Encroachment
by SomethingProfound

Summary

If Emilia Shepard had known what was waiting for her aboard the SSV Normandy, she might have never walked through the airlock. But for all the struggles ahead, she has a good ship and a good crew. ME1, Paragade Shepard. Multiple character POVs, expanded minor crew and a focus on the off-camera moments. Slowburn f!Shepley.

Notes

I've changed some of the ranks, I know, because the Alliance military falls apart if you think about it for more than five seconds.
The Crew of the Systems Alliance Warship Normandy

Command Staff:

Commander Emilia Shepard: Commanding Officer, Special Operations Officer (N7). 29, Spacer. L3 Vanguard.

Lieutenant Commander Charles ‘X’ Pressly: Executive officer and navigator. 43, American. Married with two children. Enlisted in the Navy as a quartermaster but commissioned as an officer after the Skyllian Blitz. His father was a Marine Colonel and died in the First Contact War.

Command Master Chief Petty Officer Monica ‘Buffer’ Negulesco: Ship’s command master chief. 45, Romanian. Married with three children. Her husband is a former Alliance servicemen and her eldest son is a Gunner’s Mate on the SSV Logan.

Executive Department:


Yeoman Hector Emerson: Yeoman. 19, Elysian. Recently finished A School at the top of his class; the Normandy is his first posting. Raised by his grandmother after his parents were killed in the Blitz.

Operation Department:

Chief Quartermaster Dhairya ‘Sax’ Saxena: Operations chief and senior quartermaster (enlisted navigator). 35, Indian. On his second marriage, three children, but the Navy is his true love. Previously served on the Tokyo.

Combat Information Centre Division:

Lieutenant Nina Rodriguez: CIC Officer and assistant navigator. Spanish, 26. Engaged to marry a fighter pilot based off the SSV Marie Curie.

Communications and Information Systems Technician First Class Yasser ‘Boxer’ Amjad: CIC chief. Iranian, 28. In the middle of a divorce. Has spent most of his career on frigates and has no intention of changing that. Self-described ‘shitty Muslim’.

Communications

Senior Communications and Information Systems Technician Zheng Lam: Comms technician. 23, Shanxian. Got married the day before the Normandy left Arcturus.

Communications and Information Systems Technician Lei Chou: Comms technician. 21, Taiwanese.

Communications and Information Systems Technician Germeen Barret: Comms technician. 19, Irish.
Sensors

Leading Combat Systems Operator Raphael “Prophet’ Ferreira: Sensors supervisor. Benning, 23. Comes from a large, close-knit, religious family. His dad was also Navy and his brother is a CSO on SSV New Delhi.


Intelligence

Leading Intelligence Specialist Angelos Kokinos: Intelligence supervisor. 22, Greek. Speaks six languages.

Intelligence Specialist Marianne Baumer: 19, German. Very intelligent, but still overawed by the records of some personnel aboard.

Electronic Warfare:

Leading Electronic Warfare Specialist Abishek Pakti: EW supervisor. 22, Indian. His wife, Saanvi, is pregnant with their first child.

Electronic Warfare Specialist Sumeet Patil: 19, Indian.

Navigation Division:

Flight Lieutenant Jeff ‘Joker’ Moreau: Navigation supervisor (Joker has authority, you should all be terrified) and first helmsman. 28, Spacer.

Ensign Caroline ‘Frag’ Grenado: Flight officer. 22, Mexican. Joker’s choice for his co-pilot in combat. Chosen for her high flight school scores and because she’s young enough not to have developed too many bad habits flying other frigates.


Senior Quartermaster Albert Adamczyk: Quartermaster. 20, Polish.

Combat Systems Department:


Chief Master-At-Arms Mandira Rahman: Combat Systems Chief. 37, spacer. Has an 11 year old daughter.

Electronic Materials Division:

Ensign Ji-Eun Park: Electronic Materials Officer, bull ensign. 22, Korean.

Electronics Technician Third Class Minh Tran: Division chief. 25, Vietnamese.
Senior Electronics Technician Harvey Gladstone: ET. 21, Canadian.
Electronics Technician Jamie Kilgarrif: ET.

**Gunnery Division:**

Sub-Lieutenant Anisim Matveev: Gunnery Officer. Russian, 23.
Gunner’s Mate First Class Soheila Attar: Gunnery Chief. Persian, 27.

**Weapon Maintenance and Operation:**

Senior Fire Controlman Silas Crosby: Ship’s gunner. 22, American. From Texas and known for occasionally taking over the mess to cook things his mama makes.
Fire Controlman Makara Dara: Ship’s gunner. 24, Cambodian.
Gunner’s Mate Addison Chase: Ship’s gunner. 20, from Benning.

**Weapon Repair and Ordnance:**

Leading Ordnanceman Timothe Brodeur: Ordnance supervisor. 23, from Luna. Always seems to be around when the Marines are practicing hand to hand or working out.
Ordnanceman Pilek Mataraci: 10, Turkish.

**Law Enforcement Division:**

Senior Master-At-Arms Celinda Rogers: Military police. 22, American.
Master-At-Arms Sung-Ho Choe: Military police. 19, Korean. Master-At-Arms. What he lacks in common sense he makes up for in unrelenting enthusiasm

**Supply Department**


**Food Service:**

Senior Steward Marcus Greico: Cook. Terra Novan, 20. Doesn’t really want to be in the Navy.
Steward Jozet Dreyer: Cook. 19, Dutch. Friends with Adamczyk in the CIC.

**Clothing and Storing**

Leading Yeoman Monica Paredes: 23, Portuguese.
Health Department

Medical Corps Captain Karin Chakwas: Chief Medical Officer. 55, English. Previously served aboard the SSV *Tokyo*.

Sub-Lieutenant Dariush Sherazi: Nursing officer. 23, from Demeter.

Hospitalman Third Class Xu ‘Doc’ Ling: Special Reconnaissance Corpsman (N5). 23, Chinese. Would punch death in the face if he could. Goes groundside with the ground team.

Engineering Department

Lieutenant Gred ‘CHENG’ Adams: chief engineer. 29, Terra Novan. It might take the heat death of the universe to unnerve him. Close friends with Charles Pressly despite their differences. His entire family is Navy - his parents and sister are all currently serving officers. Previously served aboard the SSV *Tokyo*.

Machinist’s Mate First Class Mikhail ‘Hellraiser’ Vorobyov: Engineering chief. 27, Russian. Father to his men type. Nickname is completely ironic.

Main Propulsion Division:

Senior Machinist’s Mate Rolf Jansson: 21, Swedish.

Machinist’s Mate Monica Auraham: 20, Israeli.

Damage Control Division:

Damage Controlman Third Class Rosamund ‘Squid/Rosie’ Draven: Damage control supervisor/firefighter. 23, Australian. Married to Talitha Draven, who she met at a previous posting. Close friends with Vorobyov, Hudson and Tali.

Senior Damage ControlmanOrden Laflamme: Damage controlman/firefighter. 21, French. Doesn’t get along with Lance Corporal Fredricks.

Damage Controlman Robert Felawa: Damage controlman/firefighter. 19, American.

Nuclear and Power Division:


Nuclear Technician Ping Yu: Nuclear tech. 22, Chinese.

Electrician’s Mate (Nuclear) Aaliyah El-Hashem: Nuclear electrician. 20, Saudi Arabia.

Auxiliaries Division:

Life Support Technician Third Class Kadri Demarci: Division chief. 24, Turkish.
Life Support:

Senior Life Support Technician Claudia Turati: 23, American.

Senior Life Support Technician Dominic Santos: 24, Brazilian.

Kinetic Barriers:

Leading Electrician’s Mate Jamin Bakari: Kinetic barriers supervisor. 23, Tanzanian.

Electrician’s Mate Rosalia Acosta: 19, Peruvian.

Repair Division

Machinery Repairman First Class John Costa: Repair supervisor. 23, Colombian.

Machinery Repairman Kai Wu: 22, Chinese.

Marine Detachment

Staff Lieutenant Kaidan Alenko: MARDET commander, Special Operations Officer (N5). 32, Canadian. L2 Sentinel.

Staff Sergeant Ashley Williams: MARDET NCO, scout sniper. 27, from Sirona.

Tactical Element Alpha

Sergeant Talitha ‘Gung Ho’ Draven: Element leader (N5). 26, American. She had a difficult childhood before enlisting on her eighteenth birthday. She’s been in the Corps nearly nine years and formerly served in Recon. Married to Rosamund Draven.

Private First Class Alex ‘Freddie’ Fredricks: Combat engineer attache. 19, from Bekenstein. Affluent background. Friends with the frequent target of Jaz, Nick and Waaberi.

Lance Corporal Jason ‘Jaz’ Teke: Special operations Marine (N5), machine-gunner. 21, Turkish-English. Friends with Nick, Waaberi and Freddie.

Tactical Element Bravo


Private First Class Akmed Mohamed: Assistant machine-gunner. 19, Egyptian. Was close friends with Corporal Jenkins.

Lance Corporal David Hodgins: Special operations Marine (N5), machine-gunner. 24, Terra Novan. ‘Great field Marine’ - tends to get demoted.

Fire Support Element

Lance Corporal Nicholas ‘Nick’ Ki-tae: Fire Support RTO, special operations Marine (N5), 21, Korean-Canadian. Jaz’s best friend. Often guns or drives the Mako. Has a boyfriend stationed on the SSV Casimir III.

Lance Corporal Lei Chou: Special operations Marine (N5), drone operator, 20, Shanxian. Holds a grudge against turians.

**Maintenance**


**Alliance Citizens:**

Major General Alyona Tereshchenko (SAMC): the commanding officer of the storied 4th Marine Division. A hard, to the point woman and veteran of both the First Contact War and the Traverse Campaign. An enlisted Marine’s general and well loved by her subordinates.

Prime Minister Anita Goyle: humanity’s first ambassador to the Citadel and now Prime Minister of the Systems Alliance. On her second term, considered unlikely to contest another election.

Fleet Admiral Kastanie Drescher (ret) (SAN): 81 years old. One of the SAN’s first admirals, along with Jon Grissom, and has a great many things named after her. Originally a naval officer who served the European Union, her papers on the potential of a ‘space navy’ attracted the attention of those attempting to set up the Systems Alliance Navy, prompting them to headhunt her specifically. They succeeded, and Counter Admiral Drescher, Deutsche Marine, became Rear Admiral Drescher, Systems Alliance Navy. Although Grissom was arguably the greater tactician, Drescher was an excellent commander and responsible for much of the logistical and organisational systems the Navy relies on. During the First Contact War, Drescher led the Second Fleet to relieve Shanxi, defeating the HN 33rd Fleet. After the war, Drescher continued to serve, eventually becoming the Chief of Defence before retiring at the age of 75.

Commandant Sora Nakano (SAMC): the commandant of the Systems Alliance Marine Corps.

Minister Jae-Eun Park: Minister for Foreign Affairs, the protege of Goyle and political ally of Donnel Udina.

Minister Idir Tabaamrant: Minister for Colonial Affairs.

Lieutenant Colonel Cheston (SAMC): a Manpower Officer on Arcturus Station, currently stationed at the Arcturus Marine Manpower Branch.

Lieutenant Priya Singh (SAN): the most junior of Admiral Steven Hackett’s aide-de-camps and the daughter of Admiral Nitesh Singh.

Lieutenant Commander Yun (SAN): one of Admiral Hackett’s aides.

Commander Frankston (SAN): the most senior of Admiral Hackett’s aides.

Commander Rita McCormick (SAN): a Scottish naval officer, commanding officer of the SSV Trenton and Emilia Shepard’s ex-wife.
Gunnery Sergeant Julia ‘Jules’ Alvarez (SAMC): a Pathfinder team sergeant and old friend of Commander Shepard’s, as they went through Marine infantry training together.

Commodore Hannah Shepard (SAN): current commanding officer of the 50th Scout Flotilla, former XO aboard the Kilimanjaro and naval aviator. Veteran of the First Contact War, in which she was widowed. Remarried to Jean Laurent, two children - Commander Emilia Shepard (from her first marriage) and Nicolas Laurent-Shepard (from her second). Friends with Captain David Anderson.


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**Glossary**

**A:**

**AFE:** Alliance Fitness Exam. Pronounced phonetically. Conducted both to get into the military and also to maintain fitness throughout service.

**Above decks:** decks that are higher to one’s current deck.

**AWOL:** Absent without leave. Can refer to a temporary absence without intent to desert or desertion.

**AJ:** Army Jerk. Term for a soldier.

**APC:** Armored Personnel Carrier. Transports infantry to the combat zone quickly.

**AFV:** Armoured fighting vehicle. An armed combat vehicle protected by armour, generally combining operational mobility with offensive and defensive capabilities.

**Air Boss:** Air officer. The officer responsible for a ship’s flight deck and its immediate airspace.

**AJ Squared Away:** A sailor who is always squared away/a lifer with no life outside the navy.

**ASTRACOM:** Strategic command.

**ATRANCOM:** Transport command.

**AT:** Anti-tank.

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**B**

**Batphone:** internal circuit between a ship’s bridge and engineering control room.

**Bail Out:** Repeated three times by the driver or commander of a vehicle, this is an order requiring all personnel to leave a vehicle, including the driver and gunner.

**Boot (person):** A person fresh out of boot; inexperienced or green. Marine term, extremely derogatory.
Butterbar: Derogatory term for second lieutenant

Bulkhead: Wall aboard a ship.

Belowdecks: Decks under one’s current deck

Boogey: Unknown target. Unsure of hostility.

Bilge Juice: Illegal alcohol distilled onboard, usually in the spaces between the armour plates and hull.

Bitching Betty: Shipboard VI warnings.

Black Hole: Arcturus Station.

BOHICA: Bend Over, Here It Comes Again.

Birdie: any sailor in Naval Aviation.

Blink: pejorative term for a batarian.

C

Callies: disruptor torpedos.

Crash and Smash: The flight deck firefighting team. Also a naval aviation game involving long tables and a lot of beer.

Civvie: Civilian

Civvies or Mufti (as in ‘I’m wearing my civvies’): Civilian clothing

Civvie Street: Life outside the military

Company Gunny (Quartermaster): Gunnery Sergeant in charge of the supplies of the Company.

CSM: Command Sergeant Major

CO/OC: Commanding officer, Officer Commanding

COP: Combat Outpost. Any secured position from a patrol base to anything smaller than a FOB, that Marines operate from.

CIC: Command Information Centre.

Charlie Foxtrot: Clusterfuck.

CHOP: Supply officer.

Commo: Comms Chief.

CHENG: chief engineer.
Cherry: Combat virgin.

CMC (Navy): Command Master Chief.

CMC (Marines): Commandant of the Marine Corps.

D

Deck: Floor aboard a ship.

Dismount: An order requiring passengers in a vehicle to leave a vehicle, excepting the driver and gunner.

Dog Watch: A short watch. Also used to refer to short terms of service.

Doc: respectful nickname for a hospital corpsman by Marines.

DoCA: Department of Colonial Affairs.

DoD: Department of Defence.

DMI: Department of Military Intelligence.

DRA: Diffuse Radiator Arrays. Civilian ships use large, fragile radiator panels - obviously this would be a problem for a warship. Instead they have DRA, ceramic strips along the exterior hull to radiate heat. These are nicknamed 'tiger stripes' or 'warpaint' by Alliance sailors, due to the fact that the DRA patterns show up on thermal sensors and each configuration is unique.

E

Eternal Patrol: A ship and its crew lost while on patrol/in space are said to be on Eternal Patrol.

F


FOB: Forward Operating Base. A secure forward position used to support tactical operations. Pronounced phonetically.

FRAGO: Fragmentation Order. Used to make changes to an operations order without rewriting the whole thing. Pronounced phonetically.

Furlough: A temporary leave of absence from duty, often a vacation.

Flyboy: Pejorative for a sailor in a aviation billet.

FNG: Fucking New Guy. Either someone straight out of boot, or someone transferred into a new unit. Tends to make a mess.

FLOB: Freeloading Oxygen breather.
**FOD:** Foreign Object Damage.

**Fruit Salad:**

**FFG:** Forever Fucking Gone. Term for a ship that spends more time in space than docked.

**FTN:** fuck the Navy.

**Fried Calamari:** an electrocuted sailor.

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**G**

**Gator Freighter:** planetary assault vessel; usually used to transport Marine units.

**Guns:** common nickname for a ship’s CSO.

**Gunny:** nickname for a Gunnery Sergeant.

**Grunt:** Infantry Marine.

**Ground-pounder:** Army or Marine personnel.

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**H**

**Hatch:** Door aboard a ship.

**HUD:** Heads up display, pronounced phonetically. Displays important information, usually using the visor of the helmet, such as kinetic barrier strength, tacnet map and status of friendlies in the same unit.

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**I**

**IFV:** Infantry Fighting Vehicle. Supports the infantry in combat. (E.g the Mako)

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**J**

**Jarhead:** Marine.

**Jody:** That civilian arsehole who steals your significant other while you're deployed; also a term for a cadence, due to the many referring to said civilian arsehole

**Jonty/jaunty:** Master-at-arms

**JOC:** Joint Operations Command.
K

KB: Kinetic Barrier

K-Kill: catastrophic/complete kill. When an armoured vehicle is completely destroyed, beyond any hope of repair and often killing the crew. Often occurs when an enemy attack causes a breach of fuel cells or ‘cooks off’ the vehicle’s ammunition. Both the Mako and M-080 are designed in such a way as to attempt to direct an ignition of ammunition away from the crew—often still destroying the vehicle but saving the lives of the Marines inside.

L

Leave: Time where a member of the military has permission to be absent from duty.

Lifer: a service person who intends to stay in the military their working lives - or at least until twenty years and that sweet retirement package.

M

MAA: Master-At-Arms; naval MP.

Mango: reservist.

Mustang: An officer promoted from the enlisted ranks, as opposed to someone who joined as an officer. Examples include Commander Shepard and Admiral Hackett.

Mess: A dining facility where military personnel eat and socialise.

M-Kill: mobility kill. When an armoured vehicle is damaged so it is unable to move as a result of enemy fire, but is not necessarily beyond repair.

MECP: Marine Enlisted Commissioning Program. One of the pathways enlisted Marines of the rank of Lance Corporal and above can become officers.

Mess Hall Intelligence: gossip.

N

Nav/Gator: nicknames for a ship’s navigator.

NavComm: Navy Command.

NCO: Non Commissioned Officer. Also referred to as noncomms. SNCO stands for Senior NCO and usually refers to NCOs holding or above the rank Staff Sergeant in the Marines and Sergeant First Class in the Army.
**Ninety Day Wonder**: a graduate of OCS.

**NIS**: Naval Investigative Service.

**O**

**OPORD**: Operations Order. An executable plan that directs a unit to conduct a military operation, detailing the situation, the mission and what activities the unit will have to undertake to complete the mission. Pronounced phonetically.

**OpSec**: Operational Security. The process of protecting small pieces of information that might be grouped together to get the big picture, such as being careful as to who may be eavesdropping on a conversation and not speaking openly on the extranet about troop movements, deployments, equipment shortages and the like.

**Overhead**: Ceiling.

**Operator**: A term used for an N7.

**OCS**: Officer Candidate School.

**The Outside**: civilian life.

**OER/NCOER**: Officer Evaluation Report/Non-Commissioned Officer Evaluation Report. Performance review by an officer's or NCO’s immediate superior

**P**

**Perscomm**: Personnel Command.

**PSG**: Platoon Sergeant

**PL**: Platoon leader

**POG**: People Other than Grunts. A pejorative for non-infantry personnel. Pronounced phonetically.

**PerSec**: Personal Security. The protection of personal information that may be used to harm the Marine or sailor in question.

**Port**: Left.

**R**

**RSM**: Regimental Sergeant Major

**REMF**: Rear Echelon MotherFucker. Similar meaning to POG.

**ROE**: Rules of Engagement. ROEs are directives to military forces defining the manner and degree of force that may be applied. They provide authorisation and/or limitations on the use of force.

**S**

**SAN**: Systems Alliance Navy.
SAMC: Systems Alliance Marine Corps.

SASOC: Systems Alliance Special Operations Command.

Salty: An experienced sailor or Marine who has been in space for a great deal of time or has seen combat.

SABER: Readiness rating of the Alliance military. SABER 5 is lowest, with SABER 1 being the highest level of readiness.

SNAFU: Situation Normal, All Fucked Up. Pronounced phonetically.


Shavetail: Inexperienced lieutenant.

Starboard: Right.

Shore leave: Leave of absence granted to a sailor or Marine aboard a ship to go groundside.

Squid, Gob, Swab: Pejoratives for sailor.

Sky Jockey: derogatory nickname for the Fleet by the Army.

Silent running: term used by Normandy vessels when utilising stealth systems.

Skipper: respectful term for a ship’s captain or a Marine commander.

Skittles: flight deck crew.

SSV Neverdock: see ‘FFG’.

SWCOT: Pronounced phonetically as ‘so-cot’, Space Warfare Command Officer Training is a course Marine, Aviation or Guard officers can undergo to become qualified to command a corvette or frigate. Commanding cruisers and heavier classes require time serving as a frigate commander and another course.

T

Tango: Phonetic alphabet for T, which stands for target. Enemy target.

TacNet: Tactical Network. An encrypted infonet that combined sensor and recon information, maps, topography, Blue Force Tracker and comms in order to expedite information transfer between all the moving parts of a military unit. Usually monitored by the CIC Officer or a communications specialist, who quarantines and organises information so leaders receive the info they need and aren’t overwhelmed.

Top: First Sergeant.

TRAVCOMM: Traverse Command.

W
**WARNO:** Warning order---alerts a unit to stand by for a mission, giving the basic information. Details will follow in the mission OPORD.

**Widow/Widower:** A sailor's partner who looks for casual flings while they're on deployment. Prefixed with the theatre the sailor is deployed to, ie 'Traverse Widow'

**XO:** Executive officer (second in charge)

**XO's Happy Hour:** A daily, hour-long mandatory cleaning evolution.
Lieutenant Commander Emilia Shepard, Alliance Navy, negotiated her way through thick crowds that always clogged the corridors near the docks, seabag in one hand and coffee in the other. She'd missed good coffee while out in the Traverse - there was enough Australian in her that she'd inherited the coffee snob genes.

With her battered jeans and bomber jacket, out of regulation haircut, Shepard didn't quite look the Alliance's war hero. That was the way she liked it. People always wanted to see the Star of Terra, touch it. Ask about one of the worst days of her life. If they were particularly brave, they might ask about what had happened afterwards.

This way she got to get to her destination without the whispers and the requests for selfies.

The guard to the docks didn't give her a second glance until he'd run her ID and orders. Then he looked in between it and her, his jaw slack. She raised an eyebrow.

"Uh...Bay E54, ma'am."

"Thank you." She stepped through, hefting her bag up more on her shoulder, and went in search of this ship that had pulled her from the near Terminus back to Arcturus Station.

Shepard had missed the commissioning ceremony, and she'd never been so glad for the sometimes inefficient naval transport network. She'd watched the ceremonies on one of the three shuttles she'd caught to get back to Arcturus Station, surrounded by chattering young Marines and sailors on their way home or to new stations. It'd been a lot of politicians and brass giving speeches, both turian and human.

It was incredible that they'd managed to make a new prototype ship boring.

If she'd been here for it they would've dressed her up and paraded her around. Look at our shiny war hero!

She'd become a N7 because she wanted to be the best, but also so she didn't have to deal with that crap anymore. And David Anderson was dragging her right back into it.

Her first glimpse of the SSV Normandy SR1 was a few flashes of dark, sleek metal through the dock windows. No wonder her mother had said Anderson was almost exploding with pride. Normandy was nowhere near the size of the Tokyo, Anderson's last command, but there were enough redactions on the files he'd sent Shepard to imply she made up for it in different ways.

"Excuse me, you can't come through here." The Marine who stopped her at the docking tube was a stocky young man, couldn't be more than nineteen or twenty, with a square face and red-blonde hair. "This is a restricted area - not for civilians."

She examined his uniform, the single chevron on his collar. A PFC, not one of the N5 Raiders Anderson had promised her.

"Just run my damned ID, PFC Fredricks."

He blinked, but took the chit she thrust at him. It beeped and then the cool, mechanical voice of the ship's VI crackled out of the speakers behind him. "Welcome aboard, XO Shepard."
The Marine went very pale.

"Excuse me." She stepped around him and headed aboard.

Captain David Anderson was waiting for her in the CIC. His dark eyebrows drew together at the sight of her.

"Sir. Lieutenant Commander Emilia Shepard reporting for duty." She didn't salute. She was out of uniform, after all.

He looked her up and down. "Not only did you not wear your dress uniform, you didn't even wear a uniform."

"I came here straight from the shuttle, sir," she said mildly, "and I had my mother organise for my things to be sent to the ship before she shipped out. I didn't have time to stop by a uniform shop."

He looked pointedly at her hand. "Yet you had time for coffee."

She shrugged unrepentant. "You can't expect me to go without fuel, sir."

"You're full of crap, Shepard. And you're late." There was a gleam in his eyes that let her know that the pique in his voice wasn't really genuine. He'd always been more amused by her 'shenanigans' than her mother would've liked.

"Sorry, sir. I know having to do your own paperwork was probably traumatising."

"Go get changed, Shepard. And get a haircut before we leave. You look like a bum."

She ran a hand through her tight black curls. "Aye aye, sir."

"Before she does, Captain, I was hoping you might introduce us." A dual-toned voice interrupted their easy camaraderie.

Shepard blinked at the sudden appearance of a tall, sleek turian, dressed in red and black armour, white marks striping his face. He'd moved very goddamn quietly.

"Of course," Anderson agreed readily. "Nihlus, this is Lieutenant Commander Emilia Shepard, my Executive Officer. Shepard, this is Spectre Nihlus Kryik, Office of Special Tactics and Recon. He's the Council's observer for our shakedown run."

"That seems...unusual."

Kryik flicked his mandibles. "A joint turian-human venture such as this is also unusual, wouldn't you agree, Commander?"

She inclined her head in agreement. Relations between the Hierarchy and the Systems Alliance remained decidedly icy. "That's true. I was a little surprised reading the files."

Was that why Anderson had decided on her? Shepard was far from the most experienced officer when it came to space warfare, and she knew her superiors in Special Operations Command would be upset at losing her. But few officers had the same background with turians that she did. The first and only Alliance officer to lead turians in battle. Nevermind they'd been part of the Elysian militia and helping had been their idea, not hers.

"How our peoples relate to each other in the future is important," Nihlus continued, "A matter of galactic stability, even."
"And you got saddled with babysitting duty," she said dryly.

He flicked his mandibles again, a turian sign of amusement. "I volunteered."

"Why?" she asked bluntly.

"Shepard," Anderson began and this time he was truly annoyed.

"It's alright, Captain. She is just doing her due diligence by her new crew, no?" Those bird-like green eyes met hers. "Many of my people see yours as a threat, one we should have crushed on Shanxi for good. That was where one of your mothers was killed, no?"

She nodded stiffly. This Spectre had done his research on her. Sergeant Isabel Alves Shepard had been a Marine tanker, but even the top of the line Alliance tanks had been no match for turian air support.

"I am not like them. I see that your species has great potential, and I would like to see it realised."

"Thank you. I think. "With your leave, sir."

"Dismissed, Lieutenant Commander."

The crew was uneasy around her, Shepard could feel it, see it in the way they looked at her, hear it in the way whispers trailed after her like her shadow and cut off when she looked at the source. She couldn't blame them. They knew who she was, and the smarter ones knew that both Captain Anderson and Commander Shepard being present meant they were likely to end up in the deep end at some point. Add in a Spectre and you had some thoroughly disquieted sailors.

Shepard just wished she knew what they were flying into. Shakedown cruise, her arse. No one brought Spectres along for test drives. She'd kept her unease close to the chest, and clamped down on the officers who voiced similar thoughts - not because they were wrong, but because they needed to show the crew a united front behind their captain, and it was the role of the executive officer to play bad cop. She'd never really taken to that particular role with ease, but it was what Anderson required of her.

She stood, shoulders squared and hands behind her back, staring at the captain's readouts before her, feeling the thrum of the Normandy's drive core beneath her feet, listening to the bustle of the crew around her. They worked together seamlessly - that pre-deployment training had paid off.

That had been one thing she'd had to get used to after she'd done SWCOT: how calm and mechanical the bridge of a warship was. There was a lot more shouting and profanity in the Marines. You had to vent the stress that came with ground combat somehow or you went a little nuts.

The space around Arcturus Station was crowded with a glittering array of starships: the predatory forms of the Fifth Fleet's warships, yachts of the super-rich; utilitarian Kowloon freighters and stocky passenger shuttles. It was something Shepard had always liked about the station - going to one of the 'wings' and watching the different ships floating past in the deep dark of space. When she was a child, her mother had often taken her there in between her many deployments, and spent hours explaining to her what the different ships were, and what they were for.

The downside of that crowd was that navigating through the shipping lanes took some time...and then there was the queue to wait to go through the Relay, even for warships. But the time had to be taken, even if the pilot bitched about the 'fastest ship in the Navy' being stuck behind some lumbering
freighter that flew like a glacier, since a ship's thrusters could melt anything behind it to slag. And wouldn't that be a sad end to a prototype warship?

"You are cleared for Relay approach, Normandy. Fair winds and following seas. Arcturus Control out."

She rested both hands on the railing on the captain's podium (a turian thing, she had a feeling she might come to miss the traditional captain's chair), a flicker of unease running through her and then ruthlessly extinguished. Anderson should've been taking the ship through this, as boring as waiting in a line was, but he was off doing God knew what with Nihlus. It wasn't like Anderson to keep her in the dark, and she'd felt the turian's eyes fix on her whenever they were in the same room, a sensation like nails running down a chalkboard.

She keyed the ship's intercom. "All hands, this is the bridge. Secure your stations for Relay transit."

In front of her, little lights flickered from green to orange to tell her that the crew was switching off sensors and cameras to prevent damage, and that the damage control parties had been stood to. Time to hope the shiny new, experimental, over-sized drive core didn't explode and kill them all when they hit blueshift. Silent tension ratcheted up within the bridge; they were the space equivalent of the old test pilots, praying for the ship not to disintegrate around them.

"Commander, all stations secure," Pressly, the ship's navigator and second officer, told her from his own station.

"Helm, begin Relay approach."

She felt eyes on her back and lifted her head from her displays to see the turian coming into the CIC, eyes that reminded of a large, dangerous cat scanning her, weighing her up, like every movement she made was being evaluated. Shepard prided herself on being close to unflappable, with confidence she'd earnt, but Spectre Nihlus put her teeth on edge. She couldn't read him; couldn't decide what he wanted from her, or whether she'd passed his evaluation.

Not that she particularly cared what he thought of her - the Council didn't give a single fuck about the people who died in the Traverse or what atrocities the Hegemony committed, despite their supercops with a license to kill. In her experience, the very people who complained about the restrictions of laws and rules, were usually the kind of people that necessitated the rules in the first place. Even the close-knit N7 teams, stuck in the savage parts of the galaxy, had guidelines.

Still, not pissing off the Spectre was the best way to keep her rank, and Anderson had told her to behave, so she'd play nice.

She watched out of the corner of her eye as Nihlus walked into the cockpit, and after a moment she followed, though whether she was going to save Moreau and Alenko from Nihlus or stop the pilot from starting a war with the Citadel, she wasn't sure.

Captain David Anderson adjusted the datapads on his brand new desk in the Normandy's captain's cabin. It was the only private cabin aboard - unlike the Hastings class frigates that had cabins for the XO and Navigator as well. She was a small ship, every square inch packed with something practical like CO2 scrubbers or weapon systems or inertia dampeners - the only concessions to creature comforts were the recreation room and the gym. Patrol frigates were heirs to the submarines of the old blue water navies, and this ship lived up to that with its cramped spaces and the racks and sleeping pods put in strange places.
A small ship, a cramped ship, a ship that NavComm was constantly nagging him about…

A fast ship. A damned fine ship. His ship. Even if he'd had to leave the deck to his X in order to start writing the first of many reports that would describe almost every moment of the Normandy's shake-down cruise and first covert mission for the Admiralty board to dissect. Even if some would say that the Normandy, prototype or not, was a step down from his previous command, the cruiser *Tokyo* and her hundreds of crew.

"Here's your coffee, sir," A young man dressed in blue and black Navy fatigues said, setting a steaming cup in front of him. The boy was nineteen, barely a year into his Navy career, and a bit starstruck now he'd gone straight from A School to a ship packed full of heroes and legends. He'd admirably restrained himself to only the occasional stammer when talking to Anderson.

He had, however, managed to drop all of his datapads the first time he'd come face-to-face with Commander Shepard, but the captain had high hopes that Yeoman Hector Emerson would be eventually able to look at the XO’s face when reporting to her.

"Thank you, Emerson." The first sip hit the spot, dark and bitter. The launching ceremony had been full of the worst kind of pomp, politicians and journalists everywhere, and it had left him with a sense of bone deep exhaustion.

"Sir, Spectre Nihlus wants to talk to you." Emerson shifted from foot to foot. Wherever the turian Spectre went, a wave of unease rippled through the human crew. If it disturbed the man, Nihlus didn't show it. If anything, Anderson thought that it amused him.

"Well, send him in then," Anderson said, a touch sharply.

"Aye, sir!" Emerson practically sprung out the door. After a moment, the Spectre darkened the doorway.

"We need to speak to Shepard," he said without preamble, green eyes inscrutable.

Anderson glanced at a stack of datapads on his desk. Personnel records. A good crew to go with a good ship. Marine Staff Lieutenant Kaidan Alenko, the type of hyper-competent, even-keeled company-grade officer every commander dreamed of having at their disposal. Sergeant Talitha Draven, thrice decorated for valour. Master Chief Monica Negulesco, one of the best Master Chiefs Anderson had had the pleasure of serving with. Lieutenant Greg Adams, who could keep a ship running with some duct tape and gum.

Lieutenant Commander Emilia Shepard. Star of Terra, N7. Obstinate as a mule. A quality that was both her worst and best character trait.

Anderson nodded, grimacing slightly. "It's time we let her in on it."

"You know her far better than I do, Captain," said Kryik. "How do you think she'll react to her candidacy?"

He considered the question, sipping his coffee again. Emerson should be promoted just for his coffee-making.

When David Anderson had been a young man, he'd realised that to be a damned good officer he needed more than tactical acumen and a measure of raw badassery. Both of those things were required, of course, especially to gain the respect of that particular breed that was the Marine. But it also required people skills, even a touch of empathy. To know what made the people under his command tick, and when to give a sympathetic ear or a boot up the arse. Anderson had a carefully
cultivated, well earned reputation as a hard arse, but he knew when to gentle his touch.

Some of Anderson's coworkers in the Navy had been surprised when he'd decided on Shepard as his executive officer. She had so little naval experience, they'd argued, and she clearly preferred her special forces assignments. The general consensus was that the woman had only attended SWCOT because of ambition, and because an understanding of joint operations was required to get anywhere in the higher echelons of the Defence Force. Or she'd done it to please her mother and grandmother. Retired Fleet Admiral Juliet Shepard had never quite gotten over her two eldest grandchildren going Marine.

There was something more that Anderson had wanted in his XO, even before the Spectre candidacy had been discussed, more than Shepard's competency and their mutual trust. Beyond even that they were alike - two special forces officers whose true home was the battlefield. She had that quality, that ability to read people and get the best out of them. Give it a week and she'd have the whole crew wrapped around her little finger.

"She's ambitious," Anderson said at last, setting his cup down, "and that can cut both ways. She might see the opportunity - and the challenge - being offered here. Or she might be royally pissed off."

He was betting on the second reaction, personally, but he was keeping that to himself. Becoming a Spectre would mean Shepard would never be able to return to her beloved N7 teams in the Traverse.

Nihilus' mandibles flared thoughtfully. "I'd like to speak to her for a moment, before you come in."

Anderson considered this, and the worst case scenario of his Executive Officer throwing a highly decorated Citadel agent into a wall with her mind. "Alright. I'll call her into the comms room."

Shepard was not happy. Shepard was not happy at all. She stared at the Spectre with a carefully blank expression, her chest squeezed with a sense of impending doom. The impending doom of her naval career, specifically. Her eyes darted to Anderson in the hope that this was a joke, but the captain had his arms folded and he nodded at her in a vaguely paternal and encouraging manner. She realised, with a pit in her stomach, that not only did her mentor approve of her candidacy for the Spectres, he may well have had something to do with it in the first place.

"Humanity has been waiting for this for a long time..." Anderson's impromptu speech told her that this was politics mixed up with the military, the sort of thing she'd gone to N School to get away from.

"Your actions during the Blitz showed not only great courage, but an impressive amount of individual skill and initiative. That's why I put your name forward for the Spectres," the turian explained. She blinked at him. She had never even heard of the man before she'd come aboard the Normandy.

It was a great honour. It could be someone else's great honour, damnit. Shepard was confident in her skills as a special forces officer, but she knew where her loyalties lay - and where her ambitions did. She wanted to be an admiral one day when she was too old to fight, so she could train and direct her people, the members of the insular and secretive Special Operations Command, in their efforts to protect Alliance space. Gallivanting around as a Council special operative, playing assassin-cop, was not part of the plan.

"Respectfully," she said carefully, "I don't believe I'm the right fit for the Spectres."
Anderson looked put out by her reluctance, but she ignored him. There was a tendril of anger towards him beginning to unfurl in her stomach.

Nihlus looked at her intently. "I disagree. Elysium is proof of your skill and determination. You can get the job done."

Elysium. It always came back to Elysium. The ghost of a battle trailing after her wherever she went. She was glad he hadn't brought up Akuze. Small mercies. "I'm a Marine," she said sharply, "not a police officer nor an assassin."

Nihlus' mandibles flared in what might have been amusement, "So N7s never 'eliminate high value targets'?"

That's different, she wanted to say. Battlefield kills of terrorists and enemy commanders. She'd killed or captured High Value Targets for an organisation she believed in, as one subset of her duties in the special forces. Special reconnaissance and direct action were still different to the mixture of intelligence and investigative work a Spectre did.

How could she do that for the Council? She didn't believe in the Council. Time and time again they had refused to mediate or intervene in the undeclared war between the Alliance and Hegemony, the conflict in which so many of her brothers and sisters, first in the infantry and then in the Special Forces, had died. How often had Spectres intervened to save human colonies or civilians?

Shepard saw a great deal to admire in the governments and societies of other species, particularly the Hierarchy and the Republics, but she didn't see the benefits of a body that separated species into those who had a say in galactic affairs and those who didn't. She'd never agreed with Parliament's single-minded focus on achieving a Council seat; the volus had invented the galactic economic system and still didn't have a seat, which meant fairness had very little to do with the whole affair.

"This isn't about you, Shepard," Anderson said, almost gently. "Humanity needs this. We're counting on you."

She was being voluntold, then. She felt a sharp bite of helplessness in the face of the System that she hadn't felt since she'd been a Lance Corporal and she'd been ordered, along with three other grunts, to paint rocks. Of all the endings to her Marine Corps-Navy career that she'd imagined, this hadn't been one of them.

"You'll be leading the Marine Detachment to retrieve the artifact for transport," Anderson continued, as if she hadn't protested. "Secure it and get it onto the ship ASAP. Nihlus will accompany you to observe the mission."

"I'll go get the Marines ready to jump," she said shortly. "With your permission, sir."

"Granted, XO-"

They were interrupted by the voice of the comms technician on duty, "Captain, it's Lam. We just got a vid message from Eden Prime on the priority emergency channel. You'll want to see this."

Nothing was ever simple.

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CODEX ENTRY:

Space Warfare Command Officer Training (SWCOT): Modern warfare is more multi-dimensional than ever before and the modern admiral or general has the unenviable task of coordinating and
understanding starships, aircraft, vehicles and infantry on the ground, in the air and in space.

Although the role of a Marine officer is very different to that of a naval officer, it became apparent in the aftermath of the First Contact war that ground forces officers needed to have a working knowledge of spacecraft and 'SWCOT' was the Alliance's answer. Officers are taught astro-navigation, ship-handling, how to operate naval equipment and run bridge watches. By the end of the course, the individual is technically qualified to stand a watch as the Officer of the Deck – or person in charge of controlling a ship – aboard a corvette or frigate, though actual assignment to such duty is at the discretion of individual captains.

Advocates believe that SWCOT gives the Marine officer greater proficiency in shipboard duties, provides lateral movement between the Marine Corps and the Navy (as shown by Captain David Anderson, who chose to switch to the Navy in the Space Warfare or command track, instead of retiring after a long and illustrious Marine career) and helps integrate the services. Critics believe it circumvents the Navy's normal way of training and vetting Space Warfare Officers, potentially placing officers without the necessary experience in command of naval vessels, and that a course is no substitute for years of experience on the bridge.

Currently most graduates of SWCOT are Marine officers and Navy pilots. Carriers can only be commanded by a senior Naval Aviator who has completed the course, and it is difficult to reach general rank as a Marine without also doing so.
"I've never seen this many eggheads in one place before," Hospitalman Third Class Nirali Bhatia observed, glancing up from her omnitool. Her platoon sergeant made a noise of agreement, never looking up from where she was fiddling with the sights on her rifle. The heat beat down on them in waves.

The Marines had settled into positions around the archaeological digsite, a full company of the 2/12th Marine Battalion having marched out from Camp Kumar, near the city of Constant. They'd been patrolling and sleeping under the stars for the last few days, while the scientists transformed this lonely, remote area into a hive of excited activity. At least the scientists got prefabs to sleep in. Nirali had complained a few times that she was pretty sure she'd developed a permanent knot in her back.

"Don't get me wrong," the corpsman added a few moments later, shutting off her omnitool, "Eden Prime is beautiful, but I'm about ready to go home."

The two of them were sitting by one of the tall, broad-leaved trees common to this part of Eden Prime. The roots made digging foxholes on these ridges and hills difficult, so the lieutenant hadn't bothered to tell the platoon to do so. Staff Sergeant Ashley Williams disagreed pretty strongly and said just that - and had gotten a caustic reminder of who was in charge, Williams. She'd turned away, anger locking up her jaw and stalked off. She was grimly waiting for a dressing down by the First Sergeant. If she didn't watch her step she'd lose her platoon sergeant billet, get sent back to rot in armoury.

But all of that wasn't Bhatia's fault.

"You've got like three months left before you go on terminal leave, right?" Ashley asked, putting down her rifle. Terminal leave, when Bhatia would take the remaining leave the military owed her before she was officially discharged. Ash had always thought it pretty fitting that leaving the military was referred to as 'separation', because sometimes it felt a bit like a marriage. Nirali was getting to the point that the time spent away from her husband was getting too much for her. She'd done her four years and was ready to get on with her life. Ash knew the Marine Corps was sunk deep into her bones, but she could understand why Bhatia was ready for her posting to be over with.

Nirali smiled. "Yes. Samesh has been planning our holiday. We're going to visit our families in Gujarat, then go on holiday in South America. I've always wanted to visit there."

The corpsman's voice was tender whenever she said her husband's name. Sometimes, at night lying in her bunk and listening to Bhatia playing Samesh's message to herself to help her sleep, Ashley wondered what it was like to love and be loved like that.

"I'll ask my ma for some recommendations of places to go in Brazil," she offered. She saw herself as human first, colonist second and Brazilian-American third, but her mother was another case.

Bhatia's reply was interrupted by another Marine throwing herself onto the ground with the dull clack of ceramic plates, pulling off her helmet. Sergeant Penny Neal ran a hand through her short brown hair that was just this side of regulation. That was Penny in a nutshell - she made a terrible garrison Marine. She only took shore postings because it was Alliance policy, and as soon as the allotted time was up she'd be back in the fight. Or busted down to Corporal for pissing off the wrong person. Whichever came first. But she'd been a great help to Ash's attempts to turn a green platoon into a unit capable of getting through a Traverse deployment alive. She tried not to think about how all these Marines and Penny would be gone in a month or two, and she'd still be stuck on this
damned rock.

Even though she had the highest technical scores of the platoon. She was the best, just like she'd been in her last platoon, like she'd been in her training platoon, but they would go to the fleet and she'd be here. Waiting for the next officer or NCO who'd turn her last name into an insult.

"Williams, Bhatia," Sergeant Neal said, pulling her canteen out and taking a few gulps, "Can't fuckin' wait until the delivery guys show up and we can stop babysitting."

"You know the Navy," Ashley said dryly, taking a moment to appreciate a droplet of water sliding down Penny's sharp jawline, "they like to take their time."

Penny caught Ash's eye and flushed a little beneath her gaze. A smirk curved her lips. Their mutual attraction had lingered between them from the time they'd met, acknowledged but not spoken. Ashley didn't believe in dating within her platoon and her First Sergeant was just waiting for reasons to write her up. But that didn't mean they couldn't have a bit of fun with it sometimes.

"Hey!" Bhatia complained, and the moment between them snapped and was gone, like water evaporating under the hot Eden Prime sun.

Ash patted her on the shoulder, "Not you, Nirali. You're basically a Marine."

"Go Navy!" Nirali gave a lackluster attempt at a fist pump. Williams grinned at her.

"Williams!" She sprung to her feet at the sudden shout and faced Second Lieutenant Matthews. He scowled at her darkly. His drill instructor routine might have had more of impact on her if he hadn't been barely twenty-two, and if the more experienced Marines in the platoon didn't look to her before they carried out his orders. He seemed to hold her personally responsible for the fact that his Marines didn't respect him, all the while throwing his weight around and trying to browbeat Traverse veterans.

"Yessir?"

"Get the platoon up and moving. The captain wants us to do a patrol of the surrounding area."

"Aye, sir." She pulled Neal to her feet by her webbing, "C'mon, you heard the lieutenant!"

There was a job to do.

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Eight years into his career as a Marine officer and Kaidan Alenko found the process of suiting up to be almost a ritual, or a meditation. He'd swapped his fatigues for a slim underarmour suit, the main purpose of which was to prevent chafing and to link up to the various monitoring and medical systems of his armour. Over that went the 'soft' part of the whole thing - two layers of ballistic weave sandwiching a layer of 'liquid armour', or non-Newtonian fluid. The harder the liquid was struck, the more resistance it would put up. Finally he strapped on the hard pieces - rigid plates of ceramic over his chest, back, sides, shoulders and thighs - and pulled his helmet on. The suit computer booted, running diagnostics of all systems, his modified HUD popping up on his visor.

All green. Alenko nodded in satisfaction.

Next, he slipped his arms through the straps of his chest rig, the load bearing system in which he stored his bits of gear, and started loading up the pockets and pouches. Two smoke grenades, three ECM disk grenades, nine heatsinks, two spare power cells, a packet of glucose pills and a few protein bars.
Across the table from him Lieutenant Commander Shepard was also packing her webbing. Like him, she'd squirreled away some snacks and glucose tablets. Unlike him, she added three frag grenades, a combat knife and a bayonet. That was unusual. A lot of grunts weren't overly familiar with the bayonet and fewer took one with them on missions.

"What's that for, ma'am?" PFC Alex Fredricks nodded towards the bayonet. Alenko was a bit concerned for Fredricks and Corporal Jenkins; they were both good Marines but new to the 103rd Marine Division and eager to prove themselves. Fredricks was their combat engineer attache - he hadn't gone through N School and he was all too aware of it. Jenkins had just passed his N5. He'd made some friends - Sergeant Waaberi and Lance Corporal Teke - but they were both more experienced than he was, and in the age old way of young men, he didn't want to look bad in front of them.

He'd heard that Shepard had dressed down Jenkins for his over-eagerness, but the young Marine was still chomping at the bit for 'real action', though the eagerness was now combined with anxiety about Eden Prime. To put it simply, the Corporal was on edge and jittery.

Kaidan resolved to keep the young Marine close to him during the mission.

Shepard magnetized her shotgun to her lower back and said shortly, "Just in case. Comes in handy sometimes."

Sergeant Draven, better known as 'Gung ho Draven' to distinguish her from her wife, Damage Controlman Third Class Rosamund Draven in Engineering, spoke up: "Ma'am, sir, do we have any idea on the enemy?"

"Negative," replied Kaidan, "We're going to be the first in, so our secondary objective is to get as much intel on the enemy as possible, while the Normandy provides support for the garrison."

Shepard's tone was firm, "Listen up, Marines, We're going in blind. I want everyone to be switched on and smart about this. We might not know the enemy yet, but this is an act of war against the Systems Alliance. We're going to get in, get this beacon and find out who was stupid enough to attack us." Suddenly there was something hard and tense in her face, her eyes glittering like hard, black diamonds. "And then we're going to fucking kill them."

"Oorah!" The war cry boomed through the Normandy's cargo bay.

Ashley had bitten her tongue and her mouth tasted of rust. The air smelt of smoke, the sky bloody and split by streams of gunfire. She burned. Hatred, pain, fatigue, the type of fury that made you want to scream with it, but she had to keep her breath for running. Feet pounding against the dirt, darting from cover to cover, gunfire stitching the earth behind her, her pursuers chattering in electronic screeches.

She had to keep moving. Her side and front was wet with blood and tissue; Penny had been standing beside her when she'd been bisected by enemy fire, her life splattered across Ashley's armour. She hadn't made a noise as she'd died. One moment she was alive and fighting and keeping her squad together, the next she was dead. Nirali had tried to go to her but Ash had told her to keep moving, there was nothing to do. She could deal with Bhatia calling her a bitch for leaving their friend in the grass and dirt, if it meant she lived.

But she hadn't. She hadn't. Everything had fallen apart. She'd crawled over Penny's body to escape as the gunshots rang out. They'd executed them so efficiently. Double tap to the head, no matter how badly the Marine was wounded, no matter how the Marine begged.
Williams ducked behind a log, hearing the thud of rounds hitting her new cover. Her hands were mechanical on her rifle. She raised it, snapped off several bursts at the nearest geth, drilling it right in the flashlight. Changed targets, fired again; a geth platform staggered and fell, its chest resembling a cheese grater. She was out of grenades, but she still had ammunition. The fury that bubbled in her chest, tasted metallic in her mouth, hazed her vision in red, demanded some sort of recompense for her friends, even if she was the only one who would know about it.

The lieutenant had been amongst the first to die. Williams had taken command, mind racing, tactical plans spinning together in her head, with how she would get her platoon out of this mess and falling back towards the rest of her battalion. Instead, fire had rained upon them from every angle and every plea for reinforcements or air strikes or artillery over the radio had been answered by static. And the Marines had died, one by one. The ones who lived long enough were executed or put on those spikes.

Her rifle beeped at her. She tugged free her sidearm and popped off one, two, three shots, knocking a drone out of the air. She grunted as her shields took the brunt of a replying barrage from one of the machines. They failed as she threw herself down, feeling like she'd been punched in the side. One of the ceramic plates was blackened, grazed by a bullet, but the armour had held. These rounds, these weapons, she'd never seen anything like them. They cut military spec shields to shreds in seconds.

That was how Nirali had died. Screaming, as those rounds had ripped through shield and armour both and into her abdomen. Ashley had dragged her to cover and pulled out a tube of medigel, but she was gone even as she'd tried to stop the bleeding.

Williams slid another heatsink home and raised her rifle. *Do not go gentle into that good night.*

She was alone. She was the last. All she could taste was blood.

The Marines of the *Normandy* advanced, a wave of gunfire and black hardsuits charging through collapsed Prothean stonework and past the still corpses of Marines and civilians alike. Some of the bodies were burnt beyond recognition or pockmarked with bullet wounds and every time Shepard passed one, she got angrier. The geth showed no fear, retreating in good order under the onslaught, even when Gung Ho Draven took down the sniper providing the enemy with cover fire with a precisely launched grenade that blew bits of metal everywhere.

They were machines. They couldn't feel fear or rage.

But anger and fear could be a driving force, something Shepard knew intimately. It drove the Marines now, ever violently forward. Shepard could feel the shared, grim determination to get to the beacon and achieve the objective of this mission - for Jenkins, so very young and now so very dead, cut down in a hail of geth gunfire.

Shepard was a maelstrom of biotics and shotgun blasts, ripping geth out of cover where they were riddled by bullets or torn apart when Alenko hit them with an opposing biotic field. She left her rifle on her back, taking shots at any geth platform that was in range of her shotgun instead. Beside her the Marine officer was the deceptively tranquil eye of the storm, as he flung an enemy into stone or tossed out an ECM grenade that fried shields and weapons. Only rarely did he raise and fire his rifle.

She'd been concerned that he would see her taking command of the ground mission as a slight - XOs on corvettes and frigates did sometimes lead ground teams, but only if no Marine NCOs or officers were aboard - but she was beginning to realise that the thought to be offended probably hadn't even crossed his mind.
She raised a hand, tendrils of blue whipping around her arm and caught a drone that had been focusing fire on PFC Fredricks. Staff Sergeant Williams, the stray garrison Marine, stood and fired. The woman was a crack shot: almost every round found its target. The drone crumpled like a tin can and without pausing the sergeant switched targets, suppressing another geth platform. Shepard was impressed - it was one thing to be so clearly talented, it was another to use that talent not only in combat, but under the sort of stress and grief Williams had to be feeling.

Fearless or not, the synthetics were steadily overrun by the black-clad Marines, with Fredricks snarling as he put three rounds through the optics of the last enemy.

The digsite was empty.

"It was here," insisted Williams, "The geth must have moved it."

"Likely," Shepard agreed. The force the Normandy Marines had carved through was nowhere near the strength required to destroy a full company of infantry Marines, which made sense if the geth had taken their prize already. These ones would have been left to harry the remaining Marines, prevent them from regrouping and counter-attacking.

"What now?" Lance Corporal Ki-tae asked, frustration flavouring his voice.

"To fly it outta here, you'd have to take it to the spaceport - can't even get a shuttle in here," Williams supplied.

"That's where Nihlus said he was headed, Commander," Alenko said, coming to stand near her. "Has he reported in since then?"

Shepard shook her head. "He hasn't. It's worth checking it out."

"Nihlus?" Williams asked quizzically.

"Spectre," Shepard said shortly, not wanting the distraction of explaining, putting her shotgun away and getting out her rifle. "How do we get to the spaceport?"

"It's past the scientists' camp. I'll show you."

"Move out," Shepard ordered. "Stay sharp and keep your eyes open. We can't rely on our scanners."

Captain David Anderson stood on the podium in the CIC of his ship, staring down at the holographic representation of the battlefield far below. Blinking icons denoted friendly positions and enemy forces; the remaining infantry of the 12th Marine Regiment had fallen back to positions defending the city alongside the Army garrison and militia, in an attempt to save as many civilians as possible. They were under sustained attack from what appeared to be a reinforced geth regiment with armoured support.

Anderson had ordered the Normandy's reconnaissance drones launched and her extensive sensors turned on the enemy, hoping to glean whatever intel they could. Anything they could learn would save lives once the relief force arrived.

What he saw perplexed him: the enemy force was large enough that it had routed the 2/12th battalion and pinned the defenders of Constant in their current positions, but it wouldn't be enough to hold the city once the Seventh Marine Expeditionary Brigade landed with a full flotilla of Alliance warships backing them up. This wasn't an invasion - this was an incursion. But why? The geth hadn't been seen outside the Perseus Veil since they'd driven their creators into exile centuries ago, and they'd
certainly never interacted with humanity before.

And then there was the dreadnought. It was a black, gleaming, hulking thing that reminded him of a cuttlefish perched near Constant's spaceport, the likes of which Anderson had never seen before. No Alliance dreadnought was that large and no Alliance dreadnought could land on a planet with Eden Prime's gravity. It was beyond even the most dire of Alliance Strategic Command's thought exercises regarding the geth.

He knew that monstrosity would swat the Normandy like a fly if they got too close, but it hadn't moved to pursue the frigate or give support to the geth forces assaulting the city. Still, he'd ordered the ship to maintain enough distance and altitude that they could make a run for it if the dreadnought decided it wanted stealth frigate for lunch.

"Netcall, this is Normandy. On station and ready for call for fire, over." He said into his comm.

The regiment's Naval Gunfire Liaison Officer sounded visibly relieved over the net. "Normandy, this is Warhorse. Fire mission, target number Alpha Zulu 2451, over."

Anderson repeated back the warning order, then ordered Joker to line the ship up and Lieutenant Gema Wulandri to input the firing solution.

"Infantry platoon in the open, danger close south 1500 metres, one round, over."

"Fire," Anderson ordered over the comm line between the bridge and the gunnery officer, down in the bowels of the ship.

The whole ship shivered as the main cannon roared, the sound echoing through the hallways and compartments inside her. A mass accelerator round was hurled through the clouds and smoke and into the middle of a platoon of synthetics advancing on a tenuously held position. The explosion threw up rock, dirt, smoke and bits of geth, leaving a deep crater and cheering Marines.

"Gunnery, shift target, grid reference." He glanced at the tacnet and listed the numbers. "Main gun."

The ship realigned in a clever little sideways slip that Joker was no doubt pleased with himself about. "Fire!"

The Normandy again shuddered as her main weapon discharged, the shell this time impacting on top of an Armature that had been tearing into one of the 3/12th's platoons. They were taking intermittent anti-ship fire, but the state of the art shields and defensive GARDIAN lasers had negated it admirably so far.

"How long until the 15th ESG is on station?" he asked Lowe. The Fifteenth Expeditionary Strike Group consisted of the 7th Marine Expeditionary Brigade, the MEB's troopships, two cruisers, two ground support frigates and enough drop ships to land all of the brigade's 14,500 Marines and sailors. Once they landed, the battle would change very, very quickly.

If that dreadnought didn't tear the strike group to pieces first.

"One and a half hours, sir. The Everest is also enroute."

Hackett, that wily old bastard, was coming himself? And bringing his dreadnought too? The geth might as well say their prayers now. If geth could even believe in anything, that was.

"Sir!" It was Senior Combat Systems Operator Lei Chou, on one of the sensor stations, "The enemy dreadnought is moving!"
"Joker, you have the conn." Anderson said sharply. "Prepare to take evasive maneuvers."

However the strange, squidlike dreadnought seemed to disregard them. Instead, it rose into the sky and then into space, leaving the battlefield behind and leaving the geth forces with no way of retreat. Anderson had the sensor technicians track it until it hit the nearest Relay, even as the ship continued to strike at enemy positions with its cannon and torpedoes.

"Well, at least it won't oppose the MEB landing," said Lieutenant Commander Pressly.

Anderson grunted. "No, but now we have a huge fucking enemy dreadnought wandering around our space and no way to find it."

Joker brought the ship around to head back towards a Marine platoon's location, and he did his best to stuff his worries about the dreadnought into a drawer called 'later' in his head. Distractions right now were worse than useless.

"Heat load?" he barked as the ship fired again, shaking beneath his feet. Heat load was the one greatest limitation of a warship - she could only fight for so long until she cooked her crew, in naval parlance, into fried calamari. He'd been checking the ship sensors and readings more regularly than he would've had he still been commanding the Tokyo. The Normandy was still supposed to be doing her space trials, not dodging anti ship fire and blasting enemy platoons into craters.

The one good thing about this mess was that he could probably try and pass the battle off as the Normandy passing all of her stress tests and then some. But knowing the type of protocol obsessed officer that constituted Naval Command, it was more likely he'd get reprimanded for taking an untested ship into combat. NavComm had always had a thing for boxing the ears of those they thought were straying too close to maverick status. Special Forces units gave them regular aneurysms. Too many beards.

"Still in the green, sir," Navigator Pressly reported. Anderson had ordered the stealth system disengaged for more operational time, trading the IES' defence of sensor invisibility for duration. The geth had AA but what the GARDIAN systems missed, Flight Lieutenant Moreau danced the Normandy free of. Some people thought that Joker shouldn't even be in the military, but Anderson didn't doubt his ship would have a hole or two in it by now if not for the insubordinate bastard.

"Sir, we've got incoming geth fighters!" Reported Lieutenant Nina Rodriquez. "Three of 'em, they're coming in fast."

Three silvery, insectoid fighters had broken off from bombing the city and swept towards the Normandy, gaining altitude. Joker flung the ship into a steep ascent, pulling up and out of her holding pattern above the battlefield. The inertia dampener and artificial gravity had both been turned down and Anderson was rapidly made glad of the fact he'd strapped himself into his restraints as a datapad flew off a workstation, past his face, and bounced down the near vertical command deck. He took a moment to make a note for himself to yell at Farro after the battle for failing to secure his work station, before the ship jerked hard to starboard, twisting and plummeting towards the surface with the fighters and two anti-ship proton torpedos in swift pursuit.

"Come on, baby," he heard his pilot say softly over the commlink and the Normandy pulled up sharply, throwing the captain against his restraints. The torpedoes slammed into a grassy hill in a plume of smoke and dirt. The Normandy whirled with the grace of a ballet dancer, spinning to face her pursuers. She fired once, twice. The first torpedo cracked a fighter into a dozen pieces that fell, burning, to the dirt. The second winged another fighter, tearing off its right thruster and sending the geth aircraft into a death spin that ended with it slamming into rock.
The third fighter was unable to pull up quickly enough and the *Normandy* split it in half with a bright blue GARDIAN laser.

Rubbing at his sore collarbone, Anderson said, "Joker, get us back into our firing station. And good flying, Lieutenant."

"That's why you keep me around, Captain," Joker drawled and eased into a turn, making the ship do a smug, saucy little wiggle as he did.

"You were stealing our fucking grenades and weapons," sweat dripped down Williams' face under her visor. There was a wild look in her eyes as she took her eyes as she took a step towards the dock worker. "We were risking our asses to protect your worthless asses, and you took our fucking weapons!"

"No one ever misses a few here and there," he insisted, "Eden Prime is a backwater!"

An ugly noise rumbled through the Marines and Powell looked around wildly, finding only hostility staring back. Williams laughed, a hard sound. "Who would attack a wealthy colony near the edges of Alliance space, huh? You piece of shit!"

Shepard recognised the murderous light in Williams' eyes. Everyone had their limit, and she was close to hers. But once you crossed that line, there was no taking it back. She grabbed the back of her webbing as the Marine advanced, jerking her to a stop. "Stand down."

"But-

"Beating the shit out of him won't change anything and we have a mission to complete. He'll get his. But not like this." They'd need his testimony about the attack and Saren later anyway. But she doubted Williams was in the frame of mind to appreciate that right now.

For a moment she thought the younger Marine might go for Powell's throat anyway, but then she stepped back, sneering in his direction.

"Good to go?" she asked her Marines, and was pleased when they all nodded. Even Staff Sergeant Williams. "Move out."

Shepard glared at the beacon as if her gaze could cause it to shut off its security field and box itself up for transport. It was a glare that had made the knees of grizzled veterans knock together, but unfortunately it had no effect on inanimate objects. Far too many people had died for this thing and now, as a final insult, it was preventing easy removal. She turned to contact the ship as Fredricks and 'Jaz' Teke carried Jenkins and Dubyansky dragged Nihlus in a bodybag onto the spaceport platform. Gung Ho Draven was busy herding the various civilians they'd found scattered in various hiding places during their advance - and keeping said civilians away from Williams who looked as if she still wanted to deliver a few punches to dockworker noses.

It was best not to leave civilians lying around in a war zone. They'd get into all sorts of trouble and no doubt someone would blame her for it. She just hoped they would be able to handball them off to someone else very soon, because if she had to listen to that scientist ranting about death and destruction for too long she'd probably get a migraine, knowing her luck.

She glanced past Williams and-

Alenko was in trouble.
Several thoughts ran through her head in rapid-fire: *he's trying to get free, he's trapped, why isn't he calling out, my Marine, I'm not losing another one* - But the action that followed was without thought, as if her body had seized control and propelled her forward, shouldering past Williams, sprinting towards him. She grabbed Alenko around the waist and heaved, gene-modded muscles screaming as she fought his solid, muscular weight and the mass effect field wrapped around him.

Gravity and momentum took over and Alenko went tumbling, sprawling at Williams' feet.

And then all her muscles locked as something dragged and lifted her helplessly towards the beacon. There were voices calling her name, but it was dull and distant over the stab of fear deep into her gut and the rushing in her ears. A terrible vice clamped around her head, squeezing, squeezing. It was like claws tearing into her skull, ripping her mind open. She tried to scream but her mouth wouldn't open.


Memories, impressions, foreign impulses buried themselves into her mind, alien and forceful.

-a dozen cities cracked open and burning. Metal claws from the sky, from the stars, ripping whole worlds into pieces.

The vise around her head tightened, tightened. She knew it would kill her, had to, would crush her skull and pulp the brain inside.

*Metal like a disease, metal knitting with flesh, invading it, making it unholy. Screaming that became screeches, metallic and cold. Organic pieces scattered on streets. Help us. HELP US-

Then there was release, or perhaps an explosion, her ears ringing and her eyes unseeing, and Emilia Shepard fled into blissful darkness.

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**CODEX ENTRY:**

*Colonial Militia*: It is an unfortunate fact that life in the colonies is often more dangerous than life in a developed country on Earth. Wildlife and pirates are both hazards to the intrepid colonist seeking a new home, and the Systems Alliance Defence Force is often stretched thin defending the Alliance's large and sparsely populated borders.

As part of an attempt to increase colonial defences and recruit colonists into their own defence, the Alliance Parliament legislated for the creation of colonial militias, under the auspice of the 'Colonial Guards'. These militias, while receiving some training and funding support from the SADF, vary widely in quality and size. Some are rather haphazard about standards, others such as Mindoir have mandatory service for able bodied adults and a well oiled training system run by Alliance veterans.

Many militias use Alliance surplus or cheap weaponry, such M96 Mattock and M8 Avenger assault rifles, Grizzly IFVs and old shuttles. Militias are prohibited from fielding navies of their own, however several large colonies such as Elysium, Terra Nova and Benning have bought retired corvettes and cutters from the Alliance for customs and patrols.

In peacetime, militias remain under the control of their colonial government, train once a month and assist with search and rescue efforts as required. During wartime, however, the Systems Alliance government may call militia troops to active duty as auxiliaries.
Prophecies

Anderson stood in front of the remains of the Prothean beacon, the shattered base still smelling faintly of smoke. The Marines had dragged it aboard and then carried the bodies of Richard Jenkins and Nihlus Kryik aboard, gently sealing them into flat, silver body transfer cases and carrying them into the freezer. Draven and Alenko had then draped Jenkin’s case with the Alliance flag and fastened it in place. That flag wouldn’t leave the body until his funeral, when it would be folded and given to the young Marine’s mother.

If his mother was still alive.

Shit. This mission had become a helluva mess. No artifact, a dead Spectre, a dead Marine. The Defence Department and the Council would want answers and they wouldn’t like what he’d have to say. That no one had seen the geth coming, that sometimes missions went to shit just because of dumb luck, that it wasn’t the Alliance’s fault Nihlus had charged off on his own, that Shepard and her team had prevented a lot of dead Marines and civilians by getting to that nuke.

Alenko and Williams had carried his XO to the medical bay, where she was still unconscious. He’d only visited briefly, despite the cold, hard stone of concern in his gut. He was the captain and the ship needed him. He’d distracted himself with the orders that had to be given: transmitting all reports and recon data to Hackett’s flagship, running more orbital strikes on enemy positions. Now Hackett’s task group was in system, so he’d ordered Joker to extricate the ship from the battlespace and enter orbit, where he’d spent several hours in vid conferences with various superiors, all of whom were in various states of panic.

You better wake up, Junior, he’d thought grimly, touching her still shoulder for a moment. If she didn’t, he’d have to tell her mother.

Captain Hannah Shepard - Shepard Senior - was one of the toughest people Anderson had ever met, even if she appeared to have an emotional range that went from ‘mildly irritated and wondering why you were bothering her’ to ‘about to kick someone out an airlock’. In the twenty years Anderson had known her, he’d seen her cry twice. Once when Sergeant Isabel Shepard had been pulled out of a burning tank on Shanxi in pieces. And once, when she’d been quietly informed that her daughter had been on Akuze and that she was gravely wounded. The first time she’d wiped her eyes, bared her teeth and gotten back in her fighter jet, determined to rain vengeance upon the Hierarchy Army, a task she had gone about with admirable efficiency. The second time she had simply sobbed, and everyone besides Anderson in the room had been shocked to realise that she was, in fact, not actually a human-shaped piece of steel.

David gave the beacon one last glare and headed back up to Deck 2, sharing the elevator with Lance Corporal Nick Ki-tae and Serviceman Third Class Robert Falawa. They were both just boys, Falawa nineteen and Ki-tae twenty-one. When the elevator door opened, they murmured a dispirited, “Sir.”

He watched them go. The gloom of Jenkins’ death and Shepard’s condition hung heavily over the crew, like a physical thing, pressing down on your shoulders. Jenkins had been a good kid. Bit overeager. Bit like a puppy in uniform. Needed to learn better bearing as a NCO. But enthusiastic, bombastic, with a talent for drawing people out of their shells. He’d somehow talked Alenko, reserved and controlled as the man was, into biotically flinging him across the cargo bay. Anderson could still remember the horrified look on Alenko’s face when Jenkins hit a crate, the abject horror of a man about to get defenestrated by an angry naval doctor. But then the Corporal had gotten up, yelling about how awesome it was and the biotic officer had had to tactically retreat before another Marine demanded to be thrown.
Anderson withdrew to his cabin and sat down to start writing the first of many reports to his superiors.

Ashley felt numb, like her emotions had switched off to avoid overload and blowing out the fuses in her brain. She was one of those unluckiest of Marines, the type that other Marines quietly avoided for fear that the bad luck was contagious.

Sole survivor. What the fuck.

She’d known Marines who’d been killed in action - it was part of being in the Corps. The Alliance wasn’t at war, technically, but combat deployments were common and regular, so at some point the name of a friend or acquaintance would end up on the casualty lists or the scrolling line at the bottom of the evening news. But this… It was like her mind couldn’t comprehend the knowledge. Not really. Six hundred gone. No. Five hundred and ninety-nine Marines gone. The 2/12th obliterated in a few hours.

What could she say to her family, to her ma? She had a feeling that if she spoke to her mother that the ice coating her insides would crack and she’d cry in the middle of the mess hall in front of all these strangers who hated that she wasn’t Richard Jenkins, or something embarrassing like that. So instead of a vidcall she pulled up her email and mechanically typed out a message. She told her mother that she was okay and off Eden Prime, that she couldn’t call at the moment but she would as soon as she could, and not to worry. She knew Mariana Williams would worry anyway. She’d already lost a husband to the military.

Someone sat down next to her and Ash looked up, closing her emails. Staff Lieutenant Alenko looked like he’d had as much sleep as she had in the past twenty-four hours - none. There were deep bags under his warm brown eyes. If she’d met him in a bar somewhere, she might’ve thought he was the kinda guy, with his immaculate hair and measured way of speaking, that her mother would love her to bring home.

He’d spent much of the time since the two of them had carried the Normandy’s comatose executive officer aboard either talking to his dispirited Marines or hovering near the medbay. There was a painful hint of guilt tucked into the downturn of his mouth.

“Sir?” she said uncertainly.

“Just wanted to see how you were doing.” Alenko said. “And we’ll have a few things to go over, with your assignment to the Normandy.”

“Yessir.” Her gut churned a little. She was desperate to be a part of the Marine Detachment, boots on the ground, get some goddamn payback. But she knew how this went. Alenko would look at her missing qualifications, her history of colonial garrison postings and at her last name, and he’d assign her to the armoury or maintenance or security. If she was lucky. It was still ship duty. She did her best to remember that.

“Since you’ll be taking over as platoon sergeant, we’ll need to-”

“What?” she burst out.

Alenko blinked. “You’ll…be the platoon sergeant? Is there a problem with that?”

A bloom of something dangerously close to hope filled her chest. “No sir. Sorry.”

He paused for a moment and then seemed to shrug internally, and continued. “I could put Sergeant
Draven up to it, if you’re not comfortable, but she’s better as a squad or team leader, and I was impressed with how you helped organise my Marines during the battle.” She’d been expecting to get pulled up for taking charge of Jenkins’ team. “You’ll take over the armoury and supervise Mako maintenance - this is a small crew, so everyone has multiple responsibilities.”

“No problem with doing that,” Ashley said, and meant it.

He smiled. “Good to hear, Sergeant. You’re missing some qualifications, but don’t worry too much about it. The Captain and I both want you aboard, so if we need to do some creative paperwork, we’ll get it done.”

She thought she should investigate that further, ask what ‘creative paperwork’ meant. Instead she nodded slowly, “Alright, LT.”

“Welcome aboard, Williams.”

Shepard’s head throbbed more than the worst hangover she’d ever had - and she’d had some impressive hangovers in the past. Special Forces liked to party, and rank was no defence against a grizzled Senior Chief who looked like he’d been around since the Hundred Year’s War pressing whiskey into your hand. Her head felt stuffed full of cotton wool, thoughts slow and stuttering in between sharp jabs of pain, and there were no fond memories to blunt the discomfort. She’d spent as long as she could justify in the dark med bay, hiding from the noise and light in the crew quarters, but now the ship was headed into dock and that meant she needed her Executive Officer. Scrambled brains or not.

Anderson had ordered that dress uniforms be worn, so after taking more painkillers and drinking a quick cup of coffee courtesy of a very guilty Alenko, she headed for the tiny cabin she shared with Navigator Pressly. In most ships the captain, executive officer and navigator had their own cabins, but the Normandy was small enough that only Anderson did. She didn’t mind. A bunk was practically luxury after all the time she’d spent sleeping under vehicles, in holes or in hammocks.

Putting on the dress uniform was muscle memory by now, left over from those long months stuck on Arcturus Station as the Alliance’s decorative war hero. White, pressed pants. White pressed shirt. White pressed jacket. She fastened the buttons up to her chin, wincing as the scar tissue laid over her left shoulder stretched. Next was the ribbon bar, a splash of colour across her chest. Anderson was going to look like a Christmas tree with all the medals he had, or perhaps a Hegemony general. She slid open the drawer and looked down at the Star of Terra she kept there, the pale blue ribbon and the glint of bronze. She fastened it around her neck, but not before she brushed her fingers across the coil of dogtags she kept beside the medal box.

For six years she’d done her best to be worth what so many Marines had sacrificed. She could only keep trying.

She gave herself one last look in the mirror, fastening on her dress sword, making sure everything was in place. She’d argued with Anderson again - twice. She wasn’t used to disagreeing with him so often, and it made her feel as if the ground beneath her feet was unsteady. The first argument had been rather matter of course and she’d accepted her captain’s judgment. The assignment of Staff Sergeant Williams concerned her; she agreed with Alenko’s assessment of the NCO’s skills, but she knew all too well what it was like to be the last one left and she’d spent a couple of months in hospital after Akuze. Williams was being thrown back into the fray without time for counseling or debriefing. Anderson thought that being amongst Marines would help and that Alenko would keep an eye on her; Shepard hoped he was right.
There was a rock of apprehension in her stomach. She was about to go before the Citadel Council and accuse one of their top agents of treason based on a few bad dreams and the words of a smuggler. She wanted to ask for an investigation, for the justice due to Eden Prime, but Anderson was thrusters full speed ahead on this one, and his eyes glittered with something hard when he said the name ‘Saren’.

Shepard shook her concerns off. She had her duty, whether she liked it or not.

She left her cabin, dodging crew members and trying not to catch the sword on anything. Anderson had ordered Alenko and Williams to go to the hearing with her, and they were waiting, in the somber dark blue of Marine dress blues, medals catching the light. Williams’ medal rack was surprisingly bare, bereft of even the Space Service Ribbon. She really needed to finish reading the Marine’s dossier; that didn’t match up with what Shepard had seen of her on Eden Prime. Some Marines preferred garrison postings over expeditionary units or shipboard postings to stay close to their families - but Williams was unmarried and had no children.

But that was a conundrum for later.

“You two,” she said briskly. “With me.”

“Aye ma’am,” murmured Alenko, and the two Marine slotted in to stand on either side of her, like it was natural. She fixed her eyes forward, ignoring the stares from the crew that touched on the star gleaming at her throat, and led Alenko and Williams up onto the bridge.

CODEX ENTRY:

Systems Alliance Marine Corps Enlisted Ranks And Their Roles:

Private (Pvt): entry rank for most enlisted. No rank insignia. Performs their MVC with no leadership role.

Private First Class (PFC): Entry rank for individuals who have met certain requirements. Promotion occurs automatically after six months service.

Lance Corporal (LCpl): The last automatic promotion for a Marine, which can typically be earned after a year’s service with a good service record. A Lance Corporal is generally expected to begin mentoring Privates and PFCs and begin developing their own leadership skills.

Corporal (Cpl): Corporals are the most junior NCO (non-commissioned officer) rank. They’re experienced Marines and act as mentors to junior servicemen. As leaders they are still very inexperienced, and they work closely with more senior NCOs to develop those skills. Corporals usually lead fireteams of 3-4 Marines.

Sergeant (Sgt): Sergeants are more seasoned NCOs. They continue developing their leadership skills, and traditionally lead squads of three fireteams. They also act as secondary enlisted advisers for junior officers.

Staff Sergeant (SSgt): Staff Sergeants are the most junior of Senior NCOs (SNCO). They are very experienced NCOs and leaders, and are responsible for the professional development of junior NCOs. They typically occupy a position of Platoon Sergeant, working as the senior enlisted adviser for the Platoon Leader.
Gunnery Sergeant (GySgt): Gunnery Sergeants are very experienced Marines, experts in their vocational specialty. They are traditionally known as drill instructors for the Marine Recruits, but can also occupy any billets requiring vast amounts of experience. Typical such positions are Weapons Platoon Sergeant, Company Operations Chief, or Armored Unit Section Leaders.

In their annual performance evaluations, called "fitness reports", eligible Gunnery Sergeants indicate whether they wish to be considered for promotion to Master Sergeant or First Sergeant, and thus whether they enter the promotional track for Master Gunnery Sergeant or Sergeant Major. Once promoted, the promotional track is usually permanent, with lateral movement between the two programs very uncommon.

Master Sergeant (MSgt): Master Sergeants are technical experts in their vocational specialty similarly to Gunnery Sergeants, but possess even more experience. Typical position for a Master Sergeant is Weapons Company Operations Chief, but a Regimental Assistant Operations Chief is also a common billet.

First Sergeant (1Sgt): First Sergeants occupy the same paygrade slot as Master Sergeants, but their responsibilities are different. Almost all First Sergeants act as Company Sergeants, responsible for handling the leadership and professional development of their Marines and NCOs. As Company Sergeant, they also manage pay issues, supervise administrative issues, manage the promotable soldiers within the company, and are the first step in disciplinary actions.

Master Gunnery Sergeant (MGySgt): Master Gunnery Sergeants are responsible for providing military leadership, technical acumen, and mastery of their MVC. They typically serve in military staff as Section Chiefs at the battalion level or higher echelon. One of the major differences between Master Gunnery Sergeant and Sergeant Major grades is that Master Gunnery Sergeants retain their MVC, while Sergeants Major are given a new MVC to reflect their general command focus.

Sergeant Major (SgtMaj): Sergeant Majors serve as the senior enlisted Marine in the units of battalion, squadron or higher echelon. They act as the unit commander's senior enlisted advisor and handle matters of discipline and morale among the enlisted marines. A special billet for this rank is the ‘Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps’, the highest ranking enlisted Marine in the entire Corps, who is the Commandant’s enlisted advisor.
The group walked out of the Citadel Tower in dejected silence. Kaidan tugged his jacket straight - Marine dress blues might look good, but he’d always found the collar irritating to the sensitive skin around his implant jack.

“I can’t believe that they didn’t even pretend to listen to your testimony.” Anderson was fuming, expression dark.

Shepard paused. “…I can. But they didn’t consider Powell’s testimony at all.”

“A smuggler.” Udina said caustically and Kaidan winced as Shepard’s eyebrow, the one with the scar through the middle of it, raised in response to his tone. “You didn’t exactly find a particularly credible witness, Shepard. A smuggler, who hid behind crates while his coworkers and the garrison died!”

“Hiding behind crates during a gunfight is an understandable reaction by a man without combat training,” Shepard said mildly. “Perhaps not the bravest reaction, but understandable. And it doesn’t make him a liar.”

“The Council thinks we’re spinning this to get rid of their golden boy because of his political views, and to save your candidacy, Shepard,” Udina continued sharply.

“Ma’am, sirs,” Kaidan broke in. “If I may?” He looked at Shepard and when she nodded, he kept talking. “The way I see it, we need concrete evidence the Council can’t see as just - politicking. Saren is, or was, based off the Citadel, there’s surely something incriminating on the station. That C-Sec officer - Garrus Vakarian? - he said he was close to something before the Council shut down his investigation.”

“If you can call ten hours an investigation,” muttered Williams.

“Right. He might be able to point us in the right direction. In the very least, he’s actually a detective, and none of us have any police work training or experience.” A special forces officer and two infantry Marines weren’t exactly the people Kaidan would’ve picked for an investigation. But, as his instructors in the Officer Training Corps would say, adapt and overcome.

Shepard nodded. “I agree, Lieutenant. But we’re out of our AO here - C-Sec have shut him down and I doubt Pallin will be happy to have us tramping around in his neck of the woods.”

Udina scratched his chin. “I might be able to help you there. There’s a C-Sec officer, human. He’s been a good source for me in the past. Harkin’s his name-”


“Yes. The drunk. He can point you in the direction of Vakarian at the very least.”

“Harkin is an asshole, but I’m sure you can get him to open up, Commander.” Anderson smiled so pleasantly that Alenko felt a sinking feeling in his gut that told him he might be about to be part of something illegal.

“I am very good with people, sir.”

“That you are, Lieutenant Commander.”
The street was narrow and above Shepard’s head hummed the occasional skycar. Everything was grey and blue - the dim light, the floor, the walls. She wondered idly if this part of Tayseri Ward had been deliberately set up to broadcast that ‘going to a dive bar’ feel.

“Can’t say I’ve ever gone to a strip club on Marine Corps business before,” Alenko said mildly. Above them the crude sign for Chora’s Den flashed suggestively. Shepard had, occasionally, but mostly to collect errant Marines causing problems. She’d often enjoyed that; the odd barfight was good for the soul.

“Yeah,” said Sergeant Williams. “Not a habit of mine either.”


“Aye aye ma’am!” said Alenko smartly. They’d changed out of their dress uniforms for this - the Alliance wouldn’t look kindly on two officers and a senior NCO visiting a strip club in Class As. No sir. She suspected, casual jeans and jacket notwithstanding, they’d all be pegged as military the moment they walked in. But military personnel weren’t exactly uncommon in bars like this, and enough Alliance cruisers stopped by the Citadel that they wouldn’t stand out.

Williams opened her mouth to respond, then -

CRACK-

Shepard wore a ‘clip on’ kinetic barrier emitter, something her ex-wife had always thought was a sign of paranoia. She officially won that old argument as her shield flared around her, bright and blue. Then Williams’ muscular form smacked into her, driving the air from her lungs in a huff, even as Alenko’s sharp, “Down!” echoed through the narrow corridor. Shepard’s shoulder hit the metal floor, hard, and a flare of pain burst across her skin.

The Marine rolled off her, pulling a concealed pistol from her jacket in a fluid motion. Shepard followed suit, switching the safety off on the slim little gun, and rolled to her feet, keeping her head below the edge of the waist high metal wall Williams had dragged her behind. The pistol was a peashooter compared to the military grade weapons she was used to, but it was something - and both she and Alenko were amped.

Alenko was on her other side, firing a few shots off in the direction the gunfire had come from with a look of calm concentration on his face. Another shot cracked overhead as he ducked, pitting the wall behind them.

“Four of them, ma’am!” called Alenko crisply. “Military grade pistols, one has a rifle.”

Another few bullets crackled overhead. Shepard wanted to know how these people had a damned rifle on the Wards - and why she didn’t. ‘You’re not allowed a grenade launcher on the Citadel, Commander’, her ass. Williams fired a few times, eyes sharp and focused. Shepard raised her head, locating the four men firing on them, crouched behind an advertisement, ignoring a bullet that pinged off her shields. All turians.

One of Williams’ bullets punched into the ad pillar and it fuzzed into a cacophony of blurred words and static. Shepard crouched back down as the four of them focused on her, shots hammering into her shields in quick, successive flares of blue.

As she did, a disk clattered to the floor between Shepard and her Marine lieutenant.

“Grenade!” she shouted and instinctively raised her hands, blue fire twisting into a barrier in front of
her.

The grenade exploded. Shards of metal burst across the alleyway, razor sharp, embedding themselves in the wall and ceiling - but deflecting off Shepard’s barrier and away from her and Williams behind her.

“I’m alright!” Alenko called, his corona wrapped around him as well. She allowed herself a moment of relief.

“Fuck these guys!” Williams slammed a new heatsink into her pistol, eyes flashing.

Alenko seemed to agree because he reached out in a sharp mnemonic and one of the turians screamed as he was Lifted into the air. His voice cut off abruptly when Shepard flung out a hand and the Warp detonated Alenko’s field in a crackle of energy. The wave of dark energy rippled out, tearing into the other assassins. The one turian still on his feet continued to fire at them in a display of either profound courage or profound stupidity. His fire ended when Williams shot him in the face, blood splattering the Citadel wall, blue against grey.

Shepard threw herself out of cover, pistol raised and blood thrumming, corona wrapped around her. One of the assassins was still alive, his legs twisted and ruined from the force of the biotic explosion.

“We have medigel,” she told him. “We’ll give you first aid and call an ambulance, but you need to tell me who sent you.”

The turian’s yellow eyes were oddly empty of pain or fear. He raised his hand and the gun in it - aiming at her chest -

Bang.

His chest exploded even as she was moving in a mnemonic. Williams was beside her, eyes hard, pistol raised. Alenko let his flare die away and Shepard swallowed down the energy she’d been about to unleash. Damn, Williams was quick.

Shepard looked down at the corpse. “He had to have known he didn’t have a chance of killing all of us.”

“I don’t think he cared about anything but killing you, ma’am,” Alenko said softly beside her.

Doctor Chloe Michel was the first human Tali had seen up close. Humans were both strange and familiar - dull eyes, flat teeth and strange legs but with hair. She watched her cautiously, skittishly; a mixture of shock at being shot and sharp-edged grief still thrumming through her. She’d known that the Pilgrimage could be dangerous, but she’d never imagined this: pursued across multiple clusters by a murderous turian and the bite of humiliation as authority after authority looked at her with sharp derision and muttered slurs.

Tali flinched as the doctor touched her side and Michel withdrew until she relaxed. They were in the clinic’s cleanroom and the human was dressed in what she called a ‘bunny suit’. She’d explained that there was a small community of quarians who’d chosen not to return to the Flotilla on the Ward, and most of them came to her. She didn’t understand that - the Fleet was crowded and the weight of her father’s name followed her everywhere, but at least no one called her a suit rat or shot at her.

Doctor Michel continued to carefully stitch up the wound with a steady hand and focus in her eyes. “You were very lucky. I believe your suit and shields took most of the kinetic force. Otherwise…”
Tali would be dead. She shivered.

The human hesitated. “Are you sure you don’t want me to call C-Sec?”

“No police,” she snapped, pulling away. She thought of Chellick. *If he’d listened to me, Keenah would still be alive.* No. She was done with trusting C-Sec. They’d probably just arrest her for not having left the station.

“Okay, okay…” Michel said soothingly. “No police.” She began putting on a wound dressing efficiently. “There may be another option, yes? The information you have - you could sell it to the Shadow Broker, and he could protect you. Even mercenaries and gangsters are afraid of the Shadow Broker. One of his men, Fist, owns a club near here. If you go there, he could set up a deal.”

She’d wanted to take the recording to the Alliance or the Council. She’d wanted to do the right thing. But Keenah was dead and she was out of options.

Tali tilted her head towards Doctor Chloe Michel. “Where do I find this Fist?”

The docking bay had emptied in under a minute when Shepard had stormed in true ‘Angry XO’ fashion and ordered everyone but the Marines out. Now she looked around at those Marines, perched on boxes and crates in their combat gear, and at the two new additions to her force. Someone on Arcturus was going to have a heart attack. That, or order her assassination.

The Marines had given Urdnot Wrex, who was sitting in a corner with his arms crossed, plenty of space, and the two closest to him watched the krogan as much as they watched Shepard. The C-Sec officer, on the other hand, had stayed near her and she couldn’t help but think of him as a kid. Vakarian had a certain mix of competency and impatience - the shot on the gangster holding Doctor Michel had been clinical, close to perfect, but it hadn’t left her any option but violence. She’d spent the majority of her adult life shooting at people or stabbing them or throwing them across rooms with her mind, but sometimes killing wasn’t the answer. She liked Vakarian, but he needed some work.

…Not that his professional development as a soldier was her responsibility. She couldn’t just steal a turian from C-Sec, no matter how good he was at shooting.

She stripped off her second favourite hoodie, avoiding the blood splatters now staining the sleeves, and folded it over her arm. “Draven, report.”

The sergeant had been in Marine Recon Unit 8 previously, and remained the Normandy’s recon specialist; Shepard enjoyed having someone else to talk to about the fuckery that was deep reconnaissance and long range patrols. Gung Ho was dressed in jeans and a jacket rather than a uniform, though she had a pistol tucked away somewhere. “Place is locked down, X, locked down good. Looked like they had a sentry drone out too - I’d say they’re expecting us. Couldn’t get inside, obviously, but I reckon all the neighborhood gangsters are inside with their favourite peashooters.”

“He thinks he can stop Marines with a few armed bouncers?” asked Williams incredulously.

Draven shrugged. “In my experience, Sarn’t, people like that think they’re tough shit. Forget there’s people like us who’ve got bigger guns.”

“Shooting up the Wards will bring C-Sec down on us,” Alenko said practically. “But we need that intel. Saving the girl would be a nice cherry on top.”

Shepard was pleased to know that Alenko wasn’t a by-the-books-at-all-costs officer; she could work with unyielding integrity, but not a lack of imagination.
“Thoughts?” she asked him calmly, folding her arms.

His brown eyes met hers. “I don’t think we have any other option than an assault, Commander.”

“If they want a fight, let’s give ‘em one,” Williams murmured.

Shepard nodded and then looked at the assembled fighters. “The objective here is to get to Fist then to Tali’Zorah. Everything else is secondary. We move fast, hit hard and get the fuck out.” A pause. “And hopefully get back to the Alliance embassy before C-Sec cottons on. Trackin’?”

She waited for a chorus of ‘aye aye’s from the Marines, a ‘yes Commander’ from Vakarian and a grudging nod from the krogan before she moved on.

“Feel free to defend yourselves and apply flashbangs liberally, but if you shoot any bystanders or God forbid a C-Sec officer, I will personally throw you out the airlock,” she said matter-of-factly. She waited until all the enlisted Marines nodded before she waved a lazy hand. “Alright, bring the sky vans around, and let’s get to it.”

Shepard looked up as Wrex stomped over to her; she wasn’t sure if that was a sign of pique or just his way of walking; she’d be the first to admit she knew less about krogan than perhaps she should. One red eye fixed her. “No stomach for ‘collateral’, Shepard?”

She met his gaze steadily. “We do things my way, Wrex, and you get Fist. We had a deal.”

He studied her for a long moment before he nodded, turned, and lumbered towards where Jaz had parked one of the vans and two Marines were loading in what looked like a rocket launcher. She reached for her rifle and followed.

You know what you have to do. The voice in her head was a mix of David Anderson and Hannah Shepard, and Emilia knew that voice was right. She did know what she had to do, regardless of how distasteful she found it. People were relying on her, and all her desire to go stick her head in the proverbial sand couldn’t stand up to that - even if the course of action collating in her head involved the politics she’d tried to avoid.

Shepard had been standing before the Council, along with Udina, Anderson, Williams and Alenko, for long enough that her legs were starting to get a bit sore, on top of the bruises and scrapes from the fighting she’d been in. The good news was that with Tali’s video evidence presented to them, the Council agreed that Saren was responsible for the incursion and near nuclear bombing of Eden Prime. The bad news was that they didn’t seem to care much for doing anything about him.

The argument had waxed and waned. The Council would strip Saren of his status and freeze both his and Benezia T’Soni’s assets within Council space. They would send the Alliance some support. But they would not send a fleet into the Traverse and Terminus to root him out, and they wouldn’t supply troops or ships to the Alliance’s war effort.

They wanted to do as little as possible, hope that the geth wore themselves out fighting the Alliance so none of the other governments had to lose their own people - and risk public dissatisfaction as casualties mounted and civilians were asked to make sacrifices. Udina knew it too. Shepard could almost taste his fear in the air, his terror of another Eden Prime, one where no one disarmed the bomb. Worse, his arguments sounded both unreasonable and desperate, and she could see how easily they ignored his demands.

“A Fleet can’t track down a single man,” Councillor Valern said dismissively.
“The Citadel Fleet could secure the area, stop the geth from attacking any more of our colonies.” Udina almost pleaded, his voice edged with something close to desperation.

“Oh it could trigger a war with the Terminus Systems,” Sparatus said, mandibles flickering. “We won’t be dragged into a galactic war over a few dozen human colonies.”

A few dozen colonies? Anger lanced through her, sharp and hot. She couldn’t understand how someone could so easily dismiss millions of lives. She hoped she never did understand.

But she bit down on her anger, swallowed the scalding heat of it. If the Council refused to help, and the Alliance was too extended to fully secure its own borders, then there was only one solution left when it came to the problem of Saren Arterius.

“You don’t need to send a fleet, Councillors,” Shepard said, voice even. “You only need to send me.”

“The Commander’s right,” Councillor Tevos said readily and Emilia had the sinking feeling the asari had been planning this all along. “She has the background and skills required to stop Saren, without the involvement of our armies or fleets. If Shepard is empowered to act and we give the Alliance the agreed economic and logistic support, the situation should be able to be resolved without further escalation.”

“No!” Sparatus burst out, mandibles flaring. “Humanity is not ready for the responsibility that comes with Spectres!”

*Humanity…or me?*

“You don’t have to deploy troops to the Traverse, the Alliance gets their human Spectre, everyone’s happy,” she replied. Everyone but one Lieutenant Commander Emilia Shepard…and Captain Hannah Shepard who was likely to hunt her, Anderson and Udina down when she found out.

The Councillors exchanged glances. First Tevos, then Valern and finally, a grudging Sparatus nodded.

“Lieutenant Commander Emilia Shepard…step forward.”

Shepard met her mentor’s dark eyes for a moment as Anderson nodded, breathed in, breathed out, then took that one step forward.

Shepard’s calm persisted through her investiture, their first run in with Samesh Bhatia and their conversation with the clerk, until they’d spoken to the widower a second time, and he’d rushed off to begin the preparations to take his wife’s body home to India and their families. Once he was out of sight, however, the XO swore savagely in a lightning crack of Spanish and clenched both fists like she was looking for someone to punch square in the face.

Alenko looked troubled, leaning against a railing, staring out over the Presidium. For her part, Ashley had a certain cold calm of her own. Part of her kept expecting Nirali to walk through the door and crack a joke about Marines being jarheads. Part of her had been unable to look at Samesh for long. Every time she had, she’d remembered Nirali sobbing and her own hands turning red with the effort of keeping her life inside her body - and failing.

She’d failed. But there’d been no blame in Samesh’s eyes, only a deep, deep sadness that hurt to look at. He’d said ‘Thank you’ and ‘she always spoke highly of you, Sergeant Williams, as her leader and as her friend.’
“That…couldn’t have been legal?” Alenko asked.

“No.” Said Shepard, visibly reining in her temper. Her voice turned wry. “Which is why he won’t report me for assault.”

Ashley smirked a little at the memory of the terror in the slimy little bastard’s eyes when Shepard had trapped him in a corner, gotten in his space with a clenched jaw and fiery eyes, only the more terrifying for the cool, measured tone of her voice. Stop stealing corpses. A man like that couldn’t understand the bond between Marine and corpsman, sharing the same foxhole, knowing that if you took a bullet Doc would be there even if it meant they took a bullet too. Serviceman First Class Nirali Bhatia had saved the life of more than one Marine, and Ashley found it fitting that Marines had ensured that she got home, even if it was in a box.

She thought Shepard had seen the same thing, because she’d insisted that a Marine detail be fetched from the garrison immediately, to watch over Nirali’s body at the morgue, then accompany her home.

“I’m glad we could help Mr Bhatia,” Alenko said as Ash joined him at the railing. His eyes moved over the deep, still lake. “Man…big place.”

She couldn’t help herself. “That your professional opinion, sir?”

She tensed as soon as the words left her mouth. Sassing her boss already? Great job, Ash. But Alenko just flushed a little and laughed, and the three of them sunk into a calm silence. It was…comfortable. Maybe it would change when the two officers realised whose granddaughter she was, but for the first time since she’d enlisted, she let herself hope that it wouldn’t.

“They’ve built themselves quite the lake,” she thought aloud. “Think anyone’s ever drowned in it?”

Shepard laughed, startled. It was the first time Ash had seen her smile, and it transformed her face from stern into something softer. Something with a hint of gentleness and surprising youth. “You two really are something. C’mon, we’ve got work to do, let’s get back to the ship.”

“Aye aye.” Ash agreed, straightening and checking the jacket of the uniform she’d borrowed from Sergeant Draven was straight before following the XO towards where the group of aliens were waiting for them. Her fingers brushed the hilt of Lance Corporal Ki-tae’s sword and thought about her great-grandmother’s sword left behind on Eden Prime, and when her grandfather had given it to her. Her grandfather, with his sad, bitter eyes, always running but never quite escaping Shanxi.

She was going to help Lieutenant Commander Shepard nail Saren to the wall and then they’d all see what a Williams was worth.

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CODEX ENTRY:

Systems Alliance Marine Corps Officer Ranks And Their Roles:

Second Lieutenant(2LT): 2nd Lieutenant is the normal entry-level rank for most commissioned officers. They typically lead platoon-sized units (16 to 44 Marines). They are junior officers, learning leadership skills on the job. They work closely with senior NCOs, who work as their advisors. A Marine officer can be commissioned one of three ways: through the Officer Training Corps (OTC) program in a civilian university, through the Systems Alliance Naval Academy (SANA) or via Officer Candidate School (OCS), the last of which commissions previously enlisted Marines, or ‘Mustangs’.
First Lieutenant (1LT): The difference between the two Lieutenant ranks is slight, primarily being experience and having higher pay. The purpose of this division is to separate the junior officers found unqualified from the commissioned service. It is not uncommon to see officers moved to positions requiring more experience after promotion to First Lieutenant. For example, these positions can include leading a specialty platoon, or assignment as the executive officer for a company-sized unit (70–250 Marines).

Staff Lieutenant (SLT): Staff Lieutenants generally commands company-sized units. When given such a command, they bear the title company commander. Staff Lieutenants also instruct at service schools and combat training centers and are often staff officers at the battalion level.

Major (Maj): Majors are typically assigned as specialized executive or operations officers for battalion-sized units of 300 to 1,200 soldiers. They may also command certain companies that traditionally are commanded by more experienced officers such as Special Forces or Airmobile units.

Lieutenant Colonel (LtCol): Lieutenant Colonels typically commands a battalion-sized unit (300 to 1,200 soldiers/Marines). A lieutenant colonel may also serve as a brigade, regiment, or task force executive officer, or principal staff officer.

Colonel (Col): A colonel typically commands regiment-sized units (4,000 to 6,000 Marines), such as the Regimental Combat Team commander in a Marine Expeditionary Brigade, or the commander of a Marine Expeditionary Unit. Colonels are also found as the chief of staff at divisional level.

Brigadier (Brig): Brigadiers generally command Marine Expeditionary or Frontier Brigades (around 14,500 Marines in a task force incorporating infantry, an aircraft group with transport and close air support aircraft and a logistics regiment) or work as high level staff officers.

Major General (MajGen): Major Generals typically serve as division commanders (large units of 10,000 to 20,000 Marines), training center commanders, task force commanders, deputy commanding generals, or senior directors on military staffs.

Lieutenant General (LtGen): Lieutenant General typically commands a corps-sized unit (20,000 to 45,000 soldiers), called ‘Forces’ by Marines. Additionally, lieutenant generals of all services serve as high-level staff officers at various major command headquarters, often as the heads of their departments.

General (Gen): Generals command major areas of responsibility and hold the highest of military positions in the Alliance Military, along with Navy Admirals.
Joker worked his way through the pre-departure checklists, fingers playing over holos and eyes scanning displays. The Normandy hummed around him, sweet as a song. Pressly was on deck, slowly pacing between work stations on the bridge; glancing over Sub-Lieutenant Rodriguez’s shoulder one moment, demanding a report from SM1 Ferreira the next. Joker didn’t mind Pressly. Late to his commission, the Navigator seemed to regard the CIC as his lawn and everyone else (except the Captain and XO) as childish interlopers, but he was good at his job and didn’t try to micromanage Joker’s flying. That was an unfortunately rare trait in the Navy’s officer corps.

Petty Officer First Class Dhairya Saxena, the ship’s quartermaster and Ops Chief, was staring waspishly at the navigation console in between bouts of pacing. He liked to work out his courses with Pressly long before the captain asked for them, but their orders had been vague and lacked a destination.

“You’re going to wear out the floor,” Joker commented dryly as he waggled the ailerons.

Saxena gave him a cold look, before subsiding back into tapping the console.

“Wonder how it’ll work,” he mused, running a diagnostic on the starboard aft maneuvering thruster which was just a few seconds more sluggish than the portside thruster, “with our XO being a Spectre.”

Joker, like most of the crew, had watched the ceremony on the large HV in the mess hall. Shepard had accepted the new title with the same blank ‘I am a Marine war hero’ expression Joker had seen from the vids and interviews. It was an honour for humanity, etc, etc, but he couldn’t help but wonder how it would affect his beloved ship. A captain was the closest thing to God on a warship, and an XO who could overrule or ignore orders without consequence could hardly be Anderson’s back up dancer.

“I heard that Pressly will be the XO,” said Ensign Caroline Grenado, voice low to avoid the notice of said officer, her eyes roving over a datapad full of checklists. Grenado was a fresh-faced twenty-two year old, a lanky, enthusiastic kid who, for all her youth, had already worked on not just the Normandy project, but the Fearless corvette project as well. Joker didn’t like anyone but him at the Normandy’s helm - she was the kinda girl you wanted people to keep their hands off - but Grenado took his jokes and her nickname of ‘Frag’ (due to the closeness of her name to ‘grenade’) with an easy good humour that made it hard to dislike her.

“Yeah,” Saxena said. “I heard that too, and that Shepard has to resign. Bit bullshit if you ask me.”

“Parliament wants that Council seat real bad,” said Serviceman Third Class Helen Lowe, sipping a cup of shitty mess hall coffee. “All ready to bend over, like.”

“You know,” said Saxena contemplatively, “It’s times like these that I’m surprised to remember you got into law school, Serviceman Lowe.”

Lowe flushed and busied herself at her station. Joker asked for Grenado to read him the next item in the checklist.

The airlock cycled open and Joker turned his head to the tread of boots on metal. Alenko and
Williams both looked worse for wear: Alenko had dried blood on his forehead and Williams’ sleeve was torn. The other Marines trickled in in twos and threes, mouths clamped firmly shut. Something had happened ashore, beyond Shepard getting a fancy new designation, but the Marines weren’t talking. And everyone knew Marines were terrible gossips.

The whole bridge froze for several long seconds when not one, not two, but three aliens walked onto the ship after the two Marines. A turian in blue, carrying a weapons case. A huge, scarred krogan the sailors instinctively edged away from. A quarian in purple, who lingered close to Alenko. A little awkwardly, the lieutenant cleared his throat and said, “If you’ll follow me, I’ll get you all settled in.”

Williams stopped by Joker’s chair and watched the strangers follow Alenko below decks with a suspicious glint to her brown eyes. This close, Joker could see that there was a spot of blood on her sleeve.

“We starting a space circus or something?” he asked.

She smiled sharply at him. “Just need a volus.”

He commented, “Looks like you lot had fun.”

Williams absent-mindedly fiddled with her askew bun. “Oh yeah. Firefight in a strip club.”

He stared at her, eyes narrowed. After he’d irritably told her not to call him ‘sir’ ever again, he’d found she was just as sharp-tongued as he was and gave as good as she got. “You’re fucking with me.”

She smirked, a flash of white teeth. “Nah. I shit you not, Joker, we shot the fuck outta Chora’s Den. It’ll probably be on the news. ‘Uppity humans destroy venerable gentleman’s club’.”

He laughed. “The Citadel Defence Fleet is gonna riot.”

“Let’s just say,” Ashley said with a hint of smugness, “we’re not CSec’s favourite people right now.”

“Hey Sergeant!” Frag leaned over. “Care to share what the NCO grapevine has dug up on what’s going on with the X?”

Williams grimaced, good humour fading. “Yeah. They’re fucking the captain over, ma’am.”

There was a dismayed silence before Saxena spoke, voice hard, “That can’t be right.”

There was a flicker of dislike in Williams’ eyes before the Marine shrugged carelessly, jacket pulling across what was clearly a concealed sidearm. “Think what you want, Sax. I’ll catch you squids later, I’m gonna go get cleaned up and check on the kids.”

Williams, like the Master Chief, had that NCO peculiarity of talking about her enlisted as ‘the kids’, even though the Staff Sergeant couldn’t be more than twenty-seven herself.

“Alright, see ya.” Joker waved lazily.

Ten minutes later it was clear Staff Sergeant Williams had been correct. Shepard walked onto the bridge, jaw set, wearing the three gold bars of a full Commander on her epaulettes and a gold command star on her left pocket. She stopped beside Joker’s chair, arms crossed. The rest of the bridge crew did their best to look very busy.
“Congrats on the promotion, Commander,” he said mildly.

Her eyes were as dark as her expression. “Be nice if it didn’t feel like I was stealing Anderson’s ship.”

He shrugged, finding himself more earnest than he would like. He had a reputation to uphold after all. “Yeah, it sucks about what happened to Anderson, ma’am, but this crew is behind you a hundred percent.”

She regarded him, features indecipherable. “Thank you, Flight Lieutenant.”

He shrugged, uncomfortable. “Would you like to address the crew?”

She nodded. When he keyed the mic for 1MC, Shepard fixed her eyes on a point past him, as if focusing on their quarry. She spoke of doing their part, of doing David Anderson and the Alliance proud. She spoke of hunting Saren wherever he went, of protecting the people they’d all sworn to defend. Her voice filled the CIC with implacable resolve.

Joker found himself close to inspired once his new CO finished her speech. She knew how to get the blood pumping. “Nice speech, Commander.”

She looked past him, through the viewport. “Fancy speeches won’t catch Saren. Pressly!”

Navigator Pressly seemed to materialise at her side. “Aye ma’am?”

“Get us out of here and set for a jump to the Macedon Relay in the Artemis Tau cluster and organize a meeting of senior officers at 20:00. You have the deck.”

“Aye…captain.”

Dark eyes surveyed the bridge. “Carry on.”

The human ship was so quiet. Tali’s skin prickled uncomfortably under her suit and she had to resist the urge to go check that the drive core was still functioning. She didn’t think the humans would like that. She’d felt their eyes on her as Lieutenant Alenko had led her to the medbay. Wary eyes.

The human doctor - Chakwas, she’d introduced herself as - hummed to herself as the medical scanner ran over Tali’s form. She had a mixture of brisk professionalism and gentle motherliness that was relaxing to be around, even when she was looking at the function of Tali’s internal organs.

“You’re doing well,” Chakwas said, patting Tali on the arm. “No fever to speak of, and the wound itself is rather minor; Doctor Michel did a good job with her initial treatment. A few days and I’ll be happy to take you off restricted duties.”

It had become quickly apparent that even Shepard’s authority was exceeded by Doctor Chakwas when it came to medical issues. When she’d calmly and firmly ruled Tali out of accompanying Shepard on the next mission, the Spectre hadn’t even blinked - let alone argued. That at least was familiar. When she’d been alive, Tali’s mother had been one of the few that could override Admiral Rael’Zorah on anything.

“Thank you, Doctor,” she murmured. “Hopefully I can help Shepard soon.”

Chakwas looked grave. “Don’t be too eager to run back into battle, Tali. War is no cakewalk.”

Cakewalk? What did that even mean? She thought about the day, the terror that had pounded
through her, then the shock of relief when the human soldiers - no, they wanted to be called Marines - had unexpectedly come to her aid. She thought of how it had felt, when her shotgun bucked in her hands and a man had fallen to the ground missing part of his chest. She’d killed somebody today. She’d lost a friend yesterday.

“I want to help,” she replied, twisting her hands together, trying to articulate that she knew that more fighting would be as difficult or worse, but she needed to be useful anyway. “I want to-”

Repay the Commander? Prove herself to the rambunctious Marines who eyed her with attitudes that ranged from suspicion to condescending protectiveness?

Chakwas sighed and turned the scanner off. “I’m sorry - I’m sure that you’re very capable and know what you’re getting into. I’m just very used to Marines and their need to get back into it as quickly as they can, and damn the consequences to themselves.” She smiled sadly. “Like one of our Marines, Jenkins, who was killed on Eden Prime.”


“Then those are two more deaths Saren must answer for,” Chakwas said, brisk again. “Now, the Commander asked the mess to stock up on dextro nutripaste, so if you’re hungry you can go there to get food.”

“I am feeling a bit hungry, thank you,” she said, carefully getting to her feet.

There were a handful of humans clustered around one of the tables in the mess hall, some mugs and what looked like actual paper cards in between them. There was a pause in conversation as she emerged from the medbay, but then the sailors returned to their card shuffling and soft banter.

There was a young man behind the mess hall counter with an expression of utter and complete apathy on his face. His nametape read ‘Greico’ but she still had no idea how to read Alliance ranks. The Marines were relatively simple but the human Navy had so many different badges she wasn’t sure which one meant what.

“You’re Tali right?” he asked, as if quarians walked onto Alliance frigates all the time.

“Yes?”

“Right, so I have like, some nutripaste tubes and stuff for you.” He put one in front of her. “They have dextro stickers on them, so, like, don’t eat the ones without the stickers ‘cause you might die and shit.”

“…Thanks, I think.”

“Whatever.” Greico said disinterestedly. She grabbed the tube and looked around for a spot to sit. One of the sailors sitting at the card game craned his head at her, brown eyes narrowing.

“Hey! Tali, right? Come sit with us.”

Feeling a twinge of anxiety, Tali slide into the empty seat. The man who’d called her over smiled reassuringly at her, though his eyes didn’t seem to know where to rest on her faceplate. “I’m Petty Officer First Class Mikhail Vorobyov, the engineering chief petty officer. But you can call me Mikhail.”

“Or just what we call ‘im.,” a woman across from them said, blue eyes fixed on her cards.
‘Hellraiser’.

‘Hellraiser?’

“It’s ironic,” Mikhail said, in a long-suffering tone. “Because they think I never have fun.”

“Boss,” said another sailor, a woman with dark brown hair and a square face. “Doing work in your spare time is what we call being boring and time for an intervention because someone needs a life outside of the Navy, AJ Squared Away.”

Mikhail rolled his eyes. “Since these louts have forgotten their manners: this is Petty Officer Third Class Rosamund Draven, but we all call her ‘Rosie’ or just ‘Squid Draven’.” He pointed at the woman with blue eyes. “And that’s Serviceman First Class Mackenzie Hudson, better known as ‘Glowstick’.”

“…Glowstick?” Tali asked. There was nothing about Hudson that reminded her of a glowstick.

She sighed. “I’m the supervisor for the nuclear reactor workshop. Nukes, glowsticks? The Navy’s full of comedians.”

“Hey, know how to play Skyllian Five?” Mikhail asked. She shook her head and he shrugged. “Ah well. We’ve not really been playing that much, just trying to think out a problem we’re having.”

“Except Rosie has been no help,” Glowstick grumbled.

Draven waved a hand. “Listen, I’m just the damage control chief. Call me when it’s on fire or putting a hole in the hull.” She paused thoughtfully. “Though, if your nuke compartment is on fire, I’m probably screwed, in which case I demand you name your first born after me and also drag away my wife before she has one of her dumb arse heroic bouts.”

Hudson snorted. “Yeah, that’s cute. I’ll stop your six foot supersoldier Marine wife.”

Tali wasn’t used to this after the months she’d been on pilgrimage - the normalcy of their conversation, the way they hadn’t called her a suitrat or watched their credit chits. “There’s something wrong with the nuclear reactor?”

Mikhail sipped his coffee, nonchalant. “Oh, don’t worry. Hudson here just feels the power draw is excessive when cruising.”

“It is.” Glowstick grumbled. “Adams agrees with me. I just don’t understand it! All my calcs say we should be well under 25% when we’re not manning weapons, but we’re still at 30%.”

Tali twisted her hands together, before she couldn’t help but speak up. “Have you…checked the drive core intake? If your calculations are running off a normal frigate’s power consumption, they might be wrong. The drive core is bigger, yes? So your systems may be running it at normal thresholds for a larger vessel because that’s the normal power requirements for a drive core of that size - this is a prototype after all.”

There was a pause before Mikhail chuckled. “That might well be it. I can’t believe neither of us thought to check that.”

Hudson gave Tali a wry grin before her gaze turned contemplative. “I’ll need to check - but if our software is running it at a cruiser’s threshold, we might be able to shave off a fair few percentage points. We don’t need that sort of power in drive if the IES isn’t active…”
Tali felt a flicker of excitement run through her. This was what she knew. She leaned forward. “In the Flotilla, sometimes we’ve had to adjust power draw for maximum efficiency. You could try….”

When Anderson had taken out the hastily found Command Badge to pin onto her uniform, Shepard had told him that she wasn’t ready to command the Normandy, and she hadn’t been lying. Mixed in with her unease over her new Spectre status and her rage that politicians were screwing over one of the finest officers she knew was a potent bubbling of anxiety she hadn’t felt since the first time she’d taken a platoon of Marines into battle as a butterbar. She’d gone to SWCOT, she knew she made a decent X, but commanding a bridge was still like wearing an ill-fitting jacket; in her bones she was still a Marine officer, meant for boots in the muck and a rifle in her hands.

Shepard, for the first time in some years, was unsure of herself. She hated feeling that way. And if she fucked up as the CO of the ship, she’d lose her crew’s respect or even worse, get some of them killed or hurt.

Anderson had looked at her with those steady brown eyes, pinned on her new rank and star that signified his loss of command, and said, “You’ve a job to do, Commander. You can complain about it, or you can do it.”

Now she looked at the assembled senior officers in the ship’s briefing room, her jaw set. They all looked at her attentively, a picture of professionalism in Navy blue. However, she didn’t doubt that many of them were upset by Anderson being relieved, with whom many of them had previously served with, and replaced with a jarhead who barely knew a frigate from a corvette.

She’d already addressed the crew as a whole, so it was time to move onto practical issues. Speeches wouldn’t convince the department heads of her ability to command the Normandy anymore than it would convince the Buffer, who was hovering near the door like a particularly angry cloud. Only actions - the right ones - would do that.

“Arcturus has put us on indefinite detached duty under Special Tactics and Reconnaissance, so our mission reports will go to Fifth Fleet directly or to the Council depending on the mission. Our home port is also being shifted from Arcturus to the Citadel for now,” she said. “I know it’s unusual, but the Normandy is experimental technology and we’ll likely be seeing a great deal more combat - so if any issues pop up, I want to know about it straight away.” Adams nodded in agreement. “For personnel issues, I want you to feel more free than usual to kick things up to the Buffer and to me; Pressly is overworked as it is.”

And personnel was at least something Shepard knew she was good at - there were many things Pressly was proficient in that she wasn’t, which meant she was going to have to delegate. A round of nods followed her words. Shepard focused on one of the officers. Lieutenant Gema Wulandri, the Combat Systems Officer, a twenty-eight year old Indonesian who’d spent her entire career in the gunnery track and knew the Normandy’s weapons systems inside and out. “How’re our ammunitions stores looking?”

Wulandri leaned back in her chair. “I got some help from Alliance Tower,” The main Alliance base on the Citadel, Shepard recalled, though it was nowhere near the size of some of the larger fleet depots, let alone Arcturus, “And they had some spare Javelin racks, so I went ahead and got the Tower folk to help us get them on.”

The Normandy’s primary armament consisted of the experimental Javelin torpedoes, which involved bolting disposable racks to the ship’s hull. Shepard understood the thinking by the Alliance’s shipbuilders - the Normandy’s small hull size and the room taken up by the over-sized drive core meant her built in weapons systems were limited, and the Javelin torpedoes vastly improved her bite,
if only at relatively short range. But the downside was that they needed to be replaced after being fired, whereas a built in torpedo tube could simply feed from the ship’s magazine - and Eden Prime had used a large portion of the ammunition Normandy had loaded at Arcturus.

“The magazine for our MAC and four torpedo tubes is at 100% and I’ve tested the GARDIAN arrays. I’ve no real concerns from my department to report, ma’am. All weapons systems operated according to specifications during the battle,” Wulandri continued. After a pause she smiled, a little mischievously. “I’d avoid the Gettysburg’s skipper though, ma’am. I think we stole his Javelins.”

“Noted,” Shepard said with a chuckle. “Adams, anything to report from Engineering?”

Adams shook his head. “We’re still learning the ship, so I’m not completely satisfied with our efficiency, but nothing that really concerns me. The IES system worked very well.”

Arcturus would be pleased to hear that.

“Alenko, is the MARDET good to go? I know they were pretty shaken about Jenkins.” Alenko had been shaken. She’d wondered if he’d not lost Marines before - but she knew, better than anyone, that one loss didn’t necessarily inoculate you against the next.

“…Yes ma’am, they were. The Buffer and I are keeping an eye on them, but I think they’re good to go. Williams is settling in well as platoon sergeant - fighting alongside her a few times has helped that, and I’ve got Lance Corporal Waaber as acting team leader of Bravo. If the Division wants to send us reinforcements, I’d prefer a PFC or another Lance Corporal and to promote Waaber. A corporal replacement would likely do more harm than good at this stage.”

She nodded in acknowledgement. “I’ll keep that in mind, Lieutenant. Anyone else have any questions or concerns I need to know about?”

“Ma’am…” Pressly began carefully. “What are we to expect with the aliens aboard? Restrictions?”

She’d been expecting that question. She’d half thought it would be Negulesco to ask it, but the Buffer had sensibilities. She might disagree with Shepard, but she’d never do so in public.

“Vakarian is a trained sniper, and more importantly, he’s familiar with investigative procedure and Citadel law.” Shepard was neither a cop nor overly familiar with the Council’s laws outside of how they impacted Alliance military operations. “Tali has a greater knowledge of the geth than anyone in our entire military - and she managed to extract undamaged data from a platform. So we’re going to need their expertise in those areas. Arcturus has agreed to put them on the ship’s roll as contractors or attaches. So, no restrictions.”

“But ma’am-” Pressly began.

She stared at him steadily. “They’re part of the crew, XO.”

Pressly’s mouth twisted but he nodded. “What about the krogan?”

“Wrex,” she stressed his name. “Has agreed to stay in the cargo hold, so long as we keep the crew from unnecessarily bothering him. There’s some bunks down there anyway.” Like the submarines she was the heir of, the Normandy had bunks and sleeping pods stashed wherever they could fit - down near engineering, near the mess hall, hidden away near the cargo hold itself. She wasn’t sure Wrex would actually fit on an Alliance rack but she guessed they’d just have to push some mattresses together for him or something.

“Understood, ma’am,” Pressly said stiffly.
“Actually, Commander,” Adams broke in. “The quarian, Tali? She’s been asking my engineers questions, about the ship.”

Pressly looked furious. Shepard resisted the urge to rub her forehead. She hadn’t expected it to be Tali who caused problems with the Alliance crew. The kid had more of a backbone than she gave herself credit for, but she was still rather uncertain and shaken up by her ordeal. “I’ll talk to her, get her to back off.”

“Oh no, Commander,” Adams said hastily. “It’s not a problem. She’s damned smart - hell, give her a couple of months and she might know the Normandy’s engines better than I do! With your permission, I would like to let her help out in engineering when she has the time.”

“That’s highly irregular,” Pressly grumbled, scowling when his friend gave him a pleasant, mildly amused smile.

“I trust your judgement, Adams. Permission granted.”

“Thank you, Commander.”

“Pressly,” she continued, deciding to ignore her XO’s anger for now - for all that the man might have a few prejudices, she trusted him to do his job. “I need you to plot a search pattern. Prothean ruins can’t be that prevalent in this cluster, and I don’t want to waste anymore time searching for T’Soni than absolutely necessary.”

“Aye aye, ma’am. I’ll get on it ASAP.”

She stood. “Very well. Dismissed.”

Chairs scraped as the ship’s department heads got up and filed out the door, leaving their new commanding officer staring at the stack of datapads filled with paperwork waiting for her.

CODEX ENTRY

Marine Frontier Task Forces: The Systems Alliance Marine Corps utilises two types of task forces - combined units formed for specific tasks or missions. One of these is the Frontier Task Force, designed to protect the colonies. The Frontier Task Force is formed of four ‘elements’: a Command Element, including the Task Force’s command staff and a military police unit, a Ground Combat Element, either infantry or combined arms, a naval Aviation unit and a Combat Logistics Element, including intelligence and communications specialists.

Unlike the more mobile Expeditionary Task Forces, a Frontier Task Force often doesn’t have a planetary assault squadron and often does include more air and ship defence units. In addition, their modularity means that a company or battalion can be deployed independently to cover less populated settlements or planets that don’t warrant or can’t support an entire task force - or if the commander wishes to forward deploy listening posts or combat outposts for intel gathering purposes.

Frontier Forces (the largest task force type) will as a rule have the same number as the Marine Division formings its Ground Combat Element, and include the 2nd Frontier Force (containing the 2nd Marine Division as its Combat Ground Element) on Eden Prime, the 10th Frontier Force (containing the 10th Marine Division) in the Traverse and the 34th Frontier Force on Elysium.

Chapter End Notes
Definitions

*AJ Squared Away: Navy slang term for a sailor who follows all regulations to the letter and/or has no life outside the Navy
*MARDET: Marine Detachment
*CSO: COmbat Systems Officer; the officer in charge of all the ship's armaments.
“Ever dropped in a Mako before?” Commander Shepard asked as seven human Marines, a turian detective-slash-sniper, and a krogan battlemaster crammed themselves into the interior of the Mako Infantry Fighting Vehicle. Designed to fit a squad of Alliance Marines or soldiers, it wasn’t exactly the most comfortable vehicle - but at least the Commander had decided that Wrex’s bulk meant trying to squeeze in another Marine wasn’t going to work. The Marines being left behind looked like children who’d been told they couldn’t have candy. They reminded Garrus of the Hierarchy’s naval infantry with their eagerness to get into the fight. Shepard had, with a hint of amusement, assured them that they were the strike team’s back up and would be allowed to jump in to help if things went south.

“No, Commander, I haven’t,” he replied, trying to work out the harness. He’d been in the Army as military police, before he’d applied to join C-Sec, but that had mostly involved checking IDs at the gates of military bases and wrangling soldiers who’d gotten too drunk and decided to start brawls. Every soldier in the Hierarchy Army did combat exercises, but the MPs hadn’t done vehicle drops - not like the Hierarchy’s Mobile Infantry.

“You’re in for a treat then,” Shepard said serenely, and Garrus wasn’t sure whether to be reassured or worried - especially when Sergeant Williams grinned fiercely, fingers fiddling with her rifle.

Lieutenant Alenko reached across and quickly showed him how to do the restraint up properly. He liked the steady, dark haired man. He was certainly the friendliest of the Marine Detachment, unlike the small one he’d attempted to talk to before they’d all loaded into the vehicle. That Marine - ‘Chou’ her nametape said - had given him a glare sharp as a talon knife and crammed herself in the opposite corner of cargo bay.

Joker’s voice boomed through the Mako’s cramped interior. “Five mikes out from Drop Zone Alpha.”

“Allright,” Shepard’s face was hidden behind her visor but Garrus could almost feel her eyes on him. “Just one last quick once over. We’ve reports of geth activity on Therum; not confirmed in our AO, but we should assume they’re here. Draven and Chou will drop in at LZ Alpha and set up a position on top of the ridges, marked as ‘Position Foxtrot’ on your maps. Their callsign will be ‘Skybird’, and Chou will put up the recon drone so we can get eyes on the dig site. We’ll insert via Mako drop at LZ Bravo, about ten kilometres from the dig site. We’ll drive to the dig site, secure Doctor T’Soni and any other University personnel, then call the Normandy in for pick up. Any questions?”

“No, Commander,” Garrus murmured and there was silence from the Mako’s other occupants. Inside the vehicle, it was hard to gauge time or movement. There was only Joker’s voice to mark how long had passed.

“Skybird is on the ground. Five minutes to LZ Bravo.”

Garrus’ mandibles were tight with a flicker of tension. He had to do well during this mission - prove to the Spectre that she’d done the right thing bringing him along and choosing him for her strike team. Prove Chou and the crewmen like her wrong. Saren was a stain on the honour of the entire turian species - there needed to be a turian helping put it right.
“One minute!” called Lance Corporal Ki-tae. Around the troop compartment the humans tugged on their harnesses to check they were fastened, and after a moment, Garrus followed suit. Alenko gave him a thumbs up.

“Go, go, go!” The ship’s loadmaster called over the radio and the Mako rumbled to life and surged forward - and into thin air. Garrus clenched his teeth as the bottom of his stomach dropped, and a few moments later he was thrown against his restraints as the IFV’s thrusters kicked in and slowed the vehicle’s fall down. The landing was almost gentle.

“Beats walking,” Alenko said nonchalantly as Shepard spoke over the comm to the recon team. The first part of the drive was quiet - a bit boring, even - until the recon team alerted them that there were geth units in their way. Shepard seemed to be in something of a hurry and decided against dismounting to fight them. Instead, the driver and gunner played a sort of ‘peekaboo’ with the armatures - ducking behind ridges and folds of the terrain to hide the Mako’s body from the slow moving projectiles and faster AT rockets, then popping back up to fire the main gun until the geth were piles of scrap metal.

“Lance, this is Skybird, over.” The voice of the Marine the humans called ‘Gung Ho’ buzzed through the comm about ten minutes into the drive slash battle.

“Go ahead, Skybird.”

“Be advised, there is a compound ahead of you and there appears to be several anti-tank guns guarding it. Transmitting data now, over.”

Shepard brought up the imaging on her omnitool. Wrex, who’d been stonily silent for most of the trip, leaned forward. “Only a fool punches a nathak in the face. We should sneak around and pull its tail.”

“I have no idea what a nathak is,” Shepard said contemplatively, “But I agree. Here’s what we’ll do…”

Thank the Spirits for reconnaissance, Garrus thought when Ki-tae gunned for a small gap hewn in the rock, the Mako shuddering as a salvo of rockets detonated behind it, before slamming the brakes so the strike team could pile out of the vehicle. He pulled a grenade out of his webbing, pressed a button on the flattened cylinder and popped around the corner of the narrow ravine long enough to fling it at the turret. He backpedaled quickly, as a rocket shot past his shoulder and detonated at his back, close enough to feel a swell of heat.

The Mako rumbled forward and the cannon roared deafeningly. There was no response from the turret.

“Press forward!” Shepard called to them, assault rifle in hand. They surged forward, either side of the Mako. Garrus raised his rifle, shooting in the general direction of the enemy juggernaut platform, glad that he’d managed to wrangle some disruptor ammo off Williams before the mission. His mandibles flared in satisfaction as its shields fell and one of his rounds punched a hole in its shoulder, even as he pressed himself behind an outcrop of rock to avoid return fire. There was a sharp crack and when Garrus poked his head up again, the juggernaut was down, a fist sized hole in its centre of mass from Williams’ sniper rifle.

“Keep pushing!”

Between the Mako’s machinegun and the ground team, the firefight was fierce and savage - but short. It was only minutes until Garrus found himself standing above a pile of dented and holed metal
that had been a geth trooper, rifle warm in his talons and adrenaline thudding through him. Shepard sauntered out of one of the buildings, shotgun braced against her shoulder as the gate towards their objective groaned its way open, Wrex following her.

“Not bad,” Wrex told her. She chuckled.

“Nice grenade throw on the turret, Vakarian,” she told him as she passed and he felt himself puff up a little at the praise. “Alright everyone, good job, mount up and let’s get moving.”

The geth had come in the night. Liara had been asleep in her cot after a long day of careful, painstaking excavation. The only ones awake had been the handful of bored Alliance Marines the human government had assigned the expedition as guards. They had been the first to die, cut down by a maelstrom of gunfire by the time she’d fully woken and staggered out into a nightmare of screams and blood on volcanic rock.

The huge krogan battlemaster stepped over the body of poor Sergeant Keenan, laughing in a deep rumble at odds with the unnatural stillness of the geth. Doctor Yates screamed shrilly at the violence - right up until the krogan lowered his shotgun and shot her.

“You brute,” Liara managed, backing away.

He chuckled. “Don’t worry, Doctor T’Soni. Mummy just wants to have a chat.”

Goddess…no. Professor T’Maras had gently broken the news that the Republics had issued a warrant for her mother’s arrest, on suspicion of helping the rogue Saren attack a human colony, but Liara hadn’t quite believed it. Goddess, it’s true. What have you done, mother?

He stepped towards her.

She shook her head frantically. “I want nothing to do with her or Saren! Leave me alone!”

“Listen, there’s two ways this can go,” he said, almost friendly. “The easy way, or the hard way. Dear mum wants you alive…but she said nothing about bruises or a few broken bones. What’s it going to be?”

“Don’t touch me!” She flung a hand out, terror and anger beating through her, and biotics ripped free, tossing the krogan and three geth platforms into the wall.

“You’ll pay for that, T’Soni!” the battlemaster shouted after her as she fled further into the ruins, jumping off the catwalk and catching herself with her biotics. Goddess, they just killed them! No. No, she couldn’t let them catch her. She wasn’t going to be a part of her mother’s insanity. There had to be somewhere to hide down here!

Her heart thudded so loudly it was all she could hear as she scrambled down the rocky passage ways, scraping her fingertips against rough rock walls. But where? Maybe - yes, the cells! Just yesterday, she and Yates had been discussing whether this structure was a prison based on the cells with barrier and restraint generators. If she could get to the one they’d fully excavated, she could bring up the barrier!

She pushed herself forward, choking back sobs of fear and gasps of exertion. She dared not stop or look backwards. She could hear the heavy tread of krogan feet, the brute’s shouts. “You useless fucking flashlights! She’s an archaeologist, not a commando! Find her!”

Geth beyond the Veil? It was impossible, unheard of! But there was no time to think about that. She
clambered down the scaffolding that had collapsed at some point during the fighting, feet hitting the sterile white tiles of the excavated cell.

“There!”

A flash of terror stabbed through her, and she flailed at control panel as geth appeared at the top of scaffolding. She gasped in relief as a blue barrier sprang up between her and her pursuers - and then in shock as something grabbed at her, energy wrapping around her limbs and immobilizing her. She struggled fruitlessly against the hold, breathing quick and hard - she must’ve hit something wrong, and with her arms trapped she couldn’t use a mnemonic and biotically trigger the control pillar.

The krogan approached the barrier, eyes murderous as he stared at her predicament. He struck the barrier a few times experimentally with the butt of his shotgun before he growled in frustration. “Find a way past it!” He snapped at the geth before his eyes fixed on her. “You’re either really smart or really dumb, T’Soni. But either way, we’ll get to you.”

With an evil sounding chuckle, he left her there, helpless. Alone, Liara felt hot tears trickle down her face. Goddess, what was she going to do?

“How bad’s the damage?”

Garrus looked up at Shepard from where he was kneeling to peer under the chassis of the Mako. It was hot enough outside of the IFV that Garrus felt uncomfortable, but the humans seemed to be struggling - both Alenko and Williams had sought what shade they could in the Mako’s shadow. Wrex had lumbered off, unconcerned.

“It looks like we must’ve taken some splash in the last fight with an armature, Commander.”

“Can we fix it?” she questioned, bending to have a look at the damage herself.

“The onboard fabricator should be able to do the trick,” Williams supplied.

“Alenko, how far are we from the objective?”

The Lieutenant came over, bringing up the map on his omnitool. Droplets of what appeared to be water speckled his cheeks and forehead beneath his clear visor. “Three hundred metres, ma’am. The only route to the site is through some pretty impassable terrain - we’d never get the Mako in there anyway.”

“Ambush central,” Williams muttered, peering over Alenko’s shoulder.

“Alright, we’ll go the rest of the way on foot. Williams, when we hit the chokepoint, I want you to set up an overwatch position and prioritize taking out enemy snipers and machineguns. We can’t afford to get pinned down. Vakarian, I want you to stay here with Dubyansky and Ki-tae to fix the Mako. Once it’s repaired, go and pick up Skybird.”

*I don’t want to stay with the car.* He wanted to get in there, scrap some more geth! But Shepard was the Commander and while they chafed sometimes, Garrus understood orders. “Yes, Commander.”

He watched Shepard, Alenko, Williams, and Wrex leave with a hint of regret before he laid down in the filmy dust to have another look at the axle. With Dubyansky still at the controls of the turret to defend against anymore geth, Lance Corporal Ki-tae wearily dragged himself over to sit next to him. The axle was twisted and melted almost right through.
“If we cut here and here,” he said, pointing with one talon, “we should be able to replace the damaged portion without taking the wheels off.”

