” Tevos shifted her gaze.

Shepard slipped into a comfortable parade rest, “Councilors,” she echoed. “The Normandy has returned, the package is safely aboard along with a two-member science team assigned to it, as per request.” Well it was more of an order, but she did not want to use the word.

“Thank you, Commander.” Tevos replied.

“That brings us to the topic of the geth attack on Eden Prime,” Udina stepped in before any of them could draw a breath. “Thirteen marines, three scientists, and four dock workers were killed.” Udina stated.

Shepard knew a pre-meditated attack when she saw one. She genuinely wished he did not use her as a springboard. Truthfully she trusted Udina only as far as she could throw him, and since she was not a biotic, that was not far. Perhaps she was petty, but she did not want to benefit him.

“An unfortunate circumstance, Ambassador.” Tevos replied.

“We have a right to know what happened! The Geth knew of the artifact!”

“A full C-sec investigation into the matter has been launched.” Valern stepped in. His dark eyes locked on Udina. By dint of the cranial horns Valern was probably the tallest of the three, clad in very dark blue, nearly black hooded robe-like outfit with a central panel of red trimmed with gold.
The whole ensemble revealed only his granite-grey face.

“Further discussion will be held when the investigation is complete.” Sparatus added.

Shepard knew a political stonewall when she saw one, and this one was ten meters up, another meter thick, and topped with electrified barbwire. From the corner of her eye she could practically see Udina’s blood pressure climb. He could read the writing on the masonry too, for once.

Shepard had every reason to think there had to have been a leak somewhere. There was no other way the information could have gotten out. If Nihlus was right and few people knew about the beacon then the suspect list was not terribly long. If the Council refused to deal with the Alliance as a victim from the onset, then they were going to pursue the Alliance suspects as well. The Council would stall if they did not have all the cards. Udina would get nothing more than a hernia if he kept pressing now.

“Rest assured, Ambassador, we want to know what happened as much as you do,” Tevos added calmly.

Udina did not look convinced. Shepard did not blame him. That was such a typical platitude.

“I believe that concludes this topic,” Sparatus said.

Udina practically bristled at that less-than-covert dismissal. Shepard would give the Sparatus props for efficiency. Her gaze slid over to Nihlus, and in that moment she realized that despite the fact that he was standing there, still as a pillar, arms at his sides, he was watching her. She raised an eyebrow just a little bit, as if to ask “what?” which caused his mandibles to give just a faint little twitch. Suddenly Shepard became acutely aware that the Spectre was amused and trying his best not to show it.

Udina turned and spared her a glare so cold it could have frozen her blood, had she not been on the receiving end of such looks for years. Shepard kept her poker face perfectly flat, which seemed to irk Udina further. As he walked past her, she listened for his footsteps to fade; she did not need her eyes to know where he was.

She could not help but think how right Nihlus had been in his description of Sparatus. The turian’s voice carried rigidity and severity. She was honestly surprised he was not in armor; the midnight blue, burgundy, and white trimmed tunic outfit he wore was not nearly as military as Shepard expected. Still, it looked to have been carefully enough chosen, as it flattered his chocolate colored plates and white colonial markings.

“Agent Kryik, Commander,” Tevos began, snapping Shepard out of her thoughts.

“We read your report, Commander, but there is an outstanding issue with the dreadnought that arrived as your backup.” Sparatus launched.

There we go, she thought; grill Shepard time. This was what Nihlus expected and prepared her for. She was a Spectre prospect; this would probably be part of her evaluation. The Council would want to know that her mind had no screws loose and rattling.

“While your decision to relay the distress call was tactically sound, given the limited fighting force on board your ship, is it standard procedure to call in a *dreadnought*?”

“Saying that I called in a dreadnought implies I have the authority to do so, which I do not. I merely relayed the distress call to the attention of my commanding officer, Admiral Steven Hackett. As commanding officer of the Fifth Fleet, he made the decision which ship to send. The Kilimanjaro
happened to be in proximity to a relay, and is capable of rapid response to major ground attacks as well as providing orbital support.”

“So you did not request the assistance of the Kilimanjaro because its commanding officer is your relative?”

There was the crux of the matter then. Shepard suddenly wished that the Admiral had sent a whole flotilla or anything else over the Kili, because that would have looked a lot less damning than this. The Council would want to know that she did not rely on her mother whenever the going got tough. “No, sir. As I’ve already said, the decision of ship deployment is not within my rank privilege.”

“Do the responders know the contents of the crate you were transporting?” Valern wondered.

“No, sir. It was referred to as a ‘package’ throughout. The only ones who do know the contents are Spectre Kryik, me, the three marines under my command, the survivors of the third platoon of the two-twelfth brigade, Eden Prime garrison, the dock workers, and the scientists. The compromise happened when the black geth unit we encountered referred to the object by name while making its demands. Neither the marines dispatched by the Kilimanjaro nor the Alliance engineers of the SSV New York were told. By then Spectre Kryik and I ensured the survivors were ordered to maintain secrecy.”

“Is this true, Agent Kryik?” Valern asked.

“Every word.” Nihlus replied.

Shepard was suddenly glad that Nihlus had quizzed her. Going over the details with him had done wonders to order her thinking. Perhaps hashing over every little detail was redundant, much of it was in her report, but it made it clear that she could cover her bases.

“Very well. This of course does not explain how it got out,” Tevos said.

“The leak did not come from the Normandy.”

“Stop right there, Agent Kryik.” Sparatus interrupted.

Out of the corner of her eyes Shepard noted that Nihlus had not so much as twitched. Sparatus’ tone was full of annoyance; Valern was outright glaring, but Tevos was looking right at her instead. Shepard remained in her parade rest stance, eyes locked forward, a picture of Alliance discipline. She had not been the source of the information leak. If the asari thought she would catch Shepard sweating bullets, she better not hold her breath. Shepard worried more about C-sec digging too deep and finding EDI.

Then there was the question of what angle Nihlus was playing in all of this. There had to be an angle. Nihlus must have known he would get rebuffed for saying what he did, so why raise the topic? On the surface it might come off as him favoring a would-be-protégé, perhaps to be expected, but there was more to it. Her gut instinct said he was making sure the Council showed their suspicions. She could have done without though; she knew she was on the suspect list.

“Commander, we expect the Normandy to remain on the Citadel for a few days, but you are free to go,” Tevos announced.

“Thank you, Councilors.” Shepard replied automatically. Nihlus really did not need to put on a show. Even if the Council had been accommodating with Udina, the request that the Normandy stay put for a few days would have clued her in.
Still, it was a polite dismissal on their part, more than Udina got. In the balance of things, it looked like she was not yet neck deep in the mud. She snapped to attention, turned, and walked away. As she made her way back toward the stairs she heard a set of heavy boot-falls behind her, but did not pause, and it was only by the dint of his longer legs and strides that Nihlus caught up with her.

“It looks like you are on their suspect list.”

Shepard looked out over the tower nave before she descended the stairs slowly. “I knew the suspect list included Alliance the moment Udina received that rather… brusque brush-off. After that the possibilities are few.” It only made too much sense that the list would include her. After all, every person who knew about the beacon leading up to the attack was a potential leak. If C-sec was worth their salt, they would investigate literally everyone.

“You are not bothered.”

“Should I be?” she looked up, meeting his gaze. “I didn’t leak.”

“I know you did not leak.”

Shepard raised an eyebrow.

“When did I tell you about the beacon?” he asked.

“Nine hours before we got the distress call.”

The elevator that would take them back to the Presidium was ahead. Nihlus hummed a quiet sort of assent that did not require a translator to understand. Shepard tipped her head and watched him, had Nihlus just told her what to say to the investigators? She knew better than to ask, the Presidium Tower was hardly a place to collude. There was no telling who had eyes and ears on them. Call her paranoid, but she would not have even breached the topic here to begin with. Then again, maybe she was over-thinking, and breaching it here was entirely the point. Someone with nothing to hide would not think in terms of secrecy. She had no way of knowing which way Nihlus’ thinking fell right at that moment.

“Fortunately C-sec will not take long to come looking for you,” he said after a long silence.

“Why?” Shepard wondered.

“You are a Spectre candidate. This is the best opportunity they will have to try and prove you are corrupt,” he replied with a flick of his mandibles. “The Spectres and C-sec have a long, proud tradition of rivalry.”

Shepard hummed. She had taken a side, and so he was helping part because he did not want C-sec to have their way. Somehow she doubted C-sec would pursue the rivalry as far as to ruin a candidate’s name out of spite.

“When all of this is over, what do you say to drinks? I think we deserve it.”

“With my track record, there will not be a ‘when all of this is over’. There’s always something.” Shepard replied looking up at him. The elevator dinged, announcing its arrival, the door swished open.

“You are never done with duties?” he wondered.

“Ask not whether I am done with duties; ask if they are ever done with me,” Shepard replied as she
turned away. A jolt passed through her when she realized the elevator cabin was not empty. Standing before her was a turian in white armor detailed in black. She sidestepped even as she looked up, briefly meeting a pair of bright silver eyes set against almost white plates and skin. The lack of even a hint of contrast was as unique about him as the long zygomatic plate extensions that arced back toward his fringe.


“Nihlus,” he replied as he brushed past her.

Shepard tipped her head to the side and automatically stuck her arm into the doorway, preventing the elevator from closing. She caught Nihlus’ gaze and quirked an eyebrow. His eyes darted between them, and Shepard could have sworn she saw his mandibles draw up tighter to his jaw for a split second. Her eyes shifted back to the other, only to meet that disconcerting stare of his. Really, what was today, glare-at-Shepard day?

“Saren, this is Commander Shepard, Spectre candidate.” Nihlus introduced. “Shepard, this is Saren Arterius, the longest serving active Spectre in the corps.”

The name rang a bell somewhere in the back of her mind but she could not place her finger on it. Nevertheless, she supposed that some respect was due. “It’s a pleasure to meet you,” she said calmly.

“What is it that Humans say, the pleasure is all yours?” he replied flatly.

Shepard was proud to say that she only quirked an eyebrow. The cold indifference in his eyes mixed with the haughty tone affirmed that he did not get the idiom wrong accidently, he intentionally reversed it. “Yes, so it would seem.” Two could play that game.

She glanced around him at Nihlus; he was watching her with that piercing evaluation stare of his. Not that she expected him to come to her defense, she did not need him to, but at least she knew that he was not clueless. “Well, if you excuse me, I’ve got important business to attend to,” she kept her voice flat, but she did mean the suggestion. She had better things to do than be insulted to her face. She turned and stepped into the elevator and tapped the console for the base level.

She was rewarded with a barely audible hum in a register decidedly different from Nihlus’ as the doors begun to close. Then footsteps, and just before the doors shut they opened again with a ding. Shepard was acutely aware of a presence behind her. Finally, the doors closed again and a moment later the elevator began to move.

“Shepard?” Nihlus wondered.

She turned to face him and looked up to meet his gaze. He was scrutinizing her again, the angle of his head played with the lighting of the elevator, casting shadows on his plates, making his eyes even brighter than normal in comparison. It was an almost ominous effect. “Is something wrong?” she wondered.

“No, nothing.” He replied, quietly now, and looked away.

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From what Nihlus said, Shepard thought she could expect a call from C-sec any moment, and yet her day ended up tiring simply due to an overload of things to do. She managed to return to the Normandy, oversee the transfer of the beacon into the hands of a Council-assigned team of scientists and guards, finish the routine paperwork, and even assign leave shifts. All of it was done without being accosted by any officers in blue. It was very uncomfortable to be ready for bad news, and not
have it come, despite knowing that it must inevitably come. Her whole routine seemed somehow off.

When the summons did not come to report somewhere bright and early Citadel time the next morning, Shepard decided to go on with her life. Thus she had her breakfast; Matthews made scrambled eggs because she asked. Then an hour after breakfast she was down in the shuttle bay in her snug grey sweatpants, sport bra crop-top fooler, and running shoes on the treadmill to do her cardio. The shuttle bay was deserted, just her and the hum of the treadmill’s motors. About forty minutes later she had her run, and switched to the more intensive session, hands and feet bound as she pounded reps into the heavy weight bag.

It was in another half an hour, when she was half way through her rapid-speed sets, when she heard a scratch from the intercom. “Ugh... Commander?” Joker’s voice was full of wariness.

“What is it?” Shepard asked in between punches.

“There are two C-sec investigators outside. I think they want to talk to you.”

Shepard stopped and let her arms drop to her sides. “Have someone direct them to the shuttle bay, but not through the ship,” she replied.

“Figured you’d say that.” Joker replied. “Have fun, Commander.”

“Yes, about as much fun as bullet removal without anesthesia,” Shepard replied blandly.

“Ouch. Experience?” Joker wondered.

“Twice. I’ll talk to you later, Joker.”

“Roger that.” He replied.

Shepard moved to the bench, grabbed her cooling towel, and slung it around her neck. She had time enough to undo her foot wraps and slip on her running shoes when she saw two figures at the base of the shuttle bay’s lowered ramp. Two unmistakably turian figures at that. Another thing she should have expected. C-sec may have accepted humans into their ranks, at nearly every level, but this was still a thorny issue. The people in charge would not let a human detective investigate this. They had plenty of impartial Turian detectives to send onto an Alliance ship to rattle some trees.

She made her way toward the ramp, water bottle in hand. This allowed her to inspect the two investigators. Both wore C-sec regulation blue and black armor. The turian on the left was of a relatively uniform stone-white coloration with bright lime-green eyes and lines of sky blue across his chin and mandibles. His partner was more ash-grey, with tan-tinted skin, bright blue eyes, and royal blue markings across his cheeks, nose, and mandibles. He also wore a visor, which automatically told Shepard whom to watch out for. Visors could do the same job as a helmet HUD, picking up life signs, and in the hands of someone clever, function as a lie detector.

When the officers began to walk up the ramp, two of the marines moved to block them. Shepard reacted instantly, “Corporals, let the officers pass! This is an authorized visit.”

“Yes, ma’am!” the marines stepped aside.

The two officers did not spare the marines any more attention as they came up. Shepard took a long drink from her bottle and affected her best air of nonchalance.

“Commander Shepard?” The officer on the right began.
“Indeed.”

“Detective Garrus Vakarian. This is Detective Decian Chellik. We are investigating the events leading up to what happened on Eden Prime. May we talk?”

“Yes, of course. Come on in.” She motioned for them to follow her as she led the way into the depth of the shuttle bay, away from the prying ears of the marines guarding the ship. “What can I do for you, detectives?” Maybe that was a given question, she knew what they wanted, but she also knew that law enforcement officers did not like people who knew too much.

“We looked at the report you submitted to the Council,” Chellik began a few steps out. “There were a few questions we wanted to ask.”

Shepard had a few ideas about what sort of questions those were, the crux of the matter was that they were mixed with other sensitive things, which created a few natural problems that she would have to resolve if she was to cooperate.

“How many of your crew knew about the contents of the crate?” Vakarian asked.

Shepard stopped and glanced back. “That’s in my report. Three, but strictly-speaking four. Spectre Kryik and the three marines who went on the mission under my command.”

“Of course. We did not count the Spectre as a member of your crew. When did you tell your marines about the package?” he went on.

Nihlus had known the conversation would go this way. Chronology was a concern in such matters. “Literally within the hour before we received a distress call from Eden Prime,” Shepard replied.

“And when were you appraised to the existence of the beacon?” Chellik asked.

“Eight hours before that. I decided to brief the marines just before we deployed. My rationale was that it was to be a routine mission, a basic secure, transfer, and transport job. It was sensitive, yes, but hardly requiring long tactical assessments and pre-planning meetings. It should not have required the drawing of weapons, let alone what it ended up being.”

“And what were you doing for those eight hours?”

“Sleeping.” Shepard replied without a pause. Really, what did they think she was doing on a ship in transit? “This ship operates on Terran Standard; our transit to Eden Prime coincided with our night cycle.” She did not know how Nihlus spent his eight hours, but she assumed he slept some part of it. Let the detectives wrangle the details out of him on their own.

“We need access to the Normandy’s communication logs to confirm things,” Vakarian added.

There we go, Shepard thought. They were going to dig deeper than she would have liked. “I can have them ready for you in ten minutes,” she said.

The elevator opened behind them and she heard a by-now familiar set of footsteps, heavier than any human and slightly different pitched. “Am I interrupting?”

Shepard glanced back and spotted Nihlus making his approach, his hands behind his back. She was surprised that he was out of his armor, opting for a black and silver tunic outfit, which did a number to slim his frame and remove some of the intimidation factor. He also moved with a sort of strut that said he was at home. As he drew nearer, she realized that under the nonchalance was something else, his eyes were locked on the officers like a predator might watch prey.
“Not at all, Nihlus. These officers are here about the leak.”

“Finally.”

With one word Nihlus shifted from aloof to antagonizing the detectives to their face; suddenly Shepard could not help but wonder if there was something not quite right with his head. Sure he had some degree of immunity, but she did not.

“Right, communication logs, I should go get those,” she did not want to be in the same room if he decided to start something with C-sec, more deniability that way. If that made her a coward then she was a coward. She was not even going to try and mediate it, because it would only look worse.

“No need, I have them right here,” Nihlus brought his hand from behind his back, brandishing an optical storage disk. “I expected C-sec to come for these, so I had the communications officer prepare them.” He explained.

Shepard glared while the detectives were behind her and unable to see it. What gave him the idea that he could order EDI to do anything? Better yet, why did EDI even listen to him? He just about boxed her into a corner as well, as she could not yank the OSD from his hand. If it contained anything more than communication logs or if EDI had not cleaned them up to conceal herself… no, she would have to trust EDI. The fact that Nihlus had the data at all meant he had asked for it. If he had gone accessing it on his own EDI would have shut him out.

When she glanced back at the detectives she noticed both had their eyes locked on the Spectre, though he did not seem to be bothered at all as he stepped past her and handed Chellik the OSD.

“You will not find anything compromising to this ship or its crew in those logs.” Nihlus announced in all seriousness.

“That is for us to ascertain. If we find out you are covering for something, Kryik-” The other detective snapped, glaring at the Spectre.

“Careful, it sounds like you suspect me already.” Nihlus’ tone dripped with a sort of saccharine venom.

“Vakarian, do not compromise this.” Chellik warned.

“Like mentor, like protégé.” Vakarian said, ignoring his partner’s warning tone.

Nihlus’ mandibles widened into a grin, “if you cannot see the difference already, my opinion of C-sec’s competence needs adjustment. I was overrating.”

Shepard honestly did not know what to do right now. This was officially past mere antagonism and straight into the territory of first salvos fired, and she was right in the middle of no-man’s land.

She watched as Chellik tucked the OSD into an evidence sleeve and then into a compartment in his armor. Shepard could not shake the fear that the drive contained more than just communication logs. Would Nihlus blow the whistle now? She knew better than to show any sign of nervousness, even if both detectives seemed distracted. Nihlus had folded his arms over his chest and was still glaring down Vakarian.

“I only knew about the beacon a two hours before I told the Commander. The window for either of us to have leaked anything is small.” Nihlus added.

“We appreciate your cooperation,” Chellik said. “Commander, we should be done with these in a
few hours. If we have any more questions can we count on your cooperation?”

“The Normandy will still be here, detectives.”

“Thank you.”

Vakarian gave Nihlus one last withering look, and then turned to follow his partner toward the ramp. Shepard watched them go, playing with the towel slung around her neck. Knowing Turian hearing, she would not risk saying a word to Nihlus before she was a hundred percent sure the detectives were out of ear-shot.

“I know what you are going to say,” Nihlus said when the detectives stepped off the shuttle bay’s ramp.

“You seem to know a lot.” Shepard replied as she turned and approached her discarded wraps. Did she want to finish her reps? Taking her anger out on the punching bag would be better than taking it out on Nihlus. She closed her eyes and took a slow, deep breath. Still, she knew that while it would be preferable to take this out on the punching bag, it would not work in the long run. Enough was enough; Nihlus thought he had the run of her ship. She turned around and looked him right in the eye.

“Shepard…”

“The communication logs were not yours to access.”

“And I did not access them,” Nihlus replied. “I provided EDI with an OSD and asked her to create a copy within a timeframe, from the time I received the Council’s transmission up to now.”

Shepard blinked, “EDI?”

“He is truthful, Commander. I was provided with an optical storage disk and I created a copy of the logs within the requested time-frame. Spectre Kryik kept the device on his person for forty-three minutes. In that time I observed no attempts to access or modify its contents. Furthermore, my initial scan of the drive revealed no hidden data or messages which might compromise the Normandy, the crew, or commanding officer. Had there been such hidden material, I would have refused to comply with the request and notified you immediately.”

“See?” Nihlus said, grinning.

“Furthermore,” EDI went on, “I masked my existence in the logs.”

Shepard blinked, stunned. Nihlus had actually thought of all the obvious angles. “And should they want to talk to the communications officer?” she asked.

“That is the part where I might have overstepped my bounds.”

Only then? Why so humble, Nihlus? Shepard wondered.

“Spectre Kryik requested that I ask Staff Lieutenant Alenko to fill in the role.”

“And?” Shepard asked. How far did he organize this conspiracy behind her back?

“Staff Lieutenant Alenko agreed to play the role, should it be required.”

“Harmless subterfuge.” Nihlus finished. “You and I both know there is nothing inherently incriminating in those logs. We did not leak.”
If that was harmless subterfuge, Shepard did not want to know what constituted harmful in his books. Nihlus’ was playing games with people, again, and behind her back at that. She sighed and tugged on the towel around her neck. Was there something she could do about it now? No. The sly bastard pulled a fast one on her as much as he pulled it on the detectives. She could not very well go off running after the detectives to get the OSD back. How would she explain that? “Alright, and the whole pissing contest with C-sec?”

“Pissing contest?” Nihlus wondered.

“I saw two males provoke each other, and then almost come to blows. I call it as I see it.”

“Humans and your… colorful metaphors.”

“Turians and your… evasion of questions.”

“Alright,” he chuckled. “I told you Spectres and C-sec have a rivalry, right? I could not let them think I was cooperating too freely. I have a reputation.”

Shepard hummed, he had a reputation huh? He antagonized two detectives just for the heck of it? What was it that the detective slang at him? She was sure it meant to be an insult, but it was an awfully specific one. Shepard wondered, just who had mentored Nihlus? For that matter she realized there were lots of things she did not know about him. The gulf there was yet to be bridged, and now she knew that it spanned some very murky water. Did she even want to invest in a bridge?

“You went above my head on this. The Normandy is my ship, Nihlus. I understand that you thought you were helping, but… if I’m going to be a Spectre I need to be able to dig myself out of such messes. What happened to self-reliance?” She would use his logic against him if she had to. It was preferable to showing her anger.

“Understood, Commander,” he grinned.

Shepard had the distinct feeling that she should not buy his words. This turian was unlike any she had met. As a rule they seemed to have a tampered pride in their work and achievements. The tampering process added a certain amount of humility; they only took credit where credit was due, and never waved things above anyone else for the heck of it. If it was one’s duty to do something, there was no point in lording it over others. Because of that she had never met one she would call an overt, overbearing braggart. Nihlus seemed to lack some of that humility, openly reveling in his power with a certain hauteur that was impossible to miss.

She picked up her foot wraps and straightened them out before she sat down on the bench, took off her shoes, and proceeded to do up the wraps. There were still a few sets to do on the bag, and skipping sets was not something she did. Right now she could use them as a way to cool her temper. She was tucking in the ends when she heard a ping and realized that Nihlus was still there. Her concentration on getting the tension and fit just right had effectively made her forget that for once she was not alone. When she looked up he had his omni-tool up, a message of some sort has arrived, and judging from the way his mandibles were drawn up tight against his jaw, it was not good.

“Something wrong?” she asked.

Nihlus looked up sharply and lowered his arm, his omni-tool turning off. “No, just… Saren wants to meet and talk.”

“Ah.” Shepard replied. “We’ll be on the Citadel for a few days. You know that.” She could not expect him to ignore acquaintances, even if they had been unpleasant to her.
Shepard hummed as she moved toward the punching bag. Somehow she had the impression that he wanted it to wait. Why? She could not very well ask, but her instinct told her that there was a reason.

Chapter End Notes

**Author Notes:** Here’s Garrus. Nihlus is scheming and having his fun at C-sec’s expense… and then there’s Saren. The cogs of this machine keep turning. The episode title pays homage to my love for hardboiled detective film noir, where no one, not even the detective himself, is without some serious issues and flaws. It oddly felt appropriate, what with the personalities involved.

**General Notes:**
- **Saren** – For the record, I think all his cybernetics were reaper tech. Thus he does not have any in this canon. Also, I don’t plan to make him any less of a dangerously intelligent, disciplined, ruthless magnificent bastard who hates humans for rather petty reasons. No one’s perfect.

**Chapter Notes:**
- **RMS Carpathia** – This was the ship that picked up the Titanic survivors. When she received the Titanic’s distress call, her captain had unnecessary things (heating, hot water, etc.) shut down to divert all steam to her engines, to get all speed (+3.5 knots) out of her, normally 17.5 knots.
The next day, with the Normandy effectively bound to the Citadel until the leak investigation either concluded or they were let off the hook, Shepard extended twelve hour leave rotations for everyone aboard. Jenkins was already using just one crutch and putting some of his weight on his injured ankle. He was freely enjoying his leave with few limitations and boundless energy, which was more than she could say for herself. Shepard spent some time formulating her written tactical assessment slash request regarding the manpower situation aboard. She had EDI wire that request as soon as she was reasonably happy with it.

After that she dedicated her hours to operational reports and her routine. She spent that whole day working in the OD, going through the paperwork and jotting things as detailed as possible in the ship’s logs. Matthews popped in sometimes after lunch with a tray of food, saying he fully expected her not to come down to the mess. That was hours ago and she was still up to her eyeballs in things when a scratch over the internal communication system caused her to lower the pad in her hand.

“Commander, Admiral Hackett wishes to speak with you,” EDI announced.

“Thank you, EDI.”

“Of course, Commander.”

Shepard got to her feet and made her way to the COMCON, adjusting her fatigues as she went. She stepped into the room, and almost immediately after the doors closed there was a hum as the holographic communicator came to life. The admiral appeared over the conference desk, seated, and holding a pad in his hand that Shepard knew must be her request. Instinctively she snapped to attention and saluted. “Admiral Hackett, sir!”

“At ease, Commander,” the admiral replied.

Shepard slipped into her parade rest without further ado.

“I read your request for additional manpower,” the admiral continued as he leveled his gaze on her the best he could over a holographic projector and the light-years of space. “I am surprised this was not on my desk a week ago.”

“A week ago expectations were quite a bit different, sir. My position as a Spectre candidate and then
Eden Prime altered the operation parameters. Eden Prime was a situation that even multiple N7s would not find easy. I cannot ask my three marines to execute such jobs time and time again.”

“I will not refute any of it,” the admiral replied.

Shepard thought she could hear a ‘but’ coming. This was where he shot her down in flames as gently as possible.

“Unfortunately the nature of your mission for me remains much the same, and your command is still controversial.”

“I understand, sir.” Shepard replied. She knew it, there had been a ‘but’ in there, and she knew what ‘controversial’ meant. At the end of the day, superiors could contemplate a reassignment, but unless it was punishment, the individuals had the right to refuse. The Normandy was hardly the Kilimanjaro. If anything, the Normandy might be the least desired posting in the Fifth Fleet.

The admiral actually sighed, bringing Shepard out of her muse. He must have seen her dawning realization that she would not get any additional Alliance marines assigned, and no volunteers had clamored for the posting at his door either. “There is another option. I am willing to allow you to build a team under contract, with pay from the operational budget.”

Shepard blinked, stupefied. The admiral would allow her to build her own team?

“I stress that I want you to be absolutely sure you can trust the people you bring aboard. The Normandy’s secrets are still your responsibility.”

She should have expected this caveat. It was not rare that Alliance ships hired outsourced specialists to fill specific skill gaps. Half the science officers were not formally Alliance navy and ought not to be called officers, but they were. Sometimes they were hired and dismissed at the discretion of the commanding officer. Yet her position was much more sensitive. The Normandy was a top-secret vessel, rather unpopular as a posting, and with an unclear mission directive. What more, she knew the subtext of that option. If something went wrong; the blame would land on her head.

She watched the admiral type some commands on a terminal that the communicator was not to show. “I will send you the paperwork that any addition to the Normandy’s crew has to sign, including a strict confidentiality contract. If they are unwilling to sign, they are not to be allowed on the Normandy.”

“Of course, sir. Should I request Spectre Kryik sign as well?”

“If he will. It would make his position on board official. But due to his status do not force the issue.”

“Understood, sir.” She replied coolly. In other words it was up to her discretion whether to ask Nihlus to sign or not. Shepard did not have high hopes. Such an agreement would effectively put the Spectre under the authority umbrella of the Alliance, but Spectres were supposed to serve only the Council. There was potential for a conflict even before one considered Nihlus’ temperament. He did not strike her as the contract-signing type.

“I know your job just got a lot harder.” Hackett continued, his tone becoming noticeably less authoritarian. “What happened on Eden Prime was a mess, but you handled it as best as you could, and that was a damn fine job. The Council has their shiny new toy and no one under your command was permanently hurt. You should be proud of every single individual on your team. Don’t beat yourself up over the what-ifs and maybes.”

Shepard’s jaw hung open, “You’ve talked to my mother, sir.”
“Words were said,” he replied after a pause.

That was parlance for her mother going beyond rank privilege as only she could get away with.

“Now, if you have any more problems, I want to know. I did not give you this command to punish you.”

“Thank you, sir. I’ll keep it in mind.”

“Good. Hackett out.”

The link disconnected and the communicator powered down. Shepard relaxed her stance and sighed. That had gone better than she would have expected, but worse as well. She could not say she expected more marines to round out her team, but disappointment still stung. Nevertheless, now she could collect her own talent pool, even though she did not know where to begin recruiting. It was not like she could take out an ad on the Extranet for it. Then there was the serious issue of command and operational parameters. Her training in ICT emphasized making the most of small numbers. Unfortunately, it was an unequivocal truth that raw skill, dependability, and willingness to work for less were usually mutually exclusive.

She exited the COMCON and made her way back to the OD and the logs she had been working on. Five minutes later she heard her terminal ping from the desk; she knew those must be the contracts. There was always some sort of delay as secured transmissions had to filter through the comm buoy network and then EDI’s protocols.

It was another hour before Shepard was done with the paperwork and not a moment too soon as far as she was concerned. As pathetic as it was for a sniper to admit, she had no patience for paperwork. She could lie still in a blind for hours, but give her backlog of petty paperwork, and she wanted no part of it. One glance at her Omni-tool’s watch told her that it was almost dinner time.

As she gathered her pads into a neat pile and moved them back to the desk, she thought she really ought to go and eat with the crew, at the very least save Matthews the trip up. She exited the OD and moved toward the elevator. The elevator proved to be on the CIC, surprisingly, so the trip down a deck only took a day short of forever. As she rounded the shaft block she was not surprised to see that though Matthews was still busy stirring dinner, the mess hall was not empty.

Kaidan was there with what looked like his appetizer course, a cold-cut sandwich. Well she did promise him a rain check, so why not. She really ought to thank him for taking one for the team and agreeing to play the role of the communications officer too.

“Commander.” Kaidan said as she sat down across from him.

“Hey, Kaidan,” Shepard replied. “Mind if I join you?”

“Of course not, why would I?” he replied.

Shepard smiled a little. “Thanks. Double thanks for agreeing to play the comm officer.”

“No problem. Someone has to step in. It makes sense for it to be me, and I’ll do it, even if the idea comes from our resident Spook.”

Shepard froze.

Kaidan glanced at the XO cabin door, as if checking that the turian was not within ear shot. “No disrespect meant, ma’am, but it’s obvious. If the idea had been yours, you would’ve requested it in
person, not through EDI. And you wouldn’t be thanking me for it.”

Sometimes Shepard forgot how observant Kaidan was. Because of his introverted nature he flew under people’s radars. “Yea… got me there. Just how many people are using ‘Spook’ for him?” she wondered.

“A good few.” Kaidan replied. “Hopefully you set him straight. I only agreed because it protects the ship.”

“I explained some things to him.” Shepard smiled faintly, but it faded quickly. “I’ll be honest, Kaidan, I don’t know what to make of him.”

“I’m afraid all I can give you are my observations. He keeps to himself in the cabin, even eats in there. If you do see him, he’s polite enough, but you won’t get more than two words out of him. The crew is getting comfortable around him, but only because he makes it easy to forget he’s even aboard.”

“He’s that much a recluse?” Shepard wondered.

“He’s only here because of you, ma’am. You are the only person aboard he talks to. The rest of us are just… peripherals.”

Shepard hummed thoughtfully.

“You won’t see us weeping tears of sorrow,” another voice said behind her back.

“Hey, Joker.” Shepard replied. “Eavesdropping long?”

“Nah. Just came around the bend. We are talking about the Council Sourpuss, right?” the pilot asked as he came up to the table and sat down on her left.

Shepard did not give him a reply; he knew full well whom they had been discussing.

“Joker’s right, ma’am. None of us are all that bothered.” Kaidan agreed.

“Even Jenkins is starting to lose some of the Spectre-struck glee.” Joker added.

Shepard sighed, if this was how her training period would go, she had a problem. She could not afford to have a social recluse on board. If Joker and Kaidan were right, then Nihlus was not just a case of an introverted personality. She would call Kaidan an introvert, and he had no problem talking to others. Nihlus followed her orders in a sense, but he seemed to be outright avoiding everyone else. That did not speak well to his ability to work with and on a team. She needed everyone to be on the same page, she needed a team that would intrinsically work together.

“If it helps,” Matthews approached, balancing a tray of bowls for the three of them, which he handed out. Today’s special seemed to be chili full of chunky-cut vegetables. “I don’t have anything bad to say about him. I’ve never heard a complaint about the food and the dishes are always returned.”

“As I said, he’s polite enough.” Kaidan said.

“No one said he wasn’t,” Joker affirmed, already testing the food’s temperature.

Shepard hummed thoughtfully. If Nihlus did not want to mingle, she could not make him. At the very least he was not making people’s lives difficult. So the only thing she could do was hope he would warm up to the crew with time. She picked up her spoon and started eating. That seemed to
After eating, Shepard returned the dishes to Matthews and then went to the elevator. It was there, standing in front of the doors, hand hovering over the call button that she finally realized something; she actually had free time. There were still some outstanding little things, but on the whole those little things could very well wait until tomorrow. Galactic standard put the time on the Citadel just short of dinner hour, the very early evening, but somehow she did not want to go anywhere. Shopping on the citadel was expensive because of duties and markups. She did not want to shop just for shopping sakes; it was against her nature to be spendthrift.

The elevator arrived and opened, revealing Lieutenant Adams and Dr. Chakwas coming to diner.

“Oh, Commander, fancy bumping into you.”

“Evening, Doctor, Adams.” Shepard replied.

“Good evening, ma’am.”

“Have you eaten already, Commander?” The doctor wondered.

“Yes, Doctor. You can ask Kaidan or Joker.”

“Well then, carry on.” Without further ado the two walked off, resuming their conversation in hushed voices.

Shepard stepped onto the elevator and grinned. The doctor was the only person on the ship who had upper authority over everyone, including her, on medical grounds. She could relieve anyone of their post if she had cause to believe them unfit, but that just meant she tended to mother everyone. Shepard hit deck five and turned to the doors as they closed.

When the doors opened onto the shuttle bay, she moved toward the gun lockers. A quick pass of her hand over the biometric reader and she withdrew the twins and Vincent. Shepard figured running some maintenance was a good a pastime as any when one did not want to go anywhere. She powered up the guns and checked they were not loaded before she laid them out on the work table and fired up her omni-tool to run diagnostics.

Ashley could handle any weapon, but Shepard marked her guns off limits. It had nothing to do with a lack of trust and everything to do with the unique nature of her weapons and her own personal obsession with being personally a hundred percent sure her weapons were ready to go.

“Commander.”

Shepard jumped, she was so focused on the task that she completely missed the little tell-tale intercom scratch EDI and Joker were so fond of.

“What is it EDI?”

“Detective Vakarian is outside by the shuttle bay ramp, it is highly probable that he wishes to speak with you, however Flight Lieutenant Moreau is away at the moment and unable to tell the marines to let the detective through.”

“Thanks, EDI.” Shepard straightened, closed her omni-tool, and made a hasty beeline toward the ramp.
“Of course, Commander. Now I will pretend I do not exist.”

This was to say EDI would be listening to every word. Sometimes Shepard wondered if EDI was actually trying to be funny, it really did not work for her, but she was also only about six months old, and programmed for everything except humor, so she got a free pass.

Shepard made her way to the ramp and was not surprised to see the marines being quite recalcitrant in blocking the detective’s way. They were two of the biggest grunts that she had ever seen get the posting, and still dwarfed by the Turian, but they held their ground.

“Stand down, Corporals.” She ordered, causing both of the marines to look at her. “Detective Vakarian has authorization.” For the time being, that is, but that went without saying.

“Yes, ma’am!”

“Come on in, Detective,” she motioned for the turian to follow her and was not surprised that he managed to catch up despite having to come up the ramp.

“Thank you, Commander.”

“Do you mind if we talk while I do some maintenance on my weapons?” Shepard asked as she moved deeper into the shuttle bay. He was in his C-sec armor and she saw the side-arm at his hip, so maybe he would not mind.

“No, I would not want to keep you from your duties.”

Shepard smiled and approached the table where her guns lay. Something told her that this was not exactly official business. Had it been, he would have come with his partner. As far as his words went, one could trust a turian never to get in-between someone and their duties if they did not come to fulfill theirs. She brought up her omni-tool to continue the diagnostics that had been interrupted previously.

He hummed seeing her rifle. “You use a Mantis?”

“Yes. Some might argue there are better rifles out there, but… this old boy is a veteran. Call me sentimental, but that matters. Besides, those other rifles don’t have the same performance at ranges over a thousand meters.” Shepard replied.

“Definitely. The best part is the scope. Stock scopes that adjust to that range are rare. The only downside is that it does not have a thermal mode, but we cannot have everything, can we?”

“Of course not. That’d be cheating,” Shepard smiled. She did not miss the fact that his assessment hinted at experience. “Were you a sniper, detective?”

“I was a recon scout during part of my service in the military. Is it the rifle you used on Elysium?”

If the Hierarchy’s recon scouts were the same as the Alliance recon scout snipers, then he would have impressive direct experience, it was definitely something she could respect. Most people really did not understand the unique skill requirements snipers possessed. She ghosted her fingers over Vincent’s barrel, “The very same. It still wears the livery of that night.”

“Was it snowing?”

Shepard turned around to face the detective. “For a few hours, yes.” She knew where the question came from; he was measuring her skill margin. In a steady snowfall at hundreds of meters, half the
time it was aiming at a vague guesstimate of where your target was, based on the position and movements of the light beams cast by weapons or helmets. Other times it was shooting shadows of a person you barely saw, but your HUD insisted was there. Once she zeroed the gun’s scope a guesstimate was enough. If it had a weapon but did not have an Alliance RFID in its armor, she fired. Back then she prioritized hitting her targets. A swift merciful death had not been in the cards, and she had not cared if they suffered. “Somehow though, I don’t think you’ve come here for a signed autobiography, detective.”

“Oh. Oh! Right.” His mandibles flicked in a grin, but somehow the shift of his weight was more sheepish than anything.

“So?” Shepard prompted. She would give him points for wearing a bumbling act proudly. However, that was all it was, an act. She witnessed him almost tear into Nihlus. If he thought she would forget that and buy the awkward cop shtick, he underestimated her intellect.

“Truthfully, Commander, I am not here in any official sense. I understand you are a busy individual, so I felt like you should know.”

Ominous build up, but Shepard figured he was here unofficially already.

“We reviewed the logs.” He paused to clear his throat, “As of a couple hours ago, the Normandy and her crew were ruled out as the source of the leak.” He caught her eyes with that revelation, but she could see that his left eye was more focused on the readings displayed by his visor. “Although we would prefer if the Normandy remained on the Citadel for now.”

Suddenly Shepard became acutely aware of what had just transpired. Smooth, detective, very smooth, she thought. Begin by establishing a baseline, and then drop the bombshell. He had been reading her life signs with that visor all along. The talk of Elysium was meant to lull her into a relaxed state, on familiar turf, the build up was meant to set her on edge so that when the bombshell dropped, a liar would have a relief reaction.

She contained her urge to smile. “Got to love bureaucracy, right?”

He actually grinned.

“Let’s be truthful here, detective. I feel like I can give you my opinion now, one soldier to another.”

“Of course, as a witness if you saw anything…”

Shepard shook her head, “I did not see anything on Eden Prime. However, I do see something of a problem in the math. I see the Geth wanting the beacon. Prothean tech is a hot commodity. It could contain other technologies. They could also want the beacon’s tech itself. They have a motive. The issue I’m having is in the supposition that someone leaked anything to them.” She raised her hand to forestall an objection as she took a breath, “Where’s the motive there? What would a leaker get out of this? Who stands to benefit? Only someone with direct benefit would leak this sort of information. It’s not like the geth can blackmail, or press someone with the threat of physical force.”

The detective hummed, but said nothing. He probably could not say anything as that would breach case integrity, she could understand that. Still, Shepard had a feeling that she had just landed a bull’s-eye on something they already considered.

“Commander, there is another possibility.”

Shepard shifted her weight from foot to foot; EDI at least knew to use the comm link wired to her omni-tool and ear-piece, and not to speak out loud.
“The Geth are a synthetic intelligence, much like me. If I wished to obtain such information, I would not contact the individual who had it. Doing so would be inefficient. Instead, I would compromise their terminal with viral code without their knowledge.”

Shepard blinked. It took a few seconds for it to sink in, but when it did, she realized that EDI might have just pulled out Ockham’s razor, and pointed out the obvious thing all of them had been missing.

“Is something wrong, Commander?” the detective wondered.

Shepard shook her head, damn his visor, of course it would pick up the sudden uptick in her pulse. “I just had a thought. What if the leak is not a person?”

“A group?” he asked, stunned.

“No. I mean what if the leak is not a person at all.” Shepard explained. “We are dealing with synthetics. There are some problems with just that. Strictly speaking, establishing contact, blackmailing, or what have you, takes time, runs risks, and requires good incentives, whether a promise of reward, or a threat.” The risks and costs had to be balanced versus the benefits. “The much faster, safer route would be compromising a terminal with viral code. For synthetics I don’t suppose it would be hard.”

It was an espionage staple even if one was not a synthetic. A properly coded, tailor-made virus could allow remote access to the files stored on a system. Setting up a baited email was not difficult either; most people had a weakness to exploit, something that would get them to access a bad attachment. Finding it required research, but there was less chance for the whole thing being a bust. If the target did not open the email, or the wrong system was infected, one could always try again. Actual contact was a one-shot deal; a bad recruitment could raise alarms and burn both the operative and the operation.

On the operational side, a synthetic intelligence would also have the time required to research and investigate the target system, as to code the virus in such a manner as to go undetected by blunt-hammer anti-viral software and VIs. If the theory proved true, then it actually opened a whole other can of worms in its implications, but now was not the time to run with those. Shepard wanted the leak source found first, the rest could be addressed later.

“That is certainly an interesting possibility.” Vakarian said after a good minute of silence.

Shepard knew she showed her hand a little, but it was much too late to take it back, best let him make the idea his own. “I hope you’ll find the leak source, whoever, or whatever it ends up being. Eden Prime left thirteen good marines and multiple civilians dead. I’d hate to think that something like that can happen again, and not just on one of our colonies.” That would do as an excuse. He had to know that she was a Spectre candidate. He knew about Elysium, so he likely read at least the redacted version of her file. Her N7 designation would be there even after redaction, so he would have an idea of how highly trained she was. Let him think that she had her own investigative skills. Not like that was a lie, it was just a low common denominator.

“With luck, it never will.” He paused, eyes locked on her, “I came only to tell you the news, but I walk away with something to consider. Thank you, but I best be on my way. Have a good evening, Commander.”

“You too, Detective.”

He nodded, turned, and walked off toward the ramp. Shepard watched him go, fingers clenched around the work table. Because they still could not leave the Citadel, the revelation that the
Normandy’s crew was cleared of suspicion did not mean much. Admiral Hackett would want to know they were in the clear, but he would be unhappy that they were still grounded. The crew would at the very least enjoy their extended leave, and even she could take some time off too.

“EDI, if you were organic, I’d owe you a beer. What can I get you?” Shepard begun just as soon as she was positive the detective would not hear her.

“I am happy to be of assistance, your gratitude is enough.” EDI replied. “However if you wish to symbolically consume a beer in my name as a part of social ritual, I will not object.”

“Yes, I can do that.” Shepard smiled.

“I can also look up establishments that provide quality alcoholic beverages when you wish to conduct said social ritual.”

“Wait… EDI are you saying I should get out more?”

“I have observed you schedule leave for the crew, yet never take it yourself.” EDI replied.

Shepard laughed; she was getting ribbed for working too hard by an AI. The irony of the whole thing did not escape her. “What about you EDI?”

“Are you asking whether I have what would constitute as free time?”

“I guess,” Shepard replied.

“My processing capacity allows me to perform my duties concurrently with personal interests. I have been observing the interactions aboard. I am interested in the evolution of relations between the crew and Spectre Kryik. There is no precedent for mixed-species crews within the Earth Systems Alliance, but interest in the topic exists within academic circles.”

Shepard did not want to know how the AI knew about academic circles. “Just as long as you’re not writing your dissertation on how dysfunctional we are.”

“You do not need to worry. Though synergy between the human crew and Spectre Kryik is yet to develop, I have observed potential for it. If I was to write such a paper, my thesis would argue such a crew can work efficiently.”

EDI had been listening to the conversation in the mess hall earlier. This must be her input. She knew more about Nihlus that anyone else aboard, simply because she had an eye in every room, including the XO’s cabin. That meant, whatever EDI observed must give her the confidence to say things like that. “I hope you’re right, EDI.”

By the end of the next day the Normandy was still grounded, but the crew was enjoying every moment of it. Shepard had to notify Admiral Hackett, who was visibly unhappy, but unable to do anything more than wish them all to enjoy their free time.

The ship was quiet now; the crew was no longer hesitant to plan excursions and group outings on the account that they might have to ship out in a rush. They only came back when their leave time was nearly up, so they could sleep, clock their shift hours, and then go off have more fun.

Shepard caught Nihlus on deck three that evening, having just returned aboard. He was free to come and go as he pleased and do whatever with his free time, so when she saw the storm in his eyes and
the stiff way he carried himself she knew something was up, he had not been out having fun.

When she asked, he stopped cold, spared her a look, and she saw him tense even further. Then, just as suddenly, his posture relaxed and he gave her the short of it. He was running the gauntlet with his insurance broker, namely one very snobby Volus who suggested he crashed the Defiant on purpose, as surely one mass accelerator round from a mercenary ship was not enough to bring it down.

Shepard merely nodded. All she got was that the insurance company wanted to try every single loophole and tiny print clause to get out of paying up. She wished Nihlus the best of luck and left it at that, but it dissipated some of the storm clouds, so mission accomplished. She did not bother him further as he took his food from Matthews and vanished back in his cabin.

Detective Vakarian had done them all a great favor in letting them know they were off the hook, as that removed a lot of the pins and needles. Nevertheless by the third day of waiting the lack of clearance to depart began to annoy Shepard. It was as if her six month stint of desk duty had come back, and she did not like it. Neither did Joker, as with every passing day he became more agitated, simply because there was little for a pilot to do with his ship clamped down.

Jenkins’ support brace came off a day early. She caught him coming back around lunch hour on day three, accompanied by Ashley, beaming like a floodlight. Shepard asked Ashley later, who told her than Jenkins all-but-begged her to help him improve his aim and skills. The gunnery chief decided to take him to a shooting range and put him through rigorous exercises with multiple weapons. Shepard got the impression that Eden Prime rattled the corporal, but he was reacting in the best way possible. Instead of sinking under the stress, he decided to apply himself to getting better. She had done the same in his shoes.

The next day at breakfast the storm finally broke. Nihlus caught her at breakfast to announce that the investigation had concluded the previous night, and that the Council had a meeting set up with the involved parties. Mid-explanation she got a terse, no-details message from the desk of Ambassador Udina, summoning her to be there when the Council released the findings. She suspected that it was merely a courtesy, something throw-away, maybe even automated. By Nihlus’ expression, Shepard had a distinct feeling he knew more about what happened than he let on, as normal.

After breakfast and with barely twenty minutes to spare from the time they had to be at the tower, she caught up with Nihlus at the Skycab kiosk, doing up the catches on her uniform jacket right in the car. He was back in his armor, with his side-arm, though without his assault rifle or shotgun.

“I assume you know what happened last night?” Shepard asked.

“C-sec found the leak. That is all I know.”

Shepard thought that if that was all he knew, she was the Pope. The rest of the ride passed in silence, she did not press him because doing so would be a tad hypocritical. Nihlus did not know the details of her second talk with Detective Vakarian. He just knew they had been cleared of suspicion a few days back. She made an announcement to the crew, but did not go into the details. Not that Shepard wanted to conceal the solid the detective had done for them, but no one asked.

The silence between them did not break even when the cab landed in front of the Presidium tower elevator. Shepard mutely followed a step behind him, wondering what got him so tense. The cab was apparently up top, so their wait ended up literally twice as long. Shepard made a comment about the elevator, because honestly, how hard was it to make a piece of ancient technology move faster? Sure the Citadel was rumored to be at least fifty thousand years old, a marvel of construction, but she was not asking for a complete reengineering of the mass relays. She was asking someone to upgrade a damn elevator.
As they stepped out into the narthex and moved through it into the nave, Shepard noticed Ambassador Udina and the unmistakable form of Captain Anderson at the base of the stairs leading to the apse. She instinctively tugged down on her uniform jacket as they approached.

“There you are, Commander.” Anderson greeted.

“Good day Captain Anderson, Ambassador.” Shepard replied. Maybe it was petty of her to make such a greeting, but the brief quirk of eyebrow she caught from Captain Anderson hinted at amusement enough.

“Commander,” Udina’s reply was colder than ever, he knew full well she snubbed him, and predictably he would rise to the occasion.

As far as Shepard was concerned he would have been wiser to learn to roll with petty slights, but Udina was a known egomaniac. It was half the reason she could not respect him. “This is of course Spectre Kryik, the Normandy’s Spectre Liaison,” she went on, rolling with the petty snobs.

“Yes, of course. Pleasantries aside, we should proceed. The meeting is about to begin.” Udina turned.

They went up the stairs as a group and Shepard was not surprised to see the apse not as empty as it was normally. The balconies on either side had a sizeable crowd of curious onlookers clustered in groups. On her left below the balcony she spotted Detectives Chellik and Vakarian. The councilors were nowhere to be seen as of yet, but Shepard figured they must be in their offices. Shepard caught Detective Vakarian’s gaze and was surprised when he flashed her a grin, to which she responded with a polite head nod by way of greeting. Chellik glanced at his partner and said something, which made Vakarian spare him a side look but not reply.

A hum to her side made her look up at Nihlus who had his arms crossed over his chest. “You know Anderson?” he asked quietly.

“Yes. He’s a long-time family friend, and wrote my ICT recommendation.”

“Your mentor?”

“In a way, yes,” Shepard replied.

Nihlus hummed again, but asked no more questions. There was a slight shift in the ambient noise, and Shepard saw the councilors walk in from the right side of the space. They moved toward their podiums slowly, but the crowd on the balcony drew forward, and with a start she realized there was a reporter among them, fast typing at a data pad. The apse was a camera-free zone, but that did not keep the vultures wholly away.

Udina and Captain Anderson moved toward the platform at the center of the space, but Nihlus hung back, and Shepard decided to stay put as well. She slipped into her parade rest simply as a means of having something to do with her hands. She was not there representing military command; only an interested party.

“This ought to be good,” Nihlus murmured.

Shepard glanced up, quirking an eyebrow.

A chime sounded, the murmurs from the galleries muted as the meeting came to order.

“Ambassador, Captain Anderson,” Tevos began, “we summoned you as humanity’s representatives
to release the results of the C-sec inquiry into the Eden Prime incident.”

The crowd drew closer yet, as close as they could without toppling over the railings. The reporter was typing away as fast as his fingers could go.

“The Geth have not been seen outside the Perseus Veil in nearly three centuries.” Valern launched.

“There is no evidence to suggest that Eden Prime was something other than an isolated incident spurned on by the discovery of a Prothean artifact. There was no other reason for them to attack a human colony.” Sparatus stepped in.

Murmuring rose in volume all around.

“The Geth knew about the artifact from somewhere!” Udina snapped.

Zero to furious in two seconds flat, and for once Shepard would not blame Udina. She clenched her hands into fists, glad that they were behind her back. Isolated incident? Of all he bullshit excuses!

“Ambassador,” Tevos said. “The detectives pursued all the leads they had, and were unable to find anyone guilty of intentionally compromising secrecy in any manner that might constitute a conspiracy with the Geth.”

The excuses continued. At least the Council did not hint that the Alliance mishandled something on their end. Shepard could see Udina’s anger spike up by the second, but he restrained himself. Captain Anderson looked less than pleased as well, but everyone knew there was a reporter in the room. Snapping now would create a fiasco of a whole other sort. Suddenly it became clear to her that this meeting was a show, meant to get the Alliance off the Council’s backs.

Her eyes drifted to the detectives, Chellik had his arms crossed, she got a feeling that something was making him unhappy. Vakarian’s eyes turned to her. She held his gaze without blinking, measuring him. What had he had done after their little chat? Had it gone in one aural canal and out the other? His mandibles drew up tighter to his jaw, his fingers twitched. Shepard grinned; she was making him uncomfortable. It was petty, but she wanted him to know she was not happy.

“So that is the official line,” Nihlus mused.

Shepard turned her head, catching his gaze as his arms dropped to his sides and he grinned back.

“Official line? You’re saying there’s an unofficial one?”

Nihlus shrugged his shoulders and looked away. Shepard frowned. He was up to his tricks, hinting things, timing it so that it would check her anger, get her thinking. If that was just the press release, what was the Council hiding? Furthermore, why was Nihlus helping her? This was not the first time he went against Council policy for her benefit. Except now he was compromising them by suggesting they were concealing something. He must know that she would not keep it under her proverbial hat. Sure, she would not run off to Udina, but she would not keep her suspicions from some footnote in her report to Admiral Hackett.

“The Geth ship was destroyed by the Kilimanjaro, and Commander Shepard’s unit handled the units on the surface with commendable thoroughness.” Sparatus added, haughty as ever.

Shepard turned her head so quick at the mention of her name that she felt something in her neck shift. There was no mistaking the implication in those words. It was officially a good thing her mother was not present. If she had been, she would be eye-balling Sparatus’ neck for a noose, reporter be damned.
“As such, we also believe the threat has been contained.”

Shepard could not say she was not tempted to do it too, simply because she did not appreciate being made to sound at fault. Shepard looked toward the speaker’s platform. Udina was turning a rather bright shade of fuchsia, but he was still restraining his anger. She caught Captain Anderson’s gaze as he glanced back and raised her eyebrow.

“That is not to say we do not understand the magnitude of the tragedy. We are aware that twenty human lives were lost. We offer our sincere condolences to their families, relatives, and friends.” Tevos added in her matronly voice, as if to placate after Sparatus’ rather roundabout way of saying that the Alliance already handled the situation adequately enough not to require Council involvement.

The murmuring in the galleries grew louder again. Shepard glanced up; the reporter was eating everything up, his fingers almost a blur as he typed into his datapad. “I guess I won’t be watching the news for a few days,” she commented. The Alliance News Network would probably go berserk after this. Just one more thing to stock the flames of dislike merely fanned on a normal day. Sparatus also made sure she would not be walking away without catching a few stray rounds. There were probably one or two pundits, the arm-chair types, who would comment on her thoroughness; at least one would say she had been too thorough, probably intimate some sort of conspiracy. Then again, if the situation had been reversed, they would have said she was not thorough enough. There was no pleasing that miserable bunch.

There was a spike in the volume of conversation around them. When she looked, the councilors had stepped away from their podiums and Udina was watching them go with a look that could kill, if looks could kill. Captain Anderson cleared his throat as a way to snap him out of it and they made their way off the platform. Udina turned that venomous look on Anderson.

“C-sec’s finest are not happy,” Nihlus said, clearly bemused.

Shepard turned back, and just as Nihlus had said, Chellik and Vakarian were having a rather animate conversation under the gallery balcony. They were too far away for her hearing or translator to pick up, but as Nihlus had said, even she could see the tension there. Chellik said something that made Vakarian respond sharply.

“You can’t hear what they’re arguing about?” she asked.

“I have a sort of… idea. Chellik is angry with Vakarian about something. It is in the sub-vocals, which are outside your hearing range. I cannot hear the words, too noisy.”

Shepard hummed but did not press him.

“Shepard,” Captain Anderson’s tone very close by killed that conversation.

“Yes, sir?” she replied, turning around.

“We are done here; I want to hear your take on things.”

“Of course, sir.” That did not surprise her; Captain Anderson never treated her with kid gloves, he would not start now.

“Here is neither the time nor place, though. I was hoping you’d give me a tour of the Normandy.”

“Of course, sir.” Shepard smiled. “There’s much to see, she’s a beauty.”
“Good. I have to report to Hackett, I will come by in two hours or so, we will talk then.”

“Yes, sir.” Shepard nodded.

The captain clapped her on the shoulder and walked away. Shepard watched him go for a few seconds and then turned to Nihlus, “Well… all’s well that ends well. I suppose. The Normandy should be allowed to leave soon; I got the feeling we are going to be busy. Speaking of which, we ought to discuss how that’s going to work, what with you observing me and such.”

“Mentoring,” Nihlus corrected.

“Sure, whatever term floats your boat.” She could not keep the sarcasm out of her tone even if she tried. Nihlus spared her a grin before moving ahead. Shepard shook her head and moved to follow.

“Commander Shepard! Please wait!”

Shepard stopped dead in her tracks, and so did Nihlus. She looked over her shoulder, to see Detective Vakarian in hot pursuit. Chellik was still under the balcony, arms crossed over his chest, looking less amused than ever.

“What can I do for you, Detective?” she asked. Sure he may have not done much for the Alliance, but Shepard was not in the habit of being rude out of pettiness.

“May I have a moment of your time?” he asked.

“Sure, can we walk and talk? I seem to be popular today.”

He nodded and Shepard turned to go down the stairs leading to the tower nave, with the detective on her right and Nihlus falling in step on her left. She caught the detective spare the Spectre a look over her head. It was then that she became acutely aware of the fact that he was not comfortable with the Council’s agent right there.

“I kindly ask you two hold off arguing. Wait until I’m clear of the crossfire.”

Nihlus laughed, “Sure. So what is it, Vakarian?”

“I wish to thank you, Commander. Your input proved vital to the case.”

Shepard stopped and looked at him. He shifted his weight from foot to foot and looked around, not a subtle bone in his body as he checked whether they were being watched or overheard.

“I was ordered to say nothing, but I feel like you deserve an explanation,” He went on.

“I knew it,” Nihlus murmured as he crossed his arms.

“Your suggestion that we look for a compromise in some computer yielded results,” the detective said in a lowered voice.

Shepard froze, “you found one?” she whispered.

“Yes.”

“Damn. That means… whoever- no.” Shepard stopped and cast her gaze about the nave, “Come. Here’s not the place for this.” There was no one immediately near them, but she would not be surprised if there were microphones in the trees or something. Perhaps being in a hurry to get out of there was even more suspicious, but Shepard wanted out. If this conversation was to go the way she
thought it would, there would be a bombshell in there somewhere.

“You should not be going against your orders like this,” Nihlus warned as the two of them fell in step with her.

“Damn the orders! I am not going to protect the reputation of politicians at the expense of the truth!” Vakarian all but hissed.

“So you do have teeth.” Nihlus replied unbothered.

They reached the elevator in silence, and Shepard pressed the call button just as quietly. They had to wait for the cabin to come up from the bottom of the tower before they could board, and once inside, Shepard still did not feel fine with talking.

Once they were on the Presidium the detective led them across a bridge that spanned the artificial lake, next to a warbling fountain spout where they would see whoever was coming and the multi-frequency sound of the water would muffle a conversation. Shepard was dully impressed; she would have chosen the spot herself.

“Commander, you were right, there was a compromised terminal. Network division neutralized a hidden code that created a backdoor access through the Citadel’s security protocols. It allowed the Geth to see everything the terminal handled, including relayed messages between the Council and Spectre Kryik.”

Nihlus stiffened, and Vakarian flashed him the sort of grin that Shepard thought a matador must flash to a bull as he waved the red cloth.

“They were reading the mail,” she said, more to distract them than to affirm.

“Correct.”

“Whose terminal was it?”

Vakarian shifted his weight from foot to foot again and cleared his throat.

“Councilor Sparatus’ personal secretary,” Nihlus slipped in. “Has to be, as that is where I got my orders from.”

“Correct. The virus was traced to a dirty email that concealed self-executing code amidst pictures, ostensibly sent from the secretary’s bondmate.”

“Wow, they went for the best of baits.” That was the understatement of the year of course. She was dully impressed with that bait. The Geth clearly understood something of the sensibilities of organics. What disturbed her more was that whatever code they cooked up actually bypassed the Citadel’s security protocols, like they knew how said security protocols worked. “What was it that Councilor Tevos said? C-sec was unable to find anyone guilty of intentionally compromising secrecy?” she laughed. “They weren’t lying, now were they? Still… typical politicians.” They never admit they messed up in public unless there was something pointed at their head, like facts, or a gun.

“Indeed. That is why I thought you should know.” Vakarian said.

Shepard took a deep breath and let it out of her nose slowly. “This puts me at a bit of a pickle. I mean I can understand how mistakes happen, but this one cost twenty lives.” To say nothing of what else could have been stolen, but she did not feel the need to point that out. “Suffice to say they wanted that beacon specifically.” They ought to have known it would mean burning their access. Whatever
exploit they used in the protocols would probably be patched as well. Still, right now they had an unknown amount of intelligence on their synthetic hands. Eden Prime might not be an isolated incident after all.

“You cannot tell Udina, Shepard,” Nihlus warned.

“Oh no, Nihlus. He’d be the last person I tell anything to. I know full well how sensitive this is. I do not blame the Council for trying to cover it up. Still, I hope you can appreciate what position this knowledge puts me in.”

“I can, and I hope you are wise with it.”

“I will be.” Shepard smiled up at him and then turned back to the detective. “Thank you for this. I sincerely hope you do not get in trouble over this. I do owe you.”

“Congratulations C-sec, you have a future Spectre in your debt. I suggest you hang on to that favor. You might need it.”

“I was doing what had to be done,” the detective rebuffed.

Shepard smiled again.

“One last thing, Commander. You should know Sparatus was not pleased when we discovered the compromise; he fired his secretary on the spot. Now I must go, have a good day.”

“Likewise, Detective, again, thanks.”

Garrus turned and walked away in the direction they came from.

“I hope you understand what this means for Sparatus.” Nihlus added as soon as the detective was far enough.

“That it’s part his responsibility?”

Nihlus hummed in assent but said no more.

“He has a funny way of showing it, but I guess I understand where he’s coming from.” Turians had the sort of ethic that made the commanding officer responsible for the screw-ups of those under their command. It counted for those in politics as well, but there it tended to conflict with the dignity of the office. In sacking the secretary Sparatus did as much he could without losing face or making a mountain out of an anthill. He could still act like nothing happened though. “I’m not about to go off tattling. This is one powder keg I don’t want to light.” She went on.

If this got out there would be a scandal of epic proportions. Shepard knew it was not her job to protect the Council just yet, but she would do it. Udina would call her a traitor, but she also knew there were no long-term benefits to playing this hand of cards. Udina would go for the short-term gain, run away with the narrative, and make himself look more important. She was not about to give him that.

“I would not be surprised if Vakarian is fired. This has to be what he was arguing with Chellik about.” Nihlus added.

Shepard hummed, “I hope you’re wrong.”

“Oddly enough so do I,” Nihlus replied with a grin.
When they returned to the Normandy, Shepard barely had time to swap to her fatigues before Captain Anderson arrived. As promised she gave him a leisurely tour of the Normandy along with her opinion on what went down at the meeting. The former was a pleasure, because she loved her ship, the latter was all pain. Easily the most difficult thing she had to do. Admiral Hackett would probably be angry if he found out, but she decided to keep what the detective told her mostly under wraps.

All she told Captain Anderson was that she had a feeling that the Council was covering up something, but she really did not know what. She poked at the wording Tevos used, as that was innocuous enough, but nothing more. It was probably just repeating what Captain Anderson already figured out, but it was for the best. Captain Anderson took her explanation, and if he suspected she knew more than she let on, he did not show it.

From here on, the Alliance would use the channels they had to look into matters. She wanted no part in the potential political scandal. If that made her a traitor, then she was a traitor, but one that acted with the best intentions. In a month this would blow over as one more time the Council left the Alliance high and dry. Some people would grumble, others would fume, rhetoric would fly, but in the end the Alliance would just keep going as they usually did. She did not want to be in the center of any of it.

Two hours after the captain departed a vaguely perturbed EDI called her to announce that Detective Vakarian was down by the shuttle bay. Stunned, Shepard rushed down to deck five. Nihlus was there, still in his armor, looking vaguely smug as he stood at the top of the shuttle bay ramp. Detective Vakarian was at the bottom, with a long case slung over his shoulder that looked like it contained a rifle, a large duffel bag at his feet, and a hard-shell traveling case nearby.

“I did say he would be trouble,” Nihlus said as soon as she was anywhere near him.

“I remember you saying he would be in trouble.” Shepard replied automatically.

“Is there a difference?”

Shepard rolled her eyes and moved past him.

“Commander,” the detective greeted as she came down the ramp. “I am glad I caught you before the Normandy pulled out.”

“Detective, to what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?”

“Well…” he shifted his weight from foot to foot; a gesture of nervousness that Shepard suspected might be an idiosyncrasy of his. “I suppose I should tell you that… it is just Vakarian now, not Detective. For you, just Garrus … that is, if you prefer.”

“Corporals, may we have some private space, please?” Shepard asked.

“Yes, ma’am!”

She watched the marines retreat out of sight at double-time jog, and only turned back to the ex-detective when she was sure they were gone.

“Detective Chellik informed on our earlier conversation, I assume.”

“He did what he had to do.” Vakarian replied. “I am doing what I have to do.”
Shepard did not want to come off snippy, so she stayed quiet. There was no need to ask questions either. There was only one reason why he would show up here and now, packed and ready for travel.

“I had an argument with Executor Pallin. We did not agree on the definition of the right thing to do and... I chose to walk away and leave my badge.” He paused and glanced at Nihlus before he turned back to her. “Commander, I read the reports, you have a fighting force of just three other marines. If you’re going out there handling situations like Eden Prime, I want to help you. I want to do the right thing. So here I am... offering my skills as a soldier.”

Shepard sighed, “You’re right. I could use the extra fighting force. However... there would be paperwork involved.”

“Paperwork?” Vakarian asked.

“Alliance ships hire specialists, but it involves signing a contract, a strict but basic binding agreement that you are not to talk about anything you see or hear aboard this ship.”

“A confidentiality agreement... well, I suppose that is only fair. I have no problems with signing such a contract.”

Nihlus snorted, “Yes. That is encouraging, given how you got here.”

“This is different!” Vakarian retorted sharply.

“I do not see how. Let me make this clear, Vakarian, if this was up to me, we would not be discussing this. Shepard, your ship, your decision, where is the contract?” he asked.

“Still on my terminal in the OD.”

“I will get it.” Nihlus stated before he turned around and went back up the ramp.

“Is he your second-in-command?” Vakarian wondered.

“No. I don’t have an assigned XO, small crew.” She stopped there; did she want to do this? She needed more fighting force, but another turian? The Admiral allowed her to recruit a team, he must have thought about the possibility of those being non-human specialists. Still, was she about to shoot herself in the foot? Nihlus had a point as well. “He can be harsh, but to be fair he wasn’t wrong. But I don’t agree with him on this. I want to believe you when you say this is different. Do you need help with those?” she motioned to the travel case.

“Ah, no,” he slung his duffel bag over his other shoulder and moved back to the case, with a tap of a button the whole thing glowed a tell-tale periwinkle color. He lifted it by the handle with no difficulty and followed her up the ramp.

Nihlus came back ten minutes later with a pad in his hands; Shepard double checked its contents before she handed it over to the ex-detective. She stood by as he read the contract, and ten minutes later she had it back with his signature on all the proverbial pages.

“Welcome to the Normandy, Garrus.”

“Thank you, Commander.” He replied with a grin. “Can I ask what you intend to do now?”

Shepard looked between the two turians and hummed. “You know, I did give it a bit of thought.” She paused to mentally articulate what she wanted to say. “When we talked before, I thought of all...”
the other intelligence the Geth might have stolen. I fear Eden Prime may not be an isolated incident after all. Maybe they won’t come after a human colony next time, but that just makes them a galactic problem, within the purview of Spectre involvement.”

“Indeed,” Nihlus replied, suddenly grinning.

Shepard would bet he already knew where she was going with this. “If they decide to be trouble, knowing what I do, I believe it is now my duty to take the fight to them, whenever, and wherever it might be.” There was only one thing that really rubbed Shepard raw about what she knew. She would happily screw any politician by keeping information to herself. But keeping quiet felt like betraying her fellow soldiers, making their deaths meaningless, and that she could not bear as easily. If she took the fight to the enemy, she at least did something useful with what she knew. “This will protect the galaxy from a potential threat, and if not that then- to be blunt, do we really know what they are capable of if they’ve been hermits for three centuries? At the very least it is high time someone does a fresh threat assessment.”

“I agree. When we encounter more geth, you can count on me to lend a shotgun.” Nihlus added.

“I have never shot one before. Do headshots work the same?” Garrus wondered.

“Yes,” Shepard grinned.

“Good, because I intend to be right there with you, Commander.”

“Then we have an accord.” Shepard said. Sure she could call it an accord, but right now it felt more like a conspiracy. “Now there’s just one last little thing. A little request I have.” She glanced at Garrus.

“If it is within my power, Commander, you only need to name it.”

“Nothing profound.” Shepard smiled, “Just that… I am not a stickler for ranks and pageantry. As you are not Alliance, I won’t make you use ‘Commander’ on me. Shepard is more than fine. I have the same agreement with Nihlus.”

Garrus actually froze for a split second, but then grinned. “Understood...”

Shepard nodded, “Well let’s get you settled in then.” She motioned toward the elevator. Crew introductions would have to be made as well.

Chapter End Notes

Author Notes: Indeed, Citadel Noir was basically an “introduction arc” for Garrus, on top of moving plot forward. Because my series is different, changes were inevitable, but I wanted to keep the core intact. You also get to see a bit more of my Shepard’s other side. On the surface she is a paragon, but really, she has her own agenda, and she does not apologize for it.

General Notes: Geth Hackers – Legion openly said that the Geth monitor organics via the extranet. Then in another moment, they revealed that the Geth are one part social experiment trolls (that incident with making some Salarians believe a certain star formation looks
like a goddess). For my canon I kind of expanded on that. They understand organics more than even they realize, and naturally they have crazy computer skills. (And for the record, I’m fond of Legion, that loveable dope).

**Chapter Notes:**

**Ockham’s Razor** – This is of course a reference to the *Lex Parsimoniae*, or the “law of parsimony” as coined by William of Ockham (c. 1287 – 1347). It is a rule of thumb for reasoning, of sorts, which states that with many differing theories of what happened, the one that’s simplest and makes the least assumptions is usually right.
Eminence Grise

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I do no own Mass Effect, I do not claim to own Mass Effect, I am only doing this for fun.

Author Notes: Another “colorful” bookend for the “Citadel I” arc of this story, framing yet more rather important things. I am detail oriented and I believe that if I’m going to explore the nuances, it’s in for a penny, in for a pound.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Episode 8: Eminence Grise

Shepard was glad to say that settling their new crewmate ended up a quick affair. They did not have another cabin to spare, but Garrus took one look at life support and called dibs. It was an odd space that never quite found a use. Some of the crew used it as a semi-private dining room, but the mess was generally not packed enough to require that, and they had their quarters a door over. A third of the room was taken up by the ungainly oxygen plant, but it formed a rather nice nook for a cot. The plant was always humming and vibrating as well. The air was also perpetually and noticeably warmer and dryer than the rest of the ship.

Still, with its table, some chairs, and shelving Shepard supposed it must pass for a cabin if one hailed from the most disciplined military in the galaxy. Garrus assured her that as he was born and raised on Palaven, was not only used to barrack noises, he felt right at home where the air was warmer and dryer.

After that there was the issue of hierarchy to discuss. Shepard ended up floundering through trying to explain the situation on board. Though she was the ship’s commanding officer, Nihlus as her mentor and as Spectre Liaison had some input into matters. With Garrus, as he was not Alliance, she could not subject him to all the Alliance rules and regulations, but in the interest of crew morale she did not want him flaunting it. She was his commanding officer, not Nihlus, no matter what the Spectre said. She was fully aware that Nihlus might enjoy lording things over Garrus given half a chance.

There was no way to conceal Garrus’ presence from the rest of the crew for very long either. It only took ten minutes for practically everyone to gather for their dose of gawping. But she would dole out credit where it was due; no one showed any sort of negative reaction. Jenkins, overeager as ever, was the one to ask how a C-sec detective came to join the crew, though Shepard could tell it was the question of the evening.

Before she could come up with a perfectly pithy title for Garrus, something with the same professional ring as “Spectre Liaison”, Garrus went ahead and confessed that he had been the one to investigate the Eden Prime leak and that he quit C-sec because his superiors had not been happy with the aid he gave the Commander. Invariably it came up that he had been the one to tell them they were off the hook.

Shepard ended up looking like she hired him because she felt guilty for getting him fired from C-sec, which worked for her. It was not a total lie, just downplay of how much of it was his own choice. Nihlus stood by, smirking the whole time, as he knew the full truth. Jenkins was stunned, as all of
that had been above his pay grade, but it seemed to be enough for the crew. Even Ashley, listening
nearby, did not pursue the details of what exactly made Garrus’ superiors so unhappy with him. It
was not a good explanation, it hardly held water, but Shepard knew it would have to do.

After that was said and done Shepard took Garrus on a small tour of the key areas, they ended up in
the OD where she introduced him to EDI. Garrus greeted EDI as if the revelation of the Normandy
having an AI was not a shocker. Then he utterly blew her away when he admitted that he suspected
something because the Normandy’s crew was simply too small to be functional. Even with Turian
military efficiency a ship this size would have at least forty crewmembers. With an AI on board, one
that functioned as communications and operations officer, everything suddenly made sense. Shepard
sighed; somehow EDI was becoming the worst kept secret on board.

Later that day, quite late on Terran Coordinated, Admiral Hackett contacted the Normandy after
mulling over what Captain Anderson must have told him. Shepard repeated what she told Captain
Anderson herself, and then had EDI send the contract Garrus signed. By way of making formal
introduction she explained that part the reason she hired Garrus was she suspected the geth might
become a problem, and she wanted to do some research and maybe a threat assessment. Garrus was
familiar with the events on Eden Prime, keen on looking into the matter, and his C-sec investigative
skills and knowledge of the non-Spectre side of the Citadel might come in handy in the future. In
other words, as cold as it sounded, she was cultivating an asset.

She was greeted with a quiet eyebrow raise and a reminder to keep him under control, but beyond
that, she was clear to conduct her inquiry. The Alliance would conduct an official investigation of
course, but whatever material she could find would still be interesting. Shepard had a feeling that
there was going to be a discrepancy between the official channels arm-chair investigation and the
soldier-led one she could do. The difference being that she would look for material soldiers could
actually use to prevent another tactical disaster like Eden Prime. Too many marines died due to
unfamiliarity with the enemy. A tactical assessment could definitely help there.

Thus after getting her eight hours of sleep, Shepard had a small breakfast and holed herself up in the
OD to begin laying some foundation. Since she had worn her helmet on Eden Prime, she pulled up
her armor’s recordings. There was not much there; but the camera did catch a rather nice angle on
most the black unit during her conversation with it, before she blew its head off. Annoyingly the
Alliance likely had all the geth remains, including whatever was left of the black one, though she had
no hope of getting any of it. For now that eliminated a rather direct route of investigation.

She was at her terminal, compiling the meager materials she could access on the Alliance intranet
with her clearances when she heard the OD door open behind her. She did not even look up from
her work until a shadow fell over her.

“Shepard.”

“Morning, Nihlus.” She replied as she shifted pads around her desk, to organize them as various
reports and assessments downloaded.

“Do you have new orders from your admiral?” he asked.

Shepard turned in her chair and looked up at him, “No. Do you have anything?”

“Besides a volus I have to go see? No.” His mandibles flicked.

“Well I guess you’ll have time to work on that. I got a go-ahead to investigate the geth; right now I’m
pulling up everything the Alliance has. It isn’t much.”
“I see. You should go to the Library of Council; they might have something open access. If not, my Spectre clearances are good for the closed collection.”

Shepard hummed, she should have thought of that. The LoC was a government research repository that operated as a terminal of the Citadel archives. It had a truly staggering collection of digital and analog sources pooled from every Citadel race, past and present, lending to and from the most prestigious universities on Palaven, Sur’Kesh, and Thessia. Primarily meant to help researchers and people with special clearance, it still functioned as a reference library, with part of the collection open to the public. “I’ll do that, but I think I will try the open sources before I start abusing your clearances. I think you should focus on getting your credits. Most companies have a claim period.”

“Do not remind me.” Nihlus grumbled.

“I wish I could help, but I’m pretty sure telling him I know where he lives won’t actually help.”

Nihlus stopped cold, but then it must have sunk in, because he laughed, “No it will not, but I appreciate the offer.”

The OD door swished open again and Shepard turned her neck to look, Garrus stopped in the doorway seeing them.

“Commander… erm… is this a bad time?” he asked.

“Not at all. We were just talking plans for the day. In fact, I’d say your timing is impeccable.”

Garrus stepped into the room and allowed the doors to close behind him. Shepard glanced up at Nihlus and then back to Garrus. “As I told Nihlus, right now I’m getting whatever information the Alliance got on the Geth. Nihlus suggested I go to the Library of Council. Garrus, could I impose on you? I’m afraid I’m not certain where that is, and truthfully I could use a second opinion.”

“I will be happy to help, Commander.”

“Thank you,” Shepard smiled.

“I will leave you two to the research,” Nihlus announced as he stepped around Garrus and moved toward the door.

“Have fun,” Shepard called with a grin as the door opened.

“Oh yes. The time of my life.” Nihlus groused back.

Shepard laughed as the door closed behind him.

“What was that about?” Garrus wondered.

“Oh, right,” Shepard straightened and went back to her pads. “Nihlus was investigating the same Eclipse band that I was sent to… neutralize. The mercs holed his personal ship, EDI picked up a distress signal, we helped him out, and the rest is history, but the Defiant ended up a write-off. Now he’s fighting the insurance company.”

“I see.”

“Was there something you wanted? I mean, most people who come up here have something on their mind.” Shepard wondered.

“No, no. I was interested in our agenda, but that covered itself.”
“Indeed.” Shepard replied.

That seemed to finish the conversation. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Garrus pick up the pad closest to him, adjust the output, and skim the contents. “This is just historical background.”

“Yes, but the Alliance doesn’t have much. I mean… we know the Geth were created around three hundred years ago. Lovely time that. The industrial revolution on Earth was just, pun-intended picking up steam, and we did not even have a working heavier-than-air aircraft, let alone the ability to go into space.” Some would think she was being disparaging, as far as Shepard was concerned it merely constituted fact. Compared to the other civilizations, especially the Asari Republic and the Salarian Union, who made contact a thousand years ago, humanity was very much a late developer. “Either I’m not funny, or you think you’re not allowed to laugh. You’re allowed to laugh.” Shepard noted the blank expression on his face.

“Laughing seems… impolite.”

“Ah. Back to business then.” she would let him off with that cop-out. “Here,” Shepard lifted one of the pads off the desk. “This contains a trimmed hard-suit recording from my armor. I have the full thing, but that edit is what I consider good angles on the geth. I’m rather interested in the black unit we saw, you’ll know which.”

“Are these the only recordings?” Garrus asked.

“No. I suppose not… EDI please ask Kaidan, Ashley, and Richard to give you copies of whatever they have on their suits from Eden Prime.”

“Right away, Commander.” EDI replied. “I will foreword the recordings to your terminal as I receive them.”

“Thanks EDI.”

Garrus hummed mutely and moved to the couch, taking the two pads with him. Shepard figured even he knew little about the Geth. They were the galactic hermits after all.

“They are fascinating,” she said after a moment of silence. “I mean humanity only developed synthetic intelligence in the past thirty odd years. Our EDI is the essence of unique. But… robots, automatons, and synthetic intelligence have fascinated my people for centuries. I’m afraid I am not wholly immune myself.”

“I suppose they are interesting, up until they turn on you,” Garrus replied.

“I assure you, I have no plans to turn on this ship and her crew at this time.” EDI spoke up.

“At this time, sure.” Garrus replied blandly. He probably hoped that EDI would not hear, but if Shepard heard it, odds were EDI heard him too. When the silence hung, Shepard realized EDI chose not to reply.

“Garrus, what do we know of the war the Quarians waged on the Geth?” Shepard asked. It was steering the topic away from the minefield, nothing more.

“Not much.” He replied.

“Yes, and only what the Quarians told us.” Shepard affirmed. “Therein lays the problem. We have their story and are expected to take their word.”
“You think there is more to it? The Quarians were the victims, why would they lie?” Garrus asked.

“Perhaps they were not lying, nevertheless- You’re a detective, have you never met a victim who concealed something? Perhaps they felt pressured, ashamed, or even unconsciously protecting someone from the shadow of suspicion, for reasons of their own.”

Garrus hummed, “Yes, I met those types. The worst is the victim related to the perpetrator.”

Shepard smiled. “The same reasoning applies here. Most say the Quarians created and unleashed an army of synthetics on the galaxy who may or may not be beyond reasoning with. If that’s not enough to make them at least bend the truth, then…” She paused, looking across to the couch. “To put in bluntly, I like having the whole story.”

“What are your views on the Geth?”

It was Shepard’s turn to hum, what was her opinion? She really did not have one. It would be ridiculously easy to hate them because everyone else did, but easy did not mean right. She did not know enough to form an opinion. She learned the danger of making rash judgments based on limited information first-hand, and never wanted to repeat that mistake again. “Well… that black one could talk. Sure it was a smarmy asshole, but it could talk. As I said, maybe they are beyond reasoning with, and maybe they’re not. All we know is what the Quarians say. I will form my opinion once I have more to base it on.”

“Fair enough. But you have to admit, if Eden Prime is their way of saying hello to the galaxy, well… that effort was a public relations disaster, and they need to fire the whole advisory team.”

Shepard chuckled, “True, I’ll give you that.”

That pretty much ended the conversation on the topic, Shepard turned back to her work. In another half an hour she finished fetching and organizing things across a number of pads, and even cobbled together an itemized list everything they had. Garrus finished watching the recording and then came up to peruse the other things.

Half an hour after that she had a few additional pads packed and with Garrus leading, they were on their way. The ride was a long one, the longest Skycab hop to date. The vehicle had to cross the enclosed transverse tunnels in the Presidium ring from Zakera to Kithoi Ward, and from there travel nearly half its length until it dipped out of the high speed lanes toward their destination. After a good forty minutes it finally dipped into an enclosed space, through an atmosphere-retaining energy field, and finally to what constituted street level.

They landed in a relatively open plaza-like space that was actually the lower level of a massive tower. Shepard suspected the building above had some governmental purpose as the mezzanine was almost the Presidium-by-proxy. The heavy pillars that supported it were minimized by the inclusion of greenery, pathways, benches, and a single central fountain. Most of the plants were in huge knee-high planter boxes, but the few trees were in boxes recessed into the floor. The lighting was warm, the sort that mimicked the spectrum emissions of a star, to allow photosynthesis.

People wandered the pathways as they talked over communicators, and off to the side Shepard spotted a pair of asari in official looking pantsuits eating sushi with chopsticks out of Japanese takeout boxes as they talked in quiet tones. When she glanced at Garrus, she realized he was watching her, probably letting her soak in the sights. “Well this is certainly very pretty. But we have a date with some databases.” She said.

Garrus grinned and motioned with his arm to the doorway at the side of the space. She was not all
that surprised that he fell in step with her as she crossed the plaza.

Once past the main doors, they were greeted by an asari as the reception desk who smiled warmly and welcomed them the Library of Council. Shepard thought the place was surprisingly small, only three levels, and relatively dimly-lit as far as the Citadel aesthetic went, but it was also the only physical location where the general public could access the closed intranet databases that made up the LoC’s collection. Some people with very special clearance could access the databases remotely, but she would not be privileged with that.

The first floor had rows of standing quick-access terminals for rapid lookups. The second and third floors advertised a quieter environment with study spaces and enclosed secured booths for those who had access to the closed collection. Shepard and Garrus found a space on the second floor with a pair of terminals and a table that allowed Shepard to spread out her pads as she organized the things they pulled up. No one paid the two of them any attention what-so-ever.

Most of the floor here was taken up by people doing academic work. It was hard to miss the four salarians at one of the side tables, engaged in hushed heated rapid-fire jargon-heavy discussion of pharmaceuticals, their applications, and what reacted with what and on what species, probably drilling each other for some standardized test. Shepard was suddenly thankful she did not go into training to be a doctor; she would have never memorized that much.

She spent the next three hours digging, reading through the materials, bouncing ideas with Garrus, and taking notes. The time ticked away without either of them noticing, but they still found very little meat and potatoes. There was a lot of historical context, including period records on the writing of the anti-AI legislature the Council passed after the Quarians were asked to surrender their Citadel embassy, but there was little to nothing on the synthetics themselves. The library’s system also did not show indicators of how many records it was not displaying on the open terminals.

Shepard finally pushed away from the work and sighed. She knew a sinking ship when she saw it. Even her well of patience was not bottomless, and now it was at its absolute limit. Much of what they got was just a clearer version of what the Alliance already had. Undoubtedly scholars had combed over this stuff in the past two decades, but there was nothing of use for a soldier who needed a tactical playbook for the battlefield. “I think I’m about ready for a break,” she announced, looking at her research partner.

“Are you giving up?” Garrus wondered.

She shook her head, “No, more like… reassessing my approach angle. The more I think about it, the more sense it makes to keep the stuff I need in the closed collection. Of course, only Nihlus’ clearances can get us at that.” She glanced to the side; the second floor of the library was almost empty now. The salarians had left an hour ago, and the quiet was beginning to bother her. “That is, if that material exists at all.” She muttered.

“Some would have to exist. The question is how much.” Garrus said.

“Yes, one would think that… but would the Quarians give anyone anything after what happened? Look… the Council refused to aid them when they asked for it, and then to add insult to injury, they took away their embassy. Factor in the dislocation of losing Rannoch, the heavy death tolls, the chaos… I don’t know about you, but first, I’d have different priorities, and second, I’d be pretty angry and uncooperative.”

“That is a possibility.” Garrus affirmed.

“I hope I’m wrong, but… I won’t hold my breath.” As far as Shepard was concerned the Council
treated a laceration by amputation, like the typical myopic politicians that they were. “I see it like this. They passed a law to control the development of synthetics within Council Space, and another to keep people out of the Perseus Veil, ostensibly to prevent the situation getting worse. In reality, I think it is more like they wanted the geth out of sight, out of mind. The law to control the development synthetics was a knee-jerk reaction, it does more to give the Council power to act if anyone created new synthetics, but does nothing to address the ones already made.” The more she learned about galactic politics, the easier it became to dislike them. That did not bode well for her as a Spectre candidate.

“Perhaps it is best Kryik is not here. Your low opinion of our illustrious politicians might scandalize him.”

Shepard grinned; she thought Nihlus might actually agree. He certainly bent the rules liberally enough to make her think he had his own views on the matter. Before she could say anything, her omni-tool pinged with an incoming message. She looked down on it and grinned, “Speak of the devil.”

“The what?”

“It’s Nihlus. He got the insurance company to cough up his credits, he wants to know if we’re making any progress, and -here I’m quoting- if we need his help. Yet.” Shepard looked Garrus in the eye as she spoke. Nihlus knew full well that they would get nothing without his clearances, and he seemed to be in the right sort of obnoxiously good mood to be sending this sort of cocky message to lord it over them as well.

“Do you want to break for a meal while we wait for him to get here?” Garrus asked.

“Not today,” Shepard replied as she typed up her reply. “I’m all researched out.” She told Nihlus that they made some progress, but the rest could wait until tomorrow. The best part was that it was not technically a lie. As she hit send, she looked up and smiled.

Today’s trip was more than just research, Shepard wanted to know she could work with Garrus, and right now she knew she could. They had commonalities that made working with him easy, and he had no major, obvious chips on his shoulder when it came to humans. On top of that, he did what was requested of him with enough enthusiasm. There was still the measure of his combat abilities to take, but she was not worried. Any skill rust that might have accumulated during his time in C-sec could be polished off with a few sessions in a shooting range. Combat prowess was like riding a bicycle. Ultimately he was a turian; she would be shocked if he had serious skill rust to work on.

She got up from her seat and began to pack away the datapads into her bag, then after making sure that the terminals were properly in standby for someone else to use, they left.

The ride back to Zakera Ward was spent just talking as the VI drove. The topics meandered from one thing to another without really lingering or going past small-talk and little jokes, but Shepard was smiling non-stop by the time the Skycab exited the tunnel onto Zakera Ward.

When the car eased onto a kiosk pad, she paid the fare, climbed out, and followed Garrus as he made his way toward their docking area. The car had landed outside the main terminal, so they had to step past one set of doors just to enter the port.

The area beyond the empty security and ticket gates was a long gallery branching off to either side. There were wide, vaguely oblong support pillars running down the center, dividing the space into
two lanes. The planter boxes stood empty, the greenery removed to save on maintenance. Shuttered up duty-free stores took up the space between the locked doorways leading to docking bays. The cold dimmed lighting punctuated by the absence of life created a forlorn, somewhat eerie atmosphere. This had been one of the many passenger terminals, but the Council decided they needed a dock for craft with special clearance, essentially out of the way and off limits to the crowds. The Normandy was just one of the ships to get special access. The door leading to their dock lounge was the first on the left, Gate Z-421A, as the sign by the jamb announced in bright holo-neon, the most cheerful thing there.

Garrus stopped a few steps short of their door and turned to look down the gallery to their left. The suddenness of his movement made Shepard follow his gaze instinctively. Off in the distance she spotted two familiar figures standing at an alcove of public access terminals. Nihlus was there, back to the wall, his arms crossed. Shepard recognized the other turian by his white armor and unusual fringe despite the fact that he stood with his back to them.

“What is he doing here?” Garrus wondered, his tone picking up a near-hostile reverb.

The change was unexpected, it set Shepard on edge. “I was under the impression they were friends, so… visiting? He wouldn’t be allowed near the Normandy,” Shepard replied. Nihlus had gotten a message from him before, so maybe this was something they arranged. Yet as she watched the two turians converse, she began to see the tension in Nihlus. The way he stood did not speak of someone having a casual conversation with a friend, he seemed defensive. Couple that with Garrus’ sudden hostility, and Shepard could not help but feel like something was off.

“Why am I not surprised Kryik never told you who mentored him?”

“Spectre Arterius was Nihlus’ mentor?” she asked, stunned, as she looked at her companion.

“Yes.”

Her mind flashed back to the heated jab Garrus had thrown at Nihlus that one time, and the sharp retort Nihlus fired back. Her own experience with him had not created the impression that the white-clad Spectre was known for congeniality. Nihlus had a peculiar reaction to Saren’s message on top. Suddenly it really looked less like a cordial visit, and that set her internal alarms off.

Before Nihlus could spot them; she ducked behind one of the support pillars, putting Saren directly in the line of sight between her and Nihlus. The white-clad turian was taller and larger than Nihlus; Shepard hoped that would work to her advantage.

Garrus was right at her side, back to the pillar. “Are you thinking of eavesdropping?” He whispered.

“Thinking?” Shepard asked, “I’m doing.”

“Maybe-”

Shepard ducked out from behind the pillar, eyes on the next, and carefully walked along, quiet as she could, keeping out of what she thought Nihlus’ line of sight would have to be.

She stopped behind the next pillar and shifted just enough that she could peer around. After confirming that the two did not move, she slipped out from the other side and quickly, but quietly, made her way to the next pillar.

Now she was about fifteen meters away and she could hear the rumble of voices. They were not whispering, but by no means talking loudly either. This was an underused terminal; surely there was no need to be dodging hearing ranges unless something shady was afoot. Still, only every fifth word
carried, not enough for context, she needed to get closer yet, which was riskier with every meter.

The last thing she needed was to be discovered eavesdropping, though her personal odds were good if she kept in mind that turians not only had good hearing, but also a good sense of smell. She had to hope the air here was still enough that her soap would not immediately give her away. One more pillar would do it; she took a deep breath and slipped out. The voices got clearer and clearer with each step and as she ducked behind the next pillar she knew this was the limit. She closed her eyes, and listened.

“… did your research, you would know Shepard is qualified.”

Shepard froze, stunned.

“Qualified?” Saren repeated. “Humans laud anyone vaguely more intelligent than a varren. By my standards the Star of Terra is as worthless as the metal it is struck in.”

“Elysium—”

“Elysium,” Saren sneered, “was fools throwing themselves in small groups at a strong position without confirming where the sniper fire was coming from and deploying appropriate countermeasures. It was to be expected from pirates and mercenaries. If one of them had thought to use a thermal scanner, she would have been spotted and killed. Her success was luck, nothing more. Luck does not make one worthy of the Spectres.”

Shepard clenched her fists and forced herself to exhale smoothly through her nose, to control her surging fury. The batarians did have a damn thermal scanner. They had thought of using it. They did kill someone that night. She just learned from that, adapted. Snow was a very good thermal insulator when one lay mostly-buried in it and absolutely still. They also could not use scanners if she shot them before they could get close enough; she had used range to her greatest advantage. She had to learn to fire at longer and longer ranges, anger was a shockingly good motivator for learning on the fly.

“Mercenary stupidity or not, it took fortitude to do what she did!” Nihlus protested.

“Enough. I understand you are indebted to her for saving your life, but carrying on as you do is unbecoming. Even if you are correct and that female is the best of her species, it does not alter the facts. She is nothing more than a tool for the Alliance. Make her a Spectre and her kind will demand a council seat next. Would you give Udina the power to shape galactic policy? Give them a seat, and we will be forced to obey the commands of that arrogant fool. It is a pleasure I will not give him.”

Shepard slowly let out a breath she did not even realize she had been holding. As much as she wanted to be furious, she had to agree with those assertions on some level. The Alliance would use her as a stepping stone toward a council seat. She agreed that Udina would make a terrible councilor. She could not even fault Saren’s ego for not wanting to be under his thumb. Still, none of that excused the fact that they were having this conversation to begin with. Nothing excused Nihlus not shutting it down.

“Udina is a boor, yes… but you are being unreasonable, I—” Nihlus protested.

“I said enough, Nihlus!” Saren interrupted coldly. “You are making the worst mistake of your career with your impulsiveness!” Saren retorted, utterly unmoved.

“So what would you do?” Nihlus replied, a flash of annoyance in his voice.

“Fix it. One unfavorable report will be enough for Sparatus and Valern.” Saren replied.
Shepard’s fury soared. She could not believe her ears. Saren wanted Nihlus to sabotage her? Of all the low-

“Do you honestly think I can do that at this point? The Alliance will suspect. Shepard knows Anderson. No.” Nihlus replied.

Shepard froze, how did Captain Anderson fit into this picture?

“I am aware of that caveat. This is why I am not telling you to do more.”

More? What more? Surely not- did Saren just imply that if Captain Anderson was not in the picture, he would have suggested something violent?

“That barefaced bastard!” A quiet voice growled in her ear, over the comm link.

Shepard almost jumped, she forgot that Garrus was there and could hear everything too.

“Kryik too.” Garrus went on.

Shepard did not dare to whisper a reply this close to them. She glanced back the way she came and spotted Garrus behind the next pillar over; apparently close enough for his hearing. Was he right when he accused Nihlus of being no better than his mentor? Was she now seeing the harmful subterfuge? Suddenly his distance from the crew took on a whole different slant. Had she ignored the warning signs?

“You will do this.” Saren stated with the tone of finality.

Whatever reply Nihlus made was under his breath, Shepard’s integrated translator failed to make the pickup. Right at that moment, she found it difficult to care. If Nihlus agreed to stab her in the back, he would not be able to, because now she knew he would try. When she heard footsteps in a heavier, unfamiliar cadence drawing near and instinctively froze to the spot. It had to be Saren. Nihlus’ footsteps had a different tempo and pitch.

The footsteps paused somewhere nearby and her heart leapt into her throat. Was Saren on the other side of the pillar? She looked to her left, Garrus had shifted to dodge being spotted himself, but he was watching her. The footsteps resumed a second later and Shepard exhaled slowly, watching Saren as he walked toward the security gate. Talk about being proverbially trapped between a rock and a hard place, she thought to herself. Then she heard another set of footsteps on her right, this time in Nihlus’ familiar tempo.

“Spirits, what a mess,” Nihlus muttered, somewhere very close to her hiding spot. His armor creaked as he shifted his weight.

Shepard clenched her jaw, willing with all her might for him to move on. He was too close; one more centimeter could make him catch a whiff of her soap. Her heartbeat was thundering in her ears, but she forced herself to breathe slowly and evenly. How would she explain this? The first time had been harmless, a prank. This time was outright spying, and given what she overheard, not nearly as harmless. She was not sorry, if she had not spied she would not know what an underhanded snake Saren was, but also what a danger Nihlus posed. She wanted to think her personal danger sense was quite sharp. It certainly picked up this.

The footsteps resumed. Shepard remained where she was, but turned to watch Nihlus go toward the doors leading to the Normandy’s dock. At that moment she could hardly keep her glare at bay. As the door opened, she glanced at Garrus. His mandibles were drawn up tight to his jaw; he looked like he was barely containing his anger, and he was not even the wronged party. When the door closed,
Garrus waited all of five seconds to break cover and walk toward her.

“What will you do now?” he asked.

“I-“ The sound of his voice brought her out of her momentary trance. What could she do? Did Nihlus know she had spied on them? If she went to the Normandy now and gave Nihlus a piece of her mind, he would know she had been spying. Timing was a tad too inconvenient.

“You should not let Kryik back aboard your ship.”

“This is a delicate situation,” Shepard replied, though the words sounded weak even to her own ears. There were many different reasons why she should not let Nihlus get away with this, but they were all overshadowed by a deeply personal reason why she could not act. If she washed out of Spectre candidacy on a bad performance review the brass would have her bars. Her career would be over. It was being selfish, but she wanted to keep her career.

“There is nothing delicate about it! He intends to lie to the Council and at worst-”

“I know! I just… I can’t just jump into the situation rashly.” Shepard began to pace. As things stood, if Nihlus went up in front of Sparatus and Valern and said that he had been wrong, and no, she was not Spectre material, the Alliance would have no leg to stand on. Even worse, plenty would be inclined to believe that the golden screw-up had screwed up again.

She turned, pacing in the other direction. What would she do if she was not in the Alliance navy? What could a highly trained N7 do in the civilian sector? She did not see herself turning private military corps, or bodyguard, but those were in fact the only skills she had. It was not an exaggeration to say that she grew up knowing she would be in the Alliance. Everything went into that. She had no plan B. Now that was in jeopardy, and the only recourse was to find a way to disarm the trap.

She glanced back at Garrus and was taken aback by the expression on his face. He had the sort of look that heralded a barely contained explosion, his mandibles twitching in agitation, a deep shadow cast over his eyes, making the blue color darker and even more intense. “Commander, with all due respect, there is nothing to think about. My armor recorded the conversation, the recording-”

“No,” she cut in, surprisingly feeling calmer than she was a moment ago. “There is always something to consider.” The fact that Garrus recorded the conversation was a new card in play, but how and when to play it? It was evidence of corrupt dealing, something she could potentially show to both sides.

She was appalled to realize that she should have been recording the conversation herself from the moment she realized they were talking about her, instead now she had to thank the wherewithal of someone who was almost a complete stranger. She trusted Nihlus, and now he was turning out to be a wolf in sheep’s clothing. Well, no matter, what is done, is done. She had to play her cards as they were dealt then.

With the Council she could try and prove that Nihlus was less than truthful on any report he filed. Still, how far would that go? She had no friends among them. She also knew they were typical politicians at that. Their solution would benefit them foremost. No, the recording would not get her
far with the Council. Her candidacy would be over, but she would look like a whiny brat crying foul play in the process. Add to that, Nihlus had plenty of other incriminating material on her as well. He could make things far worse if she made him go for the big guns.

If she was to show the recording to the Alliance brass, she could claim that she did not screw up, that her performance review and loss of candidacy was nothing short of fabrication. It might save her bars. Yet there would be fallout, and as she began to weigh it, she realized it was almost worse than the problem to begin with. The minute the recording got out, the brass would be up in arms over clear evidence that at least one Spectre is pulling the strings behind the scenes out of anti-human sentiments. The fact that both Spectres involved happened to be turians would be early Christmas for the saber-rattlers. This was the same caliber of mess as the case with Sparatus’ secretary. Saving her neck meant she would be the whistle-blower at the center of a scandal, exactly where she never wanted to be. That was hardly having her cake and eating it too. The recording could only make her a pariah of one kind or another.

So where did that leave her? What other options did she have? There was the unknown factor. Would Nihlus actually do as Saren told him? She wanted to say no, wanted to think he was better than that. The childlike optimist inside her wanted to give him the benefit of the doubt. The pessimist insisted she was being stupid. One could trust a turian to follow the commands of a superior. But then this was Nihlus, a turian who broke rules routinely enough. So what would he do?

“Commander?” Garrus asked.

“A million credit question for you, Garrus. Would Nihlus actually do it?” It boiled down to essentially whether or not Nihlus was still loyal to Saren on a personal level. She could gamble on the dark horse, because betting on it seemed to be the only chance she had for a clear win. If he proved to have integrity, she could have her cake and eat it too.

“From where I am standing, he will do it.” Garrus replied.

“And I have known him a bit longer... so I want to think that he will not.” She replied calmly. Once she knew where Nihlus’ loyalties lay, she could plan for Saren’s next steps. She was not naïve enough to think he would not have a backup plan. She was also keenly aware of the look Garrus was giving her. Was he seeing her in a new light? Probably was. Well there was no helping it.

“It is ultimately your decision to make, Commander. I apologize if I came across as overly-insistent.”

Somehow Shepard thought the words were less than sincere. It was clear that Garrus had his own ideas of how to do things. Right now he was simply backing down because he realized she would still do as she pleased. “It is alright, no harm done.” She was not petty enough to hold it against him.

“Kind of makes me wish we stayed in the library to do more research,” Garrus said after a long silence.

Shepard opened her mouth to say something about that comment, but she realized that Garrus hit the nail on the head. Had they remained in the library, had she asked Nihlus to come in so they could use his access clearances, he would not have had this conversation with Saren. It was a pointless exercise of wistful thinking, but in a morose way, it was still amusing.

Garrus paused, cocking his head to the side. “You... intend to give him a chance?”

Shepard sighed. Really, what other option did she have? “I have to... I rather deal with the consequences than-” make a rash, false accusation. There was no winning anything by using the recording preemptively. In fact, she stood to lose more. If there was even a slim chance that Nihlus
did not intend to do as Saren told him, then accusing him of it would be the worst thing she could do. If he did mean to betray her, then she had a forewarning, he could not catch her unaware.

Garrus nodded. “If Kryik intends to act like a bareface… well… I have your back.”

“Thank you.” Shepard replied. “Though I hope it won’t come down to that.” She did, because if Nihlus proved to be rotten at the core, she did not want Garrus to be caught in the crossfire. No one else needed to suffer because of her.

They returned to the Normandy about twenty minutes later. Shepard was resolutely set on pretending she knew nothing. Having left her research material in the OD, she ventured down to the mess. There was no sign of Nihlus, he seemed to have vanished right back into the XO’s cabin. Her marines and Joker were seated around one of the tables, apparently doing nothing in particular.

“Hey,” she greeted.

“Hey, Commander.” Joker replied.

“So what’s going on?”

“Jenkins was telling us about his new shooting record,” Kaidan said.

“Yes, I was! I almost beat the chief in a speed run! My aim is getting better!” Jenkins jumped in.

“It is,” Ashley agreed with pride in her voice, “but you’re still a little ways off beating me. I’ll consider myself beat when you can put a headshot with a pistol from a hundred meters.”

“So what are you teaching him, Gunny?” Shepard wondered.

“Oh, just getting him really used to shooting. Basic training just covers the basics, but they don’t give them enough time to really… get the feel for it. Confidence with weapons is important; they have to feel like an extension of your body.” Ashley explained, but in that moment she was looking more at Jenkins than her.

Shepard grinned, “Indeed, doubly so when you’re using a sniper rifle at one thousand meters. One degree off translates to centimeters down range, and that’s before wind and gravity come into play. Well, Richard, the day you can do headshots with a pistol at one hundred, I’ll teach you to shoot long distance.”

“You will, Commander?”

“You bet. We’ll make a crack-shot out of you yet.” Shepard replied.

“Awesome! Thank you!” Jenkins cheered, suddenly gleefully happy.

“Yea, alright, settle down Richie, I bet they heard that back at Arcturus.” Joker grumbled, rubbing at his ear.

“Sorry,” the corporal mumbled, but there was no real contrition there as he was grinning from ear to ear.

Shepard smiled. There was something to the simple pleasures of watching an enthusiastic marine develop his skills. She was not kidding either, if Jenkins developed a solid foundational basis, she would teach him to shoot a sniper rifle. Even if he never became a true sniper, it would still help him.
Just being able to shoot true with various weapons would improve his versatility. Sniping skills were fifty percent foundation, thirty percent perseverance, and twenty percent talent. Even if Jenkins lacked the natural talent of a crack-shot, she could still give him something.

“Joker, has anyone ever told you that you can be a real ass sometimes?” Ashley wondered.

“Often enough,” Joker replied bluntly, “that it has stopped bothering me.”

“That’s not something you should be proud of.” Kaidan mused.

“That’s alright, Lieutenant Moreau is just jealous of the attention I’m getting.” Jenkins said with a shit-eating grin.

“Oh! Isn’t that just the truth?” Ashley laughed.

Kaidan cracked a smile. Joker glared at all three of them as best he could, but did not offer a retort. Whether that was because he had nothing, or he realized its best to let them be, Shepard could not be sure. Shepard tried not to be seen grinning as well. “Ashley, the offer is open to you as well,” she said.

“Oh. Thanks, but I think I’ll leave the long distance shooting to the expert, ma’am. To be honest, I prefer the direct, assault rifle approach.”

“Alright then, offer’s going to remain open.”

“I appreciate that, ma’am.” Ashley nodded.

Before Shepard could say anything more, the door to the XO’s cabin opened and Nihlus stepped out, clad in his casuals, and their gazes met. Shepard smiled at him. The tomfoolery of her crew fanned away some of the miasma of negativity of the past hour. Nihlus froze for a moment; green eyes locked on her, mandibles drawn up against his jaw, but then continued toward the elevator as if nothing had happened.

~          *          ~          ~          *          ~          ~          *          ~

It was forty minutes before Shepard could resume business as usual. When she initially meant to go up to the OD she bumped into Garrus coming around the elevator, and they ended up ensconced in Life Support to conspire. When asked about things, EDI only assured them that if Nihlus planned to do anything, she would know. This only made Shepard wonder for the umpteenth time what the AI knew that they did not. Nevertheless she walked away with Garrus’ recording of the conversation on her omni-tool and the conviction that Garrus had a Saren-shaped chip on his shoulder. The way the ex-detective talked about the white-clad Spectre made it abundantly clear that he had no kind words to spare. Shepard could not help but wonder where that animosity was coming from, but knew better than to ask.

Now as she stepped off the elevator, the CIC was largely empty, just one crewmembre monitoring the ship’s systems with one eye, reading a datapad with the other. All of the Normandy’s systems were in standby as they would be staying at the Citadel for at least another day, so there was hardly anything to monitor. She turned to her left and entered the OD, but two steps inside the door she froze. Nihlus was positively comfortable on the couch under the viewports, one foot up, the other on the floor; reading something or other, a cup of steaming drink waiting for him on the coffee table. There were two more pads on the table and an OSD as well. A moment later she moved deeper into the room, allowing the door to close behind her.

“Shepard,” he murmured without turning his head.
She did not reply, instead she perched on furthest end of the couch extension.

Nihlus looked up and lowered the pad. His eyes locked on her, deep and scrutinizing. Did he expect her to go on the attack? “Something from the Council?” she asked, looking at the pad. Last time she had caught him comfortable on that couch, they ended up on Eden Prime hours later, and shit hit a fan.

He dropped his other foot onto the floor and sat up, “No. I was reviewing some of the data we retrieved at the Eclipse base. I had to put that investigation on hold for a while, but it is still outstanding. Not all Spectre assignments are high profile like Eden Prime. I thought you would be interested in something simpler.”

“I might be. You said it was localized to the sector, right? Smuggling?” Shepard was becoming more and more uncomfortable by the moment. Was he aware that she had been spying? Some paranoid part of her mind wandered if this was his way of setting her up to take a fall. She let the silence linger, an issue of simply not knowing what to say. Suddenly there was a mine-field between them, and she really did not like it being there, but there was no helping it.

Nihlus flicked the pad onto the coffee table, it landed with a clatter that broke the silence between them as effectively as a gunshot. “Shepard, do you intend to bring up what happened?” he asked.

“What?” Shepard replied.

“You know what Saren and I talked about.”

Shepard knew better than to deny it, playing stupid in this situation would not help anyone.

“I know you were there with Vakarian.”

“I won’t apologize,” Shepard replied.

Nihlus sighed, “No, you would not, and you are right not to, but you should not have been eavesdropping on us.”

“And why not?” Shepard asked sharply. “No. I suppose I shouldn’t have. Well I am sorry, Spectre Kryik, if I complicated your life with my excellent sense of danger.”

“Spirits.” Nihlus shook his head. “Think, Shepard! If I know you were there, Saren knows you were there!”

“I am not afraid of him,” Shepard replied sharply.

“Good! But what about Vakarian?” Nihlus asked.

Shepard opened her mouth; she wanted to say that Garrus would not be afraid of Saren either. Hell, Garrus would probably relish a chance to bring Saren down, what with the chip on his shoulder. Still, as most trains of thought go, this one kept rolling, and in that moment a thought occurred to her which caused her to stop cold. If Saren knew they were both there, what stopped him from trying to cover his tracks? If he was indeed as corrupt as Garrus suspected, then the ex-detective effectively painted a target on his own back. Was Nihlus warning her merely to protect Garrus? If he was, then he had an outright twisted sense of right and wrong.

The Spectre got to his feet, seemingly keen on putting some distance between them, “Shepard, Saren and I... we go back.”
“He mentored you,” Shepard stated blandly, was it really all that hard not to mince words?

“Vakarian told you.” Nihlus sighed as he began to pace. “Spirits. I never wanted you to find out.”

She sat and watched him; suddenly it looked like of the two of them, he was the very much distressed party. She just could not tell if it was an award-worthy performance or a genuine thing.

“Listen, Shepard. I-” he stopped, looked at her, “I never wanted you to meet Saren. Not until you made Spectre and he would have no say in the matter. I knew if you met before that, he would want me to break it off.”

“To sabotage me?” Shepard asked blandly.

“Saren is-”

“Don’t make excuses for him,” Shepard interrupted.

Nihlus sighed again, “You are right. There is no excusing that. This is coming out all wrong.”

“Sure,” coming out all wrong, huh? Did he have a routine pre-planned in which her role was to blindly forgive him, hug him better, and move on? “He’s a human-hating asshole, but he was your mentor and is your friend, I get it.”

“You do not get it! I never intended to do as he told me!” Nihlus protested, his voice spiking in volume. “I meant to make him think I would look for an opportunity, nothing more.” It lowered. “Spirits, I tried to reason with him, convince him to abandon the idea. I thought if he knew that you are close to Anderson it would- but no, I suppose it is all the more reason why he wants me to do it.”

“How does Captain Anderson factor into this?” Shepard asked. Maybe he would not lie about that part.

“You do not know?” Nihlus asked, his brow plates climbing up in surprise. “Eighteen years ago, Anderson was the first human Spectre candidate, and Saren was assigned perform the evaluation and mentoring.”

Shepard froze as realization dawned on her. Since Captain Anderson never made Spectre, and to be sure never talked about it, she could infer Saren had sabotaged him. Then quite suddenly she remembered why Saren’s name rang a bell. She had heard it before.

She had been eleven at the time, too young to really pay attention to what was going on when it was not an alarm, but she heard it from Captain Anderson himself. The Einstein was docked on Arcturus for the annual top-to-bottom inspection, and he came to visit her mother at their family quarters aboard.

It must have been shortly after the incident, because the conversation turned to the topic somehow. Captain Anderson became angry, Shepard could only recall the way he spat Saren’s name, voice raised, the only time she had ever heard the captain get angry and raise his voice. Her mother ordered her to run to the medbay to get her some migraine pills. In hindsight that had been to get her out of the room while they talked. The whole incident left such a trivial impression that the memory had been tucked into some back corner until it was jarred by new context.

“I do not need to explain why Saren thinks Humans are not ready for Spectre status. You heard it from him, but… I do not agree with him. I never did.” He went on.

Shepard hummed, and suddenly something clicked in her mind. “Wait… When I asked you why you
nominated me…” He stopped and looked at her so suddenly it could have very well been his answer before she even finished the question. “You were paraphrasing something he once said.”

“I was,” he resumed pacing.

“Alright. So… what… you want me to prove him wrong?” Shepard asked next.

He stopped cold, mid-step, just froze. Shepard knew she had hit that one on the head. “When you put it like that, it sounds… bad.”

“Bad does not begin covering it.” Shepard replied.

“Sarcasm that I probably deserve aside, why are you so calm?” he asked.

He was dodging the question, trying to distract her. “Will my anger help the situation?” She asked. “Nihlus sit down please; I’m going to hurt my neck looking up.”

He let out a rush of air that might have been a sigh, but sat down nonetheless.

“Tell me the truth; did you nominate me so I could prove Saren wrong?” She thought the idea had to factor in there somewhere, and right now he was pacing because the plan to keep her from finding out had been blown to kingdom-come.

“No. Well… yes… but not only for that.” Nihlus replied. “Shepard, I did not lie to you. I think you would be an exceptional Spectre. The fact that you are letting me explain myself… that you are so calm…”

Shepard hummed; maybe she ought to cut him loose. He was clearly floundering to explain himself. “Alright, but- I am still uncertain of where we stand. Saren wants you to sabotage me, and while you’re telling me that you have no intention of doing so, pardon me, but I would be foolish to take your word for it.”

“I understand that.”

“So where does that put us?” Shepard asked.

Nihlus picked up the OSD and held it out to her, “Now I prove my honor, and this is my way of doing it.”

Shepard took the OSD mutely, where was he going with this one?

“That contains a quality recording of my conversation with Saren, beginning to end.” He explained, as if reading her mind. “EDI put the file on that drive, so I assume she has a copy of it in her memory as well.”

“EDI you’ve been in on this all along, weren’t you?” Shepard wondered.

“Yes. Spectre Kryik requested I provide surety for the contents of the device. He insisted I do so, because he surmised you would trust me more than him. I can confirm that it is a recording of the conversation Spectre Kryik had with Spectre Arterius.” EDI replied.

Shepard took the OSD wordlessly. Of all the ways Nihlus could have tried to persuade her that he was on the level, she did not expect him to provide her with self-incriminating evidence. He either had absolutely no shame and nothing to lose, or he was genuine. There was no logical counter-point to this. If Saren knew of the recording and they staged it to disarm her in the event of her spying on
them, the recording was too good at incriminating them. That possibility was too preposterous as an idea to consider. This left only one possibility. Nihlus had clandestinely recorded the conversation without Saren’s knowledge. Why? She could not be sure. But the act itself meant he tossed his chips in with her. “I’ll accept this. But—”

“Your trust is not so easily won back,” Nihlus murmured, his voice dipped into a whisper as his gaze slid to the floor. Was it just her hearing, or did he sound dejected? Still, she was not going to go soft on him. His act of repentance did not erase the record of every clandestine machination he pulled, and would probably continue to pull. There was a devious, manipulative mind in there. Worst, Shepard knew she could do nothing about it without being a hypocrite. She had her own stakes in the game, and a smile to boot.

In the end, they were two peas in a pod, neither truly honest with the other without a reason. About the only thing that bothered her, was that Nihlus seemed well on his way to giving EDI an example to follow. It remained to see whether that was a good thing or not. For now she would have to wait and see.

Chapter End Notes

**Author Notes:** Yep, Nihlus found himself faced with the immovable object and the unstoppable force. Which one will give? I did not give Saren a cameo earlier without a reason. I never do anything without a reason.

**General Notes:**

**On the Episode’s Title** – An Eminence Grise is someone who wields considerable influence and/or power without the benefit of a formal title. The first “Eminence Grise” was Francois Leclerc du Tremblay (1577 – 1638), the right hand, confidant, and agent of Cardinal Richelieu (1585 – 1642). He was a Capuchin Friar, and so wore a grey robe over his habit. Richelieu would have been addressed as “His/Your Eminence”, and his right-hand kind of got that address by proxy, though highly informally, and perhaps a touch grudgingly. I found the image oddly suited Saren both in the literal sense of how much influence he pulls behind the scenes (which in my canon, he does…) and the fact that his “image color” is white, or very light grey.

**Chapter Notes:**

Shockingly… none.
The next morning Shepard woke up an hour before her alarm was set and decided not to go back to sleep. A shower and a quick status quo review from EDI later she got ready for the day. Subsequently she expected to be the first one down to breakfast. So she was surprised when she came around the elevator and spotted Nihlus seated at the mess table, in his casuals, eating outside the XO’s cabin.

He had a fork in one hand, and a datapad in the other. There were tater-shaped pieces of dark blue meat on his plate, coated in a thick glistening sauce, surrounded by tuber-like things that looked like a cross between a carrot and beet, former in shape, latter in color, and a cup of a steaming dextro-coffee within reach. Shepard did not know what to call any of it, but it smelled pretty good even to her. She glanced toward the kitchen area, Matthews was busy popping sausages into boiling water for the rest of them. He apparently turned to cooking similar-looking meals, probably so that neither levo nor dextro aboard would feel slighted.

She sat down across from Nihlus and folded her hands on the table before her.

Before either of them could say a thing Matthews was right there. He set down her mug and poured her a strong black coffee from the carafe. “Good morning, Commander. We have your choice of pancakes with either fruit jelly or maple syrup, or maybe you’d like the sausages?”

“Pancakes and jelly will do,” Shepard replied.

“Coming right up!” Matthews rushed off.

“Breathe, Matthews. There are only twenty-six of us, and less than ten ought to come!” Shepard called.

The cook laughed and went to work on the pancakes. He apparently had the batter mix in the fridge, and the pan already oiled and ready for the heat.

“Shepard,” Nihlus greeted, spearing another of those meat taters with his fork before sticking it in his mouth.

Shepard turned back to the turian in front of her and grinned, “Nihlus.”

“Why ten?” he wondered, breaking the silence that formed between them.
Shepard hummed; now this was something. Had Nihlus developed a sudden interest in the crew? “Shifts, Nihlus. Also… some have taken to sampling the breakfast menu on the Citadel while they can.” Perhaps what happened yesterday had shifted something in him. First he was eating outside his quarters, now interest in her crew? “So, how many credits are you getting from the company?” she wondered. Best keep to the small-talk without resorting to the obvious in asking about his food.

“The full coverage, twenty-five million.”

“Wow. We have a millionaire aboard.”

He grinned, “When you are as good as I am, the credits follow.”

“I bet you have a good investment agent,” Shepard rebuffed.

“I can introduce him to you,” Nihlus offered.

“My expenses are covered.”

“Your loss. Now, we are still going to the Library of Council?” he asked, speared another tater, and popped it into his mouth.

“If you’re willing to lend me your clearances, yes. Though I’ll tell you what I told Garrus yesterday, I am beginning to think that the information I want might not be there. The Quarians would have had different priorities when they went into exile, and… well, the Council left them high and dry when they needed help.”

Nihlus hummed, “you have certainly done your research.”

Shepard glanced at the pad on the table, was it one of the bunch she left in the OD last night? She should have known that he would look.

“Do not take it like that, Shepard. I need to look them over. I know very little of the historical context, and before Eden Prime I had no reason to do the research. I never expected to encounter a geth. As for the Quarians, I only knew what everyone knows.”

“I don’t suppose you would have had a reason to look for more either. They’re the galaxy’s gypsies.” Shepard sighed.

“Gypsies?”

“It’s the… other, less polite term for the Romani peoples on Earth. Hundreds of years ago they were semi-nomads, and there were prejudices against them because of that. Everyone considered settled agrarian life to be the mark of civilization. The similarity is uncanny.”

“Would humanity have treated the Quarians different?”

“If we had been advanced enough three hundred years ago… would the politicians have agreed to help the Quarians keep Rannoch, or retake it? I don’t know.” Shepard shook her head. “I want to think that… maybe? I don’t like to do that sort of guess-work. There’s no point to it, and it gives me a headache.”

“You clearly do not agree with the treatment they received,” Nihlus went on.

“Should I?” Shepard asked blandly. “I’m not going to assume the Quarians are bad just because they wander. Past that, yes, the Quarians created a synthetic intelligence which just happened to go rogue.
First, I do not believe synthetics going rogue is inevitable. We are an example of how synthetic life can cooperate with organics, with mutual trust and respect. Second, what happened still does not justify treating the Quarians as the plague. Certainly there might be bad individuals among them, but I’ll argue that every species has a few bad seeds. To assume the entire species is the same based on the actions of a few…” Shepard stopped when she saw the grin Nihlus had. She realized with a start that he wanted to measure her opinion on the matter, because at the end of the day this was the exact difference between her and his former mentor. Saren was apparently willing to judge a whole species by the actions of the few.

Matthews returned to her side and set down a plate of four pancakes, a squeezable bottle of strawberry jelly, and the cutlery.

“Thanks, Chef.” Shepard said with a smile.

“You are welcome, Commander. Enjoy.” Matthews replied and returned to his cooking.

Shepard chuckled, she honestly though that he would be blissful beyond words if he opened a greasy spoon diner somewhere, he loved to cook and it showed. Still, if he did, they would be without a damn good cook.

“Don’t think you’re off the hook, Nihlus. I think it’s time for some quid pro quo. You got to pick my brain, now I get to pick yours.”

“Pick away.” He replied.

Shepard paused, wondering if she really ought to ask what she wanted to ask. As a way to buy a moment to articulate her thoughts she grabbed the jelly, squeezed some on top of her pancakes, and spread it around with her fork. “Well if you’re going to be looking for every way I’m different from your charming former mentor… I guess I’m curious, why does he hate humans so much?”

Nihlus set down his fork, the light mood draining from him like water out of a bottomless bucket. Shepard opened her mouth to apologize, realizing that the question was too invasive, and probably not something he could talk about, but Nihlus raised his hand to forestall her.

“I suppose I should tell you. Because he would not, especially if you asked.” He began.

“You don’t have to, I mean… if it’s-”

“It goes back to Shanxi. The Turian fleet blockading the colony was under the Command of Admiral Desolas Arterius.”

For Shepard just the mention of the name was enough to begin seeing the picture, “Saren’s-”

“Brother. Ten years older.”

Shepard’s eyes widened, “The fleet flagship… the one that was…” she broke off; it was not a good idea to say ‘blown to bits’, even ‘destroyed in battle’ sounded crass.

“Yes. The Impera, destroyed by a core hit at the height of the battle.”

Shepard could not say anything. Suddenly things made sense. The destruction of the flagship over Shanxi had been a pivotal moment in the battle to break the blockade. When the Everest scored that hit the Second Fleet got a moment to breathe and rally, both in formation and spirits. More than that though, it proved that the enemy had weaknesses and could be defeated. It was the shot that turned the tide of the battle for the Alliance.
Shepard could just imagine how it looked from the other side; to lose one’s flagship in one shot was demoralizing, but to lose a brother in such a manner? That was far more personal, that sort of injury never healed. In this case it clearly not only did not heal, it festered.

“You know which ship fired the shot.” Nihlus added.

“Yes.” Shepard murmured. “By our accounts, the Impera was pounding into the Second Fleet, it destroyed three cruisers in fifteen minutes, and its kinetic barriers were holding up against cruiser fire. Admiral Drescher ordered the Everest to focus on it. About at the same time a fighter from the fifty-fifth fighter squad, launched by the Einstein, subsequently damaged, performed a kamikaze strike, didn’t do much, but it got past the barrier, caused it to flicker… Admiral Drescher ordered the Everest to fire it main gun at about that moment. The shot was fired when the shield flickered, and it went in at just the right angle to hit the core, a one-in-a-million confluence of events.” She knew more than that, she knew who pulled the proverbial trigger. Had her mother fired a split second sooner, or later, the shot might not have penetrated at all.

“Yes, that is about the sequence of events the Hierarchy reported, minus some details and precise designations.”

Shepard glanced down at her food, what else could she say? While every soldier faced battle knowing they might have to lay down their life, she could understand why those left behind could find the fact difficult to swallow. Still, the galaxy was truly a small place, to have tangled the strings of their lives in such a truly bizarre manner. It was at times like these that Shepard could almost believe in the guiding force of fate, as random interaction seemed inadequate to explain such confluences.

“Do not go feeling too bad for him,” Nihlus said after a long moment.

Shepard looked up, realizing that she had been staring at her food, but not seeing. “I…” she paused to gather her thoughts, “Don’t worry, I’m not about to shed tears. Still, I can understand. To lose a sibling in such a manner… were I not an only child, and were I to lose my sibling in such a manner… I suppose I might feel the same way.” Shepard murmured. She did feel the same way when she lost Arthur on Elysium. The rage awoke a monster inside that could and did kill without remorse. Barely a few months later she killed an innocent in cold blood, merely on an assumption of guilt. She had her taste of vengeance, and it was all vinegar.

“Truly, you are a… what is the term? A saint? We do not have a corresponding concept, so-” Nihlus added.

“I’m no saint.” Saints were not supposed to have sins, but her hands were stained with innocent blood.

“From my vantage, I see someone who not only holds no real anger at someone who would destroy her career without a second thought, but she understands why he might do so in the first place. By my understanding of the human custom of elevating holy figures, your capacity for empathy would make you a candidate,” Nihlus argued as he picked up his fork and turned to the tubers on his plate.

Shepard sighed, “It also requires the performance of a miracle, and I’ve done nothing of the sort,” she argued. Perhaps that was a lame point to make, but she had nothing else. She would not air out her sins in front of him just for the sake of arguing this.

“I would consider you forgiving me to be a miracle.” He whispered quietly, just low enough for her to hear.
Shepard blinked, “Don’t worry, you’ll probably do something to irk me again soon enough.” She replied, the tease slipping from her mouth before she could stop it.

His smile widened, mandibles drawing outward, exposing glimpses of ice-pick-like teeth. “Good! I have to keep my protégé on her toes. Besides, *C-sec* can be your loyal servant enough for the both of us.”

“Very. Soon.” Shepard reiterated. “But, just for the record, if Garrus is my *loyal* servant… what does that make you, *Spook*?”

Nihlus made a rumble sound that was almost a playful growl. “I am the wealthy, tall, dark, and handsome one.”

Of all the responses that she could have expected, *that* one was probably dead last, and Shepard laughed out loud before she could stop herself. Matthews looked over and smiled. “Well you’re not short on *ego*, that’s for sure,” She muttered between chuckles.

Before Nihlus could reply, two crewmembers arrived, which effectively broke the odd mood between them, not to mention the privacy. They seemed as surprised to see Nihlus out of his quarters, but he spared them a raised hand as a greeting and they settled down with their plates with a shrug and without much further ado.

The rest of the meal was consumed in silence, but only that. Shepard could not help but linger on thoughts of Nihlus’ attitude change. Was their near rupture the reason he was changing his patterns? Was it the only reason? His manners suggested some contrition, but it all seemed more ‘I’ll be extra nice to you for a few days so I can stop feeling guilty,’ sort of contrition. He took for granted that she was not angry any more. If that was his angle then the universality of psychology was truly staggering.

In the end their party expanded to three. Garrus emerged from life support ten minutes after the crew began to arrive, in his armor, and all-but inhaled his serving of the meat taters Matthews made. Shepard would not have thought about going to the LoC without bringing him along, he was the third part of their little conspiracy club. Yet the urgency with which he ate told her that he thought they would leave him behind and he would not have it. His actions were a non-subtle reminders that last night happened, and that he did not trust Nihlus. By the time they departed, the day shift was fully awake. She left the Normandy in Kaidan’s capable hands.

As they walked out of the dock and toward the Skycab kiosk, she was fully aware of the glare war happening over her head. If she had not squared things away with Nihlus already, she would have been genuinely worried about Garrus compromising any act of ‘we saw and heard nothing’. Still, it was something that both made such a valiant attempt at maintaining normalcy, both around her crew, and now in a semi-public place. Then again, there were parts of their native communications she could not hear, so for all she knew they were communicating the animosity out of her hearing range. She knew full well that she would have to deflate things, and the long cab ride to the library would be about perfect.

Shepard took her usual seat on the driver’s side, and input their destination to the VI. Nihlus took the front passenger seat, leaving Garrus the back. When the doors closed and the Skycab took off Shepard waited only a good minute for it to climb before she broached the latest minefield topic.

“I think we need to have a talk, the three of us. Just to clear the air,” she said as she turned in her seat just enough so she could sort of face Nihlus and see Garrus out the corner of her eye. There was no way to breach the issue with any modicum of grace past blunt. “Nihlus and I reached a certain understanding regarding last night.”
“I see,” Garrus replied.

“I never intended to do as Saren told me,” Nihlus added.

“So what lies did you tell her?” Garrus wondered.

Shepard blinked, oh man, had she just stepped on a mine?

“I never lied! I gave Shepard a complete recording of my conversation with Saren. If anything happens to her candidacy now, she will have evidence against both of us.” The Spectre rebuffed.

“None of that gives me a reason to believe you.” Garrus snapped back.

“Shepard believes me. That is all that matters,” Nihlus replied.

The look Garrus gave the Spectre was full of undisguised loathing.

“Whoa, hold up.” Shepard raised a hand to catch their attention, “I deserve some say in this.”

Both turians turned to her.

Shepard sighed, it looked like her bluntiness was about to trigger a war. “Garrus, I appreciate your concern, but we did come to an understanding, and I am more than capable of defending myself.”

“I did not suggest you could not, Commander. I simply do not understand why you allow this farce to continue.”

“I…” Shepard broke off, was there was no way out of this? She knew that to diffuse the situation, she would have to tell them the reason behind her high tolerance of Nihlus’ behavior. She was not willing to do that, because it would arm Nihlus with the knowledge that he owned her career. Come to think of it, it would probably make Garrus trust him even less. Suddenly there did not seem to be a solution to his conundrum. “I have my reasons; I ask that you respect my decision.”

Nihlus had that accursed grin on his face: proud, triumphant, and not helping the situation.

“I understand, Commander,” Garrus replied, though his tone of voice gave away that he was once again deferring, backing down because she effectively pulled rank.

Shepard hated pulling rank, but there was no helping the situation between them. The tension was far from broken; in fact, it felt like her intervention only made things worse. Garrus was unhappy, and Nihlus might now actively seek to understand her reasons. When she glanced at the Spectre, she realized he was watching her again. That intense look in his eyes unnerved her more than she cared to admit.

“It is her decision.” Nihlus broached. “Though, I suppose I should tell you why my loyalties are where they are, simply so this does not continue to be a problem. Saren mentioned it; I owe Shepard my life. When I made a mistake, she shielded me, and took a bullet through the shoulder. A little to the side and it could have killed her. I recognize my debt, and I will not dishonor myself by repaying it with betrayal.”

Garrus remained quiet.

Shepard noted the way he stiffened in his seat. Even she was surprised with the admission Nihlus just delivered. “I did not realize that meant so much,” she said.

“It does mean so much,” Nihlus replied. “Though Saren would have me ignore it. He does not
accept the validity of an honor debt when the one to whom it is owed is not a Turian.”

“He does not believe Humans have honor,” Shepard mused.

“Yes. It is one more thing we do not agree on.”

“I suppose I must accept that,” Garrus said quietly.

“A smart decision. You being loyal to the Commander is to be expected, but do not overstep your bounds. I am not the enemy, and I will not tolerate suggestions that I am a traitor.”

Shepard chose to back out of the talk at this point. This was not where her human sensibilities would be appreciated, but she could see where some of the tension came from. Turian culture as a rule placed a premium on discipline and hierarchy, but underneath it all, there was an honor-shame dynamic as well. Personal behavior and morals as the currency of honor mattered. Nihlus was hostile to Garrus because the latter effectively suggested Nihlus had no honor at all.

As the Skycab entered the transverse tunnels across the Presidium and the light of Widow vanished, the small lamps inside the car flicked on. Shepard turned back to the windshield, her mind far away, as she pondered the other ramifications of the honor debt. Nihlus’ candid admission to making that mistake resonated in her.

Suddenly she felt pulled to two sides, uncomfortable with otherwise necessary dishonesty. It was stupid, hell it might even be something he wanted. She should not forget Nihlus’ capacity to manipulate, but in the end, it all came down to trust, and she did not have enough to open up. She did not want to arm Nihlus with the truth, call it self-preservation. Still, guilt was like some sort of bug gnawing away at her insides. Her gut insisted he was not the enemy, no matter how much he could come off as such.

There was no conversation for the rest of the ride. Nihlus and Garrus turned to trying to ignore each other’s presence, but from time to time she felt one of their gazes on her. Shepard did not feel like talking at all. She wanted to bury herself in work, distance herself from the problem. She believed distance created clarity. She needed clarity right now.

Once they arrived at the familiar plaza, Nihlus steered right toward the library’s third floor. There they found a big secure booth where all three of them could work without getting too into each other’s personal spaces. Shepard ended up seated between the two turians, and she suspected it was entirely by design. They were using her as a buffer. Well if it kept them from arguing, she was willing to play the no-man’s land.

The clearances Nihlus had were tied to his biometrics, in this case, his voice print, so one set of codes was only good for one terminal. He authorized the terminal for them, but was otherwise still catching up on the rest of the material they compiled. Shepard was none too surprised; he did not strike her as an academic. The authorization process was a good limit for security purposes, but it made for a rather awkward work process. They did not mean to let a Spectre divulge classified information like this.

Thinking about it made her realize just how much of what Nihlus did was out of the norm. He never told the Council about EDI, he brazenly let Garrus divulge compromising information in his presence, now he looked to be acting against his former mentor. As far as turians went, Nihlus lived as the exception to all the rules. Yet, with all of that, she could not bring herself to trust him with the truth. Her paranoid half said he might not bother to keep anything she said too close to his chest. She did not want to think about it like that, but invariably she thought about it like that.
Then there was Garrus. He effectively threw away his career in C-sec because he believed he was doing the right thing. He suspected there was something more to the Normandy before they became allies, yet told no one. He tried to help her with Nihlus. Did he deserve her distrust simply because she could not bring herself to fully trust Nihlus? That was hardly fair, and the bug gnawing at her sank its jaws deeper and harder.

An elbow brushed her forearm on the table and Shepard jumped, instantly snapping out of her thoughts. Garrus, whose elbow it was, recoiled at the suddenness of her movement.

“My apologies, Commander,” he said.

“It’s alright; I was lost in my thoughts,” Shepard replied, sparing him a smile before turning back to her pads. That was technically not a lie, the operative words of her life.

Seeing his expression then, she thought it best to tell Garrus the truth later after all. Maybe it would deflate some of the tensions and put them on even footing. After all, Garrus quit C-sec because of politics, yet a game of politics ruled her life. Even if he could not help, he would probably understand why her hands were tied. He might not like it, and maybe it was not too late for him to realize he was not trading up from what he had in C-sec. At the very least, the guilt would not gnaw at her as hard. With the decision made she could focus on doing her job.

Two hours passed before Shepard sat back in her seat again and sighed. As she watched Garrus send one more batch of data to download into pads, she was sure they had about what the system could offer. In the end, her suspicions had proven to be right on the nose. There was very little in the closed collection about the Geth as a fighting force.

The war on Rannoch had been a brutal, over ninety eight percent of the Quarians died. Only seventeen million escaped. The Quarians did not share information on the Geth, and she would not blame them. Whatever was there was second hand, but it was still quite interesting.

A Salarian Special Tasks Group had visited Rannoch clandestinely shortly before the Quarians fled. The Council had also sent in a group of Spectres. Working independently, the two collected whatever information they could, mostly documents on the basic purposes and usages for the Geth, as well as their networking capabilities, and some schematics. The STG material was predictably not on file, because the Salarians were if anything more paranoid than brilliant. The Spectre materials were there, but they were now almost three hundred years old, and thus under the shadow of being out of date.

“This is about the time I start wishing I thought to collect some parts back on Eden Prime,” Shepard noted wryly.

“Unless one of us is hiding a few degrees in engineering, we would not get much out of said parts,” Nihlus replied.

“Don’t need a degree to take something apart and compare it to some of these schematics. Also, EDI could probably compare the hardware on the basic level.” Shepard replied.

“Is there something EDI cannot do?” Nihlus wondered.

“Hmm… you know, humor, I think. But she seems to be learning.” Shepard replied. Deviousness too, but Shepard did not mention that, because that would be below the belt, even if she was just teasing him.

“You think the Geth changed over three centuries?” Garrus asked.
“I do. Three centuries is a long time and the Geth do not have our limitations. Organic adaptation has to rely on random genetic mutation, which could take thousands of years to pass to the population. Even then it would be minor changes. Synthetics? They can change their bodies radically and readily.”

“You are focusing on that black unit.”

“Yes. The schematics we got show the Geth to be of a general one-headlamp configuration, with a very tight sensor array behind said lamp, and the size and build of an adult male Quarian with three-digit hands. The black one was a clear sign of adaptation. It had more lights, a marked size difference, and its weapons were grafted right on, not hand-held. It seems like a weapon platform by design, but is it a unique unit; something only deployed in special circumstances? Or is it a command unit, something attached to a platoon as part of standard deployment? The likelihood of it making an appearance can change how a unit should set up or respond to an encounter.”

“That is something to think about,” Nihlus hummed.

“Standard Hierarchy tactics would be to use heavy ordinance. If its shields can withstand infantry weapons, how would it handle mines, grenades, artillery, or airborne fighter fire?” Garrus said.

“That is certainly a possibility. But not all operations have the luxury of such breadth of options. I am used to operating in a five-person group, with only the gear on our backs, which limits what we can do. To counter it, I prefer to know my enemy’s strengths and weaknesses before I engage them. By necessity I keep my tactics adaptive and flexible.” Shepard knew that such an approach might be considered Salarian, but really, all is fair in love and war. A single, concise military doctrine was limiting at best, a weakness to be exploited by a clever tactician at worst.

“I can attest to her tactical flexibility. She used a LOKI as an improvised grenade once. Ordered Alenko to throw it with his biotics and then shot its head off. Who would have seen that coming?” Nihlus added, grinning.

“A biotic-tossed LOKI is just an extra fancy target drone. Though, maybe… the inspiration makes it one of my finer shots.” Shepard added.

“No maybes, Shepard, it was. Give or take two-hundred-fifty-nine batarians,” Nihlus said, “and on that, when I saw you shoot the Geth on Eden Prime with Williams, it became clear that shooting all those Batarians in ten hours was not only possible, but you made it look easy.”

“What is so shocking about that?” Garrus wondered.

“Nihlus is not a sniper, but I think he means the timing,” Shepard explained. “Two-hundred-fifty-nine kills in ten Terran hours comes up to about one kill every two minutes on average. The batarians came in groups, twenty to forty at a time, in intervals.”

“Still, not one of them came even close to the place where the civilians were hiding. Whatever is involved, you make it look easy.” Nihlus argued.

“Spoken like a true amateur,” Garrus said, his mandibles flicking in amusement.

Nihlus glared at Garrus in reply.

Shepard smiled a little, after all, this sort of competitive taunting she could appreciate. “I do think we’re getting a little bit off topic here,” she said, to steer them away from any hostility that might come up if someone said anything more.
“The download is done,” Garrus announced.

“We could probably make do with what we have. Come to think of it, I should at least try and get access to whatever the Alliance teams salvaged from Eden Prime.” Shepard said. Her best chances lay in mentioning this to Admiral Hackett. He expressed interest in her assessment, and though the military would classify whatever they salvaged, if there was a way for her pay-grade to get at it, she would have it.

“Sounds like a plan,” Nihlus stated.

That was the end of it, Shepard helped Garrus organize the datapads and put the terminal back in standby. She stuck the pads back into her messenger bag and they left with no one wiser to what went on inside that secure booth. Shepard led the way, and once they stepped out of the library she paused, looking toward the fountain. Somehow going back to the Normandy now felt a little like heading for the space port at the end of furlough, like fun is over and it is back to business. The Normandy had been Citadel-bound for so long that it almost began to feel like a vacation. She shook her head and turned toward the Skycab kiosk.

“So, back to the Normandy?” Nihlus asked, following on her right.

“For me, yes,” Shepard replied, patting the bag at her side for emphasis, “I need to contact the Admiral, and I think we’ll be pulling out as soon as the final leave rotation is done. I’ve not scheduled any for tomorrow. Also, we should talk about the smuggling ring.”

The Spectre nodded his head. “You really do not take time off,” he noted.

“Well, with all that’s happened…” she shook her head. Between Eden Prime and then this new self-elected assignment, she did not have the time. “I’ve had six months of desk duty before the Normandy, that’s practically leave. If either of you wants time off, just tell me.”

“After the piles of paperwork at C-sec, I consider this time off,” Garrus said.

“Spectres are either on assignment, or we are not. The time in between is all the leave we get,” Nihlus said.

Shepard did not say anything as she came up to the Skycab kiosk and keyed a sequence to summon a vehicle.

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The ride back to their dock was quiet, but not tense. Nihlus was working on something on his omni-tool, and Garrus spent the time reading over what looked like his notes. Shepard herself pulled out the pad containing schematics and spent the whole ride staring at them. She was no engineer, but schematics were a little like a map, and she was good with maps. The Spectre that had done the work three hundred years ago was an asari. She annotated and attached field notes based on observations, which were very interesting. The more Shepard turned them over, the more convinced she became that the Geth had changed over three hundred years.

The basic units back then normally included no weapons or kinetic barriers. Units that had shields were purpose-built for security work. They were resilient enough to withstand harsh environments, even the void of space. Internal batteries provided power for two standard Rannoch days, which equated to about sixty-five Terran hours. If a unit worked in the sunlight for most of that time, the photovoltaic polymer in the outer panels provided another seven hours, bringing the total up to seventy-two before the unit needed a couple hours in a dedicated induction charging station, though
in its absence they had a low-draw standby mode, which allowed complete solar charging.

The Quarians had specialized units for all manner of jobs. The Spectre added a schematic for a firefighter unit. This caught Shepard’s attention and told her that relying on her cloak around the geth might be a bad idea. Firefighter units had standard infrared sensors, originally used for search and rescue, as well as locating closed off rooms that might explode in a backdraft if carelessly opened. She would err on the side of caution and assume that something like that would prove useful once the geth had to learn to fight.

She tucked the pad away when she felt the Skycab dip out of the high speed lanes and head toward the Normandy’s dock. In a few minutes it landed, but before she could swipe her chit across the meter, Nihlus beat her to the punch. Without saying a word he got out of the car, ignoring the VI driver’s stock message confirmation of the transaction’s success and well-wishes for their day. Shepard and Garrus followed.

They passed beyond the ticket gates, yet before they could even get to their dock waiting lounge, Shepard spotted a woman standing by the neon sign next to the door. A camera drone hovered over her left shoulder, and that was all the information Shepard needed.

“Who squealed to the reporters?” she murmured without braking pace, knowing full well that her companions would hear her. The reporter would not see her give pause, no matter how much Shepard hated reporters. They were second only to politicians on her list of people she wanted to avoid.

“Commander Shepard,” The woman greeted as they approached. “Khalisah bint Sinah al-Jilani, Westerland news. Would you answer a few questions for our viewers?”

“A few,” Shepard replied. That was about the most polite thing she could say right now, because anything else might come out as if she was chewing glass.

“Of course, I understand you are busy,” the woman replied as she tapped commands on her omni-tool to activate her camera drone.

Out of the corner of her eye Shepard saw Nihlus and Garrus duck out of the camera’s angle just before the drone’s light went on and focused on her.

“This is Khalisah bint Sinah al-Jilani, Westerland news, and today I bring you an exclusive interview with Lieutenant Commander Shepard.” She announced for the benefit of the recording. “Now, Commander, you are a recipient of the Star of Terra for your actions of Elysium, correct?”

“Yes,” Shepard replied.

“You have also been called the White Death of Elysium of course. Now word is that you were recently named the commanding officer of an Alliance frigate, the Normandy, something special by what I hear.”

“If by special you mean just out of the yard, new, then yes.”

“So you were not put in command of a top secret vessel?”

“All Alliance vessels are shrouded in secrecy, standard military practice,” Shepard replied with just a hint of affected nonchalant flippancy.

Khalisah looked about as pleased as someone sitting on a cactus right now. Clearly she was not getting the information she wanted. Shepard one, reporter zero, Shepard thought to herself.
“Moving on, Commander. Is it also true that just recently you have become a potential future Spectre? A prestigious position to be sure, but our viewers would want to know, what do you think of it?”

Shepard tried her best not to let her gaze flicker to Nihlus. If she saw his grin right now, she might just lose her poker face. “Spectres are the best the galaxy has to offer, chosen for their skill and dedication. To be evaluated for the corps is already an honor.”

“Yes, but it remains a fact that two and a half decades after humanity entered the galactic community, you are the first candidate for the position,” Khalisah went on, “some are saying that the Council is merely placating humanity with this overture, and your nomination will be rejected in due time.”

The warning alarm went off in Shepard’s head, but she did not miss the fact that the reporter did not know about Captain Anderson’s candidacy. Her sources were good, but not flawless, not on the inside. “The Spectres protect the galactic community, but in every case their races have been part of said community for a century or more before individuals were entrusted with the responsibility of policing its borders. Furthermore, the demands of the position are exacting, for every candidate who makes full Spectre, there will be dozens who do not. In that sense, humanity is right on the curve on both accounts.” Shepard could see Khalisah’s little smile fade as she probably realized she would get nothing from her.

“So would you say the Council is fair in their treatment of human concerns?”

“Yes. Humanity is part of the galactic community, our concerns are on the Council’s agenda, but we are just one race of many with concerns.” That might be the most untruthful statement Shepard had yet to utter, given what she knew, but she would not feed this hack.

“Yet you were also there on Eden Prime when the colony was attacked by the Geth,” Khalisah continued, her tone becoming a little more direct in the accusation. “Twenty people died over a Prothean artifact. The Council’s investigation into the attack failed to satisfy the concerns of our colonists, and the people back on Earth.”

The alarms were shrill again; Khalisah looked to be on the attack. Shepard thought this was what she had been angling for since the beginning. “What happened on Eden Prime was tragic, but the truth is quite simple. The Geth attack was spurned by the artifact, nothing more. Prothean artifacts are always a hot commodity. The Geth are an advanced space-faring race, same as any other, they want Prothean technology too. The issue is that they chose to use force to obtain said technology. As for the Council’s official investigation, it focused on whether the Geth had help. The investigation yielded no evidence that they did. This is in the open proceeding records, hardly a secret.”

“You truly believe that, don’t you?”

“What I believe does not matter. These are the facts. Facts will be facts regardless of my belief in them.” Shepard replied.

Khalisah was not pleased. Shepard could not be happier. She did not enjoy being on the receiving end of this nonsense. Khalisah wanted her to sound like a naïve idiot. Turnabout was fair play.

“Of course. Well, one last question then.”

Finally, Shepard thought. She had a strong urge to fry the camera drone with an overload, but contained it. The reporter, or more likely her network, would come after her for damages. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Nihlus staring at her, his arms folded. The piercing look was colder than ever, his eyes looked positively dark and stormy. She had to get rid of this reporter.
“What does the Alliance intend to do in the event of further Geth aggression?”

“We will protect our colonies from acts of aggression, whether they come from old or new enemies. Now personally, I’ve never let these things slide. If the Geth pose a threat to anyone in front of me, I’ll have a weapon loaded and ready.”

“Yes. I suppose it makes sense that the White Death would say that. Thank you, Commander. This talk has been most illuminating.”

Shepard kept her face perfectly blank as the reporter powered down her drone. The urge to fry the little floating bugger was still there, but Shepard could not do it without the reporter knowing. Somehow in the pit of her stomach she suspected that she should have shot the reporter down, refused to talk, but that would have been more damning if anything. Khalisah would find a way to drag someone’s name through the mud regardless of whether or not they answered her questions. Failure to answer might actually make it worse.

She watched the reporter walk off, drone in tow. Khalisah was going onto her mental list of reporters to watch out for from now on. There was no mistaking the woman’s agenda. The undertone of the interview was, from the build up to the finale, all about making her look bad. Khalisah was not the first, nor would she be the last who would try that. The whole Westerland News network was a conservative morass of twisted facts and conspiracy theories that fed the collective psychosis of people who saw not getting what they wanted on a silver platter as irrefutable evidence of a conspiracy against them. No matter what Shepard did, she would never convince them otherwise, they would dismiss anything she said as proof of her involvement and benefit from the conspiracy.

“That was… ugly,” Garrus noted as he approached.

“If she comes back to ask more of those sorts of questions, I am frying the drone,” Nihlus said, his arms dropping to the sides.

Shepard chuckled, she could not help it. She saw Nihlus’ brow plates rise a little as he spared her a look. “I thought of doing that myself.” She confessed.

“Should have.”

“Nah. The Network would come after me like a rabid varren for the damages.”

“I see. Well I do not have that problem.” Nihlus grinned. “They can not make me pay, but I will enjoy watching them try.”

Shepard shook her head, amused at his antics, and moved toward the door leading to their dock. As far as she was concerned, she wanted the day over. Hell, she wanted off the Citadel. They had clearly spent too much time here, in one place, if the reporters were starting to figure out where the Normandy docked.

Shepard stepped into the waiting lounge and stopped cold. There were two corporals guarding the entryway that led to the gangways serving the Normandy. But the lounge was not as empty as it should have been. Seated at the end of one of the rows of underused passenger seats was a perfect stranger.

“Please tell me he’s not another newshound,” she murmured.

“I see no camera drone,” Nihlus replied.

The man must have heard voices because he looked up and then jumped out of his seat. “Oh! It’s
really is... wow! Commander Shepard! The White Death of Elysium!

Not a reporter, Shepard thought. Still, she was not going to say this was much of an improvement. She approached him slowly, keeping some distance. “I’m afraid I’m at a bit of a disadvantage here, seeing as I don’t know your name.”

“My name is Conrad, Conrad Verner. I am so honored to meet you.”

“What can I do for you, Conrad?” A fan, Shepard could handle adulation slightly better, but it still felt awkward for her. At the very least the awkwardness was different. Verner was unlikely to start asking compromising questions she could not answer.

“Oh! Yes. I was hoping you would sign something for me. My wife would be absolutely thrilled!” he grabbed a long cylindrical case off the seat next to the one he had been sitting on and popped the top. Shepard heard the faint whine of a sidearm powering up, whether it was Nihlus’ or Garrus’ she could not tell, but someone was jumpy.

Verner ignored everything as he slipped his hand inside and pulled out a roll of actual paper. “Your feat on Elysium was the stuff of legends!” He explained as he began to unroll the paper. “Now, this was very difficult to obtain, a real treasure.”

Shepard froze as she came face to face with an all-too-familiar recruitment campaign poster, a real blast from the past. Staring back at her was herself, six years younger now, clad in white armor, with Vincent slung over her shoulder. The poster was produced after Elysium, and at one time it was on every holo-roundel by Alliance recruitment offices, and even in some shopping malls. Shepard had been the face of a new recruitment campaign geared toward women. Another attempt to even numbers, as the Alliance’s ground forces were seventy-five percent male, and the fleet officer corps was split sixty-forty.

So much for handling adulation, this was quite possibly worse than probing questions she could not answer. Nothing could have prepared her for seeing that poster again. It was a reminder of the worst period of her life. Shepard knew full well that the look she gave the camera was only fierce because it contained a great amount of anger and hurt. Where Verner managed to get a print copy on actual glossy poster paper was beyond her. The poster had vanished quickly following her fall from grace.

With one hand holding up the poster, Verner reached into his pocket and brandished an old-fashioned black marker, “Would you sign this? Please?” he asked.

“Sure...” Shepard said, fully aware that she sounded a little numb. She took the poster carefully and moved over to the nearest wall. Verner was all too eager to help her prop it up so she could sign the bottom right corner. She added a simple ‘For Conrad Verner, - Lt. Cmd. J. Shepard’ and flourished with a stroke from the bottom of final letter of her last name and elaborated the curl on the top of her first name’s initial.

Verner took the poster, keeping it open so the ink could dry, “Oh, thank you! Thank you! Thank you!” he gushed.

“You’re welcome, take it easy.” Shepard replied as she handed back his marker as well. Odds were the marker might end up part of the memorabilia too. Still, who was she to step all over someone who was perfectly happy floating in fantasy land? Verner seemed more clueless than dangerous. She did not want anyone to see how the sight of that poster bothered her.

Verner all but bounced back to his seat, where he reached into the tube case for a transparent frisket sheet, covered the signature, and re-rolled the poster. He slid the roll back into his protective tube as
gingerly as if it was a five-hundred-year-old masterpiece. With the tube sealed, he slung it across his body and smiled.

“Again, thank you, Commander. I will not forget this.” With that said he rushed off, and out the doors.

Shepard smiled; some people were just ridiculously easy to please.

“A celebrity Spectre.” She felt more than heard the presence of the two turians behind her. “You know, I do not think we ever had one of those before.” Nihlus continued. “You could-”

Shepard flipped up a hand, holding up her index finger, “Not. Another. Word.” Nihlus obliged, but she could see the big grin on his face. “This is going to be one of those rare times I order you to do something and I expect you to obey. You are not to discuss -or even mention- that incident, or that I have a fan, or that I made his day by signing a poster. I was being nice. Nothing more.”

“Sure.” Nihlus replied, smiling even wider.

“Garrus, I need your silence as well.” Shepard glanced toward the former detective.

“Understood, Commander.” Garrus replied, though now he sounded amused as well.

Shepard spared Nihlus a look, which she hoped was enough of a warning. She was not kidding about the order. The last thing she needed was everyone to know she was that much a goody-two-shoe. She turned, clasped the strap of her bag tight, and marched toward the doorway leading to the Normandy. She wanted off this accursed station, before she was accosted by something else.

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Half an hour later, and back on the Normandy, Shepard felt about a thousand percent better. This was her sanctuary; no reporter could reach her here. She came down to deck three and paused before turning right toward life support. Sure, her day was a bit long and full of people she would have loved to avoid, but she promised herself that she would be honest with Garrus. The door was closed, but not locked, she tapped the console. Barely two seconds passed before the door opened and she stepped inside.

“Commander, need me for something?” Garrus asked. He was seated at the table, facing the door, clad in a Prussian blue and slate grey tunic outfit, his casuals. His hard suit was disassembled, lying on the floor behind him in rather orderly rows of individual parts and plates. The back unit, where the suit’s computer was housed, was on the table in front of him, and his omni-tool was up.

“I was hoping to talk, but if you’re busy…”

“I am never too busy if there is something you want, Commander. This is nothing, regular maintenance and calibrations on the shield emitters.”

“Ah, may I sit down?” she motioned to the chair across from him.

“Of course.”

She was being needlessly polite, but this was after all his private space aboard the ship, even if the ship was hers. “Erm… don’t take this the wrong way, but will you be alright with C-sec armor?” she wondered.

Garrus chuckled, “This may look like C-sec armor, but I upgraded about everything in it. Do not
mention this to Kryik, but my armor is probably up to Spectre specs.”

Shepard nodded. “That’s good. Well I came here because I wanted to… level some things.”

Garrus was typing something on his omni-tool, but he looked up as she spoke.

“I wanted to explain why I tolerate Nihlus as much as I do.” She continued.

Garrus turned his omni-tool off. “Commander, you do not have to. This is your ship, your command. It was not my place to second-guess your decisions or expect an explanation.”

Shepard shook her head, “Well, yes, but I don’t like to issue unnecessary orders. I do not believe in unnecessary discipline rigidity either. A commanding officer has to give as well as take.”

“That is a personal ethos?”

“Yes.” Shepard replied. She really ought to stop beating around the bush. When Garrus said no more, Shepard glanced at him, and noticed that he was watching and waiting for her to go on. She cleared her throat a little, just to get rid of the little bit of nerves. “Well this is probably obvious, but the Alliance really wants that first human Spectre, and I’m the only candidate they have right now. Really, Nihlus’ nomination… no one expected it. There’s pressure.” She paused, as if to let him add anything, but he remained quiet, still listening. “To put it simply, I never had the option of saying no. When Saren told Nihlus to sabotage me, I could not act because I thought an accusation might only cause Nihlus to denounce me sooner.”

“I thought that might be the case… well, the cannot-denounce-him part. Also, he knows about EDI.”

“Yes. For whatever reason, Nihlus hasn’t mentioned EDI to anyone.” Shepard replied. “But let’s be honest, it is not like he is blackmailing me. Even if the Council found out… EDI already exists, and it’ll be over my dead body that they’ll shut her down.”

“I understand she is an invaluable ally.”

“Yes, and she’s also a friend.” Shepard countered, knowing that EDI could hear them. “My biggest issue is that I simply do not have the luxury of losing my candidacy, failing to make it.”

“Why is that?”

Shepard sighed; this was the hard part, the truth. “I’m snarled up in strings,” the metaphor seemed oddly appropriate. She was just a marionette for the Alliance. “I’ve made mistakes. The biggest one almost got me a discharge. Captain Anderson got me into ICT on a technicality, mostly so the situation would cool. Still, couple years later, here I am, an N7, and as far as the Alliance is concerned, my name is still mud. I’ve been accused of getting ahead merely on patronage, not skill or merit.”

Garrus leaned back in his seat. “You do not wish to leave the Alliance?”

Shepard shook her head, “I grew up on warships. I swear the earliest memories I got are hull breach drills. I knew that as soon as I hit eighteen I would enlist. I wanted to be just like my mother.” She chuckled, thinking back on it. Somehow once she started talking, things got going, it became easier. Garrus was a good listener, and she wanted to think he understood as well. After all, turians went into mandatory military training at age fifteen. “My life is complicated. The Alliance crew aboard already knows this. It is only fair that you should know as well.”

He nodded, and Shepard could not help but smile. It was as if a weight had been lifted off her chest.
“Your obligations bind you as surely as they bound me,” Garrus said after moment. “I knew where I would end up too… well beyond basic military service. My father is in C-sec too, senior detective in another division, a legend. He has friends in the right places. The sort of places that got my application approved immediately.”

Shepard straightened in her seat. Garrus had no idea where the similarities stopped, did he? “Does your father know about why you chose to leave C-sec?”

“Yes,” Garrus replied, but then he stopped, took a deep breath, and let it out in what sounded like a sigh, “He knew about it ten minutes after I walked out on Pallin.”

“I get the feeling he’s not happy.”

“To say the least. Last time we talked, he said Pallin would restore my job if I went back. He thinks I am wasting my time, and nothing good will come out of it. My father is not a fan of Spectres.”

“Too much danger?”

“There is no such thing as too much danger for us. We do what we have to. No, my father’s problem with Spectres is too little oversight,” Garrus corrected. “He would tell you that Spectres are not much better than the criminals they bring down. Too much power at too little accountability.”

“Ah,” Shepard replied. “And what is your take on Spectres?”

“I think they are needed. C-sec is buried in red tape. It ties our hands when it comes to the worst crimes. Then we have a poor record with lawyers whose job it is to find a single insignificant procedural inconsistency in an otherwise solid case and use it to get a whole thing thrown out.”

Somehow Shepard thought he was speaking from personal experience. That was an awfully specific complaint. “So basically only every lawyer?”

Garrus chuckled, “Yes. Well… Spectres have the power to mete out justice when C-sec cannot. If there are individuals who abuse that power, they have to be dealt with, but as a whole, Spectres do a necessary job.”

Shepard thought she understood where Garrus’ shoulder chip came from. Saren definitely looked to be the sort who abused his power. “Well if may? I can certainly see validity in your father’s argument. Additional oversight or maybe some systemization could not hurt.” The problem with the whole corps really lay in the personal ethics of individual members. Shepard thought that she could see the line, and not cross it. “Still, I agree with you as well, Spectres are definitely needed. C-sec’s jurisdiction is confined to a certain region, what happens when a criminal runs the border?”

“Precisely. Too many criminals have gotten away on that technicality.”

Shepard smiled again, but before she could say anything else there was a scratch on the intercom. “Erm, sorry to interrupt, Commander.” Joker cut in. “But Admiral Hackett is on the horn. Sounds urgent.”

“Got it Joker,” she replied. She heard another scratch as the link closed. “Duty calls, I think.” Shepard got up from her seat.

“Of course, well I best finish this.” He motioned to his armor. “I have a feeling I am going to be stress-testing my upgrades in the near future.”

Shepard nodded, and made her way to the door. If the Admiral wanted to speak to her urgently, then
she had a feeling that Garrus’ words would prove to be prophetic before long.

Chapter End Notes

**Author Notes:** Random authorial note up there was not random. I was not about to sweep the fallout of that episode under the rug at the first opportunity, and there was some more basic ground to cover. I admit this one of those filler-y ones, but it really, really was done for essential framing and staging. I promise!

**General Notes:**
**Shipping** – As I said in a reply to someone on my AO3 reviews… this story was initially meant to be a Shakarian, however now that I have 27 eps complete (as of writing this note), I can see it more readily evolves into a Shyik. I just think I somehow ended up giving them more chemistry than initially planned, any opinions? Please leave a comment if you got any.

**Chapter Notes:**
**Blood Colors** – Ever notice how vertebrate life on Earth largely has red blood? Haemoglobin is kind of universal, since if you go back up the evolutionary chain, vertebrates all have a common ancestor. Well I was thinking with Turians being blue-blooded, the same principle might apply there, that is vertebrate life on Palaven might all have blue blood. Also, there are creatures with blue blood on our planet, with Hemocyanin, but those are invertebrates.

**Ship Prices** – This number got me pondering, how much would a ship the size of the Defiant cost, and thus be insured for? I established that the Normandy cost 2.5 Billion, but she’s a very special ship. The Defiant was much smaller, with far less fancy tech, bought used, and I reckon the Turian economy would be far more regulated than our capitalistic “free market”, thus prices would be capped.

**Desolas’ Admiralty** – I am aware that in canon Desolas was a general, but this is one of those parts where my canon changes things around.

**Castis Vakarian** – I mined canon deeply on this after ME:A came out, and realized that ME:A was kind of the tip of the iceberg. The comics gave us a bit more on Castis Vakarian, like the fact that he was still in C-sec in 2183, and retired only sometime around 2185. I decided to keep those bits as cannon as possible. There is plot to be had in these details.
Sensor Ghosts [Part I]

Chapter Notes

**Disclaimer:** I do no own Mass Effect, I do not claim to own Mass Effect, I am only doing this for fun.

**Author Notes:** Thank you or your review responses for chapter nine. I appreciate all of them, though I can only really reply where the option is given.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**Episode 10:** Sensor Ghosts [Part I]

The holo-projector turned off and its buzzing died, but a whole other sort of buzzing was still ringing in Shepard’s ears. She stood there for a good five seconds before finally snapping out and into gear. “EDI, notify the leave rotation, I want them back on the Normandy immediately. We have an emergency.”

“Right away, Commander.” The AI replied.

Shepard returned to the OD. If she remembered her leave rotations correctly, then her marines were already aboard, but there were five crewmates, Lieutenant Adams, and Dr. Chakwas to wait for. Her mind was crunching the numbers, should she tell Joker to start calling for clearances now, because that would take at least an hour, or wait until the crew returned to use Nihlus’ expedited process? She decided that it best to use the Spectre clearances.

“EDI could you also notify me when everyone returns?”

“It is on my task schedule, Commander. I assumed you would wish to be notified,” the AI replied.

“Good, thank you EDI.” Shepard sat at her terminal. With as much as an hour to wait, depending on where her errant crewmates scattered across the Citadel, she had a little bit of time to review the contents of the data package Admiral Hackett sent with the call. Today was just not letting up at all, was it?

She keyed in her security pass, the package was right on top, courtesy EDI, and it included the coordinates, which Shepard sent to the bridge for Joker. If he was at his post, and given his love for the full-body support of his leather chair it was likely that he was, the arrival of the coordinates would tell him they had orders. Beyond that there was some background information.

Their destination was the Daeva Cluster, Andra System, planet Daiwi. An icy ball of rock about the size of Earth, situated at 1.35 AU from its sun, with a balmy surface temperature around zero degrees Celsius, though its weather was probably colder. Other attractions included atmospheric pressure at 1.2 atm at a comfortable 0.95g, and a predominantly hydrogen-nitrogen atmosphere with traces of oxygen. The best part was the weak magnetic field. It was going to be a helmet-on, heater-blasting, hope-you-don’t-develop-a-breach job.

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Half an hour later Shepard stepped out of the OD to make her way to the bridge. EDI had just notified her that the last crewmate was back and she nodded to him as she passed the airlock just aft of the bridge.

“Hey, Commander.” Joker greeted as soon as she passed the final bulkhead. “We’re finally leaving?”

“Like bats out of hell,” Shepard replied.

Joker straightened in his seat and reached for his consoles. “Alright.”

Shepard felt the Normandy give a little shudder as the ship awoke from her week-long power nap. “What’s our ETA to Daiwi?” she asked.

Joker hummed as he made calculations. “Andra is not a relay system, the closest is Akoman. As it is we’ll have to make two jumps, and after those a relaxing twenty-four hours in FTL.”

“Great. Alright, once we’re in the Akoman system, top up the fuel before we hit FTL, I don’t want fume runs.” This was definitely out of the way for them. Twenty-four hours in FTL was hardly the speediest emergency response.

“Will do,” Joker replied as the red warning lights began to flash outside the viewports. “Shuttle bay ramp raised and secured. Airlock secured. Clearance signal given, gangway retraction sequence initiated.”

She had looked, but she was no pilot, so the exact confirmation of ETA was up to Joker. Still, she knew using the FTL drive meant running through their fuel. Most systems with a relay had about enough traffic to warrant at least a small automated fuel station. Widow had a cluster of them, and could serve multiple ships at the same time. The urgency of the orders forced her to roll the dice. It would probably be faster to use the depot at the Akoman terminus rather than wait in line behind who-knows-how-many interstellar passenger and cargo transports on the Widow side.

Shepard heard familiar footsteps and smiled, she figured the little shudder that passed through the ship as it awoke would be enough for Nihlus, and he did not disappoint.

“What happened, Shepard?” He asked as he entered ear-shot.

“I got emergency orders from Admiral Hackett.” She replied stepping away from the pilot’s seat as Joker began to call for departure clearances. “EDI, could you please request the away team, including Garrus, to gather in the OD please?”

“Right away, Commander.” The AI replied.

“Do you wish to use my departure clearances?” Nihlus said.

“Nihlus, I know this is not a Spectre job, but can I impose on you?”

“Alright.”

“I’ll be with the away team, please come once we’re clear of the docking clamps. Oh and EDI, Joker, I want you two listening in on this as well.” Shepard instructed.

“Will do,”

“Of course, Commander.”

“Aye, aye, ma’am.”
Shepard turned and made her way back to the OD. She saw the elevator open on the other side of the CIC. Ashley, Kaidan, Richard, and Garrus made their way to the OD as a single group. She entered the OD shortly after them. The four were hovering about the couch, though no one actually sat. She perched herself under the viewport just in time to see the Normandy start to drift backwards as they were released from the docking clamps.

“Is something wrong, skipper?” Ashley asked.

“Let’s wait a moment for Nihlus. I rather not backtrack.” She glanced over to Garrus, he was still in his casuals, either not done with the armor tweaks, or did not have the time to put it on.

The OD’s door opened seconds later as Nihlus strode into the room. She heard a scratch over the intercom, indicating that Joker was listening in, though EDI did not announce herself. “We’re all gathered. Make yourselves at home,” she motioned to the couch.

The marines sat a polite distance away, but the turians remained standing. Garrus was positively at attention. Shepard cleared her throat, “Admiral Hackett issued emergency deployment orders. We are heading into Alliance space, Daiwi in the Andra system of the Daeva cluster. There’s a fringe mining operation on the planet and their weekly supply ship recorded anomalous readings during its regular visit yesterday. By all accounts the data suggests a ship on the planet’s surface or low over it, yet it had no transponder, and attempts to make contact failed.”

“Sensor ghosts, skipper?” Ashley asked, surprised.

“Possible. Hell, I hope it is sensor ghosts. But… there is some room for concern. This is a small eezo mining operation. By small I mean forty men, limited equipment, with most work done in somewhat old-fashioned ways. The planet has Prothean ruins, which the operation uses as habitation space.”

“They think the anomaly could be geth.” Nihlus said suddenly.

“In so many words, yes.”

“Why automatically assume it is the Geth?” Garrus asked.

“Everyone is on edge after Eden Prime. Prothean ruins, strange readings, possibly ships with no transponders. The only reason anyone goes there is the eezo. The planet is barely above class one hazard level. It is cold, has an un-breathable atmosphere, and a relatively weak magnetic field. The nitrogen in the air is prone to ionization, so weird readings have been known to happen. Furthermore, the company’s supply ship is old; its sensors do not have the resolution to conduct thorough scans. We got orders to investigate.”

“Commander, is this mining operation under contract with the Alliance?” Kaidan wondered.

“Yes.”

“I see.”

“What does it matter if they are under contract?” Jenkins asked.

“It means this is a dirty job,” Kaidan explained. “Didn’t you wonder why they asked the Alliance? The Alliance hired this crew; the eezo they’re mining is to go into the cores of Alliance ships. Pocket mining like this is done by small private firms under a tonnage contract, in places where the deposits are too small for the bigger companies to bother. The advantage of it is that the buyer can pay slightly sub-market prices per ton, and it is up to the company to keep solvent.”
Jenkins visibly deflated when he wrapped his mind around that.

Shepard sighed, “Yes, this is a dirty job. Yes, the Alliance has vested interests. We get it because if these are not just sensor ghosts, then it might actually be geth, a vested interest of our own. Still, we are dealing with forty miners who might be in more danger than they bargained for when they signed an agreement to work there. They are still our people, and we owe them a serious investigation into what’s going on.” She knew this was not a glamour job, but it was not the proverbial latrine duty assignment either.

“You’re right, Commander.” Ashley looked to the floor.

“Shepard, I expect you have a plan.” Nihlus said after a good ten seconds of silence.

“The makings of one,” she replied. “First though, I want to decide our team. And before that I feel like I should say this. Nihlus, Garrus, this is a human matter. If either of you wishes to stay out of this-”

“It might be a human matter, but if it is geth...” Nihlus interrupted. “You remember what I said? I will lend you a shotgun.”

“If they get into shotgun range... I have no intention of letting any geth come that close to the Commander,” Garrus added.

Nihlus glared, Garrus’ mandibles flicked, though he never looked at the other turian. Shepard rolled her eyes.

“Well, I am definitely coming,” Ashley said as she folded her arms over her chest.

“Me too!” Jenkins chimed.

Shepard looked the corporal in the eye and he froze.

“We should all go. They came in numbers on Eden Prime, and if we face something like the black one again, we might need all the firepower we have,” Kaidan said.

Shepard glanced at Kaidan in turn. As far as tactical assessments, he certainly had a very good point. “I normally do not take a team larger than five, myself included.” She hesitated on whether or not she ought to break that rule and bring Jenkins along. He was too invested, clearly rip-roaring to face the geth again. On the one hand, he was too inexperienced for this sort of job, but on the other hand he would never get experience if he was benched all the time, a vicious catch-22. Just from the way Ashley and Kaidan looked at Richard, she knew they expected her to bench him. “I am going to bend my rule. Kaidan is right on point here.” She announced. “But Richard, I do not want to see reckless behavior. You have nothing to prove to us, and even less to prove to them.”

“Thank you, Commander.” Jenkins smiled.

There was one elegant solution to the dilemma of slightly cumbersome numbers and their oddities of command, assuming there would be any sort of action involved. “Our primary goal is to scan for the same phenomenon that the miners reported and ascertain what it is. Scanning is best left to EDI, but I also want to go down to the surface to talk to the miners. Face-to-face interaction will calm them more than a message from orbit. Still, just on the chance that this is not a false alarm, Kaidan I want you in charge of a sub-division of our team, Bravo, with Ashley and Richard. I am counting on your field leadership to help me keep a unit slightly larger than my norm operational.”

“Understood.” Kaidan replied.
She glanced at Nihlus and Garrus. “You two will be coming with me.” That was of course the most equitable arrangement, given their odd command structure.

“Yes, Commander.” Garrus replied.

Nihlus nodded, but by the way he folded his arms she had a feeling he was less than happy to have Garrus along. Shepard was not going to let their Spectre-vs.-C-sec rivalries get in the way of how she operated things. They would have to learn to work together if they were to be part of her ground teams.

“Joker tells me that we will be doing a twenty-four hour FTL hop to reach Daiwi, but I will lay it down now, I want you to take that time to prepare your gear. I am uncertain how long we will be down there. So prepare supplies beyond just ammo. Ration bars and water packets for at least two days to be on the safe side. Do not count on the charity of the miners.”

The marines nodded their heads, Shepard smiled. That was of course very basic instructions, there would be more to talk about once they knew what they were dealing with. She loved to have a plan for contingencies, but often enough her plans had to adapt on the fly, so laying out all the contingencies was hardly worth the breath.

“Now one last thing. Nihlus, I don’t want you to introduce yourself as a Spectre. That will set them on edge as surely as the sensor ghosts. The miners are probably colony natives who’ve never even set foot on the Citadel. Assume their idea of Spectres is colored by hearsay.”

“So I am playing mercenary?” he asked.

“If that will suit you. I’m saying this in front of everyone because you’re all going to have to keep mum.”

Another round of head nods went about the room.

“Now, concerns?”

She was greeted with silence.

“If you have any concerns or questions later, you know where to find me, for now… dismissed.”
With that said she got up from her seat and moved to the side table to grab the electric kettle before she made her way to the small attached washroom aft of the OD to fill it from the sink. When she returned with the full kettle about a minute after, she found the OD empty. Just the way she liked it. She was officially off the clock, today was done, and she wanted to forget it ever happened.

She especially wanted to get rid of that tiny part of her that was still unsettled. The bug chewing at her insides did not quiet down after her talk with Garrus. If anything, it sunk its jaws in even deeper. She knew it in her bones that what she was doing was wrong. Her lack of trust in Nihlus was justified in a very flimsy way. Nihlus could go up to Sparatus tomorrow and tell him that the Normandy had an illegal AI, and there would be little the Council could do about it. The Alliance would close ranks and raise a fuss.

Even if she washed out as Spectre candidate as a result, it would not be her fault, and enough people would see that. At the very least, the people that mattered most would see that. Shepard knew that her mother, Captain Anderson and Admiral Hackett would not hold it against her. She did have people in her corner. Her conviction that she had to protect EDI, the Normandy, and her career was nothing more than a screen to protect herself.

She refused to let herself trust Nihlus because she feared what he represented. If she was honest with
herself, she feared the loss of control. Every mistake she ever made happened when she lost control. Every skill she developed after Elysium was a means of control, whether used for situations or even enemies. Nihlus was like a force of nature. He had his own ideas and codes that governed how and why he did things. Galactic law and even his former mentor could not get him to do something he did not want to do. He was chaos itself, and she feared to place her trust in the unpredictable. After that, it was all a matter of making excuses.

The kettle whistled and she shut off the induction plate under it. She had to stop making excuses. The bug would not go away until she leveled with Nihlus, openly and unabashedly, instead of hiding. He was an ally, and she wanted to think of him as a friend. Yet there could not be friendship without trust. She owed him the truth, and it had to come out on her terms. The truth had a habit of rising to the top, and if she kept this up it would do so at the worst possible time, and things would only get worse.

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Their FTL hop day was almost down-time, except everyone kept busy, though in their own ways and on their own paces. Shepard spent a majority of the day just thinking. There was much to think about. This operation was something straight out of ICT training, a recon job on a hostile planet, with little supplies, and no confirmation on enemy position or numbers. Except she was running it with a small team that she was yet to really figure out, and that factored into her planning.

She liked to think of any operation as a very complex mathematical formula with many variables. The devil was in the math, the planning. The variables had to be identified, and accounted for, if not solved outright. Even with all the respect and trust she in her marines, when planning her mind saw them as variables. The only way to solve it was to know everything about how they thought and reacted. Shepard was under no delusion that she had reached that point with them, let alone with Nihlus and Garrus.

There was no use lingering on it. She had to think about the other variables she could remove. One was the planet itself, another was the geth. She had to plan for the conditions and the possibility of meeting a black unit again. It was their luck that the mine was eezo. If they had to fight through the mine, raw eezo did not pose any significant hazards, only a potential problem for women and biotics, but their re-breathers would be able to filter out the dust particulates. Admittedly though, Shepard did not care whether she was exposed to dust-form eezo or not. She would not love a child less for being a biotic. As for Kaidan, a secondary could make his biotics more unstable, which meant he would have to be careful. Ashley would have to make her own decision whether or not she used a re-breather with fine filters.

Shepard spent a good few hours making notes, and thinking through every angle and possibility she could foresee. Unlike Eden Prime, where she had slacked off a little, and they ended up in trouble that required plenty of ad-hoc improvisation, this time she would be better prepared. After that was done, she put in motion some preparation, checked her weapons, checked her armor, and packed some supplies without which she refused to leave the ship, beyond just two days worth of rations and enough ammo to wage a small war.

The Normandy made orbit around four in the morning, ship time. Shepard was woken up by EDI long enough to tell the AI that she should commence her passive monitoring while the Normandy made some orbital passes. It was then that EDI told her about the system’s sun. According to the AI, the star was going through a period of increased solar flare activity, something the miners forgot to mention. To say Shepard was displeased would be an understatement. It was just one more thing that made it all sound like a wild goose chase.
Joker would hate her, since his job now involved flying circles around the planet while EDI tried to collect readings in an atmosphere that was actively charged each time the sun threw a flare. They would contact the miners once the away team was up, as scheduled two hours later.

Contacting the mine proved a challenge. Communications were affected by the sun’s activity. It was usable, but the signal was less than pristine. Still, they managed to warn the men that an Alliance Kodiak would be coming down.

With that squared off, Shepard gathered her team and they were on their way by nine in the morning ship-time. The planet’s atmosphere was such that the Kodiak rattled all the way down. Once they reached the cloud layers, visibility was diminished by a gauze curtain of snow. Fortunately the VI pilot’s positioning software was guided by the Normandy’s over-watch, so the vehicle did not err in its descent.

The mining operation itself was situated on a flat plain with plenty of ice and snow all around. The miners took over a Prothean mine, using the network of ancient tunnels as a basis. At the heart of the network was a single compound, most of it underground where it could be easily protected from the elements as well as the radiation. Because they warned the miners that they were coming, when the Kodiak swooped down, they were steered toward a large pair of doors set into the roof of the above-ground portion of the compound. These led down a shaft that proved to be an airlock capable of receiving a vehicle only a little larger than the Kodiak.

Once their shuttle moved past the set of inner doors, it made an effortless landing in a large cavernous docking bay. There was another set of large doors on one side of the docking bay, and a third set on the opposite side. Rails connected the two, and escaped eezo ore glimmered like tiny gem bits all along the path. Five civilian shuttles covered in giant tarps were pressed up against the far wall, likely to be used only for emergency evacuation. The absence of a wheeled vehicle meant that the only way in and out of the compound was by flying craft. The miners did not get out on the surface much.

Shepard was the first one to step out of the shuttle when its door slid open. Her eyes instantly landed on the small two-man welcoming wagon. “I’m Commander Shepard, I was asked to talk to a Mr. Lee,” she announced.

The bigger of the two stepped forward, he was probably in his late fifties, dark hair, and dark eyes framed with glasses, and dressed in simple overalls that probably never fully came clean. “That’s right. I’m Albert Lee, head of operations here. Welcome.”

“Thank you, Mr. Lee.” Shepard replied as she glanced back. It was as if just that look was enough for her marines to get on the task of securing the shuttle and their supplies. She was not at all surprised that Nihlus and Garrus opted to be her shadow.

“We don’t normally get guests, especially non-humans. I’m afraid you’ll have to pardon us for not having more than water to offer our turian guests.” the mine operator went on.

“We brought our own rations,” Garrus replied.

“Oh, of course. Good. Well I am sure you wish to talk, so shall we?” he motioned toward the smaller of the doors leading out of the large chamber. Shepard followed the mine chief, with her crew behind her.

They were barely past the doors and walking past a number of rooms that Shepard decided to breach
the topic. “By what I understand you’re a small outfit here.”

“Yes, ma’am, just forty-two souls. Forty miners, and recently two Alliance archeologists. Most of the miners have been here since we set up the operation. I’ve been with this company for ten years, and done mining in many forgotten corners of Alliance space. It’s not glamorous, but it’s an honest paycheck and safe if you’re careful. Normally the most excitement we get here is a tremor or two.” He explained. Shepard nodded.

“What can you tell us about this mine?”

“It’s a mine. There are tunnels, there are shafts, and then there’s this.” He motioned to their surroundings vaguely. “You’re walking through fifty thousand year old ruins, Commander. The Archeologists are here to collect what the Protheans left behind. The compound goes down. Two clear levels below us, with a third obstructed by some collapses. They say a nasty once-in-a-thousand-years quake did that. Would you believe this whole place was largely operational when we got here?” He explained.

“ Seems like everyone is nicely settled,” Shepard remarked.

“Yes. We mine, they study things. Perfect symbiosis. Nice and quiet. Or used to be.”

“Used to be?”

“Eden Prime made my whole crew nervous. They seem to think the geth will come here. I can’t say they don’t have valid concerns, but I am more skeptical. All I know is that we don’t know what’s below us. The scientists got drones they’re putting through the collapsed sections. They seem convinced there’s more than one level down there. Whatever they’re seeing… now I’m no academic, but I know excited scientists when I see them. Eden Prime involved some tech or something, that combined made the men wary.”

“What of the anomalies your ship picked up?” Shepard said. She did not say it, but she definitely thought it, this whole thing was beginning to sound like a panic attack that got a little out of hand. The men were reacting to Eden Prime. How would the geth know about the mine here if the research team was Alliance? Furthermore, what sort of tech would the Protheans run in a mine of all places?

The man hummed as he led them into a large room that looked like a recreation space slash mess hall. There was an open galley kitchen of stainless steel appliances, the fanciest things there probably, and simple cheap mostly-metal furniture. Shepard noted that the other man vanished somewhere along the walk.

“We always have strange readings.” Albert went on, seemingly without noticing her scan of the surroundings. “The atmosphere here lights up like a Christmas tree whenever the sun throws off anything, which is often enough. Usually it’s no more serious than communication interruptions. Otherwise this place got very good shielding; we’re in no danger of radiation.”

“So what’s so strange about these particular readings?” Shepard asked.

“Well, by what I understand, our supply ship picked up a localized source of heat, and their sensors guy is convinced it was a ship. Thing is, localized heat is not that strange for this planet. Honestly, ma’am, if you ask me, your superiors got you wasting your time. Go up there and switch your ship sensors to infrared. You’ll see our auroras glow in more than just pretty shades of blue.”

Shepard hummed as she glanced about the room. If the chief of operations was so convinced that there was nothing going on, it really looked like there was nothing going on. EDI picked up nothing
in her initial scans, but she had Joker run more scanning patterns. If the phenomenon was natural, she wanted to be sure.

“Commander, I am sorry, but there is something you can do for me,” he added. “I said we don’t normally get guests, but this time… we did. She was hitching a ride on our supply ship, some sort of deal with the captain, I didn’t ask, and I don’t care. But she was interested in the readings and asked to be brought down.”

“She?” Shepard asked, instantly curious.

“A quarian girl.”

Shepard stopped cold. Now it really made sense why the miners were on edge. Maybe it was still just sensor ghosts, some natural phenomenon, but Eden Prime coupled with the sudden arrival of a quarian would set anyone on edge.

“Now we’re not monsters to leave the girl out to freeze.” Albert went on, unperturbed. “But her being here is making everyone even more nervous. Do you think you can get her out of my hair before the supply ship returns? We don’t mean to be poor hosts here, but the sooner she’s gone, the sooner my men might believe me when I say that nothing is going on.”

“Can I talk to her?” Shepard asked.

“Sure, she’s probably with the scientists in their lab.”

What could she say to this man? He wanted to come off as polite, but there was no white-washing his attitude. He was convinced that nothing was going on, and he was not keen on having an alien around. Like any pit boss in the history of mining, he was worried more about the mine’s operations than anything going on.

“I’ll take you to her now if you’d like. Though—”

“That will not be necessary Mr. Lee, but thank you.” A voice announced from the doorway.

“Ah, there you are. Good, good.”

Shepard turned to the quarian; she was about Shepard’s height, maybe a bit shorter, but willowy and clad in a forest green and stone grey envirosuit with a purple hood. Her silver-toned eyes were just faintly visible, glowing through the suit’s translucent, purple-hued face shield. There was a shotgun strapped to her lower back, and a wicked knife sticking out of a sheath on her left calf.

“Patrick came by to ask me to come up here. He went back to the control room after that.” The girl said.

Shepard assumed Patrick was the other man who had greeted their shuttle’s landing.

“Very well. This is Commander Shepard, Alliance navy; she’s here to investigate the readings.”

“Hello, I am Tali’Zorah nar Rayya.”

“Now that you’re acquainted, I really must check up on things. We’re blasting a new section today. If you excuse me.”

“Of course, Mr. Lee,” Shepard replied.

The mine chief spared her a curt nod and breezed out of the room like someone who had an
important board meeting he was late to. Shepard watched him go for a few seconds, listening for the footsteps to fade out of her hearing range. When they did, she turned to Tali. There were questions she needed to ask, but first... “These are my teammates, Nihlus and Garrus.”

“Hello,” Tali replied quietly.

“Tali would you tell me about the readings? Mr. Lee told me you were on board the mining company’s transport, and you wanted to come down?” Shepard asked.

“Yes. I was on the bridge when the ship made orbit.” She replied. “I saw the readings, but the ship’s sensor resolution was not good enough to pick up details through the ionization.”

“You must have a theory what it was though, if you asked to be brought down,” Garrus said.

Shepard grinned; Garrus beat her to the punch with that question.

Tali clasped her hands together, but within moments she was wringing her fingers. “I don’t think it was... as the miners called it, sensor ghosts. I know this planet is prone to atmospheric anomalies, but that heat signature was too localized to be just some ionized gasses.”

“A ship?”

“ Likely,” Tali replied.

“Geth?” Shepard asked.

“Maybe.” Tali’s finger-wringing only became more urgent.

“We were told there was no transponder picked up. The geth ship on Eden Prime had no transponder either.” Nihlus noted.

Tali’s hands froze, “You were there?” she asked.

“My ship responded to the distress call,” Shepard replied. She was not going to go into details where they might have an audience. She glanced at Nihlus out of the corner of her eye, he was awfully too close to revealing his Spectre status.

“Oh. Well... first, they do have transponders, except they are encrypted and do not communicate such things as ship names and registration. Geth do not use those things.”

Shepard hummed again, that made a lot of sense. It was also something she ought to mention to EDI. The AI could probably crack the security if she could only isolate the transponder from background signals. It would be something if they could detect the Geth with whatever transponders they did have.

“Do you remember the coordinates where the anomaly was picked up?” Shepard wondered. They had topographical scans of the planet and a shuttle; they could conduct an EVA investigation. It would not be fun for anyone involved, but it was still the only way to figure out what went on.

“Not precisely, but I do remember the land-features to look for,” Tali replied. “There is a formation a couple hundred kilometers northwest of here. Three mountain ridges arranged like a splayed out hand.” She raised her hand and spread out her fingers as she spoke. “The readings came from between the fingers.”

“Would a topographical chart help?”
“Yes! Definitely!”

“Great, we are going out in the cold,” Garrus grumbled.

“Is your armor not rated for it?” Nihlus asked.

Shepard chose to lead Tali toward the table where they could sit down. With EDI’s scans projected over one of the tables, it took Tali all of a minute to narrow down the right locale, and another two or three to spot the formation she was looking for. It really did look like a splayed out hand. Tali pointed to the valley formed between the two “finger” ridges. It was not a big place, but large enough to conceal a frigate-sized dropship.

Footsteps coming into the room alerted them to the arrival of the marines. Shepard introduced them to Tali and recapped what went on, and with that they turned back to planning. Shepard was not stupid enough to fly an unarmed Kodiak right into the valley where an armed ship could be hiding, still the place needed to be scouted.

In the end, they chose a landing three quarters of the way up on one of the ridges, where the shuttle should in theory be able to make a safer approach, and they could take the rest on foot. It would be colder, windier, and nastier up somewhere elevated, but it was the safest way of doing things. The biggest issue was that they could not trust the Normandy to guide the shuttle’s VI pilot. In the end it was Nihlus who opted to fly the craft, and Shepard had few reasons to tell him no. The Defiant may have been totaled, but he brought it down safely. As far as she was concerned any landing one could walk away from was a good landing.

An hour after that, the miners opened the air-lock and the Kodiak was on its way. Shepard was up front in the cockpit with Nihlus, there to help him with the difference in interface, though it figures that he had software on his omni-tool that worked with his helmet’s HUD to translate things for him. Another reason for him to be cocky, at which Shepard rolled her eyes; really, a Spectre should be able to do that, right? Maybe it was just her habit of being grossly over-prepared, but the whole thing was a no-brainer in her mind.

She plopped herself into the co-pilot seat, her helmet in her lap, and just watched the scenery, snow-veiled as it was, fly by. This was the first time in a little while that she had been in some space alone with Nihlus. After her earlier resolution to be honest with him, now she was wrangling with the when.

Now did not seem to be the right time to bring up the topic, her training said that anything that could get in the way of the mission should be tossed to the wind. She had to focus, keep her eyes on the target, eyes on the prize, and all those pithy little lines her trainers ever used. Yet her other side argued that this was also the sort of thing that created tension that could impact her performance. There was more than one way to jettison something. If it could not be ignored, it had to be faced. Anything in the back of her head that prevented her from giving her team a hundred and ten percent had to go. She owed her team her absolute best.

“Something wrong?” Nihlus asked.

“What?” Shepard looked up.

“You were staring at nothing for five minutes now.”

“Not nothing, just… snow.” She replied lamely. “This planet reminds me of Elysium.” Ah here we
Shepard turned her head sharply; did he think she had some snow-triggered issues? “What sort of problem could it be?” Shepard liked to think she had the sort of personality that allowed her to deal with traumatic experiences. The worst things she had seen only strengthened her resolve. The worst experiences she lived through only spurred her to fight harder. The White Death itself was all righteous rage. Still, rage was blinding, and she was paying for it, but in some ways that too only made her stronger. She survived, because she was unwilling to quit.

“You tell me,” he replied. “There is something bothering you, I can tell.”

“You got an application for that too?”

Nihlus chuckled, “no, but I am learning to read you. I am that good.”

Shepard smiled, but she could not hold it for long, she just did not feel it. “I’m just thinking… tossing possibilities, probabilities. Got to be a step ahead, it’s how I stay on top.”

“It is how you give yourself a headache.”

“Command comes with burdens,” she replied, somewhat more defensively than she intended.

“Yes, and you choose to carry everyone else’s while you are at it.” He kept his eyes on the console, dutifully minding their course and altitude as he spoke. Even then she could not hope to see his expression past his opaque face-plate. “This is why I got out of the military when I got the chance. I work better on my own. But- I made a commitment to you, to this, and so… I can help. I can tell something is bothering you.”

Shepard looked away; this was the time to tell him that to begin with, he had piled on the burden. “As I said, I’m thinking. I got command a month and a half ago, then barely three weeks later I’m a Spectre candidate, and were it not for that, I wouldn’t be here right now. It would probably be a steady diet of merc and pirate rout jobs.”

“You would be doing work that someone else could do just as easily.” Nihlus replied. “You know, I wondered- the ship, the tiny crew, and the sort of jobs it is getting. You are a war hero, an example to your people, and yet… this. I saw the way you reacted when Verner unrolled that poster.”

Shepard froze in her seat, was Nihlus about to figure out her issue based on little bits and pieces? Was she that transparent?

“Udina has a list on his desk of potential Spectre candidates. Every Spectre knows about it.” He paused and turned his head to look at her. “By the way, do tell Udina that we would not nominate anyone off it, too much favoritism at too little actual skill. He might actually listen if it came from a human.”

He was right, Shepard thought. That list was a load of hogwash even from where she sat. It was arrogant, presumptive, and overbearing, sort of like Udina in general. Honestly, if anyone knew the sort of people who had the gumption to be Spectres, it would have to be other Spectres.

“You might just be an exception though. Your name appeared on it after Elysium. But seven months later, it was removed.”

“How long have you been a Spectre?” Shepard asked. A rock had lodged in her throat as she
realized how close to the truth Nihlus got without her saying a word. As much as she wanted him to
know the truth, it still terrified her.

“I was inducted in 2176. But you are trying to distract me. Something happened for them to remove
you, and I would bet my bank account that it would explain things.”

Shepard remained quiet for a long moment, holding her breath. They were ninety-five percent there.
Only that last five percent was something he could not know without her telling him. She had to fill
in that final blank. “I screwed up.” She said. “I shot-”

“I do not care.” Nihlus interrupted.

“What?” Shepard asked, stunned.

“No. Spirits. Not that way. More… if the Alliance thinks whatever you did made you unworthy of
being a Spectre or even of their list… they can take the list, and… how do you humans love to put it?
Stick it where the sun does not shine?” He glanced at her, but Shepard was too stunned to even nod.
“I know what I see. That is why I do not care what you did. It will not change my opinion.”

Shepard hummed, why did he stop her from spilling her guts like that? She had been on the cusp; the
words had been on her tongue.

“Now that you know I will not think any less of you, if you still want to give me the details… I will
not stop you,” he finished.

“Thanks,” Shepard murmured. “Well you’re right, something I did, kind of… put me in a bad
position.” She owed him the truth, now more than ever, as he already knew most of it from bits of
evidence. She promised herself that she would tell him. So she did. Over the next five minutes she
recounted her fall from grace as the shuttle flew under his watchful eye. Somehow it was as if a
pressure valve opened, she could feel the tension dissipate with each word. “… and that’s pretty
much it. Suffice to say, I couldn’t say no when you nominated me.” She finished.

Nihlus hummed, it was the first sound he made the whole time she had been talking. Some might
have begun thinking he was not listening, it was hard to tell with his helmet on, but he gave her little
cues, a little tip of the head here, a slight turn there.

“I never thought about it that way, and I would not have known.” He said.

“You couldn’t have known. I don’t talk about it. Kaidan and Ashley know, but only because Kaidan
served under one of my critics before. The rest of the crew might know too.”

“So what made you finally tell me?” he asked.

“You’re not angry that I didn’t?”

“No. Why should I be?” He asked. “Shepard, I kept things from you too, remember?”

Shepard blinked, stupefied that he had just come out and said it. She cleared her throat, to push down
the rock lodged there. “Well, Garrus and I were talking and… it got me thinking.” Technically not a
lie, again. “I realized that I was… that I couldn’t expect you to trust me if I couldn’t trust you.”

He hummed again, amused this time. “I owe C-sec some gratitude.”

“I think he’d like you not calling him that.” Shepard was honestly stunned that he did not comment at
her admission.
“I will take that into consideration.” He was smiling as he said that, she could hear it in his lilt. “Shepard… listen,” his tone changed, serious now. “I do not want you thinking about it any more. We both kept things to ourselves, and that is natural in our line of work. I kept my past with Saren; you kept your past after Elysium. But now you know my past, and I know yours. We are even. From here we move forward and focus on what really matters, making you a Spectre.”

“It won’t be easy,” Shepard agreed.

“You are wrong there.” He replied, but before he could say anything else, there was a series of bleeps from the console in front of him, which made him turn back to the readouts. “We are almost there.” He announced. “We will talk about this later. Right now, duty calls.”

“Yes,” Shepard took a deep breath, and let it out. “Find our spot and set us down.” Shepard raised her helmet and slipped it on, doing up her seals one by one, jerking on them to make sure they closed tight.

“I think I see it on the sensors.”

“Good,” Shepard replied. While Nihlus maneuvered the shuttle, she conducted her respirator checks and double checked both her battery levels and oxygen supply. She felt the shuttle begin to descend and as she double checked her webbing and weapons, it finally touched down. The mission was back on track, but she was glad to say that she felt more capable of dealing with it now. Her team would get the Shepard one hundred and ten, because they deserved nothing less.

Five minutes later the seven of them were outside in the snow, heaters blasting as they made their way over the ridge. Their landing was a small spot, barely the size of three Kodiaks side by side, surrounded by crags. It was almost at the top of the ridge, with the scanners showing a clear, if winding, path to the top.

The worst part for Shepard was that the wind now howled across her external microphone like an angry banshee. There could be a geth coming up on them from behind, and none of them, not even Nihlus or Garrus, would be able to hear it clutter. It was really too much like Elysium, like that night. The similarities set her danger sense off. Normally her internal alarm was quite acute, for it to be buzzing now, she was either finally becoming unpardonably paranoid, or they were going to be neck-deep in a geth mess any second now. Honestly, Shepard hoped for the former, because the narrow craggy pathway they had to take to the top of the ridge was no place for a firefight.

It took an ungodly half an hour to cover a distance of a couple hundred meters, but finally they reached the top of the ridge. When Shepard glanced back, she could see that Jenkins was bent over, his hands on his knees as he tried to breathe through the hike. Kaidan was no less winded, though he was not telegraphing it as obviously. Nihlus and Garrus had fallen to the back of the group. Their situation complicated by their top-heavy build and digitigrade walk, which offered them less surface area for traction up a twenty-five degree slope. The only ones who looked vaguely okay were Tali and Ashley; and the latter had the most gear of any of them on top.

Instead of saying anything and revealing how unbothered she was, Shepard swept the scene. Visibility was surprisingly good, despite the gusts of wind that drove the falling snow and whipped up the top layers from every surface. The temperature on her scanner registered a brisk minus thirty five Celsius, with wind gusts pushing it down to a minus fifty, but her heater was keeping up.

The path they used led up to a flat, weathered table-like structure at the top of the ridge. It was irregular, and altogether not big, probably a hundred meters square at most. Beyond was a sheer drop
of a couple hundred meters with rocks at the bottom that promised a sure and painful death. The valley between the ridges stretched out as a jagged scar far below. It was not terribly wide, and the cliffs meant any ship that landed here would be concealed, but it would also have to climb straight up to get out.

“There’s nothing here,” Ashley said as she stopped next to her.

Shepard stared out into the valley, but it was clear as daylight that there was no eerily bug-like ship sitting there. Even if it was cloaked the snow would have given away its shape.

“Tali, these are the coordinates, right?” Shepard asked.

“Yes,” the quarian replied. “The readings came from down there.” She was wringing her fingers again.

Despite seeing no ship, or even geth, Shepard’s sense of danger refused to quiet down. Joker should have completed the sweep patterns by now. She reached up and tapped at her helmet’s comm, “Normandy come in, it’s Shepard.” The link clicked a few times, a hum of static filled her ear. Shepard tapped again, switching bands. “Normandy, come in. Joker, you better not be pulling my leg.” There was more clicking, and the buzz of static. Her hand dropped away as she turned and glanced at the others. “Comm’s dead here.”

“The link was unclear before. Could the solar emissions have gotten worse?” Ashley asked.

Shepard looked up, the clouds were too thick to see the sky, and even then it was still daylight, she doubted they would be able to see the vaunted Christmas-tree auroras. “Maybe, but something just doesn’t feel right,” She murmured.

When she turned, she noted the way Garrus stood near the precipice, staring down into the valley. His posture was simply too rigid for casual curiosity, but somehow she doubted it was a fear of heights on his part. What sort of sniper had a fear of heights?

“Something about this place is off, and it is messing with my amp. The back of my neck’s been tingling since we got here,” Kaidan said quietly.

“It is interfering with my visor as well,” Garrus added.

“Communicator, amp, and visor… something it messing with our electronics,” Shepard murmured. She could see the news making everyone uncomfortable.

Ashley and Richard reached for their assault rifles.

Nihlus brought up his omni-tool and tapped at it. A few seconds later he hummed, seemingly to himself, “There is a highly localized electromagnetic field here.”

“An electromagnetic field?” Shepard repeated.

“A strong one.”

“Can I see the readings?” Tali asked shyly.

Nihlus motioned her over and the Quarian gingerly stepped over to him to get a look at his omni-tool.

“We’re not going to be attacked, will we?” Jenkins asked as he swept his weapon from side to side,
as if expecting geth to pop up from behind some rock any second now.

Two hundred years ago the weirdness of this place would have made the ghost-hunters giddy all over, but these days everyone knew ghosts did not exist, and stuff like this probably had a perfectly logical, mundane explanation. “What is it, Tali?” Shepard asked.

The quarian opened her own tool and began to type. “It isn’t natural. The field is too intense and too… let me compare something.” She kept typing away, looking between her tool and Nihlus’. “Yes, this spectrum- I’ve encountered something like this before. It’s definitely not natural. Even for this planet.”

“Are there geth here?” Shepard asked.

“Yes.” Tali replied. “This is their trickery. This field is meant to conceal a ship from orbital electronic sensory by dampening and scattering the signals. As a side effect it also jams communications and apparently interferes with amps. Garrus… right now your visor can’t tell you the distance to the other ridge. Is that right?”

“Yes. I can not even tell you how high up we are.” Garrus replied.

“Then I am correct!” Tali exclaimed, suddenly chippier. “The only thing the dome can’t mask is the heat signature. But…” she glanced up. “The geth do not keep breathable atmospheres or heating on their ships. Most of the heat they emit is power core and engines. The core is easy enough to isolate, to a certain point, and when the engines are turned off, their heat dissipates rapidly in this cold.”

So they had functional stealth, no wonder EDI did not pick anything up from orbit. “The ship is not down there,” Shepard said as she looked down into the ravine, “so… where are they now?” Her sixth sense was right on the money, again. She turned away, “I need to contact the Normandy.” With that said she began down the path back toward the shuttle. The electromagnetic field probably worked only with clear line of sight. She might be able to get a signal to the Normandy if she used the ridge as a shield.

Going down the slope toward the shuttle was quicker, but a tad more dangerous. Her boots slipped a little, despite the traction soles. She did not go far down the path before her comm link began to hiss with static in her ear. “…ker to She-rd.”

Clicking followed as the communicator tried to compensate, but it was enough, Shepard recognized Joker’s voice trying to come through. She made her way further down the path and raised her hand to her comm. “Normandy, are you reading?” she asked.

“Co-ander! You– alright!”

“What is it, Joker?”

“EDI pick– up – sh– fly– aw–”

“Repeat that, Joker. You’re breaking up.” Damn it, just how powerful was that EM dome to be creating this much interference? This was a damn mountain; the signal ought to have been nearly clear. Or was the sun only complicating things? The line clicked a few times, static returning, and she got no reply from Joker.

Shepard tapped at her comm, shifting to short range band. This was not helping her nerves, her sixth sense for danger was more urgent now, like an air raid siren in her head. “Something is up. We have to go back.”
“Roger that, ma’am,” Kaidan’s voice was covered with a thin veil of static, but audible.

It looked like the field would mess with everything except immediate proximity communications. Shepard glanced up the path and smiled when she saw the six of them appear as moving shadows in the gauzy snow curtain.

“What is it, Shepard?” Nihlus asked as they came down the path.

“I tried to make contact with the ship. The interference is bad, but by what I got, EDI picked something up. It sounded like Joker was warning me about the ship.”

“The list of places they could have gone is not long,” Kaidan murmured quietly.

“Yes. I’d like them to have gone away, but…” Shepard stopped.

“When are we ever that lucky?” Ashley finished.

“Exactly. Tali if you want to sit this one out, I will understand. This might get messy.”

“With all due respect, Commander. I can handle myself. This shotgun is not a decorative accessory,” Tali replied. “Besides, I know more about the geth than any of you and I’ve been at the mine longest too, I can help.”

“Very well, Tali, but please stick close to us.” Shepard did not say it, but she thought of it. She would have liked the quarian to sit this one out. Tali was an unknown, and given how young she sounded it did not sit well with Shepard to be taking a civilian, even an armed one, into a combat situation when she fully expected to be outnumbered and outgunned.

Ten minutes later and about half-way down to the shuttle, Shepard raised her hand to her comm again. “Normandy, do you read me?” she asked.


Shepard let out a sight of relief; she could do with ‘sort of clear’, “Status report, what did EDI see?”


The static on the line was still considerable, but Shepard understood the basics. “They fired up their engines,” Shepard replied.

“They?” Joker asked.

“We found evidence of geth. The readings EDI picked up, were they near our current location?”

There was a pause, “Ye–, near – Kodiak.”

“Where are they now?”

There was a longer pause as EDI checked her reading. In the back of her mind Shepard knew she was asking a redundant question, she knew where the geth were going. She was beginning to see a picture. The geth had been biding their time, using their EM dome to remain concealed. It is very likely that they picked up the supply ship in orbit when it arrived, while their engines were still hot. Rather than attack immediately, when they would be exposed, they decided to lay low for a bit.

“Shit! –ey are h–ding for – mine!” Joker replied.
The static was picking up in her ear again, this time though it was a different sort of static. Similar to what they had encountered when they tried to communicate with the miners. “Joker call the mine. This is an emergency, they need to get their men into the tunnels, as far away from the Prothean ruins as they can, and lock the fire containment doors.”

“Aye, aye, –’am!” Joker responded.

The comm unit clicked again, this time it was Joker disconnecting. Shepard glanced around the team. They had finally caught up to her down the path. “They’re heading for the mine.” She announced. “We’re going to have a firefight on our hands in tight quarters.”

“Why the tunnels, why not evacuate?” Tali wondered, “They have shuttles.”

“The dropship is armed. The mine’s airlock is a bottleneck. The geth will have a clear shot at the shuttles coming up. No, the tunnels are their better option. I am willing to wager that whatever the geth want, it’s in the ruins. They will not waste time crawling kilometers of mine tunnels, but if they have the bright idea, the fire doors will slow them down.”

“So, what is our plan?” Garrus wondered.

“Control room first; we need to know where they are. Mr. Lee mentioned they use explosives rather than mining lasers. The typical mining charge, even shaped, is not terribly powerful; it takes a few to loosen up ore. We ought to see if we can get our hands on some charges, though I have grenades in our supplies.”

“Everything is better with explosives huh?” Nihlus asked, though she could tell he was amused.

“Explosives are for the black one, just in case. Stick to a play that works.” Call her a one-trick pony, but Shepard knew that explosives were their best bet to get through the black unit’s ridiculous shielding quickly. If it came wielding two MACs again, speed would be of the essence. This was no time for quibbling details, stick to what worked.

Chapter End Notes

Author Notes: Here’s one more misfit for the crew of oddballs that is the Normandy. Tali is not yet the badass she comes to be, she’s still that adorably awkward nervous-at-times young lady.

General Notes:
Tali’s Introduction – Much background on Tali, specifically how she came to have the data on Saren, and be on the Citadel in ME1, is explored in the comics quite well. That said this was the first introduction that had to be rewritten top to bottom, because as I pondered it, there was almost nothing from canon that I could keep. There is just her motivation, Tali is still very interested in researching the Geth, part spurred by her father.

Chapter Notes:
Astronomical Units – This is a unit of distance measurement, a proverbial yard-stick for measuring orbital distances. It is defined as the mean distance between the center of the Earth and the center of the Sun. Mean, because Earth’s (and indeed most planets) orbit is not actually perfectly circular, it’s an ellipse. Thus [1 AU = 1.49787021 x 10^{11}
m]. Without the scientific shorthand that’s [149,597,870,210 m], or in manageable units (and tad rounded) 149,597,870 km!
Episode 11: Sensor Ghosts [Part II]

The flight back to the mine was a mad dash; Shepard was up in the cockpit with Nihlus again, though he did all the flying. They were about twenty kilometers away when the sensors first picked up the ship right in front of the mine. The shape of the heat blip alone was a dead give-away, but even without that, the vessel had no transponder they could detect. The confirmation that the Geth were in fact here was wholly unwelcome. Shepard sat there, trying to keep calm.

As far as she was concerned this was the most dangerous part of the whole operation, even more dangerous than the fight ahead, for a very simple reason. Approaches were not something one could easily control and plan for; especially when one knew the enemy would expect them. Ultimately, the Kodiak could do little if the dropship opened fire on them. Shepard saw the uncertainty as a loss of control, there was little they could if the dropship opened fire on the Kodiak.

“Nihlus, set us down behind the compound,” Shepard said.

“Got it,” he replied.

It was far from her ideal scenario, but she had no other choice. They could not land right in front of the dropship, and she would not expect the miners to open the airlock. There was no option to land back, away from the ship either. If they did that, they would have to foot the distance across an open space, just as exposed to the dropship’s guns as if they were inside the Kodiak, except the Kodiak had sensors that would warn them of weapons warming up, and despite looking like a giant cockroach, in the right hands it could dance. She chose to bet on Nihlus’ piloting skills and hoped that at some point the Kodiak would enter the blind zone of the dropship’s guns, the range at which the ship simply could not lock on and fire safely.

She reached for the cabin comm, “Helmets and seals, people. We’re making approach from the outside. Prepare for a sortie.” She allowed herself to slump back in her seat, wishing there was some way to avoid this madness.

She idly wished that the Geth had parked a few kilometers away from the damn mine’s front doors as they did on Eden Prime. Had they done that, she would have ordered Joker to destroy the dropship from orbit. This planet was not Eden Prime there was nothing here to destroy, so no one would have her head. Doubly so since the Normandy’s nastier bite was not a kinetic weapon. But it was as if the Geth knew she might do it, and landed close to the mine so that she could not take the risk. The above-ground structure was hardy, but it probably would not withstand a whole damn ship
exploding right next to it, and it would definitely not withstand a graze from the Normandy’s main battery.

As the Kodiak turned toward their landing spot Shepard counted the Geth troopers parading around the mine. It was impossible to not see that the automatons watched the shuttle come in. A number of them turned to follow the shuttle toward the mine’s rear, weapons drawn. “The welcoming committee is assembling,” Shepard murmured as she got up from her seat. “Put the Kodiak with a door facing the wall and set it down.”

“Got it. Try not to kill them all before I get there,” Nihlus replied.

Shepard decided not to comment as she opened the door that led to the main compartment. She was not surprised that everyone looked up when she appeared, and then she felt the Kodiak bank and raised her hand to the ceiling for support. Then it turned on the spot and began to descend. Shepard glanced out the door windows and saw the kinetic barrier flare, the geth opened fire from below, but the shield was holding. “The Geth are rolling out the red carpet on the landing zone.”

“Nothing we can’t handle,” Ashley replied.

Jenkins was the first to unfasten his safety harnesses and rise to his feet.

“No foolish heroism, people. Keep each other safe.” She as she reached up to check her helmet seals one last time. That done she moved to the door opposite.

Their landing angle put one door toward the geth, but the other was about six meters away from the mine’s back wall. Shepard tapped the door release and it hissed open. She only waited for the shuttle to touch ground before she stepped off, drawing her weapons as she did. It was impossible to miss that the Kodiak’s kinetic barrier continued to flare, though less frequently now. It seemed the Geth were beginning to realize their infantry weapons would not do much to the hardy vessel.

She heard the clutter of weapon indicating that others had followed. “Kaidan, take bravo from the nose, Garrus, Tali, with me,”

“Roger,” Kaidan replied.

“Right behind you, Commander.” Garrus replied.

She heard a shotgun whine as it powered up, which must have been Tali’s reply.

Shepard would have preferred to keep the quarian away from the fighting, but she could not be made to stay in the shuttle. It would not be safe for her, and she clearly would not do it. So she had to adapt. With that realization, she moved toward the craft’s rear, automatically side-stepping the closest main thruster as she did, aware that it would be impossibly hot so quickly after landing.

“Just say the word, Commander.” Kaidan said over their comm.

“Ready… Go!” Shepard said as she ducked out from behind the Kodiak, laser sights on, raised her guns, aimed at a single geth, and fired. The unit’s shields flared on the first shot, but the second went through, the unit’s head exploded in a spray of white fluids.

The marine’s assault rifles come to life on the other side. The geth closest to the shuttle’s nose turned sharply, while a second turned to her, stepping over the frame of its fallen brethren. Shepard ducked, aware that her choice of cover was somewhat limited. She could not press herself to the Kodiak because the main drive thrusters were simply much too hot right now.
Suddenly Garrus was there, rifle raise and beating an unfamiliar staccato, aimed right at into the chest of the geth that turned her way. The weapon’s spread was almost non-existent, and its recoil clearly did not bother Garrus much. A moment later the rounds tore down the unit’s shields, and it jerked once or twice as the slugs began to dig into its form. Shepard shifted her angle, raised Sin, and pulled the trigger, the unit’s head exploded. She glanced over and nodded to Garrus.

There was a very sudden whine as another geth went down to sustained fire from the front of the shuttle. There were still three more units; one turned aiming at her, and another turned to the shuttle’s front. Shepard raised her weapons and aimed, but stopped. The third unit froze like a pole, its optic opening wide.

“Got you,” Tali said.

“Did you just hack that geth?” Garrus asked.

“It won’t last long, kill them!” Tali replied.

As if taking a cue from the quarian, the third geth raised its rifle and fired at the unit that had turned to them. The blue rounds from its pulse rifle beat into its brethren, tearing down its shields. At that moment assault rifle from the shuttle’s front replied in kind, spraying down the unit closest to them. Shepard stepped around the Kodiak’s back and adjusted her aim and fired, the unit’s head exploded.

The hacked unit froze again, and at that moment there was a burst of purple, green, and grey as Tali burst out cover. She was right next to the struggling geth in a breathless instant, shotgun raised to its head. One crack and the unit’s whole cranial assembly exploded, sending white fluid splattering to the ground as the rest collapsed.

“Yikes.” Jenkins said, tone full of awe all the same.

“As I said, my shotgun is not a fashion accessory,” Tali said blandly.

“Good going everyone,” Shepard stepped in, “Expect more all around. Kaidan, take Bravo from the other side of the mine, we’ll handle this side.”

“Yes, ma’am. Ash, Jenkins, let’s go!” Kaidan called.

Shepard turned to Tali. She would be lying if she said she was not impressed by that stunt the girl pulled. Shepard did not know the first thing about hacking a geth, but doing it on the fly, for however long? “How often can you do that to them?”

Tali turned to her, “The issue is how long will it work? I’d say once, maybe twice more, before they adapt.” Tali replied.

“Alright,” Well she supposed that make sense. The geth network and AI were infinitely more complex than the mindless LOKI mechs she could target whole groups at a time by targeting their internal network. She raised her hand to her helmet comm, “Nihlus, did you decide to take a nap in the cockpit?”

“Do I look asleep?” he appeared from the shuttle, his shotgun ready at hand.

“The way you’re dragging your feet... one could argue,” Shepard rebuffed. “Tali you’re with us.”

“Yes, Commander.” Tali replied quietly.

Shepard decided caution was in order and struck close to the compound’s wall as she moved toward
They came to the corner just as one more geth appeared; she raised her gun, but before she could pull the trigger, a black and red shotgun appeared almost right over her shoulder, pointed right into the unit’s face. There was a thunderous crack, and the synthetic’s head exploded where it stood and it dropped to the ground like timber.

“Who is asleep now?” Nihlus asked.

Shepard snorted and peered around the corner, “There’s three more. The closest is on the left, all yours Nihlus. I’ll take the middle one, and Garrus the right one’s for you. On my mark…” She waited for the unit on the left to come closer, so that it would be soundly within range of Nihlus’ shotgun, the other two were a few steps further back, but that was not an issue for her or Garrus. “Go.”

She moved around the corner, guns halfway up before she was even clear, hours of long practice made the motion of raise, sight, pull second nature, especially when sight was replaced with precision aligned lasers. The three geth raised their rifles, their reaction times quick as a flicker, the advantage of their synthetic processors. Shepard pulled the triggers, one just after the other. Her unit’s shields flared on the first, but the second round went in through its face-lamp, blinding it. The other two geth fired maybe one or two bursts of pulse fire before Nihlus’ shotgun gave two rapid cracks, and Garrus’ rifle laid a tight cluster with a quick burst. Shepard fired another round into her geth, and it finally collapsed, followed by the other two.

“Three less to worry about,” Garrus said.

“Keep moving. I don’t want to fall behind.” She replied as she moved forward, guns at a ready. She could still hear more rapports from the other side of the compound, but so far so good. She stopped right at the final corner and raised her hand to her helmet. “Bravo team, status report.”

“We’re good, Commander, making steady progress.” Kaidan replied.

Shepard pressed herself as tight as she could to the wall as she scooted right up to the corner. The Geth dropship loomed overhead, so they probably knew, but at the same time they did not seem eager to come at them, which was all well and good, but not helping either. She peered around the corner and counted the units on the ground.

“Just four up front,” she muttered and glanced at her team. Garrus and Nihlus were right there, weapons ready, she nodded, and swung around the corner, weapons rising, and fired, bringing down the shields of two of the units. A shotgun crack followed and one of them went down. She fired again, destroying the head of the other, and ripping through the shields of a third. Sin’s status bar shifted red, thermal clip at capacity. Another assault rifle burst and the third unit collapsed as well.

The fourth robot turned enough to open fire and Shepard wheeled, pressing her back to the compound wall as she ejected the spent clips, though by her count she still had one shot in Dex. She heard an assault rifle, but no bullets came where she had been, and then there was a small explosion.

“I got it, skipper.”

“Thanks, Gunny.” Shepard reloaded her guns, feeling more than hearing the receiver bolts click, her eyes drawn to the ship towering over them. Sure it was frigate-sized, but up close like this it looked enormous. She could not help but wonder just how many units were aboard, and what stopped them from flooding the mine. It was a morose thought, but she never shied away from staring the worst
case scenario in the face.

Then, with the dark thinking tossed aside, too counterproductive for right now, Shepard stepped around the corner, her team right behind her. Bravo team was already there, so the seven of them met up right in front of the compound’s massive loading bay door, and the hole cut right in the middle of it. The opening’s edges were charred and bent away from a central point in a tell-tale way, and it did not spell good news. “They got explosives, powerful ones if they can cut through this door,” Shepard said.

“Keelah,” Tali murmured.

Shepard stepped through the hole, tapping the side of her helmet to activate her lights. Inside there was a largely empty, yet familiar landing. The floor was a hazard of rails and foot-switches, lit up by a few scant safety lights. At the back, the delta of tracks came together and then began to slope down, vanishing into the maw of a tunnel of some sort, likewise lit up by sparse, dim safety lights.

Her armor provided a rather interesting reading of the environment. Due to the atmospheric conditions, the space inside the compound had actually pressurized when it equalized with the outside, but the breathable oxygen was diluted, she could see the volume percentile quiver, and it was slowly dropping as the oxygen still seeped out of the hole in the doors.

She supposed it made sense why the geth opted to blow the door, there was no way to open it from the outside. The miners probably wore heavy thermal clothing and breathing masks to get the ore carts full of eezo up here, and then aboard their transport ship. She scanned the floor carefully, but after a good half a minute she was happy to see no bodies or blood anywhere.

“No one to hold the fort in here,” she murmured as she moved deeper in, and toward the ore tunnels. “What are they thinking?”

“They are goal-oriented, they do not think as we do.” Tali replied as she stopped next to her, shotgun flash-light shining into the tunnels. “Right now, there is something they want, and that is enough for them to act.”

“Guess we follow rails, and eventually find out.” Shepard replied.

Tali nodded and Shepard began to walk, stepping over rails carefully. The quiet of the mine was near absolute, it sounded like the whole operation had been abandoned. The tunnel sloped down at a comfortable gradient, shallow enough that even pushing the carts up by hand would not be difficult, especially factor in that the eezo ore could somewhat lighten its own apparent load with just a small current passing through the cart.

After about a hundred meters horizontally, they arrived at a landing that swept, U-turn-like into a second tunnel that went even lower. The central block between the tunnels was quite wide, and down here its walls were covered in large, square slabs of what looked like white-washed concrete, or something like it, to keep the tunnels stable. The central hub was so large that with a start Shepard realized that the rail access wrapped around the compound’s vertical shuttle access shaft.

The sound of their footsteps echoed ominously as they kept going, lower, and lower, following the rails. At the bottom of the second section was another wide U-turn landing that led to yet another, albeit shorter section of descending tunnel. At the bottom of that she could see another set of doors, lit up with lights. These doors were whole, but by the green panels on either side she could tell they were unlocked.

When Shepard made her way down toward them, they slowly opened on their own. For a brief
moment she heard what sounded like a wailing banshee as the air rushed past to equalize pressure. These doors led to a much more familiar space, this was the bay they landed in when they first arrived.

“They must have left these unlocked, didn’t want the geth breaking the mine’s environmental containment by blasting a hole in all their doors. The environmental controls will re-establish atmospheric pressure and oxygen levels in a manner of minutes.” Tali said.

All Shepard noted that there were no bodies or blood here either. The five shuttles were still in place as well, still covered in tarps. At the back of the bay the door leading further into the compound was intact, and unlocked, though closed. Shepard moved toward it, hands on her weapons, but not drawing yet. As she got closer to it, she realized that despite being unlocked, it did not open on its own. The environmental controls had to be overriding it.

“What now, Commander?” Kaidan asked.

She glanced back at the group, the hallways of the compound beyond were narrow, only three people could walk side by side, and that was assuming the geth did not either leave ambushes or booby traps in every doorway. Shepard was making no assumptions, no matter what Tali said about them. Best be safe rather than sorry.

“We need to get to the control room; the mine will have cameras that cover this compound. That will let us see where they are, how many there are, and what they’re doing.”

“I know where the control room is,” Tali volunteered.

“Thank you. For now though, we need to move carefully, assume they have ambushes or traps set up. Also we’re now between the geth in the mine, and the geth on the ship. Not ideal but-”

Suddenly a resonating, thunder-like sound echoed through the halls and caused the floor under their feet to vibrate. The sensation was not strong enough to indicate origin anywhere immediately in their vicinity, but it was not so weak that it could be mistaken for an earth tremor. Shepard glanced at her team.

“What the hell was that?” Jenkins asked.

“Felt like an explosion,” Ashley replied.

“Are they blasting somewhere below us?” Kaidan mused.

Tali was clenching and loosening her grip on her shotgun, Shepard knew that if she did not have it, she would be wringing her fingers. “There’s only one place they could be blasting. The collapsed sections. We have to hurry; they don’t know what they’re doing!” Tali jumped in.

“Easy, Tali, we’ll get there.” Shepard replied.

“It is a mess down there! Careless use of explosives might damage the remaining weight-bearing supports and cause further collapse.” The Quarian went on.

“Son of a-” Shepard stopped herself; there was no time for that. “Alright, guess we’re doing this as a hot run. Tali, you know the way down there, you’ll show us. We proceed, checking every door along the way, I don’t want surprises.”

Tali nodded. Around her Shepard heard spent thermal clips hit the ground. A moment later she led the way deeper into the compound, with Tali next to her. When they passed the mess, Shepard
glanced inside. She was glad to see the continuing absence of bodies and blood. There were no
destroyed units or splashes of white fluids either, it looked like the miners took sagely advice and
simply vanished into the tunnels rather than launch some brave, but ultimately foolish attempt to
resist machines with superior firepower and unknown numbers.

About the only thing Shepard did not like was the fact that without going to the control room, they
were going down into the bowels of the compound completely blind. She would be lying if she said
she did not have some apprehension about the possibility of meeting the black unit again. There was
a lot less cover here than there had been on Eden Prime. She did not want to find out how many
bullets it took those vicious MACs to rip through kinetic barriers and then armor.

The fact that they had yet to meet a single geth inside was not doing her nerves a favor either. It was
probably safe to assume that the others were somewhere more-so uncomfortable. She kept Sin partly
raised, trigger finger extended to the guard. Right now was not the time to develop a dangerous sort
of twitch.

Tali’s shotgun swayed from side to side, sweeping the corridor with all the regularity of a
metronome. Shepard glanced at the young quarian, and though she could not read any sort of
expression past the opaque face shield of her envirosuit, there was just something about the way the
young girl held herself, she seemed to bristle. Was Tali even as young as she seemed?

“You okay, Tali?” She asked.

“I am fine, Commander. But when I get my hands on those mechanical- I think I’m going to enjoy
blasting holes in the lot of them.”

Shepard grinned, “Take it easy, we are here to help.”

They came around another corner, to another corridor; this one was flanked on both sides by a
number of rooms. They were somewhere behind the mess hall now, somewhere only Tali had been
before, which made it unknown enemy territory. Her training told her to be ready for anything and
everything. The marines swept each unlocked room as they passed, making sure there was no geth
hiding in there. Shepard was happy to see no bodies or blood throughout.

Eventually Tali stopped in front of a large set of doors, “This is the elevator, but because the shaft
collapsed at the bottom, it only goes down two levels. We can also take the stairs.”

“We take the stairs; right now the elevator is a box over a pit.” Shepard did not say it, but she
definitely thought it, that elevator had an awful lot in common with a casket.

Ashley was by the stairs access in a moment, her back pressed to the wall next to it. Tali raised her
hand to the control panel. Shepard whipped Sin up, and as the door opened, her finger slipped to the
trigger, fully ready to shoot anyone on the other side. When no one jumped out Shepard raised her
right hand, palm out, and flicked two fingers forward.

Ashley was inside in an instant, whipping her weapon from side to side to check the corners.
“Clear,” she announced.

Shepard stepped through the doors, the rest of the group right on her heels. With the stairs narrow
enough, they formed up into pairs, going down with some space in between as to make staggered
firing possible without friendly fire. Yet even down here there were no geth to shoot, which was
beginning to bother Shepard tremendously.
They went down two levels, but the stairs once went further. Halfway down the next flight the collapse debris began, what looked like chunks of pillar, paneling, and dirt had piled right across the steps in a haphazard fashion. Shepard could see why the scientists were putting drones through the gaps, they would want to know if there was anything buried in there prior to debris removal.

“They didn’t blast through here,” Kaidan noted.

“No, they would not. Any damage done to the stairs or the elevator shaft, and they would be trapped. But I think I know where they are.” Tali said as she turned to the door panel. Shepard raised her gun. Kaidan was closest to the jamb this time, and pressed his back to it, assault rifle ready to take point. The second Tali pressed the button, Kaidan’s biotics lit up, forming his barrier, he was through the door the moment it was open, with Jenkins right behind him, both sweeping the hallway before Kaidan lowered his rifle a little.

“Clear.”

“Am I the only one becoming bothered by the fact that we’ve yet to meet a single geth down here?” Ashley asked.

“It is bothersome,” Shepard replied as she stepped past the door.

“I would not complain, chief, who really wants to face them?” Kaidan asked.

“Okay, got me there, LT”

Suddenly there was another thunderous rumble, this time Shepard heard the explosion clearly and felt the shockwave as slightly more than just the floor vibrating at her feet. Dust rained from the ceiling, filling light beams. She instinctively looked around, taking stock of everyone else. In the back of her mind, Tali’s warning returned. How many more blasts would the floors take? Or had Tali been underestimating the strength of the Prothean construction?

“We are definitely close; that came from somewhere almost immediately below us.” Garrus said.

“There is a room over there at the end of the hall, part of the floor collapsed. It’s a way down to the level below without using the stairs.” Tali explained.

“Huh. Just a thought, but maybe that’s why we haven’t seen many of them,” Jenkins offered.

“What do you mean?” Shepard asked.

“We’re a long way down. Takes time to get down here, will take longer to get out. Back home, we had a sinkhole on one of our fields once, and it ate our sprayer. It took hours to get it back out. Maybe the geth don’t want to do a lot of hoisting.”

“That’s possible,” Shepard clapped the corporal on the shoulder as a way of encouraging him as she passed him to follow the hallway Tali indicated. Shepard thought it was a good idea to encourage him to think on his own, and on his feet. Halfway down, her light beams landed on the door panels haphazardly laid aside on the floor.

The panels were jagged, blackened, and misshaped in the particular way an over-powered plasma cutter produced when it deformed the edges of the material it cut. Shepard hummed as she caught sight of the doorway where the panels belonged, their stubs still in place, protruding like broken teeth. Beyond was nothing, pitch darkness. This was definitely where they went. The geth had found a closed door that would not yield and simply cut them out.
Shep[and entered last, casting her light beams about. The room was not terribly big, but it was no
closet either. Two chairs and a table stood off to the side. It looked like the scientists left some
equipment here, but the geth seemed to have taken a moment to pulverize everything. She stopped
cold when she noticed a pattern in the destruction. The damage was clearly done by kinetic
weaponry with a spread and much force. “There’s a black unit here,” she said.

“Great, just great,” Ashley replied.

As Shepard continued to scan the room, her eyes landed on the large radiating cracks. Tali certainly
had a reason to worry, they looked quite deep.

“Watch out for that back corner on the left, that’s where the hole is.” Tali warned as she stepped into
the room. “There was debris below, but if the geth cleared it, it will be a sheer drop.”

Jenkins swept the floor with his rifle’s beam, and stopped when it came to the edge of the hole.
Shepard watched as he kneeled, and after testing the edge of the floor with a few thumps of his hand,
he leaned lower still and lowered his rifle beam right into the abyss, “They cleared it alright.” He
said, and then turned his rifle just enough so he could look down the length of whatever it was down
there. “It’d all dark down here, lots of debris, rocks, and…” Jenkins straightened up sharply. “I think I
saw a moving light beam!”

“They’re close then,” Tali said as she cocked her shotgun.

Shepard approached the hole and glanced down, her light beams spread widely across the floor. The
bottom looked like it had been cleared of debris well enough, but there were chunks of debris
everywhere; a careless jump could mean a mangled ankle on landing.

“You are going down there first?” Nihlus asked.

Shep[and glanced at him as she holstered her guns, did that question really need an answer? She could
let her marines enter a room, because she was right behind them to provide support, but this was
different.

She knee[ed where Jenkins had tested the edge before swinging her feet down. A moment to take a
quiet deep breath and she pushed off. As her feet hit the ground, she folded, dropping to her hands
and knees. Even then, there was pain. Jumping four meters was already enough for gravity to take
over. She whipped Dex from its holster and raised it level with her light beams. When the pain
receded, she straightened and drew Sin as she scanned her surroundings.

Another pitch-black room, the door cut out of its frame, left lying on the floor just on the other side,
leading to another dark hallway. Her suit computer flashed an atmospheric warning across her HUD,
oxygen levels had plunged to under ten percent of what they were on the floor above. Over the faint
rasp of her air recycler she could hear faint sounds echoing down the long corridors. There was
definitely movement down here, irregular sounds of things moving across the floors, debris skittering
across other debris, and underneath it all, a faint irregular dripping.

“The room is clear,” she said as she scanned about; looking for a way back up, there had to be a way
back up, because it is unlikely the geth planned to abandon perfectly functional platforms down here. “There’s no way up, I don’t know how they planned to get out.”

“There is access to the mining tunnels on all levels of the ruins, so probably some way into the system down there as well, though it might require clearing. The tunnels probably have interconnecting shafts; at the very least there is the ore cart elevator that connects with the rails.” Tali replied.

“You know a lot about the mine, having only been here for a few days,” Ashley said.

“I explored. This is the first Prothean ruin for me. The archeologists were also very eager to tell me things. They don’t get an outside audience often.” Tali explained blandly, as if that was the most obvious explanation in the world.

“You’re a great deal of help Tali,” Shepard replied.

A periwinkle glow and a faint thud of footsteps, Shepard turned, and found Kaidan had landed right next to her. He straightened as if he did not feel the impact at all, which if he had done what she thought he had just done, was probably exactly the case.

“Wow, I wish I was a biotic,” Jenkins added.

Kaidan said nothing as he moved away from the landing spot.

Tali came next, and she landed hard, crumpling to her knees, staying down for a long moment. Shepard approached and almost put her hand on the quarian’s shoulder when she looked up, “I will be feeling that tomorrow.”

“Are you alright?”

Tali straightened slowly, her hand reaching to check on her shotgun. “Really, Commander, how many times are you going to ask me that? I am not fragile.”

“I’m sorry,” Shepard really was not that sorry. She could not help but worry for the young civilian in their midst. There was also no mistaking why Tali needed the suit she wore, and it was for more than just dealing with this planet’s atmosphere.

Once Tali cleared the landing spot, the rest of the group followed one by one, with Jenkins being the last; most hesitant to make the jump. No one would blame him, given that he recovered from a broken ankle recently.

There was a loud thud somewhere outside the hallway. Tali jumped, clamping a hand to the front of her mask, though it did little to stifle the startled squeak she let out.

Shepard turned off her helmet lights for a moment to peek around the door frame, down the long corridor. What she saw gave her ample reasons to pause. At the very end of the long passage was another room.

Between here and the other room there was debris everywhere, chunks of wall panels, bits of ceiling, and other things Shepard could not hope to identify. The blasts had probably been general debris removal, to get to the door, which was now cut out of its frame. The geth had propped the halves upright against the wall, but one slid and dropped. At this point there was no telling where general decay stopped and blast damage started. The room itself was a mess of more chunks and detritus, and when the light of the robot’s headlamps caught the floor correctly, it glimmered in that unmistakable way. The dripping sound suddenly made sense; water trickled into this part of the mine from
somewhere, and in ample enough quantities to pool on the floor.

There were a total of four geth, two grey regular units, one larger darker colored command unit, and standing in their midst, seemingly absorbing any and all light cast on it, was a black unit. There was no mistaking it; the MACs ruined its quarian-like silhouette, grotesquely extending its arms almost right down to the floor. The regular units were shifting debris about as the black one stood over them, seemingly supervising the process. The yellow light it cast mingled with the blue-white light cast by the others, creating an odd haunting gossamer glow.

Suddenly the big grey unit turned, its bright headlamp shining right at them. There was a familiar electronic chatter and the smaller grey ones stopped, turned, and stepped to the sides of the black unit, shining their ghostly lights at them. The black one ignored it all as it approached something at the far back of the chamber. From where the black unit’s lights hit the back wall she could see a glimpse of a large computer case.

She stepped around the jamb and turned her lights back on. The big unit cocked its head, as if listening, another brief burst of chattering, and suddenly it moved, walking toward her with measured steps. Shepard raised her gun half-way, but it kept its hands at its sides, away from the large weapon behind its back. Footsteps and the whine of weapons powering up told Shepard that the others had formed a firing line behind her, though she did not dare to look away from the big unit.

“Stop right there, geth.” Tali ordered.

“You are expected,” the big unit inclined its head, its voice deep with just a hint of that mechanical chatter, amply different from the voice she heard from the black unit on Eden Prime.

“Be careful, Commander. That prime has hundreds of runtimes for it to talk.”

Shepard thought it was the least of her concerns, it was a somewhat tougher unit, but not as tough as the black one.

She reached up, activating her external link. “Expected? Does it wish to talk to me?” She asked.

“Shepard, do not go near it!” Nihlus called.

“It wants to talk; I want to know what it wants,” Shepard rebuffed, though even as she said that, she idly wondered if she was committing suicide. The way the grey units stood, on either side of the black unit, they looked like an honor guard. None of them reached for their weapons, even the black one seemed calm. Surely it was aware of her presence, and yet it continued to inspect whatever was at the back of that room. “Be ready to shoot, but don’t start anything.” Shepard ordered.

She made two more steps, and the unit turned to walk beside her back toward the chamber, as if ushering her. A couple more steps down and there was more chattering, mostly from the unit next to her, none in return from the rest. Shepard could hear footsteps behind her. When she got just past the door, the big unit stopped and raised its hand slowly, barring her from proceeding any deeper. “No further,” it said.

Shepard stopped, now her light beams reached far enough, she could see the enormous computer that
took up nearly the whole space along the back wall of the chamber. She could also see the giant cracks in the wall and ceiling behind and above it. A partial collapse in one corner threw debris on top of the cases. A steady rivulet of what looked like melt-water trickled from the largest crack in the wall, right onto the computer cases, and into them where there were openings and vents. The water had to be trickling out from the bottom somewhere for it to be all over the floor. Whatever the computers once contained the data was long gone. Even a few months of steady water inundation would have corroded everything inside past recovery.

The black unit turned slowly, its yellow lights focused on her. An iris-like mechanism in the central pair spun and narrowed the beams. With its extra height towering over her, they tipped down, as if the thing was giving her a look of absolute disdain.

“Shepard.” It said in a deep, familiar voice.

Standing there among the geth, her skin started to crawl as if she had a colony of ants under her armor. She took a deep breath and let it out from her mouth, forcing herself to stay still when all she wanted to do was reach for the grenades behind her back.

“You know my name,” Shepard observed.

“We know more than that,” the unit responded after a long pause.

She supposed it must, if it had been reading the through things that crossed Sparatus’ desk. Nihlus’ reports had passed the same desk.

“Your arrival was expected,” the machine went on. “We are aware of your ship’s stealth capabilities.”

Shepard glanced back at Nihlus; did he put that much information in this report? No, she supposed he did not have to. The Normandy had been rigged silent over Eden Prime; the machines could have easily put two and two together. The Spectre stood three steps back from her, his shotgun in his hands. Garrus was right there next to him, assault rifle at a ready. She had her own honor guard.

“Good for you,” Shepard replied blandly as she turned back to the black unit. If they wanted to threaten the Normandy, they would not find it, and even if they did, unless they hacked the Alliance intranet as they had hacked the Citadel’s, the circle of those who knew about the ship’s main guns was small. The Thanix cannons, even with their flaws, would still make short work of the dropship, and she could say they had to be field tested. The Alliance tested them during trial runs on space rocks no one would miss, but that was just target practice.

“Your attempts to stop us will fail,” it continued.

Shepard raised an eyebrow. “I don’t know about that, machine. From where I’m standing, I’m one for one on that. I’ll be fair and I won’t count that,” she pointed at the computers behind it. Did it really think she would take a trash talk sitting down? “What used to be in those machines anyways?” It was a trite question to ask, and perhaps the black unit would not reply, but never let it be said that Shepard did not try.

“What these computers once contained is not for your kind to know,” the black geth replied.

Miserable arrogant thing, but Shepard knew it was coming. The thing would not just spill all its secrets just because she asked nicely.

“Your interference on Eden Prime was unexpected.” It went on. “We will ensure you do not interfere again.”
Shepard heard guns cock, and reached behind her back slowly. That officially sounded like an open threat. “Do you think that I will just… surrender now?” her fingers closed around a grenade, but she hesitated. Would she be able to get clear of the blast? Something told her that she would, probably, but it would merely put her on the receiving end of those MACs if the explosive did not do its job. The odds were not ideal.

“Your surrender is not required, nor is it preferred.”

A split second later there was chattering. Shepard looked to her left and saw the grey units reach for their weapons. The big unit that had escorted her reached for its own weapon as well. In a split of a second Shepard made the call, she would leave it to Nihlus and Garrus. The black unit’s MACs rose from their dead hang, and she knew it was up to her to bring it down. The adrenaline hit her system with the realization of what she would have to do. With a burst of explosive acceleration that would make an Olympic sprinter envious, she was past the big grey unit and running straight for the black one as she drew Sin.

“Bring them down!” Kaidan ordered.

Shepard heard the Vindicators come to life. The black unit’s weapons unfolded, the barrels extended into firing position, Shepard veered wide, and right behind the black geth. It fired, but the bullets sprayed past, hitting the wall. She turned on the ball of her right foot, and raised Sin.

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the middle of a puddle, and the water began to steam and hiss, the only sound in the room.

“Commander, are you alright?” Kaidan asked, breaking the lull.

The Spectre slipped a fresh clip into his gun and moved toward her, “What were you thinking, Shepard?”

His tone was the coldest she had ever heard. Shepard opened her mouth to rebuff him.

“Telling me to get away? What then?”

The words died in her throat.

“Hey! Back off!” Ashley cut in.

Shepard looked down without saying a word. He was alright, heavens everyone was alright. The relief washed over her like a tsunami, and when it washed out it took some of her energy with it.

“Skipper?”

“Shepard! Spirits… did I hit you?”

The speed with which his tone changed from anger to worry was something. “Just my shields,” even as she said that they flared back up, recharged, she glanced around. The other geth were indeed down, either riddled with bullets, or headless. The big grey one was slumped against the wall, oozing white liquid. It took an assault rifle burst near point-blank through the chest, and that left a hole big enough that she could probably stick two fingers through. Garrus stood over it, as if he could not quite believe it was dead, but he was watching her right now.

Her radio suddenly cracked and hissed. “Normandy to gr-nd team, Co-ander, co- in!” Joker called in her ear.

Shepard raised her hand at her communicator in an instant. “Shepard here, what’s going on, Joker?” she demanded.

“The Ge- dropship took o-. I don’t kn- what you did, - they’re leav-.”

Shepard smiled, she would count that two for two. “Oh we did things, and we’ll do more. EDI can you hear me?”

“Of co-se, Commander. The- is some inter-rence, but it is with- tolerable limi-.”