Ki-tae frowned underneath his visor. “That degrades the strength of the whole axle though, right?”

“Sure, but it’ll get us through the day. We can do a full replacement back on the *Normandy*, Nick,” Garrus replied. Ki-tae had been adamant that he call him that.

After a moment the boy shrugged. “Alright, you’re the combat engineer.”

“If you take that side, I’ll take this side.”

“I’ll grab the blocks.”

Liara wasn’t sure how long she’d been trapped by the Prothean stasis field when she heard the gunfire. For a moment she felt a spark of hope in her chest that all that had been said was a lie - her mother hadn’t done anything terrible, wouldn’t hurt her, had sent her commandos to rescue her and would take her home to Thessia, call her Little Wing again. But it wasn’t commandos who carefully climbed down the broken scaffolding; it was three humans dressed in black hardsuits, one with a red stripe down one arm, and another krogan.

The human with the red stripe approached the barrier, rapping her knuckles against the solidity of it.

“Hello? Can you hear me out there? I’m trapped, I need help!”

“Doctor Liara T’Soni?” the human asked.

“Yes!”

The human stood there, staring, for a good few moments. Her face was hidden but Liara could feel her cheeks burn at the way she seemed to radiate incredulity. “How the fuck did a doctor of archeology get trapped in a bubble?”

“Well - I was trying to - I must’ve hit something I shouldn’t have - you *must* get me out, please!” There was an embarrassing edge of hysteria to her voice she couldn’t get rid of. The appearance of this black clad figure had given her the first taste of hope she’d felt in the eternity since the geth had come.

“Nevermind,” the human said. “I’m Commander Shepard, commanding officer of the Alliance warship *Normandy*. We’ll find a way to get you out and I promise you, we’ll protect you from the geth - but you must come with us. I need information on your mother.”

Her mother? Of course. It always came back to her mother. Liara nodded frantically.

“Don’t worry. I’ll find a way to get you out,” Shepard said, and her voice was so measured, so calm, that Liara believed her.

“Wait, there’s more geth and a krogan here. They’ve been trying to find a way past the barrier.”

“We’ll take care of them,” one of the other humans said, a certain sharp-edged glee to her voice. Was she *looking forward* to fighting that horrible krogan?

“Be right back,” Commander Shepard said, almost cheerily and then she was pulling herself back up the scaffolding. There was nothing to do but wait, despite the gunfire and explosions - and there were a lot of them. Anala back home said humans were often brutish, impatient and violent. Yates
and the other humans Liara had met while working on Therum hadn’t been like that at all, but she was beginning to wonder if these ones were. But they were her only hope of not getting bundled off by the geth, so she closed her eyes and prayed they would be victorious.

She still jumped when she heard Shepard’s voice behind her. “How did you-”

“Blew a hole in the floor,” she said matter-of-factly.

“Oh.”

“Mining laser,” she added helpfully.

“…Of course.”

Liara nearly fell when the field shut off, banging her knee against the sterile white tiles. Shepard took a step forward. “Are you okay?”

“Just a bit…stiff, I think, thank you.”

The human steadied her with a gentle hand and pulled a bottle of sorts from the straps and pockets covering her armour and held it out to her. That first gulp of water tasted better than anything Liara had ever tasted before, and she barely restrained herself from drinking it all. With unsteady hands, she screwed the lid back on and handed it back.

“Can you walk?” Shepard asked, lowering her hand. Liara couldn’t see all of her face as light broke on her visor, just a scar on her chin, vivid white against copper skin, and her mouth.

“I…yes, I think I can.”

“It shouldn’t be far,” said one of the other humans - the man - encouragingly. The other female human had her arms crossed. She seemed disapproving, but Liara wasn’t sure what she’d done.

“The Alliance military is investigating my mother?” Liara asked as they got onto the elevator.

“Your mother is helping Saren,” the female soldier said, her voice sharp. “Attacked Eden Prime. Killed a shitton of people. So you better think fast about the last time you talked to her, Miss Prothean Expert.”

Liara recoiled from the anger. “I - I haven’t spoken to my mother in years! I don’t know anything about that! I would never - “

Shepard touched the soldier’s shoulder and she subsided. “I’m a Council Spectre,” she said ‘Spectre’ distastefully. “I’ve been tasked with tracking down Saren - and your mother. We were hoping you might have some information on her whereabouts or motives.”

“I’m sorry, Commander - “ The elevator bucked and rumbled beneath their feet and Liara would’ve fallen if the Spectre hadn’t caught her arm and steadied her. Goddess, this was embarrassing.

“It’s alright. Let’s focus on getting out of here.” She raised a hand to her ear. “Vakarian, this is Shepard. Have you picked up Skybird, over?”

“Affirmative, Commander.”

“Alright, get yourselves to the LZ now and get the Mako loaded as soon as the ship arrives, over.”

“Understood, over.”
“Shepard out.” She tilted her head. “Normandy, this is Lance Actual. Get the ship to the LZ on the double! I have a feeling we’re about to witness a volcanic episode, over.” There was a squawk of indignation over the comm link and Liara could see Shepard grinning as she ended the second call. Liara wasn’t entirely sure what was funny. Shepard turned back to them, still smiling. “When we get up top, double time it. I don’t feel like taking a swim in lava this afternoon.”

Over all, Commander Emilia Shepard felt that the mission on Therum had gone rather to plan, something the N7 were not accustomed to. Sure, they’d set off a volcanic eruption and had to run for their lives, but they’d secured Benezia’s daughter and their only casualty had been an axle. Joker wasn’t happy about the whole ‘landing in lava’ thing and she’d have to check with Adams to make sure the fried sensors were just hyperbole and not something she’d have to get fixed, but she let him have his little vent session before she’d cloistered the ground team, minus Ki-tae who was helping Fredricks finish repairing the Mako, and Liara T’Soni in the briefing room.

T’Soni was not quite Emilia had been expecting of a Matriarch’s daughter. She was clearly shy, a little awkward and had mumbled a bit about her inexperience with humans. Not exactly spy material or ‘Mummy’s little genocidal helper’. Appearances could be deceiving, but Shepard’s gut feeling was that T’Soni was being honest. The initial med scans Alenko had done had shown the effects of two days without food or water.

And her theories about the Protheans matched up with the beacon’s ‘message’. Maybe it hadn’t knocked a few screws loose in her head after all. The whole concept of the Reapers still struck her as mildly unbelievable; she’d seen plenty of horrific things, but they all came down to sentient cruelty and greed, not monsters hiding in dark space. But Saren and Benezia believed in them and that this Conduit would bring them back. And if T’Soni was right that this Conduit was connected to the Protheans’ disappearance and the nightmares stuffed in her head...well, it made the Reapers more likely than she was comfortable with.

“Alright. Thank you for the information, Doctor. You should get checked out by Doctor Chakwas. We’re setting a course back to the Citadel.” Shepard needed to check some leads from the Spectre info network. “So sit back and enjoy the cruise. I think we’re done here.” She stood, cracking her neck.

“Wait, Commander?” T’Soni burst out. “Saren might try to have me killed or kidnapped again. I’d feel safer on your ship - and my knowledge of the Protheans might be useful later on.”

Shepard looked at her steadily. “This is a warship in the middle of a conflict. I can’t guarantee your safety.”

“I don’t think anyone can guarantee my safety, Commander,” she said quietly.

After a moment Shepard nodded. “Alright. Alenko, take Doctor T’Soni here to the medbay, get Chakwas to check her out. She’s had a rough day. Williams, I’d like to speak to you for a moment, rest of you dismissed.”

Williams waited attentively while the rest of the team filed out, hands loosely clasped behind her back. Shepard came closer and said in a low, even voice, “I believe her, but it wouldn’t hurt to keep an eye on her if she starts wandering the ship.”

“Aye ma’am,” the Marine agreed, whiskey brown eyes narrowed slightly.

“And Sergeant?”
“Yeah?” Williams looked at her and Shepard was suddenly and inappropriately aware that they were close enough that she could feel the warmth of the younger Marine’s arm close to her side.

She cleared her throat, taking a step back. “Be nice about it. She’s under our protection - and she’s not her mother. She’s not to blame for Eden Prime. No one should be condemned for the sins of the father.”

Williams flinched as if prodded and then nodded. “Understood ma’am.”

“That was all. Dismissed, Sergeant.”

“Ma’am.”

When the Marine was gone, Shepard breathed in and bravely faced the FTL communicator, glaring at it as if she knew it was about to tell her she had latrine duty for a month. She spared a longing thought for the brisk, evenhanded debriefs with Colonel Hoang, and pressed the button that would connect her to the Council.

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**CODEX ENTRY**

**The Principles of Attacking:**


REMEMBER: Fire without manoeuvre is indecisive. Manoeuvre without fire is FATAL.

In other words, sitting back and firing at the enemy will only accomplish so much; a Marine should remain aggressive and decisive to win the battle. Simply rushing an enemy, however, will most likely result in dead Marines and little else.

*Reconnaissance:* know as much about your enemy as you can before attacking. *Isolation:* cut off the enemy from avenues of reinforcement or escape. It may be difficult to fully isolate a target but it must be done to the best of the element's ability.

- Emplace heavier weapons where they can cover likely retreat paths. If artillery is available, consider plotting these paths as secondary targets.
- Consider leaving a ‘gap’ to convince the enemy they can escape. They may break and attempt to flee, only to run into previously emplaced friendly weapons.

*Preparation:* the use of support fires to 'soften' or attrit an enemy force before conducting an assault. This can be done via artillery or mortar fire, naval fire and close air support.

- When possible, preparatory fires should be maintained during the assault element's movement and shift just prior to the element's arrival at the element, to maximise shock and confusion and give the enemy little time to recover and react to the assault element. This may be the difference between a successful assault and the enemy recovering and opening a still vulnerable assault element.

*Surprise:* in certain situations it will be more important to attack with surprise than spend the time to prepare a target. Surprise, combined with violence and speed of action can be a force multiplier that can outweigh the the effects of preparation. Whether to use preparatory fire or attack with surprise is the decision of the element leader, such as the platoon commander.

*Flexibility:* remember 'no plan survives first contact with the enemy'. The situation may develop in many unexpected ways. This requires the Marine leader to respond with initiative and adaptiveness. Do not get overly attached to your plans.
Definitions:
*Mike: Minute
*Buffer: nickname for a ship's command master chief, coming from the old term 'Chief's Boatswain's Mate'. The term originates from the United Kingdom's Royal Navy and spread to various Commonwealth of Nations Navies – and then to the Alliance.
Lieutenant Kaidan Alenko hadn’t slept and, staring at himself in the mirror of the men’s showers, he looked like it. There were deep, dark shadows under his eyes and he found himself moving gingerly, just in case moving his head too quickly would bring back the skull-crushing pain that had led to him spending the night curled up in the medbay. Even the soft hum of the ship made his stomach protest.

What he wanted to do was go back to his sleeper pod, curl up in soft darkness and spend a few hours shielded from the galaxy. What he did was splash water on his face and shave. When he left the head Williams was waiting at one of the mess tables with her laptop, two cups of coffee and two trays of food. When he sat across from her, she slid him one of the cups and the tray piled high with food.

“Thanks,” he said, picking up his fork.

“You look like shit, LT,” she said bluntly, stabbing one of her sausages. “One of those nights?”

“Yeah. Migraine.” They both had those nights. He had his migraines and the occasional smoke-drenched dream of Eden Prime. She wandered the corridors of the ship, like ghosts were trailing after her. Sometimes they would drink coffee together and play cards, or she’d steal his paperwork so he could lie in agony without heaping worry on top of it. They were developing a strong, honest command dynamic. Even a friendship.

She pushed an egg around the tray. “I can handle things this morning if you need some rest.”

“I’m good,” he said in between mouthfuls of bacon. “How’s Fredricks?”

“I’ve confined him to quarters. He’s got a nice bruise, but I don’t think he’s hurt other than his pride. Buffer wants to mast him.” A captain’s mast, a nonjudicial proceeding before Commander Shepard herself. PFC Fredericks was probably terrified, with that sword hanging over him.

“Got a list of extra duties yet?”

She smirked. “You bet I do, sir.”

After about ten minutes of discussion about what their training schedule looked like, Williams excused herself to go attend to the armoury. Kaidan flicked through the detachment calendar. The ship’s limited space constrained what type of training could be done - there certainly wasn’t room for a range, but there was some exercise equipment for the Marines to keep themselves in a condition to fight and he could schedule ‘book learning’. They’d complain about it, but if an infantry unit wasn’t complaining about something he’d be worried.

The door to the medbay hissed open and T'Soni crept out warily. Kaidan felt a pang of sympathy even as he noted Serviceman Second Class Adamczyk watching her keenly. Adamczyk - a course and mission planner in the CIC - and his buddy Serviceman Second Class Dreyer in the mess kitchen both took stereotypes about asari too literally. They seemed to think they had a chance with her and weren’t afraid to discuss it. Alenko was in no mood to be witness to Adamczyk’s fumbling attempts at flirtation anymore than he was in the mood for a civilian contractor to feel harassed by Alliance servicemen.

“Doctor T'Soni?” he called, inviting her to sit in the seat Ashley had just vacated. She sat across
from him almost gingerly, with a tray of the same breakfast and a cup of orange juice - not black coffee like he and Williams had been drinking.

“Hello Lieutenant,” she said, eyeing the bacon curiously.

“Call me Kaidan,” he said, polishing off his eggs.

“Then I must insist you call me Liara,” she replied, taking a sip from her cup. “This is good.”

“We’ll run out of the good stuff soon, unfortunately,” He began digging into a sausage. “Milk and fresh food are usually the first to go. Then it’s onto the powdered stuff.”

She looked mystified. “You drink milk?”

He blinked. “Uh. Yeah. Cow’s milk usually. I take it asari don’t?”

“Not once we’re weaned from our mothers.”

“Huh.” Kaidan nodded to Corporal Dubyansky as he passed with Ki-tae and Chou. The big Russian’s eyes were hard when they fell on the asari across from him.

“The crew - particularly your soldiers - don’t trust me,” Liara observed.

Kaidan winced a little, rubbing his hand along his newly-shaven chin. “My guys are infantry. They don’t even like other Marines half the time.”

“They have a very strong sense of the in-group,” Liara said slowly. Of course a scientist would frame it that way. “I suppose that is to be expected - it is often seen among warrior social groups.”

It didn’t help that, for all that she had been polite, some of the Marines had picked up on their Staff Sergeant’s suspicion of Benezia’s daughter. He couldn’t fault how Williams had acted since her chat with Shepard, but the wariness remained and he couldn’t completely blame her. T’Soni was a name bound up in Eden Prime and the massacre of the 2/12, however gentle the doctor was. “Commander Shepard has vouched for you. Give them time and they’ll get used to having you aboard.”

Performance in combat was the quickest way to earn a Marine’s trust - which was why Garrus Vakarian had found himself accepted by a band of the Marines. Tali’Zorah’s skill as an engineer and ease with shipboard life had endeared her to the naval crew as well. But Kaidan wasn’t going to throw an archaeologist into battle just so his subordinates could overcome their prejudices and/or suspicions. It wasn’t even entirely because she was an asari and their enemy’s daughter - some of it was just the grunt’s suspicion of a civilian outsider.

He shrugged, mopping up some yolk with the end of a sausage. “A lot of humans are still learning to separate our violent entry into galactic affairs from the individuals they meet.”

“What about you?” she asked quietly, before taking a tentative bite out of a sausage.

“People are people, no matter their species,” he said simply. Sometimes when Kaidan closed his eyes he could still hear the snap of Vyrnnus’ neck. “There’s good and bad in everyone. It’s our actions that decide what kind of people we are. You’ve chosen to help us - that’s what matters to me.”

“Thank you…Kaidan.”

Shepard woke with the sheets tangled around her bare legs, sweat beading on her face and her head buzzing. She groaned into the silence of her dark cabin, running a hand through her tangled hair. The
alarm clock beside her bunk blinked 0327 at her.

“Fucking Protheans,” she muttered at the blank metal above her head, digging her fingers into her skull as if she could force out the dreams that had twisted behind her eyes all night. She had enough ghosts rattling around in there without the Protheans getting in on the action. After a few more moments staring at the ceiling, teeth gritted, she flicked the lights on, pulled on her PT shirts to go with the loose Navy shirt she wore to sleep, and grabbed her uniform. She wasn’t going to get back to sleep before her 0430 alarm sounded and years of military service had trained her so she couldn’t sleep past 0500 anyway. At least the showers would be empty before the rush after Reveille and breakfast.

After showering and dressing she looked something closer to an officer of the Alliance Navy, and it was time for the first coffee of the day - and to get started on the mountain of paperwork a warship ran on. It was practically tradition for a captain to pass on a lot of the paperwork to their Executive Officer, but Shepard was very aware Pressly was shouldering a great deal of work already. It wouldn’t do to run poor Charles into the ground at the start of their cruise.

At 0545 the chief steward, PO2 Kanu Medra, came to her cabin with a tray piled with no less than five eggs, three sausages and several rashers of bacon, ahead of the breakfast rush in the mess.

“Petty Officer,” Shepard said seriously, “I think you’re my favourite person on this ship right now.”

The broad Indian man smiled widely. “I’ll not tell the Buffer that, ma’am. It wouldn’t do to make the captain wait in line in the mess, and I know you and Lieutenant Alenko need plenty of sustenance.”

“You have my sympathies for having to keep two dextros and four biotics fed,” she said dryly.

“Part of the job ma’am, though I’ll admit to having to change my projections, particularly where Mr Wrex is concerned.”

She cracked a sympathetic smile and chatted with the steward for a few minutes, drawing out of him that he had a horde of children at home on Arcturus before he had to return to his duties. Once the door sealed behind him she dug voraciously into the meal. Milk and eggs were amongst the first things a warship ran out of and the powdered versions just weren’t the same, so she always tried to enjoy the supplies while they lasted.

At 0700 there was another knock at the door, followed by young Serviceman Emerson carrying another steaming cup of coffee, which he set on her desk.

“I, uh,” he stammered.

Shepard raised an eyebrow and waited.

Emerson swallowed and began again. ‘I’ve sorted your emails in order of priority, ma’am. There’s nothing urgent, but uh, the Buffer would like to meet with you today.’

“Very good, Serviceman. Has Williams’ transfer paperwork gone through with PersCom yet?” She took a sip from the cup and was pleasantly surprised. Anderson had always appreciated Emerson’s coffee, but he liked his black and strong. Shepard was unashamed that she liked a dash of milk and sugar in her bean juice, and somehow Emerson had picked up on that. Her estimate of his observation skills went up a notch.

“Uh..no, ma’am.” He looked at his feet when she frowned. “PersCom knocked it back. I took it to the Buffer and Lieutenant Alenko - to make sure I made no mistakes, but they both said it looked fine to them. I believe that’s one of the things the Master Chief wants to talk to you about.”
Of course PersCom was making her life harder. Sometimes she wondered if they went to a school specifically to learn how to lose paperwork and send people to the wrong unit. “Alright. Was there anything else?”

“No ma’am.”

The emails were all rather mundane. Arcturus had approved her request to add T’Soni as a civilian contractor, with a reasonable salary, and she reminded herself to buy Admiral Hackett a bottle of Fernet in thanks. A request had arrived from the Bureau of Ships for status reports on the Normandy. A brief, curt email from her mother struck her with a bolt of anxiety, Captain Hannah Shepard’s words balanced between pride at her promotion and wariness. I’ve heard Spectres are generally expected to resign from their previous occupations, is this true?

She had an excuse to avoid that question when Master Chief Petty Officer Monica Negulesco entered her office, the tall Romanian folding herself into the chair opposite Shepard. They exchanged pleasantries - Shepard carefully avoiding the topic of Negulesco’s husband and children. It was a sore spot, and not any of her business until the Buffer made it.

“The crew has had few discipline issues thus far ma’am, but there was an incident yesterday. Damage Controlman Laflamme and Private First Class Fredricks have had few clashes of personality, and they came to blows yesterday. Sergeant Williams ended it very quickly, and both she and Petty Officer Draven have kept them both separated, but I believe they need to be Masted.”

“I agree. They need to save it for the geth. Do you have a recommendation?”

Negulesco nodded. “Considering their exemplary previous service and lack of previous offences, I’d recommend they both receive 45/45.”

45 days restriction, where they wouldn’t be permitted to go on shore leave, and 45 days of extra duties. She had a feeling Williams would find it amusing to think up strange things for Fredricks to do. “Alright. Considering that they physically struck each other, however, I’m going to add a suspended bust for six months on top of it.”

The Buffer nodded in acceptance. “Hopefully they can keep their noses clean for that long.”

“On the topic of Williams, Serviceman Emerson informed me that PersCom knocked back her transfer paperwork. Last we spoke, I was led to believe it wouldn’t be a problem.”

Negulesco scowled. “They’re trying to give her orders to fucking Demeter, ma’am.”

“That’s not going to happen,” Shepard said flatly. Williams was an exemplary NCO and sniper. Sending her to Demeter, a planet on which a B list celebrity visiting was the highlight of the year, was not only deeply unjust, it was a waste.

The Buffer’s eyes glittered. “At the moment, the only consequence is that she’s not getting her deployment allowance, but they’ve also stopped paying her the allowances for colonial service - all she’s getting is base pay.”

Shepard rubbed her forehead, a flash of anger burning through her stomach. “At least she’s deployed and doesn’t have much in the way of expenses.”

“Not for her personally, ma’am, but she supports her mother and a sister still in high school. I think she’s a bit anxious about their financial situation.”

“Alright,” Shepard sighed, “We’ll try again and if they don’t process it I’ll have to find the time to
call PersCom and knock some sense into them. I’ll talk to Williams, make sure she knows her command is backing her.”

“Aye, ma’am.” Negulesco’s green eyes were approving and Shepard allowed herself a flicker of relief. She needed the Buffer’s support more than anyone else on the ship, and so far the older woman’s demeanour had been coolly professional. Waiting for the vindication of Shepard’s promotion - or for her to fail. Shepard couldn’t really blame her; her promotion had been politics rather than earned. It would take a bit more to break through the petty officer’s reserve, but the first few cracks were there.

Shepard leaned back into her chair and listened as the Buffer moved onto the next item of business.

Ashley had always found gun maintenance soothing. She could disassemble a standard issue Hahne Kedar M7 Lancer assault rifle with a blindfold on. Every piece had its place and she meditated with every stroke of the cleaning cloth. The thrum of the Marine kennel, as the loading bay had become known, surrounded her like a blanket of noise. The nickname had been bestowed by an annoyed petty officer due to the old Marine nickname Devil Dogs, and the Marines had predictable loved it. An enterprising Lance Corporal Waaberri had already found a sign on which she’d painted ‘Devil Dog Kennel’, a snarling bulldog and the grinning skull of the 103rd MARDIV, and hung it near the elevator.

It was a little niche the Marines had carved out for themselves, a little bit of Corps in the midst of all that Navy. It was her place. Finally, Ashley had a deployment where her skills were being utilised, where she was allowed to lead like a detachment sergeant should. When Fredricks had fucked up, Alenko hadn’t undermined her authority by intervening. He’d just stood by and watched while she handled it. This was where Staff Sergeant Ashley Williams was meant to be.

And every time she thought that, let a feeling of belonging sink into her, it was followed by a sharp-edged stab of guilt and grief. Why was she alive and in the best billet she’d ever had when Nirali Bhatia and Penny Neal and hell, John Michaels were all in the ground? She’d resented Michaels. She’d hated him sometimes. But he hadn’t deserved to die like that and his parents hadn’t deserved to get a knock on the door and a closed casket to bury.

The cloth was balled up in her fist as she stared at the rifle. The old meditation wasn’t working anymore.

Behind her, she heard laughter and scuffling as Lance Corporal David Hodgins and Lance Corporal Jaz Teke playfully shoved and elbowed each other in an impromptu spar.

“Uh…Staff Sarn’t?” PFC Fredricks winced as she turned to look at him standing at perfect parade rest. Clearly, his ears were still ringing from the dressing-down she’d given him. A bruise splashed lurid purples and reds across his jaw. At least he’d come out on top in the fight - a Marine getting bested by a grease monkey would’ve embarrassed all of them.

“Yes PFC?”

“I was hoping that well, that you’d give permission for Vakarian to help me an’ Nick with the Mako. We’re still down that mechanic, and he really knows his shit, Sarn’t.”

Fredricks wasn’t wrong. The Mako mechanic, along with the Staff Sergeant originally destined for Ashley’s billet, had been waiting on Eden Prime to get picked up when the Normandy swung past. Instead, both mechanic and Staff Sergeant had died in the Battle of Constant. The Normandy had solved one problem by taking her along, but PersCom was still trying to find a mechanic for them.
“Alright. But if anything gets broken or mis-calibrated, I’ll keelhaul you both. In space.” She narrowed her eyes at him, impressing on him that she was completely and utterly serious.

“Aye aye, Staff Sergeant!”

“Dismissed, PFC.” When the younger Marine had scampered off, she turned her attention back to the rifle and began reassembling it, piece by piece.

“Captain on deck!” Waaberi, who was fiddling with her armour close to the entry to the Kennel, called out, her voice cutting through the rise and fall of a dozen voices. The Marines stopped what they were doing and came to attention as Commander Shepard entered the bay. There was always a shiver of tension when a naval officer came in that door, but that didn’t hold when it was the skipper. Shepard might wear a Navy uniform now, but she was still a Marine in the ways that mattered; she was the best of the Corps, even. There wasn’t a Marine here who hadn’t heard the story of Second Lieutenant Emilia Shepard, Dragon Platoon and the Battle of Illyria. Young Marines were practically grown on stories like Daly at Belleau Wood, Ahern on Shanxi, and Shepard on Elysium.

“As you were, Marines.” Another senior officer might have had the Marines looking over their shoulders, wary as a mouse in the shadow of a hawk, but Shepard regularly did rounds of the ship, speaking to the most junior members of her crew, and so they’d become accustomed to their commanding officer appearing at random. She’d never had a CO who made a point of speaking to her regularly, but Shepard approached her now, as she had on all the other times she’d toured the ship.

“Williams,” Shepard said, leaning against the bench. Her dark brown eyes flickered over the rifle laid out there and the black grease on Ashley’s hands.

“Skipper.” She said easily. A flash of pleased surprise darted across the Commander’s face at the nickname.

“How’s it?”

She shrugged. “You know. Cleaning guns. My youngest sister messaged me.” She was glad Shepard had come down after she’d listened to Sara’s message. She was going to be down a sister when she went home because she was going to kill her. Of course Sara had to comment on the attractiveness of her superior officers, and of course Waaberi had heard and laughed long enough for Ashley to consider throwing her out the airlock. “Surprised to see you down here, ma’am.”

Shepard raised a scarred eyebrow. “And why is that?”

Ashley slid the last piece of the HK-M7 home. “Scuttlebutt says you’re sweet on T’Soni. Thought you might be up there, y’know?”

Her voice was sharper than intended.


Ashley wiped her hands off on a rag. “You do talk to her a fair bit, skipper.”

“I talk to everyone,” Shepard said dryly. Suddenly, horrified understanding blossomed across her face. “Please don’t tell me…”

Ashley couldn’t help it. She burst out laughing at the other woman’s expression. She managed a nod. “’Fraid so, ma’am. The grapevine has about three different theories.”
Shepard’s eyes rolled towards the ceiling as if beseeching. “Sweet baby Jesus, doesn’t anyone realise this is a warship and not the set of a soap opera?”

That set her off again. She had to brace herself against the bench, her ribs aching from laughing so hard. After a few moments, she recovered and straightened, still grinning. Shepard stared at her, almost petulant.

“I’m glad this amuses you so much, Staff Sergeant.” But there was a glitter in the Commander’s dark eyes that hinted that she saw the funny side too.

“Sorry, ma’am. But what else are the crew supposed to do besides gossip about your love life?”

“Well, it’s more interesting than what’s actually going on in my personal life,” Shepard’s voice was desert-dry. After a moment the Commander tilted her head, a strand of black hair falling across her cheekbone, dragging Ashley’s eyes along with it. “You have a sister?”

“Three. I’m the oldest. We’ve always been close.” She shrugged, “With my dad on deployments all the time, I had to help mum raise them.”

“Your dad served in the Fleet?”

“Yeah. Navy. He loved space time - took any crap assignment that got him a fleet berth.” When she’d been younger, and bitter about his absences and the responsibility it had foisted onto her, she’d thought he’d loved the Navy too much. Walking the cool blue-hued corridors of the Normandy, she felt close to him - and to understanding why he’d loved the fleet so much. “Worked his ass off, but never made it above Serviceman First Class. He was real proud when I made sergeant.”

“I can imagine,” Shepard’s voice was almost gentle before a flicker of amusement crossed her features. “Your sisters still talk to you after you helped raise them?”

Ash shrugged. “Things were tense with me and Sarah for a while.” Dad dead, mum mourning, Sarah lashing out at the most acceptable target. “Then we bonded…”

It was almost too easy to talk to Shepard. She had a way of looking at you, with those dark, inscrutable eyes, and with a word here or a question there, getting you to spill the whole story of how you’d reconnected with your little sister via letting her do her own beating up of her would be rapist ex-boyfriend.

“It was probably for the best she handled it,” Ash said contemplatively. “I probably would’ve broken him in half. Us Williams girls do things in our own time. Not before, not after.”

“Your father was deployed?”

“Yeah. He loved space, but he didn’t think it was the place to raise a family, y’know? Real ground under your feet and all. ‘I cannot rest from travel: I will drink Life to the lees: All times I have enjoyed Greatly, have suffer’d greatly, both with those That loved me, and alone, on shore.’” She recited the words her father had spoken to her so many times, soft despite the roughness of his Southern drawl.

“‘For always roaming with a hungry heart Much have I seen and known.’” Shepard said, a small smile on her face. “Ulysses. You have a sensitive side after all, Sergeant.”

Ashley narrowed her eyes at her. “No spreading that around…ma’am.”

Shepard’s mouth curled in a smirk. “Aye aye.”
“It was…my dad’s favourite poem. He used to take a recording of me reciting it every time he deployed. Badgered me to email him a version even after I enlisted.”

“That’s sweet,” Shepard said. “Does he still like it?”

“I hope so,” Ash said, with a pang of grief that still hurt, like stretching a still healing torn muscle. “I read it to his grave every time I go home. He died a few years back, in the Geneva accident.”

There was a genuine sympathy in the Commander’s voice. “I’m sorry, Williams.”

She shrugged uncomfortably. “He’s still watching over me, I’m sure of it.”

Michaels, when he’d found out she was a practising Catholic, had found it funny. A symptom of her backward nature. Shepard just smiled, told her that it wasn’t her job to tell her what to believe - and that she herself was a lapsed Catholic.

“I did come down here for a reason - not just the chat,” she said, brushing the hair out of her face. “Buffer came to me about your pay issues. I’m afraid Personnel Command has knocked your papers back. They’re trying to transfer you to Demeter.”

Ashley would’ve preferred to be shot. She stared at Shepard mutely, leaden dread weighing her limbs and heart. Those dark eyes turned sharp and fierce and Shepard grabbed her shoulder. Her fingertips seemed to burn, even through Ashley’s uniform shirt.

“It’s not going to happen, Sergeant.” Her voice was granite with determination. “I won’t let it.”

Ashley’s tongue seemed heavy in her mouth. “Thank you, ma’am.”

Shepard dropped her hand and Ashley felt cold all of a sudden. “Don’t thank me. I’m not doing you a favour - I’m doing myself one by keeping a damned good platoon sergeant and sniper.”

“I…yes, ma’am.”

Shepard glanced at the clock above the armoury. “I should go; I’ve taken up enough of your time, Sergeant.”

“Aye, ma’am. Thanks for the chat.” It hadn’t quite sunk in yet; the feeling of a chain of command that was with her, instead of trying to drag her down, like a lead ball chained to her ankle in the middle of a five klick battalion run.

When Shepard was gone, Gung Ho Draven, the tall African-American sergeant, arrived at the armoury carrying her weapons case. “Yo, Sarn’t, just gonna clean my shit if that’s all good with you?”

“I’m not going to stop you,” Williams moved over to give the other NCO room as she started to look over her M5 sidearm. God, she loved this pistol. She almost wanted to get into some real CQB action, just for an excuse to use it. The two of them fell into companionable silence as she carefully cleared the pistol and then began to remove the slide.

CODEX ENTRY

The Systems Alliance Navy Fleets: The Systems Alliance Navy currently operates eight numbered fleets of 120-200 vessels each. Some form part of regional commands and are responsible for defensive pickets, patrols and conducting anti-piracy operations in their area, other fleets are
expeditionary - rapid reaction forces meant to undertake offensive actions or reinforce the regional fleets. Numbered fleets are usually commanded by vice or full admirals.

First Fleet: The ‘Home Fleet’ is based out of Arcturus Station and protects both the capital and the Arcturus Prime Relay - functionally, the First Fleet protects Earth. It can also dispatch battle groups and task forces across much of Alliance space. The flagship of the First Fleet is the SSV Kilimanjaro DN4 and it also includes the heavy carrier Zheng He CA9 and Sun Tzu CA3 and light carriers Ibn Al-Haytham LCA1, William Marshal LCA14 and Galileo LCA12. The First Fleet is currently commanded by Admiral Alazne Egues.

Second Fleet: The Fleet that, under the command of the legendary Admiral Kastanie Drescher, defeated the Hierarchy Navy’s 33rd Far Fleet. The Second Fleet’s home is the planet of Elysium and it contains a disproportionate proportion of Elysian servicemen; the Elysium Defence Force often sends its officers on voluntary tours with the fleet to gain experience. Along with the Third Marine Expeditionary Force, the Second Fleet provides the strategic reaction force for much of the frontier of Alliance space. The newly built SSV Elbrus DN2 is the flagship of this fleet, and its carriers are Mahatma Gandhi CA2, Sun Yat Sen CA11, Omar Mukhtar LCA5 and Al-Kindi LCA13. The Second Fleet is commanded by Admiral Frederick Duus and is nicknamed ‘the Victors’ or ‘Drescher’s Cavalry’.

Third Fleet: The Third Fleet is an expeditionary fleet stationed in the Caleston Rift to defend against or launch attacks against the western Terminus systems. Some of the fleet’s assets were implicated in the Torfan massacre, though few charges were laid and none of the senior officers involved were removed. The flagship of the Third Fleet is the SSV Fuji DN3, and its carriers are Horatio Nelson CA6, Stephen Hawking CA7, Boudicca LCA2 and Achilles LCA15. The current commanding officer of the Third Fleet is Admiral Nitesh Singh.

Fourth Fleet: The Fourth Fleet is based at the Caleston Rift to protect the Alliance’s ally in Caleston and protect against aggression from the Hegemony. The Fourth Fleet is often nicknamed ‘the Nomad Fleet’ due to JOC’s habit of moving the fleet around as the Alliance’s defensive needs change. The flagship of the Fourth Fleet is the is the SSV Isaac Newton CA4 and its light carriers are Sejong LCA4, Ashoka LCA9 and Dwight D Eisenhower LCA17. The current commanding officer is Admiral Shen Mei.

Fifth Fleet: The Fifth Fleet is the Alliance’s premier expeditionary fleet and strategic strike force. When the SSV Orizaba is complete, the Fifth Fleet will be the first to have two dreadnoughts. The Fifth Fleet has taken part in numerous anti-piracy campaigns and shows of force, and is now tasked with responding to the geth threat. The flagship is currently the SSV Everest DN1, and the fleet contains the carriers Marie Curie CA8, Joan of Arc CA14, Toyotomi Hideyoshi LCA3, John Monash LCA10 and Timur LCA16. The current commanding officer is Admiral Steven Hackett.

Sixth Fleet: The Sixth Fleet is part of ‘EXCOM’ (Exodus Command) and is responsible for the defence of the Exodus Cluster, including Eden Prime and Elysium, and surrounding minor colonies. The Battle of Constant has led to something of an inquest into the fleet’s failure to stop the geth attack on Eden Prime. It has, however, been raised by advocates of the force that the Sixth has often been underfunded and has far less capital ships than the other fleets due to the belief that Exodus was safe from attack. The flagship of the Sixth Fleet is the heavy carrier SSV Hongwu CA5 and also contains the light carriers Alexander LCA8 and Grace O’Malley LCA11. The current commander of the Sixth Fleet is Vice Admiral Oliver Capel.

Seventh Fleet: The Seventh Fleet is based out of Czarnobog Fleet Depot, and is responsible for defending the Alliance’s ‘western’ borders and policing a large sector of space. As a result the Seventh has a very high proportion of scout frigates and light cruisers. The Seventh Fleet’s flagship
is the SSV Shastra DN5, and the fleet also contains the carriers Albert Einstein CA1, Charles De Gaulle CA12 and Prem Tinsulanonda LCA6.

Eighth Fleet: Nicknamed ‘the Wardens of the Verge’, the Eighth Fleet is part of VERGECOM, responsible for patrolling and picketing the notoriously unstable Traverse border. The fleet has the highest operational tempo in the Navy, with a resulting chronic shortage of manpower and ship, and often insufficient time for maintenance. It’s not unknown for Eighth ships to have to do repairs while underway that should be done in a drydock; some of its servicemen joke that ‘do more with less’ is the motto of the fleet. A deployment with this fleet can make or break a young officer’s career. With the advent of the war with the geth, the fleet has had to add ‘warfighting’ to its long list of responsibilities and its admiral’s demands for more ships have become more strident. The flagship of the Eighth Fleet is the SSV Tai Shan DN6, and the fleet includes the carriers Benjamin Davis CA10, Robert Oppenheimer CA13 and Casimir LCA7. The current commanding officer is Admiral Janice Holloway.

Chapter End Notes

MARDIV - Marine Division.
"Captain to the bridge, captain to the bridge." the 1MC boomed, severing Shepard's conversation with Lieutenant Adams. She didn't bother ending the conversation. She merely cut off mid-sentence, turned, and pushed her way out of Engineering and into the elevator, tapping her fingers impatiently against her thigh. Did they have to install the galaxy's slowest elevator on her ship?

A captain was never ordered on her own ship. If they needed to ask her something, she would be 'requested' on the bridge. But if it was an emergency…

The elevator chimed open and she surged past the knot of sailors waiting to go down to deck three. Her boots clicked against metal as she took the stairs two at a time. It wasn't an enemy contact - if it was, Pressly would've called General Quarters already and she wouldn't be the only one running.

The door to the CIC hummed open and Shepard immediately stepped past the Marine guard, looking for her Executive Officer, calling, "I have the deck. What's going on?"

Pressly, uniform neat and pressed as always, came to meet her. "Ma'am, sorry to interrupt your rounds, but we got a distress call I think you should hear." He glanced at the comms tech tucked into the corner of the CIC. "Play it for the Commander, serviceman."

She leaned forward as the sailor obeyed and a desperate voice filled the dark-hued deck, every one of the bridge crew silent. "Mayday, mayday, mayday! This is the MSV Majesty! We are under attack by pirates; we are an unarmed cargo freighter and our shields are failing! Mayday!"

She rocked back on her heels, biting down on a familiar flare of anger. "Alright, have we got the location and pulled the registry on the Majesty?"

"Aye ma'am, I've added the location given to our systems," Quartermaster Saxena said, his eyes narrowed.

"Working on the registry, ma'am," said Intelligence Specialist First Class Angelos Kokinos. Shepard was good with people, with working them out, but the softly-spoken Kokinos was something of a grey man - someone who usually faded into the background. He didn't have a spouse back home and he seemed to have few close ties with other members of the crew.

She turned her eyes to the CIC map, frowning. "Is there anyone closer?"

"Negative, ma'am," Pressly said sourly, "Eighth Fleet’s responsible for this sector but their closest ship, the Paris, is about five hours behind us."

"And we're about...twenty-two hours out, from what I can see," she said, nodding to the map.

"Twenty." Cut in Joker over the commline between CIC and the helm.

Shepard smiled despite herself. "Alright, give me a heading for the Majesty's last known location, put us up to Condition Two and get me a line to the Eighth Fleet. Joker, you have the conn. Get us there quick and quiet."

"Aye aye, Commander."
“I’ve got the registry, ma’am,” Kokinos handed her a datapad onto which he’d loaded the freighter’s info.

“MSV Majesty.” She quoted. “Registered in the Alliance and owned by Exodus Intergalactic Shipping. Last lodged trip was from Shanxi to Noveria. Six crew, Captain is a Willem Kennedy, Navy reservist but spent his whole life in merchant shipping.”

“Noveria? Better watch out for freaky science experiments on that ship, ma’am,” Joker quipped. “I’d say zombies, but the geth beat them to it.”

“Where’s the Eighth Fleet?” asked Sub-Lieutenant Raymond Tanaka. There was always something stilted about the way Tanaka stood and spoke. He vaguely reminded Shepard of an awkward high school student who’d gotten lost and found himself in the Navy. But the kid could do some magic with paperwork, which was why he’d been tapped as the XO’s assistant for the Normandy. “They’re supposed to have system pickets and patrols to combat pirates, right? And now with the geth, you’d think they’d want their frigates out scanning for their movements.”

Shepard and Pressly exchanged grimaces before she answered. “After Eden Prime, all the senators from the colonies are in an uproar. People are scared their colony will be next, so the government is making the admiralty pull a lot of ships for colonial defence pickets. The Eighth has had to pull a lot of patrols and the Admiral can’t weaken her rapid reaction forces in case one of her remaining patrols does run into geth or a colony is attacked.”

Tanaka shook his head, consternation written over his fine features. “But they need those patrols, ma’am. That’s the only way we can find the geth - they could be slipping through the holes in our frontier if the Eighth Fleet isn’t out there looking! If we sit on the colonies we’ll never know where the next punch is coming from. It’s stupid to think that defensive strategy will do better.”

“It’s politics,” she told him, “We know that - but the guy on his farm on Tiptree doesn’t. All he cares about is if his place is going to be the next one on fire. So he’s yapping at his representative and his representative wants to get re-elected, so she goes and yells in Parliament loud enough that the government rides the admiralty’s arse into reassigning their ships from actual warfighting duties.”

Pressly’s voice dripped with disgust. “Politics should stay outta it. We have a war to win.”

Shepard hid a wry smile. Her promotion, her command, her Spectre status - all politics; and she agreed with him. It’d be nice to feel like she’d earnt all of this, rather than being the human equivalent of a thrown bone.

"There are rumours that the Fifth Fleet will be moving up to help the Eighth or they might reinforce the Wardens from the Home Fleet," Pressly's eyes took on a certain questioning gleam as he looked at his commander.

She shrugged. "Nothing concrete yet. Unfortunately, JOC doesn't invite me to their deliberations.”

Pressly took the gentle push back for what it was and smiled at her wryly. For all of his faults, she'd realised she quite liked her Executive Officer and hoped that with time, his sharp edges would blunt.

“Alright, once we’re an hour out, put the ship to general quarters. I want to drop in and go straight to stealth so we can get eyes on, in case the Majesty’s attackers are still in the area. If they’re a bit big for us to take a bite out of them, we’ll collect recon and wait for the Paris to show up.”

“Ma’am, I’ve got a line to VERGECOM open,” Called Serviceman Third Class Barret.

“Good. I’ll take it in the briefing room. XO, you have the deck.”
"General Quarters, General Quarters! All hands man your action stations. The flow of traffic is up and forward on the starboard side, down and aft on the port. Set material condition Zebra throughout the ship. This is not a drill. General Quarters, General Quarters!"

“Yeah, I think we fuckin’ get it, Bitchin’ Betty.” Lance Corporal Hodgins muttered, sparing a moment to glare at the nearest 1MC speaker as the VI announcement was followed by a shrill alarm tone. The initial rush of the Navy servicemen rushing to their posts had faded and now the armoury was full of Marines (plus three aliens) armouring up. Doing up her own chest piece, Ashley spared a moment to hope the GQ alarm wouldn’t provoke one of the LT’s headaches. She glanced over at him as she holstered her sidearm. His face was creased but she wasn’t sure if that was pain or just him worrying about the hostages.

The Normandy had slid out of FTL into the Strenuus System and engaged stealth soon after. They’d located the Majesty pretty quickly - or what was left of her: a shattered hulk of scored metal drifting in the black of space. And a trail of radiation from whatever vessel had attacked her, leading to the planet of Xawin. The Majesty’s flight log indicated she’d been boarded, so the Commander was operating on the conclusion that the crew had been imprisoned by the pirates and were likely destined for a slave market.

That’s not going to happen, Ashley thought grimly, locking the ammo block into her M7 with purpose.

“Gather round,” Alenko ordered and the black-clad Marines, the quarian, and the turian did so. Wrex remained leaning against a crate, huge arms crossed and red eyes inscrutable. Ashley admitted to herself that he’d intimidated her to begin with, but she was starting to get used to the abrasive bastard. She often found herself alone in the armoury with him, and while he still insisted on maintaining his own weapons, they’d started talking shop sometimes.

“Okay, so passive scans have picked up a base on the surface of Xawin and a vessel that fits the profile of the ship that attacked the Majesty. The Commander believes the crew are in that base but wants eyes on - and an assault force if things go south. We’ll be dropping in two teams. Williams will lead the sniper team including Waaberi and Vakarian and the rest of you will come with me. We’ll drop here and here and…”

There was a lot of kit for this mission, and Ash had the distinct feeling that infiltrating on foot was going to suck at times. The surface of Xawin was a balmy -131 degrees Celsius, so the recon team members were in their bulky cold weather hardsuits, with skis strapped to their backs, and HALCD attachments clicked into place. Vakarian and Williams carried their assault rifles, sidearms, sniper rifles, and rangefinders. Waaberi had the bulky M560-B IMAW ‘Cobra’ launcher magnetised to her back and three extra rounds for it amongst her webbing.

She spared a moment to be grateful that they’d all done mountain warfare training in the past so they didn’t have to walk instead of ski.

They’d just all finished triple checking everyone’s jump-packs (no one wanted to be the guy who got splattered on the ground) when Commander Shepard entered the room. She stopped in front of the scout team, brown eyes dark enough to almost be black examining each of them in turn.

“No heroics from any of you. Put your own safety first - if you get swamped there’s no guarantee the Normandy or the assault team will get to you in time. Safety first.”

“On pain of safety briefings,” Ashley agreed.
Shepard half-smiled. “Very good.”

“How come you’re not coming with, ma’am?” asked Waaberi, the younger woman’s voice distorted by her faceplate’s vocaliser.

“I’m needed on the bridge,” Shepard replied, “And I have full faith in Lieutenant Alenko and Sergeant Williams.”

Ash straightened, pleased, “Thank you, ma’am.”

The Commander gave her another one of those almost smiles. “No need to thank me. Good luck, you three, and good hunting.”

As Shepard moved on towards the assault team, Ash noticed Waaberi looking at her, head tilted and eyes glittering mischievously beneath her visor. She glared at her. “What?”

“Nothing,” the Lance Corporal almost sang, turning away.

Annoyed, and not entirely sure why, she whirled around and set off to find the loadmaster.

Fifteen minutes later, they were standing on the open ramp as the Normandy shuddered its way through Xawin’s atmosphere, biting air dashing itself against Ash’s faceplate, metal trembling beneath her feet. She felt a bit edgy, a bit excited, the first surges of adrenaline flooding through her.

“Jump, jump, jump!” bawled the loadmaster and Ashley ran, trusting Waaberi and Vakarian would follow and launched herself off the edge. Gravity caught her and she plummeted toward Xawin’s surface. All she could hear was her own fast breathing inside her helmet and the roar of the wind outside of it, ice smacking into her hardsuit as fell.

Six thousand and ninety-six metres, her HUD displayed. In the cloud cover, she couldn’t see where she was going, could barely see anything of Vakarian or Waaberi except where hands were holding onto her to stay in formation, falling faster and faster with only the HUD to guide her.

After reaching terminal velocity, it took only minutes to hit the ground, but they were minutes that always seemed to stretch out like a rubber band. She never thought about her pack failing. She did think about the pirates and their guns, waiting below. She wanted them dead and the sailors safe. She wanted all scum like them out of the Alliance and the colonies safe, so she’d never have to see another one burn and never again have to wonder if Sirona would have a turn as the latest tragedy.

At two hundred metres she gritted her teeth as the thruster modules on her armour kicked in and g forces clawed at her. But she slowed, even as the three of them released each other. They were through the clouds now and she could see glittering white of Xawin beneath them, rising to meet her.

They landed in a puff of snow thrown up around them, cascading over armour and visors, an impact she felt in her ankles and knees. Ashley found herself sunk in a drift to the mid-thigh. Vakarian had floundered to his spurs. Grimacing, she pulled herself up out of the hole caused by her landing and brushed snow off her visor and helped Waaberi up - Vakarian was already grabbing his skis off his back.

They were alone and very small, armour painted pale enough they faded into the background - or that was the theory, anyway. The wind had whipped the environment around them into muted, curled shapes, something like a dream.

She brought up her map on her HUD and was pleased to see they were pretty much on target. Ashley signaled for the other two to follow her and Garrus gave her an awkward thumbs up. She
shook off the strangeness of it, digging her boots into the mechanism of the skis. That was just turians, the Commander had said, they liked to know where they fit. Even ones who said they were bad at being turians, like Garrus Vakarian.

They skied silently through a silent, blurred landscape before making it to the frozen ridge Alenko, Williams, and Shepard had decided on in the plan for the mission. The skis had skins on them that meant you could slide forward but not backward, so working their way up was less difficult than it could’ve been. Near the top they removed the skis, putting them back on their backs, and threw themselves into the snow to crawl the rest of the way. They were nearly there when Vakarian paused.

“You okay?” she called.

His voice was wry, “Turians and snow don’t get along.”

Concern prickled at her, “Is your suit working okay?”

The suits they were using today were fitted with heating tech to survive the deep cold that could kill them in less than an hour. It was still cold, the kinda cold that settled in your bones, but the suits were supposed to keep them defrosted enough they wouldn’t bite it. Ashley dug her knees into the soft snow, crystals collecting in the joints of her armour, and grabbed him by the webbing, pulling him the rest of the way with the help of gene-modded muscle.

They settled into position after Garrus had assured her he was just cold, not about to drop dead, hardsuits mottled in greys and whites, half buried in a snow drift, peeking over the top of the ridgeline, muscles still aching from the arduous climb. She pulled out the sniper rifle, the scope integrating with her visor HUD. She swept the sight across the terrain below them as Vakarian set up his rangefinder beside her. Waaberi lounged in the snow, the Cobra laid out beside her.

A field of rock and yet more white stretched below them, and beyond that, the raised lump of the pirate camp. There was a sole prefabricated building, a large ugly thing that could've been on a dozen worlds. There were some just like it on Sirona. Wire ran around it in a haphazard oval, the entrances sandbagged, with a few watchtowers looming black. A battered looking frigate rested beside the base, dull brown and snub-nosed, its ramp down. Looked like an old batarian model, with a few scrapes torn through its armour. More than enough to rip through a freighter like the Majesty, but a new warship would eat her for lunch.

Garrus made a noise, looking through the scope, “Seeing some AT and snipers in those towers.”

“Tag it,” Ash replied and the markers began to spring up on the Normandy tacnet, minimized on her HUD.

“Looks like some turrets as well,” he added.

“Alliance models,” she said flatly, glaring down at the squat guns. “Stolen or knock-offs.” She marked them as well.

Alenko’s voice buzzed in her ear, “Saber to Little Birdie, how copy?”

“Loud and clear, over.” She replied, snow crunching beneath her as she shifted, her breathing amplified inside her helmet.

“We’re in position. Continue visual reconnaissance and wait for further instructions, over.”

“Roger that, Saber.”
They settled in to wait.

The *Normandy* lurked in space, a dark predator shrouded in the deep black. Shepard stood on the bridge, hands behind her back as she focused on the plot.

Man, she really wished the ship had a captain's chair.

After dropping off the Marine teams, Joker had pulled the ship back out of atmosphere, still in stealth, and hid her behind some debris in orbit.

“*Big Brother, all objectives sighted. The hostiles have taken them off their vessel and into the base. Looks like the ship is taking off, over.*”

“Roger that, Little Birdie. Keep an eye on them, over.” she glanced over at Lieutenant Wulandri, who was acting as her tactical actions officer. Normally, it would be the ship's Navigator’s role in combat, but Pressly was XO and therefore the officer of the deck. It left Wulandri’s young assistant in charge of Gunnery down on Deck Two. “Give me a course of action, Wulandri.”

Wulandri cleared her throat. “The signature looks like an old *Tazarl* class frigate, Hegemony built.”

“Of course,” Pressly growled under his breath. Plenty of decommissioned Hegemonic Navy vessels just happened to end up in the hands of pirates.

“She looks like a grandma, but she’s got more punch than we might like. Triple three hundred metre mass accelerator cannons and decent armour. But getting those guns in meant the Hegemony sacrificed on a few things; namely, she has no torpedo tubes whatsoever and her GARDIAN batteries last about as long as my ex-husband.”

Shepard hid her smile. “And we have a ton of torpedos.”

“Exactly, ma’am. I say we wait until she's leaving atmo, get in behind her and fire a full barrage of torpedoes.”

“We've got lift off.” Reported one of the sensor techs.

“Keep us in stealth until the last moment,” she ordered. The decided course of action had its downsides - those mass accelerators had a good chance of ripping through the *Normandy*'s shields and armour, and staying in stealth this long after running 11 light years had built up a considerable amount of heat. If the first volley or two of torpedos didn't destroy the pirate vessel, they might have to make a run for it. And that would leave the ground team in a bad place, with no way of getting off Xawin if their presence was discovered.

“There she is,” murmured Wulandri as the blinking indicator of the enemy frigate rose from orbit.

Joker brought the *Normandy* in carefully, setting in behind her. Ugly thing that ship, all blunt planes and square corners. She'd look prettier as debris.

This, at least, was familiar. Hunting pirates was the bread and butter of the Alliance Navy and Marine Corps. Surrender or death were the only options available to those Alliance ships caught, and Shepard had every intention of enforcing that.

“Tactical, lock target, torpedo launchers one through six.”

“Target locked, torpedo launchers one through six.”
“Disengage stealth systems.” The *Normandy* dropped out of stealth barely twenty kilometres behind
the pirate ship - but there wasn’t time for her to react. “Fire!”

Six pairs of torpedoes sprang from the *Normandy*, eating up the space between the two vessels.  
GARDIAN beams sprung from the pirate ship as it hastily attempted to reverse course, manoeuvring
thrusters burning brightly in the dark. The lasers cut through the first barrage and they exploded
harmlessly, far from her hull.

“Lock torpedo launchers seven through twelve.”

“Locked.”

“Fire!”

Another twelve torpedoes leapt free. The enemy frigate in its haste to return fire had presented its
port side to them. Shepard smiled hungrily; all the better - a bigger target.

The first eight torpedoes died, slashed into harmlessness by the frigate’s GARDIAN batteries. Then
they faltered. A torpedo slipped through and then another and another

Explosions carved their way through the pirate ship's armour. She began to list, her port
manoeuvring and main thrusters reduced to slag, gaps in her hull bleeding air.

“Lock midships, main gun,” Shepard said. But she waited as the enemy vessel slowly spun, sheets
and spars of metal breaking off her and floating free.

“They’re abandoning ship, ma’am. I’m reading life pod launches,” Pressly reported.

“Launch recovery drones,” she ordered. The drones, all thrusters and grasping arms, would grab the
life pods and drag them aboard. “Have a security detachment waiting to take them into custody. Full
seals and magboots - if any of them try to resist, space them.”

There was a pause before her XO nodded. “Aye, ma'am.”

“Comms, set up a broadcast to the pirate base.”

“It's open, ma'am.”

Shepard spoke, voice cold and resolute. “This is the Alliance warship *Normandy* to pirate base on
Xawin. You have attacked a ship flying the colours of the Systems Alliance. This is a crime that
permits me to use lethal force against you. And I will do exactly that if you do not immediately lay
down your arms and surrender.”

There was a long pause before her tech spoke. “Ma'am, they're transmitting a video connection.”

“Accept.”

The holographic interface before her buzzed and swirled into the form of a batarian, a scar running
down one side of his face, across one eye socket. A glass eye stared blindly out of it. When a
batarian lost an eye, they had to undertake a pilgrimage to the temples on their homeworld to ‘reunify
the soul’ and craft a ceremional replacement. Cybernetic eyes were anathema, a lie to the gods that
rested on the pillars of strength. “I am Captain Amorak Lihask. I would know the name of the human
who has murdered my brother and my employees.”

She smiled without humour. “Vengeance, not murder. It's Commander Shepard - and you will
surrender to me or I'll bomb your little base to dust.”

Lihask bared his needle-like teeth. “I have something valuable to you, human.”

She raised one scarred eyebrow, “Really?”

The video feed panned, showing the dirty interior of a room, littered with Tupari bottles and old food wrappers. Lined up against the wall, blindfolded and with their hands cuffed, were six human men and women, four in overalls and two in the white uniform of the merchant navy. The crew of the Majesty. “Tell the commander you want to live, animals.”

Fury rose in her at that word. The one rescued slaves whimpered. The one they’d shouted at her and her Marines during the Blitz. She fought it down. The hostages needed her to be calm, in control.

“P-please,” one of them, a young woman barely over twenty, gasped. There were tears on her cheeks. “Please.”

The camera panned back to the pirate chief.

“All right,” Shepad said, keeping a hint of boredom in her voice, like the hostages meant little to her. “Let’s talk.”

ODEX ENTRY:

Systems Alliance Navy Officer Ranks and their roles:

Ensign (En): Ensign is the normal entry-level rank for most commissioned officers. Depending upon their MVC, Ensigns may go directly to a warship after being commissioned to serve as a division officer, or he or she may serve up one to two years of specialty training before reporting to a combat unit. If on a warship, Ensigns engage in extensive on-the-job training, receiving training and mentoring from senior officers and enlisted alike.

Sub-Lieutenant (SbLT): The difference between Ensign and Sub-Lieutenant is slight, primarily being experience and having higher pay. The purpose of this division is to separate the junior officers found unqualified from the commissioned service. It is not uncommon to see officers moved to positions requiring more experience after promotion to Sub-Lieutenant. Like Ensigns, Sub-Lieutenants serve as Division Officers.

Lieutenant (Lt): Lieutenants usually serve as Division Officers aboard Navy ships, commanding groups of sailors and petty officers. They are also commonly found as Department Assistants, taking on some of the administrative and leadership duties assigned to them by the Department Head. On small commands such as frigates, destroyers or corvettes, Lieutenants can serve as department heads, or even the executive officer.

Lieutenant Commander (LtCdr): Lieutenant Commanders typically serve as mid-ranking officers in the Alliance Navy. Their most typical billet is a department head, which has them lead several Division Officers. LTCDRs are also often found as executive officers aboard frigates and other similar size commands. They may also be assigned to command corvettes, the smallest vessels in the Navy. They are often referred to as just ‘Commander’.

Commander (Cdr): Commander is the first senior commissioned officer rank in the Alliance Navy, and is equivalent to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel in the Alliance Marine Corps. Commanders often serve as the captain of a small Navy vessel, such as a frigate, or a destroyer. Commanders may also lead squadrons of aircraft, command a squadron of corvettes, or serve on the staff of a senior officer
aboard a large Naval vessel.

Captain (Capt): Captain is a senior commissioned officer's rank in the Alliance Navy, and is equivalent to a Colonel of Marines. Navy captains can hold a variety of high-level leadership positions, such as commanding large vessels, navy schools, air wings, space stations, or groundside bases. Captains have a great deal of autonomy in commanding their vessels, and those who prove their leadership and dedication over several years of service may be rewarded by receiving command of a larger and more important vessel or installation.

Commodore (Cdre): traditionally the title of any officer assigned to command more than one ship at a time, a Commodore is a one star flag officer and commands a small flotilla or squadron of small Navy ships, a naval facility, a group of air wings or serve on a fleet staff. By tradition in the Alliance Navy, when an officer is selected or appointed to flag rank, all current Navy flag officers write the selectee a letter congratulating him or her for attaining flag officer status.

Rear Admiral (RAdm): a two star rank, Rear Admirals generally command a larger flotilla or squadron of naval vessels, an important naval facility or a group of air wings. They may also fill in positions on the staff of a senior officer.

Vice Admiral (VAdm): a three star rank, Vice Admirals generally lead important installations or large task forces, such as a carrier or dreadnought strike group. They may also command a smaller fleet or be the executive officer of a full sized fleet.

Admiral (ADM): Admiral commands a numbered Navy fleet during an operation or war, upwards of a hundred warships and auxiliary vessels.

Fleet Admiral (FAD): A Fleet Admiral typically has over 30 years of Naval experience, and commands all operations taking place within their area of operations. They can also hold one of the positions reserved for the rank, such as Chief of Navy or Chief of the Defence Force. They are among highest ranking members of the Alliance Military.

Chapter End Notes

Definitions:

HALCD: High Altitude, Low Controlled Descent.
IMAW: Infantry Multi-purpose Assault Weapon. A rocket launcher system used for destroying structured, assaults and as a secondary anti-tanks system.
VERGECOM: Skyllian Verge Command.
Bitchin' Betty: Nickname for a ship's VI
“I’m no ideologue, Commander,” the pirate Lihask said so pleasantly he set Shepard’s teeth on edge. “I’m sure we can come to an agreement.”

The Commander folded her arms. “Your surrender means you and all of yours live.”

His top eyes rolled. “You want these hostages alive and I don’t wish to live the rest of my life in an Alliance prison getting beaten for having too many eyes. I want a shuttle.”

Shepard shrugged. “This is a patrol frigate, ‘Captain’. We don’t carry shuttles.”

“Then get one.” He bared his sharp teeth again.

“What type of shuttle do you want?” She asked blandly. “We have Kodiaks and Vespers nearby. Vespers are bigger than Kodiaks but unarmed. Neither will be big enough for your entire gang.”

Lihask’s head tilted right, but Shepard kept her face still, not giving away that she understood the insult. N7s studied the common batarian languages in detail - body language and the flicking and movement of the eyes was as important as words. “I know how your negotiation techniques work, human. You will draw this out with questions in the hope I will get tired and capitulate. No games. Get me a shuttle, whatever is closest.”

“I will need to speak with my superiors,” she replied evenly and closed the connection. She turned to Pressly, “Have we retrieved all of the escape pods?”

“Aye, ma’am. Most of them went along quietly - one did try to have a go of it, but Chief Rahman taught him the error of his ways.” Pressly paused, discomfited, “The Chief also, uh, communicated that your orders are to space them if they attempt to break out. He said the prisoners quietened down after that.”

Shepard simply nodded. “How far away is the Paris?”

“Two hours, ma’am.”

“Get me a line to her captain in the comm room.” An hour later, after a long conversation with Captain Hamish Lou, Shepard returned to the bridge, a certain grim pleasure in the line of her mouth. When Communications Technician Lam had reconnected the call to the pirate base, she gathered all the very real disgust she felt and directed it towards the fuzzy holo of Lihask. “Another Alliance ship is on the way - with your shuttle.”

“Good,” he said, staring at her with all four eyes. Her hands itched and she clenched them into fists. “Send it down and then you can have your people.”

“I don’t think that’ll work,” Shepard said dryly.

Lihask flashed his needle teeth at her, “Don’t play games with me, Commander!”

Her mouth curled. “I’m not getting an Alliance pilot captured by you lot. Two shuttles. The second pilot and the hostages will get on one and you take the other. We’ll send them down after the hostages are brought up top and outside the wire and not sooner.”

“Unacceptable,” he snarled.
She raised her chin. “That’s the offer, Lihask. I’m not sending those shuttles until my sensors show those hostages are alive, and I’m not sending them to your base so you can seize both and take my pilots. You have an hour to decide. Lam, cut the connection.”

The holo fuzzed and died. The Commander walked over to the coffee machine squirreled away in the corner and began to make herself a cup. Her movements were sharp, jaw hard.

“How’s the ground team going?” She asked Pressly, who she’d put in charge of monitoring the situation down there while she negotiated with Lihask - and with Captain Lou.

“They’re a bit cold and bored, but doing well,” he reported, “Alenko says the pirates seem to have holed up in their base - no patrols or recon drones that he’s seen. Williams has reported the same.” He paused, shaking his head. “Amateurs.”

Shepard just took another sip from her cup.

Forty-five minutes later, Lihask called the Normandy again. Shepard arranged her features in a suitably bland expression as he tilted his head to the right and crossed his arms. “We will bring them outside the compound to meet your shuttles…but I will not have your ships intervening. You will wait on the other side of the system until the exchange has taken place.”

‘Never interrupt your enemy when he is making a mistake,’ Napoleon Bonaparte had once said. Words to live by. So Shepard made a point of arguing just long enough before she agreed to that demand.

“The Paris has arrived in system. They’re hailing us,” Lam reported.

When Shepard nodded, a holo of the other ship’s captain popped up in front of her captain’s podium. “He’s taken the bait, sir. Once your shuttles are in the air, we’ll need to move both our vessels to the other side of the system.”

Lou’s eyes had a hint of stress tucked into the creased corners. “I hope this works out as you plan, Commander. We’re launching two Kodiaks now. Their callsigns are Eagle One and Two - I’ll have them report to you.”

She hoped it worked out too. Her plan wasn’t exactly ‘by the book’, but the book and its insistence on ‘never negotiating with terrorists!!!’ wasn’t particularly helpful if she wanted to get the Majesty’s crew out alive. But if this all went wrong, that book would be thrown at her - not at Lou, who had, by agreeing to allow her to continue negotiating, foisted all responsibility onto her shoulders. And they both knew it.

He’d done so on the basis that she was a Spectre - and she had a feeling that this wouldn’t be the first time a situation like this would happen. She couldn’t say ‘sir, yes sir’ and wash her hands of the whole thing anymore, no matter how much her ingrained instinct to follow the chain of command screamed at her.

But Shepard was okay with the weight; she wasn’t going to get those hostages killed if she could avoid it, just because of a high-minded policy written by some old demagogue on Arcturus, safe behind their desk. If she calculated wrong, she’d meet the consequences with her head held high.

“Thank you, sir.”

“Paris out.” Lou’s holo faded away.

“Shuttles have launched and are in position, ma’am,” Pressly reported.
“Very good. Joker, take us away from the planet on bearing 124. Half ahead - no reason to build up any more heat than necessary.” As it was, the CIC was getting decidedly toasty. Beads of sweat had formed on her XO’s forehead.

“Bringing us out of orbit.”

Garrus Vakarian was cold.

It was the sort of cold that got under your plates, dug icy tendrils into your very bones. He shuffled uncomfortably in the snowdrift he and the two humans were practically buried in, reminded of his mountain warfare training on Thracia, frozen mudball that it was. He didn’t understand how any turian could bear living in these sorts of temperatures.

Lance Corporal Waaberi was lounging on her back, looking like she should be on a beach rather than a snowy ridgeline. A beach, Garrus thought wistfully, he’d love to have a gunfight on a beach. For all her affected laziness, Waaberi was watching their backs, while he and Williams stared down the pirates.

He stared at a sentry through his scope. The sentry had only moved when they’d swapped, forty-five minutes ago. “Why no patrols?”

“Might just be dumb,” Waaberi offered. “A smart guy woulda given it up like three hours ago.”

“Scared the skipper will drop a twenty kilo slug on their heads if they move, maybe,” Williams mused, brushing off some ice that had crusted her visor.

Garrus opened his mouth to reply when he saw a flutter of movement out the corner of his eye. He swept the sight towards it. Far below, a haphazard group was making its way out of the wire surrounding the pirate base. There were at least eight persons armed with assault rifles - batarians and turians if he had to guess - shepherding six humans with their hands cuffed. A hiss of disgust forced its way out of his mandibles. The hostages were only wearing thermal clothing, not proper climate controlled cold climate suits.

Williams had seen it too. “Eagle One, we have eyes on the packages. Be advised, I don’t think they have too long before they freeze - no suits, over.”

“Copy that, Little Birdie. We’re on our way, over.”

“Don’t worry,” the sergeant said over the radio, checking her rifle over, “We’ve got your back. Little Birdie out.”

Garrus carefully tracked the little group as it meandered out from the base, reticle hovering over the chest of one of the batarians. Scum. Slavers and pirates, fit only to be killed or thrown into a work camp. His trigger talon practically itched. The whut-whut-whut sound of the Kodiak shuttles was heard long before they appeared through the clouds, echoing across the frozen plain. They were bright and blue against the sheer white of Xawin, thrusters flaring as they came into land. The pilots had been carefully instructed on where to land so that the bulk of their spacecraft didn’t block the sniper team’s view and so that they were easily reached by Alenko’s team, carefully hidden in a nearby gorge.

He could almost feel the tension starting to ratchet up inside the humans either side of him.

“Little Birdie, Lance, patching you in so you can hear my communications with the enemy.” On the other claw, Commander Shepard sounded calm, as if she was making herself a cup of that coffee all
the humans were addicted to. “You don’t have the permissions to transmit, but I want you to know what's going on, over.”

“Roger that,” Williams replied, “Shuttles are landing now, over.”

Garrus has been carefully studying the manuals Commander Shepard had given him on Alliance protocols, but he was still glad it wasn’t him handling the radios. Humans got very agitated if you said ‘repeat’ instead of ‘say again’ when you didn’t understand a transmission. Williams had very seriously told him (complete with hand gestures): “‘Repeat’ equals **BOOM!’”

In the Hierarchy Army, if you wanted to fire artillery again, you said that - ‘fire again’. It was little things like that, that made Garrus feel a bit off balance fighting alongside the humans, previous military service or not.

As agreed upon, the pirates sent across one hostage at a time. Each one was made to halt where the four Marines on the shuttle could see their hands, scanned, and then pulled into the Kodiak and bundled up in survival blankets. Garrus approved of the caution. Pirates, especially those contracted by the Hegemony government, were known to boobytrap slaves and bodies. He sometimes thought the Alliance needed hastatim - to put fear into them so they stopped using such tactics.

But human honour was not turian honour, so he didn’t say that to the humans either side of him.

There were only two hostages left. He settled in the snow, reticle hovering above a pirate's head. The second to last one stumbled over to the Marines, hands shaking so violently with cold that he could see it through his sight. A Marine searched him and then helped him aboard the Kodiak.

“I have a counter-offer for you, Commander,” the pirate captain sounded disgustingly smug. "I'm not taking chances with your Navy pursuing me when all I have is one of your shitty shuttles."

"Don't be stupid, Lihask," Shepard replied, voice like sharpening steel. "I'm not going to die today!"

"I'm not going to die today!" the batarian shouted and Williams swore beside him. Through his scope, a feeling of helplessness scraping his insides, Garrus watched as Lihask began dragging the final hostage towards Eagle Two. Far below, the Paris' Marines were shouting - but they were outnumbered and they couldn't fire without fear of hitting the human man. "Captain Kennedy will take a bit of a trip with us. Maybe if dear brother Garoth can come up with a ransom - he's a businessman, you know! - he'll get to see Willem again."

Willem Kennedy was fighting, flailing at his assailant with ineffectual fists. It was the desperation of a man faced with death or slavery. Garrus stared, finger balanced on the trigger.

"Damnit!" Williams hissed beside him, "I can't get a shot!"

They heard the shot, all the way up on the ridge. It echoed across the plain, a single retort. Garrus' mandibles tightened. Blood welled and pooled, staining Willem Kennedy's abdomen a deep red. The pirate who had been holding him pushed him away and he toppled into the snow like a discarded puppet.

One of the other batarians smacked the killer on the back of the helmet and they gestured angrily at each other. There was a moment of frozen shock by the Alliance troops.

Then Williams growled into her commlink, "Hostage down!"

She fired, and the killer's head snapped back, faceplate blown open. Garrus followed suit instinctively, his round ripping the chest of another pirate open. The turian scrabbled at his chest for a
moment, before stilling.

The others panicked and ran for Eagle Two. One even dropped his rifle. After a momentary pause, the door gunner of Eagle One opened fire, scything across the surviving six. Two fell, cut down, but four managed to get into the shuttle and slam the door behind them, the Kodiak's shields sparking but deflecting the heavy machine gun's fire.

By now, Eagle One was taking fire from the base. Shepard's voice crackled inside his helmet. "Eagle One, get out of there. Lance is moving in, they'll secure Kennedy, over."

Garrus lifted himself up enough to look at Lance Corporal Waaberi, "Waaberi! Can you hit the shuttle with your launcher?"

"Probably," she said, picking it up and setting it against her shoulder.

"I'll spot you!" He said.

"Negative on that!" Staff Sergeant Williams said, "Alenko is moving in and they've got AT in the base towers. Destroy the towers first."

"Lhask will get away!" He growled. "We can't let him!"

"That's an order!" Williams' voice was harsh, unyielding. "Get the fucking towers down, Waaberi!"

"Uh...yes, Staff Sarn't!" Waaberi peered through the sights of her IMAW. "Firing!"

A rocket burst out of the launcher, a blue flash across the valley before it dashed itself against one of the towers in a bloom of fire, shrapnel and shattered ice. There wasn't much left except twisted metal when the explosion faded.

Williams helped the other Marine reload while Garrus watched Eagle Two and Amarok Lhask soar up into the sky. Further and further away from retaliation.

"Firing!" Again the young Lance Corporal fired her launcher and again, a tower was reduced to rubble.

Garrus Vakarian watched as the rogue Kodiak rose and rose, and his talons tightened on his rifle. It was Doctor Saleon all over again! Didn't Williams understand that he'd just do this sort of thing again?

"Hostage down!"

Ashley’s voice echoed in Kaidan's helmet. Squished into the vehicle commander's seat inside the Mako, he reached forward and tapped Lance Corporal Ki-tae on the shoulder, "Get us in there!"

"There's a lot of AT out there, sir," Dubyansky told him, a hint of doubt in the junior NCO's voice.

"Williams and Waaberi will take care of it," Alenko said firmly. They'd discussed it before the mission - their priorities. People before revenge. Kaidan was glad to see that Shepard cared about the right thing and not just vengeance. It gave him hope that their mission would be completed with as much integrity as possible, considering that they were hunting down a rogue Spectre to avenge Eden Prime.

"Aye aye, sir," Nick murmured and the Mako leapt forward, shaking off the covering of ice and snow it had collected, like some great beast rising from slumber. They'd been hiding in a crevice below the
The sniper team was sitting on top of a ridge, bored enough that Nick Ki-tae and Dubyansky had started swapping very unlikely stories about their last shore leave.

Draven had rolled her eyes when Fredricks had joined in, talking about the asari Consort on the Citadel. "Yeah fucking right, you saw the Consort, PFC."

"What's so great about some asari anyway?" Hodgins had asked, "Just go to a club, man. There's usually some Maiden curious enough to give a Marine a go."

"That's just racist. You're projecting human morals onto asari."

"Bite me, Mohamed."

"She's not just some asari!"

"There's a waiting list for years, PFC. You telling me you got ahead of generals and politicos? Gimme a break."

"You're an arsehole, Sarn't."

"Yeah, I get that a lot."

Now the Marines were deadly silent, doing one last check over of their weapons as the IFV raced forward, churning up snow beneath its wheels. It was a bit strange - he'd gotten used to having the big krogan and Commander Shepard on missions, unusual for SAMC ops or not.

"Looks like Waaberi fucked them towers up," Ki-tae reported.

"Focus on machine guns and snipers. Fire at will."

"Roger." The Mako shook as the young Marine fired the main gun. Alenko grimaced, glad for the sound dampening of his helmet. Ki-tae swept the machine gun in the direction of the enemy base.

Dubyansky slammed on the brakes and Alenko was thrown against his restraints. He reached up and unbuckled himself, heading for the door and hitting the lever to open it when Dubyansky called over his shoulder, "APC safe!"

"Dismount, let's go!" He said to the Marines and he was the first down the ramp. He spotted the five still forms prone in the bloodied snow and headed for the one not in armour, stepping over one of the dead pirates, who was missing a portion of his chest from a sniper round, the corpsman on his heels.

Willem Kennedy groaned when Alenko and Ling bent over him. "Draven! Give me some covering fire while we treat!"

"Aye, sir!" The Sergeant replied with alacrity and he heard gunfire shortly after, as the Marines formed a loose skirmish line, firing their rifles and machine guns in the direction of the enemy. He ignored all of it - his men, the return fire, the boom of the IFV's main gun.

Keeping Captain Kennedy alive was what mattered. Gut shots were nasty and there was a lot of blood pooling in the snow and staining Kennedy's clothing. He brought out a packet of medigel and deployed it over the entry wound while Ling took his vital signs, pausing only to give the man a reassuring squeeze on the shoulder.

"My name is Lieutenant Kaidan Alenko. Can you hear me?"

"Yes," Willem managed.
"We're gonna get you out of here, okay? We have a medbay on our ship and a very good doctor. You just need to hold on for me."

"Okay," The man said, tears in his eyes. "Fuckin' hurts."

"I know. We have to roll you onto your side, okay? It's gonna hurt, but it'll keep your airway open and I need to check you for other injuries."

Willem gritted his teeth and groaned as Kaidan and Ling carefully rolled him onto his side together and applied medigel to the ugly looking exit wound. Alenko worked with weapons every day of his life but it was never comfortable to see what a modern gun could do to an unarmoured civilian.

"We're coming back as quickly as possible," Shepard said over the comm, "What's Kennedy's status, over?"

"He needs Chakwas sooner rather than later, over."

"Roger that. I'll patch you through to her now, over."

Kaidan was grateful for that as he hid a grimace at his vital signs that Ling had taken, his scanner uploading them to both of their suits. The first aider program he'd installed into his suit and linked to his omnitool blinked warnings at him. Hypotension. Tachycardia.

He listened to Chakwas' calming crisp voice as she talked them through what to do for the poor bastard. There wasn't a great deal he could do on the surface of Xawin for an abdominal injury, only watch as Ling went through the motions, the young man's eyes intent under his visor.

"Shit!" Teke's yell made his head jerk up. Above them, pieces of flaming metal fell from the clouds, twisting and smoking. "The fuck is that?"

"One of the shuttles," Draven said flatly. Then there was a slap of ceramic on ceramic as the sergeant smacked Teke's helmet. "Eyes on the enemy! Jesus, you think you're a sightseer?"

"Hey," Kaidan said lowly, grabbing Kennedy's shoulder gently, and when he didn’t reply, Ling pressed his knuckles to his sternum and rubbed. The man made a soft noise of pain, eyes fluttering, but didn’t speak. "Chakwas, he's slipping out of consciousness."

Alenko watched over the unconscious captain, occasionally having to shield his form with his own body and a quickly summoned barrier when the return fire from the gunfight got too close for comfort. The Normandy arrived ten minutes later, casting a dark shadow over the valley, and came down to land as close to them as was possible without risking a squashed Marine - or a fried one. The snow sizzled and melted when it came into contact with her hull.

The ramp thudded down. Ling deployed his portable stretcher that he carried in his gear and together they carefully rolled the limp sailor onto it before lifting him up and running towards the ship. Chakwas and her assistant met them in the cargo hold and took the stretcher from them.

"Ling," the doctor said to the corpsman, all business, "I'll need you. Get out of your armour and scrub in."

"Aye, ma'am." Ling began pulling off bits of webbing and gear hastily as the medical team moved to the elevator. Kaidan helped as best he could until the corpsman was free of his battle gear. Ignoring the fact that he was in his boxers and tank top, the young serviceman sprinted to the elevator to follow Chakwas up.
In the distance, he heard an earth-shattering boom that seemed to go on and on and on. He realised that it was the sound of the main gun of a cruiser hitting a terrestrial target. The Paris must've arrived over Xawin and rained fury down on the pirate base. There would be no more prisoner-taking today.

The other Marines were coming up the ramp now and fixing the Mako back into place. Alenko pulled off his helmet.

"He gonna be okay?"

He turned to look at Williams, who must've skied down from the ridgeline. She'd already deposited her weapons on the armoury bench, ready to be dried and cleaned. She left puddles wherever she stood, as the ice and snow coating every facet of her armour and arms melted in the warm, pleasant temperatures of the ship.

He shrugged, "I hope so, but I don't know. They got him from point blank range into the abdomen and I think they hit his liver."

"Jeez." Williams shook her head. "Fuckin' pirates."

"Did you see the Kodiak explode?" He asked, "Do we know if the hostages got away safe?"

"Oh yeah, they're safe on the Paris." Williams smiled and there was a hint of savage pleasure to it. "Eagle Two is dust."

Commander Shepard stood on the bridge of her warship and felt a complex cocktail of emotion whirl in her stomach. Pressing the button that had detonated the drive core of the Kodiak carrying Amorak Lihask had been easy - the crew of the Paris had done a remarkable job sabotaging the shuttle in such little time. She doubted there was anything larger than her forearm left of the aircraft or of the people onboard it.

Easy. Deaths meted out methodically. Nothing like killing someone up close and personal with a shotgun, when you were either quicker than your opponent or dead. Shepard wasn't certain she liked the difference, the detachment from your own actions, but she knew she'd have to adapt to it. She was the Normandy's captain and it was very likely she'd kill from her bridge again.

"All crew aboard and accounted for, ma'am," Pressly reported.

"Very good. Get us off this rock."

The Normandy lifted into the air and rose up into the sky, leaving the burning wreckage of the pirate bay behind her. As they were, Captain Lou hailed her again.

"You owe me a shuttle, Shepard." But the officer was smiling.

"Sorry, sir. Perhaps try 'a Spectre did it' on the form?"

He chuckled. "I'll let you know if that works out. And give my compliments to your sniper. My gunnery officer is very impressed - we hit the target on the first shot."

"I'll pass it on to her."

His stern face folded into something like concern. "I heard Captain Kennedy is in a serious condition."

"Aye, sir. My doctor says it's going to be close on whether he makes it."
Lou shook his head. "Unfortunate, but not your fault, Commander. These things happen when it comes to scum likes these pirates."

Shepard bit down on a flare of irritation. She'd fought in the Traverse her whole life - before and during the Blitz and the corresponding crusade. As a twenty-one-year-old Second Lieutenant - little more than a kid - she'd had to make calls like this. It was the Marine Corps that shouldered most of the burden of the horrific things slavers and pirates did - booby traps and monofilament wires and slaves implanted with control chips so you had no choice but to open fire. Sometimes there was no good answer, no option that let you come out with all your people alive and your honour intact.

But Lou was trying to be nice - out of relief, perhaps, but he was trying. She nodded, "Yessir. Thank you for your assistance."

"Anytime. Paris out."

The holo faded. She rubbed her face. Pressly approached, grim, to tell her that Captain Willem Kennedy had died on Doctor Chakwas' operating table.

"Helm, change course to Arcturus," she said quietly. There was no point rushing to the nearest Alliance hospital if Willem was dead, "X, you have the deck."

She needed a shower.

CODEX ENTRY:

Systems Alliance Navy Enlisted Ranks And Their Roles:

Serviceman Third Class (SvM3): Servicemen 3rd Class are the deckhands of the Navy, assigned a rating or job according to their training and specialty, without leadership responsibility. Addressed as Serviceman, Hand, or just Rating. Eg. Gunner’s Mate.

Serviceman Second Class (SvM2): Experienced Serviceman, having similar responsibilities as SvM3, but receiving an upgrade in paygrade as a result of experience and skill. SvM2 sometimes act as the Senior Serviceman among SvM3, but this position is only temporary. SvM2 have no authority over SvM3 unless given the Senior position by a superior. SvM2s are addressed as Senior Rating if holding the Senior billet or Serviceman. Eg. Senior Gunner’s Mate.

Serviceman First Class (SvM1): Servicemen 1st Class are the most senior among rank and file sailors, and typically function as the Leading Serviceman or his assistant. If not given a leadership position, SvM1 have similar responsibilities as other Ratings. SvM1s have authority over junior SvMs within their specialty, and authority over all junior SvMs if given a leadership billet. They are addressed as Senior Rating if holding an assistant’s billet, Lead Hand if given the Leading billet, and Serviceman/Rating otherwise.

Petty Officer Third Class (PO3): The PO3 is the most junior of the Petty Officer ranks, equivalent to a corporal in the Marines, and the first non-automatic promotion. Instead, promotion to PO3 is contingent on performance reviews by superiors and passing technical tests relating to their rating. In large divisions, a PO3 might run a workshop in a division and assist the division’s leading petty officer. In smaller divisions, a PO3 may be the senior enlisted advisor for the Division officer. They are addressed as Petty Officer or Rating Third Class. Ex. Fire Controlman Third Class.

Petty Officer Second Class (PO2): The PO2 is a more experienced leader and a technical leader. The PO2 may lead a smaller division or be the leading petty officer of a large division. Addressed as Petty Officer, Rating Second Class or Leading Petty Officer if in the lead billet. Ex. Gunner’s Mate
Petty Officer First Class (PO1): The PO1 is equivalent to a Staff Sergeant in the Marines and is a very experienced serviceman. They are expected to help develop junior petty officers and servicemen, and are usually lead a division or are the department assistant in smaller departments. Addressed as Rating First Class or Leading Petty Officer. Ex Leading Damage Controlman.

Chief Petty Officer (CPO): The first ‘chief’ petty officer. Navy chief petty officers serve a dual role as both technical experts and as leaders, with the emphasis being more on leadership as they progress through the CPO paygrades. A recognized collateral duty for all Chiefs is the training of newly-commissioned junior officers and they wear the same service uniform as the Alliance commissioned officers. If their ship is big enough, Chiefs also have areas called ‘Goat Lockers’ where junior enlisted or even commissioned officers aren’t allowed unless specifically invited - even the captain of the vessel will usually request permission to enter. CPOs usually hold the billets of large division or small department chief, advising the division or department officer. Chief Petty Officers are addressed as Chief Rating or Chief. Ex Chief Gunner’s Mate.

Senior Chief Petty Officer (SCPO): Like their name implies, Senior Chiefs are senior Chiefs. They have more general leadership experience than CPOs, and thus take on advanced leadership duties. They usually hold the billets of department chief, but sometimes can be found as the Command Senior Chief on small vessels such as cutters, corvettes and occasionally frigates.

Master Chief Petty Officer (MCPO): Master chief petty officers are generally considered to be the technical experts in their fields. They serve in space and ashore in commands of all sizes. Many master chiefs choose to enter the command master chief petty officer program and if selected, a master chief receives additional leadership training and is assigned as the command master chief (CMDCM) of a vessel or facility. The command master chief is the senior enlisted person at a command and as such works as a liaison between the commanding officer and the enlisted ranks as well as advising the CO.

In this capacity, the CMDCM assists the commanding officer in issues of quality of life, discipline, training, and morale. The CMDCM insignia has a silver star in lieu of the enlisted rating between the arc and the top chevron. More experienced MCPOs occupy the highest enlisted positions like Force Command Master Chief and Fleet Command Master Chief, advising admirals. A master chief in the command billet is often referred to as ‘Buffer’.

The most senior serviceman in the Navy is the unique position of Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy, who is the enlisted spokesperson and advisor to the highest echelons of the brass. Although an enlisted rank, the Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy is given the courtesies and precedent of a Vice Admiral, similar to how the Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps is given the protocol equivalency of a Lieutenant General.
“Uh…Sergeant Williams?” Garrus folded his arms, coming to stand in the armoury. There was grease on his talons from Mako maintenance. He’d have to remember to wash it off.

Williams looked up from her bench, an ammo block in her hands, scored from the shaver of an assault rifle. With everything wet from the snow, they’d all had to dry off and clean their gear thoroughly while the Normandy transited to Arcturus Station. Williams hadn’t left the armoury except to eat - she’d insisted on checking over all of the gear to make sure everything was in order.

“Hey Vakarian,” she said, putting the block down. “What’s up?”

He suspected Williams hadn’t been particularly happy to have him and Wrex aboard to begin with. She’d watched them both carefully. But he’d realised that she was something he could understand - a rifleman who distrusted anyone who wasn’t. And Garrus had proven himself in battle.

“I’d like to apologize.” His mandibles flared. She raised an eyebrow.

“What for?”

“For arguing with you on Xawin. I should’ve trusted you and Shepard.”

Williams regarded him for a moment before she shrugged. “I get it. I wanted to nail the sonofabitch as well. Watching him fly off was a real kick in the teeth, but we had to get Alenko to Kennedy and destroy that base.”

He flicked his mandibles in understanding. “I hate pirates.”

“Me too,” she said dryly before her expression turned contemplative. “It felt weird, y’know? Calling in that orbital strike. I read out some numbers and next thing fifty people are dead.”

“It was on them, Williams. They didn’t have to fight us. We just ended it. Just like Chora’s Den.” Chora’s Den had been a highly efficient slaughter, twelve Marines, Garrus and Wrex slicing through the gangsters with barely a pause, ending with Wrex blasting Fist in the face with his shotgun. Alenko had been shocked, horrified, even with blood splattered on his chest and arms from the bouncers the lieutenant had killed in their way in. Shepard hadn’t been. He remembered that clearly. She’d been expecting it. She’d made a deal with the krogan and paid it with Fist’s blood.

Garrus wasn’t quite sure what to make of Commander Shepard yet. She’d verbally sliced him to pieces over the shot he’d made in Doctor Michel’s clinic and during their first conversation onboard the Normandy. But yesterday she’d threatened to space twenty captured pirates and she’d killed Lihask by blowing his shuttle up. The streak of ruthlessness fit his idea of a Spectre, but she bound herself in so many rules!

“Yeah, I guess.” Williams sighed, sliding the ammo block free of another assault rifle. “Just gotta get my head around it.”

He nodded. “I understand.”

The human tilted her head. “You’re alright, Vakarian.”
“Uh…thanks.”

“But,” she said, frowning, “don’t try that shit in the field again. Shepard needs to know she can rely on you.”

“I know,” Garrus said very seriously, “I don’t want to let her down.”

Whatever she was about to say was cut off when the 1MC crackled with Lieutenant Commander Pressly’s voice.

“All hands, be advised we are on final approach to Arcturus Station. Overnight shore leave for red and white watches has been authorised on Arcturus. All personnel authorised for leave are ordered to assemble in the docking bay for liberty brief.”

Fredericks groaned audibly from the other side of the bay. “Can we go back in time and beat the ass of whoever made up liberty briefings?”

“PFC Fredericks,” Williams said pleasantly, “you are the very reason liberty briefs exist.”

The younger Marine flushed as the laughter filled the Kennel.

“What about you, Wrex?” Garrus asked the krogan, who was fiddling with a shotgun in the corner.

Those red eyes turned in his direction. “Arcturus is full of annoying pyjacks. Jumpy, annoying pyjacks. I have better things to do.”

“That’s racist,” one of the Marines whispered. Wrex just closed his eyes, settling against a crate. Apparently, it was nap time.

“Vakarian, you should come drink with us,” offered Dubyansky. “We’re gonna play vidgames, then go party later.”

He took it as it was meant to be - acceptance. “I’d like that.”

“What’re you two up to, Sergeants?” Waaberi asked Williams and Gung Ho, all the while stuffing her overnight bag eagerly.

“I’m gettin’ laid,” Draven grinned. Fredericks, Hodgins, and Jaz wolf-whistled.

“I’m very happy for you, Sergeant,” Williams said dryly, “I’ll get you a cake. As for me, I got roped into shopping with the Nerds.”

“Yeah, Rosie said somethin’ about that.” Gung Ho leaned against the wall, arms crossed. “LT, Tali, Glowstick, and Hellraiser, right?”

“Yup. They promised me alcohol,” Williams was suddenly serious, staring at each Marine in turn. “Just don’t be shitbirds on shore leave, okay? I don’t want to explain that to the Buffer or the XO. Remember the three Hs.”

“Don’t end up in the headlines, don’t end up in handcuffs, don’t end up in hospital,” the eleven Marines chorused as one.

Williams smiled pleasantly at them, “And if you fuck that up, I’ll make your life a living hell.”

“Aye aye, Staff Sergeant!”
“Now, get outta here.”

Twenty minutes later, two-thirds of the ship’s company, excluding the Commander and the watch team that had to guard the ship in port, was assembled in the docking terminus, packed in shoulder to shoulder. It was strange to see all of the humans out of uniform.

The Command Master Chief paced slowly in front of the formation, scowling at everyone like they’d kicked her puppy. She reminded Garrus vividly of the Kentarch in his Army unit. He wondered sometimes if there was a school all NCOs went to, regardless of species, where they learned ‘how to make a soldier cry with just your expression’ and ‘how to yell bizarre insults at the speed of light’.

“Allright, listen up shipmates!” She said, crossing her arms, “Now, I know you’ve all heard this briefing ten million goddamn times, but I have to give it anyway because invariably one of you will be a fuck up and apparently the ‘my sailor is a dumbass’ defence won’t cut it with the brass.”

She cleared her throat and launched into it, like a machinegun firing words instead of bullets, “If you tap it, wrap it or whatever the fuck the equivalent may be - ya’ll got pamphlets. That includes aliens if you’re gonna be boldly going like you’re in the goddamn Star Fleet! If you come back here high as a fucking kite, because you bumped unprotected uglies with a drell, I will throw you in the brig!”

What was ‘Star Fleet’? He resolved to Plex it. After Negulesco was done shouting.

“Don’t start fights, just finish them. And if someone jumps one of your shipmates, you better be in there beside them because no one on this ship gets their arse beat alone! If you get into trouble, call me or Sergeant Williams and we’ll get you out of it. Do not add or subtract from the population of Arcturus Station! If you do have to kill someone, make sure you follow proper escalation of force.”

Garrus had to swallow down a chuckle.

“If you end up in the drunk tank and I have to fish you out at three am, I will wait until you are hung over to ask Flight Lieutenant Moreau to serenade you over the 1MC.” She glared at them with feeling. “Ship’s company! Dismissed!”

Lieutenant Commander Charles Pressly watched his commanding officer as she stood on the captain’s podium and guided her ship through the mess that was Arcturus Station space. She wasn’t her mother - whose ship handling skills were known to be exemplary, as shown by when she’d precision jumped the heavy cruiser Rio De Janeiro to within metres of an escaping pirate vessel, triggering its FTL safeties. Faced with the Janeiro’s forty broadside cannons, the pirates had surrendered.

No, Commander Shepard was not Captain Shepard. But few people were. There were rumours that the close to complete dreadnought Orizaba would be Shepard Senior’s.

Pressly imagined what it would be like to be a dreadnought captain. Thousands of crew, prestige, a weapon of mass destruction under your feet. He’d never be a dreadnought captain - but he could have a cruiser one day.

He daydreamed about that - maybe one of those sleek new Beijing heavy cruisers - as the Normandy nosed into port. Home. For real, not just play-pretend like their new homeport assignment of the Citadel. It wasn’t right - more alien interference in the operating of an Alliance warship. The Council seemed to have forgotten whose colours the Normandy wore and who’d paid for her construction.

“Pressly?” Shepard had stepped down from the podium. She was a good fourteen years younger than him - the same age as his youngest sister-in-law.
“Yes, ma’am?”

Shepard looked a bit on edge. “I have a few things to do at NavComm and I’d like you to come with me.”

“Of course, ma’am.”

She frowned, staring past him and the bulkhead behind him, at something he couldn’t see. She wore that expression a lot more these days, since whatever that beacon had done to her brain. Pressly didn’t know about monsters from dark space and visions, but he believed Shepard. There’d been rumours after Akuze, of course there had been, but Shepard wasn’t crazy. If Illyria and Akuze couldn’t break her, no alien beacon could do it.

Pressly waited patiently until she shook herself out of wherever she’d gone. Her dark brown eyes refocused on him, apologetic but he kept his gaze enquiring, as if he hadn’t noticed her space out. “Doctor T’Soni will be coming with us. Hackett wants to talk to her.”

He swallowed down the urge to grimace.

When the Normandy was docked and Shepard handed the deck off to Lieutenant Rodriguez, who’d pulled the short straw of looking after the ship while she was in dock, Pressly joined Commander Shepard and Doctor T’Soni, dressed in his dress whites. He hated the whites. They seemed to attract any liquid capable of causing stains.

T’Soni kept sneaking glances at the younger officer. Charles thought that was probably to be expected - Shepard was a very striking young woman, especially in uniform. Especially with the gleaming bronze star at her throat, collecting both light and eyes.

As they waited for their taxi to arrive, a constant stream of crew members passed them, raucous and excited. He spared a thought for whatever bars they were headed to tonight.

The sky taxi pulled up and they all got in. He keyed in the address for Naval Command and the ‘car lifted off gently, humming as it joined the streams of traffic that bracketed the station. Arcturus Station was a lot smaller than the Citadel and it was usually better to take the mass transit monorails, but Shepard had insisted on the skycar. Pressly supposed that the assassination attempt on the Citadel had her on edge.

Liara T’Soni was peering out the window at the traffic and the crowds of humans, many of them in uniform or in business suits. “This is where you live, Commander?”

“Yes, when I’m not on deployment,” Shepard said absentmindedly, hands folded over a briefcase in her lap, “I have an apartment here. Your family lives here, don’t they Pressly?”

“Yes, ma’am. Well, my wife and daughter do. My son just started university in the UNAS,” He smiled proudly. Ryan wasn’t going into the Navy like his dad and grandfather, but he was a smart kid. Going to make robots and drones.

The skycar touched down outside of the compound that contained NavComm - no public taxi was getting inside the beating heart of the Systems Alliance Naval Service. The entrance was guarded by two Marines in combat armour with assault rifles, accompanied by a peacekeeping drone armed with a taser and a defence drone, armed with a machinegun. Arcturus security had always been tight and war had only heightened the paranoia. One of the Marines carefully scanned and examined their Department of Defence IDs despite their awed glances at Shepard’s Star of Terra. They took their time staring suspiciously at the asari’s, but eventually allowed them through.
Navy Command was a collection of two to four storey buildings, white and steel, separated by soft lawns of grass and gardens of Terran plants. In front of the main building stood the pillar of Eternal Flame, steadily burning.

GREATER LOVE NO MAN HATH THAN THIS read the inscription, stark and lonely, and Pressly took a moment to stare at the flickering flames.

Shepard paused as well, face inscrutable, before she led the way into the building, tossing over her shoulder, “I want to check in at Personnel Command first, see if our requests have been approved yet, then I’d like you to oversee our replenishment while Doctor T'Soni and I meet with the Admiral.”

“Of course, Commander.”

“Afterwards, I was thinking we could have dinner, with the other senior officers. You can invite your family.”

“I’ll let Mary know.”

They stepped into the Navy Personnel Command and Marine Corps Manpower Branch office on Arcturus and Shepard approached the Marine sergeant behind the desk, “Excuse me, Sergeant. I’ve been having some problems with my Marine Detachment staffing requests, and I’m hoping it’s managed to be fixed by now.”

“Oh...sorry, ma’am. Request number and your command?”

“SSV Normandy, reference number 45-6732,” Shepard supplied and they waited as the Sergeant painstaking picked at the keys to enter it. Even with all the jokes about jarheads, you’d think a SAMC POG would be able to type. Pressly’s eyes settled on a propaganda poster. Join the Marine Corps, see the galaxy sort of shit. Not like there was anyone to recruit in this office - everyone had already signed off a sizable portion of their life to the Navy or Marine Corps.

The sergeant looked relieved as he looked at his screen, “It’s sorted ma’am. I’ve got orders here for a Lance Corporal Jassem Shamom to be your ground vehicle mechanic, and Staff Sergeant Jan Hendrickson to be your MARDET NCO.”

Shepard stared at him. Pressly resisted the urge to facepalm. With some despair he thought, Perscom, why are you like this?

Realising that he’d made a misstep, the sergeant started to sweat under the gaze of an angry N7 officer and swallowed, “Uh…ma’am?”

“That,” Shepard said very patiently, “Is not what I asked for. I’ll take the mechanic, but I don’t need a staff sergeant. I have one! I just need PersCom to stop trying to send her to Demeter and finish her paperwork so she gets paid.”

The sergeant stammered and blushed bright red. Pressly felt a bit sorry for him.

“Commander Shepard. Who let you out of the Traverse? Don’t you have batarians to cut the throats of?” The man who’d entered the room was tall and trim, his dress blues neat and crisp - and lacking a combat action ribbon. His name badge read ‘Cheston’ and he had the silver oak leaves of a Lieutenant Colonel at his throat.

Shepard’s eyes sharpened and the room dropped a few degrees in temperature, “If you’ve not noticed, there’s a war on. And I don’t cut their throats.” She mimed grabbing a shoulder and stabbing
down. “Have to stab, not slash. Easier to get through the armour, and batarians have a big artery there.”

There was something wrong with N7s. He gave poor T’Soni, who looked a little shocked, a comforting pat on the shoulder, like he would his daughter. It didn’t seem right to him that Liara was more than twice his age.

Colonel Cheston’s expression was black, “Why are you harassing my Marines, Shepard?”

“Your office has fucked up my transfers,” Shepard said flatly, “I need it to be unfucked so I can get back to shooting geth. I’ll take Shamom, but I need my actual staff sergeant’s paperwork completed.”

Cheston sneered, an expression that ruined his handsome face, “You want a Williams?”

Oh, Pressly thought. Oh. Charles had often thought about the last time he’d see his father. Colonel Pressly had told him that Shanxi was a quiet place, maybe he ought to bring his new girlfriend out. General Williams was good to work for. Put his men first.

“Congratulations,” Shepard was saying, “You know her last name. And yes. I do. I was told I’d get what I needed for my mission to hunt down the bastard responsible for Eden Prime.”

“I thought you were supposed to be killing Saren, not surrendering,” Cheston said, an ugly tone of amusement in his voice.

Pressly opened his mouth. This pen-pusher was insulting his captain and ship! However unfortunate her ancestors were, Williams was part of the Normandy. But Shepard gently touched his arm and he subsided, before she turned on Cheston.

“You know what Ashley Williams did a couple of days ago? She landed a direct hit on an enemy base with the main gun of a cruiser. No corrections or anything. Now, I know you’re a paper pusher and your battles consist of getting the coffee dispenser to work, but that’s fucking incredible. Colonel, if you haven’t noticed, there’s a war happening. That means we need our best killers out there doing just that, not stuck guarding gates on the colony equivalent of Ohio. Now, will you let all of us get on with our jobs, or am I going to have to make your life very uncomfortable when I go see Admiral Hackett?” She bit off the threat and it hung between them, the whole room still and cold with the clashing anger of two senior officers.

“I’ll sort it out,” Cheston said stiffly.

“Thank you,” Shepard said, completely insincere, and Pressly suppressed a grin.

“Commander Shepard and Doctor T’Soni to see Admiral Hackett,” Shepard announced to one of the Admiral’s aide-de-camps, Lieutenant Priya Singh. There were some who thought Singh hadn’t earnt her position as Hackett’s flag lieutenant. Shepard knew, from bitter experience, that children of officers as successful as Priya’s father, Admiral Nitesh Singh, were often held to ridiculous standards and their achievements derided as nepotism.

But the younger Singh was by all accounts very trustworthy and intelligent. Hackett wouldn’t have chosen her otherwise.

“I will let him know you’ve arrived, ma’am,” Singh said.

“Admiral on deck!”
Shepard drew herself up and saluted as Hackett, commander of the Fifth Fleet - the tip of the Alliance Navy’s spear - emerged from his office. He was the sort of man you thought might be made of living steel - hair allowed to go silver, blue eyes like knives. Whenever he looked at her, Shepard felt as if he was seeing right to the heart of her.

He returned the salute and shook Liara’s hand firmly.

“With me, Commander,” Hackett said firmly and walked off, expecting her to fall in with him, his other aides - Lieutenant Commander Yun and Commander Frankston.

She followed, drawing the doctor with her.

Shepard had worked with Admiral Hackett before - when he was Vice Admiral Hackett, Commander Special Operations - Skyllian Verge and she was Ghost Actual, commander of Taskforce 5. The personnel of VERGECOM hadn’t called her ‘the Hero of the Blitz’ or ‘Sole Survivor’; to them she’d been Hackett’s Hatchet. That’d been alright with her - as her ex-wife had pointed out in their divorce proceedings, she’d gone out there to run away from those two years of her life.

She should email Rita, see how her new command was treating her and if she’d noticed anything unusual in her patrols. She’d likely be irritated that Shepard had waltzed into something that Rita had had to spend fifteen years earning, but she’d answer. Commander Rita McCormick was far too nice for her own good. That should’ve been the warning sign that they wouldn’t work out.

Rita was going to make someone with a functioning sense of priorities very happy one day.

“You know the Executor and Udina are still riding my ass about you shooting up that damned strip club, Shepard,” Hackett grumbled as they walked through the narrow, metallic hallways of NavCom. “So smiling, it’s not funny.”

“Of course not, sir.” She arranged her face into a suitably grave expression. They’d worked closely, Hackett and Shepard, but there weren’t any lovey-dovey feelings. She suspected Anderson saw her as his protege first and subordinate second, but to Hackett she was a tool. A useful one, one to be looked after and kept in good condition, but a tool.

“How many gangsters did you kill? Twenty-five?”

“Thirty-one, sir.” She was glad that she’d talked down the two warehouse workers, but she felt little to no guilt over the others. Anyone with sense would’ve known going up against a full squad of 103rd Marines plus a krogan and a turian was a bad idea.

“Thirty-one gangsters,” Hackett said contemplatively as he led her into a large briefing room, “We should send the Executor a cleaning bill.”

There was a sound from Commander Frankston that sounded dangerously close to a laugh.

Hackett turned to her, abruptly all business, as his aides began setting up the room for the meeting. “Have you finished your proposal?”

“Yessir.”

“You’ll have to work hard to convince the others,” Hackett warned, “Our plan will get Marines and servicemen killed, no way around it.”

Shepard winced. The thought of going up and speaking before three admirals and two generals and
asking them to get their men killed was a harsh one. But that was the harsh math of war. The same
equations that had led to her stand in the ruins of outer Illyria and the deaths of six Marines. Six of
her friends.

“I know that, sir.”

“We’re both putting our reputations on the line here,” Hackett said, steel eyes examining her
carefully, “We need this offensive to go ahead. Stick to the geth.”

“I’m not crazy, sir,” she said quietly.

“I know, Shepard. But look at it from our perspective. We can’t make strategic decisions involving
hundreds of ships, hundreds of thousands or even millions of personnel based on your visions.”

She nodded, “I understand that, sir. But the Reaper theory does match both what I saw from the
beacon and the extinction patterns of the Protheans. If the Reapers do exist, can we afford to ignore
them?” He watched her, face not revealing what he thought. She forged on, “I need to find Saren
before he finds this Conduit. It might be a weapon, who knows, but if he wants it we need to stop
him. I have one ship to find one man in the entirety of the Traverse.”

Like looking for a needle in a very large haystack with one hand.

“What do you want exactly, Commander?”

Other officers were filtering in, both Navy white and Marine cobalt. She was running out of time
before the meeting started or someone more high-ranking than her took the admiral’s attention.

“Sir, I believe we need a task force to investigate this hypothesis.”

“Admiral,” Liara began uncertainly, obviously off-kilter amongst all these uniforms. Shepard felt a
hint of sympathy - it mustn't be easy to be thrown into the centre of an alien military, “My hypothesis
on the extinction of the Protheans does fit this, but not only that - there is evidence that other species
have also disappeared very suddenly at the apex of their history, within centuries.” She dug out a
datapad and held it out to the admiral, “This had my hypothesis and current evidence, including my
old papers.”

Hackett took it and quickly passed it to Yun, who’d appeared at his shoulder like a summoned genie.
Yun quickly put it into a briefcase and locked it.

Shepard continued, “I would also ask for your help, sir. Ships, to go to known Prothean sites, to look
for evidence of Saren’s interest or mentions of the Conduit.”

Hackett sighed, stroking his chin and the wiry silver hair there, “I won’t lie to you, Shepard, things
are tense. We’re ramping up production of warship hulls but it’s taking time and Parliament’s
running scared. When we pull these ships for offensive operations against the geth, we’ll have less
strength to deal with any trouble from the batarians and everyone knows they’d love to take a bite of
us if they think they can get away with it. We’re fighting a two-front war with only material support
from the Citadel.”

“I know, sir.” She kept her voice even. Hackett would only respond to reason - emotional entreaties
or temper tantrums wouldn’t move him an inch. “But I don’t see what choice we have. If we don’t
take offensive action, Saren has the initiative, and if we don’t start looking more in earnest, he could
get what he wants without me coming within a dozen light years of the bastard.”

“You were supposed to be a weapon against the Hegemony,” Hackett grumbled before he nodded.
“Alright, Shepard, I’ll see about setting up a task force, and I’ll find you some ships.”

“Thank you, sir. You won’t regret it.”

Hackett’s icy eyes fixed her in place, “We’ll see. You should congratulate your mother, by the way.”

“Sir?”

“I stole her back from Home Fleet. She’s the commodore of the 50th Scout now - just finished writing her congratulation letter.”

Shepard smiled, a little wryly. “I’m surprised she didn’t refuse it.”

“She was being wasted as the exec on Kilimanjaro,” Hackett said, watching as more officers entered the meeting room. “I did have to promise her she’d still get the Orizaba when she’s launched. Threw in a division of cruisers to match her one star too.” Another admiral was approaching. “Excuse me, Commander.”

“Thank you for your time, sir.” Shepard turned to go find her seat for the meeting, gesturing for Liara to follow her. “This way,” she murmured to the asari. “Just avoid Admiral Mikhailovich. He’s trying to pin me down so he can do an inspection of the Normandy…”

CODEX ENTRY

Arcturus Station:

Arcturus Station is Stanford-Torus-type space station with a diameter of 5 kilometers, at the L5 of the gas giant Themis and the capital of the Systems Alliance. Inaugurated in 2156, construction began in 2151 and concluded 11 years later, with materials supplied by nearby metal-rich asteroids, many of which housed or still house transient populations of miners and freighter workers.

Originally designed as the headquarters for the Alliance’s exploration and colonisation efforts, the station was expanded mid-construction in scope after the First Contact War, when it was chosen to be the site of the Alliance Parliament and government departments. The project wasn’t without its detractors; some believed the Alliance should be headquartered on Earth, others on a colony world, others thought the cost extravagant. In the end, those who supported the station won out, seeing it as a symbol of an independent Alliance - one that served humanity as a whole and not just the ambitions of the old Earth states. It remains an impressive feat of engineering and one of the larger space stations in Citadel Space.

Arcturus Station remains strategically important to Alliance defence considerations - it is located at the nexus of several mass relays, allowing ships there to respond across much of Alliance space and the only way to access the Sol System is through that nexus, making it an ideal choke point for the home world’s defence. The station contains the headquarters of the Systems Alliance Defence Force, its component services, Joint Operations Command and Special Operations Command. It’s also home to the various government apparatus including the Colonial Affairs Administration, and shipyards for the manufacture of warships and civilian vessels alike. Currently under construction in Arcturus drydocks are the Orizaba DN7 and Aconcagua DN8, dreadnoughts scheduled to be completed in early 2184 and early 2185 respectively, and the carriers Elizabeth CA15 and Kastanie Drescher CA16.

Arcturus’ population fluctuates rapidly, with military and government personnel coming and going. Two fleets, the First and Fifth, and three Marine Expeditionary Forces, the Fourth, Fifth and Sixth, are based out of Arcturus Station. Many politicians choose to live on the planets they represent or on
nearby Benning, only living on-station for part of the year.

Known residents:

Prime Minister Anita Goyle
Commandant Sora Nakano
Admiral Steven Hackett

Chapter End Notes

Definitions:

POG: Person Other Than Grunt. Marine/Army pejorative for non-combat personnel.
1MC: 1 Main Circuit. Public address system aboard a Navy vessel, audible to anyone embarked. Divided into subcircuits to that parts of the ship can talk to each other without the entire crew hearing.
Tali woke up thinking she was going to die. Her head pounded like someone was taking a hammer to the side of her head, and her stomach twisted and roiled.

"Keelah," she whimpered, pressing a hand against her visor. What was the point of toxin filters?

...well, to be fair it seemed she'd deliberately ingested the toxins in this case. She pried her eyes open and tried to remember where she was and what had happened. She was curled up into a tight ball of misery on a couch. Of course. It was the Dravens' couch and she could see a blurry someone else sprawled on the soft carpet of the Dravens’ loungeroom.

She was never ever ever going to a bar with humans again. The shopping trip with the humans who'd invited her along had been fun, even if she and Alenko had argued for exactly twenty minutes about omnitools until Ashley had gotten bored and demanded that her bribe of alcohol be paid. So Alenko and Hellraiser had bought a round of beer and when they’d all finished, Ash had turned to her, eyes suspiciously bright and asked her if she wanted to come to 'the club' with her and the other enlisted Marines. Oh, and Vakarian too.

That sounds like fun, she'd said. Keelah why. It had been fun. Ash had even found some Drossix Blue and a straw for her. Alcohol had always been seen as an extravagance on the Flotilla, so she’d said yes because wasn’t the point of the Pilgrimage to get out the galaxy and experience things? She'd even enjoyed the ‘buzz’ as the humans had called it after a bottle or two. She'd danced with Ashley and that kind, young Marine with the bright yellow-white hair, Alexei. He’d helped her find her way around the ship in her first days aboard.

Then a very drunk human man had come up to their group and Tali had felt the easy fun drain out of the evening. She hadn't quite understood the social context - aliens! - but one of the Normandy Marines had quietly explained that this man and his friends were also Marines but from a different division. She still wasn’t entirely sure why that was a big deal.

But the man had said something to Williams, something about cowardice and turians and her family name, and Amina Waaberi had promptly punched him. It'd quickly turned into a confused mess of fists and flailing while Tali unashamedly hid behind Ashley, the tall human dealing out blows with surprising finesse for someone who’d had as many shots as she had. When someone had shouted ‘the masters-at-arms are coming!’ the fistfight had dissolved into a panicked scramble to get out of the club.

Tali distinctly remembered being carried part of the way by Alexei as they ran out the back door and climbed over fences and gardens to get away.

The last things she remembered was Gung Ho's wry expression as she helped them all inside, and Ashley saying very seriously and emotionally that she’d 'throw down' for any of them before curling up on the floor.

"You alive?" Someone with an accent described to her as 'Australian' was poking Tali in the shoulder. She grumbled at them, taking a swipe at their hand. Go away, Rosie. "Yep, alive."

Footsteps retreated and with a displeased whimper, Tali curled up tighter, wishing for the black
nothing of sleep to return.

Unfortunately, it wasn't to be.

A loud, persistent beeping erupted next to her head and she jerked away, scrabbling at the source - her omnitool.

"Crash sail, crash sail, crash sail," the omnitool chirped, heedless to her pain, "All personnel are to return to the ship immediately. Department hands are to account for personnel and report manned status to XO."

"Why the fuck did I join the Marine Corps?" Ashley wondered blearily from where she was lying on the floor. After a moment, the human woman staggered to her feet and grabbed Tali's shoulder. "Sorry, Tali, hangovers are shit, but the Normandy's sailing."

"I thought we weren't leaving until this afternoon," Tali managed, trying to unfold herself without too much pain.

"Something must've come up. I'll get the others." Williams moved off and Tali soon heard the cacophony of the sergeant waking up her Marines - curses and at least one 'five more minutes, sarn't'.

"Does that happen often?" Tali asked when Ashley and Gung Ho had shepherded everyone into the mass transit. The former had a very impressive bruise across one cheek - all purples and reds.

Amina grinned at her as the mass transit carriage rattled its way towards the docks, "Bar fights are a fundamental part of the Alliance Marine Corps experience. You're welcome."

"Commander."

Kaidan Alenko remembered the first time he'd seen Commander Shepard on this very space station. She'd been dressed in jeans and a battered bomber jacket, a plain sea bag across her shoulders and a steaming cup of coffee in her hand, barely weeks before the Normandy left on her maiden voyage. She'd looked like a civilian, complete with out-of-regs haircut, if you didn't look at the way she held herself, the scars on her lip and chin, and cutting through her eyebrow, and Fredricks had acted on that assumption.

He'd told her that this was a restricted area, no place for a civvie, all polite arrogance with a rifle across his chest. She raised one eyebrow at him in that way she had and fished out her ID chit. He had to restrain a chuckle, remembering the horror that had crossed the Marine's face when the VI had cheerily chirped: 'Welcome aboard, XO Shepard.'

Now, she rubbed at her face, the bags under her eyes. "We've received a distress call from the colony Feros. There's geth there, and there was a sighting of that big dreadnought, so we're heading there as fast as Adams and Joker can get us."

"Roger that, ma'am. I'll make sure my guys are ready."

"Mm," Shepard said. It wasn't like her to be so vacant-eyed and he was relieved when the sharpness returned to her gaze. "Sorry, Alenko. Just thinking."

"About what?" he probed carefully.
"The offensive is going ahead," her voice was hard and grim. They stood together on the docks, watching the crew trickle onto the ship in ones and twos and threes. "Fifth Fleet and 4th MEB are spear-pointing it, but they'll be using task-forces from the Third and First as well."

"They're taking the geth threat seriously, then. That's good, right?"

"Yeah. They're not taking the Reaper hypothesis as seriously, but I can hardly blame Hackett for that. I can barely believe it myself."

"I believe you, ma'am," he said quietly.

She gave him one of her rare, warming smiles. "Thank you." It faded. "A lot of good Alliance Marines and sailors are going to die in this offensive."

"We train for war, but it doesn't make it easier to deal with when it actually happens."

"No."

"I still think about Jenkins," he admitted. Some nights when he closed his eyes, it was all he saw. Jenkins, his shields crackling and shorting out, then he fell straight down like a dropped sack of potatoes, his face still slack with surprise when Kaidan closed his eyes.

"I remember every Marine killed under my command. It's the price of what we do, the bars on our shoulders. All we can do is do our best," Shepard was tense beside him. He could see in the tendons of her arms, the set of her jaw, the shutters over her eyes. He couldn't imagine it really. Six Marines on Elysium, fifty on Akuze. Alenko honestly didn't know if he could've coped with it.

"I'll try," he said at last. He wanted to say something to her, give her some comfort, but everyone knew not to mention Akuze to Shepard. Part of him was glad to know that Shepard did still worry about those under her command, that Akuze hadn't battered the caring out of her.

She nodded firmly. "I know you will, Lieutenant. Your Marines respect you."

Messed up kid that he'd been, a young Kaidan Alenko could never have imagined this - comradery, twelve Marines that respected him, a CO who listened to him. Purpose.

"Thank you, ma'am."

"I should get on deck. Report to Pressly once all your Marines are accounted for."

"Aye aye."

Ten minutes later, almost all of his Marines came off one of the monorail carriages along with Tali. They all looked rather worse for wear and his platoon sergeant had a very impressive shiner. Ashley ushered the Marines and one alien towards the ship before approaching him, completely and utterly shameless.

"Good morning, LT," she said, saluting.

He returned it, "How'd you get the bruise?"

"Fell, sir."

His lips twitched despite himself. "And it has nothing to do with First Sergeant Hancock's email to me this morning, alleging my Marines were in an altercation with his?"
"No sir."

"And if the Top were to call you into his office to ask about it?"

"I wouldn't admit to shit, sir. I don't care what the First Sergeant says, he doesn't have any camera footage."

The knife was thirty-five centimetres long, dull black beneath the lights of the cargo bay, broad-bladed with a sturdy spear point. It was sharp enough to cut the tiny, smooth scales of an asari with the slightest of pressure and strong enough to pierce the thick hide of a krogan or the plates of a turian.

Urdnot Wrex knew it was perfectly sharp, but he inspected it anyway, turning it over in his hands. It was funny to watch the human Marines edge away when he got the knife out, anyway. No human could fight with this weapon. Wrex had had it for ten years and killed with it on six different planets.

He imagined jamming it underneath Saren's chin. Now _that_ was going to be a good fight. Shepard was a battlemaster - even a warlord, the first he'd seen in the human species. She had gone to speak to her leaders the day before; that was the strange thing about humans. They followed their 'chain of command' even when it meant following someone unworthy, like that Udina. If Shepard were a krogan, she would challenge that weasel for chiefdom, defeat him, and many warriors would flock to follow their better. And the clan would be stronger for it.

Humans were not the only ones who acted like this - Wrex had seen it in many species over the centuries since he'd left Tuchanka. _Aliens_. Respect was earned.

But, it wasn't as if there were any warlords worth following on Tuchanka anymore. Everything had become a facsimile of strength and ritual as the krogan tore themselves to pieces. All of it, meaningless.

The elevator hummed and opened, and out crept the young asari, Liara T'Soni, towards the armoury. She was avoiding the warrior Williams quite studiously, considering they were on the same tiny warship.

"T'Soni," Wrex rumbled, stepping forward. She jumped, spinning to face him.

"Oh - good morning, Wrex."

"What are you doing?"

Her chin raised. Good. There was some backbone there, after all. "My personal firearm is stored down here. I was checking on it."

He turned his head to stare at her with one gleaming crimson eye. "Really. You can fire a gun?"

She flushed a deeper blue. "I have basic commando training. My mo - Benezia insisted."

"Prove it," he said.

"W-what?"

"You think the geth will stand around while you examine Prothean ruins, T'Soni? No. They're going to make your battlemaster fight for every artifact, every site. If you cannot fight, you will be a liability and I'm not going to babysit you."
"Shepard said-"

"Shepard isn't here," he said, towering over her. "Show me."

He drew his corona up around him. She took a step back, but her own biotics flared in self-defence.

"I don't think-"

Wrex chuckled. "Don't worry, T'Soni. I'm not going to hurt you." Much.

Bruises at most. Shepard would be upset if anything else happened to the blue. He threw out a shockwave towards her and nodded in approval when she battered it aside with her own barrier. He tossed another field at her centre of mass, pure kinetic energy and she blocked that too.

T'Soni was stronger than she looked, at least biotically. He felt a flare of interest at the matching of strength.

"Hit back," he ordered. Her hesitation was clear, but after a moment she stepped forward and whipped a ball of crushing energy towards his face. He blocked it, absorbed it stoically. He'd honed his biotics over centuries, long before this Maiden's parents so much as glanced at each other.

"What's going on here?"

Wrex turned his head. Shepard's dark-haired lieutenant was standing in the open elevator, biotics crackling around him as he looked between the mercenary and the archaeologist.

"Don't get in a twist, Alenko," he said shortly, "Just seeing what the doctor here can do."

"It's okay, Kaidan," Liara's voice was soft and the tension gradually bled out of the Marine until his corona faded.

Wrex fixed her in his gaze again. "You're stronger than he is. You'd be even stronger if you were tempered in battle."

"She's a civilian!" protested Alenko.

"You think Saren cares about your distinctions?" Wrex asked, bored, not entirely sure why he was bothering. "Or these Reapers? Those who refuse to defend themselves will still die by the blade."

The asari flexed a hand, sparks of blue dancing along her fingers, expression thoughtful. He turned his back on both of them and returned to his corner and his knife where he'd left it - jammed into one of the crates there.

It was hours later when Shepard came to find him, smelling of gun oil and sharp soap. She crossed her arms. "Wrex."

"Shepard."

"Liara asked to come on the next mission to Feros. Alenko said you might've had something to do with it."

He narrowed his eyes at her. "If she wants to fight and earn a place in your krannt, that is her decision."

Shepard shook her head. "Sure."
"Heard there’s geth."

"Yeah. We’ve got about fifteen hours of FTL before we land. I was planning on bringing you along - it's CQB on steroids down there. Could use your muscle." Shepheard smiled faintly. The expression tugged at the white scars on her face.

"Good. I was starting to think you’d forgotten about me down here," he showed a hint of teeth.

She was unmoved. "Xawin was Alliance business. I only brought Garrus because I'm low on snipers. This is geth - and a sighting of Saren. Exactly what you signed on for."

He chuckled. "I could get used to scrapping geth. I looked up your battles, you know. Before I decided to come with you."

A wariness crept into her gaze. "Oh?"

"What is it they call you? 'The Lion of Elysium'? What is a lion?"

She grimaced. "It's a stupid nickname. A lion is an animal on Earth; a predator used as a symbol a lot. I've tried to stop them using it for years and yet, they keep calling me that."

"Why shy away from your own accomplishments? Victories are the only reason battlemasters are followed. They called my grandfather the Nathak, and he never shied from it."

Shepheard shrugged, turned away. "Chalk it up to a human thing. Be ready to go when we reach Feros."

Ashley couldn't sleep. She spent a good couple of hours tossing and turning in the pod before she gave it up and decided that if sleep wasn't happening, at least the weights room would be empty. The burn was a good way to exhaust the body and quieten the mind.

Alone, she selected some hand weights and started going through her routine. There wasn't a lot of time to stay in shape on an active warship, particularly with the restricted space, but it was more important than ever that she did. Getting winded from the weight of her guns and armour would just be embarrassing.

"Williams."

Ashley snapped upright, nearly dropping her weights. Commander Shepard was in the doorway, dressed in a clinging tank top and PT shorts, wisps of hair curling out of her bun. Ash resolutely fixed her eyes on the officer’s face. "Evening, ma’am."

"At ease," Shepheard said with a hint of a smile on her lips. Williams relaxed, but despite herself, her eyes were drawn to Shepard’s shoulder - to the blotches of raised white skin at odds with the smooth copper of the rest of her. When she forced her eyes away, a wry expression had settled across the Commander's face. "Not pretty, I know."

Ashley wasn't quite sure how to respond. Telling your commanding officer that she was an attractive woman and that her scars made her more striking, not less, seemed like a bad idea. She settled on, "You’ve been through some shit, ma'am. Just shows what you’ve survived." Eager to change the subject, she added, "Were you after some weights?"

Shepheard shook her head. Her expression was suddenly appraising and Ashley shifted under the weight of her gaze. "I read your file, Sergeant."
Ash stiffened, fingers tightening around the weights still in her hands. She avoided looking at the skipper by putting them away, "Okay."

Shepard continued as if she hadn't noticed Ashley's sudden withdrawal. "Your ITB scores show you have the highest unarmed proficiency out of the Marine detachment. Black belt, first degree, yes? The only one who matches you is Lance Corporal Hodgins, and Hodgins is far too prone to unprofessional behaviour."

Ash blinked. "You want to spar, ma'am?"

"Yes," Shepard nodded. "It's not an order, but I find it's a good way to keep on your toes and get out your frustrations."

"By wailing on a subordinate, ma'am?"

Shepard drew herself up, "N7s do not 'wail'. Or 'flail'."

"Uh huh. No biotics."

"That'd be cheating," Shepard said lightly, redoing her hair.

"Everyone knows N7s cheat, skipper."

Shepard chuckled as they walked towards the sparring mat. "That mouth is going to get in you trouble one day, Williams."

There was a moment in which Shepard appeared to realise how that had come out and reddened. Ashley just smirked. "So they say, skipper. You gonna be trouble?"

Shepard off-balance was kind of delightful, actually. She was always so controlled, so unruffled. "I-"

Ashley threw a punch at her solar plexus, only for Shepard's forearm to slap into hers, knocking the blow off course. She was fast. Ash was probably gonna get her ass kicked - Shepard was, after all, a N7 commando and biotic Vanguard. But her pride would never let her go down without a fight.

"And you said I was the cheat," Shepard chuckled, a fading bloom of colour across her cheeks.

"Hey, you can't tell me N7s fight fair." She danced away from one of Shepard's testing strikes.

"On the battlefield, if you're fighting fair, you're fighting wrong," Shepard said, moving to close in. Ashley threw a few punches to keep her further out, use her own height advantage. "But this is just a friendly sparring match, right?"

"Uh huh," Ash drawled out before trying a knife-hand strike aimed at Shepard's ribs, only to wince as her wrist was seized in an iron grip. Shepard stepped close and all of a sudden she was on the soft mat. Fell for a goddamn throw! Damnit.

She bounced back to her feet, determined. She managed to get one good hit in that had Shepard wincing and jumping back.

"I won't lie," Shepard said suddenly, "I was concerned about having you on my ship."

"Because of my grandfather?" She bit off the angry words before she could help herself.

Shepard frowned, shaking her head. "Your last name is a shitty reason to blacklist you. It would be even if you were a fuck up - but you're not."
"You've known for a while." It wasn't a question. They exchanged a few more blows. They were pulling them - no one wanted a trip to the medbay - but Ash knew she was going to have some more bruises in the morning to match her face. She decided against doing a vidcall with her mother in the next couple of days. The Marine Corps beats me up, ma!

"I was waiting for you to feel comfortable telling me," Shepard said softly, at odds with the strike to Ash's solar plexus that had her gasping for breath. The skipper stepped back, waiting for her to recover.

And now she felt like a bit of a shit. "Ah...sorry, Commander."

Shepard smiled at her. "Don't be. I can understand why you'd be worried. You've been unfairly kept from the fleet postings you deserve and from OCS. Twice."

Ash winced. "Yeah."

"None of that reflects on you. You're not just a good Marine, Williams, you're a great one. I was worried that maybe you were being knocked back because you were selling your gear on the sly or you were an alcoholic or you broke the Prime Minister's favourite vase. Realising it was your damned name was a relief. Being Joachim Williams' granddaughter isn't anything to be ashamed of."

"That's the first time an officer has ever said that to me," Ash said softly, looking at the floor, the developing bruise on her wrist.

"My mother was on Shanxi, you know. She was a fighter pilot back then - flying the old Falcons. She got shot down, flying CAS missions during the fighting. She was found by your grandfather's Marines and fought beside them with just her shitty SMG. They had the airfields and air superiority by then - there was nowhere else for her to go while the noose tightened on Petal City. They weren't even really sparring anymore, just looking at each other in the dim lighting of the exercise room. "When she got home, she was all skin and bones."

"Pop's people were starving," Ashley said stubbornly, "They couldn't even look for supplies because they were surrounded and the turians were bombing the shit outta them."

"He held out for as long as he could and then he surrendered because he put his troops first. He saved a lot of lives, both Alliance and civilian."

"He's always been a hero to me, ma'am."

"Good." Shepard said firmly and Ash felt something twist and release in her chest, leaving only relief and fierce pride behind. "The Alliance needs to live up to what it could be - and it can't do that if we shirk organisational responsibility and keep putting the weight of Shanxi on your shoulders. If a good officer like your grandfather surrenders, it's the Alliance's fault. They got cocky, thinking we were the only ones out there and their relief force was too far away to help him."

"I...yes, ma'am."

"I would've done what he did. Your great-grandmother and grandfather threw their lot in with the Alliance when it was a glorified space agency, you and your father served when it turned its back on you. You deserve better. That's what you'll always get from me, Williams. What you deserve and what you earn - nothing more, nothing less." Shepard's eyes seemed to burn into her.

"That's more than the Alliance has ever given me before," Ashley admitted, "I'm glad for the chance. I won't let you down."
"Don't worry about me - don't let yourself down."

"Ma'am," Ash wondered cautiously, unable to let go of that last bit of fear when it came to officers, "If it wasn't my family, why were you worried about having me onboard?"

There was a long stretch of silence between them, fragile, Shepard's face dappled with shadows.

"I know what it feels like to lose a platoon."

A stab of grief transfixed her, still sharp-edged. Ash swallowed. She'd read about Akuze. Fifty Marines melted and torn to pieces by three thresher maws. A single survivor, who'd carried the body of her platoon sergeant for fifteen kilometres.

Shepard was looking through her. "I hated the galaxy, I hated myself. I don't want that for you."

Ash couldn't find words for a long minute. "I'm here, doing this - for them. Because Saren...Saren fucking killed them. And I can help."

Shepard smiled a ghost of a smile. "I know you can. I just want to know that if things are too much, that you have someone onboard you can talk to. I know the last thing I wanted was some officer insisting I spill my heart out. But if you can't talk to me because I'm your boss, I'd like to know you can talk to someone else."

"And if I do want to come to you?" Ash said slowly.

"Open door policy, remember?"

"I'll keep it in mind, skipper."

"Good." Shepard rubbed a hand through her thick curls.

Ash shrugged off the awkwardness suddenly springing up between them. "Rematch?"

"You're on."

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CODEX ENTRY

Marine Martial Arts: Marine Martial Arts, also sometimes called 'Marine hand-to-hand', is a hybrid combat system combining elements of unarmed and close quarters combat techniques. Distilled from centuries of human martial experience, the system has been influenced by a great many other systems, including wrestling, fencing, savate, kung fu, Krav Maga and jujutsu.

Marines are taught punches, upper and lower body strikes, chokes, throws, joint locks, knife and bayonet fighting techniques, to utilize weapons of opportunity, unarmed restraints, fighting using rifles as bludgeons and ground fighting on a variety of species. Advanced fighters may also use techniques to fighting unarm against an opponent with a gun or knife. Marine hand to hand focuses on differing levels of lethality depending on the compliance level of the opponent; but in life or death situations, it is known for its brutal counter attacks and focus on aggression and violence of action. A variant is taught to biotic Vanguards, who are expected to fight in close quarters more often than the average Marine.

Marine Martial Arts use a belt system, with tan being the lowest and black (2nd degree) being the highest. Black belt (2nd degree) masters train the instructors that teach martial arts to recruits.
Definitions:

Crash Sail: emergency sailing, rather than planned. Crew and supplies must be loaded by a certain time, or the ship leaves without them.
"What do we know about this planet, ma'am?" It was Alenko who was the first to speak up once Shepard had pulled together the group in the briefing room - her Marine officer and sergeant, her XO, her Buffer, Liara, Garrus, Tali, and Wrex. It was all hands on deck for this one.