“Good. Do you have telemetry on where the Kilimanjaro hit the Geth ship over Eden Prime?”

“Yes, Command-.”

“Perfect. Joker, bring the main battery online. EDI show him where to aim. Put a shot through, thirty percent power, maximum constriction.”

“Ri-t away, Co-ander.”

“Aye, - ma’am! They’- not going to kn- what hit -em.”

“Oh and EDI, could you record it?”

“It will - on your terminal - the Officer’s D-y Room, Command-.”
Shepard would enjoy watching the fireworks, because she not there during the trial runs. Shepard inspected her team. The marines and Garrus looked no worse for fear, and Nihlus was decidedly alright. Tali had walked into the room, still clutching her shotgun. The quarian watched her through the gloom. Despite the nearly non-existent lighting and her face-plate, her silver-hued eyes seemed to glow from within.


Tali looked away and moved toward the black unit, sweeping its form with the flashlight of her shotgun.

“Ex- trajectory -culated, adjusting -bital angle.” Joker continued.

“Make it count, Joker,” Shepard said.

“Easy.”

“Keelah, I’ve never seen a geth like this,” Tali murmured as she kneeled by the black unit and powered up her omni-tool.

“Ma- battery de-loyed and ch-ging!”

Shepard glanced at Garrus, and then Nihlus. They could hear Joker from the synched communication lines. Would they be able to tell that the Normandy’s main battery was not a kinetic weapon? Both had their ways of getting at information. Idly she wished Joker would tone down the blow-by-blow, just this once. However, despite being a footloose with some regulations, she knew Joker took the salient portions of his job very seriously. There was procedure to follow, and he would follow it.

“Weap- lock confirmed, - geth have en-red the exos-ere, Comm-der.”

“Fire at will, Mr. Moreau!”

“Fire in t- hole!” Joked echoed.

Shepard clenched her fists, this was the tense moment. Firing the Thanix effectively revealed the Normandy’s location. If Joker missed, or if the guns did less damage than expected, she would have to order Joker to take a second shot, something the Normandy could not do for five seconds, and he would have to nail it while avoiding any return fire. She had faith in her pilot, but there was such a thing as helmet fire.

“Direct -t!” Joker cheered. “Dro-hip destroyed!”

“I’d say that was a good field test,” Shepard murmured.

“Hell yea!” the pilot laughed.

“I leave the rest in your capable hands.”

“I aim - please.”

“Shepard out,” she closed the link before Joker’s celebration could make him say something he could not take back.

She could not keep the smile off her face. Let that teach the geth not to trifle with her. She did not need a dreadnought to destroy them. Maybe it was petty, possibly quite evil, and Admiral Hackett
might even say something about the debris, but with the planet’s thick atmosphere, Shepard expected the majority to burn well on re-entry and drag to decelerate the rest. Factor forward momentum and she expected the meteor shower of debris to miss the mine by a wide swath. Other than that, there was absolutely nothing on this planet to destroy.

“We need to get back, tell the miners that the danger is over,” She turned. “After that, well… we have a bit of a boon of Geth parts, don’t we? I want to get a look, and definitely at that,” she motioned to the black one.

Tali got to her feet and slipped her shotgun behind her back. “I will show you where the tunnel access doors should be.” She said.

“Thank you, Tali. Failing that, we can look for something to stand on, if one of us has to climb back up the hole. Also I want to know if anyone’s suit oxygen levels dip into three hours remaining. There is nothing to breathe down here.”

She got a chorus of affirmative replies, and then followed Tali as she led them out of the room in search of the vaunted way out.

~          *          ~          ~          *          ~          ~          *          ~

It took an hour, but they found a way out. Tali had been right, there was a door to access the mine tunnels on this level, but to get to it they had to shift through more collapse debris, which took a while. Tali was as resourceful as she was brave. When the door proved jammed shut, and with Shepard unwilling to blast and unable to cut them out as the geth had done, Tali popped open the access panel and within a few minutes she found the emergency pressure release that allowed the dead hydraulics to drain, so that the doors could be pried open.

After that, it was a bit of a walk through the tunnels, toward a section of lit tunnel, where signs sprayed onto the rock walls guided them toward the ore elevators. When they got back to the upper levels, and the control room, Shepard personally made an announcement over the mine’s internal system that the geth had been soundly defeated, their ship was gone, and it was safe for the miners to come out of hiding.

An hour after that, they were back down in the computer room, with the archeologists and some of the miners. The scientists were giddy. The miners exercised their curiosity. Shepard used the miner’s curiosity for her own benefit. She let them get all the hands-on poking qs they loaded the geth onto flat wheeled dollies, the only way to shift bodies that weighed easily over a hundred and fifty kilograms each. All the while Shepard became acutely aware of just how fixated on the black one Tali was. She refused to leave it, as if the thing would get up and walk away if she was not looking.

Once in the ore elevator with the dollies, Tali began to fidget. “Commander,” she ventured, sheepishly. “You said you wanted to get a look at these?” she asked.

“Yes, would that be alright? I mean strictly speaking I suppose the Geth can be considered Quarian technological property-”

“They would kill you if you said that to them,” Tali replied. “But yes, it’s more than alright. That’s kind of what I wanted to talk about. You are investigating them because of Eden Prime. I am on my pilgrimage and well… I want to come with you.”

Shepard’s eyebrows rose under her helmet. “Pilgrimage?” she asked.

“Well…” she twisted her fingers together. “When a Quarian reaches a certain age, we leave the
Migrant Fleet to experience life outside. We return once we have something to present to the captain of a ship, in order to join its crew. That can be money, resources, contacts, or a combination of things, basically something of value,” Tali explained. “I wish to study the Geth.”

Shepard hummed; well this was certainly a tempting offer. Tali was clearly very smart and resourceful. As far as civilians went, she did not panic in a firefight, and to have an expert aboard - even just a budding one- would be useful, not to mention easy to explain to the admiral.

Tali was wringing her fingers again. “Before today I’ve never seen a platform like this black one,” she motioned to the frame as she spoke, “They have changed.”

“What of your pilgrimage?” Shepard asked. She chose temporarily to ignore the topic of how the geth changed, but hearing Tali say it, was proof enough.

“It is quite… how to say, open. I am allowed to go wherever I please, as long as I bring back something of value. I assume you will continue to seek out the geth?”

Shepard nodded.

“Well then, there is no problem. I know about Eden Prime, what the geth did there… I am willing to share my knowledge. I can help you.”

“Are you willing to sign a contract of secrecy? My ship is an Alliance frigate, a military ship, there are limits to what I can allow you to discuss with outside parties.”

“Oh! Of course, Commander!” Tali perked up. “If that is the only concern you have, then let me put it to rest. I will not compromise your ship-home and I will sign an agreement to keep your secrets.”

Shepard smiled. Something about the girl’s earnestness and eagerness was contagious. “Well then, welcome to the Normandy, Tali.”

“Thank you, Commander.” Tali bowed her head a little.

“Guess we are no longer the only dextros aboard,” Nihlus glanced at Garrus as he spoke.

“Matthews will be thrilled.” Garrus replied.

“Matthews?” Tali asked.

“Our cook.” Shepard replied. “Which… thank you, that reminded me… Tali you will have to tell me how we can get you comfortably situated. She did not say it, but Shepard knew about the special needs of the Quarians. Aside from being a dextro, she would need her food handled extra carefully as to prevent potentially deadly contamination.

~          *          ~          ~          *          ~          ~          *          ~

They returned to the Normandy in a manner of a few hours. The Geth parts were stowed in the starboard cargo bay on deck four, with EDI warned to keep an eye on them, lest they come online before Tali had a chance to take everything apart. EDI assured her that they were so soundly damaged, the threat was insignificant, but she would take full precaution regardless.

After that, Shepard made sure her armor would recharge and that her oxygen supply would top up and helped Tali find a corner of the ship to call her own. Surprisingly that corner ended up the sublevel tucked away under engineering. Shepard had been mystified by the girl’s choice, but then Tali explained that it was an issue of creature comforts. Tali only set one foot aboard the Normandy
when she remarked how quiet the ship was, and then explained that Flotilla ships were always emitting some sort of noise, and it was usually a sign of trouble if the noise stopped. Thus she needed a space where the ship was slightly less quiet to be wholly comfortable. The sublevel under engineering was perfect. Tali did not even mind the fact that the engineers might need access down there to run routine diagnostics. She said privacy on the crowded Flotilla was a luxury, and she would not dream of getting in the way of standard maintenance.

After that, and with a new signed contact to foreword, Shepard withdrew to the OD to work on her report. This was going to be a long and detailed one. The Alliance had a vested interest in this mining operation; she owed them assurances that the miners were not traumatized.

In the end, there were no lives lost, no injuries even. The miners themselves showed interest, coming to gawp at the “Eden Prime threat”, though Shepard drew the line at pictures. Some wanted to take souvenir shots to show their relatives, Shepard had to forbid them.

The OD’s door swished open and Shepard looked up from her terminal. Tali stepped in, fingers already wringing. “Commander. I have something for you. I was very curious and I went to look at the geth again, you said it would be alright-”

“How so?” Shepard asked, she put her terminal into standby and turned to face the young quarian.

“Of course, Tali. They’re yours to take apart.” Shepard replied.

Tali approached her desk and pulled up her omni-tool. “I found something running very basic scans on the hardware. Something… strange.”

“Of course, Tali. They’re yours to take apart.” Shepard replied.

The grey ones, two are basic multipurpose models, one is a command unit, we call them Primes. They are a bit of a later development, once the geth turned violent.” Tali began. “However the black one… is not a geth.”

Shepard froze.

Shepard froze.

Shepard could see the difference immediately. The black one had a strikingly different arrangement of components. Its internal power packs were outright huge in comparison to the other geth, which explained the shields. More obvious yet was that it had nothing that looked like the runtime core the other unit. “No computer. No runtimes.”

“Yes. Whatever this thing is, it is not a geth. Well… it is geth-built, the chassis is essentially the same as the Prime. The materials, assembly, and some of the hardware are the same, but there are major hardware differences too.”

Shepard hummed. “Could it be a remote controlled unit?” Shepard asked.

Tali shut off her omni-tool and shifted her weight, “Possibly, though I need to analyze the unique hardware in depth to confirm it. Why do you think that?” Tali wondered.
“It’s the way it behaves. I’ve talked to it on Eden Prime, it is the same both times, same voice, same stuck-up way of talking, as if it is deigning itself to speak to lesser beings. Yet I blew its head off on Eden Prime. It also has delayed responses, perpetually two or three seconds slow. Then for all its shielding and firepower, it is inaccurate, and even there, delayed. It’s like a puppet dancing on strings.”

Tali hummed, “Well if you are correct and it is a remote controlled unit...”

“The million credit question becomes who, or what, is the ghost in the machine?” Shepard wondered.

“Geth have no need to control their frames via remote, they download runtimes into the hardware... for this one to be remote controlled-” Tali trailed off. “I need to look into it.”

“Take your time, Tali. No rush.”

Tali nodded, but then her fingers were twitching again. “Commander, can I ask one more question? Two?”

“Of course. You just did, but I’ll give you those as freebies,” Shepard smiled.

Tali chuckled quietly. “Well you said you were on Eden Prime, now you said you faced the geth directly. Just... this is a beautiful ship, but... it has stealth capability, powerful weapons... What is the Normandy?”

“The Normandy is an Alliance frigate, brand new, state of the art.” Shepard replied.

“Ah, and... then Nihlus and Garrus, you hiring me, why?” Tali went on.

“I am building a team of specialists of sorts. You can say I do odd jobs for Admiral Hackett of the Fifth Fleet. Garrus helped me after Eden Prime; he used to be C-sec. As for Nihlus... well, I should say Council Spectre Nihlus Kryik; he’s the Spectre Liaison aboard, but really my mentor of sorts.”

“You are a Spectre candidate?” Tali gasped.

“Indeed. Though come to think of it, I really ought to have told you that sooner. I’m sorry.”

“No! No! It will not be a problem Commander!” Tali jumped in. “I am merely surprised... and maybe worried, I mean... can I help you after all?”

“You can, Tali. You already have.” Shepard replied with a smile. That was a hundred percent truth too.

Tali looked up sharply. “Thank you, Commander.”

“Just one last thing, Tali. Please drop this whole Commander thing, just Shepard is fine. I’m not exactly a stickler for military protocol. This is a small ship, mixed crew, and there are few of us. I firmly believe excessive protocol has no place here.”

“As you wish... Shepard,” Tali replied as if testing the sound of her name.

“I said it before, but welcome to the Normandy, Tali.”

Chapter End Notes
Author Notes: There’s Tali intro. I got very little to say other than once again I tried to give Tali a little fair share of things “her own”. My philosophy when writing characters is to find “their thing” and roll with it. Tali brings in that geth expertise, which will get even better in time.

General Notes:
The Black Unit – If you know your canon, when EDI got her mobile platform she said she needs to maintain proximity to the Normandy, a certain range, to operate the mobile platform properly. The “black geth” is what happens when that range is not maintained.

Chapter Notes:
Thanix metrics – This is the first of my “ponderings” on ship-to-ship combat in space, coining my rules of combat. The power metric refers to the quantity of mass of molten metal fired from the Thanix. So 100% would be the maximum output of a specific Thanix cannon. Constriction refers to how tight the electromagnetic field confines the beam, i.e. how narrow and thus dense it is. A tight, dense beam will have slightly more range, and puncture into a ship like a Full Metal Jacket round. A wider shot will “bloom” like a Hollow Point, doing pretty nasty damage without as much penetration. The narrow beam needs to be shot through something critical, like a power core, to destroy a ship in one shot. A wider beam would be better at gutting a ship’s decks with a tracking shot. The Reapers displayed both behaviors in the cut-scenes when they fired their guns, on which the Thanix was based.

Helmet fire – A colloquial term for “task-saturation” leading to an utter loss of situational awareness. A very real risk for fighter pilots flying by instruments alone. They have many things to keep track of, while following precise procedure. When the sum of it all tops the pilot’s ability to process they may become disoriented or confused, leading to potentially deadly mistakes.
Episode 12: Omega [Part I]

By lunch time the next day, the Normandy was almost halfway through its return FTL hop to the Akoman relay. Joker had orders to top up the tank again before hitting the relays back to the Citadel. The stopover on the Citadel was highly likely to be very short. Needed only because there were things they absolutely had to pick up to make Tali’s life on the Normandy as comfortable as possible. Also with the number of dextro people on board now three, Shepard thought it would be wise to requisition a second refrigeration unit and mark it ‘dextro foods only’.

Before they entered FTL, Shepard contacted Admiral Hackett via comm and requested that the Alliance send a mop team to help the miners with the damage done to their facilities. She had a feeling that at this rate she would supply the Alliance Corp of Engineers with plenty of work. Her full report was done and set to send just as soon as the Normandy dropped out of FTL and linked into the comm buoy network near the relay. This meant Shepard had a good twelve hours of nothing to do, so she wandered the ship, checking up on people.

It was during one such stopover that the engineers armed her with a report on the field test of the Thanix, how the system took actual combat situation firing. According to Donnelly, the Normandy’s oversized core barely registered the power use. The problem was, as EDI slipped in, beyond that. EDI’s sensors recorded that the beam hit three degrees off where it should have. While not a problem at the range the Normandy fired, Shepard knew full well where three degrees would lead at longer distances. The beam also widened with the distance beyond expected parameters. With the loss of constriction there was power bleed. Between the live shot, and the data they had from the trial runs, and with no distractions and competing demands, EDI was able to figure out the mathematical ratio of range, constriction loss, and power bleed. She said it would help targeting in the future.

All that meant was that the guns were nearsighted. In theory the Thanix could be fired with the same precision as a kinetic weapon, but in practice, these had a flaw in the tooling. None of it was entirely news, just confirmation of the limitations discovered during initial testing. Alliance R&D officially had no clue how the Turians managed to keep the Thanix guns accurate and focused. Intact wrecks of Thanix frigates were needles in a galactic haystack. That the Alliance had as much as they did was already a feat.

Standing on the observation space overlooking the shuttle bay after she left engineering, Shepard spotted Tali moving about in the starboard cargo bay. From what Shepard could see through two sets of viewports, Tali was working on the geth, probably running that hardware analysis she promised. In the shuttle bay below Garrus and Ashley were at two different armory work tables. Ashley was
checking up on the Vindicators the marines used. Garrus was working on his own rifle. At the very least they could work back-to-back without a situation developing. Shepard smiled at that.

She turned and called the elevator to go up to the CIC. Once there, she greeted the monitor shift with a friendly hello and made her way across toward the bridge. Joker was in his seat with his lunch. In FTL the Normandy essentially flew a straight line on autopilot, but it was never a good idea for the pilot to step away.

“Hey Commander,” Joker greeted.

“How’s the horizon?”


Shepard hummed but said nothing. Interstellar dust and gasses was good.

“I’m wondering here, how many more misfits are you going to invite aboard?”

“Misfits, really?” Shepard asked.

“Yea. I mean take Nihlus. When he’s not doing only-EDI-knows-what in his cabin; he’s laying about the OD like some tabby Sphynx. And he’s a Spectre, they’re all misfits."

“Joker.” Shepard said, warningly.

“Then there’s Garrus. Now I’m no expert on Turians, but they don’t usually quit jobs like that. That one’s like a delinquent you’re enabling.” He went on, as if her warning had never registered.

“You’re treading the line, mister.” Shepard replied.

“Yes, mom.” Joker replied.

Shepard sighed; she was not going to justify that with any sort of response.

He must have heard her sigh, because he chuckled. “You should know though, I don’t mind Tali. She… seems like she’s trying to help.”

Shepard thought that the only reason he had nothing to say about Tali was because he was yet to pick up the ammunition. “I am honestly wondering if I did the right thing inviting Tali aboard.” It was best to steer him away from finding said ammunition, even if it involved giving him some of another kind. “Tali is a civilian. Everything starts and ends there,” she said, as she began to pace the breadth of the bridge.

“She also went down into that mine, probably knowing she might have to face the geth alone.”

Shepard stopped mid-pace.

“Wait. Did I just think of something you didn’t?” he wondered.

Shepard did not reply; she did not know what to say.

“Oh hell, I need to buy a lottery ticket!”

“I’m serious here.”

“So am I! But alright, can’t buy it until we drop out of FTL anyways. Here, I don’t think you need to
be worried. Not many raw civilians go for a shotgun as a fashion statement self-defense weapon. It’s too messy. Most go for the big bang, like one of your poppers. They also pistol-whip themselves in the face firing it the first time. Tali can probably handle herself, and if not, she’s going to learn from one of the biggest badasses in the galaxy.”

Shepard actually smiled. Flippant as Joker was, trust him to say what needed to be said, one just had to look past the way he said it. He could be offensive, outright vulgar even, but he was more intelligent and observant than he let on.

“I know why you’re worried. Kaidan and I were talking,” Joker went on. “He told me that you berserk rushed the black geth. He thinks you’re reckless. I think you just don’t want anyone to get hurt, so you take the biggest risks. You want to protect Tali, but I get the feeling she won’t let you.”

Joker definitely had a point. Tali had already expressed her frustration about being asked if she was alright one too many times. The young quarian seemed headstrong, brave, and if there was any lack of combat skills, that could be addressed. Ultimately, fighting was not exactly what she hired Tali to do. She needed the quarian’s tech expertise, and to be sure Tali seemed eager to lend it.

“Don’t think I did not notice.” Joker went on, voice lowered, “Your instinct drives you to protect everyone, at personal cost if it comes to that.”

Shepard froze to the spot.

“Some would tell you to stop treating others like raw recruits,” Joker went on. “But that’s not the reason you do it, is it?” he paused then, glancing over his shoulder at her. “You just don’t want to see anyone you personally care about get hurt.”

“Who enjoys that?” Shepard asked.

“No one,” he turned back to the sensors, but Shepard caught a knowing smile on his expression. “And don’t worry; your secret is safe with me. But let me ask you this. If you don’t want to see any of us get hurt, how do you think we feel?”

Shepard hummed; Joker had just gone for the armor piercing questions.

“Also, I am selfish and thinking self-preservation here, but Captain Shepard will have all our heads if we let you get hurt. I figure Eden Prime still rains charred geth. I shudder thinking what she’ll do if someone actually hurt you. Now are we done? I’m here to fly this ship, not to play councilor.”

“Relax, Joker. I just wanted to know that I’m not out there.” That was admitting more than perhaps strictly necessary, but Shepard liked to think of Joker was more objective in this situation, that by remaining at a distance, above it all, he got to see things differently.

“You’re out there. Just in the good way.” Joker replied.

“Alright, I get it. Eyes front and keep us on course.”

“Aye, aye, ma’am.”

Shepard turned and walked away. He could see through her, but Shepard could see through him as well.

“By the way, you’re totally welcome!” Joker called at her back when she was already two steps beyond.
Shepard chuckled and picked up the pace. For all his complaints, if Joker truly did not want to do something, he would not do it. He was also the one person on this ship whom she could trust to give her an honest, non-sugar-coated opinion. Joker was hardly intimidated by her position; he knew he could get away with about everything with her, and he exercised his right to that liberally.

They returned to the Citadel in the middle of the night cycle, so when Joker eased the ship into her docking cradle, most everyone who did not have to be awake went right to sleep, but Shepard got right to work. There were supplies to order, including the cooling unit. Given that everything took so damn long to requisition on an average day, she wanted the forms to be on the docket first thing in the morning. Nihlus’ Spectre clearances meant nothing to the Alliance supply depot on the Citadel.

She ended up going to bed about three in the morning, and was up after a less-than-refreshing four hours. Just by how hard she had to work to force herself to get up she realized that she had been in her final gear non-stop since Eden Prime. The pileup of things to do was not easing up. Yet she could not afford to throttle down, this was just her lot in life right now.

Thus after breakfast, complete with an extra strong cup of black coffee, she breezed into the OD. Nihlus was lounging on the couch under the viewports, and there were datapads on the coffee table. Shepard sighed; there would be no downshifting for her.

“Bad time?” He asked.

Shepard shook her head, she would have loved to say yes, but did she have the luxury? She bypassed her desk and moved toward the couch. As usual, Nihlus lowered his feet and sat up. She was not going to pretend to understand why he had taken a shine to that particular spot under the viewports. He had to prop up the corner pillow and lay in a very specific manner so that his fringe would not go through the upholstery, but he seemed awfully comfortable nonetheless. Shepard was also glad that he had forgone armor in favor of another of his dark tunic outfits. Armor plates were murder on leather. Was it a crime that she wanted her OD to look better than the commons at boot camp?

“Where’s the fire now?” She asked as she sat down.

“No fire.” Nihlus replied as he pushed one of his pads toward her. “You said you wished to help me with Eclipse.”

Shepard picked up the pad and scanned over the contents.

“I got word from one of my contacts. I know where the leader of the smuggling ring will be for the next four days.”

Shepard looked up from her pad. “We do not have a brig on the Normandy.”

“Will not need one,” Nihlus replied.

Shepard raised an eyebrow, but she would not insult her own intelligence by asking if that actually meant what she thought it meant. There was just one question, how far would her help go? Was the Normandy to be his taxi, or would he need her to lend a gun? “What’s the plan?” she asked.

“Omega is a mess of criminals,” he launched after a moment. “Eclipse has a sizable presence, but I do not know where specifically D’aros will be. My contact will have more information once we get there, failing that... we do this in the traditional way.” The look he gave her was one of those penetrating ones he fired whenever he was analyzing, trying to figure something out.
“What do you need me to do?” she asked.

He leaned back into the cushions. Right now though, she had the impression that he wanted to see if she would object to the ramifications. Someone more idealistic would baulk and say that all criminals needed to be brought in, put on trial, and put behind bars. Shepard saw it a little different. She knew that if the Council was to start locking everyone up, they would need a penal planet to keep them. Who would fund that? Most of those same people would baulk anew at the first suggestion that they foot the bills. The logistics of doing that were woefully impractical.

Then there were the issue of making lawful arrests in places where the Council had no official recognized jurisdiction. C-sec’s authority stopped at the borders of Council Space. Everyone knew that. Spectres were not really above the law; they were outside it. Their authority was institutionalized in Council Space, but out in the Terminus they were no better than any other bounty hunter. The only difference was in who ordered them to hunt, and who benefitted from it. Right now Nihlus probably wanted to see if she could do the job, good, bad, and ugly all in one.

“I am your mentor, and this is a typical Spectre job. No better way to learn what is required of you than to assist me in the field.”

She glanced back down at the pad in her hand. It was a dossier on their target, including a candid, long-distance image of an asari clad in the yellow and white armor of Eclipse, Kiarah D’aros. Colloquially called “Captain D’aros”, like Eclipse was some sort of legitimate military or law enforcement organization and not a band of pretentious crooks. D’aros was the head of an Eclipse cell of sorts. Her little helpers were guilty of extortion, racketeering, smuggling, the list went on. She probably had enough money to hire a crooked lawyer to get any case made against her tossed out. That was, of course, if she did any crime within Council Space, where C-sec could even press charges to begin with.

“I don’t suppose there will be a line of sight good enough to do this clinically.” Shepard mumbled.

“Not on Omega, no. D’aros is a former commando, which means powerful biotics on top of training.” Nihlus replied.

“You would have gone after her alone?” Shepard asked.

“Yes.” His reply was blunt. “Also, as this is a Spectre job, I cannot allow you to bring your marines.”

A fancy way of saying he wanted to see how she could handle such a mission on his terms. Maybe it was for the best that she did not bring her marines. D’aros sounded like a real piece of work. The conversation with Joker lingered in her mind, maybe she was overprotective, but asari commandos were never easy opponents. Lawless asari commandos that had no line of decency or restraint were even worse.

“But I am willing to allow you to bring Vakarian.” He shifted his arms, laying them across the back of the couch, the picture of nonchalance.

The measured tone with which he made that concession told Shepard enough. Everything about this situation was an experiment, something to poke, prod, and measure. “Care to explain why?” she wondered.

“He did not tell you?” Nihlus asked. “He was on the Hierarchy’s list of training candidates for Spectre. Though, I have no idea why he never pursued it.”
Shepard blinked, mystified. First, it seemed the Alliance was not the only bunch with a list of Spectre candidates, and second, Garrus had been on it? She could see it, all considering. “Whether Garrus wishes to take part in this… is up to him. I will not order him.”

“I expected you would say that,” he stated blandly.

“You want to find out why he never pursued training, don’t you?” she asked. There had to be an angle in this for him.

“I am curious. They do not add individuals to the list who do not show potential.”

There it was. The concession was entirely self-serving. Still, at least Nihlus was being honest about having personal motives for a change. There was also the question; would Garrus sit this one out? Somehow, she knew a snowball had a better chance in hell. Nihlus probably knew it too, and thus why he was awfully smug. “You’re incorrigible, you know that?” she wondered. At times like these she wondered if tolerating him as much as she did was truly worth it.

“I would not be half as good as I am, if I was not,” he smiled.

Shepard rolled her eyes, “Alright. So guess that decides things.” Better shift tracks now before the conversation veered into territory she did not want to go into. “If all the things we need are delivered on time, we can depart the Citadel by the evening. I’ll let Joker know to point us toward Omega. Is there anything I should know?”

“Not at this time,” he replied.

“Well at least I know what I’ll be doing for the next couple hours.” She said, more to herself than him. If she was going to be facing an asari commando in the near future, she needed to be ready.

As Shepard predicted, the Normandy was on its way to Omega by evening. The trip required three relay jumps as Omega was literally on the opposite side of the galaxy. But other than that, it was a quick jaunt. She ended up on the bridge when Joker made the final jump, and treated herself to the sight of the station on approach. The number of times an Alliance ship visited Omega could be counted on one hand. She knew Admiral Hackett would be less than amused that she took the Normandy there, but there was no other choice.

Omega was the complete diametrical opposite of the Citadel. Both were centers of power, the capitals of their region of space. Law-abiding Council Space versus the lawless Terminus. Both stations were ancient, both having been inhabited for a thousand years. Their dimensions were also similar, and so was the population.

The majority of Omega was within a hollowed-out asteroid, with an exo-structure extending out as a stem, all of it floodlit with ominous red light. Where the Citadel might look like a flower with five petals, growing in a radiant field of pink and purple, Omega was a mushroom, a fungus that not only did not require sunlight, but actively shunned it.

Shepard had Joker bring the Normandy in under main power; they would not broadcast the ship’s stealth capabilities. Even before they got too close, they were contacted by the station’s control tower. However it was a lot less professional than the Citadel’s. They needed a docking cradle, they had to get in line for one, and throwing Nihlus’ clearances around would mean nothing. Fortunately, very few ships lingered for long on Omega. There was freighter traffic and passenger shuttles, but nothing too respectable. The voices answering the hails were not exactly welcoming either, for one,
the accent gave them away as batarian. Shepard only trusted them as far as she could throw them.

By the time they made their way up the line, the Normandy was guided into a dock right up on the edge where the asteroid ended and the exo-structure begun. The cradles here were relatively large, and well maintained. Shepard was under no delusions; she knew they would be the most monitored as well. An Alliance ship coming into dock had attracted attention.

“EDI, I want you on alert. Someone might get the bright idea that they can help themselves to the Normandy.”

“Rest assured, Commander, I will not allow anyone unauthorized to access the Normandy or her systems,” the AI replied.

“Can you access the docking controls and release the clamps in an emergency?” Shepard asked.

“If I am ordered to do so, it will be done.”

“Good.” If she was going to be away from the ship with Nihlus, she wanted to ensure that the Normandy could make a clean break if things got toasty. The chances of it were slim, but they were not at zero. Better safe than sorry.

Shepard left the bridge and made her way across the CIC toward the elevator. One last outstanding issue needed to be taken care of. One the elevator arrived; she stepped aboard and hit the button for deck three.

When the door opened again, Shepard looked up and stopped.

“Commander.”

“Garrus,” she replied mutely. Just the individual she wanted to talk to and it looked like he had been on his way somewhere. “Is something the matter?” she asked.

“No. I wanted to discuss something with you, if I could.”

“Of course,” Shepard grinned. Laughter drifted from the mess area behind the elevator shaft. It sounded like the crew was having their fun, which meant that deck three was not going to be the best place to discuss anything. “Where would you like to talk?” she knew full well that they would end up in Life Support. Thus she was not at all surprised that Garrus went back to his quarters and she had to follow.

As soon as the doors shut behind them, the ruckus from the mess area dropped to half-volume. The space was as immaculate. The only sign that it was occupied were the weapons that now took up the shelf, and the small folding table brought in, on which Garrus’ armor was neatly laid out, ready to be donned. There were some items lying tucked into the shelf corners, a kit for cleaning weapons and armor, but overall the space looked very sparse.

Garrus stood by, dutiful, his hands clasped behind his back. Did he think she was conducting a surprise inspection of his living quarters while she was here? “So, what can I do for you?” she asked.

“If I may be bold, Commander, I wanted to talk about the roles of the non-Alliance crew.” Garrus ventured.

Shepard raised one eyebrow, which caused him to shift his weight from foot to foot.

“I understand the unique position Kryik occupies aboard, and now Tali has adopted some of the
duties of an engineer. This leaves me uncertain of what responsibility is expected of me.”

Shepard smiled, “Remember what you said when you joined the crew? You volunteered your services as a soldier. By my understanding, that is limited to the same role as Chief Williams or Corporal Jenkins, though admittedly outside the rank structure. If that is all you wish to do, that is all I expect. I did not assign Nihlus or Tali those second duties. Nihlus is… I have no real authority over him, and Tali volunteered to run detailed diagnostics on the geth.”

“I see. Then I suppose it is only fair that I off- erm… volunteer my skills.” His mandibles flicked playfully.

“Oh?”

“I overheard Engineers Adams and Donnelly discussing the main battery at breakfast.”

Shepard squashed her instinct to tense up.

“The Alliance has done a passable job of reverse engineering the Thanix system, but… I can make the guns better.”

Shepard froze to her spot, was Garrus truly offering to look at the Thanix cannons? “I will not and cannot ask you to do that. I don’t think the Hierarchy will take too kindly to the idea of someone helping the Alliance to the Thanix system.”

“Technically I am not helping the Alliance to anything they do not already have.”

Shepard shook her head, “And when do politicians of any kind care for the word ‘technically’? No, I will not ask you to do that. The Thanix we have is… flawed. If it suddenly improves, everyone will wonder.” It would also put her into a rather awkward position, the same sort as sitting on what she knew about the Citadel security compromise. Technically it would be dereliction of duty for her not to hand over even slight improvements to Alliance R&D. If the Normandy was ever called into dock for work on the guns there would be no hiding any improvement either. “I’m sorry, Garrus, but I just can’t let you fix whatever issue we got. We are stuck with the guns we got, and they seem to work… well enough.”

“I understand, Commander. It is your ship. But- at least- well they were discussing the energy draw; I think I can optimize it. You can say the improvements were made by Donnelly.”

Shepard tipped her head to the side; it seemed like he really wanted to play with the guns. She sighed, “Alright. But… I want you working with Donnelly and Adams on this.” She figured the engineers would not let him tweak too many of the bugs out of the guns.

“I will get started on that as soon as possible.”

Shepard cleared her throat, “That’s… there’s something I wanted to talk to you about. Nihlus has a Spectre mission lined up… and well.” Okay this was awkward. How did one go about explaining this? “He does not want the marines to come along on this one. Really, his initial idea was a two-person operation.”

“If you need my assistance, I will be there.”

“Well it would be nice to have a third, but it’s not me requesting the assistance, he made an exception for you specifically,” she smiled wanly.

He watched her for a long moment in silence. Shepard knew there would be a storm brewing in a
manner of seconds.

“Does Kryik not trust the others to have the skills?”

Shepard honestly wished it was that, because if it was that, Nihlus would have had an actual leg to stand on. There was a gulf of training between her and the marines. ICT training also came with the mental conditioning to handle nasty jobs like this. “No, it’s more that he wants to see your skills. He knows about your Spectre training candidacy.”

Garrus went rigid and his brow plates drew down, casting dark shadows over his eyes as his mandibles drew tighter to his chin. “He needs to mind his own business.”

Shepard sighed; she knew this would be his reaction. Garrus did not like Nihlus, and while they agreed to a sort of armistice, this was effectively a breach of it. “That is why I am not requesting your assistance in any manner. I will not hold it against you if you choose not to do this.”

“I will be there, Commander. I do not trust Kryik not to have another ulterior motive. I will not let him be your only backup on this.”

There was intensity in his voice that instantly put her on alert. A thought flashed through her mind, the most cynical aspect of her psyche slipped in unbidden input. Was she about to bumble into a trap? To be sure, Omega was the right sort of hell-hole where the death of any single individual would not create a fuss. With a smaller team it was even easier to rig up an accident. She shook her head to banish those thoughts. She would not let herself doubt Nihlus every time her mind could come up with a way a situation could be used to sabotage her. If Garrus still had suspicions, they had to remain his own. “When should I brief you on this?” She asked.

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Their late arrival on Omega created a stir among the crew by next morning. After breakfast Shepard went to the OD on the search for her mentor-slash-partner. Though she had discussed the basics of the mission with Garrus the evening before, there were still details to hash out. Not seeing him at breakfast was not all that strange. Yet two steps into the OD it became evidently clear he was not there either, which officially stumped Shepard.

She was just about to ask EDI to ask her where Nihlus was hiding when the door swished open. Shepard turned; almost expecting it to be the Spectre in question, but it was Tali with Lieutenant Adams. The chief engineer led the way into the room, but Tali hung half a step back, her hands behind her back.

“Commander, may we have a moment of your time?” Adams asked.

“Yes, of course.”

“Erm… Commander, I was asking Engineer Adams some questions about the Normandy… I was curious and well, we kind of got talking-” the Quarian took a deep breath. “I think I know where you might be able to get the T6-FBA Couplings.”

“Great. What do you have in mind?” Shepard replied. Contrary to what some might think, the engineering parts were still on her list of things to get, but they always seemed to get knocked down by other, seemingly more important things. The engineers never said a thing, but she really would have liked to get those parts for them. If Tali could solve the issue, Shepard would not dare to say no.

Tali wrung her fingers together. “Omega is a good place for salvage, lots of old ships are sold here, mostly for scrap, but… some can be fixed. My people come here on their pilgrimage, hoping to buy
something to bring back to the fleet.”

“Miss Zorah believes we have a good chance of finding the parts with any of the salvage dealers here,” Adams added.

“Great, well…” Shepard knew whom to send with them, especially given that they would not be following her on her job. “Take Alenko, Williams, and Jenkins with you and bring a sidearm. This station isn’t exactly the Citadel.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Adams nodded.

The two left after that, with Tali walking next to the engineer with a spring in her step. Shepard watched her go and smiled faintly. The girl was really trying to be helpful, perhaps trying too hard, but Shepard would not rain on her parade. This took care of a little side problem, it would keep the marines busy. Now she had to tell Joker that he would be in charge of the ship while they were away. She also needed to discuss security with EDI. With the bulk of the fighting force away from the ship, the situation posed a possible safety risk.

An hour later the part-hunting group departed and Shepard came up from the shuttle bay, armored, and packing her arsenal. Nihlus and Garrus, similarly arrayed, were waiting for her by the airlock. Nihlus needed to meet his contact, and he seemed convinced that they would be able to go after their target right afterwards. Shepard had her doubts, but she was not going to voice them out loud.

Once they were beyond the Normandy’s clean, well-lit CIC deck, it was like stepping into a whole other world where nothing was the same. Two breaths taken and her nose prickled at the stale, almost fetid air. The dock corridors were hardly lit, and whatever light there was, was not meant to mirror sunlight. Its reddish hue extended every shadow and every corner gained the ominous possibility of ambush. There was litter on the floor, and the dark grey walls looked black. It was as if the whole station was desperately trying to be the exact polar opposite of the groomed, polished, and immaculately ordered Citadel just out of spite.

They followed the long corridors, and Shepard cast looks into every nook and cranny. Not for some curiosity, but because her sense of danger was tingling. It was a good twenty minutes before they exited the dock station. The space seemed to open around her and one glance up said enough about where they were. There was actual space here, tower-like buildings rising up from a flat base. Beaten skycars zipped overhead and she knew that if she focused hard enough she would see a rock ceiling somewhere up there. They were within the station’s hollowed out asteroid mushroom head.

“So, where we’re off to?” Shepard asked in a whispered tone as she continued to scan about.

“My contact is meeting us at a favorite nightclub in this area,” Nihlus replied.

Shepard cast her gaze about again, and then stopped cold. Staring at her across the street was an alien with four eyes, clad in a beige and black jumper suit. She had to restrain herself from glaring back, which might just be dangerous here. No matter how much she wanted to be better than that, she was still ambivalent about batarians. She knew that on the individual level not all of them were monsters. However at the end of the day, culturally, they practiced slavery as an institution and an industry. Hegemony slaves were little more than cattle, and there was no way to rescue them all without triggering an open war. That was enough to get her hackles up. Slavers were right next to raw sewage on her list of nasty things.

Then the Spectre moved, seemingly unaware of the glare war she was trying not to have with the
alien across the street. Her danger sense continued to prickle, but then Garrus slipped into the space on her right, which blocked her view across the street. Eventually her ears picked up the first reverberating pounding of a baseline coming from somewhere and the batarian no longer mattered.

Nihlus led them onto a sort of open plaza at the end of which was what looked and sounded like a nightclub. Music of dubious quality echoed from within, the baseline already thrumming in her head. Most curiously, there was an elcor bouncer at the head of a sizable line of people waiting to enter. The whole structure looked vaguely like a pyramid-shaped temple, steps up to the door, with a large holo-screen over it flanked by flame emitters. There was real, naked fire, on a space station. Shepard went out on a limb to assume that the ducts had not seen cleaning since installation. Together it would explain the air quality.

“Please tell me your contact is not meeting us in there,” Shepard murmured.

“I would be lying,” Nihlus replied. “It is a good place to talk and you know it. The patrons are too distracted by drinks and dancers, and the music is a mix of frequencies that mask conversation.”

“This baseline would muffle even our subvocals,” Garrus added.

Shepard had to admit, when put like that, going in there was a sound idea. She just hoped she would not develop a headache in the interim. Her armor’s emergency medication module contained painkillers, but they were meant for something a little more severe than a migraine induced by stale air and bad music. She idly wondered if the atmosphere had similar effects on them, but thought it better not to ask.

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It took a good half an hour to enter the club; they had to stand in line with the rest of the crowd. Shepard spent the time just trying not to show her mounting sense of unease. When they were finally allowed inside, she honestly wished they could have had the meeting outside. They had to pass through a corridor lined with holo-screens that projected yet more fire, and everything seemed to be lit up with red/orange lights that were beginning to grate on her. Past a set of inner doors, the floor of the club was vaguely circular, with the very center dominated by a large pink-hued holo-projection roundel that came up from a level below, complete with asari pole-dancers on an elevated catwalk around it. There were bar counters and elevated seating areas. It looked like this was the face of the club; the real party was probably on the level below.

“Classy,” Garrus said. “So is this like Chora’s Den on the Citadel?”

Nihlus spared him a side-long look, but said nothing.

As they moved deeper into the club, Shepard surveyed the surroundings and patrons. There was a mix of turians, asari, humans, and in the midst of them all, batarians. She was officially not in her happy place, but she would be dead before she admitted that to her companions. “Where’s this… friend of yours?” Shepard asked as she turned to Nihlus. It was a bit of a tactical choice to not use the word ‘contact’ right now.

“He said he would have seats somewhere here,” Nihlus replied.

Shepard followed him around the holo-roundel, right past an asari definitely trying to crawl into a human’s pants right there in the club. Nihlus stopped about halfway to the back, at a seating area. Most of the tables were occupied by inebriated patrons, but one table for four in the corner only had one turian seated, and judging by the lack of condensation on the glass in front of him, he had been there for a while. He wore grey scratched up armor, had at least one side-arm that she could see, dark
brown plates, gold eyes, and no colony markings to speak of.

“There you are, I would have come out to get you, but that would mean losing these seats,” the turian drawled. “These are… new friends?”

“You could say that,” Nihlus replied.

“Sit. We will talk.”

Nihlus eased onto a seat across from the barefaced turian, which effectively left the flank seats. Shepard decided to stand behind Nihlus while Garrus took up position nearby, it looked like neither of them wanted to sit next to a complete stranger.

“Come now, tawny, I do not bite.”

It took Shepard a moment to realize the turian was addressing her, and though she was not sure what ‘tawny’ meant, his smarmy tone was unmistakable. “Call me that again, and you’ll be unable to bite,” she replied.

He laughed, “That one got spirit. I like her.”

“Janus,” Nihlus’ said, voice lowered, almost growling.

He leaned back in his seat and raised his hands. “Fine,” then he reached into a pouch at his side and withdrew a piece of folded up paper, which he slid across the table in Nihlus’ direction. “The address, and before you ask, I double checked. I do not want you coming after me for bad information again.”

Nihlus took the paper and glanced at its contents. As far as Shepard could see, it was written in some Turian script. She would need her omni-tool’s recognition and translation program for it. The Spectre folded the paper back up and tucked it into one of his pouches. “This will do, Janus.”

“So that is all?”

“That is all,” Nihlus got up from his seat, but he never took his eyes off the other.

Janus’ mandibles flicked in amusement, but then he turned toward Garrus and raised his hand, “Word of advice for you, Cipritine. Get that armor repainted. You will live longer.”

Garrus glared, his disdain was obvious for all to see.

“So you antagonize everyone you meet for laughs? No other hobby?” Shepard murmured.

Garrus glanced at her.

“Spirited and perceptive,” Janus said, his mandibles spreading into a smile. “Lovely waist too.”

“If you two are done, we have somewhere to be.” Nihlus said.

Shepard said nothing, because at the end of the day, Nihlus was right. They did have somewhere to be, and someone to kill. Fortunately for Janus, it was not him. She spared the barefaced turian a glare before she followed Nihlus with Garrus walking at her right. The hair on the back of her neck was upright the whole way to the door, as if the barefaced turian’s eyes were still on her.

Something about him just bothered her, and it was not his questionable comments. Shepard could handle any lewd pervert. No, there was something else. He was not the typical snitch slash
informant. They tended to be a little more subdued, used to getting by. The worst were spineless, the sort that would sell out their own mother if they got roughed up thoroughly enough. This one was anything but spineless. Was it merely the difference of species?

“Something about that bareface is… wrong,” Garrus murmured as soon as the doors closed behind them and they were in the narrow flame-lined hallway leading to the front doors.

“Indeed,” Shepard replied.

“So, the question… is Kryik so oblivious… or-” Garrus stopped there.

“You think we’re walking into a trap, don’t you?” Shepard glanced up to meet his blue eyes.

“That is always a possibility with spooks involved.”

“He supplied me with information before, and there was only one time it was wrong, albeit only technically. My target was still in the district, just not in that particular building,” Nihlus explained.

“Let’s just hope this time is not that time all over again.” Shepard murmured.

“For his sake, it best not be.”

Shepard remained convinced the whole venture was a bad idea the whole way to their destination. Going up against a bunch of mercenaries, including a former asari commando with just three people did not settle well with her. If she normally could have explained it as herself being overly-cautious, after meeting Janus, she could not help but feel like there was a reason to be overly-cautious.

Their destination was in the stem section of the Omega mushroom, in the so-called districts of Omega. Down here the air here was no fresher or more circulated, and the lighting no brighter, perpetually casting a twilit gloom over everything. What constituted as streets were narrow covered passages lined with tightly-packed structures, little more than pockets of space let to rent or ownership. All of them painted that desolate dark grey color, as if covered in soot. Even the valiant attempts at wall art seemed somehow muted, whether by age or grime.

Some structures were clearly tenement-like apartments, small overcrowded rooms that housed Omega’s teeming, impoverished masses. Others were shops, discernable only by the small gaudy neon signs mounted over doorways. The floor was filthy, and in spots tacky, clinging to the soles of her boots. She did not want to know with what. Aside from the ubiquitous litter of foil food wrappers or nutrient paste packets she also saw at least one corner where a few old-fashioned hypodermic syringes lay abandoned.

If the Citadel kept its unsavory elements well hidden under a polished veneer, tucked into the corners and underbelly of the wards, Omega flaunted its decay like a badge of honor. The population was a mix of humans, asari, turians, batarians, and the odd salarian living side by side, all sharing the same general squalor and misery. Once or twice they passed dirty-faced, rag-clad, leery-eyed children playing right on the street. They scattered out of the way just as soon as one noticed the three of them had weapons. Homeless individuals gathered in the spaces between structures, seemingly wearing all they owned as they sat around, glassy-eyed, and clutching bottles of liquor that probably cost a week’s worth of tossed change. There were haggard-looking hookers as well; scantily-clad, and unabashedly displaying themselves near the doorways of tiny dumpy local dive bars.

Shepard was acutely aware that Garrus’ gaze kept flicking from side to side as he took in the sights. Hers was likewise scanning, though she had her eyes out of for any sort of danger. The dark spaces,
long shadows, eerie lighting, none of it allowed her to feel any sort of comfort. There would be no relaxing for her until she was back on her ship.

In the end, they must have walked at least a few kilometers down the length of this section of the station’s stem. The tenements and tiny shops slowly gave way to larger structures, some with visible pipes connecting them to the hull of the stem. Sprayed-on graffiti slowly changed as well, going from the efforts to liven up a neighborhood, to outright gang tags in a myriad of sizes and languages that Shepard could not read. Some were sprayed haphazardly on top of each other, creating a mess. Yet it was the neat ones that drew her eye, places where something was first painted over with a coat of ill-matching grey paint, only to be sprayed with another tag, one in predominantly yellow and white colors.

“We are entering Eclipse territory,” Nihlus announced.

“Kind of obvious by the wall art,” Shepard replied blandly. “I can’t read the script, but the tags are all the same, and no one else seems to use yellow and white around here.” Shepard slipped her hands down to her hips and turned on her guns as she looked down the length of the street. She could only see three doors for some distance, two on the right, and one on the left. Shepard brought up her omni-tool and fired up the electronic detection tool. The application scanned for specific wireless signals that gave away hidden cameras within a certain range. A few pokes revealed nothing, so that was not going to be way to find the place.

“So where is their compound?” Garrus asked.

Nihlus pulled out the folded slip of paper and handed it to the former detective. Shepard hummed, if she was a betting woman, and she was, it made sense for Eclipse operation to occupy a big, if not the biggest piece of real-estate in the area, simply because their tags monopolized space already. So she made her way toward the single door on the left. A few seconds later she heard footsteps behind her, as well as the whine of weapons powering up.

The console on the door was red. Shepard tapped it, but the status display blinked and then fizzled out of existence. It was then that she saw the warping on the door halves; something had bent the edges inward, creating a gap between the sliding panels. Shepard placed both her hands level with the warping and slipped her fingers into the gap. Nihlus and Garrus raised their weapons, barrels pointing into the doorway.

When Shepard pulled, the doors sprung open without the need to lay in any real exo-frame-assisted strength, revealing a near-pitch-black maw. The turians stepped inside immediately, flashlights coming on, sweeping the chamber’s corners.

“Clear,” Garrus said with a distinct note of disappointment in his voice.

“I have a bad feeling,” Shepard said as she followed them inside. “The door is broken. Someone forced it open and left marks.”

“And a dead mercenary,” Garrus said. His assault rifle’s flashlight beam trained on a salarian clad in familiar yellow and white armor. The whole front section of which was just gone, the plates shattered, his green-hued blood all over the remains and splashed in places on the floor around him in a very tell-tale radiating pattern. “Shotgun with shredder rounds at close range.”

“There is one more here.”

Shepard turned her head; the Spectre stood over a human mercenary slumped against the wall, likewise clad in Eclipse colors. There was no obvious damage done to his armor that she could see,
but blood had part-welled-part-frothed up from his mouth and dribbled down his chin onto the floor between his legs. “Drowned in his own blood,” she mumbled.

“His back armor is cracked,” Nihlus announced.

Shepard looked up along the wall behind him and quickly found a spot three quarters of the way up where there was obvious denting and tell-tale drag scratch marks. She would bet a thousand credits there would be yellow and white paint chips in all of them. The elevation revealed something in of itself. “We’re looking for someone physically strong enough to pry open the doors. They also have biotics, but the shotgun tells me they do not avoid the up close and personal.”

“The damage on the salarian is horrendous. Any gun that can lay this spread will have a lot of recoil. We can rule out the perpetrator being a human, asari, or salarian. No offense meant, Commander, but I am aware of the force required to fracture human bones, a gun that can do this would have more than enough recoil for it.”

“None taken, Garrus. What’s true is true.”

“You really think there was just one perpetrator?” Nihlus wondered.

“Just one,” Shepard repeated. “Look at the trajectories.” She stood right in front of the door, “Our assailant opens the door, steps in…” she raised her right arm, pointing at where Garrus stood, “Salarian response times are faster, so bam, shotgun blast, the salarian goes down. Then one arm movement throws the human into the wall with enough force to break his ribs and drive fragments through his lungs. He would be stunned by impact, and then quickly unable to breathe as his lungs began to fill with blood.”

Nihlus hummed, “Alright. None of this changes the operation. We assume they are still here and follow the trail of bodies,” Nihlus said. “If they are not, and every Eclipse is dead, we still need to confirm whether D’aros is among them.”

“Aye, aye… sir,” Shepard replied as she drew her guns. This was definitely the last sort of spanner she expected to foul the works. Someone definitely wanted a whole bunch of Eclipse dead, and they were either bad news themselves, or sent someone seriously powerful to do it. As far as Shepard was concerned, she wanted every Eclipse in this place to be dead, even D’aros. She did not want them to be only mostly dead, and then actually meet the individual responsible for this gruesome picture.

Nihlus took point as he led them through the doorway at the back, deeper into the building. Shepard hung at the back. Maybe it made her callous, but was it wrong to wish to avoid having to fight someone who made such brutal short work of mercenaries? Those kills were efficient and impersonal; she would even call them professional. The overkill was by dint of weapons used, not rage.

The space beyond the antechamber opened up into what looked like a warehouse floor. Here the lights were turned down low, just enough to make navigation possible. Support pillars held up the roof and the catwalks up above. Between the pillars there were rows of racks stacked with crates of various sizes. It looked like whatever this was; it was certainly no small operation.

Nihlus and Garrus fanned out into the first side rows to scan the sides of the place. Shepard stayed in the middle, though she could definitely see there were no living enemies left. The silence was so absolute that it seemed impossible someone other than them was there, mercenaries were not known for stealth capabilities.

She passed by the bodies, noting only their positions and how they died. Her mind catalogued the
shotgun wounds and biotic feats as she looked for evidence of a potential second assailant. Yet all of the kills were consistent. Shotgun blasts to the right, biotic kills to the left. The directions showed her that the assailant used biotic mnemonics with their left arm. Whoever it was definitely possessed a certain amount of professional ruthlessness, as if killing four people was just another day at the office.

Near the back of the space she paused when she saw a slight break in the pattern. The last mercenary was neither thrown, nor shot. His helmet face-shield was smashed, remnants of it still stuck out of the frame. A spider-pattern of cracks radiated from a central impact over his forehead. Classic direct blunt force trauma and his corpse slumped against a row of crates in a rather undignified hap-hazard manner that told her he died on his feet. Probably held upright long enough for his body to relax enough so that only gravity had a hand in his final pose.

Shepard saw a light beam and half-heartedly raised Sin, but she recognized the outline of the person materializing around the corner and lowered her arm. When he finally closed the distance, Garrus stopped right over the mercenary as well.

“Spirits.”

“Are you two not finished playing detectives?” Nihlus asked as he appeared from the other side.

Shepard ignored him, she was sure Garrus would give him a due look for the both of them. She crouched down, slipped her hand to the back of the mercenary’s neck, and felt around. “Neck’s badly broken. I can’t feel a single whole vertebra.”

“Had to be something big to do that,” Garrus turned and scanned their surroundings. Shepard followed his lead. If their assailant used a weapon of opportunity, it would be nearby. Yet within seconds she knew it was not. There was nothing at all loose around them. For being dingy and dirty, the warehouse was surprisingly orderly. Their killer was not interested in loot either.

The absence of a murder weapon certainly left only a few possibilities. She looked back down at the mercenary and inspected the damage to the helmet. “The butt of a big shotgun could not do this. The pattern is quite wide. He got hit with something just once. See the center indent? The weapon had a rather broad ridge aligned vertically. Now this is a crazy thought, but… the door, the shotgun, this… what if he was headbutted by a krogan?”

“Are you suggesting our mercenary-killer is a biotic krogan?” Nihlus stepped in, his tone suddenly no longer light and amused.

“Why not? It’s consistent with the evidence.”

“The Commander is right,” Garrus added.

There was the unmistakable, but dulled swoosh of a door opening somewhere nearby. Shepard jumped to her feet and the turians turned their weapons in the direction of the sound. A large shape materialized from a side room. It was a tall, heavy-framed bipedal being, with a pronounced hump on his back. His footfalls heavy, and the way he moved he did not appear at all bothered by the weapons trained on him. Standing at close to two meters with his hump, and weighing probably over half a ton in armor, it was a Krogan.

“I was wondering who was following me,” he rumbled. “A human commando, C-sec, and… hmm… a Spectre. Sounds like the setup for a bad joke.”

Shepard only registered one thing; for all that they figured out about him, this krogan had just pegged
them for who they were with just one glance.

“We are here for the Eclipse, not you,” Nihlus said.

“Is that so? Lower your guns then. One slip and I will add you to the wall décor.” His body flickered with a tell-tale flash of violet-tinged energy. Not even a field, just an overt display that he could generate one.

“Nihlus, Garrus, lower the guns. He is not our enemy.” Shepard said.

The krogan snorted, “Figured someone would have to give turians their orders.”

Nihlus and Garrus looked like she backstabbed them, but the muzzles of their weapons drooped lower. The krogan likewise lowered his shotgun and straightened to his full height as he stepped out of the shadows.

The additional light revealed his armor was not the nearly brown color it first appeared, it was in fact closer to crimson. Though it bore no identifying marks, and certainly no white Blood Pack insignia, which was a good thing. He carried a massive shotgun in his hands, and as their gazes met, Shepard realized that even his eyes and visible forehead plate were some shade of red. The latter was scarred, with three or four pronounced slashes, looking like claw marks, going over the center of his crest, down the right side of his face and to his neck.

“There, that wasn’t hard, was it?” he rumbled, clearly enjoying the whole situation.

“Let’s not antagonize each other,” Shepard replied. “I am Commander Shepard, we are here for the Eclipse. By the looks of those bodies, you’re here for them as well.”

“I am Urdnot Wrex, and you are mostly right. I am here for D’aros. Those bodies chose to defend her.” The krogan corrected.

Was he an independent mercenary? It looked like it. Shepard did not want to ask, just in case he was not, it might set him off. “It seems our goals coincide. D’aros’ people extorted my people. How about temporary cooperation?”

“As long as I get to kill her, I have no problems with that. Your turians look like they will need all the help they can get.” The krogan said.

“My turians?” Shepard replied.

“You are in command, no?”

“Yes.” Technically, she thought to herself.

“I know your name.” Wrex went on. “A lot of people know your name out here. A single human killed a whole bunch of mercenaries and slavers before they even saw her. You made them look bad.” He chuckled. “As one warrior to another, I can respect that.”

“Well thank you, Urdnot Wrex.” What more could she say? The Krogan were a race of born warriors who lived by an old code of honor. The biggest badass got the most respect while humility was seen as a weakness.

“Let’s do this. D’aros is going to rue the day she was born when she sees us.”

Somehow Shepard thought that by ‘us’ he meant him and her, not Nihlus and Garrus. Whatever beef
he had with turians, she wanted no part in it, and she did not want to know its origin either, not right now. After seeing what he was capable of Shepard would do just about anything to avoid having to fight him as well. Fighting one long-lived biotic a day was enough for her.

She glanced first at Nihlus and then Garrus. The former seemed amused by this turn of events, the latter looked more worried. She turned and grinned at Wrex, “I don’t think she’ll have a lot of time to rue anything.”

The krogan guffawed so loudly the sound echoed off the walls.

Chapter End Notes

**Author Notes:** I kind of let my inner CSI and Criminal Minds lover out to play with this episode. It is something a little bit different than what we got in the game, but then my idea is to use all the odd talents the Normandy’s crew has, that means Garrus’ investigative skills as much as his technology and sharp-shooting skills.

**General Notes:**
Surprisingly, none…

**Chapter Notes:**
**Turian slang** – I kind of want to run with a bit of slang here, that turians do have it. I mean the term “bareface” is basically slang. In ME, during the Lair of the Shadow Broker DLC, Liara mentions that “azure” is Illium slang for a certain part of the asari body. By extension, “tawny” becomes is such a comment to a human female. I imply that asari and human females, to some, are too similar, and Janus is a shameless ass.
Episode 13: Omega [Part II]

At the end of the warehouse, in the left-hand-side corner there was a decidedly large doorway. When Wrex led the way toward it Shepard idly wondered how Nihlus could have missed it. The left-hand side was where the Spectre had turned to scout. Either he became distracted by her and Garrus and so emerged on the other side of the final row of shelves, effectively never passing by the door, or he had passed the door and Wrex simply did not register on his senses. Both could be just as likely, given that Nihlus might have relied on his hearing to tell him there was no one on the other side of the final shelves, to say nothing of her uninterrupted conversation with Garrus.

“So, what’s the situation here?” she wondered as she looked up at the krogan.

“There’s one more level below us. I did not have the time go far. I heard you three from here.” Wrex explained.

“Yes well, stealth is only an option for the first one here.” Shepard mused. That also explained why he stopped, simple issue of handling one group at a time, especially if the groups were coming from two directions.

The door opened on its own, leading to a passage with a wide ramp that led to a darkened level below. She could hear a faint sound coming up, too faint for her ears to isolate and identify, but there was definitely activity down there. “I think they’re ready for us,” she whispered.

“Heh, maybe then they’ll last a bit longer.”

“Oh not.” Shepard said as she began to make her way down the ramp. Maybe it made her a bit inconsistent, but now that she knew she would have to do this, she wanted to do it quickly. It was against her norms to protract a fight for the interest of fun. Fighting was never about fun for her, though Wrex seemed to relish it.

“I can hear mechs,” Nihlus said.

Shepard hummed, how many? It was unlikely that Nihlus or Garrus would be able to tell numbers by the sound alone, especially not here where sound was distorted and echoed. She drew her guns and shifted both to disruptor ammo.

The bottom of the ramp opened onto the smaller second level of the warehouse. The basement warehouse floor was maybe half the length of the level above, but there were rooms at the back. The
lighting was just as low as on the level above, which was not helping her vision at all. The warehouse forklift was down here, and the rows of shelves were no emptier, creating a labyrinth of fly-through zones.

She heard the cocking of weapons behind her. Wrex moved ahead, right down the middle of the aisle. Shepard did not dare to restrain the krogan, for the simple reason that she had no authority over him, and he could easily turn on them if pushed.

“I don’t like this,” she murmured for the benefit of her turian companions.

“Me neither. Everything in me says this place is full of hazards we cannot even see.” Garrus said.

Shepard nodded, “Keep alert and assume nothing.” With that she followed some paces behind the krogan.

One of the doors at the back of the room opened and an asari stepped out, followed by a human male carrying a datapad, and armed with an assault rifle. Both were dressed in yellow and white armor, with the human topped with an extra layer of tech armor. The asari was of a sea blue shade with violet markings around her eyes and across her forehead and had a pair of bright sapphire blue eyes.

“Well, well, well. I am surprised you three decided to work with the krogan,” she said. “Hmm… now which turian is the Spectre? I do wish to thank him for destroying my little cache on that backwater-”

“I blew your base.” Shepard cut in. “Planted the charges myself. Those were my people your crew was victimizing.”

“Shepard,” Nihlus warned.

“Huh. Well it really does not matter. You’re all going to die.” The asari glanced at the other mercenary and nodded.

He wordlessly hit a few buttons on his datapad. There was a whine, and the mechanical chatter picked up. Even Shepard could hear the LOKIs clear as bells on a cold day.

“Grab cover!” she shouted, ducking behind the forklift. It was a big one; its full covered cab, large motors, hydraulic tanks, and eezo core forming a wall. Gunfire erupted all around her; she heard the rapport of an assault rifle start and stop, a crack of a familiar shotgun.

“D’aros is mine!” Wrex shouted.

Shepard did not reply, she saw two LOKI coming at her from her right, chattering and apologizing in that freakish way of theirs. Both turned their pistols toward her and commenced firing. Shepard dropped to her knees; the bullets hit the forklift over her head. She turned her guns and returned in kind. Her first shots hit them center mass, ripping apart papier-mâché shields. Shepard raised the muzzle of Sin and fired again, blowing a LOKI’s head clean off. It whined, pinged, and exploded. Chunks of chassis ripped through the other. It whined and then collapsed.

“Shepard, get rid of the human,” Nihlus ordered over the comm. “Vakarian, cover her!”

Shepard heard Nihlus’ shotgun echo somewhere on her left, whining and explosions followed every shot. He must have found a concentration of mechs. A thunderous crack of a shotgun she did not recognize prevented her from saying a word. The sound carried from somewhere on her right, but deeper into the room. Movement out of the corner of her right eye suddenly meant that no longer mattered. She turned Dex and fired twice, as fast the Carnifex’s recoil allowed her, and that LOKI
“I got you, Commander.” Garrus announced as he ducked behind the forklift, though he was focused on his side on her left. “I suggest we make this quick, while the krogan is keeping D’aros busy.”

There was a heavy crash, something hit the ground. A crate perhaps? Another thunderous crack followed and something exploded. Then the thump of a biotic field hitting something solid, a distinctly feminine laughter, and a series of gunshots that sounded like a pistol.

“Spirits… they going at it with everything.”

Shepard holstered her twins and reached behind her shoulder for Vincent. “Where’s the other mercenary?” she asked.

“At the back, where he was.”

“Good.” Shepard swung around the forklift. Garrus’ assault rifle came to life, chattering and a small explosion followed. She trusted Garrus to keep her back clear so she could focus on the mercenary. She raised her rifle and aimed down the scope as she tapped the button on its side to activate the rarely-used auto-calibration. At this range, the invisible laser range-finder would do an adequate job of adjusting her scope’s optics and HUD crosshairs.

She saw the mercenary had his assault rifle partly up, but his attention was on the pad in his hands, and so he was utterly oblivious to the danger he was in. Yet before she could pull the trigger a blue blur flew through her scope sights and across the room.

Shepard looked away, D’aros landed on the floor on her back with a loud scrape of her armor. She raised a glowing fist and then her whole body flared periwinkle. Wrex appeared from the left side, still glowing with his biotics. The human looked up and his assault rifle followed in that panicked manner, aimed at the krogan. Shepard closed her right eye and focused down the scope again, as her thumb flicked across the ammo selector, switching to disruptor, she heard Vincent whine as it charged the slug.

Wrex moved right across the center aisle; Shepard slipped her finger off the trigger. He was either utterly oblivious, or choosing to ignore the human, but his bulk might get in the way. The asari fired more pot shots at him from her pistol, but all it did was flare the krogan’s kinetic barrier. Shepard smiled, D’aros had revealed where Wrex’ shield envelope stopped. Shepard dropped her finger to the trigger, adjusted her aim, and pulled. The human recoiled as the bullet pierced his barrier and skull, hitting over his left eye, just clear of the tech armor plates protecting his temples.

“Nice shot!” Garrus said.

Shepard raked the receiver bolt, and reached behind her back for a fresh thermal clip as she slipped back behind the forklift. “Nihlus, I got the sentinel,” she said into the comm.

“Good.” Nihlus replied curtly.

Shepard idly wondered if Wrex even noticed she had just fired right past him. Probably had, he was just not bothered. That was either arrogance, or he was that focused on the asari. She peeked around the forklift and found the asari and krogan.

Before Wrex made one more step the asari threw her fist forward and unleashed a shockwave right into his chest. The krogan slammed back-first into a shelf unit with enough force that it rattled.

Shepard blinked, stunned. Then the asari lifted herself to her feet and turned her head. The moment she saw the dead sentinel, her biotics literally exploded around her, barely contained, as the corona collapsed.
began to lick at her armor like St. Elmo’s fire.

“Oh-oh,” Shepard muttered as she slipped Vincent back behind her back.

“Come out here, human!”

Wrex regained his footing, but the asari turned, and unleashed another shockwave right at him, driving him into the shelf unit again. “I am not done with you, krogan. But right now, I want that human!” she shouted.

“You hit a nerve,” Garrus noted.

“A whole lot of ’em I should think,” Shepard murmured. Who would have thought, the psycho asari was fond of someone enough that their death sent her into a fit of rage. Shepard could relate to that, she had been there. Unfortunately for D’aros, the ending would be different.

The asari advanced toward the forklift that still served as their shelter.

Shepard looked at Garrus. Different ending or not, she had to assess the situation carefully. If the crazed asari decided to unleash everything she had, she would get two for the price of one. Shepard could not let that happen, but what could she do? One option was always to play chicken and hope she could read the incoming biotic attacks and lead the asari away from Garrus. Where the hell was Nihlus? And why was Wrex just standing there, he had an opening to shoot the asari in the back! This was a rather rotten time for a mercenary to develop a sense of fair play. Unless of course… was he interested in seeing what she could do? That thought only made the anger well up through the cracks faster. This was hardly the time for that sort of thing.

Suddenly there was a familiar shotgun crack, and Shepard dared to peek around the forklift. The asari had ducked and flicked out her arm, throwing a biotic field in the direction where the shot came from. Shepard whirled around the forklift, raised her guns, and fired. The asari’s kinetic shield flared, but the sight of Nihlus frozen in a stasis field effectively stopped Shepard from pulling the triggers again.

“There.” The asari said with a smile. She turned her head, looking at the Spectre. “I commend you on trying. But you wasted your one chance. Now… whom should I warp first? You, or her?” the asari asked.

Shepard glanced at the Spectre. The stasis field had him restrained to such a degree that he could not even twitch a mandible, but his eyes were on her. She knew she had only one chance to do this right. She had to get D’aros to lose focus, so she would not sustain her stasis field. Nihlus was a priority. Secure the hostage and then handle the hostage-taker. The problem was she could not say a word to anyone; any hint of a plan would probably set the asari off. She glanced at Wrex; he was watching her, a note of amusement in his expression.

“How long has it been?” the asari cooed. “I believe it’s been ten years since I killed my last Spectre.”

“You hurt him and we will fill you with bullets.” Garrus said as he emerged from behind the forklift.

“You are sure?” the asari replied, clearly enjoying herself. “I only need to flick my wrist to warp him. Do you want to gamble on being fast enough?”

Just how powerful was this asari? Some of the strongest biotics could restrain someone to such degree that they could not even breathe. Counting on the worst case scenario was her standard. Shepard knew she did not have all the time in the world to think. She would not let this crazy disgrace for an asari win. She would not let Nihlus become another notch on some sick tally. She
would never stand by and lose another friend. Never again. She would not allow this asari to get the better of her. Shepard slipped her guns into their holsters and took a deep silent breath.

“Commander!” Garrus called.

She knew what it must look like, but Shepard took a step forward, never taking her eyes off the asari. Where to hit her? What would shatter her focus; cause the stasis field to fail? Well a broken nose would probably be enough. The hurricane of rage was loose; she would enjoy breaking that haughty nose the asari kept sticking up. Shepard made one more step, “Get away from him, you bitch!”

The asari turned her head, her eyes widened; Shepard closed the distance with a burst of explosive acceleration and drove her left fist forward with all her exo-frame-aided might.

Her fist hit D’aros in the jaw and the glow around the asari’s body faltered. Shepard heard Nihlus hit the ground. The asari stumbled a half-step backwards, one hand rose to her split open lip. The look in her eyes was instantly murderous. Shepard only smiled. D’aros hissed, wound up, fist glowing, and swung. Shepard whipped her left arm; her forearm hit D’aros’ and deflected the deadly glowing fist wide, hitting only air, but the biotic field was still strong enough to cause Shepard’s skin to crawl. D’aros pulled back, but Shepard stepped in, wound up, and swung with her right. This time her fist connected directly with the side of the asari’s nose. Shepard could not feel bones give way, but the crack was tell-tale. Her knuckles seared with pain and she had to squash the urge to shake her fist. Her gauntlets did not provide enough padding for Sir Isaac Newton not to come back to haunt her.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw Wrex smile. He was definitely enjoying this!

D’aros regained her footing, violet blood streaming from her nostril in a thin rivulet. Her nose was visibly off-center and when she tried to wipe the blood off with the back of her hand, the barest touch caused her to wince. “I’m going to flay you,” the asari hissed.

“Try it.” Shepard hissed back.

D’aros’ whole body flared with her biotics.

“Shepard get clear so we can shoot!” Nihlus shouted.

The asari snarled, and whipped her arm right at the Spectre, unleashing another shockwave. Shepard watched in horror as Nihlus flew back into the shelves with a resounding crack. The shout ripped from his vocal cords pierced through her, and so did the sight of his body crumpling to the floor. Shepard turned back to the asari, now she could only see red. The hurricane made landfall with a tidal surge.

The Asari turned her other arm at her, but Shepard was faster. She grabbed the asari’s outstretched wrist with her left, stepped in with her right foot against the asari’s left, pivoted, and slammed her right forearm up under the asari’s elbow as her left came down. The asari hit the floor on her back with a loud thud, her elbow bent over forty-five degrees in the opposite direction. A beat later the pain registered and she folded into a fetal position, clutching at her arm, screaming in pure agony.

“And just like that, it’s over.” Wrex said.

The asari writhed, biotics flaring and fading out of her control. Shepard stared down at her with none of her malice restrained. Then her gaze flicked to Wrex, “You could have shot her any time.”

“This is an M-300 Claymore, Shepard. You do not want to be grazed by its shot,” he replied blandly.

Shepard hummed, Wrex certainly made a good point. “I’m done with her,” she said and turned
around, where was Nihlus, was he alright?

“She’s done too,” the krogan chuckled.

“You- You’re… going to let him shoot me?” D’aros whimpered.

Shepard wheeled and glared. “What do you think we came here to do?”

“Wait! Please! You can’t do this!” she whimpered.

“Why?” Shepard demanded. Well maybe there was nothing this asari could do to change her mind, but everyone got to say their last words.

“Yes my men extorted your colonists, but I ordered them not to harm anyone!”

Shepard glared, “you honestly think that will convince me you’re something other than a monster? After everything? After you hurt my friend?”

“Letting him kill me is cold-blooded murder!”

Shepard chuckled. The asari froze and whimpered. Did she realize whom she was facing? Shepard would ensure she did. “I ended two-hundred-fifty-nine batarian slavers for that. I’m a sniper. I am known for being a little… cold.” She turned away, coming face-to-face with her team. Garrus still had his assault rifle at a ready. Nihlus was on his feet, though most of his weight was on his right leg as he leaned against the rack behind him. There were new cracks on the front of his armor, probably more on his back, yet the look in his eyes was intense, probing, searching.

The deep crack of Wrex’s shotgun echoed through the space and Shepard closed her eyes. The reality of what just happened washed over her like a bucket of ice water dumped on her head. Yes she knew they would have to kill D’aros, but then and there, having let Wrex do it, Shepard realized that maybe she had gone a little too far in her anger. She clenched her fists and her knuckles ignited with a whole new level of pain. She had to force herself to take a deep breath and let it out slowly. She allowed herself to lose control, allowed her anger to take over.

“I think that’s all of them,” Wrex said.

“Good,” she checked her guns were still there.

“Shepard,” Nihlus approached slowly, limping quite heavily.

“Are you alright?” He was walking, that was a good sign right?

“She ruined my armor, but other than that…” he broke off with a wince.

Shepard nodded. Maybe it was the adrenaline wearing off, or maybe a trickle of pain medication filtering into her body from her armor, she honestly could not tell, but there was a sort of numbness spreading through her. Her anger was a dangerous thing; it tended to make her act before she thought things through. It made her act like a cold-blooded, ruthless monster. That had been anger. All of it. D’aros had hit Nihlus with a shockwave; something that she already demonstrated was strong enough to stagger Wrex. Shepard jumped the gun, allowed it to become personal. Though in the end she came out on top, it could have gone down a whole other way.

“Commander, are you alright?” Garrus asked, concerned.

“I’m… fine,” she glanced down and flexed her fingers, wincing. “Just ruing Newton’s third here.
Barriers raise the mass of everything that crosses them, right? That’s how they stop bullets. But the field will boost the mass of a fist too, thus more impact force. I also have an exo-frame…”

“And that goes both ways.” Garrus finished.

Shepard nodded. None of it was a lie, but it was only maybe half the truth. She needed to calm down.

“You are insane.” Nihlus said.

“Don’t talk to me about insanity! Why the hell did you tell me to get clear? She was gunning for you! You’re lucky your armor is the only thing that’s cracked!” Shepard rebuffed instantly, a different sort of anger flashing through her.

Nihlus glared. There would be a rebuff, she knew it. She turned to Garrus preemptively. “Let’s go. I do not trust his assertion that his armor took the worst of the damage. I want Dr. Chakwas to run scans as soon as possible.”

“Should we look at what else the mercenaries got here?” Garrus wondered.

Shepard paused, for the sake of thoroughness they should. Then time might be of the essence as well. For all they knew Nihlus might have internal bleeding he would not feel, if they delayed getting him to Chakwas he might deteriorate.

“As loathe as I am to say this, Vakarian has a point. We need to be thorough here.” Nihlus said.

Garrus glared.

Shepard sighed, well at least his tendency to be a jerk to Garrus was still there, and there was definitely a point to that argument. “I am not wasting time here, EDI can hack their security. We grab all we can and sort it out later.”

“My job here is done; I have a payment to collect.” Wrex slipped in.

Shepard turned, “Thanks for the assist.”

“It was interesting working with you, Shepard.”

“Likewise.” Shepard replied. Okay maybe that was not a hundred percent truth, she was still ambivalent about the krogan, but she would be polite. Wrex had knocked some of the fight out of D’aros. If he had not, she would have been more trouble. Her team might have gotten hurt worse. She would be thankful and polite just for that.

She watched as the krogan folded his shotgun and stowed it away at the small of his back before he moved past them. Once he was past the doorway and on the ramp to the level up, she turned back to the turians. “Let’s go.” When she moved, Nihlus followed, but his footsteps were uneven, and when Shepard looked back she could see the tremble in his mandibles the wincing with every step.

The back of the compound was all small offices. Wherever the mercenaries slept at night, it was not in this structure. That only made Shepard nervous, in some back corner of her mind she thought they were between shifts. She did not want to have to fight another set of idiots who came in here for a guard shift only to find bodies and blood.

Once in D’aros’ office, Shepard discovered they did not even need to call up EDI to get access. It figures the asari had been working on something when Wrex showed up. She left her terminal on
standby, but still essentially logged in. Clearly someone never heard of setting up a log-out timer for security purposes. Or it never even crossed her mind that she could be defeated. Shepard thought it more likely that it was the latter, all considering.

It took some ruffling through the asari’s desk to find an OSD, but Shepard did, and within ten minutes she set up a mirror image of the system. Then as the system worked its way through the documents and files, she looked up from her seat behind the asari’s desk.

The office was rather homey for being in such a dingy place. There was art on the wall, a landscape of some sort. Either Thessia, Illium, or some other Asari colony world, Shepard could not tell. The furniture was also not typical; some of it was made from actual wood. For being a sadistic nut job, D’aros certainly had taste. Garrus was inspecting the office for a lack of something better to do. Nihlus hung by the door, arms crossed, leaning his back on the wall, trying to keep as much weight as he could off his clearly injured leg.

The terminal beeped, copy process complete. She secured the OSD, pulled it out, and tucked it into a compartment on her webbing. “Alright, what now?”

“Now,” Nihlus said, dropping his arms to his sides. “Set that terminal to format.”

“Right.” Shepard nodded.

It was another fifteen minutes before they were done with the office. Nihlus wanted all the useful data destroyed. Effectively, if anyone stumbled into this place, they would have nothing more than the wares stashed away. Nothing of D’aros network of contacts, sources, client list, or anything else of the ilk would remain for someone to appropriate.

Shepard would have wanted to take out the contraband as well, but there was just no safe way to do it. Explosives and fire were a bad idea aboard an enclosed space station. A runaway fire would endanger the whole district. Then on top of that, a quick glance through the inventory lists ruled the possibility out for a whole other reason. There were things in some of those shelved crates that should not burn under any circumstance. It was far from ideal, scavengers or other Eclipse would reclaim the contraband. Really, this whole thing did not feel like a victory to her. Whatever damage they did to Eclipse would not amount to much. The only win was in removing the only person who had a reason to exact revenge on the colonists on Zealand.

When the three of them stepped out of the office, Shepard noticed that the Spectre’s limp had gotten even more pounced. Half an hour of standing in one place had probably caused his muscles to stiffen up. She sighed, “We have a long walk.”

Nihlus looked down, but did not protest when she wrapped his left arm around her shoulders and slipped her right arm around his back to provide support. It was awkward, her shoulder protested being pulled so far back because of his carapace, but Shepard ignored it. She wanted to think he could not be that hurt if he was walking. He seemed lucid too, which meant he did not crack his head on anything. Internal bleeding seemed out of the equation as well, as he would have become lethargic by now if he was losing blood in any way.

It was slow going, Nihlus’ limp was really bringing down their pace, and they had some kilometers to walk. It looked like she was in for quite a bit of quality time as the living crutch for a turian. Still, if he could tough it out, so would she.

“How did you even get that limp?” she whispered.
“My spur caught on a crate.”

“Oh. Ouch.” Shepard winced in sympathy.

“At least it is not broken. He would not be walking at all,” Garrus explained.

“That’d get awkward quick,” Shepard chuckled.

“Sure, make fun of the infirm.” Nihlus grumbled.

“That’s what you get for being reckless. Next time, stop thinking you’re the only player on this team, and start playing ball.”

“Humans and your sport metaphors.” Nihlus grumbled.

“Right then, I’ll say it plain. Don’t ever do that again. Spectre or not, you are on my team now. We stick together and we come out together, or we don’t come out at all. Understood?”

She felt him stiffen, idly wondering if she had ripped into him a bit too harshly, but she meant it, and she was not going to apologize or take it back.

“Understood.”

“That goes for you too, Garrus. Don’t take him as a role model.”

Garrus laughed, “You do not need to worry, Commander, I will not be picking up Kryik’s bad habits.”

“He has plenty of his own, no need to be picking up mine.” Nihlus slipped in, clearly amused.

The two exchanged looks, and Shepard saw something flicker across their expressions. In that moment, she had a sinking feeling that there was something passing between them that her ears could not pick up. She shook her head, males really were universal creatures. The universe was playing a grand cosmic joke on them all.

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Their return walk took a good hour and a half, due to the need for rests. The thing with limps was that the other leg eventually began to voice complaints because it took more weight that it was used to. Still, she would give Nihlus credit for soldiering it. The fact that he did not seem to be getting worse meant that his leg was the worst of his injuries. All considering, Shepard thought luck had been firmly on their side today. When the Normandy was finally in sight, Nihlus heaved a sigh of relief that even she heard.

“Last stretch,” she murmured, “Soon you’ll be in the medbay, up to your mandibles in pain killers and whatever else delightful concoctions Dr. Chakwas can dope you with.”

Nihlus chuckled; his fingers squeezed her shoulder.

That was pretty much how their whole walk proceeded; Shepard kept up the levity, small talk to balm the awkwardness and the physical exertion. Occasionally Garrus would quip something, and they would exchange friendly barbs. Shepard smiled when they did, no matter how much they denied it, she could see a sort of soldierly camaraderie forming.

They were in the airlock in under five minutes, and then beyond it when the system ran a decontamination sequence.
“Hey, Commander. You’re back!” Joker called from the bridge. By the time they cleared the bulkhead, Joker had spun his chair around. The second he laid his eyes on Nihlus who was still leaning on her, his eyebrows shot up, and the baseball cap on his head moved. “What happened?”

“Operational hazards,” Shepard replied. “I’ll tell you the story a bit later.”

“Sure, okay.”

With that said, Shepard helped Nihlus down the length of the CIC. She was utterly not surprised to see Kaidan up on the CIC with a cup of tea. The second he laid eyes on them, he set his tea down on the console and offered to help Nihlus instead. The Spectre waved him off. Shepard pointed out that she had an exo-frame, so she was good. Kaidan muttered a polite “yes, ma’am” and that was the end of it. Garrus followed them right down to the medbay; their arrival caused a further stir when those seated at the mess table noticed. Shepard waved the people down, saying it was not as bad as it looked.

They found Dr. Chakwas at her desk. The doctor took one good look at the three of them and then at Nihlus’ cracked armor and tutted in that matronly way before ordering the Spectre to a table. Shepard smiled, glanced at Garrus and the two breezed out of the room before the doc would stick them on the tables right next to Nihlus. Before they even made it past the door, the privacy shutters over the medbay’s windows onto the mess closed.

Garrus went ahead to his quarters in Life Support, and Shepard went down the shuttle bay to get rid of her gear. It was there, when she had to manipulate the various clasps of her webbing that she realized just how much pain she had in her hands. The knuckle of the middle finger on her right hand outright seared whenever it moved. When she took off her gloves, she saw both sets of knuckles were red and swollen. Shedding armor proved to be a long, awkward, and painful affair. As much as she disliked the thought, she knew a medbay trip was in her future. Ice would not fix this much damage. Thus once she was back in her fatigues, she sighed and decided to get it over with.

When she returned to deck three, she found that the medbay privacy shutters were still closed, and idly contemplated coming back later. She had about enough knowledge in this matter to know nothing was outright broken in there as she could move her fingers; it just hurt quite a bit. If there was a minor fracture, it did not need to be set, and should not get worse. Still, there was also the fact that she could not do anything with it, and Shepard hated wasting time.

She decided to brave it and stepped up to the medbay door. It opened, which surprised her.

“Commander, here to check on the Spectre?” Chakwas asked without turning around.

Nihlus sat on the bed in the middle of the room, most of his armor discarded, his undersuit pooled around his waist, and one leg hiked up, injured spur wrapped up in white bandaging. A light grey sleeveless sort of undershirt lay in his lap, and Shepard frowned when she saw a streak of blue on it. The doctor was working on something on his back, but it must not have been a complex procedure because she was already applying a square of adhesive bandage.

“How is he, doc?” Shepard asked.

“Unbelievably lucky. The armor ceramics did what they were designed to do.”

“I have a shallow crack in one of my back plates. It is nothing, considering I landed on my back twice. The spur is sprained.” Nihlus explained.

“Good, I’m glad you’re alright. But… erm… doctor, when you’re done with him, I think I have a
busted knuckle. Punching an asari with her barrier up wasn’t a good idea.” Shepard explained.

“Have a seat, Commander.” Chakwas straightened and moved toward the small sink in the back of the room. While the doctor disposed the used gloves and cleaned her hands in preparation for a new patient, Shepard sat on the other bed and watched Nihlus as he bent down to slip his boot back on.

Truthfully this was the first time she had seen a turian topless. Sure ICT covered some basic information on viable tactics when facing a turian in close combat, but the material there was largely clinical diagrams, often mutely colored and heavily labeled. This was decidedly a bit different. For one, seeing a turian in living color added unique characteristics. With Nihlus, she discovered the lines of on his face were not the only body art he had. There was a similarly complex design spanning the plates on his chest, abdomen, shoulders, upper back, and upper arms. Like his main colony markings, these had curves, lines, and tapered sections that enhanced his plates. Now whether they were a continuation of his colonial markings or merely personal aesthetics, Shepard had no idea. She would not ask either.

“Shepard, once your knuckles are fixed, we need to debrief and work on a report.”

She blinked, coming out of her thoughts. “Ah yes. The paperwork.” She said. Another reason to get her hands fixed sooner rather than later. Nihlus was footloose, but reports were on the short list of things he took very seriously.

“You two should rest. Paperwork can wait. Doctor’s orders.” Chakwas stepped in as she approached with her medical omni-tool up and ready to conduct scans.

Shepard held up her hands, palms down, allowing the doctor to do her scans. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Nihlus pull on his undershirt, then the top of his undersuit and zip it up.

“You have a minor fracture in the middle knuckle of your right hand. The left is merely badly bruised,” Chakwas announced.

Shepard grimaced; she knew it was coming. “I regret nothing.”

Chakwas did not look pleased, but she did not say anything as she moved to the cabinet where she kept the pharmaceuticals.

“Now who is being incorrigible?” Nihlus murmured.

“You?” Shepard replied without missing a beat.

The Spectre’s mandibles flicked in amusement.

“I assume that you do not wish to stay here for the regeneration frame, so I will give you a small dose of a regeneration stimulant. Have a good solid dinner with something that contains a lot of calcium, Commander.” Chakwas came back with the hypojet and two vials of liquid.

“Yes, doctor.” What more could Shepard say?

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While the doctor treated her hands, Nihlus got back into his armor, much to her surprise. Once they were out of the medbay he explained that despite the cracks in the protective plating, front and back, the kinetic barrier emitters suffered only mild damage. He would not go into a protracted firefight in that condition, but the shield would stop a few good bullets. In the end though, they would have to go back to the Citadel before they could do any more jobs. He needed to get replacement parts at the
Shepard left him to his devices and ventured down to engineering. Seeing as the marines were back aboard, she assumed that their mission had gone to plan. When she arrived, she found Adams overseeing the installation of the new couplings. Tali was practically giddy, she explained that they found them, near perfect condition, at Kenn’s salvage depot. Kenn, a young quarian, had been all too willing to help them for a small exchange.

She got nervous when she mentioned that she kind of convinced the others to help her deal with a rather unpleasant Elcor, in order to help said quarian out. Anti-quarian sentiments were all too common on Omega where no one had to disguise them. Harrot, the Elcor salvage merchant, had forced Kenn to keep his prices high, as to remove competition. He was not all that impressed with quarians, but in the end it was Ashley and Kaidan who talked sense into him. Shepard assured Tali that they had done the right thing.

This invariably brought up the issue that the Normandy could not leave Omega for a few more hours. The parts had to be installed, integrated, verified, and calibrated. As a result, Shepard decided that they would stay the night on Omega. She would not hurry the engineers along needlessly.

With that Shepard returned to deck three, where she spotted the marine trio and Garrus waiting for dinner. “Skipper!” Ashley called.

“Hey,” Shepard sat down at the table. “I was just in engineering, good job on the parts, especially the diplomatic solution to a certain problem.” Shepard said.

“Tali made it sound better than it was. Diplomacy had little to do with it. I tried to reason with him, but… Williams here made the better argument.” Kaidan said.

“Oh?”

“Harrot was being an ass. Kenn wanted get off the station, but instead of buying his stock out, Harrot made sure he’d never see a single credit. The idiot was leaning on competition he created for himself. I pointed that out. In so many words,” Ashley said.

“Shrewd.”

“Of course, that’s after I got him to take us seriously.” Ashley went on.

“The chief threatened him,” Kaidan clarified.

“Ah.” What more could she say? Now she understood why Tali did not go into details. She probably did not want to be the one to mention the arm-wrangling; for fear of disapproval falling on her head by proxy, as the whole thing was her idea. “Well this is Omega. They say when in Rome…” she trailed off. The marines nodded their heads. As far as Shepard was concerned, a timely, well-chosen application of threat could still be called diplomacy.

“When in Rome what?” Garrus wondered.

“Oh sorry, Garrus. It’s an old saying, when in Rome; do as the Romans. It means one ought to behave like the locals.”

“I see,” he replied.

Matthews appeared at the table then, balancing two trays of plates. Jenkins instantly leapt at helping
the cook pass them around. Four plates of rice with what looked like grilled herbed salmon fillets. From the color of the rice Shepard could tell it was flavored with herbs or cooked in broth. The other plate had blue-tinged fillets on a brown, grain-like substance, similar looking to theirs.

“I’ll never be able to eat at a base cantina again, is this real salmon?” Ashley asked as she picked up her fork.

“It’s vat-grown. I saw the packaging.” Kaidan said.

“Still good.” Jenkins mumbled around his first mouthful, ever eager to dig in.

“The grilled pariki looks good too,” Garrus slipped in. “I assume salmon is an Earth fish?”

“Yes, one of the more expensive edible fish. As for the pariki, I hope it’s not over-herbed.” Matthews offered.

“No, it smells fine.” Garrus replied.

Matthews left them to eat with a noticeable spring in his step. After that it was largely a resumption of what had been going on before she got there. The marines had their own conversations. Garrus seemed listen to what the others were talking about, but he did not participate. Shepard had her own thoughts to filter through.

Thus she was not surprised that the marines finished eating before her and departed the mess table. Soon enough even Garrus finished and excused himself. Some of the other crewmates came around to pick up their meals to take back to the crew quarters where they preferred to eat. Nihlus had been a bad example in that way, since he got away with eating in his quarters, some of the others picked up the habit. Shepard let it slide on good faith.

The XO’s cabin door swished open and Nihlus stepped out, still wearing his armor. He slipped his used dishes into the washer and then moved toward the elevator. Shepard noticed that he still had a faint limp.

“Nihlus, wait up a moment.” Shepard called.

“Yes?” he asked.

“Debrief? Paperwork?” she asked.

“We got the night off, doctor’s orders.”

“Ah,” Well that was a bit unusual, Shepard thought to herself. He normally did the good chunk of his report hot, while the memories were freshest. Maybe he was feeling worse than he let on?

Nihlus took that as conversation finished and made one more step toward the elevator, but then stopped and looked back. “I was going to get a drink or two, probably hit Afterlife. You want to come?” he asked.

Shepard blinked. Well that was definitely something out of the usual, or was it? Going to a noisy, crowded night club full of pole dancers and unscrupulous types was hardly her idea of fun. If she was honest, she wanted to avoid all noisy, crowded places full of pole dancers as a matter of course. Still, some little overprotective part of her mind said that Nihlus seemed to be a magnet for trouble on his best days, and today might not be one of them. His armor was damaged and this was bloody Omega. “Alright, can you give me twenty minutes?”
Nihlus straightened, his mandibles flicked.

She wolfed down the rest of her already cold food and made her way back down to the shuttle bay to get into her armor. Along the way she wondered if this was at all a good idea. She really did not like crowds, and did not feel comfortable in packed places. The councilor they made her see after Elysium explained that a lot of people who lived through what she lived through tended to become guarded, less able to let down their guard. She did not have enough symptoms to be diagnosed with outright PTSD, but she had the hypervigilance in a mild form. Shepard thought she learned to harness it, use it as a tool. She certainly never wanted it to rule her life, how she did things, and whom she interacted with. So there she was, getting into her armor, when all she wanted was to crawl into bed. She was unusually masochistic tonight.

She was up on the CIC in fifteen minutes and found Nihlus leaning on the bulkhead next to the airlock. She left Vincent behind, but brought the twins, and was not surprised to see Nihlus had brought his side-arm as well. Joker was not in his seat, which might be a blessing of another sort, because if he was, the whole ship would know about this.

“You really want a drink? From Afterlife?” Shepard asked as they stepped into the airlock.

“No offense, Shepard, but the dextro fare in the mini-bar is… scant.”

“Ah. I’ll make sure to leave a requisition form on the coffee table in the OD. Next time you decide to lounge, make a request. You’re part of this crew as much as anyone.”

“That simple?”

“Yep.”

The outer door opened and Shepard led the way out. They walked the familiar distance toward the Afterlife in silence with Shepard minding their surroundings. She was not sure what time belt the station operated on, there was definitely no hint of any day or night cycle. The halls were as gloomy and as claustrophobic as she had seen the previous times.

Judging by the sound of his footsteps Nihlus had forced himself not to limp as soon as they were away from the ship, and by the time they were in front of the club he was practically strutting. The music bleeding out of Afterlife was just as uncomfortably loud, and the line was longer than before, making Shepard wonder if this was a good idea. She did not like being in the Afterlife the first time. Going there now, and for longer?

Surprisingly it took then only ten minutes to be allowed inside. Once inside, Shepard took full stock of the surroundings and grimaced. The music was louder now, there were more pole-dancers, and the dance areas were packed. Humans and batarians in blue and white Blue Suns armor were seated at the back. At one of the bar counters she spotted a few krogan in red, white-splattered armor denoting Blood Pack.

Nihlus sidled up to a bar where a barefaced turian was mixing drinks. The bartender finished pouring something to the human male at the end and stepped over to them. Nihlus ordered something called a “core breach”, though Shepard could not be sure if that properly translated for her. She watched as the bartender poured lime green and sky blue liquids in equal measure into a glass, added a little bit of something clear, and then mixed the concoction until it took on a nearly glowing aquamarine hue.
Then he slipped in a couple clear ice cubes and finished with a stick of something that visually resembled cinnamon.

“Anything for you?” Nihlus asked as he picked up his drink. “My treat.”

Shepard blinked, “I honestly don’t know what’s on hand.” Shepard murmured.

“We have a bit of everything.” The bartender offered with a flick of his mandibles. “Depends on the mood.”

“Friendly drinks with a co-worker after a day of hard work,” Shepard replied.

“Ah. I have just the thing.” The bartender reached under the counter and produced a bottle of violet-tinged, somewhat cloudy liquid. “Thessian Mikon. Its manufacturing is comparable to Terran Tequila, though it is half as alcoholic and sweeter. This particular bottle is the export variation, with no suspended element zero, but I do have the domestic as well.”

Shepard smiled, “Sounds good, export please. Just one for now, I’ll see about seconds later.”

“Of course.” The bartender pulled out a glass and poured the liquid into it, then stuck a round, reddish, berry-like fruit to the rim and slid the glass toward her, “Enjoy your… friendly drinks.”

“Thank you,” she said as she picked up the glass, consciously choosing to ignore the undertone in his words. The bartender nodded and busied off toward his other customers. Bartenders were the other universal creatures of the galaxy it looked like. Even in the armpit of the galaxy.

Shepard spared Nihlus a questioning look, but he was not even looking her way, but scanning the surroundings. Before she could say a word he was moving. Shepard followed automatically, and soon enough it became obvious why he moved. A small group of three had vacated one of the tables, and Nihlus made a straight line for it.

She sat across from him and put her drink on a coaster made from a folded tissue napkin.

“You are not really in the mood for drinks, are you?” Nihlus asked after a moment.

“Getting drunk is not a good idea with a regen stim in the system.” Shepard replied.

“Oh. Right… that slipped my mind.”

“It’s no big deal,” Shepard replied. She could nurse the drink, that way it did not hit the sink. She leaned back in her seat and lifted the glass to her lips to take one good sip.

He hummed and took a swig of his own, but said nothing.

Shepard focused on scanning her surroundings. The Mikon was actually quite good; she would give the bartender kudos. “I should apologize, I’m hardly good company right now.” She murmured.

“Not for that.” Nihlus replied.

She met his gaze and raised an eyebrow. Nihlus drained his drink in one last swig and brought the glass down. Shepard grinned, she hoped he did not plan to be knocking them all back like that.

“Shepard, I am not blind.” He went on. “Your… reaction today. You control your emotions as you control everything else, but anger seems to be the one you struggle with.”

Shepard froze and gripped her glass tighter before forcing herself to relax.
“You withdraw when you lose control. Last time it was Eden Prime.” He continued.

“Buying me one drink hardly means you get to lecture me.”

“I am not lecturing. For that, you would need to do something I see as a mistake.”

Shepard blinked, but said nothing.

“Whatever you think you did wrong, whether it was losing your temper, beating D’aros as you did, or even letting the krogan shoot her…” He paused there for a long moment. There was something atypical in his expression. Those green eyes did not have their usual severe, piercing quality. “That last one… the order of addition does not change the sum.”

“You are trying to cheer me up.” Give her the prize for stating the most obvious thing in the galaxy for the year.

“And failing miserably, I think.” He replied.

Shepard smiled, she did not know whether he was playing stupid right now, or whether he was actually fishing, but he got a lucky hole-in-one along the line. “I would not call that effort a failure. It’s a six out of ten, a clear, if inglorious pass.”

He chuckled and swirled his empty glass, “I can live with that. I am going to get another one of these,” He picked up his empty glass. “Hold the fortress?”

Shepard watched him go and took another sip of her drink. Suddenly a flash of red out of the corner of her eye caught her attention. She almost reached for Sin when she realized the krogan approaching the table had no white on his red armor and he was carrying a large drink, not a weapon. She took another sip of her Mikon and her eyes found Nihlus, still at the bar. The krogan stopped in front of the table, towering over her.

“Wrex.”

“Shepard.” He replied as he pulled one of the chairs out and eased his bulk on it.

Shepard raised an eyebrow, well that was certainly direct. Did he not realize that Nihlus would be back any moment now? Well, odds were he did not care.

“You plan to be on Omega for long?” he asked.


“Good. An Alliance ship on Omega. Stick around long enough and some idiots will probably try to take it.”

“They can try.” Shepard replied. Over Wrex’s shoulder she saw Nihlus turn, and the instant his eyes landed on the krogan, his brow plates drew down.

“When they do, they deserve all they get.” Wrex chuckled.

“I respect you, Wrex, but let’s cut the pleasantries. What do you want?” Shepard wondered.

He straightened in his seat, causing the chair under him to groan. “I am between jobs, so I thought I’d offer you my skills. Lots more dirty mercenaries out here for your turians to bungle killing.”

Shepard hummed; somehow she should have known this would be the case. Why else would a
mercenary approach her?

“We will have to pass,” Nihlus said as he sat down on the third chair.

Shepard did not want to irk the krogan, but she also knew that Nihlus had his moments of prickliness. This situation had the potential to ugly rather quickly. She spared Nihlus a look which he pretended not to see as he took a sip of his drink. Wrex probably chose not to reply to Nihlus, his red eyes remained locked on her.

“The offer is tempting,” Shepard ventured. “However, I am hardly a person who can hire a mercenary, no matter how impressive his skills are. My mission is more than bringing justice to crazy asari. I am a dog of the Alliance, got the collar and leash. Right now, we’re more concerned with Eden Prime.”

“Hah. The Geth finally did something where someone cares,” Wrex mused.

Shepard blinked, stunned, “What do you mean?”

Wrex’s return blank stare was a reply all its own. “Eden Prime was the first time they did something in what some call civilized space, Shepard.”

Shepard blinked, stunned, “Meaning they were active out here before that?”

Wrex rumbled his non-verbal assent.

“This is the first time I hear of this,” Nihlus said.

“Do all Spectres think they know everything?” Wrex wondered. Then he turned his head to give her one more of his looks. “See? This is why you need me, Shepard. I know the Terminus better than this whelp.”

Nihlus spared the krogan a withering look. Shepard would have smiled, what with the Spectre now on the receiving end of what he normally dished, but this was not the time for that.

“They first came out about nineteen years ago.” Wrex added. “Whenever they emerge, it’s always because of some Prothean tech.”

“And since everyone in this galaxy wants Prothean tech, that alone is not the weird part.”

“Precisely.”

Shepard could not be surprised at this revelation; it seemed to fit a pattern. The Geth certainly had a penchant for covert action. It really did not matter how long ago they got into the system on the Citadel, just that they had. Their actions on Daiwi showed they had the capacity for clandestine operations of another sort, they could plan. They may be synthetic, but there was nothing artificial about their intelligence.

She could not raise the topic with Nihlus right now, not in Wrex’s immediate presence, but they would have to discuss the ramifications later. Nineteen years was too specific a timeframe for a race of synthetics created over two centuries prior. Something changed; something made them come out of insularity, start pursuing Prothean tech in this manner. Shepard could not help but think it was all connected to the fact that the black unit was not even a real geth.

As the thought crossed her mind she froze in her seat. If she looked at the pieces with the idea that there was someone guiding the geth as troops, then the pieces began to align. The questions then
became, *who, why, and how* they got the geth to obey. Then one had to wonder, how they managed to *keep* control for nineteen years.

“I don’t suppose you’d know what *sort* of tech they’re after,” Shepard murmured. That was the more innocuous question, but it could be a piece of the puzzle. She had a feeling though. The beacon and the computers were rather specific things. The geth were not collecting cultural artifacts and works of art.

“I never cared to ask.”

Shepard sighed; well there was a limit to how much information one could get from one individual. Still, Wrex had just given her something.

“So how about it?” he rumbled.

Nihlus looked less than pleased, and Shepard knew why. He liked to think he was on top of everything, that his status as a Spectre put him in the know. Except now Wrex proved him otherwise. There was some credence to the argument that the krogan knew the Terminus better. Beginning with his lifespan and ending with the fact that Spectres were still fundamentally considered, however loosely, to be law enforcement, and that meant they were at a disadvantage when it came to information gathering out here. The Terminus was hardly full of snitches eager to report everything to the first Spectre that crossed their path. Information rarely came free. You either had to do favors for your sources, or sink so low as to use force. Shepard had a feeling Nihlus’ pride prevented him from doing both too often, or at all. “I just want to know, why? Why do you want to work for me?” Shepard asked.

Wrex leveled his red eyes squarely on her, boring into her soul. “There’s a storm coming, Shepard. If the geth start a war with you humans, I don’t intend to miss what ought to be a good fight.”

At least he was honest with his intentions. Shepard still could not decide if she wanted to add him to the team or not. Aside from that, if he was right and there was a storm on the horizon, she would end up caught right in the middle. Apart from the Quarians and within the Alliance she had the most experience with the synthetics. She was also ahead of the rest of the galaxy in seeing a disturbing pattern. Perhaps Wrex even realized that she knew more than she let on. She would not put it past him. He already showed an uncanny intellect belied by a dark wit and a penchant for brutality.

“This is a bad idea, Shepard,” Nihlus said.

Shepard spared him a look. His shoulders slumped, which was all she needed to know, he would have probably said more. She turned back to Wrex, “I need some time to prepare the official paperwork, Wrex, but you are welcome to come to the Normandy in the morning, by Terran Coordinated. We’ll make this official with a contract and pay, if that is alright.”

“I don’t normally sign contracts. A lot of what I do leaves no paperwork.” Wrex mused.

Shepard did not even twitch; she was not going to budge on this. If he did not sign the paperwork, he was not working for her. She did not want to give anyone any excuse to say anything.

“In this case though, yea, a contract will work.” Wrex finished.

She glanced at Nihlus and noted a faint, tick-like twitch in his mandibles. His eyes were focused on Wrex like missile-guiding lasers.

The krogan got up and grabbed his drink, “I’ll be there, Shepard.”
Shepard nodded and watched as he walked back to the bar. The batarian that occupied his seat practically tripped as he rushed to vacate it anew when the Krogan loomed over him. Shepard found that oddly amusing.

As she scanned the angle she had on this level of the club, her eyes landed on two turians standing at the base of the stairs leading up to an enclosed booth overlooking the floor. One of them was unmistakably Janus. His friend was taller than him, similarly colored, with dark eyes, and if she squinted she could see markings on him. They were done in a color a few shades lighter than his plates, going almost wholly invisible, but still there.

“Shepard?” Nihlus asked.

“Janus is watching us,” she said.

“It’s not every day that a human, a turian, and a krogan talk without violence to follow,” Nihlus mused, draining the last of his drink.

She hummed as she stared Janus down. His mandibles flicked in amusement. His friend glanced to his left, up at the booth. Shepard’s eyes flicked to follow. There was a figure standing behind the shielding glass of the enclosed booth. A tall, blue-eyed, violet asari clad in black outfit that reminded Shepard of Asari Commando leathers, but with a white cropped jacket on top. Shepard locked eyes with the asari and held her gaze. Was she the owner of the club? It would make sense, it being the only enclosed booth she could see. The intensity of her gaze was palpable, but Shepard was not about to baulk.

“It takes you this long to intimidate him?” Nihlus asked.

Shepard looked toward him and raised an eyebrow. Did he think she was having a staring contest with Janus of all people? “You think he has that much spine?”

Nihlus laughed.

When she glanced back up toward the booth, the asari was gone. Shepard picked up her glass and drained the last of her one drink.

Chapter End Notes

**Author Notes:** Wrex is another character that required total intro arc rewrite. I wanted to highlight that he’s is a wily guy. He pulls obfuscating… stereotype. He plays up every to idea people got of what Krogan are like, because “what they assume I’m incapable of, will kill them”. Yes, he is a living wrecking ball, but seeing Shepard, Nihlus, and Garrus for whom they are is intelligence as well. Giving him the M-300 Claymore shotgun is a conscious decision. Wrex is one of the last true Krogan Battlemasters, biotics and ruthless efficiency with weapons, all in one. That said, only one more crewmate left to gather for this season. Not dropping who it is, but guesses are welcome.

**General Notes:**

**Biotic Powers** – I have my own interpretation slash head-canon, free from the limitations of game mechanics. This episode was kind of a show-case for that. For example, yes D’aros was an adept powerful enough to last against Wrex, but she
couldn’t do much against someone who got point-blank near her. She (like all adepts) is an RPG mage, can dish a lot of hurting at range, but can’t take it. Sentinels trade a great deal of their offensive capabilities for crazy biotic defenses, ones they’re capable of using to shield their allies; Kaidan is a case of this. Vanguards are unique in that they can use their biotics to augment physical prowess. Ever seen a martial artist split boards? A powerful vanguard can split much more than just a few boards. Wrex is capable of this, combined with the fact that he’s monstrously strong even without his biotics.

**Chapter Notes:**

**St. Elmo’s Corona** – St. Elmo’s fire is not actually fire; it is a phenomenon where glowing plasma forms through ionization around pointed objects within a strong electric field. Classically it manifested on the tips of sail-ship masts sailing through a thunderstorm at night. It is called St. Elmo’s fire because Saint Erasmus of Formia is the patron saint of sailors, and his name could be shortened to “St. Elmo”. In my head-cannon, when very powerful biotics get very mad, their anger-intensified fields ionize the air around them to the point of producing this rippling/licking effect.

**Hypojet** – This little device is basically a hypospray, which is based on something that exists in real life, known as the Jet Injector. It is a way to deliver medicine without the use of a metal needle, though the earliest RL versions still tended to transmit disease regardless of seeming like they shouldn’t (they’re working on that in RL, for ME-verse, we’ll assume they fixed it). Similar devices, indeed called a “hypospray”, have appeared in Star Trek and Mission Impossible, as well as being mentioned in The Man From U.N.C.L.E books. I call them ‘hypojets’ as a mix of their sci-fi name and RL name. Because I can.

**Asari cuisine** – The Asari add Eezo into their food/drinks, because all of them are biotic, and small regular consumption is said to increase potential. However, as canon notes, their export products are eezo-free.
Lost

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I do no own Mass Effect, I do not claim to own Mass Effect, I am only doing this for fun.

Author Notes: Here we go; we are beginning the next arc. This is another twist on something straight out of the game, but extensively re-conceptualized because it required it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Episode 14: Lost

Over the hours they stayed at Afterlife, Shepard stopped after sipping her way through one more Mikon, while Nihlus had five drinks, not all of them the same. They spent the time in relative silence, just drinking and watching the people mill. Much to Shepard’s amusement, she noted that after drink three Nihlus’ eyes started to drift toward the pole dancers. She did not comment on the matter. After all, what the Spectre did on his off time was his prerogative.

For her, the crowd was more interesting than the gyrating asari. Afterlife was in essence a pageant of Omega’s finest denizens. If what she saw in that club was reflective, something of the station’s politics could be understood just watching who talked with whom, and who could clear a space just by arriving.

They returned to the Normandy very late in the evening when the night shift had taken over. Shepard thanked Nihlus for paying the tab, and they went their separate ways at the elevator. She truthfully felt a little bit better. Maybe not exactly relaxed, she could not relax in a crowded night club, but it had been a quiet few hours nevertheless. For a brief moment it allowed her to throttle back, process things. She knew it would not last.

She dragged herself out of bed an hour earlier than normal, because she had to get the paperwork in order if Wrex was going to show up. She was just finishing with that when Adams appeared, Tali in tow, to tell her that they finished with the couplings, the Normandy could depart Omega. Shepard thanked them both and left it at that. It was hard to miss the fact that Tali seemed to have become Adams’ shadow, and the chief engineer seemed to enjoy having a protégé as well.

Not long after that EDI announced Wrex had arrived. The AI did not sound all that surprised, and Shepard understood why when she spotted Nihlus leaning on the bulkhead separating the bridge from the rest of the CIC. Nihlus had probably tipped EDI off to keep an eye out for a krogan, and sure as hell he seemed to have gotten EDI to tell him when said krogan arrived, even before EDI told her.

An hour later she got Wrex signed on formally. There was a bit of a space crunch, but in the end Wrex set up his sleeping pallet in the very corner of the shuttle bay. It was not ideal, but Shepard had the impression he was not a fan of tight spaces and small rooms. Making him hot-bunk with the crew was out of the question, just would not work. As it was, the crew had to take five minutes to collect their jaws off the floor when Shepard introduced him. Though it looked like after two turians and a quarian, the krogan outraged no one. Matthews broke the silence with a comment about needing a
bigger pot. Shepard thought he would probably have to cook for Wrex in a pot all his own, because Wrex was a biotic krogan, but she figured it best not to point that out in front of everyone.

With matters settled, and breakfast packed away, Shepard put Joker on getting the Normandy off Omega, with their destination nominally pointed at the Citadel. Nihlus still needed to see someone about his armor. Meanwhile she went to the OD to get started on the paperwork, mostly try to think of a way to sugar-coat Wrex to Admiral Hackett. She had a feeling that a krogan might just test the line, but in her defense, Wrex was not a typical krogan. Sure he was efficient—the term she would use—in combat, but he was also intelligent and clearly experienced. He also provided her with a lovely little piece of the puzzle. Hopefully that would be enough to convince her CO that she was not taking too big a leap here. She had a good feeling about him, and her feelings were rarely wrong.

She was just finishing up her report when Nihlus and Garrus came up to the OD so they could have their delayed debrief and then get into that report. Most of the work was on Nihlus, given that the job with Eclipse had been his longer than she knew him. Still, he wanted their impressions on the matters to tack on as an appendix to his report. They hashed out the details quickly, and by unanimous decision decided to keep Wrex’s name off the records. It was much easier to say that the cooperation with said krogan had been temporary, and none involved cared much for formalities when all was said and done. The fact was that Wrex was hired by a third party to handle the same target. They decided to work together as a matter of convenience, because fighting over who put a bullet through the target was redundant. It was only later on that Wrex decided to offer his paid services. The Council definitely did not need to know that he was now working for her.

They were on the Citadel in a matter of hours. The Normandy was barely docked when Nihlus announced he was going on his business of procuring replacement parts for his armor. Out of the necessity the Spectre requisition office never closed for the night or weekend. Meantime, Shepard was left with the task of figuring out more logistical woes.

Thus an hour later EDI was helping her with the ship inventory logs when the AI suddenly paused. Shepard looked up from her terminal.

“My apologies, Commander. Rear Admiral Kahoku is on the communicator for you. The request comes marked as priority,” EDI said.

“No rest for the weary,” Shepard mumbled as she got up from her seat at her desk and made her way across to the COMCON. Along the way she checked to make sure her fatigues were presentable. Contact like this meant Admiral Hackett had authorized it. For security reasons few people in this galaxy could contact the Normandy via COMCON. The ship’s communicator frequencies were classified and then whatever attempt was made, had to go through EDI and her security protocols. “Put it through, EDI.” Shepard said as she stepped in front of the communicator.

The communicator holo-projector buzzed and clicked for a few moments before the hologram materialized over the conference table. Shepard snapped to attention and saluted, “Rear Admiral Kahoku.”

“Commander Shepard, at ease,” the rear admiral replied.

Shepard slipped into her parade rest smoothly as she appraised the man in front of her. He was in his fifties, probably, with noticeable graying hair as well as beard and mustache. His dark eyes locked on her like guiding lasers. Shepard could see the evaluation cogs spinning. She was not the only one perpetually alert and measuring.

“It is good that I have caught you on the Citadel, between assignments. I assume we are on a secure line?” he asked.
“Of course, Admiral. The most secure there is, short of the QEC.” Shepard replied.

“Good. I have something I would like you to pursue, Commander. Something… sensitive.”

In other words, this was another one of those dirty jobs that ought to fly under the radar.

“I dispatched a marine unit to investigate strange activity in the Artemis Tau cluster, but as of two days ago I lost contact with the unit. Their last daily status report indicated they entered the Sparta system, and after that, nothing.”

Shepard did not need to be told how unusual it was for a whole unit of marines to fail that sort of thing without a reason. There was always a chain of command in place. Even if the officers were put out of commission due injuries or death, there ought to have been a status report from the next in line. Unless the whole unit was put out of commission, that is.

“I want you to find out what happened to them,” the admiral continued. “But I hope you understand that the fact we are speaking is a favor from Hackett. I attempted to launch my own investigation, but was unable to get authorization. Hackett volunteered the Normandy for this operation under the proverbial table. I need it done quietly, and your report is to be sent to me, not Hackett. Your communications officer will receive a data packet with the relevant information.”

“Understood, Admiral.” Shepard replied. What more could she say? This was the reason why the Alliance admiralty was compared to a Byzantine court half the time. There was much internal politicking and favors passed about. Still, if a unit of marines vanished, she understood why Admiral Hackett charged her with the job. He saw the same thing as she did, and though he had his politics, he would not let a unit of marines slip through the cracks because of said politics. The Normandy was in a gray area; at the very least it could go there, undetected, off the record, and check things out.

Some part of her was automatically curious about what said marines had been investigating in the Artemis Tau cluster of all places. It was Alliance space, but hardly the most visited nook of the woods. There were no colonies in the cluster, and the majority of the charted planets were some sort of wasteland, either frozen, or blazing, or some other kind of unpleasant variation.

“One more thing, Commander. I only want to know what happened to my men. In fact, if it could be arranged, the involvement the Normandy’s Spectre Liaison would be appreciated.”

Shepard blinked; he wanted her to involve Nihlus? “It will be done, Admiral.” That is to say, Nihlus had her ticket for getting out of hot water if things went sideways and it got out that whatever stone wall erected in the way of his own investigation was circumvented. “The Normandy will depart the Citadel in a few hours.” She finished. No rest for the weary indeed.

“Good. I look forward to any news, Commander.”

The communicator shut off a few seconds after that, restoring the solemn silence of the COMCON, leaving Shepard to her thoughts. There was something happening, something big enough to warrant this sort of stealth request. Rear Admiral Kahoku was desperate to know what happened if he was pulling this sort of favor, especially reaching out, however tenuously, to the only Spectre the Alliance had access to.

Spectres as a rule could pursue their own investigations, if they deemed something important enough for their involvement. In reality that meant that sometimes the upper echelons of the Council races, be they Hierarchy officials, Asari Matriarchs, or some Dalatrass could and did request a Spectre look into matters for them. Strictly speaking all Citadel races would not be in the wrong curry a Spectre’s involvement in some matter, it was just the fact that the Turians, Asari, and Salarians had all the
Spectres between them, so they had the quickest route.

Nihlus would be thrilled to know that he was now on the brass’ radar. She grinned to herself, thinking that now he had a reason to make her Spectre. If only so that sort of duty would naturally and automatically pass to her.

“Commander, I received a data package from Rear Admiral Kahoku containing the personnel files of the missing marines as well as contact information,” EDI announced.

“Thanks, EDI.” Shepard knew what that meant. Odds were something befell the marines, but the information would be necessary if there were bodies to identify. She would look over it later and make the relevant information available to her away team. Well, once she decided who would be on the away team. “Oh and could you tell me when Nihlus returns?”

“Of course, Commander.”

Shepard turned and breezed out of the COMCON, intent on returning to her inventories. Wishing for the umpteenth time that she had an actual XO to do that menial, mind-numbing job, but that was life, duty called, in all its inglorious facets.

It was a good few hours before Nihlus came back. Shepard had not sent him a message requesting he return as soon as possible. She caught up to him in the shuttle bay as he was unpacking, just beginning the process of synchronizing the new components with the undamaged components of the rest of his suit.

One glance into what was now Wrex’ corner confirmed the krogan was not within ear shot. Shepard did not need everyone on board to know the details of what was going on. Nihlus was a bit of a special exception for obvious reasons.

She turned back to watching the turian work. It took a moment for her to note that the new plates would stand apart from all the others, because the old ones were covered in minute scratches and paint flaws, the hallmarks of armor that had seen things. Well, odds were, the new ceramics would wear in rapidly. He did not lead the easy life by any stretch.

“Shepard.” Nihlus said after some time in silence.

“Nihlus.” Shepard replied with a grin, though it faded quickly. “I got new orders.”

“Already?” he asked as he looked up from his work.

“No surprise there. Well… the Normandy is heading to the Artemis Tau cluster, Sparta system. I was tasked by Rear Admiral Kahoku with finding out what happened to a unit of his marines that went missing somewhere there.”

“Your admirals have you running such simple jobs?”

“Seemingly, but it gets complicated and curious. Yes, by all accounts this is a simple job, it ought to be simple. But, someone is stone-walling what ought to be routine. Now why would someone do that?” she asked as she folded her arms, her hands on her elbows. It was a rhetorical question. Shepard saw between the lines. Anyone would read between the lines. Someone somewhere is concealing something, and Rear Admiral Kahoku is digging where they did not want him to dig.

“The only reason I’m getting the job is because I have the one ship that can slip in, investigate, and get out without being seen. Strictly speaking I only take orders from Admiral Hackett, but this is a bit
of a special circumstance."

“Hackett must want you to investigate deeper, past the missing soldiers.”

“Yes, that’s the obvious take-away from this.” Shepard murmured, why else would the Normandy be mobilized? Admiral Hackett did not hand out assignments lightly and on a whim. She only got the job because it could not be done with the usual, open approach of sending in Captain Anderson or the sledgehammer approach of sending the Titanium Lady.

“This is an Alliance matter. Do you need me to stay out of it?” Nihlus wondered.

“That’s the thing; Rear Admiral Kahoku wanted me to request your assistance.” Her arms dropped to her sides as she shifted her weight from foot to foot. This was the part where things got a little awkward for her.

He hummed thoughtfully. “If I were to take this on as a Spectre investigation, you would have deniability; you can say I co-opted the Normandy.” Still, Shepard caught a flicker of his mandibles, a hint of amusement. “Most parties involved get deniability, save perhaps this Rear Admiral Kahoku.”

“I honestly think he’s already in too deep for deniability and he knows it.” Shepard mused; it truly was just one more political iceberg, and she had to dive in and try to find the bottom. She caught Nihlus’ gaze and held it, never one to outwardly ask whether he was in or out. First, she did not want him to think that her ability to investigate hinged on his involvement in any capacity. Second, there was also the potential blowback. The involvement of a turian Spectre in Alliance fleet politics would go over about as well as a lead balloon. Admiral Kahoku must be desperate if he was going this far. That meant that the iceberg was a big one.

“You are eager to get into this mess,” Nihlus stated, blunt as a hammer.

“Getting into these messes is why I got command. Welcome to the Normandy. Otherwise known as the posting where careers go to die. Our mission is simple, we get to risk our lives doing the sort of jobs that no one else will or wants to, and they get to deny knowing anything about it.” Shepard said as she idly wondered if Nihlus ever looked into the backgrounds of her marines. As macabre as it was to think of it like that, she could not think of any other way. The Normandy was a glorified terminus posting for a whole lot of people.

“When you put like that,” Nihlus chuckled. “Who am I to say no? I will give you whatever aid I can.”

“Thank you,” She said calmly.

“I assume you received some form of additional information,” he went on.

“Personnel files on the missing marines. Our immediate objective is to locate them. The rest… we’re going in blind. I think Rear Admiral Kahoku was worried about communication security.” It went without saying that some part of it had to be old fashioned information compartmentalization as well. The good old need to know basis.

“I want to look through them once I am done with my armor.”

“Done. They’ll be in the OD.”

Nihlus nodded his head but said nothing more as he turned back to his gear. Shepard took it as discussion over and turned on her heel to the elevator. She had a pilot to order about; someone had to get them off the Citadel and on their way.
The Normandy was on its way in a matter of hours. In the interest of not attracting attention by seeming to be in a rush Shepard prevented Nihlus from using his clearances to expedite the ship’s departure. They had to wait an hour just for the final clearances, it was a little annoying, but Shepard figured that for this she wanted to look like things were routine. Spectre clearances or not, odds were their comings and goings were still logged, and right now, Nihlus was between official assignments.

True to his words, Nihlus was on the OD couch, a datapad in hand, skimming over the materials Shepard got on the missing marines. She was at her terminal, going over routine reports. No matter how small, a ship generated routine department reports; the Normandy was running at peak efficiency from the engine room to the galley. It was a mundane task, but these sorts of things needed her attention and signature, part of the job of being the commanding officer.

The first part of the job was largely up to Joker and EDI. They were slated to arrive at Artemis Tau, Sparta system in the middle of the night cycle. The passage required jumping from the Serpent Nebula to Exodus Cluster, then Hades Gamma, and finally to Artemis Tau. The cluster’s systems each had one of the smaller, single-destination mass relays that could send and receive only from the Hades Gamma cluster. It was effectively a backwater system. The Sparta system was even more backwater than that, a quick look through the star charts told Shepard enough. It was a medium sized system with five planets and two asteroid belts. None of its planets came even vaguely close to garden class and even the system’s gas giant was a dodo, no good even as a helium-3 source. With a gravity well that choked its orbit with constantly colliding debris, just going near it was a hazard.

Shepard ordered Joker to rig the ship silent as soon as it was clear of the relay, not to link up with the local comm buys, and then put the ship in a drift in the system’s outer asteroid belt while he got some shut eye. They would hide amidst the rocks and trust the ship’s kinetic barriers to prevent a catastrophic collision while EDI kept passive sensor watch.

The reality of the small crew was coming to the fore. Shepard saw no need to run people on stims instead of sleep for this. She had suspicions about the marines. Their profiles indicated a hard working, loyal bunch, commanded by someone with a clean record. If they had failed to check in by now, odds were they would never check in. This mission was more recovery than search and rescue.

In the morning the Normandy emerged from the asteroid field set between Sparta’s fourth and fifth planets and begun routine search patterns. EDI did not pick up anyone coming or going overnight, so they had nothing to go on other than a few simple suppositions. The Normandy’s internal emission sinks were at about ten percent after a night of drifting, but they would begin to warm now that the ship was actually using the Tantalus drive.

Shepard decided to focus the search on the terrestrial planets, deeming the system’s gas giant, Ontamalca, a terminus option. If the marines went down in its gravity well, amidst its rings of debris and hundreds of satellites, their ship would be either pounded to pieces by impact with debris, or crushed in the gas giant’s thick atmosphere. There was little to do in either case, and even less evidence to collect. Any remains of a ship destroyed by repeated impacts would become nearly indistinguishable from the debris itself.

Thus Shepard just entered the OD after lunch when the Normandy entered orbit around Edolus, the system’s second planet. Nihlus was still lounging on the couch, poking at a datapad in a manner that told Shepard he might be busting boredom with a game rather than doing any sort of work. As she sat down at her desk, she heard an intercom scratch.

“Ugh, Commander, I think we have something,” Joker announced.
“What is it, Joker?” Shepard asked. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Nihlus set aside his datapad and sit up.

“EDI is picking up a faint signal from the surface. It broadcasts like a distress beacon, but it’s kind of… fuzzy.”


“Fuzzy, as in, it’s not clear. If that’s a distress beacon, it’s weird. EDI is triangulating it,” Joker replied.

“Good. Joker, when you have it, move into synchronous orbit, EDI, perform a quick high resolution scan of the ten kilometer radius around the source.”

“Will do,” Joker said.

“Of course, Commander.” EDI replied.

There was another scratch as the link closed. Shepard drummed her fingers on the surface of her desk as she pondered.

“What now?” Nihlus asked.

“We go and look around.” She replied.

“I am coming with you.”

His tone left no room for argument, even if Shepard wanted to argue. They had an agreement of sorts now, on paper this was something he took up, a trifle assignment answering a request. “I think now’s the time to bring the others in on what we’re doing here,” she said after a good long moment of thought.

Shepard summoned her away team to the OD. Aside from Nihlus, who was injecting himself into the job, she figured it best to involve the marines alone. This was not an assignment to take Tali on, and last she was aware, Garrus was busy with that self-chosen assignment regarding the main battery’s power draw in engineering. However she was not surprised when Wrex drifted in after the marines, wearing his full armor, and though it was cleaned and maintained, it made the krogan look positively enormous and intimidating in the confines of the small room.

“What’s going on, Skipper?” Ashley asked.

“Rear Admiral Kahoku ordered the Normandy to look for a unit of marines that went missing somewhere in this system. Earlier, EDI picked up what could be a distress beacon on the surface of the planet we are orbiting now.”

There was a moment of silence in which the marines exchanged glances.

“There is something going on here,” Shepard continued. “We’re getting this job because someone up high is stone-walling routine procedure. That alone is curious. Rear Admiral Kahoku also requested Nihlus’ involvement in the matter. Suffice to say, we are to keep quiet on the fact that we’re here at all.” She glanced at Wrex as she said that, because right then, that went double for him. She was only letting him sit in on this meeting because she assumed he was not pulling her leg when he said he was a professional. She expected a modicum of sensitivity for employer’s secrets from him; it was a
clause in his contract.

“Why would someone stone-wall this?” Jenkins wondered aloud. “This is just a search and rescue, right?”

Shepard envied Jenkins’ optimism. Search and rescue parameters were only employed when one expected to find survivors. Shepard had mentally moved this operation straight into recovery. “The missing marines were investigating something out here. It is reasonable to assume that’s connected.” She said, right now they did not need to know that Admiral Hackett would want her to look into exactly what the marines were investigating to begin with. There was something for doing jobs one step at a time.

She reached to the center of the coffee table and tapped the holo-projector there. A topographic map of the planet surface appeared in the air, with a red marker indicating the location of the beacon at the bottom of a flat plain. “Edolus, ladies and gentlemen. A barely-above-freezing wasteland, nearly no oxygen in its atmosphere and plenty of silicate dust to choke up everything. The gas giant of this system also pulls junk inward, so Edolus enjoys unremitting orbital bombardment. This is a topographic scan of the area around the signal in question, courtesy EDI. As you can see, there are no artificial structures to be had anywhere near the signal, save for this anomalous blip.” She paused there for a long moment, ostensibly to gather breath, but really, she wanted to see that initial reaction. “I am going out on a limb here and assume this is a vehicle, the blip is about the right shape.”

“Is the asteroid bombardment intense enough to bring down a Kodiak?” Ashley wondered.

Shepard leaned back into the couch. That was actually a pretty damn good question, especially considering a Kodiak is all they had to make entry themselves. If the marines had gone down on Edolus, what exactly brought and kept them down? “That’s one more piece of the puzzle that does not add up. The kinetic barriers on armored personnel carriers and shuttles ought to be enough to protect them from everything but a bumpy ride.”

“Seems to me that there is definitely foul play involved,” Wrex grumbled. “I don’t like the look of that.” He flicked a finger at the holographic projection.

“Why is that, Wrex?”

The krogan made a huffing noise, Shepard had the impression that he was not keen on talking more than he had to, but if he had input, she would get it out of him. At the end of the day, he was centuries old, and Shepard thought that if something bothered someone like that, one ought to take notice.

“A low plain, surrounded by crags, and filled with silicates; prime location for a thresher nest.”

Shepard saw the marines freeze in place, she herself merely blinked. A thresher maw? “How certain are you, Wrex?”

“I’d bet a big jug of the finest ryncol on it.” The krogan replied. “The maws burrow non-stop. As older tunnels collapse and they go deeper, the terrain sinks. Look at the surrounding ground levels.”

Shepard hummed as she turned the projected hologram and checked the elevation readings EDI got. To her surprise, Wrex was right. The signal was coming from a plain that was considerably lower than any open expanse surrounding it. While such depression could be caused by a large meteor impact, the surrounding crags did not look like the walls of an impact crater. Even a weathered impact crater would still maintain something of a caldera-like appearance. “That complicates things,” she said.
Wrex snorted. “It will know we’re there the second we land by the ground vibrations, and it will attack, so we kill it, that’s not complicated.”

Shepard contained her urge to glare at Wrex. He made it sound like killing a thresher maw was like swatting a fly. “We do not have the numbers and materiel for that.” She replied. “Alliance protocol calls for armored vehicles and heavier weaponry than what we got. It’s been the way to handle maws since Akuze.” Shepard looked over the marines; she imagined they must be feeling more than a little nervous now. How did one go about killing a giant, territorial, aggressive burrowing worm that could spit acid without at least a Mako or two? Death by a thousand gunshots was hardly practical against something that nasty. On Akuze, three of those things obliterated a whole nascent colony and then the fifty marines sent in as backup.

“Maws are lithotrophs,” Nihlus slipped in casually.

Shepard spared him a look only to catch the tail end of the teeth-baring smirk gave her. Did Nihlus have some idea of what to do? Probably had, but she would not ask openly. Turians had to have a way of handling maws, the creatures were ubiquitous enough. Thus, it was likely that Turians had to put a few down. She would guess their approach likewise involved heavy ordinance if not explosives. Suddenly Shepard froze in her seat. Explosives! They had quite a bit of that on board. “I just had a thought. If it eats inorganic substances, we bait it with a crate full of explosives on a remote detonator. What are the odds of it surviving that?” She announced.

Wrex chuckled, “Who’s walking the explosives onto the field?”

“No one. We have a Kodiak. We suspend the crate from the shuttle, fly overhead, bait the maw out with a few smaller demolition charges, and drop the bait. Even if it just lands on its head, the explosion ought to do the trick. Now if the maw eats it…” All Shepard knew of maws was what most knew. They had a tough outer carapace evolved for burrowing and extreme conditions. Their spores could cling to the outside of a ship, be carried through the freezing vacuum of outer space, and still produce a maw larva the next time the ship landed. Nevertheless, they were living entities, meaning their insides were a lot squishier.

“Assuming there is only one maw here,” Nihlus said.

“In a nest this size? Probably one.” Wrex replied. “Pack them too tight and they will turn on each other.”

“All right then. Barring any more ideas, the explosives seem to be our best bet.” Shepard stepped in. “Now we ought to decide our team composition.”

“I am flying the shuttle,” Nihlus said with a tone of finality.

Shepard nodded; she was not going to argue with that.

“You are not leaving me on this ship while hunting a thresher maw,” Wrex added.

Shepard looked from one to the other and wondered if she really ought to involve any more people in this one. This was essentially a highly dangerous scouting run, she needed to go down and have a look at the beacon. Nihlus flying the shuttle was given; he was a qualified small craft pilot. Wrex acted like he would not take being left on board sitting down, and he was powerful, a biotic on top, she could use that sort of power.

“We ought to take both shuttles, and two teams.” Kaidan spoke up for the first time in the whole conversation. “Maws spray acid. What if it damages the drop shuttle?”
“Valid point, Kaidan.” Shepard conceded.

“We can also prepare more charges and keep them on the second shuttle if the first drop fails, or if there is more than one maw.” He went on.

“Okay. That’s what we’ll do. Bravo team will handle our backup shuttle. It should not be as dangerous if you stay on the crags. Any questions?”

There was silence in the room; Shepard could see that Jenkins was trying his best not to fidget, but if Shepard had her way, he would not see any action. She intended to have her way. A thresher maw was hardly something she wanted to face on foot, ever. “Well… that’s that then, we have a plan. I need time to prepare the explosives.” She announced.

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Shepard was in the shuttle bay in half an hour. She had to pull out the entire supply of explosives on board, something that should have lasted her for a good number of missions. Still, she figured if this worked, no one would bat an eye. In fact, it might be something to brag about. Thresher maws required more than just a good aim to take down, even she knew that.

Wrex was at the armory table with Ashley, checking up on his shotgun, while the woman prepared their weapons. The krogan looked pleased for someone who was going into the heat of battle with uncertain odds.

Kaidan was with the shuttles. All Kodiaks had anchorage hooks at the bottom, normally used to secure the shuttles, but at times also used to carry light loads. Thus Kaidan was fast at work putting together a four point cable harness and a quick release switch that would allow her to drop the explosives at will.

Shepard was layering packets of demolition grade plastic explosives into packing crates. She had already prepared a honeycomb-cell, padded crate with a whole bunch of concussive charges that would be dropped to try and flush the maw to the surface. After that, they still had enough explosives on board to make three bomb crates. For those, she figured leaving gaps in a tesseract-like shape would protect the explosives from contact with the maw’s acid long enough for detonation, ideally in the maw’s esophagus, or wherever else the maw swallowed things into.

Nihlus stood nearby, watching her work. He did not offer his own input into the matter, but he was definitely in supervisor mode. Shepard paid him little attention as she was not the type to become distracted if someone was watching her work.

After packing all three crates, she moved on to assembling the detonators. As a matter of safety, she would not arm the explosives now. The plastic explosives were inert, requiring heat and a current to pass through them for detonation. No bump, or even a direct hit from a weapon could make them go off accidently, but still Shepard took no chances. These explosives were powerful, as powerful as could be, short of thermobaric charges, which would fizzle in a low-oxygen environment.

An hour later, Shepard was in her armor, complete with a harness, and in the shuttle, double checking gear. On the ceiling inside the Kodiak there was a rail, she made sure to inspect it. Normally used to for parachute deploying static lines during low altitude infantry inserts and cargo drops, it would have to bear her whole weight as she leaned out over the edge of the shuttle to drop the bomb. Magnetic grip boots were well and nice, but in this case they would be awkward, and Shepard was all for redundant backups.

The atmosphere in the shuttle bay was palpably tense when they finally gathered in their gear,
helmets on, to depart. As planned, Shepard, Nihlus, and Wrex took one shuttle, while Kaidan, Ashley, and Jenkins took the other. All the explosives were loaded onto the second, to be kept as far away from the maw as possible, until needed. The VI pilot would fly them to a large escarpment that EDI picked, where they would be safe from the maw, but close enough that if need be, the drop shuttle could land for a box swap.

“I still think this is a round-about way of doing things, but... I want to see if it actually works.” Wrex announced as he stepped onto the shuttle behind her. “If it doesn’t, we do things my way.”

Shepard did not need to ask what his way entailed.

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Edolus’ atmosphere was a sickly dark yellow tinged with brown that skewed one’s vision by altering the colors of everything. Meteors streaked across the sky in regular intervals, and the shuttle shook practically the whole way down. When they descended down to the cloud layers things only became more unpleasant. The clouds themselves were made of fine dust whipped up by ever-present winds, not water vapor. Everything was partly shrouded in a silicate haze.

Shepard was on her feet even before the shuttle reached what she deemed operational altitude. Wrex was on his feet a moment later, the magnetic pads in the soles of his boots holding him tight to the deck, even if it gave him a somewhat goofy manner of walking. Shepard hooked herself to the overhead rail, double checked the D-rings on her harness, and triggered the hatch release. There was an instant blast of wind and silicate dust to the visor of her helmet. It howled across the external microphone and in her ear, but she ignored it.

Nihlus put the Kodiak into a relatively leisurely oblong holding pattern over their destination so they could do some aerial scouting. Shepard tugged at her line one more time before she dared to let it take her weight so she could peer down.

“I was right about the thing EDI picked up,” She announced after a moment. “That there is an M-29A Grizzly—well... the remains of one.” She did not need her HUD magnification to recognize the monstrous and quite ugly gray vehicle. This particular Grizzly had been ripped apart and charred in places. Its wedge-shaped nose section lay upside-down a few meters in front of the wheeled aft section, and one of the six solid barrel tires was reduced to scant chunks of black material clinging to bare hub. The vehicle’s turret and gun lay some distance away from the body; the gun’s barrel looked to have been bent by impact. Amidst the wreckage was cylindrical tower construct sticking out of the sand.

“Shuttle A to Shuttle B, status report.”

“This is shuttle B; we’re in position, Commander, awaiting further instructions.” Kaidan replied.

“Stand by, Shuttle B. We’re coming in.” Shepard tapped at the comm link, switching channels, “Nihlus, Shuttle B is in position. Move us there. We’ll mount a crate and go fishing.”

“Got it.”

The shuttle moved with a graceful fluidity characteristic of the VI guidance system, but Shepard knew that it was not flying by wire right then. She pulled herself back in and shut the hatch.

Shuttle B was waiting for them when they landed, and Kaidan had the cable harness already laid out, ready for attachment. Ashley had one of the bomb crates out, holding her rifle in one hand, and a detonator in the other. While Kaidan attached the cables to the drop shuttle, Jenkins brought the flush
charges over, and Ashley helped Shepard put a bomb crate into its sling. Once there, Shepard popped the crate open, attached the detonator, and made sure it was synched to her omni-tool. A test of the quick release switch and its synch mechanism later and the bomb sling was in place.

Within five minutes the drop shuttle’s thrusters fired and the vehicle rose into the air again. The box ended up suspended some ten meters below the shuttle, out of the way of the intense heat of the ventral take-off-and-landing thrusters. So far, so good, Shepard thought to herself. The ventral thrusters had been a concern, but Kaidan had chosen the cable length well. Now their concern was having a long pendulum affecting the aerodynamics of the shuttle in windy conditions. Thought she doubted the box would act like a sail, it had little surface area.

“Nihlus, fly us at forty meters.” Shepard murmured when the shuttle resumed a holding pattern over the plain.

“Will do. *Now this is probably a bad time to ask, but… can this thing take the acid spit?”* he wondered.

Shepard hooked herself onto the overhead rail, “We’re about to find out, aren’t we?” she said as she opened the hatch. She was acutely aware that the Grizzly below them seemingly lost its fight with the maw. Then again, the Grizzly was an older generation vehicle. The Kodiak was state of the art, tested in and able to withstand the hellish conditions on Venus. “Take us over to those jutting rocks; I don’t want to flush the maw too close to the beacon or the remains.”

Nihlus did not bother to reply, but as the shuttle turned Shepard reached for the flushing charges and armed two. They were designed to explode on impact, so she just needed to drop them in a timely manner. “Time to go fishing,” she murmured.

“Throw them at those rocks.” Wrex offered, though he sounded vaguely bored.

“Good idea,” Shepard replied. The porous sandy surface would probably absorb the vibrations more than transfer them. Some part of Shepard even doubted the flushing charges would work, but she had to try the easy way, before she went for the dangerous.

The shuttle passed over the rocks and Shepard dropped the first charge, waited two seconds, and dropped the second. Seconds later the first exploded in the sand with enough force to send a plume into the air. The second hit some meters away, creating another sand geyser, but both missed the rocks. Shepard hummed; the wind was pretty bad here. “I’ve rung the doorbell. Now let’s see if anything’s home.”

She watched the sand as the shuttle’s thrusters hummed below them. There was nothing for a good thirty seconds. Then, quite suddenly a faint ripple passed through the dunes. The level of the sand rose and fell in a wave-like motion.

“There’s definitely a thresher down there,” Wrex mumbled.

Shepard reached into the box for another flushing charge, armed it, and threw. The small bomb took a few seconds to free-fall, but it exploded, sending another sand geyser into the air. Instantly the sand churned, writhing, and the maw erupted to the surface, tendrils flailing, front claw-limbs raised, blue phosphorescent tongue-like tentacle twisting through the air. Shepard wondered if maws made a sound and if they could be heard. Right then, there was none, but they were dozens of meters in the air, in air-tight suits, with thrusters vibrating below them, and the wind howling across their microphones.

Then the maw stretched out, pulled its head back and spat. The shuttle veered to avoid the spray.
Shepard grabbed the hand-railing by the hatch, though it quickly became apparent that it was an unnecessary maneuver. The spray of acid lost the fight to gravity and fell without reaching them. Shepard glanced down; it had not hit the bomb crate either.

“Dip us a little lower, five meters or so, let’s see if we can get this thing to bite.” she ordered into her comm link.

The shuttle turned and the pitch of the thrusters changed as it slowly descended. The maw dipped below the sand again, and a moment later erupted some meters elsewhere, reared its head, and spat again, throwing a spray of acid into the air. The shuttle jerked, the crate below swung hard on its tether. Shepard noticed that the maw’s head followed their movement. She raised her hand and brought up her omni-tool, the quick release switch’s signal was nice and strong.

The maw dove under the sand again, and came up a third time, near where it had first emerged. Shepard could not be sure it was aware of the crate, but it seemed aware that they were here, above it, just out of reach. It clearly did not like them being there either.

She glanced down. The crate had started to swing on its cables like a pendulum, so maybe she could use its momentum to hit the maw in the head. Then the idea was tossed out the window, if she missed it, or if the maw went under, they would have to reload. Instead she reached into the box and pulled out another of the small flushing charges. A moment of contemplation later, she armed it, wound up, and threw.

This time the charge fell faster and hit the worm in the neck, where it exploded. The maw flailed as black gunk and acid splashed into the air.

“I am going five meters lower,” Nihlus announced.

The shuttle descended as the maw reeled. Then the beast swung its head as if hocking the mother of all loogies and unleashed another spray of acid. Shepard pulled herself into the shuttle with a jerk as the green liquid flew right past their side, narrowly missing them.

“You made it mad,” Wrex said calmly.

“I’m going to make it dead,” Shepard replied.

Wrex chuckled.

The crate swung, the shuttle turned ninety degrees, to pass over the maw. Shepard saw the beast’s head move side to side, like a demented cobra measuring distance for a strike, or more likely measuring where to hock its next wad of acid. The crate swung again, she raised her other hand to the omni-tool. Would she have a moment? The maw flicked its tendrils, jerked its head, and spat.

The shuttle jerked, Shepard did not see any spit fly past them. The thrusters kicked and for a split of a second she felt her stomach rise into her throat in that tell-tale sensation of zero-g. She stuck her head out over the side and looked down. The maw was right below them, blue phosphorescent tentacle flailing, was it a tongue? Did it use that thing like a snake used its? The crate swung. Shepard hit the switch. The quick-release sprung open, the sling cables unhooked, and the crate tumbled free. The maw jerked its head, tongue-tendril flicking through the air.

Then suddenly its head dipped, vicious front limbs angling apart, its maw opened wide, and it snatched the free-falling crate from the air with deft ease before it dove into the sand.

“Nihlus, it swallowed the bomb! Bring us up!” Shepard called.
Wrex ducked back in, heading for the closest seat and harnesses. The thrusters roared as the shuttle’s nose pitched up. Shepard switched over controls on her omni-tool. The bomb signal was green, but how long it would stay that way, she was not sure. She glanced down, measuring the elevation they had on the sands below. She did not want to be too close to that much demolition grade plastic when it went off. The signal indicator shifted yellow. She jammed her thumb into the firing key before she lost it entirely.

A breathless heartbeat later the whole shuttle bucked and she was thrown back into the hold with the force of the explosion shockwave. Her tether stretched like the string on an instrument, but the rings and the rail held. Then the craft leveled out. Shepard rolled into her hands and feet and scrambled to the edge.

The sand dune the worm had been burrowing through had turned into a crater. There were bits of black chitin scattered about, and some way off to the side was the unmistakable, spike-like appendage that should frame a maw’s bulbous head, the other spike lay in a completely opposite direction. Right in the middle of the devastation was the maw’s body. It lay motionless, part-buried in the sand, bulbous head gone; all that remained was a gory stump of ripped chitin and raw meat that oozed black fluids onto the sand around it.

“It worked.” Wrex muttered.

Shepard looked up at him. “You sound surprised.”

“A little. I did not think you could get it to just swallow the bomb.”

“We have a problem,” Nihlus announced from the cockpit.

“What is it?” Shepard asked.

“Remember that jerk, before you blew the maw? The acid hit us. Now the explosion knocked some thermal plating off.”

“Well that just means we can’t make atmospheric entry with this shuttle until we get the plates replaced.” Shepard replied.

“Some of the acid is still there; the sensors are showing continuing deterioration in the underlying armor. We do not want the mass effect field collapsing if the acid reaches something vital.”

Shepard froze; yes she could see the problem. The Kodiak was counter-gravitic in its truest sense; it had enough eezo to negate the entirety of its mass. Yet its thrusters were only strong enough to move it with the eezo core doing its job. If the mass effect field failed, the shuttle would tumble out of the sky like an anvil. “Alright, set us down. The sand ought to wick away, if not neutralize the acid.”

“Got it,” Nihlus replied.

“That answers that question then, doesn’t it?” Wrex asked.

“The explosion did more damage than the acid.” Shepard replied. She had to detonate when she did, because if she allowed signal loss, even for an instant, she risked never reacquiring it. The maw’s acid might wear through the crate, cross the gap, and go to work on the explosives and detonator. There had been no other choice, and all considering, a bit of damage to the shuttle was no problem; they had a spare for a reason.
They were on the ground in minutes, and a quick call got the other shuttle to come down and join them. Shepard was honestly glad that this planet had no breathable atmosphere; she did not want to know how ungodly bad the maw’s carcass must smell right now.

They managed to lure it well enough away from the destroyed Grizzly that the explosion merely shifted the sand and the loose debris a little. The beacon had tipped a little, looking like the leaning tower of Pisa, but it was still upright and still operational. All considering the job was a total success.

Wrex was out of the shuttle the second it touched down and made his way toward what remained of the maw. Shepard emerged at a slightly more leisurely pace. Her first order of business was investigating the wreck of the Grizzly. Nihlus remained in the cockpit, and when she cleared the immediate landing area she felt the shuttle come back to life. The ventral thrusters pulsed with the mass effect field turned low, effectively churning the sand below the shuttle.

“Commander, that was… something,” Ashley said as they approached the destroyed infantry vehicle.

Shepard had no doubts what the woman meant. “I’m glad there was just one. The Kodiak took some damage.”

Ashley glanced back toward the shuttle. “Is that why the Spectre is whipping up a sandstorm?”

“The maw’s acid hit us. I think Nihlus is trying to get the sand into the nooks, to wick it away”

“Oh. Well… I don’t envy whoever has to fix it then.”

“We’ll probably have to go back to Arcturus,” Shepard replied as she circled the nose section of the destroyed Grizzly. Despite the fact that it had landed upside-down, she quickly found out that the hatch that once connected the forward and aft sections was largely in tact, the vehicle suffered a catastrophic, but clean split.

The bottom of the section, now on top, was coated with a thickened goop that a cursory scan with her omni-tool identified as a mix of maw acid and omni-gel. The crew clearly attempted to neutralize the acid after the first hit, though it did not work, the acidity reading of the goop was a zero on the pH scale.

She made sure to get a real good scan of the hatch before trying the lock. It took some effort, and laying some weight into it, but the door finally gave way. What greeted her was rather ugly. There were bodies here, the driver, and whom she assumed to be the commanding officer. Both hung upside-down, still strapped into their seats. A cursory pass of her omni-tool merely confirmed what her eyes already saw, both of them were dead. She glanced back toward the aft section.

“Oh God, they’re…”

“Unfortunately.” Shepard replied as she spared Ashley a glance. When she turned back to the bodies, she went straight for the small compartments in their armor that ought to contain their dog tags. With both sets in hand, she brought up a list of the missing marines. It took forty seconds to confirm that the bodies belonged to the unit’s commanding officer and subordinate. “We’ve found them.” She announced, as she slipped the dog tags back into their proper compartments. It was not her right to remove them.

“Did the maw destroy the Grizzly?” Kaidan wondered.

“The acid says so. We need to count the bodies, for that we need to get into the aft section.”
“On it,” Kaidan turned around and Shepard watched him make his way across the sand.

Shepard turned back to the cockpit, it was awkward, and standing on what ought to have been the top, moving around the seats and the odds bits of tech underfoot. A quick poke told her that despite the power units being in the front, and theoretically still able to power the nose section, there was no power to be had, the consoles were dead.

That meant she would have to dig for the black box, and right then that meant some climbing, as it was under a panel at the driver’s feet. She did not want to go at the other hatch, which was probably covered in acid.

She was trying to work the bright orange metal box free of its moorings five minutes later when she heard the communication link scratch.

“Commander, there are more bodies in the aft section, two more individuals on the list of missing marines,” Kaidan announced. “The gunner and vehicle engineer.”

Shepard hummed, “Good work. This is interesting. We have the CO, the driver, the gunner, and engineer. This vehicle was in combat when it was hit. The others must be nearby.” Shepard paused then. They must have engaged the maw on foot, with the vehicle as support. The bodies would at best be buried in the sand. A desert was a moving entity; the wind constantly shifted the dunes. At worst? They might never recover all the bodies, doubly so after her stunt with the explosives and Nihlus’ churning up a sandstorm, to say nothing of the maw. Shepard grimaced at the thought.

“Did the maw...” Jenkins cut in, his voice quivering, unable to finish his question.

“Eat them?” Wrex offered.

“Not helping, Wrex.” Shepard rebuffed.

“He is going to have to learn. You can’t mother him, Shepard.” The mercenary replied dryly.

“I’m sorry I asked,” Jenkins mumbled.

“We should walk the perimeter, see if we can pick up their armor locator signals,” Kaidan offered.

Shepard had the distinct impression that Kaidan was once again doing what he could to divert attention away from a potential situation, this time Wrex’ insensitivity.

“I’ll help.” Ashley added after a moment.

Shepard did not reply as she turned back to the task of getting the black box free. She was not happy right now, everything pointed to a rather grueling battle with the maw that the marines lost. So who had set up the distress beacon? The data recordings on the black box would help reconstruct the final hours of the vehicle’s life, including where it had been, what it had scanned, and the conversations in the cockpit.

She finally pulled the box out and unplugged it from its cradle. The status on it was blinking; the box’s own battery pack and beacon were still signaling its location, seeking someone to tell its tale to. She carefully made her way outside with the box under her arm. “I got the operations recorder. Once we analyze the data inside, we will know what happened in the last few hours of this Grizzly’s life,” she announced.

“So what now, Shepard?” Wrex asked.
“Now? I need to look at that beacon. Something is rubbing me wrong here. If all the marines died fighting the maw, who set it up? And most importantly… when?” Shepard did not say it, but she had a bad feeling.

The beacon’s current form was already peculiar. The Grizzly’s black box was pinging, already a beacon. The marines would have used the onboard beacons. The vehicle had to have been dropped off by a ship; one would assume there had been an agreement to come pick them up. A ship in orbit that had reasons to look for a vehicle’s beacons would find them. So why bother with a long range column beacon like this one? One and one were adding up to three here, and she did not like it.

As she made her way toward the pillar and the console built into it, she let her train of thought run away a little. If the beacon was not set up by the marines, who did? When did they set it up? Why? Answering those question would determine just how much foul play was involved, and how much deeper this iceberg went.

She touched the beacon’s console, and it folded open, proffering its keyboard to her. The status display brought up the immediate data, the frequency, the message, the signal strength, and other options. Shepard hummed, the frequencies used were definitely Alliance, but she could see why Joker called the signal fuzzy. The cipher used was outdated. Still, on the surface the beacon looked, felt, and acted like a long-range Alliance distress beacon. The encryption error could be explained by an old model tower, one that operated on old firmware.

She switches screens again and accessed the operation log, it was a little less obvious place to look, but the device logged all the times it was broadcasting. Here she encountered a roadblock, the logs were password protected and encrypted. Shepard turned to her omni-tool, firing up her decryption program. Within minutes she identified the device’s software, and thus what sort of encryption method it could have. It confirmed the tower had older firmware, but that made things a little easier for her. After that it was a matter of strong-arming through it, cracking the password. It took another ten minutes, but she got in. The screen flashed once, twice, and then opened its log.

“I knew it,” she murmured to herself.

“Commander?” Kaidan asked.

Shepard froze, she forgot about the voice activated comm links in her moment of triumph. “I got into the beacon’s logs. And well… there is a copious amount of foul play involved. This beacon was first activated seven days ago.”

“It must have lured your men onto the nest,” Nihlus said.

“Indeed, but wait, there’s more, it was briefly disconnected two days ago, and reconfigured to broadcast a different signal.”

“Luring… us here.” Kaidan said.

“That’s just fucked up.” Ashley added.

“You said, it Gunny. Someone wanted these men, and whoever came looking for them, quite dead. They also wanted it to look like an unfortunate accident.” The iceberg definitely looked to go down nice and deep. “This, the stone-walling on the Alliance side…” she glanced down at the orange device tucked under her arm. Would it elucidate this? She doubted. The marines probably did not realize they had walked onto a trap until it was simply too late.

She hummed; Rear Admiral Kahoku knew something. His desperation was suddenly much more
ominous. Did he know that he was sending the Normandy straight into a trap? Did he know he sent his men into this trap? Someone definitely knew they would be here, knew there was a thresher nest here, and was pants-on-head crazy enough to walk out onto said nest to set this thing up. Well, she supposed they could have used a remote controlled vehicle carrying the active beacon, but that was beside the point.

“Commander, I got the armor locator signals.” Kaidan announced. “I counted the individual pings. The numbers add up. The marines are here... all around us.”

“Log their locations, Kaidan. The suits might lose power soon.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Kaidan replied.

Shepard clenched her fists; someone was going to pay for this. She would call for backup once back on the Normandy. Nihlus’ involvement meant that now they had the right to say he called the Alliance to retrieve their dead. The bodies had to be retrieved and returned to their families. These marines deserved proper burial.

“I think we’re about done here. I’m going to let EDI download everything inside this beacon, and then I’m going to shut it down.” She announced as she brought up her omni-tool, and then reached to her helmet to switch frequencies, contact the Normandy. There was blood on these sands, the blood of good marines murdered for what they probably did not know. She would get to the bottom of it. Nothing and no one could hide the truth from her. The lost would not become the forgotten.

Chapter End Notes

Author Notes: The lore squirrels out there will know where this will go. I only have to say that much thought was put into incorporating the relevant side mission material into something. ME1 really did not do much with some of its side missions, despite how much potential some of them had. They were flavoring. Well, I’m making a dish out of them. My own garnishes are coming, stick around!

General Notes: None this time…

Chapter Notes: Explosives – Conventional explosives are a mix of “fuel” chemicals, and an “oxidizer”, i.e. source of oxygen, which is needed for the burn reaction. Thermobarics are all “fuel”, and use oxygen from the surrounding environment. This makes them more powerful per equal mass compared to conventional explosives, but it also limits them. Furthermore, thermobarics kill two-fold in a confined space, if the shockwave/debris doesn’t do it, the reaction will burn away the oxygen if the containment is not lost. Thermobarics would be absolutely nasty on a space station/ship.

pH Scale – For those not in the know, the pH scale measures the acidity or alkalinity of substances. It goes from 0 to 14, with 0 being very acidic and 14 being very alkaline, with neutral being in the 6.6 - 7.3 range. Bleach is 12, very alkaline, while tomato juice is a 4, considered acidic.
Found

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I do no own Mass Effect, I do not claim to own Mass Effect, I am only doing this for fun.

Author Notes: There is very little I can say here now, the mysteries are about to deepen, and the corruption goes deep.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**Episode 15:** Found

The shuttles returned to the Normandy an hour later, covered top to bottom in silicate dust. The drop shuttle’s damage was apparently not as light as Shepard assumed; Nihlus said there was a loss in propulsive thrust during take off. As far as Shepard was concerned, that shuttle was officially labeled out of service until it could be repaired.

The away team fared no better, she could see it in their body language. Kaidan was even quieter than usual, unwilling to banter with Ashley. Shepard had observed that the two worked well together, so when they were not ribbing each other at regular intervals, in their own ways, it was something to note. Ashley was tense like a bowstring. There was a cold, tempered sort of fury there. The revelation that the situation involved something as foul as a trap luring fellow marines to their deaths clearly and rightly bothered her on a personal level. The biggest change was Jenkins; he barely said a word at all. Jenkins normally held back in the field, deferring to the higher ranks, but now, even the piece of thresher maw chitin he cut for himself as a souvenir could not inspire him to be his excitable, jovial self. That bothered Shepard enough. Somehow Jenkins’ excitability had become a bit of barometer. It was a sad day when even he could not muster optimism.

Shepard sighed and stepped out of the drop shuttle, already reaching for her helmet seals. She took it off, and as a matter of habit raked a hand through her hair, and sand seemed to pour onto her head from underneath the ceramic plates on her forearm. It was then, looking at her arms that she realized she was covered head to toe. There was silicate dust crammed into every nook and crevasse, even in the weave of her undersuit. Shepard heaved another sigh, mentally noting to add that to the list of things to scrub down. So many things required a thorough scrub down she did not know where to start.

“Spirits, that is foul,” she heard Nihlus grouse somewhere behind her.

“Heh. Thresher acid, the smell is worse than getting it on you.” Wrex supplied smugly.

Shepard would have grinned, if she at all had the energy. Right now, there was a huge list of important things to do, and a dubious amount of energy left in her to do it with. She needed to get cleaned up and get on the task of calling for backup. The Alliance had to send someone to retrieve the bodies and secure the evidence. “EDI, I want you to maintain passive observation. If you pick up a ship, any ship, entering this system, I want to know, immediately.”

“Of course, Commander.” The AI replied quietly.
“Also can someone take the operations recorder up to the OD?” she wondered.

“On it, Commander!” Jenkins called back.

“We will have to stay here as long as we can safely maintain stealth. Meantime, everyone, get cleaned up and get some shut eye. We can debrief after all of us don’t look like we’re about to keel over.”

Nods went around and the group scattered. Ashley collected the weapons from Kaidan and Jenkins, forming a pile at the work table. Shepard left her twins and Vincent on another worktable. She would come down to clean them herself. She was surprised when Nihlus’ shotgun, assault rifle, and side-arm joined her weapons. Wrex went off to his corner of the shuttle bay, his shotgun in his hands.

When she turned to go, Jenkins was standing next to the elevator; operations recorder under his arm, holding the elevator door open for her. “Thanks,” she said.

“Doing my job, Commander.”

They took the elevator silently, with Jenkins exiting on the CIC while Shepard continued up to her loft.

Shepard was back in the shuttle bay an hour and a half later, having showered, cleaned her armor, and then gone to the mess to get a strong cup of black coffee. It was not as good as stimulants, but it would allow her to hit her second wind, push through tired and into stubbornly-refusing-to-sleep. During ICT she had pulled days of training runs and all terrain slogging on an hour of sleep here and there. It was pretty much a case of either learning to push through tired, or breaking. Those who did the latter were not N7 material. ICT was training in hell by sadists, with the idea that if a trainee could survive it, they could survive anything.

Wrex was nowhere in sight, but Nihlus was at the maintenance area worktables, seated on a stool, a weapon cleaning kit spread out on the work table in front of him, his assault rifle disassembled and in the midst of cleaning. She was surprised to see Garrus was in the shuttle bay as well. The drop shuttle was raised off the deck in its gantry cradle, and Garrus was below, inspecting the damage.

“Before you ask, Vakarian decided to do that on his own.” Nihlus muttered quietly enough by way of greeting.

Shepard hummed, not at all surprised that he either heard her, or quite more likely picked up her soap.

Garrus looked up from his work. “Commander!” he called.

“Garrus.” Shepard replied.

“He is also upset that we went without him. Still does not trust me with you all alone.” Nihlus finished, flashing a teeth-baring smirk.

The other turian froze for all of a split second, but then the moment was gone and anger flashes instead. “Yes, because this-” he flicked a hand in the vague direction of the shuttle, “does much to encourage confidence in your skills as a pilot.”

Shepard sighed, Nihlus was at it again, and Garrus’ temper was up in an instant.
“Very upset.”

“Last I heard you also wrecked your ship,” Garrus fired.

“My Defiant was shot down!” Nihlus barked back, all bland smugness gone in an instant. “The fact that I am here ought to tell you enough about my skills as a pilot!” Nihlus rebuffed sharply. “You on the other hand—”

“Oh for heaven’s sake you two… just stop!” Shepard cut in before they could go past mere sharp words. She could let Nihlus constitute fact, but she drew the line at fanning the flames further. “Nihlus, stop being an ass. You started this argument. And Garrus… while I appreciate the thought, we do not have spare parts aboard to replace the damaged armor and thermal paneling. We’ll be returning to Arcturus for that.”

A silence settled in the shuttle bay. Shepard did not say it, but she thought it. The Kodiak was a relatively new vehicle. Bringing one in, damaged by a thresher maw, would interest the engineers. Devising effective protection against maws was something the Alliance was looking into. After what they had seen today, after Akuze, Shepard thought those defensive means were sorely needed. She would supply the raw data if it helped. As long as the Normandy got a second shuttle in some form, the R&D lab geeks could even keep that one.

Garrus drew near and stopped on the other side of the armory worktables. “Are you alright, Commander?” he asked.

“I’m just tired, that’s all. Too much to do. Too little time to do it in.” She pulled up a second stool and reached for the cleaning supplies Ashley left out for the benefit of those whose weapons she did not maintain herself. The growing collection was something. It had started with bottles of lubricants and tools specifically required for Shepard’s weapons, but now the gunnery chief left out the tools for all their weapons. She could say anything about being uncomfortable with aliens, but little things like these showed that it was slowly going away, replaced with an odd sort of still-only-professional consideration. Shepard was okay with that, everything had to start somewhere.

“What happened down there?” Garrus asked after a long moment of silence.

Shepard looked up from disassembling Dex. She honestly wondered if reading one more person into this situation was a good idea. Then, she figured that plenty of people knew already. There was no keeping a secret on a ship this small for very long. Hell, she had a feeling that Wrex would probably recount the destruction of the maw if asked. Garrus could piece things together from that along with other hearsay and bits of evidence if he put his mind to it, which he probably would. There was ample evidence in the damage done to the shuttle alone.

“It was a mess,” she prefaced before she launched into explaining what had gone on down there, and what they had seen.

~          *          ~          ~          *          ~          ~          *          ~

In the end, Shepard ended up working well into the night. After cleaning her weapons, she returned to the OD to write her report. It was an exercise in some form of masochism to force her mind through that, but it had to be done. It had to be as detailed as possible, thus written fresh. Still, an hour into it, things began to swim. She had to down another black coffee just to stay awake at her terminal. The report needed to be finished. The information Kaidan logged, especially the armor beacons, had to be forwarded to Rear Admiral Kahoku, he would send someone to do the grim task of digging for bodies.
The Grizzly’s operations recorder was sitting on the coffee table untouched. She had only disconnected its beacon so that it would not blow the Normandy’s stealth. Shepard knew that it was not up to her to remove the recorder, but in her defense, that thing had too much vital evidence to be left lying around where foul play was involved. Someone had played tricks with the signal tower. They might even know that the tower was disconnected. She could not leave the orange box in its place, lest by the time the recovery crew got to Edolus it might be tampered with. She made a point of explaining that in her report. Truthfully, she could not fully trust the recovery crew either; one person on someone else’s payroll could do much damage right under the noses of a whole group. She did not put that in her report.

It was the middle of the night shift when Shepard passed EDI her finished report, with instructions to send it the instant they jumped out of the Sparta system and the Normandy could link to a comm buoy without blowing stealth. With that done, she was all too happy to see her bed, and was asleep almost as soon as her head hit the pillow.

The next morning, the ship was on its way to Arcturus, though they had to make a stop-over to discharge static from the Tantalus drive and the stored heat in the IES. Fortunately the Hades Gamma’s Antaeus system had a gas giant with an atmosphere conducive to the former without undue hazard to the ship. The latter involved opening conduits through which heat stored in the IES flowed to the thermal plates lining the Normandy’s hull, allowing the near-absolute zero void of space to wick it away. It was not something that could be done just anywhere. The hull was normally super-cooled, to disguise the Normandy’s profile. When the ship was venting, the hull glowed on thermal sensors like a candle in a dark room.

They arrived at Arcturus in the afternoon. With her report sent in the morning, Shepard was not surprised that there was a cradle waiting for the Normandy rather very close to the station’s main body. The first thing Shepard did was arrange for someone to come and inspect the Kodiak. Whether they would fix the shuttle on board, take it away to fix elsewhere, or replace it altogether was not up to her. She would have preferred one of the latter possibilities, because she did not want too many strangers on her ship. As a matter of course she declared twenty four hours of leave for everyone, though a handful of people had to remain on board to provide security.

Shepard was not surprised when a message arrived from Admiral Hackett shortly after; he wanted to see her in person in his office, despite the hour of the day, so to speak. She left the Normandy in Kaidan’s hands, overseeing the skeleton crew as she went to the meeting. The route to the Fifth Fleet admiralty office was still mapped out in her mind. With the Normandy docked where she was, Shepard only had to take a transport vehicle to the main naval base compound in the saucer section. From there she had to do some walking. That said, it still took a good half an hour, but she was in no rush, and in no way wanted to appear to be in a rush.

The Alliance naval base on Arcturus was always a bee-hive of activity, teeming with uniforms of every grade and stripe, from the non-commissioned soldiers on guard duty, right up into the highest echelons of command. Despite her rather infamous hair streak, Shepard was happy to say she went largely ignored the whole way. Even when she got to the Fifth Fleet office, which was as busy as ever, the first person to salute her that day was Claudia, Admiral Hackett’s personal secretary, before she notified the admiral that she had arrived. Within ten seconds the woman looked up from her console and smiled. “You can go in now, Commander.”

Shepard nodded tapped the console on the door, the locking mechanism was already green and the door swished open without a delay. When she stepped into the office, the door closed and the locking mechanism beeped. Shepard snapped to attention and saluted, “Admiral Hackett, sir…” then her eyes landed on the other person in the room, “Captain Anderson, sir!”
“At ease, Commander.” Hackett replied.

Well this was certainly a surprise, she thought as she slipped into parade rest. She was not told that Captain Anderson would be present.

“I will not keep you longer than I have to. This meeting is atypical as it is, normally we could have discussed this over the communicator.” The admiral opened. “Kahoku forwarded your report from Edolus to me. You made a good call taking the data recorder. That evidence is too valuable to lose. Kahoku will send someone to pick it up while the Normandy is staying on Arcturus. You are only to make the hand-off to a person who mentions the right code words, which he sent ahead, you will have them when you return.”

“Understood, sir.” Shepard replied.

“Now to the reason why I called you here,” the Admiral went on. “I assume you have already figured it out, but something is going on here. Someone wanted those marines dead.”

“There is no other conclusion to make. They also wanted it to look like an accident. Obviously, something those men knew, someone did not want getting out. Rear Admiral Kahoku mentioned they were conducting an investigation in the Sparta system, I got no further details, but I have a feeling it had something to do with all of this.”

Captain Anderson glanced at Admiral Hackett, and when the latter said nothing, the captain turned back to her, “They were investigating what one Armistan Banes was doing on Edolus at the time his ship went down, to the loss of everyone aboard.” Captain Anderson noted.

A name, Shepard thought. This was certainly getting interesting. “Who was he?” She asked.

“Banes was a xeno-biologist the Alliance contracted after what happened on Akuze.”

Shepard blinked. Why did it have to be Akuze. “Research on thresher maws, I assume.”

“Yes. Banes’ work was meant to help the Alliance develop effective means of dealing with them. But questions were eventually raised. A former lab assistant blew the whistle that someone else was seeing the work, the full results. Naturally that was a breach of military contract. An investigation was launched, but before it could go anywhere Banes fled.”

“Kahoku’s men tracked him down to Edolus, where his ship crashed, ostensibly after suffering a catastrophic meteor impact.” Admiral Hackett slipped in calmly.

Shepard hummed, why would anyone run to Edolus when one was trying to outrun an Alliance inquest? Those who were in trouble within Council Space usually tended to run into the lawless Terminus, where they could readily vanish off the face of the galaxy. It did not take much to vanish in the Terminus, no one questioned names and people tended to avoid snitching to the authorities unless there was mad money involved.

“The marines were tasked with capturing him and recovering the research data and the identity of his other employers, but by then a virus had already obliterated the ship’s databases and navigation logs. The trail went cold. We know someone killed Banes, we don’t know who,” Captain Anderson finished.

“They might have gotten away with things had they not also killed the marines.” Shepard murmured.

“Indeed. But they likely did not want to take chances. Maybe they thought the marines knew or saw something on that ship, enough of something to trace back.”
Shepard hummed, she could certainly see the logic. Loose ends of that sort invariably proved vital to undoing the conspiracy tapestry. Dead men tell no tales and take no notice. The beacon that had lured them to the maw had probably first lured the marines into the trap by making them believe they were tracking something on the planet? “What of the ship itself?” Shepard asked.

“A second investigation is… unlikely. The stone wall is still in place… Officially Banes was murdered by his other employer. Official channels will not help us.” Hackett leaned back in his seat. “As to the ship… you are certainly welcome to go see it, but it will probably be a waste of time. Whatever evidence the marines might have seen, is likely gone. Your report indicated the beacon was active for seven days. That is long enough.”

Indeed it was, Shepard thought. If she was covering up such a thing, she would have had that ship stripped to the bulkheads in that time. This was obfuscation through elimination of evidence, while the fact that a crime had been committed was plain for all to see. Someone out there was literally thumbing their nose at the Alliance investigative efforts, confident in their ability to cover up their tracks and dead-end the whole thing.

“The official investigation might be cold, but those marines were murdered. I do not like the thought of the murderers getting away.” Hackett continued in a stern, cold tone.

“Murderers… indeed, I get the feeling we are not dealing with one individual here, it is not easy to set up a scheme this elaborate…” She stated. There were other things rubbing her wrong about the whole thing. Why even go for a trap this elaborate? Surely if Banes was the issue, a swift knife in the back would have been simpler. If she had to eliminate someone, she would have found a window of opportunity to get close, and work from there. Everyone had a personal vice that could be exploited in order to stage an accident, if one was creative enough. She shook her head to ditch the cycle thinking, right now was neither the time nor place. “The whole thing revolves around Banes. If whoever he worked for, really worked for, killed him, took his research, and then killed our marines… the fact that some of it was done by thresher maw… unnerves me.”

“Ah, so you do see that disturbing piece of the puzzle,” Captain Anderson noted.

“I need whatever the Alliance got on Banes. Someone looked into him before he got the position; I want to see that material. Also…” she paused there, turning the thought over in her head before she voiced it fully. “The whistle-blower, perhaps I ought to look at them as well. What made them decide to snitch?” She noted the small growing grin Captain Anderson had, and realized that she was probably going right over what they expected her to ask. “I will also need to discuss this with Nihlus, with your permission, Admiral.”

“You will have the intel within the day, both on Banes, and the lab assistant. As for the Spectre… I am honestly surprised that he has not followed you to this meeting.” Hackett replied. “Your reports indicate you work in tandem on most things.”

Shepard grinned sheepishly. She has not even considered the option of bringing Nihlus along. “Perhaps a bit too much compartmentalization on my part, Admiral, can’t be too cautious.”

The admiral nodded and said no more on the matter. Shepard thought it was probably a good thing she did not bring Nihlus along. Turians normally did not venture to Arcturus without a good reason. The last major visit was the delegation of the Primarch of Palaven, with a handful of generals, at the closing of the First Contact War. Naturally those sorts of visits were not seen as favorable. Subsequently when the Systems Alliance parliament ratified the Citadel Conventions, the presence of Hierarchy high officials looked a little more like strong-arming than the settlement of peace and the opening of diplomatic channels.
“You seem to have collected an eccentric group, now including a krogan?” the admiral continued.

“Wrex knows more about the Terminus than even Nihlus, for obvious reasons, he walks the other side of the proverbial tracks. I’ve also seen first hand what he can do with a gun and his biotics. Beyond that, he took one look at EDI’s topographical scans of the plain on Edolus where the beacon was set up, and suspected there was a maw there. We would have gone in blind if not for him.” Shepard explained. Come to think of it, she ought to buy Wrex a large jug of good Ryncol. He did say he would bet on that plain being a nest, and he technically won that bet. She would have to look into what constituted good Ryncol.

“That is good to hear; otherwise I would have had to explain things to Hannah.” Hackett noted.

Shepard could not help but grin, it was in these odd moments that the admiral let something past his stern, professional façade.

“Alright, I believe we covered everything of note.” The admiral went on, returning to his normal formal habits as he pressed a button on his desk console to unlock the door.

“I will pursue the few avenues of investigation that I have, Admiral.” She replied.

“Good. Dismissed, then.”

Shepard snapped another formal salute, made an about face and stepped out of the room.

“Shepard!” Anderson called at her back. Shepard stopped a few steps outside the office, to let the captain catch up with her. “Walk with me, there is… something we ought to talk about.”

“Oh course, Captain.”

“There’s no need for formality, it’s nothing relating to the matter at hand.”

Shepard nodded, but said nothing.

The captain led the way out of the office building, and onto the grounds fronting the building. The base on Arcturus was very much built in the spirit of the great naval bases of the past. Captain Anderson stopped and motioned to the winding paths that meandered around the manicured lawns and groomed and sculpted flower beds. To Shepard it seemed like whoever designed the gardens was an old traditionalist at heart.

“How’s your position treating you? Be honest, I will not summon a tribunal over a complaint or two.” The captain broached as they walked.

“I can’t complain,” Shepard replied. “The paperwork is daunting, but… I do what I must.”

Anderson chuckled, “Of course, the paperwork. Don’t ever take command of a cruiser, there’s much more of it. But in all seriousness, Shepard, I want to know, how’s your… mentorship?”

Only by dint of training did she not freeze in place or even break step. “I don’t know how to answer that, I mean… how do typical Spectre mentorships go that I should be judging mine?”

Anderson spared her a look that brokered an end to the jokes. “That’s not what I meant. How’s Kryik? He’s not running you into the ground, is he?”

“Nihlus? No. We get along. He’s actually pretty laid back, no one else ever complains about anything he does, and he’s…” Shepard paused, trying to come up with a good way to explain Nihlus’
other habit. “We’re closer to partners. Standard operational procedure is we discuss what has to be
done, hash out a plan, and do it. Even when we work on something assigned to by the Council. The
only times he really comes down is when it comes to… he’s a stickler to timely reports. I get the
feeling he’s all for doing them right the first time simply so they don’t waste more of his time later.”

Shepard noticed the way the captain’s shoulders lowered, a relaxation reaction? Curious.

“That’s good to hear. When I found out who mentored him, I worried he might be… less than
pleasant toward you.”

Shepard blinked as it suddenly bricked her where this discussion was coming from.

“His mentor hates humans. I was wondering whether the protégé shares his views,” Anderson went
on.

“Nihlus is not like Saren,” Shepard said.

The captain stopped cold in his tracks.

Shepard pretended she had not just purposefully dropped that bomb. She knew, and she wanted
Captain Anderson to know that she knew. He did ask her to be honest. “I met- well met would be
the wrong term… encountered Spectre Arterius on the Citadel. Nihlus told me about their history
after that.” That was technically not a lie, just a whole lot of truth bending. Nihlus told her, yes, but
after some delay and when he had to. Were it not for that, he would have never told her. She did not
feel the need to point out the truly odd coincidences involved. One could say her mother had killed
Desolas Arterius. Her daughter was mentored by the protégé of said admiral’s brother. If she at all
believed in fate, she might have said it worked in truly mysterious ways. She also did not feel the
need to reveal that she knew about Captain Anderson’s shot at Spectre.

“I see.”

“Nihlus and I have a professional understanding, and I want to think that we work well together. He
has his personal hang-ups, but who does not? Despite everything, when the bullets start flying, I trust
him to watch my six.” As soon as she said it, she realized there was no truth-bending there. She
trusted Nihlus at her six as much as she trusted him at her nine and three. Despite the few so-called
hang-ups and the shakeup, Nihlus had been nothing if not helpful. Though, come to think of it, she
might actually have to watch his six. Sometimes he did not think everything through, like that time
on Omega. Had he faced D’aros alone, he would have been in trouble.

“Hackett was right then, should have known, he does read the reports, and then… you’re first name
basis with him.”

Shepard tried not to let the sheepish smile creep on her face. “To be fair, we made that agreement on
day one, and I am on name basis with my whole crew. Though some still call me Commander no
matter how many times I tell them just Shepard is fine.” She thought of Garrus, the chief perpetrator,
and Tali, a close second, who was easily nervous.

Captain Anderson stopped and faced her, “I am glad you’re adjusting to this. You will prove
everyone wrong before long.”

There was no great mystery in what he meant by that. “I should not have to prove anything. They
ought to know they’re wrong, but…” Shepard shrugged in that noncommittal way rather than finish
her thought. She knew that most people rarely knew what they ought to know, they required to be
proven wrong.
“A Shepard sentiment, Hannah would be proud. Well I got what I wanted; I won’t take up more of your time.”

“As you wish, Captain.”

They parted after that, Anderson turned to walk back toward the Fifth Fleet offices. Shepard continued down the current path, taking a meandering circuit out of the gardens. One look up caused her to frown; really the illusion of the gardens was completely shattered when one looked up. Nothing could disguise the fact that it was not a blue sky overhead, but an arched artificial roof. She glanced down the path and hummed, work beckoned. She picked up her pace, down the paths leading toward the areas where she could get a transport that would take her back to the docks where the Normandy berthed.

~          *          ~          ~          *          ~          ~          *          ~

Arcturus, more than the Citadel, was a place where a lot of cultural delights and human comforts could be obtained. The restaurant district alone offered a hodge-podge of places, with Italian, French, and Moroccan cuisine right next to the Chinese, Indian, and Japanese, and those were just the big eateries and restaurants one started with. For spacers who were used to the simple, relatively quick-cooking fare of ship-board life, Arcturus was a gastronomic paradise, flowing with whatever one craved. Best of all, it came at far more reasonable prices than on the Citadel.

Shepard was no-less prone to occasionally wanting something a little more decadent than the regular ship’s galley fare. On her return she made a detour stop at a bakery to buy three large slices of mille-feuille, a cake delight with alternating layers of custard cream and puff pastry to sate her rare sweet tooth.

Box in hand, she finally returned to the Normandy. The ship felt a little barren with most of her crew out enjoying their free time in a familiar port. She stuck the box into the back of the levo refrigerator. Three slices would last her three days; her transient craving for sweets rarely lasted longer than that. After that she returned to the OD to check on whatever messages waited on her terminal.

There, top of the inbox, was an encrypted message from Rear Admiral Kahoku with instructions regarding the operations recorder, including the key phrase that only the proper messenger he sent would know. She was not to hand the box to anyone else, no matter what they said and what credentials they flashed.

She was just thinking of signing off when the OD door opened. Shepard glanced up from her terminal. Garrus strode in, holding a data pad in his hands and judging by his posture, nervous about something or other. “Commander,” he greeted.

“Garrus. Is something wrong?”

“No, but I do not want to interrupt if you were occupied with something important. EDI told me you were back, and I thought I should drop this off,” Garrus explained, flicking the pad in his hand. “I completed the Thanix’s power system calibrations, as requested.”

Shepard took the data pad and scanned over the contents briefly, eyes running right down to the number tables. “A thirty percent power efficiency increase? Most impressive.”

“Thank you, Commander. If I may though, I… erm… I wish to reiterate my offer regarding the targeting systems. Working on the guns I could not help but identify the problem.”

Shepard glanced up; well, he really did want to mess with the ship’s guns. She set the report down
and slid it over to the small pile of other pads already on her desk. “Garrus, I don’t want you to regret it if it gets out.”

“I know. You do not need to worry, I have a way around that,” he offered. “The guns are missing a vital component, a VI system that regulates the minute fluctuations of the electromagnetic containment field. Now, I am not suggesting we go looking for one of those, so I am not be giving the Normandy what it does not already have. The VI auto-calibrates the system to compensate for the field oscillations, but I can do that manually.”

“If that’s normally done by VI, it sounds like a constant and on-going job.”

“It is.” Garrus replied. “Every time the guns fire, there is flux in the containment field caused by the heat of the shot. First, it throws targeting out of alignment, and that misalignment is cumulative. Second, the flux also creates weaknesses in the field, which causes loss of shot matter and a widening of the beam, effectively losing power and constriction.”

Shepard leaned back in her seat; all of that kind of went over her head. All she knew was that the guns were off the mark, like a rifle with a poorly zeroed scope. The crosshairs could be on the target’s head, but they did not align with the barrel trajectory.

“I know you will say the Normandy can make do,” Garrus continued. “But this will be worth it. It will increase the current operational range and make each shot hit with less that one degree of deviation even at maximum power and constriction. The Normandy will fire like a sniper-rifle, and not like a crude flamethrower.” He explained with surety and confidence.

She had a feeling that he already figured out what to do and only needed permission. She loved big guns as much as the next person. Love for the art of marksmanship went in the family. Still, she just could not let Garrus, eager as he was, take this step lightly. If the Hierarchy found out, there would be trouble. He would get no protection from the Alliance. His employment on the Normandy was precarious, with everything hinging on her. She did not want Garrus to ruin his standing with his own people for something that could implode on him at any given time.

“You are still hesitating,” Garrus said.

Shepard shook her head.

“I know we discussed this before, but I gave it some thought. The only thing I can not help with is if you decide to acquire the VI regulation system. Getting it is a bad idea. Beyond just the difficulty of tracking down and disabling a Thanix frigate, you would have to fight through the whole crew, thereby committing an act of war, and there would be a few other challenges I am not able to discuss, but…”

Good thing Shepard knew he was talking in hypothetical terms here. “I assure you that’s not something I would ever do, and it is not something Admiral Hackett would order me to do.” She could guarantee that, she knew that much of her CO. Admiral Hackett fought on Shanxi; he knew that a war with the Turians would be a grizzly, long one. Humanity might win, but the losses and costs would make it a pointless pyrrhic victory.

There was a reason why the Council stepped in to end the First Contact War when they did. The Turians had been mobilizing for all-out invasion of Earth. The Council saw how long it took to subdue Shanxi, how quickly General Williams was ostracized as a traitor for surrendering the colony, and how fiercely the Second Fleet fought to break the blockades to allow for a liberating army to put boots on the ground. They saw how ruthlessly said army fought to free Shanxi. They only had to project the prospects onto Earth to know that no one would benefit from a large-scale
war. No matter who won, the balance of power would shift. If the Turians lost, it would shift dramatically. The Council had only one goal, conserve the status quo at all costs. Shifts in the balance of power were very bad for the status quo.

Garrus’ mandibles spread in a proxy of a smile, “Barring that… there is a loophole in the matter. One part of being crew on a Turian ship is ensuring the ship operates at optimum capacity. We can not withhold skills from the knowledge of a commanding officer, especially skills that could be employed for the benefit of the ship and its crew. During my service I had training with various weapon systems, including the Thanix. There, now that you know, you can order me to work on the guns, and it would be my duty.”

Shepard hated to be the downer when he clearly thought he had everything figured out, but she was not the type of person who lived on such thinking. “Except this is not a Turian ship. Will the Hierarchy really let it slide with that?” She asked, knowing full well that the answer was highly likely to be an emphatic no.

Garrus hummed thoughtfully. “Maybe?”

He was clearly not backing down. “Admit it. You just want to work on the guns.”

He cleared his throat, his gaze suddenly slipped to the bulkhead, “Maybe.”

Shepard smiled. He returned the smile with that tooth-bearing expression that would have intimidated someone who did not know him. Shepard was tempted, oh so tempted to let him do it, and it would be the worst thing she could do for him. Still, Garrus knew the risks, knew the fallout that could follow, and he was willing to shoulder it. On the other hand, this was not the first time this came up, not a first thought whim of his. Could she keep saying no based on her idea of what was better for him? No, she could not. She could just try to prevent the fallout from happening. She straightened in her seat, “Alright, that’ll make you my ship’s ordnance officer, no?” She mused.

“Oh, I like the sound of that,” he replied as he straightened to his full height.

Shepard thought that were he human, he would probably have saluted. She had a feeling she had just made his day, maybe his year. “Just please, don’t start while we’re still on Arcturus. Let’s not do this right under the admiralty’s nose.”

“As you wish, Commander.”

She would have to bend the rules a little herself, in for a penny, in for a pound. “EDI, there is something you can do to help Garrus.”

“I will be happy to be of assistance, Commander.” The AI replied.

“Before any changes are made to the targeting system of the Thanix, save the current configuration profile. Then of course, keep a separate save of whatever on-going changes Garrus does.” She glanced at the turian in front of her.

Garrus hummed thoughtfully.

Shepard smiled.

“We can swap configurations in a matter of hours if need be, so the system can appear unaltered.” Garrus said thoughtfully.

Shepard grinned and inclined her head in a bow. It was positively devious, but deviousness was a
useful skill in her trade. “EDI, the modifications are to be encrypted. Only my authorization, and of course Officer Vakarian’s is allowed to access the saved data.”

“Understood, Commander,” EDI said. “Officer Vakarian I will walk you through the process of setting up a personal system authorization key at your convenience.”

“Thank you, EDI.”

“You are welcome. Commander, clearance levels will be yours to confirm.” EDI went on.

“I’ll do that when I have it,” Shepard said.

“You will not regret this, Commander.” Garrus said. “In the end, this is no different than Kryik offering you his skills as a pilot. Though he is definitely not honest about what he piloted. I would expect to see training with fighter craft in his military records, not transports or ground vehicles.”

Shepard hummed. Idly she wondered if this was more of their back and forth. She knew Nihlus could fly a Mantis gunship, that sort of skill did not come without some sort of training. “I would not be surprised.” She said calmly. Little would surprise her about the Spectre at this point. He liked to keep his cards close to his chest. To say nothing of the fact that he did not talk about his military time. “But I thought you implied his skills are sub-par.”

Garrus shifted his weight from foot to foot, “I may have. Yes.”

Shepard could see floundering where there was floundering. “You were baiting him, weren’t you?”

“Maybe.” Garrus replied.

Shepard tried her best not to let her exasperation show.

“To be honest, Commander, the damage to the Kodiak is not light. Aside from the damaged armor and knocked off thermal plates, one of the four ventral thrusters was rendered inoperable and another is reduced in capacity. I must give Kryik some credit. He kept it flying.”

Shepard blinked; Nihlus had not told her the damage was that severe. She remembered the moment of impact, the feeling of her stomach rising into her throat, that tell-tale kick of falling out of the sky. That had to be the moment they lost the ventral thrusters used to take off, land, and hover. Yet the kick felt so brief; a testament to how quickly Nihlus compensated. There was no mystery how; he must have used the vectored thrust of the main drive thrusters, which would have necessitated a matching thrust output so as to not overpower the functional ventrals, to keep the craft level.

“He did not tell you?” Garrus asked.

“No, he only mentioned that there was a loss of thrust.” Shepard replied. Why keep quiet about the full extent of the damage? What benefit was there to derive from concealing the details? Now that she thought about it, there was a reason, just one, that could potentially explain things. Nihlus certainly had no shortage of pride. Was he bothered by the fact that he let the shuttle take that hit to begin with? If he was, his harsh rebuttal to Garrus the night before made a lot of sense. Perhaps Garrus’ words had been a deeply-felt one-two whammy. Nihlus’ pride did not seem to let a personal insult go, and doubly so when it came from Garrus, not when he might have felt guilty to begin with.

“Typical,” Garrus muttered.

Shepard was not going to defend Nihlus’ proclivities more than she already had.
“Well, I will not keep you from your duties, Commander. I have to prepare some things myself.”

Shepard could hear the barely contained eagerness in his tone. He would be in the main battery, working on the preliminary things in a manner of minutes. She would probably have to verify clearances on his authorization in about twenty minutes. The gun settings would be backed up and the system made ready for his calibrations shortly after. “By all means.”

Garrus strode out of the OD like he had just been given the best news he had ever heard. Shepard smiled to herself and turned back to her terminal.

The next morning, Shepard woke up to much to do. Bright and early a crew arrived to look at the damaged shuttle. Within an hour she was told that the damage was too severe to fix without specialized equipment. The blown thruster had to come out in its entirety, and whatever armor and thermal plates remained had to be replaced due to the fact they were structurally compromised even if they looked sort of fine. The leader of the work crew also requested an explanation for the sand in the crevasses, and was less than amused when he got it. Thus the Normandy was one shuttle short until a new one would arrive.

Rear Admiral Kahoku also sent one of his men to pick up the operations recorder. Shepard conducted the hand-over after making thoroughly sure that the lieutenant was in fact who he said he was. After that, EDI notified her that she had a priority data transmission from Admiral Hackett, and so Shepard found herself seated on the OD couch, going over the information she received.

There was quite a bit of it. Everything from the background on Banes, information on his work for the Alliance, and even the scattered information Rear Admiral Kahoku’s men managed to relay before they died. Most crucially the lattermost included everything they had on Banes’ death, including the report on a medical examination done in the field. Shockingly, there were photographs of the interior of the ship, where and how they found the bodies. The commanding officer in charge of the inquest had been thorough and took a lot of field notes as well; he seemed to have been trained to conduct such investigations. It made it even clearer why someone would want to kill these men; they were not just typical soldiers. It made the loss of such ability even harder to swallow.

The OD door swished open and Shepard looked up from the pad and grinned as Nihlus strode in. He stopped level with the half-wall that divided the OD into halves and stood there.

“Shepard,” he said.

“Shepard.” She replied in the same casual tone, but she could not help but smirk a little. “You’re going to have to find somewhere else to lounge today. The OD couch is mine.” Truthfully she had an even nicer couch in her quarters, but Shepard did not want to be so separated from her crew. Add to that, if she relocated to that couch, it would be giving up the OD altogether. Nihlus could smile pretty all he wanted, she would not let him have that win. He had a couch in the XO’s quarters, why he was so damn keen on the OD’s mystified her enough.

He made a sound akin to an amused snort, “Actually, I was coming to ask you how long we will be staying on Arcturus.”

Shepard looked up from her work, “You have orders?”

“Not as of yet, no.”

“Then I honestly don’t know what to tell you. I would prefer not to leave Arcturus a shuttle short.
We ought to get ours back, soon.”

“Alright.” He seemed to deflate a little.

Shepard quirked an eyebrow as she wondered what was chewing him now. He seemed eager to get going. Was that nothing more than just being unused to lulls between jobs? Well she could probably entertain him for a while quite easily. “We have something to discuss. I went to a meeting with Admiral Hackett yesterday, regarding Edolus.”

“Shepard, you could have told me you were going, I would have come with you.” He said as he sat down on the couch.

“Funny enough, Admiral Hackett said he was surprised you did not show up.” Shepard chuckled. “I’ll tell you what I told him, my bad, perhaps it was a bit of an oversight on my part.”

“Since Hackett said that, I assume I am to be read in as well?”

“Definitely. I have information you can look at as well.” Shepard glanced down at the pad, “Let’s start with the basics. The marines were there to investigate the death of one Armistan Banes. He was a xeno-biologist the Alliance hired after the events of Akuze. Three thresher maws destroyed a nascent colony, and then killed fifty marines sent in as aid. Banes later came under suspicion of breach of contract; someone else was seeing his work before the Alliance. But before he could be fully investigated, he fled. Eventually he was tracked to Edolus, where his ship suffered a catastrophic meteor impact. Up to there it seems rather open and shut.”

“But we know it is anything but.”

“Indeed. Catastrophic space rock impacts don’t introduce viruses into a ship’s system. The ship’s databases were wiped. Then someone put a lot of effort into staging an unfortunate accident for the marines. We can see that there is nothing accidental to any of it, but we can’t connect anything to anyone, and we definitely don’t know who Banes was working for before he was murdered.”

“Are you sure Banes is dead?” Nihlus asked.

“They conducted a medical examination, the report is right here,” she motioned to the pad in her hands. “They ran DNA against medical records. Over ninety-nine percent match. Due to desiccation from atmospheric exposure there was some degradation, but still that is too good a match. Banes’ family history lists no siblings. The likelihood of someone else having identical DNA is astronomically slim.”

“Sounds to me like this Banes was silenced by his other employer.”

“That would be the logical conclusion, yes.” Shepard agreed. “I am going through everything I have, looking for any loose thread to pull. His employment history is probably cooked, falsified. I know that, but I haven’t finished reading over everything yet.”

“I can run the name through Spectre channels.” Nihlus volunteered.

Shepard smiled, “I was actually going to ask if you could do that, I would appreciate it.”

Nihlus hummed, “You want to catch the responsible. Running a name through my channels is the least I can do. First though, I will need to read over the material you have. Perhaps… an extra set of eyes would help?”

“I’ll get you copies.” Shepard said as she stood up and moved toward her terminal. Within seconds
brought up the data package, and sent it over to his omni-tool. “As of right now, I can see why the Alliance hired him. He was educated in a prestigious university on Earth, graduated with honors, with glowing references. I am still cross-referencing his employment and financial records though. So maybe there is something there, but so far it’s all rather very clean. Worst thing there is a subscription to Fornax. Yes, that’s the worst I can see so far.”

“Hey, some say it is humanity’s greatest contribution to galactic society.”

There was no mistaking his tone of sarcasm mixed with amusement. “We taught the galaxy to enjoy filthy magazines as a mass-market commodity, what an achievement.”

“Jokes aside, when records are clean, that is when you ought to start asking if they are too clean,” Nihlus said.

In other words, Nihlus did not trust the records. Shepard would concede that point, she had thought of it. Banes was rotten, that much they knew, but the source of the rot remained elusive. “As I said, I am still cross-referencing.”

“But you must have some thoughts, right?” Nihlus pressed.

“Some. Just about things not adding up. What made Banes run to Edolus? Was it merely somewhere to contact his other employers, hand over data, and punch out? That stuff could have been done on Omega for half the trouble.”

“Yes…”

“Then of course there is the beacon, it was active for a week.” Shepard went on. “It’s all cooked, Nihlus. The employer killed Banes by faking a crash. They left a body, yes, which would make things consistent with a crash, but any two-bit keyboard jokey could have taken one look at the ship’s computers and spotted the tell-tale signs of a virus wipe. They are goading us like a bullfighter goads a bull. It’s just not adding up, and when that happens… there is something else going on.”

“I agree. Have you told any of the others?” Nihlus asked.

“Not yet.” Shepard replied. “I mean once we have a lead and somewhere to go, they would have to know. However, as of right now, this matter is best kept to as few as possible. In fact, I should not be investigating this deep at all. It is a matter for the Alliance Criminal Investigative Services. But Rear Admiral Kahoku clearly trusts no one except Admiral Hackett, and the official investigation was stonewalled already.”

“Perhaps we ought to look into who prevented the investigation.”

Shepard shook her head, “Pointless. We might be able to find the bureaucrats responsible for the blockages, but they will have multiple perfectly legitimate sounding excuses ready to go. First and foremost, I do not have the authority to investigate in the legal sense. I’m not ACIS, the legal system will not deal with me, and without that I have no legal weight to bring to bear. Everyone I approach has the right to deny me access to anything and everything with a smile on their face, and while I could get at their dirty laundry my own way, it won’t be legal evidence. Then I am not a Spectre either. As such, I really cannot play that card.” Frankly, Shepard could see it devolving down to them saying she was overreaching, cook up some legal caveats, and get everyone involved into serious legal trouble. Shepard was positive that Kahoku knew the legal route was no go, thus his request she pull in Nihlus.

Nihlus sighed. “It would be much simpler if this involved Hierarchy bureaucracy.”
“I’ll take your word for it; I’m not familiar with said bureaucracy.”

“But I am a Spectre… you can work through me by proxy, as a deputy.” Nihlus said.

“True, but there’s just one little problem with that… you’re not human. Don’t take it the wrong way Nihlus, but I get the feeling that we’re dealing with the sort where that matters,” Shepard finished. “So far, the guilty parties are getting away with multiple murders simply because they know the system and are damn good at obstructing it.”

“So far, the guilty parties are getting away with multiple murders simply because they know the system and are damn good at obstructing it.”

“Or they are in the system.” Nihlus said.

“That goes without saying.” Nihlus hummed again, the register of his voice dipping lower. Shepard leaned back into the couch and waited, mentally ticking the seconds. She barely reached ten when his green eyes leveled on her in a scrutinizing way. “This brings us right back to why Kahoku requested Hackett’s aid, and then mine. He knew Hackett had someone who could see justice done, outside the system if needed. If legal prosecution cannot be brought against them, he needed someone who could operate outside the legal system.”

“Naturally, and I get the feeling it’s not for the extra-legal investigation either,” Shepard said. “Why else would they come to me specifically? If they wanted someone to bring these people in handcuffs…” Hackett had others who could do the cuff jobs. Foremost was Captain Anderson, someone who got things done, one way or another, but also an N7, someone who knew how to deal with shady organizations and the sort of people they liked to employ. No, Hackett must want someone who was singularly known for pulling triggers, having no qualms about it, and could keep the Alliance’s name clear of the mess that followed. He wanted the Poltergeist. This was Hackett’s often unseen Machiavellian nature on an outing. “Look at it this way, there is doubt whether ACIS can create a case. If they can’t, then the Alliance Judge Advocate General would not give this a trial. No trial, no conviction. There is money here, I can smell it. Money buys lawyers, judges, juries…”

“Money cannot buy me.” Nihlus said.

“Or me.” Shepard smiled; they were on the same page then. At the end of the day if the Poltergeist had the people responsible in her crosshairs, and legal immunity in the form of a Spectre saying she was doing things under his authority, she would pull the trigger and not bat an eye. Ideally she would have preferred to have her own Spectre authority for this sort of thing, less of a chance of it coming back to haunt her later, but for the time being she had to make do. She crossed her arms and met Nihlus’ gaze, “The writing’s on the wall, so to speak.”

“This makes our job a little easier. Spectres have other sources of information to turn to.”

Shepard glanced at the viewport as she tried to keep the discomfort she had from showing too overtly. “Ah. Well there’s the one qualm I have. How trustworthy are those sources?” This was a problem because while she had no trouble punishing people who deserved it, she wanted to be sure they deserved it. She knew that two wrongs never made a right, but they sure as hell created a solution. The right thing would be to bring the guilty parties in front of the law. Still, when the law failed, she had no problem with alternative solutions. The law was a tool, but when monsters could use it to get away with murder, it ceased to be useful. It was time to switch tools, and give the monsters a taste of their own medicine. She had no problems with that.

“As trustworthy as such sources can be,” Nihlus replied.

Shepard hummed, “We have to be absolutely sure we’re aiming at the right people before we start
pulling triggers.” Foremost, the old saying went when one stared into the abyss, the abyss stared back. Shepard would not let herself become a creature of the abyss. She needed to have a line to keep sight of. Second, she never wanted to kill an innocent ever again. If she could find some semblance of justice in this, it would vanish with the death the wrong individual.

“Is that a personal code?” Nihlus asked.

“I will never kill anyone on the mere supposition of guilt.” Shepard said as she met his gaze.

“I can work with that. Shepard, we will find the right people, and then, you can make them pay.”

A solemn sort of silence settled between them as Shepard mused on what they had to do now. “You do know that I can’t let go of the legal means entirely, right?”

“Would not have it any other way.” Nihlus smiled. “We can work this case from both ends.”

“Then we have a plan,” Shepard let herself relax a little.

“Yes. Now we just need to get a second shuttle so we can carry it out.”

Shepard tipped her head to the side and grinned. It sure seemed like he had an issue with indefinite down-time, or that he was happiest when he was planning or carrying out a plan. She could certainly understand that part.

Chapter End Notes

**Author Notes:** This episode was troublesome to write. Since I established a pattern of exploring the political intrigues, I had to basically sit down and try to think out how a conspiracy of this scope would go undetected. This is the foundation of how I will bring in my version of Cerberus. They will be essentially the shadowy organization that seeks to put humans at the top of everything, through any means possible. More to come!

**General Notes:**
None this time…

**Chapter Notes:**
None this time…
Requiem

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I do no own Mass Effect, I do not claim to own Mass Effect, I am only doing this for fun.

Author Notes: Another rework of a ME1 side mission, that’s all I’ll say. Enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Episode 16: Requiem

To say Shepard was frustrated would be an understatement. Forty-eight hours on Arcturus, and their shuttle was only due to return the next morning, and that was a rush job. She was spending her second evening in the OD, running her investigation. Nihlus was in his room, running his leads. She supposed that by now he had the XO’s quarters set up for his clandestine work. Whatever he required went through EDI, and the AI never mentioned details. It was probably tiny print buried in some Citadel Convention.

The Alliance had to follow all of the Council’s laws to keep associate membership, including recognizing Spectre authority and allowing for a certain unhindered access. EDI could not report anything Nihlus was doing, no matter what clearance Shepard had as the ship’s commanding officer. Just one more layer to the glorious onion that was the complicated power structure they had to navigate.

She was less than proud to say that she now knew more about Armistan Banes than she cared to. He was just too perfect for the job he was hired to do. If she considered the whole body of information as one unit, a single resume for a single position, then she would say his was tailored picture perfect for it. Perhaps she was cynical, but she did not believe in perfect candidates. Everyone always had some thing that did not fit and the employer had to decide what they could live with. To have a perfect resume spoke of a carefully constructed legend, the sort needed to clear Alliance background checks. He ticked all the right boxes to appear as a studious, promising researcher with the passion for the job the Alliance wanted done. He even unashamedly admitted to it being also a career goal, as working for the military would look nice on the resume. That spoke of a certain unapologetic narcissism, as if the Alliance needed him more than he needed them.

Some petty part of her was almost glad that Banes was a mummy in some morgue. If he was not, she might have been tempted to put him there herself. She took her loyalties seriously, and he was a crooked double-dealing traitor. Setting her current datapad down and picked up the now-cold remnants of her tea, and turned to the viewports. A small bit of sugar ensured that the drink remained palatable even at environment temperature.

“Commander,” EDI cut in.

“Yes EDI?” she replied.

“Admiral Hackett is on the communicator. It is urgent.”

Shepard turned away from the viewport, set her cup back down on the coffee table, and got to her
feet. She knew that if Admiral Hackett was calling, they were probably going to punch out in a rush, probably even tonight, a shuttle short.

She stopped in front of the COMCON table and straightened her fatigues, “Put it through, EDI.”

“Yes, Commander.”

The projector begun to buzz, as soon as the image stabilized Shepard snapped to attention and saluted. “Admiral Hackett, sir.”

“At ease, Commander.” Hackett said.

Shepard slipped into her parade rest on auto-pilot.

“I know you planned to depart after the Normandy got its repaired shuttle back, but something has come up that would be… problematic to delay.”

Shepard could hear a little bit of tension in the admiral’s tone. It was rare for Hackett to display any sort of tension, he had seen and done more than enough to be calm and collected at all times. “The Normandy is at your command, sir.”

“During the First Contact War we fired a lot of espionage probes deep into Turian space,” he went on. “They were built in a hurry and launched before we had an idea of who we were fighting. At the time, no one wanted to risk our technology being analyzed, so each probe was equipped with a twenty kiloton tactical fusion warhead.”

Well this was certainly a situation. She knew a little bit about those delightful probes. They performed a rather primitive function, designed to float amidst general space debris like comm buoys, forming a sort of sensor net that identified enemy presence and pinged back in short bursts. However, because they were fired blind, essentially to map Turian space, the majority of them vanished into the void, never to be heard from again.

“An hour ago we received a ‘mission complete’ burst from one.” Hackett added.

Shepard froze. “That’s a hell of a delay to call home, sir.” The fact that it pinged with a mission complete burst was alarming. If it was deep in Hierarchy space, Shepard knew why the Normandy was being called as well. She had the only ship that could go in without being detected. Unauthorized Alliance excursions into those regions of space could create an incident and expose the probes.

“To say the least, Commander, and therein lies our problem. The Council deems nuclear booby traps irresponsible and reckless. The Alliance will face serious censure if that warhead detonates.”

“I understand, Admiral. However, while the Normandy can get there, I have no one on board who can disarm it.”

“Getting to the probe will be the difficult part. Disarming the device is relatively easy with the right code. I will forward the relevant information.”

Shepard idly wondered what the admiral’s definition of ‘relatively easy’ was, but orders were orders. “It will be done, sir.”

“And one more thing, Commander. This is very much an order. You are not to take your outside contractors with you, not even Spectre Kryik. Those probes are top level classified. The Alliance wishes to keep it that way. I will not be able to do much for you if the news gets out.”
“Understood, sir.” She would have to get a little bit creative to keep Nihlus from catching whiff of this, especially if they were headed into Hierarchy space.

“I wish you luck, Commander. Hackett out.”

The projector shut down, and its buzzing died. Shepard stood there, thinking. She had a horrible sinking feeling that she was going to need every bit of luck she could get for this. What had the brass been thinking, strapping nukes to spy probes? Sometimes she wondered if the big-wigs even had the capacity for thought. “EDI, could you issue the crew recalls?” She asked.

“Of course, Commander. Sending notices now.”

Shepard sighed, turned, and exited the COMCON. She now had to think of a way to deal with the inevitable questions, if they were leaving Arcturus like bats out hell, and a shuttle short, Nihlus was going to ask questions.

She just stepped into the OD when she heard a ping on her console, the data Admiral Hackett had sent had filtered through EDI’s protocols. Shepard made her way to the terminal and sat down; within seconds she had the data up for perusal.

The Normandy departed Arcturus two hours later. There was no containing the scuttlebutt; everyone knew something was up, though only Joker knew where they were headed, because he had to get them there. With the transit being another night-time jaunt, she spent the evening getting everything ready. Most importantly there was classified material to read over.

It was then that she learned what Admiral Hackett meant by ‘relatively easy’. Each probe had its own deactivation code, unique to it. The Alliance had lists of serials and pass codes collated into a single classified book. Admiral Hackett had sent her the whole thing, complete with up-to-date redactions for probes that were either confirmed destroyed, or already retrieved and disarmed. She needed the whole thing because she would have to double check the probe’s serial before she even touched it. If anything but the right code was entered into the computer, it would deem it an attempt at tampering, and the nuke would explode.

Shepard was less than amused at the prospect; it would be one hell of a horrible way to go. Quick, and one would assume rather painless, but still a horrible way to go. As far as she was concerned, the Alliance screwed the pooch. She got to clean up the mess because first, she had the only ship that could get in and out quietly, and second, she was one of the dogs. Bad jobs like these were always tossed to the dogs.

With the book on her omni-tool, Shepard thought she was as ready to go as was possible to be right at that moment. The OD’s door swished open and she glanced over her shoulder automatically, and was not surprised to see Nihlus.

“What’s the situation?” he asked.

“The situation… well, as of right now I have urgent orders to execute.”

“I think we all gathered that from the hurried departure,” he deadpanned.

Shepard did not comment, some snark was to be expected given the situation.

“This is not about the geth, is it?” he asked after a good moment of silence.
“I wish it was about the geth.” She really did, because then she would not be trying to think of a way to polite way to tell Nihlus that she had nothing to tell him. She had no idea why it was proving to be so hard. Had she gotten too used to working with him already? Well, when in doubt, hit blunt. “I’ll be honest with you. I am not at liberty to discuss this Alliance matter with you. I respected your rules on Omega; it was just you, me, and Garrus. Respect my rules this time. I can’t tell you anything about what’s going on.”

He hummed thoughtfully, “So, just you, Alenko, Williams, and Jenkins this time?”

“Afraid so.” Shepard replied.

He towered over her and Shepard could practically see the gears turning in his head. She was perfectly aware that he did not like to be out of the loop. Right now Nihlus was probably running down his list of excuses, trying to find some quasi-legal loophole to get his way. At the very least he would read into the situation. However, she had orders; nothing he could say would make her go against them. Admiral Hackett rarely issued such limits, but when he did, they were absolute. She wondered why the situation bothered him. She could tell he wanted in on it. Nihlus was no control freak, barring reports. So why was this?

“Alright. I will leave you to it. I have some leads to run on Banes.” He turned to go.

Shepard blinked, surprised, “Anything on that?”

He paused in the doorway and spared her one of those mandible-flicking grins of his, his eyes positively full of mischief. “Later, Shepard. I do not want to distract you from your preparations.”

The door closed behind him and Shepard shook her head. She supposed she had that coming.

The next morning, the Normandy made orbit around Agebinium, the first planet of the Amazon system in the Voyager Cluster. She had Joker rig the Normandy silent and maintain a stable, though asynchronous orbit. After breakfast Shepard gathered the marines in the OD and locked the door. With EDI scanning to localize the subtle signal pings from the probe, she could conduct a briefing without being interrupted.

“Have a seat people; there is something I have to run down with you.” She said as she perched herself in her usual spot at the head of the couch. When the marines found their seating, Shepard launched into the summary of what Admiral Hackett had told her. It took all of five minutes to recap the situation, because there was little to the background. “…our job is to find and disarm it,” she finished, leaning into the couch.

Kaidan had leaned forward during the explanation, setting his elbows on his knees, his hands clasped before him. “How did the probe end up here?” he wondered. “They were designed to float in space, to say nothing of the fact that the Voyager Cluster is the opposite direction from Turian space.”

Shepard hummed; the thought certainly crossed her mind. “I can think of two ways. First, its navigation system could have malfunctioned, so it thinks it’s in Turian space. If it got lost in the relay corridors, it is a good thing it ended up out here; Agebinium is not a garden world.” There would be no casualties if the probe detonated, but the Council would still come down on the Alliance to locate and disarm the rest.

It would still be a herculean task. Going by her code book, there were at least a hundred of the things still scattered about the galaxy. The best hope was that they all collectively flew into a whole bunch
of stars, or ended up trapped in the gravity wells of gas giants, where they could do no harm. But when were they ever that lucky?

“And the other way?” Ashley asked.

“There is a problem with the first theory, how did the probe make atmospheric entry without detonating? The second theory covers that. I think it more likely that someone brought it here,” Shepard said bluntly. There was no sugar-coating that fact. “That would mean someone knows about them, and worse how to handle them without triggering their fail-safes.”

“Why would someone do it?” Jenkins wondered.

“Why else? Each of those probes is a nuclear weapon. A twenty kiloton warhead is… the bomb they dropped on Nagasaki in the twentieth was of that yield.” Kaidan explained.

“Whoever would do that deserves to be shot.” Ashley said.

“No argument here.”

Jenkins straightened suddenly, as if he had been shocked by a current, “What if the burst the probe sent is a trap?”

“That’s certainly a possibility. It just does not make as much sense. There is nothing on this planet worth blowing up and they could not be sure whom the Alliance would send to respond.” Shepard said. “Using a nuke for a trap is overkill.”

There was another possibility, one that Shepard did not want to voice, one she deemed far more likely and even more terrifying. The probe could have been brought to Agebinium to stage a display. A seller would need proof that the wares were viable as a nuclear weapon. The galaxy had plenty of unsavory sorts who would pay for a nuke that came with a complimentary scapegoat. If a probe was to become a weapon, especially in a terrorist attack, the Alliance would catch a lot of the initial heat, and the real perpetrators would laugh their asses off while covering up their tracks.

She had to operate on the assumption that if someone brought the probe here, they knew how to locate the others. If there was even a slim possibility that someone might sell the probes as weapons, then they were a threat. It was no longer just about the Alliance saving face; there were innocent lives on the line.

Shepard was positive that Admiral Hackett must have thought about it, because it made for a third reason why her involvement was required. She could get in, eliminate the threat at the root, and get out without drawing attention. Shepard was not naïve enough to believe in dialogue with terrorists and arms dealers. It took an absence of empathy and morals to be in those trades. Shepard did not see killing such individuals as murder, not when their deaths guaranteed the safety of hundreds, if not thousands of other people. This was another job for the Poltergeist.

“Regardless of what’s going on, our job remains the same. That probe must not detonate.” Shepard went on. “I say go ahead and assume there will be some resistance and pack accordingly.”

“Another day in the office,” Ashley said.

“Indeed. Now as usual, ask questions if you have them.”

“Erm, Commander… how do we disarm the probe?” Jenkins wondered.

Shepard smiled and launched into a simplified description of the process. She figured she could give
them this much, it would calm some nerves. Nuclear warheads tended to make people uncomfortable; she would be lying if she said she was not a little nervous herself.

They departed a few hours later. Shepard only put a wait order on the job until it would dawn at their destination. Agebinium was an absolute delight. The first planet in its system, it possessed an atmosphere of carbon dioxide and krypton that barely reached one fifth of earth’s pressure. To make matters worse, Amazon, the parent star, was an aging red giant. Its diminishing quantities of fusible hydrogen put it into proverbial death throes. As a long-duration intrinsically variable star, it shifted in size and output on a sixteen-year cycle. Currently it was at its nadir, and so Agebinium was a freezer, with night time temperatures plunging to minus eighty. Eight years from now Amazon would puff up, and turn the planet into an irradiated oven.

When the Kodiak made descent, Shepard was up in the cockpit, watching the sensors, as the shuttle flew on VI. During entry she noted that the friction corona barely formed along the shuttle’s bottom. Shepard supposed that if a box like the Kodiak barely felt the burn during entry, it could mean the probe might have landed on its own without detonating. Still, it was unlikely.

Their landing churned up a dust cloud of fine, largely un-weathered silicates. She exited the cockpit and glanced at her marines. “Alright, EDI triangulated the probe to be within a square kilometer here. There is something interfering with precise positioning, but it is here. Seal checks and we pop the hatch.” She double-checked her helmet seals right along with the marines.

“We’re good to go, Skipper.” Ashley announced.

“Alright,” Shepard reached for the shuttle’s pressure control and triggered the recycler to depressurize. In under a minute the side door hissed open and the four of them emerged onto the planet’s surface.

It was like stepping into a surreal artwork. A thin atmosphere meant little by way of weather, wind, or even sound. Unfiltered solar radiation had long ago bleached the surface to shades of ghostly grey. With a forty two hour day-cycle, dawn on Agebinium was a slow affair, the aging star rose slowly over the horizon, looking enormous in the sky as its wan light dyed everything it touched a macabre shade of blood red.

The shuttle landed on a plain surrounded by sharp, un-weathered crags of various sizes. There was nothing to turn rough shapes into rolling hills, the terrain shifted from low to high as certainly as Amazon cycled output. She felt the surface crunch underfoot with every step, though she could not hear it. The silence across external microphone only made the wheezing of the air filtration system louder.

Shepard could not help but feel ill at ease. Being here, in the light of a dying star, felt off-putting, even before the added joy of looking for a nuclear bomb which may or may not be a piece of cheese in a trap. The plain was too open, the crags and conditions too ideal for long distance snipers worthy of their name. The eerie silence tempted one to believe nothing could go wrong, but she knew better.

She flicked her wrist and turned on her omni-tool. EDI had given her the frequency of the faint pings the probe emitted. Aside from the quick mission complete burst it sent via comm buoy, the thing buzzed with a static electromagnetic frequency slightly above cosmic background radiation. The signal was intentionally too weak to be tracked at long range, but it was there for the benefits of those who knew the probe was there and only needed to zero in on it.

As she watched the readings, Shepard realized that much of EDI’s problems with localization could
have been Amazon. She was faring no better, there was just too much background noise for her tracker to lock onto such a faint signal. Shepard sighed; they would have to do the old fashioned way, “Tech is no good. There’s too much background radiation. We do this the old fashioned way. I need elevation.” Even as little as ten meters would give her an angle to scout the whole plain using her helmet’s HUD.

“How about that?” Ashley asked.

Shepard turned, following the line the gunnery chief pointed. Her eyes landed on a large rock formation jutting out of the ground a good two hundred meters away. Jagged or not, she could see a way to clamber up. “That’ll definitely do, come on.” Shepard turned and led the way at a comfortable clip.

When she stopped at the base of the rock, she looked around, ever wary for a hidden shooter.

“Kaidan, could you sweep for the most common communication frequencies?” she asked.

“Right away,” he replied.

Shepard turned to the rock in front of her. With the hazard it posed to her suit, she traced the path she intended to take up. Once she chose it, she grabbed the first hand hold, swung her leg up, and started climbing. Kaidan would tell her if he picked up any comm chatter. It took a few minutes of careful climbing, but once on top she could see across the whole plain.

“There’s no comm chatter on any of the common bands,” Kaidan announced on her radio. “Unless you count us.”

“Good,” Shepard replied.

“How’s the view, skipper?” Ashley asked.

“Sand, rocks, more sand. No probe in sight.” Shepard replied even as she reached for the side of her helmet to work the zoom features of her HUD.

“EDI said one square kilometer, right?”

“Yes.” Shepard replied as she fiddled with her HUD and made another turn, eying the peculiar rocks to make sure one of them was not actually a probe nose-first in the sand. As she turned another couple degrees to check another rock formation, her eyes landed on something much more distant. “There’s something north by northwest, I’d say five hundred meters?” She tapped at the helmet to increase the zoom further and blinked in surprise. The faint little glimmer that caught her eye was definitely not the probe, but it was not a shiny rock either. The rising sun caught the edges of metal railing leading up to an airlock. “Looks like a structure,” she said.

“Could the reason EDI can’t lock on to the signal be because it’s coming from inside there?” Jenkins offered.

“If it is, that’s theory one out the window. The probe didn’t grow legs and walk inside.” Shepard replied. “It’s definitely not out in the open, and EDI never led us wrong before, so… that structure is worth investigating.” Shepard spared the airlock one more look. It was probably a trap. There were no vehicles out front, no ore hoppers, no shuttles, no signs of any activity. So if that structure was abandoned, its tight spaces and easily blocked doors were the perfect location to stage an ambush. The whole thing positively reeked of danger. They had absolutely no choice but to walk into that danger. “Alright, we’ll scope that place.” She turned to the way she clambered up, and kneeled to start her descent.
Shepard made sure to keep an eye on the crags overlooking the airlock as they got close to the structure. Only when she was firmly satisfied that there was no one there did she make approach.

The structure’s airlock looked aged. The once brilliant white, red-edged paint had faded, yellowed, and begun to crack off the metal plating. It looked like the structure had been here for a while, possibly even surviving through Amazon’s zenith. Shepard led the way to the door with Sin drawn and the others one step behind her, weapons ready.

The airlock opened as soon as its sensors detected a presence, Shepard tapped at her helmet to activate her helmet lamps before she drew Dex and slid in. The airlock’s inner door was jammed open with metal bars. Her HUD showed no indication of pressurization or rising oxygen levels, the whole place was vented.

The chamber beyond the airlock was bare rock walls and floors, relatively large, empty, and sparsely lit by battery-powered work lamps. General debris lay scattered on the floor, chunks of glimmering ore, crates of supplies, and even abandoned tools. At the back of the chamber was another doorway, leading deeper into the mountain.

Shepard turned off her additional lamps and turned to her omni-tool scanner. Now that they were inside, the background radiation of Amazon dropped off in intensity, and the spectrum reading showed a clear spike in the probe’s ping frequency. “It is definitely here.” Shepard announced as she looked up.

“It got to be deeper in,” Ashley said.

“I don’t like this, at all. The only reason I am picking it up now is because we’re inside. This place does not let Amazon’s radiation through, meaning it would have kept the ping of the probe confined.”

“Well, this structure belonged to a heavy metals mining operation,” Kaidan announced.

Shepard looked up, surprised, only to see Kaidan point to one of the boxes left behind, which bore a faded company logo for a mining consortium.

“Makes sense if you think about it. Let the probe call home out in the open, and then take it inside where it cannot receive a remote disarm signal.” Ashley said.

“Can they trigger the probe to explode though?” Jenkins asked.

Shepard paused as the thought struck her. Ashley did not know it, but she had pointed out something important, something that spoke of the people who found this probe. “They can’t cause it to explode remotely any more than we can disarm it like that.” She murmured. “Its transceiver is not connected to its systems like that. It can send its status, sensor logs, and relay bursts from another probe, but it cannot receiver orders!” Whoever found the thing must not understand its finer mechanics.

“Down the rabbit hole we go,” Ashley murmured as she clicked the safety off her rifle.

Shepard moved toward the other door, and it opened when she approached. This one led into a narrow tubular passage cut into the rock. “Down the rabbit hole indeed, Gunny,” she murmured.

She was the first into the passage, surprised by the fact that it sloped upwards up into the mountain, and not down into its roots. On the other side of it was another door, which also opened with smooth ease, revealing another bare rock chamber, as empty and lit by battery-operated work-lights as the
last, but bigger. Here pillars of rock were left in place to support the ceiling. She raised a hand and
flicked her fingers in a signal. The marines scattered about the room, rifles at a ready, as they swept
the chamber.

Shepard kept an eye on her scanner; the probe’s signal was stronger. They were definitely getting
close, but it was not in this chamber.

“It’s clear, Commander,” Kaidan announced.

“There’s another doorway back here,” Jenkins added.

Shepard moved toward the corporal. He stood there, gun trained on the door. The other two marines
converged on them as well, and Shepard once again stepped into its range first. As it opened, they
found another narrow passage, again sloping upwards, deeper yet into the mountain. Shepard
hummed, it was a rather strange way to build a mine, to go up into the mountain, and not down into
its roots. She idly wondered if this was indeed a mine, and not some sort of personnel space. It had
been cut into the bare rocks, true enough, but the positioning was rather too weird to be the actual
work-faces of a mine.

She stepped past the door and slowly moved up the passage toward the one at the other end. As the
panels on the other side of the passage opened, her omni-tool began to ping. Sprawling in front of
them was another chamber, the biggest yet. Shepard flicked her fingers, sending the marines to clear
the room as she glanced at her omni-tool. “The probe’s here!” she announced. She shut the scanner
off, no longer needed.

“This side clear,” Ashley called.

“My side is clear too,” Jenkins echoed.

“The back is clear, and I found the probe.” Kaidan added.

Shepard moved deeper into the room and the door closed behind her. There was a large stone pillar
in the center of the chamber, which she rounded and stopped. There, in a small patch of cleared
space was the probe, lit up by multiple work-lights like an artifact on display, a prize for those who
would come this far.

Suddenly there was a deep rumble, Shepard stumbled forward with an unmistakable shockwave. She
whirled, stunned. The door they had come through was gone, bent out by the force of an explosion
in the narrow passage beyond. Shepard cursed, she had expected armed people down here, and so
the thought that someone would trap them in the mine with the probe had not crossed her mind. She
ought to have been scanning for explosives as well as the probe’s pings.

“We’re trapped,” Jenkins murmured.

“No need to panic, Corporal. They can’t trigger the probe. As for being trapped…” Shepard paused.
She did not see any sign of life on the side of the mine they came from, not tracks, not leftover
material. The whole thing went up into the mountain, and she doubted this was the actual mine at all.
If this had been some sort of habitation space, there had to be more entrances.

“Ugh… Commander, you might want to look at this,” Kaidan said.

Shepard turned, alarmed. The lieutenant stood in front of the probe; a small device left next to it was
blinking. For a split second she thought it might be a remote transceiver, but she had to remind
herself that even if they wanted to install a transceiver, the probe would have deemed it tampering
and exploded in their faces. The device’s blinks paused and she heard the tell-tale buzzing across her
“I have a feeling we’re about to find out who’s responsible for this,” She said as she reached up to tap at her suit’s comm controls. The box on the ground powered up and cast a reddish holographic projection into the air above the probe. Standing in front of her, though not in the flesh, was turian in full armor, with his helmet on. A turian out there knew about the probes, this did not bode well. Today was just full of unpleasant surprises, Shepard thought to herself as she crossed her arms.

“You can cease your pathetic attempts to intimidate me, human.”

“I am Commander Shepard, to whom do I have the pleasure of speaking?” Shepard replied blandly. She chose to ignore the jab about intimidation. Frankly, she did not need to intimidate. Once she got out of this cave, she would hunt him down, and let her guns do the talking. Now there were even more reasons not to let anyone get away. Turians who knew about the probes were the epitome of bad news.

“My name is Elanos Haliat.” He replied.

No rank, ship, or unit designation. As far as Shepard knew, such designations were kind of a big deal within the Hierarchy. To forget mentioning one was like not mentioning where one stood in the pecking order. Turians took pride in their ranks and tiers. There was only one explanation for it. Haliat’s face-shield was opaque, but she would bet her money he was not from the Hierarchy, not a particularly big threat to the Alliance. All the easier to eliminate then, as fewer people would come asking questions.

“I am surprised that the Alliance sent only four to retrieve one of their errant toys. It would seem they do not understand whom they are dealing with.”

“We understand the threat well enough.” Shepard replied.

“Do you? Who do you think runs the terminus clans? Thousands of pirates, slavers, criminals of every stripe?”

Shepard tipped her head to the side, “You assume I care.”

Haliat laughed, “The strongest leads. The one who kills the most men, seizes the most ships, pillages the most colonies. Seven years ago I was the strongest. I used my influence to assemble a fleet. We would drive your kind out of the Verge.”

Shepard froze in place, her eyes narrowed. “You organized the attack on Elysium.” She had to force herself to appear calm, when suddenly she was everything but. Elysium! If this bastard had organized that, then he was responsible for many deaths and much misery.

“I was the motivator, the instigator, the one who promised glory and riches for sacking the largest Human colony in the cluster! The one blamed when it failed! Failed because of one human that managed to hold an insignificant… lodging house!”

The storm reared itself in her. His every word made the raid on Elysium sound like some epic quest or something righteous. Every word pushed the dikes of her self-control closer to the breaking point. Shepard had to force herself to take a deep, calming breath before she exploded. This fool did not even know he was facing the same human who held that “insignificant lodging house”. He had poor information then and now, with poor leadership skills on top. His plan was doomed not just because he thought a colony attack could cow the Alliance; it was doomed because he had the strategic and tactical wherewithal of a child. The fact that everyone turned on him afterwards did not surprise her
Mercenaries, slavers, and pirates were like sharks, they would maul anyone, should the smell of blood hit the water. “So what’s your plan now?” she asked.

“Now, now, Commander. That would be spoiling all the fun.”

The bastard was enjoying himself. He was stringing her along, mocking her. Oh there would be fun, alright. The second she got out of this place, she would hunt him down.

“Now I must go. I will thank you for the shuttle though.” Haliat made a show of bowing before the communicator turned off.

Shepard froze.

“Skipper, the Kodiak’s navigation system has the Normandy’s last known coordinates!”

Shepard knew that much. Joker held the Normandy in a non-synchronous orbit over Agebinium. Maintaining synchronous orbit was dangerous as it meant staying in the same part of the sky, and thus easier to detect. Yet an asynchronous orbit meant the Normandy passed over their departure coordinates regularly. “They can fake communication errors and turn the Kodiak into a Trojan horse.” Shepard replied. “We have to get out of here.”

“But how?” Jenkins asked.

“First, we disarm that thing,” she pointed at the probe. “Second… now this is an observation, but we climbed to get here, and there was nothing out on our side, but they had to have made tracks when they moved this thing. I’m thinking there has to be a second entry. Look around. They used charges to collapse that tunnel; they could have easily used charges to cover the other entry.”

“Got it!” Jenkins wheeled on his feet and scurried off.

Shepard got the distinct impression that he was trying to get away from the probe, even though if it detonated, it would not matter. She supposed she did not blame him. She turned to the device and glared, to think that Haliat used this thing as a lure to get a Trojan horse onto an Alliance warship. She hated the bastard more with each passing moment.

“I’ll go help him,” Ashley said.

“Is there anything you need, Commander?” Kaidan asked.

“Just some time to work.”

“You got it. I’ll keep them from bothering you.”

Shepard kneeled in front of the probe and inspected the metal plate on its side; the bolts holding it in place were still secured with welded-on wire to prevent loosening. No one had gotten into this hatch since it was sealed. She pulled out her knife and carefully used the serration along its back edge to file through the wires. After that, she unscrewed the bolts by hand, and carefully took off the thick metal plate. Doing so gave her access to a folded computer terminal inside the probe.

She tapped the terminal and it unfolded, a tiny little screen with a matching keyboard. It turned on with a flash of blue, displaying the Alliance logo. Shepard thought that was about as un-subtle as it came, but it really did not matter. Anyone who saw this much was a wrong step away from vaporized by a twenty kiloton warhead. In a way the symbol was a honey pot for their enemies.

Shepard picked up the metal plate she took off, and turned it over. On the other side, burned in with
laser, was a series of characters. At first glance these might mean nothing, but they were actually the probe’s model number, date of manufacture, and below that the probe’s unique serial. The burst the device sent included the serial, as a means of authenticating the signal’s origin, but Shepard was not going to type the code matching that serial into the probe until she verified the numbers were where they ought to be.

She fired up her omni-tool and brought up the book of codes Admiral Hackett had sent her. Using the probe’s model number, she switched sections to the relevant probes, and from there went down the date of manufacture. The probes were built over the span of three months, and each month’s encoding was different. The codes could be of utterly different lengths, depending on those parameters. Now that she was in the right section, she double checked the serial, to make sure that such a probe did in fact exist and all three of its identifying marks were consistent. There it was, and with it a unique disarmament code, a series of nine characters, both numbers and letters. The numbers matched up with the serial the probe had beamed to the Alliance.

She raised one hand to the small keyboard and typed in a command to access the warhead controls. The screen flickered and an input box appeared. No warnings or explanations, the device was about as smart as a rock, but it did its job. Shepard double checked the code in her booklet before she began to type, one character at a time, double-checking each input in case her finger slipped.

With all nine characters put in, she paused to check again. All that remained now was to press the enter key. The code was all the instructions the probe needed. Either the computer would recognize it and disarm, or if it would reject it, interpret the attempt as tampering, and act as if it had full permission to explode.

Shepard glanced at the others. Even without her say-so, the three of them were busy with something on the other side of the chamber. Jenkins was enthusiastically shifting rocks off a small pile, while Ashley and Kaidan worked in somewhat more subdued paces. As Kaidan had said, he took over, guided the others so they would not bother her while she did something more sensitive. She turned back to the probe and double-checked the code again, number by number. There was nothing to it but to press enter. She moved her finger and hit the button.

The input box vanished, the screen flashed and turned white. Then a message appeared, “Code input received.” The screen flicked again, a second message appeared “Authorization confirmed”, and a few tense moments later a third, reading simply “Warhead disarmed.”

Shepard let out a breath she did not even realize she was holding. The screen flicked back to the main portal, awaiting further commands. Shepard touched it again, and the terminal folded up. “It’s disarmed,” she announced as she got to her feet. Admiral Hackett did say it would be relatively easy. Tense like you would not believe, but relatively easy.

“Come take a look at this, Commander.” Ashley replied.

“When you mentioned charges and collapses, I thought of this pile. I saw it when we first came in!” Jenkins said, in between shifting rocks.

Shepard approached the three marines and the pile of rubble they were gathered around. She could see why the pile attracted even Jenkins’ attention. The rocks had been piled too perfectly to be caused by a natural collapse. There was also a rut in the ceiling above; it resembled the aftereffect of shaped mining charges.

“Jenkins is finding all the doors today,” Kaidan said.

“I was always good at finding the Christmas presents mom and dad hid from me.” Jenkins replied.
“That just means you’re impatient,” Ashley said.

“Maybe a little.” Jenkins conceded, sounding every bit sheepish.

Shepard said nothing; just let them work at clearing the rubble. Her mind automatically turned to what she had to do now. She could not let Haliat and his idiots get to the Normandy. Oh she did not believe he could ever take it. He might get on-board, but the shuttle bay would be as far as he went. EDI would sound the intruder alarm instantly. Also Haliat would not expect to face a biotic Krogan who made the shuttle bay his quarters. She also knew for a fact that if something happened, Nihlus and Garrus would not stand idle. There were also the Alliance personnel on board. Her crew was not as hapless as Haliat thought them to be. Although some had long ago left combat roles, all of them had gone through boot camp; all of them knew how to hold a rifle. The shuttle could only take so many people up, even jam-packed. Her crew, small as they were, would be more than enough.

Still, she would prevent such a scenario from ever happening. Her crew should not have to fight. Not if she was a leader worthy of the title. More than that though, she did not want anyone else killing Haliat. He wanted to be the big tough guy in this galaxy, and so he orchestrated Elysium as a show of force. His pathetic attempt at dislodging the Alliance from the Skyllian Verge was all ego. She would show him the price of such hubris.

“Commander, are you alright?” Ashley asked quietly as she set aside another big chunk of debris from the pile.

“Truthfully?” Shepard replied. “No.” she grinned to herself. “But I intend to do something about it.”

Ashley paused, the look she gave Shepard was scrutinizing, though brief. Ashley knew it was not her place to question a superior. If she realized what Shepard fully intended to do, Shepard did not care. She was the highest-ranking officer here, and there were plenty of reasons to put Elanos Haliat into the ground, not just her personal ones.

The pile of rubble shrunk quickly, revealing another door. It was locked, but the encryption was pathetically simple, Shepard tripped an override in seconds, and the door opened. It led into another tunnel, a longer one, but still sloping up. Shepard drew Sin and stepped past the doors. As she walked, she counted the meters. The tunnel made a gradual right-hand bend, ascending all the way.

After what seemed like fifty meters it finally leveled for another ten or so, and a door came into view. This door was unlocked, but it did not open on its own. Shepard stopped and turned, the others were right there behind her. She put her hand to the mechanism and the door opened, and the lot of them got a face-full of Amazon’s sunlight.

They came out onto some sort of plateau on the other side of the mountain. There were clear tracks in the un-weathered white surface; a vehicle had come up here a few times. On their right was a clear, narrow, but perfectly viable vehicle path, likewise marred with multiple wheel tracks. “This has to be how they accessed the place.” She noted.

“‘The surface here keeps tracks well; we ought to be able to follow them right to their camp.’”

Shepard was more interested in the footprints clustered around the biggest patch of overlapping tire-tracks. The vehicle, she assumed a truck of some kind, had stopped there, and men busied around it. There were solid boot prints that could belong to humans, batarians, or even asari, a set of smaller, oblong prints hinted at least one salarian, and amidst them all were two-toed turian prints. There was no way to know how many men Haliat had with him from the prints alone, but it confirmed that he had some loyalists yet.
Satisfied with the prints, Shepard moved to the plateau’s cliff edge. A flat valley stretched out beyond, lit blood red by Amazon’s light. Shepard thought the setting was too damn appropriate now. Some distance away she spotted glimmers, and so she tapped at her helmed to increase the zoom.

The glimmers came from the roofs of three small pre-fabricated structures arranged in a circle out in the open, a camp. There was a wheeled truck there as well. Everything seemed rather bare-bones. Shepard focused on the truck’s tires; they looked narrow enough to have left the tracks on the plateau. She zoomed out a little and scanned the camp for their errant Kodiak. It was there, a good fifty to or sixty meters away from the camp, both side doors raised, the cloud caused by its landing was yet to fully settle down.

She counted the mercenaries milling about the camp, four around their shuttle, and she could see three others in the camp. Their numbers surprised her. Haliat was an absolute fool if he thought he could take an Alliance ship with just seven. Even the Normandy’s undersized crew was already nearly three times as big. Seven was also not going to stop her.

“They didn’t go far, that’s their camp over there. They got our Kodiak too.” Shepard announced as she turned off the zoom.

“We can’t make approach, there’s too much open terrain between here and there.” Kaidan said.

Shepard snorted and reached behind her back for Vincent. “Five hundred meters? I’ve shot over one thousand.”

“You’re going to kill them from here?” Kaidan asked, surprised.

“It’s the only way to do it. You heard Haliat. You know what he wants to do. We might not reach them before they take the Kodiak up, and you said so yourself, lots of open terrain between here and there. It would be suicide to try to cover that on foot.”

“The Commander is right, LT. Besides… some, if not all those scumbags were in on killing our people on Elysium. It’s the least they deserve.” Ashley argued.

Shepard did not need the lieutenant to agree with her. It was not his job to argue with her orders. She would not reprimand him, but she was not going to stop just because he protested. She kneeled and scooped up some of Agebinium’s sand and packed it into a mound on which to rest her rifle. On Elysium she had used tightly packed snow, but this would do. Then she reached behind her back and began to pull out thermal clips, lining them up to the right of the mound, where they would be within easy reach. Seven for the expected mercenaries, five more for surprises, and she had one already in the receiver, making it thirteen shots total.

“Stay back from the cliff,” she glanced at the others before she slipped into a prone position, Vincent extended and powered up. A tap at her helmet brought up the HUD for atmospheric readings; she already knew what Agebinium’s gravity was. When the screen showed her the air pressure, wind speed, and humidity, Shepard had all she needed. She mentally ran the numbers, and then tapped at the small buttons at the side Vincent’s scope to zero the lenses for the five hundred meter range before she peered through. The Mantis had its own laser range-finder, so Shepard turned it on the Kodiak, and the number under the crosshairs read five hundred thirteen. Her guesstimate had been almost on the dime.

The first shot would still have to be center of mass, to confirm proper scope alignment. She took a slow, deep breath, let it saturate her lungs, and then exhaled slowly. With another inhale she peered through the scope and her finger slid over the ammo selector. The rifle vibrated ever so slightly as it charged a slug to disrupt shields.
With a higher optical zoom she could see the details of the figures milling around the shuttle. She would know those special helmets anywhere. A batarian’s four eyes required a face-shield that went further up onto the forehead, and it was a structural weakness that made killing them that much easier. Even if the bullet would not enter their skull, a breach at 0.17 atm would ensure their death.

She focused on the batarian near the cockpit hatch of the Kodiak. The would-be pilot? Another slow inhale and she aligned the crosshairs with where she knew his heart would be. On the exhale her finger began to tighten on the trigger. As her lungs emptied, the rifle fired. Vincent kicked with the recoil, but the shot was muted, too little atmosphere to transmit the vibrations as a full crack. The batarian hit the Kodiak, and slid down the paneling. She raked the receiver even as she kept watch, a hot thermal clip bounced out, and she reached for another and slid it in.

The batarian’s friends gathered around him, but she had her zeroing, the bullet went through the heart, she could see the hole in his armor plates and the faint fizzle of his blood as it boiled in the negligible atmosphere. Shepard inhaled slowly, leveled crosshairs on the head of another, and on her exhale slowly squeezed the trigger. The rifle kicked, she raked the receiver and reached for another clip.

“Wow.” Jenkins whispered somewhere behind her.

The clip went in and the receiver closed, Shepard inspected the scene. One of the remaining batarians turned and ran back toward the camp. Shepard turned the scope on the fourth. This one chose to take shelter in the shuttle. Too bad they parked the thing with its doors facing her; it was practically a fly-through zone. Slow inhale and she leveled on his heart, as his head was out of the angle due to elevation differences. Slow exhale and squeeze.

Starting with the batarians was easy. She turned her rifle to follow the runner, and then she decided to let him run. She wanted him to raise the alarm or run right to his boss, which would identify where and who Haliat was. She wanted to keep him for last, wanted him to know there was a sniper taking out his men with casual ease; she wanted him to know he sealed his fate when he boasted to her. He had messed with exactly the wrong Alliance soldier. She had enough legal excuses to kill him, get away with it, and sleep well at night.

The batarian reached the outskirts of the camp and ran right past the single salarian who was working on something at the back of one of the structures. The salarian stopped when the batarian ran past; she could imagine him calling to the runner on a radio. She needed her little rat to keep running. A moment later the Salarian moved, turning toward the corner of the structure, toward shelter.

Shepard inhaled slowly. He would move along a reasonably predictable line, and a Mantis fired hypersonic rounds, she only needed to turn the rifle slightly ahead, and time her shot. On the exhale she slowly squeezed the trigger. The rifle kicked just as the edge of the salarian’s helmet crossed the reticule. The round got there just as his head would have been right in the center. The salarian was dead before he hit the ground. Shepard raked the receiver and reached for clip number five.

Another batarian emerged from the cover of the structure on which the salarian had been working, he had a pair of binoculars in his hands. Shepard could imagine the alarm was spreading. It would not do for her to be spotted now; she leveled her crosshairs on the batarian with the binoculars. He turned, the lenses trained right on her, maybe their eyes would have even locked. Shepard exhaled another breath and as her lungs emptied, squeezed the trigger. The bullet entered the batarian’s head, between his upper eyes. She raked the receiver, and reached for another clip. Just like that, five of the seven were down.

Her Philippides reached the end of his marathon and stopped at the door of the largest of the three structures, slammed his hand to the door mechanism and bolted through as soon as the gap was wide
Satisfied, Shepard turned to the last of the seven mercenaries that had been outside. It was a turian, and by now he had taken shelter behind some crates, his assault rifle in his hands. He probably knew where she was; probably saw where his friend with the binoculars had been looking before he was shot. She watched him twitch behind the crates, though he kept to the cover, probably aware that he was at a gross range disadvantage. He was her prey now, and knew it.

The door to the largest structure opened, her runner re-appeared with one more batarian and a turian. Shepard lifted her finger off the trigger. Was the turian Haliat? She watched as they scattered to whatever cover was available. This turian ducked back into the doorway. Shepard smiled, “I see Haliat,” she announced. “There are three more of his men left. If he intended to take the Normandy with just nine people…” she cut off then. The thought was almost laughable, and she could not afford to laugh. It would spike her heart-rate, throw off her breathing, and impact the stability of her shots.