Shepard watched the holographic orb representing Feros spin above her wrist, projected by her omnitool. From this perspective, Feros was a green jewel, gleaming. Most planets were beautiful from a distance. "Pilot colony established in 2178 by ExoGeni Corporation. It's under charter for the next fifteen years so ExoGeni can explore - and exploit - the extensive Prothean ruins. Urban Prothean ruins cover a good two-thirds of the surface, so ground transport will be difficult and we're looking at combat inside the old Prothean arcologies - and pretty hard limits on what support the Normandy can give us."

Liara nodded emphatically. "Too much firepower may compromise the ruins - they're in excellent condition considering their age, but they have gone many thousands of years without maintenance."

"And what about the geth?" asked Williams, ever practical.

"We're not certain of their strength at this point. They destroyed the single system defence corvette protecting Feros and attacked both the ExoGeni headquarters and the main colony. The colony is still transmitting distress calls, so at least someone is alive in there, but the status of the headquarters is unknown."

"So the main focus of their attack had to have been the headquarters," Garrus mused.

"Exactly. The current plan is to land at the docks near the main colony, ascertain the situation there, then use the Mako to cross to and assault the ExoGeni facility. If Saren was here and focusing on them, there has to be a reason." A light blinked above her hand, picking out a single pair of skyscrapers in a sea of ruins.

"ExoGeni might not be happy about that," Alenko pointed out.

She frowned. "I don't really care about what ExoGeni thinks. This is a matter of national security; their profits and secrets are hardly important. If any of their personnel are alive, they will co-operate or they'll end up in handcuffs. Don't let them push you or your Marines around."

"Roger that."

"Any other questions?" Shepard asked.

"Status of the corvette crew?" That was Alenko again.

Shepard's lips pressed into a thin line. "She went down with all hands."

"Damn," Ashley murmured. There was a moment of hard, grim silence. Shepard didn't pray these days, but she spared a moment for the fifteen crew of the SSV Integrity. She hoped it had been quick and that the Navy wouldn't drag their feet sending another ship to recover their remains.

When no more questions were forthcoming, Shepard cleared her throat. "Alright. Everyone get geared up. I want Alpha Team under Draven left to defend the ship since we have a live situation with geth here, the rest of us will push into Zhu's Hope."
"Roger that, skipper."

Sometimes Shepard missed her N7 team. Not just because she loved them with all the ferocity you loved ten other people with whom you lived in the strange isolation of Tier One covert ops - which she did - but she also missed all the intel gathering they'd done before each of their raids. She'd worked with imaging and HUMINT so good she'd known what brand of cigars one of the pirate warlords in the outer Traverse preferred while directing his raiding fleets from his mansion. He'd been smoking one when Lead Hand Chen Sieh had put a bullet in his head from 1.5 km away.

On the *Normandy*, it often felt like she was fumbling in the dark, with only half the story.

They armoured up and stepped out onto the docks, Alenko and Shepard leading the way, and Williams lurking behind them like she didn’t quite trust her officers to look after themselves without her there.

Which was good, because almost as soon as they met David Al Talaqani, the colonist sent to fetch them, the corridor behind him was boiling with geth. Alenko grabbed the civilian, shielding him with his own body and biotics. Shots smacked into Shepard’s chest, her shields burning and sparking. *When in doubt, attack.* She drew biotics around her, humming and shouted her intention to Williams.

*Charge.*

She's never been quite able to explain how it felt. One moment she was standing beside Alenko, the next she slammed into the group of three geth, throwing them back in a burst of dark energy. She brought up her shotgun in a smooth motion, under the nearest geth's flashlight and pulled the trigger, leaving only a sparking stump where its 'head' had been. Whirling, she threw a punch at the rocket-bearing geth, fist surrounded with a heavy field that punched right through its chest and into vulnerable wiring and conduits, white fluid breaking across her black armour.

*Shit.* The last geth had recovered from being thrown back and her shields, already abused, began to sputter, her HUD helpfully telling her *kinetic barrier at ten percent. Please replace battery.*

She was bringing her shotgun - and barrier - up when the geth whined a mechanical dying sound and toppled, two holes the size of her hands punched through its centre of mass. Panting, blood electric in her veins from adrenaline - god that was always a rush - Shepard looked over her shoulder, even as her Marines surged forward, setting up security just beyond her.

Williams lowered her rifle. Always watching out for her, it seemed.

It was…comforting, strangely enough, rather than stifling or patronising. Shepard was well aware of her own lethality and skills, but a Vanguard on the battlefield was someone balancing on a knife’s edge. If she made a single mistake in the complex choreography of close quarters combat, missed a biotic movement or a shotgun blast, she would be dead. Williams was a second chance - a shot in the right place at the right time.

Shepard pulled out a new shield battery and slotted it into place, tucking the depleted one into the pocket she reserved for spent batteries. Williams walked over, frowning beneath her visor.

"I hate it when you do that...ma'am."

Shepard smirked at her, still buzzing from the fight, before she turned to Alenko, crouching over Al Talaqani. "Alenko, how's he looking?"

"I think he might have a concussion," he replied, peering into the man's eyes.
"Send him aboard, then. We need to keep moving. Draven, set up a position here to defend the airlock. No geth is scratching my ship."

"This is the worst place for a colony I have ever seen and I grew up on Sirona," Ashley muttered when they emerged onto the roof of the ancient skyscraper, on which the colony of Zhu's Hope had been transplanted like some kind of growth, spliced into the old Prothean water conduits and hydroponics. The settlement itself was just what appeared to be a dismembered Kowloon freighter, surrounded with make-shift fortifications.

"You a colony kid, Sarn't?" asked Alenko.

"Yessir. But if this was my colony? I'd be looking for a way to get the hell outta dodge."

Shepard was inclined to agree. But: "Opinions...to ourselves, Marines."

"Aye aye."

They were greeted by two exhausted civilians carrying ancient Mattock rifles, eyes jumping all over the place, fingers close to triggers.

"Where's David?" A woman demanded. She was wearing an old, battered hardsuit that looked at least two cycles out of date.

Fuck me, Shepard thought, they're defending against geth with outdated gear and small arms? Where's ExoGeni's security forces?

"There was a geth attack near the dock," she said calmly, soothingly, "I took him aboard my ship so my doctor could have a look at him. I'm sure as soon as she's done, he'll be back."

"...Right. You're the Alliance right?"

Shepard exchanged glances with Ashley. Yes, that's generally what that symbol on our armour means.

"Commander Shepard, Alliance Navy. This is Lieutenant Kaidan Alenko and Staff Sergeant Ashley Williams, Alliance Marines. Who's in charge here?"

"Fai Dan. He's on the other side of the colony."

"Thanks."

They were about halfway through the colony when a shout rose up. "Geth!"

Shepard repressed a sigh. "Let's expedite."

Then she began to run.

bysitting duty! Garrus sighed, perched on a crate overlooking the colony of Zhu's Hope. He'd argued with Shepard - he was as good a marksman as Williams! And he was a combat engineer with his own tech grenades loaded for destroying or interfering with the geth.

But Shepard had waited for him to run out of arguments patiently, and then told him that was exactly why he was staying with Alenko. She was taking Tali for tech support and Williams and Wrex for their CQB skills. He was to stay with Alenko to help if the geth tried another attack.
Alenko had kept the Marines together, as a 'reaction force', so that if the geth showed up, they could easily react to an attack from any direction, then began helping fortify the settlement further, lifting crates and scrap metal with his biotics, each movement slow and deliberate. Garrus was pretty sure the lieutenant was stronger than he often let show. He'd crushed a geth when they'd been counter-attacking through the tunnels earlier. Just turned its 'chest' - and central processing unit - into a crumpled mess of metal.

Alenko jogged back towards them, composed despite the exertions, and Garrus gestured for him to come over.

"Don't you think this colony is weird?" he asked, low enough that the nearest colonist, fixated on the panel she was fiddling with, couldn't hear.

Alenko looked around thoughtfully. "They've been through a lot. They're not soldiers."

"Yet they haven't asked us to take over the defences. They're not panicking. They refuse to answer any questions or enquiries, except to tell us to talk to Fai Dan."

"What do you think is going on?"

Garrus looked away, flicking his mandibles thoughtfully. "They're hiding something, Lieutenant."

Alenko frowned. "What do they have to hide? We're here to help them."

"Remember them smugglers on Eden Prime?" Asked Lance Corporal Hodgins idly, inspecting his pistol. "Maybe they're up to something illegal and they don't want the Alliance to know."

"Yeah, but those civvies came clean with us during the attack. Worrying about the Big Government getting on you for smuggling seems pretty secondary to the geth."

"Yeah, only after they stole the 2/12th's grenades," muttered Hodgins bitterly. Those smugglers hadn't been very popular with the Marines, not after they'd had to fight their way past the burnt remains of their comrades, not after they'd had to kill husks the geth had created out of their siblings in arms. A few of them had ranted about it to Garrus, told him how an entire battalion had been smashed to bits by the geth incursion. Maybe those few cases of grenades and pistols wouldn't have made a difference, but it couldn’t have hurt.

There was a low, pained groan, cutting raggedly through their conversation. Alenko bounded to his feet, ever the helpful medic, Garrus following suit, his talons falling to his rifle - just in case. Shepard had told him to help the human officer, and he took his duties very seriously, including keeping the officer safe from any duplicity.

Zhu's Hope's leader, Fai Dan, was hunched over, gripping his skull.

"Sir, are you alright?" Alenko asked, taking a step forward, a crinkle forming between his eyebrows.

"Stay back," Fai Dan moaned, pressing his hands against his temples. His eyes were those of a wounded animal. "You...have to go - can't stop it. Don't want to hurt you. Please go."

"What? Sir, I can help - "

"GO!" He screamed it and then his hand was trembling its way towards the pistol on his belt.

"Shit - Lieutenant, we should - " Garrus wasn't sure what to do. His instincts saw the gun and
thought threat. His instincts wanted to shoot, to protect himself and his squadmates. But something wasn't *right* here.

There was a flash of blue and Fai Dan was knocked over, handgun skittering away from his hands along the floor.

Alenko, still glowing, grabbed Garrus' shoulder. "We're leaving. Back to the ship!"

"The fuck?" Hodgins was still gaping and Garrus bodily shoved him to get him moving. Lance Corporal Amina Waaberi had shown why she was acting team leader for Bravo Team - she'd already recovered from her shock and was hauling the corpsman, Ling, with her.

"Defend yourselves if you need to," Alenko shouted as they began to run, "but don't kill! These are civilians!"

"Fuckin' nutcases, maybe!" Hodgins retorted.

Arcelia Martinez - Garrus remembered her, because she was the only one of the colonists who'd struck him as a soldier - careened around a corner and towards him. It didn't make sense, he had time to think, Martinez was ex-Army, a mercenary for ExoGeni's security forces, but the way she came from him was mindless.

Her assault rifle rose. He seized the muzzle and forced it up, the retort loud beside his helmet, then slammed his elbow into her unprotected jaw. She dropped heavily to the ground in a pile of ceramic armour and he winced. But he couldn’t stop to check that he hadn’t broken her jaw, he just had to step over her prone form and keep moving.

Alenko was on the radio, speaking in between raising barriers between their group and bullets or lashing out with blunted biotic force. "Draven! The colonists have become hostile! Get inside the ship and tell Pressly to initiate lockdown. No, I don't know why. Just do it!"

A gaggle of colonists charged them and Alenko hissed, shoving outward with his hands, knocking them over like a bunch of beanbags being tossed about.

"Go, I'll cover you," he said, pointing at the doorway leading to the docks. Garrus was starting to see the merit of how humans didn't segregate their biotics from their normal units. He swung around, ready to help the lieutenant if it came to it, as Waaberi, Ling, and Hodgins fled into the corridors, but he seemed to have it well in hand, pushing back any of the colonists who got too close.

"Vakarian, move," Alenko said, a firm, commanding tone in his voice, more so than Garrus had heard from the quiet officer before, blue light sparking across his fingertips. It was the sort of tone that didn't so much as demand obedience, as it did expect it.

"Yessir," he said reflexively and moved, glad to hear the Marine's booted footsteps following him after a moment. They sprinted through the dusty corridors in grim silence, tossing glances over their shoulders for pursuit. Garrus knew what he'd do if forced to choose between his own life or one of the human's and a colonist, but he really didn't want to have to make that decision.

The way they'd been acting...the warning in Fai Dan's voice - none of this was natural.

A burst of relief filled him when they rounded the corner and saw the bulk of the *Normandy* in dock. The colonists wouldn't be able to break into the frigate once she was locked down and it'd take much, much more than the small arms they had to damage her - more than anti-vehicle weapons, even.
Draven had already pulled her team into the ship, so Alenko simply shepherded them straight to the airlock.

"We're coming in," he said over his comm. "Seal the door after us. Don't wait for decon to finish."

"Jesus fuck," Hodgins murmured, pulling off his helmet.

"I've never seen anything like that," Garrus shook his head, feeling the dregs of his fight or flight response starting to fade away.

Alenko took off his own helmet, sweat beaded on his face. "Me neither."

The lieutenant took an energy bar out of one of his many pockets, but his hands were shaking from exhaustion too much to tear it open. Without a word, Waaberi took it from him, ripped it open and handed it back, the man immediately taking a bite out of it. Garrus imagined that the amount of biotics he'd used, with barely a moment to rest in between each effort, had been exhausting - but Alenko hadn't shown it until they were all safe.

The decontamination cycle finished and they all trooped into the CIC, Garrus stowing his rifle away. That's when they heard it. A thumping from behind them, metal ringing.

"They're hitting the hull," one of the sensor technicians whispered. Over her shoulder, Garrus watched the external camera feeds, watched as a group of colonists banged on the ship's armoured hull and airlock fruitlessly. One even unloaded his assault rifle at the ship in frustration, but he might as well have thrown rocks; the ship's kinetic barriers barely even registered the hit.

"It's okay -" he read the woman's nametape "- ET Korrapati." That's what the humans called their electronics technicians. "They can't get through the ship's hull with small arms or even anti-tank weapons. You'd need a dedicated anti-ship weapon for that, and Feros has none."

"It's creepy," she said. Garrus still didn't quite get human indicators of age beyond the broadest of strokes - wrinkled skin and lightened hair - but he had a feeling if Korrapati was a turian, she would've just graduated from boot.

"Unnatural," he agreed. "Don't worry. The Commander will find out what's wrong with them."

"Even if we can't contact her?" Korrapati asked quietly.

"It's just geth jamming. Once she's destroyed the geth, Joker or Lam will let her know what's going on and I'm sure she'll find a solution."

Some of the anxiety had drained out of Korrapati, so he gave her a friendly pat on the shoulder, glad his reassurances had worked. Shepard had told him that morale and the mindset of the team were as important as having ammunition.

Halfway to Alenko, he stuttered to a stop, a thought striking him with the force of a punch.

Alenko frowned, pausing with a bottle of bright orange liquid halfway to his mouth. "Is something wrong, Vakarian?"

"Lieutenant," he said slowly. "What happened with that colonist we brought aboard when we landed?"

Alenko's eyes widened. "Shit."
It was the first time Garrus had heard the man swear, but there was no time to think about that. The two men ran for the stairs down to Deck Two, shoving sailors out of the way.

"Security alert-"

The Mako rumbled over the old, crumbling skyway, pushing its way past the debris of the previous battle - hasty defensive positions, a burning M-29 Grizzly in ExoGeni corporate colours, the odd geth unit. Shepard hunched across from Wrex in one of the troop seats, rifle in her lap, trying very hard not to think about the skyway giving way beneath the weight of the IFV.

Getting crushed to death by debris was not high on her list of ways she’d like to go.

The interior of the Mako seemed tiny when you stuffed four humans, an asari, a quarian, and a krogan into it. An assault force of just her, Williams, Tali, and Wrex - and Liara she supposed, but Liara wasn’t battle tested yet - wasn’t as large as she would have liked, but she was unwilling to leave the Normandy and Zhu’s Hope unprotected. So she’d put the other Marine team and Garrus under Alenko’s charge and put him to the task of keeping the colonists safe. There was also Dubyansky and Ki-tae, but she would have to leave them to guard the Mako.

It was a bit of a pity. She liked working with Alenko.

“Shepard?” Tali asked from where she was manning the Mako’s ECM suite. “I’m picking up some comm chatter.”

“Turn it up,” she ordered.

“There’s some kind of rover out there…”

“Rover!” Dubyansky sounded horribly offended. “This is an Infantry Fighting Vehicle with 155mm of fuck you on the top!”

Shepard suppressed a smile. “Where’s that coming from?”

“Just...right there, Commander.”

“Driver, stop.”

The Mako rumbled to a halt and Shepard led Williams, Tali, Liara, and Wrex out of the vehicle, leaving the other two with the IFV. They were in what looked like a weight station, if she had to guess, debris piled up, the ceiling oppressively cracked. It seemed strange, to think of Protheans and things as mundane as heavy vehicle safety inspections. Guess Protheans put their boots on one at a time just like us.

“Signal is coming from in there, Commander,” Tali murmured quietly to her, vocaliser blinking on her helmet.

"Williams, take point," she ordered.

"Aye," the Marine said, pulling out her shotgun. "Shoot any flashlights. Do I get ten points for shooting the big ones?"

"Sure. But it's -15 for civilians, so watch your fire."

"Yeah, I think 'not shooting the people you're supposed to be protecting' came up in basic training."
"All I remember from basic is Ellison calling me a maggot," Shepard admitted, "and the mud. All that mud, everywhere. It was very traumatising for a baby spacer."

They hugged the wall, rubble crunching underfoot, Shepard following Ashley, with Liara in between her and Wrex bringing up their six. The first mission with the krogan, she'd never have dreamt of putting the krogan on her six, but he'd had plenty of opportunities to kill her at this point - when she was unarmed, even.

Williams whirled around a corner, gun raised, then dropped the muzzle to the floor. "Skipper, looks like we found ExoGeni."

Shepard followed - to find four guards in armour wearing the green and white logo of ExoGeni still with their rifles raised behind makeshift barricades.

"Do we look like geth to you?" she said flatly, gesturing to the Alliance symbol on her armour.

"That one does!" one of the guards shouted back, pointing his rifle at Tali. Williams immediately stepped in front of her.

"That's a quarian, you dumbfuck," the Marine said severely.

"Let them in! It's the Army!"

"Marine Corps," she corrected, offended, before she could contain herself.

The surviving highest-ranking ExoGeni representative was an odious scumbag and Shepard stayed only long enough to get what intel she could pry out of Jeong and Baynham - and long enough to receive an entreaty from the latter to look for her missing daughter - before she ushered her team back to the Mako, Jeong's insistence on not disturbing corporate property soldier still ringing in her head.

She settled back into her seat and hummed thoughtfully. "Tali, could you hack Exogeni's files?"

"I thought you said we were only going after the geth?" Liara said beside her, blinking big blue eyes.

"I lied," Shepard said succinctly.

"I think so, Commander," Tali fiffled with her omnitool.

"Chakwas, Alenko, and I declared martial law after we saw the shape the colony is in," she explained, "so we have every right to look around if the enemy is in there."

Under the Alliance's Emergency Act, three military officers - two of different branches and a specially trained and experienced Crisis Response Officer - in agreement could declare a state of emergency on a colony, empowering the military to make strategic decisions regardless of whose toes needed to be stepped on and requisition civilian and corporate property to the defence of the colony - and on large ones, subordinate the colonial militia to Alliance command. Feros had no official civilian government, not yet, just a corporate one, so she'd felt even less compelled not to.

"Even if that was not so," Liara pointed out, "you are a Spectre."

"Yeah..." It was like unlearning muscle memory. The urge to introduce herself as 'Alliance Navy' instead of 'Council Spectre'. The instinctive adherence to rules she'd lived her life around - bent before, yes, but she'd always understood there were consequences. Spectres had always made her uncomfortable - the idea that they might run into one on a mission and find their missions divergent.
That a Spectre could kill one of her N7s and justice would be as likely as the Hegemon and Prime Minister sitting down to lunch to discuss biotiball.

"You think ExoGeni is hiding something, ma'am?" Ashley's voice pulled her free of her thoughts.

"Jeong is very eager to keep us away from his corporation's secrets. It might just be an inability to realise we don't care about which corporation makes the most money, but if they're up to something, I'd prefer to know about it. And the geth - Saren personally - attacked Feros. I think ExoGeni has or had something he wanted. Maybe he's already taken it, but we need to find out what brought Saren here."

"And smash some geth while we're at it." Wrex ran a hand over his shotgun, clearly eager to get to that part.

Liara was breathing hard, feeling exhaustion sink deep into her, down to the bone. The geth had not wanted to give up the HQ anymore than the krogan had, fighting fiercely to hold their ground. Their own team had moved quickly, Shepard setting a frenetic, aggressive pace, having Liara slam the geth with biotics before Wrex, Sergeant Williams, and Shepard cleaned up with shotguns and the odd Shockwave. A few times they had run into fights Shepard had been unwilling to throw them into, and they pulled back into the warren of corridors, drawing the geth and krogan into ambushes.

Now, she leaned against a wall, staring at the krogan bleeding on the ground, as Tali tried to work out how to use the faulty shutters to cut through the geth ship's claws. It had been easy, with the geth, not to think of it as killing. But the krogan had knocked Commander Shepard to the ground with his charge after she'd dispatched two geth, and Liara had reacted. She'd thrown him free of the Commander, then followed it up with a warp and Wrex had shot him twice to make sure. She tried to avoid looking at the marks the warp field had left on the body.

She looked up at footsteps. Sergeant Williams, face hidden by her polarised visor. She jerked a thumb towards the body. "First time?"

"Yes," Liara admitted, looking at her feet.

"It gets easier."

Liara wasn't sure that it should. Williams passed something to her. A bottle containing a bright orange liquid.

"You look tired," the Marine said gruffly. "We've still got plenty of fighting to go - and that Thorian thing. You should drink this."

She pulled the cap off and took a sip. The liquid was very sweet and syrupy, clinging to her tongue, and she made a face. Williams huffed a laugh.

"What is this?"

"Specially formulated energy drink for troops and biotics - tastes like shit, but it works. I carry some extra, in case Alenko or Shepard use all their supply up. Finish it, you'll feel better." Williams paused. "I think. Your biology should close enough to ours that it'll do the trick."

There was an almighty screech and she jumped as the shutters smashed down and crunched through the metal of the geth dropship's claws and the ship fell, power conduit tearing and sparking.

"Fuck yeah! Good one, Tali!" Williams called to the quarian.
Then their comms came to life as the geth barriers and jamming fields died with the enemy ship. Joker's voice, taut and thin. "Normandy to Lance, Normandy to Lance, answer your damned phone, Commander."

"Lance copes, Normandy. Sitrep."

"The colonists went nuts! They attacked the squad in Zhu's Hope, but Alenko pulled them and Draven back into the ship. They're outside - we can hear them banging on the hull."

"Hang tight, we'll sort the situation out. Do not fire any weapons at them unless they're somehow getting onto the ship."

"Sure, we'll just...stay here."

Shepard turned to them, eyes gleaming with a cold light. "Let's get moving. I need to have a chat with Doctor Lizbeth."

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**CODEX ENTRY**

Department of Colonial Affairs: a large department of the Systems Alliance government, the Department of Colonial Affairs (DoCA)'s mission statement is to oversee the expansion of humanity into space. Established very early on in the Alliance's existence, the Department oversees the planning of new colonies, provides expertise to initiatives, ensures all the legal hoops are jumped through so the colony is a full member of the Systems Alliance and provides assistance and resources during colonial development.

DoCA includes experts of all stripes: environmental scientists, lawyers, architects, city planners, agricultural scientists, geologists, astronomers, planetary climate scientists, biologists, military attaches and sociologists. The Department also includes a Colonial Bureau of Investigation, a law enforcement agency charged with ensuring the laws and regulations relating to colonisation are followed and that colonists are not being exploited by the corporations that often fund new ventures.

Not all colonies are founded under the banner of the department, but these colonies risk not having full Alliance membership (and thus military support) and missing out on government funding.

DoCA is also charged with helping each new colony construct its own new planetary government within Alliance law and with constructing new electorates, so each colony is represented in the Alliance parliament.

In emergency situations, the Department works closely with the military, the Systems Alliance Emergency Management Agency (SAEMA), aid organisations and individual colonial governments to assist those affected and limit damage to both property and people.

Historically, governments who have attempted to influence or defund Colonial Affairs have faced sustained and fierce opposition from the public. The current Minister of Colonial Affairs is Idir Tabaamrant of the Galactic Labor Party.
Goddamnit, Lizbeth.

This was why you secured civilians on the battlefield, Shepard reminded herself as she met Jeong’s wide brown eyes steadily, ignoring the pistol muzzle in her face, ignoring the ExoGeni thugs behind him, pointing their rifles at her people. You secured them so they didn't blow your cover and run to their mothers.

That wasn't entirely fair - Lizbeth had a functioning moral compass, which was apparently rare enough in ExoGeni, and your mother being threatened was enough for most people to lose their cool - but frustration burnt in her chest, underneath practiced calm.

More than the gun being waved in her face, Jeong had put her crew in danger. She didn’t want to think about what would’ve happened if she hadn’t left Alenko - calm, even-keeled, biotic Alenko - in charge.

The man in front of her had no idea what danger he was in. Even if he pulled the trigger on her, Williams or Wrex would kill him. It'd turn into a slaughter, with all these scientists and workers caught in the middle.

No time. Jeong had made a mistake. He should've pulled the trigger the moment he pointed a gun at her. Instead, he'd hesitated, grandstanded, in the hope that they would blink first. She almost pitied him.

The moment stretched like cheap plastic, then snapped as she made her decision.

Shepard was a Marine, a N7, a killer, and she didn't hesitate. She pulled her pistol free, raised it and pulled the trigger in a single flow of movement like the gun was part of her body, part of her arm. Distantly, and not for the first time, she thanked the drill instructor at ITB that had forced an eighteen-year-old Vanguard to practice and practice and practice point shooting.

The bang echoed through the tiny room, drawing gasps and screams that she barely registered through her focus. She lowered her M5 and Jeong slumped to the ground, missing part of his chest, blood pooling on the dusty floor.
She whirled to face the ExoGeni security guards, flaring in preparation to throw them against the wall before they could open fire. But Ashley and Wrex had already cornered them, assault rifles raised.

"Wanna be next?" Williams asked, aiming right at the nearest one's head.

"Please do," Wrex chuckled darkly, "I have some ammunition left."

The four of them clearly decided they'd prefer to live and dropped their guns before raising their hands. She ignored them since they were no longer a threat and stepped forward, kicking Jeong's pistol away from his hand. She didn’t bother with the medscanner once she got a good look at him.

Dead as a doornail, not that she'd expected otherwise. The M5 Phalanx had been developed to put down krogan and armoured targets alike. An unarmoured human…Jeong’s torso had been shredded like tissue paper.

"First the geth, now we're shooting each other?" Julia Baynham whispered, rubbing her face.

"First rule of not dying like a fuckin' idiot," Williams said sharply, "don't point guns at a Marine."

"But what will we do now?" she asked, wrapping an arm around her daughter. "If ExoGeni pulls funding..."

"They won't," Shepard said, voice flat. "Not after I give Colonial Affairs all the files and vid footage I have."

"We still have to get to the Thorian," Tali pointed out, "and find out what the geth wanted with it."

"The colonists won't let you near it," Lizbeth said very softly, staring at her feet. "The Thorian controls them now. They'll die first."

"If that's what it takes," Wrex rumbled, with harsh, pragmatic philosophy in his voice.

"We can't just kill them all!" Liara said, with surprising ferocity.

"It's not like we brought rubber bullets," Williams muttered regretfully, still eyeing the security guys suspiciously.
"There has to be another way," Lizbeth exchanged glances with her mother.

"Maybe there is..."

Fifteen minutes later and some modified gas grenades later, they were back in the Mako and moving again, the only exciting moment during the drive being when Dubyansky used the Mako to ram an Armature off the side of the skyway. A man after her own heart, the Corporal.

"Remember," Shepard said, "gas grenades first, flashbangs and fists second. I don't want anyone - colonist or us - getting shot. Liara and I will try to keep a barrier up for added protection, but we need to move fast and avoid getting pinned down."

They all got out of the IFV only -

"Contact?" Tali's voice was questioning.

Frowning, Shepard turned, shotgun raised. "It's either a contact or not - what the fuck."

She could only describe the thing as a twisted mockery of a human, a corpse creature with a skull-like face and dark pits where eyes should be, with skin of pallid green. It roared and lept at the quarian with claws instead of hands.

Shepard fired. Half the thing's face sloughed off, dribbling goo, but it kept coming with that guttural sound reverberating from what was left of its horrific, grinning mouth. She pushed in front of Tali and lashed out with a Shockwave. The creature was thrown back and into the edge of the garage wall - and more or less splattered.

Shepard wrinkled her nose. She wasn't wearing a faceplate so she could smell the resulting mess, and it was worse than the swamps of Yamm under the midday sun - and that was saying something.

"More zombies," Williams' voice was that of a woman who had seen far too many zombies lately. "Plant zombies. Ma'am...I think we're in a horror movie."

Shepard nodded very solemnly. "This means Wrex or I will be the first to die. The authority figure or the krogan is always the first to die."

"Yeah, I'll just hide behind Liara."
"Uh...what?" The asari looked between them. She was sweet and shy enough to be the surviving protagonist of a horror vid. Though none of the ones Shepard had seen had protagonists capable of crushing geth with their mind.

"Human horror vids. Don't worry about it. Stack up." They stacked up on the door behind Wrex. "Just remember, shoot the zombies, don't shoot the humans."

Wrex didn't deign to respond. He just keyed the door open and rushed forward, a bullet sparking blue off his shields.

Sub-Lieutenant Dariush Sherazi's panicked breaths filled the dead silence of the mess hall. Kaidan tried his best to breathe through the stabbing pain burrowing into his skull, flecking the edges of his eyesight with tracers. He locked his gaze on Sherazi - and on David Al Talaqani, standing behind the naval nurse, with one arm around the Persian's chest and the other holding a scalpel to the man's throat.

He'd overdone it. He'd used his biotics sparingly during the initial fighting and the counter-attack to drive off the geth, knowing he could split the burden of biotic support with Wrex and Shepard. But when the colonists had flipped, that hadn't been an option. It'd just been him, and four people he was responsible for getting out alive. He'd felt the migraine coming on, but he'd thought it'd be fine, that he could just go lie down and hate the galaxy for a bit, secure in the knowledge that Garrus, Ling, Hodgins, and Waaberi were safe.

But now David was holding a knife to the throat of an Alliance officer.

"Put it down," he said through gritted teeth.

"Don't want to...hurt anyone," the man said jerkily, "can't...think..."

Alenko breathed in deep, through the pain, and executed a crisp mnemonic. David and Dariush both were suddenly frozen in place by a stasis field, coated by biotic power.

"Someone needs to get the scalpel," Kaidan through clenched teeth.

"Got it!" It wasn't a Master-At-Arms or a Marine who darted forward, past the line Kaidan had instructed Vakarian and Bravo Team set up - it was the young Yeoman, Hector Emerson. Carefully, Kaidan opened a small hole in the field, and Emerson pried the scalpel out of Al Talaqani's hand, cautiously avoiding the vulnerable skin of Sherazi's neck.

"Okay, when I drop the stasis, Hodgins I want you to restrain Al Talaqani. Emerson, can you pull Sherazi away from him?" Kaidan asked, a metallic taste in his mouth.
"Got it, LT," Hodgins said, stepping right up to the field.

"Yessir," Emerson's bright blue eyes didn't move from Shezari's face.

"Dropping the field." The stasis field flickered and faded away, releasing the two men.

Hodgins roughly pulled David away from the Sub-Lieutenant, handcuffing him quickly before he could resist. Even restrained and overpowered by a gene-modded, fit space Marine, the colonist kept fighting - against the flex cuffs binding his wrists, and against Hodgins' grip on his shoulder and arm.

"Stop that!" the Lance Corporal growled, smacking him in the back of the head.

"Hodgins," Kaidan said sharply, and the Marine gave him a scowl but contented himself with restraining the man. "Put him in the brig. At least one guard watching him at all times - and I don't want anyone putting a mark on him. I don't think all this was his idea."

"Aye aye, sir." Hodgins began hauling Al Talaqani away, ignoring his attempts to resist or strike at the Marine's armoured face and chest. After a moment, Waaberi trotted after him.

Sub-Lieutenant Sherazi was sitting on the floor, one hand pressed to the red mark on his neck, shaking. Yeoman Emerson had his hand on his shoulder, face creased with concern. Kaidan had an infantry Marine's nonchalance about danger, but Sherazi was a naval nursing corps officer, not a Marine. He gave the other man a comforting smile, and he and Emerson helped the nurse to one of the mess hall's benches.

"You okay?" Emerson asked, and after a moment added, "...Sir."

"He nearly killed me," Sherazi said, disbelievingly, "I...didn't even see it coming."

Kaidan sighed, pressing a hand to his temple like he could force the pain away. "I'm sorry, I should've had a Marine stand guard on him."

Sherazi shook his head. "It's alright, sir. No way any of us could've guessed Zhu's Hope would turn on us like this. I've never seen anything like it."

"Neither have I," Doctor Chakwas, crisp as always, arrived, kitbag in hand. She gently pulled Sherazi's hand away from his neck and checked the scratch. "You'll be okay, Dariush. I'm very sorry this happened."

"I was just taking obs," he said quietly, "And he just - attacked me."
Alenko wanted to be deaf and blind. Listening to the conversation was like sitting still while someone drove knives through his ears and into his brain.

Chakwas touched his arm. "How is your BSL, Lieutenant?"

"Suit says it's fine now," he said thickly.

"Go lie down and take your medication. I'm sure Sergeant Draven can handle anything further."

"...yes ma'am," Kaidan mumbled and stumbled to his feet and found the medbay blissfully empty and dark. The thought of going down to the armoury to put away his gear was too much, so he simply shucked his gear in as near to a neat pile as he could manage, careful to make sure the safeties were engaged and the ammo blocks pulled out of his guns. Dressed in just the tight-fitting body sleeve the Marines wore under their hardsuits, he swallowed the pills and collapsed into one of the beds.

All he could do was wait. Wait for the medication to maybe work or more likely, wait until the migraine finally passed on its own.

Ashley breathed hard, bruised ribs pressing into her mesh with every pant. They'd gotten through the colonists quickly enough using the grenades - and a few flashbangs. Every time she struck a colonist, she'd prayed they'd be okay, that she hadn't killed or severely injured them - but it was a chance at life, unlike a bullet to centre mass from a military grade mass accelerator.

Then they'd descended into the tunnels beneath the remains of the *Borealis* and shit had gone straight to hell. She hadn't felt like laughing since Shepard's quip about needing bigger guns, a good half hour before.

"I hate this planet!" she shouted, blowing the head off one of the *plant zombies*. Couldn't they go back to the days of just shooting batarians and pirates? How many varieties of zombie did one galaxy need?

Shepard focused on severing another one of those (gross) bulging nodes holding the Thorian up within the carcass of the old Prothean tower. Ash, Shepard, and Wrex had been taking point as usual, with Liara and Tali providing biotic and tech support, and Ashley had to admit to herself that she was starting to feel a bit battered after the firefight with the geth, colonists, and now plant zombies.

"Williams," Shepard said, after the Thorian's scream had faded, "protect Tali."

They moved forward, practically wading through a horde of the plant-things and the occasional asari-plant-zombie-that-could-talk. Shepard had said to protect Tali (and to be honest, she'd have
done so anyway - she liked the kid, and a single suit breach could be fatal), so when one of the zombies sliced at her with its claws, she stepped sideways - and into the blow.

She gritted her teeth against the burn of pain across her bicep and used her other hand to pull out her combat knife and jam it into the creature's face, again and again, until it fell, head well and truly mush. She spared a wry thought for hey, got that knife kill finally before more of them were on her. She shot the next one, and the next one.

They were fighting in narrow ledges and corridors and stairs, with no way of retreat until the Thorian was dealt with, and now the creatures were attacking from behind as well. Shepard resorted to having Ashley take up their six, while she and Wrex charged their way forward.

God, the smell. Because Ash definitely needed nausea to go along with the bruises and exhaustion.

Fuck Feros. Fuck Exogeni. Fuck the Thorian. She punctuated each thought with a blast from her shotgun. When the heat sink hit capacity, there was no time to reload, so she just used it as a bludgeon, smashing the creepy little shits with the stock. It felt...wrong. No give of flesh or bone beneath the metal. Just plant material and sludge.

They were all covered in it. Disgusting, vile liquid either from bludgeoning the plant zombies to death or from when they threw up on them. Ash was never eating again, at this point.

The first sign of another of the asari thralls was the distorting air as biotics twisted gravity. The second sign was when Ash felt herself get picked up and flung across the corridor, armour and all. She hit the wall hard, seeing stars when her helmeted head bounced off concrete and slid to the floor, reaching for a shotgun that wasn't there. A hazy, sickly green figure rose above her, glowing blue.

She had time to think huh, not exactly how I would've picked this ending, then the asari-thing stumbled, courtesy of a shotgun blast (Tali, by the shout of “bosh'tet!”), her fingers found her Phalanx, and she pointed and fired. The thrall's hand was blown off mid-way down the forearm by the round, falling to the floor in a mass of kelp-like matter.

C'mon! Garrus will never let me live it down if I keep missing. Some sniper, Williams. She readjusted and fired again, blasting a hole in the thing’s chest, but then a field of dark energy struck the thrall and it was flung right off the edge of the cavern.

Liara T'Soni peered at her. "Sergeant?"

She couldn't help the laughter. "Holy shit. You just fuckin...shoved her off..."

The asari looked concerned, "Are you...alright?"
"Yeah, yeah," she bit down on the cry of pain that wanted to escape, and forced herself to her feet, blinking as her head spun, "Thanks for the assist."

"Good to go, Williams?" asked Shepard, a hint of sympathy in her dark, focused eyes.

"Aye skipper. Let's get this fucker already." She found her shotgun on the other side of the corridor and slotted a new heatsink into place. "I gotta beat Wrex on points."

"You're welcome to try, pyjack."

"I'll show you, you old dinosaur. Youth over old age."

"It's called experience, Williams."

"Williams," Shepard said dryly, "stop antagonising the krogan and let's go."

She tossed the skipper a haphazard salute. "Ma'am, yes, ma'am."

Shepard tilted her head, looking at Shiala. She wasn’t sure she liked the idea of a stranger poking around in her head, but if it turned the nightmare into some kind of message…

"We're letting asari who've popped out of trees and rambled about mind-controlling dreadnoughts into your head, ma'am?" Williams was steady on her feet for someone who was almost definitely concussed, and she was glaring steadily at the asari, hands lingering near her gun.

Unfortunately, the Marine's willingness to shoot Shiala wasn't going to get Shepard the Cipher.

"I'm not very fond of the idea either," she said slowly, "but I need to - understand the vision if it can lead me to the Conduit."

"Might also scramble your brains," Ashley muttered. The Marine was afraid for her, Shepard realised.

"Maybe," she shrugged, with a half-smile and turned back to the asari, gaze sharpening. "Alright."

Shiala stepped closer to her and her eyes were a clear green and very sad. Shepard tried to imagine seeing your own hands do terrible things, unable to stop them. A few months ago, she would have scoffed at the thought of mind control. Now, she tried to regulate her breathing and not flinch away.
Shiala murmured soft things, siari things that Shepard didn’t quite believe but tolerated.

*Mission first.* Before her life, before the lives of the crew, before even the sanctity of her own mind. She imagined it must be easier, with an asari you trusted and loved, but Shepard could feel nothing but vulnerable, against something she didn't understand and couldn't combat.

"Embrace Eternity!"

Her skull began to pound from the inside out, as if it was being forced open, to widen beyond human limits. Information surrounded her, suffocated her, was forced inside her until a shard of her own thoughts feared that Emilia Shepard might cease to be, overwhelmed by everything burning into the circuits of her brain.

*I am Emilia Shepard. I am a Marine, I am a N7, I have served the Alliance since I turned eighteen. I have a mother, a kind stepfather, a brother, I am-

Tvad Amasek is a Lawbringer, and a Lawbringer can have no mercy in his heart lest he blocks out justice. The history of the Prothean Empire is survival - survival against the tempest of their homeworld, survival against each other and survival against the scourge of machines. To fulfill the cosmic imperative, they must preserve the strength of the whole, and this means destroying weakness wherever it appears like the cancer it is.

Tvad knows this, has lived this for two hundred years, across a dozen worlds, many just like this one. He walks the skyways, feeling the pistol bump against his thigh, and above him, rain drops against the city-shield and is deflected.

He will spill blood tonight, for the Empire. He is an instrument of righteousness and his hand will not falter.

*Human. Human, she can feel the tatters of what that means, just brushing her fingers, she has to hold onto - human -

Amiviri is this place. She was born here when the Empire was strong and healthy and the only concerns of a warrior were the imposition of peace and unity. But that was very long ago before the Empire fractured like brittle stone, and a warrior's duty became vengeance.

Once, she had thought she would see the Empire victorious as it always had been. Then death had come for her brothers and sisters in arms, one by one, defeat by defeat. She had held the killing knife to the throats of two of them, held their cooling bodies against her.

And now the enemy is coming for the planet she belongs to. Sometimes, a warrior must stand. Some of her lineage still lives, and so she has sent them with the sanctuary ships, seeking the last worlds of
their people. Her brother had pleaded with her, begged that she come with them, live.

But sometimes, a warrior must stand. A brother must obey the head of his lineage, for all that he had played with her in the shadows of the towers that now burn.

A warrior must stand.

Kiliili’saro has not obeyed. He is the last of their battle kin, and he says he will not leave while she still lives. The densorin have such long, thin faces and not enough eyes, and once she would have been repulsed by him. That was very long ago. Sometimes she finds herself wishing to lay her hand upon his face, read the essence of him, the soul of him.

There is no point to the things he wants. She tells him so. He tells her, gently, sadly, that she is Prothean to the end and to a fault. Sometimes she feels that, after all these years, he can read her without a touch.

It doesn’t matter. The city burns. Her wounds bleed onto the floor of her childhood home. Soon, very soon.

A great black ship hangs above.

I am-

Shepard gasped and choked on the breath. She was lying on the floor, with someone’s arm around her shoulders and their hand on her stomach, holding her up. Her head hurt as if the bones of it had all been cracked and tears burned in her eyes, her chest aching with loss.

A thousand lifetimes had passed. Vengeance, the ghosts murmured, insisted. She understood very suddenly that she would never be able to shrug the Cipher off or ignore the deep imprint it had left. She had experienced the essence of the Protheans that had lived and died here, and the fury of a dead race had seeped into her very bones.

"Skipper?" Williams was looking down on her, whiskey brown eyes sharp with fear, and the grip on her tightened.

"I - fuck," she groaned, grabbing her head and finding only helmet.

:"You fell," Liara explained, kneeling. "Sergeant Williams caught you."

"Thanks," she said, voice rusty.
"I'm sorry if you suffered," said Shiala, sorrowfully, "but it was the only way. The ancestral memories of the Protheans are part of you now."

"What did you see?" asked Liara, eagerness tempered by concern.

"I'm...not sure. Something. It's still...confused." Her head lolled back as she fought against unconsciousness. The back of her helmet met Williams' armour and she realised that their position possibly wasn't...professional. "I need to get up."

Williams helped her to her feet, and when Shepard stumbled, steadied her.

"Let's get you back to the ship," she murmured, and Shepard gave a weak thumb's up, and allowed the younger Marine to drape Shepard's arm across her shoulders for support.

"And what of me?" asked Shiala seriously.

Shepard waved a hand, nearly smacking poor Tali in the face, "If the colonists will have you, go for it...I don't fuckin'...execute people. That's against the UCMJ and shit. I should go."

Ashley hurt. Her head throbbed and her vision swam, and she was pretty sure something was busted in her shoulder or bicep from that creeper smacking her in the arm. But none of that was important - she was on her feet, and she needed to get her Commander back to the ship safely.

Because frankly, she didn't think Shepard was going to be able to do it on her own. She was sagging into Ash's side, close to dead weight. Her bloodshot eyes jumped around, unable to focus.

"What did she do to you?" she worried, adjusting her grip on the officer (despite the slime on both of them). She shot Shiala a venomous, suspicious look.

"Not her fault, not really," Shepard mumbled, taking a woozy step forward. "Protheans, fucking around in my head. Let's just...go."

The climb back up the stairs seemed to take an eternity. Shepard was heavy against her side, silent with the effort of movement. The colonists were clumped together in a dispirited crowd when they emerged, practically radiating guilt.
Arcelia Silva Martinez, the ex-Army soldier, turned corporate rent-a-cop, approached. She'd lost her rifle in the struggle and her face was a riot of bruises. "I'm...so sorry. I was trying to fight it, but every thought of my own was excruciating."

Shepard stared at Martinez woozily. Williams realised that the officer was focusing all her energy on staying conscious and upright, which left Ash in charge by default. Wrex didn't care, Tali and Liara were too shy to take the lead, and she was at least ranking Alliance.

"It's alright," she said through the ringing in her ears. The whole descent into the Thorian's pit was a jumbled mess in her head, hazy. Probably the concussion. "We need to get back to the ship. We can sort everything out in the morning."

"Scientists," Shepard murmured, a reminder.

"..Right." She keyed her comm. "Baynham, Zhu's Hope's secure."

She waved off further self-recrimination and gratitude from the colonists or any more questions, promising tomorrow, tomorrow.

Ash fixed her mind on that one goal: getting to the Normandy without falling over or letting her Commanding Officer fall. She'd never been more grateful to hear Bitchin' Betty say, "Stand by, shore party. Decontamination in progress."

They gingerly stripped out of their corroded and dented hardsuits and Ashley told them all to just shove it in a biohazard bag for now. She had the grim expectation that all the gear the four of them had used during the fight against the Thorian was well and truly ruined. Half the plates looked cracked and when she inspected her knife, the blade looked wrong, patches gone brittle.

She liked that knife.

"How are you feeling?" Shepard asked quietly after they'd staggered past a concerned Pressly.

Ashley contemplated that - the sharp pain in her head, the swollen, lurid red of her bicep on an arm that wouldn't fully extend now, the amount of gear she was going to have to write reports about losing and replace.

"Like I don't get paid enough to get covered in zombie guts."
Shepard half-smiled as Ashley helped her down the stairs. "So, I should try to limit the giant, talking plants?"

"It'd be appreciated. A pay rise would be great too."

"Sure," Shepard said dryly, "I'll get right on the comm to the Commandant."

Chakwas came to meet them, eyeing both of them critically. "Injuries?"

"Prothean bullshit for me," Shepard said, wiping at her face. "Williams hit her head and got struck a few times. Might want to monitor all of us for fume inhalation."

While Chakwas attached neurological monitors to Shepard, the nurse sat Williams down on one of the beds. When Sherazi was finally done with his assessment she was allowed to go grab a shower and then lie down on a bed in the medbay.

Sleep came quickly, warm and dark.

CODEX ENTRY

Human Colonisation:

(Excerpt from ‘A New Atlas: The Evolution of the Systems Alliance’ by Professor Alice Gao)

When Maria Petrovsky became the first Prime Minister of the Systems Alliance in 2160, she became the head of a newborn ‘super-nation,’ still struggling to define itself in the face of a suspicious Citadel Council and a sometimes outright hostile Earth. Petrovsky was a combination of idealism and political ruthlessness; a former Russian Federation diplomat who had ‘jumped ships,’ and she deeply believed a strong Alliance was integral to humanity’s survival on the galactic stage. She was integral, as part of the so-called ‘Blue Conspiracy’ alongside such figures as Admiral Kastanie Drescher and Han Ling, to securing a range of powers for the Alliance, powers that perhaps exceeded what Earth nations had intended to give, by utilising the widespread fear of alien invasion post-First Contact War.

The new Prime Minister was preoccupied with nation-building, ensuring the independence of the Alliance and overcoming what she saw as the greatest threat to its future survival - a lack of extrasolar colonies. The Alliance was at a disadvantage as it attempted to establish itself on the galactic stage, as the human population and industrial base were concentrated on Earth. This was in stark contrast to the other players on the galactic scene, who had had centuries to build up their colonies into economic centres.
Petrovsky was deeply concerned by the idea of being hemmed in between the Hierarchy and the Hegemony, commenting to other members of the newly formed United Conservative Party that the Alliance must ‘expand or die.’

Her solution to the long-term ‘entrapment theory’ was the New Futures Initiative; a second, more aggressive colonisation wave into the theoretically unclaimed space of the Traverse, in particular, the Verge. This included tax breaks for colonisation companies and corporations, ad campaigns encouraging migration, assistance in setting up colonisation drives and charters by prospective colonists and generous funding. The aim was to secure multiple garden and resource-rich planets en masse, rather than waiting for colonies to be well established before moving on.

This fell under one of the first acts of the new government: the Colonisation and Colonial Administration Act. If a world wished for the protection of the Alliance Defence Force, they had to play by its rules, which restricted the establishment of corporate governments and corporate ownership of planets. Some colonists and companies would find these restrictions abhorrent and formed ‘wildcat’ colonies in the outer Traverse and Terminus systems, but Petrovsky was unconcerned.

This effort resulted, in the decade between Petrovsky’s election and 2175, in the establishment of twenty colonies.

The effects of this were numerous. It’s likely that it did ensure the economic success of the Alliance into the future. However, the military was stretched to the breaking point and many colonies were left without adequate defences, as the budget struggled to build orbital defence platforms, anti-ship turrets and shielding for all the planets that required them. While the Army and Colonial Defence Forces did establish units on new colonies, the equipment for these units was often outdated and lacking.

In addition, it deeply angered the batarian Hegemony, which had been exploring and settling the Traverse itself. Batarians and humans require similar liveability conditions, meaning they were competing for the same garden worlds, a finite resource.

In 2171, the Citadel Council decided against the Hegemony in its challenge of the Alliance’s colonization in the Skystllian Verge, and in protest, the Hegemony closed its embassy and withdrew from the Citadel Treaty Organisation. While the Alliance was pleased with the outcome, the decision ensured that these two species, both of which were considered potential threats by sectors of turian and asari government, and who had both fought Council governments, would become increasingly embroiled in a bitter dispute over colonisation. This tension would eventually lead to the bloody Traverse Conflict.

Chapter End Notes
Definitions:

UCMJ: Uniform Code of Justice.
The group clustered in the *Normandy's* comm-slash-briefing room looked ragged around the edges. Alenko had dark shadows under his eyes that told her he'd been battling one of his migraines. Liara had a look that Shepard had seen on the faces of too many young Marines after their first battles, and not for the first time she questioned her decision to bring the archaeologist along - ‘she volunteered’ did little to soothe her conscience. Williams was covered in bruises and unsteady on her feet as if the asari planet clone had slammed her sense of balance right out of her; Shepard had only fetched her from the medbay by promising Chakwas to return her as soon as the briefing was over.

But they'd succeeded in their mission, and no one had died or even been seriously wounded. That was a win, in Shepard's book.

They went over the mission with a fine-toothed comb; what went well, what went wrong. Shepard admitted that she should have taken a larger team, and ordered David secured. Alenko wished he'd had thought about David as well, and posted a guard on him before he attacked Sub-Lieutenant Sherazi, but Shepard did point out to him he'd done a good job getting everyone out of Zhu's Hope with no casualties.

When they'd finished reviewing the mission and Shepard had signed off on the post action report to be sent to both the Alliance and the Citadel, Liara stood up before they could all be dismissed.

"With your permission, Commander, I would like to try something. You have the vision, but it is confused and locked away in your mind, even with the Cipher. I could help you put them together.” T'Soni was frank. “I could join my consciousness to yours. Hopefully, my knowledge of the Protheans can clarify your vision.”

Shepard scratched her chin. Her last experience with an asari fiddling with Prothean gibberish in her head had nearly caused her to pass out - Williams had needed to half carry her back to the ship. But if it meant she could think clearly again, if it meant that the visions cleared into something coherent...

“It’s worth a shot.”

Liara stood in front of her, chin raised slightly in defiance of her own nervousness. Was she really that intimidating? Shepard had done her best to be kind and gentle, but she'd be the first to admit that she didn't interact with civilians very often, didn't understand them, and her way of dealing with green Marines probably wasn't the best way to make Liara feel comfortable.

In the corner of her eye, Williams was leaning forward, brown eyes intent, as if she thought she might have to stop Shepard from falling again. Shepard hoped not; an officer's dignity could only survive being carried around like a fainting Bekenstein socialite so many times.

She focused her gaze on Liara, shoulders tight.

"Relax, Commander," Liara closed her eyes, and when she opened them again, they were deep, deep black, and the room was fading away. "Embrace Eternity!"

-a dozen cities cracked open and burning. Metal claws from the sky, from the stars, ripping whole worlds into pieces.

-
Metal like a disease, metal knitting with flesh, invading it, making it unholy. Screaming that became screeches, metallic and cold. Organic pieces scattered on streets. Help us. HELP US-

-Blood on the soil, the ground cracked open, the tanks melting, figures in black armour melting, melting!

C’mon Sarn’t we’re gonna make it, stay with me, god stay-

Shepard jerked away and found her breathing ragged and harsh. She gritted her teeth and focused on where she was. The cool metal flooring beneath her feet, the feel of the tough material of her fatigue pants when she ran her thumb across the side of her leg, the crick in her neck from waking up wrong. Liara was caught up in her theories being right, and Shepard tried to refocus on the asari’s voice.

Should’ve known that would happen.

She was a little grateful when Williams called, “Alright, get to the point! What did you see?”

"The beacon on Eden Prime must've been badly damaged," Liara said regretfully. "Part of the vision is missing."

"So it was a waste of time," Ashley said sharply, her eyes darting between them, narrowed.

"Not entirely," Shepard admitted, "I can hear myself think now."

Williams' expression gentled.

"If we can find another beacon, I can fill in the gaps-" Liara's hand flew to her forehead, and she grimaced. "I am sorry, Commander. The Joining...the visions...are exhausting."

"Williams, get yourself and Doctor T'Soni to the medbay. You should both rest."

The Staff Sergeant frowned. "But what about helping Zhu's Hope?"

"You have a concussion," Shepard said archly. "I'm sure Lieutenant Alenko can survive one day without his platoon sergeant."

Williams shot Alenko a mock dubious look, and he chuckled.

"Alright," she grumbled, "but if either of you get your fool asses shot off..."

"We'll be sure to give you an opportunity to say 'I told you so,'" Shepard replied dryly. "Now, shoo."

Zhu's Hope stunk, according to the grumbling Marines around Tali, as they trooped back into its perimeter, stepping over the bodies Shepard's team had left behind - the sludge-like plant zombies still sitting under the sun and bloating. Tali was glad for the air filter in her helmet, so she didn't have to smell it. The colonists murmured apologies at any Normandy crewman who came near them and still eyed the ExoGeni staff with suspicion (those Shepard hadn't arrested at least - all of the security personnel and the scientists on the Thorian project excepting Lizbeth Baynham were in the ship's brig). But they'd already elected Arcelia Silva Martinez and Julia Baynham as their new leader and spokesperson, respectively, and were visibly more hopeful, like a blanket of fear and despair had been ripped away.

The Marines, Garrus, and Tali assembled in a loose semi-circle beside the freighter to listen to Lieutenant Alenko.
There was a long list of things to do before the colony was stable, but Wrex hadn’t come with them. The big krogan had remained on the ship, doing something with his guns and ignoring the rest of them. He only really listened to Shepard, and it didn’t seem that convincing him to help was high on her priorities.

"Alright guys," said Kaidan in his calm, soft-spoken way. Every Marine's eyes focused on him. "The Commander wants us to help Zhu's Hope get back on their feet. There's some Marines from the 40th Frontier on their way to take over, but they won't be here until this evening. I've spoken to Ms Martinez about what they need; their biggest issues are that the water system isn't working, the power is down, varren are blocking access to hydroponics, and we have indications that geth are still present in the tunnels.

He looked around at them. "So, I'm splitting us into two teams. Jaz, Nick, Fredricks, Hodgins, Tali, Vakarian, you're with me. We'll clear out the geth, fix the water system and see if we can't retrieve the power cells. The rest of you are on guard duty and fixing the colony up - I want two guards on the brig at all times and the rest of you working on the settlement. Rotate the guards every couple of hours - and no talking to the ExoGeni prisoners. They've already tried to bribe the Chief Masters-At-Arms. We need the remains dealt with before they cause disease. Fai Dan and Ethan Jeong are already bagged, so just move them into the freezer."

"Does it ever freak you out that we store bodies in our freezer?" Jaz asked Nick. "Like, where our food comes from?"

Tali blanched beneath her visor. That didn't seem sanitary! Why didn't they just cremate them quickly, like the Migrant Fleet did?

"Where else we gonna put 'em?" Nick Ki-tae shrugged. "They're in the cases anyway."

"Fuckin' freaky, man. I hate going in there when we've got stiffs."

"Just burn the...zombies, out on the skyway," Kaidan continued. There were groans from several of the Marines put on the colony detail. He ignored them. "Once you've dealt with the bodies, help the colonists with repairs. Ling, you'll be helping Chakwas and Sherazi do a medical examination of all of the survivors. Any questions?"

Ling raised his hand, and Kaidan nodded. "Sir, won't Command want one of the plant...zombie things for study?"

"They do. One has already been bagged for them and taken aboard."

Fredricks raised a hand. Kaidan eyed him. "Yes, PFC?"

"Sir, does that mean we have a zombie in our freezer?"

Alenko's sigh was audible from where Tali was standing. "The remains are being stored in the freezer, yes."

"Shit man," Jaz said, nudging Fredricks, "one minute you'll be getting a snack and next minute -"

"It's dead, Marines," Alenko said, with the tone of the long-suffering.

"Yeah, but sir, that's what they always say," Fredricks said. "Then someone will be alone getting a juice from the freezer and then BAM!" He hit his palm with a fist for emphasis, ceramic clacking. "Their brain gets eaten!"
"Why would they eat your brain?" Tali asked, thoroughly confused. The 'plant zombies' as Williams had dubbed them had simply tried to claw them all to death the day before.

"Because," Jaz said patiently, as if to a child, "that's what zombies do!"

Kaidan held up a hand. "That's enough. Does anyone have a question that isn't stupid?"

Silence.

"Alright, let's get moving."

Tali followed Kaidan as they left the colony, the Marines that were coming with them forming a column. Lance Corporal Jaz Teke took point with his light machine-gun, still occasionally muttering to himself about zombies.

"There's still geth down here, so everyone stay on their toes," Alenko said crisply. "Tali, stay close to me."

"S'all good, sir," Hodgins said idly, from where he stood at Teke's shoulder, sweeping his LMG to cover another doorway. "You got our backs with your space magic, yeah?"

"That's not an excuse to be sloppy," Kaidan said sharply.

"Yeah, Hodgins, aren't you supposed to be a hotshot at this shit?"

"Fuck off Jaz."

"No, fuck you!"

"Focus!" Alenko said, voice like a slap.

"Aye sir, sorry sir."

"Contact!" A flash of movement ahead, and Jaz dove to his stomach, opening fire with his LMG. The shots were painfully loud in the tight confines of the tunnel, making Tali's ears ring, especially once Hodgins also started firing his LMG. She turned her auditory emulators down, fumbling for an ECM grenade before she switched on an Overload program and flung it at the nearest geth - one of the big Destroyers already bearing down on them.

Its shields flickered and died under the burst of electricity, and a second later the Destroyer fell, entire torso riddled with bullets as Jaz and Nick both focused their fire on it.

She threw another disk grenade, focusing on bringing down the geth's shields while the Marines followed up with gunfire - and a lot of it. Alenko barely fired his own rifle, focusing on directing his Marines and occasionally flinging one of the geth platforms into the air with his biotics, where it would be smashed to bits by the others.

Then the gunfire faded, and the geth were more or less piles of scrap metal.

Hodgins laughed, picking himself up from where he'd been lying half behind a support column, and folded the LMG's bipod back up along its barrel. "Fuck yeah. That's what I call superior firepower."

"Casrep," Alenko ordered. When no one spoke up, Tali saw him smile behind his visor. "Load a new heatsink and let's keep moving."

"Sir, you're worse than my mother," Jaz muttered, pulling the lever on his machine-gun to eject a
glowing, cherry-red heatsink. "You gonna remind me to replace my shield batteries too?"

Nick chuckled, "Right, because it's not like you got your ass literally shot in our pre-deployment sims."

"Why are we friends again?"

"A mystery for the ages, like how Fredricks even got into the 103rd in the first place."

"Stop picking on Fredricks, Nick," Hodgins called, "it's not his fault he's a fuck-up!"

"Control your urges to make pithy comments for five minutes and find me the water system valves," Alenko said mildly.

"Looks like one here, sir, looks busted though," Jaz reported.

"Tali?"

"On it!" She brought up her omnitool and came over to where Jaz was standing. She turned to the valve controls and began scanning it. She found his presence - armed, alert, staring out into the tunnels so she couldn't be snuck up on - reassuring. She'd initially found the Marines intimidating. They were loud, insular, often crass. They'd often been dubious of her combat skills.

Now though...

She was going to miss them when it was time to go home.

Tali flash-fabricated a new circuit board, carefully pried out the old one (which had a ragged split right down the centre, as if hurriedly struck with a fist) and slotted the board into place. A silver-grey holo window popped up, prompting for a password. She entered the numbers Arcelia had given them and hit the button to end maintenance procedures and re-open the valve.

Below, she heard the rush of incoming water, flooding into the pipes with a victorious roar.

Shepard entered the comm room and faced the FTL transmitter, pulling her uniform straight idly. Her thoughts felt like they were sloshing around her too small skull, pressing at the seams of her mind. At least melding with Liara seemed to have quietened the constant screeching of the Cipher and the beacon visions, though she wasn’t sure if she should broach the topic of what else Liara had seen.

It wasn’t the young asari’s fault. It was Shepard’s own brain that had decided to mix up and blend the nightmares. But she’d never wanted anyone else to hear the screams that still sometimes rattled through her.

Feel the deep leaden weight of failure, as a Marine and an officer she carried with her wherever she went.

Shepard shook herself. The lives the Cipher had deposited into her skull were as familiar as something you’d only half-forgotten, but the important part was that they were a step closer to this ‘Conduit’ that Saren was so obsessed with.

“Comms Tech Lam. I need a long range FTL link to the SSV Vancouver. For the attention of Commodore Hannah Shepard, Flotilla Commander. Priority 2.”
Best not to clog up the Priority 1 channels for emergencies, but it was still urgent. Knowing her mother, a low priority message would be ignored as a personal call.

“Connecting now, ma’am.”

There was a buzz as the FTL communicator reached for the nearest comm buoy, the screen blinking [CONNECTING] at her. A few moments later, it resolved into the dim steel interior of the Vancouver’s flag CIC and a woman in naval fatigues. Black curls shot through with grey, steady brown eyes - like an old sea captain’s, she’d heard it put before. A single star glinting on each shoulder. A bloom of warm affection spread beneath Emilia’s ribs.

“Commander, 50th Scout Flotilla speaking - “ Hannah Shepard broke off, a small smile spreading across her stern face as mother and daughter looked at each other for the first time in months.

“Ma’am,” Shepard Junior said smartly.

“I don’t have time for a personal call,” Hannah said with a hint of genuine apology in her voice. “I’m on the clock.”

A commodore always was, but Shepard simply nodded. “I understand. So am I. This is work related.”

Hannah raised a single eyebrow, “Oh?”

“I’m currently on the colony of Feros. I’ve driven the geth off from the main settlement, but I’m concerned that there might still be geth forces present on the planet. In addition, I’ve discovered evidence ExoGeni was violating several laws in regards to the colonies and their head rep on the planet tried to have them purged-”

Hannah held up a hand and her daughter stopped.

“Purged? As in ‘kill them all’?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“What did you do with this rep?”

“I killed him,” she said bluntly.

Commodore Shepard blinked., “Frontier justice, Junior?”

“Self-defence,” she said mildly.

“Of course,” Hannah said dryly. A flicker of something like amusement crossed her face.

“Continue.”

“So geth, ExoGeni being genocidal,” she ticked Zhu’s Hope’s problems off on her fingers. “They’ve also got some problems with essential infrastructure. I’ve detailed Marines to fix their power and water needs, but their hydroponics systems have been damaged, and I don’t have the expertise or parts to fix it.”

Hannah nodded, eyes sharp. “And what do you want from me, Commander? That’s why you called me, yes?”

Emilia smiled, just a little. “Your flotilla is the closest, ma’am. I was hoping you’d be able to run some patrols past Feros so a shipping company will feel secure enough to fly in the supplies they
need. I also request that one of your scout frigates do a full scan of the planet for geth remnants and bump it up to the local QRF if there are so that a task force can be dispatched.”

“That’s a lot of assets for, what, three hundred people?” Shepard Senior pointed out. “Why not just evacuate?”

Commander Shepard took a breath. Her mother loved her as much as she despised nepotism. She would have to be convinced with cold rationality, like any other officer. “Beyond any duty to the colonists here on Feros, I can’t evacuate that many people with the Normandy, meaning we’d need to dedicate a lot of assets anyway. In addition, the Attican Beta is a strategic choke-point - against the batarians and geth both. A foothold here only benefits us.”

Hannah said nothing for a long moment before she sighed and lifted her eyes to Emilia’s. “Alright, I’ll have the Kokoda do a sweep and see if I can establish some patrols or a picket in the cluster. Do you need a garrison?”

“Negative, ma’am,” Shepard replied, hiding her relief, “General Lou of the 40th Frontier has already agreed to garrison Feros with a full platoon.”

“ExoGeni is going to scream bloody murder about the military violating their rights,” Hannah mused.

“They’ll scream louder once the BCI get rolling,” Shepard said grimly.

“That’ll be a pleasure to watch. Anything else?”

“Nothing further, ma’am.”

“Very well. And...Emilia?” Hannah’s face gentled, the mother shining through the Commodore. “Congratulations on the promotion; I’m proud of you. Look after yourself out there.”

Emilia ducked her head, smiling. “Thanks...mum. Congratulations to you as well, on the star. I’ll do my best. Normandy out.”

Best to close the connection before they both got too emotional and ruined Commodore Shepard’s hardass reputation in front of her flag staff.

She had just brought up her omnitool to look at her to do list when the 1MC hummed with Pressly’s voice: “Ma’am, XO. Scanners have picked up something; a ship just dropped out of FTL in system.”

Shepard shut down the window she’d just brought up and wheeled towards the door. “Any ID on her?”

“Looks like an armed merchantman, Commander. MSV Anaconda. Registered to ExoGeni.”

“Fucking ExoGeni,” she hissed venomously, brushing past the Marine guards and onto the bridge. “Helm, get us in the air and put us on an intercept course.”

“You’re not fucking with this colony anymore. Not if I have to blow you out of the fuckin’ sky.

The bridge of the armed merchantman Anaconda was grim and silent. Captain Daniel Reilly had to force himself to remain outwardly calm and in his chair, rather than pacing the tiny bridge. Geth! The attack on Eden Prime had transfixed the entire Alliance, and now so did the nightly reports on the fighting as Hackett launched the first probing strikes of his offensive - accompanied by the morbid
counter of how many had been killed that day. Reilly had stopped watching the news and relied on the Company’s own analysis of danger zones after the first special in which reporters solemnly showed footage of caskets arriving home.

Likely to give yourself a meltdown with that sort of exploitative showcasing of grief.

It was all enough that Reilly was glad he’d been a company man his entire space-faring career. Friends of his who’d gotten into the business via the Merchant Marine Academy and the Reserves had been called up by a Navy hungry for personnel and materiel in their dozens.

No, sleek and beautiful as the naval ships were with their massive guns, Reilly had no intentions of dying for half his current salary. Plenty of dumb patriotic types to do that for him.

“Skipper,” his pilot, Serena Ippolito (only recently poached from one of the space liner corps) spoke up, “looks like that Navy frigate Mr Jeong mentioned is still hanging around. She’s coming out of orbit.”

At the mention of Jeong, Reilly grimaced. Nasty business, the orders he’d relayed from the ExoGeni higher-ups. Nasty indeed. But necessary. The Thorian needed to be preserved, and the company protected - the geth were a cover story served up on a silver plate. The assayers the Anaconda was carrying would make sure everything was in order.

The Navy would likely just blow the thing up. Soldiers only seemed to have one use for aliens - target practice.

“Huh.”

He was pulled out of his thoughts by Ippolito’s curious utterance. He shot her a questioning look.

“It’s just, skipper, well this frigate doesn’t fit the signature of a Hastings frigate.”

A sliver of anxiety crawled up into his throat. “It’s definitely Alliance?”

“Her IFF and codes say so,” Ippolito confirmed. “She doesn’t look anything like the geth signatures we downloaded before we left port, Captain.”

“Weapons are manned anyway, boss,” his first mate, Marcus, was more confident than he had right to be. The Anaconda had chased off a few pirates - corvettes and jury-rigged raiders looking for easy prey - but a real warship would rip through her civilian shielding and vulnerable hull with contemptuous ease.

"Alright," Daniel said, "keep us on course."

Ippolito kept the Anaconda steady, eating up the thousands of kilometres between the outer system and Feros. The warship was just as quickly coming towards them, and Reilly watched her blinking light on the plot - and the signature the ladar system had put together. His pilot was right - she didn't look like a Hastings.

Running the routes Reilly and the Anaconda did, he'd seen a fair few Alliance warships in his time. Mostly frigates and light cruisers, on solo patrols, far from civilisation, but if he was lucky, sometimes they’d be part of a convoy accompanied by a division of destroyers. That only happened in the red sectors though, where piracy was rife. Feros was a backwater, with little to attract traffic and less to attract pirates.
If this frigate wasn't a *Hastings*, it had to be one of the new frigate class, the type the Alliance was all hush-hush about. His cousin worked for the Bureau of Ships, and he'd refused to talk about it, even when Reilly had plied him with his favourite beer. Last Daniel had heard though, the new prototype had just been launched.

What had brought a prototype frigate to Feros? He had some respect for the crew of that ship - if that was what this ship was. He wouldn't want to be the one taking a prototype, full of bugs and kinks that needed working out, into a fight with the geth.

"We're being hailed," Ippolito observed.

"*Anaconda, this is Systems Alliance warship Normandy.*" Whoever was on the frigate's comm sounded like she had a stick up her ass. "*Break off your approach. This is now a restricted space zone, over.*"

Reilly exchanged incredulous looks with Marcus. Restricted space? This colony was under corporate charter for the foreseeable future. He shook his head and keyed the comm. Navy types. Always had to act like hardasses.

"*Normandy, Anaconda. With all due respect, Feros is an ExoGeni colony, and this is an ExoGeni ship. We have a right to land, and our assayers need to assess the damage, over.*"

"*Anaconda, Normandy. Under the Emergency Act, Feros is currently under martial law, due to the geth presence and the inability of ExoGeni to co-operate. Break off your approach, over.*"

"Inability to-" Daniel scowled and hit the radio again. Fucking thugs thinking they could just tramp all over the Company's property. "*Normandy, Anaconda. ExoGeni is going to have to insist that we be permitted access to our property, over.*"

"*Anaconda, Normandy. I'm not fond of repeating myself. I have given you a lawful direction twice. You will heave to, or I will be forced to fire upon you. Over.*"

Daniel Reilly glared at that little blinking light with feeling. Picking a fight with the Navy wasn’t an option. "Do it, Serena."

The *Anaconda* slowed and came to a stop, drifting in the void. Reilly crossed his arms and looked at Marcus. "Send a message to the bosses. Let them know the Navy is up our asses about this. Maybe they can squeeze the admirals to call this bitch off."

"Got it, boss."

"And someone get me a cup of joe," he said irritably.

Some ten minutes later, as the *Normandy* circled closer, like a lazy shark in no hurry to eat its lunch, another man entered the *Anaconda*'s tight bridge. Daniel wasn't usually fond of having his passengers on the bridge - got too crowded and dirt thumpers got in the way of operating his ship - but he thought he might make an exception this time.

John Hyung gave him the creeps, to be honest. The lead assayer had worked for the Company as long as Reilly had, if in a very different role, and he had flat, colourless eyes. Dead eyes. Sometimes Daniel wondered that if to do all that dirty work you had to slice off a bit of your soul each time.

"What's the holdup, Captain?" At least Hyung was always polite and respected Reilly's expertise.

Daniel pointed out the flicker of the frigate. "Navy's being a pain in the ass, Mr Hyung. They're
refusing to allow us to land."

Hyung extended an elegant hand toward the comm, but stopped short of touching it. "May I?"

"Be my guest," Reilly mumbled. One of the new kids still learning the ropes came back with a steaming cup of black coffee and he wrapped blunt fingers around it, ignoring the burn.

Hyung opened the channel. "Normandy, Anaconda. I need to speak to Mr Ethan Jeong, the head of the colony on Feros, over."

A pause, and when Normandy spoke, there was a distinct hint of cool amusement. "Anaconda, Normandy. I'm afraid that's not possible. Ethan Jeong is dead, over."

Reilly rocked back in his chair at that, nearly spilling his joe.

"Normandy, Anaconda. We were led to believe Mr Jeong survived the geth attack, over," Hyung continued smoothly.

"Anaconda, Normandy. That he did. He didn't, however, survive pointing guns at Alliance personnel. Maybe you should add that to your next corporate training day - 'Don't threaten Marines.' It'll go nicely with 'don't use civilians as test subjects when fucking around with a giant, sentient plant and then try to have them all killed to cover it up.' Over."

"Shit," said Hyung.

CODEX ENTRY

X4-3 Weapons Module:

The X4-3 Weapons Module is a system manufactured by Kwon Shipbuilding for the Athabasca line of freighters. The modular design of the Athabasca freighter men's different capabilities can be installed - tanks for transporting liquids, cargo holds, labs, survey equipment, and even weapons.

The X4-3 Module consists of six forty metre mass accelerator turrets, a magazine for ammunition and, as civilian ships lack a warship's systems and advanced VI, a dedicated fire control system. Due to power draw and the size of the module, the X4-3 can't be fitted to a Kowloon class freighter, the Athabasca's smaller cousin. The module is generally only installed by wealthier companies operating in the Traverse and other unstable regions, due to not only expense of the module itself and ammunition, but also due to tight regulations of ship armaments in Citadel space, the need for sailors experienced in the use of fire control systems, and the loss of cargo space.

The Alliance government permits ships traveling through so-called orange or red sectors to carry small arms and shipboard weapons for self-defence, though the design of civilian ships limits those to modules such as the X4-3 and the occasional GARDIAN defensive cluster.

Chapter End Notes

Definitions:
BCI: Bureau of Colonial Investigations. The law enforcement branch of the Department of Colonial Affairs.
"ExoGeni is very upset by your behaviour on Feros," Udina said sharply over the FTL communicator, expression flickering in orange. "Threatening to blow up their ship, killing Ethan Jeong..."

"I followed Alliance protocol in both of those incidents," Shepard's voice was mild. She stood with her shoulders square, but that was simply instinct at this point, and her arms were crossed. If Udina were military, he would understand the insult that she wasn't standing at ease, but the man was ignorant on the minutiae of the military and didn't care so long as he got what he wanted out of people like Shepard.

"Do you understand what it would do to the Alliance colonisation drives if ExoGeni pulls their support?" Udina's voice was harsh.

"Pulls their support?" Shepard's eyebrow shot up. "They're looking at an inquiry."

"The outcome is the same," he snapped. "We lose traction and funding in the Traverse. ExoGeni doesn't just fund Feros, but three other early stage colonies."

"They were experimenting on their colonists," Shepard said flatly, "I don't think the Alliance should trust them with those colonies. If they didn't want consequences, they shouldn't have committed the crime."

"Damn it, Shepard." Udina pinched his nose between his thumb and forefinger. "Take the prisoners and evidence to Czarnobog Station. BCI and NCIS agents will be waiting; they'll figure out which individuals are responsible for the mess on Feros. Do you understand, Commander?"

Oh, she understood. The whole thing would be pinned on a handful of individuals - on Jeong perhaps, who could no longer defend himself - and ExoGeni's management would wring their hands and act very contrite all the while believing themselves exempt for the law.

At least Feros was safe. She'd carefully inflamed the righteous fury of the young lieutenant who'd taken over, and so long as he was there, his integrity and anger meant ExoGeni couldn't land on the planet.

"Yes, Ambassador. I'll set a course ASAP."

Udina nodded curtly and logged out. Shepard stared at the screen for a few long seconds, before she walked out into the CIC. She stopped to give the order to Pressly before walking over to SvM3 Marianne Baumer's station, one of the ship's intelligence analysts. Baumer was very intelligent, but she was young and tended to be overawed in her commander's presence.

She was less likely to ask questions of Shepard than Leading Intelligence Analyst Kokinos.

"Baumer, do you have the file on Feros? I need to check a few details before we reach Czarnobog."

"Yes, ma'am. I'll just put it on a secure datapad for you...there."

She took the datapad straight to her cabin and connected it to her laptop. Shepard took a moment to
fully consider what she was about to do; Alliance officer and Spectre wrestling with each other inside her skull.

_I can't let this be buried._ Udina would say this was how the game was played; ExoGeni needed the Alliance and the Alliance relied on ExoGeni for a part of its colonisation efforts, and that was worth sweeping a few 'indiscretions' under the rug. The public got a few scientists to chew up, ExoGeni got a rap on the knuckles, the politicians kept their campaign donations, and the Alliance kept its early stage colonies funded without tax money.

If the price of the game was innocent lives, then the game was wrong.

Shepard made two copies of the Feros files. One went onto a secure OSD. The other was loaded into a secure communications 'cloud' used by the investigative unit at Future Content Corporation.

_Att: Emily Wong_

_This one's a big one._

_-E. S_

She paused a moment, then hit send.

Four days after the Thorian's destruction and three days after handing the colony's protection over to a butterbar from the 40th Marine Division (Frontier), the Normandy eased into dock at Czarnobog Fleet Depot, a boxy grey space station that was home to the Seventh Fleet.

Staff Sergeant Ashley Williams waited on the CIC deck at ease, hands clasped behind her back and feet apart. She and Alenko had been ordered to the bridge, but Pressly had told them to wait, and so they did, like two statues in Marine fatigues side-by-side. She liked being around Alenko - she’d call him a damned fine officer on duty and a friend off.

Truth be told, it was kind of interesting to see the Navy bridge team working. She spent most of their transits on the crew deck. They were like clockwork or a finely oiled mechanism, rolling along with barely a hitch. Shepard, up on the captain's podium, barely had to orchestrate.

It was very different to the profanity-laced world of the Marine.

"Welcome to Czarnobog Fleet Depot," Joker said over his line to the bridge, "also known as the station where even the apocalypse would be behind schedule. You may think we got normal priority docking clearance, but that was, in fact, 'expedited.'"

Williams, who had spent a very boring rotation as part of the Marine garrison on ‘the Bog’, had to agree. Her only real job had been getting her Marines out of lock up every weekend, like clockwork. Turned out that when you stuck an infantry unit on a place as thoroughly boring and bureaucratic as Czarnobog, they would create their own entertainment.

There was a distant thump as the docking apparatus locked into place.

"Docking tube secured, ma'am," reported Pressly.

"Very good," Shepard said crisply, stepping off the podium. "You have the deck, XO."

"Aye, ma'am."
"Williams, Alenko, with me." Shepard was looking at her omnitool, frowning slightly, when they fell into step with her. "You both got your sidearms?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Good." Shepard grimaced. "Hackett wants me to have a protective detail from now on. So you two are it for today."

"Makes sense, with the whole assassination attempt," Kaidan said reasonably.

Shepard shot him a look. "That's what the Admiral said."

He just smiled.

They walked into the airlock, waiting with weary resignation for the ship VI to finish its decontamination procedures. Ashley double checked her weapons were secure and in some cases hidden - her M5 on her hip, the smaller concealed pistol in an ankle holster, the knife in her boot and the knife at the back of her belt, under her uniform jacket.

When she finished, Alenko was staring at her. She shot him a quizzical look: "What?"

"...you know we're not assaulting Czarnobog, right?"

"I like to be prepared," she said defensively.

Shepard grinned. "Every woman should have a knife. Or three, in Williams' case."

Ash rolled her eyes. "First you ask me to bodyguard you for the day, then you mock my weapons..."

"I prefer 'affectionately tease,'" Shepard replied as the outer airlock door cycled open, turning to say over her shoulder, with that half-smile tugging at the corner of her mouth. "I like a woman who's well-prepared."

Ash couldn't help the small smile that rose on her lips.

A veritable crowd was waiting for them and the smile turned into a grimace. At least there were no reporters - no one from Westerlund News was getting on a 'Bog dock without forms signed in triplicate. Looked like predominately squids - and suits from NCIS and BCI. Great.

"Follow my lead, and we'll get through," Shepard said as seriously as if they were about to charge some geth.

About five steps later they were accosted by the NCIS and BCI agents, who paused their quiet bristling at each other in order to flash their badges. "Commander Shepard. The ExoGeni prisoners - "

"Are aboard," Shepard interrupted smoothly. "My executive officer, Commander Pressly, can facilitate the transfer, along with the physical evidence."

The NCIS agent, a stout man whose badge read Donnelly, stared intently at Ashley's name tape. So intently, she had the absurd urge to cover it with her hand. "We'll need to talk to Staff Sergeant Williams."

Shepard gave him one of her looks - raised eyebrow, mouth slightly curled. "I'm afraid that's not possible, Agent Donnelly. Sergeant Williams is part of my protective detail today and we will be departing as soon as the exchange and refuelling are complete."
"She's a witness-"

"To Ethan Jeong's death, yes," Shepard smiled without humour. "You have the written statements?"

"Yes, but-"

"That will have to do," she said severely as if inconvenienced. "If you'll excuse me, I have mission vital tasks to complete before we sail."

Ashley followed in Shepard's wake, hiding her smirk until they were free of the crowd.

"What exactly are we doing, Commander?" asked Kaidan quizzically.

"We've got some presents from R&D waiting, replacements for the gear we lost and some new toys," Shepard replied, smacking the button to the elevator down from the docks and into the heart of the station.

"Couldn't I have picked that up as armoury chief?" asked Ashley innocently.

"...yes."

Ashley smirked, stepping into the elevator. "You just wanted to get off the ship and away from the suits."

"I can neither confirm nor deny that, Staff Sergeant," Shepard said lightly. It was good, to see her smiling, loosening up. Forgetting to keep up the stoic vid hero exterior.

"Well, if we're wasting time, I know a great burger place we could grab a bite at," Ashley said, leaning against the wall of the rattling elevator.

"Mission vital burgers," Kaidan agreed solemnly.

"Real beef, sometimes," Ash added.

"Definitely mission vital. My morale is mission vital, right?"

"Sure, ma'am," Kaidan agreed, "can't have our CO going on strike."

Ashley followed Shepard down one of the grey corridors, past the hull number etched on the otherwise blank wall. She'd hated it here, watching the Seventh Fleet Marine Force guys drink it up and telling war stories before they trooped back onto their cruisers and frigates and carriers, and she remained behind. Her CO at the time had told her that this was the closest she'd ever get to fleet service and to be glad they even let her on the ‘Bog.

You were wrong, motherfucker.

The station armoury was on the Marine base within the Fleet Depot, and Ashley remained close to Shepard's side as they walked through, telling herself that she was scanning the crowd for potential threats to her commander, not for people she'd known when she was stationed here. She had nothing to say to any of them. At least on Eden Prime her platoon had respected her as their sergeant. The unit here had picked on the company commander's apathy towards her and acted accordingly.

"You alright?" Kaidan asked, a furrow between his eyebrows.

"Yessir, just..."
"Flashbacks to garrison duty?" asked Shepard sympathetically.

"Something like that, ma'am."

They showed their ID chits to the armoury guards, anonymous behind their polarised visors and passed inside.

Shit. The tall, broad man behind the counter was very familiar. Gunnery Sergeant Kyle Dalaet had been her platoon sergeant aboard the 'Bog and he'd seemed to take particular joy in ignoring his duty to back up his squad leader in front of the enlisted Marines. Her jaw clenched hard.

"I have a pickup, for the SSV Normandy," Commander Shepard said, handing over a datapad.

Dalaet scanned it with a certain bored laziness to every movement, not even looking up. "Bay 34, ma'am. Here's your equipment manifest, I just need your armoury sergeant to sign for it."

Ashley extended a hand and his eyes jerked to her face, blinking in surprise.

"Fuckin' hell, Williams," his voice was ugly with nasty amusement, "who the fuck let you on a frigate?"

"I did," Shepard crossed her arms - drawing attention to the blood stripe down her right arm, and the bars on her shoulders. "Is there a problem with that, Gunnery Sergeant?"

Dalaet's sneer didn't quite fade, but he had the sense not to push his luck with a senior officer and an N7 at that. "No ma'am. The Staff Sergeant and I are just...ol' buddies, ma'am."

Ashley snatched the datapad from his hands and quickly signed with one implanted fingertip, before handing it back, expressionless.

"Need directions?" He smirked.

"I think I remember," she said flatly, turned on her heel and led the two officers deeper into the armoury. Her previous good mood evaporated like dew under a hot sun. Of arseholism.

There were three boxes waiting for them, nondescript, with [PROPERTY OF THE SYSTEMS ALLIANCE MARINE CORPS] stenciled on their sides and an anti-grav trolley that they could all be loaded on and easily pulled along.

"You check the manifest, Kaidan and I will load them," Shepard said easily, unbuttoning her uniform jacket. There was a pistol tight to her side, and a 'clip on' shield generator on her belt.

Ashley stared at her until she raised an eyebrow in question. "My...superior officers...are going to do manual labour? While I check a list? My world is upside down, ma'am."

Shepard shrugged, uniform shirt pulling across her shoulders and biceps. "Maybe I have a sudden nostalgia for life as a Lance Corporal. Stacking boxes, painting rocks..."

"What, no push-ups?" Ash scanned her ID into the lock of the first crate and the lid popped open. "I got smoked a lot as a Lance."

"Why am I not surprised?" Kaidan mused, and she shot him a wounded look.

The box was full of rifles empty of their ammo blocks, but she narrowed her eyes at them. "These aren't M7s."
“Nope,” Shepard said, popping the word, before she pulled one of the rifles free of its rack, turning the deadly-looking black weapon over in her hands. "Say hello to the M9 Valkyrie assault rifle, courtesy of Hahne Kedar Shadow Works and Army Research, Development and Engineering Command. Much more stopping power, select fire - auto, single shot, two round burst, fairly accurate on the single and burst modes according to the tests."

She handed the rifle to Ashley, who weighed it in her hands. "Bit heavier."

Shepard nodded. "Clip size is about half, too. Anyway, you know they've been trying to replace the Lancer for a while - this is one of the competitors and I've heard good things from some of my N7 buddies. So I managed to talk some friends into sending us some to field test. They've passed quality testing, so I was thinking we test 'em out, see whether we like 'em."

Ashley grinned, holding the rifle in a firing position, muzzle pointed at the floor, to test the ergonomics. "...We're weapons testers now? Awesome."

"Means paperwork," Shepard warned as Ashley passed the Valkyrie off to Kaidan so he could feel, "but yeah. I got some mod kits and the maintenance manuals thrown in too, so you can tweak yours if you want. I always want dual sights on mine, can't understand why they always give us rifles with shitty as fuck iron sights..."

Ashley counted off the rifles and marked them on the manifest before moving onto the next crate. "Replacement hardsuits...Four."

"We have the shield capacitor replacement kits?" Shepard asked. "They've really sped up rolling out the next gen capacitors."

"Yeah, wish we'd had them on Eden Prime," Ashley said softly.

A long stretch of silence passed between them, filled with the shadows of Eden Prime's dead, before she cleared her throat. "Let's get these checked off and back to the ship, and we can go grab that morale-boosting burger..."

Liara startled at the knock on the door. She was fond of the little lab she'd been assigned aboard the Normandy. It was quiet, out of the way. She could focus on her research without interruption, unlike the other parts of the ship which were always full of people coming and going.

She saw some irony in the fact that it was an asari, someone supposed to be more communal than humans, who found herself in one of the few places that were truly private aboard the Normandy. Who needed that privacy.

"Come in."

She was expecting Doctor Chakwas, who was kindly insistent on dragging her out on a regular basis for food and tea, but it was Commander Shepard in the doorway, light glinting off the star pinned to the pocket of her uniform jacket.

"Do you have a moment?" Shepard's body language was painfully stiff. Liara was suddenly and horribly certain she'd done something to upset her.

"Of course," she said, looking down at her hands.
Shepard sat down on one of the chairs, crossing her feet at the ankles. "I wanted to let you know that the investigation into Saren's financial holdings has come up with a corporation your mother also has significant shares in."

"Oh."

Shepard's expression gentled. "Do you know anything about Binary Helix?"

Liara shook her head. "I'm sorry. I wasn't involved in any of my mother's business dealings. What I know about Binary Helix is likely less than you do - a corporation that works in genetic modification and biotechnology."

"I thought so, but it was worth asking." There was a pause as if Shepard was unsure of what to say. "I should apologise."

"For what, Commander?" Liara asked.

Shepard grimaced. "My mind mixed up some of my own, less pleasant memories with the beacon images. I'm sorry you had to experience that."

The memories had been fractured, confused, but the flashes Liara had seen had been full of death, and she'd felt Shepard's bone-deep grief and the stab of dread burrowing into her insides. She shivered despite herself. The last image had been Shepard kneeling in the sand and dust, arm and shoulder burning and bubbling, a dead weight across her shoulders, a shuttle in Alliance blue hovering above and a howl locked behind clenched teeth.

"That was Akuze, wasn't it?"

Shepard looked at her, eyes flat and emotionless.

Liara hurried to explain herself. "I'm sorry, I looked you up on the extranet - I wanted to know what kind of person I was working for when I first came aboard." I wanted to know you. "There were many mentions of Elysium - and Akuze."

Shepard sighed, suddenly looking tired. "It's alright, Liara. My history is well known, at least in the Alliance military and the colonies. Not so much on Earth but most of Earth tends to pay attention only to itself."

Liara didn't quite understand that - or the mild, half-amused, half-bitter tone Shepard used. There was some political distance between the Systems Alliance and humanity's homeworld that was, well, alien to her. Thessia was part of the Republics and her people took part in the Grand Forum as they did in their local ecclesia. The Primarch of Palaven was part of the Hierarchy Assembly. But in many ways, Earth was not part of the Systems Alliance.

"I should have asked you," she murmured, looking at her hands.

"It's okay," Shepard repeated. "It's not your fault. Just...I would ask that you not share anything you saw besides the beacon, with the crew."

"Of course, Commander."

"I'd also like you and Tali to train a bit with Sergeant Williams. I know your biotics and martial arts skills are excellent, but she can teach you our tactics, our comms protocols, our hand signals, how to use some of our weapons," Shepard said. "That is if you still wish to come on my field missions."
Liara lifted her chin resolutely. She wasn't even quite sure why it was so important to her - a desire to fix her mother's mistakes, maybe, or the chance to see Shepard's incredible ability to interface with Prothean technology and keep her mind, but it was. "Yes. I don't believe Sergeant Williams likes me, however."

Shepard smiled, a little wryly. "Perhaps not. But she'll teach you - and teach you well - because I asked her too."

Sergeant Williams had her moments of brusque kindness, but she was often crass, unsophisticated and straightforward to the point of rudeness. Liara opened her mouth, and then Shepard's expression turned earnest. Her eyes were a deep, deep brown, dark enough that she'd thought at first that they were black, with flecks of a lighter hue around the pupil.

"Give her a chance." The entreaty was confident. "I think you two might surprise each other."

After a moment Liara sighed. "Very well, Commander."

"Thank you." Shepard was pleased. "I have to get back to my duties, but I was hoping you might join myself and the others for dinner tonight. We've loaded new supplies from Czarnobog, so it should be a good one."

Liara usually ate in her lab, or with Doctor Chakwas, but it was difficult to say no, with Shepard's dark eyes meeting hers. After a moment she nodded.

“I would remind you, Commander,” Chakwas said very gravely, “that bribery is unfitting of an officer and a gentlewoman.”

Shepard gave her a winsome smile, and after a moment the doctor sighed and took the bottle of Serrice Ice Brandy from her hands, tucking it under one arm.

“I warn you, if any of the Marines - or our aliens for that matter! - get hurt, my revenge will be swift and great.”

“I would expect nothing less, Doctor.”

"One day," Chakwas said to herself as the Commander made her escape from the medbay with her CMO successfully bribed, "Marines will find a method of entertainment that isn't punching each other."

"Of course," said Sub-Lieutenant Sherazi from his desk, "and Elanos Haliat will call us up to say he's very sorry for the Blitz and he's a social worker now."

Whatever Chakwas was going to say in response was cut off by the 1MC ordering all Marines not on CIC guard duty to report to the vehicle bay, and requesting the presence of Liara T'Soni, Garrus Vakarian, and Tali'Zorah. Chakwas shook her head. Commander Shepard worked fast.

Shepard smiled pleasantly at the collected ground team. Some of them looked a bit worried at her expression. The crates and knick-knacks that were often stacked or scattered around the Kennel had been pushed to the sides (Lieutenant Tucks was going to cry when he realised that his system of colour coding and alphabetsising had been thoroughly destroyed) by Williams and Fredricks, both of whom might be the two people more excited about this than she was. She was currently standing on the sparring mats she'd had dragged in here and a tarp had been put over the armoury. Didn't want to
get any blood on their brand new toys.

Maybe that was the reason for the worried faces.

Ah well. The Marines at least would cheer up soon.

A fair few of the sailors had drifted down as well and were perched in the corners of the room on crates or sitting on the floor. They just needed popcorn and they were set. Turned out this didn't just interest Marines.

She did, however, suspect that half of them were here in hopes of seeing shirtless Marines and the other half were hoping she'd spar Alenko with biotics involved.

Lieutenant Alenko stood at her side at ease, his shoulders squared and his hands clasped behind his back. He was practically begging to be put on a recruitment poster with his upright posture, perfect hair and solemn expression. She hadn't discounted biotic sparring, but it had to be done very carefully - use a wrong field to counter and you had an explosion, a dead crewmate, and a manslaughter charge. She was only a fan of the first item on that list.

That was why she'd been unimpressed with Wrex's little stunt before Feros - but Liara didn't seem to hold any grudges, and in truth, she should've expected that two biotics who were much older than her would understand restraint.

There was more to Urdnot Wrex than the simplistic worldview he showed the Normandy's crew.

"Corporal Dubyansky," she said, voice snapping through the murmur of conversation.

"Aye ma'am!" The blond Marine stepped forward, dressed in his PT shorts and a tight t-shirt that had MARINES blazoned across the front. He was getting admiring looks from several of the sailors.

Shepard almost reconsidered the whole thing - fraternisation was so much paperwork. She cleared her throat. "What are the advantages of the turian in hand to hand combat?"

"Height and reach, ma'am," Dubyanksky replied. There was a cough from Garrus which Shepard ignored studiously. "Most turians are considerably taller than the average human. In addition, they have natural weapons in the forms of their talons." Here, Garrus turned around to show everyone his hands, wiggling his talons, to the sailors' amusement. Smartass. "Ahem, and their carapace makes it more difficult to get in disabling or killing blows."

"Disadvantages."

"High centre of gravity, ma'am. Relatively thin neck. Waists are slim and contain vital organs - and are not as well protected by the carapace as the chest."

"Very good. How would you go about killing a turian in hand to hand, Corporal?"

"Uh -" Dubyansky shot Garrus an awkward glance "- distract via breaking a spur, if possible. Sweep or throw to get them on the ground. The knife to the throat or waist."

Garrus' mandibles tightened visibly, the turian equivalent of a wince. She nodded. "A turian with a knife in their waist might not die straight away but they're unlikely to get back up."

Shepard drew the knife from the scabbard clipped to her belt and held it up so everyone could see the black carbon blade. "You should all know the Marine Corps' standard issue combat knife, I hope."
"Used most often to open MREs and play stupid knife games that keep Navy doctors employed," supplied Williams.

"And kill zombies," Gung Ho added.

"But not before you open your MREs because gross," Amina agreed.

Shepard ignored the Marines. "Before the First Contact War, the SAMC used the good ol' ka-bar. Afterwards, a new fighting knife design was put into production with a spear point rather than a clip point, sacrificing some of the cutting 'belly' for a stronger stabbing point." She slid the knife back into the sheath. "Hodgins, Vakarian, c'mere."

They obeyed, both men eyeing her. She beamed at them, then tossed a rubber training knife at the Corporal. "Care to give us a demonstration?"

"Aye ma'am," Hodgins said, green eyes narrowing as he shifted the training knife into a saber hold. They circled each other for a handful of seconds before the Marine shifted into movement, aiming a thrust at Garrus' waist.

They traded probing attacks for a few seconds, before Garrus trapped Hodgins' knife against his side with one hand and brought the other one - hand open, claws extended (if blunted by the gloves he habitually wore) - down on the Marine's neck.

"Dead," Shepard observed. "He just sliced your carotid artery open."

Garrus released the human man who took a few steps back, scowling. He was pissed off at himself - and so he should be. Garrus was a cop, used to the restraint techniques C-Sec used and a naturally talented fighter, but Hodgins was a N5, a Raider - and a Marine Martial Arts instructor qualified brown belt.

He needed to do better. But he didn't need his commander to point that out.

"Again."

This time, Hodgins was more focused. Shepard suspected that he'd dismissed Garrus as Just A Cop. Garrus was a MP turned police officer, but that wasn't the whole story. Shepard had his personnel file from the Hierarchy Army and C-Sec, and he'd been selected for special training for those shortlisted to become turian Spectres, which had polished his talents further.

The issue was Vakarian's attitude, not his talent.

They were getting frustrated, both used to overcoming their opponents with little effort, and Shepard hid a smile. It was unlikely that Hodgins could be convinced out of his attitude - he'd decided he was going to be a front lines Marine and so he could be handled but not changed. But Garrus...

Well, it didn't hurt to try.

Garrus tried to get another 'kill' blow in, only for his arm to be seized and for Hodgins to hip throw him to the ground, using his own height and weight against him. The Marine was then on him, stabbing viciously with the rubber knife multiple times until Shepard announced Garrus was dead.

She gestured for them to return to their spots, Hodgins wiping his forehead, a thoughtful look on Garrus' face.

She turned to face another Marine. "PFC Mohamed, advantages and disadvantages an asari has in
close quarters combat."

"Skin is tougher than ours," he supplied. "The back of the head is very sensitive. Most are biotics though, and they can have hundreds of years of experience."

"How do you fight biotics?" she asked him, stepping closer to him, head tilted.

"Disorientating techniques, ma'am." Shortly after PFC Akmed Mohamed had finished his N5, he'd been on a mission in the Traverse in which the Raiders had tangled with Eclipse. Mohamed had responded admirably to being charged by a Vanguard; when she was almost on top of him, he'd dropped a flash bang and then thrown himself to the floor. The flashbang had rung him like a bell, but it'd also fatally disorientated the asari and the rest of his team had blown her to hell.

"Such as?" she prompted.

"Flashbangs, strikes to the aural channel, eyes, pressure points, solar plexus," he answered, standing almost painfully straight. Mohamed had become withdrawn, cold, since his friend Jenkins had died. Shepard resolved to get Williams to keep an eye on him.

Shepard nodded. "Alright, so I'm splitting you Marines into two teams. One team will be with me, doing advanced bayonet and knife drills - yes, we will be carrying bayonets from now on because zombies - and one will be with Lieutenant Alenko to practice anti-biotic fighting. He'll teach you to fall so you don't hurt yourself; you'll be trying out those fighting techniques and testing the new hardening modules in your armour.

"Liara, Tali," she turned to the two of them, gentling her tone, "you'll be with Williams. I know she's been teaching you knife-fighting, Tali, and you've got self-defence training, Liara, but she can give you training in the hand to hand weapons we use."

There were nods all around. The first Marines clustered around her, fixing practice bayonets to their rifles. She heard giggling as Chou was lifted by Kaidan's biotics and his half-exasperated, half-amused. "This is combat training, Lance Corporal."

"We gonna show the geth the fear of cold, hard steel," Jaz whispered to Nick, and both of them giggled.

*Like teenagers,* she thought, fond despite herself. They were both only 20 and 21, and she'd been worse when she was that age. God, sometimes she wondered how her platoon sergeant had restrained himself from throwing Private First Class Shepard out the airlock.

"Yes, we are, Lance Corporal Teke," she said sweetly. "In fact, I'm going to make sure you get to take point when we bayonet charge armatures. Pretend I'm said armature and show me what you can do."

Jaz levelled his bayonet at her neck height and charged, yelling something like a battle cry out of a terrible medieval battle vid.

She side-stepped and tapped him almost gently as he passed her. He went sprawling, rifle bouncing along the hard metal floor of the hold.

"...ow."
Warship Classifications:

**Corvettes:** the smallest class of commissioned warship, the corvette is lightly armoured and armed and is primarily used for patrol and escort missions in low-risk areas, often enforcing a nation’s spacefaring laws, such as intercepting Helium skimmers and drug smugglers. They have also been known to be used as special forces insertion vehicles due to their small signature and agility. However, a corvette is more or less useless in fleet-to-fleet combat due to its relatively paper-thin armour and small guns, beyond some utility at mine laying or sweeping.

**Frigates:** larger than corvettes, frigates are a magnitude more powerful than corvettes, built with often larger drive cores for improved speed and maneuverability. Frigates are often seen as successors to the old submarines - flying alone for months on end. Unlike destroyers, frigates usually operate alone or in small divisions, as they conduct long-range patrols, raid the enemy and scout ahead of other fleet formations. In large space battles, they are often formed into wolf packs to hunt fighters and use their speed and maneuverability to finish off wounded ships.

**Destroyers:** the jack of all trades, destroyers are dedicated escort craft, somewhat smaller than cruiser but larger than a frigate, with heavy weaponry for its size and a large amount of GARDIAN point defence clusters. They do, however, lack a frigate’s independence, and tend to be seen working as part of a squadron or division escorting a larger warship, such as a carrier or a dreadnought. In battle, destroyers screen the fleet’s main battle line from fighters and torpedos and engage other enemy ships at medium and short ranges.

**Cruisers:** large and heavily armed enough to look after themselves, fast enough to run from most dreadnoughts and expendable enough not to require escorts, the cruiser is the ‘poor, bloody infantry’ of the Navy. Light cruisers often patrol independently and suppress piracy in border regions, heavy cruisers are usually the heaviest ships seen outside of major wars, leading frigates or destroyers in small ship to ship engagements. In major fleet battles, heavy cruiser squadrons are often part of the main battle line and light cruisers hold the flanks, preventing enemy vessels from flanking the broadsides of heavier ships.

**Battlecruisers:** the poor man’s dreadnought, the battlecruiser is often fielded by medium-sized star nations who don’t have the money or manpower to build and maintain full sized dreadnoughts. The battlecruiser is as fast as a cruiser with weaponry close to a dreadnought’s. While very successful against smaller ships, the battlecruiser’s lighter armour has often seen them easily destroyed by heavier dreadnoughts. No Citadel Council major power currently fields battlecruisers, though the Alliance has a proposed ‘Illyria-class battlecruiser’ concept meant to be paired with assault carriers.

**Escort/Light Carriers:** smaller than the capital full-sized carriers, the Alliance builds their light carriers off the same hulls as their heavy cruisers. Carrying a single wing of aircraft, the light carrier is used to add fighter power to fleet formations not warranting the use of a capital ship, or as the ship of a Marine unit, carrying the Marines, their equipment, their vehicles and their aircraft into battle - in the latter role they are often called ‘Planetary Assault Vessels' by the SAN and ‘Assault Ships' by the Hierarchy Navy.

**Carriers:** the size of dreadnoughts, the carrier is a primarily human vessel carrying up to three carrier air wings of subcraft. Due to their last of substantial anti-ship arms and low maneuverability, carriers are always escorted by other ships. Some have been used by the Alliance to carry their large Marine Expeditionary Brigades as well as fighters and interceptors. A carrier can only be commanded by a former naval aviator who has commanded a cruiser or similar tonnage vessel before.

**Dreadnoughts:** Simply massive vessels, bristling with weaponry and covered in thick, heavy ship
armour. Dreadnoughts are classified by their guns (any ship with a gun of 800 metres or above is considered a dreadnought by the Treaty of Farixen) and are often a kilometre in length. The ultimate arbiter of space combat, the dreadnought is a ship killer, able to bombard smaller vessels from beyond the range of their own weaponry and soak up return fire. Contrary to popular myth, dreadnoughts are not slow - due to square/cube law, a dreadnought's reactor, drive core and thrusters are substantially larger in comparison to her size than a cruiser's. However, they are less than maneuverable and too sharp turns in some environments risk tearing the ship in half. Dreadnoughts are always escorted and generally attempt to stay out of knife-fight range.

Chapter End Notes

As always, thank you for reading and reviewing!

The thing with the guns: yes, I know in canon the Valkyrie isn't around in 2183, but the idea that the Alliance changes its standard issue rifle twice in three years is a bit ludicrous.
"This is definitely a trap," Ashley said matter-of-factly, staring suspiciously at the nondescript door leading into the side of the desert mountain.

"Definitely," Shepard agreed, magnetising the new rifle they both carried and pulling out her shotgun. "Nukes don't walk themselves into mine shafts."

"But we're still going in there," Ash sighed.

"Oh yeah. Nukes also don't disarm themselves."

"Why can't we ever go anywhere nice?" she asked plaintively, also switching out for her shotgun.

"It's the pirates' fault, usually," Garrus said.

"Reckon there's a 'Pirate Weekly' I can send a strongly worded letter to? 'Get better taste in lairs, thanks the Marines'?" Ash muttered, and Garrus' mandibles flared in a turian equivalent of a grin. He was alright, Garrus. She didn't want to thump him as often these days.

Wrex rumbled a laugh. "One nuke has you all shaky, Williams? Careful, you might miss."

"Fuck off." She stacked up on the door behind him. "I can't shoot a fucking nuke, now can I?"

The mine was dark and empty.

Ash turned on her visor's night vision filter, and everything faded to weird shades of green. They moved in silence, communicating with Alliance hand signals, the ones Wrex had already known and she'd taught Vakarian. But there was no one here.

*Nukes don't get up and walk.* It wasn't reassuring, the stillness, absent of any clue as to who their enemies were.

They descended further into the mine in silence.

"Chemlights through here," warned Wrex, "better turn off your night vision."

They emerged into the next room, bathed in the yellow light of chem sticks.

"Uh. Yeah. That's the nuke." It was strange, to think that this long, metallic cylinder was capable of destroying cities. The *Normandy* carried a total of two nuclear missiles, like most frigates, but Ashley had never seen them, hidden as they were in the magazines of the ship, let alone been close enough to touch them.

Garrus bent over it, Shepard at his shoulder, and then there was a screech of alarmed radio chatter from Alenko and the others outside in the Mako, that cut off before any of them could discern any meaning from it. It was followed by a flicker that turned into the yellow holo of a turian in heavy armour, face bare of any paint.

"Commander Shepard," he hissed.
Shepard went very still beside Ash, whose eyes slid to her uneasily.

"Elanos Haliat. You've crawled out of your hole at last," Shepard drawled.

*Oh.* Every colonist knew who *this* fucker was. There were posters of him still hung up on Amaterasu. The school children sometimes graffiti-ed his face with devil's horns or mustaches.

He predictably rambled at length about the survival of the fittest and his grudge against the Commander for foiling the attack on Illyria. It was all shit you could read from Terminus blowhards on edgy extranet websites.

"What do you want, Haliat?" Shepard cut him off. "To share your philosophy sermon? Or are you waiting for me to thank you for my Star of Terra?"

"I wanted to see your face one last time." His own face twisted with victory. "When you realised you are going to die. The entrances are sealed and that nuke will soon go off. Your Marines will never be able to blast through the doors in time, and when you're dead, I will kill them too, just as your men on Elysium died."

Shepard's eyes were cold and black, like a predator circling, her voice without inflection: "I'm going to kill you, Haliat."

"Goodbye, Commander Shepard."

The holo cut out.

"Garrus, I hope you can disarm this thing," Ashley muttered, feeling sweat bead on her face. If she died here, her family wouldn't even get pieces to bury.

"I can do this," he said firmly. She hoped he was right - that his Spectre preparation course and its EOD module meant he could disarm it.

Shepard tapped open a commline and barked into it, "Alenko, the nuke's on a timer. I want you to get everyone to the minimum safe distance and set up a defensive position - no, that's an order, Lieutenant! You won't be able to cut through in time, and Haliat will likely attack you. Yes, *that* Haliat."

"Anyone got some last minute declarations of love? Confessions? That's what happens in the vids," Garrus joked in between fiddling with the nuke, his blue eyes intent and his talons surprisingly nimble.

"It was I," Ashley said solemnly, "who used the last of the sugar this morning."

"Traitor." Shepard's voice was teasing, but run through with knife-like cold.

Five minutes later, after Ashley had started pacing, aching with the need to hit something, Garrus crowed in victory, "Done! I did it! We're not dead!"

Ashley thumped him solidly on the back. "Never doubted you, Vakarian."

"Thank the Void," Wrex tilted his head, examining them both with one large, red eye. "It would've been embarrassing to die in the company of a turian and a couple of pyjacks."

"You know you like us, down in the deep recesses of your shriveled black heart Wrex," Shepard said, pulling out her shotgun. "Now let's get moving. Someone needs my boot up his ass."
"Think I've found a way out," Ash called. It wasn't a way back where they'd come from - but it was a way out. She hoped none of them had realised how afraid she'd been - her heart now only just settling back to its normal rhythm. She wasn't afraid of fighting, of combat, but you couldn't fight a nuke. It was just - BAM - and you were gone, leaving nothing but a shadow to mark where you'd once existed.

Fucking Elanos Haliat. She hoped the bastard and his pirates were nearby. Killing them would get that sour taste of fear out of her mouth.

*Bring it.*

Shepard lay on her stomach at the top of the ridge, looking through the scope of her new rifle over the red, red sand at the approaching pirates. There was a good platoon of them, advancing cautiously in a loose skirmish line. At least a couple of krogan, a marksman or two.

*This could get nasty.*

They knew the bomb had failed to detonate and were coming to take her out, and she had herself, Wrex, Garrus, and Ashley against all of them. But she had a handful of advantages - their armoured vehicle had gone off in search of the other Marines, who had the Mako and Waaber's rocket launcher, Vakarian and Williams were snipers and the terrain was flat and featureless below, with almost no cover. A shooting gallery.

There was little cover on the ridge, but they had the advantage of high ground and the protection of the terrain itself - rolling a few metres away would shield them from return fire.

Shepard focused, ignoring her own thudding heart, her hope that Alenko would destroy the Grizzly and counterattack quickly, the looming possibility of failure.

"We want to inflict casualties as quickly as possible," she told them, "so open fire as soon as you think you can hit. Hopefully, once we bloody them, they'll pull back, and Alenko can hit them."

What she wanted was to kill Haliat, but that would be suicidal at this point. No, this would be a battle of wills. If the pirates could weather the assault on the ridge, press their numbers advantage...ignore their buddies falling beside them, then the four of them would die here.

She wished for an air strike, but the *Normandy* had picked up a heat signature in system. It could be a pirate vessel - her ship would lie in wait if it was.

Beside her, Garrus' sniper rifle cracked, loud even through the dampening of her helmet. Through her HUD she watched one of the pirates fall, visor pulverised, and the rest of them scattered, trying to find scraps of cover.

Shepard set her Valkyrie against her shoulder, clicking the little dial over to one round mode. She flinched as a round snapped overhead, return fire from the enemy snipers. Another pirate fell, green blood soaking the sand. One of Ashley's rounds, right through centre of mass. A beautiful shot.

Another crack, another dead pirate, but whoever was leading down there had wised up and was driving their force forward, across the sand. The four krogan figures were in the lead, machine guns in hand.

"Focus on the krogan!" she said sharply, aiming through the scope of her rifle at the protruding head
of the nearest krogan pirate. Once he was within range, she pulled the trigger and a bloom of orange burst from his chest. She angled the Valkyrie slightly higher and fired again. The krogan staggered to his knees, the bullet punching through his shoulder pauldron - and the wound began to sizzle and burn.

She adjusted again, and the next round punched through the front of his helmet. He fell into a smoking heap.

"They keep getting up!" Garrus yelled in frustration.

"That's what krogan do," Wrex growled at him. "Keep shooting them!"

A wall of bullets crashed around them as the enemy platoon came within range with their knock-off Lancers. Shepard pressed herself into the dirt, gritting her teeth as the rounds cracked overhead, whined past her ears, pockmarked the sand in front of their position. She breathed through the instinctive panic trying to claw itself free and reached to trigger her comm. Either side of her, her squadmates were poking their heads up to fire off a few retaliatory rounds, but only while their shields held out - and against this sort of onslaught, it wouldn't be long. Even her and Wrex’s barriers would die quickly, chipped away by the sheer rate of fire.

"Lance 1 to Lance 2." dust crashed into her visor as a machinegun bullet cratered the dune merely metres from her. "Sitrep, over."

"Lance 1, Lance 2, enemy armoured vehicle is down; we are en route to assist." Alenko's voice was very welcome.

"Step on it," she said matter of factly, "we're pinned down."

"...Roger that."

"Fuck!"

Her head snapped to Williams. "You hit?"

"I'm fine," the Marine snarled. "Fucking pieces of shit..." Williams pulled out the depleted battery, tucked it into a pocket and then slotted in a new one. Shepard could only trust her not to downplay her injuries.

Ashley fumbled for something in her webbing as her shields flickered and recharged around her, swearing, and pulled free a grenade.

"Eat this, fuckers," she muttered to herself, pulled the pin and flung it down the slope, where it tumbled a few time before detonating at the feet of the first advancing pirate.

Shepard heard the deep, earth-shattering boom, felt it in her teeth, before she peeked up and saw the flash of metal as the Mako advanced. The vehicle jockeyed back and forth, turret muzzle blue with sustained machine gun fire, scything across the pirate platoon. They fell in clumps, blue and red and orange and green blood drunk down by the sand. An infantry platoon in the open without anti-tank support or their own vehicles would always lose to an IFV with a 155mm cannon and coaxial machinegun.

Shepard breathed out. "Lance 2, Lance 1. Cease fire, cease fire, over."

The Mako fell silent and came to a stop, wheels churning up sound. The ramp thudded down and black-armoured figures emerged, forming their own skirmish line.
"Williams, Wrex, with me. Garrus cover us."

"I - yes, Commander. What are you doing?"

She climbed to her feet, brushing sand grains off her rifle. "Clean up."

Wrex followed her. He'd been struck once or twice, craters in his armour, but his red eyes almost dared her to try and coddle him, so she said nothing. The old bastard knew his limits better than she did.

They made their way carefully down the slope, picking their way past the first of the bodies. Wrex unloaded his shotgun into the skulls of any krogan they passed, and Ashley emotionlessly kicked the others, pistol in hand. A battle wasn't over until all of the bodies were checked to make sure they were bodies and they'd all been bagged and tagged.

The Alliance, when time and operations permitted, did their best to ID and bury or cremate their enemies. On Elysium, there'd been thousands. All sorts of combat support units had been given the grisly duty of collecting the enemy dead and digging their graves or burning them. She'd gone back to Illiyria, three months after the Blitz, once her wounds had healed, and the whole city had still stunk of smoke and death.

Was this the last skirmish of the Blitz? Justice for Elysium? Justice for Dragon Platoon's dead?

All of a sudden she tripped - something caught around her ankle - and she slid a couple of metres in the sand, grains abrading the paint of her armour, her rifle spilling out of her hands.

"Skipper!"

Elanos Haliat loomed above her, eyes burning with rage. He was missing his helmet and the side of his face was blue with blood, a mandible torn away, droplets splashing on her chest plate.

"This is worth it," he said, surrounded by the scattered remains of his crew, "if I kill you."

He jammed the mouth of his pistol against her chest. She knocked his arm up with her forearm desperately, knowing her shields wouldn't work at point blank range. The gunshot was deafening beside her ear and her left shoulder erupted into fire.

He snarled, pulling the gun back and then shouted when she struck him with a shove of pure biotic energy, flinging him free of her. She staggered to her feet, baring her teeth at the flare of agony, and pulled her pistol free with her functioning arm.

Haliat's pistol had landed barrel first in the sand. He dove for it. She raised her hand and fired three times. The first two deflected off his shields. The third punched into his shoulder, blowing the joint apart.

He howled in agony, falling back into the dirt. He twisted to look at her, with vicious hatred. "So much for humanity's paragon! So...fucking...superior and arrogant."

His talons were grasping for his pistol. She could almost hear the ghost of Gunny Ellison's voice: *Don't assume the bastard is down because you wounded him! A Marine follows through.*

Her next shot struck him in the face, right in the middle of his speech that they were both killers, both -

Shepard stared for a long moment at the ruin of Elanos Haliat, her shoulder radiating agony, blood
trickling down her armour.

Lance Corporal Alim Anker. Private First Class Alex Vlahovic. They’d hated each other, those two, to the point she’d put them in separate squads. In the end, they’d died metres from each other. Sergeant Bian Vanh. Steady under fire, never a showboat, adored by her squaddies. Shot dead beside Shepard by a sniper. Petty Officer Third Class Altan Tilki. Quiet, lanky. Killed trying to reach his Marines, because he was their doc.

Lance Corporal Max Romero. He’d been engaged, just like she had been at the time. He would have lived, if Tilki hadn’t died, or there’d been a hospital to take him to. Sergeant Henri Rosenberg. She’d thought he was an arsehole. He was, even. But they’d respected each other and sometimes that was better than affability. She hadn't seen him die.

There was a grim satisfaction that Haliat was dead, but little relief. Revenge didn't bring the dead back, and there was always someone else to step into Haliat's place and take the Hegemony's money.

"Area clear." Williams' boots crunched in the sand as she rushed to the Commander’s side. “Shit, you’re wounded.”

"Bag 'em and tag 'em," Shepard said distantly, "I want off this planet."

She'd refused to think of them during the fight. Combat should never be personal, not for an officer. But for now, she let herself think about them. Her Marines. Hers. The first Marines under her command to die. The friends she’d traded to death to save Illyria.

Williams fumbled for her medscanner, than grabbed a tube of medigel, smearing it over the wound. The pain numbed, except for a grinding that she gritted her teeth against.

“Medscanner says it’s just a graze, ma’am, not too deep, but I think it fractured your clavicle.”

"Make sure we bag him carefully," she said, resisting the urge to kick the corpse. That would be unbecoming of her as an officer, and Haliat wouldn't feel anything ever again. "Command will want to know they can strike him off their list."

She fumbled for a sense of victory. They'd disarmed a nuke and killed a good thirty pirates, including a man who'd been on the Alliance's most wanted list for seven years, for the cost of a couple of holes in Wrex and a broken clavicle.

One down, a million to go. A Marine in the Traverse had no shortage of targets. It could wear on the soul, that and Shepard supposed it was just one of those days. She tilted her face towards the sky, listening to the hum of antiproton thrusters as the Normandy swept in gracefully to pick them up, ignoring the shouts as Ling and Alenko arrived, ready to fuss over her.

Williams’ hand lingered on her back for a moment. “That scared the shit out of me, ma’am.”

Shepard smiled wryly to hide the churning in her chest. She wasn’t sure if it was because she’d thought for a moment that was it, or because she’d just noticed the scorched crack down the centre of the other Marine’s chest plate, and the remnants of a slug caught there.

Navigator Pressly stood beside his captain as they waited for the call to connect to the SSV Everest. She managed to project recruiting poster model, even though she couldn't wear the figure eight splint for her fractured clavicle with her uniform jacket. She wore just a Navy t-shirt, the straps of the splint
looping across the front of her shoulders, the dressing covering the wound on the top of her left shoulder poking out the neck of the t-shirt.

If she was in pain, it didn't show on her face. He wasn't entirely sure how she'd convinced Karin to let her out of the medbay.

The feed solidified into Admiral Steven Hackett, in all his steely, ice-eyed glory. Pressly and Shepard both snapped salutes reflexively.

"I trust you've both read the files I forwarded," he said, returning the salute.

"Yessir," Pressly answered, mouth in a thin line. It hadn't been pleasant reading, not at all. Geth battle groups in the Armstrong Nebula, geth on the ground, spotted by the Alliance's scout vessels. One light cruiser had been ambushed and destroyed. Armstrong had little to commend it; the Alliance restricted itself to patrols and the odd punitive raid in the area. The ol' "Agincourt back when he'd been the tactical actions officer aboard her had participated in the Theshaca Raids within the Nebula.

No, the geth couldn't be there for Prothean ruins, not in those numbers. They were witnessing the formation of an invasion armada.

"My quarian says she believes that the geth may have a planetary base, sir, for not only repairs of their ships but for the storage of servers."

Hackett raised his eyebrows. "Servers?"

"Yessir. The geth are software - these servers would, she believes, allow them to back up themselves if we destroy their ships and boost their entire network's processing power."

"Making them more efficient in combat," Hackett surmised.

"Yessir."

Hackett rubbed his goatee. "I'm moving my forces to cover an attack from Armstrong, but I'm not going to wait for them to invade. We need to destroy those servers if possible, then strike first. I'll transmit you some co-ordinates; head there and rendezvous with Major General Alyona Tereshchenko of the 4th MARDIV. Her pathfinders are in charge of investigating the geth FOBs in the Nebula. You will assist her in finding and destroying the primary geth base."

"Aye aye, Admiral."

Pressly wondered if that would cause issues. There was a bit of a rivalry, he knew, between the 103rd and the 4th. They both were premier shock troops, though the 103rd were N4s and N5s, and the 4th were regulars - and obstinately proud of it. By tradition, the 4th supplied the instructors for the Airmobile school on Terra Nova, the one that taught advances aerospace assault tactics.

"There is another matter," Admiral Hackett added, expression darkening. "The journalist Emily Wong has released the first of a series of articles alleging very dark things about ExoGeni Planetary Explorations. The information she has is not publically available." Shepard was silent. "It's caused something of an uproar. The parliamentary Opposition and crossbench are insisting on a full inquiry into the company, and they have the numbers to force the issue."

"Politics isn't my concern, sir," Shepard said evenly. Pressly was inclined to agree but kept his mouth shut.
He liked his younger commanding officer; she was a very practical sort and like to cut to the heart of things, and while his earlier obedience had been born of duty he was now finding that he wanted to. He had to admire the way the Marine had carefully cultivated the loyalties of her crew beyond their required obedience, without becoming more human to them than she needed to be. She'd drawn his life story right out of him without saying more than a handful of things about herself.

But respect and liking aside, he could really do without the political storm that had battered the Normandy since Shepard had taken command.

Hackett sighed. "You know what you were doing, Commander. Udina is very upset. There are those who think you’re letting your Spectre status get to your head. That you’re becoming a bit of a loose cannon."

Pressly thought to himself that Udina was generally very upset anytime he spoke to Shepard. He'd heard 'political implications' more than he cared for in the past two months.

"Permission to speak freely, sir?" Shepard asked calmly, but for the slight tightening of her expression.

"Granted," Hackett said in a tone of a man unsure whether he'd live to regret that.

"Sir, you know that I am loyal and always have been." Shepard's voice had a hint of earnestness. "I have always done what's required of me."

"You have," Hackett agreed, "and you've never complained. That was why I agreed with your candidacy."

Huh. Hackett had had a say in the candidate for the first human Spectre? The rumours of the man's ascendency within the military were true, then.

"Thank you, sir. However, I hope you can understand that I'm in a difficult position. The Alliance is the hard place and the Council is the rock. There's no regulations or manuals for me to rely on. I have to learn how to negotiate being an officer of the Systems Alliance and a Council Spectre myself."

"Get to the point, Commander."

"The Alliance needs to decide if ensuring I have no drift of allegiance is more important than my mission."

A pause from the admiral. Pressly realised that Shepard was not so much upset that she was on a leash - that was tolerable so long as she had the resources to do her job - just that said leash was too short. If the rumours were true, Hackett had kept his leash on her very long when they'd both been in the Traverse.

"I'll speak to Udina," Hackett said at last, "but I make no promises. You will have to put up with him."

"I understand, sir."

"Just focus on this Prothean super weapon or whatever Saren is after, " Hackett said with finality, "and try not to make a habit of intel leaks."

"Aye, sir."

"And, congratulations on killing Haliat. We’ll release a press statement once his remains have been
formally identified."

"Thank you, sir."

"Hackett out."

Shepard turned to Pressly. "Can you see to briefing the department heads and getting us on course?"

"Yes, ma'am. At least the Admiral is on our side."

Shepard smiled slightly. "Hackett is on the Alliance's side. But he's a good man - he has his people's backs and he knows when to take his hands off the steering wheel."

Pressly wasn't sure what the difference was between their side and the side of the Alliance, but he nodded.

"I'll go start telling the department heads, with your leave, Commander."

"Dismissed, XO."

CODEX ENTRY

Interplanetary Combatives Training:

Interplanetary Combatives Training or 'ICT' is the unified training program for the Alliance's special forces, based out of the Interplanetary Combatives Academy in Brazil (also known as 'the villa' or 'N Academy'), though training takes place across Alliance space. The N Academy runs Selection and several courses, whose candidates come from all branches of the Alliance military - the Navy, Marine Corps, Army, even Naval Aviation and the Colonial Guards.

Selection: Selection is the first hurdle a Marine hoping to join the Alliance’s special forces faces. Candidates may either be invited to attempt Selection or may volunteer to do so. Many eventual Ns do not pass Selection on their first attempt as it is specifically designed to weed out the vast majority of candidates-out of every two hundred who attempt it, only twenty to forty will pass and be granted the N1 designation. Selection occurs twice a year and includes: navigation through hostile terrain; long timed runs in heat and cold while carrying full combat gear; various physical ordeals and; 36 hours of ‘interrogation’ in which the candidates are placed in stress positions and must repeat only their rank, name and service number or say “I cannot answer that sir/ma’am” no matter what they’re asked. Throughout the four week process, the instructors will give no indication of performance, even refraining from smiling or frowning. If the candidate passes all tasks, they will be awarded the N1 designation and invited to attend further training at N School. If they fail, they are given detailed constructive criticism and praise and returned to their units, often encouraged to return.

Small Unit Course: nicknamed 'the Commando Course' or 'Garden of Hell course,' this course at ICT covers fieldcraft, survival skills, vehicle handling, small unit tactics, foot patrol tactics, health and first aid, navigation, amphibious and aerospace assaults, cliff assaults and shuttle drills. To pass this course, the candidate must complete, in full gear: the Endurance Course - a challenging ten kilometre course filled with obstacles; the 14km Speed March - a speed march in 90 minutes at a speed of roughly 10 kmph; the Navigation Challenge - in which a team of candidates must work together to complete a tactical navigation course within four hours. If a Marine passes, they now receive the N2 designation. They may elect to continue to the next ICT course, return to their unit or join a special forces support unit, providing logistical, technical, signals and medical support to other special forces units.
**Reconnaissance Course:** this course includes training in long-range patrol and surveillance techniques, as well as most aspects of insertions into combat, such as high speed, high-risk shuttle insertion with rappelling, military freefall and parachuting, high altitude drops in a variety of vehicles, individual drop pods, jetpack flight and combat diving. This is a particularly dangerous section of training, with inevitable casualties. The final test for this section is when the candidate is deliberately dropped off-target and must make it to the target area to regroup with the rest of the cadre, while avoiding ‘enemy patrols.’ If completed successfully, the Marine is awarded the N3 designation. The N3 may elect to continue to the next course, transfer to a divisional reconnaissance platoon, or transfer to the Combat Search and Rescue Course.

**Combat Search and Rescue Pipeline:** also known as the 'PJ Pipeline,' CSARC is a very long course with a high dropout rate. Unlike other courses, it doesn't confer another N designation- it simply qualifies the N3 to serve in the Naval Aviation Branch's CSAR units. It includes full training as a paramedic, and minor field surgery, pharmacology, combat trauma management, advanced airway management and military evacuation procedures, as well as recovery tactics.

**Hostile Environment Small Unit Training:** ‘Dizzy School’ is the scarier big brother of ZGT, which all Marines undertake as part of initial training. The N3 is taught how to deal with several situations such as combat and evasion on planetoids without oxygen and those with hazards, station, and ship boarding special forces tactics and insertion by frigate and corvette, those stalwarts of special operations, often while under fire. If this phase is passed, the individual receives the N4 designation. The N can elect to transfer to a special recon unit, such as Marine Force Recon, Army Long Range Surveillance companies or Navy Special Warfare Units, or continue on.

**Assault Training:** the N4s are trained further in sensitive site exploitation and planetary assaults, as well as sabotage, pathfinding, and foreign weapons. This course ends with the infamous 'Manhunt.'

**The Manhunt:** The Manhunt is one of the most brutal and challenging aspects of N School training. All that has been taught to the candidate in the previous stages is put to the test. The candidate is dropped via jump jet onto the Moon, but during the drop, the jetpack will simulate an emergency. The N4 must safely land, at which point their suit will be ‘dead’, with navigation and all systems disabled except for life support (with enough oxygen for the duration of the exercise) and a transponder (for safety reasons-it will activate if the candidate needs immediate assistance), with only their rifle loaded with practice rounds and a limited supply of food and water along with a drawn map. They must avoid troops, shuttles, and drones hunting them for seven days.

If captured, they will be taken to a facility for the rest of the seven days and subjected to interrogation techniques in which they are stripped naked, strung up, splashed with cold water, and subjected to psychological techniques such as white noise, the simulation of someone being beaten nearby, and the exploitation of phobias. (The vast majority of candidates are captured and even those who evade capture for the entire week must be subjected to this treatment.) Afterwards, they will be taken to a room and be asked various questions by an officer. They must only answer with their rank, name and service number or ‘I can’t answer that.’ A candidate can request to be excused from the Manhunt at any point. If they endure all of this, they are taken to a room in which they are informed they have passed the test and are granted their N5 designation. At this point, the majority of N5s are assigned to units - instructors prefer candidates to have experience as N5s before coming back to attempt the Attachment Phase, though it isn't unknown for some candidates to continue on.

**Interim Training Period:** Before attempting the Attachment phase, there is a period of four weeks in which the N5 is taught further classes in linguistics, leadership, medical treatment for both humans and aliens, marksmanship, demolitions, tradecraft, combined skills and executive protection. If the
candidate passes the Culmination Exercise at the end of the ITP, they may proceed to the Attachment Phase. It's rumoured that live ammunition is used by trainers during the Culmination Exercise to test the candidates and build trust between them.

**Attachment Phase:** After the completion of all previous phases of training, only the Attachment Phase remains. The N5 is attached to an active-duty Special Forces unit on deployment and must prove themselves to the supervising N7 during combat. If completed satisfactorily, the N5 will receive the N6 designation and assigned to a unit. If completed in an ‘admirable and effective fashion,’ they will receive the coveted N7 designation and be granted the Red Stripe.

Chapter End Notes

Two things: the idea of an officers only special forces is one of the weirdest things Bioware did in ME3 and I'm categorically ignoring it, because it's kinda ridiculous.

And I made Elanos Haliat a turian because he was originally supposed to be, has a turian voice and frankly, his dialogue makes sense if he's not human.

Definitions:

EOD: Explosive Ordnance Disposal
Old Friends

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The Kodiak shuttle touched down on the port flight deck of the SSV *Joan of Arc* gently, and the pilot twisted to look at Commander Shepard. "Thank you for ridin' with Joan of Arc space lines, your exit is to the left..."

Emilia restrained herself to a roll of the eyes. *Flyboys.*

She smoothed her hands over her uniform and hopped down the gap between the shuttle's floor and the deck. All around her was activity - scurrying servicemen in brightly coloured vests denoting their role amongst the chaos, better known as Skittles, aircraft being moved into and out of the hangars, shuttles rising, fighters being slotted into launch tubes.

The *Joan of Arc* was a kilometre long and carried an astronomical amount of servicemen, pilots and now, Marines. Shepard had forced herself to resist pressing her nose to the window of the shuttle on the flight from the *Normandy* like an Earther in space for the first time. Besides the magnificence of the capital ship herself, this lonely slice of space was filled with the other vessels of the 5th Carrier Strike Group: six destroyers, lean and predatory, two heavy cruisers, bracketing the carrier, the hulk of the troopship *Scimitar* and two reconnaissance frigates. Past the window had flashed the lightning blue of fighters at practice - or play, depending on how you saw their playful maneuvers.

The CSG was larger than she’d been expecting. Perhaps Hackett had been able to pull ships from other fleets to bulk up his battle groups after all.

"Commander!" The black-haired man wearing the insignia of a Marine major and the wings of the Airmobile had to shout to be heard over the cacophony. "Major" - she read his badge- "Jacobsen. I imagine the general sent you to fetch me."

"Yes, ma'am. If you'll follow me."