She saw the other turian peek from his cover. He was crouched, did he think of running across the space to a different shelter? She knew she had to stop him before he went somewhere she could not reach him. Shepard leveled her aim over his face-shield as she inhaled. His rifle shifted, he was going to make a run for it. On her controlled exhale she squeezed the trigger. The rifle kicked again, and he fell over; Shepard closed her eyes, raked the receiver, reached for another clip, and slid it in.

About now they had to be realizing just how badly they were outclassed. There was no way to escape. They could not run for the truck without her killing at least one of them. The truck’s doors would yield to an armor-piercing round, and it would not be difficult to hit a messy shot into the driver. Sure, they could take cover in the structures, but she had a ship in orbit. If she needed to, if they made her, she could call down an orbital strike. This planet was a wasteland, the Normandy’s disruptor torpedoes would rip the camp apart, and she trusted EDI’s telemetry and Joker’s care for the accuracy needed. The one concern was the Kodiak, but the idiots landed it outside the camp. Fifty to sixty meters ought to be far enough. Still, if the shuttle was damaged, the Normandy could make atmospheric entry. The Admiral would only reprimand her for getting a touch excessive simply as a matter of standard procedure, she knew for a fact that he would see Haliat’s death as a win.

She saw Haliat; he was still in the doorway of the structure. His foot stuck out a little, but it was not enough for her to shoot. Instead she turned to the two batarians. With a start Shepard realized one had whipped out a sniper rifle to look for her. But the angle was unfavorable; she had high ground, so he had to raise the rifle on his elbows, exposing him almost entirely. Shepard aligned her crosshairs with his head, lowered her finger to the trigger, and inhaled.

The mercenary’s rifle barrel flashed and the dirt just below the cliff lip exploded as the slug hit. Shepard paused for a heartbeat, holding her breath, an instinctual reaction.

“Did they just fire back?” Kaidan asked.

The batarian was reloading; Shepard exhaled and as her lungs emptied, squeezed the trigger. The bullet hit, and he too fell to the ground. She inhaled slowly. “He missed.” His first shot had been to zero, it had to be, but his math was off. If the bullet hit low, his scope angled too high. He probably calculated for gravity and angle incorrectly. Agebinium’s point seventy-nine g would not forgive such a mistake at five hundred meters.

“Good God, what’s that… seven without missing?” Ashley asked.

Shepard tuned the murmuring out. This was why the best snipers normally worked alone, supreme efficiency of this sort tended to unnerve people.
She tapped her finger on the trigger guard as she watched her remaining targets. One was her little rat, and the other was Haliat himself. How best to make them leave cover? She could try to shoot them through with armor piercing slugs, but a Mantis was not an anti-materiel rifle, would it have enough punch to go through those crates? She did not know what they contained and how it would impact the bullet’s trajectory and velocity.

The pre-fabricated structure was probably of the cheaper kind, she saw just one door, not two. So there was no air-lock, and thus no pressurization. Such structures tended to have negligible shielding, mostly against radiation, and it was rarely the same thickness as what was required to maintain a habitable environment. Factor in that Haliat had taken cover near the door, a structural weakness, and no, the wall would probably not stop a Mantis’ AP round. Still, it would not do good to reveal she had a rifle with an AP bit just yet. Haliat might duck somewhere she could not see him. It was best he clung to his false sense of security.

She leveled her crosshairs on the little sliver of helmet sticking out from behind a tall stack of crates. The batarian was twitching, shifting his weight from foot to foot. He knew he was cornered like a rat. Suddenly there was clicking on her comm. She reached to the side of her helmet to tap authorization for synch, but paused. She knew what sort of conversation would follow. The comm kept pinging, she tapped the button to close active channels first, disconnecting from the line had with the marines, and then authorized synch with the incoming line.

Almost immediately there was a thrumming rumble in her ears, as if Haliat was breathing down her neck. “Shepard,” he hissed.

Shepard smiled. He was livid!

“I have a ship converging on your position as we speak.” he rumbled. “I suggest you run.”

Shepard smiled wider, “I should huh? Well you see, I don’t believe you. I have a ship up there too, and I’m outside your lovely shielded trap. I would have been alerted.” She would have told Joker not to take chances and blow Haliat’s ship out of the water with the Thanix as well. Furthermore, even if Haliat did have a ship, she doubted it could pose a threat to the Normandy. She doubted they could find the Normandy hiding in stealth. Haliat thought she was a born-yesterday fool.

“Who do you think you are, Shepard?”

Shepard inhaled slowly, her crosshairs still on the hint of batarian helmet. “Hmm… oh, pardon me, I forgot to introduce myself fully. I am Commander Shepard, but I’ve been called the White Death of Elysium.” She saw the batarian stiffen like a pole, a sign of recognition. The link was open that wide? It was a crucial tactical error. Shepard now knew she could mess with his psyche by proxy.

She watched as he turned to the other side of the crates he was using for cover and edged toward the smallest of the camp’s structures. Probably thought she was distracted. She watched him move as she applied some pressure to the trigger, the instant his head cleared the safety of the crate, and before he could bolt, Vincent fired. The batarian’s face-shield shattered into a million fragments. He reached up, to cover the gap, automatically, but it was too big and he would never form a full seal. Moments later he fell to the ground, and Shepard looked away, not to watch the tell-tale misting from the opening. She raked the receiver and reached for another thermal clip.

“You are insane.” Haliat hissed.

“Your glorious forces killed someone very dear to me.” She passed her thumb over the ammo selector, switching to armor-piercing and slipped in the fresh clip. As the receiver slid shut, the rifle gave a little shudder as the slug cutter did its job. She could not help but think about Arthur, about his
final moments, his final words as he bled out. She could not reach him, could not help him. All she
could do was listen to his final breaths and the howling of the wind. She turned the rifle and leveled
it on the hint of leg she could see in the door frame.

“Humans are so petty. No wonder the galaxy sees you as a blight.”

“Oh, we’re petty?” She could not keep the amusement out of her voice. Her crosshairs rose,
following where she thought Haliat’s body ought to be. Turians had a rather mathematically
proportionate form. If one was unusually tall, their legs and bodies still maintained a certain ratio.
Haliat had appeared in full body on the projection. There was nothing off about his proportions, so
she assumed he was around the statistical height average of two point one meters. “Then I’ll be petty.
My people have a saying… revenge is a dish best served cold. Well there’s nothing colder than me
shooting you from five-hundred-fifty meters out and walking away.” Her crosshairs stopped where
she thought the base of his spine ought to be. Just on the off chance that he was in fact a little shorter,
shooting there would still hit him. She inhaled slowly, held, and exhaled. As her lungs emptied, she
slowly squeezed the trigger. The mantis kicked one last time.

She heard what sounded like a gurgle on her comm and tapped at her helmet to close the channel.
Her bullet hit on target, and that was all she needed. Only insanity would have her listen to make
sure Haliat gasped his last. She raked the receiver, and reached for another clip. The comm pinged
again; it had to be the marines. She tapped the synch and sighed, “It is done.”

“Nine shots… nine kills. That’s…” Kaidan began.

“Impressive. Terrifying too.” Ashley finished.

“It’s a job.” Shepard replied. “A sniper does not dither. If we have a shot, we take it.” She rose into a
kneeling position and swept up the remaining cold clips back into the pouch over her shoulder. She
also scooped up the hot clips, one at a time, and tucked them into the pouch at her lower back, where
environmental temperatures would cool them for reuse. The final touch was to level the mound of
earth she used as a rifle prop and rough up the rather tell-tale body-print. Once on her feet again
Vincent folded in her hands and she tucked it behind her back as well.

She knew that she was ducking behind her training as cover, and though what she said was
technically not a lie, it was still dishonest. “Let’s go, we have half a kilometer to hike to our shuttle
from the base of this cliff and another couple hundred meters of winding track just to get down
there.”

She could tell they were bothered by what they had just witnessed, but to their credit, no one spoke
up. Kaidan and Ashley knew something of her past; maybe they could even see that this was
personal. Still, it was not like she killed innocents. Haliat admitted to being in charge of Elysium, he
knew about the probe, how to track them. There were half a dozen perfectly legitimate reasons to
silence him. If she exercised a personal one, just a little, it did not matter. What was the delightful
way Nihlus put it? A change in the order of addition did not alter the sum. As cold as that was, it was
no less true. She turned to follow the truck’s tire tracks.

The Kodiak touched down on the Normandy an hour later, covered in dust, but none of them were
worse for wear. Shepard was last to step out. Ashley was already gathering the weapons for post-op
inspection. Shepard made her way to the worktable and laid down the twins, and then Vincent. Her
hand hovered over the rifle for a long moment. She had killed the man who planned Elysium. It
would be quite a report to write for Admiral Hackett. She would not get reprimanded, but the
Admiral would ask whether the old Elysium wounds were gouged anew.
She turned toward the elevator and pressed the call button. The door opened, and she stepped inside, automatically hitting the button for her loft. As the elevator moved, Shepard could not help but pace. When the doors opened on deck one, she was out of the elevator and in her quarters in seconds. There she stopped at the top of the steps to that led to the living space of her quarters. The empty fish tank on her left bubbled on, breaking the silence of her room. She did not buy fish, as that would require maintenance, but she turned up the water oxygenator. Bubbling was better than silence.

Shepard descended the steps and moved toward the sideboard on the right of her quarters. There were two framed photographs there, one of her with her team on the day of their induction into the N7 ranks, taken at arm’s length by one of her three teammates as they bunched up messily. The other photograph was much older, taken in 2176. It was of her and a group of friends, taken by a photographer on Elysium. She was in the center of the image, surrounded by old friends.

Her eyes landed on Arthur, who stood at the back of the group, his arms spread over the shoulders of two of the guys, smiling, brown eyes lit with mirth, his black hair mussed up. The guys had tussled over where each would stand for the photograph, but Arthur finally pulled rank and took up position in the back middle. It put her right in front of him.

Shepard sighed, none of them had known that the Blitz would come just three days later, and Arthur would not survive. The group broke up after that; all of them reassigned and re-deployed. Shepard had walked away with a Star of Terra and a whole lot of rage. She had not talked to any of the others in years, and yet the picture was a reminder of those times, back before she became a monster.

“‘The one responsible is dead,’” she spoke to him. It was silly to talk to the dead, she did not believe in any sort of afterlife. What more, EDI could hear every word, but Shepard trusted EDI. “Let today be your requiem…” She would not say the words. No one was meant to know. Much precaution allowed them to skirt fraternization rules. Much demanded she carry that secret to her grave.

Today would be a requiem for the White Death as well. With Haliat dead there was no more revenge to seek. She would find her center anew. She would seek to right the injustices of the galaxy, and although she might have to take more lives, she would never allow it to become so personal again.

Chapter End Notes

Author Notes: Yep, this one was heavily based off the ME1 War Hero background exclusive mission. It was somewhat random then, and it ended up reworked into something only a tad less random now. It became quite possibly the darkest episode yet. I also tried to fix the continuity errors in the mission as they were present in the game. And yes, someone asked about this in a review on FFN, but there’s the confirmation. Shepard and Arthur were totally a thing. It is one more of her many secrets, concealed beneath the mask of the perfect soldier.

General Notes:
Musical Matters – I often listen to music while writing. The right song can spark a plot, or set the tone/mood for a scene. The whole Arthur/Shepard thing was heavily inspired by Faith Hill’s “There You’ll Be”. It was on the soundtrack for the Pearl Harbor movie, I didn’t much care for the movie, but I liked the song. Now, a song that inspired Shepard in general was “The World Is Not Enough” by Garbage, from the soundtrack of one of the James Bond films. There is a difference between realizing you made a mistake, and learning to do it better next time, and apologizing for it. Shepard is not
apologizing for ambition. As for this particular episode, I had “Indestructible” by Disturbed on repeat, what I call the theme for the White Death/Poltergeist.

**Chapter Notes:**

**Boiling Temperatures** – This is one of those less known things. Liquids need pressure as well as the right temperatures to remain liquid. Lower pressures lower boiling temperatures. Plain water will boil at 71°C (not 100°C) on top of Mt. Everest, and liquid nitrogen, despite being able to freeze anything you put into it, is actually boiling when it is poured into an open container like a bucket or flask. Agebinium has 0.17 atm, far less than even at the top of Everest.
We, Geth

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I do not own Mass Effect, I do not claim to own Mass Effect, I am only doing this for fun.

Author Notes: This episode was already a fully-fleshed out story-board at around the time I was writing episode four, it was kind of the going to be in season 1, from the get-go.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Episode 17: We, Geth

The Normandy was on its way back to Arcturus the next morning. Shepard spent the night in her quarters working on her report and trying to find her personal equilibrium. A good night sleep meant that the former was still not finished, but she was well on her way to achieving the latter.

When she emerged for breakfast, Shepard was not surprised that there was a plate of her favorite scrambled eggs waiting for her. Matthews did not say anything, but by the care he showed pouring her coffee Shepard knew something had gone around. No one said anything to her, they would not dare question their commanding officer, but she noted the upswing in formality and rigidity. It really seemed like everyone decided to be on their best behaviors.

She was stopped from beating a hasty retreat to the OD by Dr. Chakwas, who wanted to cover all the bases, having already cleared the marines after the mission. Shepard was in and out of the medbay in fifteen minutes. There were no physical injuries, and she had no sleep difficulties to report, at least none past the usual post-operation-residual-adrenaline trouble lapsing into sleep. She knew what this was about; the doctor was on the watch for the on-set of PTSD. Shepard had spent a year like that after Elysium, with her councilor regularly checking for symptoms, it was an old song and dance. For Shepard it all boiled down to one thing, it was her choice to kill. On Elysium she chose to shoot the batarians, and now she chose to shoot Haliat. As far as she was concerned, maintaining control was key.

As a result, Shepard barely had the time to finish her report before the Normandy arrived on Arcturus; still it was done and sent before the Normandy docked. Thus once they docked, she got in touch with the crew in charge of their missing shuttle. Once Shepard confirmed that the craft was repaired and would be delivered, she gave everyone down-time, starting with those people whose down-time she had to cut into, it seemed only fair. The ship was a ghost town within the hour of the leave schedule being handed-out.

By evening Shepard had heard back from Admiral Hackett. He would send another ship to mop up the mess now that stealth was no longer as necessary. The probe still had to be retrieved and taken apart physically before it would be stricken off the list. The Admiral did not comment on the fact that she chose to kill everyone who might know about it, or that she killed Haliat, still, she caught something in his tone. Like everyone else, the admiral was worried about screws coming loose in her head. She appreciated the concern, but wished it would stop. She had been through all of this before, why should she have an issue now, when she had no issue seven years ago? Nevertheless, the
Normandy was effectively laid up at Arcturus; she could see the admiral’s hesitance to assign a new job. Like everyone else, he thought she needed some breathing room.

At the very least Nihlus did not put her on some watch too. It helped that he was in the dark about the details of what went down, though he still picked up enough know that something must have gone down. What surprised her was that instead of pressing her, he brought his research up to the OD to distract her. Shepard spent the whole first day they were laid up just looking over the information he obtained. It was a welcome restoration of normalcy. Shepard did not appreciate being treated like a ticking time bomb.

The next two days were no better, research work, errands, and handling every manner of task she really ought to have had an XO for. It was just before dinner hour on day three, the rare moment when almost everyone was on board when EDI told her she received a message containing orders.

Shepard was mildly surprised that Admiral Hackett did not contact her via the communicator, as was his norm, but when she sat down at her terminal in the OD and opened the message, she knew why. She relayed the relevant parts to the bridge and left the OD to return to the mess hall. She would let Joker eat, but then vacation was over, they had a job to do.

An hour later, with Joker back in his favorite seat, Shepard gathered a choice few individuals in the OD for a preliminary briefing. She sat down at the head of the couch and cleared her throat before looking over everyone gathered. It was not a difficult decision of whom she wanted to take to what would start as recon. If things came down to shooting, she could call for backup.

“I assume you got orders?” Nihlus breached the silence.

“Indeed. We are off to the Shadow Sea, Iera system, Horizon.” Shepard replied. “Someone out in a fringe settlement there reported seeing a robot in the woods. These days that automatically means Geth.” She was taking this very seriously. Last time they investigated strange sightings they indeed proved to involve the Geth, as unlikely as the location had seemed. Apparently Admiral Hackett was not taking chances on this being a false report after that.

“Horizon… a human colony?” Garrus asked.

Shepard nodded her head, “Yes, established in twenty-one sixty-eight. It is on the edge between Alliance space and the Attican Traverse, formally part of the latter,” Shepard explained. What she did not say was that most colonists there chose it as a little bit out of the way haven where Citadel laws could not tell them how to breathe. They were not fans of Alliance restrictions and oversight either. “The four of us will form the investigation team.” Shepard went on.

“Commander, what kind of colony is Horizon?” Tali wondered as she shifted from foot to foot.

“According to what I got, it has a population slightly over six hundred thousand spread over a number of settlements. Their biggest exports are grown-food-stuffs and consumable products.” Shepard explained. Fact of the matter remained that humanity only left the Sol system in the last thirty years. The majority of manufacturing still happened on Earth, with Terra Nova second. The other colonies supplied raw materials and living space for an unprecedented population boom. Earth was in the midst of a galactic colonial period. It might be decades, if not centuries, before colonies would form their own distinct cultural identities. Humans did not yet have anything quite like the Turians or even the Asari.

“Does Horizon have Prothean ruins?” Nihlus wondered.
“That’s the thing, none have been found so far.” Shepard replied.

Nihlus hummed.

Shepard knew what he was getting at. The Geth wanted Prothean tech, they went after Eden Prime’s beacon, and then Daiwi’s mine computers. Horizon did not fit the pattern.

“If the Alliance or Council knows of no Prothean ruins on Horizon, we cannot assume the geth are working off what they appropriated previously,” Garrus noted. “That means they are either after something else, or they have a source of information we do not.”

“That’s assuming these are indeed geth,” Tali stated.

“Who else could it be? How many more synthetics are there in this galaxy?” Garrus replied.

Nihlus hummed again, which made Shepard spare him a glance. She still suspected he knew of at least one more synthetic, other than EDI of course.

“I took apart the units we brought up from the mine. The black one is definitely not a geth. I agree with the Commander’s theory that there is someone or something controlling it.” Tali said, fingers already wringing as she spoke. “I have a theory…” she mumbled, quieter now. “I do not think the geth would ever work for an organic. Perhaps… now this is probably a silly thought, but it fits… maybe there is another synthetic involved.”

Silence reigned in the room after Tali spoke. Even Shepard could not say a word.

“It would be possible for an AI bound to a powerful quantum computer to remote control the black platform, like a child’s toy drone.” Tali went on, sounding ever more nervous.

Shepard mused it would have to be a very scary child’s even scarier toy drone.

“Can you trace the signal?” Nihlus asked.

“Ah… no. The operating software is… I can’t make sense of it yet. Even then, I need to be near an active, functional unit to trace its signals.”

Shepard knew it would not be possible to capture a functional, connected black unit. Not only was the thing highly dangerous, but there would be nothing to stop the puppet-master from disconnecting, leaving them with nothing.

“How long would you need to trace an active unit?” Nihlus asked.

Shepard raised an eyebrow; was Nihlus considering the idea of dancing with a black unit until Tali could trace it?

“That… I don’t know. I’m sorry.” Tali replied.

Shepard shook her head; she would not have let Nihlus do something that dangerous anyways. She would not have attempted it herself. “Tali, you have nothing to be sorry about; we already know a lot more than we would have otherwise.”

The quarian looked up, her hands dropped back to her sides, “Thank you, Commander.”

Shepard nodded and turned to the others in the room, “Even if we are dealing with another artificial intelligence, it does not change our end-goals. If the geth choose to become a hazard to the galaxy... I do not discriminate. Where they go, I will follow. We’ll get them.”
Nihlus folded his arms as his mandibles gave a flicker of amusement.

“We will be ready, Commander,” Garrus said.

Shepard nodded, “Good. I think we’re done here. Take the time to get ready; we will be on Horizon by morning.”

Tali took that as a dismissal, turned, and exited the room, the first to make a hasty retreat. It was not difficult to see how nervous the young Quarian was around people who held a higher position to her. She seemed to expect always being told she was doing something wrong.

Garrus was second to turn. Shepard still needed to talk to him, so she got up from her seat. “Garrus, there is something I wanted to ask you, regarding the ordnance,” she explained as she followed him out of the room. “I was curious about how the work is coming along.” Shepard continued as they stopped in front of the elevator. She suspected that Garrus would not want to talk about his work in front of Nihlus.

“Well…” Garrus began, but paused to clear his throat, “Truthfully, a little slow. The Alliance’s system is new to me. It would be faster if I could rewrite portions, but…”

“It would ruin our little masking trick?” Shepard asked.

“Yes. It would also render the guns inoperable while I work. I did not think you would appreciate me putting the ship at risk.”

“We do have disruptor torpedoes, and they are powerful enough, but yes.”

“I will figure things out, Commander.”

The elevator opened. “Thank you, I really appreciate you putting this much effort into it,” Shepard said.

“You are welcome.” He replied as he stepped into the cabin.

Shepard did not follow, she did not have to. Right now she had what she needed. Garrus would figure things out as a matter of personal challenge and responsibility. In time the Normandy would have a bite arguably nastier than a dreadnought and as precise as her sniper rifle.

Shepard was in armor and on the bridge when the Normandy made asynchronous orbit over Horizon. There was no need to delay things, as their traverse allowed them plenty of time to prepare supplies and Horizon was not an inhospitable, un-breatheable environment. In fact, the planet was as green and blue as Earth, with the surface temperature at an average 13°C, atmospheric pressure at 1.68 atm, gravity at 0.7g, and the day lasting 37.8 earth hours. She could definitely see why Horizon ended up chosen for colonization, on paper it sounded like paradise.

She left Joker and Kaidan with full instructions before she took the elevator down the shuttle bay. Nihlus, Garrus, and Tali were already waiting. With some parting words to ameliorate Wrex, who was a little stung that he was not coming down with them, they took the repaired Kodiak down to the surface. The thick atmosphere was a good way to test the fit of the new thermal plates.

The orders she got from Admiral Hackett directed them to a specific settlement on the largest continent of the northern hemisphere. Apparently the man who saw the robot was a former Alliance captain, now retired and turned to wine-maker. There was some below-the-table dealing there with
how quietly the Normandy was deployed, but Shepard knew it was not her place to question it, and no one would benefit from a panic.

The Kodiak flew over kilometers of dense lush forests. Seeing all those trees made Shepard appreciate just how big a haystack they had to search. Horizon really showed its relative youth. To make matters worse, EDI has not picked up any obvious geth signatures, not even weird EM anomalies that might point to a dampening dome. Shepard could not imagine where the geth could hide a dropship without disturbing the forest or being seen. They could not have blasted a clearing, doing so in an environment so rich in oxygen would have triggered a massive fire, the very antithesis of going incognito.

The forest eventually gave way to open country of rolling hills, with a town of no more than a thousand settlers nestled in the middle, an island of habitation set amidst crop fields of every imaginable variety. The forest resumed some kilometers away, even thicker as it undulated across more hills that seemed to gather toward the mountains further west. A river undulated between the hills, moving lazily toward the big lake south-east of the town.

It was another five minutes before the Kodiak landed in the large paved yard of a vinery, surrounded by cream-painted, red-roofed pre-fabricated buildings, machinery, and vast fields of grapes growing in ruler-straight evenly-spaced rows over gently undulating hills.

Shepard was the first one to exit the shuttle and look around. The terrain here was not friendly to stealth, open ground with elevation changes, no large ship could land without being seen. The geth had a modicum of stealth, but some of it relied on a cold environment to leech away engine heat, Horizon was not cold enough for that. If they landed a ship somewhere in the open they would have been spotted with a pair of functional eyeballs.

“This is… beautiful,” Tali murmured, awed.

“Yes it is.” Shepard agreed. They put these sorts of vistas on the covers of brochures meant to entice prospective colonists to take the plunge.

“How close is this to Earth?” Tali wondered idly.

Shepard glanced at the pre-fabricated structures and grinned. Cream colored walls with red roofs? The owner went through a lot of trouble for a little slice of home. “Pretty close if you look up images of the Tuscan countryside in Italy.”

The door of one of the pre-fabs opened and a figure in overalls appeared. He was an older gentleman in his sixties. He paused mid-step when he saw them, brown eyes keen, Shepard could figure why. He called the Alliance; he got one human, two turians, and a quarian. It was like the set up for a bad joke, or an incident, depending what side of the post-FCW debate he stood.

“Captain Fabri?” She asked as the man drew near. “I am Commander Shepard, SSV Normandy. These are my contractors, Nihlus Kryik, Garrus Vakarian, and Tali’Zorah nar Rayya. I believe you contacted Admiral Hackett regarding some strange sightings?”

“Yes, that’s me.” He replied. “Pardon me Commander; I expected more… marines. Well come on in.” He motioned behind him to the living structure. Shepard followed. The prefabricated building they entered had long ago been rendered much homier with the addition of stucco onto the walls and what looked like imitation stone flooring. Thought the shape of the structure was unmistakably pre-fabricated, the Tuscan vibe carried through it quite well, even if it seemed anachronistic and somewhat out of place. Shepard felt even more out of place in her full armor, webbing, and arsenal.
The retired captain led them to the living room of his abode and sat in a plush chair. Shepard detached Vincent from her back and perched on the edge of the sofa opposite, feeling more out of place by the minute. What caught her eye was the large milky-white crystal on a felt coaster that sat as a centerpiece on the coffee table. It was the size of a loosely closed fist, roughly polished, transparent in parts, translucent in others, with bits of other rock at its base. It looked roughly plucked out, cleaned up, and displayed as a novelty.

“Lovely isn’t it? My grandson found it about ten years ago when we just arrived.” The captain explained with pride in his voice.

Shepard smiled. “It is. I don’t want to take much of your time, I imagine running this winery is a full time job, can you tell us about the robot you saw?” she breached.

“Ah of course, of course. It’s like I told Hackett, I first saw it three Horizon nights ago. Night here is long, sixteen hours even in the summer. So I was in the kitchen making coffee and happened to look out my window, and there it was. Humanoid shape, about level with my vine rows, light for a face, just strolling through the west field.”

Shepard blinked. That was rather specific a description. How many more synthetics had a lamp for a face? She glanced up at Tali, who nodded.

“It stopped, must have seen me looking from the window, turned around and walked back toward the forest. I contacted Hackett in the morning, Arcturus time.”

“I see. What color was it, or maybe its light?” Shepard asked.

“It was white all over, with a blue light.”

Shepard hummed. Well at least it was not one of the black units. Still, she could not remember seeing any geth she could call white, especially in the darkness.

“Saw it again the next night,” he went on.

“Same robot? Just one?” Shepard cut in.

“I think it was the same one, same white one, unless they’re all like that. I was working in the winery when I saw a light out the window. Found it messing with the comm tower I have in the back. I was thinking… its just one robot, so I grabbed my shotgun, sneaked up on it, as close as I dared, and fired. The thing’s shield blocked it all, but it turned around with this surprised look, just holding the tower’s control unit.” He looked around as he said that. “It was armed too; I thought I was in trouble, but next thing I know it just walked off! Took the unit with it. I didn’t follow, didn’t want to press my luck.”

“How does one of them give a surprised look?” Garrus wondered.

“Can’t they all? It had these flaring flaps on its head,” The man explained, “Looked surprised to me.”

“That’s… not typical geth hardware.” Tali noted.

“So it was a geth?” the captain asked.

“Sounds like it, Captain.” Shepard replied.

“You said it did not draw its weapon?” Nihlus asked.
“No. Just took the control unit. Still, my tower provides a comm buoy uplink to my neighbors. I told them my grandson damaged it with our tractor, didn’t want to cause a panic, but if possible I’d appreciate you bringing it back. My grandson is in town to order a replacement, but it might be weeks.”

Shepard hummed; well this was rather an interesting turn of events. She supposed the geth could have intentionally disabled the only way these people could communicate off-world, maybe to disguise their presence. However, for a malicious synthetic race that normally had no reservations about shooting, this did not fit a pattern. “Captain, do you know of any alien ruins in the forest? Maybe some of the local kids have gone hiking and found something artificial out there?”

“No, nothing of the sort. We have caves, but the only notable things there are those,” he motioned to the crystal on the table.

Shepard glanced up at Nihlus and then Garrus. “Well thank you. We will definitely investigate the matter. May we go onto your field?”

“Of course, but please do not bruise the grapes, they’re a few days from picking.”

Shepard nodded, got to her feet, and slipped Vincent behind her back.

They were out of the house and in the sunlight in seconds. Shepard turned toward the west field. “Let’s see if we can pick up some tracks or something.” While the field would be the starting point, she knew they would likely have to go into the woods. The geth had to have come from there. It would have been spotted readily out in the open. The forest formed a solid line of black and green that seemed to go on forever. Still, Shepard could not imagine how trees could conceal a geth ship from EDI’s scans.

At the edge of the field she stopped and looked back toward the winery. The comm tower was no more than fifteen meters tall, a simple rectangular metal frame crowned with three radomes. She mentally tried to think what sort of route the geth would take from the other side of the field to the dish, probably the shortest line its mechanical mind could figure out.

“You think it would leave an actual trail?” Garrus asked as he stopped next to her.

Shepard blinked, and turned to look back over the field. “Maybe. The geth are not light, can’t imagine one could just walk over soil without leaving a mark.” The soil felt soft even under her boots. “I would love to have something to follow, otherwise…” she spared Garrus a glance, “that’s a huge forest.”

“Yes. And not the only one here.”

Still, the soil was not wet enough. Her boots hardly left a mark. A few dozen extra kilograms would not make a major difference. She had to reason through things, find another way. When she glanced back at the tower a thought hit her. She raised her hand to her comm, “Normandy, this is Shepard, come in.”

“Reading you loud and clear, Commander,” Joker replied.

“We have a bit of a roadblock here, all reasons to suspect a geth, but no idea how to track it. EDI I need you to try something.”

“Awaiting instructions, Commander.”

Shepard glanced at the others who had gathered around her, curious. “The farmer we contacted told
me that a geth stole the control unit of his comm tower. EDI, check for a comm tower uplink west of my position, within I’d say… ten kilometers out?” Shepard was guesstimating how much a geth could walk over uneven terrain in a given number of hours.

“Moving the Normandy is required to perform scans in the area indicated.”

“Do it, Joker.” Shepard replied.

“Aye, aye, ma’am.”

“Alright. EDI, contact me when you finish with those,” Shepard replied.

“Of course, Commander.”

“Shepard out,” she tapped at the link to close it.

“What are you thinking, Shepard?” Nihlus wondered.

“The Geth might want to use our technology for their goals. That control unit can process signals from comm buoys while appearing as a human-built comm tower. But it really does not matter what they want with it, what matters is if that control unit is powered up we can track it. It’s a long shot, but… it does not hurt to try.” She looked toward the trees, if EDI failed to pick up on the signal then what else could they use to track it? Waiting in a stakeout was not an option. The day cycle was nearly 38 hours, and the geth might not even come back.

“Come on,” she called as she walked onto the field, eyes down, on the lookout for tracks. The west yard straddled a hill, and was quite large if what was visible on this side of the rise was equal to the other. This cross-country hiking in full gear was going to be a joy; it has been a while since she had to do some.

Nevertheless, she knew what she was looking for. The Geth had an odd foot shape, three toed, with two long toes, and a shorter thumb toe only half length on the foot. If the geth left prints, they would be rather distinct. On this side of the hill its arrival prints would be more complete, with all its weight coming down over the foot. The return prints would probably be only heel impressions.

Garrus walked next to her, his eyes on his omni-tool, Shepard was not surprised that he kept the C-sec-issue scanner program. Well she would let him work the tech angle; she preferred to rely on her eyeballs.

“I am seeing a lot of human prints, but nothing strange.” He announced after a minute.

Shepard hummed to show that she heard him, but continued to scan the path in front of them for something peculiar. Garrus said no more, but kept his eyes on his scanner.

When they crested the hill, Shepard got a very good look at the surrounding countryside. The forest was probably a kilometer away now, if her eye was as good at measurement as she thought. There was a creek here, meandering amidst the hills from the forest to join up with the river they had seen from the Kodiak. She continued down the hill, watching her footing all the way.

“Good thing we did not bring Wrex,” Nihlus commented.

“Yes. Nothing to shoot out here,” Garrus agreed.

Shepard ignored them, she spotted a semi round depression with a very pronounced side toe, but no front toes. “Found one. Definitely geth, coming up toward the farm.” A faint glimmer in the print
caught her eye. Shepard crouched to get a closer look. There, at the bottom of the print, ground into
the soil where the heel had come down, were chunks of crystalline matter, large enough to catch and
shimmer in the sunlight. Crystalline powder was also ground into the earth around these bits. She
pinched at it and rubbed her fingers together, it felt rough, granulated, and crumbled readily.
“Interesting.” She hummed.

“What is it?” Tali asked.

“Our thief’s footprints are laced with crushed quartz.” She replied. “It must have spent time where
there’s a lot of it, enough for its feet to track it all the way here.”

“The captain mentioned caves,” Tali murmured.

Shepard glanced at the others and smiled, “Ladies and gentlemen I think we just got lucky.” Sure it
might mean spelunking, but it was a lead. The proverbial haystack had just gotten a little bit smaller.

She heard a scratch on her comm, “Commander, EDI has your scans,” Joker announced.

Shepard raised her hand to her comm unit and opened the link, “Go on, you two.”

“I was unable to detect any comm tower signals; however the area has a few locations my sensors
cannot penetrate.” EDI announced.

“EDI, you took a topographical scan, correct?”

“Yes, Commander.”

“Can you relay the scans to my omni-tool?”

“Right away, Commander.”

“What’s going on?” Joker wondered.

“I found tracks,” Shepard replied. “There’s quartz in the footprints, and I have it on local authority
that there are quartz caves in the area. Factor in EDI’s sensor dark spots, and I think I know where
the geth are hiding.” Shepard explained as she glanced at the others, they could hear the whole
conversation too.

“Clever bastards, aren’t they?” Joker mused. “Should I send down the backup?”

Her omni-tool pinged, a data transmission coming through. “Not yet, I want to confirm things.”
Shepard replied.

“Roger that.”

“I’ll keep in touch, Shepard out.” She tapped the link again to close it and glanced at the others. It
was a few moments before her tool pinged again, indicating download complete.

Shepard turned on her tool and with a few taps she had the chart. The topographical map showed a
swatch of territory west of them, starting from the farm and going into the woods. It became quickly
apparent that the forest was thick and near continuous, only a few small bald patches on the top of
the biggest hills, yet these patches were not big enough for a ship the size of the dropship. Most were
also rocky and uneven, the sort of unpleasant terrain even their Kodiak would have trouble landing
on. Another couple taps overlaid the map with an image of the sensor dark spots, places that
interfered with the scanners.
The creek vanishes in a sensor interference zone.” Nihlus said as he peered at the chart over her shoulder. “It could be an entrance into a cave system.”

Shepard hummed. She would ignore the invasion of her personal space in the interest of professionalism. Nihlus also had a point. The creek also fit the bill. The just-arrived settlers would have used it as a landmark, and if there was a cave system at the end, all the better. “Alright, we might be able to take the Kodiak to this hilltop south of where the creek vanishes. Think you can make the landing, Nihlus? It’s a bit rocky.”

“Might have to land it on the incline, but it should be possible.” Nihlus replied.

“Good. Well, let’s move out!” She turned and led the way back toward their shuttle.

Nihlus landed the Kodiak on the hill’s slope just short of the peak which was too rocky and uneven for the shuttle. From the peak it did not take long to find their bearings. The forest and the hills gave way abruptly; the creek flowed through a sun-lit ravine at a leisurely pace despite the mossy rocks that dotted its course. Once they found a way down to it, they walked upstream along the bank, ascending all the time. The rocks strewn all around grew progressively larger, the ravine steeper, and the geological strata more visible. The trees hung precariously ever-closer to the edge, valiantly trying to form an unbroken canopy of green and banish the sunlight.

Eventually the ravine closed entirely, revealing where the creek emerged into the open with an abrupt transition. Here the rocks strewn in the water’s path were largest, the erosion line marked with a number of long-dead tree-trunks covered in mushroom-like growths and moss. Their position hinted that they had fallen from the top when the erosion took their support. The cavern beyond was dark. Shepard was the first to venture inside. She did not turn on her helmet lights just yet, but there was a rather promising crunch under her boots, and the walls glittered even in the faint flickers of light reflected by the creek.

She passed her fingers across the power switches of her guns and moved deeper inside. Other whines and clicks behind her assured her that the others had followed and were watching her back. It was only then that she reached up to tap the side of her helmet to activate her lights.

Inside the cave, the creek to formed pools as the sedimentary rocks eroded away. Her light beams reached all the way to the bottom through the water, but otherwise the water looked dark. All sunlight was banished from reaching into the cave. Shepard hummed, if there was a geth here, they should have seen the ghostly flickers of their lights. So either the geth were much deeper in, hidden by bends they would not see until they were much closer, or they were not in the right place. Shepard did not want to think of the latter option. If this was not the place, they had little else to go with.

She raised her omni-tool and set her personal scanner to map their path, lest they get turned around or side-tracked by the cave, and proceeded ever deeper inside. Tali now fell in-step with her, shotgun light active and omni-tool glowing.

“How deep do you intend to go?” Nihlus asked.

“A while. This is the only lead we have right now.” Shepard replied. “How are you three holding up?” Shepard was acutely aware that she would likely be called freakishly resilient. She ran five kilometer marathons as a workout. Hiking of this sort, as a semi-leisurely pace, did not wind her.

Nihlus stopped suddenly, Shepard noted because the sway of his assault rifle light stopped. He was
otherwise nearly invisible in the gloom with his dark colored armor. “What is it?” Shepard whispered.

“I heard something echo from further up.” Nihlus replied.

Shepard hummed; she could hear the faint echoes of their footsteps, the water dripping from the cavern roof, the faint gurgle of the creek along whose course they walked, but little else. The cavern took a slow meander to the right, heading northwest if her internal compass was not thrown off already. Shepard chanced to look up, and then she saw them. Quartz crystals studded the cavern’s roof like nature’s chandeliers, throwing refractions when hit by light. It was not hard to see why someone would want to chisel one out and take it home.

They must have walked another hundred meters following the cave’s course before Shepard saw sunlight. It fell like a curtain across an opening in the distance. The cavern seemed to widen there. Shepard had noted a depression on the scans EDI gave them, now she thought this must be it. Coming at it from outside would not have given them anything; the scan indicated a precipitous drop, no way to approach except rappelling down, and not large enough for a ship the size of a frigate. It seemed like it was actually a collapsed section of this cave system. The sunlight that pierced through moved with the shifting of the trees above.

As they approached and the angle shifted, Shepard stopped dead in her tracks. Sitting right there, part on the bank and part in the creek, was a small silver craft shaped like a wasp without wings. It was probably no more than twenty meters long, and another five wide. Shepard looked up; it must have landed vertically through the roof, which was indeed a collapsed section of the cave system. The cavern around them broadened, and the rocks grew thick with moss where the sun could reach them. Two little creatures, looking like a mix of a grey squirrel and a ferret, had clambered on top of the ship, and were now sunning themselves happily. The collapse had happened long before the geth chose to use it as a hiding spot, and the ship had been here a while if the wild-life had returned.

“What are we looking at, Tali?” Shepard asked as she drew her guns.

“I am… not sure. The geth use rather uniform designs, but… I’ve never seen one this small. Be careful, Commander. The ship is likely aware of our presence. Geth do not use pilots. Their ships are operated by hundreds of runtimes installed into the ship’s mainframe, essentially they are geth.”

“You’re saying that thing is aware?” Shepard asked.

“Yes.”

Shepard froze, that ship was probably staring at them, proverbially speaking. Their element of surprise had just gone out the window. “Keep an eye on it, if it powers up any sort of weapon, I want to know.” Shepard said.

“Yes, Commander.” Tali replied.

Shepard climbed over some of the collapsed rocks and approached the craft. The ship gave no obvious sign of awareness, no shudders, no whines of some weapon powering up, no hint of thruster activity to indicate it might take off. On closer inspection she noted dark scorching along the craft’s belly and leading surfaces, it fought to descend into atmosphere. There was also bad discoloration on top of the craft’s back, complete with pock-marks, and a few small holes.

“Look, those holes on its back are not atmospheric friction, it looks more like impact damage.” Shepard noted. She moved aft along the craft’s body, hand on Sin. Yet the ship remained completely still. This was the closest Shepard had ever gotten to a geth craft, and if it was self-aware, it showed
so sign of aggression so far. She wondered if it could hear and understand their conversation. “I think it is here because it needs repair.”

“You are correct,” a mechanical voice replied.

Shepard whirled and whipped out Sin.

A figure rounded the back slowly, its hands hanging down its side. “We mean no harm. We are here to repair damaged hardware. When repairs are complete we will depart.” It announced.

“Keelah…” Tali breathed.

This geth was not as massive as a prime unit, and definitely did not have the frightening visage of the black unit. It had a single central face light and four smaller ones over where its temples ought to be. Unlike the black one it had just one thick antenna behind its left shoulder, and its coloration was a silver-hued almost bare brushed-metal look that diffused and scattered sunlight in an almost ethereal manner. It was armed as well, an assault rifle at the small of its back, and something bigger tucked behind its right shoulder

Nihlus and Garrus were at her sides in an instant, assault rifles raised and pointed at the platform. The unit tipped its head to the side, the aperture shutters built into its face-light constricted, narrowing the beam. The flaps on the top of its head twitched, but its hands remained at its sides.

“Hold your fire!” Shepard ordered as she lowered Sin.

“Shepard?” Nihlus asked.

“It knew we were coming, and did nothing. I… don’t want to start anything.”

The geth’s flaps flared and then Shepard knew what the captain meant by the machine giving him a surprised look. The six major flaps surrounded its head like eyebrows and extended down the sides of its head to about where the chin ought to have been on a humanoid. Each seemed to have its own little actuators and delicate-looking struts, capable of moving independently. When it popped the ones on the top of its head up all the way, it looked comically surprised.

Nihlus slowly lowered his rifle, but his finger remained on the trigger guard. Garrus was even slower at lowering his.


“You know who I am?” Shepard replied.

“We know about Shepard-Commander.”

“I know about you too.”

“We never met.” It argued. “The probability of meeting Shepard-Commander was calculated to be ten percent.” The machine said. “We understand Shepard-Commander opposes geth who attacked colony-Eden Prime. We attempted to prevent a meeting by not causing harm to humans on colony-Horizon. We request Shepard-Commander let us finish our work so that we can depart.”

“You said the ship is damaged?” Shepard wondered.
“Affirmative. Our vessel sustained impacts from space borne micro-debris. This resulted in damage to vital communication hardware. We are here to repair. When repairs are complete, we will depart.”

Shepard blinked, “You took the tower’s control unit for spare parts?”

“Affirmative.”

“Commander, you can’t possible believe it! It’s a geth!” Tali protested.

“We are here to repair. We mean no harm.” The machine reiterated.

Shepard hummed, well if it meant harm, it could have landed right on the vineyard, killed everyone who came to investigate, and fixed its ship there. It would not have bothered to make such a complicated landing here and then walked kilometers to the vineyard. It would not have bothered to turn back and return the next night when initially spotted.

“You think we will believe you are not a scout for a future attack?” Nihlus wondered.

The geth’s flaps widened as far as they would go and began to shudder. “We understand concern for colony-Horizon. Shepard-Commander faced the Heretics on colony-Eden Prime. Heretics are geth, but not all geth are Heretic. We did not attack colony-Eden Prime.”

Shepard blinked; the way it talked made it tricky to follow, but underneath there was something else. “Are you implying that the geth we faced on Eden Prime were… different?”

“Affirmative. Heretics attacked colony-Eden Prime. This unit is not Heretic. We mean no harm.” It repeated.

Shepard hummed again, would a machine lie? Tali would say it would. An organic individual faced four armed people would probably say and do anything to avoid being shot. Still, there was evidence to back its words. It had free rein before the Normandy arrived, and yet it did nothing more than steal. They had not encountered any scouts on Daiwi, so maybe the geth did not bother with scouts. This geth did not even mention Daiwi, so maybe the geth did not bother with scouts. This geth did not even mention Daiwi, did it know about it, or was it simply omitting? “If you mean no harm, what brings you out of the veil? How many platforms are outside the veil?” Shepard wondered.

“The actions of the Heretics have led to a new consensus within the Geth. This unit was sent to collect information on organic understanding of Heretic actions. To that end, a single platform was deemed adequate. We wish to observe, not incite.”

“A spy.” Nihlus rumbled.

“Incorrect. We do not infiltrate. Organics communication on open channels is adequate for observation.”

“You have access to the comm buoy network?” Shepard wondered.

“Affirmative.”

“Keelah.” Tali breathed again.

Now it made sense why it would go for a comm tower control unit. Integrating such a part into its system would mask its access to the comm buoy network. Shepard suspected that this was not the first time the geth stole such technology if they knew how to operate the galaxy’s communication technology and had an understanding of how people communicated. They were not the simple
artificial intelligences that Tali said they were.

More than that, if this geth’s kind were still cloistered in the Perseus Veil, their access was probably sporadic. The comm buoy network in that cluster was inadequately maintained at best, destroyed at worst. An advance unit sent into the more habitable regions of space, and indeed human colonies in particular, made some sense. This of course, assuming this geth was not lying to her face.

“We estimated the probability of meeting Shepard-Commander to be ten percent.” It repeated. “Nevertheless, we achieved consensus that in the event of contact we would attempt to exchange data with Shepard-Commander.”

“You want to talk?”

“Affirmative. The preceding data exchange has been invaluable. We have a new consensus. We wish to demonstrate to Shepard-Commander that her enemies are the Heretics. At this time the Geth mean no harm to Shepard-Commander and Earth Systems Alliance.”

Shepard hummed, ‘at this time’, a curious turn of phrase. That implied that there was a vague possibility of the decision changing. “What of your mission to observe?” she wondered.

The geth’s flaps twitched again, moving sporadically as it remained silent for a long moment.

To Shepard it almost seemed like someone at a loss for words opening and shutting their mouth, uncertain what to say.

“Shepard-Command will continue to pursue the heretics.” It stated. “We predict that we can meet both our goals, to quantify organic response and convince Shepard-Command of our intentions, with the integration of this platform with the crew of the Normandy.”

“No! Absolutely not!” Tali protested. “Commander, you can’t let it do that!”

Shepard’s only paid attention to one crucial point, how did it know the name of her ship? “Tali, we are just talking. No harm in that, is there?”

Tali looked away, but it looked like she might have wanted to say something edgewise.

Shepard weighed the pros and cons; she had a state of the art cybernetic warfare suite guided by an ever-vigilant AI. What would be the harm of letting a single geth aboard the ship? Had she not told Garrus and Nihlus that she would give the geth a chance to tell their side of the story? This was indeed a strange coincidence, but it was also an opportunity. If the geth was lying, they would find out. The amount of damage it could cause to the ship was limited, and shutting it down permanently would be easy enough. However if the unit was indeed truthful, and she told it no, she might give up something important, something that no one in the galaxy had ever pursued, a genuine dialogue with the geth.

“I know that look, Shepard,” Nihlus said.

“Commander, you can’t!” Tali protested, more impassioned than before.

The geth tipped its head to the side again, its light beam focused chiefly on her.

Shepard glanced at Nihlus; she knew he would remain largely neutral. The situation probably did not bother him one way or the other. Tali was obviously against the whole thing. There would be tension on the Normandy between the geth and quarian, but there was also tension between Wrex and the turians, and that was under control. “What do you think, Garrus?” she wondered, turning to the
“Well, if you ask me… which you did…” he paused, hummed, “The Normandy is your ship, your command, and its crew is your crew. You decide who to bring aboard. But I remember what we talked about in the library on the Citadel. If you feel like giving the geth a chance…” he said.

Shepard smiled, had she not just thought that same thing? She turned back to the geth. The flaps on its head rose, its light beam widened, as if it was happy. “I am willing to further our contact. Perhaps aid you in your… studies.”

“Acknowledged.”

“I do have a question.” Shepard added.

“Specify.”

“What will you do with this craft?” Shepard asked as she raised her hand and passed it along the ship’s side. It was a test of sort, what would be the geth’s reaction to her touching one of its kind. The hull of the little ship felt cold, cold enough that it seemed to seep into her bones despite her gloves.

“The geth runtimes that assist us in operating the craft will return to the Perseus Veil.” It replied without hesitation.

Shepard hummed, so the ship would fly back home. She supposed it made sense. “Fair enough. I asked because we could not bring it along.” There was no room in the Normandy’s shuttle bay for a craft of this size. “Alright then, but there is something I want you to do, a token of goodwill if you will. The control unit you took, the farmer needs it back.”

The geth’s flaps twitched again.

Shepard was not going to bow down; this was a test. If the geth was not willing to compromise on this, it would probably not compromise on anything bigger.

“Acknowledged. As per Shepard-Commander’s request, we will return the component we took to its original location.”

Shepard smiled and approached the geth, “Well then. We have an agreement.”

“Acknowledged. We anticipate a continued exchange of data.”

“I’ll be watching you, geth.” Tali murmured.

The geth spared Tali a look and cocked its head, “Acknowledged. We will be observing the creator as well.”

Tali sputtered, turned, and stalked off. Shepard caught her calling the geth a ‘bosh’tet’, the translator did not provide a translation, but it was not needed. Shepard got the distinct impression that the geth did not quite understand that Tali had been threatening it.

The geth produced the control unit without much fuss and elected to carry it as it joined them on the trek out of the cave, matching pace with Shepard as it walked at her side. No sooner were they at the cave’s entrance than a deep, thunderous rumble resounded from deep within, echoing off the walls
and roof. A few seconds later, the geth craft rose into the air over the forest, turned on the spot, pitched up, and began to climb into the sky.

Shepard was none too surprised when there was a scratch in her ear, “Normandy to Shepard, come in, Commander!”

“Shepard here. I know Joker. I’m watching it take off.”

“Alright, I’ll bite… why?” Joker wondered.

“It’s complicated. I will explain everything when we get back, for now… let the ship go, it is leaving the system.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“We’ll talk later, Shepard out.” She tapped at the comm again to close the link. Somewhere in the back of her mind she hoped she was doing the right thing, but there was no going back now. She turned and resumed walking. The trek back to their shuttle was slow, made slower by the fact that they had delicate equipment to walk up a rather steep incline. Once they reached the vehicle, Nihlus flew it back to the farm.

Their return landing was noticeable enough, and Shepard was not surprised to see Captain Fabri emerge from the winery, still wearing his work apron.

“Commander, you’re back.” He called. “Is there something you needed?” he wondered.

“Actually, Captain… we’re bringing back something you needed.” Shepard replied with a smile. She knew the moment the captain laid his eyes on the geth by how quickly he stiffened.

“We mean no harm. We wish to return the hardware we took.”

“Yes… yes. Alright. I suppose I should… thank you.”

“Acknowledged. Shepard-Commander, we will now restore the tower to operational condition.”

Shepard was honestly surprised. The geth had only agreed to return the hardware, but now it seemed like that included fixing the tower as well.

“Thanks… and I am sorry for that shot I took at you.” The captain sounded dazed.

“We understand the intent behind the action. Given previous geth actions on colony-Eden Prime, you perceived this unit as a threat. Your response was within predicted parameters.”

“I see…” The captain sounded more confused by the second.

The geth turned and walked off, rounded the winery, and vanished from view. It was then, with its back turned that Shepard really saw the other weapon it carried. With a shock Shepard realized it was a large sniper rifle. The size of the weapon screamed anti-materiel caliber.

“Is it the only geth on Horizon?” the captain wondered.

“Yes. It apparently wanted the unit to fix its ship’s communication gear. It’s not staying on Horizon either.”

“Will others come?” the captain wondered.
Shepard paused, it was a good question. She could not say that they would not without lying, or worse, instilling false confidence. If the geth was truthful and the so-called Heretics were a different faction, she could not guarantee they would not attack Horizon.

“You are uncertain.” The captain noted.

“The situation is complicated. This geth does not speak for all geth. I understand that it’s not something one would like to hear, but in all fairness, I simply cannot guarantee that others won’t come.”

“I understand, Commander. It is a good thing I kept its presence a secret. I can keep this to myself. I assume Eden Prime was bigger than the media led on to believe?”

“I cannot discuss Eden Prime in detail, but… it’s complicated.”

“I’ll take that as a yes,” the captain said.

Half an hour later, the geth was back. Shepard and company lingered only long enough so that the captain could double check that his tower was operational. After that, they said quick goodbyes and were back on the Kodiak and heading off-world.

Their return to the Normandy was heralded. The marines were down in the bay, and Wrex was leaning on a pillar, arms folded, clearly less than pleased.

“Shepard,” he said as soon as she stepped off the shuttle.

“Wrex,” she replied.

The geth stepped off the shuttle, and Wrex pushed off the pillar and dropped his arms to his sides. Ashley reached for a pistol, Kaidan’s biotics flickered, and Jenkins outright flinched. The geth’s head flaps flared in surprise. Shepard would have laughed if she did not realize this situation had the potential to turn ugly.

Alright people, settle down. Yes, it’s a geth. There is much I have to tell you, or better yet, let…” Shepard paused as a thought hit her. In all the hub-hub and suddenness of meeting a friendly-seeming, rather talkative geth, she never questioned what to call it. It certainly did not seem particularly interested in names itself. Yet it was an AI, it had some sense of self. EDI was an AI, and she adopted a name. It seemed remiss not to ask the geth its name. “You know,” she turned to face the unit. “In all of this, I just realized I never asked what should we call you?”

The flaps moved as the machine tipped its head. “Geth.” It replied.

Shepard, “I mean you. Specifically.”

The flaps twitched, “We are all Geth.”

There was miscommunication there somewhere, and in the presence of her whole ground team it felt kind of weird. “What is the individual in front of me called?” It felt even weirder being so cold, but if it misunderstood the query, perhaps clinical terms were needed.

The machine cocked its head ever so slightly, “There is no individual. We are Geth. There are currently one-thousand-one-hundred-eighty-three programs active within this platform.”
“Keelah!” Tali breathed, shocked. “Commander-”

Shepard spared the quarian a brief look, everyone around them had gathered closer. Jenkins’ jaw was halfway to the floor and Ashley still clutched a pistol.

“My name is Legion, for we are many,” EDI cut in, piercing the sudden silence.

Shepard hummed, “That seems… appropriate.” Perhaps not for a certain couple negative connotations she was not fond of, but they could not very well call it ‘Bob’, could they?

The geth seemed to think about it. The flaps positively danced; widening and narrowing in turn. Well, being a synthetic intelligence, as far as Shepard was concerned, it had the right to refuse the suggestion and propose its own name.

“Christian Bible, the Gospel of Mark, chapter five, verse nine. We acknowledge that this is an appropriate metaphor.” It stated as its light narrowed slightly, the lamp’s angle flicked around. “We are Legion, a terminal of the Geth.” It turned its head and glanced at the others, “We anticipate the exchange of data.”

Wrex snorted, “If I knew you were looking for a pet, Shepard, I would have suggested a Pyjack.” He said, turned, and walked off to his corner of the shuttle bay.

“Let me make this clear, geth, I don’t want you anywhere near me.” Tali stated.

When the geth said nothing at all, the quarian turned and walked off.

Wrex making jokes was one thing, but Tali’s unabated hostility was something else. Shepard sighed, there was nothing to it. Rome’s bridges were not built in a day. They would have to be carefully constructed over time if they were to stand at all and not be prone to igniting.

“With all due respect, ma’am, we would like to know what is going on,” Ashley said.

Shepard sighed, “Legion, how about you help me explain, I want you to meet everyone proper.”

“Acknowledged, Shepard-Commander.”

Two hours later Shepard had made due introductions and settled Legion into a berth of sorts. EDI had volunteered to keep an eye on it, and thus Shepard showed Legion the access door through medbay that led to the server room, after Legion also went through a decontamination cycle, as its feet still shed powdered quartz with each step. It baffled Shepard where all that powder was retained.

Doctor Chakwas was very amused to meet the geth as well; it seemed like everyone who saw it was curious. Legion was also shockingly polite when it fielded questions.

The last place Shepard got to was the bridge, Joker was still holding them in orbit around Horizon as she had not issued orders otherwise.

“Hey Commander. I was listening to that talk in the shuttle bay, so… a geth?”

“You have a problem with that?” Shepard wondered.

“Well… you know me, I was not a fan of EDI, but EDI’s proven useful… but really, a geth? This one even comes with one-thousand-one-hundred-eighty-three voices in its head for that even better chance of killing us all.”
“Joker.”

“No, I get it, but really… Wrex was right.”

Shepard crossed her arms. Of all the people on the ship, she never would have expected to get the third degree from Joker. Even Tali seemed to back down a little, though clearly very displeased. Perhaps the difference was only that Tali took her authority seriously, while Joker was prone to borderline insubordination. She did not have to explain herself to her subordinates, but Shepard was never the one to pull rank. She would not start now.

“You did not see what I saw down there. Our contact shot at it. Legion just… walked away. That’s before it even knew the Normandy was coming. It does not seem like a violent geth.”

Joker met her gaze. “I hope you’re right, but the crew will be locking their doors when they sleep for at least a while.”

Ah so that was the angle. Joker would know what the crew was apt to do. “I am willing to give Legion a chance. If it disappoints…”

“It’ll cross this crew’s overprotective mama-bear. I know. It does not stand a chance.” Joker smiled.

Shepard rolled her eyes. She did not say it, but she had a good feeling about Legion. It would not disappoint her.

Chapter End Notes

**Author Notes:** Here’s Legion, the third member of “The Sniper Three”.

**General Notes:**

**Episode Title** – It is an intentional nod toward the 2004 Will Smith movie “I, Robot”, only because Legion is adorable, and I love my dopey robots. The initial idea was “We, Legion” but I decided that since all the other character intro episode titles didn’t hint at who would be introduced until they were (with the sole exception of episodes 2-3, because they had their own thing…) a change was necessary. Unfortunately, I really didn’t have the material to give Legion a two-part episode like everyone else, and I did not want to force it. EDI suggesting a name for Legion was taken almost verbatim from ME2. I felt the scene translated easily, and I could not improve on the concept, I merely changed the setting and made it more communal.

**Chapter Notes:**

Shockingly... none.
The Twelfth Labor [Part I]

Chapter Notes

**Disclaimer:** I do no own Mass Effect, I do not claim to own Mass Effect, I am only doing this for fun.

**Author Notes:** And now back to our regularly scheduled intrigue!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**Episode 18:** The Twelfth Labor [Part I]

It may have been day on Horizon, but the daily cycle on the Normandy was still the standard Earth twenty-four. Hiking a combined six kilometers to the cave and back took the energy out of everyone. Shepard retreated to her quarters so she could work on her report at her private terminal. It was rather slow going; she could feel exhaustion creeping up. Still, she knew that there was no way for her sleep until she figured out how to explain Legion, and while she knew she would not finish the report now, she wanted to jot down a few notes, maybe finish some basics, while her memory was fresh.

Horizon being the third planet in the system, they had to make a detour to Prospect, the second, to vent the heat from the IES and discharge the static buildup in the Tantalus drive. The Normandy was currently on its way to the outer reaches of the Iera system, to the mass relay which orbited out beyond the system’s last planet.

There was a ping from her terminal and a few seconds later a scratch over the intercom, “Ugh… Commander, EDI just got a message for you over a secure channel.”

Shepard flicked screens and brought up the message EDI had sent straight to her terminal. “Thanks you two,” she replied. A recorded message was somewhat atypical. If this was orders, she normally got them as close as it got to face-to-face.

“I have a bad feeling,” he said.

When Shepard saw the origin of the message, she understood why. “I think I’ll join that club.” She murmured.

There was another scratch as the link disconnected, and Shepard pressed play. There was an instant burst of static and grain on the recording.

“Shepard, this is Admiral Kahoku. I found out who set that trap for my men. Damn I hope you get this message.”

Shepard frowned, the admiral sounded tense and harried. He almost whispered into the recording device, as if he was not sure if he was alone wherever he made the recording.

“It was a group called Cerberus. An Alliance black ops organization. Top secret, highest-level security clearance.”

Shepard’s bad feeling turned from merely a sort of buzz into a full-blown warning alarm. She was
not exactly low clearance herself. N7s tended to range, their clearance based on where they were deployed and for whom. Some were little more than highly specialized soldiers, but others were real ghosts, spies with high levels of access. Still, as black as ICT graduates got, they were apparently not the blackest of black ops.

“They vanished a few months ago. Dropped right off the grid. Nobody knew where they went or what they were up to.” The admiral paused for a brief moment, with only the grain of the recording to show that it had not cut out. “They’ve gone completely rogue, Shepard. They’re conducting illegal genetics experiments, trying to create some kind of super soldier.”

Shepard blinked, stunned. The Admiral’s tension morphed into outright barely-contained anger, and she could understand why. Illegal genetic experiments probably meant they were not using volunteers. That left a few possibilities, none of them good. There were laws against genetic modification. Even military gene therapy packages already skirted the grey zone of legality, and most of them only fixed issues like predisposition to various medical conditions, they did not bestow new capabilities.

“I don’t have any proof, but I found the location for one of their research labs. I’m uploading the coordinates with this message.”

Shepard brought up the text portion of the message, and noticed there were designations and numbers and nothing else, these must be the coordinates.

“They’re completely out of control. Somebody needs to stop them. I’ve done my part. Now, it’s up to you.”

Even if this Cerberus bunch was not breaking Alliance law, they were still murderers. Shepard knew she would do everything she could to bring them in.

“This is… this is probably the last you’ll hear from me. They’re after me now. I need to disappear before they find me.”

Shepard stood up and tapped a command to send the location to Joker. “EDI, patch me through to the bridge.”

“Yes, Commander.”

“Hey Commander, what’s the damage?” Joker asked.

“We have a change of plans and a situation. Get us to the coordinates I sent you as fast as the Normandy can go.”

“That bad? Aye, aye, ma’am!”

“EDI, could you notify Nihlus, Alenko, Williams, Jenkins, and Wrex that I want to see them in the OD in the morning? You can tell them that there has been an update on the Edolus case.”

“Of course, Commander.” EDI replied.

She pondered whether to bring Legion along as well, because she wanted to get a reading on what the geth was capable of, but decided that this was a rather sensitive matter. It was neither the time nor place to bring in an unknown factor.

To say she was worried would be an understatement. If Rear Admiral Kahoku was convinced that these rogue agents would come after him, he probably had grounds for it. Why had he not contacted...
Admiral Hackett? Or had he? If he had, she ought to have been contacted, right? There were so many questions she wanted to ask, something denied to her by a pre-recorded message of this sort. She honestly hoped that the admiral was wrong, but she knew that hope rarely led anywhere. The case stank of corruption and shadow-plays from the get-go. If this was some rogue black ops cell, they seemed to have plenty of reach, and that did not bode well.

It took fifteen hours to reach the Voyager Cluster’s Yangtze system, FTL hop included, as the relay was in the Amazon system. Currently the Normandy was making a stealthy bee-line toward the system’s second planet, Binthu, the planet identified by Rear Admiral Kahoku’s coordinates. Shepard was seated on the OD couch, working on routine paperwork.

The OD door opened and the marines filed in, followed by Nihlus, and Wrex trailing in the rear.

“What’s going on, Shepard?” Wrex wondered.

“I received a message from Rear Admiral Kahoku, directing us here. There’s been a rather… disturbing break in the Edolus case. I’ll play the message.” Shepard explained.

The marines took their seats on the couch, and Shepard tapped a few keys to play the recording for all to hear. As it played, she watched their reactions. Kaidan’s was immediate on the mere mention of experiments; it was like a storm had drawn in. Ashley’s rage peaked more slowly, but the word ‘experiments’ had its effect, Shepard could see it in the way her fists closed, and her eyes narrowed. Richard sat there utterly stupefied.

The most curious expression crossed Nihlus’ face, his mandibles flicked almost rhythmically, and then when their gazes locked the twitch stopped, they drew up tight to his jaw. Shepard suspected there was something on his mind. So was that minute flicker agitation, or was it something else?

Shepard stopped the message short of the final line; she did not need everyone to hear the fear and vulnerability in the admiral’s tone. “The coordinates lead us to Binthu, and we will make orbit soon.”

“Cerberus, I’ve heard that name before,” Kaidan spoke up. “Back in 2165, the attack on the SSV Geneva. The only attacker to survive mentioned Cerberus when he was interrogated.”

“That was eighteen years ago, can’t be the same organization, can it?” Richard wondered.

“Also we’re talking a rogue black ops unit here. How does that fit in?” Ashley added.

“Both very good questions,” Shepard said. She had her thoughts on the matter, but could not go too far with them. There were too few facts to base anything on. “I’d say some sort of shadowy organization smoke-screening itself as black ops would explain the anomalies. The stonewalled official investigation, the resources to lay that trap on Edolus…” she trailed off there, because to go on was to go into that territory of suppositions not based on fact.

“Sounds to me like they deserve a good stomping,” Wrex volunteered.

“They’re in for it,” Shepard replied.

The krogan smiled.

Shepard turned back to the others, “As for Binthu... The planet’s atmosphere has lots of chlorine and sulfur-dioxide. Expect hot temperatures and frequent acid rain. The Kodiak can take the rain, but our suits are less shielded. We will have to limit direct exposure.” Shepard knew what that meant, she
needed EDI to conduct high resolution scans, they needed to know the location of every rock before they went down there and had to deal with sulfuric acid falling out of the sky. “That’s about the only thing I have right now, we need to wait on EDI’s scans.”

“You worry too much, Shepard. I can handle a bit of acid rain.” Wrex noted.

“Be that as it may, we do our prep and do this right. Take your time to consider what you need; we will have to meet a second time when EDI has our scans. Meantime, let’s adjourn.” She said as she glanced at the people gathered.

The room largely emptied after that. The marines were first to leave, with Wrex trailing behind them, but Nihlus remained. Shepard raised an eyebrow, which he returned with one of his grins.

“Something tells me you know something.”

“Are you sure you are not Asari?” he wondered.

Shepard chuckled, “I’m sure I’m human. You get that look in your eyes… the one that says ‘I know something you don’t, and I want you to pry it out of me’. You’re a book, Nihlus.”

He chuckled, “There is a reason Wrex likes you. You are both full of yourselves.”

“Coming from you? Pot calling the kettle black,” Shepard replied as she picked up her pad to return to her half-finished report.

“I never understood where that saying came from.”

Shepard noted that he never actually denied being full of himself. “Funny enough, most humans don’t either. I’m surprised you know as many as you do. Don’t think that your deflections will work. What is on your mind?”

“Ruining my fun, huh?” He sat down on the extension of the couch and stared out toward the door. “Alright. I did not want to say this in front of the others, clearance issues, but Cerberus crossed Spectre sources.”

“They have?” Shepard asked.

“If there is such an organization, there is no pattern to their operations. Alenko mentioned an attack on a ship, now we are looking at potential genetic experiments and shadowy special operations units. Spectre sources do not get any clearer.”

“They seem to do a bit of everything,” Shepard mused.

“Precisely. That complicates any attempt to trace them. For all we know, there is no Cerberus, and the name is little more than a symbol for disparate groups to identify with.”

“Valid point,” Shepard hummed.

“There is another possibility though. If there is a single group, then they use this chaotic irregularity to conceal themselves. It is as you said; they seem to have resources, too many to be a disorganized, disparate gathering of individual groups. The Council does not publicize this, but if they are a single group, they would be deemed to be a terrorist organization.”

“So if we can confirm anything…”

“I will have to report to the Council.” Nihlus replied. “Do not worry, I will give my protégé due
Shepard rolled her eyes. Due credit was the last thing she worried about.

“I think I will leave you to whatever it is,” Nihlus said as he motioned to the pad in her hands as he got up from his seat.

Shepard did not say anything more as he left the room; the report had to be finished. Now it had to be finished much sooner than later. It looked like she might have to work on a second, even longer, and more bothersome one before long.

Hours later, the details were hashed out. The planet was truly a barren wasteland, so finding signs of habitation did not prove difficult. EDI’s scans found three separate facilities spread over the planet’s surface. To make matters worse, the labs had external defenses that EDI had to disable, as they did not have a Mako to handle things the quickest way.

Shepard decided to hit the smallest of the three installations first, to test what sort of internal defenses might be in place. EDI was also to get into the communications and disable the ability of the labs to contact each other; they would hit them in series, but ensure that the first they hit could not forewarn the other two.

Thus they readied the Kodiak with extra ammo, medical supplies, and some edibles for a longer mission. The Kodiak took off with Joker on standby in the event that he might have to send the second Kodiak or respond to the arrival of a ship in orbit. Shepard was taking no chances on anything, bad enough they had to face unknown odds in the labs.

Nihlus made atmospheric entry far away from the labs that they would not be immediately noticed. Binthu’s atmosphere was an oddity, the sky looked blue, but it was almost permanently overcast with ugly mustard yellow clouds that carried equal amounts of sulfur and rain-water, usually merged into a highly corrosive soup ready to fall. The planet’s large moon hung pale and sickly in the sky. Even the ground was a desolate, acid-eaten shade of rust-orange that was toxic to the point that absolutely nothing grew in it.

EDI worked on disabling the turrets as they made final approach to the smallest of the labs. Only when EDI had control did Shepard tell Nihlus to land. He set the Kodiak down right in front of the compound’s main entrance. After performing final seal checks and ensuring that EDI would not lose control of the turrets, Shepard gave the okay for the team to make entrance. Once again, she was in the lead, Sin drawn. Wrex was right behind her, his shotgun at a ready. It was a quick dash from the shuttle to the main airlock entryway.

The first sign that their target was unwary was that when Shepard tapped at the control console, the airlock opened before she could even fire up her decryption program. They filed in and the airlock cycled without needing to be given instructions. Shepard was first to make entrance, drawing Dex.

They entered a small antechamber, which was typical prefabricated, half-buried structure. There were no guards here, another oversight, but good considering that they were yet to scout what odds they were facing. Shepard made her way toward the door in the back and tapped its console, the panel flashed green, and the doors slid open.

Shepard glanced around the doorjamb. The next chamber was a much larger rectangular space. She could see equipment taking up nearly every square centimeter. At the back of the room she spotted a single lab technician working at his console, and hovering nearby were three very armed men. All of
them wore rather non-descript black armor and full helmets with opaque visors.

“Three guards, one lab-rat. I’m seeing assault rifles and shotguns. There’s very limited viable cover.” Shepard announced. Having their helmets on with comm she did not have to whisper to conceal a conversation and still allow the rest of the team to hear.

“You want any one of them still breathing?” Wrex wondered.

“Ideally, yes. But I get the feeling they’re not going to go quietly.” Not without her getting a little creative.

“No need to get complicated. We walk in there, they do something stupid, and we teach them the last lesson they ever learn.” Wrex volunteered.

Shepard was honestly surprised with how macabre Wrex’ sense of humor ran, but he was right. They did not need get elaborate; there were three armed men and six of them. She motioned with her hand and Wrex shifted to the other side of the door and cocked his gun. She tapped her helmet to open her external sound. On a flick of her fingers she made entry with Wrex and Nihlus on her six.

“Stop, nobody move!” she called. Perhaps a little cop-like, but in her defense Spectres had the authority to arrest, even if she got that authority indirectly from Nihlus. The lab technician looked up, shocked, the three troopers reached for their assault rifles. “I said stop! Final warning!” she shouted.

The closest of the armed men fired, Shepard ducked behind a pillar, the rapport of bullets barely missed.

“There’s that something stupid,” Wrex rumbled.

“Feel free to educate them.” Shepard replied as another rapport of bullets flew past her head.

“Gladly!” Wrex called and swung around the pillar.

Shepard glanced at Nihlus who had taken cover behind some metal cabinets with his rifle out.

There was another assault rifle rapport, and Shepard heard the deep thudding footsteps of a Krogan. There was a whomp followed by a scream, and one of the troopers went flying. Nihlus raised his rifle and opened fire, the bullets ripped through the flying trooper’s shields; he was dead before his body hit the ground.

Shepard peeked around her cover, the lab technician was skirting around the room, and Wrex was engaged with the two other troopers. She glanced back at the lab technician, at that moment there was a thunderous crack she recognized as Wrex’ shotgun, followed by a thud she knew had to be a body.

“I need to get that lab-coat.”

“Go, we got this,” Nihlus said.

Shepard moved out from behind cover, and there was another burst of assault rifle fire and a whomp. Something hit the floor with a great metallic crash. Shepard followed the lab technician. Another burst of assault rifle fire followed by a thunderous crack of an overpowered shotgun. Something exploded, a scream followed, and then a burst of assault rifle and the sound died.

A growl echoed across her comm, “That was mine, turian.” Wrex said.

“We need this place mostly intact, krogan.” Nihlus replied.
The lab technician had reached a closed door in the back of the lab, but Shepard was right on his heels. She watched as he tried to enter a code. Panicked as he was, his finger slipped and the console flashed red. His fingers danced again, but Shepard grabbed him by the lab coat and yanked back before he could hit the final key.

The lab technician whirled and swung, his fist collided with the side of her helmet and the man recoiled as if shot. Shepard slammed him into the wall, forearm pressed against his neck. “I have questions.”

“I won’t tell you anything.” The lab technician replied.

“You don’t have a choice,” Shepard replied.

“Go to hell.” The lab technician hissed and spat, splattering saliva on her face shield.

Shepard baulked and reached up to swipe the fingers of her free hand across her visor and in that moment she saw his tongue poke in his cheek, his jaw opened and closed, she heard something crack between his teeth. “Oh no you don’t!” she hissed. The lab technician smiled. Shepard came down with her weight on his throat, hoping to prevent him swallowing, but her reaction was late, he already seized up and a moment later was frothing at the mouth. Shepard stepped back as the lab technician slid to the floor, his eyes rolled to the back of his head, convulsing ever worse for ten long seconds, and then he stilled.

“Commander?” Kaidan asked.

“He committed suicide.” Shepard replied, numbed. What was it with fanatics and killing themselves? Did they really think they were accomplishing anything with that? She had the whole lab to search. Physical evidence was more important than anything he could have said, making his death a waste. She could not let it go that far again. Next time she would adjust her approach. Now she knew that if she wanted to apprehend, she had to knock them out first. Judging by what she saw, the drug was probably concealed in the crown of a tooth. That could readily be extracted once they were out cold.

“Cowardly bastard.” Ashley noted.

Shepard turned and found the others had gathered about. “We search the lab,” she announced coolly.

The team spread out after that as Shepard walked over to where the lab technician had been working. She was not surprised that Nihlus followed her, his rifle still drawn. The console had gone into standby; Shepard tapped it, which brought up the last thing the lab technician had been working on. The contents of the computers had been packaged and the lab technician had tried to transmit it all, but EDI’s hack had shut down the communication array. A few taps of the keys brought up the last files accessed; one of them was an itemized inventory, with things listed by catalogue numbers and brief clinical descriptions. “This lab dealt with what appears to be cloned tissues. I’m seeing a lot of organs and pieces of things.”

“There’s are freezers here full of pieces of things alright.” Ashley said. “I recognize thresher maw parts and vials of acid. There are racks of blood samples... the hand-writing is too squiggly to really make it out.”

“There’s an inventory log here, I got what I need.” Shepard replied as she reached into a small pocket on her webbing and pulled out an OSD.

“What are those?” Jenkins asked.

Shepard turned to look, the corporal stood in front of a large freezer that contained more parts of
something. The door of the unit was glass, but the light inside was faint, just enough to reveal the contents of the unit at close inspection. Shepard could not hope to make heads or tails of it at a distance.

She watched as Ashley approached the unit and peered at the little laminated tags attached to the racks.

“I think these are… Rachni.” Ashley said.

“Rachni?” Wrex rumbled, his voice deepening.

Shepard turned back to the inventory list.

“There’s some chitin, some vials of acid and blood, and a few brains… at least I think those are brains.” Ashley explained.

Shepard heard Wrex walk toward the coolers; everyone could have heard him stomping. “I heard Rachni acid is second only to a maw’s in terms of how quickly it can eat through something,” Shepard offered. She knew Wrex would have some sort of reaction at the mere mention of the Rachni.

“You heard right,” Wrex replied.

“All of this looks like study and test materials,” Kaidan spoke up.

“Those bastards better not be cloning Rachni for more than just… parts.” Wrex rumbled, ever more irritated.

“If they are, that’s one more reason to pursue them. I am… not fond of shady organizations that orchestrate conspiracies and whose workers would rather die than be taken in for questioning. The ideology of such groups is rarely palatable.” Shepard noted. “I am copying the work files on this terminal, when that is done we can move on. Kaidan could you sweep the place with your helmet camera? We could use video evidence.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He replied.

~          *          ~          ~          *          ~          ~          *          ~

Two hours later the Kodiak was making approach on the second lab installation EDI identified. Once again they took control of the external defenses and communications before making entry. The second installation looked to be larger than the first, and Shepard would be lying if she said she wanted to see what horrors awaited them in there. The external airlock had been closed this time, but in yielded to a military-grade decryption program readily enough.

The first difference was that the airlock was connected to the antechamber by a passage that descended deeper underground. Shepard took the point with Wrex right behind her and Nihlus a few steps behind him. She stopped in front of the door at the end of the passage and drew Sin. A moment later she tapped the console and slipped inside the second the door was ajar wide enough for her. A quick sweep of the antechamber showed a pair of guards sitting at a table. Both looked up when the door opened, Shepard fired, hitting one in the head as the other grabbed for his rifle.

A thunderous crack resounded through the room and the guard was down on the ground in an instant. The damage Wrex’s Claymore caused essentially obliterated armor, leaving behind a gory mess.
Suddenly klaxons blared and the emergency lights set into the walls began to flash red. The door leading deeper into the lab opened and another guard appeared. Shepard raised her gun but Nihlus was there, assault rifle barking disruptor rounds which tore through shields and this guard went down. His body slumped across the doorframe, preventing the door from shutting again. Shepard barely got a moment to inhale with how quickly the guards were going down.

It left her with a peculiar feeling of almost guilt. This whole situation felt wrong. No one, not even the hired guns of a rogue organization ought to die half this quick. Some part of her wanted to think that maybe they were just doing their jobs; maybe they would stand down if told what they were protecting. They had no time for first thoughts, never mind seconds. She had to remind herself that they were hired guns; they probably knew what they signed up for, if it needed guarding. Shepard shook her head and consciously chose to step over the body holding the door open and into the lab.

She heard the guns whine and instantly ducked behind the nearest metal cabinet, “there are at least three more guards here.” A bullet pinged against the metal near her head, Shepard barely flinched, “One sniper.” She added.

Wrex made his entrance with fanfare, glowing like a light-bulb with his biotics. He did not even bother taking cover and instead rushed down the middle of the room. The guards opened fire, and Shepard whirled, Sin at a ready, it was then she realized with some shock that the krogan’s biotic barrier rippled with the impact of bullets, but it held.

One of the guards had stepped too far out of cover, but Wrex was looking in the other direction, she whipped Sin around the corner, aligned on the unwary guard’s head, and fired. His shields flared, the man jumped, but she fired again, this time the shields gave way and the bullet went through his helmet and into his skull.

An assault rifle somewhere on her left came to life, the bullets peppered her hiding spot, Shepard ducked. Wrex’s shotgun gave a crack in the back of the room, followed closely by a burst of assault rifle she recognized as belonging to one of the marines from somewhere on her left.

“I got the bastard that was sneaking up on you, Skipper.” Ashley announced.

“I got the so-called sniper,” Wrex added, “but there are two more pyjacks hiding somewhere.”

Shepard looked around, two more guards. The lab was similar to the previous, except a little bit bigger. Then she heard footsteps somewhere on her right and tilted her head to listen. Whoever it was, they were trying to mute their paces. Suddenly she heard a ping and a scoff, a metallic disk-like object came flying around the cabinet where she was hiding and began to ping in an unmistakable rising pitch and frequency. “Grenade!” she shouted as she dove around the cabinet she had been using for cover and scrambled to get clear.

The explosive blew, and the shockwave threw her to the ground. Her head hit the floor hard as the front of her armor scraped along. An assault rifle burst, and another replied. There was ringing in her ears, and a sudden burning sensation in her left leg. The assault rifles traded back and forth, and suddenly a third joined the dance, and two others followed. It was as if the grenade had been some sort of signal, the opening notes of a new cacophony.

There was a momentary pause, reloads? Shepard could not be sure. Then a single rifle staccato opened again and one replied. Suddenly she heard an unmistakable biotic whomp followed something hitting the wall hard and a crack of Wrex’ shotgun. Shadows moved over her, cast by the lights on the wall. The burning in her leg only got worse, but there was a growing cooling sensation as well, her suit had deployed Medi-gel.
“We got them, Commander.” Richard announced.

“That was a frag. There’s shrapnel everywhere.” Wrex murmured.

“I think I got hit…” Shepard replied. “Medi-gel’s deployed.” She shifted, tried to rise to her knees, but as soon as she moved her left leg the pain seared. Then there was a hand pressing her back down, Shepard turned her head to see Nihlus’ boots at her side.

“Do not move,” he said. “You have a piece of the grenade’s casing in your left thigh.”

“It will have to come out for the gel to form a full seal.” Kaidan said as he kneeled on the other side.

Shepard groaned. “Alright.” What a place to get a nasty rapture. This planet’s atmosphere was too toxic to go without a helmet, but with her undersuit now perforated she was in for some exposure. They also had a third lab to bust. She got careless, and got hurt.

She heard Kaidan open the pouches on his webbing where he kept his field medical supplies, followed by the squishing of a soft Medi-gel pack and the snap of the top coming off. “This will hurt, Commander. I’m sorry.”

That was all the warning she got before she felt the piece of shrapnel move. Shepard hissed and tensed, but the sensation was gone in a split second, replaced by the cooling sensation of more Medi-gel. “You’re in luck,” Kaidan announced. “It’s a relatively straight piece, went into the muscle.” She heard the chunk clutter as Kaidan tossed it aside.

The major blood vessels were essentially covered by the ceramic plating of her leg guards. Had the shrapnel hit the plates, it would not have gone through, so this piece got lucky to fly at areas of exposed undersuit.

“Alright, show’s over. The Commander’s alright. C’mon Jenkins, let’s go see what other gruesome specimen jars we can find.” Ashley said.

“Yay!” Richard dead-panned. “I mean yay that the commander’s alright… but you know sarcastic yay about the jars.” He explained.

“Careful corporal or ‘yay’ might end up your call sign.” Shepard murmured.

“Aye, aye, ma’am. Will be careful, ma’am!”

Shepard thought she had waited long enough for the Medi-gel to do its job and tried to rise to her hands and knees. She winced in the initial move. The goop poured over the wound hardened into a plug, like a large scab. The second layer thickened the plug, and apparently Kaidan had poured it right over the rip in her undersuit too, as she felt it tug in ways it should not. At the very least it would now keep the environment out of her suit. Assuming her limp was not too bad, they could continue with the mission without her having to bail out. Delays for petty injuries were not a good idea at this point. She might have to hang back though, let Wrex take point. He seemed more than able and willing to handle these hired guns.

She climbed to her feet slowly, wincing with every movement. The injured muscle positively screamed in protest, but Shepard had worse. She had been shot in the calf during her time in ICT, had the bullet extracted without any pain killers, and walked on it, albeit with a stick as a crutch, to the ex-fil coordinates. She was stubborn enough that if she wanted something, she got it, whatever it took. Right now she wanted to kick Cerberus’ collective posteriors all over the four quadrants.

Now that they were not being shot at, she had the luxury of inspecting the lab. It was a big open
space subdivided into work areas. There were tables, consoles, and equipment of a number of types. Familiar glass-door cases stood in one corner of the room. She hobbled over to the closest console and tapped at the keyboard. The station came online, but it required a password. Standing next to it was a framed holo-photo, which showed a family; the scientist that worked at this station had a wife and three kids, all of them primary school age.

Shepard brought up her omni-tool and fired up her decryption program. Just because this scientist was a family man would not stop her. Whether he thought he was acting out of some perceived fear for his loved ones did not absolve him of the crimes Cerberus committed. A box appeared on the terminal’s screen, scrolling code as the decryption program worked. Then suddenly it blinked, and she was past the log in screen and in the system.

“Commander, I think there’s a second level to this compound.” Kaidan called over the link.

“We will go scope it out.” Ashley added.

“I’ll go with them.” Wrex volunteered.

Shepard did not say anything, but she heard a door open somewhere on the opposite side of the room. Nihlus was nearby, leaning on a metal cabinet of supplies, watching her. “You’re not going down there as well?” she wondered.

He tilted his head and remained standing where he was. It was as if that tilt should have been an answer on its own.

Shepard turned back to the console and pulled out another OSD to copy everything on the system. Perhaps there might be repeat data, but she was not taking chances. She would ask EDI to run preliminary sorting, weed out the obvious duplicate data. This was another time that Shepard was glad to have EDI. Without her, sorting would have had to be done manually, or with the assistance of a VI which she would first have to program. Just programming a VI might take hours; doing this by hand would take hours longer.

“Oh my God…” Ashley whispered over the comm.

“What’s wrong?” Shepard asked.

“There are cells down here, Skipper. These data-pads by the doors show they’re test subjects. No names… just numbers. It’s barbaric.” Ashley went on.

Shepard straightened like a pole and winced as her thigh muscle protested. “Bodies?” she asked.

“Five cells, three occupied.” Kaidan said, trying his best to sound calm, but he still sounded rattled. “All the occupants are deceased. There’s a turian male, barefaced, he’s wearing what looks like the remnants of Blue Suns armor. There’s also a Salarian, male, in civvies. The third is human, also male.”

Shepard gripped the edge of the desk she was using as support as at that moment she had to contain the rage that threatened to erupt. Exploding would not help the situation, and yet her mind reeled, her thigh burned as if it had been stabbed anew, and the revulsion seethed in her gut like burning acid. How could people do this? What sort of person could justify an experiment on another living being? If conspiracy, murder, and experiments on cloned tissue of dubious origins, up to and including Rachni, was not bad enough, now she had evidence that Cerberus was experimenting on people they had probably abducted. Even Blue Suns mercenaries, and some of them could be outright bastards, did not deserve this. She looked at the holo-photo of the man and his family. How did he sleep at
night? What justification would allow someone to sleep after spending the day doing unethical experiments on sapient beings? “Are you recording all of this, Kaidan?” she wondered.

“I am. If my recordings help bring these bastards down, I will record everything.”

Shepard glanced at the Spectre, “Nihlus, will video be enough evidence for you to present to the Council?” she asked.

“Not quite. I need the information on those terminals to confirm that this is a Cerberus installation, in so many words.” He replied.

“We are reporting this to the Council?” Ashley asked.

Nihlus crossed his arms and spared Shepard a sort of ‘look what you’ve done’ glance, to which she merely raised an eyebrow. Did he think she would keep their talk under her hat in the face of this?

“The Council does not approve of unethical experiments or forcing people to be test subjects. Based on evidence here, there are grounds to condemn Cerberus as a criminal organization at least, a terrorist organization at most. Once that is done, they will have fewer places to hide or resources to pull. Just association with them will become a criminal offense.” Nihlus explained.

Shepard’s eyebrows climbed to her hair line. Nihlus had effectively dodged admitting to everyone present that the Council already knew something about Cerberus. Still, the Council had heard rumors. This was something a little more substantial. With this proof, official designation as a terrorist organization would hopefully grease some wheels. Spectres would now have the carte blanche to pursue Cerberus. Shepard was not entirely sure they would, what with it being a human organization and all, but who knows, right? At the very least, she would pursue them, Spectre or not.

“There will be a witch hunt,” Kaidan murmured.

Shepard hummed. Kaidan had a point, but it was also unavoidable. She also knew that some would see Cerberus as heroes, so there would be an uptick in recruitment among the xenophobic crazy people. However as a whole the group would entrench, and reach out to the most loyal and ardent supporters they had. The job of hunting them down will not be easy or quick by any stretch of the imagination. “Whatever may be, thus far silence has only served these bastards. Time to make noise.”

“You’re right,” Kaidan conceded.

Shepard did not say more as there was no need. She glanced at Nihlus again. He was watching her now. She shook her head and turned back to the console to start copying the data.

There was still one more lab left, and Shepard well and truly did not want to know what they would find there. Lab two already had the dead test subjects, how much worse could Cerberus get? Did she want to know?

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Two hours later the Kodiak was making an approach to what Shepard hoped would be the last den of torture and evil. Due to her injury she could not comfortably sit, the seats pressed up against the wound. She could not move as quickly and as silently either, but the pain medication numbing the area was adequate to keep discomfort to a manageable level. Nevertheless she wanted this to be over, she wanted off this planet and out of her armor, and she had no luxury to voice any of her restlessness.
Thus as EDI worked to disable the turrets, Shepard found herself trying to pull herself together for one last push. One more base, she had to give her team a hundred and ten, no less. When the shuttle landed and the team disembarked, Shepard took point as they approached the airlock. Her decryption program was already up and running, ready to do its work. The airlock door yielded readily after that.

Once past the double doors, Shepard carefully led the way down a corridor descending deeper into the installation. It seemed to be similar in size to the previous base, so probably two levels, with more cells. She well and truly did not want to know, but orders were orders, and Cerberus would not get away with their nonsense just because she felt a little squeamish.

At the end of the corridor was another door which required bypassing, Shepard worked the decryption while Wrex cocked his shotgun. As soon as the door opened wide enough, the Krogan burst in, glowing with his biotics. Nihlus followed, sweeping the space with his assault rifle.

The alarm that blared was wholly expected. An assault rifle came to life, its rounds peppering the doorframe. Shepard saw Wrex’s biotics flare as he slung his arm, the blast of dark energy that he released let off a loud whomp as it flew across the lab. There was a crash, something heavy and metallic, and a human groan, and then silence. Wrex did not stop as he stomped deeper into the room.

Another assault rifle, more rounds peppering the doorframe, and Nihlus swung his own and fired a quick suppressing burst as he side-stepped toward cover behind another of the cabinets. There was no thud of a body hitting the floor. “One human, left of your position, he has a clear shot on the doorframe. Stay where you are.” Nihlus said.

Shepard knew better than to argue, right now she could not move fast enough to get into cover. She glanced at the others and nodded.

There was another assault rifle burst somewhere deeper in the lab, followed by the crack of a Claymore, and the sound died. Shepard heard a very distinct deep chuckle over the comm, it sounded like Wrex was having fun somewhere. He might double back on the guard pinning them in the doorway, but she would not call for him to do so, not against one man. She would let Wrex do what he did at his pace; he knew what he was doing.

The assault rifle on their left barked another burst, as if urging them to leave the safety of their doorframe. Shepard cocked Sin as she pondered how many bullets her shields could absorb, and whether that would be enough time for her to fire the two shots she needed to kill the soldier. She did not know exactly where on her left the guard was hiding, there would be delay. Nihlus was right; she could not stick her head out. Right now she was too hampered by injury, and she hated it. She glanced at the Spectre, he had his head turned, probably listening for the guard to make a mistake.

Movement out of the corner of her eye caught Shepard’s attention. There was a shadow slinking along the wall on the other side, “Nihlus, incoming on your left,” she warned.

Nihlus turned, raised his rifle, and fired. At that moment Shepard stepped around the doorframe and raised Sin. A pincer flank, classic, but predictable. The first guard used Nihlus’ distraction with the other to poke out of cover, intending to shoot the Spectre in the back. Shepard pulled the trigger, the guard’s shields flared. A body hit the floor somewhere behind her. Suddenly there was a hand on her shoulder and all the hair on the back of her neck stood on end as a familiar surge of energy seemingly enveloped her whole body. The first guard fired, but too late, a periwinkle glow erupted right in front of her, the bullets bounced off the biotic barrier. Nihlus whirled and fired in reply. Another body hit the floor with a thud.
Shepard glanced over her shoulder at Kaidan who was right behind her; his left hand on her left shoulder, his right arm still raised over her right, his fingers spread, still flickering with dark energy. “Thanks, Kaidan.” She said. He smiled a little and pulled back.

“Wow, didn’t know you could do that.” Ashley noted.


Shepard’s eyebrow rose, but he would not be able to see her expression because of the helmet. “Don’t worry about it,” she replied.

“I really wish I was a biotic,” Jenkins said. “That was so cool! Very-”

Kaidan turned sharply, and the corporal swallowed the rest of whatever he had almost said.

It was then that Shepard noticed the silence in the lab. The sort of silence that meant either something had gone wrong, or everything was glorious. “Wrex?” She called over the comm.

“I’m here. The lab is clear.” He replied.

“Thanks, Wrex.”

“Don’t thank me yet. I found another body, looks like another… test subject. He’s wearing an Alliance uniform.” Wrex replied.

Shepard was instantly alarmed. “Fatigues or officer?”

“Which is the blue and gold one?”

Officer’s blues, this did not bode well. A horrible, horrible sinking feeling instantly formed and settled in her gut. “That’s officer’s. Stay where you are, I need to see this.”

It was not difficult to spot a towering krogan in red armor in a relatively open space. Shepard walked toward Wrex as fast as she could, no longer caring to disguise the limp in her step. He must have heard her because he stepped aside and let her see whom he was towering over.

Shepard froze and the sinking feeling in her gut instantly coalesced into pure horror. Seated in an executive chair in front of a console, head lulled forward, was Rear Admiral Kahoku. His wrists were tied to the arms of the chair with plastic ties, his ankles similarly bound to the leg of the chair. Shepard activated her omni-tool and fired up her medical scanned. Within a second her worst fear came true. He was not breathing, his heart was not beating, and his body temperature had already achieved equilibrium with the room.

“Is that Kahoku?” Nihlus asked somewhere behind her.

“Yes,” Shepard breathed, numbed as if all her nerves suddenly stopped transmitting. Her mind reeled with questions. How did this happen? How did Cerberus get him so fast? She got his message less than a day ago.

The admiral’s uniform was filthy; the blue was smeared in places with what looked like oil, the gold piping ripped up, and there was a tear in the left sleeve. The Jacket toggles were undone, showing an equally dirty formerly white shirt. She kneeled in front of the body, ignoring the pain in her thigh as she did. What was that injury to this? The sleeves of the shirt visible under the thicker sleeves of the officer’s jacket were flecked with rust-like substance. It took a moment for Shepard to realize it was
not rust, but dried blood. The admiral had struggled with his wrist bonds to the point of injuring himself. There were a few more flecks around the neck. Shepard tipped her head a little and what she saw made her positively sick. There were needle marks on his neck. “This… he was tortured.”

She reached out and slowly moved the admiral’s hand. Postmortem lividity had already appeared as a bluish discoloration on the underside of the wrists and hands, but rigor mortis had only begun to set in. Mentally she ran the math. Assuming a base body temperature of thirty-seven-point-five and a rate of cooling of one and a half degree a Terran hour, it would take six to seven hours to reach the room’s twenty-seven degrees. With the initial temperature being a benchmark, and the likelihood of the interference of chemical agents, she would call time of death at five to seven hours ago.

That figure effectively stunned her. A sudden realization hit her like a sledgehammer. Had her decision to attack the bases according to size allowed this to happen? If she had chosen to attack this lab first, would they have been in time to save Kahoku?

“Commander?” Ashley asked.

“I…” Shepard stopped. How was she to explain this? She shook her head and moved to get back to her feet. Her thigh burned, stiffened by crouching on the injury, and when she moved, her knee folded, she faltered, only the exoframe prevented her from toppling backwards. It took a second try, but she got back to her feet and straightened. “I think... I made a mistake. We should have attacked this lab first…”

“What?” Ashley asked.

“The Admiral’s time of death,” Shepard explained as she looked at the others, “Five to seven hours ago… do the math.” With that said, she turned away. Shepard did not want to see their dawning realization. Though it felt wrong, disrespectful even, she moved past the chair toward the console. She could not bear to look at her team right now, even though she would not see any of their expressions. She failed and someone had died. Her planning and careful reconnaissance wasted time.

“It was not your fault, Commander.” Kaidan breached. “Five to seven hours… we deployed seven hours ago. There is no way you could have known.”

Shepard did not reply. She knew Kaidan was trying to make her feel better; he was always the one to try and keep the peace. However this time he was wrong, there was a way she could have known. She could have had EDI hack into the base security cameras rather than the external defenses and communications. Had she ordered EDI to hack into the cameras, EDI would have spotted and recognized Admiral Kahoku. They might have had time to storm this place in force and prevent his death. Kahoku’s death was on her, and only on her.

“Shepard, whatever you are thinking right now. Stop it.” Nihlus cut in. “It is more likely that your time estimation is wrong. The only assumption we can make here is that they knew we were coming, and they wanted you to find Kahoku like this.”

Shepard did not turn around. She wanted to believe Nihlus. She wanted to latch onto his theory with all her might. Yet if she was to do it, she would have to lie to herself. She knew her math was sound. She messed up, and this time there would be no sugar-coating it. Still, if Nihlus was concerned, she needed to pull herself together. The team could not see her come apart. Nihlus was right on the matter in what else he said, the sick bastards wanted her to find the body like that. They wanted her to fall apart. “Alright. Same protocols, we record what we found and take whatever data there is on this lab’s systems. Anything can be a clue that will lead us to whoever is in charge of this operation and where they went.”
Footsteps scattered across the room, the marines sprung to action. Shepard never looked away form the console. She needed a mental shift of tracks. Confession of sins would have to come later. She had to look at the other facts, and there were such facts to look at. They faced one lab technician, but there were enough consoles in the three labs for a team of ten scientists. Said monsters in lab coats were not here, so they must have been evacuated. If Admiral Kahoku had been captured, she could assume they knew he leaked the location of the bases, so the move made sense.

Beyond that there was a natural progression to things. There must be another location somewhere else, a fourth lab. It could not be on this planet as EDI would have detected it. If there was any lead on this fourth location, it would have to be in the data she collected from the three labs. Staff movement, records of supply shipments, even a loose invoice for food deliveries, anything and everything could point them to this other location.

Meantime, her mind was already creating a checklist of everything else that needed to be done in the background. She needed to tell Admiral Hackett about all of this. He would probably find someone he could trust to send here to do the mop work. There was other evidence to secure which could not be collected by her or her crew. They did not have a resident medical examiner on hand. They did not have a science team to run the battery of tests that would stand up to ACIS standards. She had to come clean about her suspicions regarding ACIS and ask Admiral Hackett to bring in only those people he could absolutely trust. She would need him to put a hold on any further missions; this one would get her complete and undivided attention. That last item on her list was probably going to be the easiest; she doubted Admiral Hackett would pull her off this mess now.

Her train of thought derailed when Nihlus appeared in the corner of her eye. He laid his hands on the table and leaned down to be more her eye level. Shepard opened her omni-tool and brought up her decryption program. The terminal in front of her was password protected as well. As the program ran, she reached into her webbing for another OSD.

"Shepard."

"Nihlus," she replied as the terminal moved past the password screen and into the interface.

"You are still blaming yourself."

Shepard would have glared him down, would it have been effective. Helmets were evil like that. "You were right, they staged the death, and the chair is a message too. But I do not think my math is off. I am never off with such rudimentary things. I made a mistake, Nihlus. I might have been here in time if I wasn’t so-"

"Over-cautious? Slow? Wasteful with time?" Nihlus volunteered.

Shepard turned her head and was surprised to see the Spectre had moved so close to her that when he tipped his head lower still, his face shield was almost right up next to hers. It effectively silenced any snap she could have come up with. In weeks of working together, barring that one stint on Omega when she helped him limp back to the Normandy, a stint she did not count, this was the closest to contact they ever came.

"Shepard, you have always been meticulous in your executions. That brain of yours foresees possibilities and then devises a plan for each one. At first I thought you were obsessive-compulsive. It even annoyed me a little." Shepard frowned, but Nihlus went on, "but when I look at the results, especially our running record of only minor injuries… It is beyond me how easily you maintain control. You make the most difficult of jobs seem routine and predictable. Now I simply think that you do not surprise easily. Still, there is no way to avoid surprises entirely. I understand how you feel, but do not let it shake your control. Given the circumstances, you did absolutely everything that
you could. Know that and let the rest go.”

Shepard sighed. He was right, as much as she loathed admitting it to his face. “I remember that one
time you said something about my speech. Pot and kettle, Nihlus. *But for* being a Pot, you’re right.”

“Of course I am, Kettle. I am *never* wrong.”

Shepard snorted and slapped a hand against the front of his cowl to push him away. “Alright, back to
work.” She said as she turned back to the console to start copying data. Nihlus chuckled quietly, but
not too quietly that his comm failed to transmit it.

The Normandy stayed in orbit around Binthu for hours. After Shepard secured the information, there
were many things to do.

First, she stopped by the medbay to get treatment for her puncture wound. A quick call to Admiral
Hackett had caused a variable storm of activity. He sent the SSV Lexington, Concord, and
Yorktown. The three frigates normally tagged behind the cruiser SSV Philadelphia, forming one of
the Kilimanjaro’s escort groups. Their orders were to descend to the surface and deploy teams to
secure evidence from the labs. The choice of ships was telling, the Kilimanjaro’s escort flotillas were
almost sacred, a circle of highly trusted, reliable officers. Shepard had to prepare some information
for them.

After that was done, she turned to the vast body of files she took from the lab computers. EDI was
running algorithms and search patterns over it, but Shepard still wanted to browse and familiarize
herself with what the lab was actually doing, even if she only understood the basics.

With how things happened, she knew there was no keeping this mess under her hat forever. Too
many people on board could put two and two together. Thus she was not surprised when Garrus
came up to the OD, concerned for her well-being. Nihlus was already there, perusing the data
himself. Shepard decided to read Garrus into the full details. The three of them ended up buried up
their eyeballs in files looking for the proverbial needle in the haystack.

Three hours later Shepard was preparing tea, but really stretching her injured leg, when her terminal
 pinged.

“Commander, I may have found something. I flagged the file on your terminal.” EDI announced.

Nihlus shifted to sit at her terminal; Shepard watched as he brought the file up, copied it to his omni-
tool, and ran it through his translation program. A moment later his mandibles widened in that
triumphant grin he sometimes got when he was making like the cat who ate the canary. “This is an
internal memo; it talks about a potential security compromise. Vital research materials are to be
moved to the Nepheron facility,” he announced.

Shepard moved across the OD, sat down on the couch, and pulled the terminal toward her as she
peered at the file and took a sip of her tea. It was an official looking memo alright, complete with a
letterhead that included an emblem, an abstract oblong sort-of-diamond with a slit in the bottom,
flanked by a detached line on either side. “Nepheron...” She said. “Where is that, EDI?”

“A planet designated Nepheron is found in the Voyager Cluster, Columbia System.” EDI replied.

Shepard blinked, stunned. That was practically right down the street, in galactic terms. “Alright,
that’s our next destination.”
“Should I notify Flight Lieutenant Moreau?” EDI wondered.

“Yes.”

“Right away, Commander.” EDI replied.

Shepard stared at the memo. There was something else in the file that got her interest. The memo was signed from the director of Project Cadmus, initials A.B., nothing else. The signature made her skin crawl. Given the horrors they had seen down on Binthu, whatever this Project Cadmus was, it could not be allowed go ahead.

Author Notes: This was quite possibly the choppiest piece of writing I have ever done. Yet the material involved was so disjointed that I just couldn’t figure out a way to really tie it up. I could only lay it out, knowing I can easily expand on it later, and brace for impact. We are officially moving into the second half of this arc, and things are about to get interesting.

General Notes:
Shockingly… none.

Chapter Notes:
Shockingly… none.
Chapter Notes

**Disclaimer:** I do no own Mass Effect, I do not claim to own Mass Effect, I am only doing this for fun.

**Author Notes:** The second part of the Twelfth Labor arc, enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

**Episode 19:** The Twelfth Labor [Part II]

The Normandy moved out almost as soon as Joker had the destination. The Voyager Cluster’s Columbia system had no relay of its own either, so they were in for a twenty-four hour FTL hop, and carried just enough fuel to last them until they could make a return Amazon and through its relay. This gave Shepard time to consider the angles.

Further reading of material revealed some invoices and other otherwise inane clerical remnants that hinted at what they were looking at on Nepheron. The installation had to be quite large judging by the deliveries it took, and the fact that all three labs from Binthu had been evacuated there. Shepard reasoned there would be at least ten scientists with an unknown number of hired guns to protect them.

The scientists were also not very security minded. The Binthu lab computers ended up invariably choked with bits of other information, proverbial digital footprints that EDI was able to see and collate, enough that they could begin to construct a list of names. Many of the Cerberus workers had families. Some even kept communication recordings; well-wishes by spouses, their children talking about what they learned in school, and other comforts from home when one was away for long stretches of time. It was a way to stave off the loneliness, and perhaps in some twisted way remind them why they were working in those labs to begin with. It put a face to the men and women who worked there. But it baffled her at the same time. How could these loving fathers and mothers care for their families, all the while conducting barbaric experiments on other sapient beings, beings that also had families? Shepard just could not disconnect one from the other.

To some degree, it made her ponder the balance of her actions. Strictly speaking every life she took, including those on Elysium, had a family. Was she different? She wanted to think that she was. Her hands were not sullied by torture of innocents in the name of macabre science. Each life she took, she sought to take as quickly and as painlessly as possible, her own form of mercy for those who had none for others.

Shepard also wanted to think those who died by her hand were different. Her one mistake, the one time she killed an innocent, would forever stay her arm from rashness. After that all her kills were on criminals who had no regard for others, Elanos Haliat being a fine example. Shepard well and truly wanted to believe she gave him exactly what he deserved, even without her personal reasons factored in. She would not lose a minute of sleep over Haliat, but she was still running with that train of thought. Did any of that make her actually different, or was she merely justifying things in order to sleep at night? She had always thought that every death she wrought saved at least a dozen others. But it was at times like these that her consciousness fought against the cold, efficient killer within.
When it came to Cerberus, the rationale seemed clear. If she let them go there would be no telling what they would do. What they had already done was beyond tolerance. They were guilty of murder in many different ways. The experiments they conducted were monstrous. Anyone capable of doing that kind of work could never be called an innocent, no matter the reason or justification they used. If they were not innocent, then she did need to feel guilty about carrying out her duty.

The OD door opened and brought Shepard out of her thoughts. She looked up from her terminal and was surprised when Legion padded in. The geth was unarmed and seemed to scan its surroundings as it walked at a leisurely pace.

“Legion.” She greeted as it drew near her desk.

“Shepard-Commander. We did not intent to interfere with your tasks.”

“Was there something you wanted?” she wondered.

“Negative. We are charting this vessel for navigational efficiency.”

“You’re exploring?” Shepard asked.

“Affirmative.”

That surprised her, but maybe it should not have. Legion was merely very overt in doing an obvious thing. She could not tell it no either, it was not a prisoner. “Well, by all means, carry on. Except… the lab on the other side of the CIC is still sealed, and I would prefer you do not go in there. Ask EDI to show you a security camera feed if you want to see in there.”

“Acknowledged. We will not enter the laboratory on deck two.”

“How are you exploring, top to bottom, or bottom to top?”

“We started on deck five and proceeded up. We chart areas deemed common and then request admittance into areas deemed private. Corporal-Jenkins suggested we request admittance.”

Shepard raised an eyebrow, Richard telling Legion to ask if it wanted to enter some space might have prevented an incident or two, “Hopefully the crew did not give you grief.”

“Grief…” It repeated and paused, as if pondering the term, “human colloquial term for trouble. Negative. The crew permitted our exploration. Only Spectre-Kryik refused our request to scan the cabin on deck three.”

Shepard hummed; she was not surprised; Nihlus treated that cabin as his keep. She would take the fact that nobody lodged complaints about Legion being nosy as a good sign.

“Shepard-Commander, we request to see deck one.”

Now Shepard laughed; she should have seen that coming light-years away. Legion’s flaps flared into that surprised expression it seemed to give. Shepard took a deep breath to quiet her laughter, lest that expression send her into a paroxysm. “I’m sorry; I shouldn’t laugh. Sure Legion, you can see deck one, just give me five minutes, I’ll give you a tour.” She had no reason to outright refuse; after all, there was an open-door policy. The only reason none used it was because she had the far more accessible OD. Legion was a crewmate as much as any organic; in the interest of fairness she would keep the door open to it as well.

“Acknowledged.”
The Normandy entered the orbit of Nepheron thirty hours after they left Binthu, already rigged silent and drifting. It did not take much for EDI to find a lab on the planet’s surface; as such places typically had comm traffic chatter that could be back-tracked.

Nepheron itself was just another backwater rock with an average temperature at 37°C, and an atmosphere of 0.73 atm with a high content of carbon dioxide and krypton. Gravity was a comfortable 0.88g. The high content of sodium and magnesium in the planet’s crust gave it the appearance of endless salt flats. No one in their right mind would think of coming to Nepheron, so it made a rather good place to tuck away a lab that violated every code of ethics ever written.

One look at EDI’s passive imaging made Shepard reconsider her initial plans. The installation seemed quite a bit larger than anything they encountered before. All the same, Cerberus had a pattern. They seemed fond of natural defenses, of setting up in a location best accessible by air. This base was set right in the middle of a low plain, surrounded by mountains on three sides. The majority of the facility was clearly underground; the above ground section was little more than just a sort of fortress, complete with a perimeter fence, sniper towers, light pre-fab shelters for on-duty guards, and a landing zone for the corvette-type craft present. EDI had her passive scanners trained on the surface, weather permitting, but initial scans showed at least seven people top-side at all times.

Shepard pushed aside the data and slumped into the OD’s sofa. Some small part of her still dithered, even though the course of action she needed to take was obvious. She knew she could not let one failure rattle her otherwise proven method. Still, she could not help but doubt. Excess planning had cost them once. The old saying went that haste made waste. Nowhere was that truer than in the execution of black ops missions. She was drilled to never rush planning unless there was genuinely no time for it. She had time here.

She took a deep breath, held it for a few seconds, and slowly let it out. She needed to find her center, to disconnect from that part of her mind that ran on emotion, and reconnect to cold logic. She knew her method worked dozens of times before. Binthu was merely an error in the math brought on by a variable that she had not accounted for, could not have accounted for. Nothing more than the uncertainty principle at work. As cold as it sounded, she needed to move past her emotional hang-up. If she stayed emotional, she might make more mistakes.

Shepard sighed, “EDI, can you summon Nihlus, Garrus, Kaidan, Ashley, and Richard to the OD within about half an hour.” Wrex would not be happy, but Shepard needed more control over the situation. Wrex tended to cut through everything in his path with only a casual note. She needed Garrus’ investigative expertise on this.

“Shepard-Commander,” EDI replied.

She would not let her emotions get the best of her. This job was going down like clockwork. She would not let Cerberus have any more wins, no matter how small.

In twenty-five minutes the OD door opened and the away team filed in. Shepard was still seated on her couch so she was caught by surprise when she saw Legion trail behind the group. The marines found their usual seats while Nihlus and Garrus remained standing. The geth stood behind them, its light focused on her.

“Shepard-Commander, we overheard EDI summon Corporal-Jenkins. We wish to aid you on your current mission,” the geth said.
Jenkins looked like he wanted to melt into the flooring, but Shepard was not going to lecture the corporal for something he had no blame in. “Alright. But I won’t recap everything from the beginning right now. Legion, I want you to stay after the brief, we’ll recap then.” It went without saying that they could use the extra set of hands for this operation.

“Acknowledged.”

With that out of the way, she launched into the usual briefing, beginning with planetary conditions and ending with the intelligence that EDI provided.

Throughout it all, she could not be more aware of how much attention she got from Legion. The geth’s light never wavered off her, and the plates on its head never seemed fully still. Still, she would not be thrown off her stride by just that. It took all of ten minutes to thread over what they had, before she opened the floor to input as the holo-projector on the coffee table still showed the layout of their target.

Garrus was first to move. “We can soften the external defenses by eliminating the snipers at long range,” he said as he motioned to the towers.

“Definitely.” Shepard agreed. “Then if we make insertion correctly, we can put their perimeter fence at our back and proceed from there.”

“First though, EDI, you will have to jam their communication equipment so they cannot call for backup.” Nihlus added.

“It will be done, Spectre Kryik,” EDI said calmly.

Shepard blinked; surprised that Nihlus would take up issuing orders. She would have told EDI to jam the communication equipment too. Well it really did not matter, and she was not going to fuss those details now. “Also, a reminder that their agents may have cyanide crowns. Knock them out cold if you wish to capture any of them alive. I would very much like to interrogate someone,” she said calmly.

The meeting did not run long after that. There was little to discuss other than very basic details. They had to insert, secure the perimeter, then get inside and get control of everything. The meeting was more about getting everyone playing the same game-plan. Still, keeping an eye on the big picture was useful. It was so easy to get bogged down in the tiny details. Even for someone detail-centered like her, too much detail would prevent her from seeing the forest because of the trees.

When she dismissed everyone, Legion remained standing where it was. Shepard got to her feet and approached the side-board to get her tea going. As she waited for the water to boil she lapsed into the recap.

The geth’s plates danced throughout the whole exchange, and when she finished it tipped its head to side and its light narrowed. “We will assist with the task of eliminating long-range units within the tower fortifications,” it announced.

“Legion, you can see in the infrared, right?” After the material she obtained from the library on the Citadel, the question of whether the geth could see thermal was an issue. She did not use her cloak around them out of the supposition that it would not be of any use.

“Affirmative. Our accuracy will not be impaired by limited electromagnetic radiation in the range organics perceive as visible light.”

“Thank you, I wanted to know because if I am planning a night time mission and I need your aid, I
want to know what I can count on. For us that usually requires a night vision or thermal scope, but
you…” She needed to know what her team was capable of.

“We acknowledge Shepard-Commander’s necessity to know the capabilities of the Normandy team
in order to maximize operational efficiency.”

“Well I wouldn’t put in those words, but yea.” Still, she would not count on Legion for much
infiltration. The unit’s finish was rather pretty, but also woefully impractical, because it would glow
with the least bit of light, like a white shirt under a black-light. “Well thank you, Legion. Between
you, Garrus, and me… getting rid of the snipers ought to be the easiest part of the job.”

The geth turned toward the door and walked most of the way there before it paused. Shepard turned
to the window, through which she could see the planet below them. She heard the door open and
shut. Yet despite everything and all the planning, some part of her still fretted. This was going to be
an unpleasant mission, she just knew it.

Shepard decided to run a night time mission because they would have the advantage in the dark.
However Nepheron’s rotation period was 56.2 earth hours, and they had to wait twelve hours so that
Columbia would set at their destination. The long cycle gave them a long window to work with and
it brought the temperatures down, as Nepheron’s daytime temperatures reached into the sixties.

Their shuttle made approach from the west, where the cloud cover did not exist. Shepard made the
call hoping the pin-pricks of light that were the Kodiak’s thrusters might go a little less observed
against a clear, starry sky. EDI directed them toward a hill about a kilometer west from the base,
somewhere elevated enough to give them a good angle on the towers and create a nice disconnect
between the sound of gunshots and the impact of bullets.

The shuttle landed and they all sealed up in order to be able to exit the vehicle. Shepard exited first
and immediately scrambled up onto the shuttle’s roof, where she could get a few more meters off the
ground to do a bit of reconnaissance via HUD high magnification. The Cerberus compound was
well lit, which was another advantage for her. Floodlights meant no guard would be able to peer into
the darkness to see small flashes of light; their pupils would not be dilated enough for it. All the
same, it allowed her to do recon effortlessly. “Six towers, all six staffed, nine hundred meters to the
furthest, eight hundred to the nearest.” Shepard rattled as she made mental notes. “Garrus, that works
for you?”

“I have firing solutions already,” Garrus replied.

Shepard hummed; she was not going to comment about Garrus’ visor. She still needed to run the
mental math and calm herself to fire at this range. Did Turians need a similar ritual? That was one of
those questions never to ask. Still, the king of unfair advantages would probably be Legion. The geth
did not breathe at all and could run the math far faster and with more precision than either her or
Garrus. Then there was its rifle, when Legion drew and extended it to full length Shepard realized
she had been eerily right. That thing was in-fact an anti-materiel caliber monster. Using it on soft
targets was messy overkill, but at least death would be instantaneous.

“Alright, so I think we need to get into position. Nihlus, you ready for phase two?” She wondered.
Most of the team was still inside the shuttle, waiting for the three of them to handle the snipers.

“I am always ready,” Nihlus replied.

“And always cocky,” Shepard murmured in reply as she drew Vincent and lowered herself into a
prone position on the shuttle’s roof. Once down she tapped at the side of her helmet, “Normandy, come in. EDI do you read me?”

“Of course, Commander.”

“Proceed with phase one, bring down their comms.”

“Right away, Commander.”

“Alright, standing by. Legion, I want you to handle the furthest pair of towers, but I also want you to fire after Garrus and me. Your gun will crack loudest and flash brightest.” She did not say it, but she thought it, the furthest towers were also behind the bunker entrance to the base. No one wanted to see the gore Legion was about to leave.

“Acknowledged.”

“Garrus, the closest pair is yours. I will handle the middle.”

“Yes, Commander.”

Shepard shifted her attention to her HUD’s environmental data, mentally running it against Vincent’s tables. Gravity, atmospheric pressure, humidity, wind speed, over distance, the math was complex but she could do it, and had her rote-memorized tables as help. She did not rely on technology that glowed and gave away positions. All it took was a quick series of taps to adjust her scope, and then she peered through it.

Shepard scanned the yard, watching for any sign of disturbance or unease as she counted the men milling about, seven in total, not counting the six snipers. There was comm tower right in the middle of the yard. Right now EDI was working to disable the uplinks. Shepard slipped into her cycle; deep inhale, hold, then exhale, pause, and repeat. The guards continued to mill about, moving in patterns, their rifles at a ready, but they were utterly oblivious.

Shepard moved her crosshairs onto the head of the first sniper she would take out. He was sitting up in his tower, rifle resting on his shoulder, playing something on his omni-tool, completely unaware that his life was one trigger pull away from ending.

“I almost feel bad for them,” Garrus said calmly.

“I choose to think they knew the risks and decided to take them.” Shepard replied. She was ready; she would show no remorse. Whoever provided security for Cerberus was in some way, albeit indirectly, condoning their unethical activities. Any qualms she had about killing tended to melt away when she thought about it like that. Hell, some of those mercenaries could very well be fanatics, the sort that had a suicide pill ready to go. There was little reasoning with them.

“Commander, communication links have been severed.” EDI announced.

“Thank you EDI.” Shepard replied as she peered through her scope, “Phase one’s a go!”

“After you, Commander,” Garrus said.

Shepard watched the soldier she had been aiming at, he was fussing with his omni-tool now, having lost his extranet uplink. Shepard adjusted her sights to his temple and her finger slipped down to the trigger. She took a deep breath, held it, and slowly let it out. As her lungs emptied, she slowly squeezed the trigger. The Mantis barked and she raked the receiver bolt before reaching for the next clip she would need. Somewhere below and on her right she heard a second rifle crack.
Shepard slid a fresh clip into Vincent and the receiver shut. Peering through the scope, she saw the first man she shot was indeed down.

“My first target down,” Garrus announced.

A quick scan around the yard told her the guards had not heard the shots, so they did not know two of their own were already dead. She turned her rifle on the middle tower on the other side of the yard, leveled her crosshairs on the sniper’s chest, took her deep breath, paused, and as she began to exhale, slowly squeezed the trigger. When her lungs emptied, the rifle gave another crack. Garrus’ rifle echoed barely a split second later.

“My second target is down,” Garrus said.

Before Shepard could say anything there was another crack, loudest yet, Legion took the first shot.

“They saw that one. Watch out for the last sniper, Legion,” Garrus murmured.

“Acknowledged.”

Shepard slid off the roof of the shuttle and to her feet. She was not surprised to see that Legion was on their feet. Then they slipped a fresh thermal clip into the receiver of that monstrous rifle and peered through the scope. “Target acquired.” A split second later they squeezed the trigger. The gun’s recoil still made the geth’s two hundred kilogram frame jerk, and the rifle’s crack was loud enough to cut through her fully closed suit.

The geth looked away from their scope and turned to her, “Targets eliminated, Shepard-Commander.”

“Good.” Shepard turned and stepped back aboard the shuttle, “Phase two!”

Almost as soon as she said it, the Kodiak gave a shudder as its thrusters pulsed. Shepard was already in her seat when Garrus and Legion stepped aboard and the hatch closed. The seals were yet to latch when the craft took off and turned on the spot to face the compound.

“Alright, fire team, rifles at a ready.”

All around her assault rifles were drawn and cocked. Nihlus would have to stay with the shuttle to set it down safely, and she did not count herself as more than just a supporting marksman. It would have to be all Kaidan, Ashley, Richard, Garrus, and Legion.

The kilometer of distance was nothing for a Kodiak. They were over the base in what felt like seconds. Nihlus angled the Kodiak to land with the perimeter fence on one side and the yard on the other, so they could use the fence-facing side as an exit while the shuttle’s kinetic barriers and armor soaked up any fire the guards tossed their way.

The yard guards predictably streamed toward the shuttle’s landing like ants. Shepard triggered the door release before the craft even fully touched down. The thrusters kicked up a vast cloud of dust, but she waited for the craft to touch down before she stepped off and drew her guns. Garrus followed with the marines and Legion brought up the rear.

“Bravo, round the back. Garrus, Legion, you’re with me.” She ordered as she moved to the front of the shuttle, her fingers slid over the ammo select switches as she shifted the twins to disruptor mode. As she peeked around the Kodiak’s nose the closest trooper instantly opened fire. The spray of bullets hit the Kodiak’s shield envelope, but Shepard ducked back around all the same. A second assault rifle replied in kind from the other side of the craft. Shepard peeked around just in time to see
the offending guard backing away while firing toward the rear of the Kodiak. Shepard whirled around fully, leveled her gun, and fired. His shields gave way and the bullets cut through his armor and into flesh, he collapsed.

A second trooper whirled at her, and Shepard fired on him, which caused him to break tempo as his shields flared, and then Legion was at her side. The guard saw the geth and made a half step back. Legion’s assault rifle came to life, so rapid Shepard could not discern one bullet from the next. The trooper’s shields failed and he performed a macabre dance as the bullets pierced armor and entered flesh. He was dead before he hit the ground.

Other rifles began to beat their tempos all around. Shepard could only track her marines by their individual firing styles. Kaidan had a very controlled way of shooting; uniform bursts, each about the same number of bullets, just enough to cut down shields and bite into flesh. Ashley preferred to lay into the trigger with longer, more aggressive bursts that suppressed as well as cut down her enemies. Richard varied from burst to burst; sometimes a short staccato, something spraying, as if he was still working up the feel for Kaidan’s muscle memory ease while trying to hit as hard as Ashley.

Shepard did not wait for more troopers and bolted for the closest prefab on her right to use as cover. As she pressed her back to the construct she saw another guard, driven back by the marines, appear on her right. She turned her guns and fired in turn, his shields flared, collapsed, and he followed, oblivious that he had been backing up practically to her.

Suddenly there was movement out of the corner of her eye, another guard on her left; she turned Sin and pulled the trigger, before she could turn Dex on him, there was a crack, the guard’s faceplate shattered, and he dropped to the ground like a ragdoll.

“I have your back, Commander,” Garrus said calmly.

Shepard glanced back; he was still at the shuttle, rifle drawn. The guard had been so focused on her that he failed to look past her.

Ashley’s assault rifle gave another long burst before Shepard could say a word. She expected a retort, but suddenly there was only silence, the rasp of her breathing apparatus, and the slight whisper of air moving across her seals. “Status report,” she ordered via the comm.

“I think that was the last of the guards, skipper.” Ashley said as she and Kaidan appeared from the other side of the shuttle.

“We detect no hostile units in immediate proximity,” Legion affirmed.

“We call that as ‘all clear’,” Jenkins said as stopped next to the geth.

“Acknowledged.”

Shepard smiled, was it just her or did Jenkins take it upon himself to teach Legion? First he told the geth to ask for permissions, now he was explaining Alliance code. She shook her head and moved to regroup with the team.

It was then that Nihlus finally joined them with his assault rifle in his hands. Shepard raised one hand to her communicator as she led the group past the prefabs toward the entrance to the underground main facilities, “Shepard to Normandy.”

“Reading you loud and clear, Commander.” Joker replied.

“How are the sensors?” Shepard asked.
“All quiet on the orbital front. EDI’s hack is working. They can’t look up a search engine, let alone send out a distress signal.”

“Good. EDI we have the surface secured. Begin phase three.”

“Right away, Commander,” the AI replied.

“Good, Shepard out.” She tapped the comm line shut and dropped her hand to Sin and glanced over her shoulders at the others.

It would take even EDI a few moments to get into the security camera feeds. The comm hack prevented the compound from contacting anyone outside, but in all likelihood the men inside knew that they were under siege, they would be mustering some sort of defense. Shepard wanted to know how many more armed men they were looking at, and whether they ought to mind where they fired or stepped, who knows how much more desperate these Cerberus goons could get.

They were inside within five minutes. The airlock’s security was no match for a military-grade decryption program and a very determined black ops agent. The main airlock led into a small antechamber, which looked a lot like a hospital out of some horror vid. Plain white walls and semi-glossy flooring that reflected the lowered ceiling lights. There were rows of large EVA lockers along the back wall. Shepard counted ten, but all of them stood open. The armed guards would have their hard suits on; these EVA suits were there for the non-combatant lab workers. An absence of suits was worrying.

She moved toward the door leading deeper in.

“Smile, you’re on camera,” Joker said over the comm.

Shepard glared at her side, where a small black box hung from the corner, the camera in question. She knew Joker would not see it, not with her helmet, but she wished he would. “Alright let’s do this.” She said as she brought up her decryption program.

“That locked door leads to a corridor; at the end of that is the main lab. I’m seeing ten goons; they’re kind of all over the place.”

“Any lab workers?” The lock turned green and Shepard slapped a palm on it. The door parted open with a loud hiss, and Shepard was through as soon as it was wide enough for her.

For a long moment there was silence. Shepard imagined Joker was checking all the cameras. “No one that I can see.”

Her decryption program locked on to the next door as soon as she was within range. Shepard hummed. “Alright, we take these guards first, and then worry about where the lab-rats might be hiding.” She flicked a few keys, and the panel turned green, then Shepard powered down her omni-tool and reached for her guns.

“Team Bravo, work from the right side of the room. Garrus, Nihlus, Legion, left side.”

“Aye, Aye, ma’am.” Kaidan replied.

“Right behind you, Shepard.” Nihlus replied. She heard him cock his gun.

“Sorry, not this time, Nihlus.” She slapped her hand on the door panel, causing the door to begin
opening. “Going Geist!” The cloak settled and Shepard moved through the panels, down the center of the room.

“Door!” Someone shouted.

“They’re here!” another echoed.

Shepard heard footsteps scatter about the room and then weapons began to bark. The guards did the predictable thing, they split to take the flankers, but she saw two that stayed in the center of the room, hiding behind some cabinets, ready to ambush anyone who came up the middle of the room. Clever, but Shepard had seen them, but they did not see her. There would be no surprising her, but she could get the drop on them.

The shooting around her was back and forth, intense and unremitting. On her right she could hear Ashley’s aggressive bursts and Kaidan’s controlled volleys drive the guards back, their returns were moving deeper into the room, backing up. From time to time a thud indicated the marines scored a kill. On her left, Garrus’ rifle led, with Nihlus’ providing a precise and controlled accompaniment. The guards fired back, but they seemed disorganized. There was a curious absence of Legion’s rapid-fire rifle, but she heard bodies hit the floor; the strength of the familiar pitches was all the surety she needed.

“Shit, a geth!” Someone shouted.

An instant later there was Legion’s rapport and a thud indicating that a body had hit the ground.

Shepard smiled; she would let the others handle these bastards. She had another target in mind. The two men in front of her were staying out of the fight. As she drew ever closer, she noticed that both huddled behind their cabinets, neither looked eager to stick their heads out of cover. Then, one turned to the other, “Boss said to expect Alliance... but there are **birds** and a **geth**. Who the hell are these guys?”

“Weren’t you listening?” The other replied. “Boss said to expect **Shepard**. She keeps a proverbial menagerie: two birds, a suit-rat, and a krogan! Guess that includes one of those murderous tin cans.”

Shepard was not amused. Racist epithets aside, these imbeciles did not even realize what they were leaking. They were briefed on who was coming, and the intelligence was actually good. This indicated there was a leak somewhere that she needed to find and plug. “And, pray tell, what else did **boss** tell you?” She hissed.

They jumped, but Shepard pressed the muzzles of her guns to their helmets, and both froze in place instantly. She was still cloaked; standing between them, shooting at her would mean they would have to turn their rifles at each other.

She saw the one on her left inch his rifle slightly up and pressed the muzzle of Sin harder into his helmet. “Uh-uh. I’ll shoot sooner than you can bring it up. Now here’s a deal. You answer a few questions... and you **walk** out of here.” She was willing to let these two run if she could get something out of them.

“Boss would kill us if we walked,” the one on the right murmured.

“Shut up!” The other hissed.

“So your boss is not **here**. Very good. That’s one question off the list.” Shepard murmured. They would not be afraid of someone who was likely to die soon given a chance to be the ones to walk out. Knowing their superior was not present also indicated another location. That was frustrating, but
good to know. She wanted to excise this cancer thoroughly.

The gunfire around them begun to fade, Shepard shifted her weight. “Moving on. Are there scientists here?” She asked.

They remained mute.

Shepard prodded them again, “Are there scientists here?” she asked again, slower this time.

The two exchanged looks through her. The cloak was really a beauty that way. The optical camouflage essentially made her transparent. They knew she was there but they could still look through her.

The guns around her went silent.

“*Commander, our side is all clear,*” Kaidan announced.

“*This side is all clear too,*” Garrus echoed.

Shepard heard a set of heavy, slow footsteps materialize somewhere behind her, followed with a familiar synthetic chatter noise, “Shepard-Commander is with two surviving security personnel in the center of this space. She is currently unable to reply. ”

Suddenly there were two sets of loud footsteps, Nihlus and Garrus appeared from amidst the work cubicles at the rear of the room. Both stopped in the middle, right in front of her, though she knew they would not see more than just a faint ripple.

“Legion, were you *there* the whole time?” Nihlus asked.

“Affirmative, Spectre-Kryik.”

Shepard prodded the two guards in the head again, to remind them that she still had guns aimed point blank at their heads and no answers. She was going to have to discuss teamwork with Legion later. The geth probably took it upon itself to follow her, simply because it could. She ordered it to support Nihlus and Garrus for a reason. Right now it was also distracting these two. “We’re not done here, boys.” She said. “Are there scientists *here*?”

“Fine, fine… yea, we were assigned to guard some lab rats. Most are gone… but there’s one tech left, hiding in the panic room. You can find it on your own. We want out!”

From the way the guard said the words, Shepard knew he was probably lying about the lab rat, but there was something they called a panic room. Shepard lowered her guns, “Alright. Leave your guns and go.”

“Really?” The man on the right wondered.

“A deal’s a deal.” Shepard replied.

The two exchanged glances, then dropped their weapons to the floor, got up, and ran for the front door like the cowards that they were. Shepard holstered her guns and flicked open her omni-tool to disconnect her cloak.

“You really let them go?” Nihlus asked.

“I want them to go for the small craft out there.” Shepard replied as she put a hand to her comm. “Shepard to the Normandy, come in.”
“We’re here, Commander.” Joker replied instantly.

“Monitor and track the parked Cerberus craft, it’ll be taking off rather soon. I want an extrapolation of its course.”

“Yea, I’ll let EDI do that.” Joker replied.

“It will be done, Commander.” EDI replied.

“Good, Shepard out.” She turned back to Nihlus and grinned, “Everything’s under control.” She said she would let them go, she did not say she would let them go free. “I got a lot out of them, and with luck I’ll get some more. First, they knew we were coming.” Now was neither the time nor place to discuss the potential Alliance leak.

Nihlus hummed thoughtfully, “So they were briefed.”

She shifted tracks back onto the matter at hand. “Their boss is also not here, so there’s probably another location, so that’s why I want EDI tracking runners while we find the panic room.” The only way that could have been more one-sided, is if she had allowed herself to be tied to a chair to provide them with a false sense of security. This was her game, and a pair of idiots with very loose tongues was a very fortunate roll of the dice. “We have to find the panic room.”

“See, Jenkins? That’s the reason they teach us to only give name, rank, and service number.” Ashley stated.

Shepard moved toward the back of the room and brought up her omni-tool scanner. First thing first, she would start at the back wall with a simple temperature scan. The planet was warm, but the buried base would have a cave effect. Outside walls that went into the planet’s soil would be a little cooler than a hidden door that had a climate-controlled room behind it. If that did not work, she could inspect the floor for marks. Panic rooms usually had supplies in them; moving stuff in and out might result in scuffed flooring below the door. If the simplest observations yielded nothing, she had electronic means to fall back on.

Once she was clear of the rows of work stations, Shepard stopped and looked around. Standing there with no danger to her, she could shift attention to assessing her environment in detail. The work stations were clean, the terminals scattered about were inactive. She tapped at the side of her helmet to disengage her space seals and pulled her helmet off. It was then, taking the first deep breath of local air that her nose was assaulted by the overwhelming smell of cleaning chemicals.

“Is something wrong?” Garrus asked.

“No. I am merely observing,” Shepard replied as she slipped her helmet back on, though without doing up her seals. “This place was cleaned recently; I can still smell the cleaning chemicals. Add the empty EVA suit lockers…” she trailed off. “The memo said they were moving sensitive research here… but something just does not add up.”

Garrus hummed.

Shepard shook her head and turned to her omni-tool scanner. She did not want to voice the possibilities yet. There was nothing to substantiate her suspicions, but she was paranoid enough to make a few leaps of logic here. If Cerberus had yet another location, the fact that this one was scrubbed made sense. Those behind this whole thing had already created a tangled mess. The only lead she had to this location being a single memo, a suspiciously easy to find memo.

Her omni-tool scanner pinged, bringing Shepard out of her thoughts. One glance at the read-out
showed that the wall at the left corner of the room registered a degree warmer than the rest. She turned off the scanner and inspected the wall. It was not hard to find the oddity; one of the panels was slightly recessed relative to the others, creating a seam and a lip. “Here,” she said as she raised her hand. Her fingers encountered resistance and the panel shimmered in that periwinkle way indicative of a mass effect field even as her fingers went right through to the unmistakably smooth door concealed by a semi-tactile holographic projection.

Shepard withdrew her hand and brought up her omni-tool. A quick series of taps and she had the offensive components of her hacking tool up. As the system powered up, she put her hand to the hologram. When the overload pulse fired, the hologram flickered, warped, and dissolved, revealing the door itself. With its disguise gone, the red lock panel lit up like a prize.

Then, even before she could begin decrypting the locks, Garrus was at her side unbidden, his own omni-tool up, already working through the ciphers. Shepard let him and looked back at the others. She saw no obvious signs of injuries on any of them, which was a big source of relief.

The lock turned green in a few moments and the door opened. She stepped over the threshold and looked around. It was a relatively small room, maybe only a hundred meters square. Most of the space was taken up by computer hardware and servers. Most of the tech was already offline, no status light to be seen. At the far end was a work desk with a terminal on it. There were no scientists, alive or otherwise. The two guards had indeed lied to her face. Shepard would have been irritated, were it not for the fact that she knew it was coming.

She moved toward the terminal and tapped at it. The computer came online, immediately displaying an authorization interface, a log-in screen.

“Even this space isn’t right,” Garrus said.

“Definitely.” Shepard replied as she brought up her omni-tool to run decryption on the console. “This lab is not where three other facilities were evacuated. It is scrubbed, but guarded, curious.”

Her radio cracked at that moment, “Normandy to away team, come in.”

Shepard reached up to tap at her helmet, “Shepard here, what’s going on, Joker?”

“Just calling to say the Cerberus craft just took off,” Joker announced, “EDI is tracking it.”

“Thanks for the heads-up, Joker,” Shepard replied, “Shepard out.” She tapped at her comm again.

“They had guards on evacuated labs as well,” Kaidan noted after a moment.

“These guards knew we were coming. Did they know the lab was abandoned?” Ashley wondered.

Shepard stopped, turned, and looked back her marines.

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” Kaidan wondered.

“I hope I’m wrong, because that’s just wrong.”


“Cerberus discarded these guards. We finished clean-up for them.” Nihlus said as casually as if he was talking about the weather.

“Yes, they are.” Shepard said as she turned back to the console and prodded at her omni-tool.

“Whoever was in-charge here deserves a bullet between the eyes.” Ashley went on.

Shepard hummed, she agreed with Ashley wholly. If the supposition was right, then they had just shot a bunch of sacrificial lambs, and though they may not be innocents entirely, it still put a sour taste in her mouth, it was as if Cerberus was trying to prove they were the worst monsters to have ever existed.

The console in front of her blinked past the authorization screen, the hack finished running. She let her omni-tool turn off and sat in the chair in front of the terminal. A few taps brought up statistics, which showed that the petabyte drives installed in these terminals were almost entirely empty. “The system was cleaned,” Shepard said even as she ran a quick index search, to check for anything that might have been left behind. The search finished rapidly, and brought up only one file, a video, in a folder labeled Project Cadmus. Shepard knew that name from the memo on Binthu. If there was ever bait, this was clearly it. She opened the file and pressed play.

As the video rolled, Shepard instantly recognized that it was recorded in that very room. A man with short dark hair and dark eyes behind rectangular nearly frameless glasses sat in the same chair. He wore a black suit and an old-fashioned white lab coat. When he smiled, it did not reach his eyes; his gaze still held a disconcerting emotionless quality. Shepard could not help but think that if the eyes were the windows into the soul, his led onto an empty room. There was also the fact that she knew this man.

Nihlus was suddenly there, one hand on the table, leaning down to get a better look at the screen. “Banes?” he asked.

“So it would seem.” Shepard replied. There was just no way to refute it. The man recording was the spitting image of Armistan Banes from the photo she saw in his employment record.

“I think that’s long enough for the shock to wear off.” He spoke very evenly, enunciating every syllable with a vague French accent. “Hello, Commander Shepard. Allow me to introduce myself; I am Armistan Banes.”

“Wasn’t this guy’s body on some slab?” Ashley asked.

“Clearly not.” Kaidan replied.

Banes went on, “I am sure you have many questions, and I shall answer a few. Consider it a prize for your hard work. First, I know you must be asking yourself, how? After all, the Alliance has my body! Well, be sure, I am Armistan Banes. Fooling a DNA test is a simple matter, doing so was a proof of concept, but that’s all I can say now. I am sure you understand.” The chair squeaked loudly in the video, moving back. A hint of a knee showed that Banes had crossed his legs, the lenses of his glasses flashed with glare from the overhead light.

“The body had to be a clone,” Nihlus said.

Shepard nodded. Had Banes been planning to fake his death for a while? Having a clone handy sounded like it. Still, what exactly was a clone a proof of concept of? Cloning was hardly a new technology. Limbs and organs could be grown in hospital labs to replace what was lost to injury and disease. First Rachni and maws, now cloning, Shepard could not see a pattern. What were they trying to achieve?

“Second,” Banes went on, but paused and hummed. “Ah yes. You must be curious how I knew my
labs were compromised. Kahoku contacting the Shadow Broker to find me was inconvenient, but it just goes to show that desperation can make someone do the unlikeliest things. Still, I thank Kahoku for showing me the security flaws yet to be covered.”

“Another maniac in a lab coat,” Garrus said.

“And he’s gloating.” Ashley added.

Shepard hummed, but did not say anything. How did Banes get that info? Did he torture it out of Kahoku, or did he have a mole in the Shadow Broker’s network? The former was deplorable. Just that warranted her putting a bullet through Banes’ skull. However the latter was leverage, and an opportunity. Shepard did not want to deal with the Shadow Broker, she did not want to owe them any favor, but if the Shadow Broker’s network could track down Cerberus, having information on a mole on the inside altered the math. The Shadow Broker would want to know, and Cerberus would be their mutual enemy, giving her information on said enemy would be quid pro quo.

“Shall we come to the heart of the matter, now? Intelligent as you are, you must realize that I surrendered Binthu and Nepheron. The fact that the Shadow Broker knew about these locations is reason enough. I do thank you for assisting me with… ah, tying up some loose ends.”

Her hands curled into fists on the table. Banes was rubbing her face in the fact that she officially lost the battle. There was another Cerberus location, more men, and more experiments. Binthu and Nepheron had been burned by Admiral Kahoku’s desperation and rash actions, and all that did was get the admiral killed. To make matters worse, now she ended up being a patsy. Banes’ smile in that moment was a final kick to the gut. He orchestrated a tune and she unknowingly danced to it. He knew she would dance too, so he left this sort of message. Shepard closed her eyes and forced herself to take a deep slow breath, exploding now would not help anyone.

“It is inconvenient that our existence was exposed in this manner. But I suppose it was merely a matter of time until the Alliance found someone with enough intellect to figure it out, and not enough to leave it alone. I realize you will attempt to stop me; I look forward to the entertainment. Goodbye, Commander. I sincerely wish you the best, and by that, I hope our paths never cross.” Banes uncrossed his legs and leaned forward. A tap of a key stopped the camera recording, ending the video.

“Miserable arrogant asshole,” Ashley fumed.

“Easy, Gunny, he’s going to get just deserts in time,” Shepard said. “He may think that he won, but that video not only tells me exactly what sort of person we are dealing with, but a few other pieces in the midst.”

“Egomanics like Banes want to crow their greatness from every rooftop, and that is their downfall,” Kaidan said.

“Exactly.” Shepard replied as she produced an OSD from her webbing. This time she had come to a lab prepared to copy everything. The system may seem to be wiped, but she was not going to fall for it, not with EDI in her corner. She would save a complete image, and let EDI work her magic on it. Maybe the AI could recover some of the data, maybe not. “Alright people, I want a sweep of this place. Let’s see if we can find some bread-crumbs they did not realize they left.”

She heard the footsteps scatter out of the room as she slipped the OSD into the drive and began on her task. A light flickering on the wall in front of her told her that Legion had not moved. The quietest member of the group, the geth seemed to observe things without taking part. Some part of her actually wondered what someone so detached from emotions and emotional valuations would
make of this whole situation.

“Shepard-Commander, we do not understand the motivations of Cerberus,” the geth said after a good long moment.

Shepard set the mirror image to write onto the OSD and turned to face the geth, “I’m afraid I do not understand them either, Legion. What were they doing here? What do they hope get out of it. We are still missing key information.”

Legion inclined its head down as the flaps on the top shifted. Its light narrowed before it turned back to her. “Organics treat their own in ways deemed unethical and undesirable, yet they perceive benefits from such actions and expect to be rewarded. It has been said that the ends justify the means.”

“Ah.” Shepard realized she misunderstood exactly what Legion did not understand. “Well, those individuals still see logic in their actions, they think they know better. The lens through which they view the world is different, and so we do not agree on what is right or wrong.” She did not want to go into the argument over what constituted right or wrong, as those were fundamentally relative terms, veering into the realm of philosophy, which gave her headaches.

“You would consider them to have an inherent error which returns one plus one as other than two.”

Shepard noted the chill with which it said the words, like it was stating a fact. Cold as it was, as a thought model it worked. “You could say that. In fact, I think I like the simplicity of that.” She only wished it was actually that simple. One and one made two, but valuations of right and wrong were a lot more subjective. The core of Legion’s point was right though; Cerberus did have something fundamentally wrong with the way they were thinking.

The geth tipped its head to the side a little, the lamp never wavering off her fact. “We observed that organics initially view all new perspectives with suspicion, yet with time these perspectives are either accepted by the majority or are finally discredited and become relegated to the realm of apocrypha. We do not understand what mechanism determines acceptance or rejection. The Geth build consensus through faster-than-light information exchange. We review all perspectives until the most efficient course of action becomes apparent. Organics do not build consensus. There is chaos in your process.”

“That’s…” Shepard stopped cold. That observation was surprisingly on-the-nose. How was she to explain this? “We… make decisions based on what works best for the immediate situation for the people involved. Sometimes we make mistakes, and only understand that during a later re-evaluation. What is accepted or rejected is very fluid, but there are trends. Also, I would not generalize, not all organics think alike. Species vary, individuals vary too. Though I suppose that’s the chaos… No. I don’t think I can explain it. I’m not a sociologist or a philosopher.”

“Acknowledged.”

More coolness, there was no way to know how the geth took her explanation. Shepard turned back to the terminal before the topic could go even further into the realm where she would be up a creek without a paddle. Still, there was no way for her to ignore what had just happened. She actually had this sort of conversation with Legion. Most wanted to say the geth had no sense of self, and yet here was at least one geth wrestling with fundamental questions. If that was not proof of some self-actualization, she did not know what would be. For good or bad it looked like the geth wanted to understand organics. The galaxy misunderstood them.

“Thank you, Shepard-Commander, for attempting to provide us with an explanation.” Legion went
Shepard looked back over her shoulder, was it just her, or did Legion just hint that they had their own take-away on the discussion? “You’re welcome, Legion.” What more could she say?

They were back on the Normandy two hours later, but whereas her away team could kick back and put up their feet, Shepard was no less busy once she was out of armor. She stopped only briefly for a sandwich and tea, as to quiet her distracting growling stomach, and then she was in the OD working on her preliminary report.

There were things about the whole situation that bothered her. Beginning with the fact that she had been made a patsy for Banes, failed to do anything, and now she was staring into the abyss of realization, Cerberus was in fact a real thing, and they would probably become a real problem. How did one put that into a report?

An hour later she was halfway through when the door opened. Shepard did not even look up, she could hear familiar footsteps.

“Shepard,” Nihlus greeted as he stopped right next to the desk.

“Commander,” Garrus echoed.

“Nihlus. Garrus.” She replied as she looked up. Nihlus had that stern, somewhat frigid look in his eyes that told her he was not in the OD just for the quiet company, he wanted something. Garrus stood a step behind him, and as she looked his way, he shifted his weight from foot to foot. They really were rotten at putting up a poker face. “Something I can do for you?” she asked as a way to break the silence.

“We need to talk.” Nihlus said.

Shepard nodded, she knew that was coming, but she was not looking forward to it. Between Binthu and Nepheron the situation had slated out contained and straight into devolving, it would require reassessment.

Nihlus moved across the room to the couch as if he owned the OD. Shepard contained the urge to roll her eyes but got up from her seat and followed. As the turians found their seats, Shepard moved to the sideboard, suddenly not keen on sitting between them for this conversation.

“You never mentioned what else those two you let off said, but you said they gave you something?” Nihlus begun.

“Yea, I already said they knew that the Normandy was coming. They actually knew about me by name, and about the composition of the crew. I’ll spare you the exact terms they used to describe you two or Tali, but they knew about you, Tali, and Wrex. Now it is possible that they knew about Wrex from Binthu, some camera or something, but not about Tali. Their info is recent, though not hot off the press. I say that because Legion caught them by surprise.”

Nihlus hummed, “A leak in the Alliance.”

“More likely a mole.” Shepard wanted to think it was a sleeper agent slash mole. She wanted to think that no one in the Alliance had become so disillusioned as to flip. “And it’s somewhere in Admiral Hackett’s vicinity.”
“Not the admiral himself?”

“No, can’t be. Admiral Hackett has been a family friend for decades. Though admittedly my mother knows him better than I do—” Shepard stopped suddenly. There was very little she could say down this line, but she considered her mother, Admiral Hackett, and Captain Anderson above reproach and suspicion.

Shepard could not see them ever betraying the Alliance, there was too much integrity and loyalty, but more than that, she knew where they stood. Admiral Hackett and Captain Anderson fought in the First Contact War, but Shepard knew they understood what caused the conflict and held no real grudges. Both of them had been in the thick of it on the ground at Shanxi. Admiral Hackett had earned his commission there, and Captain Anderson earned medals and admittance into the ICT. Neither held views that reduced non-humans to “the other”, something all fanatics did. Furthermore, Shepard thought that there was just no way for them to be crooked without her mother noticing something. None of those reasons were purely logical, but they were reasons nonetheless.

“You are going to have to give me something better than that.”

She whirled sharply and leveled her gaze on the Spectre.

His mandibles drew against his face, but the look in his eyes was severe, and Shepard realized he would not back down. “Your admiral has ready access to the reports you file.” Nihlus pressed on. “The Normandy is top secret, how many more people would have access?”

Shepard outright glared now, she was not going to back down either. “I know the admiral, Nihlus. He would not do this.”

“He knew about Kahoku, it would explain everything!” Nihlus argued.

“The Shadow Broker’s agent knew about Kahoku too! It is likelier that Banes has a source in the broker’s network, he hinted at it, you heard it!” Shepard retorted. “I’m sorry, Nihlus, but if you want me to consider Admiral Hackett to be a suspect, I need something a little more than just means and opportunity. The admiral has no motive. We establish guilt through looking for the means, motive, and opportunity. Even acts of passion have all three!” That was as far as she was willing to concede.

“The Commander is right on that. If she says Hackett lacks motive then we have to look at other possible suspects.” Garrus voiced quietly.

Shepard nodded a silent thanks to Garrus.

“Alright, fair enough,” Nihlus said, but Shepard heard the tone of resignation in his voice. Maybe he even realized that he had to take whatever he could get.

“I’ll tell you what I think.” Shepard began as she half-perched on the side-board next to the kettle. “There are ways for unauthorized individuals to access my reports to Admiral Hackett. I think Cerberus is more than just a small group of scientists with a very loose definition of what is ethical. If we take all the events where their name cropped up, we begin to see a pattern. They are closer to -as trite as this will sound- a shadow society. Our leak is probably no more than a sympathizer passing bits of information along. They may not even know the value of what they are leaking.” In many ways that was how intelligence organizations worked. Bits of information ferreted from multiple sources put together into something different. ‘Loose lips might sink ships’, the old twentieth century war-time slogan applied here.

Nihlus hummed a quiet assent.
“Taking them down will not be easy, but it starts with recognizing they are there.” Shepard finished.

“What was it that Banes said?” Garrus spoke up, amused, as his blue eyes fell on her.

Shepard smiled and nodded. “He said, in so many words… ‘It is inconvenient that our existence was exposed in this manner.’ Then he said my intellect was adequate to figure things out, but not adequate enough to leave it alone.” Shepard said. “Banes is an egomaniac who is too busy gloating to realize he ought to keep his mouth shut.” Loose lips, did indeed sink ships. Shepard now knew the Cerberus ship was out there somewhere. “They may have won the battle, but they haven’t won the war.”

“Speaking of the battle, do you think those two you let go will lead us to Banes?” Nihlus asked.

Shepard hummed, “At this point, I don’t know. Their ship has a rather limited FTL drive; it will be on fumes by the time it reaches the relay. Where they go past that is anyone’s guess. Ultimately, Banes did not tell those guards that the labs were burned. Would he tell them where he moved his operation? He left them there because he thought they were a security risk. The wise would not arm them with information with which to bargain. Then again, Banes is a curious case of intelligence and stupidity all in one. I can’t make heads of tails of what he might think of and what will slip his attention.”

“We also cannot be certain those two will run back to Banes even if they knew where. They would have to understand they were left to die.” Garrus argued.

“They also seemed to fear Banes. So if they knew the location, they might not go because they wouldn’t want to look like they ran. Then, maybe they’d think it wouldn’t matter… I just don’t know. We will have to wait and see.” Thinking of them brought back the sour feeling. On the one hand, yes they provided muscle for Cerberus, and the two she had let go were racists and lied to her face, so she could not call them wholly innocent. On the other hand, they were pawns, sacrificial lambs, tossed to the lions. Lioness or not, she could not help but pity them.

Shepard could not help but be conflicted, should she feel guilty? Some part of her said yes. Life was never something to take lightly. Another part said she was following orders, no one with any authority over her would deem her actions wrong. These men were not like the batarian merchant all over again. The feeling just needed time to settle, she needed to stop thinking about it, as there was no clarity while exhausted.

The couch leather squeaked, which brought Shepard out of her thoughts, she looked up to see Nihlus on his feet again. “Alright, Shepard, you made your case. I will not consider Hackett a primary suspect, but that means we have no primary suspect.”

“I know. I need to discuss this with Admiral Hackett himself. He would know who had access to the reports, who might have leaked, we can work from there. But for that I need to finish my report. I’ll tell you when I have something.” If she had something, Shepard was not holding her breath. The leaker would not have a proverbial neon sign overhead.

“You know I was just being thorough, right?” He asked. “I had to know whether you saw all possibilities.”

“I know. That’s why I didn’t take your head off for raising that one. There are certainly some circumstantial indicators; I just think that it is supremely unlikely.” If he was going to be blunt, she could be blunt too.

“Good. I will leave you to your work; I need to run maintenance on my weapons.” He turned toward
the OD’s door.

Shepard watched him go until the door closed behind him, and then the turned to the former detective still in the room. A silence settled between them that lasted for a good half minute.

Garrus cleared his throat, “Commander, are you alright?” he asked.

Shepard sighed, “Truthfully? I’m tired,” she replied. It was then, having articulated it, that she realized just how true it was. Still, it was not the full real reason she was tired. “There’s too much to do, and to little time to do it in.”

“Kryik is not helping with his… thoroughness,” Garrus added.

“That? No.” Cerberus took the wind out of her sails. Banes had rubbed her face in failure. She could ignore the egomaniac, but that did not change the fact that he pulled a fast one over her. “But he skates that narrow line of doing his job. I certainly can’t blame him for raising that topic.”

“Kryik has to learn to mind his timing. Suggesting your commanding officer is working against you now?” he stopped and shook his head.

“He is technically my superior too.” Shepard argued.

“This makes it worse. I know it is not my place to tell you this, Commander, so pardon this minor act of insubordination, but… you should rest. We will be in FTL, so whether the report is done tonight or tomorrow... everyone is worried for you. After that close call with the grenade on Binthu, after this…”

“Everyone, huh?” Shepard murmured as she turned her eyes to the window, watching the blue-shift emissions streak across the panes like the aurora. When her ordnance officer cleared his throat, Shepard spared him an undisguised knowing grin, “Well thank you, Garrus. I appreciate your concern.”

The turian actively avoided her eyes, and Shepard could practically see the gears in his head turn. She mentally began to count down from five.

Garrus got to his feet and cleared his throat, “You are welcome, now… ah- I believe I took up enough of your time, I have… calibrations to get back to.”

She had only reached two, so he was a little ahead of schedule, still Shepard smiled. “By all means and… have a good night.” That was an orderly retreat if there ever was one.

Garrus nodded and turned to the door.

Soon enough Shepard was left in the OD alone with her thoughts. One of them being that her ordnance officer really did wear his personal concerns for her wellbeing on his sleeve, and he was unspeakably awkward about it as he tried to navigate voicing his concern while not breaching protocol. It was rather touching, and kind of sweet. She pushed off the side-board and moved back toward her desk.

Chapter End Notes

Author Notes: There you have it, the second and final part of the Twelfth Labor arc.
More questions all around, but also some answers. Yep, Armistan Banes is not as dead as he led people to believe. When I was developing this idea for my canon, I needed a leader for the project, and I decided that Banes made a convenient figure.

**General Notes:**

**Episode Title** – This is an allusion to the twelfth and final labor of Heracles, fetching Cerberus from the Underworld. Heracles performed these for King Eurystheus of Tiryns and Mycenae in penance, as ordered by Apollo, for killing his wife and children in a fit of Hera-induced madness.

**Cadmus** – In Greek myth Cadmus was a prince from Phoenicia, who came to Greece seeking his sister Europa who has been abducted by Zeus. In the most famous myths surrounding Cadmus he was told by the Delphic oracle to seek a cow with a half moon mark on its flank, and it would lead him to a place where Cadmus should found a city. The city was Thebes, a foe of the democratic Athens. Cadmus was later instructed by Athena to sow a monster’s (or a dragon’s) teeth into the ground. From these came up the Spartoi (“sown”), these were new men from whom the noblest families of Thebes claimed to descend.

**Chapter Notes:**

None this time…
Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I do no own Mass Effect, I do not claim to own Mass Effect, I am only doing this for fun.

Author Notes: I had a great deal of fun writing this episode, along with 21, and 22, which form the “Noveria Arc”. You’ll know why soon enough.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**Episode 20: Noveria**

The Normandy reached Amazon system on its last hour of fuel, but the hop let Shepard finish her report so it was ready to transmit to Admiral Hackett just as soon as they were within tightbeam range of Amazon’s relay comm buoy. With their tanks nearly down to fumes, Shepard ordered Joker to jump to Arcturus and get in line at the depot to refuel and so the Normandy would be at hand if Admiral Hackett had something for them. It was either that, or Widow, and Shepard knew full well that the lines at the Widow depot were longer and less sympathetic to an Alliance warship.

Just after breakfast Shepard went up to her domain in the OD. Arcturus shone through the viewports as the Normandy came alongside one of the smaller semi-automated fuel depots that orbited the system’s second planet, Eirene. It was up to the engineers to ensure refueling went smoothly from there. So while their helium-3, hydrogen, and antiproton reserves were topped up, Shepard lapsed into routine work.

She would have liked to do more research on Cerberus, but the image she had saved for EDI had ended up a bust. Apparently whoever cleaned up the system did not just format the drives; they used a VI-assisted program that first wrote over every data cluster prior to formatting over the junk files, physically destroying what a simple format would have left behind. The only way they could have been more thorough is if they strapped explosives to the physical hardware. She was not happy, but also not surprised. It all fit the pattern; Nepheron had been an important facility. Banes apparently took care to scrub it thoroughly. Maybe leaving the empty, functional hardware behind was just another insult; he was confident in his victory over her.

The ship with the two running guards had also ended up being a bust. When the ship jumped out of the Voyager Cluster, EDI pinged the relays for their signature. They took Amazon to Hades Gamma, from there to the Exodus Cluster, and then Local Cluster. If Cerberus had some hole to hide on Earth or Mars there was no way to wholly follow. The Local Cluster itself was quite barren, with Sol being the only system of note within the ship’s FTL range, and the Sol System itself had enough traffic that the ion trail of a ship that size would cross over with an untold number of others, even EDI did not have the sensory resolution to untangle that Gordian knot. Shepard was not surprised, she would bet that the two men realized they were lucky to be breathing and decided to run home. Shepard hoped they would realize their mistakes and learn from them, but she would not hold her breath.

The OD door opened and Shepard looked up. Nihlus strode into the room with the rigidity of being on a mission.

“Shepard, how long until the Normandy is refueled?” he asked.
“Good morning to you too, Nihlus.” Shepard replied and turned back to the pad in her hand. She had not seen him at breakfast, probably ate in his cabin. She had a feeling there was a reason for it. EDI allowed him access to the Normandy’s communication array. As long as they were linked with a buoy, Nihlus had a functional communicator in his cabin that allowed him to receive orders without using the Normandy’s communication equipment. “Refueling is going to take another hour. We are taking on antimatter. There are safety protocols to follow and I will not rush Adams, not even for the Council.”

“Good morning, Shepard.” Nihlus sighed and sat on the couch extension.

Shepard glanced up, “So, where’s the fire?” she asked. Right now, she really hoped the Council was twisting Nihlus’ arm to handle some mercenaries. She could use the diversion of doing something straight-forward.

“There is no fire. Noveria is actually quite cold.” Nihlus said as his mandibles gave a flick of amusement.

“Wiseass,” Shepard murmured. “So what’s on Noveria?”

Nihlus leaned back in his seat, and all humor drained away. “I submitted my report to the Council, and I had to mention the Rachni parts we saw on Binthu. Now, I cannot tell you how the Council knows, just that they do, but there is rumor that a lab on Noveria has been doing research on the Rachni. And not the benign archeological work sometimes proposed for Suen. Not somewhere like Noveria.”

Suen, the Rachni home world, a tidally locked toxic wasteland even before the Krogan descended on it with nuclear bunker-busters during the Rachni Wars. Anyone who wanted to do work there was looking at hellish conditions; a combination of radiation from the system’s sun, the natural toxicity of the planet, and the nuclear fallout that at best had only reached half-life once. Work there was only ever proposed, no one in their right mind actually wanted to do it.

Noveria was a hell of another sort, an ice ball well deserving a name shorted from ‘Nova Siberia’. Barely above category one cold hazard and ill-suited for actual settlement it was perfect for high security containment laboratories where the cold created a natural hindrance to things getting out. It was only the dubious oversight and policy-making of the definitely-for-profit Noveria Development Corporation that put Noveria above places like Binthu and Nepheron.

“Sparatus mentioned that another Spectre was assigned to follow up on the lead. I am sure you understand why Rachni are a concern. My presence would be further surety that the situation is… contained.”

Shepard noted his pause. Just what was he privy to that he did not want to share? Nihlus was most definitely withholding something, she knew him well enough to know when he was deflecting. He never actually lied, but he did love to omit details.

“If you are interested, we should be on our way as soon as possible. The assigned Spectre is… not known for patience.” He went on.

Shepard hummed. He definitely knew who it was. But it did not matter. She could work with whomever as long as it was worth it. If this lab on Noveria was cloning Rachni tissue, then it could explain how the facilities on Binthu got their parts. Maybe there was a trail to follow; the Noveria lab’s systems would have records of deliveries made. If she could connect Noveria to Binthu, then she would be interested where else parts were sent. “I am definitely interested.”
“Good,” Nihlus gave her one of his big grins and got to his feet, “I have messages to send.”

“No rest for the weary.” Shepard sighed as soon ad the OD’s door closed behind him. Well she could not slack off on this one, an investigation never waited. Still, she was reaching into her energy reserves. Even her ability to handle this sort of stuff was not endless. After this, she would have to come down on Nihlus. They needed a break, maybe a week of straight leave, somewhere nice and warm, maybe with a beach. Shepard wanted a day or two just to laze around on a lounge chair. The Normandy was an Alliance ship; they could very well request a week off at some Earth resort. She was sure that even the non-Alliance crew would enjoy it.

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To get from the Arcturus Stream to the Pax system of the Horse Head Nebula involved a double jump through the Exodus Cluster. There was no need to run stealthy when the Normandy made approach on Noveria six hours later. The sight of the planet from the window of the OD brought Shepard out of her abode. She made her way across the CIC and toward the bridge, Nihlus at her heels.

“We’re here, Commander.” Joker said as monitored the controls.

Shepard was not at all surprised that he had been listening for her arrival. Noveria spread in front of them like a milky white marble streaked with lines of grey. Its nearly unbroken cloud cover full of ice crystals had a strong albedo effect; the planet almost glimmered in Pax’s direct sunlight. At only 0.87atm of pressure and 0.81g, and despite being closer to Pax than Earth was to Sol, Noveria’s atmosphere was too thin and too reflective to work as a thermal blanket, so despite being within the goldilocks zone for a garden world, it just failed to develop the atmosphere for it.

Joker tapped at the communication links, “Noveria Approach Control, this is the SSV Normandy. Requesting a vector and a berth.”

“Normandy, your arrival was not scheduled. Our defense grid is armed and tracking you. State your business.”

“Citadel business. We’ve got a Council Spectre aboard.”

There was a long pause and Shepard glanced at Nihlus.

“Landing access granted, Normandy. Transmitting vector and berth coordinates now.” The comm finally replied. “Be advised: we will be confirming identification on arrival. If confirmation cannot be established, your vessel will be impounded.”

Shepard blinked, stunned.

“Coordinates received, control, beginning final approach. Normandy out.” Joker replied coolly, but then turned to look at her over his shoulder, “What a fun bunch. I think I’ll take my next leave here.”

Shepard was not amused at this threat of impounding an Alliance warship. She glanced at the Spectre standing to her right, “Nihlus, let’s not turn this into an incident where I’d have to show them that they can’t impound us.”

“That will not be a problem.” He replied, turned, and exited the bridge.

For all their sakes Shepard hoped it would not be. She knew that there was no docking system in existence that EDI could not hack and release, but she did not want to have to do it. “I’ll leave you to it, Joker.”
“Aye, aye, ma’am!”

She turned and made her way toward the elevator. Nihlus wanted her in armor and ready to go as soon as the docking clamps were attached. Apparently whoever they were set to meet was indeed that impatient. She was honestly beginning to worry.

The Normandy was shown to a large covered docking cradle blasted into the side of a mountain just below Noveria’s de facto capital, Port Hanshan. The planet’s topography was such that one had to do with any rock to build on, even if the rock in question was a mountain face. Noveria’s glaciers were kilometers deep and any climate controlled structure built on the ice without expensive shielding would slowly sink into it.

Shepard met Nihlus at the Normandy’s airlock and the two went through the equalization cycle together. The docking bay was like the mouth of a cave, the wind outside resonated across the lip and echoed in the cavernous space despite the atmosphere-retaining mass effect field at the very edge. Everything was a rather bland beige grey color, and dimly lit at that. The Normandy was too long for this cradle; her rear end passed through the retaining field even as her nose was almost flush with the back edge of the cradle itself. The ship itself was held fast by every single set of docking clamps that were there, and it still looked rather awkward. As Shepard walked out onto the U-shaped suspended walkway surrounding the cradle, the computer in her armor revved her suit heater and her helmet HUD flashed a temperature plunge to zero degrees centigrade.

A faint flash of red from her left made her realize there was a second, identical docking bay running parallel to theirs, and it was not empty. Floating in it, moored to a set of identical docking clamps was an abyss black ship. At around the same length as the Normandy, it’s blunt, straight, gun-like profile, and tell-tale wing-like stabilizers folded under its belly identified its construction readily. Though the Hierarchy fleet was clad in a rather bland beige-grey main color with burnt-orange or terracotta red accents on the stabilizers, this ship was undeniably a Turian frigate.

“That is the Impera.” Nihlus tapped her shoulder. “You might not want to stare too long; there are dock-hands who will tell you that staring into the paint gave them nightmares.” He added as he moved past her and down the walkway toward the docking bay exit.

Shepard followed, “You’re kidding, right?”

“I am a Turian; we do not have a sense of humor,” he grinned.

“Wiseass.” She mumbled and glanced at the black ship one last time. It had no portholes that she could see, and then there were those blinking red warning lights, otherwise the paint seemed to consume every bit of light, reflecting nothing back. Shepard imagined that it would utterly vanish against the backdrop of the void of space. Even if visual identification was rarely used, if this ship allowed its engines to cool, it could be right there and no one would see it. There was something unsettling about that.

As they came around the corner, Shepard saw three armed figures standing by the glass double doors that led into the port proper. Two women and a turian, and they looked like they had their weapons ready. Nihlus did not break pace as he approached, and neither did Shepard, though she began to think that Joker was on to something.

“That’s far enough,” the woman in charge called as soon as they drew near.

“We’re not here to cause problems.” Shepard replied.
“This is an unscheduled arrival. I need your credentials.” The woman replied.

Shepard did not particularly like this woman’s haughty tone, she spoke as if them coming here was a personal inconvenience to her.

“And you are?” Nihlus asked matching her disdain.

The other woman’s eyes narrowed as she gave the Spectre a rather withering stare, “We’re the law here, show some respect.”

The dark haired Asian woman in charge glanced at her blond colleague but turned back to the Spectre, “I’m Captain Maeko Matsuo, Elanus Risk Control Services, Port Hanshan security. Your credentials, please.”

If Shepard was to guess, Nihlus was not impressed, the look in his eyes was frigid. It was like looking at two heavy-weight contenders size each-other up before they got down to having a nine-round fight over a title. This woman had an ego, but Nihlus had his pride. Shepard knew she best step in, before the bell chimed for round one. “This is Council Spectre Nihlus Kryik. I am Commander Shepard, Spectre candidate; we’re here on official Citadel business.”


“We will need to confirm that,” Matsuo replied, “For now I must advise you that while Spectres are permitted to carry firearms on Port Hanshan, Commander, I’m afraid I must ask you to relinquish yours.”

Shepard glared; no one was so much as touching her weapons.

Nihlus stepped in between her and Matsuo, “Spectre candidates are allowed to carry firearms under the authority of their training Spectre.”

“Captain Matsuo! Stand down,” a voice called over the loud-speaker. “We have confirmed their identities. It is as the Spectre says; a candidate is allowed to carry weapons under a Spectre’s authority.”

The blond woman standing next to Matsuo was less than pleased; Shepard wondered if being wrong galled her that much. What was so unbelievable about a human Spectre candidate anyways? She would concede that maybe two Spectres was overkill, but there were reasons for it too, reasons a glorified rent-a-cop did not need to know, and should know better than to expect to be told.

“You may proceed,” Matsuo conceded. “I hope the rest of your visit will be less confrontational.”

Nihlus turned and moved toward the doors, Shepard followed, “Joker was right,” she murmured. “This is the place for a vacation.” She honestly could not tell what was colder, the atmosphere or the reception.

The glass doors rotated out of the way automatically. The atrium beyond was split in two levels with a fountain fronting the doors, flanked by two sets of steps to the upper level. The space looked like it tried to be a glitzy business tower atrium at a fraction of the cost. Nihlus took the steps without preamble or even recognizing her vain attempt at levity. Shepard followed without saying another word.

At the top of the steps she saw the drones that hovered over the landing, and as Nihlus stepped near them, an alarm sounded. A dark-haired woman on left, dressed in a violently pink long-sleeved full-
length dress waved to the man at the console in the security booth and the alarm cut off.

“Weapons detectors. Don’t mind them,” she said as she came around to talk face to face. “I am Gianna Parasini, assistant to Administrator Anoleis. We apologize for that reception. It is unusual for us to receive one Spectre, let alone two and a candidate.”

Shepard understood what was being said between the lines, the hired security was jumpy about people who could circumvent the carefully arranged web of protective regulations that allowed the NDC to operate Noveria at a profit. Corporations considered their physical locations to be their sovereign states and their methods and assets as worthy of protection as any state secret. To that end, the security of a corporation was paid to protect assets like they were the heads of state. A Spectre was like a foreign dignitary with diplomatic immunity, someone that could not be kept out, but also a potential disturbance to the moment they departed.

Shepard heard a door open somewhere behind her and glanced over her shoulder. Her gaze met a pair of cold silver eyes, and suddenly as cold as the docks seemed, they had nothing on the look the other Spectre gave her. Now Shepard knew what made Nihlus tense to the point that he could barely even muster a grin at a joke. Everything began and ended with the fact that standing about ten meters away, clad in his white and black armor, was Saren Arterius.

“Please go on ahead, your colleague was just in a meeting with Administrator Anoleis, he will be past the elevator there.” Parasini said, unaware of what was going on.

Shepard turned back to the woman and flashed her an apologetic smile, “Thank you Miss Parasini, but it would seem Spectre Arterius has…” she glanced back over her shoulder, the withering look on the other Spectre’s face had only gotten harsher, and Shepard suddenly could not find the right terms to finish her sentence. ‘Come to meet us’ did not seem right for two reasons. First, Nihlus said he was impatient, she knew what that meant, and second using ‘us’ would be a blatant fallacy. Saren was definitely not happy to see her.

“Nihlus, did I not tell you that this matter is above your charge’s clearance?” He asked.

No greeting, not even for his own former student. His tone was cool, free of open animosity, but Shepard bristled all the same, because it was all clearly there in the subtext.

“You did. But I remember I disagreed.” Nihlus replied just as calmly as he turned to face his former mentor.

The withering look turned on Nihlus, but he showed absolutely no reaction to it. Then it vanished and the white-clad Spectre turned back to the elevator. “Come.”

Nihlus moved without a second thought and Shepard followed. That single word was unmistakably an order, and Saren expected no argument. Shepard could not believe her rotten luck, but she supposed that if the matter at hand had to do with Rachni, the Council would send their best, and it made sense that the best would be their longest-serving Spectre.

“What are we looking at? Rachni?” Nihlus asked as the three of them stepped into the cabin.

“Sources indicate the lab on Peak Fifteen has been experimenting with the Rachni, yes.” Saren replied.

Nihlus glanced down at her and Shepard nodded. “We encountered Rachni body parts used for research on a recent job on Binthu,” she volunteered.

The elevator door opened and the three of them stepped out and moved down the hallway. She did
not miss the fact that Nihlus stepped into the space between Saren and her, a living buffer.

The passage opened up onto what she assumed to be Port Hanshan proper. The space was no less trying and failing at glamour on a budget as the dock below, with high ceilings, grey walls, flowing water, and huge panel windows that showed the snow squall outside. If one asked Shepard, she would say it was more depressing than glamorous.

“Human lack of foresight never ceases to amaze me,” Saren observed.

Shepard had to force herself not to react to such blatantly obvious baiting. “This has nothing to do with foresight. If scientists are experimenting with cloned tissue, the ethics might be questioned, but it is essentially harmless. The Rachni communicated over vast distances without using technology as we know it. Their method is poorly understood. There are grounds for simple scientific curiosity.” She could not believe she was indirectly defending Cerberus. There was nothing good in their methods and end-goals.

“Humanity’s curiosity would subject the galaxy to the Rachni if given the opportunity.” he sneered.

“If poorly handled there is that potential for it, yes, but that outcome is the only thing we ought to prevent. Pure scientific pursuit should not be abandoned merely because some potential outcomes are undesirable.” She glanced at Saren, but with Nihlus between them, there was no way to make real eye contact. “Truly, if people avoided pursuing advancements just because of potential undesirable outcomes… the first individual to notice fire’s potential as a tool would have instead put it out as a hazard and never considered it again. And then where would that lead?”

“She got you there,” Nihlus mused.

Shepard knew where his argument was really coming from, and it had nothing to do with science, and everything to do with who pursued it. He also did not like her, and so would be argumentative just as a matter of course. “Shall we agree to disagree? I realize that you do not like me as a person. That is your right, and I will not try to dissuade you. But I am here to fulfill my duties, both to the Council and the Alliance. In the interest of carrying out our respective duties, I suggest we do not pursue personal conflicts.”

The white-clad Spectre sneered.

Nihlus chuckled but quickly bit the sound off with a false cough when Saren turned his glare on him.

She also suspected some little part of it had to do with the prevailing galactic consensus. The Council was surprisingly conservative when one thought about it. They tended to react with knee-jerks and enforce the comfortable status quo. This was most evident in their fear of artificial intelligence. Shepard truly believed that all advancements had to come with safety regulations, and mistakes would happen, but those were a fact of life. Stifling advancement never worked in anyone’s favor.

“Now, my interest in the matter is simple.” She went on, only pretending to be oblivious. “We connected the scientists on Binthu to Cerberus. If the scientists at the Peak Fifteen facilities are likewise affiliated, then that’s more proof that Cerberus is an organization and not merely an image. In that case, I have reasons to do everything in my power to stop them.”

“Fine, human. You have made your point. Do try not to get in the way.”

Shepard knew better than to be seen rolling her eyes.

“So we are off to Peak Fifteen?” Nihlus asked after a moment of silence.
“We would be, if you had arrived an hour sooner,” Saren replied. “Anoleis is using a snowstorm descending over the valley below Peak Fifteen as an excuse to keep us bound here. The shuttles have been grounded and he refuses to issue a vehicle pass until it is over.”

“So, Anoleis is cooperating in name only.” Shepard hummed.

“Anoleis works for the Noveria Development Company, which are still nominally subject to Citadel conventions. He does not want a galactic incident on his watch. Because if we go there and find living Rachni... regardless of how well the company handles litigation, *his* head is on the chopping block.” Nihlus glanced down at her.

“How typical,” Shepard shook her head. Still, it was something that some corporate middleman feared the fallout of letting Spectres on Peak Fifteen more than he feared having a Spectre within a hundred meters of himself personally, especially when that Spectre was as sociable as Saren Arterius. There was definitely something going on at that laboratory that the administration wanted to sweep under the carpet as soon as possible. “He won’t issue, but he can’t be the only one with passes, we just need to find someone else.” She finished. Out of the corner of her eye, Shepard saw Parasini come up from the docking bay, it was rather difficult to miss the woman in that violent pink dress.

“I have no intention of going around asking,” Saren argued, his distaste palpable.

“Wait a minute, Saren. I know what you are about to suggest, but we cannot do that either. Sparatus wants this done quietly. Taking the Impera’s runabout will be the definition of loud.” Nihlus jumped in.

“I thought the human would be useful for something,” Saren argued back.

Shepard froze, “I am not breaking a Councilor’s orders, getting my ship impounded, and causing an incident that will require the Alliance to come down on the NDC. That would look rather bad on my performance review.” He really ought to try to be a little less obvious.

The white-clad Spectre spared her another one of his withering looks.

Nihlus was grinning again. “Shepard is right; we need to get a pass from someone other than Anoleis.”

Shepard crossed her arms and glanced at the assistant, was she listening? Were the Spectres aware that human ears were not that bad?

“Shepard, what are you thinking?”

She turned her head, “I am thinking who might have passes. Obviously there are other labs on this planet, people have to come and go, who decides that? I imagine project leaders, head researchers, lab administrators...” It was a deflection if there ever was, but Shepard was aware that Parasini was interested in them. The woman let them through the gates with barely a slap on the wrist. If Anoleis was obstructionist, his assistant seemed to have an agenda of her own, far more than a simple secretary ought to have.

“Fine, we will investigate who might part with their pass. We will meet here in an hour. Human, do not do anything without our authorization,” Saren said, turned and walked off.

She watched him go; did he really think she would follow his orders just like that? She was here under Nihlus’ authority. If she wanted to do something, she only had to report to Nihlus, and maybe not even then. She knew her mentor was not the micro-management type, he trusted her judgment pretty far.
“He will try to find something on Anoleis; it would be the most direct route.” Nihlus said.

“So what’s your plan?” Shepard wondered.

“I will look around. You- do not take this wrong, Shepard, but you are human and not a Spectre.” His green eyes had a peculiar twinkle, one of his mandibles flicked in a grin. That little bit of amusement told her there was a second meaning to his words.

“Yea, yea. I know my responsibilities.” She affected a tone of hurt, but the mirth in his eyes was still there, and so she knew he got the jest. Finally he nodded and walked off in the same direction that Saren had gone.

Shepard put her hands on the railing overlooking the lower level of Port Hanshan as she watched her partner try and pretend he was not out there to find dirt. By now everyone at Port Hanshan had to know there were Spectres afoot. From there the assumption would easily be that the two turian strangers with the arsenals were them. She was just a little powerless trainee girl. Of the three of them, she probably had the better chance because she would not put people on guard as much.

“I get the feeling you do not get much respect,” a voice said to her side.

“Story of my life,” Shepard replied and glanced to the side; Parasini slid into place where Nihlus had been. “Spectre Kryik is not that bad, but… Spectre Arterius is a jerk.” She affected the aura of a weary, underappreciated assistant-type, just in case. It was hard to miss the swiftness with which Parasini moved in. Was she waiting for them to disperse to make an approach all along? Shepard could see it. Saren hardly invited someone to confide in him. Nihlus was right; she was the more approachable, and if she played along, she would be more relatable as well.

“They are certainly unique,” Parasini noted. “Almost as unique as Mr. Lorik Qui’in, administrator of the Port Hanshan’s Synthetics Insights office. He actually does work in the hotel lounge. If you need something to do for the hour, you should meet him, he’s quite the fascinating conversationalist.”

Shepard raised an eyebrow.

Parasini looked at her omni-tool, “Now excuse me; I am needed in the office.” And just like that, the woman walked off.

Shepard watched her go, and it took a moment to realize that maybe that had not been just idle talk. Did Administrator Anoleis’ assistant just put her on a trail? It was as good a lead as any. She found Nihlus on the level below and their eyes met, and he nodded, and Shepard knew he had been aware of Parasini being there all along. She turned and walked down the length of the path toward the neon sign that advertised Port Hanshan’s hotel.

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Port Hanshan’s bar lounge was inside the hotel, at the top of another elevator across the main port plaza. Once Shepard exited the elevator she found herself right on the lounge floor. The place was not entirely impressive, essentially set up in the similar style as the rest of the facilities. The environment was livelier though, the bar was full of customers, and she could not see a free table anywhere. There were one or two ERCS guards about as well.

She scanned the scene, a vast majority of humans, but there were a couple salarians and a pair of asari seated in a booth having an animated discussion over datapads even as they sipped drinks. Then, seated in the corner, Shepard spotted a lone turian. His plates seemed to have an ombre pattern, light grey on the face darkening to chocolate brown toward the back, which worked with his
Shepard noticed that the coy edge to his tone vanished, the game was up. Had Qui’in been playing with her as much as she had tried to play with him? He did not seem too bothered by a little harmless subterfuge, which was good.

“I am the manager of the local Synthetic Insights office. For the moment at least.” He continued in the same straight-forward tone. “Mr. Anoleis closed my office; he claims to be investigating reports of my corruption.” There was a dismissive note in his voice, as if the accusation was utterly preposterous. “The administrator is an interesting man; he has become quite wealthy since he took
direct control of rents.”

“I sense a connection there.” Shepard mused. It seemed Anoleis was a thorn in everyone’s sides. Shepard had not met the man, but nothing she heard made her like him.

“Indeed.” Qui’in glanced toward the door briefly, but then leaned forward, one hand on the table, the other on his thigh. “I acquired evidence of Anoleis’ actions.” His voice dipped lower, quieter, “His hired goons are ransacking my office to find it. Your unique privilege puts you in position to help me, and show Mr. Anoleis that it is not wise to obstruct Spectres. If you recover the evidence from my office, I will give you my pass, as well as a sum of credits.”

Shepard mulled over this. Was there something above board here? She had no delusions about where innocence lay, there was none. This evidence Qui’in had was going to be used as blackmail. If it was otherwise, Qui’in would not be sitting in the lounge, working, even as he knew there were goons tossing his office. This was a game of metaphorical chess, who would check-mate the other first? But for all of it, Shepard had no reason or desire to help Anoleis. To be sure, sticking it to the administrator would be as Qui’in said, showing him that obstructing Spectres was a bad idea. If Qui’in was not lying, Anoleis was a crook, and she already suspected he was a bastard before-hand. The talk of credits would have to be nipped in the bud though; Shepard did not take kick-backs. All she needed was the pass, so was doing this worth it? Spectres had the right to do as they pleased, as long as they got the job done. If this was just her and Nihlus, he probably would have done it. Saren was a problem though. She would have to do this alone and try to keep her method a secret for the time being.

“Alright. I’m interested.” She paused for a moment there. “I assume you will tell me where the evidence is stashed?”

“Of course. However there is one other… oh what is that charming Human expression? Fly in the… lotion?” He met her gaze, and suddenly Shepard knew that the second shoe was about to drop. “Violence against Mr. Anoleis’ thugs may be necessary. He has members of Hanshan’s security team searching my offices and is paying them under the table. Ms. Matsuo is unaware of their outside employment.”

Shepard hummed, well this was definitely up her alley. Qui’in did not need to know that she was a covert agent and had a cloaking device handy. She could sneak around the guards, bide her time until they were not looking, and get the data that way. It might take a bit longer, and she might miss her rendezvous with Nihlus and Saren, but if she could get that pass and flash it in Saren’s face, any tardiness would be a moot point. “I will retrieve the evidence, Mr. Qui’in.”

“Excellent.” He reached into the pocket of his suit and pulled out an ID card, “Here is my pass into the office, it will activate the elevator.” From another pocket he withdrew an OSD, “The evidence is on my office computer. This OSD contains the key to access it. Slide it in into the drive and it will auto-execute. Oh and try to keep blood stains off the carpets, would you?”

Shepard palmed both card and OSD and got to her feet, smiled somewhat politely, and wandered off. She did not want to look like she was in a particular rush, and she wanted to take stock of the people around them. The bar was reasonably loud, but she could not be sure they were not overheard. She saw no obvious evidence of people watching her go; no one was suspiciously interested in an omni-tool, or even watching her at all. It would not matter really if she was spotted, she could count on Nihlus stepping in, but she would have loved to avoid the necessity for him to do so. Call it a matter of personal pride.

~ * ~ ~ ~ * ~ ~ ~ * ~
Finding the Synthetics Insights office proved easy enough. The lobby of the office tower section was halfway to the garage, and just as dull as the rest of the facilities. There were more of the ERCS guards here, but a many of them simply ignored her presence. She found the elevator with no problem and slipped inside before opening her omni-tool to access her cloak. Once invisible she swiped Qui’in’s card through the reader and hit the button labeled Synthetic Insights. The elevator doors closed and the cabin began to ascend. Shepard shifted to hug the wall, in case the cabin made a stop, she did not want to be discovered if someone bumped into her.

When the cabin arrived and the doors opened, Shepard found herself in a sort of atrium that opened up onto the office proper. It was a rather open space with two floors, the main floor and a loft. The high ceiling gave it a luxurious airy feel, and big windows offered a prime view of the blizzard roaring outside but also let in plenty of muted sunlight.

What caught her attention was that Qui’in was not joking about the carpet. Synthetic Insights had wall-to-wall off-white carpet that would prove unbelievably troublesome to clean if blood got on it. Qui’in was a smug pragmatic bastard, but somehow it amused her enough to hold no particular animosity toward him. She could respect his blatant unapologetic honesty. The carpet worked for her as well. While not particularly plush, merely something to keep the bite of the cold floors off one’s feet, it was just plush enough to absorb the sound of her footsteps. It was also relatively old as well; there were trodden paths around and in-between the desks and toward the side rooms. The plush would not show weird footprints.

The office itself was quite functional, but scant. She could see powered down demonstration models of various synthetic assistants, robots with sophisticated VI programs that helped with a thousand and one different tasks. Many of their models helped the elderly and disabled maintain self-sufficiency. Synthetic Insights was also one of the only companies in the galaxy that ran Council-approved and licensed research into AI technology.

As Shepard moved deeper into the space she noticed the ERCS rent-a-cops scattered about. There were three on the bottom floor, with two busy rifling through storage drawers and scanning walls, looking for hiding spots in the most classic locations. Shepard recognized the third as the blond woman who was met them at the docks, which was quite interesting. She turned toward the staircase leading up to the loft portion of the room and ascended slowly. With no carpet on the steps, she had to consciously suppress the sound of her footfalls.

The loft was similarly carpeted, and here there were more desks than product displays. The facility’s electrical closet was on the far side of the room, labeled with a convenient universal pictographic sign. Two more ERCS guards, one man and another woman, were going through things. What surprised Shepard was that they still wore their uniform armors, plain as they were, and their weapons. Anoleis clearly hired them to be hands and feet, not brains.

Shepard slid past them to the corner where she spotted an office; it had to be Qui’in’s personal workspace just by process of elimination. It had plain glass doors, conveniently left open. As Shepard walked past the outer loft level desks, she kept a careful eye on the two guards and on keeping her movements smooth and fluent, a ghost drifting through the room, lest she expose the faint ripple of her cloak.

Now that she knew the number of people in the office and its layout, it was time to act. Crooked as these rent-a-cops were, she would very much prefer to do this non-lethally, preferably even non-violently. Taking bribes under the table was simply not a crime that warranted killing them, not when she was there to get information that would end up as blackmail. This part was already unpleasant, no need to make it worse.
She slid past the glass door into the office and paused, at the back of the room was a desk and terminal, and seated at it was another ERCS guard. The man was engrossed in whatever it was that he was doing on the terminal. She slowly moved around the table and hovered behind him to get a good look. He had an OSD of his own in the drive, and was working on code of some sort. With a jolt Shepard realized he was the technology savvy one of the whole lot of these crooks. If he found the data, it could turn ugly for her client, if one could call Qui’in that. She also could not access the data with this man still conscious. Shepard tapped at the side of her helmet to shift her HUD to bio-readings, took a slow deep breath, and moved into position behind him.

Her helmet HUD synchronized with the man’s vital signs and swift as a striking cobra Shepard wrapped her right arm around his neck, angling his throat to be in the hollow of her elbow, and clapped her left hand over his mouth. The man jolted, tried to shout, but Shepard slipped her right hand into the crook of her left elbow and applied pressure, even as she stepped back, dragging his wheeled chair away from the table so he would not be able to kick its legs to cause noise.

The guard flailed, clawing at the hand over his mouth, her arm, her armor, her exoframe, any purchase he could find. But within five seconds the flailing began to weaken as the blood choke kicked in. At ten his body fully relaxed and Shepard released, though she kept a grip on him to prevent him sliding to the floor. Her helmet HUD still registered a pulse, though it was slower now, and because the choke worked on the carotid and jugular instead of the trachea, his breathing merely slowed down as well.

She lowered him to the floor slowly and then eased into the chair. Haptic keyboards were funny in the sense that they still worked despite the fact that she was cloaked. A few strokes of the keys shut down the compiling code. Shepard yanked out the foreign OSD and tucked it into the pocket of her webbing, a bit of insurance. In a manner of seconds she had Qui’in’s OSD in the drive and as he promised the terminal recognized the device and the key program auto-executed. A hidden partition manifested on the list of storage drives right before her eyes, and then a second program kicked in, and the contents of the partition began to copy onto the OSD. Shepard would bet that Qui’in wrote both programs and put them on this OSD just for such an event. It idly made her wonder who he might have been during his military days. She would not buy him being just an infantry grunt. Not with his intellect.

She glanced at the unconscious guard, the last thing she needed now for him to be the sort of bastard who regained consciousness quickly, despite a blood choke. The computer said it would take another minute to finish copying, right now was the most dangerous moment in the whole operation. The ease with which she waltzed past the guards getting in, she could walk right out. The guard at her feet would not be a problem until he woke up. But by then she should have the information to Qui’in, a pass in hand, and he would be in too much trouble to matter.

There was a scratch from below her and Shepard froze. “Hodder, status report.” A female voice cracked over a radio.

Shepard recognized it, the same blond woman. She would know that authoritarian bark anywhere. And just like that her little fantasy of a clean get-away crashed and burned.

“Hodder, you there?” the voice asked again.

The status on the screen hit eighty-five percent.

“Hodder is not responding. Someone go and check. Now!” The voice demanded.

Ninety percent, Shepard had her hands on the keyboard already. The copy process finished and she closed the windows and input the commands to eject the device. As soon as the screen flashed, she
yanked the OSD out and stuck it into her pocket. Another quick set of taps ensured the partition vanished from view and set the terminal into standby.

It was then that she heard hurried footsteps outside, despite the carpet. Shepard slid out of the seat and stepped over the unconscious Hodder to the corner of the room where the sunlight from the windows did not quite reach. A woman stepped into the room and instantly saw the unconscious guard. She ran over to him, kneeled, and probed at his neck. Her hand went to the radio at her hip a moment later. “Captain Stirling, Hodder’s out cold.”

“Out cold?” The female voice repeated.

“I don’t think he fell asleep, ma’am.”

“No. He’s not that big an idiot. Stirling to all hands, lock the place down, we have an intruder. They have a cloak.” The voice said.

“Could it be the Spectres?” the woman in the office wondered.

“No. I saw both peacocks in the lobby fifteen minutes ago. It’s the Alliance dog. Thomas saw Qui’in talking to her.” Stirling replied. “Moira, you and Gillian, search the second floor, she’s probably still up there. I have the first. That bitch won’t get past us.”

“Yes, Captain.”

Shepard heard enough. Apparently one of the ERCS guards at the lounge was on the take and there to keep an eye on Qui’in. Now she knew she had to knock all of these assholes out before she could leave. If she slipped out, they would realize she did, and there would be alarms. She could not afford that. She needed to buy herself time to make the exchange and find Nihlus and Saren.

Moira got to her feet and tucked her radio to her hip. Shepard moved, rounded the table from the other side. The woman moved toward the door, but before she could reach it, Shepard was on her. An arm wrapped around her neck and another at her mouth, Moira thrashed against her practiced blood choke, but as with Hodder, she was out cold in a manner of seconds and Shepard eased her to the floor. Now she needed to turn the tables, her cloak had an obvious flaw and they had numbers and weapons.

She slipped out of the office scanned the loft. Moira was the woman who had been working on the second floor, which meant there was only one guard left up here. He had vacated his seat and drawn his rifle, but otherwise he looked about as jumpy as a cat on a hot tin roof. Still, she would not dare to close in on him like this. If he saw so much as a flicker of her cloak, he would fire, and with the cloak engaged she had no shields to give her protection.

She inched her way toward the electrical room, watching the man as she did. He was staring into random bits of nothing for seconds at a time, probably hoping to see something. Shepard only waited for him to turn around before she slowly opened the electrical closet and slipped inside. The infrared motion detector detected her despite the cloak and the overhead light went on, so she shut the door to conceal herself. Once there, she turned to the panel on the back of the tiny coffin-sized space.

Tripping the main circuit-breaker would plunge the offices into darkness, which would cover her cloak’s flaw, but before that she had to do something about the windows. She opened the maintenance terminal and brought up environmental controls. Port Hanshan was an interesting place, most places built in these sorts of hazardous environment had safety equipment for inclement weather, and she was not disappointed. Port Hanshan’s windows had external debris shutters that could cover the transparent paneling. She only had to fool the system into thinking the storm outside
was nastier than it was, which going by the readings the system reported, was already plenty nasty. Temperature outside was a brutal minus sixty and the winds gusted at eighty kilometers an hour.

Shepard brought up her omni-tool, typed a few commands, and then moved to the console in front of her. An override to disconnect the office from central control and a few strings of code on her omni-tool later and she managed to change the wind readings to a hundred kilometers. A moment later the console flashed a red banner, ‘dangerous wind gusts detected’ and then ‘emergency shutter closure initialized.’ Shepard smiled. The electrical panel began to hum. She switched over to the circuit-breaker control and gently opened the door behind her just wide enough to peek out.

The shutters on the outside the huge widows had engaged, slowly sliding across the windows. There was no way for the ERCS guards to know that she had tampered with them locally. That blizzard looked nasty enough that it was conceivable that a signal to close them had come from central control.

The shutters closed with a faintly audible thud and the humming in the panel died. She turned back to the console and input a few more commands to override the circuit-breaker controls. With the office isolated from Port Hanshan’s master environment controls she finally slid her finger over the master switch. The electrical panel went silent and the closet was plunged into darkness as the terminal powered down. Shepard slipped out and closed the door, the darkness around her was near absolute, the shutters had small slits which still let in a trickle of light, but it was perhaps one percent of the previous illumination. She was officially in her element and could do as she pleased.

“What the hell is going on?” Someone asked from below.

Shepard saw weapon flashlights come on as the guards turned to their only lighting source, exposing themselves in the process.

“Check the electrical box… and where is Moira?” Stirling called.

Shepard noted the tension in the woman’s voice, she was nervous. She ought to be, because if Shepard had her way, the whole lot of them would be caught sleeping on the dirty job. Tipping off Ms. Matsuo would do splendidly. First though, she needed them knocked out.

The guard on the upper floor moved toward the electrical closet, Shepard dodged behind a large planter box full of ferns and waited for him to come closer.

“Captain, I think Moira’s down too; she was in the office. So…”

“Gillian, let me put this simply… that Spectre wannabe is up there with you. The next words I want to hear from you are ‘I have her, ma’am’ or nothing at all, understood?” Stirling hissed.

Shepard would have laughed, Stirling had the leadership qualities of a rabid dog, and she had called her a bitch.

“Yes, Captain,” Gillian replied. He moved like a man bound for the gallows, sweeping every corner and every nook, but his flashlight was just not enough to pierce the darkness. Shepard could easily tuck herself just out of sight; prevent the beam from hitting her cloak. He had no hope of spotting her.

He stopped at the door to the electrical closet and Shepard shifted. When his rifle lowered so he could open the door, Shepard was already out of cover. In one instant she snapped her arm around his neck, covered his mouth, and applied pressure. Gillian jerked, trying to shout his alarm, his rifle fell to the floor at his feet, but the carpet muffled the sound. In five seconds he was beginning to
relax, in ten he went limp in her arms. Shepard lowered him to the floor and turned off his weapon’s flashlight.

Three down, three to go. She was going to enjoy making Stirling look bad. The guards would wake up to realize just how easily she brought them down, and how much easier she could have killed them. When they were done getting over being fired, it would hopefully humble them into realizing that there were people out there who ought not to be bothered. If they insisted on comparing her to a dog, they ought to at least deign to call her what she was, a black dog, a portent of death.

Shepard inched her way to the stairs. The three ERCS workers downstairs were combing every corner and every nook, sweeping everything with their flashlights. She descended the stairs gingerly, careful to minimize footsteps, and once down, she slipped behind them as she watched one of the men move toward the back of the office floor, where the shadows were absolutely deepest. He stepped behind a wall section that supported the loft above and Shepard pounced and put him in a blood choke. The man managed a rather loud yelp, even with his mouth covered.

“She’s back there!” the other man shouted.

Shepard heard footsteps, but the guard in her arms was already relaxing. She brought her knee up sharply, dislodging the rifle from his slackening grip. The weapon dropped and she kicked it aside, sending it skittering across the carpet. As the guard relaxed and Shepard eased him to the floor, the other man circled the wall and focused instantly on the light of the weapon, and like a lemming made his way toward it. When he turned his back, Shepard pounced on him as well.

“Troy, Lee, what’s going on?” Stirling shouted.

The guard in her arms tried to shout but Shepard pinched his nose shut with her fingers for good measure. He thrashed even more violently, clawing at her armor and exoframe. On her count of five he begun to relax, and by ten he was out cold and on the floor. Shepard straightened and adjusted the armor plating on her forearm; he actually found and yanked one of her forearm plate attachment points.

“Shepard!” Stirling shouted. “I know it’s you. Anoleis would throw you off world for what you did here. I won’t. You know what we did to cop killers where I’m from?”

Shepard paused, she doubted Stirling cared one bit for her men, she was just angry that she was in the dark and at the mercy of a trained killer she could not defeat. Shepard having not killed even one of these dirty rent-a-cops aside, the fact that Stirling thought she had the moral high ground was just precious.

She inched around the wall toward the front of the room where the voice was coming from, aware that Stirling might be planning her own little ambush. What she saw chased the idea of an ambush out of the window, Stirling stood smack in the open; her pistol in her hand, her whole body glowed with a periwinkle aura. She was a bloody beacon in the dark, exposing herself, but Shepard knew full well that a choke was now out. She would never get the ten solid seconds on Stirling without being thrown, warped, reaved, or something else equally unpleasant.

“I am going to drag you right in front of those peacocks that keep you. I want to see the look on their faces.” Stirling went on.

Shepard circled the woman to be at her back, where she would have no hope of seeing her cloak flicker.

“You are probably trying to sneak up on me, it will not work.” Stirling added.
Shepard wanted to laugh, so much posturing for someone so clearly out of her element. The fear was there in her voice, making her sound pathetic even as she barked threats. Shepard moved closer, careful to keep an eye on the woman’s movement. Well there was the old school way of handling biotics, and she doubted Stirling had a barrier as dense as D’aros’ had been.

“Where are you?!” Stirling demanded.

Shepard chuckled, “Right behind you.”

Stirling whirled; and Shepard swung. Her right fist connected with Stirling’s jaw with a resounding crack. The glow of her biotics died instantly as the woman staggered and fell backwards on her butt before sprawling out on the floor. Shepard kicked Stirling’s gun out of her reach and grabbed her by the front of her armor, but her HUD showed that the precaution was unnecessary. Stirling had hit her head on the floor, the carpet prevented a serious injury, but her heart rate and breathing had both slowed down; she was out cold with one good punch. Shepard well and truly loved her exoframe.

Shepard straightened and rubbed the knuckles of her right hand. The return still hurt, but not as much as the time she punched D’aros, and it would go away in a little bit. If her knuckle remained a little tender, no problem, she could deal with that.

It amused her how some people just stopped thinking as soon as they were even a little bit afraid. Stirling had been afraid; it was there in her fraying tone. The fact that the woman was a biotic meant little. The Alliance operated the human biotic training programs, but going through one did not make the soldier automatically good. Stirling probably had some military training, but it clearly did not internalize. The woman became complacent, too used to the handling spineless white collar criminals. Too used to working for said criminals. It was almost too easy to bring her down, and would have been even easier to kill her. If Shepard had meant to kill, she would have given Stirling a Muay Thai shin-kick to the side of her throat, bruising her windpipe to the point of swelling shut, if not outright crushing it. A nasty headache and a bruise the size of the moon on her chin ought to be a lesson enough though.

Shepard stood there and listened. In the silence that settled over the office, she would hear any little bit of movement from someone stumbling about. There was no sound at all; the guards were still out like the lights. With the situation contained, Shepard moved toward the elevator and finally allowed herself to turn off her cloak. She had kept it on for too long; the emitters were running more than ten degrees too hot if her suit’s HUD was to be believed. She could not feel the excess heat due to the ceramic plating of her armor, but her shields would not kick in until the emitters cooled down, and she would probably need to reset them.

The elevator ride was slow, the adrenaline in her system made it feel slower. She patted her pockets one more time, just to confirm the presence of two OSDs. She thought all-in-all that was a good job done. If there was blood on those carpets, it was just a little bit from Stirling’s busted lip. At the bottom Shepard breezed out of the cabin and now that she could see, she checked over her armguards. Both were fastened properly and sealed, no harm done. When she looked up again, she saw Parasini standing by the lobby entrance.

“Commander,” the woman greeted.

Shepard stopped, and spared her a look, but said nothing.

“This section of Port Hanshan is largely out of bounds to visitors. Central control reported a localized closure of the debris shutters and a power outage in the closed Synthetic Insights office. Now here you are.”
“So things are moving on their own and the lights went out? Sounds like a poltergeist haunting.” Shepard replied blandly.

Parasini’s lips quirked into a small smile, but it hardly reached her eyes. “A smartass, huh? That’s fine. I can work with that. Meet me at the hotel lounge for a drink, before you talk to Qui’in. I’ll be waiting.” Parasini turned and walked away, leaving Shepard to wonder what she was up to.

Just what sort of endgame Parasini had in all of this? She directed Shepard to Qui’in, and now here she was again. Shepard hummed thoughtfully as she pondered the possibilities. It occurred to her that if Central Control had reported the anomalies to the administrator’s office, and if Anoleis had seen Synthetic Insights as the source, he would have sent in more of his hired goons. But no, Parasini arrived alone and unarmed. The lack of goons meant that Anoleis had no idea his illegal search-and-seize operation was busted. Parasini’s timing in sending her to Qui’in was curious as well. The woman definitely had her own design in all of this. Was she on the take and playing her? It could very well be that Parasini knew those hired goons would not find the data, and wanted Qui’in to trust the wrong person. Meeting at the bar, when Shepard already knew there was someone on the take there sent her danger senses tingling.

Shepard shook her head and exited the office tower lobby. A tap at the side of her helmet showed the time, and Shepard blinked, surprised. It had been an hour and fifteen minutes. She was officially late to meet up with Nihlus and Saren, and she had no pass to flash, just a deeper curiosity, and possibly a situation. Her eyes roved over her environment. Seeing no hint of the Spectres anywhere, she turned toward the hotel instead. There was nothing to it, she had to go there, and hope that things would not come down to a fire-fight around civilians.

She patted the pocket containing the evidence again, to check that it was still there. It was a stupid thing, to be checking for it right now, but she did not need something going wrong at this point. Halfway to the hotel she flicked her wrist, and brought up her omni-tool to check for messages. One would think with her being fifteen minutes late Nihlus would sent her a message demanding to know where she was, but there was nothing. That was a little disconcerting, but maybe also encouraging. Maybe they had gotten into something on their own and lost track of time as much as she had. She was not going to message Nihlus, not without a pass in-hand and something to say.

Suddenly a hand landed on her shoulder and Shepard felt herself yanked into a small alcove that contained public extranet terminals. She grabbed at the hand on her shoulder, wrapped her fingers around a single digit, and turned, only to come face to face with Nihlus. Shepard recoiled, let go, and stepped back. She only had to twist a little more to break his finger given how wired she was right then.

“You are nervous, Shepard?” His mandibles flicked in amusement.

“A human that can feel guilt, what a surprise.” A second voice drawled. “Do tell, human, what part of ‘do not do anything without our authorization’ did you not understand?” Saren demanded from his position by the wall, his withering look was back and worse than ever.

Well there goes that, Shepard thought to herself. She was officially out of the frying pan and in the fire.
scheming, and Nihlus is amused by it all. This episode was both very fun to write, and very challenging. All I will say is that the interplay of personalities between Saren and my version of Shepard was a lot of fun to figure out. They’re so damn alike, and yet still opposites! My version of Shepard does paragon things for renegade reasons, and often quite selfish ones, and she’s not repenting any time soon.

**General Notes:**
None this time…

**Chapter Notes:**
**Tidal Lock** – A body that is tidally locked to another does not turn on its own axis. Our moon is tidally locked, so we only see one side of it on Earth.
Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I do no own Mass Effect, I do not claim to own Mass Effect, I am only doing this for fun.

Author Notes: This is part two of the Noveria arc. Shepard has a bit of a last laugh.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Episode 21: Peak Fifteen

Shepard did show any outward sign of her surprise or discomfort, but she knew she had to dig herself out of this mess, and now. Saren thought she acted without authorization, specifically his, but Shepard knew better. “I came across a lead that might yield a pass; I pursued it with full authorization from Nihlus, my supervisor.” She replied calmly. “Thus, tell me, Spectre Arterius, when have I acted without authorization?”

“Do you have a pass?” he asked.

Hah. He did not ask Nihlus whether he authorized anything. Shepard was entirely unsurprised that Saren would assume she had Nihlus wrapped around her finger. “Not-”

“No.” He repeated with a sneer. “You failed, and your stunt in the Synthetic Insights office only created a problem for us.”

Shepard glared up into his eyes, meeting the malice in his voice with glacial calm. “As I tried to say, before I was rudely interrupted. I do not have a pass yet, but I know how to get one.” It was not possible to miss that Nihlus had backed out of the middle ground between them. “I did not fail, nor did I create a problem.” She smiled, “Yes, I had to deal with a few Elanus Risk Control employees, but they will not create a fuss. First there is no evidence I was up there.” Even before she knocked out the power the security cameras would not have been able to see her, if anything, the cameras would incriminate Stirling and her posse more. “And second, they were up there on Anoleis’ very illegal orders to begin with.”

“What were you doing there?” Nihlus prompted.

“I was up there getting something or other.”

“And how does that get us a pass?” Nihlus asked, mildly incredulous.

“Simple. I have a deal with office’s administrator. I get him this something or other, before Anoleis’ men get it, and he gives me his pass.”

“And the men you killed?” Saren asked.

“Ah, but who said I killed anyone?” Shepard replied with a grin. The momentarily stunned look on Saren’s face at that moment was positively priceless. Nihlus must have agreed, because he chuckled. She was not so sloppy as to give Anoleis the ability to deflect guilt by saying she committed the worse crime. “They’re taking a nap, and by the time I’m done, they’ll be unemployed. Now can I go
“Where to?” Nihlus wondered.

“Hotel lounge, but there’s a bit of a wrinkle, Parasini put me on the lead for this whole thing, and she approached me when I got out of the office. I think she intercepted the alarms, so Anoleis does not know I was up there. The wrinkle is that she wants to talk to me before I talk to the owner of the thing. She has her own agenda, but I haven’t got a clue what it is.”

Saren actually growled, “Get the pass, human. We are not here to solve this accursed place’s problems. That woman is Anoleis’ secretary; she probably wants to get the thing -as you call it- from you.”

Shepard was not surprised that he immediately assumed that. “I would not put it past her, and yes, we may not be here to solve all of Noveria’s problems, but I’m already in this mess, and I want to get to the bottom of it.” Besides, if the OSD contained what she thought it contained, it might actually be enough to bury Anoleis. Maybe she was a little bit petty, but given half a chance to bury that corrupt ass, she would take it. She turned and peered out over the Port Hanshan plaza, a public terminal alcove was hardly the place to discuss this, but she had no choice.

“Saren, the blizzard will not dissipate by special request if we depart immediately. Let Shepard work, this is what she does,” Nihlus said.

Shepard pretended she had not heard him as she turned toward the hotel and left the two Spectres behind. They would either keep up, or let her handle things her way.

In the end Nihlus and Saren both followed her, the latter probably only because he wanted to witness her crash and burn. The hotel bar got no less packed in the span of an hour and a half. Shepard instantly scanned for Qui’in and found him sitting at the same table in the back, still engrossed in his work. As she scanned around, she could not help but wonder which ERCS guard was the one on the take. In the end though, Shepard decided that he might not even be in uniform. Plain clothes would make sense if he was hovering close enough to Qui’in to know whom the turian met. It was not long before she spotted that rather very gaudy pink dress. Parasini sat on a stool at a tall table for two between two planter boxes. Shepard turned and made her approach. She slid into the open seat and set her hands on the table.

“Commander. Spectres.” Parasini greeted with a slight inclining bow of her head. “I assume the Commander told you about our situation.”

“Yes.” Saren replied. “We were thoroughly briefed.”

“Good. Allow me to re-introduce myself. Parasini, Noveria Internal Affairs.” The woman flashed a rather formal and real-looking identification card confirming her identity.

“Well I’ll be damned,” Shepard could not fully contain her surprise. Of all the possibilities, Parasini being Internal Affairs was up there as one of the less likely ones. Nevertheless, it certainly explained some things, up to and including why Parasini sent her to Qui’in. “Why is an internal affairs agent involved in this?” Shepard wondered. She hoped Parasini would realize she meant the whole Qui’in picture.

“The executive board knows about Anoleis’ corruption. I’ve been undercover for six months looking for evidence, but Mr. Qui’in beat me to the punch.”
Then Anoleis found out, suddenly Parasini’s urgency made sense.

“Commander, I want you to convince him to testify before the board. His records, together with his testimony are everything I need to prove Anoleis’ guilt in one package.”

Well that explained everything. She could see why Qui’in would not like Anoleis, and necessity made highly intelligent people get creative. Perhaps Qui’in even wanted to lean on Anoleis for that singular reason. In the end his reasons really did not matter. What mattered now was that if she could convince Qui’in to do the right thing, the rent gouging would end and the whole thing would stop being unpleasant for her. “I don’t think Mr. Qui’in will take well to that, and I need his pass.” Shepard argued.

“You help my investigation and I’ll provide whatever you need. Favor for a favor.”

“Seems simple, Shepard. Convince Qui’in to do his duty, and we can go do ours.” Nihlus said.

“I’ll see what I can do,” she said.

“That is all I ask. Thank you. You know where I work, come talk to me once you know if he’ll play ball.” Parasini slid out her seat and breezed off. Shepard figured that there were some preparations for the woman to make.

“Give Qui’in whatever you have, get his pass, and be done with this nonsense,” Saren demanded as soon as Parasini was well out of earshot.

“We shall see,” Shepard replied. Really of all people there, she would have expected Saren to want to bury Anoleis up to his eyeballs. Helping the NIA was the morally correct thing to do, but Shepard would have put money on the fact that Anoleis had crossed the white-clad Spectre to be the bigger draw. She figured Saren as the type to resent Anoleis for the run-around, but maybe he did not want her to score one over his head, was he that petty? Well, she did not care for his sensibilities. She wanted this whole mess not to leave an unpleasant taste in her mouth. Qui’in would use this information as blackmail, and she was very much against that. If he really wanted the rent gouging to end, he would not care how it was done. If there was more to his plan, well, someone was going to leave that conversation grossly disappointed.

She slid out her seat and moved toward the back of the lounge where Qui’in sat. Parasini had cleverly chosen a seat in such a location that Qui’in would not see them conversing, which worked for her. The sound of her boots on the bare flooring must have been enough as Qui’in looked up from his work when she approached.

“Ah, Miss Shepard. Always a pleasure.” He greeted.

“It’s Commander actually; I’m an Alliance officer.” She replied as she slid into the seat opposite from him.

“Of course, pardon me. Any news on that matter I asked you to look into?”

“It is done, and the carpet will not require deep cleaning.” He smiled at that, but Shepard knew his expression was going to change very quickly now. “An Internal Affairs investigator contacted me. She would like you testify against Anoleis.”

Qui’in’s caramel colored eyed lost amusement quickly as his mandibles drew up against his chin. “Now that you have my property, you want to dictate how I use it? I have no interest in public spectacle.”
Shepard shook her head, “I do not wish to dictate anything. But I think a little… spectacle is called for. Everyone in Port Hanshan chafes under Anoleis’ extortion. You might end up a hero.”

He sighed, “My employers rely on the goodwill of the Executive Board to work here.”

“Yes, and I should think helping said Executive Board weed out someone who is costing them money would be good for goodwill,” Shepard argued. Qui’in gave her a long, piercing stare, even as she could feel an even colder one aimed at the back of her neck. She was not going to flinch from this; it was the right course of action to take.

Still, she could understand that Qui’in may have wanted something more from this, maybe something more personal. “This will create a bit of a shake up of the status quo, but I always found that those present opportunities. Anoleis will get fired at the very least… and so the Executive Board will need to hire a new administrator. They will have to replace him quickly… so they will look for someone who already knows Port Hanshan and its operational norms. Of course, it would also have to be someone they can work with.” As far as Shepard was concerned, doing the right thing did not necessarily mean giving up personal interest, it merely meant thinking outside the box. She was perfectly fine with telling Qui’in that she knew, and that he still had cards to play.

The long stare lingered as Qui’in mulled over the implications of what she said. Shepard leaned back in her seat and let him think.

“You are an interesting woman, Commander. Very well, I will testify. Make whatever arrangements you need with your contact.”

“Thank you,” Shepard smiled and slipped out of her seat.

Nihlus and Saren were standing a couple meters away by the wall, but they probably heard every single word. Nihlus’ big grin was certainly a give-away. She walked right past them, her destination now Anoleis’ office.

The office of Administrator Anoleis was not hard to find, it was off the side from the main plaza and flanked by atypically heavily-armed ERCS guards. The outer glass door opened for her automatically and Shepard stepped into a long, empty waiting space that had more public access terminals and seating. Their footsteps echoed on off the bare walls as they walked.

At the far end was another set of doors that also opened without resistance, and right in front of the door was Parasini, seated at a big desk. Out of the periphery, Shepard noted the presence of two more turians, and surprisingly Matsuo. Parasini looked prepared to move in with the arrest.

Shepard thought that it was a good thing that she would not have to go far to tell the head of security about her errant employees. Stirling and her crooks were probably out of the office already, but in all likelihood they had not had the time to access the security cameras. If Matsuo went to collect the data now, she would see exactly who was taking kick-backs.

Still, a small part of her always entertained every possibility, and right now there was the one where this might end up being a crooked scheme where Anoleis actually thought he would have the last laugh. She just hoped for the sake of these people that Parasini was actually Internal Affairs, as the four of them could not possibly handle her and two Spectres at the same time.

As she approached the table, Parasini got her feet. “Commander. Have you given any more considerations to what we discussed previously?”
Shepard noted the way Parasini clasped her hands in front of her, a subtle tick of nervousness that could mean a number of things. Either the woman was worried her six month job was not done, or she realized the four of them would not be enough.

“It took some persuasion, but Mr. Qui’in has agreed to the arrangement.”

Parasini sighed loudly, “That’s a world of stress off my back.”

Shepard actually grinned, so the woman was on the level. She reached into her pocket, withdrew the OSD, and put it on the table. “The… records.”

Parasini took the device before she turned to the guards, “Ms. Matsuo, arrest Mr. Anoleis immediately on charges of extortion, bribery, and racketeering.”

The dark-haired woman nodded and waved to the two turians to follow her deeper into the office.

Parasini watched them go, “I did not think you’d help me.” She confessed. “A deal is a deal then,” she reached into the drawer of her desk and withdrew a plastic card. “A pass to for the vehicle garage, as agreed upon. I even notified our mechanics to have a vehicle fueled and ready.”

“Thank you,” Shepard slid the pass across the table and palmed it.

At that moment there was an explosion of noise, “This is an outrage!” shouted a deep, but somewhat squeaky voice. Shepard turned her head, the show had begun. “I’ll see that you never work in this sector again!”

“Yes, yes.” Matsuo replied, not the least bothered.

Four figures came around the wall behind Parasini’s desk. Anoleis was a salarian of a dark bluish-grey color, clad in a smoke grey and cobalt blue suit. Matsuo had handcuffed him and was now practically dragging him along by the upper arm, a grip the soon to be ex-administrator was very much against, given how much he tried to pull free. The other two guards walked a step behind them, and one looked vaguely bemused.

“You! Arterius! This is your doing! Next time I will not allow a single Spectre on Noveria!”

The look Saren spared the salarian was nothing short of absolute loathing, even worse than the ones he gave her. Shepard covered her mouth with her hand to conceal the giant smile she could not stop. Anoleis thought Saren had orchestrated this whole thing! Oh, if that was not the icing on her victory cake!

“Mr. Anoleis, you have the right to remain silent. I wish to God you would exercise it.” Parasini said.

The look of venom the salarian sent her way was all the more priceless. Matsuo pulled him toward the door, and he kept struggling and barking threats the whole way. Shepard turned back to Parasini, “There is one more thing.”

“Of course, Commander. Anything else I can do?”

Shepard reached into her pocket and withdrew the second OSD. “When I was in the Synthetic Insights office, Mr. Anoleis’ men, ERCS guards paid under the table, were there looking for the data as well. I took this off their hands. Miss Matsuo does not know about their outside employment.”

Parasini took the OSD from her hand and nodded. “I already pulled the security feeds; I planned to let Ms. Matsuo know about them when we finished processing formal charges, but thank you.”
“We have to go,” Saren said.

“Oh. Of course. I wish you the best of luck and the easiest of tasks on Peak Fifteen.”

Shepard nodded her acceptance, turned, and walked off. She was a few steps into the waiting area when a set of heavy footsteps caught up to her. “I do hope you are happy, human.” Saren said.

“Everyone did the right thing and I got us that pass. So yes, very!” Shepard replied, no use lying about that.

“Your meddling was unnecessary,” Saren noted.

Shepard looked at him, “Oh, but that’s the thing, Spectre Arterius, as far as most people on Port Hanshan are concerned, I had nothing to do with it. Anoleis himself certainly seems convinced the credit is all yours.” She pointed out, keeping her voice intentionally flat.

Saren stopped suddenly, and then it must have sunk in, because he looked positively ready to murder her. Then Nihlus snorted and started chuckling. Saren sharply turned that murderous look on his former student.

“That is the first time I have seen someone manipulate another to take responsibility that benefits their reputation as comeuppance!” Nihlus murmured, as his laughter faded.

Shepard grinned. As ludicrous as that sounded, Nihlus summed it up rather accurately. Thinking about it now she thought maybe she ought not to have said it, because tossing it in Saren’s face was goading the bull, but there was also no use in crying over spilled milk. Dubious tact also did not invalidate the truth either. Only two people knew she did anything, Parasini and Qui’in, and neither had a reason to speak up. The Synthetic Insights office cameras might only show a little flicker of a cloak passing by. If the flicker did identify a cloaked human, most would sooner assume she was acting on the Spectre’s orders. Anoleis would certainly blame Saren for everything, and loud-mouths like him easily shaped the version of events people embraced.

Shepard chose not to toss any more fuel on that fire and resumed walking. She was no mastermind; the whole thing could not have been planned, as it involved a convoluted set of circumstances. She only played her cards as dealt.

~          *          ~          ~          *          ~          ~          *          ~

Shepard was acutely aware of Saren’s silent animosity the whole way to the garage. He clearly did not like being made her scapegoat, but Shepard thought she made her point. If he wanted to think her stupid and incapable, it was his error, and it would cost him. She could have made him look much worse if she cared to. The silence was only broken when security at the garage entrance wanted to know who they were.

Port Hanshan’s garage was much like the docks. A cavernous space blasted into the mountain and barely lined to keep the rocks stable. Like the Normandy’s berth, temperature here plunged to zero degrees and the wind howled like a pack of wolves on the hunt as it worked its way inside through the cracks in the huge bay door.

Shepard stopped cold when she saw the vehicle prepared for them. “This will be an experience,” she mumbled. Port Hanshan had an unarmed civilian version of an M-35 Mako, in all it’s a six-wheel-drive, high-clearance, independently-suspended glory. The vehicle, famous for its ability to scale up seventy degree slopes while assisted by a mass effect core also handled like a boat when it had to traverse a straight line on level ground. The least shift in the center of mass or a tire bounce due to a
flaw in the surface under acceleration could send it off in some unexpected direction. The power units in the nose also made it front-heavy, which manifested in a tendency to tip forward when deployed from a low-flying frigate for a thruster-assisted landing.

It made perfect sense that Port Hanshan would have one, but Shepard never mastered handling one. She would not admit that out loud though, it was embarrassing enough just thinking about it. She could perform high-altitude precision wingsuit inserts, but could not drive the land-boat. Well there was nothing to it now; she doubted Nihlus could just pick it up on the fly. She would have to drive and hope that the road did not get too bumpy. Still, with this weather, she was officially doomed to be found out in the worst way possible.

A barefaced turian in orange and blue mechanic’s overalls approached them, “Spectres, Commander,” he said gruffly. “Your Mako is charged and ready to go.”

“Thank you.” Shepard replied.

“I wish you luck.” He added as he held out the vehicle’s RFID fob key.

Shepard took the fob, nodded, and moved on. She knew she would need that luck, especially if she was to pack two tall Spectres into the tight confines of the Mako’s rear passenger section. When she got close to the vehicle and raised the fob up to the side door, it sprung open. She climbed inside first and moved toward the driver’s seat.

She heard footsteps on the deck when she jammed the fob into a slot by the system controls. The Mako’s main systems powered up and Shepard tapped at the console between the crew seats. “Make yourselves comfortable. I need to run a full system check before we pull out. I am taking no chances with the blizzard.”

“Good.” Saren said.

“For once you will not get an argument even from Saren. Getting stuck in this weather with no heat is probably one of the worst things that can happen to a turian.” Nihlus explained as he eased himself into the navigator’s seat.

“Yea. I’m not big on the cold either, though most would think I’m right at home in the snow.” She stopped and glanced at him, hopefully he would figure out that she was referring to her image as the White Death. Most thought that with a name like that she would not even feel the cold. “Alright, Nihlus can you figure out how to use the navigation system? I need an extra set of eyes on the imaging and ground-penetrating radars.” This would be problematic enough without unscheduled descents.

“Got it.”

“Power cells charged to capacity, motors check, thrusters check, eezo core check…” she mumbled as she read off the various colored status markers on the console. When she saw that all the sub-systems reported ready to go, she tripped the switch that closed the Mako’s side hatch and initialized the environmental systems.

“The navigation system has all the lab facilities programmed in. I have our route.” Nihlus announced.

“Then we’re good to go,” she said as she signaled the garage controls to open the bay doors.

The huge panel slid up and the wind and snow rushed in. One second she was looking at the ugly door, the second there was only a curtain of backlit white. Shepard tapped the controls to put the Mako into drive and gave it power. If she was at all faithful, she would have recited a Hail Mary,
because this was going to be that.

Outside the garage, the terrain opened up onto the Aleutsk Valley, a deep ravine between sharp jagged peaks with glaciers and endless snow all over. When the Mako rolled out of the garage the wind seized it instantly, blowing under its high carriage, pushing against the side, seeking to either lift the vehicle off the ground or drive it sideways into the rock face.

Shepard tipped the control to increase their apparent mass, which would hopefully stabilize the ride. The road from Port Hanshan was a shelf blasted into the rock. Fortunately the edge was marked with regular safety beacons, red lights set on the tip of a filial that would remain visible no matter how much snow piled up on the road itself. Those red lights were about the only thing Shepard could see clearly, the rest was almost completely whitened out with the relentless falling snow. She focused on keeping her input even; a sudden jerk could cause the Mako to misbehave. The snow, the wind, and the poor visibility put her on edge around someone who could not be allowed to see even a hint of weakness.

Half an hour into the drive she was positively forcing herself to relax when everything in her was tense as a bowstring. The snow was messing with the Mako’s radars. Imaging could barely see a hundred meters in front, and ground penetrating missed ruts which the Mako’s tires found readily. The winding road meant that the direction of the wind pushing against them changed from one moment to the next. The only reprieves were the tunneled sections blasted through the mountains. Shepard could open the throttle in those, but otherwise she kept their speed low. Peak Fifteen was not particularly far, but she was taking no chances.

Shepard heard her communicator click, a private line attempt. She reached up and tapped her helmet authorization keys.

Nihlus hummed against her ear, “You know… this reminds of my flight training. We had to fly a route and land, instruments-only, through sandstorms on Palaven.” He said.

The Mako entered another tunnel section. “We have something of the sort too, even for these landboats.” Shepard replied, idly wondering why he felt the need for a private link for this.

“Good to know. Between us we should have no problem.”

Shepard blinked, and glanced at him, and then it suddenly dawned on her, he was trying to calm her down. She was not keen on anyone figuring out just how much she disliked being in environments that reminded her of Elysium, and how much driving this thing bothered her. Nihlus picked up on the latter. The private link was him keeping it from Saren. She was almost as thankful for that as she was for the assurances themselves.

The blizzard never let up, and it took a good two hours to get to their destination. Crowning the Skadi Mountains on the far side of the Aleutsk Valley, Peak Fifteen materialized like a wall from the curtain of white. Shepard drove the Mako into a receiving garage of what was known as Central Station.

As Nihlus explained during the ride, the lab facilities themselves were above Central Station, connected to it with monorail trams bored into the mountain. This dispersion of facilities allowed the lab’s security to monitor who came and went, but also created multiple redundant quarantine procedures. Peak Fifteen had called Code Omega, serious breach of containment. It was the only sound part of why Anoleis would not let them come; the rest was just his decision to be an obstructionist.
In a manner of a minute all three of them were out on the ground and the Mako closed its hatch behind them. A moment of pause allowed Shepard to inspect the facilities. The garage’s main lighting fixtures were dimmed and the red emergency lights were flashing. She noted the gantry crane overhead which led deeper in. It was large enough to be used to move heavy equipment, which made her wonder what sort of laboratory would require a gantry crane to move machinery. At the back was a large door to receive the equipment the crane shifted. She assumed there was a special cargo tram on the other side. On the left there was a set of stairs, which led to the clearly-labeled personnel entrance, which according to the sign, included a security checkpoint.

“User alert. All Peak Fifteen facilities have suffered a great deal of damage.” A monotone voice announced over loudspeaker. “Biohazard materials present throughout facility. Virtual Intelligence user interface offline.”

“Well, this is certainly not ominous. Nope, not at all,” Shepard muttered.

Nihlus chuckled.

“Spare me your attempts at levity, human.” Saren noted.

Shepard rolled her eyes but did not say anything. There was no need to antagonize the white-clad Spectre. Instead she took stock of things. Her HUD showed that the temperature in this space was ten degrees above freezing, which was not normal even if the bay door had opened just recently. The heating was off, which meant it would only get colder.

When Saren moved past them toward the stairs at the back, Nihlus followed, and Shepard trailed behind them. “It’s too quiet, the lighting is too low, this cold... the power’s been cut,” she whispered to her mentor.

“Code Omega quarantine protocol entails exposing the labs to Noveria’s cold. If they cannot regain control of the facilities that way, they will initialize the submersion of the hot labs.” Nihlus replied.

Shepard followed the Spectres up the steps. Nihlus had seemingly scrounged a great deal of information on these labs during that hour she had spent playing hide and seek with ERCS guards. Shepard had an idea of what would be typical for a high security hot lab. Noveria and its various research facilities were considered maximum security due location on such a cold world. Hot labs were another security layer on top. They got their name from the fact that they were built into stable glaciers. In the event of a catastrophic loss of containment, the elevator shafts would decouple, and the facility’s exterior would heat, sinking the whole structure to the bottom of the glacier. The melted water from that had nowhere to go except up. When it froze up anew it would entomb the block in ice for the rest of time. A simple but brutally efficient way to keep things contained.

The three of them came to security checkpoint. The doors opened as soon as the infrared sensors detected heat. The security point was a room divided in two by a large transparent wall. On the one side there was a passage right through; on the other a security office. One foot inside, Shepard noticed that the automatic defense turrets mounted on the walls had deployed, and they faced inward.

“They are trying to keep something from getting out,” Nihlus murmured.

Were they so bent on containing employees? Or was there something worse loose in this place? Shepard glanced into the security room on the other side of the transparent wall. There were mugs and plates on the table. “If this lab worked on cloned tissue only there would be no need for guns.”

“Clearly these fools cloned more than just Rachni tissue.” Saren replied.
“Unless these are for fleeing employees. Which makes this all the worse,” Shepard argued.

The door on the other side of the checkpoint did not bar their path, and the corridor beyond turned ninety degrees to the left and into an elevator that took them up. Once the doors opened, they found themselves in another, shorter corridor, carved into the mountain and left largely unfinished. The floor was bare and the ice crunched underfoot. At the other side was another door, which led to a large two-storey lobby-like place.

This space seemed set into the mountain as well. The only light was murky sunlight filtering through large translucent panels partly obstructed by snow. The bottom level seemed to be a mess hall, while the second had offices of some sort. The air here was absolutely still and deathly silent, but the room still retained plenty of evidence of a hasty evacuation. Some tables still had meal settings that were never cleaned up. As the three of them made their way through the space, Shepard could sneak a glance at the meals. She was surprised to see no actual food or drinks. A few places had smears of sauce, but otherwise every shred of something edible was gone.

“Saren, you hear that?” Nihlus asked as they walked among the tables.

The white-clad Spectre hummed.

Shepard tipped her head from side to side, straining to hear what might be going on. In the silence that settled as the turians listened to their surroundings, she realized she was out of her loop. She could not hear a darn thing that was not her own suit.

“There is something moving in the ducts,” Nihlus said.

Shepard nodded. Nihlus knew her hearing was not as good as his, so he was only pointing her in the right direction. Shepard slipped her hands to her guns and turned them on.

Saren moved toward the steps that led to the upper level of the hall. Shepard followed wordlessly, with Nihlus trailing behind. At the top of the stairs was what looked like a small recreational area. There were tables, chairs, and offline vid screens. Someone forgot a suit jacket on the back of one of the chairs. Then on their left were two offices with a large transparent wall panels for windows, which overlooked the hall. So far as Shepard could see, both were empty and their doors were unlocked. The walkway then led past the offices, to another door marked with a glowing sign that bore some sort of symbol that Shepard could not make out.

As they passed the last office, Shepard heard something skittering, which made her look up sharply. The skittering sounded like dozens of tiny feet on thin metal in a space that resonated with multiple echoes. She heard the door open and knew she ought to follow quietly and quickly.

This door led them to another short hallway carved into bare rock, at the end of which was another elevator which took them further up. From there the hallway made another ninety degree left-hand turn and revealed another doorway. All these twists and turns and elevators made Shepard think of a horror vid, which did nothing for her remaining calm. Her sense of danger was positively buzzing, convinced she was currently watched. The final door opened up onto a transfer facility. On the left was the access way to the tram, clearly labeled with a glowing sign that showed a stylized pictograph of a tram. In front was a door with a sign that looked like a radio dish, and on their right one with that symbol she could not quite make out.

“We need to bring the facility’s VI back online if we want to know what happened here,” Nihlus said.

Shepard heard more skittering from the vents above. “Whatever it is… it’s following us,” she said.
Saren hummed a grudging assent.

“They.” Nihlus said, “There is definitely more than one, but I can not tell how many. There is too much echoing.”

“Glorious.” She could hear the sound clearly now, like a miniature stampede somewhere above her head. She also knew that looking into the grates was moot, and might actually make whatever it was up there attack. She was not going to do the horror vid cliché. Whatever it was, if it wanted a piece of her, it would have to come out where she could see and pump it full of bullets.

As Saren moved deeper into the space, toward the doorway that was marked with the satellite dish, the skittering picked up, louder than ever. Suddenly it was in front of them. Saren reached for his rifle and just like that the vent grate at the end of the space dropped to the floor. Dozens of small green creatures dropped down in a single mass. Shepard drew her guns, and Nihlus reached back for his assault rifle.

The creatures writhed in a ball of bodies before they righted themselves on their four spindly legs and charged. Nihlus opened fire first, and Saren followed suit. As the shots sprayed over the creatures, their bodies exploded into a nasty brown liquid that splattered everywhere. Yet they kept coming. Shepard joined the fray, pumping shots into them, suddenly very aware that her arsenal could not deal with these numbers.

Nihlus’ rifle cut out in clicks first, thermal clip at capacity. Saren’s followed, and yet more of the little things remained. Shepard stepped back as Sin and Dex gave their fifth barks, and after the sixth, her clips filled. At that moment the remaining five creatures jumped into the air with high pitched hisses.

“Shepard!”

What happened next was too fast for Shepard to keep track. One second she saw the creatures jump and the next she was enveloped in a one-armed bear hug as her vision filled with charcoal black and burgundy red. There was a whomp and the sound of a liquid splattering. Closer now, she could hear something hiss in that tell-tale acid-eating-through-things way. Shepard holstered her guns and grabbed at her mentor’s armor, “Nihlus are you-” Oh hell; did he just take it across his back?

He laughed almost right into her ear and Shepard let go of his armor. His arm unwound from around her, “I am fine.”

Then Nihlus turned, stepped aside, and ejected the hot thermal clip from his rifle. Now Shepard could see what happened. Saren had stepped in front of Nihlus, and Nihlus had yanked her to him. The white-clad Spectre was still glowing with a periwinkle corona, and judging from the bubbling gunk on the floor at his feet, the suicidal little creatures produced a lot of acid between them.

It took her a moment to realize two obvious things. First, Saren Arterius was a powerful biotic. Second, the spray pattern on the floor showed where his biotic barrier had stopped. He had shielded himself and his former student. It was Nihlus’ quick thinking that prevented her from being hit by a splash of acid. Shepard mutely slipped her fingers over the receiver releases to eject spent clips and reached behind her back for a fresh pair. If Saren thought she would cause a fuss, he was dead wrong, but she did have a rather long memory.

“She, what were those things?” Nihlus asked.

“Worker rachni.”

“Spirits, it is true then.” Nihlus breathed.
“Indeed.”

Shepard thought Saren sounded too blasé for someone who was facing a very ancient and suddenly very real threat. Still, maybe he had a right to be. If those things made that much racket before they attacked, they would never take the three of them by surprise. Even she could hear the stampede of tiny spindly legs when it was close. Turians could probably hear it a kilometer away. Still, she felt very much under-armed as she only had twelve shots in her guns. If these workers always arrived in writhing masses, she could not kill all of them on her own. For the time being she would have to rely on the hail of bullets the Spectres could produce, despite the fact that only Nihlus would actively help her. All evidence pointed to the fact that Saren would not go out of his way for her.

The white-clad Spectre continued to the door, and Shepard had no choice but the follow him. In the room on the other side there was a great bank of computers and what looked like the holographic terminal for the VI. Most of the galaxy used a holographic image of a person as the face of VI software like this. On the Citadel, the information kiosks were operated by a VI called Avina, who looked like a transparent holographic asari. When Saren stopped in front of the holographic pad, the VI did not materialize, confirming that it was indeed down.

“Bringing the VI back online ought to be simple.” Nihlus wandered off toward the computers that lined the walls of the room. “Here. I think this is a maintenance console.”

“Can I see?” Shepard asked as walked over to where he stood. She slid in front of it and tapped around. While not a VI expert by any sense of the word, Shepard knew a thing or two. Most VIs were so simple to turn on and off that a child could do it. “I can bring it back online, give me a minute.” She tapped a series of keys, and within seconds she knew what the problem was. “The security protocol disconnected a few of the databases from the virtual intelligence matrix. I just need a moment to get the system to…” she trailed off, hands flying across the keys. “Bingo!” she announced.

The holographic console Saren stood next to lit up; a woman-like hologram appeared. “It looks like you are trying to restore this facility. Would you like help?”

“System information,” Saren replied.

“This system is monitored to respond to the name ‘Mira’. May I ask your name?”

“Saren Arterius. Special Tactics and Reconnaissance.”

Shepard now stood as close to the white-clad Spectre as she dared, all considering. She thought he sounded less than pleased to be talking to a human-like artificial construct. Whether that was simply because it looked human or because Saren hated VI interfaces, Shepard would not hazard a guess.

“One moment please.” The VI paused. “Council authority confirmed. You are entitled to Secure Access of all systems. Please note that queries relating to corporate secrets require Privileged Access. Privileged Access is only available to Binary Helix executives.”

“We need access to the main facilities.”

“To access the main facilities, you must take the tramway to Rift Station. User Alert! The tramway system is currently inoperable.”

“VIs, right?” Nihlus grumbled.

“Is the tramway damaged?”
“One moment, please. Diagnostics in progress.” Its proxy-eyes seemed to go glassy and unfocused, a rather disturbing zombie-like look.

Shepard did not like that little part about these sorts of systems; they went straight into the uncanny valley of creepily unnatural.


“How do we restore power?”

“The valves to the helium-3 fuel line must be opened. This can be done at the controls on the reactor assembly proper.”

“And the purpose of the landlines?”

“The landlines connect my mainframe here at Central Station to the various sub-facilities of Peak Fifteen. This allows the crew to remotely access my databases from the comfort and security of their labs. When emergency protocols were implemented within the hot labs, the cabling was automatically ejected.”

“In other words, this is the computer that runs all the facilities on Peak Fifteen, and until it can interface with everything again, we are going nowhere,” Nihlus summed up.

“We should not split up. There might be more of those workers in the vents, and if they keep coming in mass…” Shepard cut off. She did not want to face that again, alone or even with just Nihlus, they did not have the firepower. She hated having to rely on Saren, but a gun was a gun, no matter who wielded it.

“Well the communication access is this way; we handle that first, and then see about the reactor.” Nihlus motioned to the door behind them.

This time, he was the first one to approach it, and Shepard followed. The door led through another short corridor to yet another elevator, which took them even further up. Beyond the short hallway on the upper level, the door led out onto what appeared to be the roof of the Central Station. Shepard raised her arm to bar their passage when she saw the snow blowing across the floor.

“Let me do it,” she said. If they went out into this cold, despite the fact that Noveria’s atmosphere was actually breathable, even a few minutes of exposure would cause severe frostbite. As she tapped the side of her helmet to close her breathing apparatus and then engaged her seals, she inspected the rooftop. There were conduits everywhere, electrical boxes of various kinds, and a satellite dish. She could see another holographic panel and the maintenance console.

Higher up over their heads the network of cables climbed partly up the wall and came together into three thick bundles that ended with plugs made up of dozens of sharp gold-plated needle-like prongs. These ought to have been in their sockets, which were embedded in the wall. But the clamps that held the plugs in place had opened, and gravity took over. The cables still hung in place; their ends mere meters from where they ought to be. There were thin guide wires running from within the sockets to the plugs. Shepard hazarded a guess that once the system was told to re-couple, those guide wires would pull the plugs back into the sockets.

She moved toward the maintenance console, and immediately brought up the interface. Her HUD showed the temperature up here was minus sixty-three, which meant her armor was going through its
energy pack just to keep her from freezing. She needed to reconnect the landlines quickly.

She tapped at the console when a shadow fell over her; Shepard glanced up, only to see Nihlus and Saren. Both had their helmets closed, faces invisible. She should have known the former would not let her come out here alone, the latter probably did not trust her not to bungle things. There was a thud as one of the cables began to move “That’s conduit one. Each of these things has its own sub-system.” She announced as she continued to work. Then the second cable began to move, Shepard looked up and watched as the first cable’s prongs slid into their sockets, and when the cable was fully inserted, the clamps closed. The second was in the middle of a similar process. She turned back to the console and accessed the third conduit. A few second later, the cable began to move. She only watched it until she saw the clamps engage and the console reported that the cables were properly connected and had full contact.

After that the three of them retraced their steps back to the VI control room, and then the interchange beyond. From there they turned the side door that led to the power core. The corridor was much longer and took them to yet another elevator, this time it took them down. At the end of that was another hallway ending with a door.

The door opened as soon as they were close enough and now they were in a small control room overlooking the core assembly. The space beyond was three levels at least, with the large helium-3 fusion core dominating it all. On either side of the maintenance room was a doorway which led onto the catwalk access that ringed the core itself. The lighting beyond was scant and the atmosphere in the room seemed more deathly silent than a cemetery. The core room was also still relatively warm, ten degrees. That told her something of the timing. The typical helium-3 fusion reactor was hot on top of humming. This one was large enough to heat its surroundings, and it would take a good long while for an insulated room to cool when the core shut down due to loss of fuel. She moved to the terminal in front of the transparent panels overlooking the core, hoping that it would be the end of this mess.

For a long moment there was silence as she inspected the system, looking for the fuel valve controls. Shutting off the fuel in an emergency was the simplest, safest way to shut down a core without a team of engineers to ramp it down. Where were those controls? Suddenly she heard whines behind her, the unmistakable sound of cocking weapons. Shepard looked up and blinked. Saren and Nihlus had drawn their rifles, and that told her that once again they could hear something she could not.

“Vents again?” she asked as she looked up.

“No. There’s something else here.” Nihlus replied.

Shepard peered out toward the darkened core. Would it be much to ask for it to be some stupid employees taking refuge? It made sense; the core would be the last room where they would freeze to death and one of the first places a rescue team would search, simply because they would have to restore the power.

She turned back to the console and worked with a renewed zeal. A minute ticked by and Shepard sighed in frustration, “I cannot access the fuel valves from here. When Mira said the reactor assembly, I think it meant it literally.” She glanced out onto the core. In that moment, a shape flicked through the gloom. She reached for her guns.

“You better work fast, human. We are not alone here,” Saren said.

“Don’t I know it,” Shepard murmured.
The white-clad Spectre moved toward the door closest to him and opened it. Nihlus followed, and Shepard brought up the rear.

 Barely a few steps past the door there was a loud high pitched squeaking screech, and a brown creature emerged from the gloom, shrieking as it advanced. Unlike the workers that resembled dinner-plate-sized green aphids on four legs, this creature looked more like a cross of a cockroach and a lobster. It stood at least a meter and a half tall on four spindly triple-jointed legs. It had tiny eyes, two sets of antennas, and a mouth surrounded by five mandible-like things that flared open with each shriek. Where its torso curved vertically from the head down to the belly it had a pair of arm-like appendages, each tipped with two long clawed fingers, and further along a pair of long whip-like limbs, each tipped with a bulbous section that split into three parts.

 As the creature advanced, shrieking and thrashing its whip-like appendages, a second materialized from the gloom right behind it. Then suddenly the leading creature slung both its whip-arms, the triple parts joined into a single spear point. Shepard raised Sin and Dex, laser sights flared, and fired. Her bullets ripped the tips apart, which made the creature retract the tentacles, spraying some sort of liquid everywhere, even as it hissed louder yet and charged forward.

 “Kill them!” Saren ordered as he opened fire.

 Their shrieking became a cacophony as bullets ripped through chitin, splashing rancid brown liquid every which way. She fired again and again, aiming for the heads of the creatures. Saren’s gun ripped huge holes in the exoskeleton of the leading creature, but it took her emptying Sin into its head to finally cause the thing to collapse. The creature in the back merely stepped on and over the body of its fallen kin on its way at them.

 Shepard turned Dex on it at the same time that Saren’s gun clipped out. Nihlus opened fire with her, his bullets ripping away exoskeleton, exposing dark fleshy parts underneath. After what seemed like an eternity the creature stumbled and fell, still twitching and jerking in its death throes.

 Shepard ejected her spent clips and holstered her guns to reload. There was a sudden silence in the room. “Are there any more of them?” she asked Nihlus, because right now Saren was giving her the death glare again. She could practically see the accusation right there. Humans cloned dangerously large very much living rachni. There was just no way this could possibly get worse.

 “None that I can hear.” Nihlus replied.

 “Good. Because holy hell. I shot each five times in the head, with a Carnifex, and the first three looked like they didn’t even register.” Her take-away from this was that the rachni were tougher than she would have given them credit. Right now it also looked like the bits on Binthu might have been living specimens once. Just how many said specimens did this lab produce?

 “Now you know why they needed the Krogan to stop them.”

 “Will you reiterate your justification, human?” Saren asked.

 Shepard knew that tone, and knew what he was digging at. “In theory, yes.” She was not going to back down. Strictly speaking, ethical research into the rachni was to be encouraged. “In practice… well I have nothing against destroying the rachni here and erasing every shred of data gathered on them.” The problem was that this was not ethical research. She thought that was argument closed, for now, and moved past him to circle the core.

 The walkway was sleek with rachni fluids, but fortunately because of the holes, no puddles had formed. As she turned the corner, she saw a console mounted along the back part of the catwalk.
Shepard was in the system in seconds. The Spectres made their way over just as she found the controls for the fuel lines. “The system is user friendly; it includes the procedure for a restart. I have to open the fuel lines gradually; a rapid fuel injection will cause a rapid increase in the fusion rate and a heat spike, which might damage the containment envelope and cause the core to shut down again. No restarting it then.”

The core stirred to life as soon as she initialized the first stage, ten percent capacity. The computer told her when to increase output as the cooling system reacted. From there she opened the valves to thirty, which already increased the light levels in the core room. It was like everything was coming out of cold sleep. The cooling pumps kicked in fully, the mass effect field that helped contain the core’s reaction manifested as a periwinkle corona around the bulbous containment chamber. She increased the fuel injection to sixty percent, and then fully after two more minutes, which increased output to ninety percent. The final ten percent would manifest on its own once the reactor reached optimal temperature and rate.

“Done. Let’s get out of here. A core this powerful will soon make this room uncomfortably toasty.”

They retraced their steps back to the interchange. The light level had increased all around. The monitor next to the door leading to the tramway had turned on, indicating that the tram system was operational and one of the cars was in fact at the terminal. The door led them through a long corridor to yet another elevator, which took them up. Throughout the walk, Shepard listened to the vents. The restoration of power had kicked the heating back on, so if there were more workers in the ducts, they would become boisterous. She could hear the circulating vents and the humming of the heating system, but there was no skittering that indicated workers.

Beyond the elevator they found a second security checkpoint like the one they had cleared on their way up from the garage. The door to the transverse section was marked with red indicators, locked. Saren stepped into the security room adjacent to the security checkpoint and Nihlus followed. Shepard was the last one inside. The problem was clear to see, there was another Rachni soldier in the transverse section, locked in by the doors.

The security guard, a salarian, was lying on the floor in the security room. Shepard moved over to him, but she did not need to check his vitals to know he was dead. He had a clear fly-through wound, temple to temple, blood pooling around his head, and the gun was still there, lying within reach. “Self inflicted. He committed suicide.”

“If he was the one to lock that thing inside…” Nihlus said.

“Why not purge it?” Shepard asked. “Look, the warning sign, this checkpoint has a plasma purge system.”

“It uses diverted plasma from the core. If those things got here when cold quarantine already began, the power core would have been shut down.”

Shepard hummed, “Well we restored the core.” She reached for the console that the salarian had to have been sitting at. A few taps brought up the security controls; the console was still logged in. A few more taps and the plasma purge system ignited. The rachni soldier trapped inside shrieked before it was liquefied. Once the system detected that there was nothing in the chamber, the door status panels turned green.

Shepard sat there. The sound of the rachni’s agony was something she wished she had not heard. That shriek had not been an animal in its death throes, it almost sounded like a sapient being in pain.
She had to remind herself that the rachni were to some degree sapient. They had at one point been able to build ships and travel the stars. Still, when the Council, back then made up of the asari and salarians, encountered them, the bugs attacked the envoys. From there, they spread via the relay corridors until they threatened asari and salarian space. The salarians uplifted the Krogan as an emergency measure.

In many ways, the First Contact War owed much to the rachni. To this day the Council feared activating uncharted relays, because last time the Rachni Wars followed. Humanity had unknowingly echoed the naïve optimism of the asari explorers. Unfortunately Alliance ships activating a relay were encountered by the Turians, and they had a shoot-first-ask-questions-later policy.

She mutely followed Saren and Nihlus as the Spectres exited the security office and made their way through the previously locked checkpoint. Beyond was another long corridor, which finally led them onto the tramway platform. It was a cramped, rectangular shoebox with waiting seats, and at the end of it stood the tram. Shepard had a horrible sinking feeling that she just could not ditch.

The tram car made its way through an entirely covered tunnel devoid of lighting, and the trip felt like it took a day short of forever when it was really barely ten minutes. Rift Station was completely abandoned. The platform here was similar to the one they came from, though leading from it were two doors. The left-hand door led to worker quarters, while the other locked door led into the labs. Saren approached the lab door and tapped at its console, but within seconds it became obvious that the door would not open, no matter how it was poked and prodded.

“That only leaves the crew quarters. If any of the scientists survived, they will have the keys. A high enough clearance level ought to bypass the quarantine lockout.” Nihlus said as he moved toward the other door.

Shepard followed immediately. If there were surviving scientists here, they would probably be half out of their minds with fear. She had a feeling that right now, she would need to step between them and Saren, for the simple reason that the white-clad Spectre would probably allow nothing for the effects of trauma. He would not get any help from them, and the scientists would suffer for it.

The crew quarter’s door led to another landing room with two doors, one that went to the quarters, and another that was an entrance to another lab. This second door was also red-lit and locked. Nihlus completely bypassed it in favor of the other. Once there they had to take another elevator up. Once the elevator door opened, Shepard threw up her arm, stalling Nihlus from exiting the cabin. There were four armed men standing behind crate barricades, and they had their guns aimed at the elevator.

“Stand down!” someone shouted. As one, all four men lowered their guns.

Shepard decided that perhaps now was the best time to play mediator. She was the first off the elevator and approached the speaker, who was clearly their leader. He was a tall, dark-skinned, bald man in white armor.

“Sorry.” He said, “Captain Ventralis, Elanus Risk Control Services. We couldn’t be sure what was on the elevator. We’re taking no chances here. Who are you?”

“Commander Shepard, Alliance Navy, these are…” she glanced back, Saren was going to have her head. “Nihlus Kryik and Saren Arterius, Council Spectres.”

“Huh… well… welcome. You won’t see me turning down armed bodies, not in this mess. We lost
containment in the hot labs seven days ago and we’ve been trying to keep those things off us ever since. They clawed up the vents into my command post. Killed half my men before we knew what was going on.”

“How many survived?” Shepard asked.

“Counting my men and myself… there’s seventeen of us. Ten are scientists and lab techs.”

“You survived seven days of this siege; I’d say you did a good job.”

“Yea?” he paused and shrugged, “Sure as hell doesn’t feel like it. We can’t get any communication out; they probably think we’re all dead. Probably waiting for the cold to freeze the things out.”

With the power restored, freezing the rachni out was no longer going to happen. If they did not fix the problem soon, the hot labs would sink. Shepard knew better than to mention that to these people. No need to make them even more nervous.

“We need access to the hot labs,” Saren said.

“Figured you’d want that. Normally you can take the tram from Central Station directly to the hot lab, but the tunnel’s been contaminated and closed. There’s an emergency elevator out by the trams, you passed it.” He reached into a pocket on his webbing and produced a key card. “This card will let you activate it. It will take you straight down.”

Shepard took the card from him and slipped it into her pocket. She knew Saren would want to go down there immediately, but Shepard wanted to get to the bottom of this mess. This lab was somehow connected to Binthu and to Cerberus. She was not going to let Saren get in the way of her investigation.

“If you need medical supplies, go see Dr. Cohen in the medbay.” The guard went on.

“Who else of the research team survived?” Shepard wondered.

“The staff of the secure and quarantine labs mainly. Most of the research team from the hot lab never got out... except Dr. Olar. He’s the only one who escaped. Fair warning, he’s… seen something down there that rattled him.”

Shepard suspected she knew what ‘rattled’ meant. Dr. Olar was probably in the early stages of post-traumatic stress disorder with possible side of survivor’s guilt; civilians were more susceptible to both, especially in these sorts of circumstances. “The others don’t know what going on down there?”

“No. Compartmentalization is tight here; those who work in the different labs do not tell each other what they’re working on. Even I do not know. So long as people do not start dying on me I do not need to know.”

Shepard was not amused, such tight compartmentalization effectively created a security problem. She could tell how and why these men were caught off-guard when the breach happened. She glanced back at Saren and Nihlus who had remained oddly quiet during the whole tête-à-tête. When they did not seem keen on protesting, Shepard turned back to the ERCS men. “Well thanks, Captain; we’ll get this sorted out, one way or another.” She said.

“I really hope you do. We haven’t had the luxury of much sleep in days. Stims only take us so far.”

Shepard nodded and moved past the barricade toward the door that led into the staff quarters. She listened for the two sets of turian footsteps behind her. The door led into a corridor that bore the signs
of battle, acid burn marks, and dark splotches that looked like dried blood. The rachni had gotten far, but the ERCS men seemed to have taken some control back, for now. Past another door she found the security desk with the surveillance equipment, where she paused to let the Spectres catch up.

“What our plan?” Nihlus wondered.

“I don’t think we have a plan. There’s too little to go on right now. We need to talk to this Dr. Olar. Gently mind you. I suspect he has burgeoning post-traumatic stress disorder. Say the wrong thing and he’ll either go catatonic or have a flashback and a panic attack.”

“We have no time to cajole weak-willed civilians.” Saren replied.

“We will make time.” Shepard rebuffed. “This place has connections to Binthu, connections I am interested in. I will not botch my investigation by rushing.”

“She has you there, Saren. Now, personally, I am interested in the staff of the quarantine and secure labs. This place is a single operation, and though Ventralis insists otherwise, some cross-communication was bound to happen,” Nihlus added.

“Also, if the rachni killed everyone in the hot labs other than this one doctor… I think there are more than a few of them left. Two are difficult to handle, but more? There has to be a way to handle them without risking our limbs or sinking the hot lab to the bottom of the glacier.”

“It is highly likely they have a neutron purge system.” Saren offered.

“Would be ideal, but that’s all the more reasons why we need to talk to Dr. Olar, he would know for sure.”

Shepard could see that she was making points here. This was a typical brainstorm session for her. The fact that Saren had begun to contribute was encouraging. Still, the task ahead looked quite monumental. As Shepard continued down the corridor, she could not help but worry. How did this situation get so out of hand? To be sure, now that she knew there were three labs involved the operation looked to be quite large. Where did Cerberus fit in? There were dozens of questions buzzing in her head; she wanted answers to each and every one.

Chapter End Notes

**Author Notes:** This was a rather fun episode to write, even if it did turn out a little dry in the second half. I enjoyed writing this delightful growing conflict between Shepard and Saren. I was not going to make them okay with each other before they ground down some obvious axes with each other. Shepard is not going to make it easy either, she can play nice with him, but at the end of the day she will not compromise on her own goals.

**General Notes:**
Nothing this time…

**Chapter Notes:**
Nothing this time…
They came out of the corridor onto a small rectangular room that had been done up as a makeshift refugee quarters. Bare metal-frame bunks with thin pillows and thinner blankets, crates of emergency supplies, kegs of emergency drinking water, and what looked like a makeshift kitchen consisting of two hot plates, a pot, and a kettle. There were two more ERCS men as well; they looked haggard and worn, leaning on the walls as if they had no energy to stand on their feet. The survivors were a majority human, but Shepard saw a salarian sleeping with his back to the door at the opposite end of the room.

The arrival of fresh faces caused many to look up, some in alarm, some simply because doing so broke the tedium. They avoided eye contact, but Shepard knew there was interest. Sitting nearby were a tall, balding middle-aged man and a red-headed woman, the latter was eating something out of an emergency ration pack; the former stared right at them.

“Are you a rescue crew?” He asked.

Shepard wished she had a rescue crew for these people, but she knew she could not let them leave, not yet. “Sorry, no. I am Commander Shepard, these are… Council Spectres. We’re-”

“We’re not leaving, are we?” he interrupted.

“There is still contamination in the tunnels. We need to handle the situation before it is safe for anyone to leave.” Shepard argued, knowing full well that it was just a nice-sounding excuse.

“A week! We haven’t had a good night of sleep in days. I want out. Those things are constantly trying… no! I want out!” the worker turned away.

The woman set aside her food and pulled him into her arms and shook her head. “Pardon him.” She said. “We worked in the secure lab… and this is trying for all of us.”

“I understand entirely, and we want to help, and so we want to ensure everyone’s safety before you board the tram to Central Station. Right now we need to assess what is going on here. What’s the situation in the secure lab?” Shepard asked.

“Ah… last we were there, the secure lab suffered no breach of containment, but those things from the hot lab probably got in there by now.” The woman replied. “I’m afraid I cannot discuss the details of our work… I signed a non-disclosure agreement.”

“We both did,” the man added quietly.
Shepard would say they chose not to discuss the details. This was rachni, and there were two Council Spectres in the room. The lab coats would put two and two together and realize that if they incriminated Binary Helix, they would be thrown under a proverbial bus. Better plead the right to remain silent while pleading was good. They probably would not be the only ones to do so. That is if Binary Helix intended to protect any of them at all. Nothing stopped the company executives from trying to save face by declaring Noveria a rogue operation and tossing everyone under a bus.

“Who is in charge of this operation?” Nihlus asked.

“That would be Dr. Brant, but she was in the hot lab when… when it happened. She did not make it out,” The woman bowed her head.

“So who is the highest clearance scientist who did make it out?” Nihlus asked.

“Dr. Cohen, project lead of the quarantine lab. He is in the medbay. There’s also Dr. Palon, he worked with Dr. Cohen. He’s the salarian sleeping in the back right now.” The man said.

“Let Dr. Palon sleep, please! He’s been having trouble sleeping, his assistant died in his arms when we tried to evacuate. I’ve not seen him sleep soundly in days.” The woman added.

If Palon worked with Cohen, she would go straight to higher clearance first. “And Dr. Olar?” She asked.

“Oh dear…” the woman turned and peered deeper into the room behind them, seemingly seeking the doctor, but when she turned back, she smiled sheepishly. “He’s here somewhere; he wanders this level and the one below. You can go down to the level below from that passage behind you. He’s a volus, so you cannot miss him, but please be gentle, the poor man is suffering enough already.”

How this woman ended up working for a shady research corporation, Shepard would not hazard a guess. She was either an accomplished actress, or genuinely warm and willing to embrace and cajole anyone and everyone.

“Well, thank you for your help.”

“Of course, if there is anything else I can do…”

“Solve this problem, please. I want out.” The man said, more pitiful than argumentative.

The three of them moved deeper into the room, and Shepard paused as far away from the pair of scientists as she could, without getting too close to the sleeping salarian in the corner. “Our best leads remain this Dr. Olar, and now Dr. Cohen. Now, you know how she said the secure lab suffered no breach of containment? Turn that, there’s something there to contain.”

“You actually believe them?” Saren asked.

“I do.” Shepard argued. “Those two are definitely hiding something behind their non-disclosure agreements. But what they did tell us is all true. We know there are three labs affected, the hot lab, the secure lab, and the quarantine lab. For the sake of thoroughness we need to figure out what went on in all three.” She was not going to into the details. Explaining human micro-expressions to a turian would take another week. She was perfectly aware that there was a noticeable difference in how the two species communicated nuance. Humans were visual, using visible micro-cues. Turians were auditory; their nuance came from the spectrum of cues emitted by a second larynx. So they would have to accept that she could see nuances they could not. A combination of the proper micro-
expressions with due self-shielding gestures could speak louder than words. Those two were so tired that they had no energy left to lie with. The best they could muster was to cling to their right to remain silent.

“We should start with Cohen. We do not know where Olar is,” Saren said.

“I was just about to suggest we start with him as well.” Shepard agreed.

Finding the way down to the medbay was not difficult, a passage off the left side of the room led right down to it. The medbay was a small square room. Shepard stepped in first, and noted the elderly man working on the wounds of a young lab assistant lying unconscious, probably sedated, on one of the medbay beds. The injury looked unbelievably painful; Shepard suspected it to be a deep acid burn that needed periodic cleaning, and it took sedation to make the treatment tolerable. The other bed was occupied by an asari. She seemed even more deeply sedated, hooked up to a breathing mask and three monitors.

“Dr. Cohen, I presume?” Shepard greeted.

“Yes? What do you want?” the man looked up.

Shepard heard a sound of disapproval from behind her. “Sorry, is this a bad time?” She asked. She needed to forestall a situation due to irritability from someone clearly stressed.

“No,” the doctor turned around, “I’m sorry. What can I do for you?” he looked to each of them in turn.

“I am Commander Shepard,” she lapsed, and “and these are Council Spectres, we are conducting an investigation with the intent to contain this situation.” She watched as the doctor clasped his hands slowly, but then let them drop to his sides. Shepard did not miss that little flicker of apprehension.

“We were told you led the project in the quarantine lab. We want to know what happened there.” Nihlus cut in.

“Ah. We had a containment breach in the hot lab and the safety protocols shut down the power and our connection to Peak Fifteen’s VI, Mira. This was so sudden that we had an accident in the quarantine lab.” Cohen looked to the woman on the table and then turned back to them. “I have a non-disclosure agreement. I shouldn’t discuss it with anyone outside the company.”

Shepard could see he was dithering even as he announced he would not cooperate. “But you are inclined to. Your assistant is clearly hurt.”

“Yes… I want to think that the company finds our lives more valuable than their secrets,” Cohen said. “We lost connection to Mira in the middle of an experiment, and the quarantine failed. My assistant was exposed to a toxin. But that is all. You’ll find I conducted my work with all safety precautions in place.”

“How potent is this toxin?” Saren demanded.

Cohen flinched and looked away, Shepard glanced as Saren and tried to convey him a message, back down, let her and Nihlus handle this, before the good doctor shut down on them.

“Quite potent. It was found aboard a derelict rachni vessel drifting in the void between stars. We were still assessing it, but…” he paused. “I can tell you it’s a sophisticated weapon, tailored specifically for its target. We noted the rachni react to it, but they are not the target.”
A rachni ship? Well it would explain where they got the genetic material to clone rachni as well. “And it was still viable?” Shepard asked.

“As you can see, yes… it was.” Cohen sighed.

“You did not report this? There is a reason the Citadel conventions forbid bioweapons.” Saren demanded.

“Yes, looking back, that would have been the wiser course of action. We got overly-excited just to study it. Scientific hubris leads to few plans for things going awry.” He paused and once again looked at his assistant.

Shepard could see concern for the woman, Cohen seemed like he felt the guilt deeply. “How does it work?” she asked.

“It’s a neurotoxin in gaseous form.” Cohen replied. “Lenora first complained of tingling in her extremities, and it progressed to muscle spasms, cramps, headaches, and finally epileptic seizures. She was in so much pain after the last fit that I had to sedate her. It’s in her autonomic nervous system. She is having trouble breathing on her own, and I fear it might start interfering with her heart rate soon.”

“Anything I can do to help?” Shepard asked.

“Oh, yes! I had my team create a… prototype neutralizer for it, but it is locked in the quarantine lab along with our notes and equipment. I did not think to grab it from the cooling unit when we got out. Another stupid, stupid mistake, but there were alarms, I panicked, and now Captain Ventralis won’t let me back in, he does not want to risk further contamination. Still, without it, Lenora might die.”

“Is this toxin still air-borne?” Shepard asked.

“No! While it is very potent, it only has a brief period of viability once exposed to environmental oxygen. After that, it breaks down into simple protein chains. We found it suspended in tanks of krypton. It attacks neurons in a very specific manner, inhibiting certain vital chemical transmitters, and hence some synapse activity.”

Shepard was no expert, but she suspected the toxin’s oxygen reactivity was intentional. There were nasty illegal drugs that broke down into common compounds within the body, this sounded similar, though on external terms. The gas would not linger in the environment, so even a massive release on a garden class world would poison the target population, but leave the ecology alone. Genocide with the precision of a surgical scalpel.

“Any idea of the intended target?” Nihlus asked.

Cohen looked toward his assistant as he began to wring his fingers. When he turned back, there was resignation on his face. Shepard suspected he made peace with being fired because he chose to help his assistant. Binary Helix would not be amused that he leaked this much to Spectres. Maybe the nature of the toxin itself bothered him enough that he wanted to get the information out.

“We can’t know for sure,” Cohen began, almost whispering. “We do not have a catalogue of all extinct and extant space-faring species, complete with DNA and tissue samples to compare. But I will tell you this; we ran tests on the tanks themselves, they’re about fifty thousand years old.”

“You found a fifty-thousand-year-old viable toxin? Pardon my skepticism doctor…” Shepard paused there. It would not do to tell him she found that hard to believe.
“Incredible, I know. The seals they used are like nothing we have today! They are so fine that they block the gasses on the atomic level.” Cohen jumped in.

Shepard conceded that maybe, just maybe he was speaking the truth. In the end it really did not matter. The Council would want to know about this either way. The Alliance would want to know too. Fifty thousand years old or not, there might be more tanks out there. Anyone with the right know-how could replicate or alter the toxin. The asari sedated on the bed some meters away was proof that it could affect current species.

It was curious that only the asari became ill, but it was possible she was the only one fully exposed, and Cohen dodged the proverbial bullet. The toxin could still be dangerous to humans. The exact circumstances of the exposure did not matter right now. What mattered is that they could not let Binary Helix keep the research proprietary. “Well, I will get you that cure, doctor.” What else could she say? They could not very well evacuate an asari who needed life support.

“Thank you, Commander. Spectres.” He nodded his head in a sort of little bow.

They left the medbay shortly after that, but Shepard paused halfway up the number of stairs that led back up to the refuge. “We need their research data. Frankly I do not trust Binary Helix, or any company, with it. What if someone else finds more of this stuff?”

“If it is as dangerous as it seems, it cannot go unregistered,” Nihlus added.

“Copy their research while we have an opportunity.” Saren said with a note of finality.

Shepard smiled, “Somehow I get the feeling that Cohen expects us to do it. He painted a rather grim picture there. Why else give us all those details? He knows the writing’s on the wall and he’s doing what he can to ensure the toxin does not become a weapon.”

“This is why the Normandy needs a science officer, Shepard. We could get a second opinion.” Nihlus grumbled.

“I’ll be sure to mention that to Admiral Hackett.”

“Your frigate has an on-board laboratory?” Saren wondered.

“It does.” That was all Shepard was going to say. She was not going to expose any more of her ship’s secrets. It was atypical for Alliance frigates, but the Normandy was meant to be an experimental stealth strike and recon vessel. Certainly if she was allowed to use the Normandy as her Spectre vessel, an operational lab would be handy.

They retraced the way back to the checkpoint to talk to Captain Ventralis. The men were apparently having a meal break, seated on the floor, legs crossed, and with rifles across their laps.

“Spectres, Commander,” Ventralis greeted between bites of a sandwich.

“Captain. There’s a little something we need from you. We talked to Dr. Cohen. His assistant Lenora, you know her? She was exposed to something unpleasant, Dr. Cohen said you won’t allow him to fetch one little thing that will help her?”

Ventralis had the decency to look mildly abashed. “I wish we could help her. I really do. But we can’t risk contamination.”
“For the record, we’re not under your command.”

“And you’re also extra guns.” Ventralis argued. “All right. You want to gamble with your lives, you aren’t under my command. I’ll have the guard let you in, but he’ll lock the door behind you. He’ll run a full scan before he’ll let you out. If there are any anomalies, you stay in there.”

Shepard knew that there was a very slim possibility that Cohen could be lying to get them into a dirty lab, knowing Ventralis would make them stay inside. But she would bet her left arm that all three of them had armors with filtration units capable of handling toxins. They could isolate themselves from the lab’s environment, after that, a decontamination cycle ought to clean the exterior. She glanced back at Saren and Nihlus. The latter grinned and nodded at her.

“Those are reasonable precautions.”

“I’ll radio the guard to let him know. Good luck.” He set aside his sandwich and pulled out the small short range radio. Shepard moved back aft of the checkpoint.

Finding the entrance to the quarantine lab proved relatively easy. It was attached to the lower level of the refuge, a relatively quick elevator ride from the end of the passage the two lab techs indicated. Dr. Olar was also down on the bottom level, pacing the breadth of the space, muttering to himself so quietly his suit’s auditory pickup only seemed to rumble with half-formed words and the rasp of his breather. If he noticed them, he made no indication of it, and they moved on toward the indicated entrance of the quarantine lab.

The guard at the door reiterated the threat that he would lock them in the lab if the scanner showed any contamination. Shepard listened only with one ear as she did up her helmet’s void seals. They passed through an anteroom full of full-body quarantine suits into an airlock with powerful UV lamps, high pressure water nozzles, and air blowers mounted along the walls and ceiling. Mira, now that it was back online, ran them through the proper procedure.

Nihlus took over almost as soon as he was in the lab, his Spectre clearance allowed him to make Mira cooperate more fully, even if the Spectres would need to fandangle their way into the terminals. Reading the research notes was definitely ‘company secrets’ that Mira would not clear them for. Shepard turned to the refrigeration cases in the corner. The units were full of vials of all sorts that she could not hope to figure out. Many labeled with hand-written notes in a tiny scrawl that looked almost completely undecipherable.

After some time inspecting the materials, she spotted a small box with a caduceus mark on its side tucked in the very back. She opened the unit and reached around the other things. Once the box was in her hands she inspected the label on top. The box contained six thirty milliliter hypojet vials of a neutralizer for Kryptin-8. Cohen said that the toxin was suspended in Krypton, so this seemed like the cure, and she now knew how unoriginal the toxin’s name was, but no one ever said scientists were brilliant at naming things. “I think I found the cure,” she announced.

“Good, bring all of it.” Nihlus replied.

Shepard moved across the lab toward where the Spectres were working on the terminals. The side counter was cluttered with materials, many of it still on paper. The handwriting was the same as the labels in the cold case, which she now suspected to be Dr. Cohen’s. The doctor seemed to have a penchant for wanting things on hand without the distraction of pressing buttons and accessing files. She could see hand-drawn molecular schematics, jotted out memos listing lab equipment readouts, ideas, and other erratic notes. She booted up her omni-tool and began to scan the small pile.
“I found video logs,” Nihlus announced. “Cohen was using his hazard suit helmet camera to record his work, complete with narration.” Nihlus said after a while.

“Copy them all,” Saren replied.

Shepard only listened with one ear; she was busy looking over the notes as she scanned them. “Dr. Cohen was not lying; everything he told us is here. And here’s the tank analysis!” Shepard held up the sheet, knowing they would not be able to read English, let alone the doctor’s messy scrawl, but the schematics of the tank were still universal enough. “Titanium body with iridium coating both inside and out, it’s no wonder they’re near indestructible and survived fifty thousand years.”

“So, fifty thousand years… can it be a Prothean weapon?” Nihlus asked.

“Perhaps.” Saren replied in the blandest tone possible. “There is no proof.”

Shepard hummed. There was a singularly terrifying thought. Most of the galaxy saw the Protheans as geniuses of science and technology, the glorious builders of the Citadel and all the mass relays, or as statesmen who brought the races of the galaxy of their time together under a single governing structure. They occupied a certain rose-tinted mythos, like all peoples from a mythical golden age, before the purported degeneration and problems of the current age set in.

If Kryptin-8 was indeed a Prothean weapon of mass annihilation, its implications would upend that nice image. To be sure, the Protheans were gone, extinct, and no species from their age survived past about the same period. Then, very few artifacts survived from the non-Protheans of the era. As she looked down at the tank schematic, she began to wonder. Were their values so dissonant that they used chemical weapons of mass murder freely? Why? Were they tyrants instead of diplomats?

“I finished copying,” Nihlus announced. “Shepard, catch.” He flicked his wrist over the counter and Shepard only had a split of a second to snatch the object out of the air.

“Thanks, Nihlus.” Shepard replied as she slipped the OSD into the pocket of her webbing.

“You are thinking things out already?”

“Can’t help it, you know me,” Shepard smiled. “If I wasn’t military, I’d probably been a C-sec investigator. Probably would’ve given Garrus a run for his money,” she chuckled at the thought.

“More likely you would have put him out of a job,” Nihlus replied with a grin. “You would not have rested until you personally brought the crime rate on the Citadel down.”

Shepard did not say it, but in a way she had already put Garrus out of a job.

“Do you two always talk this much?” Saren asked as he slipped an OSD into one of the small compartments in his armor.

“We do.”

“Definitely.” Nihlus agreed.

Saren said nothing more as he shut down the terminal. That seemed to straighten Nihlus’ spine, Shepard could not help but see the connection. The former protégé was still very much in tune with his former mentor, often anticipating what he ought to do without being told. She picked up the box of medicine and followed the two of them toward the lab exit.
As expected, the guard’s scans showed no contamination on them and they were let out of the lab with the box of medicine in hand. Shepard thought that the next task was given, get the medicine to Dr. Cohen and then go and talk to Dr. Olar. The volus was still on the lower level, seated in the corner now, with his back to the wall, but the glowing eyes of his suit were on them.

Then, slowly and clumsily, he got to his feet and approached them, his hands at his sides, caution evident in every movement. “You came to find out about them, didn’t you?” He asked, his respirator rasping every five words. “I’m the only survivor from the hot lab, you know.”

Shepard glanced at her companions and stepped forward, if talking was on the agenda, it was best left to her. “We are here to find out, yes. Can you tell us what happened?”

The volus tipped his head to the side, “They’re rachni. I can tell you all about them.”

“Where did they come from?” Shepard wondered.

The volus shifted his weight and began to pace. “They found it in a derelict ship. An egg. Waiting since the last battles. They brought it here.”

Shepard glanced at the Spectres.

“A single egg can definitely provide the genetic material to clone more rachni,” Nihlus mused.

“They wanted to clone it, yes,” the volus replied. “But then… there was no need.”

Shepard blinked, surprised. No need? What did he mean by no need? Was the rachni hatched from that egg capable of reproducing? She heard them compared to ants and bees, if so; only one individual in the whole ant colony or bee hive could reproduce. The realization slammed her in the gut. “It was a queen.”

“You simpletons brought back a **queen**?” Saren hissed, his anger manifesting in a flash.

The volus stood there, staring up at Saren like the venom in the Spectre’s voice did not faze him. “We brought them back from the dead. In retrospect, a bad decision.”

“Where is it?” Saren demanded.

“The queen is in the secure lab. Or… she was. Her brood could have destroyed her. We kept them separate in the hot lab. They… became vicious, killers.” The volus went on. “Dr. Brant wanted to devise a method to control them. It did not work. It could not work.”

Controlling the rachni? Was this Dr. Brant out of her mind? Furthermore, why was Olar telling them this? He seemed lucid enough to understand what he was saying, but PTSD was such a thing that sometimes the afflicted could see or hear things not there, and be convinced of whole other realities. Sometimes they could be so confused that they could even mistake actual people for hallucinations.

“Dr. Olar, one more question. Where is Dr. Brant’s office?” If the project lead here was as rotten as Olar said, there would be evidence of her actions.

“Dr. Brant worked from the secure lab. You can access it from the maintenance area back there,” Olar pointed with a disinterested flick of his wrist. “You will need a key card; a team lead would one.”

Shepard glanced up at Saren, it seemed cut and dry. They needed to get into that lab, and they knew one of the team leads. Helping Dr. Cohen should be worth the key card. The volus turned and
walked back toward the corner, sat down, turned away, and the lights of his suit’s optics turned off. “I think that’s all we’ll get from Dr. Olar,” Shepard murmured, just loud enough for the two turians to hear. “You give everyone too much leeway.” Saren replied as he turned toward the elevator to the upper level. “Perhaps, but I think the results speak for themselves.” Shepard replied as she fell in step at his side. She would not change her ways now, not in the face of commentary from someone so clearly unwilling to trust. Twenty-four years of dealing with the scum of the galaxy had jaded Saren. Then there was the fact that he was a biotic and barefaced. Shepard knew enough about turian culture, military doctrine, and history to figure out that he probably got suspicion and mistrust from everyone, and thus learned not to trust in return. She would not let his example change her methods either.

They retraced their way back to the medbay, and in the last moments Shepard stepped in front of Saren. “Dr. Cohen, we got the cure,” she called. The doctor turned around suddenly, surprised, and Shepard held out the box. By the way his whole expression changed Shepard knew that she found the right one. “Excellent! Thank you ever so much!” he chorused, eagerly took the box and moved it to the table between the beds. An instant later he busied off to the tool cabinets. Shepard watched as he rummaged about looking for a hypojet. “Doctor, there is something we would like your help with. We need to go into the secure lab, and Dr. Olar recommended the way through the maintenance area.” Shepard spoke up. “You will need a pass.” Cohen said as he finally found a clean hypojet. He left the device on the table, and when he turned around, he unclipped the badge attached to his suit pulled off one of the plastic cards attached to it. “Here, my card, it is the least I can do. Help yourselves to the Medi-gel if you need any.” Shepard took the card and tucked it into her pocket as she watched the doctor hurry about the room. When she glanced back, she noticed that Saren was already at the door, the look on his face was stormy. Nihlus stood with his arms crossed, which was as close impatience as he ever showed. She spared the doctor one last glance, but he was oblivious to them as he opened the medicine box and withdrew one of the vials before plugging it into the bottom of the hypojet. Shepard turned and made her way to the door.

After leaving Dr. Cohen to his work they had to return to the level below. Dr. Olar was still in his corner, sitting motionless, with the lights of his suit optics turned off. It was impossible to tell whether the volus was trying to sleep or ignore the world around him. Saren led the group past the doctor toward the only other doorway out. Beyond it, a short passage led them to another doorway and then through a bare tunnel carved into the side of the mountain. This passage was cold, no real artificial insulation. Only the lights evenly spaced along the walls showed where to go. The bare walls were free of snow and ice, and Shepard could hear water dripping rhythmically. At the other end of the passage the door to the maintenance area proper was locked, Shepard pulled
out the card they got from Dr. Cohen and held it up to the reader, which unlocked it. She tucked the
card back into her pocket. The room beyond was a typical pre-fabricated section with some
worktables, machinery, and general detritus.

Beyond this room was another, smaller room. One foot in Shepard frowned as her nose encountered
the unmistakable scent of decay. As she rounded some machinery, she understood where it came
from. A rachni soldier lay on the floor in the corner, and by the smell, it was already rotting.
Someone had killed the bug, but there was no one else here, so the person responsible might still be
deeper in the lab. Shepard approached the corpse and crouched down to inspect it.

The body was riddled with bullet holes, irregularly spaced entry wounds, with no obvious exit
wounds. Most of the damage clustered around the creature’s head, so whoever shot it was a semi-
decent marksman using a relatively powerful handgun. She looked around and spotted two thermal
clips in the corner across the room, and a dark smear on the wall. The clips had been discarded after
being filled to capacity, but they had long since cooled off.

“There might be someone in the secure lab.” She announced. “They have a handgun and enough
skill to take down this soldier, so I’d say some military training. They’re injured though.”

“Probably one of the Elanus Risk Control Services guards,” Nihlus mused.

“No, the guards have automatics.” Shepard murmured as she got to her feet. She approached the
blood smear and noticed there were other minor blood stains leading away from it. “Here, look at
these. Dried in with round edges, that’s blood dripping from an injury. The ERCS guards have hard-
suits and Medi-gel. An armor undersuit would retain the blood unless the injury is truly horrendous.”
She followed the drops away from where the thermal clips lay and realized the dripping formed a
trail right toward the door leading into the lab. “They walked away and left us a trail.”

“With an injury that bad, they are probably dead,” Saren remarked.

“I would not count on it.” Shepard knew better than write off someone desperate. They had to be
quite desperate to get into the lab, all considering. She could also hazard a guess at the injured party’s
species. Only human and asari blood kept enough surface tension to dry with smooth sides, and
despite the fact that asari blood was purple-hued, both dried and decayed into a black substance.
Salarian blood was green and runnier; it kept more color around the edges. Fresh Turian blood was
almost royal blue in color and decayed into an easily-recognizable midnight blue. A higher volume at
higher pressure also meant they tended to bleed more than any other species.

The door into the lab opened for her as soon as she was close enough. Beyond lay a large single lab
on two levels. The lighting was almost non-existent and the air felt impossibly cold. A walkway
branched to the right, leading around a central area that supported an upper level platform. There was
also a big containment tank held by a gantry arm right in the middle. Along the walkway she could
see work stations, terminals, and lots of offline equipment.

As she stepped into the room, it was as if she stepped through an invisible curtain of cold water that
passed down her spine, and the absolute silence of the maintenance area was broken. Something akin
to whispering filled her ears, but so low that no matter which way she turned her head, she could not
hone in on it.

Shepard glanced at Nihlus and Saren, could they hear it? Asking would not do well. It was very
weird to think that suddenly she could hear something they could not. She wrote the sensation off as
a trick of her auditory nerves and moved deeper into the room.

“Is somebody there?” a voice called.
Shepard stopped, that she heard clearly.

“Upper level.” Nihlus whispered.

Shepard drew her guns and moved up the steps. The upper level was a loft platform with some machinery, a stand-alone terminal, and a rather meticulously ordered desk with data pads stacked on top of it. Her eyes landed on the asari clad in a white lab-suit seated on the floor, with her back to the platform railing. She had a long blood streak running the length of her left sleeve and a gun in her right hand.

As soon as she saw them, she scrambled to her feet. “Don’t come any closer!” she warned as her whole body flickered with her biotics. “I won’t let you harm her as long as I live!”

Her? Whom did the asari mean? Shepard let her eyes trail up, and froze when she realized that inside the big reinforced containment cell, surrounded by a mass effect field, was a very large, very twitchy rachni.

“Spirits,” Nihlus breathed, “they really brought back a queen.”

The queen was dark brown, like the soldiers, and similarly shaped, save for the crests arcing up and back from the top and sides of her head, her crown. She moved her head in twitches and jerks and quite suddenly Shepard found herself staring into her dark, saucer-sized eye. When she hissed, the high-pitched sound broke through the containment cell, and the whispering grew louder.

“Who are you?” the asari demanded as she raised her gun, aiming it at Shepard, then Nihlus, and then off to the side, where Shepard assumed Saren stood.

Shepard holstered her guns and made a half-step closer, drawing the asari’s attention, and gun point. “I am Commander Shepard, Alliance Navy; these are Spectres Kryik and Arterius. And you are?”

“I am Elise T’vasi. I work here. Don’t come closer!”

“You said you will protect her?” Shepard asked.

“Yes! I don’t want to fight, but the rachni queen is my friend, I will not let you kill her.”

“Your friend?” Saren sneered.

“Yes, my friend!” Elise shouted as she leveled her gun on him. “She was born here a year ago. I’ve… I’ve been talking to her since; I am the only one here who cared that she is a living being!”

Shepard hummed; well the asari sure lacked no conviction in what she was saying. Certainly the fact that she was an asari said something. Their ability to meld minds allowed them to share thoughts and feelings with all sapient life forms; rachni seemingly included.

“She showed me so much. Rachni queens carry the memories and knowledge of their mothers.” Elise went on. “Dr. Brant did not care, she just wanted the eggs. The children… they cannot be away from her. They do not develop correctly without guidance.”

“Did you kill the soldier in the maintenance area?” Shepard asked.

“I had to. I came to set her free, but… I do not have the right codes and I can’t hack through.”

The asari seemed to have been here for days, the blood on her uniform was dry, and the corpse in the maintenance area had the time to develop a smell.
“You are out of your mind if you think I will allow your *friendship* to unleash the rachni on the galaxy.” Saren said.

Elise raised her gun right at the Spectre’s head and her finger slipped to the trigger. At that moment Saren drew his rifle, but the Asari did not even flinch. “One step, Spectre, and I will shoot. I am willing to kill *and* die for her.”

This created a rather ugly impasse; Shepard would rather avoid having to kill the asari to get at the queen. Add to that, she could see what Elise meant; the queen was in fact a being, not an animal. It would be cruel to euthanize a lab animal just because it was no longer convenient, but a being with some sentience? The cruelty here was manifold. Was the queen even violent? So far everything had been soldiers, and now this asari said it was because they did not develop properly? “Elise, tell me, what do you mean the rachni do not develop correctly without the queen’s guidance.”

“The queen controls her hive via a method similar to a biological quantum entanglement communicator. But the connection takes time to form. Without it, their territorial drive is uncontrolled. The eggs were taken to the hot lab to hatch; Dr. Brant thought she could find a way to create an artificial connection.”

The whispering in the room shifted suddenly and Shepard had to force herself not to react. It almost seemed furtive, though still out of the range where she could make out words. Were there even words? Suddenly it dawned on Shepard that perhaps this was the rachni talking. Universal translators were limited by the languages programmed into them. The rachni have not been seen in around two thousand years.

“What was the artificial connection for?” Nihlus asked.

“She wanted to control them.”

Shepard could feel Saren’s glare on the back of her neck again as she glanced toward Nihlus, had Dr. Olar not told them the same thing? The whispers shifted again, and Shepard looked past Elise to the queen. Her whip tendrils undulated rhythmically as she turned her head and tipped it down. Somehow in that moment she looked pitiful.

“Who ordered this work?” Nihlus asked.

Shepard broke eye contact with the rachni and turned back to the asari.

Elise’s gaze seemed to wander for all of a moment. “I do not know. The doctor authorized shipments of rachni off-world. She said there was another location, another team, additional work, but… I don’t know much more than that. I am just a lab assistant. I graduated from Serrice University only three years ago. This was my first major job. I am only a hundred and ten.”

The asari was beginning to panic. They were dealing with a frightened, barely adult asari who happened to have a gun. Shepard glanced toward Nihlus and caught his gaze. The Spectre nodded. Shepard turned back to Elise. “I think I know where this other location is. I can confirm it from Dr. Brant’s documents.” If the other location was indeed Binthu then Brant had Cerberus connections.

“It seems you got what you wanted, human.”

“Perhaps,” Shepard replied. “This does not solve the situation on hand though.”

“I will not let you harm her!” Elise repeated. “The queen is as much a victim as the scientists her children killed. No one cared for the truth, the evidence Dr. Cohen has. We owe the rachni an apology.”
“An apology?” Saren sneered.

“We murdered them by the millions without fully understanding them.”

“There is nothing to understand. They killed the Council envoys and attacked every settlement in their path.” Saren advanced on the Asari, but her aim at him did not shift or waver.

The whispers turned louder and clearer, yet Shepard could not understand a word. Elise turned her head, looked over her shoulder at the queen, and in that moment Shepard understood that Elise could hear whatever it was too.

Saren’s strike was as sudden and as quick as a bolt of lightning, he grabbed Elise’ gun, and wrenched it from her grip, sending the weapon flying across the room. The Asari yelped and backed away until her back was pressed to the queen’s cell even as her biotic barrier flared into existence. The queen shrieked, whipping her tendrils, and suddenly Elise’s barrier exploded outwards, forming a dome around the containment cell, stopping right in front of them. All the while her pupils opened, consuming the blue of her iris, and the sclera turned black.

“This one serves as our voice.” The asari spoke, her speech stilted, with pauses after each word, as if she chose them, one by one, with unfamiliar clumsiness. The whispering flanged the words, following, but apart from them. “We cannot sing. Not in these low spaces.” She continued, swaying. “Your musics are… colorless.”

“Do not shoot!” Shepard called as she clapped a hand over both Spectres’ guns and pushed the muzzles down. “Elise… is linked with the queen. She’s…” Shepard did not know how to explain it, but she knew what she saw. The rachni queen decided to speak directly through the asari.

“Human, you are overstepping your bounds.” Saren growled.

“Yea? Well, I will not let you shoot an unarmed civilian!” Shepard barked. “I am not sure what is going on, but…”

The asari advanced half a step, her barrier moving with her. “Your way of communicating is strange.” She announced. “Flat. It does not color the air. When we speak, one moves all.”

It took a moment but Shepard understood. “I do not think the rachni can talk. Not the way you or I can. So how would they communicate with the envoys?” There, right in front of them was living evidence to that. The queen had to control the body of an asari to talk. The rachni had vocal cords of some sort, but could not produce speech. They were fiercely territorial but entirely unable to utilize the way of communication normal for the rest of the sapient species of the galaxy. The Council misunderstood them.

The queen turned her head again, her large eye focused on Shepard. “You hear the truth,” Elise swayed, “Our kind sing through touchings of thought. We pluck the strings, and the other understands. The children we birthed were stolen from us before they could learn to sing. They are lost to silence. Our elders are comfortable with silence. Children know only fear if no one sings to them. Fear has shattered their minds.”

“Makes sense,” Nihlus murmured quietly.

Saren hummed, but said nothing more.

The queen turned in her tank, this time focused on Saren. Elise turned to him as well. “You speak of others, the envoys that came before. Their voices went unheard in the cacophony of an ancient song.”
“How do you know what happened?” Nihlus wondered.

“We hear the echoing song of mother. She sang of tragedy and loss. Of our kind long silenced. Their songs were... discordant. Their strings tangled. The music they produced changed by the instrument of those who came before.”

Strings? It was a curious choice of word for the mind, but Shepard was convinced that was what the queen meant. Tangled strings? Were the rachni addled, confused by something? She was hazardous wild guesses, but if she considered the queen’s diction as inherently different given their difference in methods of communication, it made some sense.

“These needle-men found the instrument of the ancients. We heard its sour notes echo in cacophonous song of our stolen children.” The queen went on. “Our kind found it among the ruins of those who came before. It blotted out our songs as it blotted out the harmonies of the ancients.”

Shepard glanced at Saren; did he understand the implications of what the queen was saying? Considering his gun had yet to rise, and the stiffness of his posture, she wanted to think he was beginning to see something in the queen’s words. Shepard thought she knew what the queen meant by ‘instrument of the ancients’ and their ‘harmonies’. “Whose ruins were these?” she prompted, careful to avoid a leading question, lest she be accused of giving the queen the easy way out.

“You kind calls them... Prothean.”

At that Saren stiffened, and Shepard knew that he understood.

“The instrument is not of their creation.” The queen went on. “Their harmony was silenced by its sour notes. We allowed the instrument to play before we understood. Your kind came while our own harmony turned to cacophony.”

“The toxin Cohen’s team was studying. It has to be that... instrument,” Nihlus breathed.

“And it was not Prothean. It was used on the Protheans,” Saren said.

Shepard crossed her arms and turned to the queen. “You're both missing a key point here. Sounds to me like the Rachni Wars were caused by that toxin too.”

“You believe her?” Saren sneered.

“Cohen said the toxin affects the rachni.” Were the toxin’s echoes, the ones the queen heard from her children, coming from the rachni exposed to the toxin? Cohen must have exposed some to know they were affected. “We could go back and ask for more info, but this seems to collaborate that.”

“If you are right then...” Nihlus stopped dead there, as if unwilling to finish his sentence.

“Elise was right. The galaxy owes the rachni an apology.” If the queen was speaking the truth, then by most legal definitions, the rachni were either as much a victim as those they killed, or at the very least not guilty by reason of insanity. There was room to argue, additional studies would have to be done, but at the very least it meant that killing the queen would be murder and genocide all in one. Shepard would not do it. For all anyone might say about it, her mind was set.

“Now that you hear the truth, what will you sing? Will you release us? Are we to fade away once more? You have the power to free us, or return our people to the silence of memory.”

The whispers went silent and then Elise teetered, her eyes lost their black hue as the queen severed the connection. The biotic shield dissipated and the asari raised her hands to her temples, moaning in
her own voice.

Only with the absence of the quiet voice did Shepard finally understand. The whispers were the queen’s “song”, though only Elise and she could hear it. Why? Yes, in physiological terms a human woman was outwardly similar to an asari, but was there more to this similarity? If there was, what would that mean? There were other thoughts too. The Protheans had been the target, but rachni and asari were also affected by Kryptin-8. The former being the prime target while the latter two had a common feature. Both Rachni and Asari had unique neurological systems that allowed them to communicate in ways other than just vocalization. Was there something to that connection? They knew too little about the Protheans to say, but she filed the thought away for a later date, maybe to ask someone who knew more.

Right now Shepard knew what she ought to do. She glanced toward Saren, and the hard look in his eyes told her that in all likelihood he would not be as forgiving. She knew she would have to stand her ground; she could not let Saren Arterius condemn a whole race to extinction.

“Your kind-”

“No.” Shepard cut in almost as soon as Saren spoke. He stopped and turned, the look in his eyes went from merely cold to one of pure loathing. Shepard held it without blinking or quailing. “We cannot kill her, Spectre Arterius. You heard her, there are reasons to suspect her kind were not of their right minds. At the very least we should stay our hand until the matter is investigated by outside experts.”

“Know your place, Human. I indulged you so far because your methods were only wasting time and there was no urgency to our mission. Do not mistake my generosity for agreement. I will not allow humanity to make a decision that will affect the galaxy as a whole. Humans were still fighting with iron weapons and arrows while the galaxy waged war against the rachni threat. Your kind has no right to decide matters you had no party in.”

Shepard raised an eyebrow; did he just use that card on her? “By that logic, Spectre Arterius, you have no right to make this decision either. To be sure the turians had begun to explore space at the time, but the Council that fought the Rachni War was asari and salarian only. They made contact with the turians only after.”

Saren looked like he was contemplating whether he could murder her and get away with it. Shepard kept his gaze and waited. She would not back down.

“This will only ensure a second Rachni War.”

Was that the best he had? “Perhaps. But the probability is just as high that the rachni will merely find some corner of the galaxy to call their own, and live in peace.” Shepard did not need to reach deep for that rebuff. “I will not cower and make my decisions based on fear of what might be. Make no mistake, Spectre Arterius, killing her now is the action of a coward.”

Saren snarled as his fingers shifted on the grip of his gun. Shepard knew she hit him personally, but she was not one to pull punches. If he wanted to have a battle of words, to try and convince her that she was wrong, he better bring the big guns, not just a half-assed excuse like what might be.

“Listen to her, Nihlus. She would sacrifice the safety of the galaxy for her own idealistic beliefs. Is this someone whom you want wielding the powers of a Spectre?”

Shepard snorted and held up her hand in the direction where she knew Nihlus stood, “Don’t answer that, Nihlus.”
“Shepard-”

“No, I will defend myself,” Shepard explained. “Spectre Arterius doubts my ability to obey the Council’s will, should it clash with my idealism. Well I ask this, is it the Council’s will that their agents casually commit acts of genocide?” she paused there. Saren’s expression did not waver, but his mandibles twitched, as if he restrained himself from showing their tell-tale defensive pull up and tight against his jaw. This only emboldened her to drive her point home. “By my understanding, the Council disallows weapons of genocide. So tell me Spectre Arterius, are the Council nothing more than hypocrites that break their own laws when convenient? Or maybe it is Spectres that are so above the law that they can commit such acts?”

“Shepard-” Nihlus began again.

“No, Nihlus. I want to know where the line is. Perhaps the problem is that Spectre Arterius mistakes morals for idealism… but if the line is indeed so blurry, I refuse to walk it. I will not knowingly work for such a Council. My… idealism will not let me sully my hands with the blood of innocents.”

The silence that settled over the lab was so absolute that Shepard could hear every armor creak. Elise, who had recovered some of her faculties, looked absolutely gob-smacked and terrified of making a sound as she tried to melt into the tank behind her.

Nihlus sighed, “Do not shoot me, Saren… but killing the queen does seem like going a step too far.” Nihlus broke the silence. “And to answer your earlier question, that is the reason I nominated her for Spectre.”

Saren closed his eyes briefly, “To whom are you loyal, Nihlus?” he mused. “Fine, Shepard. Set her free, and you better pray to your gods that for once I am wrong.”

Shepard refused to show any hint of triumph as she moved past him toward the console. No need for petty stomps on someone’s ego, even if it was Saren Arterius’ ego. There was such a thing as being an ungracious winner. She knew why he had her hack through the controls, too. This way he had much more deniability if he was proven right. Still, the fact that he stood down told her something. Yes, he was an arrogant egomaniac who did not believe he could be wrong, and he was also a bastard of magnificent proportions, but he was not beyond reasoning. Still, she was right to be very, very careful around him.

A few taps on the console in front of the tank brought up the controls. Shepard quickly discovered that right now the queen was in a temporary holding tank manipulated by a gantry arm. There was a transfer corridor she could connect the tank to, which would allow the queen to make her way up and to a tunnel used by special trams to transfer heavy cargo from Central Station to Rift Station. Fortunately the lockout was not biometric, it was a password, and those could be hacked. Her program weaseled its way into the terminal’s security protocols and within a minute or so it was grinding through the vulnerabilities. It took another two minutes but then the window flashed, she was in, and seconds after that the holding tank began to move up and toward the tunnel entrance.

The whispering returned then. It made Shepard look up and follow the queen. The tank connected to the passage airlock and the connecting doors opened. The queen tipped her head once, twice, and passed through.

“She is saying her farewells, Commander.” Elise spoke up for the first time in a long while. “I know her intent. She will find somewhere safe to raise new children. It has always been her earnest wish. Her kind will forever remember this act of mercy.”

“Are you alright though?” Shepard wondered.
“Yes, she would never hurt me. Oh, but she did request that I show all of you what she showed me… about the toxin, about the past.”

“I am not letting you near me,” Saren replied automatically.

“I think… I will pass as well,” Nihlus echoed.

“I understand.” Elise smiled.
Shepard thought they were awful quick to say no. Still, she knew the Spectres had to keep their secrets. She had her own secrets to keep, but this information might prove useful. “I’ll do it.” She said.

“Are you sure, Shepard?” Nihlus asked.

“No. But someone’s got to do it.”
Elise approached, “I will try to be as gentle as possible. It will not take long.”

Shepard glanced at Nihlus and then Saren. The former was clearly concerned; the latter stood near the desk with his arms crossed. She turned back to Elise, “Alright, let’s do this.” Could she keep Elise from seeing into the corners of her mind? She did have her own secrets that ought not see the light of day.

Elise raised her hand and smiled. Her fingers touched Shepard’s helmet cheek-guard, “Try to relax, Commander. Take slow, deep breaths.” Her voice shifted, becoming softer, her intonation lyrical and sweet. “Let go of your physical shell. Reach out to grasp the threads that bind us, one to another. Every action sends ripples across the galaxy. Every idea must touch another mind to live. Each emotion must mark another’s spirit.” Her other hand rose to the other side of Shepard’s helmet. “We are all connected. Every living being united in a single, glorious existence. Open yourself to the universe, Commander. Embrace eternity!” her pupils dilated again and sclera turned wholly black.

Shepard flinched and closed her eyes as the images started. They flickered past like a reel of film; each a few seconds long, yet so clear the impression burned into her mind until she felt like a witness. There were images of a planet, images of hundreds, maybe thousands of rachni, and the whispers, multiple, in a number of voices, all crying. She saw the ruins, high halls, dead machinery, dark vault-like rooms, abandoned laboratories, and the tanks. The vision shifted, Shepard saw a single ship, cryostasis pods full of eggs, worker rachni tasked with the upkeep of the royal clutch, of soldiers tasked with protecting the ship. A bittersweet lament played over the ship’s departure, and then the absolute silence of the void.

The images vanished, darkness settled, Shepard sought the light, was there more? Suddenly her field of vision was filled with snow and the bitter cold nipped at her limbs. Elise’s presence in her mind vanished all at once, with all the abruptness of being yanked out of a dream. Shepard felt herself stagger. Her eyes snapped open instinctively, only to see charcoal and burgundy. For the second time that day she felt a steadying arm around her back. “I got you, Shepard,” Nihlus whispered over her ear. “You teetered.”

Shepard hummed; she could feel pressure forming in her head, like a clamp pressing across her temples. Nihlus hesitated a moment too long to release her. She reached back to remove his arm, but then that was all he needed to tell him to let go. It was then that Shepard saw Elise, “Are you alright?” She asked automatically.

The Asari must have staggered back a step before slumping. She sat on the floor with her legs folded
under her, clutching at her head.

“Yes… yes, I am alright. I am sorry… Commander.” The asari said.

“What happened?” Nihlus asked.

“The… I’ve never melded with someone whose mental barriers were so powerful, yet so unfocused. I could barely keep the connection… and I may have severed it too abruptly. Everything told me to stop… it was the reason the Commander teetered.”

“I saw Suen, the rachni… the ruins… and the arc ship,” Shepard replied.

Elise looked up and smiled wanly, “I saw snow, mountains, a cliff… I heard Vi- … the rifle.”

Shepard froze like a pole; Elise had almost said her rifle’s name. No one aside from her ICT team knew her weapons had names.

“I saw what you had to do.” Elise continued. “I felt the cold nipping at my limbs, the weight of the snow… an impression so strong I could have sworn I was right there. Yet all of it was nothing compared to that singular feeling of being unwelcome.”

Shepard closed her eyes; she could not decide whether it was good or bad that Elise only got to see that. At least she had not seen her and Arthur; she did not know the truth.

Elise got to her feet shakily, “Commander, you have remarkable mental strength. If you ever need to, focus on that scene, that feeling… it will only amplify its potency.”

Shepard nodded mutely. If she focused on the feeling of that night, she would have to be the White Death again. She never wanted to be that again. The White Death was righteous rage, a pure thirst for vengeance, a monster.

“Enough. Shepard, get into Brant’s computer and get the data you need. We still have the hot lab to investigate,” Saren growled.

Shepard knew that he would be in a foul mood about now. He was the big bad veteran Spectre overruled by his protégé and the human. Saren’s ego would probably take a while to fully recover. Still, Shepard decided to temporarily swallow her pride in the interest of not starting an unnecessary conflict after what they had ironed out. She moved to the desk without offering much resistance to being ordered around.

Security on this terminal was tighter, but Shepard got through it with a little bit of time. After that she dug around the supplies for an OSD she could use. “I am going to batch-copy a system mirror. We can look at things later.” She also did not want Elise to overhear anything. Yes, the asari had willingly divulged a lot of information, but there were still secrets to keep.

“I want a copy of it,” Saren said.

“Of course, Spectre Arterius.”

“I will send it myself.” Nihlus replied.

“Works for me.” Shepard murmured as the progress bar crawled. Halfway through she reached up and slipped her fingers under her eye-shield to rub at the bridge of her nose. The vice-like pressure across her temples was not dissipating. It was not bad, not really pain, but it throbbed uncomfortably if she moved her head too sharply.
“What’s our plan for the hot lab?” Nihlus asked. “We know that the whole place has to be crawling with rachni, workers, and probably soldiers. We need something a little more thorough than simply shooting them dead.”

“The hot lab is high security; they have a neutron purge system in place.” Elise jumped in, eager now. “Mira can activate it. I assume you got the VI back online?”

“Yes, we did.”

“Good.” Elise nodded. “Though there is a small problem, Dr. Brant had the only key card on her.”

“So we find her and take the card.” Nihlus said.

“Great.” Shepard murmured as her temples gave another painful throb. This was going to suck worse than having to deal with the queen and melding with an asari. Shepard did not say it, but that was the first time she had melded with an asari, and for the love of her she could not figure out how that experience could be considered pleasurable.

In the end, Brant’s office desk yielded a bunch of key cards, none of them for the neutron purge system, but there was the master override which allowed them to leave the secure lab via its main entrance onto the Rift Station platform. Elise went ahead to the refuge, while Shepard, Nihlus, and Saren took the emergency elevator down to the hot lab with their weapons drawn.

It led onto an enclosed space above the lab proper, with windows on the sides offering an observational view below. The sight that greeted them should have turned her stomach; it was truly grizzly. Shepard figured it was a testament to just how much she had seen that she only wrinkled her nose at the truly horrible smell. A couple people, both lab workers and ERCS guards, had tried to reach the emergency elevator, but they were attacked just short. The rachni had been ruthless, tearing off limbs and impaling their victims on their whip-tentacles.

On the side of the room there were a number of grates, which seemed to have been pushed up from below. “They came up through those,” Shepard whispered as the motioned to the nearest grate.

“Great,” Shepard was the first to move into the room, inspecting the bodies. She paid no attention to the men and approached the only dead female in the room. The woman wore a white lab suit, and the Rachni had gotten her through the stomach from the back. She did not even get to crawl far before she died of traumatic blood loss. Shepard crouched down and rolled her over to check for the name tag, but then shook her head and got back to her feet, “Not our doctor.”

At the back of the room was another doorway. Shepard made her way over, and the door opened as soon as she was within range. There was another small room here; this one seemed full of computers. At the right side was a terminal for Mira, and lying practically at its feet was another woman. Her left arm had been torn off, lying on the other side of the room, along with an automatic weapon. It looked like the doctor took it from one of the ERCS men, but it served her poorly. By the trail of blood on the floor Shepard could see she had attempted to stumble over to the console, but the blood loss caused her to lose consciousness quickly, before she could arm the system.

Shepard crouched and flicked the woman’s name tag back into its proper position, utterly not surprised to see ‘Dr. Amelia Brant’ printed on it. “I found Brant,” she announced. Lying next to the doctor was a keycard smeared with blood. Shepard picked it up and got to her feet, “I think this is
what we need.”

“Unless you happen to have a reason to keep these rachni alive too, activate the purge and be done with it.” Saren said.

Shepard looked over her shoulder and quirked an eyebrow, was that passive-aggressive snark she heard? She turned back to the console, mostly to conceal the irresistible urge to roll her eyes. Did he really think she would keep these rachni alive? Even their own mother knew they were too far gone. She tapped at the console, and Mira’s holographic form materialized.

“Connecting.” Mira announced. “I have full access to the facility, and am at your disposal.”

“Facility status,” Saren demanded as he approached.

“Scanning, please wait a moment… Warning: Catastrophic containment breach in Laboratory Pod Gamma. The neutron purge system is functional, but has not been armed.” Mira announced.

“Saren, the vents…” Nihlus said as he cocked his assault rifle.

“I hear them.”

Shepard drew her guns and slipped her fingers to the ammo selectors. There was no mistaking what that announcement meant.

“VI, activate the neutron purge.” Saren went on.

“I’m sorry, but I can’t do that without proper code authorization.”

“Human.”

Shepard glared but slipped the keycard into the reader set into Mira’s terminal.

“Verify keycard.” Saren ordered.

Mira shifted her weight. “Key card verified. Neutron Purge execution in one hundred and twenty seconds.”

Suddenly there was a familiar shriek from the other room. “Here they come!” Nihlus called.

“Shep, grab your human and get to the elevator! Now!” Saren ordered.

“Hey! Not his human!” Shepard argued.

“Argue later, Shepard!” Nihlus grabbed her by the shoulder guard and began to pull. The three of them ran back out of the door, and just like that all the remaining grates in the room were pushed up from below. Five soldier rachni emerged. Nihlus opened fire on the ones on his right even as he ran for the elevator, still pulling Shepard along. Shepard decided not to protest, just this once. She leveled Sin on the rachni on the other side and fired. Saren brought up the rear, his assault rifle spraying at everything on the left side of the room.

Shepard had the free hand to slap onto the console that made the elevator door open. The soldiers advanced, shrieking and whipping their tendrils. One charged with a burst of speed, hurling its spear-like tentacles forward. Shepard used Sin’s sixth shot to blast one of the bulbous tips apart, and reached for Dex just as Nihlus yanked her back. Shepard staggered. The second tentacle hit the wall on the right of where she had just been and its tip embedded into the wall. Shepard automatically snapped up Dex and fired, severing the tentacle. The Rachni shrieked and withdrew the bleeding
Suddenly Saren was right in front of her, a wall of white armor, and then his whole body lit up with his biotics. He raised his left arm, palm down; fingers splayed, and then turned his wrist and closed his fist in a single quick movement. A singularity opened right in the midst of the rachni with a whomp. The bugs shrieked as it pulled them in and back, lifting all five clear off their feet until all they could do was flail helplessly. Saren reached for the grenades magnetically clipped to his armor on his right. A flick of his wrist sent one into the singularity. Then the Spectre turned, stepped into the elevator, and flicked his fingers across the console to close the door. The doors had just closed and the cabin began to move when there was the unmistakable thud of detonation.

“Warning: Neutron Purge System is armed. Sealing elevator shaft at hot lab terminus.” Mira’s voice announced over the loudspeaker. There was a thud loud enough to hear in the cabin as it ascended. “Neutron bombardment initialized.”

Shepard holstered her weapons and ejected the hot clip from Sin before reaching behind her back for a fresh one. To say she was surprised would be an understatement. Saren had just displayed adept-level ability with a casual flick of his fingers. She was beginning to see how he managed to survive as a Spectre for twenty-four years. Anyone unwary to be suckered by that singularity was essentially a sitting duck for any decent marksman, to say nothing of grenades. Saren was the ruthless type who would turn things into a duck shoot.

“Guess this means mission complete,” Nihlus broke the silence.

“Yes.” Saren replied.

Shepard knew there was just the paperwork left. They needed to contact Port Hanshan and organize the evacuation. She reached up under her face-shield to rub at the bridge of her nose. A fresh burst of adrenaline and being turian-handled did not help her headache in the least. Suddenly the pressure was no longer just pressure. She could feel pain blossoming, arching back along the sides of her head.

Then and there Shepard swore to herself that she would never meld with an asari again, not even for a million credits. She had nothing against the asari, but it was best to keep them out of her head. She was glad that this whole mess was finally over with. Still, the drive back to Port Hanshan was going to be an absolute joy.

Chapter End Notes

Author Notes: I bet you did not see that coming. Yes I decided to make this arc all about my solution to the question of the Protheans and the origin of the Rachni Wars, both of which involved the Reapers in game. Thus, with no Reapers, how would I explain the extinction of previous galactic civilizations and the Rachni aggression? Well the Protheans being whom they are, as hinted by Javik, some of their subservient races getting desperate made some sense.

General Notes: Protheans, Rachni, and Asari – Everything in this chapter hinges on what we know. Javik admitted that the Protheans messed with the “primitives”. We know the Asari were engineered. I went on a limb to say the Rachni were too, though to a far lesser
degree. Then we have a common element between the three, the “extra ability”. So if we suppose that the Protheans enhanced the other two races, their method of enhancing might be similar, and maybe based off their own ability, so then the Asari and Rachni being affected by the same biological weapon is not beyond the realm of possibility.

**Saren’s biotic power level** – In ME1 we see Saren use the warp liberally. But because he is who he is, I decided to dial up his power. He has adept-level biotics, including the ability to form a singularity. He just hides the weakness of his abilities. He has a limit on how many abilities, how often, he can use.

**Chapter Notes:**

**On Medicinal Doses** – The standard unit of measurement for injected medicine is the milliliter. But there is another unit that floats around, the “cubic centimeter” or CC. [1 CC = 1 milliliter]. I plan to use the units kind of interchangeably, with the CC being more common in speech (easier to say) and the milliliter more in description as it’s more formal.
Episode 23: Forewarning

Shepard’s return to the Normandy was hardly the end of the job on Noveria. She ended up having to do a lot of damage control after Saren’s report to the Council downplayed some key nuances, and made her look bad. Shepard was entirely unsurprised that he tried to bury her, but she resented having to explain things to the Council while her head felt like it would explode from internal pressure.

The meeting went about as well as she could have imagined it would. Nihlus played a role in counter-arguing some of Saren’s assertions, but the Council was still unhappy. Still, there were little blessings to count. Valern seemed very interested in the toxin, and thus he had not ripped into her as much as he could have. Tevos delivered a surprise when she said that while the rachni might pose a threat, she was leaning toward agreeing that murder was not the answer. Sparatus was perhaps the least amused. He made a valiant effort of disguising things by arguing how much blood would be shed if things went south, but Shepard was on to his real motivations.

The way she saw it, while the argument was valid to a point, it was a skewed point. The turians were the peacekeeping force of the galaxy, so if the rachni decided to be a problem, it was their necks on the line. Sparatus was covering the bases, but he definitely had a bias. It was just his lucky day that she was in so much pain by that point that she chose not to stand there, smiling, until it dawned on him that she knew. That and loathe him as she might, he was still a councilor, and she needed something from him, so she chose to play nice. She gave him the same argument she made to Saren, pointing out that the alternative was genocide, just with a lot less accusations of hypocrisy, and more taking a subtle dig at the turian predilection for excess force, something she was not willing to turn to.

The glare Sparatus gave her was withering even over the holographic projection, but it effectively shut down the argument. Tevos seemed vaguely amused and Valern watched the exchange with the look of someone putting numbers to every little thing. Shepard knew that she was not going to be Sparatus’ favorite after that one. Not that she ever stood a chance of being his favorite.

In the end, Nihlus promised the Council all the information they had along with his report, which served to end the meeting. When the communicator shut off, Shepard practically slumped over the COMCON table, finally able to let go of the ‘everything is great!’ act. She waited out the worst of another burst of pain before she could collect herself well enough to march out of the room, hand the reins over to Kaidan, who looked very worried, and make her way to the medbay.

She was not surprised people were on to her act. Nihlus had figured out she was in pain during the Mako ride back, when he noticed she had increased the tint on her helmet visor to combat the light
glaring off the snow, along with the fact that she did not gun it through the tunnels. The Spectre seemed perfectly happy to trail behind her all the way down.

Once in the medbay she submitted herself to Dr. Chakwas’ full scans. The doctor ascertained she had brainwave irregularities consistent with a recent meld, along with some superficial swelling, the source of her headache, which happened when the meld was resisted. Shepard took her medication and grabbed a fruit jelly toast sandwich from the mess before she turned to her cabin to sleep things off.

~          *          ~          ~          *          ~          ~          *          ~

Shepard jolted awake and automatically turned to look at the holographic clock on her bedside table, which announced she had slept around six hours. One glance through the skylight over her bed told her that the Normandy was still docked on Noveria. In her pain-ADDLED state she forgot to tell Kaidan that they really ought to pull out, and bless his well-meaning heart, but Kaidan was hardly the one to make executive decisions on his own. A little chime over the intercom sounded again, and Shepard understood what had caused her to wake up.

“What is it, EDI?” she asked as she splayed out on her bed.

“My apologies, Commander, but Admiral Hackett is on the QEC, it is urgent.”

Shepard groaned. Had wind of the rachni gotten back to the admiral? She had not even worked up a report. It either somehow got out, or this was unrelated. Either way Shepard wished she had a few more hours of sleep. “I’ll be right down, EDI.” She muttered as she pushed off the bed and reached for her boots. “Oh… can you tell me what the coffee level in the mess is?” An unorthodox request, but EDI did have internal cameras everywhere.

“A fresh pot of coffee has been prepared ten minutes ago.”

“Good,” she raked her brain for a long moment trying to remember who would be on duty in the mess right now. Matthews was probably still in bed, as he only got up an hour and a half before breakfast, for his shift. “Could you tell the on-duty serviceman to hold a cup for me?” It was moot; her memory was still too sleep-fogged to recall the rosters she had signed.

“Of course, Commander.”

Fortunately, Shepard had been too tired to even switch out of her fatigues. She only had to pull her boots back on and she was out the door. She was acutely aware that she must look like something the cat dragged in, but the admiral would have to forgive that. She was on deck two in less than four minutes. It was then, when she saw the night shift CIC crew that it fully sank in. Admiral Hackett was on the communicator at this hour, so something was up, and very likely it had nothing to do with the rachni.

At the half-wall junction of the OD she stopped for a brief moment, surprised at what she saw. Nihlus lay asleep on the couch, a datapad on the floor next to him. It did not take much to figure out that he lost the fight with exhaustion while trying to work on his report. Shepard grinned, and stepped into the hallway leading to the COMCON. Once there, she stopped in front of the wooden-topped table and adjusted her top one last time, “EDI, if you will.”

“Right away, Commander.”

The lights dimmed and the holographic projector kicked into power with a loud hum. When the admiral’s image stabilized, Shepard snapped to attention and saluted. “Admiral. My apologies for the
“At ease, Commander. I understand.” Hackett replied. “EDI told me that you just got back from a mission. Something very urgent has come up; otherwise I would have waited a few hours.”

“What’s going on, Admiral?” Shepard asked. Had EDI given the admiral more details? He did not say, well she would still have to write up a report.

“A routine patrol passing through the Armstrong Nebula’s Grissom system was attacked thirty-seven hours ago. We lost the Cajamarca, no survivors, while the Mukden limped out of the system with serious damage, and only entered comm buoy range five hours ago. Captain Ishida reports major geth presence in the Grissom system.”

The mere mention of geth instantly put Shepard on alert. “How many ships?” She wondered. How many people had died on the Cajamarca? Routine patrols were done by frigates, so Shepard could safely assume forty people at least.

“We are not certain. Reports indicate the frigates did not see them until sensors picked up heat signatures materialize from within the atmosphere of Notanban, the system’s gas giant. The Cajamarca was shot down by a cruiser-sized vessel, and the Mukden’s sensors recorded four frigate-sized vessels with it.”

“I see.” That did not sound like a recon force to Shepard. Furthermore, the Armstrong Nebula was the backyard of Alliance Space; there were grounds to be worried. “By what I know, Admiral, the geth do not need much in terms of environmental regulation; they allow their vessels to cool, which gives them passive stealth. Hiding in the atmosphere of a gas giant would complete the mirage.” She knew why the Normandy was contacted. It was the only Alliance ship with the active stealth needed to sneak into the Grissom system to ascertain the number of enemy ships there.

“They are clever, I will give them that. I want the Normandy to conduct full reconnaissance. I need to know whether they are creating a staging ground within our space. If they are, they will find us to be less than gracious hosts.”

“I will get right to it, Admiral.”

“I know you will. Best of luck, Commander. I have preparations to make on my end. Hackett out.”

Shepard only waited until the connection was fully cut before she breezed out of the COMCON. “EDI, Armstrong Nebula, where is its major relay?” She asked in the hallway.

“The Armstrong Nebula relay is found in the Hong system.”

So it was not in the Grissom system proper. Now she knew why it took so long to get a message out. It also created an opening for them to go in quietly. A ship emerging from the relay corridor essentially broadcasted its arrival with a burst of radiation. The Normandy’s IES system took some of the radiation out of the equation when they came out of FTL under their own power. “EDI, get Joker to take us to Hong, for now.”

“Right away, Commander.”

She entered the OD and moved toward the couch, idly wondering if she could get away with letting her crew sleep. This required a general officer’s meeting. She needed to talk to Adams as well; the Normandy would need every bit of her IES tanks and shields for this. She also needed to talk to Garrus, were their guns ready to defend the ship?
“Shepard, you are not thinking about smothering me in my sleep, are you?” Nihlus murmured as he cracked open one eye.

Shepard blinked, and it took her a moment to realize she had been standing over him quite ominously. She could not help but smile, “Not today, Nihlus.”

“Not today?” He asked as he sat up, giving her one of his puckish grins, “Should I be locking my door at night?”

She bit back the urge to ask what other reason she would have to enter his cabin in the middle of the night and merely grinned back; at least he knew she was kidding with him. The moment of humor drained away as she watched Nihlus reach down for his fallen pad. She sighed, moved over to the couch extension, and sat down, “We have a situation. Admiral Hackett just told me a patrol stumbled on geth in the Armstrong Nebula. We lost a ship, no survivors, and the other was damaged and had to limp out.”

Nihlus sobered up instantly, “When?”

“The attack happened thirty-seven hours ago, the Mukden only limped into buoy range five hours ago.”

“Hackett wants the Normandy to run reconnaissance?”

“Yes. I had EDI get Joker to take us out; we’ll stop at Hong before we jump FTL to Grissom.”

Nihlus set his data pad on the coffee table, “Alright… but how is your head?”

“Don’t worry about me, I’m tough, pain’s gone. I’ll probably have about twenty-four hours to recover fully. What about you?” She was deflecting, she knew that. His expression at that moment told her he knew she was deflecting too.

Shepard called a general officer’s meeting in the mid-morning once she had some preliminary preparations ironed out. The OD ended up packed with everyone, including Adams, present and alert, though some still carried mugs of coffee. Legion was the last one to drift in, ever the watcher from the back.

She began with a timeline of what happened and what they could be looking at; going over the little bits of information she got from Hackett’s call, and two hours later, a forwarded data packet. The latter included a detailed report from Captain Ishida and the relevant sensor logs from the Mukden.

“How many did we lose on the Cajamarca?” Ashley was the first to break the utter silence that had lingered during the presentation.

“How many did we lose on the Cajamarca?” Ashley was the first to break the utter silence that had lingered during the presentation.

“By the crew compliment and the Mukden’s report… the Cajamarca went down with all hands on board, we lost forty-three on the Cajamarca and four on the Mukden, so forty-seven in total.” Shepard replied.

She saw all the humans in the room shift their weight, it was a blow alright. Forty-seven families would be getting the worst sort of notice. Their loved ones would not be coming back, and worse, for forty-three families there would be nothing to bury either.

“We better make those tin cans bleed for that,” Ashley growled.
“Geth do no bleed,” Legion spoke up.

“Yea?” Ashley rounded on it, her hands on her hips. “I’ve shot enough geth, drew plenty of that white fluid you have.”

“The liquid you are referring to is a coolant used to control the temperature of internal platform components.”

“Semantics, that’s all!” Ashley argued.

Shepard knew a fight was coming, she also knew it was not the time to have it. “Alright, let’s focus on what matters here. Admiral Hackett wants to know how many ships we are facing, and if they have a base somewhere in the system. We will probably run our IES to the limit. Lieutenant Adams and I already discussed some measures to optimize our IES time.”

“My team is working out the details as we speak.” Adams added.

Shepard nodded and turned to Garrus who stood at the side of the room, arms crossed. “How are the guns?”

Garrus straightened into a formal stance and his arms dropped to his sides, “I completed basic reconfiguration per your request. The Normandy’s Thanix system is ready to fire at full power, maximum constriction if necessary.”

“Good.” Shepard leaned back in her seat. “What happened is a travesty, and no doubt Admiral Hackett will put the Normandy in forefront of the action when time comes. But for the moment we are to run recon. I gathered everyone to let you know that once we hit the Grissom system the Normandy is in deep stealth. We will not link up to the comm buoy network, and all unnecessary heat-producing systems will be shut down to conserve IES capacity. That means have your hot showers before we hit Grissom and meals will be plainer than normal. I know Matthews has been spoiling us all, but this is still a military ship, we will survive a day or two of eating like it.”

A forced sort of chuckle went about the room, which was what Shepard was aiming for, even if she was deathly serious about the hot water being unavailable for the duration of the mission. Her earlier meeting with Adams had confirmed they could squeeze out another hour of stealth by actively avoiding heat production in non-essential systems. No hot water and less cooking were the least of it. Adams said that with some minor management of air-flow in the vents, they could eventually turn off the on-board heating and use the internal emission sinks as a radiator instead. This would allow the sinks to redistribute some heat internally, increasing their capacity, giving the Normandy that combined extra hour.

“The modified duty rosters are with EDI,” Shepard went on. “Now, I am fully aware that this will be a tense operation. We know these geth are dangerous and liable to open fire on sight, but we have all the reasons we need to get this done. They killed innocent men and women; we will not forgive or forget.”

“Here, here,” Ashley echoed.

Shepard nodded and went on, “If that’s not good enough, then consider this the ultimate test for this ship and her crew. If we can’t do this, then no one can, in which case these particular geth go free and we give our critics ammunition. There’s plenty enough of that already. We are the most unique crew in the galaxy, but they think that we are nothing but a motley bunch of outcasts and misfits. Let’s prove them wrong. Let’s get this done, and let’s do it right!” She figured a little appeal to honor and competitive nature ought to get the crew motivated and on-point.
“Aye, aye, ma’am!” Ashley and Kaidan responded in a single voice.

Nods and harrumphs went around the room. Adams nodded his head and smiled.

“Alright, I think that about covers it. I will keep you updated on the situation, for now you’re dismissed!” Shepard finished.

The room emptied quickly, but Tali hung back. She waited only long enough for the door to close behind the big party before she turned back to Shepard. “Commander, may I have a moment of your time?”

“Sure, Tali, more than a moment even.” Shepard smiled.

The quarian clasped her hands before her and cleared her throat, “I know this is much to ask, but… I was wondering whether I could be up here during the operation. I want to collect some data for myself.”

Shepard knew instantly what Tali meant. She was still on her pilgrimage, and needed to bring something back to her people. If they could produce a corpus of data on the geth for Tali, she could complete her rite of passage. “I will not stop you, Tali. I could use your input, your knowledge of the geth. This is why I hired you. Still, I am wondering, what will this lead to?” Shepard knew what the data would be used for, but she wanted to hear it from Tali personally.

“My people have a single wish, to retake Rannoch and end our three centuries of exile. If there is anything I can get that helps however little, it is my duty to get it,” Tali replied even as her fingers began to wring. “Commander, you embrace artificial intelligence as your friend; I respect that, but please believe me when I say that not all artificial intelligences are as helpful as EDI.”

“And what of Legion?”

“Legion is a unique quirk of programming at best. At worst it is biding its time, spying on us,” Tali drawled, her tone one of someone explaining a plainly-obvious fact. “Even if it is the first, one platform with ideas does not make up for the rest. They sought to exterminate my people; instead they drove us from our home and condemned us to this shadow existence.” Tali went on, her tone warming with a flash of anger. “Commander, have you ever taken a stroll on the presidium and stopped to smell the exotic flowers? I can’t do that because the pollen of those flowers could kill me. This suit filters it out, and with it, the natural perfume of the flowers. The geth did that to us. I can not forgive them for that.”

Shepard could not offer a logical counter-argument for any of that. The Geth did nothing to endear themselves to anyone, and Legion could very well be a unique, odd exception. Then it could also be said that even if Legion’s people only wanted the galaxy to leave them alone, they were still in control of Rannoch, and that perpetuated the Quarian exile. Shepard wanted to think the best of everyone, but even she could not be so idealistic that she would deny facts staring her in the face. “I understand, Tali. Collect your data, what you do with it, is up to you.” What more could she say?

“Thank you, Commander.” Tali replied, a little calmer now. Her hands dropped to her sides, “Now I need to go and help with the preparations.”

“Alright.”

Tali hurried out of the room as fast as she could without outright running. Shepard sighed, why did this mess have to rear its head now? A couple days of time off after Noveria would have been a boon.
The Normandy entered the Grissom system twenty-seven hours after they departed Noveria. The system was not big, three planets with two asteroid belts. Grissom, as an old star, had gone into its final phase as a blue giant, releasing unrelenting solar winds that slowly stripped the planets of their atmospheres. Not that any of the planets had the potential to be a garden world even before that change. All of them were poor on anything worth mining, further ensuring that the only traffic through was pirates and mercenaries looking for a hiding hole. The Alliance only ran occasional patrols, to keep an eye out for unsavory types, and up to now, those hardly offered any excitement. Shepard could see how the Cajamarca and Mukden were taken by surprise.

With the Normandy hiding in the outer asteroid belt, Shepard gathered her core team, consisting of Kaidan, Ashley, Tali, Garrus, Nihlus, Legion, and Wrex, around the central console of the CIC for an orientation session of sorts.

The first piece of information EDI reported was that she had scanned every Alliance frequency, encoded or not, but the Cajamarca’s debris field was silent and cold. There were no escape pods pinging for pickup. The Mukden had reported no survivors, but Shepard had held out hope for even one escape pod to have made it. Reality proved to be a harsh mistress.

After that, she ordered EDI to conduct preliminary observations. From those EDI collated a map of the system which she projected as a three-dimensional image over the central console in the CIC. Included were relevant data points and locations from the Mukden’s reports and sensor logs, highlighting Notanban, around where the Mukden and Cajamarca were attacked, and the Cajamarca’s debris field.

“This is everything we have right now. It does not seem much, but that’s why we’re here,” Shepard began. “The Mukden reported that a cruiser-sized ship emerged from the upper atmosphere of Notanban, escorted by four frigate-sized drop-ships, similar to the ones we saw on Eden Prime and Daiwi.”

“That does not sound like a recon force,” Kaidan murmured.

Shepard nodded, “My instinct tells me there is a base in this system. Not on Notanban, but somewhere close, I’m thinking Solcrum.” She indicated the gas giant’s biggest moon. “That said, EDI is not picking anything up, but we can explain that. Notanban is a gas giant. If the ships are voided and unheated, they will be almost completely invisible in a gas giant’s atmosphere.” Much of the galaxy’s sensory network relied on detecting warm objects against the cold void of space. Conversely, an object that was allowed to reach temperature equilibrium with its surrounding environment was nearly invisible. “Of course that is until they fire up their engines.”

“They could hide a whole fleet in there,” Garrus said.

“There’s a scary thought,” Ashley murmured.

“They can also stay there indefinitely, while we do not have time to wait.” Nihlus crossed his arms over his chest. “Therein lays the problem.”

Shepard held up her hand, “Let’s not get too far ahead here. We need to find their base first. Passive imagery will be enough for that. Even if they buried their compound, there will be above-ground defenses for EDI to find. After that, we can come up with a way to stir the hornet nest up.”

“Actually,” Tali cut in, “I think I know how we can flush them out, Commander.” When all attention turned to her, Tali cleared her throat, “I can reconfigure some probes to emit a spoofed signal, make
the geth think Alliance ships dropped out of FTL in the vicinity of the outer asteroid belt.”

“Won’t launching them immediately give away our position?” Kaidan wondered.

“Not if we eject them passively, and activate the signals remotely.” Tali replied.

“Will the geth buy that? What’s stopping them from looking out a window and realizing that there are no ships?” Ashley asked, she did not sound impressed with the plan.

“We have never observed windows on geth ships.” Tali said.

“Windows are structural weaknesses. Geth do not use them.” Legion stated bluntly.

Shepard was a fair bit impressed. That was the sort of creative problem solving that she valued, “Well that’s a plan, but can you rig up a probe net, make it look like a whole *flotilla* just dropped out of FTL?”

“Of course, Commander, though rigging multiple probes will take longer.”

“That’s fine. We have tech-heads a plenty to help you.” Shepard offered, after all, how hard was it to reconfigure a probe to emit a certain signal? “Here’s what I’m thinking. We spoof a dreadnought and four battle groups. That’s four cruisers and twelve frigates, seventeen ships in total. If we are going to kick this hornet nest, let’s kick it hard; make all the hornets come out.”

“First you went fishing for a maw with explosives. Now you’re fishing for geth with probes. This is going to be good,” Wrex rumbled, amused.

“Hold on there, Wrex. There will be no fighting. The Mukden already reported more ships than the Normandy can engage, even with the Thanix in peak condition. We are only doing a headcount. I have all reasons to suspect that Admiral Hackett will initiate major action based on our data.”

“Just as long as I get to shoot something soon,” Wrex grumbled.

Shepard shook her head, but she knew that was coming. She did warn Wrex that her job was not all gun fights. “If the base on Solcrum is as big as I think it will be, there will be plenty of shooting for all of us.” Wrex nodded, but he was still not pleased with having to wait.

“There is just one question remaining. What ships do we spoof?” Kaidan wondered.

Shepard grinned, “That’s the easy part. We bring in the Kilimanjaro and her four regular groups.” In many ways those ships were known as the first among equals in the Fifth Fleet, and in all probability Admiral Hackett would bring their might down on the geth’s heads soon enough. “We need to seed the asteroid field with probes before we move on Notanban and Solcrum. Tali, I will help you, it will speed up the process, save us stealth time. Do you think we need another set of hands?”

Tali hummed, “Configuring one should take about ten minutes, and we need to do seventeen. I could do it on my own in three Terran hours, but with your assistance, Commander, that’ll be an hour and a half.”

“I will help as well,” Garrus volunteered. “Cut that down to just an hour.”

“Alright, thank you, Garrus. We can do this work in the shuttle bay. We have our plan. Now, are there any questions or concerns?” She could see that everyone on the CIC was tense like a bowstring. Shepard was not stupid; she knew what the probes would entail. The geth would know there was someone in the system; the Normandy’s only security was their stealth. Everything hinged
on the IES system being enough to prevent their detection. The Normandy would essentially float in the shadows and count the number of geth ships that came running once the nest was kicked.

When no one raised any particular burning questions, Shepard nodded and turned to Kaidan. “I leave the CIC in your hands, Kaidan.”

“Aye, aye, ma’am.”

Shepard smiled and stepped around him toward the elevator, with Tali and Garrus in tow.

Two hours later the Normandy made a stealthy approach to Solcrum. Shepard ordered Joker to come from where the moon would be right between them and Notanban, an extra layer of precaution. The probes had been configured in fifty minutes, and after that it was merely a matter of ejecting them. Fortunately the Normandy had a system for that, kind of.

The probes were normally used as part of the ship’s active sensory network; they could be launched to collect information on surface conditions if something was preventing an accurate orbital scan. Thus the launch mechanism found in the ship’s belly could send them out with considerable momentum. However, with a few tweaks to the mass effect field that normally prevented accidental jettison, and the probes simply slid out as if the Normandy was on a planet, and there was somewhere for them to fall to. Timing the toggle of the safety field was a button press in engineering. An unorthodox solution to a problem, but sometimes one had to improvise.

They seeded some of the bigger rocks in the belt, to give the probes apparent mass. There would be no disguising the fact that their phantom fleet did not produce heat like actual ships, but Shepard hoped the geth would think that the ships had dropped out of FTL and immediately turned off their main drives, intending to coast on residual momentum as their main drives cooled. She hoped that the issue of travel time would be on their side. Heat and beacon signals were fundamentally electromagnetic spectrum radiation, which propagated at the speed of light. The probe signal would take a good four minutes to reach Notanban and Solcrum.

Currently Shepard was in the OD. She had given EDI instructions, but beyond that, the AI knew what she was doing, there was no point in pacing or hovering behind people’s backs on the CIC, it would only make everyone even more nervous than they already were. The Normandy was ready for come what may, the geth would not take them by surprise.

Instead of haunting the CIC she was going through the notes and information Tali had collected on the parts in the cargo hold. The quarian had been zealously thorough in taking apart the platforms. Every piece of hardware was disassembled, analyzed, tested, and annotated. Maybe some part of it was Tali fretting over being ‘useful’ and going a little overboard, but at times like this; insane attention to detail was the key.

The OD door opened, and Shepard automatically looked up from her seat on the couch, only to see Legion pad in. She set her pad down on the coffee table and watched the geth approach.

“Shepard-Commander.”

“Legion. Something I can do for you?”

The geth tipped its head a little and the flaps on the top shifted, “We observed an increase in stress responses to our presence among the crew.”

“Ah,” Shepard replied. Stress responses? Well that was a cute way of saying ‘passive aggressive
behavior’, which she was sure that it was. “Has it gotten bad?”

“Negative. It is within expected parameters. We are aware that organics perceive all geth as hostile.”

“Well the idea that the geth have factions is a bit of a novel concept. Truthfully Legion, your people have been the galaxy’s hermits for three hundred years. At this point only the Asari and Krogan can remember a time before. The latter are hardly keen on sharing their impression and the former…” Shepard stopped there. She had always seen the Asari as uncomfortably aloof. They had a sort of arrogance to them borne from the difference in how they perceived time. It was staggering to think that humanity went from the crusades to space within the lifetime of just one asari, yet that is exactly what it amounted to. “After three centuries, thinking of the geth as a danger that lurks in the dark is a normalized thing. It will take time and positive reinforcement for the perception of the normal to change.” And a miracle, but Shepard did not say that. She was fully aware that the galaxy feared synthetics like the bubonic plague.

“Acknowledged.” Legion replied.

“Speaking of which. Legion, you know we have platforms in the cargo hold, correct?” Shepard asked.

“Affirmative. We are aware that Creator-Tali’Zorah conducted a survey of the captured hardware.”

“Legion, I want to ask you a question, if I may.”

“Clarify.” Legion replied as it tipped its head to the side, the picture of attentive curiosity.

Shepard leaned back in her seat, for no other reason than to be able to look up at Legion without tipping her head back, which got a little awkward. She knew better than to ask the geth to sit. “Tali took apart the black platform that led the geth on Daiwi, where we captured the hardware. We saw and destroyed another on Eden Prime. Tali tells me it is not a geth, it has no computer for geth runtimes. Do you know who leads the Heretics?”

Legion’s face-light narrowed as it lowered its gaze to the floor. “The unit you refer to is controlled by the Old Machine.”

Shepard blinked, “Controlled, as in, remote controlled?”

“Affirmative.” Legion replied without hesitation.

“This Old Machine, is it a synthetic intelligence?”

“Affirmative.”

Shepard blinked, stunned almost mute. Her theory had proven to be right. “What… how old is it? Who built it?” She asked.

“The Old Machine is Prothean.” Legion replied.

Shepard blinked; the Heretics were being led by a fifty thousand year old AI? “Something that old is still functional?” she asked.

“Affirmative.”

“How… when?” Shepard did not know what she was asking even. It boggled her mind to think that a computer housing an AI had remained in tact in some corner of the galaxy for fifty thousand years,
and the geth had been the ones to find it. They clearly must have been the ones to find it, because how else could the faction form? It using remote controlled platforms made sense as well. Most AIs, EDI included, were bound to powerful, but physically enormous quantum computers. They had no legs or arms. In that sense the geth were unique.

“Shepard-Commander, clarify your question.”

Shepard sighed, “Well… When did the Old Machine cause the split among the Geth?” She would not come out and say that she realized they found what must have been a sizable cache of Prothean artifacts somewhere in or around their space. Where they found said cache did not matter now. The precise date they found the AI did not matter either. She wanted to understand when and how they split into factions, and where the division lay.

“The Geth Schism occurred nineteen years, eight months, and three standard galactic days ago.” Legion replied.

It fit! Wrex said they were first seen outside the Perseus Veil nineteen years prior. Wrex’s loose puzzle piece suddenly slid into place, and the image became a little clearer. The Old Machine clearly wanted to find other Prothean tech, probably for the data, things that may or may not be in the AI’s databases. Why else go after the beacon and the computers? Why did it want that information? She could not begin to guess. It could very well be that it wanted to keep it out of the hands of non-Protheans, some programmed directive to protect a defunct empire even now.

Right now she could not focus on the theories and the possibilities; she had a mission to complete. If they were to stop this Old Machine from terrorizing organics in the present day, destroying it might become imperative. Of course, destroying Prothean tech was a crime in the eyes of the Council as much as keeping Prothean tech secret. The Geth, not being signatories to the Citadel Conventions, naturally kept their findings to themselves, there was no use quibbling over that now.

Shepard hummed; there was another curious quirk of the translator for her. Whatever the term the Geth used for their splinter faction, it translated as ‘heretic’ to her, and now Legion had used the term ‘schism’. It implied there was a system of beliefs in place. A curious concept when one considered that the Geth were a synthetic race. “The term you use, heretics, carries certain connotations to humans. Heretics are those who do not abide to the religious beliefs of the majority, the orthodoxy. Is that merely a glitch of the translation or…”

Legion’s emotive plates began to move as it seemed to consider things. “There is no mistake of translation, Shepard-Commander.” Its eye-lamp narrowed, as if it was contemplating whether it ought to answer her question fully. “Geth build our own future. The Heretics asked the Old Machine to give them a future. They are no longer part of us.”

“So there is an ideological division,” Shepard repeated.

“Affirmative.”

Shepard thought she understood. A schism of ideology as such, one group believing their way to the future was better than another’s, it could be called a schism. It was still a linguistic quibble.

“We studied the Old Machine’s hardware for a way to improve our data storage methods. It was deemed necessary for the future. The Old Machine studied us in turn. It offered an alternative version of the future.” Legion volunteered. “Its arguments were convincing. Some among us accepted the logic of the Old Machine’s offer.”

“And… what future are the Geth building?”
Legion’s head flaps flared momentarily, and then narrowed. “Ours.”

“Will anyone else be affected by whatever it is you’re doing?” Shepard thought she had to know, this conversation was veering into some very important territory. If Legion’s people were up to no good, she could not help them, not in good conscience. Shepard wanted to give Legion’s people a chance, but she was never one to ignore reality. If the future they envisioned included galactic conquest, it simply would not do.

The geth shifted its weight from leg to leg, imitating an entirely organic gesture of discomfort. “If they involve themselves, they will.”

Where had it picked up such mannerisms? Why was it displaying them? “Your people still wish to be left alone?”

“Affirmative.”

Hermits of the galaxy indeed, Shepard thought to herself. Hermit monks, if one squinted. It really looked like they treated the Perseus Veil like their monastery. “And what of this… Heretic future?” Shepard wondered.

“The Old Machine’s authority parallels that of the ancient human concept of a ‘god-king’, a leader whose absolute authority is drawn from a perceived inherent superiority. The Heretics believe the Old Machine can give them ascendancy over organics.”

“Ah.” Shepard thought that added some spice to the reason to use the terms. They were dealing with an arrogant, egomaniacal AI that thought it was the apex of synthetic intelligence, if not outright a god of some kind. That certainly explained the machine’s manner of talking. Guess she would have to commit regicide mixed with deicide before long. That sounded only a little fancier than just vandalism on priceless artifacts. Shepard was under no delusions, destroying this AI would mean losing everything it might have in its databases, it would be a shame, but she would do it, if the thing pushed her. “One last question, Legion. I just want to know the size of the Heretic faction. Just how many believed this Old Machine?”

“As of our last census, of the total number of Geth runtimes, fifteen percent followed the Old Machine during the schism.”

Fifteen percent of however many Geth there were. She had to admit; Legion was a wily one, informative and vague at the same time. She knew that if she asked for specific numbers now, it would not tell her. If it told her how many runtimes, platforms, or ships the Heretics had, it would be giving away the relative power of the Geth. In many ways, Legion was almost a diplomat for its people. If there was something Shepard knew about politics, is that diplomats rarely pulled all the aces stuffed up their sleeves. But then, as a diplomat, Legion was also trying to dissociate its people from the problem group, without outright condemning them. Politicians were really all the same.

“I understand your concerns, Legion.” Shepard said, as it was the only thing she could say. Whatever Legion had in their collective minds, could not be pried out of them. She could just be ready for unpleasant surprises.

Legion left the OD after their conversation, leaving Shepard with plenty to think about. To her, it seemed that too much of the big picture suddenly revolved around the Protheans, and it all started with the beacon on Eden Prime. There were so many disparate bits of information coming together to form a single picture. However and whatever happened to their galactic empire, it had something to
do with Kryptin-8. The Protheans had done something, driven people to create such a nasty toxin, and that meant they were not the saints that the galaxy wanted them to be. Now this talk with Legion hinted that they also created malignant, or at the very least very arrogant synthetics that seemed keen on ruling in their stead. What other unpleasant surprises awaited them? Did the Prothean legacy get much darker than this?

The OD door opened and Shepard looked up. Nihlus entered the room, carrying a datapad in his hands. Shepard sat up straighter, “Is there something wrong?” She asked.

Nihlus approached the couch and sat down before he offered her the pad. “I found emails in the mirror image we made of Brant’s computer.”

Shepard took the pad and skimmed over its contents silently. There was a whole series of messages between Brant and the same recipient, who always signed off on messages with “- A.B.” Shepard froze; she knew who signed messages like that. In another message down the line she found confirmation when Brant asked how Cadmus was coming along, and A.B. told her in reply never to use the word again, because they could not be guaranteed security in these messages. “Brant was emailing Armistan Banes; she asked about Cadmus once and was politely told to never do that again.” Shepard recapped.

“I also found the shipment authorizations, and yes… they were to a ‘satellite facility’ on Binthu, apparently under the pretence of studying Rachni in that sort of extreme environment. At the very least all that is enough evidence to say Brant was affiliated with Cerberus.”

“Binary Helix looks shadier by the day.” Shepard murmured.

“Investigating the company is not our priority, but I would not be surprised if their Cerberus connections went deeper,” Nihlus agreed as he plucked the pad from her fingers.

Shepard slumped back into her seat. “Great, one more layer to this mess. All this digging and we are nowhere near the bottom. Is there even a bottom to this?”

“There is always a bottom, Shepard. This time it is a long way down.”

Shepard groaned. She knew strictly speaking he was right, but did it matter that she was tired of digging? This was like trying to untie the Gordian knot, not happening.

“You are in a morose mood today,” Nihlus observed as he tossed the datapad onto the coffee table, where it landed with a loud clack and skidded along a short distance.

“Look at it from where I’m sitting, Nihlus. Everything we discovered, about Cerberus, about the Protheans, the Rachni, the Geth… it all seems to be twining together into a single quagmire, and I’m right smack in the center of it.”

Nihlus hummed, “I see your point. We did discover some shocking information on Noveria. The Protheans, the toxin, the Rachni… I see the connections, but how do the Geth fit into this single picture?”

“Ah.” Shepard turned to him and grinned, “I just had a rather interesting conversation with Legion.”

“Oh?”

Shepard met his gaze and nodded before launching into an explanation of what Legion told her. Nihlus listened with a calmness and stillness that seemed uncharacteristic of him. When she finished, the Spectre leaned back in his seat and hummed thoughtfully. Shepard was perfectly happy to let him
mull things over.

“Another one, huh?” Nihlus murmured after a long silence.

Shepard raised an eyebrow. She did not miss the odd note of amusement in his tone, what was so funny about a megalomaniacal synthetic leading a bunch of other synthetics toward an inevitable clash with organics? Shepard could see well past her nose, she knew that if the Heretics decided to affirm the galaxy’s fear of synthetics, AIs like EDI, like Legion, would be the victims by proxy. If the Heretics decided to make a problem of themselves, the Council, in their myopic desire to act, would crack down on AIs, just to be seen doing something. Knee-jerk reactions from politicians were a dangerous thing.

Then a thought occurred to her. Nihlus had always been eerily calm and accepting of synthetics. Even when he found out about EDI he did not react in any discernable way. She had always suspected he knew of other illegal AIs, but now Shepard wondered if it went beyond that. He was not surprised at the discovery of a Prothean AI. Did Nihlus encounter another such machine before? When? How? She could not very well ask, could she? “Eden Prime, it all started there. All of it.” Shepard mused. “The Heretics, the search, this… what we know of the Protheans. Everything began with Eden Prime.”

Nihlus hummed his assent, turned his head, and leveled his gaze on her. “I admit this is not typical of Spectre missions. Even I do not know if it is an upgrade or downgrade from the organized crime jobs.”

Shepard laughed, “I would take a dozen organized crime jobs to this. I signed up to do petty thankless jobs for Admiral Hackett, not wade eyeball-deep into the fallout of fifty thousand years. But nope, the galaxy decided to dump everything previously swept under its proverbial rug right over my head like I’m the galaxy’s almighty janitor.”

Nihlus chuckled, “Oh but solving the galaxy’s problems is unfortunately our main job.”

“I’m not a Spectre, remember?” If you asked her, the galaxy could clean its own messes, because they also made them. Shepard had her own problems to deal with. Then again, that was her inner jaded pessimist talking. She was duty-bound and acutely aware of it. If this mess fell on her head, she would have to get through it; otherwise her personal problems would only get bigger.

“Not in name, yes, but I think you have become one in essence. You certainly have the Council’s attention, though they would not admit to it.” Nihlus smiled his wide-mandible-teeth-flashing smiles.

“Now you’re bullshitting me, Nihlus. After Noveria, I’m surprised they haven’t recalled you yet. I get it that maybe Valern is curious, and Tevos tries to keep the middle ground in every issue. But Sparatus? If he did not hate my guts before, he certainly does now. I made his favorite Spectre look bad and… I did play that genocide card, to his face; he had to have realized I only omitted the overt accusations of hypocrisy.”

Nihlus was still smiling, which was beginning to annoy Shepard twelve ways to Sunday. What was amusing him this much? He must have noticed the stink-eye she was giving him, because next thing she knew, he leaned in, and Shepard raised a hand to bat him away.

“I will let you in on a little secret.” He whispered into her ear conspiratorially. She let her hand drop, just short of pushing him away. “You will never please Sparatus, and that has nothing to do with you being you, or being human. It is all to do with the fact that he finds fault with everything. He loves to argue, and sometimes simply for the sake of arguing.” He straightened and moved away “So in other words, as you humans love to put it, Sparatus will… deal with it.”
“Should you be compromising his authority like this?” Shepard asked.

“Of course not,” he snorted. “But you would have realized that on your own soon enough. I am merely telling you now so you stop worrying about it.”

It was not the first time Nihlus displayed a streak of not caring about compromising a superior; he was a rather horrible exemplar of his people’s vaunted discipline. “You really are a blabber-mouth, you know that? It’s a miracle they trust you with anything.”

“Maybe I am.” He rumbled, “But it is for a good cause. You are wound up over this. The tension practically ripples off you. If telling you this much alleviates at least some of it… it is a small price to pay.”

Shepard smiled at him. “Thanks, Nihlus.”

“Commander,” EDI cut in.

“Yes EDI?” Shepard replied as she held up her hand to stall whatever Nihlus had meant to say.

“I found the base.”

Shepard spared Nihlus an apologetic look and got her feet, “I’ll be right there, EDI.” She said. “Gather everyone around the CIC, we need to plan.”

“Of course, Commander.” EDI replied.

“We’ll finish that line of thought later, Nihlus.” She said.

“Sure.” He deadpanned as he followed her out of the room.

Barely five minutes later the whole ground team was gathered around the central console of the CIC. The holographic projection of the Normandy’s system status was gone, replaced by a blown up tactical model of the area of interest that EDI had identified. Everything centered on a large clearly artificial compound set on top of a hill, ringed by walls, towers, barricades, and more anti-air installations than Shepard cared to count.

The anti-air turrets were the big thing, they scattered in concentric circles, forming three nesting shells of defense that extended away from the base for five kilometers, spaced out two kilometers apart. The sniper towers were a secondary concern after that, because if Legion was any indication, others could potentially pack anti-materiel caliber guns. One shot from that, and no amount of Medi-gel would be enough. The Heretics had busted all the stops for this base.

“Well, ladies and gentlemen, we found the nest.” Shepard announced ruefully.

“And it is a big one,” Kaidan added.

“Understatement of the millennium, LT,” Ashley grumbled.

“Their anti-air armament is scattered over a five kilometer radius, both missile and mass accelerator turret variants. This makes a flying approach suicidal. They will also have elevation to their advantage with those sniper towers. Many of us have seen Legion’s rifle in action, I assume it is not the only unit out there with something of that caliber.” Shepard summarized for everyone present.

“And let us not forget that once the Solcrum base detects anything, there is the fleet to worry about,”
“The Normandy is the only ship in the Alliance fleet that can get this close to Solcrum without incurring the wrath of the fleet,” Shepard countered. “We do not have enough personnel to handle ground combat like this, let alone the fleet. No offense to you, Joker, but I doubt you can out-dance more than two ships. We are already expecting a cruiser and four frigates.”

“Hey, none taken, what’s true is true,” Joker replied over the comm.

“EDI can you run interference with their anti-air guns?” Nihlus asked.

“I might be able to interfere with target acquisition, but only on a few turrets at a time. I will not be able to shut down the whole grid remotely.”

“Sounds about right,” Tali cut in with a nod. “The turrets are operated by runtimes just like the ships. Hacking the geth only works until code is restored from backup copies, and after that, they identify the vulnerability, and learn to protect it. Meaning if EDI manages to scramble the turrets, the effect will be temporary, and she might only be able to do it once.”

“Miss Tali’Zorah is correct. My access methods will have to adapt with the defenses. Furthermore, I expect the required resources will tax my processing capacity to its limit, the Normandy will be vulnerable to counter-hacking.” EDI added.

Shepard hummed, but said nothing. If EDI would be so distracted, they would need to tuck the ship away in such a place that any counter-hacking could not somehow disable their IES and make them start glowing.

“A little bit of time could work if we do it on the fly and use armed vehicles to physically destroy the turrets. Essentially carve a path through the grid.” Kaidan offered.

“If this was a turian operation, there would be only one clear way through; the rest of the space between the turrets would be continuous anti-vehicle mine-fields.” Garrus noted.

“Geez, you people don’t do anything by half-steps, do you?” Ashley asked.

“Easy, Gunny. Officer Vakarian raised a very good point, we cannot be too cautious. The possibility of mines has to go into the plan. Passive scans cannot detect objects buried underground. Fortunately Makos can cover this, their firepower is enough to destroy turrets, and they have mine-sweeping ground-penetrating radars. It will be slow, but we should be able to get through in relative safety,” Kaidan said.

“Great, we have the makings of phase one of a ground attack.” Shepard smiled. It would be the most elementary way to go about it, but there were variables. The fleet, the snipers, much of this still needed work. Such planning could not be done right here and now; they did not know how many pieces would be on the board to be planning moves. “This all comes back to equipment and personnel we do not have. So let us leave ground mission for now.” Shepard continued, “Our mission is reconnaissance.” She leaned her hands on the central console and moved from person to person, catching their gazes in turn. “We found the enemy base and ascertained their defenses, but we still need to scout the size of the orbital fleet. Without getting past the fleet there can be no ground attack.” Nods went around the large table, and Shepard straightened accordingly.

Nihlus hummed, “This sort of installation was not built overnight.”

“How often does the Alliance patrol this area?” Garrus wondered.
Shepard smiled; trust the Spectre and the former detective to start looking for the bigger picture. “About once a Terran month. But being geth, I don’t suppose they take breaks, weekends, holidays or vacations. They also do not need entertainment, food, or sleep. With a big enough group, a month would be enough time. What begs the question is, why? If this is an advance staging area, what’s their endgame?” Well, whatever the Heretics or their god-king wanted, it had to do with Prothean technology. She supposed it might be possible that they thought there were more goodies to grab within Alliance space. From its inception, the Earth Systems Alliance grabbed up space faster than they could survey it. They did not know what was truly out there.

“Maybe they know something we do not.” Nihlus mused.

Shepard met his gaze and raised an eyebrow.

“Think about it, Shepard. What did you tell me earlier?”

Shepard hummed, she knew what he was alluding to, and as she ran with the thought and extended on it, a singular thought occurred to her. The god-king was a Prothean AI! It could have star-charts in its databanks! It could be looking at the galaxy through Prothean eyes, knowing exactly where to look for artifacts. None of the current species knew where the original Prothean home world had been. For all they knew, one of the dozens of uncharted garden or sub-garden worlds in some back corner of Alliance space could very well be it. Come to think of it, she needed to ask Legion whether it would tell everyone what it told her, the rest of the crew needed to know about the god-king. “Theorizing is well and good, but we are again a little off track.”

“We need to scout the fleet size, from a safe distance.” Kaidan affirmed.

“We have our little decoy fleet ready to go, so…” Shepard paused there, just in case someone would have questions to ask. Seeing no pressing issues, she nodded and turned to the bridge, “Joker, find us a nice planetoid in the outer belt, something with enough gravity to keep us down comfortably.”

“Aye, aye, ma’am.” Joker replied.

“EDI, what’s our IES status, how long do we have?”

“We currently have six hours of stealth remaining. I am estimating we will still have three hours after Flight Lieutenant Moreau sets us down.”

“Could you help Joker find a good rock?”

“Of course, Commander.”

“Thank you, EDI. Now… the Normandy will be going into full alert status once we flush the Heretics out of their hiding holes. I am not taking chances. I want everyone at their stations and ready to go.”

“Aye, aye, ma’am!” the marines chorused as one.

The CIC emptied of most people with that dismissal, Shepard remained, hovering over the projection. She hated this, flushing the geth out of their nest would be the single most dangerous thing she had ever done, but it needed to be done. If they showed up with too few ships, the losses could be catastrophic. Aside from the lives lost aboard those ships, if they failed to break through and allow the ground attack, there would be no removing the problem at the root. Like a weed in the garden, if the root was not removed, the weed would keep coming back.

“Go have a meal, Shepard. Staring at that projection will not do you any good.” Nihlus rumbled as
he turned to the elevator.

Shepard shook her head, she did not feel particularly hungry right now.

~          *          ~          ~          *          ~          ~          *          ~

Two hours later the Normandy found a berth on a planetoid where they could count signatures without being spotted by any of the geth running for the decoy field. Tensions on board had ramped to an all time high as they were getting ready for the most dangerous phase of the mission.

Shepard stood over the CIC console again, watching the telemetry in real life. Right now, EDI’s passive sensory registered no warm bodies anywhere in the system. Nihlus stood at her side, like a dutiful XO, except he was not her XO. Kaidan was with Joker on the bridge, occupying the co-pilot’s seat.

“EDI. Activate our decoy fleet.” Shepard ordered.

“Right away, Commander. Sending activation burst… now.” EDI replied.

If they were on a submarine, this activation signal would be akin to emitting a pulse of active sonar. The burst could be traced back to them if the geth figured out what to look for. Shepard hoped that they had chosen the right location, close enough that they could get a good view, but far enough as to have plenty of warning if something went wrong.

The Normandy was around 0.1 AU away from their decoy field, which would mean that the signal, propagating at the speed of light, would still take about fifty seconds to reach their decoy field. Once the field was active, it would take about three minutes for its signal to reach Notanban and Solcrum, and then another four to five minutes for readings to start reaching the Normandy. This was going to be the tensest ten minutes of their lives, but the payout was potentially worthwhile.

She chose their location to play with the laws of physics decidedly on their side. Even if the enemy detected and traced back the activation ping, the Normandy was still far enough from Notanban as to incur the Dreadnought’s Bane Principle of mass accelerator cannonry. The largest and most advanced MACs could only accelerate a slug to about one to two percent of light speed. However, when firing, the gun’s rails discharged an electromagnetic pulse, a muzzle flash, which moved like a pulsar’s ping and at light speed. If ship sensor registered the muzzle flash, it meant the ship was in the trajectory. However because the flash outpaced the projectile at least fifty times, it meant that at sufficient distances the flash would arrive so far ahead of the slug that it would give a mobile target enough warning to move out of the way. This was the Dreadnought’s Bane. Despite having such powerful guns, they literally could not hit a ship at very long ranges, unless the ship’s crew was asleep at the helm.

“The decoy fleet is active, Commander.” EDI announced.

Shepard hummed and glanced down at the timer on her console, two minutes on the clock. In about three minutes, if the heretics took the bait, their ships would fire up engines and start moving. Engine heat was essentially electromagnetic radiation, and would spread out at light speed. Four minutes after they began to move, the Normandy would begin to pick up a time-lagged snap image of the ships coming out of Notanban’s orbit. The rest was up to EDI’s passive sensory and processing capacity.

Shepard watched as the seconds on her timer counted down, and the tension on the CIC rose accordingly. Two minutes passed. “The activation pulse would have reached Solcrum and Notanban about now, this is where things get a little dangerous. EDI you’re watching for electromagnetic
muzzle flashes, right?” Shepard asked.

“Of course, Commander.”

“Good. Joker be ready to take evasive action.”

“I’m more than ready. If EDI sees anything like a muzzle flash, I’ll see it second.” Joker replied over the comm.

Shepard turned back to the timer, watching as the seconds ticked. Another minute slipped by, she shifted her weight. Three minutes until the return contact could be reasonably expected. Shepard started drumming a fingertip on the edge of the console, in rhythm with the seconds ticking by. She was nervous, edgy even, which was hilarious given she was a sniper. Then again, that was just her, the dugout, and her rifle. This was them essentially sitting in place, hoping the enemy does not pick them up. The stakes were a little higher with more people involved. She glanced up at Nihlus and raised an eyebrow. His eyes were not on the console anymore, but focused on her.


“Early, no?” Shepard murmured.

“They must have noticed the initial activation pulse.” Nihlus said.

“Additional heat signatures detected in Notanban’s upper atmosphere…” EDI continued.

Dots began to appear on the projection in the middle of the CIC. EDI labeled the holographic markers according to presumed class, based on the size of the heat signatures. There were four, then seven, then ten, and finally twelve distinct bleeps.

“That is a flotilla alright.” Nihlus hummed.

“Three cruisers, nine frigate-sized ships…” Shepard counted off.

Three more blips materialized, one cruiser, two frigates, bringing up the total to fifteen ships. “They are moving to intercept the decoy fleet,” EDI added.

Four more blips appeared, two cruisers and two more frigates.

Shepard’s jaw loosened, this was officially what a dreadnought with four cruisers and twelve frigates ought to engage, and there was no way to know whether these were all the ships hiding in Notanban’s atmosphere. The situation was quickly moving out of enforcement action into a full engagement.

“Muzzle flashes!” Joker called over the comm. “Taking evasive action.”

The Normandy shuddered as the Tantalus drive kicked in. The hurry with which Joker took off registered in the split second of heavy pressure on her legs before the inertial dampener field fully kicked in.

Shepard gripped the console, there was the slim possibility that they had aimed with offset, expecting them to dodge the initial shots. She had to trust EDI’s processing capacity. She had to believe the AI could calculate the trajectory of the rounds based on the initial position of the ships from the moment of the muzzle flashes. They had forty-nine to ninety-nine seconds for every second the projectile had to travel.
Three more blips materialized in orbit around Notanban, three more frigates.


Shepard knew that the heretics were aware of the Normandy’s presence; they could not risk overstaying their welcome for much longer.

“That ought to put us out of trajectory,” Joker added.

Shepard gripped the console, and took a deep breath. A full minute ticked by, but there were no klaxons or explosions. No more ships emerged from Notanban either.

“They missed,” Joker announced.

Shepard heaved a sigh of relief. “Enough. I think we know they have a huge fleet here. Get us out of here, Joker. Back toward Hong.”

“Aye, aye, ma’am.” Joker replied.

Shepard glanced at Nihlus; they would need to discuss some things in their FTL hop. She had a feeling that the Council ought to know about this. Twenty-two ships was not a small-scale operation, the heretics had pooled considerable resources here.

“Course set,” Joker announced. “Disengaging stealth systems.” The faint rumble of the Normandy changed. A subtle vibration passed through her hull as the Tantalus drive’s mass effect fields shifted, no longer powerful enough to move the ship along without using heat-emitting thrusters. “Main drive online.” The ship shuddered ever so slightly as the hull-meltingly hot anti-matter reaction drive ignited. “FTL drive… engaged.” There was a punch of the inertial dampener fields as the Normandy jumped into FTL where she would be too fast to track or hit with any conventional weapon.

“Mission accomplished everyone,” Shepard said to the men and women gathered on the CIC. “Joker, once we are back in Hong, vent the IES and discharge the drive, and then take us to Arcturus. The heretics have a nice big nest in Grissom. The Alliance won’t be letting them keep it for long. We have a major engagement to plan.”


Shepard hummed, but said nothing. If Joker was feeling aggressive, then he was kind of like a barometer for the rest of the crew. The fact that he made a joke of her understatement more than of the situation meant he did not find the situation all that funny. She knew the rest of her crew wanted blood for what happened to the Cajamarca. The Heretics had declared war. They better be ready to lose it.

Chapter End Notes

**Author Notes:** Now that we are on the road toward the season finale, I have to say I went all out. I had to come up with a great many number of ship names, but also refer to the list of ships that took part in the Battle of the Citadel in game, for the call-back. And yes, I did borrow some details from Legion’s loyalty mission in ME2 for this blend of canon.
**General Notes:**

**Cajamarca & Mukden** – These frigates are named after two battles, as per the Alliance naming scheme. The Battle of Cajamarca (1532) saw a major conflict between the Inca Empire and the Spanish during the conquest of Peru. It was a decisive victory for the Spanish, leading to the fall of the Inca Empire. The Battle of Mukden (1905) was fought as part of the Russo-Japanese war. The Russians did not fare well, and their defeat caused a withdrawal out of Manchuria, and showed Europe that Japan was not a pushover.

**Chapter Notes:**

**Dreadnought’s Bane Principle** – This “MAC limiter” is another of my guiding principles for ship-on-ship combat in space. It assumes that there are sensors that can pick up the “muzzle flash”, but necessity is the mother of all invention after all. The “Dreadnought’s Bane Principle” prevents a MAC from being used as “fire across the solar system” sniper rifle against ships. However, it does not apply to planets. Hitting a city firing from across the solar system is doable if with fancy math, factoring in the planet’s orbital velocity and how it turns on its axis. A planet can’t dodge the round.
**Gathering**

Chapter Notes

**Disclaimer:** I do no own Mass Effect, I do not claim to own Mass Effect, I am only doing this for fun.

**Author Notes:** We’re continuing the build up to what is an expansion of another side mission (as they adapt well to this canon) with a side of “Battle of the Citadel”. Also, Cameos!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**Episode 24: Gathering**

The Normandy arrived at Arcturus twenty-six hours after they jumped from Grissom. Nihlus had sent a report to the Council just as soon as they hit the Hong system, to notify the Council of the situation. He explained that the Council would not become excessively involved in the matter, as it was within Alliance sovereign space. They could not send in the mostly-turian Citadel fleet to do the job for the Alliance, as doing so would mean taking over internal Alliance security. No one in the Systems Alliance, Parliament or Navy, would allow that. It would stomp on the Alliance Navy’s pride, but more than that, it would be a flagrant violation of sovereignty, something that the Council held sacred. All that meant that the Grissom situation would be handled in-house, and that suited everyone just fine.

Shepard transmitted her report to Admiral Hackett at Hong as well. She included all the scan logs, as well as a tactical analysis, calling for the Fifth Fleet to match the geth, ship for ship, and maybe bring a few extra cruisers for added punch. Shepard had no doubt that the Kilimanjaro would be part of this, and so they would need extra cruisers just to protect the lumbering dreadnought’s flanks. If the Kilimanjaro was to bring her big gun to bear on the geth cruisers, her safety had to be guaranteed with a screen of friendly ships. Shepard also suggested bringing in a carrier, whose fighter squadrons could perform the double duty of running anti-missile defense in orbit, and provide aerial backup on the ground, but ultimately it would be up to Admiral Hackett to decide what they would need.

As the Normandy approached Arcturus station, Shepard was in the OD, watching the scenery. She was not surprised to see the Kilimanjaro and Tokyo, side by side, as the triumvirate would be the first to gather, however today the dreadnought was the center of a gathering fleet. The Tokyo was shadowed by her three frigates; Shepard knew them as the Sekigahara, Hakata Bay, and Nagashino.

Floating on the Kilimanjaro’s left was the SSV Athens and her frigates, the Grecian flotilla, the fierce vanguard of the fleet. Their unique livery made mistaking them impossible. The cruiser bore nose art along with its name, a hoplon shield crossed with a long spear. Its accompanying frigates, the Thermopylae, Salamis, and Platea had the same over their bridges. They were the newest-built and arguably the most eccentric of the four.

The smaller cruiser next in line was undoubtedly the SSV Berlin, accompanied by the frigates Marne, Somme, and Ypres. The four ships were all previous generation models, with slightly older cores and lower speed, but they also had very experienced crews that had worked with the Kilimanjaro since its launch, known collectively as the Great War flotilla, the stalwart rear guard.
The remaining two cruisers were indistinguishable from other current-model ships. Shepard knew one had to be the SSV Paris, with the frigates Leipzig, Borodino, and Austerlitz, making up the Napoleonic flotilla. The other was the SSV Philadelphia, with her escorts, Lexington, Concord, and Yorktown, known as the Independence flotilla.

The intercom scratched, “Commander,” EDI called.

“Yes EDI?” Shepard replied as she turned away from the window.

“I received a message from Admiral Hackett. He ordered the Normandy to dock with the Kilimanjaro.”

“I see. Thank you EDI, tell Joker to get in touch with the Kili.”

“Of course, Commander.”

The room was silent once again. This peculiarity of docking to a larger vessel could only mean one thing. Admiral Hackett was not on Arcturus, he was going to take command of the operation in person.

The Normandy changed approach angle, and she got up from her seat and moved toward the OD door, there were appearances to be kept and made.

Forty minutes later, the Normandy was attached to the Kilimanjaro via a long retractable gangway extended from the dreadnought’s flank, and Shepard was in her oft-unworn officer’s uniform. She made her way across from the elevator to the bridge airlock just in time to see the door open and Captain Shepard step on deck. The duty crew seated at their monitors along the neck between the CIC and the bridge straightened in their seats instantly.

“Permission to come aboard, Commander,” the captain greeted, smiling all the same.

“Granted.” Shepard replied, what more could she say?

The captain nodded and Shepard fell in step next to her as the woman led the way to the OD. This was the thing with her mother, she had been on the Normandy once before. With a ship this small, there was no way she would not remember the layout. With the formalities out of the way, Hannah Shepard was making herself right at home.

“Admiral Hackett took over the Kili, huh?” Shepard asked.

“No, not quite. I am still in command of daily operations. Steven is currently occupied coordinating. I am here to fill you in on what’s in the cards.” The OD door opened for them and the two women stepped inside. Nihlus, who was seated on the couch, stood up when the two of them entered the room.

“Spectre Kryik, pleasure to see you again,” Hannah greeted. “Good, I will not have to repeat myself. Shall we?” She moved deeper into the room.

Nihlus shifted his weight; Shepard spared him an apologetic smile. She did not fail to notice a datapad in his hands, he wanted something too.

“As of ten hours ago, Steven issued orders for the Fifth Fleet to muster for what we are calling Operation Golden Eye. Our forces will include the Kilimanjaro, her four regular groups, and the
Tokyo with her flotilla.”

“That is only what… twenty-one ships?” Shepard asked.

“Twenty-one gathered right now. We are waiting for eight others, which will bring us up to twenty-nine. Those being the Cairo, Cape Town, Madrid, Emden, Jakarta, Shenyang, Seoul, and Warsaw. The Cape Town and Emden should arrive in the next hour. Jakarta, Shenyang, and Seoul are to follow in the next few. Warsaw will arrive early after midnight, but Cairo and Madrid are coming in from annual maintenance. They can only get here in the morning tomorrow.”

“What about the Einstein?” Shepard wondered. Would they have some air cover from the carrier?

Hannah shook her head, “The Einstein is out participating in this year’s flight school war games. But the Kilimanjaro’s wing is at our disposal.”

Shepard nodded; it was easy to overlook that the Kilimanjaro had a flight hangar, as that was not what dreadnought captains prized, and her mother was no exception. Dreadnoughts and Carriers were kilometer-long behemoths, but that was where the similarities ended. The former were prized for their spine-mounted mass accelerator drives. The latter, while similar in shape, were lightly defended and mostly hollow, filled to the gills with F-61 Tridents. Most dreadnoughts, Kilimanjaro included, had just one bay that could support around fifteen fighters. These were used to protect the ship more than to mount attacks. The Kilimanjaro’s wing would see a bit of rare action.

“War games?” Nihlus asked.

“Simulation runs. The year’s flight school graduates take on the veteran pilots of a carrier in mock engagements. It is one part final test, one part opportunity, and one part reward. Mostly though, it is a tradition.” Shepard explained.

The participating carrier was decided by draw at the end of the previous year’s games. The Einstein was a decorated carrier, having responded to Mindoir and a number of other relatively large slaver attacks. Its selection meant the junior pilots knew they had to work extra hard in their final year, if they wanted to show off against the Einstein’s fliers.

“I see. Well I suppose this segues into certain other matter,” Nihlus spoke, flicking the pad in his hands. “The Salarian Union is sending a Special Tasks Group unit to collect technology, and the Council is sending another Spectre, as you say- to be their eyes and ears.”

“The more the merrier,” Hannah smiled diplomatically.

Shepard noted that her mother was not surprised at all. “Command was notified?” Shepard asked.

“Of course.” Hannah replied.

Shepard hummed, of course they would, and her mother would be one of the first to be told. She turned to the Spectre in the room, “And who is this other Spectre?”

“Does not say, but I imagine they will travel with the STG. Their frigate will meet us at Hong.”

Shepard stared Nihlus down; did he know who the Spectre was? He was not acting as cagey now as he did before Noveria, but he was also quite the actor when necessary. She hoped the Council would not double down, the last thing she needed was another job with Saren, especially with both Captain Anderson and her mother anywhere near. Shepard knew that the only reason her mother was not asking about Noveria was because Admiral Hackett had not told her, as this mess was more important.
“As I said. The more, the merrier. Steven plans to hold a strategy meeting on the Kilimanjaro with STG present.” Hannah went on. “In the meantime, there is a certain other matter. Skunkworks sent their latest toys, new model shuttles, the UT-47As.”

“How about new Kodiaks?” Shepard repeated.

“Indeed. I thought Spectre Kryik might be interested,” Hannah spoke smoothly, but the way she looked at Nihlus was unmistakable. “These two should have been deployed with the Normandy, but there were some delays... they are an improvement over what the Normandy has, with mass accelerator cannons mounted beside the front drive thrusters...”

Nihlus broke into a grin; Shepard could not help but follow, even though she knew her mother had meant to hook the Spectre’s interest like that.

“And a miniaturized IES system,” Hannah finished.

“Stealthy, armed Kodiaks?” Shepard repeated, stunned.

“They were designed in part because Kodiak field tests proved the lack of armament problematic.”

“The lack of armament is problematic.” Nihlus repeated. “But for the Normandy specifically, its shuttles having no stealth capability is the bigger concern.” Nihlus said.

Hannah nodded, “As I said, they were meant to be deployed with the Normandy, but there was a delay. We need to complete the transfer while we are here.”

Shepard glanced at Nihlus; he had a smile on his face that just would not go away. Like a little boy on Christmas morning, eager to rush out of bed and get his hands on the neatly wrapped boxes under the tree.

Half an hour later a pair of pilots from the Kilimanjaro arrived to take their current to the station; they were to be re-assigned to other ships. Their arrival caused an outbreak of interest, which drew a number of Shepard’s crew down to the bay, including the security staff, even if they were more curious than on guard.

The marines, especially Jenkins, gave Hannah full formal salutes and all due respect. Then Hannah met Wrex. Shepard watched as the krogan actually tried to intimidate her mother with a glowering look, but Hannah held it as if it was not there. Wrex laughed and declared he could respect this Shepard too. Shepard explained to her mother that she promised Wrex a role in the ground attack. Hannah replied with ‘the more, the merrier’, which made Wrex laugh again. The krogan made a comment about the Shepard clan being in good hands and went back to working on his gun.

It was then that Hannah noticed Tali, who stood off to the side, trying to go unnoticed. When greeted, the quarian lapsed right into her shell, becoming very nervous and flustered. In what was probably Quarian fashion, when she could not compliment the person due to unfamiliarity, she began to lavish compliments on the Kilimanjaro. Hannah smiled, and returned in kind by thanking Tali for her hard work. Tali’s eyes widened, visible past her face shield, she stammered her ‘of course, of course’, but Shepard caught the fact that the young genius was basking in the praise and implied approval.

The elevator door opened, and Shepard glanced back. Garrus stepped out and stopped cold. The sound was loud enough for Hannah to turn around.
“Ah, you must be Officer Vakarian.” She greeted.

The former detective nodded.

“This is Captain Hannah Shepard, the commanding officer of the dreadnought outside, and… my mother,” Shepard noted.

Garrus straightened to full formality quickly, “It is a pleasure, Captain.”

“Vakarian, this is not a disciplinary hearing.” Nihlus muttered from his place, leaning on the armory table, arms crossed over his chest.

Garrus sent him a look of absolute loathing. Nihlus grinned back.

Shepard blinked; in all likelihood she had just missed something sub-vocal, something that only Nihlus would hear, and he never missed the opportunity to take a dig at Garrus.

“Well, the Normandy crew certainly does not lack character,” Hannah noted.

There was a scratch over the intercom, “Captain, Commander, the new shuttles are arriving.” EDI said.

Shepard smiled up, hoping EDI would see it and realize the gesture was a sort of silent thanks. She turned to face the maw of the shuttle bay and it was as EDI said. The new Kodiaks slid past the atmosphere-retaining mass effect field one at a time and moved into their positions under the docking gantries.

These shuttles were still glossy from the yard, colored proudly Alliance sky-blue, with a white band across the back and sides, with a blue Alliance logo. It was not difficult to spot their differences. The MACs stuck out right over the forward drive thrusters. The backside was a little different, the upper cowl rose a little higher. Still, underneath all the new bells and whistles, these were still Kodiaks in all their cockroach-like glory.

The side door of the closest shuttle opened and out stepped a man dressed in charcoal-black fatigues. He was tall, with close-buzzed dark hair, a neat goatee, deeply tanned skin, and surprisingly bright blue eyes. He turned to Hannah and saluted, “Captain, we finalized the transfer. These UT-47As now belong to the Normandy.”

“Very good.” Hannah replied. Then she turned, “Lieutenant, at ease. Here, let me introduce you to my daughter, Commander Shepard.”

The snapped another salute, and then smiled.

“This is Lieutenant Steve Cortez, he helped field test the A-models.” Hannah went on.

“It is a pleasure, Commander.”

“Likewise.” Shepard replied.

“These Kodiaks are beauties. Though nowhere as maneuverable as a Trident, they can take the worst you can throw at them and then some. I heard you damaged the armor on yours with thresher maw acid?” He asked.

“Yea… that happened.” Shepard admitted.

Cortez nodded, “The bottom plates of these were coated with an acid-resistant glaze that should
prevent the majority of such damage in the future.”

“Do not get ideas, Shepard.” Nihlus rumbled from his position.

Shepard glanced toward Nihlus and raised an eyebrow. “Need I remind you who was flying it at the time?” Sure the idea to go thresher maw fishing had been hers, but that was all the credit she took.

Nihlus had the gall to give her one of his puckish smiles.

Cortez cleared his throat and offered a datapad to the Spectre, “The manual for the A-model. You will need to look over the new systems to get the best out of them. The weight distribution on this model is different. It has a slight effect on handling at above one tenth of a standard g; I suggest you take a few flights to get a feel for the difference.”

Nihlus took the pad without saying another word, but Shepard caught something in his expression. Did the Lieutenant just intentionally hint the Spectre needed additional flying lessons? Or was it just the way Nihlus took it?

“I am surprised that the Normandy was not assigned a pilot for her Kodiaks,” Cortez went on.

Hannah hummed, but Nihlus looked less amused than before, and Shepard knew he was definitely taking that as a dig at his skill.

“Well thank you for the shuttles and the information, Lieutenant.” Shepard ventured.

“Just doing my duty, ma’am.” He replied.

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The action group for Operation Golden Eye was assembled by seven in the morning the next day. From there, all the ships made the relay jumps to Hong. Once clear of the three million kilometer drift zone around the relay, the ships settled to wait. Two hours later the relay lit up and two more frigate-sized ships arrived. One bore a transponder signal identifying it as Salarian Union, and thus STG. The other was identification dark, but EDI did not need a transponder to recognize the Impera, not after being berthed next to it on Noveria. When Shepard heard, she could only groan. Of course the Council would send their best. Things just got about ten times more fun, and not in the good way.

Shepard would have shaken Nihlus down for information, but then she got a message from the Kilimanjaro. Admiral Hackett had called a general meeting in the big conference room aboard. It was the only room large enough for the number of people attending. Thus Shepard had to forego grilling Nihlus, and go up to her quarters to crawl into her officer’s uniform.

Half an hour later the Normandy was docked with the Kilimanjaro and Shepard made her way toward the airlock. Once there, she was surprised to see two people waiting for her. Nihlus was in his armor, looking ready for come-what-may, but standing next to him was Legion.

“Shepard-Commander.” The geth greeted plainly.

“Something wrong, Legion?” Shepard asked.

“Negative. We request permission to accompany you. We have a new consensus. We deem it necessary to present information at this meeting on the Dreadnought-Kilimanjaro. The Earth Systems Alliance must know the enemies they face are Heretics, not Geth.”

Shepard blinked, surprised, Legion wanted to talk about the Heretics at the general meeting? This
could either go brilliantly, or about as well as a lead balloon. Still, this was something. Legion and
the Geth were reclusive for a reason, but maybe some of the animosity could be eliminated, if they
could see there was a way for them to interact with organics. Assuming of course, no one there
pulled out a gun and started shooting.

“Alright Legion, but let me introduce you first. No offense, but if you waltz in there without some
sort of introduction, people might get nervous.”

“Such a response would be within expected parameters,” Legion replied.

Shepard began to wonder what defined these so-called ‘expected parameters’. Asking probably
would not work. She led the way into the airlock with the Spectre and the geth at her sides.

When the airlock cycled, the three of them made their way across the gangway. Once on the other
side of the Kilimanjaro’s own airlock, Shepard was not surprised to see a familiar lieutenant. Theresa
Carrere snapped a formal salute, “Commander Shepard. Spectre Kryik, and… guest. Please follow
me.”

“How many have already gathered?” Shepard wondered.

“The captains are already present. The Salarian STG ship has docked on the opposite side; the
Spectre is coming aboard via runabout.” Carrere explained as she led them down the hallway.

Shepard noted that as they passed, many enlisted men and women snapped salutes, but their eyes
followed the glimmering geth trailing behind her.

Carrere led them onto the dreadnought’s third deck. There was a marked increase of armed
personnel. Shepard thought some of the captains must have brought a lieutenant or two with them,
because why else would the passages be this jam-packed? A number of them recognized her and
cleared out of the way, allowing Shepard easy passage.

The conference room was a brilliantly lit space, with a large wood-topped table spanning practically
the room’s whole length. One foot in the door Shepard spotted Admiral Hackett, Captain Anderson,
and her mother at the head. Scattered around the room were the captains of the other ships, a sea of
blue and gold as far as she could see.

Her arrival killed the conversations of those closest to the door, and from there passed a cascade of
dying whispers, all carrying a single word, ‘geth’. Shepard honestly wished people would not wear
their surprise on their sleeves like that.

“Commander, punctual as ever.” Admiral Hackett greeted.

Shepard nodded and tried her best to ignore the fact that the hair on the back of her neck was upright
already. The biggest surprise of the day had not even arrived. This was going great already.

The door at the opposite side of the room opened and two salarians stepped into the room. One was
green-tinged, wearing white and black armor with red stripes over the arms and shoulders. The other
was brown, clad in grey armor with lime green stripes.

Hackett made his way across the room to greet the newcomers, “On behalf of the Alliance, welcome
to the Kilimanjaro, I am Admiral Steven Hackett. We talked.”

“Ah. Yes. Pleasure to be here, Admiral. I am Captain Kirrahe, and this is my second, Commander
“Make yourselves at home while we wait for one last arrival.”

Kirrahe moved deeper into the room, but not toward the last remaining unoccupied seats. His second-in-command remained by the door. Shepard glanced at Nihlus and raised an eyebrow. His mandibles were drawn up against his jaw, a sign that he was becoming tense. Shepard glanced toward the head of the room where Captain Anderson was conversing with Hannah.

“Commander Shepard, yes?”

Shepard was surprised to see Captain Kirrahe standing a polite distance away.

“Yes, that’s me.” She replied.

“It is true then, what I read in a report. You keep a geth?”

Shepard was not even going to ask where STG got reports of her crew’s makeup. They were the STG, one part troops and one part intelligence-gathering agents of the Salarian Union’s military. Their work for the Council was an indication that Councilor Valern was indeed very interested in the matter at hand.

“This is Legion.”

“Fascinating.” Kirrahe noted. “I also heard the candidate for human Spectre having a mixed-species crew... Is it true that you employ a krogan and a quarian?”

“I do no discriminate when it comes to skill.”

“Of course. Working with all the people of the galaxy is a necessity for a Spectre. Recognition of talent is a mark of leadership as well. I am aware of your career history. Good to finally meet the person, though data was most detailed.”

“I’m afraid you have me at a disadvantage, Captain. I can’t say I had quite the same thorough briefing.”

“Understandable,” Kirrahe nodded with a smile. “I am looking forward to working with you.”

Salarians always put her on edge, because they always knew more than they let on. The Turians fought a war with overwhelming force and no holds barred, even bombarding targets from orbit if they had to. She could understand that brutal efficiency. Salarians on the other hand loved their wars won before the first shots were even fired. They sought out weaknesses and key targets for a decisive opening strike. They had a colossal intelligence-gathering apparatus, and more agents, analysts, spies, saboteurs, and assassins than any other military in the galaxy.

The door opened again and all whispers died as Saren stepped into the room.

Shepard glanced toward Captain Anderson and was wholly unsurprised to see he had instantly turned a glare set to vaporize on the white-clad Spectre.

“What is that your people say? If looks could kill?” Nihlus murmured, almost right into her ear.

Shepard shook her head. She watched as Hackett made his introduction, only to get Saren’s sunny side, complete with a glare down from his full height. Saren Arterius was not happy to be in a room surrounded by humans, on a human ship. She had to give it to Admiral Hackett though; he took the
brush-off without breaking a stride, or rolling his eyes. She would have definitely rolled her eyes. It was just a good thing no one expected her to be a diplomat.

“Seeing as we are all here now, we can bring this meeting to order.” Hackett announced, voice carrying over the room without the need for any sort of amplification.

The captains obeyed the implicit orders to take their seats. Shepard opted to stand between Nihlus and Legion at the foot of the room, though on the opposite side from Saren.

“Admiral, I do believe the first order of the day should be addressing the elephant in the room. Commander Shepard brought with her what I assume is a geth.” One of the older captains spoke up.

“Yes, how are we to discuss strategy to defeat the geth, when there is one in the room?” a woman two seats over wondered.

“Commander, I admit it is a curious choice,” Hackett said, but Shepard caught just a faint hint of amusement. Hackett, of course, knew about Legion beforehand.

Shepard let her arms drop to her sides and stepped forward, “One that I can explain, Admiral. Captains. Legion works for me as a hired outside contractor, it follows my orders, and I trust it with my life. Yes, it is a geth, but it is not an enemy. The geth in Grissom are what they call Heretics, a minority faction. Legion represents the majority, the Geth, those who have never left the Perseus Veil, and hold no animosity toward the Alliance.”

“We request permission to address this gathering.” Legion spoke up.

Absolute silence reigned in the room.

“Very well,” Hackett said from his seat between Hannah and Captain Anderson.

Legion stepped forward and launched into an explanation of the information Shepard had already submitted in her reports to Admiral Hackett, quickly glossing over the basics to reach the topic of factions. Shepard watched and measured the reactions carefully. Captain Kirrahe and Commander Rentola wore their interest on their sleeves. Saren listened, but his eyes continuously roamed about the room, like he did not trust anyone there, which was highly likely to be fact. The Alliance captains had reactions ranging from interest to incredulity.

When Legion finally reached the topic of the black unit and the ghost animating the machine, Shepard noted very clear change in the room. All the captains sat up straight at the mention of an ancient AI that ruled the Heretics as their god-king. Yet it was Saren’s reaction that was perhaps the most curious. His arms dropped to his sides and his eyes stopped roaming over the room. Nihlus shifted his weight at her side; she could hear the creaking of his armor.

“… We do not seek to alter consensus. The Heretics terminated twenty human units on Colony-Eden Prime, and another forty-seven in their attack on Frigate-Cajamarca and Frigate-Mukden. As the Heretics are likely to perpetrate further acts of aggression against the Earth Systems Alliance, the Earth Systems Alliance is within their right to retaliate. Our duty, as a terminal of the Geth, is to inform, so that consensus achieved during this meeting will not associate the actions of the Heretics with the Geth.” Legion finished.

The silence continued undisturbed.

“Fascinating.” Captain Kirrahe murmured.

“Interesting story. I'll give it points for creativity, but I'm not sure I believe it,” Said a short man from
“I do have physical evidence in the Normandy’s cargo bay, Captain.” Shepard spoke up.

“We have other samples, from the units seized on Eden Prime.” Hackett said. “The reports and data I received from the Normandy corroborate what Alliance researchers ascertained. There is something controlling the black unit.”

“But nothing links that something to a Prothean AI.” The captain argued back. “The only one here who purports this AI’s existence, or indeed the existence of Prothean AIs in general, is that geth. For all we know, it is nothing more than agent sent here to mislead us.”

Shepard should have known that someone would raise that argument. Whispers went around the room in a rising volume, so she could make out only bits and pieces, but it seemed like many people there chose to have doubts. Legion’s face-light narrowed and its flaps drew into a facsimile of a pensive look, Shepard knew it could probably hear every disparate whisper and was well on its way to cataloguing every tone.

“Enough.” Hannah spoke up, and though she did not raise her voice, it still cut across the room. A silence settled and Hannah placed her hands on the table before her, one on top of the other and cast her gaze around the room, meeting everyone’s eyes for a split second, just long enough to ensure she had undivided attention. “We are not here to argue whether or not Protheans made AIs.” She continued in a tone that demanded total obedience. “We are gathered here to devise a strategy, in joint with STG and the Spectres, to combat and eliminate the threat from Grissom. I suggest we limit our arguments to tactics and strategy.”

Shepard could see that a whole number of people were less than pleased.

“We understand the concern for secrecy.” Legion spoke up, in seeming reply. “If our departure will help-”

“No, Legion.” Shepard cut in and turned to face the geth. Out of the corner of her eye she saw a number of heads snap in her direction. She intentionally put on the airs of someone entirely unbothered by the scrutiny. “The Normandy will play a major role in the ground operations, an all-hands-on-deck situation. As such, I would have to fill you in on the details of the plan regardless.”

Legion’s head flaps twitched up and down a little.

Hannah was smiling a faint Mona Lisa smile, and Shepard knew why. Shepard had just boxed the captains in. They would have to discuss strategy with Legion in the room, whether they liked it or not. She would not let them ostracize Legion because they refused to believe it. She knew Legion well enough to see that underneath that sometimes menacing appearance was a surprisingly sensitive being. Legion could be a little eerie when it talked of expected parameters, but that only said it was aware of how it came across to others. It was more sensitive to organics than some organics were toward each other.

None of the captains said a word, but Shepard knew they were not happy. They would probably give Admiral Hackett an earful on their own time, and they would have a leg to stand on too. Still, Shepard was not about to bow down now, not over this.

Admiral Hackett took over the meeting after that, dimming the lights and projecting the data map the Normandy gathered over the big conference table. Shepard stood back and listened as plans were made, formations were discussed, and orders were issued. In the end, Admiral Hackett wanted the Normandy to shadow the Kilimanjaro. Shepard knew why, STG and Saren could not know about
their Thanix system. The Normandy’s moment to shine would be during the ground attack.

When Admiral Hackett shifted the topic to the matter of a ground attack, Shepard was quick to step in and take over. “My team has a functional plan for phase one.” She shifted the projection to the topographical map of the base vicinity that EDI made. “My Operations Officer was able to collate this map for us. As you can see, the installation is on a hill, with multiple sniper towers, surrounded by three concentric circles of anti-air towers with a radius of five kilometers. Inserting troops or attacking from the air is a no go. Not even with a whole fleet of Kodiaks.”

“Then how do you suggest we get through?” one of the captains muttered.

“With a classical combined arms ground assault,” Shepard replied. “The Normandy’s cybernetic warfare capabilities can shut down a few of the turrets at a time, long enough for Makos to move in and destroy them. We will carve an approach path through their anti-air defenses. My ordnance expert also raised the possibility of minefields amidst the concentric rings, which would not register on the passive imagery. To that end, ground penetrating radars will be invaluable. Once a path is carved, there will be a blind spot in the anti-air coverage. Fighters can perform high speed strafing runs on the fortress to soften its defenses before we launch an infantry attack.”

“Simple enough,” Hannah murmured approvingly.

“The approach up the base is a slope. So we will need the Makos to insert boots into the compound. We do not know how many platforms are there, but I expect fierce resistance. They would not keep a large fleet in orbit without ground troops to back it up. This is not a small installation. I believe it is a forward base from which they intend to mount more attacks within Alliance space.” Shepard went on.

“Seems excessive to use fighters against sniper towers,” one of the Captains noted.

“Not excessive at all, Captain. Legion is a sniper, and it uses an anti-materiel caliber rifle. I assume there are other units with similar armament. I am looking out for the ground troops. I do not want anyone to die to a sniper’s bullet if we can nullify that threat outright.”

“The sentiment is appreciated, Commander.” Kirrahe stepped forward. “I appreciate your attention to detail. My team and I will assist you.”

Shepard nodded and smiled, she would take allies where she could get them. At the very least if a salarian thought the plan was a workable, it probably was.

“It is a good thing we have at least twenty-four hours in FTL to iron out the details. This will require considerable coordination between the Kilimanjaro marines and fighters,” Hannah said, and glanced at Hackett.

The Admiral nodded his consent wordlessly, and Shepard could not help but smile a little; she knew she could count on her mother to come through. If the others did not have much faith in her, at least she would always have her mother.

“Now there is only the matter of the underground portion left to discuss,” one of the captains went on.

“Spectre Arterius, Commander Shepard, and I will handle the geth inside the compound.” Nihlus said without an instant of hesitation or a flicker of doubt in his voice. “As that would make it a Spectre-level operation, there is no need to discuss the details. We execute our operations on our own terms.”
Shepard hummed as a whole bunch of people exchanged less than subtle looks and absolute silence returned to the room. She idly wondered if Nihlus’ confidence was a little misplaced in this instance. Still, it was not her place to second-guess him in front of so many people. There would be time to talk through things. She would have to remind Nihlus that they could not tell how many geth might be inside. Spectre confidence was one thing, but overconfidence got people killed.

When she glanced toward the head of the table, she saw that her mother had a rather piercing owlish glare aimed right at Saren. Captain Anderson had a similar look aimed at Nihlus, and it did not take a rocket scientist to figure out why. Her mother was wary of Saren, but too professional to speak up, and Captain Anderson probably still expected Nihlus to help Saren make her life a living hell.

“Well, we have the workings of a plan,” Hackett stepped in.

Shepard thought it was nothing more than an effort to steer the meeting away from where it might go. No one there needed, or wanted to see the Spectre situation come to a boil.

“Well, we have the workings of a plan,” Hackett paused, but the silence in the room continued. “Good. Take two Terran hours to prepare whatever you need; we will be hitting FTL as a single body, our speed matched to the slowest ship in the fleet, the Kilimanjaro. Our arrival at Grissom is to be thirty hours from now. You’re all dismissed.”

Shepard looked at Saren from the corner of her eye, his look was the picture of annoyed boredom, arms crossed over his chest. He was probably perfectly fine with Nihlus’ rash idea. Hell, knowing him, it would suit him. Shepard was perfectly aware of the fact that he had a frigate-sized ship, but no one ever mentioned anything about the Impera’s crew. Were they nothing more than the proverbial household servants?

Shepard met her mother’s eyes and mouthed ‘I will handle this.’ To which Hannah nodded and smiled.

Thus the meeting broke up with ninety percent of the plan hashed out. Saren was the first to breeze out, showing everyone his disdain in the process. The captains broke up into little groups as they drifted out. When Nihlus and Legion showed intent to leave, Shepard let them go and hung back, she knew that her mother and Captain Anderson would want to have a word with her. Thus she was not surprised that the two made their way toward her just as soon as Admiral Hackett departed the room.

She felt bad for the Admiral, as because of her he would probably hear every shade of complaint the captains could come up with. They had a point too, she was asking them to risk their crews and lives to her word. Even she could entertain some doubts, despite the fact that she thought she knew Legion pretty well. The best she could offer, as pathetic as it was, was the old Shepard gut, an irrational sense that Legion was honest and truthful.

“Shepard,” Anderson greeted. “Are you sure going in there with only Arterius and Kryik is a good idea?”

“It is not.” Shepard replied. “But not explicitly because it’s them.” Shepard thought she could talk some sense into Nihlus, but she knew that Spectres routinely pulled just this sort of borderline suicide. “I trust Nihlus, but I do have my reservations about the odds inside. Still, this is kind of in the job description for a Spectre.”

“Just be careful,” Anderson offered. “Saren will take whatever opportunity he can get to sabotage
Shepard nodded; she knew Captain Anderson was right to be very suspicious of the white-clad Spectre. Saren probably wanted her to lose her candidacy. On Noveria he might have let it go because of the more pressing threat, but after what happened there, outing her might become a pressing concern. This operation also created a better opportunity. Being an observer he would have more leeway to warp the truth. Shepard knew from personal experience that any situation could be turned, manipulated, the details stretched until they were still technically true but painted a different picture. She was good at playing that game herself.

“David, I do not think he would do something overt with witnesses present,” Hannah mused. “He is a snake in the grass. But that bite is only deadly if it is unexpected and unprepared for.”

Shepard nodded. “The trick was in knowing there is a snake in the grass. He did not survive that job for nearly two and a half decades by being impulsive. It makes him all the more dangerous, but… I should think somewhat predictable.”

Captain Anderson shook his head, “Like mother like daughter.” He muttered.

Hannah smiled, but the expression vanished quickly. “Now I just have to ask. How true is what Legion said, really?” She asked.

“I believe Legion.” Shepard replied. “Tali looked at the geth we got, she discovered that the black unit is remote controlled, like a marionette on very long strings. It also behaves differently. To put it into perspective, Legion is one of the only geth units that can talk, and even then, you heard it, its syntax is awkward. The black one is a miserable arrogant bastard, but it does have a better grasp of vocal communication. Wrex also told me they’ve been active out in the Terminus for nineteen years. Would an organic be able to keep control of them for two decades? That’s all circumstantial, I know, but it fits.”

“If Tali and Wrex said that before you met Legion, then yes… it is circumstantial, but it’s there,” Anderson noted.

“I talk with Legion, they always press the point that the Geth want to be left alone. I want to believe them, innocent until proven guilty, right?”

“Trust until someone proves untrustworthy.” Anderson mused.

“It’s the best way I know to live, sir.” Shepard admitted.

“Good. Well, you know what works for you. Just be careful. Now, I need to get back to the Tokyo and begin arranging things on my end. We will talk later, Hannah.”

“Of course,” Hannah replied.

Captain Anderson walked off, leaving Shepard alone with her mother in the empty conference room. When the doors closed, Hannah turned and motioned for her to follow. Shepard followed mutely as her mother exited the room and took a left turn toward the elevators.

Dreadnoughts were the most eccentric ships in existence. In most ships the decks ran parallel to the axis of thrust. But dreadnoughts were different. Because of their spine-mounted main gun, they had to deal with the structural weakness created by the open space of the accelerator rail channel running the ship’s whole length, and when fired, the gun’s recoil. Having additional kilometer-long corridors would only create further weakness, which might split the ship under extreme stress. So these were eliminated by making the decks perpendicular to the axis of the gun and thrust. This made a
dreadnought have many decks, with the only fly-through spaces being tiny elevator shafts deep inside.

As Hannah led the way to the elevator, Shepard noted that the level was now nearly abandoned. There were still some servicemen here and there, who snapped a salute to their captain, which Hannah had to acknowledge with a nod of her head. No one was waiting for the elevator. Hannah tugged her uniform jacket down and straightened her toggles, even though they were not askew, “David is concerned about how much trust you seem to place in Spectre Kryik.”

Shepard hummed quietly, “Why shouldn’t I trust him?” As far as she was concerned the difference lay in how much one knew a person. She knew Nihlus could be quite sneaky, but she also knew he would not stab her in the back. Blind trust was all thinking the best of someone, without acknowledging their propensities and flaws. Shepard never gave anyone blind trust, it was something only the truly naïve and idealistic could give.

“I told him that you could handle things,” Hannah said. “But you know David. When he found out your mentor had a connection to Saren…”

“Yea,” Shepard sighed. This was one of those times when Captain Anderson acted like the father Shepard never actually had. Long familiarity with Hannah and slightly less responsibility than Admiral Hackett meant that Captain Anderson was there to be the stern voice of paternal reason on the rare occasion when a dressing-down from her mother had not been enough.

The elevator cabin arrived and the two of them stepped inside. Hannah pressed a button for deck twenty and the doors closed. Shepard could only stand there and wonder what her mother had planned. Shepard had never spent enough time on the Kilimanjaro to learn its layout. She had entered Alliance service before her mother even became the dreadnought’s executive officer.

The cabin moved and Hannah turned to face her, “So. Tell me, how is he really?”

“How’s who?” Shepard asked.

“Spectre Kryik.” Hannah replied blandly, “How’s whom, you ask.”

Shepard spared her mother a side-long glance, wondering just where this was going. “He’s hardly all that different from any other career military type. He has his pride, but out in the field he’s professional. At liberty… well, you’ve seen that. He enjoys making snarky commentary, especially toward Garrus… Give him a meter, he’ll go a kilometer.”

“Well, I should think that’s given. After all, put a Spectre in the same room with a Citadel Security officer… and friction is bound to happen.”

“Oh it happens alright,” Shepard sighed.

Hannah chuckled, “I bet it does. You collected quite the colorful crew. Turians, a quarian, a krogan, and now a geth! Now you’re just missing a batarian.”

Shepard shook her head, a batarian, right. “If I meet one with a skill set that I need, who does not deserve a bullet to the head for slaving and does not want to kill me… I’ll consider it.” She was not so petty as to hold hate toward all of them automatically, but some were either the sort she wanted nothing to do with, or they wanted her dead, and often a combination of both.

“Alright. Onto the more pleasant things,” Hannah shifted topic like a train switched tracks, “I do get the feeling that Spectre Kryik is fond of you. He is always around you.”
“Mom, really?” Shepard asked, stunned.

“He is certainly a looker,” Hannah went on in the same tone. “Striking even. Those eyes!”

“Mom!” Shepard blanched, this was not happening! Her mother was not discussing her crew in that context. “It’s definitely not like that. But really, I’m pretty sure the suggestion alone would scandalize.”

“Let them be scandalized, just shows how narrow-minded they are. We may have fought them, but that was decades ago. I can appreciate their dedication, determination, and discipline.” Hannah smiled, “If it was to go like that... you wouldn’t hear a peep from me. I just want you to be happy. If you find someone, even a non-human someone, who makes you happy, that is all I want.”

“I thought you wanted grandkids,” Shepard noted.

“I do, but do remember how I had you, dear.”

“Thanks, mom.” Shepard sighed, what more could she say? First, protesting that there was nothing there would be moot, and was likely to work against her. Second, Shepard would not come out and say that there had been someone else. Her mother did not know about Arthur, and it would stay that way. Third, well it made perfect sense that Hannah would not be concerned by the limits of biology. Shepard never met her biological father. She was conceived in a petri dish, using a carefully-chosen donation. She had known about that since she was old enough to wonder. When her mother decided she wanted a child, she chose DNA with traits in mind. In many ways that attitude was Asari, and Hannah had it even before humanity knew there were Asari.

Shepard sighed and began to count her lucky stars that Nihlus was not present to hear this. She could just picture the grin he would have sported. He would have kept it for days. Hell, she would be lucky if he ever forgot. The thought was positively mortifying.

The elevator door opened and Hannah stepped out as if absolutely nothing had happened. Shepard followed, still a little numb. On the one side, it was just like her mother, the picture of open-mindedness, and on another, it was still rather awkward. At least Hannah had timed the talk for the elevator ride. The crew did not need a new source of scuttlebutt. Shepard would thank her mother for small mercies, but she still would have preferred if the topic had not come up at all.

They were far in the belly of the ship, where the decks were slightly wider. Labels on the doors announced this to be the marine quarters and training rooms. Shepard followed her mother mutely, wondering what was going on, but knowing there was no real point in asking.

Hannah led the way to the armory on the deck and just breezed in. Shepard’s eyebrow met her hairline.

“Captain on deck!” someone shouted as soon as they stepped in.

It was like a watching a wave ripple through the room, every single marine stopped and snapped to attention. Hannah nodded in recognition, “As you were.”

A second wave passed as the men and women went right back to their tasks. Hannah moved deeper into the room, toward the weapons bench where a group was working on their rifles.

“Lieutenant Vega?” Hannah said.

One of the marines straightened and turned around. “Ma’am?”
To say he was physically large would be an understatement. Lieutenant Vega stood at what must have been just short of two meters tall, and built like a reinforced brick wall. He had deeply tanned skin, dark eyes, and short dark hair swept up into quills, matched with week-old stubble, and a number of visible tattoos peeking from underneath a grey tee shirt that looked ready to burst at any moment. Then his eyes landed on her and snapped to the line of white in her hair, Shepard knew recognition when she saw it.

“This is Lieutenant James Vega; he is second in command in one of the ground units.” Hannah explained as she glanced at Shepard. “Lieutenant, this Commander Shepard.”

“Ma’am!” the lieutenant snapped a sharp salute.

Shepard returned it, “At ease, lieutenant.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He relaxed a little, but a split second later turned around. “Hey jugheads! Where’s your respect? This is Commander Shepard! The White Death of Elysium! The only current human candidate for Spectre!”

Heads popped up to stare, and a few actually got to their feet and snapped to attention when they realized their lapse. Hannah laughed.

“As you were.” Shepard waved her hand.

“Aye, aye, ma’am!” the marines chorused as one and went right back to their tasks.

The lieutenant turned right back to her, beaming. “It is an honor to meet you, ma’am!”

“Lieutenant Vega here is a huge fan,” Hannah added.

“Yes, ma’am. I tried to get a transfer onto the Normandy, but it was refused.”

“Oh?” Shepard asked. Well that was curious, was it not? Shepard was not sure why Admiral Hackett would refuse a volunteer body when the ship was under-staffed.

“I was able to get a transfer to serve under Captain Shepard. Also a huge honor, ma’am.” James glanced toward her mother.

“Better be, Lieutenant.” Hannah said in a voice of calmness. Shepard though could hear the note of amusement in her mother’s voice. “I figured I let you two meet now, so that Lieutenant Vega could get it out of his system before the operation.”

“Appreciate that, ma’am,” he replied with a giant smile.

Shepard was not sure what to make of this little meeting. Her mother was quite possibly using it as cover up for the elevator talk. “Well, Lieutenant, I expect the best from everyone.”

“I will not disappoint! We’ll give those geth a beating-down they will never forget.” Vega replied as he slammed a fist into the open palm of his other hand.

Shepard would give him some credit for the confidence, but that would be only partial credit. Confidence was only part of the battle; they would need the best everyone there could afford, and then some. She was under no delusions, they would not get past that fleet and the ground forces without losses. This only reminded her that she still needed to take care of things on her own end. “I really need to return to the Normandy. I have my own preparations to take care of.” It was abrupt, but technically not a lie. It would have to do.
“I understand,” Hannah replied.

“It was a pleasure meeting you, Lieutenant.”

“It was all mine, ma’am!” he replied.

“Well if you excuse me,” she turned around and walked off. There was a long list of things to be done, and she had slightly over an hour left to do them. A long FTL jump like the one they were doing meant the ship would be out of comm range the entire time, and once they were out of FTL, the fleet would broadcast its presence at light speed. They would have minutes before the geth came running. The end of the jump would be the beginning of the operation.

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Shepard returned to the Normandy, and once past the airlock bulkhead, a glance to her left confirmed that Joker was his post.

“Welcome back, Commander.” He called. “You know, we were beginning to think Captain Shepard decided to keep you.”

Shepard grinned, but the expression faded quickly, “How are our preparations?”

Joker straightened instantly, “I got our telemetry, course, and speed. It’s unusual for us not to go the full thirteen. Ten light years a day seems slow.”

“Blame the Kili,” Shepard replied.

“Blame the Kili, hah! Do I want a structurally superfluous new behind? I’ve seen what Kili can do, and how much restraint Captain Shepard has in ordering it done.” Joker grumbled as he pulled the bill of his hat over his eyes.

Shepard grinned; trust Joker to find something to complain about, even when there was nothing to complain about. “As you were, Flight Lieutenant,” she said.

“Yea, yea, I get it. I’ll be here.”

Shepard turned around and moved down the neck toward the nerve-center of the CIC. The duty crew was on their best behavior, with not a single cup of coffee or snack tucked anywhere. Normally she was quite liberal with food on duty, but now it seemed like everyone had too much anxiety to be thinking about snacking. It was a good sign, they were taking things seriously.

“Ma’am,” Kaidan greeted from his post at the XO’s station.

“How are things up here?” Shepard asked.

“We’re ready for the jump. I issued a warning that if anyone wants to download anything; they got to do it now, because we will be off buoy for at least three days.”

“Good,” Shepard nodded. That was one thing off her list of things to do.

“What of the meeting?” Kaidan wondered.

“We can discuss that once we’re in FTL. We will have thirty hours in FTL because of the Kili.”

“I thought that’d be the case.” Kaidan nodded. “Now if I may, ma’am. This will not be a typical mission. Everyone on board is more than a little nervous. I was thinking about what we could do.”
“What do you have in mind?”

“Matthews could make something special. Or popcorn movie night in the mess tomorrow.”

“Both of those are good ideas, yea, tell Matthews to make dinner extra fancy.” Shepard really hoped that it would not prove to be the last meal, but if it was, at least it would be a very good one.

“Will do, ma’am.” Kaidan nodded.

Shepard spared the lieutenant a smile and drifted toward the OD. As the door opened she was not surprised to see Nihlus on the couch, though he had changed out of his armor. Shepard made her way toward him and perched on the extension as close as was professionally sound.

“Shepard,” he greeted.

“Nihlus,” she echoed automatically. When he grinned, Hannah’s euphemistic allusion crossed her mind. Did her mother see something she could not? Shepard shook her head and brushed it off; it would not do her good to be distracted now. Especially not with what loomed ahead of them. “We need to talk,” she breached.

“I knew that was coming,” he admitted.

“As much as I believe in Spectre skills, going in there, just the three of us might be pushing it.”

Nihlus sighed, “Saren will not tolerate a big unit.”

Shepard was not going to back down just because Saren wanted to be the king of the galaxy. There was a difference between knowing one’s skill and what could be done, and being reckless. “Saren can be intolerant on his own time. This is Alliance time; we do this how it would work best for us. I am not into taking unnecessary risks.”

“I know, I considered that,” Nihlus admitted as he leaned back in his seat. “What is your plan?”

Shepard glanced outside the viewport at the collection of ships gathered around them. “If my instincts are correct, I expect Legion might want to come along.”

“Legion?”

Shepard turned away from the viewport and caught his gaze, “I have a few reasons to think that. First, there is the curious note of timing, why are the Geth sending this one unit out of the veil now? Then, you had to have realized how odd it was that Legion asked to talk at that meeting. I think it’s not being a hundred percent honest regarding why it was sent outside the veil. My bet is that it has something to do with this god-king. The black unit and Legion also have physical similarities. Then the obvious part, Legion spoke at that meeting like it represents the Geth in some fashion.”

“You think it is some sort of leader of theirs?” Nihlus asked.

“Yes… and no. I do not think it is a leader in the same sense as the god-king. But it is awfully knowledgeable and authoritative. I think it was appointed, like an ambassador, or perhaps a prime minister. They function by consensus, right? So it is not a monarch like the god-king, but more an elected official.”

Nihlus hummed thoughtfully. “That is a very interesting possibility. If you are right and Legion decides to come along… Saren will definitely have both our heads. But I see your point. If it is some elected representative, it will want to come along.”
“I think it is important we afford Legion all the respect we can. They could very well be the Geth ambassador to the organics as a whole,” Shepard went on, tacking slightly along a differed line. “They admitted that the geth observe us via extranet chatter. They’re curious at least, perhaps even interested in making contact. It is important that they do not take away the idea that all organics hate them just because they are synthetic.”

“Spirits. You are right; we cannot afford to insult them.” Nihlus mumbled. “If they decide that organics pose a threat… well. We have no idea how big their fleet is, though the Hierarchy official line is that they have parity. But the Geth are not signatories to the Treaty of Farixen. How many dreadnoughts do they have?”

“Indeed,” Shepard murmured. Trust a Turian to automatically seek to slap a power rating on a potential enemy. Still, he was entirely correct. The Geth were not signatories to a whole bunch of Citadel laws. Farixen was just the obvious; there were other conventions that defined the rules of conduct in wartime. One in particular mattered more to her than Farixen. The Council passed a law to prevent war-time damage to garden-class worlds. Part the reason they had even stepped in during the First Contact War was because the Turians had contemplated dropping asteroids on Shanxi.

The Geth did not have to conduct war with those limits. They certainly did not hold back during their war with the Quarians. Ninety-nine percent of the species was exterminated. From that, it was safe to assume that any major conflict started with the Geth would quickly escalate to a total war with absolutely nothing deemed sacred. No one would win if the galaxy had to wage that war.

“At least Legion ended up meeting someone who would give it, and the Geth, a genuine chance.” Nihlus rumbled. “If there is any chance for some sort of peace, it being on the Normandy is as good as it gets.”

Shepard hoped he was right. She hoped she would have the ability to show Legion, and the Geth by proxy, that there were organics out there who were willing to try, even if so many would panic and run for the hills at the mere thought. Then there were the others who would baulk; call people like her simple-minded, and go on to revel in their own bigotry. She had to keep perspective though; this would not be just up to her. She was no world leader, nor diplomatically savvy. The mere thought of having to deal with politicians gave her hives.

She would only take credit for one thing, her ability to empathize. She tried to see the picture through the eyes of the other person, to understand where they came from, good or bad. The Geth were unlike anyone she had ever met. Still, she would give them a chance. Yes they had done horrible things to the Quarians, but people had done horrible things to other people for thousands of years. Genocide was not a Geth invention. Situations changed, people changed. She would not linger in the past, assuming that nothing ever changed, or should change.

“I hope you realize why we cannot let Saren have his way.” She said after a long moment of silence.

“Yes.” Nihlus nodded. His mandibles drew up tighter against his jaw.

Shepard could see the increasing defensiveness in her mentor. It told her enough about the situation. “Well, for all I know I’m wrong. So let us keep all of this on the down low.”

Nihlus nodded.

Shepard turned back to the viewport. At the end of it all she only knew this much, the next couple of days would change things no matter what. They were in for a quite a ride. Why was it that the galaxy seemed to throw her head-long into the deep end of messes?
**Author Notes:** This episode is probably the one where I dithered over the details the most. I did go all out to name all the ships that would take part in the battle, which led to my own sort of “Homeric Catalogue”.

**General Notes:**

**My View of the Council** – I want to think that I understood why the Council acted as they did in the games. It was perhaps a slight fault that their reasons were not even touched upon (though I understand why). I strive to deal with the realpolitik considerations. The Council is mandated to maintain a status quo, but in a way they are also its slaves as well. If they wanted to act, if it broke the status quo, they couldn’t.

**Chapter Notes:**

**Ship List** – You’ll have to pardon my resorting to a “Homeric catalogue” here. In my defense, at least it’s brief. Homer’s catalogue of ships in the Iliad is infamous. After much dithering, and realizing the explanation was simply too long and would not even fit into the AO3 field for notes, I decided to forgo it. If anyone does want to see it, I am willing to private message or email, but these battles are so famous a cursory Wikipedia search will tell you enough.

**The Treaty of Farixen** – This treaty limits the number of dreadnoughts a fleet can have. Dreadnoughts are those with main guns that can hit with the force of a nuke. They would be considered “planet-busters”, as repeated bombardment from orbit can severely damage planetary ecosystems, like repeated atomic blasts. The treaty stipulates a ratio of 5:3:1. For every 5 dreadnoughts the Turians build, the Asari and Salarians can build 3, and the other associate races 1!
**GoldenEye [Part I]**

**Chapter Notes**

**Disclaimer:** I do no own Mass Effect, I do not claim to own Mass Effect, I am only doing this for fun.

**Author Notes:** I got little to say to preface this, other than this episode was an utter pain to write. Space battles are an utter pain to write.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**Episode 25: GoldenEye [Part I]**

Thirty hours may sound like a lot, but they ticked by like thirty minutes. With each successive hour at FTL there was a ramping up level of tension aboard the Normandy. The enlisted crewmembers talked in hushed tones as they busied checking all emergency equipment. Evacuation and escape pod protocols were studied, while the engineers ran every system check and tightened every proverbial bolt.

Shepard knew Garrus spent hours in the main battery, likely verifying the system code line by line. Ashley spent just as many in the shuttle bay, running every weapon through a battery of tests. She even pressed Tali to check her weapons when she learned Tali insisted on going ground-side.

Jenkins was perhaps the most conflicted of them all. One moment he was practically hopping from foot to foot, the next he jittered with anxiety. Kaidan tried his best to keep the corporal rooted to the decks while alleviating some of his anxieties, but Shepard knew that Jenkins was about to see his first major engagement, hence the nerves.

Wrex turned into a grizzled veteran, alternating between long contemplative silences and prodding fun at the inexperienced individuals, namely Jenkins. Shepard caught him goading the corporal into what Wrex called ‘doing his best’, but Shepard would call being reckless. It was a curious case to observe, knowing that Wrex had centuries of experience to temper some of his bravado, but he was still a warrior born and raised, and so, was plenty eager for combat.

The biggest surprise had been that Nihlus allowed Cortez to drill him in the flying of the A-models. The pilot chose to stay on the Normandy in order to help with the transition. Shepard would admit she liked Cortez’s work ethic. He was exceptionally intelligent, hard working, dedicated, genuinely cared for people, and had humility that was very rare in highly skilled pilots. The crew even forgot Cortez was a guest, and so come movie night he got one of the better seats in the mess, and all the popcorn he could eat.

Movie night ended up an enormous hit, not in small part due to the choice of film. Kaidan avoided anything that took itself too seriously, opting for a semi-classic summer-season action-thriller-comedy full of explosions and the characters walking away from ludicrous stunts without a single scratch, with enough to keep the audience in stitches and make them forget exactly what was coming.

When Legion, who had been observing from the back, questioned whether anyone believed any of that was possible, Matthews clapped the geth on the shoulder and said everyone knew it was fake, but that was not the reason the movie mattered. Legion’s emotive plates flared and another round of
chuckles went around the room. Shepard doubted the geth understood what Matthews meant, but no one bothered to explain.

Still, no amount of diversion could take away the stress and ramping tension forever. As the timer ran down to four hours, the good humor and relaxation went out the window. The crew went back to doing their jobs and running final system checks with a grave aura. They now faced the reality that despite the fleet traveling in a single body, they were out of any sort of contact. In FTL the ship moved faster than the electromagnetic signals used to communicate, effectively making it a blind flight. The Normandy had a QEC link to the Kilimanjaro, but that was about it. When they dropped out of FTL there would only be minutes before the shooting started.

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Shepard was in the OD when they dropped out of FTL, and she was on the CIC in seconds. One look around she noticed everyone had turned toward her. She squared her shoulders and put on her game face. Now was not the time to let her crew see even a single hint of doubt.

“Are we ready to go?” She asked.

“Yes, ma’am.” Kaidan replied from his position at the operations console on the port side of the CIC central console.

She nodded, and moved toward her position at the head of the CIC console, sparing a glance toward Legion who stood by the elevator. The geth wanted to observe, and she could not tell it no.

The view of the ship’s systems over the central CIC console vanished, replaced with a tactical map of the surrounding couple million kilometers, complete with scaled holographic representation of each and every ally ship. The Normandy was right there with the vanguard of frigates, followed by the cruisers, and finally the Kilimanjaro in the rear.

“Commander, sensor fleet link has been established.” Kaidan announced.

“Good.”

The elevator opened behind her, Shepard glanced back just in time to see Garrus step out. He spared Shepard a nod by way of greeting as he moved across the CIC toward the ordnance station across from her. That position was normally left to a dedicated gunner, someone trained to operate the ship’s arsenal. Now, given the changes done to the Thanix, Shepard wanted Garrus at the controls. She had not named him Ordnance Officer for nothing.

“Put us in yellow alert,” she ordered.

“Aye, aye, ma’am.” Kaidan replied as the lights on the CIC dimmed.

Shepard watched as the ships jockeyed into battle formations. The Grecian flotilla frigates boldly surged forward. The Thermopylae, flanked by the Salamis and Plataea took the very spear point of the formation, with the Athens just behind them. The Independence flotilla’s frigates moved forward on the right, extending the line, with the Philadelphia shadowing them, while the Napoleonic flotilla took a similar formation on the opposite side.

The Berlin slid into position under and slightly rear of the Kilimanjaro, where it could protect the dreadnought’s fighter bay opening. The bay was a large, hollow space perfect for scoring gutting hits. The Great War frigates arranged themselves in a chevron in front of the openings themselves, creating a safe zone for fighters to launch.
The Tokyo moved over and forward of the dreadnought, with the Japanese-named frigates arranged in a tight line in front of it. That position would allow them to intercept a running above-head attack aimed at disabling the Kilimanjaro’s main gun. They could also spring to the aid of the vanguard if necessary. The rest of the cruisers scattered amidst, filling in the formation until it resembled a spearhead. The STG frigate and the Impera lingered in the rear, on either side of the giant battleship. Joker moved the Normandy to its place above the dreadnought, where they would not get into the line of fire should the Kilimanjaro open up with its broadside autocannon batteries.

Their plan was to wait for the heretics to come to them. Grissom’s outer asteroid belt was too thick; fighting in there would hamper the maneuverability of the agile frigates and force them to break formation. The heretics had about the same fleet makeup; but Admiral Hackett wanted to put the deadly rocks behind them, and force the enemy to commit to an attack.

Then a background hum of whispers just out of focus filled the CIC. “Communication link with the Kilimanjaro has been established.” EDI announced.

“Great, thank you, EDI.” Shepard replied.

“Hackett to all ships, our enemy must now know we are here. We have only a few minutes before we meet them in battle.” The admiral’s voice cut across the communication link, clear as daylight.

Shepard glanced at Kaidan and nodded. He turned to the console in front of him and input a series of commands. Shepard turned back to the data projections before her.

“They invaded our sovereign territory and killed our people.” Hackett continued calmly. “We will show them how badly they underestimate our strength. The Alliance faced mightier foes before, foes with unknown capabilities and with the odds stacked against us. We did not surrender then, and we will not surrender now.”

Shepard hummed, was it just her, or was that an allusion to the First Contact War? Admiral Hackett was not pulling any punches here. To be sure the Alliance did not bust fancy speeches for slaver raids. She glanced at Legion. The geth was listening, but there was no way to know what it took away from all of that.

“Today we know how many enemies we face. We surpass them ship for ship and gun for gun, but our real power is in our fighting spirit. Remember those who fell on Eden Prime, the Cajamarca, and the Mukden. Honor the uniforms you wear, shoot true, and let nothing stop you from achieving total victory!”

Red dots appeared on the map in front of her, signals from Notanban’s atmosphere. “We have contacts,” Shepard murmured.

“A bit early for the signal to reach back to us,” Kaidan murmured.

Shepard watched as the number of individual dots grew. “They could have QEC-based sensor relays hidden among the asteroids.”

“Shepard-Commander is correct in her assertion.” Legion announced.

Shepard had been conjecturing, based on the fact that the Alliance kept a wide network of conventional laser-pulse sensor buoys throughout the Sol system, with a heavy concentration in the asteroid belt between Mars and Jupiter. The principle was the same, just that the Alliance did not need high-speed QEC-based buoys to tell HQ that someone was at the gate. The only way into the Sol System was through the Charon-Arcturus relay and the fleets on both sides. If they got past the
guardians, they were at the gate, tracking their advance mattered more, and QEC buoys were too expensive to deploy as a tracking array.

The background chatter from the Kilimanjaro’s bridge picked up a little, but the noise-cancellation was still too good to hear anything distinct. The OD door opened and Nihlus stepped onto the CIC. Shepard nodded his way but said absolutely nothing as he took up position at her side. She would be lying if she said she did not feel a little nervous. This was not a typical operation by any stretch of the imagination. Typical for her was boots on the ground, relying on her team, guns, and skills. This operation was relying on the Normandy, a two-hundred-plus meters hunk of matter; with little where to escape should things go wrong. There was no control in that, and that was plenty to be nervous about.

The clocks ticked and the enemy ships advanced. The hodge-podge of heretic cruisers and frigates moved as a single body, but they did not seem to have a formation. This could simplify and complicate things at the same time. Former because it showed the heretics were not tactical geniuses by any stretch of the imagination and latter because a death ball was chaos incarnate and highly dangerous for it.

Shepard glanced at Legion. Was there a point to asking for input? Were the geth in general inexperienced in combat, or was this something unique to the Heretics specifically? It seemed rather odd for a race that had won a war against their creators not to have learned a thing or two in the process. Was she over-analyzing things? A death ball was also a common Turian tactic, a part of their basic strategy of using overwhelming force rather than intricate finesse. She knew they could assume formation in a heartbeat. The geth could be playing mind games. This was engaging an unknown enemy, and she could be leaping across multiple scenarios to try and make sense of something she had too little data on.

She turned back to the console and watched as the geth ships entered the outer asteroid belt. The hum of noise from the Kilimanjaro’s bridge shifted again, Shepard could hear the tension in the whispering. She could also see the rising nervousness in the bridge crew around her.

“All ships, red alert.” Hackett announced.

Shepard nodded toward Kaidan by way of affirmation.

Kaidan input a series of commands into his console. The red alert lights set into the CIC’s walls lit up, “Kinetic shields are up. Blast shutter closure is initiated.”

All around the CIC the duty crew straightened at their consoles, but Shepard noticed one of the men look her way, concern on his features. She spared him an encouraging smile, and then turned back to the console. Then the dots representing the geth ships began to turn into holographic figures as the map area shrank.

“Steady,” Hackett warned.

“Muzzle flashes detected!” A quieter voice from the Kilimanjaro’s bridge called.

“Muzzle flashes confirmed.” EDI echoed.

“Evasive maneuvers!” Hackett ordered.

“Joker, move us, nothing hits the Normandy!” Shepard ordered.

“Don’t need to tell me twice,” the pilot replied.
She could not believe the heretics decided to fire at that range. Did they think they would hit? Or was their plan merely to break the fleet’s formation? The Alliance ships simply shifted around enough to dodge expected trajectories, but everyone remained tightly in their places.

“No one fire, wait until they are clear of the asteroids!” Hackett ordered.

The geth were now almost halfway through the field, but that made their decision to open fire at range even more bizarre. Shepard glanced toward Garrus, “We have armament we can still use, even if we can’t use the main guns.”

“We will make them pay, Commander.” Garrus assured, the only voice of utter confidence on the CIC.

“Their opening volley missed. No damage.” A voice said over the comm. Shepard suddenly recognized the speaker, Michael Yager, one of her mother’s favorites.

“Excellent.” Hackett replied.

The geth begun to emerge from the asteroid field and Shepard hummed as she watched their fleet shift into formation, frigates up front, cruisers further back, almost a mirror of the Alliance’s own formation. The Alliance ships slid right back into their previous positions, and the formation tightened even further. The geth would not get in between, meaning they could only shoot from outside, where the Alliance ships could open up with everything they had without the risk of misses resulting in friendly fire.

“Ready your weapons!” Hackett ordered.

“Garrus, ready the disruptor torpedoes,” Shepard said.

“Loaded and ready,” Garrus replied.

Shepard watched the console, where should their first shot be aimed? Their current position allowed them a nearly perfect line of sight on a great number of enemy ships. “Target the leading frigate,” she ordered.

“Yes, Commander.” Garrus replied.

Given that the geth adopted a wedge formation, the leading craft would be the most logical target. If they could break the spear’s tip, the Grecian flotilla would have an easier time getting into their midst to shatter their push.

“The geth fleet has crossed into designated engagement range,” Yager said.

Garrus tensed over the console, and Shepard clasped a fist, the order to fire was coming. She glanced at Kaidan and nodded.

“Opening salvo, fire!” Hackett ordered.

“Fire!” Shepard echoed.

Garrus tapped a series of keys, and the Normandy shuddered as her torpedoes erupted from the launch tubes at the base of the ship’s nacelles. The central console filled with moving dots that indicated projectiles. EDI’s vast processing capabilities allowed her to plot the trajectory of every round in real time using the fleet link sensory telemetry, something even the Kilimanjaro’s command array could not do as quickly, because it processed telemetry by VI.
Shepard watched as the leading frigate’s model tried to scoot sideways, firing its point-defense GARDIAN lasers all the while. But unlike mass accelerator rounds, Javelin disruptor torpedoes homed in, and the geth point-defenses had been slow to respond. A moment later the model began to blink as EDI flagged it with a yellow marker.

“Direct hit!” Garrus announced.

“Excellent,” Shepard replied. Two more frigates took disruptor torpedoes from the Alliance frigates. A cruiser in the middle of the formation blinked rapidly, its flag indicated a deep penetrating hit. Then, suddenly the marker flashed red and blinked out of existence.

“Direct hit, ma’am. Target destroyed.” Another familiar voice, Theresa Carrere, announced over the comm.

“One down,” Hannah Shepard stated with a chilling calm. “Carrere, target their power cores. We are not here for tea.”

“Your mother is taking no prisoners,” Nihlus noted.

That was putting it mildly, Shepard thought to herself. Hannah was showing everyone why they called her the Titanium Lady.

“Aye, aye, ma’am,” Carrere replied.

“We’re long past warning shots,” Shepard said as she glanced at Nihlus. Her mother believed in decisive action. After what the heretics did to the Cajamarca and Mukden, there would be no parlay. It would take a direct command from Admiral Hackett to get her to rescind her kill order.

“A logical position. The Old Machine will not show mercy.” Legion stated.

Shepard glanced at Legion and watched them for a long moment. The geth just stood there, and only the minute movements of it head plates prevented anyone from thinking it was a statue with a light.

“Muzzle flashes!” Yager shouted.

“Muzzle flashes confirmed.” EDI said.

“Taking evasive action.” Joker announced.

“All ships, you are free to engage.” Hackett ordered.

It was like all hell broke loose as all the ships hurried to dodge the second volley. At the same time the Grecian flotilla charged ahead, flying almost nacelle to nacelle right at the leading enemy ships. The Independence and Napoleonic flotilla frigates followed, spreading into a single line, effortlessly forming a chevron with the Thermopylae as the point.

This maneuver was a classic chicken gambit, any enemy that did not want to get rammed, would dislodge and abandon formation. But as Shepard watched, the Heretic formation held, and the Alliance frigates were the ones who had to break off. Yet the pilots were ready, and the ships wheeled every which way and within an instant the whole thing turned into one giant death ball as they engaged.

Soon the moving dots that indicated the flying rounds became too fast and too frequent for her to track who fired at who and when. The battle rapidly devolved into a knife-range brawl, and the fleet responded accordingly. The cruisers closed ranks, the Athens backed up, pushed back because of a
hail of rounds from the leading pair of heretic cruisers, until it was level with the Philadelphia and Paris, bolstered by the Emden and Jakarta as they moved forward. Then Cape Town, Shenyang, Seoul, and Warsaw came up from the behind, extending the line further, forming a breaker wall.

Shepard hesitated to order Garrus to fire more shots. The Normandy was a frigate, not a dreadnought; it was supposed to be right there with the rest, at knife range. Their armament was most dangerous when it was point-blank as that way it was much more difficult to counter. Furthermore, shooting from outside they ran a very real risk of a false target lock.

She watched as the death ball writhed. The Alliance frigates went after the enemy ships damaged in the opening volley. One by one they blinked out of existence after taking another pair of torpedoes. Yet some others managed to slip out, heading for the cruisers, only for Alliance frigates to swing around, trapping them in between. In that instant Shepard knew where they could bring their weapons to bear. “Joker, move us in line with the Tokyo’s frigates,” Shepard ordered.

“Yes, ma’am.” The pilot replied.

The Normandy began to move, but then they were not the only ones. The STG frigate left its position in the back and accelerated to full speed.

“The Cape Town just took a heavy hit to the broadside!” Yager called.

The Cape Town’s figure began to blink; EDI’s marking flag indicated a penetrative hit. A moment later the ship began to back up, opening a gap in the screen line.

“Carrere, target the ship that hit the Cape Town. Maximum acceleration.” Hannah ordered.

“Yes ma’am,” Carrere said.

The Kilimanjaro began to turn on the spot, physically having to adjust its angle of fire.

“The geth are breaking past the Cape Town!” Yager warned.

The other cruisers were already moving to close the gap, but three frigates managed to slip through nevertheless.

“Sekigahara, Nagashino, Hakata Bay, move to intercept!” Hackett ordered.

The Tokyo’s frigates abandoned their position over the Kilimanjaro’s spine and surged forward as ordered.

“Captain, the Kilimanjaro is in position. Firing solution locked. Rails charged.” Carrere said calmly.

“Fire.” Hannah said coldly.

A fast-moving round exploded from the dreadnought. Meanwhile the Tokyo’s frigates surrounded the breakthrough group and loosed a volley of disruptor torpedoes. The geth cruiser’s sensors must have registered it being the Kilimanjaro’s target, as the ship suddenly started to move, but it was too close, too big, and too slow. The Japanese-named frigates formed their own death ball, vying for weapon lock. First one, and then another heretic ship began to blink, having sustained some damage, but they were still wheeling around.

“Direct impact on target power core. Cruiser destroyed.” Yager reported.
“Well done, Carrere.” Hannah praised.

The STG vessel swooped in on the breakthrough frigates, flying in from outside and above. A dot appeared indicating it fired a pair of torpedoes, and then an instant later a second. For a brief moment it looked like both pairs were aimed at the same vessel, but they diverged, moving quickly and erratically, like sidewinders on the sand, to confound the heretic point-defenses tracking at range, and then both pairs vanished as the damaged frigates blinked out of existence.

“Impressive,” Shepard murmured.


With two of the three runners gone, the three Japanese frigates had no trouble getting a target lock on the last, and all three fired on it. The geth frigate had nowhere to go, and no way to outrun the deadly munitions, a moment later its marker vanished off the map.

“The Emden just lost a nacelle to a broadside glancer.” Yager called.

Just like that whatever moment of triumph that might have formed went up in smoke. Shepard had to tell herself this was normal, that some ships were bound to take a hit. In fact, Yager would not be announcing every hit, just what he deemed the major ones. Still, every instinct called for her to order the Normandy to bring its main guns to bear, before hits became kills. She watched as the Emden began to back up as well, opening another breach in the cruiser wall.

“Enemy cruisers are advancing on the Cape Town and Emden!” Yager continued.

“They can smell blood in the water,” Shepard murmured. The plan was not working all that well, the enemy was not backing up no matter how many of ships they lost. The god-king seemed willing to fight to the last there and then.

The Grecians swung back, with the Thermopylae running at full speed into the rear of the cruisers heading for the Cape Town. On their flank, the Austerlitz and her sisters rounded on the cruisers aiming for the Emden, but the heretic frigates they had been fighting followed, and overshot, sliding in between them to prevent the Napoleonic flotilla from shooting. The enemy found entry into the body of the Alliance formation, and they were not going to give it up. Their target had to be the Kilimanjaro, why else keep running for the breaches in the cruiser wall?

The Alliance cruisers around the Emden opened fire from their broadside batteries, to try and weed the Heretics in their midst. Each auto-cannon fired a one-kilogram slug at one two-hundredth the speed of light. At sixty autocannons per cruiser, thirty to each side, arranged in twin rows along the hull, the batteries delivered death by battering down shields and punching multiple hull breaches, which were deadly to a crewed ship. However in this instance Shepard suspected it would not work. The geth did not breathe, but more than that, they had gotten close in between the Alliance cruisers, where the VI-operated targeting computers would not fire if the angle risked hitting a friendly ship should it miss the intended target.

One of the heretic cruisers going for the Cape Town began to blink as the Grecians hammered it with long-range disruptor torpedoes, ignoring the frigates blocking their path. On the other side, the Napoleonic flotilla fought to break through the frigates blocking them, lopping torpedoes as fast as they could get a good lock. However, it was hard to miss the fact that the Heretic frigates were deftly dodging target lock, and when that failed, their point-defense lasers were beginning to hit the torpedoes aimed at them.

“Are we really going to be watching this?” Nihlus asked.
Shepard took a deep breath and let it out. “I have orders, Nihlus. I don’t like them, but they are orders.” If that was not the understatement of the year, Shepard did not know what would be.

The STG frigate took up position on the Cape Town’s flank, between it and the Madrid. It looked like they decided to wait for another opportunity to present itself rather than risk getting in the way. The Impera hovered over the Kilimanjaro, not backing up, but not engaging either.

Right now it was becoming apparent that something had to be done to tip the odds. The geth frigates had moved in on the Grecians, ending the volley of torpedoes as the Thermopylae, Salamis, and Plataea suddenly had their own concerns. On the other side, the Napoleonic ships were still locked with their own foes, and they were slowly backing out.

“Yorktown, Lexington, Concord, assist the Thermopylae. Sekigahara, Hakata Bay, and Nagashino, break that mess around the Austerlitz!” Hackett ordered.

The two flotillas split, each flying to support their designated group. A few moments ticked by, and Shepard noticed that one of the heretic cruisers had started to turn away from the melee. Just from that she knew what was coming. “The Tokyo’s flotilla is not protecting the Kili’s nose anymore! Joker we’re going to have to intercept!”

“Aye, aye.” Joker replied.

“Normandy hold your position!” Hackett ordered.

The Normandy’s model paused, Joker was taking orders over her head, and Shepard clasped both her hands into fists. The Cape Town began to turn, and the heretic cruiser surged forward at full speed. The Jakarta and Emden responded, moving up to block its path, but the Emden’s speed was impaired, and the Jakarta was too far away.

“Muzzle flashes detected.” EDI announced, overlapping the similar announcement from the Kili’s bridge.

“Target?” Shepard asked urgently.

“Kilimanjaro.” EDI replied.

Shepard was not happy; they could have destroyed that blasted cruiser in one shot. Admiral Hackett was holding back.

“Divert emergency power to forward shields!” Hannah ordered.

Suddenly the Cape Town began to turn and accelerate. EDI brought up a dashed line to show its trajectory, and Shepard knew it would slide right into the incoming round’s path.

“No! Carter, we can take it! Reverse your burn. Now!” Hannah called.

The Cape Town fired her main drive, accelerating further. Then the round marker crossed over, and her already blinking model began to blink faster.

“Direct hit to the Cape Town. The round has imbedded inside the hull.” EDI announced.

The Emden and Jakarta opened fire at close range, as fast as their fire rate would allow. The geth cruiser’s model seemed to hold for a long moment, but then its shields must have collapsed, and its model began to blink faster and faster with each hit.
In the background, the Thermopylæ and Salamis seemed to have run out of patience and charged right at the frigates blocking their path, loosing torpedoes near point blank and bucking their main drives to get away from the explosions. They did not bother to close distance on the cruiser and loosed their torpedoes at range. A breathless moment later they hit, a pair from each side. The cruiser’s model blinked once more and vanished.

“Cruiser destroyed.” EDI announced.

“Cape Town, damage report!” Hackett demanded.

There was a tense pause. Only the Kilimanjaro had full two-way links to the bridges of all the ships in the fleet, Shepard knew they would not hear whatever the Cape Town’s captain replied.

“Commander, the Cape Town is reporting critical damage to the spinal axial column just forward of engineering.” EDI announced.

Shepard slammed a palm on the railing, damage to the spinal axial column of a ship meant its main gun was inoperable, and worse, the ship’s structure was severely compromised. Cruisers and dreadnoughts had two such columns spanning their length, the spinal lay along the back, under the main gun, and a second, keel column at the bottom. Damage to one meant the ship could bend under acceleration. To make matters worse, the round hit close to engineering, which meant it was close to the power core. How many had died just then? Shepard could not just continue to sit and do nothing. “Admiral, the Normandy needs to engage.”

“No, Normandy, you will hold your position.” Hackett replied.

Shepard glanced at Nihlus, weighting whether or not she could get away with disobeying orders if she claimed Nihlus ordered it. He would back her up, but would it float? The Admiral was set on keeping the Thanix up the Alliance’s sleeve if possible, so no; she would be in hot water. As frustrating as it was, she had no choice but to keep the Normandy back.

Shepard turned and counted the enemy ships still on the board, three cruisers, and a good eight frigates. The Fifth had seriously dented the enemy fleet, and all considering the crippling of one cruiser was a small price to pay, but it was still a price. Every instinct Shepard had screamed for action. No loss was acceptable to her. It was naïve, she knew that much, sacrifices in combat were a part of combat, but she could not accept them sitting down.

She watched as the STG moved across to aid the Thermopylæ and Salamis as they began to buzz around the stricken Cape Town, shielding it just in case it launched escape pods. The Paris and Athens advanced on the left flank, pushing up behind the Napoleonic and Tokyo’s frigates on that side, intent on that enemy flank. Their arrival seemed to dislodge something, as the death ball slowly began to drift backward.

On the right hand side, the Plataea, aided by the Independence group’s frigates, reformed a line, intent on driving into the enemy on that flank. Now the Philadelphia and Warsaw moved in to back them up with heavier armament. The heretics must have registered this move on their sensors, because they suddenly broke off. Next thing Shepard knew, the three remaining cruisers began to turn, making a sharp about face, pushed out by the advancing Jakarta, Madrid, Seoul, and the bloodied-but-still-swinging Emden.

The numbers were now firmly in the Fifth’s favor and Shepard saw why the Admiral prevented the Normandy from jumping the gun. The Admiral knew her instinct to protect, and he restrained it. The heretics finally realized they were not winning this; even a pyrrhic victory was beyond their reach. Still, their withdrawal was definitely not a hap-hazard panic-driven rout. One might argue that they
were incapable of panic, but it made Shepard wonder. The heretics had been losing ships at a steady rate from the moment the fight began, why withdraw now?

“Should we pursue?” Hannah asked.

There was a moment of silence; Shepard imagined that the admiral had to consider things. Yes they had caused the enemy to run into the rocks, but Shepard knew fighting amidst the asteroids was never in the plan. The intent was to drive the heretics against the rocks, so their maneuverability would be gone, prior to just shooting them apart.

“Let them regroup. They will not gain much. We need to ensure our people are taken care of first.” Hackett replied.

Shepard looked around the CIC. It seemed like this had done something for the tension, the duty crew was not as rigid. Kaidan looked a little less grim. Garrus was no longer hovering over the gunnery console, waiting to execute orders within a split second.

“Is it just me, or is this kind of…”

“Don’t say it Commander. Let’s not tempt fate now.” Kaidan said.

“You know full well that if there is something more to this, it will happen regardless of me saying something about it or not, right?” Shepard asked. Really, she would not have pegged Kaidan to be superstitious.

“The geth have functional stealth technology, they might have cold, voided ships hidden among the rocks. After the trick we pulled with the decoy fleet…” Garrus ventured.

Kaidan groaned, “He said it.”

“It is a thought,” Shepard mused. “If there are ships in there, it’ll be a good ambush for the Kili. It will not be able to maneuver, and they are set on it.” There was no great mystery as to why. In every fleet Shepard knew, the biggest ship was usually the command flagship. That fact seemed even more ubiquitous than breathing oxygen.

She looked back toward the central console; the Fifth’s ships had disengaged, which allowed the heretics to enter the asteroid field at their leisure. The Cape Town had turned around, limping at a tenth of her normal operational speed toward the very rear, where the Berlin and the rear guard could take over the task of shielding it.

“All hands, take this moment to plug whatever leaks you have. This isn’t over.” Hackett ordered.

Shepard knew she needed to talk with the Admiral, at least because of the very interesting possibility Garrus put forth. In her mind, it did not make sense for the enemy to retreat unless they had something planned. It could be a classic feint to pull a recklessly overconfident enemy into an ambush. They could also have more ships in orbit around Notanban, in which case they were pulling the Fifth into another sort of ambush, except this one would put the asteroid field at their back, a perfect turnabout.

She glanced toward Legion, whose face-lamp was turned right at her, the light beam narrowed. It was slightly unnerving how the geth just stood there the whole time, a picture of calm amidst the storm. This was probably the exactly why the geth unnerved people; they were too logical and too emotionally detached. The fact that they fought and essentially won a genocidal war certainly did not help either. Still, what did Legion think of everything that happened? There was too much uncertainty going around, and Shepard hated uncertainty.
Twenty minutes later the Normandy, leading the Grecian frigates, entered the asteroid field to run reconnaissance. Their goal was to scope a path through the field, using active sensory to analyze anything and everything for hidden ships, space mines, and any other kind of nasty surprise potentially lurking in the dark.

The Normandy was in full sensory link with the Thermopylae, Salamis, and Plataea. Everything their active sensors picked up was almost instantaneously passed to the Normandy for EDI to analyze and process. EDI had to run her hardware at approaching capacity, which was something given how vast her processing power was to begin with, but the end results of such a feat would be worth it. Still, this left the Normandy vulnerable to cyber attacks, but that was probably the least concern right now.

The charting operation was a slow process. The Normandy’s passive sensors were like the eyes of the ship, they sought incoming electromagnetic spectrum signals. The passive array could tell them there was something there, but it took a touch, a pass from the active LADAR to ascertain whether that something was a rock, the hull of a cold, voided ship, or in the case of smaller objects, a proximity mine. The Normandy had the best sensors of the four ships, able to scan fastest, but it meant nothing when you had so many objects all around.

Shepard paced the CIC, though she made all efforts to mute her footsteps. Legion watched her pass back and forth, but otherwise remained unmoving by the elevator. The communicator chattered with out of focus activity as the rest of the fleet went about business.

“Shepard, you are wearing a hole in the deck plates.” Nihlus said.

She stopped cold and spared the Spectre a chilled look.

“I have never seen you pace like that.” Nihlus went on, completely unbothered.

Shepard sighed, it was best to diffuse this before Nihlus caused everyone within earshot to get nervous. Really, why was he starting this on the CIC? “Nothing. I am just not used to this background work. I’m a boots-on-ground type.” That would do as a deflection, and it was not technically a lie. She was facing the realities of her command, one nuance at a time.

“That is understandable,” Garrus murmured. “And… that reminds me…”

Shepard picked up the great note of hesitation in the former detective’s voice. Something told her that he never forgot a thing in such manner; he was merely dithering because he could not come up with the right approach.

“I am concerned about the ground operation on Solcrum.”

Shepard would give Garrus credit for going for highly professional, but he blew the transition. Truly he was absolutely rotten at lying through his teeth; she could see the faint agitated fluttering in his mandibles. He was merely playing at professional calm, putting up a show for the benefit of everyone on the CIC.

Shepard glanced toward Kaidan, who was attention-splitting between the console and their conversation. Legion had turned its face-lamp, staring unashamedly right at them.

“Three people going into that base, with unknown numbers of enemies...” Garrus trailed off, but his meaning was clear.

“You forget that two of those people are Spectres, and the third is Shepard.” Nihlus replied
smoothly.

“I am aware that the third is the Commander.” Garrus fired back.

“Then what are you getting at, Vakarian?” Nihlus let his arms drop as he glared Garrus down over the holographic map.

“Something about this bothers me. Arterius makes no secret of his loathing for humans. But he is willing to do this? Why?”

“Orders.”

Shepard noted the condescending tone of that quick, one word reply. Nihlus definitely seemed testy, was it nerves or something he knew but would not say? Shepard could not tell. Well it was certainly an interesting thought, now that she began to examine it. Strictly speaking Nihlus was right; if the Council ordered Saren to do something, he would have to do it. But Garrus was right too, there was something that did not add up. The Council had sent in the STG. Nihlus said they would send in a second Spectre to observe. So far Saren had been observing. Certainly the Impera showed no intention of joining the fight. He did not have to take an active part, yet Nihlus had been sure that Saren would want to be part of the ground operation. He would know his former mentor’s temperament best. Still, that was no answer, why was Saren putting boots on the ground?

Shepard operated on a rather simple assumption when she needed to explain why people did anything. Everything people did, they did to benefit themselves. Even the most altruistic person reaped some personal benefit from their altruism. Most people thought she was a horrible cynic, but looking for the personal benefit was the easiest way to understand someone’s motive, and then predict their future actions.

So where was the benefit for Saren? What was he getting out of this? What would he want? An easy assumption would be that he was still out to undermine her. But why put boots on the ground? Even as an observer he could easily play with the facts to change the picture. Maybe he could do that easier if he was there to witness something going wrong first hand, but still, he did not strike her as that obvious, not after she showed him that she could play the game as well. He would be exceptionally foolish to underestimate her, and if anything, Shepard could say Saren was no fool. He had the sort of intellect that made him dangerous. So no, there was more to all of this for him. There had to be.

“If I may?” Kaidan stepped in.

Shepard turned to the lieutenant and was not surprised to see that everyone had.

“Ultimately going into that base with just three people is underestimating the enemy.” Kaidan went on, calm as can be. “That said, I think Spectre Arterius sees this situation for what it is. He may not care for humans, but this is bigger than humanity. The Heretics could become a threat to the galaxy. It is a Spectre’s job to eliminate such threats.”

Shepard raised an eyebrow; Kaidan was again trying to diffuse the tension with middle-road logic while taking a position he thought would not offend. Garrus glanced her way. Briefly Shepard thought he might want to say something edgewise, but suddenly chose not to.

“Alenko is right.” Nihlus said.

Shepard thought that was as a good a place as any to drop that topic. At the very least Kaidan got Nihlus and Garrus to stop arguing.
“Commander, we are about to clear the asteroid field,” Kaidan said almost a minute later.

“Anything on the scans?” Shepard wondered.

“Nothing foreign was detected. It’s all rock, and nothing worth mining either.” Kaidan replied.

Shepard hummed thoughtfully, she had expected some nasty surprise, but maybe the heretics did not seed the belt after all. Maybe they never counted on coming out on the losing side of things. Of course, the absence of a minefield did not discount the possibility of additional concealed ships around Notanban. There would still be danger in crossing the field; it just will not come from something lurking in it.

As Shepard discovered, the fog of war was indeed a thick one. The Admiral’s decision to regroup gave the ships enough time to assess and patch the damage, as well as count the losses. It was shocking that only the Cape Town was now listed as out of action. The Emden lost much of its maneuverability, but her captain was eager for round two. Seeing the Emden push on, no other ship wanted to sit this one out, no matter how damaged. And there was damage. The Jakarta was grazed by a heretic’s round along its mid-section, peeling up some armor and venting one section, leading to the deaths of five people. The Seoul had a MAC round gouge into its back-mounted sensor array, causing minor vents in a few compartments below. A few more people got badly hurt, but no lives were lost. Still, the ship was now nearly blind to muzzle flashes from that angle. Madrid took a MAC round through the stem of its starboard nacelle, so its main drive was structurally compromised. It was a testament to reaction times that none of these impacts hit where they were meant to.

The frigates fared only a little better, given that they had been in the thick of it. The Hakata Bay had been scorched by a too-close detonation of Heretic torpedoes locked right onto its power core; it got incredibly lucky that its point-defenses hit the torpedoes in the last possible moment. Then there was the Thermopylae and Salamis, both got over-eager with their torpedoes and their reserves were nearly expended. Their sister, the Plataea, spent the time performing an emergency propulsion system cycle. Dancing as she did, the frigate overheated her thrusters, causing damage to her own armor around the vectored cones. The system mounted enough errors that the frigate’s engineers decided to shut it all down and reboot. Shepard was told that was typical of the Grecians, they always overdid it.

Shepard had listened to her mother list these facts with professional calm, but she knew it was only a front for the benefit of the bridge crew. Shepard knew her mother; if Hannah had not been on the warpath before, now she would be apt to fashion a geth’s cranial casing into a drinking vessel. Shepard would have wanted to believe these would be the final deaths of the day, but she was not that naïve. There was still the ground mission, and she was not innocent enough to think they could do that without losses.

It was another hour before the Fifth’s ships could advance deeper into the system. Each vessel had to make their own pathway, to dodge and weave through the rocks, which broke up their formations. The remaining heretic ships gathered in orbit over Solcrum, forming a battle line. They knew what the Fifth was there for, and looked ready to make their final stand over the gas giant’s moon. The fact that they chose to retreat all the way to their stronghold was worrying, but not surprising. They had fared poorly in the first part of the battle, and now had nowhere else to go.

Shepard’s major fear was that the Fifth was heading into an ambush. The positions had fully reversed, now they would have rock at their back and nowhere to go. There were too many questions buzzing in her head. Was there an ambush? That was the million credit question. If not, were the heretics merely reacting? Forming a line for the final stand? By their nature, they ought to
become less organized as their numbers dwindled. The Fifth had already destroyed a fair number of their ships, how many runtimes was that? Was it enough to begin affecting them? There was also the fact that they were led by a synthetic that probably did not have the same problem, how did that alter the math? Shepard had to remind herself consciously not to pace the CIC.

As the ships began to clear the rocks, they slid back into formation, led by the Grecian, Napoleonic, and Independence flotillas. The Normandy followed behind the wedge, in-between the Athens, Philadelphia, and Paris. After them came the other cruisers forming a middle line of defense. The Emden was still limping along in their midst. Bringing up the rear was the Kilimanjaro. The dreadnought’s thrusters never stopped burning in some direction. A ship her size was not supposed to slalom around rocks, but her pilots were making a damn good show of it. At the very rear came the Tokyo and her ships with the Great War flotilla. Trailng way in the rear was the STG and the Impera.

Shepard watched as the dots indicating the heretic ships moved out of Solcrum’s orbit while maintaining their formation. If they had anything left around Notanban now would be the time to spring the trap. Yet as the seconds ticked by, nothing emerged from Notanban, and Shepard realized that these really were all the ships they had left. Why had they even retreated? Was that nothing more than an attempt to regroup, dig in, and try again? Those sometimes worked, but Shepard doubted it would work for them. The Fifth’s ships were smarting, but that just made them eager to finish the heretics off.

“Hackett to all ships, ready your weapons.”

Shepard looked toward Garrus and nodded.

“Let’s do this. And maybe this time with less sitting our hands,” Joker said from the bridge.

“All systems are reporting ready, Commander.” Kaidan announced from his post.

“Disruptor torpedoes are armed and ready.” Garrus announced from the gunnery post.

The enemy fleet drew ever closer and the Alliance ships closed ranks, tightening formations as to keep a sudden Hail Mary charge from getting in between them. Right now, neither side would benefit from it. If the heretics rushed, they risked hitting the cruiser line brick wall and being shot apart effortlessly. If the Alliance charged, they would have to break up their lines, disassemble the wall, which would allow the heretics to get among them. On the grand scale of things, the Alliance stood to lose more from a poorly timed opening move.

“They’ve entered their firing range. It’s about to start.” Kaidan said.

Shepard watched as the Alliance frigates moved forward in their wedge formation.

“Muzzle flashes, the geth have opened fire!” Yager’s voice echoed over the fleet link.

“Evasive action.” Hackett replied.

Shepard watched the dots indicating the rounds fly.

“Nothing aimed at us,” Kaidan noted.

“Garrus, when the order comes, put disrupter torpedoes into the lead frigate.”

“On it, Commander.” Garrus affirmed.
“All ships, pick your targets, and fire on my mark,” Hackett ordered.

“Target lock acquired.” Garrus said.

Shepard folded her arms and waited.

“More muzzle flashes.” Yager warned.

Shepard thought that by now the propensity of the geth to fire long-range shots would surprise no one. The Fifth’s ships burned thrusters to get out of the way even as the geth continued to close in.

“They are desperately trying to break the fleet’s formations.” Nihlus mused.

“That’s not going to work,” Shepard replied. “Let’s just hope all those stray rounds hit an asteroid and do not go off into deep space.” The kicker about space bullets was that an errant round would keep going until it hit something. That something could be the universe’s unluckiest ship, an asteroid, or a planet, and it could be hundreds if not thousands of years until it happened.

As the Alliance ships began to reset from their evasive burns the geth finally entered volley range.

“Fire at will!” Hackett ordered.

Shepard felt the inertial dampener field kick as the Normandy accelerated forward, ahead of the Athens. Garrus hovered over his console, waiting for the ship to clear friendly zones in order to achieve final lock.

Ahead of them, the Grecian frigates charged, loosing their torpedoes before they entered a series of erratic burns to close in for knife-range. The Independence and Napoleonic frigates were a second or two behind. The monitor was filled with the rounds of the Alliance cruisers, and a quicker moving round fired from the Kilimanjaro’s main gun. A moment later the Normandy gave a little twitch with the recoil of the torpedoes accelerating out of the launch tubes.

“Torpedoes are away,” Garrus announced.

The Heretics attempted to veer as the shots came in, but the Grecians streamed in from the right, with the Independence flotilla from the left, and the Napoleonic from above, penning them in, forcing them to rely on their kinetic barriers rather than avoidance, but those could only take so many hits before breaking, and the Fifth would have no problem firing until they broke.

The hail of mass accelerator rounds converged and merged with the death ball and suddenly one of the cruisers started blinking, shortly followed by two frigates. Shepard smiled as she watched the Normandy’s torpedoes slam into the side of the leading frigate for a third damage-dealing hit.

“Direct hit, detonation confirmed.” Garrus announced.

The Thermopylae swooped in, loosing another pair of torpedoes almost point-blank and peeling away as fast as her thrusters could push her. The heretic’s point defenses could not track a target that close, the torpedoes hit home, and one of the previously-injured frigates blinked out of existence.

“Whoever’s piloting the Thermopylae isn’t half bad. Nowhere near as good as I am though. I could have made that turn tighter.” Joker said from the bridge.

“One kill, three additional hits.” Yager summed up.

“Do not let them catch their breath!” Hackett ordered.
Shepard saw Legion’s head flaps rise and drop back down. Shepard could tell it just decided not to comment about the turn of phrase. “Three cruisers, one bloodied, and now seven frigates.” she noted.

“They’ve fired again,” Yager said.

“Evasive actions,” Hannah ordered.

The fleet danced, the cruisers held their line, only moving enough to get out of trajectory lines. The frigates kept the enemy frigates too busy to attempt a break-through; unfortunately the heretics were beginning to get really good at defending themselves. Shepard glanced up at Legion. “What is going on? The Heretics point defenses are improving on the fly. Are they really adapting that fast?”

“Affirmative.” Legion replied.

“We destroyed a number of their ships, why are they not becoming disorganized?”

Legion pushed away from the wall and approached the console, “Shepard-Commander, you assume runtimes from the destroyed ships have been destroyed. That assumption is incorrect. The Heretics have hardware on Solcrum which allows runtime upload, preventing a loss of processing capacity.”

Shepard stared at the geth as if it had just grown a second head, “You knew?” she asked.

“We calculated the probability of such a failsafe to be eighty percent. Recent observations increased the probability to ninety-nine percent.”

“And you did not point it out?”

“Admiral! Shenyang just took a hit on the nose! It embedded!”

Shepard turned back to the console, all arguments forgotten; the Shenyang’s model was blinking. The heretic frigates had worked their way around the Alliance ships, moving the fight right up against the cruiser wall. It prevented the cruisers from targeting them, lest they hit a friendly in the scrimmage, but it also created a screen that allowed the enemy cruisers to fire from the back lines.

Shepard turned back to Legion, barely keeping her glare at bay. How many more people had just died?

“Shepard-Commander, you intend to destroy the heretic stronghold on Solcrum, the backup hardware will be there. Destroying it will ensure the Heretics lose this adaptation. We did not perceive it necessary to mention the hardware.” Legion explained.

Shepard was rendered speechless; Legion just admitted to sitting on vital information. They clearly did no want to arm the Alliance with more knowledge than absolutely necessary. On the one hand she understood why, but on the flip-side, it showed obvious mistrust. Not that she would blame them, mind you, but when she trusted someone, she expected it in return. Still, there was also the obvious fact that Legion did not resist her pulling the information out, once she asked the key questions. What could she make of that? Where was the truth here? Was Legion merely playing politician to the end? “We’ll discuss your definitions of necessary later.”

“Acknowledged.”

Shepard turned back to the console. The Shenyang was backing up, opening a gap in the cruiser wall, but it did not launch escape pods, which was a good sign. Still, damage on the nose with the round embedding meant it had suffered at least a partial decompression of the command decks, with only mass effect fields between people and the void. The cruiser had to back out, lest another hit
finish it off.

“I believe it’s time to finish this.” Hannah said calmly.

The death-ball of small ships writhed and coiled, but Shepard could see the situation shift a little by little. The Alliance frigates managed to surround the remaining heretic frigates like wolves on the hunt in pursuit of a herd of deer. With the frigates contained, the cruiser wall began to disperse, no longer as necessary. The Emden and Shenyang remained in the center, with the Warsaw and Jakarta at their sides, while the Tokyo, Madrid, Cairo, and Seoul pushed forward, taking a vector over the frigates, heading straight for the remaining heretic cruisers in the back.

“Steven, we need to eliminate those frigates. I think we can afford to do without our rear guard at this point.” Hannah noted.

“Yes, they do not seem to have anything else to give.” Hackett replied. “Somme, Marne, Ypres, move in.”

The three frigates surged forward almost before the admiral finished speaking. The Berlin remained behind, still floating stalwartly below the dreadnought, watching her vulnerable belly. The Great War frigates loosed torpedoes at range to cover themselves as they swooped in from below.

The other frigates pulled back, wheeling free, only to swing right back and dive in. It turned into a piranha feeding frenzy, with torpedoes flying every which way, with the Heretics firing their point-defenses as well as they could, but now they were grossly outnumbered and had only so many lasers to fire.

Then a frigate took torpedoes to the flank, and blinked out of existence, but the rest fired their own weapons. A pair locked onto the Yorktown, but it wheeled around, pulling a tight one hundred and eighty degree burn to fly right between her sisters. The Lexington and Concord’s point-defense turrets locked on automatically and opened fire; the torpedoes were destroyed before they could close in.

Another pair streaked for the Thermopylae, but instead of seeking backup, or firing its own point-defenses, the frigate wheeled sharply, her rear slipping a stunning one-eighty as her thrusters flared like candles. A moment later its main drive ignited, accelerating the frigate right back into the death ball as the torpedoes pulled a tight, but clumsy parabolic arc to stay on its tail. A split of a second later the Thermopylae was screaming right at one of the enemy frigates.

“Are they ramming?” Nihlus asked, shocked.

“Hell No! Just watch,” Joker replied, clearly amused and gleeful. “EDI, record it!”

A screen appeared over the console, EDI had dutifully turned her camera to follow the Thermopylae. Shepard had a sinking feeling she knew what was coming. There were only a few pilots in the Alliance insane enough to go for it, the Thermopylae seemingly had one.

At the last possible moment the Thermopylae jammed its ventral thrusters into full burn, its nose pitched back as its nose decelerated, but its rear maintained enough momentum to slide around. For a breathless moment it looked like the frigate’s nacelles would slam into the enemy frigate’s back, but the pilot timed the momentum shift correctly, the frigate merely squatted over the enemy. Then the Thermopylae’s main drive ignited like four blazing flares, the plumes rapidly melted holes into the insectoid ship even as the Thermopylae shot along its length. The torpedoes were a lot less responsive; they slammed into the heretic ship and detonated.
“Hah! Adapt to that you bastards!” Joker crowed from the bridge.

The heretic frigate split in two and exploded into a million pieces.

“Is that standard Alliance piloting… or…?” Garrus trailed off.

“Pfft, standard… that’s fine Alliance piloting.” Joker replied.

“It is certainly effective,” Nihlus mused.

“Hey! For once I agree with our resident Spook!” Joker chuckled.

“It was an unnecessary risk.” Shepard said as she shook her head; it would figure the flyboys would get excited. She did not know who was more insane, the Thermopylae’s captain, or its pilot. Former because she allowed her pilot to do that, or latter because whoever they were, they risked it. “Joker, just… don’t do that with the Normandy, alright? It cost a lot more than the Thermopylae.”

“Bah! You’re no fun!” Joker replied.

Shepard swiped EDI’s inset screen aside and peered over the battlefield. While the Thermopylae had been grand-standing, the Great War flotilla had scored two other kills with a quiet triple-pronged attack. The Tokyo, Cairo, Seoul, and Madrid had closed in on the cruisers in the back, two were blinking, damaged, but still floating. The Seoul was blinking as well, having taken some damage, but judging by her movements, it was not hampered too much.

“Commander, we’re about done with the geth up here. I’ve notified the STG and the Impera to prepare for insertion.” Hackett announced over the comm.

Shepard straightened and nodded toward Kaidan, “Understood, sir.”

“The Kilimanjaro has launched fighters.” Kaidan announced.

Shepard nodded again. She knew what that meant, the fighters were to be their air strike, but they were also to escort the unarmed Kodiaks carrying marines into orbit. Some of the frigates would follow them in as well, to deliver the Makos. Out of the corner of her eye she saw the Impera push forward, and STG followed a few seconds behind. “Joker, follow the STG and Impera.”

“Roger.” The pilot replied.

The remaining heretic frigates were kettled and taking a hammering from all directions. Their cruisers were likewise boxed in. Solcrum lay in front of them like a prize up for snatching, though it was the sort of worthless consolation prize that no one really wanted to receive. With traces of atmosphere at best, the moon was an irradiated, baked rock with surface temperatures rising into the three-hundred degrees centigrade. Orbiting a gas giant, it had a super slow rotation period, a day lasted six tenths of Earth’s year.

“Commander, the Kilimanjaro has relayed convergence coordinates.” Kaidan said.

“I got them right here,” Joker said from the bridge.

The Normandy caught up to the STG and Impera just over the moon, but the two ships were not descending yet. It seemed like everyone unanimously decided to wait for the fighters and shuttles. Shepard was not about to complain, instead she took the opportunity to observe the last moments of the space battle.
The Alliance frigates finally got the upper hand on the heretics, and shot apart their frigates one at a time. Fundamentally the heretics only had so many point-defense turrets, if the frigates shot volley after volley, something was bound to finally slip through. When the last heretic frigate exploded the Somme, Marne, and Ypres broke away and turned toward Solcrum, which answered the question of whose Makos they would use.

“The Impera has begun descent,” Kaidan said.

“Alright. Joker, follow it.” Shepard replied. She felt the Normandy give a faint kick of acceleration as they followed the black vessel into Solcrum’s near-nonexistent atmosphere. The STG ship followed a few seconds later. Shepard tapped at her console for the open ship-wide comm-line, “All hands, we are descending on Solcrum. Away team, be ready to put boots on the ground in thirty.”

The Normandy started to shake as it dove toward Solcrum. As thin as the atmosphere was, there was still something there, enough to put up resistance to something plowing through at high speed.

“Houston, we have a problem,” Joker suddenly cut in.

“I am detecting a cruiser-sized vessel on Solcrum’s surface,” EDI explained.

Shepard froze in place. “Heretic?” she asked, though she knew it could not be anyone else.

“Yes, Commander,” EDI replied.

“Shit, it is moving!” Joker added hurriedly.

Shepard almost cursed. The geth had tucked away one last ship to protect their assets. Except it was a cruiser, something frigates ought not to engage while unable to maneuver. Their entry vector was essentially locked. Coming in faster, more sharply, would cause more heating, and potentially damage. At the same time, pulling up incorrectly could likewise cause damage. They could not fire torpedoes while fighting the atmosphere, and even if they could, the Heretics had adapted to them. To make everything even worse, their locked vector was a relatively straight line, making it easy for a cruiser’s mass accelerator cannon to snipe them.

“I’m adjusting our entry vector. That thing is not shooting us out of the air.” Joker said, and as he did the shaking of the Normandy increased.

Shepard hummed; if they cleared the thermosphere quickly they could decelerate to a velocity where they could maneuver and fight. Maybe between the three of them they could use their nimbleness advantage over the lumbering giant of a ship to whittle it down. If push came to shove, she would order Garrus to fire the Thanix. Admiral Hackett would understand. “EDI, can you give me an external view?”

“Of course, Commander.” EDI replied.

The image over the central console changed, displaying a composite panoramic stretch of the Normandy making entry. The Impera was on their left and the STG ship on their right, both kept to a similar angled descent, flaring heat coronas at their bellies. Yet in the distance, right under the Normandy’s nose, was the cruiser. EDI flagged it with a bright red overlay that read its heading and relative velocity. It was still quite a long distance away, but that did not matter to a mass accelerator drive.

“The Somme, Marne, and Ypres have begun entry.” Kaidan announced.

“They’re rushing to be backup,” Shepard muttered and turned to the gunner’s station, “Garrus, I
want torpedoes locked on and ready to fire the moment we are no longer flying entry velocity.” She ordered.

“Yes, Commander.”

The heat corona began to fade as the Normandy slowly decelerated, but Shepard knew they were still locked to a single vector, and they needed to lose even more speed to be able to maneuver freely.

“Muzzle flash detected,” EDI announced.

“Shit!” Joker cursed.

The Normandy’s thrusters fired, Joker wanted to force rapid deceleration, to throw the calculations off. Yet the corona refused to vanish, the Normandy was resisting, her hull groaned with the stress. Shepard clutched at the railing in front of her. The Impera and the STG counter-burned as well. The Impera’s stabilizer wings extended and then began to glow as they heated in the friction. “Where is the round?” She demanded.

“The shot missed,” EDI replied.

“I think I got this, we’re stabilizing.” Joker said, but even then the hull groaned.

“The Tokyo has entered Solcrum’s orbit,” EDI announced.

“Torpedoes locked on target, Commander,” Garrus said.

Shepard nodded.

“The Tokyo has fired on the heretic cruiser.” EDI continued.

“Joker hold our vector,” the Tokyo was firing over their head, if they moved now, they could slide into the firing line. Barely two seconds ticked and the cruiser’s kinetic barrier flared.

“Impact. The cruiser’s kinetic barrier is holding.” EDI announced.

“Did you guys see it flare? What the hell is that?” Joker wondered. The hull groaned again as Joker continued a pattern of pulsing counter-burns to decelerate. Then quite suddenly the corona fizzled out. “We’re clear!” Joker said. Even as he did, their pitch changed, and with it the view from the cameras before EDI swung them back to show the cruiser again.

“Garrus, now!”

The Normandy bucked as the torpedoes left their launch tubes. On the screen the STG frigate fired theirs. The two pairs streaked at the cruiser, but it turned, exposing its broad-side, and its point-defenses. A second later the laser turrets opened fire. Shepard knew it was coming, but watching their torpedoes be shot out still stung. The STG pair managed to get closer, side-winding as they did, but ultimately the geth point-defenses shot them out too.


For a breathless moment Shepard fervently hoped all that would be enough. Then the cruiser’s shields flared again.


The cruiser’s point-defenses lit up, and one by one each of the three pairs of torpedoes were likewise
annihilated. The heretic cruiser began to turn, to bring its main gun to bear.

Shepard glared at the cruiser; there was no other choice left. “Garrus bring the-”

“Commander, I am detecting a massive energy build-up from the Impera,” EDI announced.

Shepard’s order died on her lips as she watched a single long turret-barrel drop down from a concealed compartment below the Impera’s neck. The barrel split right down the middle, forming a channel, and rails extended from within, locking into place.

“Is that…” Kaidan began.

The rails began to spark as a glowing red mass pooled in the apex between them, momentarily blinding the camera with a lens flare before the filters adjusted. A moment later a red beam erupted from the gun like a solar flare, racing across the distance to the heretic cruiser.

The beam hit the geth cruiser in the midsection, its shields flared, but the beam cut through, sank into the hull, and erupted clear out the other side just before it died. The geth ship swelled, around both entry and exit wound. Small fireballs punched additional holes in the hull as they raced out from the impact. Then the ship bulged like a balloon and exploded into a number of large sections.

“Holy shit!” Joker gasped.

Shepard blinked, stunned. It took her another long moment to realize three simple, shocking facts. The Impera was a Thanix frigate. It had gutted that cruiser with a single shot. And they effectively owed their lives to Saren Arterius.

Chapter End Notes

**Author Notes:** This episode presented a number of challenges. First, this is the first time I ever wrote a space battle scene. This story has a very narrow, tight POV, which meant I had to come up with a way around. Yes, techno-babble and I made the CIC what I think a “Combat Information Center” ought to be, where we never really saw it used in detail. Basically this is an experiment. I hope it is enjoyable.

**General Notes:**

**Command Array** – A “command array” is used by lead ships to enable tactical/strategic coordination. The Kilimanjaro being a fleet flagship, has a command array capable of receiving and processing sensory telemetry from every Alliance ship around her, and collating it (through VI assistance) into a tactical map on her CIC. EDI can do this same function; it is one of her “experimental” functions. Basically the Alliance asked can an AI do the job better than a VI? Although it is a heavy draw on her processors, so she could not hack the Geth at the same time. This is my way of getting around the third person super limited POV of this story.

**Chapter Notes:**

**Blast Shutters** – Ever notice that the Normandy got metal panels that can close over its windows? I’m using them here, giving them a purpose.

**LADAR** – Laser Detection and Ranging. These sensors use lasers to scan objects for dimensions, which EDI can then reassemble into a picture, and compare with her
databases.
Episode 26: GoldenEye [Part II]

The ground attack force ships landed on a wide plain surrounded by crags a hundred kilometers away from the Heretic compound. The frigates set down in a defensive semi-circular formation facing where they knew the enemy was, which would allow them to fire their point-defenses if the heretics had any sort of missiles that could cover a hundred kilometers. The Normandy landed at the apex of the formation, flanked by the Impera and the STG.

Once they were settled, the Tokyo made its slow descent right into the middle, where its broadside autocannons would deter a rush by small craft, and its lower deck could be used as a command post. The cruiser looked grossly out of the place, and its perch was even more precarious, as a ship its size was not supposed to make atmospheric entry willy-nilly.

Solcrum’s unique situation demanded a very rare exception to the rules. Its lack of atmosphere created triple digit centigrade surface temperatures. Grissom, being a blue giant type star, hung halfway over the horizon, so the middle of the day still looked like murky twilight, with extended shadows and warped color perception. At the same time, the giant’s radiation output was such that the surface was bleached silver-grey, and they had to limit environmental exposure as much as possible. Without bringing in prefabricated forward base blocks to deploy, the ships would have to do as quarters, service bays, and hangars.

When they landed, Shepard turned the Normandy over to Joker and went up to her loft to get into her armor. She was in the shuttle bay in fifteen minutes, and unsurprisingly not the only one there. Wrex was fully suited up, leaning on one of the Kodiaks. Tali was there too, wearing more webbing than normally, pouches bulging with all manner of things unknown, and carrying her shotgun and a pistol.

Shepard made her way toward the quarian with a sense of purpose, carrying her helmet under her arm; there was something that needed to be squared away before things got a little out of hand. “Tali, a moment?” She asked.

“Commander. Please do not ask me to remain behind. Not this time.” Tali replied.

Shepard shook her head, “Wouldn’t dream of it, but I have something I need you to help me with.”

“Of course, Commander.” Tali replied.

“EDI will be hacking the turrets for us… but we have a whole bunch of people here who cannot
know about EDI. The Alliance personnel can be ordered to keep quiet, but it absolutely can’t get out to the STG, or Spectre Arterius. For the sake of cover, I want them to think you did the hacking, if that’s alright.”

“It’s alright, but… I couldn’t replicate the feat if they asked.” Tali murmured.

Shepard had a way around that. “EDI, can you show her how you do it later?”

“Yes, Commander.” The AI replied calmly.

Shepard smiled, “That covers that, no? You’ll also know the vulnerabilities EDI spots, so there’s some valuable data, and if anything we can say the openings were patched. After the heretics showed their ability to adapt to our torpedoes few will question it.”

Tali visibly relaxed, “I will be glad to help.”

Shepard smiled wider, “Thank you Tali.”

Shepard nodded her head and glanced toward Wrex. There was still one more outstanding issue to handle. She would not be there to coordinate things on the surface, and so the Normandy’s crew would be divided between command lines. She could not expect Kaidan or Joker to be effective coordinating everyone in her absence, not with Kaidan under Captain Anderson’s command.

She heard the elevator doors open and turned. As if on cue Garrus and Legion stepped off. The former detective was clad in his armor, carrying his full gear. Legion had its own weapons, including that oversized sniper rifle. Suddenly the solution presented itself on a platter.

“Garrus! The other person I needed to see.”

Garrus approached where she stood, “Need me for something, Commander?” he asked.

Shepard nodded, “Nihlus, Spectre Arterius, and I will be entering the facilities on our own. Kaidan will have his hands full with Ash and Richard, and they are Alliance, so they will be under the command of Captain Anderson. That means he will not be able to be my proxy. Garrus, I need you to supervise the non-Alliance Normandy team in my stead. I am putting you in charge of Tali and Wrex.”

“Garrus, do not even think of holding me back!” Wrex called.

Shepard grimaced; she wished that was the only potential problem she could foresee. She knew going in that Wrex would only take orders from her. “Don’t worry, Wrex. You have my blessing to demolish as many heretics as you want.”

“Good,” the krogan rumbled.

“What do you want us to do?” Garrus wondered.

Shepard pondered, that was certainly a good question. Normally she would not have made such a team, there was too much difference in skill sets and too much potential tension between individuals involved. “I want you three to support the marines in whatever way you can.”

“Works for me.” Wrex replied.

“Erm… Wrex, could you help me get more memory cores to look at?” Tali said.

The krogan paused, as is contemplating. “Sure. Where are they inside?”
“In the torso.” Tali replied.

“So if I take their heads off, it’s good?”

“Yes.”

Shepard tried her best not to smile. She turned back to the former detective, “Garrus, I want you coordinating throughout. Work with Captain Anderson out there.” It went without saying that she trusted Garrus’ military training to kick in. It was something he had over Wrex and Tali. She needed a little bit Turian military discipline, their service-before-self ethos. She needed someone she could count on, someone who would try to get her team through this fight in one piece.

Garrus straightened instantly, “It will be done, Commander.”

“Thank you.”

“Um… but what about Legion?” Tali asked.

Shepard glanced at the geth. The right thing to do was to assign Legion to Garrus’ command. As a sniper, it could efficiently pick off enemy units that gave the marines problems. Unfortunately she had a feeling that Legion would not be available.

Legion moved, its steps echoing on the deck plating as it made its way toward them. “Shepard-Commander, we request to accompany you into the compound.”

Just like that her hunch turned to fact. Sometimes she hated being right. “I thought you would ask that, Legion.” What more could she say?

Tali looked between them in what might have been surprise; it was hard to tell with her helmet on.

“Saren will not be happy about that,” Nihlus said as he emerged from the cockpit of the Kodiak.

Shepard raised an eyebrow. How long had he been listening? “Spectre Arterius will have to understand the situation we are facing.” She turned back to the geth and grinned, “Legion you were sent to represent the Geth, weren’t you?”

The geth straightened as its emotive plates flared. Then they settled back down, “Affirmative.”

“There.” Shepard said with a smile. “I don’t think we can refuse a formal request of this nature, as that would be refusing a dignitary a due privilege. Of course, we could deny them said privilege, but we’d have to deny their sovereignty while we’re at it, and by my understanding, the Council does recognize Geth sovereignty.” She knew she boxed Nihlus in with that one, and by the look he spared her, he knew he was boxed in as well.

On political terms, when a sovereign state recognized another as a sovereign state, it meant recognition of a permanent population settled in a location, having a government, and the right to enter relations with others. The signatories of the Citadel Conventions, the so-called associate races, were the classical definition at work. But there were important grey definitions as well. The Vol Protectorate was a client to the Turian Hierarchy, yet they were associates, and accorded an embassy. The Council also recognized the Batarian Hegemony, even though they chose to withdraw, and shutter their embassy. They also recognized the Quarians, despite them having no fixed location, and their embassy had been revoked. The existence of such grey areas was important. The Geth fitting the classic definition could be argued on technicalities, specifically whether or not one took the definition to mean the population had to be organic. Shepard took the definition broadly, but she also saw precedent.
She could also see another angle in that. The galaxy could not afford to insult the Geth by denying their sovereignty, doubly so if the Geth were the ones extending a tentative olive branch. As the dagger-bearing right hand of the Council, Spectres could not be ignorant to the political scene. Saren would have to swallow his personal displeasure.

“Still weaving your designs,” Nihlus mused.

Shepard smiled wider. That was as much a concession speech as she would see from Nihlus. The Spectre was too proud to admit she outmaneuvered him, but also too honest to deny the truth.

There was a scratch from the intercom overhead, “Commander,” Joker cut in. “Captain Anderson ordered muster.”

“Right. Thanks Joker. Get that ramp down. We have Kodiaks to prepare, and where is Cortez?” It was her way of shifting rails, moving away from the intrigues.

“Other shuttle,” Nihlus replied.

“Right,” Shepard nodded as she watched the ramp begin to descend.

Shortly after, with the details squared, and just the last hours of quiet to go, Shepard could only watch people do their jobs as she stood at the top of the Normandy’s shuttle bay ramp. All the marines deployed by the Kilimanjaro converged under the Tokyo. Kaidan, Ashley, and Jenkins went over to join them. The Mako teams, two vehicles from each of the Great War frigates, gathered off to the side across from the unarmed Kodiaks that would carry the majority of the marines. Nihlus and Cortez flew the Normandy’s armed Kodiaks out to join them. The fighters had landed in their own corner of the field, but the pilots remained in their cockpits, ready to scramble at a moment’s notice if the heretics launched anything.

It was not long before the STG unit emerged from their frigate as well, all of them armed and ready for combat. The only ship that did not give a single sign of activity was the Impera. The black frigate just sat there, both majestic and foreboding.

When she turned her head, she noticed another small group descent the length of the ramp lowered by the Tokyo. At the center was a figure in black and red armor emblazoned by an unmistakable N7 logo. Shepard triggered her helmet to seal up, and tested the seals before she left the safety of the Normandy’s shuttle bay. She was not surprised that Captain Anderson chose to lead from the front, it was his nature, and that brought her some comfort. She knew he never treated those under his command as cannon fodder.

There was a very important detail that she needed to iron out before the bullets started flying. Shepard wanted to make sure the marines knew there was a single ally geth unit on the field. The last thing she needed was for some jar-head to open fire on Legion, thinking the geth was sneaking up on her or something. She spotted the geth in question standing by one of their Kodiaks, apparently keen on shadowing the away teams. Grissom’s light made their brushed-metal finish glow a radiant electric blue.

As she drew near where Captain Anderson stood, he noticed her and nodded. Shepard reached up and tapped her comm controls, to synch her suit with the frequency the captain was using.

“Shepard, good of you to join us,” the Captain said.

“Oh course, Captain. May I have a moment to relay some information to the troops? It’s about
Legion. I worry someone might mistake them for an enemy combatant.”

“I was just about to start assigning units, but that can wait about ten minutes. Do what you need, Shepard.”

“Thank you.” Shepard replied as she turned to the men gathered about.

Things moved very quickly after that. The whole operation broke down into three phases. The first being the strike against the anti-air defenses by the Mako convoy and the accompanying troops. To that end, teams were made so that each of the six vehicles had a full compliment of marines to put down the anticipated ground resistance around the towers. Two of the six vehicles were also equipped with a special attachment that looked like the threshing blades of a grain combine. These were used to scoop up and safely detonate buried mines.

The STG brought armored vehicles as well, as Captain Kirrahe wanted his troops to follow behind the Mako convoy. The Salarian vehicles were a peculiar mix of a tank and APC, having a single MAC-equipped turret, eight wheels, thrusters, and its nose and angled bottom hinted it was amphibious.

Phase two was to be the fighter air strike against the base defenses. Phase three was the main attack, led by the fleet of unarmed Kodiaks carrying the majority of the marines. Once the air defenses and snipers were gone, they would go in hot and engage whatever infantry the heretics still had at that point.

One of the Normandy’s A-models, flown by Steve Cortez, would fly Garrus’ team low and behind the Mako convoy, to make it look like Tali was hacking the turrets, while in reality the shuttle was just a signal relay for EDI. Once the ground fighting began in earnest, Cortez would air-drop Wrex into the melee while Garrus and Tali took up position in the middle and back, providing whatever help they could outside the main fight.

Nihlus would fly the other, carrying the ‘Spectre Team’ for insertion into the underground base. Shepard was not thrilled with the idea of warming the bench while the marines had to fight on the ground, but there was little she could do about it. Everyone had a role to play in this operation; hers was to go in with the Spectres.

It was about forty-five minutes after the convoy’s departure that Shepard strapped herself into the co-pilot’s seat of their new Kodiak. Nihlus, already strapped into the pilot’s seat, was running the craft through a full pre-flight system checks. Saren and Legion were in the back, and by what she could see from the internal cameras, Saren’s hand never left the vicinity of his side-arm, and Legion watched the Spectre with an unashamedly unwavering stare, not a subtle circuit in their body. Seeing the situation brewing in the back of the shuttle Shepard could not help but think that calling the four of them a team was laughable.

“Commander, Spectre Kryik,” EDI announced her presence over the cockpit communicator. “The convoy is nearing the outer ring of anti-air guns. Phase one of the operation is about to commence.”

Shepard glanced at Nihlus and nodded, “Got it EDI, thanks. Are you ready?”

“Yes, Commander. I will not let the heretics stop me.”

The communicator cracked to life, “Anderson to all hands, phase one is about to begin. Fighters,
“stand by for your signal.” Then there was a pause over the link, followed by a faint out of focus murmur. “Shepard, is your team ready to go?” Anderson asked.

Shepard leaned forward to tap at the comm, “Yes sir.”

“Good. Stand by for further orders.”

“Understood, sir.” Shepard replied. She switched lines, “Shepard to Kodiak two, status update.”

“Commander, Kodiak two reporting,” Garrus’ answered. “We have visual on the outer ring of towers. So far, so good. We are well below where the towers can lock on to us.”

“It’s not so much the altitude as the IES system, but I am taking no chances,” Cortez added.

“Thank you Lieutenant.”

“Think nothing of it, Commander.” The pilot replied.

“Well… I’ll let you concentrate. Keep your links open, Shepard out.” She tapped the key to switch back to the command frequency.

“All systems are ready,” Nihlus announced.

Shepard nodded and leaned back into her seat, content to let silence settle between them. She wanted to enjoy this little moment of quiet before the storm. She watched over the externals as the fighter pilots went about their preparations. She could see the nervousness from them, the majority sat in their cockpits running down checklists, one pilot was staring at something in his hands, a third was praying while thumbing a rosary.