She could negotiate the decks of an *Einstein* class carrier with her eyes closed, and she was pretty sure she could work out a *Zheng He* like the *Joan of Arc*, but she fell into step with him.

"Admiral Audino and Captain Yu are watching the fighter exercises," Jacobsen said apologetically, "but they will be joining you and the General for dinner." When he said General, she could hear the capitalisation.

They came to a door, and Jacobsen knocked once and then held it open for Shepard. She stepped inside.

"About time you showed up."

Shepard snapped off a salute. The woman who returned it was scowling, but she didn’t take it personally. That was just Major General Tereshchenko’s regular expression unless she was speaking with some of her enlisted Marines; it was common knowledge the general preferred their company to that of other officers. She was a severe woman, with a face seemingly carved of weathered rock, blond hair tied back in a bun, dressed in fatigues rather than dress blues. Tucked into her belt was a large, spear point combat knife. Enlisted Marines whispered that it was the same knife that Tereshchenko had used to kill several turians during the First Contact War.
Of course, that series of combat knife, designed to pierce turian plates, hadn’t been designed until after the war, but Tereshchenko didn’t seem inclined to disprove the rumour.

“Good to see you, General.”

“Hrmpf.” Tereshchenko gestured for Shepard to come further into her tiny office - victim of the little space Joan of Arc could spare. “Hear you got to be the sacrificial lamb to the Council.”

“Well-”

“Don’t get all diplomatic with me, Commander,” Tereshchenko said brusquely. “I don’t have time for that shit. Just speak straight. Sit down.”

Shepard sat as Tereshchenko settled behind the desk, laying her briefcase on its surface. “Aye, ma’am.”

“Giving one of our best N7s and a Star of Terra recipient away like that,” Tereshchenko said with some disgust, like Shepard was a weapon foolishly cast aside. She supposed that to the general she was just that. “And then the Council just bloody announces it all over the media! If that’s how they deal with PERSEC, I imagine some idiot in Parliament is going to be asking us to start publishing ICT graduation lists before I know it. And then they wonder when you nearly get fucking assassinated.”

Shepard considered pointing out that the assassination attempt had been before she’d been named a Spectre, but it wasn’t prudent to contradict a General, and she had been rather discomfited by the realisation that everyone and their grandma knew that she was now a Council agent.

“Unfortunately, ma’am, it was the only way I could see to deal with Saren.”

“I will be sending a very strongly worded letter on what is and isn’t appropriate to divulge to Westerlund fucking News,” Tereshchenko grumbled. “Anyway, you brought the data?”

Shepard slid the briefcase towards her. “Right here, General. We located geth outposts on Maji, Casbin, Antibaar, and Rayingri. Enemy armour and AT was observed, as well as snipers. Fortifications and towers were present.”

Tereshchenko opened the briefcase and took her time looking at each one, flicking through the pictures they’d taken of the geth outposts and data readings.

“Normally, I’d advise simply blowing them up with artillery or a cruiser,” Shepard continued, “but I don’t believe any of these outposts are the geth headquarters. Staging areas or FOBs perhaps, but they’re far from sufficient as control point for an invasion force.”

“I agree,” said the General. “Geth need to network to achieve intelligence - it’s possible that by securing these bases we may be able to trace their signals to their home base if I can get my hands on whatever ‘geth experts’ that won’t fuck it up.”

“I have a quarian who is an expert in that field, General.”

“I'll take that as you volunteering to take one of these FOBs, Commander,” Tereshchenko said, absorbed in the recon data.

“Yes, ma’am.”

"I want you to hit Antibaar. These scans suggest some hefty resistance, so I want you to take one of
my Pathfinder teams. I've already had volunteers - I believe you know Gunnery Sergeant Alvarez."

Shepard couldn't help the smile that spread across her face. "Yes ma'am, I do."

After a very surreal dinner with the five most senior persons currently aboard the SSV *Joan of Arc* - General Tereshchenko, Vice Admiral Audino, Commodore McNeil, who commanded the destroyer squadron, Captain Tran, *Joan*’s CAG, and Captain Yu, whose ship it was - Shepard headed down into the maze of corridors to find the little office (or cupboard) the Pathfinder team leader was currently working out of.

"Well, well, well," Gunnery Sergeant Julia Alvarez's wide grin was at odds with her textbook salute, "look who the General dragged in."

Shepard returned the salute. They looked at each other for a long moment before Alvarez laughed, stepped forward and threw her arms around her, careful not to jostle her splint.

"It's good to see you, Jules," Emilia said, sincere."You too, Em."

The last time she'd seen Jules Alvarez had been nearly two years ago when their blocks of leave had matched up, and they'd hit Paris for two weeks. Theirs was a friendship forged in fire and fury, bound too tight to ever really be free of, but one maintained by emails and the odd vidmail. It was true for most of her relationships, Shepard had to admit, but Jules was her best friend. She'd known Private Shepard and Second Lieutenant Shepard, and she was far from intimidated by the 'legend.'

A good thing, but...

She opened her mouth. Jules raised a hand, stalling her, a move only she could get away with, "Don't worry. Professionalism in front of your crew. You're the boss for this one - I'll restrain my urge to embarrass you."

Shepard raised an eyebrow. "Like you did when you got assigned to Dragon Platoon after I went to OCS?"

Jules grinned. "I was *perfectly* regulation abiding."

"Uh huh. You used any and every excuse to make me return salutes - including when I was holding things! I know you put your squad up to walking past me like a fuckin' merry go round."

The Gunny laughed. "You got me back though." The smile faded, and Alvarez's eyes settled on the bandage, the splint. "So...heard you got Haliat."

"Yeah," Shepard said quietly.

They stood in silence for a long moment, remembering friends long gone and then Gunny Alvarez nodded firmly. "Good. Fucker had it coming. I'll go rustle up my team and their gear and get their asses on the shuttle. Meet you there?"

"Roger that, Gunny."

Antibaar was one of those planets that had attracted Kaidan to space in the first place. The landscape was frozen and whipped into strange and wonderful shapes, and the sky was cast in a tapestry of purples and pinks, like eternal sunrise. You couldn't stand on its surface and not be aware of how small you were, how you were swallowed up by the sheer expanse of the galaxy.
A lot of Marines seemed to lose their appreciation of the things they saw over time. Kaidan had promised himself that he’d hang onto that sense of wonder, no matter what he saw or what was done to him.

"Sir." Gunny Alvarez stepped over a twisted bit of geth rocket trooper, and Kaidan dragged his eyes from the sky.

"Yes, Gunny?"

"Watch yourself," Joker had told Kaidan when he’d gone fishing for information about the guests the Normandy would be hosting for the next few weeks, "I heard Gunny Alvarez is an old friend of the boss."

Joker had an NCO-like talent for knowing everything that was going on aboard 'his' ship. Kaidan had wondered, wryly, if he’d said that in front of the commander.

If the Gunny and Shepard were old friends, it wasn’t reflected in their outward behaviour, which showed only the professional respect between an experienced NCO and an experienced officer. The twenty Pathfinders had been courteous but kept to themselves, taking the cramped confines of the ship and lack of beds beyond the rolls they’d brought with distant good humour.

Sergeant Lionel Mitchell, a wiry African-American, had told Alenko: "Sir, this is a lot better than most places we end up sleeping."

They said Pathfinder Company was one of the finest units in the best conventional light infantry division; a mixture of not only infantry Marines, but combat engineers, assaultmen and naval signals personnel. They’d lived up to their reputation, even alongside his seasoned Raiders. There was a raised eyebrow or two when Wrex, Garrus, and Tali had suited up to come along, but no comments. Just, “Where do you need us, sir?”

Now, the geth Forward Operating Base on Antibaar burned. The sentry towers had been dashed to pieces, and even the geth colossus had been shredded by the combined fire of a Mako IFV, two M39 Sturgeon light armoured reconnaissance vehicles and two rocket launchers.

The geth had been left where they’d fallen, in piles of broken metal and pooled conduit fluid. Alliance rules of war called for the burial or cremation of enemy dead - but burying a robot seemed a bit ridiculous, even for regulations. Did the geth even feel grief? Remorse? Anything? He’d heard that they simply recycled their fallen, hammered the dead into new shapes.

No, the only courtesy the geth would get from the Alliance would be a mass accelerator round right on top of this base once they were done, to make sure nothing was left behind that the enemy could use.

"We've finished the sweep of the immediate area," Alvarez reported, rifle pointed towards the purple sky. "No sign of any further geth activity, but I've set a defensive perimeter, just in case."

He nodded approvingly. "How long until Tali's done?"

"She said half an hour, sir. There's one other thing. Our sensors have picked up what appears to be the beacon of an Alliance IFV about ten klicks away. We do have missing recon units in the area."

"You want to go check it out," Kaidan surmised. When she nodded, he frowned slightly. "It's likely to be a geth trap."

"Yessir," Gunnery Sergeant Alvarez said, in a perfectly respectful tone that still managed to get
across 'no shit, lieutenant'. It truly was a skill he had to admire, the ability a senior NCO had, to make you feel like you were still a boot and it was best just to shut up and let them do their thing. "With your permission, I'll take the Mako and a team of yours along with one of my Sturgeons."

"Permission granted." He held back the urge to tell her to be careful.

"So you and the Skipper go back, huh?" asked Hodgins, trying to come across as nonchalant.

Ash tried not to look at the Gunny, tied not to look like she cared to hear the answer. But she did. She really did. It seemed to her sometimes that Emilia Shepard had neatly boxed up her history, and put it up on some tall shelf, where you could read the labels - military brat, Elysium, Akuze - but never the contents. Never what mattered.

Except for maybe one thing. *I hated myself. I don't want that for you.*

"Yeah," said Gunny Alvarez, breaking through her thoughts, "we went to boot together, then I was one of her squad leaders, back when she was butterbar."

"Recruit Shepard is weird to think about," mused Dubyansky from the driver's controls.

"No one is the same at 18 as they are at 29." Alvarez's tone held a kernel of cool dismissal. The Gunnery Sergeant began fiddling with her M-96 Mattock rifle. An ancient design, most often seen in the hands of militia, but some Marine marksmen swore by it, and it seemed the Gunny was old-fashioned.

"Did she still rescue cats from trees?" Ash asked idly.

Alvarez nodded seriously. "And helped little old ladies with their groceries."

"Got eyes on the beacon coordinates, boss," Ki-tae's voice snapped the light atmosphere, hammered it into something more business-like. They were looking for Alliance dead. "Seeing a lot of geth wreckage around the IFV..."

"So our guys got some hits in." Ash focused on the camera feeds as the Mako shuddered its way over the rough terrain. Whoever designed the M-35's suspension needed a smack up the head.

"I dunno, boss. They all look kinda...melted?"

"Shit," swore Gunny Alvarez, face turning pale under her visor. "Thresher-" the whole Mako screeched and tilted crazily, as the vehicle was struck heavily by *something*, tumbling sideways. Teeth rattling in her skull, Ash was thrown painfully against her restraints. Someone's rifle, ripped from their hands, bounced past her face.

"The fuck was that?" Hodgins shouted, words jagged with fear.

"Maw," Alvarez bit off, and Ashley realised, sharp claws of dread sinking into her gut, that the Gunny was afraid. "Drive, dammit!"

Dubyansky jammed his foot onto the accelerator, and the Mako jerked forward as soon as it was on six wheels, careening wildly across the snow drifts. On the camera feeds, the thresher maw rose to the sky, tentacles flared, huge blue tongue-like appendage lolling.

"Nick!" Dubyansky shouted, throwing the vehicle into a sharp turn. There was no reply from the gunner. The Mako would've told her if there was damage to the turret, she reminded herself. She was
sitting in the vehicle commander's seat, after all, a veritable arsenal of sensors and comm technology at her fingertips. But none of that helped if Nick wasn't shooting.

"Big Bird, Lance Actual, be advised that we're under attack from a thresher maw, over." Ashley's voice was far calmer than she felt, as the Mako jerked hard to left and away from a splash of acid.

"Say again, Lance Five," Shepard's voice was like slate - stone, brittle.

Sorry skipper, she thought, but there was no time to talk about it. The cannon was still silent. She forced her hands to unbuckle her restraints and pull herself into the turret. Nick was frozen, his face white under his visor. No time to reassure him. No time, no time. She pulled open the younger Marine's harness and shoved him into the main compartment, before settling in his place. The holographic controls glowed softly under her hands, the turret spinning to face the thresher maw. Let's dance.

Her first shot went wide as Dubyansky flung the IFV into a wild, yawing turn to avoid a tentacle, the shell smashing into a nearby ridge in a plume of shattered ice. She jammed her finger down on the coaxial's trigger, spitting a steady stream of rounds at the monstrous worm, as the automatic reloader ground mechanically above her, fitting another shell into the cannon and venting the heat.

Shepard's voice was in her ear, still, but while she allowed herself the reassurance of the rise and fall of her voice, even jagged-edged as it was, she couldn't take the time to listen let alone respond.

The machine gun left gaping holes in people, but compared to the bulk of the thresher maw, it was barely specks. The stings of an insect about to be squished. Ashley gritted her teeth, swinging the turret around to follow the thresher maw's form as the Mako wove erratically. She could hear swearing and a few prayers from the troop compartment, as if from a great distance.

In the corner of her eye, the Pathfinders' scout vehicle was making a run for it. The Sturgeon had only light armour and a heavy machine-gun - no match for a thresher maw. But the worm was turning towards it, mouth gaping blue.

"No you don't, motherfucker," she hissed from between clenched teeth, and fired the main cannon again. The ferrous slug punched into the maw's side, through chitin, causing a horrific, gaping wound that cascaded viscous liquid. But it was still up - and now it was pissed.

With surprising speed, the maw burrowed down and out of sight. What kind of ungodly creature could just take a 155mm shell and keep going?

"Fuck, where'd it go?" Dubyansky's voice was ragged with panic.

"Keep driving!"

The Mako lurched across the pitted plain, wheels churning snow, Ash swinging the turret back and forward.

The snow began to ripple. Ash opened her mouth, "Driver! 7 o'clock -"

The maw burst upward in a flurry of dirt and muddied white, globules of acid raining onto the Mako before Dubyansky could spin it free. The damage control warning beeped at Ash, but she ignored it in favour of stitching a line of machinegun bullets up the thresher's sinuous length.

The IFV was still moving, and the turret was still working, and that was enough for her right this second.
"Lance Two, this is Big Bird." It wasn't Shepard's voice on the comm anymore, but Lieutenant Wulandri, better known as Guns. "We can't get a firing solution with your current movement and position, over."

"Well, Big Bird, if I stop," Dubyansky snarled, in between erratic course changes, "we'll get fucking eaten by a fucking worm!"

"Lance Two, if you retreat, we could get a shot in, over."

Thresher Maws were territorial creatures. Sometimes retreating from their nests was enough, but not always. Sometimes they followed you if they were angry or hungry enough. Like on Akuze.

No, if it followed they'd never be able to outrun it, and they'd lead it right to the rest of the unit. Dismounted infantry with only machine guns and a couple of rocket launchers to protect themselves with.

Ashley blinked at her HUD, opening the comm channel, even as she shot the cannon, dirt and shards of rock obscuring the front of the worm for a handful of seconds. "This is Lance Five. No can do, over."

"Lance Five, I need you to - "

"Break, break," she said sharply, cutting Guns off. "With all due respect, Lieutenant, unless you’ve suddenly become a ground combat expert while I wasn’t looking, I need you to shut the fuck up and let us fight. Lance Two out."

 Fucking Navy, she thought savagely as the thresher maw disappeared from view again, trying to tell a Marine how to fight a giant fucking worm.

"Please find hull-down position and activate self-repair protocol," the Mako VI chirped. She hit the mute.

The maw resurfaced, and Ashley turned the muzzle of the cannon to meet it. The world faded. There was nothing but her, the controls under her hands, and the thresher maw through the camera. The Mako shuddered around her as she fired. The mass accelerator slug smashed open the maw’s head. For a moment the maw towered above them, awe-inspiring even in ruin, before it toppled, the ground shaking beneath the Mako’s wheels.

She slumped with relief, hands falling from the turret’s triggers even as the Marines cheered, delirious with the joy of being alive.

Someone tugged on her webbing from below, and she allowed Hodgins to pull her into the troop compartment. Someone slapped her on the back with a clack of ceramic.

"How’s the damage?" Ashley asked. It was still, after all, her vehicle.

"We should make it back to the FOB," Dubyansky said, wiping his forehead. “Fuck, let’s not do that again.”

“No promises, Corporal. Nick, mind taking over with the gun?”

“Aye aye, Sarn’t.” Ki-tae wouldn’t meet her eyes but began to unbuckle himself.

Sympathy burst in her chest. He wasn’t a coward - but to look like one, to fail your brothers and sisters, that was worse than death for a Marine. She caught his shoulder: “Nick?”
He flinched visibly. “Yeah, Staff Sergeant?”

“It happens to all of us, especially with maws.” It wasn’t something to get angry about. It was just the human nature military couldn’t fully beat out of a person. Yelling at him now would just shatter his confidence further.

“Ever happen to you?” he asked quietly.

“Yeah, first firefight,” she lied. “Now you know what to expect, that those things can bleed and what you have to do, you’ll be right. Now, get up there. Dubyansky, get us back to Alenko.”

The Mako rumbled to life and charged forward, past the corpse of the thresher maw.

"So," said Jules, lounging across her desk, poking at her dinner of dubious meat stuff with her fork, "Spectre. First human Spectre."

Shepard grimaced, sipping her water. "Yep. Wasn't my idea. Wasn't like I could say no."

Jules stabbed a bit of meat and swallowed reluctantly. "Yeah. They've really shackled you to this, huh?"

"Yes," Emilia said, with a hint of bitterness. "My career depends on finding a single man in the entire galaxy. And then what?" She sighed, stabbing her dinner and imagining for a moment it was Udina. "I get gifted to the Council to do their dirty work."

Jules raised an eyebrow. "You've done the Alliance's dirty work for years."

"That was my choice," she looked at her hands. "I keep telling myself that I've lived my life at the whims of the military since I was born, but I still had choices. You know I've worked hard for everything I've gotten."

Elysium had given her a boost, right up until Akuze, and after that, they'd been afraid of her breaking, wrapped her up in cotton wool, given her a logistics command. Sometimes she wondered if it was the star around her neck or her mother's name that had kept her from a medical discharge.

"I'm sorry, Em." Jules pressed her hand to Shepard's wrist.

She shook her head after a moment. "I just have to get used to it. Getting twisted up and resentful about it doesn't help anything."

Jules ate in silence for a while before she spoke, tentatively: "Have you spoken to Shay recently?"

Silence, hard as rock, fell between them.

"No." The word was a shard of diamond. When Jules opened her mouth, Shepard cut her off with a quick shake of the head. "I don't want to have this argument again."

Jules' eyes were distant and sad as if she was looking back at the people they'd used to be - Emilia and Jules and Shay - two Marines dragging the third out of the dark hole she'd found herself in, all of them too young to realise that friendship couldn't bandage all wounds.

"He's not going to change, you know," Emilia added. "They should've made him the Spectre. He's more their style. Victory over everything."

"Emilia, that's not fair."
She clenched her jaw. "What he did-"

"He knows he was wrong," Jules pleaded.

"Does he?"

"Yes!"

Her hands were fists. "He let his own shit rule him, and hundreds died for it!"

"He knows that better than either of us," Jules replied, refusing to back down. "When are you going to stop punishing him for it?"

Shepard scowled at her. "Who said I am?"

"He's not responsible for Akuze, Emilia."

The words were a little like getting stabbed. That was the problem with people you loved. All too often they knew just how to slip the knife between your ribs. Shepard suddenly felt very tired.

"My forgiveness isn't what he should be concerned with," she said, rubbing her face. "Just...let it go."

Jules' hand was warm on her arm. "Sorry."

"It's alright." It wasn't, but there was very little Emilia Shepard wouldn't forgive Julia Alvarez for.

They ate in silence for several minutes, before Jules spoke up, clearly trying to change the subject, lift the weight hanging over them: "Spoken to your staff yet?"

She shook her head. "Not yet. You know how I feel about thresher maws; if I'd spoken to Williams right away, it would've been that talking, not objectivity. And I need to find that balance, you know? She wasn’t wrong, and her shooting got my guys - and yours - out of that mess, but telling an officer to fuck off over open comms…"

"Well, don't take too long," the Gunny said dryly, "she thinks you're angry at her. I thought you might not appreciate me saying you weren't angry but scared. Can't wreck the rep."

Shepard's lips twitched. "I think the part about how I'm six foot and chew steel for breakfast has already been debunked."

Jules nodded solemnly. "I believe that lost its luster when you had to get a stepladder to get something off the top shelf."

She shot her a long-suffering look. "I'm not short, Jules. I'm average height. You're just a giant."

"Uh huh."

CODEX ENTRY

Pathfinder Company: The 1st Pathfinder Company is a division level reconnaissance, pathfinding and forward force unit in the 4th MARDIV, consisting of 98 Marines in a headquarters element and four platoons.

Prior to the main force of the division landing, the Pathfinders conduct long-range reconnaissance, as
well as finding and marking drop zones and shuttle landing zones, before clearing and protecting said areas until the rest of the division lands. After landing, the company provides tactical intelligence and offensive actions, such as sabotage and sniping missions.

Training to join the company is done through the Pathfinding Cadre at the Airmobile School, and consists of five weeks of selection, including speed marches, basic patrol skills, construction of concealed observations posts, demolition training, live fire drills, and a final exercise involving the candidates working in teams of 4-6 to plan and execute typical reconnaissance missions, culminating in being 'captured' and subjected to interrogation techniques. Following selection, candidates then undergo further training in HALCD/HAHCD techniques, in-depth weapons and comms training and advanced patrol techniques.

So far, the most famous action undertaken by the Pathfinders is the Varinia Confrontation, during which the company, while protecting a small settlement in the Traverse, was attacked by a Blood Pack unit that outnumbered them 20 to 1. Despite running low on ammunition and lacking heavy artillery or armoured vehicles, the Pathfinders held out for 20 days before being relieved by the 3rd Marine Expeditionary Brigade, without suffering a single Marine killed in action.

Chapter End Notes

Definitions:

HAHCD: High Altitude, High Controlled Descent. Unlike in HALCD, where the 'jumper' turns on their thrusters at a low altitude, in HAHCD the jumper turns them on almost immediately after exiting the aircraft. This technique is generally used by reconnaissance and special forces personnel for insertion when stealth is required. HAHCD also allows for long distances to be covered in the jump – up to 80 kilometres.
There were a few strange things about his job, Joker decided, the Normandy humming around him, speeding toward yet another conflict. The camera feeds were one of them. They were part of the ship’s battle-net, the network that tied together all the ship’s myriad of capabilities in haptic displays, tactical maps, communications and status displays. All of it stemming from the Normandy’s brain - the hybrid CIC and bridge.

If Shepard had so wanted, she could’ve managed the Normandy’s ground missions from orbit, with precise instructions and intel that a commander a century or two ago would have died for. But she didn’t. In fact, she called it ‘over networking’ and either went ground side herself or put Alenko in charge, relegating the CIC to strategic intel gathering and air support. Joker didn’t have an opinion - it was Marine business. But she did make sure he had camera feeds.

The footage from the thresher maw attack had been confused, vertigoinducing. Flashes of white, the rattle of gunfire. He wasn’t sure if he was unnerved by the brief glimpses of the maw itself, or by the fear in the Marines’ voices - those gung-ho men and women who he’d never seen flinch before, or if it had been the way Shepard had frozen. He thought he was probably the only one to see the look on Shepard’s face when she’d been talking to Williams on the comm.

Fear. Seething, helpless rage.

He supposed that could’ve been the thing to tip the Commander off her pedestal, but personally, he found it almost a relief. Not even the Alliance’s poster girl was perfect or fearless. If she hadn’t had a reaction to ‘Suddenly, Thresher Maws,’ he would’ve had to admit he was probably working for a robot dressed in a human flesh suit.

Speak of the devil, and she would suddenly appear, looming over your shoulder. Did they have a ‘how to walk quietly and scare the shit of your pilot’ class at the Villa?

Joker craned his head back to look at Commander Shepard. “Anyone ever tell you that your ninja act is really creepy, ma’am?”

“Oh yeah,” she said with satisfaction.

He sighed, swiping at a haptic panel. The ship’s hums climbed in pitch. “Did you come over here just to loom?”

“I can loom anywhere I want on my ship.” Shepard’s voice was mild, and he thought he heard a flicker of amusement. “What’s our ETA to the rendezvous with the Scimitar?”

Yeah, he wasn’t looking forward to that. Escorting an assault ship was like driving a sports car alongside a school bus driven by the galaxy’s most timid grandmother.

“Twenty hours,” he replied, leaning back in his chair. Would it kill the Navy to pay for some more cushions? “So…”

Shepard raised an eyebrow.

“Spoken to Sergeant Williams yet? The whole bridge heard her tell off Guns. It was great,” he said
happily.

“I thought you liked Guns.” Shepard leaned against the doorway of the cockpit, arms crossed.

“Yeah, sure. I like some snark-to-snark combat as much as the next guy, but it’s not about that. An E5 telling off an O3? That’s some quality ‘fighting the man’. My inner anarchist is cheering.”

She rolled her eyes. “Your inner anarchist? Doesn’t that make a Navy career painful?”

“Not for me,” he said slyly, shooting her a smirk.

“So I’m finding out,” Shepard said dryly, but there was a glint in her eyes like she got the joke.

“Soooo?”

“Whatever I do or don’t say to Williams - or to Wulandri, for that matter - is none of your business, Flight Lieutenant.”

“You’re a spoilsport, Commander,” Joker complained, adjusting an aileron. It was coming up on shift change. He’d give the helm over to Frag, get something to eat, sleep, and then be back on the bridge in time for the Flip - when he’d have to reverse the Normandy’s course to begin deceleration.

Shepard’s expression was bland. “Marine business is Marine business.”

“Yeah, like shooting things…and punching things…getting shot at…making ground decisions…”

Shepard just smiled slightly, not taking the bait.

Footsteps. Frag, drinking from a sippy cup with one hand, walked up the skinny walkway connecting the helm and the CIC. The Navy refused to allow coffee on the bridge unless it was in a sippy cup like this was a daycare or something. Most people got over their pride a few months into their first tour. The Navy ran on coffee, after all. If it ran out, there might be riots. Or tears.

“Ma’am.”

“Ensign,” Shepard acknowledged.

“Sir, I’m here to relieve you.”

He turned to shoot a look over his shoulder. “What’ve I told you about the ‘sir’ thing, Frag?”

“It’s in the manual.” Grenado was utterly unconcerned. “So I’m going to keep saying it. Sir.”

“You’re insubordinate, y’know.”

“Ever heard of glass houses, rocks?” she asked sweetly. “Besides you can’t give me an order against the regs. That’s in the manual too. Now move already, it’s my turn.” Shepard turned her face away with a cough that was suspiciously close to a chuckle.

“As you were, Flight Lieutenant Moreau, Ensign Grenado.” With that, Commander Shepard disappeared as quickly as she’d appeared.

“Sometimes I’m convinced N7s can teleport,” Frag muttered. Joker carefully picked himself up from the chair with the help of his crutches.

“Don’t scratch the ship, Frag.”
“Fuck off already, sir,” she tossed over her shoulder, settling into the helmsman’s seat.

He carefully made his way down the stairs to the mess, getting a sandwich that hopefully had beef in it and not some weird sludge that’d give him cancer in forty years. The Normandy’s resident turian was sitting at one of the benches, digging into something that was bright blue.

"You're the pilot," Vakarian observed.

Joker hadn't spent much time around Vakarian. The turian spent most of his time down in the 'Kennel' working on the Mako with the Marines, proving the old maxim that soldiers, regardless of species or affiliation, had more in common with each other than anyone else.

Joker stuck to the CIC most of the time. Even when he wasn't at the helm, the Chief Helmsman had jobs to do - course planning with Pressly and Saxena, training the two ensign pilots, writing the book on how to fly the Normandy class. That's why they'd chosen him and two relatively inexperienced, albeit talented, frigate pilots. He was the best pilot in the fleet, and Frag and Maalouf hadn't developed bad habits yet.

"That's me," he said, tilting his head, "and you're Shepard's turian. The one who keeps pissing people off."

His mandibles twitched. "What?"

Joker took a bite of his sandwich. The silence was taut as he chewed and swallowed. "Heard you told Tali her species deserve what they got because they created the geth."

If turians could scowl like humans, he would've bet Garrus would've had one to resemble a storm cloud. "If they hadn't created the geth, things would be different."

"If the turian Hierarchy hadn't recommended Saren to be a Spectre, things would be different," Joker parroted back with a grin.

The turian didn't look impressed.

"It's one of those things you think but don't say, you know?" he continued, sipping an orange liquid masquerading as juice. "Particularly when Ashley is teaching Tali how to knife fight. Just like asking why the Alliance has officers who need crutches to walk." His smile was sharp.

"I wasn't going to ask that," Vakarian said stiffly.

"Sure. I'll let you in on why: It's because I'm the best." Joker finished his sandwich and brushed a couple of crumbs from his beard. "No one can fly the Normandy like I can. And that's not arrogance. That's confidence."

He liked to tell crazy stories about how he'd been given the Chief Helmsman billet. Stealing the Normandy, having Captain Anderson and the turian ambassador beg him to become the new pilot. Told him who was dumb enough to think he'd had to prove himself by doing something that would've gotten him a court-martial and a jail term.

The truth was something much more mundane. Six years in active service since he'd graduated from flight school, working his way from third helmsman to the SSV Peleliu's first. Dancing the Peleliu through an asteroid field and out the other side to escape a run in with a pirate cruiser and wolf pack, then returning at the head of a reaction picket to blow them to pieces. A stint as an instructor at a Fleet Replacement Squadron (frigate).
"We'll see if you're as good as you think you are." Vakarian tore another bite out of - whatever that was.

"Sure will," Joker said, levering himself to his feet. "Just remember, I'm not the one who has to prove himself. Not here."

“It’s going to be a large one, isn’t it? The battle.”

Perhaps the question was foolish. Since Feros, Liara had taken part in one other firefight - the assault on Antibaar - and she thought she’d acquitted herself well. She hadn’t wept or collapsed or anything else embarrassing. But there was a certain apprehension filling the Normandy, as she made her way towards her rendezvous with a ‘planetary assault ready group,’ full of the reinforcements General Tereshchenko had promised them. These young Marines, who took dropping into combat against pirates and geth in stride, had a certain caginess, a wariness. Like a hum through the lower decks. They were on their way to a true battle, not just a skirmish or ‘short duration raid.’

She’d found herself - nervous. Commander Shepard had spent much of the past day in private conversation, with Alenko, Williams, Alvarez, and Wrex. Making battle plans, she’d realised. When Shepard did emerge from her cabin or the briefing room, her expression was distant and distracted, the running of the ship left almost entirely to Commander Pressly.

But Liara hadn’t quite meant for the question to pop out in the mess hall when Kaidan was about to dig into his lunch. In the corner four of the Marines - Hodgins, Jaz, Nick, and Fredricks - were playing Skyllian Five. There was a red mark on Nick’s collarbone, where someone had grabbed him in the eternal game of cat and mouse the Marines played, in which they ambushed each other and ‘won’ by very slightly nicking each other with their combat knives. They were pretending to be engrossed in their game, but their attention had been caught.

And Kaidan knew it by the wry twist of his mouth that was quickly replaced by a calm but firm expression. “It’s going to be larger than the fights we’ve been in, yes.” His voice was gentle as ever. It was always surprising to her that this man - this genuinely kind man - was capable of such violence when it was needed. It wasn’t even a faked genteel persona. It was as much him as the jokes he made about ‘saluting anything you can’t eat or kill’ and the way he’d thrown geth around like toys on Antibaar. “But we’ve got back up. General Tereshchenko is assigning the entire 1/10th Battalion, a company of tanks and some air support - a lot more than we’ve ever had before.”

“M-080 tanks?” asked Nick excitedly, abandoning his pretense at playing cards.

“Yep. 14 of them.”

“Fuck yeah! We’re gonna get some!” He punched the air.

Hodgins leaned back in his chair, rolling his eyes and running the cards between his hands. “You mean the infantry and the tankers will get some. We running recon?”

Alenko nodded, smiling reassuringly at Liara. “The plan isn’t set in stone yet, but it looks like we’ll be the task force’s eyes and ears. Recon and prep work.”

“Something beside raids?” Jaz drawled. “Fuck, sir, I think I mighta forgotten how to do the other stuff.”

“That’s alright, Lance,” he said, “I’ll just boot you back to the Villa for a refresher with Iron
Jacques.”

The younger man blanched.

“Iron Jacques?” asked Liara, jabbing at her lunch.

“He’s one of the instructors at the Villa - the school they train Ns at,” explained Rosie Draven from the end of the table. “Talitha thinks he’s a sadist.”

“He runs the Manhunt,” the other Draven said, walking to the table, tray in hand, dragging her hand across Rosie’s shoulder affectionately. “Aka, he gets to legally torture the candidates.”

Hodgins shot Gung Ho a flat glance. His eyes were a pale, pale blue, almost colourless and often frighteningly empty. “Have you been spilling Villa secrets, Sergeant?”

Gung Ho gave him an innocent look, draping her arm over Petty Officer Draven’s shoulders. All the nicknames and slang the humans used made her head spin. The translator didn’t always help. Williams had, in her brusque way, delivered a stack of manuals to the ‘aliens’ on the ship and told Liara to memorise the important parts. Wrex had stared down at her with his red eyes, but the Sergeant had just scowled in response. “I’m not fucking dying because y’all don’t know our fire mission procedures.”

Kaidan had come by an hour later to explain in that calm way of Shepard’s reasons for wanting them to learn Alliance procedures and tactics. Wrex had just grunted. At first, Liara had thought that Kaidan tried to gentle Williams’ instructions out of kindness.

Then she’d realised that he was always conspicuously absent when Williams was berating someone.

Hodgins shook his head, tucking his cards into one of his uniform jacket pockets. “Whatever. Sure, tell the Republics all our secrets, Sergeant. I’m gonna get some rack time. Gotta be all rested when it’s killin’ time.”

His eyes lingered, cold, on Liara’s face before he left the room.

“Don’t worry ‘bout him,” said ‘Squid’ Draven. She didn’t understand why they called Rosamund Draven that. She’d flinched the first time someone had yelled that - she’d only heard it spat from the mouths of Terra Firma protesters before the Normandy - only to find they were calling the Petty Officer instead.

Liara looked at her hands, avoiding their pity. “I understand my mother caused many Marines to lose friends and family.”

Gung Ho snorted. “Yeah. But not him. Hodgins is just an asshole. But I’d go into battle with him at my six any day, so we keep him around.”

What was a ‘six?’ Liara nodded uncertainly and sunk into her seat, fading into the background as the conversation rose and fall, the room electric with a mixture of apprehension and excitement.

The war was both the best and worst thing to happen to Ashley Williams. The Normandy, if cramped, was a frontline frigate, the first on the battlefield and for the first time, she knew that her talents were actually being used, not consigned to a dusty rock because of Shanxi. But the cost was tattooed behind her eyelids when she slept. Nirali Bhatia’s scream still echoed inside her skull. That
was what had driven her from her sleeping pod, amongst the still forms of the ship's crew, the one she'd slotted into with maddening ease, to the near-empty mess.

It was the Middle Watch, most of the crew snatching rest where they could, and so it was only her and one morose looking Navy cook whose name she couldn't remember behind the mess counter. She knew all the Marines by now with an intimacy unknown outside of combat but getting to know the Navy crewmen was taking a little longer. The bench was hard and cold, the coffee tepid, but she sat silently, chin perched on a fist.

It was moments like this that Alenko often sat with her in silence or with a few reports they had to go over, to get her mind off things. Alenko had lost a Marine on Eden Prime as well.

But the LT was asleep, and he'd had a migraine during their last shift, and they were headed to battle. Waking him would be inconsiderate, unprofessional, weak.

You're fine, embrace the suck, she could almost hear Ellison's bellowing through the years. He'd been a goddamn bastard who made her life hell and the one person to treat her fairly from the moment she'd signed those enlistment papers. How proud she'd been when he'd made her patrol leader. Now she sipped from her coffee and wondered why she was so fucking glad to be on this ship when Bhatia had gone home to her husband in a coffin.

“Captain on deck,” the cook squeaked, and the reaction was automatic. She got up, spun and came to attention.

“At you were.” Shepard looked like she'd just crawled out of bed, dark curls barely contained in a bun, dressed in just a white Navy shirt and fatigues, scars peeking from the colour. It was the first time Ashley had seen her looking anything but squared away. Shepard was collected, even in PT gear, even after battle.

“Would you like anything, ma'am?” the cook asked, almost like he'd been expecting her.

“Tea. No, I'll get it myself,” she said curtly, waving the sailor off. “Go have a break.” Ashley started moving, keen to give the Commander the solitude she clearly wanted but came to an abrupt stop when Shepard snapped, “Not you, Williams.”

“Yes ma'am,” she murmured, levering herself back into her seat. The cook went, the door hissing shut behind him.

Shepard rubbed a hand through her messy hair, scowling at her cup as she covered a tea bag with boiling water, “He never lets it steep long enough.”

Ash's first thought was that she hadn't realised they even had tea in the mess. The second was that Shepard seemed to be a regular.

Shepard rubbed a hand through her messy hair, scowling at her cup as she covered a tea bag with boiling water, “He never lets it steep long enough.”

Ash's first thought was that she hadn't realised they even had tea in the mess. The second was that Shepard seemed to be a regular.

Her third was that she really shouldn't be admiring the ripple of muscle in her arms as she moved, the contrast of the clean white shirt against her skin.

The chanting of 'unprofessional, unprofessional,' didn't save her when the Normandy's captain turned and caught Ash's eyes hastily jerking to her face. There was something close to a glint in Shepard's eyes, but the officer said nothing, just came to sit across from her, batting at the teabag with a spoon.

They were alone. And there was no reason that should matter.

“What're you doing up so late” - She squinted at the display on the wall - “early?”
“Couldn't sleep,” Ash said simply, honestly.

Shepard took a sip, holding the cup between two hands and staring into it like it held answers to something important. “Ah.” She sipped again. “If it gets too bad, go see Chakwas. Can't have you getting sloppy in the field, won't do any of them any good.”

Any of them. The 212.

“Aye aye, ma'am,” she said softly.

“You'll know when it's becoming a problem, Williams.”

It was more trust than any other commander had given her before, even though Shepard still seemed half out of it. Ash wasn't going to fuck this up. She wasn't.

(She was, however, going to find a goddamn bar once they got shore leave and get this all out of her system. She hadn't gotten laid for months. That was the problem.)

She swallowed.

Shepard saw the quaver in her throat, said in a voice that was close to gentle and awkwardly so, “Williams, you did all you could.”

Guilt closed like a fist around her chest. Very softly she said, “Not so sure about that, ma'am.”

Darbi's face had twisted as she pulled him down, only for her hands to come away red. He'd been eighteen, just out of ITB. A kid. A kid she'd led into an ambush.

“Hindsight's 20/20, Sergeant.” Shepard's hand brushed her own bicep, where the scars were, up to her throat and Ashley's eyes followed her fingertips as they pushed up her sleeve, just a few centimetres.

“How did you...” Ash trailed off. Everyone knew you didn't ask Shepard about Akuze.

“Survive?” Crushed stone fell from her lips, eyes hardening.

Ashley just shook her head. “No. How did you live with it? How did you move on afterwards?”

Shepard was certainly awake now, her dark eyes measuring as they caught on the Marine's face. “You remember them. You can't forget the way they died or what you did or didn't do. It's no use trying to. You remember, and you do better because it's your job to try and make sure everyone comes home. And eventually you know that just because you were in charge doesn't mean you're to blame.” Shepard's hands were fists on top of the table, either side of her cup but there was a sad softness in her eyes. “I had no way of knowing thresher maws were there when I sent out my platoon. I can't spend the rest of my life blaming myself for something beyond my control. And neither can you, Sergeant.”

Ash dropped her head, staring at the back of her hands and the scratched metal of the tabletop. “I led them into that ambush.”

“You were encircled and outnumbered, with no reinforcements or fire support available. Do you honestly think it could've ended any other way?” Shepard's voice was low and relentless.

“I...” She dropped her head, slumping. “No. We were fucked from the moment the geth landed.”

A hand came to gingerly, cautiously, rest on her uniformed shoulder. “Blame the geth and Saren.”
“Reckon we'll get him?” she asked softly. Shepard's fingers burnt through her uniform jacket.

“You know we will.” It felt like they were always one step behind Saren, always playing catch up but when Shepard said it like that, you had to believe.

“Yeah. We'll nail him soon. For Eden Prime.”

“Oorah,” Shepard said with a dry smirk.

“Commander,” she said it before she could change her mind, “I need to say something.”

“Alright,” was all Shepard said, removing her hand. To leave it there would step right over that line they were standing too close to, but Ashley couldn't help but miss it.

"I know I lost my temper, on the last mission. With Wulandri. I know that would've put you in a difficult position. I'm sorry about that."

Shepard smiled, taking another sip. "Guns knows she fucked up, distracting you. But we both know I can’t have my NCOs mouthing off to my officers in front of the crew."

Ashley winced. "Yeah."

"Just tell them I yelled at you or something." Shepard waved a hand lazily. "We both know you can't do that again, but you got everyone out of there, and that's the main thing."

"Thank you, skipper."

Shepard snorted. “Don't thank me. Go get some sleep. We'll be dropping in thirteen hours, and I need you and your Marines focused.”

She stood up and left Ashley sitting alone in the mess hall with her cooling coffee and Shepard's empty cup, watching her walk away.

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**CODEX ENTRY**

**Systems Alliance Parliament:** The Systems Alliance Parliament was established in 2160 by an amendment to the Charter, three years after the First Contact War, heralding the true transition from space agency to a full government and nation in its own right. The Parliament consists of two houses, one with members elected on a population basis and the other elected on a planetary basis, hypothetically to balance the interests of Earth and the colonies. In practice, the colonies became more affluent in Alliance politics due to their influence in the Upper House and the trend of colonists voting more regularly than Terrans. More cynical analysis suggests that this was deliberate, preventing Terran interests from hamstringing humanity’s expansion on the galactic stage.

Although the head of state is the President, elected separately from the members of parliament, the true power in government is the Prime Minister, usually the leader of the most powerful political party of the time. While signing legislation into law and possessing executive powers, the President is ultimately a figurehead during peacetime.

While originally formed with several checks against its power, the necessities of humanity’s entry onto the galactic stage meant there was a shift in the balance of power between the Earth nations and the Alliance. The Alliance was required to stand for itself before other galactic societies, and this,
combined with the dispute with the Hegemony over the Attican Traverse led to the Alliance becoming more unilateral and powerful in its own right, an unpopular move amongst the more nationalistic and paranoid.

The Alliance’s legislative jurisdiction presides over everything beyond Earth’s orbit - the colonies, defence and diplomacy with other space-faring species and also includes such issues as transhumanism, artificial and virtual intelligence and genetic engineering. In these areas, disputes between nations are referred to the SA High Court for resolution. The Systems Alliance has bases on Earth for defence and recruiting purposes, but no Alliance troops have ever been deployed there, even alongside UN peace keeping forces.

The current Parliament is the 7th, with the next election due in mid-2184, led by Prime Minister Anita Doyle. The Prime Minister, a life-long public servant and politician who helped establish the Alliance on the galactic stage as the first Ambassador to the Citadel, is considered likely to retire rather than contesting another election.

Chapter End Notes

Definitions:

ITB: Infantry Training Battalion. An example of one such unit would be the Infantry Training Battalion Terra Nova, part of the School of Infantry - Exodus (SOI-E). All infantry Marines, after graduating Recruit Training, attend the 59-day long course run by their ITB, which trains advanced marksmanship, urban combat, martial arts, patrolling, use of grenades, tactical formations and navigation, as well as specific specialisations for machine gunners, anti-tank specialists, mortars or light armoured vehicles. All non-infantry Marines attend Marine Combat Training (MCT) at the School of Infantry, which teaches basic rifleman skills.
Wounded In Action

Chapter Notes

Serious injury warning in this chapter, folks.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The room was cramped, with upwards of twenty people clustered around a table. A tactical display took up most of its top, a lattice of blue light morphing into the shape of terrain, the movement of units, expected fortifications. Not that Garrus could see much of the display, crammed into the corner with a Navy operations officer on one side and Wrex’s bulk on the other. The Navy officer divided his attention between listening to the Colonel standing next to the table and eyeing the four non-humans suspiciously. Even getting them all onto this ship - the ‘gator freighter’ Scimitar - had been difficult, the Marine guards reluctant to allow ‘foreign nationals’ aboard. Shepard had come armed, however, with various official documents establishing their status as contractors. Where the paperwork failed, an invocation of Admiral Hackett’s name didn’t.

But despite that, Garrus was starting to think humans and turians had more in common than either side would like to admit, and whatever Castis Vakarian liked to complain about humanity’s aggressiveness and lack of respect for Citadel space’s institutions. His father wasn’t completely wrong about that. Commander Shepard had asked him, genuine confusion in her voice, why he thought a Council seat had to be earned. He’d pointed out that a seat was only given once a species showed they were willing to defend Council space - and Shepard had tilted her head a little sharp smile on her lips, before she said that he really meant the Council.

He still wasn’t sure what she meant by that distinction. Hadn’t the Hierarchy sacrificed millions against the krogan in the Rebellions?

But the similarity stuck in his mind as Colonel Jeremiah Lang spoke to the assembled officers. A quiet, self-contained man who looked as if he was daydreaming half the time, Lang spoke of the why and the what of ‘Operation Buzzsaw’ - but not the how. He left that to the commanders of each unit to work out the specifics of. That was almost turian.

Previously ‘the Scholar’ had been part of General Tereshchenko’s staff, Shepard had told them on the shuttle ride from the Normandy to the Scimitar . When war had broke out, he’d been given command of the 21st Marine Expeditionary Unit, also known as ‘Taskforce Dagger.’

“You’re the ones on the ground, in the middle of the fight,” he said, “you will have a better view of the situation - the small picture if you will - then I will. Take advantage of opportunities presented to you - so long as it serves our ultimate objective.” His black eyes pressed into each of them clustered around the table. “Those servers must be destroyed or the Navy is going to lose a lot of people tomorrow.”

A handful of grim nods rippled across the room. Garrus snuck a glance at Shepard. Her face was hard to read. She reminded him of a shatha lying in wait - coiled energy concealed by a nonchalant, even lazy exterior.

“Commander Shepard,” Lang said evenly, and there was another flash of familiarity on an alien’s face - the uncomfortable tension strung between two people in the uncommon situation of not
knowing who should take the lead and who should follow. The answer was clear to Garrus - the Spectre should lead - but humans were new to this.

“With your permission, sir” - there was just-there emphasis on the last word. The unspoken tautness in Colonel Lang’s posture eased into unspoken relief. Garrus’ mandibles clicked in surprise - “I’ll take command of the reconnaissance element.”

Lang nodded, not quite smiling. “Very well, Commander. Once we’ve begun the assault on the base, I would like you to take up position as a rapid reaction force - either to retrieve the wounded or to strike weak spots.”

“Roger that,” she acknowledged.

The meeting went quickly after that. The recon element - the Normandy Marines and the Pathfinders - under the callsign of ‘Stranger’ would land first. The Pathfinders would set up a landing zone before Stranger proceeded to the mountains above the geth base to provide spotting for artillery and air strikes. A ‘landing support platoon’ would take over the task of getting 14 tanks and 43 infantry fighting vehicles from the Scimitar to the ground safely, before those same combat elements attacked the geth base in a combined arms assault.

“The lack of significant atmosphere means our focus needs to be on speed over any concerns of the sound of vehicles.” Lang’s XO rubbed her face, bags beneath her eyes. “And we’re looking at a Level One heat hazard, so make sure your people have their hot weather gear on.”

When the last of the specifics were hammered into shape, the officers streamed out of the room, headed back to their units. Shepard led them back to the Scimitar’s flight deck, chewing on a piece of ‘gum,’ which reminded Garrus of the bala leaves some turians (usually from Gothis) habitually sucked on. If the Normandy still had that new ship smell, the Scimitar was showing her age - in the loud thrumming of an old drive core, spots of discolouring on the deck plates and the cramped feel of a ship filled with forty years worth of retrofitted technology.

It’d be good to get back to the Normandy. It was starting to feel like his ship, not just somewhere he was visiting.

“Alright, everyone,” Shepard said over the hum of the incoming Kodiak, “game faces on. This is the real deal.”

The first impression Liara T’Soni got of a ‘real battle’ was one of chaos.

‘Stranger,’ as they were being called, had landed on the blue, heat baked surface of Solcrum in the Mako and two Sturgeons, before the Pathfinders began to set up ‘Landing Zone Cowboy’ with little electronic beacons to guide in the rest of the task force. The rest of them had piled out of the Mako and dug into a ‘skirmish line’ facing the distant geth base. Digging through the sodium crust with the ‘entrenching tool’ - a small, collapsible metal spade taken from the armoury - was backbreaking, especially in full armour, leaving her arms feeling as if the bones in them had been transformed into lead. She more or less slumped into the scratched out hole, white crusting her gauntlets as she set the rifle that still felt unnatural in her hands against the lip of it.

As soon as she’d crawled into that hole, the sky began to erupt with flecks of falling vehicles, their thrusters flaring bright against the distant burn of Grissom. They looked like metallic snowflakes, in their silent and oddly gentle descent. LZ Cowboy transformed from solitude to a chaotic mess of moving vehicles, swarming figures in Alliance blue and the flash of gunships and fighters above. And all of it - utterly silent.
Her helmet buzzed suddenly with Shepard’s voice: “Netcall. Warhorse is taking over security and the LSP is in charge of the LZ now. It'll take Raptor a little while to unfuck themselves, so we're going to get moving for our recon and fire mission tasks. Everyone mount up. Vehicle commanders report to me once everyone is onboard. Stranger Actual out.”

Liara pushed herself up from the sodium cracked ground and headed for the Mako, glancing over her shoulder at the rumble behind her. Four blockish vehicles in Alliance colours inched forward, brutish and menacing, large turrets traversing slowly. The M-080 light tank, with its heavy main gun, thick armour and multiple machine guns. To pump themselves up, the Marines had shown each other videos of those vehicles in battle.

She shivered remembering the huge explosions, the remnants of pirate vehicles blown to shreds of metal on the holo screen and, with one last glance at the blue-striped tanks, pulled herself into the Mako, settling opposite Waaberi.

Shepard entered last, buckling herself in even as she gave the order to move out. Unlike their usual missions, neither Nick nor Alexei were driving. They were apparently the 'fire support team,’ so two sullen Pathfinders had taken over the role.

The driver floored it, the whole vehicle rattling, and Liara winced as her head banged against the side of the crew compartment.

"Worse driver than even Nick," muttered Fredricks.

"I heard that," The other Marine crossed his arms, "Just for you, I'll find every pothole next time I drive."

"Potholes? On unexplored worlds?"

"Potholes, ditches, craters...I'll find something."

"You're a peach, Nick."

The Mako laboured its way up steep inclines, wheels grinding, and through sharp clusters of rock, leading the two smaller Sturgeons. Liara felt blind, on edge. Trapped in metal. Shepard was still beside her, looking through orange holos and tilting her head to listen to comm channels only she could hear.

"Getting some jamming on the sensors," Tali reported from the e-warfare seat, long fingers dancing over controls. "Battlenet is getting all scrambled."

"We're getting close then. Get us into position, driver."

The Mako halted, the bulk of it hidden behind a rise of rock, the Sturgeons finding positions on either side of the IFV. As soon as they were dismounted, Shepard set them to digging again. Liara found herself digging beside Waaberi and Tali while Shepard led a handful of others, including Garrus and Wrex, further down the ridge to where they could get a better view to call in air strikes and artillery. Above flitted a handful of tiny, flying drones controlled by Lance Corporal Chou, that quickly became specks and then nothingness.

Again, arms aching, she attacked the hard, cracked crust. This was never in the vids.

The geth base was a distant grey lump, oddly non-threatening.

Liara side-eyed the triangular form of an anti-tank rocket drone as it settled beside her, legs extending
to brace itself on the rocky ridgeline. The *Normandy* squad had fought them in battle, never alongside such battle drones, but twelve of them - a whole 'flock' - and their controller had been assigned to Shepard's command for the battle. They perched here and there, like deadly birds, unnervingly still.

"Netcall. Get ready, folks. Bombardment commencing."

There was a long moment of stillness as if nothing would happen, and then in the distance blooms of dust and fire. Again and again and again, as the Marine artillery and ships in orbit rained heavy shells down on the outer defences of the geth base. In the silence, it was surreal, almost beautiful. Liara zoomed in with her visor camera to see the outer wall crumbled into little pieces and several of the strange, smooth towers the geth used twisted into lumps.

"Three turrets still up, marking them now, over."

"Armature still up, over."

"Sentry towers down."

"Time to bring in the birds."

Liara half-listened to the chatter of conversation, resting her chin on her forearm as she sat on the ground - until she saw a flicker of movement to their right, in the hills below them. She uncertainly keyed her comm: "Contact two o'clock, two kilometres. Squad of - infantry and two armatures, over."

"Roger that." Shepard seemed pleased, for some reason. Pleased to have a fight or pleased Liara had picked them up? "We'll let them come to us. Drones and vehicles can handle it, over."

The calm, unconcerned way the others prepared for the battle - Waaberi pulling out her rocket launcher and setting it against her shoulder, the Mako's turret rotating towards the danger - calmed the last of her nerves. They gave off an air of having done this many times before.

She could see Alexei ahead of her, standing despite the onrushing danger, his palm pressed to the side of his helmet and his other arm stretched out in front of him, covered in the orange gleam of his omnitool. Two fighters, blue smears across the sky, burst out from behind the mountain and towards the geth base. They were so close to the ground it feels like Liara could reach out and touch them, just before they pulled up and rocketed back into the sky, leaving more craters behind instead of geth.

This happened twice more, Alliance Navy fighters dropping bombs on the geth base and one time on top of the geth patrol working its way towards Stranger, leaving one of the Armatures in two pieces. Then another fighter fell out of the sky in a flash of silent colour, just as the Marines below her exchanged the first shots with the geth patrol, muzzle flashes like strobe lights in the heat, but something struck her as odd.

It was coming towards them, instead of the geth base.

"TAKE COVER!" Shepard's shout carried across the valley, above the thunder of gunfire. It was a voice that expected - *demanded* - obedience, and Liara began to move even before her mind fully registered what was going on.

She threw herself down and into her 'fighting position' and the ground in front and to the side of her exploded with a roar loud enough to rattle her brain and the *thud-thud-thud* of shrapnel ricocheting off her shields. Everything around her was dust, thick enough to blot out the sun. She was on the
ground, covered in dirt. Her aural canals rang, her head throbbed.

She sat up, brushing clods of dirt off her armour. The rocks further down the ridge, where Shepard had been standing with Lieutenant Alenko, were now a blackened crater.

A figure in the familiar dark hardsuit of one of the *Normandy's* Marines appeared through the dust, gesturing at her, clearly trying to say something - but all she could hear was the Goddess damned ringing inside her skull. After a moment the Marine gave up and simply grabbed her arm, hauling her to her feet and dragging her after him. She blinked a few times. Her HUD identified him as *LCpl J Teke*.

Jaz. Thank the Goddess.

He staggered to a stop so suddenly she ran into him, bouncing off his solid form. His voice was a distant whisper through the channel. "Oh no. Ya Allah."

Lance Corporal Hodgins was lying on the ground at an odd angle, half out of his blackened foxhole. His legs were lying two metres from his body. Liara's chest seized tight enough to hurt, and it took her two tries to bring up her omnitool and the squad net, with its life sign monitor for each of the *Normandy* ground crew. *Please, Goddess, let him be alive.*

"He's alive!" she almost shouted, relief sweet and euphoric. She fell to her knees beside him.

"I'll get the corpsman!" Jaz shouted, his voice still faint. "You get some medigel on him!" The young Marine didn't wait for her to answer him but turned and ran, disappearing into the dust still covering the battlefield.

Hodgins' hands fell on her forearm. She had to pull away to get out the medigel packets, wincing as she applied it, his gasps of pain getting louder as her hearing returned. His gray eyes were like a wounded animal.

Her hands were covered in red human blood.

"I don't understand," she told him. He smiled at her, a rictus stretching across his face.

"Stupid...motherfuckers...dropped a bomb on us. Fucking...Navy. Can't find their collective ass with both hands. Don't tell...the Commander I said...that."

"The Alliance Navy," she said dully. She thought about the crater where Shepard and Alenko and the others had been. She imagined them in pieces, like Hodgins, and shuddered.

"Battlenet's...supposed to stop this," Hodgins said distantly. "Doc..."

He'd never called her that before. Always T'Soni or asari.

"Yes?"

"...Doc...when Jaz gets back...ask him to check if...my dick's still there."

"What?" She blinked.

He scowled, his face gleaming with sweat. "Can't ask a lady to..."

There was an alarmed squawk inside her helmet: *"Fucker’s coming in again! Everyone get into cover NOW!"*
Liara threw herself over Lance Corporal David Hodgins almost without a thought, pressing her faceplate into the ceramic plates covering his chest, this man who had only ever treated her with cool contempt. The thought of leaving him to die was worse than the thought of dying herself.

*Is this how prey feels, the moment before the predator strikes?*

A mass accelerator boomed from above, a line of impacts kicking up dirt towards her in a blink of an eye that felt like an eternity. She drew her biotics around her and forced them out, a blue dome forming over the two of them.

Then the hits struck. Each felt as if they were pounding her into the ground, agony ripping through her as the barrier sapped her strength - but no, she couldn't drop it or they were both dead.

Seconds passed. The silver and blue of the fighter passed overhead. She pushed off Hodgins chest, the barrier flickering and dying, and collapsed beside him on her back. She could taste burnt ozone.

"Hodgins?" There was no reply, and she couldn't find the strength to rise. "David?"

She closed her eyes against the urge to cry, when his hand grasped hers and squeezed.

"Still here...Doc."

Staff Lieutenant Kaidan Alenko was a controlled man. He'd honed his hold on his temper as finely as he had his control over his biotics. That came in handy when he had to sprint for cover and then throw up a barrier alongside his commanding officer and a krogan to protect the ground forces with them from shrapnel.

Now, though, letting his hands drop with a hint of a quiver, blue wreath fading, Kaidan felt a surge of cold race through his chest and into his throat, freezing him into clarity. Those of Stranger further down the hill had been lucky - Shepard's quick reflexes and the three powerful biotics - but the alerts popping up on his HUD showed that not all of their people had been as lucky. Three blinked with red - severe injuries. Another six were showing signs of injury. One of the Sturgeons smoked sullenly, turret ripped off and armour cracked black. Two Pathfinder Marines were pulling frantically at the half melted hatch to get to the driver and gunner.

"I'm going to kill whoever called that in," Shepard said beside him. Her voice was very matter of fact, as if she were advising him of a new manoeuvre or the weather.

"I'll help," he said from between numb lips, voice cool and calm as a winter lake.

She keyed her comm. "Hawk, Stranger. Check fire, check fire! That bomb just hit us! Check fire-"

The fighter was coming back. Alenko grabbed Shepard's arm and pulled her down with him, his hands lighting a split second before hers did. The barrier sprung back into existence, and he gritted his teeth, arms aching with the effort of holding it up.

The gun run sliced past them and up the ridge. His chest twisted with fire when two more alerts popped up on his HUD. *Mission Specialist L T'Soni. LCpl J Teke.*

"Fucking check fire!" Shepard shouted. "You're killing Marines!"

There was an alarmed squawk of reply, a distraught squadron commander's voice on the radio, but Shepard didn't reply, simply switched channels to call for a medevac shuttle. Kaidan ducked when gunfire snapped overhead - the geth had resumed their attack. He brought up a glowing fist and tore
a geth platform from the ground. A sharp retort came from just above him, where Garrus and Ashley had set up with their sniper rifles, one of them punching the geth's head right off with a round.

"Machinegun's down," Alenko reported to Shepard as she took shots at another geth, the rounds raising puffs of shattered rock. "I'm going to go see what's going on."

"Roger."

He ran.

He slid into the fighting position holding the members of Draven's team, behind some rocks. Ling was nowhere to be found - nor was Jaz Teke, Alpha Team's LMG gunner who was showing as wounded on his HUD. The team was just Draven and Fredricks.

"Where's Ling and Teke?"

"Looking for the wounded," Gung Ho replied, shooting off a burst from her Valkyrie. A geth unit skittered back into cover.

"Why'd you send Teke?" Logic would normally dictate keeping your machinegunner.

She nodded to Fredricks. "He's controlling the AT drones, sir, only thing keeping that last armature from advancing on us now the drone controller is down, and I didn't want to send Ling alone. I can't raise Waaberi."

He nodded and moved on to the fighting position. Gunny Alvarez had most of the her Pathfinders well in hand, laying down suppressing fire towards the geth, though she was clearly concerned about her Marines who'd been further up the slope. He promised that he was sending someone to sort it all out, and kept moving. He’d just settled in beside Garrus, having ordered Ash to go sort out the wounded and rally the others, when he saw a surge of geth below, silver and red metal gleaming under the blue light of Solcrum.

No.

Corporal Richard Jenkins was the first Marine Staff Lieutenant Kaidan Alenko had lost to enemy fire. Not the first injury, but the first death. He wasn’t going to let anyone be added to that tally today.

No.

He pulled tech grenades from his webbing and threw them - one, two, three. Watched them clatter down the ridge, bouncing between rocks. Watched them explode into sheets of electricity arcing over the geth units, ripping apart shields and confusing targeting programs. Then, his jaw set, Kaidan shifted into a stance and raised his hands, blue fire rippling from his hands. Geth troopers were ripped from Solcrum’s salt earth, sent careening towards the sky, one after another. Then, brilliant explosions as Shepard and Wrex realised what he was doing and threw their own, conflicting fields, leaving only scraps of geth behind.

“Armature!” Garrus warned. Kaidan could see it. Digging its claw legs into the rock and salt, labouring its way towards his people, face like gun glowing ominously.

No.

He gritted his teeth, digging his armoured heels into the ground and pushed with his biotics. It felt like, for a long moment, as if he were carrying a whole planet in his hands. Beating him towards the
ground, turning his whole body heavy with exertion. But the armature jerked off the ground unsteadily, rising. He felt more than saw another biotic field mesh with his, the familiar aggressive fluttering of Shepard’s biotics taking some of the weight.

Rockets burst from the anti-tank drones that had survived the air strikes, punching through the armature’s thick steel skin. Three or four solid strikes and the geth unit blew itself apart, its eezo core detonated by the rockets' explosive charges.

Kaidan lowered his arms and the Lift field, and then sat down heavily, head swimming. Garrus stared at him.

Below him, he heard Sergeant Gung Ho Draven shout without even a shred of irony, “OORAH!”

The stink of blood and fear overwhelmed the filter of Ashley’s helmet. Get to the wounded, get them out of here, Alenko had said, in between trying to organise a defensive line as the geth pressed their advantage. It felt wrong, backtracking from the roar of rifles and machineguns, the rounds screaming overhead, but Kaidan was right. It was the job of the senior enlisted to get the wounded to safety, and in the absence of a First Sergeant, that was her.

She knelt in the dust, as Ling and the Pathfinder medic - Hospitalman First Class O’Reilly - worked on the wounded Marines, dragged by their brother and sister Marines into a dip of the terrain that sheltered them from enemy gunfire. Blood spread across blue-white sodium, turning it pink.

T’Soni was holding Lance Corporal Hodgins’ hand, speaking soothingly to him, but her unfocused eyes lingered on the torn, bloody mess where his legs had been. There was blood on her gauntlets from applying medigel. Jaz sat beside both of them, his helmet off, his eyes unfocused, but his grip on his Typhoon sure. He’d been getting Ling for Hodgins when the second air strike had come, propelling him face first into a rock, cracking his helmet casing and leaving him with a lump on the head and a concussion.

No one seemed to know where exactly Lance Corporal Waaberi, Bravo’s team leader, was. Her emergency beacon hadn’t been triggered. Ashley’s HUD wasn’t showing her as wounded - she could only assume (and hope) Waaberi’s comms were malfunctioning and that she’d show up eventually, pissed off about her teammate getting his legs blown off.

“Casrep,” Ash said shortly to Ling as he bent over one of the Pathfinders - Sergeant Wong, a hole burnt through her abdominal plate.

“Well, shit, Sarn’t,” he said, a familiar anger buzzing in his voice. Ling would punch death in the face if he could. “We’ve got three Priority Ones. Hodgins’ lost his legs below the knee and has some shrapnel wounds to his upper legs - I’m concerned about his blood loss. Wong here has an abdominal wound and definite bowel perforations. Huang took some shrapnel to the face and I believe she has a skull fracture. I’ve got seven other wounded, three of which also need medevac. T’Soni looks fine, but she’s suffering from biotic exhaustion and we need to get IV lines into her sooner rather than later. I don’t have the hands or the supplies to deal with these injuries effectively.”

“How long do we have?”

He shook his head. Wong cried out and shuddered under his hands. “Not long. They need a medevac now, Sergeant, or we’re gonna start losing people.”

“Roger that. I’ll get you your medevac.”

The pilots had tried two approaches, only to break off when attacked with anti-air fire from shoulder-
fired launchers - too slow to catch one of the Tridents but more than capable of blowing a Kodiak to hell. The geth AA team had to be nearby. She pushed herself to her feet and jumped out of the little hole the CCP was tucked into, boots raising little puffs of dirt as she ran to the nearest fighting position - scraped into the salt by Dubyansky and his team.

“Sergeant!”

“Chou,” her voice was sharp, to the point. There wasn’t time - or words - to waste. No time to discuss things with Alenko or even Shepard. Her Marines were dying. “You said you got eyes on a couple of geth up the ridge with your drone? Could they be an AA team?”

“Yes, Sergeant-”

Their conversation was interrupted by a snap of gunfire, responded to by Nick’s wordless shout of rage and the blazing fire of his machine gun, interspersed with the rat-tat-tat of Dubyansky’s assault rifle.

“Yes, I think they could be an AA team.”

“Mark it for me,” she ordered. The diminutive Marine did so, and Ash got back to her feet, pulling herself over the lip of the fighting position. “Thanks, Chou.”

“Where’re you going, Staff?” the Marine asked, eyes wide behind her visor.

“To get rid of the AA team,” Ash said matter-of-factly, as if it were obvious.

“By yourself?”

“Keep holding the defensive line,” she ordered and then jogged away, gripping her rifle.

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CODEX ENTRY

Fourth Marine Division (Airmobile): ‘First into hell’ is the motto of the Alliance’s elite Fourth Marine Division - known as the ‘Airmobile’ - and in many ways this is true; every Marine in the division is aerospace assault qualified, and one of the division’s purposes is to drop into battle to seize ‘beachheads’ and clear the way for other units. It’s said that the Fourth is made up of ‘those individuals who had to jump off a tower in boot camp, got to the bottom and decided they wanted to jump off something higher.’

Paired with naval Shuttle Assault Transport Squadrons, these Marines use thruster modules on their armour for ‘HALCD’ (High Altitude, Low Controlled Descent) jumps into combat. This means that Fourth units can be rapidly deployed even when a landing zone isn’t available and minimizes the time a shuttle is stationary (and vulnerable) while deploying troops.

A rapid reaction force, the Fourth MARDIV can be en route within 18 hours of notification and is capable of ‘forcible entry’ - aka seizing landing zones, spaceports and key infrastructure to accommodate following forces. In addition to this role, the Division’s strategic mobility means that after an invasion of a planet it will be assigned to hunt down surviving defenders located by ships or drones. However, the division lacks significant armoured vehicles and heavy artillery, leading some Marines to wryly describe themselves as ‘expensive speed bumps’ should Alliance space be invaded.

The Fourth MARDIV includes the 10th, 11th, 12th and 50th Marine Regiments, the 14th Field Artillery Regiment, the 4th Tank Battalion, equipped with M-080 light tanks, and the 1st Pathfinder Company, a specialised recon unit. The division is currently the ground combat element of 4MEF.
and is commanded by Major General Alyona Tereshchenko.

Chapter End Notes

Gator Freighter: an assault landing ship, lands Marines into battle.
MEU: Marine Expeditionary Unit
Shatha: predator indigenous to Palaven; dangerous even to turians.
AA: Anti-air
Casrep: casualty report
Medevac: medical evacuation
Perforation: penetration of the wall of a hollow organ.
“Relax, Captain,” said Commodore Hannah Shepard, arms clasped behind her back as she stood on the admiral’s bridge of her flagship.

There were days that Hannah Shepard missed her days as a Flight Lieutenant - just her, her fighter, and her wingman’s voice in her ear. She missed the rush of adrenaline when you pulled out of a dive in gravity, the simplicity of the hunt. Today, with the heavy cruiser Vancouver humming a war song beneath her feet and nine warships whirling to her commands, was not one of those days.

It was, however, one of the days that Hannah concentrated solely on the here and now - sank into the role of Commodore with her whole being - and shoved away thoughts of her daughter on yet another planet in yet another gunfight. Some might call it cold, but there were hundreds of lives relying on Hannah Shepard’s ability to compartmentalise and operate with cold, precise logic. Beyond even that, she’d long ago realised that attempting to keep Emilia away from gunfights was like trying to keep a fish out of water. You either accepted its nature, or something would die.

Hannah Shepard had been called cold often. But she had never sacrificed a life due to her own selfish desires, and that could not be said of every naval officer the galaxy over.

Captain Theron Haddon looked dubious, something she would permit right now due to the lack of any junior officers or sailors in their vicinity. She believed that no one could think of everything, and thus the input of her subordinates was valuable - but she would never be questioned in front of any crew.

“Ma’am, this is well outside of our operating procedures.”

“Operating procedures are for peacetime, Theron. In wartime we must sometimes take the lesser of two evils,” she said crisply. On the screen in between them flickered the image of the gas giant Theshaca. Five years ago, the Systems Alliance had hidden sensors on the planet’s moons, tracking the FTL exit vectors of pirates preying on the surrounding cluster. The data had led to the crippling of several key pirate groups and the destruction of eight major pirate bases - striking a blow against their masters in the Hegemony. Pirates hadn’t been seen in this cluster since; Hannah, however, would trade geth for pirates any day.

Of course, that problem was likely to reoccur until the Alliance dealt with the Hegemony properly. She had no doubts that the war with the geth would leave tempting weaknesses for the batarians to strike against, but that was a concern for another day. Today, Theshaca would be a weapon for the Alliance again.

Theron’s face twitched slightly. In truth, he was less aggressive than she preferred in her subordinates, but Hannah had been in a different fleet still learning the ropes of a dreadnought in preparation for the Orizaba until barely a month ago. Her promotion and reassignment had been sudden, with no time to tinker with her personnel roster.

“Commodore, with all due respect-” she hated when people said that “-there’s a good chance that this manoeuvre could damage the flotilla, giving us a disadvantage if the geth respond.”

“When.”
“Ma’am?”

“When they respond, Captain.” she sighed, “Listen to me, Theron. The geth will not take the attack on Solcrum lying down. They can't afford to. It necessitates a response, and we’re what’s standing in between the MEU and the geth.”

For all that the geth were mustering in the Armstrong Cluster and the Fifth Fleet was loitering nearby, neither side had taken the relay. That would force a battle immediately, and she suspected neither the geth nor Hackett were ready for a stand-up fight yet.

“I know your daughter is on Solcrum—”

He cut off at the look of cool derision on her face.

“This isn’t about my daughter, Captain Haddon. This is about the hundreds of Marines on Solcrum and their mission. If it fails, we will lose many ships - and more lives - when Hackett attacks. If we sit out here with our asses hanging out, visible to everyone within a light year or two, we lose the initiative - and potentially get smashed to pieces by a geth battlegroup before Hackett can respond. This is a risk, but it’s one I am going to make. Get to your post.”

Once he was gone, Hannah breathed in and turned to face the image of Theshaca as her staff began to file in and take their positions. Perhaps she had been hard on him, but Haddon had become accustomed to running the Vancouver on solo patrols against pirates. He was inexperienced in actual war. Hannah Shepard had never commanded a flotilla in a battle before, but she knew war. She had already bled because of war.

“Let’s do this,” her XO said. She’d taken Captain Varlam Bogomolov with her from the First Fleet, where he’d been the captain of one of the Kilimanjaro’s escorts. They worked well together, and his experience as a destroyer and cruiser captain shored up her own weaknesses.

Slowly, the nine warships of the 50th Scout Flotilla began to dip towards the outer atmosphere of Theshaca, slipping apart to individually navigate their way through the bands of radiation that wrapped around the planet. As soon as they hit atmosphere, the entire ship began to rattle and shake, thrusters fighting the incredible winds swirling around it.

A nerve-wracking hour later, the ship’s bridge reported that the Vancouver was in position, followed soon after by status reports from the rest of the flotilla.

“Ypres and Marathon are reporting damage, ma’am,” Bogomolov reported.

“Can they stay in formation?”

“Yes, Commodore.”

She settled into her chair and looked at the tactical readouts. The flotilla was now being cooled by the freezing, swirling clouds of Theshaca and ideally, their radiation - the greatest give away of a warship - would be lost amongst the gas giant’s.

“Let’s just hope Haddon keeps us out of those storms,” muttered Bogomolov.

There was a myriad of issues to staying within a gas giant’s atmosphere - one had to continually fly to avoid falling towards the core of the planet and quite literally melting, and avoid the savage storms that might tear a ship to pieces.

But the geth might guess the trick of turning off nonessential systems and active sensors to hide
amongst orbital debris and moons, but she hoped they wouldn’t guess that an Alliance commander would be reckless enough to enter the planet. She hated basing so much strategy on guesswork, but they knew so little about the geth! This wasn’t like fighting turians and barians.

And now, all there was to do was wait.

There was a sort of simplicity one could get in battle. Ashley Williams had experienced it a handful of times. A flow. Mind and body and environment as one. She leapt over a rock, armour a second skin as the servos whirred, sweat slicking strands of hair to her forehead. Her rifle was an extension of her hands. She climbed the ridge above her battered unit in what seemed like only minutes, body electric like she’d taken a hit of stimulant, exhaustion and heat forgotten or pushed aside to where they couldn’t touch her.

Anger and adrenaline had combined and mixed into clarity.

Kill the AA team. Get her people out. Worry about everything else later.

She heard electronic clicking. She wondered what the geth spoke about, in code. Did you see those idiot humans? Blew themselves up! Hilarious. She rounded the corner, rifle raised. The explosion had left a lot of still fading heat and confusion - perhaps the chaos had hidden her because the geth were caught off-guard. She shot a red one right in the flashlight with a burst of automatic fire, finger on the trigger without a thought. Her momentum carried her into a second - she swung the rifle butt, knocking it to the ground in a puff of dust. She brought the muzzle down, right against its central processing unit and pulled the trigger. It died with a whine.

Ashley’s lip curled. Not AA. Not her target.

They knew she was there now. Rifle shots raised puffs of shattered rock, closer and closer to her. She threw herself behind a rock, hands moving on her webbing, finding the familiar circular disk in its pouch. Thumbing the button and tossing it out.

A moment after the explosion, she was on her feet again. One of the geth platforms was still and the other attempted to drag itself towards cover, both chrome legs blown off - with a bulky shoulder-fired AA rocket launcher on its back. She put a burst into it and another until it stopped moving. She felt nothing but satisfaction.

Her shields stuttered blue. She swung around to find another geth unit advancing on her, withering her KB percentile by percentile. Williams took three running steps towards it and threw herself with all the force her genemodded muscles and hardsuit servos could give her. They both went down, human and machine. The geth clacked something at her and twisted on top of her, a rib-crushing weight. A metallic hand seized her by the throat and she heard something crack in the suit protecting her.

She didn’t bother trying to pry the hand off, instead finding the hilt of her (new) combat knife and pulling it free. The first savage stab skated off the geth’s pale white armoured plating. The second tore through conduits and electronics. It warbled at her, grip tightening until she thought her neck might give way and be crushed, and then the geth collapsed on top of her.

With a wheezing breath, Ashley shoved the geth unit off her, sheathed the knife and pulled out her pistol. She shot it twice for surety and then pulled herself towards the nearest rock formation.

Her suit readout showed that it’d taken some damage, but her med system didn’t show an injury.
She’d been lucky.

This was one of the things her mother was never, ever finding out about, she decided, and then keyed her comm.

“DUSTOFF, this is Stranger 7. AA team is down. Say again, AA team is down, over.”

“Copy that, Stranger 7. Inbound to get your wounded now, over.”

Ashley picked her way down the slope, back towards the CCP, ripping off a bit of plastic from her hardsuit that was constraining her neck movement and tossing it aside.

The shuttles had just landed when she made it back, rifle across her chest. Hodgins, Huang, Wong, and another Pathfinder with severe burns - most likely from the Sturgeon that had been destroyed - were already being loaded into the Kodiaks, with their red crosses blazoned across blue flanks.

Jaz was pulling away from Ling’s grip. “I’m staying! I can still fight. Take T’Soni.”

T’Soni looked mutinous as well. Ashley interrupted, pushing in between the corpsman and his rebellious charges, scowling beneath her visor.

“I don’t have time for this bullshit. Get on the shuttle, both of you, before I drag you onto it!”

She grabbed an arm in each hand and marched the asari and the Marine to the Kodiak’s door, glaring until they sat down, dejected.

The door clicked shut once the rest of the wounded were loaded. Williams stood beside Ling, and together they watched the Kodiaks rocket back into the sky, leaving behind only red splotches against the blue-white of the ground.

“I heard you went after the AA team yourself.”

She shrugged.

“You’re fucking crazy, Staff Sergeant.” He was grinning.

“Don’t forget it.”

________________________________________

Shepard stared down at the geth base below, mouth a taut line. Eleven years of training and experience was all that kept her from raging. Down a vehicle. Down ten Marines and one asari. And it hadn’t been the geth to do it - no, it’d been some trigger-happy idiot looking for glory.

She pushed it all away, banished it to a remote island in her heart, where it would wait for her. Compartmentalising had kept her and her men alive more than once. Grief was best left to when the bullets had stopped flying.

Colonel Lang’s voice was in her ear: “Stranger, the assault is commencing.” She could see the truth of that - the company of tanks leading the line in a steady advance towards the battered base. “I need your Ns’ infiltration capabilities. Are you combat effective? Over.”

“Affirmative, Overlord,” she said shortly.

“Good to hear, Stranger. I have some bad news. The geth fleet is moving to stop us, so the Fifth
Fleet is launching their attack early. We need the servers down ASAP, so get down here, over.”

She bit her lip. Below her was a ripple of fire as the M-080s tore the remainder of the geth to pieces, flanks covered by cheap, wheeled drones that mindlessly drove in front of any return fire that threatened the tanks. Mako IFVs began to punch through perimeter fencing and stop, disgorging dozens of tiny blue dots like ants.

“Copy that, sir. We are oscar mike.” Shepard hauled herself to her feet and went in search of Alenko, Alvarez, and Williams. She found them standing by the wreckage of the Sturgeon scout vehicle, still smoking. Alenko was frowning at Williams, a rare sight - he always seemed more amused than irritated by his platoon sergeant’s sense of humour and irreverence.

“Ma’am,” Alenko said.

The Pathfinder met her eyes, and her old friend’s were vacant. Jules had gone to sleep, leaving Gunny Alvarez to go through the motions. “Sergeant Mitchell is dead. I’m down a full team.”

Sergeant Lionel Mitchell had been the vehicle gunner for the Sturgeon. She hadn’t known him very well but it still felt like a knife between her ribs. Shepard looked at Alvarez steadily, asking a question without words. What do you need from me, Jules?

Alvarez lifted her chin. “Orders, Commander?”

She could do that. “Overlord needs my Ns inside the bunker. If I give you both the vehicles once we get down there, can you take care of medevac? There’s an infantry platoon setting up security for their battalion aid station and LZ, so it should just be assisting with transport.”

Alvarez nodded. “Yes, we’re up for that.”

“We’re going into the bunker?” Alenko asked.

She nodded. “Looks like. Get our guys ready to roll. I’m not certain what exactly the Colonel wants yet, but I have a feeling it’s going to involve some fireworks, so get me a report on our supply status.”

Williams nodded, “On it.”

“We have the machineguns back up?”

Kaidan frowned. “Both Hodgins and Jaz have been medevaced, but Williams and I made sure the Typhoons got given to the assistant gunners.”


The Vancouver groaned beneath Commodore Shepard’s feet, the sound of metal twisting beneath force shuddering through her decks. Hannah ignored the sound, projecting only cool dispassion - the ship was Harrod’s business - and focused on the tactical plot. On the solid dots of blue and red representing her warships and those of the geth, the flecks of fighters whirling in a chaotic dance.

The initial gambit had gone well. The Marathon had lost a sensor array when descending into Theshaca, but nothing mission critical when fighting in formation. The Ypres had taken worse damage, weakening her shields and crippling a thruster module. She’d had her climb back (carefully)
into a more conventional position in orbit.

When the geth battlegroup had arrived - a division of destroyers escorting dropships - they’d spotted the *Ypres* quickly. As Hannah had hoped, two of the four destroyers broke off and rushed the lone frigate, which had promptly run for the relay in a not quite feigned retreat. She’d waited until enough distance had been created between the two geth elements and then sprung the trap. The geth ships had died in fire, crushed by torpedo dark energy fields or bisected by mass accelerator cannons. Divide and conquer, a core Alliance tenet.

Then, the geth had called for backup. The *Ypres* was gone, through the Relay to safety - and to get Hackett’s fleet.

Now the five remaining frigates had formed a screen around the three cruisers *Vancouver*, *Seoul*, and *Adelaide*, creating an interlocked wall of point defence, slashing away the torpedos the geth ships spat at them, darting away from mass accelerator cannon rounds.

Across from her lurked a full squadron of insectoid geth heavy cruisers. The 50th Scout Flotilla wasn’t meant for such engagements; the *Vancouver* was taking a pounding as they focused on her, the biggest threat - there was no way her ships could last for long against their combined firepower.

“All ships, follow new course,” she said crisply.

The *Vancouver* groaned and swung, the flotilla folding around it and accelerating towards Theshaca.

“On our vector, ma’am,” one of her techs observed, “All ships keeping formation.” The Commodore nodded, pleased. She’d had little time to hammer the flotilla from a loosely associated administrative unit into one capable of battle, but the ships and their captains were keeping up thus far.

Engage the enemy and delay them until the fleet arrives Hackett had told her. But there were better ways to do that than a straight up slugging fest with someone a lot bigger than you.

The 50th Scout Flotilla hit the gravity well of Theshaca, curved around it gracefully and was thrown out, as if from a slingshot. Each vessel accelerated to roughly two percent of light speed, without barely a thruster burn between them, eating up thousands of kilometres a second.

The Flotilla was on course towards the enemy squadron once more.

“Launch torpedos.”

A *Hastings* class frigate could launch eight torpedos in a volley. A light cruiser 12, a heavy cruiser 14. Altogether, the 50th Scout Flotilla launched 78 torpedos towards the eight enemy vessels.

Some were caught in flashes of GARDIAN lasers, dying in the deep void of space with their killing purpose unfulfilled. Twelve struck the leading geth cruiser, tearing its starboard to shreds, leaving it to spin in lamed circles. Another cruiser was struck by ten surviving torpedos and tore itself to pieces from the inside out as a torpedo struck a reactor or a drive core. Another found its bow ripped open in a glancing strike.

Seconds passed. The two flotillas sped closer together.

“All ships, fire main cannons.”

The *Vancouver* rumbled. Eight slugs were tossed towards the geth at ludicrous speed. The crippled lead cruiser was cored right along her spine, unfolding almost unceremoniously. Another was impacted midships, bow and stern separating and spilling debris between them.
But quicker than any human could have reacted, the geth were replying with their own, deadly accurate accelerator fire. Hannah swore internally as the Mentaurus’ shields flickered as she desperately tried to evade, then disappeared. Two mass accelerator rounds smashed into her bow. At this speed, a direct hit was a death sentence - it was as if she’d flown into a wall. The frigate crumpled and twisted, crushing her crew instantly. Debris spilt into the void, little bits of ship and crew spreading across the Vancouver’s sensors.

The Commodore’s fingernails dug into her hand, lips pulling into a snarl.

“Fire!”

More destruction, the kind the human brain couldn’t fully comprehend, ripping through the geth squadron. Hannah Shepard didn't truthy know how many sentient beings she’d killed as a fighter pilot and starship captain. She wasn’t even sure if she should count geth as part of that. Like deleting software, if you thought about it.

The Vancouver had slowed by now and soared in erratic, evasive movements in between shots, and that was what saved her. The entire ship jerked and shuddered violently as a gath round sliced through her shield, then crashed through bow compartments, killing ten crewmen at their posts and wounding others, smashing two torpedo tubes and a mass accelerator cannon to shattered pieces. The ship began to list to starboard, bleeding clouds of air.

Hannah was thrown painfully in her restraints, gasping for breath. She raised her eyes to the tactical screen as warning klaxons reverberated through the CIC and an announcement called damage control and medical teams to the hull breaches. The geth ships were dead, dying or crippled. A thin smile carved across her face, humourless.

“Bogomolov, report on fleet status,” she said flatly.

“The Mentaurus is gone.” Blood was trickling down his grim face where he’d caught his cheek on the edge of something. “Not reading any life pods. Doesn’t look like they had time to evacuate. The Ypres has two severe hull breaches and is down four torpedo launchers. The Marathon has damage to its aft reactor and main thrusters; they’re dead in the water and in the process of shutting that reactor down. As for us: the Vancouver is down one spinal cannon and two torpedo tubes; we have hull breaches on the forward third and fourth decks, and the starboard bow thruster isn’t responding. Medical is reporting we have ten dead and thirty wounded.”

“Get me a line to Admiral Hackett,” she ordered her comms technician.

Some would call this a victory, one-sided in its casualties. Twelve geth ships destroyed or crippled for one destroyed frigate and damage to three of her ships. Funny, but it never felt quite as sweet as victory should. At least eighty families would be getting a knock on the door in the next twenty-four hours. When the screams of battle faded and the blood began to dry, Hannah Shepard would count their names.

“Ma’am!”

She lifted her head. “What is it?”

The young sensors tech swallowed. “We just picked up a lot of heat signatures coming out of FTL. At least sixty! I think it’s the geth fleet.”

“Launch reconnaissance drones,” she ordered, rolling her shoulders with a grimace. “How long until the enemy fleet reaches engagement range?”
“Four hours, Commodore,” Bogomolov replied.

“Ma’am, I have FleetCom on the line,” reported Comms Technician First Class Jian.

“Sir,” she acknowledged as Hackett’s face flickered into being before her.

“Sitrep,” he said curtly. Not a man to mince words was Admiral Hackett. When the Orizaba was launched, Hannah would be his flag captain.

“We’ve destroyed four geth destroyers and eight heavy cruisers. I’ve lost a frigate; I have three ships badly damaged, including my flagship. In addition, we have enemy contacts on screen - at least sixty geth ships including a dreadnought, though not the dreadnought.” she gave a silent prayer to the Lord for small mercies. “Four hours until their dread is in range.” At which point the dreadnought would dismantle them at its leisure. Hannah didn’t intend to stick around for that.

Hackett nodded, steely eyes not revealing even a flicker of thought. “Can your disabled frigate conduct emergency repairs in time?”

Hannah looked down at the report the Marathon had sent through and shook her head. “Negative, sir. Most of the main thruster assemblies are simply gone, and her reactor has been shut down for safety. She’s not going anywhere.”

Hackett considered this. “Scuttle her and get out, Commodore. The Fleet is coming in - if the geth want to get to Solcrum, they’ll have to get through us first. You’ve done well, but now it’s our turn.”

“Roger that, sir,” she said crisply.

“Hackett out.”

An hour later, Commodore Hannah Shepard stood with Commander Jeremiah Kingston and his surviving senior crew on the Vancouver’s viewing deck, the younger man’s jaw taut and his eyes gleaming dangerously bright. Pretending not to notice, she resolutely fixed her eyes on the helplessly drifting hulk of the Marathon.

“From stardust she came and to stardust she returns,” Hannah murmured. Commander Kingston swallowed, Adam’s apple bobbing and his finger hovered over his omnitool for a moment before pressing down.

And together they watched as the SSV Marathon died in silent splendour.

CODEX ENTRY:

Systems Alliance Naval Service Units:

Basic Structure of Marine Corps Units:

Fireteam: 4 Marines. An infantry fireteam is comprised of a team leader (Corporal) who also acts as the grenadier, an automatic rifleman and second in command carrying a light machine gun (PFC or Lance Corporal), assistant automatic rifleman carrying a rifle and extra heatsinks for the LMG (PFC or Lance Corporal) and a rifleman (PFC or Private).
Squad/Section: 9-10 Marines. Comprised of three fire teams and a squad leader, usually a Sergeant or Staff Sergeant.

Platoon: 19-44 Marines. Comprised of 2-4 squads or sections and commanded by a Second Lieutenant or a First Lieutenant, with a Staff Sergeant or Gunnery Sergeant as platoon sergeant.

Company: 100-150 Marines. Comprised of 2-5 platoons along with a headquarters element and commanded by a Staff Lieutenant with a First Lieutenant as XO and a First Sergeant as senior enlisted advisor.

Battalion: Roughly 400-600 Marines. Comprised of 3-5 companies. Commanded by a Lieutenant Colonel with a Major as XO and a Sergeant Major as the senior enlisted advisor.

Regiment: 3000-5000 Marines. Comprised of 3-5 battalions. Commanded by a Colonel with a Lieutenant Colonel as XO and a Regimental Sergeant Major as senior enlisted advisor. An infantry regiment with often form the ‘Regimental Combat Team’ of a Marine brigade.

Brigade: Roughly 14500 Marines. Comprised of a headquarters element, a ground combat element, an air combat element and a combat logistics element. Commanded by a Brigadier with a Colonel as XO and a Sergeant Major as senior enlisted.

Division: Between 10 000 and 20 000 Marines and made up of at least three regiments. Commanded by a Major General with a Colonel as XO and advised by a Command Sergeant Major. Divisions may have specialities, such as light infantry or armour.

Force: Several divisions, between 20 000 and 70 000 Marines. Commanded by a Lieutenant General.

Basic Structure of Navy Units:

Division: a subdivision of a flotilla or squadron, consisting of 2-4 ships. Dependent on the size of the ships in the division, commanded by the most senior captain or a commodore.

Flotilla: Any group of more than two ships, though most commonly of a single cruiser and 4-6 frigates, though composition can vary widely. Depending on size, commanded by a Commodore, Rear Admiral or Vice Admiral.

Squadron: 4-8 ships of the same classification (e.g., a squadron of corvettes or cruisers), commanded by a Commodore, Rear Admiral or Vice Admiral.

Task group: A temporary formation of vessels assembled for a purpose. Vary in size, commanded by a flag officer.

Strike Force: a significant formation based around either a dreadnought (DSF) or a carrier (CSF), consisting of said vessel and supporting escorts.

Fleet: largest formation, usually consisting of one hundred combat-capable warships and a variety of support vessels. In peacetime, fleets are largely administrative units, with individual groups and ships conducting independent missions. Commanded by an Admiral.

Chapter End Notes
MEU: Marine Expeditionary Unit.
AA: anti-air
FleetCom: Fleet Command
The front of Urdnot Wrex’s armour was covered in white conduit fluid and scorch marks. He stepped over the pieces of a geth, hefting his shotgun, surrounded by the tight walls of the underground geth base. The Graal spike thrower was a very difficult weapon to find in Citadel space, and illegal under three different arms treaties. He’d been amused when his requisition request had actually been fulfilled - as he had been by the sudden appearance of a similarly illegal Lieberschaft 2180 amongst Shepard’s gear.

Wrex was on point, as he should be, with the young Marine Mohamed one side with the light machine gun and Shepard the other side. Death, friendly fire, these were parts of war and always had been, but Shepard had taken it personally - and was now taking out her frustration on the geth. He could understand that.

They paused by a junction, Shepard with one hand to her helmet as she listened to the colonel. Then she nodded, closed the comm channel and raised her head to look at the optics of Wrex’s helmet. “Follow this course. We’ll avoid their strong points and go straight for the server room.”

He grunted, “Makes sense.”

“You know, you’re not what I expected,” Williams said. “I always heard that krogan have a honour culture and don’t like sneaking around.”

He turned his head slowly to look at her. “Right. Because you humans have a wide range of cultures and attitudes, but all krogan think and act the same.”

“Look, I didn’t mean-” she stopped. “Forget I said anything.”

“Done.” Wrex wasn’t here to entertain the egos and misconceptions of alien youths. He respected Williams as a warrior, and that was all she would get from him.

Shepard coughed. “Let’s get moving.”

They moved in silence, using jamming technology and cloaking devices to hide amongst the chaos. Dulled by the walls and rock, he could hear the staccato of gunfire, the deep thump of explosions. The ‘air mobile’ Marines were taking up the brunt of the assault, tying up most of the geth forces and bullishly hammering an advance through them. Meanwhile, the Normandy’s ground team were slipping in between gaps in the geth lines via maintenance corridors and vents, like a stiletto knife in the back.

What geth they did meet were quickly destroyed by a combination of biotic attacks, tech grenades, and shotgun blasts.

When one rocket trooper fell, chest studded with the oversized flechettes from Wrex’s Graal, Williams whistled. “Wish I had one of them.”

He reloaded. “It would probably rip your arms off.”

“Destroying my dreams here, Wrex.”
“If we don’t get bombed to shit by the geth fleet,” said Shepard, tossing a grenade around the corner to blow up an onrushing shock trooper, “I promise I’ll find you a Crusader.”

Williams brightened. “You do that, and I could kiss you.”

A pause.

“You know, in a platonic, totally within regulations way. Ma’am.”

Shepard’s lips twitched in amusement underneath her visor.

“I’m just going to stop talking now,” Williams decided. There were a couple of snickers from the Marines that cut off sharply when the Staff Sergeant looked at them. Wrex ignored it all. The mating rituals of humans hardly interested him.

He rounded a corner - they were close to their target now - paused for a split second and then threw himself backward, knocking the human battlemaster off her feet, but into cover just before the hallway was filled with the whine of a geth pulse cannon. Metal and concrete broke under each hit, leaving blackened craters the size of the krogan’s huge hand. Private First Class Mohamed wasn’t quick enough, and he went down with a yelp, shields sparking under the assault.

Shepard twisted onto her back and raised a glowing hand. A biotic field wrapped around Mohamed and pulled him unceremoniously into their midst, practically into the corpsman’s lap. His light machine gun spun across the floor, stopped by Williams’ foot.

“Prime,” he snapped at them. With one hand Williams stowed her rifle and with the other grabbed the LMG, raising it to aim at the now threatening corner. Wrex could hear the heavy thump of the huge geth’s footsteps.

Shepard pulled herself to her feet, corona still wrapped around her. Her voice was clipped as she brought up her own rifle, “Wrex, you and I will put up a barrier, try to soak up that damned pulse cannon. Alenko, Tali, tech grenades. Williams, Draven, Dubyansky, frag grenades.”

Then the geth Prime was around the corner, cannon roaring, the air thick with slugs. Wrex threw up his barrier quickly. He felt Shepard’s biotics without looking at her, felt them intertwine and shore up his own, making the barrier stronger. And they needed it. The phasic rounds were thudding into it, leeching the strength from it. He snarled and threw as much of his remaining strength into it as he could.

Beside him, Shepard fell to one knee, but the barrier stood.

The geth sparked as Tali and Alenko threw tech grenades at it, whittling down its shielding, followed by a deafening boom-boom-boom as the three Marine NCOs tossed grenades at it, the corridor filling with dust and shrapnel that pinged off the biotic barrier.

When the dust cleared, the geth was missing an arm, and its torso was pitted and scarred -but it was still moving.

“Fucking hell-” bit off Sergeant Draven.

Enough of this. Wrex roared a challenge, and charged, head down. He smashed into the geth platform brutally, knocking it off its feet, then stomped on its headlights for good measure. It whirred at him before he unloaded one, then two blasts of his Graal into its central processor.

The Marines paused, and then Draven leapt forward, followed by her team, to provide security.
Wrex turned. Shepard was still on one knee. Using biotics as much as they had today was exhausting, but if Urdnot Wrex were incapable of outlasting a human biotic, he’d retire in shame.

“You alright, ma’am?” asked Williams, a hint of concern threading through her words. Shepard forced herself to her feet, using the other human’s webbing for leverage, but not stumbling once she was up, head up and back straight.

“I’m fine.” She patted Williams on the shoulder. “Let’s get moving.” When the other Marine turned to check on Mohamed, Shepard wiped away the blood trickling from her nose.

Wrex approved. A battlemaster commanded through intelligence and skill - and the appearance of invulnerability.

“Mohamed got grazed,” Ling informed her. “I’ve put some medigel on it, but he says he can keep going.”

Shepard considered this. “Williams take point with Wrex and I, and give him his LMG back.”

“The Prime was guarding that door,” he told her with a jerk of his head. It was locked down, the interface glowing a sullen red.

Shepard called out, “Waaberi, get that door open!”

The young Marine darted forward, pulling out a shaped explosive charge which she fixed onto the door.

“Fire in the hole!” There was a thump, and the door blew inwards in a starburst of bent and shredded metal. Wrex ran in, followed by the two humans, raising his shotgun. A flash of white - a geth unit - he raised the Graal and fired, sawing it in half. Another struck down by two bursts from Williams’ rifle.

And then the room was clear. A wall was taken up by pale servers that blinked with light, made of the same strange silver construction as the rest of the geth creations.

“This is it!” Tali said, rushing forward and opening her omnitool. “Commander...there’s intel on this server. About how the geth have evolved! My people need this!” She was so excited her words ran together.

“Tali, we don’t have time to screw around. Right now, Hackett is about to or has engaged the geth. People are dying as we speak.”

Tali flinched but didn’t back down. “Shepard, this could help us - my people and yours - understand the geth and how they’ve changed since they drove my people into exile. This could help the war effort.”

A silence, Shepard’s brown eyes calculating.

“You have ten minutes,” Shepard said sternly. “Then we’re setting the charges and getting out.”

“I’ll have it by then,” the quarian promised confidently and turned to the servers, fingers racing across her omnitool’s keyboard.

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Sitting the Normandy in orbit above Solcrum while a battle raged the system over was a bit like
being a star quarterback sat on the bench during a playoff. Or something like that. Joker hadn’t been a
real fan of breaking his hips as much as football demanded back in high school. Shepard seemed
like the type, maybe. That was a woman who could put your face through a table without even
trying too hard. She had a certain confidence and easy physicality. Joker really didn’t get having a
body like that and throwing it in front of the business ends of rifles.

“Hey Pressly,” he said, adjusting the Normandy’s angle of attack slightly. If the geth showed up, he
was going to be ready for a quick one-two. They wouldn’t see the Normandy coming. Was there
anything more satisfying than a solid hit from stealth?

“What?” asked the XO testily, looking at a readout over Grenado’s shoulder.

“Reckon the Commander played football? She looks like the type to enjoy pummeling people.”
Pressly exhaled and looked for a moment as if he was praying for fortitude. “Shepard’s a Spacer.”

“So? Football pitches on Arcturus.”

“She likes real football,” Frag informed them, “she was upset when Mexico beat Argentina. I
thought I was going to get masted for celebrating too hard.”

“Soccer?” Joker sighed with affected disappointment. “Lame.”

“What even is American football? Two lines of men, slamming into each other. No finesse.”

“What finesse is there in falling over whenever anyone bumps you?”

“Not this stupid goddamn sports argument again,” Pressly grumbled. “Shut up Joker, we both know
you don’t give a damn about sports.”

Joker tugged on his hat. “Just making things a bit more lively, Nav.”

Shepard had diverted her team’s streams to the MEU’s headquarters onboard the Scimitar instead of
to the Normandy as usual. Joker felt blind. Instead, he listened to the transmissions of the Fifth Fleet
in the Hong System to distract himself and keep situational awareness. If Hackett lost the battle,
Joker had no intentions of leaving the ground team down there and no intentions of waiting to get
chewed up by the geth. Among the files saved to his workstation were a set of plans. Contingencies
written by Shepard if things went south.

The data was pure chaos. Scrambled voices blinking in and out. The Fifth were holding their own
for now, but the geth were grinding away at them, destroying a ship in the destroyer screen here and
crippling a cruiser in the battle line there. If the game plan was attrition, the Alliance sucked at it.

But that was the thing, wasn’t it? The Alliance had always known they didn’t have the numbers or
the industrial base to try to play on say, the turians’ terms, so they’d tried to get smart. Drones and
ECM and missiles that spoofed the heat signatures of warships. But right now? Now they were
finding out what happened when you got thrown up against robots that were better at the tech stuff
and could still produce more warship hulls.

But Joker wasn’t counting humanity just out yet. Shepard and her new friends of varying species
seemed to really enjoy the geth scrapping business, and Hackett was a wily old bastard. And maybe
this server deal would work.

Around the Normandy sat the four destroyers that escorted the Scimitar, the old squat assault carrier
sitting off the frigate’s port bow. There was a steady stream of Kodiaks breaking the trace atmosphere
to flit over to the troopship. Refuelling and rearming? Carrying supplies? Or evacuating casualties?

Joker grimaced at the thought as he shifted the Normandy again, so she was shielded by orbital debris.

People died. Even the asari. That was life’s one ironclad rule. That was why he didn’t, as a rule, make friends with Marine grunts. Marine grunts had a habit of getting themselves shot or blown up young because the galaxy liked to kill the very brave and the very stupid alike. He’d learnt that one the hard way.

People sometimes thanked Joker for his service, his bravery (often including a tacked on, pitying ‘especially with your condition’) like his job wasn’t sitting in a chair nine times out of ten, but he was perfectly happy staying on the ship and away from bullets. He really didn’t get why Williams got that anticipatory grin on her face at the thought of someone trying to put a slug in her head.

Fucking nutcases, grunts, the whole lot of them. He shook his head, hands pausing on his interface, hoping that no one from the Normandy was on those shuttles.

"Servers should be coming down soon..." Pressly murmured, looking at a message on his omnitool.

Joker tapped on his interface, linking into the Fifth Fleet's battlenet. With a swipe of a hand, he brought up a video feed from the bow of a heavy cruiser. The Normandy's bridge collectively held its breath.

The dismembered gun of a destroyer spun lazily in one corner of the screen. A standard destroyer had a crew of eighty to ninety; now the cold gleam of stars was their tomb. Wreckage fields scattered across the Hong System like a wayward child had been tossing around lego. More ships had died today than had in the previous ten years of anti-piracy operations.

The geth ships were disciplined lines of silver, destroyers and frigates dashing in front of the dreadnought and heavy cruiser slugs, sacrificing themselves to keep the core of the geth invasion fleet intact.

And then -

"Now," Pressly said very softly.

Something changed. The geth fleet fell into disarray, close choreography collapsing into slaughter. A heavy cruiser there, a frigate over there, unfurling into flowers of debris in dead silence. For a moment it appeared as if the geth might recover, retreat in good order, but the SSV Everest, Old Iron herself, might have been in the last decade of her life but she still had teeth. A ferrous slug struck the geth dreadnought’s flank, where a torpedo had torn off sheets of armour, and thirty-eight kilotons of forces ripped into her innards.

There was a brief explosion consuming whatever oxidisers the dreadnought had on board and the huge geth vessel shattered.

After that, the only word for the battle was massacre.

Soon, all that was left was a heavy debris field and the flutter of search and rescue gunships and shuttles across the Normandy’s sensor readings. Joker whistled and leaned back in his chair, the air thick with relief. “I’d say we won, then.”

Pressly frowned at his omnitool. “Hold her steady, Joker. We’ve got a shuttle inbound. Shepard wants Chakwas to look at our wounded before we leave.”
Joker bit his tongue and gently shifted the *Normandy* so it would be easier for a shuttle to attach to her airlock.

“How bad is it?” asked Frag. Pressly just shook his head and turned to Communications Technician Lam.

The VI’s electronic voice filled the hollow spaces: “Chief Medical Officer to the bridge, Chief Medical Officer to the bridge.”

The *Scimitar*’s recycled air stunk of blood and fear and death, the stench thick enough Kaidan wanted shove his helmet back on so he didn’t have to smell it. The casualties had spilt out of the med bay and into the adjacent mess hall, where they’d reorsting to lying out Marines in stretchers on the floor and tables. There was blood on his boots and the silver metal of the deck.

He’d stripped out of a lot of his battle gear, his shoulders aching from the weight, and now he rubbed his wrist where Lance Corporal Hodgins had grabbed him. He’d been surprisingly strong despite - or perhaps because of - his injuries, and the fear in his eyes had been strong enough Kaidan could almost taste it in the air. It had shaken him, Kaidan admitted to himself, to see the Marine that had always acted like he couldn’t give a damn what his lieutenant thought of him like that. Begging for reassurance.

Kaidan breathed in, running a hand through his messy hair, not caring about how the curls were going every which direction - and he’d be the first to admit he liked to ensure he had a clean, professional appearance. He’d carefully pieced the man he was together from the wreckage of his adolescence, and maybe hair was a dumb thing to attach to that, but…

Right now, none of that mattered. Ashley had gone to see the others while Kaidan looked over Hodgins and Liara - and now they’d wheeled the Lance Corporal off to surgery he just sat on the floor next to the asari’s stretcher and her IV stand, occasionally shifting so someone could get past him.

“How do you feel?” he asked quietly when she stirred, her scales abnormally dull.

She blinked those big blue eyes at him, out of focus. She struggled to get the words out, each one laboured, “Like I’ve been hit by a skycar.”

He laughed, a short bark, struck by her bravery, and not for the first time. This was his job - not hers - and until a month ago she’d only ever killed dangerous wildlife. Kaidan sobered, “You did really well today, Liara.”

“Thank you, Kaidan. Will Hodgins be okay?”

He paused for a moment, decided not to sugar coat it. “Yeah, he will be. They’ll ship him back to Earth or Arcturus, get him some new legs. Clones or cybernetics. He may get a discharge, but that’ll really depend on his recovery and what the med board thinks. Either way, he’s alive thanks to you.”

Liara breathed in and seemed to take strength from that, relief palpable. He squeezed her shoulder comfortingly.

“Hey, Alenko.”

He’d barely heard Ashley approach over the constant hum of movement and noise around him - the
whimpers of the wounded, the terse conversations of the doctors, nurses and medics shrouded in opaque terminology, the soft song of the Scimitar's drive core that hit just the wrong cadence compared to the familiarity of the Normandy. He looked up at her and blinked. There was something dangerous in her dark eyes, in the way she shifted restlessly, the same thing he usually saw just before they did a combat drop.

“What’s up?”

“I found him,” she said in a low voice.

“Who?”

“The son of bitch who blew us up.” Her jaw was tight and her eyes glittered. “I was talking to one of the 1/10th NCOs - used to be in Pathfinder Company - and he got real talkative when I told him I was from Normandy.”

“Who?” It was Liara who spoke, her voice hard as the steel beneath her stretcher.

A flash of surprise rippled across Ash’s face before she replied. “Some dumbfuck shavetail. Second Lieutenant Joshua Hansen, 3rd Platoon, Charlie Company. Apparently, he’s a bit of a glory hound. Surprise, surprise. Everyone in that battalion had been briefed on where we were going to be, sir.”

Kaidan rubbed his jaw, feeling the beginning of stubble beneath his fingertips. “Know where he is?”

“Scout-sniper, remember?” she crossed her arms. “Down on Deck Four, one of the squad bays. My new friend reckons the Colonel put him down there to keep us from finding him.” Her ‘friend’ was probably right - it was common sense to keep two units involved in a friendly fire incident separated. “I’m going to go have a chat with him.”

Alenko reached up hastily and caught her arm. For a moment he thought she might shrug him off, carried by her anger, but then she stopped and looked at him. Whatever she saw in his eyes satisfied her because the tension in her arm eased down a notch.

“I’ll go,” he said, “I outrank him.”

She paused, then nodded. “Aye, sir.”

He squeezed her arm in understanding and thanks, then climbed to his feet and headed out of the mess hall turned med bay. Something in his expression cleared the crew and Marines of the Scimitar out of his way until he was standing at the door of the troop bay. He strode in without knocking.

“Can I help you, sir?” a young Corporal asked, still in scratched armour. Kaidan saw the moment the colour of his armour registered with the Marine, the moment his gaze dropped to the floor like a stone sinking through water. The room was deathly silent, guilt draped over the entire platoon, heavy and choking.

“Where’s Hansen?”

The Corporal pointed.

The lieutenant looked like something off a recruitment poster - sandy hair, clear eyes, strong jaw. He straightened when Kaidan approached. “Listen, sir, I’m very sorry about what happened. Fog of war, you know. A terrible accident.”

“Our route of advance was clearly marked in the OPORD,” Alenko said emotionlessly.
“There were geth - I was trying to protect my men,” he said pompously. “Couldn’t take any chances.” Kaidan saw a flash of disgust dart across the faces of the nearest Marines.

Kaidan’s voice was cracked cold, jaw tense to stop blue flares from erupting from his skin (control, always control). “You got people hurt and killed because you wanted glory.”

The young lieutenant flushed an angry, vibrant red. “Now wait a second...”

“The Marine you killed,” Kaidan continued relentlessly, “his name was Sergeant Lionel Mitchell.”

Hansen’s mouth opened and closed. He looked like a fish. Alenko clenched a fist.

“Remember his name. It’s the least that you owe him.”

“I didn’t mean to-”

“You will address me as sir,” Kaidan cut him off, sharp as a razor. “You didn’t do your job, and Mitchell paid the price. My men paid your price.”

“Sir-”

“Do the right thing.” He looked him in the eye. “If they don’t court-martial and dismiss you, resign your commission. You’re not fit to wear the uniform.”

Alenko spun on his heel and stalked towards the hatch, leaving Hansen staring at the floor. He was gripped suddenly by the need to get out. He couldn’t get the rust of blood out of his nostrils.

“Sir...” Hansen’s platoon sergeant stood, scabs caked on the side of his face. Kaidan stopped and turned his head. “I’m sorry. I should’ve stopped him, and damn everything else.”

Kaidan saw the regret there, in the sergeant’s green eyes. He knew regret intimately, knew how it ate your insides like acid until you felt hollowed out. But he could still feel the bruises on his wrist where Hodgins had grabbed his arm. *Sir, I dunno what to do if I can’t be a Marine anymore*. He could still see, if he closed his eyes, Gunny Alvarez leaning into Shepard’s shoulder like a puppet with cut strings, as two sailors straightened the Alliance flag over the silver body transfer case.

He met those dull jade eyes. “Yes. You should have.”

Kaidan stepped past him.

The *Normandy* nosed her way carefully through the debris field scattered across the Hong system. Her sensors picked up the beacons the Fifth Fleet had already placed around the serrated edges of the silent battlefield, blaring automated messages warning of navigational and UXO hazards, while Alliance frigates and rescue shuttles slid carefully in between sheets of tattered metal, searching for geth technology to salvage or recovering escape pods and human remains.

Pressly imagined the Battle of the Hong System would go down as one of the Alliance’s great victories and be brought up just as much as Drescher’s victory over the Hierarchy Navy’s 25th Fleet at Second Shanxi was. But Drescher had ‘only’ put the 25th Fleet to flight; Hackett had crushed the threat of invasion thoroughly, the geth fleet shattered or scattered, for the cost of eight of his own warships destroyed. Most battles ended with one side running before they took catastrophic losses.

It even felt a little bit like vengeance for Eden Prime - though that wouldn’t be complete until they caught up with that spikey bastard Saren. But it was difficult to feel victorious with his commanding
officer looming over his shoulder, arms crossed. Whatever had happened on Solcram, it hadn’t gone spectacularly well, piles of destroyed geth aside. It radiated off Shepard in black waves. The Pathfinder team leader - Gunnery Sergeant Alvarez - had come back onboard looking like a ghost gone walking.

Shepard was still wearing her armour, the scent of smoke and ozone sharp in the filtered air of the CIC, and her eyes reminded him of banked coals - deceptive in their calm.

“On final approach to Joan of Arc, ma’am.”

“Good.” She rubbed at a black mark on her face. “Once we’ve offloaded the Pathfinders, I want us on course to the Relay.”

Pressly folded his hands behind his back and fixed his gaze past her. “Chief Engineer Adams advised me that he thinks we should discharge our drive core and lower our heat load before another FTL jump, ma’am.”

One of the downsides of the Normandy’s unique Tantalus drive core was that she built up a drive charge much quicker than other frigates her size.

A wry smile tugged at Shepard’s mouth. “Alright. Put us down on Treagir after we transfer our guests, XO. It’ll take us a bit longer to discharge than on Matar, but that way we can deal with both problems at once.”

“Aye aye capt’n,” he agreed.

Fifteen minutes later he listened to the distant metallic thuds as the Joan of Arc’s docking tube locked into place. The carrier herself looked unscathed, but her battlegroup had taken a real pounding. Several cruisers had black craters marring their white flanks.

The Pathfinders trooped up out of the lower decks, carrying their gear and universally grim. By the airlock, Shepard grabbed the Gunny in a quick, tight hug.

“Watch your six out there, Jules.”

“You too, Em.”

Pressly blinked, trying not to stare. It was the first time he’d heard anyone on the Normandy use Shepard’s first name, let alone a nickname.

The two Marines looked at each other for a moment longer before they exchanged picture perfect salutes. Then, just like that, Gunnery Sergeant Julia Alvarez and her Pathfinders were gone.

He looked up when Shepard returned to his side.

“As soon as Adams is happy with our discharge and heat load, I want us jumping to the Pax System.”

He tilted his head, furrowing his brows. “Noveria, ma’am? That’s outside of the Alliance’s jurisdiction.”

It was a corporate wildcat colony, grown rich on providing laboratories for other corporations, no questions asked. A frozen hell, in other words.

“I’m a Spectre, remember?” She smiled without mirth. “Got a message from an old friend. There’s
been a sighting of Lia- of Matriarch Benezia there five hours ago. If we hurry, we might catch her there.”

Liara’s mother, she’d been about to say. Pressly wasn’t sure when the thought of killing the girl’s mother had become such an uncomfortable thought.

“Aye, ma’am.”

“You have the deck, XO.”

CODEX ENTRY:

Shuttles and Dropships used by the Systems Alliance: Shuttles and dropships are small spacecraft used to transport personnel and material, often to and from large spacecraft that cannot enter atmosphere or land. The differentiation between a shuttle and a dropship is not always easily apparent, but the Alliance uses ‘dropship’ to describe larger aircraft. Most Alliance shuttles and dropships use the ‘UT’ or ‘CT’ prefix - ‘U’ standing for ‘utility,’ ‘C’ for ‘transport’ and ‘T’ for ‘shuttle/dropship.’

a. UT-47 Kodiak

The UT-47 Kodiak Drop Shuttle, nicknamed ‘Combat Cockroach’ by Alliance personnel due to its hardiness and appearance, is the Alliance’s primary drop shuttle, with a capacity for fourteen people including the pilots. The Kodiak is armed with two front-mounted cannons that can be used in a light gunship role and two door machineguns. The Kodiak is considered reliable, durable and thoroughly tested in various hazardous environments and is able to even ocean dive. Variants of the UT-47 include UT-47M (medevac), UT-47C (command) and UT-47D (used by the Special Operations Aviation Regiment in a medium gunship role; no troop-carrying capacity). A stealth variant is allegedly under development, based on the design of the Normandy SR1.

b. CT-77 Caiman

The CT-77 Caiman dropship is a medium-lift dropship, capable of transporting up to sixty-five combat-loaded troops or twenty tons of equipment, and is designed for service on the Alliance’s capital ships and large troop transports. The Caiman is armed with door guns and a limited GARDIAN system and is generally used to land troops close to the front lines, resupply bases and transport artillery, supplies and some armoured vehicles such as the M-35 Mako IFV and the M-080 Light Tank.

c. CT-94 Vespers

The CT-94 fulfills the heavy lift needs of the Alliance military, capable of carrying up to three main battle tanks or a considerable amount of materiel or troops. FTL capable, the Vespers is only carried by capital ships due to its size. Due to its light armament and arms, the Vespers is not used for combat missions and instead serves as a strategic transport or flies in supplies well behind friendly lines.

Chapter End Notes
Definitions:
Lieberschaft 2180: also known as the M-22 'Eviscerator' in its proposed military variant.
LMG: Light machine-gun
Shavetail: an inexperienced officer, particularly a newly commissioned Second Lieutenant.
OPORD: Operations Order. An executable plan that directs a unit to conduct a military operation, detailing the situation, the mission and what activities the unit will have to undertake to complete the mission. Pronounced phonetically.
UXO: Unexploded Ordnance
Liara sat in the briefing room, staring numbly at the floor, an island in a sea of Alliance uniforms. The buzz of quiet conversation around her faded away until all she could hear was the grinding of her own thoughts. Hodgins holding her hand, his limbs blown to shredded meat. The young woman who’d lain beside her on the Scimitar, deathly silent despite the wound a geth weapon had burnt into her abdomen. Her mother had helped do this. Her mother, who had always worn yellow. Her mother, who had bought her books and read her the old Athameist legends under the purple leaves of the kimia trees.

All those people - thousands! - on Eden Prime. Twenty-three Marines on Solcrum. Her mother had helped kill them. Benezia T’Soni was a mass murderer.

She closed her eyes, struggling to draw air into her lungs, her chest crushed and sharp-edged around her heart like shattered glass. "Mother, what have you done?"

She’d tried not to think about it, throwing herself into helping Shepard, focusing on the Prothean links to the current war. Now, it loomed in front of her, all-encompassing, pressing in on her.

Had Benezia changed so quickly, so absolutely, since last time they’d spoken? Liara had never been the daughter a Matriarch required, it was true, but for all of Benezia's ambition, she had never been cruel. She'd lectured Liara so many times on the greater good of the Republics, on setting your eyes on the horizon and not being bound to the past. What had she always said? Power without purpose is worse than useless - it is corrupting.

What greater good was served by such slaughter?

"Liara?" A hand fell on her shoulder and squeezed. "Are you alright?"

She blinked up at a cloudy purple visor and the silver of Tali's luminous eyes. "Uh, yes. Thank you."

Tali tilted her head. "It's okay if you're not."

She looked down at her hands. "It's just - been a difficult few days."

"Liara - " Tali began again and then stopped as the whole room went silent at the arrival of Shepard, Pressly on her heels. Liara didn't miss the way the Commander's eyes darted to her and then skittered away again. Her heart sunk, leaden, to the floor.

Shepard levered herself into the seat beside Williams, crossing her legs at the ankle. "First things first, I've been informed that Lance Corporal David Hodgins has been transferred to Jeremy Jian Military Hospital on Arcturus. They'll take good care of him there."

"What about the officer responsible?" That question came from Garrus.

"Colonel Lang assures me that a thorough investigation is being conducted," Shepard replied, before she looked around at all of them, expression grim. "I understand that many of you are upset by what happened - I am as well - but we can't let this get in the way of the mission. Finding Saren is too important."

There were nods from around the room, if reluctant from some parties.

"The good news is that the Battle of Hong has been a strategic and tactical victory. ASTRACOM believes that with the destruction of the geth fleet - and their troop transports - the geth no longer
have the strength to break through the Alliance's defensive pickets along the Traverse border. They still have the ships to continue the war, particularly since parliament still won't allow aggressive action for fear of the Terminus response, but it's very unlikely the geth will attempt a proper invasion at this point in time."

"How long before the geth can replace their losses?" asked Pressly.

Shepard grimaced slightly. "We don't have a good understanding of their industrial capacity - though Naval Intelligence is hoping that the data Tali saved may shed some light on that - but best bets are between twelve months to eighteen months."

There was a dismayed silence.

"We can't match that sort of hull production," Pressly grimaced.

"No, we can't," Shepard agreed. "This bought us time, nothing more. So I need all of you focused."

"Sitting around waiting to get swallowed by the thresher maw is no way to win a war," Wrex rumbled.

"Parliament won't move without assurances of military support from the Council - or at least the turians," Shepard said wryly, "and the Council won't move for fear of igniting a war with the Terminus."

"Cowards," Wrex dismissed. "You should eat them."

Liara stared at him. Pressly coughed into his fist.

Shepard smirked. "Eating the entire Parliament would take a very long time. Quicker to just find Saren."

Then the smile faded, and her eyes settled on Liara, heavy as stones on her shoulders, bowing them beneath the weight. "We've located a lead on Benezia; she's been sighted at Port Hanshan on Noveria, which is where we're heading now."

"Noveria?" CSO Wulandri scrunched up her face. "Ma'am, you sure they won't take our approach as a bloody invasion and shoot us out of the sky with their battle-stations?"

"So there are limits to your confidence, Guns?" Negulesco said with an amused lilt.

"Buffer, I am not getting paid enough to take on a planetary defence network with a frigate."

Shepard waved a hand. "There's an agreement between the Noveria Development Corporation and the Citadel allowing Spectres on planet." She smiled grimly. "Of course, they're probably going to make this exceedingly painful for us. Benezia is a board member for the biotech corporation Binary Helix - my contact believes she's there on business for them."

"And they don't care they're harbouring a wanted war criminal and mass murderer?" demanded Williams, crossing her arms. Liara flinched despite herself.

Shepard shrugged, a little fatalistic smile on her lips. "It's Noveria, Ash."

The Marine scowled blackly at nothing, eyes fixed on something far beyond the confines of the warship.

Lieutenant Alenko shot Liara another of those dreadfully mournful looks she was coming to hate.
Normally she could respect Kaidan’s particular brand of protectiveness, but right now she felt like she was suffocating. "Ma'am, do we have any idea of what sort of forces Benezia could have with her?"

"Geth are likely. I'm hoping Binary Helix's security forces aren't stupid enough to get between Benezia and us, but we can't count them out as a threat, so I've included intelligence on their force composition in the OPORD. Normal PMC light infantry deal. As for her disciples..."

"Acolytes," Liara corrected, then raised her chin. "Her bodyguard was one of ten commandos, all of whom spent a hundred years or more serving the Republics. Shiala was the most dangerous of them - their captain - but that still leaves nine commandos and my - Benezia herself."

"I've always heard you should use the sniper rule for a Matriarch," said Alenko. "Biggest hammer you've got available."

"Right. So we're not going to have a huge numbers advantage - or any at all if the geth and Binary Helix get in on the action, so we need to fight smart."

"Well, I'm a Navy man," Pressly said with good humour. "I don't know about you ground thumpers, but when in doubt, call an air strike."

Liara opened her mouth. *Shepard, you have to let me talk to her. You have to let me try.*

But Shepard was already waving a dismissive hand. "I don't know they'll be too thrilled with the idea of us bombing their planet, Nav."

"I can promise to aim the guns at the Hegemony if they want," Wulandri said slyly. "Maybe we'll get lucky either way."

"Thank you, Lieutenant," Shepard said dryly, "but we're not bombing Khar'shan tomorrow."

"My dreams, crushed." This was just another mission to Wulandri and Pressly. Liara curled into herself.

"Alenko, Vakarian, Tali, I know you three were working on something...tech-y."

"Nerdy," Liara heard Ashley mutter under her breath.

"Yes, ma'am." Vakarian flared his mandibles, excitement a purr in his subvocals. "We've been studying the geth hopper's e-warfare attacks, and we believe we've been able to replicate the attack that affects kinetic barriers, weapon VIs, and biotic amps, using the standard tech grenade."

"We tested it!" Tali burst in.

Shepard raised one eyebrow. "Not on Alenko, I hope."

"I volunteered."

Shepard's eyes focused on Liara when she spoke, a flicker of concern darting across her eyes before it was replaced by calculation. "Results?"

There were times that Shepard made Liara feel safe, secure against the darkness of the galaxy. And there were times like these.

"My amp shut down for between 3 and 5 seconds. The feedback was...uncomfortable. I imagine that
for species that require full implantation to use their biotics it would be significantly more so."

Both Alenko and Shepard winced slightly.

"Alright, you three see how many of those grenades you can put together. Any other ideas?"

Ideas were raised, debated, shot down, modified or agreed to. Liara was silent, staring at the floor, the blue light glancing off it.

At the end, Shepard looked at Liara again with something that might have been regret or guilt and said, "We're taking polonium rounds. I know regulations state radioactive ammunition of any kind should only be used as an anti-materiel round, but low doses of radiation have been shown to disrupt biotics. We need every edge we can get. Make sure it's ready to go, Williams."

When Williams nodded, Shepard stood. "Dismissed. We all have preparations to make."

As the 'war council' filed out one by one, Liara stood.

"Commander -" she began.

"Can I talk to you?" Alenko interrupted and then flushed.

There was a crease between Shepard's eyebrows. "Sure. Lieutenant, can you wait outside while I speak with Liara?"

"Of course, ma'am."

When the door closed behind Kaidan, Shepard turned to her. "Liara..."

"I need to come with you," she blurted out, "when you go to find my mother. She will never listen to you - but she might to me."

Shepard's gaze was frank, almost mournful. "I can't promise this will turn out the way you want it to, Liara."

"I know that."

"Damnit," she hissed and rubbed her face before pushing the point. "I might have to kill her, do you get that?"

Liara flinched as if slapped despite herself but forced the words out: "I know. What would you want, if it was your mother?"

The Commander looked tired all of a sudden. "I want to look her in the eyes, ask her why she'd betrayed everything she'd once stood for."

"I need to do this, Shepard." She paused, smiled weakly. "And my presence may make her hesitate."

Shepard smiled without humour. "Yeah. Wasn't going to bring that one up. Alright, fine. You're in for the mission."

"Thank..."

"You don't need to thank me for that."

She nodded, feeling a lump in her throat. "If y-you'll excuse me, Commander."
"Of course."

She fled for the door, the human's eyes a weight on her back.

Shepard glared around Port Hanshan’s main plaza with grim fatalism. Everything was angular, blocky, grey, as if built by someone with the imagination of a concrete block. Outside there were only white swirls of snow tangling with the buildings of Port Hanshan and the ragged peaks dominating the terrain. Even though the temperature was a balmy 20 degrees Celsius, the whole affair seemed decidedly icy.

It’d started with ERCS threatening to impound the Normandy if they couldn’t confirm their credentials ("They try that and I’ll send ‘em home crying to their mummies,” the Buffer had said dourly), and it hadn’t improved when there’d nearly been a firefight on the docks due to her refusal to hand over weapons. Shepard didn’t like to antagonise the local authorities, but there was no way she was waltzing off to confront a hostile asari matriarch without a gun or four.

Right about now though, she was thinking she might make an exception for ERCS and the NDC in regards to the antagonising part.

“I knew I was going to hate this planet,” she said aloud, crossing her arms.

“Someone should make that slimy little bastard eat his words,” Ashley said, a quiet but audible snarl in her voice. When Shepard looked at her, the Marine’s jaw was taut.

She blinked at her. “I’ve heard a lot worse.” That came with being both a spacer and a biotic. Hell, Gunny Ellison had said worse to her.

Ashley scowled. “That just makes me wanna hit more motherfuckers, not less, skipper.”

Shepard chuckled despite herself. “Well, I’ll keep you in mind if I need anyone hit.”

Ash smiled a little sheepishly, anger trickling away slowly. “Or shot.”

She put a hand on her shoulder and squeezed. “He was just trying to put me off balance by showing off his knowledge of me - nevermind all of that is just a quick Plex search away. Don’t let him get to you.”

“This planet sucks.”

“I mean,” Shepard leant slightly towards her conspiratorially, “have you seen this place? They all probably go nuts within a few weeks. It’s all the drama and fighting that happens eight months into a frigate patrol on steroids. Their moral compasses are all over the place.”

“Be helpful if they pointed in the direction of ‘let the Spectre do her job.’”

“The Board doesn’t appreciate having outside problems dropped on their laps, Spectre.” Gianna Parasini, the administrator’s assistant, had approached from behind them. Shepard dropped her hand and took a step away from the Marine, chagrined. She didn’t usually lose situational awareness like that.

She crossed her arms. “Are you a student of history, Ms Parasini? Isolationism doesn’t work when the enemy just doesn’t care for niceties. Bribery won’t work on the geth.”
“You’ve never worked in the corporate world before, have you, Commander? You can’t bludgeon your way through bureaucracy.”

That was cute, considering the Navy ran on paperwork. There was bureaucracy in the military that could make a hardened corporate man like Anoleis weep. “I can bludgeon pretty hard.”

Parasini raised a perfectly manicured eyebrow. There was a steeliness to her, sharp intelligence in her eyes - and not a hint of her boss’s open hostility. She’d also stopped Matsuo from forcing a firefight.

Shepard glanced away and shoved down her irritation. “I’m in a rush. The corporations don’t want me to be here, and I don’t want to be here any longer than necessary. I don’t want to know what research is going on here.” She really didn’t, or she’d feel obligated to start shooting. “As soon as I see Benezia, I can get out of your hair.”

“I heard that you also told ExoGeni you weren’t interested. There are few fans of your stunt with them on this planet.”

Word travelled quickly, it seemed. And yet, Benezia had been allowed to walk free - an asari wanted across half the galaxy, accused of mass murder and treason.

“ExoGeni got in my way.”

The threat hung in the air.

Then Parasini smiled. “I think we can help each other. Go talk to Lorik Q’uinn - he’s haunting the bar these days. He has some interesting things to say about the administrator. If you can convince him to recount those things to Anoleis’ employer, you’d have the gratitude of the Board.”

“Would that gratitude include a garage pass?” asked Shepard wryly.

“It might.”

“Or you could just get us a pass so we can go hunt down the dangerous criminal who has helped kill thousands already,” Ashley said acerbically. Shepard wanted to touch her shoulder again - knowing how personal this whole affair was for the younger Marine - but stilled her hands.

“Nothing on Noveria comes without a price.”

“Let’s hope I’m the only one who has to pay it,” Shepard said dryly.

When Parasini was gone, Ash shifted uncomfortably. “Sounds like a real runaround, skipper.”

“Yeah. But you know how it is, Sarn’t. Sometimes you just gotta embrace the suck.”

“Oorah,” Ash said ironically.

“C’mon,” Shepard said teasingly, “it can’t be worse than when we take inventory.”

The Marine glared at her. “You’re the one who makes us do that.”

Shepard just smiled pleasantly at her, and after a moment Ashley smiled back, shaking her head.
When Lorik Qui’in, local manager of Synthetic Insights, had told them what he needed, Shepard had lapsed into silence for the moments it took the team to assemble, then gave out rapid-fire orders.

“Tali, do you think you can shut down their security systems?”

“In my sleep, Commander,” she said, already thinking of how to do it. Humans seemed to like to focus on certain areas - IT specialist or engineer - but the Flotilla demanded a wide range of competencies from its people. Tali had spent years perfecting her knowledge of drive cores and computer systems. Both were useful skills that Shepard had come to rely on. And that felt - good, if she was honest with herself, felt good like the first time she’d gotten through Ashley’s guard when they practiced knife fighting.

“You’ve done this before,” Ashley said.

Shepard smiled after a moment and then tapped the N7 on her chest. “Of course. Raids for intel or HVTs were my team’s bread and butter.”

Tali frowned. Her translator wasn’t the best - the Flotilla installed them in the suits of every Pilgrim, but they were rarely the top end models - but she had been careful to make sure her dictionaries of common human languages were up to date. “HVT?”

“High-Value Target,” Shepard replied absently, then looked around. “Everyone clear on what they have to do?”

“Aye, ma’am.”

“Let’s get it done.”

The Synthetic Insights office was up an elevator, perched above the main plaza of Port Hanshan. Shepard hadn’t been pleased with that, but going in the front door appeared to their only option. The blizzard outside prevented the use of climbing equipment, jump jets or a shuttle, if the Normandy had even had one. The ducts were too small for the passage of people in full combat gear and would have bottlenecked them anyway, and there were no maintenance tunnels leading between the plaza and the office.

Tali adjusted her programs quickly, then tapped away, infesting the ERCS security systems. Whoever had programmed them for ERCS had been good - but they weren’t her.

“Disengaging alarms,” she reported.

“Can you get camera access?”

Tali nodded and brought the feed up with a few taps on her omnitool. Why was it that security cameras were always so grainy? Like specks of sand making up the image of a single turian in ERCS armour, his rifle propped against the wall and his helmet off. He looked thoroughly bored. The rest of the office was empty.

“Sergeant Stirling must be doing her actual job,” Williams muttered.

“Amateur,” said Shepard, as if mildly amused by his lack of attention. “C’mon. If we’re lucky, we’ll be in and out before Stirling shows up.”

The Commander strode into the elevator as if she belonged there, tugging Kaidan, Ashley, and Tali in her wake.
“Tali, can you stop him from using his comms?”

“I think so, yes.”

Shepard nodded. “I’ll take care of him then.”

The elevator dinged open. Shepard took several long strides into the room before the ERCS guard yelled. “Stop right there!”

Tali crowded to the front of the elevator, hands itching for her shotgun. Ashley’s familiar presence was beside her, fingertips brushing the butt of her pistol, face sharp with intent.

“Officer Ukria,” she said pleasantly. “You’re in violation of ERCS regulations and your captain’s instructions. I’m sure you know who I am.”

“Stirling will hear about this,” Ukria’s talons twitched.

“Your comms have been disabled. I’m going in there regardless if you try to stop me. I will use lethal force if necessary - you’re a criminal, and I can kill criminals. I’m giving you a chance to get out of this situation with your life.”

He reached for his rifle. Tali barely saw Shepard move. She was a flash of blue-bright movement, fist lashing out and connecting with the turian’s unprotected jaw. The crack of his spine and the caving of his plates echoed off stone, and he hit the ground in a pile of unmoving turian and armour. Shepard shook out her hand, blue droplets of blood sliding off the slick black of her gauntlet.

There was a sliver of silence as the Commander scanned him for signs of life, and then nodded.

“Gross,” Tali said faintly.


“Should we, uh, hide him?” asked Alenko. He shifted from foot to foot. Neither he nor Shepard had been pleased to consider killing cops - but apparently, corruption was enough to soothe their consciences.

Shepard shook her head. “Bloodstains will give it away even if we did. Best to just get this over with.”

They stepped past the turian with the shattered jaw and spine and into the office itself. Finding the data was relatively simple - Lorik had hidden it on a secure OSD in a false drawer the ERCS officers had so far failed to find. Tali carefully pried it free and shoved it in a pocket.

“Got it!”

“Let’s get out of here before -” Shepard cut off and turned, pressing herself into one of the tall, very ugly planters.

“Commander Shepard. I don’t think you’re supposed to be here.”

“I’m a Spectre doing my job as a law enforcement agent investigating a crime,” Shepard said lightly, hand falling to her shotgun. “Not that you’d know anything about that, would you, Sergeant Stirling?”

Tali felt Ashley’s hand on her shoulder, then the human tapped one of the pouched on her suit while drawing her pistol with the other hand. The pouch she kept her tech grenades in.
She quietly drew one out and rested her thumb on the arming button.

“You know what we did to cop-killers on my world?” Stirling said, face twisted with ugly rage.

Shepard shifted a foot, without answering, and then whipped out a hand, dark energy thudding violently away from her. The room reverberated with screams and the clash of metal as the guards and nearby tables were lifted up and tossed aside. Tali hastily thumbed the button and flung it, the tech grenade bouncing along the grey floor to explode at their feet. The air rang with shouts of alarm as shields shorted out and heat sink alarms beeped urgently.

Ashley moved, raising her pistol. Blood splattered the wall as a human slumped to the floor, chest an open wound.

“I’m going to break your fucking legs!” snarled Stirling and the air distorted in a snarl of energy. Beside Tali, Kaidan flared hasty blue and threw up a barrier - but the bosh’tet wasn’t aiming for them. The biotic field struck the light coating Shepard’s skin, the barrier dissipating the force just enough that the Spectre stumbled back into the wall instead of crushing bone.

“I’m going to do much worse than break your legs,” Shepard promised, her voice soft as a knife being pulled from the sheath, teeth bared white against the russet of her skin. A twisting spear of dark energy erupted from her hand. Stirling backpedaled, tripped, barely avoiding the attack which smashed through a window behind her.

Tali went for her shotgun, feeling the kick against her shoulder as she shot at a guard Kaidan had just tugged from the ground. The man convulsed and then was still, his visor blown open, spinning in the air surrounded by crimson droplets of blood.

“Charging!” Shepard growled, light flickering across her body, and the three of them swiftly shifted targets. In a handful of seconds, the woman’s shields were torn to shreds by their combined shields - and then two rounds pierced her chest and another her neck.

Shepard elongated into a blue-black flash, reappearing in a brutal impact smashing into Stirling’s centre of mass. The officer flew backward and over an upended chair, falling awkwardly with a crack as an arm broke beneath her own weight. Her cry of pain was cut short by the boom of Shepard’s shotgun.

Tali lowered her shotgun as the Commander turned to them. She could almost see it happening before her eyes - Shepard folding the killing rage away neatly, like laundry, until the next time it was needed. Until you could barely believe it was caged somewhere deep inside her.

“Good job,” said their captain, calm and crisp as usual with blood spattered on her hands and chest. “Let’s get out of here and take that data to Lorik before more ERCS show up.”

CODEX ENTRY:

The Attican Traverse:

The Attican Traverse is a region of space representing the frontier between Citadel Treaty Organisation space and that of the Terminus Systems, a collection of warring minor species, star nations, criminal cartels and fiefdoms united only in their rejection of Citadel authority. As such, the Traverse is an often dangerous, unstable place, with pirate raids, brushfire wars, and conquests of small colonies common. A low level of conflict is almost always present with occasional outbreaks.
of more serious conflict such as the Hegemony conquest of the independent planet of Esan, which led to a series of skirmishes between Hegemony and Republican forces - though a true declaration of war failed to materialise, ostensibly because Esan was not a member state of the Asari Republics.

In addition to planets claimed by Citadel and Terminus governments, the Traverse features a large variety of independent or ‘wildcat’ colony worlds owing allegiance to neither. Some colonies were founded by religions or political groups, others by corporations or those fleeing persecution. These colonists often face large challenges - pressure from their species government to come back into the fold, lack of funding for significant defences against attack, raids by pirates and slavers and little help if something does go wrong. Some planets, like Caleston, align themselves with one side. Others are isolationist or maintain loose associations with one or more faction. Noveria, a planet owned by a conglomerate of research and development corporations, maintains discreet relations with both the Citadel Council and a handful of Terminus nations.

In recent decades, the Systems Alliance has begun expanding into the Traverse, encouraged by the Citadel Council. While this has had the effect of stabilising swathes of the region, it has led to an ongoing conflict between the Hegemony and the Alliance, an undeclared war fought via mercenaries and privateer bands as often as soldiers and rife with alleged sentient rights abuses.
Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay on this one, guys! Got thoroughly stuck for a bit there.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Shepard's hand curled tight around the garage pass as if she was afraid it'd disappear into thin air. After the time - and blood - it'd taken to get it, Ashley could understand. What she didn't appreciate was the way Gianna Parasini's eyes trailed up and down Shepard's form as she drawled, "I owe you a beer, Commander."

Or the way Shepard smiled in reply, slow with a hint of white teeth. "If I'm ever on this frozen rock again, I'll take you up on that, Detective Parasini."

*Really skipper?* Shepard could flirt with whoever she liked, but a corporate cop who could've had them on their way a day ago? Not that she cared who her commanding officer flirted with, amazing ass or not. Ashley wasn't an idiot, even if she had marched into a career where she was blacklisted. She raised an eyebrow as Shepard turned back to her.

"What?"

"Nothing."

Shepard's dark eyes sharpened, but she let it go and turned to Alenko. "Lieutenant, go get the others and meet me at the garage. Williams and I will make sure there are no more delays and get the Mako ready to go."

Alenko nodded. "Aye, ma'am."

They walked briskly through the plaza, dodging ERCS guards. Ashley felt a tickle of something that might have been conscience whenever she saw those dull grey hard suits. Maybe. She hadn't gone into the military to shoot police officers - or to shoot based on just 'you're in my way'. But Stirling had struck the first blow, and they'd defended themselves.

Nah. She wouldn't lose any sleep over them.

Shepard’s head was on a swivel, hand lingering near her pistol. "I hate this planet."

"Sooner we get moving, the sooner we find Benezia and the sooner we can get off this frozen hell hole."

Shepard nodded, a furrow between her eyebrows. "I just wish..."

"Ma'am?"

They stuttered to a stop by one of the fountains. For a moment, the Commander stared blankly at the rush of water and Ashley started to think she might actually tell her what was going on in her head. Then Shepard glanced at her, and her expression cleared. "Don’t worry about it."
Ashley was tugged along in her wake as she strode off with a set jaw, height advantage or not. Shepard didn’t owe her shit and certainly not confessions, but she had to shove away a flicker of wishing anyway. It was probably about Liara and Benezia, anyway. Maybe there was something between T’Soni and Shepard after all.

Her chest twinged, like a sore muscle being stretched across her ribs.

"I need to get into the garage," Shepard said to the door guard, impatience in the way she folded her arms and tilted her head. "My vehicle should have been delivered from the docks already."

"I'll need to see your transit pass, ma'am," the ERCS guard drawled, looking for all the world like she saw irritated Spectres every day.

Shepard handed it over, and Ashley stepped passed her to lead the way into the garage.

"Really?"

Ashley shot her a smug grin. "I'm your bodyguard, remember?"

That was when the air in front of her chest erupted into shards of light as a bullet deflected off her kinetic barrier. "Geth!"

Shepard's shoulder smacked into her side, and they tumbled to the ground behind an old M-29 Grizzly missing two wheels, oil and grease black smears on the chassis. Pity. An armoured fighting vehicle sounded real good right about now. Ashley ripped her rifle from her back in a flash of her hands and drilled two holes through the flashlight of a geth rounding the corner.

Shepard surged to her feet, wrapped in blue-black light.

"Have I mentioned I don’t enjoy being ambushed, ma’am?" Ashley asked in between firing her rifle.

“It’ll be fine .” Shepard flowed into a mnemonic, pulling a geth unit from the floor and Ashley followed up with a burst to the centre of mass. She shifted into another, ripping a geth hopper from the wall and into the twist of Williams’ bayonet. They were like a left hand and a right hand, an anvil and a hammer. Like Shepard had fallen into the same battle rhythm, the same flow as Ash.

They were outnumbered, and Ashley didn’t know if Alenko had even received Shepard’s hissed out request for backup, but there was a part of her on fire.

Shepard swung out a fist and a geth shuddered back, only to fall to the staccato of Ashley’s Valkyrie. They barely had to talk about it, directions or warnings quick bitten off words, Shepard knocking the geth down or pulling them into the air and trusting Williams to put them down for good with a bullet or a grenade.

Shepard tossed a biotic field at the remaining hopper, knocking it off the wall, where Ashley finished it off with a slash of gunfire that cut it in half - but not before it had launched a small cylinder that landed at the Commander's feet. When it went off, a sheet of red electricity cascaded over her, and she yelped audibly, her corona flickering and dissipating.

Ashley broke out of cover, laying down a cone of covering fire so that Shepard could pull herself into cover.

"You alright?" she called over, slamming back into cover, the ceramic that covered her back scraping against the metal of a shipping container.
"Peachy," Shepard gritted out and her shotgun barked.

When the last of the geth fell into tattered scraps of metal and pools of conduit fluid, Ashley took three long strides to her captain's side. "What happened?"

"Got hit with one of those fucking sabotage fields." She pulled at her helmet, dragging it over her head. Ashley watched as her face crinkled with effort and her hand cut in one of her sharp yet fluid mnemonics - but nothing happened. "I think it fucked my amp. Top of the line my fucking ass." She rubbed the back of her neck, wincing. "Do you mind getting it for me? My hands are bit shaky."

"Yeah, no problem. I help the LT with his sometimes. Turn around." When Kaidan's migraines were stabbing him in the brain and he could barely move or think. She pulled off her gauntlets and the slim black gloves she wore underneath them to stop any chafing against the rough of carbon fibre.

Shepard set her helmet down beside them with a click. "My amp and socket are a bit different to Alenko's - I'm an L3 instead of a L2, but the theory is the same."

Ashley carefully brushed a couple of tight curls to the side, trying to focus on the tiny square of the amp plugged into the metallic jack at the base of Shepard's spine. Not on the softness of her hair or the warmth of her skin burning her fingertips. The smell of what had to be a nice cologne.

She felt hyper-aware. Dregs of adrenaline still coursing through her, sharpening her senses when a bit of dullness wouldn't go astray.

Shepard shivered under her touch, and her mouth was suddenly dry. "Sorry," Shepard said lowly, "bit sensitive."

"All good." Get it together Ash. It was just a neck and an amp port. She squeezed the amp between her forefinger and thumb until it clicked and popped free of the jack. Wincing at the burning heat of it, she pressed it into Shepard's open palm. She was suddenly very glad the other woman was still wearing her own gauntlets.

But it wasn't just someone's neck, was it? It was Shepard's compassion and the flow between them during battle or when they sparred. It was late night talks where Shepard opened up to her, even though Ashley knew she'd much rather keep her past boxed up somewhere it couldn't hurt her.

Shit. Shit.

She cast around for something - anything really - to say as she grabbed the cleaning kit and tube of medigel from Shepard's other hand. "What's it like?"

"Hrm?"

She cleaned the amp port carefully, trying not to brush the reddened skin around it. It must've hurt, having your amp overheat like that. “Being a biotic.”

There was a long pause during which Ashley began to regret saying anything at all. It wasn't bad enough that she - that she had a crush. She had to stick her foot in her mouth as well. God, adults should have better words for this than 'crush.'

Then Shepard shrugged, jostling Ashley's hand so the cleaning solution painted a stripe up the nape of her neck. "You know when you're in armour and you have a rifle in your hands? When civilians see you armed. You know how they look at you? Like they're afraid of you a little even if they know you're there to protect them."
"Yeah."

"That's what it's like to be a biotic. 24/7, every time someone catches a glimpse of your amp port." Shepard exhaled, "If you're lucky."

Words scattered just out of Ash's reach. What could be said? "That's tough, buddy?"

"I'm lucky," Shepard said firmly as Ash set the cleaning kit aside.

"What do you mean?"

"Kaidan - L2s. They got the shittiest luck. I was nearly a L2, but my mum threw Conatix out when they tried to scare her into giving me up. People might be afraid of me, but I work in space where most people understand biotics - at least a little bit and not too many anti-biotic bigots last long in the infantry or special forces. No one's assaulted me for being a biotic, I don't have cancer, I don't have neurological issues from my surgery, my family still speaks to me - I was lucky."

"I don't think you need to quantify how much it sucks to get the shit you do get, skipper," Ashley murmured, slotting Shepard's spare amp into place and dabbing cooling medigel onto the reddened skin around the port. "There. All done."

She stepped away, pulling on her gloves and gauntlets, staring at them. It felt like if she looked at her, Shepard would be able to read her realisation all over her face.

Shepard laughed wryly. "Sorry for dumping all of that on you."

"Hey," Ash looked up and shot her a smile, "I asked."

Shepard stretched, and a shiver of biotic energy rushed down her form. Her voice was pensive. "You know...I signed up to serve humanity. And yet there are still some places on Earth I can't safely walk."

"That's fucked, Commander," Ashley said with feeling.

"Yeah. Sometimes I think the universe has a really bad sense of humour."

The doors to the garage slid open and grey-armoured ERCS guards flooded in, led by Captain Matsuo.

"'Bout time," Ashley muttered.

"What did you do?" Matsuo demanded.

Shepard stared at her incredulously.

I hate this planet. "Just cleaning out your geth infestation, Captain."

"Geth? You expect me to believe-"

Ash kicked the nearest geth with a metallic clatter, and the ERCS captain cut herself off, raising a hand to her face.

"Where did they come from?"

"The shipping containers Benezia brought with her, most likely." Shepard crossed her arms. "It's what I would do."
“I don’t believe that. We did thorough scans.”

“Regardless of what you believe, Captain,” Shepard’s voice was almost gentle, “there are geth on Noveria. I take it you had something to do with the rest of my team being delayed?”

“There was gunfire, and they were running with weapons drawn,” Matsuo said defensively.

Shepard waved it aside. “It doesn’t matter. Just let them through, please, so I can be on my way. We’ll take the fight to the geth on our way to Peak 15.”

“If…Benezia packed the geth in those crates, there could be many more out there.”

“We need numbers,” Ashley demanded, checking the seal of her hardsuit again.

“At least dozens.” Matsuo visibly shook herself. “I must report to the Board. If this gets out, there could be an investor panic.”

“Can’t have that,” Shepard muttered under her breath and turned away.

The Mako’s wheels labourishly ground through jagged ice and soft, clinging snow drifts. The blizzard ripping through the Aleutsk Valley was in full blast, blurring their surroundings into misshapen mounds of deceptive white. Blasts of frozen wind slapped against the sliver of hardened glass that masqueraded as the IFV’s windscreen and rattled the hull mounted cameras. Shepard’s visual feeds were a mess of swirling white - she’d resorted to helping Corporal Dubyansky navigate with the help of the Mako’s sensors.

“Dozen top corporations and they couldn’t build a proper fuckin’ road,” muttered Dubyansky, as the Mako rattled over a bump in terrain. His hands gripped the steering wheel so hard Shepard was surprised it wasn’t creaking.

“Seems like this is just a maintenance road,” Shepard replied, “they use shuttles or the tram system most of the time.”

The ‘road’ was a narrow, sinuous slash through the mountain range, bounded on both sides by sharp cliffs and precarious drops, so Dubyansky drove at a creeping 30 km/h, much slower than the Mako’s top speed or their normal cruising. The climate control system hummed underneath the crush of ice and rumble of the engine, but it still felt like the cold was slipping beneath her hardsuit and sinking down to her very bones.

“What sort of time constraint are we under, Commander?” Alenko asked from the crew compartment. There was a distinct aura of iciness between the lieutenant and his platoon sergeant that had nothing to do with the weather, but they were still checking each other’s gear. Alenko had come to her about what Williams had done during the Battle of Solcum when she’d killed the AA team on her own. There was a line between the aggressive bravery required of a frontline leader and recklessness, and Shepard was inclined to agree with him that Williams didn’t have a clear view of where that line laid. He’d asked her to speak to the sergeant.

She’d told him flatly that the conversation was his to have. Shepard was too involved in the Marine Detachment as it was.

Her eyes slid to Williams who had now finished double-checking the seals of Alenko’s hardsuit and was now fiddling with her rifle. She remembered callused fingers on the back of her neck - and looked away, clearing her throat.
“Parasini said they won’t vote on it for another seventy-two hours, and after that, she’ll try to delay them as much as possible.”

“Not a lot of wiggle room,” he mused, tracing a finger over the barrel of his pistol.

Wrex grunted, a deep sound that echoed in the Mako’s infantry bay. “It’s long enough. No bunch of scientists is going to stop me.”

Garrus clicked his mandibles. “It’s the geth, commandos and - oh, the deadly, unknown menace **Binary Helix has unleashed on themselves** that I’m more worried about.”

Shepard kept her ambivalence to herself. Careful, rational preparation including adequate reconnaissance, attention to detail, understanding of both people and equipment, flexibility in the face of chaos and violence of action - this was how you won battles. *This* operation was a slapdash assault into a situation she had little to no details on, where she was most likely outnumbered. But if there was one thing she’d learnt during her career, it was that her doubts would infect her people and therefore had to be carefully packaged away where they wouldn’t show.

"Contact 2 o’clock, 700 metres. One Armature, four infantry behind barricade. Driver, seek hull down," she said tersely, cutting off any conversation inside the IFV. Dubyansky threw the Mako into a grinding turn, parking the Mako behind a slant of terrain with only the turret peeking over the top. "Looks like Benezia left a welcoming party. Gunner, AP, Armature."

"Identified," replied Nick from inside the turret controls.

"Fire."

"On the way!"

The entire Mako shuddered around her as Nick fired the main gun. Through the cameras, Shepard watched as the shell disappeared into the flurries of snow. On the sensors, the Armature was still moving. A blast of hissing blue plasma rushed overhead, missing the top of the Mako by mere metres.

"Fire."

The Armature's signature disappeared, and Shepard felt a flutter of pleased victory.

"Gunner, HE, infantry."

Two anti-tank rockets careened towards them, and she hissed out a breath. One rocket smashed into the ground in front of the IFV, throwing up a plume of shattered rock and snow that obscured her camera. They were still collating what they knew about the geth's weapon systems, but tests suggested that a Mako could take two rockets from this angle - with the heaviest armour on the front - but there looked like there were four geth rocket troopers out there.

"Identified!" Nick announced.

"Fire."

Two of the geth disappeared in a flash of heat on her thermals, but by then the other two geth had fired. One rocket missed, falling into the deep ravine beside the road, but the other flashed towards them and struck the Mako's turret with a screech of metal twisting and the blare of alarms. Shepard's eyes darted to the damage readouts. The turret was damaged, the forward portion of the gun barrel cracked and twisted.
"Firepower kill. Driver, back ten metres." Each word was calm if abrupt. Nick threw the Mako into reverse, so the fold of the terrain protected the entire Mako. She unbuckled herself from the command seat and turned to look at the occupants of the infantry bay. "Williams, get the gun back up. Vakarian, with me."

The turian followed her out of the bay and down the ramp, into the churned up snow. Her teeth chattered as she pulled her rifle off her back, her suit blinking a warning at her. The temperatures on Noveria were low enough to kill if not for the cold weather hardsuits they wore.

"Have I mentioned I hate snow?" Vakarian grumbled, trudging along in her wake, one talon hooked into her webbing so they didn't lose each other in the blizzard. The snow fall was so thick that she couldn't see more than five metres in front of her.

She didn't respond, throwing herself down into the snow and crawling to the top of the ridge, gesturing for him to go prone as well. She settled there, rifle stock against her shoulder.

"You've got a thermal scope on there, yeah?"

"Yes."

"Alright, I'll spot. I want you to snipe those geth so we can keep moving. I'll provide security."

"Yes ma'am," he agreed, pulling his sniper rifle off his back and settling into a firing position. It would probably be child's play for him - she'd seen him put down targets from nearly two klicks away.

"Left trooper, 692 metres."

The sniper rifle boomed, and on her eezo scanner, the faint outline of the geth trooper toppled to the ground. A rocket slashed through the snow towards them and she pressed herself deeper into the ground, ice crunching beneath the weight of her hard suit. It burst into flame, dirt and shrapnel against the cliff face above. Garrus shifted beside her and fired again. The last geth trooper fell.

Shepard clapped him on the shoulder. "Good job, Vakarian."

There was a trill of satisfaction in his subvocals even her limited human ears could pick up on, "Thank you, Commander."

They trudged back through the clinging snow to the Mako. Tali was perched on the top of the vehicle's hull, with Williams on the ground beside it, handing over tools and spotting her.

"How are we looking?"

"Think we're good to go, skipper. We'll have to do a barrel replacement back on the ship, but Tali is sure the gun will work until then." The Marine helped the quarian down carefully.

"It will!" Tali insisted. "I had to repair the broadside on the Rayya like this once, and that's still working."

"Everyone mount up."

Once they were all back in their seats, Alenko called to her, "Ma'am, there's a facility up ahead. I think we're nearly there."

Peak 15. Where Benezia T'Soni waited. Her eyes cut to Liara. The asari was wearing her helmet, her
"My mother may have more ambushes lying in wait," she said, eerily calm. "We can't underestimate her."

Shepard thought of a planet in the Traverse with only numbers for a name, where she’d lost two N7 operators fighting an Eclipse commando team and set her jaw.

The garage of Peak 15 reminded Alenko of a refrigerator. Everything was dark and dry and freezing cold.

"Reactor is offline," he told Shepard who nodded. "Facility is on generator. Just enough juice to keep the doors and the air filtration going."

The doors were running on emergency power, but he and Tali had managed to hack their way through, spoofing the correct entry IDs. Dubyansky had set up two drones toting medium machine guns to protect the Mako and was now trotting over, cradling a LMG in his arms. The ammo block inserted into the side had a bright warning label on it. Polonium. He had to admit that shooting people with polonium didn't sit quite right, but the Commander was adamant.

They spread out through the emptiness, rifles raised and night vision filters on, casting everything into odd shades of green. His scanner and thermal modes were both clear, but something gnawed at him. Whatever had happened here had to be bad. There were a handful of vehicles - sky cars and ground vehicles both, but no one near them. That struck him as odd. Surely if your facility were going down in proverbial flames, you'd try to evacuate using the vehicles?

Williams and Wrex led the way up the stairs, weapons raised, checking every corner and shadow. The sensation of wrong sank deeper into Kaidan, digging cool talons into his chest as they moved deeper into the facility.

"Turrets are facing the wrong way," Ash observed as they stepped carefully past the inert machines.

"More afraid of the experiments? Or just trying to keep their staff in?" mused Garrus just behind her. "Either is bad." Kaidan raised his pistol to cover the corner as he spoke.

"Still would prefer scientists to monsters," Garrus replied.

"Where's your sense of adventure, Vakarian?" Shepard asked lightly. The razor focus of her eyes sweeping the room belied her tone. Kaidan followed her gaze. The offices and reception area were dark and quiet, just like the garage, but one of the thick glass panes had been shattered. Snow was piled up haphazardly across the room, half burying someone's coffee cup. Tables and chairs lay scattered around, like a messy child's toys. Still no sign of anyone - living or dead. The hair on the back of his neck prickled and he bit down on the urge to summon his biotics. It was much easier when you knew what you were fighting.

"We'll sweep the offices," Shepard decided, but before they could move out to fulfill her order, Ashley's fist shot into the air. They all froze and went silent.

"I hear something," his fellow Marine said. After a moment, Kaidan heard it too. A metallic rattling - coming from the walls.

"Something's in the vents." Wrex bared his sharp teeth. Williams found cover behind an upturned
There was a shriek of ripping metal, and the vent cover in one of the open, glass-walled offices burst open. Something large with a carapace and flailing, sharp-pronged tentacles scuttled out, shrieking with something Kaidan could almost imagine was rage.

"The fuck-" began Dubyansky.

The bug - or whatever it was - shot out of the office and towards them with shocking speed. Wrex roared, a primal, wrathful sound and stood with his shotgun raised.

"What are you doing, old man?" demanded Williams, raising her rifle and pulling the trigger. The thing skipped sideways and her first burst of fire stitched up the wall beside it. Kaidan twisted to fire around Wrex's bulk, firing his pistol with calm, even precision. One of his shots punched a green geyser out of its side, pulling another shriek from it, but it kept coming.

"Dubyansky! Nick!" Williams growled. "You have machine guns for a reason!"

But before the two Marines could focus their fire, a thick, viscous lump came sailing towards them, courtesy of the insect. Shepard thrust out a hand and a biotic field pushed them out of the way and sent them tumbling into a snow drift in a tangle of weaponry and black Alliance armour. The liquid splattered against a table and began to smoke as it ate through metal.

Wrex snarled again and charged forward, shotgun barking.

"You're in the way, Wrex!" Shepard shouted, but he didn't seem to hear her. Blood rage? Wrex hadn't seemed one to lose control of himself, but -

Wrex smashed into the creature with a solid thump, driving it off its insectoid legs. Another blast of his shotgun and it stopped moving, transfixed to the floor by three spikes from the Graal.

A flicker of movement caught Kaidan's eye. Two more of the same insectoid monstrosities pulling themselves out of the vents. "Contact - more of them - over there!"

His old OTC instructors - and his first Platoon Sergeant - might've smacked him up the head for that terrible contact report. Dubyansky struggled back to his feet and set his machinegun against an upturned chair. The room echoed with the full-throated roar of the LMG, joined by the crack of assault rifles. The creatures' chitin tore and cracked under the assault and no one let up until they were lying in puddles of greenish 'blood.'

"Ceasefire," Shepard ordered, and the room fell silent again. She replaced her rifle with her shotgun, stepping carefully towards the one Wrex had killed. Something about it seemed oddly familiar to Kaidan. The krogan stomped after her. There was something in his red eyes that made Kaidan want to step back - and he didn't consider himself a man easily intimidated. Not even by krogan.

"Look at it, Shepard," the old battlemaster growled. "Do you know what that is?"

"Why would I?" she asked, prodding it with her bayonet.

He kicked it with a sodden thump. "They not teach you about the great wars of the past at your human academy?"

She shrugged. "I couldn't tell you what they teach at the Academy. I'm a mustang."

"It's a rachni." Wrex kicked it again, and the chitin crunched beneath his boot.
They'd shown old footage, old histories in OTC. Kaidan stared at the corpses. Monsters, back from the past. Back from before humanity had left Earth. Back from a war that had decimated entire sectors of space. Were the geth not enough for Saren?

"That's impossible!" Garrus insisted. "Your people made sure they were extinct!"

"The Rachni Wars ended two thousand years ago," Shepard said, crouching to examine one of the long, deadly tendrils. The expression on her face was one of curiosity, like this new enemy was a puzzle to be solved. "Why would they be on Noveria?"

Wrex said hatefully, "It took oceans of krogan blood to put them down, I know a rachni when I see one."

Seeing Garrus open his mouth, Kaidan hurriedly cut in. "It does look like the old footage I saw at OTC of the rachni wars. Saren seems to like bringing back monsters people thought were gone. No one believed the attackers on Eden Prime were geth to begin with either."

Ashley had known, but Kaidan hadn’t believed it at first. He remembered that. The blood on her face and the steeliness of what she believed. He glanced over at her, but the Sergeant seemed disinterested in the debate, too busy watching the dark offices. He hoped that the argument they’d had wouldn't wreck their friendship. That was the problem with duty. It had to take precedence over personal relationships.

"It doesn't matter." Shepard rose to her feet. "They're here. We kill them and anything else in the way - unless they surrender, but I don't think the bugs will be surrendering. Move out."

CODEX ENTRY

**Standard Issue Gear (Systems Alliance Marine Corps):**

- **Assault Rifle:** Hahne Kedar M7 Lancer
- **Shotgun:** Ariake Technologies M27 Scimitar
- **Sniper Rifle:** Rosenkov Materials M97 Viper or Devlon Industries M92 Mantis
- **Submachine Gun:** M4 Shuriken or M12 Locust
- **Marksman Rifle:** Hahne Kedar M96 Mattock or Rosenkov Materials M97 Viper
- **Sidearm:** Hahne Kedar M5 Phalanx
- **Automatic Grenade Launcher:** Hahne Kedar M37 Falcon
- **Heavy Sniper Rifle:** Hahne Kedar M99 Saber
- **Light Machinegun:** SA Ordnance M651 Typhoon
- **AT Recoilless Rifle:** SA Ordnance Black Widow
- **Flamethrower:** Devlon Industries M451 Firestorm
AT Rocket Launcher: Rafos Ammunition M560 Hydra

Infantry Multi-Purpose Assault Weapon: Rafos Ammunition M60-B Cobra

Superheavy Rocket Launcher: M920 Cain

Standard Combat Hardsuit: Aldrin Labs Onyx series

Heavy Combat Hardsuit: Aldrin Labs T5-V Battlesuit

Medals

in order of precedence

*Systems Alliance Navy and Marine Corps*

Star of Terra

Navy Cross

Distinguished Service Medal

Medal of Heroism

Legion of Merit

Distinguished Flying Cross

Navy and Marine Corps Medal

Distinguished Combat Medal

Purple Heart

Distinguished Service Medal

Air Medal

Navy/Marine Corps Commendation Medal

Navy/Marine Corps Achievement Medal

Combat Action Ribbon

Distinguished Unit Citation

Valorous Unit Citation

Meritorious Unit Citation

Space Service Ribbon

Colonial Defence Ribbon
Good Conduct Medal

Campaign Medals (in chronological order)

All Foreign Decorations

Systems Alliance Army

Star of Terra

Distinguished Service Cross

Distinguished Service Medal

Medal of Heroism

Legion of Merit

Distinguished Flying Cross

Soldier’s Medal

Distinguished Combat Medal

Purple Heart

Distinguished Service Medal

Air Medal

Army Commendation Medal

Army Achievement Medal

Distinguished Unit Citation

Valorous Unit Citation

Meritorious Unit Citation

Space Service Ribbon

Colonial Defence Ribbon

Good Conduct Medal

Campaign Medals

NCO Development Ribbon

All Foreign Decorations
Definitions:

AP: Armoured Piercing.
HE: High Explosive.
The metal walkways rang dully with every step Kaidan took. The cavernous reactor room was still and cold, and only the illumination strips of sullen red emergency lighting showed the path forward. He saw in strange shades of green thanks to his helmet’s night vision filter - ahead of him Ki-tae and Williams were flickering ghosts. Either side of them was a drop down the multilevel facility, to an unfortunate splat at the end.

“Fuel lines should be just ahead,” he said, twisting to look at Tali and Dubyansky bringing up the rear.

“You got this?” Ash called back to the quarian.

“Of course!”

“That’s what I like to hear.”

Kaidan shuddered despite himself as he heard a distant shriek - or what he hoped was distant. The rachni were in the vents like an infestation, and the reactor room echoed so sound wasn’t an accurate indicator of distance. He and Tali had rigged everyone’s combat scanners to hopefully pick up rachni biosigns - after all, the models they’d had hadn’t been designed in the Rachni Wars - but untested tech was untrustworthy tech.

Especially when Shepard had decided that time was vital here and split them into two teams - Alenko taking Williams, Tali, Dubyansky, and Ki-tae to fix the fuel lines and get the power on, while Shepard took Liara, Vakarian, and Wrex to repair the landlines. He couldn’t fault her reasoning, but the darkness made him wish for a few more guns.

“I’m starting to be glad we missed out on the Rachni Wars,” Williams grumbled. “Spit? Really?”

“Least it’s not vomit again, Sarrant?” Nick questioned.

“Ugh. Both gross. I’d rather they just be civilised about it and try to shoot me.”

“Can rachni even hold guns with those tentacle-thingies?”

“You know what? There’ve been far too many tentacles involved in this tour.”

“I think I’d prefer to be shot than impaled with a tentacle,” Ki-tae said thoughtfully, sweeping his LMG across a black space where the emergency lights ended.

“Even with a Kishock?” Kaidan asked.

“Oh yeah. Say what you will about the batarians, at least the harpoons don’t wriggle.”

“Thank you Lance Corporal,” Dubyansky said pleasantly. “That’s going to give me nightmares.”

“You know, not everyone would agree with you,” Kaidan observed.

Ashley’s helmeted head swivelled to look at him. “Sir, if you’re into tentacle hentai, I might have to reevaluate our friendship.”

*I thought you already were.*
“That’s kink shaming.”

“Shut up Dubyansky.”

“This looks like it, sir.” Ki-tae stepped aside to let him and Tali move up. He and the other two Marines formed a quick perimeter, watching the darkness carefully.

Kaidan knelt, examining the thick fuel lines and the deep, jagged cuts through them. Rachni or Benezia’s troops? He supposed it didn’t really matter, in the end. The safety systems had shut down the flow of Helium 3 to the reactor while the lines were out. “I’ll take the left, you take the right?”

Tali nodded and he reached for the canister of omnigel stored in his webbing.

“Contact! We got bugs!” That was Nick. Kaidan looked over his shoulder in time to see one of the rachni go for Dubyansky with lightning speed. The Marine jammed his finger on the trigger at point-blank range, the roar of the machine gun ripping the rachni’s thorax apart, splattering his armour.

“Don’t worry about us, LT!” Ashley called to him, kicking a rachni corpse - courtesy of her shotgun - off the side of the walkway. “You do your thing, we’ll keep ‘em off you!”

She was right, he was forced to admit to himself. His Marines were sharp, battle-tested. They could look after themselves - but only he and Tali could fix the fuel lines. He pulled the omnigel canister free and opened his omnitool interface, blinking at the sudden flare of light across his filtered vision.

He beat down his instinct to help fight off the attack and got to work.

Normally, he avoided tunnel vision as much as he could. That was how you got yourself killed in battle - or in his case, as an officer, got your people killed. But for this, he made himself focus completely on his task.

At least until he heard Tali shriek: “SpidersspidersSPIDERS!”

His head snapped towards her. Three of the tiny, green rachni - babies? - scuttled over the side of the walkway towards her as the quarian fumbled for her shotgun. He pulled out his pistol and fired three careful, precise rounds, leaving only smears behind.

Kaidan looked at her.

“I don’t like spiders?”

“Keep it together. There’s going to be more where we’re going.”

She shuddered. “Spiders.”

When their field repairs were done, it was back to the control room. The rachni had retreated - for now. Kaidan began the restart protocol on the main control computer and there was a rumbling hum.

“Night vision filters off,” he ordered, shortly before the reactor finished restarting and the power came back on, white light flooding from the ceiling. He winced, ducking his head.

“Lance 2 to Lance 1,” Alenko spoke into his comm. “Reactor is back online, over.”

“We’re nearly done here too. Meet us at the tram, over.”

“Roger that. On our way. Lance 2 out.”
Garrus really had to wonder at Shepard’s choice of team this time. He was starting to think he would’ve preferred to go with Tali and the Marines. Liara was silent and withdrawn, and Wrex was half into a blood rage, every movement sharp with aggression.

Shepard seemed the calm eye of the storm, unmoving as the elevator crept upwards.

“Wrex, you’ll take point. Garrus, you’ll fix the landlines while we keep the rachni off you. Liara, you and I will try to keep the rachni off their feet with biotics, so they can’t get their bearings.”

Wrex bared his teeth in what might have been a smile.

“Wrex, rachni are just a history lesson in our training- not something we train for. Any tips?”

One red eye settled on her. Garrus flicked his mandibles despite himself. Wrex was trouble enough even when he wasn’t this on edge. “To defeat an infestation of rachni, you have to end it at the source. Exterminate them. Kill the queen.”

Shepard hummed thoughtfully to herself. “To breed this many rachni, Binary Helix must have a queen or a large cloning facility, likely at Rift Station.”

“Likely the latter,” Garrus butted in. “The krogan killed all the queens. Right, Wrex?”

The krogan grasped his shotgun tightly. “My forebears followed the rachni to Suen and killed everything living on that wasteland.”

“So they found some preserved rachni and decided to bring the demon to life.”

“And so Saren would get more troops for his war.” Shepard shook her head. “Whatever Binary Helix did to start creating rachni, it can’t be allowed to go on. We’re not leaving without making sure of that.”

Wrex’s lip curled in what might have been approval.

“Let’s just hope none of them have made it towards Port Hanshan.”

“Shouldn’t we inform the Council?” asked Liara quietly, almost drowned out by the grind of machinery. “The return of the rachni is a threat to galactic security.”

“You’re not wrong. But the blizzard is interfering with our direct comms to the Normandy and while I have a line to Noveria’s satellite comm system, I don’t trust putting something so sensitive over corporate channels. We’ll inform them as soon as possible.”

“You have a line to the NDC?” asked Garrus. The elevator door rotated and opened, a gust of icy cold slurry blasting in immediately, dusting their armour with white flakes.

Shepard tilted her head over to look at him. “You think I’d come out here without a way to call off the orbital strike?”

Garrus caught a flurry of movement in the corner of his eye and whirled, raising his assault rifle. “Contact!”

Rachni emerged from the thick white of the blizzard, tentacles whipping forward in savage movement - seeking flesh to rend and tear. Shepard took a step forward, thrusting out a fist and one went flying back, tumbling end over end, before Garrus aimed and fired. A tentacle grazed Wrex’s
arm, barbs drawing orange blood through ceramic plate and ballistic weave, and he roared, grabbing it with thick fingers and pulling until it tore off. The rachni screeched in the moment before the butt of his Graal came down again and again.

“Keep moving,” Shepard ordered, flinging a rachni off the side of the roof with a slash of blue.

Garrus kept up steady barrage of fire with his assault rifle as they forced their way forward, punctuated by the boom of Wrex and Shepard’s shotguns and the pop of Liara’s pistol.

He crouched at the maintenance panel for the landlines as the roof echoed with gunfire and the maddened shrieks of the rachni. The panel popped open, revealing the terminal beneath and his talons raced across the soft orange glow of the interface. The rachni attacked like animals - right into the field of gunfire and were cut down. How had such creatures built cities, warships? Brought known space to its knees?

“I’m adding an objective to this mission,” Commander Shepard explained when the squad had reunited. “We can’t allow rachni troops to fall into Saren’s hands. In addition to finding Benezia and determining her purpose for coming here, we will locate the source of the rachni and destroy it.”

“Understood, ma’am,” Alenko said crisply, eyebrows furrowed under his visor. He would’ve preferred a whole company for either of those tasks. He reminded himself that Shepard knew what she was doing.

“The rachni are sentient people, not an infestation,” Liara said slowly.

“They’re both,” growled Wrex. “They won’t hesitate to rip you limb from limb, T’Soni.”

“I understand where you’re coming from.” Shepard’s voice was gentle, yet steely. “But they’re dangerous. We have no way of communicating with them and no guarantee that even if we could, they’d negotiate. The Alliance is on the defensive already, Liara. I won’t add rachni problems to that out of sentiment.”

“But.”

Shepard shook her head sharply, cutting her off. She turned to the window into the contamination chamber, unmoving as the rachni inside threw themselves against the plexiglass. “It’s not up for discussion. Alenko?”

He stepped forward. “Yes, ma’am?”

“You and Garrus see if you can bring up the controls for the plasma purge.”

“Roger that.” The other alternative, he knew, was fighting through them. The result would be the same, but someone from the Normandy might be wounded, or even killed. This was the most efficient solution.

Ten minutes passed as they wrestled with the corporate programming. Then: “Done, ma’am.”

Shepard stepped past him and hit the button herself. Together, they watched as the rachni burnt.

When it was over and they were wisps of dust, Shepard nodded once. “Let’s get moving.”

It was impossible to know what his commanding officer was thinking under the sleek black of her
helmet, but Alenko wondered anyway. He wondered if she was thinking about the mines and the incendiaries and the IEDs she’d used on Elysium to take apart the pirate platoon sent to take her position. He’d read the reports - the unvarnished truth. The Defence of Ground Battery 45A was taught to Alliance officer cadets these days.

The efficient solution.

Kaidan followed Shepard into the decontamination chamber and towards the tram.

To the credit of Captain Ventralis and his staff, hopped up on too many stims or not, they lowered their guns quick smart when they realised the new intruders had two legs, not six. Shepard knew what it was like when you spent a few days, a week, with no sleep on stims. Reality became something less than fixed. If the sleep deprivation didn’t give you hallucinations, the drugs would eventually.

Ventralis’ eyes were red and the corner of one twitched as he took them in, settling on the stencil of the Alliance symbol on Williams’ armour as the Marine stood beside her. “What are Alliance space jockeys doing here?”

The terminology caught her interest. “Army?”

“UNAS. In another life. You didn’t answer my question.”

“Commander Shepard, Special Tactics and Reconnaissance. Matriarch Benezia T’Soni is here. I need to speak to her. It’s urgent. For both of us - back in Hanshan, NDC has their finger on the button for one of the planetary battle stations. If the situation isn’t contained soon, we’ll all be vapor.”

Ventralis rubbed a hand along his bare scalp. “I haven’t seen the Matriarch in a few days. The outbreak started in the Hot Labs and only Han Olar got out of there and he’s - well.” he shook his head and continued. “She went into the labs to try and deal with the problem, I think, but it’s just been constant attacks since then. I’m down ten men and I’ve got scared civilians in the barracks. If we try and move them, we’ll get swarmed and picked off one by one.”

“I’d like to have a look around the barracks, talk to the survivors. See if I can learn anything more about these creatures.” She tucked her thumbs into her webbing.

He waved his hand. His fingers were trembling. “Go ahead.”

The scientists clustered together or huddled in corners - some barely reacted to the sudden presence of armed strangers, while others looked at them with painful hope. An asari leant against the wall, her face clear of emotion as she studied them. Han Olar however, was still and alone, but for the rasp of his ventilator. Shepard couldn’t see his face, but she could imagine what she’d see in his eyes - nothing.

“You’re here to find about them, aren’t you?” His voice was a flat monotone. Whoever Doctor Han Olar was, he’d gone away. Practically put up a vacancy sign.

She lowered her voice. “You mean the rachni.”

“Yes.” His head rotated towards Wrex. “A krogan would understand.”

“How?” the krogan in question rumbled.
“We brought the rachni back from the dead. In retrospect, a bad decision.”

“You don’t say,” bit off Williams. “How many have died because of that?”

“Everyone in the Hot Labs,” Olar said simply. “Except for me.”

“How?” Wrex repeated, a growl in his voice.

“We found an egg, in a derelict ship. Waiting in cryo since the last battles. The last gasp of a dead race - a queen. We brought her here.”

“You undid my ancestors work,” Wrex snarled. Shepard shot him a look but he didn’t seem to notice.

“Yes. We put her in the Secure Labs and took her children from her. And now, they reap their revenge.”

“Idiots!” Ashley burst out.

“Yes,” he agreed. “But perhaps you can undo what we have done. There is a failsafe, in the Hot Labs where the children nest. Activate it, and the rachni will be destroyed.”

“Atonement for your mistake?” asked Shepard caustically.

“No,” he said, “there is none.”

She was reminded vividly, unpleasantly, of Shay in that bare barracks room, his hands too clean and knotted together. *There’s no forgiveness for what I’ve done.*

“What about Benezia? Could she survive the Hot Labs?” Liara’s voice was taut, caught between the razor edges of anxiety and hope.

Olar wheezed. “She did not go into the Hot Labs. She came for the Queen.”

“So Ventralis lied to us,” Kaidan surmised.

“He is company. Benezia is company. It is likely he has orders.”

“So we try to get into the Secure Labs, ma’am?” Alenko looked to her.

“You would need a pass to get past the security systems. Even I didn’t have the permissions.”

“Would Ventralis?”

“Perhaps.”

She looked at the volus steadily. “Thank you for your help.”

Han Olar didn’t reply. She motioned for her people to follow her. “We’ll activate the failsafe first. I don’t want to be caught between that many rachni and Benezia’s troops - and then we can evacuate the civilians.”

“Ma’am,” it was Ashley, “the asari scientist that was here - the calm one - she’s gone.”

Shepard grimaced. “Damnit. Alright, I think we can assume Benezia is still alive and kicking then. Let’s move. Ready to kill some rachni, Wrex?”
His head swung towards her, one red eye glaring into hers. “Always.”

The elevator rattled around them. Ashley ran an uneasy hand along her rifle. It felt like the sharp jaws of a trap were closing around them.

“Ma’am, I don’t like that we’re doing exactly what Ventralis wants us to do.”

Shepard seemed serene, unconcerned. “I understand your misgivings, Sergeant, but he doesn’t know that we know, yes? We kill the rachni, then kill him if we have to. We knew there would be many enemies here.”

“I guess,” she said dubiously. The door slid open and she took point, Ki-tae beside her, rifle raised and sweeping. The room stunk of blood, rot, and acid. Here and there lay the corpses of the Hot Labs scientists, eaten away by acid and sliced by barbs to the point they were barely recognisable as people.

Like at the digsite camp. Bodies burnt and smoldering, all identity turned to ash.

*Keep it together.* Her head snapped up. “Skipper, I’ve got a life sign. Human.”

The human man had propped himself up against the wall, his breathing shallow. He’d taken a splash of acid to his side and arm - the skin had bubbled and melted away. His mouth formed a rictus of a smile when his eyes settled on them.

Kaidan moved to go to his side but Shepard caught his arm and shook her head sharply.

“Don’t touch him. Acid could still be on his skin.”

“Listen,” the man croaked, “what has happened here, it is our fault. You understand?”

“The rachni queen,” Ash said with a curl of the lip.

“Da.”

“Tartakovsky, right?” Shepard asked. “Dubyansky, over here in case his translator fails.” The arm Tartakovsky’s omnitool was on was half eaten away.

“You must be listening. Binary Helix wanted to clone them, create an army. We thought that without the queen, we could raise the babies to be obedient.”

“Obviously that didn’t work.” Shepard swept her arm across the room, the piles of corpses.

Greed. It turned Ashley’s stomach. So much death for greed. Though she was starting to think that as horrible as the situation was, it was the better of two evils. Better they fail at their attempts to play God and reap the consequences than have Saren unleash a rachni army on Citadel Space. The geth were bad enough.

“This was exactly the wrong thing to do. I am thinking that without the queen, rachni do not develop properly. Her mind shapes theirs.”

“Of course they don’t,” Ash said flatly. “Like locking a kid in a dark room away from their parents.”

“No child would be sane after that.” Liara’s voice was soft. It was the first time Ashley had heard her speak since their conversation with Olar.
“Exactly. They are mad, uncontrollable.”

“So what?” An undercurrent of anger ran through Shepard’s voice like electricity. “I shouldn’t kill them?”

Tartakovsky labourishly shook his head. “There is nothing to be done for them. We must activate the neutron purge. It will kill everything in the Hot Labs. I have codes, need Mira.”

Above Ashley, she heard a distant thudding. She tightened her grip on her rifle.

“We fixed her.”

There was a tear of metal and then Tartakovsky’s chest exploded outwards as a barbed tentacle went in his back and out the other side.

“Spirits!” yelped Garrus. Ashley jammed her finger on the trigger and Dubyansky’s machine gun roared beside her. The rachni tumbled, motionless, to the ground.

“They’re around us,” Shepard surmised grimly. “Williams, see if you can find that code and key on him.”

She knelt beside the corpse, avoiding the puddles of hissing acid and patted him down, trying to avoid his wounds. Her fingers wrapped around something rigid and plastic, just as her gauntlets began to sizzle.

“I have it!” Kaidan pulled the lid off his canteen and grabbed her arm.

“You need to get those gauntlets off.”

“I have some spare mesh gloves.” Not as good as the whole deal, but better than nothing. She ripped the still smoking gauntlets off and threw them beside Tartakovsky’s corpse. Alenko poured icy cold water over her hands and forearms for several seconds before nodding.

“Let’s move,” Shepard ordered and made for the nearest terminal room. Ashley followed with Kaidan pushing her ahead of him, rifle bumping against her hip, as she tried to hastily pull on the mesh gloves - and nearly dropped one. That’d be embarrassing.

Behind her, she heard the boom of Wrex’s shotgun and when she tossed a look over her shoulder, a rachni was twitching still after being pinned to the wall by four spikes from his Graal.

Vakarian opened the Mira terminal.

“I have full access to all systems and am at your disposal.”

“Activate neutron purge,” Ash said hastily, sliding in beside Garrus and shoving the key home.

“Proper code verification required.”

“Code input 875-020-079. Code Omega, local execution.”


“Of course,” Garrus said, “couldn’t let it be too easy, right?”

“Another item for the long list of Binary Helix’s work health and safety violations,” Ash shot back.
“Time to move,” Shepard ordered.

The door slid open. The space in between them and the elevator was a shifting, roiling mass of tentacles throwing itself at the door. They were sentient. They did know they were going to die.

“Shit.” Ashley reached for her belt.

“Push forward no matter what!” Shepard yelled as the first rachni warriors turned to them. “Frag them!”

Ashley pulled free the frag grenade and tossed it into their midst, followed shortly by ones from Shepard, Dubyansky and Ki-tae. The explosions rang loud as thunder in the enclosed space, stabbing jagged shrapnel through chitin. She wasn’t sure how many rachni were killed in the blasts, only that she had to step over a tendril as they advanced.

They kept up a steady hail of bullets, driving the rachni back, carving their way to the elevator as the countdown kept ticking. A neutron purge would be a fucking awful way to go. When her rifle’s heatsink was full she let it fall and bump her chest as she moved, pulling free her shotgun instead. No time to reload.

A shriek of (human) pain snapped her head to the side. A tentacle coiled around Ki-tae’s machinegun and pulled, the weapon wrenched from the Marine’s hands and clattering to the ground somewhere in the midst of the rachni. Before Nick could finish pulling out his sidearm, acid splattered his side.

He screamed.

_No!_ She moved for him, raising her shotgun, but it felt as if she were running in water.

Then Wrex was there. His shotgun boomed and the rachni skittered backward, before dying from a hail of bullets from a vengeful Williams and Dubyansky. The krogan paused, then grabbed the Marine’s webbing with one large hand, depositing him over one shoulder with ease.

“Keep moving!” Shepard’s voice was as hard and featureless as concrete.

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CODEX ENTRY

**The Battle of Suen:** One hundred and forty-six years after the first conflicts with the rachni and forty years after the uplift of the krogan, the tide of the Rachni Wars had turned. Following the decisive Battle of Ninmah, in which the last remnants of rachni space forces were defeated by the Coalition of Nations - the alliance of all space-faring nations at the time - an offer of surrender was broadcasted to the rachni homeworld on the insistence of the asari Grand Admiral Tavere T’Kuen.

The High Queen of the rachni refused. Declaring ‘the time for half measures is over,’ Overlord Hailat Kraig put into motion the krogan plans to invade Suen itself - a plan that the asari and salarians had expressed some trepidation about but ultimately allowed to go ahead with no formal objections.

The Coalition Fleet bombarded Suen from orbit for several days, devastating cities and destroying defences, an act that would stay with T’Kuen for the rest of her life. Hailat Kraig was less disturbed. Knowing the bombardment had only wounded the rachni, not beaten them into submission, and that the queens kept their nests below the surface of Suen where even the asari and krogan dreadnoughts could not reach, he ordered the krogan army to land.
Tens of millions of krogan soldiers landed on the poisonous surface of Suen, where salarians and asari could not go, and fighting raged for several months. The galaxy had been locked in total war for a century - whatever mercy remained had been used up with that last surrender request. Krogan troops shattered the last remaining rachni armies, then attacked the nests themselves. Hundreds gave their lives to carry nuclear bombs into the egg chambers and detonate them, killing the Queens, the brood warriors and the rachni young.

For decades after, the krogan would keep a presence on Suen, hunting the last of the rachni to extinction.
“How is he?” Shepard reloaded her pistol, slotting the heat sink into it. Her shotgun was ruined, discolouration marring the barrel where rachni spit had splashed onto it.

Alenko glanced at her from where he knelt over Lance Corporal Ki-tae. “I believe I’ve flushed all of the acid.” The floor of the elevator was covered in a sheen of water from Alenko and Ki-tae’s canteens. “And I’ve applied medigel which should prevent infection, but he’s in a lot of pain. I don’t think he’ll be able to walk far, let alone fight.”

The Marine in question had his eyes closed and was breathing shallowly. His vitals on her HUD showed he was conscious, but his heart rate and respiration rate were both elevated. She swallowed. She wouldn’t wish acid burns on anyone. Her shoulder tingled in sympathy, and she resisted the urge to rub it.

The door dinged open. The defensive positions the Binary Helix guards had been utilising were empty. Shepald’s mouth pressed into a thin line.

She grabbed Ki-tae’s good arm and hefted him across her shoulders. He groaned in pain, his visor thunking against her back. “Sorry, kid.”

“No problem, ma’am,” he managed.

She carried him over to the corner of the room and set him down as carefully as she could, gesturing for Dubyansky to come over to her. “Ventralis was trying to get us killed, I think. We need to deal with him. I want you to stay here with Nick until we can secure the trams, okay?”

“Aye aye, ma’am.”

Leaving the two Marines, they pushed into the barrack, moving tactically. Slicing the pie, clearing each room.

Ventralis was waiting for them.

“I’m sorry, Shepard. We’ve got orders from Benezia. Put down your weapons.”

She clicked her assault rifle from single shot mode to burst, pressed behind the scant cover of the doorway. “Listen to me, Ventralis. I’m getting to Benezia, even if I have to go through you to do so. But it doesn’t have to be like that. Saren and Benezia attacked Eden Prime. They’ve killed tens of thousands of people. They were going to unleash the rachni on the galaxy again! Is that the sort of person you want to die for?”

She could feel, more than see, Liara flinching behind her. In the opposite corner of the doorway, Ashley had pulled a flashbang free of her webbing.

“Step aside, and I swear to you that I’ll get you and yours out of here.”

Ventralis was silent for a long moment, and cautious hope flickered to life in her chest. But then he shook his head. “I’m sorry but I can’t.”

“Damnit Ventralis!” she burst out, her voice a snarl of frustration. “Don’t get in my way! We’ll both regret it.”
His answer was gunfire raking the doorway, sparking fragments of blue light off her shields. She nodded sharply to Williams, who flung the flashbang into the room. It went off with a discordant whine and a burn of blinding white light, wrenching pained shouts from the guards.

Shepard stepped out of cover and threw out a thudding wave of biotic power. Tables, chairs, boxes, and Binary Helix guards tangled up in that wave with the crunch of breaking metal and the snap of bone. She raised her rifle, surrounded by the roar of gunfire as her people joined the attack, and pulled the trigger. The first burst tore open Ventralis’ shields. The second cut the ceramic plates covering his chest in half. Blood pooled in the cracks.

And like that, it was over. The combined firepower of her squad cut down the exhausted guards like weeds before the scythe.

Shepard let the muzzle of her rifle fall to the ground.

“Fucking waste,” she muttered. “Williams, take Vakarian, Tali, and Wrex and clear the rest of the barracks, then get the survivors to the tram.”

“Roger.”

Seconds after the four of them had moved out, she heard the muffled retort of weapons fire.

Waste.

Sometimes the galaxy could try and trick you into thinking you understood the depths sentients would sink to, the depravities they’d inflict on each other. But if you let yourself think that, the galaxy would prove you wrong in short order.

Trusting that her people could look after themselves, she returned to Dubyansky and Ki-tae, gesturing for the Corporal to help her carry the young Marine. She gritted her teeth as he gasped in pain, hauling him onto the tram and laying him across some seats.

“How do you feel, son?”

His teeth were very white in his young face. “Hurts, ma’am, but I’ll be okay.”

“Good man.” She squeezed his hand.

Ten minutes later, Williams and the others returned, a gaggle of scientists tugged along in their wake. A patch of medigel had been plastered across Vakarian’s arm. At her glance, the turian explained, “Commando was trying to kill Han Olar.”

“Wrex threw her into a wall,” Ash said with satisfaction.

Shepard turned to the scientists. “The tram will take you back to the main station, along with my wounded Marine. A relief force from Hanshan will meet you there and ferry you back to the city.” A relief force including the rest of her Marines, her medical staff, and her Masters-At-Arms. ERCS hadn’t been pleased with her request, but she’d stayed firm. Her MAs and medical staff would make sure the civilians and Ki-tae got back safely. Shepard didn’t trust any of the corporations on this planet, not a damned one. “You’re safe now.”

Someone sobbed in relief.

Her gaze slid to Liara, whose normally bright blue eyes were dull and fixed. There were times for mercy and there were times for ruthlessness. She didn’t know which one this was.
The tunnel Shepard led them through was cold and blue, maintenance access carved out of rock and ice. Liara was tugged along in her wake, fingers wrapped around her pistol. The Commander had interrogated the scientists, leveraging their relief and gratitude for information, and that’s how they’d found out about the tunnel - and the pass one of the project leads still had.

Sometimes, these humans were much like asari commandos, if so fleeting in comparison. Where they couldn’t use shock and overwhelming firepower, they slipped away and found a weakness.

She wasn’t entirely certain this was one of Benezia’s weaknesses, but they had only run into a single rachni, easily dispatched by Wrex and Garrus. She stepped over the shattered remains and wondered when violence had begun to seem normal to her.

There was no going back, she realised, eyes fixed on the smooth black back in front of her, human armour like a beetle’s carapace. Sometimes she thought events slid off Shepard like snow off her hardsuit, but Liara had been in her mind - and Commander Shepard was a woman who carried her ghosts inside her and hid them from others. Liara had only had a brief glimpse of those ghosts, tangled up like they were with the Protheans, but she remembered the taste of iron and the thud-thud of the rescue shuttle like she’d been there. Shepard’s mind had been alien - as alien as the Prothean whispers entangled with human thought - but she’d felt that pain, deeper than the burn of acid.

The door slid open, and they entered a large cavern dug out of the rock and ice, covered in a lattice of steel walkways and platforms - and there, an enormous tank of some kind. The Rachni Queen.

But there-

The point of no return had come and passed, and part of her had still clung to hope, she now realised. That her mother could be reasoned with. That they could go back to the time under the trees, with dirt under her fingernails and a book in Benezia’s hands.

A stranger stood on the platform overlooking the queen’s cage. When she turned, Liara saw only cold grey eyes and the dark gown - rent here and there with flashes of white medigel. Even a matriarch hadn’t gotten through all those rachni unscathed. She’d always worn yellow.

“Mother .”

There was only hollow light in those familiar eyes. Benezia had been many things - ruthless when she needed to be. But she’d never been cold, never been cruel.

“Liara.” Grey eyes slid over her, to Commander Shepard. “I had never thought you would betray me to a stranger.”

Liara felt it - the shift and shudder of the gravity well, just outside the doors to the lab. Benezia would never be alone. She knew Shepard had felt it too, by the way she twitched as if to bring up a biotic barrier.

“I want to talk, Matriarch Benezia.”

“There is nothing to speak of. I will not be moved by sympathy, regardless of who you bring to this confrontation.”

Shepard took a step forward. “Liara is here because she wanted to be. Because she needed - because we both needed to know why you’re doing this.”

She felt transfixed, stabbed right through, by the pitiless stare the Matriarch levelled at her. It was the same stare she’d seen levelled at those who got in the way of Thessia’s progress. “What have you
told her about me, Liara?"

_I will not cry_, she’d told herself. Now she felt the pinprick of tears. Her voice rose and throbbed with betrayal. “What could I say, mother? Try to justify what you’ve done? Tell them that you’ve gone insane? Should I explain how to _kill you_?”

Each word felt like a jagged wound. Shepard’s hand twitched as if to touch her arm, but in the end stayed on her rifle. Liara realised that she could no longer see Sergeant Williams.

Benezia turned from her. “You do not know the privilege of being a mother. To shape life. Turn it towards happiness or despair. Her children were to be ours. The galaxy resists Saren’s plans - as you do - but that would be overcome with the help of the rachni.”

“They’re sentients,” Shepard said lowly., “You tried to turn them into slaves and they fought back.”

“All will serve, or all will die.”

“Is this what it is?” Liara burst out. “You’ve perverted your life’s work for one man’s ambition for power?”

“You do not understand,” said Benezia, almost sadly, eyes unblinking. “But you will.” Her head turned towards Shepard and her mouth curled in a cruel smile. “Have you ever faced an asari commando before? Few humans have.”

The sense of gravity around her _bent_, and she opened her mouth - but too late. Her mother’s hand flashed, and a ball of blue energy struck Shepard in the chest, knocking the human head over heels - and nearly off the walkway - in a clatter of metal and dull ceramic. The side door opened and in charged Benezia’s commandos.

“Barrier!” Kaidan yelled without pausing, and Liara felt him and Wrex beside her, as they wove flashing blue into a barrier - just in time to catch a cascade of gunfire from the commandos.

“Back up,” Shepard snapped, already struggling to her feet despite the nausea and disorientation Liara knew she had to be feeling.

The commandos were still advancing, and Liara felt the deep cold of dread settle in her gut. She’d heard of it before - the flash of biotics, of shotgun blasts, a commando squad taking apart their enemy with methodical precision at close range.

Then - gunfire from above. Accurate bursts from a machine gun, forcing the commandos to take cover.

“Williams?” Liara gasped out the question as they found their own cover on another platform, Dubyansky throwing himself onto his stomach and firing his machine gun to keep the commandos from moving.

“Yes,” Shepard said distractedly, her hands flickering with blue.

“No sniper rifle?” asked Garrus.

“Machine gun is better at this range. We need to keep them pinned until Draven arrives to flank them, but watch your ammunition! And keep an eye on the Matriarch.”

Alenko’s fingers found a tech grenade at his belt as Shepard’s found her own webbing. The two humans threw them in concert. The first went off with a flash and a whine, and then the second cut
through a commando’s biotics like a knife severing a loose thread. Dubyansky shifted his fire in concert with Tali and Garrus -

But then another two commandos were thrusting fields of swirling light at them, and Liara was forced to join Shepard in a defensive effort, shielding their squad from the effects. A box went sailing over the railing.

Shepard was panting. The hours of fighting - against mercenaries, against geth, against rachni, and now against asari - were beginning to take their toll, reflected in the strain in the Commander’s voice, in the slight tremble of Alenko’s fingers on his rifle. “Damn, they’re good.”

“They’ve been soldiers for hundreds of years,” Liara said sharply. Above them, she could see her mother watching. Unmoving, like some dark statue dedicated to a demonic god.

“Wonderful,” remarked Dubyansky. He winced as a return bullet snapped overhead like a whip, ducking so quickly his visor smacked against the metal walkway.

Stalemate. The commandos couldn’t move while Dubyansky and Williams kept up their fire with the two LMGs. But Liara knew that they had only a limited supply of ammunition, particularly after the fighting they’d already done, and they would tire out before the commandos did.

“Lance 3,” Shepard said as she fired a burst with her Valkyrie, “ETA, over.”

“Two mikes. We ran into a few leftover security guards, over.” Draven’s voice was a relief to hear crackling over the comm net.

“Copy that. Lance Actual out.”

Wrex roared as Liara felt gravity twist and tear. One large hand slapped against his bicep.

“Wrex?”

“Bitch hit me with a warp field.” He bared his teeth. Orange blood trickled from where his suit, skin, and layers of muscle had torn open, as he returned his grip to his shotgun, firing at the commando responsible. Tali popped up, flinging a tech grenade to land at her feet. It went off with the stink of burnt ozone and Wrex grinned fiercely in victory as his next blast tore right through her light armour.

“Nice one, kid.”

“Alenko,” Shepard called, not taking her eyes off the commando squad, but the krogan shrugged the Lieutenant off.

“Stop babysitting me, Shepard! I’m fine.”

That was when the room seemed to stretch, distort, a wave of flickering blue rushing over them. Liara found herself on her back, only her instinctive barrier saving her from the various boxes and lab equipment that bounced along the deck. She pushed herself back to her feet, finding her pistol. Mother. Only Benezia had the strength for such a huge show of biotic power.

She’d been lucky, but not everyone had been. Tali was helping Garrus push a box off his legs. Dubyansky was still. She started to move - but then Shepard’s hand was on her shoulder.

“Fight first,” she ordered.

“I-yes, Commander.”
The commandos were moving she realised. Trying to close the distance. Liara raised her pistol as Shepard lifted her rifle. They opened fire together, joined soon by a limping, bleeding Garrus and a snarling Wrex.

Liara breathed in, out, raised her hand. She focused on a point in the rippling, disturbed gravity of the room. Collapsed it into itself. Two commandos were caught in the resulting singularity field.

Garrus’ rifle ripped into one, punching holes through the sleek hardsuit. Shepard flowed into a mnemonic and the room filled with the shuddering boom as the resulting biotic explosion tore the other asari apart.

Goddess, no. Another wave of pure energy, sweeping them aside like toys before a child’s hand. This time, it was followed by gunfire, and Liara gasped in fear, in rage, as Garrus collapsed again - and this time did not rise.

But above, she could see her mother stagger, pressing a hand to the rachni queen’s cage, heedless of the queen’s talons smashing again and again upon the glass. Benezia was wounded, tired. She couldn’t keep this up. Otherwise, this battle would have already been decided.

“Garrus!” shouted Tali fearfully.

Shepard was struggling back to her feet, wreathed in dark energy. Only the roar of Ashley’s covering fire from her perch somewhere above them saved them from the advancing asari.

Then the door on the opposite side of the lab slid open again, and five black-clad figures swept into the room, rifles up and sparking as they fired.

_The Marines!_

A commando fell, hardsuit cracked open by Draven’s fire.

And then-

“Watch out-” Liara hit her head as she went down again before Benezia’s power, hard enough to daze even though the helmet.

This has to end.

She pictured her mother’s face. The gentle smiles. Her mother’s fingers, gentle on her crest. The frowns of disappointment. The love and the anger and the gifts and the arguments.

She rose to her feet.

“Liara, what are you doing?” Shepard called after her.

A commando reached her as she moved forward, drawing biotic power around her. A burst of machine gun fire crawled across the other asari’s barrier, weakening it. She spared a thought to thank Sergeant Williams and then struck out, hard, throwing the commando off her feet. Another burst from the Marine on overwatch ended her life.

Liara climbed the stairs, heart pounding hard enough she was almost nauseous.

“Mother!”

Benezia stared at her, eyes like a wounded animal, leaning heavily against the glass.
The last of the commandos fell, caught between Draven and Shepard’s teams.

“Mother, please! I love you, and I know you love me!”

Benezia’s hands rose, curled into claws on either side of her face. “I will not betray him- you-”

“Whatsoever this is, you’re stronger!” she insisted, stepping closer. She felt Shepard’s presence at her back, moving warily forward.

Benezia shook like a leaf and then when she opened her eyes again, they were clear - pained, but clear. “You must listen. Both of you.”

“It’s okay,” Liara insisted, “We’ll get you out of here. We’ll help you! Won’t we, Shepard?”

She cast a frantic look at the human. Her expression was hidden behind her visor.

Benezia smiled sadly. “I’m afraid not, Little Wing. Saren still whispers in my mind. I can resist the compulsions - but only for a time. He is too strong.”

“No,” she shook her head, “tell us what’s wrong and we’ll fix it.”

“There’s not much time.”

“How are you able to break free now?” Shepard, her voice flat and practical.

“I sealed myself away,” Benezia murmured, “waiting for the time when I could help destroy him. The pain helps. Like a knife through the whispers.

“So you could turn on us again?”

“Yes, but it would not be my will. Shepard. I thought...I could guide him on less destructive paths. Help him. But I was a fool. His ship is the key.” Her hands tangled with Liara’s.

“His ship? The black dreadnought?”

“Yes. You’ve seen it. Its technology is far beyond anything I have ever seen; I know that the geth did not build it. Your thoughts echo strangely within it. They become twisted, malformed. You come to worship Saren, idolise him. The longer you stay aboard, the more you come to believe in his will, no matter how terrible. I became a willing tool of his murderous plans.” Benezia’s face twisted in pain. “I am - sorry. About Eden Prime.”

Liara squeezed her hands. “Why did he send you here?”

“He wants to know where the Mu Relay is,” she murmured, shuddering. “It was lost, thousands of years ago.”

“How do you lose a Relay?” Shepard asked.

“Four thousand years ago, a star nearby went supernova. The shockwave propelled the relay out of its system but did not damage it. As millennia passed, the nebula created by the nova enveloped the relay. It is difficult to find any cold object in interstellar space, as you would know. Particularly something swathed in hot dust and radiation.”

“What does this have to do with the rachni?”
“The Mu Relay was in rachni space,” she said simply. “Rachni queens share the memories of their mothers. I...took the knowledge from the queen’s mind. I was not gentle. I...I violated her, a crime against everything I have ever believed! I put it on that OSD, over there. Take it. It’s too late for me - I pay the price for my arrogance - but you can still stop him.”

“That’s not enough!” Liara cried. “The Relay could lead anywhere. Where does he mean to go?”

“I’m sorry. I don’t know. He was looking for Prothean artifacts. That is all I know.”

“There has to be a way we can help you,” Liara pleaded.

“You have to stop-- me. I can’t- His teeth are at my ear. Fingers on my spine. You should- Uh, you should-”

“Mother!”

Benezia straightened and the remorse, the love, it had all flowed out again, leaving only slate eyes behind. “My mind is clear. No one will stand in our way!”

“Shit,” said Shepard and then the air rippled and tore. The biotic blast struck the human Commander in the chest and flung her back - and she hit the railing and tipped over, one hand seizing metal to keep herself from falling.

Liara was on her knees, head ringing. Benezia strode forward, tattered gown floating around her limbs, hands burning with light.

She raised a hand, eyes focused on the Commander.

“Shepard!” Her hand found her pistol. Her hand rose like in a dream. She squeezed the trigger. Once. Twice.

The first slug struck her mother in the leg. The knee folded in a spray of purple blood. The second struck her ribs with a shatter of bone.

Benezia collapsed.

The pistol fell from her suddenly numb fingers.

Shepard heaved herself back onto the walkway. “Liara-”

Liara didn’t hear her. She tore off her helmet and dropped to her knees beside her mother, pulled that broken, bleeding form into her arms.

“Little Wing?” A soft palm pressed against the side of her face.

“I’m here, Mother,” she whimpered.

Benezia smiled, beautiful with release. “You freed me. Thank you, my dearest of loves. I will see you again with the dawn.”

Benezia went still and silent in her arms, and Liara T’Soni began to weep.

“Well, shit,” was all Ashley could think to say as she came to stand beside Commander Shepard, LMG bumping her hip, helmet under her arm.
The officer tore her eyes from Liara, knelt over her dead mother. Her voice was rough-edged. “Casrep.”

She scratched her jaw and counted them off. “Dubyansky is still unconscious. Head injury. We won’t know if it’s ‘just’ a concussion or if it’s more serious until we can get him onto the ship. Garrus has some cracked plates. Wrex has several injuries but won’t let Alenko look at them. Waaberi hurt her wrist.”

Shepard nodded sharply and stepped past her to pick up an OSD, scanning it with her omnitool, before brusquely shoving it into Ash’s hand. “You and Alenko make copies of this.”

“Aye, ma’am.” She scanned it onto her own omnitool and then turned to find Alenko as Wrex climbed the stairs to the platform. The krogan’s eyes were fixed on the tank. The rachni queen had subsided from her earlier hammering against the glass.

“Rigged with acid,” he said with satisfaction. “Press of the button and the rachni go back to the grave of history, as they should.”

That was when of the commando bodies jerked and moved, like a marionette or some zombie out of an old vid.

“*The fuck?*” Williams snapped her rifle up, moving quickly in front of her Commander.

“This one. Serves as our voice. We cannot sing. Not in these low spaces. Your musics are colorless.” Each word was slow, laboured.

“Music?” Shepard tilted her head in confusion.

“Your way of communicating is strange. Flat. It does not color the air. When we speak, one moves all.”

"This is going to be a fun conversation,” Ashley muttered.

“Rachni communicate telepathically,” rumbled Wrex, taking a threatening step forward.

“Krogan. We know of you.”

He snorted. “I damned well hope so.”

“We are the mother. We sing for those left behind.”

“Did you order your children to kill all those people?” Shepard demanded.

“No. We were locked away here. The children are beyond our songs.”

“That’s what the scientist in the Hot Labs said, skipper.”

Wrex huffed. “Push the damned button already, Shepard. Don’t know why we’re wasting time talking to bugs.”

“I killed your children,” Shepard ignored him, speaking to the queen instead.

“We know. It was necessary. They were lost to the silence. You sing a different song to those who tried to use us. A different harmony. We are the last. What will you sing? Will you release us? Are we to fade away once more?”
Wrex snarled. “Millions of my ancestors died to put these things down, to end the war they began.”

The asari drooped like a wilting flower. “We do not want more silence. More oily shadows. We wish only to teach harmony to our children.”

Liara’s voice was trembling but strong. “If we kill her on the basis of what she might do, how are we any different to Saren?”

Shepard looked at Ashley, a faint, bitter smile on her face. “What do you think, Sergeant?”

*What do I think? That this is miles above my security clearance. I’m a grunt, not some philosopher.*

“If we let her go, there’s a chance that we end up with a second war on our heads,” she said slowly. “But if we kill her, we commit genocide. No easy way around that, skipper. Not sure I want that on my conscience when I go to the final judgement.”

“Are you stupid?” Wrex turned to her, blood still dripping from his wounds. “Your people didn’t fight them, so maybe you don’t get it! They burned a hundred worlds!”

“I am many things Wrex,” Shepard gritted out, “but I won’t be party to genocide.”

“You will give us a chance to compose anew?” Something like hope swelled a dead voice.

Shepard pushed past the dead asari to glare at the queen. “Don’t make me regret it. If you even start a skirmish with anyone, I’ll hunt you down myself.”

“We will remember. We will sing of your forgiveness to our children.”

The asari slumped to the ground as Shepard stepped forward, tapping a command into the control console. Something released in the tank and the rachni screeched a song of victory and was gone.

“Great,” said Wrex coldly. “Bugs are composing songs for you. I’m sure that’ll be a comfort to you when they infest your worlds.”

The krogan stomped off, snarling under his breath to himself.

Williams stepped closer to the Spectre and lowered her voice. “You already had your mind made up, didn’t you?”

Shepard stared straight ahead at the now empty tank. There was a bruise starting to form in dark purples along her jaw and cheek. “Yeah. My ancestors knew genocide, Ashley, too well for me to be party to one.”

“Then why ask me?”

She shrugged. “Maybe I wanted to know I had your support before I pissed off the krogan.”

Ashley rocked back on her heels, stung. “Doesn’t matter if I’d agreed with you or not, skipper. I woulda had your back either way.”

“So you would have helped me commit genocide?” There was something sharp in Shepard’s tone.

Ash’s jaw clenched. She knew herself better than people might think. She was a straight puncher - if someone had an issue, she’d rather have it out than dance around it. But she knew, suddenly, that if she stayed in this conversation, things wouldn’t end well. “Commander. With your permission, I’ll go help Lieutenant Alenko get the wounded ready to move.”
Shepard closed her eyes and then nodded. “Granted, Sergeant. Get Matriarch Benezia’s body ready for transport as well.”

“Aye aye, ma’am.”

Ashley spun on her heel and stalked away.

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CODEX

Asari Commandos: Asari commandos are the elite soldiers of the various asari Republican militaries and among the finest individual warriors in the galaxy, often seen as equivalent to a krogan battlemaster. Unlike the unified special forces commands of the turian Hierarchy and the Systems Alliance, each Republic equips and trains its own commando cadre, albeit able to integrate into the asari High Command as required.

Commandos are selected from those soldiers that have completed an initial twenty year service period with their Republican unit, and undergo extensive training in linguistics, philosophy, biotic combat, weapons handling and tactics. Those who successfully complete this long and arduous process become some of the most respected soldiers in the galaxy. Many asari Spectres were originally commandos.

Compared to both the Alliance and the Hierarchy, asari High Command prefers to deploy these commando groups over conventional forces. This has led to a comparatively high casualty and deployment rate amongst commando units when contrasted to regular Republican units.

After completing their service, many commandos choose to use their skills in the private sector, whether serving the Matriarchs or joining mercenary groups such as the infamous Eclipse group. Others become the commanders of military units, Spectres, security consultants, and trainers.
Joker was starting to feel a bit redundant by the time the ground team began to trickle back aboard, some of them in better shape than others. Garrus, Dubyansky, and Ki-tae had been carried aboard on stretchers, but they were alive. In his book, that was a win.

There had been a body in a bag - but he’d counted their guys. It wasn’t one of theirs. Maybe that was an asshole reason to be relieved, but he was.

Shepard was still in armour, stinking of sweat, smoke and a hint of burnt ozone, when she came up to the helm, nodding to Pressly and Sax. With the four of them up there, it felt very crowded all of a sudden - or maybe it was just the way the Spectre loomed, taking up space with both presence and ceramic plating.

“NDC is going to contact us to confirm they’ve sent out a shuttle as I requested. Once - and only once - you get that confirmation, get us the hell outta here. Set a course for the Citadel.”

“A shuttle, ma’am?” Pressly frowned.

“Need to know.” Her tone was a knife, and the XO nodded, taken aback. “Look. We know Saren wants the Mu Relay, but we don’t know why or where he’s going. It’s deep in the Terminus, so I don’t have a snowball’s chance in hell of convincing either the Council or Parliament to blockade it without more information.”

“So the Citadel, ma’am?”

“Yeah. Hackett sent the 63rd Scout to start looking for Prothean ruins and artifacts, and their HQ is currently on the Citadel. Hopefully, they’ve turned up something.”

“Shit.” Joker groaned, tilting his head back, “63rd? That’s the Raging Russian! He’ll make me shave!”

“Flight Lieutenant,” Shepard said coldly, “if you have a nickname for a senior officer, I don’t want to know about it.”

Jeez. “Aye, ma’am.”

“We’ve got three Marines wounded, so I’d prefer the guard watches be pulled from the MAs and other crew if possible. I don’t want them too tired covering the extra shifts.”

“Of course, Commander,” Pressly agreed. “Would you like me to inform you when we’re underway?”

“Just ping me in my quarters. I have a very long report to write.” Her jaw tightened. “Dead matriarch, dead mercs, rachni. Jesus. That’s all, X.”

“Aye, ma’am.”

She strode off, helmet tucked under her arm. She liked her striding, Commander Shepard.

“You know, Pressly, one day I’d like to have a mission where Shepard comes back not looking like she wants to throw someone out the airlock.”

“We’re on a mission to kill or capture a Spectre gone mad, the Alliance is at war with killer robots,
we just killed a crewmate’s mother and our captain has the memories of a dead alien species shoved into her skull. I think we’re doing alright, all things considered.”

Joker twisted to look at the XO. “That’s why I like you, Pressly. You might be a grumpy old fuck, but you sure do have perspective.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment, Flight Lieutenant. Sax, you got our course planned?”

“Aye, sir. Plugged in.”

“Sir!” It was Lam, the comms technician. “We’ve received a message from the Noveria Development Corporation. Something about a shuttle?”

“Put it on my screen,” the grizzled old sailor said. “Then get me a line to Hanshan Tower.”

“Line is up on your console, sir.”

“Hanshan Tower, this is SSV Normandy, requesting clearance to depart. Course and vectors submitted, over.”

“Roger that, Normandy. You are cleared for departure, over.”

“Copy that, Tower, releasing clamps. Normandy out.”

“Man, they really want us outta here, huh?” Joker commented as the Normandy hummed to life. His fingers danced across the controls, easy on the maneuvering thrusters. The frigate pirouetted out of the docking bay and arced up, towards the sky. He imagined that he could feel her excitement, her eagerness to be back in the deep black sea.

“They had rachni on their planet. We stick around any longer and the Commander might bring down another corporation or two.”

“Rachni,” Chief Saxena murmured, “not something I thought I’d see in my career.”

“Well, we didn’t see them,” Pressly pointed out, ever practical. “The Marines did.”

“Bloody Marines, having all the fun.” Sax manipulated the nav terminal with the tip of a finger, visualizing the trajectory they needed to hit the Pax Relay.

“If you call getting splashed with acid ‘fun,’” Joker muttered.

“...Point.”

Williams hesitated outside the door leading into the captain’s cabin, a datapad held loosely in one hand. She’d changed out of her armour and into clean fatigues, wincing when the material scraped new bruises. She wasn’t even sure how she’d gotten most of them. Then she’d carefully catalogued all their equipment and which pieces were damaged. After that, she’d gone and checked on the wounded.

But duty was only an excuse for so long. She did have to make this report, even if she’d recently discovered a painfully large crush on her commanding officer. Even if she was still stung by what Shepard had said after releasing the rachni queen.

Ash took in a breath and then knocked on the door. “Commander, it’s Staff Sergeant Williams. I have the casualty and gear reports.”
“Come in.”

She hadn’t been in here before, she realised as the door slid open when she tapped the holo. Shepard always seemed to seek her crew out in their own hangouts and conducted briefings elsewhere. Only Pressly, Emerson, and Negulesco seemed to go into Shepard’s cabin with any regularity.

And those who got Masted, of course.

Shepard was sitting behind her desk, uniform jacket off. Ash did her best to fix her gaze on the commander’s face. Not on the smooth curve of her biceps, bared by her t-shirt. Not on the rest of the cabin.

“Take a seat.”

She lowered herself into the chair, careful of her bruises. Not that there was much to see. Shepard’s cabin was neat, squared away. The only evidence anyone lived in it was the uniform jacket draped on the bed and the holo frame on the desk, blinking with a handful of pictures - Shepard with an older woman with the same features and a teenage boy with a twinkle of mischief in his dark eyes; a young Marine in dress blues, staring straight ahead. The hat the Marine wore was an older style. The style still worn in the 50s.

“How’re my people?” asked the Commander.

She folded her hands on top of the datapad. “Dubyansky has a concussion. Doctor Chakwas wants him in medbay for observation for a while, then light duty until his symptoms are gone. She’s got Nick under the dermal regenerator, said she wants him off duty for a week. Garrus, two weeks while his plates heal. Waaberi broke a finger, so she wants her on light duty until it heals.”

Shepard nodded. “Could’ve been a lot worse. How’s our gear looking?”

“We have a spare hardsuit for Nick, so that should be fine, but I put in a requisition for another shotgun for you, ma’am. It’s beyond even my powers. Until then, I’ve popped a Katana in your kit.”

She grimaced. “I hate that thing.”

“You’re welcome to use your old shotgun to bludgeon things instead, skipper.”

Shepard smiled. She could be a severe woman at times. Ashley liked the way her mouth curved and the lines of her face relaxed into something gentler when she smiled.

God fucking dammit, Ash. Stop thinking of her like that.

It was a Bad Idea, capitals required.

“Thank you, Sergeant.”

“Have you spoken to Liara yet?” she couldn’t help asking. She regretted it almost immediately, as the smile fled the other woman’s face.

“No. I haven’t.”

“If you don’t mind me saying so, I think you should. Has to be pretty hard, killing your own mother. Gotta fuck you up a bit.” A flicker of surprise ran over Shepard’s face and Ashley scowled, chest twisting. “What? Just because we’re not bosom buddies, I can’t be concerned for someone who just lost their ma like that?”
“Easy, Ash.” Shepard reached across the desk, and the tips of her fingers were warm on the skin of Ashley’s forearm. “You’re right. And, about before, with the rachni queen -”

Ash shook her head firmly. Her skin felt like it was on fire under the other woman’s touch. “You weren’t - necessarily wrong, skipper. But it’s probably a conversation we should have when everyone’s calmer.”

Shepard’s eyes were searching. “You’re right, Sergeant. But what I want everyone on this ship to know is that you can never take back killing someone. In our line of work, once you pull that trigger, it can never be taken back.”

“I know that,” Ash said, a bit sharper than she should’ve with a senior officer.

“I think you do. I want to know that you know you can rely on your own judgement.” Those eyes had a fire in them often hidden behind cool professionalism. How would it feel to have that intensity directed towards you and not just questions of ethics --

She cut that thought process off ruthlessly, as if with a knife. They seemed to both realise that the Commander’s fingers were still pressed against her arm at the same time.

“Skipper-”

Shepard withdrew her hand and she felt suddenly cold. “Thanks for the reports, Sergeant. I should let you get back to your duties.”

She was off-duty now but she understood a dismissal when she heard it. She rose to her feet. “Goodnight, ma’am.”

“Goodnight, Williams,” Shepard echoed, eyes already fixed on her paperwork.

Ashley wasn’t quite ready to try and sleep yet despite the yawns that were starting to force themselves out, so when she saw Kaidan nursing a cup of energy drink in the mess hall, she joined him.

“Evening, LT.”

“Hey, Ash.” He looked exhausted but not quite ready to sleep. That kind of keyed up you got after a big op.

“What’s with Wulandri?” Ashley leaned back in her chair to watch as the officer in question strode up the stairs towards the CIC, a scowl fixed firmly on her face.

Alenko took a sip of his (disgustingly pink) drink. "Someone stole her favourite datapad."

"Brave, considering she controls our nukes."

"Well, she can't nuke anyone in the ship."

"No, you're right. She'd airlock them first."

Alenko grinned before his expression went contemplative. “Listen...are we good?”

She sighed and stretched, wincing as her shoulder popped. “Yeah, LT, we’re good. You’re just doing your job, I’m doing mine. Sometimes we have to call each other out. That’s why we’re - us and Shepard - a team.”
Sure, she’d been pissed off. And she still wasn’t sure he’d been right, but a lot of her friends were dead. Couldn’t go around just throwing new friendships aside.

He smiled again. “I’m glad, Ash.”

“Yeah, yeah. Don’t go getting all sappy on me, sir. I have a reputation to uphold.”

“Whatever you say, Staff Sergeant.”

She glanced at her omnitool and then sighed. NO CARRIER, blinked the tiny icon. The Normandy’s only connection to the outside world right now was a link to Alliance command - all comms and extranet access was reserved for work only. If the ship went silent, they wouldn’t even have that. When they were closer to the Citadel, it’d get better. Maybe she’d even get to see the vid messages her mother and sister sent her.

It was one thing she missed about colonial duty.

Kaidan’s eyes were warm and sympathetic. “Missing the family?”

“Yeah,” she admitted. “This is my first frigate tour, so I’ve never been out of contact this long before. You got any siblings?”

He shook his head. “Just me. My parents didn’t want to risk it, you know? I was lucky.”

Lucky, he said. Lucky, Shepard had said on Noveria. She couldn’t quite wrap her head around that. But she could understand not wanting pity. “Right. I guess I can understand their concerns. Your dad was in the Marines too, yeah?”

“Yes,” he smiled proudly, “Sergeant Major. When I was commissioned, he called me a traitor and then saluted me.”

“You went to the dark side,” she teased.

“You know what they say about Second Lieutenants getting lobotomies? All true. Had mine in OTC.”

After the chaos of the operation on Noveria (oh, poor Liara), the hum of the Normandy’s engineering compartment was a warm relief that sank right into Tali’s bones. It had only been two days, but it felt like an eternity since she’d spoken to her engineer friends.

“We haven’t been up to much,” Vorobyov explained as she passed around cards. Tali was content to perch on a crate and watch them. “There was not much to do in dock, especially since we were confined to the ship.”

Tali remembered the cold grey of Port Hanshan and shuddered. “You weren’t missing much.”

“Ever since we fixed that power draw problem, Normandy’s been behaving herself.” Hudson patted the bulkhead affectionately.

“Uh, uh, uh.” Vorobyov wagged his finger. “Do not say such things, Glowstick. You say this and our girl will blow an emitter coil just to make us earn our keep, yes?”

“Not nuke, not my problem,” she said happily.
“I will make you many different problems then. Such as push-ups.”

“Anyone ever tell you that you’re a cruel man, Chief?”

Vorobyov laughed, bumping Tali’s shoulder with his. “Now tell us, Tali, is it true? We heard there were rachni on Noveria and you fought them.”

Tali grimaced under her visor, even though she knew they couldn’t see it. “Yes. Some of them look like spiders. Glowing spiders!”

“Do you think there are more?”

She thought of that cold, dim lab. Her arm wrapped around Liara’s shaking shoulders. Shepard’s hands on the controls to the tank.

“Yes. Whether they’ll be hostile, I don’t know.”

“They tried to kill you,” Hudson pointed out.

“Perhaps everything deserves a second chance, Glowstick. Even spiders that tried to kill us all once.”

“Should’ve nuked the place to make sure,” Glowstick retorted.

Tali remembered the dead asari, jerking like a puppet on strings - and the incredulity, the joy in her voice when Shepard had refused to kill the queen.

“Started without me?” Rosie Draven eased herself in beside Hudson with a friendly smack on the shoulder.

“How was your watch?” Tali asked. Sometimes she joined Rosie in her rounds, helping her check and fix the fire suppression systems or check the CBR defences were in order. Fire on a starship was death.

Rosie shrugged. “Nothing exploded or caught fire. So...boring.”

“A boring day for damage control is a good day for everyone else.” Vorobyov dealt her some cards. “How is your girl?”

“Talitha’s fine. Enjoyed playing the cavalry.” Rosie’s eyes flickered to Tali. “She said it got pretty hot down there.”

Tali looked at the ground, at a scuff mark on the deck beneath her feet. The engineering crew had better hope it was gone by the time the Master Chief came down to check on them. Negulesco loved to yell, particularly about ‘her deck’ being dirty.

“Yes. Liara’s mother…”

Rosie winced. “Yeah. Well. At least we got Saren’s lieutenant. Hopefully, that makes things harder for him.”

“I’m going to go check on Garrus.” She got up off the box. Garrus was a stubborn, occasionally racist bosh’tet, but he’d started making sure she got some of the nicer dextro rations and it was good to have someone to talk tech with. And when he’d gone down -

It had felt like all of her insides were twisting into a knot.
"Hey, tell him thanks for the help with that monitor in Propulsion Repair Locker 2."

"I will."

Liara felt as if she’d rubbed her face with sandpaper, eyes gritty and swollen. It felt like an eternity had passed since the bark of the pistol in her hand. She’d floated, empty, with Lieutenant Alenko’s hand - gentle despite the hard surfaces of his armour - on her arm like a tether as they’d returned to Port Hanshan alongside the cold silver box they’d laid her mother in.

Would they even give her mother the correct rites? She knew what they said back in the Republics - that her mother was a traitor, a monster. She’d even believed it herself until that icy room within the mountain and the strain on her mother’s face.

As soon as they’d gotten back aboard, she’d fled here, to this tiny storage room masquerading as both cabin and office and closed the door like the steel could keep out not only the crew and their pity but also the rushing, heavy cascade of grief. It flooded over her like an ocean pulling her into the depths. Her chest was held in a vice.

Benezia’s hands, warm on hers, teaching her the rituals of incense and meditation, her voice a melody in the later afternoon sun, the air thick with the scent of summer flowers. We are all part of something greater than ourselves, Little Wing. The galaxy is a living, breathing whole, constantly remaking and reshaping itself.

If the galaxy was some great consciousness, why did such terrible things happen?

She closed her eyes, pressing her forehead against the cold metal of her desk. Behind the lids, she saw it again. The splash of bright purple on the grating, the white gleam of shattered bone, the wet gasps.

She shuddered, drawing her arms around herself.

There was a hesitant thump on the door. She swallowed and drew herself upright.

"C-come in." Her voice was a hoarse tatter as if she’d not spoken in days.

The door slid open. The young Marine Amina Waaberi stood in the frame, shoulders bowed. "Uh. Doctor Chakwas said you should eat, so I brought you this. This is your favourite, right?"

Liara smiled weakly. "Thank you."

She rose to take it from her, but Waaberi waved her off, setting the plate and a steaming cup of tea in front of her.

Waaberi paused, biting her lip. This close, Liara could see the white rip of scar tissue that split the deep dark of her skin across her jaw. These humans were so young, but they had lived harsh, difficult lives.

And seemed to enjoy them. Liara still didn’t understand why they cheered when they saw things explode.

"Listen, T’Soni. I’m really sorry. But thank you. You saved Hodgins and now the skipper - we owe you one."

Liara nodded unsteadily, tears threatening. The Marine patted her gingerly on the shoulder. "I really
am sorry."

"It's alright," she whispered. She'd known how this might end. Shepard had said it to her, before the mission. "I'm glad Dubyanksy will be alright."

"He's got a hard head, ay?" The Marine paused again. "Listen, the boss - Williams, that is - had us clear out the aft storage and put - put Benezia in there."

Liara closed her eyes, nodding. At least her mother wasn't given that last indignity of being put amongst the frozen roasts.

"Is there...look, we have our own ceremonies. Is there anything you need to be done that we can help with?"

"No, thank you. There are a few things that must be done, but I must be the one to do them. Thank you for the lunch." She managed to keep her voice mostly level until the Lance Corporal had made her escape. Distantly she understood and felt the flicker of something like gratitude. Waaberi didn't know how to deal with the tears, not really, but she'd still made an effort, in her own way.

She let her head droop.

Every second seemed to linger painfully. She ate and drank but it tasted of cardboard that she had to force down.

The medbay was dark and still when she padded towards the door by the light of the monitors. There were a few dark lumps on the beds - Dubyanksy, Garrus, and Ki-tae - but none of them stirred as she slipped out of the door.

The mess hall was empty except for a couple of the CIC crew who didn't meet her reddened gaze as she crept into the kitchen and then out again, a box in her arms. Their silence lasted until she got into the (thankfully empty) lift, their card game ignored.

Waaberi hadn't lied. The refrigerator compartment was empty except for the silver 'transfer case' sitting in the centre. She wondered, distantly, if Williams would get in trouble for moving all those provisions. The air was crisp and cold on her face, biting into her scales beneath the tracks of tears she didn't remember shedding.

There were things she had to do. Rites to be performed. But she felt frozen as the frost beneath her boots.

"Liara."

Somehow Shepard's voice wasn't a surprise. The Commander took two long strides from the doorway to her side, thumbs hooked into her belt. She was only in her uniform pants and shirt, not the jacket, and she was close enough Liara could see the tiny hairs on her forearms raising. A human physiological sign of cold, amongst other things, she remembered.

"Can I help you, Commander?"

Shepard's mouth flattened into a line. "I think that should be my question to you. I came down to make sure everything was in order."

"I need to...I need to..." The sobs caught her by surprise again and her knees weakened. Then Shepard had one arm around her and she was weeping into the human's shoulder.
"Easy, easy," Shepard murmured, one hand carefully rubbing her back. "This has to be awful for you, I'm so sorry."

"You weren't the one to kill her." Liara's voice was muffled. The crack of the pistol shot off the icy walls. The splinter of bone, the fading light of deep blue eyes. It had been her. All her.
Shepard tensed. "No, I wasn't. But I should have been."

She jerked back. "What?"

Shepard's face was grim. "It was my responsibility as your captain. I should never have put you in the position to take that shot."

Liara pulled away carefully, breathing in deeply. "No, it was my duty, as her daughter."

"No one should ever be expected to do that."

She took a few steps forward and laid both palms on the cold metal. "I need to stay, Shepard. On the Normandy. You might need my expertise again and - I'm the daughter of a traitor now. I am not sure what waits for me on Thessia."

"You had nothing to do with it," Shepard insisted, but didn't move from where she was standing.

She shrugged weakly. "I am her daughter. I am suspect in the eyes of many of the matriarchs. The mother-daughter bond is incredibly important in my society. I caused a stir just by going my own way."

"You're welcome to stay," Shepard said after a pause. "You won't need time - for putting her affairs in order?"

"No. I will be provided for, but my mother's funeral and most of her estate will be the responsibility of my eldest aunt." Humans tended to pass things from parent to child, but age was important to many asari. And Liara was only one hundred and eight. "I just need to..." Her trembling fingers slipped on the catches. "Can you...?"

Shepard moved forward, shoulders square like she was facing the Council themselves and she deftly undid the latches - and then, when Liara nodded, lifted the lid of the case.

Liara's fingers gravitated to the unmarked skin of her mother's cheek. The Marines had arranged her limbs more naturally and covered the wounds that had stolen her life. They'd closed her eyes as well with two wet swabs over them, just after her death. It was something asari did not do, but she now knew it was something humans tried to do with their own dead. Benezia almost looked as if she'd fallen into slumber, if not for the unnerving still of her chest. She wondered if that gave humans comfort. The idea that their loved ones might someday wake up again.

She shakily poured water from the carafe into a small bowl, glad when Shepard steadied it for her, then dipped a cloth into it.

"Can you stay?" She tried to keep her voice from trembling and failed, cloth hovering just above Benezia's cheek.

"Of course," Shepard said simply.

Liara nodded, swallowed and gently began to wipe her mother's scales clean.
Shepard walked out of the comm call with the Council feeling like she needed a drink. She briefly considered getting a cup of whatever horrific swill Chief Rahman was creating with his still hidden in the maintenance tunnels, but then dismissed the thought. What she could get away with - both in the eyes of her superiors and her crew - was very different now, compared to with her N7 unit.

Besides, she should let them think there were things they could keep secret from her.

The worst part of all this with the Council was that her new superiors didn’t trust her - a novel and unpleasant experience. She’d been a troublemaker in the eyes of her first BCO when she was a butterbar, but he’d still sent her platoon on the hardest missions. The Councillors’ clearly dubious opinion of her competency was doing more than simply smarting her pride - it was endangering her mission. She’d resorted to begging ships from the Alliance instead.

Maybe that was what the Council wanted. A thrown bone to the Alliance and a scapegoat ready to go if Saren escaped her.

No. The worst part was that she couldn’t even fully blame them for their lack of faith. She’d skipped three-thirds of Spectre selection, her sponsor had gotten his head blown off in their first mission, and she still wore Systems Alliance blue like a second skin.

But she had been letting her frustration seep out, creep into the attitudes of her crew. That had to stop. Between the inquisition from the Council over her motives for freeing the rachni queen and her conversation with Liara, she felt bruised all over.

This was just another duty. Time to get on with it.

Lieutenant Nina Rodriguez had the deck when Shepard walked into the CIC and the younger officer straightened almost painfully.

“How far out are we?” Shepard asked, crossing her arms and staring at the holographic map, the swirl of stars.

“Two hours until the next Relay jump, ma’am,” Rodriguez replied, relaxing a fraction.

“Has Joker gone off duty yet?”

“Yes, ma’am. Pressly practically dragged him off the deck.”

She couldn’t help but smile at that. “Good. Carry on, Lieutenant.”

“Aye aye, ma’am.”

She’d just gotten to the bottom of the stairs and started dreaming of her bunk when the intercom buzzed and Rodriguez’s sheepish voice came over the 1MC.

“Commander Shepard, your presence is requested on the bridge. We’ve received a communication requesting to speak to you.”

She looked at the ceiling, huffed out a sigh, and spun on her heel to walk back up the stairs, smothering a yawn with her palm.

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CODEX ENTRY

Funeral Rites in Armalese Culture: Funeral traditions vary widely across asari space, as they do on Earth. The Thessian city-state of Armali has traditional rites that differ depending on the life stage of
Traditions completed regardless of the deceased's life stage include the reading of the traditional mourning poem where the reciter hopes on behalf of the mourners that they will meet the deceased 'with the coming of dawn', a call back to older Athameist beliefs that have been still thrive in the Republic and are often incorporated into Siarist beliefs, and the washing of the body where possible with warm water. A Maiden is washed twice, traditionally by her sisters and then her mother. A Matron is washed by any daughters she may have, then her sisters and mother. A Matriarch is first attended to by her daughters, then her grandchildren and then her sisters.

After the ceremonial bathing of the body, the deceased is dressed in funeral robes of a light coffin and prepared for burial. This was traditionally done by the asari's aunts but is more often done by funeral homes. A viewing of the body if possible is then done in a temple or funeral home, depending on the deceased's religious beliefs, where friends and family say their goodbyes. Close friends and family may leave things in the coffin to accompany the departed.

Instead of burial or cremation, burial at sea is most common in Armali. The body is usually placed in a small sailboat and floated out past Armali's bay, where the boat is sunk and the remains abandoned to the ocean. In Athameist beliefs, this is part of returning to Athame's Maiden aspect, which followers believe is the Goddess of the Sea. In siari belief, this returns not only the person's soul but their body to the cycle of the living galaxy.
Trouble With Rachni

“Thank you for answering my call, Commander. I know you’re very busy these days.” The whip-thin man on the other side of the FTL commlink was cordial, but there was a hard edge to the tension that wound tight through his body.

“Of course, Colonel.” Shepard clasped her hands behind her back. “What can the Normandy do for Tenth Recon?”

She didn’t know Lieutenant Colonel Zhou personally, but she knew of his command - had even done a couple of missions alongside them when she’d been a Raider. The Tenth Reconnaissance Battalion was the eyes and ears of the Tenth MARDIV, and they knew their stuff.

His jaw stiffened, and he spoke as if the words had to be ground out. “As you know, one of Tenth Recon’s responsibilities is to provide Recon Marines to set up and man listening posts to intercept and track communications across the Traverse.” When she nodded, he continued. “Two of my listening posts and a space station through which their comms and supplies were being routed have all missed their last check-ins with my headquarters. I’ve already activated the nearest QRF to the depot, but both of the listening posts are in the Styx Theta cluster. I could send drones via a Corsair but…”

“A drone or a Corsair crew wouldn’t be able to interfere if they have gotten into trouble,” she surmised. Styx Theta - now that made things complicated. It was only accessible through the Horsehead Nebula Relay, jealously controlled by the Noveria Development Corporation and their ERCS lackeys, and more than even that it was uncomfortably close to the 5 Kiloparsec Ring - where new stars were birthed within molecular clouds. It was a chaotic region of space with an overabundance of space phenomena that could kill you, uncharted planets and places no sane captain would take a starship through. All in all, it was the sort of place that pirates and other such sorts liked to hide in, away from the (official) scrutiny of navies and anti-piracy patrols.

“Yes.”

“So you need a ship that can use the Horsehead Nebula Relay and use stealth, limiting the chance anyone watching will find the location of your troops, especially if this is just a case of coincidental comms blackouts.”

“Yes. But I don’t think this is a case of a blackout.” There were deep bags under his nearly-black eyes. This was not a man that had been sleeping well recently. “All of them at once?”

“I don’t think it is either,” Shepard said solemnly. “Give me a moment, Colonel.” She triggered the CIC circuit. “CIC, how far out from the Relay are we?”

“We’re in the queue now, ma’am. Twenty mikes.”

“Okay, tell Relay Control we need to pull out of the queue. A technical issue we need to sort out. A couple of hours maybe, but we don’t require any assistance. We’ll go into orbit above Veles though - just in case and to keep out of the way.”

“Technical issue, ma’am?”

“Make something up,” she replied serenely. “You know navigation systems better than I do.”

“Aye aye, Commander. ETA to Veles is twenty minutes.”
“Very good, Lieutenant.” She shut off the PA system and turned back to the screen. “Luckily, Colonel, the Normandy happens to be in Pax already. I’ll get your guys out.”

A relieved smile bloomed across Zhou’s creased face. “Thank you, Commander.”

“No problem.” It’d been the Tenth MARDIV that had come for her and everyone else trapped in Illyria, during the Blitz. This was just what any Marine owed another. “I’ll need the precise locations of the outposts and personnel lists so I can account for them all.”

“Yes, of course. I’ll have my staff send it through to you immediately.”

“As soon as I’ve received it, I’ll get us through that Relay.”

“Roger that. Update me as soon as you can. Assassin out.”

The screen faded to buzzing static and then blackness. She straightened her uniform jacket and stepped out of the comms room, looking for the comm tech on duty. The CIC division chief - Comms Technician First Class Yasser Amjad - was at the station, and he looked up at her approach. Amjad was the sort that never seemed to attract much attention from the command team. Quiet, competent, devoutly religious - so one of the few sailors that didn’t give her headaches by getting DUIs or being thrown in the drunk tank. He had a wife and four children back home on Demeter.

A quiet planet, he’d told her when she’d finally managed to get him to relax enough to talk, but a good place for his children to grow up.

She loomed over his shoulder, and he fixed his eyes on his screen. “Send Admiral Mikhailovich a quick heads up that we’ve been delayed.”

Aye, ma’am,” the petty officer agreed.

“We’ll be receiving file transfers from the Tenth Recon Battalion. Please have these put on a secure datapad, brought to the briefing room and the coordinates given to Sax.”

"Understood, Commander.”

She hit the switch for the 1MC on the Captain’s podium, Lieutenant Rodriguez hurriedly moving out of her way. “Commander Pressly, Lieutenant Wulandri, Lieutenant Alenko, Sergeant Williams, Sergeant Draven, report to the briefing room. Buffer, your presence is requested in the briefing room.”

She was probably pulling the Marines from their bunks. Regrettable - she’d never liked those COs that cut into their crew’s sleeping time for no good reason - but unavoidable. The Colonel’s Marines might not have a lot of time.

As the officers and three NCOs filed in, she shot off a quick message to Chakwas via the ship’s network. Alenko, Draven, and Williams all looked as exhausted as Shepard felt.

“Take a seat,” she told them, tapping the datapad from Colonel Zhou against her palm.

“We’ve changed course, ma’am?” asked Pressly as he settled into his seat beside her.

“Yeah. Tenth Recon has some listening posts in Styx Theta that’ve gone dark, so we’re going to investigate. Gung Ho, you were in recon - what do you know about those posts?”
The Marine tilted her head and grimaced. “Listening posts, ma’am? Worst fuckin’ job Recon gets if you ask me. Y’all get stuck on a tiny ass COP in buttfuck nowhere for six months babysitting a bunch of commo POG bitches who spend the entire time whining about no extranet. Real isolated too, Skipper, no comms outside of the tightbeams to command. Even the resupplies were done by drone ships to limit the chance of leaks or us being tracked. Closest I’ve gotten to committing a murder-suicide.”

“How many people are usually in a listening post?”

“Sixty to ninety, ma’am. Thirty or so Recon grunts, and attached support Marines. Cooks, commos, engineers, and intel, that sort of thing. Usually has a Staff LT or a Major in command.”

“What sort of defences were usually in place?”

“Well shit, not getting found was our primary defence, ma’am. Ninety Marines alone in space - kinda fucked if anything comes knocking, you know? But we’d put up fortifications, a few HMGs, and a few defensive turrets. If anyone did find us, it was all hands on deck and hope we lasted until the QRF got there.”

Shepard stood and stretched until her back cracked. “Alright. Pressly, get us back in the Relay queue, this time for a jump to Styx Theta. Put us into stealth once we make the jump. Wulandri, I want you to have torpedos loaded and GARDIAN systems operational.”

“Roger that,” agreed Guns.

“When we’re two hours out from the first, X, put us to general quarters. The Marines will arm up then.”

“It could be a comms failure,” suggested Alenko.

“It could be. But always prepare for the worst.” Those words were the echo of a long dead Marine. “Get some rest, all of you.”

Negulesco hovered as the others left the room. Shepard raised an eyebrow.

“I hope you were planning to get some sleep too, ma’am.”

“Yes, Buffer,” she said dryly and the Master Chief, satisfied, went on her way.

When Shepard had first taken command of the Normandy, she’d rounded up the Marines and told them very seriously that she had some rules for them - and that one of them was that if any of them took stims without the permission of herself, Chakwas or Ling, she’d personally kick their arses into the nearest star. Nothing could really replace sleep, and there were enough things on a starship that could hurt you without needing any help.

And that was the first time Williams thought that her dad would’ve liked her commanding officer. He’d said to her plenty of times, made pale and wan by the exhaustion endemic to the Eighth Fleet, that making sure your subordinates got enough sleep was one sign of a good captain. Overuse of stims was the opposite.

Ashley was just waking herself up from her three-hour nap - just long enough to have a break from sleep deprivation hopefully - with a steaming hot cup of coffee sipped in between putting bits of armour and gear on, when Chakwas began making rounds amongst the ground team. She dropped a pill into Ash’s outstretched hand.
“Go pills, ma’am?”

“Shepard wants you all sharp. The Noveria mission was long.”

Ash nodded and swallowed it under Chakwas’ watchful eyes before the doctor moved onto Draven. Sleep deprivation was one thing, getting shot was another. She lifted her chest rig over her head and fumbled with the straps and latches, her hands shaking slightly. Then someone else was there, knocking her hands aside.

“Lemme,” Shepard said and then began doing them up with steady fingers. Ash went still, all too aware of her closeness, the way her own eyes wanted to focus on the near black of her irises or the texture of the scars on her face.

_Damnit, Skipper._ She could at least make this easier on her.

Shepard perfunctorily tugged on the top of her chestplate to make sure it was all tight enough and then stepped back with a cough. “Looked like you were having a bit of trouble. Don’t want any of my Marines going into battle without their armour done right.”

Even though Alenko always checked Ash’s anyway? She shrugged it off. “Thanks, ma’am. I always get a bit shaky on stims to begin with.”

“Common enough reaction. Good luck down there.”

“You’re not coming with, Commander?” butted in Draven.

She shook her head. “Need to be up here in case we run into any geth or pirate ships.”

That explained it then. Shepard didn’t say it, but it was clear she didn’t really like them going on missions without her. Last time they’d run into a thresher maw after all.

“Tali and Wrex will be going with. Wrex will be attached to Alpha team, Tali and Chou to Bravo Team. You got that?”

Draven grimaced slightly. “Just headbutt him if he gets outta line, right?”

“Yes, just like the cultural sensitivity slide shows taught you,” Ashley deadpanned.

Shepard’s lips twitched. “I have full faith in you, Sergeant Draven, Sergeant Williams. Or…at least in Lieutenant Alenko.”

“Hey!” Ash shot her a playful glare, but the Commander was already stepping away, leaving behind only the echo of her laughter.

“Good to see the boss lady loosening up a bit, ay?” said Draven, loading up her webbing. “Do you reckon Waaberi is right?”

“About what?” She slung her shotgun across her back.

“That the Commander and Doctor T’Soni are a thing, you know. Jaz saw them hugging, in the storage compartment.”

Ash frowned at her. “T’Soni just lost her mum.”

“Yeah, but…”
“I don’t think now is the time for scuttlebutt about our CO and the kid who just had to shoot her mother,” her voice came out sharper than she’d intended.

“Jeez, alright, boss. Message received.” Draven raised her hands.

“Sorry,” she muttered, checking her sidearm over. “Just a bit tired. Noveria was fucked.”

Gung Ho waved her off and started loading her rifle.

Ashley slid her pistol into its holster and started filling up her webbing with grenades and heatsinks, letting the bustle in the armoury wash over her - before halting with her fingers still on a strap.

“Waaberi, what the fuck do you think you’re doing?”

The Lance Corporal raised her chin defiantly from across the armoury bench as Mohamed slunk away from where he’d been helping Waaberi put on her chest rig. “Gearing up, Staff Sergeant.”

“ You’ve got a broken finger. You’re on light duty. Going on mission is not light duty, Lance Corporal Waaberi!”

“It’s not my trigger finger that’s broken,” Waaberi replied stubbornly, “I ain’t sittin’ up here because I got a broken little finger, boss, not while we got Marines in trouble. I’ll just tape ‘em together.”

Ash stared at her.

“ And the skipper ain’t bringing a bunch of people, so there’s plenty of room for me! And I’m the acting team leader and - no offence - I don’t really want Teke in charge of my team and -”

There was a faint ‘Hey!’ from Teke on the other side of the room.

Ash raised a hand to cut her off. “Fine.”

The Marine grinned widely. “Thank you, boss.”

“Just finish getting suited up.” Chakwas was going to kill her.

The ‘listening post’ stank of ichor and death. Wrex’s chest steadily filled with a rumbling growl that longed to tear free of his throat, roar the fury of his ancestors to these blood-slick corridors. But Urdnot Wrex was no whelp without control of himself, and so he locked it away as he stalked forward, eyes stabbing each corner, each shadow as they pursued the rachni remnants.

Rachni! He'd warned Shepard, hadn't he? And now they found only the bodies of Alliance Marines. The base was silent now of shrieking rage, the only noise the hum of abandoned equipment. Behind him, the wall was splashed with the yellow light of the team leader's omnitool as she scanned for any clues.

"It doesn't make sense," Sergeant Draven muttered behind him. She'd been wise enough not to challenge his demand to take point. "They shouldn't have gotten through their defences that easily. The turrets look like they never fired a shot."

Wrex huffed. "You Marines didn't know what they were until I told you on Noveria."

"Yeah, but - "

Williams and Alenko approached from another hallway along with the other Marine team, dried blood on the gauntlets of the corpsman Ling. Draven had also insisted on checking each corpse for
signs of life. Inevitably, there were none.

"Rachni," he rumbled, amused by the way Alenko's attention snapped to him, wariness in the lines of the Lieutenant's body. "I warned your Commander that there would be consequences for her actions."

Williams' body language shifted almost imperceptibly. There was a snarl hidden in the taut syllables of her voice. "Is that a threat?"

He eyed her, lips curling back from his teeth. "A warning."

"Enough," said Alenko, a snap of electric blue between his fingertips. "Think, Wrex. This outpost went out of contact before Shepard freed the queen on the Noveria. These rachni can't be hers. Binary Helix must've shipped some elsewhere - and somehow they've ended up here."

"I hope for the sake of your Commander and your people that you are right-" he turned away irritably- "because mine won't be around to save your asses this time."

"But how did they get in here?" Draven insisted. "There were no ships in orbit, and the external defences don't look like they've been triggered."

Wrex snarled to himself and turned away, aiming a heavy kick at a dead rachni with a satisfying squelch. The blood of his ancestors surged within him.

"I don't know," Alenko shook his head, troubled.

"Kaidan! Ash!" the quarian called urgently. He shouldered past the young warrior Teke as the two senior Marines raced over, looking over Tali. Her expression was impossible to read, under that opaque mask. Quarians smelt wrong. At least her technique with a shotgun was better now she listened to him. "It's a distress signal!"

"—Mayday, mayday, mayday! This is Lieutenant Marie Durand, acting commander of Listening Post Alpha. 10th Recon Battalion, to Listening Post Theta. We are being overrun by hostile alien lifeforms, requesting immediate assistance from any Alliance units in the region! Our long distance communication buoy has been destroyed, and our defences are compromised. Mayday, mayday!-"

"It was sent through two hours ago," Tali said excitedly. "They might still be alive."

"Good job, Tali," Kaidan said, patting her on the shoulder.

"Let's get out of here, sir," Williams suggested. "We've no signs anyone here survived, and Alpha is running out of time. The Skipper can just drop a bomb on this place to get rid of the rachni later."

"You're right. Even the rachni won't survive one of our orbit to surface bombs."

"What about the bodies?" Draven asked, crossing her arms. Human warriors were sentimental about the bodies of their fallen. A krogan knew when to leave the dead behind.

Alenko hesitated before clenching his jaw. "We'll take those we can carry, but we don't have time to stay and fight the rachni for corpses. Our duty is to those we can save, first."

Draven didn't like that, shifting from foot to foot as she said stiffly, "Aye, sir."

The Lieutenant paused, hardness draining from his expression. "I'm sorry. But Alpha needs us."

Draven squared her shoulders. "I understand, sir."
The Marines scrambled as Alenko talked over the comm to the _Normandy_, dragging dead Marines over their shoulders to carry them out. Wrex slowly put his shotgun away, and then grabbed two, hefting them easily over each shoulder. He’d known _vorcha_ that had lived longer than one of these dead whelps.

Once they’d extricated themselves from the ruined base, they lined up the dead in rows under the dull brown of Altahe’s sky and waited for the _Normandy_.

“Thanks for that,” Draven jerked her head towards where he’d placed the two he’d carried out.

“Their parents will get some comfort from getting their bodies back.”

“If it were my son, I would want to send him into the Void myself,” he said stiffly and then stepped past her. His son, who would never draw breath under the baking heat of Tuchanka. His son, who had gone to the Void half-formed and without glory. It was an ancient pain, and he hated it for its still-sharp knife edge in his gut.

He had left Tuchanka behind him. The ghosts should stay there.

Behind him, Jaz Teke spread a dull green-brown survival blanket over one of his fallen brothers. They’d run out of body bags.

"Contact!" Lance Corporal Chou shouted down from the turret, the Mako reverberating as the coaxial machine gun began to rattle away. "We've got rachni!"

Alenko gave his rifle one last look over to make sure the heatsink and ammo block were seated properly. They were all still getting used to the experimental rifle, the different movements to reload when compared to the M7.

"Alright guys." He looked around the compartment at his Marines - and Tali and Wrex. "This is gonna be a dismount under fire, so I want smoke and covering fire ASAP. We'll form a skirmish line once we’re out, and advance to destroy the attacking force alongside the Mako. Tali, I want you to be last out."

The quarian’s shields were very strong - she’d tinkered with the generators herself - and Draven and Williams had fashioned a makeshift plate carrier for her so she had added protection, but the fact remained that if her suit was breached that could be it.

"I'm ready," called Teke from near the lever that'd open the door.

"APC safe!"

The ramp thudded down, and boots rang against metal as the Marines darted out. Teke and Waaberi, both armed with the light machine guns, found cover behind folds of rock and dirt and immediately starting laying down a field of fire as smoke bloomed, hiding the movements of the others. Kaidan crossed the open ground in long strides and found cover behind a convenient rock, lifting his head to take stock of the chaos.

When he’d been fresh out of universe, butter bars just pinned to his collar, he’d wanted to lead from the front. Get his hands dirty. Thoroughly avoid being one of those lieutenants who made their Marines do all the work, take all the risks. The day after his first firefight, his platoon sergeant had pulled him aside and set him straight.
Kaidan would always prefer getting his hands dirty then sitting in an air-conditioned ops centre while his people got shot at, but sometimes you had to do your job as an officer and let your Marines do the trigger-pulling.

The rust brown sky rang with the rattle and popping of gunfire as the Mako and squad opened up. To his right, he could hear the familiar snap of Ashley's sniper rifle. Unlike Theta, Listening Post Alpha was above ground, a haphazard collection of prefabs, earth fortifications and a perimeter of gabions. Dusty camouflage netting had been draped over the whole affair, but the tattered remnants now fluttered sullenly, torn and eaten away in splotches. Two silent turrets peeked over the top of the half-wrecked barrier wall, but there was still gunfire coming from the base.

Someone was still alive in there.

The rachni, caught between the heavy fire from the Normandy Marines and the outpost, fell beneath scything fields of machine gun fire, leaving sodden heaps in the cracked volcanic dust. One or two scurried away and down into what had to be tunnels beneath the thin crust.

Kaidan took his finger off the trigger, a little disappointed he hadn't had a chance to get a shot off. "Advance!"

The Marines walked carefully forward, picking their way through the rocky terrain and making sure to double tap any rachni corpses. Couldn't be too sure.

"Friendlies!" he shouted at the walls. Days of nearly being overrun? Yeah, he'd bet the Recon guys were twitchy as hell.

He stepped through an acid-splattered gap in the walls and past a pale-faced youngster trying to pile rocks into the breach.

"Sir, you have no idea how glad I am to see you." The woman who approached, white medigel patches bright against the dark of her armour, had to be the same officer who'd sent out that distress signal.

"First Lieutenant Durand?" he guessed.

"Yessir. I-I was the XO but..."

He grasped her shoulder firmly to steady her. "It's alright. I'm Staff Lieutenant Alenko, 103rd Marines."

"No offence, sir," a bone-tired voice trailed out of a Gunny leaning heavily against the earth wall beside him, his hands on the trigger of a medium machinegun, "but I was kinda hoping for a tank battalion."

"I don't blame you," said Kaidan frankly, "but we're what you've got. Sitrep, Lieutenant."

Durand straightened, lifting her chin. "I have ten KIAs, eleven seriously wounded and twenty walking wounded. The first attack destroyed our generators, so our defence turrets and OGS are all down. We're running low on medigel, ammunition, and oxygen."

"How'd they get in?" Williams inserted herself into the conversation, brown eyes sweeping across the tattered outpost, taking in the makeshift repairs, the exhausted Marines scattered here and there like detritus.

"Our food." Durand's voice was hot, her jaw clenched. "They drop off our supplies about a klick
from here. We'd only brought in a few boxes when the creatures attacked. That's what saved us - but they still killed six of my people, including my CO, before we put them down."

Kaidan winced. "The other rachni are burrowing?"

"Rachni?" the Gunny burst out, he and Durand exchanging glances.

"Yeah. Rachni. Are they digging burrows?" he insisted.

"I think they've gotten into the old mines beneath the surface," The younger officer shook her head. "There were wildcat miners here for a while, but they were gone before we got here."

"Damnit." Ash turned away to glare at the holes the rachni had disappeared into. "Sir, we know they're intelligent. We go down there..."

"They'll pick us off," he agreed. "We don't have the manpower or time to clear an entire mine complex."

Durand's shoulders slumped. "So we just try to fend them off until they run out of bodies?"

"I recommend we get the hell outta dodge, sir," Williams opined, toying with her rifle.

He nodded decisively. "Durand, can you start triage? Our ship can start loading your worst wounded, then the walking wounded, while the rest of us defend the base."

"Aye, sir!" Durand seemed a bit relieved to have someone else giving orders and jogged off towards the outpost first aid station. Alenko didn't blame her.

"I can set up on that ridge with a team and the machine guns," Williams suggested. "Interdict any rachni trying to attack the landing zone once the Normandy is down."

"Good idea. Do it. Tali!"

The quarian looked up from where she was looking at the acid splattered main generator. "Yes, Kaidan?"

"Can you hook the Mako's fuel cells up to the POGS and turrets?"

She tilted her head in the way that meant she was tackling some technical problem. "...yes, I think so."

"Once it's done let Durand know so her Marines can refill their oxygen tanks."

Kaidan took a step back and watched the chaos around him start to take on focus, then opened a comm channel to the Normandy. Hopefully they could get as many of the outpost personnel aboard before the rachni came back.

He shouldn't have wished for that. Somewhere, Murphy was laughing.

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**CODEX ENTRY**

**Portable Oxygen Generation System**: maintaining sentient life on long distance starships, space stations and outposts on planets without breathable atmospheres requires a complex life support system, including oxygen production, deal with waste products, maintain environmental controls including appropriate pressure on the organic body and shield against harmful radiation. On starships
and space stations these systems are either designed into the construction itself or a 'plug and play' module such as the Commercial Environmental Control and Air Revitalisation System (CEC-ARS) manufactured by Andrenov Industries designed for commercial shipping.

These systems generally use the electrolysis process to generate breathable oxygen. Water is reclaimed from other uses onboard and then fed into the oxygen generator, which uses a direct electric current to split water into hydrogen and oxygen gasses. Many space stations and ships have back up chemical oxygen generators, which burn solid lithium perchlorate to create oxygen gas. However, electrolysis systems are generally preferred for efficiency and fire safety reasons.

In the field, the life support needs of ground forces are generally met by hardsuits and military vehicles. Hardsuits, when equipped with 'breather' helmets, usually combine oxygen tanks and rebreather technology to extend the amount of time troops can stay in the field. Contrary to popular fiction, human skin is gas-tight naturally and doesn't require protection from the vacuum of space - however, human flesh will expand to twice its normal size in vacuum environments, and military hardsuits are sealed and pressurised for safety reasons.

However while troops can go for several days using their suits for their oxygen needs, for bases or operations (such as the Torfan campaign) on planets without breathable atmospheres, oxygen quickly becomes a problem. This can either be addressed by bringing in oxygen supplies or using the Portable Oxygen Generation System (POGS). A smaller version of a starship's electrolysis system, the POGS can be transported by vehicle and powered by generators - or in a pinch, vehicle fuel cells.
Kaidan’s head snapped up. Beyond the ruined earthen ramparts he could see the dull green blobs of moving rachni - and a lot of them - sweeping down like a wave upon the listening post. Behind him came the comforting *thud thud* of the defence turrets firing, swallowing whole patches of rachni in flame and leaping dust. He spared a moment to thank Tali in his head as around him the snap and popping of rifle and machinegun fire sprung up around, then opened his comm channel to Ash.

“Lance Seven, Lance Actual, are you in position, over?”

“Affirmative, over.”

“Look sharp, you’ll have incoming soon. Lance Actual out.”

He raised his rifle, fired off a few rounds into the seething mass. He couldn’t really see if he was hitting anything, in the gloom and chaos. He stilled himself, breathed in, and flared with flashing blue. A field lanced from his hands and stuck a rachni warrior, tossing it back where it was shot dead by a burst from the Gunny on the machinegun. With the machineguns Ash had taken with her he’d sacrificed some of his suppressing fire on the charging horde, but so far the rachni were tumbling and falling within the field of fire regardless.

“Big Brother to Lance Actual, over.”

Kaidan kind of wished that Shepard was on the ground with them, her steady presence beside him rather than on the bridge. “Go ahead, over.”

“We’re on approach. Get the wounded ready to be loaded, over.”

“Roger that.”

“Big Brother out.”

He pushed off the side of the wall he’d been leaning on it and ran, each step punctuated by gunfire. “Durand!”

The younger officer looked up from where she kneeled over a groaning Marine whose legs had been splattered by acid. His armour had melted away and the flesh beneath had bubbled and gone a raw red. “Yessir?”

“You got your wounded ready to go?”

“Aye, sir. The worst first, then the walking wounded.”

“Alright, our ship is coming in now. Soon as it lands, get your stretcher bearer to run straight for the ramp. Staff Sergeant Williams will keep them off you.”

She nodded and he turned on his heel and sprinted back towards the perimeter. The stim he’d taken before the mission bubbled in his blood, sharpened everything to crisp definition. But beneath that lurked the specter of pain. If he wasn’t careful he knew he’d been down for the count with a
migraine. He wanted to plead, ask for it to at least wait until the evacuation was over, but he’d long ago learnt that the pain didn’t give a single fuck.

Behind him the Normandy swept out of the sky like some great bird of prey or perhaps an avenging angel, landing with a deep thud that reverberated through the ground beneath his feet. Chaos whirled around him - Tali blasting away with her shotgun yelling bosh’tets! There the snap of a sniper rifle as Ashley shot another warrior, the round punching a fist-wide hole in its carapace, green ichor flowing sluggishly. Here the sound of M8 rifles and turret fire as the Normandy’s Masters-At-Arms defended the ramp. Durand shouting as her stretcher bearers pounded dirt towards the sanctuary the ship promised.

Block it out. Block it all out. The light, the noise, the burgeoning throb in his temples. What did he need to do? The guys on the perimeter were doing what he needed them to. Ashley and Durand were doing what he needed them to do. He bit down on the urge to change something just to feel like he was doing something, and braced his rifle against the fortifications, firing off a few bursts.

“Fuck!” It was the Gunny, who he still hadn’t learnt the name of. “Jam!”

Kaidan shuffled into the MG nest with him. “Let me have a look, I’m good with tech.”

“Aye, sir,” the other man agreed and grabbed his own rifle.

Kaidan pulled the medium machinegun to him, engaging the safety. The lever was well and truly stuck, the special machinegun heatsink lodged nearly sideways in the ejection port, meaning any follow shot would overheat the gun and probably melt something. The barrel was almost painfully hot to the touch - even through his gauntlets - as it was. A few taps on the side of the gun failed to dislodge the thermal clip. “You have an extra barrel, Gunny?”

“Nah, sir!” he called back as his rifle roared on auto. ‘Sir’ came out more like ‘Sah’. “I had three, but one got fuckin’ acid on it and the other got melted! That’s the last goddamn one!”

“Damnit,” Alenko muttered, trying to pull the lever back to its starting position - but it was stuck. Wincing at the dirt, he dumped it on the ground before him, tugged out the ammo block and began pulling it apart to manually remove the jammed heat sink.

That was when the ground in front of him burst open, showering him in clods of dirt and shards of rock that pinged off his visor. A rachni climbed out, shrieking, tentacles stabbing forward. He stumbled backward.

“Gunny!” he called to warn him and then flared brightly as the rachni spat globules of acid in his direction. The biotic barrier surged up between the two men and the screaming creature, the acid splattering harmlessly against it. Good to know.

“Fuckin’ sick of these shits,” the Gunny grumbled. He raised his rifle and pulled the trigger, the rounds smashing several legs to bits, and as it tried to get back to its feet he strode forward and stabbed it with his bayonet until it was still.

Kaidan got back to his feet, snapping into his comm as he did, “Netcall! We have rachni inside the base! Say again, rachni inside the base! They’re burrowing!”

Please, God, don’t let my Masters-At-Arms lose their shit.

“Easy,” she laid a hand on MAA Choe’s shoulder, feeling him flinch through layers of ceramic. “Deep breaths. Aim a little lower. Squeeze the trigger, don’t jerk it.”
Choe nodded and the next burst ripped through a knot of rachni. Shepard nodded appreciatively. “Good job, Serviceman. You’re a real man now.”

“Bloody Marines - ma’am,” muttered Chief Rahman behind them. Shepard grinned beneath her visor.

“Damn straight.”

The first stretchers reached the ramp, armoured boots ringing against metal, shepherded by Lieutenant Durand. The wounded were hastily handed over to the stretcher bearers conscripted from amongst the cooks and logistics personnel by Sub-Lieutenant Sherazi. Then the lieutenant was off again, with barely a glance at Shepard.

She approved.

“-rachni inside the base-”

“Damnit.” she muttered aloud, pacing behind the thunder of the ship defence turrets. Ahead of her, she saw Durand’s little line of stretchers stumble to a halt, fumbling for their weapons as a rachni heaved itself over the fortifications, tentacles flailing.

She had to do something.

Shepard flowed forward. “Hey! Rahman! Don’t shoot me!”

"Wha-"

“Little Birdy, this is Big Brother Actual. Shift fire, over.”

“Roger that,” Ash’s voice had a certain resigned tone, like she knew exactly what Shepard was about to do.

She wreathed herself in violent blue light and reached out with her mind. The rachni was on the very edge of her ‘range’ with this ability but she grinned wolfishly as she locked on. And then she was gone in an elongated flash, slamming into the rachni warrior with bone-shattering force.

It chittered as it climbed back to its feet, tentacles striking forward. She sidestepped the blow and flung forward a hand,  and it was thrown back and into the nearest sandbag wall. Shepard didn’t wait for it to recover but punched down, cerulean light bright like a star held within her fist. Carapace shattered, ichor splashing across her black and red arm, and the rachni didn’t get up again.

“Uh-” Duran staggered back, blinking at her sudden arrival.

“Get moving,” she ordered. “I’ll take care of the rachni.”

She didn’t wait for the other officer to acknowledge the direction, but vaulted over the sandbags and into the listening post, pulling free the shitty Katana she’d taken from the armoury to replace her damaged Eviscerator.

Fuck. Rachni.

She worked her way deeper into the base, with shotgun blasts and flashes of biotics, rallying the Marines who’d started to fall back from the unexpected attack. She found Waaberi beating a few of the little ones to death with her rifle.

"Easy, Waaberi, you’ll break that."
"Ma'am? I thought you were staying with the ship?"

"Changed my mind," Shepard said succinctly. "Where's the rest of your team."

"Manning the defences," the younger Marine took a few deep breaths and pulled her bayonet from the sheath on her thigh, fixing it to the end of her rifle. "I'm the fastest so I was running ammunition to the machineguns. The heavies were starting to run low - and then that happened."

She picked up a canvas bag stuffed with specialised machinegun thermal sinks that she'd dropped when the rachni had attacked her.

"Good idea. Let's keep going."

"Uh, sure thing, ma'am."

Waaberi was a bit faster than Shepard, but they kept a sustainable pace, darting through the wrecked outpost methodically. She slammed a new heatsink into her shotgun as they rounded the defence turret to where Kaidan had last been seen.

He was kneeling behind one of the MG emplacements near the corpse of a rachni warrior, his dark armour unmarked when she quickly glanced him over for injuries, as he finished rebuilding a medium machinegun and handed it to the Gunny beside him. Waaberi immediately began distributing the heatsinks, running between positions.

Alenko raised his head, blinking at her. "Ma'am?"

"Alenko. Sitrep."

"We're holding the main wave of attack back but a few have started burrowing into the base itself."

"Yeah," she shook her hand off, green droplets splattering against the nearest gambion. "Got that part." The Gunny's machinegun began to chatter once more behind them. "I'm just waiting to hear from Durand now. I'll help Waaberi with running ammunition and clearing out any that get inside the base. What was your plan for withdrawal?"