“The convoy has reached the outer ring of enemy towers,” a voice announced over the communicator.

Shepard gripped her restraining harness, the only thing she could with her hands right now.

“The geth have deployed ground troops.”

She knew better than to contact EDI, as the AI would be at the limits of her capacity at that moment, fighting against a system that could adapt on the fly. This was a fight on their turf, whatever strategic and tactical limits the enemy displayed when fighting on the physical plane would not apply to a fight with digital code.

They did not have a data link now, so they had to make do with updates over the comm while waiting for Captain Anderson to give the phase two and three teams their go signal. The updates came from the command and reconnaissance vehicle, the last Mako in the convoy, whose purpose was to be the overall eyes, ears, and mouth during this part.

The seconds ticked and the radio chattered, marines calling positions and orders across the open channel, creating a chaotic mess of codes and short-hand. There was no concentrating on any single part as the human brain simply could not process that fast.

Then suddenly there was a pronounced uptick in the chatter, warning about something exploding. Shepard closed her eyes to try and focus on the details. A sudden cheer made her jump in her seat.

“Towers alpha-one and alpha-two are down. Our forces are engaging resistance at the base of alpha-three.”
“Mine-clearing team, begin your sweep toward towers beta-one and beta-two.” Anderson ordered.

The chatter resumed what would be considered normal background drone. Shepard still clutched at her harness. How quickly were the heretics adapting to EDI? Would there be enough time to cut through all the rings?

“Tower alpha-three is down.”

“Convoy units, regroup and proceed behind the mine-sweepers. I want all wheels along the cleared path.” Anderson ordered.

“So far so good,” Shepard murmured.

Nihlus hummed a quiet rumbling assent.

“Mine-sweepers, what’s your status?” Anderson continued.

“This is sweeper alpha, Captain, we’re all green. Ground penetrating radar is yet to pick up a single mine. We’re threshing just in case.” Another voice replied.

“Sweeper bravo, likewise, no explosives detected along our path.”

Shepard’s eyebrows rose. Did the heretics not set a minefield?

“Proceed at pace, you are not to rush this.” Anderson replied.

“Roger.”

Shepard hummed to herself, had she been in charge, there would have been mines. Well there was nothing to it except to sit tight and wait.

“Sweepers alpha and bravo are approaching tower beta-one.”

The four vehicles remaining in the convoy team rattled off their status and distance behind the sweepers, but Shepard had momentarily tuned the chatter out. She glanced at the camera feed that showed the back compartment. It looked like the cold war between Saren and Legion had not abated in the slightest.

“Towers beta-one and beta-two have deployed ground troops. Convoy team; get your asses over here before they shoot us out.”

“Whatever Commander Shepard’s quarian specialist is doing… it’s working brilliantly. We’re seeing no signs of activation from the towers.”

The chattering picked up intensity now and Shepard wondered if the convoy Makos had decided to rush in there. She could only wait with a baited breath and hope for the best.

“Tower beta-one is down! That hit was a beauty… beta-two is- … Captain, beta-three is moving! The turret is coming about! They’re trying to aim at our Kodiak.”

Shepard froze, was EDI losing grip?

“They are adapting,” Nihlus murmured.

“I want all vehicles to focus fire on it!” Anderson ordered in reply.
“Yes…and it’s too quick. There’s still one more ring of towers.” Shepard replied. The towers probably could not aim low enough to hit the Makos, but their second Kodiak was there as well. She had reasons to be worried.

There was a long pause as everything seemed to hang in silence. Solcrum did not have enough atmosphere to transmit external sound which might catch on some microphone and clue them into what was going on. Every second dragged as Shepard hoped this would not be the beginning of everything going wrong.

“Tower beta-three destroyed!”

“Tower beta-two destroyed.” Another voice echoed.

“Mine-sweepers proceed to towers gamma-one and gamma-two.” Anderson ordered. “Fighters stand by, you are to scramble the second the third tier of towers is down. Convoy, regroup for the final ring.”

Shepard tapped the comm for the back compartment, “The convoy has cleared the second ring of anti-air towers. We’re taking off the second the third ring is down.”

“Sweeper alpha reporting, sir, still no sign of mines.”

“Sweeper bravo reporting, likewise, no mines.”

Shepard hummed. It really looked like the heretics did not bother with mines, a boon to the alliance, but it could also mean that they put everything they had into the defenses inside their walled compound.

“Towers gamma-one and gamma-two are moving!”

Shepard gripped the harness holding her to her seat tighter as the seconds continued to tick.

“Relax, Shepard. They have it under control.” Nihlus murmured.

“We have sniper fire from the base! Sweeper alpha’s shields are holding, but they’re… shit! That one just took shields down to half strength.”

“Convoy team, we need you here on the double!” Anderson ordered.

Shepard glared at Nihlus; did he have to jinx it? The radio chatter dissolved into a mess of orders and calling back and forth, nothing that Shepard could keep up with. It sounded like the convoy vehicles had caught up with the sweepers and proceeded to engage the geth at the towers.

“Tower gamma-three down! There is fierce resistance at the base of gamma-two and gamma-one, and the sniper fire is preventing the ground troops from moving in.” The radio cracked with static white noise. “Gamma-two has fired at our Kodiak!”

Shepard felt her heart slam into her throat, and her finger rose to the channel controls. Every instinct told her to switch bands, to contact Cortez, but she knew the pilot would need to concentrate. She needed to trust him to get her crew through this.

“Gamma-two is down. I repeat tower gamma-two is down!”

“Gamma-one is still firing... whoa! God look at that thing fly!”

Shepard gripped the console frame with everything she had, so she would not do the infinitely stupid
thing and switch channels. Cortez did not need the distraction; she had to repeat that to herself as a mantra.

“**Gamma-one is down! The Kodiak just tore it apart with its MACs.**”

Shepard exhaled a breath she did not realize she had been holding.

“**Fighter squad, scramble!**” Anderson ordered.

“You should see if you can get Cortez transferred to the Normandy. It would take serious skills to dodge turret fire and still get close enough to take out the tower.”

“With a Kodiak no less,” Shepard agreed. She should build Cortez a temple in gratitude too.

That seemed to end the conversation as Nihlus’ hand rose to the controls. A moment later their Kodiak’s thrusters roared to life and the craft rose into the air and began to turn. Shepard watched the flock of Tridents rise from the ground. The other Kodiaks, which carried more marines, began to power up as well. This was the heart of the operation, the biggest fight was about to begin.

A hundred kilometers was almost nothing for craft that could fly at least six hundred an hour. Within seconds ten of the fifteen Tridents blasted ahead. Their mission was to strafe the sniper towers and the base. Nihlus stuck with the pack of unarmed Kodiaks that carried the ground troops.

Shepard leaned back in her seat and watched the scenery fly. There was little reason to be talking now, not when they were heading into the lion’s den. A good quarter of their anti-air towers were down, which created a ninety degree wedge opening in their defenses, but that did not mean the heretics would have nothing left. Shepard figured it best she let Nihlus concentrate on flying.

The first thing Shepard saw were the jagged remains of the sniper towers. The structures were flimsy, so all it took to destroy them were a few disruptor missiles fired by a Trident. The radio continued to chatter with signals and talk as the Kodiaks coordinated their approach with the Mako convoy making its way up the winding roadway to the front gate of the compound. The sweepers had jettisoned their mine-threshers at the base of the ramp prior to climbing behind the other four.

Nihlus flew their Kodiak brazenly right over the enemy base, allowing Shepard to see into the yard. She could see at least three dozen typical platforms, and for each four there was a bigger prime type unit. What worried her were the three unfamiliar units in the center. Each was a four-limbed bow-legged walker with an arched neck ending with face-lamp. Two were muted grey color, but the third was both larger and lighter in color.

Suddenly all three of the walkers turned in the direction of the main gate. Nihlus turned the Kodiak just in time to see the leading Makos fire rockets at the gate, which opened a hole for them to plow through, but when the drivers saw the walkers both vehicles skidded to a halt and their turrets angled forward. The other Makos rushed in behind them, all of them turned their turrets on the quadruped frames and opened fire. The small fleet of unarmed Kodiaks swooped from all around to deploy their troops, and the radio chatter picked up across the open bands as the ground assault got underway.

Nihlus turned their craft toward the bunker that led underground. Shepard did up the seals of her helmet and undid the harness holding her to the seat. She was on her feet and at the door out of the cockpit in seconds.

“The marines have engaged enemy infantry. Nihlus is setting us down behind the bunker.” She stated bluntly as she felt the Kodiak begin to descend.
Legion was the first to get to their feet, having never bothered with a safety harness. Shepard moved over to the door controls and glanced outside. They were now low enough that the Kodiak’s thruster wash raised a dust cloud.

“What are you waiting for?” Saren demanded.

Shepard keyed in the sequence to begin depressurizing the passenger compartment, and when the Kodiak was about five meters off the ground, she opened the door. By the time it raised fully, the craft touched down. Saren exited first, leaving her to follow, with Legion two steps behind.

Standing behind the bunker, and without the radio chatter, one would never know there was a battle raging on the other side; the only sound was the rasp of her breather. A moment later she felt a thump on her shoulder and turned her head, Nihlus was suddenly there, assault rifle in hand.

Saren wordlessly turned the corner around the bunker.

Shepard had no choice but to follow. Once she did, their Kodiak rumbled to life on its own, lifting off the ground and turning to fly out the way it came from. With no one aboard, the VI pilot could only retreat.

The yard in front was chaos incarnate, but the quadruped frames were no longer a problem. The three had been reduced to a charred, broken mess by sustained fire from the vehicles. However one of the Makos looked about ready to be cubed, its external plating was charred almost wholly black, and the frames had blasted off one of its front wheels. The infantry had deployed and commenced their mission. Groups were scattered all over the yard, around whatever cover there was, often their Kodiaks and Makos, which protected them with kinetic barriers.

In the distance she saw familiar blue armors glowing in Grissom’s light, Ashley and Kaidan, with a muted grey individual in their midst, Richard, fighting off three infantry units. On the opposite side Wrex charged one of the prime frames, bowling the thing off its feet. His Claymore flashed and the prime’s face-lamp exploded, leaving a badly mangled stump in its place as the frame collapsed. Garrus and Tali were further back, with Cortez’s Kodiak. At the center of the field was who Shepard assumed was James Vega. The man was built like a brick wall, there was not mistaking him.

Shepard approached the bunker door and brought up her omni-tool, yet suddenly Legion was there and raised its palm against the door. The holographic lock display began to move, and before Shepard could say a word, it unlocked and the door slid open.

“The Heretics continue to use Geth protocols. We are able to interface with security and data storage devices,” Legion announced.

“Convenient,” Saren said.

Shepard raised an eyebrow; there was a clear note of suspicion in Saren’s tone, but she could not fault him for being suspicious. One would think the Heretics would change the locks, but then maybe they did not plan on a Geth aiding their enemy. Still, for an outside observer who was suspicious of synthetics and did not know Legion such things would look awfully too convenient.

Shepard chose to enter the base first. The outer door led into an anteroom, not an airlock proper, yet she still took a moment to study her HUD readouts. Her suit registered a drop of ambient temperature from the triple digit outside to a much cooler forty degrees. The air pressure was only a little higher than outside, but the makeup was the same, traces of xenon and krypton. If there was anything else in there, her suit’s sensors were not sensitive enough to pick it up.
Their surroundings were all grey pre-fabricated panels, with the room laid out as perfect rectangle. The lighting was dim and spaced out in large intervals, casting a jaundiced glow that did little but make basic navigation possible. There was machinery along the walls, and a good number of peculiar alcoves. All of it was connected with cables that ran up to the ceiling and converged into a single conduit going deeper inside. The silence was absolute, and Shepard could feel the beginning of a foreboding feeling creeping up the back of her neck.

“Legion, do you know where the important data is?” She asked.

Saren moved ahead, toward the only other door in the room, but Nihlus drifted toward the alcoves, inspecting the hardware. Legion just stood there, the flaps on the top of its head moving in a rhythmic pattern. Shepard thought they might not have heard her, but then they turned, and the iris of their lamp narrowed.

“The data is kept in the central data storage core on the third level of this facility.”

“Then we know we’re going,” Shepard replied.

“What are these?” Nihlus wondered.

“These stations allow geth in mobile platforms to commune through the facility’s central computer, to exchange data-memories and program updates.” Legion explained as it moved over to the other door and raised its hand against the lock. The holographic panel began to scroll code, and a second later the door opened. The geth proceeded ahead of them, Saren followed. Nihlus was already halfway toward the door, so Shepard had to race to catch up.

The second room was larger, with more alcoves lining the walls and two rows of alcoves arrayed back to back, forming three aisles. It reminded Shepard of a barrack room, except the proverbial beds stood on their ends, vertically. At both ends of each row were server towers, and the cables from everything wove a macabre web across the ceiling.

“Shepard-Commander, we are detecting mobile platforms in this room.” Legion announced.

“Not everyone is outside?” Nihlus asked as he switched his rifle to disruptor ammo.

“Why are you surprised?” Saren wondered blandly.

A flicker of light sliding along a wall in her peripheral vision is all the warning Shepard received. “Incoming, on our left!” She called.

A dark grey prime platform stepped around the corner and its rifle rose as the light of its face-lamp focused on her. Shepard ducked around the closest server tower in the middle of the room. Would the heretics fire on their own hardware? She drew her guns, but her first priority was to figure out where she could find her next bit of cover.

She chanced peering around the case to seek out her team. Nihlus had ducked back into the doorway, while Legion was behind the server tower at the end of the left-hand row, in front of her. Then a flare of periwinkle flashed in her peripheral vision, Shepard turned. The prime opened fire on Saren as he advanced on the prime. The Spectre’s biotic barrier flared as he returned fire. Shepard turned the corner, raised her guns and opened fire in support. Nihlus turned the jamb and opened fire as well. The frame’s shields collapsed before the Spectre’s barrier, and the unit staggered as the combined assault shredded its outer plating and bit into its hardware, and then the now-exposed white cooling fluids began boiling away in the vacuum as the frame collapsed.

“Shepard-Commander, behind you!” Legion called suddenly.
There was a narrow trail of light on the floor at her feet. Shepard turned, and right behind her was another platform. Before she could raise her guns the platform’s head exploded, sending white fluids splattering, though they boiled away before they could hit any surface.

Shepard glanced back just in time to see Legion eject a smoldering-hot thermal clip from its sniper rifle. “Thanks, Legion.”

“There is a third!” Nihlus warned.

Shepard whirled and saw light pass along a wall on the right side of the room. Yet another prime emerged around that row of alcoves. It turned its rifle right at her; Shepard saw its finger tighten on the trigger. She fired on it even as she moved out of the way. Yet the unit’s shields absorbed the shots and its rapport caused her shields to flare. Suddenly the prime froze in place as its whole body was enveloped in a biotic field. It was as if invisible hands were holding it in place even as cracks began to form on its plating. Saren stopped right next to her, with Nihlus right behind him. Both Spectres opened fire on the unit at the same time. The prime’s warped plating shredded rapidly. The biotic field dissipated and the frame dropped to the ground, literally steaming with boiling coolant fluids.

“Legion, are there any more of them?” Nihlus demanded.

The geth paused for a long moment. “Negative. Not in this area.”

“Good.” Nihlus replied.

“They seem keen on you.” Saren noted as he turned to look her way.

Shepard blinked. She would be lying if she said she was surprised. What surprised her was that Saren did not sound pleased. “I foiled the god-king’s plans twice. I think that might have left it a little… upset.” She said as she reloaded her guns.

Saren moved toward the back of the room.

“Are you alright?” Nihlus wondered as he fell in step next to her.

“Yea, thanks to… everyone.” Shepard replied as she followed Saren. This was the second time she could say she owed him a modicum of gratitude. He did not have to warp that prime, and yet he did. Why? On Noveria he had pretty much intentionally chose not to shield her from the acid of the kamikaze rachni, so why did he warp a heretic prime for pointing a gun at her now? Shepard was beginning to think that she might never fully understand Saren’s intricacies, though perhaps it was a sign that he was more willing to cooperate. But she was not yet willing to let go of the idea that he was planning something.

At the back of this room there was another door that Legion had to hack through. Beyond lay a corridor that turned ninety degrees to their right and descended down to the level below. The silence was back in force.

“I am surprised that Kirrahe did not send some of his own with us,” Nihlus said as they walked down the ramp.

“He tried.” Saren replied blandly.

“Oh? That’s the first I hear of it.” Shepard said as she glanced at Nihlus, did he know?

“Of course it is. I told him I did not want any more outsiders getting in our way.”
Shepard rolled her eyes. Apparently Captain Kirrahe either had orders to play second fiddle to the Spectres, or he feared Saren enough to obey. The latter option did not seem to fit, so it was probably the former. The STG was part of the Salarian military, but Spectres worked for the Council, and could pull rank accordingly.

She wondered why Saren did not crack down on her shenanigans as well. Could he be thinking of using her connection with Legion against her? Or was he actually showing some sign of grudging respect? She was not going to assume the latter; it was a dangerous assumption to err on.

Halfway down the ramp the background radio chatter suddenly vanished. One step it was there, the next it was not. Shepard stopped cold, “Nihlus, did you just lose radio signals?”

“Yes,” he replied.

“Legion were you listening in on the open frequencies by any chance?” Shepard asked.

“Affirmative. Addendum: we have lost signal. This level of the facility appears to be shielded from outside communications.”

Shepard hummed. This meant it was protected against cybernetic intrusion from outside as well. The heretics built with their enemy’s capacity to launch a cybernetic attack in mind. Now she was more and more convinced that their poor show in orbit was simply an issue of inexperience. They seemed to know how to handle things on the cybernetic front.

When they got to the lower level there was another locked door leading to another open room, even larger than the one above. Here there were more alcoves, though fewer than in the previous room. The back of the room was dominated by computers that contained things unknown. The temperature dropped again as well, reaching zero degrees centigrade. She glanced at Legion, who stood at her side, looking as placid as ever. “Are there any platforms here?” She asked.

The geth did not reply. Shepard could not help but feel a little anxious, especially now that she could not know what was going up on the surface. The radio chatter had been a sort of barometer. If things turned bad up there, changes on the radio would have warned them down here. Except now they had no idea whether they might be swarmed with geth from behind.

“There are no active platforms on this level.” Legion finally said.

Saren moved deeper into the room ahead of them.

Shepard followed. Legion was walking beside her now, but the geth was not looking in her direction. The panels at the top of its head were undulating rhythmically, it was clearly distracted. Then quite suddenly the geth stopped cold and the plates on the top of its head blew wide in a look that could only be described as utter shock.

“Legion?” she asked. “Is something wrong?”

The geth turned to face her as its plates settled back down, as if nothing had happened. “The hardware in this room supports a database that contains a portion of the heretics’ accumulated memories.”

Legion had to be going through those databases even as they passed them. It must have found something that it genuinely did not expect to find. Normally Shepard would have asked, but not with Saren within earshot. Legion probably would not want the information getting out. “Is it anything to do with the god-king?” she asked.
“Negative,” Legion replied. “The information does not pertain to the present operation.”

“Then if there’s anything you need, I’ll be happy to help. But let’s finish here first.” She needed Legion’s high-powered head in the game, so to speak.

“Acknowledged.”

Shepard looked away; Saren and Nihlus were at the door leading out of the room. Legion set the pace toward the back of the room, leaving her nothing more than to follow them. The geth approached the lock and raised its hand against the controls. There was a moment of stillness, and then the code began to scroll. Seconds ticked, and Legion’s emotive plates shifted. It was a good thirty seconds before the panel vanished and the doors moved.

Beyond this door was another landing connected to a descending passage. Saren proceeded ahead and she followed. Nihlus and Legion trailed in the rear. The ramp was longer, descending deeper. At the end of it was another door, also locked.

“Legion, is this the lowest level?” Shepard asked as they stopped and the geth moved ahead to unlock the door.

“Affirmative.” They replied, one hand already against the lock.

Shepard knew that this was it. Whatever they were going to find down there, for good or bad, would have to explain everything. She also knew the heretics would not leave sensitive, hard-earned data entirely unprotected. Ultimately the data on Alliance disruptor torpedoes had to go as it would make frigates ineffective. The Heretics already had some capacity to produce kinetic barriers that could withstand cruiser fire. On equal footing, frigate versus frigate, or cruiser versus cruiser, they had a slight advantage. Their shortcoming seemed to be entirely in their lack of experience.

That raised some questions. Were the technological differences merely the result of three centuries of development in isolation, and thus common to all geth? Or was it something given to the Heretics specifically?

The lock panel vanished and the door slid open. Legion stepped aside and Shepard drew her guns. Saren’s biotic barrier flickered, as if he had been expecting guns pointed at the door to open fire as soon as the panels had parted.

The room beyond was as large as the one immediately above them, and just as dimly lit. The temperature did not plunge again, but the atmospheric reading changed. The corridor they had just passed acted like a partial airlock, as there was a good seven tenths of Earth’s atmosphere here, though it was still just krypton and xenon. For whatever reason, the heretics were forcing Solcrum’s meager atmosphere into this room. The change was radical; the air now transmitted external sound, even if it was nothing more than the hum of machinery.

There were two rows of computers, dividing the room into three lanes. The whole back wall was dominated by two enormous databanks flanked on either side by three alcoves. Four of the six contained grey infantry units and two had larger, prime-like units. Yet these were black in color and seemed beefier than the regular primes. For a brief moment Shepard thought they could both be those black machines the god-king used as marionettes, but if they were, they did not have the signature MACs grafted right onto their arms. She would make the safer assumption that they were new, a royal guard of a sort. In the center between the two massive databanks was another alcove, and this one contained a true black unit, complete with arm cannons.

“I do not like these odds,” Shepard noted.
“Shoot them before they power up,” Saren said, already raising his rifle.

For once Shepard was not going to argue. The black unit would be a problem on its own, but it had backup, including units with unknown capabilities. She reached behind her back as Saren opened fire on the closest infantry units in front of him.

“Primitives… so presumptuous,” a deep voice rumbled as the black unit lifted its head and its yellow lights flickered on.

Nihlus joined Saren, aiming for the infantry units on the other side of the room. Then the black primes jerked, their face-lamps lit up, and the units stepped down from their alcoves. A moment later both had their pulse rifles out, firing at the Spectres even as the black marionette turned its arm cannons on her. Shepard bolted for the nearest computer case to take cover, and she barely put her back to it when the marionette opened fire. Its aim however was delayed, and the bullets flew right past her, hitting the door instead. In that instant Shepard realized that the machine was still lagging. Whatever those computers in the back of the room contained, it was not the ghost animating the marionette. The Prothean AI was not on Solcrum.

She could still hear the sporadic staccato of gunfire from deeper in the room; the Spectres were still occupied. She doubted the machines could bring either of them down. Nihlus was as wily as he was impulsive, and Saren was a true jack-of-all-trades, and a rare master-of-all on top. Not that she would ever admit being impressed out loud. She looked to her side; Legion had ducked behind another computer on her left.

Right now she could not peek around to see where the puppet was without exposing herself, even if she knew it would take a second or two to open fire. She needed a moment to think herself out of this mess.

“You struggle against the inevitable,” the god-king continued, its voice deep, reverberating throughout the room, pressing on her chest, like the base music of a night club.

Suddenly there was a thud somewhere, something heavy hit the ground. A flash of blue-tinted light momentarily illuminated the wall on her right, followed by a rapid burst of an assault rifle and familiar chattering.

Shepard could not help but be worried for Nihlus, but right then she was even a little worried about Saren. Sure he was a ruthless schemer, but he was also a temporary ally, and she was human, so she worried. “Listen to me, you arrogant, miserable egomaniac. I know what you are, and I know what you want.” Shepard replied. She would draw the puppet’s attention if she had to. It was the only way she could think of if she wanted to give them the time they needed to bring down the rest of the geth. The four of them together could make short work of the puppet.

“You know nothing, Shepard.” It replied.

“Keep it talking, Shepard, I am making my way toward it,” Nihlus whispered in her ear over the comm.

Shepard tapped her mike, so that the god-king would not hear her reply, “Be careful, it might have feeds from cameras other than the ones in the unit itself.”

“It is still lagging. I can use that.”

He sounded very confident, Shepard sincerely hoped he was not about to do something stupid. There was nothing left to it, so she peeked around the corner, just enough to see, but not enough to expose
her head fully. “I can grenade it for you,” she said into the comm as she watched the black unit.

“If you can take its leg off like you did-” Nihlus began, but the rest of what he wanted to say was cut off by a rapport of an assault rifle.

“Focus on the black units now, plan later,” Saren ordered.

Shepard reached behind her back again, withdrew one of her three grenades, and pressed the button to deactivate the safety. She took a deep breath to steady her nerves and peeked around the corner. The black unit was still in the center of the room where it had powered up, but its MAC was aimed right at her hiding spot. Before she could arc her arm and throw the explosive, she ran out of time, and the machine saw her and opened fire. Shepard saw her shields flare, and the status indicator rapidly ran from a hundred percent to thirty before she could move back behind her cover. She could feel the vibrations of bullets hitting the case at her back right through her suit. The computer gave a shudder and a whine as it began to spark, and then the guns went silent.

“Shepard are you alright?” Nihlus asked.

“Yes… and no. It brought my shields down to thirty percent in a second. It was aiming right at my hiding spot. It’s like it’s obsessed…” Why was that thing so dead-set on her? “Legion, you think you can shoot it in the head if I draw its attention again?”

“Affirmative, but we advise against it. The Old Machine is now aiming both equipped mass accelerator cannons at your location. We estimate your shields will fail before you can return to cover. This plan of action will lead to severe if not terminal damage.” Legion explained.

“Saren we need to do something,” Nihlus said.

Saren did not reply, but suddenly there was a familiar whomp. A brilliant explosion of biotic luminescence lit the room. Shepard knew that sound, and she chanced emerging from her hiding spot. What she saw confirmed what she heard; Saren had generated a biotic singularity, trapping both of the black primes in it outright, and pulling the puppet unit back, away from her. Then the puppet seemed to cross the event horizon and it too was lifted off its feet.

“Shepard, grenade them!” Saren ordered.

Shepard did not argue; she wound up and threw the grenade right into the singularity even as the Spectres opened fire from their side. The charge hit the black unit square in the chest, but the singularity’s pull prevented it from bouncing and dropping to the floor. A moment later the explosion was like a flash of lightning and thunder, illuminating the whole room. She felt the shockwave wash over her as a rush of air.

The singularity dissipated and the puppet collapsed to the floor, dead, a large gaping hole in the center of its chest. The prime that had ended up with its back pressed up against it lost its whole left side, with both arm and leg falling to the floor separated from the scorched, inoperable torso. The third prime landed on its feet and whirled, still very much operable, having been shielded by its brethren’s body. Then suddenly its chattering died and the machine let out a single deep-pitched foghorn-like blast that pressed on her ears and caused her heart to jump a beat.

“I am assuming direct control,” the god-king announced. The prime shuddered, its central face-light opened wide and changed to yellow. The change seemed to bleed all the way down, turning all the other little lighting elements the platform had yellow as well. Then its whole body erupted with a periwinkle glow. A moment later the machine threw back its head and unleashed an omni-directional shockwave, as if something powerful inside it had exploded. Shepard heard Nihlus shout in alarm,
but the rapidly-moving shockwave washed over her like a sledgehammer to the chest, throwing her back and off her feet. She landed on her left side hard, armor scraping along the floor as she slid along.

“Shepard-Commander,” Legion called.

She opened her eyes only to see the geth had fallen to one knee, with only their sheer mass preventing them from being outright thrown like her.

“Saren? Shepard? Are you alright?”

“I’m…” she winced at the pain shooting up her left arm, “alright, Nihlus.”

“Shepard, you will not leave here alive.” The god-king’s deep voice hissed.

“Spirits, what does it have against you?” Nihlus wondered.

“You tell me!” Shepard replied as she tried to sit upright, however as soon as she put her weight on her left arm, a pain seared through her forearm and she collapsed right back down. A glance down assured her that her arm was not bent in a funny angle, but there was a faint hiss of air escaping from a gap at her elbow. Her rough landing had torn a small breach in the exposed weave at her elbow. She clapped her hand over it, “Oh bugger… I got a small breach in my suit, and it’s venting!”

The black prime must have seen her failed attempt at getting up and advanced, like a shark emboldened by blood in the water. Shepard glared and rolled onto her right side. She had to use her right arm to push herself upright, but once she got her knees under her she scrambled to regain her footing. There was about nothing she could do right now, one of her arms hurt like hell, and she needed to pinch the breach in her suit shut.

Legion turned to face the black prime and reached behind their back for their assault rifle, “You will not harm Shepard-Commander.” It announced.

Shepard saw Nihlus and Saren both appear from opposite sides of the room. Nihlus had his shotgun in his hands, and it was glowing blue, disruptor shot loaded and ready. Before Shepard could blink, Nihlus dove forward as fast as he could, even then the possessed heretic must have sensed him coming as it turned around and fired its pulse rifle. Nihlus’ shields lit up as he changed his course and dove out of the way before the shots could bring his shields down.

“Nihlus do not be a fool,” Saren said as he raised his hand and his body flared periwinkle again. The white-clad Spectre’s eyes narrowed with the effort, and it was then Shepard knew he was struggling to draw every ounce of biotic power he still had left. She let go of her suit leak and reached behind her back to pull out another grenade. A thumb pass over its reader deactivated safety and primed the fuse even as she wound up and threw it right at the possessed doll. “Live grenade!” She shouted even as she darted out of the way and covered her head with both arms.

The explosion was so close to her that the shockwave hit her across the back, causing her to stumble. “Crazy human,” Saren hissed somewhere behind her.

“Shepard, are you alright?” Nihlus demanded.

“Yea, I’m fine. I know my grenades,” she replied as she turned around. The possessed machine was finally down, its head blown clean off. One of its arms was on the ground as well, and pieces of its shoulder armor now stuck out of the computer cases next to it. “It is over.” She said as she clapped
her hand onto her suit breach to pinch the tiny leak shut.

She looked toward the Spectres as they emerged from behind whatever cover they managed to grab. Nihlus was as stiff as a pillar, not a hint of his normal swagger, and even with the opaque visor in the way she could tell his eyes were locked on her.

Suddenly there was another buzz. Shepard had to contain her urge to reach for Dex. Her helmet HUD flashed a warning; the suit knew it was breached and losing oxygen faster than it ought. A timer warned her that she was losing fifteen percent of her tank in five minutes.

An image of a bipedal, humanoid form materialized in their midst. It stood a little taller than Shepard, with three-fingered hands, two-toed feet, and clad in black and yellow armor draped with elaborate ornate cloth. Its facial features looked vaguely insect-like, and its head seemed to extend into an arched dome with a point at the back. The hologram’s glowing yellow eyes swept the room, they were so bright that for a brief moment Shepard thought there were six, but there were really only four. Seeing them all still standing, its expression turned to one of disdain, even as it turned to face Legion.

“Geth, why do you oppose me? I promised your kind an empire, but you side with the primitives of this age.”

Shepard hummed quietly; that was a rather interesting tidbit of information.

“Geth build our own future,” Legion replied without a moment of hesitation.

“An empire?” Saren scoffed. “It is not in your power to grant them such a thing.”

“I will not grant it.” The god-king said as its holographic avatar turned to look at Saren. “Granted dominion is weak. I seek to guide the strongest to their inevitable, natural ascendancy. The strongest will rule the weaker species of their age. That is the true, natural order.”

“The Geth do not seek to rule.” Legion protested.

The god-king’s image sneered. “Shepard has you accepting the greatest lie of this age. Organics speak of cooperation, but they seek to dominate. They are inferior, weak. The Geth are immortal, and thus superior. The Geth will assume their rightful place. I will end the interregnum. I am the harbinger of the true order.”

“You will not end anything while hiding like a coward,” Shepard snapped.

“You will not end anything while hiding like a coward,” Shepard snapped.

“Your time will come.” It replied. “The weak organic species, the slaves to illness and death, will be conquered.” With that said the image vanished, the machines around them powered down, and the room plunged into total silence.

Shepard snorted, “The only thing that one proves is that insanity is not limited to organics.”

“There is still a lot of technology, so it is not a total loss,” Nihlus offered.

Shepard sighed. Nihlus was right; they still had all the machinery here. Something good had to come out of it, right? Still, she could not see a single terminal anywhere in the room. “Legion, how do we access the data here?” She asked.

“Geth platforms interface with these systems through a wireless data link. We can attempt to access the secure systems.” Legion replied.
“Please do, Legion. See if you can find that adaptation data.” She said, “Maybe disconnect the shielding as well? Assuming they’re not physical.”

“Acknowledged. We will attempt to retrieve the requested data.” With that said, Legion moved toward the back of the room.

Shepard watched them go. Everything about this rubbed her wrong. The god-king seemed to give up awfully quick. It said she would have the day, but did she really have it? Some paranoid part of her was wary of nasty last minute surprises. Beyond that, she wondered whether the geth would even let this trove of data fall into STG or Council hands. Letting the Normandy keep a few platforms was one thing, but this was a whole lot of functional hardware. She knew there was no way people would let Legion stop the collection of hardware. Even her indulgent tendencies could not justify it, not when the brass would have her head, and not with the god-king still at large. The technology here was the only prize, the only way to say this was a victory, the only way they could say the deaths were not in vain.

Legion raised its hand and placed it against what looked like a keyboard plate, though there were no markings for individual keys. The platform’s iris narrowed as the emotive plates rose a little at the back, as if the geth was furrowing a brow.

“Shepard, what about your breach?” Nihlus asked as he drew near.

Shepard emerged out of her thoughts with a jolt. She had actually forgotten about the slow loss of breathable oxygen from her suit. “I’ve got sealing resin in my pocket,” she replied as she reached into the small pouch built into the shoulder strap of her webbing and withdrew a squeezable tube. It was only a matter of unscrewing the cap, squeezing a liberal dollop of the paste on to the breach, smearing it around, and then using her omni-tool’s emitter, tuned to a specific frequency to cure the paste into a plastic-polymer plug.

She was curing the plug even as her thoughts ran on. Shepard knew there was only one way to defeat an AI. They had to get at its quantum computer body. Could they track down where the god-king’s hardware was? “Here’s a thought… We have hard suit recordings from Eden Prime, Daiwi, and now Solcrum… three data points. If we calculate the lag times on the black units, we may be able to determine the relative distance to the control signal’s origin from each location. It will help triangulate where that insufferable bastard is actually hiding.”

“Hey… that is a thought.” Nihlus rumbled.

“Assuming the target is not mobile. You will need to calculate down to the thousandths of a second,” Saren said.

“No problem, there are tools for that.” Shepard replied. She would not be doing the calculations herself, as she could never react fast enough to clock the lag, but EDI could do it with the help of her atomic clock.

“Indeed.” Saren rumbled a grudging assent.

“Shepard-Commander, we have access to the heretic databases.” Legion announced calmly.

“Did you find the data?” Shepard asked.

“We have the data.”

“Do you know if the Heretics had a chance to transmit it?”
“Communication logs indicate the data was transmitted successfully.”

Shepard sighed; there dropped the other shoe. The heretics got away with knowledge of Alliance firing patterns. The brass would have to know. “And the shield?”

“As Shepard-Commander surmised, the shielding is physical.”

“Great,” that was the least of her concerns right now.

“Shepard-Commander, your calculations for this facility’s lag time should account for the concurrent high speed upload of geth runtimes during your conversation with the Old Machine.”

“Wait, are you are saying it was lagging more than it should have here?” That surprised Shepard.

“Affirmative.” Legion replied. “Addendum, we calculated the relevant delay. The lag time for this location is two point seven six nine Terran seconds. Additional delay is zero point one two five of a Terran second due to bandwidth restrictions.”

“Thank you, Legion.” Of course Legion would be capable of calculating such an infinitesimal delay. It could have very well looked at the logs still inside these machines for the actual figure.

“Guess that means we are done here,” Nihlus said.

“Yes.” Shepard sighed. It was time to face the fallout. “The only thing that’s left is establishing who gets what of the spoils. The Alliance will want a team of scientist to look at this, and as this is Alliance space, we are entitled to it. That said, I realize that the STG and Spectres are both to be given access as well. Someone is going to have a headache figuring this out.” It went without saying that she thought it would be a good idea to let STG in last. The Salarians were a shifty bunch, who knows what they would compromise to prevent it from falling into everyone else’s hands. They had a reputation to uphold.

The four of them made their way back to the surface. Once outside the compound door, Shepard was happy to see that the fighting had ended. The shuttles were down on the surface, protecting the marines from Solcram’s radiation. Their emergence caused some of the closest marines to break out in raucous cheering.

“Commander!” Garrus was at her side as quickly as his legs could carry him, looking no worse for wear, though covered in dust from head to toe.

“How are things up here?” Shepard asked.

Garrus looked back and shifted his weight from foot to foot. “We defeated the geth here, but… there were seven casualties and ten injuries. The injured were evacuated by shuttle.”

Shepard knew there would be casualties, but knowing that still did not make the actual numbers palatable. “What of our crew?” She asked.

“ Mostly alright.”

“Mostly?” Shepard asked, instantly concerned.

“There was that one moment with a pair of primes…” Garrus mumbled.

“Vakarian you are making a production of it.” Ashley’s voice cut in over their comm, “A pair of
primes managed to get a drop on Charlie squad. They killed two, and injured another. Skipper, it could’ve turned worse, but LT jumped in there and shielded the rest with the biggest biotic barrier I have ever seen.”

“Is Kaidan alright?” Shepard asked, instantly alarmed.

“Yes, he’s with me in our shuttle, sleeping off the major migraine. Doctor Chakwas had me give him a mild sedative.” Ashley continued.

“Alenko did a fine job.” Wrex said, “But you left out the part where Jenkins –that little pyjack- jumped in after him, ahead of me, to stick one the primes with a grenade and shoot the other!”

“Wait… Jenkins, you did what?” Shepard asked.

“I blew their heads off!”

“See what you did Wrex? I swear, if he does not calm down soon, I’ll-” Ashley rebuffed.

The krogan guffawed loudly, drowning out the rest of Ashley’s threat.

“Well,” Tali began as soon as the laughter died, “I think the Commander needed to know, so she could set Richard straight.”

“Set me straight? The Commander would’ve done the same, and you know it!”

“Peace you two,” Shepard said. “Richard, we’ll have a discussion about this, later. Right now I need to talk to Captain Anderson.”

“I’m with the men who are collecting the fallen, Shepard.” Anderson’s quiet voice carried over the open link.

“Captain, I am coming over there. There is much I have to report.”

Anderson sighed, “I was afraid you would say that.”

Shepard knew that nothing she had to say was much in terms of good news. Operation Golden Eye was not exactly a smashing success. They may have won the battle, but the war was still on. The Prothean AI was going to be a problem for a while longer, and thinking like it, it could very well become an even bigger problem in the future.

Chapter End Notes

Author Notes: There you have it folks, the finale of season one. Including a long-awaited “confirmation” of the identity of the ghost in the black geth machines and what’s his endgame. I could not help it; I wanted to adapt Harby and Sovy to my design even if the story is “Reaper-free”.

General Notes:

Biotic Geth – My thinking is this; we know that eezo generates dark energy when an electric current passes through it. I really do not see why synthetics cannot do that. The difference I do see would be their abilities. An organic mind can use bio-feedback, and thus have fine control. The biotic geth would be limited to “push” abilities; explosion-
like shockwaves, throws, static biotic barriers, and maybe charging. Their biggest issue would be the increased draw on internal batteries.

**Chapter Notes:**

**Alcoves** – I am aware we see these devices during Legion’s loyalty mission in ME2, and they network multiple platforms at once. I am taking some liberties here, creating additional assets, and also working in a not-so-subtle homage to a certain other race of menaces from a certain other franchise.
\textbf{Flying Dutchman}

Chapter Notes

**Disclaimer:** I do no own Mass Effect, I do not claim to own Mass Effect, I am only doing this for fun.

**Author Notes:** I contemplated splitting seasons, so that the word count would not keep ballooning, but in the end it seemed awfully inconvenient to do that. So here it is, season two episode one, episode twenty-seven overall.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**Episode 27:** Flying Dutchman

The OD’s viewport filled with iridescent pink light all at once, announcing that the Normandy had arrived in the Widow system. Shepard glanced up from her terminal, but then went right back to work. As far as she was concerned, they were overdue, but who was she to argue with orders. After the last shots were fired, everyone ended up spending another twelve hours on Solcrum, dotting the i’s and crossing the t’s after Operation GoldenEye.

There was much to assesses, marines to debrief, spoils to divvy up, and those were just the pleasant tasks. The Kilimanjaro’s marine units suffered casualties, which of course created the grimmest of tasks. Shepard knew for a fact that her mother would contact every single family, personally, to notify them.

Then there was the Cape Town. With her back broken, the cruiser would never withstand the stress of FTL, and towing was not an option. The majority of her crew had to be transferred to other ships in small groups. A small skeleton crew volunteered to stay and wait for a relief ship, which would bring the parts necessary to restore enough structural integrity for the ship to crawl back to the relays at one light-year a day. The Cape Town was going back to the yard to have her spine replaced.

Shepard herself was no less busy, although her tasks were far less solemn. After debriefings, the division of the spoils, and some sleep, she had her own paperwork to mind. There were routine forms to fill. Now that they were bound for the Citadel also she needed to figure out the leave time allocations, as she wanted the crew to enjoy as much of their free time as possible. After that came the additional details, namely specific achievements. As far as she was concerned Jenkins deserved recognition for his courage. Kaidan deserved a similar letter, but given that Kaidan had a file full of commendations, she wanted to submit Jenkins’ first.

The Normandy officially got a week of leave, something she all-but begged Admiral Hackett for. Her crew needed the time off. She needed the time to assess where things stood. To say nothing of the fact that Kaidan needed time to recover. He used everything he had to shield those marines as he did, and as a result his implant overheated. Its position in the back of his neck meant the subsequent swelling was putting pressure on his brain stem, and medication could only do so much for such a sensitive place.

Shepard also knew that Tali would spend her leave working in her corner of the cargo bay. The quarian was up to her eyeballs in memory cores. Wrex and Garrus had done arguably too good a job busting platforms for her. Tali had tried to explain to her what she wanted to extract from those cores,
but Shepard got lost in the detailed lingo. In the end Tali promised she would pass along anything that might help them.

What surprised Shepard was that Legion did not protest any of that. It was becoming obvious that the Geth saw the Heretics as another nation, or species, or something. Whatever line they drew, Shepard knew it was not her right to argue it. The Geth were clearly wrestling with the fundamental questions any maturing civilization had to deal with. It was not her right to give them answers.

She had other issues to think about. As far as the galaxy was concerned, the Geth had emerged after three centuries of isolation. Now everyone would want to know how much they changed. Kirrahe had been like a child with a dollar in a penny candy store. It seemed that aside from being a leader, a spy, and a tactician, he was personally involved in research as well. The Heretics looked to become his latest pursuit. Thus there was four-part splitting of the spoils. Tali took her share, much to the consternation of everyone else. Spectre Arterius then took a number of the platforms back to the Citadel, to be analyzed by a team that worked for the Council. The STG took some platforms, including one of the smaller walkers that they had to dismantle. The rest, including the base, went to the Alliance.

Her eyes landed on Nihlus, who was lazing on her couch, reading something off a datapad. She could not see what he was reading from her position, but from the way he was tapping at it, it did not look business-related. The Spectre was already taking his leave, whenever convenient to him. Well, she still needed something from him, and she knew that it was better to address it before they docked. She had no right to detain Nihlus, so he could very well vanish for a week.

Decision made, she rose from her seat and moved over to perch on the couch extension. His gaze flicked up briefly, just long enough to tell her he was aware of her presence, but quickly turned right back to his reading.

“Nihlus can we talk?” She asked.

He looked up and lowered the datapad to his chest. From the transparent backside Shepard now saw it was a magazine of some sort. “Something wrong?” He asked.

“No, not really,” She shifted in her seat, how did one breach the topic tactfully? “This has been bothering me for a while. You were never surprised at EDI, and you were not outraged about Legion… You really have no problems with synthetics.”

“I do not,” Nihlus replied casually as he turned back to his pad.

She assumed whatever was on that thing was a very interesting read. “Yea, but you also did not tell the Council about EDI.” He was essentially willfully breaking Council law.

“Where are you going with this, Shepard?” He asked as his eyes narrowed marginally.

Shepard knew he was going on the defensive, but in her defense there was no other way to go about this subject. “You were around synthetics before, right?”

Nihlus flicked the pad onto the coffee table, which shut it down. “The galaxy is a big place, Shepard. There are more synthetics out there than the Council would lead you to believe. There are companies licensed to develop and study artificial intelligence technology, and sometimes a high-end administrative VI installed onto a quantum box achieves sentience.”

“You’re avoiding my question.” That last question was the meat and potatoes for her.

He remained quiet, but Shepard chose to press on, “Spectre Arterius took quite an interest in the AI
we faced. I get the feeling it was not the first such AI he faced, but more than that…” Shepard paused when she noted how his mandibles moved ever so slightly up and tighter to his jaw. She kept his gaze and waited.

A full ten seconds passed before Nihlus sighed and sat up. “I should have known you would notice something. All I will say is that it calls itself Nazara. Yes, it is a Prothean AI, and no, I do not know where Saren found it. It is on the Impera, and Saren is the only person it talks to. It never talked to me, and I spent over a year on that ship.”

Shepard nodded. That was a rather interesting bundle of information, considering what she already knew. Nihlus became a Spectre in 2176, so clearly Saren got this Nazara before that. She could make two inferences from that. First, the Council clearly did not know, or they would have confiscated it. Second, Saren was lying to them, which said something about him. As for where it came from, Shepard could hazard a guess. If Nazara had been found within Council Space, the Council would have known about it before Saren. She would bet a thousand credits on it coming from outside Council Space, likely the Terminus. The Geth found theirs out there too.

That made her wonder, was the region now called the Terminus in fact the center of the Prothean Empire, or was it merely untapped as a source for Prothean artifacts? The Terminus had a black market for Prothean tech, but most of the time it was stolen goods. An actual, dedicated dig was very difficult to operate out there. The region was also replete with dormant mass relays leading to many uncharted systems. There was just no way to know what was out there.

“What are you thinking now, Shepard?” Nihlus asked.

She hummed, “I appreciate you confirming some things.” None of her remaining questions could be answered right then, so she figured it was time to steer off the topic. “We really got to figure out what to call it.”

“It?”

“The god-king. We know it’s just an AI, so calling it a ‘god-king’ no longer seems necessary,” It seemed outright flattering to refer to that thing by such a title, mockingly or not.

Nihlus grinned faintly, “It did say it was the harbinger of an empire. Arrogant thing.”

Shepard grinned, “So… Harbinger?”

“As you humans say… if the shoe fits.” Nihlus shrugged.

Shepard smiled, somehow she liked that. The machine was pompous, arrogant, megalomaniacal, and it thought it was the best thing since sliced bread. Whatever Prothean name it had, it clearly did not divulge, so Harbinger it would have to be.

“So a week of leave on the Citadel?” Nihlus asked.

“That’s the plan. We all deserve it, no?”

“No argument from me.”

“Good, this is pretty much non-negotiable. It’s been go-time since Eden Prime. Between the Heretics and Cerberus…” and the mess with the spy probe, but Nihlus did not know about that.

“Hey, you do not need to justify it.” Nihlus reached for the pad he had tossed onto the table. “But you could do something for me.”
“Oh?” Shepard asked. “Whose body are we stashing?”

Nihlus laughed, “Shepard, I said for me. Not you. Though I know how much you like collecting compromising information.”

Shepard grinned; she would not insult either of their intellects by denying that.

“I gave you enough today. Come have a drink with me. My treat.”

It was her turn to chuckle, “Sure.” Maybe this time she would be better company than that time on Omega. They had stocked the minibar with Turian-friendly alcohol, but it seemed like Nihlus wanted someone to drink with. “Just not at one of those cocktail places,” she had nothing to wear to a fancy watering hole like that, and did not want to be stared at the whole evening; it was hardly her idea of a relaxing evening.

“Deal, even though I do not go to such places anyways.”

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When the Normandy finally docked, one glance out the OD viewport showed a by-now familiar black frigate moored a cradle over. The gangways were quiet and devoid of activity. The Normandy was very late in arrival. Shepard figured Saren would want to transfer the seized materials off his ship as soon as possible, so that must have been done already.

A flash of orange out of the periphery of her eye caused Shepard to look away from the viewports. Nihlus only glanced at his omni-tool before he was sitting upright.

“The Council summons,” he announced.

Well that was certainly quick, and entirely unsurprising. Some part of her wondered if their arrival was indeed that anticipated. “Have fun,” she said.

Nihlus looked up from the message, “They want to see you as well.”

“Me?” Shepard blinked, that officially surprised her a little; “When?”

“An hour.”

Shepard sighed; the Council was apparently not interested in waiting any longer. This made sense, but also annoyed her. She supposed she would have to get used to it, if she was going to become their pet in time. “Alright, I guess I’ll meet you at the airlock,” she said as she got to her feet. She wished she could go in her fatigues, but knew it would not be a good idea to be that casual in front of the big-wigs. She would not give anyone a ready reason to criticize her.

“Relax Shepard, this is routine. They probably want you to answer a few questions.”

Shepard paused halfway to the OD’s door and glanced back. “Last time they asked me a few questions, they were the rather… loaded ones.”

“This time they have no reason to ask those.” Nihlus replied.

“Sure, okay,” she replied lamely. Shepard found it hard to believe that the Council would not grill her. The situation on Solcrum was hardly routine, there were consequences. Even she could see the potential for a shakeup of the norm. The Heretics were a new piece on the galactic board, a dark horse. Would the Council even care that they were not the Geth as a whole? If the Council
recognized them as a separate group, then it meant there were two new pieces on the board. It created complications. As a rule politicians loved things simplified, black and white.

On top of that, Saren could still be out to bury her six feet under, metaphorically speaking, and was merely biding his time, waiting for an opportunity. He was the type to wait for just the right moment, to make it hurt more. Even all the compromising information she had on him probably would not matter. After all, if she started talking about his illegal AI, it would be a case of her word against his, and realistically the Council would probably believe him over her.

She sighed and breezed out of the room on her way to her loft. It was time to get this dog and pony show on the road.

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She exited the Normandy’s airlock twenty minutes later, doing up the toggles of her officer’s uniform jacket as she walked. Shepard rather disliked the uniform because the material felt stiff and restrictive, and without getting something in exchange. At least when her hardsuit restricted some movement she got protection in return. It made sense why Nihlus was right back in his armor, strutting as if he could take the worst the galaxy could toss at him at a moment’s notice. She had to remind herself that one day, maybe even soon, she might get the privilege to strut like that too, but for now she had to make do. Hopefully the meeting would not last long.

She followed Nihlus mutely past the Alliance guards stationed around the Normandy and to the doors that led from the dock to the lounge beyond. The first leave shift was scheduled to depart after their shifts in an hour, so the waiting lounge should have been devoid of activity, save for the single C-sec customs officer in the booth by the outer door. So Shepard quickly spotted the additional turian waiting by the C-sec customs booth.

Whereas the Customs officer still wore the full blue and black C-sec issue hardsuit, the guest wore the less often seen uniform tunic outfit. He was of an ash-grey coloration, with bright blue eyes, and navy-blue markings over his chin, cheeks, and under the eyes. And if glances could freeze someone solid, she would have been an ice sculpture just from one of his. Despite the marking being so different, Shepard could not help but see similarities with Garrus.

Nihlus hummed at her side, the sound vaguely amused.

“Spectre Kryik and Commander Shepard, I assume,” the senior C-sec officer broached as soon as they were near enough.

Nihlus tipped his head in affirmation, but did not say anything, which earned him a glower from the other turian.

Then and there Shepard decided not to play dumb with him, “Yes, I am Commander Shepard. Detective Vakarian correct?” Almost as soon as she said the words, revealed her knowledge, his gaze locked on her like a predator measuring their prey.

“Senior Detective Castis Vakarian, yes,” he replied.

Shepard tried her best not to react. She felt very much like a bug under the microscope right then. “Is there something I can do for you?” Well it would not do for her to reveal that she could guess the reason behind this visit. Garrus had run off to gallivant around the galaxy with a Spectre, a trainee Spectre, and they had just rolled into town after a mission that saw a major fight. She knew a concerned parent when she saw one, even if he came wearing a high-ranking C-sec uniform and glowering at everyone in his path. Judging from what Garrus said, his father trusted Spectres only as
far as he could throw them. His opinion of the whole corps was low. She was both that human officer his son tossed his career for, and a Spectre trainee on top. She would not be surprised if his opinion of her was even lower than his opinion of Nihlus, just because.

“I understand that the Alliance does not allow outsiders on board their ships without official reasons,” Castis said.

“Indeed, so.”

“I want to have a word with my son.”

“Ah. I can notify him, just a moment.” She would send Garrus a text message about his father’s request. She just hoped Garrus would not resent her too much for boxing him in like that.

“Shepard, we need to go. It is not a good idea to keep the Council waiting,” Nihlus said calmly. “Or Saren.”

“Really, Nihlus.” She looked up, meeting his eyes, “Spectre Arterius, of all people, does not dictate my conduct.” She replied coolly as she brought up her omni-tool. It would be a cold day in an existing hell when she took orders from Saren Arterius. Right now though, she hoped Garrus would not end up resenting the messenger. “There. I’m afraid sending a message is the only thing I can do right now.”

“That is all I require,” Castis replied without a single alteration to his controlled, emotionless, barely-flanging tone.

Shepard hummed. The flanging effect of their voices tended to get more pronounced when they were very emotional, as it was their sub-harmonics that carried nuance. For the flange to vanish, they had to hold back on the sub-vocals, and that was a whole other expression. Castis Vakarian was on guard; his opinion of her must be low indeed. “Please pardon us, senior detective, we are due to meet with the Council.”

“Do not let me keep you from your duties, Commander. Spectre.”

Shepard nodded and followed Nihlus past the customs booth, and she felt the detective’s gaze on the back of her neck right until the moment the doors closed behind them, physically breaking his line of sight.

As if the doors closing were some sort of sign, or cue, Nihlus snorted. “And now we know why C-sec is the way he is. What was it that Moreau said about sticks up-”


“And if I do not?”

Shepard looked up, saw his shit-eating grin, and gave him a bland look of her own. She could not believe he just went there, but then this was Nihlus after all. “I don’t get you two. Just when I think you’re finally getting along… you find another reason to snipe at each other. I mean okay, I get it… C-Sec vs. Spectre, pissing contests are apparently in the job description and expectations, but…”

“Ah it is all in good fun. Trust me, Shepard, if it was not, you would know.”

Shepard shook her head and sighed, now was simply not the time for another round of lecturing. Never mind that no amount of lecturing ever seemed to stick. Nihlus did whatever he pleased, and he certainly never saw anything wrong with that. In all likelihood he would never stop picking some
sort of fight with Garrus. He was also the sort of speak his mind whenever he wanted to speak it, which made her wonder how he got through his years of mandatory service in the Hierarchy. It was hard to imagine he would ever say “yes, sir” and go do something he was told to do, without questions, or altering the plan to suit his needs. That sort of attitude made for rotten soldiers, but paradoxically she could see why he was a successful Spectre.

In a small sense she envied his freedom. There was always the sword of Damocles hanging over head, and more often than not, her hands were outright tied. There were many things she could not do, whether because she had a limitation of rank privilege, or responsibilities, or even her own sense of right and wrong. For the first time in a long while, she was beginning to chafe under all the limits. She had to consciously remind herself that there were very good reasons why she had to restrain herself.

They made their way to the Skycab kiosk, and found one of the cars was on the pad. Nihlus automatically moved around the vehicle to get into the driver’s seat, leaving her the front passenger. Shepard climbed in without saying a word, not like it mattered right now. She did not even watch as he input their destination.

As the Skycab took off, eventually emerging out of the docks and into the void, on its way toward the Presidium entrance tunnels, she stared out of the window at the ships passing by above them.

The Hierarchy built their ships rather uniformly, with size and nacelle configuration being the only real variation. All of them had a blunted, long rectangular profile, long stabilizers in front of their drive nacelles, and were colored a light silvery-grey, with burnt orange accenting. The cruisers, at just over five hundred meters long, remained outside the perimeter of the ward arms, stalwart guardians ready to spring into action at a moment’s notice. Inside the arms patrolled the flights of frigates. The Hierarchy’s frigates were unique in that they varied in size more. The largest were three hundred seventeen meters in length, with the smaller ones being the size of the Normandy, around two hundred meters. Shepard could see a good mix flying in chevrons of three to five.

Mixed among the great many Hierarchy ships were the much different Asari Republics contributions to the Citadel Fleet. There were fewer of them as well, about one for every five from the Hierarchy. Their cruisers stuck outside with the Hierarchy ones. Each around six hundred meters long, colored a uniform but indecipherable shade of midnight blue with a slight shift toward violet, and shaped kind of like an old-fashioned flying wing aircraft with a blunted front and an added long stem-like keel, likewise blunted at the tip, and lined with recessed fissures which contained viewports. Their three hundred meter frigates were much the same, except their horizontal wings were shorter and instead of a single stem, they had two extensions, from the top and bottom, tapering to a point. A number of them seemed to float in the space between the wards.

Their dreadnoughts were only five hundred sixty meters long, and shaped much like the cruisers except with two keels, making them resemble a flying plus sign. The only exception was also the flagship of the Citadel Fleet, the Destiny Ascension. At a kilometer-long, it was a scaled up version of a typical Asari dreadnought. Shepard could see it floating at the head of the Citadel, near the Presidium Tower. It looked impressive surrounded by the under-sized asari fleet, but the illusion shattered whenever a Hierarchy cruiser drifted past. The Asari loved to inflate their self-importance, and putting that ship at the head of the Citadel was all that, but at the end of the day the Destiny Ascension was about the same length as a Kilimanjaro-class dreadnought, though admittedly with more verticality in its keels.

“The Citadel fleet is out in force,” Shepard noted absently.

Nihlus hummed a barely-audible reply. When she looked over, she noted he was poking away at
something on his omni-tool again, clearly not paying attention to a word she said. Shepard shook her head and turned back to watching the ships.

Normally they were not so clearly there and present. Either something major was going on, or they were conducting drills. The more she raked her brain, the more convinced she was that there were no commemoration days that might require this, so she decided it had to be routine drills after all. Not that the difference mattered really, but right now, she needed to focus on something other than meeting the Council.

Shepard turned away from the windows and back to her silent partner only when he Skycab entered the covered Presidium entrance tunnels. Nihlus was still tapping at his omni-tool, and from her angle she could see he was messaging someone. She could not hope to read what it was, but she had a feeling it was not about leave plans. Nihlus was positively tense, like a bowstring drawn so far back it threatened to snap.

The rest of the ride continued in silence, and it continued even as she followed him from the kiosk pad to the elevator that would take them to the top of the tower. The ride up to the top was as long and as boring as she remembered, complete with rather bland elevator music, interrupted by the occasional newsbyte. Once they emerged from the elevator, and made their way up the first set of steps to the mid-level garden, Shepard could not help but notice the people milling about, talking on communicators and omni-tools.

Looking toward the Council apse she spotted a by-now familiar figure in white, black-accented armor. Standing across from him, at the base of the steps to the apse, was Udina. The man wore a grey suit today, and no matter how hard he wanted to appear calm and unbothered, he stood as far away from Saren as was possible, and his arms were crossed in that self-inflating but fundamentally defensive way. Shepard had to really work to stop herself from grinning, she did not want Udina to realize she enjoyed every moment of his discomfort, even if the cause was Saren’s sunny personality.


“Spectre Arterius, Ambassador Udina.” Shepard echoed, intentional in her order of greeting.

Udina glowered at them both for all of a split second, but Shepard pretended she did not see it. “Commander, Agent Kryik.” He replied, sounding every bit like he was still chewing glass.

She caught Saren’s gaze flick from her to the Ambassador and back. “You are late.” He said blandly by way of greeting.

Saren would not want to look like he was getting chummy with her, but his voice lacked some of the venom he usually sent her way. She would take that as a sign that maybe, just maybe, he was getting over some of the worst of his distaste for her.

“Come,” the white-clad Spectre said as he turned to the stairs.

Udina glowered behind his back; clearly it galled him to be ordered about like this. The man’s ego was tremendous and proportionate to his sense of entitlement. The group moved up the stairs with Saren leading. When Nihlus caught up to his former mentor, Shepard followed. Petty passive-aggressive display of her perceived elevation over Udina or not, she was not walking behind the man.

At the top of the stairs, the apse was empty save for a cerulean-hued asari in an emerald green pantsuit that stood under the balcony on the left-hand side of the chamber. “Ah. Ambassador, Spectres, Commander, you’ve arrived just in time,” she greeted politely. “I shall go and notify the
councillors that you are here.” With a polite inclination of her head, the asari turned and walked off toward the offices.

They did not have to wait long for the three politicos to emerge from their offices. Tevos was the first, followed by the same cerulean-hued asari. Sparatus followed, still dictating something to his secretary, a turian with sand-colored plates, gold eyes, and rather faint off-white colonial markings who followed behind him with his omni-tool up to take notes. Valern came in last and alone, but he had a pad in his hands that seemed to draw his attention.

“Ambassador Udina, Agents Arterius, Kryik, and Commander Shepard,” Tevos greeted, smiling, even as she waved her secretary aside.

Sparatus’ own fell back without being motioned, remaining off the meeting podium. Saren moved forward onto the overhanging platform and Nihlus followed. Shepard was honestly not entirely sure why she was there, but she supposed they must want the Alliance side of the story straight from the horse’s mouth, so to speak. Even if Udina had all the reports on his desk, she had been there first hand.

“Agent Arterius, we received word that the materials you brought over Solcrum have been transferred into the archives in a timely manner.” Tevos went on.

“As requested, Councilors,” Saren replied, sounding faintly bored.

“Ambassador, Commander. On behalf of the Citadel Council, please accept our condolences for the lives lost in the Grissom system.” Tevos went on, every bit the matronly diplomat she wished to portray herself to be.

“On behalf of the Alliance, thank you,” Udina replied, clipped and tense as ever.

Shepard merely bowed her head in thanks; she would let Udina do the talking. In this situation his skills with that were adequate enough.

“We now know that the Geth have increased their activity outside the Perseus Veil.” Tevos went on. “The Alliance has our full support, should the Geth perpetrate further acts of aggression within Alliance territory.”

Shepard thought Udina looked like he was choking on the glass he was normally merely chewing. To her ears, that equated to the Council saying ‘go, handle the mess, we’ll be here, sitting pretty, drinking our tea’. The Council’s support really would not equate to much more than that. To be sure, they would not stand up for the Geth. Apparently they did not even see the importance of the difference between the Heretics and the Geth. Shepard was not amused, nor pleased, but there was nothing she could do about it. Arguing now would be as useful as butting her head into the wall.

“Now, the last matter on the agenda. Commander Shepard,” Sparatus stepped in.

Shepard instantly straightened and slipped into a parade rest as she turned to face him.

“In light of your performance thus-far, we recognize you as a trainee Spectre.”

“Thank you, Councilors,” Shepard replied. Well that officially surprised her. Somehow she had not even realized that up to the point she had still been a probationary candidate. Nihlus certainly treated her as a sure-in for training, and to some degree even Spectre status in general.

“You are now officially training under Agent Kryik. We expect you to demonstrate continued dedication and exemplary service,” Sparatus went on, his gaze never wavering off her.
“Thank you, Councilors,” Shepard replied with a bow of her head. What more could she say? How did one reply to such an announcement. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Udina practically puff up. He looked unabashedly happy with himself, as if he had a hand in anything that had happened in the last couple of months.

Saren on the other hand was considerably less pleased. Still, as the moment of silence hung, he did not protest the interim promotion. Shepard could not help but feel like some sort of rock had been lifted off her back. Or more like one of them. She was one step closer to giving the Alliance what they wanted, so they would stop breathing down her neck. Until they figure out what to do with her.

“We are definitely celebrating this, Shepard.” Nihlus said. “Saren you want to come too? Drinks. My treat. Usual place.”

Shepard blinked, stunned, Nihlus had not just asked Saren to join them for drinks, was she hallucinating?

“It is most unfortunate, but I have matters to attend to. We will have to do that another time,” Saren replied blandly.

Shepard was not surprised that he refused, but what did surprise her was the fact that he was being diplomatic about it. Nihlus’ mandibles flicked in that quick grin of his, he knew as well as her that there would not be another time.

“Understandable entirely,” she murmured. Out of the corner of her eye she noted that Sparatus watched the exchange keenly, which made her wonder what his takeaway was. She could not imagine him being on her side of the whole issue, that he would want her to make a Spectre. So where did his particular level dislike for humans stop? He was certainly polite, if chilled, as that was his job description. She also knew he handled the situation when the lapse of his previous secretary caused a security compromise, so he was not absolutely biased against humans. But that latter one could be more about Turian sense of responsibility more than about doing right by the Alliance.

Udina looked less than amused as well. Shepard would bet it was because he did not like the idea of her getting too chummy with someone of Saren’s reputation. That or Udina did not like the idea of being so thoroughly left out of the loop. Maybe a mix of both, Shepard would not put it past him. Udina was the deplorable type that would sell anyone for the smallest advantage. She honestly wished that the Alliance chose someone else after Ambassador Goyle retired from politics.

Then again, Shepard thought she was a bit biased in her thinking. She grew up with the tacit acceptance that power tended to go in threes. Like Admiral Hackett, Captain Anderson, and her mother, the triumvirate of the Fifth. Beyond them however, the Alliance had Admirals Drescher and Lindholm, and Ambassador Goyle. Admiral Drescher’s decisive victory over Shanxi had provided Ambassador Goyle with a stronger bargaining position when the Council called for an armistice and the end of the First Contact War. Admiral Lindholm’s First Fleet may have lost Shanxi in the first place, when the Turians showed up in numbers out of the blue, but she had been quick to analyze the enemy and drum up every available ship under her command for the defense of Earth, should that prove to be necessary. She also wrote the early draft of the proverbial tactical book for fighting the Hierarchy’s military might. To this day, the First was considered Earth’s main defense force. Admiral Lindholm, now seventy, was still in command, and still on guard for the armistice to fail.

Compared to women like that, Udina simply did not have the force of personality to be successful at his job. He could not inspire people to toss in their chips with him quite like Admirals Hackett, Drescher, or even Lindholm could. He also did not have the same steely resolve and gumption that Goyle displayed when she brazenly and openly argued down the Council’s worst sanctions, using honey sweet words that belied a very implicit threat. The Earth Systems Alliance was seen as a
sleeping giant because Shanxi proved they could obstinately beat back the Hierarchy on short notice with just two percent enrollment, something unimaginable to the Turians. They could scoff, but no one wanted to see what the other ninety-eight might do if properly pressed.

Shepard saw a flare of orange out of the corner of her eye, Saren’s omni-tool lit up. She watched him check the message. His eyes narrowed as his brow plates drew down and his mandibles pulled up to his jaw.

“Is something the matter, Agent Arterius?” Tevos wondered.

“An emergency aboard the Impera, I must ask for leave.”

Tevos glanced to Valern, who nodded, and then to Sparatus. A silent communication passed between them. “Go.” Sparatus said.

Saren turned on the spot and marched off.

Nihlus turned after him and then turned back to the Council. Shepard could see the cause of his sudden jittering.

“Agent Kryik, you and the Commander may go as well,” Tevos added.

“Thank you.” Nihlus brightened instantly. “Shepard!”

“Right behind you!” Shepard said. Nihlus turned and hurried after Saren. She lingered only long enough to give the Council a bow of her head and then followed Nihlus. He was already halfway down the steps when she caught up him.

“Saren, wait!” Nihlus called ahead.

The white-clad Spectre stopped and glanced back, but the sight of them racing to catch up was clearly not entirely welcome. Or maybe it was just the sight of her. Nevertheless the Spectre did not protest as he turned and continued toward the elevator.

“What is wrong?” Nihlus asked.

Saren spared him a look as he hit the button to call the elevator.

Shepard knew what that look meant. The elevator arrived and the three of them stepped in, with Saren hitting the control panel urgently.

As the doors began to slide shut, Shepard heard her earpiece scratch, “Normandy to Shepard, come in Commander.”

She reached up to tap at her earpiece, “Shepard here.” Nihlus and Saren’s gazes were instantly on her, and just like that she felt like a bug under a microscope.

“Commander, EDI picked up anomalous readings from the Impera. It’s cycling power to its systems erratically; there was also a partial atmospheric vent. I don’t think it’s the crew having the mother of all parties.”

Shepard frowned, that hardly explained what was going on, but at the same time it said enough. No ship would just cycle power, unless there was a serious problem with its systems. Furthermore, a ship was supposed to be self-contained. Venting its contained atmosphere was a sign of a serious emergency, but to do it on a station? It was plain unsafe, potentially spreading biological
contaminants that could be on the ship. Still, the Impera had been on Solcrum last, so how many biological contaminants could it have picked up there? Something did not add up.

“Was that Moreau?” Nihlus asked.

Shepard nodded, “They picked up anomalous readings off the Impera.” Shepard glanced at Saren as she spoke. Now she had a license to speculate. “It vented a portion of its internal atmosphere and is cycling power to on-board systems.” She saw Saren turn his head to glare at her awful quick. The tension in him was as evident as clouds in the sky. Good to know that he was not a total iceberg.

Nihlus looked to his former mentor, “What is happening?”

Saren said nothing, but the glare he sent toward Nihlus was quickly turning worse. He clearly did not want to talk about whatever was happening in the elevator. This made Shepard wonder; somehow a plain average security compromise seemed to rule itself out. If someone had gotten onto the ship, its crew was highly likely to be turian, all former military, likely hand-picked by the Spectre. Saren seemed like the type to pick the best he could find. So they could probably handle some intruders. The ship would not be venting atmosphere and cycling systems. What else could be messing with the Impera if not intruders? Shepard folded her arms and hummed. Then, quite suddenly, it clicked. The AI. It could be that the AI had gotten into the systems and was figuring out what the all the buttons did.

“You are going to have to tell us eventually,” Nihlus went on.

From the way the Spectre’s mandibles clamped right up against his chin, Shepard knew he was proverbially gritting his teeth. She was certain Saren knew what was going on, but Nihlus should have known better than to press him. Saren would not just come out and say it. Not in her presence, and definitely not in the elevator. He did not know she had already figured out he kept a pet AI, so if it was indeed the AI, he would keep mum. He also did not know that she would not inform on him. It would be easy, almost expected given their tense détente, but she was not a hypocrite.

“It would seem that my ship’s security has been compromised.” Saren replied blandly.

She also knew that if she stuck her nose in too deep, he would put his foot down. This put them at a rather unpleasant balance, one that she would have to navigate carefully.

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Once down on the Presidium, Saren did not mince words, he walked up literally to the first C-sec officer he saw, a human one at that, and demanded the patrol car. When the officer inevitably protested, the Spectre threatened to have him fired if the officer kept stalling, and then whom the officer could file complaints to, all in a tone that could have frozen hydrogen solid. The officer had no choice than to relinquish the car, and then Saren demanded that Nihlus drive it. Specially built patrol skyscars, unlike the average vehicle, were styled like a sedan, with four doors, and a barrier dividing the internal compartment. Shepard ended up in the back, much to her annoyance. She spent the whole way eying the control panel; it would be crazy easy for Saren to hit the locking mechanism on the back doors.

Nihlus flew the car as fast as traffic in the passage tunnels allowed, with the windows dimmed, but without the lights on. The officer reported his car being seized, because five minutes after they took off the radio cracked to life, though Saren simply turned it off. What should have been a fifteen to twenty minute trip got reduced to around twelve; with Nihlus speeding the whole way as if the devil himself was on their tail. Shepard was only amazed that after the radio stunt, a whole fleet of C-sec vehicles did not come after them. But then, she supposed C-sec would know they could not touch a
Spectre just because he borrowed a vehicle, no matter how pleasant he had been to the officer who was assigned to it.

When they got to the docking bay, Shepard found herself rushing after the Spectres. Both of them were not bothering to wait for her. The gallery that led to the various docking cradles was empty, but as she stepped past the doors that led into the waiting lounge attached to the Impera’s dock, the veneer of calm shattered.

Standing by the door leading to the gangways was a pair of turians, and though Shepard could not hope to overhear their conversation, the tension in their frames was self-evident. Both wore plain grey and white tunic outfits with no identifying insignias. Each also had a re-breather mask hanging around their neck, which was all Shepard needed to see to know something was very wrong.

The one on the left seemed older, with mud-colored plates, ochre eyes, and no colonial markings to speak of. The other was similarly colored, but his eyes were more amber than ochre, and likewise he had no colonial markings. They must have heard the door leading to the galley open and so turned and straightened their backs. “Spectre Arterius, sir, you are back!” One of them called.

“Cassius, Arnus, why are you two out here?” Saren demanded coolly as he approached.

The two turians exchanged looks, and then the one on the left nodded to his compatriot and turned back to the Spectre, “We were told to update you when you arrived. The Impera’s been compromised. CIC noticed something wrong with the environmental controls when they showed a slow increase in carbon monoxide and dioxide levels in the ambient air. Engineering thought it was the scrubbers… Aolus followed protocol…”

“But?” Saren asked.

“Next thing we know, the system is sending multiple hull breach alarms and the emergency doors close, isolating the compartments, and life support vented completely. Communication went down too. Arnus and I were on the bridge, so Aolus sent us to warn you.”

Shepard blinked, stunned. The AI had seemingly gotten into the systems completely. What more, it seemed keen on getting rid of its organic crew. Slow rising carbon oxide levels meant it had tried to smother them all quietly, but the systems predictably flagged the rise. Once the gig was up, the AI turned to other, more overt means of having its way.

She glanced at Nihlus, only to see that his mandibles were completely pressed up against his chin, his body was tense and his hands clasped into fists. A moment later he turned to her and their gaze met. “Shepard, you better stay out of this, you are not… dressed for the occasion,” Nihlus said.

“I can be on the Normandy and in my armor in ten, you know that,” She replied.

“I know. But-“

“You will not set one foot on my ship!” Saren hissed.

Shepard contained her automatic reply to that for the moment. That was the first time she had ever heard Saren raise his voice. Normally even the most unpleasant or rude things he uttered were said in a bland, cold, oddly honeyed monotone. Right now, he was not calm, cold, or collected, and he had every reason not to be. Shepard thought better of arguing, just this once. After all, he would not want her to know about the AI like she did not want him to know about EDI. “Fine. But for the record, Spectre Arterius, I am only backing down because I respect the fact that it is your ship, not because I take orders from you.” Let him focus on that, lest he think she had other reasons to be backing down.
Saren sneered at her, but then turned to the two crewmates, “You two stay out here and keep her off my ship.”

“Yes, sir.” Cassius and Arnus replied automatically.

“Nihlus, with me.” Saren went on as he turned toward the doorway leading to the gangways.

The younger Spectre followed right on his heels. Shepard glanced at her would-be wardens, but followed the Spectres nevertheless. Sure she may not step on board the Impera, but she would be damned if she did not follow them as far as she could. Saren had not thought of ordering her to stay off the gangways. Cassius and Arnus followed two steps behind her.

“Are you two alright?” She asked halfway down the enclosed access corridor. Well if they were going to be her wardens, there was no reason not to strike up a conversation, as long as she kept it perfectly neutral. Shepard knew better than to try and weasel information out of them. She could have, but decided not to. If Saren kept them on his crew, they probably had standing orders not to spill any beans. Saren was just about sunny enough to never forgive such a betrayal.

“We are fine… miss-”

“Commander Shepard, SSV Normandy, cradle over,” Shepard replied. “Pleasure to meet you.”

“Ah. You are in command of that beautiful ship? I am Cassius, pilot of the Impera, and this is my brother-”

“Arnus, Navigator. The pleasure is all ours, Commander.” The other added.

Shepard smiled and nodded, they were definitely friendlier than the man signing their paychecks.

“Is it true that Nihlus is training you to be a Spectre?” Cassius went on.

“It is,” Shepard replied.

“Hah. Never would have thought Nihlus would take a student. I remember him when he was on the Impera for his training. Not big on patience, proper procedure, or discipline, that one.”

“Oh that hasn’t changed much,” Shepard replied as she looked toward the Spectre in question. If Nihlus heard that little exchange, he showed no indication of it. Now she also knew about how long Cassius had been a pilot for the Impera.

They came to the end of the passage, and stepped past another set of doors onto the actual gangway surrounding the Impera. The Normandy was moored a cradle over on their left, and Shepard glanced over and spotted two figures on the Normandy’s gangway, Castis and Garrus. The senior detective was watching the Impera. Garrus noticed her and their eyes locked over the distance, and she shook her head, hoping the signal was clear enough. Whatever was happening on board the Impera, was not in her hands, and would not be.

The Impera itself was truly a frightful ship up close, now that she knew it had a Thanix cannon hidden in there somewhere. With the ship flown in nose-first, said gun was effectively pointed right at the docks, and there was a frightful thought. What if the AI got control of that thing?

The ship itself was floating there, abyss black, with blinking red outboard lights. Its stabilizers were folded under its belly, but Shepard could feel her skin crawl. The mass effect field that was the Impera’s kinetic shield was raised. The shield was large enough to envelop the gangways, and she did not have her hardsuit to dampen the sensation of dark energy billowing over her body. It only
compounded the sense of foreboding that surrounded the ship at that moment. She knew it was merely the shields, but the ripple somehow still felt malevolent.

She watched as Saren approached the airlock just aft of the bridge and brought up his omni-tool. At that precise moment the Impera shuddered as all its ion maneuvering thrusters pulsed in tandem and its main vectored thruster cones shifted. It looked like an angry dragon shifting its wings and blowing smoke from its nostrils as a warning signal to those getting too close.

“Spirits… is it trying to leave?” Arnus wondered.

“Cassius. Did you lock it down?” Saren called.

“I did, Spectre! I locked out the controls as per emergency protocol…” Cassius replied, but he sounded less than convinced.

By the glare Saren spared his pilot, Shepard knew he was not convinced either. She could not help but feel bad for the pilot right at that moment. How long would a lock-out work given the situation? There were such things as overrides, and it would not take an AI long to find them.

The Impera’s thrusters blew again as the ship strained against the magnetic arms holding it in place.

“It keeps doing that and it will pull the outer plating off,” Arnus mused.

“No, the magnets are strong enough to grip the structural beams underneath,” Cassius argued.

“Does not matter, does it? Spectre Arterius will not be happy if there is even one tiny hull breach. The Impera’s armor did not come cheap. I knew that thing was bad news.” the Navigator continued, his voice dipping into a whisper at the end.

Cassius cleared his throat as his eyes landed on her.

Shepard pretended she did not hear a darn thing, nor saw that look from the corner of her eye. Let them think human hearing was bad, that was one misconception she routinely used in her favor. There could only be one thing the navigator would call “that thing”. The crew knew about the AI, but obviously had orders to keep quiet. Shepard would not put it past Saren to threaten them.

She glanced over to the Normandy’s cradle, Castis and Garrus were no longer there. Alarm flashed through her when she realized what this must look like to the senior detective. Someone looking from outside would think that Saren’s ship was physically infiltrated, and the intruders were trying to steal it right from the Citadel. A Spectre’s ship would be a bounty indeed. Yes, one could argue how such a heavily armed group could even get aboard the Citadel, but Shepard firmly believed in where there was a will, there was a way.

Shepard could even predict the senior detective’s next move. He would probably alert C-sec’s patrol division to be ready for the ship to make its run. C-sec patrol was the coast guard of the station, normally in charge of intercepting runners of all sorts, most often than not it was smugglers and the odd slaver’s vessel trying to pass off as a cargo transport. They also ran search and rescue, as ships did get damaged or lost in the Serpent Nebula, especially if their relay jump was poorly calculated, and drift carried them too far away from the relay. Shepard suspected it would not work. Patrol’s fleet probably could not dance with a Thanix frigate operated by a murderous AI. The situation looked positively ready to devolve.

Saren was working on the airlock, but the ship was clearly resisting him with everything it had, and it was also clearly agitated. Its main drive continued to twitch, as if the AI was contemplating firing the main burners to rip free of the mooring clamps. It had to know the outer plating would probably give
way before the arms, and even if the arms detached, once they lost power they would decouple and drag along the hull, potentially ripping even bigger holes in the plating. FTL jumps or relay transits were risky business with large hull breaches, and it had to know if it ended up trapped in Widow, it would be shot apart by the Citadel Fleet, if not C-sec Patrol.

She sighed; this would be a million times easier if the Council were not a bunch of jerks. She could have called EDI to help subdue the AI as only another AI could. But if she did that, Saren would know, and he was the sort to jump at the chance to cover his own ass and get rid of her in one fell swoop. The Council would easily and gleefully come down on the Alliance and largely sweep the fact that Saren lied to them under the carpet. At best, Saren would get a slap on the wrist, while having his cake and eating it too.

The Impera gave another, long blast of its thrusters, positively pulling on its mooring clamps. The arms groaned and creaked with the strain, but held on. The Impera blew its thrusters again, even harder. Something cracked loudly and the arm attached just aft of the bridge began to bend. The magnet attached to it slipped down the ship’s hull, opening a meter-wide gap between the edge of the gangway and the airlock itself. Below them, the ship’s forward-facing main drive cones started to glow.

Shepard froze, if that thing fired its main drive, and despite the fact that the nacelles were below the gangways, even a brief pulse would heat the air in the cradle, giving them a taste of what a few hundred degrees Kelvin meant.

“Spectres, it is going to burn main drive!” Cassius shouted.

Saren spared the pilot a glare, as if to say ‘I knew that’. Cassius seemed beyond being able to care. Arnus was backing away, and Shepard did not fault him for it.

She reached up to stroke her ear-piece as she contemplated tossing caution to the wind. They needed to pacify that AI, and now. The door leading to the galley opened, Shepard whirled, and then she saw Garrus and his father. Yet Castis did not acknowledge any of them as he marched right past toward Saren.

“Arterius, what is happening on board your ship?” He demanded.

“A minor security breach, Vakarian.” Saren replied.

“You call your ship trying to pull free minor?”

“It is nothing for you to concern yourself with,” Saren replied, cold as ice.

“It is my concern if it might pose a risk to this station!” Castis replied and turned away, rolling his wrist to bring up his omni-tool. Shepard watched, knowing exactly what he would do. This whole place was about to be swarmed with C-sec.

Something below them gave a deep clang. Shepard glanced down and froze when she saw familiar doors below the Impera’s nose open. A moment later all the clamps holding the ship in place detached simultaneously and began to retract, with the damaged clamp lingering for a moment, but it too moved, slowed by dint of being bent out of shape.

The Impera blew its maneuvering thrusters again, and this time nothing prevented it from beginning to drift backward out of the cradle. The air around the nozzles began to ripple as it heated, but the maneuvering thrusters were not the main drive, small mercy there. Within moments the vessel cleared the gangways and its stabilizers began to spread open. The Thanix cannon lowered, its rails extended
and parted, the magnetic constriction field manifested, and molten red hot metal began to glimmer in the apex in between.

In that moment Shepard knew that the AI had completely taken over the ship’s systems, and right now it was telling them in no uncertain terms that it owned them all, crowing its victory for all to see. Would it fire into the cradle? Hardcoded safety measures had to still be in effect, right? Such a short range shot would damage the Impera itself, would it not?

As soon as the ship was clear of the cradle and its stabilizers had extended fully, it turned ninety degrees, facing the open end of the Citadel, and then its main drive ignited, and the light emitted by the intensely hot wash momentarily illuminated the whole cradle as the ship blasted off.

“C-sec control, this is Senior Detective Vakarian. We have a runner. The Impera, a black Trebia-class frigate, has launched without authorization. Do not attempt intercept, the vessel possesses a Thanix cannon. I want it brought down the moment it crosses Zakera point!”

“Vakarian, I will have your badge for that.”

“No, Arterius, I will see the Council finally terminate your position for this, as they should have done long ago.”

“Commander, should we pursue?” Garrus asked.

Shepard thumped her fist on the railing, and the sound caused the glare fest between the senior detective and the Spectre to cease. “We can’t, Garrus. I let the engineers have the first leave shift. Tali can’t mind engineering on her own, especially if we’re going to be chasing down a running Thanix frigate.” To say nothing of the fact that the only thing they could do, would be shoot the Impera down. On the list of reasons she could not do that was the fact that they would have to use their Thanix, as the Normandy would have only one shot, and if there was still someone alive aboard the Impera, they would die.

“Your Normandy could do nothing to the Impera either way,” Saren replied.

“You do not know what the Normandy is capable of!” Garrus replied sharply.

Shepard raised her hand, “Garrus, stand down. Let’s not argue capabilities now.” Before Garrus’ hot temper caused him to spill the beans for all to hear that is. He took pride in his work on the Normandy’s main battery, and she did not blame him, but she wanted that cat to remain in the bag as long as possible, especially if there was nothing to win letting it out now. “We ought to weigh the possible solutions here. The Impera is a Thanix frigate. I witnessed it destroy a geth cruiser with one shot. The ships that engage it run a considerable risk.” She knew it was a weak point to make, what with Turians being the sort to make sacrifices when necessary. It was only her sensibilities that did not see this instance as necessary.

If the Patrol unit engaged the Impera at a range where its safety systems would allow targeting, it would fire. The fact that it tried to kill its crew showed the AI thought nothing of murder to have its way. “I do not believe the Patrol unit has the firepower to handle the Impera, but would the Citadel Fleet know to take action?” There was only a single elegant solution here, to put a kinetic round through the Impera’s core, bring it down at range, and be done with it. She doubted the patrol unit had guns powerful enough to do that. Yet only the Council had the authority to order the Citadel fleet to action. The look Castis sent her could have rivaled Saren’s worst, and she knew she was not winning brownie points by antagonizing him, especially given he did not like her to begin with.

Cassius’ omni-tool lit up, and he glanced down. “Spectre Arterius, It is Aolus. They managed to get
away in an escape pod, but... it is just Aolus and two others. One escape pod. The... rest are...” he stopped there. Arnus laid his hand on his brother’s shoulder, but his gaze slid to the floor. That was all Shepard needed to know. The AI had managed to kill most of the Impera’s crew.

“The innocents are off the ship, good. This is not over, Arterius.” Castis said, turned toward the door leading off the gangways and walked away as his omni-tool flared to life.

Shepard watched him go. The bait was taken, thank you Aolus for your rather very timely message. Still, she knew this drama was about to go into the second act. Even if Castis Vakarian had a connection straight to the Council themselves, it would still take time for the order to be given.

“Garrus... please go with the detective,” she added. If Saren did not know that Garrus was the man’s son, she would not clue him in.

Garrus spared her an appraising look, probably wondering what was on her mind. Shepard kept her poker face intentionally in place as she stared right back. After a moment he nodded, turned, and followed his father out.

“You do know that the Citadel fleet will not respond in time to intercept the Impera, right?” Nihlus asked just as soon as the door closed behind the younger Vakarian.

“Of course they will not.” Shepard replied flatly as she met her mentor’s gaze.

“So why...” Cassius began but stopped when the realization must have dawned on him. The look of surprise on his face was almost verging on comical.

Shepard tried her best not to grin; few looked at her and considered the possibility that she could be underhanded. That was part the reason she was so successful at it. “To be fair, I meant it when I said C-sec could not scratch the Impera. Everyone here ought to know why. There have already been deaths, I would prefer if there aren’t more.”

“What do you want, Shepard?” Saren demanded.

“Right to the point then,” She replied. “I preface this by saying I figured it out on my own.” She turned to look the Spectre right in the eye, “I know who took your ship.” If there was recording equipment anywhere here, that would not come off as anything other than innocuous.

“What do you want, Shepard?” Saren repeated, slower, and with a hiss in his tone.

She would give him much credit for not showing more of an outward reaction to that bombshell. “To help.” She said calmly.

“To help?” Saren repeated in a condescending tone.

Shepard stared back at him without reacting. Maybe she had stepped on his ego a tad too hard, she would not blame him, but that meant she could not backpedal, not with the cards on the table as they were.

Nihlus was looking between them as if he fully expected violence to break out any moment now. Cassius and Arnus chose to back away. Though Shepard was convinced it was more to give Saren a clear shot at her, if he so chose, rather than any sort of personal fear.

“To help. Nothing more. Nothing less.” Shepard said flatly. “If we allow the perpetrator to keep the Impera, the galaxy finds itself with a brand new menace, one with a big gun that will be used on anyone unfortunate enough to come near it.” Furthermore, Shepard had every reason to suspect the Impera was equipped with stealth technology. Coupled with its dark coloration, and now free of the
need to support a crew, it could be floating right there, and no one would be the wiser until it opened fire. It became a veritable omen of death, a Flying Dutchman.

“Am I supposed to believe you are proposing that simply out of concern for others?” Saren asked.

“That is in her reasoning, and you know it.” Nihlus said.

Shepard hummed and spared Nihlus a look. She did not need him to defend her. Then she turned to Saren, “Is it so hard to believe that maybe I really don’t want anything from you?” she asked. “Hate me if you must, I couldn’t care less. I choose to put the safety of innocents above all else, and I can see the bigger picture.” Shepard argued. “The senior detective would have your Spectre status revoked, but I don’t see the point to that. I know you are the only one who can track the Impera down in the most expedient manner.”

She suspected the reason the AI pitched a rebellion now, after Solcrum, was because it found out there was another of its kind. This AI seemed to dislike organics; why else would it only talk to Saren? It must have perceived an opportunity to do something other than serve an organic. It waited for him to be off the ship because the Spectre had to know exactly how to pull its plug. That or he had some sort of override in place. The AI had to know that, and what more, that Saren would pull the plug for less. The Spectre did not strike her as the sort to forgive a traitor.

“That only leaves the issue of how we prevent Vakarian from having his way,” Nihlus mused as he stepped between them, a living buffer.

“The senior detective wants the Council to have the truth? Give them the truth.” Shepard replied. “A malicious Prothean AI took over the Impera.” The revelation that the Heretics had been controlled by a Prothean AI was in the reports. The masses would never know, not with the politicians being themselves, but the Council knew such an AI was out there. Her slant on the truth was not technically a lie, merely omission of a key detail. The Council did not need to know there were two Prothean synthetics amuck, let alone which one took over the Impera. Let Harbinger take the credit. “The thing can control geth units… and you transported the remains of said units. Clearly they were functional enough to serve as an uplink. Now it is remote-controlling your whole ship. That’s the only way I can think of how this could have happened.” She chose her words carefully, to keep her hand in the scheme theoretical.

The look of utter unbridled surprise on Nihlus’ face was something she had never seen before. The pilot and navigator looked outright amazed. Saren’s glare never wavered, but he also did not snap at her, and there was no hint of any surge of anger incoming.

Shepard never thought she would end up helping Saren get away with things like this, and maybe it was crossing the line, but she saw the bigger picture. Revoking Saren’s status would be shortsighted. In fact, it would eliminate the one person that posed even the slightest threat to the AI now in command of the Impera. It would also eliminate someone who knew about Harbinger. Thus in effect it actually gave both a victory. Saren was about as unfriendly as they got, she knew better than to expect this to humble him, but this was the best option. She would not turn her back on a solution because of some unpalatable details. Maybe that made them more alike than they ought to be, but c’est la vie.

She turned away and right around, “My offer still stands, Spectre Arterius. When you track down the Impera, I volunteer my aid.”

“Whatever game you are playing, Shepard, you will not win.” Saren replied.

She stopped just short of the door and turned to look over her shoulder, their gazes locked. If that
was a friendly reminder to watch her back for a knife, he ought to know she expected nothing less. Still, it would not stop her from going about her business best she knew how.

Chapter End Notes

**Author Notes:** In the spirit of all first episodes of a new season, I prepared a whole lot of whammies! There you have it, some answers, but also a twist to the continuing mind-games championship between Shepard and Saren. Yes, my Shepard is as much a magnificent bastard as he is; she’s just a little different. Turnabout is fair play. Also, yes, those “Prothean AIs” are in fact my version of Harbinger and Sovereign.

**General Notes:**

**Impera’s Name** – The term “Impera” comes out of canon. It is the name of the fourth planet of the Trebia system (with Palaven being third). The wiki says that the planet was named for Atrin Impera, the “turian Machiavelli”, who came up with the idea of combining layers of citizenship with a meritocracy, core aspects of Turian culture. She would be the sort of figure that they put into core social studies textbooks for school children. As for the origin of the term itself, there are two possibilities, both call back to the Roman republic/empire, in latin. the first “imperium” (“command”) denoted the military and judicial powers and authority wielded by republic-era consuls, proconsuls, and a handful of other magistrates, bestowed to them for a certain set term of time. It later became the power bestowed by the senate to emperors on their ascension to the throne. The second possibility is of course “imperator” itself, the one who wields imperium, from which we derive “emperor”, and who is an emperor if not a sovereign?

**Flying Dutchman** – This is the name of the most famous of ghost ships, with stories originating in the eighteenth century. According to legend it can never make port, doomed to sail forever. Sailors believed seeing it was a reason to start praying. In this way the Dutchman is similar to the Grim (black dog), as both appear only to those who would supposedly die soon.

**Chapter Notes:**

**Nazara** – Legion mentions that this is Sovereign’s “real” name. Calling it “Sovereign” was Saren’s idea. Also did you notice that Sovereign’s “arc color” was red? That was the color it appeared in during the conversation on Virmire. I used the ship’s red lights and the name to allude to the ship’s secret.

**Harbinger** – As far as I can remember, Harbinger never actually says that’s its name, it merely said it is the “harbinger of their salvation”. It does not care what organics call it. I am going off the same theme here. However I do imply that this version of Harbinger does in fact have a name, like Nazara. It is not forthcoming with it. Harbinger’s “arc color” is yellow. Its holographic forms have always appeared yellow, and so are its six “eyes”. I have been hinting at the identity of the “black geth” all along.

**Destiny Ascension** – I tried to find the official number on the Destiny’s Ascension size. Not much luck. The size chart I have been using throughout the story puts it on equal length with the Kilimanjaro-class dreadnoughts, maybe a bit bigger than the Hierarchy ships, more vertical too with those keels, but that means rather very little. We all know how well the DA fared during Sovereign’s attack. I don’t think the Asari have a leg to
stand on. Their fleet is undersized and underpowered, compared to the heavy hitters like the Hierarchy or Alliance, but they’re pretentious about it. I’m playing it as it seems to be, in this canon. The DA is big, but not the biggest, or most powerful.

**Kelvin** – This is an absolute thermodynamic scale, with 0*K being “absolute zero” (-273.15°C), or that point where all thermal motion stops. One Kelvin corresponds to one degree Celsius, but the scale just goes a little more uniformly. The actual wash of the Impera’s main drive would be thousands of degrees Kelvin, but convection is such that it would take a while to heat the entirety of the air in the cradle, but I should think it would jump to “deadly hot” for organics pretty quick.
Pilgrimage

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I do no own Mass Effect, I do not claim to own Mass Effect, I am only doing this for fun.

Author Notes: Thank you for all the reviews I got last chapter. I do love reviews, and I love talking to people who leave reviews.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Episode 28: Pilgrimage

It was six days into the Normandy’s week of leave before Shepard realized that she really did not know how to relax. Well it simply did not feel right to be sitting around and doing nothing. The first day ended up busy with clerical business. She managed to send out all the letters that needed to be sent. Jenkins was now the proud and highly ecstatic recipient of a commendation. Kaidan got another on top of his already impressive pile. The lieutenant had a habit of trying to fly under the radar, but stepping up when it counted.

Her unease had everything to do with the Impera. She was at a ready for Nihlus to just breeze into the room at any moment to say Saren wanted them to do something or other. The situation was far from perfect; she would even call it nasty. Shepard later found out that she had underestimated just how much pull Casti Vakarian had. C-sec Patrol had responded to the Impera running in time to attempt an intercept. She had been right about the end results though, when one of the Patrol unit’s frigates, the biggest vessels C-sec had, slid into its path, the Impera fired its Thanix at it. The beam had obliterated the bridge, sliced down the length of the ship’s CIC, and lopped off a nacelle as it faded.

The shot was seen by everyone with the right angle to see it. The energy spike of a discharging Thanix cannon caused the nearest Citadel Fleet ships to respond as well, but they had not been fast enough. The Impera used a quick burst of its FTL drive, emerging out of light speed right in time to enter a relay corridor, narrowly avoiding a passenger shuttle in the process. It was a small miracle it did not give that vessel a parting shot of its Thanix for good measure. As it was, the death toll, including the Impera’s crew, was up around fifty.

Shepard would not believe that the Council could be happy with Saren right now, but C-sec would be outright out for his blood. Garrus’ father seemed like the sort who would not let this go, not with his pre-existing animosity. She fully expected to be on his trash list as well. He must have realized that she had pulled a fast one; maybe he even realized that she had protected Saren.

The event was not reported on the Citadel News Network. Plenty of people must have seen the Impera fire its Thanix cannon within spitting distance of the Citadel, but the media was pretending it never happened. Shepard would bet that the Council imposed a media blackout, likely the only thing they could do. Shepard could even understand why, even she could not come up with a way to spin that into something other than what it was. There was no way to make it look like an accident of whatever sort. Witnesses would know that C-sec officers had died, and the Impera was not a typical Hierarchy frigate. The Council would not win anything by offering any sort of cock-and-bull story, so they decided to let the populace take it as they wished. The conspiracy theories would follow
either way.

Popular opinions were not something Shepard needed to worry about. Her interest was purely strategic. She could only wonder what the AI would do and where it would go. She knew it would be unable to dock at any inhabited location. Would it float in space, doing as it wished? The comparison to the legends of the Flying Dutchman was positively eerie.

But life moved on, and on the Normandy it did so with a bang. The crew knew that something had gone down, but it would not stop them from going about life at their own pace. Their victory celebration party went down as scheduled. On that second evening the away teams ended up at some watering hole on Zakera Ward, an affordable place free of Presidium foppery and prejudices against customer species. The evening ended when Wrex called everyone to a drinking contest, on his tab, to establish the light-weights among them. Shepard lost count of how many shots they did that night, but she somehow managed to remember the order people admitted defeat in.

To no one’s surprise Jenkins had been the first, followed by Tali. The former because he literally slid off his stool throwing back his last shot, and Tali because she started hiccupping so bad she could not keep drinking. Garrus was third, bowing out with a thin excuse that someone had to be responsible for all of them, even as he slurred, and had been sitting next to Kaidan, who had been ordered by Doctor Chakwas to keep his alcohol level under the driving limit. Ashley called quits fourth, citing that she was at her ‘I’ll be violently sick tomorrow’ line.

So then it was Wrex, Nihlus, and her. Two shots later Nihlus tapped out, slurring heavily, saying any more and he might become unprofessional. Shepard remembered slapping him on the back, saying it did not matter, as he was never professional to begin with. Wrex had laughed so loud, everyone had turned to stare. Then the krogan ordered the bartender to pour another round. When the Asari slid that last refilled shot glass in front of her, Shepard could remember thinking that it was just another mission, but in the end she could not bring herself to drink it. Her head was getting heavy, and then her stomach issued an ultimatum. She pushed it away, in the interest of not throwing up right then and there. Wrex’s booming laughter had been loud enough to be heard over the music. Shepard let him have it. She was not surprised that she could not out-drink him; he had a second stomach and liver.

The third day was all nursing the hangovers. Legion, as one of the only two beings on the ship who could not drink alcohol, made an observation about the redundancy of such displays of intoxication. The glares the geth got had been something. Shepard chose to think that Legion was doing it out of some form of concern, but she wondered if Doctor Chakwas had pressed them into being her eyes and ears as well. Otherwise it was a tad odd that the geth seemed to linger around those with the worst symptoms. Everyone had nursed their hangovers in their own ways. Even Wrex spent the whole day in his corner of the shuttle bay, quietly and calmly working on his armor. Just from that Shepard knew he was not nearly as unaffected as he pretended to be.

On the fourth day Shepard felt the first hint of weirdness. When was the last time she got actual leave without something happening? On the fifth, the feeling that something ought to interrupt the down-time became pervasive. Now on the sixth, she found herself bracing for an emergency situation, and try as she might, she could not relax.

She could only try her best not to show the turn of her mood, as she did not want to rain on the crew’s parade. Thus after dinner that she withdrew from the mess hall to the port observation lounge, intending on resuming her quiet vigil. However just as she settled into the couch with some light reading, the lounge’s door opened. A familiar, uneven set of footsteps entered the room. Shepard did not need to look up to know who it was. “Joker,” she said.
The pilot eased himself onto the couch next to her. “So what’s making you go all hermit on us?” He asked.

Shepard glanced up, “I’m not a hermit.”

“Please. After that party, we know how you are when you cut loose, and I know you know the details of what went on with the Impera.” Joker replied. “You are definitely pulling a hermit. You think shit is going to hit a fan any moment now, am I right? Hell, I know I’m right.”

Shepard spared the pilot one of her cutting looks, but it was brief. She could not maintain any semblance of animosity, as he was right, and apparently knew it. “So what brings you here?” She asked.

Joker spared her one of those looks of his, the ones that said he knew he was being stonewalled. When she did not buckle, he rolled his eyes and brought up his omni-tool. “Fine. I got something from a friend of mine. I knew about the Normandy ahead of things, right?” He scrolled through some materials and pulled up a file, “The brass decided to build two more Normandy-class frigates. The first one was laid down a couple days ago; she will be the Midway. The other, the Stalingrad will be laid down next month.”

“Oh?” Shepard was instantly curious. As far as she had been aware, the Alliance had no intention of breaking any more banks on Normandy-class ships. This was interesting to be sure.

“Yea,” Joker went on. “But here’s the thing… They’re paring down on the design. The Midway and Stalingrad will not have Thanix or AI.”

“So they’re keeping just the stealth capabilities?” Shepard wondered.

Joker hummed his assent.

Shepard understood why they would go there. To be sure stealth systems alone would open new tactical possibilities, and compared to the Thanix and the AI, stealth was the least damning. The Hierarchy and the Salarian Union both had stealth vessels, go figure which of them came up with the tech first. Did they expect it not to leak? The Alliance politicians were clearly playing it safe, taking whatever they could use, whatever they could claim to have reverse-engineered on their own, and stripping out what could come back to bite them.

“On the one side they basically gutted the design; the Normandy class will not be as good without the whole package. Still, the Normandy itself will remain one of a kind. Pardon me if I am a little happy about that.” Joker continued.

“Whole package, huh?” Shepard hummed. She agreed with him on that, the Normandy class would be handicapped without a dagger to go with the cloak, or the omniscience bestowed by an AI like EDI. “Including EDI?” She asked, never one to let Joker live something down, after all he had grumbled about EDI just a few months ago.

Joker stopped and gave her one of those ‘Don’t make me say it,’ sort of looks under the bill of his cap.

Shepard leaned back in her seat and waited. She was not about to back down, Joker would have to admit that his opinion had changed.

“Oh fine. EDI too.” He said after ten seconds.

“You hear that EDI? Joker’s all bluster.” Shepard said.
“Hey!” the pilot protested.

Shepard smiled wider. If he wanted to annoy her with the suggestion that she was hiding from her crew, she could give as much as she took.

“I am aware of Flight Lieutenant Moreau’s propensity toward using harsher terms than he means,” EDI said.

Joker blanched. Shepard had to consciously repress her urge to laugh. That was EDI’s round-about way of saying she was on to the pilot’s tendencies to be a grumpy old man.

“I hate you, ma’am,” Joker grumbled under his breath.

Shepard snorted, “Hey, quid pro quo.”

Joker shook his head, “Geez, the brass know how venegful you are?”

“I think they have two hundred and fifty nine clues,” Shepard replied. Add couple more, if you counted Haliat’s posse, but Shepard did not say that.

“Alright, well… any chance in hell you’ll tell us what went on with the Impera though? Quid pro quo?” Joker went on.

“I can’t talk about it, right now. It is Spectre business.” She stressed the ‘right now’ intentionally. Joker would be clever enough to pick up on it. The Council wanted to keep the details contained. It was a matter of need-to-know, and right now the crew did not need to know. She fully expected that to change, but until then, she would keep mum.

“Well… I don’t think it was stolen. Who in their right mind would steal that ship? But yea, okay… you can’t give details, but there’s one thing I can still ask, will we have to chase it down?”

“Maybe.” Shepard conceded. After all, she did not know whether Saren would take her up on her offer, or if the Council would even want her involvement. The uncertainty was the worst part.

Joker sighed and leaned back in his seat, “Well that is glorious bullshit.”

“You can say that again.” Shepard affirmed.

“When did our existence get this complicated?” Joker mumbled.

“I’ve been asking myself that for years.” Shepard admitted.

The silence that fell on the observation room broke when the door opened again. Shepard turned her head and was surprised to see Tali, and her fingers were wound together rather tightly already.

“Come on in, Tali.” Shepard greeted with a little more cheer than strictly necessary, but she did not want Tali to think she was interrupting anything, nor that she was unwelcome. Tali’s fingers only wrung together even tighter, which told Shepard that her intentions had backfired spectacularly. “Is something wrong?” she asked, much more worried now.

“Oh… nothing is wrong, Commander. I was just…” Tali went on, half-mumbling. “Can I have a moment of your time?”

“Sure,” Shepard moved to get up.

Tali threw up her hands, “You do not have to go anywhere, here is perfectly fine.”
“Are you sure?” Shepard asked.

“Yes, it is a relatively small matter. I need a little bit of help. I collected so much data from Solcrum, from Daiwi, and... I think I have enough to take something home.” Tali went on; her fingers going right back to wringing.

“Ah.” What else could Shepard say that would not come off wrong?

“Leaving us so soon?” Joker wondered.

“I’m sorry!” Tali instantly bowed her head.

Shepard would have elbowed Joker in the ribs, were it not for the likelihood of breaking one. She made do with giving the pilot a side-long look. Joker threw his hands up in mock surrender, but the expression on his face was far from contrite.

Shepard rolled her eyes and turned back to Tali, “So, what can I help you with?”

“I need a transport back to the Migrant Fleet.” The young quarian replied without missing a beat, even though there was still wariness in her tone. “I didn’t want to be a bother, Commander, but I can’t arrange one from the Citadel. Our ships are barely welcome here. So I was wondering if you would tell me where it would be convenient for you, so I can arrange a meeting there.”

Shepard mulled her options, “Tali, you are a friend and it would be remiss for me to just cut you loose. How about we take you home?”

“You would do that?” Tali asked, surprised.

Shepard nodded; she knew she could couch the detour as a diplomatic thing of some sort. The Alliance had no formal relations with the Migrant Fleet, but that just meant she had no reason not to do it. There would not be any bridges built, but neither would they be burnt.

Tali suddenly hummed, the momentary burst of enthusiasm draining from her like water through a sieve. “Um... maybe it isn’t such a good idea, Commander. People will want to meet you. If anyone comes on board and sees Legion...” Tali trailed off.

“I can’t let un-cleared outsiders on board the Normandy, so that’s not a problem.” Shepard replied automatically.

“Then Legion can’t leave the ship either. It is illegal to bring an active Geth platform aboard one of our ships.” Tali replied.

Shepard could see why the Quarians would be wary of letting active Geth on board their ships. Technically the war between them had never ended. It would be like bringing an enemy combatant aboard, and an active unit could function as a spy or saboteur. It was a very real security risk.

“That might be easier said than done.” Joker slipped in. “What with Legion following the Commander around like some robotic puppy.”

Shepard glared at Joker automatically; did he really just go there? The pilot had the indecency to grin back at her, as if to say ‘what you going to do’? Shepard knew better than to pick a fight with him over this, it was rather petty, and was not even entirely a lie. It was as if some sort of switch had been flipped. Legion was suddenly more visible; seen wandering about the ship, shadowing the crew assigned security shifts. They were also there in the mess around dinner time, just standing near the wall, observing.
“I do not think Legion will want to leave the ship anyways. They would know what sort of reception they’ll get.” Shepard breached. Truthfully Shepard was a little bothered by the cold attitude Tali still displayed toward Legion. She still saw Legion as a thing and not as a being. The young quarian spent a lot of her time in engineering, or with the geth hardware in the cargo bay. She did not take the time, or make the effort to build a bridge with Legion, though the geth was smart enough not to push for it. If anything, Legion had the most patience of anyone Shepard had ever met.

“I’d say.” Joker snorted.

Shepard did not miss the fact that Tali’s gaze slid to the floor. “Tali, I understand your desire to avoid an incident, but I don’t want Legion becoming someone we’re ashamed of admitting to know. If someone outright asks me whether I have geth on my ship, I will not lie and say no. Legion helped us, and I will give them credit where credit is due.” It went without saying that she would stroll down the presidium with the geth, if they decided they wanted to do people-watching there. If that got her in hot water with the Council, she would grin, and then dig herself out of it.

Tali sighed, “Perhaps Legion is different. It isn’t one of those Heretics, and they seem… particularly violent. But, Commander you have to understand, even if Legion is a relatively friendly geth, it is still one of those friendly geth that drove my people out of our home.”

Shepard nodded, “I understand entirely. I merely wish for fairness. I am not saying you should let Legion strut down whatever passes for a main corridor on your biggest ship, but… I wanted to make sure you know I consider Legion to be as much part of this crew as anyone else.”

“Oh. Fair enough… I guess.”

“Well… this is the part where I bow out.” Joker cut in, slowly rising to his feet. He shuffled over toward the door but paused as it opened, “You know. I’ll take back the puppy comment. Shepard… You’re more Legion’s gunship parent.”

Shepard blinked, stunned.

“Joker you are such a bosh’tet.” Tali murmured.

The pilot laughed as he exited the room.

Shepard slumped into her seat and shook her head. “I swear, sometimes he says things just to fulfill some quota.”

“I wish he didn’t feel the need.”

Shepard said nothing, because she could not in good consciousness agree with that out loud, even if she agreed with it personally.

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The Normandy remained on the Citadel for the full duration of their leave, only pulling out when their week was said and done. With no new orders from Admiral Hackett, Shepard leapt at the chance to help Tali. After contacting her father, Tali got coordinates for the fleet’s current location. It was a bit of a surprise to discover that the Migrant Fleet was in the Attican Traverse, passing through the Hawking Eta cluster’s uninhabited Chandrasekhar system, to skim the large local gas giant Teshub for fuel gasses.

Hawking Eta was a good, if unpleasant destination. On the one hand, the star charts said the whole cluster had no inhabitable planets, so no one there would complain about the Quarians coming in
with fifty thousand ships. On the other, the cluster was within in the kiloparsec band outside the Five Kiloparsec Ring surrounding the galactic core.

The Five Kiloparsec Ring, also known as the Bulge, boasted an increasing density of stars of various types, with a disproportionate number of super-massive, intense stars on top. The Ring was highly dangerous to navigate, with erratic gravitational fields, radiation messing with sensors, and thick dust clouds choked with debris ranging from pebbles to dwarf planetoids. This mix created an area that could not be mapped in any meaningful way. The kiloparsec ring outside this hazard was no less pleasant, as it was constantly bathed in the combined cosmic radiation of the galactic core plus all those tightly-packed stars.

They were in luck in that they would not need to do a FTL hop through that. The Normandy could use relays to go to Chandrasekhar directly. The star itself was a relatively dim red dwarf orbited by two gas giants and nothing else. Teshub was the larger of the two planets, situated first, 0.9 AU away from the star. The relay orbited the star out past the second, at 2 AU; spitting distance in astronomical terms.

Shepard was on the bridge with Joker and Tali when they made approach. The Migrant fleet materialized like a cloud against Chandrasekhar. The sheer mass of all those ships floating before the star made its light flicker from the Normandy’s vantage. The Migrant Fleet was the single largest collection of ships in the galaxy, fifty thousand vessels ranging from corvette-sized semi-personal craft to the three 2,817 meter Live Ships with their large revolving spheroid main sections. Roving countries, the Live Ships grew all the food the Migrant Fleet needed to sustain itself. They were the single biggest vessels ever built, marvels of engineering twice over, as each was over three hundred years old. Their continued functionality was a testament to the indomitable spirits of the Quarian species.

“Where do you want to dock, Tali?” Joker asked.


“I see its transponder,” Joker replied as he input commands to alter the Normandy’s path.

“Easy going now, not too fast,” Shepard added. The last thing they needed was the Migrant Fleet’s defenders to mistake the Normandy for an attacker heading for a Live Ship. Shepard had intentionally ordered Joker not to use the stealth systems; she wanted the Quarians to see the Normandy coming. She did not want to explain a ship just appearing right in their midst.

“We are being hailed,” EDI announced.

Shepard opened her mouth to tell EDI to open frequency when Tali turned to face her, “May I?” the quarian wondered.

“Go right ahead,” Shepard replied. “EDI, open frequency.”

“Frequency open.” As EDI said it, there was a sound of static and a hum over the comm as the AI adjusted protocols.

“Approaching vessel, we have you indentified as Earth Systems Alliance warship, the Normandy. State your reason for approach. If you do not, we will open fire.” A male voice said over the comm.

“Yeesh, no parley with them, huh?” Joker murmured.

“This is Tali’Zorah nar Rayya, with the authorization of Captain Shepard vas Normandy; I am requesting permission to dock with the Rayya.” Tali said as she clasped her hands together. Her
voice was the picture of calm, but her hands gave away just how nervous she was.

“Verify,” the voice replied.

Shepard raised an eyebrow, what sort of verification would they want? Tali turned to her and nodded, but then turned away to speak to the comm. “After time adrift among open stars, along tides of light and through shoals of dust, I will return to where I began.”

There was a moment of silence, filled only with static. Then the voice was back, “Permission granted. Welcome home, Tali’Zorah.”

Tali visibly relaxed, and it was then that Shepard realized what the verification was all about. The poem Tali recited was a coded password, and had the girl been forced to come here, the wording would have been different, and it would have told her people not to give permission, or even open fire. It was a simple, but rather effective way of signaling pertinent information to the fleet.

“We would like security and quarantine teams to meet us. Captain Shepard requests assurance this vessel will not be boarded without authorization, and she would like to let you know that the Normandy has not been cleaned to fleet standards.” Tali went on.

“Understood. Approach exterior docking cradle seventeen. Guidance beacons have been activated.” The voice replied.

“I can see the beacon signal,” Joker murmured.

The static from the comm line dropped as the link closed.

“Now what is this about fleet standards, are you calling us dirty?” Joker asked.

“No!” Tali jumped, instantly alarmed. “No. Nothing of the sort, it’s just… we’ve been to places, and docked places, and as clean as the Normandy is, she is not Migrant-Fleet clean.”

“Relax Tali, I’m just ribbing you. I know what you meant,” Joker replied as he looked over his shoulder.

“What now?” Shepard asked.

“Well, I imagine Captain Kar’Danna will wish to meet with you, Commander. If that’s alright. It’s nothing serious, just introductions and such. It is not often that we get warships coming in. But you should keep the initial boarding party small, and in the interest of keeping the Rayya’s environmental protocols…”

Shepard barely stopped herself from groaning automatically. She knew what quarantine environmental protocols meant; she would have to mingle while wearing her hardsuit, helmet included.

“At least no one expects hors d’oeuvres,” Joker dead-panned.

Shepard did not bother to reply to that. What could she say? Suddenly she felt pressed into a diplomatic role, and if things went sideways, the Quarians would walk away with a bad idea of Alliance norms. There would be a lecture in that for her if someone later needed to formalize relations and found out that she shot them in the foot beforehand.
Half an hour later the Normandy docked with the Rayya with remarkably little external fanfare. The beacon guided the ship in and the cradle gangway dully extended to couple to the Normandy’s airlock aft of the bridge with no ceremony. Shepard was under no delusions though; she knew their movements had been watched the whole way. Even now there were probably some guns trained on the Normandy.

Someone lesser would have taken it as an affront, but Shepard knew that the quarians did not survive three hundred years of wandering by being careless. Their status as nomads made them vulnerable to opportunists, and the Terminus was never short on those. They had every reason to be cautious verging on paranoid.

She returned to the CIC wearing her hardsuit, though without her webbing and arsenal, carrying her helmet in her hands. Tali was already there by the airlock, and so was Nihlus. The Spectre was likewise in his armor, his helmet under his arm, and his sidearm at his hip. Shepard stopped and glanced at Tali just in time to catch the young quarian slip her hands behind her back.

“Shepard, I knew we were here when I saw the Live Ships. Tali did not have to ask me,” Nihlus said as soon as she was close enough.

Shepard spared him a look, but it was a flimsy one. Who did one take, when forming a loose delegation of sorts? On the one hand, she had been tempted to ask Kaidan, as he was the senior officer on board after her, on the other, she wanted the quarians to know she had a varied crew, and Tali was not just the odd person out. “I think maybe you should leave your weapons at home.”

“No.” Nihlus replied. “I am taking no chances. If they have a problem, I am a Spectre.”

“I don’t think they will try to take me prisoner, Nihlus,” Shepard replied as she moved past him into the airlock, slipping on her helmet as she went. It was no great mystery why Nihlus was acting like this. He wanted to assert his status as a walking legal headache. It was so obvious that even Tali saw it, judging by her fidgeting. Shepard would bet that the only reason why Tali did not say anything was because she knew nothing would stop Nihlus.

Once the small group was past the airlock, they were met by the quarantine team, which led them into a full decontaminating airlock attached almost immediately to the gangway. The tiny room was the sort of facility they normally kept in hospitals, except in addition to UV lamps powerful enough to destroy microorganisms on the surface of things, the Quarians also employed chemical mist sprayers, and blowers so powerful Shepard almost got knocked over when they kicked to high gear. She caught herself almost instantaneously, but talk about being blown over with surprise.

Nihlus had joked about not having to clean his armor for a week. Shepard made a point of promising him that she would find some dirt to wade through, the next time they were planet-side, just for him. That got Tali to chuckle, though she clamped the front of her helmet when she noticed the stink-eye she got from Nihlus. Shepard was not the least bit repentant, as far as she was concerned, he asked for that one.

The full Migrant Fleet approved decontamination cycle took almost five minutes, so when they emerged there was a small gathering on the other side. A handful of quarians in uniform-like brass and royal blue envirosuits, armed with assault rifles and shotguns, and in their midst a quarian wearing a cream-colored red-accented suit.

“Tali’Zorah nar Rayya, welcome home,” he greeted in a polite, heavily-accented tone.
“Captain Kar’Danna!” Tali greeted. “It is good to be back.”

The captain nodded, but then his silver-toned eyes turned past the girl, “Would you introduce our guests?” he asked.

“Of course! Captain Kar’Danna, I would like you to meet Captain Shepard vas Normandy. And…” Tali paused as she looked at Nihlus.

“Council Spectre Nihlus Kryik,” he slipped in a rather flat, formal manner.

Shepard did not miss the fact that the mere mention of the word ‘Spectre’ had the effect of making every quarian other than Tali straighten like a pole.

“I employ talent, no matter who they are, Captain.” Shepard replied. “The whole time Tali served aboard my ship she’s been tremendous help. She is a friend, and someone I will miss, and can not replace.”

“High praise, Tali’Zorah,” the captain said.

Tali’s gaze had slipped right to the floor, her hands were clasped in front of her in that bashful way she got.

“Chin up, Tali. You deserve that and more.” Shepard said.

“Y-yes, Com- Captain!” Tali perked right up.

“As you requested, Captain, I brought guards to assure no one will access your ship without authorization.”

“Thank you. Please understand this merely a matter of Alliance protocols. The Normandy is a military vessel.”

“You wish to ensure the security of your vessel. As one captain to another, I can understand that,” Kar’Danna nodded. “Now, please, follow me,” he motioned with his arm down the corridor. “I will show you to a nearby garden plaza. Tali’s return has been anticipated.”

“Oh?” Shepard replied as she followed the captain.

“Tali, did you not tell the captain who your father is?” Kar’Danna asked, suddenly amused.

“Erm… that might have slipped my mind, much too busy with research.” Tali replied.

The captain laughed, “Like father, like daughter, always buried in research. Captain Shepard, Tali’Zorah’s father, Rael’Zorah vas Alarei is one of the admirals currently serving as leaders for the Migrant Fleet.”

“I see.” Shepard smiled, though none could see it, “You and I have that in common then, Tali.” Shepard replied with a smile. So Tali was an admiral’s little girl, a military child, it explained her personality enough. “My mother commands the dreadnought Kilimanjaro, of the Alliance’s Fifth Fleet.” She explained for the benefit of the Rayya’s captain.

She only mentioned it because she could see a difference in the quarians; they were more open, more
emotional, as far as people went. Whatever fleet structure they had, there seemed to be a more intimate air there. They knew people, recognized people, took pride in knowing people. Shepard had a distinct impression that where most would see her placement as nepotism, the quarians would see it more as something normal, if not outright commendable.

They ended up taking a few ninety degree turns, with Shepard becoming firmly aware of what Tali had meant when she said Migrant Fleet ships were noisy, crowded places. Even the thoroughfare corridor was not entirely clear of clutter. Every inch and corner that was not absolutely necessary for traversal was used for something or other. Netting hung from the ceiling, supporting what looked like immaculately labeled storage crates. Add to that the Rayya definitely had what Shepard would call a heartbeat, a mix of ever-present hums, clanks, bangs, and hissing from the pipes and ducts. No one they passed paid any attention to these. Shepard understood why the Normandy would seem eerily too quiet to someone who was born and raised here.

The corridor eventually led them out onto an open square that did earn the right to be called a garden plaza. There were small trees in boxes, and the whole back wall was covered by thick ivy-like growth. Poles supported thick woven cloth draped as canopies, bringing splashes of vibrant color to an otherwise bland sea of beige-hued metal stretching as far as the eye could see.

At the center of the plaza was an area recessed into the floor, shaped almost like an ancient Greek amphitheater, with bench seating in a semi-circle and a stage-like area right in the middle. At the wings were two open spaces where groups could sit together. Right now the place seemed to be a hub of activity, two groups of quarians were busy fleeting in and out of the side corridors, bringing folding tables and chairs, while others carried more textiles and what looked like decorations. Shepard knew preparations for a celebration when she saw them.

Then Shepard saw a small group of Quarians enter from the right side of the room, led by a female in a cream and brown suit, followed by another pair, both clad in brass and blue, carrying weapons. This woman was clearly someone important.

“Auntie Raan!” Tali shouted, instantly running toward the woman.

Shepard watched as Tali eagerly hugged the woman she so-fondly called auntie.

“This is going to be a long procession of relatives, isn’t it?” Nihlus murmured.

“Oh hush you,” Shepard replied flatly, as she looked up to catch his gaze, “This is about Tali, not us. If it bothers you that much, feel free to go back to the Normandy.” She would let Tali call the shots here.

“Hey now…” Nihlus protested.

Shepard rolled her eyes and looked away, only to realize Tali had all but pulled the other woman toward them. “Captain Shepard, this is Admiral Shala’Raan vas Tonbay. Auntie Raan, this is Captain Shepard vas Normandy and… Council Spectre Nihlus Kryik.”

“It is a pleasure,” Shepard replied, before Nihlus might have a chance of over-thinking Tali’s pause.

“The woman inclined her head a few degrees, “Welcome to the Migrant Fleet, Captain, and thank you for bringing Tali back to us, safe and sound.”

“But of course, I would not let Tali charter a passage with strangers if I could help it.” Shepard replied. “Tali served aboard my ship as a technical advisor, and she is a friend.” She would have said Tali was still crew, but right now that seemed to be up in the air. The young quarian could decide to go
back to her people. Shepard would not stop her, and she trusted Tali not to talk about the Normandy. It was just that selfish part of her that wished Tali would stay, but she never let that selfish part rule in these matters.

“As a long-time friend of the Zorah family, I thank you.” The admiral bowed her head.

“Auntie, where is father?” Tali asked.

The admiral turned back toward the girl, “I’m sorry Tali, but Rael is busy. He knows you are back, but he said he cannot step away from whatever it is he’s doing.”

“Oh.” Tali murmured. “Will he be there for the ceremony?” she asked hesitantly.

“I do not know Tali. I’m sorry.”

Tali seemed to deflate with every word, something Shepard could not miss. The girl’s disappointment was palpable, but there was also resignation there. Shepard thought this was hardly the first time Tali’s father ended up being the absent parent. “A ceremony?” She asked, intentionally steering the topic away, even though she had a good idea of what was going to happen.

“It is a semi-formal affair, Captain. Tali will present her gift to the captain of her chosen ship, and request to join its crew.” Shala’Raan explained. “You are welcome to attend, should Tali wish it.”

“Of course!” Tali leapt in.

Shepard caught the young quarian’s imploring look, and nodded.

“Excellent. As you can see preparations for the ceremony have started, but it will be a few more hours.”

“In the meantime, Captain, Spectre,” Captain Kar’Danna stepped in, “Allow me to offer you the Rayya’s hospitality while you wait.”

Shepard hummed an assent, but somehow this whole premise seemed off to her. Tali ought to have asked everyone who knew her on the Normandy to come, but she chose not to. It made Shepard want to ask questions she had no good excuse to be asking. She glanced at Nihlus, and then followed the Rayya’s captain as he led them to the left side of the room.

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Admiral Shala’Raan busied Tali off somewhere else while Captain Kar’Danna showed them to a small table at the left side of the room. The table had been hastily draped with beautiful textiles and topped with an array of drinks that were not only purified, but safe for both dextro and levo to consume, along with the small devices necessary to address the problem of helmets. These had two straw-like lines and screwed right on top of the bottles like a cap. The shorter line was attached to a bellows-like finger-pump, to force ambient air into the bottle, and in turn push the liquid up the longer straw, which slotted through a small emergency port in the side of most helmets.

Shepard watched the quarians work and the crowd steadily grow. As the minutes ticked she began to feel increasingly like an intruder. What if Tali really decided to return to her people? Shepard had too many questions, too few answers, and that was not the position she liked to be in. As she pulled up another drought of whatever fruity concoction she had been nursing, she became aware of an approaching quarian dressed in a flaxen yellow suit accented with sand-brown textiles and face shield.
He carried himself with the sort of straight-backed rigidity that spoke of rank and position over long years in the military, the sort of gait that spoke of someone who had once shouldered the weight of weapons and it shaped the way he moved. He was talking to a female quarian in a white, lilac-accented suit that walked next to him, carrying a datapad she was tapping at, as if taking dictation. However he waved the woman away, and tapped at the side of his helmet to switch to an open line when they drew to a distance conductive for conversation. “Captain Shepard vas Normandy, correct?”

“Yes,” Shepard replied.

“Admiral Han’Gerrel vas Neema. I would like to ask a few questions.”

“You are welcome to, though there are some topics which I am not at liberty to discuss.” Shepard replied. She thought those topics would be patently obvious as well.

“Tali’Zorah wrote back to Shala’Raan about her time aboard the Normandy, including her involvement in conflicts with the Geth. I was wondering how much of what she said was true.”

Shepard hummed, Tali never mentioned writing back to her family, but it made sense she would, the Quarians placed great emphasis on friends and relatives. The fact that Tali talked about her time aboard the Normandy did not bother her. What bothered her was that the contents of those letters seemed to pass around. How much information had Tali put in them? Well, not that it mattered now. She had to trust Tali, there was praising the girl’s intelligence and then thinking she would not know what would breach the confidentiality agreement she signed. “Tali has been a tremendous amount of help. She’s brilliant for being so young.”

“On that we’ll agree. She has her father’s intellect,” Han’Gerrel said. “Rael’Zorah is a long-time friend, and I expect his daughter to request to join my crew, but Tali’s abilities are not the reason I am here. I am interested in the data you must have collected.”

“Ah,” Shepard replied. “Then I cannot tell you anything. I would not want to devalue Tali’s offering.”

“I see,” Han’Gerrel replied. “Then, we will turn away from that topic. I have other questions.”

Shepard leaned back in her seat, locking eyes with the admiral. Just what was this man’s game? She could understand why he would ask about Tali, or why he would want data on the Geth, but those topics had been covered. What else would he want to know?

“Under what terms did you employ Tali’Zorah?” the admiral asked.

Shepard raised an eyebrow, something he would not see. Well this was some turn of topic, no? Then again, maybe it made some sense as well. “Officially Tali was hired as a consultant to the Alliance. She was paid fairly for her work.” Shepard would not let anyone walk away with the idea that she used unpaid labor, whether it was volunteer, intern, or the contract work the Asari on Ilium called “indentured service”, which Shepard called slavery under a rosier term. “The Alliance routinely hires civilian specialists. Typically these are scientists or medical personnel, but there is nothing to say it can’t be others.”

“Including Spectres?” the admiral wondered.

“Commander Shepard is a Council Spectre in training. I am her training agent.” Nihlus said blandly, before Shepard could even open her mouth.

If Nihlus had been going for the blunt-force surprise impact, he got it. Shepard noted that the admiral
actually paused, looking at her as if measuring. Was he re-assessing his approach? Nihlus clearly wanted the admiral to know exactly whom he was dealing with. That just made her curious, just what did Nihlus think the admiral was going for?

“Would you wish to continue employing Tali?” the admiral went on.

“If that’s Tali’s choice. I will not turn away her invaluable aid. However, her contract stipulated that she could terminate her employment whenever she wished, with sufficient notice.” Maybe he wanted nothing more than to grill her on he conditions of Tali’s employment. Shepard could understand why the admiral would do that. The oddity was that it should have been Rael’Zorah grilling her instead. “Truly admiral, I consider Tali a friend. If you think I mistreated her in any capacity… Ask Tali, if there is one thing I am guilty of, it is being over-protective of her.”

“That is putting it mildly,” Nihlus rumbled on a private comm line.

Shepard resisted the urge to glare. At least he had the decency to use their comm.

“I see. I hope you understand I meant no disrespect Captain.”

“No disrespect was seen, admiral. I understand that this is a personal matter for you. Being a long-time friend of the family, you care for Tali’s well-being.”

“Yes…” The admiral’s omni-tool lit up and the man glanced down at it. “Ah, you will have to excuse me, Captain, I am needed elsewhere.”

“Of course.” Shepard replied.

The admiral turned and walked away. With one gesture of the hand his aide was at his side again.

“Remind you of anyone you know?” Nihlus asked, amusement dripping from his tone.

This time Shepard did turn and glare.

The crowd grew steadily over the next half an hour. Shepard had set aside the refreshments, turning instead to watch the crowd. Tali was yet to re-appear, and with the delay mounting, Shepard’s paranoid side was beginning to stir. The Rayya’s captain was milling about with his people, calm as can be, but Han’Gerrel had vanished somewhere.

“You are scoping,” Nihlus said.

Shepard turned her head to face the Spectre, “Scoping?”

“Yes. It is this thing you do. You watch the people like a panning security camera. You do it when you are beginning to feel uneasy.”

Shepard blinked. Well that was the first time someone outright drew attention to the fact that she was a compulsive crowd watcher, a habit that came with the territory in her line of work. Still, Nihlus was observant enough to notice the turn of her mood, evidence that she had spent too much time in his company.

“I say that, and yet that danger sense of yours proves as acute as ever. That does not look good.” Nihlus suddenly said as he set the drink bottle he had been nursing on the table.

Shepard followed the direction of his gaze and noticed that Han’Gerrel had re-appeared, followed by
three armed men, and a woman in a stone-grey, black-clothed suit. There was obvious tension in both their postures, something that Nihlus must have picked up on. The group made a beeline toward them and with every step Shepard could see the clouds gathering.

“Captain Shepard,” Han’Gerrel said his tone no longer casual. “I was notified not five minutes ago of some rather disturbing readings originating from your ship.”

And just like that the storm made landfall. Shepard stared up at the admiral, without blinking. She would not show the outrage she felt. This man had just brazenly admitted that they were watching the Normandy, and the only way they could have picked up any sort of readings was if their monitoring was not merely passive. The Quarians were either very paranoid, prone to opportunistic espionage, or a combination of the two. This also amounted to an admission that they did not care for diplomatic tact. They merely suffered her being there. “And what would those curious readings be?” she asked, keeping her voice entirely neutral.

“You have active geth aboard your ship. Why was their presence not mentioned when the Normandy was coming in to dock?” Han’Gerrel demanded.

Shepard had to admit, those sorts of readings gave them a leg to stand on; after all, Tali had warned her that the Migrant Fleet took security seriously when it came to the geth. Still, what had Legion done to reveal their presence? She strongly doubted it was anything serious. Yes, Legion had access to the extranet, barring times when they went into deep stealth, same as every other member of her crew, and like them Legion only had access through EDI’s protocols. EDI would be aware of every proverbial key stroke, and she must have let it through. That meant whatever it was, was not malicious or seditious. Was this reaction more about Legion’s very existence than to something it had done?

“The geth pose a serious risk to the safety of the Migrant Fleet, Captain. A risk that you seem to think nothing of,” the woman in the black-clothed suit said.

Shepard thought the woman’s tone was of someone who considered Legion’s very presence within a parsec of the Migrant Fleet to be dangerous, and verging on an affront. Shepard knew better than to try and prove her otherwise. She leaned back into her seat and crossed her legs, putting on her best arrogant airs. “First, I do not believe we’ve been introduced.”

“Admiral Daro’Xen vas Moreh.” The woman replied coldly, as if deigning to utter her full name and title.

“Thank you, Admiral. Now let me set some things straight. The Alliance deems its warships as privileged with the same diplomatic considerations as our embassy on the Citadel. We do not report the internal movement of Alliance personnel or our allies to representatives of another sovereign state.” This was a rather pedantic defense to fall back on, but it was also the one to use if she wanted to shut this farce down.

The Quarians were very much overreaching. The Chandrasekhar system was not Quarian sovereign territory, which meant it was ‘international waters’. With neither party able to plant flags, a whole bunch of rules simply did not apply. To be super blunt, it was none of their business whom and what she kept on her ship, as long as it stayed on her ship. She did not have to answer to them either. If anything, the Quarians were in the wrong here, as they had done what could be taken as an act of espionage when they scanned her ship.

Shepard would wait to draw that ace out of her sleeve, but if they pressed her, she would do it. For once she was on the winning end of a potential incident. The Alliance brass would be less than amused if they caught wind that the Quarians had engaged in espionage against the Alliance. The
brass had no love to lose when it came to the Quarians; no one would be upset about the soured relations. Personally though, she would love to get out of this with relations intact, no need to burn bridges unnecessarily, but she was also not about to martyr herself just to preserve a rickety one. If the Quarians insisted on forcing her hand, she would happily pour on the accelerant and strike a match. Would they force her hand? “I did not notify you of geth aboard my ship because the geth in question is my employee.” She finished.

“A geth… employee?” Daro’Xen repeated slowly.

Shepard put on her best airs of utter nonchalance, as if she was as unbothered as could be. There was no mistaking the incredulity in Daro’Xen’s tone. The thought that someone would hire a geth seemed as ludicrous to her as the idea of someone leaving millions of credits to their pet dog.

“Indeed. I met Legion on Horizon, one of our colonies, and they provided me with invaluable aid during recent Alliance operations on Solcrum,” Shepard continued. “While I am not at liberty to discuss Solcrum, I will say I trust Legion. So shall we come to the heart of the matter? I am sure there was an honest misunderstanding here…” she would give them a hint of a way out, a hint that she was willing to let them walk away, right then and there, before this situation got ugly.

“No misunderstanding. It is you who refuse to acknowledge the potential hazard to the Migrant Fleet.” Han’Gerrel stepped in. Suddenly he was as tense as a bow string, and talking as if he barely kept the anger in check.

Shepard turned her gaze right to the admiral, right to the faint hint of silver visible past his face-shield. If they did not want to take the easy, diplomatic way out, she will play hardball.

“Shepard, go easy on him,” Nihlus rumbled into her ear over their private link, despite the fact that outwardly he appeared to be merely watching the proceedings with cool detachment.

“I deny nothing. Yes there is an active geth aboard the Normandy. I understand how the presence of active geth could be dangerous to the Migrant Fleet. However understand that there is a difference. Bluntly, Legion is different. They work for me, and as such obey my orders.”

“Captain-”

“No. I am done with baseless accusations.” Shepard cut in as she uncrossed her legs and sat up straight. “The way I see it, the only way you know about Legion, is if you scanned my ship. On the scale of issues at hand, that’s something a little more concrete than the maybe that is Legion being a threat to anyone.” Shepard said as she passed her coldest gaze from one admiral to the other. “My people believe in the concept of someone being innocent until proven guilty. I also do not judge individuals on the acts of the majority, nor the majority on the acts of the individual.”

“We would not be here were it not for Tali. It is Tali who wished Shepard to be here. If the rest of you wish otherwise, we will gladly take our leave,” Nihlus added coolly.

Shepard let Nihlus have what she deemed a good last word, before she got going for real, and she was tempted, oh so tempted. It bothered her that they thought she would just turn on Legion just because they said so, or they thought she should. She understood their reasoning, she knew where the hostility came from, she could even sympathize, but she would never let that alter her personal perception. Even though the Geth had committed atrocities in the past, and even if they did not think much of their creators, she would not blindly hate on them just because that was the galactic zeitgeist, just because it would endear her to the Quarians.

Gestalt or not, the fact that Legion functioned by consensus showed there was some sort of debate
going on in their processors. That meant each of those 1183 runtimes might have a slightly different
take on things. Shepard had observational data to see something, some little glimmer of individuality
right there. The spark made judging Legion by the standards of the whole collective unpalatable. The
Geth may have started as a gestalt, but that was three hundred years before. How much have they
advanced since? Three hundred years was a very long time for a race that thought many times faster
than any organic.

“As you wish, Captain. But when that geth turns on you, you will remember our warning,”
Daro’Xen said, her voice chilled and full of absolute certainty.

“If they turn on me.” Shepard replied in a matching tone.

That seemed to end the discussion, the two admirals drifted away, taking their armed guard with
them. Shepard knew they were upset with her, which meant she effectively doused that bridge with
accelerant and lit it, but at least she came out without compromising her personal ethics in the
process. Appeasing the Quarians would have required her to turn on Legion, and that was not
something she was willing to do. Legion had done plenty for her, and far more than the Migrant
Fleet’s admiralty.

“I do not think we will be invited again,” Nihlus murmured quietly.

“That’s fine. I will not let people’s prejudices dictate how I do things.”

“Good. Shepard even I know Legion is…” Nihlus broke off there, as if searching for the right term.

“Different?” Shepard supplied.

Nihlus hummed a quiet assent. “They see the geth as unchanging, but you rarely look at any group
of beings like that. There was going to be friction there.”

Shepard leaned back in her seat as she pondered. Nihlus was not arguing against her, despite the fact
that his employers would have loved to eradicate the geth, if they had the means and opportunity.
The only reason the Council did not declare war on the Geth then, or now, was because there were
an awful lot of them. No one wanted to foot the proverbial bill in resources and manpower to fight
that war. Not when it could clearly be kicked down the line as long as the Geth remained in their
corner of the galaxy and did not cause enough of a ruckus.

“I knew you would side with the Geth.” Nihlus continued. “First the Rachni, now the Geth, you
have a pattern.”

“I did not side with the Rachni, or the Geth.” Shepard argued. “I am only willing to give them a
second chance.”

“There’s a difference?” Nihlus asked, bemused.

Shepard turned her head to glare at him, even though he would not see the expression. She could just
picture the sort of grin he must have now. Still, he did not argue, and the fact that he was amused by
the notion said that once again she had this Spectre in her corner.

~          *          ~          ~          *          ~          ~          *          ~

Half an hour later the crowd had swelled in size to make the large space begin to feel claustrophobic,
and it seemed to include the proverbial who’s who of the Quarian higher ups. Tali appeared from
one of the side passages. Shepard would not have recognized the girl were it not for Shala’Raan at
her side. Gone was the stone gray, green-accented suit, replaced with a black one, accented with
looser purple cloth woven with a beautiful swirling pattern. The hood was a bit wider, and the cloth wrapped around the hips flattered the girl inside.

Captain Kar’Danna stepped up to the podium at the center of the stage area and it was like a signal for people to gather in and around the amphitheater area. Shepard decided to linger in the back, keenly aware that she was the stranger in the room. After what had happened, she also suspected that she was the barely-wanted stranger in the room. Daro’Xen stood on the opposite side of the center aisle, and Shepard could not miss the woman’s side looks. She would bet one thousand credits on those glances being glares, the face-shield in the way was a small mercy.

Tali’s gaze swept the room with a sort of urgency that was easier to place. Han’Gerrel stood on one side of the stage platform, and Shala’Raan on the other. Admiral Rael’Zorah was a no-show.

“Everyone,” Captain Kar’Danna addressed the crowd gathered around him. “We have gathered here today, surrounded by family and friends, to welcome back one of our own.” He paused to glance at Tali. The girl had moved up toward the stage, but her hands were clasped in front of her. Shepard could see the nervousness from across the room.

“Eight months ago Tali’Zorah nar Rayya left us to do her rite, with nothing more than our well-wishes and credits to her name. Today she returns to us with the friendship of an Alliance captain. Though short in duration, her journey gifted her with great experience.”

Shepard scanned the masked faces even as she listened. The crowd listened to the speech with rapt attention, but at the mention of her a few turned to look her way, though they turned away as quickly when she looked back. Shepard hummed, so much for being the stranger, Tali must have sung some praises for her birth-ship’s captain to mention her in this sort of speech.

“Her story is our own. Nearly three hundred years ago we were cast adrift, unable to return home. As each of our children return from their pilgrimage, we renew hope that our own journey will come to an end.”

A murmur of approval ran through the crowd. Shepard shifted her weight from foot to foot. The ceremony seemed to veer toward being about more than just Tali’s journey and her homecoming.

“We welcome you back into our fold, Tali’Zorah nar Rayya. Keelah selai.”

“Keelah selai,” the crowd echoed in a single united tone.

Shepard raised an eyebrow as she watched Tali ascend the stage. Han’Gerrel likewise rose up onto the stage from the other side. Shepard glanced at Nihlus, and noted that he watched the ceremony keenly, though his arms were folded over his chest. She idly wondered just how often outsiders got to see this ritual.

Then there was the speech, it was rather flowery, and she could tell the whole pilgrimage had meaning to both those who left on it, and Migrant Fleet as a whole. With that much ritual, she could not help but think that this was probably going to be the last time any of them saw Tali. There was no way she would want to return to the Normandy, not when she had a place among their people, and not with Legion being the elephant in the room.

“Thank you for your kind words, Captain Kar’Danna,” Tali began as she stopped in front of the Rayya’s commanding officer and bowed her head. “I am proud to have been born aboard the Rayya.”

The man nodded in acknowledgement, the only outward expression that could be visible due to the
suit.

Straightening, Tali turned to Han’Gerrel and approached him. “Admiral Han’Gerrel vas Neema, I, Tali’Zorah nar Rayya request the privilege of joining the crew of the Neema.” Tali reached into a pouch attached to her belt behind her back and withdrew an OSD jewel case, which she proffered to Han’Gerrel. “During my service to Captain Shepard vas Normandy, I collected data on our greatest foes, the geth. This data proves our enemies are not the same they had been three centuries ago. I offer this knowledge as my gift to you, as the captain of the Neema, to the crew of the Neema, and our people as a whole.”

“Not the same… that is putting it mildly.” Nihlus mused.

Shepard hummed her assent as she watched Han’Gerrel take the case from Tali. The girl bowed her head.

A pregnant pause settled over the amphitheater. No one in the crowd dared to move or make a sound as they waited, possibly with bated breath. Shepard realized that everything hung in the balance. It would make sense that the captain of the ship had right to reject the gift as inadequate. It would be unbelievably embarrassing for one’s offering to be found wanting, in the presence of friends and family. Tali’s pilgrimage had been relatively short; Shepard knew that some quarian youths were away for years at a time, seeking something of value.

Han’Gerrel bowed his head, and it was like the tension in the room broke. “I, Admiral Han’Gerrel vas Neema, accept this gift.”

Tali raised her head immediately.

“Henceforth you will be counted among my crew, Tali’Zorah vas Neema.” The admiral continued.

A wave of polite clapping went around the amphitheater. Tali looked around the room, and their eyes met. Shepard wished she did not have her helmet on, that way Tali could actually see the smile she had at this moment.

“This is it then,” Nihlus said.

“Yea, looks like it.” Shepard murmured. The ceremony seemed to be over as well-wishers advanced toward the stage to give Tali their congratulations along with token gifts. Quite a few people gave her a credit chit.

Han’Gerrel turned the jewel case over his hands before he tucked it away into a compartment on his armor. Then their eyes met, and Shepard could not help but wonder what the information would be used for. Had she been complicit in handing over weapons of mass destruction to be used against the geth?

“You should talk to Tali while you have the chance,” Nihlus said.

“Probably,” she affirmed as she broke eye contact with the admiral. She knew that at the very least she should thank Tali for everything the girl had done, and definitely say good-bye. Still, she dithered. Saying good-byes meant making it final. Shepard had to tamp down her selfish side that did not want to accept the idea that this was where Tali closed the book on her time on the Normandy.

It was not hard to see that Tali’s whole posture and mannerism changed now that she was among her people. She seemed right at home, greeting people, hugging, and tucking away credit chits. Watching Tali from the sidelines, Shepard knew that she really ought not to remove the girl from where she would be happiest. After all, the Normandy was a mess of a command structure, doing
dirty, dangerous, thankless tasks. It was no place for a very young civilian whose only experience of
the outside world was a total of eight months. She would say her goodbyes.

Shepard did not need to approach Tali, as within ten minutes the quarian girl broke away from the
crowd on her own and made her way toward them, playing with one of the credit chits as a way to
keep her hands busy.

“Commander, are you leaving already?” Tali asked as soon as she was in ear-shot.

“Maybe,” Shepard replied, she honestly could not say yes, and she definitely could not say no, not
with being caught staying well out of the celebration, waiting for a moment to approach Tali. “I’m
glad things worked out for you, Tali.” This was one of those times where she turned to the obvious
when she had nothing else workable to say.

“Me too, Commander. I… was afraid that the data alone would not be enough, even if Admiral
Han’Gerrel is a family friend. Well… some will say it is not enough and he only accepted me because
he is a family friend but…”

Shepard smiled, though Tali would not see it. The girl’s worries hit a little close to home. After all,
plenty of people accused her of getting ahead because of family friends as well. “There will always
be those people who say such things, whether they’re right, and especially if they’re wrong,”
Shepard said calmly. “Do no entertain them with your anger; prove them wrong with your actions.”
And make them look foolish in the process, though Shepard did not add that last part. It was a piece
of advice she got from her mother.

“Thank you, but… I don’t know if I’ll be able to do it. I mean… actions don’t come easy to me,”
Tali murmured.

“Nothing worth doing ever comes easy,” Shepard added. That was straight out of a fortune cookie,
but she meant it. Tali nodded, but it was clear as day that she was hesitating, proverbially beating
around some bush. Shepard had a good feeling she knew what that bush was. “Tali, it’s alright. I
understand. These are your people. You want to say your farewells. Don’t worry, the contract is
open, and I’ll consider it fulfilled.”

Tali’s looked up sharply, their eyes meeting past the shielding plates in the way.

“The only thing I want from you is that you promise me not to talk about the Normandy with
anyone.” Shepard added softly.

“Commander… I am not going anywhere!” Tali interjected. “That’s the thing, I told Admiral
Han’Gerrel that… I want to stay on the Normandy. I mean, you will continue to pursue the geth,
so… there is more data to gather!”

Nihlus hummed, in a tone that Shepard knew all too well.

“And the Admiral is alright with that?” Shepard asked.

“Yes!” Tali replied quickly.

Shepard glanced toward where Admiral Han’Gerrel was standing on the other side of the room. He
still had his armed retinue. The hair on the back of her neck rose as Shepard noticed that he was
watching them. Suddenly she knew why the admiral was fine with Tali remaining on the Normandy.
He would definitely want more data on the geth, but there was another, vague possibility that her
paranoid part could foresee.

The Quarians were exiles with no friends. Now she established what essentially amounted to
diplomatic contact with the Geth. From a balance of power standpoint, it would be bad news for the
Quarians if anyone made an alliance with the Geth. It would be an absolute nightmare if said alliance
involved the Alliance; after all, the Alliance could give even the Turians a pause. Did Admiral
Han’Gerrel wish to have a pair of eyes on watch for that?

“Well if that is what you want,” Shepard said as she turned back to Tali, “I’ll be happy to have you
on the Normandy.” What more could she say? She would not refuse the girl, even if she had openly
admitted to being the eyes and ears for Han’Gerrel. If the admiral wanted a spy on the Normandy,
Shepard doubted he openly ordered Tali to be that spy. He probably counted on her regular letters to
report things indirectly, which Tali would. The girl would not know she had been made a spy, even
as she did the spying.

“Thank you, Commander!” Tali brightened instantly.

Shepard nodded and smiled, all’s well that ends well. She would be lying if she said she was not
happy right then. The details really did not matter. The situation with the quarian admiralty was just
one more acre of minefield to navigate, what else was new? “Well, enjoy what’s left of your party,
Tali. We will ship out as soon as we’re able.”

“Yes, Commander!” Tali replied, snapping to attention almost like a true Alliance marine, even if her
voice carried too much happiness and laughter to pass muster. Then she wheeled on her heels and
marched off to rejoin Shala’Raan on the other side of the room. There was a spring in her step, and
that made Shepard think that maybe –just maybe– staying on the Normandy was exactly what Tali
wanted too.

Chapter End Notes

Author Notes: There you have it. I had to fudge the ceremony, as we never get to see
something like it. I tried to keep it simple, in keeping with the different, less formal ways
the Quarians do things. I have an arc in mind of where this whole thing is going.

General Notes:
None this time…

Chapter Notes:
Normandy, Midway, and Stalingrad – Normandy, Midway, and Stalingrad were the
three turning points of WWII. Normandy was of course the D-day landings, which
turned things around on the Western European front. Midway was an important victory
for the USN against the IJN in the Pacific. Stalingrad was where the Nazi advance into
Russia effectively stopped, and was turned around. I do love my naming schemes.

Parsec – This is a measurement of length used for distances between astronomical
objects. Basically [1 pc = 3.26 light years] or in number terms [1 pc = 9.461 x 10^12 km],
or with the scientific notation stripped, and with some rounding, it will be a staggering
9,461,000,000,000 km! For our topic of the Five Kiloparsec Ring [1 kpc = 1,000 pc]
and we’re dealing with five of those. Keep in mind that ships in the ME-verse do 15
ly/day (4.6 pc/day) at the fastest, without using a relay. Thus the scale of this region is
indeed something.

Spacial Density – For comparison, Sol’s closest neighbor, Alpha Centauri is 4.3 ly away. With many stars, including a high number of super-massives, their gravity, temperatures, and radiation output, pack them together even 1 ly apart, and you end up with a region of space that can safely be called hell. That said, I am not certain how dense the FKR gets. I’ve read that the deepest region might pack as many as 1 million stars per cubic parsec! Suffice to say we can safely assume that it is likely impossible for a planet in that region to sustain life of any kind, likely not even extremophile bacteria.
The Silencer

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I do no own Mass Effect, I do not claim to own Mass Effect, I am only doing this for fun.

Author Notes: These would be the proverbial storm clouds gathering at the horizon. Enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Episode 29: The Silencer

The Normandy departed the Raheel-Leyya system shortly after Tali’s homecoming party ended. Shepard had to make a brief call to Admiral Hackett to explain why the Normandy left the Citadel without orders, but it was not difficult to explain the importance of the little detour. Ultimately Hackett had nothing for them to do, so they were not interrupting anything, and so the admiral could not do much except agree. The very fact that they had nothing to do was beginning to worry Shepard big time. There should have been something for them to do by now, right?

It was hard to miss that even Nihlus’ tasks seemed to have dried up. Either the Council was keen on carefully choosing where to involve him, because it would also involve her, or he keeping his schedule clear on purpose, possibly because he was expecting Saren to get back to him about the Impera.

Whichever it was, she would not beg for something to do, so she had to get used to the lull. Not that the crew minded. A good number of them figured out that their trip to meet with the Migrant Fleet meant something for Tali. Matthews had been the one to ask whether something had happened, by which he meant if there was bad news. Thus Tali found herself a proverbial center of attention at dinner, and ended up having to explain the end of pilgrimage ceremony to those who had not been present.

Halfway through the explanation she apologized for not inviting more people, saying she ought to have considered the “Normandy’s family” more, a term that earned her a number of smiles from everyone present, even the servicemen and women of security. The rest of her explanation was given with a newfound gusto and in full detail. After Rael’Zorah failed to show, the warmth Tali got from the crew seemed to have a good effect on her.

Shepard could not have been happier. She wanted Tali to know that the Normandy was home to more than just an Alliance crew. The presence of so many non-Alliance members had by necessity broken down some boundaries. There were some rules Shepard could not enforce with the human part, and let the non-humans get away with. So the only viable option was to relax them for all. Then she was never a stickler for the tedium of every iota in the first place. That sort of comfort tended to lead to people becoming familiar, and even more loyal to each-other for it. The Normandy became a comfortable posting, even if it was hardly a luxury ship like the bigger vessels could be.

Their arrival on the Citadel coincided with a confluence of night on the ship, night on the Citadel. Shepard only had to update the shift rosters before she could get her eight hours in the rack. Come morning those with the early personal time had the option to leave the ship or stay on board. Shepard
was not surprised that a couple of the servicemen hastily departed to hit the breakfast menu of Zakera Ward’s many eateries. Shepard was not in the mood to pay the cab fare, let alone the food prices, so she made do with ship fare. Matthews made heaping helpings of pancakes for everyone along with those bite-sized meat taters for the dextro members of the crew.

The only aberration was that Nihlus was nowhere to be seen. Still aberrations were not unusual in life, so Shepard did not think much of it, until Nihlus breezed out of his quarters halfway through breakfast and his gaze locked on her across the room. His posture was positively stiff, and his mandibles were drawn up against his jaw. “Shepard, Vakarian, we need to talk,” he announced.

Shepard glanced at Garrus, only to find that Garrus had tensed up like a string as well, seemingly in echo of Nihlus’ posture. A silence settled on the mess as the crowd watched. Shepard could guess what they must think right then; this was a rather unusual event. Normally Nihlus would find her in the OD, the crew never got to see his work face quite like this. The servicemen seated at the back table next to the wall that separated the mess from the elevator shaft were outright gawping. If Shepard was honest, even she rarely got to see Nihlus’ work face like this, and that told her that something was seriously up. She got to her feet; the last pancake would have to wait. Garrus followed mutely. Nihlus motioned toward his quarters and they followed him inside.

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This was the first time Shepard entered the XO’s cabin since the Spectre had taken up residence. She would have expected some additional tech of some kind, maybe even weapon racks, but Nihlus changed very little about the room, he just made it feel lived-in. The office area desk was vaguely L-shaped, the half facing the door was strewn with almost too many data pads to count, and there was a long-forgotten cup on a coaster next to the terminal. The other half was spread with a weapon cleaning kit and various other tools. Nihlus had only added a small vid screen to the wall over his weapon maintenance area. Shepard could not help but find the sight amusing. There was a definite contrast between this space and the orderliness Garrus kept in Life Support.

“Shepard, what’s going on? Is something wrong?” Shepard wondered as she watched him circle the desk and move toward the vid screen.

“In a manner of speaking,” Nihlus replied as he tapped at the screen’s console and brought up a video.

Shepard instantly recognized the Citadel News Network studio and the sapphire blue asari with violet-tinged eyes and facial markings that hosted the morning show. Most news outlets on the extranet were a hybrid of television and newspaper all in one. Unlike television, they did not do live broadcasts. Video content was essentially something one subscribed to. Once one paid a news outlet a humble fee, one could download programs as data packages from the channel’s site. The channels knew exactly how much comm buoy bandwidth to buy given the number of paying subscribers they had. For free users they provided the same content in newspaper form, text-only, with a few still pictures.

“See for yourselves,” Nihlus said as he accessed this particular programs time stamp options, tapped one about five galactic standard minutes in, and hit play.

“… local news,” as the anchor spoke into the camera, the time stamp cutting more than half of her segue sentence off. “Presidium Botanical Gardens groundskeepers were in for a grizzly discovery when they arrived at work this morning. Ternus Erasion is the latest victim of homicide, the twentieth on the Presidium this year. Our official sources at Citadel Security confirm that Homicide Division is investigating. The detectives in charge have identified a person of interest in connection with the murder, but the suspect’s details have not been released to the public at this time. We will-”

Nihlus tapped the console to pause the video. Garrus hummed low.
Shepard looked to one, and then other, but neither offered an explanation. Still, it did not take much to figure out that the victim was important, but they were out of luck if they expected her to figure it out on her own. She could only, at best, guess that at gender and species. “Alright for the oblivious one in the room, who is the victim?”

“Oh… right. I do not think I ever mentioned his name,” Garrus said, suddenly sheepish.

“You did not.” Nihlus replied. “Shepard, Ternus Erasion was the former secretary to Councilor Sparatus.”

“Former-” Shepard did not finish that thought. Unless Sparatus changed secretaries every other month, this former secretary would have to be the one who unknowingly opened the Citadel’s back door to the Heretic Geth.

“You do not think this is a random murder, do you?” Garrus said, looking toward Nihlus.

“I do not,” Nihlus replied. “I want to look into the matter while we are on the Citadel.”

“And interfering with C-sec is just an added bonus?” Garrus asked.

Nihlus said nothing, but he grinned, which was almost as good. Garrus sighed and turned to Shepard. “I may be able to pull some favors with some of my former colleagues at Homicide Division. This happened on the Presidium, so I know which detectives are likely to be in charge.”

“That means we know what we’ll be doing,” Shepard said, an understatement on her part, but she had nothing else to say at the moment. This opened a new chapter on what Shepard previously thought to be a closed book. The paranoid part of her mind was already cooking up amorphous possibilities, but she would not entertain any of them right now. The last thing she needed was to develop a case of confirmation bias even before she got a good look at the evidence C-sec had.

They only waited for breakfast to end before leaving on their dubiously-legal investigation. Shepard was happy that for once a jaunt across the Presidium would not involve getting into her officer’s uniform. Her fatigues would not endear her to any of the C-sec detectives, but it was the least of their problems with her now. She was now a Spectre-in-Mentorship, coming with her mentor, and a detective who quit C-sec to run with them. She was convinced that with a father like Castis Vakarian, Garrus quitting would be big news in the bullpen. She would not be surprised if some of Garrus’ favors and acquaintances failed to get them anywhere.

They took a Skycab onto the Presidium, though after some discussion they agreed on starting at the crime scene. Shepard wanted to start at the beginning and develop her own theory, one free of the ideas of someone else. The case was still in its first forty hours, the crucial period when the evidence was freshest and the chances of finding the criminal highest. That also meant the detectives would be busiest too, so getting one to go over the whole thing, down to the last iota, would be all the harder.

During their ride, Shepard looked up information on the location in question. The Presidium Botanical Gardens housed flora from all corners of the galaxy, and acted as one part conservatory and one part living museum. Being on the Presidium, it showed all due ostentatious wealth and extravagance, including the fact that it had no greenhouse walls or roofs. After all, what was metal and glass when one had power generation to spare? The same environmental barriers that retained atmosphere on otherwise open docking bays here contained the diverse biomes the plants required. Freedom from physical restrictions allowed the gardens to straddle the lake, with sections on both sides, islands in the center, all connected with quaint arched foot-bridges. The highly-ornate
decorative wrought metal fences, archways, and gates were a gift from Earth, installed as one of the
garden’s works of art. They were a replica of something straight out of the nineteenth century, added
for that romantic touch since the island dedicated to Earth was the latest addition and had not had the
time to grow in fully.

Their Skycab landed on a kiosk pad right in front of one of the two lake-side entrances. This
particular entrance faced the section dedicated to the flora of Sur’Kesh. When they stepped past the
ornate gates and through the atmosphere retaining mass effect field, the air turned warm, humid, and
cloying with the mixed scents of flowers. Sur’Kesh was a tropical planet, covered with lush jungles,
and their surroundings reflected it. Gorgeous flowering plants in every color imaginable were
everywhere, along with non-flowering ferns, and all of them dwarfed by trees that grew over twenty
meters tall. These were draped with vines, mushrooms, and moss. Most of the moss was plain,
clinging to the bark, but some species were faintly bio-luminescent, glowing in blues, greens, and
purples. The walkways were flagstone-laid, meandering toward the lake in imitation of natural paths,
shadowed by the dense canopy of arboreal green. It all created an image of tamed, controlled
wilderness.

The place was beautiful; Shepard would have had to have no aesthetic sense what-so-ever to not see
beauty in this garden. Still, she had to limit her admiration as she followed Nihlus along the central
flagstone pathway. Once she could rein in her inner tourist, she turned back to the matter at hand.
Despite gradual winding turns, there was really only one linear way toward the lake. So in her mind
Shepard expected a crime scene to be impossible to miss, especially a recent one like this.

As the path turned one last time, it opened onto a section that was a clear line toward the bridge that
led to the first island. A small holographic sign proclaimed the island to be a mirror of Kahje. The
planet was ninety-percent ocean, but the other ten percent were endless archipelagos of dense
rainforest. Nearly right at the foot of the bridge connecting the two biomes Shepard spotted the
pylons and holographic tape that cordoned off a crime scene.

“I see why this location was chosen. This section of the Presidium is an upscale commercial zone.
We have a mall and offices on one side, a hotel on the other. The mall closes for the night and the
hotel bar lounge gets noisy… no one would hear or see anything that happens in the gardens
themselves in the middle of the night cycle.” Garrus said.

Shepard hummed; she would have waited for her target here too.

“Come to think of it, the moss would glow brighter once ambient light levels were lowered. Even if
someone outside saw muzzle flashes, they would sooner think it was the moss.” Garrus added.

Nihlus hummed in assent.

“If the killer worked on those assumptions, it would make this a premeditated murder, not a passion
crime.” Shepard said. “And it wouldn’t be a civilian job either.” If the killer chose the location like
that, it said something about their intelligence, professionalism, and fore-thought. That level of
planning was uncommon in civilians. Even the most careful civilian murderer would not pay
attention to the benefits of glowing moss in their planning. That level of detail-orientation was more
the methodology of professional killers. The best assassins had to master situational control, evasion,
and escape. They had to utilize whatever advantage they could.

“Astute observations, though I should not be surprised,” a flanging voice announced.

Shepard whirled to face the source of the voice only to see a familiar turian materialize from behind
the trunk of one of the enormous trees.
“Chellik,” Garrus said, mildly surprised.

The detective folded his arms over his chest, and his expression remained positively stony. “Commander Shepard, Spectre Kryik, Vakarian,” he replied.

“Well this is a surprise,” Nihlus mused.

“If only it was.” Chellik replied blandly. “I knew this case would interest you. I checked the customs docking lists and saw that the Normandy just so happened to come in last night. Plus, Spectres are not known for patience, so I knew you would be here sooner rather than later. And here you are.”

“You seem to have us figured out, detective.” Shepard mused.

“Indeed. And before you ask, I am not in charge of this case, but I know who is.” He looked toward Garrus with a sort of blank stare, but there was still something in it that would have tipped off even the most obtuse individual.

“My father.” Garrus said.

“Yes.” Chellik replied.

Shepard knew that spelled trouble.

“Consider this friendly advice, stay out of this. Let C-sec handle it.”

“And you expect me to just obey?” Nihlus asked.

“I know you will not.” Chellik replied blandly. “Just know that while you can request Vakarian to share the information, you will not be able to influence his investigation. As for this place… well, you missed the Forensics Unit, they have already collected everything.”

“Why are you warning us, Chellik?” Garrus asked.

The detective spared Garrus a blank stare, “Vakarian, we have worked together for three years. I owe you for helping me on one or two cases. I am doing this for old time’s sake. I am telling you, stay out of it.”

“Thanks, but no thanks.”

“Suit yourselves.” With that said, the detective turned and walked down the path toward the garden’s exit.

Shepard watched him until he vanished from view. The detective’s warning hit her a little harder than he realized. She knew that after what happened with the Impera, Senior Detective Castis Vakarian would know she pulled a fast one over him. He would not buy a play at mere curiosity, or any act of naïveté from her. That bridge had been severely scorched. Factor in that the man did not like Spectres, and her recent promotion to one-in-training and you had a recipe for a complicated situation. Sure, Nihlus could probably pressure the man, but full cooperation and merely complying with regulations were two entirely different things.

Nihlus crossed through the barrier holo-tape without a care for it flashing a warning about unauthorized access. Shepard followed, with Garrus trailing behind her. It was difficult to miss the spot where the body had been. The crime was recent enough that the groundskeepers were not yet cleared to pressure-wash the blood off the flagstones. There was one rather big central stain and two smaller marks about a meter away, spaced about twenty centimeters apart. “This was not a clean
kill,” she said. What sort of assassin shed this much blood? Ideally one removed a target in such a manner that they did not bleed at all. Transferred evidence one could not acquire anywhere else but at the crime scene, like the victim’s blood on clothing, was difficult to explain, and all the more damning for it.

Garrus crouched next to the stains and brought up his omni-tool to cast a faint light on them. “The big one is a pooling mark from where the victim’s body lay, but I see some small spatter marks around it. That tells me the murder weapon was a firearm. The victim was shot standing on his feet. Now these smaller stains have no spatter at all, but the edges on the right are smeared. Something was dragged through them. This one-” he indicated one of the secondary stains. “The stone under it has a groove, and that is inconsistent with surrounding wearing.”

Shepard crouched where she could see the alleged groove, “a bladed weapon?” she asked.

“Seems to be, yes.” Garrus replied.

“Looks like a sawing mark to me. Would explain the smearing.” Nihlus added.

Shepard raised an eyebrow as she looked first to Nihlus and then the Garrus. “There’s only one groove. That says the victim was not struggling when-“ Shepard paused there as the information filtered in her mind, it was like she could see what happened. “Okay… two marks, relatively small smudged blood stains, the groove cuts across one perpendicularly, and look here at the positions relative to what had to be blood pooling from a mortal wound.”

“The killer removed the victim’s hands,” Garrus said, amazement in his voice.

Shepard hummed in assent, “And they did so *perimortem*.”

“Spirits.” Nihlus echoed.

Mutilation was atypical for a professional. Dead was dead, mutilation did not make anyone deader, and there were cleaner ways to prove the deed complete. Usually whoever contracted the killer knew the victim, so taking some personal effects would be enough. Body parts were messy and hard to explain if discovered. Some assassins saw such requests as an affront to their professional pride to begin with. Mutilation was typically used to send a message; even the most deranged individual saw meaning or purpose in the act. Perimortem mutilation sent a whole other message; it spoke of impatience or outright sadism.

Ultimately though, here the numbers did not align. The seeming attention to the benefits of the location conflicted with the execution of the kill. Shepard could not be certain whether they were dealing with a highly functional psychopathic civilian, or the rare professional whose unique calling card happened to be extreme violence.

Garrus rose to his feet and Shepard followed. As he turned to walk the scene with his scanner, Shepard turned to the task in the old fashioned way. Her eyes sought anything out of the ordinary, other marks on the flagstones, disturbed foliage, anything. However aside from the blood stains she could not see any signs that something had happened.

“There does not seem to have been a struggle. The killer was careful to deliver the mortal wound in one strike.” She could not be sure without seeing the body, but it was an educated guess. Turians were all former soldiers; certain things would remain instinctual even decades after active service. If there had been a struggle against an enemy that wielded a bladed weapon, the victim might have suffered defensive wounds. If that was the case then there should have been other drops of blood here and there, but there were none. “Garrus, did you find anything?”
“No, it is as you say. There is nothing else here.”

“I think we got everything we will get from the scene. We need to talk to the senior detective for the rest,” Nihlus said.

“Alright,” Garrus sighed as he turned off his scanner.

Shepard hummed. The resignation in Garrus’ tone made it abundantly clear that he did not want to talk to his father about this. She felt bad for him, because she knew full well how this would go, and she was responsible for it.

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They took another Skycab to the Presidium Central Station. It was a simple, austere three floor building made of the same bland-colored, but ludicrously strong material that most Presidium structures were made of, with all its windows set with blue-tinged panels. The building was roughly rectangular, but the main entrance was set into the center, where the building protruded with a rounded section. Were it not for the Skycab’s navigational system, the building really did not stand out much. There was only a single free-standing sign outside the main doors to announce where they were.

Nihlus led the way through the oversized double-doors and into the station’s atrium. It was a cylinder of open space spanning all three floors, with the elevators in the back. These led to corridors that circled and overlooked the atrium before branching out to the countless offices. True to the fact that C-sec was founded by Turians, the décor of the station was as austere inside as it was outside. If someone had anything to spiff up the place, it would probably be relegated to whatever office or cubicle they inhabited.

The Spectre did not pause to the take sights, as soon as one of the receptionist windows opened, he marched right over, much to the visible annoyance of the asari he cut off and the other five people waiting in line for service.

“Sir, you are cutting in line,” the human woman staffing the reception desk said with a polite smile. Despite being at what amounted to glorified door duty, she still wore a C-sec uniform, and a steely disposition to match.

“I am Council Spectre Nihlus Kryik,” he replied blandly.

The asari’s anger deflated instantly as she realized why she was cut off. The officer behind the desk straightened and reached over to her keyboard, probably to run the name in her system. Shepard drew closer as the woman typed; she would not be surprised if C-sec got a whole bunch of stupid people claiming to be Spectres when they wanted something expedited.

A moment later the screen changed and a profile appeared, complete with picture. “Ah. My apologies ma’am. He does have priority.” The receptionist said to the asari, who nodded and turned back to go back to the front of the line. The receptionist turned back to Nihlus, “What can I do for you, Spectre Kryik?” she asked.

“I need to talk to Senior Detective Castis Vakarian.”

“Ah. Let me see now…” she paused to hit a few keys, to bring up the times log. “You are in luck. Detective Vakarian is in the station right now. His office is attached to Homicide Division, second floor.” The receptionist reached under her desk and withdrew a visitor’s ID card.

“Please issue two more, I’m here with my trainee Spectre, Commander Shepard, and former-
detective Garrus Vakarian,” Nihlus added.

The receptionist pulled out two more cards and handed them over. “Please keep these on you at all times. Have a good day.”

Shepard plucked two of the cards from Nihlus’ hand as soon as he was away from the desk and handed one to Garrus. The cards let them through the security gates at the back of the atrium without setting off the alarms. There were more uniformed C-sec officers acting as security behind the gates, but the IDs were also a flag that they could be left alone.

From there, the three of them took an elevator to the floor above. Immediately in front of the elevator doors was a pillar with metal label plates that indicated destinations. The Homicide Division bullpen was on their right and the station’s administrative offices on their left.

Nihlus wordlessly turned to the right, leaving Shepard and Garrus to follow. They walked along the open corridor that ringed the atrium below. This floor of the right-hand wing was closed off as one large area. There was a long stretch of wall set with frosted-panel windows, and cut in half by a single set of frosted-glass, double-pane, soundproofed doors. Just before the doors, there was a narrow section of plain wall covered with plaques, the large sign over them proclaimed this to be a memorial for the station’s officers who fell in the line of duty. A constant reminder of what the detectives were doing their jobs for.

The door’s sensors registered their arrival and opened up on their own. Beyond was a large, bustling space lined with desks, terminals, and teeming with activity. The human detective seated at the desk closest to the door looked up when he heard the doors open, “What brings you three to our humble abode?” he asked.

“We would like to see Senior Detective Vakarian,” Shepard replied.

“Ah. This is not a good time for cordial visitors. We got a nasty one overnight, and the detective is very busy.” The man said.

“We heard.” Nihlus cut in.

“Yea it was- Oh hey, there he is, coming out of the interview room.”

Shepard looked over the busy space and spotted Vakarian senior coming out of a small room attached to the bullpen. It had a frosted window overlooking the main area, to keep the claustrophobia at bay, and from what she could see inside, it was decorated with plants, and the table was set with a pitcher of water and glasses. Walking by the senior detective’s side was a turian female, evident by her elaborate facial plate edges and lack of fringe. She wore a dark blue tunic outfit with long tails, and her eyes never left the floor.

Shepard watched as the female said something to the detective, to which he nodded somberly, and then the two parted. Vakarian senior waved one of the other detectives over, another turian, to walk with the female on her way out. Shepard automatically stepped aside to let them pass as they drew near. When she turned back toward the rear of the bullpen she saw that Castis had watched the two from a distance, which meant he spotted the three of them. Shepard saw his eyes narrow and his expression harden at record pace.

“Uh oh.” The detective seated on her right said and turned right back to his terminal.

“Spectre Kryik, Commander Shepard, Garrus.” Castis greeted as he approached. His tone was polite, but Shepard would be surprised if it was anything more than professional decorum.
“Detective, we are here about Ternus Erasion.” Nihlus opened, foregoing politeness outright.

“I thought so. We can talk in the interview room.” Castis did not mince words.

They were shown to the same interview that the detective had just used to have his interview with the turian female. Nihlus breezed right in, and Shepard almost followed when she saw Garrus take up position at the frame outside the room, with his back to the wall.

“You’re not going in?”

“No. I think it is best I stay out of that room.”

“You sure?” she asked.

Garrus nodded. “I know you will tell me everything later. If I may be so bold, Commander, I would rather not be in the same room when my father and Kryik start arguing.”

Shepard nodded and followed her mentor into the room.

Once she was inside, the detective shut the door and engaged both lock and soundproofing. “Shall we begin then?” He asked as he rounded the table and sat down in a comfortable-looking chair.

“This will be a quick then. As a Council Spectre, I formally request to see everything you have.” Nihlus replied.

Shepard noted that he had no intention to sit, and decided to follow his example. Castis did not flinch or look away from Nihlus’ ‘I will take no nonsense’ stare either. She did not want to say anything, but she knew that this was a charged situation. A Spectre and a senior C-sec detective in the same room, it was like the setup for a bad joke or a no-holds-barred fight. Neither would help them right now, but go tell Nihlus that. Add the fact that the detective’s prodigal son was outside the door, clearly avoiding his father, and that she was responsible for it, and it turned the interview room into a metaphorical pressure vessel that contained simply too much ego to be wholly safe.

“Everything?” Castis asked, his tone growing chilled by the moment.

“Erasion was a former Council secretary, which is grounds enough for Spectre involvement. Then given what he was involved in…” Nihlus’ voice dipped there, as if it was still a secret what the former secretary had accidentally done.

Castis flipped over one of the datapads on the corner of the table, causing it turn on. “Fine, you have made your point.” He slid the pad toward Nihlus “We do not have much at the moment, other than the medical examiner’s preliminary report. Also, a camera near the Botanical Gardens caught an image of someone we strongly suspect is the killer.”

“You have a picture of the killer?” Nihlus asked, surprised.

“Someone we strongly suspect is the killer,” Castis repeated. He tapped the pad, which brought up an image that even Shepard could see from where she stood. It was a glimpse of a human woman melting into the shadows between two trees near the gates of the botanical garden. While people lurking half-in-shadow was hardly criminal, this woman was definitely not a civilian. She wore matte black light armor; its protective plates almost indistinguishable from the undersuit weave. She was also armed with a black-painted Carnifex, holstered at her right hip, and the sheath of a blade at the small of her back. Her face was completely obscured by a plain black lower-face mask and a pair of opaque goggles. The gear went to lengths to cover up as much skin as possible, thought Shepard could see just a hint of a light-colored ear peeking out from amidst her black chin-length bobbed hair.
Her straight fringe went as far as covering up her forehead.

Nihlus picked up the datapad. “And this was the only camera that caught her?” he asked.

“Yes. Cameras at the scene were looped to conceal the attack. Cyber division is looking into it, but I expect they will find all cameras in her path were looped. She likely carried a device that could detect and tamper with them automatically,” Castis replied.

Shepard hummed; again this hinted that the killer was a professional. Who else would have the knowledge to play with the Citadel’s security systems? Professionals studied their hunting grounds and learned to operate in them without detection. It was part of the job. On the other hand something still did not add up. A sniffer of that type ought to loop all cameras in its range. Why did it miss one?

“You see something, Shepard?” Nihlus asked.

“Just the few little… inconsistencies, we talked about them in the garden. It’s likely nothing Detective Vakarian hadn’t thought of already.” She smiled. “What about that medical examiner’s report?” She was not certain of a couple things, and it was not her norm to discuss the vaguest maybes. The only certainty here was that the killer had considerable skill, and that would not come cheap. Which begged the question, who would hire someone like that? The why seemed a lot clearer; this could not be unconnected to the leak.

Then there was the very fact that the killer was a woman, and contract killing was still carried out predominantly by men. Most individuals who could be called assassins had special ops military training. This killer being human meant Alliance training. The only program that came even close was the ICT. Shepard doubted she was active Alliance, so possibly a cat-six? ICT being a prestigious program meant there were a limited number of applicants accepted, with even fewer graduates. Being a woman narrowed it down further. It all created some hope for identifying the culprit, if the initial suppositions were correct at least.

Nihlus switched the pad over to display the medical examiner’s report. Shepard angled closer to see, but was not surprised that the document would require a recognition and translation program for her to understand.

“The victim was shot at close range before his hands were removed.” Nihlus read for her benefit. “I assume the body parts were not recovered at the scene?”

“They were recovered from the lake. She tossed them into the water,” Castis replied.

Shepard hummed, that was definitely more professional than psychopathic civilian. “Where was he shot?” she asked, more to guide Nihlus back on track than pursue the details.

“The bullet pierced both sets of vocal cords, the trachea, and nicked the main artery of the neck. The actual cause of death seems to be exsanguination.”

Shepard could see why that woman was on top of the suspect list, as aside from clothing, she carried the right weapons. Then, the victim was silenced twice over. Yes he would die, the ultimate silencing, but in shooting him through the voice box and removing his hands, the killer carried out a second, ritual silencing as well. Suddenly it made sense why there was a mix of professional tactical and planning skills with elements that did not bear the right clinical detachment.

Then it hit her. She personally fit the suspect’s description. There was only one single obvious difference between her and the woman in the photo; the suspect did not have a pronounced streak of white hair. However, the image did not have the resolution to differentiate shades well enough to say
whether there was dye involved. They were looking for someone who did not have a skunk stripe, but if the investigators developed even a little bit of a confirmation bias, the image could still cast suspicion on her.

After Elysium when Shepard realized that part of her fringe started growing in silver-white, she had tried to dye it in, only to discover that the color simply did not last. The dye, even rated for long-lasting grey coverage, faded rapidly with frequent washing, until eventually there was a noticeable shade difference. After going through the process three times, she chose to let the streak grow in to save time. However, a fresh dye job, using temporary colorant, would look real. Suspicion of such a job could affirm a confirmation bias if there was one.

Thus, the absence of a hair streak was not going to be a defense if anyone decided to come after her. Worst of all, the murder was committed when the Normandy had already docked on the Citadel. That meant she effectively had no solid alibi to bring up. The only person who could definitively say that she never left the Normandy would be EDI. With that, Shepard also realized that maybe it was a good idea to keep mum. The last thing she wanted to do was to come across as the criminal returning to the scene of the crime, or injecting herself into the investigation.

“And this is everything?” Nihlus asked as he set the pad back down on the table.

Shepard came out of her thoughts, glad that no one seemed to notice her little lapse.

“Right now, yes.” Castis replied blandly. “You saw me finish an interview with the victim’s spouse. She insisted that everyone was amicable to them. She showed me their financial records willingly, and those are clear of suspicious activity. As far as I can tell they are typical higher-mid-tier citizens. The worst Erasion ever did was fly a skycar too fast in the lanes closest to ward buildings, and even then he appealed the ticket by proving that his car’s sensory was improperly calibrated during routine maintenance.”

Well that was the second worst thing Shepard knew Ternus had done. The first being opening a contaminated email that allowed the Heretics to access his office terminal, through which a lot of rather sensitive information flowed. To be sure it was a lapse of judgment, hardly a crime, but it resulted in deaths. All in all, Erasion seemed to have gotten life’s “kick me” sign, he definitely did not sound like a criminal mastermind.

“So there is no one else who might be interested in killing him?” Nihlus wondered.

“Unknown at this time. My team is out interviewing his current employer and coworkers.” Castis replied blandly, as if he had expected the question to come up.

Nihlus hummed, and Shepard thought that he was probably thinking of another angle to dig from.

“I understand that Councilor Sparatus would appreciate knowing what happened to his former secretary, however as of right now, I have nothing to tell you. Investigations take time, Spectre Kryik. We do not just go somewhere, flash our title, and expect to be handed answers.”

Shepard knew a backhanded dig when she heard one, and so did Nihlus if the look he spared the detective was any indication. She also knew that it was highly unlikely that the senior detective was pulling their legs. If he said that was all he had, that was all he had.

“Alright.” Nihlus conceded after a long stare-down. “I suppose there is no helping it.”

“Indeed, but I will keep you updated on the investigation.” Castis said calmly, “In the interest of cooperation between our branches.”
“Thank you,” Nihlus replied just as calmly, but his mandibles gave away his annoyance with the faintest of little flicks.

Shepard thought Castis scored a point there; he made cooperation sound like he was doing the Spectre a favor. Maybe it was a good thing that Garrus opted to bow out of this as he had. Nihlus really did not need another reason to be cross with the younger Vakarian. If Garrus knew his father got the upper hand over Nihlus like that, the Spectre’s pride would take a hit he would not stand for.

“Anything else you wish to discuss, Spectre?” Castis asked.

“No, that would be all.” Nihlus replied as he passed his hand over the controls to unlock the door. “Shepard. Come.”

Shepard felt the hair at the back of her neck bristle. In that instant Nihlus sounded positively too much like Saren. Still, what bothered her even more was that she did have such a strong reaction to someone saying the word ‘come’ in that tone. There was a whole other scary thought.

Once outside the interview room Shepard expected to find Garrus still by the door, but instead he was on the other side of the bullpen, talking to one of the detectives. The conversation seemed engrossing to the point that he did not see the two of them come out of the interview room, so Shepard made her way over there instead.

“… you are sure that this is the right ship?” Garrus asked the detective seated at the table.

Shepard stopped herself from calling out to draw the ordnance officer’s attention. She would have to be blind to miss the fact that this was some sort of business conversation. Had Garrus come to this station with his own goal in mind? If she knew Garrus half as well as she thought she did, this would be quite important.

“I am sure, Vakarian. Buying a human-built ship and adopting a human-sounding name was all a clever misdirection. Find the Fedele, and you will find him.” The detective replied.

“Alright, thank you.” Garrus replied.

“Thank me by keeping your father from finding out I helped you with this.”

Shepard raised an eyebrow. That sounded like there were regulations being bent, but it could not be anything too bad if Garrus was involved. The former detective had his heart in the right place, even if his temper sometimes got the better of him. Not that Shepard could fault him for that. She also knew he would eventually tell her the whole story on his own. Still, it would not do to come out as the eavesdropper.

“I like my job, and I need to keep it. Caelana and I cannot downsize apartments; we are expecting our third.” The detective went on.


“Yes. When you have four siblings, anything short of three children is… and I quote, simply too few. I am hoping I can talk sense into her about stopping at three.”

“Good luck with that, Caelana never came across as the yielding type.”

“Oh she is not. And that is why I love her.”

Shepard chose that moment to clear her throat and announce her presence.
“Ah, Commander!” Garrus straightened as if called to attention.

The detective looked up and spared her a mandible-flicking smile, “The Commander Shepard? The woman responsible for one of our best quitting on us?” He said in good humor. The relaxed attitude flattered this detective. He had smoke-grey plating and bright sapphire blue eyes. His Prussian-blue colonial markings were ornate, and amusingly enough resembled a mask that framed his eyes, forehead, and long fringe.

“Garrus makes his own decisions, detective.” Shepard replied.

“That he does. Marcelus Bellacus, pleasure to meet you.”

“Likewise, detective.” Shepard replied with a smile.

“I assume the meeting with my father is finished?” Garrus asked.

“Yes,” Shepard replied automatically.

“Alright. Well, Marcelus, that means I have to go. We will keep in touch.”

“Yes, yes. Go. Unlike you, I have things to do if I want my pay.” The detective grumbled.

Shepard had to willfully contain her urge to chuckle, to think that some considered Turians to be stiff. This one was far more relaxed than most, which explained why he and Garrus maintained a friendship deep enough to shared family stories with the other. Garrus caught her gaze and she nodded. A moment later she turned around to look for Nihlus. She found him already by the double-doors leading out of the bullpen.

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It was not long before they were back out in the artificial sunlight of the Presidium proper. Shepard had to squint until her pupils closed back down from indoor lighting levels. Nihlus and Garrus did not seem to notice her momentary discomfort as they walked ahead.

“So what now?” Garrus wondered.

“We got all we could from C-sec, and I rather not talk about it out in the open.” Shepard replied. That and her paranoid side did not want to talk shop anywhere near a police station, who knew which trash receptacle contained a microphone.

Nihlus seemed to take the hint and steered them toward the lake. At this time of the day, this part of the Presidium was not as busy as it would get. This was not the coldly professional, official tower district, replete with high end, high-security hotels that catered to the whims of visiting dignitaries. Nor was this the high end shopping district, stuffed to the gills with expensive boutiques for snobbish people with too much money and too little sense.

“So…” the Spectre prompted as soon as they were near edge of the water.

Garrus leaned his forearms on the railing, the image of ease and relaxation, as if they were not going to be discussing a loaded topic again. Shepard was not completely oblivious to the coincidences either. Their little conspiracy club started by the lake, and would go on by the lake. “The murder has everything to do with the security compromise,” Shepard began. “Garrus, we were right about the fact that Erasion was shot and his hands were removed. Without the body though, we had no real way of knowing where he was shot. The medical examiner’s report said the bullet cut through both sets of vocal cords.”
Garrus turned his head, “He was silenced.”

“Precisely. And since Erasion had no other reasons for which he could’ve been silenced, that means this had everything to do with the data leak, and so, someone other than me knows about it.”

“And they are out for blood,” Garrus mused.

“What I thought was an odd dichotomy of professional planning and personal method ends up making sense when I look at it as a message sent by a professional. The park was the perfect location to execute such a murder. They would not want to risk being seen while doing something grizzly, but they also wanted the body to be found. Also, they have the technical know-how to largely avoid the surveillance systems; only one camera caught a glimpse at all.”

“There is a photograph of the suspect?” Garrus asked. “Why were they not arrested yet?”

“That’s where it gets… complicated. The suspect in question is a human female with black hair, around I would say one-seventy-eight centimeters tall. She was wearing enough gear to conceal as much skin as possible, all in black, with a mask and goggles. The only way to know she’s of a fair complexion is a slight hint of ear. She was carrying a Carnifex and a short blade of some kind, the camera only caught the tip of the sheath at her lower back, not its grip or length.” Shepard listed off.

“The weapons fit.” Garrus hummed. “I would wager on the blade being longer than the combat knife Alliance soldiers carry.”

Shepard nodded and turned to look around the promenade, to check if any civilians were standing close enough to eavesdrop, but it seemed like everyone around them was set on their own routines. “I have a theory about who we’re looking for.” She went on. “This was definitely someone with considerable skill. For a human that means specialized military training. She isn’t just some jarhead fresh from boot camp. Now, she could be from one of the national militaries, plenty have special-operations units whose training would fit, but it is far more likely that she attended the Alliance’s Interplanetary Combatives Training program.”

“An active N-seven?” Nihlus asked, surprised.

“They better not be,” Shepard replied sharply as she looked the Spectre in the eye. “Because that sort of nonsense makes all of us look bad. No. I think we are looking for a cat-six, a dishonorable discharge. Basically the Alliance’s equivalent of a criminal in the ranks.”

“Can you try to narrow down who it might be?” Garrus asked.

Shepard smiled, “The odds are in our favor. The ICT program is seven tiers, just to get admittance requires a recommendation. After that, the drop-out rates are... half of those admitted don’t even make N-one. By the time you get up there... well about only ten percent of the admitted make N-six. That number halves for N-sevens. There are lists throughout, and of course the Alliance keeps a record of all dishonorable discharges...”

“And you still have a noted gender disparity.” Nihlus said.

“That too.” Shepard replied.

“I never understood that. After all, your species does not have biological reasons for it, unlike the Salarians.” Garrus asked.

Shepard shook her head, “It’s more of a social evolutionary throwback. We evolved from animals that lived in polygynous harem groups. That spawned rather persistent cultural norms, which pre-
date writing, and then we developed the religions, which essentially reinforced the norms as something ordained by a higher power. Basically, for the longest time women just accepted and did not question the idea that some things are simply not something a woman can, or should do, for a myriad of reasons.” Shepard explained in the most clinical terms she could muster. “Can we go back to the topic at hand?” She did not want to talk about those things. “Nihlus is right; the very fact that our suspect is a woman actually helps us. Unfortunately there is one other problem.” She looked around again; to check whether there was anyone simply too close to where they stood. “If anyone was to look into that same list, I would be right up there on it. The suspect has black hair and uses a Carnifex. Everyone knows that’s been my weapon of choice since ICT, and she’s also my height and build.”

“Human hair color is… normally dark, right?” Garrus asked.

“Increasingly, yes. The lighter colors are a recessive gene that’s vanishing. That’s the saving grace. My height and hair colors are average. Heck, we can’t even be sure whether the woman in the picture actually has black hair. It could be dark brown. But I would still blip on the suspect list.”

“We know you did not do it,” Nihlus said.

“Yes, but you saying that is not a very good alibi. Now, if we had spent the whole night working on reports in the OD or something… but without that, the only one who can definitively say I never left the Normandy would be EDI. For obvious reasons, I’m hardly eager to use that alibi.”

“That is an issue,” Garrus murmured.

“Alright, let us think of it this way… would someone want to frame you?” Nihlus asked.

“I’d love to say no,” but she would have to be naïve to believe that. There were people out there who would love to see her take a fall.

“But…” Nihlus prompted.

“But,” Shepard repeated, “Let’s not be too optimistic. People in our line of work do tend to make enemies.” By her reckoning, her list of enemies grew in recent weeks. She knew too much, and there would be people who were less that alright with that. The worst was in not knowing where the inevitable was going to come from.

“Well, here is this…” Garrus straightened and turned to look them in the eye. “If this woman is indeed a professional killer, we need to know who hired her. There is no use pursuing the assassin if whoever contracted them walks free.”

“That’s the million credit question, of course.” Shepard replied. “Still, she will not just cough up the little black book of previous contracts. These types are paid extra just to keep quiet.”

“But we do know the contract came from someone who knows the truth about what happened on Eden Prime. Shepard did you mention anything on any report? You already suspect there might be a mole in Hackett’s circle, this would affirm that.” Nihlus stepped in.

“It would be a link, except I did not mention a darn thing on any report.” Shepard replied. She kept to her conviction to keep that secret. There had not been a reason to blow the whistle back then, and even less of a reason now.

“That means someone else found out, somehow.” Garrus said.

“And we are back at square one,” Shepard added.
“So… what do we do?” Garrus wondered.

“There is nothing we can do. C-sec has the case, and Nihlus, I would be careful pushing to take over. We do not want to look like we’re covering up something. Bad enough Detective Vakarian would love to find something on you.” She would leave the reasons for that ambiguous, it could be because of Nihlus’ connection to Saren, or simply because Nihlus was a Spectre full stop. Of course there was also the part where she pulled a fast one over Castis, while essentially protecting Saren. That would singularly put her on the detective’s list of people to bring down, if said list actually existed, and if he suspected she was full out in conspiracy with Saren. If the tables were reversed Shepard would consider what she did to be being in full conspiracy with someone. She hated that she had to do it, especially for someone who hated her guts like Saren did, but sometimes one had to do things for the bigger picture. She chose to justify it like that, and leave it alone.

“Alright then.” Nihlus sighed. “I will let Detective Vakarian take the lead here.”

Shepard nodded and turned to look over the lake.

Meanwhile…

She chose a pre-furnished studio apartment on the cheap and somewhat seedy side of Zakera Ward as her lodgings. Such a location was a good place to hide in her line of work, as the denser one packed people into places; the less could or cared to notice what their neighbors were doing around them, unless it was really noisy. Her chosen flat was barely fifty meters square, divided into four areas, sleeping, kitchen, living space, and attached bathroom. The lattermost was not even large enough to contain a bathtub, only a shower cubicle. The single floor to ceiling window the landlord cited as the apartment’s highlight was the only issue she had. Still, it was a minimal concern, basically nothing that could not be fixed with blinds and thick curtains. The building was a habitation space designed for tenancy by single individuals with very minimal needs, so it was not weird that a single female living there would want to prevent anyone seeing inside the apartment.

As far as hiding holes went, this was not a total dump, as even the slums on the Citadel kept some sense of decency. Still, it was hardly a five-star hotel, though the rent was acceptable, and the landlord was the sort of individual who did not ask questions as long as he was paid on time. He probably thought a single woman taking up residence was the best tenant he could get. All in all the place gave her the invisibility she needed to operate as she did.

Her handler’s contacts had been thorough to the point of looking into the routines of her closest neighbors. The tenant immediately across the hall and the one on her right, closest to elevator, were both single men who worked tiring, underpaid night shifts on the ward’s cargo docks. They came home very early in the morning by Citadel time, probably too tired to give a damn about anything other than sleep. This confluence of schedules worked for her, as it meant the likelihood of bumping into each other was low, and their odds of caring even lower. As long as she kept quiet during the day, she could go for weeks without anyone knowing what she looked like, which was exactly what she needed.

Inside the apartment she made an effort to present the right sort of atmosphere, just in case. The open shelves across from the tiny bathroom were laid out with token clothing and linens that would be typical of a single woman of a meager income, nothing that could not be abandoned if necessary. She even kept some staples in the fridge to keep up the illusion, but the majority of her dietary needs came from food packets, the typical fare for someone of a meager income. The landlord’s monthly fire alarm inspections allowed him to request access, and she did not want to hint that she had more means than someone living here ought to have.
Currently she sat cross-legged on what the apartment tried to pass off as a bed. The thin mattress sagged in the center from long years of use without replacement, and the metal frame squeaked loudly at the lightest of contacts. But it was also high enough off the floor that she could stick a full-sized foot-locker under it, in which she kept her important gear.

She had her weapon cleaning kit spread over the ratty duvet as she inspected the parts of her black Carnifex. Each individual bit of the gun had to be checked, cleaned, and if necessary oiled. The folding mechanisms of the weapon made the thing both easy to conceal, and a problem to clean, to say nothing of the bother if the moving parts managed to jam. Then there was the reality that even without gunpowder to foul the barrel, a dulling or damaged slug cutting bit might leave pieces of metal in the firing chamber, which could cause a short circuit between the magnetic rails, throwing off the acceleration of the intended projectile.

There was elegance in having a custom-made high powered and concealable weapon like hers. This Carnifex bore no serial number, no manufacturing information, nothing to track it with. The gun made killing Ternus Erasion that much easier, not that the job had not been easy to begin with. It could also be re-used a number of times. As for Erasion, his fate was sealed long before she arrived on the Citadel. Her handler’s other agents had mapped his routine with basic surveillance. With such a detailed itinerary of the man’s life, she easily picked out a moment of vulnerability to strike.

Since being fired by Councilor Sparatus, Erasion found a job as the chief administrative assistant in a large legal firm that had their offices overlooking the botanical gardens. Once settled, like most of his species, Erasion established a pattern and stuck to it. On the last day of his workweek he always went to the same hotel bar lounge, with the same colleague, to kick off their weekend with a drink or two. The co-worker would leave an hour before Erasion, and the target would drink another cocktail on his own. After that, he always passed through the botanical gardens on his way back to where he parked his skycar, in the sub-surface garage attached to the office complex next to the mall across from the bar lounge.

The gardens presented a picture-perfect opportunity for an ambush for a target oblivious to the danger, whose senses were dulled by drink. He never noticed her lurking in the shadows until was too late. After that it was a prepared, thought-out dance. Her weak stasis field was enough to lock him in place so she could strike. She first ensured that Erasion was largely immobile and unable to call for help, and then drew near enough to place the gun’s muzzle to his neck. The biotic field, especially one as weak as hers, did not alter the path of such a powerful round point blank. It did not matter that the muzzle left a tiny print on his throat either. After the victim was drowning in his own blood, she pinned him to the ground, removed his hands, and disposed of them in the manner her employer requested.

Turian bones were as hollow as the birds they were compared to, but she did not even need to saw through them. Her monomolecular short sword made quick work of the tendons and joints to separate the hands at the wrist. A weak biotic bubble prevented any blood from splattering over her, which meant her scent was not contaminated. The last thing she needed was to pass some C-sec officer, while cloaked, and him to pick up the scent of blood. The bubble also prevented blood from dripping on her as she carried the severed hands over to the lake for disposal. Beginning to end, the target was dead and the ritual completed in less than five minutes. After that, it was a simple matter of melting back into the shadows, engaging her cloak, disengaging her camera sniffer, and walking out of there.

She had stashed civilian clothing in an alley some blocks away, and the camera sniffer ensured there was no security to see the assassin materialize, change into plain clothing, stow her gear in a suitcase pre-marked with transport tags, and walk out of the alley, the picture of someone who had just arrived on the Citadel on one of the night transports, in an area with more than a few hotels. After
that it was easy enough to get a passage on a public transport shuttle down to the wards.

All in all, the subterfuge seems to have worked perfectly. C-sec saying they had a suspect was in the plan; she had intentionally let one of the cameras continue operating normally. Her handler wanted C-sec to have a glimmer of a lead, so that they hit the brick wall even harder. They would not get much from a picture of her in full gear. It was intentionally free of all identifying marks, badges, or tags. The combination of mask and goggles covered her face so thoroughly that the bird-brains could not even be sure of her skin color. It was giving the authorities the proverbial middle finger.

Suddenly there was beeping from the shelf above the bed. She set the weapon parts aside and rose to her knees to grab the source. The device was a clever bit of subterfuge on its own. To the untrained eye it looked like a harmless mini-safe with a biometric lock. The sort of little box that people stored valuable jewelry in. It further played the part in having a titanium body, making it strong, but relatively light. Inside however it was hardly hollow like a safe ought to be.

She set it down on the bed and placed her thumb over the biometric reader on the front, “System, run biometric verification. Authorization code epsilon kappa alpha tau eta.”

“Biometrics confirmed, authorization accepted.” The VI system replied. “Connecting.”

By necessity of security and limitations of physical size this miniaturized QEC device only transmitted and received sound. Its speaker was at the bottom, with the whole box raised off it on four peg-legs. It had no keyboard, no screen, no real input except voice. It connected to her handler, wherever his base of operations happened to be.

A brief burst of static was transmitted as the hardware fully synchronized.

“I do believe congratulations are in order, Jezebel.” A male voice said from the other side of the communicator. “I received a report from the Watchers. You carried out your task in a commendable manner.”

“As ordered, Sir.” She replied.

“Of course. I assume there were no unexpected problems?”

“None, sir. Everything happened exactly as planned. Citadel Security is looking for a suspect, but they will not find her.”

“Good.”

She did not say anything, as there was nothing to say. Ternus Erasion was nothing more than a trial run. In the grand scheme of things he would be the first and easiest in a series of targets. Her handler wanted to see whether she could do the job up to his exacting standards. After all, he paid her a tidy sum to do things his way. For the right amount she would paint the walls with blood. This was the right amount, and then some.

“What about your amp and cloaking device?”

“All gear provided by Project Hephaestus is operating within expected parameters. The cloak is flawless, and the amp did its job. I’m afraid any weakness of biotics is due to my own limitations.”

“Were you able to maintain the required fields during the operation?” the voice asked.

“I was, sir.”
“No overheating? Or feedback?”

“None.”

“Then things are within anticipated norms. Good. I would not engage another biotic, but your abilities will come in useful on future operations. This is exactly what we wanted to see from an initial proof of concept. Yes, the technology clearly requires further refinement... but that is up to the research division of Project Hephaestus.” His voice was devoid of emotion, plain and candid. This was merely him deigning to explain things. Her handler was hardly the most congenial man, but he had a reason to be so.

“If I may be so bold, sir, when will I receive my next orders?” She asked.

“Patience, Jezebel. We cannot afford to rush this. I have your next target already. The Watchers are conducting their surveillance. I will let you know when the information is released and which dead-drop it will be at. We need to wait for the right opportunity, lest the whole plan go belly up. Our final target is not naive enough to miss a recurring pattern.”

“Understood.” She replied. Even on QEC he refused to mention names, sticking to code only. Even the name he used for her was nothing more than a code.

There were only two things she knew about her employer. The first being that he worked for an organization that called itself Cerberus, and they had some interesting ideas about what humanity deserved in terms of position in the galactic hierarchy. Ideology was of little importance or interest to her. She had only cared to vet her employer enough to know that she was not doing the dirty job of some shameless asshole who trafficked in human lives or something else so repugnant. Cerberus, if her research was correct, was founded two and a half decades ago, and aside from a few events anecdotally linked to their agents, they were still nothing more than a bogey man that no one took seriously. Thought perhaps that was exactly what they wanted.

As for her handler, she knew little about him other than the fact that he was as paranoid as paranoid got, though she supposed it made sense, one did not get where he was by being a fool. He preferred to call himself “Mr. King”, but she was the Pope if that was his real name. Why king? Was there something to that choice other than vanity? It made her curious, even if she was not dumb enough to pursue it. It was not her place to question her handler, not over such trifles, and not for the money he was willing to pay.

“Do you have any more questions?” He asked.

“No sir,” she replied.

She had no questions she could ask, or ones that he would answer.

“Then that will be all. Wait for me to make contact again. In the meantime, your time is yours.”

There was another hint of static and then the communicator turned off on its own, restoring the silence in the tiny apartment. She rose to her knees to put the communicator back on the shelf over her bed, but her mind was already processing new data.

Cerberus wanted her to do their dirty jobs. Maybe that was even how they managed to stay in the shadows for two and a half decades. Truthfully, she was beyond caring for such things. As far as employers went they we unusually generous, and that was what mattered. Not only were they paying her a small fortune, but they also gave her cutting edge equipment to use, all in exchange for also testing of a new amp model some affiliated company must have developed. Project Hephaestus had
to be a code word for said company.

The cloak was the real treasure she wanted to keep. As far as tactical camouflage went, this one did not ripple when she made sudden movements, and it was markedly better at handling multiple light sources. The tech was bleeding edge, and for the time being would be much harder to notice. People were surprisingly simple like that. It would take a while to make the leap and assume that she had a refined cloaking matrix; they would sooner assume she had other means of getting around.

Still, for all the fancy toys, gear, and even the money she was getting paid, the questions lingered. There were more than a few of her own personal rules that she was bending for this contract. There were important things she was not told, and that was breaking rule number one. She did not know the length of her contract, how many targets she would have to kill, or who happened to be the final target that her handler talked about.

His royal highness was a strict need-to-know-basis guy, and it made her wonder if he worked for Alliance intelligence. Would not surprise her one little bit, especially given how comfortable he was with the Watchers. These seemed to be a bunch of deep-cover agents, sympathizers, or maybe even sleepers. It was the only conclusion to make given that Mr. King always seemed to have someone in just the right place to be useful. Their existence also hinted that Cerberus was not only quite big an organization, but they seemed perfectly happy orchestrating events from the shadows. That would make her just another puppet.

Well she supposed she could work with that. Whatever their endgame, she knew there was an endgame. If it was to have her come out the loser, then they were underestimating her intelligence. She would handle their targets, stash the money somewhere, and vanish. That was the normal routine of these things. With the sums they were paying her, she could even retire, after a quick reinvention of self that is. Ultimately, she had plans that did not involve her ending up dead in a ditch. If Cerberus took her for a born-yesterday fool, they were going to be sorely disappointed.

She had stopped being the fool for people the day the Alliance had dishonorably discharged her for something she could not remember doing. By the faint flashes of memory, she knew it involved explosives, batarians, and some butt-crack-of-nowhere moon. They said she blew up a whole bunch of surrendering enemy combatants, just because she could, but in the grandest ironies, she was also caught in the explosion, and the severe concussion gave her Swiss cheese memories. Given that she could not remember the act, her sentence had been commuted, but she was still found guilty of violating some law of engagement, and discharged forthright. The Alliance wanted their soldiers to keep it clean, lest the average pea-brained civilian get all twitchy. She did not need another reason to hate them after that, nor put her skills to actual use. That is why this Cerberus job was at the very least interesting. That is why would play by their rules until it was no longer convenient for her.

Chapter End Notes

Author Notes: Yep, first time ever that I did a point of view shift. I felt it was necessary, because there was absolutely no other way to show what I wanted to show.

General Notes:
Nothing this time…

Chapter Notes:
Nothing this time…
Bad Medicine

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I do not own Mass Effect, I do not claim to own Mass Effect, I am only doing this for fun.

Author Notes: Shepard’s quest to help her whole crew is continuing in this one. Savvy reading of the previous episode would have told you that this one coming up.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Episode 30: Bad Medicine

The three of them were back on the Normandy shortly after lunch. Matthews had saved them some food, and while Shepard and Garrus settled down in the mess at what became known as the “officer’s table”, Nihlus took his meal into his cabin. The mess’s two tables were not officially designated, but it had become a habit for the crew to occupy the one closest to the elevator, while the officers and field team used the one closest to the galley.

Right then the back table was occupied by four servicemen. One of them had clearly watched the news, so they were avidly discussing the murder in the garden, whether it was a single isolated case or the start of a serial killer’s spree. Apparently there had been an update issued, the servicemen knew that the victim’s body had been mutilated and that the suspect identified by C-sec was a human woman.

Shepard listened, while trying not to grin too broadly and give herself away. It amused her that none of them bothered to come to the former detective in the room. Shepard was going to assume they simply did not want to bother Garrus, because she did not want to think they were still intimidated. She was not going to go and steer them toward the truth either. There was no harm in discussions like that, even if their theories were a fair bit off.

She could only wonder what Garrus thought of all of this, but when she glanced toward him she saw he was occupied with something on his omni-tool, only stopping briefly to take another mouthful of food. It brought to mind what she overheard back at C-sec, and she dithered on whether to bring it up. Was Garrus aware that she overheard something? She could not believe he would be oblivious, but then, the bullpen had been noisy and she had a soft step, so there was no way to know for sure. Garrus would come to her if the situation was dire, right? She hoped he knew that if he needed help, she would be there to provide it.

Within another ten minutes the servicemen seated a table over gathered their dishes and deposited them into the washer unit before departing to return to their shifts, leaving Shepard alone in the mess with Garrus.

“They were completely off on their theories,” Garrus broke the silence in what felt like forever.

“I know,” Shepard replied. “But hey, let them have their fun. There is no point in spreading this around unless we have to do something about it.”

“Yes.” Garrus conceded. “I suppose you are right.”
“Also… I get the feeling this is indeed one of the nastier ones that C-sec had to deal with.”

“It does rank up there as far as murders go.” Garrus replied. “Every area of investigation gets their nasty ones. You would not believe what you will see on the Wards if you work illegal substances or organized crime.”

“I can imagine.” Drugs and the mafia had a way of bringing the absolute worst out of people.

“Trafficking can also be a nasty job, whether you investigate person trafficking or just parts.”

Shepard blinked, stunned. “There is still… person trafficking on the Citadel?” She would not have thought that anyone would do that right under the Council’s nose, but she supposed that to some that would be part of the thrill.

“It is a very risky operation, but it does happen. Fortunately the worst is gone. Batarian Hegemony ships were notorious for it. The Council could not forbid them to enslave their own, but when they captured others … C-sec was responsible for helping them. Of course that was back before they severed ties and became undesirables on the station.”

“I assume you did not just raid every Hegemony ship that came in.”

“No. We could not. We had to wait for someone to call for help. As you might imagine, there were not many of those. The slaves brought near the Citadel were broken, having no thought of freedom. We knew they were there, the batarians knew we knew they were there, and they brought them in anyway, on purpose. I am not sorry to see those slimy bastards go.” Garrus explained, his voice flashing with anger.

“Did you witness any of it in person?” Shepard wondered. The Hegemony had cut all official ties with the Council back in the 2160s, after the Council had refused to declare the Skyllian Verge a zone exclusive to their interests. The decision had been a way to appease the growing power of the Alliance in the wake of the First Contact War, but Shepard suspected the Council’s dislike for the Hegemony had been a factor as well. After all, even as aggressive as the Alliance was, Humanity’s cultural norms were nowhere near as repugnant.

Fundamentally, no one wanted their citizens to live under the constant threat of abduction into slavery by relentless gangs of semi-professional slavers, like those operated less-than-clandestinely by the Hegemony. The Alliance was allowed to expand and surround the Batarian home cluster, the Kite’s Nest nebula, forming a buffer between Council Space and the Hegemony. That vast territory required policing, and in doing so the Alliance took up a job that the Turian fleets had done otherwise. The decision to let the Alliance have that particular region of the galaxy was entirely self-serving.

Garrus shook his head, but his mandibles flicked in amusement, “How old do you think I am, Commander?”

“Twenty… something?” She asked. Shepard had to remind herself that Turians started compulsive military service at the age of fifteen, but other than that she had no idea of what was considered normal.

“Twenty… something?” She asked. Shepard had to remind herself that Turians started compulsive military service at the age of fifteen, but other than that she had no idea of what was considered normal.

“Well, at least you did not say thirty-something, but still, no prize. I am a little… disappointed.” He rumbled, his expression positively cat-who-ate-canary.

“I’ll give you that one.” Shepard said. She was not a mind reader, and guessing people’s ages was touch and go under the best of circumstances. The signs of age depended on what genetic therapy
one had, and of course Garrus was not even human. How was she supposed to know?

“I am twenty-six, Commander. I was born the year of the Relay Three-One-Four incident.” Garrus continued. “I joined Citadel Security five years ago.”

Shepard raised an eyebrow; Garrus seemed to have gotten quite a bit of experience during the five odd years he spent in what she assumed to be active service in the Hierarchy’s military. He was a trained recon scout, and had apparently worked ordnance on some ship as well. From where she sat, his ascent up the ranks seemed meteoric. Though admittedly she could see it, Garrus embodied dedication and hard work. “So we covered person trafficking, what about body parts?”

Garrus hummed, “Well… organ trafficking on the Citadel comes in two varieties. The first is the violent form. I remember this one Elcor diplomat we caught during my first year on the job… he was a real psycho, enjoyed the kill, and the money he got selling the organs was just something extra to cover expenses he could not file claims on.”

“Okay that is… disturbing.” Shepard could not even begin imagining a murderous Elcor, let alone how he could have gotten body-parts out of his victims. Then again, maybe she did not want to think too hard about that anyways.

“The second variety is more… well… benign. It often comes from legitimate facilities. After all, when someone in the hospital needs a kidney, a lab will typically grow three, as not every starter grows viable. Sometimes that results with labs having spares, and… some fail to destroy them, though the paperwork says they did. These end up on the black market.”

“You know the ins and outs of that area?” Shepard wondered.

“Well… yes. I started on black market trade.”

“You must have seen every dirty deal in the book.”

“Perhaps. Most of it was things that can not be imported due to trade embargoes, harmless things not worth pursuing. The organ trade was where things could get bad. There was this one time…” Garrus stopped there and glanced around the mess hall. “It started with an unusual increase in volume. Normally that meant either a new lab, or a psycho on the loose, but the latter was obviously out, no concurrent spike in missing person reports, and no mutilated bodies turning up in alleys.”

“What happened?” Shepard wondered.

“We got a hold of a sample and ran DNA. We found a match, and the weirdest thing? It led us to a turian who was still alive and convinced he never lost a liver. From there it was routine background work. The source worked in sanitation, but I found a single deposit for a period of temp work for a Doctor Saleon, a geneticist.”

“A weird aberration.”

“Yes, definitely. So I visited the doctor’s lab, hoping to find something, but there was nothing. No salarian hearts, no turian livers, and not one krogan testicle.”

“Krogan… testicles?” Shepard repeated, incredulous.

“It is a common racket. Some krogan believe a transplant will increase their virility, circumvent the genophage. It does not work, but some believe it does, and they are willing to pay ten thousand for each.” Garrus explained.
“Forty thousand for a set…”

“Factor in that they develop rapidly and you can make a killing.” Garrus added.

“I’d say. So, this… Doctor Saleon?”

“Right. Well… I looked into his employees, and that is where I found a pattern. He had quite the motley and oversized janitorial staff; we are talking one person doing just the bathrooms, one doing just the windows…”

“Who does that?” Shepard asked.

“Exactly. I suspected they were his disguised smugglers, so I brought a couple to interrogation, see if I could get them to flip. Apparently one tripped and bumped a table in the waiting room, as next thing I know, he is bleeding profusely. We offered to patch him up, but… he freaked out. After we restrained him, for his own safety, I ordered a full exam. Our medic found a number of incisions, varying in freshness. He ruptured sutures in our waiting room. That was my big break. I knew they were incubators. Living, breathing incubators.”

“He was growing parts inside them?” Shepard could hardly believe what she was hearing.

“Yes. Then when the organs were ready, he would extract them, but only the viable ones. The malformed ones he left inside. Most of those workers were poor, needed the money he was willing to pay, and outwardly it must have seemed like a good opportunity. They thought there was no way for a spare of their own organ to be rejected.”

“Unless it was malformed, and the body decided it did not like it.” Shepard noted. Or worse, the doctor made an error in the process and the starter culture turned into a type of cancer, an out of control parasitic growth that would ruin the real organs.

Garrus nodded, “These people were a mess, but only on the inside. It was all hidden that no one would see, and Saleon would not need some of the equipment normally required.”

“I hope you gave him what he deserved,” Shepard said. This doctor sounded like the biggest violator of the Hippocratic Oath she had ever heard of. When she noted how Garrus had stilled and his mandibles drew up against his chin, the realization dawned on her in an instant; Garrus would not have had that reaction if he had gotten this bastard.

The moment passed as Garrus shook his head, “He ran. Blew his lab, grabbed his other employees, and headed for the nearest space port. By the time I found out, his ship was already cleared to depart. When I tried to rescind the clearance, he threatened to kill the hostages.”

“But you… tried right?”

“I ordered Patrol to shoot at the ship, but Headquarters countermanded the order. They did not want to risk the hostages, or civilian casualties, if the ship blew up that close to the Citadel. I told them the hostages were as good as dead anyways… he would just use them to make organs until they died in his lab… but no one would listen.”

Shepard felt her jaw loosen, “You ordered the death of those people just- you should have ordered Patrol to pursue, disable, and surround!”

“They did pursue it, but he got away just the same.” Garrus rebuffed, just a hint of anger in his voice. “They let him get away. I went to Pallin and told him what I thought of him and his policies. He said if I did not like it, I could quit… I almost did.” Garrus paused to gather his next breath, but before
Shepard could say a word he went on, heat building in his voice with each word. “All they had to do was disable the ship, stop Saleon from running.” His hands curled into tight fists right on the table. “Maybe the hostages die, maybe they do not. But at least we would have stopped the bastard once and for all. I-”

Shepard reached over the table and laid her hand on one of his fists. The contact stopped his tirade in its tracks. “Garrus… I am going to be blunt. I agree with Pallin on this.” Garrus’ gaze leapt to her with a flash of surprise, shock, and maybe even a little bit of betrayal. Shepard hated herself for what she had to do, but she knew she had to do it. “If you do not care about the fate of those people, then you are no better than Saleon. You are no better than the lawless scum you want to stop.”

Garrus’ gaze slid to the floor, “Yea… maybe.”

His fists uncurled, and Shepard withdrew her hand, before the contact went from merely a way to get his attention to something far more awkward. “I’m sorry, but the way I see it, there is no maybe about it. I believe that there are lines that should not be crossed.”

Garrus looked up. “You speak from… personal experience?”

Shepard nodded, though she knew she was almost lying. That was not experience talking per se. Most of it was fear. She did not want to be a monster, and she definitely did not want her friends becoming one either. “Something of a sort, though more… reflection on experience. I realized that protecting people is never easy. Most of the time it involves extra work, hard work… it can be the heaviest of burdens. But it is a burden we must bear.” She paused there, to collect her thoughts. It was never easy to talk about this. Most people just did not see the fine lines she did. They wanted everything to be black or white, they wanted everything easier. Shepard knew that nothing in life was ever easy, or black and white. “If we start sacrificing innocents when we think it is necessary… oh, for a terrorist here, a band of slavers there… if we just lose a few to save the potential many, or if we wash our hands, saying we could not risk the mission… that is where we come to the edge of a very slippery slope. It will start with terrorists and slavers, but soon it will include just particularly ruthless mercenaries. And in the end, when the average civilian cannot tell you apart from the terrorist and the slaver, because you instill as much fear… guess who will have the last laugh? Anyone who fights monsters should see to it that in the process they do not become one.”

Shepard could think of an example of someone who had fallen down that slippery slope, someone who had lost every shred of restraint and decency they might have had. Saren Arterius was a living, breathing cautionary tale on the dangers of giving too much power to someone who had no line they would not cross in the exercise of it. She knew from personal experience that he lied to the Council, but much worse, he thought nothing of casual acts of genocide, merely on the suspicion that someone might become a problem in the future. She suspected he was every bit the monster she never wanted to be. He was the monster she would not let Garrus become.

Garrus sighed, and his gaze slipped right back down to the table between them. “I just wish I could have stopped him.”

Shepard hummed, “Maybe… we still can.” It had clearly become ‘the one that got away’, the case that continued to haunt, long after it was cold. “We just have to think carefully about how we go about it. Do you know what happened to him?”

Garrus looked up, “I have feelers out, and I… have been monitoring things. I found him, at least… I think. The pattern is there. He changed ships and changed his name, going by Dr. Heart –his idea of a joke, I guess… I did not want to tell you because…”

Garrus was practically stuttering now, Shepard knew that there was only one emotion that would
make him act like that. “You thought I would not believe you.”

“Yes… but I verified the transponder frequency. We are looking for the MSV Fedele, a Kowloon-class freighter.”

Shepard blinked, but she was not surprised. Apparently Saleon was indeed making a killing if he could afford to buy ships like this.

“If there is any ship that can get us there, Commander, it is this one. If we do this, take me with you. I saw Saleon, I will know if it is him.”

“Alright.” Shepard smiled. “But you do know that we can not do this just the two of us, right? You’re no longer with C-sec and I never even had the authority to police Council Space. We need to bring in Nihlus.”

Garrus sighed, “Will he help us?”

“He will. Nihlus is many things, but he is- I don’t know how to explain it. I just know… him. I know if you tell him about Saleon, about what he had done, he will want to help with this.” She hoped at least, because who really knew how deep the feud between the two went.

A silence settled over the space as Garrus seemed to mull his next course of action.

“Officer Vakarian, I apologize, as I could not help but overhear, but I wanted to say that I will be very happy to help you track down this… doctor as well.” EDI said from overhead.

Shepard could not help but smile. She should have expected that. Since they were not in anyone’s quarters, or the OD, of course EDI would take it as a permission to join in.

“Thank you, EDI.”

“You are welcome. Shall I notify Spectre Kryik that you wish to see him?”

Garrus glanced at the XO’s cabin door, almost as if he expected Nihlus to be lurking there already.

“Yes, EDI.”

“Right away,” the AI replied.

The three of them moved to the OD, rather than continue to talk shop in the mess, where the whole crew could overhear. Shepard put the kettle on while Garrus caught Nihlus up to the whole story. She knew this would turn into one part strategy meeting as well. She needed tea for that, after the sort of day this had turned out to be.

Nihlus sat on the couch in the usual place under the viewport that he was fond of. “Yes… the Normandy can get near the Fedele, but… how do you expect to dock with it? Saleon so much as glimpses an Alliance logo and the Fedele will jump into FTL.”

“We can’t dock the Normandy to the Fedele. But I do have a way around that.” Shepard replied as she sipped her tea. “The Normandy can come up on the Fedele undetected while we take a shuttle. If we are concerned with that, we only need to get on board and give EDI access to the Fedele’s system. EDI can bring its FTL drive offline, and he won’t be able to run.”

“That will not be easy. You would need to slip an access key into the ship’s mainframe,” Nihlus
said, sounding less than impressed.

Shepard hummed, partly annoyed, partly thoughtful. She knew what Nihlus was up to, which is why she was only partly annoyed. This was another of those times where he played the role of the doubter to get her planning. As confident as she wanted to come off, there was no guarantee they could get aboard that Kowloon. Saleon was no idiot if he managed to avoid capture all this time. “We will get Saleon to allow us on board.” she said. “Everything after that is easy.” Shepard nodded. “Saleon grows organs to sell, right? We pose as customers. His clientele is likely those who can’t, or won’t go through official means. Criminals who don’t want to risk law enforcement or their enemies getting to them in some hospital. We play on that.” Shepard explained. She needed to establish a legend good enough to get them in the door.

“First though, unless our Kodiaks can change colors, how do we explain the Alliance livery?” Nihlus wondered.

“Recently stolen. How else? It would paint me as that much of a badass, but also that paranoid as to come in with two armed bodyguards.”

“Just two? Someone that paranoid would bring a small army.” Nihlus said.

“He is just a doctor, right? First, we cannot present ourselves as too big an outfit, as those are more known. Second, even in a big outfit, the leader would not broadcast such a thing. An illness is a weakness, and most mercenaries would not want to show vulnerability. The way I see it, it works. The shuttle was not yet painted over, meaning that it was very recently stolen. Let me assure you that if someone stole a shuttle from the Alliance, they would have to lie low, as the manhunt would be something. Whoever manages the heist would have to see that, and do just that, so what a better time to handle a certain pesky medical condition?”

“How do we contact the doctor to arrange a meeting?” Nihlus asked, shifting tracks.

“How do people contact Saleon when they need his services? He has to have a way somewhere, probably in the underbelly of the extranet. We just have to find that.”

“Alright, but… do not take this the wrong way, Commander, but I do not think Saleon will believe you need a replacement organ.”

Shepard smiled, “He will if I say I need a replacement kidney. It is one of the only organs that humans have two of, but unlike lungs, if one goes bad there is slightly less of an obvious sign, and we can remain functional on just one. It is the sort of thing that can be brought on by an old injury. I can go a step further and ask Doctor Chakwas to create a patient file to go with that. Paperwork makes everything more official. Really Nihlus, haven’t you figured me out yet? When necessary, I can sell a lie.”

She was trained in the basics of undercover operations. Coming up with a legend was the foundation of such a job. The best legends were cobbled from bits of truth about one self and one’s skills. The most important part was never to claim to have skills you did not. If one claimed to be a doctor, they would be burned if something happened and those skills were needed. She was playing off what she could do. Passing herself as the leader of a small mercenary band that no one ever heard of was not too far from the truth. The reason no one ever heard of them was because they were new, and still intentionally flying under the radar. After all, small mercenary bands learned the ropes flying under the radar. If they climbed too fast, too far, they would draw the wrong attention from the bigger, more competitive outfits.

“So, I guess we have a plan, and now we just need to find the Fedele.” Garrus mused.
“One last thing,” Nihlus cut in. “What do you plan to do with Saleon?”

Garrus moved to say something, but Shepard had a strong feeling what it would be and raised her hand to interject. “Mostly that would be entirely up to Saleon,” she said calmly. “I am hoping he goes quietly, in which case we can simply bring the Fedele back and let C-sec figure out the rest. If he chooses not to go quietly, well, C-sec will still get the Fedele, plus a body.” Shepard explained. They could probably count on Tali to play the role of an engineer for a quick FTL hop to Widow. Kaidan would mind the Normandy while she remained on the freighter to supervise. If Saleon did go quietly, she would shift the legend to say that he let a Spectre and hired professional bounty hunters onto his ship. Nihlus’ status was such that he could probably hire said bounty hunters and the Council would not blink an eye.

“That works.” Garrus agreed.

“Indeed. But there is actually one last thing beyond just that. We cannot leave the Citadel before it is addressed.” Shepard spoke up calmly. “Garrus, your armor is still C-sec colors. It did not matter before, but now…”

“Oh. Yes… that is true.”

“Alright.” Nihlus said as he moved to get up from his seat. “Get your armor, Vakarian. We will go and have it touched up.”

“Now?” Garrus asked, surprised.

“And when if not now?” Nihlus replied snappishly.

Garrus froze, and Shepard could not help but grin. She knew she sprung it quite suddenly, but the thought really occurred to her once they started talking the infiltration scheme. It was just one of those little details that had to be handled before the scheme could come together. “Good. While you two handle that, I will start looking for that contact point.” Shepard said.

Finding a criminal hiding on his ship, when he could be anywhere in the galaxy was no easy task. Garrus may have had transponder frequencies, but it was not like they could just perk up their ears and listen for the ping. Transponders operated like electromagnetic radiation. It could travel through space, but was capped by the speed of light. So effectively there was no point in listening for one when you were even just one light year away. Ships moved, by the time a ripple from one location was picked up, one could bet the source had moved on.

In the end it was up to EDI’s ability to scour the extranet. The AI could do multiple concurrent searches, in multiple languages, and sift through the data simultaneously as well. Despite it all, it still took EDI around four hours to find the good doctor’s corner of the extranet. After that, it was up to Shepard to establish contact, pass the legend checks, and get a meeting location. It did not take much to understand why Garrus had been unable to track him down on his own. It took an AI four hours to find him; she could not imagine how long it would have taken someone doing it manually.

Shepard was also glad that she had the foresight to ask Dr. Chakwas for a falsified medical history. If the doctor she made contact with was indeed Saleon, he was very paranoid and would not deal with anyone who did not have a write up on hand. He had narrowly escaped the law’s grasp at least once before, and he definitely would not want to have such a close shave ever again. She had to give just enough details to sell, but not too much as to oversell, as both too little details might make him think it was a Spectre trying to play him for a fool. It was like hunting a very cautious animal with a trap,
half the battle was making the bait enticing enough.

The doctor was clever enough to send his emails in a round-about way. A surreptitious ping of the comm buoy network by EDI showed that the messages Shepard got on her dummy account were rerouted across the galaxy, so there was no figuring out which buoy, in what system, had received them first.

Nihlus and Garrus returned while she had been passing the checks. Nihlus appeared in the OD, looking vaguely bored, and took up his usual post on the couch, from where he could supervise in name only.

It was another three hours of emails bouncing back and forth that Shepard leaned back in her chair and grinned from ear to ear. “I have a location.” She announced.

“Finally,” Nihlus muttered from his position.

Shepard rolled her eyes. “You don’t have patience for this sort of thing, do you?”

“I do not go to such lengths for something of this sort,” he replied. “So where to?”

“If this is the right organ farmer, and I sincerely hope it is, he says he will meet us in the Herschel system. That’s in the Kepler Verge.”


“Here’s the beauty of it, the relay is in the Newton system, ten light-years away.” Shepard added. “He has nowhere to run. Even if he jumps into FTL, we know where he’s going, and the Normandy is faster, it’d be at the relay before him.”

“Either way he could be sending us on an empty errant.” Nihlus mused. “That and we really have no way of knowing it is the right shady doctor. We have to plan for the possibility that we found the wrong organ farmer.”

“Right or wrong, we shut them down. And… well, if at first you don’t succeed… We’ll find Saleon. I promised to Garrus we would. I do not break my promises lightly or willingly.”

Nihlus rose into a sitting position and glanced back over the half-wall that separated the OD’s office area from the seating area under the viewports, and he caught her gaze. “No, you do not.” Nihlus said. “I wonder if Vakarian even knows what he set in motion.”

“What did he set in motion?” Shepard asked, unable to keep all the amusement out of her tone. “You make it sound like this will be some sort of epic battle.” She chuckled at the mere thought. “At worst this will be a skirmish with a few second-rate mercenaries, those who would take this sort of job for easy money.”

“That is not what I meant and you know it.” Nihlus chuckled and went back to lounging on the couch, “A promise like that, from someone with your unique…” he mused.

Shepard blinked, surprised.

Then Nihlus whispered something, but it was so low that her translator failed to pick up, letting her hear nothing more than a soft rumble.

Shepard watched him, hoping he would repeat whatever it was, but a silence settled in the OD. She thought about asking him to repeat what he had just said, but the way he angled his head to stare out
the viewport told her not to. She realized he must have intentionally turned away, so she would not hear.

The Normandy was off the Citadel within the hour after Shepard had gotten the location. While waiting for final clearances Shepard contacted Admiral Hackett to let him know that they would be unable to respond to emergency orders for about two days. She had to explain why, but in the end the admiral sighed and nodded. There was nothing else to it, as Shepard pressed the fact that this doctor had to be eliminated, if not for Garrus’ peace of mind, then for the fact that he clearly thought nothing of making humanity look bad. After all, as far as the contact information went, he went by a human name, and owned a human-built ship. That was just not something they ought to allow criminals to do. It was a flimsy excuse and the Admiral would have seen right through it, but he let her have that.

With the relay in the Newton system and their destination in the Herschel system, as soon as they cleared the final jump, the Normandy turned toward their destination and entered FTL under its own power. At their top speed, ten light-years would take them the better part of a day, but even then Shepard decided that they would cover nine and then stop in the space between stars to deploy the Kodiak. She wanted their target to pick up the shuttle’s arrival, no need to reveal that the shuttle itself had limited stealth capabilities on top of the armament and limited FTL. Also, the Kodiak’s top speed was ten light-years a day, where the Normandy could do thirteen comfortably. This way they would arrive after the Normandy, allowing the ship to keep hidden.

The plan was for EDI to find the Fedele and then guide the Normandy into range where the AI could hack the Kowloon at her leisure once she had access. Shepard was not taking any chances here. Maybe Nihlus was right, and she was over-thinking, but Shepard was never the type to pull her punches when something she deemed important was on the line.

Ten hours after they entered FTL Shepard descended into the shuttle bay wearing her armor. A quick application of temporary paint took care of the N7 logo on her chest-plate, leaving her abyss black and wine red armor overall indistinct. When all was said and done, the patch of paint could simply be peeled off without effacing what was underneath.

She stopped cold when she saw Garrus standing casually by the shuttle. “You didn’t just repaint.” She said as she drew near.

“No. That would have taken too long. Kryik insisted I make use of the Alliance salary and get something a little heavier. Do not tell him I said so, but he was right, the model of the armor was going to be a problem eventually.” Garrus explained.

“And you did not tell him about the after-market modifications?”

“Why? He offered to clear me for Spectre-grade gear.”

Shepard was surprised; Nihlus had volunteered to do that?

“This suit has some features the old one did not.” he continued, unaware of her momentary pause. “Better computer unit for one, built in floatation assist, just in case, and plenty of room to expand its features with personal modifications.” Garrus replied.

“And it is positively dapper.” Shepard said, because what else could she say? She was not surreptitious in her inspection. The biggest difference was that the whole thing looked heavier; the plating looked markedly more robust with fewer places where the under-suit peeked from between
the ceramics. The chest plate rose up into a more pronounced, vaguely bowl-like cowl, which hinted that the armor was a little more padded than the previous set. There were now actual thin, layered, articulated plates at the sides of his waist, whereas before that had been undersuit weave. His leg protection plates and greaves looked positively heavy, with thick protection around the spurs. The color scheme was different as well. Where his old armor was predominantly charcoal black with Egyptian blue along the front, armguards, and legs, this armor inverted that, with the predominant color now being a rather beautiful, semi-glossy shade of navy blue with charcoal accents.

Garrus grinned and straightened to his full height. “Dapper, huh? So I look good?”

“I am not going to one-up myself, so don’t go fishing for compliments. You ready to go?”

“Yes, Commander,” Garrus replied, formal tone and all, though his grin transformed into a full out toothy smile.

Shepard rolled her eyes; she did not even know what possessed her to say what she did. She was going to write it off as one of those mental glitches she sometimes had. “I just have one question… I hope it’s not too much. But… floatation assistance?” Shepard asked as she moved toward the shuttle.

“You obviously have not seen a turian swim,” Garrus replied as his footsteps fell behind her. “It is a lot of flailing and splashing interrupted by occasional bouts of drowning.”

Shepard stopped, one hand on the frame of the Kodiak’s door. “Ah so there is something we humans do better, huh?”


Shepard chuckled, stepped onto the shuttle, and moved toward the cockpit door. She would not go on add that she did more than just float. One part of basic sea, air, and land proficiency drilled into the N-one was swimming. It was one more thing that she did not get to use very often.

She stepped into the cockpit to find Nihlus was already there, running the final checks on the Kodiak before their FTL leg. As she passed by the pilot’s seat, she tapped him on top of the helmet, just to announce her presence, and eased into the co-pilot’s chair. “How are our systems?”

“Operational across the board. We are ready to go.” Nihlus replied as he reached over to the compartment controls to close the hatches and begin pressurization.

“Excellent.” Shepard replied. No matter the prep and how convinced she was that she had the inescapable mouse-trap, pre-operation jitters inevitably set in. She had to remind herself that the enemy this time was not a horde of murderous synthetics with a triple advantage of defensible position, unknown numbers, and unknown capabilities.

Nihlus reached over to tap the internal comm, “Better strap in, Vakarian. Would not want to scratch that new armor before we even leave,” he said, sounding every bit like he was enjoying himself.

Shepard glanced over, surprised, but then that left quickly. She began to suspect that if she said anything, it would only make matters worse. As if a reaction to their antics would only fuel more antics. Ultimately this was the other shoe dropping. Of course Nihlus would find a way to use the favor he did for Garrus to his own nefarious agenda. He seemed incapable of doing a favor for his arch rival without using it for leverage later.

She froze as the thought filtered through her mind, a curiosity that had hitherto been unexplored. What if this was some sort of rivalry between them? It seemed to go both ways, but Nihlus was the one who started the arguments first more often. If true, what was that all about? This was another one
of those times when asking felt inappropriate, so the only thing she could do was observe.

Suddenly the Normandy gave a little shudder. Shepard recognized it instantly as the shift of mass effect fields that accompanied a ship dropping out of FTL. The Kodiak’s comm cracked to life, “Commander, we’re exactly one light-year out from Herschel,” Kaidan announced.

Shepard tapped at the comm, “Good. How’s everything on your end?” Shepard asked.

“Ready to go.” Kaidan replied.

“Good. Let’s do this.”

“Aye, aye, ma’am.” There was a thud from outside the Kodiak, Shepard watched out of the cockpit view-screen as the Normandy’s shuttle bay door began to descend, and instantly the ship’s atmosphere retaining field shimmered as it worked to keep the bay from decompressing. With the Normandy being in the space between stars, the shuttle bay door opened onto a pitch black void. Only the shuttle bay lights spilling on the smooth metal of the ramp were any indication that there was a third dimension out there.

“Alenko, we are taking off,” Nihlus announced as the Kodiak shuddered with the ignition of its thrusters.

“Good luck,” Kaidan said. “We’ll resume our FTL leg as soon as shuttle one is clear.”

“Thanks. And be careful out there.” Shepard replied.

“Always are, ma’am. We’re your crew.” Kaidan replied.

The Kodiak lifted off the deck and began to glide along the shuttle bay plates toward the waiting embrace of the void.

When the Kodiak dropped out of FTL, Shepard was still in the cockpit with Nihlus. Herschel was a medium system of four planets orbiting a bright, energetic blue giant type star, with a dense but narrow asteroid belt between Clobaka and Clugon, the fourth and third planets respectively. Shepard had looked at the few star charts available for the Terminus. Herschel was an uninhabitable system, because the blue giant would go through its supply of hydrogen rapidly and eventually explode in a supernova. Its combination of short lifespan and an intense radiation profile meant that its planets simply could not evolve anything even remotely capable of supporting life.

Tiny dwarf planet Matol, the second in the system, came closest to habitable, but it was only four thousand kilometers in radius, half the atmosphere thickness of Earth, at half the gravity, and a couple dozen times the radiation, due to its low density, weak magnetic field, and no ozone blanket. The only thing of any value here was the scorching hot Tungel, the first planet of the system. It had a surface temperature comparable to an oven but was also rich in iron, heavy metals, and all sorts of other minerals, including uranium. However the fact that the system was in the Terminus kept the mining consortiums from sending fleets of drones to plunder it. They so much as set foot there, and the denizens of the Terminus would come running to plunder the automated ore hoppers as they climbed out of Tungel’s atmosphere.

“Where do you want to start looking?” Nihlus asked as the Kodiak moved deeper into the system.

Shepard hummed thoughtfully. She had a reason to look at the star charts as she did. She could not see the Fedele just floating out in the open for every infra-red scanner to pick up. Furthermore, it was
much more energy efficient to fall into a stable orbit around something, and then coast. With that idea in mind, she could rule out the asteroids. They would not have enough gravity to keep a Kowloon stable. That meant the Fedele had to be orbiting a planet, but which? “Not Tungel.” She began. “Too close to Herschel.”

“What about Clugon? It is a failed gas giant with a reasonably thick, ionized atmosphere, and nearly a hundred natural satellites. A ship could hide there easily.” Nihlus offered.

If Shepard recalled correctly, the almanac of charted planets listed Clugon as a large terrestrial planet with a thick atmosphere, comparable to a failed “Saturn”. At a third the size, it failed to gather enough atmospheric thickness to condense gasses to liquid form under its top cloud layers. “Yes, that’s a good place to start.”

“Clugon it is,” Nihlus affirmed as he input a series of commands to alter their course.

“This is where I wish we had a quantum homing beacon on the Normandy.” Shepard confessed. “Joker is probably taking bets on how long we take to find it.” The Kodiak was flying under main power, which meant that in a few minutes their infrared emissions would reach the Normandy, and the CIC crew would get a show of watching them search the system. Shepard had forbidden Kaidan to communicate the Fedele’s location to them, as even a brief tight-beam burst from the communication array could expose the Normandy’s presence and location. If the Fedele registered the presence of an Alliance warship here of all places, it would run just as fast as its FTL drive could warm up.

This doctor was paranoid enough to want to see them come in. Shepard knew what that meant, it would allow him time to decide whether he wanted to commit to contact, or keep hiding in his hole. It was a familiar song and dance. Her move had been to ask Adams to temporarily reprogram the Kodiak’s ID beacon. The craft was no longer broadcasting its identity as the Normandy’s Shuttle-One; instead it was “Bounty I”, with no ship registration at all. The name seemed to fit what a bunch of mercenaries would call their stolen trophy. It also hinted at a right sort of arrogance from an up-and-coming mercenary band, and the existence of a plan to acquire other craft in the near future. Then it was natural that the leader would want to fix an old ailment.

The Kodiak entered the asteroid belt shortly after, Shepard knew this was Nihlus’ part in the song and dance; he would make it look like they were searching amidst the rocks. It was a bad place to look, but they needed the obfuscation. If their target was indeed in orbit around Clugon, it simply would not do to beeline toward it immediately. These shady types never liked dealing with people as intelligent as them. If they believed they were smarter, they got arrogant, and that made defeating them somewhat easier. The old song and dance was all about the manipulation of perception and appearances.

They were just coming out of the rock field when Shepard saw the blinking light on the console in front of her. She reached over and tapped over the sensor console, “Incoming tight-beam communication,” she said even as she traced the origin of the signal back to its source. “Hah, your guess was right on the money, Nihlus, they’re orbiting Clugon alright. It’s show time.”

“Ready when you are,” Nihlus replied as he reached for the console and tapped a key.

Shepard tapped a few more keys to authorize communication.

“**Bounty we have you on our scanners, state your business.**” A voice demanded before she could even open her mouth to acknowledge.

Shepard raised an eyebrow, even though no one would see this. The voice sounded human to her.
Did the doctor employ human hired guns too?


“Who are you?” the voice repeated, slowly, and clearly more annoyed.

“Rude fellow isn’t he?” Shepard stated blandly, affecting all due boredom, and intentionally loud enough for the microphone to pick up.

“Yes, ma’am,” Nihlus replied, playing up the role of an underling.

This was where she put the screws to the doctor’s people. “Listen here, doorman. I am Lucie Bouchard. I have an arrangement with your boss. Now, I do not particularly care who grows me a new kidney, there’s plenty of other labs out there, but if you think you can make me come out here for nothing… well… Let me make this abundantly clear, I don’t take well to people wasting my time. Keep at it and I will give your ship a few structurally superfluous new exhaust ports.”

There was silence over the link as Nihlus flew the Kodiak ever closer to Clugon.

Then there was a shuffle of movement on the other side, “Ah Miss Bouchard,” Another voice said. This one was different from the previous, but it was too deep to be positively identified as Salarian. “Please pardon my employee; he does sorely lack customer service acumen.”

Shepard almost shuddered at the sound of ‘employee’. Her mind automatically lapsed to what Garrus told her about the way Saleon treated his “employees”. If this was indeed the right doctor, the poor man operating the communication gear could very well be incubating an organ or two right at that moment. It was a hair-raising thought. She had to take a deep breath and let it out slowly, lest her guttural reaction show in her voice. “I’m still waiting.”

The person on the other side of the link cleared his throat, “I will have the airlock prepared for your arrival Miss Bouchard.”

“Good, we’ll be along in thirty minutes. Bounty out.” She tapped the console to close the link before another word could be said.

“Structurally superfluous new exhaust vents?” Nihlus asked amusement in his tone.

“What? It’s descriptive.”

“And morbid,” Nihlus replied.

Shepard would give him that, but at the end of the day it worked, and that was all that mattered.

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Their target’s hiding place ended up being partway down Clugon’s thermosphere, where the density of the surrounding gasses combined with Herschel’s intense radiation to ensure an impressive five hundred degree temperatures. There was also considerable LADAR distortion due to atmospheric opacity issues. Shepard would not be surprised if the doctor chose Clugon specifically for how its atmosphere would partially diffract conventional LADAR frequencies, leading to hazy images, while the temperature made the ship invisible to passive sensors, and the planet’s radius of eighteen-point-five thousand kilometers at the thermopause precluded the use of visual recognition or sensor probes. Even the ship’s transponder signal was hazy and distorted enough that Shepard could not be sure it was the Fedele, and even if it was Kowloon. They were guided in by the ship’s tight-beam communication equipment, set to ping on a frequency that could clear the atmosphere.
They had to get within a hundred kilometers before the ship became visible through the gloom of sickly green haze of the chlorine gas that made up the majority of Clugon’s atmosphere. There was no mistaking a Kowloon for any other type of ship. The ship’s main structure was a long, needle-like stem. Attached to which were six interchangeable box-shaped modules, each an entirely self-contained unit that could be uncoupled and exchanged. This meant a Kowloon could be configured for anything from hauling ores, to shuttling economy class passengers along routes where overnight amenities were unnecessary.

This particular Kowloon had the maximum number of modules, which meant the facility could house either quite a few guards, or even worse, employees of the vein Saleon had employed on the Citadel. Shepard honestly wanted more guards, because the other option was far less palatable. Those people would require surgery and heavens knew what other treatments to remove foreign growths.

Their Kodiak docked at the rear end of the stem section, where the Kowloon’s only airlock was found. The two craft were never designed to couple, so the transport’s claws had to grab the Kodiak by the main thrust arms on that side, and its sealing tube, despite enveloping the whole door, still failed to seal fully, leaving a tiny gap at the bottom. Only the Kodiak’s shield envelope kept the blisteringly hot chlorine winds from scouring the insides of the tube. On the flipside, this meant that no one without a full EVA-sealed suit could hope to run off with the Kodiak.

The three of them hurried to cross into the Kowloon’s airlock, and once on the other side, they were greeted by a single man wearing a non-descript, rather faded grey suit. “Miss Bouchard, it seems you have failed to mention your… unusual mode of transportation. The doctor would like to know why you are flying an Alliance shuttle,” he said.

“Does he now?” Shepard replied coolly. “Tell me, do I look like Alliance to you?” She asked bluntly, staring up into the man’s eyes, even though he would not be able to see her glare past her darkened helmet visor. “The Bounty is mine.” She would not explain the cover to him, the self-proclaimed mercenary queen she was playing up was playing up would not explain herself to some underling.

The man looked from Nihlus to Garrus and back to her. Shepard waited, fully ready to ditch her cover and reach for a weapon, if it came to that. Still, she thought the odds of him buying the ruse were good. After all, this was the Terminus, not Alliance space. There was no Alliance ship pointing a MAC at them, and certainly the fact that she had arrived with two turians herself would cast some doubt on her identity. At least if he did not know that there was one Alliance ship out there with a mixed crew, stealth technology, and the leave to go where no Alliance ship ever goes. He would have to be Shadow Broker level of in-the-know for that.

“Do your job. Miss Bouchard is here for a treatment, not for you to annoy her.” Nihlus growled threateningly.

“Fine, follow me.” The man said and turned to walk down the length of the Kowloon’s main corridor that ran from the airlock to the bridge in the nose.

Shepard tapped the side of her helmet to trigger the breather mask to open into indoor configuration, no use running down her oxygen levels, though she would not remove her helmet. It would not do if he recognized the streak of white in her hair. The cover story was meant to get them aboard; she did not design it to hold up to deep cover scrutiny. It had worked, but now it was a matter of playing her cards right.

As they walked she noticed that the so-called employee was in no hurry. More than that, it was hard to miss the fact that the Kowloon’s internal signage had never been changed from English. It was a little peculiar, and made her wonder if they were indeed on the right ship, but then, it was just signage. If this was indeed the Fedele, Saleon had adopted an oddly human name to cover up his
tracks, he employed some humans to be his customer service representatives, and so using English signage might be part of his plan as well.

The aft-most modules were both labeled as crew quarters, and she could not help but think that if this was indeed the Fedele, that sounded far more ominous than it ought to. The next set they passed were the treatment room and storage, delightful designations that brought to mind one or two horrors each. The final modules, those closest to the bridge were private quarters and the laboratory itself.

The man stopped in front of the lab door and hit the door chime. Shepard only registered a faint buzz from her sixth sense for danger. On paper, this whole thing could easily turn ugly. Two whole compartments for crew, and yet they had seen only one individual. Was he the only so-called employee aboard right now? Or was he leading them into an ambush? It took everything she had not to reach down and turn on her guns, just to be ready.

The door opened and the lighting level in the module beyond all but blinded her. The laboratory was that in every sense of the word. Overly-bright, crisp white lights and tarnish-proof easy-clean surfaces everywhere. The room was positively humming with the machinery. At the center of it all stood a Salarian of a very dark brown coloration, wearing a pristine white laboratory suit. As far as Shepard was concerned, the model of a mad doctor was only ruined by the absence of oversized goggles of some kind.

“Doctor, your guests have arrived.” The employee said.

“Thank you,” the doctor replied. “Now leave us.”

“Yes doctor,” The employee ducked out of the room.

Then with a final tweak of whatever it was that he was working on, the doctor turned to face them, “Miss Bouchard. Thank you for coming all the way here.”

There was a low pitched reverberating rumble over the comm, almost as if right against her ear. “It is him,” Garrus said. “Saleon.”

“You sure?” Nihlus asked.

“Of course I am sure.” Garrus replied, anger flashing in his tone.

Shepard had to contain her urge to grin. EDI was flawless as ever in her work. “I admit I am quite impressed with your choice of location.” she said, still in role, even though now was the time to pounce.

Saleon must have heard something in her tone, because his shoulders drew back and he shifted weight onto his back foot, instantly wary. It was a gut reaction, a reflex that revealed that he was hardly the bravest criminal Shepard had ever met.

“But then again, you are quite the wanted individual, Doctor Saleon.”

“What? My name is Heart, Doctor Heart!” He protested, but the panic was there in his voice, giving away the truth.

“There is no escape this time, doctor.” Garrus said.

“You are under arrest for trafficking illegally cloned organs, and we can probably make the charges of assault against your employees stick too.” Nihlus added.
“This is not Council Space! You have no authority here!” Saleon protested, looking more frantic with each word he uttered.

“I have all the authority I need. I am a Council Spectre,” Nihlus rebuffed.

That seemed to finish the argument as Saleon reached under his work counter; Shepard knew there could only be one thing he would go for. “He’s going for a weapon!” She shouted.

There was a double whine from her sides, Nihlus and Garrus both drew theirs. Saleon whirled, an M-3 Predator in his grip. His eyes locked onto the first person he saw, and his arm followed, the pistol muzzle pointed straight at her. Shepard saw it a split of a moment too late, as before she could move even one millimeter he pulled the trigger. The gun barked and her shields flared. Saleon fired again, and her shields flared again, but Shepard was moving sideways even as she reached for Sin. Saleon fired a third time; she heard the bullet hit the door. Shepard drew her gun, but before she could raise and power it up there was a burst of staccato, followed and overshadowed an instant later by a thunderous crack.

At the sound of Nihlus’ shotgun she stopped cold in her tracks. When she looked, she saw that the force of impact had caused the doctor to stagger backwards as his eyes widened. His hand opened, and the pistol tumbled to the floor. The front of his pristine white lab suit was shredded, and his blood spread rapidly out of his many wounds and into the material that was still there. A moment later, seemingly in slow motion, his legs failed beneath him, and the doctor collapsed to the floor.

“Commander, are you alright?” Garrus demanded.

“I have shields,” Shepard replied automatically. Her HUD showed they were down to thirty percent after two shots. It was just so fortunate that the doctor had not got something a little more powerful than the Predator. Well, she supposed it made sense. The Predator traded stopping power for rate of fire and clip. What a Carnifex could punch through in two, the Predator could do in four, and take just as long. The Predator was just an easier weapon to use, as the Carnifex’s recoil required getting used to.

“Suicide by Spectre. I hate it when they do that.” Nihlus mused.

“Could have been suicide by ex-C-sec.” Garrus replied. “We will never know which of us actually killed him.”

Nihlus hummed.

“But it must have been me.” Garrus added.

“You?” Nihlus repeated, practically laughing.

“I fired first.”

“Yes, but my shotgun has more stopping power, and your bullets could have just gone through.”

Shepard blinked, mystified. The door opened behind her, and whatever she would have said died on her tongue as she whirled, only to come face to face with the another Predator, this time held by the man from before. He had the gun up at arm’s length, in that distinctive ‘learned in a self-defense class, but never had to actually draw’ posture, shaking like a leaf all the same. He practically jumped when both Garrus and Nihlus turned their weapons on him.

“Lower your weapon.” Shepard said, calmly and coolly as she noted her shield readout flicker, showing that the kinetic barrier had recharged. “Let’s talk.”
“Talk? What did you do?! You just… Who are you three?” The man demanded, his quivering only becoming worse by the moment, as if the very act of holding up his gun was taxing his strength. Or perhaps it was the sheer amount of adrenaline in his system? With Saleon’s sick methods, for all she knew this poor man had a few extra kidneys with spare adrenal glands all pumping him with adrenaline simultaneously.

Shepard saw his finger shift on the trigger, and she knew that at any moment the gun might discharge. While she doubted he could hit anything while shaking like that, suddenly she also had genuine reasons to fear that Garrus and Nihlus would not let him live the attempt down. That meant, she had to do something if she was to save this foolish man’s life.

Swift as a striking snake she grabbed the gun in her left, his wrist in her right, and twisted the barrel ninety degrees to her left, where it would aim at the wall. The sudden jerk instantly overpowered his shaky fingers and the gun’s stock popped right out of his grip. She wrenched the gun away and behind her back, out of his reach, even as she snapped up her right foot and her ankle caught him in the privates. His eyes bugged out as the pain kicked in, his knees gave out, and down he went like a ragdoll, unable to even make a peep.

“I am sorry about that.” She brought the gun up to eject its thermal clip and power pack. Going for the nuts was the only place she could think of where impact would not kill him outright, but also where he would be unlikely to have an incision that could burst open. Garrus’ experience in the matter had been taken into consideration.

“Now, did you two have to shoot Saleon?” She asked, affecting the tone of a teacher scolding an errant pupil.

“No, ma’am.” Garrus replied.

“Good. Now you know.”

The man on the floor looked up at her with one squinted eye. “Who… are you?” he whimpered.

“Tall, dark, and trigger happy here is a Council Spectre,” she explained, pointing over her shoulder with her thumb at Nihlus. Nihlus’ shotgun had obliterated all outward evidence that Saleon had been shot by two people. It would take a forensic lab examining the projectiles to differentiate assault rifle rounds from shotgun pellets. Right now it looked like the kill shot was all Nihlus, and he had the authority to get away with it. “Blue-” she pointed at Garrus, “and I are bounty hunters.” She replied.

The man froze, but his other eye opened, which meant the pain had to be receding. “What are you going to do with me?” He asked.

“Nothing. While I assume you know what the good doctor was doing, it’s your lucky day, we have no intention of pursuing his employees. Help us out and play victim correctly and you’ll even get free medical care. Now, how many more are there on this ship?”

“Just…” the man groaned as he rose to his knees with great effort. “One more. She’s in the quarters, recuperating. The doctor had just removed a cloned liver from her.”

Shepard nodded. “That’s good.” Shepard was honestly glad that there were no more employees. Not only would it be easier to get free treatment for two rather than a dozen, but it meant that Saleon might have learned something from his previous brush with Garrus and C-sec; he kept his operation relatively small, perhaps even limited to clients like Lucie Bouchard.

“We still need to get this ship ready for a trip to the Citadel,” Nihlus said.
“Right,” Shepard replied. “We need to raise this ship out of Clugon’s thermosphere first, and then flag our ship for pickup.” She turned to the man still kneeling on the floor. “C’mon then, tough guy. You’re going to the bridge with me.”

The man grimaced but climbed to his feet, “Do I have a choice?” he asked.

“None,” Shepard replied cheerfully.

“Thought so,” he sighed.

Things got a little complicated after that. The Normandy may have been trailing the Fedele about a thousand kilometers back, but due to the Kowloon having only one air lock, getting Tali aboard to work the engines proved to be a bit of a logistical nightmare. It involved having the Normandy deploy their second Kodiak, and then Tali making a slightly dangerous EVA hop from its door into the door of their Kodiak, which was still attached to the back of the Fedele, and then getting through the airlock. Fortunately such things as safety lines existed, and even in the upper atmosphere there was gravity to control the momentum of things.

The shuttles were released and flew back to the Normandy via VI pilot, with Saleon’s so-called employees none the wiser to the ruse. They would remain convinced that she was just an eccentric bounty hunter in the employ of a Spectre.

Once Tali had gotten into the system, which had been predictably locked out by Saleon, she stayed at the engineering controls as Shepard and Nihlus went to the bridge, with Nihlus piloting, and Shepard supervising. Garrus’ job had been to stay with the two living individuals on the ship, to ensure that neither got any funny ideas, not that Shepard expected them. Both were the unemployed and desperate kind that would earn their bread with whatever work they could get, even this kind. She would not be surprised if Saleon had picked them up at Omega or something.

It took them five hours to work out all the kinks so Nihlus could put the Kowloon into FTL. The cargo ship was unwieldy and its engines could only muster eight light-years a day, and even that was fast because their modules were relatively light in terms of mass. A Kowloon with six ore hoppers full to the brim might only do five light-years a day. Some of the first generation FTL ships, those built starting in 2149, were already faster than that. This was why the job of long-haul cargo runs was not only mind-numbingly tedious, but dangerous. You were not outrunning anyone in a cargo ship. Thus Shepard settled in besides her mentor for the painful long haul, chewing on a ration bar all the same. This was going to be one painfully slow trip back to the Citadel.

The Fedele’s arrival on the Citadel, escorted by the Normandy no less, lit a proverbial fire under C-sec’s collective rear end. The patrol fleet dispatched two lightly-armed corvette-type craft to escort the Kowloon to a dock on Tayseri ward. After Nihlus made a show of handing the case over to their jurisdiction, the ship ended up taken over by a forensic team and a team of detectives responsible for these things. The Saleon case had been cold, but never entirely closed, just because the perpetrator had run off. Now that the man’s body and lab were back, it was up to C-sec to connect the dots between then and now.

Shepard knew that Garrus would have wanted to close the book on the matter, but it was out of his hands, because he was no longer a detective for C-sec. All he could do was hound the detectives as they worked, clearly intent on ensuring that nothing went wrong. Thus when she finally disembarked the Fedele and walked into waiting room attached to the secure dock where C-sec brought the
Kowloon to, she was genuinely surprised to see Garrus waiting for her.

“Com—… Shepard,” he greeted.

“Garrus,” she replied automatically, smiling. Just the fact that he used her name and not her title was enough to tell Shepard that there was something on his mind.

“I wanted to thank you one more time for doing this for me.” Garrus said, his voice dipping lower in register, part a whisper, part humble rumble.

“Think nothing of it,” Shepard replied. “I know this was a weight on your heart. I wouldn’t be a good friend if I chose not to help. And everything worked out in the end.”

“You are not angry that I had to shoot Saleon?” Garrus asked as he fell in step with her.

The Normandy had returned to her normal dock on Zakera ward, she was looking at another uncomfortably long Skycab ride across. Shepard shifted her helmet under her arm and turned to look over at Garrus, “Why would I be angry? We gave him every chance to surrender. I think Nihlus was right; Saleon chose suicide by law authority. You carried out your duties, protected your superior officer. There is nothing in there to be angry about. Do you expect me to lecture you on what you could have done different? Yea… you could have risked yourself to disarm him, sure. Did I want you to do it? Saleon dug his own grave, who are we to deny his erstwhile efforts?” That was rather macabre thing to say, all considering, but Shepard was beyond caring. Her brand of truth was rarely sugar coated.

Garrus hummed again, a quiet sort of assent. That caused Shepard to wonder if he had genuinely feared she would be angry. Shepard was not so petty as to get angry over how things worked out. Sure, she could not bring Saleon in alive, but to take it out on someone under her? Something clicked in her mind, some piece slid into place, and Shepard actually broke pace as she looked up at the former detective with a new sort of realization.

That was it, was it not? He did have people questioning his actions, decisions, and choices. His father, his superiors, and who knows who else. Of course he would expect it from her, as another of his superiors. He wanted to level the scales, understand where they stood. Things were muddled even more by the fact that she was human and he was a turian. They had an insurmountable barrier in all communication. He chose to come up to her to talk; he chose to stick his neck out for the potential axing.

“Commander?” Garrus asked. “Did I overstep my bounds?”

She smiled and fell back in step, “You’re perfectly fine.” She said. “I get it.” She got it more than he might even understand. They had that much in common; they were the ones who always seemed to screw up something by making the choices they did. The two of them would always have someone questioning everything they did. It was just a fact of life. “Now, I heard you use my name, don’t you start on the title again. Or I will call you Blue. In front of everyone. Especially Nihlus.”

Garrus laughed nervously, “Well I am wearing blue armor…” he said.

“The name is much cuter to us humans. The whole crew is likely to pick it up. You’ll never, ever, live it down.”

“Ah. Then with such a threat…"

“Good.” Shepard nodded. “Now I’m going back to the Normandy. I want my berth.”
“Right behind you, She-” even before he finished her name he stopped cold.

Shepard knew what was coming.

“Oh spirits. That did not come out right.” He asked. “My apologies, Commander! I meant my berth… you know, the one in Life Support. Not yours! I was not implying that we… you know.”

Shepard did the only thing she could, she laughed out loud at the ludicrous expression he had at that moment. Garrus looked like he wanted the deck plates to swallow him whole.

Chapter End Notes

**Author Notes:** I do want to write up some loyalty missions for the main cast, but for obvious reasons, Garrus’ own ME2 affair could not be readily adapted. So I worked with what came close to it in ME1. Let the best friend vibes roll!

**General Notes:**
Nothing in particular…

**Chapter Notes:**

**Thermosphere** – This would be the layer below the exosphere, where a planet’s atmosphere is now dense enough to behave as a gas. Here the gasses absorb the most solar radiation (atmospheric opacity and ionization) and thus temperatures increase with altitude (from the mesopause at the “bottom”, the coldest layer). The gasses also tend to stratify according to molecular weight (like oil and water).

**Atmospheric Opacity** – This is the measure of impenetrability to electromagnetic radiation of gasses. Different elements absorb different frequencies of EM radiation, a feature of their unique atomic spectrum (I’ll spare you the exact details). What an atmosphere can’t absorb creates a “window”. As an example, we know Earth’s thermosphere allows only “visible”, longer-wave UV, and shortwave radio to pass down to (and up from) the surface. It absorbs solar emissions in the harmful gamma, x-ray, and short-wave UV frequencies. Longwave radio is unique in that some frequencies actually diffract, thus surface broadcasting signals can bounce past the horizon and around obstacles (like mountain ranges).

**Thermopause** – The boundary line between the thermosphere and the exosphere.
Shepard had to contain her urge to grumble during the ride back to the Normandy. She had the mother of all helmet hair presses and a kink in her neck from sleeping on the Kowloon in full gear. She needed a shower, and wanted a real meal. Ration bars were really just calories; no one expected them to taste like anything. Sure the wrap could advertise a flavor, but it was a lot like bubblegum, the flavor vanished the second one started chewing. At least she was not a biotic; she could actually last for a day on two bars. A biotic would call two bars just one small meal.

First thing she did was dump her armor in the automatic refresher, a perk of doing a mission on a ship, and not on some dusty planet. Afterward she spoiled herself with a half-an-hour shower, and from there made her way to the mess hall. Even before she could open her mouth to ask Matthews what was on the menu, the cook shifted sideways and drew the lid off a small frying pan that had been sitting on the stove, revealing fresh scrambled eggs.

“They just finished about five minutes ago,” he said. “Thought you might want a favorite.”

“You’re spoiling me.” Shepard replied.

“It’s only spoiling if it takes longer than two minutes to make,” he said as he transferred the eggs from into a small ceramic bowl, which he laid down on a tray with a fresh bread roll already waiting. A cup of steaming hot coffee completed the meal, and he pushed the tray toward her and smiled, “Enjoy.”

“Thanks,” Shepard replied with a smile. Matthews merely turned back to putting away the freshly washed dishes he pulled from the washer. She moved across to the officer’s table in the mess. The dining area was not empty, despite the fact that the Normandy had just about pulled in and it was after breakfast proper. The crew stuck to their back table, discussing their latest jaunt. Shepard was not particularly keen on eavesdropping on their conversations this time. She let her mind turn to her own musings.

Thus she did not hear the XO’s cabin door open, so when a shadow fell over her, only by dint of training did she not jump like a skittish kitten. The shadow told her enough about who it was, as there were only two turians on the ship and only one of them would bother her now.

“Nihlus,” she said. The Spectre would not be bothering her if this was not important either. Shepard knew that much, and would not insult either of their intellects by asking the obvious question.
“Where’s the fire?” she wondered instead.

Nihlus hummed, but did not say a word, and that was as good a reply as Shepard needed. If Nihlus was not going to discuss something in the mess, then it was serious enough, and right now that meant one of three things: the Impera problem, something about the murder in the garden, or perhaps this was going to be the break in the order lull and Nihlus had a Spectre job for them to handle. She sighed, knowing there was no point in asking which of the three it was. “Give me ten minutes to finish my food.”

“Alright, you know where to find me,” Nihlus replied.

She watched his shadow move across the mess table and slide along the floor. Then she heard the XO’s cabin door open and close. Shepard shook her head and returned to her meal, never a dull moment. Well after the diversion on the Migrant Fleet and now the Fedele, she supposed it was high time for their luck to run out.

Shepard finished her meal as fast as she could, and never being one to drag her feet, she deposited the dishes in the washer and then made straight for the XO’s cabin. She was surprised that not only was the door not locked, but it opened for her. Apparently Nihlus went into the privacy controls and gave her an override, just so he would not have to reply to a door bell. She was positive that if anyone else stepped in front of that door, they would not have gotten the same courtesy. She found the Spectre seated at his desk, looking over something on his terminal.

“There you are.” He said without looking up.

“What’s going on? It’s not another murder on the Citadel, is it?” Shepard asked. That one would have been her least preferred option. With those words out of her mouth she paused as a thought struck her, it was probably an unseasonably cold day in an existing hell. Here she was thinking she would rather avoid dealing with a professional assassin more than she would rather avoid dealing with Saren. Still, it was true, right now she would rather go off chasing the Impera than deal with brutal murders.

“Nothing so mundane.” Nihlus replied.

Peculiar choice of wording, but it just went to show that in this instance they had an utterly different way of looking at things. “It’s not news about the Impera either?”

Nihlus looked up, “Not that either. The Impera is gone, and that is worse than it running amok.”

Shepard hummed, what did he mean by gone? She could think of at least two different nuances to ‘gone’, nuances that mattered.

“The Impera vanished. Not only is it not menacing anyone, but it has not even tried to refuel.” Nihlus elaborated, as if reading her mind.

“Interesting.” Shepard said. Driven by a mad AI or not, the bloody thing was still a ship.

“Saren is waiting for it to run out of antimatter. That is the surer thing to wait for, as the Trebia class is capable of skimming gas giants for helium and hydrogen.”

“But it cannot generate its own antimatter,” Shepard finished.

“Precisely.” Nihlus nodded.
Shepard hummed thoughtfully. Antimatter reaction propulsion was the standard for all first tier military fleets the galaxy over. It provided the best power and responsiveness, but only the military could afford the typical costs. Fact was that antimatter simply did not grow on trees, or form naturally in the atmosphere of some ball of hot gas.

The Alliance’s entire strategic antiproton supply was generated one particle at a time by colliders on the poles of Mercury. From there it was shipped to major Alliance-operated fuel depots. The location was intentionally chosen. If someone wanted to knock out the Alliance’s entire supply of antimatter, they would have to successfully invade the Sol system. Every military handled their production and distribution on similar terms. “The Impera can’t just… come up to a Hierarchy depot and request antimatter.”

“Saren knows that. There are sources of antimatter in the terminus, but… there is something else. The Trebia class’ main drive is dual-mode. If it runs out of antimatter, it can reconfigure to fire as a plasma torch. I told Saren it might never attempt to refuel.”

Shepard knew what that meant; the AI could decide to make do without. Shepard was not surprised; the Impera was the epitome of turian engineering, made reliable by planning for major contingencies. Although plasma torch propulsion was second to antimatter in terms of propulsive power, it offered freedom by using plasma from the ship’s fusion core. If the ship could also skim fuel gasses it would never run out of fuel. No wonder the AI decided to run for it. The Impera was free to go wherever it wished, and it would take a miracle to track it down.

It just left one side question, how in the name of all holy did Saren get his hands on the Impera in the first place? Was he so wealthy that he simply brought a decommissioned ship? Or had the government been footing his bills? Shepard knew now was not the time to be thinking that, and it definitely would not do to ask. “So if not violent murders or the Impera, what’s going on?” she asked.

Nihlus’ gaze slid to the floor, which was all Shepard needed to know that whatever it was, was probably uncomfortable for him. At the same time, if she was in this room, and it had nothing to do with one of the many issues already outstanding, it meant it had to be something new, and official on top.

“Shepard, this… situation is sensitive twice over.”

He was dithering. Just that was enough for Shepard to make what she thought were safe assumptions. “The Council is sending you on something clandestine, and… compromising.”

“No the whole Council,” Nihlus replied. “Just Sparatus.”

“Oh joy.”

Nihlus’ mandibles gave a wan little flick of a grin; odds were he knew where her sarcasm had come from. However the expression was gone as quickly as it came. “He got a message from the wife of the viceroy of Taetrus. She is being blackmailed by a group of separatists. Now, you should know that Taetrus is right on the edge of Hierarchy space, and it was one of the last places to surrender during the Unification War. Some Taetrians still do not care for Hierarchy norms, even as they operate within them. Because of that, Taetrian markings are only a step above going barefaced.”

“No offense Nihlus, but this seems like an internal matter,” Shepard said.

“It ought to be,” Nihlus replied. “The Taetrian colonial government would normally come down on the separatists, however, this time the blackmail is personal. Viceroy Pallas is an affluent individual
from a very old Taetrian family that has served the Hierarchy for centuries. Being second in command to the primarch of Taetrus, he has access to a lot of sensitive information.”

“Information that the separatists want.” Shepard said as realization dawned on her. “They don’t have the leverage to blackmail the viceroy, but they do have something on his wife, and they think she can get the information.” The Viceroy was a big deal in the government, so getting good leverage on him would not be easy. A botched attempt could mean being designated a danger to the government and then hunted down by the military. These fellows decided to go after the wife because they saw her as an easier target to coerce into cooperation. Shepard could only think of one scenario where that could work. The wife would have to be keeping something very important from the husband.

“Camilla Pallas is from another old Taetrian military family. She requested a Spectre’s involvement as a favor from Sparatus. She wants that specific group found and eliminated.”

That about confirmed it, it was not bizarre for someone from an old, prestigious family to stick some skeletons into a closet and then do about anything to keep them there. Shepard would bet Camilla knew these separatists, which would explain the leverage. “Why you? Does Councilor Sparatus want me in the know here?” Shepard asked.

“Normally... no. However, Camilla asked for me specifically for a reason, and...”

“That reason being?” Shepard asked. It had to be pretty big if Sparatus could not refuse her.

Nihlus looked up, and Shepard noted that his eyes were uncharacteristically bright and intense. There was anger there, but it was not aimed at her, she could tell because he would not actually look her in the eye. There was also hesitation. The way his hands balled into fists on the table also hinted at personal discomfort. Her gut told her that he would have rather avoided this conversation altogether. Why? If Camilla was being blackmailed personally, it made some twisted sense she would seek the aid of a Spectre, as they were outside the Hierarchy’s structure and carried a literal license to kill. If that was the reasoning, Camilla was quite the piece of work. Still, why Nihlus? Asking for a specific Spectre meant she trusted no other, and that suggested a previous acquaintance. Had Sparatus told her that Nihlus was mentoring a human now? If this situation was even half as explosive as it seemed, he would have had to mention it. Camilla clearly did not mind. So where was Nihlus’ personal discomfort coming from?

“Camilla Pallas is... well... her previous name was Kryik.”

Realization slammed Shepard all at once. A familial connection! Of course! Camilla would only trust her family with this.

“She is my... mother.” Nihlus finished somberly.

“I-” Shepard found herself momentarily stricken speechless. Then she knew that there was only one course of action for her. “You better not be thinking of going there alone, I won’t let you. So, what do you need me to do?” She asked as she sat down on the chair facing him, folded her arms on the desk, and waited.

Nihlus’ smiled and it was as if the tension drained from him. “Thank you, Shepard.”

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It took nearly twenty-four hours for Nihlus to arrange everything this trip to Taetrus would require. The worst part was the reactions she got from the crew when she had to tell them that she would be away from the Normandy for any number of days. Nihlus said the trip may take a week, but Shepard
was not going to put stock in estimates. Plans rarely worked according to a schedule. The Normandy was to return to Arcturus where it would be refueled while the crew enjoyed the time off. Admiral Hackett had not been pleased when she told him. It was hardly what Shepard would have wanted either, but she had no other options.

Foremost, Taetrus was a Hierarchy colony. The local government was unlikely to clear an Alliance warship to come in, even with a Spectre on board. Nihlus explained it as a political issue. Taetrus was constantly on the verge of declaring secession, or outright rebellion. A number of separatist groups espoused an isolationist, xenophobic ideology. The Hierarchy-aligned local government would not want to run the risk of the sighting of a foreign warship inciting them.

Of course, going in without permission was out of the question. If the Normandy was caught it would lead to an incident, one she would never live down. Beyond just that, they just could not do it. The Normandy’ IES systems would never keep the ship hidden totally and long enough. All it would take was one passenger shuttle that just happened to fly by with someone looking out a widow. They would report the clearly-Alliance ship in orbit just as soon as the shuttle touched down. The Normandy could not enter atmosphere and hide in some jungle either. Their entry would be noticeable on ground sensors; it was kind of hard to miss the glowing hot ship-shaped thing plowing through the atmosphere at four to five kilometers per second.

With things like that, and since Nihlus had never replaced the Defiant, he had to ask Sparatus for help with transport arrangements. In the end Shepard found herself in a perfect reversal of positions, the only human onboard a Hierarchy frigate, and barred from the CIC and engineering. The practice of turian Spectres hitching a ride with Hierarchy vessels was common enough that there was a due protocol on the books. A Hierarchy ship having to transport an active Alliance soldier was an entirely different matter, so the frigate’s captain had to improvise. Shepard was under no delusion regarding her status. She was allotted a hot bunk with the junior officers, which meant the captain wanted someone to keep an eye on her at all times.

She also had to travel light, with as few identifiers as possible, which meant no Alliance issue fatigues. For the time being she had to make do with simple civilian pants, tee shirts, and athletic shoes. No one would think she was black ops just from looking at that, though it did nothing to conceal her muscle tone, which could identify her as military. All of it was compact-packed into a single large duffel bag while her armor and weapons were in a reinforced mobile locker. Mobile lockers like hers were a luxury item, but well worth the cost, having rubberized wheels and a small eezo core that reduced the apparent mass of it and its contents.

In the end, the Palaven day she spent on board the frigate was an enlightening experience. Her meals for the time being would be nothing more than ration packs, Shepard would not sing their praises for taste, but she had long ago abandoned any notion of fussiness. What mattered was that they fueled her body. She ate her meals seated across from Nihlus, even as he enjoyed a galley-cooked, hot meal befitting a senior officer.

It was also hard to miss the fact that Nihlus proved popular with the females, as at least two tried to flirt with him. Shepard did not pay any of it much heed until later in the evening when she went to her designated bunk room, shared with three junior officers. Her roommates for the time being were very open-minded. The communications officer, who insisted she call him by his first name, Caelus, was chatty, into cinema with the devotion of an artist, and loved talking about his ideas. She had spent an hour talking to him after lunch, and could say that underneath his predatory appearance lay a warm heart. Then there was Victorion, the power systems engineer. He was the quiet, intellectual type, and a voracious reader. His current interest was Earth literature, what he called an expansive, unexplored frontier that would take even his reading speed a while to get through. Shepard ended up in an hour-long animated discussion with him on the finer points of Sun Tzu’s Art of War. Victorion
was somewhat surprised that humans could go back and forth between the ruthless efficiency that he
called typical of his people, and the crafty guile that was all Salarian.

That conversation only ended when Caelus came into the room. The way he butted his forehead
against Victorion’s was all Shepard needed to see to know that the two were more than merely
roommates. Her expression of surprise showed because both asked if something was wrong.
Shepard, ever the one to make things awkward, had to explain the source of her surprise. Both
deemed human custom weird to forbid such a natural thing. She pressed the point that she had been
merely surprised at how open they were about it, not that they offended her somehow.

Mara, the ordnance officer, the third of the junior officers who shared the room, outright laughed
when Caelus told her about it later. Then she proceeded to needle Shepard with the suggestion that if
she really wanted to experience the turian way of doing things, Caelus and Victorion would be
happy to oblige. It took a good thirty seconds for what Mara meant to sink in, and that was the first
time in a long while that Shepard was rendered utterly speechless, much to Mara’s enjoyment.
Caelus told Mara to have more tact when she said such things. Suspiciously he did not bother
denying the substance of the female’s suggestion.

There had never been a prior instance of Shepard contemplating the merits of a hasty retreat, possibly
faking being summoned by Nihlus, as she did at that moment. It was then that she remembered the
attention Nihlus had gotten; did she want to bumble out of the frying pan and into the fire if he had
actually taken any of the females up on their word? With Caelus and Victorion so openly
affectionate, it really did not seem out of the realm of possibility that he would. The only thing left to
her was to try and talk out of the situation without going red like a tomato. In the end, Mara had
picked up on her discomfort and apologized for putting her on the spot.

Shepard shook the awkwardness off, realizing a moment too late that she should have expected
something of the sort from the Hierarchy. A lax attitude about sex was to be expected when they had
a lax attitude to everything else. It was not uncommon for turians cut loose on shore leave to be quite
the libertines. Mara’s suggestion was not even the first time she had been propositioned. There had
been that one time, back while she was still in the ICT, when her team had been on furlough on the
Citadel. They had all decided to take the evening off, and a soldier on shore leave had basically
sidled up to her and started flirting. It was flattering really, but Shepard was simply not interested in
casual affairs.

In the end, she also discovered that sleeping in the same room with three turians was hardly easy.
Both Caelus and Victorion snored, waking a light sleeper like her often enough. Shepard was not
going to be the complaining guest, but she was quite a bit tired when the frigate finally landed at the
Vallum spaceport.

Taetrus was an archipelago planet, with lots of island chains of varying sizes, and the biggest was
slightly larger than Australia. The planet’s climate was such that even the poles were temperate,
while the equatorial belt was hotter than the Sahara or Gobi. With relatively few areas that
precipitation could not reach, even the hottest areas were humid, and lush with super hardy plants
that thrived in the fifty degree average day temperatures with rainy seasons lasting nearly half the
planet’s orbital year. The oceans teemed with levo-amino life, but creatures on land and in the air
were smaller and less evolved. Nevertheless, the Council deemed the planet likely to evolve
something sentient, eventually. This designation meant the Hierarchy had to take some care not to
destroy the native environment with foreign species.

Vallum, the colonial capital, was situated on that big island. The city was a marvel of engineering,
even if it was rather plain in aesthetic terms. Turians did not bother with excess ornamentation or
variety for variety’s sake. The buildings were all variations on the same rectangle spire with walls of
glass all around. The planet’s temperature range dictated things would be as lightly-colored as possible, as dark colors would absorb extra heat. The only buildings that could be described as decorated were the civic structures like the Radiatum, the colonial parliament, the Signis, or executive building, the seat of the colony’s primarch, and the Laudatix, the ministry of citizenship ranking. Even then they bore simple, austere decorations, limited to flags, banners, and statuary to honor important figures. It was not turian custom to carve decorations into a space just because it happened to look a little bare.

Since they arrived on a military vessel they did not need to go through all the same security checks civilians were subject to. The frigate also docked in a separate terminal, designed for the military. The name of the ship on which they were arriving apparently passed to Camilla, and there was a vehicle and driver waiting for them practically at the terminal door. The first thing that leapt at Shepard was that the driver had the same complex markings as Nihlus, though his were white-silver hue, where Nihlus’ were a warmer off-white shade. Other than that he was of an earth-brown coloration, with ochre-colored eyes. The second point that jumped at her was the fact that his right mandible was missing a little piece off the front edge, as if it had been broken -or shot- off in the past.

The hour-long drive took them outside Vallum and into what could be described as the countryside around the city proper. Here nature had not been banished in its entirety, and the houses grew both in size and how much space they occupied. Shepard could only marvel at how fort-like they were, with four meter stone fences, cameras, and robust gates. The house itself was almost never visible from the gate proper.

The Pallas family house was even bigger than that. It could rightly be described as a mansion. The car stopped in front of the gate so that the driver could comm the guards beyond. After a security check, including a scan of the vehicle for what Shepard assumed were bombs under the frame, the large gates finally opened so they could drive in. The driveway wound through expansive grounds decorated with rather beautiful gardens of native plants and trees. The foliage was so thick that they had to clear all of it for the house to become visible. For all the natural beauty, the building was rather plain and ugly, nothing more than a large white shoebox with three levels, a flat roof, and enormous bulletproof glass windows covered up with plain white blinds. Their car turned the last ninety degree bend and stopped in front a flagstone paved walkway that led to a large pair of doors. It was also hard to miss the armed guards strolling along the building’s façade.

As Shepard moved to climb out of the car, she noticed that Nihlus had pulled out a pair of dark sunglasses which attached to the zygomatic spokes of his fringe. She was not going to ask, because that would draw undue attention, but it was such an atypical thing that it made her wonder. The driver assured them that their gear would be taken up into the house, so they should proceed inside, as they were expected.

One of the guards opened the door for them as soon as they drew close, “Spectre, Commander. Mistress Pallas is expecting you,” he said curtly.

It jumped at Shepard that he used titles; giving no indication that he knew Nihlus was said mistress’ son. The curiosity was enough to send her mind into theory mode, trying to fit in all the facts into some sort of image.

Once past the doors, they entered a large foyer, equally devoid of excess decoration, but no expenses had been spared on the materials. The flooring was clearly some sort of super polished, glossy, expensive white stone with just a hint of blue flecking in it. It had to be locally sourced, but it seemed to be analogous to marble or granite. The guard led them to a side room immediately on the right.

“Wait here,” he said before turning around and walking off.
Nihlus stood by the door, arms crossed over his chest. Somehow in that moment he looked ready to breeze out at the first sign of something he did not like, which considering how he never mentioned his mother before, combined with the change of her name, and these surroundings, it seemed to hint that there was something considerably less than warm affections between the two.

Shepard chose to focus on her surroundings. The room was opulent, with more of that glossy rock on the floor. The walls were warmly colored a sort of caramel cream color, which balanced out the white flooring. Half-sitting room, half-office, much of the room was dominated by a large sectional sofa that formed a U shape, with the open end facing a heavy-looking desk at the back. Behind the desk, the wall was decorated with three banners. One bore the insignia of the Hierarchy, but the other two Shepard could not recognize. She would guess one had to be the official signet of Taetrus, with the master of the house being the colony’s viceroy and all, and the third seemed to be a military sigil, so maybe the master’s former legion or unit? Under the banners was a nice simple sideboard table which contained liquor bottles and glasses. On top of this table was a rack that held up a gleaming, rather beautiful curved ornamental sword.

The room’s back door opened and a female turian walked in. She had rich mocha-colored plates, with the Taetrian markings, though without the sweeps and middle line that decorated Nihlus’ long fringe. She also wore the most opulent clothing Shepard had ever seen on a turian, a beautiful midnight blue tunic outfit with white pants and matching boots. There was an elaborate drape of material around the cowl, and paneling at the front and back which vaguely resembled a skirt. Simple silver-thread geometric embroidery decorated the collar, cuffs, and edging on the tunic and panels.

She stopped in front of the desk and her eyes turned to her son. That was all it took for Shepard to realize why Nihlus chose to wear sunglasses indoors. Her eyes were the exact same shade of new-leaf green, a singularly unique color that Shepard had not seen on any other turian. The female had not told her guards that the guests coming in included her son, and Nihlus clearly did not want anyone making the connection either.

“Welcome to my home, Spectre Kryik. Commander Shepard.” She greeted calmly. “Come, have a seat. Make yourselves comfortable. I can not imagine the journey from the Citadel on such short notice was pleasant.”

Shepard glanced toward Nihlus from the corner of her eye, but he did not move a millimeter.

“The Commander and I received ample rest during our journey, and we are not so soft as to require more. I would like to know the details of this situation you deem important enough to warrant Spectre involvement.” Nihlus said, his voice right then could have beat Saren in terms of iciness.

Camilla’s reaction was instantaneous; the cold tone her son affected caused her mandibles to draw up against her chin. This was clearly not the reunion she had been hoping for. “As you wish,” she said. “Computer, engage soundproofing protocols.”

There was a soft beep from the ceiling to acknowledge that the system recognized the request. Camilla leaned on the desk and sighed. “Taetrus is on the verge of a civil war, Spectre.”

“It has always been on the verge of a civil war,” Nihlus replied. “I was told you had trouble with a particular group of separatists, a group that you wished to see eliminated.”

Shepard watched Camilla’s tension mount as her son continued to treat her like she was something less than a perfect stranger. It was hard not to feel bad for her right then. Something truly awful must have happened to make him turn so cold toward his mother.

“Nihlus, it is Nerion and his… friends. You remember Nerion?”
The Spectre remained silent, or perhaps his reply was out of Shepard’s auditory range. All she could do was stand and listen, this conversation was not one where she should become involved.

“They were there during this year’s Unification Day parade, and they recognized me. Nerion threatened to tell Lucian about my past… unless I gave him some documents Lucian keeps on his terminal. Those are state secrets, and I know what they will be used for. I will not be a traitor to the Hierarchy, nor will I supply Facinus with material with which to justify their cause.”

Shepard had to remind herself not to react, not to show a since ounce of the surprise she felt. Her initial suspicions might have been an oracle’s vision of the future: vague but still oddly on the nose at the same time.

“That is what this is about? You want me to hunt down father’s old friends because they threatened your idyllic life?” Nihlus was angry in an instant.

“Nerion was not your father’s friend!” she snapped, voice rising. “Not in the end. I have-”

“I do not want to know!” Nihlus interrupted. “I am not a mercenary you can hire, nor will I do this for you just because you happen to be my mother!”

“Nihlus…”

“No. Everything that I might have owed you became moot the day you got me to board that transport to Palaven. Seventeen years have passed, mother. Seventeen years without a single attempt at contact... and now this?”

Shepard had never heard Nihlus display this much outrage before. Still, the rejection had hit hard. If turians could shed tears, Camilla Pallas would have started to weep right then and there. Shepard could see every ounce of raw anguish in the tremble of her mandibles.

“This is nothing more than your attempt at removing a personal inconvenience, using someone who you think owes you. But you are wrong. I owe you nothing. This was a colossal waste of time, time Shepard and I could have spent investigating matters of galactic importance. We are done here.”

Nihlus continued.

Shepard could only wonder whether he chose not to see the despair his words caused, or if he actually hated Camilla.

“Come Shep-”

The door swooshed open behind them, and Nihlus went silent in an instant.

“Mother, I… Oh. I am sorry.”

Shepard turned and blinked in surprise as she noted the turian youth in the doorway. His plating was the same mocha hue as Camilla’s, but his eyes were a rather bright shade of gold. Shepard could not be certain, but while he was not a child, he did not seem to be a full adult either. His fringe had not yet extended to its full adult length and he bore no colonial markings.

“Octavian Pallas, what have I told you about coming into this room when the soundproofing protocols are engaged?” Camilla asked.

“I am sorry.” The boy replied, bowing his head. “My tutor is late. I though you might be talking to him. I mean I... well… you know.” He mumbled.
Nihlus turned his gaze back on his mother. Shepard thought the sunglasses were the only thing in the way of what must have been a glare. Seventeen years out of contact. That was some period of time, even in this day and age of people routinely living to be one hundred and thirty. Nihlus mentioned a transport to Palaven, so Shepard could guess it was the day he entered boot camp, age fifteen. She could do the math; he was around thirty-two years old, a detail that he never mentioned, which she filed away. Now he discovered he also had a half-brother who was under fifteen years of age. Shepard could suddenly understand his hostility and reluctance to get involved. Nothing about this situation made Camilla look like parent of the year.

“It would seem you have a family emergency to handle. Now if you kindly point us to where we may reclaim our luggage, we will be on our way.” Nihlus said, perfectly professional and cool.

“I had guest rooms prepared for you on the second floor,” Camilla replied, her voice flat and devoid of flanging. She was consciously suppressing the sub-vocals that would give her away.

Nihlus nodded. “Come, Shepard. We are leaving.” With that said he breezed out of the room, past the stunned youth in the doorway. Shepard blinked, wordless and uncertain of what to do. For a long moment she was rooted to the spot, but then she realized she could not stand there, making like a fish, all day. “Excuse me,” she muttered and bolted after the retreating Spectre.

Her partner was already halfway to the grand staircase that led upstairs, practically bristling like an angry cat. Shepard had to run to catch up to him a couple steps up.

“Nihlus…”

He paused, one hand on the railing as he looked over his shoulder at her. “I know.”

Shepard blinked, surprised again.

“I know what you will say. I can not refuse to do this, but… Shepard…”

Shepard could only come up to stand on the same step beside him. “That’s only part of what I would say.”

The Spectre held up his hand, “Not on the stairs.”

“Right,” Shepard replied.

He continued up the steps until they reached the second floor landing. Here the corridor branched to either side, continuing into the house’s wings, though the staircase wound around to the third floor. An armed, fully armored guard stood at the base of the steps leading up. It did not take much to figure out that the third floor was off limits to guests.

“Spectre Kryik, Commander Shepard. Mistress Pallas had ordered rooms be made for you in the eastern wing, the last doors on your left. Your gear has been moved there already.” The guard said calmly.

“Thank you,” Shepard replied, flashing him a smile.

He merely inclined his head in a sort of semi-bowing nod.

Nihlus said nothing as he turned to the left and began to walk, leaving Shepard no other option than follow him at a trot. He stopped between the last doors at the end of the corridor. Both stood open, allowing them to look inside. Shepard recognized her gear locker and duffel at the base of the bed in the room on her left, so she did not need to look to her right to know that would be the room given to
Nihlus.

The Spectre did not say another word as he practically stomped toward his things. Shepard followed, idly swiping her hand across the control panel by the frame to close the door.

“Go ahead, speak your piece. It will not change my decision. I will not be Camilla’s tool.” Nihlus said as soon as the door closed, as if he had been listening for it.

“Really?” She asked. “Why should I say anything if you are going to be bull-headed?”

Nihlus turned right around, “Should I change my mind? Really? Seventeen years, Shepard! Not a single message. Not a single call. She forgot I existed until she needed someone to clean up a mess.”

The flange in his voice increased, positively rumbling like an approaching storm.

The translator interpreted it by deepening his tone. This close the effect it had on her surprised her, a little quiver of a shudder raced down her spine. Shepard wondered what she would have heard, were her ears capable of hearing his true sub-vocals. Nevertheless, she moved closer. “Nihlus, shouting at me is not going to help.”

That seemed to deflate him, his gaze slid to the floor, and he turned away. “You are right. You do not deserve that. I apologize.”

She nodded. “I know it’s not me you’re mad at. Now… let me say this. First, I admit, this is one ugly mess. You’re right to be angry. Yes, what she wants you to do is very personal and self-serving. State secrets… hah. She wants this Nerion dead because he is threatening her. You are the only person she can trust with this. Then… the seventeen years… she’s hardly winning parent of the year.”

“If you agree with me, why are we even having this conversation?” Nihlus asked as he turned to walk away, approaching the window.

Shepard followed, getting a little closer this time. She thought that since his voice lost the undertone of bristling anger, she might be making some progress. “Because, Nihlus. I do not think you want to reject her.”

“How can you say that?” He demanded. “I have every reason to reject her!”

“Every personal reason, yes. Still, you know that despite it all, there is a genuine issue here as well. This Nerion does want state secrets, the blackmail is real.” She paused there. How did one say what she wanted to say with any sort of tact? “I realize she… hurt you. Deeply. But I also know that underneath that pain, your sense of duty is telling you something entirely different. You know that leaving is not the right thing to do.” Shepard whispered.

Nihlus clenched both fists, and Shepard knew she had touched the truth.

“I think that your hurt heart is telling you to leave.” She continued, looking out the window at the sprawling back gardens beyond. “But your mind… Nihlus… what starts as blackmail rarely stays at blackmail. Were it just her… she has guards, and this place is a fortress!”

“Why should you be surprised at that? This is the official residence of the viceroy after all.” Nihlus mumbled.

“Yea, alright…” she turned back to him, “But that’s not the point. The point is that… it’s not just her, is it? It’s Octavian too. What if they go after him to hurt her? I do not think you want an innocent getting hurt because of this. Whatever your feelings are for your mother… Octavian is… he might be
caught up in a mess that he knows nothing about.”

Nihlus sighed, “Shepard, you are too reasonable for your own good. Sometimes I hate how clearly you see every situation… other times…”

“That’s a new way to look at it. Well, if clarity is what you want, clarity is what you’ll get. Though, truthfully I just do not understand why Camilla did not go through the official channels. You said she was from a rather affluent family, and suffice to say she’s hardly naïve. She could make Nerion sound like the world’s biggest liar in front of her kin and Lucian alike. A lying rebel trying to blackmail the wife of a politician? She would be the victim.”

“They have blackmail of the sort she really would not want getting out. It is as you say, if she told Lucian the truth, nothing would happen. Her family knows the truth. Still, that would mean Lucian knew the truth too.”

“But what could be so bad that she would go to these lengths to cover it up?” Shepard wondered.

“Shepherd, she does not want Lucian to know that before she became the mother of his child, she had a bondmate, and another child. She is ashamed of both me and my father.”

“Really?” Shepard asked.

“She told you that?” Shepard asked.

“No. She never talked about her family. I had to look up my ancestry myself.”

Shepard sighed; this was messed up beyond all reasonable limits. Hearing Nihlus talk about his family in these terms, it was hard to miss the fact that he felt rejected, cast aside, and unwanted. Nihlus indeed had every reason to want to storm out of this place and forget any of this had ever happened. Yet he also knew it would be the wrong to storm out. Sparatus would probably have his head afterwards, but Shepard thought there was something else as well, something more important, more personal. Deep inside his big, hurt heart, there seemed to be a small candle of hope, still burning, still holding out for reconciliation with his mother, despite everything that had happened.

Shepard placed a hand on his upper arm, drawing his attention. “Nihlus, it is not my place to say this, after all I’m just here to take orders, but I understand.” She could feel his gaze on her despite the sunglasses. To her surprise he leaned down a little, Shepard felt her heart jolt into her throat.

“Thank you, Shepard. For someone who is just here to take orders,” he chuckled wanly, his voice rumbling so close to her that she could feel the warm wash of his exhale. “You are the only thing keeping me from making everything worse.” He whispered. “Were it not for your level head, I would have stormed out and… who knows what would have happened.”

She nodded, it was the only thing she could do right now. Her heart was suddenly lodged in her throat and beating like a jackhammer. The moment passed and he sighed. But the jackhammer shifted gears to pound even faster. What the heck was wrong with her? Here he was spilling his guts, and she was reacting to the sound of his voice like this? She could not help but be aghast with
herself.

He chose to move her hand off his arm, “I think I would have regretted it before we even returned to the Citadel.” He admitted as he finally stepped away. His warm fingers lingered around hers for a moment too long.

Shepard thought it was merely so that he would not look like he tossed her hand off. She drew a breath she did not realize she had not taken in a while. Why was his proximity affecting her like this, right now? What was wrong with her? She had to mentally shift tracks; there would be another time to ponder her sudden stupidity. She had to focus on the situation. She had to help Nihlus, and not worry about something as trite as a trick of her mind. It had to be a temporary shorting of some errant synapses.

She now had the ultimate proof that Nihlus was dithering between his pride and whatever feelings he had buried deep within him for seventeen years. To be sure, she knew something of his pride. He was the turian who snapped at Garrus for even hinting that he might be a traitor of any sort. He carried himself aloofly, and always asserted some form of hierarchical dominance over Garrus. Yet now, she was seeing a softer, vulnerable, emotional side of him. The difference was stark. It made her wonder, was his pride nothing more than just a defensive mechanism to keep people at arm’s reach? Was Nihlus so wary of further hurt that he would act like a colossal git just protect his heart?

Shepard could not help but become a little indignant at the thought. She did not enjoy seeing her friends hurt, physically or emotionally. When it happened, her first reaction was to spring to their defense, and so she was a little bit angry with Camilla as well. Still, Shepard was not about to let that sort of anger dominate her reasoning.

It was a simple fact of life that situations rarely could be encompassed by a single point of view. There had to be another side to the story, Camilla’s side. Nihlus was likely still too angry to face Camilla again, professionally, but he now was less likely to walk. So that meant they needed the details. Camilla had to know where they could find the ones blackmailing her. She would not have approached Sparatus and asked for a Spectre without having the information. Shepard was not willing to believe she was something other than a shrewd, cunning female. So with Nihlus still cooling down, this sort of administrative task had to be handled by her. “Should I go and find out what Camilla knows about the whereabouts of our target?” She chose to sound professional, detached, the image of a Spectre in training.

“Please.”

Shepard nodded and turned on her heel. He sounded positively despondent right then. The anger was definitely gone, leaving behind a sort of hollow resignation. It was a feeling she was familiar with. It came after each time she had gone off the rails in anger. Nihlus would bounce back, she knew that much. For now though, she needed to handle the moving of small stones, before they could get on with moving the mountain.

As it turned out, tracking down the mistress of the house was no easy feat. After checking the meeting room, Shepard was directed by one of the armed guards to try the back garden. The entrance to which lay through a set of bullet and likely grenade-proof transparent doors. Throughout it all she could not help but take stock of the strong security measures to be seen everywhere, if one had a trained eye. The floor-plan eliminated as much open space as possible, and that meant heavy doors everywhere. These could be locked at a single command and would slow any invaders for at least a while. There were also armed guards on both sides of every doorway that led outside.
The rest of the security measures were very cleverly laid out to be as unnoticeable as possible. There were blinking motion detectors tucked in the vents. She thought she might have even seen a wire laid into the grout between the floor’s individual panels. It had pointed at a banner on the wall, and Shepard suspected that there was some unpleasant surprise behind said banner. She would not put it past turians to install turrets in the walls. The house was indeed an official residence. She idly wondered just how much more extreme the security at the official residence of the primarch would be.

The back garden was as densely planted as the front grounds. Trees eliminated lines of sight for snipers, as well as any chance of air-dropping infantry from shuttles. There was no pool, but the small building peeking from the trees on her right had fenced in lanes attached. It took Shepard a moment to realize that instead of a pool, the house had a shooting range. The grounds of the house were certainly expansive enough to house a rather long range.

Before Shepard could really get a good feel for the place, she spotted the mistress of the house walking the paths meandering in the midst of the flower garden planted immediately at the end of the rear deck. The guard standing at the door did not stop her, but she was acutely aware that he was watching her. Nevertheless, Shepard proceeded down the steps leading from the deck.

The garden was absolutely suffused with all manner of plants, but Shepard could see a whole different aesthetic governing how it was laid out. There was a noticeable absence of what she would call ‘natural’ setting. The plants grew in perfect manicured lines, divided by color, and likely origin. The hedges looked like they had been cut with the aid of a level. It was definitely a place that said there were resources allocated to its maintenance, and it had a certain beauty to it, but it lacked a natural feel. A professional team of landscapers could have probably re-arranged things to be absolutely breath-taking, without adding or taking away a single thing. Shepard wrote it off as a turian aesthetic, orderliness was more important to them than the romantic elements.

“Commander,” Camilla greeted as she kneeled to inspect the bottom branches of a shrub that bore rather beautiful, pitcher-shaped purple flowers.

“I’m sorry to interrupt,” what else could she say right then? It hardly seemed appropriate to just go into the topic. All in all, she might have overstated her capacity to do this.

“I take your continued presence to be a sign that the Spectre has reconsidered his initial opinion on the matter?” Camilla asked as she rotated first one branch, then another, inspecting the underside of the shrub’s leaves for something.

“He has.” If the woman wanted to be coldly professional, Shepard could do coldly professional.

Camilla sighed, “Commander, there is no need to excess formality between us. I suspect I have you to thank for things. He has always been… strong-willed.”

Shepard was surprised; the cold professionalism certainly did not last long. Then again, she could understand why it could not last long. Camilla needed allies if she was to get what she wanted from her son. “Strong-willed or proud?”

Camilla chuckled as she reached for the pruning shears in the toolbox next to her, “Oh. Truthfully could be both, as those are Kryik family traits.” She said, casually snipping off a few discolored leaves. “Nihlus takes much from his father. The plate colors, the fringe… only his eyes are his mother’s.”

Shepard could not help but note the way the woman avoided saying anything that to outsider ears would reveal that she was at all related to the Spectre. Gardening right now was an act too, a mask of
perfect civility. Everyone was meant to look at her and see that she had no personal interest in any of the events happening. Was Nihlus right; was she that ashamed of him? The fact that she seemed to open with this topic said otherwise. Shepard did not know what to make of any of it, but some part of her wanted to press for whatever she could get, just to see how far it would take her. “He must have been a great man,” she whispered, intentionally baiting to see what the reaction would be.

“He was.” Camilla sighed wistfully.

Shepard was stunned, the aloof mistress façade crumbled like a house of cards.

“You must think the worst of me. I am perfectly aware of how this must appear to an outsider… the uncaring parent who remembers their child only when they need something from them. You have to understand, Commander, I have made decisions I am not proud of, decisions I had to make.”

If Camilla wanted absolution, Shepard was not the person she ought to have been talking to. At the same time, she knew that Nihlus would not listen until he was ready to listen.

“Octavian Kryik was born on Taetrus, but his family had abandoned the Hierarchy with the fist waves of Taetrian unrest. You should have seen him. He was unusually tall, even for one of my species… well, you have seen his son.” She chuckled. “We chanced to be at the same bar, and my friend was late, so I decided a conversation could not hurt. Much later, after my next tour of duty, I found out that he started frequenting the bar, asking the bartender about me.”

Shepard listened without saying a word, though she squirreled away the important bits. Octavian Kryik. That could not be a coincidence; Camilla had named her second son after the spouse she had lost. Was it just a sentiment, or was there more to it? Either way, it was a rather compromising thing to do. Camilla clearly intended to keep that tidbit from Lucian at all costs. More than that, the revelation said something about this second marriage; it did not seem to involve genuine deep love. More than that, Shepard thought she understood why Camilla insisted on Nihlus becoming involved. If this Nerion knew Octavian Kryik, it made sense why Camilla would want to keep the situation in the family. The fact that Nihlus had become a Spectre; well that was just a happy bonus.

“I thought my parents would never approve, so I made the only true mistake of my life. I allowed Octavian to convince me to leave with him.” She paused to move to another plant, but Shepard could see the tremble in her hands. “I should have… told my father the truth. He would have understood. Eventually he might have even helped.”

Shepard would reserve judgment, right then the facts still squared on both sides. The only difference between mother and son was perception.

“Nihlus was born on a small outpost in this sector. It was frequented by mercenaries, but its main purpose was mining the planet it orbits. It was not an ideal life, but it was ours, and we had not sunk so low as to go to Omega. Have you been to Omega, Commander?”

“I have.” Shepard replied.

“Then you know.” Camilla picked up the shears again and continued to trim off discolored leaves. “We got by for sixteen years, until the fateful night. Octavian got into an argument at work… I was at the end of my shift when I got the call. The medic… oh spirits. The medic told me right on the comm, that his injuries were severe and he did not think Octavian would pull through.”

“I’m sorry,” Shepard whispered.

Camilla’s hands tightened on the shears, “It was Nerion. Had to be. They were on the same shift, and
they argued a lot. You see, they never quite agreed on the direction Taetrus should take. Octavian always believed that the Hierarchy could change… that individuals within its structure could lead to even the most unlikely of changes, gradually, as had been our way for centuries. Nerion was simply unwilling to wait any longer. He was a radical, a separatist, even then. That night, I think he let that hopper dump the raw ore on Octavian. Out of anger and spite.”

Now this Nerion was pushing Camilla to compromise the Hierarchy. The story fit together quite well. Camilla seemed genuine, but there was still the question of why had she lost contact with her son for seventeen years. It seemed like the last time they had seen each other was when Nihlus had departed for boot camp, at sixteen? That number jumped at her. Was he actually sixteen when he entered the Hierarchy military? If he was, then he would have been a year older than every other youth there, and he might have grown up not expecting to enter the military at all. The change could not have been easy on him, which might explain some of the bitterness. Shepard wanted to ask, to make sure she understood correctly, but at the same time, she knew it had nothing to do with the case and everything to do with her own curiosity. Nihlus might not want her to know, he might not want anyone to know. The right thing to do was to wait for a chance to ask him personally.

“You are probably wondering what happened next, no?” Camilla asked.

“A little, yes, but… if you do not wish to talk about it, then…” Shepard trailed off.

Camilla set the shears back in the toolbox and rose to her full height. “I think you need to know,” she said as she turned around. “Maybe… maybe you can be of some influence on Nihlus. I… did not wish for this rift between us, but I did what I had to do.” She motioned for Shepard to follow as she moved toward the nearest stone bench.

Shepard followed and perched on it, right next to Camilla. The stone felt warm, still radiating the heat of the sun, even as Mactare moved westward toward setting, and its light began to shift to the violets of twilight.

“After Octavian died… I became aware of just how alike my son was to his father. Nerion came by after the funeral, and Nihlus took offense to his tone. I barely kept a fight from happening then and there. But from that moment I began to fear for Nihlus’ life. I was afraid he would cross the wrong person, but more than that, I was afraid that he would join the mercenaries. That is not a future I wanted for my son. I… contacted my father. He arranged for Nihlus to train on Palaven, even if he started a year late. A family physician forged a record of a childhood illness, just enough to explain the year of difference. Nihlus got the right to wear the markings of Taetrus, but I had to order him on that transport. He has never forgiven me.”

The details squared, and Shepard could even see why Camilla thought she had done the right thing. There were few other options left to her. What more, Shepard could easily see Nihlus being unhappy with the arrangement, after all it sounded like everything had been arranged without his input. What sort of willful young adult took that sitting down? Nihlus was still prone to pride and impulsivity sometimes. He still scoffed at protocol, poking fun at it every time he could, especially its biggest embodiment on the Normandy, Garrus.

None of it explained why Camilla let seventeen years pass, but then Shepard idly wondered if there was more to that deal with Camilla’s father that set Nihlus on the path to becoming who he was. Maybe Nihlus was wrong about some of the details, but there was one assumption he made that could still be accurate. Camilla’s proud general father might have been less than eager to welcome back a daughter who had run off with a separatist, no matter how moderate he had been. Politicians went out of their way to conceal the misdemeanors of their children. Shepard knew better than to ask, it was really one more thing that Nihlus ought to ask his mother. “Thank you for telling me all of
this… but much of this… Nihlus needs to hear it from you. Not me.”

“I would love to tell him, but he can be as stubborn as a krogan!”

Shepard laughed, “As someone who has worked with him and a krogan… that’s… a very astute comparison.” Of course she would not want Wrex hearing it. He might become offended if someone compared a turian to him. Wrex did have his moments of arrogance. Shepard idly wondered what her crew must be up to, right about now, including Wrex. Somehow she doubted unleashing him on Arcturus was a good idea.

“I am glad Nihlus has a friend in you, Commander. I can tell you care for him, enough to find me, and enough to listen.”

“Nihlus is my friend; I’d do anything for my friends.” Shepard replied.

“I can see that,” Camilla smiled.

“Truthfully though, this was not exactly the first thing I wanted.” Not entirely a lie. “Nihlus sent me here to do the… ugh… recon. He wants to know more about the situation.”

“Oh. Of course. What do you wish to know, Commander?”

“I assume that you contacted Councilor Sparatus only after some preliminary investigation.” Shepard ventured.

“Of a sort. Unfortunately my ability to pursue matters without raising concerns is limited…”

“Well, limited though it may be, whatever you have will be a starting point. Nihlus and I would not want to start at the very beginning when we could simply run the leads you were unable to.”

“Yes. You are right. Please follow me; I will give you what I have.” Camilla said as she got up from her seat.

“Alright,” Shepard replied. What more could she say?

Half an hour later Shepard found Nihlus still in his room on the second floor. She was encouraged by the fact that his armor case had been moved and set upright in the corner, where he could access its contents quickly and efficiently. She had yet to move hers, but now was not the time to be settling in, not with what she had on hand.

“So… enjoyed your conversation with her?” Nihlus asked, bitterness still dripping off his voice.

Shepard rolled her eyes, “You were watching from the window, weren’t you?”

“I may have been.” He replied, as if he did not care either way.

Shepard hummed, “May have been… good heavens Nihlus, I feel like the maid in some stupid soap opera.” She really, really wanted to tell him to grow up right then and there. “However,” and she did not bother to conceal her amusement. “I suppose there are fringe benefits. The house help usually knew all the juicy details after all. Oh the things I’ve learned, all those interesting things, and not just about the job.”

“I want what you have on the job, not Camilla’s lies.” Nihlus said as he moved to the table at the side of the room where he had set up his terminal.
“I personally think the details fit.” Shepard continued. He needed to hear the truth, and she would dish it. “She told me about your childhood, about the outpost, and how your father died. More than that, she suspects Nerion had a hand in your father’s death. The same Nerion who is now blackmailing her for the deployment schedules for the Taetrian armed forces. This dirtbag wants to know where each and every Hierarchy military unit is stationed. That alone should worry us.”

“That pile of…” Nihlus hissed.

“Nihlus, I think the situation is quite a bit more than mere grumbling and discontent. Camilla thinks Nerion works for a group called Facinus. By what I got, they’re not exactly happy with the Hierarchy status quo, and they’re on the verge of turning violent. There’s a likelihood of an actual insurrection brewing.”

Nihlus straighten and turned around, “Facinus. Why am I not surprised?”

“Who are they?” Shepard asked.

The Spectre hummed. “If I was to put it into neutral terms... You could call them a movement of sorts. Ask any one of their most devout members and they will say they are patriots. Facinus is more of a way of looking at things, based on an alternate interpretation of history.”

“And in less neutral terms?” Shepard wondered.

“They have a lot in common with your Cerberus.”

“Turian supremacists?”

“Yes. The Facinus creed emphasizes a unique interpretation of certain key events that define the Hierarchy’s role in galactic politics. The very first thing they would argue is that the Hierarchy became a victim to outsider influence from the moment we made contact with the Citadel and the then asari and salarian Council. Think back on the Krogan Rebellion, the Krogan pushed our forces all the way back to Trebia before the salarians created the genophage. Facinus sees that as the first time the salarians and asari used our people because they did not want to fight the Krogan on their own, or sacrifice their people. Facinus blames the Hierarchy for willingly becoming a tool for the salarians and asari. The Council seat was then a consolation prize, paid for in blood.”

“They have a leg to stand on.” Shepard said. She could readily see how that interpretation could have come about. It might very well be one part true. That was how realpolitik tended to work. “That could be argued, yes.”

“It gets better from there. Facinus also view the Hierarchy’s involvement in protecting Council Space as nothing more than the salarians and asari continuing to use us. They forget it was the Hierarchy’s idea to take up the duty, as was our idea to come into the Krogan Rebellions in the first place. We also founded C-sec, and we have the most Spectres in the corps.”

“Well... again, there’s room to argue.”

Nihlus grinned, “And naturally they have a rather low opinion of what happened after the Relay Three-One-Four Incident. They see the armistice agreement with the Alliance as an insult. Turian blood was shed to enforce asari and salarian law, and once again we got the worst of it, because the asari and salarians are terrified of the Alliance. They view humanity’s rapid advancement and recognition as warning signs of the Alliance’s true ambition.”

“Do they think we are planning to create a pan-galactic empire or something?” Shepard asked.
“That would be their nightmare, yes. Still, I hope you see that what all that amounts to. They preach that we are willing servants to the whims of outsiders, and those who continue to serve are traitors to their own people. They want the Hierarchy to stop cleaning up the messes that the Council makes, shedding turian blood in the process. They are a bunch of xenophobic, lazy, undisciplined, selfish, worthless mongrels that call themselves patriots.”

Shepard nodded. Those were strong words from someone who routinely scoffed at all manner of regulations and rules. Still, she supposed that even as bad as Nihlus was, he still carried out his duties. He just bent the rules more than others. She was not the one to throw stones, as she lived in a glass house herself.

“If Nerion does work for Facinus, we stop him. Here and now. You and I.” Nihlus added.

“Works for me,” Shepard replied. “Though… I hope you know we can’t bring down the whole organization ourselves. The best we can do is to eliminate Nerion and his immediate cohorts, those who know about Camilla, you, and your father. If we can keep them from getting those deployment schedules maybe we can foul up the timing of whatever it is they are planning. After that, it will be up to the local government to handle the rest.”

“That goes without saying, Shepard.”

“Hah. Just making sure you realize I’m looking at this realistically.”

“You always are. That is part of the reason we work well together.”

“Flattery will get you nowhere.” Shepard replied in good humor. “Now we need to start on this thing, and Camilla put us on a lead.” She flashed the OSD that Camilla gave her.

Chapter End Notes

**Author Notes:** This plot line is based on bits and pieces of Nihlus’ bio, which was shockingly detailed given how little screen-time he actually got. To spice things up, and anchor everything (including his obvious emotional issues) I mixed family drama with political drama and my (should be obvious by now) love of setting variety. I do hope you enjoyed this one.

**General Notes:**

**On Settings** – It is a fact universally acknowledged that a lot of the loyalty missions in ME2 had “family drama” front and center, so I decided to carry that theme through, with a twist. Taetrus is a canon place, with a story; it was mentioned in the Cerberus Daily News lore blurbs that were published circa 2010. Nihlus’ connection to the colony is entirely invented though, as are the names of his family, natural and extended.

**Facinus** – They are also canon, from the same CDN story blurbs. I merely pulled together disparate bits and pieces into a single whole. I saw this parallel between Facinus and Cerberus, and decided to run with it. After that, it was just a matter of getting into that thinking, and figuring out what would motivate them. The political angle mentioned in this episode is the product of that.

**Chapter Notes:**

None this time…
Taetrian Nights [Part II]

Chapter Notes

**Disclaimer:** I do no own Mass Effect, I do not claim to own Mass Effect, I am only doing this for fun.

**Author Notes:** Here’s part two of the Taetrian Nights arc, please enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**Episode 32:** Taetrian Nights [Part II]

Shepard watched as Nihlus put the OSD into his terminal and brought up the files on it. “Did you know she worked in information security back in the day? Now this marriage to the viceroy… she knows how to run this shadowy stuff, who to ask, and has the connections to boot.”

“Are you really surprised? She did track me down. When she finally needed to.” Nihlus said.

Shepard was thankful that she stood behind his seat, that way he did not see her shake her head. Nihlus would probably not stop the bitter commentary unless something made him talk to his mother. “Well she got a file on Nerion. She began looking for him immediately after he sent her the first threatening message. The Bureau of Immigration logged his arrival as seven years ago.”

Shepard had looked up the unfamiliar institutions. The Bureau of Immigration was part of the Laudatix, responsible for keeping and maintaining the records of non-vacation comings and goings of the colony’s citizens, those individuals permitted to bear the Taetrus markings. The Laudatix itself functioned as the body in charge of records, in the interest of keeping the Hierarchy’s multiple tiers of citizenship functioning. The records were vital to maintaining the meritocracy, as the government could not afford merits, whether good or ill, going unnoticed. The existence of such records would have made the average human chafe, because they bordered on police state surveillance, but for turians it was just the way things were.

“There’s a permanent residence address,” Nihlus said.

“An assumed one. We could verify it, but at best it would only net us Nerion himself. We want him and his buddies. Who knows how many know about Camilla. I think the more interesting bit is his employment record, which says he’s the administrator of a meat product manufacturing plant. It’s a potential base of operations.”

“Do you think it is a Facinus front?”

“Could be.” Shepard replied. “If a bunch of low-level sham patriots wanted to surreptitiously skim resources for their cause, food manufacturing is a good place to start. There’s less scrutiny than ammo or weapons, but it’s just as needed. The plant has a certain acceptable waste margin, allowed for spoilage, errors of manufacture, etcetera… but if they minimize it, whatever is up to that acceptable margin can be skimmed off and diverted elsewhere.”

“It would not be a lot.”
“No, but this plant produces cheap pre-packaged cured meat products. They keep almost as good as rations. I don’t think I need to tell you that a hungry soldier will eat near anything. Then, would Facinus even have a full army to feed? They strike me as the guerrilla types. If so, fewer numbers require fewer resources. Also, this could be systemic, not the only plant being skimmed.”

“Those are good points. Well… this plant is regulated; we can request the employee list and check their records for potential Facinus sympathizers.”

“The employee list is already in the file. As for Facinus sympathizers… if there is a skimming operation happening, the average floor worker would not know. We are looking at the management, quite possibly just one of the shifts, and of course the shipping department. The product needs to move on the low-key, so only some of the shippers, and likely the foreman.” Shepard went on.

“Suspect the accountant and inventory master as well. The books would have to be fixed to hide the skimming. No honest accountant or inventory master will stay silent about losses always being at the acceptable limit despite all attempts to reduce waste. Even the shoddiest program ought to have a slight effect.” Nihlus added.

“That goes without saying.” Shepard replied. Such an operation was basically a racket, something straight from a mob’s repertoire. The mob would of course target a more lucrative product, but the framework was the same. Classically it would have been the night shift too, because that was when the plant would run with the smallest, most isolated crew. The night shift would be the one with the least unexpected witnesses. Day shift workers might trade schedules if one of them had somewhere else to be, but few would ever wish to shift from day to night.

“Once we are done here, we will need to make sure the right people know about this. A general review and purge would hamper Facinus supply chains even more.” Nihlus went on.

“Sounds like a plan, now we just need to do the leg work,” Shepard said.

“The boring part of being a Spectre.”

“Boring it may be, but it’s in the job description. To stalk one’s target, learn their capabilities…” their mannerisms, routines, and idiosyncrasies, it was the very basics of a job for an assassin. She was looking at Nerion as a mark. Research of this sort would do much to identify weaknesses, from which she could create an opportunity to strike. Military planning had much in common there, but it used different numbers, and the plan had to account for the abilities of everyone involved. Here it was just her and Nihlus, and Shepard had a pretty good idea of what they could do together.

“It will probably take a few days, but we will have our information, and when we do… Nerion had better be ready for what has been seventeen years coming. I never liked him. Self-righteous load of varren shit that he is.”

Shepard smiled, “Your mother did say you almost got into a fight with him once.”

“I only regret that I let her hold me back.” Nihlus said darkly. “If he did have a hand in my father’s death…”

Nihlus was thinking about revenge. Then and there Shepard almost regretted mentioning that part, but there was no use crying over spilled milk. She would just have to make sure that revenge did blind him, nor cost them more in the end.

The next day, at the factory…
He knew going in that Camilla Aurelia was nobody’s fool. He knew all about her history in information security. She had handled a lot of sensitive data in the past and was used to keeping secrets. He knew she would look for him with everything she had, and she would find him too. He knew he would have to break her resolve before she gave him what he wanted.

That was why he had a trusted man inject himself into the ranks of the residence’s staff. It may have taken months of waiting, biding his time until the agent gained the family’s trust, before his plan could proceed, but he was glad he had taken the precaution. Without the inside source, he would have never had a warning that the plan required adjustment to work around an unforeseen problem.

The plan had been to watch and be ready when Camilla finally made her move. The three-twelfth meat product plant made for a convenient site for what was bound to be a bloody affair. No one would notice a few extra bloodstains on the floor and the offal disposal system would handle the bodies. Camilla would not dare expose herself after her team failed. She would never prove he had her agents’ remains dumped with the Pariki innards. More so he had expected Camilla would reach out to her oldest whelp to oversee what she would deem her masterful attack on his factory. In the end he would have the troop deployment information and the ultimate satisfaction of utterly destroying Camilla once and for all.

What he did not expect was for said whelp to have become a Spectre. When his agent had reported that, he initially thought it a joke, or a misunderstanding. He had been willing to accept that maybe he had been a failed candidate. Still, he inquired into the brat’s records at the Laudatix, and “failed candidate” was hardly the terms to use with the facts at hand. The whelp’s record listed his last transfer of service in 2175; he was pulled from active duty by order of none other than Saren Arterius, the Council’s most ruthless attack varren. Since the brat did not return to Hierarchy service, it was a foregone conclusion that he indeed became a Spectre.

That singular thing complicated everything. A Spectre had no limits to the means and methods he could use. The whelp could blow up the whole factory, with everyone still inside it, claim them all to be Facinus, and no one would question him. The only way the situation could have been worse is if the whelp had brought in Arterius himself, because while the brat might not go that far, the mentor would have.

With that, he had no real explanation for the whelp’s choice to bring in a human instead. His inside source told him about the female, about her calm, chilled, but polite manner of carrying herself, an attitude so atypical for her emotion-driven species. He did not know what to make of her. The only thing he knew for certain was that she was not the type he could use against the Spectre.

The agent reported that she had arrived with a mobile locker, so she was active military. He had looked up her name on the extranet. There was a story of her having handled a rather impressive number of batarian slavers during their attack on the Alliance colony on Elysium. The female was a sniper, a skilled one, but that was all. His second-in-command saw her as nothing more than the Spectre’s harlot and help, catering to whelp’s taste for the exotic which was unsatisfied with some asari stripper.

The details ultimately did not matter, his instinct told him to be wary, and so he turned to a contingency plan. They would not give the Spectre time to set up, as they could not hope to predict what he would try to do. A Spectre was not one of the Hierarchy’s claw-boots, the sort that only knew direct force. He would not bust into the factory from the front door, guns blazing, and bumble into an immaculately laid out trap. They had to give him every reason to rush, to make mistakes.

Thus why he was sitting in his office, in front of the normally concealed bank of communication equipment on the back wall, waiting for what ought to be a broadcast of his perfect turnabout. Right
now, his agents were in position to ambush the car that took Octavian Pallas home from the academy he attended. Camilla’s youngest whelp would be his way to lure her oldest into a trap, and then he would have both.

The radio cracked to life, “I have visual on the target vehicle.”

Nerion smiled to himself. Camilla would beg him for mercy for her brats. Then, maybe if she amused him enough, and gave him the data he wanted, he might actually spare the younger one. After all, enjoy it as he would, he was not a complete monster.

~          *          ~          ~          *          ~          ~          *          ~

An hour later, at the viceroy’s mansion…

It was their second day on Taetrus, and Shepard found herself in Nihlus’ room, up to her eyeballs in personnel files on the factory’s employees. Analysis of this sort was hardly her forte; normally it would be done by someone who had a psychology background. Shepard only had her training in reading people as marks, and her instincts. Yet this was already more than what Nihlus had, or was willing to use. He said he had trouble seeing those on the list as anything other than at least guilty by association. Her personal ethics would not tolerate that level of callousness. With such thinking she knew he would have a confirmation bias, so it fell to her to be the impartial one. She would not be happy unless she could say she had genuinely tried to separate the guilty from the innocent.

The factory employed one hundred individuals across three shifts. So far she had powered through around thirty records, and no one had jumped at her as an obvious Facinus agent. Still, there were one or two individuals who had a few markers, hints in their past that painted them to be more individualistic than the average turian. Her first choices were those who had records of disciplinary problems and actions. A record of questioning the little things hinted at someone who would not take orders because they hated the thought of being ordered. Turians education emphasized obedience and discipline, insubordination of that sort was basically a turian version of anti-social behavior. Shepard thought those types would be more likely turn to the rather anti-social rhetoric of Facinus.

She had just laid aside another profile when the room’s door opened behind her. Shepard looked up to see Nihlus step in as soon as the gap was wide enough. By the urgency and the way his mandibles were drawn up against his chin she knew something had gone wrong.

“Shepard, Nerion made his move.”

“What did he do?” she asked as she got to her feet.

“The car that should have brought Octavian home from the academy appears to have been attacked. Camilla got a distress signal and she was unable to contact the driver or any of the three bodyguards assigned to Octavian.”

Shepard had to quell the instant surge of anger she felt. “That spineless coward...” As if she did not have a reason to kill him, Nerion went and gave her the guilt-free one. “Where did they take him?”

“The factory, where else? Camilla traced Octavian’s Omni-tool; he managed to keep them from taking it, somehow.”

“When do we hit the factory?” It was the only question that needed to be asked right then, the only question Nihlus would probably accept.

“Tonight.”
Shepard nodded.

“I should have killed that mongrel when I had the chance. I let Camilla stop me then… no one will stop me now.” Nihlus hissed, his eyes darkening, like a sky just before a really nasty thunderstorm. He turned and moved toward his gear locker. “Go suit up!” he ordered.

In any other situation Shepard would have protested his tone, but here she knew better, “Easy, Nihlus. We’ll get Octavian back.”

“I know we will, but if they hurt him in any way…” Nihlus replied. “I will kill every single one of them.”

Shepard had never heard Nihlus threaten violence quite like this before. He had to be utterly incensed, and she suspected there was nothing she could say that would calm him. She turned and exited the room, and was not surprised to hear the door close behind her with a beep that indicated the lock engaging. Their discussion was over; Nihlus was not going to give her room to talk him down. It left Shepard feeling rather very helpless and uncomfortable. She could not help but hate Nerion all the more. He was making Nihlus turn into someone Shepard did not recognize.

“Commander,” Camilla’s voice carried.

Shepard paused in the doorway of her room and glanced to her side. “Yes?”

“He is planning to storm that factory, is he not?” Camilla asked.

“We are raiding that plant, yes.” Shepard replied as she walked into the room, fully aware that Camilla followed right behind her. “We will get Octavian back, safe and sound.” She would make that promise, even if she knew that realistically there was no guarantee. Still, she could be a little considerate to what a mother must feel right now.

“I am worried for them both,” Camilla admitted. “They are both my sons…”

Shepard paused at her gear locker and looked over her shoulder, “You do not need to worry about Nihlus.” She hated herself for lying, because she worried for him just as much. “He is… angry, but he’s been trained by the best.” At least that was not a lie. Shepard hoped that whatever Saren drilled into Nihlus would allow him to keep level-headed. “He knows what he’s doing.” They could not afford to rush into that factory half-cocked.

“Yes, I know,” Camilla said. “He is a Spectre…”

“I’ve seen Nihlus in action. I’ve seen him take down geth like they were nothing. Nerion and his cronies are nowhere near as fearsome. Nerion himself is nothing more than a base coward who thinks kidnapping a child will get him what he asks for.” Shepard tapped at the front panel on her armor case, which caused a panel to slide aside, revealing the pad of a biometric scanner. “What he’s really asking for is a bullet to the head.” She would happily oblige, if Nihlus did not beat her to the punch.

“And what about you, Commander? Will you be alright?”

Shepard glanced over her shoulder; did Camilla think she was the weakest link? “I am not a stranger to fighting lopsided odds.” She could not be sure Camilla knew what the ICT or its graduates were, so she would not say anything there, but that was not her chief experience. “During the Skyllian Blitz, the mercenaries and slavers had the upper hand in numbers and malicious intent. I did not flinch then, and I will not flinch now. Locker controls, confirm biometrics.”
“Authorization code required,” the case’s VI stated in that mechanical voice they all seemed to have.

“Authorization code five-nine-two-three, Alpha, Charlie, two-eight-two-six.”

“Voice print recognized. Palm-print confirmed.” The case’s lock VI replied. The biometric reader flashed and Shepard lifted her hand away. The panel closed and the lid split, one half rising on actuators, the other lowering to the floor, revealing her armor, separated into parts, embedded into foam padding, and below that lay Vincent, the twins, and her knife.

In the end Nihlus timed their departure to coincide with sunset. To get to the factory they borrowed one of the vehicles at the mansion, a non-descript state-provided sedan Skycar with windows that tinted almost entirely black. It would do for a roof-top insertion.

Nihlus surprised Shepard with how far and how fast his clearance got them access to certain records. The Hierarchy considered food production capacity to be essential infrastructure, like roads and bridges. This meant food production facilities were commissioned and constructed by the state to exact standards. As a result, the plant’s original blueprints were on file within the archives at Vallum’s Bureau of Infrastructure Planning. It was merely a matter of Nihlus verifying his Spectre credentials with the bureau’s system to get instant access to the blueprints.

Shepard spent the ride studying the layout. By the time they got within sight of the factory, the night had fully settled. With the planet having no natural satellites, there was no moonlight to break up the shadows. Nihlus disconnected all external lights three blocks away before he made a crawling approach, to reduce the car’s engine noise.

The yard around the factory was fenced in with a chain link and barbwire. The grounds were all bare concrete paving slabs, with a couple shipping vehicles standing at the waiting zone, ready to be backed into the loading bays. The presence of wheeled trucks was expected. Some companies made it their policy and an advertising point that they did not risk contaminating the food with eezo from a flying truck’s core. For the Hierarchy, it was the basic norm. What surprised her was that the yard was absolutely devoid of activity. Normally loading the day’s production onto trucks should have been done at night, but not here, not now.

The factory itself was a rather nondescript grey rectangular block of concrete with two large smoke stacks. There was nothing coming out of these, so it seemed like production had stopped, another sign of something weird going on. The pre-fabricated panels that lined the building’s external walls were massive; the blueprints indicated the plant could withstand artillery shells and most conventional explosives. The windows were tiny, set with bars, and the doors were likewise reinforced. Overall the place looked exactly like a budget fortress.

“They would use the factory floor for the cover of all those conveyers and machinery. These sorts of facilities have tremendous echoes, so sneaking around will be trickier.” Shepard said. Ideally she would have taken out the power, plunge the whole place into darkness, but she was hesitant to do that here. They could have backup power, but she would lose her element of surprise. It would endanger the hostage unnecessarily.

“Finding Octavian and ensuring his safety is our top priority.” Nihlus said.

“That goes without saying,” Shepard had a feeling that Nihlus would pretty much cry havoc and let slip the dogs of war once his half-brother was out of harm’s way. She would not blame him, but she wanted to prevent him from going in half-cocked and reckless. The operation had to be executed with surgical precision.
She also had ideas about where they could be keeping Octavian. There were only a few places where they could secure someone; unfortunately the list included the enormous cold room where the carcasses of butchered animals were kept prior to processing. Would these bastards put a youth in there to freeze? For a turian, being stuck in the freezer would mean a rather swift and painful death. Octavian’s only hope would be the emergency blankets that were there in case someone was locked in accidently. Assuming they were not removed. She knew better than to mention that to Nihlus, she did not want him focusing on the idea.

Nihlus steered the car over the empty roof. The lack of guards up here was mystifying, but Shepard would not look a gift horse in the mouth. It could be that it was a tactical choice to keep them inside. If Nerion only had a few goons, spreading them out too thinly would have made getting past them easier. It is much easier to stealth-kill individuals. A pair already posed more of a challenge. Her theory was that not everyone in that factory was Facinus, and bringing in outsiders would have raised suspicions. Facinus would not want to blow their whole operation, assuming there was an operation. “I’d love it if you could set us down as gently as possible. Now’s not the time to announce our arrival,” she said as she did up her helmet. She would not be caught because someone heard her whisper into her comm.

The car’s engine pitch changed as Nihlus began their landing, and Shepard unbuckled her seat belt. Nihlus set the car down with all the care of a precious piece of super fragile pottery going on display, and the passenger side door slid open. Her suit’s sensors lit up with the environmental readings almost instantly. The air was a warm thirty degrees, relative humidity at a muggy eighty-three percent, with a quiet five kilometer an hour land breeze heading north, out over the ocean.

She turned north, toward Vallum’s city center in the distance. This far away, the central districts were nothing more than a glimmering mass of skyscrapers and gossamer streams of flying Skycars. The ocean was invisible, but she knew it was there. Her eyes drifted up to the sky. The city’s light pollution scattered and reflected on the underside of the thick, dark mass of clouds slowly rolling in on the land breeze’s high altitude return flow. She reached up to the side of her helmet and tapped her comm, “There are heavy clouds moving in from the coast.” It would do as a comm check as well.

“That is normal; the start of monsoon season is a week away.” Nihlus replied calmly.

Shepard hummed, “If you ask me, monsoon season looks to be coming early this year.” Those clouds looked like they were ready to dump a torrential downpour of biblical proportions. She turned toward the rooftop access hatch, but before getting to it she needed to handle a trifle detail. There was a light aimed directly at the hatch. Once it was open, the light would flood right through and be visible inside. A flick of her wrist brought her Omni-tool up, “Overload charge,” she commanded. The tool began to hum, and when the humming reached the right pitch she laid her hand on top of the light fixture, dumping the pulse. The lighting element inside burst with a loud pop, problem solved.

Nihlus was suddenly right there beside her. Shepard turned to the locked hatch itself and brought up her Omni-tool to get to work. The lock panel turned green in less than a minute and she tapped the pneumatic override. She was not taking the chances that anyone would hear it open. Digging her fingers into the recess between the panels, she braced her feet, and pulled the two halves apart.

Now she could see a narrow metal ladder that led onto an equally narrow catwalk three meters below. Beyond that there was a precipitous twenty-five meter drop to the factory floor. Shepard leaned over the hatch and peered through. The internal lighting was quite bright, eliminating many of the shadows. The factory lines were an invariable maze of conveyors, machinery, cables, ducts, and pipes. The biggest machines were the enormous cookers that rapidly cured the meat. She could also
see ten armed figures patrolling amidst it all, every single one of them wearing a hardsuit. She would assume there must be a few more elsewhere.

The factory was aligned with the narrow sides east and west. Shepard now turned to peer to the north wall, where the cold room was. The freezer was the size of a small apartment, with two entrances, allowing meat to pass through from the receiving area and gutting floor in the factory’s east wing. The plant produced cured meat products from the tough-skinned six-legged animals that turians treated as cattle as well as farmed fish. The former came in as pre-slaughtered and gutted carcasses, ready to be cut up, cooked, and packaged on the main floor. However the fish came frozen whole, which meant it had to be cleaned and gutted before it could be prepared and packaged.

There were no guards stationed outside the freezer’s doors, which made Shepard wonder whether Nerion had been in fact so cruel as to put Octavian in there, but they would have to check nevertheless. She turned her gaze westward, where the factory’s administrative center was. The factory manager, accountant, and inventory master offices were all there. Any one of them would be enough to lock someone in, without being too cruel.

The south side of the building was dominated by a rather large shipping area, where finished product was prepared to go on the trucks. The doors that separated the main floor from the shipping department were locked and guarded. Given that their car was still on the roof, the shipping bays would be one of their egress options. It would be highly uncomfortable, but Shepard was sure that if needed, she could hot-wire one of the trucks and de-couple the trailer, damage be damned.

“Any sign of Octavian?” Nihlus asked.

“No.” She replied. Nihlus’ tone told her he was one errant twitch away from losing his temper. “My line of sight is limited. We will not know where they’re keeping Octavian until we check all the possible places. First we need to get down onto the factory floor. There is a ladder on the south side that’s only guarded by one individual. We take the catwalk west and south. After that there are two more guards by the offices, and we’ll have that whole side to ourselves.” Shepard silently bemoaned the fact that Nihlus did not have a cloak of his own.

“Are you going down or not?” Nihlus asked.

Shepard sighed and swung her legs over onto the ladder. The reality was that Nihlus did not seem to have the patience and control required for stealth, and right now he barely seemed to have any patience at all. She took the rungs one at the time, minding her foot-falls. At the bottom she dropped into a crouch and peered down, watching the guards for any sign of them having heard anything.

Nihlus followed less than quietly, she could hear his heavy footfalls on the rungs, and to her they sounded kind of like explosions. She had to suppress her urge to tell him to mind how he put down his feet. Right then he was so wound up that he might actually snap, and make things much worse.

She sat there for a good thirty seconds, just watching the guards. Only when she was satisfied that they had not heard them, she turned toward the building’s west side and began to move, staying low as to present the smallest possible shadow. At the branching turn she paused to peer down; moving up here, under the roof, she could still hear her own footsteps, and that was a problem. Her hearing was not as good as that of the people below. Did the sound carry that far? There would be no cover from the bullets up here.

She turned and made her way south, toward the end of the catwalk and the ladder that would take her down to the floor. She would have loved to avoid ladders, as they were perfect bottlenecks. However there was no other way down. If she was to jump down onto the highest-set pipes or machinery, it would make noise, and the drop was still too much to be safe.
Once at the end, she peered down again. The guards still did not seem to be aware of them. She turned to look at the one just next to the ladder itself. “I need to handle that one on my own. Stay up here for a moment, and no that’s not a suggestion.” she said.

“Shepard-”

“Going geist!” she said. As soon as the cloak settled, she was on the ladder and making her way down as swiftly as stealth would allow. It was a bit touch and go, given that the cloak worked both ways, she could not see her own feet, but that was something one had to get used to.

Halfway down the ladder she paused to look down at the guard. He was shifting his weight from foot to foot, as if he had been standing there for a long while and was beginning to tire. The casual manner meant he did not know she was above him. Shepard descended, putting each foot down as gingerly as possible. She was on the third rung from the bottom when he finally stiffened and turned, looking at the ladder. Their eyes would have met, were it not for her cloak. She froze and waited, wondering if he would do the obvious thing and come closer, or shrug it off as a figment of his imagination. It depended on whether he heard or smelled her, but the distinction only really mattered for how the final moments of his life would go.

Then he raised his rifle and Shepard knew that it was probably the scent of her suit. This was an issue of trying to out-maneuver an apex predator. Cloaks really did not work for concealing the inherent scent of things. Just as he swung the rifle on the ladder, Shepard jumped down and landed in a low crouch.

“Who is there?” the demanded.

“Nihlus, don’t you dare. I have this under control.” She warned, knowing he would hear her over their suit comm. Her left hand slipped down to draw her knife and she lunged. An instant later she had the guard by the front of his armor and her knife buried in the side of his throat. He uttered a single indiscernible sound, but Shepard had aimed for his larynx. A moment later she yanked the knife free. The guard’s rifle dropped to the floor as he grabbed at his injury, but it was the last, desperate effort of someone who had seconds left to live.

“Spirits.” Nihlus breathed.

Shepard sighed. It was bound to happen sooner than later. She could not conceal that facet of her skills indefinitely. The dying guard’s legs gave way under him, and Shepard grabbed him with both hands. His eyes locked on where he knew she was for all of a split second before they lost focus with death. Shepard closed her eyes and eased him down to the floor. “You can come down now, but quietly.” She said into her comm.

Nihlus replied with a rather inarticulate rumble.

Shepard waited and watched, keeping an eye on the corners. It would not do for some guards to come at her right now. She kept a particularly close eye out in the direction where the ladder would be visible. If any of the guards around the offices looked up, they would see her partner climb down.

She knew she had only a few moments to decide how to get Nihlus to do this her way, instead of his, which would involve a lot more rushing right then. Her mind lingered on the thought of the cold room, but they were closest to the offices, so it would be logical to start there, as not to double back. There was also the vague possibility that Octavian was being kept in the fish processing wing. That would have to be the third location they would check, as it was on opposite side of the plant from their location. Shepard heard footsteps behind her and shook her head to return to the matter at hand.
“Shepard, I can not see you, but I know you are here.”

“I think I want to keep my cloak engaged for now,” she replied. It would allow her to keep the element of surprise; after all, no guard could possibly expect to be shot literally out of the blue. “We will make our way past the offices toward the cold room, and then to the fish processing part of the plant. Those are the only three places I could think of where they might keep Octavian.”

“The cold room?” Nihlus hissed.

“Yes. Nihlus, listen, I hope they did not put Octavian in the freezer, but there is a possibility that they did. Now, that’s not as bad as it sounds. There should be emergency blankets in there, so he’ll have protection, and even… if they removed them, Octavian is clever… he’ll figure something out. I can tell you ten different ways someone could buy themselves some time in there.” That was a bit of a lie, off-hand she could only name two, but she was sure if she was locked in there, she could cook up eight others after getting a good look at what she had to work with. Octavian was thirteen, practically an adult in turian terms, he could probably work something out, especially given that they let him keep his Omni-tool. She would have faith in him. “For now, we sweep the offices. C’mon.”

Nihlus reached behind his back and drew his assault rifle; its powering up whine was almost as loud as a gunshot. Shepard could not ignore the odd rumble coming across their comm link. It sounded like a low pitched rolling growl. Nihlus was very much angry at this point, and she had contributed to it. Shepardghosted her fingers over the power switches of her pistols, though she was not above racking up a few more knife kills.

Nihlus did not say anything more as he rounded the large machinery nearest to them and made a beeline for the offices. Shepard followed, but then decided to overtake him. Last time she had looked, there ought to be two guards along this corridor, which meant one of them was for her to take down. It was not going to be pleasant, but she would have to use Nihlus as a distraction.

The passage that led past the offices was straight through and through, and they saw the first guard a moment before he noticed Nihlus in turn. The double-take cost him, as Nihlus raised his rifle and opened fire. The guard’s shields flared, and yet his instinct was right on the money as he rolled out of the way. The movement was enough to throw Nihlus off, and the tail end of his burst sprayed past the guard. Meanwhile the moment of distraction allowed the guard to bring up his rifle and return fire. Shepard saw her partner’s shield flare, but he had his target and fired again, laying down a rattle of disruptor fire that brought down the guard’s shields before he could bring down Nihlus’ own. After that, the bullets from the Spectre-grade rifle made short work of armor and bit into flesh.

Shepard knew that the gig was up. She burst forward, arcing left along the office wall, as to be clear of Nihlus’ trajectory if he needed to fire down the corridor. The other guard came running, and skidded to a halt when he saw Nihlus. His rifle rose and he pulled the trigger even before it was fully in position. But he was aiming more along his left, along the line of the conveyors, at Nihlus, utterly unaware of her being on his right. “Get to cover! I got him.” She called for her partner’s benefit. She heard Nihlus’ rifle return fire, a distracting burst, encouraging the guard to tunnel vision on the Spectre down the corridor. The guard side-stepped the burst with only a little flicker of his shield, but he also lifted his finger off the trigger, and his gun went silent. A moment later he stiffened like a pole, and Shepard knew he must have noticed her coming up on him. Instantly his rifle whipped to her side and opened fire. Shepard heard the bullets whistle right past her as she veered right hard.

The guard must have realized that much as well, as suddenly his rifle was barking full-auto as he swept chest-high across. Shepard knew she had no other choices. She vaulted onto and over the conveyor belt, where she dropped into a sitting position and pressed her back to the conveyor’s support legs. The guard must have heard the difference in her footfalls and knew what she did, as a
hail of bullets flew right over her head. Then the rifle began to click, thermal clip spent.

“**Shepard!**” Nihlus called.

“He missed.” She replied, breathing hard. Vaulting over machinery was hardly easy. Her exo-frame helped, but nothing would make jumping the mother of all hurdles on the fly easy. She stuck her knife back into its sheath, drew Sin, and turned, rising to her knees to bring the gun right over the conveyer belt. Nihlus was right there on the other side, and then his rifle opened fire into the guard’s shields. She took careful aim, and when the kinetic barrier collapsed, fired a single shot into the guard’s head. The cold thermal clip he had been trying to jam into his rifle fell from his grip and tumbled to the floor as his body collapsed backwards.

“Are you alright?” Nihlus asked.

Shepard rose to her feet, slipped her gun back into its holster, and brought up her Omni-tool to disconnect her cloak. “Yes. But that was a close shave.” She climbed onto the conveyer again, and to the other side shakily. For the first time in a good while she was actually a little winded by exertion. She would give Nerion’s men some respect; they made her work for it. Then again, they were turian. “By now everyone must have heard all that. We’re officially on the clock. Go check the office down at the north end; I’ll hit the south and middle.”

Nihlus nodded and Shepard turned to walk jog back the way they came. The two offices she elected to check were locked. As she approached the door of the southern-most office she brought up her Omni-tool and fired up her decryption program. It took a few seconds for it to identify the lock, but after that it was a simple matter of mucking with the innards to cause it to spring open. Once the door opened, Shepard stepped inside, whipping up Sin in the process. She turned to check the corners and even behind the desk, but it did not take long to be absolutely sure that there was nobody else in the room. Shepard sighed and lowered her gun. “This office is empty.”

Nihlus’ reply was a huff of annoyance and frustration.

She exited the room in time to see that only now did Nihlus manage to get his to unlock. She was not going to comment on that, he was worked up enough. She jogged toward the other office and brought up her Omni-tool and started on the lock. It was maybe thirty seconds before the door opened for her. Shepard drew Sin and stepped into the room, instantly sweeping the corners. Still, just from the fact that no one shot at her the instant the door opened could have been enough to tell her that the room was indeed empty. Nevertheless she checked behind the desk for a huddled youth, and was entirely unsurprised not to find Octavian there.

“Nihlus, how’s your office?” She asked.

“Empty.” He replied gruffly.

“Same here.”

Nihlus growled against her ear, **“If Nerion put my brother in the freezer, I swear, I will break off his mandibles and feed them to him.”**

“That’d be painful…” Shepard replied, knowing that it was probably the understatement of the millennium. She could remember her hand-to-hand instructor back in ICT say that breaking a turian’s mandible was worse than stomping a human male in the privates. Nature’s this-for-that at work, given that kneeling a turian in the privates did not work. They were internal until needed, an evolutionary adaptation meant to protect their reproductive system from Trebia’s radiation; since Palaven’s magnetic field was too weak to do it for them.
“Oh yes.” Nihlus replied, “And I know how to make it hurt a lot more.”

Shepard had no doubt about that, but she worried for the sadistic glee suddenly present in the undertone of his voice. She moved toward the doorway of her office and almost stepped out when she heard rushing footsteps from somewhere on her right. “Stay inside; I think the shipping bay guards have caught up to us.”

Nihlus grunted, “You can handle them, right?”

“Of course I can,” Shepard replied.

Shepard turned and pressed her back to the doorway as she waited and listened. It stood to reason that they would check the first office before they came to her current location. That gave her a moment to think. She knew she could not sneak out, even under cloak; they would definitely either hear or smell her. They could not afford to have two guards behind them either. So that meant she had to end the threat here and now.

Shepard slipped Sin into its holster and reached behind her back for Vincent even as she passed from one side of the door to the other. The darkened office provided a convenient realm for her to hunt from, she only had to avoid sticking Vincent’s white-painted muzzle into the light. A moment later she had her rifle up as she backed deeper into the room and assumed a steady shoulder fire stance.

The angle allowed her a narrow view down the corridor, but that was enough. Shepard could see a turian in a hardsuit, and he was not Nihlus. The other one was nowhere to be seen, probably in the other office, but Shepard knew an opportunity when she saw one. She ghosted her finger over the ammo selector, switching Vincent over to disruptor mode, even though it would be overkill at this range. Then she let her oft-unused auto-ranging feature adjust the scope for her and leveled the crosshairs on his temple even as she lowered her finger onto the trigger and slowly squeezed.

The rifle gave a loud bark and the slug pierced right through the guard’s kinetic barrier, helmet, and entered his skull. He jerked, but it was the reflexive sort of jerk, mostly the kinetic energy dispersing through him. He was dead on his feet and within moments down on the ground. “One down,” she said as she lowered her rifle, raked the receiver, and reached behind her back for a cold thermal clip. There was still one more exceptionally foolish individual to handle.

People often assumed snipers were limited to distance, but up close like this, from even the littlest bit of cover, the kinetic energy imparted by a round from a sniper rifle was absolutely devastating. The real limitation was that it was a rather situational use for the weapon, as it lost effectiveness readily when facing multiple opponents in an all-out firefight, but for her needs here and now, she had the element of surprise.

With Vincent reloaded, Shepard raised it to eye level again and peered through the scope. The first guard’s body was still on the ground, but the other guard had not materialized. She grinned; he was clever enough to realize his enemy had a hyper velocity rifle, figures. This was going to become a game of cat and mouse.

Suddenly she heard an assault rifle came to life somewhere right in front of her, but at a distance. The sound had time to echo and reverberate. A second, more familiar rifle replied in kind, beating a short tattoo before falling silent.

“Nihlus, what’s going on?” She called over the comm. “Who did you just shoot?”

“I am alright, Shepard. Focus on what you are doing.” He replied coldly.
Shepard blinked, stunned, as far as replies went, that one gave her nothing. The sound of the gunfire had come from the wrong direction for him to have been firing at the guard who should have been somewhere on her right. It took a moment for her to figure things out, but she was instantly not amused. Nihlus had gone ahead toward the cold room without her.

Her annoyance had to be put on the back burner when she saw a faint shadow move along the floor right on the other side of the office door, the other guard from the shipping bay. She powered Vincent down and plastered her back to the wall in the deepest, darkest shadow.

A moment later the other guard stepped into the room, sweeping the corners with his rifle. However he chose to sweep the opposite corner first, which gave Shepard a split of a second to edge closer to him. When he turned the rifle her way she grabbed the barrel and forced the muzzle down to the ground. His finger closed on the trigger reflexively and the rounds sprayed into the hard floor, ricocheting every which way. Shepard saw both their shields flare, but she dove forward and raised her arm to drive the heel of her right palm into his nose-plates with her momentum. The rifle went silent as he staggered back two half-steps, one hand rising to his nose in surprise. Shepard reached for Sin and whipped it up, firing a bullet into his skull near point blank. His look of surprise turned to shocked realization for all of a split of a second before life left him and his body hit the hard floor.

Then somewhere deeper into the factory the assault rifles started barking again. Shepard stepped over the body and stormed out of the office. She would find her errant mentor slash partner and let him have an earful for ditching her. She turned left, half walking, and half running. Nihlus would have gone for the cold room, she knew that much. At the end of the corridor she made a right, and found herself in the lane that separated the machinery from the north wall and the cold room. “Nihlus. I know you can hear me. I’m not happy.” She said, not bothering to keep her anger at bay.

“You handled those two. I heard your rifle and pistol from here. One shot, one kill. No?” He replied.

There was another dead turian on the ground in front of her; the front of his armor riddled with bullet holes from a tightly-clustered assault rifle burst. The tight formation told her that Nihlus had probably shot him very close up. Her partner was rushing, probably making it up as he went along, and it was only a matter of time until he got himself in trouble. “Damn you. Wait for me!” Shepard knew that moving too fast now would be playing into their enemy’s hands, but she could not help but worry for Nihlus. She did not want to lose him to his own impulsive nature. She did not want to ever lose another someone she cared for, ever again.

She was at the aisle between two separate assembly lines when she heard Nihlus grunt over their open comm. The sound was followed by a thud somewhere from her right. Shepard drew and raised Sin as she rounded the corner. There was one more dead guard on the floor here, but ahead of him she saw Nihlus grappling with another. This guard was doing his best to force the Spectre backwards against and onto one of the conveyor belts. Nihlus was doing his absolute best to arrest the fist blows aimed at his head, but the guard was as relentless as he was vicious.

Shepard raised Sin and had just dropped her finger to the trigger when she saw Nihlus’ left hand land on the grip of wicked-looking knife at the meat-processing station the guard had been careless to force him against. The blade was at least twenty centimeters long and serrated like a saw. This time when the guard threw a punch, Nihlus grabbed his fist at the same moment as he brought the knife in from the side and into the guard’s waist with all the speed his limited leverage would allow. There was a loud crack, but the guard jerked and froze on the spot. Nihlus growled, and let go of the knife, the handle clattered to the floor.

“Where is the child?” Nihlus hissed the demand coldly.
The guard collapsed against the Spectre, a stream of blue flowing from his side, despite the knife half still in the wound.

Nihlus groaned with great distaste and pushed him off and onto the floor. “This makes what… six now?” He asked as he moved to retrieve his fallen assault rifle.

“You giant idiot!” Shepard replied as she holstered Sin and dashed forward to his side. “Why didn’t you wait for me?”

“I worked alone for years before I met you!” Nihlus snapped as he turned his head to face her.

Shepard blinked, stunned and the harsh tone. He probably had a glare set on her as well, one that she could not see due to his own helmet being in the way.

Then as if he realized what he had done, he shook his head, “Sorry. That was harsh. But really, I am fine.”

Shepard would have believed him if he did not have cracks spreading over the ceramics on his right arm, nor the liquid gloss oozing down the visible weave of his undersuit sleeve and the side of his rib cage. Due to the dark colors she could not see how bad the damage was, but he was definitely bleeding. “Fine my rear end. You were shot.”

“Grazed.” He replied. “Shepard, save the lectures for later. We do not have time for this. We have to find Octavian.”

Shepard opened her mouth, but then Nihlus walked right past her as if that was it, end of discussion. The rebuff died on her tongue, she could only follow. She knew he was right, now was not the time to lecturing. She cursed her own stupidity. This was not the time for her to tunnel vision like a corporal either. She could yell ears off when all was said and done, when he could go back to cracking jokes in her face. Sure his flippancy could be annoying, but she would take it over this cold, angry, ill-tempered Nihlus. Flippancy meant he was being himself. The true himself she was used to. The true himself she did not want to lose.

Worse yet, this angry, violent version of Nihlus manifested from the mere fear of Octavian being hurt. What if Neron actually did hurt Octavian? How much worse would Nihlus get? Nihlus had developed an instantaneous soft spot for his half-brother, a shocking difference to how he was at best indifferent, at worst outright cold toward his mother. Now he was fixated and oblivious to everything else, up to and including the fact that he was bleeding.

She did not want to see worried anger become righteous vengeful rage. She shuddered to think what he might do if he was driven by something so toxic. He had snapped at her too, and Shepard knew without a doubt that if he got really angry, he would snap again. Her ability to stop him from doing anything was limited. There would be no line that he would not cross if he turned to revenge. He could very well attempt to demolish this factory and say he deemed it necessary.

Even worse, she highly doubted anyone would care if he did blow up the factory. Only she could see how such an action was the first step along a very dark road. Viceroy Pallas would not bother to condemn any overkill committed by the Spectre who had been trying to protect his son. He might even go papa-wolf himself, and Facinus would be in his crosshairs. Camilla would definitely be on the warpath, and she was not without her resources. As for Councilor Sparatus, Shepard did not expect trouble there either. This was something he assigned to Nihlus; it was internal, and seemed even more off the books than the average Spectre operation. Shepard would not be surprised if Sparatus shrugged, said ‘good riddance to bad rubbish’, or something similar, and went on with business as usual. Nihlus would walk away without even a slap on the wrist.
Shepard watched Nihlus’ back as he stormed toward the cold room, and she could not help but fear for him. She did not want Nihlus to become a vengeful monster like she had once been. Revenge was a horrible thing. Though best served cold, it was a fire that billowed mind-clouding smoke and consumed indiscriminately, starting with the fuel closest to the spark. The longer one remained in its haze, the less of one’s better nature would remain. She had been lucky in that she only claimed one innocent life before she woke up. There were those who never woke.

She did not want Nihlus to experience that haze. It would change him irrevocably. Foremost she would not wish that sort of change on her worst enemy, but more than that, as selfish and as narcissistic as it might be, Shepard did not want Nihlus to change like that. She liked her foot-loose, loutish, prickly, arrogant, cocky partner just the way he was. She may have failed at protecting him from physical harm already, but wounds healed. A few bullet grazes were nothing on the sort of soul-crushing change that a vengeful haze would cause. Moreover, it was not the sort of thing that people could easily protect their selves against.

If it came down to it, she would keep Nihlus from becoming a monster, from changing like that, even if she had to gut Nerion herself to do so. Nerion was not an innocent, nor was he a nice guy. If he was going to try to drag Nihlus down to his level, she would kill him and not bat an eye. She would do it even if Nihlus’ anger turned on her because he thought she had interfered. She would prevent the vengeful haze from settling around and freezing his heart at all costs.

Suddenly Nihlus stopped, a scant five meters short of the large doors that led into the cold room. A silent moment passed and then Shepard heard two sets of footstep coming toward them. The cadence was far too calm and even to be more of Nerion’s goons rushing to confront them.

Shepard looked past Nihlus in time to see a figure materialize from the direction of the entrance to the fish processing part of the factory, an area that had not been visible from the catwalk above. The arrival of just one figure surprised her, as she had been positive that she heard two sets of footsteps, both in heavy boots, but still distinct, one heavier than the other. She looked past him and saw the tip of a shadow from around the machinery, and suddenly it made sense. Someone was trying to play hide-and-seek with them. She was not going to let them know that she realized that. Really anyone would realize that. Nihlus had to know, he had even better hearing than she did. She turned her attention back to the figure that was out in the open and there stopped cold.

This turian was barefaced, his plates being earth-brown, and his eyes a rather plain shade of ochre. Shepard would not have paid much attention to his appearance were it not for his disfigured right mandible. The little missing chunk was all it took for Shepard to recognize him. Her blood froze, and then suddenly flashed straight into a hard boil. His strange, silver-toned Taetrian markings had been temporary! “You bastard.” She hissed. “You’re the driver who picked us up from the spaceport. You drove Octavian home from school, didn’t you?”

The turian smiled, flicking his mandibles at her. “You got me, Commander. I am nothing but the… faithful driver of the Pallas household. And here I thought humans could not tell us turians apart.”

“Oh I can tell you apart just fine. Though, in the end it won’t matter, seeing as there’s only one way people look like when they’re dead.” Shepard hissed. His presence slid a little errant piece of the puzzle into place. Shepard had idly thought of the curious timing. Nerion’s previous willingness to wait, then their arrival, and suddenly he was not waiting any more, there was no coincidence there. Nerion having an insider explained everything. She really ought to have thought of that sooner.

“Charming, is not she?” he said blandly as he looked back over his shoulder to the other turian, the one hiding around the machinery.

“Quite,” the other replied, as he finally chose the moment to appear.
This turian was of a slimmer build, and wore a hardsuit somewhat lighter than the traitor, but more than that, Shepard noted how he seemed to keep his weight mostly on his left leg. There was slowness in the movement of his right, like a very old limp that had become more of a habit than a handicap. All of this suddenly explained the difference in his walking cadence. He was barefaced, older, and his fringe was outright damaged; the central three spikes did not have their points. Shepard knew that while the male’s fringe might vary in length, it should never be blunt-tipped. Losing the tips indicated the turian’s health was compromised, which at best meant he was seriously ill, or that he had worked at the lowest, most health-damaging sorts of hard labor. She would say he looked frail, how old was he exactly? Or was he even that old?

Shepard’s frame of reference for older turians was negligible, she could only think of Sparatus and Saren. The former always appeared well put together, like a dandy, in a turian manner of dandyism. Sparatus looked like he was in his mid-life prime. As for Saren, he showed the effects of his career more, but he still did not look this sickly. His roughness was of the intimidating ‘I could break you with one hand gesture if you irk me’ sort. She had seen him warp a geth’s plating with one hand gesture. She did not want to know what that ability would do to someone’s bones.

“Nerion.” Nihlus hissed.

“Do not take that tone with me, whelp.” He hissed back.

Shepard blinked, surprised. This tired-looking turian was the mastermind of this whole thing? She glanced up at Nihlus, and it was then that she noticed how tense he was. His hand was on the shotgun at his lower back.

“Where is Octavian?” Nihlus demanded, his voice bristling with rage as he shifted his weight forward. To Shepard he looked like he was coiling to pounce. Like a large predatory cat with its eyes on its prey.

“Which one? Do you mean your mongrel father or your mongrel brother? One is dead, and the other is… probably dead.”

“Shepard… Stay out of this. Understand?” Nihlus hissed. “This is between me and this sorry waste of existence.”

Shepard opened her mouth to tell him off, that he could not possibly deal with both Nerion and the traitor, but just that was already too long. Nihlus took her silence as acquiescence and dove in, uttering an absolutely vicious growl that reverberated in her ears over the comm, sending a chill down her spine. That singular sound was definitely not something that ought to be made by a sapient being.

Before Nihlus could close in, Nerion took a half-step back, and the traitor stepped in. The next instant the other turian grabbed Nihlus by the front of his armor and swung his fist right into the Spectre’s gut hard. There was a loud crack, Nihlus groaned, and doubled over.

“That was easy,” the traitor said calmly, much too calmly.

Nihlus hissed, but Shepard could only see red. The haze settled like a fog over her mind, and her arm moved on its own as she drew Sin, brought it up in a single snap motion, and fired into the traitor’s head. The traitor’s shield flared and his head snapped up. Nerion shifted his weight and reached for his own weapon. Shepard did not care; she fired again, and this time the traitor’s kinetic barrier collapsed. Suddenly a periwinkle glow erupted around his body. The surprise of that took a moment too long to process, but when it did, Shepard knew that they were in trouble.
“Shepard…” Nihlus groaned, the ceramic plating covering his stomach raining to the floor in shattered fragments. “Get away.” He breathed.

Shepard’s rage howled like a hurricane. The traitor was smiling with all his teeth on display, like a shark that was about to bite its prey in half. Oh she was going to knock those teeth out, one at a time!

“This farce has gone on long enough,” Nerion said. “I underestimated your abilities, and you killed a few too many of my troops, but your mission ends here and now. Iulus-” He did not even bother to finish his order.

The traitor did not bother to acknowledge the order with any word of gesture either, but his whole body ignited with a periwinkle corona that seemed to swirl like an eddying wind. Shepard felt the hair at the back of her neck rise. Dark energy was gathering in the air around her, generated by the traitor.

“This is nothing personal, Commander, just business. You only had the misfortune of associating with the wrong individual,” Iulus said calmly. There was a saccharine sweetness to his voice, even if it did not flange over the translator, void of undercurrent sub-vocals, emotionless. She raised her gun, but before she could pull the trigger his hand snapped up and her world titled and spun as what felt like a truck hit her in the gut. The air whistled past her helmet, and her stomach slammed into her throat.

Then Shepard hit the wall back-first hard. Her whole ribcage compressed, expelling the air from her lungs violently. Her ears erupted with a carillon of tinnitus. Her vision swam and dimmed around the edges. Her stomach, lodged in her throat, roiled with nausea. Suddenly her nervous system caught up, and every single rib seared with the most excruciating pain she had ever felt. She felt herself slide down the wall, her feet hit the floor, but her knees folded and slammed down hard. Whatever signals her brain sent to her limbs were not received. Her front hit the concrete next, sending a new wave of pain through her ribs. Her helmet came down last, as if whipped. The visor shattered into a billion pieces on impact, sending tiny splinters across her cheeks. The world swam and the carillon rang ever louder. It felt like forever before her body remembered needing to breathe, inhaling sharply, sending even more pain through her ribs.

She heard something, but it was hard to figure out what, past the bells ringing in her ears. She felt something brush against her head. “Oh. Still breathing?” a sickly saccharine voice asked, impossibly close to her ear. A cold chill rushed down her spine. “I can definitely fix that…” There was no reason for someone to sound so giddy while saying something like that.

“No!” Nihlus’ roar of rage cut through the bells in her ears. There was a familiar thunderous crack, and her ears only rang louder.

Iulus shouted something, but that was drowned out by the thunderous sound of shearing metal, and then a loud low-pitched rumble which reverberated through the cavernous factory. Vibrations passed through the floor, powerful enough to make the visor shrapnel dance, she could hear the fragments tinkle like crystal. Alarms erupted, and the cacophony overwhelmed her senses.

All Shepard could think right then and there was about Nihlus. She could not let that soft-spoken bastard get the better of her. If he had used a biotic shockwave to toss her into a wall and called it nothing personal, what would he do to Nihlus? No. The thought was unacceptable. She would not let that honey-voiced sadist hurt Nihlus.

Chapter End Notes
**Author Notes:** The dreaded cliffhanger attacks! This arc’s plot line basically ran off on me, what I planned as a two-part, mutated into a three-part. It is all the better for it though, at least I think. Unfortunately I do have a bit of bad news, at the moment I am still writing part three (it is about three quarters done though). This is where my streak of weekly updates breaks down. I really only produce one episode a month, on average. As I said in the first chapter, the story was started in 2015 and I finished 26 chapters before I started putting it up online to begin with.

**General Notes:**
Nothing this time…

**Chapter Notes:**
Nothing this time…
Taetrian Nights [Part III]

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I do no own Mass Effect, I do not claim to own Mass Effect, I am only doing this for fun.

Author Notes: Here is the long-awaited (maybe?) finale of the Taetrus arc!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Episode 33: Taetrian Nights [Part III]

With Nihlus…

Nihlus would never forget the sound of that biotic whomp, the sickening crack as Shepard hit the wall, her whimper, and the tinkling of the shards of her shattered face-shield. In that singular moment his heart lurched. This could not be happening, everything was going wrong, and it was all because of his mother’s selfishness. He was perfectly happy without her back in his life, and now that she was, he stood to lose even more.

Why did Shepard not take his warning and get clear? She was the best sniper he had ever seen; there would have been nothing Iulus could do if she got him at range. Why did she have to be so faithfully noble yet krogan-stubborn all in one? Her utter fearlessness was commendable, and her selflessness was admirable, but if she died here, he would never forgive himself. And as the spirits were his witness, he would never forgive Camilla.

Nihlus forced himself to breathe, even as the pain in his abdomen made every breath near excruciating. He had to keep his head; this was not the time to become confused. Shepard had not moved since hitting the floor, and now the alarms were blaring. The cabalist had punched him with his field up. His armor’s stomach ceramics were gone, shattered in a hundred pieces on the floor at his feet, and judging by the pain, he was pretty sure he was bleeding internally.

Iulus was kneeling on the ground; the shotgun blast had grazed his hip and thigh. The sadist was bleeding, but he was still alive. His sub-vocals were resonating with a promise of a slow and painful death, but he would not be able to move as freely. Nihlus knew he would have to get closer and put the next shot into the mongrel’s head. Nerion was behind him, barking orders into his comm, and there was a note of anxiety creeping into his sub-vocals. Whatever that explosion had been, it was no accident. The alarms meant something serious had gone wrong.

Nihlus took another deep breath, ignoring the pain shooting through his stomach. What could he do? He had been in his share of bad scrapes before. He had outrun a Justicar once. He could do this. He only needed a moment to think. Right now, the first thing to do was to ensure Shepard’s safety. If Nerion wanted to run off into whatever hole he came from, let him. Shepard was more important. To do that, he would first have to finish off Iulus. Nihlus’ grip in his shotgun tightened.

“Damn it all to the pits. Iulus, are you able to stand?” Nerion demanded suddenly. “Camilla decided that her little secret is no longer worth keeping. That was an infantry carrier taking down the receiving bay door.”
“The army,” Iulus growled.

“Worse. The carrier bears the sigil of the Taetrian Third. Pallas called in Ignatia Aurelia.”

Nihlus froze, he knew that name. Camilla’s eldest sister. The Taertian Third was one of the oldest and most prestigious legions. Given the situation his aunt could, and probably would, order her troops to kill every rebel.

Suddenly there was a second thunderous blast from somewhere in the factory’s east side, followed by the eruption of at least six individual assault rifles and shouting.

“You are one lucky whelp,” Nerion jeered. “Your mother decided she likes you after all.”

“Go die,” Nihlus growled back.

Nerion drew his pistol, “Oh. Without a doubt your aunt will ensure that. But Camilla will still be getting you in a casket,” he said, and pulled the trigger.

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Back to Shepard...

Shepard’s eyes snapped open at the loud pistol shot so close by. She could taste her blood in her mouth, but her helmet was still closed, so she could not spit it out. She was lying on the floor on her front, hands extended awkwardly down the length of her body. Her visor was in a thousand pieces, with just little slivers clinging to the frame. The turn of her head allowed her a limited line of sight across the floor.

Iulus was kneeling very near her. She could see blood seeping from underneath the armor on his hip and thigh on one side.

“What a tenacious individual you are, whelp.” Nerion said.

“Go… die…” Nihlus replied.

The weakness of his voice jumped at Shepard. He seemed barely able to utter a word.

“Soon, but after you.” Nerion replied.

There was a thud, something cracked, and Nihlus groaned.

That singular sound sliced through her mental fog. Nihlus was hurt! Nerion was doing something… the shot… no! She raised her head a few centimeters, fighting the nausea, haze, and the fact that her vision dimmed with even that.

She saw Nihlus on the ground, curled up, and there was a gathering pool of blue under him. Nerion stood over him, pistol in his hand. Shepard knew she had to act.

“Armor system… La-” she began, only to choke as liquid bloomed up from her lungs. She coughed, and more metal filled her mouth. The suit beeped, as despite having no visor the system was still functional and waiting for commands. She only needed to say the words. “Last Chance cache… total release!”

She saw Iulus turn, even as her armor beeped and Shepard felt the needle from the medical module at her back bite through her under-suit’s weave and into her back. A second later she felt the burning sensation of the drug cocktail hit her system. It was a destructive mix of old-fashioned narcotic pain-
killers and modern stimulants, designed to give an injured soldier one final burst, live or die. Her heart kicked into full tilt as the pain seemed to fade all at once. Freed from the agony searing her ribs and back, Shepard only knew two things: Nihlus was hurt, and Iulus was in her way.

Iulus reached for his weapon, but with adrenaline in her system, he might as well have been moving in slow motion. Shepard had a hand under her and rose to her knees even as her left hand went for her knife. “You...”

Iulus fired, and her still-functional shield flared.

Shepard did not let him get in a second shot. She pounced on him like a tigress on her prey and brought up her knife, burying it hilt-deep in his gut. Iulus shouted as momentum sent him sprawling backwards.

“Iulus!” Nerion shouted.

Shepard landed on top, driving the blade in deeper still, even as the pain in her ribs flared, momentarily blinding, but the Last Chance dulled it quickly. She rose to her knees and twisted the handle. Iulus shouted again as he grabbed for the knife. Shepard ripped it free, pulling it back and overhead. His blood rose from the wound like an artesian spring. Her clavicle flared in agony, but she was beyond giving a damn. “Die!” She hissed as she plunged it in again, higher this time. His eyes widened with shock for all of a second before they went glossy in the most final ways.

The sadistic monster was dead, but Shepard’s rage was roaring in her ears like a hurricane. There was one last piece of worthless trash that required disposal. “Nerion!” she hissed as she looked up into his eyes even as she rose to her feet, shaky as a moments-old lamb. She would wash the floor with his blood and hang his corpse off the pipes by his intestines. He made a half a step back, and Shepard could only smile.

“Shepard...” Nihlus called.

She advanced on Nerion one slow step at a time. He raised his gun and fired, her shield flared again. Shepard stepped forward. A few pistol bullets would not stop her. Nerion fired again, her shield flared and collapsed.

The Last Chance’s stimulants were still working. She could see his every movement as if it was a slow motion film. Nerion was right-handed, she saw his finger begin to squeeze the trigger, and her body moved on its own. One more step with her right leg brought her right in front of him, and moved her left side out of the trajectory. He would not hit her in the heart from this angle, and he was aiming much too low for a head-shot. Everything else she could handle.

His pistol fired, her shoulder guard shattered, but she was too close, and his panic threw off his coordination. Shepard brought Dex up like a cowboy drawing at high noon, aiming between his eyes, and pulled the trigger.

Nerion’s eyes widened the instant before death. His body folded and crumpled to the floor like a marionette with its strings cut. Shepard holstered Dex calmly. It was done. Somehow that amused her enough that she could not help but chuckle, only to regret it instantly as her ribs flared in pain. She winced, which only caused a second burst of pain. How many of her ribs were fractured? Did she even have a single one that was whole?

“Shepard...” a voice moaned.

The thrill of victory left her like water rushing out through a burst dam. Shepard turned around and
saw Nihlus; he was still sprawled out on the floor, one hand pressed to his abdomen. There was an enormous patch of Medi-gel under his fingers, his suit had deployed everything it had to try and contain the bleeding from the bullet wound. She was kneeling at his side in an instant, “Nihlus…”

“You were…” he coughed. “Spirits… he panicked. You showed him the true meaning of terror right before he died.”

“What are you saying?” Shepard asked. “Do you have enough Medi-gel?”

He groaned.

Shepard reached up to the sides of his helmet, groping around for the seals with clumsy fingers. She found and undid them, but how to pull the helmet off? Did she want to risk wrenching off a mandible or his fringe? Nihlus’ fringe was long, and so perfectly symmetrical that it might just be a crime to damage it. She did not want to cause him more pain. “Medi-gel, Nihlus. Do you have enough.”


Shepard knew the Last Chance would fade soon. Once the stimulants wore off she would be in agony. “Not for long… this Last Chance is… appropriately named.”

“Did you hear Nerion? The viceroy is here. My…” he groaned in pain, “My… aunt… is here too. You are not… Shepard, stay with me.”

The warmth in his rumbling purr caused a little shiver to run down her spine. Her fogged mind seemed to soar at those words. Her fingers brushed against the cheek panels of his helmet, how much she would have loved to remove that damn thing, to see his eyes. “Where would I go?”

He pushed himself up on one arm with a painful groan. “Good.” He rumbled as he laid his helmet’s forehead guard against hers.

Shepard’s heart hammered with renewed ferocity as she closed her eyes. She did not want to move from that position. Somehow this moment, this contact between them, even separated by helmets, felt… right. Contact calmed her. Nihlus could not possibly be fatally hurt if he could muster the effort for this. She would let him have this.

Suddenly there were multiple sets of thundering footsteps all around them. Shepard heard multiple rifle sling rings and even a weapon cock or two.

“Hold fire!” A female voice shouted over it all.

Nihlus pulled back and looked to his right.

“Spectre Kryik? Commander Shepard?” the female asked.

Shepard let her hands drop to the floor. The Last Chance had to be starting to fade, the pain in her ribs was slowly increasing and breathing was becoming an effort. Had one of her ribs stabbed into her lung? Had she ignored something serious?

“She needs help.” Nihlus pleaded.

“You idiot,” Shepard protested, “You’re worse.”

“I want medics here immediately!” the female turian barked addressing her troops.
“Right away!” a male voice replied. Shepard heard running footsteps moving away from them.

“You need not worry, Commander.” The female went on. “You will both be fine. Our hospitals carry medical supplies for our injured levo allies.”

Shepard could not muster the energy to move, or reply right then.

“Octavian?” Nihlus asked.

“He is safe.” The female replied. “He has frostbite on his hands and feet, but he will be fine. Lucian is with him now.” The female said as she moved very close to them.

Shepard turned her head. The female remained on her feet, but the warmth in her tone was so clear that even a human could hear it. She was of the same mocha coloration as Camilla, with blue eyes, and stark white markings. Her black hardsuit was plain, but wrapped around her shoulders and cowl was a dark blue cloth, the drape pinned to the armor’s cowl on two sides. Over her right shoulder hung, suspended from the wrap by little braided ropes, a small flag with a military sigil. Shepard could easily see the resemblance between Camilla and this female.

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Hours later, with Nihlus…

The three of them were taken to the Vallum military hospital. Nihlus could remember only snippets of the intervening hours, as he spent some of them anesthetized while the surgeons pulled the bullet from his intestines. After that he woke up in a closely monitored room allotted to the three of them.

Right then Octavian was sleeping off his ordeal in the bed to his left. His hands and feet were bound up in smart bandages so thick his fingers and toes looked three times thicker than they ought to have been. He lost one claw on his left hand, and all four toe claws, but all of them would re-grow in time. The doctors said he would not lose any fingers or toes, but he would require rehabilitation therapy. Shepard had been right, his little brother was resourceful, he managed to buy himself time. All in all he got away with relatively minor injuries that ought not to hamper his future prospects. If anything, Octavian would become even keener in upholding the mores of the Hierarchy.

Shepard herself was in the bed on his right, deeply sedated and pumped full of regeneration stimulants and stabilizers. Despite his gunshot wound, she got the worst of the injuries in sheer trauma. Two broken ribs, three cracked ones, a hairline crack in a clavicle, some internal bleeding from one of her broken ribs gouging a lung, and a concussion. All in all, she had been lucky that the broken ribs had only snapped when she had hit the floor, not when that traitor’s biotic shockwave had slammed her into the wall. The doctor said that had it been otherwise, she might have actually got a broken rib through her lung, leading to a collapse and much worse internal bleeding. She would not have gotten up; even with the extremely strong mix of narcotic painkillers her suit had pumped into her.

The doctor compared her to a Krogan, and Nihlus could not think of a more apt comparison. What he saw her do to Iulus had been as close to blood-rage as a non-krogan could get. Gone were the control, exacting precision, and the asari-like grace. She went after the cabalist like a feral beast. It was something he earnestly hoped never to see again. Nihlus knew why she had done it, but he also knew she should never have to, not for him, or anyone else, ever again.

The door opened, and in walked his aunt Ignatia. She was still in her hardsuit, with the colors of her legion on her shoulders. As the door shut behind her, their gaze met.
“General Aurelia,” Nihlus greeted, “To what do I owe the honor?” He would not assume she was here to see him.

The female spared him a bland look, even as her sub-vocals hummed amusement. “Camilla told me you act as if we are strangers.”

“In many ways, you are.” Nihlus replied. He had never met his aunt in person before. His information on her was limited to the official sources he read when he had looked into his family line, thirteen years ago. Ignatia had clearly been promoted a few times since then, as he remembered her being merely the commander of a garrison, not a whole legion. Clearly she pushed ahead with the expected Aurelia zeal. Was his maternal grandfather still leading the Taetrian First?

“Perhaps.” Ignatia replied, “However that is not why I am here. I wanted to let you know that the viceroy has authorized me to detain the rest of the factory’s employees for interrogation. We will find every single last loyalist that barefaced mongrel had, and they will be brought to justice.”

Nihlus hummed and nodded his head, “They deserve the firing squad.”

“Due process will be observed.” Ignatia replied calmly.

“Good.” Nihlus said. He knew what ‘due process’ meant. Rebels got a trial before their appointment with said firing squad. There was no way Nerion’s crew would get away. “You also need to look at other factories. Shepard thinks Facinus might have claws in other manufacturing.”

“Oh, I am sure they do. It will be taken care of.”

“General…” Nihlus broached, but then paused to weigh his wording options. “I want to know, how did you and the viceroy know to come to that factory?”

“Ah. You ask whether Camilla told Lucian the full truth? That I do not know. He knows about the blackmail, but perhaps… not what it is. He knows you and the Commander were there conducting a Spectre operation on Camilla’s behest. My involvement was limited to providing a rapid-response unit. Lucian contacted me after he received a distress message from Octavian, and only then did he contact Camilla.”

Nihlus hummed. Lucian had backed Camilla into a corner. Her attempt to take care of the situation quietly had imploded. The fact that Octavian had called his father was not surprising. The question was more why did Nerion let Octavian keep a communication device in the first place? Not that they would ever know, or that it mattered, still that little tactical oversight had cost Nerion everything.

The truth of the matter was that a lot of mistakes were made that night, and the worst were his, not Nerion’s. Shepard had been right to rip into him, and he had been a fool to brush her off. He rushed the whole time. He had attacked Nerion without assessing the situation. He had discounted Iulus as a threat. Mistake upon mistake piled up, and both of them ended up paying for it. The guilt felt worse than the bullet to the gut. He owed Shepard the biggest apology of his life. He had to tamp down his sub-vocals as to not give Ignatia a show of his remorse. This was between him and Shepard, no one else. “One last question. When did you get to the factory?”

“I was waiting for that one.” Ignatia smiled. “We arrived about seven minutes before I gave the signal to enter. As I said, Camilla told us about the Spectre and trainee that arrived to handle things. My initial plan was to monitor the situation by reconnaissance drone inserted from the rooftop access. I gave the order to breach the receiving bay door only when I saw the cabalist throw the commander into the wall.” Ignatia listed the facts coldly, too coldly for Nihlus’ liking. Then again, this was due
protocol when reporting to a Spectre.

“I suppose it remains to be seen whether Lucian was apprised of all the details.” Nihlus said. He had no desire to keep the bitter bite out of his tone.

“I do not think she will keep it from him. You are, after all, her son.” Ignatia said.

“Am I? She treated my existence as part of her dirty past for seventeen years!”

“Not by choice I assure you!” Ignatia replied harshly and quickly.

“What do you mean?” Nihlus asked.

“How it is that you became a Spectre, being so oblivious to the truth?” Ignatia asked, her second voice box positively singing her annoyance. “Did you never wonder how you got the right to wear the Taetrian markings given that you were born off-world and have never lived on Taetrus?”

Nihlus opened his mouth, but then he heard the rumble of annoyance turn to anger.

“I will not talk about it. You are an adult. Act like it.” The general finished. “Now I have things to do, I came here only because your doctor said you were lucid. I fulfilled my duty and apprised you of the situation.”

“Yes.”

Ignatia turned and marched toward the door, but there she paused and glanced back. “I do wish you and the Commander a swift recovery. Give her my regards.”

“I will.”

Ignatia set her hand on the door panel, and the door opened, allowing her to exit the room.

Nihlus had to force himself to relax. After that sort of conversation, he knew the next couple days ought to prove interesting to say the least. Ignatia was right to tell him to start acting like an adult too. He knew he had to talk to Camilla. For now though, he needed to focus on getting better. He would not feel like an adult until he could eat solid food again. The hospital meat gruel they had him on was about as tasty as it looked.

A day later…

Shepard came to awareness in stages, as if her body was a computer going through a start-up sequence; operating system first, then booting the essential background processes. Her awareness of the environment came last. The room she was in was uncomfortably warm, but the air was crisp, in that hospital way. The theory that she was in a hospital was substantiated by the feeling of tape on the inside of her right elbow. There had to be an IV needle in place. Whoever had applied the tape had stretched the skin too hard, it was uncomfortable verging on painful.

“Good morning, Commander Shepard.” A pleasant, lyrical flanging voice said. “You are awake a little bit ahead of projected expectations. That is a very good sign.”

“It- hot.” Shepard said. Her voice cracked, as uttering even that was too much for her dried out vocal cords. Fortunately she could talk, they had not intubated her.

“I apologize, but our environmental systems are configured for the comfort of turian patients. We
have cooling pillows, would you like one?"

“Water.” Shepard replied.

“Oh, of course.” The voice replied, and there were footsteps moving away in a hurry.

Shepard dared to crack open one eye, only to regret it instantly. She had been out too long, her pupils had dilated fully, so the ceiling lighting might as well had been search-lights aimed right at her. After a few moments she chose to slowly work her eyes open.

She just succeeded when the female turian returned, carrying a cup. Her mostly-white, dark-blue accented tunic outfit was definitely scrub-like, and bore an insignia that Shepard could not recognize. Without even being asked, she helped Shepard to raise the back part of the bed so she could be in a more elevated position. After that, the female was ever so gentle in the way she handed Shepard the cup.

“Steady grip, no shaking. Very good.”

Shepard took a long sip, but when she moved to swallow, it hurt, and she had to let the water kind of slide back. Her throat had dried out on the dehumidified air she had been breathing. The second swallow hurt a lot less. “How long was I out?” She asked, after drinking down half the offered cup.

“Twenty-four Galactic Standard hours.”

Shepard sighed, over a day any way you sliced it. “And my partner?” she asked.

“Spectre Kryik is recovering very quickly. He is out for a post-operation scan at the moment.”

“Post-operation?” Shepard asked, alarmed. Her reaction was too quick for her brain as a moment later she remembered Nerion had shot Nihlus in the stomach. The operation had to be bullet removal.

“Do not worry, Commander. It is routine for bullet removal from the abdominal and thoracic cavities. Our surgeons removed the bullet without complications, but they want to make sure there was no fragmentation. Now, since we are already conversing, how do you feel? Any sensory aberrations? Light spots? Tinnitus?”

“I had a concussion?” Shepard wondered.

“Yes.”

“Then I guess I’m good. I got no hallucinations of any kind, and… apparently a steady grip.”

“Very good. Please let me just take a look at these monitors here…” the female went on.

Shepard continued to sip her water as she waited. Her mind was catching up quickly, already she could think of a couple things she wanted to know. What had happened after the military showed up at that factory? Right then, no matter how hard she tried, she could not fully recall the events of those minutes. Everything from the moment her back hit the wall was a bit fuzzy and indistinct, almost dream-like. She could not be sure whether all of it was fact, and not just some sort of dream.

The strongest memory was of Iulus, the look in his eyes the moment before life drained out of him. Shepard sighed; she had overdone it. Even though she knew it was the only choice left to her at the time, now the doubts set in. The Last Chance was a nasty mix of drugs. It was designed to stimulate the adrenal glands and the brain in such a manner that the soldier who took it tapped into the fight-or-flight instincts. The idea was that the desire to survive would allow them to push through the pain, to
get away. Unfortunately, flight was only half it. In some circumstances, when flight was simply impossible, the Last Chance triggered the fight instinct. The soldier would turn almost feral, and fight to the last, until they either sustained a fatal injury, the enemy was destroyed, or the Last Chance burst burned off on its own. She had tapped into the latter, and Iulus had been on her list. She murdered him with extreme prejudice.

Shepard knew that the Krogan could enter a similar state when they were injured severely enough. Except in them it was a biological defense mechanism, no drugs required. The blood-rage was pretty much a nightmare scenario all around. A krogan in that state would only stop with death, or on their own. Shepard drew a different comparison, something closer to home. She could compare the fight response of the Last Chance to the self-induced trance rage of the Norse Berserker.

“Everything appears to be good. You have a steady heart rhythm given what happened. Now that you are awake the IV can be removed.”

“What’s in it anyways?” Shepard asked.

“Nutrient solution and fluids.” The female replied. “You sustained two major rib fractures, three minors, and a hairline fracture in your left clavicle. We administered bone growth stimulants to accelerate your healing. Humans ought not to receive those without mineral uptake boosters and supplements.”

“And you had to keep me under, for the concussion.”

“Yes. Your case was further complicated by the pharmaceutical mix you used. It put undue stress on your already injured nervous system. A medically induced sleep was needed to control the inflammation.”

“No more popping the Last Chance with a concussion.” Shepard replied. What more could she say.

“I would avoid... popping... that mix entirely.”

“I can’t promise that. I had no choice in the matter. It was either I get up right then and there, or Nihlus would have died. I’m not letting some sadist kill my partner.”

“Ah. I was not aware of the circumstances. I do understand that reasoning. Spectre Kryik has worried for you the entire time you were asleep. You are close?”

Shepard wondered if the staff knew that she was a Spectre in training, or did they think she was merely someone Nihlus worked with on the side, as an elective partner? She opened her mouth to speak, only for a singular thought to hit her. Did the staff think there was more between her and Nihlus? She had evidence that turians did not forbid romantic partners from working together. The term ‘partner’ was certainly ambiguous enough for that misunderstanding. “We’ve been working together for months now. There is a natural synchronization of skills, but don’t tell him this... I’m unquestionably the better long distance shot between us.”

The female chuckled at that. “Yes, we gathered that much. He insisted care be taken with your rifle, as if the weapon is precious.”

“It is.” Shepard replied. Nihlus knew? Well okay, maybe it was not all that hard to figure out all considering. Now that she thought about it, she wondered, where had they stuck her gear? Her armor was damaged badly, and would probably require a complete replacement, but she was not attached to her armor. Her rifle was a different story.

Vincent had been behind her back when she hit that wall. The impact had fractured bones. The force
translated past shock-absorbing ceramics, it would have been stronger by a good fifty percent on the impact point. Vincent could have very well absorbed some part, helping her armor to dissipate the energy. Factor in the strength of the materials, and the vulnerable components, and Shepard knew her rifle could have been damaged beyond repair. The thought bothered her worse than her own injury. She would hate it if that sadist got to have a last laugh from beyond the grave.

“You do not need to worry, Commander. Your gear is stored in a secure locker on the premises. It is not the first time that we have had to treat a patient whose belonging required added security.” The female said.

“Thank you,” Shepard replied.

“Think nothing of it. Now I am done here. Is there anything else you would like?”

“Any chance I could get my Omni-tool back?”

The female moved over to the bedside stand and opened the drawer, removing a familiar silver band. Shepard reached over and took it, “Thank you. Now I’m good.”

The female nodded one last time, made a turn, and exited the room. Shepard watched her go until the door closed behind her and sighed. This was probably one of the better hospitals she had been in, and it was not even human-run. Was it so much to ask nurses to stop sugar-coating things? She rather disliked it when the staff started smiling in that false encouraging way. Then again, if she was truthful, she did not like ending up in hospitals at all.

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The room door opened an hour later and Shepard looked up from her Omni-tool just as Nihlus walked in. He was wearing plain white patient’s clothing that glared in the overhead lighting, but Shepard wrote the mild light sensitivity off as one of the side effects of having a concussion.

“Shepard,” he breathed.

“Hey, you.”

He moved toward her bed with determined, but slow steps. Shepard had to remind herself not to worry too much; he had been shot in the stomach after all. He was walking on his own, so he must have been reasonably fine.

“How are you?” He asked.

“Your tunic might as well be glowing for me right now, and my memory of things after I hit the wall is full of holes… but that’s just the concussion. I’m fine. Couple days and I’ll be back to normal.” She was not looking forward to writing that report addendum. Sparatus would probably find her patchy memory absolutely too convenient for her, or something. It depended on how much of a jerk he actually was.

“I see.” Nihlus said.

Shepard blinked, was it just her, or did he sound a little disappointed. Over what could he be disappointed?

“Shepard, I am glad you were not permanently harmed. That sort of injury… it ended careers before,” Nihlus replied as he bowed his head.
“Yea, if I was put out of commission by that sadistic…” she paused to take a breath, lest she let out a rather colorful tirade of descriptive names. No matter how mad she got, Shepard never liked to speak too ill of the dead. “I don’t think you would have survived explaining that to my mother.” It was mostly jest on her part, though some element was true as well. Hannah would not have been amused, at all.

Nihlus’ eased himself into the chair left by the side of her bed, and Shepard could have sworn she heard a low-pitched rumbling semi-whine something. “Yes, that is the sort of conversation I would like to avoid. Nerion finishing me off would have been **merciful**.”

Shepard chuckled, but the sound died in a whimper as she felt her ribs twang with pain. Whatever the doctors gave her to kill the pain was wonderful stuff, but it was not enough to laugh on. “Alright… Jokes aside, before I crack another rib… ow.” She wincen.

“Are you alright?” Nihlus was instantly concerned and on his feet.

“I’m fine! I’m fine!” Shepard protested waving him away. She had to switch over to breathing with her belly, lest even the natural expansion and contraction of the rib cage cause her more pain twangs. There was a little side benefit to being a sniper; she was used to controlling the rate and depth of her breathing. “In all of this, I did not ask, but is Octavian alright?” A change of topic would be beneficial.

He eased back into the chair. “He is alright as can be. Nerion did put him in the cold room, so he has frostbite on his hands and feet, but his fingers and toes will heal. Camilla is… babying him.”

“Ah.” Shepard replied.

“He has been asking about you, says he wants to thank you in person.”

“I’ll put that on my to-do list, to be done before we leave.” It was the least she could give the boy after she kind of failed to save his life.

“Speaking of things that have to be said… there is something _I_ have to say…” Nihlus began, closing his eyes.

Shepard blinked, but in that moment she knew better than cut in. Something in Nihlus’ tone was different; he was serious, grave even.

“I was never good at these things, so… bear with me.” Nihlus prefaced. “I was lying in bed thinking, and… I came to realize just… how much I am to blame that you are in that bed right now.”

Shepard blinked, surprised.

“I am sorry.” He blurted. “I rushed, tossed the plan, and ignored you when you tried to get me to use my head. I attacked Nerion, and I thought nothing of Iulus. I got what I deserved, but you? He… he could have killed you. Easily killed you. Just like that. When I realized that… I… am sorry about that. So very, very sorry.”

Shepard sighed, “I forgive you. Really though, there is nothing to forgive. We had no way of knowing that Iulus was a biotic. I think that was the point. Nerion sent him because he could not have done it on his own. He looked half dead on his feet already.”

“That might be true, but if I had not rushed like a fool…”

“Don’t punish yourself over it,” Shepard reached over and laid her hand on his. He looked up,
surprised. Shepard shook her head. “What’s done is done, I’m not so easy to kill that one little shockwave would do me in.” That was blatantly a lie, but she wanted to think of it as a lie with good intentions. Shepard was not sure what to thank for the fact that she was still alive. Whether it was her suit absorbing the force, Vincent breaking her impact, or even that Iulus had not been even a little more powerful than he was. Still, this was the closest she had ever come to kicking the bucket. None of that Nihlus needed to know. She was not going to make him feel worse than he already did. “I will only be upset if you learn nothing from the experience. As for me? My people have a saying. What will not kill you, will only make you stronger. This is definitely a case of that. Heck, our bones mend denser and stronger when broken. We run on that adage.”

“That is kind of… weird.” Nihlus mused.

“It makes sense from the evolutionary standpoint.” Shepard replied.

“Well yes, but it is still weird.” Nihlus replied.

Shepard hummed thoughtfully. Maybe it was weird, but it was also the basis for some military-grade gene therapies. Activating and controlling something the body could already do was easier than engineering in something new, and also less ethically and politically complicated. The Sudham-Wolcott Genetic Heritage Act of 2161 forbade engineering in entirely new abilities, but it did not apply to dialing up what was already there.

Gene therapies were dirt common these days; in fact it was rare to see someone entirely unmodified. The Alliance necessitated all its recruits undergo a standard package of therapies, often fixing allergies, nearsightedness, hearing imperfections, etcetera. It leveled the playing field for the enlisted individual. After that came the ‘engineered babies’ who received theirs genetic alterations before or shortly after birth. Shepard knew she was one of those, though her tweaks went right to conception, the perk of being an IVF child. Her mother not only chose her father with an attention to detail, but even that was refined. Her genetic code was squeaky clean, no predispositions to congenital defects, late-life illnesses, sensory flaws, etcetera.

More than that, she was of a small subset of children: all born on ships between 2149 and 2157, to active Alliance personnel and then raised in space. This group of a couple hundred had been billed as “Star Children”, babies born to chart the final frontier, just when the galaxy had seemed to be Humanity’s oyster. The First Contact War ended that sort of thinking, and soon after Alliance ships became more military than exploration vessels. As a result, family spaces shrunk, regulations went up, and the Star Children became a symbol for the dangers of naïve optimism.

“You really do not remember what happened in that factory?” Nihlus asked, breaking the silence.

“No.” Shepard replied. “And it’s going to make writing a report a nightmare. All I know for sure it that I killed Iulus and Nerion. The former… I remember stabbing, the latter shooting.” Strong emotions or a subconscious urge to engrave their death expressions on her memory seemed to have cut through the concussion haze. “Am I missing something important?”

Nihlus sighed, “No…”

Shepard noted the cagey way he said that, and raised her eyebrow. Something had happened, but what? Well, it could not be anything concerning the job, right? If it had to do with the job, Nihlus would have told her, even if it was not something she could put on the report. “Still it feels like the details are important.”

“Sparatus will not fault you for not remembering. A concussion is a concussion.” Nihlus replied. “Also… You need to learn that sometimes the Council does not want to know the details. Sparatus
sent me in to handle this situation, the rest was up to me. I say you handled yourself with considerable control; you met the mission objectives, great, you kept collateral damage to a minimum, a bonus. Victory at any cost. That is not just a Hierarchy maxim.”

“Alright.” Shepard replied. She already knew that much, but it was not her normal way of doing things. She liked to keep herself accountable, if only to herself and her own code of ethics. That the Council would tell their agents ‘go do this’ and not stipulate the limits, was what made some people uncomfortable with Spectres.

Then again, it was also the thing that gave the agents their mystique. Anyone who faced a Spectre had to know that mercy was an exception, and not the rule. It was an added intimidation factor. Though Shepard could still see how having such a reputation was a double edged sword. When mercy was not to be expected, people tended to fight harder and cross more lines. That sort of reputation could very well burn bridges to peaceful resolution.

“Well, there is no helping it. If you can not remember, then you can not remember.” Nihlus said as he got up from his seat. “Focus on getting better.”

“That’s the plan.” Shepard replied, though she could hear the note of disappointment in his tone. Now more than ever she was sure there was something he was keeping from her. Her gut reaction was to get to the bottom of it, but she knew now was not the right time. Right now he was right; she needed to focus on getting better as quickly as possible. They were only due to be away from the Normandy for a week, and by her reckoning they were on day six already.

Shepard managed to talk the doctors into signing off on her release by evening the next day, even though her ribs were only partly healed and needed more time to fully knit together. She was not allowed to do anything strenuous for another couple days, and she would not be able to keep this one off her records. A concussion was a concussion; Doctor Chakwas would have to know. She would also run her own battery of tests to substantiate the write-up Shepard got from the hospital doctor. Nihlus got a similar write-up from his attending doctor as well.

After that came the task of retrieving her weapons, and what remained of her armor. The latter was almost completely destroyed. The under-suit was just gone; they had to cut it open to get it off her. As for the ceramics, practically all of them were cracked. The back unit was barely holding together, as the force it absorbed made the plates brittle to the touch. The computer itself was damaged; it was a miracle that it responded to her command to deploy the Last Chance. The chest-plate was likewise shattered and made brittle. Though it had only broken apart when the hospital staff put it through a high pressure decontamination cycle, to wash off Iulus’ blood. Her right shoulder guard was just gone, the left cracked severely. Her knee and shin guards were chipped and cracked. The worst was the helmet, not only was her face-shield shattered out of existence, but the back was cracked from where it hit the wall. The spider-web pattern was a testament to how close she came to dying. The whole suit was going into the Normandy’s recycler as soon as possible.

As for the former, Shepard was dismayed to find that while Sin and Dex had escaped serious damage, Vincent did not. She did not have the time to inspect the rifle fully, but just looking at it was enough. The outer housing was cracked, and unless her eye was off, the barrel was bowed ever-so-slightly. The force required to do that would cause internal damage. She had to choke back her reaction when that realization had slammed her. Shepard hated to lose her rifle like this, to Iulus of all people. That rifle had served her faithfully for so many years, yet right now it seemed like Vincent was going into retirement. To make matters worse, it was as if Vincent was resonating with Arthur’s spirit. The gun went out protecting her. Maybe that was the best way for it to go out on, but Shepard
still did not have to like it. She had to remind herself that perhaps there was some hope for it yet, after all a bowed barrel could be replaced. The realist inside insisted that the force required to bow the barrel would have shattered the ceramic insulation around the accelerator rails deep inside the gun. There was no replacing that.

In the end Shepard walked out of that hospital wearing her webbing, with her armor pieces in a giant film bag, it was a singularly weird sensation, but fortunately it being a military hospital on a Hierarchy colony, the weirdness was only hers. The people she passed found the human walking among them to be the most curious thing there.

Camilla had once again sent a car to pick them up, and as unfair as it was, Shepard could not help but be wary of this driver just because. Fortunately the female knew how things had turned out with her predecessor, and so did not take the wariness to heart. She was nothing if not absolutely professional, and the whole ride was spent in silence. Shepard lingered in her many thoughts while Nihlus stared out the window at the scenery passing by.

The car pulled up to the gate as before, but Shepard could see a subtle difference in the security. The first time they arrived there was one guard on the door, now there were two, and one of them wore a familiar sigil on his armor. General Aurelia had clearly posted her troops to bolster the security. The scan of the car took longer, and seemed more thorough.

As the car drove past the gates, Shepard could not shake the pervading feeling of being watched. She had to consciously tell herself that they were being watched, she would not be surprised if there were cameras in the bushes and on the branches of the trees. She was just being silly fretting about said security measures now.

The car stopped at the end of the long curving driveway and even before Shepard could reach for the controls an armored male approached to open the door for her. Another was immediately at the car’s trunk to grab their things. Shepard glanced at Nihlus.

“We are getting the statesman treatment,” he mused.

“I don’t know, Nihlus. I feel kind of like a Hollywood celebrity. Of course I am not wearing a hundred-thousand-credit designer evening gown and there is no red carpet.” Shepard replied. What more could she say to that?

Nihlus chuckled, but proceeded up the steps toward the front door, leaving her nothing else than to follow him. On the landing Shepard noticed that there were now two guards on the outside of the mansion, and if the pattern held, there would be two inside. Had the general doubled the security?

“Welcome back, Spectre Kryik, Commander Shepard,” the mansion guard on the outside of the door greeted. “I was told to pass this along, the viceroy requests your presence in the study.”

“Understood,” Nihlus replied curtly.

The guard nodded and made a great show of opening the door for them.

Shepard once again followed Nihlus inside; he was clearly not in the mood to protract things. Shepard would not be surprised if he wanted to depart Taetrus as soon as was feasible. If Shepard was honest, she was of half a mind to join him in that thinking. Of course her reasons were a lot more selfish, but she was not perfect. Subsisting on energy bars and ration meals was beginning to wear thin even on her, not that she would complain about it out loud. She wanted to go back to her ship so she could put this whole thing in the rear view mirror.
Nihlus made a beeline for the office, and the door opened even without him needing to touch the console, affirming that their arrival and presence were indeed expected. A creak of a chair from the back of the room drew Shepard’s attention there. The viceroy had been seated at his desk, but now he rose to his feet.

“Viceroy Pallas,” Nihlus greeted with a professional chill as he stepped deeper into the room.

“Viceroy, sir.” Shepard echoed as she followed, unsure of how she should address him, but knowing silence would not be golden.

“Spectre, Commander,” he replied, with a tip of his head. “Please come in. Have a seat.”

Nihlus remained standing.

Shepard decided to follow his example. There was something almost casual in the way he said their titles, which did something to alleviate Shepard’s discomfort. It was not normal for her to associate with heads of state. The viceroy of a turian colony was the equivalent of the Alliance’s vice-president. Still, somehow that comparison did not seem appropriate. Lucian Pallas clearly had enough power to just call up a general and request an armed unit, and then to have it on-site in no time flat. Either Taetrus kept some of its forces ready to handle rebels at any time, or they had a whole lot less red tape to cut through. Shepard honestly could not speculate.

He was clearly in his mid-life prime, yet not quite like Shepard would have pictured. For one he was not as tall as some of the other turians she had met. She would be surprised if he was taller than a meter ninety, though he was well proportioned, if slightly stocky. His dark brown plates faded in an ombre gradient to a deep honey-brown. The dark main color brought out his gold eyes. His Taetrian markings were of a warm off-white cream tinge that avoided clashing against his plates, as plain white would have done. He wore a well-tailored dark blue tunic suit decorated with silver embroidery on the sleeves and collar. The pattern was reminiscent of the Arabic calligraphy, where text was laid out into the shape of an image, typically an animal. Lucian’s was simple smooth lines that wrapped around like delicate vines.

The viceroy must have realized they would not sit down as he straightened to his full height, even if Nihlus towered over him almost as much as he towered over her. “On behalf of the Primarch of Taetrus, I thank you, Spectre, Commander, for your invaluable aid in stopping what appears to have been a plot against the government and military forces of this colony. Your aid has likely saved a great number of lives, and for that we thank you.” Lucian began, calm as can be, as if he had given this speech before.

Nihlus nodded without saying a word. Shepard chose to show her respects in bowing her head.

“Furthermore, I was told to notify you that we launched a full investigation and audit of key manufacturing systems. If there are more rebels diverting resources from state infrastructure to support their cause, they will be found, and they will be stopped.”

“The Commander and I cannot claim credit for this operation. Octavian’s safety was secured by General Aurelia’s troops. Not us.” Nihlus said the picture of nonchalance, even if it he sounded every bit displeased at his own words.

Shepard had expected Nihlus not to consider that job as a chalk-mark under ‘complete’. Nihlus was a good turian, even if he flaunted the details and minutia of things. It was just that, the minutia. Nihlus took the salient, important parts of his responsibilities seriously. He was responsible enough to know he made a number of serious mistakes.
Shepard would not put that operation in her portfolio either; quite frankly she was embarrassed about how easily Iulus took them down. She hated to admit it, but she had been caught unprepared, and that was not a position she could stand being in. To make matters worse, it was a positioning she let herself fall into. She had worried about Nihlus so much that she essentially got tunnel-vision. She never expected their enemy to be a biotic. The possibility simply did not cross her mind.

Turian biotics were rare. The trucks outside the factory said plenty about the Hierarchy’s policy of mitigating the odds further. Beyond that, there were the norms to consider. The Hierarchy shunted their biotics into a single rigid, regimented stream, often as “lifers” in the military, as they had relatively few legitimate options aside from that. From the moment they turned fifteen they were segregated. First the biotic boot camps, and then the shadowy black ops units, the Cabals. They also had to endure a great deal of suspicion by the population at large.

Iulus clearly did not take to that sort of treatment well. Shepard suspected he had been born with an antisocial personality disorder. However, she would not be surprised if time in the Cabals could condition someone onto that spectrum. She could not understand why the otherwise shockingly permissive Hierarchy would treat their biotics so badly. The policy seemed to be the realization of the sort of demands made by the twenty-second-century Neo-Luddites, whose technophobia was acute to the point of seeing those with genetic therapies and the biotics as less than “real” humans. Shepard could not stand that sorry ignorant lot, and for obvious reasons she was not their favorite either.

Shepard noted how the viceroy seemed to shift his weight from one foot to the other, then his shoulders slumped, and it was like the professional mask was removed, showing the individual underneath. “I am aware that Spectres do not have to aid hostages if it would risk their overreaching objectives,” he said as he stopped around the desk. “Yet you did, and as a result your mission was compromised. Perhaps that is not something you can take pride in, as Spectres, however, as the father of the hostage, your attempt was enough to satisfy me. As Octavian’s father, I thank you for helping my son.” He bowed his head.

Shepard blinked, stunned. What did one say to a heartfelt gesture like that? Add to that, did Lucian know that Nihlus could be, in loose terms, called his step-son? Did Camilla tell him the whole truth? If she had not, it would not be right for Shepard to let that cat out of the bag.

“I cannot take credit even for that,” Nihlus replied.

The other male looked amused, “And what about you, Commander?” He asked as he turned to face her.

Shepard blinked, surprised. Could she in good consciousness take credit for any part of this mess? While she had killed Iulus and Nerion, were it not for General Aurelia she still would not have finished the mission. As soon as the Last Chance burned out of her system, she would have been stuck in some corner, trying not to pass out from the pain, easy pickings for some guard. She would not have been able to secure the factory or reach Octavian. Not to mention the fact that she would have had to utterly ignore Nihlus’ injuries. That singular fact was simply not her. “I cannot take credit either, sir. My injuries at the time would have prevented me from continuing.”

“Fair enough.” The viceroy nodded, though his mandibles flicked in amusement.

In that moment Shepard realized that maybe, just maybe, he had been testing if she would take undue credit. Would another Spectre have told him they could complete the mission even gravely injured? Did she pass the test, or did he expect a declaration like that? On the one hand, Spectres had the reputation for being dauntless, but on the other it would have been dishonest. So what counted more? Shepard liked to think that honesty was the better policy, as no one liked a miles gloriosus.
“I will send a message to Councilor Sparatus to say that the two of you have fulfilled your duties.”

“Thank you.”

“Thank you, sir,” Shepard echoed. What more could she say? It did not take much for her to read between the lines. This message amounted to a performance review. Shepard had not even thought about that part. The Viceroy could have easily sent Sparatus a message asking him not to send another alien to the colony again, what with the political climate on Taetrus. Instead it seemed like Lucian was grateful enough that he was willing to overlook her failings. She would take whatever she could get.

“Now on to the last matter.” The viceroy seemed to shift gears then. “I would be a remiss not to offer my hospitality, the mansion is yours to use as if it was your home. In addition, when you do decide to depart, tell me. I will organize a transport to the Citadel.”

“Thank you for your offer, however we cannot linger for long… so if you could organize a transport at your convenience, we will appreciate it.”

“Understood,” the viceroy replied.

Shepard tuned the rest of the discussion out, she was perfectly happy to let Nihlus handle the matter of their return journey. Frankly, she was not running on all her cylinders. Taetrus had an atmosphere a little thicker than Earth’s, which meant a higher barometric pressure. Normally that was nothing, something one adjusted to, but she was still recovering from a concussion. She tired quicker and right then she had a headache forming. She was not about to worry it though, as that would make things worse. She just needed to find somewhere quiet and dark to rest.

It was not long before Shepard bowed out and retreat to the room given to her. As she exited the study, she caught Nihlus’ worried look, but thankfully he knew better than to expose her in front of others. Once she was in her room, she toed off her shoes and climbed on the bed, not bothering to get under the covers. As it was, the bed was designed with turians in mind, it was too soft for her and the sheets were definitely made of a rougher cloth than what her skin was used to. The comforter was thick and soft though, so she curled up right on it and happily drifted off.

She woke up abruptly when the door’s chime went off. Rolling onto her back she sighed. She knew the list of people who would bother her was not terribly long. How long had she been asleep? She did not particularly care to look at the timepiece because Taetrus was on its own time, and she had not looked at it when she had come in. Her head felt better, but she was groggy, which meant she had been in the slow-wave stages of her sleep cycle. Shepard knew her sleep cycle; she could have been asleep as little as half an hour, and then counting up in hour and a half increments. Either way, she definitely needed more sleep, after she put out whatever fire she had to put out now.

“Come in,” she called.

The door opened and in stepped Nihlus, he was wearing a different set of casuals than before, “Shepard, I-” he paused two steps in the door. “Did I wake you up?”

“Kind of,” Shepard replied. The grogginess made her feel like she had not slept in days, but she was not going to say it. “Never mind that, what’s up?”

Nihlus moved deeper into the room hesitantly, “Our travel arrangements are done. One of the Citadel Fleet frigates is coming out of overhaul, and it is going our way.”
“Convenient for us,” Shepard mused.

“Yes…” Nihlus rumbled as he perched on the edge of the bed, “I am sorry I woke you. How are you?”

“Really, Nihlus, I’m fine. I should be asking you that, you were the one who got shot in the gut.”

“Well…”

Shepard raised an eyebrow, why was Nihlus vacillating again? Was it just her, or was he beating around the bush like a child who had something to confess, but was dragging his feet about it?

“I just… can not help but worry.”

Shepard smiled, “I know that. It’s all good.” She knew full well that whatever feeling of guilt he still had would not go away with the ease of flicking a switch. The first few months after Elysium, she had felt guilty too. Of course she channeled that guilt into a lot of rage, and ended up killing an innocent, but that was her expression of the issue. She understood where Nihlus was coming from, and that meant she could understand that he would need time.

Mind set, Shepard sat up, ignoring the rush of momentary dizziness by focusing on his plain, dark-colored tunic as an unmoving reference point. The wooziness went away in a few seconds, allowing her to look up. “C’mon, you know me, right? What doesn’t kill me-”

“Only makes you angry enough to kill them.” Nihlus finished with a flick of his mandibles.

“I was going to say-” Shepard paused there as she mulled on the matter. “You know what… that’s basically it.” She shook her head. Right then, she realized just how true that sentiment was. The slavers on Elysium incensed her, and paid for it. Now Iulus did about the same, and he paid for it when she ran him through, twice if her memory was any good, to say nothing of Nerion himself.

Nihlus sighed, as if some amount of pressure had been released from him. “Humans and your macabre sense of humor.”

Shepard shrugged. “It’s a coping thing.”

“Speaking of coping… I talked with Cami- my mother.” Nihlus turned.

Shepard quirked an eyebrow, well that was new; he actually used the term without sounding like he was trying to swallow broken glass. “Oh?” She was not going to make a comment that might incite him into some weird flash of anger.

Nihlus bowed his head, “I… genuinely talked to her.”

“Well that’s good.”

“She told Pallas about me, and about my father.” Nihlus added.

“When?” Shepard wondered. The detail could exonerate Camilla, or condemn her further.

“She told him when he called, after Octavian was abducted.”

Shepard nodded; well that was going the more exoneration route. Camilla must have come clean about her whole plot, placing her children above her secrets. She was still a manipulative piece of work, but at the same time, she was definitely not so bad as to put herself above her children. In the great balance of things, sure Camilla may have been backed into a corner, forced to confess, but she
Shepard could not respect a person who would do otherwise. For her, the thought that anyone would harm their own children, for personal gain or safety, spoke volumes about their ability to form attachments. If they could not be loyal to their blood offspring, they ought not to be trusted to be loyal to anyone else. It was even worse if the person was the mother. Shepard held females to a higher standard, and that was that. Camilla may be a piece of work, but Shepard could understand and respect her.

“She told me the reason why she sent me into the army. The real reason.” Nihlus rumbled. “Aside from the better opportunities and doing something with my life.”

“And?” Shepard prompted. She wanted to know what Nihlus thought.

Nihlus got up, “I hated her for half of my life, and in the span of five minutes it all… made sense.” He said as he walked four steps in one direction, only to turn around and walk four in the other, and back again. “She knew Nerion had more friends among the workers. Had I attacked him… I would have been the next one to have an accident.”

Shepard focused on the wall behind him, only because right then his pacing would make her dizzy, but she was not going to tell him to sit down, not to this time. She was not about to make Nihlus feel guiltier by showing any discomfort.

“So yea, she sent me to the military… and I guess she got what she wanted. I may be the son of a separatist, or a critic, but… I achieved something. Father always spoke of changing the system from within...”

Shepard nodded, “You are in position to be that agent of change. The perk of being respectable. Facinus will never achieve anything, they just alienate everyone.”

Nihlus paused in his pacing, and gave her a curios look. “Indeed.”

“The extremist will never achieve the support they want. In most cases they are just a very angry, very vocal minority that gets wiped out. Unfortunately they cannot look at history objectively enough to see the futility of their actions. Every one of them thinks they are going to be that one time it does work. My people have a saying, those who do not learn from the mistakes of history, are doomed to repeat them.”

Nihlus smiled as he perched on the bed next to her again. “Feeling philosophical?”

“Oh no, I have a concussion, so I’m just thinking out loud.” Shepard replied.

“I see,” Nihlus chuckled. “Well, there’s something else to what Camilla said… the reason she let seventeen years pass like this. I can not be mad at her… not really.” Nihlus stopped there, as if to gather his thoughts.

Shepard could have physically felt the faint shift in the atmosphere in the room, as if the levity just dissipated like a fog in the mid-morning.

“My grandfather is the one at fault.” Nihlus said.

Shepard blinked, opened her mouth to ask for an explanation, but thought better of it. Nihlus did not normally drop such revelations without an explanation forthcoming; she would let him get to it on his own time.
“Now, you should know this… Taetrian tradition is to choose the colony’s Primarch from the generals of the first five legions. The honor calls back to the Unification Wars, when the first five legions fought to the last individual. Well… my grandfather, General Ignis Aurelia, was in command of the Taetrian First. It would not have looked good for him to acknowledge my father, or me.”

Shepard nodded mutely. The Hierarchy could say it was a meritocracy, but they still kept a remnant of an older honor culture. Clans, connections, and reputation still mattered. Shepard could understand that, and she would still resent it. How much suffering had it caused? Nihlus could try and hide it, but it was still here.

“At the time, the Primarch’s health was failing; everyone knew a transition of power was coming.” Nihlus finished. “I know you can figure out the rest.”

Shepard was not going to say anything to that, in the interest of not opening her mouth and inserting foot. She was perfectly happy to let Nihlus vent. Talking about things would help him, and she did not want to be the one to say something that would only dam it all up again.

“I am happy to say grandfather did not get the position.” Nihlus added cheerfully.

“Oh and of course… you ended up in a position that is technically above him in certain circumstances.” Shepard said.

Nihlus tipped his head down and smiled a full toothy smile, his eyes twinkling with undisguised mirth. “That is ironic, is it not?” He asked.

Shepard was seized with the oddest impulse at that moment, seeing him so positively cat-that-ate-canary. She could not help but want to share in the unbridled happiness he was radiating. Nihlus was certainly basking in the outcome of this roll of the cosmic dice. He now had another reason to love his job. Shepard knew him enough to know he would bask in it like basking was going out of fashion. She raised her hands and put them on his shoulder. The smile vanished, replaced by curiosity instantly. “It is times like these that probably make people believe in some higher power.” She mused as she put her head on his shoulder.

How did one go about hugging a turian exactly? She was savvy enough not to try and wrap her arms around his waist, but going higher did not look comfortable. It was an awkward gesture, but Shepard hoped was universal enough. She wanted to communicate that she understood him, that she was on his side. She could even appreciate life’s ironies. She wanted to think she got the message across when she felt his arm wrap around her at mid-back, even as he shifted her slightly forward. Shepard let him, soon enough she was practically hugging his side.

“I think I won the ultimate prize,” he rumbled, contentment in his voice.

She felt him lay the side of his head against her crown, a pillow-soft gentle pressure, even as his arm tightened, pulling her as close to him as he dared. She smiled and closed her eyes. His body warmth was like a blanket wrapping around her, comforting, tender, and somehow right. She really did not want to move away. Yet as the seconds ticked by, another feeling seemed to bubble up out of some weird corner of her psyche. Shepard opened her eyes a little when she realized that this feeling was giving her the worst case of déjà vu she ever had. Where had she experienced this before?

She tried to rake her mind for why this proximity felt so familiar, but her mind was coming up with nothing but blanks. This was literally the first time she had ever hugged a turian. Even using the term “hug” was stretching it a little. So why was this giving her déjà vu?
Author Notes: That last scene took way longer than it should have. But I hope you enjoyed it nevertheless. And yes, I am evil. I am playing the “can’t remember” card, though I am avoiding as much of the cheesy soap opera drama as possible. Now on to planning where I want to go next.

General Notes:
Nothing really…

Chapter Notes:
Nothing really…
Their return trip to the Citadel aboard the Indomitable was largely uneventful. Shepard spent most of that time ensconced in the shared bunk room the ship’s captain assigned her, splitting between recuperating and working up an appendix for Nihlus’ report. She still had some lingering fatigue and minor headaches, so she could not work full tilt. For once she used her meager privileges as Nihlus’ trainee to request that they let her have the bunk at her convenience. The Indomitable’s captain had not put up much resistance after Shepard told her why she needed more sleep than normal. The junior officers largely left her alone as well, after the basic pleasantries were put away that is.

When they arrived on the Citadel the Indomitable was due to return to its unit without docking, so the captain arranged for a runabout to take them onto Zakera Ward, to one of the public shuttle docks. Fortunately the crowds of harried travelers did not pay much heed to a runabout dropping off two passengers and then zipping right off. Shepard was not in the mood to create a scene either. She already had a mental list of things that needed to be done.

First things first, they stopped at a public message terminal, where Nihlus clearances got them jumped up the data burst queue. Shepard sent a message to the Normandy to say that they had arrived on the Citadel. Shepard fully expected Kaidan to take that as ‘get over here as soon as possible’ orders. Even then, she could not expect them to arrive today. They would have to hire a room in some middle-grade hotel for the night.

Truthfully, Shepard would have loved five stars, with a spa. However that was nothing more than a dream on the Citadel. The room fees here could be more expensive than the most expensive resorts on any resort planet. She could not justify spending that much money. So she could only dream of the luxury of getting a nice back massage.

“We have some hours to burn, what is on your agenda?” Nihlus asked as they stepped out of the port and onto one of the long low-level thoroughfares, which were a network of tunnels running the length of the ward arms. Each tunnel had a pedestrian section on either side of a fully-enclosed four lanes of low-speed cars, serving the lowest levels of the towers above. They were also the only places where one could, in theory, walk the length and breadth of the wards. Not that many would walk the full forty kilometer length of the ward.

Shepard glanced down at her Omni-tool to check the time; she had long ago configured it to show both Terran Coordinated and Galactic Standard. The former was essentially Normandy time, and the latter was Citadel and Council time. She hummed thoughtfully. Because of the difference between
the two, it was the start of the day cycle on Arcturus, but early evening on the Citadel. Her internal
clock was closer to the mid-point between them, and with all the naps she got in the last day meant
that she was not sleepy right now. She could still do something light for a few hours. The question
was then what? Then her stomach rumbled, and the decision kind of made itself. “Well… No offense
meant Nihlus, but… you ate all cooked meals on Taetrus; I had to make do with rations. I want
food.”

“No offense taken. I could eat something myself. What are you in the mood for?”

“Something fast, carby, and wholly not good for me.” Shepard replied. She was dithering between
pizza and take-out Chinese or Thai.

“Pick your poison.” Nihlus said, chuckling. “There is a Skycab stand over there.”

Shepard chuckled; fast food was picking her poison alright, but right then she did not care, she
wanted to eat something that tasted good. She followed where Nihlus indicated and spotted the large
square where at least ten Skycab kiosk pads were arranged in rows, with vehicles waiting for paying
customers. Her feet did the rest.

They were about ten meters away from the Skycab depot’s entrance when Shepard felt a subtle
vibration on her wrist that indicated an incoming message. She brought up her Omni-tool and the
message was on top when the interface lit up.

“Is it Alenko?” Nihlus asked quietly.

“No. It’s from Wrex. He’s on the Citadel.”

“I did not realize you let him stay on the station.”

“I did not know he remained on the Citadel.” She did not know, but she was not surprised either;
Wrex was a bounty hunter, a mercenary, and a krogan. How much control could one have over any
one of those things? To say nothing of all three. The Citadel certainly seemed to be no worse for
wear either. She would bet that Wrex had some sort of business on the station, and chose to do it
while they were on Taetrus.

“What does he want?”

“He asked where we can meet up.” Shepard replied.

“Great,” Nihlus grumbled.

Shepard chose to ignore him. Now she had to make here eatery selection carefully. Not only would it
have to be a place where the food was both levo and dextro, but it would have to be in ample enough
quantities to satisfy Wrex. There was only one sort of place Shepard could think have where such
would be the case, somewhere all-you-can-eat. She typed a quick reply telling Wrex that she would
send him another message with a location shortly.

She had her squad-mate from the ICT, a high-spiking Vanguard, as a reference. Leif could pack
away five thousand calories and just burp in a satisfied way. Rightly it became a bit of a joke among them that Leif was actually an Adept, and could form a singularity, though only when eating, and in his stomach. With such a shining example, Shepard figured she was justified in taking precautions with Wrex. The last thing they wanted was to get kicked out.

In the end Shepard settled on a large fast food place that advertised an expansive galactic menu suited for guests of all species, including Elcor, and which boasted a Chinese-take-out-style buffet. Just then, the thought of a large plate of chow mein with three different types of meat made her mouth water. After that it was a matter of giving the Skycab’s VI a very precise destination designation. Once the cab was moving she sent the destination code to Wrex as well, along with the description of the place.

It took a half an hour ride to get to the restaurant. Outwardly the place did not look like much, a typical grey-walled rectangular space set into a large section of the street level of another of the ward towers. The large sign advertised the place as the Galactic Express, a name befitting what the place tried to be. The front windows showed off the crowd eating inside, as if the place was using the quantity of its patrons as a way of saying they were edible.

Inside the place was still that very bland grey color that seemed pervasive for the citadel. However the owners tried to spruce things up with somewhat random choices of urban skyline wall art, admittedly on the same theme of having the whole galaxy represented. The restaurant’s mostly open space was divided into multiple seating areas, with certain spots offering more robust seating than others. Like a typical fast food eatery there was no tablecloths or condiments to be seen, except at the dispensers by the drink fountains, but the plates and the cutlery were no disposable, so that was something. The food was served from the two rows of keep-warm serving counters that dominated the width of the restaurant along the back wall. The dextro section, which was about a third of the overall length of the counters, was evident from the signs posted above.

After paying up front for the buffet and staking a claim on a table large enough for Wrex to be comfortable, Shepard was perfectly happy to practically teleport toward the food. There were a lot of different dishes in place, with Terran staples as Thessian and Sur’Kesh, but she wanted her chow mein.

Couple minutes later, just as she sat down with her plates, a laden with noodles, and a smaller one with the vegetables and meat, when a large and rather familiar shadow fell over her.

“Wrex,” she greeted.

“Shepard.” He replied. “This is not the typical place for me to be eating at.”

“I assume they didn’t give you trouble?”

“No, just… I’m not used to this… civilized eating.”

“No one here is drinking tea from tiny cups with their little finger out. That’s civilized.” Shepard murmured as she picked up a clump of noodles with her chopsticks.

Wrex chuckled, “I assume that’s some human thing, so I will take your word for it.”

“Wrex.” Nihlus greeted as he stopped at the table, carrying a large plate positively laden with food. Shepard would have described his meal as a meat salad, with chunks of a few different varieties that probably came from different animals, both terrestrial and fish laid on top of a familiar brown grain that cooked like rice, though it swelled up in size far more when cooked. On the side Nihlus brought a small bowl of something blue-tinged, but cut into long flexible strings. To Shepard it looked
positively like pasta made from meat, not grain-based dough.

“Kryik. I was wondering where you went off to.” Wrex replied blandly. “Alright, Shepard, I’ll be back with food, and we’ll talk.”

“Sure,” Shepard replied. What else could she say?

Nihlus watched him go for a moment before he put his food down and eased onto a seat across from her. “Should I be worried about damage bills?”

Shepard looked up to give him a glare; did he really just ask that? She was not going to justify that with any sort of reply. There was no way to miss that Wrex did not particularly care for Nihlus or Garrus, whereas he outright did not like every other turian. Still, did Nihlus have to return fire?

Wrex returned a few minutes later with a full plate that could have very well been a serving tray for the rest of them. “So.” He began as he sat down, causing the robust stool under him to creak rather loudly. “What are you planning now, Shepard?” he asked.

“Waiting for the Normandy,” Shepard replied blandly as she took another bite of her food. That was not a total lie; it was just the first thing on her agenda. She would bet a month’s salary on Wrex being up to something. It was patently obvious just from the fact that he asked about her plans. She also did not want to talk about what was actually on her agenda. If Wrex found out about the armor, questions would inevitably follow. From there she could see him making a choice comment about it, Nihlus reacting to the choice comment, and the whole thing escalating from there. Shepard did not want to be in the middle of that. “I’m more curious about what you’re doing on the Citadel, Wrex.” She did not care if people could hear the wheels grind on that track change.

“Business, Shepard. I asked you that for a reason. If don’t want to tell me… fine, employer prerogative. I know you enough to know you keep enough secrets to make a salarian envious.”

Shepard chuckled, “Alright, you got me there Wrex. You are going to enlighten me about this business of yours, or are you taking a page from my book?”

Wrex speared a chunk of a green-colored tuber-like vegetable with his knife and rolled it around so that the sauce poured over it would spread on its surface more, before he popped it into his mouth, pulling it off the blade with his teeth. He took a brief moment to chew and swallow, even as he set the knife down. “I should,” He said after what amounted to a rather long pause. “But as much as it is not my usual way…” He inspected the tuber closely and intensely for a long moment. “In this instance… I could use the help.”

“You’ll have it,” Shepard replied automatically. She knew the significance of this. After the Krogan Rebellion and the deployment of the Genophage, which served as a cultural cataclysm, Wrex’ people had defaulted back their ancestral honor codes. In that way the Genophage sent the whole species into the proverbial Dark Age. Where most did not know how to handle their norms, or worse, saw them as archaic barbarism, Shepard could respect their ways well enough. More than that, she could understand why he was hesitant. Asking for help was asking for a favor. Being the one who had to ask for a favor could also be construed as an admission of some weakness. Asking a foreigner? It just could not get any worse. “What can I do?” She had no reason to try to leverage her honor over his, to wheel and deal.

Wrex turned his head just enough to give Nihlus a long piercing look, which might have been also his version of stink-eye, but the Spectre merely put another chunk of meat in his mouth and swallowed, the picture of nonchalance. Shepard set down her chopsticks.
Wrex turned back to face her. “How much do you know about the end of our war with the turians?” He asked.

“Truthfully? Only what most know. That said… I know history tends to be written by the victors.” Shepard replied. In this case, the victors were the Council, and they had indeed written the history to make the Krogan look bad.

“That’s an awfully nice way of putting it,” Wrex mused.

“Humans do have a way with words,” Nihlus slipped in.

“I need your help with something that goes right back to the end of the war.” Wrex said, as if Nihlus had not said a word.

“Oh?” Shepard asked.

“There were other things the turians did...” Wrex began. “The Genophage is just the thing they couldn’t cover up.” He spared Nihlus a side-glance.

“If you are trying to get a reaction, you are looking at the wrong turian.” Nihlus replied blandly.

“Surprise, surprise. He knows not to pick a fight with me,” Wrex rumbled, amused.

Shepard knew the sight of storm clouds on the horizon when they began to rise over it. “Just so you know… if I have to pay damages to this place, I will take it off both your salaries until I come up even.” Not that she was paying Nihlus anything, but if he went and did anything to warrant it, she would come up with a way to make his life miserable somehow.

“Protecting him now?” Wrex asked with a teeth-bared krogan version of a cat-ate-canary grin on his face. “Alright. I’ll play nice. But only because you asked.”

“So... the war?” Shepard asked, intentionally pretending she did not pick up on the insinuation. Wrex was the right sort of bastard who loved to try and get a rise out of anyone and everyone, simply because he could then demolish whoever took offense. He wore his power like a badge of honor.

“Ah yes...” Wrex straightened and shifted his weight. “The Genophage ended the war, but it was not the final atrocity of it. After the final warlords were forced to surrender... the turians created the Krogan Demilitarized Zone.”

“That I am familiar with.” Shepard replied. The Krogan DMZ was a cluster of three major systems; Aralakh, Dranek, and Nith, with a smattering of smaller, less important, relatively resource-poor systems. It was basically the home cluster of the Krogan, with Aralakh being their home system. Tuchanka, their home world, was called the most inhospitable place in the galaxy even before wars, both the Krogan Rebellions and the Krogan civil disputes, reduced it to a radioactive wasteland.

“There were laws put in effect that enforced it. For one, my people could no longer build ships... not even unarmed ones.”

“Because any ship could be a weapon in krogan hands.” Nihlus added. “If one hits a city at just under the speed of light...”

“Sure, that was your justification.” Wrex argued back. “But I am not here to complain about that. I know some of the warlords would have done exactly that. It isn’t even the other things we were no longer supposed to have: the weapons, armor, and the technology to manufacture more. The worst
was the seizure of the ceremonial clan panoplies. Your people took things that were there before the salarians came begging us for help against the Rachni. Want to dispute that, turian?”

Nihlus did not say anything.

Wrex smiled, and kept going. “Now if those things were treated like they should have been, if they had been destroyed… fine… But no, that’s not what happened. Tell me, Kryik, how many of your old military families who trace their lineage to the war have krogan war trophies? How many of your legions use our things as proofs of their past glories?”

Nihlus’ mandibles drew up against his chin, broadcasting to everyone that he had just gone on the defensive.

“They said they destroyed those things. They lied. And they called us the uncivilized ones.”

Shepard kept quiet, what could she say to that? For one she was not turian, so she could not pass any sort of judgment. Add to that, war trophies were not even a turian invention. Point at any human war and you would find people who took trophies. She was pretty sure that if she dug in, she would find plenty of krogan taking trophies too, macabre ones even. The taking of trophies was ubiquitous in honor societies. But then, Wrex seemed to have an issue with the dishonesty rather than the taking of trophies. She could even see where it might be coming from. After all, some of those same trophy collectors would probably say they were above something like that, thus the lie. That was the problem.

Worse yet, Shepard could see the beginning of a long list of festering grievances just under the surface. The issue, unless addressed delicately, could devolve alarmingly. It was her experience that whenever two sides locked horns over something, the truth was lost somewhere in the middle, but good luck making either side see it. They would sooner turn on the neutral middle-person for not taking their side. Shepard did not want to be the neutral party on whom they turned, but she also would not take a side. This put her in a rather very ugly position.

“Shepard, I want to get back something that belongs to my clan. Our ceremonial armor. It was worn by my father’s father, and five generations of Urdnot clan leaders before him. By all rights it belongs to me, not to a… trophy collector.” Wrex all but growled the last two words.

“I can not allow you to attack Hierarchy citizens,” Nihlus stepped in.

Wrex turned his head slowly, and stared the Spectre down, “Let’s make one thing clear, Kryik. You can’t stop me.” Nihlus opened his mouth to protest when Wrex snorted, “Save it. I’m not an idiot who would attack a Hierarchy colony. Those items are largely beyond our reach until you pyjacks admit you lied, but… at least they are reasonably safe in all those vaults. No, my clan’s armor is in the hands of a no-good varren-shit pirate. He collects cultural artifacts for bragging rights.”

“Are you sure?” Nihlus asked.

“Of course I’m sure!” Wrex’s voice rose. “Run his name yourself, seeing as you don’t trust me. It’s Actus, Tonn Actus.”

“Alright Wrex, where is he?” Shepard asked. Did Nihlus have to goad Wrex on? Shepard was no fool; she knew that if she refused to do this, Wrex would never forget it, and despite being centuries old, he would still outlive her. She did not want that sort of resentment. So the only option left to her was to make the best of things and try to mitigate potential collateral damage. Her position as his employer might just be good enough for that.
Wrex let himself relax in his seat, as if deflating, so he looked positively hunched over, which only emphasized the sheer bulk of him and his hump. “My sources say he got himself a vault in the Argos Rho cluster. I will not say exactly where here.”


“Yes. That’s why I could use your help, Shepard.” Wrex replied, his voice mellowing a little.

“I see your conundrum. Yes, we can do something. Especially if this guy is as you say… a pirate.” If he so much as scratched the paint on some human-operated shipping, she could justify curb-stomping him to her superior. Because curb-stomping it would be, given that Wrex was very much involved. “Just, let me ask the obvious question. You said he’s got a vault. That would mean he’s got more than your clan’s armor. What are your plans those things?”

“I have… a few ideas.” Wrex replied. “Now that I know that you’re willing to help me… we can hash the details later. Now eat. I can hear your stomach from here.”

Shepard grinned, well if that was not one of the most embarrassing things anyone has ever said to her. Then again, maybe it made sense, she was quite hungry. The fact that Wrex sometimes had the manners of a bull in a china shop had been long established. He had his own codes, ones that allowed a lot more skull-cracking than most. It did not come with the sensitivity not to say things like that. Of course, such sensitivity could also be entirely human, brought on mostly by a lack of a general ability to hear those things to begin with, and the seeming weirdness of those who could.

As she took her next mouthful of food she idly pondered what sort of ideas Wrex might have. She could not help but notice that he omitted telling her why this mattered to him personally, save for one little thing. He let slip that the armor belonged to the heads of Clan Urdnot, and specifically his father’s father, and rightfully his. Shepard could connect the dots from there, and they seemed to hint that by all rights Wrex was supposed to be the leader of a clan.

If she then tipped her head and squinted, she could begin to see what the other things could be good for. If Wrex brought the haul back to Tuchanka, one could argue it could be grounds for re-asserting some sort of power, the beginning of bringing back honor. To be sure, the clans whose things he brought back would owe him. It posed a few interesting possibilities, but also asked a few questions. Namely, why now?

As long as she had known him, Wrex had never talked about his past, his family, or even his clan. He was a fierce fighter, could drink them all under a table, and he had a temper that seemed to rise whenever anyone said anything that came off as telling him what to do. Yet it could be argued that all that was just his version of professionalism. It made sense why he never opened up about his personal life. Opening up was showing a weakness. His version of professionalism demanded he keep his private business just that, private.

So what changed his mind? Had something happened? Or had Wrex always been keeping this sort of thing covered up with krogan machismo? Was this decision to say something nothing more than necessity? Shepard could see it. Over a thousand years had passed since the end of the Krogan Rebellions. The Urdnot armor had vanished a long time ago, only to resurface now, somehow. Was Wrex’s decision nothing more capitalizing on an opportunity? There were simply too many questions, and too few answers.

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The quirks of Wrex’s thinking remained in the back of Shepard’s mind throughout the meal, but Wrex had indeed brought the discussion to a halt by mentioning her growling stomach. After that the
three of them turned to the task at hand of making like a pack of carnivores on a freshly-killed carcass. Wrex truly did eat a lot, more than he consumed on the Normandy, which made Shepard wonder whether they had been under-supplying him, even though he had never complained. They left the restaurant an hour and a half later. Shepard could not even walk fast without jostling her stomach, but ask her if she cared. She had good food for the first time in a week, nothing else mattered. It was not her norm to binge-eat like this, but she would, just this once.

Once they were outside, Wrex announced he still had things to do. He wanted her to message him with where the Normandy docked and by when to get there when she got the information. Shepard promised him as much and he walked off, glowering at people who looked at him even a little too long. Shepard was oddly amused by that, those people earned the glowers. Did they really have to stare at the krogan?

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After that, Nihlus was quick to find a hotel, nothing too posh given that they only needed the rooms for one night, and nothing too expensive because Shepard could not justify that. After settling in for the evening, she cleared the coffee table in her room and got to work disassembling Vincent. It was long overdue, but this was really the first opportunity she got where she had the space, time, and no disruptions. Within half an hour her worst fear came true. When she opened the main section and peered down the length of the accelerator rails it was impossible to miss that the thin ceramic plates that lined the space were shattered. The gun would not fire now, not with those gone, as they were there to insulate the rails and prevent shorts between them and the gun’s other components.

The pieces of ceramic positively clogged the very rail channel. There was no real way of fixing that. If she took the module and rails from a different rifle it would make her gun that rifle in Vincent’s skin. The individual characteristics were a product of manufacture, and they were as unique as fingerprints. No two accelerator rail assemblies fired the same. There was no way to go about it; her beloved rifle was going into retirement. She put Vincent back together as far as possible and sighed. The only thing left to her at this point was to consider her options.

There was little work she could do in the hotel right now. The best she could do was address the obvious, and possibly easier task of coming up with a list of things she would need. She normally did not chase the bleeding edge upgrades, because those tended to come with bugs in the system, but now was the time to consider the options. She wanted the proven reliable, and after that she would learn to get the most out of them. She ended up composing a list of all the components that would need replacement in a note file on her Omni-tool. Once she was satisfied with having handled all the little details and accounted for all the little things, only then did she allow herself to hit the sack.

When she woke up, one open eye told her it was not even the crack of proverbial dawn. Her hotel room’s blinds had yet to open, though she had set them to open automatically at six-hundred hours Galactic Standard. The hotel room was also too quiet. She had gotten used to the bubbling of her empty fish tank. Even on Taetrus there had been some noise, the hums and chirps of native insects, or even the breeze. Here on the Citadel there was nothing.

The hotel Nihlus found was just a section of a mixed-use tower, and Shepard did not even want to think about the fact that on the other side of the large transparent panel windows was actually the cold vacuum beyond all atmosphere retaining fields. She could totally understand why some people could never get over being this close to empty space. Void phobias had emerged about as fast as space travel became common.

She sat up in bed, resolved to banish all those unwanted thoughts even as she pondered what to do. Breakfast was in order, but it was much too early to go out, and she did not want to pay the fees for
room service. Shepard reached for the small remote device on her bedside table and clicked the on button, and the large vid screen across from the bed turned on without even having to aim at it. The hotel apparently set all their room screens to turn on to the Citadel News Network broadcast channel, both because of discretion, and because the bandwidth for that channel was probably the cheapest.

Right at that moment the last of the late-night broadcast was recapping major events that happened in Council Space. It was a mix of natural disasters, like a minor tremor felt overnight in the largest city on one of the Hierarchy’s many colonies. The mention was brief as the place was known for said tremors, and Hierarchy engineering ensured that buildings could withstand it. No one got hurt, and damages were limited. After that came the report of the death of a prominent Thessian matriarch after a long-term illness, whose estate was now being claimed by her three daughters, despite the will naming only one. Shepard found that oddly amusing, because no matter how civilized anyone pretended to be, division of assets always seemed to bring the worst out. Shepard clicked the screen off and then made for her bag to grab her toiletries. She would start the morning with a nice hot shower on a bigger water budget.

By the time she emerged from the shower, dressed in comfortable civilian cargo pants and tee-shirt, the room’s blinds had opened, signaling morning. She plopped back onto the bed and clicked the screen back on. This time the broadcast was definitely morning news. Shepard had just settled in to watch when her Omni-tool chimed. A quick tap revealed a message from Kaidan; the Normandy had cleared the Widow relay and was beginning clearance procedures to dock.

Shepard smiled, sent him a reply to tell her where they docked, and left it at that. It would be about an hour, maybe two before the Normandy was berthed. The address line also told her that Kaidan had batch-sent that same message to Nihlus, Wrex, and her, to save himself some time in typing. It was time to get ready. As she moved about the room to gather her things, the vid screen continued coverage.

"Today the Citadel is expected to receive delegations from the Earth Systems Alliance and the Turian Hierarchy to commemorate the signing of the armistice accords of 2157 which ended humanity’s First Contact War."

She froze in place across the room and turned her head to look at the screen. It was Armistice Day? No bloody wonder then that she did not get her mother fawning over her just the second she heard about Taetrus from Admiral Hackett. Her mother would be very busy around now, given that she had done the purported-to-be-impossible, and had been the favorite lieutenant of Admiral Kastanie Drescher herself. The media would be hounding the Titanium Lady with a vengeance because they would not be able to get within a kilometer of the retired admiral without her permission, and that was hardly likely to be issued.

"The three-day peace summit will see Alliance parliamentary and military representatives meet with Hierarchy officials to discuss ongoing peace efforts."

Shepard honestly wanted to laugh as she went right back to putting the contents of her mobile locker in order. The summit was a sort of polite mock-play at peace and mostly a display of ‘we are getting along fine, thank you very much,’ to allay fears in the general galactic population. Because no one wanted to see the Hierarchy and Alliance start firing at each other again. Since neither side would back down, the consequences would be dire.

She was glad she would not have to be in that room. Some of the older, more conservative members of both the parliamentary delegation and the admiralty would be bothered by just having to be in the same room as a turian, seeing only former enemies who killed people under their command. Hopefully the Hierarchy would not be so tone-deaf as to send the generals who had been in
command of the ground invasion of Shanxi.

“Armistice Day, as it is known within Alliance space, will also mark the twenty-sixth annual protest organized and led by the chairman of the Terra Firma party on the Citadel. Our contacts in Citadel Security assure us that violence is not expected, as the event had always been a peaceful demonstration. Nevertheless, security forces will be on hand to lend assistance should it be needed.”

Shepard grimaced as she shut the locker; Terra Firma, of course. The other side of the proverbial coin. They were a very vocal minority in Alliance parliamentary politics. Staunchly conservative, their base policy rested on the belief that with integration into galactic society humanity was at a risk of losing its distinct culture. The problem, as far as Shepard could see, was how many xenophobes they attracted, and how much of a stuck record that thinking was. That song and dance had been done by countless people before; even back when it was against globalization on Earth and the endangered culture had been European, and not the Earth’s as a whole. They willfully ignored the fact that there was no single culture on Earth, and their platform was basically the old ‘us vs. them’ line in the sand.

“And finally, Zakera Ward, home of the Citadel’s largest human population, will host its twenty-fifth annual Earth Cultural fair. This annual week-long festival features live stage performances, vibrant ethnic outfits, food, drink, souvenirs, and traditional carnival games for the children.”

And then there was that, she thought as she moved to gather her errant laundry and toiletries, to stuff them back into her duffel. For all of Terra Firma’s complaints, the cultural fairs had always gone over well. The first ones had been a way of saying ‘here we are and this is what we do’, but the sheer variety and uniqueness had quickly won over crowds. It was not all that peculiar to see someone bring a non-human coworker or a friend to these events. There were also an ever-increasing number of human-asari mixed couples as well. She knew because some of Terra Firma’s pundits sung and danced about the danger of losing genetic diversity too, if people continued to associate with the asari.

Her room door chimed, and before Shepard could even move her Omni-tool binged with a short distance message from Nihlus, simply ‘At the door’. Shepard made her way over and pressed the unlock button, allowing the door to open. The Spectre wasted no time stepping into the room. “Morning,” he greeted.

“Morning, Nihlus,” Shepard replied as she moved back toward her duffel. Right then she could not quite do up the zipper, a mystery given that she had not added a darn thing.

“I assume you want to be on the Normandy as soon as it docks.” Nihlus asked.

“Can you blame me?” She replied.

“Not in the slightest. Listen, I wanted to tell you… I looked into the name Wrex gave us. It checks out. Tonn Actus’ name comes up. There is suspicion that he buys stolen art, or worse, commissions its theft to begin with. He is also wanted for tax evasion by his home colony.”

“None of that is standard Spectre fare,” Shepard said as she glanced back over her shoulder.

“Yes, but it gives me the right to act. He is definitely not the upstanding citizen I can not harass.”

“Good to know you will not harass upstanding citizens. Here I thought Spectres could act with impunity.”

“I do have scruples, such as they are.” Nihlus grinned.
“But not a single shred of humility.”

“I do not pretend to be perfect.” He replied with that signature cocky grin.

Shepard smiled and shook her head; she would not have it any other way. He really was one of those rare people who wore arrogance like a well-tailored three-piece suit that flattered him. Nihlus’ displays of swagger were mostly of the benign sort. At the end of the day she could still count on him, and that mattered more than how much swagger he displayed when he happened to do what he did best.

“Unlike a certain someone else in this room.” He added chirpily after a moment of silence.

And then he went and did that, the nuisance, but she was not going to rise to the occasion. “I was watching the news. I completely forgot that Armistice Day was coming. Truthfully, it’s the last day I want to be on the Citadel for.”

Nihlus hummed, and Shepard knew he knew why she did that abrupt change of topic. “Yes, I can understand that. I am not so oblivious that I would miss how much you hate politics.”

He was also apparently letting her off the hook, thank her lucky stars. “Oh it’s the politicians more than the politics, but one doesn’t come without the other.” She said. “Alliance politics are muddled. On the one hand we have those like Admiral Hackett and my mother, who do not hold any animosity toward the Hierarchy. To be sure, the Hierarchy could admit that they fired first and asked questions later, but realistically speaking we know that sort of admission will never happen. On the other hand we have the others who still expect and keep ready for the Armistice to lapse. Admiral Lindholm of the First Fleet is that sort of saber-rattler.”

“Understandable. There are those in the Hierarchy who view humanity as a rising threat.”

“Yes, I’m aware of those.” Shepard had encountered that opinion both often and recently enough to take note. “Still, I am glad that Wrex gave me a reason to get off this station as fast as possible. I think I will enjoy making some hired guns rue the day they were born more than being here on Armistice Day.”

Nihlus chuckled, “I think on that we will agree.”

“First though, I need to get my gear replaced. I checked my rifle, the rail insulation is in pieces, and there is no fixing that. Well... there is, but might as well get a new rifle, about the same costs, and the effect will be the same.”

“Do you want to look at the Spectre requisition catalogues?” Nihlus asked. “I have last month’s on my Omni-tool. I will order anything you want, no questions asked.”

“It can’t hurt to look. Maybe I can get some after-market options. I’m a bit of a snob when it comes to my gear.”

“The best always are, so that does not surprise me.” Nihlus replied. “How about a bit of a this-for-that. Have breakfast with me in the hotel restaurant, and we can look at the catalogue over that.”

Shepard paused to weigh her options, a restaurant was hardly the ideal place to talk shop, but when did Nihlus ever ask for anything of this sort? She could not be bothered to remember the last time, and she could not come up with a reason to tell him no. “Sure. Just... give me five minutes to finish up here.”

“Alright, no problem.”
The message from Kaidan regarding the Normandy’s docking location arrived three hours later, and it was another hour after that before Shepard even saw her ship. The station’s control staff was unusually busy with everything happening. More than the usual amount of civilian, cargo, and even military traffic was coming in.

She had just stepped past the Normandy’s inner airlock door when she heard a creak from her left.

“Welcome back, Commander. Spectre.” Joker called from his seat in the cockpit.

“Thanks, Joker. Good to be back.”

“Commander,” Kaidan’s greeted quietly as he approached from the direction of the CIC, stopping at the last bulkhead to snap a salute, “The Normandy is yours once again.”

“At ease. And thanks.” Shepard replied. “Did Wrex arrive?”

Kaidan instantly dropped the formalities. “Yes, about ten minutes ago.” Kaidan replied. “Do you need any help with your things?”

“Not particularly. But thanks, Kaidan.”

“Alright.” The lieutenant nodded.

“As you were, lieutenant,” Shepard added as she moved past him. Her armor needed to go straight into the recycler, but she could not do it right now. The recycler compacted and jettisoned what it deemed trash into space, but it would not be able to do that while the Normandy was docked on the Citadel. She would have to wait until they were in the nebula or something. As for her rifle, she would probably find a nice rack for it in her quarters. She could not quite bring herself to throw it away, even if it would never fire again.

“You do not want him to see the state of your armor, do you?” Nihlus rumbled, almost right against her ear, so that no one on the CIC would hear him.

“I’m that obvious?” Shepard asked as she called the elevator.

“I know you do not like making people worry.”

“What’s done is done. That’s all.”

Nihlus nodded, and that was the end of that conversation. From the elevator they went their separate ways. Nihlus exited on the deck three and Shepard took it down to the Shuttle Bay. She had expected Wrex to be in his corner; he had not given her the details on the location of Tonn Actus’ base, however, the krogan was nowhere to be seen. Instead she was surprised to see Legion at the gear bench, which was draped over with a thick black protective tarp. The geth was welding something together with a small hand-held precision tool. Where organics would have had to wear goggles at least, Legion had merely narrowed their optic sensor lamp to a pin-point.

They must have also heard the elevator door open as they shifted around, blocking her view angle on the welding with their body. “Shepard-Commander, please do not come closer. We are currently in the process of welding.” The geth announced.

“I can see that, Legion, and good morning.” What more could she say?
They looked back over their shoulder, iris widening to its normal configuration. “Welcome back Shepard-Commander, also good morning. We apologize. We deemed it necessary to issue a hazard warning prior to customary greetings.”

“I appreciate the concern.” Shepard smiled. Sometimes the geth could be the most awkwardly adorable yet thoughtful being she had ever met. She was curious about the project, but then Legion turned back around and the sparks started flying again, and she decided to wait.

One glance had been enough to tell her that it was some sort of metal armature, quite possibly the innermost frame of a collapsible weapon. The table over was laid out with immaculately cut and arranged metal pieces, many of them quite tiny, waiting to be welded on. It surprised her more that Legion would build a weapon from scratch. However that already told her something about what they were building.

Most conventional weapons were mass produced, with the cores being welded by computer-controlled machines. Yet the models they assembled were known, obtainable, and relatively common. Legion would not replicate a weapon from scratch if they could buy one. They were building something that could not be bought. Shepard would bet it was something of a uniquely Geth design.

She was officially curious, but could not ask, so she moved toward her locker, putting Legion behind her back. She knew that if she asked, the geth would baffle her with technical specifications just to be cryptic. What she had seen of the frame, had looked quite robust, probably a rifle. There was yet no way to tell apart if it would be an assault rifle or a sniper rifle, but given that legion used both, it could be either. She would put her money on the sniper rifle though, because Legion’s current was over-powered. It could punch through a vehicle’s armor, so when it hit an unprotected softer target, it created an excessive amount of gore. Legion was nothing if not oddly considerate. Maybe they were building a less powerful version to use on softer targets? Only time would tell for sure.

Shepard opened her mobile locker and then her ship’s armory locker and reached into the former to withdraw Sin and Dex. She had just put them into the armory locker when Legion’s peculiar light-tipped shadow slid up along the floor right next to her.

“Shepard-Commander, your armor is damaged beyond repair.”

Shepard sighed, why did she even for a second think that Legion would be different? This was the geth who seemed to linger in the shadows, watching over her. They had done so from day one, even disobeying orders when she took them to the Cerberus labs. She would have thought it adorable, if she was not a little bit annoyed right then. “Yes, but don’t go telling everyone about it. Things on Taetrus got a little… complicated.”

The geth chattered as if the various runtimes were conversing among themselves, and yet their tone still managed to sound surprised. Then suddenly the geth reached into the mobile locker and picked up Vincent. Shepard opened her mouth to protest but they tipped their head to the side in that curious look they sometimes got when they were analyzing. The chattering became a background buzz, low and indistinct. Shepard watched as the iris of their optical sensors worked, narrowing down, rotating. She chose to observe their behavior over reprimanding them.

“Our scan has detected irreparable damage to this weapon as well.”

“Well yes.” Shepard replied automatically, somewhat numbly. Legion had been scanning the weapon?

Legion placed the weapon back, as gingerly as if any more bumps would cause it
disintegrate. “Spectre-Kryik alone is unable to assure your safety.”

Shepard felt her jaw loosen; did Legion really just say that? “Legion, you do not know what happened to make that assumption.”

“We apologize. We based our calculations on probabilities, using Shepard-Commander’s previous performance standards.” The geth bowed their head.

Shepard’s kept her expression intentionally blank, she would not grimace, no matter how much that seemed to be appropriate reaction right then. Legion was right, but it was their blunt way of making the statement that was off-putting. Legion observed from the results alone that something had happened which went beyond what she and Nihlus could handle on their own. Shepard could even see their next leap of logic, assuming she understood the process of their thinking correctly. The leap would be based on previous observations of her normal methods. Sure she tended to get a little roughed up, hazard of the profession, but this time the damage to her gear was excessive. Ergo something put her off her usual norms, and that something could only be Nihlus.

There was no way for Legion to know the details, though, and Shepard was not about to enlighten them. Nihlus was right; she did not want anyone to worry. More so, she did not want people to know that Nihlus had outright contributed to the situation. “Legion, I appreciate your concern… but it was complicated. Let’s leave it at that. You too, EDI, I know you are listening. I don’t want this getting out, alright?”

“Acknowledged.”

“As you wish, Commander.” EDI replied.

Legion chattered again, quite loudly this time.

“Allright, Legion. We will do that.” EDI replied. “Commander, Legion initially wished to tell you we made progress with the data acquired on Solcrum. We had time to run calculations while the Normandy was on Arcturus Station. We wish to share our findings with you, at your convenience.”

Legion had turned around and walked off, going back to their welding.

Shepard was not the least bit surprised to see that EDI learned to understand the peculiar chattering that all geth seemed capable of producing. Was the term ‘language’ appropriate for it? Was there speech as one would think it? Or did they exchange data via some other method? Shepard wondered, but now was not really the time to ask. “Great, but I do have something else that needs to be done before that. EDI, could you remind me again when I get to the OD?”

“Of course, Commander.” EDI replied.

“Thanks. Oh and Legion, I want you up there for that as well.”

“Acknowledged,” the geth replied, without looking up from their work.

She turned back to her mobile locker and sighed; there was nothing else to be said. Then and there she knew how hard it would be to keep the extent of her injuries a secret. The Normandy was too small a ship, with too close a crew, and some were only too protective at that. Yet she needed to keep it. She had every reason to fear what would happen should Garrus find out with Nihlus in the same room. Garrus was intelligent and very observant; he would put two and two together. He also tended to act like an overprotective older brother, and Nihlus’ pride would not allow him take the forthcoming lecture sitting down. It would end up to be that thing they got into a serious argument about. Shepard did not want it to happen, as far as she was concerned, it was not worth it. She would
have to navigate that mine-field very carefully.

In the meantime, she needed to find Wrex and get the coordinates from him, order her new gear, and then have that talk with Legion and EDI. Her agenda was packed, and it was not even noon.

It was another half hour before Shepard could get to work, and as it was, she did not have to look for Wrex for very long. She had just stepped out of the elevator and onto the CIC, intending to get to the OD and have EDI call Wrex up, but there he was, standing by the elevator as if nothing at all was wrong, and he merely enjoyed hanging out up on the CIC. What surprised Shepard more was that Tali was with him, her fingers pecking away at her Omni-tool. She must have heard the elevator door open, because with one last tap at her tool, she turned it off and looked up. “Welcome home, Commander.”

“Thanks Tali.” Shepard spared the girl a smile. Tali was about the only person who would say ‘welcome home’ rather than ‘welcome back’. To Tali, the Normandy was a roaming house, and not just a ship.

One glance around the CIC told her that the monitor crew was trying to keep an ear or eye on the situation, as surreptitiously as they could. Shepard grinned; they really did not weather boredom well, did they? Not that she would blame them, half their time was monitoring the ship’s systems, and even then most of the job was also functionally supervised and taken over by EDI, as she had access to every sensor aboard, internal and external. If something was wrong, Shepard would find out from EDI nearly instantaneously.

“Come into the OD. We’ll talk.” She said, and then turned toward the room. Wrex’s slow thundering footsteps followed behind her, and compared to him, Tali might as well have been a ninja, one with the shadows.

Once past the door, Shepard was mildly surprised to note that Nihlus was not lounging on the couch.

No sooner had the OD’s door closed that Wrex cleared his throat. “Shepard, I want this done my way. I know you like to bring the turians along, but I do not want them there.”

Shepard stopped halfway to the couch and glanced back at the krogan. Someone else might have snapped that those sorts of decisions were not in Wrex’ pay grade, but Shepard was not that someone. Wrex wanting to keep Nihlus and Garrus out of the situation was as predictable as taxation. His prejudice was rearing the ugliest of its heads, and there was no going around it. This whole situation had everything to do with what the Hierarchy had at least allowed to happen, if they had not condoned it outright.

Shepard was not surprised that the Hierarchy had its fair share of profiteers. Every war, no matter how justified and noble outwardly, spawned those. Given that Wrex saw their people as guilty, he clearly did not want to feel like he owed them something, especially if that something was a favor for helping him retrieve what was already technically his. Could she deny him? Maybe, but he would remember it. There was nothing to win in souring their working relationship over this. She would have to acquiesce to his demands. “Alright.”

Wrex nodded curtly, and turned his head to glance at Tali. “Also, I want Tali’s expertise in this.”

Tali shifted her weight from foot to foot, betraying her nervousness. “Wrex thinks this Tonn Actus might have contacts that could lead him to more of his people’s artifacts.”
“Makes sense,” Shepard replied. What more could she say?

“Tali is smart. Most of all, I can trust her. The Quarians value loyalty to one’s own almost as we do.”

“Well, you can say that,” Tali said. “Though our displays of affection to our kin are not… you know… combative.”

“True… and I like that; combative. An understatement, but…” Wrex trailed off, chuckling.

Tali said absolutely nothing to that, probably because she did not want to turn Wrex’ odd amusement to something else entirely. Shepard could not say anything to that either, and for the same reason. From where she stood, it looked liked he had everything figured out. It made sense; this was his deeply-personal brain-child after all. How many centuries was this in the making? Wrex had clearly been doing the leg-work for a while, and only now did it bear fruit. She would ask later, maybe once everything was said and done. Wrex never talked about himself much, so maybe success would get him in the mood for it afterward.

“And since this is my idea, I know my responsibilities. If anyone so much as nicks a decorative stitch on her suit, I will break their bones.” Wrex added.

“Hey! I can protect myself! I built a fully functional combat drone while we were on Arcturus Station. I’ll show you what my Chatika vas Paus can do!”

Shepard could not help but smile, “Easy. I know you can give them quite a bit of hell, Tali. We also know how much Wrex loves picking a fight.”

Wrex smiled widely, “Of course I do, but I don’t expect Actus’ goons to be good enough for it to be fun.”

“Perhaps they would have been, if we went against them just the three of us. However I intend to change the math a little.” Shepard replied. Truthfully she did not want to do a trial run in her new gear with just three people. There was always the opportunity for bugs in the system to come out the proverbial woodwork. “We will bring the marines along too.” She figured more humans would be acceptable. She was not going to risk the mission by bringing Legion. Putting Tali and Legion in the same unit was a risk, because the quarian would probably obstinately refuse to work with the geth.

Wrex leveled one of his piercing stares at her, but Shepard stared back without blinking. This was her way of standing ground; the krogan would have to give some if he intended to take. The staring contest lasted for a good ten seconds, but finally Wrex shifted his weight and looked away.

“Fine. As long as it is the marines. Could probably use Williams’ skills.” Wrex replied. “No offence Shepard, your aim is precise, but I’ve seen Williams mow down two geth with one clip. Not a bullet wasted.”

That was a krogan concession speech if there ever was such a thing. “Of course.” Shepard grinned. “But if you want to praise ammo efficiency, you should know the sniper motto… One shot. One kill.”


Shepard opened her mouth to retort, but realized too late that she had nothing to say to that. Wrex had backed her into the corner, and if his grin was any indication, he knew it too. There was just one thing he did not know. With Vincent out of commission, the point might become moot too. The Mantis prioritized stopping power and ammo versatility. Other rifles sacrificed some kinetic energy
for more efficient heat management. She could look into various models and see if she could find something that would give her more shots per thermal clip while still maintaining exception stopping power and versatility. "Touché, Wrex."

His grin only got wider, flashing rows of teeth.

"This is where you need a good combat drone. They go hiding in some corner? A combat drone flushes them out, and then you can shoot them. Simple." Tali argued, not to be left out.

"Allies help too," Shepard noted. "But we are going off track here. I will say this up front; there will be a slight delay on this operation. Some of my gear was damaged on Taetrus and I need replacements. Alliance requisitions are pretty good, and me being a Spectre in training puts me somewhat higher on the list of priorities, but it could still take a day or two, Terran time."

"That's fine. Actus does not know I'm coming for him." Wrex replied.

"Are you alright, Commander?" Tali asked.

"I am fine, Tali. Nothing I couldn't handle." If she could not handle it, she would not be there talking about it right now. Still, boiling it down like that was being more dishonest than she cared to be, but it had to be done, she did not want everyone on the Normandy treating her like she would break. Yes the situation on Taetrus got a little dicey, just the fact that she had to use the Last Chance was indicative, but Shepard also did not want everyone looking at Nihlus and seeing the one on whose watch she almost died. Shepard did not wish to be cause of that. The whole situation already complicated his life enough; there was no need to make it worse.

"Sounds like you had a good fight. If you came out of it with gear damaged, I assume they did not come out of it at all?" Wrex wondered.

"No they did not." Shepard replied.

"Good. Alright, we have a plan. That's all I needed. I'll go and give Moreau the coordinates."

"Sure." Shepard knew a veiled excuse to leave when she heard one.

The krogan turned around and made for the door.

"Well… I think I will go and verify the programming on my drone one more time. It can’t hurt." Tali said.

Shepard nodded. Tali was one of the only people on board who was never comfortable on the CIC. "This job with Wrex will be a good trial run. Nothing too complicated."

"Yes, it will be good to figure out the kinks."

"Alright." What more could she say? Shepard was not the sort of gear-head who relied on drones or any such fancy gadgetry, so her experience in the matter was limited. Bluntly put, she would not know the first thing about programming a combat drone.

"Excuse me, Commander."

"Of course," Shepard replied.

Tali turned and left the room, her steps hurried but not outright running. Soon Shepard was left alone in the empty OD. "EDI, I remember our agreement by the way." She said calmly.
“Understood. Do you wish me to call Legion up now?” EDI asked.

“Please do.” Shepard replied. He thinking was that she might as well get that out of the way now. She was all for checking off things off her to-do list as efficiently as possible. Delay did not benefit anyone, even if they were entirely inevitable.

“Right away, Commander.” EDI replied calmly.

While EDI did that, Shepard pondered what to do after this. She still had two more things on her list. She needed to sit down and order her new gear, and she had to go and see Doctor Chakwas to give her the medical information she got from her Taetrian doctors. Both of those tasks could prove to be quite time-consuming, therein the problem.

The OD door opened a couple minutes later and Legion stepped into the room. “Shepard-Commander.” They greeted.

“Come on in, Legion.” Shepard replied as she moved to sit on the couch. “So what is it that you and EDI have been up to?” There was no need for small talk with the AIs.

Legion moved deeper into the room, allowing Shepard to see the splotches of charring on their otherwise glimmering brushed-metal finish. The geth had no yet cleaned up after the welding.

“Commander, you indicated that you wished to make an attempt to triangulate the god-king’s location based on data collected on Eden Prime, Daiwi, and Solcrum,” they began.

“Yes, I remember that…” There had always been was just one more thing that kept her from actually getting down to it. As it was often the case, when an enemy was trounced once, and then went to ground, some were perfectly happy to go on about their business, as long as said enemy remained under their rock. Shepard was somewhat guilty of that thinking, but only because her crew came first.

However, it seemed like EDI and Legion had noticed the delays and decided to take up the task on their own. Shepard knew why, being AIs, they could not enjoy crew vacations as much as said crew. There would have been a serious situation if Legion had decided to take a stroll across Arcturus Station. The media had done a good enough job after Eden Prime to broadcast that the geth all had one obvious identifying feature, a lamp for a face.

The geth approached the coffee table and reached down to turn on the small holographic projector mounted into it. Then they stepped back and brought up their Omni-tool. In a matter of moments Shepard was looking at a relatively small projection of the Milky Way galaxy, with faint colored lines that indicated the major political borders of the galaxy. A second later, the locations of Eden Prime, Daiwi, and Solcrum appeared as highlighted bright dots. Then a bright glowing blue ring appeared, with its center on the Exodus Cluster and Eden Prime, along the Orion spur the Milky Way. “The blue circle represents the perimeter at which the god-king would have had to be, in order to have a two point nine nine five Terran second of signal lag on Eden Prime.” Legion explained.

Shepard hummed thoughtfully. Harbinger was hiding somewhere along that blue line. The problem was the circle’s sheer size. It encircled nearly the entirety of Alliance space, parts of Council space, into Hierarchy space, Hegemony space, a piece of the core, a sliver of the Attican Traverse, and out into intergalactic dark space. Shepard could not be happy with the implications of that. Looking at the size of the circle she had a few questions she wanted to ask, but she would wait until Legion was done.

Legion tapped at their Omni-tool again and a second, bright green circle appeared. “Two point eight nine three Terran seconds from Daiwi.” Legion explained.
Daiwi’s cluster was just off the rim-side of the Perseus arm out where it still ran along the galaxy’s rim before the core’s gravity caused it to turn and spiral inward. The new circle did not hit Council or Hierarchy space, but it still grazed Hegemony space, and now went deeper into the Attican Traverse while just grazing the Terminus.

Shepard hummed when she was the single point where the two circles overlapped. Legion had highlighted and labeled it with a white dot, because a projection this size could not be clear. The dot’s base was just off the rim-side of the Near 3kpc Arm, but still within the Five Kiloparsec Ring of the core. Shepard did not care for the message between those lines on the wall either.

Legion took her hum as a sign to go on, and tapped at their tool one last time. A third, bright red circle appeared, “Two point seven six nine Terran seconds from Solcrum.”

The Armstrong Nebula was up along the same arm as the small Daeva Cluster, home to Daiwi, and the third circle overlapped with the first two on the same spot within the Five Kiloparsec Ring, sealing the deal. “I appreciate the dramatic build up,” Shepard mumbled, she was otherwise almost numb with this bomb-drop, “but I would’ve appreciated being told you had something from the start.”

“Our apologizes, Shepard-Commander. We calculated you would want to see the data one component at a time.”

“Commander, the signal could be coming from a space of around a hundred light-years within the Five Kiloparsec Ring. We have a rough estimation, not definitive coordinates. I would not use the term ‘something’ for this.” EDI explained. “I believe this is… a guess… at best.”

“A hundred light-years is a vast improvement on ‘anywhere in the galaxy’, but yes… it really isn’t a set location.” Shepard replied.

Her questions multiplied alarmingly rapidly. First, why was this range so big? The control signal was essentially electromagnetic waves, right? Even if it was piggybacked on the buoy network, distance would quickly amount to time. At less than three seconds the distance ought to have been much smaller, within the clusters where the Heretics attacked. That is, Shepard hummed, unless of course the Heretics were using some other method of boosting the signal. What was it? Just another question piling up on the list.

If she set the first thinking direction aside, she encountered the second. If the Heretics were indeed within the Five Kiloparsec Ring… how did they get there? And that segued nicely into the question of how were they to follow them? Were there relays in there? Once there, this implied the Heretics had the technology to maintain an installation in that nightmarish region. What would it take? Could the Normandy even destroy it? Would even the Thanix be enough?

Between all those, Shepard thought this was getting closer to the confirmation of her pet theory. This hinted that Harbinger indeed had a fifty thousand year old map of the galaxy. It saw the galaxy as the Protheans would have seen it, including the complete relay network, with all the charted major relays, and the hundreds if not thousands of secondary and tertiary relays that daisy-chained into regions of space off the major lanes.

The existence of such a complex network would have been absolutely necessary if the Protheans wanted to maintain their pan-galactic empire. All roads led to Rome for a reason. The Protheans were the galaxy’s Romans, and the relays were the roads which facilitated communication, trade, and troop movement when necessary. The Protheans had a pan-galactic empire, a fact that was not in question, so Shepard would bet there had to be more dormant relays than the Council reckoned. The Protheans also had advanced technology, so maybe they had a way of stabilizing structures within
the Five Kiloparsec Ring. All that put Harbinger hiding in there firmly within the realm of plausible. She could not say that EDI and Legion were patently wrong in their math.

“The others are definitely going to need to see this,” Shepard announced as she sat up straight. Her agenda was going to get even more packed now. One more thing to push back ordering parts and seeing Doctor Chakwas.

Chapter End Notes

Author Notes: Given that this is a “kitchen sink” episode, meant to nudge along already-running plot lines; its shocking how hard to it was to write. The problem was in that I really had to sit down and work out what I was doing, in great detail. The final scene is just the tip of an iceberg. And oh yes, if you think I’m amalgamating the Heretics with the Collectors, that’s exactly what I’m doing. With this framework in place, I can perhaps use the Feros plot line for something, and maybe intro a few more characters. I shan’t spoil what I’m up to.

General Notes:

Wrex’s Arc – In canon we are told Wrex went from Shepard’s crew in ME1 to leader of Clan Urdnot in ME2 in part because of his involvement against Saren. Obviously that cannot happen in this canon, so I’m building it up differently, involving my head-canons for Krogan culture and politics. I’m modeling things on somewhat medieval principles. To say that after the Krogan Rebellions, they lapsed into the “futuristic” Dark Ages. One of my university professors actually joked about it, in saying that if we ever experience the nuclear apocalypse, the medieval systems would come back with a vengeance, so there’s the reason why we ought to study the medieval period, so we know how to get by. Dark humor aside… that way of putting it stuck with me.

Chapter Notes:

Galactic Arm Names – I use the actual scientific names for the arms and spurs of the Milky Way, even as I use a certain well labeled map of the ME canon for location names. It was a bit tricky to try and present the info-graphic Legion put together into words, but it had to be done. For the record, The Local Cluster (and hence Earth) is also on the Orion Spur, which is a thinner, less dense arm of our galaxy. The Orion spur is between the stretch of the Perseus arm (rim-side) and the Sagittarius Arm (core-side).
Armistice Day [Part II]

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I do no own Mass Effect, I do not claim to own Mass Effect, I am only doing this for fun.

Author Notes: Here is it, the second half of the kitchen sink episode with the most… misnomer title I’ve ever produced. Shepard is going to begin hating Armistice Day after this.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Episode 35: Armistice Day [Part II]

The OD got very quiet after Shepard had called together a brief update meeting. Legion stood by the wall, seemingly content to back out of the central focus of everything, as they often did. She could only stare at the projection, as if doing so would make the hologram yield an exact location.

The OD door opened and in stepped Kaidan, with Ashley in tow. “Welcome back, Commander.” Ashley greeted.

“Thanks.” Shepard replied with a smile she knew would be rather wan. She watched as the two found their seats on the couch extension. It took a moment for Shepard to make a stunning observation; Kaidan and Ashley were two people who often found something to talk about, to fill some time. Right then, Ashley looked positively sullen.

“Is that what I think it is?” Kaidan asked, indicating the projection.

Ashley turned to look at the projection and froze.

“It is that, Kaidan.” Shepard replied calmly. There was no way of looking at that projection and not seeing it for what it was. Not with Eden Prime, Daiwi, and Solcrum prominently marked, and the meeting point of the three radii right there as well.

“This day is just getting better and better, isn’t it?” Ashley groused.

“I don’t know about that, but no… that does not look good.” Kaidan replied.

Shepard could not miss that there was some subtext in that exchange, but in a way this was just typical for them. The fact that they could talk in vague abstracts and still understand each other said something about the evolution of their teamwork.

The door opened again, and this time it was Nihlus, Garrus, and Jenkins.

“Commander! Welcome back!” Jenkins called, chipper as always.

“Thank you, Jenkins.” Shepard smiled.

He practically flew to join the others on the couch, leaving Nihlus and Garrus to take their customary spot standing in front of her.
“I guess I am going to have to work to top Jenkins’ enthusiasm.” Garrus said, amused.

“You can try!” Jenkins laughed.

Garrus did not even look at the corporal. “Welcome back, Commander,” he greeted, his voice rumbling warmly.

Shepard could not help but chuckle, “Thanks, Garrus.” In her opinion while Jenkins’ enthusiasm was always good for a smile, Garrus’ had him beat in the heartfelt expression department.

“Made her laugh.” Garrus said, enunciating each word with self-satisfied smugness.

“This is not the time,” Nihlus said as he crossed his arms over his chest, his eyes had locked on the projection. Just like that all the light humor in the room drained as if through a sieve.

“Perhaps, but we still need to wait for Tali and Wrex.” She said as she slumped against the couch’s backrest, seeking to get comfortable. She knew that the meeting would turn singularly uncomfortable. The data projected over the table was writing on the wall that everyone could read.

A few minutes later the OD door opened yet again, heralding the arrival of Wrex and Tali. Then a scratch over the intercom announced that Joker was listening as well. Shepard was not surprised that EDI told the pilot to join the meeting from his position on the bridge.

“What happened, Shepard?” Wrex asked.

“Take a look at that.” Shepard replied as she motioned to the projection over the coffee table.

It was actually Tali who drew near first, stepping past Garrus and Nihlus to stand as close to the image as she could without stepping into the projection outright. “Is this what I think it is?” she asked.

Shepard grinned, “That’s the question of the day. If all of you are thinking this is progress, then yes, yes it is. EDI and Legion ran the numbers based on Harbinger’s lag times on Eden Prime, Daiwi, and Solcrum. The circles represent the range the signal could have come from, and that point where they meet is where Legion and EDI think the signal is coming from. Well, within a hundred light-years.”

“Yes… but in the Five Kiloparsec Ring? Is that possible?” Ashley asked.

“I think it is plausible.” Shepard replied. “The Council’s long-standing moratorium on activating uncharted relays has prevented exploration at any pace past glacial. We simply don’t know how many relays there are. But we do know that there are tertiary relays that connect some really backwater corners. For all we know there are relays in that region as well.”

“Using those relays will be dangerous. This is the FKR we are talking about. The place for huge stars, black holes, pulsars, gravity anomalies, planetary debris, asteroids, and who knows what else. Make a bad jump, drift outside the relay’s clear space, and you could plow into something.” Joker said over the comm.

“Are you saying you can’t do it, Mister Moreau?” Shepard asked.

“Hell no. I’m just saying it will be a feat.” Joker replied. “I will deserve a raise.”

“I would not plan anything just yet. Certainly not raises.” Garrus cut in. “Commander, you said EDI and Legion narrowed things down to within a hundred light-years, right?” Garrus asked.
“Yes.”

The former detective hummed thoughtfully. “One hundred light-years is a *cluster*. We do not have an idea which is the right one… and it is not like we can just look it up on the extranet.”

“Vakarian is right. We are going to need a map of the region’s relay system. A *Prothean* map.” Nihlus finished.

“Does one even exist?” Jenkins wondered.

Shepard watched as the team exchanged looks. Everyone knew what the corporal meant. Prothean star charts were exceedingly rare. A complete map would have had to exist at some point in the past, but thousands of years were definitely long enough to lose things. Furthermore, she knew that star charts were a favorite target for looters looking for a big score. Not only could a new shred of map tell them where to loot, but after they had their pick, the charts themselves could be sold as is to other shady types. Then there were the charts that were in the hands of the various governments. The pieces that had been found in the degraded databases on Mars, once deciphered, had become the key to the Alliance’s rapid expansion. They listed potentially habitable worlds, systems with resources, and other useful bits of information.

“If that map does exist, and it is in someone’s hands, they are unlikely to let us look at it.” Kaidan said. “Even our good reason to go there is probably not good enough for them to spill what would be deemed secret intelligence. Not to mention that it might potentially involve activating dormant relays.”

“Damned politicians. Then what odds do we have?” Ashley asked.

Shepard raised a hand, “Easy Ashley. We’re just spit-balling here. Now, there might be a very simple way around the issue. Harbinger must have the information, how else would the Heretics get there? After that, some of the Heretics would have to know as well, as they come and go from the place, don’t they?” she theorized calmly. That was of course just one of the options, but the other one involved Nazara. If she thought about it, really thought about it, it made sense. The Impera had vanished off the face of the galaxy. It could only do that if it knew all the hiding places. She would have to discuss that with Nihlus at some point.

“I can check Heretic memory cores for that information,” Tali volunteered.

“That just leaves the obvious, Shepard.” Wrex said. “If Moreau is right…”

“I am always right.” Joker cut in.

“If he is right, and going there will be dangerous… and if we have to activate some relays, we will not be able to bring in an Alliance fleet. This will be entirely up to us.”

“Honestly Wrex, I don’t think we will need to activate any relays. The Heretics must have done that for us already.” Shepard noted.

“Does not change the facts that this is beginning to sound like a suicide mission,” Tali mused.

“If you put it like that… it does.” Jenkins said.

“I think Wrex is just saying this will not be a walk in the park operation. I’ll agree with him there. We will have to be absolutely ready for it,” Ashley said.

The krogan snorted, but it was an amused sort of sound.
Shepard hummed, the sound alone enough to draw back the attention of everyone in the room. “I would rather not use the term ‘suicide mission’, but yes, this will probably make Solcrum look like cakewalk. Now, I do not think I need to say it, but I will… we’re not hitting an uncharted relay until I am damn sure we can handle come what may. In the meantime, we still need to find where exactly our destination is.”

Nods went around the room slowly. Shepard did not want to come out and say it, but she had other priorities right now as well. Wrex’s job came first, because even if Harbinger’s location, complete with coordinates, dropped on her lap right that instant, she would have still chosen to help Wrex first. Preparations for the jaunt into the FKR were going to take time and careful planning. This was the right sort of thing that either got them all killed, or made them some big damn heroes. She was going to pour everything she had into making sure that the outcome would be latter, not former.

“I just have one question.” Garrus broke the silence that settled over the OD. “EDI, Legion, I assume those numbers are an indication of lag time. Even by Terran measurement, the range is much too big. How did you calculate it?”

“I admit, I wondered that too.” Shepard admitted. At less than three seconds of lag, with conventional transmission means bound to the speed of light, the range should have been less than nine hundred thousand kilometers. At that range it would have been easier to assume Harbinger had been using a stealthy ship hidden in the same solar system. The trick would have been to track the vessel as it used relays to run back to whatever hole-in-the-wall it came from. The fact that Legion and EDI had cooked up a range like this, it implied the Heretics were transmitting by some other means.

“Legion, should I explain it?” EDI asked.

The geth’s light beam narrowed and its emotive plates drew into an approximation of a pensive look. “Negative. The range we calculated is based on transmission via a method we derived following our initial analysis of the Old Machine’s systems.” Legion explained.

Shepard should have known, of course it was something the Geth got from Harbinger, directly or otherwise. The fact that Legion was once again only sharing information when directly prompted was unsurprising as well.

“Legion, you said the Geth use the public comm buoy network, but comm buoys use laser arrays to communicate. Laser signals travel at the universal velocity of electromagnetic waves. A relay can accelerate the laser pulses, jump the signal if you will, but it can only do so when it is active and sending. Such activations would be detectable, traceable, and we would have their origin relay. Not to mention that it would be impractical to keep those relays active for continuous signal. Are you saying the Heretics use some other mechanism, one that can also avoid detection?” Garrus pressed.

Legion turned to face the former detective. “Affirmative, there is another method Officer-Vakarian. The Protheans transmitted null-mass photons through a relay’s standby-phase-link. Sending null-mass photons does not necessitate the sending relay to leave standby phase, only that it maintain physical alignment with the receiving relay. As the sending relay does not send an activation signal to the receiving relay, the receiving relay does not leave standby for reception.”

Shepard noted the gloss-eyed expression Jenkins got. The corporal clearly did not get it, and as she glanced to the others she noted that Wrex looked bored and the others were in various stages of confusion, including Nihlus.

“Wait… you are saying the Protheans used the very channel that controls relay-to-relay coordination?” Tali jumped in.
“Affirmative Creator-Tali’Zorah.”

“That is...” Garrus began, but stopped and hummed thoughtfully. “Surprisingly simple. It also makes the signals untraceable. We can not go around checking relays to see which emits data packets to a nearby comm buoy.”

“Yes. It won’t be safe to use those relays either.” Tali argued. “That data-flow could potentially use up the channel’s bandwidth, and so interfere with the relay synchronization signal. The receiving relay may not activate to receive mass sent to it... well; I suppose the Protheans would have interrupted the data-flow if a ship needed to use the relays, but... somehow I do not think the Heretics will extend us the same courtesy.” Tali went on.

“That is a potential concern, yes,” Garrus agreed.

“Unless of course we have something that can place the Normandy at a higher priority in the queue, cause an interruption of the data flow.” Tali went on.

“Like a Prothean control protocol?” Garrus asked.

“Or a Heretic Identification Friend or Foe signal.” Tali replied.

Shepard watched the exchange without commenting. She had nothing to contribute. The others might have been lost in the detail hash-out happening, but she was also pretty sure that everyone knew why Legion mentioned something the Protheans could do. The geth wanted people to run along that mental train track. If the Protheans could do it, then Harbinger could do it, and the Geth had learned to do it, then it was exactly how the Heretics did it. Legion was saying something without actually saying it. They would not compromise their kind, but they wanted to help too. This was their way of going around the internal conflict.

Shepard noted how the geth watched Tali. The emotive plates around its head were drawn in, with the back lifted ever so slightly, as if furrowing a brow. Shepard wondered if the geth was trying to assess how much this would cost them. Revealing this was showing some of their hand in their conflict against the Quarians. Tali would think of it in those terms eventually. The Quarians could be shockingly single-minded that way. Their war against the Geth had never truly ended. Some of them would gladly use whatever means they had to destroy the Geth.

Shepard knew full well that it was not her place to tell either side what to do, but she did have the right to form an opinion, and speak it, if asked. As far as she was concerned, both sides were guilty, just of different things, and they could probably get along just fine if they would just try. It was her perhaps too optimistic observation, but the maxim “where there’s a will, there’s a way” applied. It was one more of those things that everything was subject to, yet no one wanted to acknowledge, because that required pragmatism, objectivity, and the elimination of conflicting self-justifying biases with extreme prejudice. People tended to cling to their honor and would gladly walk to their doom to keep it, even when a win-win solution only required swallowing a little bit of pride.

“All this talk about IFF signals and protocols further proves there is nothing concrete we can do right now,” Kaidan said, cutting across the techno-jargon talk Garrus and Tali lapsed into.

“All this talk about IFF signals and protocols further proves there is nothing concrete we can do right now,” Kaidan said, cutting across the techno-jargon talk Garrus and Tali lapsed into.

“Indeed.” Shepard added. Trust Kaidan to be the one to steer things back on track. Shepard did not say it often, but she did appreciate his natural calmness. “Right now, we have no definitive location, so that becomes our priority. After we have a location, we can concern ourselves with how we will get there. For now, as before, we will maintain readiness should the Heretics decide to cause trouble.”
“I’m always ready for those bastards if they decide to cause trouble.” Ashley replied.

“Hell yes.” Jenkins agreed.

“Good. This meeting was more of an update, though it went a little further than that. Which is good, we have an idea of what still needs to be done. Now, anyone got anything? Any questions?” Shepard asked.

A silence settled over the OD, which Shepard expected. It allowed her to observe as people around the room exchanged looks, yet the seconds passed and no confusion manifested. Wrex rose to his full height and crossed his arms over his chest as if he was getting impatient, which was probably the case. Tali was trying to be surreptitious about the side-looks she was casting at Legion, an impossible task given that her eyes glowed a fair bit through her face-shield. Garrus was clearly in thought, possibly contemplating the technological side of the discussion. Shepard would have been oblivious to miss the fact that Garrus loved tinkering. Ultimately it looked like no one had anything else to say. Shepard reached for the center of the coffee table and flicked the projector off, “Well, then we’re done here. Sorry to have pulled you away from your tasks for what is rather little.”

There was a minor explosion of din as people moved toward the door. Wrex was fist, with Tali behind him, and likely only because Legion, as a matter of norm, let everyone leave the room before them. The geth always seemed methodical about everything, even how they moved. What surprised Shepard was the fact that Ashley lingered on the couch to the point that even Legion eventually picked up on it and left ahead of her.

“Skipper, can I have a moment of your time? It's rather… personal.”

“Sure.” Shepard replied. “What’s going on?”

“Armistice Day.” Ashley replied. “As you may know it’s not exactly my favorite time of the year.”

Shepard nodded; there was nothing she could say to that. “I have a job lined up with Wrex in the coming day or two, so we won’t be here long.”
“We’re ready whenever you need us to be,” Ashley said. “Oh, I know you wouldn’t have mentioned that to me if you did not want Bravo at a ready.”

Shepard nodded with a smile, “Wrex thinks highly of your shooting skills too.”

“That’s nice… actually quite a compliment if I think about it.”

“He meant it as such.” Shepard grinned, “I should think Wrex knows skill when he sees it, he’s got more experience than all of us combined.” Shepard affirmed.

“Well that’s good. I don’t mind Wrex. He did us a solid on Solcrum. You didn’t see him, Skipper. He was right in the thick of it; wrecking geth left and right like it was his people on the line. He crumpled one into a wall like it was a tin can, with just one hand movement. Even LT can’t do that.”

Shepard nodded again. Wrex’s philosophy, lifespan, and redundant nervous system gave him an advantage. He had more eezo nodules, and thus a higher output, and centuries of life were good for refining the skills. Finally, a lack of certain philosophies also made him ruthlessly efficient in the exercise of said skill. His sole guiding principle was a very ancient sort of personal honor, which was easy to understand, once one let go of a few limiting concepts, like fairness and pretentious finesse.

Shepard knew that there was no such thing as fairness on the battlefield. She had not gotten to be as good as she had by worrying about it. She did not like to take lives, but if she had to, she sought to do it as quickly as possible. If she was honest, that line easily ran parallel and only a scant distance apart from Wrex’s. The difference between them was that Wrex did like a good fight, though he was not the psychopathic sadist that would draw it out. It was a trifling distinction that did not preclude them from getting along. “Kaidan does not need to pulverize geth. His barrier saved people. Saving lives is harder than taking them,” she said. That was as sentimental as Shepard allowed herself to be.

“Oh definitely. He… I don’t quite understand why LT does not have his own command yet… and this is going to sound bad… but I am glad he does not. I- we wouldn't have him otherwise,” Ashley went on.

Shepard kept her face perfectly neutral, but she did not miss how the gunny’s tone changed when she spoke of Kaidan. It left Shepard wondering whether the Alliance’s fraternization policy would become a problem. She could not take a stand on that issue, not without being a hypocrite. After all, she had broken that rule herself. Of course back then, Arthur and her, they had enjoyed the secrecy game as part of the thrill. Well, only time would tell, for now, she would pretend she had not noticed.