"I was going to, once Durand's done, disconnect the Mako from the defence turrets and send it and the Marines currently inside the base to set up a firing position outside it. Once they're in position, we can start withdrawing everyone on the defences."

"Sounds good to me. I'll go with the first group if you want to continue commanding the defences."

"Aye, ma'am."

"Waaberi, you done?"

"Yep."

"Let's go see Tali."

And then they were off again, heading deeper into the outpost, towards Tali and the boxes of ammunition piled near the centre of the base. With the younger N5 at her side, they moved steadily forward to Tali's position where the Mako had been hooked into the defence turrets. Waaberi skewered a squirming, tiny green rachni with her bayonet as they rounded the corner.

Gasping audibly through her mask, Tali raised her shotgun. "Thanks!"
"Don't mention it. Get ready to disconnect the Mako on Alenko’s word." Shepard turned and climbed into the IFV. “Waaberi, remember how to drive this thing?”

“I hope so!”

Shepard chuckled as she heaved herself into the turret, syncing her helmet HUD with the IFV’s. “Me too.”

It’d been a while since she’d been at the controls of an armoured vehicle’s weapons systems and for a moment she felt a flicker of nostalgia for when she’d been a Lance Corporal and the Grizzly gunner for her squad. She lost herself in the muscle memory, her hands surrounded by the soft glow of the holographic controls. The main gun boomed, dirt and bits of rachni flung up by the impact. With Alenko looking after the defence, she could just shoot things like she hadn't in years.

Facing the withering, overlapping cones of fire, the rachni scuttled out of view and back into the ground.

She went to open her comms to Alenko, but he'd already seen what she had - the rachni retreat and the chance for them to withdraw. The Marines still inside began to flow outwardly through the gaps in the listening post like air escaping a pierced balloon, a stream of blue hardsuits speckled with the black armour of her own people.

The inside of the Mako was silent except for the hum of machinery and Shepard's breathing within her helmet.

She rolled her shoulders, wincing at the old tightness. "Waaberi, I thought you were on light duty."

"Uh," stuttered the Lance Corporal. "Well...Yeah. Okay. I don't have a good excuse for that, ma'am. I didn't want to be sitting up on the Normandy because of my hand when Marines were in danger."

Shepard chuckled despite herself. "I get it. I do. But Chakwas' orders aren't suggestions."

"Aye, ma'am," Waaberi said lowly.

"I'm not going to reprimand you - but I'm not gonna save you from the Doc either."

"I'll wear it, Skipper," Waaberi's voice was earnest.

"You're doing a good job leading your team. I know Jenkins was a friend of yours."

The younger Marine stared at her controls, unmoving. "Yeah, he was. I try not to think about it too much because we have to keep going, you know? I'm not sure what that says about me."

"That you're a professional," Shepard said matter-of-factly. "That we have a job to do and we'll grieve once the mission is done."

"Is that what you did-" Waaberi cut herself off, cringing a little in her seat.

"Yes, it is. Grief has to wait sometimes. It doesn't mean that you don't care about what happened to him - just means that you're doing exactly what he'd want you to. Leading the team, completing the mission." The turret around her whirred softly. "I didn't know Corporal Jenkins that well and I regret that, but I knew him enough to know that much."

Waaberi was silent for a long moment. Shepard was content not to rush her. "Yeah. You know, sometimes I really wondered how Rich was a corporal, let along a Raider corporal. I feel bad about
that now. He was just so eager, y'know? I think maybe because most of us had our CAR and he
didn't, and he felt like he had to prove himself to us. I wish he hadn't felt like that. Maybe he woulda
been more careful."

"Maybe," Shepard conceded. Maybe if she hadn't bit his head off before the mission for mentioning
Akuze. Maybe if she hadn't sent him on point through that field, knowing he was both over-eager to
You can't control how other people will act, Waaberi, or what happens in combat. You start thinking
you could've, you lose yourself in the questions. Every time we step into the field we're rolling the
dice on whether we get to home. No way around that."

Waaberi nodded slowly. "He was a good guy though. Kept our spirits up."

There was no easy way for the other woman to admit that she knew that Jenkins had been a flawed
person. It was easy to lionise the dead.

"He was."

"You're right though, ma'am. Best way we can honour him is by nailing Saren to the wall."

"Damn straight."

"Lance Victor, Lance Actual, we're set in defensive positions near the ship, over."

"Roger that. We'll pick up Little Birdy and then exfil, over."

"Copy that. Lance Actual out."

"Take us up to Williams, Waaberi," she ordered, swinging the turret around again.

"Aye aye."

The Mako rumbled beneath and around them, then shot forward towards the ridgeline where the
machinegunners and Williams had set up, tires digging into the dirt.

"And ma'am?"

"Mm?"

"Thanks for the talk."

__________

Ashley pulled her helmet off her head and set it on the armoury bench beside her sniper rifle, flicking
a few strands of sweat-slicked hair that’d escaped her bun out of her face. The Kennel smelt of blood
and gun oil and sweat, even with the Normandy’s air filtering systems, and she wrinkled her nose a
bit as she pulled the ammo block from her rifle. She was surrounded by chaos - Garrus, still sore
from Noveria, helping Lance Corporal Shamom check over the Mako; the medical staff attending to
the wounded and Waaberi doing her best to avoid Chakwas; Marines stripping off armour and guns
and gear.

“ Durand, Williams, Alenko!” Shepard’s voice was strong and firm, pitched to be heard over the din,
“With me!”

Ash finished pulling her white undershirt on, snatched up her uniform jacket and, still in her combat
boots, clunked over to where the Commander was waiting near the elevator. She shoved her arms
through the sleeves and started buttoning it up as Lieutenant Durand shook Shepard’s hand with
exhausted enthusiasm.

“Thank you, Commander. I thought we were all going to die there.”

“Thank your Colonel and my people here, not me. Your Colonel sent us, and these two did all the heavy lifting on the missions.”

They exchanged some awkward nods.

“Uh, you’re welcome, ma’am.” Ash managed before the elevator opened and they filed in. “You did jump in there at the end though, Skipper.”

Shepard’s lips twitched in a tiny, smug smile. “You know me. I like to get my hands dirty.”

There were so many ways to take that, and none of them were work appropriate. Ash closed her mouth resolutely. One of those times where she was in danger of putting her foot in her mouth.

“So much for the plan,” Alenko grumbled. The poor guy was almost pouting. Ashley patted him on the shoulder companionably.

“You know what they say, Lieutenant,” Shepard said easily, “No plan survives first contact.”

“Pretty sure that refers to the enemy, ma’am.”

“Ah well.”

The elevator door slid open and they emerged into the soft light of the CIC. Pressly stepped down from the captain’s podium, drawing himself up to a position of attention as the chatter of the CIC crew flowed around them. It’d be easy to mistake many of the sailors on this deck for office workers if they weren’t in uniform. You know, office workers who ran the ‘brain’ of a deadly warship. Yeah.

“We’re just coming around for the BDA now.”

“Time to see all those tax dollars at work,” Wulandri said, disturbingly gleeful.

“Sometimes you scare me with your obsession with huge bombs, Guns,” Williams told her.

“You telling me you don’t appreciate a good boom?” the lieutenant asked.

“Not as much as you,” she muttered.

“Hey, Commander, can we get a camera drone to observe the explosion next time we use an earthquake?”

Shepard looked at Wulandri askance. “No.”

“Aww.”

“We’re in position, XO,” hummed the voice of Frag over the commline between the helm and the CIC. Ash wondered if Joker was annoyed he was finally off duty. He usually was when the CMC or Pressly marched him from the cockpit and put Grenado or Flyboy behind the controls.


“Launching probe. Imaging on your station, sir.”
The first footage was shaky, nauseating, but then the probe settled into a gentle arc over Nepmos. The captain’s station lit up with not only the camera views but with thermal scans as well.

Ash whistled. “Damn, Guns.”

“I know right?” Wulandri said happily. Seriously. There was something wrong with their Combat Systems Officer.

The listening outpost was gone, wiped from existence. The mines had collapsed, leaving the whole area pitted and sunken and torn apart.

“Anything on the thermals, X?” Shepard asked, arms folded and standing back. She hadn’t taken the deck and appeared to have no intention of doing so. There had to be something she wanted them here for - Shepard wasn’t usually the type of officer to make subordinates stand around on her, and especially not when they were running on coffee fumes and stims.

“Not so far, ma’am.”

“Do one more sweep and then get us on a course to the nearest fleet depot. We’ll offload Durand and her Marines there.”

“Aye, ma’am.”

Shepard looked at Durand. “Sorry, Lieutenant, your Colonel will have to organise transport back to your home base, but your wounded will get proper medical attention.”

“I understand, Commander. You have your own mission.”

She nodded sharply. “Lam, put a call through to Colonel Zhou in the comms room.”

“Routing call, ma’am.”

Shepard crooked a hand, tugging the three of them along in her wake and into the comm room. The black screen flickered - connecting, connecting - and then resolved into the grim face of Colonel Zhou. His eyes immediately darted to Lieutenant Durand, who tiredly drew herself up into an approximation of attention.

“Lieutenant Durand. It’s very good to see you.”

“Thank you, sir,” she said softly.

“Lieutenant Alenko and Sergeant Williams can give you the report on what we found at the listening posts, Colonel,” Shepard said crisply.

For the next ten minutes, Ash found herself helping Alenko give the story of what they’d found at the first outpost. She fixed her eyes forward, past the Colonel’s stony face, to the flickering grain of the wall beyond him and tried to keep her statements factual and unemotional. There was no way to say that a whole platoon had been wiped out painlessly.

A whole platoon.

She was sweating under her newly clean uniform, she realised distantly, cold and clammy. Beside her, Shepard moved imperceptibly. Their elbows knocked together. Ash seized on the sensation - her warmth and the soft brush of skin - like a lifeline, focusing on it. When she glanced at her, Shepard was looking at Zhou intently.
When they finished, Ashley sucked in a breath of air.

“Thank you, Lieutenant, Staff Sergeant.” Zhou’s voice was flinty. “I appreciate what you’ve done for Tenth Recon.”

Ash had once applied for a transfer to one of the scout-sniper platoons in the Tenth Recon. She’d been knocked back.

“Did you secure the depot, Colonel?” Shepard’s voice remained incisive.

“Yes. Have you ever heard of an organisation called ‘Cerberus,’ Commander?”

She shrugged. “In briefings. They’re some kind of survivalist group, borderline human supremacist rhetoric. If I recall correctly, they’re implicated in a few terrorist attacks on Hegemony, but you know how hard it can be to get verified intelligence about those.”

Zhou nodded slowly. “The rachni had killed everyone in the depot, but it appears that Cerberus infiltrated the workers there. They were using our automated freighter system to smuggle weapons including the rachni.”

“They had contacts within Binary Helix,” Shepard said flatly.

“It appears so. From the logs, it appears they thought they could control the rachni, use them as weapons ‘against humanity’s enemies,’ whatever the fuck that means but without the queen….”

“They went mad and slaughtered everyone, just like at Peak 15,” Ashley finished bitterly. “All those Marines died for it.”

“My Marines,” Zhou clenched his jaw, a vein pulsing. “There’s more.”

“Of course,” Shepard sighed.

“There was a list of scientists who appear to have been working with Cerberus on a project around 2178. They were on file as potential contractors in regards to the rachni. Xenobiologists, biomedical scientists, chemists.”

“So we bring them in,” Shepard surmised, “intentional or not, they’re responsible for the misuse of the system and the deaths of your Marines - and frankly I don’t want anyone trying to ‘weaponise’ rachni. We need to find out whoever gave them access in the first place.”

“Agreed, but there’s one problem. These scientists have all been disappearing or winding up murdered. The individual cases are being treated as unrelated but….”

“Perhaps it’s related to whatever they were doing in ‘78.”

“Exactly.”

Ashley felt an acute stab of frustration. Seriously, all their leads were fucking dead?

“Only one is still breathing. Doctor Henry Wayne.”

“I’ll drop your people off then go take him into custody,” Shepard decided. “Do you have a location for Wayne yet?”

“Yes, Commander. He’s on Ontarom. I’ll send the coordinates through now. Good hunting.”
Alenko and Durand filed out of the comms room when the call ended and Ash moved to join them. She was bone-deep exhausted. Maybe she’d be lucky and she wouldn’t dream. Then Shepard’s fingers wrapped around her wrist, a loose hold that stopped her in her tracks.

“Skipper?” Calling her ‘ma’am’ felt out of place in this moment.

“Are you alright? You looked a bit out of it.” Shepard didn’t let go of her wrist and Ashley didn’t want her to.

She opened her mouth to say that she was fine, but instead, she found herself saying, “Just brought stuff up, y’know?”

“I know. You know where to find me if you need to talk about it.”

“Thanks, Skipper.”

“Get some sleep,” Shepard said softly, dropping her hand. “Then we’ll talk over coffee tomorrow, alright?”

Ash nodded. “Yeah, alright.”

CODEX ENTRY

**Systems Alliance Marine Corps Force Reconnaissance Training:** The training for the ten reconnaissance battalions of the SAMC consists of five stages, acting as a cycle or loop, on a two-year schedule that allows recon assets to be consistently available to commanders on deployment. This is particularly vital for the Alliance which operates at a consistently low level of conflict due to raids, anti-piracy and anti-insurgency operations and skirmishes in frontier space. Reconnaissance battalions differ from organic scout-sniper platoons that are organic to infantry units.

Stage 1 of the cycle is the ‘Individual Phase.’ During this time, new members assigned to a Reconnaissance Battalion complete the ‘accession pipeline.’ To begin the pipeline, the candidate must already be a qualified infantry Marine or undergo the Marine Rifleman Course at a School of Infantry, before undertaking the Basic Reconnaissance Course. After completing BRC the candidate must then complete the Combat Diver Course, the Basic Aeroassault Course, and the High-Risk Personnel Course.

While candidates undergo the pipeline, already qualified Marines who choose to remain with Force Recon after their two-year cycle undergo specialised training and update previous training. These courses may include courses on tactical air control, naval fire, recon leadership, becoming a jumpmaster, the usage of drones, vehicle handling, as well as attending the Scout-Sniper School and cross-training with the 4th Division’s Pathfinders.

Stage 2 is six months of training designed to familiarise the recon platoon with the ‘long distance reconnaissance’ mission set. This training is conducted by a cadre of experienced NCOs who have previously deployed, meaning the platoon’s leadership can train themselves. Training includes: long-range communications, weapons and tactics, unmanned aerial and ground vehicle operation, threat weapons - or familiarisation with weapons used by the enemy, forces fires - familiarisation with artillery, air support and orbital support, operation and maintenance of scout vehicles, advanced aeroassault techniques, combat first aid, amphibious and diving training and advanced hostile environment survival techniques.

Stage 3 is six months spent with the Special Operations Training Group, during which the platoon is familiarised with the ‘direct action’ mission set. During this stage, the Marines train in close quarters
combat techniques, demolitions, ship/space platform boarding and cordon and search operations. Once this is complete, the platoon is designated as deployable.

Stage 4 is deployment. Depending on assignment, this may be six to eighteen months aboard a vessel within the fleet.

Stage 5 is post-deployment. After returning from deployment, the Marines are given a month of leave before returning. They are then all given the choice of leaving recon and returning to their previous vocation or remaining with their recon company and repeating the cycle.

### Chapter End Notes

#### Definitions:

BDA: Battle Damage Assessment. Assessing damage caused by a standoff weapon such as artillery, air strikes or orbital strikes.

Sorry for the delay on this one, got caught up with work and feeling a fair bit demotivated.
“Thank you, Yeoman.”

Steam swirled up from the two mugs Emerson placed on the desk between Commander Shepard and Staff Sergeant Williams. Shepard hummed an appreciative noise at the first sip. Emerson flushed as he ducked his head. At least he met her eyes most of the time.

“No problem, ma’am. Here are the reports you requested.” He laid an OSD in front of her. “Was there anything else you needed?”

“No, thank you, Emerson. You’re dismissed.”

The serviceman left her cabin, the doors humming closed behind him. Ashley watched him go with a familiar glint of mischief in her whiskey-brown eyes. “You know, ma’am, I think someone has a crush.”

Shepard wrinkled her nose. “He’s a baby.”

“You were nineteen once. You telling me you never had a crush on a hot, charismatic older officer when you were a Private?”

Shepard coughed, suddenly glad for her dark complexion. “You’re the worst.”

"Maybe by next year he’ll stop blushing everytime you look at him.”

“Be nice,” she chided.

“Cross my heart,” Ash drawled. Shepard shook her head with a small, undeniably affectionate smile despite herself. She knew the effect she had on people. It was more calculated than she cared to admit, moderating herself to get the best out of others. She was hard-edged with Wrex, gentle with Liara, firm with Garrus. But Ashley - Ashley never hid herself. You always knew where you stood with Ashley Williams.

Emilia wanted to be honest around her. It was a dangerous impulse.

“Uh huh.” She raised an eyebrow at the younger woman as she took another sip of her coffee. “Read your reports.”

“Ma’am yes, ma’am!”

Shepard smiled to herself as they read in silence. First up were the report and proposal she’d asked for from Chief Engineer Adams. With any prototype there were always problems; now it was a shield emitter that was on the fritz, decreasing the strength of the Normandy’s shielding on her port side. She signed off on Adams’ request to do EVA repair work on the malfunctioning unit while in orbit over Ontarom, as well as check on a sensor nodule that Pressly suspected was misaligned. Ontarom was an Alliance colony with several military bases, orbital defence platforms and an impressive defensive picket made up of ships from the Eighth Fleet. After the drop, they shouldn’t need the frigate’s fire support, and if they did run into trouble, she could call the cruiser in orbit.
Honestly, the only reason the Normandy didn’t have more issues was thanks to Adams, Tali, and the rest of the Engineering Department. Anderson hadn’t been lying when he’d said he’d stolen as many of the Navy’s best sailors and officers in their fields. They got the ship on a mechanical level she just couldn’t. She was a little jealous sometimes.

“Should get your new shotgun soon, ma’am. Been hard sourcing one even with throwing your Spectre status around,” Ashley remarked.

“Thank God. If I have to go on too many more missions with that piece of shit Katana, I might take one of Rosie’s axes to it.” Damage Controlman Third Class Draven had a very impressive array of axes, ostensibly for firefighting purposes. Shepard and Adams weren’t convinced that she really needed all of them, but she was just so enthusiastic about them that Shepard didn’t have the heart to order her to get rid of some of them. Plus, if Shepard was honest with herself, she was kinda waiting for an excuse to borrow one for a mission.

The only thing better than an axe was a biotic axe.

“They’d take that outta your pay, Skipper.”

“Worth it.”

Ash’s low laugh was interrupted by a knock on her cabin door. “Come in.”

“Ma’am. Sergeant.” Master Chief Negulesco’s eyes darted between Shepard and Williams and the stretch of desk between them before settling forward into a blank military stare.

“Morning Buffer. What can I do for you?”

“I was hoping you might have time for a quick meeting before your drop, ma’am.” The Master Chief’s voice was carefully neutral.

Negulesco didn’t much like Shepard leading ground missions, and she’d said so behind closed doors. It was an unnecessary risk. It was Alenko’s job. But Shepard knew herself, even if the other woman wasn’t wrong per se. Beyond the occasional necessity of her presence as the first human Spectre, she knew that if she didn’t go into the field at least occasionally, she’d get restless. She didn’t do well with confinement, with her hands tied. Her time spent on Arcturus after Akuze had taught her that all too well.

In any case, Pressly ran a CIC better than she did.

“Of course, Buffer. Was there anything else, Sergeant Williams?”

“No, ma’am. I’ll go check on how things are going down in the Kennel. Make sure everyone’s good to go.” Ashley rose, nodded respectfully to the Chief and left, taking her coffee and datapad with her.

“Have a seat, Buffer.” She finished signing off on a requisitions request for Guns and then closed the lid of her laptop, the holo screen flickering away and leaving inert metal, giving the sailor her full attention. The Buffer had an ironclad sense of military propriety - which sometimes clashed against Shepard’s laxer view of things. She’d spent too long in the special operations community for the Big Navy rigidity to sit easily with her, but she did respect Negulesco, her experience and her dedication to the ship and crew.

Negulesco was silent for several, long minutes as Shepard sipped from her mug, content to wait until
she was ready to talk. When Negulesco spoke her words were uncharacteristically cautious. “I just wanted to let you know, ma'am, that there’ve been some…rumours circulating amongst the crew.”

“About my personal life?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Shepard resisted the urge to groan or facepalm. "That's unfortunate, Buffer, but - while I'm certain the crew has come up with some things that are much more exciting than what is actually happening in my personal life - I'm not certain why it needs to be brought to my attention. Military personnel gossip. If they weren't, I'd be more concerned, as annoying as the whispers about Liara and I or any of the other rumours are."

"Of course, ma'am," Negulesco said slowly, "but this isn't about Liara. It's about Williams."

Shepard blinked at her. Her voice came out flat. "What?"

"You do spend a lot of time with her, Commander."

Shepard went stiff. "Excuse me?"

"I'm not accusing you of anything," Negulesco added hastily as her eyes flashed. "But it has been noticed by certain gossip mongers of the crew."

Shepard rubbed her face, previous good mood tatter and in danger of floating away completely. Her voice was blunt, more so than she'd really intended. "Do you know what it's like to lose your entire unit, Master Chief?"

Negulesco dropped her eyes. "No, ma'am."

"Williams knows. And so do I." She forced her muscles to relax, the tension in her to unspool. "I appreciate your concern. I know you don't always approve of my familiarity with the Marines and I can understand where you're coming from. But I remember being where Williams was."

She didn't like to remember. She didn't like the dreams that the Prothean beacon had unburied after years of stitching herself back together. But she did. She remembered all the fear and pain and rage and love that had nowhere to go, until she was bursting at the seams of herself.

Shepard didn't want Ashley Williams to hate herself like Shepard had. To wish she'd died like she had. To imagine the business end of a pistol so often it'd become familiar, like pressing a still healing old bruise.

She'd told her that. She hadn't intended to.

"I don't want to lose a good Marine," she said slowly, carefully. "No matter if there are rumours or not."

Negulesco's expression was inscrutable. "I understand, ma'am. In all honesty," and here the Buffer's granite features actually cracked into a frown, "I hadn't considered the parallel. Williams always seems put together."

Shepard's smile was tiny and crooked. "So did I."

"I-"

Shepard waved a hand. "Don't apologise, Buffer. I'm glad that you could come to me about this."
There'd been a captain her mother had served under, back when she was a Lieutenant Commander and a fighter pilot, who'd slept with his yeoman. Shepard Senior had told her that few on that ship had dared question him - the Old Man of an entire carrier. There was, Hannah had said, a difference between an effective chain of command and one in which fear overwhelmed all considerations of safety or propriety.

"Of course, ma'am. There was one other thing."

"Yeah?"

"Electrician's Mate Acosta was insubordinate to Leading Electrician’s Mate Bakari. Vorobyov and I spoke, and we agree that it needs to go to mast."

Shepard raised an eyebrow. Bakari was laid back - or perhaps lazy. She could never decide, but the man always seemed to be on the verge of falling asleep when she spoke to him. For Vorobyov and Bakari to send it to mast rather than handle it within the department....

"Alright. Send me the paperwork."

More paperwork. She was looking forward to the mission if only to feel like she wasn't chained to her desk for a bit. She focused on that - freedom - and did her best to recapture the cheer from earlier.

The Mako hit the ground with a hard enough thump that Garrus’ jaw clicked painfully. He hissed out a breath, shifting in the seat uncomfortably as he tried to shake the pain out, restrained by the straps holding him into it. He’d stubbornly insisted that the lingering soreness from Noveria wouldn’t keep him out of this mission. Chakwas hadn’t been convinced, but he’d soldiered through the physical tests and Shepard had pointed out that this mission was unlikely to get violent.

“Alright there, Garrus?” Shepard asked from across the troop compartment, a lilt of amusement to her voice as she swiftly undid her restraints. There was a curl to her lips from what he could see of her face, beneath her visor. Shepard was a stickler for everyone wearing their helmets from the moment they stepped into the Mako and for them taking their restraints off as soon as they were on the ground. Don’t want to get stuck. The way she’d said that, there’d been the ring of hard worn experience in her voice, like many of Shepard’s seemingly random habits and orders.

Still. It was good to see her smile, even if it was at his expense. He liked Shepard, admired her. But Spirits, she could be a bit…smile challenged.

“Fine, Commander,” he muttered, pulling his own straps free. They caught on a bit of webbing and he swore under his breath, subharmonics rumbling. The Mako rumbled to life, wheels squelching as they turned in thick black mud and verdant grass. With the normal Mako crew out for the count still from Noveria - though Dubyansky at least had made an appearance in the Kennel before the mission, to wish them luck and tell them that if they dented ‘his baby’ he’d put itching powder in all their bunks and sleeping pods - Lance Corporal Mohamed was driving. In silence. Not much of a talker, that one.

Beside him, Jaz grinned and elbowed him, ceramic plate scraping against his armour. "You sure?"

Garrus shoved the younger human back playfully. Shepard tsked. "Now, now, children. Don’t make me turn this Mako around."

The view through the cameras was much, much better than the last few planets they'd been to. Less ash, rock, and rachni, more flowing green hills and soft sunlight.
He was pretty sure he'd read somewhere that the planet was doomed though, which was a little
depressing. Something about the decaying orbit of a moon that would eventually smash into the
planet and cause a small apocalypse. The Alliance had bases here and special comms stations that
they pretended were secret, far from the chaotic seas whipped up by the moon that would one day
murder the planet and all of its life. He really had to wonder why you'd build a colony here.

The asari had probably pointed that out. They’d probably been ridiculously smug about it too.

They’d only been driving for thirty minutes when a hissed “Damnit,” drifted back from the vehicle
commander’s station. “Commander, we got a problem.”

The Mako lurched its way down a steep mountainous incline, tires digging into rock and dirt.
Negulesco was most likely going to insist they clean the whole IFV back on the ship so ‘her’ deck
didn’t get dirty, like any vehicle could be kept clean enough to eat off. Normally Tali would help
him, but Adams had stolen her off for fixing something on the Normandy’s outer hull, and who
knew how long that would take?

“What is it, Williams?” Shepard heaved herself up, holding herself upright as the Mako rattled with
her hands braced against the side and roof of the troop compartment.

“I was talking to the base like you suggested - uncooperative assholes, by the way - and they just cut
out on me. I think they’re under attack.”

“So our murderer is already there,” Shepard said flatly. “Can we go any faster?”

“The Mako isn’t exactly a racing varren, Commander,” Garrus cut in. The M-35 was fast for an
armoured vehicle, but that didn’t mean fast. “Especially in this terrain.”

The scientist’s research base was tucked into these soaring peaks, full of deep valleys and sheer
cliffs. Hardly the sort of terrain the Mako could get up to full speed in.

Shepard hummed in response, bringing up the tactical map on her omnitool in front of her, still on
her feet. She tapped something. “What about this route? Should cut twenty minutes off.”

Garrus’ mandibles flared, knocking against his helmet. “Commander, that’s a cliff.”

“I know,” she said, supremely unworried. “What do you say, Williams?”

“Yeah, our thrusters will do the trick.”

“You’re both crazy,” he decided.

“Everyone strap in.” Shepard’s voice was serene as she sat and buckled herself up.

Spirits preserve me from insane humans. And then they were airborne as Williams and Mohamed
launched the IFV off the edge of a cliff, camera feed spinning dizzily until he had to look away.
They hit the bottom of the valley hard enough to rattle him down to his bones as the Mako shuddered
and then settled - thankfully on all six wheels. Someone had shrieked. Williams was laughing.

“You alright there, Chou?” asked Lieutenant Alenko as he unbuckled himself. The Marine had been
the source of the high pitched sound.

“Fine, sir,” she gritted out.

“I think I’m going to be sick,” Liara observed, hunched over.
Jaz was laughing so hard at Chou that he nearly slid off the bench.

“That wasn’t so bad,” Shepard said with a comforting pat to Liara’s shoulder. “You should try a planetary assault landing through AA fire in a M-29. Always felt like I was in a salt shaker in those.”

“I’d rather not.” Was it possible for asari to go green?

“Five mikes out, Skipper,” Williams called back.

“Enough whining,” Shepard said mock-sternly, “and get ready to dismount.”

With grumpy, rumbling subharmonics Garrus checked his assault rifle over after unmagnetizing it from his armour. Shepard loved her three-point sling, but he’d just carry his and mag it to the front of his armour if he needed to.

The science facility was set into a plateau, a low cylinder-like shape bored deep into the dirt. Mohamed stopped the Mako on the ridgeline above as Fredricks in the gunner’s station slowly swept the turret across the facility’s defences, and Williams fiddled with the vehicle’s sensors. There were three brutish looking defence turrets set up on pillars overlooking the base, but they didn’t appear to have noticed the incoming vehicle.

There was also no sign of battle.

“Ma’am, the turrets are powered down.”

“Get us down there.”

The Mako heaved up and over the ridge and rumbled ever closer to the facility. And none of the turrets woke up, even as they piled out of the vehicle and set up a perimeter.

“Vakarian, Chou,” Shepard waved them over, towards the thick, heavy and very sealed door. Chou slunk over to Shepard’s other side, keeping as much distance between herself and Garrus as possible. He felt a flicker of irritation burn deep in his gut. Hadn’t he proven himself as part of the Normandy’s ground team? Shown what side he was on? That he wasn’t going to wake up one morning and decide to re-enact the Relay 314 Incident?

The glint in Shepard’s dark brown eyes told him she hadn’t missed what Chou had done - or Garrus’ reaction.

“Garrus, I’d like a small hole in the door, if you’d please.” As one of the ground team’s combat engineers, he carried some explosives for breaching and other purposes. “Then Chou, I’d like you to put a drone in there. Something isn’t right.”

“Yes, Commander.”

“Aye aye, ma’am.”

Chou headed for the Mako as Garrus pulled out a stick of ‘sticky explosive’ as they called it in the Hierarchy. The explosive was easy to mold into different shapes, attached to different types of detonators and came with a strong adhesive which meant it could be fixed onto all sorts of things. He’d seen it used as an effective if makeshift mine and one of his squadmates in the Army had even destroyed a pirate shuttle - about to take off and cause all sorts of trouble for the turian soldiers - by throwing a ‘sticky mine’ at it. Dexlius had always been the best at clawball.

He affixed the sticky explosive to the door, enough to blow a small hole through the reinforced
plastic and steel, as Chou returned, heralded by the crunch of her heavy combat boots in the grass. She was carrying a large case with the Alliance Marines symbol and a stencil of ‘USR-UAV III’ painted on the side. She opened it and removed a small, little drone, that was all thrusters and sensor modules.

“That’s pretty cool,” Garrus leant forward despite himself.

Chou smiled under her visor. “I know. Urban search and recon drone. Never seen one used before?”

“No.”

“You’re in for a treat then.” It was then that the human girl seemed to remember who she was talking to her, and the smile slid off her face with all the finality of a slamming door.

He turned away, stung despite himself, and ushered everyone from the door. “Fire in the hole!”

The explosives went off with a sharp bang as it tore through the thick door, leaving a smoking, sharp-edged hole through it. Chou didn’t wait for Shepard direction but immediately directed the whirring drone through, immediately focusing on her omnitool and the camera feed from its sensors. Williams came up beside him and took a knee, rifle held ready and directed at the door.

“Got some bodies,” Chou said and he felt the tension racket up around him, and he set his own rifle against his shoulder. “No contacts in the first room, ma’am.”

“Check for environmental hazards,” Shepard murmured.

After a moment, the Lance Corporal tilted her head. “I’ve got… tear gas, ma’am.”

Shepard nodded, unsurprised, as she reached for her ‘faceplate.’ “It’s what I’d do. Everyone, full seals and stack up!”

Garrus’ helmet was already sealed, so he waited as the humans and one asari around him fixed their plates and then checked each other. No one wanted to be tear gassed because they’d forgotten to double check their hardsuits seals.

“I want everyone to be alert,” Shepard told them. “Whoever is doing this - they’ve killed several people across the galaxy without getting caught or half of them being recognised as murders. This is an escalation from the last assassination but not a surprising one if they know we’re coming. Defend yourselves and each other, but watch your fire. We want Wayne alive.”

The first room was thick with white, billowing clouds of gas that swirled with their movements. The guards of the facility had been wearing helmets but not full seals - common enough when on a garden planet - and the three sentries in this room had clearly been overwhelmed. They’d been killed efficiently; two had stab wounds to their necks, angled upwards and into the vulnerable human brain and one had been shot in the face.

Liara made a soft sound of disgust at the sight, but Williams moved immediately to the door leading deeper into the facility, shotgun in hand. Garrus joined her and after a nod, the two of them moved swiftly forward. Again, all they found were another couple of bodies.

“Clear,” Ashley muttered softly, but enough that it would be picked up by her in-helmet comms. That was how it went - the two of them on point and everyone spreading out behind them and only bodies in each room with the billowing smoke.
And none of them were Doctor Henry Wayne.

“This guy is here somewhere,” Shepard muttered with a hint of frustration.

There - Garrus tilted his head. He barely managed to modulate his voice so it was too soft to be heard outside his helmet. “Commander, I hear something through this door.”

When they burst into the room, rifles raised, only two men were alive in there.

“Stay back!” The pistol in the man’s hand shook but never wavered from the other’s head. He was tall, muscled, his helmet abandoned on the ground. His eyes were red-rimmed and wild, the whites showing. The haircut was familiar - the same one all of the male Marines aboard the Normandy wore. “I have no grief with you, I just want this bastard!”

“Please, help me!” It had to be Doctor Wayne, thin, terrified and dressed in a lab coat. “He’s a madman!”

Garrus had seen plenty of standoffs like this. Someone who was delirious or otherwise not in control of themselves, but dangerous. All too often it ended with body bags.

“Easy,” he began but the man had already focused on his hostage.

“Shut UP!” The fury to his voice, the unrestrained violence to his movements - it all seemed very at odds with the methodical way he’d cut his way through Wayne’s guards. “You don’t get to lie, you don’t-”

“It’s alright,” Garrus said, attempting to be soothing. “We’ll stay here. Let’s talk about this, okay?”

That was when Shepard shouldered past him, knocking him aside. He drew himself up with sudden anger - this was no time for a Vanguard to be rushing in, didn’t she trust him to do his job, the job she’d admitted plenty of times she couldn’t do? This man was violent and emotional - but something in her expression, clear and cold like glass as she pulled her helmet from her head against all of her own rules, stopped him.

The man’s eyes widened, the whites visible. “Shepard? My God, Shepard, is that you?”

“Corporal Toombs,” she said, helmet dropping carelessly from her fingers to thunk against the metallic floor. “But...I saw you. I saw you die. I watched as the thresher maw pulled you under.”

He chuckled, a horrific grinding thing. “They took me, Shepard. This man and his scientist friends. It wasn’t an accident. Any of it. They lured us there! They lured us there and let those things hit us! And then - oh god, then they were so happy that someone had survived that they could get their hands on! Now they could run their tests.”

After that first moment in which Shepard recognised the hostage-taker and something close to agony had bloomed across the planes of her face, Shepard’s expression had become as cold as an Elysian winter. All emotion had been scraped from her face, replaced by a terrifyingly empty black stare.

Toombs, on the other hand, was a maelstrom of quick, jerky movements one minute and the stillness of a corpse the next.

“My team.” Shepard’s voice was colder than Ashley had ever recalled hearing. “Our friends.”
“They were murdered,” Toombs whispered, finger twitching close to his trigger. “And then they kept me in a box, let me out only to stab me and prod me and -”

“All of you out,” Shepard hissed to the rest of them, black stare not wavering from Wayne.

“Ma’am,” Alenko began hesitantly.

“I’ll stay,” Ashley jumped in. “Rest of you, secure the facility?”

Shepard said nothing and she hoped that was agreement. With one last glance at Shepard, Alenko led the others in filing out.

“This man deserves to die, Shepard!” Toombs’ voice was pleading. “For me, for you, for everyone else in our team! Are you with me?”

“He has no proof!” Wayne shouted. “I demand you arrest this man, Commander! I have no idea what he’s talking about-”

The scientist’s voice cut off like it had been severed with a knife when Shepard whirled on him.

Blue light flickered down Shepard’s arms, whirled around her in lightning flashes. Wayne went pale as a sheet as one of her hands fisted in his shirt, the other glowing and drawn back.

Ashley let her rifle fall limply from her hands, hanging from her sling. *She’s going to kill him.* Shepard’s face was cold as death and her eyes promised it. Toombs moved beside her fluidly, excitedly, pressing the muzzle of his pistol into Wayne’s cheek.

“P-please-”

“Sh- Shepard,” she murmured it without even meaning to open her mouth, but Shepard stiffened as if Ashley had slapped her.

“We can’t kill him,” she said flatly.

“What?” Toombs turned to her, eyes wild. Ashley reached for her rifle but he never turned the pistol towards her Commander.

“Listen to me,” she said lowly, hand not moving from where it curled in Wayne’s collar, dangerously close to his throat. “Listen to me. This isn’t who we are. We’re Marines, we-”

“Don’t tell me who I am, Shepard,” Toombs raged, “They killed all of our unit! They tortured me for years - you got some scratches and a scary reputation-”

Shepard flinched. “I would’ve come back for you. I would’ve helped you.”

He smiled that twisted smile again. “I know.”

“It hurts them more, alright? It hurts them more if you let me take him in.” Shepard’s glare refocused on Wayne. Her blue glowing fingers crept to his throat, forefinger and thumb digging in hard enough to leave an indent. “You’re going to tell the truth. You’re going to tell the Alliance everything. What you did to MSOT 6 and 7th Platoon. *How. All of it.* That’s the price of your life. If you don’t, I’ll find you and I’ll make you wish Toombs had pulled the trigger. Do you understand?”

The trembling man nodded vigorously.

Shepard’s dark eyes slid to Toombs. “Okay, Corporal? I’ll take him in. I’ll take him to the Fifth
Fleet. We can trust Hackett. He’ll see trial. Cerberus will get the shit they deserve.”

After a long, tense minute where Ashley wondered if she should go for her rifle again, Toombs nodded slowly and stepped back, the muzzle of his pistol dropping to the ground. “Okay. Okay. You’re right...ma’am.”

“Gimme your pistol, Corporal.” Ashley stepped closer and pried it from his limp hand.

Shepard’s hand dropped from Wayne’s throat, her biotics dying out as she took a jerky step backward. “Alenko!”

The Lieutenant appeared so quickly he had to have been lingering near the door. “Yes ma’am?”

“Take this man, put guards on him. Keep him away from Toombs and me.” Her voice was like chipped stone. “Get the ship down here and toss him in the brig as soon as they’ve finished repairs in orbit.”

“Can I have something to eat?” Toombs asked softly. There was a strange almost naivety to him now.

“Sure.” Kaidan gestured for Toombs to follow him, as Jaz and Chou roughly grabbed Wayne and propelled him out of the room, handcuffing his hands behind his back. Toombs smiled at that and allowed himself to be led out of the room.

A tremble ran through Shepard’s entire frame.

“Shepard,” Ashley began.

“Thank you for your help with Corporal Toombs, Williams.” Shepard reached for her helmet on the floor and fastened it over her face.

Alone in the elevator, Emilia Shepard forced herself to breathe. In. Out. She felt the slight cool of air from the vent above washing over her. The prickles of a bruise pressed into her by her belt, perhaps caused by a rachni. Her blunt nails, digging into her palm.

In. Out.

She’d thought she was past this. The knife of Akuze buried in her gut had dulled to an old ache.... She’d clawed her way out of that darkness by her fingernails. She’d reforged herself in the fires of ICT. She’d become a weapon rather than the broken, useless, pitiable sole survivor. Rita hadn’t understood - you nearly died, you want to throw yourself right back out there, are you trying to get yourself killed to make up for it - and it’d spelt the end of their tattered excuse for a marriage.

Now though, she felt the cold bands of that old dark wrap around her chest until each breath was a struggle.

Sole survivor. She’d been so alone when they’d lifted her into that shuttle and pulled Richardson from her hands. But she wasn’t alone. Toombs had lived, this entire time. Five years. Five years and she’d left him there.

Her nails dug deeper.

Toombs was below, dressed in a hastily found Corporal’s uniform, getting checked over by Doctor
Chakwas. Wayne was in the brig. She remembered her fingers around his throat. She’d wanted to squeeze, with hand and with biotics. She’d wanted that so fucking badly. *I’ve killed people for just getting in my way; not why this fucker?*

Shepard was a killer. She knew it. But Ashley had said her name, and she’d known that if she’d killed Doctor Henry Wayne, it would’ve been because of her pain, her rage, never her duty. It would’ve been murder and Shepard was not a murderer. There was a line there, no matter what some people thought, and she’d always tried to stay on the right side of it.

Tried to keep her people on the right side of it too. War had the appearance of condoning a lot of unforgivable things. If she’d killed that man in front of one of her Marines….

She’d sat with Toombs, while they waited for the ship, pressed her hand into his shoulder like he might disappear if she stopped touching him. He’d said nothing. What could be said?

*God, I’m sorry.* No Marine left behind, but she’d left him. Every time she blinked she saw the ground splitting beneath him, sand spraying until she could no longer see him and all she could hear was his final scream as his flesh bubbled.

The elevator door hissed open. Commander Pressly was waiting for her.

“Ma’am, I hear the mission was a success.”

She nodded sharply.

“EVA repairs are complete, Adams reports that kinetic barriers are back to 100% efficiency and the faulty sensor module has been realigned.”

“Very good. Are we en route to rendezvous with the *Mexico City*?”

“Yes ma’am, and Admiral Hackett said he would like to debrief you personally.” Pressly paused, grey eyebrows pulling together. “If I might ask, why didn’t we just leave Corporal Toombs and Doctor Wayne with the local garrison?”

*Because I trust Hackett, and I’m not sure I can trust everyone in the Alliance right now.* It was an unsettling feeling, like her skin was crawling. “This started with the Fifth, it can end with them.”

Pressly seemed unconvinced by her answer. “Ma’am....”

“If you’ll excuse me, X.” She wanted to crawl out of her skin. She wanted somewhere quiet where she didn’t have to keep pretending that she was in control, unaffected. She wanted to be alone where none of her subordinates could see the bleeding human under the uniform. But she was the Commander, and Emilia Shepard knew her duty. Years of self-discipline kept her expression blank and her shoulders square.

*Murder. It was murder.*

51 Alliance Marines had landed on Akuze. 13 Raiders of MSOT 6. 38 infantry Marines from a rifle company. First, the lead Grizzly had been hit from below, tossing it up like a toy. In their light patrol vehicles, the MSOT hadn’t lasted long at all, flesh and metal alike eaten away by the spray of acid.

Fucking murder. They’d been lured there. Baited there. Used as a test. For what? Wow, things melted when you hit them with thresher venom? Amazing. Couldn’t have worked that one out without murdering a bunch of people.
“Get me a line to Admiral Hackett,” she told the comm tech on duty, voice low and harsh. By the end of her conversation with the Admiral, she felt worse, especially since she knew Lam had heard all of that. Heard Hackett pause and call her Shepard instead of Commander, heard him say he hoped this brought her closure.

Murder. Closure would be Cerberus burning around her. She had tucked away the names and the faces, the little things she’d loved and hated about them. Richardson had always taken the bunk closest to the door when they were in garrison or on a ship and put his sleeping bag between her and the perimeter when they were in the field. She’d found it annoying, like he thought she couldn’t defend herself when she was the biotic.

He’d pushed her out of the way and gotten a face full of acid for his trouble. Closed casket funeral. His wife had hugged her tight enough to hurt, given her tea to melt the cold in her chest, told her it wasn’t her fault, told her she was grateful because Shepard was the reason they’d gotten to bury him.

Murder.

But it wasn’t her duty to hunt down Cerberus. Her duty was to find Saren, bring him in or kill him. There was a war on - what was a team of murdered Marines compared to the thousands of lives that were lost every day it dragged on?

Shepard beat a tactical retreat to her cabin. There, she could be alone, if only for a time. Alone with eleven ghosts.

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**CODEX ENTRY**

The Akuze Incident: The Akuze Incident was one of the worst accidents outside of armed conflict in Systems Alliance Marine Corps history, during which 50 Marines were killed after landing on a thresher maw nest that had escaped planetary surveys. The loss of life exceeded the SSV *Geneva* incident in which killed 34 sailors and Marines and the 2174 Fort Drake ammunition explosion, which killed 24 Marines.

After losing communications with the pilot colony on the garden world of Akuze, Kilo Company, 3/45th Marines from the 2nd Marine Expeditionary Unit, under the command of Staff Lieutenant Rodrigo Santiago, was tasked with investigating. Suspecting potential kidnapping for ransom or piracy, TRAVCOMM attached Marine Special Operations Team 6 from the 103rd Marine Division under the command of First Lieutenant Emilia Shepard to Kilo Company as a reconnaissance and hostage retrieval element.

After initial drone imaging sweeps found the colony itself deserted, Staff Lieutenant Santiago ordered his 7th Platoon and MSOT 6 to sweep the buildings and immediate surroundings while the company’s other platoons searched alternate areas of the planet.

Approximately three hours after landing on the planet, 7th Platoon and MSOT 6 were attacked while mounted by previously undetected thresher maws who were later found to have been nesting near the pilot colony site. Many Marines were killed or seriously wounded in their vehicles, while others were killed attempting to flee the initial ambush point.

Lieutenant Shepard ordered the survivors to scatter and attempt to make it to nearby rocky ground in
the hopes the thresher maws wouldn’t pursue. However, the maws were uncharacteristically aggressive and continued to attack even after the Marines should have left their nesting area, and only 5 survivors made it to the rocks, all of whom were wounded.

Initial attempts by the 355th Transport Squadron to rescue the stranded survivors were met by attacks from the thresher maws and two shuttles were damaged. Plans to use ship weapons to destroy the maws and rescue the Marines were shot down due to fears that the use of a mass accelerator would kill survivors as well as the maws.

Eventually, a daring plan was put into action; two shuttles distracted the thresher maws while a third made a run for the survivors. However, four hours had passed between the attack and the successful rescue, and all but one of the Marines had died of their injuries. For coming up with the plan and flying one of the distracting shuttles himself, Lieutenant Commander Samuel Thornton would be awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross.

Of the 51 Marines who had landed on Akuze, only one was retrieved alive from the planet.

Chapter End Notes

Definitions:

EVA: Extravehicular activity. Any activity done outside a space vehicle while beyond a planet's appreciable atmosphere.
Corporal Chance Toombs, N5, slept in the medbay bed, curled up in a fetal position. Asleep, the wounded animal expression creasing his features had eased. He looked young, very young, though most Alliance personnel looked like children to Karin Chakwas these days. Children, brave children, with the weight of planets on their shoulders.

What Toombs had been through defied comprehension. Getting his medical records had been a challenge - the personnel database had listed him as KIA/BNR and closed. Even once she’d managed to get the file re-opened, he’d refused anything but the most basic check-up, and only if Commander Shepard told him to do so and vouched for her. His body was a litany of abuse; burn scars like rope twisted around his arms, needle marks and white lines across his chest where he’d struggled against restraints so hard he’d broken skin. She wanted to soothe him as she had so many young and broken men and women over the years, but he flinched when she touched him.

Damn Cerberus. Karin had treated the wreckage of sapient cruelty all too often over the course of her Navy career. Slaves with control chips drilled into their nervous systems, the survivors of thermal weapons, those missing limbs due to mines or monofilament wires. But she found that after all this time, she still had anger left.

She sighed and turned back to the form she was filling out on her terminal. Everything needed to be in order before the handover to Mexico City’s chief medical officer, the first in a chain of transfers in Toombs’ future until he made it to one of the Alliance’s top mental health facilities. Such facilities usually specialised in rehabilitating former slaves and treating combat veterans, but she hoped they could help him too. That he might live a full life after everything that had been done to him.

The door hummed softly open, and Chakwas looked up sharply - then softened when she saw that it was Commander Shepard. Shepard usually struck Chakwas as having that self-confidence and assurance good ship captains needed, filling up every room she entered with her presence, every movement controlled. Now, with her thumbs shoved into the loops of her belt, that control more like brittle rigidity.

“He’s sleeping, Commander,” she said softly.

Shepard’s jaw clenched. “Did you sedate him?”

Chakwas raised an eyebrow. “Of course not.”

Shepard rubbed her face, chagrin washing briefly across her features. “Sorry, doc.”

“It’s been a long couple of days.”

“Tell me about it.” The Commander carefully levered herself into the chair beside Toombs’ bed, fists clenching in her lap like she wanted to reach out and touch him but had thought better of it. “He’s really out, huh?” She bit her lip until the skin went pale.

“He’s been through a great deal,” Chakwas replied, saving a copy of his obs chart. “I imagine he finally feels safe enough to sleep, knowing you are nearby.”

Something flashed across the Commander’s face before being ruthlessly suppressed, something with sharp edges. “I didn’t do such a great job last time.”

Chakwas pursed her lips, glancing over at the younger officer. Shepard’s expression was guarded,
eyes fixed on her former subordinate. The 'it's not your fault' balanced on her tongue, but she bit it down. She was certain Shepard had heard that many times in the past five years. Chakwas had only done basic psychological training - she wasn't a psychiatrist by any means, but she was the first line of defence for the crewmen under her charge and that included the Normandy's commander. Survivor's guilt was an old enemy.

"You're not omnipotent, Commander," she said at last.

"I know," Shepard sighed softly and touched Toombs' shoulder. He didn't stir. "The Mexico City is twenty minutes away. We should get him up."

"Are you going to be alright?" Chakwas asked bluntly. "The crew relies on you." There were few on this ship who would talk to her in such a manner - the Buffer and Pressly might, but only where no one could hear - but Karin technically outranked her as a Medical Corps Captain even if she wasn't a line officer.

Shepard's jaw clenched and then relaxed. "I'll let you know if it's too much."

"Acceptable," she replied with a ghost of a smile. "It's best if you wake him. He is understandably wary of me.

She turned back to her paperwork, finishing it off for handover. She heard Shepard say Toombs’ name and shake him - and then the thump of skin on skin as the Corporal lashed out, still half-asleep and gasping, only for Shepard to deflect the blow with her forearm.

“Easy man, easy. It’s just me.”

“Shepard?” his voice was soft and wondering. “I thought I was just gonna wake up back there.”

“It’s alright. It’s alright, I promise.”

“Playing some cards?”

“Yessir.” Waaberi stared very hard at her drink. Her fingers were still in a splint, bright white against the deep dark of her skin.

“Skyllian Five, L.T.” Fredricks leaned back on his chair. “Want me to deal you in? Ain’t much fun with just these two.”
He glanced down at the table - and at the coffee packets lying in piles between them. “You’re betting coffee?”

“Yessir. What else can we bet? Buffer gets upset if we gamble or some shit.”

“Alright,” he said, “I’ll go grab some of mine, and we’ll play.”

“Hey, if you see any of our xenos, can you invite them?”

Alenko considered if his Marines needed another cultural sensitivity slideshow as he went to grab his coffee rations, but eventually decided against it. They might occasionally call Garrus a cuttlebone or spikebutt but for the most part they had accepted him - and he could give as good as he got. They’d also started doing nice things for Tali and Liara, the latter much more often since Noveria. Chou was the exception, but he was starting to think the best he was going to get out of her was wary professionalism. A good officer knew when a battle was lost.

He returned to the mess hall with Vakarian and enough coffee sachets to cover them both.

“These are levo,” Garrus said, confused. “I can’t drink these.”

“Of course not.”

“Then why would I play for them?”

“Because,” Alenko said with an air of gentle paternalism, “these things are worth much, much more credits aboard an Alliance warship. After four to six months everything degenerates into a barter economy and coffee, Tupari cans, and MRE bacon cheese spread are what everyone’s after.”

“Liara said Tupari tasted awful.”

“Oh, it’s disgusting.”

“It’s for when you absolutely need your resting heart rate to be 200 beats per minute just before a patrol,” Jaz called with a grin.

“Hey Spiky!” called Fredricks.

“Furball,” Garrus shot back with an amused flick of his mandibles. Waaberi shuffled over so Garrus could sit down, elbowing Jaz until he moved.

“Are you gambling with your men, Lieutenant Alenko?” Doctor Chakwas asked in passing, playfully scandalised.

“Just for coffee, ma’am,” he said easily.

“Mind if I join you?”

“Of course not, ma’am,” said Waaberi, elbowing Jaz again to make room.

“Oh, fuck off. You’re really pissing me off now.”

“You should respect your superiors,” she replied, trying to get him in a headlock.

He batted her hands away. “We’re the same rank!”

They halted the budding wrestling match when Chakwas sat down, clearly not willing to so much as
bump the elegant doctor.

“You two should spar,” Garrus suggested as Fredricks began to deal.

“We…do?”

“No, I mean like we do in the Hierarchy Army. For stress relief.”

“Stress relief?” Waaberi’s eyebrow raised.

“I think I need an adult,” whispered Jaz.

“I’m pretty sure you’re mentally 12 sometimes, dude.” Fredricks sucked down a few gulps of his bright green drink.

“You’re one to talk,” Jaz shot back, picking up his cards. “Do you even know how it works? You-”

He cut off when Waaberi solidly thumped him in the ribs with a pained wheeze. She glared at him.

“You can’t be like that in front of officers.”

“Don’t worry, dear,” Chakwas said serenely, sipping from a hot cup of tea she seemed to have conjured out of nowhere. “I’ve heard much, much worse. I’ve pulled knives and bullets out of Marines after all.”

“Besides,” Waaberi added, “Alex here is into the blues. You just need to take a look at the pin-ups in his locker.”

Alex scowled at them, flushing red. “Why do I hang out with you guys?”

“Because you’re looking for the validation you never received from your well-bred, anti-working class, yuppie peers on Bekenstein,” Waaberi shot back.

“Are we going to play cards or are you just gonna keep mocking me?”

Jaz and Waaberi exchanged glances. It was a clearly difficult decision, but Kaidan gently spread out in his cards in his hands, and they got the hint. “Cards.”

They played the hand, Garrus snatching a surprise victory - he was starting to get the hang of it now the crewmen invited him to the games. “We should play three claw at some point. I’ll teach you all.”

“Cultural exchange,” mused Waaberi as she laid down a card. “I like it.”

“How is Toombs?” Kaidan was reluctant to break the joking mood, but the Marines had concerns from the last mission that needed to be gently soothed. And he was sure Shepard would have concerns after what had happened. Best to nip it all in the bud. The three young Marines practically sat up at the question.

“He got some sleep and was feeling a bit better,” Chakwas replied. “I think he has a very good chance of making a recovery, even after everything he’s been through.”

“That’s real good to hear, Doc,” Waaberi said softly, flicking her cards between her hands.

They played another hand, and Chakwas won, her face calm and expressionless like a lake in winter. That was a very good poker face.

“It was a pretty fucked up mission, huh sir?” Jaz tentatively offered.
Kaidan nodded. “It was.”

“They - Shepard’s team back then - they were 103rd just like us.” Fredricks frowned at the table.

“Yes. But with Toombs and Wayne’s testimony, there’ll be justice for the Akuze Fifty. I’m told it’s very likely that Cerberus will get officially labelled a terrorist organisation within the next couple of months and the record on Akuze will be set straight.”

“Shoulda already been labeled that,” Waaberi muttered, downing the last of her foul heart attack concoction. The usual justifications about how an organisation that had been known to rescue human slaves and yes - bomb Hegemony leaders and pirates had supporters in the Alliance felt very hollow. He’d never much liked the attempts to justify it anyway or that side of politics. What about the collateral damage of the bombs? The murders of people who got in the way? You did things right or not at all.

“Shepard will make sure this won’t get swept under the rug,” Waaberi said strongly, like that decided the matter. Maybe it did.

Chakwas won again.

“Daaamn, Doc.” Jaz blinked at her. She just smiled back as the Marines forlornly watched her gather up their coffee rations.

The weights room was dimly lit in the same way most of the Normandy was - to preserve power when on a wartime cruise and all available energy might be needed for weapons systems and kinetic barriers at any moment. It sometimes made Ashley feel like some kind of cave creature, who when emerging into the sunlight would shriek it burns. The ironic called the resulting pallor ‘spacer’s tan.’

Tonight, however, the gym was lit up by flashes of light as Shepard moved fluidly through mnemonics, twirling weights through the air like they were feathers. Dressed in fatigue belts and a singlet that bared her muscled shoulders, dark energy coated her skin with a cold shimmer. Would Ash’s hands tingle if she was to touch her?

She leant against the door frame, cold metal against her shoulder. Shepard had to know she was there. Pretty much all the Marines had tried to sneak up on her at some point, but none had succeeded thus far. For her part, the Commander appeared to delight in suddenly appearing like a phantom or ninja to scare the crap out of whichever crewman she’d decided to terrorise that day.

Ash reconsidered the whole thing. If Shepard was going to give her the silent treatment like they were back in goddamn high school, maybe she should just leave. But Shepard had been there for her, even at her prickliest, and at this point, it’d just be awkward.

“I’m pretty sure you’re not meant to do that without a spotter.”

Shepard paused, a weight spinning around and around above her hand. Sweat glistened on her shoulders and face. From what Alenko had told her about biotics, what Shepard was doing took a lot of energy and concentration. “Who’re you going to rat me out to? Anderson?”

“I was thinking Chakwas,” Ashley said dryly. “She’s the only one on the ship who's scarier than you.”

Shepard huffed out a soft laugh. She flared, and Ashley blinked against the light before the biotic...
glow faded and the weights thunked to the ground. “You’re a cruel woman, Williams.”

“I could spot you.”

Shepard picked up the weights and started putting them away. “Appreciate the offer, but I’m going to be feeling that tomorrow as it is. One day I’ll be able to do that exercise as long as Alenko does. His control is incredible.”

Disappointment flashed through Ash. Then Shepard’s dark eyes darted to the PT uniform she was wearing. “I think you were going for some rule breaking too, Williams.”

“I would never.”

“Yeah right.”

“Well.” She rolled her shoulders. “Don’t tell my boss. She’s a bit of a hardass.”

Shepard snorted. “Sure. Want me to spot you?”

“Yeah, I’d appreciate that, Skipper.”

She shuffled onto the bench and reached for the bar, fingers curling around cool metal. Waited until Shepard loomed over her, hands outstretched and ready to catch the bar should Ashley’s muscles fail. She worked out in silence with only the hum of the ship around her and their breathing for company, until her arms were on fire and her biceps were trembling slightly with the effort. She heaved the bar up to rack it, Shepard’s hand guiding it into place and then sat up. She gratefully took the towel the other woman tossed at her to wipe her face.

“Thanks. I needed that.”

“Always clears my head too,” Shepard murmured.

“Hey…can we talk? Off the record?”

“Of course,” she said immediately. “Is everything alright?”

She rubbed the towel down her arms and palms, thinking of what to say. She had a habit of putting her foot in her mouth, particularly around Shepard, not that the Commander seemed to mind - but she wanted this to go right. Wanted to say the right thing like Shepard always seemed to. “That stuff with Toombs and Cerberus - that’s pretty fucked up. Are you okay?”

Shepard blinked. Her tone was guarded as she said, “I’m fine.”

“With all due respect, that’s bullshit. Ma’am.”

Shepard’s dark eyes narrowed, and for a moment she thought that she’d stepped right past the Commander’s boundaries and into insubordination territory. Then the other woman’s finger lifted and pressed to the knotting of burn scars across her shoulder. “I appreciate the concern, but it’s not your job to worry about me.”

“This ship is pretty damn small for you to be an island, skipper. I already think you’re a badass without the controlled stoic act.”

She smiled, a just a little. “Who says it’s an act?”

“Alright, alright, you’re a control freak, we get it.”
“That’s the problem, you know,” Shepard said quietly, dropping down heavily to sit on the bench beside her, their elbows brushing. “I lost control. It was hard when I thought it was just an accident, but... Space is dangerous, there’s lots of risks, we all knew that. We were protecting humanity. All of that shit. But other humans fed us to thresher maws just to see what would happen, like it was some big fucking revelation? They died for nothing. I lay on that fucking rock for hours listening to my Marines die around me and -”

Bright light raced down Shepard’s arms to her clenched fists. Without thinking, Ash wrapped an arm around her shoulders, palm pressing against her scarred skin. Shepard stiffened, but after a moment she leant into her, rested her head on her shoulder, curls tickling her neck, breathing harsh in her ear. And wherever they touched, Ashley felt the buzz of her biotics, like a live wire.

“I should have been able to do something. They had him for five years.”

“Just because you were in charge doesn’t mean you’re to blame,” Ashley murmured.

Shepard huffed out a laugh. “Using my own words against me?”

“Damn straight I am. Dunno how you were supposed to know about the crazy terrorists wanting to make thresher maw lunch outta Marines just doing their jobs. The only people to blame are Cerberus.”

“I wanted to kill him,” Shepard admitted.

“I know. But you didn’t.” Would Ash be able to hold back if she had Saren before her and helpless? She didn’t know. She really didn’t. “You didn’t kill him, and you talked Toombs down and got him help. I think you won that one, Skipper.”

Shepard’s breathing evened out. “I guess you’re right.”

“I am sometimes, y’know.” She was uncomfortably warm, but she didn’t really want to move. Besides, who else would give Shepard a hug? “Tell me about them.”

Shepard paused. She hadn’t pushed Ashley to talk about the 2/12. The wounds were too new, too fresh. If she stopped to think about them, to remember, something in her might break. And there were people relying on her. She was their sergeant.

How much worse was it to be the Commander?

“We used to call him ‘Toombstone’ as a joke. Like how they used to call me ‘Junior.’ It’s not funny anymore.”

“Junior?”

“Yeah. Lots of Shepards in the service, y’know. Abuela is ‘Admiral Shepard’ even now that she’s retired, my ma is Shepard Senior, and I got called Junior. Hardly anyone dares these days. Soriano started that bullshit in my MSOT, and I think the others just found it funny. Another time, I walked into Vic - Sergeant Victor Nieves - using a goddamn fuckin’ rocket launcher to drink booze. Who the fuck does that?”

Ash couldn’t help but laugh. “How’d he even get it out of armoury?”

“I have no fucking clue. I thought the Master Guns was gonna keelhaul me in space.” Shepard’s smile slowly faded. “They were good people. They deserved better.”
“Yeah.” What could you say to that? They had deserved a lot fucking better than what they’d gotten - an awful death far from home for no good reason.

Shepard straightened and then stood up, the weariness in the way she’d slumped against Ash fading into an iron upright posture. “I do have to get back to my duties.”

At 3am? But she let Shepard go, tucking her thumbs into her belt. “Of course, ma’am.”

“…Thank you. For the chat.”

Ashley shrugged. “No problem.”

The room felt emptier once Shepard had left. Ashley laid back down on the bench, throwing a forearm across her eyes. *You’ve got a problem, Williams. You need to unfuck yourself and soon.*

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**CODEX ENTRY**

**Alliance News Network Aggregator September 2183:**

**ALLIANCE CASUALTIES PASS 3000 DEAD**

Alliance News Network - A grim milestone was reached today as the Systems Alliance Defence Force announced the deaths of three Alliance soldiers during operations against the geth. Sergeant Mikhail Smirnov, Private Timothe Durand, and Private Le Ngoc Linh, all of the 31st Armoured Brigade Combat Team were killed in action on Tuesday, bringing the number of military deaths in the Eden Prime War to 3002. Speaking from Arcturus Station prior to a meeting of the Defence Council, Prime Minister Anita Goyle expressed her condolences to the families of the fallen and reiterated her government’s commitment to the armed forces.

**SHADOWS OF THE STAR II SET FOR JULY 2184 RELEASE**

Gaming Galactic - Arc Studios today announced that ‘Shadows of the Star II,’ the highly anticipated sequel to their popular 2180 planet builder Shadows of the Star is set for release on the 6th of July, 2184.

“We wanted to take the time and care to release a worthy sequel,” stated lead developer Aurelia T’Vella. “Old players will come back to a core of challenging and unique gameplay from the previous game, but with added challenges and features to improve upon their experience.”

As in the original, players will take the part of a colonial director in charge of a brand new colony, and try to guide it towards galactic relevance. The developer has promised a better and more in-depth virtual reality experience, with the opportunity to check out your buildings and designs from ground level, and deepened cultural and political mechanics.

**EARTH ISN’T DOING ENOUGH FOR THE WAR - SPACER MP**

The Arcturus Journal - Spacer Member of Parliament Ishaan Kapoor has recently become the centre of controversy after alleging that the nations of Earth are failing to contribute to the war effort against the geth.
“Humanity is under attack,” Mr Kapoor told reporters after an inconclusive meeting between the Ambassador to Earth and the United Nations Security Council. “But if you listen to my colleagues on Earth talk, you’d never know it. This isn’t just an Alliance problem - it’s all our problem. Earth needs to step up and give the Alliance the military and economic support it needs to win this war. Spacers literally guard the way to Sol with their homes, but where is Earth when we need them?”

A spokesperson for the UN Secretary-General refused to comment, citing ongoing negotiations between the Systems Alliance and the United Nations.

LARISSA MAROS ANNOUNCES RETIREMENT

Galactic Skyball News - Larissa Maros, the captain of the Armali Songblades, has announced her retirement after a distinguished fifty-year career. Heralded as one of the game’s greats, Maros is known for her exciting chase-down tackles as well as her penchant for scoring stylistic 3 pointers. Starting her career at Armali University, she was first pick in the 2133 draft.

“It feels like the right time,” she told reporters outside the Armali training ground. “I’m ready for the next chapter of my life.”

Maros didn’t rule out a return to skyball as a coach or scout in the future but said for now her plans were to spend time with her ‘long-suffering’ bondmate, friends, and family.
The coil of dog tags was always heavier than Shepard thought it was going to be, little triangles of metal smoothed by fingers over the years. Master Sergeant Jeremy Richardson. Gunnery Sergeant Besnik Shehu. Staff Sergeant Hua Sun. All of them experienced, salty Marines. The joke had been that Richardson and Shehu had been around for World War Two. Staff Sergeant Lavrenti Borisov. Sergeant Victor Nieves. Lance Corporal Binh Lê. Hospitalman Second Class Jane Thomason.

Corporal Chance Toombs . She slid that one off the chain, regarded it and then tossed it onto her desk. He wasn’t dead. How many of the others hadn’t been dead when they’d pulled her off that rock, pulled Richardson’s dead weight from her arms?

She wished Richardson was here. He’d be telling her to stop fucking around. Get your head in the game. She had a mission that demanded completion, and she was stuck on something that happened five years ago. Making hard choices is why they pay you the big bucks, LT, he’d told her once or twice pitilessly. And he’d been right.

She’d fallen apart a little in the weights room - and to the last person she should have - but it was time to put herself back together. She’d done it once before. She could do it again.


If MSOT 6 were watching, they were probably telling her to put her big girl boots on. Do her duty - do them proud. Live by what she’d told Ashley Williams and Amina Waaber.

She closed her eyes and pushed the ghosts away. They never left, not really. But it was time to think about what to do next.

Looking for Saren was like looking for a single needle in a hay shed. Benezia was dead, but surely that would make the turian escalate, knowing he’d lost a vital ally. What was the Conduit? Why was it the key? Was it a weapon? The visions stuffed in her head still didn’t make sense, even knowing it had something to do with the Mu Relay. Mikhailovich had sent word that his task force had found something and to come back to the Citadel ASAP, and she was praying it was something that could fit together the puzzle pieces tumbling around inside her skull.

Some mornings she woke up babbling a language she’d never learnt and reaching for things or people no longer there. Thinking of places which had been dust for tens of thousands of years. Liara found it all fascinating, but in truth, it frightened Shepard down to her bones. She’d always had at least the knowledge of herself to go on, but it felt like lately that was slipping away. If she’d sacrificed even the sanctity of her own inner thoughts and memories, it needed to mean something.

Light glanced off the dull grey tabs. She rose and tucked them back into the drawer beside her Star of Terra, closed away in a box.

Shepard had just finished dressing when her door chimed. She did up the last button and opened it to see her XO standing there. Wulandri must’ve had the deck. “Morning, X.”

She’d made an effort to try and sound relaxed, in control, and was pleased to see that Pressly seemed to release a bit of tension in his stance. A bit. He clasped his hands behind his back. “Good morning,
ma’am. We’ve been hailed by the Council - top priority over the buoy. Something to do with Mikhailovich and the task force.”

Shepard tossed back the last of the coffee on her desk, raising an eyebrow. “They say what it was regarding?”

Mikhailovich wouldn’t like the Council butting into his business. He didn’t like Shepard or her extrajudicial powers outside of the chain of command; his reaction to alien politicians taking an interest in his task force would’ve been even nastier. Though, to be fair, Shepard had hardly endeared herself to him by dodging his attempts to inspect the Normandy. The last thing her crew needed was the stress and ceremony of a flag officer inspection. BuShips could wait for Mikhailovich’s opinion.

“No, ma’am.”

She set her cup down. “Comm room?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Commander Shepard.” The flickering forms of the Councillors coalesced in front of her. Shepard drew herself up to stand at ease, hands clasped behind her back as she nodded to Councillor Tevos.

“We have received information that may be pertinent to your mission to kill or capture Saren Arterius.”

“Any help you can provide would be greatly appreciated, ma’am.” She’d told Jules she was trying to come to terms with the whole Spectre thing.

“As you know, the Alliance task force you and Admiral Hackett set up had found a Prothean beacon on the planet of Eletania,” Tevos continued. Shepard hadn’t asked for permission to set up said task force before going to the Alliance. Hopefully she hadn’t been expected to. “The Special Tasks Group sent a company to the site to escort it back to a STG research facility.”

She sure hoped they intended to let her see it. She hadn’t anticipated the salarians getting involved. The Council had seemed content to let the Alliance take the brunt of the geth offensive.

“Spectres attract attention,” Valern added, “and Saren must know the Alliance is attempting to find Prothean relics to oppose him. The hope was that the STG could avoid such scrutiny. However, this was unfortunately not the case. The dig site was attacked as the STG arrived, several Alliance special operations troops killed and the beacon was taken.”

“Damnit,” Shepard growled to herself, fingers flexing.

“Yes, it’s an unfortunate development,” Sparatus conceded.

Unfortunate? We can’t afford to be losing fucking beacons to Saren!

“There is some good news, however. The officer in command of Jaesann Company, Captain Kirrahe, chose to follow the enemy force and appeared to have located a base of some sort on the planet of Virmire in the Hoc System. However, we lost contact with them shortly after.” Valern’s large, liquid eyes blinked. “Considering your mission, we believed that you might wish to investigate what happened to the STG unit.”

“With all due respect, Councillors, if an entire company of STG has gone silent, reconnaissance in force may be a better idea. My ground team is small and unsuited to large-scale combat without support.” The STG were field operatives, more spies than soldiers, but they were highly trained and
deadly in their way. Anything capable of silencing 72 or so STG operatives was not something she wanted to go up against with a ground force of 16 Marines and assorted aliens.

“Virmire lies within the borders of disputed space and within two Relay jumps from the nearest Hegemony system,” Sparatus said dismissively. “We cannot send in an invasion force blindly without provoking the Hegemon. Admiral Hackett is of the same mind.”

Always came back to the damned Terminus. She couldn’t even fault the caution. Turning your back to the Hegemony was a good way to get a knife in it. Already her bulletins included advisories of skirmishes on the borders, ‘pirates’ testing the Alliance’s weaknesses.

“We’re not asking you to take down an entire geth base alone. Investigate the STG unit and what they found, then send a message back to the Citadel and we will ensure you have adequate troops for what you require.” Tevos said soothingly. Shepard had the distinct impression she was being handled.

It wasn’t what she wanted, but it was something. A compromise she could live with. “Understood.”

“We will keep you advised of any further intelligence that may assist your mission.”

“Thank you.”

The holos flickered and dispersed. She hit the intercom. “All ground forces personnel to the briefing room.”

“Sometimes I’m sad that I can only eat nutripaste,” Tali mused, three fingers wrapped around her tube of purple-ish goo. “But then I see that, and I think that maybe nutripaste is not that bad.”

“What even is that?” questioned Garrus over his Hierarchy Army rations pack. Watching a turian eat was a revelation, Kaidan had come to understand. They - at least Garrus- seemed to prefer their meat in chucks that they could rip into little shreds with their sharp, needle-like teeth that they swallowed whole without chewing like a human. Vegetables were either torn or ground between his hard mouth plates. It made sense, he’d decided, considering turians had neither molars nor lips. It’d still been unnerving the first few times.

Kaidan prodded at his meat stuff. “You know, I’m not sure.”

He’d long stopped asking. That was for the best.

“So, Virmire,” Garrus said after tearing another bit of what almost could’ve been beef off.

“What do you think we will find there?” asked Liara, poking at her own food. The anxiety from before the Battle of Solcrum was missing. Hodgins’ wounding had begun what Benezia’s death had finished - or perhaps Feros had started it. Either way, each successive mission had chipped away at Liara’s nerves, hammered her into something harder. She was becoming a soldier, thanks to them. Kaidan wasn’t sure how he felt about that, even if her biotics were always a great help on missions.

“Knowing our luck? A battalion of geth.”

The door to Shepard’s cabin hissed open. The Commander nodded to them, a datapad in her hand, as she passed on a heading for the stairs up to CIC. It was there she ran into Williams, coming down from annoying Joker into eating. Kaidan watched as the two women paused and exchanged words hidden by the low thrum of the ship’s systems. Then Shepard smiled, touched Ashley’s shoulder, and brushed past her.
There was a connection there, drawn from experiences no one should go through. Entire units chewed to bits in hours. He never wanted to know what that felt like.

“Salarians, huh?” Ashley threw herself onto the bench beside him, leaning back with that cocky smirk on her face as she knocked their shoulders together companionably. “Guess we’re not as alone in this war as I’d thought.”

“The Council does want us to succeed,” Vakarian argued.

“Got a funny way of showing it,” she retorted.

“They gave us this intel,” Kaidan said mildly.

“Yeah. Shouldn’t complain too much.” She smothered a yawn with hand.

“You were late coming in last night,” he observed.

“Needed to clear my head a bit, is all.” Eden Prime’s weight was always there.

“The Commander seems better today,” Liara murmured, blue eyes darting to the stairs Shepard had disappeared up.

“You know the Skipper.” Ashley shrugged. “Nothing keeps her down for long.”

“I can’t imagine what that was like for her,” the asari said. “What Cerberus did…”

“We all have our crosses to bear,” Ashley murmured, frowning slightly. Kaidan bumped her again gently, silently telling her that he was there.

“Staff Sergeant Williams.” The frown on Steward Second Class Medra’s face as he loomed over them would’ve been more intimidating if the man wasn’t a human-sized teddy bear, and if the woman he was glaring at didn’t look like she could snap him like a twig.

“Yo, Kanu.”

“You haven’t eaten today. You should.”

“You know you have enough kids back on Arcturus without treating us like that too, right?”

“Food. Now.” He tugged in vain on her muscled arm.

“Jesus, okay okay. Chill out, dude.” She got to her feet with a dark scowl. “You’re worse than my ma, and she’s Brazilian.”

She came back with a plate piled with more hopefully-meat-stuff, and a glare still fixed on her face.

“I think Kanu, your mother, and my mother would get along,” Kaidan said with a grin, nudging her.

“Shit.” She speared a glutinous cube, wrinkling her nose. “We are never, ever introducing them.”

Charles Pressly stood on the captain’s podium, fists curled tight around the railing. With the ship at general quarters the CIC was almost crowded, every crew member attentive and focused at their stations. Behind him, Commander Shepard paced, her heavy boots thumping audibly against the
metal deck. When she went below, he would have the ship again. It was more common and more of a responsibility than he’d expected when he’d first boarded the Normandy as her navigator. Maybe he would get his own frigate or cruiser - when Shepard no longer needed him.

“Talk to me,” she said. “What’s it look like?”

Pressly dipped his eyes to the colourful riot of planetary scans in front of him. The ship sat in orbit, running silent, trying to run scans without giving themselves away. “Not great, ma’am.” The planet itself seemed ripe for colonisation or at least a resort. Rainforest, white beaches, the whole deal. But that didn’t account for the geth infestation. “We’ve found what I think is the salarian camp” - or rather Leading Combat Systems Operator Ferreira had - “but I’m counting at least two nasty ground to orbit AA towers on the ground and a shield over the base itself.”

Shepard clicked her tongue. “Neither AA towers nor KB generators on that scale are cheap.”

“Saren was a Spectre - I doubt many questioned when he wanted something. Either way, ma’am, if we take the Normandy down they’ll spot us and shoot us out of the sky.” Towers like that could put a sizeable hole in a cruiser, let alone a frigate.

“Could we take the guns out from orbit?”

“Soon as we fire a torpedo they’ll know we’re here.” He regretted that a lot. It would’ve been the easiest solution, one that didn’t put the Normandy ground forces in danger. All too often he just had to sit in orbit while they fought for their lives and his fingers itched to do something to help. But he was no Marine. His knees creaked, and he was a terrible shot after all.

“Getting low enough for a Mako drop would be dangerous,” Shepard surmised.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Can you get us to the appropriate altitude for a HAHCD jump?”

“I can do that,” Pressly said, relieved to have an answer for her that wasn’t no.

“Alright. That’s what we’ll do.” She nodded to herself. He could practically see the gears turning behind her eyes. “Alenko!”

The lieutenant appeared so quickly Pressly nearly jerked in surprise. Like Shepard, he was already armoured up, pistol on his hip and rifle on his back. His dark eyes were serious and alert. “Yes, ma’am?”

“We’ve got enemy AA present - one tower on the base, one further out. If we take this one” - Shepard’s arm lit up with her omnitool as she showed Alenko the positions of the AA towers on the planetary map - “that should leave a large enough gap in the AA network that we can get the ship down to the STG camp…here. But right now we can’t land or go low enough to drop the Mako.”

“HAHCD jump in, destroy the AA tower, rendezvous with the Normandy at the STG camp?” Alenko asked, in sync with their CO in a ways Pressly was almost jealous of.

“Exactly. It looks like the salarians are surrounded by geth patrols and outposts.”

“We’re going to run into contact and plenty of it, and without our IFV.”

“Most likely. I’d like you to lead the mission. I’ll leave team composition up to you, dependent on which of our aliens are qualified for jumps - and if we have thruster packs capable of slowing down
Wrex.” Shepard’s voice was dry.

“No problem, ma’am. Pressly, could I get detailed scans of the AO around the target tower? And possible landing zone locations.”

“Of course, Lieutenant,” Pressly replied. “I’ll send it to the briefing room.”

“Thanks, sir.”

“And LT?”

Kaidan paused. “Yeah?”

“Card game after this one?”

He smiled, a flash of white teeth. Handsome boy, Kaidan Alenko. Looked like he ought to be on a recruiting poster or in a HV show, and with a heroic enough personality to go along with it. Pressly was never going to introduce him to his daughter. “Looking forward to it, X.”

Two hours later he ordered the Normandy to dip slowly into Virmire’s atmosphere, sliding through the rattle of re-entry to the upper threshold the Marines were qualified to jump from. The CIC filled with a tense waiting. Would the AA towers engage LADAR randomly or if their suspicions were aroused, rendering the Normandy’s IES useless? Would they bite huge chunks out of the Normandy’s hull, leaving her bleeding coolant and shattering into metal shards?

Commander Shepard, at least, was calm, having returned to the bridge from seeing the Marines off. She was still in her combat gear, rifle a hard line across her chest. She resembled nothing more than a statue made of hard black and red planes, refusing to be buffeted by the waves of anxiety coming off her crew.

“Jumpmaster reporting all jumpers away,” reported Lieutenant Rodriguez.

“Get us outta here, XO,” Shepard ordered, staring hard at the readouts floating in orange before her face.

He gave the order. The Normandy hummed a different pitch as Joker revved her up and away. The ground team was a blinking blue icon on his tacnet. Colonel Pressly had been a soldier, first in the 82nd Airborne, UNAS Army, and then for the Alliance - right up until the end. Charles’ father had been the sort of man to understand why people liked to jump out of perfectly good starships. He would’ve liked Commander Shepard - and Sergeant Williams too for that matter. He did wonder what Colonel Pressly would have had to say about Alliance Marines jumping into combat alongside krogan and turians however.

He shook off the burst of memory and offered up a quick prayer for the safety of the Normandy’s ground forces. All of them, human and alien.

“The inlet is the only way in,” Alenko had said. “Only available LZ too.”

Garrus had never jumped into water before, the Hierarchy Army avoiding it for obvious reasons, but now he could add that to his new and wonderful life experiences while working for a Spectre. They’d come in at an angle, engaging their thruster packs well before they normally would for a HALCD jump. That allowed them to travel across the sparkling blue expanse of (terrifying) ocean
and land in a spray of water in the shallow inlet.

Shallow might’ve been an overstatement. He found himself pitched forward into the cold water as waves buffeted his shoulders and head, sand giving way beneath his weight. A lance of pure, gut-churning panic transfixed him through the stomach and drove the breath from his lungs. He forced it down, mandibles clicking. He had his hardsuit sealed. He was fine. He was fine. Just had to get his feet under him.

His head finally broke the surface of the water, and he struggled onto a sliver of white sand beach, gasping within the confines of his sealed helmet. One of the Marines had already gotten there before him, kneeling in the shallows as the waves splashed against his black carapace armour. Garrus’ HUD tagged him as Akmed Mohamed.

“Are you okay?” the human called over, voice buzzing through his helmet.

“Turians and water don’t mix,” he replied tightly. There was the slosh of water behind them, and he turned to see Waaberi and Ling approaching. Mohamed didn’t move from where he was on his knee, scanning their perimeter warily.

“2-6,” Waaberi pointed to herself. “2-1, 2-2,” she counted, pointing then at Ling and Mohamed. “2-3.” She gave Garrus a friendly smack on the arm. “Good. We are all here, and I haven’t lost any of my teammates between the Normandy and here. That would be embarrassing.”

“Netcall, this is Lance 5,” Kaidan’s voice echoed in Garrus’ helmet. “Comms check, over.”

“5, this is Lance 1. Roger, over.” Draven.

“5, this is Lance 2,” Waaberi checked her rifle over, “Roger, over.”

“5, this is Lance 3. Roger, over.” Dubyansky, on his first mission since Noveria and without his beloved Mako to boot.

“Net, this is 5. Roger, out.”

They moved out in their teams. Waaberi waved them into a wedge; the young Marine taking point and Garrus dropping back to the fourth man position. From here, he could use his sniper rifle to better effect and provide the team with longer range support. His feet sank deep into loose sand, sometimes up to his spurs, and every surface of his armour and gear was soon dripping with water and encrusted with sand and salt.

In a word, Garrus was thoroughly miserable.

The humans, on the other hand, seemed to be enjoying it. Waaberi and Ling unsealed their helmets and lifted off their face plates so they could breathe in the salty air and feel the brush of wind on their cheeks.

“Reminds me of home, though the ocean isn’t quite the right colour and our beaches don’t look like this,” said Waaberi.

“Where’s home?” Garrus asked.

“Xamar, back on Earth. I have not been home in quite some time. Maybe once we finish turning the geth into scrap metal.”

“I don’t like the beach,” Mohamed muttered. “Sand gets everywhere.”
“What do you like?” Waaberi questioned. Water lapped at her waist as she forged forward to the next sandbar.

The younger human considered this. “I like shooting geth.”

“I think we can all agree on that one.”

“It’s convenient that they have flashlights for heads,” Garrus mused. “It’s like a ‘shoot me’ sign.”

“Contact!” Teke called, his voice echoing across the bright blue water. Both teams leading immediately found cover or dove onto their bellies, Lance 3 rushing up from behind to join the skirmish line.

“And it’s not even your birthday, Akmed!” Waaberi said cheerily.

“Less sass, more shooting.” Williams splashed up beside Garrus, marksman rifle in hand.

“But that’s what we’re here for, Ash,” Garrus pointed out. “blowing things up, witty comments…”

“Don’t you start too,” she grumbled, as if she weren’t one of the worst offenders when it came to sarcasm in the field.

Three geth drones screamed around the corner, letting loose a trio of rockets to interrupt Ashley’s attempt to light one of them on fire with her stare alone. Waaberi dove out of the way of one - and into the water with a splash- the shrapnel deflecting harmlessly off Garrus’ shields. Across the inlet, he heard Wrex roar a challenge and there was a flash of blue that dashed one of the drones into the cliff face. A second sparked and died under the focused fire from Mohamed’s LMG.

Garrus breathed in and focused on the last drone through his scope, following its erratic movements with the reticle. He squeezed the trigger. The drone fell - with two rounds through its silvery casing.

Waaberi emerged , spluttering, from the water. She spat out salt water and raised her rifle. “Why the fuck did I unseal my suit? My under-armour is fucking soggy.”

“You tried to steal my kill.” Williams brushed past him to get everyone moving forward.

“I think you mean my kill,” Garrus shot back. “My round hit first.”

“Didn’t realise turians were fuckin’ blind.”

“Alright, Williams, you want to do this? We count our kills, decide who is the real pro Normandy sniper.”

“Loser buys drinks next time we’re in port.”

“Deal.”

“Aren’t you both professional snipers? Since it’s what you’re paid to do?” asked Waaberi. She was soundly ignored.

Lance continued pushing towards the AA tower, engaging geth patrols in flashes of gunfire and tech grenades and biotics. They were getting close when Alenko waved them in and then looked expectantly at Chou.

“My drones are detecting a large energy signature ahead, like an armature - only bigger. The scans suggest a mass accelerator with significant power increases over a regular armature.”
“I read in the intel bulletins that the 31st ABCT ran into what they designated a ‘Colossus.’”

Alenko’s voice was flat.

“And the damned thing destroyed one MBT and damaged another,” Williams said grimly.

“And we ain’t got no air support, artillery, or our own AFV.” Draven crossed out their first three best options for dealing with enemy armour. Water dripped down her visor. “Can we find an alternate route, sir?”

“Negative. Only way to the AA tower is through the Colossus.”

And if they couldn’t get to the AA tower, none of them were getting off Virmire. Garrus tapped the tech grenades in his webbing. “What about if we used Draven and Dubyansky’s grenade launchers to hit it with Overloads, take down its shields - and then Fredricks and Waaberi use their rocket launchers to take it down.”

Kaidan nodded. “Good idea Vakarian. And Wrex - when they hit it with the rockets, can you add a Warp field?”

Wrex rumbled an assent.

“Rest of you, concentrate on keeping the rest of the geth off us.” The lieutenant waited for everyone to nod their understanding. “Good. Let’s go.”

They charged forward and into the hiss and snap of geth bullets and the bone-chilling thrum of plasma sailing past to splatter against rock.

“Scatter! Don’t clump up!” Ashley shouted as the two of them and Dubyansky took cover behind a pile of rocks. The stone to Garrus’ back and his entire hardsuit seemed to hum as the Colossus’ attack struck in front of them. His breath came quick and fast. Don’t clump up so they couldn’t all be taken out at once.

“You got those tech grenades?” asked Dubyansky tersely. This close he could see the burly Marine’s eyes and the white in them.

He fumbled for his webbing, drew three and programmed them as Williams leant out of cover to unleash a burst of assault rifle fire on a geth platform pressing dangerously close to them. It fell with one of those awful shrieks, but then she was driven back as her shields sparked again and again and again.

“Fuck that Colossus,” she growled, slapping in a new heatsink.

Dubyansky took one of the grenades from him and loaded into the underslung grenade launcher on his Valkyrie. “I need covering fire!”

“My shields are down to 15%;” Ashley said apologetically. “I need a second to change batteries.”

“I’ll cover you.” Garrus leant out of cover and sighted down the nearest geth. His first burst sparked off the geth trooper’s shields. It warbled, flashlight turning in his direction. That’s right, look at me, not at Dubyansky. He shot again, and a round punched through its ‘neck,’ white conduit fluid spilling down its chest.

“Firing!” shouted Dubyansky as return fire ricocheted off Garrus’ kinetic barriers, the counter in his HUD steadily ticking down. The grenade launcher fired with a thunk and propelled the tech grenade in a gentle arc, to smack against the metal skin of the Colossus. The Overload charge went off,
lightning sheeting across it.

A shock trooper whirled, searching for the source. Garrus gunned it down. 10%.

5%. Another flash of light as a tech grenade launched by Draven went off.

His shields shattered around him. Williams’ hand curled in the back of his webbing and pulled him. He went sprawling into the sand. She didn’t spare a look for him but stepped forward to lay down more covering fire as Dubyansky shot off another grenade.

He reached for a spare shield battery and swapped them over, shoving the old one into a spare pocket to recharge. The flicker of blue around him was a comfort.

“Now!” shouted Alenko.

Two rockets leapt from Waaberi and Fredricks’ positions, streaking across his field of vision, shortly followed by the roiling orb of a Warp field. They smashed into the Colossus in quick succession with a cascade of sparks and bits of metal.

For a moment the huge, white-plated geth tottered on massive metal legs, sparks arcing between the edges of splintered armour and components, but then it collapsed with an electronic whine.

“Alright, Vakarian?” asked Williams.

“I’m good,” he raised his rifle, fired. The last geth platform slumped into the gentle lapping waves with his bullet right through its flashlight.

Fredricks was whooping in the background. “Take that, you fucking overgrown computer!”

“Alright!” Alenko shouted, cutting their celebrations short. “Perimeter around the tower. Waaberi, set some charges to bring it down.”

“Aye, sir!”

Shepard had her arms crossed, and her gaze was sharp-edged when she nodded to Ashley and Kaidan as they approached. The salarian camp was well hidden - each tent covered in fabbed camo netting and many of the guards only visible when they shifted in a shimmer of distortion. The salarian captain looked thin and fragile beside the Commander, like she could snap his neck with one hand. But Ash had heard a lot of rumours about the STG. You had to catch an STG operative to kill him, and she would bet that he had top of the line ECM, tech grenades, shielding, omnitool, and weapons.

She looked him over - the dull grey-green armour, the confident way he held himself. She’d never met STG before but his posture reminded her of a N7.

“What’s going on?”

Shepard scowled. “A fucking warzone is what. Kirrahe, this is Lieutenant Kaidan Alenko and Staff Sergeant Ashley Williams, two of my subordinates. This is Captain Kirrahe, the commanding officer of the STG company here.”

“To put it succinctly, Sergeant,” said Kirrahe, “your ship is grounded, I’ve lost about half my company ‘investigating’ this place, we’re outnumbered, the enemy is heavily fortified, and Saren is
likely planetside.”

She whistled. “So what, we do recon and call in the forces the Council promised us?”

Kirrahe and Shepard exchanged glances.

“Unfortunately,” the Commander said slowly, “it appears Saren is likely blocking communications. I had the Normandy attempt to call Hackett already, and we couldn’t get through.”

“And there’s worse,” Kirrahe continued. “Saren has been using this laboratory facility to breed an army of krogan.”

“How is that possible?” Wrex’s voice was a low, warning growl as he strode forward. He’d removed his bulky helmet, and his eyes gleamed hotly.

“It appears Saren has found a cure for the genophage.”

Damn. The genophage long predated humanity’s accession to the galactic stage. It had seemed one of those immutable facts. She glanced at Shepard. The other woman was studying Wrex intently.

“The geth are bad enough,” Ashley muttered. “Krogan as well? He’d roll us in a year or so, no doubt about it.” Geth production of warships, krogan numbers. The Alliance couldn’t stand alone against that.

“ Exactly my thoughts. This facility and its secrets must be destroyed before Saren can take his army to the stars - or the krogan clans find out about it.” Kirrahe blinked his large, liquid eyes.

“Destroyed?” Wrex fixed the salarian with a hard stare. “My people are dying - this cure could save them.”

Kirrahe drew himself up, fingers close to his heavy pistol. “If this cure leaves this planet, the krogan and Saren both will become unstoppable. I will not allow the same mistake to be made again.”

Wrex took one step forward - and only stopped when his shoulder bumped the smooth ceramic of Shepard’s armour. The Commander had stepped between an angry krogan and his quarry - and into reach of his hands, hands Ashley had seen snap necks like twigs and rip rachni apart. He levelled a thick finger at the salarian. “My people are not a mistake!”


He snarled in response and stomped off.

“He’s going to be a problem,” Kirrahe said flatly.

“I’ll deal with it.”

“Good. We have enough problems as it is. Meet me at the HQ tent once you’re done - we’ll need to discuss our plan of attack.”

“Damn. Wrex took that poorly,” Ash remarked.

“He looks like he’s going to blow a gasket.” Kaidan shot a worried glance in the direction of the krogan. The boom of the shotgun he was unloading into the water echoed across the encampment.

“I’ll go talk to him.” Shepard rubbed her face, looking weary for a moment.
“It wouldn’t hurt.” Ash considered this - considered what she’d seen Wrex do to people who’d pissed him off before and winced. “Well...it might actually. Do it carefully?”

“I’ve got it. But be ready, just in case.”

Wrex was a comrade. Something close to a friend. She’d eaten with him, fought beside him, cleaned their weapons together in silence. But if it came to him or the Commander?

Ashley patted her sidearm. “I’m always ready, Commander.”

She’d choose Shepard every time.

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**CODEX**

**Special Tasks Group Companies:** The operational troops of the STG belong to its ‘Infiltration Regiments’; the current number of regiments active is a closely guarded Union secret. Each Regiment consists of three battalions containing three companies. Each company has a, Operations Support Team, which includes the commander (usually a Major), the executive officer (usually a Captain) and the senior company operative, as well as intelligence, operations, communications and supply personnel.

Within each company are six Operations Teams, each specializing in a specific area of expertise. The majority of the time these teams go into the field independently and with a great deal of leeway in how they choose to accomplish their objectives, the OST mostly supplying missions and vital intelligence. Each team consists of 12 operatives, with the commander usually a captain or First Lieutenant and each operative having a specific function - though cross-training is common and encouraged. A typical team would include: an operations sergeant, an assistant operations sergeant, two weapons specialists, two engineers, two medics and two communications/signals specialists. This set up allows the Operations Team to split into two six-man elements if required.

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**CODEX**

**Normandy Callsigns:**

Overlord - SSV *Normandy*
Lance - Normandy Marine Detachment

Lance Actual/6: CDR E SHEPARD
Lance 5: SLT K ALENKO
Lance 7: SSGT A WILLIAMS

Lance 1 - Tactical Element Alpha/’The A Team’

Lance 1-6: SGT T DRAVEN
Lance 1-1: PFC A FREDRICKS
Lance 1-2: LCPL J TEKE
Lance 1-3: MSPC U WREX
Lance 1-4: MSPC L T’SONI

Lance 2 - Tactical Element Bravo

Lance 2-6: LCPL A WAABERI
Lance 2-1: HM3 X LING
Lance 2-2: PFC A MOHAMED
Lance 2-3: MSPC G VAKARIAN
Lance 2-4: MSPC T’ZORAH

Lance 3 - Fire Support Element/'FIST’

Lance 3-6: CPL A DUBYANSKY
Lance 3-1: LCPL N KI-TAE
Lance 3-2: LCPL L CHOU

Lance Victor: Mako

Chapter End Notes

Definitions:

BuShips: Bureau of Ships. One of the Navy’s largest materiel commands, responsible for engineering, building and supporting the Navy’s fleet of ships.

HAHCD: High Altitude, High Controlled Descent.
Shepard walked away from Wrex with her back straight, feigning nonchalance in front of their audience - Normandy crew and salarians both - and hiding the sudden burst of relief in her chest that left her knees unsteady.

For a moment, looking into the sharp ruby glare of Wrex’s eyes, she’d thought one of them was going to end up bleeding out into the white sand. Or both of them - if Wrex killed her first, her Marines would gun him down. Can you kill a friend? was not a question she’d wanted to answer, even as her finger balanced on the trigger.

But in the end, Wrex had listened to her and put down the shotgun. A man who’d been betrayed by his own father in a sacred place had trusted her with the fate of his people hanging in the balance.

She shook her head as she holstered her pistol at her hip. You’re really something, old man. What could Wrex do, if he overcame the deep, rotting despair he held within himself? And how much longer would he be content to follow?

“Thank you for resolving that…matter,” Kirrahe said, his eyes flicking to where Wrex was striding over to the Normandy’s ramp - and the resupply point her Chief Master-At-Arms had set up for the Marines there.

Shepard shrugged. “Let’s get to it, shall we?”

The STG captain led her into the low HQ tent, to a table covered in holos - imaging of the enemy base, scans, maps, intel of all shapes and sizes. STG’s trademark - the gathering of information. She’d done it herself a few times as a special operations team leader. But all it told her was that they were in trouble. She bent over, biting her lip as she took in the second anti-air tower, heavy machinegun emplacements, outposts on the approach, Kirrahe’s work in progress OPORD. She wanted a battalion, preferably with armour and artillery, to knock this place over.

Instead, she had half a STG company and a single MSOT, with no air support and one infantry fighting vehicle.

They were cornered, and the only choice was to come out snapping.

“Commander, this is my second in command and the commander of one of our teams, First Lieutenant Rentola.”

Rentola had a distinct displeased cast to his reddish-brown face and big, solemn eyes. She’d be unhappy if a single team showed up instead of a regiment in his place too, to be fair. She nodded to him respectfully regardless.

“Normally, Captain” - Shepard said softly, staring down at the blocky hologram of Saren’s base, her finger dipping through the orange lattice representing the perimeter wall - “I’d tell you where to shove your mission. We don’t have the men for it. Assaulting a heavily fortified base with a battered spec ops company with no artillery, air support or armour?"

As a general rule, Emilia Shepard disapproved of suicide missions. They were usually a symptom of desperation, stupidity, ill-preparedness or all three.

Kirrahe’s thin mouth was a line. “I am aware the odds are against us, Commander.”
If one of Shepard’s team leaders in the N7s had come to her with this plan for a training exercise, she would’ve kicked them out of their team leader billet so quickly they’d have whiplash.

“It’s the only option,” she admitted grudgingly. “What did you have in mind?”

“My company will provide a distraction, in the form of a frontal assault. We will split into three reinforced teams; Aeghor, Mannovai, and Jaëto. Aeghor will attack here” - a tap on his omnitool and a red arrow appeared, stabbing at one section of the wall - “and Mannovai will attack here. Jaëto will be reserve and reinforce the other teams as required. And I was thinking that you would form a fourth team - callsign ‘Shadow’ - to infiltrate the base through this maintenance tunnel. The way is guarded by some outposts, here, here, and here but I believe you should be able to deal with them or avoid contact as required. Our primary objectives will be to locate the beacon Saren’s forces stole, then set up your nuclear missile as a bomb…here, for maximum damage.”

The tramp of boots announced the arrival of her Marine Lieutenant and Staff Sergeant. Without taking her eyes off the tactical display, she waved a hand for them to come to her.

“Why don’t we just drop it from orbit? That’s what the damn thing’s designed for,” Ash asked. “Take out the AA Tower, get the fuck out, fire the missile, Saren kisses his turian ass goodbye.”

“Unfortunately the base is extremely well-fortified and equipped with shield generators,” Kirrahe replied, “It’s not guaranteed that a strike from orbit will destroy the facility. We’ve run the simulations.”

“Damn.” Ash shook her head and shot Shepard a look. “Ma’am, I’m just hearing Ellision on a loop in my head.”

Shepard could almost hear the grizzled old Gunny too. *Fire without maneuver is indecisive. Maneuver without fire is fatal.* Just with a few ‘fuckhead’ and ‘maggot’ nicknames thrown in.

“I think it’s…workable.” That was the best she could say about it. “But I have some changes I think we should make. I have a 81mm mortar on the ship and a IFV. My Marines will set the mortar up…here, behind your lines, so you have at least some preparatory fires. The Mako can use this ridgeline for cover and firing positions, then pick up the mortar team and rendezvous with your assault element when it’s time to evac.”

“That is acceptable,” the salarian said at last and added it to the tactical net.

“The assault element…” Kaidan shook his head, eyebrows furrowed in concern. “You’re going to get slaughtered.”

Rentola flinched. Kirrahe just nodded. “We’re tougher than we look, Lieutenant, but it’s true. I don’t expect many of us will make it out alive. The names of our teams - these were the first colonies the Salarian Union established. It will remind them of what we’re fighting for today, what’s worth dying for.”

There was certain set courage to the cast of his face. It was the expression of someone who knew they were marching themselves towards almost certain death, who didn’t necessarily want to die but had made peace with it - because that was what duty demanded. Shepard had been on the other end during the Blitz. What could one half-company of STG do against a heavily fortified base full of krogan and geth?

Well. What could one lightly armed Marine platoon on leave do against an invasion force?

Kirrahe hesitated, and Shepard raised an eyebrow. “That makes what I’m going to ask even more
difficult, Spectre Shepard. I need one of your men to accompany me and help coordinate.”

“You’ll need someone who understands Alliance comms protocols, especially if you’re calling in mortar fire,” she said tightly, fighting past her initial reaction of no fucking way.

“I volunteer, Commander.”

“Not so fast, LT-”

And then Alenko and Williams were bickering over who got to be a goddamn hero. Because of course they would. Because they were both fine, brave Marines. Because they’d never ask Draven or Waaberi or Dubyansky to do it.

“Enough,” she snapped, the word honed to a razor edge. Like it could shear away the foreboding sitting heavy in her gut, like a cold stone. She leveled her gaze at Williams. “Sergeant, you’ll go with the Captain.” She remembered Solcrum, and what Ashley had done there - how the younger woman balanced on that edge of bravery and recklessness - and her chest twisted tight. She put a hand on Ash’s shoulder, dug her fingers in even though she knew she wouldn’t feel it. “No heroics, understood? You’re there to coordinate and call the mortar strikes, that’s it.”

“Aye aye, Commander.”

“Alenko,” she said quietly. If he was upset at her decision, he was too professional to show it. “I was thinking Draven for mortar, Dubyansky for the victor, Waaberi for Shadow and then bomb security.”

“Sounds good to me, ma’am,” he agreed.

She shot a glance back at Kirrahe. “Alright. Running over this one last time. Jaesann Company assaults the west of the facility, with fire support from our mortar and infantry fighting vehicle, and destroys the anti-aircraft tower. Simultaneously, Shadow infiltrates from the east via the maintenance tunnel, locates the beacon before heading to clear the bomb site. Once the AA tower is down, all teams will rendezvous at the bomb site to defend it while the nuke is set up. When the bomb is set, we will exfil via the Normandy, and once at a safe distance, detonate the nuclear device remotely. Mission chain of command is myself, then Captain Kirrahe, then Lieutenant Alenko, then Lieutenant Rentola. Everyone clear?”

A grim round of nods were exchanged.

“It’s shit,” Ashley said bluntly, “but sounds like our best chance to get off this rock, Skipper.”

“If you’ll excuse me, Commander, I need to prepare my men.” Kirrahe drew in a breath, steeling himself. Asking your men to die was never easy to do.

Shepard turned away.

“Don’t do anything stupid while I’m gone, LT. You too, Commander.” Uncharacteristic nerves from the sergeant, but they were all friends here, and Williams couldn’t confide in her Marines or the salarians.

“We’ll be fine, you’ll see.”

Shepard bit back a joking response - her, do something stupid? Mostly because all the times she’d Charged things probably did look stupid to someone without telekinetic powers. And it would be strange, going into battle without Ash watching her back. It’d only been months, but it felt like they’d known each other and worked together for much longer.
“Yeah, I just...good luck.”

“Is there something you need to say, Sarn’t?” she asked instead of the jokes.

“It’s just weird, going with another unit. I’ve gotten used to working with you.” Williams’ dark eyes flicked from the ground to Shepard to Alenko. “All of you. It’s been an honour serving with you both. You’re the best officers I know.”

Shepard wanted to tell her to knock the ‘it’s been an honour’ crap off. People only said that shit when they thought they might not get another chance. “We’ll see you on the other side. It doesn’t matter we’re operating in different units today” - she gestured between the three of them- “we’re a team. No matter what. Watch your backs, remember to duck and fight like hell.”

“Aye aye, Commander.”

The rocket impacted the rocks to the front of Aeghor team’s position, bursting into deadly shards of shrapnel that sliced through the face and neck of the nearest salarian. He slumped into the water which quickly clouded over green, his fingers still wrapped around his rifle. Staff Sergeant Ashley Williams grit her teeth as the last bits of sharp metal dinged off the rock she’d taken cover behind, her head ringing.

“Covering fire!” shouted the officer in charge of the reinforced STG team - First Lieutenant Sindrile, a wiry dull brown salarian who now darted in between bits of cover organizing his men. They hadn’t had much time for anything but quick introductions before the assault had begun. She knew next to nothing about the men she was now fighting alongside. They moved in ways she didn’t expect, pulled all sorts of weird tech tricks out of their webbing, used hand signals she didn’t know. She’d had the brief thought that maybe Alenko should’ve gone with - he was the sort of guy who’d have stuff like STG hand signals from some joint training exercise tucked away in that big brain of his.

In the end, she’d decided to stick near the captain and deal with comms with Shadow and their fire support.

She popped up from cover, bracing her rifle against the rock. A haze of white smoke drifted across the left of her field of vision as the salarians popped smoke grenades to recover their wounded, a ragged barrage of rifle fire coming from their skirmish line. She ignored that - ignored everything but finding the source of their ills up on the wall of the compound. The red of her reticle hovered over the hard plating of a geth rocket trooper that had been keeping the Mako - and its cannon - at bay. There was just the rifle in her hands, her target on the walls and the line in between them. She fired three bursts in rapid succession, stitching a line up its torso to its flashlight head. The geth’s shields shattered and broke, and her final burst ripped its whole head off.

“Nice shot, Sergeant,” Kirrahe said from behind her and Ash let herself smile, mollified after feeling a bit useless.

“Cowboy, this is Eagle. AT is down, say again, AT is down. You are clear to move up, over.”

“Copy that Eagle. Cowboy moving up, over.” Hearing Dubyansky’s voice was almost comforting.

“Roger. Eagle out.” Ash ducked again as geth fire from crashed against her shields. The salarians had retrieved two men injured in the blast and pulled them into a ditch, somewhat protected from the snapping of bullets, but the dead soldier still floated limply where he’d fallen. The Union military tended to be pragmatic about that. She tore her eyes away, wincing as a round hissed over her head, her heart pounding against her sternum. “Sir, we can’t stay here. Cowboy’s moving up, and I’ll call
in some mortar fire onto the walls.”

The west of the facility faced onto the beach front, with only dunes and rock for cover, the salarians scattered across it. If they tried moving forward, they’d be without any cover at all and right under the combined fire of the geth platoon currently pounding them. If she glanced back and to the left, she could see the jagged ridgeline the Mako was using as cover. It was a shitty place to fight. Like the rest of the decisions they’d had to make today, it was the best they could do.

“Good idea!” Kirrahe shouted back. “See if we can force them off the walls or to take cover; then my infiltrators will lay the breaching charges.”

“Roger.” She blinked at the wall through her HUD, omnitool glowing orange on her wrist. Back in the day, the forward observer would need a range-finder or a laser designator, a compass, and/or other systems. Now her helmet did most of the work with a few taps on her omnitool, reading range and direction from her position and zooming in on a lightly armoured krogan that was roaring in between blasts from the LMG he carried like it was a rifle. Also helping her was that Draven already knew her position thanks to the tactical net. “Big Iron, this is Eagle. Fire mission, fire for effect, polar, over.”

“Eagle, Big Iron, fire for effect, polar, out.”

“Direction 1854, distance 595 metres over.”

“Direction 1854, distance 595 metres out.” Draven read it back.

“Infantry platoon on wall, danger close, over.”

“Infantry platoon on wall, danger close, out.” A pause, then Draven’s voice again. “Message to observer. HE in effect, three rounds, over.”

“HE in effect, three rounds, out.”

In the distance, she heard the thunk thunk thunk of a mortar firing. The krogan was still roaring and raking the front of Aeghor with the machinegun. A salarian shrieked as a bullet smashed through shields and armour and into his shoulder. Another bastard further down the wall was suppressing Mannovai with a goddamned heavy machinegun.

“Shot, over.”

“Shot, out.” She squeezed off a burst at the krogan. The rounds sparked off his limited shields, and the muzzle of the LMG swung in her direction. The first bullets cascaded over her before she heard the full-throated roar of the krogan’s gun, her shield alarm shrieking under the barrage and little flecks of stone shattering upwards to draw scored lines across her armour. She threw herself down with a quick, “Fuck!”

If Ash raised her head, she’d get it shot off. The last time she’d been pinned down had been on Eden Prime, and the experience hadn’t improved.

“Splash, over.”

“Splash, out!”

Five seconds later and the LMG cut out to the sweet, sweet sound of explosions and clatter of shrapnel. Ash popped up and grinned tightly to herself at the sight. One of the guard towers had crumbled, and a bunch of the krogan and geth that’d been giving them grief has disappeared.
survivors were further discouraged when a screaming HE shell from the Mako’s cannon tore a fair sized chunk out of the top of the wall and then began laying down a withering cone of suppressing fire.

Thanks, Dubyansky.

“Move, move, move!” Sindrile waved two salarians forward. Their cloaks flickered around them and swallowed their figures as they darted forward and towards the wall to lay the explosives. She’d expected the geth to recover more quickly, but they seemed almost disorientated and sluggish. She ducked down and took the time to mark out two pre-designated targets for the mortar.

“Jaesann Actual, this is Shadow, we’ve destroyed a geth communications array, over.”

Well. That explained that. Shepard’s voice in her ear was soothing despite the all business tone. It felt wrong, not being with the skipper and LT.

“Thanks for the help, over.”

“No problem. We'll see what else we can do. Shadow out.”

The salarian saboteurs flickered back into being within their lines. Forty seconds later her ears rang as their explosives detonated. The wall groaned with the sound of splintering metal and began to collapse, filling the air with dust. When it cleared, there was a large, jagged gap in the base perimeter.

“Yeah! Get some!”

Sindrile glanced at her, puzzled. “Get some what?”

She shrugged it off. “Captain Kirrahe, sir! I’ll call in the suppression fires and then we can push!”

“Do it!”

She called in the strikes, puffs of dust and smoke floating above the wrecked wall where they hit.

“Advance!”

They bounded up in teams towards the gap - first Aeghor, than Mannovai moving past them while they provided cover fire. And then they were within the wire. Now they were making some progress. Her heart was still pounding like a drum.

“Primes moving on our left flank!” shouted a salarian.

Of fucking course - She dove for the nearest bit of cover in the rubble of the guard tower, followed by the snarling whine of two pulse cannons. She wasn’t quite quick enough. The first projectile stuck her shields and broke them, a stubborn remnant of the round impacting her shoulder. Pain burst in the joint, but her fall luckily carried her out of the path of the follow up shots.

Damn, that was gonna bruise.

“Sindrile’s down!” the shout was shrill. Ash rolled onto her back and cast a quick eye around. Sindrile was indeed dead on the ground - and missing half his damned head. What had he said before the mission? That his clutch wouldn’t recognise him by the time he got back to Sur’Kesh? Now they never would. She thrust the thought away, hard. She couldn’t think about that right now.

“Launch tech grenades, then hit them with the rockets!” Kirrahe’s voice cut through the burgeoning panic of his men. “Hold the line!”
Williams was stuck swapping her shield batteries over, shoving the depleted one into a pocket to recharge as the Primes died under the combined assault of a variety of tech grenades and rockets.

“Williams!” the captain called, “Still alive?”

“Aye, sir!”

“Good to hear. Jaeto, move up on the right, get some of the pressure of Mannovai.”

The salarians were impressive, Ashley had to admit it. In addition to their rifle and MG fire, the soldiers of Jaeto team hit the geth again and again with flashes of overload and sabotage charges, along with blasts of fire and ice. Armoured plating and krogan flesh burnt away or was frozen solid. She did what she could to help, finding frozen geth with her scope and hammering away at them until they cracked away.

“Williams,” Kirrahe slid into cover beside her.

“Yeah?” She continued shooting.

“I need to get over to Mannovai,” he said, “their team leader is down - wounded badly. I need you to take charge of Aeghor with Sindrile dead.”

She blinked at him. “Sir?”

“Most of my officers and senior operatives are dead,” he said flatly. “These men are wavering. You are not.”

Any unit could break. “Understood sir.”

Kirrahe paused. She knew he wanted to tell her to keep his men safe, bring them through this. But instead, he just stood up and ran, a staccato of gunfire surrounding him.

She glanced up and saw a flicker of onrushing movement in the sky. Shit! “Incoming aircraft! Everyone down now! Down!”

Not for the first time that day and probably not the last, Ashley Williams threw herself into the sand hard, grunting at the impact. Two geth fliers flashed overhead in streaks of metal. The fliers were larger, heavily armoured versions of the geth drones, armed with nasty mass accelerator cannons and rockets. The lead one strafed Aeghor with its accelerator cannon, the thuds of the huge rounds smacking into the ground rattling her teeth. When she came up, she heard the shrieking of two soldiers wounded by the attack.

She shouted at the nearest soldiers, “You two, get the wounded behind the skirmish line! Everyone else, covering fire!”

There wasn’t much they could actually do for them except drag them to the medics and into cover. Not like they could call a fucking MEDEVAC. Williams followed her own order, rising to her knees and opening fire. Her second burst caught a krogan warrior in his pale, fleshy neck and he dropped like a sack of potatoes. She shot him again in the face for good measure - krogan had a nasty habit of getting back up after you thought you’d killed them.

As soon as the wounded had been dragged back, she dropped down for a moment to look at Mannovai and Jaeto’s positions, see if that second flier had struck them. She breathed a silent sigh of relief when she saw that they hadn’t. If they kept taking these sorts of casualties they might not have enough goddamned bodies to throw at the tower.
'Aeghor, Jaesann Actual, provide cover fire while Mannovai pushes forward, over.’” Kirrahe’s voice was clipped. If they got caught in the open, those fucking fliers would rip them to shreds. But they couldn’t stay here either.

“Copy that, Jaesann, over. Alright guys, cover fire for Mannovai!” The combined firepower of a battered STG team plus one SA Marine started up again. Ashley wondered idly, shooting a geth platform in the ‘chest,’ if her ears would ever stop ringing after this.

Then her comm line crackled. “Eagle, this is Big Iron, over.”

“Big Iron, Eagle, send, over.”

“That fuckin’ flier hit Cowboy. I can see the victor burnin’ from here, over.” There was a hard line of tension through Draven’s voice.

“Shit, shit, shit,” Ash hissed to herself and looked over her shoulder. She could see it - the ominous plume of dark smoke billowing up from the ridgeline. Chou and Dubyansky and Nick were up there. She keyed her comm. “Roger. Dismantle the mortar and move to Cowboy’s location to search for survivors. Once you have, rendezvous with Aeghor, over.”

“Wilco. Big Iron out.”

She let out some of her frustration and anger by shooting down two geth attempting to flank them. “Fucking fucks! Shit.” She switched channels, “Shadow, Eagle. Cowboy is down. I’ve sent Big Iron to the site to ascertain the status of Cowboy personnel and then they’ll rendezvous with me, over.”

A pause. When she spoke, Shepard’s tone was cool and sharp. The Commander was pissed. “Roger that, Eagle. We’ll see if we can do something about those fliers while they’re grounded for replenishment, over.”

“That’d be fucking fantastic. Eagle out.”

God, she wished Shepard was here.

“Stack up,” Shepard ordered, “Wrex, you’re on point.”

Wrex shouldered his way forward, Graal spike thrower in hand. The Commander was angry, he could almost smell it rolling off her in red waves. Three of her krannt were likely dead, and Shepard was taking it personally - and taking it out on the geth with flashes of savage biotic power. Good. Anger could be a powerful catalyst in battle if you weren’t a whelp losing his head. He doubted Shepard would. He let his own rage flood his veins, fill his mouth with copper and his chest with fire.

Saren would make the krogan slaves. Mockeries of themselves. A tool to be used yet again by the hand of the unworthy.

He was looking forward to the coming slaughter, yearned for it with twitching fingers. The approach had been all sneaking around, taking out geth simultaneously and then sabotaging their outposts. A few grenades aimed at fuel tanks and Waaberí’s IMAW had taken care of the grounded geth aircraft. Now though, it was room to room fighting. His favourite. He hoped to the Void that Saren Arterius was here; Shepard could get her information out of him and then Wrex would tear his mandibles off with his bare hands.

“Roger.”

“Wrex.”

The door slid quietly open. The grenades were tossed in, going off one after the other. Wrex snarled and charged in, shotgun raised. Three of the five guards in the room had been killed by the frag grenade. He fired a shot that split open the chest of one and smashed the other into the wall with a biotic field.

“Clear,” Waaberi announced, twitching at the sight of the bloodied smear of a researcher. Wrex ignored her; the scientist had a gun, which made him fair game even by the restrictive ‘rules of engagement’ Shepard insisted upon.

“Spread out,” Shepard ordered. “I want the beacon, I want whatever data on the research being done here and I want any STG POWs we can find.”

Wrex couldn’t care less about salarian prisoners, but for the moment that was all they found. Gibbering idiots for the most part that charged them with outstretched hands, just to be gunned down. The one that did make it close to him clawed uselessly at his armour plates, and Wrex caved in his skull with the butt of his shotgun with contemptuous ease.

“This is a waste of time, Shepard,” he growled at the human.

“Gimme a sec,” she said, but not to him. To yet another babbling lunatic, this one a deep red salarian in the remnants of an STG uniform.

“Let me out, let me out,” he chanted, hands claws against the barrier of his cell. “The voices, can you hear them? Nails in my skull. Incessant whispering. Must resist. Can barely hear my thoughts. Let me out!”

“Commander,” Liara said uneasily, shuddering, “I do not think all is well with this man.”

Give the asari a trophy for the obvious. Wrex growled softly under his breath, staring daggers at the doorway. He could smell it. The stench of krogan. The stench of those who had helped to nearly deliver the krogan to Saren’s dominance. The red song of the blood rage pulsed in the edges of his vision, promising to drown his enemies in their own blood. But he resisted. Urdnot Wrex controlled his rage, it did not control him.

“Let me out,” Private Menos Avot wailed, thumping his skull against the barrier.

“Spirits,” hissed Garrus.

“He’s indoctrinated,” Shepard said flatly. “Saren must be researching indoctrination, and he used the STG POWs as subjects.”

“But why?” Garrus shook his head. “He’s the one using it!”

“My mother,” Liara said softly, “said that the power came Saren’s flagship and that it is not geth technology. Perhaps the ship is Reaper technology and Saren himself does not fully understand it.”

“And he’s trying to.” Shepard stared unblinkingly at Avot for a long moment before she pulled out her sidearm and hit the latch on the cell. He immediately leapt for her throat, fingers curled in claws. He got two steps before she shot him in the face and he slid to the ground missing part of his skull.

“Commander!” Alenko burst out, horrified. Liara just stared at her, blue eyes wide.
“His mind was gone, and he tried to kill your warlord,” Wrex said dismissively.

“But—”

“Let’s move,” Shepard said calmly, returning her pistol to its holster.

Now, at least, they were moving in the right direction, the smell of krogan and lab getting stronger. The door slid open, the alarms still silent. The room was broad and filled with white desks, research stations and six scientists of varying species. One wall had several gently whirring containment fields of some sort, holding the twisted blue-black forms of human husks. The other had a dozen cloning vats.

They were studying indoctrination and the genophage both.

“Intruders!” shouted one of the scientists, an asari.

“Where are the guards? Where is Saren?” The deep rumble of a krogan’s voice made Wrex bare his teeth and raise his shotgun.

“I think everyone wants to know that one,” Garrus quipped as he opened fire. A salarian going for a pistol slid to the ground, several holes in his chest.

Wrex charged. He reached the asari first, her hands glowing with biotic fields to rip and tear, but he blocked with his own biotics. He seized her by the soft throat and crushed.

“Who dares disturb my work?”

“Battlemaster Urdnot Wrex,” he snarled. “And I will stop this monstrosity.” Wrex slammed a biotic field into the traitor’s chest. He staggered back, but he was still on his feet.

“I am Doctor Fendot Droyas, and I am saving our people—”

The room filled with a mist of blood as another biotic field flew from Alenko’s hand and detonated Wrex’s Warp. Droyas staggered, bloodied, and then fell as two bursts of assault fire took him under the throat.

Wrex whirled on Lance Corporal Waaberi, who took a step backward but her eyes were defiant and her grip on her black rifle was sure. The whelp had spirit, he’d give her that. “That was my kill!”

“That’s enough, Wrex,” Shepard cut him off. “I’m not risking the mission so you can get the satisfaction of killing someone personally. We have to keep moving.”

They stared at each other for a long, hard moment, and then Wrex snarled and spun on his heel, stomping towards the door out of the lab.

“Kill the husks and gather whatever intel is easily accessible,” Shepard told her people, resting her hand on top of her holstered pistol. Gunshots rang out behind Wrex like claps of thunder.

Ashley’s mouth was dry as a desert, sweat flooding down the sides of her face under her helmet. There was green blood on her armour. At least the three times she’d been hit so far had struck only her armour.

Of course, the downside of that was that several of her ceramic plates were cracked with patches that had turned to dust.
They were nearly to the tower. That was all that mattered. She couldn’t look back, not at the salarians that had died so far, not at the smoke heralding the destruction of the Normandy’s IFV.

Her fingers were numb as she slid another heatsink home. For every geth platform or krogan soldiers she and her team killed, three seemed to arrive. They’d pushed further into the base slowly, painstakingly, every metre gained with blood, but the tight terrain of block silver buildings and raised platforms kept funneling them right into the defenders.

“Friendlies coming in!” Draven’s voice was the sweetest song she’d heard.

“Draven! Over here!” Relief flooded through her when she saw Dubyansky dive into cover beside a salarian, followed by little puffs of dirt raised by a geth’s rifle. It just as quickly receded when she saw that Chou and Jaz were carrying a stretcher between them.

A clap of gunfire forced them to drop it, Jaz throwing himself over it. When the Lance Corporal got back up, his front was wet and bright red.

“The fuck happened?” Ashley demanded as she threw herself over. His friends had taken off most of the front of Nick Ki-tae’s armour and torn his undersuit open, leaving his chest bare and pale to the sky. There was a lot of blood, staunched here and there by white patches of medigel.

“He got fucked up when they hit the Mako,” Draven explained, breathing heavily. “He was in the turret and - well, they got him out before the fuckin’ thing cooked off, but he’s hurt real bad. I had to bring him with us.”

It wasn’t like there was a casualty collection point or aid station they could send him to.

“You stop the bleeding?”

Their fucking corpsman was with Shepard.

“Yeah, got medigel on all the injuries we could see, but he’s lost a lotta blood.”

“Get on the line with the salarians,” she ordered. Draven nodded and dashed off in a low crouch.

“Medic!”

The thin, green salarian medic slid into cover beside her. Was his name Kello? Tallo? Fuck, she should know his name, damnit. He immediately started looking Ki-tae over with a medscanner.

Ash took Nick’s hand and squeezed, “Nick? Can you hear me, man?”

When she released the squeeze, his hand stayed white with the imprint of her fingers. His face was pale and the turn of his head languid. “Hey, Staff Sarn’t.”

“How you doing?”

“Got shot by a fuckin’ AT round,” he said matter of factly. “That’s fucked up, Staff Sergeant.”

“Yeah, man, it is a bit. You know you already got a Purple Heart for this tour, right?”

He chuckled weakly.

Zallo leant back, rummaging through his kit bag. “Tachycardia, hypotension…delayed capillary refill. In a normal operation, would recommend immediate medical evacuation but…” he shook his head. “Staff Sergeant, I will need you to remove the armour on his left arm. All of it.”
There was a bit of shrapnel in his right arm, smothered by medigel.

She shifted to that side of the Lance Corporal and began tugging it all off, down to the clammy skin.

“I ever tell you I don’t like fuckin’ needles?” Nick asked as the salarian withdrew one from his pack.

“I must insert IV,” the salarian replied. “Staff Sergeant, see if you can retrieve his helmet mask and start his oxygen supply.”

His helmet was resting on the stretcher, but his armour had been left behind in the rush to get everyone to her position - including his webbing in which he’d left his breather. She swore softly and then pulled out her own breather, fitting it into his helmet.

“You’re doing great, man,” she said, easing an arm around his neck so she could fit his helmet over his head and seal it, tapping on her omnitool to start the flow of oxygen. Nick didn’t respond.

“Aeghor, looks like they’re about to push on your side,” Kirrahe warned over the comms.

“Go,” Zallo said, not looking up from where he was sliding the needle home. “I have him.”

Williams rose to her feet and ran back towards the ceaseless gunfire.

“Don’t shoot, don’t shoot!”

“Come out with your hands raised,” Shepard snapped, raising her rifle. The asari edged out slowly, hands above her head. Her eyes darted frantically between the armoured figures filling the room, her breathing rapid puffs of air.

“Please, I just want to get out of here,” the asari whimpered.

“Who are you?” she demanded. All the others had attacked, even unarmed. Gunning everyone down in the labs had left a sour taste in her mouth.

“Doctor Rana Thanoptis. I was brought here to study the ship, Sovereign.” Her eyes darted to the unwavering muzzle pointed at her chest. “It emits some kind of signal. Saren uses it to control his followers. Eventually, everyone around it is affected - not just the test subjects! Like a whisper in the back of your head, twisting your thoughts so that you do things without knowing why, until one day you lose the ability to think at all.”

“And Saren is afraid.” Shepard clenched her jaw. The bastard had unleashed a technology he couldn’t entirely control.

“Yes, I think so,” she nodded, “I think he’s concerned it’s affecting him. It’s a degenerative condition; by the time the symptoms are clear and obvious, it’s usually too late. He was most interested in the early stages of indoctrination and if it could be halted or reversed.”

“Can it?” Liara asked, swallowing. She was likely thinking of her mother and the bullet that had ended her torment.

Thanoptis slowly shook her head. “No. We were never able to stop it.”

“Give us your research papers,” Shepard dictated, moving around her. “Move slowly.”

“I can do one better, I can help you. Saren has a private lab through that door. I have the security codes, I can get you in.”
“Hand it over.” She took the datacard and handed it off to Waaberi, who moved towards the door with Mohamed.

“It works,” the Marine called back.

“Are we good? Can I go?” Thanoptis’ anxious eyes darted between them.

“No. You’re coming with me.”

“Commander,” Alenko took a step forward. “Battle is no place for a civilian.”

“E-exactly!”

Her jaw clenched. The LT was upset she’d shot the STG private, and she couldn’t entirely blame him. But either way, she was going to be responsible for Avot’s death - at least this way she’d remember it. “I need more information on indoctrination and it looks like she’s the only surviving expert on it. And” - she shot Thanoptis a tight, vicious smile - “your other option is trying to outrun a nuke.”

“W-what?”

“Waaberi, keep her safe, but if she tries to run or does anything hostile, shoot her.”

The asari squeaked - and cut off as Waaberi stepped closer, her dark eyes intent.

“If the beacon is anywhere,” Liara stepped closer to Shepard, hand brushing her elbow, “it’ll likely be in Saren’s lab.”

“Agreed. Let’s move.”

Saren’s lab was two stories of open space, except for a platform jutting out, below which rested something more familiar than Shepard cared for. The beacon hummed softly, like it was whispering words to her just beyond hearing, emitting a glow like green light through fog.

“Shepard, it’s entirely intact!” Liara’s voice was faint with awe.

She took one step towards it and then another, remembering mind-ripping agony as her brain was forcibly shoved open and expanded beyond human experience. Her heart throbbed painfully. Just one more step. There was no time to try to retrieve it and Kirrahe’s men, her Marines, they were dying out there. Maybe next time she could just volunteer to get shot. She stepped forward. If it did tear her mind to shred this time, at least Alenko was here to take over the mission.

The beacon seized her. The vice tightened around her skull, her chest, her very thoughts until they felt like they split right open and the beacon flooded into her.

Help us. HELP US.

Metal like a disease, knitting with flesh. Dark claws from the sky-

Gunny Shehu screaming, screaming. The acid bites through the ceramic and into skin and muscle and bone. He bubbles. He bubbles and burns away.

Gods live in the dark places of the galaxy. They are hungry. They came for us, and they will come for you. They will blot out the stars and devour your worlds.

Richardson calls her ‘LT’ through bleeding lips as she holds him to her chest. His eyes are blue.
Glowing blue. His fingers tighten around her throat. They tighten, they tighten. The bones of her neck crack and snap like dry twigs.

*There is no escape. Nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. They are coming they are coming THEY ARE COMING-*

Shepard was on her knees, gasping for breath, vision flashing. She couldn’t breathe, she couldn’t breathe-

“Commander!” Alenko put his arm around her shoulders, his hand grabbing onto her webbing as he helped her sit up. “You’re hyperventilating, okay? You’re okay. Cup your hands around your mouth, just like that - yes, just like that.”

She breathed.

Several minutes later she dropped her still trembling hands. “Sorry.”

"It's alright. At least you’re conscious this time, ma’am.”

“Yeah. Help me up.” She grabbed his arm and hauled herself onto her feet, head throbbing. “Let’s get moving.”

Shepard felt shaky, and she had the start of what promised to be a truly awful migraine, but she was conscious. She was alive. She had the beacon information. That was all that mattered.

“Uh, Commander?” Garrus called. “There’s a comm array here and...there’s a transmission coming in.”

“What?” Shepard turned. The space beyond the jutting platform filled with red, red, red light, towering above them.

*Black claws from the sky, tearing whole cities, whole planets apart.*

“What the…” Alenko breathed beside her.

“You are not Saren.”

Ashley ducked down as above her cut the whine of a geth pulse rifle, close enough to trigger her shields. Her HUD alarm shrieked yet again, but she ignored it in favour of pulling the lever on her rifle. The heatsink shot out - and into the hand she had cupped beneath the ejection port with a sizzle of melting paint. She quickly stuffed into a pocket, hoping the damn thing wouldn’t manage to set her webbing on fire.

Heatsinks were sort of reusable. If you gave them a bit to cool down, they could be recycled, albeit with degraded efficiency, decreasing the amount of shots you could get out of a single one. But with the amount of ammunition they were burning through, she had the feeling she’d every shot she could get out of them.

The AA tower rose above them, boasting that nasty cannon that’d tear her ship apart if they didn’t get to it.

Unfortunately, getting to the damned thing was turning out to be *complicated*. Mannovai team was combat ineffective, most of its operatives dead or dying, forcing Kirrahe to commit Jaeto fully. The only reason Aeghor was still effective was the reinforcements in the forms of the *Normandy* Marines.
“Jam!” shouted Jaz, pressing his back into the concrete wall they were using as cover. He began wrestling with the LMG, trying to clear it.

Ash popped up to cover for him, shooting down a hopper trying to snipe at their flank.

“Eagle, this is Shadow.” there was a pained terseness to Shepard’s voice and Ashley shoved the flare of concern away hard. “We need that AA tower down, over.”

“Shadow, Eagle, we’re in heavy contact. We try moving forward, and we’ll get cut to pieces, over,” Ashley shot back.

“The dreadnought just entered the system.” Shepard’s voice was...apologetic? Taut with it. “If it shows up before we’re ready to evac, we’re done. Take down that AA Tower, no matter the cost. Over.”

Ashley closed her eyes, listening to the thud and snap of gunfire, the whistling of shrapnel. “Roger that, over.”

“Shadow, out.”

There was a lot she wanted to say to Shepard. ‘Out’ was a shitty way to have to say goodbye to...whatever Shepard was to her, after all. But the mission came first. She’d always known her life might be the sacrifice required one day.

Shepard was right. They were running out of time. Nick Ki-tae was running out of time.

“We move forward, we die, boss,” Draven told her calmly. She’d been shot in the arm, blood crusting on her armour, but as soon as Jaz had shoved some medigel in there, she’d gotten back up.

“I know.”

“You have a rocket launcher!” one of the salarian sergeants called to her, Sergeant Yokan who bore his own medigel patches.

“I only have anti-tank rockets. And I’m down to one!” The whites of Fredricks’ eyes were visible.

“If you hit the struts holding the gun itself up, it could weaken it, bring the whole top of it down.”

“Maybe.”

“Only sure bet is the explosives,” Yokan agreed, “but that can be our Plan B.”

“Fredricks, can you do it?” Ash asked. It was a difficult shot, without the help of the anti-tank guidance systems of his launcher.

The PFC licked his chapped his lips. “I...yes, Staff Sergeant.”

“Alright. Jaz, Yokan, with me. We’ll push forward a bit, give Freddie some cover fire and distract the geth. Ready?” When both men nodded, she surged to her feet. “Go!”

They ran forward, through the storm. Just a handful of metres, bullets coming down around them like rain. She took a last step, bringing up the rear - and something hit her hard in the thigh. She swore as her leg folded underneath her, and she tumbled into the sand and rubble.

“Staff Sergeant!” Jaz moved to come back.
“No!” she shouted, waving him off. “Stay there! Cover Freddie!”

She looked down. A chunk had been torn out of inner left thigh by a bullet, and she clamped her hands down, hissing. Bright red blood spurted between her fingers and splashed on her blue-black armour. Pain burst through her, like she’d been stabbed in the leg with a poker fresh from a fire, radiating from her hip down to her knee.

That’s not good. The thought was cool and calm. She’d always wondered how she’d react if she got shot on the battlefield. Properly shot, not just hit in the armour. She heard the full-throated roar of Jaz’s LMG start up, joined by the pop-pop-pop of Yokan’s advanced little carbine, and grinned through the red-hot burn in her leg.

Above her flashed the last of Fredrick’s rockets as she did her best to tug the damaged plating off and fasten the tourniquet every Marine carried above her wound. The rocket hit the tower in a splintering of masonry and the shrieking of metal. For a moment she held her breath, and then with a groan, the gun fell.

She lifted one bloody hand to key her comm. “Shadow, this is Eagle. AA Tower is down. Say again, AA Tower is down, over.”

“Shadow moving to the breeding vats. Get your arses there, over.”

“Copy that. Eagle out.”

The geth were pulling back a bit after that, and there was a brief cessation in gunfire. Draven darted forward and seized Ashley by her webbing, dragging her back to where the medic was dealing with Aeghor’s seriously wounded, including Nick.

Zallo knelt over her. “Nicked femoral artery.”

“Yeah,” she said hoarsely. “Slap some medigel on it already. I’m out.”

He opened a tube with one hand, pressing down firmly on the wound. Her blood was bright red against the muted green of his armour. She hissed as he pushed the medigel into her wound. She spared a moment to thank Sirta Foundation. Years past, a femoral artery injury was likely to kill you quickly unless someone continually applied pressure to your injury. Medigel could control bleeding with its sealing and clotting properties much more easily.

And the anaesthetic eased the pain a bit.

“You are very calm.” Zallo blinked his large eyes at her. “do you require morphine?”

“Nah. Save it for the others.” With a grimace, she sat up. “I’m good. Outta my way.”

“But.”

She slowly and cautiously got to her feet, head spinning, leg weak. “Draven, Yokan. We need to get to the rendezvous.”

The two sergeants, human and salarian, exchanged glances. “Yes. About that.”

“Yokan’s drone spotted another geth platoon moving in,” Draven said grimly. “They’re between us and the rendezvous.”

Of fucking course they are.”
Armed Forces of the Salarian Union: Like the asari, the Salarian Union tends to favour the deployment of small, elite special forces units over conventional units. Unlike the Republics, the Union prefers complete, crippling, pre-emptive strikes - to end a war before it begins. As a result, the Armed Forces of the Salarian Union rely heavily on real-time, accurate strategic intelligence; those who failed to ensure their intel was correct and suffered the consequences are used as cautionary tales to the budding salarian military officer or agent.

The more conventional of the salarian branches of service are the Union Army and the Union Navy, though both focus heavily on mobility and strike capability. Unlike the Systems Alliance or the Hierarchy, there is less focus on regulation and standard issue equipment; it is common for salarian personnel to heavily modify their equipment and use experimental technology in the field.

The spearhead of the Union’s military forces is the Special Tasks Group, a military organisation that a human may see as a combination of special forces and intelligence agents. The STG deploys regularly and often into places that the Council has no official presence, destroying threats before they fully materialise.

This can be seen as a deterrent - if you plot against the Union they will find out and most likely burn down your house.

However, the Armed Forces of the Salarian Union have some strategic weaknesses. Salarian military forces can tend towards over networking and overconfidence. Salarian leaders can fall into the trap of believing they can’t be tricked and can control all facets of their military operations - something that was proved very wrong by certain cunning warlords in the Krogan Rebellions. They are also highly technologically dependent, and as any soldier knows, any tech can break - especially experimental tech.

The lack of focus on regulations around equipment and material can lead to breakdowns in logistics over long deployments - in fact, the Union tends to rely on Hierarchy logistical capacity when operating outside their own territory.

In addition, the nature of salarian politics means that changes in policy, theory, and direction are common, rapid and unpredictable.
“Fuck! Freddie’s down!”

Bullets hissed overhead, around them, thick and heavy like rain in a storm. It was all that the STG troopers and Marines could do to not be overrun. Moving forward was impossible. This was going to be how it ended. Part of Ashley had known that morning that it was the end of the line.

She flicked a glance over at where Jaz had screamed, punctuated by bursts from the carbine he’d borrowed from one of the dead salarians. His hand was bloody and red; Yokan had taken the LMG from him when he’d been hit. There was a crack in her helmet visor, and she couldn’t remember when it’d happened. She couldn’t remember when she’d been hit again either - only that her shoulder was on fire and blood was trickling, warm and wet, down her back.

PFC Fredricks was lying face down, rifle beside him, and he wasn’t moving.

There was no time to think about it. The geth were pressing again, and without them keeping up sustained fire they’d be overrun. She snarled, gunning down a geth that crept too far out of cover.

She couldn't think about any of it. Freddie, Nick. Her sisters. Her ma getting a knock on the door. There was only the rifle in her hands and the next target.

“I’m not dead! I’m not dead!” Fredricks sat back up. “Fuck, I got shot in the fuckin’ face!”

Williams stole another glance in between firing. His visor was cracked down the middle, and there was a trickle of blood down the side of his face from a laceration, but he was breathing, talking, and his skull was free of holes.

“You’re alright, man!” she called to him. “Get back on the line!”

“I can’t.” He shook his head, blue eyes wide as he wrapped his arms around his knees.

“Yes, you can,” she insisted, “we need you, okay? We need you. We need everyone fighting if we’re gonna get out of this.”

“I got shot in the face.” He flinched beneath a crackle of rounds, his breathing coming in pants. “I got shot in the fuckin’ face. I’ll die. We’re all going to die.”

Frustration snapped deep in Ashley’s gut. Her heart was a thrum in her ears as she ducked down, changing her shield batteries over with trembling hands. She wasn’t Shepard. She couldn’t ask someone to walk off a cliff and get them to thank her for it.

“I swear to God, Freddie, you will get up and fight, or I’ll shoot you my damned self!”

Where entreaties had failed, her rough tone seemed to cut through the shroud of panic that’d fallen over the younger Marine. He swore, a hint of hysteria corroding the words, and then he crawled to his knees, scrabbling for his rifle.

Fredricks shouted a formless noise of rage or fear or both, in time with the first two round burst from his rifle.
God help her, she didn’t care. He could hate her so long as he fought.

“Eagle, Shadow. The bomb is nearly set. Where are you? Get to the rendezvous now, over!”

Her lips were dry when she licked them. Part of her had known, in the salarian camp. Maybe she should’ve said something to Shepard - but what? Even if she wanted a Marine with an unimpressive career, foot in mouth syndrome and a cursed family name, her honour meant she could never say anything back. “Negative. The geth have us pinned down at the AA tower! We’ve taken heavy casualties.”

I have a rendezvous with Death
At some disputed barricade,
When Spring comes back with rustling shade
And apple-blossoms fill the air—
I have a rendezvous with Death
When Spring brings back blue days and fair.

There were handfuls of Aeghor and Jaeto still moving. Mannovai had ceased to exist. All she could see at their position were lumps of unmoving bodies. She hoped to God Kirrahe was with Jaeto.

It may be he shall take my hand
And lead me into his dark land
And close my eyes and quench my breath—
It may be I shall pass him still.
I have a rendezvous with Death
On some scarred slope of battered hill,
When Spring comes round again this year
And the first meadow-flowers appear.

“We’ll never make the rendezvous in time! We’ll hold them as long as we can - set the bomb and get the fuck outta here, over!” A strange calm stole over her.

Ashley Williams was going to die and she was not afraid.

God knows ’twere better to be deep
Pillowed in silk and scented down,
Where love throbs out in blissful sleep,
 Pulse nigh to pulse, and breath to breath,
Where hushed awakenings are dear...
But I’ve a rendezvous with Death
At midnight in some flaming town,
When Spring trips north again this year,
And I to my pledged word am true,
I shall not fail that rendezvous.

She hoped her grandfather and father were watching. She hoped they were proud.

Staff Lieutenant Kaidan Alenko splashed through the water that came up to his mid-calf, towards the lowering ramp of the SSV *Normandy*. The sleek, dark painted frigate had managed to squeeze into a space that he was honestly kind of surprised she’d fit. But Joker and Pressly had found a way. He met three salarian explosive experts who’d stayed on the *Normandy* to help Wulandri and her people turn one of the ship’s nuclear missiles into a bomb as they came down the ramp.
The Lieutenant herself followed them down, a pensive look splashed across her face and the *Normandy'*s three Masters-At-Arms flanking her, carrying HK-M7s. She was dressed in a white Navy hardsuit: thin ceramic plates over the important parts, rank stencilled on her shoulders, helmet over her head. The Navy hardsuits were lighter, more flexible, with a larger visor that allowed for a better field of view.

They could be used in a firefight in a pinch, but their primary purpose was in case of decompression or dor EVA walks.

One of the Masters-At-Arms broke off, taking Thanoptis off Waaberi’s hands and then marching her aboard the ship - to be ensconced in the brig for now.

“Guns,” he greeted.

“Hey, Alenko. So, uh, those spooks did most of the work. Once it’s on the ground, it’s not really my forte, yes? But it’s ready to go. You’ll just need to set up the trigger mechanism. Just remember to set it for remote detonation and not on a timer.”

“I don’t think I’ll mix it up,” Kaidan said with a kind smile.

Wulandri smiled uneasily. “Yes, this is more your specialty than mine after all.”

He elbowed her on the shoulder. “Hey, Sergeant?”

“Yes?” Sergeant Sewak Dizori, the leader of the salarians, looked up. His face was a pale green under his visor, marked here and there with faint creases and lines.

“We’ll just put it over there, near the geothermal sink.” When the nuke went off, it would cause apocalyptic damage to this part of Virmire.

“Of course.” The three salarians and two Masters-At-Arms began guiding it over, water sloshing around them.

The warhead was surprisingly small for a thing of such horrific destructive power.

“Listen, Alenko…”

He glanced back at the other officer. She shifted from foot to foot, fingers brushing her holstered SMG.

“I heard that it’s been pretty bad down here.”

Kaidan’s eyes were unwillingly drawn to the side of his HUD, where the biosigns of his MSOT flickered. Ashley, Gung Ho, Freddie, Nick, Jaz...they all had suit breach warnings now.

“It’s been a tough fight,” he said, “but it’s nearly over.”

Williams and Kirrahe were supposed to be here already. There was a stone heavy in his gut, and it only sunk lower when Shepard splashed over, a scowl fixed on her face. Her comm was crackling.

“-get the fuck outta here, over!” Williams’ voice was a low, pained growl. Her biosign indicator blinked at him. His mouth was dry.

Shepard ignored it, her mouth a hard line. “Alenko, Williams and Kirrahe are pinned down at the Tower. From what little she said, they’re under heavy suppressive fire, and they’re close to immobile due to casualties. It’s too hot to send in the *Normandy* alone. Not without infantry to pull security.”
Wulandri swallowed. Alenko crossed his arms. “I need ten minutes to set the bomb up for detonation anyway, ma’am.”

Shepard’s eyes met his, and after a moment she nodded. “Wulandri, tell Pressly and Joker to get this bird in the air. I’ll radio in the new LZ and then we’ll grab the bomb team on the way back. And...tell the X we’ll need triage set up.”

“Aye, ma’am,” Guns said and slapped Kaidan’s shoulder in passing as she ran back up the ramp, followed by Rogers and Choe.

Shepard turned to him, their shoulders brushing in a rub of ceramic. “I’ll leave Mohamed here. That leaves you a team of four with the salarians for security.”

“Sounds good to me ma’am.”

“Shadow to Eagle. Alenko needs time to set up the bomb, so we’ll come to you, clear out the LZ so the Normandy can pick you up then grab him on our way out, over.”

“...Understood, over.”

“I’m coming, Ashley,” she said, her tone gentling. “Just hang on a little longer, over.”

“Roger that.”

“I’ll see you soon, Kaidan.” Shepard’s gaze touched on him, a moment of warmth seeping through the iron hold she had on her emotions.

“Go get our guys, ma’am.”

She nodded and turned, followed by the rest of their team. Waaberi gave him a jaunty wave, smacking Mohamed on the back of the helmet. The younger Marine grumbled at her back, moving to kneel in the rushing water.

Kaidan bent over the bomb and got to work. In the distance, gunfire rumbled.

“I’m dry.” Yokan’s voice was a thin thread of sound, and the salarian sergeant grabbed for his sidearm as he let the LMG fall. His arm was true despite the thick green dripping down his arm, and a drone fell into the water with a large splash. Williams could see the flash of white bone amongst the tattered wreck the geth had made of his left leg. Yokan wasn’t going anywhere without help, and there was little of it to be found. All she’d been able to do for him was fasten a tourniquet above his knee - they were out of medigel now.

She could hear faintly Kirrahe ordering the remains of Jaessann Company to fall back, set up a defence near the LZ so the Normandy could pull them out as quickly as possible. But Aeghor wasn’t going anywhere. They were long past ‘combat ineffective’ even though the geth hadn’t seemed to get the message.

She’d long stopped looking at the warnings her HUD was showing.

Ashley raised her rifle and pulled the trigger. The barrel was so hot that the blood she’d somehow got onto it sizzled and stunk.

It was all she could do to keep fighting, keep dashing in between positions, convincing or haranguing the Marines and STG soldiers into not giving up.
They just had to hold on a little longer. Shepard was coming. Shepard always managed to get them through. Ashley wasn’t afraid but she didn’t really want to die either - and she definitely didn’t want her Marines to.

Overhead she heard the rumble of a ship’s thrusters and looked up. Light glanced off the silvery insectoid hide of a geth dropship. Cold, icy fingers wrapped around her chest and squeezed. Those ships could carry whole platoons of geth, and Aeghor was hanging on by the skin of their teeth as it was. They couldn’t take much more of this.

Shepard had seen the ship too. “Overlord, Shadow, can you take that dropship out, over?”

“Negative - not without bringing it down on top of you, over.” Pressly’s voice crackled with frustration.

The ship arced gracefully away from them and -

No, no, no. “Heads up, you’ve got a geth dropship inbound, LT!”

“They’re already here!” Had she ever heard Alenko - calm, dependable Alenko - so tense? “There’s geth pouring out all over the bomb site!”

Mohamed’s LMG was a scream in Alenko’s ears as the younger Marine laid down suppressive fire, punctuated by the crack of the salarians’ rifles. Geth were crawling all over the area - Primes spearheading the assault, hoppers bouncing around and trying to drive them out of cover.

With one hand he fumbled for a tech grenade, flipping the trigger and then flinging it as hard as he could. Electricity burst over the plated metal of the lead Prime. It stumbled and fell when Specialist Fesan Saenok shot it through the face.

“Can you hold them off?”

He turned back to the detonator. His fingers flew as he programmed. “There’s too many of them!”

As he spoke, Saenok screamed, high and shrill, his chest plate blown open by a geth plasma cannon. “I’m setting the nuke on a timer! Get Williams and get the hell of here!”

“What the fuck are you doing, Alenko?” The snarl in Shepard’s voice was audible. It was the tone she had when someone really pissed her off - and it was the first time it’d been levelled at him. It didn’t matter. She could write him up, but he’d never read the reprimand.

“I’m making sure this bomb goes off no matter what! It’s done! Get Williams and get out of here.”

Maybe this was his. Square, blocky numbers popped up in a violent red on his HUD, counting down the seconds Kaidan Alenko still had to live.

Four minutes. They just had to hold that long.

“Screw that-”

He wished he had time to tell Ashley that she was the closest thing he had to a best friend. That was she was going to do amazing things.

The clatter of the Typhoon light machinegun cut out abruptly. Mohamed. He looked over, firing his
assault rifle blindly. The young Lance Corporal was slumped in the water, blood surrounding him like a crimson cloud. A geth round had caught him in the neck, cutting through the ballistic weave and tearing his throat open.

His biosign flattened into a thin line.

“-radio Joker and get him to meet us at the AA Tower.”

“But - aye aye Commander. I…”

“It’s the right choice, and you know it, Ash.” Ashley Williams and the rest of his team would live. Dying for his fellow Marines was something he could live with - for the next three and a half minutes at least.

“Stay alive, and I’ll be there as soon as the others are on the ship.” There was an order in the sharpness of Shepard’s words.

Alenko smiled. Bullets ricocheted off the bomb casing. Specialist Gural went down, clutching his side.

“I think we both know that’s not going to happen, Commander.”

Something punched into Kaidan’s left hip. He fell, gasping and spluttering, the back of his head smacking into concrete so hard he heard the casing of his helmet crack. A bullet had caught him just above his thigh plating - blood pulsed from the resulting ruin.

Kaidan bared his teeth against the pain and dragged himself up, pulling his cracked helmet off. The wind was cool on his sweaty face, the sunlight on his cheeks. His rifle was gone, lost somewhere in the water - he reached for his sidearm instead.

He squeezed the trigger.

Three minutes.

“Fuck that! Just hang on!”

Shepard was not a woman to give in to defeat, but even she couldn’t fudge the numbers this time.

Shepard ran, shotgun in her hands, boots pounding against concrete. Fuck Sovereign, fuck Saren, fuck Virmire, fuck it all - all of it -

Lance Corporal Akmed Mohamed was dead according to her HUD. The kid was fucking 20.

They rounded the corner and nearly ran straight into a krogan with a dull grey crest. He roared, lowered his head, and charged.

Shepard dove out of the way, anger flickering electric in her blood. When she came up she pulled the trigger on her shotgun, smashing a crater into the krogan’s right leg. His roar turned from one of rage to one of surprised pain as orange blood splattered the walkway.

Wrex snarled and struck out with a ball of cerulean energy. It smacked squarely into the enemy krogan’s chest and sent him flailing over the railing to fall to the ground once the field lost its strength.

“Keep pushing!” Shepard shouted. “We’re running out of time!”
Two and a half minutes.

“\textit{Overlord to Shadow - we can pick up Jaeto now, but the fire near Williams is too intense, over.}”

“Do it! I’ll let you know when to come in for the rest of us, over!”

Running. Her breath coming fast and harsh. The gate slid open before her and revealed the bloody scene at the AA Tower - a handful of salarians and Marines cowering beneath the withering fire of an enemy that had numbers and elevation on them.

“Friendlies flanking from the left!” Her throat burned. Biotic energy snapped and hissed around her in angry tendrils of blue. “Shift fire!”

The tattered gunfire coming from Aeghor moved in direction to the right of them.

“Charging!”

“Commander-” Anxiety in Liara’s voice, but she stepped and was gone.

Shepard smashed into the nearest geth, throwing three platforms back and off their feet, ending their warbling with blasts of her shotgun - and in one case a biotically assisted stomp. The next enemy was a Prime - she Charged again, stumbling it, but then it crashed the butt of its pulse cannon into the side of her head.

Bright light streaked white across her vision. She stumbled to her knees, shotgun falling from suddenly nerveless fingers.

And then Wrex was there. He bowled the Prime over and set upon it like a starving lion on a gazelle, disassembling it with precisely aimed flechettes from his Spike Thrower.

“Alive, Shepard?” he called to her.

“Yeah...yeah.” She struggled back onto her feet and back into it. The geth hadn’t expected the sudden, savage flanking attack, and were beginning to falter and fall back. The pressure on Aeghor was relieved.

She vaulted down into the water and started jogging towards her people, reaching for her comm. They didn’t have much time left, and she had another Marine to rescue.

“Shepard, look out!”

She turned. A speck from the sky rushed closer, ever closer. Light glinted off armour, a rifle, a metal arm.

“Saren! You motherfucker!”

Ashley Williams slumped in the water, gentle waves lapping over her thighs, the bright seal of medigel clamped over her wound. The brackish water had turned a sullen reddish pink around her, blood dripping down her back. Her mouth was dry, her rifle warped from cyclic firing and hanging down over her chest.

Jaz was next to her, holding his hand to his chest. A bullet had ripped the delicate bone and tendons apart, two fingers hanging on by slivers of flesh and gristle.

Her fingers were tight around her pistol. She wouldn’t drop it while she lived.
There’d been a momentary lull where she’d told Dubyansky, Chou, Fredricks, and three salarians to run for the evac point - but someone had to stay behind to give them cover fire. Draven, Yokan, and Jaz had volunteered - though the salarian sergeant wasn’t going anywhere anyway. Not unless someone carried him.

65 seconds.

Ashley’s head lolled. The world hazed over.

“Commander!” Jaz was fumbling for the carbine he’d taken from Yokan.

She labourishly looked around. Metal face, metal arm, metal hand wrapped around Emilia’s throat, lifting her bodily from the ground. Squeezing the life from her.

Saren.


Her arm trembled with the effort to raise the sidearm, but her aim was true. Saren’s barrier sparked three times. He glanced towards her as if irritated by a mosquito. She shot him again, just out of pique. Fucker, you will pay attention to me. Shepard took the opportunity and lashed out with a biotic fist, staggering him back so he had to drop her.

He hissed, sharp teeth exposed, cold blue eyes stabbing down at the weakened Spectre below. He went for his rifle.

Ashley pulled the trigger again but there was a warning beep - the heatsink was full. She patted at her webbing - put she was empty. Saren’s claws curled around his rifle.

The air split with a warning siren. Forty seconds.

Saren glanced around - at Ashley, at Shepard, at the battered remnants of both his forces and theirs - and then he growled, rushing for his hovercraft.

Shepard staggered towards her.

Ashley’s chest was heavy and cold.

Kaidan…

“Move, move, move! Grab them and let’s get out! We’re out of time!” Shepard was shouting. She grabbed Ashley’s good arm and heaved her over her shoulders. As she rose back to her feet, Ashley groaned, visor clacking against Shepard’s armoured back.

“No,” she tried to tell her. Put me down and get Kaidan.

Shepard ignored her and began to jog as fast as she could while carrying her. Darkness rose steadily, clouding her vision over. Pain was a red tide washing over her. Consciousness slipped right through her fingers.

No.

The Normandy roared up, up, up, seeking the safety of vacuum beyond Virmire’s atmosphere. There, she’d be safe. Kaidan’s men would be safe. Ashley and Shepard would be safe.
Kaidan Alenko wouldn’t be. The last flame of foolish hope flickered out.

“Kaidan, I’m sorry.” Shepard’s voice was thick.

“I’m not,” he told her, “I don’t regret a thing.”

Dizori fell, the top of his skull missing and his eyes wide with shock. It was strange. You always knew that soldiers died. Sometimes they were your friends. Staring down the last twenty seconds of his life, Kaidan realised he’d never quite expected it to be him.

“Tell my parents that. Tell them I wasn’t afraid.”

He turned off the comm line. Shepard would stay with him until the end, but it was done. She needed to focus on those she could still save.

What was that prayer? Ashley would know.

_Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death—_

He jerked as another round struck home, shattering through his rib cage. He fell against the bomb, fingers scrabbling at its smooth exterior. He drew in a rattling, wet breath that tasted of ash.

Ten seconds.

His body was giving up on him, betraying him, but his face was warm with sunlight.

Five.

Staff Lieutenant Kaidan Alenko raised his face to the sun.

The countdown hit zero.

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CODEX

**Hardsuit Onboard Medical Suites:** The modern combat hardsuit contains a multitude of systems run by its onboard computer - the Heads Up Display, communications, scanners, vision filters via the visor, biosign monitors, a transponder and the medical suite. The hardsuit itself can be used as a battlefield medicine tool.

Certain parts of the hardsuit can be made rigid, stabilising the neck or back after a spinal cord injury or making a temporary splint for a fractured bone. This feature can be initialised by the user or medical personnel; in fact, some soldiers are known to use it to stabilise injured lower joints to continue on mission.

Some hardsuits will automatically dispense medigel and/or medicinal drugs, such as stimulants or painkillers. Alliance regulations prohibit the automatic injection of drugs due to the potential of adverse reactions and overdose; most drugs must be administered by a trained medical professional such as a corpsman, medic or doctor.

In addition, breather helmets can be used to administer supplemental oxygen from the hardsuit’s supply. Supplemental oxygen is particularly vital in the treatment of hypovolemia, as it increases the efficiency of the patient’s remaining blood volume.

While a higher percentage of casualties are KIAs (due to the increased lethality of mass effect weaponry when compared to chemically propelled bullets), those who do initially survive their
trauma are more likely than ever to survive their injuries.

Chapter End Notes

what's this? A sort of regular update?

I'm trying to get back into a weekly update schedule, I swear. Honestly part of it was knowing I had to go to Virmire and not wanting to. So that's over with now.

Poem is 'I Have a Rendezvous with Death' by Alan Seeger
Chaos reigned as the *Normandy* fled Virmire, leaving only nuclear fire behind. But death had crept aboard to stalk the decks of the ship and refused to leave no matter how fast she flew. Shepard walked out of the packed elevator, Ashley Williams a dead weight across her aching shoulders, her chest tight and throat sore from Saren’s talons squeezing. No Marine left behind, but she’d left two of her own on that fucking planet.

Because of fucking *numbers*.

She was followed off the elevators by stretcher bearers. The whole of Deck 2 soon stunk of metallic blood and fear as the wounded were rushed from the Kennel into the mess hall. The cooks and supply clerks had been press-ganged by a sharply-focused Chakwas into being stretcher-bearers. Greico and Sukarno rushed a pale, limp Nick Ki-tae towards the medbay and the Normandy’s small operating room. The rest of the wounded were being carried into the mess hall and laid on tables or the floor; they’d have to survive with the help of Ling and the ship’s first aid trained personnel for now. The corpsman crouched near a bloodied salarian whose leg had been mangled by geth weaponry, applying medigel below a tourniquet, black eyebrows drawn together in focus.

Shepard carefully laid Williams onto one of the stretchers and stripped out of her gauntlets and bracers. She snapped on sterile gloves over clean hands, glancing over at Steward Dreyer. He was young and baby-faced - still in his first year of naval service - and he was pale with horror, a first aid kit held limply in his fingers. She couldn’t find it in herself to comfort him. Not when her nerves were rubbed raw and Ashley’s life very much hung in the balance. Somewhere deep inside her was a little voice, pleading *not her, not her too*.

“Dreyer.” Shepard’s tone was hard, and he blinked at her, as she tugged Ashley’s chest plate and armoured collar free, pockmarked and turned to dust by the fighting. She had to find where she was still bleeding from. “Get me out some medigel and the red tape.” *There*. Blood pulsing from her shoulder. She accepted a tube of medigel from Dreyer’s trembling fingers and twisted the top off, squirting it onto the wound and then pressing down as it hardened. “Now, on her other arm, put a length of that tape. Good.”

The tape was bright red against the dull blue-grey of Ashley’s armour. A quick visual reference for the medical staff - *immediate*. Shepard started filling out the triage card, trying to keep her thoughts clear and calm. A lake without waves.

She discarded the bloody gloves and passed the wounded Marine off to one of the surviving salarian medics, who started shouting for an oxygen mask.

Shepard was the *Normandy’s* captain. Casualties didn’t change that. She took the stairs up to CIC two at a time. The bridge buzzed with a low, anxious activity.

“Commander.” Pressly’s eyes widened at the sight of her and stuck on the ugly bruising on her throat. “We’ve cleared the Relay - I jumped us into the Attican Beta since that was the closest system with a friendly battlegroup around. That dreadnought was coming after us pretty hard.”

*You exist because we allow it, and you will end because we demand it.*

No, not just a ship. A thing of ancient, malicious cunning. A hungry monster from the dark of space.

She shivered in the cool air of the CIC, ice running through her veins. How did you stop something
She looked at Pressly. “Stand the ship down to Condition Two and set a course for the Citadel. Have ambulances meet us at the docks - and some MPs from Mikhailovich’s taskforce. We’ve got a prisoner the eggheads will want to talk to.”

“Aye, ma’am.”

“I want all the unwounded ground team members and yourself as well in the briefing room in half an hour. I’ll debrief Williams and Draven later.” If Williams came through surgery alright.

“I’ll put it over the 1MC.”

“Thanks.” She turned to go.

“Ma’am?” Pressly’s voice was low and hesitant.

She stopped. “Yeah?”

“I’m sorry about Alenko and Mohamed.”

She closed her eyes for a brief moment, shoulders slumping. “Yeah. Me too.”

Marines died. That was part of the job. She’d sent men and women to their deaths before. She would again. But sometimes she got tired of her friends dying.

Shepard stopped by her cabin to change into her fatigues, and the medbay to get an update. Her head and throat ached.

Chakwas was still focused, but there was a grim cast to her mouth as she laid a pale white sheet over Nick Ki-tae’s young, slack face while Sherazi prepped a still unconscious Williams for surgery. “We did what we could, Commander, but he was in irreversible hypovolemic shock by the time he was brought on board, and went into cardiac arrest.”

“I know you did everything you could, Chakwas. I’ll come by later to see how Williams and -” What was the seriously wounded salarian’s name? “Sergeant Yokan’s surgeries went.”

“You need medical treatment too, Commander. I want to run some scans after that beacon vision - and the concussion.”

“Once you’re through with the worst off, I’ll let you do whatever scans you’d like,” she promised, and with that, she escaped. There was no way she’d stick around to get checked out for some bruises and a concussion when some of Chakwas’ patients had lost limbs.

Shepard rubbed her throat as she walked into the comms room, wincing at the tender bruising. Fucking arsehole. Finding Saren had been her duty - now it was personal. He’d killed three of her men. If he hadn’t shown up -

She’d never stopped believing she’d get back to Kaidan in time until that fucker had shown up. He’d stolen the time she’d needed.

She threw herself into her chair as the others filed in after her brief and frustrating call with the Council, crossing her arms. The empty seats stared at her accusingly. “We’re heading back to the Citadel, where we’ll offload our wounded to the hospitals, and Kirrahe and I will meet with the Council. They’re deeply concerned by the fact that Saren was breeding krogan without their
knowledge.”

Wrex gave a low, rumbling half-growl, half-chuckle.

“More than that, as some of you know, ‘Sovereign’ spoke to me on Virmire. The dreadnought isn’t merely a ship of Reaper design - it is a Reaper. It appears to be some sort of AI construct on a genocidal cycle of behaviour - it confirmed that the Reapers were responsible for the destruction of the Protheans and it appears to have hostile intent towards our own civilisation. Saren believes that by cooperating with it, he can save some of the galaxy, but I don’t believe he’s in control.”

Pressly swallowed audibly.

She sighed. “Obviously, this changes the scope of our mission somewhat. While finding and eliminating Saren remains our top priority, we need to know more about Sovereign and the Reapers.”

“What does the Council think?” asked Tali.

“They’re less than convinced of the threat,” she said dryly.

“Of course.” Garrus’ mandibles flicked, his tone sardonic. “What about the salarians and Marines?”

She paused. “Fifteen salarians survived Virmire, predominantly from Jaeto team.”

“Out of an entire company? Spirits.” His mandibles flared again, this time in horror.

“Yeah. One is still waiting to go into surgery - Williams is in right now. I’m sorry to say that Lance Corporal Ki-tae died of his wounds.”

Dead silence filled the room. Shepard’s head pounded like someone was taking a mallet to her temple. Tali hugged herself, leaning forward, pressing a hand to her face mask like she could stifle a sob with it. Shepard had made soldiers of her and Liara - innocents, young women who could’ve been other things. The galaxy needed soldiers, but Shepard had walked into this profession with her eyes open - had they?

“What about the beacon?” Wrex asked, knotting thick fingers together in front of him. The krogan had made it clear that his view of grieving was to get vengeance - rip Saren and his geth apart and let their corpses be the testament to their fallen krannt.

“Another vision. It’s...not very clear.” Richardson’s fingers, wrapped around her throat. It had felt so real. Dread slithered in her stomach.

“Perhaps I can help?” Liara asked.

The thought made her want to curl up on the floor in a ball. Reliving the visions again -

She was the Commander. She really would volunteer to just get shot next time.

“With a meld? Do it.” She pushed up from the chair, setting her feet apart in what may have looked like confidence but was mostly so she wouldn’t worry as much about falling over on her face in front of her team.

“Embrace eternity!”

Black eyes. Black, black, black, enough that she was falling or drowning or opening up beyond the boundaries of herself.
The city is burning, and the air is thick with acrid smoke that burrows into her nose and her mouth until she can only cough after each breath, even as she struggles to keep her gun level, her finger on the trigger. Her men lie at her feet, their chests and their faces ripped open, fingers nerveless and eyes staring up.

They are coming, they are coming -

The sky is full of dark shapes, larger than the towers they knock over like toys, red light lancing from each claw. The air is full of smoke and the shrieking of horns. Tearing this city, this planet apart.

They are coming, they are coming, THEY ARE COMING-

She is alone, alone with the blue sparking in her blood and the rifle in her hands but there is a hand on her shoulder.

Shepard, listen -

There is no escape. Nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. They are coming.

Shepard.

The street is full of husks. They scrabble towards her with violent blue eyes, reaching as her rifle roars on cyclic -

Shepard -

She is in the void with the cold burning stars. Planets rush past, dizzyingly fast. She knows them, somewhere deep inside her marrow, even though she has never set foot there.

They are within the void as well. The hungry monsters in the dark.

They came for us, and they will come for you. You must fight. Survive. Win. Like we could not.

Shepard staggered away from Liara and collapsed into her chair, her head on fire. She put her head in her hands, trying to blot out even the cool, blue light of the comms room. She felt as if all the strength had been wrung out of her, like water from a rag.

“Ma’am?” A hand fell on her shoulder. Pressly.

She dropped her hands and straightened her shoulders, shrugging off his hand. “I’m alright. Liara, what did you see?”

“Ilos! The beacon is on Ilos!” She sounded both winded and delighted. Shepard now realised what she’d had to do - sort through the fragments of memory and vision, find the information amongst the warning the Protheans had flavoured with places and faces Shepard knew, put it all away in the right places. “That’s why Saren needed the location of the Mu Relay, that’s the only way to get there-”

Liara staggered and would’ve fallen if Garrus hadn’t leapt to his feet and steadied her. He eased her down into her seat.

“Then that’s where we need to go.”

“The Mu Relay is in the Terminus Systems - Alliance ships are not welcome there, nor are Spectres.” Tali’s voice was dubious.

“It doesn’t matter,” Shepard said hoarsely. “If the Conduit is there, we need to get there.”
She was going to rip Saren’s goddamned head off.

“Saren will have his geth fleet,” Liara pointed out. “We will need one of our own.”

“Good thing we’re headed to the Citadel,” she replied. “The Council is massing a multi-species task force in Widow - I’ll have Normandy at the head of it if I have anything to say about it.”

Consciousness bled in slowly until smears of colour resolved into the blue-tinged ceiling of the Normandy medbay. Until Ashley Williams could feel every inch of her aching body, centred in her left leg. Her body, with its very much beating heart.

She was alive. She was alive and Kaidan wasn’t. She closed her eyes against the sudden prick of tears in the corners, clenching her fists until her blunt nails dug painfully into her skin.

*I’m so sorry, Kaidan.*

“Sergeant?” The voice was young, male, exhausted and close to teary.

She pried her eyes open. Jaz Teke’s face swam above her as he leant over. His arm was a sling, and he was back in his fatigues, the blood and ash scrubbed from his dark skin.

“Hey Jaz,” she managed through chapped lips. Her throat was dry. “Got any water?”

“Uh, yeah, one sec.” He had a moment of consternation when he realised he couldn’t both hold the little plastic cup of water and help her sit up at the same time. She solved his dilemma by silently taking the cup, leaving his good arm to gingerly ease around her shoulders, avoiding the IV still stuck in her arm.

The water was the best thing she’d ever tasted - cool down the back of her parched throat.

When she was done, Ash took a look around the medbay. Almost every bed was filled - there Draven sitting up and trying to do something on her omnitool despite an immobilised arm and an irate Sherazi, Ling bent over a pale orange salarian, Lieutenant Rentola staring at the ceiling blankly. She knew that look - it’d looked back at her from all the mirrors in the weeks following Eden Prime.

Nick wasn’t in any of them. Dread dug claws into her belly.

“Doctor Chakwas!” Jaz called. “Sergeant Williams is awake!”

The silver-haired doctor came over with a click of boot heels, bringing up a scanner. “Hold still for a moment if you would, Ashley, I’ll just run some scans. Have a look at your vitals.”

“Sure.”

Orange light washed over her. “You gave us quite the scare, Sergeant, but surgery went well. I repaired your superficial femoral artery and stitched up your shoulder - there was luckily no structural damage there.”

“Nick,” she said flatly. What had happened to her didn’t really matter - she was breathing and still had her legs and arms.

A shadow flashed across Chakwas’ face. “Lance Corporal Ki-tae didn’t survive surgery, I’m sorry. By the time we got him onboard, it was too late.”

“Oh.” She looked at her hands. “I told them to move forward.” She had, even though she’d known
there was the possibility of geth air support. She had, because she’d needed those walls down.

Jaz’s good hand gripped her forearm, tight enough to hurt. “It’s not your fault, Sarn’t.”

“I’m sorry,” she said wearily, closing her eyes, “I know Nick was your friend.”

His grip loosened. “Yeah...yeah.”

“How’s everyone else, doc?” she asked softly.

“Shepard’s team came through mostly unscathed.” Except for Mohamed and Kaidan. “Shepard has some contusions from her scrap with Saren and a concussion, but she’ll be okay. Draven’s injury was mostly superficial, Fredricks has a concussion. Jaz here is fine too.”

“Cept for my fucked up hand,” he said dourly.

Chakwas raised a grey eyebrow. “We saved your hand, which was in question for a time. It will, however, require reconstructive surgery beyond our capabilities on the Normandy.”

“They’re kicking me off once we get to the Citadel.” Jaz was close to pouting.

Chakwas rolled her eyes. “We’re not kicking you off, Lance Corporal, we’re getting you the medical care you require so you can go back to shooting geth.”

“The Citadel?”

“We’ve orders to return to the Citadel - the Council wishes to debrief Commander Shepard and Captain Kirrahe in person.”

She blinked. “Yeah?”

“Skipper did the weird mind shit with Liara” - Jaz leant over - “so now she knows where we have to go to catch up with him. Some Prothean rock called Illos.”

“So we get the Citadel fleet, go after the motherfucker and nail him to the wall,” Ashley said with satisfaction, imagining cramming a grenade down Saren’s throat.

“I believe that is the plan,” Chakwas said dryly.

“There’s more though. You know Saren’s big fuckin’ dread? Amina told me that it spoke to them. It’s not a Reaper ship - it’s an actual Reaper. Some kind of fucked artificial intelligence that wants to kill us all.”

She stared at Jaz for a long moment. “Damn. I was hoping the Reapers would be a size that I could shoot, you know?”

“Tell me about it.”

“Either way, things are coming to a head. I’m going to take your IV out - you can get up and move around, but you’re to use crutches for the next couple of days and take it easy. No heavy lifting, no ground missions, no strenuous activity. Understood?”

Chakwas’ gaze was surprisingly penetrative and intimidating. “Aye aye, ma’am.”

“I believe that the Commander wished to debrief you once you were up. She should be in her cabin - grab something to eat and get changed first. Only easily digestible foods and water for now.”
“Got it.” Ashley found that she did very much want to talk to Shepard. Ask what the fuck she’d been thinking.

“I can feed myself,” said Gung Ho Draven indignantly as Rosie Draven attempted to take her fork off her.

“You got shot in the bloody arm, Talitha,” Rosie shot back, her face tight with barely restrained fear. Liara stared into the deep green of her tea and the curls of steam coming off it. A dour mood had fallen across the mess hall, strangling most conversation. It’d taken Kanu Medra and his division an hour and a half to scrub away all the streaks and pools of blood and sanitise the room before re-opening it for the crew.

It didn’t feel quite real. Like the door might hiss open, and Kaidan would walk in, with his kind eyes and gentle demeanor. Or Nick might run in to start some mischief with Fredricks. She’d watched Waaberi and Fredricks put the black body bag containing their friend into the silver transfer case, and then put the Alliance flag over the top of it - and if either of them had cried, no one had said anything. There’d be no body bags for Kaidan Alenko or Akmed Mohamed. No coffin taken home to their families. Just an emptiness and ash left behind in a nuclear blasted wasteland.

She took a sip of her tea. There was only bitterness on her tongue. Three salarians sat across from Liara and the two Dravens, picking at the meals Kanu had whipped up for them. They seemed rather mystified by the married couple opposite them, still bickering over whether Gung Ho should be using her wounded arm at all.

Finally, they came to a compromise. Gung Ho would feed herself, but Rosie would cut up her meat for her.

“So, what now for you lot?” asked Rosie, poking at her own dubious beef.

“Jaesann will likely be disbanded,” Kirrahe said matter-of-factly, despite the glassy look in his large, black eyes. “ Barely enough of us to form a single team, let alone a company.”

“I’m sorry.” Liara clenched her fingers around her mug. It was all she could think to say, and it was terribly inadequate.

“They fought bravely and died for a cause greater than themselves.” A pause, Kirrahe tilting his head. “A very turian sentiment, but one that is true. This is a bitter victory, yes, but it is a victory.”

Rentola looked as if he might disagree, but all he did was stuff his mouth with a spoonful of rice.

“Yeah, well, when I next see that sonofabitch Saren Imma make sure we put a rocket up his ass for our boys,” Gung Ho said sourly, stabbing at her dinner with feeling.

“You seem certain you will find him,” Kirrahe observed.

“Hell yeah we will. Nothing scarier than an angry Emilia Shepard, man. Just ask the blinks.” Draven grinned, sharp and savage.

Liara wondered when promises of vengeance had become almost a comfort. She did want it - wanted vengeance for her mother and for Kaidan. Saren Arterius had taken two flavours of family from her.
“Come in.”

It was difficult to storm into a room when you had to use crutches, but regardless, rage crackled behind Ashley’s ribs, drove her forward despite the pain not quite numbed by the oral painkillers Chakwas had insisted on that pulsed in her leg.

“Ma’am.” The word was icy. Something flashed across Emilia Shepard’s face and then was gone.

“Take a seat, Sergeant.”

She carefully lowered herself, resting her crutches against Shepard’s desk. The silence was cold and hard, and Shepard’s eyes were unwavering and firm and dark.

“How are you feeling?”

She wanted to scoff or maybe cry, her chest seizing up. “I...I can’t believe Kaidan is dead. How could we just leave him there?”

Shepard set her jaw. “Kaidan Alenko was a fine officer, and he died a hero. He knew the risk—”

The snarl was out of her throat before she could rein it in. “Knew the risks? You’re gonna give me the fucking platitudes?”

It was very close to the cliff’s edge of insubordination, but Shepard didn’t crack. “It might not make it easier, but it’s the truth. We all knew that the mission might demand our lives. Kaidan gave his for our, and I intend to make sure his sacrifice is respected by following it through.”

Ash ran her hands through her hair, shaking her head. She couldn’t look at her anymore. “It should have been me. You know that.”

“Maybe,” Shepard agreed very softly, and her head jerked up. “Thinking logically, tactically, I should have gone back to the bomb. Even if it meant losing most of my Marine Detachment. The bomb was the most vital objective of the operation. Not going back put that at risk.”

“Then why?” She wanted to know. Needed to know. If Eden Prime had taught her anything, it was that there were usually no answers to the question why them and not me? Why had Penny stood those crucial ten metres to Ashley’s left? Why had Nirali looked up at just the wrong time and Ashley hadn’t? Why him and not me?

But Shepard could tell her. And Ashley needed to know, even if she had to pry the answers out of her.

Shepard suddenly looked very tired, her shoulders slumping. “Because I always intended to go back for him, Ashley. I knew you and Nick were in serious danger - I hoped that if I got to you first then the two of you could be saved, and then I could go back to Kaidan. If Saren hadn’t shown up, I like to think I could’ve. But he did. And we ran out of time.”

And Nick had fucking died anyway. Her nails dug into her palms. “You...ran out of time.”

“Yes,” Shepard said simply. The bruising around her throat was mottled in deep reds and purples, and there was an edge of hoarseness to her voice.
“It should have been me,” she whispered again. The sharp pain of her nails contrasted the deep ache of her gunshot wound.

“Ash,” the softness of her name was at odds with the intensity of Shepard’s gaze, pinning her in her chair. “Is that what you want? Are you trying to be a martyr? Reclaim your family’s honour with your blood?”

Ashley flinched as if slapped. “That’s not fair.”

But Shepard was as ruthless as she usually was, a knife of words finding every weak point Ashley had bared to her over the past few months. “Isn’t it? What the court of public opinion and the Marine Corps did to your family was wrong - but getting yourself sent home in a flag-draped box won’t underdo the past. I won’t lose you because of it.”

Her breathing came in ragged puffs. “Kaidan was my friend.”

“He was mine too.” Shepard’s voice was low, vehement, pained. “I miss him already, okay? But I need you, Ash.”

She looked up, met the dark burn of Emilia Shepard’s eyes.

“I need you on my side. I need to know if you can lead the Marine Detachment. Things are coming to a head, and I need someone I trust at my six. Saren has to pay.”

A thousand emotions clashed behind her ribs. Acrid anger because Ashley wasn’t stupid - she knew Shepard had grabbed hold of the loose strings of her being, the weaknesses she’d voluntarily revealed, and tugged - pride because Commander Emilia Shepard ST wanted her watching her back, the thick, cloying cloud of grief over it all.

She breathed in, closed her eyes. Could she do it? Take Kaidan’s place aboard the Normandy, even temporarily? See this thing through?

Ashley Williams opened her eyes and squared her shoulders. “I can do it, ma’am.”

She could, because Alenko and Williams had both known that the difference between them was one bullet. She could, because he would want her to. She could, because Shepard needed her. She could, because her Marines needed her. She could, because it was her duty.

Shepard nodded slowly. “Good. Go get some rack time. We’ll be at the Citadel soon, and I want you to come when I meet with the Council.”

“Aye aye, Commander.”

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**CODEX**

103rd Marine Division (Raider): The 103rd Marine Division (Raider) is the Systems Alliance Marine Corps predominant special operations force and the main component of Marine Special Operations Command. It is currently commanded by Major General Adamu Mwangi, a veteran of the Traverse campaign. Mwangi recently took over command from the legendary Lieutenant General Tadius Ahern, who is now the commander of the Pinnacle Station Joint Training Facility.

The 103rd traces its roots back to the USMC Raider Regiment and the United Kingdom’s Royal Marine Commando, in an unbroken line of descent from Raider units in Earth’s World War II, and was founded by veterans of those units during the early years of the Systems Alliance Defence
Force. Marines from the 103rd have fought in almost every conflict the Alliance has been involved in - the First Contact War, the Skyllian Blitz, the Traverse Campaign and now, the Eden Prime War. The division’s dead are commemorated by the Raider Memorial in Rio De Janeiro.

The 103rd’s mission includes such irregular warfare operations as: direct action, special reconnaissance, counter-terrorism, foreign internal defence, information operations, security force assistance, counter-insurgency, space interdiction operations, manhunting, and clandestine operations.

The division contains the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Marine Raider Regiments and the 1st and 2nd Marine Raider Support Groups. Each Marine Raider Regiment consists of a Headquarters Company and three Marine Raider Battalions (MRBs), which in turn contain four Marine Special Operation Companies, consisting of four fourteen man Marine Special Operations Teams. These teams customarily operate on their own, but retain the capability to work in larger units.

The majority of operational personnel in the 103rd are N5 Marines, though many support roles are filled by N1-N4 troops.
“Please proceed to Alliance Tower Docking Bay 22. Medical personnel is standing by.”

“Copy that, Alliance Tower. Proceeding to Bay 22. Normandy out.”

Joker’s voice echoed back to Liara waiting near the airlock with Commander Shepard, Captain Kirrahe, and Staff Sergeant Williams - still leaning on crutches. In front of them were the white-clothed forms of Sub-Lieutenant Sherazi and Doctor Chakwas, alongside three hovering stretchers. The occupants were all salarian - the worst wounded of the STG.

The wounded - including a sullen Jaz - would be offloaded into ambulances waiting on the docks from here, while supplies were immediately loaded into the cargo hold below. Including a new Mako IFV.

She shivered. The humans had set up pictures of the three Marines they’d lost in the mess hall. Kaidan had looked unlike himself in his official portrait - his eyes steely, his face plain of emotion, wearing the dress blues she’d never seen on him. Then they’d gathered, and Williams had called out each Marine’s name until she got to them. She’d called their names then too, once, twice, three times, and the silence had felt like an answer. Afterwards, the sergeant had fled the mess hall, and only Tali had followed her.

Behind them -

Senior Master-At-Arms Rogers and Master-At-Arms Choe stood either side of an anxious Rana Thanoptis, whose blue eyes darted between the stone-faced Commander and the MAAs, their hands lingering near their SMGs. She’d spent the trip here in the brig.

“I’m handing you over to the Alliance taskforce,” Shepard told her. “Co-operate with our scientists, and you won’t spend the rest of your very long life in jail.”

“I will,” the neurologist insisted, “I’m grateful to be alive, really.”

“Mhm.” Shepard turned away.

“Docking tube secure,” announced the ship’s VI.

“Heads up, Commander. We’ve got parasites - sorry, reporters on the docks.” Joker’s voice was indolent. “Your favourite! Westerlund News!”

Shepard groaned, rubbing her face. “It couldn’t just be Emily? Fucking tabloids. Rogers, Choe, make sure you get Thanoptis out of here and into the van as quickly as possible.”

“Aye, ma’am.”

“I’m going to have to be a distraction,” she said grimly. “Williams, no punching.”

“I’m not going to just assault a reporter, ma’am.”

“You’ve not been needled by tabloid types before.” Her eyes gentled when they touched on the hobbled sergeant and then Liara. “Both of you just stay behind me. I’ll answer any questions.”
The airlock hissed open, and Shepard squared her shoulders as if going into battle again. The docking bay was choked full of controlled chaos. Sherazi and Chakwas rushing the salarians and Jaz into the waiting ambulances and briefing the Citadel paramedics on their medical histories, Alliance sailors carrying or pushing supplies towards the ramp leading down to the cargo bay, the MAAs shoving Thanoptis towards a waiting sky van - and a throng of reporters held back by several CSec officers.

Liara watched them and found the anxiety she might have once felt had drained away. She had fought geth and mercenaries and pirates and krogan, listened to the horrific plans of a genocidal artificial intelligence in the form of a giant dreadnought. What was a reporter to that?

“Khalisah Bint Sinan al-Jilani, Westerlund News. A moment of your time, Commander?”

Shepard’s small smile seemed genuine enough. If you didn’t know her well and didn’t know the cool glint in her eyes. “Of course, ma’am.”

The first few questions were rather stock standard, but gradually they became more and more pointed.

“Clearly, foreign nationals have been aboard the Normandy - the most advanced ship by some accounts in the fleet. We can see here at the docks, Union Army personnel disembarking. Could this not cause security concerns?”

Kirrahe and his men were STG, not Union Army, but Shepard seemed disinclined to correct the mistake. “We’re at war, and the Salarian Union is one of our allies, Miss Al-Jilani. My salarian colleagues assisted us in a joint operation and acquitted themselves well. The Navy has procedures around security when giving our allies lifts, which my crew followed.”

Shepard had been apologetic when asking Kirrahe and his troops to stick to the Kennel and the crew deck, but they’d all just wanted to eat and sleep anyway.

“But you have other aliens aboard, don’t you? The daughter of Benezia T’Soni - the matriarch who helped Saren Arterius plan his horrible attack on Eden Prime.” The camera drone kept shifting, attempting to get a photo of her hanging back, Liara realised with an unpleasant sensation bubbling in her stomach. But Shepard had managed to keep herself in between Liara and the camera without appearing to move that much.

“Doctor Liara T’Soni has been cleared of any involvement with her mother’s crimes and has offered her services to assist in my investigation.”

“Is it also true that the Alliance suffered casualties coming to the aid of salarian forces?” Al-Jilani asked all too innocently.

Liara saw Shepard’s shoulders tighten imperceptibly under her uniform jacket and wished she could reach out, offer comfort somehow. She knew all too well how heavily the deaths of her subordinates weighed on the human woman, how sharp her grief for Kaidan and the two young Marines had been when Liara had touched her mind.

“I can’t confirm nor deny anything in regards to casualties. All announcements are done through the Department of Defence, as you know, Miss Al-Jilani.” Her voice was smooth and calm.

“Do you believe it’s appropriate to hand over a brand new prototype ship to the Council?”

Shepard smiled slightly, the cast of her features quizzical. “I wasn’t aware that the Normandy had been handed over, ma’am. I am still a commissioned officer in the Navy and the crew is Alliance.”
“But you do work for the Council now, Commander.”

“ My assignment right now - the one I was assigned Normandy for - is to hunt down the man responsible for the attack on an Alliance colony. That’s in humanity’s interests, last I heard.”

When Al-Jilani finally finished prodding at Shepard, the Commander led them straight to the nearest rapid transit station. When the four of them had settled into the skycar’s seats, Shepard let out a sigh of relief. “I’d rather get shot at than do interviews. Especially for damned tabloids.”

“There’s no contact drills for journalists, unfortunately,” Ashley joked.

“I don’t quite understand why someone would ask such questions - in the Union, STG doesn’t take calls from the media - but it looked like you handled it well to me, Commander. A different sort of battlefield than the one I accustomed to,” Kirrahe offered.

“Thanks. I had to do media training after Elysium.” Shepard smiled wryly. “Apparently, my language wasn’t appropriate for ANN.”

“You saved a city and they had a problem with you swearing?” Ashley asked incredulously.

“I defended one AA tower,” Shepard muttered.

“It was a deciding factor in the battle,” Liara murmured. Articles on the Skyllian Blitz had been amongst her…research on the first human Spectre when she’d first come aboard the Normandy.

Shepard grumbled, shifting in her seat. “I don’t think I like you two ganging up on me.”

Ash shot Liara a grin, and she ducked her head, pleased despite herself.

The skycar came to a stop in the embassies area of the Presidium. It was all gentle arches of silver metal and greenery, its elegantly dressed denizens leisurely strolling amongst the gardens. The Presidium felt much more like her mother’s estate near Serrice than any of the places she’d been since she’d boarded the Normandy, but as she exited the rapid transit car, it suddenly seemed strange and well - alien. More so than the warship full of actual aliens she’d been living on. She felt naked without her pistol.

From the way Ashley was glancing around, shoulders tense and jaw tight, she had a similar feeling.

“This is where I must leave you, Commander Shepard,” Captain Kirrahe said, adjusting his uniform. “I must go report to my own government. I hope we will work together again one day - hopefully under less dire circumstances.”

“I hope so too, Captain.”

And, after shaking Ashley’s hand, the wiry salarian was gone.

“He’s a good man,” Liara said, watching him go.

“Yeah. Hope he doesn’t get punished for what happened,” Ashley replied, a hint of bitterness rising in her voice.

Liara blinked at her. “What? Why would he be punished?”

“He lost most of his command.” Shepard’s mouth had a grim cast. “That has a way of following you.”
They climbed the stairs to the human embassy in silence, Williams splitting off to wait for them at the embassy bar - the Marine didn’t say anything, but it was clear the effort of using crutches and the pain of her wounds was exhausting. The human embassy was spacious and open to the air, across the ‘street’ from the volus and elcor embassies, and the main door was guarded by two young Marines, their closely shaven heads bare, who quickly and professionally checked their IDs before waving them through. “The ambassador is expecting you, ma’am.”

Two men were waiting in the ambassador’s office for them. The first, a tall, broad-shouldered and dark-skinned man in an Alliance Navy captain’s uniform, stepped forward with a warm smile to clasp Shepard’s hand. “Good to see you, Commander.”

“Likewise, sir.” Shepard’s smile was genuine. “Not falling out of any rucks because of the nice Presidium lifestyle?”

“Watch yourself, Shepard,” Anderson - for that was what his name badge read - said but his expression was one of amusement rather than annoyance. “I can still kick your ass.”

“You’re welcome to try-”

“Commander,” the other man interrupted what was clearly a reunion between friends. His mouth had a pinched look to it as if he’d eaten something sour. “You’ve certainly been making waves.”

“Ambassador.” The cheer slid right out of Shepard’s voice. “We’ve been fighting a war out there.”

“Hmpf.”

“We’ve discovered where this Conduit Saren’s been after is.”

Captain Anderson leaned forward slightly. “Really?”

Shepard looked at Liara. She straightened, meeting the human man’s hard eyes. This was not a man who would be crossed. “It’s on Ilos - a planet through the Mu Relay that was colonised by the Protheans. We have its location.”

“I need to talk to the Council immediately. We need the fleets, and we need to move fast,” Shepard cut in, crossing her arms.

“The Council is busy,” Udina said dismissively.

Shepard blinked, frustration flaring to life in her dark eyes. “Busy? What’s more important than this?”

“They’re still dealing with the preparations for the task force,” Anderson said, raising a hand to cut short Shepard’s anger. “We’re taking our 1st, 3rd, and 5th, and the Hierarchy’s 4th as well as the entire Citadel Fleet. It’s a lot of ships to organise. They said they’ll be ready for you at 0800 tomorrow. I’ll meet you at the Normandy’s dock.”

Shepard nodded. “Alright.”

When they left, Anderson followed them out. “I know you want to get this done, but hold the course for now, alright? We’ll get it done.”

Shepard sighed heavily, running a hand through her short, curly hair. “I know, sir. It’s just…we’re close. I can feel it. And Kaidan-” She broke off, gathered herself. “Three of my crew died two days ago to make sure we had this shot.”
“I know.” Something that might’ve been grief flashed across Anderson’s stone-like features. “I hand picked those boys myself. But you’ll get your man, Junior.”

“That bloody nickname again,” she muttered, and Anderson cracked a smile. “Alright. I’ll see you tomorrow morning, sir.”

“All I’m saying, ma’am, is that it’s been an intense month. The crew are 100% in for the duration - but frankly, they’re on edge and exhausted. A skeleton crew and I can oversee loading the supplies. Even one night of shore leave would do them some good.” Pressly’s voice filtered out from the open door of Shepard’s captain.

Ashley stopped, datapad in hand. She wasn’t sure if now was a good time to interrupt the ship’s commander and executive officer.

“Alright. They’ve worked and fought damned hard. The least they deserve is 12 hours off before we throw ourselves at Saren.”

“With respect, you could use a few hours off as well, Commander.”

There was a moment of silence, and Ash felt abruptly awkward. Shepard had asked her to bring the MARDET’s readiness report and the door was open - but it still felt like a conversation she shouldn’t be overhearing.

“That obvious?” Shepard’s voice was tiredly amused.

“It’s been a difficult month, like I said, ma’am. Corporal Toombs, then Virmire…I know you and Lieutenant Alenko were close.”

“I’ll think about it.” Then Shepard raised her voice. “You can come in, Williams.”

Flushing, she stepped through the doorway. “Sorry, ma’am - I didn’t want to interrupt.”

Shepard waved a careless hand. “It’s fine. You have the report?” When Ashley handed it over, the officer scanned it quickly. A crease formed between her eyebrows. It wasn’t pleasant reading. Between Eden Prime, Solcrum, and Virmire, the Marine Detachment was down five Marines - effectively an entire fireteam. It was attrition that a special operations team couldn’t sustain. But Shepard didn’t comment. “Tell the Marines they’ve got the afternoon and night off - but I want everyone back on board by 0700.”

“Aye, ma’am.” When was the last time they’d had shore leave? That day and night on Arcturus Station? She’d followed Alenko, Hellraiser, and Tali around their nerdy stores, teasing them the entire time. Kaidan had laughed and thrown back some quips about jarheads and crayons. That night, Nick had jumped on the back of a huge Marine from 1st MARDIV when he’d grabbed her. She missed them suddenly and sharply, like someone had driven a knife between her ribs. “We were…thinking of next time we had shore leave, having a few drinks in our guys’ memories. Something a bit more relaxed than the roll call, since we won’t be able to be at the funerals.”

That was a fact of life. A dead Marine’s unit was rarely able to be there when they were laid to rest. So they had their own traditions, like the roll call. If Ash never had to do it again, it’d be too soon. She didn’t know how long she’d sat in the dark behind the bulk of the Mako afterwards, with Tali sitting there holding her hand in silence.

“That’s a good idea.”
“We were hoping you’d come, ma’am.”

Shepard raised an eyebrow. “You want your Navy CO looking over your shoulder at a traditional Raider piss up?”

“You’re a Raider too,” Ash said with a shrug. More than Ash was. Shepard had at least gone through ICT and come by her old team leader billet honestly. Ashley had fallen into it, with the help of Alenko’s paperwork kung fu. “We all want you there, Skipper.”

Shepard studied her, expressionless, before her eyes cut to Pressly. “If I didn’t know better, I’d think you two planned this.”

Pressly smiled pleasantly. “Enjoy your night out, ma’am.”

“I’ll be there. But if anyone gets arrested right before we go after Saren, my wrath will be swift and terrible.”

“Roger that, Skipper!”

Poppy’s Place was far from the nicest bar on the Citadel - in fact, it was a bit of a dive. But the drinks were cheap, the owner was an Alliance veteran, and it was mostly clean. When was the last time Ashley had worn civvies? It felt like years. So she’d put on a nice if casual dress - one of the few things that’d been shipped to her from Eden Prime, along with her dad’s poetry books - that was just long enough to cover the bandage around her thigh and showed off her biceps. Had to show off the guns. She’d even let her hair down from her normal bun.

Hell, she almost felt like a person.

The crutches kinda ruined the whole deal, but whatever, she’d take it.

“You clean up well, Sergeant,” Corporal Dubyansky told her as he helped her out of the skycar, careful of her leg and shoulder.

“You don’t look too bad yourself, Alexei,” she replied. The younger Marine was wearing a pale blue button up and dark grey slacks that brought out the clear blue of his eyes and showed off the muscles of his shoulders and biceps. If it’d been eight months ago and he hadn’t been one of her Marines, she might’ve been tempted to look. As it was, she gave him a friendly thump on the shoulder.

“The others already inside?”

“I think we’re waiting on a couple of people, but the others have grabbed a table.”

The ground team had seized two long tables at the back of the dark bar, everyone with a drink in hand - even Liara, though the archaeologist was eyeing her beer with suspicion. Even Jaz, who she was pretty sure should still be in the hospital, his hand still in a sling and swathed in bandages. Tali and Garrus had bottles of something dusty and labelled dextro - Ash slid into the seat beside the quarian, throwing an arm around her in greeting.

“So much for never drinking with us again,” she teased. “Where’s the Skipper?”

“She was getting another round,” Garrus replied, finishing off his drink.

As if summoned by the comment, Shepard appeared out of the crowd carrying a tray of drinks -
mostly beers of varying types. Shepard was out of uniform and Ash had to remind herself not to *look*.
She'd never seen her in civvies before, and she wore them well, dressed in a plum coloured button up with the sleeves rolled to her elbows, contrasting with the dark of her skin.

"Williams," she greeted and handed her a beer.

"You the waiter tonight, Skipper?"

She smiled. "Something like that."

Ashley sipped from her glass, closing her eyes. It'd been a long time since she'd had a goddamn drink. When she opened them, Shepard was on the other side of Garrus with her own beer. No one really seemed to know where to start - beyond drinking.

It wasn't really a surprise that it was their captain who spoke up. "Ash, remember when we - the three of us - helped that girl on the Citadel?"

"Oh yeah. I was like 'huh, nobody died' and Kaidan was just 'I can shoot someone if it makes you feel better.'"

They both chuckled. After that, it seemed easier to talk.

"...so Nick goes *tumbling* head over ass, and we're killing ourselves laughing, obviously. Payback for him laughing at me in the sim." Jaz's eyes were dangerously bright but he was smiling. "He jumps right up, bows to us and yells 'Always Forward!' That was Nick though. Never afraid of looking like an idiot if it made us laugh."

"I was pretty nervous about coming onto the *Normandy*," Fredricks admitted. "I was just some engineer PFC getting attached to a MSOT on Captain Anderson and Commander Shepard's ship? Holy shit. Mohamed always told me to just do my job and everything would work out. And he was right."

"Kaidan had this way of making you feel...stable, I guess? He was a steady guy. The kinda guy you want at your back in a mess like this." Gung Ho, rubbing a thumb across her glass.

"It feels like every time I turned about Nick was playing cards. Are we sure the kid didn't sleep with his poker deck under his pillow?"

Time seemed to blend together into stories and laughter and tears.

*Kaidan is dead. I'm not. I have to be worth his life*. She thought about the MECP package he'd been gently encouraging her to put in. He'd even signed the damn paperwork already. She'd ummed and aahed about it - being rejected twice from OCS, first when Gunny Ellison had suggested her for it and second when she put in a similar package, had left her gun-shy.

Ashley was going to hand it in, she decided then and there, throwing back the last of her beer. Once they caught Saren. She didn't want to leave the *Normandy* but...Kaidan had believed in her. Maybe it was time she did too.

Waaberi bounded to her feet suddenly, grabbing Jaz and Fredricks by the hands and dragging them with her. The Senior Lance hadn't been drinking - she was a Muslim - but it was clear she was intent on having some fun. "Dance with me, you assholes."

Before long, most of the *Normandy* crewmen had been convinced to get up and someone at the bar, having seen the impromptu dance party start, had turned the music up. Ashley stayed where she was,
another drink in hand and the alcohol filtering warmth through her body. Chakwas would find out and properly airlock her if she tried dancing.

Shepard wasn’t dancing either, leaning against the table with her head tilted and her hands in her pockets. Ash couldn’t help but glance over at her occasionally. At some point, she had to admit, her attraction to the Skipper had morphed into something softer and much more dangerous.

Then Shepard leaned over.

“Hey.” The word was spoken into her ear to be heard over the thumping music, Shepard’s breath making her skin prickle, her callused fingers wrapped loosely around Ashley’s wrist. “Can I talk to you for a moment?”

“Of course.” She threw back the rest of her drink and set her glass down on the counter.

Shepard guided her out of the throng of people and outside, never quite letting go of her arm until they were out the door. The artificial lights outside flickered as they stopped in an alcove. Not the nicest part of the Wards but only an idiot would cause trouble with a bunch of Marines and sailors celebrating their own. Shadows dripped over Shepard’s face, but Ashley could still see the light glancing off her cheekbone, the scar through her full lower lip.

“What’s up?”

Shepard paused, uncharacteristically hesitant. “I wanted to apologise. For what I said, in my cabin. You were right - I was being unfair. You told me those things in confidence. It won’t happen again.”

“You were afraid,” Ash realised aloud.

Shepard paused again as if arguing with herself about whether to admit it or not. “Yeah. I was. I meant it when I said I can’t lose you too.”

There was a hint of something embarrassed and honest in that sentence - and Ash didn’t know what it said about her that it was that and not Shepard’s usual smooth confidence that made her heart beat faster. Honesty about herself was something Shepard only offered in bits and pieces, and Ashley wanted all of it. They’d somehow moved closer together. Close enough that she could smell a hint of Shepard’s cologne, feel the heat rising off her.

“I’m here,” Ashley said softly.

They swayed closer unthinkingly, Shepard’s hand moving up her arm from her wrist to her shoulder and leaving a trail of sparks in its wake.

“Yes, you are,” Shepard murmured, tilting her head back ever so slightly to meet her eyes. The press of her lips was a shock but not a surprise when they moved into each other, in a way that was tempting to think of as inevitable. Her mouth was warm and soft and surprisingly giving when Ashley kissed her back. She’d kinda expected that Emilia Shepard would be the take charge sort all the time in all facets of her life, but -

Ashley hadn’t quite let herself imagine this. She pressed a hand between her shoulder blades, felt the soft material of her dark purple shirt, the shift of muscle underneath. Her other hand tugged at the other woman’s hip until Shepard took that final step closer and they were hips to hips, chest to chest.

Ashley’s hands tightened. She could feel her. Her lips, the slide of her tongue, the heat of her, the solid muscles and just there restraint, the softer curves of her hips and breasts. She wanted.
She sank her teeth into Emilia’s bottom lip, almost furious with the wanting, and Shepard sighed into her, even as she dug her fingers into Ash’s shoulders hard in retaliation.

“Yo, Ash! Where’d you go? We got shots!”

Jaz’s slurred, drunken voice cut between them like a knife. Shepard took a step back and then another. Ashley was suddenly very sober.

“Shepard,” Ash began. She could see the Commander’s face better now she’d stepped into the light. She saw emotion blooming there - one she’d never seen cross Shepard’s face, even when things were desperate.

Panic.

And then Emilia Shepard whirled on her heel and fled.

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CODEX

Citadel Treaty Organisation: The Citadel Treaty Organisation is a galactic military, economic and legal bloc in the Milky Way Galaxy, often referred to as simply ‘CSpace’ or ‘the Council’ after its governing body, and is based off the Citadel space station. The Citadel is the only territory the CTO directly claims and is administrated by elected representatives in the Citadel Senate as its legislative branch, with a set number of MPs per ward and the Presidium, and the Council as its executive branch.

The CTO consists of three member states - the Asari Republics, the Turian Hierarchy and the Salarian Union of Planets - and four associate states - the human Systems Alliance, the elcor Courts of Dekuuna, the hanar Illuminated Primacy and the Vol Protectorate, a client state of the Hierarchy. Each member state government nominates someone to sit on the Citadel Council which votes on Citadel law, settles disputes between nation states and oversees the deployment of the Citadel Fleet. Although its decisions are not necessarily binding on its subordinate states, it’s rare that its ruling is disregarded.

Famous interventions and rulings have included the Republics vs Hegemony dispute over the planet of Esan/Lorek, the Hegemony/Alliance dispute over settlement rights in the Attican Traverse, the ruling that the invasion of the Alliance planet of Shanxi by the Hierarchy was unlawful and the subsequent decision that the Hierarchy owed reparations for the loss of life and property on the colony.

The CTO has several military and intelligence apparatus. The bulk of the Council’s military forces are in the Citadel Fleet, a 200 ship strong armada responsible for the defense of the station itself and patrolling Citadel Space. The majority of the personnel and ships in the Citadel Fleet come from the Hierarchy Navy on rotation, though the flagship is currently the asari dreadnought Destiny Ascension. A posting to the Citadel Fleet is seen as prestigious, if usually peaceful, and a useful feather in the cap of any ambitious turian, asari or salarian naval officer. The commander of the Citadel Fleet is the Supreme Allied Fleet Commander, currently Grand Admiral Vebius Camlin. Citadel Security also operates a fleet of cutters and patrol craft, however these are usually restricted to patrol and anti-smuggling operations within the Widow Nebula.

The most infamous branch of the CTO is the Office of Special Tactics and Reconnaissance, the Citadel’s special intelligence agency. Its agents are recruited from the various intelligence services and special forces units in Citadel Space and are given wide immunity, with little scrutiny. Called CSpace’s ‘first and last line of defence,’ Spectres are expected to uphold galactic peace by whatever
means necessary. Spectre status can only be given or stripped away by the Citadel Council; the Council often prefers to not know the specifics of Spectre activities. Spectres usually resign from any other agency or service they might be a part of, but there is precedent of Spectres retaining a military commission in times of war.

Chapter End Notes

Definitions:

MECP: Marine Enlisted Commissioning Program. The process through which an enlisted Marine applies to go 'green to gold' or become an officer.

OCS: Officer Candidate School.

MSOT: Marine Special Operations Team.
Emilia Isabela Alves Shepard felt like a goddamn fucking idiot.

She stared into the mirror in her cabin and ran frustrated hands through her tangled hair. She’d slept barely two hours since retreating from the crew outing, and it showed, dark shadows under her eyes. She’d told herself that she was human, a few flashes of attraction here and there were going to happen - particularly given her taste in women, but it wasn’t something to indulge. She’d gone down the marriage road before, and it hadn’t worked out - so Shepard had made peace with devoting her life to the Alliance and having a few nights on shore leave with civilian women. But somewhere along the line -

*I didn’t know because I didn’t want to know. The thought was cold and merciless. Because if I knew, then I’d have to take a step back. Because it felt good wanting her, and being wanted by her.*

Shepard didn’t know if she could call herself a good person. She’d killed a lot of people. Enough people that the battles and the methods and the faces got all mixed up, and she still slept at night. They called her a ‘good officer’ and she knew that was often an antonym to good person because that meant loving your men more than anything else in the galaxy - the Marine Corps, your family, your wife - and then killing them anyway because *mission first.*

Eight Marines on Elysium. Eleven on Akuze. One on Tahesh Five.

Three on Virmire.

No. Maybe she wasn’t a good person, but she’d always tried to be an *ethical* one. What had happened last night had had nothing to do with ethics. She’d *wanted*. She’d wanted so hard her hands had trembled and her heart had nearly thudded its way out of her chest.

It couldn’t happen again. She stared at herself in the mirror, hardened her jaw. She was a Commander, Ash- Williams was a Staff Sergeant; the gulf between them was as wide as a galaxy. It was wrong. How could Williams say no or feel equal with such a power imbalance? When she held her career - her life - in her hands? What would Kaidan’s parents think? That she let three Marines die for a *crush* -

And now she had ruined an important friendship and likely her career as well.

Shepard hissed out a breath and shoved down the urge to put her fist through the mirror. She had to talk to Ashley before they went to see the Council. So she put on her dress whites and settled the Star of Terra around her neck.

It was only 05:30 - well before she was to meet with the Council - when she took the elevator down to the cargo bay, peaked cap under her arm. Williams was at her armoury bench in her uniform pants and a tank top, an assault rifle spread in pieces before her. It looked like she was still trying to repair the Valkyrie rifle she’d been using on Virmire, the barrel warped from heat.

*Don’t look at her.*

“Sergeant Williams.”
“Ma’am.” Ashley watched her warily, and Shepard reminded herself that it was fair - she’d set their friendship alight and crossed a boundary that existed for a reason. It still felt as if someone had wedged a knife in between her ribs.

_I shouldn’t have caught her alone_. Not after what had happened last time they’d been alone.

"I wanted to apologise." God, how many times had she apologised to Ashley recently? How many times had she overstepped herself? Her chest twisted. "If you want to report me or take a transfer, I understand. In the meantime, I can arrange for your reports to be made to Pressly."

Ashley stared at her for a long moment. Then she looked back down at the assault rifle disassembled in front of her, sliding two pieces together. "That’s not necessary, Skipper. I don't want to report you."

"But..."

The pulse in Ash's jaw jumped, and Shepard hated herself for noticing.

"Look, what happened was a mistake. But it was both of us. Alright? Let's just... Leave it at that. I’m not going anywhere."

"Okay," Shepard said softly. "Okay."

Feeling horribly off balance, Emilia retreated towards the elevator and duties to throw herself into.

At 07:30 she confirmed with Pressly that, miracle of miracles, all the crew were aboard, though some were a bit worse for wear. Another Mako infantry fight vehicle had been stowed below, though Garrus, Shamom, and Fredricks had immediately gotten into it - apparently, it wasn’t up to snuff as it was. She spared a brief thought to wonder how all their modifications were going to be justified on their maintenance log.

“Just one thing, ma’am,” Pressly said as he walked her to the airlock. “Guns and I put in for a full combat load. We’ve received almost everything - but not a replacement for the tactical nuke we used on Virmire.”

“Maybe they’re concerned about putting nuclear weapons in the hands of a Council Spectre, regardless of my commission,” she replied as they walked through the CIC. “As long as we have our ship killers and our orbit to ground missiles, I’m happy. I’m hoping that we don’t need to nuke anything else.”

“I hope so too, ma’am.”

They stopped in front of the airlock door. “Have the ship ready to sail. I want to be at the front of the Citadel Fleet.”

“Aye aye, ma’am.”

Anderson was waiting on the docks like he’d promised, dressed in his own dress uniform and with an impressive fruit salad splashed across his chest. Ashley stood next to him in her blues with Liara. Their eyes met for a moment before Shepard looked away.

“Good morning, sir.”

“Shepard.” He thumped her on the shoulder hard enough to make her wince. “Udina’s waiting for us at the Council Tower.”
“Let’s not keep them waiting.”

The five minutes skycar trip was silent, Shepard drumming her fingers against her thigh and doing her best to ignore the warmth of Ashley’s presence beside her. She deliberately focused on the mission - they were so goddamn close to seeing that bastard into an early grave. Her fingers brushed the bruising at her throat. Saren wouldn’t find it so easy to overpower her a second time.

Ambassador Udina was already with the Council when they arrived, and Shepard gave him a hard, questioning look.

“Good job, Commander,” he said blithely, “thanks to your actions in the Traverse, the Council is finally ready to take real action against Saren and the geth.”

“The ambassador is correct,” Tevos said placidly, apparently uncaring of the dig in Udina’s voice. “If you are correct and Saren intends to attack the Citadel directly, we will be ready for him.”

Sparatus continued, straightening like the soldier he had once been. “Battlegroups from the Citadel Fleet and the Hierarchy Navy are stationed at every Relay that links the Terminus and CSpace. The Alliance 1st, 3rd, and 5th Fleets are standing by as strategic reaction forces, ready to jump in if Saren should make an attempt. Your Navy’s analysis is that the geth do not have the fleet strength to break through our defensive pickets - we will trap and then destroy their fleet.”

“The sacrifices of Jaesann Company and your Marine team will not be forgotten. They gave us this time to prepare our defences and cut off a key source of enemy reinforcements,” added Councillor Valern.

Shepard frowned. Defensive strategy would only get them so far - they knew where Saren was headed, it was time to attack him. “How many ships are you sending to assault Ilos?”

The Council exchanged looks amongst themselves. Shepard’s stomach sank like a stone. “Ilos is deep within the Terminus Systems, Commander. Sending an entire war fleet would only instigate a galactic war.”

Everyone was so fucking afraid of that old specter - war with the Terminus - that they were risking losing this war. She doubted the Reapers would be as merciful as even the Hegemony. Her fists clenched.

Udina touched her shoulder, and she barely restrained the instinct to pull away. “Now is the time for discretion, Commander. His greatest weapon was secrecy. Thanks to you, this is over.”

“I’m pretty sure his greatest weapon is his huge sentient warship,” Ashley muttered behind her.

“With all due respect, Councillors, it seems counterintuitive to just let Saren reach the Conduit, when we know where it is and that he wants it, badly.”

“You don’t even know what the Conduit is,” Valern said dismissively. “It is likely only a feint to draw our forces away from the Citadel.”

*Don’t lose your temper, don’t lose your temper.* The Council already had concerns about her stability, losing her shit in front of them would be the quickest way to lose any sort of standing she had in their eyes. So as much as she wanted to rail at them that they were doing exactly what Saren knew they would, that over-cautiousness in war was the path to defeat, that there the Protheans were in her head screaming that the Reapers were coming - she kept her tone calm and moderate.

“I understand not wanting to risk the Citadel, particularly with the political risks in the Terminus, but
I think it’s a mistake to completely disregard the Conduit - Saren has gone to immense trouble to track it down. A single stealth warship can get to Ilos without anyone knowing, and I can conduct in the very least reconnaissance of the planet. I can be discreet.”

She was a fucking N7 for God’s sake.

Sparatus sneered. “You detonated a nuclear device on Virmire; I’d hardly call that discreet .”

Shepard was abruptly so angry she couldn’t speak for several seconds. She retained enough control that she didn’t flare, but she could feel it - the crawl of dark energy ready to explode. Because you didn’t give me enough troops to do a reconnaissance in force, you son of a bitch-

“Your style served you well in the Traverse, and you have achieved a great deal, but the situation is fragile. We have it in hand,” Tevos slid in, her voice smooth and no doubt meant to be soothing.

“If you don’t want to send me, send another Spectre.” She could hear the edge of desperation in her voice - she was desperate. “Saren is only one facet of this threat. There are more creatures like Sovereign out there, and we need to know more about them.”

“Ambassador Udina”- Sparatus sounded almost bored, as if ignoring the tantrum of a toddler- “I get the feeling Commander Shepard isn’t willing to let this go.”

“You did your job, Commander, now let me do mine.” The slimy fucking weasel. “The docking apparatus around your vessel has been locked, and a team from CSec will board her to install navigational locks. Until further notice, the SSV Normandy is grounded.”

“You bastard,” Ashley snapped. “You’re selling us out!”

“It is time for you and your crew to leave,” Udina said imperiously. “This no longer concerns you.”

Shepard stared hard at him, fingers twitching into a fist.

She wanted to hurt him.

Instead, she turned and stalked away from the Council in silence, her crewmen and Anderson following her. When the elevator door slid shut behind them, she thumped a fist against the metallic wall, black-blue energy washing over her and making her teeth tingle. “Bloody fuckwits.”

A hand landed on her shoulder and squeezed. She looked up and into Ashley’s steady gaze. There was a firm faith there - faith in her that she really didn’t feel like she deserved right now. “You’ll find a way to get us back into this, ma’am.”

Shepard wasn’t sure if she wished last night had never happened - or if she wanted to kiss her again. With a hot flush of shame, she looked away, her corona fading away. “I’m gonna do my best.”

“Whatever you come up with, count me in.” The Marine’s voice was firm and strong even as she dropped her hand.

“I’m sorry, Shepard. If I’d known what they were up to,” Anderson said with regret.

“I know you would’ve, sir. Can they even do this? What happened to sovereign immunity?”

He sighed. “We’d need the Alliance government to make a complaint to the Council or the Laws of Spacefaring Tribunal, and Udina has the Foreign Affairs Department on his side here. The Navy won’t be happy - if only for the precedent it sets but…”
“The Prime Minister could overrule the Minister.” It was grasping at straws, but if it took begging the government to make a complaint to get her ship free, she’d do it in a heartbeat.

“I know Goyle,” Anderson contemplated, “she’s fundamentally a sensible person. If she is given facts and reason, she’ll overrule Udina, but it’ll take some convincing. Minister Park is one of her proteges, and she’s been working towards a Council seat for twenty years.”

“Can you talk to Hackett? His support might come in handy - and he should be warned anyway.” When Anderson nodded, she turned to Liara. “Go with the Captain and give Hackett a report of what we learned from the Virmire beacon.”

“Of course, Shepard.”

“You and I,” she said to Ashley, with an undertone of grim amusement, “need to get to the Normandy ASAP.”

“Skipper?”

“How well do you think the crew is going to take a bunch of CSec officers trying to board the Normandy?”

Understanding bloomed in whiskey brown eyes. She smiled sharply. “Well, ma’am, I’ve always wondered what’d be like to get into a firefight with CSec.”

“Very funny.”

Joker stared blankly at the shimmering holographic controls dancing in front of him. There was little for the helmsman to do when the Normandy was docked, but Pressly had asked for one of them to hang around. The supplies and crew were all aboard, and Shepard would probably want a speedy getaway.

He couldn’t fire a rifle or beat Saren into paste with biotics like Shepard could, but he could get her there in style. It was something. He needed to be doing something.

Because Kaidan was dead.

Damnit.

His eyes flicked down to a report, barely registering the numbers. He kept expecting Kaidan to walk up here and start harassing him into playing cards or socialising. Or he’d just take a seat, and they’d end up arguing about Galaxy of Fantasy builds. Kaidan had never treated him any differently - either because he was just so goddamn nauseatingly genuinely nice or because he knew what it was like to get side-eyed. Had known. Whatever.

“Being able to throw things with your mind isn’t a disability,” he’d told him once waspishly.

“No,” Kaidan had said in that thoughtful way of his. “But the migraines and chronic pain are.”

And now Kaidan was dead. Very heroically - but dead was dead as far as Joker was concerned.

The Marines had invited him to their impromptu memorial but getting smashed at a bar lost some of its appeal when you could snap your femur by stepping wrong and, while he liked Ashley, the Marines weren’t his people like they were hers. Like they’d been Kaidan’s. So instead he’d stayed aboard and helped Pressly ready the ship for departure. It’d been its own sort of comfort - the
“Normandy was his girl, after all.

“Joker? Sir, we need an officer at the airlock!” Leading Intelligence Specialist Kokinos came to the cockpit, a rare hint of anxiety in his voice.

“What?” He twisted to look at him.

“Please just come, sir.”

Joker grabbed his crutches and carefully made his way over. Raised voices floated back to him - the Buffer, Chou, and Dubyanksy, the two Marines who were on watch. He quickened his pace. Docked as they were, the airlock was open for ease of passage. Beyond the forms of the Marines in light battle dress, he could see four others - two CSec officers and two people in technician uniforms. The fuck.

“What’s going on?” he demanded.

“Sir!” Negulesco turned to him crisply. “These individuals,” she said it with as much disdain as he’d heard people use insults, “are attempting to come aboard despite being denied entry.”

Joker leaned on one crutch. “You know you can’t just waltz onto a warship, right?”

The lead CSec officer - a turian woman with bright red face paint - flared her mandibles. “This ship is being impounded by order of the Citadel Council. I have the paperwork here.”

“Like hell it is,” the Master Chief hissed, her face going a wrathful red. She looked like she might start breathing fire any moment.

For his part, Joker began to laugh, slapping his thigh. “Ever heard of sovereign immunity? You can’t seize a warship just like that.” He sobered. “Fuck off.”

The turian’s eyes flashed with irritation. “Your Department of Foreign Affairs has cooperated.”

“We don’t take orders from that Department,” he shot back. Udina being a snake? Who’d’ve thought!

“We must be allowed to come aboard,” she insisted, taking a step forward. She nearly walked right into Dubyansky who moved shockingly quickly for such a big man, putting himself in between her and the airlock. His hand fell to his pistol. The air was tense and still.

“You need to leave,” Joker told them seriously.

“And we have our standing orders - and giving up our ship isn’t part of those orders.”

“Enough!” Shepard’s voice carried, strong and clear over the undercurrent of anger as she strode into the airlock, Williams on her heel. “Stand down.”

“What?” the four of them chorused in unison.

Shepard’s shoulders were slumped almost imperceptibly and Williams’ eyes were bright with anger.

“Udina fucked us,” the Marine said succinctly.

“Stand down,” Shepard repeated. Dubyansky stepped back, staring between the Commander and the
CSec officers in incredulity. “Udina and the Council agreed to ground us. I assume you need the helm, officer.”

“Yes, Commander.” The CSec officer nervously flicked her mandibles.

“Follow me,” she said coldly. Joker followed her as quickly as he could.

“You’re letting them ground us?” he demanded.

Shepard’s jaw clenched. “I don’t have a choice, Joker.”

“Why don’t we just - leave?”

“They’ve already locked the docking apparatus,” she shot back before pointing to the helm. “There. Don’t touch anything else.”

“This is bullshit!” he watched as the technicians started putting their hands all over his workstation.

“I know.” She put a hand on his shoulder. “God, I know.”

“What about Saren?”

“They’re fortifying the Relays and the Citadel but refusing to send anyone to Ilos.” Ashley rolled her eyes. “I wish I could say I’m surprised.”

Shepard watched the technicians work like a hawk until a red warning symbol popped up over the navigational systems. “Done?”

“Uh”- the technician glanced at the angry faces surrounding him- “yes?”

“Get the fuck off my ship.” Shepard’s voice was frigid.

The anger of the Normandy’s crew was palpable. Shepard could almost see the red haze of it falling over the CIC, thick and cloying. She wanted to calm them, but her own emotions were heightened - and she had to try something. She passed a scowling Dubyansky to head into the comms room.

“Barret, connect me to the residence of Fleet Admiral Juliet Shepard, on Arcturus Station.”

She clasped her hands behind her back. She’d told herself when she’d signed her first Marine contract that she’d earn everything she got in the military - and she had, whatever anyone might say - but she thought that saving the galaxy might be an excuse on that one. Hopefully, Fleet Admiral Juliet Shepard (retired) would feel the same way.

“Juliet Shepard speaking.” The elder Shepard had been born on Earth, in the city of Melbourne, Australia, and she still carried the accent after years in space.

“Nan, it’s me,” she replied.

“Emmy? Oh, it’s good to hear your voice.”

With Izzy Shepard dead and Hannah Shepard often deployed, she’d spent a decent chunk of her childhood between two sets of grandparents. From Rosa and Joaquín Alves, she’d learnt Spanish, her culture and who Izzy had been. From Admiral Juliet Shepard and Commander Lucas Shepard, she’d learnt the weight of the Shepard name and love for the Alliance.
“I’m sorry I haven’t called often.”

“I imagine the war has kept you busy,” her grandmother replied dryly. “I assume you’re calling because of the rumours I’ve heard - that the Ambassador helped the Council ground you.”

“Yes, ma’am. I was hoping you could talk to your friends in Parliament - get the Prime Minister to see sense. I’ve found the location of the weapon Saren is after and the Council seems content to just let him take it.”

A moment of silence hung between them, and she could almost imagine her grandmother’s face, creased from years of a life well lived, calm eyes that overseen so much of her childhood. The same face she’d come to for advice more than a few times. But never favours like this.

“I’ll see what I can do,” Juliet said after a moment. “See if the opposition can put pressure on the government to intervene.”

“Thank you.” Shepard closed her eyes and breathed out.

“I can’t promise anything, Emmy,” Juliet Shepard added apologetically, “but I’ll do everything I can.”

“I appreciate it, nan.”

“Just keep the faith and don’t do anything rash. I love you.”

She wanted to protest that but after how she acted on Arcturus after Akuze…well. “Roger that. I love you too. Normandy out.”

Once the call ended, Shepard leant on the railing and dropped her head. They were running out of time. The Conservatives would cry foul, as would the Minister for Defence and Hackett, but politics took time. Saren was hurtling towards the Conduit with no one opposing him and by the time the Alliance government made enough noise to get the Normandy released it wouldn’t matter.

*I’ve lost,* she thought dully. She had never been meant to be a real Spectre, she saw that now - just an attack dog loosed to track down Saren. And God help her, she’d be okay with that if they’d just let her rip his throat out before they slapped the leash back on.

“Commander?” Barret’s voice was tentative. She glanced over her shoulder at the Comms Specialist, the young German woman twisting her hands together. Her blond hair was cut a little raggedly - the women on the Normandy had taken to cutting each other’s hair, and none of them were hairdressers.

“We’ve received a message from Captain Anderson. He’s asked you to meet him and Doctor T’Soni at Flux. He said it was urgent, ma’am.”

She left the Normandy with Tali by her side. A CSec technician was cooling her heels in the airlock under the hard-eyed glare of Corporal Dubyansky - they’d insisted on leaving someone to monitor the programs they’d loaded onto the ship’s systems, but Shepard had refused to let her stay on the bridge. She felt a shiver of petty enjoyment at the technician’s mixture of anxiety and boredom.

“Not that I am complaining, but why are you bringing me?” Tali asked as they passed through silver-metal corridors. “I thought you’d take Ash.”

Even with things - awkward - between them, she did feel better with Ashley at her six. But, “I need her to keep a rein on the Marines.” As angry as Williams was, she’d keep control of them. “Can you set a white noise signal so any bugs can’t overhear my conversation with Anderson?”
Luminous eyes turned to her. “Yes, I think so.”

“Thanks.”

Even at this time, Flux was packed. Shepard negotiated her way through the crowd, brushing past humans and turians and asari and salarians - even an elcor. The Citadel was a city without real time governed by the rising and setting of a sun, with only a short period of time per day where places like these closed. Mostly to give Citadel Security a break.

Anderson and Liara were sitting at a table in the corner, untouched drinks in front of them. Shepard slid into the seat across from her old captain. “Tali, can you-?”

The quarian already had her omnitool up. ”Done.”

“Thanks. What’d you need, sir?”

“We both know this isn’t over,” he said grimly. “You have to get to Ilos.”

She scowled. “I don’t know what I can do, sir. My family is trying to get the government to intervene, but politics takes time. And the Normandy is the only vessel that can get me to Ilos undetected. Any other ship will get shot out of the sky before I get within ten light-years of Saren.”

“Too much time. The order to lock the Normandy down was issued from the embassy - the Council doesn’t want to look like they’re just seizing an allied warship - and both the lock on her navigational systems and the lock on the dock can be rescinded from there. I can get to his computer and unlock it, then you get out of here like a bat out of hell and put an end to that bastard.”

“That’s mutiny, sir.”

“I know. It’ll end both of our careers and probably land us with lengthy prison sentences. Are you willing to pay that price?”

“This is a city of fourteen million people, Anderson. My career is a small price to pay.” She shook her head. “But you’ll be left holding the bag. We’re talking treason.”

“Like you said. Small price.” His eyes were deadly serious. She had to look away. Anderson had believed in her even at her worst - and now Shepard was going to leave him to face the consequences of her actions.

“I won’t forget this,” she said thickly.

He smiled, a little sadly. “Just make sure it counts.”

They shook hands, and she rose to her feet, bringing up her omnitool and sending a message for her department heads and the buffer to meet her in the briefing room when she arrived. And then, after a moment of hesitation, she sent a second to Ashley.

“Now I just have to convince a crew of 74 Alliance sailors and Marines to bloody mutiny and steal a frigate.”

Shepard was waiting for them when Pressly led the department heads, along with Negulesco, into the briefing room. He blinked at the sight of her. Shepard had removed her uniform and left it folded neatly on one of the chairs, the Star of Terra gleaming dully on top of it. She was just in the white t shirt they wore under their dress uniforms, the nasty acid scarring on her shoulder bared. Staff
Sergeant Williams was standing next to her without the crutches, her brown eyes alert.

Williams moved to the door, still limping, and locked it with her omnitool, the holo glowing a sullen red. Then she leant against it, crossing her arms. There was something intent and deadly in her expression.

Pressly looked from the Marine to their Commander. “What’s going on, ma’am?”

Shepard looked at each of them in turn, her expression guarded. “I’ve spoken to Anderson. We have to complete our mission and attack Ilos. The captain will unlock the Normandy’s controls from the embassy, after which I will take her into the Terminus.”

“That’s mutiny!” Pressly burst out. Beside him, the Supply Officer Lieutenant Tucks shifted from foot to foot uneasily. Chakwas simply folded her arms, eyeing their commanding officer with an inscrutable gaze.

Shepard’s eyes were steady and full of an implacable resolve that Pressly had to shiver at. This was the woman who had planted her feet in the dirt on Elysium and said no further. This was the woman who had carried her dying team sergeant for kilometres.

“I know. I can’t order any of you to take part in this; I can only ask - knowing what it will cost us all. Our careers, our freedom, potentially our lives. But if Saren gets the Conduit, everyone on this station - everyone in the galaxy - is at risk. It will be a thousand Eden Primes across dozens of sectors.

“The Council may believe that this is over, but it isn’t. Three good men died to get us here, to give us this one chance to stop Saren and Sovereign before it’s too late. I ask this of you not as your superior giving orders, but as a woman to good men and women. I can’t walk away. I can’t live with myself if I don’t do everything and anything possible.”

“Like I said before,” Williams said as if the alternative had never even occurred to her, “I’m with you.”

Pressly thought about his father, KIA on Shanxi. He thought about a long career and the people on this ship he’d come to care and respect - alien and human both. He thought about Constant City burning, civilians put on spikes. He made his mind up.

“I’m with you as well, ma’am.” His voice was strong. Inside a flutter of excitement unfurled. They were going to do it - they were going to steal a whole frigate!

“Thank you, X,” Shepard said softly.

“Count me in,” the Buffer nodded. “Screw the Council - and the fucking ambassador too. No one puts the Normandy out of commission.”

“If you are certain,” Chakwas said slowly.

“I am,” Shepard said firmly.

“Very well.”

Slowly each of the department officers began to nod, looking at each other and their Commander, anxiety firming into resolve.

Shepard breathed out, relief clear across her face for a handful of seconds. “Alright. This will have to
be done carefully. Tell your people discreetly. If anyone doesn’t want to go along with it, we need to know now. We’ll note anyone who protests in the ship’s log and disembark them just before departure, but we can’t risk the Council being warned.”

“My Marines will back you,” Williams said that with absolute conviction. “I’ll have two of them at the airlock and two at the ramp.”

“We’re going to have to break a lot of regulations and laws to get out of here,” Pressly pointed out, “We can’t start the reactor and thrusters until the last moment if we want to keep CSec in the dark. And then we’ll have to run straight for the Relay, traffic be damned. I can sort out the thruster burns needed - we’ll have to leave rushing through a heavily populated shipping lane up to Joker.”

The Chief Helmsman would be up for it. Pressly would bet his retirement money on it. The Flight Lieutenant had probably always fantasized about stealing a warship.

“If I start the drive core off the batteries rather than the reactor and skip roughly half the checklist, I can get us going in ten minutes with preparation,” Adams contemplated, dark humour colouring his voice. “We won’t have to run the normal safety tests either, so we’ll just have to hope the Normandy is going to be kind to us.”

“So long as we have navigation, thrusters, and the drive core I’m happy,” Shepard said frankly, “we can worry about everything else once we’re through that Relay.” She looked around at them all. “Alright. We all know what we have to do to get this ship ready to go at the last minute. Let’s do it.” She hesitated for a moment, and when she spoke, her voice was thick with sincerity. “And thank you all for your faith in me and our mission. I can’t do any of this without you.”

“It’s the right thing to do, ma’am,” Pressly said, rock-solid faith settling within him. Perhaps he should have been more afraid, but he found he wasn’t.

This was what it meant to be a naval officer. Duty above everything else. They had a job to do.

Ashley loitered near the airlock, playing some omnitool game to pass the time. Abby kept sending her requests over the app, and while she wasn’t super into building games, it was in some ways a way to communicate. She might not get a lot of vidcom time to talk with Abby face to face, but she could use a bit of a data to leave her some resources she needed or build something.

Particularly now she was probably going to spend a while in a cell - along with the rest of the Normandy crew. Not a one of them had declined to stay aboard. Even the fucking cooks were staying. Kanu seemed concerned they might starve while committing treason.

“You just going to stand there?” asked Joker. There was a sharp edge in his voice, but she kept her face straight, like she couldn’t bleed her with it. They’d barely spoken since before Virmire. She’d been busy. And maybe she hadn’t wanted to be blamed for what had happened to Kaidan when the voice in her head already did plenty of that.

“Yup.” She didn’t look up from her game.


She glanced up at him - and at Grenado who was trying very hard to look like she wasn’t in the cockpit. “I get it. He was my friend too.”

“You’re one too. I guess.”
She grinned. “I think that’s the nicest thing you’ve said to me, Joker. Sure you’re not running a fever or something?”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. Don’t get used to it. Did you guys have fun last night?”

Ashley still. She remembered the heat of Shepard’s mouth on hers, then the sting of her sudden retreat. She got it, she did. It still hurt. Just like the guilt buried in the dark of the other woman’s eyes whenever she looked at Ash now did.

Emilia Shepard was her commanding officer, and there were regulations for a reason. It was for the best.

“Yeah.”

“Cool.”

Her comm hummed in her ear with Shepard’s familiar contralto, “Katherine. I say again, Katherine.”

“Talk to you later, Joker,” Ash drawled and pushed forward, through the airlock. The technician jumped up at her entry, practically hiding in the corner from Corporal Dubyansky and PFC Fredricks. Dubyansky began to smile. It was a positively evil smile, and Ashley had to resist the urge to smirk right back.

“You need to leave,” she told the technician.

“I’ve been over this already-”

“I wasn’t asking,” she said pleasantly and hoisted him up by the front of his shirt with a strain of gene modded muscles, walked over to the outer door of the airlock and physically tossed him off the Normandy.

“Hey!” It was the turian CSec officer from before, starting to run towards them with three of her fellow officers.

“Sayonara motherfuckers!” shouted Fredricks and pulled a metallic something from his belt, throwing it at them. It bounced to a stop at their feet, and Ashley instinctively turned away in the moment before she heard the telltale ringing of a flashbang going off.

The CSec officers went down like drunkards tripping over their own feet, clutching at eyes and ears. A second later, the outer airlock door slammed shut. Under her feet, she could feel the deep rumble as the ship woke up.

She looked over at the younger Marine. “A flashbang? Really?”

“Non-lethal,” he said, completely unapologetic. “If I’m going to get court-martialled-”

“If you take this as carte blanche to break every reg under the sun, I’ll airlock you myself,” she promised and turned to walk back into the CIC.

The Normandy was free again.

Saren, you son of a bitch, we’re coming for you.

“I’ve wanted to do that for a long time,” Anderson remarked to Udina. The latter was still slumped at
his desk, thoroughly concussed. He didn’t hate Udina, not exactly. He found him exasperating to the extreme, but they were both patriots in their own ways. But that was the thing with focusing on the big picture to the exclusion of all else; sometimes you missed the details.

And that punch had been the most satisfying of his career.

The door slid open. Two young Marine security guards stood there, with CSec behind them. Their eyes darted between Udina and Anderson, mouths slack.

“It’s alright, son,” he patted the corporal on the shoulder as he passed. “The Ambassador will be fine.” He extended his wrists to the nearest CSec officer. “I won’t resist.”

The handcuffs clicked into place, cold metal against his skin.

“Humans,” hissed the turian.

Anderson allowed himself a smile. He’d done what he’d needed to. The Normandy was free - an arrow from the bow, a bullet from the gun. There’d be no stopping Emilia Shepard now.

“Uh, sir? We’re being hailed by Citadel control. They’re saying that they have a rogue departure - the Normandy is leaving without authorisation. They think Commander Shepard has seized it.” Communications Specialist First Class Josephs sounded faintly horrified.

Rear Admiral Dimitry Mikhailovich looked up from the plot of his ships, surrounded by the bustle of the Beijing’s CIC. His four cruisers and ten frigates had been ordered to return to the Fifth Fleet in the Andura Sector, to ready for battle with the geth. The flotilla was creeping ever closer to the Relay, waiting for clearance to jump. They had priority over civilian shipping, but there were enough ships in the Citadel’s vicinity to make maneuvering an entire flotilla through a difficult proposition.

He glanced back down just in time to see the Normandy’s IFF marker blink up. The frigate was going much faster than she should have been in such close proximity to other ships, weaving in between the shipping lanes, clearing freighters by only metres. It was reckless and admittedly a little impressive.

And behind the rogue frigate -

“They’ve sent turian destroyers after her.”

“Yessir.”

As far as Mikhailovich was concerned, Commander Emilia Shepard was an arrogant, insubordinate renegade who only had a career after getting her entire unit killed because her grandmother had been the Fleet Commander at the time. She’d only proven it by this latest stunt of leading her crew in a mutiny. She’d clearly thought herself clever in avoiding his inspection of what was rightfully one of his ships.

But.

Admiral Hackett was not an idiot. They had their disagreements, but Hackett had put him in command of the 63rd and the task force to hunt down the Prothean artifacts because he knew he got results. He had ordered the flotilla back to the fleet at this moment for a reason. And besides, it was just embarrassing how those paper pushers had rolled over like good dogs as soon as the Council had
“Tell the frigates to spread out,” he told his executive officer. “Practice screening the cruisers.”

Tham blinked at him. “That will put us in between the Citadel Fleet and the Normandy-” He broke off the nasty smile spreading across Mikhailovich’s face. “Aye, sir.”

The smile stayed as he watched the blue symbols of his frigates fan out around the Beijing, Darwin, New Delhi, and Moscow. In a battle it would form an interlocking point defence shield of sorts, to protect the cruisers from fighters and torpedos. Right now it happened to block the trajectory of the turian destroyer rocketing after the escaping Normandy.

“We’re being hailed, sir.”

“Put it through.”

“Beijing, you are impeding the pursuit of a criminal craft. Please pull in your frigates.”

“We are practicing battle maneuvers for when we fight the geth while you sit safely at the Citadel,” he replied belligerently.

“You are in the way of a pursuit. You will pull in your frigates and assist in the apprehension of the SSV Normandy.” The stern way the turian commander spoke sounded like he thought himself a real hard man. But Mikhailovich was a Rear Admiral - he didn’t intend to be spoken to like that by a mere Commander!

“Last time I checked,” he said nastily, “you lost the First Contact War, and I don’t take orders from you.”

“I will make a complaint to your ambassador!”

“Please do. Meanwhile, I will be doing actual warfighting.”

“The Normandy is through the Relay.”

He smiled. “Put us on a course to jump. We have geth to scrap, yes?”

**CODEX**

**Hierarchy Army Officer Ranks:**

Cadet: an officer still in training, sent to a unit for hands-on experience and education. Army officer candidates are chosen from boot camp trainees who display leadership and/or technical potential. Turian officer training is longer than that for non-officers (or humans) and begins at 17. Cadets may be given composite ranks if acting with authority within the unit, such as Cadet-Corporal for a cadet acting as a team leader.

Junior Lieutenant: a fully qualified officer. Generally leads a platoon.

Senior Lieutenant: usually acts as a company executive officer or leads a specialised platoon.

Captain: commands a company or leads a special forces team.

Major: battalion executive officer or leads a specialised company.
Lieutenant Colonel: battalion commander or regiment executive officer.

Colonel: regiment commander or brigade executive officer.

Brigade General: commands a brigade or serves as a division second in command.

Major General: commands a division or serves as a Legion second in command.

Legate General: commands a legion (equivalent of a human corps).

General: commands a field army, consisting of one or more legions and support.

Marshall: occupies General Staff positions or commands operations across a theatre, often consisting of more than 500,000 troops.

Chapter End Notes

I've been considering doing an index with a character list and some definitions. Let me know if ya'll think it'd be helpful.
“So.” Lance Corporal Waaberi said in between bites of her hopefully-meat-stuff. “We’re all mutineers now. I feel like we need some eye patches or a skull and crossbones flag to hang in the CIC.”

“I don’t think piracy is what the Commander has in mind,” Tali said from beside Garrus. The five of them - Garrus, Tali, Waaberi, Dubyansky, and Glowstick - were arranged across a handful of crates in the Kennel. He wasn’t sure they were really supposed to be eating down here, but no one had come to yell at them for it yet.

“I’m just glad we didn’t blow up,” Glowstick grimaced, her broad face twisting, “starting the ship up like that? With no diagnostics and ignoring half our procedures? I’m pretty sure I have about twenty new grey hairs.”

“I told you it would work,” Tali teased.

“Some of us are less comfortable with winging it than you quarians apparently,” she muttered, spearing a piece of goo.

“Come on, Hudson, where’s your sense of adventure?” Garrus twisted open a bottle of horrific tasting dextro Tupari, his subvocals humming with amusement.

“Adventure is best left to places other than a nuclear reactor.”

“Jaz is probably very angry,” Dubyansky mused. “Almost as angry as my wife.”

Waaberi smiled, the widest smile Garrus had seen from the normally cheery Marine since before Virmire, leaning back so far he was worried for a moment that she might fall right off her crate. “Oh yes. He’s probably blowing up my emails already. ‘You bitches left me outta the mutiny! I thought we were friends!’”

“He’s probably going to uninvite us to his mother’s dinners,” Dubyansky said very solemnly.

“I think it’s probably a moot point,” Garrus pointed out, “since we’ll all be sitting in jail cells after this.”

“What, the Hierarchy won’t break you out?” Hudson looked up from her meal. There was a nervous energy to the Leading Nuclear Technician. She couldn’t sit still and fidgeted like she couldn’t quite grasp the fact that they’d stolen the _Normandy_ and absconded with her.

He flicked his mandibles. “The Hierarchy is…less than fond of mutiny. If anything, they’ll complain the Alliance is treating me too leniently.”

Casti Vakarian would be furious. _I told you, boy, that your recklessness would get you into something one day we couldn’t get you out of it._

“Damn,” Hudson whistled.

“And yet, you are still here, my friend.” Dubyansky raised his own drink.
“Yes, well, you do need someone who can shoot straight.”

“Don’t let Williams hear you say that.”

They looked up as one at the tread of boots to see Commander Shepard exiting the elevator. Her uniform was without a crease, light glinting off the star on her chest and the dull gold stripes on her shoulders. There was a tense energy to each movement, like a shatha about to strike. Looking at her, this human officer he’d known only for months, who’d challenged him and inspired him and fought alongside him, he knew they were doing the right thing. Saren had to be stopped, and Shepard wouldn’t rest until it was done. And Garrus would be at her six until then.

He’d thought she was fighting with one hand tied behind her back. Maybe that was what had led Saren astray - thinking the ends always justified the means and never counting the cost to everyone else around you. The rules aren’t infallible, Garrus, but neither am I. Neither are you. And you can never take a bullet back.

“Ma’am,” they murmured.

“I just wanted to say that I’m proud of all of you.” Her eyes flickered between them all. “None of you had to come with me, risk your lives and careers like this.”

“Where you go, we go, ma’am,” Dubyansky said, crossing his arms.

“Yeah,” Waaberi added, “can’t let you solo all those dreadnoughts, yes?”

Shepard blinked a few times, swallowing, before she spoke. “You’ve all done me an incredible honour. I won’t forget it.”

“We’re going to get Saren,” Garrus said confidently. “And you will have led us to him.”

“Just another mission, Skipper,” Waaberi said. “But hey when we all get court-martialed, can you just say I was asleep in my bunk when you stole the ship?”

Shepard smiled. “I think Fredricks throwing a flashbang at CSec won’t do you Marines much good.”

“Goddamn Freddie!” Amina raised her voice. “Always fucking things up!”

“Fuck you too Waaberi!” Freddie shouted back from over near the Mako.

Shepard shook her head affectionately. “Get some rest before we hit Ilos, guys.”

“Commander,” Garrus burst out when it seemed she was going to walk away. She stopped and turned back, raising an eyebrow. “You know how turians - we believe in spirits.” When she nodded, a little quizzically, he forged on. “It’s not like human ghosts or gods, it’s the embodiment of a unit or a ship or a planet’s collective purpose, its accomplishments and honour. And those who’ve died in its service.”

There was a pause, Shepard’s face solemn.

Tali clasped her hands together. “We used to have something similar, just with our ancestors. We still thank them often.”

Garrus flicked his mandibles. “Their actions meant your species survived. That’s worth remembering.”

Tali’s mask tilted towards him and not for the first time Garrus wished he could see her face. When
she spoke, her tone was pleased. “I think so too.”

“The Normandy is young, ma’am, but it’s already accomplished a lot. If there’s any ship with a spirit moving within it, it’s this one.” He didn’t know what Nick and Kaidan had believed, and Mohamed had followed the same religion as Waaberi, but if anyone deserved to join their ship’s spirit, it was those three. “I was hoping I could…”

“Pray?”

“It’s… You close your eyes and focus on your purpose, and if the spirit hears you, it can give you its strength, its inspiration.”


Garrus bowed his head and closed his eyes, tamping down his nervousness. He listened to the hum of the ship and the breathing of the Marines and sailors around him. He thought of his mother, calm and tall and beautiful, her face marked with blue as she reached out to the spirits of her Legion for strength.

“Spirit of Normandy, walk beside us as we go into battle. Give us the strength and purity of purpose so we may not falter in our duty. And if we should fall, let it be in the service of the Cause and take our spirits into yours.”

He’d’ve added *die for the cause* like they had in his legion, but the last time he’d said something like that, he’d got an askance look from Jaz and a *dude, that’s a bit fucking dark don’t you think?*

When he opened his eyes, Shepard smiled at him and extended her hand. He held out his as well, and she shook it firmly. “I’m glad you’re here, Garrus.” She looked around at all of them. “Get some sleep before we hit Ilos. I know half of you are hung over.”

Old Iron herself slid through the dark of space, surrounded by flashes of light: close to a hundred ships bearing Alliance blue on their flanks - eighty-four warships including the carriers *Marie Curie* and *Joan of Arc* who out sized the *Everest* by a hundred metres and a variety of auxiliary ships to support the fleet. Admiral Steven Hackett stood in the dreadnought’s flag CIC overlooking his tactical net, his ships showing as flashes of heat on the sensors and as blue symbols on the BFT. The entire Fifth Fleet, in one place. And a few light years away two-thirds of the First Fleet and the whole Third Fleet had also gathered together.

It was more ships in one place than Hackett could recall seeing before, and he’d been the gunnery officer aboard the cruiser *London* during Drescher’s attack on the 33rd Far Fleet.

“Do we want to task frigates to search for her, sir?” Commander Frankston asked him.

“If the Normandy doesn’t want to be found, we’ve better chance of finding Lady Liberty’s head,” he replied dismissively.

“You don’t seem surprised, sir,” Frankston observed.

Hackett didn’t answer. *Hackett’s Hatchet*. He’d used Emilia Shepard because it was necessary. He knew her better than anyone else in the Navy, excepting her mother and Captain Anderson, and those two had too much sentiment about the girl to be objective. Not a maverick, per se, but she had an independent streak - that was why she was an N7. Sometimes with those, you had to loosen the reins a little. He’d told Udina that, but he hadn’t listened. A pity. Now they’d have to court-martial seventy of the Alliance’s best.
“Put out an advisory,” he ordered. “The Normandy is to be ordered to heave to for boarding if spotted and her crew put under guard. That’s all.”

“Aye aye, sir,” Frankston murmured, turning away.

“Get me a call to the Adelaide,” he added shortly. After the SSV Vancouver had been damaged in the Battle of Armstrong, the 50th Scout Flotilla had limped back to Arcturus Station, where its flagship remained in dry dock to repair the damage from its clash with the geth. Commodore Hannah Shepard had moved her flag to the light cruiser Adelaide.

“On your console, sir,” reported the comms sailor.

“Commodore.”

“Sir, How can I be of assistance?” Hannah sounded only quizzical - either she hadn’t heard or she was pretending that she hadn’t. Hannah had always been very good at poker.

“We have a problem,” he said mildly, “Your daughter has led her crew in a mutiny and stolen the SSV Normandy, before fleeing into the Terminus.”

There was a beat of dead silence.

“Sir?”

“I think there’s some that would like to write her off as a Terminus pirate wannabe, but that’s not really Emilia’s style, now is it?”

“Is this a joke?”

“I’m afraid not. BuShips is having a meltdown as we speak.”

“I didn’t raise her to be a mutineer,” Hannah whispered, horrified.

“We’ve had to put out an arrest order. I thought you should know.”

“I…thank you, sir.”

“Everest out.”

Her gear spread in front of Ashley - bits of armour and webbing and three guns and two knives and an omnitool - covering the top of the dull metal mess hall table. The ship was quiet around her, the drive core humming like a song just beyond hearing. Most of the crew had turned in for the night, leaving just enough crew on watch to keep the ship running in FTL. Shepard wanted all hands on deck when they got to Ilos.

Boldly they rode and well,

Into the jaws of Death,

Into the mouth of hell

She hoped their lone strike against Ilos would have a better result than the Charge of the Light Brigade.

Ash glanced at Shepard's door. The Skipper had gone in a couple of hours after doing one of her
circuits of the ship and not come back out. She'd smiled at her, shook her hand and thanked her for her help during the mutiny, but there was a terseness between them. Like calm water before the storm.

Ash didn't want it to be awkward. They clicked, on the battlefield and off. But the memory lingered.

She looked back at her gear and picked up her unloaded pistol, running her fingers over smooth metal and plastic. She'd gone over not only her own kit but that of her Marines too. It wasn't that she thought they were fuck-ups, but another pair of eyes never hurt. And they were hers. She was going to do a better job of being in charge this time.

The elevator door hissed open and she looked up to see Gung Ho Draven.

"What're you doing, Boss?"

"Just checking my gear."

"Pretty sure you've already done that a coupla times, Ash," the other Marine pointed out.

"Yeah, well, won't hurt. Already written my emails to my family." A multitude of *I love you* and *please forgive me, but I couldn't let my friends walk into this without me.*

“This really how you want to spend what might be your last night alive?” the other sergeant asked dryly.

Ashley frowned at her. “You should be asleep, Draven, like everyone else. What are you up to?”

Gung Ho smiled, a touch cheekily. “Adams gave up his cabin for the night.”

She blinked. An officer quite deliberately helping two NCOs circumvent regulations about sex while deployed? It always happened, whatever the regs said, particularly when couples were within visiting distance, but she preferred to pretend she didn't know shit about what the Dravens got up to in the goddamn storage closet. "You shouldn't have told me that, you know."

“We're gonna get court-martialled anyway,” Draven said with a shrug. “Might as well spend tonight with my wife."

"That's everyone's favourite goddamn excuse today," she muttered. "Well. Enjoy yourself?"

"I will," Draven hesitated and then pushed off. "Don't wear yourself out with all that fun you're having, Williams."

"Yeah, yeah."

When Draven was gone, she was alone again. She checked the pistol one last time and then slid it back into its holster.

*This really how you want to spend what might be your last night alive?*

She looked back at Shepard's door. Even if it was just helping her plan for the operation...

Fuck it. She had nothing left to lose anyway. She rose to her feet and packed up her kit. Once it was stowed below in the armoury, she found herself standing in front of the cabin door.

Shepard was bent over her desk, palms against the metal surface, staring intently at an array of datapads and her laptop. She straightened when Ashley entered the room, turning to face her. Her
expression was inscrutable.

"Hey. Burning the midnight oil?"

"Something like that. I hate flying blind, and it feels a bit like that's all I've been doing since I boarded the Normandy," Shepard replied, frowning.

"I don’t think anyone saw the Reapers coming, Skipper."

Shepard's mouth curved in a wry smile. "I guess not. You don't need to call me that, Ash." She’d missed her calling her Ash, and it'd been less than 36 hours. "I'm a traitor now. I probably shouldn't be wearing this uniform, let alone this star."

Her finger brushed the gold on her pocket, and she looked deflated. Shepard had been in the Alliance military for eleven years, dedicated herself to it. And now…

It wasn’t easy walking away from your life’s work.

“We had to do this,” Ash said softly, fervently. “There was no other way. You know that.” And then she smiled. “Besides, you’ll always be the Skipper to me. Oh Captain, my Captain.”

“Whitman, huh? And you call Kaidan the nerd.” Shepard stopped, looking stricken.

A pulse of grief burned in her chest, but she smiled through it. She didn’t mean to forget the good times with Kaidan. “You’re the one who can tell what poem I’m talking about off one line.”

“If you call me ‘Oh Captain, my Captain’ in the field, I’ll kick your ass,” Shepard deadpanned.

“You could try,” Ash shot back cockily. “I think I have you figured out now, Shepard, and I’ve got a few tricks of my own.”

“Is that so?” Shepard’s smirk was slow. Ash was pretty sure Shepard could read the dictionary and it’d be hot, especially when her voice got low and smoky like that.

“Why don’t you find out?” she challenged and something dangerous flashed in the Commander’s eyes - and then Shepard seemed to realise they were treading into hazardous territory and looked away. She barely resisted the urge to sigh. “Look, Shepard. I’m not a word person. Other people say what I mean better than I do. Hell - we’re mutineers, sailing a stolen warship into the most hostile system in the galaxy. Just call us humanity's best and brightest.”

Shepard sighed, hooking her thumbs through her belt loops. “There’s a part of me convinced that I’m just going to get you all killed. I keep telling myself we’re doing the right thing.” She shook her head slightly. “I don’t believe me yet.”

“Believe me then,” Ashley said strongly, Shepard’s eyes rising back to meet hers. “You’re doing the right thing. We’ll get home again, Shepard. You’ll get us home.”

Shepard searched her face for a long moment. “Thank you. You…you should be with your guys. I’ll be alright.”

“I think you know why I’m here, Skipper,” she breathed out softly.

Shepard stared at her. “It’s…it’s exhausting sometimes. Trying to be the person everyone expects me to be.”

“You could put that down tonight,” Ash said boldly, despite the loud thump of her pulse in her ears.
It wasn’t every day you propositioned your commanding officer.

“Trying the frontal assault, Williams?”

“Depends. You giving ground?” she shot back.

Shepard leant back against the desk. “I don’t know if I should.”

“What are you afraid of?”

“Besides the obvious?”

“Skipper,” she said patiently, “I think we both know that’s a bit of a cop-out. We’ve already stolen a multi-billion credit warship. I think fraternization is gonna be pretty low down on the list of charges, don’t you?”

“I can’t shut up the voice in my head,” Shepard sighed, shoulders slumping. “The one telling me that this is wrong. That there’s distance between commander and subordinates for a reason.”

“Is that what you want?” Ash asked softly.

Shepard’s hands wrapped around the edge of her desk, the muscles of her forearms taut, but she was looking at Ashley’s lips. “No. I don’t always want to lead you, Ash. Sometimes I want to stand beside you.”

“That sounds like an admission of something, Skipper,” Ashley hummed, grinning.

Shepard rolled her eyes. “Shut up.”

“Look, Skipper,” she said, sobering, “if you don’t want to do this, we can just go through reports, or I can go back to my bunk. I’m not going to get all offended. I respect you - as a friend and as an officer. That’s not going to change.”

Even if I have stupid hearts-and-sparkles feelings for you.

She took a step back - but Shepard’s hand shot out, fingers grasping her forearm. “I don’t want you to go.” Shepard looked like she was struggling with herself before she sighed. “It’s less about whether we can. It’s more whether I should. I’m your Commander. That’s a pretty big power imbalance. The last thing I want is to pressure you or take advantage of you.”

“Shepard. Emilia,” Ash said very patiently, because as much as part of her just wanted to grab her and go do you want sex is a yes or no answer, dammit, Shepard wouldn’t be Shepard without her code. “I came to you. I’m here because I want to be and because I trust you. I’ve spent my whole life fighting to get what I want. To get it done, I had to bury a lot of things. During that whole time, not even once did I feel like I was worth what I was fighting for. You make me feel good enough.”

She wanted to look away after that admission, but Shepard was looking at her with all that trademark intensity like she was something - special - instead of just some jarhead.

“It kills me that people ever made you feel that way.” She brushed her hand down her arm, sliding her thumb across the back of Ash’s hand. “You make me feel human.”

“Is that a yes?”

Shepard smiled, soft and slow. “C’mere.”
“Hmm,” she pretended to consider it, “nah. I think you should come here.”

Emilia took a step towards her, dark eyes intent, her hands finding the sides of Ashley’s face and pulling her in until they were kissing again. Slow and deep and sure, as if Shepard had found every one of her doubts and tossed them aside.

Ash pressed into her until Shepard bumped into her desk.

“My desk, really?” Shepard murmured into her mouth, even as her hands rose to the back of Ashley’s head, tugging gently until her hair came down. For all her previous anxieties, Shepard touched her with a firm sureness and desire, her lips and tongue hungry even when Ashley got her to give ground.

Ash smiled against her and nipped at her lip. She ran her hands down the front of Shepard’s uniform jacket, feeling the cool metal of her name badge and command star, the way she breathed in sharply as Ash’s touch passed over her ribs and abs.

And then she began to undo the buttons as Shepard’s hand fist ed in her long, dark hair.

Shepard woke up gasping for air, twisting in her sheets, the ship’s dry cool air washing over her bare skin. All she could think of was fire and ruin and things that lurked in the dark. Lying on hard rock with a dead weight on her and the skin of her shoulder bubbling away and a dark shadow above.

That’s not how it happened. That’s not -

“Shepard? Hey-”

“Ash,” she murmured. It was still weirdly a surprise to find another woman - this woman - in her bed. Naked and shameless, reaching for her - callused fingers brushing the small of her back.

She sat up and swung her feet off the side of her bed, pressing the knuckles of her fist to her forehead as she tried to regulate her breathing.

“Are you alright?”

She gulped in a breath. She felt sensitive all over, like Ashley had stripped her of more than just her clothes, a few dull pulses when teeth or fingers had left a mark on her shoulders and thighs. Ash kissed like Shepard had expected she might - all firm directness and passion.

“Yeah. Just - stupid nightmares.”

There was a moment of hesitation, and then Ash slung an arm around her shoulders like she had when they’d talked about Akuze. Shepard leant into her, long hair brushing her cheek. Part of Shepard wanted to stay like this. Another part of her wanted to pull her back into bed, search out the scars and softness she’d discovered with her lips and hands. They both had their share of scars, records of things seen and done and survived.

They didn’t have the time. They might never. She hadn’t even intended to fall asleep, but then she’d had Ash in her arms, and well.

Sooner or later someone would come looking for the acting MARDET commander or the ship’s captain.

“What about?”
She rubbed her face. “I watch the Prothean empire burn every night. A thousand worlds being murdered. Every fucking night. And they call out to me, keep telling me that the Reapers are coming. It’s like they stuffed all of their anger and their rage and their grief into those beacons, and now it’s in me.” Her voice cracked. “I don’t know if I’ll ever be free of it.”

“Shit, Skipper,” Ash sighed, tightening her grip. “We’ll stop Saren. I know we will.”

“I don’t think it’s going to stop there.”

“No. And while I’m not sure how much use me and my rifle will do against two kilometre tall death squids, I’m game if you are.”

Shepard laughed and pressed a kiss to the side of her mouth. “That was almost optimism out of you, Williams.”

“Don’t get used to it.”

Shepard wanted to kiss her again. So she did, pulling her in with a hand on her cheek, kissed her until they were both breathless.

“Commander Shepard, your presence is requested on the bridge.”

She pulled away with a frown. “Goddamn timing.”

“I should go anyway,” Ashley said, her eyes glinting. “Get to the bridge. I’ve got other weapons to check out.”

Shepard stared at her. “That was awful, Williams. You should be ashamed of that line.”

Ashley just smirked at her and stood, stretching. Shepard watched the shift of muscle under smooth skin shamelessly, finally able to look as long as she wanted, to admit to both of them what she was feeling. It was like breathing out after holding your breath for a small eternity.

They dressed quickly and efficiently, putting on their uniforms and decorum both. Part of Shepard couldn't quite believe what she’d done in the past twenty-four hours. Knocking over those regs one by one, huh?

Insubordination? Check.

Mutiny? Check.

Fraternisation? Check.

Ashley, dressed and looking every inch the excellent Marine NCO she was, paused by her door until Shepard went to her and gave her one last kiss. Slow this time. Exploratory. Vulnerable. You know me and I know you.

“How’s the leg and shoulder?” Shepard asked, with a hint of guilt. She’d tried to mind her gunshot wounds, be gentle, but Ashley hadn’t had much interest in her hesitations.

“It’s fine,” she replied with an affectionate head shake. “I’ll see you in a bit.”

“Roger that.”

Soon, she found herself climbing the stairs to CIC, the deck full of her crew hard at work.

“Ma’am.” Her XO seemed disturbingly gleeful.

“You wanted to be notified when we were two hours out,” Negulesco said.

She nodded. It almost felt like they ought to see it on her - see the fingerprints Ashley had left behind on her skin. “Have we launched the drones?”

“Yes, ma’am. I’ve been trying to avoid pinging,” Lieutenant Rodriguez, the CIC officer, explained. The Normandy crew had learnt the old lessons of the bygone submarines - that when trying to stay hidden it was best to collect as much data as possible via passive sensors and not risk giving away your position via active LADAR pings. “Obviously without LADAR our targeting solutions aren’t great, but we’ve got enough we can take some educated guesses.”

“I can’t hit shit, ma’am,” Guns complained.

“From what we’re looking at, we don’t want to,” Pressly pointed out.

“Hit me,” Shepard sighed.

Rodriguez turned to her holo display, the light resolving into an image of a familiar planet and blots of ret above it. “It’s a fleet, ma’am. At least one geth dreadnought, several heavy cruisers, and two large transports. You can fit an army in those.”

“What about Sovereign?” Shepard asked sharply.

Rodriguez and Pressly exchanged looks. “It’s not here, Commander.”

She rubbed the back of her neck. Maybe she’d been wrong. Why would Saren be here and not Sovereign? But no, the geth were at Ilos and she’d chosen her path. She’d get to the Conduit or die trying.

And if she’d gambled wrong, they’d deal with that later. Her crew needed to believe that she believed.

“Two transport ships...that’s a lot of geth for an unoccupied planet,” she mused.

“The MARDET can’t deal with that many,” the Buffer pointed.

Shepard smiled wryly. “Wasn’t intending on a frontal assault, Buffer.”

“Roger that.”

They drifted in a gaggle up to the cockpit, where Joker and Frag were ensconced in their pilot and co-pilot stations respectively. The normally laconic pilot looked deeply involved in what he was doing. Shepard didn’t pretend to know the ins and outs of it. She was a little surprised to see Liara up here as well as the bridge crew - looking closely at sensor information.

“And the drone doing the planetary scans?”

“Ilos has some signs of Prothean habitation,” Liara responded. “Not to the extent of Feros, but still, there are significant ruins present. The geth are congregated in one area, around this compound.”

The asari brought up imaging of the planet’s surface, highlighting one area.
“We’re getting some sort of eezo reading from the area,” Pressly added.

“Lot of vegetation and buildings,” Shepard mused. “Doesn’t look like we have room to get the ship down.”

“No way,” Joker agreed. “I can get you down under the fleet’s notice, but even I can’t fit her into any of those courtyards.”

Heavy, booted footsteps heralded Ashley’s arrival. “Ma’am, just letting you know everyone’s good to go and the Mako is ready to roll.”

Shepard felt very aware of her, where she stood and the distance between them. “Thank you, Sergeant. Pressly, where’s the nearest LZ we could get the Mako into?”

“It’s two klicks from the facility,” he admitted.

Ashley shook her head immediately. “Ma’am, we’re already too far behind Saren. We don’t have the time to negotiate two klicks in that sort of terrain, even in the Mako.”

She was right. Two kilometres could easily turn into hours in an area like this.

“Agreed.”

“You need at least a hundred metres to do a Mako drop. The most I can find near the geth is twenty.”

“We have to try,” Liara insisted.

“There’s nothing to try, Liara. It’s suicide,” Ashley snapped. “We need a different landing zone.”

“There is no other landing zone!” Pressly’s voice rose.

“Enough,” Shepard cut through the babble of voices. They all looked at her, sheepish expressions forming. “I know we’re all stressed, but arguing with each other gets us nowhere. I need you all clear-headed.”

“Aye, ma’am.”

“Aye aye, Skipper.”

“I can do it.” Joker’s voice was low and calm and steady.

Shepard dropped a hand to the back of his seat. The pilot didn’t look at her, his eyes set resolutely forward. “Joker?”

“I can do it.”

“You’re crazy,” Frag muttered.

“We’ve got this, Commander.”

“Allright. That’s what we’ll do then.” She turned to Pressly, studied his well-worn, loyal face. He wasn’t going to like her next orders. “Keep the Normandy safe, no matter what you hear on the comms. If anything goes wrong, it’s unlikely you’ll be able to extract us. If you lose contact with us for an hour, I want you to run for the Relay and Hackett.”

He recoiled. “You want me to leave you all down there?”
Ashley was silent beside her. Shepard nodded. “If it comes down to it, yes.”

His shoulders slumped. “Aye aye, ma’am.”

She touched his shoulder. “It might not come to that. But if it does...I’m leaving my ship in the best hands possible.” She dropped her hand and looked between Ashley and Liara. “C’mon. We need to get below.”

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CODEX ENTRY

RQ-45 Deep Space Reconnaissance Unmanned Vehicle (DRUV): the immensity of space often necessitates the use of unmanned scout drones and probes, both for civilian purposes - looking for minerals, mapping out potential hazards and determining the habitability of planets - and for military purposes - the detection of enemy vessels and munitions.

There are usually three types of recon drones carried by warships, especially frigates; simple, cheap probes usually not meant to be recovered, in-atmospheric drones for the collection of terrestrial information for ground troops and more sophisticated deep space drones which can be retrieved.

The RQ-45 is one of the latter. A product of General Atomics, the drone is used by the Systems Alliance Navy, Army and Customs Service. Without many of the systems needed for a ship, such as life support, the drone’s heat signature is much smaller and easier to conceal. This is particularly useful for a frigate which may be hiding somewhere and not wishing to use its active LADAR to gather more intel on the enemy.

The RQ-45 has onboard thermal, radiation and eezo sensors, as well as a LADAR system. The drone can be directed by its parent ship by a drone controller or can be guided by its virtual intelligence on pre-programmed paths. It can also enter a ‘stealth mode’, which while not true stealth like Normandy class, powers down nonessential systems to further decrease its thermal footprint.

R is the code for reconnaissance and Q is the code for unmanned systems.

A Hastings class frigate generally carries ten RQ-45 DRUVs.

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Chapter End Notes

Index added with character list and glossary of slang/terms. If there's anything you'd like to see added, lemme know.
The air was still and warm, and Staff Sergeant Ashley Williams was already sweating beneath her armour as they made their way deeper into the ruins, bounding in fire teams towards a detected power source. Shepard was in a hurry, but not enough to be stupid about it. They moved in silence beyond necessary commands.

It felt like she was walking in a cemetery. The structures around them were grandiose, all sheer ancient stonework choked by knotted plant life, and covered in green moss that came off when she touched it. And then there were the statues.

“Art,” breathed Liara, in awe. Ashley stopped beside her, warily watching the entryways. The statue had its head bowed as in prayer or hopelessness, a cascade of tentacle-like appendages covering half its face and down its chest.

It was pretty creepy, to tell the truth. Part of her was wondering when the ghosts would come out to play.

“It’s incredible,” Liara said, enthused and probably itching for a trowel or whatever archaeologists used.

“My name is Ozymandias, king of kings;
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!” Ashley murmured, craning her head back to look up at the stretch of ancient stone above her.

“We need to keep moving,” Shepard said, gently but firmly.

They kept up their advance, destroying the handful of geth they ran into, slipping past the larger patrols. The weight of Ashley’s armour pressed down on her shoulders, her gunshot wound a dull ache underneath, especially when they had to clamber over rubble, but she bore the pain in silence.

“Where’s all the geth?” Garrus questioned. “There should be more. Those transports could have thousands aboard.”

“Personally, I am glad not to fight a thousand geth,” Tali murmured.