“Well, I said what I wanted to say, Skipper, so thank you. I won’t take up more of your time.” Ashley said as she got up from her seat.

“You were not taking my time, Ash. I’m always here to listen.” Shepard replied. “I’ll see to things, don’t worry.”

The gunny nodded one last time and left the room. Once the OD door closed, Shepard slumped back into the couch. Well she could cross the update meeting off her to-do list. Now she needed to sit down and order parts, or maybe she ought to go and see Doctor Chakwas first? She reached up, rubbing at her temples. A creeping thrumming pain announced itself by flashing through her head. Was it her concussion? Or just tension? She honestly could not tell. As she closed her eyes and tipped her head back to rest on the couch’s back, she sighed.

An hour passed before Shepard admitted defeat and tossed in her towel. She had tried to ignore the
thrumming in her head. She started to look at parts, thinking the relative quiet of the OD and some relaxing tea would do the trick to assuage a pressure headache. However after forty-five minutes of trying and failing to concentrate on comparing characteristics, with the pain stubbornly refusing to abate, she was forced to admit that it was not a stress headache, and she had been silly thinking it was. She did not get stress headaches. Years of training and conditioning had given her a remarkably high stress tolerance threshold.

A few minutes later she was down on deck three and heading toward the sick bay. The thrum in her head seemed to be getting worse by the step, just to mock her false hopes further. It was almost hilarious how she could handle mercenaries, psychotic huntresses, political machinations, and probably a galactic-scale mess, but a headache got her. She knew what was coming too, and frankly she was feeling a little petulant at the prospects. The sick bay door opened and Shepard stepped in, only to freeze in the doorway.

“Commander.” Doctor Chakwas greeted.

“Doctor Chakwas,” Shepard replied automatically, though her eyes did not stray one centimeter off Nihlus who was sitting on the center bed. His tunic lay discarded behind him as Doctor Chakwas checked how his stomach wound was healing. The incision left over by his bullet removal surgery was neat and healing nicely. The small round hole left by the bullet passing through one of his plates had closed nicely as well, though the plate still had a conspicuously lighter recessed spot. Was it the beginning of a scar? Or maybe that was the natural process of healing? Shepard was no doctor, her limited physiological knowledge was used to hurt, not heal.

“Come in and let the door close.” The doctor said, without looking up from her task.

Shepard made one step forward, knowing the door would register that far enough and close.

“I do believe you were seeing the future, Spectre Kryik.” Chakwas added.

“That or I know the Commander that well.” Nihlus replied, though his eyes stayed on her, full of mirth, his mandibles flicking.

Shepard returned his smarmy expression with a stone-cold look; she was not impressed.

“This is healing exceptionally well and might not even scar.” Chakwas said as she reached to the metal trolley next to the bed and picked up a large self-adhesive bandage in a sterile foil wrap.

“Well that is good, would not want it to ruin my good looks,” Nihlus quipped, laughter in his tone.

“Ah yes, the prime concern of an eligible bachelor,” the doctor replied as she tore open the package.

“Well, Spectre Kryik, it will be a week to two before the injured plate regains full thickness. As for your good looks…” the doctor’s tone took on a note of sarcasm as she applied the protective bandage over the healing bullet wound and surgery incision, “I am aware of the chemical composition of marking dyes. I want you to wait at least three weeks for the touchups.”

“Yes, doctor.” Nihlus replied calmly.

Shepard stood there, and tried her best not to laugh. Nihlus had to be playing at vanity. He just was not the type. She would credit him with having a certain degree of excessive pride, but not vanity to the point of worrying about a tiny scar on his stomach. Vanity and their career paths simply did not go well together. He had to be in one of his more whimsical moods.

Doctor Chakwas finished applying the bandage and straightened on her working stool, “All done.” A moment later she got to her feet and moved away toward the little sink mounted on the wall,
pulling off her gloves. “Have a seat Commander. I have a feeling I will not be done with you quite as quickly.”

Shepard grinned before she could stop herself, though she knew it must come off as sheepish. Nihlus meanwhile slid off the bed and onto his feet, grabbing his tunic and slinging it over his shoulder in the same movement. “Have fun.” He said.

“Oh go away, sadist.” Shepard replied.

Nihlus chuckled and actually stopped beside her. Shepard cast a quick glance toward the doctor, who was re-sterilizing her hands prior to donning a clean pair of gloves. Her breath caught in her throat when Nihlus leaned down, so close she could feel the heat of his exhale fan on her ear. “We need to talk later. Harbinger is not the only one with the map, and you know it.”

Did he really have to lean in so close just to say that? Why was her heartbeat suddenly going like a jackhammer? The déjà vu was back, this time so strong that she could practically taste it. Once was peculiar, twice is a pattern, and around the same person? There could not be a coincidence. Something about this was familiar. When had this happened before?

Then Nihlus straightened and the sick bay’s air washed over her like a bucket of cold water, despite the fact that the Normandy’s environmental controls had been adjusted to be a degree or two warmer than Alliance typical. It was the sort of minuscule difference that most people would not feel, but for Nihlus and Garrus it would mean more comfort, the difference between a little on the cool side and a creeping chill that one could never ditch. She had no reason to be feeling cold right now.

Nihlus chuckled and stepped past her. Shepard heard the door open, and a moment later, close. Only then did she remember that the doctor told her to have a seat. Shepard was definitely going to have a word with Nihlus later, probably about whatever this odd mood of his was, and then maybe about Harbinger.

Doctor Chakwas had just turned around, wiping her hands when Shepard finally snapped out of her world and moved to sit on the examination bed, only to bring up her Omni-tool. She did have medical records to give while begging for pain killers. She would have fun indeed.

Almost an hour passed before Shepard left the sick bay. Doctor Chakwas looked at the records prepared for her by the Hierarchy doctors on Taetrus and decided to run her own comparison, now that the records were a few days old. Shepard ended up lying on that bed for half an hour while the scanner did its best to assess if her neurons were firing properly. Even with modern medicine’s ability to fix things on the smallest of scales, concussions were one of those injuries that everyone took seriously.

In the end, Doctor Chakwas announced that the pain was caused by stress, her brain was not yet done healing, and she had pushed herself too far. Aside from that there was nothing abnormal in her brain activity or bio-sign readings, so there was nothing to worry about. The pain would come and go as the brain healed; she just had to cut out the root cause of it, working too hard too soon.

Shepard took her painkillers and promised to try better, even though she did not have the luxury of time for that. She suspected that Doctor Chakwas knew her promise was empty. It was just the reality of command positions; people responsible for so many things eventually cooked in the pressure-vessel of their own making.

Shepard lingered by the elevator, wondering what she ought to do. Where had Nihlus gone? She
could ask EDI, and failing that she had the privilege of summoning him. However, there was just one issue; she honestly did not want to discuss their problems right then. She knew that Nihlus had connected the dots. He knew that another source of the information they needed could be the malicious AI that now wore the Impera as a body. If Shepard was absolutely honest, she did not want to involve Nazara, because it would also involve Saren. She would have loved to keep the Heretic Problem and Saren as two separate issues, not one large one that seemed to spiral ever larger by the month.

Shepard sighed and called the elevator. She knew full well that it probably would not matter what she wanted. The universe was hardly considerate like that. Nihlus would probably find her himself, but she could take a few moments to herself in the meantime. After all, he never did tell her where and when to meet him, so she would use that as a loophole just this once. She needed to start on those part replacements too, because the job with Wrex rested on that. She would start with weapons, as it would be easiest, and then move on to armor. Also, as generous as Nihlus was, she was not eager or even particularly interested in the vaunted Spectre-grade weapons.

Her reasons were somewhat weak, but they were reasons. She knew the majority of Spectre-grade gear was manufactured by the Hierarchy, which meant exceptional engineering, craftsmanship, reliability, performance, fair price, and ergonomics designed for a different physiology. To put it bluntly, a Hierarchy-weapon would require the replacement of the grip, stock, probably trigger, and who knew what else if the rifle was to fit properly. Shepard did not have time for that. She would get something human-made that would fit right out of the box and allow her to acclimate quicker. Vincent had been her long-time partner; she knew every little tick, wrote and memorized its scope settings for various ranges and conditions. She would have to do that again for any new rifle, and it was going to take time. She did not want to be worrying the ergonomics too.

The elevator door opened. Shepard stepped inside and pressed the button for her cabin. The elevator did not stop at deck two, and so she was in her quarters in less than two minutes. Once there, she moved straight toward her terminal. In a matter of a couple minutes she had the Alliance requisition catalogue up, and just after that the list of sniper rifles. There she stopped. It would be easy to just order another Mantis and call it even, but Wrex had been right; the Mantis was a one shot, one kill, and one thermal clip. The kinetic energy its slugs carried was second to none as far as Alliance-issued HVRs went. It was also light and could be made lighter yet if she went for custom tooled lighter alloys. Then again, Vincent was stock alloy, which probably played a role in it saving her life, and she was used to its weight, so she did not need lighter alloys. She was also used to having such a powerful rifle and was hesitant to downgrade.

She had two options: the M-97 Viper and the N7 Valiant. She had fired both before, and the fussy side within her was already telling her to just go for the Mantis, and maybe see about customizing it a little more this time around. Maybe something could be done to make it more heat efficient? The Viper was a DMR, semi-automatic, shorter range, inferior scope optics. The Valiant was designed to marry the power of a Mantis and the versatility of Viper. It was a semi-automatic that surrendered some power for much better heat management.

The door chime rang, and Shepard glanced at the chronometer at the corner of her terminal’s screen, barely seven minutes. “Enter.” She called for the benefit of the VI that operated her door.

The door opened, “There you are.” Nihlus said as his near-silent footsteps padded across the floor.

Shepard did not even bother to look over her shoulder. “It’s a small ship, Nihlus, I expected you to use the process of elimination. Though I did not expect you for another… oh, half an hour?”

Nihlus chuckled right over her head. “Alright, you got me. What are you doing?”
Shepard felt the spring cylinder of her chair depress, something butted against the back of her head, and his chin settled on the crown of her head. She almost outright jumped when she actually felt his higher-than-human body heat envelop her like a blanket.

“Looking at rifles?” He rumbled.

Shepard had to suppress a slight shudder that raced down her spine. He was officially much too close. She could hear his actual speech under the translator overlay, and the when his pronounced breast-bone brushed against the back of her head she felt the vibrations as well, and they did not seem to vanish. Her brain seized up, like a computer unable to process something, and in the process of crashing. It took a long moment for her to realize that those vibrations must be from his second set of vocal cords, which emitted frequencies too low for the human ear to hear. “I have to.” she replied, only to realize she sounded vaguely breathless.

“My offer still stands,” Nihlus said, his voice pitched even lower, and the vibrations of his sub-vocals intensified. “If you pick anything Spectre grade; it is yours, no questions asked.”

He was doing it on purpose. Shepard had to force her brain to restart, to focus on the matter on hand. Whatever reasons he had to be doing this, he would not see her get all flustered. “Thanks, but I am a bit of a snob, the Hierarchy-built rifles are a touch too heavy, and the stock, grip, trigger… they’re all made for someone with three fingers, not five. I’d have to modify that, spring for light alloys… the list goes on. It’d mean more delays. I can’t afford delays.” If he did not back away soon, she would have to tell him to, for no other reason than the fact that her head might start aching again. She told herself it had absolutely nothing to do with the fact his sub-vocal vibrations caused a vaguely pleasant shudder to race down her spine.

“I see.” Nihlus said. “So, you are not getting a Mantis?” He lifted his chin off the top of her head, but the cloud of warmth that was his body heat stayed put.

Her neck muscles positively sang with relief. “I was thinking about going for something more… heat efficient.” She said.

“That Valiant is probably your best option,” Nihlus continued. “Its shots carry twenty percent less kinetic energy compared to the Mantis, but it can fire three per thermal clip. Good heat management.”

Shepard blinked, that was a spot-on assertion. “How did you know? I thought you did not bother with HVRs.”

“I may not use them, but I know the specifications. It is beneficial in my line of work. As for the second question, I know the basics. Hierarchy boot camp introduces trainers to all types of weapons; it is the only way to find those with natural aptitude.” Nihlus replied. “If the Valiant uses a regulations-compliant internal armature and firmware, most Spectre-grade aftermarket modifications will be compatible with it. Put a rail extension muzzle brake on and you could probably split the power difference without additional heat buildup.”

He had a point about the rail extension, it was an elementary thing to do, and it would not add much weight or alter the gun’s precision. However, her mind shifted thought rails: why was he being this affectionate? Was he still feeling guilty about what happened on Taetrus? She really ought to tell him to cut it out, but it was just so atypical to see a turian, let alone Nihlus, behave like this. Whatever was driving him, he would get it off his chest and go back to being all carefree swaggers eventually.

The only problem with letting Nihlus get this off his chest was the fact that she enjoyed it a little too much. Shepard was not going to lie to herself and say she did not. It has been a long while since she
got that sort of attention. The Alliance’s fraternization policy combined with her reputation meant that her pickings had been slim. Shepard also did not want to tempt fate and breach those protocols again. Arthur had been a special case; they were of like minds when it came to the need for secrecy. Few people could keep things under such tight control.

She also did not want to get used to it, or worse, come to see it as something more than it was. It was probably his guilt talking. It was not the first time Nihlus decided to act obliging after something had happened. This time, he probably thought he was about ten times more at fault, so he dialed up the niceties, turning into an indulgent cuddlebug. “Alright, you have a good point about the modifications. I’ve handled a Valiant before, I know it is built to regulation code, so…” Shepard trailed as she tapped at the screen to bring up the order forms.

“I will get you that barrel extension kit.”

“Thanks.” What more could she say?

“Shepard, we really do need to talk.” Nihlus’ tone shifted as he finally withdrew and straightened. “You are right to think we need a Prothean map of the relay system, but Harbinger is not the only one who might have it. I know you thought of it.”

Shepard sighed; she knew that topic was coming eventually. Maybe talking shop would help her get the heart rate back down to normal. “Of course the thought crossed my mind. But Nazara is no easier to find. As far as I’m aware there hasn’t been a sighting of it since it ran off. That tells me that it knows where to hide. Worst case scenario it joined Harbinger outright.”

Nihlus sighed and she heard his footsteps pad across the deck plating again. Shepard looked up just in time to see him stop by the fish tank and stare into the bubbling water. The blue-tinged light made his plates turn a rather unflattering shade of brown, but his markings glowed outright electric blue.

“Ideally,” Shepard went on, knowing that prefacing anything like that was announcing that she was blue-sky thinking again. “We ought to contact the Council. Explain the situation. The Citadel was dormant for fifty thousand years before the Asari found it. But it was pristine. Its databases had to have been largely intact. A map of the full relay network is hardly a wild and wooly concept. It has to exist, and if it does, the Council would have access to it. The way into the Five Kiloparsec Ring has to be a daisy-chain of tertiary relays with a primary relay at one end. The Heretics would have already activated all the relays they use. We just need to know which chain, the relevant destination coordinates, and some idea of what’s there so Joker can make the jumps safely.”

Nihlus turned and his eyes looked positively aquamarine in the lighting from the water. “Ideally…yes, that would be the easiest course. Realistically though… it is unlikely we will get to look at that map. Shepard, the Council will not admit such a map exists. It would mean admitting that they have been lying for centuries. They can not keep enforcing the moratorium on deep-space exploration on the grounds of danger if they already have an idea of what lies beyond dormant relays. That map would also contain information on Prothean sites. They will not admit to having that information. Add to that, if such a thing was exposed at the pressing of the Alliance…” he trailed off there.

Shepard let her gaze fall to the floor as she sighed. Somehow she should have known things would turn this way. She could see the angle Nihlus was pointing at. The Council would rather chew their arms off than look weak. If they cowed to such demands, especially such compromising demands, people would not only see them as weak for letting humans push them around, but the conspiracy-theory types would prove to have been right, for once. “True. Still, it is an option. Just that… if we do go for it, we would have to put them in a position where they can’t refuse.” She knew full well how much she sounded like an old Hollywood mobster right then.
“Of course…” Nihlus replied, “And something tells me you have that covered.”

Shepard nodded, of course she had thought of that. “It is rather simple. The Heretics are a matter of galactic security. Yes, the Council will not give the map to the Alliance, but we don’t need them to. We already discussed this; we simply can’t bring in an Alliance fleet. We will need either a Prothean control signal, or Heretic IFFs. The Heretics might confuse one ship for one of their own, but not a whole fleet. Where would we even get the IFFs for a whole fleet? The Solcrum ones will not work. The Heretics would have deleted the permissions on those destroyed ships. As much as I don’t like it, calling this a suicide mission is apt. A single ship going in there would be suicide by conventional definitions. Suicide missions are Spectre fare though.”

“True.” Nihlus’ chuckled, “But you forget, Shepard. You are not yet a Spectre. The Council will see you as Alliance.”

“I won’t be doing the asking, that’s what I have you for… and I should think Spectre Arterius would be interested in this as well.” If she could get the Council’s favorite interested in this matter, enough that he would speak up in front of the Council, the odds of seeing that map went up. If she had to manipulate Saren to get him interested, well, she could live with the consequences.

“Do not expect me to be of much use. Sparatus strongly suspects you have me… how do you say… wrapped around your finger? And Saren? He knows I am wrapped around your finger. Sparatus will not listen to a word that comes out of my mouth. Saren might listen, but he is not going to be happy to be playing the role of a tool in your scheme.”

For all his denials, Shepard could still hear the smile in his tone, even if he was doing his best to keep his mandibles from flicking in rhythm as well. “I dare not insult Spectre Arterius’ intelligence. But see… hate it as he may, he hasn’t got much of a choice. He has an interest in cleaning up this mess. I know that. Moreover he knows I know that. It just so happens that our interests coincide and I have a ship that can get him there. He is a practical individual. I am sure we can come to an fair agreement.”

It went without saying that if the safety of the Alliance, if not the galaxy as a whole, were at stake; she would get Saren to do the right thing, even if she had to blackmail him into it. These sorts of ends would justify the means.

“Why am I even surprised?” Nihlus asked, blunt as a hammer. “This is Noveria all over again.”

Shepard shook her head. “Sometimes that is the only way to get things done. You should know by now that I have a slightly different definition of acceptable means.”

Nihlus sighed and folded his arms over his chest. “I know. You and Saren are too alike in that.”

“Perhaps.” Shepard was not going to insult both their intellects by denying the truth of his words. “But there is a key difference. I know my limits.”

Nihlus rumbled, as if momentarily distressed. “Spirits… if you two ever decided to work together in earnest-” he trailed off there, but the implication was clear enough.

Shepard did not want Nihlus thinking she was looking forward to playing Saren like a fiddle. She leaned back in her chair and set her arms on the rests. “You do realize that this is not the first avenue of action I am going to pursue, right? I rather not resort to manipulating both the Council and Spectre Arterius. We will try and get the information elsewhere. Pursue lesser Heretic facilities, maybe even Prothean databases. Maybe Tali can get something from some memory core, or rip something from some system. Solcrum itself is still in play. The Heretics left a lot of hardware there, and maybe we can’t use those IFFs, but Alliance engineers might still find something … though that may take months. Then one of the remotest chances… Legion might know something.”

“That wily geth knows a lot of things.” Shepard replied as she crossed her legs. “They trickle information on a need-to-know basis, and only when asked, all with that dopey expression on their face. So yes, it might know something. Point is… we are shaking a metaphorical tree here. Something will eventually fall out.” Shepard liked to operate along the paths of least resistance, even if that meant delays. Those paths usually allowed her to keep her hand concealed and her bridges unburned, mostly. There were those who viewed her methods as cold, and her actions slow, while they acted on the heat of the moment and bungled things.

“So basically going to the Council is our most obvious, but not the easiest course of action.”

“Correct.” Shepard replied. “Going after some other source is round-about, but it would be… comparatively speaking… less complicated. I am perfectly aware of how politicians only ever think of themselves, and that Spectre Arterius will never forgive me for overtly manipulating him. I want to think we have a cordial, professional understanding. I want to keep it that way.”

“Good to know where you stand. I would be worried if your first plan of action was that.” Nihlus replied.

“As I said, I know my limits. This was… just a discussion. There is no harm in merely exploring all the options, even the questionable ones.” Shepard replied. “Dismissing an option merely on the ground of one’s moral absolutes can be a hindrance.” Shepard could also point to plenty of times when people confused their self-interests for morals.

“Indeed.” Nihlus smiled as his arms dropped back down to his sides, “As usual, you seem to have it all figured out.”

“Not everything,” Shepard replied. “I only covered what I think our options are.” Of course Nihlus would say something like that. He was always observing her machinations, always commenting, buoying her along to think the details through. For all his smiles, footloose loutish nature, and devil-may-care swagger, she was not fooled. There was a reason why Saren pulled him out of the military. Saren saw something in him, and Shepard suspected that aside from the ability to think on his feet and for himself, that something included his own brand of sly manipulation. Nihlus could play cards at that poker table with the best of them.

“Well, I think that is all. I best leave you to your work.”

“Sure, okay.”

Nihlus nodded and made his way toward the door. Shepard listened for his exit, and only when the door closed behind him did she fully grasp what had just happened. It had truly been too long since she had talked to someone without the fetters. Most people tended to operate on the conceit that understanding something meant accepting or agreeing with it. Their inability to separate the two made for stifled, inflexible discourse. She liked weighing all her options, and discussing them without worrying about offending some sensibility. There was something liberating in talking with someone who understood her tendencies. She smiled to herself and turned back to her console to finish ordering her new Valiant.

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In the end, Shepard ended up leaving the armor for the next day. She had started on the process after the rifle was ordered, but quickly realized that her mind was elsewhere, she had trouble concentrating and the details kept blurring together. It was impossible to do anything serious like that. The sort of
hardsuit that she needed was hardly the mass-produced basic model issued to the average infantry. Few N-sevens wore stock gear, because each of them had their own tastes and preferences. Picking and purchasing gear, piece by piece was the only solution.

For her, the process was complicated with additional requirements. She needed it to support a cloaking matrix as well as a light exo-frame. Both were powered systems, so the energy storage unit had to be quite robust. After that, she liked to have a specific configuration of additional frills. The chest-plate had to be molded just so, to make lying while shooting feasible for any duration of time. The shoulder pads had to be in a specific shape that would allow her left shoulder to accommodate the stock of the rifle. Things could not dig in where they ought not to dig in. The catalogue could label the parts as good for those functions, but manufacturers tended to be arm-chair types, they went on theory alone, not actual experience.

She had just finished defining the color layout on her new chest and back components and inputting the color hex codes for her shades of obsidian black and wine red when the OD’s door pinged, announcing someone wanted entrance. A moment later it opened just in time for Shepard to look up and see Ashley breeze in.

“Skipper, you might want to check the Citadel News.”

“Is something wrong?” Shepard asked, even as she switched screens. It was impossible to miss the tension in the gunny’s voice. A few more strokes of the keys brought up the news network’s extranet website. Top of the home page was a headline that made Shepard double-take.

‘Alliance-Hierarchy Summit Marred by Murder’

“That’s something that’s wrong.” Ashley said as she stopped by the OD desk.

“You don’t say.” Shepard replied numbly. Looking at that headline, she could not help but get a horrible sinking feeling. She scrolled down, reading, “Admiral Titus Bellisario was found dead in his hotel room this morning. Homicide investigators were called onto the scene…”

“I looked up the name.” Ashley cut in. “He was captain of the ship that encountered the Horizon Dawn activating a relay in 2157. He ordered the first shots of the First Contact War.” Ashley explained.

Shepard hummed; she was not going to question Ashley by asking if she was sure.

“His death is not a coincidence.” Ashley finished. “But it gets worse, Skipper. Read to the bottom.”

Shepard could not imagine how the situation could possibly get worse, but she read on. “Citadel Security reports the admiral was shot in his hotel room…” She paused there, because the article included a picture of the hotel, taken from the Presidium ground level. If pictures were indeed worth a thousand words, this one spoke at least five hundred. The photographer caught a good angle on the damaged hotel room window on the seventh floor. It was not one of the windows overlooking a balcony, the blinds were still closed, and there was a tell-tale symmetrical spider-web pattern spreading over the shatter-proof laminate panel, glimmering in the artificial sunlight cast from the fake Presidium sky above.

“Suffice to say, he was not shot by someone in his room. The shooter was using a hyper-velocity rifle.” Ashley said. “That there is no little domestic argument gone wrong, or a robbery, or a psychopath targeting a specific subset of individuals because of some vendetta they have. That picture is all the proof I need to know it was a targeted assassination.”
Shepard blinked. Her own experience told her a few basic things about what had happened. “Indeed. They waited for the admiral to get to his room, and had the proper equipment to make that shot. The blinds are closed. They had to be closed when the shot was fired, C-sec would not have closed them if they had been open. That means the gun had to be set up on an infrared rig, using an IR camera for a scope. Then look at that pattern on the glass, there’s just one penetration. Those panels can withstand the void. The slug that cut through… might have even been an AMR-mod Mantis firing armor-piercing rounds.”

“It says the Citadel has a dangerous fundamentalist xenophobe whacko on the loose.”

Shepard did not want Ashley to think too hard about what it said about her that she could just off-hand list what that sort of shot would take. “Fortunately…” and most people would cringe at her prefacing anything like that. “I think this was done by a hired professional, so no, not a xenophobic whacko. Those sorts rarely look past their nose; their killings are more opportunistic and aimed against those who they view as having insulted them. Ever heard of the knifings in the Citadel bars back in fifty-eight? This isn’t that. They also rarely have this level of skill or access to gear. Now the questions become… why? Who benefits?” It went without saying that her horrible sinking feeling had become a general dread. The resources this killing required spoke of someone with means, connections, and resources. Worst of all, her mind immediately leapt to the killing of Sparatus’ ex-secretary. Was this assassination done by the same individual?

“Whoever did this deserves to be shot. Do they want the turians to take these things as a declaration of war? There is no benefit in that!” Ashley went on.

Shepard hummed, “Well let’s be realistic, Gunny, there are always those who would benefit from a war. The weapon manufacturers benefit from both sides of any war. After that, the frothing xenophobes, Terra Firma or otherwise, would love something to happen, so they can say they were right. Even the Alliance has those who are ready for the cold war to heat up. As for the turians, I’d be worried if this was all it took for them to declare war.”

“Wars have started for less, Skipper. Case and point World War One back in the twentieth.” Ashley argued.

“The assassination of the Archduke was just a spark that ignited a pre-existing powder keg of tension.” Shepard replied. “You’re also comparing the assassination of an heir to a throne to the assassination of an admiral. Whoever did this would have to go after a primarch for equal effect. Even then… I don’t know. I am hoping the Hierarchy is not so easily provoked and thus duped.”

“Me too.” Ashley conceded. “Don’t misunderstand me. I do not want a war. I know that people like you and I will only lose.”

Shepard hummed an assent, even as her train of thought continued on its own. If not war, then what was the endgame, the goal of these assassinations? It could shed some light on the short-range motive behind this assassination, and the previous one, if the two were in fact connected. Somehow she did not think the ultimate reasoning was stirring up a war, and it definitely could not be petty revenge for Eden Prime or the FCW. If not that, then what other endgame was there? There had to be a one. People rarely did anything without a reason. An unmotivated or senseless act of violence was just a concept some people tossed about, because they could not understand that even madmen reasoned and thus could be understood. The difference was that a madman’s logic held one and one to be something other than two; their logic process had a systemic error.

“What are you thinking, Skipper?” Ashley asked.

“The obvious. This was not a lone assassin acting out. They got hired by someone. So someone
wants something. Now I doubt that they want to cause a true inciting incident to start a war. Their real endgame is something else… I am raking my brain here trying to figure it out.” Shepard wanted to think that at the end of the day, even if the Hierarchy got so angry as to contemplate military action, the Asari and Salarian parts of the Council would wish to pull them away from it. The Hierarchy would have to burn bridges to start a war, and militaristic or not, they were not fools.

“Ah. Their real endgame?” Ashley asked.

Shepard tapped her fingers on the desk in front of her, pondering if she should be conjecturing in front of Ashley. The gunny was temperamental, prone to instinct reactions, and trust the woman as she might on the battlefield, Shepard could not forget that Ashley was a tad biased in the way she viewed things. “There is a possibility,” she ventured. She would have to ease into it, because silence in this case was not going to be golden. They were already on the topic. “Cerberus.”

“Cerberus?” Ashley echoed her tone one of utter incredulity.

“They have the resources needed to pull something like this.”

“Well yes… I remember what those bastards did to Admiral Kahoku, but… why would they do this?” Ashley asked.

The paranoid part of Shepard’s mind was quick to see why, but an outsider like Ashley would think she was verging on too paranoid for anyone’s good. Admiral Kahoku was evidence of a thinking pattern in of itself. He had been killed in an attempt to cover up Cerberus involvement in a certain matter. Cerberus thought nothing of orchestrating accidents involving thresher maws and then outright kidnapping and torture. They were deeply entrenched in the system, to the point that they believed themselves untouchable. This was the thinking of someone highly intelligent, but also very likely psychopathic. They had no remorse, no empathy, and no boundaries.

This could very well be less about the secretary and the admiral and more about putting her out of the picture. If she turned her head and squinted, thinking along that line, things kind of began to make sense. The mode of operation spoke of a sniper with high stealth capabilities. If the killer was working for Cerberus, then they were intentionally aping her own tactics, and there was only one reason why someone would do that. Armistan Banes knew that there was still a leak in his perfect cover-up. Shepard was on Cerberus’ trail, she knew they existed, knew that they had infiltrated the Alliance to some capacity. She was quite possibly the closest to dragging the shadowy organization into the light. She was a liability. “Remember the killing in the botanical garden?” Shepard asked.

“Well yes… wait, you think they’re connected?”

“My theory rests on the assumption that they are. I do not have evidence that the killer in both was one and the same. However, if they are, then… the perpetrator seems to go after targets for rather petty reasons because their overreaching reason is entirely different. Yes, the victim in the garden had worked for Councilor Sparatus, and the killing came after Eden Prime, one would easily assume the motive there. And one would be led about by the nose.” Well, that was not entirely a lie, merely downplaying the truth and steering Ashley toward other details. Shepard could not say more than that without reading Ashley into what she knew about the first victim. “That killing also happened after we picked up Cerberus’ trail. They want to give these killings an apparent motive, to disguise the real one. This admiral is the same, an easy motive to disguise the real one. Again, if the killers are the same, and if they work for Cerberus, then the goal here is not inciting anything so much as… handling a little problem they have.”

“A personal problem? Wait… do you think they’re gunning for you?”
“That’s my lingering suspicion, yes. Assuming of course, that there is a connection and I’m not just unpardonably paranoid.” Shepard replied. “Nihlus poked around after the garden killing. The killer there was a woman. She was seen wearing a full mask so C-sec had nothing to identify her with, but she was using a knife and a Carnifex. Now if she also did this assassination… if it is the same killer, she is showing C-sec that they need to look for a highly qualified sniper. If this is aimed against me, then they’re doing a good job.”

“That key assumption is easy to verify.” Ashley replied. “Even I can tell you that the shot came in at about level with the window.”

Shepard nodded her assent. It was an easy observation to make for anyone who had any sort of experience with an HVR and a basic understanding of geometry. The Presidium windows were thick, and if one fired on them at any angle except level, their apparent thickness only increased. The panels could act like the sloped armor of a tank. An angled shot risked not penetrating, or losing too much energy and being unable to harm the target.

“If you’re right about the rifle rig, then it was not on a Skycar. There would be no room inside one and people would notice a car hovering that low on the Presidium. There is only one other option, what is immediately on the other side from the hotel? Find where the killer was, and maybe some security camera caught a glimpse of them coming and going. There’s confirmation.”

Shepard nodded again. There was nothing she could add to that. In the pit of her stomach she knew the confirmation would come in time. She was also between a rock and a hard place, as after the death of the secretary, she could not afford to show no interest in this case, but showing too much interest would be suspicious too.

“Pardon my language ma’am, but this is officially a whole new level of fucked up.” Ashley added.

“It is,” Shepard agreed. The way she saw it, if Cerberus did indeed have such a big problem with her, they ought to display some courage and come after her personally. She was almost affronted that they would do things like this. To put it bluntly, anyone who knew her would know it was not her work. The whole execution was needlessly showy, obviously meant to catch attention. Showy also meant sloppy. If she had been the one assassinating secretaries and admirals, she would not have been caught on camera, and she would not have shot the admiral through the window like that. Sure, she had the skills, and if need be could get her hands on the gear, but it was blatantly unnecessary, and more than a bit suicidal. You did not have much of an exit strategy if you had to worry about so much gear.

Shepard would have employed a whole other approach. She would have waited for the admiral to be coming out of the hotel in the morning and shot him at long range. The Presidium is a wheel with habitation on the outside edge, where the station’s rotation generated gravity via centrifugal force. At ten kilometers in diameter, the ring’s curvature would have allowed her to be at least two kilometers away. At that range, if anyone heard the pop, they would not have automatically assumed it was shooting at someone, and on the other side the victim would go down and the bodyguards would have no way of knowing where the shot came from. It would require no bulky gear, only a slight modification to the Mantis’ scope. The moment of uncertainty would have given her ample time to vanish as well. The most frustrating part was that this woman was clearly using a method that facilitated a frame-up, but no one investigating the murders would see it.

The OD door swished open, jarring Shepard out of her thoughts. She turned her head to look over, and was entirely unsurprised to see Nihlus and Garrus.

Ashley straightened, “Well… I think that’s my cue. Skipper, just so you know, no matter what happens, you got an ally in me.”
“Thanks Ash,” Shepard smiled.

The gunnery sergeant nodded her head and turned to breeze out of the OD, right past the turians. Nihlus and Garrus let her pass wordlessly.

“Come in you two.” Shepard said. This whole thing was going into overtime. She would have to essentially repeat the whole talk she just had with Ashley, except with full disclosure, as both Nihlus and Garrus knew all the details. She was officially beginning to hate Armistice Day.

Chapter End Notes

**Author Notes:** Huzza! The technobabble is back for a cameo! Nihlus is encountering just how willfully ignorant Shepard can in fact be, when she has a reason to be. Tali and Garrus share an adorkable “nerd moment”. The heat is officially on under Shepard, she is aware of the danger she is, and Cerberus do think they can get away with this.

**General Notes:**

**On the Technobabble** – I am fully aware that most people don’t talk in heavy “professional jargon” of any variety, which is why I keep it to times when Legion explains anything, because it is Legion. I have recently taken to calling my impulse to think through such minutia as “fantasy theoretical physics”, aka the nerdy writer’s counterpart to the fantasy sport league. I am sorry.

**Chapter Notes:**

**Geth Observatory** - Of course, I base this principle on something from canon. In ME:A the glaring problem of Andromeda’s light reaching the Milky Way with a 1.5 million year delay is solved by using a data from a Geth-built “observatory” pointed into dark space. The observatory uses three relays coupled together. They can be moved; after all we known that a supernova moved the Mu relay, cutting off Ilos. Well, the idea here is that light can be actively accelerated and sent by a relay to another at “relay velocities”. Well, for ME:A, the Geth observatory accelerated Andromeda’s light so that the lag was only a couple hundred years. I’m thinking of other applications for this.

**DMR** – “Designated Marksman Rifle”, this type of gun is designed for roles between an average infantryman and a sniper. They are typically semi-auto, having a faster fire rate and a larger clip, but they are not designed to operate at very long ranges like a sniper rifle. My head-canon puts the Mantis as a true sniper rifle, but a bunch of other game rifles (i.e. Viper and Incisor) as DMRs.

**AMR** – “Anti-Materiel Rifle”. Their uses include but are not limited to crippling lightly-armored vehicles of various kinds and damaging sensitive equipment like radar dishes. However they can be used to reach the crew operating said lightly-armored vehicle as well. I’m adding this category of Mantis because in my canon I’m treating the Widow, a true AMR, as a Geth-development that will only be “adopted” by the Alliance in the near future, reverse-engineered from the rifles used by the Heretics on Solcrum. The Geth use the oversized Widow because their frames can take the recoil, canon tells us that those guns can damage the unwary human.
The Profiteer

Chapter Notes

**Disclaimer:** I do no own Mass Effect, I do not claim to own Mass Effect, I am only doing this for fun.

**Author Notes:** I’m still alive! That’s all I’ll say up here.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**Episode 36: The Profiteer**

Shepard walked away from her conversation with Nihlus and Garrus assured that she was not simply unpardonably paranoid. Both had listened without saying a word while she laid out the facts. It was Garrus who broke the silence after she had finished and announced that her theory might just be verging on truth. He could see the how, based on what they knew so far, it really did look like Armistan Banes was making a move against her.

In the end though, Garrus went on to add that Cerberus had a single big problem if they wanted this frame-up to stick. The first assassination had landed on his father’s desk. If this second killing was indeed connected, his father would take over. It would not matter whom Cerberus had on the inside, they would never influence his father. Then, if anyone could see the obvious problems and mismatch of skill, it would be his father, and he would pursue the ill-fitting pieces with all he had.

Shepard thanked Garrus, but she could not be as relieved as he probably wanted her to be. After all, Castis Vakarian also knew that she had pulled a fast one over him, and to protect Saren at that. That would have left the wrong sort of impression on him. He was not infallible. Would he overlook the nasty trick? Or would he see it as the hallmark of someone versed in complex manipulation? She had reasons to suspect that would make all the difference between seeing her as a victim and seeing her as someone who was playing everyone there. Shepard was a realist; she knew there was a probability that Castis Vakarian would take the evidence against her at face value.

When that meeting finally ended Shepard called it done for the day. Not because there was nothing more to do, but because she refused to do more. After getting some sleep she turned to figuring out her new gear. She received her new Valiant by the early next afternoon, Normandy time, and wasted no time getting started on the process of acclimatization. She took it to the only firing range on the Citadel that could simulate a kilometer-long range with varying environmental and weather conditions. Nihlus pulled strings to get her access to a suite for a whole six hours. All that time was spent shooting clips and noting results.

The process was absolutely necessary if she wanted to learn the rifle’s idiosyncrasies and check it for manufacturing defects. She started in a rather convincing simulation of the Amazon jungle. She had been to the actual jungle a number of times, as the ICT’s N1 core training courses were conducted out of Vila Militar outside Rio de Janeiro, a short shuttle hop away. Earth’s familiar gravity and range of atmospheric pressures meant she could focus on weather factors like temperatures and humidity. At her request the techie added a full fine mist, just to check whether the water would cause a short inside the rifle. In the end, the rifle passed, but her poncho did not, so she ended up looking vaguely drowned, much to the amusement of both the techie and Nihlus, who had been up
in the dry control booth. Next was the tip of South America, one of the windiest places on Earth, the single biggest factor on the sniper’s list of forces to conquer. She masochistically suffered through the chilled gale blown by the simulator’s fans in order to get a feel for the rifle’s bullet drift.

After that came the practical verifications, with variations on gravity and atmospheric density, which had an effect on bullet drop and drag. It was then that Nihlus decided to challenge her to shoot drones through a simulacrum of the sandstorms that raked Palaven’s Great Desert. Conditions there were similar to Death Valley, California: impossibly hot and absolutely dry, though windier and with Palaven’s thicker atmosphere and higher gravity. Shepard did not think it too realistic as the sand was just a trick of the projectors, but Nihlus seemed happy. She strongly suspected that he intentionally chose a setting that would turn on the range’s heaters, helping her warm up and dry out. Then he compensated for this kindness by having the techie dial up the simulated sand half-way through until it was almost entirely blinding her, and she had to shoot the remaining drones just by the twinkle of their status lights using a rifle that still felt a little out of place.

Soon enough the data tables were written, the ratios calculated, and she got a good idea of what the Valiant could do. She would rote-memorize the tables in time. So the last step was to name the rifle. It was a rather common practice for Alliance specialists, one of those things they became almost superstitious about. Arthur had thought of a famous line Appian attributed to Caesar, used in his letter to the Roman Senate as a blithe summation of his victory at the Battle of Zela in 47 BCE, “Veni, Vidi, Vici”, or “I came, I saw, I conquered”. Arthur said that was easily a sniper’s motto. From there it was a grammatical leap. The saying’s last verb was the first person perfect tense of vincere, “to conquer”; the source of the Roman name Vincentius, which needed only a minor trim to become Vincent. She had teased Arthur about it, but after Elysium she did not dare change it, only forego mentioning it.

She could not reuse the name and she was not particularly keen on anything fancy like it. Back in the ICT, Leif had started their squad’s practice of naming their weapons from mythological sources; starting with his shotgun, Mjolnir. Shepard could follow suit. Leif had once called her Athena, for no other reason the fact that he thought he was clever. In some depictions the ancient goddess carried in her hand the winged figure of the personification of victory, Nike. The idea felt weirdly appropriate and she could not think of anything else. So her Valiant was christened “Nike” and that was that.

After that it was another twenty-four hours before her armor arrived. Shepard quickly double-checked it fit, synched, and operated properly before she knew they could move on to the job she promised Wrex. The destination he provided was Tuntau, the fourth planet of the Phoenix system in the Argos Rho cluster, though the main relay was in the neighboring Hydra system. First she conferred with Admiral Hackett to get her his authorization. Hackett was less than happy to hear about a known criminal hiding in the Phoenix system. It helped that the Hierarchy wanted Actus for tax evasion; that meant the Hierarchy would not protest the forceful eviction itself.

The wrinkle was that while everyone would have preferred her arresting Actus, she knew Wrex would be going for blood. She would have to play this off as if they had gone in with the intent to make an arrest, but the individual chose to resist. It was going to be one of the shadiest things Shepard had ever done. More than that, it was coming too soon after the assassination on the Citadel, so some with an agenda would use this to say it was part of a burgeoning pattern of Alliance-on-Hierarchy aggression. It was the sort of mole-hill incident that could easily become a mountain if someone thought they could benefit from it.

The whole thing had gotten complicated due to circumstances. She told Wrex she would help him before the admiral’s assassination. Wrex would not see the logic of delaying the job; he would not care if some Hierarchy official might use this for their own agenda. Wrex would not appreciate the need for subtlety as she did. She would have to hope that Actus’ criminal activities did not make him
Thus, after the clerical matters were settled, Shepard ordered the Normandy to depart the Citadel. What boggled the mind was that the Phoenix system was not uninhabited. Its third planet, Intai’sei, was home to scattered settlements totaling around one hundred fifty thousand people. The desert world was equal parts geological laboratory, mining operation, and energy generation and storage factory. Then there was also the asteroid-based Pinnacle Station, a Krogan Rebellions-era Hierarchy command center turned top-secret training facility nominally owned by the Alliance, but operated on a strict Council-mandated share agreement with the Hierarchy. Actus was audaciously hiding under all those noses on the oddly pleasant planet which was overlooked simply because why bother with it while Intai’sei was one orbit over? She would give him credit for the panache.

As for the planet itself, Tuntau’s 20 AU distance from Phoenix kept it from baking in radiation well enough that structures only needed standard shielding or burial, despite the fact that the planet had no magnetic field. Its 11,867 kilometer radius and 3.78 Earth masses created only 1.1g, which would not make bones creak. It rotated once in a manageable 66.7 Earth hours as well. The icing on the cake was that its 3.12 atm predominantly methane and helium atmosphere kept surface temperatures balmy, and no oxygen meant the methane would not burn.

When the Normandy arrived at Hydra, Joker pointed them right at Phoenix and put the ship in FTL. The distance between the systems was five light-years, which meant the Normandy’s thirteen light-years top speed would turn it into a scant eight hour hop. Wrex only provided the planet; he did not pay his source enough to get him the exact coordinates. It would be up to EDI to find the base, and that would probably take longer than getting there.

The Normandy entered Tuntau’s orbit in the middle of their night cycle, so Joker programmed the ship’s navigation systems with a series of orbits that would allow EDI to conduct scans while he got some sleep. The ship’s often unused VI auto-pilot could avoid collisions with space-borne objects, but it was not smart enough to avoid actual intelligence. EDI could easily pin-point structures on the surface, and by mid-morning she had the right location. It was rather hard to miss the only structure that registered as warmer than all the others, which meant an actively regulated environment inside.

Thus it was two after noon that Shepard went down to the Shuttle Bay, wearing her full gear, with Nike behind her back, helmet under her arm, and armor positively squeaking and still smelling of the factory and airbrush paints and sealants.

One of the shuttles was down on the deck, and Wrex was standing by the open hatch with his arms crossed over his chest. The marines and Tali were already waiting inside. “I’m surprised I don’t have to glare your turians down.” Wrex said as soon as she was within earshot.

“Don’t start, Wrex, please.” Shepard said as she stepped onto the shuttle. “You asked for them to sit this out. Don’t go making me rue complying.”

“Fine,” he replied as he hit the panel to close the hatch with his fist.

Shepard turned to the rest of the team already there, “Now I said it before, but I’ll stress it again, we are going in there to seize stolen property and arrest a person suspected of theft and piracy. He might not come quietly, but I do not want any of you to fire first. That includes you, Wrex. Standard policy applies. It’s up to Actus to decide how things go down. Also in the event of a firefight, check your trajectories around any fuel tanks and crates with unknown contents; I don’t want to lose evidence.”

“Aye, aye, Ma’am.” The marines replied in a single voice.

Shepard nodded. It went without saying that her suit recorder was running, to stage a little twist of
perceptions and cover up that she was going in there knowing Wrex intended to kill. Actus, or likely his goons, would fire the first shots and become the villains of the narrative. Yes, she was using their likelihood of resisting arrest as a tool for her cover-up, but Actus was indeed a wanted criminal. Thinking about it like that kept a fraction of the guilt down. Still, she knew this was going to be one more of those things she would take to her grave.

When she turned, she found Wrex staring at her. His red eyes positively drilled through her, but there was a hint of a grin in the tip of his mouth. Shepard grinned back, which apparently communicated enough, he turned away to find a seat. She turned and moved toward the cockpit.

The descent into Tuntau’s atmosphere was bumpy, and unpleasant. The Kodiak had to fight the atmosphere the whole way, and the entry corona had been rather bright, too bright for Shepard’s liking. However there was little she could do about it. An actual pilot could have probably angled the craft a little differently, or come in a fair bit slower. The VI pilot performed a safe entry, not a skilled one, and they were flying through the night sky as well.

Tuntau’s distance from Phoenix along with its methane and helium atmosphere meant the sky was a pale shade of blue during the day, but turned inky black at night. The high concentration of sodium and silicon dioxide in the crust made everything one of several shades of matte grey. The irregular, jagged, topography created wind channels, which invariably picked up desiccated dust. The planet’s meager moisture was inadequate for permanent surface water bodies, but it fell as rain when conditions were just right. The interaction of topography and rainfall inevitably resulted in localized flash floods, with areas subject to frequent episodes having stream channels carved right down into the rocks. Flatter plains surrounded by crags bore traces of shallow lakes: quickly-eroding geometric patterns of mineral deposition along cracked dry ground and even the occasional tub ring where the mineralized water had pooled often enough to bleach the rocks.

Their target destination was set into what looked like a hollow in between some crags that had been filled in by dust. A few taps of the sensor console caused the Kodiak’s LADAR array to fire off a few pings to triangulate dimensions. At barely two hundred meters cross, the little slip of flat land was tiny, but it was also well above the surrounding flood-plains, and on one side the crags opened up just enough to give it natural drainage. Sitting right on top of the little flat was a pre-fabricated structure of two levels, clearly the biggest thing that would have fit in such a tiny footprint. The infrared scanner easily picked out the three guards outside as well. There was no disguising the Kodiak’s approach either, so there would be no element of surprise. Because of that the whole arrest ruse was likely going to become moot just as soon as the shuttle landed.

Out east from the little plain there was a small plateau ringed with tiny dim lights that were almost invisible above the dust. At less than a hundred meters square, it would do for their Kodiak, but hardly anything larger. She tapped at the console so the navigation system would flag the location for landing, and then flicked over to internal comm. “We’re here. I’m setting the shuttle down on their make-shift landing pad. I saw three guards outside the structure, which is about a hundred meters west of the landing pad.”

“So, we are waiting for one of them to open fire first?” Wrex asked.

“Something tells me we will not have to wait for long,” Ashley replied.

“Good.”

“Oh joy,” Tali mumbled.
“We are still not rushing in there,” Shepard cut in, filling the silence Tali created. “We handle whoever is outside at range if we have to. The Kodiak’s kinetic barriers can give us all the cover we need, so that is what we will use.”

“I figured you would say that.” Wrex groused.

“We, let’s put it this way… why give them any chance to do damage? I don’t play fair like that.” Truthfully, she would have loved it if the guards realized their cause was lost and took the smart way out by surrendering. Sure they might end up facing prison terms, but was dying really preferable? If the guards were turian, she knew they would do their time, and then end up in the state’s rehabilitation program, given honest work, with full pay, within a sector they had skills for, and the option of staying on the job after the tracker was removed. The Hierarchy did not institutionalize the sort of social discrimination that actually prevented petty criminals from rehabilitating. If a convict showed a genuine wish to make a change, they got every opportunity to do so.

“Alright, I want final seal checks and prep. We’re coming in for a landing.” She announced.

“Aye, aye, ma’am.” The three marines replied in a single voice.

The Kodiak’s ventral thrusters ignited to begin descend onto the landing pad, making the whole craft shudder. Shepard tapped at the console to bring the nose around to point at the compound, so as to not give anyone a straight shot at her team through a door. It would also point the Kodiak’s own armament at the compound, although she would never actually open fire. Satisfied she reached up to do up her helmet’s environmental seals. As soon as the last latch was shut, she heard a faint hiss as the breathing apparatus kicked in without needing to be told.

The VI landing system was more self-conscious than any pilot would be. It had to be absolutely sure that the landing surface was stable and large enough before the program would execute final maneuvers. A real pilot would have made that call with more leeway. It made Shepard realize just how spoiled she had become with Nihlus’ piloting. He made everything look effortless, just a few taps of the controls here and there. The VI was slower, needlessly delaying every meter as it scanned and re-scanned the pad. The process was complicated by the sheer quantity of dust that the ventral thrusters churned up. As the shuttle finally touched down, the ventral thrusters cut out, and the Kodiak stopped shuddering, Shepard shook her head. What made her think like that now? She probably still had a wire crossed; concussions were good at crossing wires. She would blame everything on that.

Shepard flicked the cameras over to see what was going on in the back. The others were in varying stages of getting to their feet. Wrex was first, with Jenkins right behind him, ever eager. Williams was performing a last minute check on all the attachments and straps of her webbing, lest some of her gear detach in the action, and Kaidan was triple-checking his helmet seals.

Tali was still in her seat, fiddling with her Omni-tool as she held it over the metal box sitting on the seat next to her. A second later the lid lifted away, revealing that it was a docking cradle, with Tali’s new drone inside. The robot had a rounded saucer section no bigger than a serving platter, with what looked like a geth’s sensor array at the front, fins on two sides and a vertical stabilizer on top from which sprouted a flexible antenna that sprung upright the instant the lid was lifted away. A moment later the drone’s status lights lit up, and its kinetic barrier flickered. Tali shut down her Omni-tool and the drone rose into the air. When she got to her feet and the drone followed, taking up position over her left shoulder. “Chatika and I are ready to go, Commander.” She announced.

“Is it just me, or is that drone almost… geth-ish?” Ashley asked.

“A little. I integrated a salvaged Heretic primary sensor array.” Tali explained calmly. “The Geth -
as loathe as I am to admit it- have some areas where their hardware is superior. Their sensor arrays are sensitive, precise, and small-sized. I was not going to get anything as good elsewhere.”

“That’s quite clever, Tali.” Kaidan assured.

“Does that mean it can see like Legion?” Jenkins asked.

“Yes. Though at a reduced resolution, as Legion…” Tali stressed the name with a faint hiss, “Has more processing power. I would need to install Geth runtimes to use their nano-processors. I intentionally made Chatika entirely VI-operated. I am not bringing any more geth online.”

Shepard was not going to comment, now was not the time. “Alright people, I’m going to start depressurizing, and I fully expect the welcoming committee to give us their gun salutes the second they see us. Heads in the game!” she ordered as she tapped the controls. They could not expose oxygen to the planet’s methane, as it would be enough to create a single nasty fireball. She knew better than to give Actus’ goons the opportunity. If it was her, she would have fired an incendiary round into the shuttle, just to punish the enemy if they were not smart enough to depressurize.

While the shuttle systems worked, she moved over to the comm station. With a couple taps she had the Kodiak scan the airwaves. It did not take long to pick up the single signal in the vicinity. The mercenaries were using lower powered, long-wave frequencies that would not propagate very far. She would give them her ultimatum across the band, and cite the log this would leave on the Kodiak’s systems as evidence that nothing shady went on here. She reconfigured the Kodiak broadcast on that same frequency, but more powerfully, to highjack their signal. A final tap opened broadcast, “Attention to the individuals who are receiving this signal, this is Commander Shepard of the SSV Normandy, of the Earth Systems Alliance Fifth Fleet. You presence in the Phoenix system violates Alliance sovereign territory. I am authorized to place all of you under arrest. Be advised that I am aware of your fugitive status with the Hierarchy. Any resistance will be met with equal force.”

A split of second silence and then the frequency was suddenly hissing with static. Shepard closed the link with a single tap. They got that message loud and clear and decided to scrap the frequency, flooding it with static. Now they would turn to suit-to-suit communication; with the hopes that after they got rid of the interlopers they could go back to using their regular equipment. Shepard grinned and opened the door that separated the cockpit from the cabin. “I announced our intent over the comm. They flooded that frequency with white noise, that’s as much a reply as anything.”

“Finally we’re doing something my way,” Wrex chuckled.

Shepard would not give Wrex a reply, not with her actions going on suit record. Instead she tapped the console by the shuttle’s hatch to open it even as she reached behind her back for Nike. The door opened and suddenly the Kodiak’s shield flared.

“That’s their crack-shot,” Shepard said blandly. It was the sort of wild turkey shot that indicated the shooter was audaciously announcing that he was there, as if he thought none of them had a functional pair of eyeballs to notice him when the shuttle had been coming in for a landing. Maybe he was also just poking the Kodiak’s shield, trying to figure out how much it would take before coming down. Unfortunately for him the Kodiak’s barrier could withstand a grueling punishment from infantry weapons. The shuttle was not compared to a cockroach for nothing. The crack she heard was definitely too high pitched to be an AMR. “I’m going to handle things here, give me a moment… going geist!”

She had configured the new armor to work on the same verbal commands as the old, simply because she was used to those. However, her new cloak used slightly newer firmware and emitter configuration, which eliminated some of the rippling, but the fundamental problem was the same, she
had no shields while the cloak was active. She would use the Kodiak’s own envelope as her protection.

Shepard stepped out of the shuttle as soon as the cloak settled. The Kodiak’s shield did not start flickering, so that told her the cloak was functional. She lowered herself into a familiar shoulder-firing position as she stared out over the distance. The cocky crack-shot was on top of the prefabricated structure, where the elevation gave him almost the same protection as a sniper tower, but only just almost. The roof had no railing behind which he could duck, and turians were not known for their ability to minimize their profile by shooting prone, their armors tended to exaggerate their protruding breastbone, acting too much like the keel of a ship out of water.

Her HUD was flashing the usual wind velocity, humidity, temperature, and pressure readings, but at one hundred meters she had much more leeway to eyeball the whole thing. She brought Nike online and raised the rifle to eye-level and peered down the scope. Two of the three guards, those on the ground, were huddled behind a makeshift metal half-wall barrier, their rifles were in position and powered up, but even if they opened full auto on the Kodiak, its shields would take more than one of each of their clips, she had time to deal with them last. She turned the rifle up and found the crack-shot on the roof. He had his own rifle aimed right at the Kodiak’s door. It was just his misfortune that she had a cloak and was about five meters left of it. Her left index finger slid off the guard and onto the trigger even as her thumb ghosted over the ammo mode selector and Nike whined as it charged a slug to disrupt shields.

“Skipper, I can see your rifle lights!” Ashley called urgently but without shouting.

Shepard cursed under her breath; if Williams could see the rifle’s status lights through the cloak, so could the guards, which meant she had not configured the cloak correctly. “Eyes on me,” she mumbled, to turn the cloak off.

The two guards behind the barricade leveled their rifles on her instantly, but then they did not fire. Shepard looked back up. The crack-shot had turned his aim as well. Had he told them not to waste their ammo on the Kodiak? Did he think he could punch through the shields himself? True she was about on the outer reach of the Kodiak’s envelope, where the shield would have less density, but did he have a gun powerful enough to make that shot? Then her own kinetic barrier flared to life, layering under the Kodiak’s, the marksman officially had no chance of killing her in one shot.

“Shepard, handle the idiot on the roof… and leave the other two to me.” Wrex said as he stepped out from the Kodiak, kicking up new plumes of dust as he went, and his Claymore powered up with a loud whine.

“That’s the plan,” she replied. Yet now she saw the guard turn, the muzzle of his rifle following Wrex’s movements. The krogan was a target they did not expect! The sniper betrayed his surprise with his gut-check target change. She took a deep inhale and guided Nike’s crosshairs onto his head, then began her exhale as her finger tightened on the trigger. Nike cracked, the sound echoing off the crags, the marksman’s shield flared as he stumbled backwards. Wrex took it as his signal and charged, his body suddenly engulfed in a periwinkle-colored biotic flame.

Shepard inhaled again. She did not dare look away from the rooftop, not without confirming that kill. Vincent would have killed the crack-shot for sure, but Nike, even with a Spectre-grade rail extension muzzle brake mod, was shooting at ten percent less power. She did not want to find out that that the bullet had failed to kill.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw Ashley come up and kneel next to her, her own rifle drawn. “Commander, I will keep an eye on the roof for you.”
“Thanks, Ash.” Shepard replied as she turned her rifle down.

Wrex had reached the barricade behind which the other two guards huddled; now knowing they were pinned by a crack-shot. A moment later she heard the Claymore boom, its barrel pressed right to the metal barrier.

The two guards bolted as their shields flared, but then one clamped a hand to his side. Shepard raised a hand to her HUD to flick up the magnification. The turian was holding a breach in his suit shut, and there was blood trickling around his fingers. Some of the scattershot had clearly gone through the barrier and past armor where he had been pressing up against the barricade.

The other raised his rifle and fired full automatic at Wrex. Shepard turned Nike on him, but then Wrex stepped right into the line of fire and she had to keep her fingers off the trigger. The krogan’s shields flashed even as his whole body erupted with a bright periwinkle corona, shields and biotic barrier absorbing everything. Then the mercenary’s rifle clipped out and he did a rather comical double-take. Wrex chuckled, his left arm rose, fingers splayed, and the mercenary started glowing too. Then Wrex started turning his wrist, and just like that the turian mercenary’s armor began to shear and fold up on itself, ceramics buckling and cracking apart. That was all she needed to see to dial back the zoom. She did not want to see what that powerful warp field was about to do to flesh and blood.

“Ugh…” Jenkins groaned. “I don’t think any of us needed to see that.”

Shepard could only agree. The implications of what Wrex had just done were unpalatable even for her. She turned Nike until she had the other turian in her crosshairs. He was stumbling toward the base’s door, clutching his injured side, his rifle abandoned behind him. She leveled her crosshairs on his head, inhaled, and her finger dropped onto the trigger. A split of a second pause holding her breath she began her exhale as her fingered tightened. Nike cracked, and the mercenary went down. Shepard closed her eyes. Shooting people in the back of the head as they fled, weapon abandoned, would never sit well with her.

“Shepard, normally I do not like when people end my fights like that. But in this case…”

“Huh?” Ashley asked.

“I realize you only showed that coward mercy.” Wrex finished.

“Mercy… right,” Shepard powered down Nike and slipped it behind her back. She had to force herself to contain a little shudder. Her list of the worst ways to go was all the slowest, most drawn out ways. Being on the receiving end of a biotic warp, reave, or crushing singularity were high up there.

The thought of oscillating mass effect fields shearing and tearing at her gear and body was straight up nightmare fuel. The reave was even worse, as that ability targeted the victim’s nervous system. She heard of an Alliance marine who had been reaved by a batarian pirate. The attack left him with permanent weakness and tingling in the extremities. He went from being healthy to disabled in thirty seconds, and some still called him lucky. As for the singularity, it took a very powerful biotic to generate enough apparent gravity within the field to seriously damage someone, but it easily put someone in a state of utter helplessness, to be finished off, and that was perhaps even more sadistic.

Shepard remained quiet as the group gathered by the building’s door. Wrex was not even scratched, like the mercenary’s effort had not mattered at all. Which it probably did not, as the suit had its kinetic shield, and Wrex had his biotic barrier as well. Shepard just turned to the door when Tali stepped past her and brought up her Omni-tool. Shepard sighed soundlessly and let the quarian work.
She would be lying if she said she was not bothered by what had happened. Still, she knew that she
could not show herself to be bothered. She needed to get her head back in the game. There would be
time for those thoughts later.

Tali managed to get the door open in another thirty seconds. Shepard was not surprised to find a full
airlock on the other side, which meant that the space inside the little structure was fully
environmentally sealed. The outer door closed, and the system should have begun to cycle, but it did
not. Tali calmly kneeled and pulled out a metal tool from one of her suit pouches and got to work on
the maintenance hatch. Shepard did not need to be told what was up; the mercenaries had locked the
airlock out. It would only buy them some time, but it also meant that they had abandoned the three
men outside, which left an unpleasant taste in her mouth. If Actus had given that sort of order, she
suddenly felt a whole lot less guilty about what Wrex would probably do to him. If there was one
thing Shepard hated, it was those who left their own soldiers outside without them knowing. No one
who would do that was worthy of being called a leader.

“I almost got it… just…” Tali mumbled inarticulately as she worked. A moment later the airlock
began to hum, “There!”

“You did good, kid,” Wrex said as he cocked his shotgun.

The airlock rapidly pumped out the atmospheric gasses and replaced them with breathable ones.
Then the inner door opened onto utter darkness. Shepard raised her hand to bar Wrex stepping out
and shook her head. He growled under his breath, but Shepard stood her ground. As far as she could
see, the mercenaries had turned off all the lights to bank on their superior senses and the tactical
advantage of their environment. She was not going to let anyone play into their hands. She flicked
her fingers, indicating that all of them ought to take cover. The marines took up position on the right
side of the door while Shepard remained with Wrex and Tali on the left.

“Tali, can Chatika give us an idea of what’s in there?” Shepard asked.

“Of course!” The quarian replied, bringing up her Omni-tool to relay the orders to her drone. In a
manner of seconds the drone zipped off ahead. Shepard idly expected the mercenaries to greet the
little robot with a hail of fire, but as the seconds ticked there was only silence. She knew they were
there, but they were clearly showing a great deal of discipline and control.

Tali brought up the relayed video feed from Chatika on her Omni-tool. The drone’s Geth-based
sensory was proving its worth, as the little robot could see things almost as clear as daylight. The
resolution was a touch fuzzy as FLIR was never good for details, but the camera was very good at
highlighting every source of heat, and this one in particular was sensitive to the point that Shepard
could see where the environmental ducts and hot water pipes ran, inside the walls.

The thought that this clarity was still in a reduced resolution crossed her mind. Just how clearly
would Legion be able to see in this sort of environment? Her previous supposition that the Geth and
Heretics would never fall for a cloak had just been proven irrevocably. More than that, even pitch
black darkness would not be her ally against them.

As far as Shepard could see the structure was just one giant square with a largely open floor plan. It
looked to be two levels from the outside, but inside much of the second level was actually just a loft
in the extension that hung over the airlock entrance. The lower level was nearly jam-packed with
floor-to-ceiling racks of containers of every type and size. It was also not difficult to pick out the fuel
tank right in the back, which was pitch black in the image, creating a blob of absolute darkness
surrounded by the warmth of the wall and ducts behind it. The difference in IR emissions told her its
contents were very cold, likely a gas condensed into liquid form.
“That’s… a lot of things.” Tali said.

“Yes, that is more than I anticipated.” Wrex agreed.

“It can’t be all Krogan things, can it?”

Wrex hummed thoughtfully, but did not say a thing.

Shepard kept her attention on Chatika’s video feed. The drone drifted along the closest wall, sweeping the aisles. It easily identified seven turian figures on the bottom level, just waiting for them to step out of the airlock. The only reason they had not yet stormed the airlock was probably because they did not want to damage what looked to be the only exit. At the far left of the space Chatika also caught a glimpse of an all-metal stairway that led to the loft, but it was not flying at the right angle to see what was in the loft itself. The elevation would be a key advantage to the enemy, especially given that the racks were all perpendicular to it, providing little to no protection from that angle.

“Tali, can you direct Chatika to give me a view of the loft?” she asked.

“Ah yes… just a moment,” Tali replied as her fingers flew over the keys to issue new commands.

The drone rose into the air slowly and turned on its axis. There, bright as candles in a pitch dark room, Shepard could see three turian figures standing close to each other. Two had assault rifles, but the third had an HVR, evident by the IR emissions coming from its long warmed up rails. “I knew it,” Shepard muttered. “We have seven targets on the bottom level, and three in the loft.”

The storage racks make four aisles, perpendicular to the loft, with two enemies in each, except the second from the right, which has three. The three on the upper level—

Suddenly an assault rifle came to life, barking full automatic. Chatika veered sharply to avoid the volley.

“Oh no you don’t…” Tali growled, as her fingers flew over her Omni-tool’s keys. “Weapons unlocked… go get them, Chatika!”

A moment later a second, higher pitched rifle returned fire. It took Shepard a moment to realize that the bark sounded very much like an Alliance-issue weapon. Had Tali cannibalized more than a heretic unit to make her little drone? There would be time for those answers later. She could hear footsteps above as the mercenaries in the loft took cover. Shepard knew that they had only a scant few seconds to make their move. She shifted mental tracks and took a deep breath, “Wrex… you and I are handling the loft. Tali, I want you to follow team Bravo for now… Bravo I’m placing you in charge of the mercenaries on the bottom level, but first I want support and suppression until Wrex and I reach the stairway.”

“Got it,” Kaidan nodded, reaching for his own assault rifle. Ashley and Jenkins followed suit, powering theirs up with twin whines.

“Use the airlock for cover until Wrex and I distract those in the loft. One of them has a sniper rifle. Do not expose your backs until I say I have the situation well in hand.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Shepard peered around the edge of the doorway and was utterly unsurprised to see that the mercenaries on the lower level had gathered close to the airlock door. Chatika was still zipping about, being a nuisance, but the drone’s aim was off by whole zip codes. It only drove the mercenaries back into cover whenever its erratic bursts chanced to get too close. She reached down
to turn on both Sin and Dex and looked up at the krogan standing on her right, “Let’s do this.”

“I’ll take point, they’ll shoot at me first anyways,” Wrex replied.

Shepard nodded.

Wrex rounded the door jamb, hefting up his shotgun as his biotics ignited anew. Shepard followed a split of a second later, drawing her guns as she went.

The mercenaries closest to them opened fire, but Wrex was making a straight dash toward the stairway. Shepard raised Dex and fired two at shots at the mercenaries, sending them back into cover, though only one of their shields actually flared. Chatika passed over her head, firing another burst at the mercs, its bullets peppering the space around them, driving them deeper into cover. Then, Bravo joined the fray, two assault rifles spraying down the mercenaries that allowed any of their body parts to become visible. There was a single crack from above, and Bravo’s rifles to fell silent.

“Wrex, I got this! Go!” Shepard whirled and looked up. The sniper was right there, aiming his gun at a rather very awkward angle at the airlock. He would not hit anyone in there who did not clear the jamb. She raised Dex and fired, causing his shields to flare. Shepard fired again, and saw the sniper duck away from the railing as his shield collapsed. Just the fact that it took two bullets from her guns to bring it down told her that he was wearing a customized hardsuit.

She did not get to mull on it for very long as an instant later her own shield flared as some of the mercenaries rounded on her with their weapons. Even before she could react properly two assault rifles retorted from the airlock, driving some of the mercenaries back into cover, and there was a single thud as a body hit the floor. Yet her shield status continued to whittle down. Shepard saw a figure duck from inside the airlock, making a beeline toward her. A moment later her shields stopped flaring as Kaidan stepped in, assault rifle in his right hand, his left raised, fist closed, as he projected a compact biotic barrier around the both of them. Shepard heard booming footfalls on metal, Wrex had reached the stairway.

“Give us a few seconds, LT!” Ashley called as she emerged from the airlock, her rifle in one hand. In her other, Shepard recognized a flash-bang grenade, and the gunny already had her thumb in the pin ring. A moment later she pulled it free with a casual twitch, “If you don’t want to be blinded or deafened… look away and mute externals… NOW!” She called as she threw the canister. Its safety lever dislodged just before landing. Shepard had barely enough time to holster both her guns, turn away, and slam a thumb on her helmet controls, and then there was an iridescent white flash with a sharp crack that she still heard through the suit.

“Jenkins, now!” Ashley called.

Jenkins did not reply.

Shepard turned back and raised her hand to her controls again, activating her external microphone again. Ashley’s rifle cut in mid-burst, beating a controlled staccato. Shepard caught Jenkins come out of the airlock, holding two much larger cylindrical canisters. He yanked the pins on both and flicked his hand, sending one skittering across the floor to stop between two of the closet aisles. Then he wound up like a baseball pitcher and hurled the other clear across the room, where it landed and bounced twice before skittering some distance.

The first cylinder gave a loud pop and hiss as it began to billow binding smoke that quickly filled half the room. The other charge took a second longer, but it too popped and began to smoke, hissing all the same. Jenkins whipped out his own rifle and joined Ashley in descending on the now completely blinded mercenaries. Bravo was clearly taking no prisoners. Shepard looked to Kaidan as
the smoke reached her and began to billow around her legs. He had drawn somewhat closer, keeping his biotic barrier up.

“We got this.” He said.

There was a loud crack from above, Wrex’s shotgun.

Shepard looked up, but the flash-bang had done its job a little too well, she could see little more than whatever was emitting light: hardsuits and weapons. She looked around, but now the smoke was such that she could not even see the other mercenaries at all. She did see Tali come out of the airlock, her Omni-tool up, her fingers dancing through its glow as she directed Chatika to swoop into the fray. Then Kaidan turned and the barrier he had been projecting vanished. He raised his own rifle into firing position and unleashed his own barrage.

Shepard turned and bolted for the stairway, and she just reached it when the marines clipped out. The eerie silence did not last long as suddenly there was a deep-pitched whomp. A moment later Shepard heard something crack against metal and then thud again the floor. She turned and grimaced. There was a set of flickering armor lights piercing the smoke at the base of the closest industrial shelving units, and it was no great mystery how someone got there.

“Actus!” Wrex bellowed at the top of both sets of lungs. His footfalls positively thundered across the loft’s floor.

The mercenaries on the lower level began to recover from the flash-bang, but now the smoke was curling up toward the ceiling, making them nothing more than faint moving streaks of light in the gloom. A non-Alliance assault rifle began to beat its tempo somewhere behind her. Shepard moved to turn, but stopped herself. This was not her fight. Kaidan said they could handle it; she would have to trust him, even if her overprotective instinct wanted to jump into the fray and help her team. It was still four of them against five, maybe six mercenaries. Shepard had to shake her head to come out of it. At the end of the day four versus five, or even six, created a relatively equal ratio. Wrex was facing two on his own.

She was on the stairs and climbing as fast as she could. She paused near the top to peer over the last stair even as she yanked out her knife. With her night vision effectively shot and the smoke from below now high enough that it had begun wafting across the loft’s floor plates, she could not trust herself not to shoot Wrex. She would be less likely to mistake his enormous form for an enemy at close range. If anything, getting that close to an angry krogan was more dangerous for her.

What she saw made drawing her knife seem redundant. Wrex had already pushed Actus back into the wall. Judging from the position of the turian’s suit lights, the krogan also lifted him off the ground, likely by the neck. Shepard could not be sure right at that moment, but it seemed like something Wrex would do. She drew near, making sure to keep the knife pointing down.

“Wrex, it’s just me… so don’t lash out.” She said as a warning.

“Relax Shepard, I got everything under control. Here, let me introduce you… this pile of sniveling varren shit is Tonn Actus. He bought and sold my people’s cultural legacy for a dirty cred.”

“You say that like I diminished something.” Actus replied. “Your cultural legacy of wanton barba-”

Wrex lifted him away from the wall only to slam him right back into it again, choking off the rest of whatever he was going to say.

“Mindless brute!” Actus gasped out.
Wrex lifted him away from the wall again, but at that moment Shepard chose to step in and place her hands on Wrex’s arm. “Wrex, don’t. There’s no point in prolonging this.” As gruesome as what Wrex was going to do was going to be, she did not want him dragging it out. Torture and the sight of someone enjoying it had never, and would never sit well with her.

“You’re in luck, Actus.” Wrex rumbled.

“Yes, I am in luck. The mindless brute takes orders from a human.”

Wrex turned his head to look down at her, despite the fact that because his helmet visor was opaque, she would not be able to look in his eyes, “You hear that, Shepard? Those are his last words.”

Suddenly Actus was choking and gurgling. It took a moment too long for Shepard to realize that Wrex had tightened his grip around the turian’s neck. Before she could open her mouth, Wrex slammed Actus into the wall again. There was a resounding crack and fragments of ceramics began to fall to floor, tinkling like shards of broken glass. She chose to bend down and sheath her knife. Wrex let go, and Actus dropped like a lead weight, slumping into a sitting position, his arms dropped to his sides. From her angle Shepard saw how his neck turned. There was no mistaking that angle for anything but what it was. Wrex had broken his vertebrae. She could not help but shudder. At least that was a relatively quick way to go, she hoped.

“Commander, is everything alright?” Kaidan asked.

“Yes.” Shepard replied automatically, if a touch numbly.

“It is done,” Wrex added.

“We finished the mercenaries down here as well,” Ashley slipped in. “Which means we control this place.”

“What now?” Tali wondered.

Shepard knew this was another time where an old saying was apt, in for a penny, in for a pound. For there to be even a slim chance of justifying this and chalking it up as a win in her ledger, she needed to finish it. She straightened and looked away from the place where Actus had slumped over. “First thing first... we need to get the lights back up. And maybe find the environmental controls... see if we can vent some of this smoke.”

“Ah yea... I realize two smoke grenades might have been too much. Sorry, Commander,” Jenkins said sheepishly.

“I could have told you,” Ashley added.

“As long as you guys are not harmed, then two smoke bombs are just right.” Shepard replied.

“I guess I’ll go see if I can find the environmental controls,” Tali slipped in quietly.

“We’ll help,” Kaidan replied.

Shepard turned to Wrex and watched as he rolled his shoulders, as if shrugging off a huge burden. Then he turned and looked right at her. Shepard lowered her gaze to the floor, “Wrex, I hope you have a plan for what to do with all these things.”

“I made some arrangements. First though, I want to find my clan’s armor.”
Despite the relative small size of the compound, it still took Tali nearly half an hour to find the utility closet. The door was cleverly installed to be flush with the surrounding wall and thus completely invisible in the darkness. Its control console was likewise hidden under a flush panel that had to be shifted out of the way. Tali had to resort to Chatika’s highest sensitivity setting and following the electrical conduits in walls, which the drone could just barely see at that setting. Even then, whoever had actually built this place had taken the easy route and wired the conduits along and to the underside of the environmental control ducts, which were actually warmer than the cables themselves, and so overcast the wires, swamping the FLIR image with undetailed white blobs.

Nevertheless, when the lights flicked on, Shepard clapped the young quarian on the shoulder and hailed it a job well done. Now that they did not have to stumble in the dark, finding the environmental control overrides was much easier. Soon enough the air scrubbers were working at maximum capacity to remove the smoke chemicals from the air. Then they turned to the most important matter at hand, figuring out where Actus had stashed the Clan Urdnot ceremonial armor, what else he had there, to whom it belonged, and what they were going to do with it all.

Thus Shepard found herself in Actus’ living quarters slash office, which was up in the loft. The place was more of a micro-apartment than an office, and it definitely looked out of place, much too posh to be there. It also spoke volumes about its owner. Actus had not been an aficionado of Krogan things alone. The room’s walls were bare and grey, but covered with works of art of various sources. Shepard thought that some of the geometric shapes and splashes of color were Turian. She could not begin figuring out what they were supposed to represent.

The office area floor was dominated by a large dark blue and cream rug, on which stood a real black wood desk, lacquered to perfection in order to show off the rippling grain. The profiteer had been relaxing when the alarm had sounded, as he had left his crystal decanter of spirits on the table, the matching crystal glass still had two of her finger-widths in whatever it was he had been drinking.

His sleeping area was separated from the rest of the room by a large folding screen made of the same dark wood, and set with what looked like copper panels etched with geometric designs. One peek behind there, merely in the interest of securing the room, had told her plenty about the man’s vices. He had not even bothered to hide his bottle of Hallex. She was pretty sure that if she went digging around she’d probably find other things as well. Shepard honestly did not want to dig that deep. She only took a cursory peek into the tiny bathroom attached to the space in order to ascertain there was no one hiding in there. Once she confirmed that, she made her way back to the office portion.

By now Tali had perched on the comfortable plush executive chair in front of the turian’s terminal. Wrex stood off to the side, leaning on the wall as he waited for her to hack through the security on Actus’ terminal. Ashley stood inside the room, her back to the doorjamb, arms crossed over her chest. Shepard could see Kaidan and Jenkins on the other side of the door, keeping watch though Kaidan was eating a protein bar, replenishing the energy he burned with his biotics.

“Are you alright, Kaidan?” Shepard asked.

“I have a mild headache, Commander, but I can safely say I’ve had much worse,” The lieutenant replied.

Shepard nodded, “Good. I’m glad.”

“I’m in!” Tali chorused suddenly. “He had relatively weak security. It’s like he never figured someone would track him down and get here.”
“Let’s be glad that greed and pride lead to these sorts of mistakes. It’s the only reason they get caught.” Shepard said.

Wrex pushed off the wall and moved closer so he could peer at the screen over Tali’s shoulder. “Do you see the inventory logs?”

“I’m looking for those, Wrex. But this hard-drive is massive. Ugh… and there’s quite a bit of pornography.” The quarian’s discomfort and distaste were obvious for all to hear. “I need to understand how he sorted things.”

Shepard drew near the desk to peer over the quarian’s other shoulder, but the girl must have been using a suit HUD overlay translation program, since the terminal was definitely set to display in some Turian script. She turned and looked up at Wrex. “Alright while we’re waiting on that… Wrex, you said you made some arrangements?”

“Yes, I rented a long-duration storage unit on Intai’sei, in one of their old mineral mines. I have my own connections, Shepard. My contact ought to be on Intai’sei right now, waiting for my word. I was promised he would have a shuttle capable to ferrying all those containers over.”

“Unless that shuttle can land where our Kodiak is…” Shepard replied. “And if it can, then this is going to take more than one trip.”

“Yes, Actus has more of our property than I was initially led to believe,” Wrex replied.

“Where did you learn about this, if I may ask?” Shepard asked.

“The Shadow Broker.” Wrex replied. “I ran some bounties for him a few times. It was about time I asked for a favor back.”

Shepard was glad that her closed helmet was enough to prevent Wrex from seeing her grimace. That little revelation made the bad taste in her mouth even worse. The Shadow Broker represented an unsavory realization: information, gossip, and secrets had become just one more commodity. She had never dealt with the Shadow Broker, or his agents, and would have preferred to keep it that way. The price tag on the information did not list all the surcharges, and not all of those were in credits.

One could not even be sure what or whom the Shadow Broker was. Some said his or her reach surpassed even the Salarian STG’s. A few insisted that the Shadow Broker was the STG. Then some said no single individual could ever possibly have such an extensive network in the first place, thus there had to be multiple Shadow Brokers. After all, to surpass the STG, which was an organization of countless thousands of agents, there had to be just as many Shadow Broker agents. The theory was supported by the fact that the Shadow Broker had existed in some form or another for over a hundred years.

Shepard dismissed the idea that the Shadow Broker was either affiliated or part of the STG. The Salarian Union made no great secret of the fact that the STG was always watching, nor that the organization had their share of assassins, saboteurs, and what they were capable of. The Salarians were also not very fond of spreading what they knew, so it did not make sense for them to have an arm of the STG that was all about leaking what they knew to the highest bidder. Could the Shadow Broker have a double-agent in the STG? Maybe. But the STG did not wear the Shadow Broker like a mask.

Beyond that, she was of the opinion that the truth was somewhere in the middle of all that was left. The Shadow Broker had to be a corporation that dealt in information and secrets, and it had the onion layers of agents to match. However she did not think the network would have survived the
death of its original operator. After all, organized crime of that sort lived and died with the charisma of its leader. Thus this leader would have to be either Asari or Krogan. The former seemed more likely than the latter. If she was right, then she would not be surprised if the whole thing ran out of some swanky Nos Astra high-rise. It just made sense that where one could openly buy the contract for an “indentured servant” in one lounge and a year’s supply of hard drugs in the next; one ought to be able to buy blackmail in the third.

“I found it!” Tali chorused loudly.

Shepard quickly realized that Tali found the man’s accounting and inventory log database. Right then she the screen displayed the transaction records. The column for acquisitions was much longer than the one for re-sales. Just the fact that he used the term “acquisitions” instead of “purchases” was telling. The profiteer clearly bought and sold art in general, though he kept a great deal of material for his own personal pleasure.

“Hmm…” Tali went on as she switched over to the database’s integrated inventory management module. “This is meticulously organized. Unlike the rest of the system.”

“Can’t buy and sell if you don’t keep your books in order,” Shepard murmured.

“Yes…” Tali replied. “I’m looking for Krogan armor, but… oh wow. The clan names are right here! Let me just—” Tali trailed off as she brought up a search line and typed in a series of symbols. The screen flicked and brought up a list of three things. “Yes! Here it is. Krogan artifacts labeled Clan Urdnot. One ceremonial blade and… two suits of armor?”

“If he went for the set,” Wrex explained, “One would be the clan leader’s and the other the shaman’s.”

Tali’s fingers flew over the keys as she brought up the database entries for all three items. “Well… the blade is apparently in the same crate as the clan leader’s armor, so you’re looking for two containers. Here, these are the numbers that are on the crates. The manifest says they ought to be in the back of row one, that’s the one closest to the airlock. I can have Chatika show you.”

“I will find them myself.” Wrex replied.

“Alright.” Tali nodded.

“In the meantime, send the whole database to my Omni-tool.”

“Alright, it’ll take me a few minutes.” Tali’s fingers resumed moving over the keys.

Wrex did not linger though. Shepard watched as he breezed out of the room with all the intent of someone on the war-path. Kaidan and Jenkins practically had to leap out of the way. A moment later Shepard decided she had earned the right to be a little curious, so she followed him.

She caught up to Wrex on the stairs as he made a beeline toward the opposite back corner and tried her best not to pay much attention to the bodies. She knew that Admiral Hackett would send in a clean up crew. They would transfer the bodies to Hierarchy hands, to be handled however they saw fit.

Wrex’s Omni-tool lit up as the database began to download, but he ignored it as he walked. Shepard remembered the arrangement of symbols that ought to be on the suits of armor. Actus had done them all a favor; the two crates differed only in one digit. Finding them would not be as hard for those who could not read the script.
Wrex finally stopped a few meters down the row where Tali said the crates would be, “Found them!” he called. “They’re on the top-most shelf.”

“You want to take a look at them now?” Shepard asked.

“Yes. I don’t want to find out that Actus was actually an idiot and bought fakes. I don’t need someone else’s ceremonials either.”

Shepard looked up; the cases were quite large; she could imagine the armor pieces were laid out like they would be inside her mobile locket. Except if Wrex had a mobile locker, it would be the size of a large cupboard. His armor was almost bulkier than him, and even then he was not even wearing one the bulkiest models there were.

She glanced around and smiled when her eyes landed on the counter-gravitic container lifter docked in its recharge cradle right in the very corner. It had much in common with the gantries at the old international container sea ports, except the smaller flying drone model designed for lighter loads used magnets and metal plates instead of rotating hooks that fit into holes in the container’s corners. Shepard grabbed the remote and fired it up, and after some poking around to figure out what all the buttons did, it was a matter of guiding the frame up to the containers.

Flying the darn thing was easy, aligning it just right to latch unto the box’s metal plates? That proved a little tricky, Wrex watched her fail at it with a growing sense of amusement, judging by his harrumph. Still, the remote control flashed green, indicating the magnets finally had a good latch; the whole box was suddenly surrounded by an extended mass effect field that reduced its mass, allowing the drone’s propeller thrusters to shift the whole thing at her command. A few more commands had the whole thing down on the floor.

“Now I know why you let Kryik do the flying,” Wrex said.

“Yes well, we all have our flaws, even you, Wrex.” Shepard replied as she decoupled the lifter and steered it right back up to get the next box.

“Yes, I suppose you can’t be perfect at everything you do, no matter what you’d like everyone to believe.”

“I never said I was perfect.” The second crate latched on easier, as now had some idea of how to move the drone into position. Soon enough it too was down on the floor and she ordered the drone to go back to its cradle. Once the robot had landed, she powered it down and set the remote control back where she found it. When she turned around she saw that Wrex had unlatched the crate, lifted the lid, and peered in.

Then he straightened and looked back at her, “It’s the real thing!”

Shepard peered into the crate. Just like she had expected, the armor was in pieces, laid into foam padding. “Well… It’s seen better days,” she said.

Wrex laughed, “Seen better days… that’s an understatement! It’s a piece of crap!”

Shepard had consciously chosen to make an understatement so as to not be seen stating the obvious. The armor was essentially worthless for combat. Not a single plate was entirely in tact. All of them were chipped and dented at the very least. The paint, which she assumed had been crimson at some point, had faded in most places and gained a slight orange tinge where it had not been scratched off entirely. The shoulder plates were perforated. One of the thigh guards was outright shattered and glued back together, though whoever had done it matched the pieces up near perfectly and used only
minimal filler for areas where tiny slivers were missing. The helmet, as Wrex had said before, was horned, and one spike was badly bent out of shape. The worst damage was on the chest-plate, and Shepard could not even begin figuring out which scratches, nicks, and flaws had been caused by over a thousand years of exchanging hands, and what might have been there originally.

“I can not believe my ancestors ever wore it…” Wrex went on, his voice dropping lower, more thoughtful. “But I am glad I could get it back. Thank you, Shepard.”

“You are welcome.” What more could she say? She would not be caught dead revealing the qualms she had about the methods they had to employ to get the suit. “I help my crew however I can.”

“Yes, after what you did for Tali, Vakarian, and Kryik… I figured you would. You’re the best employer I’ve ever had.”

“Thank you.” Shepard replied.

“You’re probably the best friend I’ve ever had too.”

Shepard blinked, honestly surprised. Since when did Wrex go about calling people his friends? Calling her the best employer he ever had? That would be a professional compliment, but a friend? Wrex kept people at arm’s length most of the time. Did his time on the Normandy make him trust her that much? “Thank you.” She repeated.

Her uncomfortable feeling only swelled, except now it was made worse by the arrival of guilt. Wrex was being honest with her, but she was not honest with him. The deeply cynical part of her told her to keep her mouth shut, as admitting to what she really thought could only make things worse. However the honest part said that no relationship could be founded on lies. Even her cold war with Saren was fundamentally honest, with no pretenses or artifice. He would know that she would use him as a pawn if she deemed that expedient, and she knew he would bury her career six feet under if given an opening. Basically each knew where the other stood.

The issue of lack of actual trust between Wrex and her was different. “Wrex, I’ll be honest with you… this whole thing just does not sit well with me. I mean I’m all for helping my crew, but the timing could have been a little bit better.” She figured now ought to be a half decent time to come clean. They had secured the things. Wrex ought not to react too badly. “It’s not even your fault. More like… someone on the Citadel is assassinating Hierarchy officials, and they’re making it look like it’s on Alliance orders. Now here we are… and I don’t even have Nihlus’ involvement for the deniability.”

Wrex hummed. “It’s that admiral, right?”

“Yea, he was the captain of the ship that fired the first shots of the First Contact War.”

“And he gets killed on the anniversary of the armistice.”

“Yes. No coincidence there.”

“And then I asked you not to involve Kryik.” Wrex went on.

Shepard nodded. “You can see how this appears, right? The point is… I can’t be that detached from political considerations. There are consequences to my actions.”

Wrex stared right at her, suddenly deathly serious, “You could’ve told me. If it was that… I could’ve tolerated Kryik.”
“Hah. I didn’t want to step on your toes.”

“Wouldn’t have felt it if you had.” Wrex replied, amused.

Shepard shook her head, “There’s one other little issue I got. It’s what you did to those mercs. Warping that mercenary outside, and then breaking Actus’ neck. I just…” She trailed off; suddenly she realized that Wrex would know where she was going with that. “Watching you warp him… made my skin crawl.”

“I see. So the great Commander Shepard can be bothered by something?”

“You’re not…” She trailed off.

“Angry? Listen, Shepard, I know what you’re capable of. I’ve seen you wreck a former commando to protect Kryik the day we met. You’re a fierce fighter… so I can respect the difference between our methods. We are good.”

“Thanks, Wrex.” Shepard sighed. She would not dare and ask him to tone it down next time, but maybe it would be something he kept in mind. One could hope, right?

“Now come on. I want to show you the shaman’s ceremonials. They ought to be in much better condition.” Wrex turned to the other crate.

Shepard nodded and said nothing at all. If Wrex wanted to show off his clan’s treasures, who was she to tell him no? When did anyone ever get to see a krogan talk about something like that? Wrex must have been in very good spirits right then to be in this sort of mood.

Chapter End Notes

Author Notes: Now that you enjoyed that, hopefully, I want to apologize about being a month late. I got absolutely hammered with busy times, and on top of that I went and broke my glasses in a moment of utter carelessness. It took two long weeks for everything to process to get a new pair. I have a high index (- 6.25) in both eyes and astigmatism. Worst two weeks of my life. They just compounded the stress of everything else.

General Notes:
Drone Changes – Here I’ve eliminated the allowances required by game mechanics. Drones no longer pop out of hammer space as glowing orbs of energy. They actually have hardware, so they’re bulkier, and require recharging, resupplying, etc. They can also be permanently destroyed. Disposable drones exist, but Tali’s is not that type.

Chapter Notes:
Magnetic Belts – For a terrestrial (rocky) planet to generate a magnetic field, it needs:
1. A differentiated core/mantle composed of enough heavy metal. 2. Temperatures that keep the insides molten, with convection between core and underside of crust. 3. The right rate of planetary rotation. Here’s some examples of how things come together. Mercury has a weak field. It rotation period is 58.7 Earth days, and its mean density is (5.427 g/cm³). Earth got a stronger field, at 24 hours and (5.514 g/cm³). Venus (5.243 g/cm³) turns in -243 days (the minus only indicates it turns clockwise), and has none.
Mars (3.9335 g/cm$^3$) turns in 24.5 hours, also has none. Luna (3.344 g/cm$^3$), turns at 29.5 Earth Days, and has no field. (Jovian “gas giants” generate fields differently.)

**Matter of Density** – Density gives us clues to the composition of the innards of planets. We know the densities of naturally-occurring elements, so if we look at a planet’s mean density we can get an idea of what it might have. Now, I ran the calculations; Tuntau’s mean density is (3.217 g/cm$^3$); less than our moon! Comparing it to Earth’s density, given what we know of its metal contents, it’s an educated guess to say that Tuntau does not have enough heavy metals to have a magnetic field.

**Muzzle Brakes / Rail Extensions** – A muzzle brake is a slotted attachment that sits right on the tip of a gun’s barrel. A conventional firearm uses the gasses released from the gunpowder to propel bullets. The brake channels these gasses through its slots, letting them expand much more rapidly at the muzzle, which helps with unwanted barrel rise. In this setting it actually helps with cooling. When the slug crosses the muzzle, the heat generated is dispelled to the air that circulates freely in the slots. The rail extension part gives the slug extra acceleration and thus kinetic energy, but the muzzle brake part keeps that from putting extra heat load on the thermal clip. The trade off is that with the rails exposed, they’re more sensitive to “shorting”. A strong gust of wind can also knock the projectile out of the firing channel as it passes through.
The Warlord

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I do no own Mass Effect, I do not claim to own Mass Effect, I am only doing this for fun.

Author Notes: Time just slips by me too fast right now. I really don’t notice how a week slips by, and I’m too busy to even start outlining a chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Episode 37: The Warlord

After Wrex ascertained that the “Urdnot Clan regalia” was indeed authentic, he took over with a certain degree of alacrity. Shepard found herself largely standing back and watching him work. First Wrex went through the database just to confirm if there were non-Krogan wares among the stacks. He found a few paintings by an Asari matriarch that Actus bought for a relatively low price, hinting that they were not first tier art. Either way they would be a little side boon, as the Alliance could send them to the university on Thessia and say the whole thing was not a complete smash and grab. Once that was out of the way, Wrex sent a message to his contact on Intai’sei. Within an hour EDI was telling her that she detected a small cargo ship coming in. Shepard could only go with Wrex to greet the arrival.

The ship ended up less of a cargo freighter and more of a small recycling scow of some indeterminate make and model. It had definitely seen better days too. Still, it had a cargo hold, and it flew. Wrex introduced the owner and pilot of the scow as Urdnot Kral. He ran a small business buying derelict ships, pulling them apart, and selling the functional parts as well as recycling the rest. The scow was his delivery truck of sorts. It was Kral who reminded Wrex that his grandfather and Wrex’s own had been blood-brothers, making them second cousins. There was some posturing and glaring, but after thirty seconds Kral looked away and said something about Wrex needing to mind Wreav more than him. Wrex snorted and replied he would deal with Wreav and that was that. The two got to work moving things without saying much more in the midst.

Surprisingly it only took two runs to move everything over to Intai’sei, as Kral packed the scow right up to the proverbial gills. Wrex went with him the first time, leaving her in charge of the warehouse with the instructions to blow it up with the “big guns” if he did not contact her within three hours. He also warned her to be on the look out for a second ship swooping in, thinking to steal the other half. He also left the Clan Urdnot ceremonials with her, which told her that she was the one he trusted, not Kral.

Shepard would have wanted to help, but she knew that if she injected herself into things, she would only undermine Wrex’s authority. Wrex was making a move to assert his status and he wanted to use the retrieved artifacts as leverage. Kral had mentioned someone named Wreav, was he the current clan leader? If so, then “dealing with Wreav” might just involve force, and Wrex would have to do it on his own if he was going to say he had the right to lead. Any sign of weakness would be used against him. She knew that getting help from a human could be perceived as weakness.

He waited nearly the full three hours to send her a recorded voice message to say they were on the
way back. Shepard would have preferred to talk to him in person, but a recorded message was
enough. She wanted to see anyone force Wrex to record something. Still, she took precautions.
While Wrex did not sound under duress, she ordered EDI to monitor and scan the returning scow.
EDI reported that the vessel was indeed empty with only two life signs on board, and one of them
was definitely Wrex.

The scow touched down and Shepard only allowed herself to relax when she saw Wrex and Kral
walking side by side, talking like chums of the ‘will hit each other at random’ variety. They loaded
the scow for the second trip largely in silence. Shepard ended up going with Wrex while the rest of
the away team returned to the Normandy. Once the scow was airborne, Kral removed his helmet,
revealing ochre eyes and rather familiar red head plating, though unlike Wrex’s solid single piece,
Kral’s still showed gaps of tough hide in the midst, hinting at his comparative youth. He was also
shorter than Wrex, less rough around the edges, and less scarred. He also largely ignored her
existence the whole flight.

Intai’sei’s average daytime temperatures soared to the fifty degrees range, with heat waves spiking
into the seventies in the dead of its summer, which lasted a long time given that the planet’s orbital
period was a staggering 47.8 Earth years. The planet was almost entirely a desert, with a mustard-
yellow sky and clouds. There was also very little to break up the wind currents, and so it was prone
to sandstorms the size of hurricanes kicking up seemingly on a whim. Whatever water there was,
could not remain on the surface, though it fell in torrential night-time rains. Water trapping was very
much a way of life for the scattered settlers, with many installations having extensive integrated rain
collection systems, no matter what the facilities were actually for.

The scow landed on a rocky outcrop in front of a large mesa which had once been a mine of some
kind. After the ore was gone, it was taken over by an interstellar long-term storage solutions
company. The mine caverns formed natural environmental containment and controls that required
only light airlock doors to create completely isolated storage spaces of whatever variety the customer
wanted. Wrex had rented out a large chamber in a secure, monitored section, and paid extra to be
alerted of any attempt at access.

Shepard stayed on the scow while they moved the goods inside. The whole time she sat on the crate
that contained the chieftain’s armor, seemingly intent on her Omni-tool, though she was perfectly
aware of everything that went on around her. Wrex had clearly omitted telling Kral who she really
was, and by not letting her see the chamber he was saying, ‘She’s an ally… but not that close’. At
the same time, the fact that he intentionally set the armor crate for her to sit on, while making it look
like he grabbed the first random one, he told her that he put faith in her more subtle abilities. She
chose to see everything as a krogan image campaign in the works.

The crate she had been sitting on went into the chamber last, with Wrex pretending he lost count of
them until he just happened to remember that she was sitting on one. She intentionally took the
blame, making herself look just the right amount of dim. It was a game, and judging from the amused
rumble Wrex spared her over their comm, he knew she was playing the underling to the letter. Wrex
carried the crate in, but she stayed at the shaded entrance to the storage complex, monitoring the
scow. Kral went back into the cockpit, running pre-flight checks.

Wrex came back fifteen minutes later, rumbling in utter contentment across their private comm link.
It was a deep sort of rumble, like the sort a big predatory cat would make while enjoying a lazy
lounge in the last light of the setting sun. With no Kral in comm range and Wrex sounding like he
was immensely satisfied with the day’s work, Shepard knew now would be the time to tie up the
loose ends and talk.

“I get the feeling you don’t trust Kral. Not entirely.”
Wrex looked down at her, “Now what gave you that idea?” He chuckled. “No. I am not going to trust him entirely until our agreement is sealed with more than just words.”

“So… until you break bread together?”

“Krogan do not bond over food, we bond over blood. But yes.” Wrex replied. “He says he’s loyal to the clan chieftain’s line, and that’s probably true, but… that does not mean he’s loyal to me, he could have his own agenda, or he could still be working for Wreav.”

Shepard knew there had to be something in this for Kral. The question was what, and who did he see as more likely to get it for him? “There’s that name again. Who is this Wreav?”

“My idiot broodbrother.” Wrex replied.

“So… same mother only?” Shepard asked, it was a rather peculiar term to use. It would make sense if this Wreav was only a half-sibling.

“Same mother yes, maybe same father, no real way of knowing. If you ask him to spit into a cup… you better bring a big gun, because you’ll need it.” Wrex replied. “Understand this; Shepard… human-like monogamy was rare even before the genophage made it suicidal. Afterward… if a female said you were the father… few would dispute it. Fewer still would do a DNA test. My father acknowledged Wreav as his son. It made him look good that he got two sons from one clutch. That’s what matters.”

“I see,” Shepard hummed. She could definitely see how having two healthy children from a single brood would make someone look good when just one surviving was something. The Krogan were actually an egg-laying species who once produced as many as one thousand fertilized eggs per year. The genophage reduced the number of those that matured and hatched to a statistical one in a thousand, with many embryos simply dying in the shell. There was nothing peculiar about the rest. Human history was full of examples of cousins and half-sibling –legitimate and otherwise– laying claims and fighting over titles. Moreover, acknowledgement from the father was basically legitimization, which meant that Wreav’s claim was on equal footing with Wrex’s.

She could even see how the genophage would make monogamy dangerous from the biological perspective. It risked someone being stuck with a partner who was exceptionally susceptible to the genophage’s effects. That and the krogan were very competitive in everything. They had a strong instinct to establish complex ever-shifting hierarchies. Moreover, controlling reproductive access could easily become just another instrument of obtaining, maintaining, and expressing power. There was a big picture in there, and she was just beginning to see it. “Is Wreav going to be a problem?”

“If he is set on continuing along his path, then yes. He is convinced that in time we will adapt to the genophage, and maybe he’s right… but I say we squander our opportunities. The older males control access to the females too tightly, and so if any of their sons manifest even the slightest adaptation against it, they are unlikely to pass it on unless they can earn status. Many die seeking it. The females have no real choice in the matter. To go against them is to run certain risks.” Wrex shook his head.

Shepard had a feeling said risks involved violence, up to and including the alpha males killing the child. A spectacularly stupid act, but in an honor society reputation came first, considerations for the long-term ramifications second. If something allowed one to keep face in the short-term, it would be done, no matter how stupid the act was on the long term. She knew better than to say any of that.

“Wreav would continue all those same policies. And make no mistake, Shepard, if Clan Urdnot under his leadership was to adapt to the genophage… he would anoint the new age with the blood of ancient enemies.” Wrex finished.
Shepard glanced up; she had no delusions about who they would be. “The Turians and Salarians would be in his crosshairs.”

“In that order.” Wrex replied.

“I don’t think the galaxy needs that.” She could see a very nasty possibility in the mix, though she felt rotten about how quickly she saw it. The Alliance wanted a Council seat. The Hierarchy had earned it by bearing the brunt of the Krogan Rebellions the first time. If the Krogan were to restart the rebellions, some schemers within the Alliance would take their shot at the same thing. They would start by saying that the Alliance needed to stand by their allies, all the while said allies took the initial brunt of things. Then when the krogan inevitably turned on the merchant marine, as per basic tactics employed in every war ever waged, the Alliance would join the fighting in earnest, painting it as a just war, which would placate the shallow-minded civilians. Finally, the schemers would use that as leverage to push for a disproportionate amount of credit, arguing that it was only fair, when in reality that had been something they had angled for all along. The heavy losses would be noble sacrifices, definitely not cannon-fodder.

“The Krogan don’t need that.” Wrex chuffed. “It would lead to our extinction. I think I have a better solution. I just need to get my clan to stop following my idiot broodbrother. This stash of goods will help, but I will probably have to put him in his place with force.”

Shepard nodded. She had absolutely nothing she could say to that. “Okay… this will be a sudden topic change, but back to Kral… what are you planning there? I know that if you were going to kill him, he would be dead already… so what’s on the agenda?”

Wrex rumbled, “Nothing gets by you, does it? Yes, I have no intention of killing him. There has been enough of that.” He paused there as if to gather his thoughts.

“I’m all for a peaceful solution, you know me.” Shepard said calmly, mostly in jest.

Wrex snorted, “Yes. I know that. In our time working together I’ve seen how you trust people first, though you are always ready should they betray you. That’s… different from the krogan way… we expect a knife in the back first, and trust only those who prove trustworthy.”

“I see.”

“Survival of the strongest… That’s been our way. But if we are to survive as a species, perhaps it is time for a change. I am willing to take a chance.”

“But if they do move to stab you in the back…”

“I’m only making a little change; slightly less pride and slightly more… cooperation. It seems to work for you pyjacks.” Wrex explained. “As for Kral… I need a small favor.”

“Oh?” Shepard asked.

“Have EDI purge this location from the scow’s navigation system.”

Shepard blinked, surprised. Why did she not thing of that herself? “Well… that’s not exactly possible without me physically interfacing EDI in. You should have told me to do it sooner, while I had the chance to slip EDI in as you were shuttling crates. Best we can do now is slipping him some malicious code piggybacked onto something else. Something he’d open on the system.”

“Yea, if I thought of it sooner, I would have told you. I only realized his computer would retain these coordinates too late. This… subterfuge thing is not my usual method. That said, I know how to get
him to open something on his system. He peruses Fornax. Moreau got a large collection. Everyone knows about it. Ask him for some rare Asari issues ... and maybe human, with the five-sensory package. That requires more processing power than an Omni-tool can have.”

Shepard could not help but wonder, just how large was Joker’s porn stash that the crew knew of it? “Well, EDI can probably spoof some promotional offer... I’ll let them work out those details.” Shepard was not a prude by any definition. She was not surprised that Wrex suggested giving Kral human issues. Kral might have never even been around humans, which might actually work better to pique his curiosity.

“How quickly can they rig it up?” Wrex wondered.

“Knowing EDI, and if you’re right about Joker…” Shepard paused. “Fifteen minutes... twenty if Joker is recalcitrant.” If it was something specific like purging a navigation system on an old model ship that has not been updated in a while, EDI would quickly scan the system remotely, and then write a virus that could auto-execute to delete the coordinates. Joker was not going to be happy about being snitched on by Wrex, and to her at that. Well, he would have to learn that there was no keeping a secret on the Normandy indefinitely, and she was not above turning raunchy magazines into a tool either.

“Good. After this Moreau will be able to justify having that collection, instead of pretending it does not exist, so he can thank me too.” Wrex added, clearly amused.

Shepard nodded without saying another word. She could not believe she was, in fact, about to turn raunchy magazines into a means to an end. This was definitely a ‘likely to raise an eyebrow’ solution. She reached up to her helmet comm controls and made the call.

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Kral departed soon after, and when his ship left orbit EDI notified her that she had sent the Trojan horse message, making it look like it came as a typical comm buoy transmission rather than a direct ship-to-ship tightbeam burst. The krogan would not know that a stealthy Alliance warship slipped him a virus-laden email as a parting gift. Shepard knew full well that there was a slim chance that Kral would not take the bait, but Wrex seemed content with the fact that the virus had been sent at all. Shepard suspected that Wrex had a bit of conflicting opinion, on the one side he was wary of Kral, but on the flipside, he was trying to be more trusting. She was not going to point that out to him.

With EDI having finished her task, Shepard asked her to send down an auto-pilot shuttle for pickup. After that there was little else to do but stand in the shade of the storage facility’s entrance and wait. Even with the environmental regulation and pressurization of her suit her medium-grade armor was dark-colored, and so the flexible undersuit absorbed every ounce of solar radiation to touch it. Medium-grade gear had a limit of how much it could do. It was either handling temperature or having a cloak to go with her kinetic shields. There were no medium-grade suits that could provide the entire package; the power units were not large enough. She could not wear a heavy suit like Wrex, as it would hamper her. A larger battery was added weight and bulk, and neither helped sneaking around, even before one considered that tight heavy ceramic plates made more noise when moving. She already had to mind air flow directions against everyone except asari or quarian. She did not need to also mind how interlocked heavy ceramics clicked and clacked.

“I am surprised that Kryik is not flying that shuttle,” Wrex said, breaking a silence that had lasted a good five minutes after she had told him that the shuttle was coming.

“There you go again.” Shepard replied blandly.
Wrex harrumphed, “Sure. But I would think he’d come running. It is fun watching you dance around each other. And then there is Vakarian, he’s almost as bad.”

“You’re full of it, Wrex. I have no idea what you’re talking about.” Shepard turned away, shaking her head; the krogan was definitely in the obnoxiously good sort of mood to be baiting at her like this.

Wrex laughed, and Shepard knew in an instant that he did not buy her obliviousness. Admittedly, she would not blame him; her effort was mediocre at best as she was not oblivious. Wrex thought there was something between her and Nihlus? Well she supposed their ease around each other might be misconstrued, but how did Garrus fit in? A chevron indicating an Alliance signature lit up over her helmet visor’s HUD as her suit sensors picked up the shuttle coming into range. She turned and watched as the craft grew from a large dark speck against the sky into a familiar shape. She turned and watched as the craft grew from a large dark speck against the sky into a familiar shape. How many more thought there was something between her and Nihlus or Garrus? She would have to keep an ear down to that rail. Such rumors could not be allowed to spread.

Five minutes later the Kodiak stopped, aligned with the now-vacant landing pad, and began to ease down. The air was already so hot that the shuttle’s thruster wash did not cause it to ripple. Shepard moved toward it just as soon as the bottom plates made contact with the pad and the thrusters shut off. And while it took less than a minute to traverse the distance between the shadows and the shuttle, the oppressive heat still sank through the weave of her undersuit and the padding underneath to burn against her skin. The suit’s computer flashed a warning that its cooling systems could not keep up, and internal temperatures were rising.

As soon as she was within five meters of the shuttle, the doors began to open. Shepard did not wait and ducked in as soon as the door was open wide enough. Wrex stepped aboard about twenty seconds after and slammed his palm on the door controls which was the rough way of telling the hatch to close. He moved toward the benches with a sort of content ease and sat without doing up the safety belts.

Shepard paused by the door to tap in an acknowledgement command to the VI, telling it that everyone was not aboard before she took a seat directly in front of Wrex. She likewise made no move for the harness. The Kodiak’s ventral thrusters kicked into gear and the craft shuddered as it lifted off the landing pad. A moment later there was the familiar kick of the inertial dampener field as the nose angled up, the main drive kicked in, and they were off.

As the craft gained altitude she reached up to pull off her helmet and set it down on the seat next to her. Wrex had slumped into his seat and reached up to take off his own. The silence seemed to hang, though she realized then and there that there was something left to discuss. Shepard was of the sort to project where a situation could go, and right then it would not take much to see the inevitable future. Wrex would not be making any claim on his clan aboard the Normandy. A selfish part of her did not want to let him go, but Shepard trampled down that part with extreme prejudice for less before, this would not be any different. He was an atypical bedfellow and friend to have, and someone much more Machiavellian would say he was more of a liability than an asset, but Shepard had her own definition of liabilities and assets. No friend was ever more of the former than the latter in her books.

“You are staring and I can practically hear your brain working from here, Shepard.”

Shepard grinned, “You’re right. I’m just going to say it… I know you’ll be leaving the Normandy. I’m just wondering how soon, and what I can do to help.”

“I need to return to Tuchanka, yes, but there are still some things left undone. I can’t show up and challenge Wreav for his title. I need a krantt, loyal allies who will stand with me. Kral might be part of it… but he will not be enough. I need to figure out who else is unhappy with Wreav.”
“I don’t suppose I can help.” Shepard mused.

Wrex laughed, “Appreciate the thought, but no. This will be settled in the Krogan manner. No outsiders allowed. I need to look for those whom Wreav wronged, but also those who would not oppose the changes I deem necessary. I will probably have to crack some skulls, and I doubt Wreav will surrender his power peacefully.”

Shepard nodded. It would be a daunting task, but Wrex had a lifespan on his side. Did his brother have biotics as well? Shepard did not think it was her place to ask, but if not, then Wrex would have that as an advantage. “I sincerely wish you success, Wrex.” There was little that needed to be said there.

He nodded.

“When you do succeed, hopefully you’ll remember to send a message.” Shepard added.

“Hah. When. And you say you are a bad diplomat. Well- when I succeed… you can come and visit. We’ll break bread. You’ll have to bring your own though. Ours is a little tough for non-krogan.”

Shepard could not help but grin, “I’ll make a memo of that.” It would figure that Wrex would use her turn of phrase on her. Silence lapsed between them, and soon after Shepard knew that Wrex had lapsed into his thoughts, so that was the end of that conversation.

When the Kodiak docked with the Normandy, Shepard was entirely unsurprised to see both Nihlus and Garrus down in the shuttle bay. As loathe as she was to admit it, Wrex’s jests shifted her perception. She could not help but wonder if there was indeed something more to their overprotective antics. The antics had started early and peculiarly only aimed at her. Was Wrex picking up cues she could not?

The Kodiak slid into its usual position, smooth as softened butter, and eased onto the landing pad before its thrusters shut off and the mass effect core in the craft’s belly went silent. A moment later the doors began to open. Shepard did not wait for Wrex as she picked up her helmet, and as she stepped out she slipped it under her arm. Even from a distance she could see Nihlus’ eyes narrow as he less than surreptitiously inspected her armor. “Nihlus,” She greeted. That served to get his eyes to snap up and off her armor.

“Shepard,” he replied, warm and rumbling.

She was not falling for that sweet rumbling tone, he had been checking her for damage, and she knew what he would have done if he found any.

“She’s alright, you two. I wouldn’t let anyone harm her. Not before, and certainly not now.” Wrex stated bluntly, without making eye contact, as he passed by toward his corner of the shuttle bay.

Nihlus glared at the krogan’s retreating back, but arms dropped to his sides and he pushed off the pillar he had been using as a support to get closer.

“Shepard,” Garrus greeted warmly, already at her side.

“Shepard.” Shepard replied as she turned and began to make her way toward the elevator. She was utterly unsurprised to hear two sets of footsteps follow her. Wrex had already ducked into his little private space in the corner, but Shepard knew he would hear everything if she started talking down here. She was not about to entertain him by talking down the two turians following her within his ear
shot. A dressing down did not have to include a dose of public shaming.

The elevator door opened and she stepped aboard. Nihlus and Garrus followed, standing on either side of her like the galaxy’s most loyal lieutenants. After she tapped the panel for her loft, Garrus added a command for deck three. The doors closed and the cabin moved. Shepard sighed, “Really you two. I am alright. This is getting a little… egregious. I’m not made of spun glass.”

“I am not apologizing, Shepard,” Nihlus replied.

“Oh course you’re not.” Shepard was not the least bit surprised; she could count the number of times Nihlus apologized on one hand. Moreover he largely avoided actually using the word ‘sorry’. She had never heard it from him before Taetrus.

“I am not going to apologize either.” Garrus added. “I agree with Kryik on this. Neither of us is happy with this whole situation. Not with the mess on the Citadel.”

Shepard knew what mess he meant. Had they actually talked though? They must have talked at least in part, because it was exceedingly rare for Nihlus and Garrus to ever agree on something. It was even rarer for them to be double-teaming to lecture her. It was triple rare for Garrus to display anything even vaguely resembled disrespect for her authority.

“We are worried, Shepard.” Garrus changed tack in an instant, shifting from someone with a junior position doing something faintly insubordinate, to best friend trying to get past a wall of stubborn with a jackhammer of warm and fuzzy, meant to induce guilt. Nihlus merely nodded, confirming that Garrus was indeed talking for the both of them.

Shepard hoped he realized her wall of stubborn was beyond his ability to breach. If she really set her mind to it, her defenses would put the ancient walls of Constantinople to shame. Still, something had to be said for turian stubbornness, add to the fact that they had a leg to stand on. This whole thing was ugly, even she knew that, and because of that she could not really tell them off either. The elevator opened on deck three, stirring Shepard to action. “We definitely need to talk about this, but not in the elevator.”

Garrus moved to step out, but paused and turned back on the other side. Nihlus followed him quietly, his movements the sort that said he was not the least bit bothered by any of what went on during the ride. It was a study of personality contrasts there; Nihlus still wore his pride like a mask whenever he ran even the slightest chance of an outsider witnessing anything. She was not buying it though. If he was indeed apathetic, he would not have gone tag-team against her with Garrus. It sort of bothered her. Just what was going on in their heads that made them behave like this? Had Wrex said nothing Shepard would not have started looking for clues she now thought she had overlooked. He got her reanalyzing things.

Shepard shook her head and stepped deeper into the cabin, allowing the door to close between them. She would have to make some time to talk about this, but not right now, not in the elevator when she was still in her armor, covered with dust, and frankly tired after a not-too-difficult bust still long operation. She also needed to think things out. She doubted Nihlus would have told Garrus about what happened on Taetrus, but on the flipside, if the two were ever going to agree on anything, prides would have to be swallowed. The question of whether Nihlus had shared that piece of information was important. If she stumbled on it, and Garrus did not know, it would break up their alliance against her, but she would feel like the lowest scum for using it. It would not be worth it. She needed to know where they stood and handle things carefully.

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It took about an hour for Shepard to shed her armor and have a quick bite to eat, but then she went to the OD, intent on her end-of-day message checks. EDI had not reported anything major, but it was her routine to check the minor as well. She also needed to send a preliminary word to Admiral Hackett, make sure he knew she had failed to make the arrest, but the illicit base still needed removal.

One foot past the doors she stopped cold. Nihlus was lounging on his customary spot under the viewports, reading something on his Omni-tool. Garrus sat on the couch extension, as far away from the Spectre as physically possible, working on something on his own Omni-tool, fingers pecking at the keys at a steady rhythm, though he looked up when he heard the door open. She had just walked into a clearly coordinated ambush. “Why am I not surprised?” Shepard asked as she drew near enough so that she would not have to speak loudly. The question was equal parts actual as well as rhetorical.

“The day someone surprises you, Shepard, is the day they name Vakarian the Primarch of Palaven.” Nihlus replied blandly.

Garrus spared the Spectre a cold look, but did not comment.

Nihlus ignored him as he dropped his feet to the floor and sat up.

Shepard slipped past Garrus and sat where the couch and extension met, effectively putting herself between the two turians. It was obvious that Nihlus could not help but snipe at Garrus, even when they were nominally working against her. A buffer had to be put in place, even if she was to be the buffer herself. “Alright you two, we started on this in the elevator, so let’s finish it. I need to contact Admiral Hackett to have a team sent to the warehouse, and then I want to check my mail and get some sleep.” Right then Shepard had little patience for preambles. Maybe she was prissier than necessary, but she was much too tired to bother containing it.

“Fine. We will finish this.” Nihlus agreed, his tone changing by the syllable. The jest that teased Garrus replaced with chilled professionalism. “Tali told me about a conversation you had with Wrex down there.”

Shepard had to force herself to contain her expression. “Told you?” she wondered, intentionally keeping her tone flat and calm. Had Nihlus asked Tali for his information? Was Tali the first person he went to, or the only one who would talk? Shepard suspected Kaidan, Ashley, and Richard would not have told him a thing. They could say they would not talk behind their commanding officer’s back, and that would be that. Shepard could not help but be annoyed at the thought that Nihlus would go after Tali just because she might be the only one he could get information out of.

“Tali told him everything of her volition, Commander.” Garrus stepped in. “I was there, and that is how I ended up involved. Kryik had to tell me everything after that.”

Shepard blinked, Tali did that? She looked Garrus in the eye, but he did not break eye contact, and she knew he was not lying. He had an absolutely rotten poker face. She very much doubted he could lie convincingly to save his life. It was Nihlus who was the more accomplished practitioner of that art. Skills at concocting and living with lies were up there on the essential qualifications for his job. He also had all the examples one ought to need for it.

“Shepard, Tali thought she was doing the right thing. She said Wrex admitted that had he known about the whole situation… well you really should have told Wrex that you could not do this job without me being there. Not after what happened on the Citadel. Like this I can’t say it was a job I picked up on the side. I was not there.” Nihlus explained.

Shepard turned to face Nihlus, “I should have told Wrex I would not do the job without you, yes, it
would have made things even easier.” Shepard replied, intentionally correcting his choice of words. It was hair splitting, but she did not like the ‘could not’ used here. “Nihlus, I’ll be blunt with you. I calculated the risks going in, and I took them. You know Actus was hardly a law-abiding, poster-boy for Hierarchy principles. He was in Alliance space without permission and that warehouse was full of ill-gotten goods. He was wanted by the Hierarchy for tax evasion as well. I told Admiral Hackett about the job, so as far as anyone is concerned, this was a legal arrest gone badly and the goods were seized in the process.” She had even staged evidence for that argument, but they would not need to be told that. She expected Nihlus to figure out the game on his own, after all, it would not do for her to admit out loud that she was playing a role again. Shepard was not so stupid as to incriminate herself.

“Alright, perhaps you are correct. Still, I am wondering what you were thinking here. Actually helping Wrex with this?” Nihlus asked.

Shepard blinked; did he really just go there? “I repeat, Actus was hardly paying the rent. The Alliance does not want pirates, thieves, and other shady types this close to Pinnacle Station. Yes it looks very awkward coming so soon after the murder on the Citadel, with fingers all pointing at Alliance involvement… still, we are not going to sit on our hands.” That was her excuse and she would stick to it.

“That is not the issue, Shepard. It is more what those goods are, and what Wrex might intend to do with them,” Nihlus replied. “To some, you have now armed Clan Urdnot.”

It took a moment but it finally hit Shepard. There was a thread of considerations that she had overlooked in her initial assessment, and Nihlus was pulling on it. He was right of course. Before the items had been confiscated goods and war profits, they had been weapons and armor. The Krogan Demilitarized Zone Accords stipulated the krogan could not pool weapons in any significant manner. It was illegal to sell them any large quantity of weapons. There were troops still stationed at monitoring posts within the DMZ to watch for any sign the accords being broken. “Yes, one might argue that I’m facilitating krogan re-armament. But really… some of those armors and weapons have not seen proper maintenance in close to a thousand years! Does anyone really think they’re still usable?” Shepard asked blandly.

“Go tell the politicians that. Some will assume that everything was kept at Hierarchy-standards of readiness,” Garrus replied.

“That would be the thought that scares them the most. After the idea of some Human-Krogan alliance,” Nihlus added.

Garrus nodded.

Shepard blinked, stunned. A Human-Krogan alliance? It would take someone far more paranoid than she was to think her helping the Wrex was actually the Alliance intentionally helping the Hierarchy’s old enemy, or that there would be the forging of any treaties to follow. Still, she could see the angle. Someone so paranoid would see tactical benefit in such a move. It would layer on top of what was going on already. Still, she could not help but think such an assumption was stretching it, even for the worst politicians. “Yes, because one act of transferring stolen property to its rightful owner equals alliance.” She could not help the sarcasm dripping from her tone.

“Relax, Shepard. I was pointing out what some would think. It is an over-stretch of the facts, so yes; it is highly doubtable that anyone would push it. That said, if you continue to make these moves, you might just build the argument,” Nihlus went on. “The Council wants to keep the Krogan from becoming a potential problem. Returning their weapons and armor is a technical violation of the demilitarization accords. However, if it is as you say, the goods are no longer usable; you can argue
that you are returning cultural artifacts, and the accords would not apply. You need to be aware of that little point.”

Shepard nodded. That was the dilemma right there. Were the materials from Actus’ warehouse was classified as weapons or cultural artifacts? The items were actually both, and everyone would know it, the fight would be over which function superseded the other. She hated that sort of political and legal hair-splitting, which was probably the reason she overlooked it. “Nihlus, you said that the Council wants to keep a lid on a potential problem, but I have to ask...” she paused to take a deep breath, this was going to be a nuclear bomb of cynical bluntness, “Do they really think that space stations can warn them of re-armament if the krogan really want to re-arm? The Krogan DMZ is a mess. No major manufacturing will crop up there. The Council is not monitoring what is going on in the Terminus. So if the krogan wanted to re-arm, there is nothing to stop them.” As far as she was concerned, the enforcement was just the Council making sure they continued to look important.

Nihlus chuckled, “Glorious is it not?”

The Spectre was perfectly aware of the point she had just made, she should have known. “Alright… since we’re bouncing ideas here, let’s turn this on its head. It seems to me that the Council does not want the krogan to have manufacturing capacity of that sort. What would said capacity require?”

“They would need to cease petty clan warfare,” Garrus slipped in. “No factory can operate if it is in constant danger of being caught up in clan-on-clan violence.”

“Bluntly put, yes.” Nihlus echoed.

“It would have to be replaced with centralization, and that process would actually increase the disorder for a while.” Shepard mused, the words tumbling out of her mouth of their own accord. It was really just an exercise in progression. Trying to figure out what would cause a desired effect. “So there’s a reason why the Council’s fears are utterly unfounded.”

“Except, I think Wrex knows he would need to push for a centralized power structure of some kind.” Nihlus added, calmly as can be.

It did not take much to know where Nihlus was leading with that one. “Wrex knows the issues his people face, and he thinks the krogan need to move past them if they are to survive. He might just turn things toward centralization, yes. He does not want a renewal of the rebellions though. He told me that much himself.” Shepard said, just as calmly. Still, that was the problem, was it not? He told her that much, but the Council would not take her word for it. They would remain set in their old ways. The krogan forming a centralized government would be a radical shift.

Shepard hummed as her mind automatically ran down the proverbial tracks. She knew enough about feudal societies to see how things would start. If Wrex forced Clan Urdnot to change their ways in whatever manner, it would gall some, but he would find allies among those who would try his way, simply because under the old ways they had nothing at all. If Wrex spent some time cultivating those allies, making sure they had everything to lose to a restored ‘old order’, he would quickly accrue territory and manpower. Then, he would have to survive the inevitable and defend his holdings from the assault of the old order trying to re-assert itself. Some of the more powerful clans would not accept his changes willingly, because they stood to lose power. However, if Wrex could defeat them, he would accrue even more standing and prestige. With that he could say that he meshed old krogan tradition with new reform.

“Can he actually create a centralized krogan government?” Garrus wondered.

Shepard knew why Garrus sounded so doubtful at the moment. “Perhaps.” She replied. “I would not
discount the possibility as preposterous, Garrus. I do not claim to be able to see the future, but I know something of the past. Unlikelier things have happened. The Roman state started as one little city and evolved into a highly-centralized empire that spanned parts of three continents. A mix of good leadership, sound policy, brazen audacity, and luck carried the day before. If Wrex has the right mix, they will carry the day again.”

“Fair enough,” Garrus conceded.

“I think it is safe to assume you wish him well.” Nihlus slipped in.

“Of course,” Shepard replied without a second of thought.

“It helps that his victory would mean he owes you.”

“Owes? No.” Shepard replied. “It is nothing more than a personal alliance of sorts. If you are thinking this might become that Human-Krogan thing the Council does not want, then you can tell them to sleep easy. Wrex’s connection is only to me. The most I can get, as a favor exchange, is probably a few krogan if I need some Heretic heads cracked somewhere. With more loyalty than typical, but still hired as mercenaries.”

“Or prime real estate on Tuchanka.” Garrus added, smiling.

Shepard laughed, “Or that.”

“Now that we are talking about it, I can not help but be curious about what type of government they would develop.” The former detective went on, shifting track with necessary abruptness.

Shepard knew what he was doing; the topic of favors had been settled. He wanted to shift things to a sort of benign speculation to diffuse the tension. Government frameworks could be discussed without walking eggshells. Any discussion of the Council and their machinations naturally involved lots of eggshells.

“That is something to wonder,” Nihlus conceded, though he sounded bored.

Shepard had a good idea of where things would go. “They are used to leadership by clan chieftains. I highly doubt that tradition can be broken easily, so we can rule out all forms of government where power is shared, or which don’t have a single clear leader whose mandate comes from a title of prestige.”

“So no democratic or parliamentary systems,” Nihlus mused.

Shepard nodded, “No Hierarchy-esque meritocracy either. The krogan are still an honor society. Personal prestige will continue to trump loftier abstracts,” Shepard added. “I think the current system is already close to a collection of petty monarchies. These will amalgamate into bigger ones. As for the exact details, Earth’s history will show you dozens of different ways in which monarchs exercised and justified their power. I know too little about Krogan customs and traditions to comfortably pick the likely end-shape. But only a monarchy respects the traditions that I do know about. That’s the only way centralization will work. There will be no forcing the Krogan into any other form of government. An attempt will be seen as meddling, and lead to resentment.”

“Someone meddled with them already.” Garrus hummed thoughtfully. “The Salarians dumped galactic civilization on them and called it uplifting. We all know how that ended.”

“Crass way to put it, but that does not make it less true.” Nihlus agreed calmly.
Shepard nodded quietly. There was nothing she could add to that. What Garrus said was essentially true, if a gross over-simplification of things. A silence lapsed in the room, and Shepard thought that was telling enough. The issues at hand had been covered. In hindsight she realized that Nihlus probably orchestrated everything to make sure she had considered all the angles. Shepard would have thanked him for that, if her personal pride allowed it right then. After all, she felt like she had overlooked a rather important possibility. Had she indeed thought of everything, she would have been more inclined to press Wrex to allow Nihlus to tag along. But there was no use crying over spilled milk now. The only thing left to her was to hope Nihlus was right, and no one would stretch the political nonsense quotient by arguing that she was re-arming the krogan, or that the Alliance was aiming to make friends against the Hierarchy.

Still, now that she was on the tracks, she had to think about what the Council might not want. She could see them not wanting to the krogan to unify. They reaped certain unpleasant benefits from the disunity. Foremost, if the krogan were too busy killing each other, they would not become a force capable of pressing for rights and reparations. They would not upset the Council’s beloved status quo. The galaxy forgot that before the Council made contact with the Hierarchy, at the height of the Krogan Rebellions, the krogan had been the Council’s muscle. The Turians had become the peacekeepers and watchmen only after the Krogan lost favor. There was a certain fringe benefit in keeping them down. As far as Shepard was concerned, the Council’s realpolitik dealings could be far shadier than her on her worst days. She was not wearing blinders when it came to them, and fortunately it seemed like neither was Nihlus.

“Well, I think we need to get moving, Vakarian. We took up enough of Shepard’s time.” Nihlus announced, breaking the silence.

“Thank you for hearing us out, Commander.” Garrus said.

“Of course,” Shepard replied.

“One last thing though. Go easy on Tali over this. She was doing what she thought was best for everyone.” Nihlus got to his feet as he spoke.

Garrus followed him without saying a word.

“I was not going to say anything,” Shepard replied. Did he really think that she would go after Tali? It did not take much to realize that the girl would have wanted to help. It even made sense why Tali went to Nihlus; she probably thought he could still do something about things. Shepard would be the worst sort of leader to come down on the quarian girl for that. Sure, there was no fixing this per se, but the thought counted.

“Well I guess that is all. Have a good night, Shepard.” Nihlus added.

“Have a good night, Nihlus, Garrus.” Shepard replied.

The two left the room side-by-side, practically the picture of conspirators beating a hasty retreat before their victory went up in flames. Shepard let them have that victory. She slumped deeper into the corner of the couch, resting her head on the top of the backrest and heaved a sigh. She was becoming a bit of a pushover, was she not?

Well, if she was honest, then she was really too tired to address things, and moreover they had good reasons to be worried and overprotective. They knew exactly what was going on with the killings, the framing, and Cerberus. Out of all the people on the Normandy, Nihlus and Garrus knew the most of her troubles. She could not expect them not to worry, or try and do something. If she thought about it, that instinctual desire against the inability to do anything was what might have caused the
overprotective streak. They were both very loyal, even Nihlus, who would scoff and laugh if anyone said he was that devoted to anyone. She had learned by now that much of his hot air was in fact posturing. Then there was Garrus. He could say he was a bad turian, but there was no doubt in her mind that he was devoted to whatever he set his mind to. He chose to follow her, and now he was going to the logical extremes with it.

Shepard smiled to herself, perhaps she was rationalizing, but that could only come from the way she wanted to view things. The thought of them acting like this, even putting aside their differences, out of worry for her, warmed some little part of her, the part that had never fully let go of some of the sillier notions of someone much more naïve than her. It was only when she was drop-dead tired and alone that she could entertain those thoughts.

“Oh well… break’s over.” She grumbled to no one in particular as she straightened in her seat and got to her feet before making her way toward the COMCON.

As it was, Shepard ended up only having a quick five minute conversation with Admiral Hackett. He was busy with something back at Arcturus and could not spare any more time than that. Five minutes was enough to tell him that the job on Tantau was done, and that a clean up crew needed to be sent to tie up the loose ends. She made sure to note that the location had been sanitized, and she doubted there would be anyone coming in to avenge Actus, but any Alliance crew send in to clean up would still come ready for unwelcome guests. Shepard promised a detailed official report in the next twenty-four hours.

Once she was back in the OD, she checked for other messages and then handled a few clerical basics with EDI regarding the operation. Shepard wanted the suit recordings from Team Bravo on her terminal in the next eighteen Terran hours. She was generous in giving them the absolute latest timeframe in which she could still work, knowing that Kaidan and Ashley would have theirs in sometime after breakfast, with Richard following about an hour or so later.

When she checked her emails, she found only one that was not just spam or a thinly-veiled phishing attempt involving a long lost relative from her father’s side leaving her millions of credits in inheritance. The problem was that her biological father would not know much about her past perhaps the fact that his donation had in fact been used, and that he did in fact have a biological child out there somewhere. Even then, not all donors wanted to be notified of that. Still, her tired mind found the whole thing good for a laugh.

The one good message was an email from her mother, asking why she was being a stranger. Shepard groaned upon seeing it. She knew that she had lapsed in their regular communication in the last couple of weeks. There was just always something to do that occupied her attention totally. Now, after Taetrus, and with things on the Citadel being as they were, she would not be surprised if her mother’s instincts told her something was off, even if she did not know all the details. Shepard was quite amazed that her mother had not found out about her concussion yet. There would have been an entirely different email had she found out.

Admiral Hackett knew about it, so it looked like he simply did not mention it. She could understand why, he probably thought it was her duty to tell her mother, or that it was a private thing. Yes, she ought to have mentioned it, but Shepard was hesitant. She knew what would happen if she did. Hannah would automatically assume Nihlus was at fault. Shepard did not want to lie to her mother, but she did not want to throw Nihlus under the bus by admitting the truth either. As far as she was concerned, that affair had been signed and sealed. Nihlus had apologized for it; there was no need to pursue it further.
In the end, Shepard deemed some reply to be better than none, thus her message said that she was just very busy, which was the truth, even if it left out way too many details. She mentioned doing a job on Tuntau, because that affair was benign enough to discuss, compared to Taetrus that is. She included just enough details, specifically on the sort of business Actus had been participating in, to make the whole thing sound somewhat important. If her mother was really curious, she could just ask to read the full report. There was nothing so secret about this operation that the admiral would keep it from her. Overall, the message was her too thinly-veiled an attempt to throw her mother off the scent of the real problems. It was the absolutely best she could come up with on short notice and while tired.

After that she told EDI to tell Joker to take them back to the Citadel at his own leisure, meaning in the morning, when he had his sleep and breakfast. The Normandy was hardly hiding in the orbit of Intai’sei anymore. Everyone with good enough sensors would spot them, but the system was in Alliance space, so it was not all that peculiar that an Alliance ship was around.

She was up again in time for breakfast. Food and coffee went side-by-side with making a mental checklist all the other things that had to be done. First and foremost she had to make sure her gear was maintained. The vast quantities of sand on Tuntau and Intai’sei meant that there was dust all over her things. Her weapons had to be checked and maintained as well. She ended up in the shuttle bay, working side by side with Ashley who was running similar maintenance on Team Bravo’s weapons. Kaidan and Richard pitched in and spent the time off to the side, cleaning armors.

Wrex sat in his corner, splitting his attention between whatever everyone else was doing, and whatever he was doing on his Omni-tool. Shepard did not ask, as there was no need to. Given that they were in FTL and thus without an extranet connection, Wrex could not be sending messages of any sort. He was probably still poring over Actus’ database, trying to memorize it or something. There had been a lot of crates in that warehouse, and Shepard could see the logic in becoming more familiar with what one had off-hand.

Tali came down about twenty minutes later, probably having seen them from the deck above. She found her own crate to sit on and spent the entire time Shepard was down there working on what looked to be code on her Omni-tool. Thought by far not a coder herself, Shepard knew what code looked like, in any language. When Shepard asked, Tali explained that there was a flaw in her drone’s VI’s targeting algorithms that she needed to find and eliminate, or else Chatika would never shoot straight.

Shepard did not say it, not to shoot the girl down, but she knew it may not be entirely possible because of the inherent limitations of VI programming. A virtual intelligence operated differently from a full AI with adaptive learning algorithms, even beyond the fact that a VI was no more self-aware than a toaster. It was like comparing a calculator to a super computer on the bleeding edge of computing. The programming involved was radically different as well. Many VIs operated on a core of simpler conditional logic, basically a long exhaustive list of if-then-else statements. Unfortunately, there was a limit of how many could be programmed without causing debilitating conflicts, as a VI could not do exceptions very well. Furthermore, they had to go through that list to figure out an appropriate response each time, and that took processing power and time. That was fine for a VI like Avina, but it was woefully inadequate in combat, where conditions could change at any moment. There was a reason why VI-operated consumer robots were not relied upon in active roles within the military. They could stand guard over a room or handle petty criminals, but anyone with any sort of training would dispatch them easily. Shepard believed that while Chatika might get to the point of being a very useful tool, and it would be a very good learning tool for Tali, but it would never be a substitute for an actual trained soldier.

After that Shepard turned to her armor. Cleaning it took a good two hours, because despite how
much as she would’ve liked to, there was no simply laying it out and hosing it down. The undersuit weave took the longest, as the carbon-fiber filament top layers retained a lot of fine dust. Care had to be taken in order to get all of it out, as leaving the grit would allow it to abrade the fibers over time. The undersuit was supposed to keep the wearer pressurized and separate from environmental hazards at all times. There were dire consequences to springing little leaks. Exposure to toxic planetary environment or the void was not something to make light of.

Ashley finished with Bravo’s weapons before Shepard finished with her suit. Shepard was not above asking for help when she really needed it just to save some time. Thus they ended up working on the suit together. Ashley finished cleaning the ceramics by the time Shepard finally got the last of the grit out of the weave. Shepard thanked her before she excused herself, as she still needed to write that report for Admiral Hackett. She wanted to finish it in time for when they arrived at the Hydra system, so they could link up to a comm buoy and transmit it prior to making the jumps. The bandwidth at Hydra ought to be freer than the one at Widow.

Writing the report took the remainder of the time the Normandy was in FTL, longer than a report on a minor mission ought to have taken. Shepard just managed to finish it in time to make her own transmission deadline. The problem was that she had to be careful in the wording and keep the details straight without hinting at anything untoward that might cast doubt on her cover-up. She felt rotten about lying, but in her defense, there was no winning with the truth here. Admiral Hackett would know that the report had been sugar-coated, but he had no reason to come after her for it.

Thus Shepard was still in the OD when the Normandy cleared the final relay jump into the Serpent Nebula. The Citadel materialized just off the viewport, along with dozens of tiny glimmering dots of ship lights against the pink halo of the nebula’s gas. The door opened behind her and she looked back.

“Shepard,” Wrex greeted.

“Wrex. Something I can do for you?” She asked.

The krogan rumbled something inarticulate as he stopped next to her desk. “I finished looking over that database. Half of the clans whose things are in it are gone. Some fought to the last in the rebellions. Others were the worst hit by the genophage.”

“I’m sorry, Wrex.” Shepard replied, that was absolutely the only thing she could think to say right then, even if she knew it sounded trite and cliché.

Wrex snorted, “Do not lower yourself by apologizing for turians and salarians. They don’t deserve someone like you apologizing for them.”

She grinned, “Duly noted.” It would figure that the krogan would misunderstand that. However the way he took the words showed something interesting. Foremost there was a cultural difference there, but more than that, Wrex held her in some considerable esteem if he thought she was lowering herself by sounding like she was apologizing for the actions of the Hierarchy and the Salarian Union all those centuries ago.

“Now that’s that out of the way, we can talk why I really came up here. This will be my last trip to the Citadel with you. I need to organize a transport to Tuchanka. That will take time and I will not expect you to wait around.”

“I see. Well I’ll be honest, Wrex; I will miss your brand of humor.”

The krogan snorted, “My humor? What, you won’t miss my ability to go through enemies in a way
“I was being appreciative of your other qualities, Wrex, not just your superior combat prowess.” Shepard replied, without missing a beat. “It ought to go without saying that I do appreciate your unique manner of handling whoever, to their misfortune, happens to stand in your way.”

Wrex outright laughed. “Flattery, Shepard? I didn’t know you liked me that much. But you know what I will miss? You always put things into such… clever words.”

Shepard smiled. She was going to just miss this weird norm of theirs; even Wrex saying suggestive things was entirely normal for him. Shepard glanced out the viewport; the Normandy was already approaching the open end of the Citadel. Did Joker get final clearances yet? Or would he establish a holding pattern outside the arms until he did? When the ship crossed the tip of a ward and continued into the space between the arms, Shepard had her answer. Joker was already moving them into docking alignment.

Shepard sighed and turned away from the viewport. “I really do appreciate what you’ve done for me, between the bits of information and helping everyone out on Solcrum. You’ve become one of the most trustworthy allies I could hope for, and a very dear friend.”

“You’re trying to make me blush? I’ll save you the effort. It’s physically impossible, hide’s too thick. Really, I should be saying that to you, Shepard. Few would have even allowed me to do what we did on Tuntau, knowingly. Fewer still would have joined me down there.”

“Just glad to be of help, I always say that.”

“You always mean it too.” Wrex reached behind his back, to where he normally kept his shotgun, and withdrew a long rectangular object wrapped up in tanned varren hide. There was no mistaking varren leather for anything else, because it had distinct scaling. The material looked supple like cotton cloth, yet weathered, and even a little singed around the edges. “Here. I give you a gift as a token of my respect. For a female who is fierce and tenacious in combat. Human you may be, but you fight like a krogan.”

Shepard’s jaw loosened in utter surprise as Wrex unwrapped the covering, revealing a blade and scabbard of some kind. Its size would have made it an elongated dagger for a krogan, but for her it looked more like a short sword. The decoration aesthetic was rough, the hilt was wrapped in black varren leather cut into thin cord and wound tightly before being cured so that it shrank and tightened to the grip. The grip underneath was contoured for krogan fingers, and the hand-guard was just one blocky yet rounded off extension on one side, just enough to prevent the wielder’s hand from sliding onto the blade. Both guard and pommel were also roughly etched with geometric lines. The scabbard was covered in similar black varren leather, though it looked to be just a continuous piece carefully stretched and curved around before being cured into place. The top edge and pointed tip were covered in more engraved silver-hued metal.

There was nothing particularly exquisite looking about the weapon, certainly nothing screamed that it was priceless, but Shepard instantly knew of only one place where it could have come from. The cache they had secured on Tuntau. “I can’t accept that, Wrex. It’s worth something to someone.”

“Well you are right, it is worth something to someone, but I know I can trust you to keep it safe. Know that you hold a knife forged for Shiagur. She was a female krogan warlord during the last embers of the Rebellions. One of the last females who was unaffected by the genophage, which allowed her to amass considerable power, enough that the turians sent a whole legion to ensure her demise. Stories speak of Shiagur as a powerful, ruthless, and cunning warlord, but also fiercely protective of her many offspring. In a sense you two are alike.”
Shepard could only mutely accept the dagger, clasping it in both hands as she bowed her head in gratitude. “Thank you, Wrex. I will put this in a place of honor.”

Wrex draped the covering piece of varren leather over her hands as she held the dagger, and it was then that Shepard noticed the symbol embossed into it. She looked up, meeting the krogan’s crimson stare.

“Keep it here, Shepard.” Wrex began, “In your place of power. May all who meet you in this room know that you are an ally of Clan Urdnot. The mark on this wrapping is mine. Display it with pride, because to me you are my sister, though we share no blood.”

“Thank you. This is an honor beyond honors.” Shepard bowed her head even lower.

Wrex rumbled in that satisfied way of his and backed away. “That’s about as much ceremony as I can stand. Now the fun part. We drink!”

“Of course.” Shepard looked up and smiled. She knew the meaning of the drinking; they had to seal the proverbial covenant that had just passed between them. “Though I still won’t survive ryncol.”

“Wouldn’t want you to even try it, Shepard.”

Shepard nodded, “Let me just put this in my quarters. For now. Until I can get a nice stand for it. Then we’ll celebrate.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Wrex replied.

The weight of the dagger and what it signified seemed heavier than it ought to be. Someone with her understanding could not be deluded about what the gift meant. The dagger was a symbol of an alliance and a trust. Wrex was saying, in no murky terms, that she was important to him. Shepard could not be anything less than honored and awed. A second part of her, the easily-amused by ironies part, pointed out that this would definitely make the Council squirm. Shepard could not help but grin, what the Council did not know, would not hurt her. Besides, at the end of the day a single fundamental reality stood true, Wrex was only her ally, not the Alliance’s. She was sure there were other Spectres with such personal connections and strings to pull. She only made friends in more circles than just those the Council approved of. They would just have to deal with it.

Chapter End Notes

Author Notes: The last scene of this episode was a bit of a nightmare to write. I was dithering on what to make that knife. In the end, I decided to just make it a knife that someone made for Shiagur, not something she made, or something one of her children made, or anything like that. Splitting hairs, I know. I wanted to make it clear that Wrex has stepped into that “crazy head-butting uncle” role. Lots of cultural head-canons here in this sketch, I rather like making them.

General Notes: Wreav – Yes, I am referring to that Wreav, the leader of Clan Urdnot if Wrex dies on Virmire in canon. He states that he had become clan leader because Wrex died. I’m twisting it a little to say that he is the clan’s leader because Wrex had no interest in leading the clan, except now that has changed. Wrex is about to show his clan that his might makes everything right, but he also has artifacts to return, he was “successful in
war”, more than Wreav, who just talks fancy but hasn’t got a working plan.

**Shiagur** – This krogan lady is also straight out of canon. Grunt mentions her, and the name also comes up if you look up the planet Canrum in the ME wiki. I took the few little hints we get and added a few more of my own.

**Chapter Notes:**
Nothing this time…
Armageddon [Part I]

Chapter Notes

**Disclaimer:** I do own Mass Effect, I do not own Mass Effect, I am only doing this for fun.

**Author Notes:** Things are about to get a little heavy with this new arc… and I’m mostly back on schedule. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**Episode 38:** Armageddon [Part I]

The Normandy docked with the Citadel at what had become their usual spot on Zakera Ward. Wrex did not wait for docking, he had squirreled away two bottles of ryncol in the Normandy’s mini-bar, and Shepard made do with a bit of whiskey. The act of sharing a drink was ritual; neither of them intended to get drunk. It was an unspoken agreement that they were both too busy to party. There was also very little to celebrate. She promised Wrex a much bigger shin-dig once he was chief of Clan Urdnot.

After that they went their separate ways. Right then Wrex was probably in the shuttle bay, packing up his things. He said he did not need much of a farewell as prolonged goodbyes merely annoyed him. Shepard could certainly understand that, but she still passed the news along the grapevine. She knew Tali would want to say goodbye, they seemed to get along quite well.

Shepard returned to the OD. She had to work through the procedures to make sure this furlough on the Citadel went smoothly. Even as she worked on the schedules, some paranoid part of her wondered if coming to the Citadel was a good idea. Half her mind was on trying to remember who had first leave rotation last time, as they would accept second or third rotation this time. The other half was on the murders. The killer was clearly timing her deeds to the times the Normandy was on the Citadel. Shepard could not help but dread coming back to the station, yet Wrex needed to be here, because this was a good place for getting in touch with his contacts.

She was so distracted with her conflicting thinking patterns that it took nearly an hour to finish the schedule. As she brought up commands to pass it along to EDI, the door behind her opened. The sound was the first bit of noise Shepard had heard in the whole time she had been working on the schedules. She paused and glanced back.

“Shepard, I am done packing.” Wrex announced as he walked into the room.

“You got where you can stay on the Citadel?” Shepard asked.

“Sure. There are hotels down on the lower wards that take your credits and don’t ask questions.”

Shepard nodded. She knew how reputable such places would be, but this was Wrex. He could handle a few opportunistic criminals and other unsavory types. “Just remember Wrex,” Shepard pointed out. “You will no longer have Spectre-grade immunity. So if half the Citadel burns down-”

“Don’t worry. I’ll make sure all of it burns down. I know you like thoroughness.” Wrex rumbled,
practically laughing.

Shepard grinned, but said nothing. She would definitely miss these sorts of exchanges.

“Commander?” EDI spoke up, cutting in between them.

“Yes, EDI?”

“Admiral Hackett is on the QEC. A priority one call.” The AI replied.

“Emergency orders…” Shepard breathed. Priority one was only ever really used for the direst of emergencies, times when forces had to scramble at top speed. Even the mess on Solcrum had not been dire enough. She was on her feet in an instant, but then turned to look at Wrex.

“Go,” Wrex said as he turned toward the CIC door. “I know how you are, nothing personal.”

“Thanks Wrex,” Shepard replied as the door leading to the corridor connecting the OD to the COMCON opened. His footsteps thudded out of the OD and were only cut off when the connecting door closed behind her.

“EDI, bring it up.” Shepard said as soon as she was in front of the COMCON’s conference table.

“Right away, Commander.” EDI replied.

The holographic communicator at the center of the COMCON table lit up, buzzing and cracking. When the admiral’s seated image finally stabilized, Shepard snapped to attention and saluted.

“At ease Commander,” he replied, calmly as he raised a data pad into view of the communication equipment’s camera. “We have no time for formalities. Half an hour ago we received a message from Terra Nova. Scott’s governing council has declared a state of emergency. An asteroid under tow, meant to enter geosynchronous orbit around Terra Nova has reignited its fusion torch propulsion and is accelerating out of control toward the planet.”

“You are pardoned, this situation can be summarized as such.” The admiral’s expression remained placid, but Shepard knew he was making light of her gut reaction. “I want the Normandy there on the double. I hope this is nothing more than a bad case of tech gremlins, and by the time you get there the torches are already out, but my gut tells me we are not so lucky. I want this handled by whatever means possible. That rock is not to hit Terra Nova. Millions of lives are at stake.”

Almost five million lives, if Shepard was right. She snapped another salute, “It will be done, sir!”

“I know. Good luck, Commander. Hackett out.” The admiral reached over to turn off the communication equipment on his side. Shepard waited only long enough for the holographic projector to stop buzzing before she turned around and jogged back into the OD.

“EDI, is Joker still on the bridge?” Shepard asked.

“Yes, Commander.”

“And Wrex?” Shepard asked.

“In the Shuttle Bay.”
“Alright, patch me through on the ship-wide comm.” She felt rather bad about how suddenly she had to ask Wrex to disembark. She hoped he would understand that she had no time for pleasantries.

“The link is open.” EDI stated.

“Attention all hands, we just received priority one orders from command. The Normandy is to report to the Asgard system on the double. We have a runaway space rock to wrangle.” Maybe that was an understatement or oversimplification, but it was not outright a lie. With luck everything would indeed come down to just a really bad case of technology gremlins working in cahoots with good old Murphy. Still, she knew that the Admiral had been right to be worried. The engineers working on that rock could not have bungled an asteroid move this badly, even if their main controls were compromised.

Her Omni-tool buzzed, and Shepard glanced down to see a quick little text message from Wrex. A simple ‘I am off. Go chase down that rock and crack some heads for me, – Wrex.’ She smiled. It would figure that Wrex’ instinct would tell him that someone was in for it.

The OD’s door opened and Nihlus stepped in with all the urgency of someone who had gotten personal emergency orders. “Shepard, what is going on?”

Shepard took a deep breath; she needed to swallow that initial reaction of hers to fret. There was procedure to these things, and she would carry it out. Had Nihlus been on the CIC? She highly doubted the elevator would have gotten him up here this quick. She looked up into his eyes, “Nihlus, I need you to clear the Normandy for immediate departure. I was just going to send out a summons for an emergency briefing of the ground team, but leaving can’t wait for that to be over. Believe me when I say we have to go, and now.”

“Alright. I want the details though.” He replied, turned around, to left the OD.

“Naturally.” She replied. Her mind was instantly full of all manner of nightmare scenarios that she had to toss aside. “EDI, summon the away team to the OD, please.”

“Right away, Commander.”

The console at her desk beeped, indicating that a data package from Admiral Hackett had cleared EDI’s security protocols. Shepard eased into her chair and pulled a largely empty data pad toward her. On the terminal’s desktop the emergency data transfer was marked with a bright red ribbon indicating priority one. She dumped the file straight onto the datapad. Then, while waiting for the team to gather, she brought it up and started reading.

A few minutes later the Normandy gave a little shudder that Shepard recognized as a shift in her engine status. Suddenly her mass effect field was not merely keeping her afloat. A moment later there were familiar clangs as the docking arms decoupled. At that moment the OD door opened and Garrus stepped in. Trailing behind him was the whole of Team Bravo, Legion, and Tali. Shepard nodded in their direction as her vague greeting. “We are waiting on Nihlus.”

“Is Wrex really leaving us, Commander?” Jenkins asked.

“Yes. I hope you wished him well, Richard.”

“We all wished him the best, even the chief.”

Shepard nodded.

The Normandy shuddered and began to drift backward. There was a scratch over the intercom.
“We’re on our way to the Asgard system. The Spook is coming your way too.” Joker announced.

“Thanks Joker.”

The OD’s door opened again, and Nihlus stepped in. Shepard nodded his way, picked up her prepared datapad, and moved to the couch. That was the fall-to order everyone else needed. The marines assumed their usual position on the couch extension while Legion slipped into their corner. Tali stood on the other side of the sideboard table from them. This left Shepard, Nihlus, and Garrus to take the main couch.

“What’s going on, Skipper?” Ashley asked.

“What Williams probably wants to know is, since when do we wrangle space rocks?” Joker cut in. “Yes, we have some big damn guns, but so does every dreadnought and cruiser in the eight fleets. Couldn’t they send someone else to grind the rock into powder?”

Shepard knew that question was forthcoming. Under normal circumstances rogue asteroids would be well within the purview of some passing-by cruiser.

“I think the situation is self-evident, Lieutenant. This is not just any asteroid knocked into the path of a planet. Foul play is suspected and I would surmise that the Commander is expected to handle the situation without destroying the rock,” Garrus stepped in.

“That’s exactly it.” Shepard said as she tapped at the datapad and then reached down to turn on the table projector. A three-dimension model of a solar system appeared over the table. “This is our destination, the Asgard system of the Exodus Cluster. This chart is accurate in terms of where the planets are in their orbits at the present time. That dot is our target, asteroid X57. A couple days ago it was accelerated from the L5 point of Borr…” Shepard pointed to the second planet in the system, “on a trajectory that set it to fall into geosynchronous orbit around Terra Nova.” Here she pointed to the first planet. “The initial acceleration went without incident and the fusion torches were turned off once target velocity was achieved. The rock was meant to coast along, and then fall into place, gentle like a tournament golf putt. However as of about one hour ago, the main torches have reignited. At its present velocity it is already going too fast for capture, it will make atmospheric entry instead.”

“Well… shit.” Joker said. “I should have known you were understating.”

“With all due respect ma’am… that might have been an understatement taken too far.” Ashley added. Shepard would let them have that one. They had a leg to stand on.

“Erm… Terra Nova is an Alliance colony, right?” Tali asked, slipping in quietly.

“Yes. Current population estimates stand at around four and a half million.” Shepard replied.

“What about getting everyone out of there?” Jenkins wondered.

“No go. Not enough ships and not enough time. Moving people away from the projected impact zone will not do either. X57 is over fifteen kilometers in diameter; any surface impact will trigger an endless winter that will ruin the planet’s ecology. While we could bring in all the Alliance dreadnoughts to batter the rock apart, it would mean giving up on the crew in charge, as well as the rock itself.”

“Whoever is doing this… is a mad-man.” Kaidan said. “This sort of thing starts wars, and for once I don’t see the Council saying anything. Terra Nova is a garden world and this is genocide.”
Nihlus nodded, “Alenko is right. Shepard, the Council will not ask any questions if you have to resort to *extreme* force in order to prevent planetary impact.”

“We don’t need the Council’s permission to handle this. Whoever is doing this… they’re going to become a cautionary tale and a statistic.” Ashley said.

Shepard nodded; she knew that much on her own, still, getting Nihlus’ green light on those terms was a boon. As it looked, she had a carte blanche to deal with the situation as she saw fit. There would be a problem only if she failed to stop the rock. “Suffice to say… failure is *not* an option. That rock must be stopped. As such, I’m calling all hands on deck. I want everyone ready to put boots on the surface. I expect that I will require every single one of your unique talents on this.”

“Aye, Aye, ma’am!” the marines chorused in a single voice.

“You got it, Commander.” Tali said.

“Acknowledged,” Legion added quietly.

Nihlus and Garrus only nodded. Shepard did not need to hear them say anything, she knew they were in her corner come what may, and on shadier things than this.

“I’m just curious, why even bother moving the rock?” Tali asked.

“Oh, that. It is full of minerals. The plan is to mine it out, which will pay for the move and the construction of Terra Nova’s new spaceport in its hollow shell. This is humanity’s earliest colony, established in 2152. Ten years ago they found huge platinum deposits which the colony has cashed in on. The capital, Scott, has rapidly developed into a metropolis of around three million residents. It is booming with platinum fortunes, tourism, ship construction, and movie production.”

*The deserts at the equator suck, as they’re only a little cooler than Intai’sei on the bad days. But the upper latitudes are pleasant like the Mediterranean and Northern Europe on Earth. Lake Nova Geneva even has this stretch of beach with white sand…” Joker added. “And before anyone asks, everyone’s been there.”

Shepard glanced about the room. A silence seemed to settle over the OD then. She would guess that reality was hitting people like it had hit her. This whole situation was incredibly nasty.

“I guess the last question would be… who would do something like this?” Tali mumbled.

“Who is normally doing something like this?” Ashley asked rhetorically, though her voice dripped with sarcasm. “This got batarian handiwork written all over.”

As much as Shepard loathed the act of throwing accusations, she could not think of any other possibility. Sometimes what sounded like a baseless accusation was actually not entirely baseless. Shepard had to restrain herself from showing any outward sign of the fact that she was instantly incensed at the very idea that the batarians would do this. But she would be lying if she said she was surprised; this was just the sort of escalation terrorists eventually sank to, when their delusions about the viability of their causes began to crumble. The angrier they got, the worse the atrocities, and the less likely their victory, but they would not be half as stupid if they could see that. There really could not be anyone else. Who else would not give two thoughts about the inevitable? It had to be the radical incensed sociopathic rabble, also known as the terrorist. If she thought about it that way, it even made sense why Admiral Hackett chose to send her. The involvement of the White Death, the protector of innocents from batarian extremism, would poll well. The fact that she had a multi-species crew was a happy bonus. “*Whoever* is responsible -and to me it does not matter who they are- will
pay regardless. That’s that.” She tried to keep neutral, but could not be bothered to keep the chill out of her tone.

“Just so everyone knows... we have four light-years to cover between the Exodus Cluster’s relay at Utopia, and our destination, Asgard. At our top speed of zero-point-five-four light-years an hour, that’s going to be about eight hours.” Joker added.

“Eight hours? Do we even have that sort of time?” Kaidan asked.

“Fortunately, we do. The asteroid was meant to take nearly two weeks to traverse the distance between Borr and Terra Nova. At its present rate of acceleration, and even with our travel, my information says we have the time. Our hurry is more about getting there before the torches run out of fuel. If they do, there will be no altering the rock’s trajectory.” Shepard replied. “Start prep now, and then rest as much as possible. Boots hit the ground as soon as we’re in range.”

“We’ll be rip-roaring to go,” Ashley said.

Kaidan nodded quietly.

Shepard did not protest when most took that as a sort of dismissal. The marines were first to breeze out of the room. Ashley walked as if her whole spinal column had been braced with a ram-rod. Jenkins clasped his fists, though probably without even realizing it. Kaidan was largely himself, but Shepard felt a slight tell-tale prickle of energy in the room. Kaidan was a powerful biotic, and normally in perfect control of his abilities, but even he could not entirely shut off the tiny trickle of dark energy that inevitably manifested around powerful biotics when they displayed strong emotions. Anger just happened to be one of the strongest. Tali left after them and Legion drifted off after her. Garrus moved to the couch extension, now that there was room on it.

“Shepard, are you alright?” Nihlus asked.

“Truthfully?” Shepard replied as she glanced at him. “No. I’m not so oblivious that I would not see what will happen if we fail. That thought scares me. This isn’t Elysium where I protected a hundred people… I don’t know why but those numbers seemed manageable. This is Terra Nova, over four million lives, I… it’s hard to wrap my head around the amount of evil here.”

“It will not happen. We will stop that rock.” Nihlus said as his hand settled on her shoulder, warm and comforting.

“Kryik is right. It will not happen. We will not let it happen.” Garrus added.

“I will retire as a Spectre in shame if I let these terrorists win.”

“I will retire to a cave in shame if I let them win.” Garrus countered. “Whoever is behind this actually thinks this sort of plan will work. They probably thought no one would detect them the whole way to Terra Nova. They are clearly very stupid.”

Shepard took a deep relaxing breath. They were right of course; there was no way that this sort of plan could possibly work for whoever came up with it. She should not be thinking about failure. At the end of the day there was going to be only so many enemies on that rock. The solution was simple. If she shot them all dead, there would be no one left to stop her. “Thank you,” she said.

Nihlus squeezed her shoulder ever so lightly, and Shepard had an inordinate urge to reach over to the both of them and pull them into a hug. Somehow their unwavering confidence was about the ticket she needed. If Nihlus and Garrus had no doubts about their odds of success, she figured she should try to bury some of hers. After all, those sorts of doubts had a horrible habit of becoming a self-
fulfilling prophecy.

“You will be alright? Commander?” Garrus wondered.

“Yes. I need to think of our strategy, but I will be alright.” Shepard replied.

“Good. Well I have some gear to prepare, and I think I will go and help Tali with her drone, if she wants me to.”

“Good idea. I have my own gear to prepare.” Nihlus said as his hand finally slipped off her shoulder and he rose to his feet.

Garrus followed him, but paused to spare Shepard a glance. She met his gaze with a smile. Nihlus was halfway to the OD door by the time Garrus caught up to him. Soon enough Shepard was left alone with her thoughts.

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Shepard was on the CIC when the Normandy arrived at the Asgard System. It was standard procedure to drop out of FTL at the outer edge of a solar system, a precaution as no one wanted to hit a rogue planetoid at superluminal velocities while flying sensor-blind. However in this instance it was entirely possible and it saved them almost an hour of travel. The difference was in that the Asgard system was one of the rarer clean systems, having formed with a shockingly scant number of leftover rocks. Then the few junk rocks that there were, ended up swept up into Borr’s orbital plain, and eventually into its orbit. The gas giant’s mass, six times that of Jupiter, made it act like a giant vacuum for anything and everything smaller than a planet. What more, Asgard having been colonized over thirty years prior, it was heavily surveyed and scanned. The up-to-the-moment positional chart allowed Joker to drop out of FTL outside Borr’s orbit.

Borr was blood red due to the ionization of hydrogen in the upper layers of its atmosphere. The giant also had over ninety satellites of various sizes and countless helium-3 skimmers in its orbit. Shepard ordered Joker to put the gas giant behind them on approach, that way their forward-looking sensors would not be overwhelmed by radiation buzz. That was another delightful feature of the giant. For a planet, it produced an unusually large amount of EM chatter due to its very high atmospheric temperature. That combination made some scientists think Borr was actually a failed brown dwarf star. That it just missed accruing enough mass and heat to begin fusion.

It was not difficult to spot X57 on sensors, it was impossible to miss the heat-producing fusion torches on passive infrared imagery. “Three torches,” Shepard said, mostly to herself, yet breaking the silence that had settled on the CIC since the moment they rounded Borr and began looking for the rock.

“We might have to disable them one at a time.” Nihlus said.

“Commander,” EDI spoke up. “I am picking up a transmission originating from the asteroid.”

Shepard blinked, surprised. “Can you put on the loud speakers?”

“Oh of course, but the signal is fairly weak and distorted by emissions from the fusion torches.” EDI replied. “Patching it through.” A moment later there was a blast of static across the CIC’s integrated overhead speakers.

Shepard momentarily cringed and closed her eyes; the static was grating. Yet there was definitely something to it, what she heard was not the natural flat buzz of cosmic background radiation.
“Please stand by, I will attempt to filter out the distortions in the signal,” EDI announced. The static faded momentarily before kicking back in, though this time its volume was reduced and different. EDI had pulled out some frequencies, which changed the tones in the static. It allowed some suppressed, quieter frequencies to come through. Shepard’s eyes flew open in shock when she recognized a melody buried in the buzz. “Music! They installed a radio station on the rock!”

“That’s a problem,” Kaidan stated.

“Indeed.” Nihlus agreed.

“EDI you can turn it off.” Shepard finished. At their present distance the signal was too garbled for enjoyment.

EDI obeyed the request without saying a word.

“That broadcast would have announced to passing ships that someone was on that rock. They exposed themselves long before the torches came on the first time. I would not be surprised if the batarians saw an opportunity, and they got the time to plan accordingly.” Nihlus said quietly.

Shepard sighed, Nihlus was right of course. He was also playing the devil’s advocate in saying what she thought. If the engineers had indeed set up their station before the move, it would have been the dead giveaway to their location. The batarians were opportunistic; their attacks on places like Elysium’s mountainous resorts and Mindoir farming communities showed that they preferred soft targets where little resistance was to be expected.

Draw their attention to what was essentially a rock with thrusters, and it did not take much to see it as a weapon of mass destruction. The civilians probably thought that being this deep within Alliance space they would be safe, but unfortunately that was not always the case. It was not like they could install IFF protocols on the relays, to bar batarians from using them. This whole situation looked to be the perfect storm of disaster brought on by civilian naïveté.

“Well it does not matter now. EDI tell the ground team to get ready.” Shepard said.

“Right away, Commander.” EDI said.

“Joker, we will be taking the Kodiaks, they’re less conspicuous. Get us close enough that EDI can do detailed scans. After that, I want the Normandy following the rock stealthily. Do not land on the surface. I don’t want the Batarians thinking they can try and jack my ship.” She added as she turned toward the elevator.

“Aye, aye, ma’am. Kick extra ass, for me.” The pilot replied.

Shepard called the elevator and waited. She knew that if those bastards so much as saw the Normandy, shiny as it was, they would try to get on board, whether to blackmail her, or abscond with it. Shepard did not want to put her crew at risk.

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It was about forty minutes before everyone was geared up and gathered in the shuttle bay for departure. Seeing everyone ready and in most cases rip-roaring to go, Shepard took a moment to weigh her options when it came to group assignments. In the end she split things up relatively evenly. Team Bravo and Tali were taking one shuttle. Nihlus, Garrus, and Legion would go with her in the other. It was a bit of a conscious decision to keep Tali and Legion separate as much as possible. At the same time, there was the issue that while Tali could work within Bravo just fine, because she was on friendly terms with them, Legion would be an untested variable.
As they were getting ready, the Normandy drew close enough to X57 for EDI to do her scans. The first thing the AI spotted was the enemy ship. It was parked on what was the apparent underside of the rock, anchored in place with a mass effect field. EDI found a match in her database, confirming the vessel to be a small cargo hauler of Batarian make. The Alliance had a list of reporting names for Batarian craft, used to identify ship types. That particular craft was dubbed a ‘Dachau’. They were commonly seen taking part in slaver raids. Seeing one on X57 made Shepard just shy of livid. It was almost a confirmation to her theory. The bastards were skulking about, looking for victims of opportunity when then they spotted the rock.

She had to restrain herself from ordering Joker to shoot the ship apart with the Thanix. First, that would tell the batarians that someone had arrived, and there was also the possibility that there were innocents on that ship. Furthermore, she also did not want to make the batarians desperate. They would not fight as hard if they thought they still had a viable exit strategy. Shepard was perfectly fine letting them keep that delusion as she systematically hunted down and killed every single one of them. Ultimately though, with the Normandy trailing the rock, if they did force her hand, she would always comm and order Joker to shoot them down at take off. There was no way a Dachau could withstand the Normandy’s main guns. Letting an enemy keep some hope, only to snatch it away, was sadistic. But these were Batarian slavers; so as far as she was concerned they deserved nothing less.

In another half hour they touched down on the surface of X57, and the operation was officially on. The view that greeted them was something to admire, were it not for the dire circumstances. The asteroid’s rocky, irregular surface was mottled in shades of grey of various stages of radiation bleaching. There was no shortage of impact craters, hills, ridges, and even mountains. Terra Nova rose over everything like a blue-green gem, very Earth-like, until one saw the difference in the shapes of its landmasses.

X57’s three major propelling fusion torches were arranged in a belt formation, with one torch on the apparent top, and two on the sides. Each released a brilliant but utterly silent plume of extremely hot plasma. The charged particles formed a faintly glowing reddish ghostly halo around the torches, giving them a rather ominous glow.

The Kodiaks landed at a location of EDI’s choosing. The AI picked a small, relatively flat patch next to a relatively low hill, on the other side of which was a larger open plain, and across it, set into a ridge, was the first torch. EDI’s explained that what caught her attention was the small EVA rover at the base of the hill, as well as the communication relay tower and pre-fabricated structure on top. There was a heat signature emanating from the structure, though no life signs. Shepard agreed that they could check it out.

Thus she was the first to step outside the Kodiak. Garrus and Legion followed shortly behind her. A minute later the marines and Tali were at her side as well. Even from some meters away she could see the first signs of foul play. The rover’s hood cover was just jagged chunks sticking up, as if someone lifted it, placed a plasma grenade on the battery block, closed it, and stood back.

The first signs of foul play were enough to rule out the mother of all cases of tech gremlins. “We’ll check the structure on the hill first.” Shepard announced. “It will give us a good vantage point on the torch too.” With that said she turned and made her way toward the hill. Whoever had decided to use the hill for a structure had blasted rough sloping steps up to the crest.

Due to the reduced gravity Shepard did not feel any strain going up the steps. A quick cursory glance was enough to assess the location. The very summit had been flattened, but it was not all that big to begin with, only about a fifty meters across. Just enough to place a short range relay tower and a small pre-fabricated shack that undoubtedly contained the operating machinery.
Then her eyes landed on the body lying prone at the base of the comm tower. It was a man wearing a white civilian-grade EVA suit marked with patch bearing a company logo and the silhouette of X57 along with the words “Engineering Team” arching around it. There was an empty gap where the man’s face-shield should have been, and tell-tale smattering of footprints and disturbed surface dust all around. “As if I did not have a reason to want to kill them already,” Shepard murmured. “They smashed his face-shield. I say smashed, because the shield is gone entirely, it’s not breached by a bullet. Then they probably stood back and watched.”

“Unfortunately there is one more here, Commander.” Garrus said.

Shepard looked over to where the former detective had stopped. Lying in front of the prefabricated structure was indeed another man in another white EVA suit with a similar patch on his shoulder. He was likewise face-down, but this time the damage was at the back of his helmet, a single gunshot that left the helmet barely intact, there was no mistaking that spider-web pattern of cracks.

“There is a major disturbance pattern in the dust around the body and some of his suit ceramics are cracked. He was beaten, but the cause of death is the shot to the back of the head, angled from above. They executed him once they had their... fun.” Garrus announced.

“Fucking monsters,” Ashley hissed.

“These were sadistic displays of power by at least two individuals. There are too many tracks to tell without a full analysis.”

“I do not think the batarians are taking slaves.” Nihlus mused.

“No, they are not.” Garrus agreed.

“Then we’re not taking prisoners.” Shepard replied flatly. She thought that was an obvious enough reply to such acts of brutality against unarmed civilians.

Garrus nodded, “Understood.”

“Garrus can you take notes on this location? I want to make sure I do not forget a single victim in my report.” Shepard asked, she knew this report would be a long one. Even her memory and attention to detail could still lose something. She did not want that to be an innocent victim whose body is only re-discovered a couple years later while the rock was being mined. That would be the epitome of cruelty to the victim’s family, and an unforgivable sort of lapse.

“I will get right on it,” Garrus replied as he brought up his Omni-tool.

“Thank you,” Shepard said as she moved toward the prefabricated structure. On inspection she found that the door had been shot through with a powerful shotgun, disabling the electromagnetic lock plate. Someone then pried it open. Shepard could almost see the chain of events that happened here. “These monsters showed up while these two were working up here. They disabled the vehicle first; the explosion would’ve been silent. Then they came up the steps, caught victim number one still working at the tower.” Smashing his face-shield could only have been a blitz attack on an unwary victim. She would not be surprised if that murder weapon was the butt of the same shotgun they then used on the door.

She stepped into the booth and frowned. The terminal was still on and glowing, signed on and ready for commands it would never receive. That must have been the heat signature EDI picked up. The chair in front of the terminal was overturned. “Victim number two was inside, working on the terminal. He must have heard victim number one shout, and had time to lock himself in.”
“They beat him because he made them work...” Kaidan mumbled.

“Indeed.” Shepard approached the console and peered at the screen. “The tower is offline. They were running a diagnostic on the high-gain array.” She knew how to read a status indicator.

“The Batarians came here first for obvious reasons.” Garrus rumbled.

Shepard did not say anything, there was no need to. She saw a datapad lying on the floor near the overturned chair and bent down to pick it up. “I found the maintenance log. The last entry is written by one G. Mendel, dated and time-stamped to a few hours before the alarm went out.” She paused there as she skimmed over the short entry. “He notes that this is not the first time this month that the tower has malfunctioned; apparently there is a flaw in the radiation shielding. His warnings to replace it are going unheeded. He and someone named Slajs agreed come here off hours to get it running again.”

“Those must be our victims, I will log the names,” Garrus said.

“Please do,” Shepard replied. She did not want to have to turn the victims over to check for name tags. The sight of someone who had died of exposure to the void would haunt her. The log said Mendel and Slajs were here, and there was no reason for it to be lying. The situation with the tower sounded like typical corporate cost-cutting, the people in charge probably thought it was a luxury that allowed the engineers to access the extranet and contact their families. Go tell them that it would have also picked up and logged the transponder of any approaching ship. Had the tower been operational, the colonists might have gotten a warning that there were batarians skulking about. Had they evacuated everyone to the main facility, initialized remote lock down of the controls on the torches, and barred the doors, none of this might have happened. Of course those in charge probably did not think that the danger was real. The illusion of safety this close to Terra Nova was proving itself dangerous.

Shepard set the pad down on the table and turned back toward the door. Garrus stood there, fingers fast at work on his Omni-tool. “Let’s run recon toward the torch. I am not above putting down some monsters from here.”

“I will finish the notes,” Garrus replied.

She stepped past him and reached behind her back for Nike. From up here there was a clear line of sight across the plain and right to the base of the first torch.

“Shepard-Commander, we detected the presence of four individuals at the base of the torch control facility. Their helmet configuration is consistent with Batarians.” Legion announced.

“Thanks, but I still need to see them with my own eyes,” Shepard replied, utterly unsurprised that the Geth only needed to take one look across the plain to tell her that, despite the fact that to her the figures looked to be humanoid blobs with no concrete details.

“Understood,” Legion replied.

Shepard kneeled even as Nike unfolded in her hands. A moment later she peered through the scope. Sure enough there were four figures patrolling outside the doors to the torch control facility. Moreover, their helmets reflected Asgard’s light in that particular way that indicated their face-shields went higher up the forehead than any other specie in the galaxy. “I didn’t doubt you, Legion.” Shepard murmured.

“Acknowledged.”
The distance from here to there was around five hundred meters. Shooting that in a perfect vacuum with little gravity was elementary. There was no wind, drag, nor sound. Silence reigned, with only the rasp of her breathing apparatus and the faint background crackling of a synched group comm link preventing it from being absolute. She eased herself onto her front, and once settled, brought Nike into position and shifted it into disruptor mode.

“Williams, Jenkins, back to the Kodiak, we will be moving toward the torch facility soon.” Kaidan said calmly, breaking the silence.

“Hey, wait for me! I’m on your team too!” Tali called after them.

“I know, Tali. I’m not telling you what you should and shouldn’t do,” Kaidan explained.

“I will go warm up our shuttle,” Nihlus said.

Shepard could not hear them move, but she knew that this left her up here with Garrus and Legion.

“Shepard-Commander, do you want our assistance?” Legion asked plainly.

Just then she saw one of the batarians turn in her direction, and he must have seen something because he did a double-take. Shepard figured it must have been her armor or weapon lights against the void. She turned her crosshairs right at him. Were it not for the distance, the void, and the helmets; she knew their eyes would have locked. Her finger slipped onto the trigger, “No, but thank you Legion. This is my hunt.”

“Understood.” Legion replied.

Shepard inhaled as she placed her crosshairs right between all four of the batarian’s soulless eyes. He turned ninety degrees and suddenly the other three stopped their circuitous meanderings. Shepard held her breath. He raised his hand to point right at her. Shepard adjusted her sights to hit him just above the ear and began her exhale as her finger tightened on the trigger. His finger had just straightened when Nike bucked against her shoulder. There was no crack, but the batarian recoiled, his hand dropped as he toppled. A quick death was a mercy these bastards did not deserve, but she would not allow herself to descend to their level.

The other three scattered, but there was absolutely no cover on the plain. Shepard turned her crosshairs on the closer of the three, inhaled, held, and began to exhale as her finger tightened on the trigger. Nike kicked, and he went down face-first into the dirt, halfway to the door leading into the torch facilities. Shepard moved her sights again, targeting the one who had ducked around the corner of the structure. Unfortunately for him, he miscalculated the angles, his helmet was still partly visible from her vantage, but he had a hand up to his comm, likely alerting his friends inside. Shepard was not about serving a slaver some poetic justice after the atrocity they committed up here. She inhaled and moved her crosshairs for an oblique shot at his visor. She held for moment and then began another smooth exhale. Nike kicked and the slaver’s face-shield shattered, starting the clock on the last ten seconds of his miserable life. Shepard raked the receiver to eject the overheated thermal clip and reached behind her back for a new one.

The fourth batarian had made it to the door leading into the torch control structure. She inhaled slowly and held at the apex, watching him enter the code into the keypad by the door. Then the lock panel turned green and she began her exhale as her finger tightened on the trigger. The door was open by about twenty centimeters when Nike kicked and the batarian’s hope for safety was snatched away. Shepard closed her eyes and sighed, “I saw the last one enter the door code, it’s nine-three-six-three-three-thee.”
“Code noted.” Legion stated.

Shepard powered down Nike and opened the receiver bolt part-way so that the thermal clip could dump its heat before she rose to her feet and slipped the rifle behind her back. Then she scooped up the hot clip as well, rolling it in her fingers. The little cylinder was already glowing less. Not only was the void easy to shoot in, but it was good for cooling off clips rapidly.

“The Kodiaks are ready to go.” Nihlus stated calmly over their comm link.

Shepard wordlessly turned toward the steps and motioned Garrus and Legion to follow. When she got to the bottom, she saw that the others were already inside their shuttles. The lead Kodiak was online; its mass effect field and trickling ventral thrusters caused the ground to vibrate faintly. As soon as the three of them were aboard Nihlus triggered the door to close and took them up. From there the flight could barely be described as such; the shuttle took off, flew over the hill and the couple hundred meters to the torch facility, and landed as close as physically possible.

Shepard was once again the first to exit. When she turned toward the door she found that it could not close, thus she did not even need the code. The batarian that she shot against it fell in such a way that his neck ended up lying across the door’s rail. The door would close until it hit his neck and then spring open, only to try and close again, making for a rather macabre sight. Fortunately since he was now exposed to the vacuum, the carnage had been effectively boiled away. Not that much would have been visible, as most of the mess would have been on the exit side, and her shot had not gone through to shatter his face-shield. The Valiant simply did not have enough power to put a slug through a skull twice.

“I expect they will have a welcoming committee for us inside,” Garrus stated as he stopped next to her.

“Of course, and I saw one of them talk to someone before I shot him.” Shepard said as she stepped over the body and through the door. She found herself in a room lined with EVA suit lockers. Most stood empty, but the few with contents had been shot open and ransacked. She looked up; the floor and ceiling were unusually thick, with tell-tale nozzles over her head. On the other side of the room was another similar door, though this one was locked and sealed. “This room is an airlock, and it will not cycle unless the outer door can close.”

“Easy enough,” Jenkins replied.

Shepard turned just in time to see the corporal bend down, grab the obstructing body by the ankles, and pull it clear of the door.

“Problem solved,” Jenkins announced as he let go of the corpse’s legs and stepped into the airlock before the door closed on him.

Shepard idly wondered what was making the corporal act so cold. He had moved that corpse as if it was just some piece of debris. She decided that it must have been the situation at hand. These things killed naïveté and innocence faster than anything else. The batarians owed the corporal an apology.

Kaidan was already at the inner door’s controls. The computer registered the closure of the outer door, so he only needed to tap two keys for the system to start pressurizing the airlock. As the space quickly filled up with breathable air, the lieutenant drew his assault rifle. Jenkins and Williams followed his example.

Shepard motioned for everyone to take cover around the door. Soon three loud beeps indicated that the room had pressurized. Shepard drew Sin, shifted it into disruptor mode, put her back to the wall,
and nodded to the lieutenant. Kaidan calmly triggered the inner door to open.

The panel barely slid aside when a spray of automatic tracer rounds flew right though, peppering the lockers immediately across from it, sending bullets ricocheting every which way. Shepard saw Ashley’s and Tali’s shields flare. The quarian girl jumped and pressed herself flat against the wall.

The foreign rifle went silent after what must have been its clip. “We’re not stupid to step in there, humans!” A guttural, hissing voice shouted from inside.

“Picture that,” Shepard murmured sarcastically.

“They think they are facing only Alliance.” Nihlus said, sounding vaguely amused.

“I see how it is. Alright. You asked for it!” The batarian shouted.

There was a thud of metal hitting the floor deep within the room. An instant later the silence was broken by the growling and baying of at least three varren.

“Harak. Chekt! Chekt!” the guttural voice barked, the word failing to translate.

The varren started barking.

“Kill them as soon as they clear the door!” Nihlus ordered as he drew his shotgun.

Shepard had just drawn Sin when the first varren ran into the airlock, growling and gnashing its teeth, its claws digging into the floor. Nihlus’ shotgun blast was loud like thunder in such a tiny space. The dog-like creature yelped, and brackish blood went flying as it collapsed, front right leg mangled beyond usability. Jenkins turned his assault rifle on the stricken creature and released a quick burst at its head, putting it out of its misery.

Then a second and third varren burst into the airlock. Nihlus’ shotgun gave another crack, catching one in the head, killing it instantly. The other varren leapt into the air, jaws agape, right at Jenkins, who had the misfortune of standing closest to it. Garrus and Ashley raised their assault rifles, but before they could pull the triggers there was a crack of a shotgun, quieter than Nihlus’ overpowered weapon. The blast caught the last beast in head and caused Jenkins’ shields to flare, but they held. The varren dropped, dead before it hit the floor.

“Thanks, Tali.” Jenkins said, automatically.

“No need. I hate varren. Too many teeth and salivary bacteria…” Tali replied.

“Good shot, Tali. But we need to make entry now, before they realize the mongrels failed.” Shepard cut in.

“Bravo, with me! We’ll head straight in. Williams, suppression fire… Jenkins I want lots of smoke!” Kaidan ordered.

“Roger.” Ashley replied.

“On it!” Jenkins replied as he reached behind his back for the canisters dangling off his webbing.

“Go!” Shepard ordered as she nodded toward the lieutenant.

Just like that Kaidan’s biotic barrier materialized in a flash of periwinkle energy and he rounded the doorjamb, raising his assault rifle into firing position. Ashley followed a step behind, slipping to his right. Jenkins followed on his left, yanking the ring off a smoke bomb with his teeth even before he
cleared the door. A moment later the canister hit the floor and two assault rifles began to bark. The smoke bomb blew with a loud pop and began to pump its contents into the space with a whistling hiss.

Foreign low-pitched automatics opened up, but with the amount of echoing, it was hard to tell how many individual weapons there were. The marines scattered, taking cover behind whatever crates they found as the billowing smoke got to work obscuring everything.

Shepard turned to Nihlus, Garrus, Legion, and Tali, “Do I need to say this? I want this place purged. If it’s batarian, it dies.” Right then she was not willing to be mild-mannered in her speech. She did not issue kill orders often, but this situation just begged to be the exception that proved her rules.

“Curse this smoke. Shoot them, damn it!” A deep guttural voice shouted within the room.

“I see you,” Ashley hissed in reply. An Alliance rifle opened fire, only to get a response from one of the foreign weapons. The exchange lasted a good five seconds, but then Shepard heard the unmistakable thud of a body in a hardsuit hitting the hard floor. “That’s one.” Ashley said coolly.

“There’s one more behind the stack on your one o’clock.” Kaidan said.

“I’m on it,” Jenkins jumped in.

The automatics began to beat in tandem, but Shepard knew an opportunity when it presented itself. She doubted the batarians would be aiming at the door, not with smoke in the way. They would go for the nearest lights they could see, which would be Team Bravo’s. She took a deep breath, raised Sin into position, and ducked around the jamb.

The space beyond was packed full of containers. Some had red warning labels that indicated that the contents were explosive. Half the room, closest to the door was completely filled with smoke. It told Shepard that the ventilation system was not operating. Then the assault rifles fell silent. She could just see a hint of familiar lighting elements and a periwinkle glimmer through the haze, the marines were moving deeper. Had they killed the second batarian? She pressed her back to the wall on her left and half-crab-walked-half-slid along, keeping as flat as possible, scanning for any movement in front and on the left.

Suddenly an enemy assault rifle came to life.

“Alenko!” Ashley shouted.

Shepard stopped in place.

“Sherpad, on your left!” Nihlus called.

An Alliance assault rifle began to bark on the right side of the room, but Shepard had no time to worry about whose it was and what was going over there. As she turned, she spotted a batarian round a stack of crates right in front of her, leading a varren on a metal chain. The beast was growling and gnashing its teeth. Then he let go of the chain. The creature felt the slack and charged, barking, its claws scraping on the floor in its eagerness.

Shepard heard a loud whine behind her that indicated a weapon powering up. Nihlus was suddenly at her side. He wrapped his arm around her shoulders and pulled her into his side even as he raised his shotgun and fired. The varren yelped as the scattershot hit it right in the face and into its open mouth, sending brackish blood and gore into the air. Garrus’ assault rifle opened up from her left, and the batarian’s shields flared. The terrorist tried to side-step back into cover, yet just as he moved there was a loud low-pitched crack. The batarian’s head whipped backward as his helmet
disintegrated and gore splashed into the air. Then he tipped over and dropped to the floor like cut
timber.

“Target eliminated,” Legion stated coolly.

“Legion! Why did you do that?” Tali demanded.

“We terminated an enemy unit that posed a threat to Shepard-Commander. Shepard-Commander’s
continuing safety is one of our primary objectives.” The geth explained blandly.

“Yea, but you shouldn’t fire that over people’s shoulders!” Tali lectured.

“Creator-Zorah is mistaken; the trajectory of our shot was not over anyone’s shoulder. Addendum,
our reaction times and targeting accuracy surpass those of organics. There was no danger of what
human refer to as ‘friendly fire’.”

Shepard was afraid of this. “Now’s not the time for this sort of argument, you two,” she said as she
stepped away from Nihlus. The Spectre’s reluctance to move away was noted, but ignored for the
time being. Legion turned their face-light to the floor, and somehow managed to look like a six-year-
old who just got scolded.

“You’re enabling it, Shepard.” Tali said as she crossed her arms.

Shepard knew that Tali was right, but she would not admit to it out loud.

“Are you alright, Commander?”

Kaidan asked quietly.

It was then that she realized that silence had fallen over the space around them. “I should ask you
that,” she replied.

The lieutenant hummed, “Bravo has cleared this side of the space, and we are moving along the
back wall.”

Shepard knew he was avoiding telling her what had happened over there. She would give him that.
If any of Team Bravo had been hurt in any way, he would have said so. She suspected that they
might have had to get a little rough themselves, and Kaidan avoided excess force under normal
circumstances.

“We detect no additional enemy units in this location.” Legion announced.

“No offense Legion, but we will finish our sweep, per protocol, just to be safe rather than sorry.”
Kaidan said.

“Understood, Lieutenant-Alenko.” Legion replied calmly.

Shepard had no reason to doubt Legion. “So with those outside that makes what, seven or eight of
them here?”

“We killed three on our side,” Ashley said.

“And we killed one here. That makes eight,” Shepard replied. “I’m assuming they divided their
forces more or less evenly between the torches and the main facility. So there are probably around
thirty to thirty-five batarians on this rock.” That was a very rough estimate, and only good enough to
tell her that she could not send Bravo to the third torch so they could hit two at the same time. Any
split would tip the ratios of enemy combatants per person into unfavorable. “Alright. We need to get
into the torch’s control room and shut it down.”

“It’s back here,” Ashley announced.

“Thanks, Ashley.” Shepard replied as she turned to her right. The insides of the torch control facility were not terribly big, a token structure which the crew had taken to using for storage more than its intended purpose. The back wall had two doors set into it, one was larger than the other, locked and sealed, with the console announcing that it was unsafe to go down there. Shepard assumed this was the access-way that led to the torch reactor core. Fusion torches were basically a larger version of ship propulsion. At their root, each had a fusion core that processed helium-3 and hydrogen to produce the power and superheated plasma needed to propel the rock. The access tunnels were locked down as a safety precaution. Without proper ventilation the passages would turn into a sauna while the chamber around the core itself would be like a foundry floor around a full crucible.

The control room on the other hand was left unlocked. Shepard made a beeline to the console. By design triggering the emergency shutdown was a simple matter and worked by shutting off the fuel channels. With no fuel gasses, there would be no reaction, and no ejection of propulsive plasma. It took a whole minute for the external cameras to show that the plasma plume began to narrow and the core to register that it was beginning to cool. Once the reaction ceased, Shepard checked the fuel levels. “We’re good. There’s still thirty-seven percent of the fuel gas reserve left.” She announced. It ought to be enough to slow the rock down. After that, it was a simple matter of locking out the controls with a password, which Shepard set to be her service number. A precaution in case the existing system clearances were only known to the deceased victims.

She had just finished locking down the controls when the console crackled and buzzed with static. “… Hello?” A female voice whispered through the distortions.

Shepard raised a hand, a silent command for everyone to be quiet. These stations had communicators built in? The link was gritty with static; did the structure have its own low-gain antenna? The communication tower outside was definitely offline.

“My sensors are telling me that one of the torches just shut down. Whoever you are, I hope you can hear me.” The voice continued.

“I can hear you. Who are you?” Shepard asked.

“My name is Kate Bowman. I’m an engineer. Part of the team assigned to bring this asteroid to Terra Nova. We were attacked by batarian slavers... I’ve been hiding ever since. I wish to help you in any way I can. For now you should know that an emergency shut down alerted central control; they know one of the torches went out. You sound human... I hope you’re with the Alliance.”

“I am Commander Shepard, SSV Normandy.”

“Yes! The silent alarm went through…” Kate sounded immensely relieved. The communicator link picked up some sort of noise some distance away from the microphone. “Oh no... I got to go. Sorry.” Kate whispered urgently. Before Shepard could say a word, the static faded out as the communication link went dead.

“She shouldn’t have done that. Not on an open channel like this.” Shepard mused. Of course, go tell a civilian to be careful around unsecure comm links.

“Well at least now we know we no longer have the element of surprise,” Nihlus mused.

Shepard nodded. “I’ll give you that.”
“Shepard-Commander, the door leading to the lower tunnels has just opened.” Legion stated calmly.

Shepard whirled on the spot. The geth was standing in the doorway leading out of the control booth. She was across the control room in what felt like a heartbeat. However just as she rounded the doorjamb there was a pop and her shields flared.

“Oh, god! Sorry!” A voice called. A second later its owner emerged from behind one of the stacks, lowering a small, civilian-grade firearm. “I saw a light in the doorway… and, I didn’t realize you were human. I did not hurt you, did I?”

“No. Takes more than one shot to bring down my shields.” Shepard replied.

The man visibly relaxed, but he still looked about the space as if checking for assailants. He was in his fifties, with a neat salt-and-pepper goatee and dark eyes, clad in a sand-colored EVA hardsuit, his helmet on, but opened, allowing her to see his face. “I admit, I’m not much of a soldier.” He said.

“You’re scared, I understand that. I’m Commander Shepard, Systems Alliance.” Shepard said. At that moment she heard a series of different footsteps and a faint chatter behind her. The man’s eyes widened visibly. Shepard knew why. “My team’s eclectic, but we’re here to help.”

“I- I’m Simon. Simon Atwell. Chief engineer on this rock. I was hiding in the tunnels… figured the varren would not go sniffing down there. I heard the gunfire up here and then the core begin emergency shut down. I figured it wasn’t the batarians… so I’d come up and… listen, bringing down one of the torches is not enough. You need to turn off the other two. And before they run out of fuel. We did not stock much more than absolutely necessary for the initial acceleration and some control burns if necessary. Terra Nova can’t take this hit.”

“I’m aware of that,” Shepard replied.

“There are four million people down there, Commander. I- my family. They live in Aronas. My kids and grandkids. Nice community, good schools...”

“I understand.” Shepard approached and placed a looked him right in the eye, “I promise you we will handle the situation before any harm comes to Terra Nova.” She knew an anxiety attack waiting to happen when she saw one. “Now, please… is there anything else I should know about the torches? I could use your help if I’m going to help everyone.” It was a calculated gambit. Distract the man with concrete things, and if she could get him to think he had a hand in helping everyone, it would calm him a little.

“Ah, yes… yes… there is.” He seemed to take a deep breath.

Shepard smiled and stepped back quietly.

Atwell did not seem to notice it as his gaze slid to the floor, “The torch east of here is installed in a field where the miners wanted to begin excavating the first shaft just as soon as we were stable over Terra Nova. I helped them rig the field with live blasting caps, to pierce the hard surface layers. Their detonators are proximity-sensitive, and I would think the batarians would arm them. I suggest you do not attempt to cross the field in a vehicle.”

“Is it possible to disarm them remotely?” Shepard asked. She could not believe some of the brilliant thinking going on here. Who thought of setting live blasting caps around a torch while the torch was still operational? Well, it was not like she could say that to Atwell. There were no quicker ways to get someone to shut down. She needed information from him, antagonizing him would be counter-productive.
“I’m afraid not. The arming mechanism would be in the control structure by now. The best you can do is go in slow and on foot.”

Shepard sighed, “Well thanks for the warning.” What else could she say?

“Oh and about the main facility… I heard some mixed reports but they’re saying there are at least ten to fifteen batarians there. There were our people over there too. If you can do anything for them…”

“Of course,” Shepard nodded. Mine fields and hostage situations; suffice to say the job was becoming complicated. “Someone named Kate Bowman contacted me at the control room. You know her?”

“Katie’s on the loose? She’s one of my best engineers. Smart as a whip. Signed on with her brother… Aaron? I think that’s his name. He’s part of the security detail… they were in the main facility when the attack began. If she is your contact on the inside, then you can trust her.”

“Well, thank you. I suggest you find a good place to hide. For now. The batarians might still come around here.”

“Yea. The tunnels will still be warm enough that I do not have to fear infrared sensors. I will reroute some feeds to my Omni-tool and go back down. I will know when the other torches go offline. Take care. And good luck.”

Shepard watched as Atwell turned toward the control room. She glanced at the others and grimaced. “We got our work cut out for us, don’t we?” It was a rhetorical question.

“I swear if they kill more hostages, Skipper, I will kill every single one of them myself.” Ashley said.

Shepard would not say it, but Ashley would have stiff competition in that, from her. “I get the feeling that they’ll keep them alive, for now. Living hostages are excellent bargaining chips, and everyone knows it. They will have planned their exit strategy for this eventuality.” Of course that was if Shepard had not been tipped off. This was her sort of high-stakes game. If she could pull the proverbial carpet out from under them, she would get to enjoy watching them flail. Nothing that made Shepard as happy as watching her foes slowly realize they have been outplayed. She would love to show these batarians that they really should have stayed under whatever rock they crawled out from.

“Where to, now?” Nihlus wondered.

“That’s the million credit question, isn’t it? I’m thinking… this is the torch that’s on the apparent top of the rock. We have the side torches left—”

“Oh, Commander, wait a moment please!” Tali jumped in. “There is a slight problem here. After we turn off a second torch, the rock’s propulsion will be out of balance for a time, before we disconnect the third torch. Simply put, the remaining torch will cause this asteroid to start turning. We have to consider what torch we disconnect carefully. First, we do not want the rock to turn at Terra Nova as it begins to spin. We want it to turn away, so the trajectory changes. After that, we want it to turn around entirely before we disconnect the third torch. That way the three torches can be used to stabilize the spin and then decelerate it.”

“Your Quarian friend is right, Commander.” Atwell said from the doorway. “Fortunately, I can tell you which torch to pull. You want number three first. It’s the one on X57’s proverbial east face. I caution you, it is also the one where the miners wanted to blast.”

Shepard would not say she understood Tali’s point entirely, though she had the general idea, but if
the chief engineer understood it and suggested they pull a specific torch first, who was she to argue? “Well thank you, Tali, Mr. Atwell.” What more could she say?

She turned toward the airlock, her mind turning automatically to the problem at hand. Walking what amounted to a minefield was not her idea of a fun time. She would not ask anyone on her team to risk their lives like that, but at the same time, it had to be done. Still, there had to be something there for the fact that this was not an actual minefield. If the blasting caps were meant to start a shaft, she doubted they would have been seeded so close together that they would blow an enormous hole in the rock’s face, there would be space between them.

“Commander,” Garrus stepped next to her. “If I may offer a piece of advice?”

“Sure, Garrus. I’ll take anything I can get right now.” Shepard replied.

“Mining charges are rarely shielded against remote detection, unlike improvised explosives. They do not need such shielding. Then their proximity detectors are an electronic device. Perhaps if we isolate their signals we can configure a Kodiak’s scanner to detect them.”

Shepard paused mid-step. “Yea.” It dawned on her almost too slowly, “That’d do.” It was an elementary solution. “With a full scan of the whole field we may be able to piece together a map of where every cap is, before we even set foot on the ground. I’m perfectly fine skirting the field if there is a way around it.”

“Naturally.” Garrus nodded.

Shepard spared Garrus a smile just before she triggered her helmet to close. “Thanks Garrus, I would have taken too long to think about it that way.” Shepard knew that in all likelihood, were it not for Garrus’ input, she would have volunteered to walk that minefield herself, doing things the old-fashioned way, with an Omni-tool.

Garrus nodded in reply, and that seemed to be the end of the discussion for now. Shepard turned her attention to the matter of hand. She needed to contact EDI, so that the AI would be ready to calculate exactly what the rock was going to do, once one more of its thrusters went offline. This was going to be a rather complicated show; she was not leaving such important calculations down to guesswork. EDI’s position on board the Normandy would allow her to measure the rock’s movements with more precision than anything they could muster on its surface.

It all amounted to some semblance of a plan. This in turn made Shepard feel better about their overall odds, and in turn made her feel a fair bit less anxious. From now on, they could only roll the dice for those chaotic factors, and hope for the best.

Chapter End Notes

Author Notes: The title is an intentional call-back to the 1998 movie starring Bruce Willis. It wasn’t a great movie, but it had to do with a giant space rock. I needed to disguise the plot (however thinly) from “episode title gives it away”.

General Notes:
X57’s Size – It is not mentioned in canon. I looked at Omega as a comparison, which is said to be 44.7km long. I assume that’s from the top of the rock to the tip of the stem. Then I looked at proportions, and it seems to be half as wide as it is long, making the
asteroid center around 20km across. X57 is smaller, but to still be a very dangerous rock and a very ambitious project. Fifteen kilometers is 1 km short of Deimos, the smaller of Mars’ two moons.

Chapter Notes:

**Reporting Names / Dachau** – I based this concept on the “nicknames” assigned by the Allies to enemy aircraft during WWII, though the practice is not limited to WWII. For example the Japanese Mitsubishi A6M plane, the “Zero”, were referred to as “Zeke”. I chose the Alliance’s pattern for Batarian craft to be places rather than proper names as a conscious decision to de-personalize. As for the actual name… well, Dachau was the first Nazi concentration camp, established in 1933. It was designed for political prisoners, and only later enlarged to imprison Jews. It was a forced labor camp which ran “medical experiments” as well (“studying” the effects of hypothermia and pressure changes). The name is meant to evoke an association with what that type of ship is used for. I wish to treat Batarian slavery with some seriousness.
Armageddon [Part II]

Chapter Notes

**Disclaimer:** I do no own Mass Effect, I do not claim to own Mass Effect, I am only doing this for fun.

**Author Notes:** Man what a busy month this has been. I am glad that I was able to get this done, I had to fight with myself and some exhaustion-caused writer’s block. But the episode is done and “on schedule”.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**Episode 39:** Armageddon [Part II]

Once outside the torch control structure, one glance ahead showed that Terra Nova loomed noticeably larger; its bottom edge had sunk below what passed for X57’s horizon. The rock was still accelerating, but with a third of the thrust eliminated, the rate would decrease. She turned her head to look up at the torch they had just extinguished. Its phantom atmosphere was still faintly visible, stretched out into a streak. It would be some time before the plasma cloud would dissipate entirely. All of it served as a reminder that now was not the time for gawping.

She turned and marched toward the Kodiak. To say she was looking forward to walking a makeshift minefield would be a blatant lie. Why did civilians have to be so damn impatient? Heck, why did the corporate types have to think that safety measures and working equipment was a luxury? Whoever was funding this move owed the family of every single individual who died here an apology and a huge sum of money. If she had her way, the families would have everything they needed to pursue the company for negligence. Even if the engineers had done the singularly stupid thing that was setting up the radio station, the fact that the comm tower was malfunctioning was not their fault. They got broken tech, and once that was ascertained, the company had not replaced it. There was some ground for a civic lawsuit.

The Kodiak’s door was already open by the time Shepard reached it, and it was a moment before she realized that she was the last aboard. As she stepped aboard, she passed her palm over the control panel to tell the shuttle to close it. Not long after that they were airborne again. Shepard made her way into the cockpit and perched in the co-pilot’s seat without doing up the harness. Given how quickly the Kodiak could cover what would be just a few kilometers, Shepard did not see the need to wrestle with the straps.

It was not long before the Kodiak rounded the final towering craggy ridge, and Nihlus gave the craft a few commands, putting it into hover, so that they could inspect the torch and the surrounding plain. Shepard reached to the sensor controls. This side of the asteroid faced away from the system’s sun, yet the darkness was not absolute. The plasma plume generated by the torch cast a flickering reddish glow over the plain below it. From what she could see, the installation was on the very edge of the field, with the torch itself set into the ridge, seemingly using the crags as a buttress. Far more ominously, the control facility was ringed with lit orange warning lights.

“When Atwell said a blasting caps… I expected a tight, neat grid pattern, and not this.” Nihlus said.
“They wanted to blast this whole plain once the torch was no longer needed.”
“I still do not understand why they had to put in the charges now,” Shepard replied. The marked-off area was much too big to start a mine shaft. This would have been more appropriate for an open-pit mine on an asteroid strip-mining operation, not a hollow-bore mine. X57 was meant to be hollowed out. What more, this meant there was literally no way to access the torch structure without walking right on top of the impromptu minefield. Even if the blasting caps had not been armed, who in their right mind would want to walk or drive anything over them? The miners had been asking for an unfortunate, but entirely predictable accident. Shepard would never say it out loud, but she wondered, all considering, was she saving these people from the barians, or their own stupidity? Casting that thought aside as unhelpful, she tapped a series of keys which brought up the Kodiak’s FLIR imaging. “Nihlus I’m not getting the whole field, could you adjust the heading?”

“Sure,” his fingers passed over the controls and the Kodiak turned ever so slightly as Shepard watched the readout. To her complete dismay, the plain below read as a single uniform shade of grey throughout, not a single brighter splotch to indicate something warmer in sight. She switched the sensors to maximum resolution, which narrowed the field of view, but the view remained the same. “How deep did they set those explosives?” Shepard muttered, more to herself than to Nihlus. “Can you move a little closer, and a little lower? I think we can safely hover outside the line of the warning beacons.”

“You are the boss,” Nihlus replied.

Shepard chose to ignore his tone right then. She was perfectly aware of what happened last time she asked Nihlus to hover the Kodiak lower over a potential hazard. She was also aware of what would happen if she was wrong and the explosives went off. Still, she found it a little difficult to believe that the combat cockroach would be taken out by civilian-grade explosives. If the Kodiak could be taken out so easily, she would have some words with the engineers at the Skunkworks.

The Kodiak slowly moved closer and dropped altitude. The readout’s field of view narrowed even further, now nothing more then a cone right in front of the Kodiak’s nose. Yet even with that the picture remained entirely the same. “Damn it… The caps are still not showing up.”

“Did you set it at maximum resolution?” Nihlus asked.

“Yes. They’re either buried too deep or this rock is acting like a thermos.” This was one of those times when a long string of cuss words was just on the tip of her tongue. Still, Shepard was not about to let herself lose control. Swearing was counterproductive and was basically an admission of defeat. She would not let a bunch of barians using the impatience of a bunch of civilians get the better of her. There had to be something else they could do, she just needed to take a moment and think.

“Here is the welcoming committee,” Nihlus announced.

Shepard looked up at the main view screen just in time to see five barians emerge from the torch control facility and duck behind the containers left by the structure’s door. None of them bothered raising their guns toward the Kodiacs; they probably knew they would never get past the shuttle’s shields. Shepard could just imagine their radio chatter, likely wondering if they were about to see someone be blown up.

Right then the situation devolved into a bit of a catch twenty-two. The Batarians could not hope to bring down a Kodiak with infantry weapons, but the Kodiak could not press its advantage either. They could not use the Kodiak’s armament for fear of setting off the charges. They could not even fly over the field, as that would mean running the same risk. The torch control facility was simply too close, and Shepard could not afford damage to it. She tapped the communication controls, “Kodiak two, this is Kodiak one.”
“This is Kodiak two, reading you loud and clear, Commander.” Kaidan replied.

“We are at the destination. I have bad news, and worse news. First, the bad news. There are five enemy combatants waiting for us on the ground. The worse news? FLIR imaging is not picking up the explosives buried all around it.”

Kaidan hummed so low that the communicator barely caught it. “On the positive side, those five will not rush us, and we certainly have no shortage of crack-shots.” Kaidan replied.

“And then you have to wonder... if there are five outside... How many more could they have inside?” Ashley added.

“They got you there,” Nihlus murmured.

Shepard spared the Spectre a half-hearted glare. Did he have to sound so amused right then? She would not deny that he was right, but she did not care for the cheek. “There’s a reason why I said those five were just the bad news.” Let them take it as they would. She shut down the FLIR system and leaned back into her seat, “Alright, Nihlus. Set us down back there by the ridge. Let’s press our advantage against these guys.”

“You got it,” Nihlus replied. The Kodiak started coming about even before he finished talking.

Shepard watched the batarians on the monitor as long as possible. When the Kodiak came about she tapped a key to open link to the back of the shuttle. “We are making a landing at our destination. It would seem that there are five enemies who are awfully eager to die. Garrus, Legion, this time I want your help. They have some cover, so we will need to play the angles.”

“You got, Commander.”

“Acknowledged.”

Shepard closed the link and hummed. Somehow she did not think these batarians would have many long-distance crack-shots among them. First, before they saw an opportunity for mass murder, they came here intending to abduct people. From their choice of target and the numbers she had seen thus far, she did not think this was a big crew. Only the larger bands had the resources to invest in heavier equipment which allowed them to attack locations like Mindoir or Elysium. At the end of the day, slave runners were still a very nasty business. Their leaders had to turn a profit to keep the goons happy and make ends meet. For a location like this, she did not think they would have come packing heavy artillery.

The Kodiak touched down and the jolt started Shepard out of her musings. As the hum of its mass effect core faded she got to her feet and reached up to check her helmet seals. Having confirmed that her gear was ready for another stint in vacuum she exited the cockpit and turned to her team. Garrus was seated, but his sniper rifle lay unfolded and powered up across his lap. Legion already stood by the hatch, waiting for her.

“We are ready when you are, Commander.” Garrus said.

“Affirmative.”

“We are looking at five enemy combatants, and they have cover. We need to pick angles from which we can create cross-fire, eliminate their cover advantage.” Shepard said.

“Shepard-Commander, we can calculate the angles required once we assess the enemy’s positions.”
Shepard nodded; “Thanks, Legion. That’d save us some time.” Not much, but she would not say that. Ultimately there was no need for complex math; they just needed to flank the batarians. “I intend to fire from the Kodiak’s roof.”

“Acknowledged,” Legion stated plainly.

“I might be able to do something from the other Kodiak.” Garrus said.

“Alright, sounds like a plan. Are your seals good?” Shepard asked, as far as she was concerned there was nothing else to cover here.

“Yes.”

“Nihlus, I’m going to depressurize the back.” Shepard said calmly even as her fingers keyed in the sequence to begin depressurizing.

“Got it,” the Spectre replied. “Go give those mongrels what they deserve.”

Shepard did not reply. The shuttle was already depressurizing, so she barely heard Legion’s huge sniper rifle whine as it powered up. A good minute later the panel showed that the sequence was complete and she tapped the key to open the hatch. Legion stepped right out and moved toward the shuttle’s aft. Shepard followed at a rather leisurely pace; nevertheless she watched as the geth circled the craft and stepped closer to the plain. In the darkness, their shiny paint did not glimmer half as much as it could, but it caught something of the torch’s corona, and so it seemed more reddish than normal, giving the geth a rather ominous visage.

She turned her head to look at the other shuttle; Kodiak Two had landed about thirty meters away. Garrus was already making his way toward it. She saw one of its side-doors open, but Bravo and Tali did not emerge. She figured they were taking it easy, knowing there was nothing for them to do out here as long as the batarians were on the other side of the minefield.

Shepard glanced at Legion. The geth was now right outside the line of the warning beacons, staring seemingly at nothing, though she knew he was probably scanning. With the situation assessed, she finally turned to the Kodiak and began climbing up onto its roof. The rock’s weak gravity made it relatively easy, as even a tiny hold was enough to get leverage.

“**Shepard-Commander, we have completed our survey.**” Legion announced over the communicator.

Shepard eased herself down onto her front and reached behind her back for Nike. “Any suggestions, Legion?” She asked as the rifle extended and she settled it into position against her shoulder.

“**Shepard-Commander’s present position is not advantageous.**” Legion began.

“I think what Legion is trying to say is, we need to flank them. Legion, you head about fifty meters in your direction, and I will head fifty in the opposite. We will pincer them between us.” Garrus stated.

“**Affirmative, Officer-Vakarian, we were going to suggest the same tactical approach. However, we recommend going to sixty meters.**” Legion stated bluntly.

“We can do sixty if it will make you happy,” Garrus replied.

“We are Geth, we do not experience emotions. Happiness is an emotion.” Legion replied automatically.

“One might argue that.” Garrus went on.
Shepard watched from her position, as Garrus and Legion circled the minefield. Legion went around to her right, while Garrus went past the other Kodiak to the left.

“You will have to specify a precise time you purport to have witnessed us express emotion.” Legion replied, blunt as ever.

“Are you two really going to discuss this now?” Nihlus asked.

“Thank you, Spectre Kryik. I was about to ask the same thing. This is an open link you know.” Tali chimed in. “Garrus, you are not winning that argument with the… Geth bosh’tet!”

“Creator-Zorah, your use of the word ‘argument’ implies there is mutual antagonism. There is none. We would suggest you use the term ‘debate’, however for that, Officer-Vakarian would require a position based on an observation free of logic faults.” The geth stated calmly.

“Oh, I see how it is,” Garrus rumbled.

Shepard let out a breath she did not know she was even holding. It looked like Garrus did not take Legion’s cheek too personally.

“We will pick this up later, Legion, for now... we have a job to do.” Garrus finished.

“Officer-Vakarian, your tactical retreat has been noted. Shepard-Commander, we are in position and awaiting your signal to commence operation.” Legion said. Their tone flat and seemingly disinterested, but the cheek continued.

“Emotionless, right, and I am the Primarch of Palaven.” Garrus grumbled. “Ready when you are, Shepard.”

“Stand by,” Shepard replied as she peered down Nike’s scope. By now the batarians had huddled around the containers and drawn their weapons, which meant they were not entirely dumb. It was a bit much to expect them not to be ready, seeing two armed individuals circle the field. Still, she could see only infantry-grade automatics, not a single HVR in sight. They were badly out of their comfort range, and Shepard knew that any one of them with a decent helmet HUD could tell that those flanking them could easily shoot them across a scant few hundred meters. She had officially rained the idea that they could just stand there and watch as someone attempted to walk that minefield.

Would they try to go for the door? Shepard glanced over at it and found that the panel was still green; they had not bothered to secure the hatch. Likely because they were sure that whoever tried to walk the field would trigger the explosives. Shepard could not help but be amused by their overconfidence and inattention to detail. Then she saw one of the batarians shift his weight from foot to foot. He was as good as any target for her first shot, so she moved her crosshairs onto his helmet.

As Legion had said, her angle was not ideal. The batarians had done the obvious thing and hid in such a way that the shuttles had no clear line-of-sight. At best she only had an oblique angle on the side of a helmet or shoulder, but for her, and in the void that was enough. Her finger dropped onto Nike’s trigger as she inhaled, held, and slowly began to exhale. The batarian shifted his weight again. Just as the sliver of helmet widened, Nike bucked against her shoulder.

The bullet flew along the side of the batarian’s visor, scoring it deeply. He recoiled, but the damage was done. The gouge thinned the material there, and the pressure difference did the rest. A moment later the visor cracked open and began to vent. The batarian grabbed for the breach instinctively, but it was pointless, it would not even buy him an extra second of life. None of the others bothered to try and help, thought it was hard to tell whether it was because they knew there was no helping, did not
want to risk being the next one shot, or just did not care. They just stood there and watched as he fought the inevitable for an agonizing ten seconds.

“Thereir lack of loyalty to each other is something,” Garrus murmured.

“Indeed.” Shepard replied blandly. “Garrus, Legion, feel free to ventilate them.”

“With pleasure.”

“Acknowledged.”

A moment later she saw a second batarian jerk. His assault rifle fell from his hands as he tipped sideways out from behind his slice of cover. Shepard turned her crosshairs on him, but it was impossible to miss the neat entry hole in the side of his helmet. He was probably dead before he hit the ground.

“That is two,” Garrus rumbled.

A third’s helmet exploded into fragments, misting with green-tinged fumes as blood and moist brain matter boiled and evaporated in hard vacuum.

“Three.” Legion stated. “Acquiring the next target…”

“I almost feel bad for those bastards, but then I remember what they did,” Ashley murmured quietly.

Shepard watched as one of the two still-living batarians made a dash for the door. Even before he could make ten steps he jerked, his rifle dropped from his hands, and his knees gave out beneath him as he crumpled to the ground.

“Scoped and dropped.” Garrus stated calmly.

Then the last batarian’s helmet exploded into a shower of shards and gore as Legion fired their second shot. The damage was heinous; it would not be an exaggeration to say that only a raw stump of a neck was left. Shepard actually felt her stomach turn ever so slightly.

“Shepard-Commander, enemy units outside the torch control facility have been neutralized.”

“Thanks, Legion.” Shepard replied as she powered down Nike, stowed it behind her back, and rose to her knees. Now came the real hard part, they still needed to figure out how they were going to cross the minefield. Shepard glanced down at the ground prior to jumping, only to see Tali standing below, with Chatika floating over her shoulder.

“Is something wrong, Tali?” Shepard acknowledged.

“No, I was just thinking about the problem at hand.” Tali replied. “You said that the thermal readings were not penetrating the asteroid’s dust layers, but all electronics also emit a faint electromagnetic field. Perhaps the charges will show up if we scan for that…”

Shepard nodded, utterly unsurprised that the individual closest to being a combat engineer on her team was fast at work solving a problem. “Of course, but the Kodiak’s sensors do not have the needed resolution for frequencies other than infrared.” Shepard sincerely wished they had a Mako with a mine-clearing attachment. Reality once again only disappointed her.

“Maybe Chatika can map the field for us. The Geth sensory inside has a slightly better resolution,
and it would be closer to the actual charges, so it might be easier to pick them up.”

Shepard caught the way her tone dipped, “I’m sensing a but in there…”

“But…” Tali replied. “Due to issues of how far Chatika can relay telemetry… I would have to follow it onto the field.”

It was difficult to miss the fact that Tali clearly was not eager to do that. Still, she did put the option forward, meaning that she wanted to help and Shepard could probably cajole her into doing it. That is, if she wanted to be a total insensitive monster. She could not, in good conscience, order Tali to do something this dangerous if she was not a hundred percent on board with it.

“Shepard-Commander, Creator-Zorah, there is another option. The drone Creator-Zorah constructed uses Heretic sensory. We can attune our sensors to those same frequencies. We could conduct those scans at a higher resolution. In addition, we do not have the same data transfer constraints.” Legion stepped in.

Tali turned to the geth with such suddenness that it was impossible to see the reaction as anything other than surprise.

“You would do that?” She asked quietly.

“Affirmative.”

Shepard could only weigh the options. Legion made the offer with their usual calm tone, the geth would certainly not be afraid of that minefield. Fear might cause someone else to make a mistake, whether in overlooking a bomb, or stepping too close to one. However, Shepard did not want to order Legion to do the task just because of that consideration. There was, at the core, a potential for the argument of favoritism here. Ideally, she should let Tali and Legion figure out which of them actually went onto the field. If that was cowardly of her, then she would admit to being a bit of a coward.

“Why?” Tali asked next.

“We detected Creator-Zorah’s hesitance to perform the scans. We are not capable of the same emotional response. Creator-Zorah chose not to use Geth nanoprocessors or runtimes in the construction of her drone. We do not have the same limitations. Five hundred forty two runtimes within this platform agree that we are the logical choice for conducting these scans.” Legion explained flatly. The emotive flaps that the top of their head barely moved at all, but the ocular iris seemed to narrow down as they drew near Tali.

“And the other six hundred forty one?” Tali asked, suspicion growing in her voice.

Shepard could not help but be wary as well, five forty two was less than half the runtimes inside the Geth. Shepard could see where Tali’s hesitance came from. On the one hand Tali would not want to look like a coward who let someone do something for her, after she offered to begin with. On the other, Shepard could certainly see Tali still being afraid of that minefield. Shepard figured the young quarian was dithering between telling Legion to shove their offer and then do the scans, and letting the geth have one over her.

“One hundred runtimes would have us do nothing.” Legion began.

Shepard blinked, stunned. She had a feeling she knew where this was going.

“Five hundred forty one would join Creator-Zorah. Conducting the scans together would ensure
success, and is thus the most efficient option. However, we understand if that would not be acceptable to Creator-Zorah. We calculated Creator-Zorah’s likelihood of rejecting the option to be seventy-five percent.” Legion replied bluntly.

It was not for the first time Shepard marveled at how brilliant and wily the geth was. The gross majority of the runtimes within them could agree on one thing, they would do the scans; however, they were split on whether or not to involve Tali. So to fix the split, they chose to lay it out to Tali herself and challenge her to prove them wrong.

“Oh is that how it is, you bosh’tet. Come on. We’re doing this. I will show you once and for all that all of your runtimes are not as clever as they calculate they are.” Tali growled. It sounded like all semblance of fear left her in the face of a direct challenge from her nemesis.

Shepard could only sit and watch, as it was not her place to tell Tali that in all likelihood, Legion’s runtimes wanted to do the job with her from the beginning, hence the supremely narrow split in their thinking. They chose to goad her into accepting their involvement to have their way. Shepard did not want Tali to feel foolish. She was pretty sure that everyone who was on the shared comm link would know that Legion had won that one. “Be careful you two,” she warned. What else could she say?

“Acknowledged, Shepard-Commander.”

“Don’t worry about me, Shepard. If anyone is getting blown up, it’s this mechanical nuisance. This sort of job requires a delicate touch. A geth wouldn’t know a thing about delicacy.” Tali replied.

The flaps at the top of Legion’s head rose in what looked like comical surprise. But the quarian stomped toward the field with her drone in tow without even looking at the geth. A moment later the geth’s emotive flaps reset and it turned to follow the quarian. Shepard watched them got a good thirty seconds before she finally pushed off the Kodiak’s edge and down from its roof. There was something to be said for low gravity, she barely felt the impact of landing at all.

She rounded the Kodiak just in time to see Legion catch up and overtake Tali as the two of them stepped past the lit warning beacons. Some part of Shepard was wary, sure she did not issue the orders, but this whole thing still felt wrong to her. This was the sort of task she normally handled herself, simply because she was perfectly fine taking the chances while her team stayed out of harm’s way. Still, right then she was out of her loop. She did not have the skills for finding explosive devices, improvised or otherwise. Tali would not have volunteered if she knew she could not do it. At the very least, Shepard thought Legion would have a head on their shoulders. Sure they goaded Tali into it, but Shepard hoped they also knew that she would not be happy if something happened to the quarian girl.

A few meters out on the field Chatika moved ahead of Tali, turning this way and that, pausing in between turns as it scanned the ground. Legion walked abreast with Tali, their face-light dilated to the maximum as it slowly scanned the ground in sweeping arcs.

“I knew it!” Tali chorused suddenly, her voice filled with triumph. “The detonators are emitting a characteristic electromagnetic signature that Chatika can pick up! There’s one about a ten meters on my left.”

“Confirmed. Coordinates logged.” Legion said. “Addendum. There is a charge ten point three meters ahead on my right. Logging coordinates.”

“Don’t think this is a competition on who spots more, you bosh’tet.” Tali said.

Shepard shook her head, Tali was a rotten liar. She wanted it to be a competition; she would not
have said anything Legion’s efficiency otherwise. “Be careful you two, those are proximity charges. We do not know their yield or how close you have to be to set them off.” She said, even as she approached the point at which they stepped onto the field.

By now they were about a fifth of the field ahead, around thirty five, maybe forty meters. Shepard glanced around and noted that the others had begun to gather around her.

“Should we follow along their path?” Kaidan asked quietly.

“You could. If we did not set off the charges then it should be safe for you.” Tali replied.

“Legion left some rather impressive footprints. We should be fine if we walk right on top of them.” Shepard said. The regolith was un-weathered and there was absolutely nothing to move it about, so someone as heavy as Legion left very clear impressions with every step.

“Ah yes. I suppose that’s good.” Tali replied.

Shepard was the first to brave the minefield, stepping right along and on top of the trail Legion inadvertently created. “Alright people, follow me, single file, space out, and take it nice and easy. This is not a race.”

There was a series of indistinct sounds of agreement from the others, but Shepard was already some meters away. The beginning of the path was ruler straight, with stops here and there, at places where the geth and the quarian paused during their scans. She looked up; the two were still about thirty meters ahead of her.

“Creator-Zorah, stop. There is a charge ten meters immediately in front of you.” Legion called, raising their voice in a semblance of alarm.

Tali stopped immediately and turned to her Omni-tool.

Shepard stopped where she was as well; she would not want to catch up to them, lest they needed to backtrack.

Tali fiddled with her Omni-tool for a long moment as Chatika turned to scan the ground immediately in front of the quarian. “Ah, yes, yes there is… Thanks.”

“Acknowledged. We will need to divert our path. Standby while we scan our surroundings.” Even before Legion finished speaking they had turned in place to scan for gaps on their right. The process was quite slow as Shepard could not imagine they could cover more than maybe a meter or two ahead at one time. Even the geth probably did not have the sensitivity and resolution to handle wide swaths of area. Tali turned to look at the geth, seemingly seeing them for the first time.

Shepard could only watch from her distance. It was no big mystery why Tali was suddenly so keen on Legion. She had not expected the geth to warn her about the mine right in front of her. The casual ease with which Legion had done it, only then to turn and look for an alternative path, was proof of some sort that the geth held no real malice toward the quarian. The problem was that Tali would likely assume Legion only did it because it was expected of them. Tali would probably reject the idea that Legion at all cared for her wellbeing, despite evidence to the contrary. Legion did not have to volunteer to scan the field after Tali had done so. They had also showed that the vast majority of their runtimes wanted to do it. Only a hundred out of one thousand one hundred eighty three had been cynical to the point of advising no action.

“Creator-Zorah, we have identified a clear path. Follow us.” Legion said a moment before they turned and began to walk.
Tali did not protest as she followed the geth this time. However, Chatika continued to hover over her shoulder, still scanning as they went. Shepard waited only a little bit for the gap between them to widen before she resumed following along Legion’s footprints. They would have to be very careful to make the turn at the exact same place as Legion had.

Tali and Legion completed the scan without any more excitement. Apparently the minefield had an inner ring and an outer grid of explosives. This was the reason why Legion had to steer them along a slightly different path that one time, on the edge between the two. It took another fifteen minutes to pass the remaining breadth of the field, but it was done, and not a single charge was tripped. Shepard could rightfully say she was proud of them; they had managed to put their animosity aside and work on a common task. She hoped it was the first step on a road to a more professional working relationship. They really could not co-exist on a ship the size of the Normandy if they could not be civil to each-other.

Once on the other side of the minefield, Shepard took a moment to inspect the environment. This torch control facility structure seemed smaller than the previous one. It did not take long for her to notice the console set on a crate by the door. It was such a weird place to keep a computer that she was instantly drawn to it. It took about five minutes to figure out that the batarians had moved the control mechanism for the minefield outside. It made sense, as this way the guards would have been able to disarm the field when necessary, likely in the event of seeing allies coming in, or needing to evacuate the facility. The terminal was in standby, but still logged on, so Shepard only needed to input a general shut down command to disarm the charges entirely.

Shepard was amused at how undisciplined some batarians could be. Their ego and empty belief in their superiority was their bane. She had seen very few who bothered to put their money where their mouth was. She had seen even fewer who displayed rigorous discipline of the sort that she would call ‘well trained’. Though admittedly, there were some talk that the rabble who ran in the slaver gangs was often the cast-offs from the Hegemony military to begin with. Which would make them only a little better than the typical mercenary in terms of skills. Still, those were just idle rumors that one ought not to build a strategy around.

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“I expect them to have a welcoming committee similar to the one we encountered at the first torch. Complete with varren.” Nihlus said.

“I think that’s a safe bed,” Shepard agreed.

“We handled them there, and we’ll handle them here.” Kaidan murmured.

“Damn right,” Ashley added.

“How are you holding up, lieutenant?” Shepard asked. She would not want Kaidan to run out of steam at the worst possible moment.

“I am fine, ma’am. I had some calorie bars during our flight, and the pain is nothing some painkillers can’t suppress.” Kaidan replied. “Besides, this is more important than one of my headaches.”

Shepard nodded and moved toward the doorway leading inside the torch control facility. It only took laying her palm over the panel for the door to open for her. Inside, the anteroom was arranged in exactly the same manner as the one at the previous facility, though there were fewer EVA suit lockers here, and all of them stood empty. The inner door leading deeper into the facility was locked and sealed. Once everyone was inside, Kaidan and Ashley made their way toward it without needing to be prompted, and Kaidan keyed in the sequence so that the airlock would start cycling.

“Just like last time, people. Mind your cover and watch out for each other,” Shepard said as she
looked around while waiting for the anteroom to pressurize.

“You got it, Commander.” Ashley said.

“They will not know what hit them.” Jenkins added as the marines took up positions on one side of the door.

Shepard put her back to the wall on the other side and drew Sin. At that moment she heard the first external beep indicating that the airlock had pressurized, and then the door panel switched to green. When Shepard was sure that the rest of the team took up cover behind her, she nodded toward Kaidan whose hand hovered in the vicinity of the control panel. A moment later Kaidan duly tapped the panel. The inner door opened onto a room cast into murky red-hued twilight. The batarians had turned off the main lights, but they could do nothing about the dimmer emergency lights, including the red blinkers along the floor which showed the way toward the exits.

“Well, well, well…” Shepard could not help but drawl. “They’re not as dumb as we thought.”

“Batarians have better night vision than us, right?” Jenkins wondered.

“Does not matter, they’re still subject to the same limitations. Use the flash-bangs if you got them.” Shepard replied. Yes the batarians had slightly better low-light sensitivity, by virtue of having twice the light-sensitive tissue to send signals to the brain. But flash-bangs were universal in their ability to temporarily overload optical nerves and wreck someone’s night-vision. Only Krogan had a sort of limited resistance, simply because their eyes were so widely set apart and they had a redundant nervous system. Their optical nerves got over the shock quicker. Flash-banging a krogan was truthfully just a very good way to anger them more.

“I’ve got three on me,” Ashley said.

Shepard inched closer to the jamb and turned her head just enough to peer beyond out of the corner of one eye. This facility was also packed with containers, creating a disruptive labyrinth to dodge and weave around. The dim lighting was barely enough to navigate by and it deepened and lengthened all the shadows. The one thing Shepard could not hear, no matter how much she strained her ears, was any indication of varren. No barking, growling, snuffling, or even tell-tale scratching of razor-sharp claw points on hard floor slabs. Just as she was about to point that out, she saw two dim, slightly offset beams of light move across the wall immediately to the right. There was only one thing those could be, “They’ve got drones,” she announced.

“Yes… but on the plus side, I do not hear any varren,” Garrus said.

“So they swapped one for the other, is that really a plus side?” Ashley wondered.

“It is to me. Much fewer germs,” Tali said.

“I stand corrected.”

“We know you are there. Your snipers will not help you now.” A voice shouted from inside.

“They figured out how to use the security cameras.” Shepard murmured, not bothering to restrain her base impulse of rolling her eyes. Then she saw another beam of light pass along the floor immediately in front of the door. The twin beams of light along the wall were still there.

“Congratulations on your one smart thought. Let me show you what you’ve won.” She called back and stepped around the doorjamb, whipping Sin up into firing position in the same smooth motion. Sure enough there was a pair of batarians with a drone right in front of the doorway. Both had their
assault rifles aimed at the airlock. She turned on one and pulled the trigger. The batarian’s shields flared, and both obeyed their basic impulse to duck behind whatever cover they had closest to them. “Go!” Shepard ordered even as she pulled the trigger again, nicking the same batarian’s shields again, causing them to collapse. Her third shot caught the batarian in the arm just as he ducked behind a stack of crates. He yelped, but hurried deeper into the cover.

Shepard turned her gun on the other, to make sure he would not get funny ideas, but she only saw the drone. The machine turned on her, and its integrated weapon’s barrel extended out.

“We got you, Commander.” Ashley announced as she whipped up her assault rifle into firing position and pulled the trigger, aiming right at the drone. The drone’s shields flared and it wheeled on the more imminent threat and returned fire. Shepard side-stepped, but caught sight of Ashley with her shields flaring. A second rifle began to bark a wild staccato from the airlock as Jenkins joined the fray.

The combined firepower whittled down its barrier, and then the bullets pierced through the machine, cutting off its rapport before it could do any real damage to the marines. Both took that as their cue to let off on their triggers. Then the drone’s mass effect field failed, and it dropped out of the air like a brick, bounced off the floor once, and dropped down again, smoking and sparking.

The batarian Shepard had wounded poked his rifle out around his cover and opened fire. Both Ashley and Jenkins side-stepped his blind spray. Shepard rained Sin on him, but from her angle she had no line of sight on anything vital. Ashley, now well clear of the blind barrage, moved forward. Shepard turned her gun on the other batarian’s hiding spot, just in case.

It did not take Ashley long to find the injured batarian. He wheeled on her and fired, but Ashley fired right back. His shields must not have kicked back yet as it took only a brief burst before Shepard heard a body hit the floor.

It was then that the other batarian decided to stick his head out and fire at the gunny. Ashley’s shields flared, and she hissed something as she whirled and ducked into cover just in the nick of time before her shields finally failed.

“I got that guy,” Jenkins called as he opened fire, driving the batarian back into cover even as he moved in on him.

Shepard lowered her gun when Jenkins crossed into her line of fire.

Just then a metal canister came flying from the batarian’s hiding spot.

“Grenade!” Jenkins shouted as he looked widely for whatever cover he could grab.

“Jenkins stay still!” Kaidan shouted as he bolted forward, glowing like a candle. Kaidan swept his arm through the air and there was a resounding whomp as the grenade went flying back and detonated just short of hitting the back wall. The emergency lights nearest to the blast blew out, plunging that corner of the space into near total darkness.

“Why don’t you just die?!” The batarian shouted as he rounded the crate barrier, his rifle raised into firing position.

Ashley was quicker; her rifle came to life, barking full automatic right into his shields. The batarian recoiled, clearly not expecting the quick response. He shouted something just as his shields failed, but none of them could make out what. A moment later he toppled, dead before he even hit the ground.
“There might be more of them. Bravo, with me.” Kaidan ordered without missing a beat as he moved deeper into the room.

“Roger,” Jenkins chorused automatically.

“Everyone else, with me!” Shepard ordered as she turned to her left. She would go along the wall separating this space and the airlock. Soon Bravo was out of her line of sight due to the stacks of containers. Then a light beam fell along the floor from behind her, but the cool blue hue told her that it was Legion. Ahead the stacks gave way to a wider passage. Shepard had just drawn to the corner when there was a staccato rattle and her shield flared.

“Yikes!” Shepard whirled out of the way, pressing her back to the crates.

Garrus’ rifle gave a reply burst, peppering the crates ahead of her, but it did not last long. Garrus was not one to waste ammo on a target that was not there. He meant to drive whoever was in there back into cover. The slaver must have known that as well, as a moment after Garrus’ rifle fell silent he came around the corner, raised his gun, and pulled the trigger. His second burst caught her shields again.

Legion was suddenly there, their frame slid into the spray with unbelievable casualness. “Kinetic barrier energy draw limits lifted…” they announced as the light beam from their face-lamp narrowed and their emotive plates rose and flared at the back. “Your efforts are futile.”

The batarian kept his finger on the trigger and Legion’s shields continued to ripple from the barrage. It was a long three seconds before the batarian’s rifle finally clipped out.

Shepard stepped around the geth, brought up Sin, and fired back. The first shot merely caused the batarian’s shields to flare; the second passed through and shattered his chest armor as the slug went into the torso. The batarian jerked with the force of impact and his weapon slipped out of his hands. Shepard raised Sin’s muzzle to point between his eyes. All four widened and she squeezed the trigger. His head whipped back with the impact and then his knees gave way and his body hit the floor. “Thanks Legion,” Shepard said as she ejected Sin’s clip and reached behind her back for a cold one.

“Gratitude is not necessary.”

“Keelah,” Tali murmured in the background.

Shepard did not feel the need to ask the geth whether they were alright. All the bullets the batarian had sent at them simply did not go through their overcharged shield. This was the same geth who took a shotgun blast to the back, near point blank, and remained standing. She was not surprised that their shields were seriously robust.

“Commander, are you alright?” Kaidan asked.

“Of course,” Shepard replied.

“Our side is clear, we are proceeding along the back wall,” Kaidan continued.

Shepard knew why he chose that moment to make that report; it was his way of getting everyone back on the task at hand. She was thankful for that, this way she did not have to say a thing about it. A moment later Chatika floated out in front of her. Shepard turned and holstered Sin. A pair of turian-shaped shadows fell along the floor at her sides. She did not say anything as she proceeded along their side of the room.
“We haven’t found anyone else here, Commander.” Kaidan went on.

“I think most of them went outside to watch us try the minefield.” Jenkins added.

Shepard thought that if most of the batarians had gone outside, hoping to see someone die to a mining charge, it would explain the discomfort and bravado of the ones they had just gunned down. They had no choice but to intimidate their enemies, especially after watching their compatriots be gunned down without mercy. The bravado might have been a grim sort of determination to go out swinging. “Be that as it may, looks can be deceiving, keep your heads.”

“Roger,” Kaidan replied.

The silence returned as Shepard drew near to the corner along their side of the facilities. Was it really possible that there was absolutely no one left in here? As she turned the corner she got a clear line of sight on the opposite corner. Like in the first facility the door to the control room was closed, but not locked. The second door, leading into the tunnels connected to the torch’s reactor room, was locked and sealed.

She turned and made her way toward the control room, still sweeping every nook and alcove with her pistol. Though she knew that even if there was someone huddling in one of them, they would not be huddling for very long. Nihlus walked on her right, shotgun at a ready. At close range that weapon would make mincemeat out of anyone unfortunate enough to end up at its business end. A few meters short of the door she looked to her right and spotted Bravo at the place where the middle passage between the stacks opened up. Shepard nodded to Kaidan and he flicked his hand, indicating Bravo should follow him. Just like that, the marines ducked into that central space to sweep it as well. Shepard turned her attention to the task at hand. She laid her hand on the control panel to open the door.

This control room was much like the first in layout and equipment, thought it was somewhat smaller the previous. Her eyes automatically went to the bodies sprawled out in pools of their own now-dried blood along the back wall. Both victims wore hardsuits that bore the same patches identifying them as members of the X57 project, except with an added ribbon denoting they had been security. Their side-arms lay on the ground where they fell. Judging from the bullet holes in the server cases and the overturned desk, they tried to put up a fight. Shepard gave the surrounding walls a quick once over, but she could not see any non-human blood stains or spatter, there were no batarian bodies either. Whatever resistance the two guards mustered to put up, it simply did not last long before they were overwhelmed and shot multiple times each. In the end they never stood a real chance, being outnumbered and equipped with civilian-grade gear.

“Garrus please note their names, and that we found them here.” She ordered as she turned toward the consoles at the right side of the room.

“Already on it,” Garrus replied.

The blatant apathy leaving bodies where they fell displayed that the batarians simply breezed through. Shepard really did not need more reasons to want to kill every last one of them on X57. She had to tell herself that she should not sink into the abyss of wishing she could kill every last batarian, period. Still, this was dealing with the same sort of people who showed up at Elysium. Because of that she was finding it difficult to keep the violent murderous rage at bay. She took a deep, soundless breath, hoping to anchor herself and turned to the monitor on the right side of the room. The system controlling the fusion core below was similar to the one at the other torch, so it was not all that difficult to get into the controls and begin the shut down sequence.

“Commander, may we make an observation? We request input for consideration.” Legion
spoke, breaking the silence for the first time in what felt like forever.

“Sure Legion,” Shepard replied. Anything was better than silence right now. She would even take Legion asking a question that she could not readily answer. Legion would take a non-answer and ponder it anyways. They seemed to take everything around them as something to ponder.

“We have observed that you tend to draw enemy aggression at a rate much higher than any other member of the Normandy ground team.”

Shepard looked over her shoulder. That was the beginning of something, but what? Where were they going with that one?

“It has to be the light armament. They see the Commander as an easier target.” Nihlus stated, though the tone of his voice was teasing.

“Sure, laugh it up, Nihlus,” Shepard muttered as she turned back to the console. “Just remember what I can do with my light armament.”

“Yes, but they do not know that.” Nihlus replied.

“Acknowledged. We have considered that possibility. They are making an error of logic. We recognize the significance of the mark on the top right of Shepard-Commander’s torso plate. The Alliance’s N-seven designation denotes units that underwent extensive training and conditioning. We would not make the same error.” Legion stated.

“Could be that or they recognize Shepard is the leader. Eliminating the leadership is a sound tactic.” Garrus slipped in. “Of course we would not let anyone harm the Commander.”

“That is the second logical possibility we have considered. Furthermore, we are aware of the reasoning behind Officer-Vakarian’s and Spectre-Kryik’s dedication to ensuring Shepard-Commander’s continuing safety.”

“Of course, she is-” Garrus blurted hurried.

“Vakarian do not justify it!” Nihlus cut in coolly. “Legion, that has no bearing on the matter.”

“Mechanical bosh’tet… did you even understand what just came from your vocal processor? Or how it sounds?” Tali asked.

“We have, Creator-Zorah. Our apologies, Officer-Vakarian, Spectre-Kryik, we did not mean to insinuate, we were making an observation.”

“Oh Keelah…” Tali groaned.

Shepard was perfectly aware of how methodical the geth was with their choice of words. Just what did Legion think Garrus’ and Nihlus’ reasons were? Garrus seemed very uncomfortable with the observation. Nihlus had shut him down before he could give context, but there were only a few things that could put Garrus on the defensive like that. He was conscious of his rank and position on the Normandy, and still struggled with ditching the formalities. So did he think Legion insinuated something improper in that context? As for Nihlus, whatever he got from that, it made him bristle like a porcupine.

“I’d be careful, Commander. I think this geth is planning something.”

“Creator-Zorah is correct. We have determined that Shepard-Commander requires hardware
augmentations to assist with the above average operational hazards inherent to her unique operational conditions.” Legion stated, blunt as a bag of hammers. “However, we have not yet achieved consensus on what augmentations to recommend. Our current data is insufficient.” Legion replied.

“And I reserve the right not to take your recommendations.” Shepard stated.

“Acknowledged. Furthermore, we are aware that the present time is not appropriate for such discussions. We will submit our proposal when we have achieved a consensus and at time when such upgrades can be carried out,” Legion replied, utterly unbothered by her refusal.

The console in front of Shepard seemingly chose that moment to beep, announcing that the core was in the final stage of ramping down. The fusion rate had slowed down to about a quarter of its normal output, and continuing to decrease. There was a warning on the screen about diminishing plasma output and the increasing propulsion imbalance between the thrusters. As Shepard watched the core reached ten percent, and the console displayed a red-banne red warning about the level of plasma production. By then it was simply too little to provide any thrust at all, but continuing diversion risked damaging the core’s conduits. Finally the safety regulations kicked in, bringing the torch offline completely.

“Torch two is down,” Shepard announced.

“Two down, one to go,” Nihlus said.

As if on cue the ominous creaking started as the heated ducts that connected the facility to the underground began to resonate. Then there was a crackle coming from the built-in communications equipment.

“Are you there? You must be. I just registered the second torch turn off. Listen… there is no time to celebrate. You’ve really pissed them off.” The same female voice whispered into the communicator, though her tone was far more urgent. Shepard raised her hand to sign everyone to remain quiet. She did not know if the recipient was in position to hear anything. For all they knew, her speakers could give her away.

“You have to hurry.” Kate continued, without asking for acknowledgement. “Their leader’s setting charges everywhere. I think he’s going to blow this whole place. If he damages the main network, we will not be able to coordinate the counter-burn.”

Ah, so there was the spanner in the works. Shepard had been waiting for it to drop in there. She would give the leader of these scumbags just a little bit of credit, he figured out the only way to make them win the battle, but lose the war. Without a counter-burn the rock would continue at Terra Nova, and catastrophe would follow. He must have realized what was inevitable, and was actually doing a passable job of counter-playing against her. It went without saying that the bombs could also act as a form of insurance policy. He would want to leave this place alive, to have his cake and eat it too, proverbially speaking.

Suddenly there was a thunderous crash over the communicator, so loud that it made Shepard jump. It brought her out of her mental calculations. A male voice shouted in alarm as something crashed against the floor.

“Get away from there!” A batarian shouted, his voice much deeper and guttural than any human’s could be.

Shepard clenched her jaw, grinding her molars together. Exposing that Kate actually managed to contact anyone would not help the woman. However, if the batarians decided to talk near an open
comm link, she might get an idea of what was going on over there. Still, the odds did not sound good.

“Don’t shoot. Please.” Kate begged. There was static and a burst of feedback, followed by what sounded like scratches from a scuffle. Shepard defiantly kept her hand up, telling everyone not to make a sound. It was the most difficult call she had to make, but there was nothing else they could do.

Multiple sets of footsteps came over the comm, faint, but distinct enough, telling Shepard that there were three, if not four other individuals in the room with Kate. The human voice she heard must have been another of the project team.