Chou was using her little urban drone to scout ahead through the ruins as they descended deeper and deeper. “Ma’am, I found something. Looks like a squad of geth and a Prime guarding something.”

“That’s about where we read that power source, Commander,” Tali added.

“If we’re lucky that the override for the bunker door,” Ashley said, checking her rifle over. She’d had to give up her Valkyrie as a lost cause, so she’d taken a Vindicator marksman rifle for this mission.

“Alright. Garrus, Tali, as soon as we round that corner, I want you to toss in some tech grenades. Then Waaberri, put a rocket in the Prime.”

The fight was over quickly, shrapnel from Waaberri’s rocket tearing through metal and conduits and pinging off shields. The remaining geth were yanked off their feet by Liara’s Singularity, where they were quickly shot down.
“The power source is up there.” Tali tapped on her omnitool, pointing to a ramp at the back of the room.

They were halfway up, armoured boots a heavy tread on the concrete like floor, when Ash’s ears filled with a rise and fall buzz of noise. She grimaced, tossing her head like she could shake the throbbing sound right out. Shepard, in front of her, froze so abruptly she nearly walked into her.

“Hey, are you alright?” She touched her back.

Shepard’s head swiveled to look at her. “Can’t you hear that?”

“The noise? Yeah, it’s giving me a headache.”

“It’s…you can’t understand it?”

“Commander?” Liara moved forward, a hint of excitement in her movements. “It’s language, isn’t it? Prothean language, spoken aloud for the first time in millennia! You can understand it!”

Shepard nodded.

“What is it saying, ma’am?” Ash asked. There was something haunted in Shepard’s expression. She wanted to comfort her - but she couldn’t. Not in front of the others.

“All is lost,” Shepard said flatly, looking away, “No escape.’ That’s all. The same two sentences on repeat.”

“That’s fucking creepy,” Waaber observed.

Shepard shifted her grip on her shotgun. “Let’s keep moving.”

The security room - because that was what it must be - was covered in a thick layer of dust disturbed where the geth had walked through, leading to a soft flickering hologram. Shepard went straight to the console without hesitation. Ash followed her, resting her rifle on the ledge to look through the window into the lower room. The glass was long gone.

She glanced over at Shepard. The Commander was using the console with the same surety she might use an Alliance computer. After about five minutes she dropped her hands from the controls and took a step back. “I’ve opened the door. I’ve downloaded some facility maps, I’ll put them on your omnitools.”

Ash brought up the map as soon as the Commander transmitted it. “Looks like a quicker route back to where we left the Mako here, ma’am.”

She’d had to leave Dubyansky and Fredricks to guard the vehicle, and she didn’t want to leave them alone with an open door leading towards the geth for long.

Liara stepped towards the Commander. “But this map, it only shows the outside parts of the facility - nothing about what’s inside the bunker. Is there anything.”

“All of this out here was for security and shipping,” Shepard said. “They didn’t want their security personnel knowing too much about the Conduit project.”

“What, like Oak Ridge?” Ash asked.

“Something like that. The console is damaged, that was all I could get off it.” Shepard winced at another burst of sound. “Let’s go.”
“It’s incredible,” Liara enthused as they made their way to a still functioning elevator. “No one in my field has ever been able to interface with Prothean computers the way you have. It usually requires translation programs and even then…”

“I read a paper”- Shepard’s fingers dances across a control panel and the elevator jerked into motion- “by one of your colleagues, Doctor Zelova T’Gayne? I only understood about two-thirds of it - I’m definitely no scientist - but she had a theory on how Prothean computer technology works.”

“I know the paper, the one on Prothean neural interfacing?” Liara’s face lit up. It was a light that Ashley had never seen for the combat operations side of their job. She wondered what it was like, to study a people for your entire adult life, and then meet someone who had incredible insight into them.

“Yeah. When I touch Prothean technology - it’s like it’s happening in my head, rather than on the screen.” Shepard’s mouth pinched at the corners under her visor.

“Incredible,” Liara breathed, brushing her fingers across the stonework of the elevator wall.

Ashley just wished that the insight into the Protheans didn’t come at such a cost to Shepard.

Dubyansky and Freddie were waiting for them once they exited the elevator, both men kneeling behind cover, rifles pointed at the way into the bunker, fingers twitchy on the trigger.

Ashley considered the dark hole deeper into Ilos’ surface, the utter cemetery-like silence fallen over them, the debris of a murdered civilization around them and said calmly, “Who votes we take the armoured vehicle into the creepy underground bunker?”

“Yes.” Waaberi nodded.

“Sounds like a good idea,” Garrus agreed.

“Absolutely,” said Shepard. “Mount up.”

Shepard raised her rifle and hit the shimmering barrier in front of her with the butt. Her arm jarred - there was no give whatsoever. "It's some sort of kinetic barrier, set for slow moving objects. Like us. And I don't think we can get through it. Not with small arms."

"A trap set by Saren?" Wrex rumbled, stomping up to peer at the barrier intently, shotgun in one hand.

Tali waved with her omnitool, then shook her head. "It's not geth technology."

"I think it's Prothean," Liara said. "Look at the colour of the kinetic barrier - it's not blue like our technology or that of the geth. And its strength, despite the threshold being set so low."

"So, an automated trap?" Garrus asked.

"If it were automated, wouldn't Saren and the geth have triggered it?" Williams called over her shoulder, eyes - and the muzzle of her marksman rifle - fixed on the way they'd come and the second barrier there.

"Perhaps there is another party at work here," Liara guessed.
Shepard turned away. "I don't know. But the only way out is that door."

She pointed. The door was the same stone-like material as the wall, the holographic handle pulsing a soft green in the dark. Above them, there were only those pods, all dark and silent. They were passing through a mass tomb. Something in her wanted to weep.

"I don't like this," Ashley insisted, "this all stinks of a trap, Skipper."

"I know. But I don't think we have any other choice. Draven, Dubyansky, keep your teams here. Rest of you, with me."

It was a bit of a squeeze into the elevator, particularly with Wrex coming along, but if they were walking into an ambush, she wanted him with her. She tapped the elevator controls, and it jerked into motion, descending along a slanted track.

"Think these elevators are safe?" Ash mused.

"Well, they can add on some occupational health and safety violations to my charges at the court-martial," Shepard said lightly.

"You didn't do some risk assessments for rushing through ancient cities? For shame, ma'am."

The door slid open, and they emerged into a tall, cathedral-like room. More of the pods jutted out of the walls and all around were scattered pieces of long abandoned Prothean technology - computers, monitoring equipment, power supplies. Dust swirled with every footstep.

But not all of the technology was dead. A light beckoned her forward, hovering over a computer terminal.

There was a shattering of light, coalescing into an orb of jagged orange light, flickering where the holographic emitters had broken. It wasn't a beacon like on Eden Prime or Virmire, but it called to her nonetheless.

It reached out to her, the light spilling over her hands, tugging her mind open.

*You are not Prothean, but you are not machine either. This eventuality was one of many that was anticipated.* The voice hummed inside her skull. *This is why we constructed the beacons as a warning for those who might come after us. I do not sense the taint of indoctrination upon you - perhaps there is still hope.*

*Who - what are you?* She spoke but didn’t speak. *Some kind of VI or AI?*

“It’s some kind of VI program,” Tali was saying behind her. “Badly damaged. Can we get anything off it?”

*I am Vigil.* The name was a cascade of impressions - ancient, lonely grief that could never be soothed, the long waiting, the long-dead man whose personality and knowledge had constructed this program.

“Shepard?” Ashley’s hand fell on her shoulder, shook her a little. She couldn’t respond. Her jaw was locked shut, her mind filled with the ebb and flow of Vigil’s conversation. “Shit.”

“Don’t move her too much,” Liara instructed, her voice strong and firm. She was lightyears from the asari Shepard had met on Therum.
The Citadel is the heart of your civilisation, as it was for us. A shining beacon in space - and a trap. She felt sick. A giant Relay, right under everyone’s noses. She saw flashes of the Citadel, much the same in its silver beauty, but those who walked its halls were not asari or turian or salarian. When the Citadel Relay is activated, the Reapers will pour through, and everything you know will be destroyed.

Fire bloomed behind her eyes. A sobbing of pain and terror filled her ears.

The Citadel Fleet, the Council, all of it - it’ll all be gone in a single blow, she realised.

That was our fate. Our leaders were dead before we even realised we were under attack.

We are more spread out than you are. The Citadel was the beating heart of CSpace it was true, but it was only the seat of the CTO. Every other species had their own government apparatus elsewhere. Not like the Protheans. They had been a single, unified empire spanning the Milky Way.

It will not save you for long. The Citadel Relay is the control node of the entire network. From it, they can deactivate and activate Relays as they please.

A slaughter. A methodical one. Cluster by cluster, planet by planet, city by city. Every life snuffed out, every resource stripped and taken. Leaving only barren worlds behind in silent, inscrutable testimony.

The Conduit is the key. Of course. Shepard has missed it, so utterly focused on her objective, on keeping moving. What was a conduit? A tube, a tunnel - a channel for something to move through. The Conduit was not a weapon - it was a backdoor.

What do I do? It was a plea. Black waves of despair crashed over her. She was an ant with a boot hanging overhead. A fish caught on a hook. Vigil’s voice cascaded over her, so very old and so very sad.

When Shepard stepped away, reeling, Ashley’s hands were on her shoulders.

“Skipper? Are you okay?” There was anxiety in the younger woman’s voice.

Shepard shook herself, managed a smile. “I’m alright. It’s…a VI called Vigil. A very advanced one. We were speaking.”

“About what?” Liara’s eyes were very wide and excited.

Shepard turned back to the computer terminal. A handful of minutes later she pulled free an OSD, and her omnitool chimed a notification that a datafile had finished downloading.

“What’s that?” Tali crowded forward. Shepard tapped on her omnitool, orange light shimmering around her fist.

“I’m sending you all a file. It’ll corrupt the security systems of the Citadel’s master control unit, giving us temporary control over the station. Whatever happens, one of us with this file must reach that unit.”

“You want to take control of the Citadel?” Garrus’ mandibles flared under his clear visor.

“Yes. I know what Saren and Sovereign are after. I’ll explain in the Mako, but we’ve got to go. Now.”
“Get out of here, Normandy,” Shepard’s voice was cool like ice over the comm link. “That’s an order.”

Helplessness surged up in Charles Pressly’s chest, into his throat until he couldn’t speak for several seconds. “Ma’am, with all due respect, you can’t ask me to leave you all behind.”

“I can, and I am. Listen to me, Charles - the Conduit isn’t a weapon, it’s a backdoor to the fuckin’ Citadel. The Citadel itself is a giant Mass Relay, the one the Reapers use to start their invasion. The Protheans sabotaged it, which is why Saren has been doing all of this. He’s going to reopen the Relay.”

“Jesus Christ,” he breathed.

“It’s likely the geth are already attacking the Citadel. I need you to get the fuck out of here and get to Hackett. He needs to jump the fleet to Widow now, before it’s too late. I’m transmitting a report with details of my conversation with the Prothean intelligence. It’s not my best work, but the dot points should do. I’m in a bit of a hurry.”

“You couldn’t get video footage, ma’am?”

“Prothean technology uses neural interfacing. Bit hard to record something that happens in your head.”

“Uh…yeah, that would make it difficult, ma’am.”

“You need to give this to Hackett. I…we worked together. He’s always had faith in me. I’m hoping that will be enough to convince him.”

“I’ll do everything I can, Commander,” he said softly.

“I know you will. We’ll see you on the other side of this. Gods speed, Normandy. Shepard out.”

Pressly closed his eyes and then opened them. He was the Normandy’s acting captain, and it was time to bring her home. “You heard the Commander. Sax, get me the fastest route you can to the Fifth Fleet. Joker, back through the Relay.”

“We’re flying right back into the arms of the Fifth Fleet after mutinying. We’re totally getting arrested,” Joker announced, even as the Normandy hummed in a graceful arc away from Ilos. “I just want to point out that this is a terrible plan.”

“Do you have a better one, Flight Lieutenant?” Pressly asked waspishly.

“No, sir!”

“Just focus on the flying. I’ll deal with the rest.”

The cell was roughly eight steps across, with a hard metal bench taking up one wall. David Anderson had taken a couple of naps on it with the help of a thin blanket and a pillow that was more like a cushion. He’d slept in worse places. Shanxi had a few foxholes where he’d fallen asleep to the sound of gunfire.

His only visitors had been the Alliance interrogator, his lawyer, and Dimitry Mikhailovich.
“Damnit, David,” he’d said from the other side of the bars, scowling. “We could’ve used you in this war. You’ve got no sense where that girl is concerned.”

Two guards had been posted, but they’d obviously been ordered not to talk to him. Without his omnitool, that left only sleeping, working out or pacing. The Alliance was still deciding what to do with him. They would want to conduct the court-martial on Arcturus, but with everything going on, it’d take some time for a ship to take him there.

He was doing sit-ups when the whole cell rumbled and shook. The lights flickered.

“What the fuck?” one of the MPs raised a hand to his helmet and started talking on his comm, attempting to find out what was going on. The other dropped his hand to his pistol, looking up and down the empty corridor uneasily.

Anderson rose to his feet and went to the cell door, straining to hear.

“Shit.” The MP corporal turned to his partner. His nametape read Collins. “Klein, they’re saying the Citadel is under attack. We’ve got to evacuate.”

“What about him?” Klein jerked a thumb in Anderson’s direction.

The corporal hesitated. “We’ll bring him with us. Sir, please step away from the door. We’ll have to handcuff you.”

Handcuff him? In the middle of a battle? It was idiocy. Anderson stepped back anyway.

Collins unlocked the cell door and advanced towards him. Somewhere up the hallway, a door hummed open. Klein turned, drawing his pistol. “Wha-”

Anderson heard it - a warbling electronic sound. They’re here. His body moved without conscious thought, battle-tested instinct propelling him down onto the floor. “Geth! Get down!”

The hallway filled with gunfire. The bullets ricocheted off the metallic walls in deadly shards, the whine of geth weaponry flooding his ears. Anderson froze - there was nowhere to move without exposing himself, and he had no shields or armour. The first two rounds dropped Klein’s shields. The next six hit his front, cracking and burning away the ceramic plates over his chest and splitting his helmet open until there was only blood, bursting out of him in a pink mist the moment before he hit the ground.

“Klein!” Collins had never been in a firefight, that much was obvious. He took one, shocked step forward, Anderson’s fingers just brushing his leg in an attempt to stop him. His shields died around him in shards of light, and then he jerked as a single bullet struck him square in the side of the shoulder. A look of surprise crossed his face, and then the corporal collapsed in a clatter of ceramic, his pistol spinning away from his limp hand.

Just within Anderson’s reach. He curled his fingers around the grip and pushed himself into a low crouch, pressed to the cell wall. He heard metallic footsteps, coming closer. He raised the pistol, breathing even. He’d played the deadly version of cat and mouse before. The geth wouldn’t find him easy prey.

Then - the distinctive crack-crack of a Valkyrie two round burst. And again.

“Captain Anderson, sir! Are you alive?”

He blinked and stepped around the corner, lowering the pistol when he saw Lance Corporal Jaz
Teke standing over the scrap of three geth troopers. The younger man was quite the sight - bracing his assault rifle with a hand swathed in a dressing, and armoured vest over a tshirt and jeans, and not one but two M560 Hydra rocket launchers slung across his shoulders along with a duffel bag.

At Anderson’s arch look, Jaz shrugged. “I requisitioned some equipment from the armoury, sir. I had to guess at your size for the vest.”

He unslung the duffel bag and pulled out a vest that Anderson pulled over his uniform. It was a little tight. Maybe Shepard was right and he as getting too accustomed to station life.

Anderson knelt over Collins, feeling for a pulse at the underside of his jaw. There was none. The bullet must’ve gone right through his lungs and heart. He straightened. “We need to get moving.”

There was no point in checking on Klein - not when half his lungs and skull were decorating the wall.

“Poor bastard,” Jaz muttered, stepping over the dead Marine. There was a burn of rage in his voice, but he was watching his sectors. Anger was no good if it distracted you from what you had to do.

They left the cell block, Anderson slinging one of the rocket launchers over his back and swapping his pistol for Teke's rifle. The Marine was still struggling with that busted hand of his.

The law enforcement detachment had been hit hard. The air was thick with the scent of metallic rust as they entered the offices beyond the brig, and here and there were the sodden, unmoving and blue uniformed corpses of many of the Marines and sailors stationed here. It'd been a small unit, and when the attack had come most of them had been unarmoured, without heavier weapons than their sidearm. They'd fought back anyway - he counted at least five geth they'd taken down before being overrun.

"How'd you get in here?" he asked softly as they cleared the room.

Jaz shot him an affronted look. "I'm a N5, sir. Getting into places I'm not supposed to be is just part of the job."

"Do you know what's going on?"

The younger man shook his head. "Beyond the fact that the geth are attacking? No, Captain. I was out for a coffee, get out of the hospital for a bit you know? One minute I'm arguing with some dickhead about my latte, the next I'm dodging pulse cannons." Something haunted flickered over his face. "They were just firing into the crowds, sir."

Anderson winced, but there was no time to dwell on it. "How'd they board the station?"

"No idea. It was like they just teleported in or something."

They came to the bullet scored door out onto the Presidium. "The best defensive position is likely the CSec Academy, so that's where we'll head. If we’re lucky, a counter attack can be organized from there. Keep low and out of sight. We can't afford to be drawn into an extended firefight or pinned down."

"Aye, sir."

"There's some maintenance tunnels that'll bypass a lot of the open areas. Should get us to the academy quicker."
Jaz blinked and Anderson allowed himself a small smile. Best not to let the kids forget he himself was a N7. It was always good to know the terrain around you.

The holo lock was malfunctioning, so Anderson pried it open with his hands while Jaz covered him, blocky pistol in hand. They stepped out into something out of an apocalypse vid.

Every breath Anderson inhaled tasted like the air itself was scorched. Smoke billowed up from several parts of the previously idyllic Presidium. There were more bodies - of all species this time, many of them dressed in expensive dresses and well-tailored suits. The diplomats, public servants, and politicians of the galaxy, gunned down in ivory halls. The floor was slick with blood of a dozen colours.

"It's like Eden Prime all over again," Teke said, sickened.

Worse than Eden Prime had a population of less than four million, and the city of Constant - the epicenter of the attack that had started all this - had a population of 1.3 million. There had been thousands of casualties. The Citadel had fourteen million souls aboard, and it wasn't like they had anywhere to run.

"Follow me." Anderson made sure to put a strong hint of command in his voice, tugging Jaz along in his wake. He pried the cover off the entrance to the maintenance tunnel, Jaz watching his back. They could see movement down on the terraces and walkways below them, light glinting off the hard metal hides of geth units, but none of them appeared to have spotted the two men. In the distance was the rumble of an ongoing firefight. At least someone was fighting back.

He set the cover aside and dropped down into the tunnel, assured that the other Marine would follow him. The maintenance corridor was narrow and dark, soft shadows clinging to the walls, lit only by dim red strips of lighting along the grated flooring. They shuffled along in an attempt not to make too much noise.

He'd explored these tunnels a few times - albeit dodging bored CSec foot patrols rather than geth platoons - so he hung a left turn from memory.

Jaz paused. "Sir, do you hear that?"

Anderson stopped, straining his ears. He shook his head irritably. "What, Lance Corporal?"

There was an unearthly howl and a husk - all dimly glowing cybernetics and inhumane blue eyes - jerked out of the shadows. Its hands were curled in black, sharp claws - reaching out -

The husk slammed into Jaz Teke, knocking him off his feet with a metallic clatter.

"Oh shit-" His exclamation cut off into a horrible wheeze as the husk's hands wrapped around his throat and squeezed.

Anderson charged forward, stabbing forward with the muzzle of the assault rifle. He struck it solidly in the side, the metal sinking a good few inches into its desiccated flesh. It hissed but only tightened its grip on Jaz's throat.

He jabbed again, this time at its throat, tearing one of the tubular cybernetics free, and then pulled the trigger. The Valkyrie's retort was thunderous in the contained space. The two round burst severed its neck, and it collapsed.

Jaz gasped for air, shoving the husk off him. Anderson froze, listening carefully for signs that the gunfire had attracted more attention. He heard it - the sound of groaning and shambling.
He grabbed Jaz by the arm and hauled him, still dazed, to his feet.

"Run."

The *Normandy* dropped out of FTL with a shudder. Under his uniform Joker was sweating, even in the cool, crisp air of the ship’s command deck. His eyes flicked from his readouts to the LADAR screen - and the handful of blinking blue dots there. He’d never thought the sign of Alliance cruisers would fill him with so much foreboding. This was the part where they hoped Hackett really did believe in Shepard and that those cruiser crews would hesitate before blowing them out of the metaphorical sky.

They had their shields up, but their weapons were not loaded, and the IES was turned off. He kind of wanted to tell Lam to broadcast ‘we come in peace,’ but he doubted the Fifth would find it funny.

“Cruiser on intercept trajectory,” Frag said from the co-pilot’s seat, her voice tense. “They’ve spotted us.”

“Normandy *this is Alliance warship Warsaw. Heave to and prepare to be boarded, over.*”

Pressly’s expression was calm and hard, his hands clasped behind his back. “*Warsaw*, this is Lieutenant Commander Charles Pressly, acting captain of the *Normandy*. I will gladly heave to on one condition. I must speak with Admiral Hackett. Over.”

There was a long moment as the *Warsaw* continued to accelerate towards them. She was a Beijing class heavy cruiser, with twin five hundred metre spinals, forty broadside cannons on each flank, and fourteen torpedo tubes. The *Normandy* could out-fly her any day, but she made his baby look practically toothless.

“Normandy, *this is Admiral Hackett. Where is Commander Shepard?*”

Pressly raised his chin, unflinching despite being on the phone to one of the most powerful men in Alliance space - who was less than happy, by his tone. “The Commander isn’t onboard, sir. We’ve been to Illos - and discovered what Saren Arterius intends to do. Transmitting the report now.”

Joker jerked his hat straight as they waited for the admiral’s response.

“If he doesn’t believe us, initiate the stealth system and get us out of here,” Pressly said softly. At Joker’s surprised look, he shrugged. “I’m not sitting in a brig while Saren ends civilisation.”

“Aye aye, sir.”

“The *Warsaw* is slowing down, sir,” Frag reported.

“Normandy, *Admiral Hackett. Shepard believes this?*”

“Yessir. She’s pursuing Saren through the Conduit, but it’s likely the Citadel may be shortly under attack, if it’s not already. She wouldn’t have sent us back alone to face the consequences of her actions if she wasn’t certain, and I think we both know that.”

“*Form up with the 56th Scout Flotilla,*” Hackett ordered, “*we’ll work out what to do with you all after we’ve dealt with the geth.*”

“Understood, sir. *Normandy* out. Helm, you heard the Admiral. Bring us into the fleet’s formation and patch us into the 56th’s command net.”
“Aye, sir.” He wove his way through the thick cloud of Alliance ships, ducking under the Everest’s huge bulk. “Aren’t we nominally part of the 54th?”

“Maybe Hackett is worried Mikhailovich would draw and quarter us all for the whole mutiny thing,” Frag replied.

“Bring us into formation with the Trenton, Joker.”

The Fifth Fleet flowed towards the Relay, the frigates and destroyers forming a moving, living shield in front of the heavier ships. As one they began the transmission sequence to jump to the Widow Nebula.

Joker frowned. “Uh, Pressly?”

“What is it?” the older man leant over his shoulder.

“I’ve tried connecting to the Relay several times, but I’m not getting a response.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” he snapped.

“It’s not responding! It’s like it’s not active.”

Pressly jabbed a finger at the viewport, filled with the shimmering, rotating light of an active Relay. “Looks pretty active to me, Joker.”

He spread his hands in frustration. “I know, but it’s not doing anything!”

That was when the ship’s comms channels began to flood with dozens of voices as dozens of ships began to report the same thing.

They had an entire fleet of warships ready for battle, but they weren’t going anywhere.

“Goddess,” Liara breathed. Garrus felt his mandibles tighten close to his face.

The Mako was at the top of a long ramp - about three hundred metres or so - leading up to an immense structure of two columns pointing at the sky, and in between them two rotating rings around an immense eezo core. The air itself seemed to hum.

The Conduit.

The ramp was filled to bursting with geth marching towards it. Troopers with assault rifles and machineguns, rocket troops, at least three huge, clanking Colossus platforms. They hadn’t noticed the Mako yet, but there was no way to reach the Conduit without revealing themselves. It was at least a company or two of geth - and they were barely a squad in a single IFV.

“There’s no way we can fight through them,” he said grimly from the Mako’s turret. “Even if we do, there’s likely even more troops on the other side.”

“Yep.” Ash popped the word.

“We’re not going to fight them.” Shepard’s voice was smooth and calm. “Dubyansky, move. I’m driving.”
“Uh, what?”

Shepard more or less shoved the huge, blond Marine out of the way and took his place at the wheel. “Tali, Garrus, you two messed with the shields yeah?”

“Yes. They should be fifteen percent stronger than before.” Tali glanced up at Garrus. “But uh-”

“We have to get through,” Shepard said, her eyes filling with deadly calculations as she watched the horde of geth roil below. “We just have to hope the kinetic barrier holds.”

“This is insane,” Garrus pointed out.

She smiled grimly at him. “Ready on the gun?”

“…yes, ma’am.”

Shepard breathed in and out audibly. “Alright. Let’s do this.”

The Mako jerked forward, wheels grinding against the concrete as she brought the IFV up to full speed as quickly as possible. Garrus jerked in his restraints as it rumbled down the ramp, his hands whirling the cannon to face down a Colossus. Even with the main turret’s stabiliser, the ride was rough enough to throw his aim off, the MAC shell roaring over its flashlight head.

The shield readout on the turret tried to drag his eyes to it. *Don’t look at it, don’t* -

He jammed a talon down on the coaxial trigger, spraying a wild scythe of bullets around, sparking off the Colossus’ shields but taking down one of the rocket troopers. The Mako was *surrounded* by fire - small arms and rockets and plasma bolts - shields melting away. He could barely see what he was shooting at, but he kept going, firing the main cannon the moment it finished heat cycling.

The Conduit loomed above.

Just a little further. The Mako hopped off the ground as Shepard recklessly hit the thrusters, carrying them over a low aimed barrage of rockets and hitting the ground hard enough Garrus’ head cracked against the turret’s side.

The Mako lurched up the ramp towards the Conduit, the entire vehicle humming with its energy.

“C’mon, c’mon,” Shepard was almost chanting under her breath.

The VI warned mechanically that the shields were gone. Light like lightning flicked out to meet them, cascading over the vehicle’s hull, and then the Conduit caught hold of them and tugged, propelling them into the deep dark.

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**CODEX ENTRY**

Debate between Matriarch Janele Caletis and Matriarch Aethyta Matesava:

Date: 4/09/2075

*Recorded debate in the Republic of Armalia ecclesia between Matriarch Janele Caletis, director of the Armali Department of Public Works, and Matriarch Aethyta Matesava, former team leader in the Armali Intelligence Bureau, on the subject of Mass Relay research.*

Aethyta Matesava (AM): You’d have us all bury our heads in the sand and sing hymns until Parnitha
collapses in on herself.

Janele Caletis (JC): What you call ‘regressive idiocy’ is simply good sense, regardless of your refusal to see that. You want the Republics of Serrice and Armali to spend trillions of credits on this project of yours, and for what? The current Relay network is more than sufficient for transportation, and in fact, we haven’t even activated all of the current Relays for very good reasons. No, this is all about your curiosity and nothing more. I’m sure that that was an asset during your service with the Intelligence Bureau, but it can hardly be the basis for good policy, nor stripping funds from more important projects.

AM: Our entire galactic civilisation is based off the Relays - and we don’t know how they work. Sure, we know the theory behind them, but not the specifics, the mechanics. While I’m sure you’d much rather Armali invest in elcor sculpture, surely even you can see that understanding technology we all rely on is more important.

JC: Your disdain for the more ethereal of asari pursuits is well known.

AM: Wanting our daughters to do more than shake their tits at aliens and get their heads blown off in Terminus wars isn’t disdain. You know how difficult it is for a Maiden to get into postgraduate programs? It’s about as difficult as a hanar attempting to become a bodybuilder.

Moderator: Please, Matriarchs, if we could stay on topic.

JC: Of course, my apologies.

AM: Yeah, whatever. If my ‘service with the Intelligence Bureau’ has taught me anything, it’s that knowing is always better than not knowing.

JC: You’d bankrupt the Republic for very little benefit. I can’t endorse such a far-fetched scheme.

AM: This is why the rest of the galaxy accuses us of stagnancy. You lot will sit your blue asses on Thessia, smugly superior right up until everyone else overtakes us, because Goddess forbid we do anything with our longevity!

JC: Your thuggish antics have no place in the ecclesia!

Moderator: Please, can we refrain from personal attacks -
Commander Tex Altadius, CO of the Hierarchy Navy warship Resolution, was having a very bad week. First, he had the misfortune of being among those ships left to guard the Citadel itself, while his brothers and sisters got to take the fight to the geth. Then, the human flotilla had interrupted his pursuit of the criminal ship Normandy, allowing it to disappear into the Terminus systems where even the mighty Hierarchy would not be able to find it. Humans had all the thuggish, violent tendencies of krogan, if lacking their durability, and lacked discipline - the most vital trait of a soldier. They wanted and wanted, and when given an inch took a mile. He hoped that the Primarch Assembly saw the danger.

Tex scowled down from his captain’s podium. His bridge crew stepped carefully around his black mood, engrossed in their work.

He’d told his commodore that the human Mikhailovich must have been working with the rogue human Spectre, but he hadn’t wanted to hear it. “I’m not following up that debacle with one of my captains accusing an allied admiral of collusion with a mutineer!”

Now the Resolution traced a lazy circuit in between the Citadel alongside one of her squadron mates in the HSV Blue Fang. For all that the destroyers were moving at immense speed, Altadius felt like he was running in place.

“Netcall, all ships form up in battle wall at designated coordinates.” His commodore’s voice broke through the silence of the Resolution’s CIC, taut and edged. Commodore Trenarian was not a turian prone to anxieties. Tex’s mandibles flared.

“XO, get it done,” he ordered, and the destroyer changed course smoothly. The coordinates the squadron had been given were near the station itself as if to block the entrance.

“All ships, set Condition One.”

Altadius stared at the commlink for a long moment, before he shook himself. “XO, sound battle quarters.”

She didn’t hesitate despite her clear surprise and turned to give the announcement. The CIC filled with the sound of running feet as the off-duty bridge and CIC personnel made their way over to their stations, alert and disciplined.

“Half an hour ago, Rear Admiral Yaneren’s battle group was destroyed.” Trenarian’s voice was hard as steel. Tex rocked back on the captain’s podium, shock running through his crew like lightning. Yaneren had in her battle group several squadrons of heavy cruisers and destroyers. All gone? There was the taste of ash in his mouth. “It is likely the geth fleet responsible is on its way to Widow.”

“Where is the Alliance?” Altadius’ XO demanded, Lieutenant Commander Remidis, anger burning in her eyes. The humans had been meant to jump in as soon as a Citadel Fleet battle group was attacked!

“We are amongst the last defenders of the Citadel Council. We must not falter in our duty.”

“The Relay just lit up like a bonfire, sir,” his CIC watch officer called over. He calmly ordered gunnery to ready all of the destroyer’s weapons, shut down unnecessary systems and bring her kinetic barrier to a hundred percent.
The tactical map in front of Commander Altadius began to fill with dozens of flashing red dots as the geth poured like a wave out of the Relay.

“Spirits,” the XO breathed, her voice iced over with dread.

The remaining Citadel Fleet ships were outnumbered and had only one dreadnought - the geth had brought three and the huge black ship responsible for the burning of the human colony Eden Prime. The one the humans had labeled Sovereign, a name that revealed their almost religious fear of the vessel. Any ship could be destroyed - but right now he felt something like dread stir in his gullet.

“Stand strong,” he reminded her. As one, the 67th Destroyer Squadron (Hierarchy Navy) began to fire their main cannons, as the Resolution’s comm channels filled with the shrieking of terrified civilian shipping attempting to outrun the encroaching battle. A freighter passed a mere ten metres over the top of his ship, fleeing as fast as its exhausted fusion torch could propel it. A wave of torpedos and kinetic rounds burst from the geth lines, like the fist of a titan falling from the sky. And in the clouded space of the Widow Nebula, the ships of the Citadel Fleet began to die in brief blasts of colour, quickly swallowed by the void.

“Sovereign is firing!” shouted the CICWO. Without waiting for an order, his pilot shoved the Resolution into a hard bank to port. The shot barely cleared the destroyer’s stern, continuing past her.

“Shields down to 60%, sir,” one of the sensor techs announced. Tex’s mandibles flared in shock despite himself.

“That just hit Tayseri Ward,” Remidis said, her voice dead for all the inflection in it. Albatius’ eyes were drawn despite his will to the readout from the rear-facing sensors. The dreadnought’s shot - whatever it was, because by the Spirits that was neither laser nor mass accelerator - had bored deep into lower Tayseri Ward, burning through skyscrapers and deep into the internal compartments. How many hundreds had that one stray shot murdered?

He looked away. “Why isn’t the Citadel closing?”

Standard procedure in all the defence drills the Citadel Fleet ran was for the station to be sealed, using its impenetrable hide to protect the fourteen million that lived upon the giant space station while the fleet dealt with the threat.

“I don’t know, sir - there are reports that geth may already be onboard the Citadel.”

“What? How -”

The pilot burst into colourful swearing, and the Resolution soared upwards desperately.

To their starboard, the Blue Fang was the first of the Resolution’s sister ships to die in fire, as another of those red slashing attacks cut her in half. The bow section imploded into pieces barely larger than the length of his leg, one spar of metal cartwheeling towards his vessel.

“Keep firing,” he shouted as his CICWO and XO froze. The space between the Citadel and the Relay was full of the flash and fire of mass accelerator projectiles.

“The Citadel is finally closing,” called the comms technician, elation in his subvocals.

“Do not let them inside the arms!” came Trenarian’s voice.

“We must hold our ground! For Palaven!” Altadius pointed an imperious finger forwards as the Resolution shuddered with the sound of its dual spinal gun firing.
Sovereign appeared out of the clouds like something out of a nightmare, red lightning sheeting off its sides. The Unity on Resolution’s starboard broke apart as she was struck by a succession of torpedos, pulling her apart. Altadius was numb. A classmate from the academy had commanded that ship. Sovereign kept coming.

His insides froze. It couldn’t mean to -

“Evasive maneuvers!” he shouted to the helm.

And those were the last words of Commander Tex Altadius as the Reaper Sovereign contemptuously rammed the destroyer in its way, shattering the HSV Resolution into a hundred pieces raining down on the Wards below.

When the Mako snapped back into normal space, it was to the sound of screaming metal and screeching brakes as Shepard tried in vain to slow them down, followed by the vehicle groaning as it overbalanced. Its momentum became nothing but a roll, flinging anything unsecured in the troop bay around like a child having a tantrum. Liara’s head hitting the wall behind her back, her restraints tugging painfully on her shoulders. When it finally stopped, the Mako was on its roof, and the lights had flickered out. Gravity pulled at her hands.

She heard a groan from beside her.

There was a sound of movement - ceramic scraping against metal, and then a heavy thump. Shepard hissed out a fuck, and then the Mako filled with the soft orange glow of an omnitool light, flickering over the Commander’s dark armoured form as she balanced carefully on the Mako’s roof. “Everyone okay?”

There were a few groans of acknowledgment.

“Sound off,” Shepard said firmly. One by one they all called out. Liara began to struggle with her harness as Garrus contorted himself to get out of the turret, talons scrabbling against metal.

“I’m stuck,” Liara called to her.

Shepard stepped closer, inspecting the harness with her omnitool light. “Williams, get everyone else out and form a perimeter.”

“Roger.”

Shepard tugged on the restraints, but they remained stubbornly closed. After a moment, she shrugged. “This vehicle is being written off anyway.”

And then she drew her combat knife with one hand and began to saw through the straps while looping the other arm around Liara’s shoulders. When the tough material parted, she fell, but Shepard’s grip rotated her enough that she didn’t land on her head.

“Thank you,” she managed, looking for her submachine gun that had come loose in the crash. She found it on the other side of the cabin and magnetised it back to her armour before they began to crawl out of the damaged IFV, Shepard pushing her rifle ahead of her. They’d landed on one of the walkways at the base of the Relay Monument and ended up smashing into a storefront. Glass crunched under her armoured boots.
“Well, it’s official,” said Williams as they emerged from the Mako, “M-35s are fucking tough.”

“It broke,” Liara pointed out.

“Yeah, but we’re all alive and not in pieces after driving into a Mass Relay. Which is pretty impressive, if you ask me. I thought we were all going to die.”

“Always the optimist, Williams,” Shepard murmured with a hint of amusement.

That was when Liara got a good look around. “Oh…Goddess no.”

The Presidium was burning. Thick clouds of oily smoke billowed up from ruined buildings and stained the artificial blue sky a deep grey. All she could hear was the sound of klaxons, broken by the smooth calming voice of an Avina terminal encouraging residents to evacuate to shelters. Here and there were the limp, bloodied piles of the dead. And there - a line of metal spikes jutting out from one of the walkways, some of them piercing through a still form like a pin through a butterfly.

Liara had seen those in the intelligence reports from Eden Prime. It was how the geth had turned humans into husks. Shock troops.

Shepard’s voice was calm, without inflection. “We need to move before more geth come or we stumble into a patrol.”

Liara shot a look at her. Shepard looked as if she was simply going for breakfast.

At her look, a harsher cast covered the Spectre’s face, a scowl forming. “The dead won’t thank us for standing around grieving, and the living won’t either.”

“Contact,” reported Draven crisply. “Fireteam of geth, two hundred metres, bearing 030.”

The first shots sparked against the floor near Liara’s feet, quickly answered by the sharp retort of Williams’ marksman rifle and the thudding snarl of one of the LMGs.

“Break contact,” Shepard ordered. “Back into the corridors.”

The LMG continued with a roar until Waaberi pulled a canister out of her webbing and tossed it in front of them. Thick white smoke poured out, covering them like a cloud, and they retreated back into the warren of metallic corridors. Dubyansky reloaded the Typhoon methodically.

“What’s the quickest way to the Tower?” Shepard asked Garrus.

“This way.” The turian took point, flanked by Williams and Dubyansky. They hurried along in silence, peering around corners and into disturbingly empty stores and offices. Liara shivered. There was something ominous about the emptiness, even without the klaxon blaring.

“Husks!” Dubyansky shouted from point. They filled the corridor, growling and shrieking, tatters of cloth hanging from their bodies. Alliance uniforms, Liara realised the moment before she flung a hand out, biotics running down her arm. A Singularity field formed to their front, catching the husks and pulling them into the air, leaving them to swipe at nothing in frustration. Ashley’s shotgun boomed alongside Dubyansky’s pistol and Garrus’ rifle until they were still and in pieces.

“I fucking hate those things,” Ashley hissed, her hands visibly trembling as she reloaded. Liara had never seen her so unnerved on the battlefield. Even on Virmire, she had been calm right up until her team had been overrun. Something about the husks had shaken her.
“Hey,” Shepard said - and her tone had a certain gentleness but also a firmness. “You good? Game face on.”

“I’m good, I’m good,” she insisted, taking a deep breath to steady herself and strode off, clearly determined that she remain on point with Garrus.

They emerged onto the plaza below the Citadel Tower, hearing the thunder of gunfire. Above rose the orange gleam of the Wards closed above them - and there the dark form of Sovereign, clinging to the Tower like some monstrous cockroach. Goddess, what if they were already too late?

A cluster of mostly turians had taken cover amongst what had once been an upscale bar.

“Friendlies!” Shepard called over. “Don’t shoot!”

A few guns were pointed at them, but they were allowed to pass through the lines. They were an odd mix of CSec and Hierarchy Army uniforms, with a handful of asari, salarians, and even two humans. Only a handful had armour, and their heavy weapons consisted of a few machineguns and two rocket launchers. The Normandy’s ‘light infantry’ looked armed to the teeth in comparison.

“Who’s in charge here?” Shepard demanded.

“That would be us, Spectre Shepard,” a calm, elegant voice with hints of a Serrican accent. An asari and a salarian approached, both wearing deep, dark armour with yellow striping for the salarian and purple for the asari. And both were wearing the wings of the Office of Special Tactics and Reconnaissance.

Spectres.

Shepard straightened almost imperceptibly beside Liara.

“I am Spectre Taleena Matolyt.” Matolyt was a Matron, with dark blue microscales and sweeping white markings along her cheeks. “This is Spectre Jondam Bau.”

“You have done well, considering limited resources and training,” said Bau. “And it appears you were correct about Saren’s intentions.”

He had a strange little pistol he was fiddling with.

Shepard looked around, mouth a grim line as she took in the smoke and carnage. “I’ve never wanted to be right less. What’s the situation?”

“The station is closed, as you can see. What remains of the Citadel Fleet is stuck outside, and that dreadnought is sitting right on top of the Tower as it is. The Council was evacuated aboard the Destiny Ascension, but she is being swarmed by the geth,” Matolyt replied crisply, “and their troops control the tower.”

Jondam Bau continued, “We were attempting to take back the controls - and the station defences, but geth resistance is very heavy. Your captain, Anderson, is gathering reinforcements at the CSec Academy. We must wait until they arrive to attack again.”

Liara looked over at Shepard. “That will take too long, Commander.”

Shepard nodded. “I know. The Citadel is a Mass Relay, and Saren is attempting to open it. He has to be stopped. I must get to the tower master control unit.”
Matolyt and Bau exchanged glances. The asari Spectre crossed her arms. “It is not a matter of will, Shepard. There are at least two companies of enemy troops within. We don’t have the manpower.”

Shepard whirled around, eyebrows furrowed. Her dark eyes flicked between her own people - her eyes meeting Liara’s for a moment - the gathered soldiers, and the Tower, lingering on Sovereign.

“The outside of the Tower doesn’t have gravity, does it?”

Bau tilted his head, curiosity flaring in his liquid eyes. “No, it does not.”

“Then I can take my team up the side of the Tower, bypassing most of the geth hard points.” Shepard decided.

Matolyt shook her head. “Saren will just send geth troops out to stop you. They have even fewer problems with zero-g than special forces commandos like your people.”

Liara saw the expressions that crossed Shepard’s face like lightning flashes then. Calculation, regret, determination.

“Not if you attack from below and tie up their main force.”

Matolyt’s mouth flattened into a grim line as the two other Spectres looked to each other, in silent communication. Shepard was asking them to throw themselves - and these men and women here - into the enemy’s teeth, to act as a distraction.

After a moment, Bau nodded slightly, and Taleena Matolyt breathed out. “Very well. We will engage as many of their forces as we can - for as long as we can.”

“Thank you,” Shepard said very softly.

“You will have to get above the gravity zone. The second floor should be sufficient.” Bau pointed upwards with one spindly finger. Taleena Matolyt had already turned away, shouting for combat engineers and breaching charges for the thick doors.

Three turians in Hierarchy uniforms were wounded during the push to the second floor of the Citadel Tower. Their medic bent over them, medigel clutched in her claws. One of them was keening, spurs scraping against the floor as his feet kicked in agony. Tali looked away, feeling sick to her stomach.

“This is where we part, Spectre Shepard.” Taleena’s voice was serene, despite the purple blood dripping down her arm from a laceration. A geth rocket had sliced apart her shields, and only a quickly summoned barrier had saved the Spectre’s life.

“Thank you, Spectre Matolyt.”

“If we survive this day, drinks are on me.” She strode away, Disciple shotgun in hand.

Tali stepped over a severed geth arm as the Normandy crew gathered near one of the ceiling to floor windows.

“How’re we getting out there?” Garrus asked, peering out the glass. They were surrounded by what had been one of the reception halls for the Citadel Tower; now it was pocketed with bullet holes, chairs and tables upended, terminals smashed. One of the receptionists, a young asari Maiden, laid on her back, staring sightlessly at the ceiling.
Ancestors. So much death.

“I might be able to open a –” Tali began before the Commander interrupted.

“Everyone sealed?” Shepard asked through the speaker of her breather helmet. Once everyone had confirmed, she drew her pistol and leveled it at the window.

“Really Shepard?” Ashley sighed, at the moment before she shot it twice. The glass shattered outwards, a kinetic barrier flickering up almost immediately to seal the breach. “Of course you shot out the window instead of just looking for the maintenance hatch.”

“If you want to search around for a hatch, be my guest Williams.” Shepard gestured with the pistol. “I’m going out that way.”

“After you, ma’am,” Ash said playfully.

“Some bodyguard you are.”

Tali didn’t feel much like joking after seeing so many bodies, but from what she’d heard both Shepard and Ashley had seen their share of scenes like this.

Could you witness things like that - like this - time and time again without sealing off some part of you to survive?

She lined up behind the two human women. When it was her turn, she stepped over the edge, and the drop became the floor. She breathed in, out, closing her eyes as she let her brain adjust to the shocking change of perspective. She’d done this many times - both in the Fleet and even once or twice on the Normandy.

Liara was having more trouble, her breathing loud over the in-helmet comms. Tali gently grabbed her arm.

“Just focus on where we’re going, not on which way is up. That’s how you get disorientated.”

Once Shepard received word from her fellow Spectres that their attack was underway, they began the long walk up the side of the Tower.

The geth came anyway. Each metre gained was bought with heavy fighting as they did their best to force the geth back, all the while staying in contact with the Citadel Tower. If they failed to do so, they would be flung into the void between the Presidium and the Wards. Dubyansky, Draven, Freddie, and Waaberi laid down heavy suppressive fire with their machineguns and rifles, while Ashley and Garrus picked off priority targets methodically.

In the weightlessness of space, it was difficult to get her tech grenades on target, so Tali resorted to using her shotgun on any geth that came close to flanking them.

In contrast, their biotics were in their element. Black-blue fields battered the geth off the Tower’s surface and away from its limited gravity, until they dropped away to eventually smash to pieces on the Wards somewhere.

Without sound, the firefight seemed like something out of a dream - lacking the retort of gunfire or the snap of bullets overhead. Every movement was slow, like running in place.

At least, it felt dreamlike until Garrus was hit.
A rocket aimed at their snipers detonated as the turian desperately attempted to evade - a pained grunt wheezing over the comms as he struck a protruding piece of architecture hard enough to break something and his feet kicked as he tried to get back his grip on gravity. He rose, inexorably, into the air.

“Garrus!” He could be a bosh’tet, but he was her friend. She reached desperately for his leg, but her fingers only brushed his spur before he was out of reach. Her voice rose in a panicked shriek. “GARRUS!”

Then beside her was Liara, her hands raised and wreathed in blue flame. A biotic field formed around the turian sniper and tugged him down. He hit the ground hard, and he groaned, flopping onto his back.

“Thanks, Liara,” he wheezed.

Tali ran to him - or as close to a run as you could get in zero-g, grabbing at his talons. “Are you alright?”

“I think I’ve cracked a plate,” he managed. Ling came over, medkit in one hand and his omnitool scanner already up on his other wrist.

“Back on the line, Tali,” Shepard ordered sharply.

“But—”

“Now. Ling will look after him.” There was no give in the Commander’s voice at all.

Miserably, Tali turned back to the geth. She wanted to crush them into scrap metal, grind their processors under her boot. Wrex had found one of Saren’s krogan, blasting at him with his shotgun until they met, crest to crest. A few seconds of struggling, and then Wrex gripped the other krogan by the armour and heaved him up and out of the Tower’s gravity.

“Dropship!” one of the Marines shouted in warning, moments before the insectoid ship soared into view.

“Down!”

Tali wasn’t sure who it was who screamed the order, but she threw herself behind cover as the dropship’s guns opened up, spraying them with MG fire. Her HUD blinked as a medical alert for LCpl Chou popped up.

There was nothing to do but cower under the deluge. They had no heavy weapons beyond Waaberi and Fredricks’ rocket launchers, and the cascade of bullets was so thick that to stick your head up was to lose the top of your skull. Behind her, chunks of wall were ripped out with each impact. And then - above - a flash of light as three turian fighters shot over them, firing a barrage of missiles at the dropship. The dropship shuddered and began a lazy spin as its thrusters sputtered. It dropped out of sight, and Tali heard the distance deep, bone-shaking boom of a drive core detonation.

“This is Captain Simrian of the 24th Fighter Group. We’ll clear a path for you as best we can, and keep Sovereign distracted, over.” The turian woman’s two-toned voice was hard-edged. Resolute.

“Roger that,” Shepard replied simply. When Tali looked up, she could see the swirl of fighters dancing around Sovereign, their missiles and autocannons dashing against its shields without effect. And every so often there was a flash of bloody red as Sovereign killed them, one by one.
Ancestors, people were dying for every step they took up the Tower.

“Tali, look out!” Ash shouted.

She whirled, raising her shotgun, finger balancing on the trigger. The dark armour of a geth destroyer rose before her - it must've used the nooks and crannies of the Tower's wall to flank them. She pulled the trigger, the shotgun bucking in her hands. The geth jerked back, a hole in its chest plate, but then there was the bright strobe light of its own shotgun going off.

Her shields sputtered and died. She felt as if someone had taken a bat and cracked it across her side. Her gun slipped from suddenly nerveless fingers. I just got shot, she realised distantly. Someone was calling her name. The destroyer's shotgun muzzle stared her in the face.

This is how I die. Light years from the Flotilla, still a child in her father's eyes, on the outside of the Citadel Tower.

Then her shields, still flickering back to life, sparked as a two round burst flew past her head to shatter the geth's optics. It staggered. Another burst hit the processor and the geth slumped. It floated almost serenely as its magboots failed.

"Tali!"

She herself was floating at a strange angle, one foot still magnetised to the Citadel, at least until someone wrapped an armoured arm around her and pulled her with them, into cover.

"Ash..." she murmured. The Marine's face was pinched and pale.

"It's okay," Ashley told her, her hands coming away bloody. Tali’s suit HUD was filling with warnings as the VI pumped her with antibiotics and medigel.

"How is she?" Shepard's black armoured form knelt down beside her, taking one of her hands. Tali squeezed back.

Ash shook her head. "I'm no corpsman, Skipper, but it's bad. She needs a cleanroom and a doctor."

Shepard’s hand pressed along the side of her helmet. Quarians had luminescent eyes - those dark enough to be black eyes had unnerved her the first time she'd met Shepard. Now she saw the regret there, and she was glad her Captain was here. "We have to keep moving."

"She'll die!" It was Liara, over Ashley's shoulder. Somewhere, Sovereign had moved one of its huge legs, and the entire Tower shuddered. The Marine just bowed her head.

"You think I don’t know that?" Shepard snapped back, raising her head.

Blackness ebbed over her vision, and the conversation faded away, like mist under sunlight.

After the silence of space, the warning klaxons within the burning and damaged Council were loud as thunder in Shepard's ears. She stepped over an asari dignitary, her blue dressed stained a deeper purple. The Citadel Tower security team had fought hard, but they too were dead. One of the trees - she'd never found out what planet the species was from - was burning and the air stank of smoke.

She remembered the first time she'd walked through this chamber, with Kaidan and Ashley either side of her. Kaidan had commented on the trees. Ashley had mused on the potential of the stairs as
defensive positions. Everything had seemed simpler then, even with Eden Prime looming over them.

Of course, the geth had taken up positions there with at least two machineguns and a Prime. Maybe she ought to get Ashley to do her lotto ticket for her.

*I left two of my crew to potentially die.* The thought was a scrape of something sharp in her insides. Chou had said she was going to try and get herself and Tali down to Matolyt and Bau's troops - and their aid station. But Tali had been unconscious, and Chou's arm was missing a whole chunk thanks to a geth autocannon. There was nothing to say that Chou would be able to defend them if they ran into more geth.

She let the thought wash over her and then ebb away, leaving only cold focus behind. There was too much riding on this for her to be consumed by sentiment. The grief would be waiting for her later. It always did.

One of the geth machinegunners spotted them, and the air filled with the whine of pulse weaponry. Shepard ducked behind a nearby bulkhead, throwing up a barrier - quickly depleted - to cover the retreat of two of her Marines. The good thing was that the geth hadn't seemed to see Williams and Draven disappear towards the back of the Council chamber. The balconies could make for a decent sniper position.

"Biotics, we're going to put up a barrier to protect Waaberi," she pitched her voice to be heard over the gunfire. "Waaberi, I want a rocket in the MG nest."

"Roger that, ma'am."

"Biotics, barrier!" She closed her eyes and moved her hand, her biotics meshing with Liara and Wrex's to form a thick barrier in front of the Somalian Marine. Waaberi stood and fired; the rocket smashed into the geth position with a roar that rattled the whole chamber. Those geth not destroyed by the explosion found their shields shorted out by a tech grenade lobbed by Garrus, his mandibles pinched close to his face and his movements careful with pain - he'd definitely cracked some plates - followed by the sharp retort of Williams' sniper rifle.

Shepard took the soot-stained stairs two at a time, shotgun in hand. Wrex was right behind her.

The petitioner's platform was empty.

"Where's Saren?" Wrex swung his head around as if he could will the turian into being if he glared hard enough.

Shepard slowed. A hum filled the air.

Saren rose above her on the same hovercraft he'd had on Virmire. A grenade bounced down the stairs, sending them all diving for cover. Shepard brought up her barrier, folding it around herself and Garrus, feeling heat wash over her as it went off.

"The final confrontation," the former Spectre mused as Shepard pressed herself behind a planter. "I should have known it would end here, like this, here of all places."

There was a certain symmetry, Shepard admitted.

"I can't get a shot," Ash's voice was a frustrated hum in her ear, "that tree is in the way. Keep him talking and I'll see what I can do."

"Sorry it took so long," she shot back, "I had to kill a small army of geth on my way."
"All of it remains pointless as ever," Saren replied dismissively. She glanced up and physically recoiled. Cybernetics burrowed into him, thick cabling out of his chest and steel claws where his hand had been. His eyes were the cold gleam of a husk. "I have already begun the upload. In a few minutes, Sovereign will have full control of the station. The return of the Reapers is at hand - and you have front row seats, Shepard. You've been a surprisingly able rival, but you've lost, you know that don't you?"

She gritted her teeth. "This isn't over until one of us is dead."

"I suppose you are correct on that account." She heard the crunch of glass as Saren dropped from the hovercraft onto the platform. "You survived our encounter on Virmire, but I've changed since then. Sovereign has...upgraded me. Perhaps I should thank you for that; after Virmire I couldn't stop thinking about what you had said. About Sovereign manipulating me, about indoctrination. But now, my doubts are gone."

"Sovereign is controlling you through your implants, you fucking idiot!" she shouted back. "You were sworn to protect the galaxy, not pull the trigger on it! You want to roll over and just let them cut your throat instead of fighting - what kind of Spectre does that make you?"

"You've seen the beacons, Shepard!" Saren's voice rose stringently. "They are too strong. You will die, your family will die, your friends will die, your crew will die - everyone you've ever met will die! Don't you understand? The Protheans couldn't stop it. You can't stop it. The cycle will always continue."

"Maybe you're right. Maybe I can't stop them. Maybe I'll just die trying - maybe. But after they've killed the rest of us, they'll kill you too. And everyone who has helped you. We're nothing but meat to the Reapers. As soon as the invasion is over, you'll be discarded as well!"

"I had no choice!"

"Bullshit!" She launched herself up and out of cover. Saren stared at her, a pistol held loosely in his organic hand. He didn't raise it. "You could've fought. You were a Spectre! You could've resisted, but you just rolled over! Just step aside and let me get to the console. I can stop it. Just let me through."

"Damnit Shepard, you're in the way! You need to move!" She blocked out Ashley's irate voice, focusing totally on Saren.

His eyes fixed with hers, otherworldly. Pained. "Maybe you're right. Maybe there's still -"

Saren screamed, a ragged, horrible scream. His pistol slipped from his fingers, bouncing off the floor. His claw-like hands rose to his face, digging into his mandibles. When he lowered them, there was something dead in his expression. "I'm sorry. Sovereign is too strong - it is too late for me."

"There's still one option left," Shepard said very softly.

Their eyes met.

Something crossed the turian's face. Maybe it was peace or just acceptance. "Goodbye, Shepard. Thank you."

Saren stepped to the side and closed his eyes. The chamber echoed with the crack of a sniper rifle going off. His head snapped back in a spray of blue blood and brain matter. For a moment he stood, suspended, and then he fell over the edge, glass shattering around him.
Shepard looked over the edge, at the motionless corpse below. There was only a small flicker of satisfaction and a larger one of - pity or perhaps regret. She’d done her job. She hadn't expected to feel anything for Saren Arterius.

*This is no time for goldbricking.* She turned, keying her comm. "Williams, get down here. Rest of you, defensive perimeter while I get this damn station open."

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**CODEX**

**Citadel Treaty Organisation Medals:**

In addition to medals and commendations awarded by its constituent governments, the Citadel Council awards its own medals to military personnel and civilian persons who distinguish themselves in operations under the CTO’s control. These awards are incorporated in the orders of precedence of the Asari Republics military and the Hierarchy armed forces; however, they are still classified as foreign decorations in the SADF and must be worn after all Alliance awards.

CTO Medals include:

- **Council Medal of Honor:** the most prestigious individual award conferred by the Citadel Council, equivalent to the Alliance Star of Terra, Hierarchy Nova Cluster, Republics Sword of Thessia or Union Silver Dagger. It is issued for acts of valour and gallantry at the risk of life, above and beyond the call of duty.

- **Council Distinguished Service Medal:** awarded for gallantry in action against an enemy of Citadel Space not justifying the Council Medal of Honor.

- **Council Legion of Merit:** awarded for exceptionally meritorious conduct in the performance of outstanding services and achievements while serving in a CTO led force.

- **Conspicuous Gallantry Star:** awarded for gallantry in action against an enemy of Citadel Space, so long as the action didn’t justify the DSM or Medal of Honor.

- **Citadel Service Medal:** awarded to any member of a constituent military who serves in a CTO activity, such as the Citadel Fleet.

- **Peacekeeping Medal:** awarded for participation in a Citadel peacekeeping taskforce.

- **Star of Valour:** awarded to civilians for acts of conspicuous courage in circumstances of extreme peril.

- **Galactic Unit Citation:** the highest unit award awarded by the Council, for extraordinary courage in action against an enemy of Citadel Space. The unit must display such gallantry, determination, and esprit de corps in accomplishing its mission under extremely difficult and hazardous conditions so as to set it apart from and above other units participating in the same campaign. The collective gallantry of the unit should equal what would justify the individual award of the DSM. The last time the GUC was awarded was the Krogan Rebellions.

- **Palladium Star:** awarded to a unit that distinguishes itself by extraordinary courage in action against an enemy of Citadel Space. The collective heroism should equal that which would justify the award of the Conspicuous Gallantry Star.
The Normandy crew spread out, taking defensive positions at the top of the stairs, staring down the doorway with gun muzzles and fingers balancing on triggers. Meanwhile, Shepard stepped up to the central control unit, her omnitool an orange haze around her wrist. First, she began disabling the long-range comms blackout. She was far from Tali or Garrus’ technical proficiency, but she had done some training as a N7 - and Vigil’s program was surprisingly user-friendly. Now, for reopening the Relay system and opening the Citadel...

“…this is the Destiny Ascension. Mayday, mayday, mayday. Kinetic barriers are down to forty percent, and our escorts are all gone! The Council is onboard, I repeat, the Council is on board! Mayday, mayday!”

Shepard hit the comm, even as her other hand continued to puzzle out the Relays. “This is Citadel to Destiny Ascension. Tower controls have been recaptured. What is your situation, over?”

Relief filled the asari voice on the other side of the line. “Kinetic barriers are down to forty percent, and our main drive is offline, so we can’t do an emergency jump. We - we had to come in to get the Council, and we just got swarmed by the geth. Our escorts are all gone. We need immediate support, over!”

A muscle jumped in Shepard’s neck. What kind of brain-dead motherfucker comes up with an evacuation plan that involves using a 1.5 kilometre dreadnought as a taxi instead of long-range artillery? She thrust the frustration away. It wasn’t helpful right now - if they all survived this, then she could tell the Grand Admiral in detail what she thought of his evacuation procedures.

“Copy that, Ascension. I’ll see what I can do. Stand by. Citadel out.”

“Fifth Fleet to Citadel Tower. The Fifth Fleet is in the Andura Sector and ready to jump.” Hackett’s calm voice washed over her. She’d never been so glad to hear his voice. “As soon as you open the Relays we can get through. However, the First and Third Fleets will need one to three hours to be ready to jump.”

The Destiny Ascension and her ten thousand crew didn’t have that long.

“Commander Shepard, you have eyes on the situation. I don’t. Should we come through now or wait until the First and Third are ready?”

“Bring them through.” It was Liara, behind her. “There are ten thousand people on that ship!”

“If we bring the Fifth Fleet alone, they’ll take heavy casualties,” Ashley shot back. “They’ll likely not have the strength to destroy Sovereign.”

“This is bigger than humanity! The Council is the galactic government.”

“Screw the Council! This is their fault!”

Wrex rumbled in agreement.

Shepard whirled around. “All of you shut up and let me think.”

When they subsided, she turned back to the console and closed her eyes for perhaps three seconds. Alright, Junior, pros and cons. Whatever decision she made, there would be death enough.
The Council. Irrelevant. Their animosity towards her wasn’t cause enough to justify their deaths, but they were also expendable. Everyone was if it came down to it. They could always make a new Council. However, the political ramifications of a human officer letting the Council die could seriously damage the Alliance’s standing in the galactic community, putting countless human lives at risk.

The *Destiny Ascension*. The largest dreadnought built, with the teeth to match. With the amount of damage she’d taken, she would be useless in this battle. She carried ten thousand souls.

Sovereign. So long as it remained in one piece the crisis wasn’t over.

The Fifth Fleet. Her cousin, her mother, her ex-wife, the *Normandy*, were all amongst the fleet’s personnel. But if she was to make this decision logically, their lives could be worth no more than anyone else’s. Expendable. Ash was right - they would take more casualties without the force of numbers. They might not be able to finish the job. But there would be further reinforcements.

The Citadel. CSec and the troops aboard were still fighting, but they were outnumbered and attempting to protect millions of civilians. With every passing minute, it became more and more likely they would be overrun. Once Matolyt and Bau were overrun - and they would be eventually - the geth would focus on killing the *Normandy* ground team. They could lose control of the Tower before the Alliance got here, handing it right back to Sovereign. The Fifth Fleet would land Marines on the Citadel as soon as a path was cleared.

She opened her eyes. Her hands moved with surety. “I’m opening the Relays. Good luck, over.”

“Roger that. Fifth Fleet out.”

“I hope you know what you’re doing, Commander,” Garrus said, leaning heavily against the railing. Ashley was silent.

*So do I.* Shepard just signed a lot of death warrants. “If the Fifth takes too many casualties, they’ll just have to distract Sovereign until the First and Third arrive.”

The words sounded cold even to her.

“Ma’am! We’ve got geth on the other side of the door - I can hear them setting charges!” Draven called up to her.

“Everyone get ready,” she ordered. Ashley fell in beside her. Then - out of the corner of her eyes - Crimson light crackled and collated over the corpse of Saren Arterius. It jerked once, twice, like a marionette, and all the flesh and plate began to melt away until there were only charred bones and the silver-blue of cybernetics poking through.

“What the fuck,” said Commander Shepard.

The thing staggered to its feet and what was once a turian face tilted up to regard her. Ashley’s sniper rifle had smashed in Saren’s mandible and mouth - the skeletal jaw was cracked and severed on one side, hanging down in a hideous parody of a smile.

It leapt upwards in a jump no turian could make, as the door to the Citadel chamber smashed inwards and a geth squad began to pour in. Shepard stumbled back, fumbling for her shotgun. *Shit shit shit -*

“I AM SOVEREIGN AND THIS IS MY STATION!” The voice was thunder and fire and the screaming of horns.
Ashley’s marksman rifle went off once, twice, but the creature seemed to barely notice the rounds as it seized Shepard around the throat.

Not this again. She jammed the muzzle of her shotgun under the arm holding her up and pulled the trigger. The shotgun roared, cracking the still smoking bone, and the grip around her throat loosened. She stumbled back. It raised a hand, crackling with bloody light that shot out to meet her. It hit her in the chest, snapping over her dark armour with burning heat. She couldn’t breathe -

And then she was falling.

Darkness rose to meet her.

The Fifth Fleet jumped out of the Relay and into chaos. The Normandy was barely out of FTL when Joker had to jerk her into a climb to avoid a spinning knife of metal that had once been an allied ship. The sensors were alive with hundreds of ships, thick debris fields and the streaks of heat of torpedos and mass accelerator rounds. All around the Normandy were the transponder signals of Alliance vessels. Far behind were the huge behemoths of the Fifth Fleet’s dreadnought and carriers, the latter throwing wings of fighters into space as quickly as they could.

“Joker, bring us around. We need to screen the capital ships until the fleet can finish deploying.” Pressly was the picture of calm and command, his eyes intent on the captain’s readouts. If he was concerned about taking the Normandy into the biggest shitfest since the Krogan Rebellions, he wasn’t showing it.

They hadn’t bothered with the IES. This wasn’t what Guns had taken to calling ‘drive-by torpedoing’ - sneaking up, torpedoing their unfortunate victim, and watching the resulting core detonation. This was the largest space battle the galaxy had seen in centuries, and they were going to need every bit of heat endurance Adams could get out of the Normandy.

Joker curved the Normandy in a slashing run as the geth immediately reacted to the arrival of reinforcements - sending a wave of lighter ships and fighters against the Fifth. If they could, they would get off a few volleys before the Everest could respond. A dreadnought could probably shake it off, but an unlucky cruiser or carrier wouldn’t. Joker danced the Normandy in between a geth frigate and a swarm of fighters, red GARDIAN lasers stabbing outwards. Two fighters were sliced apart, and one laser scored a deep, burning cut into the geth frigate’s flank.

They cleared the geth formation, his hands already moving to swing her around. At their stern, the geth frigate exploded as the Trenton cored her with a torpedo.

“All ships move in and save the Ascension.”

The fleet wheeled as one.

The Destiny Ascension was alone against an armada of geth vessels swarming her, like wolves bringing down a moose, nipping and tearing at her where she couldn’t bring her massive main gun to bear. She had several hull breaches, bleeding coolant and air from her wounds. The Citadel Fleet had managed to destroy one of the geth dreadnoughts, but that left two. The Everest had a nasty bite, but would it be enough?

The order came in from above for the fleet’s destroyers and frigates to launch torpedoes. A mixture
of disruptor torpedoes and armour penetrating ship-killer ‘warp bombs’ erupted from the Alliance lines. GARDIAN arrays slashed and stabbed, but with that many torpedoes, at least some would find their mark. Metal crunched and splintered, ships spilling their insides amongst the Widow Nebula’s clouds.

But not all of the destruction was geth warships. The Normandy shuddered as behind her the SSV Jakarta ate a dreadnought round to the bow, splitting her into several pieces in a cloud of debris and escaping oxygen. She wasn’t the only blue transponder signal to burn out. Joker didn’t try to count - he just jerked the Normandy down and out of the way of the resulting core detonation.

“How many people on that ship?” asked Grenado shakily from beside him.

“Focus,” he told her, even as his mind supplied the answer. Five hundred for a heavy cruiser.

Hackett was splitting the fleet, the Everest and several squadrons of heavy cruisers and destroyers pounding away at one of the geth dreadnoughts. As for the other-

The rest of the heavy cruisers were throwing all they had at her.

“We’re gonna swarm her as soon as the heavies bring her shields down,” Pressly told him. “Be ready.”

Joker Moreau just nodded.

“Hey Joker,” Lieutenant Wulandri, their CSO and TAO, called. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d heard that woman this serious. “Remember what we talked about when we were studying those geth dreadnought schematics?”

“Yep.”

“Reckon you can get us right up in the sucker’s face?”

He smiled a small, grim smile. “Of course I can.”

Pressly nodded slowly. He’d been in on those talks too. “Let’s do it. Engineering, initialize IES.”

Joker threw the Normandy into a screaming charge - straight at the enemy dreadnought - like she herself was just another one of a volley of torpedos rather than a ship, her frigate shaped signature hidden by the IES. Sweat dripped down Joker’s forehead as the ship began to heat. At what felt like the very last moment, well within the dreadnought’s kinetic barrier, he pulled up, the Normandy’s nose close to scraping the dreadnought’s flank. Just after, down in forward gunnery, Senior Gunner’s Mate Silas Crosby pulled the trigger on the frigate’s main gun with an exuberant, “Eat this motherfucker!”

The tungsten projectile crashed through a weak point in between two smooth armour plates, already scarred and pitted by a disruptor torpedo, stabbing deep into the dreadnought’s insides and smashing into her drive core, like a stiletto to the heart. But not before a GARDIAN laser lashed out as Adams disabled the IES and turned on their tiger stripes in an attempt to stop them from cooking - the whole ship shuddering as armoured plating boiled away.

“We’re hit!” Grenado shouted.

The Normandy seemed to groan around them as he forced her out of the epicenter of the coming blast as fast as she could go despite her suddenly wanting to pull to port. When it went off, the whole ship twisted and bucked, threatening to become uncontrollable between the core detonation and what
had to be a missing starboard bow thruster.

“C’mon baby,” he murmured. He regained control just as the ship threatened to careen into a piece of what had probably been a ship once. She swerved enough to avoid a ship-killing collision, but the debris still ripped another wound into the Normandy’s flank with a shriek of metal on metal audible in the CIC.

Joker brought them back into formation, heart pounding beneath his sternum. *Giving me some frights today, ol’ girl.*

“*Both geth dreadnoughts are down. Destiny Ascension, you are all clear, over.***” Hackett announced over the comms.

Joker patted the nearby bulkhead. “That’s my girl.”

“Engineering, I need a damage report.” Pressly wasn’t inclined to celebrate. Joker hoped he hadn’t promised Shepard she’d get the ship back without a scratch.

More orders flowed in from the chain of admirals. The Fifth Fleet swung towards the opening arms of the Citadel. Wounded, leaving the debris of dead ships behind them, some ships damaged and bleeding oxygen. But they turned to another fight anyway.

To the dark parasitic form of Sovereign, clinging to the tower Joker’s friends were currently fighting for their lives inside.

“Let’s dance, you overgrown cuttlefish.”

In the moment that Shepard fell and the thing that had once been Saren leapt down after her, the entire Normandy ground team froze. Then there was the distant percussive sound of breaching charges. Looking across at Williams, Garrus saw the realisation bloom in her eyes - with Shepard down and Alenko dead, she was in charge.

“Wrex, Liara, you’re with me. Rest of you - deal with those geth!” Shrouded by biotics, the three of them disappeared into the gardens after their Commander.

*Time to hope they can deal with whatever that thing was and we don’t all get shot in the back,* he thought sardonically. Garrus couldn’t believe that Shepard could’ve been killed by that. The Saren creature had gotten a lucky shot. Shepard would be fine. She had to be.

His side, where he’d struck the Tower on his not so elegant way up, was an unrelenting burn of pain, even after the injection Ling had given him to keep him on his feet. When he bent, he could feel the broken edges of his carapace grinding together under his cracked armour. He bared his teeth and steadied himself against the planter in front of him, laying his sniper rifle along the top of it. Tali had called his name when it’d happened. Tali, who might already be dead.

*Focus, Garrus.* The voice sounded like his father or maybe Shepard. He’d been trying not to think about his father or the shitty little apartment he’d shared with Jalix or his friends in CSec. He looked through the scope, syncing the rifle with his visor. Joining the Normandy had been the right choice, but he’d forgotten how much he still had to lose on the Citadel.

“Watch your ammo!” Draven shouted. Between Ilos and their fight to the Council chamber, they’d burned through a worrying amount of their ammo blocks and heatsinks. They’d taken all they could carry, but the remainder of the spare ammunition they’d been forced to abandon with their Mako.
He sighted down his scope at the encroaching geth. His first shot drilled right through the flashlight of a geth rocket trooper. The rest scattered for cover, just as the full throated roar of the LMGs started up. So long as they kept up the rate of fire the geth couldn’t make much headway. He found himself wishing for one of Shepard’s pulls or Liara’s singularity fields. He understood the logic - Ashley wanted to overwhelm the Saren-thing as quickly as possible and get the four of them back into the fight, and the Marines operated well together without handholding - but he’d gotten very used to working with biotics.

Garrus wished Kaidan was here.

Below, he could hear the sounds of fighting.

His rifle was an extension of him. He pulled the trigger again, and a destroyer went down, chest dented in. He set each heatsink on the rim of the planter when he ejected them. Beside him, Waaberi stood and fired the last of her Cobra rockets. The room shook with the percussion of it, the ensuing explosion tearing a Prime and two troopers apart.

He paused, hearing a faint wailing. “Do you hear…”

_Husks_. Dozens of them flooding in, packed shoulder to shoulder, blue eyes gleaming in the dim light. Not just humans either. Turians, with their crests and mandibles stretched into blackened spikes. Asari, cybernetics woven into their skulls. That explained where all the diplomats, security guards, and bureaucrats had gone.

Of course. Of course they could make husks out of other species. How could he have expected any different? At least the husks don’t have guns?

“They’ll try and drive us out of cover,” Garrus said calmly. “We can’t let them. We have to stop the geth from getting to the master control. Keep up your sectors of fire and staggered reloading.”

Beside him, Freddie’s breathing steadied. On his other side, Waaberi sighed.

“Fuck man. I need to get paid more.”

“What?” He feigned shock. “You actually get paid for this crap?”

She laughed.

With a howl, the horde of husks charged.

The SSV _Seoul_ died in a flower of debris, the explosion of dark energy painting itself across the _Normandy’s_ sensors. Joker had narrowly pulled the _Normandy_ free of the attack that had destroyed the cruiser. Missing one of her maneuvering thrusters had left her feeling sluggish - but she was still flying. Still fighting. She glowed on the sensors, tiger stripes up and down her sleek flanks like warpaint.

“All wounded have been evacuated except for Crosby.” Rosie Draven’s voice rattled through her helmet as she reported to Pressly over the comm circuit. “We’re putting a patch over the hole in gunnery and sealing off Berthing 2.”

“Roger that. What is Crosby’s status?”
"He's insisting he stay at his post, sir. He's got some burns, but he's not going to drop dead. That's what Sherazi says, at least."

"Copy that. Keep at it, Rosie."

"Will do, sir."

Another flare of heat across their sensors and Joker jerked _Normandy_ to port and out of the way. The Reaper had not only its main gun but smaller versions on the end of each 'tentacle,' and each strike was deadly - burning through the Alliance ships' armour and shields with shocking efficiency.

Normally with a dreadnought, a frigate would stay close enough that it couldn't use its powerful main gun. Sovereign disregarded those old truisms about dreads completely. It was taking all of Joker's piloting skill to keep them alive and the _Normandy_ in one piece.

He focused solely on that. His hands, his ship, the feel of her around him. He lined up the shots, knowing Wulandri and her gunnery crews would keep up with her. And behind him, Pressly's rough voice was the conductor for an orchestra of violence - staying on top of the ship's position, the output of her weapons, the damage control crew, the needs of engineering.

"Engineering to the bridge, we need to vent heat and soon. The starboard vent was damaged by that debris strike, so I'm only going to be able to use the port."

"Go ahead," Pressly replied.

Soon after a sheet of lithium droplets - millions of them - erupted from the Normandy's port bow nozzles, burning bright over any nearby ship's sensors and leaving a wake of heat behind her. Some of the lithium would be caught at the stern and recycled - but not all of them, not with the sharp turns and twists the Normandy was making.

Behind them, the SSV _Trenton_ - the ship that'd been on their flank for much of the battle - was cut in half by another beam. The stern section erupted violently in a flash of dark energy. The bow section spun slowly and inexorably towards Tayseri Ward, shedding escape pods with every rotation.

"Damnit," Frag said softly. The Fifth Fleet was battered and bruised and losing ships all the while. Some drifted, disabled, at the mercy of Sovereign and friendly fire in space thick with weapons fire.

The situation was made worse by the fact that the _Everest_ couldn't even fire her main gun. Not with Sovereign where it was. A single missed round could cause inconceivable damage to the Citadel.

Beyond what they were already causing. But what choice was there? Fight, knowing each missed shot and every bit of debris falling onto the Wards was killing civilians, or leave, knowing everyone on the Citadel would die?

"The Cruiser Squadron 6 is requesting a retreat," Lam reported. Rear Admiral Spencer was not known as a coward, but half his command was debris.

"We can't," Joker objected. "Soon as we let up, Saren gets control of the station and we're all food for killer cuttlefish!"

"Negative." Hackett's voice was flat. "Keep up the attack. We have to take down that monster, no matter the cost!"
Shepard laid at the base of a tree as Ashley’s boots hit the ground, jarring her still-wounded leg painfully. She took long strides over to the Commander, rifle raised as she scanned for Saren. Sovereign? It was dark enough she considered putting on her night vision filter, shadows seeming to cling to the rocks. Behind her, she heard the thumps as Wrex and Liara followed her down.

“Skipper? Are you okay?”

Shepard groaned and flopped onto her back. Her chestplate was charred and pitted where the projectile had hit, but it looked like the ballistic weave was still intact. “...ow.”

“Can you stand?”

Shepard nodded and slowly climbed to her feet, grabbing her shotgun. Her face was pinched with pain. “Where is that son of a bitch?”

A red lance of light cut out of the shadows like an answer and lashed across Ashley’s shields, boiling them away. Her hardsuit beeped a warning at her as she threw herself out of the way, snapping her rifle up. Saren clung to the wall like some monstrous spider, glowing a sullen red the colour of old blood. She squeezed the trigger, two of her bursts hitting it before it leapt, scuttling away. Its shields barely appeared to flicker.

“Stay mobile,” Shepard ordered hoarsely. “We’ll just have to wear him down.”

It was something of a cat and mouse game - ducking in and out from behind trees and rocks to hammer at it with weapons fire and biotic fields. A few times Ash reached for her last remaining frag grenade, but Saren was moving too quickly. Like a geth hopper rather than a man.

Liara was a moment too late stepping back as the creature shifted position and a bloody ball of crackling plasma sailed at her - only to be batted away at the last moment by a desperate biotic barrier, the asari staggering back. Then Shepard was there, shotgun up and firing, the garden echoing with each thunderous boom, driving it off.

“Its shields are so strong,” Liara gasped, sliding another heatsink into her SMG.

“Damn good capacitors,” Ashley agreed. The Vindicator wasn’t great in this sort of fight, so she’d slung it over her back in favour of her shotgun.

“To the Void with this,” Wrex growled, low and angry. His eyes tracked the turian, and when he passed close enough, cutting at Shepard with another beam, the krogan moved forward with shocking speed and agility. One large hand seized Saren around the leg and pulled the creature right off the wall, slamming it down with bone-crushing force. With his other hand, he raised his Graal spike thrower and fired.

The Saren-thing jerked as three long fletchettes stabbed deep into its chest. Then the snapping of red energy around and within it seemed to grow stronger, and it lashed out with one clawed hand, throwing Wrex - all 800 pounds of him - off and leaving a deep wound in his side, dripping orange blood down his side.

“You alright, Wrex?” Shepard called to him. Ashley shot at Saren again, swearing as the shotgun blast missed by centimetres.

“I’m fine,” he snapped, slapping a wad of omnigel over the wound. “Just kill the bastard.”

“I’ve got an idea,” Shepard said, retreating back towards Ashley. “How many grenades do you have left?”
“Just the one.”

“Then we’ll have to make it count. Wrex, Liara, I need you to grab Saren with your biotics, hold him in place. Then—”

Saren leapt out of the dark, and another blast of plasma crackled as it shot forward. At Shepard, with her scorched armour, the chest plates ablated and boiled away, her KB emitters still flickering.

“Shepard, watch out!” Ashley called to her - but Wrex was quickest. He shoved Shepard aside, sending her sprawling into a flower bed. The bolt struck him in the side, burning through armoured plates and into flesh with a horrific stench. The krogan toppled over with a heavy crash and didn’t move. For a moment, Ash froze. It didn’t seem possible for Wrex to go down - but he had.

“Wrex!” Liara took a step towards him. Shepard struggled out of amongst the flowers, bits of leaves and stems caught in the joins of her armour.

“Liara,” she said very calmly, “I need you to hold Saren.”

There was a steel to Liara’s expression when the asari nodded. The next time Saren scuttled towards them, she flowed forward into a mnemonic, lashing out with a biotic field that slammed him into the ground and held him there. She gritted her teeth. “I can’t hold him for long!”

Shepard shoved a hand upwards in a far less graceful movement and a shimmering dome of black-blue energy formed over the prone Reaper creature. “Ash -”

Ashley already knew what she needed. She took her last grenade out of her webbing and pulled the pin, tossing it to neatly land at Saren’s feet. The grenade went off, throwing up dust and dirt - all of it, the explosion, the shrapnel, Saren trapped within Shepard’s barrier. When the dust cleared the Saren husk was in several pieces - limbs pulled away at the joints and peppered with shrapnel. Saren’s intact claws twitched once, twice, and then were still.

The barrier flickered out, and Shepard tugged her faceplate off, tucking into her webbing. Blood ran from her nose down to her chin. “I really hope he does us the courtesy of staying dead this time.”

Ashley took a couple of steps forward and shot it in the face a couple of times with her pistol to make sure. Too many goddamn zombies.

Liara was kneeling at Wrex’s side, her omnitool out. The krogan laboriously got to his feet, teeth bared. “Remember Shepard, I want his skull.”

“Yeah, about that,” Ashley said, backing away as the corpse began to smoke. Within a few seconds, Saren had been completely consumed by the smolder, leaving only ashes.

“Son of a bitch.” Shepard shook her head. “You had your helmet cam on?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Good. I have a feeling a written report isn’t going to cut it. We should get back up top. Wrex, can you walk?”

He answered that by striding off in search of the stairs back up top.

"Picking up the First and Third Fleets on the sensors!"
"About time," Grenado muttered. Joker for his part didn't answer, spiraling up and out of the way of a cruiser's main gun. The *Normandy* fired torpedoes the whole way up, each aimed at the monster's throat.

He wasn't sure exactly how much more use the other ships would be anyway. Sure, they'd have more frigates, destroyers, and cruisers and the worst damaged of the Fifth Fleet could retreat, but the main issue was that Sovereign's barrier needed the dreadnoughts and heavy cruisers to focus fire on it. And they couldn't. Not with the Citadel right there. They'd inflicted damage, but the wounds in Sovereign's glossy black hull looked like bug bites compared to what it'd done to the fleet.

"We've used all our Javelins," reported Wulandri. "We're down to the main gun and the internal tubes."

"Understood. Joker, you see that breach the *Cairo* caused, to our starboard?" Pressly asked.

"Yes," he said shortly.

"Can you get us in there so Gunnery can take the shot?"

"Yep." Joker pushed the *Normandy* into a dive, right at the hull breach the heavy cruiser SSV *Cairo* had put in Sovereign's 'leg' before the Reaper had retaliated and destroyed her. Payback time.

The ship shivered as the main gun fired. The round smashed into the hole, making it larger and cutting out the bright red glare of that tentacle's weapon. But it didn't feel like nearly enough.

"*Warsaw's* about to go," one of the sensor techs announced grimly. The cruiser was bleeding coolant and clouds of gas from a dozen gouges cut into her hull, and her drive core was a dangerous waver on the dark energy sensors.

But her captain seemed to have different ideas. Escape pods fled from the ship's stern, but not enough for all four hundred of her crew. Her course steadied. She gained speed. Her bow pointed right at Sovereign.

"Holy shit," whispered Frag, frozen beside him.

"Joker, evasive maneuvers!" Pressly shouted.

"Already on it, old man," he shot back. The *Normandy* twisted up, thrusters burning, as the *Warsaw* punched forward and into Sovereign. She crumpled from the bow, metal tearing and spilling into space. Then her drive core went off with a soundless wave of energy that rattled the *Normandy* like a tin can being shaken.

Sheets of crackling energy ran down the Reaper's sides. And then a torpedo hit, carving a scar through the black hull.

"*Warsaw took its shields down. All ships, focus fire on its drive core!*

The survivors of the Fifth Fleet regrouped amongst the shattered debris of dozens of ships, joined by the still unscarred vessels of the First and Third. They fired everything they had - torpedoes, main guns, broadsides - at the monster.

Sovereign’s grip on the Tower faltered and then failed. It fell in slow motion, tentacle legs wriggling like a beetle on its back.
“Its drive core is damaged! Now’s our chance to finish it off!”

“Joker, get us in there,” Pressly ordered. They were all sweating in the heat of the CIC. A drop rolled down Joker’s face.

He flipped the Normandy and went right for the Reaper’s throat. The frigate’s main gun fired as the space around them rippled with flashes of accelerator rounds. The slug punched through weakened carapace-like armour, stabbing down, down, down - and then came out the other side having drilled a hole right through its insides.

There was a moment where the pilot held his breath.

And then fracture lines spread across the Reaper’s hull until it cracked open, tearing apart into a hundred pieces, molten metal from its guns spilling out until it cooled into chunks in the cold of space.

Joker pulled the Normandy away from the chunks of debris propelled by the detonation of that huge drive core, as the comm channels filled with the rise and fall of jubilant voices.

It was over.

“Oh god,” Frag whispered. Her voice was thick as if she were about to start crying. Joker frowned, turning to look at her. Their eyes met, hers wide and horrified. “Joker, a piece of debris just hit the Council chamber.”

Garrus pushed himself up from his crouch, wincing at the grinding in his side, as the others climbed back up top. He scooped up his discarded heatsinks and put them back into his webbing, each movement mechanical. Every part of him ached. His head still rang with the sustained gunfire, even now they’d let their fingers off the trigger.

Ling was kneeling next to Waaberi, whose arm hung at an odd angle. A turian husk had made it past their withering cones of fire and pulled her arm right out of the socket before she grabbed her sidearm and shot off the top of its skull.

The stairs were thick with piles of husks, slippery with the fluid that leaked from their bullet wounds. Shepard’s face was without expression as she stepped over the corpses, each step making a disgusting squelch, but Liara looked green around the edges.

“I think I’m gonna be sick,” Freddie muttered. His hands were shaking as he pulled off his helmet, face paler than normal.

“Is he dead?” Garrus demanded.

“Yes.” Shepard fumbled with the cap of one of her canteens. Ashley stepped close to her and twisted it open for her. Shepard drank greedily from it, a few drops of brightly coloured sports drink dripping down her chin, and turned towards the now empty window. Had the fleet gotten Sovereign?

Williams patted Shepard on the pauldron and then began to move along the line, checking on her Marines.

Draven tramped over, helmet under her arm. “Fourth MARDIV is pushing to secure the Presidium.”
“Good,” Shepard began and then stiffened.

The window filled with the dark metal of a bit of Reaper debris, tumbling towards them. The Commander was the closest. “Run!”

The voice demanded obedience, cutting through the panic threatening to choke them all. Garrus ran. He tripped down the stairs, pushing himself up with claws that sank into wet mush that had once been a husk.

And then all he could hear was the screaming of metal on metal.

Darkness.

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CODEX

Kinetic Barriers:

Kinetic barriers or ‘shields’ are undoubtedly one of the most important protective technologies on the battlefield. They are used by the individual soldier, armoured vehicles and warships alike - and some settlements may even have ‘bubble shields’ to harden bases or evacuation shelters, though it is usually too cost prohibitive to cover an entire city.

Kinetic barriers are stable mass effect fields projected from emitters synced with generators containing element zero. Light, personal shielding devices like a ‘clip on’ portable generators rated for mining work or small arms may only have one or two emitters forming a relatively weak orb-like field around the user. The standard Alliance hardsuit contain six emitters distributed across the body. A dreadnought may have hundreds.

Power draw and heat are the main concerns for KB generators. Heat is less of a concern for smaller categories, such as personal protective devices and vehicle shields. Vehicle barriers are usually powered by the vehicle’s fuel cells.

Hardsuit devices are powered by small power cells called ‘shield batteries’ by Alliance troops; when a shield is depleted the cells take some time to cycle and recharge. A shield’s depletion is usually accompanied by an audible ‘shattering’ sound and an alarm, though kinetic barriers break silently. The auditory cue was added by hardsuit manufacturers to ensure soldiers under stress wouldn’t miss that their kinetic barriers were down. Many soldiers carry more than one shield battery on missions; when one is depleted the ‘recharge’ time for the generator can be shortened by swapping one battery for another in cover.

Warships will often preserve power and heat capacity by running their kinetic barriers at between 50-70% maximum strength when not engaged in combat, depending on the ship’s size, quality of generators and threat level. This still protects them from debris strikes at speed and should survive an initial barrage. However, most captains will still prefer to avoid situations where they’re caught with their proverbial pants down.

The downside of a kinetic barrier is that it can sometimes deflect energy within the area meant to be protected, the equivalent of setting off an explosive in a small room. This is a particularly deadly threat in terms of nuclear and element zero warheads on torpedoes and missiles that can pass through a kinetic barrier and then detonate within its envelope, meaning a ship’s GARDIAN systems are integral to its survival.
The sound was overwhelming, a roar of crunching and tearing metal and masonry. It was all Ashley could hear. It sounded like the entire world was coming down, crumbling to pieces on top of their all too fragile bodies. It was - dust and the breath was driven from her lungs and a sharp pain in her skull through the helmet and -

Ashley Williams came to lying on the floor of the Council chamber, blood in her mouth, head and side throbbing in time to her pulse. She lay still for a moment, forcing herself to think through the pain. Catalogue injuries. She wiggled fingers and toes and flexed muscle. Legs and arms weren't broken, she decided, but she definitely had a concussion and from the grinding pain in her side, a broken rib or two as well. Her still unhealed gunshot wounds were bursts of pain in her thigh and shoulder.

A crack ran down the centre of her visor, nonsensical orange letters flickering in and out on her HUD - two thousand credits worth of technology and it wasn’t telling her shit. She lifted her hands and popped the seal on her helmet, pulling it carefully off her head and letting it clatter against the metal floor.

“Williams! Still breathing?”

She blinked up at Wrex, standing over her like a monolith. The armour covering his hump appeared cracked and scratched, blood dripping down his side.

“Yeah…yeah.”

“Pulled that off you.” He nodded to a piece of debris. No wonder she felt like she’d been hit by a bus.

“My HUD’s broken,” she said hoarsely, glancing around the chamber anxiously. Here and there she could see movement. Please, please let everyone be alive. “Everyone okay?”

Wrex’s red eyes were strangely solemn. “Shepard’s suit isn’t on the network.”

“No.” Shepard couldn’t die. Not now. Not after everything. Not when Ashley hadn’t told her yet. There was something clenching her throat in an iron grip.

Wrex bent down, teeth bared. “She’s not dead, Williams. A bit of rubble can’t take a warrior like that.”

Shepard wasn’t invincible. She was terrifyingly human, with delicate ribs Ash had traced with her hands.

“Now,” he said, “are you going to get up and help me find your warlord, or are you going to keep lying there?”

If Abby had been there, she would have yelled at Ashley for even thinking about getting up. But there were more important things than a few cracked bones. She crawled to her knees, gasping as broken ribs ground together and her head throbbed hard enough she thought for a moment she was going to pass out again. Get up. She stood, grabbing at a ridge of Wrex’s armour to pull herself up.
She was half expecting the krogan to shove her off for that - Wrex was fond of his personal space - but he tolerated it until she could stand straight.

“Ash!” Draven pushed aside a piece of debris, limping. Garrus was behind her - he too had lost or discarded his helmet, his mandibles tight against his face in pain.

“Gung Ho.” She reached for her, clasping their hands together in relief. “Get an accounting of everyone, and triage the wounded.”

“You should see Ling.”

She shook her head. “I’m going to look for Shepard.”

Draven looked past her, at the shattered audience chamber, blackened and twisted metal rising like broken ribs. Where Shepard had been standing, closest to the window, as the fleet had ripped Sovereign apart. She’d been the first to realise the danger. She’d shouted at them to run. She’d probably saved their lives. What Draven thought was clear in her eyes.

Ashley turned away so she didn’t have to see it.

“Williams,” Garrus began. There was a low, pained note in his subvocals.

“Go see Ling,” she snapped. Garrus had been hurt even before the fight with Saren. And she was in no mood for his particular brand of hard-edged realism.

He paused, and then followed Draven.

“I’ll help.” Liara was limping as well, a deep laceration carved through her armour and into her calf, patched over with white medigel from her suit’s medical system. But the look in her blue eyes was steely, and Ash just nodded, knowing she wouldn’t be dissuaded. And her biotics might come in handy if -

*Just get moving.* That’d been her mantra since Eden Prime. Just keep moving. An object in motion stays in motion. She could stay in motion even if -

She pulled herself over a slab of concrete, gasping as her ribs ground together. The smoke was beginning to clear, but it still tickled the back of her throat, threatening to make her cough. Their progress was slow as they picked their way through the ruins of the Council chamber, over bits of concrete and metal and Reaper parts, Ash having to stop every so often. After so much abuse in the past two weeks, her body was beginning to give up on her.

She gritted her teeth and kept going. If Wrex was annoyed by her weakness, he said nothing.

“Why the fuck did she have to wear black armour?” Ash muttered to herself. Everything was shades of black and grey and soot-stained silver.

“Oh Goddess,” Liara murmured, her voice thick with tears as she stepped over the remnants of a Keeper.

It wasn’t fair. Shepard had survived Elysium and Akuze and Eden Prime and Virmire and their long trek to the Council Chamber. She’d survived whatever Sovereign had turned Saren into it. To die to some *fucking rubble* after they’d *won* felt like a slap in the face from God.

*Please, please, please let her live. Please, God.*
Ash’s eye caught on something. A flash of colour. A hand, sticking out from under a spar of metal, with a stripe of red across the back of the wrist.

“Shepard?” She threw herself into a stumbling run, half sliding down the slab of metal she’d been standing on. Distantly she heard Wrex and Liara following her, but nothing mattered. Her vision focused in on that one hand. “Shepard!”

She levered herself carefully over the metal. The bar had pinned Shepard by her upper arm to the ground, her arm stretched above her. There was a spiderweb of cracks across her helmet visor, and her armour was dented and scoured and covered in soot, crumbling bits of rubble piled atop her. But her chest rose with breath.

“Shepard, can you hear me?”

Under the cracked visor, Shepard's lips twitched into a small, pained smile. “I'm a little stuck. Tried to stop it falling on me, but my biotics gave out.”

“You fucking asshole,” Ash breathed, falling to her knees with the force of her relief, knocking off the bits on top of her. She wasn’t sure whether to kiss her or punch her. “You scared the shit out of me.”

“Sorry,” she murmured just before the small space in between pieces of rubble filled with Liara and Wrex.

Wrex simply nodded. “Shepard.”

“Wrex.”

“Goddess, I'm so glad. We thought you were dead.”

“Everyone else?” Shepard demanded, because of course she did.

“Battered and bruised, but accounted for,” Ashley replied. The tense lines of Shepard's face relaxed somewhat. “What about you? Where are you hurt?”

“My wrist is almost definitely broken, and I got hit a few times by debris. My suit is dead, so I don’t know beyond that.”

“We can get this off with our biotics.” Liara studied the metal bar intently.

“No!” Ash burst out. Both aliens stared at her, and she blinked against the haze in her head. “She's been under that for at least an hour. If we lift it off her, it could kill her from crush syndrome.”

Wrex’s red eyes rolled to Shepard. “Is there anything that doesn't kill you humans?”

“Can you two get back and see if we can get in touch with Anderson or Matolyt? We need a doctor up here before we move her.”

Wrex just grunted in confirmation and began to climb up. Liara paused for a moment, glancing at Shepard, the sweat beading on her forehead before she too left.

As soon as they were gone, Ashley began to tug at the armour of Shepard's free arm, getting it loose.

“Getting me undressed, Williams?” Shepard murmured, smiling with her eyes closed.

“Oh yeah,” she deadpanned, pressing two fingers to the inside of Shepard's wrist. “Nothing gets me
going like rubble and mass destruction.”

Shepard huffed out a laugh, twisting like she was trying to get into a more comfortable position. Her pulse was a bit quick. Ash tugged off her own glove and laced their fingers together. Shepard squeezed her hand.

“Thanks for staying with me.”

“Of course I did. I thought…” she breathed in unsteadily and pressed her lips to the back of Shepard's hand. “You fucking asshole.”

Shepard smiled at her, and there was something tender there she wasn't ready to name. “Next time I'll try to avoid getting squashed by a Reaper.”

“Greatly appreciated,” she said dryly.

Shepard shifted uncomfortably again. “Can you talk to me?”

“About what?”

Her head lolled back, face shiny with sweat. “Anything. My wrist is fucking killing me.”

“Alright. So you know how I'm from Sirona? Well, there were these little lobster-like things that lived in the dams they used to irrigate the fields. Yeah, yeah I know, I practically fell off the cattle truck.”

“You're a farm girl,” Shepard said delightedly.

“You want the rest of the story or not?”

“Sorry, sorry.” Shepard didn't look at all apologetic.

“So we called them clippers, and we’d go out and catch them with basket cages and fry them up for lunch. I’d take my sisters out to go fishing, get them out of Ma’s hair for a bit, you know?” God, her head hurt. She rubbed her temples with one hand, the ballistic weave harsh against her skin. The old memories of growing up in Hickville, Sirona were lazy yellow sunlight and the smell of dust and wheat - out of place in this ruined place of silvers and shadows. “There was this older kid that liked to throw his weight around with the younger kids. He stopped messing with me after that…”

“Oh yeah?” There was a wicked gleam in Shepard’s dark eyes.


Shepard shook her head slightly, amused. “Of course you did.”

“Anyway. He left me and my sisters alone after that, but he was still giving other kids a hard time. So I took one of the clippers we caught and stuck it in his lunchbox one day. You shoulda heard the squeal when he opened it and got nipped on the finger for his trouble.”

“Troublemaker,” Shepard murmured, eyes drooping.

“Hey, hey. Stay awake for me, okay?”

“'M here,” she mumbled, and Ash squeezed her hand tight.

Ashley raised her head when she heard distant shouting - and a familiar voice. She staggered to her
feet, Shepard’s hand slipping from hers. “Anderson! Over here!”

The first seven days after the Battle of the Citadel, as it had quickly been named by the media, passed in a haze of painkillers and exhaustion for Garrus Vakarian. The only word for the situation was *messy* - comms channels crammed with military and emergency services traffic, the space around the Citadel thick with debris, whole sections of the Citadel needing evacuation. It took him four days to hear that his father was alright, five to be able to send a message back to Palaven to let his mother and Solana know they were both still breathing.

Solana’s response was just *idiot, my plates have dulled thanks to you!*

The first three days he woke up and fell asleep to the white-blue glare of the *Normandy’s* medbay lights and the soothing sound of Doctor Chakwas’ voice. Many of the docks were damaged, but Pressly had somehow found them a berth to quickly load the majority of the ground team.

Chakwas had set his misaligned plates and then stapled his chest back together. Around him the medbay had been filled to capacity - Sub-Lieutenant Matveev and Gunner's Mate Crosby with burns, Waaberí with her dislocated shoulder, Williams with her collection of injuries - even *Wrex* had been bullied into receiving at least some medical attention by their stern CMO.

Everyone but Shepard and Tali. All they’d heard was a brusque ‘they're both alive’ from Captain Anderson.

When he could finally stand and move properly, he decided to make his escape. They needed all the claws they could get on the Citadel, and he was still technically a CSec detective. Chakwas only let him go grudgingly, with his assurances he'd take it easy and go for regular check-ups.

"I can help out too," Ashley butted in hopefully, "with the search and rescue maybe."

Chakwas turned on her. "You will do no such thing. You are not leaving this ship until I give you medical clearance, Staff Sergeant."

"But-"

"Last time I let you off with a light duty chit you decided to take part in a transgalactic assault."

"Last time a crazy ass Spectre was trying to kill everyone!"

"And now you're on bed rest until I say otherwise."

Garrus flicked his mandibles nervously. "I'll talk to you all later. Thanks. Bye."

He exited the medbay as quickly as possible before either human could stop him, nearly stumbling over a sailor-filled sleeping bag.

"Watch where you're going, dude," Lowe muttered and then pulled the top of it over her face. Berthing 2 had suffered a hit during the battle, the tail end of the GARDIAN laser damaging Gunnery, and the Normandy didn't have enough bunks for her entire crew as it was. Garrus had already made himself at home with the Marines down near the armoury, but now many of the sailors had to find new places to sleep - even stranger than where the engineers already slept. Vorobyov had found Wulandri asleep on top of a rack of torpedoes they'd taken on from a replenishment ship.

It felt strange stepping off the ship alone. But he knew what he had to do - Garrus headed straight for
the nearest CSec station. No one seemed to care about how he'd left or that he'd helped with a
mutiny. They just put him straight to work.

The station was thick with armed soldiers roaming in squads and even platoons. The Fifth Fleet had
landed a large portion of the Fourth Marine Division, and the Hierarchy soon sent elements of the
2nd Trebian Legion. The Marines, battered by the war as a whole and then by brutal urban battle,
still insisted on taking point on rooting out the last of the geth. They searched the Citadel ward by
ward, right down to the Foundations, slaughtering any geth they found.

So CSec didn't need Garrus' rifle. He was put on Urban Search and Rescue.

It was backbreaking, boring, dirty, grim work. At first, they found handfuls of survivors in the
wreckage of Tayseri Ward, but as the days passed, they found fewer and fewer.

In the vids, there was always a celebration scene after the bad guy got what was coming for him. But
like many things, this aftermath didn't quite live up to his expectations either. He didn't feel like
celebrating when he helped pull a little asari baby and her dead mother out of the wreckage of their
skyscraper.

"Mother held up the rubble until she couldn't any longer," observed one of the search and rescue
specialists. "Shifted that slab a bit so it wouldn't crush her kid."

Garrus didn't reply. He just held the little girl in his arms, close to his carapace, until the paramedics
came. She was too weak to cry, and she had little stripes of white across her cheeks. Afterward, he
could never remember what suburb it was or what the mother had looked like. But he'd remember
that tiny, striped face, streaked with ash and dust.

He met Jalix, his old roommate, at a canteen they'd set up for the workers.

"Heard you guys killed that bastard."

"Yeah."

"Good. Good." Jalix's claws trembled when he tried to pick up his ration. His dark grey mandibles
were flush to his face. "You know Teonara School? A bit of a cruiser fell on it. We spent six hours
digging it all up. We didn't have bodybags small enough."

Garrus didn't know what to say, and all too soon it was time for them both to get back to work.

He worked until he was sore and aching all over and fell asleep in emergency housing packed with
dozens of CSec officers and Alliance Marines for four, six hours at a time before it was time to do it
all over again. At least he didn't have the job some had - fishing all the bodies out of the nebula
around the station. There were no survivors there.

Garrus Vakarian knew that this wasn't over. It'd take years for the Citadel to recover and one Reaper
had done this. Our numbers will darken the sky of every world. It wasn't over.

He needed to talk to Shepard. He managed to get a message to her - in response she just sent a
hospital and a room number.

The hospital on the Presidium was packed full of the injured, and there were many more guards than
he remembered. His ID was checked three times before he even got to the right ward. An Alliance
Marine stood in front of the door, his rifle magnetised to his front.

"You can't come through here, sir."
Garrus' mandibles flicked with impatience. "My friend is in here. I need to see her."

"You can't come through here," he repeated, as if from rote.

"What's going on here?" The woman standing behind them was tall, dressed in an Alliance Navy uniform with a star on each shoulder, dark curls shot through with grey. Her name tape, he realised with a jolt, said 'Shepard.'

"I'm Garrus Vakarian," he began, "I serve with Commander Shepard-"

"I know who you are," she cut him off. If Commander Shepard's eyes were often scrutinising, Commodore Shepard's gaze was like a sharp knife down to the bone. "What's the problem?"

That was directed at the young Marine.

"He can't come through here, ma'am."

"And why is that?" Commodore Shepard asked with barely contained impatience.

"Ambassador Udina said only people on the list can come in, ma'am."

"Lance Corporal," Hannah Shepard said, crossing her arms. "Is Donnel Udina a military officer?"

"No, ma'am."

"Is he my daughter's next of kin?"

"No, ma'am."

Don't hurt yourself, Garrus thought.

"Then why should he have anything to do with who visits my daughter in the hospital?"

"Uh."

"Move." The word was a snap of command. The Marine moved. "This way, Detective Vakarian."

"Thank you."

The room was tiny, barely big enough to fit the hospital bed and a chair. But it was a private room - rare enough when the Citadel hospitals were choked with patients. Shepard was sitting up, datapads scattered across her lap and one arm in a sling, and she looked up with a warm, genuine smile when she saw him. "Garrus!"

Last time he'd seen her, she'd been dangerously weak, her wrist disturbingly boneless. The medical staff had been already putting in an IV before they got her out of the Tower, worrying over her blood sugar or something.

"Commander Shepard."

"I have to get to a meeting, but I'll be back later," Hannah said.

"Alright. See you, jefa." Shepard put aside one of the datapads. "Take a seat. You look exhausted."

"It's been a tough few days," he admitted.

"I can imagine."
"Private room, huh? Bit of a luxury."

"I know. I don't rate it." Shepard scowled. "Once they got my blood glucose up I wasn't in any danger. Plenty of people with worse injuries. They should toss me in the open wards with the rest of them. Or better yet, discharge me."

"I'm surprised you haven't knotted all the sheets together and tried to escape out the window," Garrus chuckled.

"Trust me, it's getting more and more appealing. But I'm pretty sure my mother warned the hospital about me - and once I do get out of here I'm going to have to deal with politicians and the media."

"I got the feeling she didn't really like me," he said carefully.

"My other parent died in the First Contact War." Shepard's voice was matter-of-fact. "Mum has never really forgiven the Hierarchy for it."

"Oh. I'm sorry."

Shepard shook her head. "It's not your fault. She helped you because she knows that too. She just can't help feeling it, you know?"

When he'd first come aboard the Normandy, maybe he wouldn't have got it. But things were a lot more grey than the black and white he'd always let himself believe. It was far from a comforting new look at the galaxy - Garrus felt far older than 27 about now.

"I get it. Heard much news?"

"Just casualty reports." Shepard nodded to the datapads. "Too many names I recognise."

"Have you heard anything about Tali?"

Shepard pushed some hair out of her eyes. "She's in good hands - with some of the few quarian experts on station. She's still in a serious condition but she's stable, and they seem pretty confident that the infection is responding to treatment."

Something inside Garrus released. "I might go visit her."

"I think she'd like that." Shepard raised an eyebrow. "You said you wanted to talk to me about something?"

"I'm going back to CSec. And I'm going to try the Spectre candidacy thing again. The right way, this time."

Shepard nodded slowly. "I won't lie and say we won't miss you, but I understand."

"Having another Spectre who knows about the Reapers would be a good thing, right?"

"Absolutely. I'll write you up a letter of recommendation."

He flicked his mandibles. "I wasn't going to ask."

They'd had their disagreements, after all.

"You've earnt it. And Garrus?"
"Yeah?"

"I'm proud of you."

_I am sitting next to the Prime Minister._ Shepard attempted not to shift with discomfort or scratch at where the high neck of her dress uniform scraped at her still sensitive amp port.

The first couple of days after she'd finally been released from the hospital had been a whirlwind of interviews and debriefings. Admiral Hackett and General Tereshchenko had interrogated her in depth about what had happened during Ilos and then at the Tower. Then the media had wanted goddamn sound bites.

They were calling her the fucking 'Saviour of the Citadel.' That was just as irritating as 'Lion of Elysium.' She hadn't single-handedly chopped up Sovereign. Her crew had fought and sacrificed and bled for their victory. The Fifth Fleet was full of heroes as far as she was concerned.

In between meetings she'd read the casualty reports. Too many names she recognised. SSV _Cairo_. The first ship she'd served on once she'd been commissioned as a Second Lieutenant, as part of the Marine Detachment. SSV _Trenton_. Rita's ship. She still didn't know if her ex-wife had survived the battle - they were still accounting for the Fifth Fleet's personnel.

The conference hall was small and the light flickered. The electrical grid remained patchy. Hackett sat on one side of her and Anita Goyle the other - Shepard felt a little like a prisoner if she was honest.

She flexed the fingers of her left hand with her right, grimacing at the dulled sensation, and tried not to fidget. They'd had to open up her wrist and piece the shattered bones together. They'd told her that with time and rehabilitation she'd regain full function of her hand, but right now it was little more than a hunk of useless meat on the end of her arm.

The first Councillor to enter was Tevos. She nodded gracefully to Shepard and then smiled warmly at the Prime Minister. "It's good to see you again, Your Excellency."

"Likewise, Councillor." Goyle folded her hands on top of the table. "Let's get straight into it, shall we? The Alliance has lost nearly fourteen thousand personnel over the last six months - and most of those casualties were Eden Prime or last week - in a war you failed to support us in until the last moment."

"Sending troops into the Traverse would have triggered a war with the Hegemony or the Terminus, and you know it, Anita," Tevos said calmly.

Goyle waved a hand. "Let's not lie to each other. If the geth had invaded turian or asari or salarian space, the reaction would have been far different. If not for Shepard and her crew you would all be dead, and I'm sure the rest of us wouldn't have been far behind."

Shepard shifted uncomfortably.

"What are you getting at, Prime Minister?" asked Valern, his face shadowed by his hood.

Salarians sure did like to take 'cloak and dagger' to its logical extreme.

"We face a multitude of dangers - we haven't eradicated the geth, the Terminus can see that we are wounded - they're already nibbling at the turian borders as well as our own - and then there is this Reaper hypothesis. To be frank, you need us. We've proven our use to the galaxy. We've bled for the
galaxy. And if I'm going to ask my people to keep dying for you, we're not doing it as a client to be dictated to."

"You've been a part of the Council for twenty-eight years," Sparatus sneered, "hardly enough time to fully earn it."

Shepard leant forward, ignoring Goyle’s sharp glance at her. "Come on, Councillor. It's not about earning it. It's about power. Always has been. You say this is about earning it, but you're the ones who make the criteria. And it doesn't seem to include either patience nor even great achievements off the battlefield. The volus have been holding up the galactic economy for centuries. We lost a third of a fleet last week. We've bought our seat at the table with blood, Councillors." I did. She'd made the call. She'd sacrificed all those people. "We were useful as a buffer state between CSpace and the batarians, and we needed the territory. But if you want us to keep standing in between the Citadel and danger, we need a voice."

There was a moment of silence.

Then Councillor Tevos leant back and tilted her head. "You've made your point, Your Excellency, Commander."

After a moment Valern nodded. And then finally, Sparatus, very grudgingly. Shepard slowly let out a breath she hadn’t realised she was holding.

After the Councillors were gone, Hackett leaned back in his chair. "You'll be pleased to know that neither you nor any member of your crew will face charges. The order was suspect to begin with, and most of the admiralty are willing to overlook the whole affair considering how important the Normandy was to the outcome of the battle. Minister Shastri even intervened on your behalf."

"Thank you, sir."

"I've secured a drydock berth for the Normandy on Arcturus. You can head there once the formalities are taken care of."

"Formalities, sir?"

"There's going to be some ceremonies, I believe."

"You might want to get a haircut," Goyle said casually, standing and picking up her briefcase.

"Aye, ma’am." She pressed her lips together. Wonderful. Grooming advice from the Prime Minister. Though, glancing at her appearance, she was looking a bit shaggy. Not like Saren had given her much time to go to a goddamn hairdresser. "Sir?"

“Yes?"

“I've started a packet for Staff Lieutenant Kaidan Alenko to receive the Star of Terra, sir.” It was the least her friend deserved.

Hackett looked at her, blue eyes unblinking - and then he nodded. “It’ll have my signature on it. The turians already want to give him the Nova Cluster and the salarians the Silver Dagger. If there’s one thing turians understand, it’s valour for the cause.”

“Thank you, sir.”

"Dismissed, Commander."
She saluted Hackett with her right hand to account for her injured left and turned smartly on her heel.

Wrex leant against a tree as the garden slowly emptied of people of all species, all of them chattering excitedly, camera drones darting to and fro. Humanity had its Council seat. He wondered if the humans were fool enough to feel secure in that. The Council’s gratitude was all too often a poison chalice. Once a tool had outlived its usefulness, they tossed it aside and into scrap bin of history.

"Wrex."

"Shepard."

The human warlord looked up at him. She was in her dress uniform, chest gleaming with bits of metal. There'd been plenty of those. A Council Medal of Honour for Shepard, a Distinguished Service Medal for Williams - along with Navy Crosses from their own government and a Silver Dagger to the latter from the salarians for Virmire. Joker had a Distinguished Flying Cross hung on his uniform - though he mostly looked irate he'd been forced to remove all that hair from his chin.

Liara, Tali, and Garrus had all received the Star of Valour.

They'd wanted to give Wrex one of those, and sit him up front with the rest of the *Normandy* crew. He'd told them exactly where to shove their medal.

"You really think they're going to prepare?" He jerked his chin towards where the Council members were mingling with the elite of the Alliance, under the eyes of watchful CSec guards.

She shrugged, rubbing at the back of her neck. "I think they'd be idiots not to. Goyle, Hackett, and Anderson believe. So sure, they're right we can't go screaming it to the public, but we do have to start preparing. I'm taking the *Normandy* back to Arcturus tomorrow for repairs, then we'll get back to it. There's a lot of work to do."

"That there is," he agreed.

She looked at him steadily. "I get the feeling you're not coming with."

He huffed out a breath. "What you've said - about giving up - and Virmire. It got me thinking. The Reapers are coming. If the krogan are to survive, we have to be more than what we currently are. And if no one else will do anything, that leaves me."

"I see."

"Someone has to drag those knuckleheads to glory. Besides, I'm not sure how many more of Garrus' quips I could deal with before I toss him out the airlock."

Shepard chuckled. "Good luck, Wrex. It's been a helluva thing, fighting beside you."

He extended a hand, and she grasped his forearm back. "You're krannt, Shepard. Rare enough thing in this galaxy. You need someone's skull kicked in, let me know."

"Roger that."
Police and Military Casualties of the Battle of the Citadel (2183):

*Hierarchy Navy:*

12 destroyers
11 frigates
20 cruisers
Total Personnel KIA: 8670

*Hierarchy Army:*

Total Personnel KIA: 634

*Republican Navy:*

6 cruisers
8 destroyers
Total Personnel KIA: 2720

*Citadel Security:*

Total Personnel KIA: 6213

*Systems Alliance Navy:*

1 light carrier
8 cruisers
16 destroyers
20 frigates
200 aircraft destroyed
Total Personnel KIA: 10435

*Systems Alliance Marine Corps:*

Total Personnel KIA: 312
All Allied Forces:

Total Personnel KIA: 28984

Chapter End Notes

One more chapter to go!
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Systems Alliance warship Normandy returned to her birthplace surrounded by a glittering escort of civilian and military ships. They were a swirling flicker of blue indicators on the ship's tactical plots as Shephard looked down at them, the fingers of her right hand curled around the cool metal railing. She was finally out of the sling, but her left forearm was still encased in a bulky black brace, a dull gnawing of pain never quite disappearing.

Chakwas told her that the tingling was her nerves regenerating, and the itching was her bone knitting back together. It was still driving her nuts.

"Quite the hero's welcome, ma'am," Pressly observed, as the Normandy slipped through the dark expanse, a corvette swirling off to her port.

"That it is." Not everyone would agree. Already a few talk show hosts had accused her of getting all those Alliance personnel killed to pander to the Council, her 'true masters.' Like she didn't have loved ones in the Fifth Fleet. Like she'd valued three lives over ten thousand.

You could never control the narrative around your own actions, not really. Not what people thought. She'd found that out with Akuze and Elysium.

"Normandy to Arcturus Control, requesting permission to dock."

"Clearance granted, Normandy. Proceed to Docking Bay A45. Welcome home."

"Pressly, once we dock, get the crew to start unloading. I'd like to hand the ship off to the dry-dock and dismiss them all as soon as possible."

"Copy that, ma'am. I'll set the Buffer on the job."

Shepard made her way down the stairs to Deck 2. The ship hummed with a low buzz of energy, the crew darting around with energy she hadn’t seen in a while. It'd been a long, hard tour of duty, with stresses none of them had expected to face. Soon, the crew would be reunited with spouses, parents, children after months apart. Time away from home was always an inevitability in the military, but it felt sharper with so many Alliance servicemen and women coming home in boxes.

Shepard paused by the makeshift memorial wall, running her eyes over the holos. Jenkins, who she'd barely known before his life had been snuffed out. Mohamed, who had carried his best friend's death until the end like a boulder on his shoulders. Nick, who even in his portrait seemed to have a smirk curving his mouth. Kaidan, calm and dependable, his absence like someone had chopped off one of her hands.

All she could do - all she'd ever been able to do - was keep putting one foot in front of the other. Keep doing her job. That was your tribute to your dead friends - a world that was maybe a little bit better than it was before. She'd do right by them. Maybe there was nothing she could do to stop the Reapers, but she'd damn well put herself in their way anyway. Her brothers were watching.

Tali was sitting up and talking with Liara when the Commander entered the medbay.

"Hello, Tali, how're you feeling today?" She took a seat beside Liara, biting her lip as she barely
resisted the urge to stick a finger under the brace to itch.

"Getting better," the quarian replied. "Slowly." There was a distinct tone of frustration in her voice that brought a flicker of a smile to Shepard's lips.

It'd been a close run thing. Chou had dragged Tali to the turians, barely conscious herself by the end, whose medic had somehow managed to keep her alive until a quarian doctor had taken over. They'd had to put several of her internal organs back together, then fight off a life-threatening infection.

"You gave me quite the scare," Shepard said softly.

"Ugh. I think I've been shot enough to last me the rest of my life."

Shepard squeezed her shoulder. "Here's hoping." She paused. "What are your plans, Tali?"

Tali would need to leave them at some point. She had the geth data and Saren was dead. But the ship already felt oddly empty without Garrus and Wrex, and it would only feel more so once the young quarian returned to her people.

Tali hesitated. "I probably shouldn't make the journey back until I'm fully healed. The Traverse can be dangerous."

"That it can," Shepard agreed pleasantly. "Perhaps we can give you a lift. It might be a bit...circuitous, though."

"I'm sure I can manage," Tali said dryly, and Shepard patted her on the arm.

"You are a very resourceful young woman after all."

"Thank you," Tali's voice hummed with amusement through her helmet.

The ship reverberated with the metallic sound of the docking apparatus clamping onto the hull. Shepard stood. "I should get up top."

Ashley was waiting for her near the airlock. For a moment Shepard just let herself look at her. The way she held herself a bit gingerly from her still healing ribs, the fading bruises on her jaw and forehead from the rubble that had done its best to crack her helmet open. Those things, and also the way she smiled at the sight of her, full lips curving. Ashley was alive, and so was she.

Shepard had noticed her mouth the first time they'd met, framed by her helmet. The thought - and the flash of attraction - had been fleeting and easily dismissed. Perhaps she'd overestimated her self-control.

Or perhaps it was that Ashley was brave and forthright and not afraid of her - not when it came to teasing her or calling her out. Shepard was in deep.

And she still wasn't quite sure where they stood. There'd been no discussions of the future the night before Ilos.

"There's a lotta media on the docks, Skipper."

Shepard sighed heavily. "More?"

"Hey, look on the bright side. Soon you will have met every journalist in Citadel Space."

"Williams," she said very seriously, "please shoot me."
"Pretty sure it's against the UCMJ to shoot my commanding officer."

"UCMJ hasn't stopped you before," she murmured.

Ashley smiled, heat in her gaze, her voice low and warm enough that Shepard felt a prickle up her spine. "I don't remember you complaining."

God, Shepard wanted to kiss her. Instead, she said, "We should talk."

Ashley's smile froze for a moment and she rocked back a half-step, putting space between them.

Shepard resisted the urge to bang her forehead into the nearest bulkhead. Good damn job.

"That never means anything good."

"I didn't mean it like that. Damnit. Look, I'm terrible at this. I just want to talk about where we stand."

"Aren't you supposed to be good with people?"

Shepard just glared at her.

Ash raised her hands. "Alright, alright. I'll swing by your apartment or something."

Footsteps approached from behind them, boots clicking against metal deck. She half-turned to see Wulandri, Liara, and Pressly.

"Once more into the breach, my friends," she said dryly. The airlock cycled open to the clicking of camera drones like dozens of crickets.

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The door slid open in front of Ash. She was dressed in civvies for the first time in what felt like years, her shirt and jeans bulging slightly with the dressings still laid over her healing wounds. In the vids, people were right to go pretty much straight away, but she felt battered all over even now.

"Come in!"

The apartment was small, the walls the same sleek lines that Alliance engineers liked so much on their ships and space stations, and very bare. Shepard's cabin on the Normandy said more about her than her Arcturus apartment did, and Ashley was disappointed despite herself. The only furniture in the lounge room was a white couch and a HV playing...Space Truckers?

"Really?" She turned to look at Shepard, who was leaning against the counter of the tiny kitchen, a glass in hand. "Space Truckers?"

Shepard smiled sheepishly. "I'm behind by like two seasons."

Behind her, a man with a very bushy beard was very dramatically performing what was really a routine EVA repair on a freighter. Complete with suspenseful music. Ash shook her head, amused. "You have a terrible taste in HV."

"So I've been told. You want a drink? I don't have any beer, but I've got...ginger beer, fernet and...water."

Ash stepped past her towards the fridge, then stopped as their elbows brushed, turning to face her. "I think I'm good."
Shepard set down her drink with a *clink* of glass and reached for her, good hand sliding to her waist. Ashley kissed her, like remembering something or discovering it all over again. When she pulled away, she tucked her face into the space between Shepard's neck and shoulder, listening to the rise and fall of her breath. After a moment, Shepard raised her hand and ran her fingers through Ashley's hair.

She didn't want to think about those long, awful moments in the Citadel Tower when she'd thought Shepard was dead. But she couldn't help it. She'd wanted - needed - to see her, touch her, know that they were both still alive. But duty had intervened, as it often did.

Shepard didn't seem inclined to move, but Ashley eventually pulled away, if reluctantly. It couldn't have been comfortable for Shepard, with her back pressed into the counter like that.

"We should talk," she said.

"Yeah."

They settled on the couch, Shepard idly rolling her glass between her palms, the water sloshing around inside. There was one window behind the HV, overlooking one of Arcturus' squares - a splash of green over all the metal, though nothing like the Presidium's honest to god lake.

"Not worried about the media trying to take footage of you watching Space Truckers?"

Shepard smiled slightly. "It's one of those fancy windows. You can see in, but not out."

"Huh." She turned to look at her. "So. Where do we go from here?"

Shepard frowned. "What we did crossed a lot of lines. I should regret that, but I don't."

"Neither do I." Something knotted in Ashley's chest unfurled.

"But" - Shepard took a sip of water- "I am still your commanding officer. I write your NCOERs. There's a power discrepancy there I can't ignore."

"You're not concerned about the chain of command?"

"I trust you to follow orders in the field," Shepard said that so resolutely. That faith was something Ash hadn't always known if she deserved, but Shepard had given it almost immediately, as soon as she'd proven herself to her as a competent NCO.

"And I trust you not to take advantage of me," she replied, crossing her arms. "I wouldn’t have gone to you that night if I didn’t."

“Even discounting the power issue, I’m…” Shepard swallowed, running a hand through her hair. “I’m difficult. I try to be in control of everything all of the time - I alphabetize and colour code everything. I practically need an OPORD to go shopping. I blew up my marriage - and I was an arsehole about it too.”

Ashley’s lips curved affectionately. “I know all that already. And I haven’t run screaming yet, have I?"

Shepard glanced away. “No."

“Look, Shepard…Emilia. I wouldn’t be offering to risk my career and yours if I didn’t think you were worth it, flaws and all. The question is, do you? If you don’t want a relationship, that’s alright.”
Her heart would break if she were honest with herself. She’d fallen for Shepard hard and fast. But damned if she was gonna pressure Emilia into anything. “We’ll just chalk it up to stress of the whole ‘sailing a stolen warship into the Terminus after a genocidal madman’ thing. We’ll just be co-workers and friends.” And Ash would buy herself a big bottle of whiskey.

Shepard stared steadily at her hands, lacing them together. “It wasn’t just sex to me, Ash. I want to see where this goes, even if logic is telling me it’s a terrible idea that could get us both court-martialled.”

“Good. ‘Cause I’m kinda attached to you now.”

Shepard smiled slowly, softly, “Yeah. I’m attached to you too.”

“We’ll have to be careful,” Ash said, even as Shepard wrapped an arm around her shoulders and she leant into her. “At least until I’m an officer and we’re in different chains of command.”

“I think I can handle that,” Shepard murmured and then pulled on Ash’s arm until she was settling above her, one hand sinking into her curls, the other on her shoulder. She leant down to kiss her, teeth catching on her bottom lip to make her hiss. Shepard’s hands crept under her shirt, gentle on her back, avoiding her ribs.

Ash kinda couldn’t wait until they didn’t have to be so cautious with each other but until then…

This wasn’t bad at all.

Commander Emilia Shepard looked down at her assembled crew, lined up in rows within the docking bay. Her crew. Hers. God help anyone who tried to fuck with them. Liara and Tali stood with them - she had hoped Vakarian and Wrex could have been here for this last goodbye, but she understood.

“I’ve been informed by BuShips that the repairs to the *Normandy* will take about a month. So enjoy your time off - you’ve earnt it. I know you’re all eager to get off duty and see your families, so I’ll keep this short. Staff Sergeant Williams, front and centre!”

She saw the flicker of surprise run across the other woman’s face as she came forward, saluting sharply. Ash raised her eyebrows in a question. *What are you up to?*

Shepard just smiled slightly and cleared her throat. “Attention to orders! The Prime Minister of the Systems Alliance, acting upon the recommendation of the Minister of Defence and the Commandant of the Systems Alliance Marine Corps, has reposed special trust and confidence in the patriotism, valour, and integrity of Ashley Madeline Williams. In view of these special qualities and her dedicated service to the Systems Alliance Marine Corps, she is therefore appointed to the grade of First Lieutenant.”

Ashley just stared at her. Gung Ho Draven stepped forward, carrying a small box and wearing a grin. Shepard gently removed the staff sergeant chevrons from her collar, fingertips brushing the skin of Ash’s collarbone, and replaced them with the silver bars from the box.

“You deserve this,” she said softly, so only Ash could hear her. “Don’t let anyone tell you otherwise.”

Then Shepard took a step back and raised her hand. After a moment - the shock still thick in her
“I, Ashley Madeline Williams”- her voice was a low, fierce, proud hum- “do solemnly swear that I will defend humanity and the Systems Alliance against all enemies, that I will bear true allegiance to the same, that I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion, and that I will well and faithfully discharge the duties of the office on which I am about to enter. So help me God.”

“Congratulations, Lieutenant,” Shepard said warmly.

“Thank you, Skipper.” They shook hands, Ash still looking at bit dazed, and then the other woman walked back towards the Marine Detachment. As one they drew themselves up and saluted. Ashley slowly returned it, and then took her place among them again.

Shepard turned back to the crew. “I’m so proud of all of you. For those of you that are leaving us - it’s been an honour to be your Commander, and I wish you all the luck for the future. The rest of you - enjoy your month off and get back here ready to kick some more arse. Buffer.”

Negulesco stepped forward. “Ship’s Company! Dis-MISSED !”

Shepard clasped her hands behind her back as best she could with the brace, watching as the neat lines of personnel broke up and scattered towards their families with shouts and backslaps of farewell to shipmates. Ashley immediately turned to her fellow Marines and slugged Draven hard in the shoulder in the midst of laughter.

“You motherfuckers all knew, didn’t?”

Draven slung an arm around her shoulder. “Hell yeah! Skipper got us in on the surprise. Congratulations, ma’am.”

“Another one lost to the dark side.” Dubyansky clutched his chest.

“Fuck,” Ash realised, “I’m gonna have to find all of you fuckers a silver coin.”

That set all of the Marines off again, Jaz looking like he was in danger of toppling over from laughter.

“Here I was thinking you were happy for me, but really you just wanted my goddamn money.”

Shepard smiled and turned away, flexing her numb left hand. There was a great deal of work to be done - Sovereign was only the vanguard after all - but she had a good ship and crew behind her, and that made all the difference.

The SSV Normandy nestled into drydock, her sleek hull embraced by supports. Workers covered her like ants, attached by safety lines. The ship had suffered two hull breaches in the battle - far less than some ships currently languishing in the Citadel and Arcturus drydocks but enough to keep her out of the fight for a bit.

The man carefully walked up her portside, keeping his line taut, his mag boots clanking against the hull. The biggest mistake rookies could make was not keeping the line tight. It was a static safety rope, not a rock climbing one. Not much give. He’d seen workers badly hurt by a three metre drop. He wasn’t planning on being a statistic.
The second would be easy enough to fix. It had scored the armoured hull, but failed to pierce the true hull. They’d cut off the damaged armour plates and send it for scrap metal, then weld on the new one. Good as new. A repair the man had helped do a few dozen times over in the twenty years he’d worked in the shipbuilding industry. Already sections had been taken off, baring the ship’s skeleton like scaffolding that the armoured hull was welded onto.

A ship’s baffles usually contained interesting artifacts of sailors’ proclivities. For all her heroism, he’d been amused to find the Normandy was no different. They’d already found the still and a very large stash of porn.

The other hull breach was more serious, with damage to the armoured and true hulls and two compartments. The enlisted berthing was pretty much twisted metal, and the forward gunnery control room had been damaged. They would have to repair her from the inside out, stress and pressure testing all the way. No one wanted a repeat of the Geneva Incident. Shitty patch job on an old ship blew out, vented a berthing into space. Navy had been less than happy.

They’d be even unhappier if their shiny new hero got killed by a bad repair.

He’d have to be careful, he decided, climbing around the bump of a kinetic barrier emitter. The Navy had posted guards in the CIC and engineering - they were very protective of this ship and its secrets. Still, he didn’t need to go near the drive core or the strange, oversized heatsinks for what he needed to do.

The man found what he was looking for on the hull - one of the ship’s FTL comms arrays, jutting up near the stern.

He carefully negotiated his way into the trench-like maintenance access. There, at the base of the comms array, with his body concealed from his fellow workers, he pulled something out of his pocket. It was the size of his palm, and it was like no other device he’d ever seen in his life. It kinda reminded him of a wasp’s nest, yellow-orange and oddly organic looking.

He hid it deep within the array, then stood to make his way back up.

If his conscience troubled him, the large amount of credits that would soon be transferred to his account would soothe it.

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**CODEX**

Alliance News Network Aggregator October 2183:

**AMBASSADOR DONNEL UDINA CONFIRMED AS NEW COUNCILLOR**

Alliance News Network - The Alliance Parliament has today confirmed the appointment of former Ambassador to the Citadel Donnel Udina as the new human representative on the Citadel Council. Udina thanked Parliament for their faith in him and promised to fight for humanity on a galactic stage.

Rumours of a row between Udina and the first human Spectre Emilia Shepard were denied by Alliance officials, as was the rumour that he was involved in the short-lived arrest order for the SSV Normandy during the forty-eight hours leading up to the Battle of the Citadel. Shepard herself said only that she wishes Udina the best in his new role.

**ARAH T'HASS, COLOMBIA RIOS AMONG STARS TO HEADLINE BENEFIT GALA**
FOR THE CITADEL

Citadel NewsNet - Queen of asari pop Arah T’Hass and Earth actress Colombia Rios will be among the stars invited to an exclusive benefit gala for the Citadel Relief Fund, to be held in Serrice. Tickets are expected to be similar in price to the Serrice Museum of Art History Gala, in excess of 40,000 credits. Current estimates are that the Relief Gala will raise around 12 million credits for the Fund.

SYSTEMS ALLIANCE FEDERAL ELECTION CALLED FOR LATE NOVEMBER

Future Content Corporation - Prime Minister Anita Goyle of the Systems Alliance has called a federal election in six weeks, in which the entire lower house of the Parliament and half of the Senate will contest their positions or ‘seats’. Riding a high from their handling of the Eden Prime War, Galactic Labor is considered the favourites to secure a majority, in close contest with the Conservatives.

The Prime Minister has announced she will not stand for the next election, kicking off a three horse race for Labor leadership between Minister for Defence Amul Shastri, Minister for Foreign Affairs Jae-Eun Park (widely regarded as Prime Minister Goyle’s protege) and Minister of Colonial Affairs Idir Tabaamrant.

Chapter End Notes

So...that's a bloody wrap, ain't it? Thanks so much to everyone who has reviews/followed/favourited, it means a lot.

Udina isn't a popular councillor choice, I know, but it's a bit of a video-gamey thing to have a mid ranked naval officer choose a diplomatic appointee. And I have plans for Anderson, so don't worry he'll be about.

My plans after this is for a couple of shorter stories set after ME1 to wrap up things like Cerberus and Admiral Kahoku. That fic will be 'What Lives In The Dark' and I hope to be onto ME2 shortly in 'Fianchetto'.

Huge shout out to my beta, the_wrote.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!