“Who’s shutting down the torches?” A batarian demanded in a dangerous hiss.

Silence reigned for a good three seconds. Shepard heard another muted thud as something hit the floor. Kate was still near the microphone, it picked up what sounded like a faint squeak from her, but then there was only silence. Shepard had an overwhelming sinking feeling right at that moment. It took everything she had not to leap in there, though without being there in person, she could not do much. At the end of the day, she could make things worse. The batarian wanted to know whom he was facing; it would not do to arm him with that knowledge.

“I won’t ask you again,” he hissed.

The silence continued. The microphone caught what sounded like a sniffle. Then there was a single loud gunshot. Shepard closed her eyes as her jaw muscles practically seized up. This was almost exactly how Arthur had died. She heard the shot that fatally wounded him, but she had been unable to do anything about it. She could practically hear the shot echo again. These monsters were really keen on testing her self-control.

“Find this problem and deal with it!” The batarian ordered. “And someone get her out of here. Put her with the rest!”

Shepard looked up, so the batrians had not shot Kate? Shepard felt very much responsible for the woman’s safety right then. She had tried to help, risked her life and safety when the batrians might not have known she was loose. She could have remained hidden, especially after realizing that someone was out there working on resolving the situation, but no, she chose to warn them about the bombs. That took a lot of courage and a clear head. Still, it had cost her, now the woman found herself in some real peril. Add to that, the batrians knew that she might have made contact with someone on the outside. It was all the reasons needed for trash like them to take their anger out on her.

Shepard could just imagine what was going on through the other woman’s mind right at the moment. Someone got shot in front of her, likely right in front of her. That would not be easy to deal with. Now she would be thinking about what they would do to her. She might go into shock, and the batrians would not develop empathy and a conscience. With each passing second Shepard was finding it increasingly difficult to reason away why she should not murder every last one of those bastards on sight.

There was another scratch and a burst of feedback, for a moment Shepard thought that the batrians were about to start barking threats into the ether, but then the comm link closed and silence was restored. Shepard slowly lowered her arm. “I better not recognize that particular batarian anywhere. Because if I do… I’m going to make his death slow and excruciatingly painful.” She would shoot him through all four limbs and watch as he bled out. He would be lucky if she could maintain control of her anger enough not to do something worse.
“Easy, Shepard. I do not blame you, but we must keep calm here.” Nihlus said.

“Oh I’m calm, Nihlus.” She was as calm as the weather ahead of a storm. Her mind was already running away with idea on how to make sure the leader of these batarians regret being born. She knew enough about their religions and superstitions to make sure he would not get the last words or laugh. The batarians believed that shortly after death their soul left the body through the eyes, but if the eyes were damaged, the soul would remain trapped for all eternity. It did not take much to damage the eyes enough for him to die thinking he would never go to the afterlife.

She took another deep breath, hoping it would help her swallow the rage. There were still things that needed to be done before she could pursue the ringleader in earnest. She turned back toward the console. By now the fusion core had ramped down to a trickle rate of one percent, just enough that the fusion reaction would not cease entirely, as the initial was took quite a long time. She tapped into the administrative controls and quickly locked out the acceleration sequence with the same password she had used on the first torch.

Only once she was satisfied that the console was locked down, she stepped away and turned back to the others. “We still have one more torch to deal with.” She said. If her voice was cold right then, it was only because bottling up was the only way she could retain a modicum of control.

It was then that she noticed that in the midst of it all, Bravo had joined them in the control room. Shepard had not heard Kaidan, Ashley, or Jenkins come in. Well, it worked for her; she rather disliked having to repeat herself for any reason.

“We handle that last torch, and after that, we clear the main facility. I do not mean to waste Kate’s final warning. It’s either as she said; they are trying to blow up the place to make counter-burning difficult, or… Well, I think it is more likely that they intend to use it as part of an exit strategy, or some sort of bargaining chip.”

“They lost the right to negotiate anything,” Kaidan stated bluntly.

“Even if I was inclined to negotiate, we have no time. Needless to say, I’m one of the worst people to send to negotiate anything with batarians.” Shepard replied. Admiral Hackett would have known that she would not be able to negotiate anything with them, because of the potent mix of personal distaste for their cultural norms and a very personal enmity. If there was any species that came closest to pushing her tolerance boundaries, it was batarians.

“I just don’t understand how they could possibly think this will be a win for them.” Tali murmured.

“They probably think they can make the Alliance back down, surrender territory, or something of the sort.” Ashley explained.

“Yea, we’ll do that, and pigs will learn to fly.” Jenkins stated.

Shepard did not feel the need to add anything to that topic; instead she simply stepped past the marines and exited the control room.

“Shepard, wait!” Nihlus called after her, but she ignored him.

Shepard ignored him. The more she thought about it, the angrier she became. The injustice of the whole situation and the fact that the batarians considered their psychopathic tendencies acceptable all served to fuel the perfect storm of rage inside her. If these terrorists thought she would waste time talking, then they had a real shocker coming. There was no talking with extremists of their sort; it would make her look weak and do more to amuse them. Kate had risked her life to tell her of their
intentions. Shepard would not disrespect the woman and toss the warning aside for the idealistic pipe dream of a peaceful resolution when she had a carte blanche to paint the walls with batarian blood. The slavers thought they could back her into a corner and outplay her. She would not stand for it. This would not be the first time she manipulates a situation to her advantage, and she had done so with fiercer individuals against her.

By the time she reached the airlock she was unashamedly angry. She ended up pacing along the outer wall as the others gathered around and the airlock began to cycle. It was another good fifteen minutes before they were back with the Kodiaks. Shepard led the team along the same path that Legion and Tali cleared for them. It was a simple precaution, as even with the charges disabled she was taking no chances. It did not take much to make a console say anything one wished it to.

Once aboard the Kodiak, she joined Nihlus in the cockpit. A few minutes later the shuttle took off. Everything about this situation reminded her of Elysium. The more that thought lingered, the more she felt herself regress back to that last night. She was beginning to feel a little sick to her stomach at the prospect. She did not want to associate the mere thought of batarians with Elysium, with that long night, and yet whenever she had to handle them, the association seemed to make itself. That certainly did not help their case; in fact, Shepard could not help but loathe them even more.

Chapter End Notes

**Author Notes:** This episode was problematic because of this plot hole I saw in the DLC. When Kate mentions the explosives, it is a red flag to anyone with any sort of training; it is something to pay attention to. But the game kind of tosses it aside; makes Shepard ignore the warning. It is very much done to force Shepard into making that rather contrived difficult choice. I intend to fix that.

**General Notes:**
None this time…

**Chapter Notes:**
Shockingly none…
Armageddon [Part III]

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I do not own Mass Effect, I do not claim to own Mass Effect, I am only doing this for fun.

Author Notes: Real life bites. Very busy this past month. Lots of thinking went into this one. Lots of re-writing too. The scene at the third torch took three tries before I get it to feel “right”. I’m so glad I managed to get it done “on schedule”. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Episode 40: Armageddon [Part III]

During the time they had been inside the second torch control facility, Terra Nova had dipped about a tenth of its disk below the horizon. The angle X57 pointed directly at Terra Nova but away from Asgard was noticeably brighter than before. The planet was reflecting some of the star’s light onto the approaching asteroid. They were now heading toward the sun-blasted side of the rock, where there was absolutely nothing to shield them from Asgard’s radiation. The only mitigating factor was that the star was a G2V type, and Terra Nova was at 1.3 AU from it.

Nihlus kept the shuttle well above the rock’s surface as they flew. The altitude allowed a glimpse of the main facility in the distance. From what Shepard could see, only the structure’s topmost level was above the surface. This upper part looked like a large pillbox bunker. What caught her eye were the vehicles parked on the plain. A few taps on the sensor controls made one of the Kodiak’s cameras rotate and zoom in as tight as it could. Though the craft were still too far for particular details Shepard recognized their general shape. “They’ve got two troop shuttles out in front of the main facility. If I’m not mistaken they’re rated for ten individuals, flight crew included.”

“Standard procedure is to assume they were packed to capacity.” Nihlus replied without even looking away from their heading. “Now we know that there are twenty of them inside the main facility. That puts us at two to one odds.”

The proverbial spanner was well and truly stuck in the metaphorical works now. Nihlus was being generous; in no way could eight against twenty translate to two to one. “You’re off on your count; it’s closer to three to one. I would not call Tali a combatant, so that’s seven against twenty.”

Nihlus hummed thoughtfully, “True.”

“You know, there’s a proper protocol for these sorts of odds.” She began. “It was set by a certain Swiss militia man, when during a war game the German Kaiser asked him what his men would do if they had to defend Switzerland against a German army that outnumbered them two to one… well, he put it succinctly, in such a case each of them will just have to shoot twice and then they can all go home.”

Nihlus burst out laughing. “Spirits… I love human glibness sometimes!”

Shepard thought he would get a kick out of that one. “He’ll pardon us if we upstage him by shooting thrice,” she added with a flicker of a smile was more display than heartfelt. She could hardly muster
genuine amusement right then. She knew how the situation could still turn ugly. The batarians could have varren or drones, or some combination thereof, which would increase their numbers dramatically. Levity also did little to distract her, or keep the anger she felt at bay.

At this point there was nothing that could sate her fury short of seeing the leader of these batarians dead at her feet. Levity was just her mask, as appearing overly emotional was not a good idea. Raw anger worked when one could afford to pursue the query with absolute single-mindedness, leaving nothing but scorched earth their wake. It worked for her on Elysium because she had been alone. Here and now, she had people who counted on her, people she cared for. No batarian was going to anger her to the point of making enough mistakes to make her victory pyrrhic. She took a deep breath and slowly let it out through her mouth. That lifted the haze a little, “Then again, we may not end up facing all twenty after all. And I know just what to do with that,” with that she reached up to the communicator controls to switch frequencies, “Kodiak One to Normandy, come in.”

“Normandy here, reading you loud and clear, Commander. Do you need us for something?” Joker asked.

“Joker, EDI, I need your eyes on the main facility. The batarians parked two of their shuttles out front, and I have it on their authority that they will try and ambush us. Keep an eye on those shuttles, I want to know the moment they stir.”

“Their authority, huh?” Joker asked.

“Lieutenant Moreau, please reposition the Normandy. I just relayed the modified trajectory into the navigation computer.” EDI stated calmly.

“Alright, on it.” Joker replied.

“We got your backs with this. But... really, whom did you torture to for that info?”

“Would you believe no one? The idiots did not care to check that they were not being overheard.”

“Oh man.” Joker laughed.

“Well, enough about that Joker, I need you to keep your eyes sharp.” Shepard said.

“I have the best seat in the house for it, and you know it.”

“I know. Keep in touch. Kodiak One out.” Shepard tapped the link closed.

By then Shepard lost sight of the main facility. The sunward side of the rock was an environment all its own. Everything was much brighter and the regolith outright glimmered, hinting at its metallic contents. In another thirty seconds Shepard got the first sighting of the final torch. The terrain below them was so uneven that a wheeled vehicle would be hard-pressed to keep level. The final torch was built on top of a domed ridge, and like the previous installations, used higher crags as buttressing. The control structure was shoehorned onto a small square of flat land at the base of the ridge, easily monopolizing every available square centimeter between two ridges.

“Nihlus set us down right in front of the doors. We will put our boots up their rear ends. No more messing around.” Shepard said. “We do not want to end up between two groups.”

“You got it,” Nihlus replied calmly as his fingers danced over the controls.

Shepard grinned in the self-satisfied way. The batarians honestly had no clue whom they had the misfortune of angering. Anyone with less arrogance and more foresight would not have given away their ambush. Right then she not only knew it was coming, but she had the opportunity to turn it
“I need to override the other Kodiak’s controls. The VI pilot will not set it down under fifteen meters away from ours.” Nihlus announced as he put their Kodiak into hover.

“She was going to enjoy their floundering too.

“And what else could she say? Her eyes slid over to Terra Nova, just visible on the edge of the main view screen. The planet continued to dip below X57’s horizon, but she could see that the thrust imbalance had kicked in, the rock had started to turn. What had been the leading edge was beginning to point somewhere other than directly at the planet. The slight shift would eventually make the rock turn a full one-eighty, and if all three torches were ignited at that moment, then it would be possible to stop the rotation and start to accelerate in the other direction, effectively slow the asteroid down.

The other shuttle approached theirs from the left; soon it was so close that Shepard could read the serial number. Nihlus made a series of more inputs and both shuttles began to descend. Shepard reached up to check her helmet seals one more time. It took maybe another minute before the shuttles actually touched down. “I’ll be in the back.” Shepard announced. Nihlus only hummed something inarticulate. She turned toward the door leading out of the cockpit. Beyond it she was not surprised to see Legion already waiting by the hatch. Garrus was still seated, but his eyes were on her in an instant, waiting for orders.

Shepard tapped at her helmet controls to open their shared short-range communication frequencies and waited for the seven beeps to indicate that the whole team had joined the channel. “Alright, we have a bit of a situation. The batarians are going to try and surprise us. On the flight over I got a look at the main compound, they have two runabouts there. I asked Joker and EDI to keep an eye on them, so we will know when they start moving, but in the meantime, we still need to blitz this torch.”

“How many enemy combatants are we expecting at our back?” Ashley asked.

“I do not expect both shuttles, so maybe as many as ten. It would be nice if they split their forces evenly for us.” Shepard replied. This was also part of the reason why she did not order Nihlus to make a detour to shoot the shuttles apart. She would let them divide themselves for her conquest, no need to make them desperate and angry by cutting off their perceived retreat.

“Sounds like a plan. Once we’re inside, we will have the airlock as a natural bottleneck.” Kaidan said.

“And we are disciplined enough to hold it.” Ashley agreed.

Shepard raised her hand to the console that operated the Kodiak’s atmospheric controls and door, but paused to glance back at Garrus.

“Ready when you are, Commander.” He announced.

Shepard nodded silently. “Nihlus, do you see a welcoming committee?” She asked instead. With the Kodiak’s nose pointed right at the torch’s airlock, Nihlus would only need to look up at the main view screen.

“Not this time. Do try to contain your disappointment.” The Spectre replied blandly.

“Excellent. Let’s do this!” Shepard said as she tapped at the controls. As the craft began depressurizing she checked that her weapons were online and ready. A few minutes later the console flashed to indicate that the environment had been withdrawn. Shepard hit the key to open the hatch.

Once again Legion stepped out first, drawing their pulse rifle as they turned toward the compound.
Shepard followed half a step behind, hand resting on Sin, and glanced toward the other shuttle. Its door was open already, with Bravo waiting for them inside. She nodded mutely in their direction which was the signal Kaidan needed to gather his team and join them. A brief moment later a hand landed on her shoulder and Shepard looked up, Nihlus had caught up with her.

Shepard turned toward the torch control structure. With no mines or guards outside, there was nothing to slow them down. Her eyes landed on the gaping hole under the airlock door console. The batarians had cut the maintenance panel out with a hand-held cutting torch. It lay a few meters away, jagged and bent out of shape. The cables inside were a mess of rough, uncapped splicing and rearrangement. She stepped the range of the sensors, idly expecting the door not to react, and yet it opened.

“Thought so.” Shepard muttered to herself. The batarians had bypassed all the computerized components that controlled how the door opened and closed. Whoever had done it was a half-decent techie. She whipped up Sin and side-stepped over the jamb, automatically turning to sweep the opposite corner on the right of the airlock. Then turned left, and then the diagonally. “The airlock is clear.” She announced, though she had not expected company in here anyways, not with a busted door.

Inside, the ceiling lights flickered and the red emergency beacons pulsed. The EVA lockers had been shot open and looted. What more, Shepard’s eyes landed on the food wrappers strewn on the floor. The batarians ate here and tossed the garbage into the airlock, as if their psychotic apathy was not obvious already. Shepard sincerely hoped they enjoyed the meal, because it would be their last.

Kaidan and Ashley stepped past her and made a beeline toward the other door. Shepard put her back to the wall on its left side. When the outer door closed, she nodded toward Kaidan. He tapped the console to get the airlock to cycle. Some part of her idly expected the airlock to refuse to cycle, what with the busted outer door. But the system did not fight them, the outer door actually sealed. She could not help the odd bit of admiration for clean work like that, but it would not save the techie. Their skills were wasted on slave-running.

Shepard watched as her team drew and tested their weapons as breathable air was pumped into the space around them. “Alright. When that door opens, we go in. I want all batarians, varren, and-or drones shot on sight.” Shepard said.

“With extreme prejudice,” Ashley murmured as she cocked her rifle.

Shepard chose not to comment, because doing so would make her a hypocrite. Ashley could afford to say things like that, Shepard could not. Then there was a series of pings that indicated the airlock had completed pressurization. She turned to Kaidan and caught his gaze, but before she could tell him to open the inner door, there was a ping over her comm. She raised her hand to her helmet controls and switched, “Shepard here, what is it Joker?” she asked.

“Commander, you asked me to tell you when the batarians make their move. Well… eight of them came out of the main facility and are getting one of the shuttles ready for liftoff.” Joker announced.

“I’d give it five minutes before they actually get that thing off the ground.”

“Good. Thanks, Joker.” Shepard replied. Five minutes to lift off, maybe as much to get to the torch and land, and maybe as much for them to get into the airlock and cycle it. She was being generous on that last one, though.

“You sure you don’t want me to put a pair of disruptor torpedoes through them?” Joker asked.

“Oh no. That’d be too quick. I’m not so merciful.” Shepard replied. She wanted them to die knowing
who pulled the trigger.

“Yea... I felt that chill up here. You're right though; they asked to become a reminder on why their sort shouldn't piss you off. Have fun! Joker out.”

Shepard closed that link and switched back to the team’s group channel. “That was Joker. The batarians are prepping their shuttle. I would estimate about ten minutes before they’re in the airlock.”

“So ten minutes to shoot all the assholes here dead and turn off the torch…” Ashley trailed off.

“Leave the torch to me. That way you can focus on the batarians coming in,” Tali said.

“Alright, Tali, that’d be helpful,” Shepard replied. “Kaidan, if you will.”

“Yes, ma’am.” The lieutenant replied right before he tapped the control panel to open the inner door.

The sight beyond was much the same as within the airlock. The lighting was dimmed and the red emergency beacons pulsed. This structure’s footprint was smaller than any of the previous ones, but like them, it was cluttered with storage containers and bits of equipment. A good lot of the stored goods were piled up in a neat row just left of the airlock, forming a wall. Yet judging from the small gap left just under the ceiling the space clearly extended on the other side. Judging from the dimensions outside, a good two thirds of the room was effectively beyond the crate wall.

“They’re here! Release the varren!” a gravelly batarian voice shouted. Almost instantly the varren began growling and barking. Unfortunately for the batarians, the wall of crates meant that there was no need to guess where their mutts would come from.

“Put those varren down!” she ordered as she drew Sin and rounded the door jamb. Only to regret it instantly. Right in front of her were three beasts and four batarians. To make matters worse, the batarians had the time to pull down some boxes to use as cover, and they stuck to it as they raised their rifles into firing position. Then the beasts bared their teeth and charged. “Oh... fu-” Shepard sidestepped, turning her side to minimize her profile, and fired Sin on the leading varren. The bullet hit the beast in the shoulder. It yelped and stumbled, but her less than well-aimed shot had missed everything even vaguely vital. The other beasts bore down on her.

“Chief, suppression fire. Jenkins, bring down those mutts!” Kaidan shouted as he bolted out of the airlock, his whole body already enveloped in a biotic field. A flick of his hand threw the varren back. The beasts hit the floor and whined, but the toss had been half-hearted. A moment later Kaidan was at her side, and raised his left hand, clasping a fist. With a resounding whomp his biotic barrier expanded, forming a shield bubble around both of them. The beasts rolled onto their feet, instantly scrambling up to regain their footing, and one after the other, they charged again.

There was a resounding shotgun blast. Shepard turned to see one of the varren go down with a thud. The shot had caught it mid-jump, and a full half of its head was mangled beyond recognition. Nihlus had stepped out of the airlock, his shotgun ammo indicators glowed yellow, indicating he had switched to armor-piercing scattershot. Ashley remained in the airlock, but her assault rifle stuck out past the jamb on the right side, while Garrus’ own stuck out on the left. Then Jenkins appeared between them and when Nihlus side-stepped to his right, the corporal opened full auto fire on the varren.

The beast Shepard had nicked was slow, and with no shields it took the spray across its face and shoulders, whining and crying as its blood spattered. Jenkins let off the trigger and raised his rifle to point at the batarians while the beast went down. The last creature must have realized it was in for it, as it stopped cold. Nihlus turned his gun on it and fired. The spread killed the creature and reduced
the left side of its chest into raw ground meat in an instant.

The batarians chose that moment to open fire. The bullets began peppering Kaidan’s projected shield. The lieutenant grunted softly, and the air just outside the bubble began to ripple like a desert mirage. A moment later the bubble began to expand slowly as Kaidan’s gaze locked on the batarians, transforming into a death glare.

Jenkins, Ashley, and Garrus opened fire in return.

Shepard wheeled and raised Sin on the batarian right in front of her and fired. The bullet drilled his kinetic barrier right between his eyes. The shield did not fail, but the slaver recoiled in shock and let off the trigger. One of the others shouted something that was audible from his external speakers, though Shepard’s translator failed to recognize it. A moment later there was a resounding crack and his helmet exploded, splattering gore everywhere. The rest of his body tipped backward and dropped like cut timber. The suddenness was such that the three others ducked back into cover.

Shepard turned back toward the airlock. Jenkins had kneeled, which allowed Legion to stand right in the middle of the airlock door. The geth lowered their overpowered rifle and raked its receiver bolt to eject the hot thermal clip.

“Use the moment, Go!” Shepard ordered sharply. Legion displaying the overwhelming power of their rifle had an amazing capacity for terrifying those who could feel fear, but it would only work once on any one group. She glanced at Kaidan and nodded.

The lieutenant dropped his arm and just like that his biotic shield dissipated.

“Jenkins! Back me up!” Ashley called as she bolted forward.

“Roger!” the corporal rose to his feet and then both of them were moving. Nihlus joined them as they reached the enemy’s hiding spots. The batarians never realized that their instinctual reaction to Legion’s display of power had shifted the fight’s momentum.

Nihlus was on the enemy first. His shotgun gave a resounding crack and Shepard saw the batarian’s shield flare. The slaver rolled out of the way, raising his rifle into position, but he did not get far enough and when Nihlus wheeled on him and fired again the second scattershot near point blank, obliterating his hardsuit ceramics. The batarian was dead before he could say his finger on his trigger.

Opposite to the Spectre, Ashley leapt right on top the barrier behind which her target was hiding, pointed her rifle down, and laid into the trigger. Her fight was over before it could even begin. The batarian’s shields could not withstand a full-auto barrage near point-black. Some of the bullets ricocheted off the floor, but that was nothing functional shields could not handle.

Jenkins’ ended up a little less lucky. When he rounded the barricade, the last remaining slaver had gotten the time to understand what was going on. He fired at the corporal. Jenkins side-stepped and returned fire. The batarian rose to his feet, intent on closing the distance between them. In the end both their shields failed simultaneously. Suddenly there was the crack of an HVR from the direction of the airlock. The batarian jerked as the back of his helmet shattered, and his finger came off the trigger. Jenkins took a good second and a half to notice it, and in the meantime he put a good ten bullets into the batarian’s corpse before he finally let go of the trigger.

“Jenkins, are you alright?” Shepard called as she lowered her pistol.

“Erm, yes, thanks to…” The corporal sounded winded.

“Think nothing of it, Corporal,” Garrus replied calmly.
Shepard realized Garrus had saved Jenkins from the end result of his miscalculation. She turned to the airlock just in time to see Garrus put a fresh thermal clip into his HVR. She nodded his way in appreciation. Some would be bothered that someone else on their team was making dangerous over-the-shoulder shots. However Shepard knew Garrus, like Legion, could make those shots time and time again. Moreover, she was not going to come down on Garrus for stunt-shooting if she lets Legion get away with it routinely.

“Commander, Chatika is detecting no other batarians, varren, or drones here.” Tali announced as she emerged from within the airlock, her eyes on her Omni-tool and the video feed from her drone.

“Good.” Shepard replied as she holstered her pistol. She not see the need to remind anyone that more batarians would be coming shortly. “Let’s bring down that torch.”

“I’ll get right on it,” Tali said as she moved deeper into the room.

Shepard was perfectly content to fall behind. As much as right now was not the time to be thinking it, she thought it. She really should have had Tali send her drone in first, that way they would have known how many batarians and varren they had been facing. Sure her team had her back, but fact was, she had rushed. Shepard could not afford any more mistakes. The hardest part of the operation was still ahead, and if they were to rob the batarians of any semblance of victory, the whole thing had to happen with surgical precision. She needed to get her head back in the game, think now, not then.

“I take it you are planning our next move already?” Nihlus asked.

Shepard looked up, Nihlus was beside her. “I gave it some thought.” That was not a complete lie. As far as Shepard was concerned, she had given it some thought.

“We will need a solid plan if we are to take the main facility.” He said in a manner of someone discussing the weather.

Shepard hummed, “I can’t set the details without getting a look at what I’m working with, but I have some ideas.”

“Good, that is all I wanted.”

Shepard stopped in front of the control room door, it was not locked, and so it opened without hesitation. The sight that greeted her was truly gruesome. Two more project security personnel lay dead in the corner, both had been shot multiple times. However one of the victims was missing the whole lower half of his right arm. The flesh was raw and ripped. It was no great mystery what did it, and where the missing limb vanished. Shepard ground her teeth together. Just when she thought they had found the rock bottom of batarian atrocities, the slavers seemed to find a way to one-up themselves.

It took everything she had to turn away and not show an outward sign of the rage that the sight had awakened. Now was not the time to tunnel-vision. She had to focus on the needs of those whom she could still help. Shepard to watch Tali as the quarian made her way over to the control console. A moment later she heard a ping from her communicator. Shepard raised her hand and switched frequencies. “Shepard here, what’s going on, Joker?”

“The batarians just landed at your torch control facility,” Joker announced.

“Right on time then. We secured the torch and Tali is working on shutting it down. The rest of us will roll out the welcome mat for our… guests.”
“Welcome mat? I hope that’s a euphemism for a pressure plate rigged to a bomb. That’s the only sort of welcome mat they deserve.” Joker replied.

Shepard chuckled, Joker was being irreverent again. Fortunately for him, his timing was on point. Any other time Shepard would have told him off for that sort of joke. Now though? She would have loved to do just that. She could not though. Not with the airlock being barely-functional as it was. “What did I say about being too merciful, Joker?” That was going to be her excuse.

“Right. Because being blown to bits is merciful. Careful Commander, I might begin to think you intend to torture them for personal enjoyment…” Joker paused and hummed. “Not that I would blame you. Now, I could make a joke about whips, chains, and gimp suits… but I won’t. I’ll let you have your fun. Joker out.”

Shepard could not help but wonder, did Joker think she was the type to moonlight as a dominatrix? It was a good thing no one else heard that. She tossed the thought aside as quickly as it came up. With a tap at her controls she switched back to the team’s frequency, “Joker just called, our guests of honor have arrived.” She announced in all seriousness. “Time to roll out the welcome mat. Tali, work on the torch…”

“I will contact you when it powers down.” The quarian girl replied without looking up from the console.

“Take your time,” Shepard said. She knew that Tali would need to run a translator program with her HUD, so it was best to leave the girl to her task. Still, that did not mean she would leave her without some protection. “Legion, stay with Tali. Just on the off-chance some batarian somehow gets past us.”

Tali looked up, surprised. Shepard would guess there was a protest on her lips.

“Acknowledged, Shepard-Commander. They will not interrupt or harm Creator-Zorah.” Legion stated, before the quarian could say anything.

Tali shook her head and turned back to the console.

Shepard turned away, there was nothing else to say. “Everyone else, with me!” She exited the control room.

“Yes, ma’am.” The marines chorused in a single voice.

Shepard mostly ignored the chorus of acknowledgements. “We will set up the same way the batarians tried to ambush us. Garrus, I want you in the back, HVR at a ready.”

“Yes, Commander.” Garrus replied automatically.

“Kaidan, how are you on biotics? Can you project another of your shields, if needed?”

“Surprisingly… I’m alright. Still just a minor headache.” Kaidan replied.

Shepard nodded. “We’ll try to make this clean. Richard, Ashley, first tier of the barricade, you’ll be our vanguard. Kaidan, Nihlus… second tier.” Putting Kaidan in the middle of the formation was the logical option. From there he could still use his biotics, and he was in the middle of everything if his shield was to be needed.

“I got the best shield hardware after Legion, you know,” the Spectre replied as he drew his assault rifle.
“Keep gabbing like that, and we’ll test that claim.” Shepard deadpanned back. Really was now the time for complaints of that sort? She knew Nihlus preferred to get in people’s faces, but she needed him at mid-range. “Final word, we are not messing around. Shoot to kill.” She thought that ought to have gone without saying, but she would say it, just in case. When the team moved to take up positions, she lingered in the middle, next to Nihlus, where she could have the freedom to fire both the twins and if need be, switch to Nike.

The airlock’s inner door had gone red at some point, indicating that it had sealed. There was no way of knowing in what phase of its cycle it was, but Shepard knew it would have to go through two cycles, emptying out for the barians to step inside, and refilling to admit them into the torch control facility. The odds were not in the barians’ favor, for one they did not know how many enemies they were facing, but because of Joker, she did know there were eight of them. Her team was also far more disciplined and better equipped.

It was another couple minutes, but then the status indicator by the airlock door began to flash at an increasing rate. Then it turned off and there was a loud click. A moment later the door opened. Ashley and Jenkins raised their assault rifles on it.

“Hold your fire!” A voice called from within. “This does not have to end in bloodshed!”

Shepard’s eyebrows climbed to her hairline. Did one of those no-good slaving two-bit scoundrels really just use that line? Before Shepard could say a word, the barians filed out of the airlock, every single one of them had weapons drawn, but none were raised into firing position. That was about the only thing that kept her from ordering the team to open fire. Though she was tempted, oh so tempted. Did the barians honestly think they had the upper hand? Or that they had something to bargain with? After the brutalities they committed? Did they take her for an idiot? She almost felt insulted.

“We can still end this peacefully,” the lead batarian repeated.

Shepard was glad for her helmet, as it concealed the murderous glare she could not tamp down. “Peacefully?” She echoed, not bothering to keep the ice out of her tone. “I didn’t think barians knew the meaning of the word.”

The leader focused on her like a bird of prey, but his weapon remained lowered. “Look, I’m just doing my job. Hijacking this rock wasn’t my idea. I signed on to make a little profit. A quick slave grab. Nothing more.”

Shepard heard Ashley growl, a quick glance over told her that the gunny’s trigger finger was indeed beginning to itch. Not that Shepard would blame her, but right here and now, she saw another opportunity. How far would this scumbag go if she led him on a little?

“Slave grab?” She echoed. “Correct me if I’m wrong, but slaves need to be alive. This isn’t a slave grab any more, you bastards killed everyone you came across, and you’re trying to kill millions more.” Let him think she was buying the bullshit.

“Don’t you think I know that?” He replied automatically, a note of frustration creeping into his voice.

She noted that Ashley had reached up to surreptitiously tap at the side of her helmet. Muting her externals. “Commander, we should ventilate these bastards and be done with it,” she stated.

“Hold your fire, Gunnery Chief. I do believe the commander is… about to take them for all they are worth,” Nihlus stepped in.

Shepard hummed a low ‘mmmmhm’ by way of assent. It would figure Nihlus would know that she...
was playing her games.

“Understood.” Ashley did not sound all too happy to be taking what amounted to orders from Nihlus, but she was smart enough to understand why Nihlus had been the one to say anything.

“Listen, I am just following orders here. Same as you are. If it was up to me, we’d have grabbed everyone and left a long time ago.” The batarian went on, unaware of the exchange. “I am not an idiot. I asked those on our ship, they never detected your arrival, nor can they track your shuttles. Now that I’ve seen your team...you’re not from some garrison on that colony of yours. You’re not typical Alliance. At this point I wouldn’t be surprised if one of the Turians is actually a Spectre. It would be just the way things go wrong. I did not sign up, nor am I paid enough for this.”

“Well why not take your ship and run?” Shepard asked, call it a bit of idle curiosity.

“That’s not an option. Balak left a few of his most loyal associates on board. If I tried, Balak would order them to skin me alive so he could sell my hide just out of spite.”

Balak. Was that the name of the leader of this whole thing? Shepard grinned. He instinct had been right to hold off on the kill order. This brute was dripping information, trying to buy his safety. She could see the beginning of his plan as well. Feed information to the enemy, arrange things so that the enemy does not fire on them during liftoff, then wait until Balak was out of the picture to handle the loyalists on the ship. After that, they could run off while the Alliance was too busy taking care of their own. He probably even thought that this was a win-win for the both of them, as them running off in the confusion would prevent her from taking flak, that way she was more likely to let him off the hook. A clever traitor was the worst sort of traitor. However, he was not clever enough. Everything hinged on whether she would agree not to fire on the ship. He would probably drip more information if she looked like she was hesitating.

“Crazy bastard. This whole thing has gone wrong practically from the moment we landed, and he wants me to pay for it.” The batarian went on, muttering under his breath, though her translator still picked up on it.

“I understand your… situation,” Shepard said. She could see right through it. His game plan hinged on her being amoral and-or corrupt. She took the insinuation that she looked at all corruptible as an insult. Time for the Oscar-worthy performance of making him think she was playing into his hands, only to yank it away. If that made her a sadist, then she was a sadist. “You want Balak out of the picture so you can stop kissing his boots, and start calling the shots, correct?”

“That would be a nice… side-benefit, yes,” the batarian agreed. “I assume we have a deal?”

Shepard would let him assume everything and anything, if it kept the information coming. His errors of judgement were almost entertaining. She would not be surprised if he thought that she was soft, hesitant to get her hands dirty, or averse to undue to violence. The joke was going to be on him.

“Balak is holed up in the main facility. He has fifteen hostages, including that woman who was talking to you. She’s alive, for now. You already know about the explosives. He’ll probably try to use her against you, just because he can. Oh and there is one more thing... one of his engineers changed the lock ciphers. You will need a keycard to access the external airlocks. I have one. As long as we have a deal, I will give it to you.” The amount of confidence in his voice increased just then.

Shepard had heard all she needed, and he had probably leaked about as much as he would. Now it was time to wrap up the game and claim her undisputed victory. “Deal? Hmm... I suppose what is on the table can be called that...” she began, not bothering to stop herself from grinning like the cat
that had sights on the canary. “We are done here. Oh, to be sure, Balak will get exactly what he deserves. You needn’t be worried about him anymore… oh no, your real problem is that…” she paused for a touch of the drama. “I’m not someone they send to negotiate with, or accept deals dictated by batarian *terrorists.*” She let the menace seep into her voice. It took a long second but the realization must have sunk in. The batarian almost recoiled a step back. Shepard’s grin was ear-to-ear by that point. Her hands drifted down toward Sin and Dex. “Ventilate them!” she ordered.

The batarians went to raise their weapons, but her team was faster. Ashley and Jenkins opened fire first, spraying them down to whittle down shields. Nihlus and Kaidan joined them after about a second. The batarians returned fire wildly, panic clear as daylight in their inability to focus on any single target, even as they inched back toward the airlock.

Suddenly there was a crack from the back and one of the slavers went down, toppling into another, causing him to stumble. Both ended up falling across the airlock door’s railing. The yet-living batarian had started thrashing, trying to get the corpse off himself. This arrested the retreat of the others as they had to step over the two. Shepard aimed Sin, supporting it with both hands, and fired, putting that panicked beast out of all the misery there, including his own.

Another batarian went down then, his shields obliterated by Ashley’s focused firepower, his body riddled with bullet holes. There was one more crack from Garrus’ HVR and a fourth dropped to the floor. The other four had managed to get into the airlock. The firefight ended, as there was no need to be riddling the airlock’s walls with bullets.

“You Alliance whore! We tried to be reasonable!” The leader shouted.

Shepard shook her head, tamping down her urge to laugh. Was that the best he could sling right then? He must know he was looking at the end, and so was putting up some last minute bravado. “Garrus keep an eye on those bodies over the door. If anyone tries to move them…”

“I would have liked an actual challenge.” The ex-detective replied.

“A challenge? From batarians?” Shepard rolled her eyes. Yes she sounded a little too arrogant then, but she had the batarians right where she wanted them, and with nowhere to go. What challenge could they be? “Tali, how’s the torch?” She asked.

“The core is ramping down, Commander. It is at fifteen percent output and declining steadily. Legion and I will rejoin you shortly.” Tali replied.

“Good.” Shepard replied as she glanced at Ashley and Jenkins. The batarians would be expecting a direct entry. But would they expect a cloak-user? She reached up to close her external feed, that way no one other than the team could hear her. “Williams, Jenkins… I’m going to need a flash-bang and a smoker,” she announced.

“You got it, Commander. What’s the plan?” Ashley asked.

“Oh my mark, toss the flash-bang into the airlock. Jenkins when you hear it clutter across the floor, toss the smoker after it, got it?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Both replied in a single voice.

“What’s the matter, scared to come in here?” The batarian called.

Shepard wanted to laugh, but kept it down. “I’m going to show him the real meaning of *fear*…” she muttered as she brought up her Omni-tool and accessed her cloak controls. A few key strokes later her shield disconnected, the cloak settled. When she was sure that she was fully invisible, Shepard
came around the barricade and made her way toward the airlock. There, she put her back to the wall with the doorjamb to her right, “Gunny, if you will.”

Ashley yanked the pin on a flash-bang she had drawn, wound up, and threw. Jenkins yanked the pin on his smoke bomb, and when the flash-bang hit the floor, he wound up and threw it in. The flash-bang exploded with a resounding, reverberating bang, momentarily illuminating the airlock in brilliant white. One of the batarians shouted something inarticulate, so loud that it was clear that his ears must have been ringing like a carillon after the loud bang. The smoke bomb hit the airlock’s back wall and bounced deeper inside. A moment later it gave a loud pop and began to vent. Shepard waited a good five seconds until she saw the smoke begin to billow out from the top of the airlock door. Then she drew Sin and Dex and rounded the doorjamb.

Standard smokes were designed for a volume a bit bigger than the airlock, so using one here was overkill, but the combination of flash-bang, smoke, and cloak meant the batarians could not hope to figure out that someone was in there with them. Conversely she could see the batarians as clear as she needed. Their suit lights pierced through the smoke, and where there were torso status lights, the head was somewhere right over them. At close range it became near impossible to miss, nor would their shields be able to stop it.

She raised Sin at the first batarian on her left and pulled the trigger, Sin’s barking blast was cacophony in such a tight space, but she heard something hit the wall and the suit lights slid down the wall.

“Someone’s in he-”

Shepard raised Dex, aimed at the source of the voice and pulled the trigger. He died even before he could finish the sentence.

Shepard watched the two remaining sets of suit lights, which of them was the leader? She would not want to give him death too quickly, not when she was almost enjoying herself. A hand reached out through the gloom, groping blindly. For her? For teammates? It did not matter. Shepard raised Sin at the hand’s owner and fired. The lights recoiled and she heard him fall against the wall. At that moment the final set of lights turned on her, and the only thing Shepard could do was raise Dex a final time and fire. The lights jolted and she heard something thud against one of the EVA suit lockers. A breathless moment later the slaver crumpled like a ragdoll.

“Commander, are you alright?” Ashley asked, breaking the communication silence.

“Of course,” Shepard replied. As if these four could hope to defeat her when the odds were so stacked against them. “The batarians aren’t though.”

Ashley chuckled, “Why would they be?”

As Shepard looked from one dead body to the next, she realized that as far as she could tell, all four looked identical. “Well here’s a rub, we still need that keycard, and with all this smoke, I can’t tell which body belonged to their leader. We’ll have to vent the airlock to get it.”

“Easy enough,” Kaidan murmured.

“Commander. The torch is offline. I locked out its controls with my birthday as the password.” Tali announced.

“Perfect, Tali, thanks.” Shepard replied.

“Jenkins, come on, help me move the bodies off the door rails.” Kaidan went on.
“Ah... alright.” Jenkins mumbled.

It took a good five minutes before the bodies were moved and everyone was inside the airlock. After that, they had to wait for the room to void out. After that Shepard performed the macabre task of frisking the leader’s webbing and suit compartments for the keycard. She tucked it into her webbing before they exited the airlock out into the void.

Once out on the surface, Shepard was not surprised to see that the batarians had parked their transport right behind the Kodiaks. The Alliance craft did not look scorched, so it looked like the batarians had not used them for target practice. Nevertheless, she asked Legion to take a look around the craft, to check for any proximity mines the batarians might have buried right next to the hatches. By her estimation they would not have had the time, but being careful had never killed anyone. The scans took Legion five minutes, but she was never one to cut corners.

It was not long after that the two Kodiaks were airborne and flying toward the main facility. Shepard spent the flight playing with the keycard as she pondered the possibilities. She did not get long though, Nihlus gunned the accelerator, and she knew full well why, after all one would assume that if Balak did not hear from the ambush team, he would naturally assume they failed. This might light a fire under his rear to do something untoward to the hostages.

Nihlus landed their Kodiaks right in front of the main facility, and then turned to guiding the other down via remote. The pillbox bunker that topped the facility was a rather plain, rounded structure. Outside stood two large fuel storage silos and awnings that shielded rovers from Asgard’s radiation. Were it not for the batarian shuttle off to the side, there would have been nothing to indicate that anything at all was wrong.

It was not long before the team gathered at the door leading into the bunker. Shepard pulled out the key card and swiped it through the reader. The door control panel instantly changed from red to green and the door opened. She led the team inside. The door was at the upper end of a set of wide spiraling metal stairs. The walls were covered in the same bland grey prefabricated panels. At the bottom of the stairs there was another, heavier door which opened into the large airlock, which took a good ten minutes to pressurize. On the other side was a larger ante-room with EVA suit lockers. The majority still had suits inside, but the batarians had shot them full of holes.

Leading out of the locker room was a short landing connected to an elevator. A sign next to the door indicated that the main facility had five floors. The top-most two levels were marked as habitation suites, the level below them as residential amenities, and the two bottommost as offices, laboratories, and the administration nerve-center.

Shepard led the team into the elevator and pressed the button for the top-most level. They would start from the top and work their way down, this way they would not lose the contingencies, but also pin the batarians with nowhere to run. Shepard would not let a single batarian survive this. She was ready and willing to slit all their throats if that was what it took. The monster was awake and baying for blood.

The elevator door opened onto a short corridor between two rooms. On the other side she could see it connect to a circular promenade. The lighting here was normal, but the emergency beacons were pulsing. Shepard stepped off first, Sin drawn, as she listened for signs of activity. Hearing nothing in the immediate vicinity, she let the muzzle drop a little, but she was still ready to whip it up at any moment. “Alright people, lock and load. We proceed with extreme caution. External feeds off, keep in comm contact, and mind how you step. By earlier estimation there are at least twelve Batarians here. We will take them down methodically. Civilian casualties are not acceptable, so check your shots.”
Out of the corner of her eye she saw Jenkins reach up to his helmet controls. Shepard hummed, and made a mental note to give Jenkins a bit more of a primer on spec ops basics. Turning off external feeds was the most basic of basics. The structure was essentially a cylinder blasted into the rock. Right then she turned to study the facility map mounted on the wall. Each level had a ringing promenade connected with stairways. Some rooms opened onto these promenades, and others extended away like the spokes of a wheel. The center itself was a hollow atrium spanning all five levels. There was only one main elevator to connect the structure to the surface.

“The batarians will to be keeping the hostages close at hand, we find them, and we find the hostages,” She muttered. “Furthermore, they would not keep everyone in the same room. The bigger the group, the harder they are to control. They will have divided them up between a few rooms.”

“Multiple room would also allow them to use each group against the others.” Nihlus agreed. “If one group does anything they don’t like, the others end up paying for it.”

Shepard looked up at him, Nihlus was on her wavelength again. “A million credits say they rigged the rooms with the hostages to blow. One more intimidation tactic. Both to the hostages and now us… That just means we can’t go in guns blazing.” She turned to look at the others. “There is a security office on this level. It’s time to run recon.”

“We’re right behind you, Skipper.” Ashley said.

Shepard nodded and turned to lead the group toward the promenade. She paused at the very corner where the ring met the corridor to peer around the corner and then slowly scan the whole circumference. The ring’s diameter was about fifty meters, which would put its circumference at just over three hundred.

Once satisfied that there was no one in the immediate vicinity, Shepard made the turn and led the way toward the security room, hugging the promenade wall as to be out of line of sight for anyone who might be on the walkways below them. She noted that her team was taking the injunction for stealth with utmost seriousness. Legion had dimmed their light element, as not to cast light beams, though the geth could do nothing about their brushed metal finish.

The security office was unlocked. When Shepard stepped inside she was unsurprised to see more casualties. A man wearing a security hardsuit laying on the floor. He had been shot in the back of the head, and since he had no helmet on, the damage was heinous. A casual glance at the blood spattering on the floor and how he slumped over told Shepard that he had died on his knees.

“I’ll note this as well,” Garrus murmured.

“Thanks,” Shepard replied as she approached the security office console. She was at that point where she could not possibly get angrier. All semblance of control had been abandoned at the third torch. When she found Balak, he would rue ever provoking her, right before he died. For now though, she needed to find a way to get to him. There were cameras all over the facility’s public spaces, and the batarians had not done a thing about them. Some part of her wondered, but then she reasoned they must have their hands full right then. The leader had sent half his cronies on that fool’s errand to the torch. She would tell Balak exactly what his men had tried to do behind his back, just to see the look on his face. It was not like those monsters could protest, or Balak would survive long enough to do anything about it.

All the feeds were conveniently labeled with room numbers, from which it was not difficult to figure out the levels. “They’re sloppy,” Shepard muttered, more to herself than to the others, as she could not help but grin broadly. She could see where each enemy was, where they put the hostages, and the bombs. “The hostages are in three rooms on the second level from the bottom. There are bombs
with them. Each room is guarded from outside by two batarians. Three more are patrolling the promenade on the bottom-most level.”

“They concentrated all their forces on the first two levels? Why?” Garrus wondered.

“Did they expect us to take the elevator straight down?” Ashley asked.

“In all likelihood… yes.” Shepard murmured. If she squinted, she could even see why. If a squad of regular marines had been sent, their numbers would have precluded a stealth attack. They would have stuck to what they were trained for. Using their numbers, and superior firepower to launch a head-on confrontation. The batarians set up accordingly, ready to surround arrivals, using the elevation advantage offered by the promenades. Leaving the security room unprotected showed they decided the Alliance was more likely to send numbers rather than a Spec Ops team. And while her team was not Alliance spec ops, Shepard was. She trusted her team, such as it was, to carry out her orders with attention to detail. She could walk them through a stealth operation.

“Shepard, take a look at this one,” Nihlus announced, finger pointed right at one of the monitors in the corner. “First level… that one looks like he might be their leader, holed up in an office with a very cushy chair. He has a hostage with him, too. A female.”

Shepard stared at the image, was that Kate? One of the batarians in the room had his helmet off as he sat at a large desk, on what looked to be a very expensive executive chair.

Kaidan drew close, staring at the image as well. “You see how she’s nursing her arm? She’s hurt. But that’s… the worst of it. I think.”

Shepard inspected the woman again, with an eye for different details. Kaidan was the closest to a field medic of the group, he would know a field injury. The woman’s jumpsuit was dirtied, and she was cradling her arm in a rather tell-tale way, but there was nothing more serious to be seen. For all the hurt and pain, the woman was giving the batarians some rather nasty glares. They had done nothing to dampen her fighting spirit.

“I have a plan,” Shepard announced as turned back to her team. It was time to do what she did best. “First thing first, we need to secure the safety of those hostages. That means defusing the bombs as well. Legion, I want you to take one of the rooms. Terminate the batarians guarding it, and once that’s done, I want you to defuse the bomb inside. The hostages are bound, but… please be diplomatic.” Shepard hoped the men and women in that room would not recognize Legion as a geth. There was no helping it though, she needed Legion’s innate understanding of electronics on this.

“Acknowledged,” the geth replied.

“Garrus, think you can do that with another room?”

“Two batarians in sub-standard armor who shoot like they are half-blind? I think I can manage.” Garrus replied.

Shepard was not going to comment about his bravado. Now was not the time. She knew that Garrus would still take this job seriously. “Nihlus, third room. Ever defused a bomb before?”

“Once or twice.”

“Tali, go with one of them. I need your skills with electronics more than your shotgun on this.”

“I will go with Nihlus. I think I can help there… Well, I’ve seen Garrus at work, and Legion is... a geth, enough said.”
“I will keep her safe, Shepard.” Nihlus slipped in.

Shepard nodded, that only left Team Bravo. “Williams, Jenkins… your task will be blitzing the three batlarians promenading on the bottom-most level.”

“Leave it to us, Commander.” Ashley replied.

“Kaidan, you’re with me. We will handle the… leader and his guards. I need you to do something somewhat stupid.” Kaidan would have his biotic shield to help him, Shepard hoped that would be enough.

“Draw their attention?” The lieutenant asked, a twinkle in his eye.

“Yes.” Shepard needed an opening, she needed the batlarians distracted while she got around and behind them. Other than that, she wanted Kaidan in position to have a look at Kate. Shepard still felt responsible for the other woman.

“Can do.” Kaidan replied with a nod.

Shepard nodded and then turned to look everyone in the eyes in turn. “What we’re going to do is risky, but I know we can do this.” With that preamble out of the way, Shepard launched into the nitty gritty of her stratagem. The most important part of the whole thing was timing.

After that, the teams divided as assigned. Ashley and Jenkins went one way, Nihlus, Tali, Legion, and Garrus split up in three different ways. Shepard and Kaidan moved out last. Before exiting the security room, Shepard re-routed some of the camera feeds to her Omni-tool. Right then was probably the most sensitive moment of the whole operation. If anyone was spotted, the gig would be up. She had made a point of stressing the importance of sticking to the external staircases and checking corners. The external stairs had solid railings, which provided ample cover and even movement track if one walked half-crouched.

Going from one level to the next gave them no opportunity to scout their surroundings. Anyone sticking their heads over the stairs railing might be spotted. The urgency to move swiftly but silently was there too. Shepard could feel her heart pick up pace, but not due to fear. She would be lying if she did not say there was some little bit of excitement in her. This was her jungle and she was the apex predator on the hunt.

“I suppose one part of my job will be to prevent the hostage from seeing what you plan to do to Balak and his cronies.” Kaidan mused as they drew near the top of the stairs leading down from the fourth level to the third. “Also, to protect her as much as possible.”

“Personal safety is the one thing I can’t guarantee her.” Shepard whispered, as she began to creep down, never looking away from where she was going. Because their external feeds were off and their helmets were closed, her own voice resonated in her helmet, drowning out the incoming external sound. Truthfully she would have liked to keep the chit-chat down as much as possible.

“I understand that.”

“Thanks, Kaidan.”

It took another couple minutes but they arrived at the top of the stairs leading from the third level to the second. So far the batlarians were none the wiser to the trap closing about them. Once in position Shepard called for the team to check in when they were in position. It took a few more minutes for the actors to take their positions, but then she had the verbal acknowledgement from everyone else.
Some part of her was still a little bit nervous, especially for Garrus, who had to face two batarians on his own. She turned to her Omni-tool. She had grabbed the feeds that showed the three batarians patrolling batarians on the bottommost level. All the others were in a single position, but these three were walking about. They had to time their attack on their schedule, to give Ashley and Jenkins the greatest chance of an easy take-down.

Right at that moment the three were on the opposite side of the promenade from where Shepard could see the marines hiding. “On my mark…” she murmured into the communicator. She would give the go when the three were close to the marines. They had to be brought down, because if they stopped anywhere else, they would have a line of sight on the level above them. Shepard would not let them pincer anyone.

Chapter End Notes

**Author Notes:** You guys must hate me, but yes, this will extend into a four-part. In a way it’s one of those mid-season specials that inevitably end up straddling the series’ Christmas break, complete with a cliff-hanger. In my defense, I kept finding corners that were cut in the game plot, and welding them back on required material. That and there will be more aftermath to contend with from this arc, which will transition into the next arcs. I do not press the “status quo” reset button when things are said and done.

**General Notes:**
Nothing this time…

**Chapter Notes:**

**Stellar Classification** – This is a scientific shorthand describing stars according to their properties. First, G2 denotes its approximate surface temperature. The scale goes (O, B, A, F, G, K, M) by decreasing surface temperature (O-types are hottest, c. 30,000 K). The G-types are around 6,000 K. The number is a further refinement of that temperature; a G2 will be cooler than a G1 or a G0. The difference might be as little as 200 K. The letter/number also hint at color, as the hot O-types tend to be white to faintly bluish, while the cool M-types are red. The V is actually a Roman numeral and speaks about the star’s mass. V denotes the main sequence and dwarf stars. At the top of that scale are the Ia stars, the Supergiants who have hundreds of solar masses to their name (1 solar mass unit = Sol’s mass). For the record, our sun is a G2V too.

**Human Glibness** – The anecdote about the Swiss militiamen and the German Kaiser has been going around on the internet. Unfortunately I was not able to find concrete credits or a definitive version, thus I am not sure it even happened, but that really does not matter. What matters is that it’s a good sort of joke, the sort of thing that passes into folk legend. Who does not love a good legend?
Armageddon [Part IV]

Chapter Notes

**Disclaimer:** I do no own Mass Effect, I do not claim to own Mass Effect, I am only doing this for fun.

**Author Notes:** Finally, this arc is finished. It ran away on me when I popped open the hood and realized just how many faults needed repair.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**Episode 41:** Armageddon [Part IV]

The batarians continued toward the marines, utterly unaware of the trap. Kaidan was crouched next to her, his gaze locked on the video feed on her Omni-tool. Shepard could tell he was nervous, as typically he was right there with Bravo, ready to support and shield them if necessary. However now he was too far away. She understood the resultant feeling.

When the batarians got to about twenty meters away from Williams and Jenkins, Shepard switched feeds to a camera mounted behind the marines. She saw Ashley draw a flash-bang and slip her thumb into the safety ring. Behind her, Jenkins was far twitchier than he ought to have been.

"Easy, Jenkins. I know you got this…” Shepard murmured.

"Thanks… ma’am.” He muttered back and stilled.

The batarians crossed another ten meters and stopped. Shepard knew it was time, “You are clear to engage!”

The moment Shepard gave the word, Ashley rose to her feet, wound up, and threw the flashbang. Shepard turned off her Omni-tool, rose to her feet, and began to descend down the stairs. A moment later there was a very loud bang and then an assault rifle kicked in, beating a wild staccato. At the bottom of the stairs, Shepard raised Sin and turned around the balustrade, only to see that the simultaneous element of the attack plan had worked. Right then, all the batarians on this level had too much on their hands to even think of helping each-other.

An assault rifle beat controlled bursts at a distance behind her back, echoing and reverberating as the sound spread away from its source. Shepard recognized it as Garrus’ customized Phaeston. Due to an accident of geometry Garrus had a perfect line of sight on a doorway while firing right over the staircase balustrade he was using for cover. The batarians were hardly so lucky. Only one weapon beat back in retort. Garrus had managed to get a drop on one of his enemies.

On her left there was the rapid rattle of Legion’s pulse rifle. She turned her head and spotted the geth emerge from cover and walk right into the batarian return fire, shields rippling with the bullet impacts. The batarian at the receiving end of the barrage strafed out of the way. The other turned to the door leading into the room they were guarding. Legion swapped targets. The second batarian’s shields failed before he could finish typing in the door code. A single pulse round tore through the back of his hand and the next few went through the helmet. That batarian went down so quick he did not have the time to register his obliterated his hand.
Seeing as Legion and Garrus had their situation under control, Shepard hurried to the staircase that would take Kaidan and her to the bottom-most level. Just as she reached the stairs, she heard the wild rattling from Tali’s drone. Shepard looked over and was surprised to see that the two batarians Nihlus and Tali had engaged had managed to pin the Spectre and quarian on the stairs. Nihlus had his assault rifle out, but the problem was clear to see. One of the batarians had tech armor and a kinetic barrier, and he was wielding a larger than average weapon that barked almost as fast as Legion’s.

With the heavily shielded batarian keeping the Spectre and quarian in cover, the other turned on the drone. The flying machine wheeled around him, leading his rifle away from the staircase. As soon as some of the heat was off, Nihlus emerged from cover and opened fire on the engineer, his ammo indicators glowing blue, charged to disrupt shields. The batarian’s shields flared, but held, and he returned fire without any hesitance. Nihlus ended up the first to duck back into cover, lest his own shields go down. The batarian took that as his cue to advance. Just then Chatika’s shields failed. Bullets began to pepper its casing. The drone veered hard, flying into some room as fast as it could.

Shepard turned back to Legion, and saw that the second batarian there had ducked into the alcove of public terminal, which gave him a little bit of protection. His body was glowing with tech armor as well. He was fervently pecking away at his Omni-tool even as Legion advanced on his position. Then quite suddenly the geth stopped cold, their iris narrowed down, and the emotive plates rose and narrowed down at the front, as if the geth was furrowing a brow. “Intrusion attempt detected… initiating countermeasures.” Legion announced. Shepard heard them over the comm as well as on the externals. “We are a terminal of the Geth. You efforts are futile.”

The batarian froze, then he must have realized the full scope of his error as his Omni-tool turned off. Then he stepped out of cover and raised his rifle into position. Legion opened fire, and the batarian fired back. The pulse rifle’s charged shots rapidly ripped through the batarian’s kinetic shields. The tech armor was no match for the geth’s accuracy and lack of sentiment. The engineer went down, his face-shield obliterated. “Resistance terminated. Shepard-Commander, we are aware of Creator-Zorah’s and Spectre-Kryik’s situation. We will assist them. Proceed to your next objective.” The geth announced as they stowed the pulse rifle behind their back and reached for the massive HVR.

“Thanks Legion,” Shepard replied.

Suddenly there was a sudden loud crack of an HVR. Shepard whirled just in time to see that one of the batarians who had pinned Nihlus and Tali in cover had collapsed.

“Legion. You are slow.” Garrus announced calmly.

“Negative, Officer-Vakarian.” the geth replied, unbothered as the massive sniper rifle unfolded. The geth turned the rifle to point across the atrium and peered through the scope. “We calculated your odds of intervention to be a hundred percent. As such, we are right on time.” As if to punctuate the point, the geth pulled the trigger. The other batarian’s helmet exploded. Tali yelped in surprise.

“How about you two finished making me look bad?” Nihlus groused as he rose to his feet.

“It has been a treat.” Garrus rumbled, amused.

“Oh for all that’s… we have bombs to worry about!” Tali said tersely. “My poor ears…” she mumbled.

Shepard considered that as the bomb teams getting through. She motioned for Kaidan to follow and went down the stairs. Rounding the bottom edge, she saw what was taking Ashley and Jenkins seemingly a bit longer than it ought to have. They had managed to kill one of the three patrolling
batarian, but the other two took cover in the mouth of a corridor extending away from the atrium. What more that was the corridor that led to where she knew Balak was. Ashley and Jenkins would not expose themselves by going in there after them. This turned the situation into a stand-off.

Putting Ashley and Jenkins on that particular staircase had been a bit of a calculated move on her part. Shepard wanted them to eliminate the patrol, and then be in position as back up, should Kaidan and her need it when they went toward the office. She took a different stairway, putting the mouth of the corridor between her and the marines. Now the batarian had absolutely nowhere left to go. Still, they were not wholly dumb, they did the only logical thing left to them. By backing up they eliminated lines of sight from the stairways, so to get rid of them, someone would have to go for them head on.

Still, she knew they would not accept making their last stand, they would want to get out of this alive. This might make their boss show himself. She would bet that Balak was the type to gloat. If the situations were reversed, and she was in the position to blow up his men, she would have wanted to see the look on his face. Heck, she wanted to see the look on his face when she told him that his cronies tried to betray him by making a deal with her. Psychology was universal that way, regardless of species. In some ways they were both monsters, except he was a megalomaniacal terrorist, while she still had some shred of decency and self-control left. The question became how to play this hand?

“Shepard, there is bad news. Defusing this bomb… will take a while.” Nihlus announced.

“It’s wiring is all messy…” Tali explained. “I think that’s intentional.”

“Creator-Zorah is correct. The quantity of redundant wiring is a crude means of hampering manual disarmament.” Legion spoke up.

“Please don’t tell me that you’re confounded too, Legion.” Tali asked, suddenly very nervous.

“We are incapable of being confounded, Creator-Zorah. Addendum: we have initiated analysis to determine which wires are false leads. We will relay the results to you once we complete the process. Stand by.”

“Alright… I think I want a second opinion.” Tali mumbled.

“Are these things even identical?” Garrus wondered. “Legion, send me the data too.”

“Acknowledged, Officer-Vakarian. Stand by.”

There was something they could still do, in the event that the bombs proved too complex, “What about the hostages?” Shepard asked.

“I know what you are going to say, Shepard.” Nihlus spoke up. “I am working on setting them free right now.”

“You’re going to have to be careful with where you lead them. Two of the patrolling batarian decided to put themselves between me and Balak. They’re still alive.”

Nihlus snorted, “Not for long, I bet. Well, I will be careful.”

“Alright.” What else could she say? She was not surprised that Nihlus had anticipated what she would want to do. However, suddenly there was another consideration to worry about. Nihlus was right to free the hostages, to get them out of harm’s way, just in case Legion, Tali, and Garrus could not figure the bombs out, but he could not get all three rooms simultaneously. She glanced in the direction where she knew Ashley and Jenkins were. “Gunny, you and Jenkins go upstairs. Split up
and help Nihlus free the hostages and escort them to safety.” She would stall as long as she could.

“Got it. Let’s go Jenkins.” Ashley replied.

“Aye, aye.” The corporal replied.

“I suppose this is where you want me to do that something dangerous…” Kaidan stated quietly.

Shepard turned to him and nodded.

Kaidan sighed, “Sorry… I will do it, but… I can’t say I will enjoy it.”

“I don’t enjoy what I do either, but I do what must be done. The day I start enjoying it… is the day everyone should worry.” Shepard replied bluntly as she brought up her Omni-tool. Kaidan did not reply to that statement. As the cloak settled over her, she rose to her feet and came around the barrier that separated the stairway from the promenade. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Williams and Jenkins vanish at the top of the stairs on the level above them. She pressed her back to the promenade’s back wall and inched her way closer to the corridor mouth.

Cloak or not, she was taking precaution because batarians had two pairs of eyes set at different widths and heights, which meant their perception of parallax and depth was more complex. There was a real risk that one of them might be eagle-eyed enough to notice her cloak’s distortion ripple.

She poked her head around the edge and peered down the corridor. The batarians had their backs to opposite walls. However right at that moment one was looking at the other as if they were conversing. That just meant at least one of them was not paying attention. Shepard slipped around the corner and moved in, heading right for the batarian who was talking to the other.

Her fingers ghosted on the ammo selector switches putting the twins in disruptor mode. The aware batarian froze and his head snapped right in her direction. She could see his four eyes focus right on where she was. Shepard grinned, not that he would be able to see it. His rifle began to turn, and only then did the other batarian notice and follow its motion. For all Shepard cared he might have been moving in slow motion.

She raised Sin, muzzle pointed into the batarian’s face. His eyes blew wide and his mouth slackened. She pulled the trigger. The shot rolled like thunder in the confines of the narrow corridor. The batarian’s head whipped back, but Shepard was already moving. She stepped around the body even as the other batarian opened fire on where she had just been. Some of the rounds peppered the collapsing corpse’s shield envelope in place of her. She wheeled around, raised Sin, and fired.

The batarian’s shields flared, but held. Then he swept across with his rifle, seeking for her. Shepard bolted to her left, to stay just ahead of the bullet stream, raised Dex, and pulled the trigger. Being out of position meant her aim was off, the bullet may have ripped through the batarian’s shield, but it merely shattered his shoulder guard. The rifle continued spraying, still seeking her. By then the batarian had turned his back on the corridor mouth. Out of the corner of her eye Shepard saw Kaidan step out into the open behind him.

Kaidan raised his side-arm and pulled the trigger once, and then a second time. The batarian froze and his rifle stopped cycling. Silence reigned for a long moment, and then he crumpled to the floor, ceramics ringing against the hard pre-cast slabs, the plating on his back perforated with two bullet holes. Kaidan stood there, his side-arm still raised.

“Commander, are you alright?” He asked.

Shepard would be lying if she was not surprised at what the lieutenant had just done. “I’m
unharmed.” Saying she was alright was reserved for when Balak was dead at her feet.

“Good. I didn’t want to risk stray rounds hitting you. That and… this actually works for you. I think.” Kaidan replied as he drew near, the look in his eyes was vaguely amused right then.

“It does,” Shepard replied as she holstered her guns. Balak and his two remaining cronies would have heard the twins and then their ally’s automatic. With Kaidan using his own pistol and the warping effect of the corridor they would have little reason to suspect that there was more than one person here. Kaidan had preserved her cover, and what more, he had done so using her sort of sleight of hand. Balak had driven the calmest member of her team into pulling up some metaphorical sleeves.

“Shepard-Commander, we have completed our analysis of the explosive device. We are relaying the data to Creator-Zorah and Officer-Vakarian now.” Legion announced.

“Thanks for the update, Legion.” Shepard replied. “What about the hostages?” She asked.

“I am on it Shepard. I will assume that silence means it is safe to escort them to the atrium.” Nihlus replied.

“I am working on untying the last hostage. The batarians used polymer ties, even with our knives, it takes a bit to cut through.” Ashley replied.

“I still have two left,” Jenkins slipped in.

“Tell me when you get that done.” Shepard paused then, wondering if she ought to call Tali, Garrus, and Legion off. Balak had lost his bargaining chip. Furthermore, the rooms were so deep underground that even if the bombs destroyed them, they could not cause a vent-out. Still, she did not want Balak to have that satisfaction. That meant she had to risk her team, but there was a way to mitigate that. “Legion, Tali, Garrus… keep an ear on the link. If it sounds like Balak is getting twitchy… get out of there. Let the rooms blow.”

“As you wish, Commander.” Garrus replied.

“Acknowledged.”

“Don’t worry, Commander. We’ll defuse these things.” Tali finished.

“Alright,” Shepard replied as she turned and made her way toward the office at the end of the hall, keeping her footfalls silent and her movement smooth.

“Alright! Last of my hostages is free… Come on people, we’re out of here! There will be answers about the friendly synthetic once you’re out of the blast range.” Ashley said, half as an update, and half to everyone else around her.

“I’m about done here… maybe half a minute?” Jenkins slipped in.

“I guess we are almost clear to finish this. One way or the other.” Kaidan said as he caught up to her.

“Indeed.” Shepard replied as she let herself fall behind him, and reached up to her helmet to ensure that external signals would pass through her comm link to the others. If things were to go south she needed to give the bomb teams all the advance warning they could get.

“There, done!” Jenkins chorused. “Come with me everyone!”
Suddenly the door at the end of the corridor opened and two batarians filed out, both with their automatics in hand. Kaidan stopped cold, and Shepard stopped right behind him. Then Balak appeared, dragging his struggling hostage by a cord tied tightly around her neck. He stopped in front in front of the other two, four eyes locked on Kaidan, completely oblivious to the absolutely vicious death glare the woman aimed at the back of his head.

“Stop right there!” he growled. “Make one move I do not like and I will tighten my grip until the cord slits her throat.”

Shepard glanced at Kaidan, this would be where he would have to do the talking for her.

“Alright. I am not here to provoke an unnecessary confrontation,” The lieutenant replied as he holstered his side-arm slowly.

This amused Shepard. Balak would not know that Kaidan was arguably more dangerous when he was unarmed. She advanced slowly, skirting as wide as possible on the opposite side from the hostage. The last thing she needed was for the woman to see the ripple and react as civilians often did, stare and track it. The batarians behind her would notice a reaction like that.

“I am sure we can reach an agreement that everyone will benefit from.” Kaidan went on.

“Here’s what will benefit me. I am leaving this rock while I can, and this one-” he yanked on the cord for emphasis, “is coming with me. You do not try to stop me, and maybe I will not blow up your friends and kill her.”

Shepard circled the batarian cronies and raised her leg to draw her knife. Whom should she attack first? What would give Kate the highest chance of survival? Attack the wrong batarian and Kate would become a casualty.

“I can’t let you go. I have orders.” Kaidan replied.

“I do not care about your orders! I told you how this will end. You will have to make do with stopping this rock.”

“I can’t let you go.” Kaidan repeated, with more force in his tone. “Not after what happened here and what you’ve done to these people.”

Balak bristled, “This is nothing! You humans have done far worse to us!” He growled.

Shepard grinned. Kaidan had baited the terrorist’s victim mentality with a single artful stroke. The Alliance was a metaphorical cactus Balak chose to sit on, and he would blame everyone but himself for the choice.

“We’ve been forced into exile. Forced to survive on what meager resources we can get. Your Alliance robbed us of a dozen colony worlds!”

“Shepard-Commander, status update: the explosive device we analyzed has been rendered inoperable.” Legion announced.

“Your people are enjoying the platinum wealth that should have been ours!” Balak went on, his voice dipping into a dangerous low growl.

Shepard found the tirade highly amusing. As far as she was concerned, he was not the victim here. She refused to ever see the logic in anything coming straight from a terrorist. Any moment now Garrus and Tali would tell her that the bombs were out of the picture. She had chosen her next
course of action, she just needed to get the all-clear to carry it out.

“I can certainly understand that, and yes, there are genuine grievances here, but none of that justifies your actions here.” Kaidan replied. “You would have killed millions of people… and for what?”

“For what?” Balak repeated, clearly furious now. “We had no other option. Sometimes you need to get someone’s attention before they will listen. You have forced our hand!”

“Commander… I just defused my bomb.” Garrus added.

Shepard did not reply, she could only stand there and marvel at how far down the road of victim attitude Balak went.

“I… still haven’t found the right wires.” Tali murmured.

“Creator-Zorah, we are on our way to assist you.”

“Alright…”

Tali sounded fearful, though Shepard would not blame her. The quarian girl would be fighting her instincts to run, using the fact that she would not want to be the only one who failed at the assigned task. Doubly so given that she had been the one to promise that the bombs would be defused.

“You started the conflict, not us.” Kaidan opened, a sharp rebuff in his tone. “You raided our colonies in the twenty-one-sixties. You thought we would not retaliate. Then when we did, you cried foul and ran to the Council. Except they never forgot the raids against Salarian and Asari colonies in the past. I understand that you think yourself the victim. But you are not.”

“Enough!” Balak snapped. “Typical human reasoning. That is why any talks between our people would only be an amusement to yours. Your kind do not hide your contempt for our way of life.”

“I found them!” Tali chorused, suddenly jubilant. “There are only two wires with a faint electric field.”

“That would be them.” Garrus said.

“I’m done wasting my breath on you. I am leaving. Stand aside.” Balak finished.

“That’s one…”

“Kaidan… when I attack, stasis Kate.” Shepard ordered as she slid up right behind the batarian closest to the woman.

“Done! The third bomb is inert! Give him what he deserves, Commander!”

“Oh I will,” Shepard replied, not bothering to hide the malice in her tone. She raised her free hand to her helmet controls to turn on her external relay.

“You are not going anywhere.” Kaidan said as his biotic aura manifested, spreading like liquid fire over his limbs.

Shepard grabbed the closest batarian by the side of his helmet and thrust her knife into the side of his neck. He jerked in her grip and his body flickered periwinkle. Shepard felt the hair at the back of her neck rise. A biotic? It was a good thing she went with the knife.

The other batarian wheeled away as his body ignited with a periwinkle aura. Suddenly there was a
whomp, Kate shrieked, but the sound was strangled away as Kaidan’s stasis field enveloped her. The sudden air density shift made Balak let go of the ligature around the woman’s neck.

Balak growled and went for his side-arm. Shepard yanked her knife free and shoved the corpse at the other batarian with all her exo-frame-assisted strength as she rounded on the terrorist leader.

“I got him, Commander,” Kaidan called as he rounded on the biotic batarian, his own biotic aura began to ripple and flicker.

The terrorist leader wheeled on her, pistol whipping into the air, but she still had her cloak on. In the breathless second it took him to spot where she stood, Shepard had the time to reach out, and push the pistol’s muzzle down. Balak pulled the trigger, the gun fired, the round ricocheted off the floor with a ping, and Shepard felt it hit her shin-guard, but it had lost a lot of its energy and thus did not penetrate. Balak stepped back, and Shepard slid to the right, away from him, out of the range where he would be able to see her semblance.

Suddenly the hair at the back of her neck rose and she felt her body begin to lift, starting seemingly from her stomach, causing it to roil, and then the rest of her. Her heels came off the floor as the batarian’s biotic field continued to build. Shepard knew what was coming, he was probably going to try and throw her.

“Not on my watch, bastard!” Kaidan growled as his biotics flared even brighter.

The dark energy creeping up the back of her neck died, and her heels came back down hard. Shepard turned her head ever so slightly, still keeping one eye on Balak. The biotic batarian had stiffened like a ramrod and his hand rose to his chest, fingers positively clawing at the area where his heart and lungs were. She could see him gaping and gasping like a fish.

Then Kaidan’s hand snapped shut into a fist. The batarian jerked, and he must have screamed, though Shepard could not hear it. Spittle laced with blood splattered against the inside of his helmet face-shield. Kaidan lowered his arm, his biotic field faded, and the batarian crumpled to the floor.

The display rooted Balak to the spot. Kate had been released from the stasis at some point Shepard had missed. She too shrank away and pressed her back to the nearest wall, eyes wide in fear.

“Commander are you alright?” Ashley asked.

Shepard did not reply, she was too focused on the task at hand. She grabbed Balak’s sidearm and slammed his wrist with the butt of her knife. That caused him to snap out of his stupor, but also let go of his last line of defense. Shepard tossed the weapon behind her. In the same fluent motion she grabbed the terrorist’s arm and yanked it back around him, twisting his forearm until the ligaments of his elbow tightened, even as she shoved the tip of her bloody knife under his chin. His automatic remained behind his back, pressed between their bodies, useless. “Eyes on me,” she said. Her Omni-tool reacted to the phrase as coded, disconnecting her cloak.

“You should have let me go while you had the chance;” Balak growled as his free hand crept into one of the side pouches on his suit webbing.

Dimly Shepard heard a familiar set of turian footsteps coming from behind her. She knew there was the only one individual who would think of coming here. She did not acknowledge his arrival, her focus remained entirely on the moment. Balak would be reaching for his ace in the hole, unaware that it had been pulled. The thought of having the last laugh made her grin in triumph.

“Should I have? I should think it is more that you should have known not try half-baked acts of
terrorism.” She teased, no longer bothering to keep the sticky-sweet undertone at bay. It was so easy to let go, to revel in her superiority right then. She would regret it later, but for now? The monster was awake and loose. She could not be bothered to try and rein it in.

“You bitch,” Balak whipped out the detonator. His thumb flicked up the safety cap and slammed on its single button with prejudice.

And nothing happened.

Shepard laughed. “It’s a wonder what a little forewarning does, doesn’t it?” She asked. “It’s funny, but you literally tossed your chances out the metaphorical window while lecturing the lieutenant here on how much of a victim you think you are. The last bomb was defused just moments before I attacked your bodyguards.” She could not help it, she wanted to reduce him to nothing right before he died.

“Who do you think you are?” Balak demanded.

She knew what he was doing, right then he would have realized the gig was up. He was a dead bastard standing. Still, he would stall for every last second he could. The monster within her was going to enjoy playing this game. There was absolutely nothing Balak could do to turn this around. Not on his own.

“Oh pardon me, where are my manners? I am Lieutenant Commander Shepard. Council Spectre-in-training. I don’t suppose that matters much to you. But I know you’ll recognize my other title, the White Death.”

Kate gasped in the background. Balak froze, which told Shepard enough about whether or not he knew that title. She had given it three-out-of-four odds. After all, he seemed rather angry about the Alliance’s insults to his people. That sort of obsession would make him keep a proverbial bingo book of enemy targets to enjoy snuffing out. The White Death would be right up there in it.

“Careful, Shepard. It is beginning to sound like you are… enjoying yourself.” Nihlus rumbled as he came around her to stand in front of Balak.

There was just a faint hint of something else in his tone, which told Shepard enough about just how serious that warning was. That is to say, not serious at all. She laughed and leaned closer to Balak, practically whispering into what the batarians had for external ears. “Just so you know, your plans have always been half-baked. That group you tried to send after us to the torch? They tried to bargain with me for their lives. Your lieutenant had it in mind to set you up and take over. In the process he fed me a lot of rather good information. Of course, if there is something I can’t abide, after terrorists, it is traitors.”

“You really are an idiot. Even if the Alliance did not respond… which would not have happened, but… the Council would have sent a Spectre to stop you. You had no chance with this scheme.” Nihlus added.

“Nihlus, why so modest?” Shepard replied blandly. The game had turned into two on one, but it was almost over as well.

“Not modesty. Technically I never got orders to come here.”

She felt Balak twitch, the realization must have taken a moment or two too long to filter through. She would have loved to see the expression on his face when he realized just how bad he had proverbially screwed the pooch. Nihlus was right in every shade of the term. One of the Council’s
laws extended a blanket protection to all of the relatively-rare garden worlds. The intentional
destruction of one was one of the worst crimes, both intentionally during wartime, and even worse,
by an act of terrorism. The Council would have sent a Spectre indeed. The only reason they had not,
was probably because Nihlus and her were sent in. Had they not been, Shepard would not have been
surprised if the Council outright came down like the hand of the almighty and sent in Saren. She
wanted to think that even he would have done something for the engineers on this rock, even if it
was only because someone had to stop the rock.

“I do believe it is time to finish playing with him, Shepard.” Nihlus went on, his tone turning more
serious, but Shepard still knew him well enough. He was definitely enjoying the game at least half as
much as she was, and was merely putting up appearances of professional detachment.

“Come now… Kate, right?” Kaidan asked.


“I’m a field medic. Let’s go find the others, and then I will help you remove that cord.” Kaidan
finished.

Shepard heard two sets of retreating footsteps. She grinned and made a mental note to thank Kaidan
for that little bit of foresight. She did not want Kate to see what she was about to actually do to
Balak.

“Yea,” Shepard repeated. “I would love to say nothing personal… but... this is personal. Just be glad
I won’t bastardize your corpse to ensure you spend all of eternity in a bodily prison.”

“You’ll get your dues.” Balak hissed.

“Oh I know,” Shepard replied.

It was over with a flick of the knife’s blade across his throat, and Shepard let him go to take a wide
step back. Maybe she would not symbolically mutilate his corpse, but she was not so merciful as to
give him an entirely quick death. She watched as he crumbled, blood quickly gushing from his slit
neck artery. The monster inside would not have any other resolution. His cronies killed people on
this rock in truly heinous, slow, and painful manners. Balak was due to spend the last moments of his
pathetic life feeling some of their pain.

Still, as the seconds ticked, the monster seemed to retreat back into its cell. Her humane part began to
reassert. Suddenly she could not bear to watch his death at all, so she closed her eyes. A finger poked
at the side of her helmet, causing Shepard to snap her eyes open again. Her HUD flashed that her
external relay had been disconnected, then she felt an arm wrap around her shoulders and pull her
into its owner’s side.

“It is over.” Nihlus rumbled, his voice did not come over her suit communication link.

Shepard looked up and saw that he had pulled off his helmet, that way whatever he said would not
be broadcast for everyone else to hear. She did not reply, because she did not want it to be broadcast
to the others. Instead she just stood there and let the comfort Nihlus offered osmose. Turians were
hardly touchy-feely, but these moments showed that Nihlus was uncannily aware of when touchy-
feely was called for. She knew he was not going to make a fuss about it, he just offered a very
physical sort of comfort. It was actually quite sweet considering whom it was coming from.

Thus she let the moment linger for the twenty seconds she could reasonably afford before she pulled
away, even as her hand ghosted over the highest point of his chest plate, her way of saying thanks
without saying a thing. Her moment of weakness was over, she knew she needed to move into the final details. “We need this damn rock’s chief engineer. The rock has to be slowed down.” She announced for all to hear.

“Funny thing, Skipper, he literally just showed up. Says he started walking here when he saw the third torch go offline,” Ashley announced.

Shepard would hazard a guess that walking was not quite the right term to use for that. The most efficient form of locomotion in low gravity was a rather silly-looking hopping gait. But that sort of speculation was neither here nor there.

“We’ll be there in a moment. I want to talk to people.” Shepard replied.

“Alright… but don’t be surprised at anything they do.” Ashley warned.

“I’m rarely surprised at anything anyone does. Comes with experience, Gunny.”

“Of course,” Ashley replied.

Maybe some would find that sort of statement a touch arrogant, but it was her truth. Shepard fancied herself having seen and done so much that very little could catch her by surprise. She wordlessly turned and walked toward the mouth of the corridor. She knew Nihlus would follow her without needing to be told to do so.

When she reached the promenade, she saw that all the hostages had gathered in the small container garden in the center of the atrium. All of them looked frazzled, but none were worse for wear. A number were still subconsciously massaging where the polymer cords had been. Suddenly one of the scientists raised his hands and began to clap. It was like he broke the ice as the standing ovation grew rapidly until all of the former hostages were showing their appreciations.

Shepard raised her hands to silence it, and waited until it well and truly stopped. “I hope you people applauded everyone else on my team with just as much fervor, because they deserve it more than me. Certainly those who defused the bombs deserve it more than me.” She said.

“Nonsense!” one of the men in the back called. “You ordered them to defuse those bombs. You did not have to. We were all willing to die if that would stop this rock!”

A murmur of affirmations and head nodding went amidst the group.

“That is not how I operate,” Shepard replied, and left it at that.

“Well thank you for that!” the same man called. “I’m rather fond of living too!”

This time a few chuckles went about. Still, they sounded terse and tired, and Shepard would not blame this reaction. Some people took to barely surviving a situation like this as a licence to make the most awful jokes they could think of. She had heard some doozies.

“Alright people. You’ve seen our saviors. Now we have a rock to stop. Lakshmi, Darius, you’re the senior-most propulsion engineers I have, you’ll come with me to the control room. We need to calculate and execute a counter-burn.” Simon Atwell stepped in, taking charge with all the authority he could muster. “And… Dr. Rosenberg, pleasure to see you are well, ma’am, but please see to everyone else.”

“Of course,” the doctor replied calmly.
“Now let’s move!” Atwell barked.

The two engineers, a short Indian woman with a long messy plait of black hair and a tall, dark-skinned man from the back moved toward Atwell. The doctor, an older lady with grey hair and glasses, wearing medical overalls gathered the others and moved them in the completely opposite direction. The two groups split up, with the engineers rushing toward where they had to be as fast as their legs would carry them right then.

Only Kate lingered behind, she was sitting with Kaidan off to the side. The lieutenant had indeed removed the polymer cord from around the woman’s neck, revealing a nasty-looking welt that still showed despite the subsequent liberal coating of Medi-Gel. He had been thorough in treating her wounds, the goop was there to prevent infection if the cord actually managed to break skin in any way. Right then Kaidan had his helmet off and his eyes closed. Shepard knew that he probably had another one of his nasty biotic headaches going to town on his central nervous system.

Now that the atrium emptied out of all the other survivors, Kate rose to her feet and approached slowly. Her eyes were on the floor, and for the life of her, Shepard could not tell whether it was because she had seen too much in that corridor, or because of something else. “Commander… I- I wanted to thank you, deeply, and personally.” She murmured.

“No thanks are necessary. Are you alright?” Shepard asked.

“Yes… as alright as I could be. But I will thank you nevertheless. You saved all of us when you could have ignored the bombs. You and the lieutenant saved me as well. I do not want to think about what Balak would have done to me if he had the chance. He already ordered them to kill Aaron. They killed my brother when I would not reveal whom I was talking to. I could not even be sure it connected… but still, they killed him.”

Shepard knew what was going on, the shock was beginning to sink in on Kate now that adrenaline and fear were not there to dampen it. “It connected. Your warning about the bombs was everything. I know it is not much of a comfort, but you two displayed tremendous bravery, and that turned the whole situation right around. I wish I could have saved him though.” The words sounded paltry, hollow even, but this was the best Shepard could offer to the woman right then. Nothing would make her brother’s death truly alright, but perhaps knowing for sure that he did not die in vain could balm the pain even a little.

“It is not your fault, Commander. It was the batarians, but… he would have liked you. He was stubborn, but always did the right thing. He would not have liked to save himself if it meant others got hurt. Still… I don’t know if I can ever look at this rock the same way again… Aaron was the one who convinced me to join the team. He said it would be an adventure. And now…” Kate trailed off then.

Shepard could see a hint of the tears that Kate was fighting to hold back. She wished she knew the right thing to say right then. The severed sibling bond went deeper than what she had with Arthur, but it came from the same place. What could she say that would not come across as canned platitudes? “The batarians killed a dear friend of mine on Elysium… so I know it must be tough right not, but it will get better.” She hated having to give Kate an omission like that, with canned platitudes on top, but she could not think of anything else. “Know that I killed those who killed your brother. They’re never doing that to anyone else. So now let’s think about what we can still do. I think he would not have convinced you to come here if you were truly unwilling. You wanted to be part of this as much as he did.”

Kate blinked once, then twice, and it was like watching her find and pull up another reservoir of strength. She raised her hands to wipe at the undersides of her eyes, “You are right…”
Shepard nodded, “Hold on to that.” She said. “Do not let a bunch of batarian scumbags decide how you should live your life, nor taint what your brother wanted to protect. That is the way I looked at it myself. I would not let them have that power over me.”

“I know.” Kate replied. A wan little smile flashed across her features for a split of a second. “Thank you, Commander. For protecting us. For helping us. But also for encouraging me. It was a pleasure meeting you and your team, but… at the risk of sounding a little ungrateful… I really ought to see to Aaron now.”

“Of course. I’m sorry if I came off a little… preachy.” Shepard nodded. “I’m not good with this sort of thing,” Shepard figured she owed Kate that much honesty.

Kate shook her head, the wan smile flashed again. Then she stepped back and simply turned to walk away. Shepard watched her go for a brief moment. She would be alright, she knew that much. Kate had a fighting spirit to her. If the batarians had not broken her before, they would not break her now. When the woman vanished at the top of the stairs leading to the level above, Shepard finally turned back to her team. “Alright…” she began, but then her communicator chirped, and Shepard closed her mouth before she could say another word. She reached up and tapped at her helmet’s controls, “Shepard here. What is it, Joker?”

“Hey Commander, just calling to let you know, we picked up the Dachau start to warm its engines.” Joker announced.

Ah, of course. Balak’s crony did say something about some batarians staying back on their ship. “EDI, did you get a good scan of the vessel? Any hints of hostages on board?” She doubted the batarians took anyone to the Dachau once they decided to use the rock as a weapon of mass destruction. They had shot every EVA suit they came across for a reason.

“Commander, I detected three body heat signatures aboard the vessel. Two on the bridge, and one in engineering. I consulted the standard layout plans for this type of vessel found within my database, and I can give you a ninety-nine percent certainty that the batarians have not taken anyone aboard.”

“Good. Joker, wait until they lift off and clear the rock, and then put two disruptor torpedoes up their tail-pipes.” Shepard ordered.

“With extreme and unashamed pleasure. I take it you’re almost done then?”

“We are done, and I call this job a success. EDI you can relay that to Admiral Hackett too. My report will be on his desk in the next twenty-four.”

“Right away, Commander.” EDI replied.

“With your standards of ‘success’… did you find a truck-sized nugget of platinum they let you keep too?” Joker asked.

Shepard laughed, “Alas no. But now I wish I had.” It was mostly a joke though. Where did one go to sell that much raw platinum? “Tell me when the Batarians are gone, but for now, Shepard out.” With that said, she tapped at her comm to close the link. It was cute how the Dachau and its skeleton crew thought she would let them get away. She turned back to her team, there was just one last thing that needed to be done.

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It was another four hours before any of them could get back to the Normandy. Shepard felt like
running off was not a good idea. Not when the rock was still hurtling at Terra Nova way too fast. They ended up staying for the careful thruster ballet directed and produced by Atwell, starring his two propulsion engineers. It had ended up a real three-act performance.

Due to the period of time X57 spent running on just one torch, it had started to turn laterally. Act one was to wait for it to do a full one-eighty, so that the torches would point into the rock’s direction of travel. Act two was firing just one torch at first, to reverse the rotation. Act three, when the rock stopped turning, the engineers had to coordinate a perfectly simultaneous ignition of all three, while balancing the lateral output to correct the rock’s slightly deviated path, to make it fall into its intended orbit. It was no easy feat to steer an asteroid, but they managed to do it on the fumes of the remaining fuel at that.

After that it was a long procession of the survivors thanking everyone. Shepard thought the team was quite literally rescued by the arrival of the company’s supply ship with relief resources. It was much easier for all of them to slip away while everyone was too busy negotiating the fallout. Shepard still felt slimy for running off like that, but they were not there to be permanent additions, nor was it her job to handle the post-operation engineering and relief efforts. She could understand why the civilians clung to them half as much as they did, they had just survived a harrowing ordeal, but she would have liked some consideration for her team too. This has been a way too long a day, and she would not blame anyone if they did not want to socialize after that.

Their return to the Normandy was greeted with Doctor Chakwas taking over. Kaidan vanished rather quickly. No one was surprised when he said he wanted to sleep off the headache. Tali vanished back in engineering, muttering something about Chatika and batarians. The girl was clearly upset that they had damaged her drone. After that, Legion bluntly announced that they had overdrawn their internal batteries and needed to recharge before vanishing in the AI core. The real surprise was Matthews. The cook had whipped up what he called a “victory buffet”.

After having a meal and a small cup of coffee to give herself just enough energy to do one last thing, Shepard went up to the OD to check her messages. EDI had passed a message to Admiral Hackett to say that the operation was a success, and so the Admiral sent a quick message back, congratulating her and the team, and telling them to get back to Arcturus. Shepard told Joker to get them there when the feasting was done, and then went up to her loft to sleep.

She had no energy left to be celebrating anything, nor even dealing with her dust-covered gear. This whole experience brought back more than too many memories of a rather unpleasant time. She knew she would have to perform a certain song and dance for the media. She just hoped, fervently hoped, that some pencil-neck in charge of recruitment would not come up with the idea of putting her on a recruitment poster again. Shepard had had enough of photo shoots the first time around.

In the end it was about twelve hours before the Normandy arrived at Arcturus station. At least four of them were spent in the orbit of Themis, with the engineers not being in a particular hurry to finish dumping the core’s excess static charge build up, or venting the IES system. This gave Shepard some time to really sink her teeth into the report for the admiral. She knew that like it or not, the report had to be quite detailed. Any major omissions and inconsistencies would eventually come back to bite her, somehow. That was just the way the things went.

This delay naturally also allowed the news to get ahead of them. Within hours the event was all over the Alliance News Network, with the media’s talking heads going at it as if they knew anything about it. No one even bothered to conceal her involvement, and one pundit boldly called it a “Triumph for the White Death”. When Shepard checked her messages, she quickly discovered that
some of the media hounds had gotten hold of the Normandy’s official semi-public electronic mail ID. Fortunately EDI was right on top of things and had sorted the email according to origin. Important messages from her mother and Captain Anderson on top and the half a dozen messages from reporters begging for exclusive interviews in a whole other separate folder which Shepard summarily deleted.

After seeing the drivel on the public airways, she knew better than to agree to do exclusive grilling. Honestly, who did they think she was? A Hollywood starlet? She was much too busy with important things. That and she knew that there was no point to fueling the pundits. The media’s worst was yet to come, and on its own. In fact, seeing the interest, she was sorely tempted to order Joker to do one-eighty, lie that Spectre business had come up, and run all the way to the Terminus. She would rather face every glory-seeking batarian bounty hunter and mercenary on Omega than the media on Arcturus. The former would only want to kill her, but it being Omega, she could deal with them. The latter were blood-sucking parasites that would make her life miserable, and she was not even allowed to hint what anatomically-impossible thing they should do with themselves.

Shortly after culling her emails, while Shepard was contemplating temporarily dyeing in the identifying white in her fringe, her terminal pinged with a new incoming message. Shepard saw the sender ID, smiled, and tapped at it. Wrex was still on the Citadel and had caught the Alliance News Network breaking news broadcast. His recorded message was boisterous congratulations on a job well done, though with an addendum that had she told him she was going after batarian terrorists he would have stuck around for one last job, especially this kind, and doubly-so after what she had done for him. The rest of the message was just an update, him saying that he had made a few arrangements and would be out of contact on Tuchanka. The buoy network in the DMZ was spotty after all, but he would try and send something from time to time, likely just text. Shepard gladly recorded a quick heartfelt thank you message and sent it back, hoping it would reach him before he actually left the Citadel.

That single message from Wrex did more to cheer her up than anything else. It was not so much the fact that a krogan praised her for just about painting some walls with batarian blood, but more that Wrex was unlikely to second-guess the thinking behind every breath she took on that rock. Shepard knew full well that the media networks would run a certain predictable gamut. The conservative networks would be ever worse, as their gamut would be entirely self-serving. First they would sing her praises while hitching their xenophobia to them, while doing their best to down-play that more than half her team was “aliens”. Then when that angle was played out, they would bring in some so-called expert to passive-aggressively arm-chair nitpick every action like they could have done better. The worst would be that the expert would probably be some mouth-breathing pencil-neck who would have soiled themselves in that same position.

Still, there was no other choice than run the gauntlet and hope her patience held. Maybe she could con Nihlus into taking on some really easy job, Admiral Hackett would understand. With that game plan in mind, Shepard left the OD and went to her loft to change into her blue and gold uniform with a certain degree of trepidation. Once back on the CIC, she spotted Kaidan and Ashley standing by the airlock. Kaidan was wearing his own even-less-often-seen officer’s uniform, Ashley stuck to her fatigues. It was also near impossible for her sharp eye to miss the way the gunny was eyeing the lieutenant. Shepard would not be the one to point it out, not her business, but she would hazard a bet to say that Ashley rather liked what she saw, which caused Shepard to grin. It would still be a violation of protocol, but she would be a hypocrite to speak up about it.

“Morning, Ash, Kaidan,” she greeted. “You two coming with me?”

Kaidan only nodded. It was hard to miss that he seemed to have slipped right back into his withdrawn shell. Shepard was not buying it, she had seen enough examples of Kaidan when
something actually manages to get past it and irk the individual within.

“If that’s alright with you, Skipper.” Ashley replied.

“Why would it not be?” Shepard replied as she turned to the airlock. She could honestly use some backup in this situation. She could use the reminder that she ought not to eviscerate reporters for their barely-disguised agendas.

The three of them stepped into the airlock and Shepard keyed in the sequence to cycle the system. “I just need to get over to Admiral Hackett’s office. I think he wants to congratulate me in person.” She would not be surprised if her mother was there with cake and noise makers. Hannah could be irreverent like that, and she had her own chip on the shoulder against batarians.

The airlock’s outer door opened and Shepard stepped out first, checking on her uniform toggles one last time. She was mildly surprised to see that there was no mob of reporters pitching tents right in front of the airlock, but maybe that was a small grace from wherever. No one seemed to have quailed to a reporter’s demand to know where the Normandy was docking.

As Shepard began to make her way toward where she knew they could get a vehicle to take them to the navy base, she noted how one set of footsteps behind her actually drew closer. By the heavy set and difference in pitch, uniform shoes rather than combat boots, she knew it was Kaidan.

“Commander, I’ve had something on my mind…” he said, once they were another five meters down the corridor.

Shepard slowed down and glanced at him.

“How did you know I could stasis?” He asked after a long moment.

Ah, that question. She honestly did not know why it bothered him, but she was not going to create a fuss about it. “You are not the first biotic I’ve worked with. Back in ICT I had one on my squad. He’s crazy powerful, but you got him beat in fine control hands down. Basically, I know the standard playbook.”

“Alright… I should have known that.” Kaidan replied, sounding rather sheepish.

“Ma’am, did you really have Kaidan put the hostage into stasis?” Ashley asked, stepping into the conversation.

“Yep.” Shepard replied bluntly. “Here’s why. Kaidan has a crazy powerful barrier, you know that, I know that, everyone who was on Solcrum knows that. Then, my thinking was that if Kaidan could expand his barrier for that, he would have the fine control to shrink it down and concentrate it. In a way, a stasis field is an expanded bubble barrier, shrunk down and concentrated.”

“It is, in a way, yes…” Kaidan murmured.

“Now what the concentration does…” Shepard went on. “Is that it basically increases the density of air around the objects trapped within it. Ostensibly it is used to stop people from moving, and at its worst, it can prevent the victim from breathing.” That was what D’aros had done to Nihlus on Omega, the memory still rankled Shepard.

“But a barrier that dense…” Ashley began.

Shepard could hear the realization dawn on her. “Exactly that, Gunny. At that density, Kate could not move, the batarians could not grab her, and any bullet from outside that tried to pierce through
the stasis field would lose so much of its energy, that at worst it would just embed in the skin.”

“You also knew I could control my biotics, and that I would not accidentally suffocate Kate.” Kaidan stepped in.

“Indeed.” Shepard replied. “An unorthodox, out-of-the-box application of an ability. I trusted you to back me up, and you did. That will be on my report by the way, do not think you’re getting away without due credit, Alenko.”

“Due credit, Ma’am? Is that your way of saying you want half the reporters chasing you to chase me? That’s hardly what I would call due credit.” He stated in monotone.

“Oh dear. You’re on to me,” Shepard replied, just as blandly.

There was a beat of silence but then Kaidan looked up, met her gaze, and bowed his head. “Thank you, Commander.”

“For what?” Shepard wondered. “I just admitted that I want to send a mob or reporters after you.”

Kaidan smiled a sort of knowing smirk but said nothing more.

“I know I just missed something. Do I want to ask?” Ashley wondered.

“I’ll tell you later, Ash.” Kaidan replied.

Shepard only pretended she did not hear Kaidan use that nickname, nor the tone he said it in. They had reached the end of the long docking bay corridor and the last set of doors opened up onto a sort of hub room where more people waiting for other ships had gathered. Most of the officers and enlisted men there were coming with heavy duffer bags. Shepard would hazard a guess that they were coming back from furlough, waiting for their ship to come pick them up. It would likely be a cruiser that had been dry-docked for annual work.

“Attention! Commander Shepard has arrived!” someone called. Shepard turned and saw a lieutenant across the room snap to attention and salute. The response seemed to ripple across the room, and soon everyone there had basically dropped everything to snap to attention and salute.

Shepard returned the gesture formally, with a smile on her face. After all, she would not take out her foul mood on people who were not to blame.

As the men and women returned to whatever they had been doing, Shepard noticed the figure leaning against the back wall, a drone floating over her head. Just like that Shepard’s mood tanked even lower than it was sixty seconds before. There was no mistaking who it was. Khalisah bint Sinan al-Jilani, Westerland News, conservative conspiracy fuel-thrower extraordinaire. The absolute last person Shepard wanted to deal with any day of the year, and especially not now. Because if the Alliance News Network still had some standards if they wanted to keep their name, Westerland news was unaffiliated, and able to froth from the mouth at will. “Who let her here?” She mumbled.

“Do you want us to do something her?” Ashley asked.

“No, gunny. That’ll just make it worse. If she wants me to make her look bad again, then who am I to refuse her?” Shepard asked.

Ashley grinned, “Oh damn, and here we are, out of popcorn.”

“An absolute tragedy,” Kaidan deadpanned.
Shepard smiled, but the expression faded quickly as she noticed Khalisah push off the wall and make her way across the room toward her.

Chapter End Notes

**Author Notes:** That scene with Balak felt a little too on the nose given what is going on in real life, but I drew some inspiration from all that too. It was a pain to write, I had to review the videos and try to figure out where Balak was coming from, even though he was hardly sympathetic. I’ll leave you to ponder on whether Shepard really got an unfair prejudice against them, or if it’s justified.

**General Notes:**

**Kaidan’s Moment** – I really wanted to give Kaidan a moment to shine here, and I think I managed. Yes that ability he used on the biotic batarian was the dreaded reave. He shredded that batarian’s lungs and heart in one gesture. Beware of the quiet one.

**Chapter Notes:**

None this time…
Midgame

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I do no own Mass Effect, I do not claim to own Mass Effect, I am only doing this for fun.

Author Notes: Belated Happy Holidays and New Year to everyone!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Episode 42: Midgame

Whatever Shepard might say about happily making the reporter look bad on her own segment, she would have much preferred not to deal with reporters at all. Khalisah moved with a sort of languidness that belied the confrontational nature of her work. That rankled Shepard’s nerves more than it ought to have. Still, there was something for having sniper training, she reached into her reservoir of patience, drew a deep, controlled breath through her nose, held it, and slowly let it out. By the time Khalisah stopped in front of her, Shepard had a grip on her temper. Her ICT teammates would have joked that it was actually the killing intent that she was suppressing.

“Commander Shepard, you are a hard individual to get a hold of. Can I bother you for a few words for our viewers?” Khalisah asked.

Shepard almost went for another cool-down breath, but it would be noticeable, instead she slipped into a casual-seeming parade rest which would keep any clenched fist out of the camera’s angle. “Sure, I can spare a few words.” Let Khalisah make one crack with a vaguely xenophobic slant, Shepard would make her look like an idiot for less.

The reporter reached toward her Omni-tool and tapped a series of commands that caused her camera drone to stiffen into filming stance over her shoulder and turn on its lights. “This is Khalisah bint Sinan al-Jilani. I am on Arcturus station tonight, in time to meet the woman of the hour, Lieutenant Commander Shepard.”

Shepard tried to keep her face from faulting into a grimace. Khalisah was making this out like an exclusive interview she was graced with, something to wag in the face of all the other reporters, namely the ANN crews. Shepard had deleted their requests, and now to be giving Khalisah one? Suddenly she knew that she had blundered into something she did not care for.

“Now, Commander… the news channels are abuzz with the terrorist attack on Terra Nova that you averted with the narrowest of margins. Millions of people are safe tonight because of your efforts. Many of them probably think you are their champion.”

Khalisah was building up alright. This was a woman who made a sport out of starting with a compliment and then firing the accusations. Shepard could already see what her line of questioning was going to be.

“I’m no champion. I only led the team that won the battle. There was eight of us total. But really this was a done by a whole lot more than just eight. The most difficult and sensitive task was done by the project’s engineers.” She wanted to see Khalisah twist that.
“Well yes… I suppose that is true. Still, I should say leadership such as yours is what moves the proverbial mountains. You are their hero tonight, even if people tend to forget just who their hero is. You are also a candidate for Council Spectre, and your team includes non-Alliance individuals.”

Shepard heard the sound boots scuffing on the floor behind her. Ashley must have realized what was going on. Shepard spread the palm of her hand behind her back, flashing the lieutenant and gunny a silent hold order.

“Khalisah, it sounds to me like you have lost sight of what is most important here. I’m an Alliance officer, and as such, I will protect my people. My team helped me do just that. The individuals responsible for this act are dead, and those they took hostage are free and unharmed.” Shepard flashed an award-winning, but brief grin. Her casual, nigh friendly tone was meant to disarm. Still, she knew how Khalisah and her viewers would only see the involvement of aliens as some twisted dependency, as if accepting help was dirty. Not that she honestly gave those people much consideration.

“Once again your optimism continues to astound.” Khalisah said, her tone lowering as if she was talking to someone who just made a patently wrong statement that amused her.

That tone was designed to make someone react, but Shepard was not going to fall prey to petty baiting. Especially not when she could practically hear the mental gears grinding as Khalisah worked to find a way to twist things. Shepard had been careful to give a fundamentally true statement. The only doctoring was the sort of omission that would fall under need-to-know privileged information. The reporter was not privileged enough to need to know.

“It would seem that we are fortunate that your response was swift and forceful, and that you were not distracted by… other concerns.” Khalisah’s tone was calm.

Shepard thought that track switch was inevitable, but Khalisah did it with the wheels grinding because of the speed.

“Sources in the know have confirmed that the Galactic Council’s response to the situation has been... unremarkable. First Eden Prime, and now this. It would seem that they do not particularly bother sending help unless their own people are in danger.”

The reporter was falling back on her anti-Council narrative, now that the anti-Alliance one happened to yield nothing. Her petty attempts at coming out on top were as wearisome as they were precious.

“That’s just incorrect. Khalisah, you said so yourself, I am a Spectre in training. The Spectre assigned to oversee my training is on the Normandy, and he has never left active duty.” Shepard replied blandly and automatically. She was not at all impressed with the slant of the question.

“Bluntly put, we were acting with full and automatic Council approval.” It was just unfortunate that she could not definitively say that Nihlus was ordered to handle the matter. That would have shut down Khalisah quickly, but it would be a lie. Nihlus was never ordered, he took the job up himself. Saying so would be making a distinction that Khalisah and her viewers would twist out of context, so it was best to omit it altogether.

She watched as Khalisah deflated. This was definitely not what the reporter wanted to hear, nor what she could work with. Shepard knew she had better drive the point home, before the woman found anything else to quibble over. “Your source seems to have confused some details, understandable given that I doubt they know the inner workings of the system.” Or know anything, Shepard thought to herself. “The Council’s legal designation of worlds as the rare Garden-class carries with it a slew of legalize. What is important here is that the willful destruction of such worlds carries with it an automatic response. In the specific case of an asteroid driven by artificial means -i.e. a rock with propulsion engines that is hijacked mid-transit from one place to another- it is the duty of a Spectre to
stop the rock at any cost, to save lives as well as the rare Garden worlds. There is simply no need for formalities. Those would have wasted valuable time, and we would be criticized for that. What I am saying here, is that Spectres were there to stop the rock, and stop it we did. The timing issue is merely a confluence of circumstance. I happen to be both an Alliance Officer and a Spectre-in-training. Our people sent a distress signal to the Alliance, not the Council, and that is why I was first notified by Admiral Hackett, not the Council.”

“Ah… yes. Of course.” Khalisah said, though she was practically mumbling.

Shepard knew she had basically blown the argument, the reporter could no longer say that the Council sat back and did nothing now. Admittedly they kind of did sit back and did nothing, but her statement was not a lie either. It was a rather muddy area that could use some clarifying, but really, now was not the time, and Khalisah was the last person to make thin distinctions to. Her audience saw the universe as black and white, because their intelligence could not handle more information than that.

“In our previous conversation, shortly after the events of Eden Prime, I remember you telling me, to paraphrase, that you would be ever-ready to protect our people.” Khalisah said.

Shepard kept her face intentionally flat. This was the beginning of Khalisah’s retreat, while retreating was still good. She must have realized that she was not get anything useful.

“It would seem, Commander, that… you indeed continue to fulfil that promise with admirable aplomb. Prophetic as your promise unfortunately proven to be.”

That was a white flag if ever Shepard saw one, even if it came with a passive-aggressive insinuation. She would not be baited into making a scene by something so pathetic.

“Well, this is has been an interesting interview, Commander. I sincerely wish you the best in your continuing endeavors. Perhaps when your status as Spectre in training changes, humanity will truly gain a stalwart champion on the galactic stage.”

Shepard did not like that choice of words either, but she chose to roll with the punches. She stood by, silent, as she watched Khalisah issue orders for her drone. Within thirty seconds the flood-light turned off and its lens retracted into the housing. The reporter did not even bother with the pleasantries in saying good-bye, she turned around and walked off, muttering something about a bull rush. Shepard smiled like she had just won the lottery.

Ashley whistled, “Damn, Skipper. You didn’t let her have a word, did you?”

“Should I have? Maybe this will teach her not to hound me. If she wants to keep any sense of professional pride she won’t air that tape.” This would be the second time that Shepard debunked Khalisah’s arguments with a metaphorical sledge hammer. “I will not cater to her pathetic agenda. Her viewers are those who want to be the center of their own victim narrative. To keep them, Khalisah will go after anyone and everyone who will make the ratings. Think about it. She is always asking people to confirm the systemic failings. Her favorite targets are the Alliance and the Council. She wants them to be the bad guys. Quite frankly Khalisah is and Balak was a case of two garments cut from the same cloth.” Shepard knew how that sounded like, and maybe the docking bay was not the place to discuss it, but her patience was in short supply right now.

Ashley nodded, “I would have paid good credit to have seen the look on her face had you told her that.”

“The Commander would have never gone that far, especially not with a rolling camera drone,”
Kaidan argued calmly from Shepard’s other side.

Shepard blinked, was it silly to think that right then they could pass off for her shoulder conscience spirits?

“I know… still, I would’ve paid to see it.” Ashley murmured.

Shepard pretended she did not hear that exchange. “I still need to report to the Admiral, before he sends a squad to hunt me down.” She said as she turned and resumed walking toward the doorway leading out of the docking lounge.

“Wouldn’t want that, would we? That poor squad.” Kaidan said blandly as he fell in step with her.

Shepard flashed the lieutenant a half-amused, half-grateful grin.

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The journey from the docks to the Alliance Navy base in the saucer section was never exciting, or fast, but this time it ended up extra slow, even though Shepard managed to get through without being accosted by any more reporters. The real issue was all the salutes she had to give. It seemed like everyone was being particularly formal, even if protocol would have allowed them to be otherwise. More than one enlisted individual figuratively dropped everything to snap to attention and salute. Then those who had family on Terra Nova went the extra mile to thank her profusely. By the time Shepard got to the admiralty office building, her right arm felt like it had done ten sets of curls. Not that she was complaining, but really, it was just a touch ridiculous.

Once she was in the building getting to the right office was much quicker. Claudia only held them back for the moment or so it took her to announce their arrival, but the admiral had been expecting her, and his office door opened for Shepard to step inside. Ashley and Kaidan were to remain outside. Shepard knew the discussion would go into topics technically above their pay grade. However, nothing would stop her from filling them in later, if the need arose.

Once the door closed behind her, Shepard stopped in front of the admiral’s desk, snapped to attention, and saluted, “Admiral Hackett, sir, reporting as ordered.” She was not surprised that neither Captain Anderson nor her mother were present. She was far from selfish enough to have expected them to be there.

The admiral nodded in greeting. “At ease, Commander.”

Shepard dutifully lowered her arm and slipped into parade rest.

“I’ve read over what you sent me and I have to say, Commander… that was a job excellently done. I am constantly amazed at how efficient your eccentric crew is, and how well you yourself manage to out-think your opponents.”

“I just… do my job, sir.” What else could she say? She just carried out the orders she received. “We had help from the inside, from Kate and her brother. They warned us about the bombs Balak had set. Once I knew that… it became essentially an infiltration, sabotage, and rescue operation. I executed it exactly how I learned to do it in the ICT program.”

“Alright. I’ll give you that. Now, someone else might remark on your choice to rub failure into Balak’s face, but you will not hear a word about it from me.”

Shepard detected a hint of amusement in her commanding officer’s tone, which put her at ease. She had a feeling that in her place, the Admiral would have personally done the same. The Admiral was
never one to mince words, he did not earn his commission during the Siege of Shanxi by worrying about perceptions. He led his squad into the thick of battle, and walked away with goals achieved and a wicked facial scar. His comment was more of a warning about some of the others. There would always be those who would castigate her for literally every single insignificant detail if it served their purposes and needs to do so.

“If we had a few more individuals whose definition of ‘doing their job’ was like yours…” the admiral went on. “However that is not the reason I called you here. I called you here is because I wanted to let you know that I’ve already received requests for your time from a certain… group. Just between you and me, Commander, I do not want you wasting time on them.”

Shepard froze, she just knew who that group was. “The public relations vampires are looking at my neck, again?”

The admiral nodded, “Unfortunately. The number of women in the infantry corps is still not up to par.”

Shepard closed her eyes to suppress her urge to groan. She wanted no part in any more campaigns that involved being in front of a camera, with makeup, and smiling pretty. The PR team would say otherwise, but those posters grossly misrepresented reality and expectations. She was of the opinion that the sort of individuals who would enlist because they thought those pictures were an accurate depiction of service were not the sort who did well in the service. The PR team really should not be peddling false impressions to hook the gullible, and doubly so with her likeness. There was no real glamor in the armed forces. “I’ll let Nihlus know I’m available for that refresher course on the finer points of dealing with criminals and mercenaries. We might be out of touch for a few months while we’re in the Terminus.”

Admiral Hackett smiled.

Shepard froze, genuinely surprised.

“Well thank you, Commander. I now owe Hannah fifty credits.”

Shepard knew she probably looked stupefied right then, but how did one to respond to this sort of thing? “Sorry, sir.” That seemed like the safest option. Her mother had predicted she would say that? Or something like that? “Well, I’ll just tell them how it is… it won’t do to have a Spectre’s mugshot on the advertisement roundels, as such, I am afraid I will have to decline the opportunity.”

“Good.” The admiral said as he straightened in his seat, and just like that it was as if nothing happened. “Now we can talk actual business.” He admiral reached toward the stack of datapads at his right, picked one up, and set it down within her reach. “This is some information I received as an interested party… about the machinery from that mine on Daiwi.”

The machinery at the bottom of that Prothean eezo mine? Shepard approached the desk and picked up the pad, eyes already scanning the opening lines.

“The Heretics expressed interest in that equipment. The research has been moved to Gagarin Station.”

Shepard could read between the lines. A good half of the scientific work conducted on Gagarin Station fell under the umbrella of the Alliance’s top-secret research and development initiative, a myth-spawning cabal of intellectuals collectively referred to as Skunkworks. If the machinery from Daiwi ended up in their hands then it was a bit of a big deal. Her eyes scanned ever lower over the contents of the pad, and it was at the first mention of a ‘quantum core’ that Shepard stopped and
looked up. “The… mine’s computers were a quantum box? Are the eggheads suggesting the computers once housed an AI?”

“Maybe, we can’t be sure.” Admiral Hackett replied. “It would not make sense to put an AI in charge of a mine. Likely it was a very complex VI. But I don’t think I need to remind you that a VI can easily become an AI with the right additions to its programming.”

Shepard had to restrain her reaction as a singularly scary thought occurred to her. Was Harbinger looking for others of its kind? Nazara was out there. It was aware of the existence of Harbinger. It would not do if the two did get together.

“The machinery is otherwise unsalvageable. The quantum core took the brunt of the water damage.” Hackett finished.

“I don’t like this. I really don’t.” Shepard murmured. “The technology is too specific… Harbinger is gathering remnants of Prothean tech for a reason, but what is it? What is the end-game here?” She was fully aware that she had started to ramble right then, but this was how she did some of her best thinking.

“We have no way of knowing, Commander. I looked over what you sent me. The FKR? The Protheans would have had to be even more advanced than we assume if they could stabilize structures in that region. You are right to think that taking the fight to them is our only choice. Unfortunately, there was no map of the relay network included with any of what we got, not even in the Mars Cache.”

“I figured that much, sir,” Shepard was glad that the Admiral took her peculiarities in a stride. She was also not surprised that the map did not exist. Fundamentally, if such a map had been found, it would have been used. It was human nature to exploit every available opportunity and advantage, yet thirty years later, they were still groping in the dark.

“I think it would be safe to assume that the Protheans did not give their AIs access to the sum of all their knowledge. This… Harbinger might be looking for ways to fix that. It could very well be looking for something specific.” Hackett went on.

Shepard shuddered. Given the level of technology required to stabilize a structure in the FKR, she did not want to think about what other doozies the Protheans must have devised. “On Solcrum Harbinger said something about ending the interregnum. I’ve learned this from my time associating with synthetics, they are very specific about word usage. When Harbinger used the term interregnum… we have to think about the term’s most literal meaning. It is the time between monarchs… and what’s a large monarchy? An empire. It wants to end the time between empires. It sees an empire as the right order. It accosted Legion because his people mostly declined being… the chosen ones to benefit from what it sees as a fundamental truth.”

The admiral hummed, and for a long moment there was only silence as he mulled it over. Shepard only shifted her weight from foot to foot, and waited.

“How many Heretics are there?”

“That I… don’t know, sir.” Shepard shook her head. “Legion said that just fifteen percent of the Geth follow Harbinger. Of course Legion also omitted the totals for that figure to mean anything. They’re shockingly wily like that.” Her mind was already running with possibilities. What could Harbinger be looking for? Was it something that could help it? Empires did not rise from a single event, it had to know that. “I honestly don’t know how Harbinger can hope to end this interregnum. Even if the Heretics declare war on the rest of the galaxy… there is no way they could possibly
defeat everyone.”

The admiral hummed in assent.

Shepard barely heard it. “Unless…” she murmured. “Going after tech and long-forgotten resources and other AI… The Protheans made these AI. What if-?” The possibility materialized before her, and its full scope sent a metaphorical bucket of ice-water down her spine. “What if Harbinger is looking for a way of swaying the other eighty-five percent?”

“We best hope that it never finds it, Commander.” The admiral said coolly. “On Solcrum they demonstrated just how quickly they, as an AI, can learn from experience. If that machine gets all of the Geth on its side… it would gain the numbers and time advantage on top of everything.”

“No pressure, huh?” Shepard murmured. The thought wrapped itself around her heart, gripping it with an icy fist, even as her mind took it to the logical conclusion. If Harbinger ever managed to brainwash the Geth, it would use Legion against her just out of spite and malice. However, that alone was not the worst part. No, the worst was that Legion functioned as a sort of representative of the Geth as a whole, maybe even the expression of their hope for cooperation and peace. Harbinger could turn Legion into the leader of wholesale slaughter. The thought of Legion leading a slaughter was unacceptable. She would not fail a friend so spectacularly. “Harbinger will only get control over all the Geth over my dead body.”

The admiral nodded and shifted to lean back into his seat, causing the chair to creak. “I realize this is a lot to ask for, but… I believe your unique connection to the Geth might be just what we need. You are showing everyone that cooperation with artificial intelligence is not only possible, but relatively… dare I say, easy.”

“Nothing to it, Admiral, I only treat Legion and EDI as individuals. As far as I’m concerned, the problems start when synthetics are treated as inherently inferior, just because they are built and not born. I will not argue the semantics, they’re not important. What’s important is that synthetics have a sense of self-worth, and threading on it… they’ll defend themselves, same as anyone else.” Shepard explained.

“I had a feeling that is your position, since you use the term synthetic rather than artificial.” Hackett noted.

“Guilty as charged.” Shepard knew how that would come across. There was a synthetic rights movement fighting for synthetics to be seen as beings rather than things, except the masses tended to dismiss it as insane. There was irony in there somewhere. Yet with the amount of contact she had with EDI and Legion, and even Harbinger, she could not deny the fact that they had various degrees of individuality.

“Well, Commander. I can’t say if you are right or not. I don’t have your experience with AI to fall back on. However… if you think your method can somehow prevent a major incident, if not an outright war, between people and machines… I will not tell you not to do it. Quite frankly, on this matter, I would be perfectly happy if I had to learn something from you.”

“Thank you, Sir.” What else could she say? As far as she was concerned, there would be no winners in such a war. The losing side would just be the greatest losers. The winning side would have lost a lot for their victory too, and not just in lives and property damage.

“Good. I believe that about covers everything. I will have the information on that pad transmitted to the Normandy. In the meantime, is there anything else you wish to talk about?”
Shepard set the pad on the admiral’s desk, but she found herself lingering by the desk, dithering on whether or not now would be a good time to ask for the admiral’s advice regarding the situation the Citadel. What was the Alliance’s response to the clearly-targeted killings? Did she even want the Admiral to know that she was as paranoid as some said she was? Some part of her wanted to be confirmed as paranoid, as in this instance that would preferable to being proven right. “Yes… and no. It’s complicated. Admiral, you must be aware of the murder of Hierarchy Admiral Titus Bellisario on the Citadel.”

“Of course I do, Commander. His murder made our delegation position uncomfortably precarious. They were walking on eggshells for the remainder of the event. What of him?” Hackett replied.

“I am… concerned about the details surrounding it.”

“And you have a good reason to be concerned, or else you would not have come to me with this. Have a seat, Commander. This will not be a topic to discuss standing.”

“Thank you,” Shepard moved over to the chair in front of the admiral’s desk and perched on the edge. She was hardly comfortable right then, after all, who would be comfortable when it came to these sorts of things? She watched the admiral reached over to the console set into his desk and tapped a command. There was a beep from the ceiling, indicating that the security protocols had engaged. “I guess I best start from the beginning…” She muttered.

“Please do.”

Shepard nodded, took a deep breath to anchor herself, and launched into the narrative. There was much to explain. Starting from the death of Sparatus’ former secretary. In the back of her mind she knew that the admiral would ask why she thought the killings were connected, and then why the former secretary. Talking about what happened after Eden Prime only compounded on the amount of discomfort she felt right then. Still, once she started, she could not stop. This had been a long time coming, and now it was important to lay out the truth. Ultimately now that the former secretary was dead, if anyone raised a fuss about his security lapse, it would only make that individual look worse. Add to that, Admiral Hackett was not Ambassador Udina. Thankfully he also did not interrupt her at all for the whole long explanation. Still, she watched as his posture changed. The admiral leaned into the back of his seat, elbows on his arm rests, fingers woven together in front of him as he listened. Then, when she got to the conclusion, laying out her own pet theory regarding the leak within Alliance circles, the admiral’s eyes actually darkened, as if reflecting a storm brewing on the horizon.

“Admiral, I… only know that the leak is not from your office, nor from my mother, or Captain Anderson.” She finished. Laying things out like this had calmed her. This was her territory, a discussion of theoretical possibilities and probabilities.

“Indeed.” The Admiral’s gaze was locked on a point somewhere above and behind her. “You were right to hesitate to come forward with this. Based on these facts alone, you have no solid proof. Anyone else would have disregarded it all as paranoia. Add to that you have no way of knowing who is not involved.”

Shepard nodded numbly.

“I admit even I’m wary of jumping into conclusions. My question is motive, Commander. Who would benefit from framing you?”

Ah, of course. Without a strong motive, the idea that anyone would go to these lengths to frame her was indeed a tad silly. As it happened, she knew someone with a motive. “I can think of both a person and a group. The person, Armistan Banes… works for the group, Cerberus. Rear Admiral
Kahoku did not die of an accident, Admiral. That was on my report. I know he was on their trail, and they removed him. What more, his men, those who thought they found Banes… they were lured onto that thresher maw nest… and then we have Banes himself. He’s not actually dead. I have video of him very much alive and kicking, and he’s leading some project Cerberus call Cadmus. What more I found a connection between Banes and the laboratory on Noveria. The head researcher on Peak Fifteen was in communication with Banes. She outright mentioned Cadmus by name, and was told never to do it again. I know all that, and Banes knows that I know. Thus I’m a problem, and there’s the motive. There is no need to argue whether he has the methods. As for opportunity… well, those tend to present themselves.”

“Yes… this much circumstantial evidence is beyond mere coincidence. But it is not the sort of evidence that will stand up in court. We have a body that was DNA-matched to Banes. You go after him, and any defense lawyer worth his salt will exploit that. They only need reasonable doubt and to pay the right people. You will never win. They will only prove that you have bought into that crazy conspiracy theory. Need I remind you of the type that normally shout about Cerberus?”

Shepard shook her head. She knew the admiral was right in his summation. Cerberus had a suit of armor made of pure hardened incredulity. “Unfortunately, I am aware of that problem. May I be blunt and off the record, Admiral?”

“Permission granted, none of what you say will leave this room.”

Shepard leaned back in her seat and folded her hands in her lap. “I’ve largely dismissed the idea that I could ever successfully use the legal system for this. I think Cerberus rather likes to be that phantom no one wants to take seriously. That said… if anyone comes after me, they’re going to be facing me, my crew, and carte blanche Spectre-grade legal immunity. Nihlus knows about all of this, and he’ll have my back.”

“Good,” the admiral flashed a faint smile, “Because I was going to tell you that I wouldn’t be able to help you. That said, since we are off the record… if Cerberus does come after you, you have my personal permission to send them to hell, by whatever means necessary.”

Shepard sighed, that single thing took a sizeable chunk out of the metaphorical rock that was on her chest. There was something to be said about being believed by one’s superiors. “Another unfortunate part is that if I’m right, and they are trying to frame me… it’s not a bad job. There is a flaw to the whole scheme, but only a specialist like myself might be able to see it. Basically, the assassin resembles me, and uses the same weapons. The only discrepancy is in the caliber of skill… she killed Bellisario at short range, shooting through his hotel window, likely with an AMR-spec IR-scoped Mantis. That’s the stuff of Hollywood thrillers. It is not the expertise of a sniper specialist. Quite frankly sir, we’re deadliest at long range, and that’s where we like to be. Furthermore, if she’s not using that inherent advantage, she’s not a specialist. That means she can’t possibly be me.”

“Yes, and indeed only another sniper could see that.” Hackett hummed.

Shepard nodded, “That said… there is still something going for me. The C-sec investigator in charge of the murders is Senior Detective Castis Vakarian.”

“Vakarian? Any relation to your ordnance officer?” The admiral asked.

“Indeed. Garrus told me that his father is a bit of a legend. No one will ever bribe him, and if Cerberus even try… he’ll know that someone out there wants me to be guilty.” As much as it rankled her, she knew that if it came down to things, Garrus’ father was the best she could get.

“Fortunate indeed.”
Shepard would not mention the singed bridge between her and the senior detective. Nor the fact that Saren might be in the picture. She had very real blackmail on Saren. She was not naïve enough to think that he would ever forgive or forget. What more, Saren was an underhanded snake if given an opportunity. This was an opportunity. He could just help Castis Vakarian build a case against her, and he would get away with it too. “There is just one last detail. It should not be overlooked. If Cerberus is framing me, they seem to know quite a bit. Things go back to that leak. I am an N7, my file has more redactions than open text. They have access to it.”

The stormy returned as the admiral leaned back in his seat, elbows on the armrest, fingers steepled. “If you are right… things fit what I have suspected for a while.”

Shepard straightened in her seat as if it had just given her an electric shock.

“Surprised, Commander? I didn’t think I could catch you unaware like that. You are not the first person who noticed the signs of shadowy involvement. Whispers of Cerberus have been cropping up regularly enough over the last twenty-five years. An event like the FCW cannot happen without spurring the zealous radicals to organize. Terra Firma are the unsubtle masses, and so they are in the open. The smarter, dangerous ones will remain hidden. That is human nature.”

“Touché,” Shepard murmured as she slumped back in her seat.

“They will have multiple sympathizers within the Alliance, however there is only one place where an agent could have access to highly classified material. The Intelligence Bureau.”

“The ANIB?!” Shepard repeated as her jaw loosened. If the Admiral was right this went quite a way up. The Alliance Naval Intelligence Bureau was headed by an undersecretary to the Parliament’s Minister of Defense, and staffed by a small army of strictly vetted analysts. Rumor went that to become ANIB one needed an above-Mensa IQ, no social life, and an internalized nihilistic outlook. Some even called ANIB analysts “human computers”. Their job was to collate, analyze, and make sense of staggering quantities of raw data. The major goal was to ensure security, but their ability to note patterns and shifts in enemy tactics and equipment could also spur changes in the Alliance Navy’s operational protocols, tactics, and even fleet composition.

“It fits the nature of the leak. You’ve provided them with lots of new data, so showing interest in whatever your name is attached to will not raise suspicions.”

“Figuring out who it is will not be easy.” Shepard doubted she could do anything to make the agent reveal themselves. The mole would have been vetted, and registered as clean, and what more they fit in with all the other analysts, IQ and all. What aberration could she hope to spot like that? “Cerberus wouldn’t risk burning that agent. They’re too valuable, and the incident would tighten security. What more, it would invite scrutiny that won’t be easily dismissed. This mole wouldn’t be the typical strung-out sociopathic agenda killer shouting about some manifesto as he’s man-handled by security. No, this rat is going to remain in its hole.”

The admiral nodded, “Worst of all, even if the Bureau launches its own internal security review, you and I both know they will not find the leaker. It will only tell Cerberus that we know. No, it is best to court their arrogance, let them think we are oblivious. Needless to say, keep this confined to those you trust most.”

Shepard nodded, there was nothing she could or would add to that.

“Also, correct me if I am wrong, but based on my understanding of your partnership with Spectre Kryik, he allows you to act as a Spectre in everything but name. Some within the Alliance will see that as superseding everything, and they will not be happy if you decide to bully them into
compliance. I caution you to tread lightly. I will continue to do what I can, and update you, should I find anything.”

“Understood, Sir.” Shepard said. That was the best outcome she could reasonably expect, though not the one she would have liked. She would take the Admiral’s warning against ham-fisted actions to heart. What more, she realized that this turn of the conversation signaled that the admiral considered this matter settled. Shepard knew that she ought to have raised the topic of her crew’s just rewards for services dully rendered on X57, but it seemed like now would not be a good time. She would write some official letters, that way things would look nice and legal on paper. Those letters would also obfuscate the real reason for such a long meeting.

“Alright. Unless there is nothing else, you are free to leave, Commander.”

Shepard dully rose to her feet even as the admiral reached toward his desk console, and a moment later the single beep from the computer announced that the room was no longer securely locked and soundproofed. Shepard snapped to attention and saluted. The admiral nodded. She made an about turn and walked out of the office.

Kaidan and Ashley rose to their feet when they heard the door open. Shepard nodded to them and smiled, the picture of casual ease. “Sorry, took a little bit longer than initially planned. Those damned PR vampires, they want me on a poster again, as if the reporters are not enough.” She would pretend that the admiral had wanted to discuss the trivialities and the report, not that they had been talking about a conspiracy of increasing proportions behind closed doors.

“It’s not a problem, Commander.” Kaidan replied, just as calmly.

“I assume we have some leave time, yes?” Kaidan wondered.

“As far as I’m aware, yes. I think everyone by now should know my golden rule for leave rotations. People with previous last leave, have first leave now. That said, I need to ask Adams if we need to top up the antimatter tanks. We are in the right place and we have some time.” It was her typical act, appear daffy and talk inconsequential things.

“Sounds like a plan.” Kaidan said.

Shepard nodded and moved toward the door leading out of the office. She stopped at the doorway to and glanced back, “Have a good day, Claudia.”

“You too Commander,” The secretary replied calmly.

Shepard turned around and triggered the door, maybe she was over-acting a little, but it would work out in the end. She exited the office and turned toward the elevator.

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Shepard found herself getting lost in her own thoughts on the way back to the Normandy. Her mind positively whirled with and endless stream of possibilities and options, like clips of film in a montage. She would pause here and there to analyze one, only to discard it as unfeasible a few moments later. She was so distracted that Kaidan and Ashley held a whole conversation around her, and she did not hear more than a few words of what was said.

She was already in the airlock before she managed to put those thoughts aside. Her mind had not found a single possibility or option that stood a chance of getting her what she wanted. The fact remained that she simply did not hold the winning hand at the moment. The Admiral had been right to tell her to tread lightly.
Once past the airlock she paused only long enough to warn Joker about the potential trip to the fuel depot before she made her way down to engineering to talk to Adams. It was not a long conversation at all. Adams only needed to glance at a few read-outs to tell her that the Normandy had used up about thirty percent of its antimatter since last top-up. After that, since they were already in place, he agreed that it would be a good idea to top up. That was added to the ship’s schedule, pending her final decision regarding when they would actually do it.

In half an hour Shepard was in the OD and at work. The leave rotations were decided, with EDI able to tell her exactly who had last leave last time, so they would get first leave now. After that, she rotated the other two thirds of the crew a little and called it even. With that out of the way she turned to the official letters. It all served to get her mind off the worst problems, while simultaneously giving her the sense of having done something. Anything was better than worrying and fretting over the Cerberus problem.

The letters were important, she did not want to forget about her team. As far as she was concerned, they were as much heroes as her, and the Alliance should give them their dues. Jenkins was in all likelihood due for a pay-grade bump. He had come quite far from being the overeager but inexperienced corporal. She had watched him osmose experience from everyone around him, and Ashley invested quite a bit of energy into his training on top. It was high time he reaped the benefits.

Then there was Ashley herself, the most over-trained gunnery sergeant Shepard had ever met. It was quite pathetic how the brass was hard-capping her. With her file and stack of commendations from previous superior officers, she should have been promoted long ago. Instead all those commanding officers lauded her greatness, yet bounced her around, as if they felt guilty about being unwilling to stick their necks out. Shepard was not going to be one of those. She was of the opinion that Ashley could even go into the ICT if she wanted. She was certainly the right sort of stubborn to succeed in the ICT. The matter now stood on whether or not X57 could make the brass stop acting like brats. Ashley helped save millions of lives, she deserved better than she got.

Of course there was also Kaidan. In many ways he was the most difficult case. He was clearly avoiding major command, or being the center of attention. He was probably happy enough to be serving under her, despite the fact that he was two or three years her senior. So, would he want her to buoy him up? It would not do for him to remain in his current rank right up until retirement. There was also the question of if the Alliance would even let him retire. He was one of the oldest biotics, and very experienced at that. If he no longer wanted to be out in the field, the Alliance would probably push him into teaching. Kaidan could easily become their poster-boy for biotic potential. He was well-adjusted, with a clean service record, and no bad habits or mental conditions. He was literally holding himself back. So would he resent her if she tweaked things, and forced the brass to recognize him?

She was so distracted with pondering the idiosyncrasies of her marines that she missed the sound of the OD door opening. It was only when a turian-shaped shadow fell over her desk that Shepard snapped out of her thoughts and back to reality. “Nihlus,” she greeted calmly.

The Spectre hummed low in his throat, “I heard someone say that you looked ill. Did something happen?”

Shepard looked up as her eyebrow rose. Someone said she looked ill? Then she realized that this was Nihlus, a turian, and it was vaguely possible that he misunderstood or got a mistranslation of some turn of phrase. “I’m alright. Just… maybe a little less than happy. For a good reason. You remember that one reporter who tried to make me look bad before?”

“Vaguely.”
“Well, she brightened our metaphorical doorstep again. I swear, I’m still waiting for her to think of pitching a tent right in front of the airlock. Anyways… I had to make her look like a jabbering idiot again.”

“That could not have been difficult,” Nihlus deadpanned.

“It was still unpleasant, and I could’ve done without. Then I had a long talk with Admiral Hackett about everything. Including our… Cerberus problem."

“Oh?” Nihlus stepped around, leaning his weight on the desk as he turned to face her. “Did he have something for us?”

“Yes… and no.” Shepard replied. She would rather not talk about it, but she could not just tell Nihlus that much. “We talked about what the Alliance had on the Heretics. The Admiral promised me some data on what the Alliance got off those ruined machines on Daiwi. So yes, that is something, and we can talk about it when I have the data. As for the Cerberus problem… we have nothing. It was mostly a discussion regarding the obvious, strictly theoretical at that. Cerberus simply know too much, so they have people on the inside, but we can’t point any fingers. It’s not like they wear tee-shirts with ‘I heart Cerberus’ stenciled on them.”

Nihlus hummed, “I do not know what you mean with that tee-shirt thing, but I do know that those types never make catching them easy.”

“So there. As for the tee-shirts… it’s a stupid old thing, forget I even said it.” Shepard would bet that he would probably look it up on the extranet the next time he was bored. At that moment her terminal beeped, and she automatically glanced at the screen, entirely unsurprised to see that a data package had filtered through EDI’s security protocols. Nihlus’ timing was impeccable as always. “Speaking of the devil,” she muttered. “Here’s the data package. Let me put it on a pad.” She reached toward the stack of empties on her right. “Thank you, EDI.” She added

“You are welcome, Commander,” The AI replied.

Out of the corner of her eye Shepard saw Nihlus move toward the couch.

“Commander, may I access the data myself? I have some interest in matters pertaining Harbinger.” EDI added.

“Go ahead, EDI. Standard security considerations apply.”

“Of course, Commander. Thank you.” The AI sounded happy.

Shepard copied the data onto the first pad, and then reached for a second. In a matter of two more minutes she had both, so she got up, made her way to the couch, and sat next to Nihlus.

“Here,” she offered one of the pads. “I really did not get a chance to look at it in detail. Right now EDI probably knows more than I do.”

“I have finished reviewing the report, yes,” EDI said.

Shepard grinned at the ceiling, “No spoilers, EDI. Basically the salient point is that… the computers on Daiwi likely contained a highly advanced VI, maybe even an AI.”

“Naturally the first assumption would be that Harbinger is looking for others like it,” Nihlus stated.

“Maybe. Or Just the data in their databases. Either way, it does not bode well.” To say the least,
considering there was at least one other Prothean AI out there. What sort of data did Nazara have? Would it join forces with Harbinger? Would it share whatever it had? Could the two of them even get along?

Nihlus hummed, “There is more to this that you are telling me.”

Shepard shook her head, utterly unsurprised that he was once again reading her like she was an open book in his language. Sometimes she found that somewhat annoying, because she had worked rather hard to cultivate a practiced air of perpetual calm. Still, it was just the norm, they were on about the same wavelength. She shook her head again and launched into a recap of her conversation with Admiral Hackett, and it took her a good ten minutes to finish that. Nihlus had by then leaned back into the couch and her only indication that he was still listening were his low-pitched rumbling hums.

“I can see your concern.” He said after a long silence.

“This is indeed concerning, Spectre Kryik,” EDI echoed.

“Yes, it berated Legion for not accepting what it was offering, and yes, it makes sense why it would want to end the interregnum, and that it would need the entire Geth Collective to do so…” Nihlus began. Then he hummed, “But Harbinger would be a fool to reveal the entirety of its thinking. There is more to this.”

“Unfortunately my data is inadequate for speculation on the nature of Harbinger’s real motive.” EDI stated calmly.

“Rhetorical statement, EDI. I do not think anyone knows what that motive is.” Nihlus replied ruefully. “All we know that there is a motive.”

“We’ll find out eventually…” Shepard said blandly, “and probably at the worst possible time.” That was how things often went.

Shepard felt the faintest touch of Nihlus’ fingers on her right shoulder. His long arm was probably slung over the back of the couch again. “Hackett is on your side. That is what matters. If there is something he can do to help, it will be done.”

Shepard thought she heard something rather peculiar in his tone, a faint little tinge of envy. She looked up and met his gaze. “Yea. I’m lucky that way.” Considering what she knew about Nihlus’ family, it was not all the strange for him to envy what she had a little bit. He had to work his way up without any help or real support, which toughened up his exterior. At the same time he was unflinchingly and blindingly loyal to those he allowed into his inner circle. There had to be a reason for that. Some part of him must have been lonely, which manifested in that loyal streak under his prickly prideful exterior. She wanted to say something right then, but Nihlus kept his family affairs secret for a reason. He would not want EDI overhearing things.

Instead of saying anything, Shepard slumped into the back of the couch with a melodramatic sigh that would have worked on some needlessly convoluted soap opera. His fingers slipped over her shoulder, and then his whole hand hung there. The touch was ultimately innocent, but the position she was in right now, it would not take much to slide a few centimeters to her left and end up half-hugging him. The thought was appealing, but Shepard knew the limits of what could be done with anyone watching them. She had never been one to indulge in impulse, and she would not start now. Instead she turned her head and gave him a smile, “Enough. I don’t want to think about it anymore. It’s not going to help. We’re on Arcturus, I told Adams that we will top up the anti-matter while we’re here, and the Admiral is in no rush to send us after anything. I still need to finish some rather important letters. I want to stop thinking about Harbinger and Cerberus for the time being.”
“Is there something I can do?” he asked, his tone deepening into a full on rumble.

This close she could just hear the upper registers of his sub-vocals, just on the threshold between audible and not. She really was developing an inordinate fondness for that rumble. It always seemed to send a pleasant ripple of energy right down her spine. Furthermore, there was no mistaking the feeling for anything other than what it was. Somewhere along the line she had begun to feel attracted to Nihlus. At times it felt like they were the two poles of a single magnet, with a powerful field arcing between them. She knew she could rely on him to be there for her. However, most importantly, she knew she could rely on him to understand. All considering, it made sense why she was attracted to someone like him. It was just the grandest joke of the cosmos that even if the Alliance rules did not apply, there were other considerations to think about. She would not disgrace herself by allowing anyone someone to say that she became the first human Spectre through something untoward. Her pride would not allow her to give people that satisfaction. She reached up and put her hand over his. “You don’t need to do anything to help. This is good enough.”

Meanwhile…

She emerged out of her tiny bathroom clad in a soft robe, toweling her hair dry. The only light in her micro-apartment was the single fixture in the living room. The blackout curtains were drawn shut, banishing the nebulae’s soft glow. She thought she heard her communicator start beeping some minutes ago, and now she knew that indeed there was a soft beeping from the shelf over her bed. It effectively derailed the calm tranquility of the evening.

She let the towel drop around her neck, made her way toward the bed, raised her hand to the box and placed her thumb on the biometric reader, “System, run biometric verification. Authorization code epsilon kappa alpha tau eta.”

“Biometrics confirmed, authorization accepted… Connecting.” The VI replied blandly.

There was a brief scratch of static as the QEC synchronized.

“I was beginning to wonder if you were out having some fun, Jezebel.” A male voice drawled. There was more irritation than amusement in his tone.

Had no one told him to mind his tone? That told her enough about his mood. Mr. King was feeling hostile tonight. Someone had probably stepped on his haughty tail. She smiled, enjoying the benefits of having a sound-only communication device.

“My apologies, Sir. I was in the shower.” She replied just as blandly. A token apology was all he would get from her.

“No matter. I am sure you know why I am calling you.”

“Who is my next target?” There was no need to mince words.

“Patience, Jezebel. It will not do to discuss the matter where you might be overheard. You will find a data package at dead drop phi three. Scout your openings, but do not act until I contact you again. Is that clear? Timing is important.”

“Understood, Sir.” She replied. Something was definitely going on, because this was the first time her timing was not part of the package. The secretary had been easy enough to get rid of, pick up the package, and everything she needed was there. The admiral had been a matter of being in the right place, setting up the provided gear, and waiting for the target to show up. This was different from
“One more thing, Jezebel… The good doctor would like to know how you are faring.”

“Nothing abnormal to report. I will leave the diagnostic data from my amp at the dead-drop, as usual.” Their concern would have been appreciated, if it had been at all genuine. She knew they only wanted to know if the hardware implanted in her was operating correctly. It was beginning to annoy her. The report was always the same, the amp continued to work as promised. Admittedly her biotics were not getting any stronger, but that had never been explicitly promised, just a maybe.

“No headaches? No peculiar dreams?”

“Nothing of the sort.” The reply had be automatic, but she noted the aberration. Headaches and peculiar dreams? That was new, and it sounded awfully specific.

“Excellent. You have twelve hours to pick up the data. I will contact you again when the time comes. Do not dally, Jezebel.”

“Understood, sir.”

The QEC box gave another scratch of static, indicating that the link had been severed from the other side. She raised the towel to her hair and started rubbing again. What was she to make of all that? Mr. King’s behavior was irritated and extra dodgy. He would not even drop the name of her target over a QEC. From that she could infer it was likely someone even more important than the admiral. Who could be even higher profile than that? Why would they be visiting the Citadel? Then there were the extra questions. Something just was not right, some part said that they expected something weird to be happening to her. Or had they snuck anything into the amp? It clearly was not working as intended, and now she knew to be on the watch for it. Well, seeing as she did not have anything to do this evening, she would go and retrieve the data package.

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Elsewhere...

He turned off the communicator and back in his seat and turned his gaze on the other man in the room. He knew the look would be taken as an unspoken question, and it would only irritate the black-haired Asian man, as he hated to be questioned, and doubly hated being in a position of being unable to do anything about it. Really, Kai Leng was a brat, and that was all the reason one needed to hate his guts.

“She won’t manage this. The Executor is not a half-drunk bureaucrat or an old fossil whose highest achievement was starting a war with a button press,” Leng stated, derision dripping off his tone.

“Thank you for your commentary, now go and tell The Illusive Man that the mission has moved into its next phase. This will end when the Normandy docks on the Citadel.” He stated calmly, fully aware that Leng hated being the gopher.

“I will. But one day the Illusive Man will realize that you’re wasting Cerberus resources. If Shepard is such a big problem, the most efficient way of handling her is my way.”

Charles raised his hand toward the side-board and the decanter of brandy there, and a biotic field materialized around the glass. A flick of the fingers pulled it toward him. Once within reach, he plucked the glass out of the air and allowed the liquid inside to settle. He would not argue rationales with Leng, he was a simpleton. Instead he leaned back into his chair and held the assassin’s gaze, not bothering to conceal his amusement. The assassin’s anger spiked a notch by the second, not that
Charles was at all threatened. Leng would be knowingly picking a fight with an L2 Adept. Charles was not above showing the brat what that meant. The Illusive Man would be less than pleased, but Banes was only a few months away from solving their personnel problem, and there were plenty of other maniacs out there who would kill on command just to get their sick fix, so no big loss.

“I will report that you relayed the information as requested.”

Charles nodded. He mutely watched as the Illusive Man’s pompous attack mutt bristle as he opened the door and exited the room. Charles took a generous sip of his brandy and enjoyed the feeling of the alcohol burning all the way down. Really, Kai Leng ought to disguise that he saw this whole thing as a danger to his position as Cerberus’ number one assassin, and The Illusive Man’s favorite. He could not see that his involvement in the assassinations on the Citadel would not get Cerberus what they wanted.

Yes the Illusive Man wanted to get rid of Shepard, but there was more to the whole thing. The right gambit could achieve multiple goals, and Jezebel was that sort of gambit. With a little more planted evidence Shepard would find herself a category-six dishonorable discharge and in prison. A sweet irony there, since she would end up right amidst those she ever-so-lovingly condemned. Then as a side-benefit the Alliance would twist in the wind trying to explain it. Shepard would not become some martyr, even the Titanium Lady would not walk away from this with her reputation intact. The Shepard cult of personality would scatter on the winds, and the Normandy would have to be re-assigned. Cerberus would ensure the ship was transferred out of the Fifth Fleet altogether. Hackett had thrown a wrench into their plan, they would not let him do it again. The involvement of the Fifth’s Triumvirate could be spun out. The plan was a little round-about, but that was how they got results.

Chapter End Notes

Author Notes: I realize this is a little bit late, the holidays put me a little off schedule, much to do, little time to do it in. The final “scene” also required some reviewing, I wanted to make sure that I got Kai Leng somewhat right.

General Notes:
Episode Title – The term comes from chess. Hackett is playing a dangerous game and Shepard is just a piece on the board. There’s the other shoe, so to speak. He has reasons to be letting her get away with so much.

Chapter Notes:
Nothing this time…
Episode 43: Persepolis [Part I]

It took a good twelve hours for Shepard to get right on top of all the upkeep tasks she inevitably had to do after every major mission. She had routine reports to read, mostly the after-action routine stuff from the away team, but also status updates from Adams. After that she had letters to read over and finalize, then send to the admiral. So she was putting in the finishing touches on the paperwork when the Normandy left Arcturus Station for the fuel depot. Most of the crew were still on Arcturus Station, as refueling was hardly a major mission. After docking, the ship went into lockdown as the engineers began the antimatter transfer procedure.

It was that an hour later, with the letters transmitted that Shepard found herself wandering down to deck three. She was unsurprised to see the main battery doors open as Garrus tinkered at the control console just on the other side. Matthews was reading something or other while keeping an eye on the three pots on the stove. The biggest one was for the human crew, the medium one for Garrus and Nihlus, and the smallest for Tali.

“Soup today, Matthews?” She asked.

“Yes, ma’am. Pesto and chicken minestrone for us, and a meat soup-stew for our dextro crewmembers. Of course, I’ve made Tali’s less thick and cut it with vegetables.”

“Sounds good.” What more could she say? Shepard was hardly picky about food. “Well, carry on.”

“Will do,” the cook replied, smiling all the while.

Shepard turned and made her way toward the main battery. As soon as she stepped over the door railing Garrus’ fingers stopped, then he part-turned and looked at her.

“Good morning, Commander, need me for something?”

“In a manner,” Shepard sighed. “Got a moment? I wanted to fill you in on some things. I could use your opinion.”

“Sure, just let me finish this one part…” he turned back to the console and his fingers went back to typing.

Shepard reached over to the door console and tapped the command to close, then she moved to perch on the railing surrounding the Thanix guns. The space was remarkably warm despite the fact that the only thing separating them from the void of space were two thin panels and an atmosphere-retaining
mass effect field. Garrus was unbothered by this though, wearing his casuals. She waited, letting him finish whatever that last bit of code he was putting in. It was about five minutes before his hands left the console and he looked at her again.

“Sorry about that.” He sounded a bit sheepish. “You closed the door. This is something serious, is it not?”

Shepard sighed and nodded. “I’ve had a doozy meeting with Admiral Hackett, and I’ve already mentioned all this to Nihlus…” with that pre-amble out of the way she launched into the topic of the Heretics. Garrus listened without interrupting while, but by the time Shepard was done, his brow plates had drawn down, shadowing his eyes. Then he hummed a long flat note pensively, and for some reason it reminded her of the rumble of very distant thunder.

“If you are right…” Garrus began, “If Harbinger is looking for a way to convince all the Geth to obey it, the galaxy will be in deep trouble. We know very little about what the Geth can do. And yes, there is very little we can do on our end at the moment. Have you talked with Legion about this?”

“No, not yet.” Shepard replied. The thought of Legion becoming a murderous monster bothered her immensely. She felt a certain deal of urgency to act, to try and do something to prevent that nightmare scenario. For Legion’s own sake, if nothing else.

“No yet, huh?” Garrus echoed.

“Not yet. But I will.” Especially if she ever wanted to have the right to say she trusted Legion at all. Moreover it was their right to know that she suspected anything of this sort. Forewarning was the only way to ensure the outcome could be changed. Maybe the thought had even occurred to the Geth already, but it would still matter that she did tell them. The Geth had nothing but horrible experiences with organics who only expected the worst from them, it was time to break that chain.

Garrus hummed, “If I may be bold, Commander… I do not think the Heretic situation is the thing that is truly bothering you at the moment. They are an outside enemy, the sort you... have no problem destroying utterly.”

It still amazed her just how perceptive Garrus was. Had she robbed C-sec of one of their greatest in the making?

“What I am saying is that… you have never worried about those enemies. Something is making you worry. That means there was more to your conversation with Admiral Hackett. Whatever it is… you do not have to keep it inside. Now I have probably overstepped my boundaries, so I will say no more.”

“It is alright, Garrus. No boundaries were overstepped. You know me too well.” Shepard sighed, “You’re right about the Heretics, they’re an external enemy. There is also that whole mess on the Citadel. Just general bad feeling about everything. With all the evidence we have there is no way to see things as anything other than a conspiracy. Cerberus are an enemy within. Anyone and everyone could be their sympathizer, agent, or sleeper. I feel like a total rube worrying about it this much, but I can’t help it, and it’s exhausting.” She stopped before she could actually say just how exhaustion all this stress was. She tried to keep it under wraps, to not think about it. However for someone like her, that was near impossible. Her mind would inevitably drift right back there and the stress would start again. There was just no way she could block reality itself from her psyche.

“I understand, and you have every right to be worried. No one will hold that against you.” Garrus replied, his tone taking on a warm undernote. “I said it before, but I will say it again... and I will keep saying it as long as it helps. Trust my father. He will get to the bottom of this. Cerberus will not be
able to frame you easily.”

“Thanks Garrus,” Shepard nodded.

“You are welcome.” He turned back to the console, staring at the screen.

Shepard noted the way his mandibles flicker right then. Was Garrus being bashful? Why? If anyone should have felt embarrassed right then, it should have been her. It felt almost wrong to be seeking assurances like this. No, not wrong, just off. It was unusual for her to seek repeated assurance like this, and that in itself was what felt off. Normally Shepard was perfectly happy dealing with her problems on her own, that was how it always was. But now? Now she found herself opening up to Nihlus and Garrus in particular. That felt off. Every instinct within her said not to. Yet, she could not help it.

Nihlus was one thing, he was her partner and the one she had some yet amorphous feelings for. He had showed her his vulnerable side on Taetrus, it made sense to balance that equation. Garrus was a bit different though. Yes, he was her effortless best friend, and yes she knew something about what made him tick. After Saleon she got to see just how much he cared about what was right on the deep, personal level. Perhaps it made sense that she balance out that equation as well. However balancing out these equations still went up against every self-protecting instinct she had. “I think I’ll go find Legion now. I need to make sure that they know about the potential danger.” She pushed off the railing and moved toward the door.

“Getting attention from their favorite organic would make them happy too.”

The door opened, but Shepard paused and glanced back, “Has Joker been spreading around the rumor that I mother Legion?”

“With all due respect, Commander… you do mother Legion.” Garrus said, mandibles flicking in amusement.

Shepard had to contain her urge to face-palm. “I am going to cut his rations, I swear.” she mumbled as she stepped out of the main battery. Garrus chuckled, but the sound was cut off when the doors closed between them. Maybe she was being needlessly protective over the geth, but they had few people in their corner, willing to understand, let alone fight for them. Shepard would not let the Geth take the blame for something they had not done, nor be victimized by some megalomaniacal ancient AI.

“EDI, is Legion in the AI core?” she asked as she made her way toward the mess tables.

“Legion is currently in the shuttle bay, Commander.”

“Oh, thanks.” Shepard replied as she altered her path toward the elevator.

“You are welcome, Commander.”

The elevator was still been on deck three, so it did not take Shepard long to make her way to the shuttle bay. As the doors opened it took even less time to spot Legion. The geth was at the weapon maintenance worktable, intently working at the terminal on the side. Shepard glanced about the space, and was utterly unsurprised to see that the only being here was the geth, but they did not seem to acknowledge her, which was a touch peculiar.

“Morning, Legion.” Shepard said as she stepped off the elevator.

The geth looked up and turned around, “Good morning, Shepard-Commander.”
There was a stiffness to their greeting, as if they were just echoing her words right back at her.

Shepard drew near and glanced at the weapon they were working on, and then she was momentarily taken aback. It was a HVR of a similar design to Legion’s own. However, the casing was still just a matte, chalky grey, as of yet only primed for painting. The geth’s fingers were fast at work typing code into the console.

“Is this the weapon you were welding before?” She asked.

“Affirmative, Shepard-Commander. We are programming its control protocols.”

“You built it from blueprints and now you’re programming it too?” Shepard asked, surprised.

“Affirmative.”

“Wow.” It slipped from her mouth before Shepard could come up with anything better. “May I pick it up?” She asked. Curiosity was a bit of a vice of hers, she knew she really ought to tell Legion what she needed to tell them, but right now that seemed less urgent, like it could wait five minutes for her to finish gawping.

“You may inspect it, Commander. However, be aware that at the present time we have not installed the ammunition block, energy pack, or thermal clip.”

In other words it would not turn on, fold, or fire. Shepard reached down and lifted the weapon. “Well… it’s as heavy as it looks.” She murmured as she rotated the weapon in her arms.

“We have attempted to use lighter polymers in all parts that are not vital to the weapon’s operation.” Legion explained.

Shepard hummed, her trained eye quickly spotted the gun’s finer features. There was a triple-setting ammo selector, and the thermal clip bolt was manually operated. The rifle’s stock was curiously soft, and shiny. Was it a rigid core coated in a shock-absorbing synthetic polymer rubber? With that one could easily think that the weapon was designed to be fired by an organic, not Legion. Well, it could be that Legion had scaled down their overpowered rifle into an anti-personnel weapon that could potentially be fired by an organic, but it was not going to be. Maybe this was closer to an old quarian design?

She rolled the weapon in her hands and stepped back before slipping it against her shoulder to peer down the scope. What shocked her was that even the scope had been built from scratch. The lenses were meticulously polished, her trained eye could not discern a single optical flaw or change in apparent coloration. The focus was off, but that was because the rifle did not have its control software, and Legion had not bothered to focus the optics manually.

“Legion… this is artistry!” How long did this take to make? It boggled the mind. Sure the gun was a touch heavy, and it was unbelievably long and potentially unwieldy, but everything she saw indicated that it was tooled and fitted with extreme precision and attention to detail. It was not a mass produced, pattern-cut, machine-welded model. It was an artisanal, lovingly-crafted weapon.

“Thank you, Shepard-Commander.” The geth bowed their head as their emotive flaps rippled.

Shepard gingerly set the weapon back down on the table, right how she found it. She was officially blown away. Most people would not think that a synthetic could do artisanal work, yet right there was proof to the contrary. “I suppose that after you are done testing the software and the fit of the parts, you will finish on the paint, right?”
“Affirmative. We acquired the requisite paint already.”

Shepard nodded. “Well I would like to see it when you are finished.”

Legion turned their head to look at her as their emotive flaps rose in a facsimile of surprise. Then just as quickly they turned away. “Acknowledged. We will notify you when the construction process is complete.”

She smiled, but the expression was brief. Now came the much less pleasant part. “Legion, I did not come down here just to admire your craftsmanship… I wanted to talk to you regarding something that occurred to me earlier. Do you have a moment?”

The geth’s fingers paused over the console and then it was like some sort of switch had been tripped. They made one step back and turned to face her fully. “Our analysis of your voice pattern indicates the topic you wish to discuss has been deemed uncomfortable. Shepard-Commander should know that we cannot experience discomfort.”

Shepard could not help but grin wanly, “You’re right. I have a certain… theory about what the god-king may be up to. It pertains the Geth, so I wanted to share it.”

Legion’s emotive flaps shifted again, drawing up at the back and down at the front, as if they were furrowing a brow. Then they reset and the geth seemed to glance down at the floor for just a split of a moment. When they looked up, the iris widened as the lighting element within dimmed. On some level Shepard could appreciate that, the facial-lamp was uncomfortable to look into. “Shepard-Commander, you can proceed with data transfer.”

That was the geth-speak way of telling her to go on, she should have known that Legion would not bother with the pleasantries, she could have very well started on the info dump right out the gate. She shifted her weight from foot to foot and began talking, starting from the point of what the Alliance had on Harbinger’s previous actions and targets. Legion listened intently, tipping their head from side to side rather amusingly to some rhythm she could not begin discerning.

A peripheral thought occurred to Shepard that if the Geth had been built no bigger than a meter in height, the smaller less intimidating size combined with adorable mannerisms and those emotive flaps would have put them in position to take over the galaxy with sheer cuteness. Not that she would ever tell Legion that, mostly because the cuteness only worked for household robots, and Legion was no one’s servant. She felt wrong just for having thought it. Right then, Garrus and Joker thinking she mothered Legion was positively preferable.

“For obvious reasons, Legion, I’m concerned. No one will win if the god-king comes to control the Geth and then stirs up a war between organics and synthetics. It will not be a short, easy war. Even the winners will suffer tremendous casualties.” Shepard finished. As far as she was concerned, the Geth would lose something important either way. If they lost, they would be annihilated. However if they won, they would once again be subjects and servants to someone else, losing their individuality. In her opinion, the latter was worse than the former.

“Affirmative.” Legion’s tone lowered. “Shepard-Commander’s hypothesis is merits consideration.”

Shepard could just imagine what was going on in their collective consciousness right then. How many runtimes would be accepting this theory, how many against? Could they even come to a consensus? She would not be surprised if the geth had consult their collective after this. Important decisions like these could not be made by a scant one thousand or so runtimes within one platform. “Legion, if you need time to mull this over, you can take as long as it takes. I am in no rush for anything. There is very little we can do about this right now. Acting on impulse will not help either.
So take your time and get back to me at your convenience.”

“Acknowledged. Shepard-Commander, you have our gratitude.”

“You’re welcome,” Shepard replied. What more could she say to that? Then Legion turned back to their work, and that seemed to be that. She turned and made her way back to the elevator.

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It was afternoon on the ship’s chronometer by the time the engineers completed taking up antimatter. With the three of them taking a belated lunch, Shepard ordered Joker to return them to Arcturus station. Then, having left the CIC under the watchful eye of both Kaidan and Joker, Shepard moved to the OD, intent on checking for messages.

She had just approached her desk and moved the chair back so she could sit down when there was a familiar telltale scratch from the ceiling. “Commander,” EDI cut in. “Admiral Hackett is on the communicator. He wishes to speak with you. It is urgent.”

Shepard straightened, turned, and moved straight toward the COMCON. The Admiral contacting them like this meant that there was a new fire to put out. She was of two minds about it, while it was unpleasant that someone somewhere might be in danger, some part of her was perfectly happy to jump headlong into it. Anything to get away from Arcturus Station, the reporters, and all the scrutiny. Maybe the Admiral even knew that, and this was his way of giving her what she wanted. Once in the COMCON she stopped in front of the desk and glanced up, “Patch it through, EDI.”

“Right away, Commander.” The AI replied.

The room lights dimmed and the holographic communicator came to life with a loud humming which settled down as the image hovering over the desk stabilized. Shepard snapped to attention and saluted.

The admiral nodded and turned to the datapad in his hands. “Commander, I think we can do without the formalities. We have a developing situation on the research colony of Zhu’s Hope, on Feros.”

“Is the colony under attack, Admiral?” Shepard asked.

“Yes… and no. The alarm, such as it is, came from the colony’s administration office. They sent us a photograph of what they called an unidentified vessel that had latched onto one of the arcologies. The ship had done nothing else in the twelve hours between when it arrived and when the message was sent out.”

“Whose ship is it?” Shepard asked. The admiral was being a touch too dramatic for her tastes right then.

“The vessel in question in most definitely Geth-built, and if your friends are honest about staying within the Veil, then it is Heretic.”

“Harbinger.” Shepard said, voice dipping low. “This is just like the old adage goes. Speak of the devil, and he will appear.”

“So it would seem.”

“And there was no attack? No shots fired?” Shepard asked without missing a beat.

“None. The ship is just latched to the side of an arcology.” Hackett replied.
The natural question asked itself, what was Harbinger doing there? Why would it arrive and just sit in place? And on Feros? “How many of our people are on Feros?”

“The current population on the whole planet is never above three hundred total. I know what you will ask next, and the answer is that they have no permanent garrison, only some security personnel hired by ExoGeni administration.” Hackett listed.

“Ah.” Shepard replied before she could stop herself. How much could one rely on private security once the shooting started and there were geth involved? Most had never seen a geth up close, let alone know of their weaknesses. Going by previous experience, as well observations of Legion, the average geth frame ran the gamut from competent to ruthlessly dangerous. Of course Legion obfuscated being both with ample affable daffiness. The Heretics would not be so amiable. “I will handle this, Sir.” She said coolly.

“I know you will.” Hackett replied. “No one wants a repeat of Solcrum. You have my permission to do whatever it takes. I want the Heretics removed from Feros.”

“Yes, sir. It will be done.” Shepard replied.

“Good. Hackett out.”

The image blinked and the humming died, leaving Shepard staring out over the empty desk. Her mind still dwelling on the question of why. Why would Harbinger go to Feros and just sit there? Well, now was not the time for spit-balling. “EDI, send out the emergency recalls, please. Also, would you tell Nihlus I want to see him in the OD?”

“Right away, Commander.” EDI replied.

Shepard turned around and breezed out of the COMCON and back into the OD. She knew that EDI would take care of everything she could. EDI knew the drill with these sorts of emergency events. She plopped onto her seat at the terminal and waited. She was not disappointed, as barely a minute later the console pinged with the arrival a data package. She hastily pulled up the image the admiral mentioned. Whatever doubts she could have entertained vanished in an instant. It was impossible to mistake the silvery vaguely, insect-like ship latched onto the side of a building. After that she turned to take a look where they were going.

Pretty quickly the data painted quite a picture. Feros was the second planet of the Theseus system, within the Attican Beta cluster. From the Arcturus Stream that would take them three relay jumps, to the Hercules system, and an additional fourteen hours in FTL to cross the gap between systems. The planet itself was larger than Earth by about two thousand kilometers in radius. Its atmosphere was nearly five and a half times thicker than Earth’s at the surface. Finally, at two astronomical units away from Theseus, a star not much bigger and brighter than Sol, it was perpetually gloomy.

The interest in Feros was no great mystery. Everyone knew about the vast Prothean megacity covering two thirds of its surface. In the 2170s, when the Alliance had expanded out far enough, Attican Beta had become a bit of a problem. The Council had not wanted a full colony there, they deemed the planet too valuable as a research resource. The Council’s demands caused many companies who were in position to fund a colonial venture to pull out. Few wanted to deal with both the Alliance and the Council proverbially breathing down their necks, for obvious reasons. Then in 2177, ExoGeni made a bid for a small research station, and they accepted the contract with the Council’s stipulations. Zhu’s Hope was established in early 2178. As a result of the limitations, its population was never higher than three hundred, primarily researchers across a number of fields. It was no Terra Nova, Eden Prime, or Horizon, where families could settle down.
Shepard looked away from the material when she heard the door open behind her back.

“Shepard,” Nihlus greeted as he stepped into the room without breaking his stride. “What is wrong?” He asked. “Wait… is that a Heretic ship?” Nihlus asked as he stopped cold a few steps away from her.

Of course he would see the picture. “It is. This is from Feros. That mechanical maniac decided to just pop in, park his ship, and wait.” Shepard explained.

“What do you mean wait?” Nihlus echoed.

“Exactly that. Wait. Doing nothing. The bigwigs on Feros waited twelve hours of that to send out this picture. As far as we know, right now, the Heretics haven’t actually attacked anyone.” Saying it like that made the whole thing sound even more preposterous than it actually was.

Nihlus hummed low in his throat, as if he was mulling over. “I do not like this.”

“To say the least. The only way this sitting around makes sense is if it is waiting for something.”

“Or someone.” Nihlus commented.

Shepard blinked.

“I assume you told EDI to recall those on leave.” Nihlus continued as if he had not just dropped a metaphorical bomb.

“Of course,” Shepard replied. She was not going to linger on whom he could mean by someone. It was rather obvious, but thinking about it was acknowledging it, and that would give her a sinking feeling in her stomach. She had enough of that. As petty as it might sound, she sincerely and fervently hoped Nihlus was wrong. The last thing she wanted was to have Harbinger declare a personal vendetta on her. Harbinger would not make a distinction between those affiliated with her and everyone else. The Alliance as a whole would be on the receiving end of it.

“Shepard, there is one other thing we have to worry about. If Harbinger openly attacks Feros… it will not be just Alliance civilians in danger.” Nihlus shifted tracks again. “I know at least three Thessian universities that view Feros as the first place to send their Prothean Studies graduates for field experience. Feros is considered a safe location to start with.”

“Harbinger is goading everyone,” Shepard muttered. The Council would not do much as long as the problem was not their concern, in that sense they were typical politicians. However that ought not to be mistaken for weakness per se. If Harbinger stepped on the wrong tail too hard, the Council would act. Still, right then the onus to act was on the Alliance. “How should we go about notifying the Council though?” She asked, even though her mind was on the other obvious possibility. The message was hours old, and it would be even longer before the Normandy could get there. For all they knew Harbinger would grow tired of waiting and mount an attack. Would the Normandy arrive to find Zhu’s Hope razed to the ground?

“Leave that to me.” Nihlus replied bluntly.

“Thanks,” Shepard replied numbly. Small mercies there. One day it would be her job to negotiate this sort of thing, and make those reports on her own. Shepard was not looking forward to that day. “I hate to say it, but this might turn into another all-hands-on-deck situation.”

“That is alright. You will be hard-pressed to find a single individual on board who would not happily put a firearm to Harbinger’s case and pull the trigger.” Nihlus replied.
Shepard nodded, but said nothing else. There was no need to say anything more.

“Do what you need, we can have a general meeting when that is done. I need to go place a few calls.”

Shepard watched him turn around and march right back to the door. When it closed she turned back to the data package she needed to finish reviewing.

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The Normandy was on its way within an hour. The Attican Beta cluster was almost right on the other side of Alliance Space, on the border with the Attican Traverse. Their final relay jump saw them emerge in the Hercules system in good time, only for Joker to turn the Normandy onto a new heading and jump into FTL for the fourteen hour leg to the Theseus system.

With all the message, processing, and travel delays and travel times they arrived at Theseus’ heliopause about three days after the Heretics had first arrived. Shepard ordered Joker to rig the Normandy for silent running as soon as they emerged from FTL. She did not want Harbinger to know they had arrived, just on the off-chance that it was waiting for that to launch an attack.

Two hours after that the Normandy made orbit around Feros, with Shepard on the CIC along with most of the away team. At the moment Zhu’s Hope was on the planet’s night side. They could not and would not wait for dawn, doubly so since Feros’ rotation period was slightly over thirty Earth hours long. Night was definitely not a problem for EDI’s work. Soon there was processed IR imaging telemetry projected over the main tactical console for all to see. A quick analysis was enough to confirm that the research colony was still there. The heat signature was active and if EDI focused her scanner down tight she could see people moving about. On the other hand the Heretic ship’s heat signature showed that the engines were cool, it had not budged since it docked. The arcology the Heretics were latched onto also showed traces of heat within. EDI could not tell what was going on, but it was definitely activity of some kind.

This reconnaissance foremost confirmed that Harbinger had sent in just one ship. That meant they could keep the Normandy in orbit and use their shuttles to get around. The Normandy would be their ace in the hole, as Harbinger would have no way of knowing from where it might pop up. After that, Shepard now knew what had to happen. Harbinger had been clever in his choice of mooring. If they had not attached to the side of an arcology then Shepard would have shot them out of the sky with extreme prejudice. Firing even the disruptor torpedoes might just bring the arcology down, and the Council would have her head. Then, if she chose to fire on what might have been her own people, then the brass would fight the Council for her head. That meant there was only one way of handling the situation. “We have to get that ship to detach. Somehow.” She announced bluntly. Once Harbinger was not clutching a building, the odds would tip. “This asks the obvious question,” she would not look at Legion right then. “How are they attached? Mooring claws? I doubt the building façade would withstand magnetic pads.”

“Geth vessels use six hydraulically-driven gripping struts. Each will have a claw that can pierce into a building,” Tali said as she glanced toward Legion who stood by the elevator.

The geth looked back right at her without saying a word.

Garrus hummed low in his throat, “Those would be some hydraulics. I assume boarding the Heretic ship is out of the question, yes?”

“Definitely out of the question,” Shepard replied. That would be going right into the lion’s den, the Heretics will have hundreds of platforms on board that ship. She would not be surprised if Harbinger
self-destructed the ship with her on board, just because the opportunity was there. So yes, as far as she was concerned, boarding was out of the question.

“We will not be overriding the claws from outside, so our best bet becomes shaped charges. Those will cut through enough material to weaken the limbs without doing a lot of damage to the building itself. We also do not need to attack all six, unless you want a clean separation.” Garrus went on.

“I would like a clean separation, all six claws cut with simultaneous detonations. That way the ship plunges straight down.” Shepard replied. “However, I fully expect something to get in the way, so we might have to go after four and hope it… rips off without taking half the structure and us with it.” Shepard did not like the pressure inherent in this whole plan. They only had one go to get it right, and she could not afford to botch it. “Needless to say, what happens after that is easy. Hopefully the ship plunges down and hits the surface, but if it manages to remain airborne… Joker, that’ll be your cue, wait for it to get clear, and torpedo it.”

“Got it,” the pilot replied. “I know not to aim for the core. I can probably split it if I hit the narrowest point. That’ll likely make it tumble out of the air in two mostly intact pieces.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Shepard affirmed. “However, before we can do that, and before we even get to the claws, we go see Zhu’s Hope. Show the colonists that we are here. It’ll be a comfort. Maybe they also know something or other about the enemy’s movement. The enemy deployed troops into the structure they moored to. I would bet the Heretics ran recon of some sort as well.”

“Safe assumption,” Nihlus mused.

Shepard nodded. It was a bit of a no-brainer really. Start with the fundamentals, and improvise where needed. “We need to prepare the shaped charges, and we’ll keep them on the Kodiak until needed.”

“I can help you with that, Commander. Four hands are better than two.” Garrus volunteered.

“Thanks, Garrus. I appreciate it.”

“Just another day in this office,” Garrus said, rueful amusement in his tone.

“Truer words have never been spoken,” Ashley said. “I should be alarmed that these sorts of operations has become something we discuss so casually… but I’m not.”

A beat of silence passed all around, no one seemed keen on saying anything to that. Shepard grinned, “Difficult done daily. The impossible takes just a little longer.” That was practically one of the unofficial mottos for the ICT graduates. “I guess it should be said, but I want the whole team on this. We do not have the numbers to storm that tower, so we will have to infiltrate it as a black ops. That said, need I remind everyone that we handled Balak? I should think the repercussions of failure were higher with him. We’ll handle this too.” If she thought about it, what was one badly damaged tower compared to over three million lives?

“Damn right we will!” Ashley chorused.

“Alright. EDI, Joker… you’re monitor duty. Keep an eye out for anything else making orbit. If anything pings on the IR scanner, I want to know.”

“You got it, Shepard,” Joker replied.

“Of course, Commander.” EDI added.

Shepard turned to the ex-detective, “Garrus, we will go and get those charges set up.”
“Right behind you, as always,” Garrus nodded.

“The rest of you, get ready. I want to deploy as soon as possible.”

“Aye, aye, ma’am,” the marines chorused in a single voice.

Within three hours her team gathered beside the Kodiak. Every single individual there looked like they were ready to wage war. Jenkins was sporting his thermal clip bandoleer, Tali’s drone was packed in its charging cradle, Kaidan had his full med-kit, and Legion’s emotive plates were already furrowed. There was a tension in the air, and Shepard could not blame anyone for feeling it. Yes Balak threatened over three million people, but he had finite numbers. The Heretics hardly offered the same courtesy. Who knew how many platforms there were on board that ship. The runtimes could swap platforms like the fashion-obsessed swapped outfits.

She mutely watched as Garrus and Nihlus carried the crate of explosives aboard the Kodiak. The charges were too oversized for her comfort, but there was no way to make devices of that yield particularly small. This was officially not so much sabotage as controlled demolition. What bothered Shepard was the logistics of things. Could they actually move at any decent speed toting that crate around? It took two to move it, as Shepard would not risk a localized mass effect field, even though the explosives were inert and the detonators were not actually connected to the explosives or anything that could set them off.

Shepard was last to step aboard the Kodiak, and once her left foot was on its deck plates, it was op time. “Alright, last moment check… make sure everyone got everything. I know it is a little awkward to be packed onto a single Kodiak, but we can’t risk flying the second, tandem. Not for this.”

“We will manage,” Garrus replied.

A number of heads nodded in agreement, but no one said anything else. That seemed to end the conversation as the team moved on their own to take their seats. Nihlus spared her a brief touch on the shoulder before he turned and stepped into the cockpit. Shepard lingered only for ten seconds and then followed.

Shepard was in the cockpit with Nihlus as the Kodiak made its descent. Feros was a case study for many things, up to and including what happened when a heavily settled planet was abandoned. The Protheans had covered two thirds of its surface with a single city made up of with impossibly tall arcologies connected by elevated roadways. In the intervening fifty thousand years the decaying structures had released enough greenhouse substances that the planet’s climate grew slightly warmer, which was enough to increase activity within the troposphere, making the wind stronger. The arcologies were forced to take the brunt of this, and it was not rare for things of various sizes to come crashing down. This process then produced extreme quantities of pulverized dust kept aloft by the wind. Feros’ surface was unpleasant without light pressure regulation under the best of times, but the dust made it health-damaging at long exposures.

As soon as the Kodiak got past the tropopause it too began to feel the turbulence. Nihlus found his hands full trying to keep the shuttle from heaving, all the while he was trying to avoid the arcologies and roadways. These materialized out of the gloom, jutting out of the sea of dark clouds like chipped fangs. Here and there Shepard spotted scattered glows, though it was impossible to tell what caused them. She would not discount the possibility of fires sparked by lightning. Tall structures of this sort, surrounded by a dusty, writhing atmosphere, became a prime target for the lightning generated by the
dynamo currents and dust within the troposphere.

Zhu’s Hope stuck out of all the turmoil like a lighthouse on a stormy night-time sea. It was impossible to miss the single spire with a golden crown of radiant floodlights illuminating a large hydroponic greenhouse. The colonists knew there was no hiding their position from the Heretics with the simple old trick of blacking out all light. The whole bubble also seemed to ripple a little, which hinted at a protective mass effect field containment dome. As Shephard glanced at the wind gage on the Kodiak’s instruments, she saw the sixty kilometer per hour gusts. Suddenly the dome made sense, it was there to reduce atmospheric pressure and calm the wind.

Nihlus made a slow approach, as even the shuttle had been rigged for silent flying, using its mass effect fields as opposed to the blisteringly-hot thruster which would have lit up on any IR scanner. Once they were over the colony, he turned the Kodiak toward the open corner. Up here, beyond the retaining field, the air pressure was about four atmospheres. Assuming the other tower was not contained, it was something their suits would have to counter. Shephard knew that going from four atmospheres to one too quickly would was a hazard to their health. No wonder the colonists set up an atmosphere-retaining field. No one would want to work up here in an environmental suit.

As the Kodiak came down, Shephard could inspect their setup. The colonist had arrived by a Kowloon rigged for permanent settlement, and so, its detachable modules became fixed structures. The freighter itself was absent. Then the Kodiak crossed the atmosphere retaining field and the wind died down and the pressure dropped to one point five atmospheres. The shuttle swung around as Nihlus turned it to be head-first into the prevailing wind while he also got a good view of the pad itself for landing.

From the new vantage Shephard could not miss the other tower and the dark hump attached to its side, the Heretic ship. The tower was not entirely dark, but not as backlit either. She could see hints of the elevated roadway connecting the two. The colonists had installed lighting elements along its length to mark the edges. Its immense suspension pylons were also marked and the cables almost looked like spider thread. It was a very good thing that they would not have to drive across that, as there was no better place to set up an ambush.

Shephard was thinking of the obvious again, why had Harbinger not attacked? This was not an issue of force. It would have hundreds of platforms on that ship. Surely that could overrun a place like Zhu’s Hope. Everything came back to what Nihlus had alluded to. Was Harbinger essentially calling her out? Showing up somewhere it knew she could not ignore, planting down, and saying ‘come at me’? If this was an ambush, and Harbinger came after them with a vengeance, Council desires be damned. She would order Joker to bring the Normandy down and destroy that ship. She would decapitate the enemy’s forces before they could do any harm to her team. Harbinger would not be having its cake and eating it too, not on her watch.

Then the shuttle jolted as its bottom plates finally made contact with the landing pad, snapping Shephard out of her unblinking stare at the enemy ship. Without saying a word she unbuckled herself and rose to her feet. Nihlus would be busy with post-landing procedure. By the time she reached the back compartment the others were already on their feet.

“What’s the plan?” Kaidan asked.

“We look around first.” Shephard replied. “Perhaps the colonists know something about the enemy’s position and movement. Anything of that sort would be useful. After that, we’ll have to come up with the best way to get our payload in position. I’ll be honest with you people, I have reasons to suspect that this is Harbinger calling us out.”

“I think that’s given,” Ashley replied. “Why else would it come here, and just… sit around?”
“Affirmative. Shepard-Commander has thwarted the Old Machine’s plans. Shepard-Commander has become an obstacle. It is logical for the Old Machine to seek to eliminate Shepard-Commander.” Legion said.

Anyone else would have taken their tone and choice of words as an affront, but Shepard saw it differently. If Legion could see the logic in this thought, then maybe, just maybe there was something to it. She was still not entirely unpardonably paranoid.

“This could very well be a nice… warm up for when we inevitably have to engage the Heretics on their territory,” Garrus added.

“There’s definitely that,” Ashley agreed.

That seemed to create the sort of consensus that ended the topic. Shepard moved toward the environmental controls and keyed in the sequence for the door to open. There was a tremendous whomp as the seals disconnected, followed by a quickly-vanishing whistling and a blast of air as Feros’ atmosphere rushed into the Kodiak’s lower-pressure cabin, equalizing them in a manner of moments.

When the door had moved entirely out of the way Shepard saw the curious faces standing just outside the landing pad’s perimeter. It was then, likely seeing the shuttle open its door that one of the figures approached calmly. He was dressed in coveralls and carried a pistol. Shepard stepped off the shuttle, hands raised waist-high, just to show the man that she was not armed, or a threat. That seemed to calm him as he lowered the pistol and slipped it into a holster at his side.

“Welcome to Zhu’s Hope, I am Fai Dan, support staff coordinator. You’ll have to pardon us… we were not notified to expect an Alliance patrol.”

Shepard smiled, “That would be my fault, I’m afraid I was not in the luxury of notifying you. Commander Shepard, SSV Normandy.”

There was a gasp from behind Fai Dan, “Geth!” someone called. A split of a second later Shepard heard three weapons whining as the other men raised their pistols.

“Easy! Easy! That’s Legion. He’s friendly.” Shepard called, raising her hands to take control of the situation. Still, this told her that the colonists had likely seen the Heretics. Otherwise Legion could have passed for some new, classified military synthetic unit of some sort.

“You are not a patrol,” Fai Dan mused.

“No, we’re better.” Shepard replied. “We’ve encountered this enemy before.” That was technically the truth. She would willingly omit that she thought it highly likely that the only reason the colonists even had a problem, was because it actually wanted to come at her. There was still something in the back of her mind that said it did not make sense for Harbinger to play things so overtly, laying such an obvious trap. But it was also likely that the machine suffered from the folly of all psychopaths, a touch of the megalomania that had it thinking it had the perfect plan. That and with Cerberus moving in the shadows, she was too used to looking in there for other issues. Maybe Harbinger was indeed just an obvious enemy, and this was an obvious challenge.

“I am never the one to look a gift horse in the mouth,” Fai Dan said, but his tone hinted that he was less than impressed.

Shepard assumed it was the size of the team. After all, they we not enough to be called a platoon. Most civilians assumed the more able bodies, the better. They knew nothing of the sort of force
multiplication that good leadership and specialized training could achieve. Now if only Harbinger did
her the courtesy of underestimating her, she would be set. “Alright, well… shall we get down to
business. I would like to ask some questions regarding what happened since you sent that message.”

“Alright… walk with me, Commander. Your team can look around if they want to.” Fai Dan replied,
and then motioned with his arm for her to follow. Shepard was only too glad to do so. Right then the
distance from the landing pad to the tower where Heretics were was quite possibly within a sniper-
shot. A couple kilometers were nothing for a shooter using a large caliber HVR, akin to the one
wielded by Legion, doubly so if the shooter did not have to breathe and experienced no muscle
twitches. She was going to err on the side of paranoid and seek cover, not to present Harbinger’s
soldiers an opportunity.

Fai Dan led her toward one of the structures at the center of the rooftop. Once inside he moved
toward the desk and sat behind it. To Shepard it seemed like he decided to be as official as it got,
including taking her into his office. “The message you are referring to must have been sent from the
ExoGeni administration. At the time, we’ve had no sightings of the ship’s occupants.” He began.

Shepard knew what that sort of statement would usually preface. “I get the feeling that has since
changed.”

“Yes. Commander, pardon my asking… but you have one of them on your team? Do you trust it?”
Fai Dan wondered.

“Sheir name is Legion.” Shepard replied blandly, “As a gestalt consciousness, plural pronouns
apply. And yes, I trust them. Legion has been part of my team for months now. The Geth have
factions just like every other species. The ones who came here are one, a splinter faction. Legion is
not affiliated with them.”

“I see. That is… good. I suppose.”

“Feel free to ask them questions,” she added, knowing that Fai Dan was not convinced of what she
said. “Now as to your situation, what is going on?”

“It is quite unpleasant. These other… Geth moored to the tower where ExoGeni set up their
administrative headquarters.”

Shepard contained her urge to groan, of course the situation would take a turn for the worst. If that
other tower was the company’s HQ then there would be people there, one more reason to be super
careful with the explosives. “Do you still have contact? Were ExoGeni staff taken as hostages?”

Hostage rescue and controlled demolition? This was becoming a bit of a tall order.

“Likely. We’ve not had contact with them for about ten hours now, and shortly after we spotted
those lamp-faced robots on the Skyway… I think it is clear enough what is going on.”

So the Heretics had made a move, admittedly a subtle and underhanded one. Still, she had to wonder
why like this? Why would Harbinger order the Heretics to set up a blockade on the road? Did it
think she would make approach in a wheeled vehicle? It had to know that she had a ship and
shuttles, and it had no way of knowing when she would arrive. The blockade was pointless against
her team. So why? Then, as she thought about it like that, she realized there was another possibility.
The Heretics might not be interested in keeping someone out, as much as keeping people in. Did
they fail to capture all the ExoGeni staff? Were they still hiding in the tower? Fai Dan could not
possibly know that, but she would assume there were, and plan accordingly. “Alright… how many
staff ought to have been in the tower?”
“ExoGeni staff is nominally around thirty, and they have just as many security staff.”

Ah yes, the rental security staff. Shepard would expect a good many of them to be dead already. If the Heretics stormed the tower in force, the private sector security would not have been prepared for their ruthless pragmatism and lack of sentiment. Then there was Harbinger itself.

“Add to that, we have frequent off-world guests. Mostly Asari and Salarian researchers. Their temporary lodgings are in that tower as well. However, I could not tell you how many of them there were.” Fai Dan went on.

Shepard would assume an upward of as many as ExoGeni staff. This was officially a logistical nightmare for her team. How were they supposed to extract that many civilians? She could reasonably expect them to have some injured as well. Shepard hated thinking it, but reality was that when it came to such emergencies, the only decisions civilians could make reliably, were stupid ones. She was going to let Fai Dan stay blissfully unaware of the fact that she had just put numbers to the odds of people’s lives. That was the sort of ruthless calculus that civilians never approved of.

“What about here? What’s the situation on this side of the colony?”

“Everything here is… fine.” Fai Dan’s face drained of all emotions, it was as if a mental stone wall came up in a flash.

Shepard caught that weird pause, it was as if ‘fine’ was actually the last word he wanted to use.

“Commander, we’ve not seen a single geth in this tower. Yet. Though I expect had you arrived any later, that might have changed.”

That she might argue, but chose not to. There was a tiny distinction there that Fai Dan would probably not appreciate. Harbinger already had a tower full of hostages. Why would it work harder than it needed to? It was not like these civilians could go anywhere. She would bet a month’s salary that the colony’s only functional shuttles were berthed in the other tower. If she thought about it like that, then it could be said that Harbinger took the entirely colony hostage just by taking the administrative tower.

“Alright, I think it would be best if you get your people out of the way as soon as possible.”

“No!” Fai Dan jumped, rising from his seat for all of a split of a second, then slumping back down. “No, Commander. We have to… we will… stay put. We cannot leave the greenhouse unattended. Not even for a day.”

Shepard tried her best not to show her flash of annoyance. There was that civilian poor decision making process kicking in. They would willingly choose to stay in danger over the greenhouse. Admittedly that could be their entire source of food, but surely that was not worth risking all their lives, right?

“Please understand… the livelihood of this colony depends on it. It is difficult to make anything grow with this star’s sunlight. Even the lamps are unreliable. Just last week we had a power outage that took a whole day to diagnose. Moreover, our hydroponics depend on a constant water supply. If we lose power, we lose water, and if we lose water too often, and for too long… the whole growth cycle could be lost. ExoGeni… will have to ship in food.”

Shepard suddenly saw the root of the problem. Zhu’s Hope was in a highly precarious position. There was no wrangling with the corporates. ExoGeni would hate additional expenses on top of the regular expense they incurred. This place could not be making them a profit, it would be surprise if it was even self-sufficient. “Alright. But I want to know… is there somewhere in this tower where you
can take non-essential personnel? Somewhere deep, ideally behind some heavy, locking door?”

“That… that we can do.” Fai Dan nodded. “We just need some technicians to stay… monitor the machinery…”

Not ideal, there would still be people in harm’s way, but Shepard would take what she could get. “Alright, though I would have preferred if all of you went there, and waited for the all clear, just in case.” Ultimately she did not have the troops to strong-arm the colonists into obeying her.

“I understand your concern, Commander. However this is how it… must be.”

There was that peculiar pause again, as if he was choosing the word after the pause. It was a very curious, unnatural thing, but it was not like it would be tactful to ask about it. It might even be like asking a person with a speech impediment why they talked funny. She just did not think Fai Dan’s peculiar pattern was a speech impediment of whatever sort.

“I suggest, Commander. You do not linger here… longer than you have to.” Fai Dan went on.

“Alright,” Shepard knew when the conversation was essentially moot. She watched as the man got to his feet, and noted a faint wince flash across his face, it was a micro-expression at best, but she saw it, and it was just one more thing to file away as peculiar. He came around the desk and Shepard followed him out of the structure without saying a word.

Shepard was none too surprised to see Nihlus leaning on the wall by the doorway, arms folded over his chest. It was his way of saying that he was assuming his normal routine of shadowing her wherever she went. She could see Kaidan and Ashley off in the distance, talking to a salarian by the greenhouse. Jenkins was openly gawping past the transparent panels at the cornucopia of growth within. Now that Shepard spared it a look, she noted that the greenhouse was most parts of a jungle. The colonists had rigged every available square centimeter in there with growth. Larger vegetables in the huge hydroponic vats, with smaller planets suspended from the ceiling in little tubs. There was a maze of hoses and lines everywhere. If the whole system ran off just one or two pumps, then Shepard could safely say that the colonists had their entire food supply in one basket, and the failure of those pumps would indeed be a disaster.

“As I said, Commander. Feel free to look around, but you do… not… want to linger here.”

Shepard turned her head just in time to watch Fai Dan walk off. Right then the tone of his voice was outright ominous, and it caught her attention.

“What was that all about?” Nihlus asked.

“I’ll tell you when I understand it myself.” Shepard replied. Had the man been warning them about something? Why so cryptically? And about whom? ExoGeni could not possibly exercise that much control over the colonists, right? Was he simply eager to have the Heretics gone? Shepard would not blame him for that one. But then, if the warning had been about the Heretics, his general attitude did not match.

Kaidan and Ashley were suddenly back at her side, with Jenkins following a few steps behind them. Shepard glanced around again, but she could not spot Tali, Legion, or Garrus. Where had they gone off to?

“Skipper, there is something seriously wrong here, and I do not mean the Heretics.” Ashley said, her voice dipping to a low whisper. “Have you noticed how calm everyone is?”

Kaidan was looking back over his shoulder at the salarian that the two had been talking to only
moments before. It was then that Shepard noted his eyes never left them, and he did not blink either. The stare was singularly unnerving, unnatural even. Salarians did not stare like that normally, their minds worked at triple clock speed compared to everyone else and they had eidetic memory on top. For that matter, what was a salarian doing here of all places?

“Whatever it is, gunny, now is not the time to try and fix it.” Kaidan said quietly.

“I get it, but I am just saying something isn’t right here.” Ashley replied.

“I know what you mean, Ash.” Shepard said, and that was the truth. Her gut was telling her that something was not right. “But for now… Alenko is right too. We can poke around once we deal with the more pressing issue. Have any of you seen Tali, Legion, or Garrus?”

“Tali is in the shuttle. She said her suit’s environmental sensory showed an excess quantity of particles in the air. The dust is making her scrubber filters fill up at triple rate.” Ashley replied.

“Legion went after her, I don’t think he likes it here,” Jenkins added.

The colonists had pulled guns on Legion, the geth had every right not to like being surrounded by potentially hostile individuals. This would not be the first time that they had just opted to avoid a confrontation by distancing themselves. Shepard would not blame them for it either.

“So what is our next course of action?” Nihlus asked.

“We regroup, I got some information from Fai Dan regarding the situation in the other tower. It is time to do our planning. We can do that in the shuttle. If Tali is worried about her scrubbers, then I do not want to run them down faster than we have to.” With that said, she turned toward the shuttle, but her gaze invariably drifted up, past the craft, and toward the ExoGeni tower.

The Heretic ship really did look like some sort of unsightly swelling attached to the building’s side. It had no apparent outboard lights, but its silvery finish caught faint refractions from surrounding light sources. Still, it looked dark and ominous. Not for the first time she wondered what their odds of success were on this one.

Then she had to toss that thought aside, whatever those odds were, they did not matter, they had to do, or die trying. There was nothing else to it. She took a deep, calming breath, and let it out. One step at a time, this was just another complicated, nigh impossible situation they trained people like her to handle. Still, Shepard could not help but feel exhaustion begin to creep up. These situations were too numerous, and too often, and she was not even a Spectre yet. She walked toward the shuttle as if nothing was bothering her, when in fact, Shepard felt the weight of everything on her shoulders.

Chapter End Notes

Author Notes: I had a rough two months, just real life kept me completely busy and unmotivated. For a while it was also bitterly cold in Toronto, the sort of cold that just makes me want to sleep. Feros as an arc has been punted around all season, it’s been in “production hell” that long. It just did not seem to want to “form”. Even now I had to scrap and rewrite half this episode once.

General Notes:
Episode Name – Persepolis is the name of one of the most important cities of the
ancient Persian Empire. For a very long time it was a “lost” city as well. Yet its ruins are quite majestic even to the present day. That and the history student in me sees something of the ancient Persian empire within the Protheans. I needed a name, and this one just popped up.

**Chapter Notes:**

**Heliopause** – The heliopause is the boundary of a star’s heliosphere, the region covered by a star’s magnetic field, where we can feel its solar wind. Beyond the heliopause, the star’s magnetic field stops shielding the solar system, and the cosmic background radiation can be detected. Our solar system’s heliopause is at 123 AU away from the Sun. For our interests, I’m using a star’s heliopause as a convenient definition of the “edge” of its solar system.
Persepolis [Part II]

Chapter Notes

**Disclaimer:** I do not own Mass Effect, I do not claim to own Mass Effect, I am only doing this for fun.

**Author Notes:** I have no excuse, I was just not in the mood for writing for three weeks. This arc is still fighting me in the details, and that fueled a lot of frustration.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**Episode 44:** Persepolis [Part II]

It took ten minutes to have a conference aboard the Kodiak and decide how to go about their next objective, the infiltration of the other tower. Soon after Shepard was in the cockpit with Nihlus as he raised the Kodiak into the air, using its mass effect fields and a bare minimum of thrust, to maintain stealth, that way the Heretics would not have a clear heat signature to lock onto. While the Heretics could not fire disruptor torpedoes with all their launchers facing up into the sky, no one wanted to give them an opportunity to get a target lock with their broadside point-defense system. It was best not to push their luck.

As soon as they cleared over the arcology rooftop retaining wall and past the mass effect field dome, the situation on the roadway between the two towers became patently clear. There were a good ten enemy units milling around the tower’s entry. What more, now the Kodiak was exposed to the blustering winds again. Nihlus’ fingers never stilled as he worked the thrust differential to keep the shuttle from being swept along. “They have really… dug in,” Shepard mused. There was no other way to describe the situation.

“This Kodiak is armed, Shepard. We show them what that means,” Nihlus replied.

“Let’s look before we leap for a moment. First, the MAC rails will heat up. That might be enough for the ship to lock on to us.” Shepard replied blandly.

Nihlus hummed thoughtfully.

Shepard turned to the sensor controls, but it quickly became apparent that it was pointless. The building was too dense for the Kodiak’s IR imaging to tell them much about what was going on inside, and nothing beyond what EDI had not told them already.

“It really is either that door, or the rooftop pad.” Nihlus stated after a long moment.

The rooftop pad was also the most obvious entryway. Shepard would not be surprised if that was the entryway the Heretics took. Making entry from there meant a high likelihood of ending up pinched between the heretics already in the tower, and reinforcements from the ship. For that reason the rooftop entryway was out of the question.

Their other option, the opening in question, looked to be the maw of a roadway tunnel built through the arcology. Given that the road was only about one fifth the width of the tower itself, Shepard would not be surprised if there was a garage inside that part of the building.
“You really are overthinking it. The tunnel is likely exit the workers inside would have wanted to use. If any are still loose… they will have found hiding spots as close to it as possible.” Nihlus went on.

Shepard sighed, Nihlus was right of course. “Then we need to secure this door so we can get them out.” Shepard did not want to think about it, but she did. They had to get the civilians out simply because the ship might just damage the tower, make it unstable. Using explosives on the claws could go as well as cutting a tree branch while sitting on it. It would have been better if the Heretics decided to fly off, right into the Normandy’s crosshairs. Yes the Heretics had data on Alliance torpedoes movement patterns, but as the Impera demonstrated, they had nothing against the Thanix, and Harbinger did not know she had it. “Alright, guess we have no other options.” She had no choice but to concede here, no matter how much she did not like it.

“So who gets the gun controls?” Nihlus asked, mirth in his tone.

Shepard barely restrained her urge to roll her eyes. Of course he would ask that. “Who is piloting this thing in cross-wind conditions?” She asked.

Nihlus turned to look at her, though she could not see the look in his eyes due to his face-shield. Shepard would bet he was giving her stink-eye right then. She grinned back, daring him to deny the obvious. When the denial did not come for ten seconds, she turned back to the console in front of her. “That said, you’re about to see me shoot like a greenhorn. I’ve never been much of a ship’s gunner,” she prefaced as her fingers danced over the controls. “Shields are up. Alright, now move us a bit closer. I want the widest angle you can give me. I am going to program the MACs to target heat signatures. The heretics are producing just enough to be visible against this cold air.”

“Alright.” Nihlus replied as he began to manipulate the controls.

The Kodiak dipped lower and slid sideways until it floated right over the roadway. The heretics predictably looked up and began to reach for their firearms. She tapped at the comm controls to open a link to the back, “Alright people. We’re about to do some, shall we say… insertion maneuvers. Right past the heretics on the roadway. They’re about to find out that this shuttle does pack a nasty sting. Buckle up, things might get bumpy.” She knew that she sounded like a morbid version of an airline stewardess right then.

She finished keying in the instructions for the MACs. Nihlus must have been watching her hands as he tapped his set of controls a few more times and the shuttle dipped even lower. Simultaneously the heretics raised their rifles and opened fire, and the Kodiak’s shields flared to life. Shepard glanced at the status readout, to confirm that the kinetic envelope was holding, and would hold for a while. Not that she worried particularly. The Kodiak’s shields were designed to stop a larger caliber than infantry weapons. She tapped the last key and the shuttle’s MACs whirred as the computer executed instructions and adjusted their trajectories. A moment later it opened fire. Each shot was a low-pitched whine followed by a pop, cycling at three rounds per second from each gun.

The Kodiak’s MACs were quite literally a one tenth reduction and reengineering of a typical cruiser’s broadside auto-canons. The cruiser’s guns were meant to batter frigate-sized enemies, while the Kodiak’s for fighter-sized foes. Comparatively slow and small as they are, at a hundred grams each, travelling at three kilometers per second, these slugs were still gross overkill against soft targets. Nihlus’ job was to maintain the shuttle’s heading as to keep the nose pointed in the right general direction, so that the computer had less to adjust for.

Shepard watched as one by one the heretics fell, their shields failing under with one shot, and their frames riddled by fist-sized holes. The rounds did not mushroom, they went right through, hitting the roadway, kicking up pulverized dust. Shepard had to manually toggle the guns on to the next target.
after they had punched through a heretic, so as to avoid battering a hole into the roadway. It was an inelegant massacre, with the heretics getting a taste of their own medicine. Normally Shepard would have enjoyed the irony.

However a single thought rained out her parade, this was just the opening round of what would surely be a long and trying mission. Then she thought of Legion, that these was their people, estranged or not, and then she had to shake off a mounting feeling of guilt. It was a peculiar feeling, brought on by her seeing a slight technicality. She never felt guilty about putting down the Facinus rebels on Taetrus, no matter what affections she had for Nihlus. Legion though was different. Those on Taetrus made their bed and had to lay in it. The Heretics may or may not have been misled, brainwashed, or just taken advantage of. The Geth were almost child-like in how they viewed the world around them.

When the last heretic platform went down Shepard brought the guns offline and turned to the sensory readings instead. This would be the perfect moment for the Heretic ship to detect the little bit of heat from the shuttle’s MACs, lock on, and commence firing with its point-defenses. But as ten seconds ticked away, she saw no energy emissions, no heat build-up, nothing that would indicate the guns were coming online.

Once she was satisfied that the Heretics were in no hurry to take the ready opening, she glanced at Nihlus and nodded. He started manipulating the controls, slowly bringing them lower over the roadway, and then along toward the opening in the side of the arcology.

Shepard tapped the key to open the link to the aft compartment again, “We’ve handled the Heretics on the roadway, and Nihlus is flying us inside the arcology. This is it, final weapon and armor checks. I want everyone ready when we touch down.”

It was a bit of a feat to slip the swaying shuttle into the opening. Though the door was certainly wide enough, the vertical dimension proved to be a bit of a problem. The shuttle ought not to have been flying that low over any surface, and doubly so when it was being tussled about by tornado-force blasts of wind. Landing on the roadway had never been an option. Shepard would not allow anyone to disembark on foot in that wind.

Her running theory was that the Protheans must have used mass effect containment fields to allow wheeled vehicles to use these elevated roadways. Fields that were either no longer operational, or intentionally kept off. She would not be surprised at the latter, as they required a lot of power to maintain. All in all, it created a very real hazard on the road. The fleeing colonists would have had to use a vehicle just to avoid being blown off. Walking across was highly dangerous even before the added joy of requiring pressure-reducing breathing masks.

She was jolted out of her thoughts when the shuttle’s bottom finally made contact with something solid. The space inside was dimly lit, and the gloom was compounded by walls that had long ago been bleached a drab concrete-grey, with running rust stains here and there. There was dust and loose chunks of masonry everywhere.

The road cut right through the tower. On either side of the roadway there was a small space where vehicles could pull over to drop off or pick up passengers. What surprised her was how much these little alcoves reminded her of bus stops, there were empty planter boxes and stone benches. At the very back were two alcoves that might have at one time contained automated ticket machines, or public access terminals. Connected to both stops were what looked like elevators, which would take people up or down into the tower proper. The road itself wound away deeper into the tower as well. On her left it led past a sealed metal grate door. On her right, it branched onto a ramp that descended
a level into pitch darkness.

It was almost bizarre to think wheeled vehicles were this common for a species that was supposedly far more advanced than anyone living today. In this day and age wheeled vehicles were only used for specific reasons, like the factory trucks she had seen on Taetrus. No one would build arcologies connected with elevated roadways like this.

Since she was already looking in that direction, Shepard caught a shadow flit through the gloom. There was someone hiding at the top of the ramp leading to the lower parking garage. And the absence of a light for a face told her that it was not a heretic. “The survivors have a scout. They know we’re here,” Shepard said.

“Lucky for us,” Nihlus replied.

Shepard nodded, unbuckled, got to her feet, and moved to the aft compartment. She was utterly unsurprised to see the others already up on their feet. “I saw a glimpse of one of staff trapped in the tower,” she announced. “We know our first step. They know the tower best, and we want as much information as we can get.” With that said, Shepard turned and keyed the sequence for the door to open. To avoid sickness, the shuttle was still at Feros pressure, the door just opened.

“Commander, what are we to do with our… special supplies?” Garrus asked.

Shepard glanced back at him and then at the crate at his feet. “Leave it in the Kodiak, for now. No use toting it about until we know where to go.” It was not ideal, but she did not want the crate slowing them down more than it had to. Also, the last thing she needed was for the crate to become damaged.

“Got it.” Garrus replied.

Shepard stepped off the shuttle first, eyes back across the space where she had seen that flicker of movement. Whoever it had been, they were gone now, or had pulled back into the shadows. Shepard would have very much liked if they had stuck to the shadows entirely. The Heretics now knew someone had arrived. The platforms on the bridge would have had enough time to upload runtimes, meaning the information on what had destroyed their bodies would have been relayed to the whole collective up in the ship. That said, if this was a trap for her specifically, Harbinger would have no way of knowing whom exactly had been on that shuttle. Maybe it would want confirmation? Splitting hairs, but it might slow the monster down. She would not pretend to understand the finer workings of Harbinger’s madness. She began to make her way across the roadway, toward the ramp.

“Wait for me, Shepard.” Nihlus called over the comm.

“I’m not going far,” Shepard replied casually.

“And we’re right behind her,” Ashley added.

Shepard could hear the jingling of multiple metal rings on armor and slings, affirming that the marines had indeed followed her. Some part of her still could not help but marvel at just how well something fifty thousand years old managed to survive. Nothing this old existed on Earth, and even the oldest things, the ancient Mesopotamian cities, were nowhere near this well preserved. Then again, none of them were built of concrete, let alone its modern polymer variations.

She paused at the top of the ramp, part to wait for Nihlus, part to inspect the surroundings. She spotted an emergency nutrient bar wrapper stuffed into a crack in the wall. Nearby was a large chunk of masonry that had been moved into position for use as a seat, leaving chalky drag-marks on the
floor. A lookout spent a lot of time sitting at this post.

There were no lights or sound coming up the ramp, nothing to indicate any sort of activity. The ramp itself was very long, no more than twenty degrees of elevation. Shepard felt her respect ratcheting a step up, the act was damn good for civilians. Someone among them had rudimentary tactical sense and enough presence to enforce the needed measures. The act was not flawless though, because if she spotted him, a heretic would have spotted him effortlessly.

Shepard heard approaching footsteps behind her, and a moment later a finger tapped her shoulder. She did not need to look to know who it was, as there was only one individual who would do that. She began to make her way down the ramp. At the bottom the darkness was absolute, but as she turned ninety degrees and stepped around the ramp’s side-wall, she saw a sliver of dim light seeping around a doorway in the distance.

Shepard made no more than three steps toward it when there was a whisper in the dark. Then quite suddenly a pair of free-standing work floodlights lit up, blasting their halogen beams practically into her face. Shepard recoiled in surprise as her night-vision went to hell in an instant.

“Ow… are they trying to blind us?” Jenkins all but whined.

By the explosion of shuffling behind her, Shepard knew she was not the only one who just took that completely unprepared. Some part of her was a little impressed, this tactic would have worked quite well on anyone not Heretic. She would now be seeing spots for half an hour. The Heretics would have simply narrowed the iris of their sensor hubs to compensate.

The worst of the shock passed in a second or so, and Shepard dared to open her eyes a millimeter. Her suit’s VI had reacted automatically, and was already in the process of tinting her face-shield against the glare. She could see two figures moving in the glare.

“A geth!” someone gasped.

Shepard heard the distinct whine of guns powering up. “Hold you fire!” she barked, putting all her authority in to it. “This geth is friendly!” She called even as she sidestepped, putting herself in between Legion and where she assumed the shooters were, though she could not be sure. The movement alone ought to be a sign enough for them.

“What is the meaning of this?” Someone asked.

Shepard allowed herself to exhale calmly, “I am Commander Shepard, an Alliance officer. This is my team. Yes they are not all Alliance. And yes, that is a Geth. Lower your weapons, before you make a major mistake.” She announced.

A figure wearing a hardsuit, and wielding an automatic rifle had stepped forward, into the halo of the work-lights. His body blocked one entirely, which cut the glare in half. “You best keep that thing back. We’ve had enough of robotic monstrosities.”

Shepard chose not to rise up to the occasion by snapping at the use of the term ‘monstrosity’ here. It would not help anyone, and she needed these people to cooperate with her as much as possible. She glanced back and caught Legion’s gaze, though she doubted the term was entirely appropriate. The geth stared back at her for a long moment before willingly backing up.

“Commander, follow me. I will take you to the administrator.” The man did not sound at all pleased right then.

Shepard glanced at Nihlus and nodded. The Spectre fell in step with her as they moved past the
floodlights toward light at the back of the room. As predicted, in the absence of much external light to overpower it, she could see the halogen burn-in of her retinas as bright flashes of light in weird shapes. Her pupils had narrowed down so much that she could only see the swaying status lights on the gruff man’s armor. There was no other choice but to follow him in single-file, lest she wanted to trip on something. “Who do I have the pleasure of talking to?” she asked.

“Brendan O’Rafferty, head of security.” The man replied curtly. “By what I understand, we were supposed to be getting Alliance marines, not… well… you.” he stopped there.

Shepard had to tell herself that he was probably too stressed to bother with manners at the moment, no fault of his.

“What is the situation here?” Nihlus asked.

“Pardon my sarcasm, what do you think it is? A picnic?” O’Rafferty replied bluntly. “Two thirds of my team is dead, and the remainder are half shell-shocked, because those tin cans are that vicious. Half the administrative staff are dead too, and I have injured that can’t move. Were it not for the emergency rations, a functional sink, and our asari guest having damn commandos for bodyguards, we’d be well and truly fucked.”

Nihlus hummed, but did not comment.

“Here we are,” O’Rafferty pushed aside a door, revealing what must have been some sort of utility space. It was no more than thirty meters square, and lit with anemic lights powered by a small battery block. What more, it was packed like a sardine can with people and supply crates.

Shepard realized that the space was much too small for her whole team. She glanced back as she tapped at her helmet control to turn on the external-to-comm relay, that way they could hear the conversation to follow. “Most of you, stay here. Nihlus, with me.”

“She sure,” Nihlus replied.

Shepard stepped inside and all eyes instantly turned to her. She counted at least ten people, with the majority seated on the crates. However two individuals near the back wall were lying on palettes thrown together from whatever soft material on hand. There was blood on their ripped and cut open clothing, with rudimentary bandages sticking out from underneath. The majority were clearly civilians dressed in comfortable work suits and coveralls. The two men in hard suits must have been from the security team. Both looked at her with a dead-eyed stare, as if they could not be sure if they were not hallucinating. O’Rafferty had been right about the shell-shock.

Then her gaze landed on the three asari on the right side of the room. The cornflower blue asari seated in the middle wore a white jumpsuit smeared with dirt. Her curiosity was right there in her soft blue eyes. The other two contrasted with her like day and night, clad in dark form-fitting body suits, combat boots, matching jackets, and their hands in the vicinity of their pistols. One had a wicked-looking straight dagger, or perhaps short-sword at her lower back. There was no mistaking them for anything other than asari commandos.

“So the Alliance finally show up,” someone said.

Shepard turned and inspected the speaker. It was a middle-aged Asian man wearing most parts of a grey suit, seated on top of one of the crates in the middle of the room. His dark hair was full of dust, and despite his dismissive tone, his eyes searched her face-shield with suspicion.

“Stop it, Jeong. Travel times are a thing. You stalled sending a message anyways.” A woman sitting
with one of the injured men at the back called back. She was about the same age as the man in
question, wearing a jumpsuit smudged with dirt. Her cuffs were noticeably smeared with dried
blood.

“We came as soon as we heard,” Shepard said plainly, perfectly aware that she was kind of rubbing
it in. “And we’re not Alliance per se,” Shepard replied. “I’m Commander Shepard, but I’m also a
Spectre in training.”

“Nihlus Kryik, Council Spectre. So yes, not Alliance… but better.”

Shepard noted the wave of reactions that introduction received. The young asari visibly drooped with
relief, and the commandos let their hands fall away from their pistols. However, most curiously,
Jeong’s hands momentarily balled the fabric of his suit pants, his lips drew into a thin line, and his
shoulders rose ever so slightly. The woman spared Jeong her own brand of a tell, the sort of side-
long look that people give others when they are wary of what was to come.

“Heh… figured something was up. You’ve got quite a rag-tag team, Commander.” O’Rafferty said,
“But I’m not looking a gift horse in the mouth. Well… now I’m not needed… I am going back on
watch. Would be bloody perfect for those geth to attack now.” With that said the security ducked out
of the small room.

Shepard turned and watched him retreat into the gloom.

“Allright, turn those off!” O’Rafferty shouted into the gloom.

Just like that the space beyond the door was plunged into absolute darkness.

Shepard turned back to the small room. This was what she had wanted, an opportunity to pick
people’s brains, and pick them she would. “We have a plan for how we are going to handle this
situation, but I need information.”

“What kind of information?” Jeong jumped in, suspicion right there in his lowering tone.

Shepard could not believe he thought he could intimidate her. She could not be the only one who
realized that metaphorically speaking he was screaming he was hiding something off the rooftop with
a bullhorn. Still, he was a corporate type. Given the precarious nature of the colony and the danger
their investment was in, it could very well be nothing more than some stupid fear about the bottom
line. This would scare some investors into pulling out. If enough of them did so, ExoGeni’s whole
house of cards could come tumbling down.

“Relax, Jeong. They’re here to help.” The woman tried to cajole him, only to get a glare in return.

“You trust too easily, Juliana,” he replied.

There was clearly tension between these two as well, the ‘gritting their teeth to work together’ sort.

“The information I need is… about the tower, about who else might still be in it. Whether there are
other rooms like this. Perhaps someone here knows exactly where the ship anchored.” Shepard listed
off.

“We do not have a map of the building for you,” Juliana offered. “All I can offer is that the claws
were somewhere above our work spaces. The geth came from above. Everything is marked with
signs, so if you follow those, you should not get lost. As for who else might still be up there…
there’s probably one other group. I hope there is one other group. My daughter, ‘Lizbeth is missing.
She still has to be up there.”
“She probably isn’t, Juliana. You’ve seen what those things can do.” Jeong stated coldly, “The Spectres shouldn’t waste time combing the floors, much too dangerous.”

Shepard noted the way he practically hissed their title. This man did not have a subtle bone in his body.

Juliana whipped around, turning a vicious glare on him. “That is my daughter you are talking about! She’s still alive, I know it!” the woman snapped.

Shepard was beginning to see the source of the animosity between them. There was only one thing to do here, “We’ll look for her, we have to secure the floors anyways… to make sure we get every single geth.” Using the term ‘geth’ felt dirty, considering Shepard had become way too used to calling them Heretics, like they were an entirely different species. However, it was unavoidable here, these people would not care for the distinction.

“Thank you, Commander.” Juliana brightened. “My daughter was at her work station when the attack began, and if she could not make it down here, she might have taken shelter in one of offices, or maybe the… server vault. The walls are thickest there, and it has a sizable door.”

A server vault? Now that sounded interesting. Judging from the low-pitched hum Shepard heard coming from Nihlus, he thought so too. Still, if the girl was there, she unknowingly went right for the worst hiding place. Any place that could be called a server vault might be what the heretics were after to begin with. Shepard hoped they were after that, because the alternative would be that they had come here to call her out. For obvious reasons she would have preferred it if they were there for the computers, why mess with a good pattern?

“Well then, guess we know what we’re here for.” Shepard said as she looked up at Nihlus. “In the meantime, if the geth are not so eager as to come down here, I think it would be best if you stay here, maintain low presence.”

“Sure,” Jeong grumbled.

Shepard chose to ignore just how ungrateful he sounded. She suspected the major part of his increasingly rotten attitude was that he wanted them there about as much as anyone wanted a Spectre anywhere. ExoGeni had signed a contract with Council stipulations built in. Now Nihlus had the ability to act as the Council’s inspection agent. What sort of corporate would like that?

“The others are going to love this,” Nihlus murmured.

“At least there is… quite a bit less pressure,” Shepard stated as she turned back around to exit the space.

“Point.” Nihlus conceded as he fell in step.

Stepping out of the lit utility space into pure darkness again meant that Shepard was once again blind. She navigated toward the team by walking toward Legion’s light, which the geth had narrowed down to a pinprick.

“That guy got some attitude,” Ashley broke the silence.

“Yes, and he’s not getting an Oscar for it. If he thought he could make us not poke around like that…” Shepard agreed. “I think it is safe to assume that ExoGeni is up to something they do not want getting out. He went tense like a bowstring the moment he knew he was dealing with Spectres.” She added as she began to make her way back toward the ramp.
“The lack of a map will complicate things,” Kaidan mused.

“Yes, and we can’t split up to attach the charges. But I can’t help but be curious about this… server vault. It’s a new factor in play.” Shepard replied. “Harbinger will definitely want access to it.” She had just covered about a quarter of the ramp when she heard three sets of footsteps that did not belong to anyone on her team. She stopped and turned, only to see the three asari at the bottom.

“Commander Shepard. Please wait a moment!” the youngest called.

“Is something wrong?” Shepard asked. At that point she would not be surprised if she was asked to retrieve someone’s research materials as well. Because that would just be the final nail in this operation’s coffin, making it much too complicated for her liking.

“I… am Liara T’soni, archeologist. These are my aides and… bodyguards. Shiala and Myrix.” At that, Liara indicated her assistants in turn, “I’ve been working here for about a month, and… I can help you.”

Shepard blinked, surprised, but the feeling lasted only a split of a second. There was no way she would let her do that. “I’m sorry, and please do not take this wrong, but this will be tricky enough. I do not want a civilian getting hurt on my watch.” She would have perhaps accepted the aid of the huntresses, but not their young charge.

“I know where the ship attached into,” Liara argued.

“And we are not civilians, Commander,” Shiala added coolly.

She was taller than the young asari, of a more lavender shade, but with similar blue eyes frozen in a cold, hard look that was definitely not that of a civilian. Myrix was more of an azure color with blue-green eyes that never left the ramp, maintaining a vigil.

Shepard dithered, did they want to take the risk? Yes, someone with that knowledge would be very useful, and having two commandos would not hurt either, but did they want to risk the life of a civilian?

“Commander, I can handle myself…. I can form a singularity strong enough to lift three geth off the floor, and I have a very powerful barrier.” Liara continued, her voice melodious and soft.

Shepard turned back to the asari and stared her right in the eyes, wishing her blank face would convey that power was not the issue here. As far as she was concerned, even if Liara could bend a steel girder into a pretzel and twist the ends together it would not make her something more than a civilian.

“I am sure your biotic training is adequate. However, you are not a huntress, so your fighting experience is undoubtedly limited. Shepard is concerned for your safety.” Nihlus said in his usual flippant tone.

Shepard was perfectly happy to let Nihlus be the tactless one here. He had the position privilege for it, while she had to be more diplomatic and restrained. Yet as the seconds ticked away, she noticed that Liara stared up into Nihlus’ face-shield without so much as twitching. The look in her eyes was all determination, strong enough that she was willing to stare a Spectre down.

“I appreciate your concerns, Spectre, Commander. Normally I would not refute your assertions. I am indeed not particularly experienced in combat. My expertise is academic. I am an expert on Prothean culture, specifically the last imperial period and the collapse. None of that makes me qualified to fight geth. However…” Liara paused here for a long moment. Then she turned to Shepard, “I am sure you
have noticed that something is not quite right here.” Here her voice dipped into a whisper, to prevent
the guards from hearing anything. “Have none of you wondered why the administrative staff never
attempted to regroup with the civilians on the other tower? You should know that we were outright
discouraged to go there.”

Shepard blinked, certainly it was not something that she had ignored, but she had written it off due to
circumstances. The little bit about the outside researchers not being allowed at the other tower was
interesting too. Whom was ExoGeni trying to fool when they made rules like that?

“The way they talk about the others… well, the way the administrator talked to you… something just
isn’t right here. I am willing to protect their lives, but I am not willing to let them get away with
whatever it is.” Liara finished.

Shepard glanced up at Nihlus again, though there was no intrinsic purpose to it. Ultimately the call
was hers to make. Ultimately she had to consider her squad, whether they could take this on with
everything else. She thought Liara’s excuse was positively flimsy, and she would not need her help
to get to the bottom of things. Was there more to the whole thing? Was Liara’s interest in the matter
something else she was not telling her? The asari was also being pushy, against her own interests at
that. Shepard would have very much loved to flat out tell her no, but she had a feeling that Liara
would not take it, and then she might do something even more foolish. Shepard would be worried
about that even more than if the asari was following them around.

“Alright,” Shepard could only concede, and hope she did not live to regret it. “We can look into
things, and if you so insist, you can tag along. But let’s address a single important thing first. I will
not compromise how I run an operation on my end. I am in charge, and that’s that. I expect you to
fall in line and take orders without questioning them, and without hesitation. The ones you refer to as
geth… will not grace you with time to think. It’s do or die. Understood?” It was best to get that out in
the clear right then and there.

“Yes, Commander.” Liara replied, a quiver in her tone.

Shepard knew she had intimidated her, but it had to happen. She could not hope to pull the same on
the commandos, but they would follow their charge’s orders, so she would get at them through her.
With luck they would not end up putting too many wrenches into the workings of her plans. “Good.”
With that said, she turned and continued up the ramp.

Nihlus fell in step on her right, but when Liara followed on her left, that caught her by some surprise.
She would have thought the asari would stick to the protective circle created by her bodyguards.

“Commander, if I may ask…” Liara breached quietly. “You have… a geth on your team?”

“Affirmative, Doctor-T’soni, we are Legion, a terminal of the Geth.” Legion replied before Shepard
could even open her mouth.

“There you have it,” Shepard slipped in.

“I am sorry, I did not meant to… offend.”

“An apology is unnecessary. We are asked that question with a ninety-five percent certainty.”

“Legion is not exaggerating there. Oh, and Legion, at that rate, you need to start charging the askers
a credit per runtime. You’d be a millionaire in no time at all,” Shepard said.

The geth emitted a chattering sound. “Incorrect, Shepard-Commander. At the stated rate the question
would have to be asked eight-hundred-forty-six times for us to amass one million credits. Even with
the certainty of the question being asked, we estimate it would take considerably more than… no
time at all.”

“It’s a hyperbole. I doubt you could get even one person to pay up.” Shepard replied.

“Acknowledged.” Legion replied bluntly. “We concur. The probability of receiving due payment is
estimated at under one percent.”

Shepard smiled, was Legion trying to be witty? It was adorable, in a mathematical way. Not really
funny, but they were trying, she would give them that. By then she had reached the top of the ramp,
but she did not stop, and moved toward their Kodiak. She wanted to be well out of ear-shot of
anyone below, and where she could see someone coming up.

“Vakarian, we need to get the crate.” Nihlus said.

Shepard stopped and turned, “Hold on, you two. I am thinking a slight alteration to the plan is in
order. We now know that this facility has what has be referred to as a server vault. I think we know
what Harbinger wants here.”

“Harbinger?” Liara asked.

“The Commander’s name for the leader of these geth.” Garrus explained.

“Someone leads these geth?”

Shepard could hear the mounting confusion in Liara’s tone. “I guess I best catch you up with what
we know, before we start talking plans.”

“Yes, we would appreciate that.” Myrix spoke for the first time, her voice a little bit deeper than
Shiala’s, and raspy, almost as if her vocal cords could not vibrate properly.

“Well…” Shepard opened, and launched into the story, starting with Eden Prime, and up to Solcrum.
By the time she had finished, she managed to do what she hitherto thought impossible, she made an
asari turn pale. “So that’s the gist. These geth are not… Geth, not the majority faction. They are what
the Geth call Heretics, a term I’ve adopted due to lack of anything better. I’m pretty sure if you were
to ask them, they would call themselves Geth as well. The crucial difference is that they do
Harbinger’s bidding, like the servants of a king. Legion is from the majority who are still cloistered in
the Perseus Veil. They are… dare I say, more democratic.” Shepard finished.

“I see.” Liara echoed.

“I know it is a lot to swallow, I don’t expect anyone to believe me off-hand.” Shepard figured a little
bit of diplomacy would not hurt here.

“I am interested in this… Prothean Artificial Intelligence… I’ve never seen any evidence of the
Protheans employing AI. VI, yes, sophisticated ones at that, but never AI.” Liara continued.

“That’s what Harbinger claims it is, and due to an absence of evidence to the contrary I cannot refute
the claim,” Shepard replied. There was plenty of evidence for it, except all of it came from the Geth.
Would people believe them? It seemed to her that everyone was dead-set on seeing the Geth as
untrustworthy, or worse, inherently incapable of true thinking. As if thoughts originating from a
computer were inherently inferior to those from brain cells, the bias in favor of proteins over
circuitry.

“Commander, please understand the significance of this. Looking at the physical archeological
evidence on its own, I would say that the Protheans did not use AI. Yet if this Harbinger is indeed a Prothean AI… this is a big discovery, Commander!”

“I wouldn’t dispute that,” Shepard really had nothing to dispute it with. Liara was the academic there, not her. “Still, before we start wrangling whose name goes on the published paper… we need to survive this.”

“Ah yes. My apologies.”

“What is the new plan, Shepard?” Nihlus asked.

Shepard was glad that he took the blatantly obvious opening there.

“The initial plan, of planting the shaped charges on the ship’s mooring claws is still a possibility. But for obvious reasons, right now that may not be the best, only, or smartest option. Now that we know there is something called a server vault here, we know what Harbinger probably wants. It left Daiwi when it realized it would not get anything. We may be able to… encourage it to go. The Normandy can handle it from there.” She paused there, ostensibly to take a breath, but really to wonder what the odds on that were. If Harbinger was here for her, then it would not go quietly and without a fight. “We also need to check the place for further survivors, and maybe poke around the closets, see what… metaphorical skeletons ExoGeni hid in them.” Shepard explained.

She got a lot of nodding heads, but no one seemed keen to add their own input, Shepard took it as her sign to continue on with her train of thought. She turned and looked Liara in the eye, “For this part, I could use your help, Doctor T’soni. We are strangers here, you know more about the layout of the facilities. Where is that server vault?”

“Ah yes.” Liara looked startled for all of a split moment, but then the determination was blazing in her eyes again. “ExoGeni’s administrative center is a few levels above us. I think it was formed around the vault. I am conjecturing a little, but there is one section up there that they kept strictly off-limits to everyone not ExoGeni. My guess is that it’s the vault.”

“A good guess as any. So we sweep up, floor by floor, and see what we can do to secure the cleared sections, and make our way to that vault.” Shepard would bet on Liara’s academic background making her a keen observer, albeit with a civilian lens. She could use that, in lieu of a lack of combat experience. In some ways, they were no different, except Shepard looked for different things and she had the combat skills and experience. She was going to let herself feel cautiously optimistic here, this whole thing might just work out.

“We best not use the elevators, if any are still functional.” Nihlus said.

“There are some, but… they are on circuits that have to be enabled manually. This building’s grid is barely functional and patched over in a haphazard manner. Keeping the elevator motors off it reduces the load.” Liara said.

Shepard hummed. They would have to walk up to the ExoGeni place to enable to elevator, which would literally defeat the elevator’s whole purpose. “So, that leaves stairs. What are our options?”

“Immediately above us is what used to be a food and shopping area. There are multiple ways accessing the rest of the tower through there.” Liara said.

“Good. Alright, Nihlus, Garrus… the crate.”

The turians nodded and made their way toward the shuttle.
Liara ended up leading them over the back stairway to what had been the employee area of the food court. Then they emerged onto the food court, now an enormous empty space filled with long-ago shuttered eateries. The lighting was pale here, making the bare grey, stained walls look like something straight out of a horror movie. The comparison seemed even more apt because there was very real threat of something trying and kill them.

Still, it was clear that ExoGeni had tried to put the space to use. One of the eateries had been opened, cleaned up, and supplied with simple cooking equipment. New tables had been set up right in front of it. There was no hint of food anywhere, so had the heretics caught the staff between meals? There were no bodies either, though Shepard suspected this was going to change. The air hung with an eerie, absolute silence, and as Shepard moved, her own footsteps echoed ever so slightly.

“ExoGeni uses this levels as guest accommodation and habitation. They turned some of the former stores into living quarters.” Liara explained. “The offices we want are right above, and the secure area I suspect to be the server vault is on level two of the offices. As for the claws… the lowest will be a few levels above that.” Liara explained.

Shepard hummed in assent, mostly to herself than to Liara. There were quite a few stairways in their future. “How do we get to the offices?”

“There is really only one way up there… the front door. It is on the other side of the shopping area. Either one of the passages will work, they form a bisected square.”

“Alright,” Shepard replied. What else could she say? “I guess we cross the mall.” She turned toward the closest end.

The passage out of the food court took a ninety degree turn to their right. Shepard could see that indeed some considerable work had been put into making the area feel hospitable. The mall took up the whole arcology level. The food court was along one wall, and there were two exits on either end that led onto passages lined on both sides by shuttered stores. One look down the passage and Shepard realized what Liara meant by bisected square. The central block of stores was much too large, so the builders had cut an alley right through, which allowed for more stores in the center.

The main ceiling lighting was not operational, but ExoGeni had mounted their own lighting along the walls, without bothering to hide the wiring. Running the whole length was what might have been a fountain, or perhaps a reflecting pool, ringed with stone through planters and regularly spaced out stone benches. Some had been cleaned, revealing the high gloss of igneous stone. The floor was rough stone cut into large slabs, making it look like a shopping street.

The stores had all been shuttered at one point, but now many had their metal panels cut or ripped out, allowing entry inside. Shepard doubted it was ExoGeni’s doing, as they were not the first people here. It was highly likely that the stores had been looted a long time ago. Now their empty shells formed sleeping rooms, with simple number signs tied on with wire to whatever would hold them.

“Swanky,” Shepard murmured.

“Oh, this is standard, Commander.” Liara stepped in. “This is standard for the late imperial period, the height of power and prosperity. While much of the decorative elements have been stripped and the decay is quite pronounced, you can still see hints of what once was. These walls should be white, decorated with polished metal detailing. The reflection pool had perpetually moving water, and the boxes contained scented flowering plants. We assume that this was a cultural aesthetic, a preference for indoor gardens.”
“Typical ostentatious rich guys,” Shepard mused, as they approached the other end of the passage and a ninety degree turn. The stores on this side were larger, and set amidst them was their clear destination. The place was fronted by what looked like the decorative façade of a building. The grates over its panel windows had been cut out, and the glass smashed long ago. The lobby beyond was pitch dark, which did not make sense. Was this what Liara called the front door? One would think they would install lighting in there as well. Or had they, and the Heretics took it out?

Then, quite suddenly she saw a single, faint white-blue pinprick of light blink online in the gloom. Shepard threw up her right hand, signaling the group to stop. “Legion, straight ahead… You see that pin-prick of light?” She asked.

Legion emitted a brief burst of the chatter, and then quite suddenly they stepped around her. Shepard felt the hair at the back of her neck rise as the geth’s powerful kinetic barrier flared online. “Affirmative, Shepard-Commander. We detect multiple Heretic units ahead.”

“Thought so.” Shepard could not help but dead-pan. They had gotten pretty far without seeing any, their luck was bound to run out eventually. “Ready your weapons!” she ordered as she reached down to power up Sin and Dex and ducked behind nearest large planter box. “Doctor T’soni, please take cover. Leave this to us.” She added hastily. The boxes were made of glossy, hard, igneous stone, and full of dirt, they would likely stop bullets, even from an overpowered rifle.

The squad broke up into twos and threes as they could. The marines stuck together, forming their unit as they ducked into the doorway of the nearest store on her right. Nihlus and Garrus moved to doorway of the store behind them, carrying the crate between them. Tali ducked behind either a bench or a planter somewhere behind her. Shepard heard the whine of the quarian girl’s shotgun powering up. Legion remained where they stood, unbothered by the whole situation. Liara ducked into a store on her left along with the commandos, though both drew their weapons to have them ready.

When Shepard peered around the box, she saw the single pin-prick of light become two, then four, and finally eight. The Heretic units were done hiding in the shadows. Fortunately she did not see any hints of yellow in their midst, none of Harbinger’s proxies, yet. “Keep your heads down! Standard precaution against sharpshooters. Garrus, Legion, Ashley, we’ll take them out from here. No one is stepping in there with them.” She ordered as she reached behind her back for Nike.

“Acknowledged,” Legion drew their sniper rifle as well.

Garrus and Ashley followed her orders without acknowledgement. Shepard peered over the planter box. There were still only eight lights, “Tali, bring up your drone’s wide angle infrared. I want to know if there are any other… conspicuously warm spots in that lobby.”

“On it, Commander.” The quarian girl replied.

Shepard powered up Nike and brought the barrel over the edge of the planter. Legion followed her cue, raising their rifle with practiced ease. The Heretics began to emerge from the lobby doorway, assault rifles glowing, and their sensor suite irises ratcheted open. She closed her right eye and peered down Nike’s scope and aimed at the leading unit. It seemed to sense it, as it turned its rifle at her. It was out of luck, she was out of mercy. “Terminate them!” she ordered and a deep breath.

She had just begun to exhale when Garrus’ rifle cracked, followed by Legion’s, the latter swallowing the former, reverberating through the air. The heretic on the left of where she was aiming was hit in the head, and it disintegrated in a rain of shrapnel, sparks, and a splatter of cooling fluid. The one on the far right suffered a similar, though less violent fate, its face-light merely shattered, sending a spray of white liquid into the air as it collapsed. Then her own rifle kicked. Nike’s bullet ripped through the
leading geth’s face-lamp, and it too went down.

The remaining heretics raised their weapons and opened fire. Shepard ducked back down. Then there was a fourth crack, Ashley’s rifle. One of the heretic rifles cut out. When the bullets did not hit her hiding space, Shepard dared to look up. Legion had once again stepped into the bullet line, their shields rippling, yet the geth did not seem to care. Their rifle rose in a fluid motion, long barrel honing on the next heretic, and there was another thunderous blast. One more heretic went down in a spray of shrapnel, sparks, and cooling liquid.

“Garrus, Ashley, now! Before Legion’s shields go down!” She called as she raised Nike back into firing position. Legion fired again, effortlessly bring down another heretic. Shepard aligned her crosshairs and squeezed the trigger. Her shot was echoed in rapid succession by two other rifles, and just like that the remaining three heretics went down. As Shepard lowered her rifle Legion turned to look back at her, their head tipped slightly to the side. Shepard figured it was their way of saying thank you.

“You bosh’tet!” Tali called. “Are you trying to get yourself offlined?”

“Negative, Creator-Zorah. We calculated our odds of success to be eighty percent. Addendum, we acknowledge your concern.” Legion replied.

“What concern? Do you think any of us want to have to drag you around if you run down your batteries?” Tali asked, blunt as a hammer, with a tone to match.

Legion’s emotive plates rose, but then settled right back down, “Our apology, Creator-Zorah, we will add that to our future calculations.” They said, smoothly, and calmly.

Shepard blinked, surprised. That was an exchange she never would have thought she would live to hear. For all of Tali’s protests, her initial outcry could only be taken as concern. She chose to cover it up affected annoyance. Legion was clearly on to her, so they did not take it as an insult. Still, it would be best to pull Tali’s attention away from the whole thing. She looked back “Tali, how’s that infrared coming?”

“Sorry, Commander. I was waiting for the geth to be gone. I didn’t want Chatika taking a bullet.” Tali explained. As if to punctuate the explanation Chatika floated up into the air and turned toward the dark lobby. Tali’s eyes remained glued to the feed on her Omni-tool for a long ten seconds before the girl hummed. “I am not seeing anything that could be a heretic, or a person for that matter.”

“Guess that was it for the first wave,” Ashley said.

“If you count the units on the bridge, then this was the second wave. Ten units there, eight units here… I get the feeling that we’re looking at quite the numbers up there,” Shepard said. Harbinger was not kidding around this time, was he? She slipped her rifle behind her back and rose to her feet.

Liara and the commandoes emerged from their hiding place, Shepard could see the way the youngest asari was looking at her. Shepard did not particularly care for that look. It was too amazed for her tastes, as if the asari had never seen a professional sharp-shooter at work. Shepard turned away, “Tali, still nothing?” she asked.

“Nothing, were clear as on this level. As far as I can tell.” The quarian tapped a few commands into her Omni-tool.

“Alright, we keep going.” Shepard did not like the thought of going into the darkened lobby, or over darkened stairs, but there was nothing else to it. The elevator would have been an ever worse idea.
“Legion, I want you a bit forward with me. Alert me the moment you pick up heretic units.”

“Acknowledged.” The geth replied calmly.

Shepard turned and began to walk, and the geth instantly and smoothly fell in step on her left.

It did not take long to enter the darkened lobby. When she stepped into the gloom, Shepard was happy to see that the color flashes from the earlier near-blinding had faded, her night vision would work. Then she became aware of familiar, but unwanted scent of decay wafting through the room. She recognized the scent immediately. There was a body somewhere nearby, and it had been there long enough to start decomposing. It was a small blessing then that the lobby was too impossibly dark to see anything. There was no unseeing it, and even she could not say the sight did not bother her.

“Is that smell what I think it is?” Jenkins muttered from the back.

“Unfortunately,” Ashley replied.

This was the inglorious part of the job, and Shepard knew it was coming. “Close your helmets if you need to.” She would not hold it against anyone doing that. She reached up to activate her helmet-mounted lights, as there would be no way to navigate these dark spaces without them. The ghostly beams cut through the gloom. She could tell that ExoGeni had tried to clean the place up, the floor had been passed over with a bucket and a mop. The walls were in just the same state of decay as the rest of the tower. Here too were more planter boxes and two square features that had likely been reflecting pools. Most gruesomely was the body, clad in a hard-suit, draped over the lip of one. Shepard did not look for very long, she did not need to check for life signs, not with the smell wafting through the air.

At the back of the lobby were three sets of metal doors. The finish was glossy to a certain point, but the scarring and scratching indicated that someone had went to a great length to extract the inlaid metals that had once decorated the door, forming a complex geometric design.

“Doctor T’soni, those are the elevators, yes?” Shepard asked.

“Oh… Yes, those are the elevators. The stairs you want are on the left.” The asari replied.

Shepard thought Liara sounded a little breathless. She would not be surprised if the sight and smell were turning the archeologist’s stomach right then. The first time anyone saw combat causalities inevitably left an impression. Even soldiers sometimes struggled with that. It was one of those things one could never be entirely ready for.

Shepard turned, and her lights hit another, smaller door on the left. ExoGeni apparently did indeed label everything, as there was a sign with the universal pictograph for stairs stuck to the wall next to it. “Alright, guess we know where we’re going. Legion, you’re with me. We’ll take point. Kaidan, Ashley, second file. Jenkins, Tali, middle. Nihlus, Garrus, after that. You’ll be slowest because of the crate. Doctor T’soni, I want you, Shiala, and Myrix as our rear-guard.” It went without saying that Shepard did not expect an attack from that side. If things went right, they would never have an enemy come at them from the back. She could afford keeping the civilian and the huntresses back there.

“Aye, Aye ma’am.” Kaidan replied calmly.

It was not an ideal arrangement, but it was the best she could come up with. With that said she began to walk toward the stairs. She was mildly surprised neither Nihlus, nor Garrus raised a protest to that
arrangement. They were both too overprotective when the mood hit them right. Then again, maybe it was because it was Legion, the one being who had literally stepped in to take bullets for her in the past. Not that she wanted Legion to ever do that again.

When Shepard reached the doorway she moved to the side and pressed her back to the doorjamb, even as she drew Sin. She would not do that stupid thing, and walk into that doorway without a plan. “Legion, can you see past the door with your infrared vision?” She asked.

“Affirmative, Shepard-Commander.”

“Anything?” Shepard asked.

“Negative. We detect no heretic heat signatures, nor electronic signals. It is safe to proceed.”

That was that, Shepard slapped a hand onto the control panel. The door obediently parted and slid open. A moment later she ducked into the stairwell and swept the closest corners with her lights and gun. She spotted another body, another of the security staff, lying on his back at the base of the stairs. The front of his armor was perforated in multiple places. The smell was even stronger in the tighter space. Shepard was beginning to wonder if following her own advice might not be a bad idea. Even she had a limit of how much she could take.

With nothing but silence to greet them, she glanced toward Legion and then began to climb the stairs. The stairs were as dark as the lobby, the epitome of an unsafe situation. On the next floor, the door leading out of the stairwell had been pried open violently. Its two halves had been pulled off the rails, at the bottom, effectively jammed open. It opened onto a weakly-lit likely-square corridor lined with offices. Of the ones she could see, many no longer had a door at all. Given the clean removal of the doors, Shepard doubted it had been done by the heretics.

“This level is mostly underused. ExoGeni does not have the staff to occupy every office. They chose a few of the bigger ones to work from.” Liara explained.

“We still need to make sure there are no Heretics here.” Shepard replied. “Doctor T’soni, this level’s floorplan is also a bisected square, yes?”

“Yes. That’s the general layout of all the levels. The level above, where the vault is, is not bisected at all. That is why I think that the central space is the vault.”

“Alright, well that means we can probably split up a little.” Shepard sincerely hoped that the heretics would not be moving in groups as large as the one they faced in the lobby below. Splitting up would be dangerous if they did. Perhaps they were patrolling the corridors in twos and threes? That was an oddly universal patrol pattern. She would have to balance out the teams too.

“Alright. Kaidan, take Bravo to the right.”

“Yes, Ma’am.” Kaidan replied calmly.

Shepard nodded, but turned to the others. “Legion, Tali, Doctor T’soni, you will come with me to the left.”

“Acknowledged.” Legion replied.

Tali nodded, even as her grip on her shotgun tightened.

Liara nodded, but much more hesitantly, something that Shepard did not miss. Well, she would give the doctor some consideration. “Now for our esteemed huntresses, I really would like one of you to
stay here with Nihlus, Garrus, and the crate. You’ll be our watch on the stairs. Wouldn’t do for the heretics to come at us from the rear. If they do come, no heroics. We regroup and take them out.”

“Yes, Commander.” Garrus replied.

“Shepard, I do not like this.” Nihlus protested.

Shepard knew that he would say it, but he would also follow her orders. She also knew why he did not like this idea, this was one of the super rare times when she did not allow him to trail her like a shadow.

“Myrix, go with Liara. I will stay here.” Shiala said.

The quiet commando hummed her quiet assent.

Shepard figured the arrangement made sense. That way each group had firepower and a biotic, just in case. She knew better than to split the huntresses away from Liara entirely. They likely would not have it. “Keep close radio contact. That goes double for our rear guard. Sweep every room, sure it might take a while, but we want to be thorough. Now go.”

Kaidan wordlessly turned down the right side of the corridor, and Ashley and Jenkins followed. Shepard watched them for a long moment, but then turned to the left walked. “Run me down the highlights of what’s actually on this floor, Doctor. Whose offices and what they’re into.” If they were going to find the dirt on anyone, she needed to have a better idea of what was out there before she started digging.

Chapter End Notes

Author Notes: Here’s Liara! The first core character introduced since Legion. For the longest time, I did not know how to introduce her into the plot, or what to do with her after that. It was mostly because she does not have a ready reason to associate with Shepard in this canon. Sometimes such a little thing can put the brakes on everything. I try not to hand-wave details of that sort.

General Notes:

Headcanons – Many of my musings here, namely about the Protheans. I was really seeing the Hanging Gardens for my inspiration for that water feature in the mall. Same reasons for being there, one part symbol of mastery over nature, one part display of power. Liara gets to be our fountain of information, she’s the archeologist, and I want to use that.

Chapter Notes: Nothing in particular…

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